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A Man, A Jersey and a Tight End

TOP SHELF

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Chapter One

The ruffled, white kitchen curtains were immaculate. The counters and floors gleamed. The bearded, hairy man standing with his furred arms buried elbow deep in sink suds, a cell phone propped between ear and shoulder, lifted a dish from the water and into the drainer.

“Ten days now,” he said into the phone. “If you don’t count showers because, according to our Brian, ‘soap will jinx it.’”

He nodded as his caller spoke, reaching across to part the curtains and peer into the backyard. “I know. Well, I wanted to talk to you first, seeing as you’ll be back soon.” He nodded agreement. “Yeah. Yeah, you too, Paul.”

He disconnected the phone, wiped his hands on the dishtowel with “Mother’s Kitchen” embroidered across its hem, removed his apron and walked to the back door. “Brian!” he called. “Will you come here please?”

“No,” said Brian. “I won’t take it off.” He stood in the middle of the backyard, arms crossed, chin up and a saucy smile on his face. He seemed quite pleased with himself. The ‘it’ in question was an oversized, official NFL football jersey. The number emblazoned on it was ‘56’ and a signature in black Sharpie across the name ‘Taylor’ on the back. Apparently Brian had owned the thing since he was fourteen.

Jim could believe the jersey was almost a decade old. It was a grass-and-blood-stained, torn, nightmare.

“I’m not taking this off until the Giants win the Super Bowl,” said Brian.

“I just got off the phone with Paul,” said Jim.

Brian’s eyes glinted. With what, Jim couldn’t be sure. Paul had been out of town for several weeks now and the past ten days had been increasingly frustrating for both himself and Brian. Jim just couldn’t seem to strike the right disciplinary tone with him.

Making matters worse, Scott had been on an extended road trip for the past two weeks and Jim was feeling a little needy himself.

“He said he wants you to go inside, take off that jersey, and call him.”

“Can’t.” Brian turned his back to pick up a football that he had let drop to the ground. “I’m not taking this off until the Giants win the Super Bo-o -- oh!”

“Don’t you ‘can’t’ me, Brian,” growled Jim, a wad of the aforementioned jersey and the waist of Brian’s jeans in either hand. And he carried Brian into the house.

“If the Giants lose, it’ll be on your head,” Brian shouted from the bedroom.

Jim shook his head, adding a scoop of deodorizing cleaner to the washing machine and crumpling the garment in there.

He walked back into the bedroom where Brian sat, wrists bound to spindles in the headboard, wearing nothing but his boxers. Brian looked outraged.

“I’ll call Paul,” said Jim.

“I’m not talking to him!” he heard Brian shout as he went looking for the cell phone.

The change in Brian’s demeanor when Jim finally held the phone up to Brian’s ear and Paul’s voice could be heard at the other end was remarkable.

Brian’s body went limp. “Hi, Daddy,” he whispered.

He listened, eyes going bright as he blinked rapidly. “Yes. Yes, sir.” He glanced up, quickly and tearily, at Jim. “Yes, sir. I-I understand, Daddy. I love you.”

Jim took the phone away from Brian’s ear and left the room before he spoke into it. “Yes, I will. But, Paul. This isn’t working. You understand that, right? We have to do something about it. Yes.” He sighed. Through the door Jim could see Brian looking up at him, expression pleading.

“Ask him when he’s coming home?” said Brian and his mouth twisted a little as he held back whatever he was feeling.

Jim tisked. “I mean it, Paul. As soon as you get home. Okay. Bye.” He disconnected and looked at Brian.

“You know what I have to do, don’t you, Brian?”

Jim took the buckled bindings off of Brian's wrists and helped him to stand and slide down his boxers as he sat on the edge of the bed. Jim patted his lap. "Okay, Brian."

Now that it had come down to it, Brian felt apprehensive. "I'm sorry, Mama Bear."

"I know, Brian." Jim patted his knees again. "Let's get this over with."

"You going to use your hand?"

Jim shook his head, expression grim. "Paul said the paddle."

"No-o..." whined Brian, already twisting and covering his ass.

"Now, Brian."

Brian laid himself down across Jim's lap. Said lap was big and firm and warm. It was oddly comforting, despite the awkward position, and Jim's hand was gentle as he rubbed Brian's exposed bottom.

"Ready?"

Brian bowed his head and clutch at the edge of the coverlet and Jim's shoe.

The first swat stung exactly as it always did. The second hit the other cheek with the same power. Three more smart smacks and the feel of the swats began to seem continuous. Brian felt his legs twitching uncontrollably as the paddle continued to paint fire across his bottom.

He was sobbing against Jim's leg when Jim finally stopped.

"Brian." Jim's hand gently rubbed his back and Brian catapulted himself off of Jim's legs and into his arms, sobbing harshly.

Jim murmured and stroked Brian's head and let him sob into Jim's beard.

"I miss him," sobbed Brian over and over. "I miss him so much."

After a very long while, Jim lifted Brian onto the waterbed, lying him on his side, so that his sore bottom didn't touch anything. Jim kissed Brian's forehead, his nose, his lips. His head moved down. Brian clung to him, stroking Jim's hair and face like he would a security blanket as Jim moved down Brian's body, nuzzling and kissing, until he found Brian's penis and sucked it carefully into his mouth. Jim concentrated, keeping his mouth gentle, with constant suction, until Brian became fully erect, and started to breathe harder.

A few more minutes and Brian came, hard and with a quivering belly, his hands tightening on Jim's shoulders.

Jim sat up and stroked Brian's hair out of his swollen eyes. He drew the covers up over Brian again and kissed him, once more on the forehead. "Goodnight, Goldilocks," he said. He switched off the light.

"Don't go," said Brian.

"I'll be back," said Jim. "I need to do something."

Scott was, literally, whistling 'Dixie,' bouncing up and down in the seat and occasionally grinning at himself in the rearview mirror. He was way ahead of schedule and going strong. He'd be back at least twenty-four hours before he'd thought and he could not wait to get himself some Mother Bear.

His cell phone trilled and he hit the Bluetooth button. "Yo!" he shouted, cheerily.

"Baby," Jim's voice was thick with emotion. "God, Scott, I miss you."

"Hold on." Scott checked all his mirrors, downshifting carefully. He slid the rig gradually onto the asphalt shoulder and waited until he was completely stopped, parking lights flashing, before he picked up the phone.

"You okay?"

"No." Jim sounded totally depressed.

"I'll be back by the end of the week," said Scott.

He could hear Jim sigh.

"What happened?"

"Brian," said Jim.

"That little squirrel?" said Scott happily. "I'm gonna kick his ass when I get back."

He heard Jim chuckle tiredly.

Just the sound of his man's voice was making Scott hard. "Hey, baby, you want some now?"

“Scott, where are you?”

“Sittin’ in my rig.”

God, he could almost see his man torn between the idea and his concern. “What if someone sees you?” said Jim, finally.

Scott chuckled, undoing his belt. “I’ll wave,” he said. “I’ve got a hand free. You ready?”

A sound came through the receiver: sort of a growl with a little whine at the end. Yeah, he got how Jim was feeling. He’d had an ache in his balls for twelve hundred miles now. The kind you got when you needed more than one of the dildos he kept stashed in his suitcase.

Wiggling down in the seat, so he could spread his legs out, planting boots on the door and the console, he pushed his jeans down a little more so he could bring out his balls, too. Scott squeezed his eyes shut and just stroked them for a minute.

“Mmm, thinkin’ ‘bout how it feels when you hold my nuts,” he said to Jim. “How it feels when you lick ‘em. You like that, don’t you, baby?”

There was a rumble of agreement, Jim’s voice a little shy. “You taste good there, Scott.”

“Yeah, baby?” Scott tugged at his balls, let his hand wander and begin to tug at his cock. He wasn’t fully hard yet, but he was leaking a little. He spat into his hand. “You hear that? That’s me making myself wet for you.”

Jim moaned.

Scott chuckled. “Whatchya doin’ now?”

Jim whimpered a little. “I-I’m...”

“You got that big weapon out, darlin’? You strokin’ it, getting it nice and hard for me now?”

“Yes,” said Jim breathlessly.

Scott rolled his hips on the seat and thrust into his hand, squeezing his fingers tighter around his prick. “Christ. You gonna fuck me with that, Jim babe?”

“Yes.” Jim was definitely panting.

“Tell me,” demanded Scott, stroking fast and hard.

“I’m going to hold you down. Y-your hands are t-tied behind you. You’re on your belly and...”

“Babe!” Scott arched, balls tight and reaching for the orgasm he could see just out there on the horizon.

“Scott. Oh God, honey, you’re so tight.”

“Jim! Fuck! Oh, Christ!” Scott shot so hard he saw it hit his windshield. Through the phone he could hear Jim panting and huffing and the definite slap of hand on flesh and then a low, inhuman moan.

They breathed. Then Scott laughed. “Hooooeee!”

A tired, embarrassed groan came from Jim. “Never done that before.”

“No? Wow, that’s cool.” Scott had out his handkerchief and was cleaning himself, his steering wheel, and his windshield. He laughed. “Came all over my cab. Bet it’s pretty funky in here.”

He could hear Jim’s grin right through the phone.

“So,” said Scott. “I’ll see you Saturday night?”

“Paul’s due back Thursday. We’ll have to celebrate,” said Jim. “When do you think you’ll be in?”

“Ah, late. Don’t wait up. I’ll see you Sunday morning.”

“I’ll wait up,” said Jim.

Scott’s eyes went warm. “Okay, babe.” He disconnected and started up his truck, the buzz and the tingle all over him.

Jim washed up and went back into the room, crawling in behind Brian and spooning him, still careful of his backside.

Brian clasped Jim’s fingers and brought them up against his chest. “You talked to Scott?”

Jim murmured his assent.

Brian laughed softly. “I heard you groaning.”

“Go to sleep, Brian,” said Jim.

“Yes, sir,” whispered Brian. He wiggled a little closer. “Love you, Mama Bear.”

“Love you too, pup.”

Chapter Two

Jim heard the door slam and came into the living room. Brian had tossed his jacket and backpack on the couch, so that the pack's contents had half spilled out. Jim could hear the shower in Brian and Paul's room running and he was merely intending to remind Brian to put his things away properly, until he looked down and saw the magazine peeking out of Brian's backpack.

Brian came out of the bathroom, wiping his hands, and saw Jim sitting in the big chair in the living room, the magazine in his hand.

"Hey, that's mine," said Brian. "Put it back."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Brian, sit down. We need to talk."

Brian crossed his arms and opened his mouth as if he were going to sass Jim, but the expression on Jim's face must have made him think twice about it because he moved over to the sofa and threw himself on it instead. "Talk about what? That magazine? Are you kidding?"

Jim opened the magazine and looked at it. It was an extreme bondage magazine, oriented toward gay men.

"You going to tell me you don't approve?" Brian snorted. "Gimme a break."

Jim put the magazine down on the table and leaned forward, hands on his knees. The boy who sat before him looked nothing like the healthy, happy young man whom Paul had kissed goodbye four months earlier. It had been a progressive change. And so subtle as to be almost invisible. But Brian's current expression, a kind of sullen resentment, and his tendency to say "no" to any request, were now his most common characteristics.

Now he sat in a twisted heap on the sofa, arms folded around his chest and one foot tapping nervously against the table leg.

Jim paged slowly through one of the magazines. The images were intense, many of the men bound so severely they would have to be in pain.

"Do you want me to do any of these things to you, Brian?"

Brian twitched. He wrapped his hands together between his knees and scowled at the floor.

“Do you want Paul to do any of these things to you?”

An expression, half anger, half agonized uncertainty, twisted up Brian’s face. “I don’t know.”

“I have a St. Andrew’s cross dissembled at the back of my closet, Brian. If you need it, I’ll put it together for you.”

Brian’s head came up, his eyes wide.

“But I feel that’s something you should discuss with Paul. Am I wrong, Brian?”

The poor kid. Jim didn’t know if he was angrier with himself or with Paul. They should have known this would happen. They should have known that, no matter how frequent Paul’s phone calls and video conferences and emails, a relationship of this sort could not be maintained long distance.

Now Brian was shaking his head, and then shrugging. Jim could see Brian struggling with a host of emotions and he held out his arms. “Come here, Brian.”

He pulled Brian into his lap. The kid twitched and seemed to be all knees and elbows for a minute as he struggled with himself, but Jim just wrapped his arms around Brian and gave him a big bear hug until he felt every muscle in Brian’s body go limp.

“He’ll be home tomorrow night,” he whispered into Brian’s hair.

“Are you going to tell him?”

“About the magazine?” Jim kept his body loose and comforting, not showing his confusion. What was Brian trying to bring up? What issue? “I tell Paul about everything,” said Jim, finally. “Especially if it concerns you and Scott.”

This seemed to be the right answer. Brian relaxed again, snuggling into his embrace.

“You want some dinner now?” Jim asked after awhile.

Brian’s head shook against his chin. “Not hungry.”

“You’ll eat,” said Jim, calmly. He helped Brian to his feet and headed off to the kitchen. “Come help me wash vegetables.”

“What was that?” Brian popped up out of his chair and ran to the window for about the twentieth time.

“Sit down, Brian,” said Jim.

“He said he’d be here at six. It’s ten after six,” Brian whined, coming back to the table reluctantly and sliding into his seat.

Jim sighed. Brian had been fidgeting and jumping at every sound all afternoon. Now he sat in front of his untouched dinner plate practically vibrating in place. “Paul is a man, not a train, Brian,” said Jim. “He doesn’t run on a schedule.”

“Yes, he does,” said Brian, pouting. “He’s *never* late.”

“Eat your peas.” Jim tried not to smile. The kid had a point. Paul was the most punctilious man he’d ever met. “And if you leave the table again without permission, you’ll be facing a corner when he comes home.”

That subdued Brian and he picked up a fork and finally began to eat.

Okay, where did one begin with how many things weren’t fair about the situation? Brian mashed peas into a pile of goo, saw Jim giving his plate a dark look and scooped them up and shoveled them into this mouth.

Not fair.

First of all, that Paul had to work in Northern California six months of the year.

Secondly, that Brian’s school schedule overlapped Paul’s trip north so that they had to spend about four months apart.

And thirdly, that during that time he still had a growly and, in his opinion, overly domesticated Top ordering him about and tattling to Paul whenever Brian got just the teensy eensiest bit out of line.

His bottom still hurt from the paddling last night. Okay, he’d kind of been goading Jim into it. But some part of his brain had hoped that just *maybe* Paul would come home sooner if he thought it was necessary.

“Stop banging your fork against the plate, Brian,” said Jim. “If you’re finished, you may be excused.”

Brian took his plate to the sink and that’s when he heard the Harley in the driveway. Not the car backfires or lawnmowers that had been making him jump out of his skin all day, but an honest to goodness, turbo charged, four muffler low-rider.

“He’s home!” Brian did a fair impersonation of Wile E. Coyote, arms and legs spinning, as he ran for the door.

The big oak door opened and then his Papa Bear was standing there: all six foot four, black leathers, skin-tight jeans and calf-high biker boots. He dropped the helmet he swung from one hand to the table when Brian hurtled into his arms.

Nothing smelled like his Papa Bear in leathers. Brian clung like a burr, face buried in the smell of hot leather, and man, feeling Paul’s hands firm against his back, fingers in his hair, beard burn on Brian’s cheeks and the squeak of his leather jacket under Brian’s knees where they wrapped around Paul’s hips.

“Honey...” his Papa moaned and then there was the taste of his mouth. Brian couldn’t let go, feeling his man’s body moving, aware of those big hands holding him close, of the light changing around him as they moved and then the sound of a door and the dimness and quiet of their own room.

“Welcome back,” he heard Jim say as they disappeared into their bedroom.

Like sliding from the saddle, Brian reluctantly relinquished his hold long enough for Paul to shed the jacket and T-shirt under it, revealing the complex mass of snake tattoos with the ‘D.A.D.D.Y.’ tattoos rippling over his six-pack.

Brian wanted to weep, his fingers running over the tat possessively. He kissed each snake head and then his face was in Paul’s hands and his mouth was being taken.

Then they were looking into each other’s eyes. And so much was said that neither of them could say out loud: about lonely nights and longing, about worry and hope and having faith.

Paul’s fingers were on his cheek, a wondering expression on his face. Then his fingers wandered through the mass of curls. Brian pulled the band free and let them fall so that Paul could wrap those arms around him and feel the silky hair against his torso.

“I... I... waited...” Brian didn’t know how to explain, so he led Paul to the bed and let his clothes drop to the floor, crawling back on the bed and lying down, arms stretched out.

Paul groaned and seemed to have trouble with his boots, finally climbing up and cradling Brian, the look on his face almost of agony. Breathing hard, Brian found Paul’s hand and brought it to where he needed to feel Paul.

Lips on his mouth, his neck, the bald head rubbed under Brian’s chin as those lips brought marks up on Brian’s collarbone, fingers finding the whole map of Brian’s body

as if rediscovering it. Those fingers found where Brian had prepared himself, kept himself open for days for his Papa Bear.

With a desperate noise, Paul stretched Brian's legs and pushed himself inside, long, hard and smooth, like an oiled piston, and both men cried a high sharp sound of need.

"Baby..." wailed Paul, pumping hard almost immediately, the movement rocking Brian against the headboard over and over. Grabbing Paul's shoulder with one hand, keeping the leverage against the headboard with the other, Brian arched and tried to work his body into his Daddy's thrusts, twisting and begging, then demanding, as Paul cried out with every shove. Finally, toes digging into the mattress, thigh muscles trembling, Paul froze against Brian, gripping him with both hands and cried out against Brian's shoulder.

Shuddering, with the heat of Paul's release filling him, an orgasm snaked around Brian's spine and shattered his brain.

Even the stars in the heavens didn't blink for a long, long moment.

"You okay?" Paul's nose nuzzled beneath Brian's ear.

"I am now, Daddy," said Brian, petting at the bald head softly, his eyes already blinky and his body dozy and limp for the first time in weeks.

"God, I missed you," breathed Paul. His words were muzzy and sleepy, too. Brian patted his Daddy in a vaguely comforting manner, the world still rocking beneath them from the shattering sex, as they fell asleep wrapped around each other.

It was silly to feel sorry for himself, but that's what Jim was feeling. He punched the numbers of the cell phone in again and frowned when Scott didn't pick up.

Ah well, the dishes needed washing. The rhythmic thumping had finally ceased by the time Jim had folded his dishtowel and hung it back up. He smiled to himself. Waffles with strawberries for breakfast, he was thinking.

Paul and he still needed to have a talk about this arrangement. But that could wait.

Chapter Three

Scott was making good time and feeling mighty fine until around Albuquerque. That's when the twitchy feelings started in his muscles. He could see the purple clouds swelling the southern horizon and his radio reported, amongst a ton of static, that a big storm was coming up from the Panhandle.

Having driven cross the terrain many times in the past decade, Scott had an eye and a nose for weather and later he'd admit to himself that this storm was no more than a few raindrops and a heckuva lotta noise. But the twitchy feeling in his muscles was turning into a crawly feeling all over his skin and a grouchy, disagreeable disposition in his brain.

Seven hours out of California, just a hop, skip and jump to home, really, and for no reason Scott could explain, he found himself deciding to sit the storm out instead of driving through, pulling his rig into the big parking lot of a little trucker bar where he'd been known to tie a few on in his day.

"Well, will you look what the storm blew in," said Old Charlie. He slapped at his gleaming bar with a rag and sauntered over to where Scott had bellied up.

"Whatchya havin', stranger?" Old Charlie grinned and winked. Because Charlie could pull a draft for you or point you in the direction of some available pussy, depending on your mood.

"Bud," said Scott. "For starters."

Charlie drew a draft. "Starting a tab?"

Scott placed his plastic on the counter. "Looks like."

It took about half an hour for the thunderclouds to release themselves, but that jumpy feeling in Scott's gut was just getting worse, and it seemed that, instead of making him mellow, each successive beer was making him just a little bit more aggravated.

"Hey, dude, could ya, like try playin' some other song?" said a big hairy man with a tiny baseball cap squeezed down over his head, sitting at the end of the bar.

Scott looked down at the number seventeen button on the jukebox he'd been about to push, again. Then back up at 'dude.' The guy was about twice Scott's height, tufts of hair pushing out of a red flannel shirt pulled tight over a barrel chest that was probably fifty percent beer belly and the other fifty percent painfully hard muscle.

"And what's wrong with 'Wichita Lineman'?" asked Scott, all that roiling and boiling energy he'd been riding sort of rolling up his spine down his arms and ending up balled into two fists.

If the man had known him at all, he'd have guessed what the bright spark in his honey colored eyes meant. But he didn't know Scott, did he? And wasn't that sort of the point?

So, big dumb and hairy put down his beer and pushed back that tiny little baseball cap and said. "Mebbee you could find somethin' from this century is all I'm sayin'."

Just like that, Scott was a ball of rock-hard angry right up in the man's face. "Fuck you," said Scott, grinning just big as all fuck.

And then they were a combined ball of fists and flying caps and fur.

Okay, now this is what he'd been looking for, thought Scott, just before Doom fell from the sky in the form of a giant fist. And the lights went out.

"He wanted you to find it?" Paul and Jim sat in the living area, the bondage magazine on the coffee table between them.

"Definitely. He couldn't have been more obvious if he'd painted 'I'm confused and frightened about my relationship' in block letters on the wall, Paul. I... don't know if I handled it well. I may have scared him."

"Sounds to me like *he* scared *you*," said Paul.

"When it comes to pushing boundaries, Brian is a creative genius," said Jim. "I'm worn out."

"I've been thinking about the situation, since our phone call." Paul slapped his knees and stood. "I have some ideas."

The world was a different place when he knew Paul was at home and waiting for him. After his last class, Brian ran home and came through the front door like a force of nature, feet flying, backpack and jacket flung in the general direction of where they were supposed to go. "I'm home!" The door he had flung open slammed hard into the wall.

"Brian!" said two big Tops simultaneously, in their Stern Voices.

And now wasn't *that* something to take the happy out of a guy's feet.

"Yes, sir? Sirs?" squeaked Brian, stumbling to a halt and looking from one big, serious, man to the other.

He'd only been home for two seconds. What could he have done *already*?

Paul came up and gave him a hug, though. *His* Paul, the one with the inked skin and worn blue jeans and big smile. Paul hugged him hard enough to lift him off the floor for a second and then gently set Brian down. "Hang up your jacket."

"Sure." Brian jetted over to the flung jacket, picked it up.

"And your backpack."

Grinning madly, Brian grabbed the backpack, too.

"Good. Now take them into our room. And get ready. We need to talk."

Brian hesitated, his engine still running, but his feet suddenly stuck to the floor. "Talk?"

Paul wasn't grinning anymore. His face as stern as Brian had ever seen it. "Yes, Brian. Jim and I have been having a long conversation. You and I need to talk."

Brian had to admit there had been a certain amount of trepidation mixed in with his anticipation of Paul's return. He'd been pushing Mama pretty hard, especially this last month. He'd been aware of it, but almost unable to stop himself, like watching himself fall off a ladder.

But he'd kind of hoped Paul would understand.

Taking the long unused harness from the back of the closet, and Paul's explicit 'get ready' brought things home very quickly. He hadn't used the harness, of course, since Paul had left. The buckles and straps felt foreign in his hands. There had been a time when wearing this had made him feel safe and steady. Something reliable at the end of his day. It was like an anchor.

Now, it felt weird.

And instead of the joy he'd thought he'd feel at Paul's return, there was a sense of unreality. It was like some stranger was out there in the living room waiting for him to prepare himself. Brian set down the harness, and, still clad in his towel, sat down on the bed, the churning emotion in his chest and belly settling into a kind of resentment. It wasn't fair.

There was a soft knock on the door. Brian called, in a sullen voice, "Come in."

Paul came in, treading softly for such a big man. The door clicked shut and Brian's heart rate about doubled.

"Brian?"

He couldn't look at Paul. It was as if his head was frozen, his tongue stuck at the back of his throat. He felt Paul sit down on the bed next to him.

"You want to tell me what's wrong, Brian?"

The words weren't there. Even if he'd known what exactly he was feeling, Brian wouldn't have been able to express it. He shook his head.

"Brian." It was said in Paul's stern, gentle voice. "Young man, look at me."

It was harder than anything, but Brian raised his chin. He could feel his head shaking a little, his teeth clenched and defiant. His eyes burning. "What?" he said.

Paul's eyes narrowed. But then, instead of whatever Brian had tremulously been expecting him to do, his Daddy's big arm circled him, pulling Brian against his chest. Brian fought it, but he was pressed against the familiar inked snakes, Paul's lips in his hair, hand against the back of his neck, firmly in the center of his back.

"I'm so sorry, Brian."

"You are?" Sorry was a word Brian usually found himself saying. "What are you sorry for?"

Instead of answering, Paul stood, taking Brian with him, and walked them both over to the harness. "Let me help you with this."

Brian stood in a kind of trance as Paul performed the ritual, adjusting every buckle and strap as if the thing were new, his hands caressing Brian, owning him.

"Lie down on the bed, Brian."

Brian crawled onto the mattress and rolled over so he could watch Paul. Paul went to the closet, rummaged, and brought out a number of objects. Brian, his heart starting to hammer again, thought he might have never seen any of them before.

"W-w-what?"

But Paul didn't answer. Paul deposited the items on the nightstand, and then removed his jeans. His Daddy's pretty cock was half-erect, the ink on his thighs moving as he climbed up next to Brian and lay down.

"Try to relax, hon." Brian hadn't even realized he was tense until Paul spoke the words. Then those big hands traveled over him. Warm, gentle but sure, knowing fingers painted sensation and care on every inch of Brian's body. He murmured, a wordless sound and Paul's mouth was on his.

Gentle, lips only, and Paul's hand still caressed him like Brian's body was velvet. Brian shivered and looped an arm around Paul's neck, opened his mouth and welcomed Paul's tongue. Deep kisses, they went on forever until Brian was moaning into Paul's mouth, pressing his body toward that touch.

"Roll over, Brian."

Simple. Slow. Paul's fingers were at his opening, working in something slick and warm. When he felt the thickness of a dildo pressing there, Brian almost whimpered.

"Slow down there, sweetheart." Paul held him still as Brian attempted to impale himself. Forcing himself to wait, he heard his own voice now begging as the thing slowly entered him.

Brian felt Paul fasten the dildo into the harness, holding it snug against him. Then Paul laid on top of him, his weight and warmth completely covering him, and whispered against Brian's ear. "I love you."

"Please." Brian heard his own voice, full of tears. "Please, Daddy, I need..."

"I know, hon. But first, I want you to know how much I love you."

Brian heard his own voice, pleading, lips against the mattress begging.

Paul's hand was on his backside, the other hand checking the straps and the fittings to be sure nothing scratched or scraped Brian. Protecting him. Making him safe.

There was the sound of something on the nightstand and then the soft whisper of suede across Brian's lower back, across his legs, finally just resting, still, across his backside.

Brian moaned.

"Ready, hon?" Paul asked. The question more a warning than an inquiry. He heard the quick swish of the flogger in the air and then felt the sharp, familiar yet not, sting.

Brian cried out.

It went quickly, Paul really applying each stroke for maximum effect, so they fell on top of each other. Brian gripped the mattress with both hands and jumped at each stroke. His

toes curled, his teeth clenched, involuntary cries devolving into sobs and then weeping, gulping breaths as Paul stopped.

Paul's hand landed on his back, stroking, and then on his head.

"Brian." Paul's big hands, sure and strong arms around Brian, gathered him against that warm solid chest. He clung to Paul.

"How is he?" Jim and Paul sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee. Brian was rolled in a ball in the bedroom, sleeping as if drugged.

"It's going to take time," said Paul. "We haven't even begun to discuss the issue."

Jim stirred his coffee, holding back comment.

"He's upset with me," said Paul.

Jim nodded.

"You have a right to be upset with me, too," said Paul.

"Oh. I am," said Jim, but when he raised his eyes, their expression was merry.

"Oh oh, and I take it you've already decided on my punishment?"

"Oh. Yes, I have," said Jim. He sipped coffee. "Have you seen the new AGRA stoves?"

Paul groaned. "Well, I'd better be there when he wakes," he said, rising.

"I'll get dinner started," said Jim.

"Thanks, buddy. When is Scott due back?"

"Tonight. Thank God."

"We should plan something for Sunday, then."

"Super Bowl Sunday," said Jim, rolling his eyes. "It's a high holy day, apparently."

Brian dreamed of pirates. He always had, since he was a boy. Though the dream had evolved and his reactions to it had changed as he'd grown older. In the beginning, the dreams had been frightening, perhaps from having spent too many evenings watching old

movies with gap-toothed buccaneers blowing holes in the sides of ships. Or maybe from the 'Treasure Island' that his father loved and read over and over to him until Brian had reached that age when his father had stopped reading to him, had stopped even coming in to say goodnight.

Those pirates had been predators. Looming, foul and frightening and Brian had woken screaming from the nightmares, running to find sanctuary in his parents' bed until his father had started sending him back to his own room.

"Too old for this nonsense. Go back to sleep."

Then, the pirates had evolved. They became dark-haired, mysterious men, leaping onto railings with swords that wove through the air. Or eager men with bright laughing eyes who climbed, always out of reach, above Brian into the sails and rigging as the ships leaned and swayed and the ocean licked at his ankles.

He'd wake wet and hot and confused, and filled with an indescribable longing.

For a long time, Brian hadn't dreamed of any pirates whatsoever. But tonight he dreamed and the dream was a combination of the nightmares of his childhood and the wet dreams of his adolescence.

He was in the hold of a ship. He knew that from the sound: that unmistakable creaking of long beams tasked to their utmost as they strained against the combined forces of wind and water. And the rocking and lift and drop of the floor and walls around him was familiar, and yet not.

Brian had never been to sea, but he knew he was a prisoner on a ship, a ship sailing into rough seas and bound for he knew not where. The heavy hemp ropes tied his arms and legs securely. His hands were held up to bracelets of steel fastened securely to the planks. Chinks of light came through the walls of his room and he could see men moving about out there. Their legs flashed as they ran before the blue sky and scudding clouds. The occasional shout and whistle sounded.

He heard thudding feet on the floor and the door opened.

The man who came in was a giant. His hair fell to his waist and his eyes flashed dangerously at Brian. He wore a billowing white shirt that opened to the waist, revealing skull and crossbones tattoos. His hips were narrow, clad in black with a long sword buckled low across his pelvis. In his one hand he held a long black whip. Brian moaned and fought his ropes as the giant raised his whip arm, but instead of the horrible lash, Brian felt the man's embrace around his body, his mouth at Brian's ears. "Don't worry, I have you..."

Still Brian fought his bindings, now aware that he was naked and too vulnerable. Too exposed.

"I have you..."

"No," said Brian. "Let me go," and he struggled. Those arms only held him tighter. Tighter than the ropes even.

"I have you, Brian. I won't let you go." Paul's kiss in his hair. Arms around him.

Brian gasped like a man coming up from under water and struggled mindlessly to free himself.

"I can't move," he said. "I can't move."

"Yes, you can," said Paul. "See. You can move anytime you need to."

Panting and gradually coming to his senses, Brian realized that his arms weren't pinned to his side as he had imagined. Actually, he was holding onto Paul. He breathed hard, trying to calm the beating of his heart and stared into Paul's concerned face. "I had a nightmare."

"I know you did, honey. You were screaming."

"I was? I'm sorry." Still panting, Brian looked around the room in concern. Nothing looked different, yet nothing looked quite right either.

Paul stroked his hair, his face, the look of concern unabated. "What did you dream?"

"I was a prisoner," said Brian.

Paul's brow wrinkled. "How did that feel?"

"I felt trapped," said Brian. He had to get loose for some reason and he extracted himself from Paul's arms. He sat up. "Trapped and not."

Paul just lay there waiting.

Brian looked down at him. "I didn't know where I was or where we were going. The pirate said he wouldn't hurt me, but how could I be sure of that?"

"I see," said Paul. He sat up now, and then rolled up and out of bed. "Stay there," he said. He left and Brian heard him in the bathroom, then padding around to the side of the bed and turning on a light there, before coming back to sit next to Brian.

"Are you comfortable, honey?"

Brian worked his arms and legs a little. The dildo was still inside him, held snug by the harness, but it wasn't uncomfortable yet. Just very there. "Yes."

"Good." Paul nodded and sat down next to Brian. He brought out the bondage magazine and laid it, unopened, between them. Brian felt every muscle in his body go rigid, his heart slamming into action and he couldn't raise his eyes to look at Paul.

Casually, slowly, Paul began turning the pages. On occasion, he'd stop at one. When he reached the end of the magazine, he closed it, then sat with his hand on top of it and said, "Brian, I'm going to open this again. I'm going to go through it a page at a time. You say 'no', 'yes' or 'maybe' to each page, okay? And Brian? If you say 'maybe' or 'no' to each and every page, that's fine. Do you understand?"

Brian swallowed. His throat was so dry he had to work the saliva in his mouth to be able to do so. "Yes," he said, hoarsely.

"Okay." Paul opened the magazine and did exactly as he said he would. To most of the images Brian immediately said 'no,' On one, he hesitated. Paul didn't speak, he didn't move. He waited.

"Maybe," whispered Brian, so quietly, he wasn't even sure Paul had heard him. But Paul nodded, a dip of his head, and turned the page.

The next page was the sort of image that Brian imagined he and his friends had made jokes about in high school. A man was bent over a horse, his ankles bound, his arms bound behind him. Brian couldn't breathe properly. Air rushed in and out of his lungs faster than he could control it. "Yes," he managed to get out and then he put his hand over the page. "That's all. The rest are 'no,' I'm sure."

Paul closed the magazine and put it in a drawer. The sound of the drawer closing was a very definitive sound.

"Good boy," he said.

Brian felt like he'd just been through a pop quiz in macroeconomics or something. He was sweaty and a little light-headed.

"Lie down, Brian. I'm going to give you a massage," said Paul.

Brian wondered what time it was. There was no sound of birds. No leaf blowers or garbage trucks, but he felt he must have been lying there for hours. Paul's fingers worked their way around every muscle in his body, kneading him into a lump of doughy mindless goo until Paul rolled him over and worked down his chest, over his abdomen and began working Brian's now fully rigid cock.

"Ahhhhh..." An orgasm rippled through his body and a stream of come sprayed Brian's

chest with heat.

It wasn't until Paul leaned over, pushing the sweaty hair from Brian's face and kissing his cheek, that Brian realized that a steady stream of tears had been falling from his eyes.

"How long have you been thinking about this magazine, Brian?" asked Paul, softly.

"Found it a couple months ago," said Brian. "And I started thinking..."

"You didn't tell me," said Paul.

Brian shook his head, tearful.

"Sweetheart," sighed Paul. "You know we have to do something about this, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tomorrow, you are grounded and silent. Understood? Scott will be home the next evening and your punishment will be over then."

Brian nodded.

"I'll have an assignment for you in the morning."

"Yes, sir." Even though he was being punished, Brian still felt more rested and relaxed than he had in some time.

"I have you, Brian, do you understand? You're safe."

Fresh tears threatened Brian and he swallowed hard. "Yes, Daddy."

Chapter Four

When Jim came into the kitchen in the morning, he found a pale, weary tattooed man vainly trying to fry an egg.

"Get away from that." Jim shooed Paul away from the stove and the pan before he did something really dangerous to himself.

Paul threw himself into a kitchen chair and laid his head on the table.

Jim went to the coffee maker and scooped grounds into the espresso maker. "Rough night?"

"I am a pirate, sailing into dangerous waters, holding a frightened young man in the belly of my ship."

"Wow," said Jim. "And I thought being an aged hippy in a white van was living dangerously."

"We discussed the magazine."

Jim's eyebrows rose.

"I don't know what I expected."

Jim cracked two more eggs into the pan and brought several oranges out of the refrigerator.

Paul watched him. "This is me asking you for help," he said.

"I know." Jim squeezed the oranges methodically and thoroughly over an electric squeezer. Then he rinsed the thing, poured a glass of orange juice for himself and Paul and brought the coffee pot with him to the table. He sat down.

"That was me stalling for time," he said.

Paul half smiled.

Jim sighed. "I have been a little further down that road than you, I admit. I can show you the mechanics. I can't guide you past that."

"Thank you," said Paul. "I wouldn't expect you to."

"He's never..."

"I trust Brian," said Paul.

Jim studied him, stirring cream into his coffee. "You worried about Scott?"

"That is a concern," Paul admitted.

"He and I will talk. He'll want to quiz you. Extensively."

Paul chuckled. "I relish the challenge."

Jim grinned then. "Man, I miss that little monster. I have been counting down the hours."

"When is he supposed to get here?"

"Oh, not until late, but I'm going to be ready for him." Jim's furry eyebrows did a suggestive little dance.

There was the quietest little mouse noise and Brian came padding into the room. He wore his blue robe. Generally, when Paul was around, Brian wore boxers indoors. Paul figured he was still shy about wearing the harness publicly, so he'd donned the robe.

Jim jumped up and pulled out a chair for him, laying a cushion on it without comment. "Eggs and juice and bacon?" he asked Paul and Brian.

Brian looked for permission at Paul and then nodded at Jim, smiling.

Jim tousled Brian's curls. "Coming right up, Goldilocks."

Brian sat at the desk in his and Paul's bedroom. It had been Paul's desk, once upon a time. When Brian had moved in and started college, Paul had expanded the filing system and bought him a new computer. Whenever Brian sat down at it, he had that same feeling he'd had the day Paul had unveiled it for him. This was a place where he was wanted. A place set aside for him.

Today it was where he sat, laboriously writing out over and over. "There is nothing I can't tell Paul." One hundred lines. The repetition was oddly as comforting as the affirmation.

There was nothing he couldn't tell Paul. When he'd first seen that magazine, at the back of a store where he usually stopped to look at the latest Sports Illustrated and Newsweek, some weird chill had enclosed him. As if he was trapped in his own little world of fear. It

was a familiar place. It was the place he'd gone when he was fourteen and first really knew that he was gay, but didn't yet understand what that meant. That sweaty scared feeling, as if he were always hiding.

He'd bought the magazine and stuffed it at the bottom of his bookbag, bringing it out, like he had the Blue Boy he'd hidden during his adolescence, paging through it.

This was what he was? These... men who seemed to have no feeling for each other? Nothing but the pain in their faces?

So far from Paul and he couldn't ask him over the phone, the fear was something he couldn't even name. Is this what they were?

"Brian, baby." Paul's hand landed on his shoulder as Brian wrote the lines. He looked up into warm eyes full of love.

"I was afraid to tell you," he blurted, even though he wasn't supposed to speak today.

Paul nodded. "We'll talk about it later. I promise."

Then Paul hugged him. Just leaned over and enclosed Brian in his warmth and scent.

"You should take the harness off and shower before dinner. Your body isn't used to this."

Brian stood and Paul helped him slip out of his robe and the harness, gently sliding the dildo free. Brian shivered as the pressure left his body. And Paul was almost immediately there, arms around him, mouth at his ear, his neck.

"Baby, I want you. Are you okay?"

Nodding, urgent, Brian leaned over, spreading his legs and grasping the desk with both hands. Paul slid in and the first thrust almost lifted Brian from his feet. Big hands on his hips held him steady.

"Oh, babe, oh, God." Paul moaned, sliding in and out, his crotch slapping into Brian's butt again and again as his cock just kept hitting that spot over and over.

Brian's knees were shaking, his arms losing their strength, he wailed and Paul's arms were around him, holding him up while his hand stroked Brian's cock fast and hard and Brian was snug against Paul. Paul's was voice in Brian's ear, shock and shiver going all through him as he came.

Paul chuckled. "Can't get enough of you, baby."

Brian shook his head grinning, and then led Paul by the hand so they could shower together.

Jim looked from one man to the other at the dinner table, shaking his head. They both had wet hair and big grins.

“Surprised either one of you can walk,” he said.

Brian giggled.

Smile stretching from ear to ear, Paul said, “When’s Scott due?”

Jim sighed. “Four more hours or thereabouts.”

“Have you talked to him since the other day?” asked Paul. Jim had been calling Scott off and on and hadn’t gotten him to pick up yet.

“Nah, but he doesn’t like to talk and drive. He thinks it’s a hazard. And I want him to be safe above all else, so I don’t mind if he keeps driving.”

Paul nodded. “Brian, your speech restriction is lifted after you clear the table.”

Brian did so immediately. Placing the last dish in the sink and saying, “I love you guys.”

Jim and Paul exchanged looks. “Isn’t he the cutest thing,” said Jim.

Brian was actually too tired for sex that night and went straight to sleep, petting Paul and talking to the individual snakes on his chest like a child might to her dolls. He’d named each one and had once told Paul a long complex tale about them.

When he was breathing deeply, a little whistle on every fifth exhale, Paul slid out of bed and went out to the living room to sit with Jim.

They each nursed a bottle of beer and chatted about business. Paul shared a few of his ideas with Jim and, around midnight, called it a night.

“Make as much noise as you want, buddy,” he said as he stood at his bedroom door. “I understand.”

Jim laughed.

Around three, there was a tentative knock at Paul and Brian’s bedroom door. Paul slid out of bed again and came out to see a worried Jim pacing up and down. He had the cell phone to his ear and was leaving an urgent message.

He disconnected and said to Paul, "He won't pick up."

Paul dialed Scott's number on his cell phone with the same result. "Is there weather, maybe?" he asked.

Jim shook his head. "I've been watching the weather channel. And I went online. No storms reported that would cause traffic problems. No red zones on the known freeways." Red zones were areas with reported severe congestion. During rush hour, red zones were simply due to excessive traffic; in the middle of the night, they were generally due to accidents.

"Unless he's somewhere it wouldn't cause congestion. Somewhere without a lot of..."

"Scott's not been in an accident," said Paul, immediately. "You're the first person he'd call. And if he couldn't call, the police would have."

Jim and Paul were the emergency names kept in the little envelope with the registration and insurance above Scott's visor.

Jim did another circuit on the floor. "I'm going to start calling the hospitals," he declared.

Paul sat down and tried to think what he could do to help and Brian came out into the room, rubbing his eyes. "Paul?"

"It's okay, Brian. You should go back to bed."

"But..." Brian came over to him, holding out his cell phone. "Scott's on the phone."

Jim snatched the phone out of Brian's hand. "Scott? Are you alright?"

"Goddammit," said Scott. "I told that little brat to keep this on the QT."

"Where *are* you?"

"Fucking hoosegow."

"You're in *jail*?" yelled Jim. "You..."

Paul snatched the phone away from Jim before he could say something he'd regret.

"Where are you, Scott?"

"No, I will not put Brian back on the line. He's half awake and this isn't his problem is why. Do you *really* want me to give the phone back to Jim? I didn't think so. Okay.

Where are you and what do we have to do?” Paul lifted a pen from the nearby table and started scribbling on a pad. “Right. Good. We’ll wire it right now. Can you drive? You sure as hell better be sober, buddy, before you get back into that truck.”

Paul glanced at Jim, who was literally tearing out hair. His fingers were in his beard and he was tugging at it in a state of high agitation. “What time do you think? Okay. We’ll expect you then.” Paul hung up.

“Jim, go sit down. Brian, get Jim a glass of brandy.”

“No,” Jim was headed to his bedroom. “I’m stuffing a bong. Will you join me, Brian?” Brian looked at Paul who nodded and waved him to follow Jim. “I’ll take care of the bail,” said Paul.

Brian was good and mellow and Jim had stopped tearing tufts of beard out when Paul appeared in the doorway.

“Come on in,” said Jim hoarsely. He held the bong up and Paul took a short toke before handing it right back.

Jim offered it to Brian and Brian glanced quickly at Paul, saw the discreet negative headshake and handed it back to Jim. “You go ahead,” he said. “I’m kind of sleepy.”

Jim nodded, sage and sad and fretful. He inhaled deeply and smoke curled slowly from his nostrils.

“He’ll be here in a few hours,” said Paul.

Jim’s fingers wandered over and over through his beard. He took a long slow toke off the bong. Smoke rolled from his lips as he said. “I fucked up.”

Brian looked up at Paul. Then Brian and Paul crawled up to either side of Jim and wrapped their arms around him.

“You want some music?” said Brian.

“Pink Floyd,” said Jim, morosely. “Thank you, please.”

“You didn’t fuck up,” said Paul. “This is just Scott being Scott.”

Chapter Five

He'd been booked and printed and lying on his side on a cold wet cement floor for half an hour before Scott finally sobered up enough to realize what he'd done to himself.

Fucking hell.

There had been a time when this was a monthly occurrence. Years ago, of course. And Scott had generally been careful to deliver his loads first. He sat up with care, and glared at a pair of beaten work boots attached to the legs of the man sitting on the bench near him.

"You ain't used your call yet," said the guy. "Better do it if you want to make bail."

"Thanks," said Scott, easing himself to his feet.

The big hairy guy, clutching his tiny little baseball cap, waved at him. "No problem." He had a swelled shut eye and an open cut on his cheek.

That was the first time it occurred to Scott to check his own face. A ginger exploration revealed at least one bad cut and a lip that was about twice its size. So he'd won, right? Cheered by this, Scott called the matron and went and made his call.

What the hell was wrong with Jim, he didn't know. You'd think the man had never been in a fight. Scott sulked.

The bail had come and he'd found his truck, thank Christ, safe and sound. Now he sat in the cab, nursing the lip with an ice pack from the 7-11. Loathe to head toward home, but feeling an urgency to do so.

So he'd had a little fight. It happened. Jim couldn't possibly be pissed off about that, could he?

By the time Scott had pulled his truck up into the driveway of the bungalow three blocks up from Melrose, his body had worked itself into an electrical storm of its own. His belly was tight and anxious, with a thread of anxiety. His knuckles ached, now that he was sober, from the fight. And the muscles in his arms and neck twitched with memory and anticipation.

Though he told himself it was no big deal, Scott had been chewing over things all the way from New Mexico to Silverlake.

Both Jim and Paul had sounded PO'd, but those two were always posturing. Maybe that sort of attitude worked on Brian, but Scott could hold his own. He wasn't gonna go in there and start pleading.

Right?

Scott realized he'd been sitting in the cab, just looking at the house, long after he'd turned off the engine. His hands were sweating. He pulled them off the steering wheel and rubbed them on his pants, then forced himself to open the door and hop down.

His knees were rubbery, but that was probably the hangover combined with the fight adrenaline and then the long drive.

"Hey, I'm home!" His voice sounded okay, he decided, though he had to clear his throat a little.

There was no one in sight. Not sure what to make of that, Scott swung his duffel bag to the ground. Then came the slap of bare feet and Brian appeared. His hair was loosely bound and his eyes were huge.

"You jerk!" Brian said.

"Well, hello to you, too, Goldilocks," said Scott.

Now Paul and Jim entered behind Brian. They had that look they got when they were about to lay down some law or another. Man.

"Brian, go to our room," said Paul quietly.

Scott didn't know what pissed him off more, Paul ordering Brian around like that, or Brian just meekly going. When Scott had been living with it for a while, he got used to it. But he'd been free and on the road for weeks now and it struck him anew how wrong that was.

"You get him to fetch sticks yet?" he said to Paul.

"Scott!" Oh, boy, now he got that worried look from Jim. He squinted at Jim then. Wondering and a little annoyed with himself because he couldn't quite look straight at the man.

He shrugged off his jacket, so he'd have an excuse for that. "Happy to see you too, lover," he said, and wanted to bite his own tongue when he heard how his voice sounded. Sort of choky. Must have been the still swollen, split lip.

Then Jim was right there behind him, hands on both shoulders. Scott willed his body to jerk out from under the touch, but his body ignored him and instead he found himself being pulled back against Jim's warm chest, big furry arms wrapping around him.

He grabbed Jim's forearms to pull him off, you know? But instead found himself clinging tightly with all ten fingers. An unmanly noise escaped from between his lips.

When Jim led him into the bedroom, Paul was nowhere in sight.

"This is stupid," Scott spat. And was pleased he sounded as pissed off as he was. He stood in the corner of the bedroom, opposite Jim's small forest of Marijuana plants. His nose faced the corner and his hands were clasped on his head and there really was nothing to do but glare at the boring intersection of two walls and grouse.

Scott knew the wallpaper on these two walls so well he could probably have drawn the repetitious cascading flower design from memory.

"You should have thought of that before you sassed Paul," said Jim calmly. And whatever he was doing clinked and thumped and Scott twitched, longing to turn around and see what Jim was up to, but knowing better than to try it.

"Somebody has to do it," said Scott, reasonably. "That man acts like he thinks he's God or something. He's got Brian to heel like a trained chimp."

"That's enough," said Jim, sharply. "I don't want to gag you with that lip, but don't think I can't find a way to keep you silent, Scott, if I have to."

Scott closed his lips together and scowled fiercely at the corner.

"And you can wipe that look off your face," Jim added. And then he was right behind Scott, hands on both his shoulders. "Okay, honey, we'll take care of that cut on your cheek and then we'll deal with the other." He turned Scott around and both Scott's heels dug into the carpet instinctively, resisting Jim's guidance enough that he got a little slap on the behind.

"What is that?" asked Scott. "What are you going to do?" His damned feet were going where they were urged, despite his protests.

Jim eased Scott up against the contraption. Knelt and fastened Scott's ankles loosely to the bottom posts. "Give me your hands, babe."

“No,” said Scott, watching in horror as his hands moved, as if of their own volition, into Jim’s. Jim fastened Scott’s wrists with the same loose leather bracelets. And Scott stood, breathing hard, his ankles and wrists were fastened securely and comfortably to a large wooden ‘x’ set up in the other corner of the bedroom.

Then Jim just *left* him there. Well, actually, only for a few minutes. But by the time he reappeared, carrying a bowl of water that smelled strongly of antibacterial soap, a soft cloth and his medicine kit, Scott was breathing hard.

And his damned cock was straining against his jeans, too. What the hell was *that* about?

“Okay, try to hold still,” said Jim, as he always did, knowing full well that Scott would jerk and flinch while Jim tried to bathe the wound.

Jim leaned casually against this medieval looking *thing* he’d tied Scott to and studied the cut on Scott’s cheek carefully. “Doesn’t look like it needs any kind of stitches. Your lip looks worse. How are your teeth, Scott?”

“Fine,” growled Scott. “All present and accounted for. Sir.” He said the last in the least respectful tone he could muster, bordering on insolent, actually.

Smack.

Jim’s hand landed right on his behind and there was a sting to it.

“I warned you,” he said. “How many warnings do you get?”

Scott ground his teeth and muttered and pulled uselessly at his bindings. Jim stepped away and then came back. Some kind of soft rubber thing was held up and against Scott’s face, which he tried to flinch away from as best he could. But Jim held his chin and worked the thing around his head. It was all straps and buckles and Scott kept fighting.

“How many warnings, Scott?” said Jim.

And when Scott grudgingly spat out, “One,” Jim slipped the rubber thing between Scott’s teeth and tightened some strap, and then Scott was standing there with a thin rubber bit between his teeth, growling and snapping like a muzzled pit bull.

Jim stood there for a long time, stroking his back and making soothing noises. And as mad as Scott was, after awhile he could feel himself starting to relax. Then Jim’s lips were on the top of his head and a whisper was at his ear.

“Okay, babe. We’ll start out with ten minutes.”

Start out?

And then Jim was gone. At first all Scott could hear was his own loud breathing. Gradually, though, he calmed and then he could hear the sounds in the kitchen: subdued voices, Brian's voice raised in inquiry.

Then it was more silence. Ten minutes? It had to have been an hour. Scott had been sitting in the cab of a truck for weeks, so he didn't mind standing, but his mind had been speeding on adrenaline and some other gnat-like worry for so long that it was almost painful to feel it slow down and rest. He could hear the birds outside, the house settling. He could hear the pop and sizzle of something cooking and the sink being turned on and off.

Then, after what seemed like at least a decade, Jim came back into the room.

"Scott will be fine." Paul scraped shaving foam from just above his own ear and his eyes met Brian's in their doublewide bathroom mirror.

"His face was bashed up," Brian pointed out needlessly.

"Yes." Paul tapped the razor against the edge of the sink and rinsed it under the spigot.

Brian toyed with his toothbrush, and then straightened his soap dish. He rocked from foot to foot and was about to wander out of the bedroom when Paul got hold of him with both hands.

"Brian, look at me."

Brian looked up, his brows creased in worry. "His mouth was swollen."

"Do you trust me, Brian?"

Brian nodded immediately.

"Scott will be fine." Brian's eyes searched Paul's for a minute and then he took a deep breath and released it in a long sigh.

"You didn't get enough sleep last night. I want you to take a nap this afternoon."

"Yes, sir."

Paul folded Brian in his arms and kissed the top of his head. "Isn't today that big football game of yours?"

Brian hopped back, his mouth wide in an 'O' of shock. "I forgot! How could I have forgotten?" And the hushed house reverberated as he whooped. "Yeah, the Giants are gonna win, I can feel it, where's my jersey?" And he was off, bouncing around their bedroom like a blond-headed ping pong ball.

"Tom Brady, my man is so gonna kick your butt!"

Paul shook his head, smiling.

Scott heard Brian whoop and he smiled. He was down to his boxer shorts and sitting on the bed. He rubbed his wrists over and over, not because they were sore from the bindings, but because he liked how the reminder of the restraints felt when he rubbed them.

Jim sat at the foot of the bed, massaging Scott's feet. He had that quiet contemplative expression he got and his massage was gentle and slow, but Scott still felt enormous pressure coming at him from the gentle man at his feet.

"I'm sorry," he blurted finally. "I should have called you right away. But I was drunk."

Jim set down one of Scott's feet and picked up the other. "You were drunk," he stated.

"I stopped at a bar and had a few beers." Scott hated how his voice could go all whiny like that before he'd even noticed.

Jim nodded. Set down Scott's other foot and looked at him. "Reasonable, responsible thing to do."

Scott ducked his chin trying to escape that calm, steady gaze. His eyelashes were the same honey color as his hair and they twitched as he tried to find something to look at besides the man calmly staring him down.

"I don't know why I did it," Scott admitted.

"You don't?"

Damn it, Jim wasn't cutting him any slack. Like Jim never found himself just doing something for the hell of it.

"Couldn't get the edge off," Scott admitted. "Thought a beer might help."

"A beer and a fight."

Scott scowled. Perceptive son of a bitch. Wasn't marijuana supposed to make you dopey and mellow?

"Yes," said Scott. "Beer and a fight. Sometimes a man's just gotta..."

"No, you don't," said Jim.

Scott folded his arms and his legs twitched.

Jim sighed. "Roll over, baby," he said, standing.

Scott whined. "Jiiiiimmm." But when Jim bent down to help him, Scott rolled over and stretched his arms out, grasping the head board with both hands.

He shook his head hard to Jim's gentle, "Do I need to bind you?"

"Just get it over with," said Scott, breathing hard.

Jim slid his boxers down and soothingly rubbed his butt. "You never fight unless there's something bigger you want to avoid," he said. "Don't you want to tell me about it, Scott?"

"Quit playin' shrink and just do it," said Scott, turning his head away so Jim couldn't see his face.

Scott had barely laid his cheek to the cool sheet when the first sharp slap came right across the muscled part of his butt. It was followed by three more hard swats. The last one made him jump.

Scott was heavily muscled, but the nerves on his rear end were as sensitive as any man's and Jim knew just how and where to land each spank for maximum sting and burn. Scott didn't cry out, but his whole body jerked against the mattress, his hips trying to escape as the fire spread across his ass and upper thighs.

His mouth opened so he could draw in huge breaths, hands clenching and forearms straining, legs jumping against the mattress. Finally, Jim stopped.

Scott pressed his face to the mattress. Hands reached up and turned and gathered him and he was folded up in a big lap, hands stroking his head and a prickly warm beard brushing against his face.

"I'm sorry." Scott couldn't stop himself shaking. "I was so fucking nervous."

"What about?" said Jim.

“You. We. It’s been over a month. I... I mean, what if you weren’t here when I got home?”

Jim stopped his rhythmic petting. “What if I wasn’t here?”

“You’ve done it before,” said Scott, his voice bitter. “Left.”

“Ah,” thought Jim, petting his lover, considering. Scott was correct. Early in their relationship. He’d been scared, he could admit it now, and some part of him had translated that fear into flight. But he and Scott had settled all of that a long time ago, hadn’t they?

“You should know I wouldn’t do that,” said Jim. He turned Scott’s face so that he could pet the man’s face and gaze into those honey colored eyes. “Don’t you?”

“Paul leaves. Doesn’t matter. Why shouldn’t you?”

“I’m not Paul.”

Scott was watching him with less assurance than Jim would have liked to see in his eyes. “I see,” said Jim.

Scott sniffled and Jim kissed him. Once on the head, once on the nose and then once, thoroughly, on the mouth.

“How’s your behind?”

“You’re a bastard,” said Scott. “But you know that. I’ll be okay.”

“Think you’ll be able to watch your football game?”

“Maybe,” sniffed Scott. “I might need a little more attention. You might’ve been getting some all these weeks, but I’ve been lonely out there on the road.”

Jim stroked Scott’s shoulders thoughtfully, his hands gentle and slow. “You’re talking about Brian, right? I’ve been ‘getting some’ with Brian.”

“Well, sure,” said Scott. He stroked his wrists. “Haven’t you?”

Jim petted the area just above Scott’s ear, obviously thinking how to answer this and Scott said, “Not that I have a problem with that. I know how it is with you two. Hell, kid’s a good bounce and so smart.”

“I missed you, Scott,” said Jim. “I missed more than the sex.”

Scott was silent and very still.

“I love you, baby,” said Jim, and his voice was soft and had a weak frightened sound in it that Scott didn’t like one bit.

“Okay, okay. I know.” He wrapped his arms around Jim, nuzzling the big furry chest, inhaling his man.

“You got yourself beat up,” said Jim, sounding both angry and hurt.

“Actually, you should see the other guy.”

A gruff laugh vibrated under Scott’s cheek. He felt a big hand on the back of his neck.

“You want me exclusive, I’ll do it, Scott. Just say the word. I’m sure Brian and Paul would understand.”

“Aw, man.” Scott buried his face against Jim. “But then I couldn’t fuck the little squirrel either.”

And he felt Jim’s laugh again. The big man’s muscles easing.

They held each other, that feeling of being home finally settling into Scott’s bones. Then Jim pushed Scott away, taking his chin in two big fingers and raising Scott’s gaze to his own. “Can’t believe you didn’t say anything before.”

Scott looked into Jim’s eyes and gave him a sheepish grin. “Me neither.”

Jim smiled and stroked Scott’s shoulders, hands running down Scott’s chest and playing for a moment there. Scott rumbled and twisted, trying to get the attention he wanted without letting his sore butt touch the mattress.

Jim’s hand wrapped around Scott’s cock and pulled. Scott twisted and moaned.

“Hold on,” Jim rolled off the bed and then was back in a minute with lube.

Scott grinned and grabbed handfuls of hairy man.

Jim squirted liberal amounts in both their hands and they smooched and moaned into each other’s mouths, twisting and groaning as they jerked each other off.

Jim came first, a shuddering moan and his cock swelled in Scott’s hand.

“Oh, babe, that’s beautiful,” whispered Scott, panting, watching Jim’s thick cock spurting all over his fingers. “Can’t wait to get that fat cock inside me.”

Jim groaned and tightened his fingers, not able to do much more while Scott fucked his fist. “Missed you, baby. Missed you...” Scott said against Jim’s mouth as he came.

Chapter Six

“Halftime!” yelled Brian and Scott simultaneously and they both leapt off the leather sofa, Brian catapulting over the armrests to catch up to Scott at the back door. They fell in a tumble out the door yelling about coin tosses.

“But you’ll miss all the good commercials,” Jim protested. He had a bowl of popcorn in his lap, a beer in his hand and his feet up on the coffee table where a half dozen varieties of his special hors d’oeuvres were laid out on party platters.

“Leave ‘em,” said Paul. He was slouched down in his big chair, arms and legs spread out and head resting against the back rest. Half awake, really. The optimum football viewing position, in his opinion. “They have their own game during halftime.”

Jim put the popcorn bowl down on the coffee table. “Scott’s cut could open up again,” he fretted.

Paul’s half-lidded eyes slid over to regard his friend. “Didn’t you two get that taken care of?”

Jim knew that Paul meant the *issue* not the *cut*. “Yes. Maybe. I don’t know.”

Sighing, Paul sat up and picked up a mushroom puff, popped it in his mouth. “Maybe we need to call a meeting.”

“Maybe.”

A high squealing scream of delight was followed by a protest and then, remarkably, the rumble of the water running through walls as somebody outside turned on the garden hose.

Paul and Jim exchanged glances and both rose to their feet.

“I’ll show you offensive strategy!” That was definitely Brian.

More screaming.

Paul and Jim bumped shoulders at the door until they finally jostled through and stood watching two wet, muddy men rolling in a grassy mud puddle in the middle of the yard.

A slick, mud-covered football popped straight out of the knot of man bodies, did a slow arching twist in the air, and fell with a plop into a puddle.

“Mine!” yelled Scott, and his mud-covered torso leapt from the twist of bodies. Scott was small, but compact, and his body hit the puddle like a large rock. Water and mud splattered everywhere.

Jim looked down at his shirt and his eyes narrowed.

Scrabbling and slipping and spraying mud everywhere, Scott came up from the ground, mud ball tucked under his arm and started zigging and zagging across the yard, a muddy Brian, long dripping jersey and all, running, yelling behind him.

“And score!” shouted Scott, doing a victory dance.

It was quite a dance. Scott was soaking wet, his clothes stuck to him like he’d been sprayed with brown paint. That compact, well-endowed body did a little shaky butt dance and Brian stopped running and stood gaping instead.

He whistled.

Scott turned. Mud on his face, those eyes glowing beneath it. He tossed the football to the ground and spread his arms. Giving the whole wet, muddy package a little shake and roll.

“You want some, Goldilocks?”

Brian whooped and leapt on him.

Jim made some noise of protest.

Paul glanced at him. “Okay!” he yelled, clapping his hands. When Brian, who was now on top of Scott and groping sort of randomly, didn’t respond, Paul put his fingers into his mouth and emitted a piercing whistle.

Both men stopped moving.

Scott chuckled, grinning up at Brian. “Personal foul?”

“Not in my book,” said Brian. He’d found a perfect place for his pelvis and he twisted a little there.

“Alright, you two. There’s just enough time to clean you off before the second half begins,” said Paul, picking Brian up by one arm like he was just a stuffed doll. He placed Brian firmly on both feet and pointed at the house. “Shower,” he said.

“But...”

“Now,” said Paul.

“Why shower when we can just hose off out here?” said Scott from behind them and Paul turned to see what Brian was grinning at. Scott had stripped his shorts and shirt off, and stood in his muddy sneakers. Arms and legs muddy, but torso relatively clean.

“Where’s that hose?” Scott said.

“Between your legs!” screamed Brian. “Oh, man, look at you.”

Scott’s equipment was not in proportion to the rest of his compact body. He shook it, then turned his back and gave everyone another little show as he leaned over to pick up the hose. It was a pretty, if muddy, sight. Scott straightened, obviously fully intending to do a little backyard impromptu ‘Flashdance’ with the hose and nothing else, but Jim was there and had hold of his arm. “I don’t think so.”

“Wha...”

Half lifting, half dragging, Jim pulled Scott across the yard and into the house.

Paul and Brian could still hear Scott’s protests after the screen door had slammed shut.

“What did he do?” said Brian. He turned on Paul and stamped his foot.

Paul gave him a discerning look. “I think you know, Brian. But go take a shower. We’ll talk after the game.”

Brian’s lower lip protruded a bit and he may have stamped once in a puddle as he went across the yard, but he didn’t want to risk missing the second half of the game, so he went.

Brats on crack.

Jim looked grimly down at the two wet-headed wrestling men at his feet and thought that’s exactly what he and Paul were having to deal with.

For about the fiftieth time, Scott pinched Brian. Or Brian elbowed Scott, and shoving and wrestling and kicking occurred. When Paul snapped “That’s enough,” both voices claimed, “He started it,” and then they had a few minutes of peace.

Then Brian elbowed Scott. Or Scott pinched Brian.

The game ended, Brian jumped up and down hooting. Scott jumped up and down and stuck an elbow in Brian and they were wrestling again, only this time somebody kicked the coffee table and beer bottles toppled.

“That’s *it!*” snapped Jim. And jumped to his feet.

A few minutes later, Brian and Scott facing separate corners and the television off, Jim mopping up the mess said, quietly, to Paul. “Let’s talk.”

The Giants had won the Super Bowl. It was a miracle, was what it was. And it was unfair on a superhumongous level that anybody in their right mind, even a Top without a proper appreciation for football, would expect a guy to be all sedate and, “Good game, sir,” and shaking hands or something after that.

Brian moved restlessly and his eyes slid sideways to look at Scott standing there. Jim had place Scott’s hands on his head. He always did that to Scott. Brian didn’t know why, but he thought it might be because, if Scott’s hands didn’t rest on his head, then they moved everywhere, rubbing his wrists, his neck, his stomach.

Brian thought about rubbing and then about Scott out in the yard doing his naked dance and he rocked from foot to foot.

“You got ants in yer pants, Goldilocks?” he heard Scott hiss from the other corner, giving him a wicked golden glance from those eyes.

“Quiet! Eyes forward!” yelled Jim.

God gave Tops superhuman hearing. It was just another one of those unfair things.

“Are you sure?” said Paul. He and Jim were leaning against the counter and Jim had that intractable look he could get: big arms crossed, eyebrows furrowed so that they almost met in the center of his nose.

“Scott and I need a vacation. Just him and me together.”

“It seems like the whole *problem* is instability, so how would your taking off somewhere help that?”

“How would staying here help?” argued Jim. “Brian may be happy now, but you know he knows you’ll be leaving again and it will be eating at him. And then there’s the other thing.”

“Ah, yes, the other thing.”

“Scott isn’t going to like it.”

“I’d suggest keeping it from him,” said Paul dryly, “but I can’t imagine Brian being able to do that. Even if you and I could. But what do you think will happen if you two come back from your trip and Brian tells him then? He’ll think you tricked him.”

Jim blinked. For the first time since they’d entered the kitchen, he looked a little unsure. “He would. You’re right.”

“I don’t see any way to do this but head on, buddy. I really don’t.”

Jim shook his head. “Paul, you don’t know Scott like I do. He’s insecure. And when he’s insecure, he’s fractious. And when he’s fractious, there’s no end to the trouble he’ll cause.”

Right on cue, they heard a whisper from the living room. “Quiet!” yelled Jim. “Eyes forward!” There was a sudden and marked stillness.

Paul couldn’t help but chuckle.

Jim plaited his beard, fitfully. “He can go too far. He was in *jail*, Paul.”

“He has a good survival instinct,” said Paul.

Jim continued plaiting his beard, his eyes worried. Jim had lost a partner to drugs many years ago and had blamed himself for quite some time. He knew Scott was a different sort of man, but he also thought that Paul had the optimism of someone who had never seen self-destruction up close and personal. How fast it could escalate, how it could utterly destroy a life.

“I hope so.”

“We’ll talk it over. Every step of the way.”

Jim heaved a sigh.

“Right now, I’m going to let Brian stand in that corner for a little while and then I’m sending him to bed.”

Jim nodded. “Sounds about right. I might take Scott for a ride before bed.”

Paul clapped him on the shoulder. “Now that sounds romantic.”

Chapter Seven

“Been riding for weeks,” Scott had grouched at first. “Don’t see what’s so great about driving somewhere else.”

Jim fitted an extra bottle of water into the picnic basket and said, “You’ll see.” He reached over and caressed Scott’s head briefly, letting his fingers slide over the short hairs at the back of Scott’s neck. Feeling Scott pressing a little into the caress, though his face still wore a scowl.

Every inch of Scott’s body was broadcasting that Jim wasn’t going to get off easy.

So, Jim packed supplies and a couple of blankets in the back and was now steering the big white van up and over one of the many mountain passes that led to the Pacific Ocean.

Scott sat on the passenger side, mulling over whatever it was that had him still in a knot, only responding when the glowing doobie was passed to him. “Thanks.”

He passed it back, smoke escaping through his teeth as he said, “You gonna *tell* me where we’re goin’?”

“Nope.”

Jim could feel Scott studying him, but he kept his eyes on the twisting roads. Then he heard Scott make some dissatisfied noise and adjust his position on the seat with a little ‘hmpf’ of annoyance.

“Bossy Bessy,” Scott grumbled.

A few miles later, Jim slowed and turned off the main road, creeping under the trailing branches of an old eucalyptus, then trundling with much bumping and swaying down a steep, rutted dirt road to a small clearing.

He stopped the engine and opened his door.

“This is it?” said Scott, not moving. “Looks like a place folks dump trash.”

Jim was *really* not going to get off easy.

“It’s a short hike from here,” Jim said calmly. “Help me carry the supplies.”

He loaded them both up and then led the truculent, but silent, Scott down a root and rock defined path to a small sandy area that seemed almost scooped out of the surrounding cliffs by a gigantic sand shovel.

Scott dropped his pack and looked up and around. Dusk was settling quickly around them and in the tiny bowl they had entered, it was almost completely dark, the stars clean white dots almost filling the sky above them.

“We won’t have a fire,” said Jim, opening the tarp he’d been carrying. “Besides being against the law, it’d attract attention. But unless someone comes down that path, no one’ll see us.”

A wave chose that moment to heave itself against a strand of rocks some hundred yards out. Scott jumped a little as the deafening crash echoed off all the walls.

Jim grinned. “Not conducive to lengthy conversation, I guess. But we didn’t come here to talk.”

“No?” Scott eyed the things that Jim was busily laying out in the sand. “What’d we come here to do?”

The last had been said a little nervously. Jim strung the tarp from one stake to another and said. “Make love.” Drawling the vowels out like some kind of Elvis Presley impersonator.

“What?” sputtered Scott, his face going deep red. He turned away, hands flying out expressively. “Christ, you sound like some kinda Oprah special man...”

Jim just finished assembling the tent. He brought out the blankets. “Help me with these.”

Looking troubled and thoughtful, Scott did as he was asked. Very quickly, they had a snug tent erected. Thick warm blankets from one edge to the other, the canvas billowing around them, a small sterno stove casting a glow and the incoming tide now a deafening roar of wind and waves.

Scott sat in the far corner of the ten by ten space, watching Jim. He was wearing cut-offs and his arms, covered with curling golden hair, were wrapped around his legs.

“C’mere,” said Jim, but the waves crashing drowned out his words. He reached toward Scott instead, making a beckoning gesture.

Scott gave him the most distrustful look imaginable, but Jim just kept gazing at him, hand outstretched, and finally Scott came.

Jim wrapped his arms around Scott and pressed him down into the blankets. Jim physically engulfed Scott, holding his wrists to the blanket, albeit gently, and kissed his face, his chin, his throat.

Scott made some mewling sound of both protest and pleasure and Jim fastened his lips to Scott's mouth.

Scott's clothes disappeared rapidly, his body stroked and explored, kissed and sucked, the scratchy wool blanket, the cool ocean air around them, Jim's soft warm curling chest and beard hair, his mouth wet and tasting of pot and Jim's own taste; Scott was so overwhelmed he could think of nothing but the sensations that enveloped him.

Jim whispered at his ear now, his hand busy between Scott's legs. Scott couldn't even distinguish what Jim was saying, it was the nature of his voice. Needy, sexy, demanding. His breath warm and wet. His body urgent, heavy, and moving against Scott's.

Jim's cock was a weight on Scott's stomach. Cool moisture rubbed into Scott's belly. Jim finger stroked and circled and slowly penetrated his hole, rubbing something cool and slick there, pushing in and out, penetrating further and further until, muttering something mildly obscene against his lips, Jim kissed Scott deeply, tongue taking possession of Scott's mouth, and pressed his prostate persistently and firmly.

Scott's entire body thrust up against the warm weight that held him down, his mind full of ocean and need.

Jim slid his finger out and looked down into Scott's eyes. Then he lifted his body just enough for Scott to roll over. Scott's mouth inhaled the wooly smell of the blankets that also smelled vaguely of popcorn and charcoal and Jim, his body sweaty despite the cool air around them. He could feel Jim's mouth and hands on his back, his neck, at his crack and then the heaviness of Jim's thick cock pushing slowly and inexorably into him until he was arching, head straining back, Jim's kisses on his neck, his cheek. Scott turned his head back so he could find Jim's mouth, kissing him even as Jim's hips undulated and shoved again and again at that spot.

Waves crashed and, like he was exploding inside and out, Scott crashed, held in Jim's arms, safe under Jim's body, he lit up.

Then he lay there for a long time. After a while, Jim rose, drawing a soft cool down comforter over Scott's supine body, and rummaging in the picnic basket.

Scott looked up and saw a bottle of water and a chocolate cupcake inches from his nose. He grinned. "Chocolate."

In the lull of the waves' crashing, Jim said, "I brought fudge too."

He crawled in under the comforter with Scott and wrapped himself around Scott again. Kissed his nose. Scott reached for the cupcake and Jim fed it to him a bite at a time, taking kisses between bites. Their mouths were chocolatey and crumbs fell in Jim's beard.

A hissing sound accompanied the waves crashing and the surf's noise seemed to be abating somewhat.

"We above the tide line?" asked Scott.

Jim petted him, put another dollop of frosting on his finger and fed it to Scott who suckled it from Jim just like a puppy. "Mmmhmm. Tide'll start going out now. In the daytime, people can come around the point at waterline."

The hiss and dull whoosh of water was all they heard, the canvas of their tent still flapping sporadically. Scott felt his ears were still numb, though, his body almost floating, and they still whispered to each other. "You've been here a lot."

Jim petted him. "I have."

"Guess you've been with a lot of guys. No big deal. So've I." Scott snuggled closer to Jim, head tucked under the man's chin so he could use his beard as a kind of pillow.

Jim let his fingers play over Scott's golden crew cut, slide down to stroke the tip of an ear. "Not like this," he said definitely.

"No?"

"Have some water," said Jim. "If you dehydrate, you'll get cold." Jim cradled Scott's head a bit, so he could lift up to drink the water. If Scott had let himself think about it, he would have pushed the image from his mind. A grown man holding and feeding a bottle to another grown man. But he didn't think about it, he just enjoyed the feeling of being cared for and surrounded.

A soft kiss pressed against his lips. Warm brown eyes looking into his. He wrapped his fingers in Jim's hair and drew his face down so they could smooch some more.

"It's nice not talking," he said, when they parted. "I'm not good at it anyway."

Jim's eyebrows went up and he looked down at Scott.

"Not like Brian."

Jim let one finger play across Scott's chin. Traced his lower lip. Scott licked that lip, feeling the nervousness trying to sneak up his spine again. Jim's body, his presence, kept it just over there.

Truckers talked about their girlfriends to other truckers. They talked about their wives. Sometimes they just grunted and drank their beers and let the other man draw conclusions from the set of their shoulders and the squint in their eyes.

Because, you know, nothing lasts forever. And you're always on the road and really, what difference is it gonna make if you're the man who comes home to her or some other. It's the sort of thing that starts going through a man's head somewhere up on the I-9 at three a.m. when there's nothing but three hundred miles of black asphalt and the sound of your truck's wheels spinning over it to keep you from going crazy.

"Bet you know lots of smart guys," said Scott. "Me, all I know are rednecks."

"Plenty of smart rednecks," Jim pointed out. His voice a question mark.

"Not me," said Scott. "I'm nothin' special."

"*Ah ha*," thought Jim. He wrapped his arms around Scott, burrowed his nose behind Scott's ear and didn't answer. He could feel the man starting to twitch, though.

"I told Paul I wanted to take you away for a while. Just you and me," said Jim after a long while.

He *felt* Scott stiffen. "Yeah?"

"But he asked us to stay."

Scott took this in. Turned it over in that odd little head of his. Over and over. Jim could almost see the wheels starting to turn.

"We all need each other," said Jim. "Brian and Paul and I. We need *you*."

Scott frowned and ran his fingers through Jim's beard. There was no quick cure for this. Jim could see that. So he held Scott close, laid kisses on his head, and said, "Sleep, baby. We'll go back at sunrise."

Scott sighed and let Jim gather him up against him, winding his fingers and toes and even snuggling his head in so Jim couldn't have released him if he wanted to.

The slow thud and drag of the receding tide, Jim's humming little lullaby and the shaking of the canvas around them was all there was and Scott fell asleep.

“Where is Scott going?”

Paul thought it interesting that Brian had said “Scott” and not “Scott and Jim.”

“Jim thought it would be nice for them to have some alone time.”

“But he just got home. I haven’t even gotten to *talk* to him.”

Paul was unpacking and Brian sat at the desk, printing out a paper he’d written for class tomorrow. Paul paused, hand halfway to a hangar, and said, “You’ve been talking to him all afternoon, Brian. Teasing and arguing and talking.”

Brian poked at a tiny imperceptible flaw on the wood of his desk.

Paul sighed and set his suitcase aside. Unpacking could wait. He went over to the bed and sat down, stretching out his arms. Brian stepped across the room and slid into his lap without question, wrapping his arms around Paul’s neck and lying his head on the man’s broad shoulder with an unhappy sigh.

“Scott’s got a lot on his mind,” said Paul.

“He always talks to *me*,” said Brian. “Sometimes you guys are...” He shrugged his shoulders, expressing the eternal impenetrable denseness of Tops around the world and through the centuries. “But he talks to *me*.”

“I’m sure he’ll talk to you about it when he’s ready,” said Paul. “Haven’t you ever found it hard to talk about things, Brian? Even to Scott?”

This struck a little close to home and Brian was silent, head lying on Paul’s shoulder. When he felt his Daddy stir, fingers gently dragging the tie from his hair, Brian whispered against his neck. “Time for bed?”

“Mmm,” said Paul, mouth traveling to Brian’s temple, to his cheek, to his mouth.

They fell back on the bed and Brian let Paul unwrap the tie of his robe as if Brian were a gift. Lying the sides open, Paul gazed down at his body with hungry eyes. Brian felt like a box of chocolates and he smiled, opening his arms and legs.

It was slow and easy; they rocked together, taking their time. Brian let his hands travel over Paul’s back, never tired of the feel of those muscles moving, his Daddy’s tight backside tensing and quivering as his need mounted and he hardened against Brian.

“Lie still.” It was a gentle command, but Brian did his best to not move at all. Paul kissed each collarbone, moving to the gold rings in Brian’s nipples and spending time on each, licking and giving short quick bites that made Brian gasp and struggle to remain still. Paul moved down quickly and swallowed Brian’s cock in one go, then drew off in a long, wet, sucking motion, then bobbed down again.

Brian couldn’t help the restless movement of his feet against the sheets and Paul’s hands clasped his legs and his voice rumbled. “I said. Be. Still.”

A shiver ran up Brian’s spine and Paul was above him again, his weight on his elbows on either side of Brian. Their cocks aligned and Paul rocked, eyelids half-closed, bright blue watching Brian.

“Daddy...” whimpered Brian and Paul sat back on his heels, hands traveling over Brian’s legs and buttocks, finally coating him with something cool.

Brian was unable to be still now. Twisting against the sheets, hips arching, until Paul’s blunt presence pressed against him and then in.

Full and ready to burst, his legs wrapped up around Paul’s shoulders, entire body under the control of the powerful man who now pumped rhythmically against him. Brian breathed hard, skin slick and hot and that mouth descended on his even as he strained against Paul, groaning. Warmth flooded Brian.

Still gasping, Brian felt Paul withdraw and descend again to pull Brian into his mouth, sucking hard, tongue wrapping around him like one of Paul’s snakes until, panting and thrashing and crying out, Brian came into Paul’s mouth.

Under covers then, he was safe in Paul’s arms. Paul was almost asleep, Brian could tell from the deep rumble of his breathing, when Brian whispered, “I still want to do it.”

Paul’s lips on his head. A reassuring squeeze. “I know.”

“Love you, Daddy,” Brian whispered.

And Paul hugged him close, cheek against his head. “I know.”

Chapter Eight

“He wants to do *what*?”

“Brian has indicated an interest in it and...”

“*Brian* has. You mean, Paul has said he wants to do it and Brian is afraid to say no.” Scott stomped from one side of the room to the other, banging his feet with every step. Since he rolled when he walked and as he was wearing nothing but a white T-shirt, the image he presented was very much like a well-endowed troll with pretty eyes; Jim was having trouble being properly attentive.

Of course, Scott noticed this. “What are you looking at?”

“You.” Jim raised his shoulders in a helpless shrug. “Can’t help it, baby. You’re the prettiest thing I’ve seen in a long time.”

“I’m not pretty,” growled Scott, though certain parts of him pinked a little as if he were pleased. His cheeks. And his belly. Jim noticed the rosy flush spreading, getting distracted again.

Scott crawled up on the foot of the bed, on all fours, stalking Jim, still growling, those blond eyebrows lowered and fierce over eyes just like a tiger’s. “I’m not pretty. I’m dangerous.”

“That’s the truth,” said Jim as the golden-haired body of his boyfriend straddled him and Scott bent his head down to nuzzle and lick Jim’s cock.

Looking up at Jim through golden eyelashes, Scott stuck out his tongue and licked a long slow slurp around and around and around.

Jim moaned.

And Scott just stopped. “We aren’t done discussing this,” he said, smile feral.

“Sure we are,” said Jim. “Whatever you said. I agree. You’re right. About everything. Please, Scott, baby...”

Scott chuckled. He bent his head again and licked around and around and around.

Jim moaned and opened his legs.

“I wanna ride the pony,” whispered Scott.

Jim just swallowed and nodded, helping Scott get astride him and slowly lower himself onto Jim’s cock.

Oh heck, they could discuss this later.

Paul heard Scott’s groans coming from the other end of the house and smiled. It wasn’t Paul’s thing, but Jim’s anatomical particulars usually elicited just those sort of groans from both Scott and Brian.

Paul was about as secure as they came, but he couldn’t help but think about this, and Brian’s request, and wonder...

“Ridiculous,” he said. He tapped the search keywords in and hunted carefully. Brian was at school, giving Paul the time and space to research the very subject in question. Jim had offered to advise, of course, but Paul could admit he always liked to find things out for himself.

He opened a promising looking window and winced immediately at the images there.

And then there was how the entire question made he, Paul, feel. It was a curious and interesting sensation, thinking of doing this with Brian, *to* Brian. It was more stimulating than Paul would have imagined it could be.

He could admit that his attraction to the idea concerned him a little.

So he kept reading, trying to block out what was disturbing or cruel or just plain disgusting. Trying to find useful information that would protect them both. Man, he thought. A year ago, before he’d met Brian, he’d thought he definitely had it all under wraps. Himself. His life.

Amazing what one little wide-eyed brat could do to a man’s world.

The clock on the computer monitor clicked and Paul shook his head at the time. Brian would be home soon. He methodically cleared the cache and any bookmarks and shut down the computer.

From the other end of the house, he heard another long, drawn out groan.

Brian pulled a folder out of his backpack and the envelope came out with it, flipping off the zipper and plopping onto the ground at his feet.

Brian picked it up and turned it over in his hands. It wasn't like him to procrastinate, but the envelope had been in the bottom of his backpack long enough that the edges had grown thin and grubby and the return address sticker was half scraped off.

It contained a letter and a form and a return envelope.

Paul would do more than raise an eyebrow if he found out Brian had been sitting on this for so long.

Nevertheless, Brian stuffed the letter back into the bag, taking care that it wound up back at the bottom. As if hiding it would somehow make the contents disappear.

The whole situation was just too complicated.

"Just can't deal with you yet," he told the letter. Then he slung the backpack over his back, just in time to hop up and catch his bus home.

Jim was whistling something that sounded remarkably like 'Small World' when Paul sidled into the kitchen and said, "Hey."

Jim looked up from chopping a pepper and raised an eyebrow. "Hey yourself."

Paul perched his ass against the counter, crossing those big inked arms across his chest, chains on his leather boots clinking when he crossed his legs and kicked, meditatively, at the linoleum tile.

Jim rinsed his knife and reached for another pepper.

"How's Scott?" said Paul.

Jim thought briefly of his lover who currently lay spread eagle across the waterbed, ankles and wrists restrained, a towel covering his tush and a serene smile on his sleeping face.

"Resting," said Jim.

Paul looked around the kitchen, seemed overly interested in the dangling chain of the ceiling fan and then said, "You talk to him?"

"A little," said Jim. "You ready to talk to him?"

"No," said Paul immediately.

“Hmm.” Jim scraped the chopped peppers into a bowl. “Have we reached an impasse?”

Paul tsked. “I did a little online research.”

“Oh, Christ, Paul, what did you expect to find there?”

“I don’t know.” He toed the linoleum. He sighed.

Jim wiped his hands and turned around. “Okay.” He held out a fist and drew one finger at a time up, enumerating his points. “One. Take it slow. And I mean s.l.o.w. You might not even do it the first time. Two. You set the pace. I don’t care what Brian tells you, you understand? A man in that position doesn’t always know what he wants.”

“Christ,” said Paul, fervently. His jaw clenched.

“Three,” Jim persisted. “Give yourself the space to deal, afterwards. Brian will be...” Jim sighed. “Just fucking be there for him.”

Paul’s head was down, but he was listening. After a few minutes of silence he said. “Okay.”

Jim reached under the cupboards and brought out a soup pan.

“You’ve done this before, though,” said Paul.

“Not with someone I *cared* about,” said Jim. There was something about the way he said it, something damning. Paul’s eyes narrowed as he studied Jim.

“Thanks,” he said. And strode out of the kitchen, the chains on his boots ringing out with each step.

“Don’t mention it,” said Jim, shaking his head and pouring tomato sauce into the pan.

“I’m home!” called Brian brightly. He hung up his jacket and carried his backpack into his room to put it where it belonged under his desk.

There was a pink rose on the desk. Puzzled, he picked it up and found the note under it.

He read the note and a crimson flush rose up his neck and into his cheeks. Carefully, he folded the note. Put it in his pocket. Then he went off to shower and get ready for dinner.

Paul came in from the garage where he'd been tinkering with his bike, wiping the last of the grease from his hands.

He stopped and looked at the set dinner table. There was a vase with a single pink rose sticking out of it. "Who put that there?"

"Brian," said Jim. He opened the refrigerator. "We're eating in ten."

"Okay." With one last look at the rose, Paul turned to the sink and began washing his hands.

What the hell was wrong with Scott?

"Ask, don't reach," snapped Jim, for about the tenth time.

Scott rolled his eyes. "Pass the butter, Bri?"

When Jim had woken him, Scott had been a sleepy happy golden bundle of satisfied man. That had lasted until he'd sat down at the table with Brian.

Now he jittered in place. "Accidentally" kicking people under the table, "accidentally" flipping bits of pepper off his plate, "forgetting" his manners and looking more and more pleased with himself as he did so.

Brian's cheeks were pink and he seemed distracted, eating quietly and only lifting his eyes now and then to smile shyly at Paul, who seemed equally struck dumb.

What the hell was happening in his house, thought Jim.

"Wanna kick a ball around after dinner?" said Scott to Brian now. Well, thought Jim, at least he'd burn off some of that nervous energy.

"No thanks," said Brian, with that enigmatic shy smile again. "I think I'll go to bed early tonight."

"You have class tomorrow morning?" asked Scott.

"No. No class."

Scott's leg, swinging back and forth, connected with Jim's shin rather hard. "Oops, sorry," said Scott.

"Scott, just set your feet down on the floor."

Now the bright, nervous energy seemed to implode and Scott scowled. Jim sighed. "You've finished anyway. Why don't you excuse yourself?"

Scott jumped up from the table, almost tipping his chair over and thwacked Brian in a lighthearted way on the shoulder. "Lazy."

The thwack, was, in Jim's opinion, a little harder than it should have been.

And Brian seemed almost feverish, with that high color in his cheeks, his quietness.

"Maybe it's a good idea that you go to bed early," said Jim.

"Yes," said Paul. "Yes, Brian. Let's call it an early night."

Jim's eyes narrowed. Oh ho. He rose from the table with a sigh. "Well, go on then, I'll get Scott to help me clean up."

Paul locked the bedroom door as he entered. Brian was still in the shower; he could hear the water dripping and some other tell-tale sounds. When Brian came out, his hair was wet and lay over his shoulders, the curls twisting at the ends. He had a towel knotted at one hip, and the rings in his nipples glowed.

"Did you mean it?" he asked, breathless.

Oh God, did he mean it? Paul realized he had this one last chance to back out, but just as that thought occurred to him he looked at Brian standing there and realized that he, Paul, wanted this, too. Perhaps more than Brian and for reasons he understood even less well.

"Anything you need, hon," he said. "You know that."

Brian nodded eagerly.

"But we do this my way," said Paul. "Slowly and carefully, you understand?"

"Yes," said Brian.

"Yes, what?" Paul made his voice cool and authoritarian.

It was exactly the right tone. Brian's skin went bright pink. "Yes, sir."

Brian dropped his towel. He was already partially erect and waxed and Paul knew he had cleaned himself. He crawled up on the bed, but Paul said, "Wait. We need to use some other sheets."

“Okay.” Brian stood and watched as Paul stripped the dark satin comforter from the bed and laid two layers of fresh new cotton sheets down instead.

“Lie down, Brian.”

Brian lay down on the bed. His skin was white and spotless and flushed with excitement. Paul took off his boots and shed his jeans. He was pushing off his boxers when Brian said, “Can you... wear the leather pants?”

Paul managed to keep his mouth from dropping open. He had leather leggings that tied up the sides. They were almost costume-like and he hadn’t even known that Brian knew he had them.

Brian was flushed and breathing faster. “I’d like it.”

Paul grinned. “Okay, hon.”

Brian lay back, watching as Paul slid on the leather pants, laced them, then coated his hands and arm in oil. Brian opened his legs and looked up at the ceiling as Paul prepared him, breathing a little more deeply when Paul inserted a third finger into his channel, rubbing and massaging slowly and carefully. Brian’s cock was fully erect and straining against his belly. Paul leaned over, the leather creaking, and kissed it. Brian murmured and moved his hips fitfully.

“No, Brian. You are not to move at all.” Paul carefully laid his arm across Brian’s pelvis so that he couldn’t move.

“Maybe I need the harness,” whispered, Brian.

Who was driving this train anyway, thought Paul. “I’ll tell you what you need.”

Brian turned wide, dilated eyes toward him. “Yes, sir.”

“You’ll lie still because I told you to, understand?”

Brian’s ribs rose and fell rapidly with his breathing, but the movements of his hips and legs ceased. “Yes, sir.”

Paul poured more oil on his hand. Brian was so oily that a deep stain was gathering around where his butt rested on the sheets. Sliding slowly in and out, Paul inserted the tip of his forefinger. “Lie still,” he commanded, and slid in four fingers.

Brian went completely, utterly still. The nipples rings flashed as he panted. “Oh.”

“God, baby.” Paul slid his fingers in very slowly, feeling Brian’s flesh gripping him, but giving way very, very gradually. In and out, in and out. Brian moaned, head tossing to

one side and Paul stopped. Brian's channel clenched and relaxed a little. A rhythmic thing, like spasms.

"Paul," he breathed.

"Yeah, hon."

"I want more."

Christ. Paul had to close his eyes for a second and get hold of himself. "Anything you want, baby." He began the slow rub and slide in and out, in and out. Each time, he got a little closer to his thumb. Reaching over at one point, he just dumped oil over the whole area until his hand resembled a piston on a high octane machine.

They were breathing in unison, he realized. The thud of Brian's blood was something he could feel around his knuckles. The grasp of Brian's body, the timing of his breathing, all mirrored by Paul's body.

He reached the point where the tip of his thumb was at Brian's hole and he slid it in, just the tip.

Brian wailed.

Paul stopped again, heart thudding.

But Brian's one hand somehow found his shoulder and squeezed and somehow Paul knew that was a signal, and he pushed just a little more. Hairs and micrometers and tiny little bits, and time stopped. He and Brian breathed in unison and Paul's thumb was swallowed. It disappeared; his entire hand was inside Brian, who closed around his wrist like the sleeve of a sweater.

Paul couldn't breathe. He felt like weeping, but didn't dare move. Brian's cock was leaking steadily, a tiny stream dribbling down his hip and Paul leaned over, all on instinct, his hand inside of Brian, and suckled very gently at the leaking cockhead.

Brian didn't move at all. Still and silent, his entire body seemed to shudder and the channel around Paul's hand clenched, rhythmic pulses moving from his fingertips to his hand. The cock in his mouth swelled and, for reasons he would never understand, Paul knew it was time and he spread his fingers, just a little, and turned his hand.

An eerie wailing cry from Brian, and great spurts of come filled Paul's mouth; Brian's body vibrated around him, under him. And then, holding the softening cock as gently in his mouth as a retriever would hold a pheasant, letting his hand relax, he felt the aftershocks shudder through Brian's body one after another, like waves pounding on a beach.

Paul didn't know how long it took for him to slowly inch his hand from inside of Brian, how long to strip his leather pants off. They were completely soaked inside with come he didn't even remember producing. He didn't know how long it took to gently, so very gently, gather his lover up against him and cradle him like a broken child, crooning mindless words.

Brian's eyelashes fluttered open, revealing eyes almost neon blue. "Now I'm yours," he whispered simply.

Paul wanted to weep. "Yes."

It was after four a.m. Jim sat in the kitchen, drinking shots of tequila. When Paul came into the kitchen, he poured a shot into a waiting glass and held it out to the man.

Paul stared at the alcohol. "No thanks."

Jim gave him a look. Shrugged. And tossed the drink down himself.

Paul went to the sink, poured himself a glass of water. Drank it. "I didn't know," he said.

"Nope." Jim poured another glass of tequila.

"This changes everything," said Paul.

Jim nodded. "Glad to hear you say that."

Looking dazed, the giant inked man wandered back toward his bedroom. "Goodnight."

Jim watched him go. "Night."

Chapter Nine

“If you were a woman, I’d guess you were pregnant,” said Scott.

They were sitting on the front porch, resting from their soccer game. Brian lay on the hanging swing above Scott, pushing it back and forth with one foot and he laughed.

“What are you talking about?”

It’d been a week since the Super Bowl and Scott was feeling just a tad more settled. Jim had kept him pretty much restrained most of the time and Scott had spent more time staring at corners than a grown man, in his opinion, ought to have. But he felt mellow. Or as close to mellow as he had in a long time.

“When a girl starts getting that secretive look on her face, she’s generally got a bun in the oven,” said Scott, lazily tossing the soccer ball up and catching it with the same hand.

“I’ve seen it a lot.”

“You’ve known a lot of pregnant women?”

“I’ve known my share. A woman is sexy when she’s expecting,” said Scott. He mulled over how to explain it. “She’s full of wonder.”

Brian smiled to himself.

“See?” Scott sat up and pointed at him. “That! What *is* that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” lied Brian. “I’m just in a good mood.”

Scott went from curious to pissed off, just like that. “Oh. Right.” And he hopped up and tossed the soccer ball down into Brian’s lap. Just a little hard.

“Ow! Scott?”

But Scott reentered the house, slamming the door.

“What the heck is wrong with you?”

Jim had gone to the store and Paul was out talking to a local Honda dealership. He’d decided to try to start his own in So Cal. It was a few years before they had planned, but as soon as he did they wouldn’t have to be separated.

“Heck?” sneered Scott. “There are no Tops for *miles*, Goldilocks. You still scared to swear?”

Brian scowled. “Why are you being such a jerk?”

“Me? Why am I?” said Scott.

Brian shoved him. “Yeah.”

Scott shoved Brian back. “Hey. Jerk.”

Brian shoved him a little harder. “Stop that!”

Shove. “YOU!”

Shove. “NO. YOU.”

Another shove and this time Scott left his hand on Brian’s chest and pushed him right into the wall. “You think you’re all that? You think you can just...”

“What?” said Brian, wrestling to get away from Scott, and failing. Arms wrapped around each other, each trying to gain some kind of leverage, they fell against the wall and on to the floor. Brian’s elbow contacted Scott’s chin and a spark lit a fuse that had just been waiting in Scott’s brain.

He sat up and punched Brian right in the eye. Brian howled and swung out at him.

“What was that?” said Jim. He’d picked Paul up from the dealership on the way home from the store and they were out unloading the van when they heard what sounded like a crash in the house.

Jim set the grocery bags down and Paul ran up, opening the door just as a knot of frenzied fists and knees and angry faces careened against the wall just next to it.

“Hey!” he yelled.

The man-meld worked a few feet inward and fell onto one of the leather chairs. The whole mass of bodies and furniture fell over. Jim appeared in the doorway.

“What’s going on!” he yelled. “Scott?”

Paul waded into the mess and, like separating fighting dogs, came up with two bloody men, each held by the scruff of a torn shirt and each still trying to reach the other with fists and feet.

Jim grabbed Scott and pried him loose, swinging him around easily and tossing him on the sofa. When it looked like Scott might bounce right back up, Jim merely pointed one thick finger at him. “*Stay.*”

Scott stayed. He raised a hand to his eye, which was purple.

“Brian?” Paul was on his knees, next to Brian who was propped up on his elbows, his nose, mouth and the whole front of his shirt drenched in blood. One eye was swelling shut. Paul’s hands wandered rapidly all over him, checking for breaks, open wounds, cuts. He found, much to his relief, only the bloody nose and eye; he stood and, looking from man to man, pronounced loudly in the voice of Zeus. “WOULD SOMEBODY LIKE TO TELL ME WHAT IS GOING ON HERE?”

“Ask him!” said both Brian and Scott, pointing at each other.

“He’s got a bee up his butt,” whined Scott.

“He’s been a jerk all day,” complained Brian.

“Ever since *you* came back,” said Scott to Paul.

Brian sat upright, his one eye wide with outrage. “This is not *Paul’s* fault! You... You’ve gone *mental* or something.”

Jim was looking at Paul. His arms were crossed, one hand stroking the end of his beard. Paul met that gaze.

“Go to your room,” he said to Brian, quietly. “Clean your face and wait for me.”

“Somebody’s in trouble,” sneered Scott.

Paul’s head swiveled. “Scott...” he said.

“Scott, go to your room, too,” said Jim. His voice was cool, and his gaze was leveled on Paul. There was something in that look.

Scott huffed, but he got up and did as he was told.

Paul and Jim watched their men trudge off. Then Jim turned his glare back on Paul. “This is your fault,” he said.

“Jim...”

“No, you listen to me. You are not the only man in this relationship. You may be the bossiest, most willful man here, but we *all* care about Brian. We *all* need to know what’s happening to him.”

Paul was silent. Cowed.

Jim hmphed and muttered and then he said. “And we all care about you too, Paul. You think *Scott* doesn’t see something troubling you? You think *I* don’t?”

Paul raised both hands and rubbed his temples with his palms as if his head would burst. “Jim...”

Jim came across the room then, and wrapped those big arms around him. Paul just laid his head down on that big, sofa-like shoulder and let Jim hug him.

After awhile, Jim gave Paul a few good pats on the back and released him. “I have a certain man quivering in my room waiting for his punishment. I think it’s cruel to make him think about it for too long.”

Paul nodded.

“But, tomorrow morning breakfast meeting. Agreed?”

“Yes, Jim.”

Jim patted Paul on the cheek. “Good boy.”

The sass in Paul’s eyes would have gotten him a swat if he’d been another man.

Brian wasted a few minutes trying to see his eye in the bathroom mirror, but he knew things would be worse if he wasn’t ready when Paul came in. So he stripped off his bloody clothes, slid on some boxers, cleaned up his face as best he could and knelt on the pillow, head down, waiting.

Paul came in quietly and the door clicked shut. He didn’t speak. Brian stayed where he was, head down, while Paul went into the bathroom, opened and closed medicine cabinet doors, ran water and came out again. He sat on the bed, putting things there that Brian couldn’t see without raising his head, which he dare not do.

He heard the thump of Paul removing his boots and the groan and creak of the closet doors being pushed wide open. Then came much rummaging at the back of the closet where Paul kept *those* things and Brian’s heart started beating hard.

“Come here.” Paul’s voice was flat. Brian came to him and Paul indicated with a gesture that Brian should kneel on the floor at his feet. Paul’s fingers grasped Brian’s chin and raised it. Paul studied Brian’s eye, expression cool and dispassionate. Then he brought out some salve and tape and rubbed arnica gel into his bruised chin. Then Paul released Brian’s chin and stood.

Not knowing what to do, Brian stayed where he knelt.

Paul came back in and sat on the bed and he said. “Get the paddle, Brian.”

“G-g-get it, sir?”

“Yes. I want you to bring it to me.”

This wasn’t a request Paul had ever had made of Brian before, but he went to the closet, confused, pushed back Paul’s and his wardrobe to reveal the wall behind with the row of harnesses and straps and various sex toys.

“Which one, sir?” he asked.

There was a moment of silence. Then in a cool voice, Paul said, “Which one do you think?”

Brian’s hand was shaking as he took out the paddle made of clear plastic. Paul had never used it on him, but Brian knew instinctively that this one would hurt the most.

Already choking back his fear, mouth dry, Brian brought the paddle to Paul and put it in his hands.

Paul just sat there. Breathing hard now, almost unable to do so, Brian knelt down and draped himself over Paul’s lap.

There was the briefest comforting stroke on his back. The small compassionate gesture touching Brian so deeply it almost made him want to cry, and then a swift sound and the first swat.

Oh my God, that *hurt*!

An involuntary cry issued from Brian’s mouth and he jumped. Paul’s arm came down across his back, holding him in place. Another swat. A pause. Another. The pauses between were almost as bad as the actual blows. The sting and fire seemed to go on and on after the first contact.

“No!” blurted Brian after the last one. But Paul kept going. The same rhythm. Slow sharp.

“Please...” Brian scrambled at the floor, his legs jerking. Paul swatted him again. And again.

The burn was so intense that it felt like Paul had poured gasoline over Brian’s butt and lit a match. He was sobbing now, unable to hold on or get away. If it weren’t for Paul’s arm lying over his back he would have fallen off Paul’s lap.

The paddle came down again. And again.

A thousand years later and it stopped. Brian kept sobbing. The pain was still rippling across his backside. Paul held him like that for a long time. Finally, Brian was too tired to cry anymore and Paul helped him to slowly stand. His butt hurt so badly that even walking hurt and Paul seemed to expect that, helping Brian to hobble to the bed and lie on his stomach.

Then Paul sat next to him and laid his hand, warm and gentle, on the back of Brian’s neck.

Brian’s brain felt empty. His eyes were empty and tearless. His muscles were loose and empty. He closed his eyes and he was empty and he floated away.

Scott didn’t even resist Jim. Jim came in, pointed at the cross and Scott just rolled to his feet with a fatalistic expression and stood quietly while his ankles and wrists were bound.

“Do you need a gag?” asked Jim.

Scott shook his head. He didn’t feel like talking anyway.

“You understand what has to happen?” asked Jim.

Scott nodded.

A drawer opened, there was rummaging. It closed.

“You understand why?”

Scott was trying as hard as he could not to twist around and see what Jim was holding in his hand. His naked butt was twitching with anticipation and he had trouble bringing in breath to reply.

“I really lost control I... I *hurt* Brian.” His voice was shaking and he had to draw in a deep breath to say, “I don’t know why I did it.”

The softest touch of something slender and hard against his legs. Scott strained, looking down and saw the end of a wooden paddle resting on his leg. His heart started pounding hard and fast and he lost control of his breathing.

"I'm sorry, Jim," said Scott, his voice shaking.

"I know you are. We will *all* talk about this tomorrow, Scott. You aren't alone in this."

Scott couldn't trust his voice. He nodded his head.

"Seventeen, Scott. Do you understand?" And the paddle swished through the air.

Scott grunted and jerked with each swat. Jim didn't spank him often and he had never done so before with anything but his open hand. The paddle was a level of punishment beyond anything he'd experienced and yet, somehow, anything less would have almost disappointed him.

By the fifth swat, Scott was crying out. The shock of each blow so intense he'd already lost count of how many he'd received.

"Ten," said Jim, as if he knew.

Scott, nodded, gasping for breath; his legs jerked against the restraints by the twelfth. And when Jim said, calmly, "Thirteen" and swatted, Scott sobbed out loud. Really sobbed, tears welled from his eyes and stung as they trickled over his cut face. Scott rarely cried and he never cried openly; it was a bizarre feeling.

"Fourteen," said Jim. And another great hiccupping sob rose up from deep in Scott's chest.

"Fifteen." It was endless. They'd never reach seventeen. The paddle swished through the air again and Scott sobbed.

There was an infinitesimal pause and then, "Sixteen." Scott didn't know if he imagined it or if this one was harder. A wailing cry escaped from his mouth and his whole body was shaking now, sweat pouring from his armpits.

"Seventeen," said Jim, his voice hoarse. And Scott pressed his forehead to the leather bound wood, his whole body shaking.

"Ten minutes." Jim's voice sounded strained. "And I'll release you." And then he was gone.

It took a few minutes for Scott to get hold of himself, but when he felt that peace that came from being forced to stillness, it was heightened by a kind of intense relief, waves

of it rolling over him like cold water. He almost hung from his bound wrists, body going limp with it.

When Jim came back in the room to unbind him, Scott turned into his waiting arms and whispered, "Thank you."

Jim held him. Scott looked up at him and touched his face in wonder. Jim's cheeks were wet.

"I love you," said Jim.

Scott rested his head against that soft warm chest and nodded. Yes.

Jim laid him down carefully, kissed him everywhere. Jim even kissed his fingertips and toes. Then he lay down, looking into Scott's face until Scott's eyes closed and he lost consciousness.

Chapter Ten

The smell of bacon frying is almost a religious experience to some people. Jim lifted strips with a fork with one hand while shoving eggs in another pan with the other.

Brian buttered toast. His eye was completely swollen this morning and throbbed. He'd had the raw meat application and now his eye was covered by a big, lumpy gauze pad. He looked like a lopsided monster and Scott felt rotten every time he looked at him.

Scott's own eye was purply red, but Brian was a lousy fighter and he really hadn't done much damage. Scott's stinging butt made him feel better and he couldn't help but notice that Brian was walking with extreme care.

"Lemme get you a softer pillow," Scott said, when Brian came in the kitchen, and the one good eye squinted over at him gratefully.

"Thanks." Brian's nose had white tape over the bridge, but at least it wasn't broken.

Scott held out his hand in peace, but Brian just wrapped his arms around Scott's neck pulled him over and kissed him. Brian smelled like medicine and it was gross but it was the nicest kiss Scott had gotten in a long time.

"I love you, Scott," said Brian. "I'm sorry."

God. How could anyone not love the little monkey?

Paul was quiet and not nearly as Toppy as usual during breakfast, Scott noted. Good.

There was French toast with powdered sugar and fresh blueberries and grapefruit and sausage and bacon; Scott's tummy was stretched so tight he'd thought he'd burst when he finally put his fork down and said, "I'm done."

"Thank Goodness," said Brian. "I thought you'd never stop eating."

Everyone else had finished a while ago and were drinking their coffee.

"I was hungry," Scott said.

Jim stood and gathered up the dishes. "Good. You haven't been eating enough lately." Jim swept the crumbs off the table, put a fresh pot of coffee down with cream and sugar, pulled up his chair, set it down so he could straddle it and said "So."

Paul seemed suddenly very interested in whatever he'd gotten beneath his nails. Jim bent a hard gaze on him, though, and eventually Paul looked up.

"I guess I should start," Paul said. "Well, first of all, working away from home half the year just isn't working for a lot of reasons. And it's not just Brian. It's me. I feel guilty and I feel pressured and I know that Brian picks that up and doesn't like to bother me when he has things that he needs to talk over."

"I should do it anyway," said Brian.

"Yes. But it's understandable that you don't."

"But Brian has Jim to take care of him," said Scott.

Jim looked at him. "He has you, too."

Scott waved that off. "Me? Heh."

"Yes. I should have told you," said Brian. "Some of the things I didn't tell Paul. I was embarrassed."

Scott stared. "Embarrassed? Goldilocks, you have seen me buck naked with a two foot long cherry red dildo up my ass. What are you talking about embarrassed?"

Brian's cheeks had gone pink at the mention of the cherry red dildo. "I know."

"And I take the responsibility for Brian upon myself too much," said Jim. "It's egoism, really. Brian is a capable young man and doesn't need such close supervision."

Damn right, thought Brian. But he knew better than to say it.

"Damn right," said Scott and he winked at Brian with his one good eye.

"So we've all been worried about letting each other down and not trusting each other enough to talk about it," said Jim. And now he *was* looking directly at Scott.

"Hey," said Scott. "How'd this get to me all of a sudden?"

"It's not, Scott," said Paul. "It's all of us. We have to trust each other. We *all* have to trust each other."

Scott swallowed. He tried not to look at Paul.

"I don't blame some people for not trusting me, though," said Paul. "Since Brian and I have been trying to hide things."

Scott looked at Brian, who was going shades of maroon and staring at his knees.

“You really *are* pregnant?” asked Scott.

Brian cracked a crooked grin. “No.”

“Phew,” said Scott. “I mean, you *told* me you were on the *pill*, man.”

Brian gave Scott a discerning look. “You’re embarrassed, too.”

“Yeah. Well.” Scott drummed his thumb once on the table top. “Jim mentioned something. Is that what this is about?”

“Some.”

“I can’t believe you’d let him do that to you, Brian,” said Scott. Bluntly.

“I would. I already did.”

Scott just sat there. “Fuck.” He said.

Brian’s eyes went teary, and Paul immediately flushed red and jumped up to go to him. “Scott, that was...”

“Scott has a right to say what he feels,” said Jim, just as growly and protective of his cub as Paul was of Brian.

“Not if it’s intolerant. Or--”

“You have no right to shut someone up just because you don’t like what they--”

“Who are you telling me what my rights are, anyway, Jim? You have way too much interest in what goes on--”

“Oh, right, because my feelings for Brian and Scott are not important? I don’t--”

“Not our *sex* life! That is--”

“Yes, I *do*. I, Paul--”

“STOP IT!” Brian jumped up and screeched in his best bratty voice. Glass rattled. He stomped his foot. “Both of you stop fighting this minute!” He stood there, bright red and breathing hard. Then he gestured at Scott. “You and me need to talk. C’mon.”

He grabbed Scott by the arm and pulled him toward Scott’s seldom used bedroom, as they disappeared round the corner he pointed back at Paul and Jim. “One more word and

somebody will be facing a corner with soap in his mouth!” And he stomped his foot once more.

Scott was laughing when Brian dragged him into the bedroom and shut the door. “Hiss and spit, baby. You really told them.”

“Stop it, Scott. We’ve got Jim and Paul fighting with each other! It’s awful.”

“Oh, come on, Brian. Who’s got black eyes? And who can hardly sit down this morning? You and me are the ones getting the worst of it here.”

As if reminded, Brian gingerly rubbed his backside. “Scott, you think there’s something wrong with me, don’t you?”

“What? No, Brian, you’re fine. That snarly top of yours has a few screws loose maybe.”

“Paul never does anything I don’t want him to, Scott. You know that, right?”

Scott sat, gingerly, down on the bed, his usually cheery face dead serious. “I think he makes you *think* you want it, maybe.”

“Scott.” Brian found himself searching the room, as if the words would pop out there somewhere. “Look, you are the only friend I have. I mean, can you imagine me inviting some of the guys from chem lab over here or something?”

Scott had never been in chem lab, or known guys who had, so he couldn’t imagine it at all. “No,” he said. “I only know bunch of white trash, so, no, I can’t.”

“What?” Brian just shook his head as if to clear it. “What?”

“Wonder what your college friends would think of you living with a redneck?”

Brian’s brow wrinkled in utter perplexity. “That’s not what I’m talking about.” But Scott had that surly look he got on his face only on rare occasions, still and closed-in looking. He’d looked like that the first time he’d told Brian he was bisexual.

“Scott. If I told anybody I know that I lived in a discipline relationship with three other men, what do you think they’d say?”

Scott knew what he had said when he’d found himself falling into this situation. He still said it to himself sometimes. “You need psychological help?”

“Exactly. You did, once, even.”

“Yep.”

“Nobody understands. Nobody but us. And... and if *you* don’t understand, Scott, well, maybe there *is* something wrong with me.”

Brian’s good eye was getting blurry and squinty again and Scott couldn’t imagine how uncomfortable the OTHER eye was feeling at this point. “Okay, don’t get your undies in a bunch,” Scott said. “I’m listening. Make me understand.”

Brian sighed. “I saw this bondage magazine at the news store a few months ago.”

“Yeah? One of those S&M rags?”

Brian blinked. “Is that what you call them?”

Scott tilted his head to one side and looked at Brian. Then he frowned and tilted it the other way, like he was trying to get Brian in focus. “You think you’re a freak.”

Brian rubbed at his one good eye, leaving grubby tear streaks on his cheeks. He sniffled.

“Oh fer...” Scott looked to heaven and grabbed Brian in a rough hug, rubbing his head. “You knucklehead.”

“Am I a masochist?”

“Fuck that, Brian. It’s just words. Like faggot and queer and fairy. You let them, they’ll get to you.”

Brian wrapped his arms around Scott and Scott sighed and pulled him down so they sat side by side on the bed.

“I thought, ‘is that what kind of man I am?’”

Scott just held him, chin on top of Brian’s head. He remembered wondering what kind of man he was. He hadn’t always liked the answers he’d found.

“And then I saw... that. And I wanted to do it. I knew I did. And I just thought maybe I really do need counseling. Or... or...”

“Oh, Goldilocks,” said Scott. And he kissed him on the top of Brian’s silky mop of curls.

“And if *you* think its wrong...”

“I’m an idiot,” said Scott. “A stupid redneck. What are you listening to me for? So... when you and Paul... did that. Was it anything like the magazine?”

“No,” said Brian.

“It had to hurt.”

“Not really. It was intense, is all.”

“I just don’t like the idea of Paul doing stuff to you that’s... extreme,” said Scott. “You’re young, still. You don’t know.”

“I asked him to,” said Brian.

“You did?”

“It was amazing,” said Brian. “I don’t know if I ever want to do it again but it was amazing.”

“Oh.”

“And I *always* listen to you, Scott. And I don’t think my ‘college friends,’ of which I have none, would think more or less of you than they do of me. Well, except you’ve got a nicer ass than mine.”

“You haven’t seen yours like I have,” Scott pointed out. But he was smiling down at Brian and he looked pleased.

“You know ‘white-trash’ and ‘redneck’ are just words, too,” said Brian. He looked into Scott face. The gauze patch was crooked and droopy and his one good eye was swollen and serious. “You’re my best friend. I love you. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before.”

Scott kissed Brian’s nose and mouth and touched foreheads with him. “Yeah. Jerk.”

“I missed you.”

“You too, Squirrel.”

“Haven’t even gotten to fuck you yet,” said Brian, letting his lip stick out in a pout. He batted his one eye at Scott. It was not sexy but it was damned cute.

Scott jumped off the bed and just like that, snap, crackle, dropped his boxers.

Brian looked. “Nice. Where’d that come from?”

“Must have a thing for gauze bandages,” said Scott, grabbing his dick and waving it at Brian like a wand. “Care to cross swords, mister?”

“What was that?” said Jim. “Are they fighting again?”

There was a thump. Then another. Then another and another. Thump thump thump thump.

Paul laughed. “I don’t think they’re fighting.”

“Oh yeah,” said Scott. He panted and rocked on his knees. “God, yeah.”

Brian held him by his hips. Scott’s butt was still rosy red and Brian didn’t want to hurt him, but the place where Brian’s cock was nestled was sheer heaven and he didn’t want to relinquish that either.

“Oh. Oh. Right there,” groaned Scott, rolling his hips.

Brian thrust obediently Right There and felt Scott’s channel start to spasm, his friend howling. Then Brian’s eyeballs rolled right back in his head and he came so hard he blew a hole right through part of his gray matter.

When he opened his eye, Scott was peaking down at him. One pretty honey colored eye and one about ten different shades of ick.

“We look awful,” said Brian.

Scott flopped down on the mattress next to him. “Yep.”

“It’s all the fault of those men out there.”

Scott gave this some thought as it seemed a rash statement, but then he shrugged and said. “Yep.”

“We need to punish them.”

“Why, Goldilocks, you shock me!” said Scott, lying on his tummy and resting his chin on his folded arms.

Brian laughed an evil laugh. It was a laugh that would chill the blood of any man who has ever had a clever little brat in his life. “I know just how to do it, too,” he said.

Chapter Eleven

When Brian and Scott re-entered the kitchen, Jim and Paul were just a little surprised to see them coming arm in arm and looking contrite.

“I’m sorry I shouted,” said Brian meekly.

“I’m sorry I spoke back,” Scott chimed in, sincerely.

The two men each looked from Jim to Paul. Even with the gauze and antiseptic medicine on their faces, they looked adorable.

Well, it was a surprise, but a pleasant one.

Jim huffed and mumbled and then Scott just went across the room and into his arms. “Oh,” said Jim. “Well, then.” He looked at Paul, an expression of bewildered happiness in his eyes.

Paul knew he had a similar expression on his face. Brian wrapped around him, face pressed to his chest, and whispered, “Sorry.”

Whatever either Jim or Paul had been going to do with their day was quite suddenly put on the back burner as they each retired to their separate bedrooms. A little hastily.

“Let me,” whispered Brian, going to his knees in front of Paul as soon as the bedroom door was closed. He drew his Daddy’s pants and briefs down as he went, and immediately nuzzled Paul’s cock, his whole face rubbing in the smell and warmth.

Paul put one hand back against the closed door to keep from falling, the other on top of Brian’s head. Brian’s loose hair was tangling and clinging to Paul’s thighs and sticking to his cock and pubic area. Paul’s knees started shaking almost immediately when Brian looked up at him with that one wide innocent blue eye and wrapped those pretty cherry lips around his cock.

Brian helped Paul lie down on the bed instead of the floor, which was where Paul almost landed when his legs gave away. Brian crawled up on the bed, stripping his clothing off as he went. Hair falling around his face, brushing Paul’s groin and stomach as he bobbed up and down, Brian looked up at Paul, the arch of his round white butt wagging in the air just behind his head. Paul groaned, threw his head back and let Brian suck the life out of him.

Then Brian got up, daintily wiping his mouth with the back of his arm. “You stay there,” he said. “I’ll get the blankets.” And he did, tucking Paul in. He went off into the bathroom, did his thing, came back out and sat down at his desk.

“I have homework to do,” Brian told him. “Is that all right, sir?”

Paul’s brain was buzzing happily, and his limbs were limp. There was something going on, but he really couldn’t concentrate on it at the moment. “Yes,” he sighed, head falling to one side as he dozed off.

He heard, “Thank you, sir,” before he slept.

Scott looked like a golden teddy bear, but he wasn’t, generally, as cuddly as one.

Now he snuggled and growled playfully and seemed to bend into whatever shape Jim wanted or needed. Jim was breathless with it, his hands running over the soft curling hair on thighs and belly and chest. Scott gave way under him, groaning, begging, “Please, sir,” over and over.

Please, sir, what?

“Anything...” moaned Scott, his head arching as Jim sucked up a mark on his neck. Jim ran the palms of his hands up and down Scott’s golden arms and grasped his wrists firmly.

Scott moaned and shivered. Jim scrabbled at the headboard until he found the restraints that always lay tangled somewhere there and looped them quickly around Scott’s wrists. Scott merely moaned and acquiesced.

It was almost too much for Jim. Scott never just *let* himself be restrained. He almost always put up some kind of resistance, but now he kept whispering, “Please.”

Jim sat at the foot of the bed, finally, panting. Scott’s hands were bound behind him. He lay face down, on his bound and bent knees, bubble butt high and vulnerable and he just kept moaning, “Please, sir.”

Jim was almost crying when he entered Scott.

He’d taken care not to tie Scott too tightly and he was slow and easy when he fucked Scott. Scott’s behind had endured a lot in the past twenty-four hours and Jim didn’t want to *hurt* his partner. He just loved the feeling that he could *dominate* Scott so.

“Harder, sir,” whispered Scott. “Please, sir.”

“Really?” said Jim.

“Please,” whispered Scott.

Jim groaned and pumped harder. Scott’s continuous pleas and his own excitement and Scott’s complete subservience sent Jim over the edge almost immediately.

He untied Scott as soon as he’d caught his breath and his partner lay under him, mouth open and soft, tongue receiving Jim’s, hands loosely caressing Jim’s arms as they smooched.

Jim looked down at Scott, feeling like a hole had been blown through his middle somehow. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, sir,” whispered Scott.

Dazed, amazed and grateful, Jim laid his head down next to his partner. In just a few minutes, he was asleep.

Paul was out in the garage working on his bike. The radio was bumping out an old ‘Clash’ song, his arms were up to their elbows in grease, he’d just had a mind-blowing blowjob and all was definitely A-Okay with the world.

He heard the tiniest little mouse-like knock at the door and he looked up to see Brian standing there. His uninjured eye wide and blue, his hair unbound and falling in ringlets around his shoulders, he wore nothing but a pair of white Fruit of the Looms.

White Fruit of the Looms.

Paul snapped his lips closed and reached up to turn off the radio. “Yes, Brian?”

“I’m sorry, sir. But the phone is for you.” Brian held out a cell phone. Paul jumped up and took it, giving that ass in its white cotton briefs a little pinch as he did so.

“Hello? Ah, yes, Guy, we did. This afternoon?” Paul looked at the clock above his workbench. “Yes, I think I can do that. Okay, see you there.” He gave the phone back to Brian. “Going to go talk to those new principals about the dealership, hon.”

“Yes, sir,” said Brian.

Paul tousled that pretty head. “How’s the homework?”

“I’m almost done, sir,” said Brian. “I’ll go finish it now.” He padded off.

Wiping his hands clean and frowning thoughtfully, Paul followed Brian through the hallway to go to the kitchen. On his way, he saw Scott standing facing a corner, hands on his head and very still.

He stopped. Jim was out having the van detailed and Paul couldn't recall having punished Scott for anything.

"Why are you in the corner?"

"I swore, sir."

"Is Jim home?" He hadn't seen or heard him return.

"No, sir. But I accidentally said the F-word so I'm standing in the corner."

Paul stared at him. From their bedroom, he could hear the click click click of Brian's keyboard as his boyfriend dutifully did his homework.

With a growing sense of unease, Paul went into the kitchen to clean up for his meeting.

The financial men seemed even more enthusiastic than Paul had hoped. He and Brian had worked out the numbers already, but they'd planned on it being at least another two years before they'd be in a position to take the risk.

The money men seemed to think that completely unnecessary. In a Bear market, the Harleys were still moving like hotcakes. Faster, even, with the rising cost of gas.

Paul came back feeling optimistic and cheery.

Better yet, his house smelled like fresh-baked bread and his partner was padding openly around the living room in nothing but his harness and a pair of loose boxer shorts. The gauze pad was gone and Paul was relieved to see that Brian's eye, while still discolored, was almost completely back to normal.

Paul swept Brian up and kissed him deeply and thoroughly, lifting him up on his toes. Then he placed him carefully back on the ground and looked around. "Where are Jim and Scott?"

Brian's smile was merry. "They've been in Jim's bedroom almost all day."

Paul chuckled. "Well, it smells like Jim had time to bake."

Brian nodded. "Scott helped him."

“Scott helped *cook*?” Weird.

He was going to comment on this, but Brian chose that moment to drop his boxer shorts.

He was half-erect and a leather cock and ball ring was attached to the harness. Half-smiling, and, whipping his hair flirtatiously as he did so, Brian spun on one foot and walked toward the bedroom, his perfect round butt rolling with every step. The dildo fastened in the back of the harness was red and very obvious.

Paul followed like a dog after a steak. He hoped his tongue wasn't hanging out.

A trail of boots, socks, and clothing led straight to where Paul knelt on the bed behind Brian, fucking like a machine.

He was drenched in sweat. It dribbled and pooled between his ass cheeks and behind his knees. His sweaty hands slipped where he gripped Brian's hips. The blowjob that morning had taken the edge off and his body seemed capable of going on for hours.

Brian rocked against him, as fast and hard as Paul. On every third or fourth thrust, he twisted his hips just so and Paul groaned loudly as Brian's channel rubbed here and there.

The cock ring was still on. Paul could feel it as his slippery fingers held Brian's cock. His partner moaned and cried out and they moved with even more frenzy.

Just when he thought he'd have an attack, or a stroke, he felt Brian's hand come up and work the release on the cock ring. Brian's body froze, straining and quivering and warm sticky come shot between Paul's fingers. That was the last straw. Paul thrust one more time, shouting some kind of Hallelujah, and came.

“Would you like some more Sangria?”

“Yes, I would. Thank you.” Jim reached over when Scott's back was turned and surreptitiously pinched himself on the arm.

His baby was feeding him grapes and strawberries and bits of fruit in bed. He was feeding himself, as well, using Jim's body as a plate. Sticky fruit and chocolate sauce still remained over parts of his skin where his cock stuck up like a fire hydrant, red and happy and practically glowing.

Jim was either dead or sleeping. He pinched himself again.

Scott handed him a refilled wineglass of Sangria punch and strolled to the end of the bed. Jim sipped the wine and watched him, legs spread to accommodate his swollen balls. Scott stopped at the vantage point right between Jim's legs. He was naked except for the black collar around his neck.

"You know, when I'm on the road, I sometimes take a few friends along."

Jim nodded. Scott took dildos when he traveled.

"I thought you might be interested in knowing what I do with them."

Scott turned and brought a dildo out from behind the platter of fruit slices. Jim felt his swollen, sticky dick swell as Scott experimentally weighed the thing in his hand. It was black and thick and about 12 inches long, with a bright red on/off switch at the base.

"I call this one 'Jim,'" said Scott. "I wonder why." Scott looked up at Jim, quickly, from beneath those golden lashes. "You need something, babe?"

Jim shook his head no.

"You sure? You don't want another strawberry?"

"I'm sure," said Jim hoarsely. He sipped his Sangria.

"Okay. Good. You tell me if you want *anything*," said Scott. He turned, his round perfect butt thrust toward Jim as he leaned on the dresser. He held the dildo out, pushed the switch and it started to buzz and jump.

Scott bent one arm back and applied the thing to his shoulder muscle.

"Mmm, feels so good," he said.

Jim whimpered and grasped his own dick. Scott turned around quickly. "You want me to do that for you, babe?"

Jim nodded, desperate, and Scott came over and crawled up between Jim's legs, still holding the vibrating dildo in his hand. Scott bent over and rubbed at his crack with it.

"You know what I think about when I massage myself with this, Jim baby?"

Scott leaned forward and licked the head of Jim's cock. Once, twice. Little licks. His elbow rose and fell slowly as he rubbed the dildo up and down and then, Jim realized he could *see* what Scott was doing with the dildo, in the mirror facing their bed.

He whimpered and grabbed at his cock again, but Scott beat him to it, wrapping his mouth around Jim and sucking as he stuck the tip of that fat dildo into his hole and pushed.

Jim moaned. The glass of Sangria spilled on the bed. Scott's tongue did some kind of evil tribal dance around the head of Jim's cock and the black dildo slid further and further up Scott's ass.

Scott moaned around Jim's cock, his butt writhed, the dildo had almost completely disappeared and suddenly he sucked Jim down, all the way, the palate of his throat pressing Jim's cockhead. Scott's head bobbed up and down and his hand thrust the dildo in and out.

Jim thrashed, hands flying out to catch hold of whatever they could. Sperm, blood, bone marrow from his spine and all the bits of brain he had left flooded out of his penis while a light show blew open his mind.

For about three seconds, Jim was the Buddha.

Jim managed to open his eyelids far enough to see his lover. Scott's head arched and fist flying, coming all over Jim's groin and then Jim passed out, a loopy smile on his face.

"How's it going?"

Brian and Scott lay across Scott's bed eating graham crackers.

"Okay. Its fun, you know?"

"Yeah. That's the best part." Brian had his hair in a ponytail and he wore old cut-offs and a T-shirt. He lay on his stomach on the bed, his sneakered feet waving in the air behind him.

Scott wore sweats and socks. "I get cold, off and on," he said.

"Yes." Brian nodded. "When I first started wearing only boxers indoors, I'd get cold. But the convenience, you know, outweighs the chill." He grinned.

"I see your point," said Scott. "And then there's that dopey look Jim gets on his face."

"Oh, yeah. That look where his one eye gets bigger and his eyebrow does this?" Brian perfectly impersonated a besotted and sideswiped-by-lust Jim.

Scott hooted. "That's it."

They lay on the bed and cracked up.

Brian sobered after a bit. “Hey,” he said. “There’s something I haven’t told anybody. Can I show it to you?”

Scott nodded, watching as his friend slid off the bed and fetched something from his back pocket. It was a much folded envelope. Frowning curiously, Scott took it from him and opened it. Read the contents. He whistled.

“How long have you had this?”

“Two months.”

“Oh, boy, Brian, Paul’s gonna blow a fuse.”

“Yep.”

They were both silent, contemplating this.

“What are you going to do?” asked Scott, finally.

Brian shook his head.

“What do you *want* to do?” asked Scott pointedly.

Brian’s brow furrowed into a dozen little lines and he laid his head down on his arm. “I don’t know. I know *exactly* what Paul would say.”

“That’s not what I asked,” said Scott.

Brian looked at him. “What would *you* do?”

“Doesn’t matter and you know it,” said Scott.

Brian buried his face in his folded arms. “Argh.”

Scott reached over and patted him on the shoulder. “Whatever you do, I’m behind you, buddy. You got that?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Scott.”

There was a bump and some noise from the interior of the house. “Uh-oh,” said Scott, sliding off the bed. “Duty calls.”

He yanked the sweatshirt off and slipped the sweatpants down. He was about to pull of the ankle socks but Brian said. “No.”

“No?” said Scott.

Brian looked him up and down; gave him a wise look. “Leave ‘em. Trust me.”

Jim came out of the bathroom after his shower, steam following him, patting his furry chest dry and found Scott sitting on the bed in nothing but a pair of white ankle socks.

His poor exhausted cock twitched.

“Hey,” he said. “Did you nap?”

“Yes, sir,” said Scott. He rose, looking dutiful and a little shy, even, standing there with his weight on one leg, one arm behind him, holding the other elbow, chin down a bit.

If Jim thought there was the remotest possibility he could get it up again, he would have thrown Scott onto the mattress.

“I have some errands,” said Jim. He chuckled. “I seem to have gotten distracted. Are your chores done?”

“I washed the floor and took the recycling bin down to the street. I raked the lawn,” Scott enumerated. “And I saw that the laundry needed to go into the dryer, so I went ahead and did that and folded it.”

Jim’s entire body was numbed by large quantities of mind-blowing sex, but a prickle of unease ran up his spine.

“Really?”

“Yes, sir.” Scott looked suddenly worried. “Was that all right, sir?”

Christ. The man was his heart’s desire and here Jim was making him feel wrong about it. “Course it was.” He drew Scott against him and kissed the man. “Thanks. You want to come with me on my errands?”

“Yes, please,” said Scott.

“Okay. Think you’d better get dressed then.”

When Paul woke from his sex-induced coma, he found Brian in the living room, dusting.

His boyfriend had shed the harness, but he was wearing the tightie-whities again, his package darker and swelling the pocket in the front. He'd donned one of Jim's kitchen aprons and went around the bookcases and mantel on tippie-toe, dusting. Every time he lifted his arm, the briefs flashed.

Paul leaned against the doorjamb, watching, his tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth.

Brian seemed to sense him and stopped. "Hello."

Paul exerted an extreme effort and straightened. "You getting all your chores done?"

"Yes, sir. My homework is done and I ironed my shirts and when the dusting is done, I was going to ask you if you wanted me to iron yours, too?"

Paul got that weird feeling again, but his mind was struggling past a miasma of lust, so he just said, "That won't be necessary. So, it sounds like we have some free time. What would you like to do?"

Brian smiled a sweet smile. "Anything *you'd* like to do, Daddy." He raised the duster and whisked away at a shelf. The apron rose and Paul was flashed again.

He cleared his throat. "How about we order a pizza and rent a movie?"

"I'd like that, sir," said Brian, dusting away.

"Good. I'm... um... going to finish in the garage. You can... um... call me when you're done."

White Fruit of the Looms floating in his head like sugarplums, Paul wandered back out to the garage.

The minute Paul closed the garage door behind him, Brian dropped the feather duster, shed the apron and sneezed. Thank goodness. He'd been standing in front of that mantel *forever* waiting for Paul to come out of the bedroom.

He heard a thunk in the garage and grimaced. Goodness, he hoped his man didn't hurt himself with any power tools or anything.

Humming to himself, Brian gathered up his cleaning supplies and went off to get himself "dressed" for dinner.

“Hold on a minute,” said Jim. He came around the van and stopped Scott, who’d been lifting a box for him. Jim lay the back of his hand across Scott’s forehead. “You’re feeling okay, Scott, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Jim.” Scott looked up at him, pretty eyes bright and adoring. In the sunlight, the hazel flecks in them were easy to see. He smiled, the dimple in his cheek deepening.

Jim lowered his hand. “Okay, then.”

Scott lifted the box, biceps bulging under T-shirt sleeves, and then straightened, butt muscles bulging as well in the super short shorts he had chosen to wear. He climbed the stairs, a vision from Heaven, in Jim’s opinion, and stood calmly waiting at the door for Jim to open it.

“Where do you want this?” asked Scott, preceding his lover into the house.

“The kitchen,” said Jim. “I’ll... uh... get the rest from the car.”

Brian came padding into the living room at that moment. He was wearing loose, blue thin sweatpants and, it appeared, not much else. His feet were bare and his hair was loose on his shoulders again.

“Hi, Jim!” he said brightly and came into Jim’s arms just like that, smelling like soapy boy and fabric softener. “Paul said we could order pizza and a movie tonight. If it’s okay with you?”

Okay with him? “Sure,” said Jim. “Of course. Where *is* Paul?”

“Garage,” said Brian. “Can I help with anything?”

“You can help Scott unpack in the kitchen.”

“Yes, sir,” said Brian, turning to do so. The sweatpants hung on his hips and the swell of his butt showed when he turned around. Watching Brian walk across the living room was hypnotic.

Jim caught himself gaping and snapped his lips closed. He frowned thoughtfully as he went back out to the van for the other box of supplies.

“Paul,” he called, poking his head in the garage. “Can I talk to you for a minute?”

Paul looked up from under a muffler. He was whistling. “Yes?”

Jim shut the door carefully behind him and then looked around the garage nervously. “Tell me something. How many times have you been called ‘sir’ today?”

“I don’t know.” Paul slid out from where he’d been working and sat up.

“I’ve been feeling excessively ‘sirred’ today,” said Jim.

Paul’s mouth spread in a disbelieving grin. “Excessively ‘sirred’? Are you joking?”

Okay, it did sound paranoid when he said it out loud. Jim muttered and played with his beard. “Maybe not,” he said. “Never mind.”

Paul shook his head, smiling and looking for a wrench. “Okay.”

“We having a pizza and movie night?”

“Thought it might be nice. You want the break from cooking?”

“Yes, it’s a good idea. Thank you.”

“Daddy, can I have soda?” asked Brian from his seat on the floor cushion.

Brian had problems with cavities and the dentist had cautioned him about sweets and soda.

“No, I don’t think so, Brian,” said Paul, adjusting the volume on the remote.

“Okay,” said Brian, easily.

Scott sat down next to him and said. “I won’t drink any either, so you don’t have to feel bad.”

“Thank you, Scott,” said Brian.

Jim had heard all the jokes about the crazy, paranoid, old pot-smoking hermits living in the woods. He figured he was just a hop, skip and jump away from that. Because every time Brian or Scott looked up at him, wide-eyed and smiling sweetly, goosebumps went up his back.

Now Scott laid his arm across Brian’s shoulder, leaned over and nuzzled Brian’s ear and Jim shook his head at himself. His brain was addled, that was all.

Just before dinner, he’d found Scott in the bedroom, in those obscenely short pajama bottoms he sometimes wore. The ones that were so tight across the crotch, they may as well have been transparent. And too short in the back, too. Scott only wore them when Jim begged and now he was walking around in them like it was nothing.

He was trying to fasten something to the ring in his nipple, the one that matched Jim's. He looked up. "Can you help me with this?"

"Sure." Jim fumbled with the clasp and realized his hands were shaking. It was a tiny weight.

Scott looked up at him with those golden eyes. "I heard it makes your nipples feel more... intense," he said.

"Yeah, I've heard that, too," said Jim, his voice gruff. He managed to get the thing on without tearing the ring out of Scott's nipple or dropping it. "There."

"Thank you, Jim," said Scott. And gave the weight a little push. "Ah," he said. And then he walked out of the bedroom.

Now, Scott was sitting on the floor, that damned weight still hanging from his nipple ring, his tongue painting swirls around the ear of Brian, who was still wearing nothing but those thin sweatpants and Jim was losing his mind.

Jim had pizza, beer, and a wet dream sitting at his feet and he was getting nervous? He had to cut back on the pot, obviously. It was eating his brain.

"Can't believe you chose this movie," said Paul happily. "I thought you hated Die Hard."

"I can see the attraction," said Brian. "Though you're a hell of a lot better looking than Bruce Willis, Daddy." He gasped and covered his mouth. "I'm sorry."

Paul was sitting back on the leather couch, one blue jean clad leg up on the seat, the other planted on the floor next to Brian. He toed Brian playfully. "Its okay, hon."

Brian smiled sweetly and batted his eyes at Paul. Goosebumps went up Jim's back.

Scott leaned over and stuck his tongue in Brian's ear, but this time Brian turned his head and they smooched.

After awhile, their hands entered the action and by the time the explosions and gunfire were really dominating the screen, Brian and Scott were lying on the Oriental rug, groping each other and making out in earnest.

Jim hadn't been watching the movie for a while and Paul seemed to have lost interest as well. With explosions echoing off the walls of the living room, both men watched, glassy-eyed, as their two Brats rolled on the floor, pushing each other's pants down and playing with each other's cocks.

When Brian sat up, spun around and the two entered an enthusiastic sixty-nine position, the remote rattled to the ground from Paul's fingers. Jim had to swallow the copious

drool in his mouth and caught himself rubbing his crotch as he watched Brian's open mouth take in Scott's long cock, his tongue moving over the vein. Scott moaned and bobbed up and down on Brian's saliva-slick cock.

Brian's fingers found Scott's butt and went exploring. As he found and stretched Scott's hole, Jim slid off the couch like he was melted butter and heard the thud of Paul's knees hitting the floor near him.

Half aware of Paul near him doing something or other to Brian, Jim couldn't get the buttons on his jeans open fast enough as he bent to Scott's exposed crack and licked and sucked, getting involved with Brian's fingers in the process.

Somebody cried out, and Brian's fingers dug into Scott's butt and Scott started clenching and moaning and Jim was just able to release his own cock, a button flying off somewhere in the process, and get his hands around it when he heard Paul wailing and Brian yelling "Fuck me, Daddy." And then Scott was up on his knees and Jim had Scott's hips in both of his hands and he'd plunged his aching dick into Scott's wet hole and his heart was going to stop.

It was over in a flash. They lay, pants around their ankles, in a lazy crisscross of manflesh across the Oriental rug.

Paul moaned.

Jim could wholeheartedly second the emotion in that sound. His balls *ached* with all the sex he'd been having and his quiescent and currently almost comatose-partner, curled up against him and cooing in an agreeable way, set every alert Jim had off.

Jim sat up. "What's going on with you two?"

Scott rolled onto his side, looking up at Jim with sleepy eyes. "What?"

Jim struggled to his feet, holding his pants up by the waist band. He pointed an accusing finger at Scott and Brian, both of whom were looking up at him like Heaven's own innocent cherubs. "You two. Are up to something. I know and I'm asking, what is it?"

Scott scowled and crossed his arms. Brian's mouth flew open, eyes widening even more and he looked at Paul.

"Oh come on, Jim," said Paul. "We're all just relaxing. Why can't you enjoy it?" He laid an affectionate hand on Brian's head, letting his fingers play there.

"Scott," said Jim, his eyes serious. "Tell me what's going on."

Scott stood, looking pointedly away from Jim. “I’m sorry,” he said to Brian. He leaned over and pulled up those obscenely tight sleep pants and walked, all haughty and insulted innocence, toward his own bedroom.

Brian looked like he might cry. “Daddy?”

Paul’s face was grim. “Jim, can I talk to you in the kitchen?”

“What the hell, Jim?”

“Listen, Paul. I know a thing or two. There is something going on there and we are being played.”

“Brian has been...” Paul stopped. “Perfect.”

“I’ve never had Scott so easy to please and agreeable,” said Jim. “Ever.”

Paul washed his face with one hand. “It’s been idyllic.”

“Bliss,” said Jim.

They looked at each other.

“BRIAN!” bellowed Paul.

A skitter of feet and a wide eyed young man stood in the doorway, sweatpants pooling around his slightly pigeon-toed feet. “Yes, sir?”

“They *know*,” hissed Scott.

“Shhh. They’ll hear you.”

Brian and Scott stood in opposite corners of the living room. Hands clasped behind their backs. Eyes front.

“Jim is *psychic*,” fretted Scott. “It’s like he can see through my skull.”

“Shhh,” Brian whispered, urgently. “They don’t know. They’re guessing. Don’t break, Scott.”

“QUIET!” came the bellow from the other room.

Sometime later. Scott and Brian were still standing in their corners, only now each had his nose resting in the middle of a small chalk circle that had been drawn on the wall. Scott made a weak, sighing noise, like the creak of an old house settling, and Brian felt a twinge of guilt.

This had all begun, supposedly, as a fun prank to get back at Paul and Jim a little bit. That's how Brian had presented it to Scott and he'd almost had himself convinced as well.

But there was more to it than that and Brian wasn't sure what to do, now that he had enmeshed his friend in the web of deceit and evasions.

He fidgeted, glancing toward the kitchen doorway, where Paul and Jim still sat, talking.

"EYES FRONT!" he heard bellowed.

"It has to have been Brian's idea," said Paul. "It's so devious."

"Scott can be devious," said Jim, surprised to find himself defending his Brat's bratly honor.

"That's true," Paul allowed. "But would he have been able to talk Brian into it?"

Jim shook his head.

"Well." Paul stood and clapped Jim on the shoulder. "At least you caught it, bud. I'd be tied to a chair by now, clucking like a chicken. You should have seen Brian dusting today. Thought I'd have a stroke!"

Jim grinned. "I almost hate to see it end. Those short shorts of Scott's would be illegal in some states."

Paul looked bemused and then surprised. A single laugh escaped from him. "That monster! He dropped something on the floor in front of me. *Twice*. And bent to pick it up without bending his knees. And I felt *guilty* for ogling him."

Jim chuckled. "God forbid you treat him as a sex object. The demon."

"Both of 'em," said Paul. "Well, time to get to the bottom of it."

"So to speak," said Jim, pushing back his chair and rising as well. "You have a plan?"

“Yeah. Follow my lead?”

Jim swung his arm toward the kitchen door. “After you.”

Things had gone horribly wrong.

“Get the paddle for me, Brian,” said Paul, in that cool voice.

Brian hesitated. Paul sat on their bed, Scott spread over his lap. Scott’s pants were down and Paul had his hand just lying there. From his vantage point, Brian could see Scott’s face: bright red, eyes huge.

“Do either one of you want to tell me what is going on?” said Paul, rubbing Scott’s butt.

“Stop with the Gestapo tactics,” growled Scott from upside down. “Crazy leather freak.”

“Why is Paul spanking you, Scott?” Jim snapped.

Scott opened his mouth with some retort, but, Brian was relieved to see, seemed to think better of it in his current position.

“You think I’ve kept a secret,” he said.

“You’ve been keeping something from Paul and me,” said Jim. “That’s why this has to happen, Scott. And you know it.”

Paul looked at Brian and held out his hand. “Brian? The paddle?”

It wasn’t that they both didn’t deserve it. It was that Paul had never spanked Scott. Ever. Something was wrong with it and Brian felt like the twist in his stomach was going to just tear him in half. Yet, he couldn’t open his mouth and say whatever it was he had to say because, for some reason, he still didn’t know how exactly to say it.

“Yes, s-s-sir,” he said, instead. And reached in the closet and brought out the paddle.

“Jim?” said Brian. Hoping, just maybe, Jim would relent and consent to punishing Scott himself. But Jim stood in the doorway looking like the grimmest genie from a Hans Christian Andersen tale: big arms folded and stoic face set down into his beard in a permanent frown.

Paul rested the paddle on Scott’s rump and Brian could see his friend trying to control the shivers this evinced.

“We don’t keep secrets in this house,” Paul said to Scott. And then he looked up and straight at Brian and said. “Even if we’re asked to.”

Paul raised the paddle just as Scott was about to say something snide and the smack of it seemed to ring in the room.

Scott yelped, his eyes wide.

SMACK.

Brian could see Scott’s legs jump and the way Paul leaned on him to hold him down.

SMACK SMACK SMACK.

Scott’s head was down now, face bright red, eyes tightly closed. In the horrible silence of the room, they could all hear Scott take in a long shaking breath.

SMACK SMACK SMACK SMACK.

“Stop it,” whispered Brian.

Paul didn’t even look up.

SMACK SMACK.

Paul stopped. Across his lap, Scott’s whole body was shaking. His ass was maraschino cherry red and his face was flushed. Paul let him up and Scott flailed for a minute, looking for comfort, but when Jim remained in the corner, he flung his arms around Paul.

Paul held him, crooned comfort into his ears. “Do you want to talk about it?” he asked Scott.

And Scott shook his head.

Still holding Scott, hand rubbing his back firmly, Paul looked up at Brian.

Brian walked the four steps over to him. It felt like a mile. “Scott,” he said, laying a hand on his friend’s shoulder. He helped Scott to stand and walk over to Jim, who held him. Then he went back to Paul and dropped his pants, got into position.

Paul sighed. “Brian, why won’t you tell me?”

Brian shook his head. It was all so horribly familiar. The soothing hand on his back, the cool paddle just resting there for a minute, and then the fire. The endless, endless fire, until Brian was a shaking mass of grief and Scott was yelling “Stop it! God, Paul, just stop it!” and still it didn’t stop until it did. And even then, Brian couldn’t stop crying,

flinging himself into Paul's arms and sobbing as if his heart would break. Because it would. If he ever told Paul. It would all be over and Brian would rather take his punishment every night for the rest of his life than tell Paul.

"Show him the fucking letter," said Scott. "Or I will."

From Paul's arms, Brian stared over his shoulder at Scott and said, "I hate you."

Scott had taken the paddling, stoically, but he flinched at Brian's words. "I'm sorry, Brian," he said.

Jim cradled Scott's head against his chest. "Nobody hates anybody."

Scott burrowed into the soft fur there and shook his head.

"So, where is this letter?" asked Paul, calmly.

"In my backpack." Brian felt a big fat tear roll down his cheek. "I'll get it for you."

Chapter Twelve

They all sat in the living room. Well, Paul and Jim sat and Scott and Brian stood. Scott was gripping Jim's shoulder so tightly that his knuckles stood out white. He was glaring at the floor. He'd tried, once, to say something to Brian as they'd left the bedroom, but Brian couldn't look at or talk to *anybody* yet, so he'd just ignored Scott.

Paul finished reading the letter, folded it, and looked at the floor for several minutes. Then he handed it to Jim and waited for Jim to read it.

"Brian?" said Paul, after he and Jim had exchanged one of those meaningful mind-meld Top looks that always made Brian feel like there was A Plan that he shouldn't be told about quite yet. "*Why* didn't you show this to me?"

That was the question, wasn't it?

It had been one of those long exhausting weeks that took every ounce of Brian's resolve to bear and so he just said, "Because I knew what you'd say."

"And you didn't want that?"

Brian shook his head.

"I don't understand," said Paul. "You received a letter of merit and an offer for a prestigious internship with a major company and you didn't want me to say 'I'm so proud of you Brian'?"

Brian looked up at him. "Well, that part I like."

Paul just stared at him, the letter in one hand and his empty open palm in the other lying on either knee in absolute astonishment. "What part do you not like?"

"The internship," said Brian. "It's in New York."

"Oh," said Jim. "I see."

Paul looked at Jim, looked back at Brian. "It's only six months."

What was really horrible was that Paul even thought it was acceptable. Brian shook his head, fighting the stupid tears and the choky feeling in his throat and spat. "Fine. I'll go then." And he spun on his heel and ran to the bedroom and slammed the door.

Paul stared at the door, turned and stared at Jim. "I could go to New York."

"I don't think that's the point," said Jim.

"You could go, too." Paul pointed out. "We all could."

"I couldn't," said Scott, softly, glaring at the floor. "My routes are all western and northwestern. But then, who cares. He wouldn't want me there anyway."

"Honey, I'd want you there."

"Oh, come on, given a choice between seeing me and seeing Goldilocks?" Scott was breathing hard, his face flushed. "This will break us all up. Brian knows that. And Paul doesn't even *care*." And then he, too, stomped out of the room, and another bedroom door slammed.

Paul's eyes were big as saucers. "Jim. What am I doing wrong?"

"Oh, that's nice. You ask me *now*?"

"I'm sorry. I... I'm so confused."

"It's partly my fault," Jim sighed. "This has been brewing for a while. I knew there was something wrong and I blamed it all on your being absent. Of course, that was only part of the problem. Brian knows that if you start your own dealership down here, you won't have time to visit him. He won't be able to help you either and, in case you haven't noticed, that's a big part of what makes him feel like an equal partner in your relationship."

Jim rubbed his neck. "I could go to New York with him, but if I did, as Scott pointed out, Scott's and my relationship would suffer. I'd actually have to choose, on occasion, which man needed me more. And their friendship would be strained probably beyond bearing."

"But there has to be a way."

"There is. You put off the dealership deal until Brian is back, as you originally planned. You and I take turns going out there, so that Scott always has one of us here. We help Scott afford to visit New York on occasion, too. Though the thought of those two in New York City without one of us is truly frightening."

Paul's expression was somber.

Jim studied him. "It's a big sacrifice."

"I can't believe he thought I didn't care," said Paul. "And Scott? He still thinks he's a fifth wheel, doesn't he?"

Jim's head bowed.

"I thought we were doing so well," said Paul. "I'm such an idiot."

Jim cracked a small smile. "They say knowing that is the first step toward wisdom."

Chapter Thirteen

When he heard the small knock at the door, Scott thought it would be Jim. “It’s open,” he said.

When Paul’s head peeked around the door, Scott quickly stood up from the corner where he’d been sitting, hunched up in a ball.

“Can I come in?” said Paul.

Scott shrugged. “Sure. It’s your house, I guess.”

Paul slid in and let the door close behind him. “It’s your house, too.”

Scott studied his own hands.

Paul walked over and took those two hands gently in his own. “Will you talk to me?”

Scott shrugged noncommittally.

Paul sat on the bed, drawing Scott toward him. If it were Brian, he would have pulled the man into his lap. Paul settled for Scott standing before him.

“I owe you an apology,” said Paul.

Scott tipped his head and studied him with one narrowed eye.

“I don’t pay attention to what you say often enough. I don’t have an excuse for it. All I can do is ask you to forgive me and give me a chance.”

Scott was silent.

“I’m still learning all this, too, Scott,” said Paul. “I’m going to make mistakes. And I’m scared...” He shook his head.

“Hey,” Scott said, softly. He laid a hand on the side of Paul’s head. Stroked Paul’s temple very softly with his thumb for many minutes.

Paul spoke, head down. “I should have talked to you about... what happened between Brian and me, instead of letting you hear it from Jim.”

“Yeah,” said Scott. “That scared the crap out of me.”

“Did you think I’d hurt him?”

“I think Brian would do *anything* for you, snake-man. You have way too much power over him. I mean, I get that that is sort of what’s happening here with all of us, but with you two it just seems so out of balance.”

“*I* have power over *Brian*?” said Paul. He shook his head in disbelief.

“When Jim orders me around, well, I know he’s just doing it for my own good,” said Scott. “It’s not like I wouldn’t do whatever it is, anyway, when I got good and ready to.”

“I never ask Brian to do anything he doesn’t want to.”

“If it were up to Brian, would he have even *thought* of any of this?” said Scott. “Naw. He might be involved with some uber-Macho leather daddy, but would he be wearing a collar and leash?”

“Brian doesn’t wear a leash,” said Paul. “But I get your point. If I hadn’t met Brian, though, Scott, I wouldn’t be involved in this kind of relationship either. I’m as surprised as he is.”

They still stood, Paul holding Scott’s one hand, Scott stroking Paul’s temple. “What is this?” said Scott suddenly, tracing the design above Paul’s ear.

“An asp.”

“They poisonous?”

Paul’s eyebrow crooked. “As it happens. Legend has it that Queen Cleopatra killed herself with the bite of an asp.”

“Hmmm.” Scott stroked the design, following it behind Paul’s ear and down his neck. “So, if a guy kisses you here, it’s like he’s eye to eye with a poisonous snake?”

Paul’s blue eyes crinkled at the corners. “I guess.”

“How big a marshmallow do you have to be to feel like you gotta tattoo poisonous snakes all over your erogenous zones?” said Scott. But when Paul looked up at him, he was smiling gently.

“I don’t know,” said Paul. And as he watched, Scott leaned over and kissed him on the temple. Then Scott kissed his ear, then his neck. Paul’s hand came up and caught the back of Scott’s neck, feeling the curling hair there and his grip tightened just a little as

Scott's mouth traveled down, soft as a feather, kissing the snakes all the way down to Paul's collarbone.

Scott went to his knees there on the floor, pushing Paul's apart so he could kiss the triad of snakes twisting like a bouquet of fangs on Paul's chest. He kissed each one and then he licked a trail down their twined bodies to the D.A.D.D.Y. tattoo.

Paul watched him, a little dazed, his hands just riding on Scott's head as he descended.

Now Scott licked each letter of the tattoo very slowly, then he stopped and looked up at Paul. His eyes were dark, like molten gold.

Paul took in a deep breath.

Then Scott took Paul's face in his and kissed him. It was a soft kiss, like a first date kiss, Scott's mouth gentle and just a little damp. Then he sat back and looked at Paul with his head cocked to one side.

"Brian seems to like you."

Paul exhaled a little shaky laugh. "He does."

"So I'm giving you a chance."

"Thank you," said Paul fervently.

Scott smiled a small predatory smile. "I think you might be worth it."

Jim met Paul in the hallway as they passed.

"Brian is calming down," said Jim. "I discussed the plan with him and he thinks it might work."

Paul emitted a relieved sigh. "Thank you."

"How was Scott?"

Paul regarded Jim thoughtfully. "You are a braver man than I, my friend."

Jim's eyes were dark and merry. "It's worth it."

"I can see that it would be."

Jim chuckled.

Paul stepped up, took his friend's face in both hands and kissed him. Once, softly, twice with open lips and finally, for a long time, with tongue.

When they separated, Jim's eyes were smoky.

"Goodnight, buddy," said Paul.

"Goodnight, Paul."

His own bedroom door was open a crack and when he stepped in, Brian was sitting up in the bed, back against the headboard, the covers drawn up over his knees, reading a book. Brian set it on the bedside table and held out his arms.

Feeling grateful, and lucky, and like a man redeemed, Paul crawled into his lover's arms.

Chapter Fourteen

“Morning.”

Scott had managed to avoid breakfast with Brian and he’d been bumping around busily with something behind the closed door of his bedroom all morning. Brian had stood there, hand raised to knock, for several minutes, but then chickened out.

Paul was lacing a dark blue tie through the collar of his shirt when Brian came back in the bedroom. “You talk to Scott?”

“Not yet.”

Brian stared at the screensaver on his computer monitor until he felt a warm hand fall on his shoulder. “Brian.”

“I will.”

He looked up at Paul, who was starched and pressed and immaculate in his business attire. Only the wisp of one snake head curling over his ear gave one a hint of the man underneath.

Well, that and the expression in those cool blue eyes.

Now Paul’s fingers tightened in a supportive way on Brian’s shoulder and those eyes warmed. There was something sure and steady in that look, something solid. Brian hadn’t realized, in all his worry during these past few months, that his Daddy was feeling a little unsettled as well. Something had happened to them this week, though. Brian had felt it last night when Paul had crawled into bed with him. He’d felt it this morning when he’d woken up with the thick inked arm wrapped around him.

“I’ll shower and then I’ll talk to him, Daddy. I promise.”

Just a nod and a look from Paul, and Brian may as well have sealed that promise with a notary stamp.

So he had a whole speech prepared and he’d already recited it twice while he cleaned up. When he came out of the shower, though, and padded into the main room in jeans, his hair still dribbling a rivulet down his spine, he found Scott frowning down at an enormous brown package.

“Morning.”

Scott looked up, fast, and away again. "Morning."

"What's that?"

Scott shrugged. "It just came. Jim's out, so I signed for it."

The company name printed on the box was "Blackwell-Honey Corp Special Rigs" and it was addressed to Paul. "Maybe it's a motorcycle part." Except Paul never had those parts sent to the house, not when he had an entire crew of expert Harley mechanics at his beck and call in the office up north.

"It weighs a ton," said Scott. "Two men brought it in here on a dolly and I can't even budge it." Scott was, despite his height, one of the stronger of the four men in the house, so that was saying something.

"When's Jim coming back?"

A large mysterious brown box being a little too much for two Brats to resist for too long.

"He said an hour or so."

Brian sighed. He and Scott stared at the box.

"I'll get the box cutter," said Scott.

"Okay."

"Holy shit," said Scott for about the fourth time.

"You can say that again," breathed Brian.

Strips of corrugated box, tape and Styrofoam packaging blocks filled the living room floor. At the center of which was a five foot long leather gymnastic 'horse' with holes bored into the thick metal handles at either side. In a series of smaller boxes, wrapped carefully in plastic, were more metal poles and cross-joists and various types of buckles, cuffs and restraints.

"It's an all-in-one dungeon," said Scott. "Holy shit."

"We shouldn't have opened it," said Brian, the remorse of hindsight now setting in. "Maybe Paul meant it as a surprise."

"A *surprise*? Like, 'Surprise! I have you now, my pretty, bwahaha'?"

Brian toed the leather horse. "It was in the magazine."

He'd gone quiet and inward and Scott immediately felt it and shut up.

"Let's clean this up," said Brian, bending to pick up the debris.

"Sure." Scott jumped to help him.

They got the living room back into its original pristine state and then sat down on the sofa. The horse seemed to dominate the room.

"So. You wanted one of these?" asked Scott, carefully.

"You have a cross in the corner of Jim's bedroom," Brian pointed out in a prickly voice.

"I didn't mean anything," said Scott immediately. "Really. And, I'm *sorry* about last night, Brian. I wasn't going to say anything, I really wasn't, but you *had* to tell Paul and I couldn't watch you..."

"I know. I'm sorry I said I hate you."

"I couldn't sleep," said Scott fitfully.

"Oh, Scott, I'm sorry." Brian draped his arms around Scott and pulled him into a close hug. "Thank you," he whispered against Scott's ear.

Scott held onto Brian, his breathing calming. Until finally Scott sat back, a little of that bounce and elven glee back in his eyes. "So. You wanna try it out?"

"Man, you look hot." Brian assessed the effect of Scott's bare bottom against the black leather of the horse. They hadn't been able to adjust its height much, the weight made that almost impossible without other tools. But they'd gotten a step stool and a box and Scott was posed up on it, legs spread, thighs and ankles strapped snugly. Brian had Scott's hands loosely bound behind his back as well.

Scott wriggled and pulled at the wrist restraints a little and said. "The leather feels kind of sexy, Goldilocks."

"Really?" It sure *looked* appealing.

"Yeah, climb on up here and try it out."

"Shove over then."

There was just enough room for Brian to climb up on the box and wriggle his naked pelvis next to Scott's. The leather was a little cold at first, but Brian fastened the thigh straps, pressing his hips into the leather and after a few minutes, it warmed and his penis sort of woke up and nestled into it. "I see what you mean," he said.

Scott gave him a hot look. "Try it with the ankle cuffs."

"I can't reach." Brian unfastened the thigh restraints, climbed down, fastened the cuffs to his ankles, and then climbed back up. From where he perched on the box, he bent all the way over and grabbed a pair of wrist restraints, holding them between his hands with his arms behind him like Scott's, just to get a feel for it.

"Wow." Scott's cheeks had a ruddy color in them and he was kind of twisting against the leather. "Hey, um, Brian? You wanna, um, christen this bad boy?"

Scott's butt was tensing and releasing, tensing and releasing, his legs straining against the bindings.

"You bet," said Brian and then, because God lets no deed go unpunished, and has a special place on his list, apparently, for Brats, the restraints looped around his wrist got their Velcro somehow stuck together. When he jerked, surprised, to get them loose, they tightened and his wrists were bound.

He was stuck.

"Oh crap," said Brian. "Get me down, Scott."

"You kidding? You tied me up here, Brian. I can *not* move."

"Twist sideways and try to reach me."

Scott tried. "Can't," he said, after straining for some minutes. His eyes had that hot hot hot look they got and he was twisting sort of constantly now against the leather horse.

"Man, Brian, I really need to..."

"Me, too." The feeling of the leather, the sight of Scott and his *smell*, were all having an effect on Brian.

"Oh, Christ. Oh, God," said Scott.

"Manohmanohman," Brian agreed.

And that's what Jim saw when he opened the front door. Two pink round butts writhing against a black leather horse.

Jim dropped the bag he was carrying on the floor and a container of orange juice bounced a couple times and popped open.

“Jim?” That was Scott’s voice. That was Scott’s butt. Working on the assumption that he wasn’t having a flashback to his San Francisco decade, Jim circled the buffet laid out there in his living room. A set of big blue eyes, and big golden ones looked up at him.

“We’re stuck,” said Brian.

“Get us down, man?” said Scott.

Instead of immediately doing as he was asked, as any Normal Ordinary Man would do, thought Scott, Jim looked puzzled. He walked around them. When he stood in front of them again, he was plaiting his beard thoughtfully.

“Where did that come from?”

“It came in the mail,” said Brian. “We thought we’d open it for you.”

“We cleaned up the mess,” said Scott. “See?”

Jim nodded. “I see. It came in the mail?”

Both heads bobbed up and down in the affirmative.

“Who was the package addressed to?” asked Jim.

Oh, boy.

“M-m-maybe it had Paul’s name on it?” said Brian.

“But you know better than to open Paul’s mail, don’t you Brian?” asked Jim.

Don’t speak, don’t speak, don’t speak, Scott willed his friend as hard as he could.

“Y-yes, sir,” said Brian.

Dang it, thought Scott. He did not like the big grin that was stretching across Jim’s face. Not at all.

“We’re doomed,” he said to Brian, as Jim merrily turned his back on them and, whistling, proceeded into the kitchen, carrying his retrieved bag of groceries.

“He can’t leave us up here forever.”

“What time is Paul coming back?”

“Maybe six?”

Scott groaned, letting his head sink down so he resembled a limp pasta noodle lying over the horse. “We’re doomed.”

“Jiiiiiiiiimmmmm!”

“Brian, shut *up*. It won’t do any good.”

“Scott, I need to...” Brian tried to wriggle but he couldn’t. He just didn’t have enough leeway to get any friction going.

“I know, I’m hard as iron too, but...”

“Jiiiiiiiiimmmmm!”

Jim came out of the kitchen, drying his hands on a towel. “Did you see any ball gags in that box?”

Brian’s eyes went big as saucers. “No.”

Scott shook his head furiously in the negative.

“Odd,” said Jim. “You’d think there would be.” He retreated back into the kitchen.

Brian whimpered. “If I could just get a little movement going here. Scott? Let’s try rocking the thing at the same time.”

“I dunno, Brian, we might tip over.”

“Oh. Yeah.”

Jim reappeared. “Are you comfortable?”

Scott rolled his eyes. “What do you *think*?”

“Well,” Jim considered, head tipping. “It looks like your weight is evenly distributed. I believe you aren’t straining your necks, are you?”

“My neck isn’t what’s straining right now,” snapped Scott. “For Christ’s sake, Jim, get us down from this fucking thing.”

Jim’s eyes narrowed and Scott wished fervently, not for the first time in his life, for a verbal do-over.

Turns out there were ball gags in the box after all.

“How was your day?” asked Paul. He poured another glass of wine. It was a small Napa vineyard, unpretentious and sweet.

“Quiet,” said Jim. “For once. It’s amazing how much one can get done without interruptions.”

“I hear you,” said Paul. He sipped his wine. “Well, have you chosen?”

On the coffee table before them lay an assortment from Scott’s dildo collection. Vibrating, jellies, ribbed and glow-in-the-dark.

“I’m torn between the blue two foot jellied and your standard vibrator,” said Jim.

“I like to stick to the classics,” said Paul. “Your basic oiled foot long, you know?”

“Mmmm,” said Jim.

A muffled moan sounded and they both looked up. It was hard to say which of their two men was in more dire straights. Scott was pink from head to toe, his butt straining. But Brian was covered in a sheen of perspiration and those normally bright clear eyes were wild.

Smiling, Jim and Paul rose and selected their instruments.

At least he didn’t need to pee. Brian’s bladder was used to three hour lectures anyway, but he was so hard he figured he wouldn’t have been able to tell even if it *was* full. Scott had whimpered a lot about an hour ago and a dribble of something had sounded out on the floorboards.

“Oh dear,” Jim had said, when he next passed by. He’d cleaned it up and still left them there. That’s when Brian knew that they were going to die there. And he didn’t care really, if he’d only be allowed to come one more time before he did.

His balls were throbbing. The leather seemed to be becoming softer and warmer and *nicer* every minute and yet, his restraints did not loosen at all. Nice job, he told himself. Brian the dungeon master. He apparently had a knack for tying things up.

Paul had come home and for just a few seconds Brian had hoped he'd be liberated, but the look in his Daddy's eyes sent despair into his belly.

And then they'd brought the dildos out and Scott had grunted and whined and Brian figured their men were going to have pity. But then they sat there for what seemed like *hours*, drinking wine and eating *crackers* and discussing the *weather*.

Finally they stood and Brian felt, with a relief so intense, it almost made him pass out, Paul's hand on his backside.

Then came the smoothest touch of fingers in his crack. Then oil. Next to him, Scott's eyes were squeezed shut, and he was moaning loudly around the ball gag. Then Paul's fingers rubbed up and down and Brian was groaning also.

The head of the dildo sat at his hole. Slowly, slowly, it was pressed in. Almost there, Brian was weeping with need and the dildo retreated. Fingers pressed him open again. Then, slowly, slowly, the dildo was pressed in once more. Almost there. Next to him, Scott was whimpering, sharp cries sounding around the gag, his neck muscles straining and then the dildo pressed just there.

Oh. God. Brian's whole body went rigid, shot through with electricity. Press, press, press. He could only strain, sensation and heat, like a downed electrical line, whipping through him. The dildo retreated just fractionally and then suddenly it was pumping into him, hard, long, firm strokes and Brian shuddered and shook and pumped come into the welcoming leather.

"Let's see your wrists."

Paul lifted Brian's arms, one at a time, from the warm bath water. They were red but not bruised. He shook his head, kissing the palm of Brian's hand. "You could have really hurt yourself."

"I'm not an idiot," said Brian, sourly. His head rested against an inflatable pillow. The warm scented water was up to his neck.

"No?"

Brian opened one eye just a crack. His Daddy knelt by the tub, naked, the snakes seeming to almost wink and crawl over him in the candlelight and reflections off Brian's

bathwater. The last tiny crumb of resentment Brian might have been feeling for being left tied to a leather horse for three hours just fizzled away.

“Where are you going to set it up?” he said.

Paul looked at him and the heat in his eyes was truly inspiring. Brian’s cock, still throbbing between his legs, started floating upwards. He grinned.

Paul grinned back. “I thought we should have a meeting and vote,” he said.

“We need another room,” said Brian.

Paul laughed. “It might bring up the value of the house.”

“A dungeon as a real estate draw,” said Brian, meditatively. “Only in Silverlake.”

“I don’t really like the word ‘dungeon,’” said Paul. “Maybe ‘rec room’?”

Brian smiled and let himself sink down so that he could blow bubbles in the water, his hips sliding up and the head of his penis peeking up at his Daddy with a hopeful look.

Paul smiled down at it. “Let’s get you to bed,” he said.

Chapter Fifteen

“OH SUSANNAH, OH DON’T YOU CRY FOR ME, FOR I’M GONE TO ALABAMA WITH MY BOYFRIEND ON MY KNEEEE...EEEE!” sang Scott at the top of his lungs. He was sailing up the I-9. He’d spent an hour at the last major truck stop, checking his rig from top to bottom. All systems were, as the spacemen said, good to go, and he figured he was going to make about five hundred miles before nightfall.

“FOR I’M GONE TO ALABAMA WITH MY BOYFRIEND ON MY...” One of the many horse-trailers he’d encountered on the road that afternoon was slowing rapidly in front of him. Scott started downshifting and signaling to change lanes. As he was whizzing by, still going a good naught sixty, he saw the trailer list badly sideways and then the whole thing, truck and trailer went off onto the soft shoulder and stalled.

Well, shit.

His mirrors saw no one coming or going. And though there were call-boxes all along these main highways, and though no man in his right mind drove the open country without a cell phone these days, the fella behind him looked to be in the kind of trouble that needed help more immediately than might be available in the middle of Buttfuck.

Scott worked his rig off the side, and threw on his flashers. He brought his triangle warning signs down from behind him and hopped out of the cab.

Running back down the shoulder, he could see a man struggling with a horse. The trailer had sunk into the soft mud by the shoulder so that it listed at a forty-five degree angle and the horse looked as freaked out as any being would be finding itself in a moving vehicle tipping sideways for no good reason.

“Hey there!” yelled Scott, running up.

The man glanced at him. He was taller than Scott, but young with big, green eyes as freaked out as the horse’s. He held the animal by the halter, something Scott would not have wanted to try, seeing the way the horse pulled and stomped its feet.

“Can I help?” said Scott, hopelessly.

“The rope in the trailer,” said the man. The horse jumped again and almost lifted him from the ground.

Scott ran around to the back of the trailer. When it had tipped, it looked like the door in the back had swung open and then completely broken off. Bits of rider’s tack lay all over

the ground and Scott saw a longish rope and bridle there, so he grabbed them and ran back.

The man grabbed the rope, performed some kind of knot trick and fastened the horse to the back of his truck. Then he leaned over, grabbed up a cowboy hat that had fallen into the dirt, dusted it off, clapped it back on his head and sat on the fender with a great sigh of relief.

“Wow, sir. Thank you so much.” The hat pushed his hair down into his eyes and he took it off, pushed the bangs back, and reapplied it. Now Scott could see dark brows over grass green eyes in a face not quite old enough to have even grown a proper beard. Those eyes regarded the horse trailer now. A look of dismay washed over his face. “Aw, hell,” he said.

Scott made a sympathetic grimace. “That’s gonna be a chore to get back on the road.”

“You think?”

“Christ, how’d you *do* that?”

“I think I blew a tire.”

They went round to the ditch side of the trailer and, sure enough, a naked rim with just the last vestiges of rubber was what they saw.

“You have a spare?” asked Scott.

The guy nodded. “Oh.” He held out his hand. “The name’s Joshua Miller and I thank you.”

“Scott.” They shook. “You got a cell phone?” asked Scott. “I can call AAA for you if you want.”

“Got an old CB radio in the truck,” said Joshua. He laughed. “Ain’t got AAA. Ain’t even got single A.”

Scott chuckled, dialing. “I’ll lend you my card. My b... friend lets me use an extra in case I need to rent a car or something... hello? Yes...” And Scott wandered back and forth, finger in one ear, while he talked to the Triple A people. Then he hung up.

“They’re gonna be a while, I’m afraid. This really is the middle of nowhere.”

Joshua looked worried. “Hey, I know you men hafta make a deadline. I don’t want to keep you.”

“Nah,” said Scott. “I push it hard for a few days so I can take it easy or make it back early. Don’t like stressing it. Or driving too tired.”

“That’s smart,” said Joshua. He was looking Scott over now. As if really seeing him.

“Your horse need anything?” asked Scott.

“I’ll get some hay outta the trailer if I can.” Joshua started climbing down the bank to get to the front of the trailer, his feet slid.

“Hold on, let me help you,” said Scott.

And he and Joshua kept themselves busy until the Triple A truck pulled up. Then there was a lot of logistical reckoning and Scott waited to sign for his card and then he shook Joshua’s hand. “Well, good luck.”

“Wait.” Joshua pulled out a card. “I’m at my uncle’s place in Redding. This is his horse and his trailer you’ve rescued. You come by, he’ll throw a steak on the grill for ya, I bet.”

“A steak?” said Scott. “I never say ‘no’ to a steak. I’ll try to make it.”

He climbed back in the cab of his truck, slid it out onto the road and gradually regained speed, the man with the pretty eyes and the beat up horse trailer receding down the highway behind him.

Scott thought if he made up the mileage tomorrow, he could take time off for a steak dinner in Redding, easy.

“Hullo? Jim?” Brian lay across the bed. He was showered and his newly shorn hair stuck up around his head in wet peaks. He had a towel tied around his hips and a slim, shiny buckled collar around his neck. He fingered it as he talked on the cell phone.

“Yes. We’re fine. Yeah. Work’s so cool. I love it. No, Paul went down to get the paper. We’re going to a bike show tomorrow. How’s Scott?”

He rolled over on the bed, letting the towel fall open and scooting up on the mattress as he did so. “How long? Man, you must be lonely? Oh.” Brian laughed. “You dirty old man. Yes, well Paul said you’d like those pictures. Yeah, I *bet* I look embarrassed.”

Brian reached over and turned both bed lamps down to the lowest setting. Then, as he talked on the phone, he rummaged through the collection of bottles on the nightstand.

“Well, will you ask him to call when you hear from him? I miss that man. I know. I miss you, too, Jim. Uh-huh. Okay. I will. Yeah. Love you, too. Bye.”

Brian hung up. He turned the phone off and lay back, feet spread, and poured a pool of oil into his hand. Then he just sat there.

Within minutes, the doorknob rattled and Paul's familiar inked head and leather clad shoulders came through the door. He dropped his keys on the table there and turned and said, "Erk."

"Hey, Daddy," said Brian, one hand up and gripping the spindle of the headboard, the other stroking his cock slowly with the oil. He opened his legs wider and rocked, arching.

Paul loosened his collar, unsnapping his gloves and shedding jacket and shirt rapidly. The snakes appeared as if from under veils.

Brian closed his eyes, lips parted, and rocked and stroked himself and said, "I'm thinking about you."

"Yeah?" Paul didn't bother to attempt his boots or jeans, crawling up on the bed with his fly half down.

"Thinking about how you feel..." Brian stroked himself, moaned. "When you grab my ankles."

Paul grabbed Brian's ankles. Brian's legs tensed and pelvis twisted as Paul did so.

"And push my legs up..." whispered Brian, and felt his legs lifted, his ankles over Paul's shoulders. Paul grinned and pulled down his zipper, releasing his cock from his briefs and pulling Brian's hips toward him.

"And fuck me," said Brian, as Paul pressed in.

Grunting, Paul did just that. Pressing Brian down into the sheets and pillows, the headboard thumping against the wall, both of their hands working Brian's cock until Paul suddenly reared back and roared, pistoning in and out hard and Brian had to put both hands above him to keep his head from banging into the headboard.

Milky fluid spurted from Brian's cock and he screamed "Daddy!" and Paul's mouth closed over his. Paul's back, ass, and thigh muscles strained, until his head fell against Brian's neck and he groaned. He shoved one more time and collapsed across his bent lover.

"Can't. Breathe," squeaked Brian, after a minute.

Paul scrambled up off of him. "Sorry."

"Oh man, don't be." Paul helped Brian unbend. "I talked to Jim."

“Yeah?”

“Scott’s on the road for a few more days. Poor baby. Jim says ‘thanks for the pictures.’”

Paul laughed.

“Someday, when I’m a mogul, those pictures will be worth millions,” said Brian airily.

“They’re worth millions now,” said Paul.

“You think Bill Gates has any pictures like that of himself floating around?”

Paul shuddered. “I hope not.”

Brian stretched. It was a long languorous cat-like stretch and it made Paul’s blue eyes go dark. “You hungry?”

“Yes.”

“For dinner.”

Paul gave him a look. “Yes.”

Brian stretched and rolled as if to sleep again. “Mmm, call me when it arrives.”

A loud swat landed on Brian’s round white behind. “Get dressed,” said Paul.

Brian looked back at his lover, smiling. “Yes sir.”

Redding was a big piece of nothing covered with one block of store fronts, a Wal-Mart, and a car dealership catty-corner from a lot full of used horse trailers.

Scott drove slowly under the dangerously low-slung banner declaring it “Redding Rodeo Days” with a date on it from the distant past. He pulled up in front of the car dealership and got directions to the ranch listed on the card.

“You won’t wanna drive that rig up there, though,” said the man who appeared to be Sales Manager, cashier and mechanical crew all in one.

“No?”

“Road’s a mess whenever we get a big storm like the one last week.”

So, feeling pretty rude at his presumption, he called the number on the card. Joshua sounded happy to hear from him, though, and told him to “set right there” so he could come pick Scott up.

The familiar truck pulled up, the familiar face with the big eyes and same dark hat looked out at him when Joshua flung open the passenger side door. Joshua seemed changed, though. He was quiet, one elbow on the open window, finger resting lightly on the wheel, mouth small and pensive and eyes forward.

“Thanks for the offer,” said Scott, just to fill the silence. “I hope you meant it.”

“Uncle Rich, he says he’s glad I offered,” said Joshua, without turning his head. And then he said nothing else.

The easy friendliness of the young man Scott had met beside the highway seemed completely buried under this subdued man. The truck pulled up, soon enough, though, to a long ranch house that seemed one of those types that began as a trailer home and then, with time and the odd additions, just sank into the land like it had grown there. A dotting of buildings stretched from the near right of the house off into the distance.

“That’s my uncle’s operation, that ways,” said Joshua, indicating the buildings and the fields beyond with a wave of his hand. He turned off the engine and hopped out of the truck.

Scott followed him up to the front door of the house, where Joshua paused, wiping his feet carefully and taking a deep breath before turning the handle.

“Uncle Rich?” he called. “We’re back, sir.”

And older man came down the hall, his voice and the sound of his rubber tipped cane preceding him. “Close that door behind you, son.”

Joshua leaned back and closed the door firmly as a big, older man came round the corner. He was over six foot tall and must have weighed around two hundred and fifty pounds, Scott guessed, being kind of connoisseur of big and tall men. There was a good bit of paunch stretching out the cotton of his traditionally styled snap front cowboy shirt, but there was also still a lot of muscle in those shoulders and arms, and the calloused hand that shook Scott’s was a vise.

“Uncle Richard, this is Scott... Scott, this is my uncle, Richard Miller,” said Joshua, straight out of Emily Post.

“Sir,” said Scott.

“Thank you for rescuing my idiot nephew and my horse,” said Uncle Richard. “I’m pleased you decided to take time out to let us thank you proper.”

Scott glanced quickly at Joshua and saw that his eyes were averted, his cheeks pink. "Thank you for inviting me."

The clock on the mantel ticked. The ice in Scott's iced tea clinked as he set it down and the clock on the mantel ticked again.

Uncle Rich didn't seem much inclined toward idle talk and Joshua seemed unable to speak at all. Scott found that he was carrying the burden of the conversation himself and he'd run out of things to say about the weather some time ago.

A dark woman with black hair in a severe bun on her head came into the room and Joshua sat up, almost eagerly. He said something to her in Spanish, and she answered in rapid pretty speech. Joshua started babbling away at her, only pausing to say, "Dinner's ready," and the next thing Scott knew, they were sitting at a big table with bowls of beans and salsa and chips, three plates with steaks on them as big as an entire cow and a multicolored rice that smelled amazing.

Every man had a glass of water and a glass of beer at their spot. Scott didn't drink when he was working, but he was too polite to decline. So he just let the glass sit there. He noticed that both Joshua and his uncle had a couple refills from a man who came in with a pitcher.

Nobody talked while they ate, either, but that was okay with Scott. He didn't want to stop chewing anyway. The food was delicious.

Uncle Rich finished his meal, put his silverware in a perfect cross on his plate, wiped his mouth with the cloth napkin, laid that down, said, "Excuse me," and stood. "I have work to do. Thank you so much, again, Mr... Good luck to you." And he thumped away down the hallway.

Joshua noticeably relaxed. He called out something in Spanish and the man came back in, this time carrying two highball glasses with some kind of amber liquid, ice cubes dancing in it.

Sighing mightily, Joshua tipped one back and drank it almost all the way down at once. "Christ, I needed that."

"I don't drink when I'm driving," said Scott, sounding prudish to his own ears. But it was the truth.

Joshua just gave him a look and snagged the second glass, setting it by his own. "You want a ride back right away or you have time for a tour?" he said. His words were noticeably slurred.

Scott figured it might not be a bad idea to let Joshua walk a little of the buzz off before climbing back in his truck. "I could do with a walk," he said.

Joshua stood, lifting the second glass and drinking down its contents like water. "C'mon, then."

Joshua led him through the house. It was large, but simple. "This is my room," he said in a bored way, turning on the light. Scott looked around. There were team banners on the walls, some ribbons hanging from trophies on a shelf, a bookshelf with, it appeared, an extensive collection of slim paperbacks, and a signed football on a desk covered with the paraphernalia of adolescence.

This brought Scott to a question he hadn't really considered before. "How old are you?"

Joshua shot him a look. "Twenty-four last June."

And he still lived in a child's room.

"Uncle Rich brought me up after my folks passed. It's just me and him, here." Joshua stepped to the door and turned the light out again. "C'mon, I'll show you the barns."

Barns. Plural. And Joshua wasn't kidding.

In a dune-buggy like car, Joshua drove them down the row of two and three story buildings, all of which seemed to house some overlarge multi-limbed farm machine. "Uncle Rich rents combines and such," said Joshua. "He used to have cattle, but he got sick of the trouble of ranching."

"You help him with his business?"

"Ain't much use to him. Was when there was livestock. That mare you saw, that was our last one. Now he's sold her, guess you could say I'm the last animal the old man's got left to burden him." That was said in the bitterest of tones.

Joshua turned the little vehicle around the end of the last building and up a rise. He killed the engine and sat back. From their vantage point they could see the sun just settling over the horizon, miles of grass and fence and one star showing in the evening sky.

Joshua exhaled. A long weary sound and put his feet up on the dash. "You got a girl?" he said suddenly.

Scott was surprised, but just said, "No."

Joshua turned his head, pushed back his hat and gazed at him steadily. "But you got a b...friend," he said.

Scott didn't drop his eyes, but his face went steadily warmer.

"Don't worry bout it," said Josh. "I ain't even got a b...friend. So you're one up on me."

Scott didn't come out to strangers, especially on the road and *especially* on the road in rodeo towns in Wyoming.

"I don't want trouble," he said. "I appreciate the steak dinner, Mr. Miller, but I don't want to..."

"Oh *hell*," said Joshua. "Don't go off all in a tizzy. I'm not gonna out you fer Christ sake. I'm just saying." He kicked at the steering wheel. "I'm just saying I once had a b...friend and... you're one up on me, is all, if yours ain't dumped you yet."

Oh.

"Shouldn't even call him that, I guess. I mean, you'd laugh if I told you."

Scott wasn't given to putting his feet into other men's shoes much. But he imagined, for one horrible moment, being gay and living in Redding with Uncle Rich. "Sorry," he said.

Joshua made a face. And Scott had an uncomfortable twinge of sympathy for the man who had nothing to do, nowhere to go, and apparently painful memories to accompany him.

"You took care of your uncle's cows?" he said.

"Cows?" Joshua gave him a look. "Yeah, I took care of the cattle. Uncle Rich had a line of cowponies for a while there, that was nice."

At least he was talking again, thought Scott. And he seemed to like talking about the farm animals more than the human ones. "A line?" he said. "What do you mean?"

"That mare," said Joshua. "She was a good one and Uncle Rich, he got a good bit of money for her. Federation stock, you know. Her blood's got some nice reining champions."

Scott had no idea what the man was talking about, so he asked, and got a history of cutting and reining horses, then a history of bloodlines. Joshua talked and talked and his face became animated and the young man Scott had met by the side of the road emerged as he talked.

His words rolled out of him and he made a story out of each and every question Scott asked him. Scott thought it was a lot like listening to one of those radio men who sometimes would get on the country stations late at night with their long stories.

“But I talk too much,” said Joshua.

“Naw,” said Scott. “You’re fine.”

He got a smile and a warm look from those eyes that, in hindsight, he realized he should have noticed and been forewarned by.

“Thanks for listening to me jaw,” said Joshua. “It gets too quiet sometimes.”

Scott couldn’t imagine it. He thought suddenly of Jim and Brian and Paul and thanked God in his heart for them.

Joshua studied the ground. Then he lifted his hand and just looped one finger around Scott’s. Scott looked up and those green eyes were just tired and sad and begging.

Christ.

“I got a man at home,” said Scott.

“I know.” Joshua dropped his fingers and looked away. “Well...” Joshua sighed deeply. “Guess I should be offering to drive you back to your truck. Thanks for rescuing me.” he smiled and his eyes crinkled at the edges.

And then, for no good reason that he could think of later except the man needed it and Scott knew what that was like, Scott leaned forward, took Joshua’s chin and kissed him. Once. Soft and lingering and then he let Joshua go.

Joshua blinked at him, eyes wide and hurting.

Oh, man. Scott reached up and touched that too young face, then, all on impulse, leaned forward and kissed him again. This time, Scott wrapped his hand around Joshua’s neck and held him there so Scott could open Joshua’s lips and let the kid feel his tongue. Joshua’s mouth opened and just received him, hungry and eager as a young calf, his hands coming up to rest on Scott’s shoulders. When Scott broke the kiss, Joshua’s mouth remained open, his eyes closed, long lashes fanning flushed cheeks. His eyes popped open and he took a deep breath.

“I shouldn’t have done that,” said Scott.

Joshua nodded. His eyes were wild and hot. “I’m sorry,” he whispered.

“Sorry for what?”

“This.” Joshua’s hands moved to either side of Scott’s face, and he kissed Scott back. It was an inexperienced kiss and that was, finally, what made Scott do what he did next. If he’d felt the man was anything less than an innocent, he would have shoved Joshua away.

Joshua’s hat was pushed askew, his hair sticking up. Scott took it from Joshua’s head, smoothing his hair and said, “Where can we go?”

Joshua looked at him. “There’s a sofa in the barn.”

Joshua was an eager and simple lover. Happy to be kissed, happy to be touched. Running his fingers over Scott wonderingly and crying out like a boy when he came in Scott’s hands, his thighs trembling and his one hand clutching at Scott’s arm.

Scott was working himself, resting his cheek against Joshua’s cool chest, when Joshua said, “Can I suck you?”

Squeezing the base of his cock and waiting until Joshua got the condom on, Scott watched in awe as Joshua bent over him, his eyelids fluttering, cheeks hollowing as he sucked. He looked up at Scott and his eyes were shining as if with tears and Scott laid his hand on that silky long hair and came in the condom as hard as he ever had.

Then he lay back on the sofa, gazing up at the roof of the barn, Joshua passed-out across his chest, and tried to think what he’d done and what he was going to do about it.

“Hello, Jim?”

Just outside of some backwater. Twenty-four hours from delivery and still well within schedule, Scott had pulled off at a rest stop for ten minutes to call home.

“Hey, baby. God, Scott, how long ‘til you get home?”

“Nother thirty hours at most.”

“Can’t wait to see you. Hey, Paul sent some pictures from New York. I’m gonna forward them in a minute.” There was a lot of feedback noise and mumbling and then the beep as an image was delivered to Scott’s cell phone. He looked at it and laughed. Brian buck naked, in a collar, with a leash hanging from it, grinned up at him.

“Wow, Jim, that is nasty,” he laughed in to the phone. “You gonna get busted by the Feds for internet porn, lover?”

Jim was hooting away there on the line. “There’s more.”

"I bet there is." Scott sighed, a long heartfelt exhalation. "Wish you were here right now, baby. I need you, Jim."

"Soon." Jim sounded a bit choked up.

"Yeah. Soon. Well, I gotta go."

"Drive carefully."

"Yes, sir," said Scott. He disconnected and looked back over his seat. "Hey, you wanna pee, you better do it now, bub. I ain't stopping between here and Seattle."

"Okay." Joshua climbed over the seat and slid down and out the passenger door, running across the grass to the men's room in his bare feet.

Scott watched him. He had thirty hours to think of something.

"Wish Brian were here," he said to himself. Of course, he could call Brian, but truth was he didn't know how to explain himself. If Brian could *see* Joshua and maybe *talk* to him, Scott figured he might understand.

When Joshua had roused from his sex-induced nap and sat up, Scott had still been writing the speech in his mind that would let the boy down easy and somehow leave them both with some sense of peace.

When Joshua woke, he dressed quietly, brows serious below the brim of his hat as he drove back to his truck in the dune buggy. Scott wanted to thank his uncle again and Joshua led him to where the old man was working in his office. There was another man there and the uncle barely acknowledged Scott when he expressed his thanks.

"Don't know," Scott heard the uncle say to his visitor as the doors swung closed again. "Friend of my useless nephew's."

Grim-faced, Joshua stopped at his room again, before they left. "I have a book to take back to the library," he said. He must have misinterpreted the way Scott was looking around his room. "Got a lot of books in here for a cowboy, I guess."

Scott hadn't noticed the books, really. He was the sort of man who noticed sports gear. "Nah."

"Alls I got is books," said Joshua. "Think I'd go stark raving if I couldn't disappear into 'em sometimes."

Later, Scott would go over and over it, trying to find the moment when he'd made up his mind. "Come to Los Angeles with me," he heard himself say. "Can't live your whole life in a book."

Next thing, Joshua was sending his truck ahead of him and throwing his little duffel in the back of Scott's cab and here they were, barreling along at ninety miles an hour back toward Scott's family and their exclusive relationship.

Not that he'd done anything to endanger that trust, mind you, just a lot of kissing and hand jobs, really. Scott was clean and he planned to stay that way and he'd told Joshua about Jim. But it still felt like cheating.

Scott looked down at the picture of Brian in his cell phone. He thought of Jim.

Oh Hell.

The passenger door opened and Joshua climbed back in. He'd scrubbed his face and the long brown bangs fell, wet and dark, into those grass green eyes. Pink and clean, with a grin stretching across it, his face looked even younger than the twenty-four years he'd admitted to Scott. "Ready?" he said.

Hell no, thought Scott. But he turned the key, pulled the clutch and put the truck into gear. "Buckle up," he said.

Jim always fought the anticipation and dread that tumbled continuously in his belly in the hours before Scott arrived back home.

Scott was not an easy man to love. He battled one's affection, battled one's sentiment. And just when he seemed to have relaxed and decided to trust a man, he'd get some crazy idea in his head and he and Jim would have to battle past that.

It was worth it, though.

Because once the smoke had cleared, Jim would find himself nose to nose and belly to belly with a man fifty percent horny little devil and fifty percent intense pure heart, Pretty, tiger-like eyes gazing at him like he was the next best thing.

Jim was sitting on the sofa pretending not to be waiting when he heard Scott's rig pull up out there on the street.

His heart pounding, hands feeling suddenly cold, he heard the door outside slam, and the sound of footsteps. He thought he heard a man's voice talking, but then Scott talked to himself a bit now and then.

The door creaked open. That golden head peaked inside, a big grin stretching across it.

“Baby,” Jim forgot all about pretense and Scott had barely gotten his duffel thrown down before Jim had his man in both of his arms and was tasting his tonsils.

He set Scott down with a thump, but didn’t relinquish him. “Welcome home.”

A clearing of a throat made him look up. A slender young man stood on his porch wearing worn jeans, a dark snap button shirt, long straight brown hair sticking out from under a cowboy hat and big green eyes. “Hey,” said the stranger.

Jim looked down at Scott. His eyes made a question mark.

“Hey Jim,” said Scott. “This cowboy followed me home. Can I keep him?”

Chapter Sixteen

“You want any more potatoes?”

“No thank you,” said Joshua. “You’re a really fine cook, Mr. Jim.”

“It’s just Jim, son,” said Jim. He shot another look at Scott. They were like tiny little arrows, those looks. Scott figured if they *were* arrows, he’d pretty much look like he’d been attacked by a tribe of angry Indians by now.

Joshua was looking around the kitchen, those enormous eyes rolling. Jim sighed. “I’ve got pie for dessert, if you’d like some.”

“Yes, please,” said Joshua, sitting straight up. Jim dished out the pie, added a dollop of ice cream and went for the coffee things.

Scott figured this was going to be a long evening.

“So, Joshua, what do you do?”

“I guess I’m kinda a wrangler, sir,” said Joshua. “I can handle most kinds of ranch animals.”

“You have a job set up out here in Los Angeles, then?”

“No, sir.” Joshua looked from Scott to Jim and back to Scott.

“Joshua thought he might go up to Camarillo and around the Equestrian center down here, looking for someplace that needs help,” said Scott.

Jim set the coffee pot down on the table with a little thunk. “You take cream, Joshua?”

“No, sir. Thank you, sir.”

Jim shot a look at Scott. Ouch. Those little arrows were getting mighty pointy.

While Joshua went off to the powder room, Jim said. “So where’s our cowboy going to sleep?”

“In my room?” Scott said a little weakly. “Because I’ll be. Sleeping. In your room. Right?” Jim shot him a look.

Hell.

“How’s your cowboy going to feel about sleeping *alone*, Scott?”

“Jim, nothing like that is going on. I mean, well, maybe something sorta, but not like that. Nothing like...” Jim was stirring cream in his coffee in a manner that Scott thought might turn it to butter in the near future.

“He knows,” Scott said. “I told him.”

“Yes, sir,” said Joshua from the doorway. He looked worried and just like his horse had that day by the highway, skittish and all hands and big eyes. “Scott told me you and him are an item. I don’t mean nothing, but Scott was kind enough to invite me to stay...” He drifted off, big eyes going from Scott to Jim to Scott to Jim. “I should leave,” he said.

“No,” said Jim. “We have plenty of room and you’re welcome, Joshua.” He stood.

“Let me help you with those, sir,” said Joshua, jumping to take plates from Jim’s hands. He busied himself at the sink. “You cooked, I’ll clean,” he announced. And when Jim didn’t immediately respond, added, “Go on, now,” shoos them out of the kitchen.

With one more dark look at Scott, Jim went.

“Babe, come on, let me explain.” Scott followed Jim in to their bedroom. Jim had gone to the marijuana forest and begun picking buds. His intent was obvious.

“Please do,” he said.

“I just ran into him. He was stranded. We started talking and... I mean, *look* at the guy, Jim.”

“What I was noticing,” said Jim, sifting seeds and crumbling grass into the bowl of his bong. “Was how he was looking at *you*.”

Scott went back and made sure the bedroom door was shut.

“What are you talking about, Jim?”

“That boy has a huge crush on you, Scott.”

“No, he’s just lonely.”

“Hmmm.” Jim lit the bong and took a long hit. He offered it to Scott, who took it gratefully.

“He got dumped recently. And he lives alone with a son-of-a-bitch. Of course he latched onto the first gay man he met. Probably the *only* gay man he’s met up there.” Scott exhaled through his nose and passed the bong back to Jim. “He just needs a friend, Jim.”

Jim studied him. Inhaled smoke. Exhaled. “Friend,” Jim said.

Scott looked across at him with eyes going dark in the dimly lit, smoky room. “Missed you, baby.”

Jim’s eyes narrowed.

Scott came over and sat next to Jim. He rested his chin on Jim’s big shoulder and looked up at Jim through his lashes. “You miss me?”

Jim set the bong down on the table.

Scott leaned against Jim, opening his legs a bit and wriggling. He rubbed at the growing bulge at his crotch and whispered, “Been hard since you kissed me, ‘hello.’”

Jim’s eyes followed the movement of Scott’s hand.

Scott’s other hand got up under Jim’s shirt and started finding a nest in his chest hair. “Keep thinking about that big cock fucking me.” His hand clutched at his crotch as he said, “Thought dinner would never be over...” and he was flat on his back on the undulating waterbed, Jim’s mouth on him, Jim’s tongue pressing into his own. Warm, calloused hands under his T-shirt and pulling at the little nipple ring there.

Scott moaned and tried to get Jim to press against him where he needed it. He helped Jim strip his clothes from him, loving the smell and the feel of it, and when Jim rolled him and began pushing the lube in, Scott bent his head to the mattress in abject gratitude. Then he heard the snap and crinkle of what must have been a condom wrapper and he turned his head. “Christ, Jim, you don’t need that.”

“Don’t I?”

It felt like a window shattering in slow motion deep inside him. Scott rolled over and looked up at Jim. “No.”

“You haven’t been having sex with that boy?” And who knows who else? It wasn’t said, but it was implied.

“No,” said Scott. “Not sex. Not exactly.” His cock was wilting and so was Jim’s. Scott rolled over on his belly.

He felt Jim’s warm hand rest then, in the middle of his back. There was something about the gesture, something anchoring and sure. Like Jim was saying, right now I’m upset

with you, but it's going to be okay. And Scott just lay his forehead on his arms and said, "I love you, you asshole."

"Me, too, kiddo."

"Okay, there was... something."

"What sorta something?"

"Hand jobs. I'm sorry."

Silence. Jim's hand moved slowly up and down. He was petting that little bit of soft hair at the base of Scott's back. Scott remembered once when Jim was waxing uncharacteristically poetic, he'd told Scott that he'd fallen in love with Scott the first time he'd seen that little patch of hair.

"I knew it wasn't right at the beginning. When we first asked you to quit playing. I had a bad feeling."

Scott thought maybe he'd never felt more awful in his life. "I don't want anybody else, Jim. That's not what this was about."

Jim was silent again, his hand petting. Sometimes, Jim just understood. It was a Toppish characteristic of his that Scott frequently cursed. But Scott was hoping and praying this would be one of those times when Jim just understood.

"I would have appreciated it if you'd spoken to me first," said Jim.

"Would you? You get a long-distance call sayin', 'there's a young man here near dying of loneliness in the middle of Buttfuck and I just want to give him a body to hold onto and a kind hand around his aching dick,' and you would have said, 'Go for it?'"

Jim was silent for a long while and then he said, "Was it really like that?"

"He was like a puppy somebody kicked out onto the road, Jim."

He heard Jim sigh, a long thoughtful exhalation through his nose. Then that big warm hand moved, just stroking the place at the bottom of Scott's spine. "He's a good boy," said Jim. "Maybe he can teach you some manners."

"Like hell," said Scott and got a nice swat on the behind for that. He rolled over. His cock popped up like it had never been down and he could see that Jim's cock was feeling better about things, too. Dark red, and jutting up there from between Jim's thighs. Man. Scott licked his lips. He always forgot just what a thing of beauty Jim's cock was.

"You gonna stick that in me, baby?" he said, hoarsely. "Cuz my ass is so lonely for you."

Jim growled and manhandled Scott back onto his belly a little roughly. “Been thinking about that ass a lot...”

“Baby, slow down, it’s been weeks.”

“Deal with it,” growled Jim, climbing up on him and pushing it in fast and hard, because he knew that’s what Scott wanted. Because Scott knew Jim knew.

Scott moaned long and loud. “You’re breaking me, Jim.”

Growling, Jim pumped into his lover. “So fucking tight.”

“Yeah,” said Scott, gripping at the rolling mattress with both hands. “Oh, fuck, yeah.”

Skin slapping against skin; their voices rose together.

Joshua looked up from where he was seated on the sofa when Scott came padding out.

“Hey,” said Scott. “I’ll show you where you can sleep. And I’ve got you clean towels.”

“Thank you.”

Joshua followed him down the hallway. At the bedroom, Scott put the towels on the bed. “This is my room, except I hardly ever sleep here. The bathroom’s just there, second door on the left. Jim and me are the fourth door down there on the left. You want something, come on and knock.”

Joshua was looking down at the towels and nodding. He pushed the hair out of his face in that nervous way of his and said, “Jim’s a nice man.”

“He’s a real son-of-a-bitch,” said Scott. “But that’s what it takes to handle a son-of-a-bitch like me.”

“Oh,” said Joshua. “I don’t think you’re a son-of-a-bitch, Scott.”

Oh hell.

“Well, I am.” Scott went to the door. “See you at breakfast, Joshua.”

He heard the kid mumble, “Goodnight,” as he shut the door.

Scott crawled into the nest that Jim and his waterbed made for him. He curled up around his lover just like a squirrel and said, "That boy needs a Top worse than an old jar of jelly."

Jim chuckled. His fingers traveled over Scott like he was Braille, little needles and pricks of good feelings following them. "You applying for the position, baby?"

"No way," said Scott. "I'm a brat. A spoiled brat."

"That you are."

"Not spoiled enough, though."

"No?" Jim's fingers found a part of Scott of which he was particularly fond and Scott vibrated a little against him.

"Mmm," said Scott into Jim's chest. "Do that again."

"Do that again, what?"

"Do that again, sir," whispered Scott, snuggling in a little closer to give Jim better access. "Please, sir, thank you, sir..."

Joshua seemed content in a kind of yearning, heartsick way, to follow Scott around, but not ask for more than friendship. He eagerly helped out with whatever housework he could find to do, was respectful and sincerely grateful toward Jim and, two weeks down the road, he actually got a part time job at a ranch up off of Cucamonga. A man kept steer for cutting classes and needed someone to take care of them.

Jim's reserve at the wisdom of letting the young man live with them was abated somewhat. Of course, Joshua had no idea how things really were between Scott and Jim. Partly because Jim wanted to keep things low-key and partly because Scott was on his best behavior.

Jim smiled to himself as he dumped the mayo into his tuna spread. A sorry, grateful Scott was a joy in more ways than one. Every time Jim thought about what they'd done the previous evening, his head felt warm and his balls ached.

"Hey, you seen Joshua?" Scott came in, bouncing a soccer ball from his hand to the floor to his foot to his hand to the floor. Jim caught the ball mid bounce.

"No balls in the house." And at Scott's pleased look and mouth open to retort, he added, "Not even funny. I haven't seen Joshua since he went out to bring the garbage pails back up from the street."

Scott snatched his soccer ball from Jim. “Huh. I was going to show him... oh, fuck.”

Jim was going to say something about Scott’s language, but then saw where Scott was looking.

Paul had built a ‘rec-room’ out of the converted and unused old garage standing at the back of the property. He’d reinforced the walls, insulated them, installed heating in the new wooden floors and, most importantly, moved the St. Andrew’s cross, discipline ‘horse’ and a few other items into the room.

There was also a ping-pong table and a video game corner.

They kept the room locked, for so many reasons. But Scott had cleaned it this morning, as Paul and Brian were due home within the next couple of weeks and he’d left the door unlocked.

Joshua stood in the open door. From the window Jim and Scott could see the young man’s face.

Scott shot out the back door before Jim could stop him.

Halfway across the yard he called Joshua’s name and the young man turned, his eyes big, his face white. Scott skidded up to him, talking fast and Joshua took a step back. “What...” Scott reached for Joshua’s arm and, maybe he imagined it or maybe Joshua really did flinch away.

Scott reached out and carefully shut the garage door. Then he took his key out and locked it. Joshua was looking at him as if reading him anew to see if there were any words he’d missed on the first reading, or small print.

“Was that...?” he said.

“A ping pong table?” said Scott, wryly. “I’m afraid so.”

Joshua’s mouth seemed to be trying to shape a word and then Jim appeared behind Scott and Joshua’s face went very still. “Oh,” he said.

Always defensive, and feeling just a little guilty, too, Scott rolled up onto the balls of his feet and said, hostilely, “Oh? Oh, what, cowboy?”

Joshua’s eyes went from Scott and Jim to the garage.

“Didn’t you get a good enough look?” said Scott and he stepped up to the door.

“Scott...” Jim was saying, but Scott opened the door wide and stepped in, swaggering just a bit with braggadocio.

“Come on, Joshua. You can’t see everything from the door.” And when Joshua looked back at Jim, he added, “Oh, don’t worry, Jim won’t do anything to *you*. This little master/slave thing is exclusive, you know?”

Joshua looked worried. “Scott, I don’t think...”

“This is *my* personal favorite.” Scott stood behind the St. Andrew’s cross, his chin on the cross bar and both hands around the tips of the beams. “See, you can strap me on forward or backward. Great access points here and here,” he gestured roughly and slid one arm through a restraint there and slipped the buckle closed with a snap. “See?”

“Scott. You don’t have to explain,” Joshua said.

“But I *want* to,” said Scott, grinning a big angry grin.

“Scott, stop it,” said Jim quietly.

“No, Joshua wants to see,” said Scott. “Don’t you, Joshua?”

“SCOTT!”

Breathing hard, Scott whirled around and yelled at Jim, “WHAT?”

Jim stared him down, eyes steady, voice calm. “One more chance, Scott.”

“See,” said Scott out of the side of his mouth to Joshua, glaring at Jim. “If I say ‘no’ one more time, I get strapped to that thing and punished.”

“I’m sorry, Scott,” said Joshua. “I didn’t mean to pry into...”

“NO. FUCK YOU,” said Scott quite loudly to Jim.

“Joshua, I apologize for Scott,” said Jim quietly. “Please go into the house. I’ll be there in a minute.”

“No, I want him to stay,” said Scott. But Joshua skittered out the door, pretty darned fast, in Scott’s opinion, and Jim walked over and shut the door behind him.

Scott was breathing hard and he couldn’t keep still, pacing back and forth and when Jim approached him he pushed the man away. “No.”

“Scott, you know we have to do this.”

Scott stopped dead. Just stopped. “Fine,” he said.

Jim sat down on the bench. “Come here.”

Scott walked over and Jim unbuttoned his pants and pulled them down, bringing Scott into his lap easily and before Scott had even taken a breath, Jim swatted him hard ten times and then popped him back up to his feet.

“Corner,” he said.

“That’s it?”

Jim eyes were blazing. “Quiet,” he said. He pointed. “Corner.” Scott looked at Jim as if he were considering and then biting back a number of words, but then he went off to the corner and stood. When Jim came up, lifted his hands and clapped them on top of his head, he dutifully clasped his fingers there and didn’t comment.

“I’ll be back in twenty minutes,” said Jim.

“I’m sorry about that, son. Are you okay?”

Joshua had been sitting on the sofa. He started and almost rose to his feet when Jim entered the house.

“Yes, sir. I’m s-s-sorry, sir. I see now I shouldn’t have opened the door.”

“Sit, son. You don’t need to apologize.” Jim came round and sat in a chair.

“Is Scott all right?”

Jim studied Joshua. “Scott is facing a corner. I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“F-facing a corner?”

“After I spanked him, I set him to face a corner,” said Jim, calmly, as if he were explaining how one set out annuals in the garden. “We should have told you, son. I see that now and I am very sorry. Scott and I have a very special relationship. It is very important to us that Scott relinquishes this control to me.”

Joshua’s eyes were wide, but there was something about the shock there that seemed less judgmental and fearful of Jim or Scott and more fear of something else.

“Do you have any questions? Concerns?”

“N-n-no, sir.”

“I am willing to explain anything that confuses or bothers you, Joshua.”

“It’s none of my business, sir,” said Joshua. “Whatever you and Scott do between you is none of my business.” He was afraid of knowing, Jim thought. And that was very interesting.

Jim rubbed his chin. He played with his beard and then he said, “Has anyone ever spanked you, son?”

The color seeped up Joshua’s neck and very slowly stained his face a deep rose. “Sir?” he barely whispered.

“Or is it that you’ve only thought about it?” asked Jim, with that unerring perception. “And you never knew how to ask?”

Joshua’s mouth opened and he was breathing hard. He looked like he might bolt at any moment.

“The first rule in this house,” said Jim, “is we don’t keep problems to ourselves. You have worries, you bring them to someone. Do you understand?”

Joshua stared at him.

“I said, do you understand, Joshua?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good boy,” said Jim. “Scott needs me now. While I attend to him, I’d like you to go into the kitchen and start setting the table for dinner. We’ll eat in half an hour.”

And he stood and walked out, leaving Joshua gaping after him.

Jim sat in the big comfy chair that Paul had dragged out to the rec room and rocked, reading a magazine. Scott stood in the corner with his hands on his head. When the digital clock on the wall clicked onto the eight, Jim said, “You can come over here now, Scott.”

Scott lowered his arms and came across the room, slowly and via a large arch, but he ended up standing before Jim.

“That was cruel, Scott,” said Jim. “I’m disappointed in you.”

Scott scowled. He'd been standing in the corner reliving the way Joshua had looked at him, standing in the open garage doorway, and he was still feeling defensive.

"Do you think we're through here?" asked Jim.

"No," said Scott. He felt surly.

"Do you think you can go into the house and apologize to Joshua?"

Of course, the correct answer was, "Yes, sir." Scott willed his mouth to speak the magic words that would get him out of the rec room unscathed, and was only a little surprised to hear, instead, "Why the hell should I apologize to him?"

Jim didn't react at first. Which of course was even more chilling than when he snapped out "corner" or "here." It meant he was thinking.

Scott ground his teeth and breathed harshly through his nostrils.

"I think what really bothers me, Scott, is how you are judging yourself, here. How you are judging *us*."

"I didn't!" said Scott, immediately. "It was Joshua..."

"Joshua didn't say anything. Joshua apologized."

"Well, he would," snarled Scott. "He's a kiss ass."

Jim frowned and tapped one hand on the arm of the chair. "Bring me the paddle," he said, finally.

Well, good. Do it and get it over with. Scott stomped over to the case where they kept the paddles and toys. His hand hovered over the wooden one, but at the last minute he decided not to give Jim the opportunity, and pick the more painful lexan paddle.

He brought it back, and dropped his pants, his movements jerky and angry, glaring at Jim the whole time. Dropping to his knees, he laid himself over Jim's lap, his teeth gritted, hands locked around each other, legs tensed.

"Ten, Scott," said Jim.

For reasons he could not bring close enough to the surface of his brain to articulate, this low number angered Scott.

Jim's hand moved on his back, like some kind of freaky divining rod. "Fifteen? Is that better?"

Scott nodded his head once and closed his eyes.

The first swat sounded loud in the room. The second, third and fourth left bright round patterns of red on Scott's behind and his feet scrabbling against the floor.

By the tenth, Jim was really wishing Scott hadn't requested more. His lover's butt and the backs of his legs were fire red and his body was shaking. Jim administered the last five in an agony, and then dropped the paddle, lifted Scott off his knees and hugged him fiercely.

"I love you, Scott," he said. "And I will do anything for you, do you understand?"

He didn't expect a reply, Scott was shaking and mute. Eventually, he calmed enough so that Jim was able to help him pull his pants back up and walk back to the house for dinner.

Both Joshua and Scott were silent and thoughtful before, during and after the meal and Jim decided to send Scott to bed early.

Scott curled on the bed, restless and jumpy. Jim sat beside him, trying to soothe him, but Scott was unable to relax.

"Please, Jim." Scott was almost tearful. "I need..."

"Okay, baby. Let me see what I can do."

Jim made him as comfortable as possible, while giving Scott the security he needed. He laid him on his stomach with wrists and ankles spread and bound with the soft Velcro straps.

Then Jim sat with him, stroking his back until Scott went to sleep, and then he drew the sheets up carefully over Scott and went out to the living room to deal with Joshua.

Joshua was sitting in the living room, watching television. The sound was turned up loud, he had the remote in his hand and his foot was tapping against the floor rapidly.

Jim came in the room. "Can you turn that down please?"

Joshua looked at him. He lifted the remote and muted the sound.

"Thank you." Jim sat down.

Joshua sat, looking at him, that one foot nervously jittering.

“So, Scott tells me you were in a relationship,” said Jim.

“Yep.”

Jim noted, curiously, the lack of Joshua’s habitual ‘sir.’

“But it wasn’t a domestic discipline relationship,” he stated. “That’s what we call this, you know.”

Joshua just looked at him for a second and then he said, “No.”

“How much older was he than you?”

That wine-colored flush rose into Joshua’s cheeks again. “How... how’d you know?”

Jim just sat waiting for the answer.

“He was forty,” said Joshua, sounding angry for the first time since Jim had met him. “And he was married, it turns out.”

Jim sat and waited.

“He had a son my age,” said Joshua. “Can you believe that? We’d been seeing each other off and on three months and he tells me.”

Jim waited.

“Don’t know why I didn’t just walk away then,” said Joshua. “I just couldn’t. And he... he...”

Joshua’s face darkened. “He’d call and I’d just come running like his *dog*. Bastard.” And Joshua raised the remote and deselected the ‘mute’ so the sound blasted into the room like an audio fist.

“Turn that down,” said Jim.

Joshua scowled.

“I said,” said Jim, loudly and distinctly, “Turn. That. Down.”

Glaring at him, Joshua tossed the remote to Jim. “You do it,” he said, and jumped up.

Jim set the remote down and followed Joshua. The young man went straight to Scott’s bedroom. Jim noted he didn’t shut the door and he threw himself on the bed.

“Young man,” said Jim, feeling his way very carefully. “Go out to that living room and turn that television down.”

“You do it,” said Joshua again.

Jim bit his lip and studied the back of Joshua’s head. Then he walked over to the bed, lifted the man by his arm, swung him to his feet, gave his bottom one hard smack and said, “Do as I told you to.”

Joshua yelped. And then he walked out to the living room, heels thumping angrily all the way, picked up the remote and turned the sound off.

Then he came back into his bedroom. “There,” he said. “Happy?”

“No,” said Jim. “But you are, aren’t you?”

The deep wine color flooded Joshua’s face again.

“I told you, Joshua. You can ask me anything. I expect it. Do you have something you need to ask me?”

Joshua looked confused. Then he looked angry. Then he looked confused.

Jim relented. “It’s been a long day, maybe we all should go to bed early.”

Joshua nodded.

“Goodnight, son.”

He heard the voice softly behind him as he went down the hall, “Goodnight, sir.”

In bed, his hand resting lightly on Scott’s arm, Jim dialed his cell phone. “Hello, Paul? I know it’s late. I’m sorry. Listen, when are you and Brian coming back? Really? Well, there’s something that’s come up here and I wanted to talk to you about it. Do you have time right now? Thank you...”

Chapter Seventeen

They were due back in Los Angeles within the week. Brian's internship had concluded, successfully according to his sponsor's report and his school's, and he and Paul were cruising through the East Village in a sort of celebratory romp.

Brian and Paul had been together, now, for two years. Though Brian wasn't much for cruising bars, and though his social life had basically consisted of school, home, school, home, he had come to realize that there was a big difference between the men he met at the trendy leather bars and the few couples he met who were like him and Paul.

There was talking the talk and then there was walking the walk.

And, within that smaller circle, there was an endless variety of complex circles. So, though Paul and Brian moved tonight through a club full of leather wearing, spiked collar sporting, leashed and harnessed men, women and others, Brian still kept that certain watchfulness he always bore toward strangers.

He was leaning against the bar now, waiting for Paul to come out of the men's room. Compared to most of the patrons, Brian appeared fairly vanilla this evening. He wore nice jeans, a loose white shirt open to his mid-riff and a slim black collar.

If one looked closely, one might see the tiny gold loops in each nipple. And only Brian knew that his collar was real and had its own matching leash.

"Hi there." A big man, shirtless, with a leather jacket unbuttoned on top and a leather biker cap, shouldered up to the bar near Brian and gave him a wink.

"Hello," said Brian.

"Can I buy you a drink?"

"I'm waiting for my friend."

"That's cool," said the man. "I'll buy your friend a drink, too."

"Well, that's very generous of you," said Paul. He stood behind the man and the look in his eye gave Brian a little shiver.

"Hey, no problem," said biker-cap, turning and though Brian was expecting the usual stunned and then quietly shrinking away reaction, this man just yelped, "Hey, how ya doin' buddy?" and moved as if to embrace Paul.

Even more shockingly, Paul shouted in pleased surprise and returned the embrace.

“Brian, this is Freddie,” said Paul after all the leather slapping was over with. “He and I used to ride together up in Ontario.”

“Then this genius decides he wants to sell choppers,” said Freddie,

“And this idiot decides he wants to teach,” said Paul.

And they both proceeded to tell Brian all about each other, with much laughing and pointing of fingers and unexplained jokes that set them both to pounding on the bar as they laughed helplessly, ordering one round after another.

Brian was an intelligent, well-adjusted young man. But he was a Brat and he was feeling a definite lack of Proper Appreciation.

He preened. He leaned on the bar and shook his ass. He leaned his elbows on the bar and let his shirt fall open to show his nipple rings. He gave men walking by the eye.

“Hey, Paul, I think we’ve been ignoring your fella here,” said Freddie wisely and Brian looked up, startled, into the man’s keen brown eyes.

Paul looked over at Brian, bemusedly. “Really, Brian?”

Brian sulked, damn it. He could feel himself doing it. But Freddie just laughed, head thrown back, and grabbed him with a big, leather-clad arm and gave Brian a quick squeeze.

“I’m sorry, kid. I won’t steal your man away another minute. But, Paul, we’ve gotta meet up somewhere.”

“Oh,” Paul looked disappointed and Brian felt like a jerk. “We’re headed back to LA next week, Freddie.”

“You’re kidding!” said Freddie. “But I’m teaching at UCLA next semester. I’ll be living right there!”

Brian saw a chance to redeem himself and said, quickly, “You should stay at our place when you get there. Until you get set up. Then you and Paul can catch up.”

“Really? No, I couldn’t impose.”

Paul gazed at Brian, his eyes dark with a happy gratitude. “Yes, we’d like that.”

And Brian felt like a prince again.

Later, Paul said, “Freddie’s the only old friend who understands the life.”

“Oh,” said Brian. Well, that explained that knowing look Freddie’d given Brian. The man had Top-sense. “Where’s his partner?”

“He’s been alone for a long time,” shrugged Paul. “He has the odd relationship here and there, but nothing seems to gel.”

Brian had a chilling thought and he shivered.

Paul looked at him curiously.

“Just thinking,” said Brian. “There’ll be three Tops in our house.”

Paul just laughed.

Paul told Jim about it that night when Jim called to tell him about Joshua.

“The living room sofa folds out,” said Jim, ever the housekeeper. “And we have three bathrooms. There shouldn’t be a problem.”

“Are you sure? It’ll be a lot more work for you.”

“I’m absolutely sure. And Joshua helps with the housework. Actually, I’ve been meaning to talk to you about him.”

“That’s right, you said.”

“He wants being brought out, Paul.”

“He doesn’t know he’s gay? But...”

“No, no, no. I don’t even know if there’s a word for it. He’s a perfect little angel, a model of decorum, and then he brats like an expert.”

“Like Scott?”

“This young man is *nothing* like Scott.”

Paul could hear the worry in Jim’s voice. Jim was always afraid of failing those who relied on him. “You’ll be fine,” said Paul. “Another week and we’ll be there and then we can let Brian have a talk with him.”

“Oh my *God*,” said Jim.

Paul had to laugh.

“Wait’ll you meet Brian,” said Scott. “He’s great.”

They sat on the front porch. Scott had been so excited he appeared to be impersonating a Tasmanian devil, and with Joshua constantly tailing him, Jim had finally had enough and chased them both out front to wait for Paul and Brian’s arrival.

Joshua gazed at the empty street in front of the house with worried, serious eyes as if he expected this Prince to manifest right in front of him.

“He’ll love you,” said Scott. “Don’t worry.”

Of course voicing Joshua’s worry only made it more likely, in his mind. “You said he goes to college?”

“He’s a brain.” Scott shrugged. “But he’s not bookish, you know? He’s got a mean little passing arm and he knows his way around a basketball court. Hey! Me, you and him can go kick a soccer ball around later.”

As Joshua’s soccer skills were meager, this only increased his anxiety.

This college man with the superior athletic skills who had been Scott’s best friend long before he met Joshua was starting to loom larger than Armageddon to Joshua.

“Maybe I should wait inside,” he said. “I’m getting another headache.”

But just then Scott jumped off the swing and hooted. “There they are!”

There was nothing for it, Joshua was going to have to meet this person.

An airport limo pulled up to the curb, and, almost immediately, a big inked man emerged from the passenger’s side. A moment later, the back door opened and a tall twenty-something blond man climbed out. His hair was short on top, twisting in curls at the nape of his neck and he wore a white business shirt, thin necktie and Hollywood Star sunglasses. This was the personage upon whom Scott leapt like a golden retriever.

The inked man went around, apparently to pay the driver, and amidst the general shouting and greetings, Jim now out on the porch and hurrying across the lawn, the blond wunderkind embracing everybody, another tall man emerged from the other side of the car and came around to the sidewalk.

Black hair and sunglasses, dark suit jacket, jeans and biker boots; he looked like some kind of dangerous underworld figure. He removed the sunglasses and looked up at Joshua, standing frozen in the middle of the sidewalk. Dark, dark eyes, and a slow, wide smile. "Hello," he said.

Joshua's heart stopped beating. Breath caught in his throat. The man came toward him, a curious penetrating look on his face. "Who are you?" he said.

Joshua blinked. "Um," he said.

The man's eyebrow twitched just a little. "Um?"

"J-Joshua," said Joshua, relieved beyond belief that he could remember his own name. And then, in a mighty miracle of brain power, he remembered to produce his hand. "Joshua Miller. How do you do, sir?"

The man's hand was warm, steady, it enclosed Joshua's. "Frederick Griffin, Mister Miller. I'm very pleased to meet you."

Joshua's whole body went warm. He could feel the embarrassing flush seeping into his face.

"Well, hello?" The big inked man came striding up and clapped the back of Frederick Griffin's shoulder with a big hand. "This must be Joshua."

Then Scott, thank God, was there and Joshua felt himself ease as soon as Scott had hold of him and was pulling him along, babbling away.

The blond man, who was indeed the wondrous Brian, grinned down at him and held out his hand and then the two of them led Joshua back into the house. As they disappeared inside, Joshua looked back down the steps to where Frederick Griffin stood with the other two men, looking up at Joshua with those black eyes.

"I've never known a cowboy," said Brian, as if Joshua were an astronaut or something. "What's it like?"

Brian was actually quite normal for a Prince and Joshua was finding it hard to be intimidated by him. "Smelly, dirty and poor," he said. "Mostly. Unless you like animals."

"Do you?"

"Yep. I guess."

They lay in a row on Brian's bed. Each one of them wearing a 'I heart New York Pizza' T-shirt. Scott had on sunglasses with twin lenses that resembled big apples.

"Joshua's really into animals," said Scott. "He can talk your ear off about reining and reins and harnesses."

"Oh, that reminds me. I got you something, Scott." Brian jumped off the bed and dug in one of the suitcases. He brought out a long dark red box. He was about to hand it to his friend when he stopped, looked at Joshua, and literally seemed to dim, as if the light inside of him had been switched off. "I'll give it to you later."

"Joshua's cool," said Scott. He and Brian exchanged some kind of secret eye handshake and then, looking cautious, Brian handed Scott the box.

"Holy shit," said Scott. He separated quantities of white tissue paper.

"Jim'll have a heart attack," said Brian. "I guarantee it."

Scott drew it slowly out of the box. "Hooooooollyyyy shit, you son-of-a-bitch."

Brian chuckled.

Joshua frowned at the quantities of black leather and buckles and long straps.

"What is it?"

Scott held it up to himself. "Leatherman's negligee," he said.

"It's a harness," said Brian. "I have one, but this one is more Scott's style, I think." This last was said with one of those more-than-friends looks that Joshua had noted the two men exchanging more than once in the past half hour.

"See the collar? It has loops where he can attach a head harness, a ball gag, a leash. I'm telling you, Scott, Jim will need resuscitation when he sees you in this the first time."

"I have to plan this," said Scott. "You have to help me plan this, Brian."

Joshua's incipient headache, the one that had threatened out on the porch, was making its presence known again. "I'm getting one of my headaches again," he told Scott.

"Man, that sucks. Joshua gets pukey sick headaches," Scott explained to Brian.

"Oh no, Joshua. What do you need? Do you want me to get you some aspirin?"

"I really just need to lie down." Joshua pressed his head to the mattress, shutting his eyes.

“My granddad used to get them,” said Scott wisely. “Only thing you can do is lie down in quiet.”

“Well, this is the quietest darkest room in the house. Joshua, you lie down in here,” said Brian. “I’ll tell Paul we have to wait and you stay in here until you feel better.”

“I couldn’t...”

“Yes, you could.” Brian grabbed some other boxes up and said, “C’mon, Scott, I have a gift for Jim, too and then you and me have to go plan.”

“Aw man, I’m glad to have you back,” said Scott as they tiptoed out, softly closing the door behind them. Joshua turned his head in the now dim room and closed his eyes.

Wearing a full length apron, the front of which was covered with a picture of the naked body of a very well endowed man, Brian’s gag gift from New York, and setting the dining room table, Jim looked up as Scott and Brian went scampering across the backyard and into the rec room.

Scampering was the word for it, too. And Scott only scampered when he was up to some mischief.

“They look happy,” said Freddie, coming into the dining room and watching the men out the window.

“God help us all,” said Jim. And Freddie laughed.

“I really appreciate you putting up with me, Jim,” he said. “What can I do to help?”

Jim counted forks. “The glasses are in the cupboard behind the sink, if you don’t mind. Joshua usually helps me, but he’s come down with one of his migraines.”

Freddie fetched the glasses and set them above the plates. “Joshua’s the young man with the surprised green eyes I met on the front steps?”

Jim looked at him. “Scott’s adopted him, I think. He’s an angel, but...” He shook his head. “I need another napkin.” He went off, muttering.

Paul came into the dining room then. “Have you seen Brian?”

“He went into the garage with Scott.”

Paul looked out the back window. “*Did* he?”

“You’ve got quite the busy home life here, Paul. I’m surprised. I thought you were sworn to bachelorhood.”

Paul lifted a shoulder, looking chagrined. “So did I, but... *you*’ve met Brian.”

“Always thought I was the one who would end up with a domestic situation,” said Freddie, fully meaning it *both* ways.

Jim came back into the dining room, carrying napkins. “Freddie, if you really meant that offer of help, I’d appreciate somebody going into the kitchen and stirring the spaghetti sauce so that it doesn’t burn. Whoa, there, Paul!” he added as Paul was about to slip away. “There’s a load of towels in the hamper ready to fold. Please put those and sheets on the table by the sofa.”

His headache reduced to a dull throb that Joshua knew he could now quell with aspirin, Joshua went into the kitchen for water and found the dark-eyed man in there stirring a pot on the stove.

He got a glass down from the cupboard and filled it with water, trying not to stare.

“Hello, again, Joshua,” said the man. “How is your headache?”

“Better,” said Joshua. He drank his water.

“Jim asked me to help while you lay down. We’ll be eating soon. Are you hungry?”

Joshua shook his head. The thought of sitting at table with three strangers, all of whom knew Scott and Jim better than he, was too difficult at the moment.

The man turned to the pot, still stirring. He’d taken off his jacket and wore a cotton shirt tucked into those tight jeans. The black boots at the bottom of his ensemble had the chains across the bridge and around the heel and the whole outfit reminded Joshua of the only other type of nomadic man he had encountered in his life besides cowboys.

“You a biker?” he asked.

The man looked surprised. “I was. I’m a teacher, now.”

Joshua swallowed more water. “What do you teach?”

“Literature.”

“That like, books and stuff?”

“Yes.”

There was another long silence, those green eyes reading him. Frederick couldn't imagine what was going through Joshua's head when the young man completely surprised him.

“You teach poetry?”

“Poetry? Yes. Do you like poetry?”

“Yes, sir.”

Joshua got up from his chair and washed his glass carefully and thoroughly. Then he dried it and put it back in the cupboard. Then he cleaned off the sink.

Jim came in the kitchen. “Oh, Joshua. Are you feeling better? Good. Will you help me carry the food to the dining room?”

“Yes, Jim,” said Joshua.

“Thank you. Freddie, how's that sauce?” Jim peeked in the pot. “Perfect. Joshua, please show Freddie where to find a sauce dish. I'll call Paul.” He wandered off and they could hear him calling. “Paul, I hate to think what Brian and Scott are doing out there, would you go bring them in to dinner?”

“The sauce dish is here,” said Joshua pulling it out and putting it on the counter near Freddie.

“Thank you, Joshua.”

“You're welcome.”

He poured the sauce into the dish and Joshua carried it carefully out of the room. Jim came hurrying in past him.

“Oh, good. Well, I guess we're ready to sit down. So you met Joshua?”

“I don't know,” said Freddie.

Jim gave him a sharp look.

“He's very polite,” said Freddie.

“Yes, he is. Most of the time. He's still waters, is that young man.”

“Really?”

“I’ve lived in a house with him for two weeks and he’s only opened up to me once and that was a full-fledged temper tantrum.”

Freddie looked at the doorway through which Joshua had disappeared. “Seems hard to imagine.”

“Scott knows him a little better and he says Joshua is just cautious. He *claims* that Joshua can talk your ear off. I think the boy is a little intimidated by me, so I believe Scott.”

“Hmmm.”

“I’ll seat you next to him,” said Jim, blithely. And left the kitchen.

Dinner was interesting.

Freddie wondered if any couple he knew had ever established a dynamic like the one he was watching in this house. Brian and Paul he had understood. But adding Jim to the equation and then Scott complicated things exponentially.

There was a relationship between Brian and Scott that was obviously sensual and probably consummated. Jim had a definitely Toppish attitude toward his uber-Macho friend, Paul. Brian flirted outrageously with Jim. And he frequently saw Paul looking at Scott with the stunned expression of a man whose cock was sucking all the blood from his brain.

It boggled the mind, is what it did.

“Please pass the mashed potatoes?” said Joshua, from beside him. The young man sat quietly next to him. Back straight, napkin in his lap, elbows primly at his sides as he ate slowly, watching everyone at the table with wide eyes.

Well, Freddie couldn’t blame him. This group had to be intimidating. He brought the bowl over and, when Joshua served himself one tiny little spoonful, Freddie took the serving spoon from him and gave the kid a little more.

“You should drink your milk,” he said, automatically.

Joshua blinked. Then he picked up his milk and drank it.

“So,” said Freddie. “How do you like California?”

Joshua looked up at him again. There was intelligence in that gaze. The kid wasn’t a dozy cow, but Freddie could see the caution there that Scott had spoken of.

“Fine, sir. I like it fine.”

“I’m new here myself,” said Freddie. “It’s strange being a stranger, isn’t it?”

Joshua looked down at his plate, and Freddie could see Joshua’s ears turning red. He mentally kicked himself and said, “Maybe we can talk Paul into taking us to the beach. Can’t wait to see some of that surfing.”

Joshua nodded, reaching for his milk.

“Would you like to come with us, if we go?” asked Freddie. Better to give the kid yes and no questions, he figured.

“Yes, sir,” said Joshua.

Bingo.

Freddie looked across the table and saw Jim watching him. He smiled and Jim raised an eyebrow and turned to ask Brian a question.

When the meal was over, all five men cleared the table in what appeared to be a well-established routine. Jim wandered off by himself somewhere and Brian and Scott and Joshua apparently decided to play soccer in the yard.

Paul sat back on the sofa and heaved an enormous sigh.

“Tired?” said Freddie, sitting down across from him.

“Relieved,” said Paul. “There’s always an adjustment period for Brian. He was pretty tightly wound, our last few days in New York.”

“I’m surprised to hear that,” said Freddie. “He seems very comfortable.”

“He frets,” said Paul.

“Ah.”

“He and Scott haven’t seen each other much in the past six months.”

Freddie thought how best to ask the question that had been niggling at him. “Are they close?”

“Scott and Brian?” Paul seemed to be amused by something. “I’m sorry, Freddie, I really never told you, did I?”

Told him? Freddie had known Paul for quite some time. For a second, his mind spun with all the possible ‘things’ that Paul could not have told him. It was daunting.

“I suppose you haven’t.”

Paul laughed. “Christ. I’m sorry. We...” he indicated the general vicinity of the house with his hand. “Are all, as you say, ‘close.’”

Freddie absorbed this. Then he got it. Then, for the first time in about twenty years, he blushed.

Paul was still laughing. “Believe it or not, I’m so used to it I hadn’t thought to explain it to you.”

“Well, I thank God you have. I was a little confused.”

Paul shook his head, still chuckling at himself.

“And Joshua? Is he...”

“Oh. No, he’s a friend that Scott brought home.”

Freddie thought of the young man seated at the table, so definitely an outsider, watching that intimate family circle.

“I see,” he said.

“Score!” yelled Scott and did his little victory dance.

Brian whistled appreciatively. “Hey, sexy, shake that thing over here.” He picked up the ball and ran to the sideline. “Heads up, Joshua,” he called out and kicked the ball to him.

Joshua was able to handle the ball a little bit, going the other direction, before Scott got it away from him again.

“Hey, that was a foul,” yelled Brian, giving chase.

Brian and Joshua were teamed against Scott, Scott definitely being the superior soccer player. Not that they were really playing a game. Scott and Brian seemed to be using the game as an excuse to maul each other, every successive play becoming more and more physical until, finally, as Joshua stopped running and watched, Brian actually tackled Scott to the ground and started kissing him right there in the middle of the lawn.

The ball fell from Scott's hand and he wrapped his arms around Brian and kissed him back.

Joshua didn't know what to do.

He saw Scott gazing up at Brian with a serious expression, and heard Brian say, softly, "God, I missed you." Then Brian kissed Scott again. Joshua could hear Scott moaning into the kiss.

Joshua spun on his heel and ran into the house.

"Fuck. Ow. Turn on the light."

Brian giggled. "I don't need a light. I've found what I'm looking for." And his fingers wriggled down into Scott's boxers.

Scott grinned in the dark and tussled a bit until he had Brian's pants down around his ankles. He could feel Brian's head pushing between his thighs as he painted a trail across Brian's stomach with his tongue.

"Ohmmm, Ohmmm," Brian came off Scott's cock long enough to whisper. "I'd forgotten what you taste like."

Scott was too busy drawing Brian into his throat to answer.

Later, lying side by side, still in the dark rec-room, Scott whispered. "Oh crap. Joshua."

"Do you think we embarrassed him or something?"

"Or something," said Scott. "Jim's gonna have 'words' with me, if he finds out."

"Would he tell?"

"I don't think so." Scott drifted, pushed his nose behind Brian's ear, ran his hand up Brian's chest. He encountered the collar and he said. "Hey, I saw some naughty pictures of you with this."

"Yeah."

"He really does have you on a leash."

"Hmmm," said Brian. "Thing is, he's at one end of that leash and I'm at the other. Only difference is *my* end of the leash is pretty.

“My hero,” said Scott. “You are the uber-Brat baby.”

“Hey, buddy, can I come in?”

Jim looked up from where he sat in the middle of a bean bag chair like a bearded caterpillar, smoking his bong. “Hi, Paul.”

Paul perched on the end of the waterbed and took the bong when it was offered. He inhaled a bit and said, “You okay?”

“I am very glad to see you home,” said Jim.

“Rough week?”

Jim shook his head, inhaling deeply. Paul figured, if his friend didn’t smoke pot, he could probably sing opera with that lung capacity.

“What do you think of Joshua?” said Jim, smoke trailing from the corners of his mouth.

“I haven’t really talked to him yet.”

Jim nodded. “He’s avoiding you.”

“Really?” said the six-foot-four bald and tattooed man. “Why do you think?”

Jim just looked at him. He set down his bong. “I’m not sure what to do about him.”

“Oh, Jim,” said Paul. “Why do you feel like you have to do something about every stray bird that falls at your doorstep?”

“This stray bird flew into the house and sat at the end of my sofa and sang,” said Jim. “To flog the metaphor to death.” He stood and emptied the bong out.

Paul rested his chin on his hand. “Freddie seems intrigued by him.”

“Yes,” said Jim. “I noticed that, too.”

“I’ll try to talk to him,” said Paul. “I’ll tell you what I think.”

“Thank you.”

“So where is he?”

“Last I saw he was in the backyard playing soccer with Brian and Scott.”

“I’ll go look for him.”

Brian and Scott were coming out of the rec-room when Paul checked the backyard. They were untucked and loose and happy and walking draped around each other with no Joshua in sight, so he went back down the hallway and found Scott’s bedroom door closed. He knocked.

“Come in?” said a voice and Paul opened it a crack and peeked inside.

“Hello, Joshua.”

An apparently startled Joshua jumped off the bed and stood bolt upright in the middle of the floor.

“May I come in?” said Paul.

“Yes, sir,” said Joshua. He looked like he was ready to snap a salute.

“Please, sit down,” said Paul.

Joshua immediately sat down.

“I haven’t had a chance to really talk to you,” said Paul. “And I thought it might be nice to introduce myself without all the others around.”

“Yes, sir,” said Joshua.

Paul wasn’t sure how to get Joshua to relax. Of course, if he’d *told* him to relax, he imagined Joshua would have immediately done so. So he just sat down on the bed and said, “I understand you work with livestock?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Well, that’s interesting. Is that something you want to do as a career?”

Now that Paul looked at him closely, he could see that the Joshua’s eyes were swollen and he had that pinched up expression that he’d had earlier in the day.

“Is your headache back?” he asked kindly.

Joshua shook his head. He swallowed hard and said, “No, sir. I’m... I’m just tired I guess.”

Wow. A whole sentence. Paul felt like he was tormenting the man, so he stood and said. "Well, if there's anything you want or need..."

"Thank you, sir. Everyone is being very nice, sir."

Good Lord. "Goodnight, then," said Paul. And gently shut the door behind himself.

He stopped by Jim's room, but Scott was there now, lying next to Jim, apparently having an intimate conversation. Paul leaned in the doorjamb, aware that his friends would have shut the door if they wanted privacy, and just enjoyed the sight of them.

They lay belly to belly, their legs crossed over each other's. Jim's dark brown body hair contrasted nicely with Scott's golden.

Scott, head propped on one hand, talked softly, his entire attention on Jim, who listened, rapt, to whatever Scott was saying. Scott's fingers groomed and twirled Jim's beard. Jim's arm stroked Scott's chest, occasionally brushing over the gold ring in Scott's nipple that matched his own. Their faces glowed in the pool of lamplight.

"Goodnight," said Paul to them both.

"Shut the door?" said Jim, his eyes still on Scott.

Paul closed it quietly behind himself.

"Hi, Daddy." Brian put down the magazine he'd been reading. He sat cross-legged in the middle of the bed, naked and seemingly completely unselfconscious.

Paul still felt his body warm, some engine turning over deep inside, when he saw his lover's nude form.

He sat on the bed to take off his boots and Brian crawled over, wrapping himself around Paul's back and shoulders.

"You must be exhausted," said Paul, cautiously.

"I am," Brian admitted. "But I won't feel like I'm home 'til you've fucked me on our bed."

"I see." Paul removed his jeans and hung them over the chair, then turned to Brian, cradling his body, settling between his legs when Brian opened them.

He leaned down and kissed Brian, open mouthed. Their tongues played lazily, their lips sliding to chins and cheeks and back again. Brian's hand played on the back of Paul's neck, over his ear, squeezed his shoulder muscle as they rocked gently against each other.

Easy, slow, knowing how this would end and enjoying the journey as much as its destination, Paul and Brian rolled so Brian sat astride Paul, his mouth on Paul's pectorals, licking the tattoos. Then they rolled again, Paul lifting Brian's leg and just sliding his hard and oozing cock under Brian's balls, loving the heat there, feeling Brian swell against him also, slowly.

Paul looked at him knowingly. "Did you and Scott talk?"

Brian grinned. "Yeah, Daddy. We talked."

Paul rolled him again, and now he lay between Brian's thighs, the one leg lifted, his thrusts gaining purpose. He burrowed against Brian's neck and sucked a small mark there.

Brian arched. "Oh."

Paul lifted Brian's other leg and found the tube of lube that lay on the bed. He pushed in a little. His boyfriend was wet and warm already, and seemed more than ready for Paul. "You feel better now?" he said.

"I was afraid it would be weird. But he's still Scott and I'm still me. Yes, I feel better."

"Good," said Paul in Brian's ear as he found Brian's entrance and slid in.

And then they didn't talk for awhile. In the end, Brian's heat equaled his own, head arched back, gasping breaths, both hands on the head board as Paul thrust against him.

Paul felt Brian come without having been touched. The warm wet spread between their bellies, and Paul sank against him, loving the feel of it as he shuddered and came deep inside Brian.

"Welcome home, Brian," he said, before he slept.

The sofa bed was remarkably comfortable, but Freddie had spent many years sleeping on the ground next to his Harley, so he wouldn't have minded much worse. The house was quiet with that occasional settling sound that old houses had, a sound as comforting as an old lady's rocking chair. And after the bumps and moans from Paul and Brian's room stopped, Freddie sat up against the cushions and read one of his favorite books.

"Excuse me."

He'd come in so quietly, Freddie hadn't even heard him. Joshua stood there, in light blue flannel sleep pants that ended above his ankles and a T-shirt. One could see how thin the young man was.

The dark hair really was too long in the front and Joshua pushed it out of his eyes and held a book out toward Freddie.

"I thought you might like to read it," said Joshua. "It's my favorite."

Those eyes looked swollen and tired and very serious. Feeling like he was taking a very important test, Freddie took the book from Joshua. It was a paperback of "Leaves of Grass."

"This is one of my favorites, too," said Freddie. "Thank you."

He was given a tentative smile, Joshua's expression worried. "I like the part about 'I and this mystery,'" said Joshua.

A sense of enchantment, subtle and slow, wound around Freddie as he opened the book and found the page with the passage.

*"Sure as the most certain sure, plumb in the uprights, well entretied, braced in the beams,
Stout as a horse, affectionate, haughty, electrical,
I and this mystery here we stand."*

"Clear and sweet is my soul," recited Joshua, "and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul."

Freddie was afraid to speak and break the spell.

"You said that about being a stranger. I... I like to read his words, sometimes, when I feel like I don't belong anywheres..." Joshua stopped himself, looking across at Freddie as if he'd been caught out, his too long bangs falling in his eyes and Freddie's heart cracked in two.

"I should go to bed now," said Joshua. "Goodnight."

Wait. Don't leave. Freddie wanted to say, as Joshua padded off. He held the book tightly in his hands as if by doing that he could keep the entire moment from escaping.

Then he switched off the light and lay down, staring up at the ceiling.

“Good morning, Mama Bear.” A sleep cuddly, warm and wiggly blond-headed young man snuggled up to Jim and hugged him. “Mmm, you smell good, what is that?”

“Coffee cake,” said Jim. “It’ll be ready in ten minutes.”

Brian rested his head against Jim’s chest and they stood there while the oven baked and the sun slowly rose and the household wakened. Jim sipped coffee from his old cracked blue mug and, after a while, there was the thump of feet on the floor and Paul appeared.

“Morning, Jim.” Paul reached for his mug and coffee and then leaned on the counter hip to hip with Jim, arm laced over his shoulder. “Something smells good.”

“Coffee cake,” said Brian, from deep in Jim’s chest.

“It’ll be ready in five minutes,” said Jim

“RrrrI’mhungry...” growled a curly golden Scott, stomping into the kitchen in nothing but boxers. “Shove over, Goldilocks,” he said, one eye still closed, the other half open. He pushed his way up under Jim’s arm, like a demanding lap dog and burrowed in. “I smelled something good,” he said, looking dangerously close to falling asleep again, right there on his feet.

“Coffee cake,” said Paul.

“Ready any minute, now,” said Jim.

“Well, I can see who the most popular man is in this family,” said Freddie, padding into the kitchen. He’d risen and put on jeans, but was barefoot and shirtless.

“Only before breakfast,” said Jim, still sipping coffee despite his heavy coat of man-flesh. “As soon as that oven timer dings...”

DING!

Three men tumbled to the kitchen table, pulled out their chairs and sat, looking expectantly up at Jim.

“Just like baby birds,” said Jim, shaking his head. He brought out the hot pan, set it on a trivet and started up the top burners where pans of eggs, bacon and sausage were just waiting.

“Morning,” said Joshua, coming in and going straight to the refrigerator. “Who wants orange juice?”

Everyone did.

Joshua was fully dressed. His hair wet, as if he'd recently showered, worn ropers on his feet. He seemed pre-occupied, bringing glasses down from the cupboards and pouring juice and milk, his brows troubled and those eyes cast down.

"You have to work this morning?" asked Jim.

Joshua nodded, pulling his chair up to the table. "Yes, sir."

"Your cowboy thing?" asked Brian, reaching across the table for bacon.

"Ask, don't reach," said Paul automatically.

"Pleasepassthebacon," said Brian. "Where do you work, Joshua?"

Freddie noted the quick glance up at Paul before Joshua said, "Rancher in Sylmar has twenty or so steers want moving and feeding."

"Do you ride a horse?" said Brian.

Joshua seemed to almost smile. "I do."

"Can I come with you? Daddy, can I go with Joshua to the ranch this morning?"

Joshua's green eyes definitely flashed in surprise, darting quickly from Paul to Brian at the 'Daddy,' then straight down at his plate.

"I think you might be in the way," said Paul, regarding Joshua thoughtfully.

Paul looked up at Jim and they Had Words, in a manner of speaking.

"No, sir, he wouldn't," said Joshua. "He could sit up by the house the hands use and watch me. Wouldn't take more than half an hour." There was just the slightest pleading note to his voice. *So, thought Freddie, Joshua wanted to show off for Brian a little.*

"We have a guest, Brian. And you just got back." Paul sighed, crumbling easily under the power of Brian's pleading look. "Fine. Be back by lunch, though."

Joshua dipped his head. "Yes, sir."

"You really don't have to call them 'sir' all the time," said Brian.

They were riding in Joshua's truck up a two-lane highway at the base of the San Fernando Mountains.

“It’s how I was raised,” said Joshua.

“You don’t ‘sir’ me and Scott,” Brian pointed out.

Joshua looked surprised, as if he hadn’t noticed this. He slowed and turned carefully onto a road that seemed mostly ruts until they reached a wide bridge over a drywash and found themselves on a long, well-kept gravel driveway.

“That’s the herd way up there by that bit of red fencing,” he said, pointing out Brian’s side window toward an area on a foothill backing against the higher ridges. “They bunch on instinct. So it’s easy to get them to come back to the pasture down there.” He indicated a broad area in front of them. “I’ll take old Buddy up there. He’s the boss’ cowhorse. I whoop at ‘em a bit and after a while they decide to move just to shut me up. Down there, I’ll break open some sack for them in that trough and they’ll eat. And that’s all I have to do.”

“Sounds like fun.”

Joshua flashed a broad smile at Brian. The smiles were so rare they were startling and changed his face utterly. “Yep, I guess it’s okay. Been doing it since my legs was just long enough to reach the stirrups, you know. Not so much fun when it’s cold, or raining. Or the damned stupid cattle think they’re better off freezin’ to death than doing as they’re told.” He pulled the truck up in front of a long porch, which consisted of sun bleached wood and half a dozen varieties of plastic and wooden chairs. “This job here is nothing like real ranching, of course. There you sometimes got a whole day to get from one end t’other and most of us use trucks and tractor bikes now as much as we do horses.”

“Still. It sounds cool. Why’d you come to Los Angeles?”

Those big green eyes looked caught out for a second, and then Joshua looked away, one shoulder lifting in a lazy shrug. “Wanted a change.”

He hopped out of the truck.

Brian sat in one of the chairs on the porch and watched Joshua lead a small brown horse from a stall, throw what seemed like massive quantities of leather gear over the horse, fasten, buckle, snap and then swing one long leg up and over the saddle with ease.

The small brown horse and the tall, dark man cantered off and were soon blobs of color up against that little bit of red fence. The steers up there eventually seemed to stir and flow downhill to the wild pasture Joshua had indicated and, just as he’d said he would, Joshua climbed on top of a trailer with troughs on either side and poured something from awkward looking burlaps sacks into a chute at the top. The steers jostled and shoved and knocked the contrivance around but Joshua just ran along it, like a tightrope walker, leapt over a fence and came striding back up toward Brian, leading the horse, and dusting his jeans off as he came.

Brian watched him, thinking.

Brian was adept at reading people on a gut level. It was partially instinctive and had also been honed by a half year of corporate politics, albeit at a low level. He lived in a community where quick glances and sidelong looks communicated a world of information. And he was a tightly wound, emotionally sensitive Brat, with radar like a bat's.

“So,” said Brian, as Joshua strode up. “How’d you and Scott meet?”

Joshua just stopped, mid-stride. “What?”

Brian jumped up from his chair and followed Joshua as he led the horse back to his stall and removed all of the leather he’d spent so much time putting on.

“You work for one of those companies Scott hauls for?” Brian persisted, hanging over the railings and watching him.

“No,” said Joshua. “I had an accident off the highway. He stopped and helped me out.”

He came around the fence with the tackle in his hands and seemed, to Brian, to be moving as quickly as he could away from Brian.

“He helped you out and then he just offered to drive you to California?” said Brian, following Joshua doggedly as he walked back up to the tackle shed.

“Not exactly.” Joshua concentrated, like it was rocket science, on getting the halter and reigns hung up on their hook just so.

“How exactly?” asked Brian. “It sounds interesting.” He folded his arms and looked at Joshua with a politely inclined head and very narrow blue eyes.

Joshua lifted his hat, shoved his hair back and clapped his hat back on his head. “We should be gettin’ back, soon,” he said. “I promised your Paul.”

Brian waited until Joshua really thought he had changed the subject successfully and then he snapped, “Fine, don’t tell me. You don’t know who I might tell, right?”

Joshua’s gaze came back to Brian immediately, wide and shocked. “I didn’t mean...”

“Sure you did. Most people trust me, but there’s no reason for *you* to.” Okay, now he was laying it on a bit thick. Brian stopped himself and settled on just spinning on his heel and stomping off in high snit.

Predictably, Joshua chased him. "I'm sorry, Brian. I didn't mean an insult. Honest to God. It just seemed best not to talk about it. It seemed like it was nobody's business but me 'n Scott's."

"You and Scott have a secret that's nobody's business but yours and his? Not me? Not Jim?"

Joshua's lips closed slowly, his eyes went wide.

"Oooooohhh," said Brian.

"It was just a temporary fancy, really," said Joshua. "Honest to God."

"A crush. You followed a man all the way to Los Angeles because you had a crush on him? And nothing else?" Brian folded his arms. "How romantic," the sarcasm whipped and rolled and coiled at Joshua's feet.

Joshua wasn't sure what more he could say to make matters better or worse, so he just said. "Oh my gosh, I've forgotten something." He ran off toward one of the fenced in corrals.

Brian pulled out his cell phone and dialed Scott's number.

Scott was carrying a bundle of sheets to the washer when his cell phone rang. He stuffed them in the machine and answered, "Hello, Sweetcakes."

"You slut," said Brian.

"You know it, sugar," said Scott happily.

"If I were standing there I'd pound you into the ground," said Brian, furiously.

"Goddammit, Scott, you let me suck you off last night and you didn't even say anything."

"What?" said Scott.

Brian's voice was reaching decibels that could break glass. "I talked to Joshua, you son of a bitch!"

"Joshua?" said Scott. His brain seemed to be stuck.

"Oh he didn't tell me the details, asshole, but I can just imagine. God. And what do you know about him, Mr. Can't-keep-it-in-his-pants?"

"Now hold on," said Scott.

And then Brian let Scott really have it. “I’m telling Paul,” he shouted, his voice a shriek. And disconnected.

Scott looked at his phone. He turned around and walked, a little quickly, back into the house. “Jim?” he called.

Jim came round the corner in a second. Scott’s voice had had that note that mama goats, mama sheep and Mama Bear responded to immediately.

“What’s the matter?”

There was a quick, somber, family meeting and everything was more or less cleared up.

“Sorry I freaked,” said Brian.

“Don’t blame you,” said Scott. “I wanted to call you all the way up in Wyoming but I didn’t know how to explain it...”

Jim sighed. “I never told Paul or Brian either. It seemed irrelevant. Stupid of me. Sorry.”

Paul was sitting with his elbows resting on his knees and his hands clasped, looking at the floor. By the time Jim and Scott had found him and calmed him down, Brian had already called. Paul had had a few minutes of honest to God fear. It hadn’t been pleasant.

“We never should have stopped using protection,” he said.

“What?” said three voices. And then everyone was talking and arguing and explaining.

Outside on the front porch, Joshua kicked the porch swing into motion with a hard thump against the side of the house with his booted foot.

“You’re leaving marks on the house,” Freddie pointed out.

Joshua looked up at him, one eyebrow up, some flash in his face, and he kicked the wall on the next swing, even harder.

“Joshua? I said, your boots are leaving black marks on their house.”

Joshua swung back, swung forward. Extended *both* booted feet now. THUMP.

Freddie put down the paper he’d been reading.

THUMP THUMP.

The challenge on Joshua's face was unmistakable.

"Stop that," said Freddie.

Joshua threw his head back, his smile insolent. The swing swung back. Forward.
THUMP.

"That's it," said Freddie, and grabbed both Joshua's arms, swung him up and off the swing.

"Hey!" said Joshua. "Get your hands off me, freak."

Joshua yanked at the hold on his arm, as if to walk away, but Freddie didn't release him. "You want to tell me what's got you all in a twist?" he asked, calmly.

"Let go of me, jerk." Joshua struggled.

"Stop name calling," said Freddie and laid a smack on Joshua's rear end.

"Ouch! Crazy asshole!" Joshua struggled, but Freddie sat on the porch railing behind him, threw the gangly young man over his lap and right there on the front porch, in the sight of God and Everyone, smacked Joshua hard, several times, on the seat of his jeans.

"Any more of that mouth, young man," said Freddie, "and I'll pull down these jeans and spank you properly."

"Crazy. Asshole," said Joshua, enunciating clearly.

"That's it." And Freddie stood, lifting Joshua and half carrying, half dragging the protesting young man around the corner of the house and into the rec room.

Joshua did seem to start struggling in earnest at this point, but Freddie just stripped the jeans down, sat down on a bench and, leaning with his full weight across the arm on Joshua's back, he smacked that struggling bare behind until it was bright red and Joshua's demands had turned to pleas and finally to sobs.

Freddie let him go, dragged him up and held him.

"I'm sorry," sobbed Joshua.

"I know you are. I just wish I knew why you felt like you had to do that."

"It's my fault," Joshua said into Freddie's shoulder.

“What is?”

“They’re all fighting because of me.”

“That hardly seems likely. What did you supposedly do?”

“I... I chased Scott. I knew he was a married man, but I followed him down here anyway. I knew it was wrong...”

“Scott? But Jim and Scott like you, Joshua. They aren’t fighting about you.”

Joshua sobbed against Freddie’s shoulder. Freddie stroked the shaking back until Joshua calmed. Then Freddie helped him dress and walked him over to the overstuffed chairs in the corner.

Joshua scrubbed at his face with his shirt sleeves, obviously miserable and trying hard not to show it.

Freddie cleared the long bangs out of Joshua’s face, felt the man’s head push into his hand like a dog's seeking a pat. “C’mere,” he said.

Joshua almost resisted being pulled into Freddie’s lap, but when he did come it was like he’d always been there.

Freddie stroked the silky hair, felt those long arms around him, the damp face against his neck, eyelashes blinking.

“It’s okay,” he murmured. “I’ll take care of you.”

“Where’s Joshua?” asked Scott.

“I dunno,” said Brian. “He was on the porch when we were all talking and I went out to apologize and he was gone.”

“Joshua’s with Freddie,” said Jim calmly, from where he stood at the sink.

“Where?” said Brian, heading to the back door, but Scott knew Jim’s looks and threw out an arm to stop Brian.

“Maybe we should wait until later,” said Scott.

Jim smiled, putting a plate in the drainer. “That’s a good idea.”

Chapter Eighteen

“Are you sure he doesn’t know?”

“Well, if you keep looking like *that*, he will.”

“Looking like what?” Scott wore that cherubic expression that only masked true deviltry.

Joshua and Brian exchanged looks and Joshua said, “All you need is two little horns comin’ outta your head, Scott.”

“Listen,” said Brian. “Try to look a little guilty. Then he won’t suspect anything.”

While Scott tried to look ‘a little’ guilty, but not, Brian said to Joshua, “You can’t tell Freddie.”

Joshua had been Freddie’s shadow the past week. Brian had learned to understand the wholly personal dynamic that every power exchange embraced, but he had never seen one where the dominant partner was so completely in charge of the submissive. Freddie had taken Joshua to get his hair cut. Freddie told Joshua what music to listen to and books to read. Freddie picked out Joshua’s *clothes* for him.

And they weren’t even a couple.

“Isn’t there something strange about it?” he’d asked Paul one night. He lay on his belly, naked and spread legged on a towel while Paul massaged oil into his every crack and crevice.

“Mmmmm. Strange?”

“That they don’t have sex, even, and Joshua does what ever Freddie tells him to.”

Paul worked Brian’s glutes with the expertise that only a man with a long term relationship with those buttocks could have. “The mentoring relationship is an old institution and isn’t always sexual.”

His thumbs worked down and pressed the area just above Brian’s balls and Brian’s legs spread and his butt pushed toward Paul.

“Daddy?”

“Yes, hon?”

Brian lifted his butt just a little more. "Daaaadddyyy."

Paul smiled and climbed between Brian's legs. "Coming, Brian."

Now Joshua looked worried and serious. "If Freddie asks me, I have to tell him."

"See, that's the thing," said Scott. "No, you don't."

Joshua looked at Scott like he was talking Swahili.

"Well, never mind, Freddie doesn't pay attention to things like this," said Brian.

Brian had armfuls of candles and he was setting them in little groups all over the inside of the rec room. He and Scott and Joshua had arranged the furniture as best they could and draped every ordinary surface with dark towels and sheets. Brian hoped that, by candlelight, the room would look very gothic.

And then they'd lead Jim in here to find Scott waiting for him on his knees with heavy shackles on his ankles and wrists and the new harness snugly fitted on him.

"What do you mean, he doesn't pay attention?" said Joshua.

Brian and Scott looked at each other and Scott raised an eyebrow.

"Nothing, Joshua," said Brian.

"Never mind," said Scott.

Joshua looked from one to the other. He was at the hero worship stage and couldn't believe his friends could find any fault with Freddie.

Brian stood back for effect and said, "Hooee, Jim is going to have a heart attack."

Scott stood surveying the room as well. "Last year, I didn't remember and I think the crazy old coot was actually hurt."

"Remember what?" said Joshua.

"It's kind of our anniversary."

"Oh," said Joshua. "You've been a couple for two years?"

Scott and Brian looked at each other and then they both burst out laughing. "Something like that. It's been two years since the first time I got a taste of Jim. Brian remembers, don't ya, Brian?" And then they both were laughing again.

Joshua didn't like it when the conversations went this direction. "Well, I'm going in. Freddie gave me a book and I want to read it."

"Kay," said Scott. He and Brian watched Joshua leave.

"Scott?" asked Brian, as the door closed behind Joshua.

"Yeah?"

"Is Joshua a virgin?"

Scott considered this. "Maybe. That might explain things."

"You think Freddie knows?"

Scott rolled his eyes. "Wouldn't Mr. Control Freak love that?"

They were silent, thinking about it and then Brian said, "So, what do I have to tell Jim to get him out here?"

Jim was sorting laundry. This was no mean feat. In a household that consisted of four men, all with similar jeans, T-shirts, socks and underwear needs, and all of different sizes and builds, sorting laundry involved reading each and every tag.

He was standing in front of the folding table with his reading glasses perched on the end of his nose and a pair of white Fruit of the Looms in his hands when Brian came around the corner with wide, worried eyes.

"Um. Jim?"

Jim glanced up, and then, seeing Brian's expression, removed his glasses entirely and set down the undies. "What's wrong?"

"I don't think *anything*. But. Um, could you come out to the rec room?"

That last delivered with the apprehensive urgency of a young man who had just done Something Regrettable.

He followed Brian across the lawn at a trot and when Brian stopped at the door, and hesitated, Jim was prepared for any number of awful scenes.

He was *not* prepared for what he saw.

The room was pitch black. Not just dark, but *black*, the darkness swimming with the flickering light of candles, so many of them that the center of the room seemed almost to swell and undulate with light.

At the very center of that magical aura, head bowed, arms bound, knelt Scott.

Jim forced himself to breathe.

He could see the bindings on Scott's arms. Not the simple Velcro straps that Jim used most of the time, soft, and easily removed by the wearer, if necessary. These were real shackles: thick iron, with the solid links of chains falling to the floor where they were fastened to similar irons around Scott's ankles.

His pelvis was encircled with leather, like a black garter belt, a cock and ball ring holding him firmly.

Around his chest was another thick band of black leather, an opening over each nipple and, in place of the nipple ring, Scott wore a shield with a barbell that attached to the leather vest.

The collar around his neck was heavy and another long link of iron-black chain hung from it.

His head was still bowed, the golden hair glowing in the candle light.

"Scott," said Jim. "Babe?"

He saw the chains move and the nipple ring glint as Scott took a deep breath. His voice was husky. "Happy anniversary, Jim."

There was a silence. Jim could hear the candle flames.

"I... wanted you to know," said Scott slowly, head still bowed. He took a deep breath. "I mean, I know I fight you but..."

Jim sank to his knees in front of Scott.

"I'm yours, baby," said Scott. "One hundred percent. Do what you want with me, Jim."

"Scott." Jim cupped Scott's face and raised it so he could look at his lover. Scott's eyes were bright and fierce and his face was flushed.

"And this damned harness is making me hard as iron, Jim, so *while* you're doing what you want, could you find it in your heart to fuck me?"

Jim couldn't even speak. He nodded. Then he helped his shackled boyfriend to his feet and took Scott over to the bench where he bent him over. There was a butt plug attached to the harness which Jim eased out of Scott.

From where his head lay on the bench, Scott said, "Can I hold you in my mouth, baby?"

Jim could barely stumble around to the other side of the bench. He fed his cock into Scott's mouth and waited until he couldn't bear it anymore, then went back to the other side. Pulling Scott's legs apart as far as the leg-irons would allow, and holding Scott's wrists against his back, Jim pushed his thick cock into Scott in one firm motion and his lover cried out his name. The chains clinked and Jim officially did what he rarely did; he Lost Control.

He remembered at one point to reach around and release Scott's prick from its constraints. Scott moaned loudly as he did so. Then Jim just grabbed Scott by the wrists and one leather-clad hip and focused on cramming his entire body into Scott via his hole.

He was crying when he came.

"Oh, baby, Oh, God, Oh, lover..." Scott was panting and moaning, his cheek against the leather bench, his body quivering with his aftershocks. "I came buckets, baby."

Jim draped across Scott's back, sobbing. His breath wheezed.

After awhile he heard Scott chuckling. "You alright, Jim?"

"No," wheezed Jim. "You killed me. I think you broke my dick, too."

"God, no," said Scott, sounding truly horrified.

"What... I mean why?" Because in two years, Scott had never *admitted* that he needed or wanted the restraints. He never put them on himself. He never offered that to Jim.

"I can't say it in words, Jim," said Scott in a simple, calm way. "So I wanted you to see how I feel about it. About us."

Jim thought he was going to cry again. He wrapped his arms around Scott and laid his cheek against Scott's back.

"You getting all womanly on me back there, sugar?" said Scott, a smile in his voice.

"What if I am?" Jim was definitely snuffling as he said it.

"Nothing," said Scott, closing his eyes and smiling. "Nothing at all, darlin'. Happy anniversary."

“Happy anniversary, Scott. I love you.”

Scott’s smile broadened. “Yeah.”

Chapter Nineteen

“Aww, it’s so cute.”

“It’s disgusting.”

“You’re just grumpy cuz you don’t have your puppy dog following you around anymore.”

Scott laughed, stretching a leg across the waterbed and pushing the tip of his big toe, gently, against Brian’s hole.

Brian wriggled. “Tease.”

Scott grinned. And poked. Poked. His cock seemed to feel a certain empathy for his toe and started growing. So, Scott changed the rhythm of his poking. Now he poked, rubbed, poked, rubbed.

Brian rolled over. “Want some help there?”

Molten gold eyes half closed, Scott had slid down onto the waterbed and was stroking in earnest. It having been really only a hypothetical question; Brian crawled over and slurped Scott’s cock down and Scott just threw his arms out to either side and said “Yeahohyeah.”

There was a knock at the door then, a chuckle, and Brian felt a very familiar presence just behind his thighs.

He slid up to the end of Scott’s penis and, in between flickering licks, he said, “It fell on the floor, I think.”

“Thanks,” said Paul. His warmth disappeared from behind Brian for a minute, and then slick fingers plunged in and out of Brian’s hole followed, almost immediately, by a long firm presence.

Brian swallowed Scott as far down as he could, feeling his cock swell.

“Kiss me,” he heard Scott say and Paul’s body pressed down on Brian as he stretched over him and Brian could hear them kissing each other.

Scott’s cock swelled again and this time warm come filled Brian’s throat. He swallowed eagerly, his own cock swaying, hardening, between his legs. Every slide of Paul’s against

his prostate pumped him up like a tire, until suddenly Paul had gone back onto his heels, pulling Brian back with him, and Brian was sitting *on* Paul's long prick, which seemed to somehow reach as far as his spine. Brian was exclaiming about this quite loudly when Scott's mouth closed around his cock and somebody's hands started tugging at one of his nipple rings and then he just Died and Went to Heaven.

"Ah, there you all are," said Jim at the door. "I thought we were going to put the water tub up together."

"I needed a shower first," said Scott. "Remember? You sent me in."

"And I came in to give him a clean towel," said Brian.

"And when they didn't come back, I had to go fetch them," said Paul.

Jim looked over his bed, which had six arms and six legs thrown helter skelter across it like a mansized game of Pick-Up-Stix. "Thanks for doing that, Paul."

From underneath Brian, Paul waved, a weak smile on his face.

"Okay, then," he said. "Alley oop, all. Let's get cracking."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Yes, sir."

"Watch your tone, young man." Paul smacked Brian's behind as said behind scrambled off the bed.

"Why don't we get Freddie and Joshua to help us?" said Scott in that innocent voice that made Jim's eyes narrow.

"Leave those two alone."

"Brian said they're on the front porch reading *poetry* to each other," said Scott, pulling up a pair of shorts with a wiggle and jump that made three sets of eyes blink.

"Scott, leave them alone," said Jim.

Scott slid a T-shirt over his head. "It's disgusting," he said, when his golden head had popped through the neck hole. "He's making the rest of us look bad."

Brian sat on the bed, tying his sneakers. "Joshua's a normal person with Scott and me. He only acts creepy around you two."

"I could only wish a little of that creepiness would rub off," said Paul dryly.

"See? That's what I mean," said Scott.

“Leave them alone,” said Jim. “And I mean it.”

Scott picked lint from his shirt, lips pursed.

“Scott?” said Jim, and Scott had to sigh.

“Yes, sir.”

“What are they doing?”

“They’re going to install a hot tub and a gazebo in the backyard,” said Freddie. He turned a page in the book. He was sitting in the porch swing with Joshua lying back under his arm so that they could read the book together.

“Should we be helping them?” asked Joshua, sounding worried.

Joshua, Freddie had noticed, always seemed to think he should be helping. ‘Earning his keep,’ as he’d once called it.

“Jim seems to feel it’s some sort of family bonding experience,” said Freddie. “I imagine that means it will involve a lot of arguing and tantrums, so I really don’t mind missing out.”

He could feel Joshua fretting.

“What’s bothering you?”

The long worried pause came first. In the past couple of weeks, Joshua had become only a little more willing to talk. And he always chose his words carefully. “Do you think Scott needs his bedroom back?”

Freddie parsed the question in his own mind, drew some conclusions based on previous conversations with Joshua, and asked back, “Don’t you think Scott would tell you if he did?”

Joshua pondered this. Freddie knew from experience that Joshua might mull over his question for some time, maybe hours. Maybe days. So he turned a page and read out loud. “*While I am I and you are you, so long as the world contains us both...*”

Joshua followed the words with him, just a whisper. And Freddie wondered if Joshua had any idea why Freddie was reading Browning and Byron of late. Why Freddie, whose taste generally ran to the modernists and post-modernists, should suddenly have a taste for the romantics. If Joshua had any clue at all of what was happening to Freddie.

Because Freddie hadn't any clue himself.

He recognized some things. Joshua naturally asked for direction, and Freddie was a natural director. He'd had this sort of mutually fulfilling relationship with people before: students, interns and lovers. He recognized the lust factor, also. Joshua seemed so hesitant that Freddie hadn't acted on it, yet. He expected that that was why it seemed so *present* all the time. But the depth of longing was surprising.

Freddie *ached* for Joshua.

"What's wrong?" Joshua was looking up at him. And Freddie realized he'd stopped reading and was just drifting, swinging back and forth with Joshua pressed up against him, under his arm, silky hair brushing his neck.

"Nothing's wrong. I was just daydreaming."

"Oh."

My God, Joshua had to know. at least the physical part. Freddie had been half-hard for two weeks. Pressed up against him like this, Joshua had to at least be aware.

Maybe he was and he wasn't interested. Maybe he was just a very insecure young man in need of a dominant friend. After all, he'd been attracted to Scott, and Freddie was nothing like Scott.

The thought plunged Freddie into a despair that surprised him.

"Freddie?"

Joshua was looking up at him with real worry on his face. Freddie forced a smile, but of course, that only made it worse. Joshua intuitively knew something was being hidden from him and he assumed the worst. Well, this was ridiculous. Freddie owed it to himself and to the man in his arms to clear the air.

"We need to talk, Joshua. I hope you won't mind."

He hated the drama of it, because it only heightened Joshua's anxiety, but Freddie took him to the bedroom and closed the door. It seemed too private a thing to talk about in public.

Joshua's brows were creased, he kept nervously pushing his hair out of his eyes. He looked like he might burst so Freddie decided to just say it.

“You must know I’m attracted to you.”

Well, that had probably *not* been the thing to say. Joshua didn’t blink. That wine-colored blush did rise up his neck, though.

“I’m sorry. What... what I meant to say was...” Listen to him, fumbling and stuttering like a teenager.

“I didn’t know,” said Joshua. “I thought you felt sorry for me.”

What?

“You’re so smart,” said Joshua. “And I’m so stupid. I thought you felt sorry for me.”

“You’re not stupid, Joshua,” said Freddie, a little sharply. “And I don’t want to hear you say that about yourself again.”

A spot of pink appeared on each of Joshua’s cheeks. “Yes, sir,” he said.

“I’m sorry,” said Freddie, grasping Joshua’s arm. He found himself unable to resist and touched the back of his hand to that blush. Joshua’s cheek pushed just slightly against Freddie’s hand and before he could think, Freddie had gathered Joshua up and kissed him.

“Oh,” breathed Joshua against Freddie’s lips. So Freddie kissed him again. He felt Joshua’s arms come around his back and pressed him down onto the mattress.

Joshua’s mouth opened under his and Freddie’s hands wandered from his arms to the buttons of his shirt, plucking at them and moving from Joshua’s mouth to his chin to his neck, pushing aside the fabric and laving one nipple roughly with his tongue.

Joshua breathing hard, hands resting lightly on Freddie’s shoulders, his whole body shaking. Freddie pushed the shirt back from Joshua’s shoulders, helped Joshua remove it, kissed his wrists, his arms, came back to his mouth and kissed him deeply, tongue pressing into Joshua’s mouth as his hand wandered and found Joshua’s belt buckle and slipped it open.

Joshua made a noise and his fingers tightened on Freddie’s arm.

“Joshua?” said Freddie. “What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing. Don’t stop,” breathed Freddie.

Slipping down the zipper, Freddie found the wet hard lump in Joshua’s briefs and kneaded it gently, the man arching and shaking beneath him. Freddie crawled up so that

he lay almost fully on Joshua, reaching down to open his own pants and release his throbbing cock. Joshua lay there looking up at him, his eyes wide as a startled deer's.

"Joshua, is what I'm doing making you feel bad?"

"I don't..." Joshua breathed in and out. "I'm sorry..."

"You don't want to?" Freddie swallowed hard, closed his eyes and concentrated on controlling himself. "It's okay, Joshua. I understand..."

"No," said Joshua fiercely. "No, I want to."

In two weeks, Freddie had learned that one had to wait very patiently sometimes for Joshua to find the words. He wasn't feeling terribly patient at the moment, but he tried.

Joshua's eyes searched Freddie's face. He breathed and his hand touched Freddie's chest, traveled over it, traveled down and then up again. "I don't know anything," he said finally.

"But... you said you had a boyfriend. I thought..."

"I'm not any good at it. He... he said I wasn't."

Rage at this mysterious 'he' and compassion for Joshua's hurt warred with Freddie's lust. "There aren't any good or bad ways to touch each other, Joshua. It's just nice, isn't it?"

Joshua's eyes were filled with some bitter memory. "I want to make you feel good."

"I feel good right now, Joshua. Just lying here with you."

Joshua's chest rose and fell as he breathed hard with whatever emotion he was feeling. Freddie found his hand drawn to the planes of white skin and lean muscle, his palm floating down to the soft little belly, the trail of hair. Joshua's jeans opened to the white briefs, his cock still a mound with a growing damp spot. After two weeks of restless sleep and erotic daydreams and frustratingly chaste hugs and cuddles, Freddie thought he was about a step from madness.

"I'll teach you," he said. The arrogance of it would make him cringe in the morning, but at the time it seemed the shortest way between point A and the point where he longed to be.

"I'll teach you to make me feel good, Joshua. And you teach me how to make you feel good. Okay?"

That solemn expression was not exactly the one a lover longs to see, but Joshua nodded his head.

Freddie swallowed. "All right. Let me help you take off your pants." Joshua lifted his hips and helped Freddie slide the denim down his long legs. Freddie pulled his own slacks off a little wildly, bunching them and kicking them somewhere onto the floor. "Now give me your hand."

He pressed Joshua's palm around his cock, wrapped the fingers tightly around it and had to breathe for a minute. He slid the white briefs down and a lovely thick cock, dark with blood, lifted its head above Joshua's silky black pubic hairs.

"Oh," moaned Freddie. He wrapped his fingers around it and let its weight rest there. God, he wanted to taste it.

"We need a condom." God willing, they'd need more than one.

"There's some in my duffel bag," said Joshua, his voice a whisper. And then Freddie had to kiss him again, legs brushing against legs. Joshua's grip tightened and Freddie gasped and said. "Not yet. Let me..."

He slid off the bed and threw things around from the duffel bag until he found the box of condoms and brought a handful of foil wrappers back to the bed.

Joshua's skin was flushed from his pelvis to his cheeks and he was holding his own penis, leg moving restlessly, breathing through his mouth.

He muttered something unintelligible when Freddie slid the condom on and when Freddie wrapped his lips around Joshua's cock and sucked once, hard, Joshua arched and moaned and his balls drew up. Freddie gripped the base of Joshua's cock and heard him gasp.

"Do you want to come, Joshua?" whispered Freddie. "I can make you come now and then we can take our time later."

Joshua flailed a bit, thrashed. He looked down at Freddie and said, "What do *you* want me to do?"

Oh, man. Freddie had to close his eyes and think of Brussels sprouts just a second to keep from shooting all over the quilt. "Hold still," he whispered. "Hold very, very still."

The feeling of Joshua straining not to move while Freddie's mouth sealed over the tip of his cock and slid down was amazing. The choked off moan and tremble of his thighs when his cock swelled over and over in Freddie's mouth was heady.

Freddie slid up Joshua's shocked body and kissed him, peeling the condom from his penis. His own cock was heavy and hard against Joshua's belly and Joshua looked up at him and said, "Can I suck you?"

One of the blessings of middle age is some semblance of staying power. Freddie got the condom on and lay back, while Joshua positioned himself between Freddie's open legs.

Joshua looked up at him. "What do you like?"

Freddie's head fell back and he thought of Brussels sprouts again. "I like my balls sucked."

Joshua's head moved down and Freddie tried to think about anything but the feeling of that silky head, the warm mouth drawing in his nuts and rolling them. He heard an embarrassing whimper come out of his own mouth and he said, teeth gritted, "Joshua? Suck me. Just the head. Hard. Now. please."

And Joshua popped up and caught the head of Freddie's penis and sucked on it so hard Freddie thought it would come off. A bright flash went off in his skull and Joshua kept his mouth around Freddie, soft and gentle, until he'd finished coming.

Joshua crawled up Freddie's body with the look of a young man who was eager to know his grades and Freddie managed a dopey smile and to stroke the smooth hair back from Joshua's face before he dozed off.

Brian came into the house looking for a screwdriver Paul thought he'd left in the living room. He noticed that Joshua and Freddie weren't on the front porch anymore and when he left, he saw the door to Scott's bedroom was closed.

"What are you grinnin' about?" snarled Scott. He was drilling holes in two by fours with a sour expression. Home improvement was not Scott's favorite afternoon activity.

"I'm just in a good mood," said Brian. "What did you want me to screw, Daddy?"

Chapter Twenty

“The cab is here, Brian. Are you ready?” Jim stood at the open door wearing a good suit and looking worriedly at his seldom worn watch.

Brian came trotting out of the bedroom in a pair of black dress pants and starched white cotton shirt. “I want to wear a bowtie.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “This is L.A., honey. Not the Met. No one dresses for the Opera out here.”

Brian raised an eyebrow at Jim, who had trimmed his beard neatly and wore his hair braided down his back, in addition to the suit.

“I want to,” said Brian.

“Put it on in the cab, then,” said Jim, who had to be half an hour early for everything.

Paul came through the living room, spun Brian around, gave him a kiss and a swat on the fanny and told him to do as Jim said.

“What are you going to do all night, Paul?” asked Jim, watching the tall handsome young man their Brian had become as he trotted down the sidewalk toward the cab.

“Going to break in the hot tub,” said Paul.

“Good idea,” said Jim. “Get Scott to join you. He pulled a muscle trying to ride that horse that Joshua uses and he’s had me at my wits end all day with his whining.”

“Will do.” Paul trotted over and gave Jim a kiss for good measure. “Have a good time.”

It was an interesting experiment, Scott thought. He sat on the lip of a bench in the hot tub and watched his dildos floating in the water in front of him.

Some floated, some didn’t. He had no idea why.

“That can’t be a good idea,” said Paul, stepping slowly into the hot churning water from up on the wooden deck they’d built around it.

Jim and Paul had insisted the hot tub be enclosed in a gazebo with ‘privacy walls.’ At the time, Scott had bitched endlessly, as it required another couple of days of labor to build the additional walls, but now, looking up at the naked, inked body descending into the tub beside him, he was very grateful that he didn’t have to worry about the neighbors.

Paul groaned, sinking down into the water. “The plastic in those things is probably not meant to withstand these temperatures,” he said.

“If they can handle my hot ass, they can handle a hot tub,” said Scott.

Paul snorted. “Take them out, Scott.”

Scott sank up to his chin in the hot water, and considered refusing a direct order. There was something to be said for a six-foot-four naked man with a semi throwing one across his inked thighs.

But his quad muscles still ached from horseback riding and Paul looked to be in such utter bliss over there, Scott hadn’t the heart to be a brat tonight.

“Yes, Paul.”

He scooped out the collection and stood to throw them onto the towel he’d left lying on the deck. When he turned around, he noticed one of Paul’s eyes half open and watching him.

Scott went up on his toes and leaned over, so that his butt cheeks hovered just above the swirling waters. “Like what you see?”

“Who wouldn’t?” said Paul, like it was no big deal.

So then, of course, Scott had to stretch toward his towel, keeping his butt out of the water and clenching a little as he did so. “Oh, darn it, I can’t reach.”

There came a sploosh in the tub behind him and a big body pressed him right into the wall of the tub as Paul reached over his head and scooped up the towel.

“Here.”

Never call a Toppy Top’s bluff, Scott reminded himself. Now that he had Paul there, very much there, he wasn’t sure whether he had meant what he had just offered.

Scott and Paul had one of those relationships by degrees. Mostly, they interacted in groups with Jim or Brian or Jim and Brian. About six months ago, though, something subtle had begun changing between them. Scott had been very aware that he was flirting. And, a little like waving one’s hand over a candle flame, he was both fascinated by, and cautious of, the heat.

“Aren’t you going to take it?” said Paul, still holding the towel.

Yes, that *was* the question, wasn’t it?

“I could...” Scott pushed back from the lip of the hot tub and was aware of Paul allowing him freedom of motion without lessening his contact.

The towel was placed, very carefully, down in front of Scott and two hands placed just below his armpits. Those hands traveled, very slowly, down his sides, the fingers mapping every inch of skin in their passage.

Warm lips at his ear, “Don’t you *need* it?”

Scott turned around. Now he was nipple ring to nipple ring, so to speak, with Paul. The heat of the tub water kept them both from full erection, but the pressure of their pelvises sent tingles through him.

The water churned around them, the lights of the gazebo creating green and black shadows in the ridges and dips of Paul’s sculpted body. The snakes inked there seemed almost to rise from the water like some sort of mythic creature and the eyes looking down at Scott were so dark blue as to be almost black.

Feeling pretty close to that flame, Scott bent forward and kissed the middle of Paul’s neck, one tiny inch of un-inked skin. He pushed a little, experimentally, and felt Paul give again, as if they were dancing. Paul’s arms held Scott close, but allowed him to lead.

“’S getting hot,” said Scott, softly. “Isn’t it?”

Holding Scott by one shoulder so that he turned as Paul turned, Paul leaned over and pushed something on the hot tub’s control panel. “The water will cool down to room temperature soon,” said Paul. He laid one finger at Scott’s hairline and traced it softly to the top of Scott’s ear.

“Thank you.”

Scott let his hands play over Paul’s biceps, down the ripped abdomen to Paul’s waist, where the water foamed, then dipped his fingers below the water line. He felt Paul’s thighs bunch, his torso stir just slightly.

Scott looked up at Paul through his eyelashes and saw just a flash from those eyes before Paul’s mouth was on Scott’s and they were both swaying there, arms around each other, fully engaged in the kiss.

As the water cooled, Paul hardened against Scott and he found that he was edging the man to one of the fiberglass 'seats,' urging Paul down. Scott placed a knee on either side of Paul's hips and reached back to guide Paul's stiff cock to Scott's entrance.

It was gratifying to see that Paul was breathing hard, his lips open and moist, his face and chest flushed. Scott felt less endangered and more protected by the arms that encircled him, pulling Scott down onto that long prick as strong hips shoved upward, hitting Scott deep and hard.

The water made him buoyant and Scott let Paul guide his hips up and down, watching as Paul's face went red, jaw clenched with the effort. He kissed the bald head, forehead, face, lips, gasping when Paul's hand suddenly grasped his penis and started stroking long, firm strokes.

He was glad for the sound of the jets. They, hopefully, masked his moans as he came.

And afterward they floated, Arms twined together, legs lifting with the swells of whirlpooling water.

"You know, 's gonna get pretty funky in here if we come in the water all the time," said Scott, smiling against Paul's mouth.

"That's what the filtration system is for," said Paul.

"You get the big family pack kind?"

Paul grinned. "Guess I should."

"Guess you'd *better*, snake man."

Chapter Twenty One

It was a vignette Brian had become accustomed to seeing. An upset Joshua pounding his heels as he walked across the house, down the hallway, into the room he borrowed from Scott followed by the thunder of the slammed door reverberating through the house.

And then Scott, sauntering in, eyes blinky and innocent, practically whistling. “Where’s Joshua?”

“If Jim finds out you’ve been teasing him again, he’s not going to be happy,” said Brian.

“I’m not teasing him. It bothers me, is all.”

Scott had a problem with overly submissive behavior. Or, rather, he worried that the men one submitted to might take advantage. Brian thought that Jim must be the most patient man in the world.

“What’s he done now?”

“Nothing. I mean, *nothing*. Freddie told him to rest so he was just sitting there, refusing to move.”

“Joshua had that bad cold,” Brian pointed out. “I think it scared Freddie. Jim thought it might be pneumonia the one night, remember?”

“What’s the point of being sick if you can’t have a sick day,” fussed Scott. “It’s just wrong, is what it is.”

“Well, he’s moved now. He looked really upset when he came through here.”

Scott looked worried. “I’d better talk to him.”

Brian sighed, shaking his head. He’d been polishing boots and he put the boot and the polishing rag down. “I think you should just let it rest, Scott. Joshua is highstrung.”

“You know what really pisses me off?”

Brian picked up another boot and applied a glob of polish to it. “No.”

“They’re still not doing it.”

“Sure they are. I saw them kissing the other day.”

“Maybe *that*, but not the real deal.”

Brian paused in his polishing and turned to stare at Scott. “You don’t have a spycam in your bedroom do you?”

“No. God, Brian. Joshua *told* me. Or, actually he *asked* me about it and I could tell from the questions.”

Paul had spoken to Brian about gossip. More than once. Brian had been getting quite a taste for it in New York and it was starting to become a bad habit. The problem was, what seemed like gossip to Paul always seemed like normal human inquiry to Brian.

“What kind of questions?” he asked.

“Oh, like, was it really sex if a man didn’t *you know*, and did men still like men if those men had never *you know*, and was there something that let other men know that one had never...”

“You’re kidding.”

Scott raised a hand in solemn Boy Scout mode. “No.”

“You think it’s Freddie?” said Brian. “Maybe he’s not into *you know*.”

Scott cracked a grin. “A Top that doesn’t top.”

Brian giggled. He and Scott looked at each other. In unison they said, “*You know*,” and both fell onto the sofa laughing.

Wiping tears from the corners of his eye, Brian said. “I asked Paul about it and he was all, ‘the tradition of the mentoring relationship in Greek culture.’ Gah. I know what Greek means to me.”

“Toga?” said Scott.

“Toga,” said Brian. “Which gives me a great idea.”

“Did you actually ever try to peel a grape?” said Scott testily. He shook the mangled remains of another purple grape from his fingers.

“I think we’re supposed to feed them whole from the bunch.” Brian, leaned over, holding the grapes over Scott’s head. “Jump, puppy.”

“Watch it, I’ll bite you,” said Scott. “Joshua! What are you doing in there?”

From behind the bedroom door came Joshua’s voice. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

Both Scott and Brian walked over to said closed door. “What’s the problem?” called Scott.

“I don’t think Freddie would like this.”

Scott and Brian looked at each other and rolled their eyes in disgust. “Listen, Joshua,” said Brian. “I tried this once with Paul and he *loved* it.”

Scott and Brian were both dressed in short white pleated ‘slave’ skirts, collars, and nothing else. Brian had purchased the costume for Halloween a while ago, and had modified it so that all three men could wear something. Scott had the fake laurel leaves embracing his brow and the slave bracelets clinked on Brian’s wrists when he raised his arm to the door and leaned on it.

“It’ll ruin everything if you don’t do it, Joshua.” Brian looked at Scott and played his ace. “Don’t you think Freddie will feel left out when they all come home and Scott and I are dressed up and you aren’t?”

There was a long, long silence, and then the rattle of the door being unlocked. Brian grinned at Scott triumphantly.

Joshua came sliding out, and both Scott and Brian stepped back and looked him over appraisingly.

“You look *hot*,” said Brian finally, Scott nodding his agreement.

Joshua did. The tall, young body was lean, but muscled. He had a slim gold collar around his neck and a flat stomach, with a trail of hair leading to bony hips from which the waistband of the skirt hung. The short pleats (Brian had said, wide blue eyes honest with Reason, that he didn’t have enough material to make the skirts longer) ended just below where the view up those muscular thighs might get interesting.

Looking *hot* seemed not to please Joshua overmuch, though, and he turned as if to go back into the bedroom. When he did, the skirt flounced and both Scott and Brian took a quick step back.

“Freddie is going to *die*,” said Brian. “And I mean that in a good way.”

“Yes?” Joshua hesitated, obviously torn between causing a good reaction from Freddie and the possible risk of dressing like this without having checked with Freddie beforehand. His indecisive swaying was causing an indecent display to flash at the two men standing there.

“Trust me,” said Scott, holding his hand over his heart in sincerity.

Joshua seemed to think Scott’s judgment in these matters to be that of an expert. So Brian and Scott managed, like luring a rabbit from its hole, to get Joshua into the dining area where they’d set up their feast.

Phase two was next.

“Hold still,” said Brian, teeth biting his extended tongue as he squinted and attempted to draw a line of black liner under the rim of Joshua’s eyelashes.

“I’ve never worn makeup before.”

“This isn’t makeup, it’s part of the costume.” Brian stepped back and cocked his head to check the effect. Joshua blinked up at him. The eyeliner wasn’t half bad, if Brian did say so himself. The mascara enhanced Joshua’s already long eyelashes and his eyes looked enormous and waif-like.

“Hey, Goldilocks. Smile.” Brian turned and a flash went off. When his vision had cleared, Scott was standing there, waving a Polaroid in the air. “For Paul. For later,” said Scott.

Scott had emerald green eye makeup that gave him an even more evil Pan-ish look. Brian had simply painted the thick eyeliner around his own eyes, with a curled point on either side like an Egyptian hieroglyphic. It made his blue eyes look otherworldly.

Scott admired the photograph. “Got to get this one enlarged.”

“Do they do that?”

“Sure. Ready, Joshua?”

“I don’t know.” FLASH. “Freddie might not...” FLASH. “Scott, you shouldn’t...” FLASH.

Chuckling, Scott ran off to stash the pictures somewhere.

“When are they due back?” asked Brian, when he reappeared.

“Soon,” said Scott. “Jim thinks that new mechanic is ripping him off, so he just wanted Freddie and Paul to show up and put the fear of God in him.”

“That won’t take long,” said Brian. Most people discovered a Fear of God upon first meeting his boyfriend. He figured the combined vision of Paul and Freddie roaring up on Harleys in their leathers would convert the mechanic in a matter of seconds.

Joshua looked around the room. “Are they going to mind that you’ve moved the furniture?” Scott and Brian had shoved the table against the far windowed wall and laid their feast of cheese, wine and fruit out on platters in the center of an old picnic quilt. In the manner of a Roman feast, they’d laid pillows and cushions in a square around the food in the center.

“Not once they get a look at us,” bragged Scott. In the short skirt, with his collar and the laurel leaves set jauntily above those wicked eyes, he looked more like a satyr than a slave-boy, in Brian’s opinion.

“Sit over here, Joshua.” Brian directed him. “So when he comes in the door, he’ll see you. And Scott and I will sit here and here.”

They were just getting themselves posed when they heard the roar of motorcycles pulling up out front.

“Remember to keep calling him ‘Master,’” said Brian. “It’ll turn him to goo. I swear.”

Poor Joshua was looking more and more like a frightened rabbit. “Smile,” said Scott. “You look like a Roman sacrifice, not a Roman slave-boy.”

Joshua tried a tremulous smile. “Like this?”

They could hear heavy boots on the stairs outside now. “Better stick with the scared look,” sighed Scott. “Freddie seems to go for it anyway.”

The door in the living room could be heard opening followed by Paul’s booming voice. “Hello?”

“I’m here, Master.” Brian hit his pose on the cushion. He and Scott exchanged grins. Show Time.

While Jim had a little talk with the man working on his van, Freddie and Paul sat back, gloves and helmets cradled against their chests, and waited.

Paul gave Freddie a knowing look. “How is Joshua?”

“Better. I told him to rest for the day and we’ll see how he is tomorrow.”

From Paul’s expression, Freddie knew that he had meant more by his question than a polite inquiry after Freddie’s health.

The problem was, Freddie didn’t know the answer.

He'd been in discipline relationships before. He'd been pretty deeply in a BDSM relationship for a year, actually. And there had been a couple of very fulfilling non-sexual Dom/sub relationships that he'd cultivated over the years. He'd always felt those relationships had been healthy and mutually satisfying. He'd never felt like he did now.

Although Joshua readily did whatever Freddie asked, suggested or even commanded, Freddie felt, somehow, that he wasn't in control *at all*. He felt, in a metaphorical way, that he was always on his knees before the quiet young man, as if in a perpetual state of courtship.

Maybe it was the onset of middle age, he thought, some weakness taking hold of him. Maybe he needed to have his testosterone levels checked or something.

"Something bothering you?" said Paul.

Freddie sighed. If he couldn't talk to Paul, who could he confide in? "I don't know. I don't know how Joshua is. Man, I don't know how *I* am."

"Really? What's got you puzzled?"

Freddie shook his head, loathe to admit, even to Paul, that he didn't know what he was doing.

Paul gave him one of those piercing looks. "You know, when I first met Brian, I couldn't believe it. I thought, 'What the hell is happening to me?'"

Freddie was startled to have his inner thoughts spoken aloud. "Seriously?"

Across the way, Jim's mechanic was shaking Jim's hand and their friend had a big smile on his face indicating his satisfaction with whatever agreement had just been reached. Paul flipped his helmet up to put it back on. "That young man believes you walk on water, Freddie. Just remember. Trust goes *both* ways." And he pulled the helmet over his head.

Thoughtfully, Freddie did the same.

"Oh, Brian." Paul stood in the entrance to the dining room, looking down at his lover who hung from his neck, batting his eyelashes.

Paul may have been trying to sound like an indulgent Top, but his hands were reaching up under that short skirt already, and his face was going dark with blood.

“Oh, Master,” cooed Brian, rubbing and twisting into those hands. “I’ve been a naughty, naughty slave.”

Paul laughed gruffly, but when Brian wrapped both legs around Paul’s hips, hauling himself up the leather-clad body, and kissing him open-mouthed, Paul pushed him against the wall hard enough to make the house shake.

Jim chuckled and grinned at Freddie. “Master?” they heard Scott’s voice calling and Jim stopped mid-chuckle, looking toward the room from which that cry had uttered.

Freddie followed Jim around the corner and saw Scott, laid out on a cushion in the same getup as Brian’s, only less modestly so. His one leg bent upward so that the skirt covered practically nothing. He held grapes just above his head, mouth opened to receive them. Jim growled, and Scott dropped the grapes.

“Oh, oh, Master. What am I going to eat now?” And Jim was on all fours, just like his namesake animal, mauling his boyfriend with a big paw.

“Say it again,” Freddie heard Jim demanding and Scott’s half-laughing, half-serious “Master” cut off by a kiss.

“H-hi, Freddie. I mean, um, Master.” Across the tablecloth spread in the middle of the room, Joshua knelt on a rose-colored cushion. His eyes enormous, outlined in kohl, bare-legged, bare-chested, with just a little skirt around his hips and Freddie stopped dead.

“Joshua?”

Eyes wide, mouth opened slightly as he breathed, cheeks pink with embarrassment, Joshua stood and came slowly toward Freddie. The skirt swayed.

Freddie blinked.

“Are you hungry, Master?” Joshua shyly took Freddie’s hand. Like a fish on a hook, Freddie was led back to the waiting cushions, and pulled down next to Joshua. The damned skirt kept lifting and moving, giving Freddie little peeks at what he knew was under it, but never a good look.

Joshua reached toward a dish in the center of the tableau and the skirt slid up over that beautiful and, as yet, pristinely untouched ass.

When he sat back to proffer a strawberry, Freddie’s mouth was already hanging open. Joshua popped the fruit in. Then he fed himself one. He leaned forward and gave Freddie a fruit-flavored kiss.

“Would you like me to dip it in chocolate?” asked Joshua, leaning across the cushions again.

Up went the skirt. Wiggle twist went that pretty rump. Freddie’s hand was on one of Joshua’s thighs before he had thought. Joshua looked back at him, from where he was stretched across the tablecloth, his eyes wide.

Controlling himself, which these days was feeling more and more like reining in a twelve-horse chariot, Freddie removed his hand.

“M-master?” said Joshua. Man, *that* wasn’t helping any either.

Joshua sat up and offered a strawberry now, with fudge dripping from it, and Freddie eagerly sublimated by eating the tart and sweet dessert. “Thank you,” he said.

Joshua licked at the fudge on his fingers as Freddie watched. He could *feel* the blood thumping in his groin.

“Where did you get that... that...” Freddie gestured, unable to articulate exactly what he’d call the article of clothing that both covered and did not cover Joshua. Temptation of Satan maybe?

“Brian made me,” said Joshua, looking worried. “I can take it off.”

“N-no, that’s alright,” said Freddie, swallowing.

“I should have asked you first,” said Joshua.

“It’s alright, Joshua,” said Freddie, urgently. Both of his hands seemed to want nothing more than to slide up under that short hemline and grope blindly. He had to clench them to control the urge.

Joshua looked at him, licking his lips nervously, and then his eyes jerked to another corner of the room.

Freddie had been so taken up with the vision of Joshua’s ass, he’d not noticed it before, but the action between Jim and Scott had heated up considerably. The laurel was now on Jim’s head and he lay across a platter of fruit with Scott bouncing happily up and down on his cock. The skirt rucked up around his waist and Jim moaned like a cow.

Paul and Brian were completely missing and Freddie didn’t have to think hard to imagine what they were doing. There did seem to be a quantity of the fruit buffet missing, though.

“Freddie?”

His poor baby was nervous again. That anxiety could ratchet up to the point where he got a headache and Freddie refused to be the cause of Joshua's pain.

"I love the outfit," he assured Joshua honestly. "Let's go to our room so Scott and Jim can have some privacy."

Scott chose that moment to howl enthusiastically, seeming to second the motion.

"Yes, sir. I mean, Master," said Joshua, still playacting. And he stood.

Freddie looked up to the hand being offered him, then his eyes traveled to the right and higher and he was now looking up *under* that skirt. Stroke was imminent, he thought fatalistically as he took Joshua's hand and stood.

He may as well die with a smile on his face.

"I'm sorry," said Joshua, the minute he had the bedroom door closed. "They said you'd like it."

"I did. I do," Freddie assured him. "You look... amazing."

Joshua came toward him slowly, that damn skirt swaying. "I don't look shameless?"

"Well..." Freddie tipped his head and felt a loopy grin on his face. Of course, Joshua stopped, suddenly indecisive.

"Come over here," said Freddie. He didn't mean to snap out orders, but sometimes it was just easier. And, well, he rather enjoyed how readily his orders were obeyed.

Of course Joshua came over immediately, sat on the bed.

"Do you mind me playing?"

Freddie shook his head. "Playing is part of the fun, Joshua."

"I like calling you Master," said Joshua.

Freddie had to take a breath. "I like it, too. But, you know, I'm not your master, Joshua. I'm your lover."

His hand was wandering on its own, down the satiny feel of that fabric, over the hip bones barely covered there, across to the lump slowly hardening.

Joshua touched Freddie's hand where it held him. "Can I touch you, too?"

Freddie was amenable to all suggestions of that nature and quickly shed all of his clothes. When Joshua acted as if he would remove the skirt, though, Freddie stopped him.

“I really do like it,” he admitted.

“You do?”

“Yes. I’d like it if you’d... Would you...” Freddie just had to see that round butt as the skirt slid up from it. “Roll over on your stomach, Joshua?”

Joshua did so, long legs spread and stretched out, back arched, looking over his shoulder at Freddie. “Like this?”

“God. I... forgive me.” Freddie allowed his hands to do what they longed to do, rubbing Joshua’s butt through the material, pushing it up and rubbing, kneading. Joshua pushed up toward him and Freddie had to take deep breaths, his mind going white.

“Freddie?” The fear there stopped Freddie cold. It always came to this. Joshua looking so frightened whenever Freddie approached this Holy Grail.

He’d been pulling back, holding back, really, that twelve-horse chariot, for weeks now. What if Joshua didn’t like it? Didn’t want it? He was fairly certain the young man had never done such a thing. What if the act hurt him, disgusted him?

“Freddie, did I do something wrong?” asked Joshua. And Freddie remembered Paul’s words.

“I want to...” Freddie breathed slowly. “Joshua, will you let me...” He let his fingers slide down into Joshua’s crack, between those perfect white cheeks, lightly touch Joshua’s hole. “Here?”

“Do you want to?” asked Joshua worriedly.

What if the boy would let him do it whether he, himself, wanted it or not? Freddie studied Joshua. “I trust you,” he said. “I know you’ll tell me if I hurt you or do something you don’t like.”

Joshua looked up at him.

“You will, won’t you Joshua?”

“Yes, sir.” said Joshua.

“We’ll need lube,” said Freddie. “A lot of it. I don’t want to hurt you.”

“I have some.” said Joshua, blushing furiously. And Freddie was almost dizzy to see that the flush extended up the inside of Joshua’s thighs as Joshua hopped off the bed and went to the dresser.

Freddie was trying to control his own body’s reaction to the show when Joshua tossed a huge tube of Astroglide down on the bed. “Scott gave it to me,” he said.

“He would.” Freddie grinned. “Lie down again, Joshua?”

He took his time. Joshua gasped when Freddie’s fingers penetrated him further than they ever had. He tightened up a little when Freddie worked in a third. “You okay?” asked Freddie.

“Yes, Freddie.”

God. Freddie kept up the slow massage, getting about half of the tube of lube worked into Joshua before he finally dared sheath his cock and set the head at the oiled entrance.

Slowly, he pushed in. Joshua’s head went down, but he urged Freddie to continue and even when Joshua moaned a bit, fingers grasping the sheets near his face, Freddie trusted his partner to tell him if it was too much and inexorably worked his way in until he was there and he hovered over Joshua, supporting himself on his elbows. He whispered, “I’m all the way inside you, sweetheart. Are you all right?”

“Freddie...” Joshua’s eyes were closed, his face flushed, his hands clenched.

“Baby. I’m not hurting you?” The pressure in his balls was intense, Freddie longed to move.

Joshua shook his head. “No,” he squeaked. “Freddie... please...”

“What, Joshua?” Freddie kissed Joshua’s ear, his breathing becoming loud even to himself.

“Do it,” whispered Joshua. “Please. Freddie. Do it.”

Groaning, Freddie let his body take over and slid in and out, building up speed. Joshua gasping and crying out beneath him, but all of the sounds were joyful ones, and then Joshua clenched around him, reaching blindly to find Freddie’s hand and grip it tightly. Freddie couldn’t stop his body, couldn’t stop pistoning in and out, the feeling so marvelous he didn’t want it to end. And when it did end, when he could hear again, his own voice crying out and he finally lay, still shaking with lust, his cock throbbing and encased in his lover’s tight heat, he still, somehow, didn’t want this feeling to ever end.

“That was amazing,” whispered Joshua.

Freddie pulled out carefully, rolled Joshua over gathered him up and held him as close as he could. He kissed Joshua's ear. "Was that so terrible?"

"Terrible?" Joshua opened an eye a crack. "No, that was wonderful."

"I was afraid you only did it to please me," admitted Freddie.

"You were?" said Joshua wonderingly. "I thought you didn't want me."

"Oh, my God," said Freddie fervently. "I'm dying of wanting you, Joshua. All the time."

Joshua looked completely amazed. "Oh."

"You should have told me you were worried," said Freddie. "And I should have trusted you to say 'no.' I will in the future."

"I know. It's just... sometimes, I'm afraid to tell you," said Joshua, sadly. "I try not to be."

"It takes time," said Freddie. "And I understand. But you must tell me these worries of yours, Joshua. Whatever they are. Will you do that?"

"Yes, Freddie."

"Whatever you tell me, it won't stop me loving you," said Freddie. And stopped. And heard himself.

And that's when he knew what had been ailing him.

Joshua looked shaken, and Freddie knew exactly how Joshua felt but still he bent down and kissed Joshua and said it again, "I love you."

"Another grape?" said Brian. He sat on Paul's thighs on their bed in his collar, and little slave skirt, decorating Paul's erect and swollen cock with a fruit salad.

Paul lay there with the expression of a man who is indulging a beloved child, temporarily. "These sheets are going to be a mess," he said.

"Spoil sport." Brian pouted. And he laughed at the expression on Paul's face. If he weren't sitting on his Daddy's legs and if Paul weren't inclined to put up with just about anything at the moment, he figured he would have gotten a good swat for that remark.

He leaned over and nibbled some of the fruit, being sure to come into accidental contact with Paul's cock every nibble or so. A rumbling noise came from Paul's chest and when

Brian looked up, he had a second of looking into the eyes of a predator and then he was flat on his back, ankles up and over Paul's shoulders, fruit squishing between them.

Poised there, Paul's cock sat just at his entrance, but not penetrating. Brian was pinioned and Paul had hold of both of his wrists. "You'll help Jim with the laundry," Paul said.

"I will?"

Paul smiled. He didn't move. Brian wriggled, trying to get a little more of what he wanted to sink in just a little, but he was helplessly immobile. Brian glared up at Paul. Paul merely met that glare with a cool, unbearably self-assured gaze.

Ah, heck, why not accept defeat? Brian sighed as best he could in his squished position. "Yes, sir. Aaaah!" Talk about instantaneous feedback. Paul slid straight home, pushing Brian into the mattress.

Oh, that felt good. Brian moaned and Paul slid back out, hovering just there again. "So," he said. "What made you and Scott think of this little idea?"

"Me and Scott? Why do you think it was a 'me and Scott' plan?" Brian wriggled. And why wasn't Paul fucking him as he so obviously ought to be doing?

Paul just smiled down at him with that ridiculous Top-like arrogance.

Man. "We thought it would be fun. We wanted to help Joshua," Brian said, hoping somehow to make himself look like the bringer of light and love he surely was and realizing only belatedly that it sounded more like 'meddling.'

Paul slid in and out a couple of times, though, and Brian was just beginning to feel things looking up, so to speak, when Paul just stopped again.

"What are you doing?" said Brian through gritted teeth.

"Why, honey, I thought you knew what we were doing."

"Well, we're supposed to be fucking," spat Brian from the ridiculous position of bent-in-half bottom boy. "But somebody keeps forgetting."

"Tell me about 'helping' Joshua," said Paul.

Brian tried to harrumph, but found that impossible currently. He settled for a look of righteous indignation. Paul continued with the imperturbable look which was even more annoying because it gave the impression that he wasn't as Utterly Desperate as was Brian.

But Brian *was* utterly desperate, wasn't he? "Scott said Joshua and Freddie haven't *you know*, so we thought we'd help them."

Uh-oh. Even as he said it, Brian knew that his chances of getting fucked in the next half hour had just gone from fifty-fifty to about nil. Sure enough, Paul completely withdrew, sat up and before Brian could say topsy turvy, he was face down on an inked lap.

"Brian, we've talked about gossip and meddling, haven't we?"

Brian was still hard. He could feel Paul pressing against him. "This is ridiculous," said Brian.

SMACK.

Brian hadn't deserved a real spanking in a long time. He yelped with surprise at the sting.

"Haven't we?"

Brian moved uncomfortably, trying to get his prick just there against Paul's thigh.

SMACK.

"Hey!" said Brian. "I was still thinking."

Paul's hand just lay on his stinging butt. And he said, very calmly. "It may seem like innocent fun, Brian, but people can be hurt by it."

"I'd never do anything to hurt Joshua," protested Brian.

"That's the problem with it. It may seem to begin with the best of intentions, but it's still meddling with other people's lives and it's wrong."

When Paul was right, dang it, he was right. Brian sighed. "Yes, sir."

"We've talked about this many times, Brian. You know the issues. You know the consequences."

"Yes, sir."

Brian gave up and hung onto the bed and Paul's leg. He flinched at the first few and was fighting the need to cry by the end. It had been so long since Brian had needed a spanking, he'd forgotten what a relief it was when it was finally over, when Paul was holding him and he knew he was forgiven.

"Hon?" said Paul after a long while.

“Yes, Daddy?” sighed Brian from where he was cradled against Paul’s neck.

“Are you too sore, now?”

Brian smiled. “No, Daddy. I mean, Master.”

Paul chuckled. “Guess I’d better put you on your knees this time.”

“Yes, please,” said Brian.

There was whipped cream in his beard and cantaloupe juice down his thighs and Scott was sobbing and begging for *more* and *harder* when Jim started thinking.

He stopped moving.

“Oh, God. Oh, Jim, Lord, why are you stopping?” said Scott, looking around behind himself where Jim knelt with both hands on his rucked-up slave skirt and his cock half in and half out.

“Did I see Joshua in a toga?” asked Jim.

“Huh?”

“When I came in.” Jim, looking puzzled, gazed around the room as if seeing it for the first time. “And where’s the table?”

“Against the window, Jim. Lord, man, I’m dying here.”

Absently, and really, thought Scott, not putting a lot of heart into it, Jim began rocking in and out.

Okay, well then, that was alright, right there, and again. Scott bowed his head and moaned.

“But I know I saw Joshua,” said Jim. And he stopped. And *pulled out*. And stood up.

Scott whimpered. He put his head right down on his hands and made a sound like a puppy left out in the yard.

“Scott? Why was Joshua dressed up like a slave boy?”

“He didn’t want to be left out,” said Scott. Okay, it wasn’t exactly the *truth*, but it wasn’t exactly *not* the truth.

Jim stood there, hands on his hips and looked down upon Scott in a way that made him cringe. "That doesn't sound like Joshua."

"We thought he might think it was fun."

"*We?* Who is this *we*?" asked Jim. Like he couldn't guess.

Scott sighed. He sat up, brushing foodstuffs off his body and skirt. "Brian and I," he admitted.

"Scott, I've told you to leave Joshua alone."

"I was..."

Jim pointed to the bedroom. Scott tried one more pathetic, eyelash-blinking pleading look, but Jim was intractable.

Scott rolled to his feet and trudged into their room. "How long," he said, as Jim tightened the straps.

"You haven't told me everything," said Jim.

"You can't keep me tied up indefinitely!" said Scott.

"Can't I?" and the son-of-a-bitch walked out of the room.

"And that's all we did," said Brian. "I really didn't think it was a bad idea, Jim."

Jim pulled meditatively at his beard.

"And the toga thing was *my* idea, not Scott's. Paul reminded me about meddling and gossip," said Brian, ruefully. "I do have a problem with it."

"You don't always know what's best for people," said Jim.

"*You* do," said Brian.

Jim looked at him in honest surprise. Then he looked up at Paul who stood leaning in the doorway with an equal look of astonishment on his face.

"The difference is, I hope," said Paul. "That we know when people need to let themselves know what's best for them."

Brian's eyebrows did a 'he's crazy' twist on his forehead. "Huh?"

“That didn’t even make sense to me, Paul,” said Jim.

“Me, neither,” said Freddie, from the hall doorway. “Even though I think I agree with him.”

Freddie looked, Paul thought, like man who had had all his engine parts oiled and cleaned. “Joshua says ‘thank you’ to Brian and Scott. Though I would have preferred he’d found a way to talk to me in his own time.”

“Yes, sir.”

“He looks up to you,” said Freddie.

Brian cringed. “I know, sir.”

Freddie looked around. “Where *is* Scott?”

“He’s waiting,” said Jim. He stood.

“It was *my* idea,” said Brian.

“Thank you, Brian,” said Jim. “But that’s not the issue.”

Scott still lay supine, arms and legs spread and bound, counting the dots on the ceiling. He’d lain in this position so many times he almost felt like he *knew* some of those dots. Personally.

Jim came strolling in. Scott still felt hopeful until Jim closed the door, then he just closed his eyes in grimly fatalistic acceptance. Well, fine. He’d just lie here and take it like a man.

Jim sat down in his bean bag chair. He was silent for a long time. Sometimes, when Scott had really messed up, Jim would sit there and wait until Scott couldn’t stand it anymore and would just start babbling confessions. Well, it wasn’t going to work this time. Scott clenched his jaw.

Jim sighed. “This is troubling me,” he said. And then he said nothing else.

The old clock sitting on the dresser that Jim wound every morning with a key ticked off the seconds.

Tick, tick, tick, tick.

“*What* is troubling you?” asked Scott of the ceiling.

“I think we’ve had this issue hanging over us like the sword of Damocles for some time,” said Jim.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick.

Argh. Jim was going to make him participate in the conversation just by dropping comments like that and then not explaining himself. “*What* issue,” snapped Scott.

“What issue do you think?” asked Jim.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick.

“I don’t know,” snarled Scott. “You’re the one who sees it dangling like a fucking sword.”

He *felt* Jim’s eyes snap at the swear word.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick.

“Why us?” said Scott. “We’re fine. Aren’t we, Jim?”

Tick, tick, tick, tick.

Jim didn’t answer him and, tied spread eagle on the bed, Scott suddenly wanted to curl around himself. Suddenly he wanted to hide and he couldn’t. “Jim?”

“I’m here, baby.”

But that wasn’t enough. He needed to *feel* Jim there. He needed to *know* Jim would be there. “I need you,” said Scott, and hated like hell how his voice sounded.

And Jim was there in a second, warm and present, lying next to him, almost *on* him and those warm brown eyes were looking into Scott’s. “I’m here, baby.”

Scott exhaled with relief. The panic he’d felt a moment ago completely gone. “Let me up?”

Jim’s eyes read him. “But we haven’t talked about it.”

“Is this about Joshua, because it’s just that he’s so... so...”

“Submissive.”

“Yeah.”

“Like you?”

“NO! Christ, no.”

“Then why does it bother you?”

God. What did Jim do, what was it about his voice or the way he looked at Scott that made the breath start to huff in his chest and that choky feeling start in his throat? His eyes prickled. “I’m a man, Jim.”

“Thank Christ,” said Jim, smiling a little. “So’m I.”

“But I respect you.”

“You think I don’t respect you?” said Jim, looking honestly shocked.

Scott was silent.

“Scott, I... I...” Jim realized that everything he was about to say merely emphasized his physical attraction to Scott. *I worship you. I can’t stand to be without you.* Scott was just lying there and Jim suddenly felt that what he said next was going to be so important that it would define their relationship for years.

“If I were to be stuck someplace,” he said. “Without anything but the bare essentials for survival. And the powers that be said, ‘you can have one other person there to help you get through this’, I’d pick you.”

Scott was looking down, his golden lashes flickering. “You would?”

“Absolutely.”

“And not just for the mind-blowing sex?”

Jim paused. “Well, that *would* have been factored in. Of course.”

Scott gave him the barest smile. “Of course.”

“But it wouldn’t be the main consideration. You’re the man who’s got my back. I know that.”

Scott looked up at him. His eyes had gone that deep golden color they could that made him look like a lusty tiger. “I love you.”

“Yeah, I love you, too.”

“You gonna untie me now?”

Jim peered at the clock on the dresser. “I figure another ten minutes should be enough for what you did to Joshua.”

“Jim!”

Jim chuckled. “Then I’m gonna come back in here and finish fucking that pretty ass.”

Scott grinned, wriggling his butt happily into the waterbed mattress. “Yes, sir.”

Chapter Twenty Two

“Go out long!” cried Scott, taking three hopping steps back, throwing arm retracted.

Wearing a muddy, flapping Giants jersey emblazoned with the number fifty-six, Brian ran into the officially-marked end zone and raised his arms for the pass that was never completed.

A Browns jersey with a mud streak down the back and a pair of holey jeans sticking out hit Scott smack in the chest and brought him down.

“Wah!” yelled Joshua, jumping up and pouncing after the ball as it bounced across the lawn.

Scott just lay there. Halfway down the field, Joshua turned around and looked back at Scott, who still lay on the ground, as if stunned.

Joshua came trotting back. He’d filled out a little in the past few months. Freddie encouraged him to eat properly and had him working on the stress that ate away at him. But he was still tall and rangy, the thick hair sticking out at a weird angle from the sweat and the game. “You okay, Scott?” he said, worriedly.

Scott howled, got a hold of one of Joshua’s legs and brought him down.

“Hey!” Joshua yelled, getting tickled and screaming at the outrage of it.

And “Ooomph,” he said, when Brian leapt on him as well.

“No Browns player sacks my quarterback!” yelled Brian, rolling Joshua and grabbing him in inappropriate places.

Joshua screamed and laughed.

“He doesn’t even seem like the same young man,” said Jim, watching them from the window.

“Oh, he is,” said Freddie. “He’s less anxious with you all, but it’s still a struggle for him with strangers.”

“Brian said he’s seen him on campus talking to other students. So he’s making friends.”

“He is learning to interact. Slowly.” Freddie set down his coffee. “A colleague of mine from the literature department called to speak to me about him. About his poetry.”

“Really?”

“Of course, I knew he was brilliant,” said Freddie, smiling, “But it was nice to hear it from somebody else.”

Jim sat back, stirring his coffee. Freddie and Joshua would be moving into their own place this weekend. Joshua had seemed quite calm about it. Where Scott and Brian might have reacted to impending change with fretting and stubbornness, Joshua seemed to be content to go wherever Freddie led.

Freddie, however, was looking apprehensive and like he wanted to talk.

“Have you met any of your new neighbors?” asked Jim.

“I have. A young couple next door. Totally cool. Of course, Joshua is still nervous about them. I’m glad your lot are so close by. He’ll have someone to talk to. It’s hard enough being shy. It’s... different for him,” said Freddie. “Because of the way we are.”

“You think your relationship makes things more difficult for him?”

“No,” said Freddie, but the way he was pulling at his ear, staring at the coffee table said ‘maybe’ to Jim. Jim set down his coffee cup.

“Freddie, the boy that followed Scott home was a victim just looking for another predator to hurt him. The boy out there in that yard is healthy and happy and learning to take care of himself. Do you think he’d be that way without your relationship?”

Freddie steepled his fingers in front of his face and leaned his forehead on them. “I hate to do anything to hurt him.”

A soft smile creased Jim’s face. “We always feel that way about the ones we love, but you can only do your best.”

“See, you can just *say* that.”

“You have to trust him.”

“That’s what Paul says.”

“Paul is, occasionally, right.”

“Only occasionally?” said Paul, coming in from the bedroom. “Sorry, had to do that conference call.”

“How’s the deal going?”

“Ah. If I don’t get an ulcer, it’ll be great.”

“Don’t talk like that in front of Brian,” said Jim. “Brian has become convinced lately that we are old and feeble and prone to geriatric illnesses. He’s been hounding me about our diet.”

Freddie laughed. “He must have been talking to Joshua. Joshua’s got me eating oatmeal every morning. I don’t even know how it happened.”

“Hmm, sounds like something Brian would do.”

“Yes, Scott would just sit there and tell you how unhealthy whatever you were eating was until you’d be unable to swallow it.”

Freddie stared at him. “That’s what Joshua does when I smoke my pipe.”

Paul grinned. “Three evil little minds working together.”

“So. First you have a house warming and invite all of us.” Brian was sitting on the hot tub, holding the football between his knees and enumerating a list to Joshua. “Then Scott and I give you gifts. Freddie can’t say anything because they’re gifts.”

“Geronimo!” There was a streak of golden skin and a giant *splloosh* behind Brian. Water rained on him from above and he whirled around. “Scott!”

Scott paddled to the side, looking pleased with himself. “Time for the wet boxers contest, gentlemen. I’ll be the judge and you be the contestants.”

Joshua looked shyly at Brian, but he wasn’t as easily embarrassed by either young man these days. “Can I tell you what I want?”

Brian looked delighted. “Yeah?”

“You know that, um, leather thing you, um, wrap around your, um, youknow.”

Brian and Scott exchanged looks. “Oh, I’m sure we can find a cock and ball ring *somewhere* around here,” said Brian.

“I’ll have to check for size,” said Scott.

Joshua grinned. “Freddie wouldn’t like...”

“NO!” said Scott. “I thought we had you trained to stop saying that.” He swam to the other side of the hot tub, and so missed the look Joshua gave him.

“Are they still playing football?” asked Paul.

Jim peered out the window. “Sitting by the hot tub.”

Paul rolled his eyes. “Planning something.”

“Should we be worried?” asked Freddie.

Jim shrugged fatalistically.

Paul laughed. “Jim and I used to worry, now we just practice damage control.”

“You make us sound like old men, Paul,” said Jim. “It’s only been a couple of years.”

Freddie shook his head. “You seem like old hands to me. Which reminds me, I’ve been meaning to ask how late is too late to call? In the event that someone might have an emergency question?”

“You’ll be fine,” said Paul.

The back door banged open and Brian came running in. He was filthy and wet, the football jersey slapping around his knees as he ran. “Joshua fell in the hot tub,” he said, laughing.

Freddie stood. “He fell in?”

“Well, actually. Scott took off his clothes and jumped in and Joshua threw Scott’s clothes over the fence so Scott pulled him in and I was just sitting there.” Big, innocent blue eyes under dripping-wet blond hair. “And they got me wet, too, but not as bad as they are, so, anyway, they wanted me to come in the house and get them some clean, dry clothes.”

He trotted down the hallway, feet making wet splat noises on the wood as he went.

Jim sighed. “I’ll go do something about this.” He rose, and looked down at Freddie. “How are you feeling?”

“Well, I’m not as worried about Joshua,” Freddie admitted. “As long as he has Brian and Scott. I *am* a little worried about *me*.”

“What are you two looking at?”

Jim came into the bedroom, wiping his hands on a kitchen towel. Joshua and Freddie had said goodnight hours ago and the sounds from the bedroom at the end of the hall had ceased. Paul was still finishing up paperwork in his room and Brian and Scott lay on their bellies in their boxers on the waterbed looking at a magazine.

“Goldilocks thinks he needs a tattoo,” said Scott.

“Scott’s just afraid that if I get one, you’ll want him to get one, too.”

Scott snorted but Jim said, “Scott knows I’d never ask him to do anything he didn’t want to do.”

Those pretty eyes rolled toward him and away. “Stupid idea anyway,” said Scott. “What’s that one mean?”

“Chinese character for ‘courage,’” read Brian. “Hey, look, a bear print.”

Scott pulled the magazine out of Brian’s hands. “What kind of moron would want that on their butt. Or... would you have this on your thigh?”

“I want a slinky looking red dragon around my belly.” Brian rolled onto his back so he could demonstrate the placement of the dragon. His boxers were definitely tented. Which figured because, peering over their shoulders at the thing, Jim could see that half the models were nude men.

Scott noticed Brian’s condition as well. “Here?” he said, lightly tracing the circle with his finger.

Brian looked at him, eyelids half closed, mouth half opened. “Yeah. Um. No. A little lower.”

“Here?” Scott looked up at Brian, his eyes glowing. And he slid his fingers under the waistband of Brian’s shorts. “Oh, look, Goldilocks. I found your dragon.”

The head of Brian’s cock emerged from the elastic and Scott bent over and wrapped his lips around it slowly.

Jim set down his dishtowel, shed his jeans, and came up behind Scott, wrapping his arms around his chest and nibbling at his ear.

Scott hummed approval, either of what he had in his mouth or of what Jim was doing and Brian lifted his knees, shedding his boxers and opening his legs so that Scott could really get down in there.

That pretty bubble butt had been soaking in a hot tub for an hour and Jim just couldn't resist it. He held both cheeks in his hands, licking the pretty pink pucker around and around.

He felt a hand on his leg and somebody's mouth on his calf and wriggled down to accommodate what was probably Brian's mouth sucking on the head of his penis.

"Hey," said Paul. And Jim saw, out of the corner of his eye, two booted feet. Then one booted foot. Then a booted foot and a bare foot. Then one bare foot. Then a pelvis and a cock at his cheek and a 'may I cut in' and Paul was poking at Scott's wet hole.

Scott made a very, very enthusiastic sound and this somehow translated into Brian arching and moaning and that translated into a very nice buzz along Jim's cock. He moaned and found Scott's lips on his for just a minute.

"Oh. God, don't stop," he heard Brian cry and Scott's mouth was gone and the suction on Jim's prick was suddenly intense and needy and the sound of slapping flesh just by his face was loud. Scott's knees dug into the mattress. Now Brian's hand helped his mouth, tugging at Jim's balls.

"Oh. Daddy. Oh," Brian cried. His breathing was loud in the room for several minutes and then Scott's mouth was on Jim's again, the taste of come on his tongue. Jim cried out as his orgasm snaked down Brian's eager throat and Scott moved his face into Jim's shoulders, butting him like a little goat as both he and Paul moaned and then they collapsed on top of and sort of sideways across Brian and Jim.

Men breathing and someone sort of laughed and then there was a knock at the door.

Jim arched his head back and saw a very sleepy and rumpled looking Freddie standing there. He wore loose sleep pants and had love bites all over his chest. Jim smiled. Oh, he was going to rib Freddie in the morning about those hickies.

"Sound's like someone's being killed in here," said Freddie.

"That's Brian," said Scott from somewhere under Jim's arm. "He's loud."

"I am *not* loud," said Brian. And his head popped up from between Jim's legs. "I'm encouraging. Paul screams."

"Screams?" said Paul in outrage.

“It was *all* of you,” said Freddie. “And I wouldn’t mind, except we have to meet the movers early tomorrow morning.”

“Sorry,” said a chorus of voices.

“Thank you,” sighed Freddie and padded off again.

There was giggling, and then some smooching and wiggling, and finally some sighing and rearranging of limbs. The bed was big and warm and in a few minutes they could all hear Paul snoring.

“Poor old Papa Bear,” said Brian. “Can we sleep in your bed tonight, Mama?”

“You can sleep in our bed any night you want,” said Jim.

And that’s exactly what they did.

THE END