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Soldier

TOP SHELF

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## ***Dedication***

To Mom, who thinks what I do is cool. For an 82 year-old, I think that is cool.

## Chapter One

“Do ya see ‘eem?” The whisper seemed awfully loud in the darkness behind the big old house.

”Shhhh, Gommy. You have to be really quiet. Are you sure you saw someone out here? It wasn’t just in your mind?” Dillon asked softly.

“I swear it, Dill, really. He was just huge, and he was way back there by that broken fence thing.” Gom pointed out toward the back of the big empty yard. Dillon looked out there, but saw nothing unusual. The grass was sparse in the summer heat of middle Texas. It grew a little thicker at the back where the old log was pushed up against the falling down fence. “He was just standing so still, like a statue. He never moved *at all*. I was too scared to do anything fer a minute.” Bless his heart, Gom was scared a lot.

“That’s okay, Gom.”

“Then I heard you and I knew I’d be okay. You gonna go see if he’s out there?” Gommy, short for Montgomery -- which was way too big a name for the tyke -- had very big eyes and they were perfectly round. He worshipped Dillon with a single-minded passion.

“Nah. Not tonight, Gom. If he tries anything, we’ll be ready. But thanks for letting me know. Good eye, buddy. We’ll keep watch and see if he’s up to something. A big guy, huh?” Dillon ruffled Gom’s hair, .

“Huge, Dill. He had muscles ever’where and he was wearin’ those clothes like the soldiers wear so nobody can see ‘em.”

“Camouflage. Okay, well, let’s go in. I’m sure the others are hungry. We’ll get everyone settled, and maybe Tommy’ll sing for us. That always calms everyone down. If not, I’ll make up a story or two. How’s that?” They left the tiny back porch, little more than rickety steps, and headed back in. Dillon Kramer had found out early on that his ability to create stories and relate them with whatever feeling was called for at the time was a great way to settle the young boys in his care. But, man, that Tommy could sing like an angel. That worked, too. If all of them were upset about the strange man, it might take both him and Tommy tonight.

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Outside, Soldier stood motionless at the side of the house, only a few feet from the two as they went back in. He liked the one called Dill. He was obviously the leader of the group inside. He was a pretty thing, too. Soldier felt himself getting hard and refused to move at all. He would not. He knew how to be silent and still. He’d been in Special Ops and he could get in and out of almost anywhere without being seen.

He must be losing his edge. He'd been invisible for so long, he was surprised the little one had seen him. Soldier was alone -- very alone. He didn't have friends, or enemies, for that matter. He was just a man who'd gone to war for his country and come back after too many years, damaged. Soldier was damaged in his heart and his soul as much as his body. . He was thirty-three, was very tall, very large, and very, very strong. He kept his head shaved so he didn't have to worry about seeing anyone to get it cut. He didn't like most people, didn't like them around him.

God, how long had it been? It was bad enough that he'd chosen to be alone, to avoid being with anyone. But he was gay. Well, he'd be in a gay relationship if he had a chance to be in any. Suffice it to say that if he was going to have sex, it would be with someone like the pretty man who lived in that interesting house. Soldier wondered how old the man was, what his story was, if he would be... Soldier shook his head, finally moving away from the door. This wasn't like him. He didn't wonder about people, care about people. Not in a long time.

He turned to leave, pausing once when he could have sworn he heard an angel singing. There was the most haunting sound coming from the house. He stood still and let the sounds wash over him. Goose bumps rose on his arms. He couldn't help it; he edged back and listened until the sounds died down. He was strangely touched by the song and the beauty of the voice. He thought he knew who was singing, Tommy, Dill had said. Whoever it was, was truly gifted. He left with a little lighter step.

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Inside the house with the blacked-out windows, Dill was getting the "troops" ready for bed. They had eaten dry cereal again, and even though it was getting old, none complained. He did a head count, got to six and went looking for Gommy. Dill found him looking out the back door, with it just barely cracked.

"Gom, you know better. No lights. Come away from there." He didn't yell. No one yelled at Gommy. He was little and sweet and often lost in another world. He'd been special to Dillon since he'd first shown up.

"I'm sorry, Dill. I just wanted to see if the man was out there. I won't do it again. Are you mad?" Gommy had shown that he could handle anything but disappointing Dill.

"No, silly. Come on, it's time for bed." Dillon made sure the door was locked and bolted securely. He felt Gom take his hand and smiled inside, letting the boy keep it as they went up the rickety stairs, keeping close to the wall so they wouldn't fall through the rotten parts.

"Dill?"

"Yeah, Gom?"

“Can I sleep with you tonight? I promise I’ll lay real still and I’ll try not to pee and I... I... I... don’t know what’s wrong...” Gom started to tear up and Dill was afraid he was going to go into one of his all night crying things and Dill hated those.

“Hey. Gom, it’s okay. You can bunk with me tonight. If you get my bed wet, we’ll just move to the floor. No problem. I don’t think you’ll pee tonight. You might drown me in tears, though. Come here, you.” He reached down and picked up the little boy and swung him around and had him laughing before long.

“Shhhhhh. Don’t be so *happy*. You know they’ll all want to sleep in here, then. Are you ready to go to sleep? Do you think you can?” Dillon knew that Gom never slept through the night. For an eight-year-old, that was strange. Granted, Gom was the tiniest eight that Dillon had ever seen. His behavior was more that of a five-year-old. He figured he ought to start training Gom to help him since the boy didn’t sleep anyway. He thought about it. Gom would benefit from having something to make him feel special, needed. A good idea came to mind and he put it to Gom.

“Gom?”

“Yeah, Dill?”

“I need you to sleep really hard tonight, ‘cause I been thinking about you being my special helper. I need to get you up with me to help get things started in the morning.” Gom looked like Dill was offering him a million dollars.

“If it works out, then maybe we can do it for good. You’ll be my second in command. Would you like that?” Dillon knew the boy would. He couldn’t help but notice the way Gom idolized him.

“Really?” Gom’s eyes were so wide, it looked like his eyebrows were going to climb right into his hair.

“Of course. You want to help me? If you do, I want you to know you have to get enough sleep. This is a big responsibility. You see I haven’t asked anyone else, don’t you?”

Gom nodded his head so hard his hair flopped on his forehead.

“So, you have to promise to start eating more and sleeping when you should if you are going to be able to keep up with me.” He waited for the expected promise, which, of course, came readily.

“I promise. Come on, let’s get to bed. I’ll be real still and sleep really hard. I can’t wait for tomorrow to get here.” Gom said, adoring eyes gazing up at him. “I love you, Dill. You know that, right? It’s okay?”

“Sure, I do. Of course it’s okay. I love all y’all, too. Let’s get to sleep now.” Dill smiled as Gom lay down and pretended to be sleeping already. He just hoped Gom got a little sleep for real. Gom was a little too... little.

Dillon was very small himself, but he was strong. He'd always been small, and he'd taken some hard knocks for it. The fact that he was also unusually pretty had made his life even harder.

He had learned to run really fast at a young age and he'd learned to fight later. The one time he wasn't fast enough had been when he was fourteen. He'd been raped, beaten, cut badly, and left for dead.

He'd been gay-bashed and nearly killed before he'd even known he was gay. How ironic. The men who had attacked him were never caught. All he had been able to remember were the taunts and name-calling. An old man had found him half under a dumpster in a back alley.

Since he'd been alone already and had no money, the doctors at the hospital had done the best they could for him without anything special. They'd sewn him up, patched him up, got him well enough to leave, and showed him the door. He didn't blame them; he couldn't have paid. Dillon didn't come from an area where people had health insurance... or paychecks, for that matter. Growing up as poor as he had, seeing what poverty and ignorance did to people made him want to be different. Dillon had worked hard to get out of the ugly part of Dallas. By hitchhiking, he'd made his way to this small town called Parkington, between Dallas and Abilene. It was a nice town, growing all the time. He didn't know a lot of people here, but his scars and his past didn't seem to matter much, as he mostly stayed hidden with his charges.

He was fine with it. He truly didn't care. The scars on his face didn't seem to bother the boys he worked with. It had happened eleven years ago. He was twenty-five now and was pretty happy doing what he was doing.

What *was* he doing? Dillon had fallen into being the leader of a group of boys that needed a home. For one reason or another, these boys had left or been thrown out of their previous lives. They had come to him through his friend Daniel at the local shelter, and he'd taken them in and suddenly he had a house full of needy boys, all looking to him for food, shelter, guidance, help, love; basically, all their needs. Daniel had helped him when he'd shown up here, and he'd worked around the shelter since. Now he was paid a small stipend and had been given this house to use for these kids. Daniel had gone to bat for him and made it happen. It was part of Social Services, yet not one with a high public profile.

Dillon spent his time finding ways to get food, money for first aid, and all the things he needed to keep a house going with seven boys... all hungry, all the time. The little he got from the shelter paid utility bills. The house was set up for these boys, but wasn't quite under the *regular* scope of the Social Services Department. They were in a special arrangement, set up and supervised by Daniel. They were just lucky, Daniel had told him more than once, that there were a couple of caring, understanding social workers in the department that worked with Daniel and allowed them to continue as they were until they could get a better set-up here. Dillon had applied for a foster parent license, but hadn't heard yet. Daniel was helping with that, too.

Until they were in a more legitimate situation Dillon made sure that the boys were secluded here. That worked well for them, since they were all coming from places where they didn't feel safe,

so the steps he went to in order to keep them hidden fit right in with their need to feel secure. It was like a game to them, which worked to Dillon's advantage. They weren't strictly illegal in what they were doing, but it didn't bear close scrutiny.

Dillon figured that since this wasn't his house, it might be a problem in getting the necessary approval. He didn't even know how they'd gotten the house, he just knew it was falling down around them. It had only the most basic amenities, but they made do. The boys were just happy to be safe and Dillon was just glad to be able to help them.

Dillon thought about the treat he had for the boys tomorrow morning. He'd scored three big boxes of pancake mix and a huge jar of maple syrup. After some civic group had held a pancake breakfast as a fundraiser, he'd asked for the items, and they had gladly given them to him. They'd told him what he would need to make them and he had just enough to make it work. Dillon thought Gom would enjoy helping with the surprise.

Before he dropped off to sleep, Dillon wondered about the man Gom thought he'd seen. Maybe Gom had seen someone. Dillon decided he would have to be extra careful and aware for the next little while. They couldn't afford to be turned in and separated. He knew the situation wasn't up to speed here yet, and he didn't want some bigwig over Daniel's head to come swooping in and say they couldn't continue as they were. So far, they let Daniel oversee this house as well as they shelter and it was working well. If they were scrutinized too closely, well, who knew what would happen to some of the little guys?

Dillon smiled a little as Gom scooted over and settled against him. If Gom needed to be close to sleep, Dillon could provide the heat necessary. No problem. He wrapped his arm around the sleeping boy and nodded off himself.

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Outside, Soldier drew the light cover over himself as he kept watch on the house. He'd decided to stay around and see what was really going on in there. He was interested in the two he'd seen. After listening to them, he wondered how many more there were. Wanting to be left alone, Soldier hadn't even checked in with the people who were responsible for the house. Were Dill and the boys just squatting, or had they made arrangements to stay in the house? He didn't really care either way.

Soldier never really slept, not completely. He'd gotten used to being aware all the time in the service, and then after he finally got off the meds, he refused anything to make him sleep. He didn't like -- actually, couldn't stand -- to feel vulnerable. So he kept watch, and had for the last few days.

Soldier was very interested. It was the first thing he could say that about in the last year and a half. Since he'd been watching, he'd only seen the one called Dill leave the house. Tonight was the first time he'd seen anyone else from inside at all. Interesting. If there were more, Dill was doing a good job of keeping them hidden. Was it for their safety? Soldier wondered again what the hell was going on here.



Still, that was a good-looking man. He was maybe a little small, probably five-foot-eight or so. Dill had really pretty, thick hair that seemed to want to curl. Soldier wondered what it would feel like. He wondered, too, what color Dill's eyes were. He liked people's eyes. Or he used to, anyway. But still... it was all very interesting.

## Chapter Two

Soldier watched Dill leave the house the next afternoon so he stayed far behind as he followed to see what was going on. He thought now might be a good chance to get an idea about how Dill managed to take care of however many kids that lived there without any visible signs of income. Soldier wanted to know how many kids were in the house. He wondered if he could find a way to get in and do some recon while Dill was gone one day. Right now, Soldier was more interested in what the guy was up to.

Dill went to the back door of a couple of restaurants. He was met by older men who gave him sacks of something. Leftovers? He then went to a shelter and Soldier watched while Dill walked around, observing what went on. Was he looking for someone?

Soldier watched as one of the staff members eventually walked over and talked quietly to Dill. The man shook his head and Dill nodded and left. This whole thing was beginning to intrigue Soldier more and more.

It looked like Dill was heading back to the house when Soldier saw a couple of thugs step in behind him. He moved closer, right behind them, and listened to the creeps talking just loud enough for Dill to hear. Soldier could tell that their plan was to make Dill nervous.

“Whoooweee! Ain’t he purty? But, ooooh, no way, man. Ug-gle-eeeeee. I don’t know whether to beat the ugly out of him or fuck him cause he’s so damn pretty. Whadaya think, Bone?”

“I think if we turn him the right way, we can ignore the ugly and get off on the sweet side. Hey, pretty boy, you lookin’ for some dick?” ‘Bone’ grabbed his crotch as he offered.

Soldier was ready to crack their heads together just for talking so ugly. He hated crude language *and* bullies. He watched Dill tense up. Soldier knew it’d be hard for Dill to run with the bags he was carrying. Dill took off and, when he did, the two gave chase. They didn’t get very far, though. Soldier had a hand on both their necks and they stopped dead in their tracks.

“Hey! What the fuck? Who are you? Let me go. Owww!” The whiner turned and got a good look at Soldier and changed his tune. “Oh, shit. Hey, man. Be cool. We’re out o’ here. Let go.”

“Leave him alone,” was all Soldier said.

“He yours? No problem, man. I can see why. We’re gone, promise. Just let *go*.”

Soldier threw them both to the ground and looked up to see that Dill had disappeared. Good man. Very fast.

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Dillon had run like the wind and, when he didn't hear footsteps dogging him, he took a second to turn. He stopped so abruptly that he nearly fell over. There was a giant bald man in Army camo holding on to both of his would-be attackers.

*Well, what do you know? Gom was right.* There was a big Army guy around. But why was he there, and why had he stopped the punks from hurting Dillon?

Dillon didn't wait to find out. He took advantage of his good fortune and kept running. He was home in minutes, with a lot to think about.

He went out after supper, reminding the boys to be quiet and not open any doors. Gom asked if Dillon wanted Gom to come with him. Gom was taking his new duties seriously. Dillon told him he was just going to take a look around.

Dillon slipped out the back door and stood still, watching. It was a quiet night, cooler now with a breeze stirring. He could hear cicadas buzzing and traffic from the front of the house, but back here, it was calm. He thought he could feel a presence there, watching back. Surprisingly, he didn't feel scared. It was more a feeling of someone being there *for* him, not one of danger. How strange.

Dillon set off toward the back of the property, staying alert and watching for movement. He sat on an old tree that had fallen long ago and made a nice bench for watching the back of the house. Sitting still, he waited for his vision to get used to the dark back here so he could get a better look.

Was that a shadow by the side of the house? Dillon sat still and never took his eyes off the large shape. He knew there was nothing by the house so the shape didn't belong there. Taking a deep breath, letting it out, and taking his courage in hand, Dillon said, quietly,

"Hey."

The shadow moved just slightly, and Dill only noticed because he was watching so intently.

"I know you're there. I'm not scared of you. What do you want here? Was that you today?" Dillon waited and watched, and finally the shadow moved away from the house and started toward him. The man was huge, but made no sound and was in front of Dillon in seconds. *Shit.* Dillon looked up and up and couldn't make out much of the man's features. There wasn't much of a moon tonight.

"Who are you?" Dillon asked. The man didn't answer.

"Are you here to hurt any of us? I don't think so. You've had plenty of chances." Dillon kept telling himself not to be nervous. This man had protected him today. "Why are you lurking out here in the dark? Why won't you talk?"

Dillon hated to keep asking questions, especially when he got no answers, but he had responsibilities here. “Did you save me from those assholes today? What am I saying, I know it was you. Thanks, by the way.”

The big man nodded. Dillon could see that. He scooted over a little on the makeshift bench him, an invitation.

The man hesitated. Finally he sat, awkwardly, by Dillon. Neither spoke for a bit. Dillon figured that they were both a little freaked out by the fact that they were sitting close together and they didn’t know each other or what to expect.

“Soldier.” It was offered quietly.

“Hmm? What? *Soldier*? Is that your name?” Dillon thought the man's voice was sexy, very low. *Sexy*? Where had that come from?

“Now.”

“Okay, works for me. Thank you for what you did today, Soldier.”

“Hmmmph. Okay. Tell me...why’d they say you’re ugly? You’re not.”

“Have you *seen* me?” Dillon knew why. If this guy had been watching him and the house he should know why, too.

“Yeah. For a while.”

“Then how can you ask? Most people think I’m pretty hideous.”

“That’s crazy. You’re too pretty. Why do you say that?” There was genuine surprise in Soldier’s tone.

“I’m beginning to wonder if you really *have* seen me. Here.” Dillon reached out to take Soldier’s hand.

Soldier jerked at the contact. It was like he wasn’t used to being around people. He talked very little. Maybe he wasn’t used to being touched, either. He settled, though, and let Dillon take control of his hand.

Dillon brought Soldier’s hand up to his face so Soldier could feel the scar tissue that nearly covered the whole right side of his face and down to his neck. Soldier pulled his hand back quickly.

“See, even in the dark I’m ugly.”

Soldier reached back and smoothed his hand over the scars again, almost in a caress, Dillon thought. Soldier snorted back in his throat. He dropped his hand and then, in a jerky move that seemed totally foreign to him, he took Dillon's hand and brought it to his face on the left side. Dillon's hand paused when he touched Soldier, then moved over Soldier's scars as if memorizing his face like a blind person would. In the dark, it was just like that.

Soldier didn't move a muscle, as if waiting for an expected reaction.

"After the hospital, I've never allowed anyone to touch me. Hell, no one would want to." Soldier's rusty voice told a story in itself. He sounded like he was just waking from a long sleep and was trying to orient himself to a new world. His belief that no one would want to touch him told Dill that he'd been through a lot of pain, both physical and mental.

But Dill wanted to touch him. He just kept on moving his hand over Soldier's face, down to his neck, following the path of the scars. In a move that surprised even him, he tried to reach under Soldier's shirt to see how far they went. Soldier finally pulled away.

"I'm sorry." Dillon instantly pulled his hand back. *How could he...?* "I can't believe I did that. It was incredibly rude." Dillon was embarrassed at how long he had touched Soldier.

Soldier just shrugged. Silence again.

"You didn't know I had scars, too?" Dillon asked.

"No. Never saw that side. Recent?" It sounded like it hurt Soldier to think of Dillon going through the same pain he evidently had.

"Nah. 'bout eleven years ago." Dillon laughed and said, "Now I only get chased half as much as before."

"Why?" Soldier clearly didn't understand what Dillon meant.

"Oh, I just meant half the time they don't see the other side so they..." Dillon's self-deprecating explanation was interrupted.

"No, why do you get chased? You don't bother anybody. I've seen you."

Dillon figured that was a long speech for Soldier, but the man seemed to be really interested in what had happened to him.

"Well. These came from a bunch of gay-bashers who lit into me one night when I was fourteen. They were kind of like the ones today. They hated anyone who was 'pretty and queer.' Their words." Dillon shrugged in a fatalistic way. What was done was done. "They took care of that, huh? Funny thing is, at fourteen, I didn't even know I was... uh... queer. Mmm, guess I shouldn't have admitted that."

“Relax. I don’t hate queers. *I’m* a big old ugly queer. And you’re still pretty.” Soldier said. “I can’t believe the things that are coming out of my mouth. I haven’t talked this much in years, especially things like I keep saying.” He shook his head, as if amazed at himself. “Your name is Dill?”

“Dillon. Dillon Kramer. The kids... I mean some people call me Dill. But I like Dillon.”

“Dillon is better. How many are in the house? I know of two besides you.”

“Why?”

“I’m just curious. Don’t worry. I’m not going to do anything to you, or them. It’s just interesting to me... what you do.”

“Why do you care? I don’t tell people about us. I can’t let anything happen to them. I... help them. They need me. I won’t allow anyone to...”

“Dillon. Relax. I told you. No problems.” Soldier spoke calmly. “I’m interested in knowing how you got the house, how many are living there, what you all need, how you manage to live, why no one questions you...” Soldier wound down, his voice kind of tired. Again, it seemed like he wasn't used to talking.

“Who are you? How do I know I can trust you?” Dillon did trust him, though, and wondered why he did. He was really looking for justification for the feeling of trust he couldn’t explain.

“I won’t hurt you or them.”

“Why’ve you been watching the house? Us?” Dillon had to know. He couldn’t let anything happen to his boys.

“I’m just Soldier. I’m around. I saw you one day, then again, so I watched to see where you went, what you did. I hadn’t gotten close until recently.” Soldier shook his head a little. “I can’t believe the little one saw me. I won’t hurt any of you. You all can stay in the house; no one will take it from you.”

“How do you know that?” Dillon was wary.

“I just do. You’re safe there. You don’t do anything illegal, do you?”

“Lord, no. We just try to get enough to eat and let some of them heal if they need it.” Dillon gave simple answers without talking about each child. “Others are hiding until they can get wherever they need to go. Some will stay until they can get out and do something else.”

They both looked up when they heard the back door open and watched as Gom snuck out. He had a sack in his hand and he was heading right for them. Brave little fart. He knew he was supposed to stay inside.

“Gom?”

“I’m sorry, Dill. But I saw the man and I wanted to see if he was hungry.” The tiny boy couldn’t seem to help the quick glances at Soldier. “I don’t think he would hurt us. He’s been real still by you. I was watching out for you. That’s my job now, right?”

Dillon shook his head and held out his hand for Gom to come closer. Gom came to stand right between Dillon’s legs, facing Soldier.

“Soldier, this is Gom. He’s been made my second in command at the house and he evidently takes his job seriously.” Dillon looked down and spoke quietly to Gom, smoothing his hand over the bony shoulders. “Gom, you don’t have to protect me. I just made you my special assistant to help me with the others. What do you have there?”

Gom was looking at Soldier with awe. He didn’t say anything.

“Gom?” Dillon prodded.

“Oh. Uh. Sir... Soldier, I mean... is that really your name? I brought you some of the stuff we had left. Do you eat? Why are you always out here? Are we in trouble? I won’t let you hurt Dill.” He leaned into Dillon. “Where are you from? Are you in the Army? Can I touch your face? Does it hurt? You must have hurt bad. You’re awful big. Are you hungry?”

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Soldier had to smile. How could he answer all that? He couldn’t even remember all the questions. But the kid had showed spunk coming out here if he was worried about how big Soldier was and if he was going to hurt Dill. Dillon.

“I eat. Thanks.” He reached for the sack. Gom handed it to him and smiled, and Soldier’s heart did a little flutter thing. This little one was special. “So, you take care of Dillon... uh Dill, huh?” He tried to think of all Gom had asked. “Not in the Army anymore. I was. Yes, it hurt... real bad. I don’t usually let anybody touch me, at all, but... uh... you can if you want.”

“You let Dill. I won’t if you don’t want me to.” He started to shake a little as he went on, “I was probably being bad to ask you. It’s bad manners, huh?”

“It’s okay... Gom, is it?” Soldier wanted to ease him for some reason.

“Yeah. Gom or Gommy. I’m too little for *Montgomery*. I *would* like to touch you once, just for a little... to see how it feels. Are you sure I can?”

“Gom...” Dillon started to say, but Soldier broke in.

“It’s okay. Come here, little one. Here,” Soldier took Gom’s little hand and pressed the palm against the rough scars on his face. He moved it a little so the boy could feel how rough it was and then he dropped his hand and let the kid touch him.

Gom’s eyes were huge as he moved his hand over Soldier's face. He patted it softly and said, “Does it hurt when I touch it? I don’t want to hurt you.” There were tears gathering in his eyes and he dropped his hand.

“Here, what’s the matter... uh, Gom? It’s okay. It didn’t hurt me.” Oh, shit, what should he do now? He was so out of his element here. “I’m a tough guy anyway, but there’s very little feeling in that side of my face because of the scars. Don’t cry.” He felt awful as tears fell down the little boy’s face. The boy didn’t make a sound, though.

Dillon closed his arms around Gom and sat him down on his leg, saying, “Shhhhhh, now, Gom. You heard what he said. You didn’t hurt him. Come on now, don’t cry or you’ll get all worked up. I hate when you cry for so long.” Dillon patted Gom on the back.

Soldier’s eyes widened. He was totally stunned when Gom said, through his tears, “But someone hurted him bad and it makes me sad.” He sniffed and rubbed his eyes. “I can’t help crying. I’m sorry. Don’t be mad.”

“Honey, you’ve got to quit thinking we’re gonna be mad when you cry. It never makes me mad. I just hate to see you *sad* enough to cry.” Dillon hugged him close. “Come on, now, dry up and tell Soldier it’s okay. I think he thinks he did something wrong.”

“Oh, no. You was nice and let me touch. I wish they didn’t hurt you, though.” Gom did the strangest thing then. He stepped away from Dill and went to stand between Soldier’s legs and put both arms up to Soldier’s shoulders and laid his little head on Soldier's chest.

Soldier was literally flabbergasted. He couldn’t move. He didn’t know what to do. He looked over at Dillon, who was smiling gently at Gom. Finally, he put a hand up and patted the kid on the back. Gom sighed and relaxed against Soldier. This was too weird.

Soldier looked down and saw that the kid had actually gone to sleep. He looked at Dillon, knowing that Dillon could see the surprise in his face. He handed the sack back to Dillon and gently picked Gom up and settled him against his shoulder like a baby. There was such a difference in size between them, it was almost like the little boy *was* a baby. Gom turned his face into Soldier’s neck and sighed again.

“Soldier?” Dillon whispered. “That is the first time Gom has ever touched another person as far as I know. He lets me touch him, he wants to cuddle with me even, but no one else ever even tries.” He shook his head, clearly not believing what he was seeing. He went on to explain, “He goes into the worst episodes. He cries and cries. It’s enough to break your heart. You must have something really special. He trusts you like he does me. Do you mind holding him?”

“No.”



“He gets *so* little sleep. I even let him sleep with me when he asks, hoping he'll sleep better.” Dillon's worry and fondness for the child was clear in his voice. “He doesn't eat enough and I worry about him. I still don't know all that happened to him.”

“You know any?” Soldier didn't know if he could stand hearing about it if it was something really bad, but he felt compelled to ask. He started rubbing softly against the boy's back and felt Gom relax deeper into him.

“Some. Just from nightmares. He was... I can't believe I'm telling you this. I can't believe any of this. This is the first time I've... but I guess I feel as safe with you as Gom does. If you get tired of holding him, or don't want to, I'll take him.”

“He's okay, doesn't weigh anything. He's comfortable, leave him be. What's he *like* to eat?”

“Right now, he's really fond of pancakes and syrup. I got some the other day and there was enough left over for a second meal. Man, he was *so* happy. He likes chicken, fried chicken.” He smiled as if remembering something. “Once I got some leftover from, somewhere or other, and he ate that, too. He nibbles a little. Eats a little cereal. Likes Cheerios, the honey kind, but I can't get that very often.”

“Hmmm.”

They sat silently for a while, neither of them wanting to wake Gom from the deep sleep the boy was in. Dillon shivered as a breeze blew through the trees back by the fence. In a gesture that he didn't plan at all, Soldier opened his arm for Dillon to slide over against his side. Without hesitation, Dillon slipped over and fit himself right up against Soldier.

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Oh, warm man. Soldier smelled... like a man. Nothing fancy, just clean, good man smell. Dillon felt himself get hard for the first time in, well, as long as he could remember. He wasn't even embarrassed. He just huddled in against this big man, the one he knew nothing about. What did that say about *him*?

Didn't matter. Anyone who could hold Gom with such gentleness had to be a good man. He turned and was going to say something to Soldier, he didn't know what. Soldier turned, too. Suddenly, they were face to face, or they would have been if they were anywhere near each other in height. But Dillon looked up into Soldier's face and they were looking into each other's eyes.

“Don't,” Soldier said.

“What?” Dillon asked, just as eloquently.

“Don't go thinking I'm somebody special. I'm not.”

“Yeah, you’re sitting in the dark holding a troubled child while he gets the first real sleep in weeks, I think.” Yeah, Soldier was special, all right. “And you’re keeping me warm, and you don’t think you’re special. Why?”

“I just don’t know how to deal with people. I try to stay away from them.”

“Why, because of your scars? They don’t matter. I know we all have stories to tell, probably some horror stories, but we’re all good. Anyway, I guess I should go in.” Dillon hated to. He was caught between nervousness and excitement. “I’ve been out here too long now. The others will be getting nervous. It’s a shame to wake him up.”

“Go on in. Do what you have to do to get the others down. I’ll be right here. He can sleep as long as he can.” Soldier seemed strangely reluctant to let the child go. Gom obviously made him feel... something. Dillon didn’t bother trying to figure out what it was. “You can come back and check on him. I’ll sit here all night if he needs it that bad.” Dillon bet he would, too.

Dillon snorted softly and said, “Sure. You’re not special at all. I can’t believe I’m doing this, but I trust you. I’m going to get the others to bed and then I’ll come back and see about Gom. If you’re sure?”

“Go on. He’s fine.”

Dillon was reluctant to leave the man’s side. He’d felt safe and warm and even a little excited by Soldier. He went back to his duties in the house, taking a last look before he went in the door. Soldier hadn’t moved at all. Dillon knew Soldier wouldn’t. The man would sit there, motionless, and let Gom get the rest he needed. It was so amazing to Dillon that Gom had gone into such a deep sleep just by being near the man. He shook his head. Something else.

He got the boys ready for bed and ended up having to tell them a story to get them settled. It was probably an hour later that he slipped out the door again. He had a blanket with him, and he’d made Soldier a sandwich and had one of the last of the apples for him.

“Has he even moved?” Dillon whispered as he sat beside Soldier. He set the food down on the blanket between them.

“No. Thanks. I’ll eat the sandwich and save the apple. They all asleep?”

“Yeah, finally. I had to tell them a story tonight. They were worried about Gom not being there. They all come from different places, but they quickly became protective of each other.”

“How many?”

“Seven, counting Gom.”

“All with bad history?” Soldier winced.

“Pretty much. They...” Dillon stopped when Gom gasped and started to jerk and fight against Soldier’s hold.

“Hey, now, shhhhh. It’s okay, little one. I’ve got you. Soldier won’t let anything get you. Shhhhh... relax... that’s right... shhhhh.” Soldier’s hand went back to smoothing over the boy’s back and he looked relieved when Gom settled down again. Gom slipped back into deep sleep. Dillon was just amazed.

“He okay?” Soldier asked, quietly.

“Evidently. Usually when he wakes up like that, there is no getting him back to sleep. He’ll sit in a corner and cry and cry, never making a sound. I think I’d like to hear him scream and cry sometime.” Dillon voice dropped to a whisper as he related Gom’s anguish. “It’s always without sound. I think he had to learn to not make noise to get by. Makes me crazy to think of who hurt him.”

“Do you know who?”

“Yeah,” Dillon said, and then more softly, “his mother.”

Soldier made a fist and then slowly released it. He asked, quietly, “How old is he?”

“Daniel says he’s eight, but he’s so small. He acts more like five and looks it, huh? We go with eight.” He looked at Gom, resting so completely on Soldier’s shoulder. “I wish I knew more. I do what I do for them, but I don’t know so much. They need so much.” He shrugged a little, his voice wavering a little, letting some of his insecurities show.

“Does he need to see somebody?”

“Would he do well in counseling? Of course, there is no way he can get any right now, but I wonder what he’d be like if he could get some of his... pain... fear... anger, whatever, out. Maybe soon, we could get something like that set up. When we’re more established. I know they need more than I can give them. I fear that I’m not doing them enough good.”

“Yeah, right.” Soldier put a “duh” in that.

“I take care of their immediate needs. I know that. But sometimes it’s just not enough and I feel like I shouldn’t be doing this at all.” Self-doubt colored Dillon’s words. “Maybe they’d be better off in regular Social Services. But for these few, it didn’t work.”

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“Where would they be without you? Is that what you need to ask yourself? Where would Gom be? Where did he come from to begin with?” Soldier was intrigued by how these boys came to be here.

He thought Dillon was wonderful for doing what he did. He could see problems, though. It seemed that if Social Services ever got hold of this, they could all be taken away. That would be horrible for Gom, he knew, and probably for the ones he hadn't seen. What had Dillon meant by *regular* Social Services?

Gom squirmed a little, trying to get closer to Soldier. He put his arms up around Soldier's neck and settled again, sighing deeply. Soldier looked over at Dillon.

“What do you want me to do? I'll sit here all night if he'll get some sleep. You said he needs it bad. I'm afraid if we move him, he'll wake up and that will be that.”

“Maybe we should try. You need some sleep, too.”

“Okay, here goes.” He leaned forward and tried to pull Gom's arms from around his neck. Gom grunted and clung. Dillon tried to pry him away from Soldier, but they both stopped when Gom cried out.

“No. Please. I'll be good. No noise. I sorry. See. Shhhhh... please...” Gom wiggled and squirmed and Soldier eased the boy back against him again and shook his head at Dillon.

As soon as he was tightly held against Soldier's shoulder again, Gom settled and placed his face right into Soldier's neck. Gom's lips touched the skin on his neck and Soldier couldn't help the shiver that ran through his body. This precious child had been abused, hurt, scared.

“Leave him. Here, let's do this.” He slid off the log onto the ground, using it for a backrest. He motioned for Dillon to cover them with the thin blanket. Dillon slid down and covered all three of them, then retrieved the sandwich for Soldier and handed it over.

“Please, eat. I'll stay here 'til morning, too. The others sleep through the night with no problem. Shoot, waking them up is the problem. Thank you for being his bed tonight.”

Soldier smiled. No problem. He ate the sandwich, not even caring what was on it. When he finished it, he said, “Thanks. Come on over here and keep warm.”

Dillon didn't hesitate. It was summertime in Texas, but tonight it was cool. Soldier had seen Dillon shiver. It was chilly and he wanted to be close to this man, wanted to get to know Dillon, know his story.

Soldier gathered Dillon close and they settled in to sleep in the backyard of the house one of them owned and the other lived in. Life was really strange sometimes. Dillon turned a little and settled more comfortably against his shoulder. Soldier leaned his head and smelled Dillon's hair. How long had it been since he'd smelled shampoo on someone else and been turned on by something that simple? He very gently rubbed his chin over Dillon's hair, enjoying the softness. Dillon's head rested against Soldier's neck on the other side from Gom, and Dillon, like Gom, sighed deeply right before falling asleep.

He was already more interested in Dillon than he should be. He remembered Dillon touching his face. He shivered and he was hard in seconds. He almost groaned. What a day it had been. He'd been forced back into the world of people. It wasn't so bad with these two. He wondered what tomorrow would bring. He settled into his half-awake doze and hugged the two in his arms.

Soldier felt almost whole for the first time in more than two years. He'd had a purpose in the Army. He was good at what he did. He was getting a little of that feeling back. He was protecting, caring for, serving. One small, who had stolen a part of his heart that he had thought long frozen. The other, larger than the first one, who he was afraid would steal another part.

### Chapter Three

“Soldier...?” Gom’s soft little voice by his ear.

“Mmmhmmm?” Soldier’s answer was just as quiet.

“Did I wake you up?” Gom sounded a little afraid.

“Nah, I wasn’t sleepin’.”

“Yer eyes was closed,” Gom responded, pulling his head back to look at Soldier.

“Yeah. Restin’ ‘em. I don’t sleep much.”

“Me, either. Too scary. I sleep *good* on you. Thank you for holdin’ me. Are you tired of me?”

“Nope. You tired of me?” Soldier couldn’t resist teasing him.

“Silly. You feel good. I’m not scared with you. I gotta pee.” Like the child he was, Gom’s conversation hopped from one thing to another like a bunny.

“Okay. Up you go. You can go over there by that tree.” Soldier nodded his head to the side, indicating a tree over by the back corner of the yard.

“*Outside?*” Gom’s brows were heading for his hairline as he asked the question.

“Of course, outside. That’s one of the best things about being a boy. Didn’t you know?”

“Nuh-uh. Can I *really?*” They were still whispering, though Soldier doubted that Dillon was still asleep. He was probably enjoying the conversation.

“Of course. You don’t do it out in public, but back here in your own backyard with nobody watchin’, go for it.”

“Neat.”

Gom got up carefully, trying not to jostle Dillon, and went over to a tree and stood a minute. He turned back to Soldier as if to ask if it was okay. Soldier nodded at him and was tickled when Gom smiled at him. Gom took care of business and headed back.

He came and stood by Soldier. It was still very early, barely light out. He was waiting for an invite, it seemed.

“You want back under here for a little while longer?”

“Can I? I have not *ever* had good sleep like last night. Can I try to sleep a little more?” Soldier couldn’t imagine anyone turning that down.

“Come on. Don’t bump the big guy.”

Gom slipped down onto his leg and settled in again, just like he’d slept last night. It wasn’t long before he was sound asleep.

This time, the whisper came from the other side, “First time I’ve ever been called the big guy.”

Soldier smiled a little, “Compared to him, you are.”

“I should get up. You have to be cramped and sore. Did you sleep at all?”

“I got enough. You?”

“You *are* good to sleep with... on... I mean... shut up, Dillon. Got a shovel? I could dig a *deeper* hole.” Dillon blushed as he stammered through that.

“S okay. I’m glad you slept. Don’t worry about it. I’m not going to jump you. Even knowing we’re both gay, I wouldn’t ever expect anything. I know I’m not all that anymore.” *Well, why don’t you just run off at the mouth?* “Not that I ever was, uh, can I borrow that shovel?”

Dillon snorted softly and said, “I was just thinking the same thing. I think you *are* all that, and more. I would be interested, if you, I mean, well, if you would be...”

“You? As good-looking as you are, and as good a person as you are, would be interested in *me*? Right.”

”Are you talking about the scars? I don’t look at you and see scars. I would like to know more about you, hear your stories, even tell you some of mine, but I know what kind of man you are.”

“No, you don’t.” Soldier was blunt.

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“Yeah, I really do. You’re a loner. And I’d venture a guess and say you’re lonely. You’re strong. You’ve had a long, hard road after getting hurt and the hurts just keep on coming.” Dillon knew he was right as Soldier sat immobile. Dillon could read people.

“I don’t like to...” Soldier started, but Dillon cut him off.

“My scars are less and I deal with it every day. You care about people that you don’t even know. You step in to help.” Dillon hoped he wasn’t upsetting Soldier, but he kept on. Yeah, he knew this man pretty well.

“You’re making me sound like some do-gooder. I’m a loner, have been since I got out. I don’t deserve all these kind words.” Soldier said, closing his eyes for a moment. Dillon wondered if Soldier was wishing things were different, that he was not so alone.

“You sat uncomfortably all night and held a child just so he could get the sleep he so desperately needed. Just for that, I could kiss you. I mean, thank you. I am really going to have to invest in a really big shovel, huh?” Dillon ducked his head, embarrassed that he kept saying things that made him look foolish.

“Dillon, if you ever want to kiss me, you just give me a signal and I’ll find a way to make it happen. God, just the thought of having that sweet mouth on mine is enough to make me... hell, I’m gonna have to start digging with my bare hands if I don’t shut up.”

Dillon finally pulled away from his comfy nest against the big man’s shoulder and looked him in the eye.

“Hey, this is probably the only time we’ll be on the same level, with me sitting up and you slumped down like that. This might be our only chance. Kiss me?”

“What about Gom?” Soldier asked. “Though I gotta tell you, I’ve never wanted to kiss anyone so badly in his life. Just once. Just a taste.”

“Is he still out cold?”

“Yep.” Soldier said.

“Let’s chance it. We’ve only got a few minutes before I have to go in and start breakfast, okay?”

“Bring it here, Dillon. I want a taste.” Dillon leaned the few inches necessary to bring their mouths together. Dillon felt Soldier’s hand on the back of his head. As if he was going to go somewhere!

He opened his mouth and let Soldier do whatever he wanted. It had been so long since he’d felt another mouth on his. He couldn’t even remember. Oh, sweet heaven. This man, this huge man, knew gentle.

Dillon had expected Soldier to more or less attack his mouth, and he’d been okay with that, but Soldier was tentative. Soldier licked across his top lip, then pushed his tongue part way in and touched the tip of Dillon’s. Soldier pulled back and Dillon followed. That was evidently what Soldier wanted. Soldier sucked on Dillon’s tongue and had him breathing hard through his nose.

Soldier moved his fingers on the back of Dillon’s head and groaned a little. Dillon shivered against him. He pushed back into Dillon’s mouth and the kiss took on a little more bite. Soldier swept through and staked a claim, one that Dillon gladly gave up.



Dillon knew he'd do anything if Soldier would keep on kissing him. He took great pleasure in meeting and playing with the tongue moving back and forth into his mouth. Mercy, he knew what it simulated. Lord, he couldn't even *begin* to think about *that*.

They both heard Gom sigh and jerked away from each other. No freaking out the kids. They stilled, stunned. Dillon knew he was hooked. He wondered if Soldier was as into this as he was. God, he hoped so. And how weird was that?

Did the man have a last name? Or even a first one? He doubted he'd been born Soldier. What did he do? How did he live?

Dillon had a thought as Gom woke up and started to move a little. He watched Gom snuggle and raise his arm to pat Soldier's face. Gom was a goner, no doubt about it, but how did Soldier feel about all this?

"I need to know something, Soldier." Dillon would just ask him.

"Ask."

"What do you see happening now? I don't mean... uh... you know... I mean, about you and us and the boys and, well, do I tell them about you? I don't bring strangers into their lives. It's just too dangerous. But you're different." Dillon talked quietly, looking right into Soldier's eyes. "I know Gom will want to, but if you want to stay away from all of us, that's up to you."

This whole situation was so bizarre, he didn't know how to go forward. He looked to Soldier for answers.

"Believe me, this is new to me, too. I haven't talked to anyone in ages, really talked. It's been way longer since I even touched anyone, much less held or kissed them. I'm as freaked out as you are. But I feel good being with you and the little one here."

"We'd love to have you around. Do you need a place to stay? We have room, sort of. It's not in good shape, but it's a roof. So, I guess I'm asking if you want to throw your lot in with ours, as they say." There was so much Dillon didn't know about this man. Had he really just asked Soldier to move in with them? Was he crazy? He probably needed to run this by Daniel.

"You would offer that to me, when you know so little about me?" Soldier said aloud the same thing Dillon had thought. "You'd let me move in with you and your boys?" Soldier had a sudden thought. "It is all boys, right?"

"Oh, yes. All boys. Hey, Gom, I know you're awake and listening to us. Not nice. Heads up, buddy," Dillon said.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to listen. I just like being here. I never felt so... so..." he stopped suddenly, looking like he was in pain. Dillon figured out that Gom had realized that it sounded

like he was saying that he felt better with Soldier than with Dillon and that evidently horrified him.

“Oh, oh, Dill, I didn’t mean...” Tears gathered, and Dillon could tell he’d been right. Gom thought he had insulted Dillon by liking Soldier so much and being so easy with him.

Soldier saved the day... again.

“Gom. Chill, dude. Dillon knows you love him best. I just make a better bed. Dill is nice to curl up with, huh? And he takes care of you and he wanted you to be his special helper. Does he look upset?”

Gom looked up with drenched eyes and, when he saw Dillon smiling at him, he launched himself into Dillon’s arms. Dillon hugged him and laughed.

“Come on, now. No tears. I kind of liked using Soldier to sleep on, too. But I don’t think we need to tell the others about it.” Until Soldier told Dillon what he wanted, they’d keep it quiet. “I should go in soon. They’d all sleep all day if we let them, huh? We’re the early birds. What do you think we should say to Soldier?” Dillon asked the little boy.

“I love you, Soldier. Please don’t go away. What if I need you again?” Gom stopped and thought a second, as if afraid he was asking too much. “I don’t have to sleep like that all the time. I won’t bother you again, but... well, would you like to stay with us?” *Those eyes*, hopeful and pleading.

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God, Soldier thought, go ahead and watch him melt. This kid could already get anything he wanted from him.

“I’ll make sure the others don’t bother you. But... if you don’t want to... I won’t fuss... and I’ll try not to cry, you know, so you won’t feel bad. Promise.” Gom sounded so serious with his vow of trying not to cry. Soldier doubted if he could stick to it, though.

Good Lord, this child got to him like no one ever before. Soldier had some thinking to do, and some serious shopping. More thinking. He looked at Gom.

”Will you do me a favor? I’d like to talk to Dillon a minute before he has to go in. Will you sneak back in and see if everyone is okay?. It would help us out a lot.”

“Sure. Are you going to talk about... no, I know it is not my biz-niss. Right, Dill? I’ll go. Can I hug you in case I don’t see you again?”

“Tell you what. You hug me, and I promise you’ll see me again. I won’t go away without seeing you again soon. Deal?” Soldier opened his arms for the boy to settle on him again. He felt the little arms go round his neck and he squeezed gently, careful of the little ribs he could feel too many of through the thin shirt.

Gom put his face next to the scarred side of Soldier's and moved his cheek up and down against him, obviously a caress.

"You're my secret, special friend. I'm glad I met you. I feel real good today. I won't tell anybody, okay?"

"For right now, that would be good. We'll see about later. Go on in now, okay?" Hell, Soldier thought *he* might cry any minute. What *was* it about this child?

"Okay. Dill, you want me to do anything for you?" What a little man.

"No, hon. I'll be in with you in a few minutes and we'll start breakfast, and maybe the smell will bring them down. It's fried bologna this morning. Scoot now."

Gom scooted and Dillon and Soldier were left in silence. Soldier didn't know what to say. He felt like he'd entered another time and space, and he didn't know how to act.

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Dillon knew what he *wanted* to happen. He wanted to get to know more about this man. He wanted Soldier to come in and let them take care of him a little. Dillon wanted to make Soldier feel like he was part of a group, not so alone. And of course, he wanted to see if Soldier really was that good a kisser, or if it was just that it had been so long. But all the things he wanted seemed selfish. What did Soldier want?

"I need to take care of some things. I've been out of... contact with people for about the last two years." He looked at Dillon. "But I don't know how I feel right now. This has been a really strange experience. Not necessarily in a bad way."

"Can I say I hope you liked what we did... the kiss...?" Dillon blushed, but kept on with his list. "And I thank you again for what you did for Gom. That was amazing. I would like to get to know you better."

Dillon wanted Soldier to believe this part. "The scars are *so* unimportant to me. The only thing I care about is that you were so hurt. I'm sorry for that. As far as them making you less desirable... bullshit. I've never wanted anyone the way I want you. But I'm used to not getting what I want, so don't think you have to consider me in your plans... unless you want to, I mean. I'm going to keep going 'til I need that shovel, aren't I?" He made quick little digging motions.

"You're cute." Soldier looked surprised at himself. Dillon would bet that he'd never used the word cute before.

"Yeah, that's me. If you're on the right side... or the left side, if you want to be literal."

“Uh... idiot.”

“Hmmm?”

“Well, if my scars, massive and ugly, mean nothing to you, why would you think yours, smaller and not so ugly as mine, would mean anything to me... except that you got hurt? Oh, and I’d like to get my hands on who did it.”

“Really? They don’t bother you?”

“Uh... idiot,” Soldier said.

“You’re repeating yourself.”

“If I have to.”

“Okay. I get it. So, we agree that our scars don’t bother each other. But I get the feeling you’re leaving, and I don’t know when I’ll see you again. I’m just corny and romantic enough, believe it or not, to want to know if I’ll see you again.”

“Didn’t I tell Gom I’d be back? He’s something else. I’ve never seen anyone like him. Besides, I’d come back just for another kiss,” Soldier said with a smile.

Dillon smiled, too, as he said, “I could *so* go back for more of that. But I’m going to go in and take care of business just like always.” He was trying to gear himself up to saying goodbye to Soldier after discovering such an interest in him. “I’m just going to think about you, like, all the time and wonder when I’ll see you again and what it’ll be like and if we’ll get another chance to... kiss, or anything else.”

“Anything... *everything* else sounds good to me. You’ll see me... probably before the week is out. I have some serious thinking to do. Plans to make that will include some decisions about what to do with my life from here on out. I’ve got people to contact. I suddenly feel so energized.” Soldier looked contemplative for a few moments, as if already making plans.

“I’m hoping that’s a good thing.” Dillon didn’t want to think Soldier felt forced into doing anything because of last night.

“I’ve been in limbo for a long time. Bouncing around, alone, and feeling like life was hopeless. I’ve felt for too long like there was nothing in it for me. But, I thought... pretty much all night... and I might have something that I could do with my life that would make it worth something after all.”

“I hope you find what you’re looking for. I think you’re worth so much. I’m going to go now before I need a shovel, a hoe, a rake, and a wheelbarrow.” Dillon blushed.

Soldier laughed and then stopped abruptly. Dillon knew why right away. It had probably been more than two years since the man had something to laugh about.

Dillon smiled at him and couldn't help it; he leaned over and took Soldier's face in his hands and kissed his mouth, and then put his face to the rough scars and moved his cheek against them in a sweet caress.

"That meant more to me than all the money stashed away, all the medals I've thrown away, all the words from all the people who've tried to help me before." Soldier said. It was just enough to confuse Dillon.

"Before I lose it completely and do jump your bones right here in the backyard..." Soldier took a quick kiss, set Dillon aside and promised, "I'll be back."

Dillon went inside the house, refusing to turn and watch him leave. All day, all the next three days and nights, he kept saying to himself, "He'll be back."

## Chapter Four

Soldier spent one whole day just thinking. He thought about the sexy, intriguing man he'd just met. Realizing that he could spend quite a long time thinking about Dillon, he made himself move on to planning for the future. The idea of doing something with the inhabitants of that big old house became the impetus for his day of reflection and planning.

Once he realized his life was going to change in a major way, he decided he was tired of being on the fringe of it. Both Gom and Dillon's responses to his scars had shown him that, in the grand scheme of things, they weren't important. He'd stood in front of the mirror and looked at them objectively. For so long he'd felt isolated and freakish because of them and now after this response from one man and a little boy, he felt different about himself. Better, for sure.

On the one hand, he'd gone through so many scenes where people responded in strong negative ways to them. On the other hand, he'd tried to tell himself that he didn't care what others thought. His acceptance by both of these dear people reinforced his belief that the scars were just a part of him. Certainly they were nothing to be ashamed of, or to hide. If people couldn't handle the scars, it was their problem, not his. By God, he had a life to live.

Soldier was no longer in pain. He was not going to live like a victim any longer. He couldn't believe he'd gone from a strong and confident soldier, brave and honorable, to a quiet, secretive, lonely and damaged, almost pathetic excuse for a man. The more he thought about it, the madder he got at himself. How could he have allowed himself to live like he'd done something wrong? He'd served his country, saved lives, and had come through the hell of recovery. The rest of his life could stand for something. Soldier became energized just thinking about the future. For the first time in a long time, he was attacking the future instead of just letting life happen to him.

The second day, he contacted his attorney, James Kindall, to get information from him. The man sounded shocked to hear from him, no doubt because it had been so long since Soldier had instigated a conversation with him. He seemed even more surprised at some of the questions he heard from Soldier. The attorney hadn't believed Soldier was serious. Soldier had assured James he was of sound mind.

"You want to what?" James's voice was incredulous.

Soldier figured it did sound a little out there, and sudden. "I'm going to find out all the ways I can help Dillon and the boys he's responsible for at the house. I can see you think I've lost my mind, but frankly, James, I think I've finally found it. I've been drifting through this life. Just thinking about all the ways they need help and all I can offer makes me feel strong, excited, and ready to take it on."

"Have you talked this over with this Dillon person?" James asked, ever the voice of reason.

“Not about all of it. I told him I’d be back. If he doesn’t want anything to do with me, in particular, helping with them, then I’ll find a way to finance it. I will find ways to help, and I want your assistance in this in as many ways as we can come up with.” Soldier felt a twinge of fear that Dillon wouldn’t be as excited about all this as he was.

“I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Soldier grinned at James’ pessimistic attitude. “You just take care of all the things I’ve asked so far and be ready for more things as I encounter them. I know a lot of this has been vague, but until I have a better idea about how things are run over there, I have to be careful. I don’t want to cause a problem for them.” Soldier just knew he wanted to make things better. He had to find a way to do it without bringing Social Services down on their heads or scaring any of the boys away. Now he just had to get Dillon on board with the idea.

“You’re the boss. I’ll get started on the things that are concrete and wait to hear more about the rest.”

“Got that right. Thanks for helping, James. This is a good thing. I promise.” Soldier said, leaving James to start on his requests and heading across town to another office. He knew he’d have some explaining to do there, too. For someone who generally used very little of the money he had, he was getting ready to ask for an extremely large amount. It was his, after all. He had enough money to buy himself anything he wanted. He’d just never wanted all that much.

Soldier had been a wealthy man before he went to war, last of a great banking family. He hadn’t spent what he’d earned in all the time he had served. The Army had paid for his hospitalization after the fire bomb had nearly obliterated his face, neck, and left shoulder. He’d endured months of pain, isolation, surgeries, and rehab.

Through all of it, he hadn’t talked more than a few necessary words. He’d gotten a medical discharge, honorable, since he had managed to save three of his buddies before he fell. He remembered them coming to see him in the hospital, but they finally stopped when he didn’t respond to their gratitude. He now felt ashamed of that. He’d been so caught up in his own pain, he hadn’t allowed them to voice their feelings. He should have, no matter how much it would have embarrassed him.

Soldier’d been unable to connect with anyone since returning. He knew he had gotten a certain reputation for being cold and alone, but he couldn’t help it. It was like he’d been frozen inside. He didn’t hate people, and he wasn’t a danger to anyone. He just didn’t like to be around others, especially since he was covered with scars and was larger than most people. He was tired of being stared at, whispered about, and avoided. That little Gom had put an end to that in one meeting. Suddenly, Soldier wanted to meet and talk and share and touch and love. It was like he was waking up from a long nightmare.

As he headed to his accountant’s office, dressed in a navy suit, vastly different from his comfy cammos, he thought about all that had transpired to bring him here.

How did they live in the house, how come no one checked on them, and what were they doing? He wanted to know. Why? He owned the house. Hell, he owned the whole fuckin' block.

Soldier felt a little shiver as he thought about pretty Dillon again. Lord, he didn't need to be thinking like that right now. Dillon was a delicious little thing, though. Soldier was anxious to see him again and see if these feelings were real.

"You want how much, to do what? Man, uh, Soldier, are you okay? Are you sure you're in your right mind?" Jason Compton asked, waving a hand at Soldier. Soldier allowed the man his humor and incredulity. After all, he'd expected it. This was a big change from the meager amounts he'd asked for in the past just to get by on in life. Jason was a friend, though they didn't see each other often. Soldier'd noticed Jason's hesitation at calling him Soldier, but the man would get used to it. It's what Soldier was comfortable with now. Jason had been there for him through all he'd been through, in the background, where Soldier was more easy with him.

"I want to go over my holdings here, get an idea about what I need to do to set these plans in motion. I'm going to present them as a done deal and hope that Dillon will accept what I've done and go along with it. I'm trusting you with all this information. I'm going to need your help with a lot of things in the future. I want us on the same page."

"Are you sure about this? This is going to be a lot of money, and no end in sight if what all you told me is correct. You're sure this is what you want to do with your life. You've never even acted like..." Jason trailed off as Soldier stood over him at the desk. Soldier wasn't trying to intimidate Jason, he was just big enough to do it naturally.

"I'm sure. I've got James working on the legalities of the transfers and the joint deals. You are to make it work with the accounts and setting up things as I've outlined here." Soldier handed Jason a folder that had pages of notes he'd written the previous day.

"I think you've really thought about this. I have to say, I'm totally shocked. But I can also say I've never seen you look so well, happy or excited. I'll look at this and do as you wish. Let's get to it and hammer out the details. This is all very strange. Tell me about the house again, and the boys there."

Soldier told Jason what he felt he could without causing a problem for Dillon and the boys. He would tell both James and Jason more as he was able to and they got farther along with their plans. He left Jason's office with forms and checks and more details to think about. Soldier walked with a new spring in his step. Supper that night tasted better than food had in a long time.

His suite at one of the bigger hotels was big and comfortable, but he noticed none of it as he returned. He sat in a large chair in front of the window and watched the sky as he thought about his plans for the next day. The desire to see Dillon again was strong, but Soldier had things he had to do first.

He spent the next day shopping. His marathon made a lot of people very happy. Money was no object as Soldier bought clothes, two cell phones, opened an account at a large grocery chain,



with both his and Dillon's names on it, and another at the Costco store near their side of town. He ended the day by purchasing a brand new silver Hummer. Why such a big conspicuous vehicle for someone who was used to being just the opposite? Soldier figured he needed something that big for all the things he was planning and he was breaking out of his shell and jumping into life with both feet, and a big, shiny, showy but functional piece of transportation.

This was all a little drastic. It was a complete turnaround in his life. People may think he was crazy. But for the first time in years, he felt happy, honest to God, *happy*. Soldier felt like he was doing something good. He was excited about his plans and hoped he wasn't being too presumptuous. Having done all this on his own, if he found that Dillon hated the idea and wouldn't go with it, he'd find another way to use his plans.

Soldier was anxious to tell Dillon about the things he and his team had been arranging for the future and safety of the house. Making sure that the boys would be able to stay there and be free from any kind of danger was important to him. Soldier could tell how much Dillon worried about it and he hoped that Dillon would accept his help and let him be part of it all.

Soldier had high hopes He shook his head as the thought passed through. *Hope*. Something he hadn't had for a long time.

There was no doubt in his mind that it was spending the night holding that beautiful little boy, so sweet and so needy, that had tipped him over from living alone on the fringe of life to jumping in and wanting to take it on. Well, that, and holding sexy Dillon in his other arm all night.

Soldier drove his Hummer to the grocery and filled two carts. Going through the aisles like a madman, he bought fried chicken, pancake mixes (reading the back to make sure he had everything needed to fix them in the cart), milk, juices, and coffee. He bought several boxes of cereal, being sure to get the honey kind of Cheerios for Gom.

In the first aid aisle, he bought bandages, antibiotic ointment, sunscreen, and rubbing alcohol. Then it was on to the paper aisle. Soldier got paper plates, towels, plastic cups, toilet paper, and then hit the next aisle, where he purchased little individual toothpastes and brushes and shampoos and soaps.

He got some strange looks as he tried to wrangle the carts to the checkout counter. He'd grown used to the other looks, the ones that stared and then dropped from his scars. It just didn't matter anymore. He grinned as he rolled all of the goods out to the Hummer.

After driving to the house, Soldier pulled into the overgrown driveway. Knowing he was being watched as he got out, he didn't even try to go to the front door. Locking the Hummer, he headed for the back door.

Soldier knew he looked vastly different, standing here in khaki pants and light blue dress shirt, and if Dillon wasn't there, he doubted if he'd be let in. He knocked, and after waiting a few minutes, he quietly said, "Gom? Are you in there? Dillon? This is Soldier. Will you let me in? I know I look different, but I promise you there'll be no problems..." Before he could get the rest

out, the door flew open and he was attacked. Good thing he hadn't brought anything with him. He caught Gom as the little boy launched himself into Soldier's arms and Soldier had a ready laugh for him.

"Soldier! I can't *believe* yer here! Dillon said we had to let you go if you wanted to, but I hoped so hard every day." Gom cupped Soldier's face to make sure he was paying close attention to his words. "Are you gonna come in? Please, don't leave this time, okay?"

Soldier saw Dillon standing behind the door, looking at him. Dillon's face was a little more reserved, a little wary. He was quiet, his eyes half closed, as if not wanting his feeling to be clearly shown. Soldier knew he was responsible for the frown and the sad look.

"Hey, Dillon."

"Soldier. You, uh... look different. I'm not sure what to think."

Soldier watched Dillon's rapid pulse in his throat above the faded blue T-shirt he was wearing. He wondered if it was fear, anger, or excitement. The fleeting picture of his lips on that very spot, touching that mesmerizing beat made Soldier wince. If he only would get the chance.

"I'll explain everything in a few minutes. Will you let me pull my vehicle around back here and unload some stuff? I... uh... kind of went shopping today and got some things for the boys." Soldier was excited about giving them the needed items. He hoped Dillon let him follow through on his plans.

"Gom, will you help the others unpack all the sacks while Dillon and I go talk out back again? We need to get some things ironed out. You have to be responsible, though. There's a lot of stuff and it's all for you all, but you're not to get into anything 'til we come back in. Deal?" Soldier asked, continuing Dillon's plan of making Gom feel a sense of worth and strength.

"Sure, Soldier. I'll help you. Okay, Dill?" Gom looked to Dillon for permission to do as Soldier asked. "I won't let them get into anything 'til you say it's all right. Hey, Soldier?" Gom looked up into Soldier's face and then leaned to his ear and whispered to him. "I'm so glad you came back. I missed you. I think Dill did, too. He was real quiet."

Soldier held him tight and whispered, "I'm back, buddy. We'll see if he lets me stay."

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Gom giggled and Dillon was surprised at the sound coming from the boy. He had to smile at *that*. Gom jumped down and came to take Dillon's hand and pulled him out the door to Soldier.

"Come on, Dill, tell him it's okay to stay. He came back, Dill, he came back. He *said* he would, and he *did*." Obviously, Gom wasn't used to people keeping promises.

“Okay, bud. Stay in here. I’ll go with Soldier and we’ll move that big thing he’s driving and see what all he’s been up to. We’ll see you in a minute.”

Dillon walked out onto the tiny step and Gorn closed the door behind him. Now he was standing beside Soldier and he didn’t know what to say. He didn’t know this well-dressed man. Dillon didn’t know what to think about him.

Dillon had gone on as usual, making the rounds for food and other necessary items for the group in the big old house, checking in with Daniel, and feeling silly for missing someone he barely knew.

“Hey.” Soldier touched his hand, briefly, uncertainly.

“Hey yourself. Are you the same Soldier who left here a few days ago?”

Soldier looked right at Dillon as he said, “The same in some ways, very different in others. But I’m still very much interested in you and your boys and your life here. You asked if I’d throw my lot in with you. You asked that without knowing anything about me. That was very... kind, sweet... brave of you. Now, well I’m going to ask you to be brave again.”

“Uh, I guess so. What have you gone and done?”

Soldier reached out and touched Dillon’s hand again. “Come on, let’s go get the... thing I bought. A Hummer. Looks like what I went around in over there. Weird. Should be good for what I want it for, though.”

They walked around and Soldier opened the doors and they both climbed in. Before Dillon could look in the back and see all that Soldier had bought, Soldier turned in his seat to face Dillon.

“Are you upset that I came back?”

“Upset, no. I... you just seem so different now. I don’t know you like this. I’m not sure what to think,” Dillon admitted.

“Will you let me talk to you... in the back like I said? We’ll take all this in for the boys and they can get it unloaded and then you’ll be able to decide where we’re going. I’ll leave it all in your hands. This is your operation, after all. But I promise you no harm will come to you or your boys because of me... or what I hope to do. Will you trust me?”

“I trusted you enough to sleep in your arms after knowing you a few hours. I should trust you enough to listen to you.” Dillon turned and gasped when he saw that the back of the huge Hummer was filled with bags of stuff.

“What in the world have you done?”

“Dillon, I had *fun*. For the first time in years, I actually had fun. I shopped and thought about someone, or several someones, besides myself. It was great, therapeutic even. I’ll tell you all of it, I promise. Let’s get this done, okay?”

They drove around behind the house and Soldier parked close to the back door. It opened a crack and Dillon nodded to Gom. He came out, his eyes nearly popping out of his head when he saw the big Hummer.

“Wow. What *is* that? It’s so *big*.”

“It’s a Hummer. Maybe I’ll give you a ride in it sometime. Would you like that?”

Dillon watched as Soldier waited for Gom’s answer.

“You mean leave here?” Gom clearly couldn’t imagine being brave enough.

“Yeah, maybe.” Soldier smiled and said, “Help us, okay? You hold the door and we’ll get all this inside. You put the stuff in the fridge that needs to stay cold and we’ll be inside in a few minutes. I need to talk to Dillon for a little bit, then we’ll let you all dive in. Okay?” Soldier smiled at the boy to enlist his help and support.

They got the job done and the door was closed. The two men stepped behind the Hummer and headed for the back of the yard. The Hummer made a sort of blind. Dillon doubted they could be seen from the back of the house.

They sat down on the log and Dillon waited. Soldier seemed reluctant to start now that the time was here.

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What if Dillon didn’t want Soldier involved? He’d been head of this household for a while now and he might not want interference. Now that the moment was at hand, Soldier was feeling a little uncertain.

“Soldier?”

“There’s so much to tell you. I guess I’d feel better if I knew you were glad to see me. Did I dream all that the other night?”

“No. You didn’t dream it. We slept out here.” Dillon smiled now, hesitantly. “We kissed. It was great. Gom fell in love. He missed you like crazy.”

“What about you?”

“I missed you more.” A giant gust of a sigh came from beside him and Dillon turned to look Soldier in the eyes. “I thought you weren’t coming back.” Dillon was obviously trying not to

make it sound like an accusation. “I thought something had happened to you. I didn’t know how to check. It wasn’t a good few days for me. Then I’d get mad that I was missing you so much when we barely knew each other.” Dillon still sounded a little put out, admitting he had missed Soldier so much.

“Whew. Okay. At least we’re still on the same page. Do you want a kiss as bad as I do? Then I promise I’ll give you a fast but thorough version of what’s going on.” Soldier tried not to sound like the beggar he felt he was.

They were in each other’s arms in seconds and both moaned as their mouths met. Soldier brought Dillon over onto his lap and their groins met in a most satisfying way. Soldier attacked and plundered Dillon’s mouth like he was the whole starving Army. He licked, he flicked, and he thrust. He couldn’t get enough. He went deeper and harder and was afraid he was going to bruise Dillon’s lips, but he couldn’t seem to stop. He pulled back and said, roughly, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I don’t mean to hurt you...”

“Shut up. More.” Dillon attacked right back. *Well, well, feisty little man.* He took just as strong a kiss as Soldier had gotten. He moved his hips against Soldier’s and moved his tongue in the same way. He seemed just as hungry. He licked and sucked and tasted and then started over.

“I was so afraid you’d disappeared from my life. I was so interested and so excited. Then I worried that you were hurt or something. *Then* I was just resigned to you being gone from my life. It wasn’t a good time for me.” Dillon was obviously trying to make up for that now. He sucked on Soldier’s tongue and hummed as Soldier’s arms tightened around him.

“Ooooooh, baby. We’ve got to stop or I’m gonna strip you and throw you down behind this log and take you in all the ways I’ve been thinking about for days.”

“You have? I mean, been thinking about me?” Dillon looked delighted.

“Do you doubt it? I was here the other night... and morning. I was into it. Of course I thought about you, a lot, especially at night. I want to see where we can go. I know where I want to go, but we have to get things settled. We’re supposed to be talking here. I’m going to have to let you go for right now.” He snatched another quick kiss and picked Dillon up and put him beside him.

“Damn, you’re strong.”

“Yeah, and you’re gorgeous and sexy and hot as hell. Now let me tell you what I’ve been doing. I really hope you like it and want to let me be part of your life, and the boys’.”

Soldier noted that Dillon shivered at the words, and he hoped that it wasn’t in fear or denial.

“I am a *very* rich man. I know it wasn’t evident when we met. I was coming off a really hard time in my life, as you know. I was as lost as the boys you work with in there. Meeting you and Gom and spending the night holding you both changed my life. It made me want to live again.

Don't get me wrong, I wasn't heading toward ending it all or anything like that. I just wasn't really living, you know."

"Gom really took to you. He missed you terribly. He hasn't slept, I know that," Dillon said.

Soldier looked closely at Dillon and told him how things changed. "I felt good, really *good* just knowing I helped that sweet child sleep when he needed it. And, God knows, I loved holding you. But that's another story."

Dillon blushed at his words and Soldier wanted to take him back in his arms again. He fought it and continued.

"I'm the last in my family. My grandfather and my father were in banking and they invested well. I could *never* spend all I have. I never even touched all I made in the service. It's just been building, also well-invested." He made a gesture with his hand as if to say it all meant nothing to him.

"So, you're rich?"

"Yeah. So, here I found myself with a renewed interest in life. Wanting to help in a situation that needed what I could give. I felt good about maybe being able to help you all. Uh, the reason I was here to begin with is... uh... I own a lot of property around here, including the house, this house."

"Oh, *man*. I'm sorry. I'll..."

"Shhh. I was just kind of rambling around looking at things here and there, checking on different holdings around the state, and got interested in what was happening here in Parkington. I'm thrilled the house is being used like this."

"I didn't know. I'll..."

It was important that Dillon understood the next part. "Wait, please. You're repeating yourself. I've been to my lawyer and accountant in the last few days. I found out that someone went to the city and found that the house wasn't being used, asked around and found the caretaker, followed the trail to the right office and got permission to use it. I'm surprised the Social Services allows you all to stay in there with it in the shape it's in. It needs a lot of work, Dillon. It's a wonder they didn't shut you down."

"I've told you. We're kind of under their radar. We're not an established bona fide Social Services home. We're working on different things to come up to par, but right now, I'm mostly working with Daniel. He keeps the brass off our backs and out of our business. He covers for us, so to speak. It's not perfect, but it works for us and we've gotten by with it. So far, it's been the best thing for these boys."

“I’ve arranged for the future use of this house. It’s yours. I have opened accounts at grocers and other places in both our names. I hope you don’t mind. I also opened a bank account in both our names.” Soldier watched as Dillon’s eyes got bigger, though the young man stayed quiet and still and listened. Soldier hoped he didn’t sound like some crazed stalker. Deciding to get it all out, he continued.

“Now this doesn’t have anything to do with you and me. This is strictly business. I want to be part of your... thing here. I like what you’re doing.” Soldier hoped Dillon recognized the sincerity in his voice. Here was another point that Soldier wanted Dillon to understand and approve. “I want to see it continue. I want you to be able to do it legally and with the backing you need to give these kids what *they* need.”

“I’m speechless. I really don’t know what to say.”

“I’ve been a little worried you’d think I was stepping on your toes. I don’t want to take your place. I’d like to work with you... under you.” An honest slip of the tongue, but a vivid image nonetheless. “Well, don’t take that the wrong way. I *mean*, I know you’re the boss, I know nothing about what all you do. I’m just impressed by it and want to help.”

Now Soldier was to the asking part. He prayed the answer was what he hoped for. “Will you let me? Can we at least try and see if we could work together to help these boys?” Since he’d been doing most of the talking, and Dillon looked like he was in shock, Soldier waited.

Dillon sat, obviously stunned, for a few minutes. Soldier knew that Dillon had a lot to take in. Here the man Dillon had thought was more or less homeless owned not only the house *he* lived in, but maybe half the town.

Soldier figured Dillon was thinking about him being rich, super rich, and wanting to help them. He thought it probably had blown Dillon’s mind that he’d opened accounts with *his* name on them, too. It was probably overwhelming. He sat quietly and let all of the information settle in with Dillon.

“I... I... Soldier, I can’t believe all this. My mind is reeling.” Dillon had a crease in his forehead as he frowned, evidently trying to process all he’d just heard.

“Can we try? Just for a few days? Spend some time. Let me meet the other boys and learn all you do and what needs to be done. Let’s see if there’s a way to make this more legal so you don’t have to sneak and hide and be afraid all the time. I don’t understand how much Social Services has to do with your group here.”

“Oh, we’re legal, just not typical. This is kind of an off-shoot of Daniel’s shelter. My boys just have special needs that can’t be met through the usual channels. We’re kind of off the radar, so no sponsors, no advertising, not too much in the way of help. We get by. Right now it’s what’s best for the boys.” Dillon supplied.

Soldier was talking fast, hoping that he could get all his points across and Dillon would agree to them. “Hell, I’ll adopt them all, if I have to. I don’t want anything bad to happen to any of your boys and I’m scared you’ve been just really lucky not getting caught. It would be horrible if the authorities came and separated you all.” He put his hand up and smoothed Dillon’s brow, erasing the worry-crease, trying to ease the freaked out look in Dillon’s eyes.

It seemed that Dillon had finally gotten some of his thoughts together and threw them out. “I’m in shock. This is your house? I’m a little lost here. Are you sure you want to be part of this? I meant it the other night, but I thought it was a situation where I was helping *you*. Looks like now you’re the one helping.”

“I was afraid that might bother you,” Soldier sighed.

“No. No, Soldier. I don’t care *who* helps these boys. I’m not looking for glory. I don’t have to be the one. It would be great to have some help. I imagine the others’ll love you as much as Gom does.” Just saying his name must have reminded Dillon of how long they’d been out there, leaving Gom in charge. “Oh shit. We should go back in.”

“You’re sure? I don’t want you to have second thoughts later.”

Dillon looked at Soldier and said, “I’ve listened and thought about it. I believe it’s a good thing, a good plan. Please. Stay. Come in with me and meet the other boys. We’ll give this a try, a trial, and see what we can work out.”



## Chapter Five

They got up and went toward the back door, which opened as soon as they hit the porch.

“I thought you was *never* comin’ back. Dill, he got *chicken!* And we had to *wait*. Can we eat now? We’re dyin’. And there’s cold milk and *juice* and Cheerios and, oh, Soldier! Are you gonna stay here?” Soldier wasn’t sure Gom even took a breath in that whole long speech.

“For a while, for sure, maybe longer. Is that okay with you?”

Gom jumped again and Soldier caught him and hugged him tight. He’d missed this little guy. Gom took Soldier’s face in his hands and said, seriously, “I missed you so much. I’m happy you came back and you didn’t even have to bring all that stuff... but... can I have some chicken now?”

Soldier laughed and hugged him again, setting him down. “Sounds good. Are there any legs in there?”

Dillon yelled for all the boys to come on in and meet Soldier. He began to move some of the things off the somewhat rickety table in the center of the kitchen and set them over on the counter so they could put the chicken out for the others to eat. There were two big boxes of chicken and some containers that had potatoes and beans in them.

Soldier noticed the poor state of the linoleum floor, cracked and stained in places. A couple of the cabinet doors were barely hanging on, their hinges rusty. The refrigerator in the corner by the cabinets could be heard on occasion, making a disturbing hissing noise. He wasn’t sure it would last much longer. The bags of groceries he’d brought in were lined up along the counter, also cracked and stained. The other bags, not food, were sitting in the floor by the door to what he figured would be a utility room, if it had any of the appliances that would usually denote such a function.

Soldier watched as several boys filed into the room. He would have expected them to come tumbling in laughing and arguing over who got what, but they were silent and they stood just inside the door.

“Dill?” the tallest one said, hesitantly.

“Okay, guys. You trust me, right?” Dillon looked at each of them in turn.

They nodded, but still looked at Soldier with doubt.

Gom took over. He took Soldier’s hand and pulled him over to the group.

“Tommy, this is my friend, Soldier. He’s really big and strong, but you don’t have to be afraid of him. He’s really nice.” Tommy seemed to the leader of the young ones. Gom was earnest in his need for Tommy to accept Soldier.

Gom continued. “He let me sleep on him all night. He won’t hurt any of us. I know he’s a good man. Dill likes him, too.” The little general now had firmness in his voice. “Now, you all be *nice* to him and he might stay. I want him to stay real bad. Okay?” Now he was back to pleading. This was clearly very important to Gom.

Soldier spoke up, “Hey, guys. I met Dill and Gom the other night and liked them. I want to help out here. I’m not turning anybody in or making anybody leave.” He wanted them to know they were safe here. He wasn’t changing that.

“This is your house. Dillon has said I could stay here for a while, but I guess it’s really up to you all.” He swept his gaze over all of them, lingering on Tommy. “If you don’t want me here, then I’m sure Dillon’s not going to go against what you all say. But I promise I’m only here to help. And Dillon is still the boss of this outfit, okay?”

“If Dill says you’re all right, I guess it’s okay. Did you buy all this so we’d let you stay?” the big one, Tommy, asked.

“I bought this stuff for you all. It’s yours, whether I stay or go. And there’s money for more... again, whether I’m here or not. I’m not trying to buy my way in. I’ll earn my way. Maybe there’s some work to be done here that I could help out with. What do you say? Can I stay?”

A little one, almost as small as Gom, spoke up, bravely, “Wha’ happened to yo’ face?”

“Ben!” Dillon started to say, but Soldier put his hand up. He squatted down to the little guy’s level and said,

“I was in the Army. I was in the war and my unit was ambushed and a lot of the others died. I helped save some of them, but I wasn’t able to help all of them because a bomb went off and got me good. It burned me and knocked me out. When I woke up, I was in the hospital.”

Soldier smiled at the little one, trying to make the story not so grim. “They tried to help me, and they did the best they could. But I was burned so bad that, well, it’s just gonna be ugly. Don’t be scared by it, okay?”

“Can I touch it?”

Soldier silently groaned. What was it with kids? They all wanted to touch his scars. He nodded and took the little boy’s hand and put it on his cheek and rubbed it a little.

“Ooooh. It feels funny. Does it hurt?”

“Not anymore. Anybody else, while we’re doing this? I can’t believe this is more interesting than fried chicken, but if you want to, have at it.”

A couple of others came forward and touched him, their eyes wide with awe.

“It’s even worse than Dill’s. You’re a big, big man. You won’t hit us, will you?” This from a boy with thick glasses and eyes that moved back and forth in a very distracting manner. Soldier tried not to stare.

“There’s no way in hell I will ever hit you. I promise you that. Okay?” Soldier’s answer got a nod in response.

“What if you get mad?” That question was from a fierce-looking little black boy.

“I can’t swear I’ll never get mad, but I can swear I won’t ever take it out on anyone in this house. Deal?”

“Yeah. Want some chicken?”

“Yes, I thought you’d never ask. You got any chairs?”

“No, we just stand around the table and eat. It’s okay.” The kid shrugged and turned back to the group.

Soldier looked at Dillon and saw him smile at all that’d been said. Soldier had an idea. “May I serve them?”

“Sure. Go ahead. I’ll get them something to drink.” Dillon turned to do just that.

“Okay, guys. How about this? I’ll stand over the chicken and you come up, tell me who you are, and how I can remember your name.” Soldier looked at each of them again. “Just something about you... not your whole life story or anything, cause I’m getting kinda hungry here, but something short so I can remember all of you.”

He didn’t want them to think he wanted them to spill their guts to him, a stranger. “Like, I’m Soldier. That’s what I go by now. I was a soldier and I was proud to serve my country and that’s the name I want to be called. So, who’s first?”

Gom came forward and held up a paper plate and said, “I’m Gom, and I love you.”

Soldier nearly dropped the piece of chicken in his hand. Grown men were not supposed to have tears in their eyes, but this child got to him in ways he never knew could happen. He cleared his throat so he could talk around the lump in it.

“Gom, huh? I’m not gonna forget you. Been sleepin’ lately?” He sucked in his breath when Gom just shook his head no and held his plate out. Soldier didn’t know where he was sleeping, but he bet there’d be a living blanket on him tonight.

He noticed that the others were in line by height, with Tommy in the back. They were still a silent group. He put a leg and a wing on Gom’s plate and sent him on to Dillon who was now ready with the other things for the plates.

The next one up was the brave little toucher. “My name is Ben. You might forget me... cause I can’t think of nothin’ to tell you.” He was almost in tears.

“How about... you’ve got the biggest brown eyes in the world?”

“I do?” They looked even bigger as the boy smiled up at Soldier.

“I swear you do. They are just the biggest, brightest brown eyes I ever saw. They look like chocolate candy. Now, that’s a great way to remember you. You’ve got chocolate kisses for eyes.”

The little boy giggled and got his pieces of chicken. The next one came up and just looked at Soldier, not talking, just waiting.

Soldier glanced at Dillon for help. Could the kid talk? Should he make something up?

Dillon spoke up and said, “Bart, don’t you want to tell Soldier your name? Uh-oh, I already did, didn’t I? You tricked me. Well, fine then. Soldier, this is Bart and he doesn’t like to talk much.” Dillon smiled at the little boy, who stood still and quiet but attentive. “He gives good hugs and likes to cuddle in your lap, but nope, not much of a talker. Oh, and he’s very smart. He’s quick to learn things, to help out. Smart Bart. How’s that?”

Bart got his chicken and Soldier got a hug around his leg as Bart went to Dillon for potatoes and beans. The next guy was black and he looked like he was ready for a fight.

“Why I got to tell you somethin’ bout me? What if you tell on me? I can’t stay then. I’m not sayin’ nothin’. You can keep your chicken!” He was frowning and his lip stuck out.

The kid started to turn away and before Dillon could step in, Soldier leaned over and said, “Son, you don’t have to tell me a thing about you. And I’ll give you all the chicken you want. You don’t have to talk to get the chicken... or any of the food. It’s here for you. I was just hopin’ to find a quick way to learn everyone’s name. You just hand me that plate and I’ll see if I’ve got a big old piece in here for you. Whoa, can you handle this big thing?”

“I’m Jack.”

“Thanks, Jack. There you go.” Whew. This was hard. There was a lot of pain and anger and fear in that boy. The next one was a little more talkative. Okay, a lot.

“I’m Johnathan James Jenkins. That’s J.J.J. I’ve been here for almost half a year, Dill says, and that’s almost the longest. I’m real good with numbers. I bet I can tell you how old you are. When were you born?”

“1976.”

Johnathan immediately said, “You’re 33.”

“Wow. You *are* good with numbers. How about this one? How many pieces of chicken you want?”

Dillon laughed behind him, obviously pleased at his playing with... uh...

“What do they call you?”

“J.”

“Smart.”

“No, that’s Bart.”

“Oh, cute. Now you’re teasing me.” Soldier played with them a little. “Trying to confuse me. Take my chicken and go home.” With that, Soldier acted like he was going to pick up the box and leave, and the next guy’s lip started to quiver. Damn. Had to be careful how you played around here.

“Whoa, just teasing. So, now, who are you?”

“I’m Randy. I’m hungry. I’m always hungry. Can I have more if I’m still hungry?” The thin child before him obviously needed lots more.

“You sure can. I’ve got plenty. And there’s biscuits and honey for dessert. How about that, Randy?”

“Good, sir.” Randy. Hungry, always hungry. Good manners.

At last, Tommy stood before Soldier. He looked about twelve. He was thin and sort of awkward and shy. He wouldn’t meet Soldier’s eyes.

“Hey.” Soldier said, and waited.

Finally, he heard...

“Hey, Tommy. I’m... uh... I’m not strong, and I want to be. Will you help me get strong... so... so... no one can hurt me?” Tommy’s voice shook just a little as he admitted his need. “I want to be strong enough to fight back. Oh, and I can sing. Dill says.”

“I heard you one night. Singing, I mean. You have a beautiful voice. I’d love to hear it again... sometime when you want to. I’ll teach you how to protect yourself. I won’t teach you how to fight so you can hurt others but I can teach you self-defense. You don’t have to be big to be able to take care of yourself. Deal?”

“Yes, sir. And I’ll sing for you sometime, if you want.” Now Tommy blushed.

“Good trade, Tommy.”

Soldier had just glanced at the first empty chicken box when he looked up and saw that Dillon was standing there with an empty plate.

“Well, hello, young man. What’s your name? Would you like some chicken?” He heard some snickers from the boys at his teasing Dillon.

“I’m Dillon Kramer. I love chicken. I’m looking for someone to help with the repairs on this place. I’ve got a houseful of boys I could use some help with, too. Know a good man for the job?” Soldier was relieved. Obviously, Dillon had watched him with the boys and now had no doubts about him. He knew that the differences Dillon had seen in him had thrown him for a loop.

“Why, yes, I do. I have good qualifications. I’m good with my hands. I can build things. I know how to scrounge around and find things when they’re needed and I like to help out. Think I could stay here?” Soldier liked this role-playing for the kids.

Dillon looked around the room at the guys all happily munching on chicken.

”What do you think, boys? Should we let the man have some chicken... and a home?”

They all nodded and kept eating.

“You’re in. Any chicken left for me?”

“Nope. The box is empty.” Soldier smiled at the surprised look on Dillon’s face.

Gom and Tommy both stepped forward with their plates and were already reaching to hand him pieces of chicken off their plate.

“Hey, I was joking with him. I’ve got a whole ‘nother box over there. So we can have some and you all can have more. Hey, Randy, you ready for more?”

“Yes, sir. I am. That’s some good chicken.”

“Anybody else?”

“How about putting the chicken on the table, and now that you know their names, we can get some and they can serve themselves all they want. Don’t make yourself sick, guys, okay?” Clearly Dillon wasn’t used to having to tell them to go easy on the food, as there wasn’t usually a surfeit. “Have one more piece each. Then we’ll have dessert with cold milk, and then after clean-up, it’ll be time to think about bed. Story or song tonight?”

They all looked at Tommy, who blushed, but nodded his head. He’d sing for them tonight.

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It was late and most of the kids were in bed, or what passed for beds: a lot of mattresses on the floors in the rooms upstairs. Nails on the walls held the few clothes the children owned. It had been decided that Soldier would sleep in an old recliner that was downstairs. If they put it up against the wall, the broken part would be okay and he could sleep there. He figured if they worked it right, it would hold Gom and him. It wasn’t even discussed. He knew he was going to let the boy stay with him if there was any chance it would help the kid sleep. He wondered about that.

Soldier kept a mental list going. There was a dilapidated couch by of the front window, which had old curtains that were dark and ugly. Soldier wasn’t sure if they were blue, black, or a dark green. They kept out curious people, he figured. There were no little tables, knickknacks, or any of the things that usually made up a home. This was simply a shelter for these boys. A safe place to stay, but not really a home. He thought that was a shame.

Soldier had passed out all the toiletries he’d gotten and was touched by how thrilled the young boys were with the small gifts most people took for granted. They needed beds, sheets, pillows, table and chairs, couches, lamps, dressers. He’d have to see about getting a washer and dryer. For this many people, that was a necessity. That meant checking on the electric outlets. There was so much to do. So much he had to talk to Dillon about. How to get all this done without alerting people to the kids’ presence and messing up the good thing Dillon had going on here?

Soldier looked up and there were Dillon and Gom. They both looked hesitant. It was clear to him that Gom wanted to curl up on him and get some real sleep and Dillon was dying to ask if he could. He knew how much the boy meant to Dillon and it killed him that Gom couldn’t sleep. Gom did look tired. He was not going to make them ask.

He went over to the chair and sat down, gingerly, and stretched out as much as he could and said, “Where’s my living, breathing blanket? Gom, you comin’ up here?”

“See, Dill? That’s why I love him. He’s a *good* man. I love you, too, though. Don’t think I don’t. I’m gonna go pee and be back in a minute, Soldier. Thanks for askin’ me to sleep with you.”

Gom ran to the bathroom upstairs and Dillon looked at Soldier all spread out before him.

“I think I’m jealous of Gom. How sick is that?”

“Shit. Don’t say that. I don’t want to have to explain anything awkward to the boy. We’ll find our time... somehow.”

“I wondered. You said it was strictly business and I thought...”

“Dillon, I was talking about putting both our names on the bank account and the accounts at the stores was just business... so either of us could shop when we were out, or buy things for the house.” Soldier couldn’t have Dillon thinking that he didn’t want them to be together. “I didn’t want you to think I was trying to get you to do anything you didn’t want to by putting our names together like that. See?”

“Yeah. Cool. We’ve still got a lot of talking to do, but I’m glad you’re here.” Dillon stepped over and touched Soldier’s cheek, the scarred one. It was only a quick caress, since they heard Gom’s feet on the stairs, but they both felt it.

“I’m back. G’night, Dill. Will you be able to sleep without me up there?”

“Yeah, baby. I’ll be fine. You crawl up on Soldier and get a good night’s sleep for me, okay? You know I worry when you don’t sleep.”

“It’s okay now. I’ll sleep good tonight, won’t I, Soldier?” Gom looked to Soldier for verification.

“Sure, buddy. Here, now, get comfortable and don’t wiggle too much or we’ll both hit the floor. I’m not sure about this chair.”

Gom giggled again. “That’d be funny if we did.”

“Says you. I don’t think so.” Soldier smiled for Gom.

Dillon laughed a little as they settled.

Gom said to Soldier, “Good night. Soldier. I promise I won’t sleep on you all the time... just when I really, really need it. You’re a good guy to let me.”

Gom reached up and patted Soldier’s scarred cheek and was out like a light. Soldier could feel Gom breathing against his neck. There were places in between some of the worst scars where he still had feeling. Those small little bursts of air against him were almost unbearably sweet. Soldier lay there and thought and planned for a long time before he dozed off.



## Chapter Six

Soldier woke when he felt something warm and wet on his stomach and side. *Uh-oh*. Gom had peed. Before he could wake the boy up, he felt him stirring and he knew when Gom realized he had wet on him. He instantly started to cry and tried to get up. Soldier wasn't having that.

"Hey. Gom. Ease up, buddy. What's the matter?" Like Soldier didn't know.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm bad, so bad, bad boy. Don't... don't... I'm sorry... please..."

"Shhhhh. Hey." Soldier picked him up, easily, and turned him to face him.

"Look at me. Come on. Do I look mad? Gom, look at me, hon. See, I'm not mad. So you peed. Big deal." This kid was too upset over something so small. "I've got other clothes and we can take a quick shower before anyone else is up. No one will know about it. Why are you crying?"

"You're not gonna hit me?"

"Why would I hit you, honey?"

"Cause I peed. I got you wet. It stinks. I'm bad. I'm sorry. I'm not worth killin'. I know." The tears were still there, slowly running down Gom's face and it was all Soldier could do not to join in. Sounded like this child had been through hell.

"Who told you that garbage?"

"Garbage?"

"Yeah, who told you that you were bad, and not worth killin'? Who hit you when you just peed?"

Gom looked down and would have hidden his face if Soldier had let him.

"Hey, Gom, we're buddies now. I don't just let anyone sleep on me. That means I trust you." Soldier was talking quietly and softly, wanting Gom to know it was okay, but also wanting the boy to tell him something so he could help.

Gom just sniffed and wouldn't meet Soldier's eyes.

"Last night you told me you love me. So that means you should trust me, too. Do you?"

Gom nodded so hard his hair bounced on his forehead, but tears still ran.

“If you trust me, you’ll tell me who hit you. It wasn’t Dillon, was it?” Soldier knew it wasn’t, no way. But he figured Gom would defend Dillon and maybe tell him who it was. It worked.

“Nuh-uh! He would never hit me. He loves me, too. It... it... was...” Gom dropped his head and whispered, “My mom. She hated me.”

“Now that’s just awful. How could anyone hate you? You’re a great kid. I liked you right away. Your mom, I’m sorry if it makes you mad, but your mom was just crazy. Wrong.” Soldier truly couldn’t believe a mother could hate this sweet child.

“Really? I thought moms was always right and kids didn’t know nothin’.”

“Yep. Just wrong. Sometimes moms don’t know how to be good moms and they should not have great kids like you.” God knew that was true.

“Me?”

“I don’t know where she is, but you’re here now, and Dillon and I both think you’re the best. You believe both of us, don’t you?”

Slowly Gom raised his head and looked right in Soldier’s eyes with this dawning expression on his face.

Soldier could almost read Gom’s thoughts. *His mom was wrong? Could it be? Maybe he wasn’t a bad boy.*

Gom frowned again.

“What? Tell me, Gom, you know you can trust me.”

“I still peed on you and it stinks and you oughta be mad, but you’re not. You’re being nice to me. How come?”

“Cause I like you. Cause I don’t care if you peed on me. You slept good all night, didn’t you?”

Gom nodded strongly again and almost smiled, “I was comferble on you. It was like I was safe and warm and... special.”

“Oh, buddy, you are... all three of those things, from now on. Okay, do you have some clean clothes? I have some over there in that bag. They’re probably wrinkled, but I’m just going to be working in them. What say we go shower and we’ll keep this our secret?” Soldier *so* wanted this kid to know he was all right.

Gom wiggled to be let go, so Soldier let him and he had a chestful of Gom again. Gom was crying again, silently like Dillon had said. But Soldier didn’t think the boy was upset this time. It

felt different. He let Gom cry for a few moments, then said, teasing, “Okay, now you’re wetting the top half of me, too. Give me a break, will ya?”

Gom laughed a little and pulled back to look at Soldier. He reached up and patted Soldier’s scarred cheek, love evident in the caress. Soldier had no doubt that he’d become this child’s hero. Soldier didn’t even question the joy he got from that knowledge. He just let it soak in.

They got up and snuck upstairs together. Gom tiptoed into the room where Dillon was asleep and grabbed some clothes off a shelf and met Soldier back in the hall.

They went into the bathroom and Soldier quickly stripped the wet clothes off the child and set him in the tub. He told Gom to stand in the back until he got the water right, then he closed the curtain and told Gom to hurry.

“I’m clean, Soldier.” Gom’s whisper came quickly. Soldier leaned in, turned off the water, and had a thin towel ready for Gom when he stepped out. Soldier almost chuckled at how fast Gom whipped the towel over himself.

The little boy bent over to swipe across his ankles and feet and Soldier caught his breath. Was that? No, surely not. It looked like there were little rows of round circles across the bottom of Gom’s little buttocks. Soldier shook his head. He didn’t even want to let his mind go there. Maybe it was just shadows or something. He’d have to ask Dillon.

After telling Gom to hurry and get dressed and to sit and wait for him, Soldier threw a towel over the rod and jumped in, throwing his clothes out. He hurried through his own shower and grabbed the towel, using it quickly, then wrapping it around his waist.

When Soldier stepped out, Gom was dressed and sitting on the top of the commode. He looked scared to death. He was actually shaking. His eyes rounded, though, when he saw how bad Soldier’s scars were and how far down Soldier’s side they went. It looked like tears were going to start again.

“Hey now, don’t cry. You already cried cause I got hurt, remember? You don’t have to *re-cry*.” Soldier teased him, trying to stop the tears. “It was over a good while ago and it doesn’t hurt anymore. Don’t worry about me.” God, what a sweet, loving kid. “Go check and see if we’re still the first ones up. If we are, will you help me make pancakes?”

Gom jumped down and went out, very quietly. Soldier dressed quickly and followed him, coming face to face with a sleepy and -- God help him -- sexy Dillon, heading for the bathroom.

“You’re up early,” Dillon stated in a rough, sleepy voice.

“Gom and I wanted to shower before everyone else got up.”

Dillon nodded, knowingly, and said, “Oooops. Thanks for taking it so well.”

“Handled it better than he did. Spent a little time convincing him he wasn’t a bad boy, he was *too* worth killin’, and no one was going to hit him. Even convinced him his mom was wrong.”

“Wow, he told you about his mom?” Dillon looked amazed again.

“Some. He’s hiding a lot of pain. She obviously convinced him he was more or less worthless. Workin’ on that. I know you are, too.” Soldier fought the need to reach out and touch. Dillon was sleepy, rumped, and sexy beyond standing. He wanted to taste, just a little. *Nope. Not.*

“Oh, when I was trying to get him to tell me who hit him for peeing in the bed, I asked him if it was you. I knew it wasn’t, but I wanted him to defend you and tell me. That’s just what he did. He loves you very much.” Soldier did touch him now, just a quick caress on the smooth cheek that still showed the crease lines from the pillow. “You have helped him tremendously. What you do is remarkable. We need to talk later. I have some concerns. Just know I’m proud of what you’re doing,” Soldier said.

“I try.”

“I want to know so much. How you got into this. How do you manage it? Where did you start? How did you come to be here?” The questions just kept coming, pouring out. “Where do the kids come from? How do the bills get paid? You have electricity and water and so on. I don’t get it.” Soldier was full of questions and concerns this morning after thinking for a good portion of the night.

“I’ll explain all I can. Right now, uh... can I get in there?”

“Sorry. Sure. I’m gonna go down and start breakfast. Okay to make pancakes?”

“Great. Where’s Gom?” Dillon looked around the hall. All was quiet.

”I sent him to see if we were still the first ones up. I wanted him out so I could get dressed. I was afraid he would start asking embarrassing questions. I’m new to this. Protocol, you know.” Soldier went on to explain his reasoning. “I was just trying to make him feel like it wasn’t a big deal, the peeing thing. I got by, because he was more interested in my scars. He’s a sensitive little thing, isn’t he?” He shook his head, remembering how the tears flowed so easily for the little one.

“He really is. He has such compassion for others, after all he’s gone through,” Dillon said.

“I told him he didn’t have to cry about them again because he already did. He’s such a special kid. He gets to me.”

“Join the club. He’s got me so firmly tied around his little finger that it’s a wonder he can get around. Just don’t tell him.” Dillon smiled up at Soldier as he admitted how much he cared for the special little boy.

“I gotta feelin’ he already knows.”

“Probably. See you in a few.”

Soldier went on down and found that Gom was getting things out for him to cook the pancakes. He had it mostly right. Smart kid. He looked up and beamed when Soldier came in. He came right over and hugged Soldier's leg, looking up to say, “Thank you, Soldier.”

“What for, Gom?”

“You know... our secret.”

“Why, Gom, I don’t know what you’re talking about. We’re just cooking breakfast for the guys, right?” Soldier smiled down and ruffled the boy’s hair.

“I get it. That’s right. I’ll be your second command, too. Okay?” Gom's eyes were bright as he offered. “Uh... I mean, Dillon said I could be *his*, but if you don’t want me to be one... I mean, you know, your special helper... I’ll...” Gom wound down and waited for Soldier to tell him he wasn’t needed or wanted.

Soldier figured the boy had been told that quite enough. “I was gonna ask you if you’d help me, kind of like you did last night. You introduced me to the others and I will need your help getting them to accept me.”

“*Me?*” That disbelief in Gom’s tone was becoming familiar to Soldier.

“I really want to be part of this group and you’ll be the key to helping me. I need you. You’re very important.” Soldier made sure to look right into Gom’s eyes as he said that, so Gom would know he was serious. Wouldn’t it be great if this little boy came to believe how special he was?

“I *am*? I mean, I am, aren’t I? I’ll help you, Soldier. You can count on me.”

“Thanks, Gom.” Soldier thought he really had to do something about this tears thing. He couldn’t keep tearing up every time Gom said or did something that touched him. It just wasn’t manly.

They set about making lots of pancakes. Dillon came in and made coffee after finding out that Soldier liked it. He told Soldier he didn’t have a coffeemaker, but he managed to get a couple of passable cups. Dillon found the bacon in the fridge and made some to go with the pancakes.

“The boys won’t know what to think, meat *and* pancakes. I know the juice won’t last past breakfast. What a treat for them. I still can’t believe that the cupboards are full,” Dillon said, shaking his head, apparently as awed as the kids were about the abundance of food.

Soon, they heard the boys coming down the stairs and into the kitchen. Dillon said, “I bet it was the smell of bacon that did it.”

“Oh man, do we really get to eat that?” Soldier didn’t have any trouble identifying the voice.

“I hope so. How many can you eat, Randy? I bet I can fill you up this morning. Want some juice?” Soldier grinned at Hungry Randy.

Tommy came in, rubbing his eyes, and his got bigger at the stack of pancakes on the table with the growing pile of bacon beside it.

“Wow, there’s juice?”

Soldier began to get the idea that juice was the true luxury for these guys. He wished he could take them out and shop with each one of them. He vowed to talk to each one and find out their special favorites and make sure they got them. Not a big deal, but it would make them feel important. Maybe they could have a day for each one. Randy Day, Tommy Day... now that bore thinking about.

They had a wonderful, filling breakfast. Soldier was amazed at the amount of food that was devoured. He couldn’t stand thinking about how hungry these guys had been. No more, he vowed.

Soldier asked them all to go find something to do so he could talk to Dillon for a bit. He needed to get some ideas about how he could help without stepping on Dillon’s toes.

First, he wanted to know what needed to be done most to fix up the house. Above all, Soldier wanted to spend some time with Dillon, just to talk and get to know him. There were two sides to this and he needed to know how to juggle them and make both of them work.

They found themselves back on the log with the boys cleaning up and promising to stay inside. Soldier had a hard time not reaching out and pulling Dillon to him. He wanted to do so much with this man. Soldier just wanted him, period.

“We’re in sort of a unique situation. I need to know so much. I also find myself wanting so much from you and there is just no way we can do anything... of a personal nature... in the house with the boys.”

“I hear that.”

“So, can I put something out there to you and see what you think?”

“Sure. Shoot.”

Soldier wanted Dillon to know he wanted this, but not at the expense of the boys. “I have a suite of rooms at a hotel not far from here. Is there any chance we could get some time together soon... away from the house? I know you leave sometimes. But you never stay away for long.”

“I try not to leave them long. Sometimes Daniel comes and stays with them or sends someone from the shelter. If it’s a really short trip, Tommy watches them, but he’s too young to be made responsible.”

“I won’t take a chance on harm coming to them. But I find myself wanting some private time with you.” The thought had Soldier hard and ready to jump the guy like he’d promised he wouldn’t do.

Dillon faced Soldier. “Yes. We can sneak away sometimes. I want to spend time with you, too. We’ll find a time. I meant it when I said I missed you. So, what else do you want to know?”

“How much can I do without being too presumptuous? How careful do I have to be? I want to buy some stuff for the house... beds, table, chairs, washer, dryer... stuff that we need, but I don’t want you to think I’m taking over.”

“Don’t worry about my toes. I’m just freaked out about all these changes,” Dillon answered.

“I want to work beside you. I don’t want attention brought to the house that could get you in trouble, either. How do you handle things like bills and so on?” Soldier had really been wondering about that one.

“The utilities are kind of paid for by the guys at the shelter and that’s where I hear about the boys who need us most. The shelter is mostly for transients, but sometimes they get, or hear about, boys who need a different kind of home.” Dillon spread his arms a little to gesture to the house.

“Under the radar, so to speak.” Soldier used the words Dillon had earlier.

“Yeah, boys that would just not do well at all, anymore, in the system. There are plenty that Daniel turns over to the Social Services and it works out fine, but for some of these kids, it would just do them so much more harm. In some cases, that is what they’re running from. The system is great when it works, but sometimes you get bad people who do really bad things. My boys get hurt and they run. They can’t go back.” Dillon looked at Soldier, obviously needing his understanding.

“Are they all from here? I mean, would it be bad for them to be seen? Would they get in trouble, taken away, recognized? Is anyone looking for them? I mean, like Gom’s mother? How did he come to be here?” Soldier was really worried about that.

“You might want to hold onto my hand, because when you hear this, you’re going to want to tear something apart. If you’ve got hold of me, you might be more careful.” Soldier could tell that Dillon was sort of playing, but not.

Dillon took Soldier’s hand and started to talk. “His mother was a crackhead. She was wasted most of the time from when he was little on. I don’t know how it lasted so long without someone finding out.” He shuddered and squeezed Soldier’s hand. Soldier wasn’t sure if it was for his comfort, or Dillon’s own.

“When he was found, she was dead on the floor in the bathroom. He was sitting on the toilet, *tied* to it, with his clothes on. He was wet and dirty. No one knows how long he’d been there.”

It was all Soldier could do not to cry with that vision in his head.

Dillon’s voice quivered with anger and compassion. “He had marks on him from a recent beating and he was crying, of course with no sound. It was probably the smell that finally brought someone there. I gather it was an awful scene. He ran away from two different foster homes because they yelled at him for wetting the bed, but he... he has a hard time going to the toilet.”

“No wonder,” Soldier muttered roughly.

Dillon flinched, but he went on. “He goes, but it’s a real test of his bravery every time he walks into a bathroom. Uh, Soldier, I’m going to need that hand. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea. Hey.” Dillon put his other hand up and caught a tear that rolled down Soldier’s cheek, catching in the cracks and crevices of his scars. “Aw, man. I know. It hurts to even hear it said out loud. He’s such a sweet, loving, needy little boy. How could...”

Soldier stopped him with his mouth. Just put his over Dillon’s and kissed him quiet. He couldn’t bear to hear any more.

“Do you know,” he finally began to speak quietly, “I never cried... during all the shit I went through. Not once. Not when they told me who all died... the ones I didn’t get to... not when I was in so much pain *I* wanted to just die, not when I thought my life was over anyway.”

Now his voice began to break a little. He shook with anger. “But the thought of that little boy tied to the fucking *toilet*, looking at the dead woman who beat him and tortured him, makes me want to scream and cry and... you were right. I want to hurt somebody. Thanks for holding on.”

Soldier eased his grip on Dillon’s hand and massaged it gently. “I’ll calm down. He doesn’t need that. Are they all like that? Stories like that? ‘Cause I want to know, all of it. I don’t want to say or do something to hurt one of them because I don’t know what their biggest fear is, you know?” God, he’d have to be strong.

“Yeah, they’re all pretty bad. I’ll fill you in. But I think this one tears at you more because you already love him. You’re a good man, he says. You really are.”

Soldier shook his head trying to get himself together and asked, “So, can I go shopping in a big way? I have both our names on the deed to this house and this land. It’s ours, so there should be no problem anywhere with us buying stuff and bringing it in. Maybe it will look like we’re setting up house. Let’s look at how the rooms are set up and see how many beds and stuff we need.” Not a bad idea, Soldier thought. Now he was thinking with goals in mind.

“There’s so much, Soldier.”



“I’ll arrange to take over the bills so no one will ever be able to take anything away from you all. I want to do so much, but only if you want me to.” *Please want me to.*

”Hey, anyone who wants to help my boys is okay with me. I just was never able to tell anyone before. That it’s you, and that I want you like crazy, makes it even better. You’re not stepping on *my* toes. How could I not welcome help for my boys? Sure, bring on the stuff.”

“Thanks, Dillon.”

“We’ll get Gom and go around making lists of things that need to be done and what needs to be repaired. The stairs come to mind.” Dillon smiled for Soldier, so Soldier knew it was all right.

“Another thing. I’m not planning to come in and buy them a bunch of frivolous stuff like big screen TVs and music boxes and so on. This is all necessary stuff. I did have a couple of thoughts, though.”

“Shoot.”

Soldier told him about the special day idea. Getting together with each boy, and since there were seven, each having their own day with their favorite things for meals and maybe even play stuff. The *other* idea Soldier mentioned made Dillon’s eyes light up.

“Oh, how cool. Uh... you asked if anyone would recognize Gom. No. He’d be safe if he was seen in public. He’s just scared. I bet he’d get over that if it meant spending time with you. He is certainly the one for that job. You’re a good man, Soldier.”

They headed back in to make lists and talk to the boys about what they thought needed to be done most. They discussed who would help out with what and they were all promised one-on-one time with Soldier and Dillon that night for a special project. Meanwhile, Soldier was going shopping. He asked Dillon if Tommy could come help... was it safe for him to be out and about?

“Sure. I think so. Tommy, you want to go with Soldier and help him choose beds and linens, a table and chairs, and even a washer and dryer? He could use the help and I’m needed here. We’ve got some cleaning to do and things to move around out of the way. Gom will help me today. Then, maybe tomorrow he can help Soldier with another project. Sound good, guys?” Dillon got Gom’s nod and grinned at the eager little boy.

Soldier waited to see if Tommy would agree to go with him. Tommy simply stood up and walked over to him without saying anything.

“Tommy, you don’t have to go if you’d be uncomfortable leaving here. Let me know how you feel. I can do this alone. I’d just like the help and some company, you know?”

Tommy said, quietly, “I’d like to help you. If you’re sure you want *me*?”

“Yep. You’re the man for *this* job. Let’s get the list and head out. We’ll be back this afternoon, guys.” Off they went.

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Soldier had expected a quiet ride to the furniture store and that’s what he got. He hadn’t thought Tommy would be talkative and he wasn’t going to grill the boy. He passed a few comments about this or that just so Tommy wouldn’t think he was grumpy, but pretty much let the boy get used to being with him and out of the house. Before they got out, though, he asked Tommy a question.

“You feel safe with me? You’re not nervous now, are you? If you have a problem, don’t you hesitate to tell me and we’ll split.”

“I’m fine, sir. I want to help you.” Tommy said, clearing his throat, obviously trying to make his voice strong.

“You can call me Soldier. Let’s go look for beds and stuff for the kitchen and a washer and dryer here. Then we’ll go somewhere and get sheets and things. You can help get cool sets for the little ones.” He figured Tommy knew them better so he’d have good ideas.

“Sure,” Tommy said.

“I don’t know about all household shopping. We’ll learn together. Then... you can decide where we have lunch before we hit the grocery again. Looks like we need juice. Lots of juice.”

“Juice is good.” Tommy looked like just the thought of orange juice made him happy.

Soldier and Tommy had a ball picking out a couple of bunk bed sets and three twin beds, and a queen-size for Dillon’s room. (Maybe someday he’d get to share that.) They got a really heavy-duty washer/dryer set and a table and chairs big enough for everyone to have a seat at the table at the same time. Tommy’s eyes were huge when they were done.

“Are you a billionaire?” Tommy muttered as they headed back to the truck.

“Not quite. But I have enough to outfit this house and keep you all in food. I haven’t spent any in years, had no need to, and now I find I want to do this and it makes me happy.” Soldier was amazed at how happy it *did* make him to spend all that money doing for others, making other people happy.

“Now off to Wal-Mart and we’re going to get stuff for the beds, some big fluffy towels and washcloths. You can help me get a few games and things for the boys to play. We’ll get the juice and some more food for the guys there.” He wanted Tommy to feel like he was in on some of the decision-making. “How about stuff for brownies tonight? And some vanilla ice cream to go with them?”

“How come you’re being so nice to us? You don’t even know us. We could be really bad boys and you’re spending all this and doing things to make us... happy. It’s weird.” Tommy probably doubted everyone’s motives.

“Tommy, I don’t know your story. Why you’re here or what happened to you. Trust me, I have no ulterior motives. I just like what Dillon is doing and I like the idea of helping young boys in trouble. I don’t want anything back from you all except respect.”

“You won’t want us to... you know... do things to you? Like...” Tommy blushed and didn’t continue. Soldier could tell he was getting agitated thinking about... what he was obviously thinking about.

“Hey. Look at me. Never. Hear me now. I will *never* expect anything like that from any of you. I don’t believe in molesting, exploiting, or hurting young kids. Don’t you worry, ever, about *that*.” Soldier looked at Tommy to make sure he was listening closely. He was.

“I’m glad you’re paying attention to me, Tommy. If you find the others are thinking anything like that, I expect you to tell them not to worry about me. You’re safe with me, Tommy, I swear it.”

“Good.” The relief in the young voice was enough to make Soldier want to spit nails. He figured he knew part of this boy’s story. Damn.

They had a good time shopping for the other things on the list. They got lots of food again and, of course, lots of juice. Finally, they were done and back in the truck.

“What would you like for lunch? We’ll have to drive through and get something and eat on the way home because we have all the cold stuff in the back.” Soldier explained things to Tommy like the boy was older, hoping to make him feel important. He figured Tommy was pretty grown up for a young boy. Too much so, to Soldier’s way of thinking. Damn it.

“The furniture people are coming by at about three, so we’ll have to keep the boys out of the way. We’ll have to check with Dillon on that one.” Soldier said, thinking out loud.

“Can we go to McDonald’s? I had some of their fries once and they were good, hot and salty.” That was quite a speech from Tommy. McDonald’s it was. Soldier ordered the works and they sat in the parking lot and ate some of it, then finished on the way home. Soldier could tell that Tommy was one happy kid right then. Soldier couldn’t wait for tomorrow’s outing with Gom.

What Soldier really wanted was an outing with Dillon. Oh, he *really* wanted that. He’d been without for well over two years, so he could wait a little longer, but it was different now. He had someone that he was *so* very hot for. He wanted Dillon more and more all the time, but the logistics were a little daunting. They couldn’t leave the boys. They couldn’t just go sleep in the same room with them there. He sure didn’t feel like explaining his and Dillon’s being gay. Whew. There was nothing like a little self-control to build a man’s character.

That night, it became painfully obvious how few clothes these kids had. Soldier and the man from the store had set up the utility room and he was getting a load of wash in, and the load wasn't that big, even with stuff from each boy. What had they done before?

Soldier figured Dillon had carried them somewhere to get it done. Okay, more shopping. When they met with the boys tonight, they'd get sizes and clothes preferences. Shoe sizes, too. He'd need Dillon on that trip. Ooooh, he'd get time with Dillon, even if it was just in a department store. *Down boy.* He thumped himself.

"Doesn't work, I've tried it." Dillon said from the doorway.

"Works for a little while, 'til you show up anyway. Man, I want some face-time with you. Been thinking about it a lot." Soldier looked at Dillon hungrily.

"Yeah. I'm there with you. Thinking, I mean. After everyone is asleep tonight, let's go out to the log, or the truck, or something. God, just a good kiss and I'd probably blow."

"Oh, yeah, keep talking like that, why don't you? That'll help."

Dillon laughed and Soldier mock-frowned at him. He asked about shopping for clothes for the boys. They decided it would be later in the day since the morning was for Soldier and Gom's project.

"I think I could get Daniel from the shelter to come and stay for a few hours while we go shop for some clothes for them... and maybe stop by your hotel for a couple hours of... face-time, as you called it."

"Baby, we're getting face-time later tonight. I'm liable to suck your lips right off your face. When we get time alone behind a locked door, I want more than your face."

"I'd love a list of what you want just to think about, but I'm afraid I'd have a hard time walking between now and then." Dillon looked down at his tight jeans.

"Oh, I'll take care of that tonight, I promise. We can manage a couple of quick jerk offs without making too much noise or being away from them too long, but I want you in ways you probably haven't even thought about."

"I'll be there. I'd say, if I can arrange it with Daniel, we have a hot date."

"Good. Let's get set up to meet with the guys. Then we're making brownies. Then bed for them and time for us. Damn, I'm horny. Come here. Can we sneak one kiss, at least?" Soldier vowed to try to keep it at one, one good one.

Dillon looked out the door and then closed it. Soldier had him up against it before he could get fully turned back around. Oooooomph! Soldier smiled at the sound from Dillon, then, his lips

were taken and mauled. Oh, heavenly day. That was what Soldier needed. Soldier opened and thrust and sucked and licked and thought his head would spin right off his shoulders.

Soldier held on, wanting this to never stop. This knowing he wanted someone, and was wanted back, and not being able to act on it, was worse than not having anyone at all.

Dillon muttered, "I want to climb right up your body and rub all over you and touch you in sweet places and taste more and... oh, that feels wonderful."

Soldier's hands were moving over Dillon's back and settling on his ass, squeezing and molding. He sighed into Dillon's mouth and started to shake.

"Dill? You in there? Gom's upset again. Uh... Dill?" It was Tommy.

They drew apart and tried to get it together enough to open the door without embarrassing themselves. Tommy looked at Soldier like he was the devil incarnate. Dillon slid by on his way to Gom and Tommy looked at Soldier and simply said, "Liar."

"Whoa, son, wait a minute. You don't say that and walk away. What's the matter?"

Tommy, quiet, shy Tommy, sneered at him and said, "You said you weren't like that. You don't think I know what you were doing? I know that smell. You all were getting it on and you said..."

"Tommy? Wait. Come in here a minute... please. Now, you hop up on that dryer so we can be face-to-face. I'm going to treat you like a grown up and explain what was going on. I won't have you thinking I'm a liar or that I was doing anything wrong. You're not afraid of me, are you? Will you let me talk to you?" Soldier was asking, but he was determined to get this straightened out.

Tommy sullenly came in and surprised Soldier by hopping up on the dryer and looking right at him, waiting. Soldier reached out and closed the door. Tommy's eyes got wide, but he didn't say anything.

"Relax. You're right. We *were* getting it on. Did Dillon look like I was forcing him to do something? Did he look upset? No, you know he didn't." Soldier wasn't yelling at the boy, but he wanted Tommy to listen to him and understand, so he was talking clearly and succinctly.

"I can't believe I'm talking like this to a boy, but this is important to *you*. So, I'm going to be straight with you... that's a joke. I'm *not* straight. See? I'm gay. So's Dillon." Hell, Soldier thought, that was pretty blunt. Since Tommy wasn't saying anything, Soldier went on.

"We found that we really like each other. We'd like to be together, but it's just not possible here, for just *this* reason. We don't want anything to upset the boys."

Tommy just kept glaring at him, silent, still looking like he felt betrayed.

Soldier might have blushed as he admitted, “This was *my* fault. I was in here doing laundry and he came in with a question and we got to talking. I asked for one kiss before we started on the brownies for you all. I admit it got out of hand, but we would not have done anything else, I swear it. Not here. And, Tommy, Dillon is a grown man. Not a boy. I meant it when I said I would never, ever, touch a young boy. I don’t know how else to tell you, to make you trust me.”

Trust was an issue in this house and Soldier *would* have it. He *had* to have it from all of them.

“I don’t ever lie. Never. If people don’t like the truth about me, I’m big enough to handle whatever they throw my way, but I can’t stand thinking you don’t believe me or trust me, especially after we talked today.”

When Tommy continued to sit quietly, Soldier kept on, praying he was getting through to Tommy on this issue.

“You can come to me and tell me anything and I will never judge you in any way. I know by what you said and how you act that something bad happened to you. It won’t here. That’s a guarantee.” Soldier had been watching Tommy’s reactions. There were none at first. Tommy had remained sullen. But, as Soldier went on and Tommy began to get the sense of it, his expression changed a little.

“Now it’s up to you to decide whether you trust me or not. If you want to talk to Dillon and me together, we can do that, too. But don’t let this grow into something in your mind that is just *not* a problem for you.” Something else occurred to Soldier so he just put it out there. “Unless, maybe you have some kind of bad feeling for gay people in general. Is that it?”

Tommy looked up at Soldier now, honesty shining in his eyes. “No, sir. I’m sorry I called you a liar. I... believe you. I don’t think you’d do anything to any of us. I don’t care if you’re queer. It doesn’t matter to me.” He shrugged his shoulders and went on. “I won’t tell the others. They don’t know about stuff like that, I don’t think. I hope they don’t.”

“Me, too. We’ll try to make sure this kind of fear is no longer a part of their lives.” Soldier was beginning to feel better about things between them when Tommy spoke up again.

Now Tommy looked down and seemed embarrassed, almost nervous. “And... uh, yeah, something nasty happened to me, but not about being queer, er, gay. I might could talk to you sometime, maybe.” A look of panic crossed Tommy’s features and he went on. “Not yet, though. I get scared when I think about it and it makes me mad that I get scared and...”

“And you’re the one who wants to learn to fight back. I promise I will teach all of you that, but especially you. I will train you so you don’t ever have to feel like a victim again.” Soldier would, too. It was important to this kid to not be a target anymore.

“Thank you, Soldier.”

“Are we square now? No problem? Want to help me make brownies?”

“Yeah. Cool. I’m sorry I was ugly.”

“I understand, in light of all you’ve told me, that it looked like I was lying to you. But you see the difference now since it’s between Dillon and me. I’m not sure he’d be comfortable with any of the others knowing, so I’m glad you’ll keep it quiet. You’re a good kid. I’m glad to know you.” Whew, Soldier had dodged that bullet.

“Yeah?” Tommy looked disbelieving.

“Definitely, yeah. Come on. Time for chocolate.”

They worked together and had ice cream on top of hot brownies and the sounds from the children proved it was a great success. Dillon kept looking between Soldier and Tommy as if to see if everything was all right, but they were fine.

They scheduled a fifteen-minute meeting with each kid and took notes on sizes, clothes, food preferences, and favorite things to do. Soldier planned on getting them each a couple of play-around outfits and one nice one. After getting a little insight into each one, he and Dillon were really thinking about starting the special days next week. They would start with the youngest and end with Tommy on Sunday.

Later, they would check on actually getting the house listed as a shelter or home for boys. That way, no one had to hide anymore. But that meant legalities Soldier wasn’t sure about yet. He decided he was going to set Dillon up as director of the house and put him on salary.

The man needed some money of his own and seemed to have no visible means of support. Soldier could afford to support them all into the next century, so it was nothing to him. He didn’t know how Dillon would feel about it. Tricky subject, money. He’d save that conversation for later tonight. He’d have to tell him about Tommy, too. Another tricky subject.

Oh, well, he’d deal. It was the new life path he’d chosen and he was happy with it. Soldier marveled at how far he’d come, how much his life had changed in just a few days. He had purpose, goals, excitement, and the possibility of a relationship. Life was funny.

## Chapter Seven

“I can’t believe we’re finally here, alone, together. I was beginning to wonder if we’d ever be this way again. C’mere, you,” Dillon said eagerly, dropping down on the old log by the back fence. This had become “their” spot. This tired old fallen tree was where they could be alone together and hash out the day’s problems and maybe spend a little face time. It was quiet back here, close enough to be there for the boys, but far enough away to feel like they were free for a few precious moments.

Soldier smiled at that tone in Dillon’s voice. Dillon obviously couldn’t wait to get his hands on him.

Soldier straddled the log and turned Dillon to face him. Leaning, he put his mouth to Dillon’s and took his time. Soldier kissed him gently a few times, and then pushed slowly into his mouth, touching Dillon’s tongue and sliding against it. He breathed in and moaned at the way Dillon filled his senses. It was as if he wanted to inhale Dillon, suck him up and fill himself with the taste, smell, and feel of him.

Soldier moved his hands across Dillon’s chest and smiled into his mouth when he felt Dillon’s heart pounding against his palm. His was probably beating just as hard a tattoo. He moved his hand up and cupped Dillon’s face and turned it to hold it still for him to deepen the kiss.

Dillon pulled away, pushed his face into Soldier’s neck, and took deep breaths.

“God, I want you. Need you. Love the taste of you, the smell of you... oh, the feel of you.” Dillon reached down between Soldier’s legs and moaned when he took the hard heat into his hand.

Soldier couldn’t help the groan as Dillon rubbed him, measured his length, and caressed him through his pants.

“Can I...?” Dillon asked.

“Please...”

Dillon bent his head to watch as he carefully unzipped Soldier’s pants and put his hand in to take out the hard cock. Soldier knew he was pretty big, long, and very thick. He shuddered thinking about taking Dillon. God, he wanted to... so much. Dillon smoothed the length of it, touching the tip and spreading the big drop of pre-come around the large, flared head.

“I can smell you. God, you’re sexy. Uh, I want... to...” Dillon hesitated. “I know we haven’t even talked about protection and if we’re safe. God knows I am. You have to have actually *had* sex in the last few years to be unsafe. I was tested after I had a couple of encounters a long time ago, and then again. Since that, there’s been no need.” Dillon looked up at Soldier’s face, waiting.



“Dillon, I’m as clean as can be. I’ve had every test known to man. I haven’t had anyone since... God, months and months before I was hit. Clean then, clean now. You trust me?”

“You know I do, with my life, with my boys, certainly with my health. Same here, Soldier. I haven’t been with anyone in, well, enough years to be embarrassed about it. I’m safe. I swear it.” Dillon bent to put his mouth close to Soldier’s cock. He breathed out and Soldier shuddered.

“I think it sounds like we were both a couple of losers until we found each other and now I think we’ve won the fuckin’ jackpot. Clean and ready to go.” Soldier pushed into Dillon’s hand. “Please move that hand and do whatever you want. Then it’s my turn. Oh! Yes! Damn, your mouth is hot.”

Soldier couldn’t believe he was finally feeling this. “There, yes, right under there, oh! Dillon, oh baby, you’re gonna make me embarrass myself. Mmm... mmph...” He couldn’t help it. It has been so long and Dillon had a wonderful mouth, open, accepting, eager, and right now, very full.

Soldier shot hard and had to put his fist in his mouth to stop the shout from waking the whole neighborhood, much less those in the house. He moved his hips in and out as Dillon took all of him and then cleaned him up, placing a chaste kiss on the tip when he was done. Dillon moved up and Soldier just had to have that mouth again, *had to*.

He held Dillon’s head in both hands and thrust his tongue into him, taking that sweet, hot mouth over and over again, forcing Dillon to breathe hard through his nose. Soldier swept through Dillon’s mouth, gathering up his own taste and the sweetness of Dillon himself. Moving his lips down, he planted hard kisses in the crook of Dillon’s neck and along the top of his shoulder, wanting to just eat him up. He pushed and Dillon leaned back on his hands, presenting his whole torso and groin for Soldier’s delighted gaze.

Soldier looked at the buffet before him and thought how nice it would be to have a big bed to play on. Soon, he prayed. Right now, a feast awaited a starving man. He put both hands on Dillon’s chest and drew them down, kneading and molding, getting a feel for the way Dillon was built. Perfect: lean and tight and hard. Soldier didn’t waste a lot of time, though, wanting to taste and suck and listen while Dillon lost it. Sweet Dillon. Sexy Dillon. Surprisingly impatient Dillon.

“Come on, man. I’m about to lose it and I really would like to feel you on me. I’m not gonna last, you know that. Just... oh... yeah, there’s my Soldier. Oh, your hand is rough, feels so good. Harder, yeah?” Dillon watched as Soldier leaned down to take him into his mouth.

Soldier didn’t waste any time here either. He opened wide and took Dillon’s whole prick right down to the base. Soldier had Dillon’s cock touching the back of his throat as he swallowed against the tip.

Dillon almost lost his seat on the log.

He didn't last any longer than that. He crooned as he pulsed his load right down Soldier's ready throat. Soldier liked that Dillon didn't yell out, but kept making a sweet, humming sound that encouraged Soldier to keep it going. He licked Dillon clean and gently put him back into his jeans. Then he reached to pull Dillon close.

Soldier tugged him up onto his lap so their groins met. Soldier wrapped his arms around Dillon and hugged him up tight so Dillon would feel completely surrounded.

"Now that's just another form of heaven," Dillon said. They were so tight and so close, breathing the same air, and their hearts thumped together. Dillon wrapped his arms up around Soldier's neck and held on.

Soldier loved the quiet and the dark of the backyard and the closeness he felt with Dillon.

"Mmm. How long can we stay like this?" Dillon muttered.

"Mmm. 'Bout two years," Soldier mumbled back.

"Works for me. You comfortable?" Dillon sighed, his breath teasing Soldier's neck.

"More than I have been in... well, ever."

"I hear ya. Ya know, being gay, which set me apart, and feeling so alone, and scarred and ugly, all these years was worth it, if it led me to this... right here," Dillon said, and snuggled in like he wanted to be closer than close, wanted to be part of Soldier.

"I can pretty much say the same. People will say we're together because we're both scarred, you know. I don't care. I didn't even know about yours 'til you made me feel them that night. I can't believe I watched you all that time and always seemed to be on the other side of you." Soldier shook his head again, rubbing against Dillon's.

"Yeah. I don't even see yours most of the time. I just look at your eyes and that's it for me." Dillon didn't seem to mind letting Soldier know he was a goner and was quite happy about it.

"Can we talk a few minutes? I mean about some things I want to get straight." Soldier hated to break the moment, but he knew they couldn't stay out here all night, so things had to be said.

"Sure." Dillon gazed at him.

"First, Tommy. We talked some in the truck today and he let some stuff go about wanting to learn to take care of himself and why. Someone did something bad to that boy, something sexual. Makes me sick and furious." Soldier couldn't keep the anger out of his voice.

What was wrong with people? Gom's mother, and whoever messed around with Tommy. What was the world coming to?

“Yeah, Tommy’s a good boy. He deserves better.”

“He asked if I’d ever do anything like that to any of the boys and I swore I wouldn’t. Ever. So, when he found us in the laundry room, he called me a liar.” He felt Dillon jerk against him and start to pull away. He held tight and went on. “We had it out. He said he could tell by the smell we were getting it on and I had said I wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“But we... I...” Dillon interrupted.

“It’s okay. I put him up on the dryer, face to face with me, and we talked. I had to be honest with him. He... this is important to him, understanding this.” He told his story, letting Dillon know he wouldn’t have spoken to Tommy like that under other circumstances.

“Yeah, I get it. Go on,” Dillon urged.

“So, I explained that you are a grown man: that we like each other, and that we’re gay and we want to be together. But we can’t. Not at the house with the kids there.” Yeah, yeah, they had gotten busted... there at the house with the kids there.

“I admitted it was my fault he caught us. I had asked you for a kiss and it got out of hand. I think he finally understands.” God, Soldier hoped so!

“Good, that’s good.” Dillon was finally relaxing the tense muscles in his neck.

“He said what happened to him had nothing to do with being gay or not, and he didn’t care if we were queer. We’re okay with it now, but I wanted you to know.” One load off.

“Wow. Okay. We’ll definitely have to be careful. No more kissing there. I hate that.” Dillon’s tone showed just how much he didn’t like the situation, but would learn to live with the rule. “I don’t want there to be any grounds for any kind of action against us. If word got out in a negative way that two gay guys were sheltering young boys, that would make the headlines, now, wouldn’t it?” Dillon asked, clearly trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

“I bought that big bed for your room, hoping that some day I’d get to share it. Hey, if we have to, we’ll keep the suite at the hotel, or just get a room sometimes. I won’t give you up. I want you, Dillon, so, so much. You make me feel lighter, like life doesn’t suck anymore.”

“Same here. I can’t wait to spend some sex time with you. This was great and I feel lots better, but I want it all, and I want it soon. I’m calling Daniel and seeing if he can come tomorrow after lunch, and see how long he’ll give us.” There was excitement in Dillon’s voice.

“God, wouldn’t it be nice to have all afternoon and then order room service and lounge around and be naked and happy together?” Dillon said.

“If you want to go back in there tonight, you’d better shut up. Count me in, and tell him I’ll pay him to do it.” Soldier was picturing things himself.

“So, you’ll pay to have sex with me?” Dillon laughed. “Kidding! Hey, you know I was joking. Hell, *I’d* pay to have sex with you, any day. What else you want to talk about?”

“Money.”

“Can’t help you there. Got none. We clean you out already?” Dillon laughed up at Soldier.

“Never. I told you I have enough to take care of these seven boys, me and you, and probably whoever else shows up, ‘til the next century. I really am rich, filthy rich. It never meant a thing to me before. But now that I can do this with it, I’m a happy man.” At last, having money made Soldier happy. He could make a difference. “I want to find out how to get this place listed as an honest to God boys shelter or home or whatever we need to make it. I want to pay you to be the director. I want you on a salary. I want you to have your own money.”

“But it would be your money, Soldier.”

“If you left and someone else came in to take over, I’d pay them. So? I pay you, same difference. It’ll be a fund that I’ll set up and your salary will be paid out of it. It’ll contain funds for the repairs on the house, maybe an addition back here. Hmm. What if there was an apartment back here for me? That idea has possibilities.” Soldier smiled as the comment evidently had him starting to think domestic thoughts.

“That sounds like a good idea. Take some time, though.”

Soldier nodded and went on with his thoughts. “I worry that someone could come and take the boys away and *say* this wasn’t a sanctioned home or whatever the bureaucracy could come up with. If we look into it together, we could come up with a way to make it safe for everyone.” He knew there was a way. They just had to figure it out.

“We could work on that, together,” Dillon agreed.

“I don’t want to just make decisions and set things up. I want this to be something we do together. Can we? Will you... with me? Just because I’m the one with the money doesn’t make me more important.” Soldier wanted to be clear on that so Dillon understood it. “You would’ve kept on without me. *You’re* the heart of this whole thing. Without you, it would fall apart. So, what do you say?”

Dillon said, “It’s a lot to think about. I’ve already started working on something. Waitin’ to see if it works out. We’ll talk about it more, look into some things, talk to Daniel. It’s a good thing we don’t have close neighbors. I’ve always thought that.

“Uh... I own the properties on both sides. You’ll never have close neighbors.”

“Damn. You are *something* else.”

“Hey, I didn’t buy it. My grandfather bought it a long time ago. But I’m *so* glad.”

“We have lots to think about and plan for. We’re good right now. We can go a few days, throw a few ideas around, talk to Daniel and get some ideas on legalities. I’m glad you came along and wanted to be part of us. In more ways than one, I’m glad.” Dillon gave a wry grin.

“Makes two of us,” Soldier added.

“Okay, Mr. Sex on a Stick, one more kiss -- *one* -- and we’ll go in and be grown up about this.” Sure.

Several kisses later, they managed to get back to the house. They walked close together, arms around each other, touching for as long as they could. When they got to the back door, they saw a shadow in the window. Soldier knew who it was. They hurried in and saw Tommy heading for the stairs. Soldier called out to him.

“Tommy, will you come here for a minute? Please.” They stood in the kitchen and waited for Tommy to appear. He did, head down, silent.

“You want to ask Dillon anything? Seriously, go ahead.” Soldier was speaking softly, letting Tommy know he wasn’t angry. “Now’s a good time. I gather you were waiting to see that he was okay after being outside with me. I like that you care for him so much, but I’m asking you to talk to him.”

Tommy looked up at Dillon and simply said, “You okay?”

“Tommy, I’m ridiculously happy. Soldier makes me *happy*. He has never done anything I haven’t wanted him to do. I know it’s hard for you to understand, but we like each other... a lot. Is this really going to be a problem for you?”

“Nah. I get the being queer thing. Long as it’s what you want. I don’t want nobody hurtin’ you like... like they did me.” Tommy stopped when he realized what he’d said. His eyes went a little wild.

“Hey. You wanna tell us about what happened to you? We’ll understand. Maybe you need to get it off your chest, maybe make you breathe a little easier. What do you think?” Soldier asked gently.

“I... I... what if you... uh... you might not like me anymore. It was really awful and he swore that people would hate me if they knew and I’ve been so scared people would find out.” Now that Tommy had started, he couldn’t seem to stop the words.

Soldier knew not to touch the boy, but he gestured for them to follow him into the front room. Soldier and Dillon settled on a rickety old couch and let Tommy choose where he wanted to be. The boy settled on the floor in front of them, facing them -- and his fears -- head on.

Tommy was braver than he thought, Soldier decided.

Tommy started again, and didn't stop until he'd told them a horror story about the men his mother brought home and how they were allowed to use him when they wanted.

"I begged her over and over. I cried sometimes -- a lot really. It didn't do any good. Nothing mattered to her but making the *men* happy." Tommy's eyes filled. Soldier also noted the sneer when he said the word 'men.'

"I don't know why so many of the men she was with wanted to do that to me, but it was like I was *nothing* to her." Now Tommy's head bowed and it seemed a clear indication of the way his mother had made him feel less of a person. Tommy wouldn't face them now, his retelling of his history making him feel again that he was worthless.

Soldier was so afraid of saying the wrong thing that he said nothing. He prayed for the knowledge to do and say what this young man needed.

Tommy went on with his story. It seemed the last man was the worst. He did things to Tommy that no child, no person, should ever have to endure. Tommy was amazingly strong as he talked about the atrocities he had lived through. He shook, though. A fine tremor riddled his body as he continued. Soldier wanted to hold Tommy, calm him, find some way to ease his mind, but he felt so inadequate. Tommy told them, pretty graphically, what had been done to him and how he finally just couldn't take it any more and ran. How he had managed to get to the shelter, he didn't even remember. That was fraught with just as many bad memories.

Dillon spoke up, which gave Tommy a break. Tommy watched closely as Dillon explained how he got Tommy at the house. When he'd arrived at the shelter, they sent him to Daniel, who must have realized that he was a special boy and would never make it in the foster care system. He had been too hurt, too scared, to be sent from place to place, not knowing where he was going. Daniel had arranged for him to go with Dillon and it had been days before Tommy even spoke. It had taken him months to get where he was now.

Soldier watched Tommy as Dillon explained the situation. It didn't seem to bother him that Dillon was discussing his life.

Tommy sat still. It was painfully obvious that he expected the worst from his dejected stance, shoulders slumped, head down.. He looked up and his eyes widened as he stared at Soldier and Dillon, whose hands were clasped so tightly together that the knuckles were turning white. There were tears on both of their cheeks.

Tommy looked like he didn't know what to do.

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to make you mad... or upset. I knew I shouldn't tell... ever. Now you can't stand me. I'll leave if you want. I won't..."

“Tommy?” Soldier began, in a voice roughened by the tears in his throat. He'd thought Gom's story was bad, and it was, but this young man's bravery in getting out, and his fear of all things male, made Soldier admire him so much for living in this house and going on like he did.

“Yeah... uh... yes, sir? I know it's ugly to talk about. I shouldn't have...”

“Honey, will you sit up here between us? I promise not to touch you in any way, although I'd love to hug you and tell you what a great kid I think you are. Dillon and I both think you were brave to have lived through all that and come out as good a boy as you are. We don't think you're bad at all.” Soldier hoped someday Tommy would want to be touched again. He was such a super kid.

Soldier's voice was stronger now as he made the solemn vow, “As long as I have anything to say about it, no one will ever hurt you again. I will personally stand between you and anyone who wants to hurt you. I already promised to teach you how to defend yourself. That's a promise. I don't break my promises.”

Tommy stood and took a step toward them, then another. They dropped their hands -- Soldier's were nearly numb now and Dillon's must have been, too -- and Tommy gingerly sat on the edge of the couch between them.

Dillon turned a little to face the boy. He so clearly wanted to reach out to Tommy and give him some comfort. He didn't seem to know what to do for those few minutes.

“Dill?”

“Yeah, Tommy?” Dillon answered softly.

“Do you want me to leave? I will. I don't want the other boys to be around me if you think... I'm... you know... dirty... or...” Tommy stopped when he heard the strange sound that Dillon made.

“Tommy, please. Don't even *think* of leaving. You are so important to our group here. You're so special, so loving. You help with the little ones and I have come to rely on you more than I should, I know.”

Tommy was the oldest and he naturally got relegated to helping with the little ones. Dillon had obviously thought it made the boy feel needed.

“Now that Soldier is here, he can take on some of the things you've been doing, and you can go back to being just a boy. I count on you. I think you're just a wonderful kid and nothing you've told me has made me think any less of you. Instead of thinking of you as dirty, I think of you as our *light*. Your goodness just shines and you don't even know it.

“I really want you to believe what I’m going to say next. It’s important. That stuff is in your past, *gone, done*. You’ve told us, and we still think you’re great. We think you belong here with us. Do you think maybe now you’ll be able to put it behind you a little?”

Before Tommy could answer, Dillon spoke again. “Another thing, tell me the truth now. Is it going to be a problem for you knowing what Soldier and I feel for each other? I’m so sorry that you were... uh... freaked out earlier tonight. I don’t want you to be uncomfortable in any way in this house.”

Soldier didn’t know what he’d do if Tommy answered the wrong way. He couldn’t hurt these kids in any way. They were Dillon’s life. But Dillon was becoming so very important to him.

Tommy said, “Guys, I’m sorry I made you feel bad. I called Soldier a liar and he really wasn’t. It was all in my head.” Tommy’s face almost cracked a smile as he looked between the two men who cared so much for him. He did look sorry that he might have hurt them, and Soldier breathed a sigh of relief. “I kind of like it that you all like each other... like that. It doesn’t bother me. I know you all are grown up and can do anything you want to with each other.” He ducked his head now, “I’m not the boss of you all. You don’t have to ask me nothin’.”

“Usually, that would be true and we wouldn’t even think of talking to a child about it, but you’re a special case. Because of your history, which is forever more just that, history, we care about *your* feelings about what we feel for each other.” Dillon looked right into Tommy’s eyes as he said this.

Soldier figured that Tommy had seen and been through enough that he could handle knowing they were gay and wanted to be with each other. He *was* still a child, though, and his thoughts and fears were important.

“I don’t think the others would even understand or care, but you do, and your well-being is very important to both of us,” Soldier said.

“No problem, guys. I’ll even help you all. I can watch the little ones sometimes if you all want some time together to talk or... you know... kiss and stuff.”

Soldier and Dillon looked at each other and tried not to laugh. The idea of asking Tommy to cover for them so they could go make out... *so* not going to happen.

“You are an exceptional child, you know that? Thank you for the offer, but if we want to be together we’ll arrange it and not expect you to cover for us,” Soldier said seriously.

Dillon added, “It says a lot about you that you’d offer, though. It shows a very grown up understanding and a kindness that most kids your age would never be able to show. I want you to get some good rest and not worry about all this any more. Think you ought to go up to that new bed now? You need to get some sleep tonight,”



Soldier piped up. "I'm taking the chair again tonight. I'll see you in the morning. If you're up in time, maybe you could help me make breakfast?"

"How come you're not gonna sleep in the big room with Dillon? It's okay, you know." God, Soldier thought, the kid sounded so grown up.

Soldier admitted, "It *would* be great. And okay with *you*. But it's not really a good thing to do when we're taking care of a house full of boys. We won't do anything that would cause us to lose you boys and that might just do it. Don't you worry about us. You go on to bed now." Soldier hoped the boy could sleep a little easier after sharing his horrible tale. Maybe some of the weight of it would be off his young shoulders now. But, as for Tommy's suggestion, until they knew more about laws and rules governing this kind of home, they had to be extra careful.

Tommy sat a moment as if he was thinking about something very hard. Clearly gathering his courage, he turned and put his arms up to Dillon and took the hug that Dillon offered to him. Soldier could see what it meant to Dillon from the look on his face over Tommy's shoulder. Dillon's eyes were closed tight and a deep frown creased his forehead, indicating his troubled thoughts, but his lips were turned up in a small grin as Tommy accepted his hug.

Tommy turned to Soldier and did the same thing. It meant more to Soldier than he could ever say. Between Tommy and Gom, he was going to be a basket case. If the other stories were like this, he didn't know how he would ever make it.

They watched him walk up the stairs -- that would be one of tomorrow's projects -- and, when he disappeared into his room and shut the door, they looked at each other.

"I don't have words," Dillon managed to get out.

"There aren't enough. That twelve-year-old boy is stronger and braver than I ever hope to be. We'll be careful around him even though he says we don't have to. I just can't hurt him. I think we're going to be awfully needy when we do get together, but it won't be here." Soldier was sure in his answer.

He was so sorry he'd been responsible for putting Tommy through needless pain. Knowing what he did now, he was adamant about not doing anything to make Tommy remember all the boy had gone through.

Dillon chimed in, "I know. So, I'm off to bed. I'm glad we had some time tonight. You're getting to me in so many ways. I'm calling Daniel in the morning. You're taking Gom for his special trip, right?"

"Yes, but first thing in the morning, I'm going to work on the stairs. I may have to go get some lumber and so on, but I'll be back and get it done in time to take Gom for our project. I'll also buy everything we'll need for it. I'm looking forward to that." Soldier thought of something, so he asked, "Are you sure you don't want to go, too? We can wait 'til Daniel comes and we can both take him."

“No. You do it. He adores you. This’ll be so good for him.”

They stood and, though they wanted to embrace, they had made a decision that they would not do that here. So. Damn.

## Chapter Eight

“Soldier, this is so *big*! I can see *everything*.” Gom managed to bounce even confined in the seatbelt. “I’m not even scared. Where we goin’? I’m glad you picked me to help you. You and Tommy did a good job doin’ stuff yesterday. Wow. I got my own bed.” Soldier’s heart turned over at seeing true happiness on the little one’s face. “Guess what? I didn’t pee, either. I probably will, though, you know. I’m sorry...” Despite his quickly rattled words and excitement, he still worried about getting in trouble.

They were going to have to work on that.

“Hey, we got a washer and dryer, too, didn’t we? And we got that plastic thing for under the sheets. No problem. You come to me if that happens and we’ll take care of it.” Soldier reached over and patted Gom on the leg, then held his hand out, palm up. Gom smacked it, and they had a pact.

“This thing *is* big, isn’t it? Dillon and I agreed that you were the perfect person for this job. I believe where we’re going is just up there.” He pointed when he saw the sign ahead and slowed down. “Here we are. You wait, and I’ll come around and get you. If you fall from up in here, you’ll break something for sure.”

Soldier had to admit he enjoyed the tight sweet hug he received when he got Gom down from his seat to set him down on the ground. Goodness and love just radiated from Gom’s little body. Again, Soldier marveled at how someone could hurt him.

“What is this place?” Gom’s eyes were big and he reached for Soldier’s hand.

“It’s a place where they have lots and lots of dogs that nobody wants. I thought maybe we could pick one out and take him home. Give him a little love. Think we could do that?”

“A dog? Really? Really, *really*?”

“I don’t think I’ve ever heard three reallys in a row, but, yeah, *really*. Do you want to help me pick it out?” Soldier smiled down at the incredulous look on Gom’s face.

“You want *me* to help you pick out a *dog*?” Gom’s eyes were huge, and so beautiful, filled with his joy and excitement. He bounced up and down. He pulled on Soldier’s hand and began to try to drag him toward the door of the Humane Society.

“Who better to help me? It had to be you.” Soldier was getting excited just watching the little boy’s happiness.

Before long, Gom had fallen in love with a sweet little puppy and when the lady there, Marybeth, had let him out to be held in Gom’s arms, it was obvious the feeling was mutual.

There was much licking and whining and wiggling, and when he peed on Gom's shirt, it was a done deal. Gom looked up at Soldier with such an awed expression. It was like he'd found his soul mate, one with a problem like his.

"You're going to have to help house train him. No peeing all over the house. Will you do that?" Soldier had no doubt Gom would be diligent about it.

"I'll do anything if I can take him home. He loves me, Soldier, can't you see?" The passion in Gom's voice was heart-wrenching. Gom obviously couldn't believe something loved him. *Him*.

Soldier could see. He talked to Marybeth, making arrangements to take the dog, and they headed out. As they were passing one of the big pens, they heard a whine and Gom stopped dead in his tracks. Soldier stopped so he wouldn't run in to Gom. Big mistake.

He watched Gom walk over to the pen and look into the sad eyes of the ugliest dog he'd ever seen. Really, really ugly in the extreme. The dog was sitting, but when Gom got close, it stood and hobbled over. The dog was nearly skin and bones and one leg was obviously shorter than the others. Its fur was scruffy and uneven. A mutt. An ugly, broken-down mutt.

"Oh, that's Traveler. He showed up here on his own a few weeks ago. He was nearly dead." The lady waved her hand as if the dog were nothing. "No one even looks at him. I'm afraid he'll have to be put down if he doesn't start to do better pretty soon. His feet have recovered from what must have been a long walk. He's not sick or anything, he's just sort of hopeless." Marybeth shook her head before going on. "It's sad, but we can't afford to keep him. There's not much chance of anyone wanting him."

Gom looked up at Soldier and, of course, there were tears in his eyes. Shit.

"He's not hopeless, Soldier. He's just lonely. No one loves him. Does she mean they're going to *kill* him?" A tear escaped and ran down, followed by another. "You can't let them. Here, you can take Pee Wiggles back, ma'am. I want this one. He needs me more."

When he tried to give the pup back, it wiggled harder and whined and cried and put up such a fuss that the lady had to give him back to Gom to make it calm down.

Soldier watched as Gom stood, tears running down his face at the dilemma he was faced with. Clearly, he loved the puppy already, but Traveler's needs were bigger.. Soldier could read Gom's thoughts in his expression. His little face showed that he realized that someone would come for the puppy because he was cute, but Traveler would be lonely forever and die if Gom didn't take him.

"Pee Wiggles, I love you. I'm sorry. But he *needs* me more. I can't leave him. You'll be okay, I promise." Gom's little voice shook as he said the words that were obviously breaking his little heart. "Somebody good'll come for you, but I can't let him die here all alone. I gotta let you go. Here, please take him, ma'am."

It was a toss up as to which of the two grown ups was more misty-eyed at the love, wisdom, and caring in the young boy.

Soldier cleared his throat, “We’ll take both of them. What do we need to do? Gom and I need to run to the store and get stuff for *two* dogs and we’ll come back and pick them up in about an hour. Is that okay?”

Marybeth was thrilled and Gom just stood and cried. Of course. He did that when he was upset *and* when he was happy. Soldier picked him up, let Gom put his head on his big shoulder and cry it out. He finished up the paperwork and they made plans to return for the two, Traveler and Pee Wiggles.

Marybeth pointed at Gom. “Is he all right?”

“Yeah. He’s happy. He’s just really sensitive. Cries when he’s this excited. You’re okay, right, Gom?”

Gom nodded against his neck, wiped his eyes on Soldier’s shirt, and raised his face to see Marybeth. His face was still a little wet, but it was glowing with such joy. Marybeth smiled back at Gom and winked at him.

“Your son is a lucky little boy. Your love for him is evident in the way you hold him and know him so well.”

Gom looked at Soldier with huge eyes, and Soldier looked back at Gom. Neither one said anything. Neither denied it. They just smiled at each other and left the building to go shop for their two new dogs.

They returned shortly and picked up clean and excited dogs. Soldier even bought a towel to put on Gom’s lap in case the puppy peed again. Soldier couldn’t wait to see Dillon’s face. Two dogs. It wouldn’t take long, with Gom explaining, for Dillon to be right there with them.

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Dillon was still shaking his head as they drove to the store to shop for the boys.

“Stop that now. You’d have done the same thing,” Soldier demanded.

“You’re right. I would have. I feel bad leaving Daniel with seven boys and *two* new dogs. But he seemed okay with it. He even said he’d stay ‘til about nine or so.” Dillon let out a joyful laugh.

“Happy?” Soldier asked, looking over quickly then back to the road.

“Oh, my God, Soldier. We’re going to get some time. I can’t quit thinking about it... you... us.” He made himself straighten up until they got the job done. “Okay, stopping now. Shop. Clothes,

shoes, and we'll stop on the way home for more juice. Who knew it would be juice they'd crave?"

"Here we are. You got the list. Let's get this done. Then we'll have a quick lunch, then go to the hotel, a long, shared shower, and hours of hot, hard sex." There was a gleam in Soldier's eyes as he started teasing. "Exploring every inch of you with my hands and my mouth."

Dillon blushed and his breathing changed at Soldier's words, so, of course, Soldier just *had* to keep it up.

"Taking you in ways that I've dreamed about for days. Finding out what makes you sigh, what makes you moan, and seeing if I can make you scream. Though I got to say I love that sweet hum you get going when you're about to come."

Dillon was embarrassed by the whimper he couldn't hold in. "Shut the fuck up. Talk about me! How am I supposed to walk in there now and shop like I'm not hard as nails and hungry as hell?" But Dillon smiled. "You're a mean, mean bastard, you are."

"I'm *your* mean bastard. What do you think of that?"

"I like it. Maybe we could shop later, before we go home and, go to the hotel now, like *right* now?" Dillon was already shaking from the images in his head from Soldier's words.

"They open late?"

"Til nine. It says so on the door."

Soldier turned the truck back on and peeled out of the parking lot. In a very few minutes that felt like much longer, they were trying to get the key card in the little slot in the door. There! Yes.

"Kiss. Now. Oh," Dillon said as he was up against the wall right inside the door to the room. He closed his eyes and sank into sensation and emotion. He threw his arms up around Soldier and held on as they finally shared a kiss, knowing that they had hours to continue. He moaned as Soldier thrust his tongue in and out repeatedly. He pulled himself closer and ground his hips against Soldier's. Mmmmmm. Hard.

"Jesus! Dillon, I have to have you. You are so sexy, so hot. Do you even know that?" Soldier appeared to be having a hard time getting a deep breath.

"Never knew it before. Glad you think so."

They both pulled back for a moment and looked at each other.

"Take those clothes off and meet me in the bathroom. I want to be sure I'm clean and don't smell like dog pee. I have everything we need by the bed... and in the shower. I'm not sure I can wait that long. Need you so much. Go on. I'm going to strip in there... if we do it together we'll never

make it to the shower. I'm going in there now... uh..." Soldier stopped to take one more kiss before he headed for the bathroom.

Dillon followed, completely naked, in very short order. He walked in and gasped. Soldier stood, waiting for him. His cock stood tall and curved slightly toward his stomach. Dillon headed for Soldier, his own dick bouncing as he walked. Dillon smiled as Soldier watched every movement as he walked to him.

Right before Dillon reached him, though; Soldier turned and reached in to turn on the shower, took Dillon's arm, and pulled Dillon in with him. It was a very large shower with big glass doors and a wide seat in the back. Oh, now that had possibilities.

They stood under the spray and kissed and touched and explored new areas on each other. He and Soldier had done a little exploring together, but Dillon thought that being able to see and feel all of each other was fabulous. Oh. Dillon shivered as Soldier eased his fingers down his crack and teased his hole. He sighed into Soldier's neck and spread his legs a little, giving Soldier easier access. Dillon felt one thick finger entering his body and he pushed back, wanting more.

Soldier gave him more... and more. He pulled his hips back a little and reached for Dillon's prick. Soldier squeezed and began to jerk Dillon off as he eased his finger in and out of Dillon's ass. Dillon started that humming noise that made Soldier smile wickedly. He bent to take Dillon's mouth and the circle was complete.

Soldier thrust and teased and forced more and more feelings through Dillon. It didn't take long for Dillon to cover Soldier's hand with come. Since Soldier had his back to the spray, he was able to bring his hand up and lick it clean. Dillon's eyes glazed over, watching Soldier taste him.

"Oh. Oh, Soldier. I... needed that. I want you so much. Do you have anything in here to..." Dillon sighed as Soldier reached over and held up a new tube of lubricant.

"On your knees, lean on that seat back there. I want to take you right here, right now. You want that? Want me inside you?" Soldier smiled down at Dillon.

"More than you know." Dillon reached up and pushed his tongue into Soldier's mouth for a couple of thrusts of his own. He pulled out, turned quickly, and knelt on the floor of the tub, his arms on the seat. Turning his head, he watched as Soldier knelt behind him and opened the lube. Soldier winked at him right before leaning down and licking the small of his back.

"Oh. Mmmm," Dillon managed.

"I'm gonna taste you down here later, gonna rim you 'til you hum me a whole song. Want to do everything with you." Soldier's hands were shaking a bit, making it hard to get the lube open. "But right now, I want in."

"Come on. I'm all yours. Need to feel you."

Soldier greased his fingers and pushed one, then two, into Dillon, watching to make sure Dillon was doing okay with it. Soldier added another finger and moved them around, stretching him out.

“Now, Dillon? You okay?”

Dillon thought that Soldier’s voice sounded like there might be a prayer attached to the question. He quickly let Soldier know he was ready. “Please, do it.”

Soldier almost growled as he eased his fingers out and got more lube for his dick. He grasped Dillon’s cheeks and spread him, pushing his cock right into that little hole. He pushed steadily until he was all the way inside Dillon. He held still for just a second, as if to savor the heat and the tightness surrounding him. He moved his hands to hold onto Dillon’s hips.

“Hold on, baby. I don’t want to ram your head into the wall. I want to fuck your brains out, not smash ‘em.”

Dillon wondered how Soldier could joke, since *he* was almost senseless with need.

“Oh, Soldier, you feel so good, so big. It almost hurts, but it’s so *good*. Please, don’t hold back. Take me as hard as you want to. I want you so much. Oh, my God, *so* worth the wait. Go for it.”

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Soldier went for it. He eased out and then back in for a few strokes, making sure he wasn’t going to hurt Dillon. When Dillon started pushing back to meet his thrusts, Soldier knew his lover was ready for more. He held on tight and started slamming in over and over, making them moan in unison. Oh, this was what he was talking about.

“Put your hands up on the wall,” Soldier told Dillon. When Dillon did, Soldier put his hands on Dillon’s shoulders and began to fuck him hard and fast. Dillon obviously loved it. He rocked back to force Soldier deeper into him and hummed deep in his throat, letting Soldier know exactly how much he was enjoying it.

Soldier had thought he wouldn’t last once he got inside Dillon’s hot body, but he seemed to be in a zone. He just thrust and humped, faster and harder, even when he felt the water begin to cool a little. He wasn’t stopping. He didn’t care if it turned into icicles.

Soldier eased down a little and reached down with one hand to grab Dillon’s cock and jerked him in time with his thrusts. Moving around, Soldier could tell when his prick hit Dillon’s gland. Dillon’s hum stopped and he yelled out Soldier’s name. Soldier repeated the action, wanting to hear it again. Not long after that, both of them roared out their release.

Soldier came in great spurts deep inside Dillon’s ass and slumped for a moment onto his back. God. He felt so good. But he bet Dillon was feeling a little battered and sore.



“Come on, baby, let’s get up and clean up a little. I’ll dry you off and take you to bed. That was... I don’t even know the words for it. You’re amazing. I didn’t hurt you, did I?” Soldier helped Dillon stand and held him when he wobbled a little. Soldier reached to add some more hot water and they stood in the spray, holding on to each other as their hearts calmed a little.

“I loved every minute of it. *You* were amazing. Lord help me, I’ll feel you for days.” Dillon caught the look on Soldier’s face and hurried on, “No, don’t frown. That makes me very happy. Come on, out. I want to lie down with you. Hold you and learn everything there is to know about this beautiful body.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m beautiful, all right.”

“Am *I*, to you?”

“*God*, yes.”

“Then why is it hard to believe you are to *me*? I get hard just looking at you, smelling you when you walk by, hearing you talk about the boys and seeing how you care for them. You’re awesome, a hot, sexy, beautiful man. Mine. Yes?” Dillon asked, looking up into Soldier’s face somewhat adoringly.

Soldier thought Dillon was more than beautiful, looking up at him like that, water streaming over his face, his long lashes wet and spiky-looking. He got caught up just looking for a second then remembered to answer. “Yours. Yes.”

They pulled back the covers and crawled into each other’s arms and lay still for a few minutes, just being together. They began to move their hands over each other’s bodies, not greedily, but slowly and gently, mapping over the contours of muscles and scars and smooth skin.

They were lying still again, facing each other, trying to get their breath under control. Talking wasn’t necessary. Dillon reached up to smooth his fingertips over Soldier’s face.

“This face is becoming so dear to me. You swept in and changed my life, the boy’s lives. It’s overwhelming, the feelings I have.”

“Are you upset that I came in and just made myself a part of your lives?”

“No, not at all. I’m thrilled. It was a struggle every day to find enough for them to eat and make sure they were, if not happy, at least content.” Dillon reached to trace Soldier’s lips as he talked. It seemed he couldn’t be this close and not touch. “They were beginning to feel safe and comfortable, and then you come along and now they’re safer and more comfortable. How could that bother me?”

“I just worry that I’ve taken over too much. I don’t want you to ever feel like that, like I’ve overstepped. Please tell me when I do.”

“Soldier. Did you put my name on your bank accounts and the others for the boys?”

“Yes, I told you.”

“You did that after spending one night in the backyard with me and Gom. How does a man do that? Give so much, after so little exposure. What if I was, I don’t know... not honest or something?”

Soldier’s let his admiration and respect for Dillon show in his eyes and his voice. “Get real. I’ve seen what you do, what you’ve given up so they can have things. I’ve seen how they affect you. And I’ve seen the effect you and your caring have had on them. They’re thrilled with me right now because I’m giving them things they haven’t had, but you... you’re the brains and the heart of all of it.”

“And you’re becoming the backbone, the strength.”

“I’m just glad you let me come in and join you. It’s given my life new meaning. I thought hard about this.” Soldier really had, and wanted Dillon to know he was serious about his commitment to working on a relationship with both him and the boys.

“I know you have. My admiration for you knows no bounds,” Dillon admitted.

“I know it all seems to be happening quickly. That’s how I work. But it’s not just a whim or something to kill time. This is it. This is what I want to do. I’m loving all of it.”

Dillon let him know right away, “I’m loving the time with you. I needed to be like this with you. I don’t want to give you up.”

“I’m staying, with the kids, with you, especially with you. I’m going to either build an apartment in the back or build on one of the lots on either side. I’m thinking of expanding the whole thing, making more room or putting in different areas for the boys. When summer’s over, we’re going to have to think about school. Nightmare, huh? I guess there are papers on these kids?”

“Daniel has all that at the shelter. I just house them and care for them right now.”

“Together, we’ll figure out what’s going to happen. Right now, I want to follow through on a promise I made you earlier. After that, I’d love it if you’d fuck me with that long, gorgeous dick of yours. You want that?” Soldier was needing again.

“Hell, yes. What promise?”

“Turn over and put that pillow under you. I want your ass up in the air where I can get to it with my mouth, my tongue. Have you ever been rimmed?” Soldier smiled at the look on Dillon’s face.

“No. I haven’t done too much. But I know what it is. Wondered how it would feel. You sure?” Dillon looked like he might expire on the spot just thinking about Soldier’s mouth on his ass.

“Oh, yeah. I’m gonna make you hum and sing and sigh for me. Over.” Soldier ordered, but soothed the command with a sweet kiss, tongue flicking across Dillon’s lips, teasing him. Dillon, no fool, was quick to comply and within seconds, he was moaning at the feel of Soldier’s lips and tongue at the base of his spine.

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Ooooooh, wet and soft and it made him all shivery. Dillon started to say something, he didn’t know what, when Soldier slid his tongue right down between his cheeks and he thought he’d come right off the bed. He couldn’t believe how hot that was.

“Oh, shit. Soldier, oh... mmmm... honey... that... oh!” Dillon didn’t know you could even *do* that. Soldier’s tongue was *inside* his ass. Soldier had spread Dillon’s cheeks wide and pushed right in with his hot wet pointed tongue. Oh, Lordy, was there ever such a feeling?

Dillon decided then and there that he *had* to do this for Soldier. Did *Soldier* know what it felt like? Dillon was panting and trying to push back against Soldier, wanting more of that feeling. Soldier reached down with one hand and started caressing the area between Dillon’s balls and the little puckered bundle of nerves around his hole. Dillon was just a quivering mass of sensation as Soldier continued his caresses up onto and around his ball sac and back to the soft sensitive skin right behind them.

“My God, I don’t... I’ve never, oh, please...” Dillon didn’t even know what to say as Soldier pulled his tongue out and replaced it with two fingers and began to finger-fuck Dillon as his tongue moved down to caress the area his fingers had encountered earlier. Those fingers knew right where to go and they tagged his gland again and again. Dillon couldn’t stand it. He shot all over the pillow and had to cover his mouth to hold in the sobs of release.

Soldier crawled up, pulled the pillow out from under him and lay right over him. “I think you like rimming.”

“Ya think?” Dillon was almost embarrassed at how much he liked it, how he’d lost all control. He tried to turn, wanting to see Soldier. Soldier eased off him and over to the side, just waiting with his arms open. Dillon went happily. He needed to be held after that.

“My God. That was amazing. That’s about the most intimate thing I’ve ever dreamed of, much less done. Have you ever... I mean has anyone ever done that to you?”

“No. Heard some guys talking about it once. Wondered on it. I thought about it. Never thought I’d want to. With you, there was no doubt. I want it *all* with you.” Soldier’s eyes grew warm as he looked into Dillon’s.

“Like, you’d let me do that to you? ‘Cause I want to. I want you to know how that feels. I don’t think I’d want anyone else to do that to me, and I know I couldn’t even think about doing it to anyone else, but you, I’d love to.”

“Damn. Make me so hot just thinking about it. How much time do we have? We’re gonna run out of time before we get everything we want to do in. We still have to shop. ‘Member?”

“Oh, God.” Dillon whipped his head over to the clock by the bed.

“Woo-hoo. It’s only five. We should probably leave about seven to get all the stuff done. Two hours. I believe it’s your turn to wiggle and moan a little. Wanna assume the position, Soldier?”

“Which one is that, Dillon?”

“The one I was just in. I want to share that with you. I can’t believe how it feels. I want you to know how you made me feel. Okay?”

“Bring it on. I’d love it.”

“What if I do it wrong? I’ve never...”

“I hadn’t either, remember? Just do whatever you want. I can’t imagine anything feeling bad. I’m all yours to play with, sweetheart.”

“Sweetheart. Cool. I’ll be your sweetheart.” Dillon smiled as he moved the pillow up under Soldier as his lover pushed up from the bed. He got into position and started the same way Soldier had. He flicked it with his tongue lightly, again and again, loving the response that got.

“Fuck me. Dillon, I need you inside me, now, deep. That long hard cock, deep in me. Please.” Soldier had the presence of mind to reach for the tube and hand it back to him. Dillon quickly slathered them both and set his prick right at the sweet, hot hole before him. He pushed in and didn’t stop until he found himself tight against Soldier’s butt cheeks. He wiggled around and moved, trying to push in as far as he could get.

He got great sounds for his efforts. Then he began to pull out and the sensation of the drag against his cock had him holding on tight to Soldier’s hips and hoping he could give him a good ride. Dillon started to hum deep in his throat and took a tighter grip on Soldier and rammed him as hard as he could manage.

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“Oh, yes! God, Dillon. Harder. Fuck. You’re so deep... fuck me... oh, don’t stop.” Soldier’s whole body was quaking, pleasure making him moan and plead. “Please, oh... you’ve made me a babbling idiot. I don’t care... just don’t stop. Jesus, I’ve never felt like this.” His fingers grasped the sheet and his toes curled as he admitted, “I’ve never in my life begged anyone for anything. Please, don’t stop. More, harder.” He was begging now.

He began to rock back to meet each of Dillon's thrusts and he was heaving so for breath, it seemed his heart would burst out of his chest. Soldier wanted this to go on forever. The tightness gathering in his balls and the tingles in his cock let him know he was about to blow and he figured Dillon couldn't last much longer, but, oh my, what a fuck.

Soldier came first, hard, and squeezed Dillon's cock that was buried up his ass, milking it hard as he spasmed and groaned through his orgasm. He was thrilled when Dillon managed a few more thrusts before coming deep inside him. Dillon groaned as Soldier continued to squeeze his cheeks to give Dillon the most friction and sensation he could.

Dillon smiled down at him before he settled on Soldier's chest. "We've got a problem."

"Hmmm?" That was all Soldier could manage.

"I don't think I can move. Putty. I'm putty. You know putty?"

"Yeah. That soft stuff you roll around in your hands?"

"Yep. That's me. Putty."

"My putty."

"Yep," Dillon chuckled. "Your putty."

"Rest a minute. Then we'll shower again, with lots of kissing. I want lots of kissing. Then we'll dress, shop, grab a bite, the juice, and go home to our boys."

"You just described heaven. This whole day has been the happiest of my life. Waking up with you in the house, you working with the boys on the stairs, those crazy dogs you and Gom brought home, and this little bit of bliss. That is a word I don't think I've ever used. But it sure describes sex with you." Dillon rattled off a few more he'd never had occasion to use. "Bliss, ecstasy, delight, rapture. All words I don't come into contact with on a daily basis, but I now know exactly what they mean, making love to you."

"Everything you said... right back at you. I agree with all of it. You make me so happy. I never thought I'd call someone sweetheart... ever. You are my heart. I know I sound sappy, but I don't care. I want some more time, but I think we're building something here, something strong and good." Soldier looked up into Dillon's eyes.

"I feel the same way. I won't rush in and make declarations yet, but, oh, I love being with you, doing anything at all, but this... only with you." Dillon agreed.

"Come on. Brush teeth, shower, and much kissing."

“What, you don’t want to kiss me after I licked your asshole?” Dillon sputtered. He acted like he was going to kiss Soldier and then laughed out loud as Soldier ducked. He laughed again as Soldier hopped out of bed, reached for him, lifted him up, and carried him into the bathroom.

They stood beside each other at the sink. Dillon turned and plastered himself to Soldier’s side as Soldier brushed his teeth, then cleaned the brush and handed it to Dillon, smiling. Dillon brushed and spit and wiped his mouth and laughed again as Soldier turned to sit on the counter, putting them on a more even level, and took his mouth immediately.

The kiss started out like Dillon was a sweet, young virgin. Soldier was just touching Dillon’s lips and coming back again and again for soft touches. Then he added his tongue and licked gently across Dillon’s lips, not even going inside.

After the long, hard sex they’d just had, kissing like this, with softness and sweetness, was just an amazing feeling to Soldier. Dillon started to reciprocate in the same manner, putting his tongue out to touch Soldier’s before hiding back in his mouth. Dillon eased it out again and sighed into Soldier’s mouth as it opened and Dillon touched tongues with him.

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Dillon was entranced with just this. Their tongues continued to mate, lovingly and carefully. Right now, hunger was appeased and sweet tenderness reigned. Dillon would never have thought this big man, this hardened soldier, had this kind of softness in him. He slowly eased his tongue into Soldier’s mouth and sighed as Soldier’s lips closed on it and he was caught. Soldier teased it, tangled with it, sucked it, and loved on it, all slow, soft, gentle. Dillon had to hold on to Soldier’s arms to keep standing. He was getting weak just from this heavenly kiss.

Dillon took Soldier into his soul and made him welcome. He wouldn’t tell Soldier yet, feeling it was a little too early to make such a declaration, but Dillon belonged to him now. Finally, they came up for air and Dillon dropped his face into Soldier’s neck.

“That was the sexiest thing I’ve ever done. You’re an amazing man. I... *I* am a lucky man.” Dillon kissed Soldier’s neck and turned to start the shower. He stepped in and Soldier was right behind him. Dillon stood as Soldier soaped his whole body, every single inch, then shampooed his hair. Soldier rinsed him off and then stood as Dillon did the same for him, clearly enjoying every second.

Shopping quickly, they were pleased with their purchases and managed to get juice and stuff to make ice cream sundaes for the kids before bed tonight as a surprise. Soon, the men were headed back to the house with joy and contentment in their hearts. They turned onto their street.

Oh, holy hell. There was a police car in front of the house. Soldier roared up into the drive and to the back door as usual. Dillon was out of the truck before it had fully stopped. Soldier ran to the door right behind Dillon. What the fuck? No one here would have called the police. What could have happened?

## Chapter Nine

Soldier was almost afraid of what he'd find as he stepped in right behind Dillon. It was quiet in the kitchen and he wondered where the children and dogs were hiding. They walked into the front room and found Daniel on the couch and a police officer sitting in what had become Soldier's chair.

"Hey, guys. What's up?" Soldier hoped he sounded casual, not like he was scared shitless something was wrong with the kids.

"No problem, Soldier. This is Officer Mike Bradford. He has this beat and he'd always thought this house was more or less abandoned. I was explaining it was an extension of the shelter."

Daniel gestured to Dillon and went on to say, "Dillon works for us here and takes in the boys who don't work out in placements with the social services." He spoke to Dillon now, "He was asking about some of them and I was giving him the rundown on them when you showed up." Daniel was obviously trying to let them know he had set the scene for them. "Dillon, I told him you had just received your license to be a foster parent and that's how you're able to keep the boys here."

This was news to Soldier. It was a great idea, but he hadn't known it. It would explain a lot, but he couldn't believe Dillon hadn't told him.

"And you, sir, are you also a foster parent?" Officer Bradford looked at Soldier.

"No, but I plan to look into it. I'm interested in being one for sure. I like what's going on here. Actually, I own pretty much this whole street. My grandfather bought this whole block when he started investing years ago. I just came here recently. Been a little busy in Iraq."

"Yes, sir. So you, uh, you live here now?"

"No, I have a suite at the Hartland Court. I have sacked out in that very chair a couple of times, but I'm thinking of building on one of the other lots. Is there a problem?" If there was, Soldier wanted to meet it head on, right now. He wanted to know what they were dealing with here.

"Not at all. Daniel here assures me that everything is in order for the boys that are here, not that I've seen any of them tonight. I keep hearing some whining, though."

"Oh, that's probably Pee Wiggles, our new pup. I doubt if you can pry them away from him. He *is* a cutie."

"You name him, Soldier?" Daniel teased.

“Not.” Soldier snorted. “Gom did. That’s what the pup did all over him first thing, so I guess he just figured he’d name him that. I didn’t question it.”

“Well, I’ll be going. I’ll come by later this week, Daniel, and see you and check out the stuff on the kids. Nice to meet both of you. Take care.” The officer left by the seldom used front door. The three adults stood looking at each other until they heard him drive away.

“Dill, are they gonna take me away...?” They heard the little voice and looked up to see Gom sitting on the top of the steps. There was a steady stream of tears on his face.

“Come on down here, buddy,” Soldier went to the bottom of the stairs and waited. Before Gom got to the bottom, he launched himself at Soldier, who was ready, knowing what Gom would do. Gom did his limpet imitation and both arms and legs wrapped as far as they could around Soldier and clung for dear life.

“It’s okay. You think I’d let anyone take you away from Dill?”

Gom shook his head back and forth on Soldier but wouldn’t raise his head. It was clear that he felt safest right where he was. Soldier held on and let Gom absorb the strength he needed from him. Soldier had it to spare.

“All right, any of you others just waiting up there? Come on... and you can bring the dogs down, too.” Dillon said. The room was full in seconds. Clearly, they’d all been waiting for permission to come down again. Everyone started talking at once.

“Quiet!” Soldier snapped out and it became silent. “Thank you. Daniel, Dillon, can you all reassure these boys?”

“Certainly. No one is going anywhere. We’ll all be together. I’m going to take steps to insure that this house stays as it is. We’ve been a part of the shelter... sort of. We have Soldier’s backing now, and his funding. We’ll look into what we need to do.” Dillon looked at all of them as he spoke. They all seemed to relax as he finished.

Soldier looked at Daniel. “Can you stay for a bit? I have some questions.” At Daniel’s nod, Soldier looked at Dillon and said, “I think it’s time for ice cream sundaes. How glad am I that we bought that cooler? I still bet the ice cream’s a little soft.” That was the least of their worries now.

“Sounds good,” Dillon agreed, readily.

“Let’s go get the stuff we bought and send them up to put it away. We’ll get the treats ready. They’ll have a late night, but I think they need it right now. You?” Soldier wanted Dillon’s agreement with the plans he suggested.

“Good ideas. Tommy and Daniel, will you all help me get the stuff out of the truck? Wait’ll you all see what we got for you.” Dillon shook his head, smiling, trying to get them all to lighten up.



“Man, Soldier’s a spending machine. We’ll divide it up and, Tommy, I’m putting you in charge of getting them all into the right hands and so on. Any problems, we’ll sort out tomorrow. Everybody meet back here for treats, then bed.” He gestured for them all to get going.

Things moved along according to plan and, before long, the kids were in their rooms. Who knew where the dogs ended up? Gom finally let go of Soldier when Pee Wiggles needed him. The mess was cleared up and the three men were sitting around the table with coffee, despite the Texas heat.

“First, let me ask: Dillon, do you really have your foster parent license?” Soldier needed that cleared up.

“No, but we’d talked about it and I’ve filled out the application. I’m just waiting to hear. There is no reason why I shouldn’t be approved, now.”

“I’ll get my lawyers to check on it and see. I want to do the same. Now, what’s the possibility of our both being foster parents here together? Is it against the law?” Soldier hesitated at the next question, but it had to be asked. “Do we have to *not* be together in order to have these kids here? I don’t know the laws here. What kind of trouble are we going to encounter?”

“Are you all a couple? I’ll check on the different ways the law looks at the situation.” Daniel seemed a little embarrassed. “I think you have a better chance if you’ve established that you’re a solid unit, uh, not just lovers, you know?” Daniel looked uncomfortable asking the personal question.

“I think we more or less established ourselves as a couple today, a solid unit. Don’t you agree, Dillon?” Soldier looked over at the other half of his heart. “And I’m not just saying that to fit some kind of mold for the law to like.”

“I agree. I’d like to talk more about it, but I can honestly say that I’d be happy to never say goodbye to you. Actually, I’d be happy to be right here in this house or one next door or in a tree-house out back, if you were there. How’s that for solid?” Dillon’s eyes never left Soldier’s as he made the statement.

“I like it.” Soldier more than liked it. He just didn’t want to declare his feelings in front of someone else before he did so to Dillon first.

Daniel said, “Here’s what I’m going to do: I’m going to check on the progress of Dillon’s application. I know someone in that office. I’ll get you an application and you can come by the shelter tomorrow, Soldier.” He looked from Soldier to Dillon and then back to Soldier.

“Sure, I’ll be down.”

“I doubt you’ll have a hard time getting approved, except for the home part. I know you have to have a job and a home that’s acceptable. This, with a little work, will work for one of you, but we have to do some checking on how it would work if both of you lived here,” Daniel said.

“If I have to, I’ll live next door. We want to be together in the same house, if it can be worked out. If not, we’ll figure something out. Dillon has a paying job.” Soldier wanted to get that established right away. “He’s director of this house. He’ll have a salary as of sometime next week. I’ll have the lawyers draw up the papers and make it all nice and legal, so he has no trouble passing on any questions they come up with.” He glanced at Daniel for confirmation.

“Sounds good.”

“With you backing him and me funding him and the house, it should be clear. I’ll work on my own application and, in the meantime, be building something next door with an apartment for me, separate from the area for children.” Soldier got more and more excited about the idea and expanded on it. “We may even connect the two buildings somehow so that it’s like a compound. It all bears thinking about, but things are looking better. Agreed?”

Both men nodded. Next question.

“Are there papers somewhere on these kids? Is there someone looking for them? I mean, I know Gom was in the system and ran away, so aren’t they looking for him? Is he likely to be taken away if they find him?”

“No, there’s no one out there looking for Gom.” Daniel said, and Dillon agreed with a shake of his head.

“What about Tommy? Hell, what about all of them? Will we be allowed to keep them if we do get the approval for fostering?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem. We’ll deal with whatever comes up.” Dillon said.

“I know they’ve stayed hidden here. Was that for safety from outside or just to make them feel safe inside?” Soldier was afraid to think of losing them. He was amazed at the depth of emotion they’d brought out in him in such a short time.

Daniel tried to explain. “It started out some of both, but I’ve been working on it all along. We don’t just spirit them away and hide them.” He paused, then went on. “Well, in some cases we do. Tommy, for example. We do what we feel is necessary. Let’s just say I’ve been creative in some of my explanations to authorities as to where the boys are in some cases. We’ve been able to get by with it, so far, but we’re working on making it more acceptable.”

Dillon broke in with, “Daniel knows just how to work the system to get what we need for these boys.”

Daniel shrugged his shoulders as he explained. “They trust me, bless them, and I have paperwork on all of the ones in question. It’s just that Dillon and I know that these particular boys can’t handle the whole regular foster care thing. They’ve been the family route, the mom and dad

thing, and it's blown up in their faces, damned near scarred them for life... uh..." Daniel said, then stopped suddenly, his eyes flicking back and forth between Soldier and Dillon.

"Oh, please, don't even act like you think I care that you said the word scarred. I'm a little thicker-skinned than that. You, Dillon?"

"Yeah, yeah, yada yada, scarred for life. Go on." Dillon smiled at Daniel to show he was teasing him.

Daniel went on with his explanation, saying, "In some cases, it was the mom who traumatized them, but a lot of the times it was the father figure, or just a male in the household. They can't handle some scenes and, when we know that, we set things up where they are listed as staying here, in a temporary foster setting, and I'm allowed to be in charge of their records and speak for them."

Soldier figured they weren't really doing anything illegal, but they were toeing the line a little in some cases. But he deemed it worthwhile for the boys' sakes. He listened as Daniel went on about the boys.

"It started with one and then two and kind of grew out of hand before we could follow through on our set-up plans. Let's meet again in a couple of days and see how far we've gotten. How's that?"

Daniel needed to get back to the shelter and had lots to get ready and figured out. So did the other two. They all said goodnight and Daniel left. Soldier looked at Dillon and smiled a little.

"Never a dull moment," Soldier said, sighing.

"Yeah. I didn't mean to *not* tell you about the foster parent thing. I was just waiting to see if it came through. I wasn't as sure of it as Daniel was. I wasn't intentionally leaving you out of the loop. We've had so many other things going on, it slipped my mind. We haven't been together that long, but we *are* a unit."

"So, Daniel thinks you'll get it?"

"I think it'll have a better chance with all you say you're setting up, but I wasn't sure and I didn't want to say anything. I was scared it wasn't going to happen, and then I wouldn't know what to do for the boys, but you came along and things just whirled into high gear. I've had a few other things on my mind."

"I'm going to check and see what the laws of Texas are about gay men as foster parents, both singly and as couples. I'm not at all knowledgeable about stuff like that. It may not even be a problem. Wouldn't it be nice if it was just fine?" Soldier had another thought about what they'd talked about with Daniel here.

"Too good to be true." Dillon grinned at Soldier.

“I didn’t mean to put you on the spot earlier.” Soldier knew he had a bad habit of doing things spur of the moment. “I tend to do things in a big hurry. I make up my mind and I do it. With you, I’ve made up my mind. *You’re it*. I don’t want to be your boyfriend. I want to be your partner, as in life-partner. Too soon?”

“I... uh... Soldier, are you saying, do you mean... I don’t know if...”

“Well now, Silver Tongue, are you trying to ask me my intentions?” Soldier loved the look on Dillon’s face, sort of a cross between delight and hope.

Dillon blushed to the roots of his hair. “I guess so. It just seems funny to talk about being life partners when we haven’t even made any declarations.”

“You look nervous. I don’t know if you want me to say yes or no.” Which kind of made Soldier nervous.

“Let me make it easy for you. Soldier, I’m into you. I’ve never felt like I do now with anyone else. Granted, I’ve not had many opportunities, but I know what I feel. I don’t want there to be any doubts in your mind that I know what I’m saying. I’m not a kid and I’m not someone who isn’t sure of himself. I’d like to start a life with you.” Dillon’s face was open and his eyes clear as he declared his intentions to Soldier.

“That’s what I wanted to hear. I’m not that good with words, but I feel the same way, Dillon. I want to be yours. I want to live here and take care of these boys and others like them.” Soldier’s voice was sure and steady. “I want to make a life with you. And, uh, don’t situations like this usually end in a kiss?”

“I love that you love to kiss. Just *love* that about you.” Dillon smiled at Soldier and added, “That, and a million other things. Think it’s safe to kiss here? Can we keep it at that?”

“Maybe we could take it outside? But we just declared our love for each other and our hope for a future. If you think I’m going to bed without a kiss, think again.”

“The kids are asleep. Laundry room?”

“Good idea. Come on.”

They were in and had the door closed and, of course, Dillon found himself pushed up against it.

“Hmm mmm,” Dillon protested, before Soldier could take his mouth. “Wait. Let me get on top of the dryer. Put me on your level and then you won’t have to bend so much and...”

Soldier picked him up and put him on the dryer.

“Mmmm. Something else I love about you. You’re so strong... and big... and sexy... and a good kisser... show me...”

Soldier laughed and complied. He pursed his lips and kissed Dillon, short sweet kisses, one right after the other. He never settled in and sank into a really good one.

“*What* are you doing?” Dillon laughed into Soldier's mouth. He had his arms around Soldier, one hand rubbing his head, and the other squeezing the back of his neck.

“I’m afraid to let go and kiss you like I want to. I don’t have a good history in here.” Dillon stated, ruefully.

“Silly. Does the door have a lock on it?”

Soldier leaned over and flipped it. That was all it took. Dillon didn’t even have time to take a good breath before his mouth was engulfed in Soldier’s. Soldier wanted to inhale him. Dillon seemed to want it just as much.

”Dillon?” Soldier pulled back, sensing that Dillon had something to say.

“It just suddenly hit me. You love me. You are so *much* the man of my dreams and you love *me*. And you love my boys. I’m so happy. I suddenly felt like Gom, like it was just too much and I was gonna cry.”

“I’m a broken down old soldier who scares people on the street.. I was a lost soul little more than a week ago. You love *me*? And you’re not going to cry. You’re going to kiss me.”

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“Bring it.” Dillon said, ready to kiss Soldier like he’d never been kissed. This called for something special. He put his hands on either side of Soldier’s face and looked him right in the eyes for a few seconds, until he had Soldier's attention. He let his feelings shine right through and leaned that little bit and set his mouth to Soldier’s. He tilted his head and let his tongue slide right in and meet the one eagerly awaiting it.

They didn’t moan so much as they sighed. Pure, sweet happiness flowed from one to the other. It was sappy and mushy and so sweet it made their teeth ache, but it was the best kiss they’d ever shared. It went on seemingly *forever*. How long, neither knew.

It changed from slow and sweet to hot and hard and they clung to each other like they were weathering a storm. They eased back down into calm, slow kissing with tongues out and touching then flowing across the other’s lips in soft, wet caresses. Their hands were surprisingly still. They were just getting off on sharing kisses.

Sometimes, their eyes opened and they’d watch each other intently, solemnly. Then the kiss would change one way or another, and they’d close them to put all their senses into the feelings

they were making with their mouths. By mutual, unspoken consent, they stopped and put their foreheads together. They opened their eyes and just gazed at each other.

“Did we really just do that?” Soldier asked.

“Whoever said a kiss is just a kiss was an idiot. That was *not* just a kiss. That was...” Dillon searched for a word, but couldn’t find one that fit how special it *was*.

“A wedding?”

“Oh.” Dillon’s heart turned over in his chest. This man of few words.

“Yeah, oh.” Soldier echoed Dillon’s awe at the importance of the moment.

“You said you weren’t good with words. You may not rattle like I do, but you have good words. Yeah. That was an experience. I thought the kiss this afternoon was something, but this one will make it into my memory chest. I’d say we’re what you’d call a very solid unit.”

Soldier just embraced him and held on tight. Dillon did the same, putting his legs up around Soldier’s middle and pulling him as tightly to himself as possible. He felt like that lady in the commercial wanting to shout, but just whispering quietly, “*I love this man.*”

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They had discussed whether Soldier should return to the suite but decided not to change their routine right now. It was important for the boys to feel that nothing had changed in their lives. So, later that night, Soldier was asleep in the chair when he heard a tiny whisper and a tentative touch on his arm.

“Soldier?”

“Yeah, buddy? Couldn’t sleep? Uh, problem with the bed... did you pee?”

Gom nodded his head and tried not to cry as he said, “I’m sorry. I know I’m bad. I’m scared. Please don’t let them take me back. I’ll try harder to be good.”

“Come up here, sweetie.”

Gom’s eyes got huge. “But I can’t. I’m wet and I stink. I’m ugly and not worth...”

“Shhh!” Soldier shushed him quickly. “Stop right there. We had this conversation. Your mother was wrong.” How could he get through to the little boy? “You love *me* now, you believe *me* now, right? You are *not* a bad boy. You’re a good, kind, sweet, loving boy.” God, he just had to make Gom believe this. “You’re *good*. Do you hear me? Now, come up here. I don’t care if you *are* wet, and you don’t stink. I need a hug. I can’t stand to hear you say those things that your mother said. They make me sad.”

“Me, too.” Gom reached up to Soldier and was picked right up and placed on his chest.

Soldier didn't even flinch when the wet child settled onto him. He had lived through far worse and could handle a hell of a lot more to make this child feel good about himself. “You sleepy?” He hoped.

“Yeah. Pee Wiggles is with Tommy and Traveler is asleep on the floor, but I still couldn't sleep and I got to thinking about the police man and what if he took me and gave me to someone who hated me again and...” Gom always talked so fast and with such anguish evident in his little voice.

“Shhh!” Soldier said again. “Gom, baby, don't. No one is going to take you away. Didn't you believe me last night?”

“Yeah, but then I went to bed and I got scared and... and...” Gom dissolved into tears. Soldier figured he'd let the boy cry a little. Gom obviously needed to get it out.

“Okay, I'm gonna give you three whole minutes to cry and get it out of your system. Then you're gonna give me a hug goodnight and go on to sleep for me. We'll wake up early again and shower and maybe do a little laundry while we start breakfast for the others. Deal?”

“Yeah. Thank you, Soldier. Sometimes I just need to cry.”

Soldier heard a little whimper as Gom let loose and cried against him. Hot tears soaked his shirt and he was amazed to hear the occasional little sob and hiccup. Gom was beginning to feel safe enough to cry, really cry.

One day, they'd all rejoice when he just bawled like a baby, with great big sobs and wails. It was a strange world. You wouldn't usually wish for such things, but being able to cry normally would be a big step for this child. This heart-stealer. Good thing Soldier had a big old heart, because between what he felt for Dillon, Gom, Tommy, and the others, he was spreading it pretty thin. He could handle it.

“Time's up. Sleep,” he said quietly.

“Okay, Soldier. Thanks. I love you.” Gom hugged him tight around the neck and dropped right off to sleep. Amazing.

“You, too, buddy.”

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Soldier woke early and lay still in the chair, glad that Gom was still sleeping so soundly. The little boy had slept through the night, not waking to nightmares once. Progress. He was thankful for each little step.

“Soldier...?” a small whisper.

“Yeah, Gom?”

“You’re awake. Did I wake you up?”

“Nope. I woke up and you were still sound asleep. I was just lying here thinking.”

“Want me to get off you? Am I too heavy?” Gom started to wiggle like he was going to get down.

“Hey. Be still. It’s still really early. You don’t have to get up yet. Do you want to sleep more?”

“I don’t think so. Can I ask you something?”

“You can ask me anything.”

“Really? *Anything?*”

“I will answer anything you ask.”

“Can it be our secret... like the other? I... I never told nobody else this.” Gom was whispering now.

“I’ll keep your secret. Are you sure you want to tell me and not Dillon?”

“I think I want to talk to you about this. I love Dill... a lot. But I love you, too, and I think I need to tell *you* this. Okay?”

“Sure. It means a lot to me that you trust me. Whatcha got on your mind, buddy?” Soldier hoped he had what it took to be what this child needed right now.

“Do you know about me... I mean... about my mom and that she’s dead and she hurt me?” Gom was speaking softly and hesitantly.

“Yeah, I know a little.” Too much for his peace of mind.

“Well, I know you like me... and so does Dill. But, why didn’t she? Why did she burn me and hurt me and tell me she hated me?” Gom’s eyes were full again as he asked the painful question. “I tried to be good, but I was always so scared. What did I do wrong? I don’t want to mess up again. If I know what I did wrong, then...”

“Whoa, buddy. You don’t need to say anymore. Okay? I can tell you for sure that you did *not* do anything wrong...” Yep, Soldier’s heart was going to break.



“But how do you know? You wasn’t there. She said I did, all the time. She burned me and burned me and told me I was bad and then she... she...”

“Honey, where did she burn you?” Soldier had seen marks on him, but he *so* hadn’t wanted to believe what he’d seen.

Gom gasped and then ducked his head and said in a sick little whisper, “Down there.”

*Shit. No. No way.* Soldier wanted to curse and yell and throw something and hold Gom and tell him life really didn’t suck. But how could he? For this kid, life *sucked*. All the boy had to do was go to sleep and life sucked over and over. Now he understood why Gom couldn’t... wouldn’t sleep. Why the little boy wet rather than go to the bathroom. Soldier wondered if Dillon knew about the burns. Surely Dillon knew, but Gom had said he hadn’t told Dillon this. Whew. Soldier had to come up with something before Gom thought there was something wrong.

“Gom.” Soldier was whispering, too, to let Gom know he understood that it was a secret. “There is a lot I don’t know and I don’t want to do or say anything wrong. Can I ask you a few things?”

“Yes.” Brave little boy.

“First, let me tell you again. Your mother was wrong. She was messed up, okay? Sometimes people are just messed up. I’m so sorry it was *your* mother and that she hurt you, but I need to know some things, some secret things.” Things Soldier didn’t really want to know. God help him, he didn’t want to mess this up.

“Now, can you tell me where she burned you? Are you scared to? Does it still hurt you?” Soldier didn’t know how recent this all was and whether it had anything to do with Gom’s bathroom problems. Were the burns affecting him in some way other than psychologically?

“I’m not scared with you. You would never hurt me. ‘Sides, we already took a shower together. I saw *your* scars. You got big scars. I bet they hurt more than mine even. I got lots of little ones on my butt.” That was what he thought he’d seen that morning after the shower. Those little circles on Gom’s behind had to be from cigarette burns.

*Jesus Christ, who could do that? Why?* Soldier had to hold his response in. He put on just a concerned face and asked, quietly, “Is that the only place? Did she do anything else to you? You might as well tell me all of it, then maybe I can take some of it into my mind and give you a break.” *Would that he could.* “You won’t have to think about it as much, ‘cause now I’ll know and you can try to forget some of it.” Lord knew Soldier would take it all from Gom if he could, the pain, the scars, the memories, the fear... all of it. “Because, Gom, I promise you, I will not let anything like this ever happen to you again. I will make you believe that you’re a good boy and you did not do anything to deserve this mean ugly thing. So, is that all?”

Gom shook his head and tears fell again. “She burned me on, you know, that little bally thing, too. Down under there.” Gom’s head dropped nearly to his chest as he tried to hide what he seemed to think was ugliness in himself.

Soldier followed his instinct to reach out and hold this little boy and let him know that he was safe now. Soldier felt sure now that Gom's bathroom fears were psychological, not physical. But he would have to make sure.

"Okay, little one, heads up. I've only got a couple more questions." Once Gom was settled and had his head leaning on Soldier's chest, Soldier asked, "Do those still hurt you... or is it just the memories that hurt?"

"Uh, it doesn't hurt me anymore. I just get scared that I'll do something wrong again..."

"Honey, honey. You're not listening to me. You did *not* do anything wrong. There is nothing you could do that would make anyone hurt you like that again. You have to believe me." Soldier was so frustrated that he couldn't get the boy to understand that he was safe now. He wanted Gom's fears to go away. God give him the ability to make this kid believe him.

"You were *never* a bad boy. *She* was a bad mother. She should never have touched you like that. No one should. Do you hear me? No one should ever touch you there when you are young." He peered into Gom's eyes to see if the boy was listening and taking in what he was saying. "When you grow up you can do anything you want, as long as it doesn't hurt anyone else. It's not right to hurt another person, is it?"

"No. I would not hurt nobody." Gom was so serious.

"I know you wouldn't, sweetie, and no one *here* will ever hurt you. I don't care if you do something bad. Sometimes little boys mess up and do things they shouldn't or do things they don't know is wrong." Soldier put his big hands gently around Gom's cheeks and told him, "No matter what you do, no one will hurt you. We'll talk to you, and I can't swear we won't ever punish you, but I *can* promise it will *never* be by hurting you. We might take something away for a little while or something like that but never... *ever* will I allow anyone to hurt you again. Okay?" As God was his witness, Soldier would never let this child be physically abused again in any way.

"Yes. You, uh, won't tell the others will you, about, you know...?"

"Well, let me ask you this. Can I tell just Dillon? I just had to know that it wasn't something that was still hurting you. But Dill loves you and he needs to know about what happened to you. He won't tell anyone either." Soldier wanted Dillon to know about this, but he wanted this boy's trust, too.

"He won't be upset with me, will he?"

"Lord, no. He'll be upset that you were hurt more than he even knew. But he won't be upset with *you*. I can promise you that. You believe me?"

“I always believe you, Soldier. You don’t lie ever, right?”

“Right. So, in that case, you have to promise to try to believe that you did not do anything wrong. Your mother was a bad person, not you. You were a little boy who should have been loved, not hurt. Now... guess what?”

“What?” Gom’s eyes were big.

“Now you *are* a little boy who is loved, just like you’re supposed to be.”

“Wow.” It was the quietest “wow” Soldier had ever heard, but he thought it signified that Gom finally got it. Gom finally understood that he was not a bad boy, had never been a bad boy.

“Soldier?”

“Yeah?”

“You can tell Dill. He loves me, and he thinks I’m a good boy, too, doesn’t he?”

“Yep.”

“We gonna go shower now? And I, uh, you know, need to take off the sheets on my bed.”

“We can do that. What are we making the others for breakfast today?” Soldier asked, trying to get things back to as normal as they could be without letting Gom know that his heart was absolutely breaking.

He didn’t care what anyone said. He put Gom into the shower again and laid clothes and a towel out for him. Soldier dried Gom’s hair, teasing quietly with him as Gom got dressed. He would not have Gom think there was something wrong with him. Soon, they had sheets washing and breakfast cooking.

He was teaching Gom how to make cinnamon toast when Dillon showed up. Gom looked from Soldier to Dillon and seemed afraid for a minute, like he thought maybe Soldier was going to blurt out all his secrets right then.

He winked at Gom and shook his head. Gom visibly relaxed. Soldier didn’t know if he was cut out for this or not. He wanted to go out and beat somebody up. 'Course, the one who needed it was dead and gone, so Soldier had to suck it up and try to make this little boy’s life better from now on. He wanted to be there for Gom. He had to make that happen. He would check into what needed to be done to make it so.

Everyone spent the morning going through all the clothes and getting everyone fixed up with their own sets. They were all amazed that they had nice outfits. None could figure out where they would wear them. Who knew? Some day, they might all go out to eat or something. You never

knew. If it could happen, Soldier would make it happen. That would all be part of the talks with Daniel.

It was late that night before he and Dillon got a chance to talk. Soldier could tell that Dillon had known all day that he had something on his mind. Dillon hadn't pushed. Now, they were sitting on the ground, leaning back on "their log," and Soldier had his arm around Dillon, and again he found himself holding someone and allowing them time to just cry it out.

"I've heard so many bad things in the last months. So many ugly things have been done to these boys. My God, the things that beautiful boy has been through. I can't believe he told you all that. It's amazing that he feels that safe already with you. I'm so glad you're here for him, for all of us. I just can't believe he's as whole as he is, considering." Dillon shook his head, reaching up to wipe his eyes.

"I know, honey. I've wanted to put my fist through the wall several times today. I've never heard anything like that in my life. He's lived in fear all this time that he was going to do something wrong and get hurt again." Rage warred with compassion inside Soldier. "How could anyone do that to that great little boy? He's so sweet and kind and he loves everybody."

"I know, I know." Dillon's voice was hushed, sounding pained.

Soldier continued, his voice cracking occasionally, strong at times. "It's just disgusting, makes me sick to think of her burning him like that over and over and how it must have hurt him so much." He still shook inside with rage thinking of Gom's pain and longstanding fear because of her. "How did he come out of that and be the wonderful boy he is? It's just amazing. I swore to him that there was nothing he could do that would make us hurt him... ever. He has it ingrained in him that he's a bad boy and is just waiting for the bad things to happen."

"It's not fair, Soldier."

"I explained that all boys mess up sometimes and if he did, we may have to punish him, but it'd never be physical. We'd talk to him, take something away, etcetera, but no one will ever hurt him again." Soldier knew the next part would get to Dillon, so he was ready with tightening arms. "He told me I could tell you 'cause you love him and you think he's a good boy, too. He just takes my breath away sometimes." Soldier let Dillon soak up the love and compassion from the hug. "Damn. We have to do everything necessary to make sure we keep these boys safe. I want to take Gom to a doctor." Soldier knew he had to and he knew it would be hard for Gom to go through it.

"You're right. He'll do okay if you take him." Dillon said.

"Just to make sure he's really all right. Make it all legitimate, since he told me. I think it needs to be reported." Soldier knew that it was the right thing to do, but he'd have to be careful of Gom's feelings. He wouldn't have the boy hurt.

“We’ll set it up right away.” Dillon sounded businesslike now, but Soldier heard the tension in his voice.

“Let’s get busy and talk to Daniel and see about making this official. I want to know laws and find out if we can do this together. I’m not taking any chances. I’m calling my lawyers tomorrow and we’ll meet with them. They can come to the house. We’ll find out what’s needed and we’ll make it happen.” Soldier stopped and just held Dillon for a while as they thought about their plans.

“How about the rest of the day? Weren’t the boys cute with their new clothes? Once we get it all figured out with Daniel, maybe we can have an outing with all of them. I’d love something positive for the boys.” Dillon’s smile at the thought of making the boys happy made Soldier’s heart turn over.

“I’ve really wondered about if they’re safe with us. Is there someone going to try to take them away?” Soldier asked, trying to stay on task.

“Not really. They were placed in the system, but something didn’t work out in these cases and they ended up in Daniel’s space. He knew what they needed and made it happen.” Dillon settled in more closely to Soldier before he continued. “They’re supposedly in foster care. We’re fudging a little, but soon it’ll be so. Then we should be safe to take them out.”

“That’s good. We’ll have to plan some outings.”

“The only one I worry about is Tommy. He’s from the next town over. His family is still there. They tried to get him back twice from the system after he was finally taken away. After what he told us, I guess we know why. I figured he was safe with you the other day.” Dillon put his hand up to Soldier’s scarred face and smoothed his hand absently over it as he talked.

“How’d that happen? I mean, how’d he end up here?”

“Well, he ran away, but had nowhere to go. He ended up in a shelter like Daniel’s and they put him into the system, then back home. He ran again and it happened again.” Dillon shook his head against Soldier’s shoulder at the stupidity of the system sometimes. “This time they put him in a foster home. Something went wrong there, I don’t know what, but the SS person there contacted Daniel. Thank God.” Dillon sighed heavily.

Soldier tightened his arms around Dillon and rubbed his chin over the top of Dillon’s head. Dillon finished his story about Tommy.

“They sent him here. His mother and some man tried to get him back, but it wasn’t allowed. But he’d seen and heard them and was scared to death he’d be sent back to them. He still lives in fear that they’ll be allowed to take him back. Not going to happen.” Soldier smiled in the dark at the mighty warrior in his arms, this small man who would fight like a gladiator for his boys. “They don’t know where he is now, but I’m afraid if they find out, they’ll try again. Legally, they can’t get him, but they’re filthy; they aren’t worried about the law. We’ll protect him.”

“Damn straight.”

“Soldier?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m tired. So tired. It takes so much out of me, the way these boys have been so hurt. It just hurts me and I just feel so worn out right now. I’m so glad you’re here, sharing this.” Dillon cuddled in closer to Soldier like he was soaking up the comfort Soldier was offering. “It feels like I’m not the only one responsible anymore. Having your help makes it easier. But, oh, I’m just sick thinking about what’s happened to those two. I need you just to hold me a little while. Then I’ll go in and sleep as much as I can. I imagine you’ll end up with a wet blanket again.”

Soldier was glad that Dillon could admit his need. “Not a problem. Gom’ll come ‘round. He just needs to feel safe and secure. He’s getting there. Did I tell you he cried on me before he went to sleep and there were a few sounds? You know how he always cries silently?”

“Yes. Really?” That brought Dillon’s head up to look into Soldier’s eyes.

“Yeah, he told me that sometimes he just needed to cry. I told him he could for a few minutes then he had to go to sleep. So he did and there was an occasional whimper and a few little hiccups, but it’s more than I’ve ever heard before. It was funny. I told him time was up and he just said okay and went to sleep. The kid is a marvel to me.”

“Yep. *You* are a marvel to me. You have such compassion for these boys. It warms my heart.”

“Well, what can I do to make you feel better right now? Just hold you? Or would you like a kiss or two to help you make it through the night?”

“Dumb question. I’ll always take a kiss from you. You’re a master. I love your mouth... love kissing you... lo... mmmph,” If he could have, Dillon probably would have said he loved the way Soldier shut him up when he started rambling.

In about a half hour, Soldier carried a sleeping Dillon back into the house and was surprised when he saw Tommy waiting in the kitchen. He whispered, “Is everything all right?”

“Yeah. I was just making sure you all got back in okay.”

“You’re not still worried that I’m doing something Dillon doesn’t want, are you?”

“Uh, no. Is he all right?” Tommy looked at Dillon’s slack body held in Soldier’s arms.

“Tired. Sound asleep. Worn out. Will you lock the door and help me get him into his bed? Then I’ll slip back down to the chair and you can go on to bed.”

“Soldier, you don’t have to sleep in the chair. I know you all are together now and it’s okay. Really.”

“No, Tommy. It’s not okay here. I told you. Not yet, anyway. We’re being very careful to not do anything that would cause us to lose you all. If they thought we were carrying on in the house with you boys here, it could cause us to lose you all. We won’t let that happen.” That was something he and Dillon felt strongly about. He went on to explain to the twelve-year-old who often acted like he was going on twenty. “So, we go out back, and we talk about the day and what we need to do next and how we’re going to handle things. We might sneak in a kiss or two. But I promised you nothing else would happen here. He just sacked out. I couldn’t wake him, so I just carried him in.”

“You’re awfully strong.” Tommy said, sounding envious.

“Yeah. I am. You want to start working on what we talked about tomorrow? We can set aside a little time each day, just the two of us, if you’re comfortable with that.” Soldier wanted to keep his promise to help Tommy learn self-defense.

“Yeah. I’d like that. Tired of being scared all the time.”

“I understand. All right, go on up. I’ll see you tomorrow.” Soldier nodded to the door, indicating that Tommy should head on to bed.

“Soldier?”

“Yeah?”

Tommy spoke quietly, and obviously from the heart. “It really is okay, I mean, the two of you. It doesn’t bother me. I know you better now and I know you’re a good man. I’m glad Dillon has you. You make him happy. I think he was a little lonely before.”

“So was I, kid. So was I.”

## Chapter Ten

Things moved quickly when you had money and good lawyers. They checked on the status of Dillon's application and found it had been approved but not processed yet. They got that finished and next thing they knew, he was official, with special connections to Daniel's shelter. He would still only be handling the cases that Daniel deemed right for the house.

Soldier's lawyers had gotten all the paperwork completed on getting the house listed in Dillon's name. A chunk of Soldier's money was set aside for the house. Soldier made the crack that between the two of them (and, secretly, Gom) it could be called Scar City. Dillon laughed and said they should put it together and call it Scarcity. That's just what they did.

Some people would mispronounce it and think it meant things that were scarce, but they all would know it was for people who were scarred in some way, visible or otherwise. It would be pronounced with the accent on "scar" because it had meaning to all of them. They discussed it with the boys and made it clear what the name stood for, and that it did not mean *they* were scarred. It meant that they were there for healing and help and everyone had things they needed to get over.

The boys were just lucky enough that they had people and a place to help them. They thought it was cool, and thought of it more as Dillon and Soldier's place because they both had big scars people could see. Whatever worked for them. Both Dillon and Soldier liked the name and what it meant to them was that it was theirs, shared. It was them.

Dillon talked to a couple of local construction companies and went with one that had a good reputation and could start right away. He worked with them on plans for just what he wanted. The two buildings would join by a breezeway and it all came under the name Scarcity.

They met with Daniel and Soldier took a look at all the paperwork on the boys and got a better idea of how the deal worked with Daniel and the Social Services workers. Soldier filled out forms and got his process started, giving details on the new building and the fact that he would have a private apartment in it. The apartment entrance was what would connect to the other building through the breezeway and would be used by Dillon and Soldier for getting back and forth when needed. Everyone else would use the front or back entrances.

At some point, Soldier saw them living together in the apartment, which would be big enough for that to happen and they could get someone else in to stay at the other house... as the kids were older and less needy.

They would always have needy ones and they would always get the attention they needed. By then, they might just be housed in Soldier's building. It all depended on the laws governing Texas and how much trouble came from them being gay and working in foster parenting.



It was about four days later that they had a visit from Officer Bradford again and this time he had his partner, Officer Jansen, with him. When Jansen stepped back a little at seeing his scars, Soldier figured they might have trouble with this one.

“So you’re the ones who have the little boys here, huh? How’s that workin’ out for ya?”

“Exactly what are you referring to, Officer?” Soldier didn’t like the sneer in his voice. Officer Bradford looked embarrassed, but said nothing.

“After Bradford here told me what was going on here, I figured it needed to be checked out a little more thoroughly. Sounds kind of fishy to me. I want to see those boys down here now and I will be deciding if it’s healthy for them to stay here.” Pompous authority rang in the officer’s voice.

“By whose authority will you be making decisions about these children?” Soldier demanded, thinking the man was not only big and rude, but a smartass, too. The man seemed to be trying to find something bad going on here. Well, Officer Asshole was in for a surprise. Soldier wasn’t easily intimidated. He knew the police couldn’t come in here, on Soldier’s property, and demand things, but he didn’t want to cause a problem for Daniel and Dillon’s program.

“I don’t need nobody’s authority but this badge. Now bring ‘em down here. What’re you afraid of?” Again, the sneer in the officer’s voice made his thoughts clear. He thought he was going to find evidence of wrongdoing in this house and he appeared delighted at the prospect.

“I’m not afraid of anything. *They’re* afraid of loud people yelling questions at them. Be nice.”

“You’re telling me how to do my job?” Officer Jansen said incredulously.

“I’m asking you to be calm and nice to these boys. They’re here because they’ve been abused by grown ups. They scare easy.”

“Yeah. I bet they’re scared of you. I’m sure they mind what *you* say.”

Dillon started to say something, but Soldier held up his hand and shook his head. He’d come across this kind before. He hoped he could undo whatever damage this man did here today. He looked at Officer Bradford and asked, “Do we have to let him see the boys? Shouldn’t he have some kind of formal papers or something before he can demand to see them? It’s going to cause the kids a lot of distress.” Soldier could imagine Gom and Tommy being scared to death of being taken away, and Jack would probably go after Jansen if the officer said something rude to the boy.

“I think it would be better to not cause any trouble and just let him see them. We’re not here to take anyone away. He just doesn’t like it that you two are working with them. He’s a little...”

“Homophobic?”

“See, I told you they were queers. You said you didn’t know. It ain’t right, them being with young kids. Hell, they could do anything.”

“Watch your mouth.” Soldier said quietly.

“You threatenin’ me? Are you that stupid?” Jansen looked gleeful, apparently hoping Soldier would do something he could take him in for.

“Not at all. Just don’t say anything ugly in front of these kids. They don’t even know we’re... as you say ‘queer.’ The subject never comes up. We just work with them and make sure they have what they need. Please don’t make something ugly out of this.” It galled Soldier to say please to the idiot with the badge and the attitude.

“Get those boys down here or I’ll go looking for ‘em.”

Things were getting out of hand. Soldier looked at Officer Bradford again for help but the younger officer was obviously cowed by his older, bigger partner. Soldier looked to Dillon, who actually looked sick at the coming confrontation.

Soldier went to the bottom of the stairs and called up, “Tommy, will you bring Gom and Ben and the others down here, please. There are a couple of officers who just want to talk to you. No one’s in trouble here, okay? Don’t worry.”

The door opened and Gom came first. He looked like he was going to cry and Soldier smiled for him

“Hey, buddy. It’s okay. Come on down. You know I won’t let them hurt you.”

“I know, Soldier.” Gom tried to be strong, but by the time he got halfway down the stairs he was shaking hard and tears were streaming down his face. Soldier had to bite his lip. He held out his arms and Gom jumped. He caught Gom to him and winked at Tommy who held Ben’s hand as the others trailed down. Gom refused to raise his head from Soldier’s neck so he just held on to him.

Tommy was great. He herded the guys over to the couch and got them all sitting in a row, then he sat on the arm and looked up at the policemen and in a very brave voice, he said, “What do you want to know?”

“These guys do anything to you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“I knew it. Tell me what, boy.” You’d think Jansen had won the lottery from the smile on his face. Soldier didn’t know what Tommy was up to.

“Well, Dill, uh Dillon, took us in and takes care of us and gets food for us and makes sure we have enough to eat.” He looked at Dillon with respect. “Then Soldier came and he owns the house and he bought lots of stuff like clothes and beds and sheets, even a washer and dryer. He got us two dogs and that makes the little ones happy.”

This time his gaze went to Soldier and his admiration shone through. “He’s the only one who can get Gom to go to sleep, so that’s good. Let me see. Oh, he told me he would help me defend myself so no one else would ever hurt me again. That made *me* feel better. He makes us breakfast.”

“So. He sleeps here, too, does he?”

“Yeah, sometimes. He has a hotel room, I think. But sometimes, he sleeps in that big chair over there.” He pointed to the poor broken chair against the wall. “That’s when Gom can’t sleep, so he just sits and holds him all night. I doubt if he gets much sleep, but Gom does. He doesn’t sleep very often so when he really needs it, Soldier stays and holds him. I guess that’s it.”

“You sleep with that little boy there?” Jansen was still trying to find something wrong in all that Tommy had said.

“I do. Sometimes.”

“Hey, little boy, look up here,” Jansen ordered.

Soldier glared at Jansen and said, “Easy.” To Gom, he said, “Hey, buddy, look at the man and answer his questions. He thinks there’s something wrong with us sleeping in the chair.”

Gom pulled back his head and looked at Soldier for a few seconds and then Soldier turned a little so Gom could look at Office Jansen.

“Does this man sleep with you in that chair?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Does he do anything to you?”

“He hugs me and tells me I’m a good boy and lets me cry when I need to. Sometimes I just cry and he doesn’t get mad. He tells me to cry ‘til I’m done and then to go to sleep and that’s what I do.” Gom patted Soldier’s face. “He makes me feel better. I can sleep when I’m on him, but other times, I wake up really scared. I try not to ask him too much cause I know I’m heavy and he probably don’t sleep so good. Only when I get really *so* tired... then he stays and I sleep so good then.” Gom glared at the man.

And it seemed Gom wasn’t quite finished. He added, “He’s a good man... and I’m a good boy, he said I was. So there.” Gom dropped his head back to Soldier’s neck and reached up and patted

his scarred cheek again. Soldier found himself shaking with anger at the officer and love for the boy.

They all waited for Officer Jansen to decide what he was going to do with what Gom had told him. He finally looked at all the others on the couch. “What about you all? You got anything to say? These men ever do anything to you? Touch you where you don’t want them to, try to do private stuff to you?”

“No, and you’re ugly for saying so. Why you come in here bein’ ugly about Dill and Soldier? They don’t do nothin’ but take care of us. Why you sayin’ that stuff? You oughta leave, mister.” This came from Jack. *You go, little bit.*

“Uh, Jim. I think that’s pretty clear. Your fears are unfounded. These two are good and decent men and they’ve given these boys a good home. Let’s leave them alone. I’m sorry to have troubled you all.” Officer Bradford looked apologetically at Soldier and Dillon. Finally, he’d spoken up and got it right.

They both left with Jansen still blustering, but he had no leg to stand on now, so it was just hot air. As soon as the car pulled away from the curb, the boys were off the couch and Soldier dropped down in the middle of it. They all piled on top of him and tried to hug him. The couch groaned and broke and they all laughed and tried to untangle themselves. Dillon stood watching them and smiling. Soldier loved them all so much. What brave boys Tommy and Gom had been. They deserved a treat.

“So, uh... think we can get a new couch, Soldier?” Dillon’s voice held laughter.

“Think we better. Maybe a couple, and maybe a new recliner for Gom and me. Hey, Tommy, and you, too, Gom, I want to thank you for what you said and how you were so brave.” He touched each of them on their shoulders, showing his love and respect for them. Thanking them. “And you, too, Jack. He was a really mean man, but you were all so good. You told the truth and you were very strong. I’m proud of you all. Aren’t you, Dillon?”

“I’m so proud of all of you I could just bust. I think we need a treat. I was trying to figure something out.” Dillon said. “I’ve got an idea. Since we can’t be with all of them all the time I’ve resisted getting a TV, but what if we bought one and used it for movies? Get a DVD player and pick out the movies. We could have a couple of movie nights a week, with popcorn of course, for special treats for good behavior or something. What do you think of that idea?”

There was a chorus of positive responses in various forms and degrees of loudness. They decided that it would be a good day for their first outing as a group. They asked each of them if they felt safe enough, with the two of them going, to be out. They all agreed and they went to get into their good outfits.

Soldier and Dillon decided they would take them out to eat at a local buffet and then to a large discount store for furniture shopping. They’d buy some movies and set up a rental account at a local movie store for more later. They all needed a treat after that meeting.

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They had a ball. They went to an early supper and neither was surprised when the boys all wanted juice to drink instead of Cokes. The amount of food those boys packed away was awesome. Even the waitresses were impressed and seemed to have fallen in love with the boys. They were very attentive and helped the little ones with their plates and suggested ideas to the older ones.

Soldier and Dillon just watched the boys enchant the ladies and clear plate after plate. They left a generous tip and headed for the big chain store. It was only about seven or so, but it was busier than Soldier had expected at this time of night. He and Dillon told them over and over to stay together, no wandering off to look at stuff. They held the hands of the two smallest ones and the others huddled close. Good.

They went to the furniture department and found a couple of good, big couches and a couple of end tables with doors and drawers in them for storing things. He and Gom tried out three chairs before they found one they agreed was a good one for sleeping.

They headed to the TVs and DVD players. Each boy was going to be allowed to pick one movie and if it passed inspection from the grown-ups, he would own it. Soldier and Dillon picked out a few for all of them, also. They were looking at one that Ben was showing them when they heard Tommy yell from the next aisle over.

“Soldier! Help! Get away from me! *Soldier!*” There was panic and fear in his voice and Soldier sprinted. He reached for a gun that hadn’t been there for over two years. He turned the corner at a dead run and saw Tommy backed up against the shelves of movies with a man and woman standing right in his face. The man reached for Tommy’s arm and Soldier was there in seconds.

“Touch him and I’ll break your arm. Get away from him. Tommy, come here. Get behind me.”

“Who the hell are you, you ugly son of a bitch?” This from a big man in dirty overalls and stringy gray hair. He smelled like he hadn’t washed in ages and the woman with him was no better. She was dressed like a hooker, in a low cut top that showed more than Soldier wanted to see and a skirt that was so short he was afraid they were going to see enough to scar them *all* for life.

“I’m the man that’s protecting this boy from anyone, including you. Now leave.”

“That’s *my* boy. You got no right to treat us like this,” the woman said. She started for Tommy. Soldier took a step toward her. She stopped.

By this time the whole group had arrived and were watching the drama with wide eyes, huddling together. Dillon stood with them, just as riveted.

Tommy was tired of being scared, he'd told Soldier that. He stepped around Soldier and said, in a surprisingly clear voice, "I don't have to go with you ever again. I know that. They told me that. You can't hurt me any more. I will never go with you." His voice was strong. "I'm safe and I like where I am. I *don't* like you." He stood with his feet planted and his arms crossed over his chest.

Soldier was so proud of him. He could see Dillon was, too. "I think he made that pretty clear. If you try to come around him again, I will call the police and you better hope they get there before I get done with you. If you ever *touch* him again, I *promise* I'll make you sorry. I can do it... and I will." Soldier meant every word.

"Why do you care about him? He ain't nothin'." The mother was being ugly and belligerent now.

"There are so many answers to that, but I doubt if you would understand them," Soldier said, knowing as he said it that the sarcasm would be lost on those two.

Gom, little Gom, stepped up beside Soldier and took him by the hand, and said, "Tommy's a good boy. He helps us all and he sings like a angel when we can't go to sleep and he is *never* mean. He is *too* somethin'!"

Soldier was about to bust his buttons, he was so proud of his boys. What a day. What beautiful, strong, brave children they had.

"I think it's time for you to leave. If you don't, I'll get that officer I see heading this way to take you away and I'll make sure he has reason to lock you up. Never come near this child again. I mean it." For the first time Soldier *tried* to look menacing. He used his fiercest glare and turned his scarred face to them and nearly laughed when they scuttled away.

He turned back to the group and they all looked at him with awe.

Jack spoke up. "Wow, dude. I'm glad you're on our side."

Little fart.

"You better believe it, buddy. I'm on all your sides. Let's go home. This stuff will be delivered tomorrow, and tonight we stop for ice cream on the way home... or is everybody too full from supper?"

This time, a negative chorus met his question. Soldier looked over at Dillon and winked. Whew! He could use some time on the log. Hell, they could use some time in the suite. Where was Daniel when you needed him?

Of course, there was no way either one of them would leave the boys tonight. Too much had happened today. The boys needed to be reassured and comforted despite their show of bravery. When night came, the demons would be back, but these boys were getting better. They were

beginning to have faith in themselves, especially Tommy. And what about Gom standing up for Tommy like that?

Soldier looked forward to talking over the day with Dillon tonight. Lord, he needed to kiss the man. Seemed like it had been ages! He wished for more than a kiss, but that would wait. Not too long, he hoped.

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Kids in bed, dogs taken care of, house quiet. Soldier and Dillon were on the ground in front of their log and Dillon was straddling Soldier's legs and rubbing his groin hard against Soldier's. They were trying to control their breathing and not separate their mouths at the same time. It was hard, but Soldier didn't want to give up the connection. They'd come out, sat down, and turned toward each other, and Soldier knew they'd both planned to talk first about the unbelievable day they'd had. It didn't happen quite that way, because as soon as they'd faced each other, they were like magnets. Their lips were together and Soldier was reaching for Dillon, pulling him over his legs, wanting to be as close as possible. Finally, having to breathe, they stopped and took a few deep breaths. Dillon rolled his forehead on Soldier's shoulder and sighed into his neck.

"I love you." Soldier just put it right out there.

Dillon gasped, his eyes going to Soldier's as if trying to read the truth there. "I love you, too, so much. I've thought about telling you for a while."

"I think we've been through enough together, it's like we've known each other forever. I feel like I know you so well. I'm sure about this, Dillon," Soldier said very seriously.

"I have no doubts about us either. This is the real thing. We're in love with each other. Isn't that the coolest thing? I thought I'd be alone, just me, taking care of these children."

"Now we'll take care of them together."

"That makes me happy. *You* make me happy," Dillon said, leaning to steal another kiss.

Soldier spoke, playfully now, "Do you want to know what I want to do to you? Do you want to hear me say it out loud? We can't act on any of it, but I want to strip you bare and start at the bottom and lick all the way to the top." He loved the shudder that went through Dillon at his words.

"I swear to God, I won't miss an inch. I want to lick your asshole 'til you cry out and beg for more. I want to fuck you and hear you hum for me 'til you come. I want to suck you dry and touch that tender place behind your balls that makes you shiver and shake for me."

Dillon gasped now and pulled back to look at Soldier, his eyes huge, hungry.

Soldier wasn't done. "I want to watch your mouth slide onto my cock and take it as far as you can. I want to feel that long, hard dick slam into my ass over and over as *hard* as you can. I want to feel your..."

Dillon slapped his hand over Soldier's mouth. "One more word, just one, and I'm going to come in my jeans, right here, right now. You've got me so hard and so hot..." Soldier moved his hand away.

"Tongue. I want to feel your tongue on my neck." Soldier slid Dillon's hand on down his chest, and said, "I want you sucking here, and then I want your mouth on my..." Dillon sobbed once and shook. Soldier could smell him, and held Dillon tight as he shuddered against him. Soldier rubbed Dillon through the wet jeans until he stilled.

"That was cool." Soldier liked that his hot words of want and need had gotten Dillon off.

"Says the man *not* in the wet jeans and red face. Damn, I never thought I'd come just from hearing you talk. But you really are mean. You did that on purpose." Soldier could tell that Dillon secretly loved it, reveled in it.

"Sure did. It was totally cool. I was just telling the truth. You wait 'til next time we're alone. I'm gonna do everything I said, and by then, I'll have thought up a few more."

"Well, right now, *I'm* gonna do one of 'em." With that Dillon moved over and reached for Soldier's zipper. He had it down and had bent to take Soldier into his mouth before Soldier could even begin to say maybe they shouldn't out here. Too late, they were.

Soldier sighed and gasped as Dillon moved his agile tongue up and down his shaft and then took the head into his mouth. Putting both hands on Dillon's head, Soldier smoothed and rubbed and grasped, trying to be silent while getting blown by the best mouth ever. Soldier knew Dillon was great at what he was doing because he was working with love. He'd obviously set out to make Soldier happy and he was doing just that.

Dillon would be soft and sweet, licking and lapping up and down, and then he would suck like a Hoover as hard as he could. He hummed, showing he loved it when Soldier's ass would come up from the ground trying to get more of him. He got hold of the base of Soldier's cock and then his head bobbed up and down rapidly as he sucked and slurped until Soldier was coming hard, deep into his throat. Taking it all down, he spent a good while making sure Soldier was perfectly clean before he put him back. Finally, Soldier was all tucked in and Dillon scooted up for a kiss.

"Can I have one of those special kisses? Then I want to talk a while about our fabulous boys."

Soldier took Dillon's lips softly, knowing how Dillon liked that. Dillon liked all the different kisses Soldier offered, but Dillon seemed to like it best when Soldier started out slow and sweet and then built to passion and heat, hard and thrusting, then ended the way they started. Soldier liked it that way, too. They spent a long time, nuzzling and nipping and loving on each other.



When Soldier finally lifted his swollen lips from Dillon's equally puffy ones, all Dillon said was, "Oh."

"Yeah."

They sat, coming down for a few seconds and then they talked and whispered for a long time about the events of the day and how proud they were of the boys. They agreed that they had both found their calling in life. This was what they wanted to do. They got so much from these boys. Each boy was discussed and their accomplishments noted and it was a long time before they headed back in.

When they got into the kitchen they were surprised to see a note on the table with their names on it. Looking at each other they picked it up and read it together.

*Dill and Soljer,*

*We all want you to no that we luv you all. We had a good time toonite and we want to thank you for standen up for us today. We was skared a lot but you are both reel strong and tuff. We feel that way with you here four us. Goodnite.*

*Tommy, Gom, Ben, Jack, Bart, J.J.J., and Randy.*

Each name was there, some big and awkward, others tiny and barely legible, but they were so dear. Tommy had obviously written the letter and helped the little ones. Soldier decided he needed to do a little work on spelling with the kid, but that was the least of his worries right now.

"We're lucky. This is a great bunch of guys. It won't always be this easy. But I swear I want to wake them all up and give them a big hug. They're such good guys." Dillon said, his eyes crinkling as he looked from the note up to Soldier's face.

"Yeah. I think this gets framed and put in an office some day," Soldier added, smoothing it, taking special care with it.

"Good idea."

## Chapter Eleven

It was about five o'clock in the morning. Gom and Soldier woke at the same time. Soldier was thinking, *Smoke. Is that smoke? Shit! Is that smoke?* and Gom said, "Soldier, somethin' smells funny. Like a fi-yer."

Soldier held on to Gom and jumped up, looking around wildly. He really had a thing about fire. Understandably. He saw that smoke was coming into the front room, where they were, from the kitchen area. He set Gom down and told him to run out the front door and stand by the porch and wait for the others.

"No! What about Pee Wiggles?"

"I'll get them all. I promise. You just go. Now, Gom. Don't make me worry about you, too." Soldier set off up the stairs at a dead run, yelling for Dillon and the others to get up, grab some clothes, and hit the front door running. He pulled his cell from his pocket and called 911 as he ran, opening doors and rousting kids. He found the two dogs in with J., Randy, Bart, and Jack. He hurried them all down the stairs carrying their clothes and trying not to trip over the dogs. He got those four out with Gom, who was sitting by the front step, crying. But the boy had followed Soldier's orders. Good boy. Soldier would see to him later.

Back in he went. He met Dillon and Tommy on the stairs. "Where's Ben?"

Dillon stopped and said, "I thought he was with you. Ben!" he screamed and headed back up. Soldier stopped him and said, "You go and get them all out and keep them together, and I'll find Ben."

"But..."

"Go! It's moving fast. What in the hell caught fire? Damn it. Ben, hey! Ben, answer me, buddy. You up here?" Soldier started a methodical search through each room. Ben and Gom shared a room and Soldier looked through it but didn't see or hear the boy. He'd checked them all and was passing that room again when he heard a sound. He ran back in and said, "Ben, honey? You in here? We've got to get out of here now. The others are waiting for us. Where *are* you?" He heard a thump in the closet and ran over and there Ben was, huddled in the corner. Soldier reached for him and Ben screamed.

"Nooooooooo! It'll get me. I got to *hide*." Ben had covered his head with his arms and his little body was shaking hard. "Don't take me. I smell it. It'll kill me, too. No, Soldier... please... oh..." He dissolved into tears as Soldier picked him up and carried him out. Soldier ran down the steps, choking now on the smoke and cringing as he saw the flames now coming into the room. He hit the door running and was glad to see that Dillon had them all dressed and huddled close out by the street, well away from the house. He could hear sirens. Good.

He didn't know if the house would be worth saving when it was all over with. It didn't matter. All the kids, and Dillon, were safe. The dogs were excited and barking, but staying with the boys. He remembered the Hummer parked close to the back door. His keys were in his pocket and he handed Ben over to Dillon and said,

"Stay here." He sprinted around the side of the house and could see flames coming out of the windows of the house. It had reached the top floor now. He went to the door of the Hummer and unlocked it quickly, hopping in and turning to back out. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw a movement in the back yard, back by the fence. There was just a glimpse of a man. Soldier had only a quick sighting of him but he saw enough to know it was the big man from last night, the one with Tommy's mother.

*Motherfucker.* If he did this... hell, no *doubt* he did. He'd probably followed them home last night, just waiting for his chance to get even. He would pay. Soldier backed quickly around the house and just made it onto the street and down a little so the fire trucks could get in. Soldier locked it up and went to the boys.

Gom ran for Soldier as soon as he saw him. Soldier caught him on the fly, as usual.

"It's okay, buddy. We're all okay."

"You saved us. You saved us all."

"Hey. You woke up the same time I did. And you did just like I told you to even though you wanted to go after Pee Wiggles. Thank you for that." Soldier squeezed Gom to his chest, so glad to be holding him. "I know it was hard for you to go outside and trust that I would get them all out safely."

"No, it wasn't. You never lie. I knowed you would get 'em."

Soldier was glad he'd been able to get them all out so he could keep his promise to this little boy.

More sirens as police cars came from all directions. Soldier kept hold of Gom as he went to meet the policemen as the firemen jumped into their job. He stopped one of them and told him he'd seen someone behind the house when he had moved his Hummer out front. He thought arson might be probable.

Dillon was talking to Officer Bradford when Soldier turned back. Jansen was there, too, hovering like a vulture. Soldier stepped over to them.

"That boy seems to always be on you. I wonder about that," Officer Asshole said.

"This boy woke up when he smelled smoke and he was responsible for us getting out in time. If he's scared now and needs to be held, I defy you to find something wrong with that." Soldier didn't care what the officer thought of his answer.

“Whatever,” Officer A. muttered.

Randy spoke up, “What’re we gonna do now? All our new clothes and stuff was in there.” The others nodded up at him with big eyes solemn faces, looking to him for answers.

Dillon looked a little shell-shocked himself. He had hold of Ben and was rubbing his back and repeatedly telling him no one was going to die, they were all safe.

Soldier figured they could all show up at Daniel’s shelter. He didn’t know if Daniel had room for all of them or not, right now. But, he figured, *he* could do just as well at the hotel. He could share with a few boys and get another room for Dillon to share with the others. For tonight, at least. Then tomorrow, he would rent a place and they would find out about this one. He doubted there would be anything left. No problem. He had insurance on it.

He got the number for the hotel, then called and got them another suite, luckily right next to his. He explained the situation and was told that the hotel would comp him the room for the night, but he told them it wasn’t necessary. They insisted, and just like that, the boys had a place for the rest of the night.

He went to Dillon and said, “We have two suites now at the hotel for the night: mine, and the one beside it. Can you take them over in the Hummer? I’ll stay here ‘til this is safely over and take care of all the stuff that’ll come from it.”

“Sure. They’re a little freaked. They won’t want to leave you here. Do you have any idea...”

“Yeah. A definite one. I’ll tell you later. Not for small ears.” Soldier turned to the boys and said, “Okay, guys, listen up.” He was aware of the officers standing there listening. “I got another big room beside mine at the hotel where I live. They’re waiting for you all to come over.” They all looked like they were in shock, sleepy and scared.

“They’ll get beds and cots and whatever, so everyone will have a place to sleep the rest of the night... and late tomorrow, I hope. We’ll see about getting you all some new clothes, too. Don’t worry.” He hoped they could get calmed down and get some rest.

“I’m gonna stay here with the firemen and the policemen. When it’s all cleaned up, I’ll see you back there. Dillon will take you over in the big truck.”

“What about Pee Wiggles and Traveler?” Gom spoke up from his shoulder. Soldier had honestly forgotten the kid was there. He was so used to the small weight of him.

“Hmmm...” Soldier thought for a minute. That *was* a problem. He remembered a sign at the hotel that said No Pets Allowed. Gom was looking like he was about to cry again... or still, and Soldier was stuck for a minute.

Help came from a surprising source. Officer Jansen spoke from behind them. "I got a couple of dogs at my house and room for more. If you want, I'll take them home for the rest of the night and tomorrow. Then you can get them back."

Soldier was at a loss for words. He didn't know what to think. Was the man serious? Would the dogs be safe with him, after the way he'd treated all of them?

"Thank you, Officer. That is a nice thing. You like dogs, too?" Gorn said, raising his head and looking at the man.

"Yeah. Got a couple of mutts. They won't mind company. They won't hurt yours. I'll give you the address and you can get them tomorrow. I'm off tomorrow anyway."

Soldier looked him right in the eyes and said, "Thanks. That will help a lot. Are you sure?"

"Yeah. I figure I been a butt about y'all long enough. You all go on and I'll take the pooches. You know what you all will do now?"

"By tomorrow afternoon, I'll have rented a place to stay while we rebuild. I'll take care of it."

Later, Soldier called Daniel on his cell, gave him the pertinent details, and asked him to get any information on Tommy's mother and the man she was with. He knew that bastard had started the fire. Since he'd told them he saw the man out back, the firemen were on the lookout.

Needless to say, the man wasn't that smart. The gas can was still there, behind the house.

It's a wonder Soldier's Hummer hadn't blown when the kitchen and utility room were engulfed. It'd been close. Upon closer inspection, there were a few places where the paint was curled and discolored from the heat. Whew. Soldier was lucky he hadn't blown up when he started it. Another reason he'd like to get his hands on the man. He wasn't worried about the damage to the vehicle. Hell, now it was scarred just like the rest of them, the official *Scarcity* vehicle.

Time passed. People came and went. Questions and answers were traded between a varied group of uniformed men. Soldier stood up through all of it, watching. There was so much to think about. But he was just about dog-tired and still had to stay and meet the fire inspector. He'd told everything he could to the police and firemen there. His insurance man was coming soon. Daniel would be by a little later with information for him. There were people milling about everywhere. There was even a news team there from a local TV station. Soldier had no intention of talking to them. He saw them talking to the policemen, though. Great, let the police handle it.

He needed Dillon. He really, really, *really* needed Dillon. He could stand to be held himself right now. It was sometime after eight in the morning now, and he hoped the kids had slept and that Dillon had managed all right. Of course Dillon had managed. Dillon had managed fine before *Soldier* got here.

What Soldier needed was a good long nap and to wake up in Dillon's arms with time to do several naughty things to the man. It seemed like forever since they'd been together. He wanted. He smiled a little, thinking of what he wanted.

"I can't believe you can muster up a smile right now," said Daniel, stepping up to Soldier. Showed how tired Soldier was. He hadn't even been aware Daniel was there.

"It's about all I can muster this morning. You got info for me on those two? We hadn't even had a chance to tell you about meeting them in the store and them trying to take Tommy. We were calling you today to see about some kind of restraining order or something." There weren't enough words to tell what Soldier wanted to do to that man.

He rubbed his hand tiredly over his head, eyes blinking rapidly at Daniel. "But, Daniel, I saw him out back when I was moving the Hummer up here. Yes, it was dark, but the fire was already making light enough back there to see he had on overalls and had that stringy hair. I want him caught. He could have killed us all." Soldier couldn't suppress a shudder at the thought. He was so tired and stressed. "When I think about those boys and what would have happened if Gom and I hadn't smelled the smoke. If everybody had been upstairs it might've been another story."

"I've brought as much information as I have on them and will give it to the police. I don't want you going after him on your own. You can't afford to get into any trouble now." Daniel looked like he was worried about Soldier going off half-cocked. Maybe the look on Soldier's face caused the concern..

"I'm not going after him. I'm going after the kids and Dillon. I just want him caught and put away, and the woman, too, if she was part of it. I don't want Tommy to have to worry about them ever again." Soldier's eyes lit up for a second as he recounted their experience from last night. "You should have seen him last night at the store. He stood up to them and then little Gom stood up for Tommy. It was amazing."

Daniel was full of praise and some news. "They've come a long way. You and Dillon are good for them. I've done some preliminary checking on laws and so on about you all fostering. We have to decide if this is a foster parent family or a sanctuary for boys. That makes it more a business-type deal. You might have less trouble with the gay thing with that. I'm still doing research."

"Scarcity Sanctuary." Soldier turned the name over in his head. He liked it. He would check on that. Maybe he would just build one big complex, one that would be plenty big enough for these and more, with a separate apartment for him. It looked like the whole house here was a total loss.

The policemen came over and the four of them talked at length about the man Soldier had seen. They discussed who the man was and possible reasons why he'd done what he had.

Without telling Tommy's secrets, Soldier explained that he and Tommy had seen Tommy's mother with that man the night before, and they'd made their third attempt to get Tommy back

after having him taken away due to abuse. Soldier was glad to see that the police were taking it seriously.

Next came the fire inspector and Soldier explained the same to him. Then came the insurance agent and he was told what he needed to know. It was going on ten-thirty in the morning when Soldier finally left, Daniel giving him a ride to the hotel.

Soldier called from the car to tell Dillon he was on his way. He must have sounded tired, because Dillon promised to keep the boys in the other room so he could get some rest.

“Fine, but I need to see them all first.”

“Honey, you couldn’t get out of that if you tried. You’re all they’ve talked about. GOM is beside himself with worry and the others are very quiet.”

Soldier was so tired, but he could tell it was all Dillon could do to talk quietly and calmly for him, knowing he needed that right now. Soldier was sure Dillon wanted to shout questions and rant about his fear for the boys and their home. Dillon kept it together, though his voice was shaky, and Soldier was proud of him.

“They’re watching TV, and room service brought up huge trays of breakfast for them. They’ve been so nice to us. The kids are awed by this place. You know they’ve never seen anything like the luxuries here. The only thing the boys asked for was... guess what?”

“More juice.”

“You’re good.”

“Good and tired. See you in a few.”

Soldier hung up and he and Daniel talked some. He told Daniel how all the boys were fiends for juice. Daniel wondered how long they’d be at the hotel.

“Oh, hell. I’ve got to get something arranged. I need to talk to a realtor about renting a house big enough for us to use ’til we get the new place built. I’ll use all three lots and make it really efficient. It’ll take a while. We’ll need a place nearby, if possible. Oh, and we’ll have to pick up the dogs from Officer Jansen.”

Daniel gave Soldier a local realtor’s name to check in with and told Soldier that he’d call with the number as soon as he got back to the shelter.

The manager met Soldier as soon as he got in the hotel doors. *Uh-oh. Problems?* Soldier straightened. He knew he was a sight, with his wrinkled clothes and soot and red eyes from all the smoke. He waited.

“Sir, welcome back. I’m Bill Manchoy, the hotel manager. I’m sorry about your loss. The hotel would be happy to offer the room for another night for the children, complete with meals.” The manager’s eyes held respect and compassion as he continued, “I have to tell you that’s the most well-mannered bunch of boys we’ve seen in here. I know they’re probably in a bit of shock, but they’re definitely a hit with the staff. If there’s anything you need, you let us know. I’d be glad to see to it personally.”

“Thank you, Bill. I’m in desperate need of a shower and some rest. I’d planned on trying to go out and find a place to rent for the next months while I rebuild. Daniel, at the shelter, is getting me the name of someone to work with. I’m glad they haven’t caused any trouble. I appreciate your kindness.” *I want Dillon...* For a second, Soldier thought he’d said it out loud. Damn, he needed to get to his room.

“Well, take all the time you need. I might suggest you rest and spend time with the young ones today. Maybe get a good night’s sleep tonight and check out a few places tomorrow.” Bill seemed to notice how tired Soldier looked. “Sorry, just a suggestion. We’re glad to have you here. Let us know if we can do anything.” He turned, and Soldier headed for the elevator.

The quiet hum of the glass-walled elevator nearly lulled Soldier to sleep on the way up. He paid no attention to the beauty of the hall carpet, the bright colors and design, or the softness of it. The pretty paintings on the walls were lost on him, but he was sure the kids had been awed by it. The little tables that were spaced at intervals along the long hallway had fresh flower arrangements in them, something he was sure the boys weren’t used to seeing. Soldier could see how this would freak them out a little, to say nothing of how opulent the rooms themselves were. Yeah, he bet the boys were having quite a new experience here.

Soldier went straight to his room, not knowing who or what he would find in there. He slumped against the door and looked around. It was quiet. He could see that there were three cots in the room, but his bed was made up. He longed to lie down just for a while, but he was filthy. He heard a sound and looked up, and there stood Dillon in the bathroom doorway, completely and gloriously naked.

“Sweet Jesus. You take my breath away.”

“Come on. Tommy’s keeping the boys for a couple of hours in their room. He told me to take care of you and then they want to see you.” Dillon held out his arms invitingly. “Come here. I want to take care of you. I *need* to take care of you.”

Soldier walked over to him. He was afraid to touch Dillon, he was so dirty and sweaty and sooty, but Dillon just stepped up and embraced him, holding on tight. Soldier felt Dillon shaking so he pulled him even closer. Soldier pressed his face into Dillon’s neck and breathed. *Oh, yes.* He loved that smell. Dillon. They stood for a few minutes, holding and breathing.

Dillon began to talk. “I want to fall apart. I held it together for the boys and they’ve been great. But I was so freaked out.” He kept clutching Soldier to him. “We could have all died. If it hadn’t been for you and Gom, it could have been so bad. I’ve been worried about you. You have to be



exhausted.” He began to pull away a little, clearly thinking of Soldier now. “Here. No kissing. Shower, massage, sleep. You need to rest. Oh, well, they have to see that you’re okay, too. Is that all right?”

“No. Kiss first, then all that other. The thought of you is all that got me through all the shit I’ve had to do all morning. Bring it.”

“Bringin’ it,” Dillon said, and put both hands on Soldier’s dirty, sweaty, blackened face and kissed him all better. It must have been obvious that Soldier needed it hard and dirty, because Dillon thrust his tongue in and ravaged his mouth.

Soldier held Dillon fast and took and took. Soldier opened wide and took Dillon’s tongue in repeatedly, giving Dillon his moans and sighs as the gratitude they were. Dillon sucked on Soldier’s tongue, licking and nipping it with his teeth, clearly knowing that Soldier needed to *feel*. This wasn’t the soft, sweet, long kisses they were so good at. This was need, explosive, heightened need. Soldier felt Dillon hard against him, but knew this was not the time. Soldier wanted to take care of him, but he was more than exhausted.

“Come on. Let me help you.” Dillon started removing Soldier’s clothes and dropping them in the corner.

“Shewww. Nasty.”

Soldier nodded in agreement as Dillon got the shower going.

Soldier had lost a good portion of his amazing strength and was too tired to move. No wonder. The adrenaline, the action, the fear, the details, the hassle, and the anger all worked to take it out of him and leave him so tired he could hardly stand up.

Dillon went to him and took his hand, like leading one of the children, into the shower. Soldier let out a groan as hot water washed over his worn body. Sore muscles, tense for so long, began to loosen under Dillon’s soapy massage. He had to put his hands out to the wall to hold himself and lock his knees to stay upright. He let the water pound his head and shoulders as Dillon proceeded to wash him from head to toes.

Dillon didn’t miss a spot, but he didn’t linger and tease as he would have in better circumstances. Dillon encouraged Soldier to step out and he dried him off carefully, finally asking him lean on the counter so he wouldn’t fall over.

Once Soldier was dry, Dillon pulled him into the room. He had found some sweats and a T-shirt for Soldier to wear to see the boys and then to sleep in. He helped Soldier step into them. Through all of this, they didn’t talk.

“Dillon. Thank you. I don’t know when I’ve been so tired.”

“Soldier. You’re welcome. I love you... with all my heart.” At the knock on the door, Dillon went to open it and took the tray from the man and locked the door again.

Soldier perked up at the smell of bacon. *Oh my God, food.* He wolfed down the BLT and fries and smiled when he saw the orange juice. He couldn’t seem to get enough of it. Thankfully, there were two large glasses. He began to feel human again.

He put the tray aside and pulled Dillon onto his lap. This time, he put his hands on Dillon’s face and held him still for another kiss. *Oh, sweet heaven. Dessert.* He wasn’t as wild this time, but he took what he needed and gave back enough to get them through until they could spend some real time together. He moved his lips over Dillon’s face and down to his neck, licking and sucking and tasting Dillon’s skin.

“I know. We need to go to the boys. I know. I just had to have a taste. God, I love you.” Soldier wished he had the words to tell Dillon how much the man meant to him. He smiled, thinking about how Dillon had taken care of him earlier. “I was so scared. I’m so thankful it wasn’t worse. I’ll tell you all the details later. Now, let’s see the boys. I bet Gom needs a hug.”

“Oh, yeah. I think I’ll bring them in here for a little while, and then we’ll all go back over there and let you sleep.”

“Wish I could hold you while I sleep. But, no, that’s later. But soon, dear God, it’s got to be soon.”

“I hear you. Get ready. I’m gonna bring ‘em in and they’ve all been so worried about you. You might want to get up on the bed where there’s room for everyone. They’re all going to have to see you, touch you, to know that you’re really all right,” Dillon warned.

Soldier was sitting in the middle of the bed when the door opened, and he saw Gom’s wet eyes first. The little boy leaned just his head in to make sure it was all right. Gom seemed afraid to come in any farther.

“I sure could use a hug.” Soldier opened his arms.

Gom ran and jumped on the bed, sobbing, “Soldier, Soldier, Soldier...” He couldn’t seem to stop saying it as he covered Soldier’s face with kisses. He finally wound down and wrapped his arms around Soldier’s neck, laid his face on Soldier’s shoulder and wailed. He cried and cried, great sobs and scalding tears, hiccups and sniffs.

*Finally!* Soldier cradled Gom and had tears in his own tired eyes as he realized that something had cracked in Gom, and the boy was crying out loud. Safe. Gom knew they were both safe and that allowed him to let loose. His little hand kept coming up to pat Soldier’s face.

Soldier looked over and saw that the others were waiting silently. He could tell they were shocked to hear Gom’s sobs, too. They knew there was something wrong when someone cried so much, but never with any sound. He gestured for them all to come on up. They scrambled onto

the bed. He reached out to touch each of them. Ben's lip was quivering and Soldier touched it and winked at him.

"It's okay. I'm okay. We're all together. I'm tired from working all day, but I'll be fine after a nap." God, Soldier loved these kids. "What say we all go out for supper at that same buffet we went to last night? Anybody want to?" He was amazed that they were all so quiet.

They all nodded and somehow each one managed to touch him in some way, a hand on his shoulder, a touch on his knee, a rub on his arm. He was their lodestone. They seemed to feel better after assuring themselves he was okay. Tommy held back and let the others get their reassurances. He was very solemn. Soldier looked over at Dillon and nodded to Tommy. Dillon shrugged and started to gather the others up, leaving Soldier with Tommy and Gom.

"I'll go and let you sleep. You look real tired," Tommy said.

"Not yet. Gom, baby, will you let me talk to Tommy a minute? Then I'm gonna sack out. Thank you all for being so good in there. I'll be with you in a few hours. I promise."

Gom had settled down into sighs and hiccups. He pulled out of Soldier's neck and smiled through all those tears. He patted Soldier's face again and leaned to kiss his scarred cheek. Soldier took it as the blessing it was. Gom scrambled down and went with Dillon and the others.

"What's on your mind, Tommy?" Soldier asked quietly.

"It was him, wasn't it?" Tommy said, his head down.

"I think so. I think I saw him in the back of the yard when I was moving the truck. He left a gas can so we know it was started on purpose." Soldier hated what this was going to do to Tommy. "I won't lie to you. If they catch him, he'll go to jail. Maybe her, too, if she helped him."

"I don't care about *them*. I'm sorry about your house. It's my fault. They're mad at me, 'cause I won't go back, and they tried to kill us all, Soldier." Tears were now on Tommy's face, running in a steady stream. "I have to leave. I can't let anything happen 'cause of me. What if... what if... it's all cause of me." He shut down then, just sort of folded his arms around himself and closed himself off. No way was Soldier allowing that.

"Hop up here. That's a bunch of crap. You hear me? Don't you even *think* it's your fault. Maybe it's *my* fault 'cause I threatened him last night. Maybe I should leave, so you all will be safe." Soldier could see Tommy shake his head, getting ready to say something, but he went on. "If you leave, they win. We can't let that happen. You are safer, healthier, happier here than you've ever been, right? Yeah, I know. You are *not* to think it's your fault." He kept having to tell kids that their *parents* were scum, not them. It was a fucked-up world.

"They're bad people. I'm sorry for that, but it certainly isn't your fault. Is it Gom's fault his mother took drugs and hurt him?" At Tommy's wide-eyed head shake, Soldier went on, "Of course not. Some people are just bad, Tommy, and it's not a child's fault when a parent is bad."

Soldier put his hand on Tommy's shoulder and squeezed. "You promise me you won't think of leaving us. We really couldn't do without you. We love you and need you here to make us all a complete group. Okay?"

Tommy nodded and raised his face at last. He looked a little stronger and more settled. He scooted up a little and raised his arms to Soldier for a hug.

Soldier embraced him and hugged him hard. "You're such a good, strong boy. We love you, Tommy. It would mean a lot to me if you would sing for us tonight before we go to bed. It's just what we need to calm down and settle into being safe and together." Soldier knew Tommy needed to help in some way, small though it was, to make up for his feeling of responsibility. He'd have to find other ways to keep the boy from thinking of leaving. "I think we're staying here one more night, and then we'll all go out and find what we need tomorrow. I'll need your help."

"I'll help you. And I'll sing for you all tonight. I... I love you, too, Soldier, I think. I never knew what that meant. Love, I mean. Gom says it a lot. But, I think it's what I feel for you all, like I wouldn't be... right inside without you all. Is that right?" Tommy looked to Soldier for confirmation of his feelings.

"Just about right. None of us would be right inside without you with us. You're a smart kid, too. Run on, now. I'm about to flake out. It's been a really long couple of days, huh?"

"Yeah. You rest. I'm gonna tell Dillon to come back in here for a while, 'til you go to sleep. I'll watch the others. We're just watching TV... cartoons. I know you all aren't gonna... you know... but I think he needs to be with you a little. He was really worried about you."

"God, you're an old twelve. Thank you. I'd like to talk to Dillon before I fall asleep and tell him about some of the stuff from this morning and what we have planned for tomorrow. I'm glad we have you, Tommy. You're a great kid." Soldier's words were becoming slurred as he felt exhaustion taking over.

In just a few minutes, Dillon slipped back into the room and came over to Soldier. He pushed Soldier over, pulled the covers back on the side of the bed, then rolled him over onto the clean sheets, covering him up. Then he went around and slipped into the other side. He reached out and took Soldier into his arms and smiled when Soldier rested against him, his face in Dillon's neck.

"I'll leave in a bit. I just want to hold you, breathe the same air. I want to feel your heart beat. Rest now." He cradled his large man against him and watched him breathe.

Soldier simply said, "Oh, God."

He was out like a light and didn't move for five hours.

## Chapter Twelve

Dillon had the boys ready for supper out when Soldier showed up at their door at about six. He opened their door and saw eight smiling faces. He held out his arms. He felt whole again. All was right in his messed up world.

The staff at the buffet was tickled to see them back and, when the boys told them what happened, they got the royal treatment. The kids ate like pigs and ended with specially made sundaes for each. Dillon and Soldier put away a fair amount themselves.

They would go back to the hotel and talk, all nine of them, about what was going to happen next. They were all a unit. They had called Officer Jansen, who'd lost the name Asshole when he offered to help with the dogs. Soldier told him they were staying there one more night and asked if he would arrange to board the dogs somewhere, and the man had again surprised him by offering to keep them until they had a place. Would wonders never cease?

They invited Daniel over for the meeting and pretty soon, there were ten of them sitting on couches, cots, bed, and floor. The boys all listened avidly as the three men discussed what would be best for all.

Soldier figured these kids had been thrown away and tossed around enough, without ever knowing where they were going or what was going to happen to them. That was over. They didn't interrupt, but they were very interested and it was evident that they were happy to be in on the planning.

Soldier, Dillon, and Daniel discussed the rebuilding that had now changed in size and focus. Soldier would get in touch with the construction company he'd hired tomorrow and let them know new plans would have to be drawn up. The boys would get to help with some of the details. How cool was that?

Daniel was seeing to the legalities of making it a bona fide sanctuary for boys. The name would be Scarcity Sanctuary and would still be an off-shoot of Daniel's shelter. They decided they didn't want to be state-run and have no say in who came or why. They liked working through Daniel. It was to be funded by Soldier through a separate foundation. Dillon would be director and Soldier would be listed as founder and assistant to the director. This would all have to be hammered out by lawyers and authorities, but Daniel would help with that, and Soldier had the lawyers and Dillon had the kids.

Soldier took a few minutes to ask the boys for ideas about the new building and what it should have. Ideas poured forth, some wild, but some that were very smart and showed that the boys were thinking about needs, not just wants. These boys had been through so much, lost so much, and hurt so much. Soldier found that they were surprisingly unmaterialistic. They just wanted food, safety, and love. That was enough. Anything else was just gravy, for them.

Soldier stepped out -- to go to the bathroom, he said -- but he called down to room service and asked if they had a big cake he could have decorated and sent up with lots of cold milk. They said they had just the thing, and asked what he wanted it to say. He found out it was a sheet cake, so he asked if they could put everyone's name on it and divide it into ten pieces. He rattled off all the names and went back to the group. Dillon raised an eyebrow, showing he could tell something was up. Soldier just smiled.

When the knock came at the door, Soldier sent Gom to answer it. The look on the little boy's face would forever live in his heart. It took very little to thrill these kids.

"Soldier, it's a *cake!* A big cake. For *us?* And milk. Lots of milk. Oh, boy." Gom turned and Soldier was right there to catch him. He got a strong hug from the happy boy and ushered the room service waiter inside. In just a few minutes, they each had a plate with a large piece of cake with their name on it and a big glass of milk. Even Daniel and Dillon were looking mighty happy.

Soldier sat and looked at the group and smiled when Gom brought him over a big piece with "Soldier" on it. There was near silence for a while, with only a few "Mmmmm's" and "Good's" and clinking of forks and smacking of lips. After the sundaes at supper, they would all be on sugar overload, but they'd deal with it. It felt good to make them this happy. Cake and milk and safety and contentment were such normal things, but new to these boys.

It made Soldier's heart turn over to see them enjoying themselves. Gom offered the rest of his cake to Tommy, who looked over at Randy first to see if he wanted it. Ben had given Randy the rest of *his*, the little ones unable to finish the big pieces. These boys were loving and giving, and it amazed Soldier every day that they were that way after what they'd been through.

Before long, hugs were dispensed and sleeping arrangements figured out. Soldier and Dillon each had boys in cots in their room, but Gom ended up in bed with Soldier. He crawled up and looked at Soldier and whispered, "What if I pee on this big bed?"

Soldier touched his nose, got up and went into the bathroom and grabbed a couple of big towels. They were as long as Gom's body. He spread them out and Gom laid down right on them and smiled up at him. Before long, there were two more little bodies up with them. Soldier scooted over and lay very still all night, glad the kids could sleep. He got a good night's rest, though he really didn't sleep too much. Once, he heard Gom whisper, "Soldier, I gotta pee."

"Come on, buddy, I'll take you in there." Soldier lifted the boy straight up from the bed and took him into the big bathroom. He leaned on the counter while Gom took care of business. He smiled when Gom came up beside him and reached to wash his hands. He lifted Gom so the boy could reach the sink, helped him dry them, and carried him back to the bed.

"Good boy," Soldier said as he settled Gom back onto the big bed.

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Early the next morning, Soldier slipped out of the room, leaving three sleeping boys in his bed. He went next door and found that Dillon, too, was awake. He motioned for him to come out into the hall. He wanted to take him right into his arms, but he knew that was out of the question. He looked down to the end of the hall and saw a couch.

“Let’s get that and bring it right here between the rooms and we’ll talk and be able to listen to both rooms.” They did just that and sat for a while talking about their plans, how best to execute them with seven boys in tow. Soldier told Dillon about seeing the man in the yard and that Daniel and the police knew it. The fire was obviously arson. He told Dillon about Tommy’s fears and how he had tried to ease Tommy’s mind about leaving them. They talked about Gom crying loudly all over Soldier last night. They smiled at being so happy the kid had bawled like a baby.

“He’s healing, Soldier. You have helped him so much. He might have gotten there, but you accelerated his improvement. He connected with you immediately and you’ve made him feel safe enough to be normal. He’s gonna be all right.”

“We need to take him to a doctor about the burns, Dillon. Like really soon. I want to know that he’s not physically bothered by them. I don’t think he is, but hell, what do I know?” Granted, Soldier was learning every day how to deal with some really different situations, but he had a long way to go.

“You make a great father figure. Bet you never dreamed you’d be that, huh? Gom and Tommy are good character judges. Tommy was a little harder to win over, but look where he was coming from. You’re right, though, Gom needs to see a doctor and we need to know if there’s anything else we need to do for him.” Dillon said.

“I’ll take him, if you want, and I’ll stay with him the whole time so he won’t be scared, but he reported it to me in good faith, and I don’t want him to think I’d tell just anybody.” Soldier would never do anything to lose the love and faith Gom had in him.

“He’ll do fine with you there with him.”

“I want a clean bill of health for him. Plus, I want it on record that he told me and I took it straight to a doctor. I don’t ever want anyone to question anything about what we do with these kids. Everything needs to be above board.” Soldier went a little further with his plans. “I want us to be able to live in that big house together with the kids. What do you think about coming clean with them and just being together? I don’t mean we’d do anything in front of them, just live together. Could they handle it? Could it be okay?” *Wouldn’t it be wonderful?*

Dillon smiled at the thought and said, “I’m not sure. It’s my dream come true, you know that. Let me make some calls and talk with Daniel about it and see what he can find out about other cases like ours.”

Maybe they could find a way. Hell, maybe it would be all right. They could be worrying for nothing, but they couldn't take any chances.

"I mean, I don't know who'd come forth and cause a problem. Not the people at Daniel's shelter. Not Daniel, for sure. He's the one who places them with us. He's the one who keeps tabs on them and he's thrilled with their progress with us. Tommy already knows and, I gotta tell you, I nearly fell out yesterday when he told me he'd watch the boys so I could go be with you 'til you went to sleep. He said you needed me for a while so you could rest easy. He's something else." Dillon was a little misty-eyed as he talked about the boys he clearly loved so much.

Soldier nodded and said, "Yep. They're all amazing. Let's get the house thing taken care of and see about this creep. See if they catch him. Make sure the kids are protected, especially Tommy, for the next few days. We've got a lot to think about, a lot to do.

"I'd love to be able to sleep in your arms every night, right down the hall from the boys, everyone safe and secure. But for a while, you have another little sleep partner. I'm ashamed of being jealous of a troubled little boy." Dillon obviously wanted to crawl up on Soldier's lap and take some of what they both needed.

Soldier laughed and touched Dillon's hand. He moved his finger along the back of it where it lay on Dillon's thigh, traced down and between each finger, then pushed against it so Dillon would turn it over. Soldier slid his finger across Dillon's palm and up to the inside of his wrist. Soldier grinned as he noted Dillon's rapid heartbeat and increased breathing.

He was being unfair to both of them. This was going nowhere, but it felt good to caress his lover, if only on his hand. Dillon closed his hand around Soldier's and slid their palms together, twining their fingers. Soldier squeezed and they smiled at each other. Soldier knew they both badly wanted to do so much more.

"Let's get this day started. Shall we take them to McDonald's for breakfast? They'll like that. Then we'll make some calls from there while they play on the stuff." Soldier rattled off ideas for things they needed to take care of this morning. "We can set up a few places to look at. You check with Daniel about us being together. I'd love to start out the way we want to continue, you know. Not just spring it on them later. Be honest with them from the beginning. This will be a new beginning for all of us. I think they can handle it. You ready for this?"

"I've got you. I'm ready for anything."

Soldier's heart turned over at the simple statement. "Ah, now that's 'I need a kiss' kind of talk, so watch it." Soldier threatened. "Let's get 'em up and moving."

They moved the couch back and each went to their rooms and got the kids up and ready with promises of breakfast and a play area. They asked for a couple of notepads and pens from the front desk and borrowed a phone book to take with them.



Breakfast was very productive. Soldier called Daniel's realtor friend and they had three houses to look at, two that were close. He made an appointment with the woman and checked in with Officer Jansen.

Jansen was back to work today but said the dogs were fine. Soldier told him they were looking at houses and would get back to him. He was told to take his time and do what he had to do for the kids. The man had done a complete turnaround. He asked if there was any news on the arsonist and was told there was none.

Soldier could hear Dillon talking with Daniel and he nodded a few times and smiled a little. Soldier hoped it was good news. Soldier was serious about coming clean with the boys and not hiding any more.

Like he'd said, they would not do anything in front of them, but to be able to get up together, sleep in the same bed, just touch each other occasionally would be wonderful. Soldier doubted that, with what the boys had been through already in their young lives, living with a gay couple would traumatize them. They were a pretty savvy bunch.

Dillon told him that Daniel had checked around and there were other homes sort of like theirs that were being run by gay couples. It wasn't unheard of, by any means. They didn't have to jump through any hoops to get set up, just needed to take care of the kids and bring them up well. Not a problem. It felt like a huge load had been lifted. If they could be together, they could handle anything.

They gathered the boys and headed out to meet the realtor at the first house. Not a possibility. On to the next one. Nope. When they pulled up at the last house, the kids were all bug-eyed. It was very large and had a fenced-in yard that would make it perfect for kids and dogs. They all went in and the kids scattered. He told them all to be careful and not mess up anything, but he knew it wasn't necessary. Their boys weren't rambunctious. Yet. They would get there as they got more comfortable. Let 'em.

The realtor explained that the owners of this house had moved suddenly and were really wanting to sell it, but had agreed to put it up for either rent or for sale in order to move it quickly.

Soldier checked it out and liked what he saw. It was only a few blocks from where they were building and it was certainly big enough. He decided to furnish it and buy it, instead of renting it. They'd be there for months and then *he* could either sell it or rent it, maybe even offer it to Daniel for another place like theirs. He'd see. He went to tell Dillon and see what he thought. Dillon's eyes matched the boy's earlier.

"You can do that? Just buy it, fill it up, then maybe give it away? I don't think I grasp the scope of your wealth quite yet."

"Uh. That's something else I want to talk to you about. You need to learn to think of it as *our* wealth. I'm putting your name on everything. I told you I was serious about us. I'm not alone any more. We'll own it all and spend it however we want. We have enough that we can put all

these kids through any college they want and take care of any others that come along and never want for anything ever again.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“Dillon, do you *doubt* me?” Soldier was really thrown. He’d thought that Dillon was as committed as he was.

“Soldier, I will follow you to the ends of the earth. I’ll participate in any venture you come up with.” There was complete conviction in Dillon’s words. “I love you more than life itself. I want us to be together forever. I don’t doubt *you*. I just never expected to be... wealthy.”

“Well, you are, Dillon. I love you, too. You are now just as wealthy as I am.” They looked up when they heard a noise and Soldier nearly swallowed his tongue when he saw all the boys lined up along the rail overhead. They had obviously heard every word. So, too, had the lady realtor who was standing on the stairs. Dillon and Soldier looked at each other, neither knowing how to start the next conversation.

Soldier took it. “Ma’am, could we have a few minutes with the boys alone? We’ll be right out. I’m going to want to purchase this house outright, if that’s possible. I’d like for you to help us find someone to help furnish it for us. Can you do that? Or are you bothered by what you heard?” He’d start right now, finding out now how people handled their situation.

“Not in the least. I’ll work with you on buying the house and I know just who you need to furnish it with these boys in mind. Take your time. I’ll be in my car, working on some papers.” She smiled at the two men, who sighed in relief.

Soldier looked up at the boys. They were all watching him quietly. He motioned them all down and they filed down the stairs, looking at Dillon and Soldier, back and forth.

“Let’s all sit in a circle on the floor of our new house and have a talk.” They all sat down and Soldier thought about sitting across from Dillon and having the kids spread out between them, but then he changed his mind and sat down right by Dillon. “Okay, I know you heard us talking, so who wants to go first? I’m sure you have questions for us. I promise you we’ll answer you honestly.”

“You guys know I’m okay with it,” Tommy said.

“Does this mean we can’t all stay together anymore?” Randy asked, showing that he was not really sure what was going on.

“Not at all. Here’s the deal. I know some of you are young and may not understand, but I believe in being honest. Dillon and I like each other... a lot. No.” *Might as well go the whole way.* “We love each other. We want to live together. I want to be with you all the time, all of you.” This is where might get a little hard for some of them to understand. He hoped he could explain well enough.

“Some people don’t like for two men to live together, to love each other. Some people think it’s wrong and they’ll say bad things and maybe even hate us. But some people, like the lady outside, don’t think anything about it. How do you all feel about it?”

“What’s it mean? Why do people think it’s wrong?” Gom asked.

“A lot of people think only a man and woman who are married to each other should live together. That’s okay for them to believe that. But sometimes, people can’t help who they love.” His eyes cut to Dillon and he couldn’t hide the smile on his lips or the love in his eyes.

“Dillon and I want to live together in the house with you all. We don’t want anyone to leave. We want to raise you all together just like we are now.”

“So what’s the big deal? If nothin’s different, then why we sittin’ here?”

*Leave it to Jack.*

“Because if we’re to be honest and live like a gay couple, which we really are, then we would sleep in the same bed, live in the same room.” Soldier wanted that firmly established. That was a necessity as far as he was concerned. “The rest would all be the same as usual. We’d cook breakfast for you all, take you places, do things with you, help you when you’re scared, do all the things we do now. We’d just be happier doing it because we’d be together. Right, Dillon?”

“Most definitely. Nothing would change for you all. We both love you all just like always. We just want to be able to be considered a couple.” Dillon looked uncomfortable, like he hoped he’d gotten that out right.

“You gonna be kissin’ and smoochin’ and all that stuff like I seen my mam do with her fellas?” This came from Jack.

“We’ll try not to do that in front of you all. We’ll certainly be kissing each other, but it’s a private thing.” *Hopefully it will remain so.* “I can’t swear one of you might not come in and catch us sometime, but we will not do anything else in front of you, I guarantee you that.”

“So, then, who cares? You still like us, right?” Jack again.

“Dillon and I both love you all. You boys have come to mean so much to me in the little time I’ve known you. It’ll only grow through the years. There’ll be people who call us names and may say things to you and, if that happens, you let us know. Remember how the policeman that has our dogs first thought we were doing bad things to you all?” When they all nodded, Soldier went on, “There’ll be people who think we would do things like that. They don’t understand that being gay means you like other men, not little boys... like that. We would never do anything wrong to any of you.” He looked at Tommy and smiled, glad they were on the same page.

“We’ll protect you with our lives, I swear it. It’s okay for us to help you get dressed, or the little ones to shower, or whatever. It’s just like having two dads instead of a dad and a mom. You’re safe with us in all ways.” Soldier had to have their understanding on this. He wanted no worries from his boys about their safety. “Do any of you doubt that? If so, let me know now and we’ll deal with your fears. Any problems? Questions?” Soldier held his breath. He knew the little ones weren’t able to understand it all, but he figured the others were pretty knowledgeable about the ways of the world.

There was silence for a long while then Gom looked at Soldier and asked in that little voice of his, “Do you mean I can’t sleep with you anymore... you know, when I can’t sleep for a long time?”

“No, baby, it does not. Come here.” Soldier gathered Gom into his lap and hugged him. “I will always be there for you. Listen up, now. Here’s how I see it going. This does not mean that Dillon and I will go in our room and lock the door and not be available to you all. We will go in and *close* the door. If you need one of us you *knock*... you always, *always* knock good and loud, and we’ll tell you when you can come in.” He was mentally crossing his fingers, hoping this would work and no one would forget and be traumatized for life.

“We will never ignore you or not answer you. It doesn’t mean we want to be away from you all, it just means we want to be alone together some, too.” Soldier looked down at his buddy in his lap and said, “Gom, we’ll shop for another chair and, when you need me, we’ll sack out in it just like before. Dillon will probably be glad to get away from my snoring.”

“You don’t snore, Soldier,” Gom protested.

Soldier laughed and kissed the top of Gom’s head. “So, do any of you have a problem with us being together as a couple?” He waited and looked around. They all shook their heads. “Will you promise to come to one of us with any problem or question you have about anything at all?”

“Yes, sir. We -- at least I -- don’t care if you’re gay. We’re glad you make Dillon happy and that he makes you happy, too. We want to stay together with the two of you, right guys?” Thank the Lord for Tommy.

“Yeah. I don’t care. Long as you don’t make us leave... and you don’t leave us either.” That was Jack again.

“Wow. You guys are great. I’ve been so afraid you would not like it and that it would be a problem for you.” Soldier smiled as he breathed a sigh of relief that things had gone so well.

“You all make me so happy to be part of this... can we say we’re a family? Would you like that? The name of our house is going to be Scarcity Sanctuary. It will be where boys like you come to be helped just like you all have.” He thought a second and went on to relieve their minds that nothing was changing in the immediate future. “We won’t take in a lot of new kids right off. It’ll just be us for a while. You all will be part of the building and planning of the whole thing. What a project, huh? You’ll still call us Dill and Soldier, but I already consider you all my kids.” He

really did think of himself as a father to these boys. It was amazing how that much emotion could grow in so short a time. “I know Dillon does, too. I’m just glad he has agreed to share you all with me.”

Dillon had been silent through all of this and Soldier suddenly felt bad that he’d monopolized the whole thing. He turned to Dillon and said, “I’m sorry. I’ve taken over again. I didn’t mean to leave you out of it. I just spoke for both of us like I had a right to.”

“You do. You said everything right. I wouldn’t change a thing. Are you all as happy as I am that Soldier came along?”

A chorus of “yeah” followed, and all the boys headed for Dillon and Soldier and toppled them over, crawling on them and hugging and laughing. It was wonderful fun and so welcome. *Whew*. Another hurdle conquered. On to the next one. Bring ‘em on. Soldier felt like he could tackle any problem now.

## Chapter Thirteen

Soldier was so excited that he was shaking. He and Dillon were going to spend hours together, alone. Daniel and some other staff members from the shelter were taking the boys to the park, and then to supper and a movie at the shelter. Daniel would bring them back to the house when the movie was over.

The boys were excited. They liked Daniel and, since they had been in the house for over two weeks, they were comfortable knowing they would return to safety.

Soldier was on his way to their new home now from the construction site. He spent some time there each day. The crew was still clearing the mess and leveling the area. They had all spent days working on the plans, including the boys in some things, and all were happy with the final plans. Even Daniel had been part of the planning, putting his seal of approval on the way they had set things up.

Soldier finally made it into the driveway in his new truck. He'd needed something besides the Hummer so they would both have something and the Hummer held them all easily. The new truck was handy for working.

Soldier walked in and stood a moment looking at Dillon. "Is it true? We're alone for hours? All alone? *How* did you manage that?"

"Daniel came up with the idea, bless his heart. He and the others are going to keep the boys 'til later tonight. They'll be very diligent and watch out for Tommy's people and make sure he's safe. So, sexy man, what do you want to do... first?" Dillon's voice held sweet seduction.

Soldier walked over, took Dillon's hand, and pulled him toward the stairs. They walked steadily and surely to their room. Soldier closed the door behind them and locked it, feeling he could do that since they were alone. As soon as they were positively private, he turned to Dillon. "Do you know how hungry I am? How much I want you?"

"Got a good idea. About as much as I want you, need you. We get together so seldom, it's like we need to do everything we can all at once. You go first. I'm all yours."

Soldier stalked him as Dillon headed toward the big couch. Soldier had picked it out specifically for what he had in mind. The back was tall and the pillows thick making it a nice comfy spot for what he wanted. He had thought about this a lot.

Soldier walked right up to him and Dillon ended up sitting on the back of the couch. Soldier engulfed him completely. He wrapped Dillon up and held him tight, opened his mouth and satisfied a need that had grown out of all proportion. He sucked on Dillon's lips, opening his mouth and sweeping in. He pushed his tongue in and Dillon let go a sweet whimper. That sound just fed Soldier's desire.

Dillon was so hard and so needy and was obviously thrilled to finally have a chance to taste and savor. Putting his hands up, he smoothed them over Soldier's tanned head, moving down to his face, one side smooth, the other rough, just like Dillon's. He began to breathe heavily as Soldier continued to fuck his mouth.

Dillon tried to get his hands between them to remove Soldier's shirt. He gave up and tried for his belt. Soldier was like a man possessed. He couldn't let Dillon go, couldn't stop kissing him. He knew he was bruising Dillon's lips, but God, it'd been so long.

"Mmph... mmm, Soldier," Dillon finally managed, "Naked. Please. Want to touch." His mouth was taken again, not quite as hard this time, but very skillfully. Soldier moved back a little and Dillon got busy. In seconds, he had opened Soldier's clothes enough to touch him. Soldier was rock hard and nearly desperate..

"God, I could just eat you up. Please, baby. I need you." Dillon voiced his need aloud.

"Take it off or I'm liable to rip it," Soldier warned. In a couple of blinks, they were both naked. Soldier reached down in the side of the couch and found a new tube of lube and Dillon's eyes widened.

Soldier took Dillon by the shoulders and turned him and bent him over the back of the couch. The pillows were big enough that Dillon would be comfortable. It evidently didn't matter, as Dillon was squirming already.

"Hurry. I've been empty so long. Ooooooh, your fingers... uh-huh. Yeah, Soldier, more." Dillon looked back over his shoulder and his eyes widened and he gasped as he saw the look on his Soldier's face.

"Oh! There, again. Yes. You are... my love... you are... oh again..." Dillon trailed off as Soldier complied and kept pushing fingers into him and managing to hit his gland every time.

Soldier finally deemed Dillon to be stretched enough for what he had in mind. He got his cock ready and pushed forward until he was tight against Dillon's ass. Soldier leaned over Dillon, covering his back and wrapping both arms around him. He spread his legs for leverage and began to thrust in over and over, hard. He knew Dillon needed that as much as he did.

He promised himself that he would take Dillon again before the day was over with tenderness and make it last forever. Right now, he just had to fuck. The sounds coming from deep in Dillon's throat let him know he was right on. He straightened up and took hold of Dillon's hips and began a heavy pounding in and in and in. He reached under them and took Dillon's leaking cock in his hand and, after only a couple of pumps, he collected a handful of come. He used it to smooth over Dillon's cock and kept on stroking him until Dillon was hard again.

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“Never, never, never leave me. Love you. Fuck me, Soldier. Never stop.” Dillon was babbling, but he didn’t care. The man inside him was like a machine, filling him again and again with such wonderful sensations. Soldier was so thick that the drag as the man pulled out and the force of his reentry was enough to make Dillon scream into the pillow. He braced himself on the seat cushions and pushed back, literally fucking himself on Soldier’s cock. Soldier came with a yell and pulled Dillon up by the shoulders and put a bite on the back of his neck that had him shuddering.

As soon as Dillon could breathe again, Soldier turned him into his arms and held him against his chest. “Fuck, I needed that. Please tell me I didn’t hurt you,” Soldier pulled back a little and looked down into Dillon’s eyes.

“Fucked me raw. Made me melt.” Dillon was holding Soldier tightly. “My legs are jelly. Can we move to the bed?”

Soldier just picked him up and carried him over to their big bed. He put Dillon down right beside it and pulled the covers back and they crawled in together. When they settled, Soldier was holding Dillon in his arms and just looking at him.

Dillon looked right back. For a few minutes, it was quiet. Finally, he asked, “What are you doing?”

“Looking at your eyelashes.”

“Uh-huh. Okay.”

“You have such long eyelashes and they curl up on the ends. Your eyes are really blue. It’s like looking at the sky.” Soldier laughed at himself, seemingly giddy with happiness. “God, I’m getting sappy.”

“I like it. I won’t tell anybody.” Dillon returned the loving look. “You’ve got nice eyes, too. Very dark brown. They’re almost black, like rich, dark chocolate. I’ve never thought of just looking at you so close like this. It’s cool. You know I love your face... aaaah! Don’t even.” He whopped Soldier on the shoulder for even frowning when he said that. “You know better. I love every inch of you. It’s *all* beautiful to me. I’ve never loved anyone like this. I’ve never wanted someone all the time. God, you make me happy.”

“We’re a pair, all right. Come here, baby.” Soldier pulled Dillon into his body and held him for a minute. He rolled and Dillon was on top of him. Soldier kissed him sweetly then lifted him and, the next thing Dillon knew, he was holding onto the headboard and his dick was in Soldier’s mouth. *Oh, sweet heavenly day.*

Dillon sucked in a deep breath and tried not to whimper at the way that hot mouth felt around him. Soldier was a talented man. He had Dillon by the hips again and was moving him so that Dillon was actually fucking Soldier’s mouth. He slid one hand a little further back and put one



long finger to Dillon's hole and then Dillon was going back and forth between the two instruments of pleasure.

Soldier tried to smile around Dillon's dick. Dillon knew Soldier loved it when Dillon hummed low in his throat. Soldier told him that he loved hearing that sound, loved knowing he was making his lover happy. Soldier kept it up until Dillon couldn't take it any longer and shook and shuddered as he came down Soldier's throat. Soldier lifted him again and brought him right back down on his chest.

Dillon crossed his arms and looked right into Soldier's face.

"Sexy man. I want to lie here with you for just a little bit and then I want us to get wet and slick and shiny clean and then... you know what I want. I want to make you shake a little while I take your asshole and make it mine," Dillon murmured, huskily.

"It's already yours. Any time you want it. Any *way* you want it."

Dillon liked the sound of that. He slid down a little, kissing his way across Soldier's chest, nipping and licking his nipples until they beaded up for him, then following a path down to Soldier's groin. He made a thorough study of the area.

There was, of course, that gorgeous prick and the thick curls around it. He went instead for the tender skin at the juncture of Soldier's leg, where thigh met groin. He put his mouth to work licking and sucking, kissing and nibbling on the soft skin on both sides of the burgeoning cock that kept bumping the sides of his face. He ignored it and kept up his work.

Dillon spread Soldier's legs with his hands and moved further down. He did take Soldier's balls into his mouth, one at a time, and move them around, softly pushing them against the roof of his mouth with his tongue as his fingers began moving on that tender space behind them. Dillon paused to put one of his fingers into his mouth and wet it liberally. He pushed it right into the puckered hole that immediately clenched it tight. He pushed and turned, looking for that spot and having no doubt when he found it. Soldier pushed up from the bed and grunted. Dillon knew that sound meant "more." Dillon kept it up, while moving back and forth between Soldier's tight, hot balls. He felt Soldier begin to shake.

He managed to turn just a little and get the other hand up to Soldier's dick and began to move up and down it. He took the moisture from the tip and smoothed it over the crown. He squeezed and slid his hand all the way to the base and back up. Then he repeated it.

He kept up all three treatments until he felt Soldier jerk upwards, and hot come covered his hand. His finger was held tight within Soldier's spasming hole and Dillon felt Soldier's balls draw up, tight and hard. He didn't stop until he felt Soldier settle back down to the bed and relax a little. Ah, a job well done brought Dillon great satisfaction.

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It was a few minutes before Soldier sat up enough to take Dillon under the arms and pull him back up to lie with him.

”Damn, you’re good. That was something else. You had me going from every angle. Now I need just a minute and then we’ll go shower.” Soldier nuzzled his face into Dillon’s neck and took a few breaths. He loved Dillon’s scent.

Very softly, Dillon said “Much as I’d love to nap after coming that hard, I’m not wasting a minute with you. We can sleep tonight. I want *you* more.”

“Got me.”

“Mmm.” They lay still in each other’s arms just soaking up the sweet aftershocks from great sex. The occasional shudder, the sweet ache from muscles little-used. It all felt so good, Soldier thought. They would look at each other and smile and then nuzzle their face into a neck or shoulder, or settle in for a kiss.

When they got up and headed for the shower, they followed what had become a routine for them when they *got* a chance to shower together. Soldier soaped and shampooed Dillon, without missing a spot, and then Dillon returned the favor. Usually, they ended with one or the other bent over with their hands on the wall, taking a hot, hard cock up the ass. The other would get blown as they dried off, touching and caressing each other.

When they got back to the bed, Soldier told Dillon to lie face down on the bed.

“Pillow?” Dillon asked.

“Not yet.” Soldier straddled Dillon and sat on the back of his legs, and then proceeded to give the man an amazing all-over massage. Dillon appeared boneless when Soldier reached the tips of his toes. Dillon tried to turn and was nearly unable to manage it. He did, though. He held out his arms for Soldier to come into them.

“Fucking heaven. I want to do that for you... in a minute. It’s that putty thing again.”

Soldier laughed and held him for a bit. Then Dillon moved and pushed and let Soldier know he wanted to do the same thing. Being no fool, Soldier was quick to assume the position.

Dillon’s hands were strong as they kneaded and stroked over Soldier’s back. He was more gentle as he worked over the area behind that one shoulder that was so scarred. He scooted down and massaged Soldier’s tight buttocks and the crease between was traced as well.

”Pillow,” Dillon muttered.

Soldier, knowing what was coming, quickly complied with his command, but managed to mutter, “Pushy.”

“Mmmhmm. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Hmm Mmm,” Soldier assured him and spread his legs so Dillon could work on him. He wanted this, knew how much Dillon loved it and knew he’d turn right around and reciprocate. It wasn’t long before he was humping the bed and pushing back into Dillon’s mouth. That man knew how to use his tongue. Dillon flattened it and moved it over and over and over Soldier’s hole making the nerves there spark and tingle until Soldier was nearly sobbing with feeling. He sucked in great gasps of air, trying to get a good breath.

“Dillon!” he screamed and came all over the pillow in great pulses. He slumped and tried to catch his breath. Mercy, the man could make him mush.

Soldier knew there was something he wanted to do, but his brain was on overload right now. He lay there, panting. Finally, he had to move, had to hold Dillon and tell his lover how he felt. He felt Dillon kiss the small of his back and crawl up him. He pushed his hips up and pulled the pillow out from under him, and then turned to catch Dillon in his arms.

“I can’t believe how that feels. I can’t believe how good you are. I’m gonna get you back... kiss first.” Soldier smiled at Dillon’s raised brows and teasing look. “I don’t care where it’s been. I want your mouth. We’re clean, come here.” Soldier devoured Dillon’s mouth in a kiss that told Dillon how good he was and how great Soldier felt.

Dillon laughed into his mouth. They had been spending the nights together since moving into the house. But, really, they were still a little hesitant to really make wild, passionate love to each other with the kids around. They were happy, though, to be able to touch and caress and just talk together before going to sleep.

Twice, they’d heard Gom at the door, and Soldier had picked the boy up and taken him down to the recliner to sleep. It looked like Gom was maybe getting to where he was able to get a little more sleep on his own lately.

“I’m so glad you took Gom to the doctor yesterday,” Dillon said.

“Yeah, relieved my mind, too. You know, with him telling me that, and us being gay, I didn’t want anyone to ever get hold of that innocent information and turn it ugly.” Soldier frowned at having to worry about stuff like that, but that was life. “He was so scared when we went, but I insisted that I go in with him and I sat on that table and held him on my lap while the doctor checked him out. His little body shook the whole time, but he didn’t cry, Dillon. He whimpered a little, but he answered the doctor’s questions and held on tight to my arms around him and he handled it so well.” Soldier was so proud of how brave Gom had been.

“He’s our little man,” Dillon murmured.

“The doctor assured me that the scars are not causing any lasting damage and he recorded the whole thing and filed it away. He was smart enough to tell Gom that no one would see it and he would tell no one.” Soldier had been relieved to hear the doctor’s assessment. He tightened his

arms around Dillon as he continued. “He knew it bothered Gom, and at my urging, he also told Gom that he was not a bad boy, had never been a bad boy, and his mother was not a good mother. I think it helped Gom to hear someone else say it. He loves me and trusts me, but I don’t doubt that he thought I was just trying to make him feel better.”

“You’re probably right. He loves you so much, Soldier.”

“God, Dillon, I love that kid. If it wouldn’t hurt the others, I’d adopt him outright. I’d like to give him my name.” Another thought occurred to him and he went on, “But more than that, I’d love to give *you* my name.” He looked up into Dillon’s eyes and smiled when they widened as Dillon realized what Soldier was saying.

“Dillon Soldier?” Dillon looked quizzically at him.

“Dillon Marsh.”

“Your last name is Marsh? How can I be in love with you and not know your last name? Hell, I don’t know your *first* name!”

“Keith. I’m Keith Marsh... glad to meet ya.” Soldier smiled at the absurdity of it.

“Oh, you. Well, I’m glad to meet you, *too*, Mr. Marsh. I like that. Keith Marsh. Cool. Dillon Marsh. In my mind, I’m Dillon Marsh. You want to be Keith Kramer?”

“Sure, in our minds. In the meantime, I want your ass. What do you think of that?”

“Same as you thought. It’s all yours.”

Soldier proceeded to make it his. He rimmed Dillon to a steady hum of joy and then moved up to make love to him as he’d planned earlier. He slicked them both carefully and eased into Dillon, who was already highly sensitive after having Soldier’s tongue working on him. Dillon pushed back to take more of Soldier in and sighed as he sank all the way.

Dillon lay with his arms crossed and his forehead resting on them. He rolled it from side to side as Soldier went about gently and tenderly blowing his mind. Soldier was taking things so slowly and carefully, he didn’t even have to hold onto Dillon, using his hands to caress his back and sides and buttocks.

Soldier leaned down and moved his mouth across Dillon’s shoulders and down his back, alternating between kissing and licking. He loved taking time and making it last as long as possible. Dillon hummed and sighed and panted for him.

Finally, Dillon began to move back as though asking for more. “Soldier, you... you make me want to cry, you’re so good to me. I feel like Gom. Tears when I’m happy and tears when I’m sad.”

“Are you really crying?” Soldier was alarmed.

“Nah. I... you’re just so sweet to me. It makes me melt. I want to turn over and see you. I don’t want you to stop. I just want to see your face... please.”

Soldier immediately pulled out carefully and reached to help Dillon onto his back. He moved between Dillon's legs and, before pushing back into him, he looked at Dillon closely to be sure his lover was okay. He leaned down and kissed each eye closed, then one more kiss for Dillon's sweet lips.

Reaching down and pulling Dillon’s legs up over his shoulders, Soldier eased back into him. Dillon reached his hands up and Soldier took them. He pulled them to his mouth and kissed each, and then bent his arms down to the bed and leaned down to take a kiss. It was a good, long kiss that echoed everything that Dillon had said. Soldier kept on loving Dillon like that, slow and easy. He thrust in over and over, keeping his eyes on Dillon’s.

Dillon smiled up at him and squeezed his hands. “Oh, my God, I’m going to feel this for days. I couldn’t be happier.”

“I’m glad. Do something for me?”

“Anything.”

“Jerk yourself off. Let me watch. I want to feel you come on my cock while I watch you, watch your face when you come. You’re so pretty.”

“Only to you, baby, and that suits me just fine. I’ll come for you.” Dillon took one hand from Soldier’s and put it to Soldier’s cheek, smoothing and caressing. The other, he used to grasp his dick and begin to slowly pump up and down it. Dillon used the drops of come at the tip to ease his way. Rubbing his thumb over the slit, he sucked in a breath. “Oh, love that sting. Ooooooh, feels so good,” Dillon said, looking up at Soldier, and continued the movements.

Soldier was watching carefully to see what Dillon did, what he liked. Lover. *My lover*, he thought. He moved a little faster and harder as he felt himself near the edge. Soldier looked back to Dillon’s face and watched avidly as Dillon jerked and shook and, finally, come spattered over his stomach and chest. Soldier gazed at Dillon as he thrust in a couple of times, harder than before, and came right behind him. Dillon never closed his eyes. Soldier loved the shared experience.

It was another unique and special time for them. Soldier realized that they were building quite a compilation of memories, things that were so special to them that he knew they would never forget them.

“I couldn’t feel more married if I’d stood in front of a preacher. You are my other half, Soldier. I waited my whole life for you.”

“Yeah. I never thought I’d have somebody. I’m not exactly a babe magnet with my memory demons and my scars. I know... I know,” Soldier said, at Dillon’s quick look. “Same here. But, in general, I just thought I’d be alone all my life. Now my life is so full and so happy, sometimes I don’t know what to do with it all.”

“You’re such a softy, so thoughtful. I can’t believe you had that old log brought over here and put back there by the back of the fence. It’s special. I love that you felt that, too, and brought it over here for me.”

“For us.”

“Yeah, for us. You see. That’s why sometimes I feel like crying. I just have so much emotion in me when we’re making love, like today, or when I see you with the boys, it just fills me up.”

Soldier lay down beside Dillon and began to smooth the thick spatters of come over his stomach, like lotion. He pulled Dillon to him and plastered them together.

“What in the world are you doing? Gluing us together? You know we’ll have to shower again.”

“Aw, gee. That *is* a shame. Want to just lay here for a few minutes first? I want to hold you and look at you a little. I never get tired of looking at you. Is that weird? Am I scaring you?”

“HmmMmm. Nope. I can do that. If you’ll throw a hell of a kiss in at the end of your looking. I love, love, *love* your kisses, all of them.” Dillon put his head on Soldier’s arm and looked right back. Soldier thought Dillon was trying to show him with his eyes how much he loved him.

“You have so many different kinds -- kisses, I mean. Those long, soft, sweet ones turn me inside out and the others... well, you are one sexy man, Soldier.” Dillon looked from Soldier’s eyes to his mouth and back up... then back down.

Soldier got the message and leaned to kiss him... both ways. He started out tenderly, using his tongue to trace Dillon’s lips and gently flick them apart. He teased inside and touched Dillon’s tongue, and they spent a good while moving back and forth between the two open mouths.

Before too long, though, Soldier was hot again and he pushed Dillon onto his back and came up over him, taking Dillon’s head between his hands and thrusting his tongue into Dillon’s waiting mouth. He tilted his head and moved it around, changing angles and moving in ways that guaranteed the most sensation for both. He sucked on Dillon’s tongue until he was panting for breath and then let Dillon do the same for him. He pushed into Dillon’s mouth and reveled in the strong suction against his tongue. He began to fuck Dillon’s mouth with his tongue and began to press his hard cock against Dillon’s.

Fantastic friction. He moved and felt Dillon harden against him. He was going to keep on until they both came again. There was something to be said for doing without. They moaned and sighed and soon both were adding to the mess on Dillon’s stomach. Soldier dropped his head to Dillon’s shoulder and tried to catch his breath.

“Think we’re done?” Soldier asked.

“Yeah. Maybe. Shower sounds good. Hot water, slick skin, deep massage, good smells, wet kisses...”

“Hey. That doesn’t sound like *done*,” Soldier teased, moving his hand over Dillon’s shoulder.

“Nope, sounds good, though, doesn’t it?”

Soldier laughed, “Yeah. Does. Come on. We’ll play in the shower and then change the sheets and maybe even have a date. Would you like to go to dinner with me, Dillon?”

“I believe I would. I could sure eat. We’ve got time. Come on, sounds wonderful.”

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They were sharing a huge piece of chocolate cake after a delicious dinner when Dillon’s phone rang. He frowned but didn’t hesitate to answer it. His face turned white and Soldier reached over and took his other hand.

*Don’t let it be the boys.* Soldier couldn’t stand it if... while he and Dillon... and he knew Dillon would never forgive himself. He waited impatiently as he listened to Dillon ask questions that sounded like what reporters were taught to ask: who, what, when, where, why, how.

When Dillon slapped the phone closed, he turned an ashen face to Soldier. He couldn’t seem to bring himself to speak.

“Dillon, you’re scaring me. Tell me. We’ll handle it.”

“Someone tried to get Tommy at the shelter. They were watching the movie and Gom had to go to the bathroom and Tommy took him. When they were coming back down the hall, someone grabbed Tommy and pushed Gom down.”

Soldier flinched at the idea that Gom might be hurt.

“Gom let out a shriek and they all went running. Somehow, the guy got in a window in the back. They found it broken. He was dragging a kicking, fighting Tommy to the back when Daniel and Big Tom from the shelter caught up with him.” Dillon started talking faster, as if he knew that Soldier had to know everything as quickly as possible. “They were more concerned with saving Tommy than catching the guy and he managed to get away... again. We need to go to the boys. They’re freaked. Daniel wanted to know if we’d come, 'cause they called the police and they have to stay there.” Dillon wound down after telling it all and just sat a second, looking stunned.

Soldier gestured for a waiter, told him there was an emergency, and handed him a one hundred dollar bill. They were out the door in seconds and running for the truck.

They had the Hummer, since they had planned on going on over to the shelter and getting the boys so Daniel wouldn't have to bring them back. They sped back to the shelter. Soldier couldn't wait to get his arms around the boys. He knew Dillon felt the same. They couldn't even speak, they were so worried about the boys and the continued trauma they endured.

When they pulled up, they saw two police cars and an ambulance. Oh, fuck. Was one of them hurt? They hurried inside and there was chaos as they were rushed from all sides. They each grabbed whoever they could and hugged and calmed, but Soldier was searching for Tommy and Gom. Okay. He loved them. They were special to him and they were missing from the mass of freaked-out children vying for their attention.

Finally, one of the shelter workers moved and Soldier saw Tommy. He was sitting on a couch, and a more sad and dejected kid Soldier had never seen. Hell, now Tommy'd be *sure* he should leave them. Well, it wasn't going to happen.

Soldier extricated himself from the boys, leaving them with Dillon, even though he knew it wasn't fair, but he had to go to Tommy. And where was Gom? He became frantic 'til he saw a couple of paramedics sitting on another couch with Daniel and Gom. Soldier changed direction and went to the little one first, to see how badly the boy was hurt. When he came around the corner of the couch and Gom saw him, you could have heard his shriek in the next county.

"*Soldier!*" Gom was up off the couch in a flash and Soldier caught him right up. He wanted to squeeze him, but looked at the medics.

"Is he okay? Can I hug him? Where's he hurt?" Gom was clasping Soldier tightly around the neck, but Soldier continued to hold him gently until he knew.

"Bump on the head and skinned knee. He'll be okay. Hug away." The lady paramedic said, smiling.

Soldier closed his eyes and held Gom to him, dying inside because his little boy was hurt. He rubbed Gom's back and held him close.

"I love you, baby. Are you okay? Are you?"

"Sure I am, Soldier. Now that you're here, it's okay."

Soldier's heart turned over in his chest at the sweet words.

"I was scared. That same mean man tried to get Tommy and I screamed at him and he pushed me down. I hope he didn't hurt Tommy's arm. He was draggin' 'eem." Gom pulled his face out to look at Soldier.

Soldier gently ran his hand over Gom's little head until he felt the bump on the side of the little boy's head. He put Gom over on one hip and pulled his leg out to see his knee. Other knee. He



switched sides and pulled that leg up. Ouch. There was a large bruise and scraped skin around an area where a cartoon bandage had been placed. Soldier wanted some alone time with that asshole. “Honey, I’m taking you to Dillon now. He needs a hug, too, and to know you’re okay. I need to check on Tommy.”

Gom took Soldier’s face in his hands and kissed him and said, “Thanks for coming to get us. We knowed you would. Go see Tommy. He feels bad.”

When he got to the couch where Tommy and the officers were he said, “Officers, I’m going to ask if I can take the place of one of you, 'cause I really need to be next to Tommy right now.” Tommy didn’t even look up. Soldier *really* needed to sit with him.

Soldier was glad to see that Officers Bradford and Jansen were here. Right now they were talking to Daniel. One of the other officers got up and said, “Are you Soldier? Yeah? He won’t talk to us.” The officer evidently felt sorry for Tommy and could read the worry on Soldier’s face. “He just keeps saying he’s sorry. We need to find out more from him. Can you help?”

“Yes. Will you leave us alone for a minute?”

The other officer got up and they moved away a little to give them some time.

Soldier sat right beside Tommy. When Tommy didn’t say anything, Soldier jumped right in. “All right, buddy. You need a hug or you need to hit somebody? I need both, really bad. I know you’re twelve, but would you freak if I just grabbed you up and held on? I was scared to death, Tommy.”

Tommy turned his head then and Soldier could see pools of tears in the boy’s eyes. Soldier opened his arms and Tommy twisted until he was facing Soldier and then he was straddling Soldier’s lap and had his arms around Soldier’s neck. He hid his face and just cried. Soldier held him, put his face down on Tommy’s shoulder and rocked him a little. The kid was shaking like Gom did when the little boy was scared.

“You get it all out. I know some of what you’re thinking. I’ve come to love you very much and I know how you think. You think you have to leave now 'cause you got one of the boys hurt.”

Tommy jerked and Soldier knew he was right.

“You’re not going anywhere, buddy. You’re staying with us.” Soldier made that statement and the next promise in one breath. “I will never leave your care to someone else again. How do you think I feel? Dillon and I were eating supper at a restaurant, sharing a big old piece of chocolate cake and someone was trying to hurt my boys.” His voice quivered with anger still at the thought and, yeah, there might have been some guilt in there. He couldn’t help it. “You think I should leave 'cause I let my guard down? If you think it’s my fault, maybe I *should* leave.” He said it on purpose. He knew Tommy would defend him.

“You can’t... can’t leave. I’m the one! They want me back.” Tommy was clearly ashamed as he admitted new information to Soldier. “She made money off me... did you know that? She wants me back so she can get money... and he just wants someone to hit... and... you know...” He ducked his head.

Soldier took his chin, gently, and made Tommy look him in the eyes. “Yeah. I know. And you think I’m letting you go? You must not know me too well, yet. I’m going to hound the police ‘til they catch them, or I’ll step up and find them myself. Lord help us all if I find them first. No one is going to come in and hurt my boys again.”

Soldier could tell that Tommy had begun to get an idea of how upset Soldier was on his behalf. Tommy had to feel better knowing how fierce Soldier was. Soldier was proud that Tommy paid close attention to him as he went on.

“Tommy, you must promise me you won’t leave us. I couldn’t stand it if you did, and Dillon would just die. He loves you all so much. We both do.”

“I know, but... Soldier... he hurt *Gom*. I can’t stand that. What if he hurts him more next time... or one of the others?” It wasn’t fair for a twelve-year-old to have to go through so much pain and worry about the safety of other children.

“Not gonna happen. I’ve been going to the site every day, but I’ve got a crew there. They don’t need me that much. I’m not leaving you all again ‘til this is done. By done, I mean them behind bars and you safe with us. Got it?”

Tommy nodded and dropped his head to Soldier’s shoulder again and sighed. Soldier looked over at the officers and held up his hand for just a few more minutes. He let Tommy gather himself together and then picked him up and put him back beside him. He put his arm behind Tommy and pulled him right into his side.

“Now, we talk. I’m teaching you to defend yourself. One way is to talk to the police and answer any questions they have.” Maybe if Tommy could help them out, he would feel better. “Try to remember anything from tonight. Did he say anything to you? Did you see which way he went? Is there any way you can help? That might make you feel better, like you have a say in what happens. You’re helping to catch them.” Soldier had another worry. He went right ahead and asked Tommy. “Let me ask you this. Do you have any feeling left for the woman who says you’re hers? Do you care what happens to her? Are you wanting to protect her?”

“Hell, no. Oh, I’m sorry.” Tommy’s eyes got big.

“Free pass on that one, kid. No problem. Okay, so we’re going to find them and we’re going to put them both away. I had to know it wouldn’t bother you.”

“I don’t want to ever see them again. I hate what they did to me and I don’t want them to hurt any of the others.” Tommy looked over to the waiting officers. “Tell them to come back over here and I’ll tell them anything I can.” He leaned forward so he was out from under Soldier’s

arm and then he reached up and kissed the cheek nearest him. “Thank you. I love you. I know that now. I know that’s what I feel for you and Dillon and the others.” He hesitated, but went on to say, “But you, you *get* me.”

“Yeah, I do. Don’t ever forget it. You belong to us now, not them *ever*. You can leave us when you graduate from college and go on to be whatever you want to be.” Soldier smiled at the look of relief on Tommy’s face.

“Officers, Tommy wants to help you catch them. He’s ready to answer your questions. Tommy, you need me to stay with you?”

“No, sir. I’m fine. I needed you... and you came. I’m fine now.”

Soldier almost hated to leave him, but felt Tommy needed to do this on his own. He would talk to the officers later and fill them in on anything Tommy wasn’t able to tell them. He let Tommy handle himself with them. Soldier was proud of him.

He turned back to the others. They were huddled together on the other couch. Some had arms around others and they all had huge eyes, full of shock and worry for Tommy and Gom. He headed over.

“Room for me on there?” he asked, bending down to pick Gom up from the middle and take his place, setting him on one knee and reaching to take Ben onto the other. The little ones needed comfort most.

Jack, of course, was blunt as usual. “You gonna go kick some as... uh, butt?”

“Love to, buddy. Can’t tell you how much. But I’m going to be staying real close to home until the police catch the creeps. I think we need a project. You know those two really big trees in the back yard?”

They all nodded, confused.

“I’m thinking they need really nice, big tree-houses in them. Who wants to help me build ‘em?” Soldier asked, looking at the faces turned up to him.

Lots of “I do’s” met this question. They started a discussion on how the tree-houses should be built and what they should have in them. Should they have a ladder or just a rope to get up to them? Soldier got them going and then settled Ben against J. and tried to put Gom down by Jack, but the little boy clung and whimpered, so Soldier just stood up with him.

He left them discussing the new project and went to find Dillon and Daniel. They had some talking to do.

He found them in an office. Dillon looked as shell-shocked as Tommy had. He could see guilt and remorse all over Dillon. Soldier wasn’t having any of it.

“Gom, go to Daniel for just a minute, okay? I’ll be right back to get you. I’m just going to take Dillon in the hall for a minute.” Soldier passed Gom over to Daniel and reached down to take Dillon’s hand and pulled him out of the chair. Dillon looked surprised and tried to pull his hand back. He pushed Dillon out the door and turned back to Daniel, who gave him a thumbs up sign.

He closed the door and moved down the hall a little way and pushed Dillon up against the wall. Dillon tried to look down at the floor.

“Look at me,” Soldier said sternly, and waited for Dillon to comply. “Don’t you dare try to tell me you feel responsible. There were four workers here tonight with these kids. The doors were locked. It could have happened if we’d been here with them. You are *not* going to think it’s your fault. I already went through this with Tommy.” He used the same argument here.

“I asked him if he wanted me to leave. I asked if he thought it was *my* fault for letting my guard down and not being here? He said no. It’s all his fault cause they want him back because they made money off him. We both know it’s not his fault.” Soldier put his hand on Dillon’s cheek and kept eye contact with him.

“You, Dillon Marsh, are not going to take this on yourself and end up regretting *anything* we did today. It was not irresponsible. We covered our bases. It’s their fault. We’ll handle it. Now look at me and tell me you agree with me.” Soldier was scared he wouldn’t be able to get it across to Dillon that it wasn’t because they took the time for themselves that this happened to Tommy and Gom.

“You called me Dillon Marsh.” Dillon’s eyes were wide.

“I did. I told you, in my mind, you are. I won’t say it in front of others, but I need you on the same page with me. I’ve got the boys calmed down and they’re talking about the two tree-houses we’re going to build in the backyard. I’m not leaving until these creeps are caught. How about you?”

“I can swing a hammer.”

“That’s not all you can swing, you sexy thing, you.” Whew. Soldier had him back. “You swing that sweet ass like you want me to have at you again. Don’t let them take anything away from us. Not our love, not our making love, and not our boys.” Soldier took Dillon fully into his arms now. “We’ll be there from now on, every minute, ‘til they’re all safe. Then we relax. You with me?”

“I’m sorry. Of course, I’m with you. I just got to thinking I had been selfish and had such a wonderful time with you and they were being scared and hurt and...” Dillon’s voice trailed off at the look on Soldier’s face.

“Shhhh. Got it. Been there myself. But I had to explain to Tommy it wasn’t his fault and when I did, I realized it wasn’t mine either. If we’d left them with just Daniel, I might feel bad. But they

had plenty of coverage. It was just dumb luck on Dickbrain's part that he got in. He's the one at fault." Soldier went on to tell Dillon about how brave Tommy was being. "Tommy's talking to the police now. Maybe he can help. It'd be good for him if he could in some way. Give him a feeling of power." He was so proud of Tommy. "We'll handle it together. That's how we do things now. As a nine-member unit. Love you."

"Love you, too. Soldier Kramer." Dillon laughed at the look on Soldier's face before he, too, laughed out loud. They turned back to Daniel's door. Gom was resting on Daniel's lap, but as soon as Soldier came back in, the little boy reached up his arms for Soldier to take him back. Soldier picked him up and Gom put his head on Soldier's shoulder and patted his cheek, and off to sleep Gom went.

Soldier headed out to the front room to see if it was okay for Gom to sleep all night or if the paramedics were worried about his head. He was told it was not bad enough to worry about that. They smiled when they saw Gom sacked out totally on Soldier.

"Man, these kids love you. You're all they could talk about," one of the paramedics said, smiling. "This one kept saying you'd be here. You and Dillon needed a date tonight, but you'd be here 'cause they needed you. He has complete faith in you. That's rare." The paramedic was obviously impressed with the love he saw between all of them. "How long have you all been together?"

"I'm not sure. A few weeks."

"That's all? To be that closely bonded in so short a time. Amazing."

"When it's right, it's right," Soldier said and smiled. And it was right all around.

He went to a chair and sank down with Gom, waiting for the police to finish with Tommy so they could all go home. He heard the boys talking about being hungry and tired. He thought maybe he'd fix some pancakes when they got back. He always made sure there were all the fixings for those at the house.

Before long, the police were finished with Tommy, and Soldier went to talk to the officers.

"Tommy, can you tell us where they live? Do you know any of the places Ross usually liked to hang out, drink maybe?" one officer asked.

That was the guy's name, huh? Soldier thought "Dickbrain" suited him better.

The police took as much information as they could and Soldier told them to find those two, so his boys would be safe. He told them he'd be checking in and they would press charges and do anything the police needed him to in order to get Ross and Tommy's mother sent away.

Home. Pajamas. Pancakes. Hugs. And Soldier would be sleeping in the chair tonight with Gom. No problem. He didn't really want to let the boy go, anyway. What if Gom had been hurt worse?

It made Soldier sick to think of it. Tommy had bruises on his arm where Ross had dragged him toward the back.

Soldier heard a sound and looked up. Dillon was at the rail above. Looked like someone else couldn't sleep on their own. He stood up with Gom and headed up the stairs. They'd do a repeat of the first night. He'd sit and hold them both while they slept.

He went in and settled on the big bed, pillows behind him, and stretched his legs out. He settled Gom on one shoulder and pulled Dillon in to the other one. Soldier leaned down and kissed the top of Gom's head and then turned to do the same for Dillon. *Oooops*. He met Dillon's upturned face and got a sweet, sweet kiss instead. He took it gladly. He pressed Dillon's face to his chest and sighed, his arms and his heart full of love.

## Epilogue

One tree-house was finished and they were working on the other. The first one was for the older boys. It was higher and they had learned to use a big knotted rope to climb up to the door of it. The boys were getting strong, and Soldier loved working with them. They played and ran and did exercises with him like they were in the Army. The dogs were in heaven. They were growing and they loved the boys. It was a mutual admiration society. The boys lavished love on the two mutts.

Today, Soldier and Gom were working on the house for the smaller ones. This one had a ladder up to it and it wasn't quite as high. The floor was in and two walls were standing. They were working on a window in the third wall when they heard Dillon yelling for them. He and Tommy were running out the back door toward them. The other boys came scrambling out of the other tree.

"What in the world?" Soldier helped Gom down and they met at the bottom of the ladder. "What?" Soldier was anxious. They still hadn't found the two criminals who'd tried to get Tommy.

"Officers Bradford and Jansen are on their way over here with some news for us. They wouldn't tell me over the phone. They should be here any minute." Dillon looked around at all the children avidly listening to the news. "Should we see them alone? What if it's bad news?" Dillon obviously didn't want the boys to have to deal with any more trauma.

"What about it, guys? You want to hear what the officers say? Can you handle it? Even if it's bad news?" Soldier believed they should deal with things, good or bad. He and Dillon were there for the boys if it was bad. If it was good, they had a right to hear it. They'd lived through all of it. They deserved to hear the end of it. Hopefully, it wouldn't be too bad.

Soon, the two officers that the boys were now becoming familiar with, were in the front room and the boys were all gathered around.

Officer Bradford began, "I don't know how to say this. Are you sure you want all of them in here?"

"So it's bad?" Soldier asked, taking Gom's hand.

Jansen spoke up. "Depends on how you look at it. They're gone. They'll never bother anybody again." He looked at Tommy, and there was compassion in his eyes as he went on, "We got a lead, and two cars showed up there. He saw us coming and tried to run. That would have been fine, but he had a gun and he turned to shoot, and one of the officers shot him. He's gone."

Tommy had no expression whatsoever.

“Another officer went to the house to apprehend the woman, uh, your mother. When she saw that Ross had been killed, she shot herself. I’m sorry, son. They’re both dead.”

Soldier watched Tommy closely to see what the boy needed. He watched Tommy get up and go to Officer Jansen and put his arms around him. Jansen looked stunned.

“Thank you, sir,” was all Tommy said. He then went and hugged Bradford, too.

Officer Jansen cleared his throat and looked around the room. All the boys were smiling, happy for Tommy. They didn’t know all the horrible things those two had done to him; they just knew Tommy had been scared of them and now they would not hurt him again. Considering the things they’d been through, seen, heard, and had to do before they’d come here, death didn’t bother them.

Soldier could tell that Jansen thought it weird that everyone was so pleased at these people’s deaths. Officer Jansen just didn’t know. Soldier went to Tommy and whispered in his ear. Tommy looked at him and nodded solemnly.

Soldier drew the two officers outside and told them just a little of what had been done to Tommy since he was about seven or eight. Four or five years of sexual, physical, and mental abuse capped off by kidnapping attempts, burning his house, and hurting his friend. The boy had no feelings for the couple and now the officers understood. Soldier hadn’t liked them thinking that Tommy or his boys were just bloodthirsty. They were *loyal*, was what they were.

The police left and Soldier went back inside. Tommy came to him and hugged him.

“Why do I want to cry when I hated them?” he whispered to Soldier.

“Because you’re not *like* them. You wanted them gone and punished, but you never wished them dead. You’re a good person. They were not. That’s the difference.” Soldier looked down into Tommy’s face, seeing relief warring with anger on the boy’s face, knowing Tommy was having a hard time figuring out how he should feel. “You’re relieved that it’s over, but you think you should be sad and you’re worried that you’re not. You’re just fine, Tommy. Relax. Feel whatever you need to and don’t worry about it. You’re a good person. You just remember that. You’re safe, now, son. All of you are safe.”

“I like when you call me son.” Tommy whispered that, too.

“I like it, too.” Soldier kept his arm around Tommy and they went to join the others.

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Later that night, Soldier and Dillon were in bed. They lay holding onto each other, both quiet. They were so relieved that all was right with their world. The boys were safe and happy. Tommy would be fine. Gom was improving all the time. The others were getting along fine. They needed



to get Bart to a doctor next and see about him not talking. They made compensations for him, but if it was a permanent thing, then they needed to find out and learn to deal with it.

“I’m so glad I’ve got you. You make everything all right.” Dillon finally broke the silence

“Same here. I couldn’t get through the day if I didn’t know I had you. Come here, this calls for a kiss of epic proportions. I want to fall asleep with your taste on my tongue and your body all over me.” Soldier expressed his desire, leaning to take Dillon’s mouth.

They kissed and it led to sweet, hot sex. No one knocked on the door and they fell asleep just like they’d planned. And there were pancakes for breakfast... and lots of juice.

End