



Cat Grant

*Strictly
Business*

From the author of *The Arrangement*

 Lyrical Press, Inc.

Strictly Business
by Cat Grant

Lyrical Press, Inc.

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Dedication

For Don, for believing that if I did it once, I could do it again.

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Acknowledgements

As always, thanks to Gina for brainstorming and beta-reading above and beyond the call of duty.

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Chapter 1

December, 1998

Eric Courtland's mother died a week before Christmas. He sat at her bedside while she drifted in and out of consciousness, until her eyelids fluttered, the breath leaving her body in a tiny, toneless puff. Her pulse, already thready and weak, ebbed away at last. Eric held her hand tightly, chafing it when it grew cold as if he could bring her back to life by sheer will.

He leaned forward to kiss her softly on the forehead, then tugged the lilac-scented silk sheet over her face. His eyes burned, but the tears wouldn't come. It was just as well; he'd done enough crying—alone in his room, of course—this last year and a half, watching her slip away by degrees from a heart condition her doctors claimed was treatable. Despite Eric's pleas, she hadn't even tried to fight it. She'd died for one simple reason—because she no longer wanted to live.

He headed downstairs to his father's study, his footsteps echoing sharply in the empty hallways. He'd dismissed the private duty nurse yesterday, preferring not to share his mother's last hours with a virtual stranger, but now he found the stark quiet unsettling. Stopping to stare dully at the Picasso hanging in the foyer, he tried to swallow against something thick and solid congealing in his throat. His mother had loved this painting so much. He remembered the day she'd had it hung here, back when they'd first moved from the city to this house on the northern edge of Seneca Lake.

He had been ten years old then. It was one of the few times he could recall seeing her truly happy.

He made two difficult but necessary phone calls from the house phone, then hit the top number on his cell's speed dial.

Nick Thompson picked it up on the second ring. "Hey. You okay?"

"I'm fine," he said tightly. "I-It happened about half an hour ago."

"I'll catch the next train up from Penn Station. I should be there by nine."

"Don't. There's no need to take time off from your job on my account."

"I'm sure the New York *Herald* can spare a cub reporter like me for a day or two."

"Look, I know you want to help, and I appreciate it. But..." He let out a long, slow breath. "The coroner'll be here in a little while, and once that's done, I'd like some time alone."

"You sure that's such a great idea?"

"Nick, believe me, I can handle this myself."

"I know you can. That doesn't mean you should have to."

"It's not like I've had much choice," he replied wearily.

"You still haven't heard from your father?"

"His cellphone's been off for the last day and a half." Which, of course, meant he was probably shacked up at the Manhattan penthouse with his latest mistress. More than once Eric had seriously considered driving up there and yanking him out of that tramp's bed by force, but the thought of his mother dying alone finally quashed that impulse. "His

secretary's trying to track him down, but who knows how long that'll take."

"Jesus," Nick breathed. "I'm sorry, Eric. I really am."

"Not half as sorry as he's going to be."

* * * *

Eric was still awake, sitting in the living room nursing a double scotch when his father came through the front door around midnight. "How magnanimous of you to put in an appearance," he spat, tossing back the last of his drink before standing up. Raw willpower alone kept him steady on his feet.

Edward Courtland's tall, sturdy frame filled the doorway, casting an elongated shadow in the crackling light from the fireplace. Cold gray eyes swept Eric from head to toe and back again, jaw tightening in that familiar expression of disapproval and disgust that had made Eric wet his pants when he was ten. Now, ironically, he could barely summon up a chortle. "Madeleine didn't mention that you'd come home from grad school."

"Well, it'd help if you'd bothered to answer your phone, or even your fucking email."

"I'll thank you not to take that tone with me," Edward rasped, turning toward the stairs.

"You're too late. She's gone," Eric called after him. "It happened this afternoon, in case you actually give a damn." Bitterness mingled with triumph, a sweet, heady taste lingering on his tongue when he saw the utter devastation on his father's face. "She kept asking for you. Toward the end I

let her believe I was you, so she'd have a chance to say goodbye. She was so out of it she didn't know the difference."

Edward turned and headed for his study, trudging down the hallway like a man sleepwalking through knee-deep snow. He dropped into his chair with a heavy groan, staring blankly at nothing.

Eric followed, grateful for the fresh anger fueling him, burning away everything except the tight fist of hatred inside his chest. "Nice try, Dad, but you're about a year and a half too late with the show of grief."

Edward's glance flicked instantly in Eric's direction, hard and steely once more. "Once the funeral's over and done with, I want you out of here."

"This is more my home than yours. I can count on two hands the number of days you've spent here since I graduated college."

"Nevertheless, it's my name that's on the deed." Opening his briefcase, he scooped out his laptop and a sheaf of files. "Now that your mother's gone, I don't see much reason for us to go on pretending you've ever been anything but a disappointment to me."

Christ, that stung. Twenty-four years of the same callous treatment, and it still hurt like a son of a bitch. "I tried," Eric ground out through gritted teeth. "But nothing I did ever met your standards of perfection."

"Trying means nothing. Achievement's the only thing that matters in this world, Eric. You've never understood that." Turning his attention to his laptop screen with a dismissive

wave of his hand, he added, "Don't worry, you won't starve. I'm sure your mother's left you well provided for."

* * * *

They buried her two days before Christmas, on one of the coldest, bleakest afternoons Eric had ever experienced. Snow flurries chased them the entire way from the lake house to the city, mile after endless mile of mind-numbing whiteness as he stared out the limousine window. Luckily, he'd had the foresight to filch a Xanax from his mother's well-stocked medicine cabinet; it made the rest of the world seem remote and slightly unreal, but at least it kept him from screaming.

To his surprise, he found the memorial service rather touching. Relatives and old friends of his mother's, most of whom he'd never met before, paraded up to the church podium one after another, telling their stories about her. People who hadn't seen her in over twenty years still remembered her with affection. For the first time since the afternoon of her passing, Eric's composure threatened to crack, but he bit his lip and steeled himself. He'd be damned if he'd give his father the satisfaction of seeing him lose it.

His mother's will specified that she be buried in a small private cemetery a few miles north of Manhattan, next to her father and older brother. The snow had finally subsided, but it was still so cold Eric's hands felt like lumps of frozen lead inside his fur-lined gloves by the time the graveside service drew to a close. He spied Nick and his parents shivering near the back of the crowd, as well as two men whose faces he didn't recognize, one tall, one not so much, both clad in plain

black suits and overcoats, hovering by the hearse and limousine. Eric's stomach plummeted when he realized who they were. Shit! Why the hell did they have to pick today to show up?

At least they had the good grace to wait until the mourners dispersed before approaching. "Edward James Courtland?" the taller one asked, flashing his ID—a big, shiny FBI badge. "I'm Special Agent Parker, this is Special Agent Harris. We'll have to ask you to come with us."

When Edward's face went as pale as the half-spent clouds up above, Eric almost felt sorry for him. Almost. "G-Gentlemen, I've just buried my wife. Can't this wait for another time?"

"No, sir, I'm afraid it can't. The US attorney's office has been trying to contact you for days now."

"And what on earth do they want with me?"

The shorter one reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out a folded arrest warrant. Edward skimmed it, eyes bulging as they traveled down the page. Eric had to clamp down on the inside of his cheek to stave off wildly inappropriate laughter. "Insider trading and stock manipulation? This is someone's idea of a joke."

"No, sir," said Agent Harris. "Now, will you come with us quietly? We'd rather not use the cuffs, but we will if we have to."

"All right," Edward snarled, then, turning briefly to Eric, added, "Call my attorney and meet me downtown," before following the agents to their government-issue black sedan.

* * * *

Eric didn't get in to see his father again until the next morning, on the opposite side of three-inch reinforced safety glass down at the federal holding pen. Edward's burnt-orange jumpsuit provided a perfect complement to the pungent, metallic odor of ammonia and desperation. Eric could hear him getting ready to breathe fire through the private phone's tinny connection.

"It was you, wasn't it?" he accused. "You're the one who reported me."

Eric grinned. He couldn't help it; this felt every bit as sweet as he'd anticipated. "How long did it take you to figure it out?"

"You're the only one who had access to my laptop. It had to be you."

"You should've been more careful. I learned how to hack passwords by the time I was twelve."

"I can't believe even you would sink this low."

"I would've thought you'd be pleased with me. Achievement's everything, right?" He leaned closer to the glass, skewering his father with an icy glare. "Since it looks like you're going away for awhile, all your assets—including your Courtland Industries stock—now fall under my control. And that, along with the block of stock Mom left me in her will, puts me squarely in the CEO's chair. How's that for an achievement?"

Edward's face flushed the color of bruised plums; for a moment, Eric thought he might have a stroke on the spot. "How long have you been planning this?"

"The ironic thing is, I didn't plan it at all. I stumbled across those doctored stock reports by accident the other night when I was trying to dig up some exploitable dirt about you and that skank Amber to leak to the scandal sheets."

"How serendipitous. But I won't be in here for long, not with my connections."

"Funny, but I haven't noticed any of your cronies rushing down here to bail you out. Might prove a bit awkward, seeing as they're under investigation, too." Eric sat back with a sigh. "For what it's worth, I'm sorry they showed up to arrest you at Mom's funeral. But if they hadn't, you'd be sipping daiquiris on a beach in the Cayman Islands by now. And yes," he added acidly, "I found the tickets in your briefcase, too."

"Bravo," his father sneered, bringing his hands together in mock applause. "You must be very proud of yourself right now."

"I'm just glad I won't have to look at your face for the next few years."

Edward bared his teeth. "We'll see about that."

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Chapter 2

"I might as well tell you, Mr. Courtland—the board and management are none too happy about this change," Thomas Ross, Courtland Industries' VP of Production stated firmly. "They feel you're far too young and inexperienced to lead this company."

"Then I suppose it's a good thing that this is a business, not a democracy." Eric sat down in his father's plush leather chair, adjusting the angle of the blotter before turning his attention back to the man standing in front of the antique rosewood desk. He thought about asking Ross to sit down too, but decided against it. Best to keep him off-balance, make sure he knew from the outset who had the upper hand here. "And last time I looked, the other board members didn't own fifty-one percent of the company."

"So you intend to impose your will upon those of us who've spent decades building this business with your father, when by your own admission you know nothing about the agricultural products industry?"

"Maybe so, Mr. Ross, but I can read, and this company's last three quarterly reports have been dismal, to put it mildly. Whatever you've done in the past obviously isn't working now."

"And you know what will work, I suppose?"

It wasn't quite a taunt, but it burrowed under Eric's skin nonetheless. "I'm halting production on everything that hasn't shown clear and rising profits over the past year. Our

resources could be better spent developing newer, greener technologies. And yes, in case you're wondering," he added with pointed emphasis, "that means the budget for your department will have to be cut by roughly twenty-five percent."

Ross's eyes widened. "You do realize it'll be years before any of these new projects start generating revenue?"

"It's called the wave of the future, Mr. Ross. You either swim with it, or you end up drowned, which is exactly where the company was headed under my father's navigation."

"Well, I don't think that's at all fair—"

"And anyone who can't—or won't—get onboard with me is, of course, free to hand in his resignation."

Ross paled, swallowing hard. "I-I'll look over my budget, and see where I can make some reductions."

"I'll expect your report by the end of the week."

Eric waited for the office door to shut with a loud click before striding across the room to the tall, glassed-in mahogany case that held his father's collection of Etruscan and Sumerian statuary. They were ugly things, squat and graceless; his mother had refused to allow them in the house. He'd have them boxed up and sent to storage by the end of the day.

In fact, he'd have the entire office redone—fresh paint and carpets, new furniture, everything. He'd bring his two favorite Monets down from the lake house, to give himself something serene and beautiful to look at while he worked.

He'd banish his father's stink from this room and every other room in the building. By the time he was through, no one would remember Edward Courtland had ever existed.

* * * *

Nick wasn't sure how Eric would react to him showing up at the penthouse unannounced, but the second Eric's face lit up in a delighted grin, Nick's heart felt ten pounds lighter. "Happy Birthday!" he crowed, holding up a large pizza box as Eric ushered him inside.

Eric took one look at it and burst out laughing. "I can't believe you remembered."

"Hey, we have to keep with our yearly tradition."

Eric lifted the lid gingerly with one finger, inhaling the heavenly aroma of double pepperoni. "You went all the way to Alfredo's? They're on the other side of town!"

"I know it's your favorite."

"Thank you," he murmured, leaning in for a soft kiss before grabbing Nick's hand and dragging him to the kitchen.

Acres of gleaming chrome, stainless steel and white formica left Nick momentarily dazzled. Blinking hard, he climbed onto a stool at the center island. "Wow—and me without my sunglasses."

Eric chuckled. "My housekeeper's very particular about the spotlessness of her domain. You should hear how she scolds me if I forget to put my dishes in the sink." He got out plates and drinks—Coke for Nick, a glass of red wine for himself—then they dug in, their man-sized appetites banishing conversation for a few ravenous minutes.

Nick glanced at the birthday feast rapidly disappearing from Eric's plate, allowing himself a private smile. Eric had always leaned toward the slender side, but now he looked as if he'd lost close to ten pounds since Nick last saw him at the funeral. When he got stressed or focused on something, the thought of eating rarely crossed his mind. He'd passed out and ended up in the infirmary during spring finals week their senior year at Columbia, after two days of living on nothing but black coffee and Benzedrine. Classic type A behavior, Nick mused.

The gleeful stuffing of their faces continued apace, but it was only once he'd finished inhaling his fourth slice that Nick realized what was missing. "Damn! I should've remembered to pick up some beer."

"I'll have Estellita put it on the grocery list for next time."

"Next time?" He flashed Eric a look of mock amazement. "That sounds suspiciously like an open invitation."

"C'mon, you know you're always welcome here. I'm actually a bit surprised you haven't shown up before now."

"You've been so busy getting settled in here and at the office, you've barely had time to chat on the phone in the last month. I didn't want to intrude."

"You're not intruding," Eric insisted. "In fact, I'll give you a key, so you can come and go anytime you like."

"You sure about that?"

"Of course. Why wouldn't I be?"

They finished their meal and strolled hand in hand into the living room, then out onto the balcony. Nick's breath caught at the view of Manhattan spread out before them, thousands

of tiny twinkling lights set in black velvet, with the Hudson shimmering in the distance. "It's like we're looking down from heaven," he whispered.

Eric just grinned and led him back inside.

The cream-colored carpet looked so thick and plush, Nick couldn't resist kicking off his shoes—so it seemed only appropriate that Eric should pick precisely this moment to tackle him to the overstuffed leather couch and plant a toe-curling kiss on him. For a few precarious seconds Nick feared they'd end up tumbling to the floor, but apparently the furniture was built to withstand impromptu make-out sessions.

"Everything here looks brand-new," Nick observed, running his big toe along the edge of the walnut coffee table.

"That's because I had the place redecorated after I kicked Amber out on her bony, botoxed ass."

The hard tone in Eric's voice shocked him. "Geez, Eric ... That's harsh."

"Don't worry, women like her always land on their feet. The jewelry my father gave her's enough to cover her rent for the next three years. But the real kicker is, the deed to this place was in my mother's name. I didn't find that out until I saw the will. I don't even know if she was aware of what my father was using it for. I hope she wasn't, anyway."

"Look, I know that's why you did it," Nick murmured. "Why you turned him in, I mean. You wanted to make him pay for the way he treated you and your mom. But he's still your dad. Don't you think—"

"What, that it's too stiff a punishment? You wouldn't say that if you'd had to live with him for the past twenty-odd years." He pulled away with a sigh, sitting up straight. "When I was eleven, a bunch of kids from school dared me to go into this little mom-and-pop supermarket and steal something. So I went in and picked up a pack of gum and slipped it in my pocket. I got within three feet of the front door when the guy who owned the place caught me."

"Everybody does something stupid like that when they're kids. It's practically a rite of passage."

"Yeah, but somehow I doubt your father told you, 'You shouldn't have tried that if you weren't sure you could get away with it.'"

Nick's mouth dropped open. "J-Jesus."

Eric shrugged. "So that's how I feel about him and his stock manipulations. He brought it all on himself, and if I hadn't caught him, someone else would have eventually. Of course, he wouldn't have needed to resort to dirty tricks if he hadn't run the company into the ground in the first place."

"Do you think you can turn it around?"

"I don't know," he replied softly, the words sending a startled jolt up Nick's spine. In the entire time he'd known Eric, he'd never heard him admit uncertainty about anything. "I'm not worried for myself. My mother left me millions in stock and other property—I could sell her art collection tomorrow and never have to worry about working again. But my grandmother's got her entire life savings tied up in Courtland Industries stock. If the company goes under, she'll lose everything."

"What about finishing your doctorate? I thought you only had a few months' work left on your dissertation."

"I can't think about that right now."

"What, you mean after all that studying, you're just going to let it go?"

"I talked to the dean of the political science department a couple of weeks ago. He's willing to give me a year to make up my mind about finishing it. But honestly," he added with a short, defeated laugh, "I doubt it matters if I do or not. It's just a useless liberal arts degree."

"That's your father talking again. It's not useless, and neither are you."

"Sometimes I think you have far more faith in me than I deserve."

"Look, don't worry so much, okay? The degree will still be there when you're ready. And so will I," Nick added with a smile, catching hold of Eric's hand, tugging him down beside him.

They kissed slowly at first, savoring each hot, wet flick of lips and tongue, then with increasing abandon, grinding their bodies together. With a groan of frustration, Nick yanked his t-shirt free from the waistband of his jeans a split-second before Eric's hands knocked his own roughly aside, dragging the offending garment up and over Nick's head.

"M-Maybe we should take this to the bedroom," Nick managed to stammer.

"I don't want to wait that long." Fingers trembling at his own fly, Eric finally got the button undone and the zipper down. His cock popped out as if it were spring-loaded, rosy-

pink with arousal, the head already smeared with leaking pre-come.

The hot, musky fragrance of it made Nick drool. "I want to suck it," he hissed, starting to scoot down, but Eric's solid weight straddling his thighs foiled that action.

"Later, I promise," Eric said with a deliciously evil grin, his hand snaking between them, working Nick's fly open before pulling out his thicker, meatier cock, jacking it without mercy.

"You bastard," Nick muttered. "If you make me come too soon, I'm gonna—"

"Kiss my feet, like you usually do." Stifling Nick's next protest with another kiss, Eric took both their cocks in one hand, stroking hard. But when Nick arched reflexively into the brain-melting touch, Eric let go, grabbing hold of Nick's waist instead, grinding their hips together, now with nothing but sweaty, sticky skin between them. They kept on, whimpering and thrusting, until Nick let go with a broken cry and came, hot, wet ribbons splashing them both.

Sitting back on his heels, Eric dragged a fingertip through the puddle pooling around Nick's navel, then brought it up to his mouth to lick it clean. "I don't hear any complaints," he smirked, reaching down to grasp his own still-erect cock.

Most of the time Nick didn't mind Eric taking charge, but tonight he wasn't about to let this encounter pass without getting in a few figurative licks of his own. Reaching for Eric's cock, he wrapped his huge hand around it and pulled, squeezing the spongy head in his warm, sweat-slicked grip. Eric's triumphant expression vanished instantly. A few more

long, brutal strokes had him spraying all over Nick's chest and belly before collapsing in a heap on top of him.

They lay together in deliciously sated silence for several minutes. "We should probably move before we get permanently stuck together," Nick said at last.

Eric groaned. "Give me a minute."

He couldn't help chuckling. "That wouldn't be a complaint, now, would it?"

"Fuck you."

"You'll have to race me to the bedroom first."

"Well, in that case..." Eric opened one bleary eye. "You're on."

* * * *

Eric wasn't normally much for cuddling, but when he awoke the next morning with Nick's solid six-foot-plus frame curled around him, he realized he'd slept the night straight through for the first time in a month. It felt so good, he switched off his alarm and lay there drifting in and out of a pleasant doze, savoring the brief comfort until Nick rolled over on his back and stretched.

He came awake immediately when he spied the clock, raking a hand through his dark curls. "Geez, it's almost eight. Don't you have to get to the office?"

Eric shrugged. "That's the great part about being the boss—nobody docks you when you're late."

"Well, if you're in no hurry, I'll grab the first shower." He'd just swung his legs over the edge of the bed when Eric caught hold of his arm. "Cut it out, okay? I'm already run—"

"Why don't you move in?" he blurted.

Nick stared at him. "*What?*"

"C'mon, it's not that big of a surprise. We've talked about it before."

"I-I know, but I thought we agreed we'd wait until we found a place together—a place we can *both* afford."

"It's not like there isn't plenty of room for you here."

Nick smiled ruefully before leaning in for a quick kiss. "I love you for suggesting it, but there's no way I can do it now. For one thing, I've still got six months left on my lease."

"That's no problem. I'd be happy to pay it off."

"I wouldn't," he said firmly. "Look, I know you're only trying to help, but I need to do this in my own time."

"You still haven't told your parents about us, have you?" It slipped out before Eric could stop himself, but from the way Nick flinched, he knew he'd struck a nerve. "For God's sake, Nick, you're twenty-three years old. When are you going to let them have the honor of knowing who you really are?"

"You know, this may come as a surprise to you, but some people actually *love* their families!" Jumping to his feet, he stomped to the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. A few seconds later, Eric heard the firm, heavy click of the lock.

He propped himself up on his pillows and waited until Nick emerged, his hair still damp, a towel loosely knotted around his waist. At least now the look on his face was more abashed than angry. "I didn't mean to upset you," Eric said.

"I know you didn't, but..." Nick rubbed a hand over his face. "I have to pick the right time. I can't just go home for the weekend and say, 'Hey, Mom and Dad—I'm gay, I've

been sleeping with Eric for the last three years, and now I'm moving in with him.' How would you feel if somebody dumped all that on you?"

"It's okay." He was about to say it didn't matter, but he couldn't, because it did. It mattered terribly. "I understand."

Nick dropped to his knees by the side of the bed and cupped Eric's face in both hands, kissing him soundly. "We'll work this out, I promise."

Eric forced a smile. "Of course we will."

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Chapter 3

The annual stockholders' reception was the last place Eric wanted to be, but if in the last twenty years his father hadn't managed to weasel out of attending, he knew he didn't stand a chance, either. So he painted on a smile and pressed the flesh of clammy-handed, humorless stuffed shirts who glared at him like he was Satan incarnate, mitigating the social agony by parking himself within beeline distance of the nearest exit. Luckily, the ice-cold flutes of Cristal served up by circulating waiters helped file the edge off his nerves.

He'd just taken a sip from his second glass when he caught sight of a very familiar—and very animated—petite blonde in a stylish black strapless gown cornering a fellow partygoer near one of the buffet tables. He walked up and tapped her on the shoulder. "I'd know the back of that head anywhere."

Allison Taylor swung around with a surprised smile. "Well, hello there, Mr. Titan of Industry!"

"Hardly, but thanks for the vote of confidence," he replied with his first truly sincere laugh of the night. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I don't recall seeing your name on the guest list."

"Oh, my editor always gets invited to these things, so he dragged me along as his plus one. He needed somebody to mingle and take notes while he gets smashed on your expensive booze."

"I like the way he thinks." Tossing back the rest of his glass, he waved a nearby waiter over for another and proffered one to Allison as well, clinking glasses.

"Party hearty, huh? Just like college." With a wink, she downed a healthy sip. "Speaking of which, is Nick here tonight? I haven't seen him."

"He decided to sit this one out. It's not exactly his scene."

"I thought wherever you were was his scene."

"Yeah, well ... Life's been a bit complicated for us these last few months."

She nodded, her expression instantly sympathetic. "I was sorry to hear about your mom. I know how much she meant to you."

"Thanks. I appreciate that." Then, clearing his throat, he added, "So how's life over at the *Wall Street Journal*?"

"Hectic as hell, even if I am barely one step above an intern, but hey, any foot in the door, right? And on that note..." She flashed him her trademark toothy-bright smile. "How about an interview?"

He laughed. "Give my assistant a call and we'll set something up. I can't guarantee how soon, though. My schedule's pretty packed for the next couple of weeks."

"No problem. I'm sure you're worth waiting for." Hooking her arm through his, she coaxed him into a leisurely stroll around the room. "You know these people a lot better than I do. How about wangling me some intros?"

He tried, but every time the two of them got within striking distance of sizable clump of people, they all fell silent, pasted

on frozen smiles and waited for him and Ally to pass out of earshot before resuming their conversation.

"Wow," Ally marveled after their third swing and a miss, "I'd heard the stockholders weren't all that fond of you, but that was downright rude!"

"You get used to it, especially when you have to face the same thing at the office every day." He scanned the room quickly, his gaze caught by a tall, Armani-clad figure nodding at him from several yards away. Eric waved back, more than a bit amazed when the man started over in their direction.

"He looks friendly, at least," Ally observed, turning up her megawatt grin as the man approached.

"I've been wanting to shake your hand all evening," he declared, extending his hand to Eric to do just that. His grip was firm and appreciative yet, mercifully, not bone-crushing. "I didn't think there was a man alive who could topple Edward Courtland from his pedestal."

"You must be the only person in the room who feels that way. I could've sworn a couple of them actually gave me the evil eye." Turning, Eric held out his arm to present Ally.

"Bran, I'd like you to meet Allison Taylor, the newest bright light over at the *Wall Street Journal*. Allison, this is Branford Crane—"

"CEO of Crane BioGen, the country's most up-and-coming biotechnology firm," Ally interjected, holding out her own hand. "I think it's safe to say that everyone here has heard of you."

Bran's steely hazel eyes went wide with amusement. "Only the bad things, I hope."

"Oh, you have no idea. But now if you'll both excuse me," she added regretfully, "my boss is over by the bar, waving his arms to get my attention. The things I do for a paycheck!" Angling up on her four-inch heels, she gave Eric a quick peck on the cheek and piped, "Good to meet you!" to Bran before scurrying away.

Bran gave the back of her an appraising glance before returning his attention to Eric. "So ... the evil eye, huh? I've been on the receiving end of that a few times myself."

"And that was from some of my more gracious guests."

"God forbid their stock price should drop." Bran rolled his eyes heavenward. "Don't worry about it. That sort of thing happens every time there's a changing of the guard. Give them six months, and they'll be singing a different tune."

"It may take a bit longer than that."

"If it does, so be it. One thing I've learned is, pay no attention to your critics. A ship can only have one captain."

"That's assuming the crew doesn't mutiny."

"I have faith in your abilities," Bran said with a sensual twist of his lips that put Eric instantly in mind of another party—his parents' Christmas gathering four years ago. He'd been attracted to Bran from the moment the older man walked through the front door, but it was only once he'd overindulged in his father's favorite thirty-year-old single-malt that he'd summoned up the reckless courage to come on to him. To his surprise, Bran took him up on it, dragging him off to the coatroom for one of the most mind-bending fucks of his life. He'd done it mostly to outrage and embarrass his father, but the lingering ache in his ass and the bruises Bran

had left on his hips and thighs still haunted his kinkier dreams. Even now, the memory of it made him grateful his tailor had allowed some extra room in the crotch of his tux.

"S-So, is David here?" Eric queried, wishing now that he hadn't indulged in that third glass of champagne. David Henning was Crane BioGen's VP of research and development—and Bran's live-in lover. "I wouldn't mind saying hello to him."

"David and I aren't together anymore. It hasn't been officially announced yet, but he's taken a position with McKesson in Chicago." Draining his own glass, he set it down on a passing waiter's tray, waving off the offer of more. "It's a great opportunity for him. And the truth is, we've been over for awhile now."

"Sorry to hear it."

Bran shrugged, raking a hand through dark hair flecked with gray at the temples. "What can I say? When life pitches you fast balls, sometimes all you can do is duck."

"I should have that engraved on my headstone," Eric joked weakly.

"You'll do fine. But if you ever need help or advice, feel free to call me."

Eric made his escape a few minutes later, ducking out the side door, taking the stairs down to the garage. By the time he reached the penthouse, exhaustion combined with alcohol had taken its inevitable toll. His right eye felt like someone had rammed an ice pick through it. All he wanted was to knock back some aspirin and go to bed.

When he opened the door to find Nick lounging on the couch thumbing through a magazine, it took his last ragged shred of willpower to master his irritation. "I didn't know you were planning to drop by," he said tonelessly, bending to give his lover a perfunctory kiss before heading back to the bedroom.

He'd shed his tux and was just stepping into a pair of silk pajama bottoms when Nick appeared in the doorway. "What's wrong?" he asked, a half-hearted smile doing little to mask his concern.

"Nothing, I'm just tired. It's been one hell of a night." Stepping into the bathroom, he flicked on the light. "Oh, I saw Allison. She says hi."

"Wow, I haven't seen her in over a year. I guess I should call her."

"I'm sure she wouldn't mind hearing from you." Shutting the door, he relieved himself and brushed his teeth before washing down three extra-strength Tylenol with a palmful of tap water. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, startled by the hint of purplish shadows under his eyes, tight lines springing up around his mouth. There were actually a few strands of white at his hairline, mixed in with his usual sandy blond. If he kept going at his current pace, he'd look older than his father by the end of the year.

Nick was waiting for him in bed, the lights already out. Eric crawled under the covers and rolled over to face the wall, hoping Nick would take the hint that he wasn't in the mood.

Silence hung heavy and crackling in the air until Nick suddenly sat up. "Would you rather I went home?"

"No, of course not. I just need to get some rest tonight. The last couple of months are starting to catch up with me."

"I wish you wouldn't push yourself so hard."

Eric sighed. "If I don't, nobody else will."

"C'mere," Nick murmured, scooting up behind him so they spooned, his arm snaking around Eric's waist.

"Nick, I don't want to—"

"Shh. Be quiet now. Sleep."

And, lulled by the soft thump of Nick's heartbeat and the warmth of his body, he did.

* * * *

Nick woke alone around three AM. Rolling groggily out of bed, he headed down the hallway to Eric's office to find him crunching numbers on an oversized calculator, his desk covered with open files and stray loose pages with notes scrawled all over them. "What was that you said about getting some rest?"

"I slept a couple of hours, but then I woke up and couldn't stop thinking about this," Eric replied a touch sheepishly, sitting back in his chair. "Sorry if I woke you."

"You didn't." Circling around to Eric's side of the desk, he pushed aside some papers so he could perch on the edge. "But if you'll come back to bed, I'm sure I can figure out some way to help you get back to sleep," he added with a sly smile.

"In a little while. I really do need to finish this."

"What, you don't get enough paperwork done fourteen hours a day at the office?"

Eric pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes drifting shut for a moment. "I've been going over the budget. There isn't enough money to start developing those new projects I've greenlighted. I've slashed every department except R and D down to the bone, and I still come up short. I tried borrowing against the company's lines of credit, but my father maxed them all out months ago."

Shock and despair curled sourly in the pit of Nick's belly, though he knew it must be nothing compared to what Eric felt. "Isn't there anything else you can do?"

"That's what I've been sitting here thinking about. It looks like I'll have to sell some stock."

"How much?"

"About fifty million dollars' worth should be enough to get the new projects started."

Nick let out a slow whistle. "Won't that knock you out of position as majority stockholder?"

"I'm hoping I can buy it all back quietly once things get on a more even keel in a few months. It's the only solution I can come up with."

"Well, I know you'd rather not, but how about selling some of your mother's artwork instead?"

Eric shook his head. "Those are all multi-million dollar pieces, and everyone who's anyone in the art world knows who owns them. The second they hit the market, they'll raise a red flag. The company's in a precarious enough position without announcing to the whole world that it's on the verge of going broke."

"Won't selling off such a large block of stock all at once do the same thing?"

"I can break it down into smaller blocks spread out over several weeks. A couple other large stockholders have already started dumping their shares, so hopefully this'll slip under everyone's radar."

Nick opened his mouth to suggest something, but thought better of it. "Never mind."

"Go ahead. I'm pretty sure I already know what you're going to say."

He sucked in a breath, then plunged ahead. "Look, this is your father's mess, not yours. You're killing yourself trying to fix it. Is it really worth it? Why don't you just sell all your stock—and your grandmother's, too—and walk away? No one will think less of you."

"No one but me," Eric replied bitterly.

"That's bullshit, Eric. Quit beating yourself up. That's your father's job, and he's gone. He's out of your life. Stop trying to turn yourself into him."

"Is that what you think I'm doing?"

"All I know is, the guy I fell in love with three years ago is getting further and further away from me, and I don't know how to get him back."

"Look, I wish I had an answer for you." Eric sighed deeply, wiping at his eyes. "I wish I could tell you this will all be over in a few months, and everything'll go back to normal. But I don't know if it will. Maybe it is an exercise in futility, but I can't just give up. Not without trying everything I can think of first."

Nick nodded and made for the door, shoulders slumped with a heavy, defeated weariness, as if he'd been running a marathon in a blizzard. "I'll let you get back to work, then."

"Before you go, I'd like to ask a favor."

"What's that?"

"From now on, I'd appreciate it if you'd call first before coming over."

Nick knew he should have expected it, but nevertheless the shock hit him like a fist to the solar plexus. "I-If you want me to give back my key, all you have to do is say so."

"Nick, c'mon ... Don't be that way. You know how wrung out I've been. I can't keep on putting in such long hours at the office, then come home and have to entertain a guest."

"I'm not a guest, I'm your fucking *partner*," Nick snapped. "You asked me to move in with you not even two months ago, for crying out loud!"

"And you said no. Believe me, I got the message."

That was it. He'd heard enough. "Fine, have it your way," he replied tightly. "You always do."

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Chapter 4

A few weeks later, Eric returned from a late lunch to find Madeleine, his assistant, normally the picture of briskness and efficiency, fidgeting at her desk. "M-Mr. Ross is waiting for you in the boardroom," she stammered.

He frowned. "I wasn't aware I had an appointment with him."

Ross appeared in the open boardroom doorway directly across from Eric's office a second before he finished speaking. "You don't, but nevertheless we'd like a few minutes of your time."

"We?" Eric echoed, stepping inside to discover a half-dozen Courtland Industries vice presidents gathered around the black enamel conference table. Their faces reminded Eric of one of his father's favorite movies, a hokey old sword and sandal epic with bloodthirsty Roman spectators cheering on the lions as they ripped poor defenseless Christians to shreds.

"Gentlemen," he began in as calm a tone as he could muster, taking his usual seat at the head of the table, "I'm assuming my invitation to this meeting got lost in the mail?"

"I'll come straight to the point, Eric," Steven Warner, vice-president of finance—and one of his father's oldest friends—intoned icily. "We've given you several months to start making improvements, and frankly, we're disappointed. All these expensive new projects you've proposed have barely gotten off the ground. Our stock price is the lowest it's been in a decade, with no signs of recovery anytime soon. In short,

the stockholders have demanded that we take swift and decisive action."

"Fine. They can present their grievances to me directly at the quarterly meeting next month."

"I'm afraid it's a bit late for that," Ross interjected. "This morning we called an emergency meeting of the board of directors. We had enough proxies from the stockholders in hand to force a vote. By an overwhelming margin, they've voted to relieve you of your position with the company."

A red haze descended over Eric's field of vision, howls of outrage welling in his chest, but he dug his nails into his palms and waited for it to pass. By the time he'd regained control, everyone but Ross had risen and left the room. "I don't suppose I have to ask who'll be taking over."

"For the time being," Ross answered, looking like the proverbial cat with yellow feathers dangling from his jaws.

As if Eric hadn't endured enough humiliation, Ross followed him back to his office with a security guard, leaving him no choice but to watch them both hover over poor Madeleine like a pair of fussy maiden aunts while she cleaned out his desk. They drew it out for nearly an hour, scrutinizing each and every item, making sure she didn't slip in so much as a box of company paper clips.

"You can have all this delivered to my address here in the city," Eric said once everything was packed up and ready to go. "Take special care with the Monets. They're probably worth more than your house."

"Of course." Mouth curling in a satisfied sneer, Ross held out his hand for Eric's key card and parking pass, handing

over an envelope in exchange. Inside was a check for six weeks' severance pay—one week for each month worked. The same thing they gave departing secretaries and other clerical staff. He tore it to pieces and let them flutter to the floor.

Madeleine was back at her desk now, practically in tears. "I-I'm so sorry, Mr. Courtland. It's been an honor working for you." She sniffed. "You're not at all like your father." For the first time in his life, Eric took those words as a compliment.

The executive suite had a private elevator straight down to the garage, which at least spared him the further shame of being paraded out through the lobby. Fat, cold raindrops spattered his windshield as he eased out into the late afternoon gridlock, the sky itself mirroring his own gloomy mood.

He flicked open his cellphone and checked his messages; his inbox was full, with three messages from Nick listed one after the other. His thumb hovered over the 'call back' button, but he couldn't think of a way to explain what had happened without sounding utterly pathetic. Besides, he was fairly sure Nick already knew; somebody from CI had probably leaked the news to all the city papers, just in time for the evening edition.

Spying a curbside newsstand, he pulled over, rolled down his window and tossed the guy a couple of bucks for the *Herald*, frowning when he saw the front page. Nothing but coverage of the war in Kosovo, and Boris Yeltsin barely escaping impeachment.

But when he flipped it over to read beneath the fold, the air froze in his lungs.

* * * *

The bar was quiet, dark and sleazy, just the way Eric liked it. Three double scotches hadn't helped his latest pounding headache, not that he gave a damn. In fact, ironically, he found this pain rather welcoming; it kept him sharp, focused on the moment. He'd had enough pain in his life that he'd long since learned to view it as normal, as an excuse to withdraw and retreat inside himself to a place where everything was calm and peaceful.

But he didn't want calm or peace. He wanted to brood, to seethe. He wanted to kick his own ass up and down the block.

"Eric?"

A touch on his shoulder made him glance up, startled to see Branford Crane looming over him—and even more startled at the expression of genuine concern knitting his brow. "H-how the hell did you find me here?"

"You don't see too many sapphire-blue Jag XKEs in this neighborhood," Bran answered with a rueful chuckle.

"Besides, if I'd had the kind of day you had, I'd be getting shit-faced, too."

Eric supposed he should be grateful, but he'd swallowed that, along with his civility, with his last drink. Still, he might as well take his frustrations out on someone. "Have a seat, Bran." He did his best not to slur, pushing the other chair out from the table with the toe of his shoe. "That is, if you don't find the stink of failure too overwhelming."

"You didn't fail, Eric. You were fucked over." Bran sat down, pouring himself a drink from Eric's bottle. "There's a difference."

"No, there isn't. There's just winning, and it doesn't matter how you do it."

"Now you sound like Edward."

Eric snorted, taking another long sip of scotch. "He was right all along, you know. If I'd taken his lessons to heart, none of this would have happened. But I got preoccupied. I took my eye off the ball. I never should've taken it for granted that locking him up was enough to render him powerless."

"What are you talking about?"

"I guess you haven't heard the latest," he replied, giving the newspaper a nudge across the table. *Courtland Indictment Dismissed on Tainted Evidence* stood out starkly even in the bar's muddy lighting.

"Shit," Bran breathed, his eyes widening as he scanned the short article. "I had no idea this was coming."

"Me either. I don't even want to know how many palms his cronies had to grease to make this happen."

"If it's any consolation, when Ross called me this morning trying to get my proxy, I went to bat for you. I pleaded with him to give you more time. Then I tried calling you, but of course your office line was conveniently busy, and I don't have your cell number."

"Thanks for trying, Bran, but it doesn't matter now anyway. Nothing matters now." One last drink, burning all the

way down his esophagus, and when he tried to stand, he found, to his mortification, that he couldn't stop wobbling.

"C'mon," Bran said, deftly catching him under the arm. "My car's waiting out front. I'll give you a ride home."

The limousine was quiet and comfortable, city lights flying by in a blur beyond dark-tinted windows. Eric found himself lulled into a trance so sweet that when Bran's hand closed over his, pulling away didn't even occur to him. Instead he smiled, leaned in and let the older man draw him into a deep kiss.

Soft lips and tongue burst with the bitter taste of scotch as his fingers wound through Bran's silky hair. It was all a bright and shiny haze, a whirlwind in Eric's mind, but he didn't care. He welcomed it, wanted it. He could feel the lust warming in his belly and his cock, comforting and familiar, curling at the base of his spine. It was a pale, empty thing that would be gone come morning, but for right now it was better than feeling nothing.

They were tearing at each other's clothes by the time they reached the front door of the penthouse. Bran pushed him roughly inside, eyes glowing dark with lust. Eric didn't protest; he remembered only too well how much Bran liked playing the dominant partner, and Eric was in a mood to be manhandled.

He pulled off his jacket and tie quickly, letting them drop to the floor, but when he tried to finish unbuttoning his shirt, Bran slapped his hands away and took over the job. Another rough, quick push, and he found himself pressed against a high-backed leather chair, Bran's fingers at his belt and fly,

reaching inside to grasp Eric's cock and give it a few slow, cruelly teasing strokes.

Eric gasped. Bran laughed, and the sound was sheer silken brutality. "Turn around," he ordered, spitting into his palm, "and hold on."

He braced himself, but it still hurt; God, it hurt. Agony and ecstasy, pounding into him, splitting him open, grinding him down. Bran's hand gripped the back of his neck, holding his head down, fucking him with such force the chair skidded across the carpet. Eric loved it, wanted it—this and more. He wanted it to go on forever, until oblivion claimed him and he ceased to exist.

His arms started to ache from clinging to the chair, his cock hanging heavy and swollen between his thighs. Finally Bran bit down hard on his earlobe and sped up his thrusts, grunting like an animal when he came. He went limp for a few seconds, resting his weight on Eric's back before pulling out.

There was a telltale rustle of clothes being straightened, and then Bran's hand was on his back, stroking and soothing, helping Eric right himself. "Give me a call tomorrow," he said softly, "I've got a proposal you might find interesting."

"What? I don't—"

"Just call me." A few muffled steps across the carpet, and he was gone.

* * * *

Eric woke late, his entire body a mass of aches and twinges. A hot shower helped work out the residual stiffness; dry toast and aspirin washed down with a pot of black coffee

held the worst of his hangover at bay. Truth be told, he felt pretty good for a man who'd lost his career, his company, his self-respect, and had his brains fucked out, all in the same day.

He stared at the phone for a long time before finally picking up the receiver to dial Nick's cell number. "It's me."

"Jesus, Eric, I was just getting ready to come over there!" Nick cried. "Didn't you see my messages?"

"I did, and I meant to call you back sooner, but ... things got a little out of hand."

"So I've heard." He let out a long, gusty sigh of relief. "I'm sorry, for what it's worth."

Eric closed his eyes a moment, the dull throb in his skull reasserting itself. There were so many things he needed to apologize for, but the words jammed in his throat and refused to budge. Part of him longed to confess his drunken transgression with Bran last night, to fall to his knees and beg Nick's forgiveness. And Nick loved him enough that no doubt he would forgive him, though at first he'd be terribly hurt. Eric had hurt him enough lately. He didn't deserve this, too.

"Thanks," Eric replied wearily. "Although if I'd listened to you, maybe none of this would've happened."

"Water under the bridge, huh?" There was a short pause, followed by, "Do you mind if I come over tonight? Sounds like you could use some company."

"Actually, I was hoping to have a little more time alone. I've got a lot of ... baggage I need to sort through."

"You realize we haven't seen each other since last week, right?"

There it was again, that tight fist in his chest, closing around his heart. He dreaded what he was about to say, but in the end, he knew it would be best for both of them. "I thought it might be a good idea if we took a break."

"Okay. Why don't we drive up to Seneca Falls this weekend? I haven't been home since Christmas."

"I was thinking more along the lines of taking a break from ... each other."

"Oh." Stunned silence crackled along the airwaves. "When did you decide this?"

"It's been on my mind for a while."

"So is that what all the 'don't come over unless you call first' crap was about?"

"Oh, for Christ's sake, Nick, I've barely had a chance to catch my breath the last six months. And now I'm asking you to give me a little space, and you freak the fuck out on me."

"Fine," Nick said at last, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Take all the time you need."

The line clicked off.

Eric considered hitting redial, for all the good it would do; while he hated ending their conversation the way they had, given a choice between leaving Nick angry or devastated, he'd take anger. Its wounds healed faster.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he dialed Bran's private office number. Bran picked up the call himself. Eric couldn't help noting how pleased—and even a bit surprised—Bran sounded to hear from him, though he was plainly too busy to stay on the line. They made an appointment to meet for drinks that evening at Bran's condo, then hung up.

Getting through the rest of the day was like having itching powder under his skin. His eyes felt dry and gritty, his head pounded, but a short nap in the middle of the afternoon helped, and soothed his restlessness as well. By the time he exited the elevator in Bran's building, he'd managed to regain his cool, his mind nonetheless still abuzz with curiosity about Bran's mysterious proposal.

Bran's condo was almost as luxurious as the penthouse, with an absolutely breathtaking view of the north end of Manhattan. If Eric squinted, he could see a few faint distant lights near the cemetery where his mother was buried. Fortunately, Bran sidling up with a glass of Scotland's finest single-malt kept his thoughts from taking a morbid turn.

"So what's this all about?" Eric asked, letting Bran steer him into the living room.

"It's something I've been thinking about for awhile. Yesterday just made it imperative that I finally act on it." Bran seated himself on the couch, Eric in the chair to the right of it. They placed their glasses on the heavy glass end table, their hands brushing as they did so. A frisson of scalding sensation snaked down Eric's spine; he took another hasty sip of his drink to disguise his nervousness while he waited for Bran to continue. "I think we both know that Edward needs to be taken down. He's torpedoed at least three deals of mine that I know of, one of them while he was still in jail. The corporate community won't do anything to check him, and the law's obviously worse than useless. So I'm going to do it. I'm going to ruin him, no matter how long it takes. And I want you to help me."

Eric felt a grin spreading across his face—a huge, Grinch-like grin, poison-apple sweet.

"I take it that's a yes?" Bran prompted.

"You have to ask?"

"I thought you might say that." They clinked glasses, and drank to it.

"So what exactly did you have in mind?" Eric asked.

"A number of things. Buying up stock, working a few deals I've been keeping on the back burner. I've also gleaned some information on a few of his cronies that might prove useful. We may be able to turn at least a couple of them against him. In time, of course," he added. "I want to wait until he thinks you've accepted your downfall and you'll never be a threat to him again. I want him to think he's won. Knowing Edward the way we both do, I think it's safe to say that could take years. So I need to know that if you're in this with me, you're in it for the long haul."

Eric studied the depths of his drink for several moments before nodding. "I'm in, for as long as it takes."

"Excellent."

"So what specific role did you have in mind for me to play here?"

"Well, first, I'd like you to come onboard as my new vice-president of research and development. With David leaving, the division's a mess, and I understand you're in the market for a job right now."

For a moment Eric was genuinely floored. "I-I'm flattered, but are you sure about this? There must be some better qualified candidates out there."

"You've already run an entire company that's twice the size of mine. I'd say you're qualified." Bran got up and strode to the bar, pouring himself another drink. "You needn't worry that this is suddenly going to turn into a temporary position. As far as I'm concerned, if you come aboard, you're in for the duration."

"There's a rousing recruiting speech if ever I heard one," Eric smirked, knocking back the last swallow of his Scotch as he stood up.

"I'm glad you find my proposal ... inspirational." Bran set down his glass and leaned back against the heavy mahogany bar. His gaze took a leisurely stroll up and down Eric's body before settling on his lips, then he seized Eric's fine wool slacks by the belt-loops and dragged him in for a mouth-bruising kiss.

Eric stiffened instinctively at first, when all of a sudden it dawned upon him that he didn't want to fight it. He was tired of being in control, of living his entire life inside his head. He didn't want to think anymore. Just once, he wanted to let go. He wanted to *feel*.

The kiss nearly annihilated him. Like everything with Bran, it was a wild ride, and one that swiftly set Eric's head swimming, his pulse spiraling into the triple digits. He wrapped his arms around Bran's waist and held on, lust sluicing through him like a tsunami, blood singing in his temples, until Bran decided to let him up for air at last. "Go in the bedroom, get undressed," Bran whispered roughly, nipping at the sensitive skin beneath Eric's right ear, working

it between his teeth before letting go. "I'll be there in a few minutes."

Though he'd never been here before, the bedroom wasn't hard to find; there were only three doors off the main hallway, one of them the bathroom. It was dark except for the harsh city lights pouring in through thin drapes. He stripped quickly, tossing his clothes on a chair next to the bed, shivering as the room's relatively cool air wafted over his flushed skin.

His cock already stood at half-mast, and he hadn't even touched himself. And if Bran had anything to say about it, he wouldn't be touching himself until much, much later—if at all.

The soft pad of footsteps down the hallway signaled Bran's approach. Eric heard a dresser drawer open and close, and then Bran's hand clasped his shoulder, nudging him toward a high, sturdy Oakwood cabinet in the far corner of the room. "Brace yourself against that."

He obeyed quickly, wordlessly, resting his head against his folded arms. Bran circled behind him, kicking his legs into a wider stance. "Stick your ass out. Show it to me."

He obeyed again, wiggling a bit for effect, only to be rewarded with a sharp, stinging slap on his right cheek. "Tease," Bran breathed, cupping both Eric's ass-cheeks now, squeezing and kneading them with bruising strength. "But I suppose you've a right to be. You've got a great ass, Eric. I dreamed about it last night. I'd forgotten how much I enjoyed fucking it."

The scene then began in earnest, with tiny, finger-light taps on both globes of his ass, building in perfect synchronous

rhythm to open-palmed smacks that left Eric's skin smarting, ablaze with heat. He whimpered and groaned, his entire body trembling with tightly-wound tension by the time Bran finally stopped. "Begging for mercy, Eric? Or do you want more?"

"I-I can't..."

Another hard slap, right where his last blow had landed. "The question was rhetorical. Be silent." A momentary pause, and then he felt Bran's lube-slicked fingers probing between his aching cheeks, breaching his hole, plunging roughly inside. "Damn. Still so tight, even after the reaming I gave you last night." He added a third finger and pushed in deeper, finding Eric's prostate, working it mercilessly.

Christ, it was too much. Too much pain and overstimulation, and suddenly every star in the known universe went nova behind Eric's eyes, his still-untouched cock jerking and spurting all over his belly and the front of the cabinet. Bran let go of him, and he crumpled to the floor.

"I don't recall giving you permission to come," he stated with barely-masked irritation. Eric didn't move, or look up. He knew that tone all too well; it was one of his father's specialties—and whenever he used it, it was best not to cross him. "Get on the bed," Bran snapped, tossing the tube of lubricant onto the mattress. "If you need more of that, you'd better use it. And make it entertaining for me while you're at it."

In other words, put on a show. Eric could do that. Climbing up on the mattress, he propped himself on a pile of pillows and spread his legs invitingly. With a copious squirt of lube on his fingers, he did what Bran was doing to him only minutes

before, only more slowly, drawing it out, looking up to meet Bran's gaze staring up at him from the foot of the bed. It was sluttish and insolent, and he knew—hell, he *hoped*—Bran would punish him for it later.

Bran's gaze locked on his as he unhurriedly shucked his clothes. First his jacket, followed by his white dress shirt, which fluttered like a ghost in the room's pale light. Shoes, socks, slacks, and finally boxers, his fully-erect cock making an unmistakable tent in the soft cotton. "Very nice," he murmured in approval at Eric's little performance. "Although maybe I should've let you use a dildo."

He knelt on the bed between Eric's spread legs. "Slide down," he ordered. "Stretch your arms up and touch the headboard. Keep them there."

Eric did as he was told, lying flat on his back now, legs hooked over Bran's shoulders. He sucked in a long, steadying breath as Bran positioned himself, pushing his cock home with a deep, brutal lunge.

Once the sharp stab of entry faded, it didn't hurt as much as the night before—but last night Bran had been in a generous mood, giving Eric exactly the kind of hard punishment he craved. Tonight it was Bran's turn to take what he wanted, and take his time doing it.

After a few minutes of hard thrusts, Bran pushed himself up on his fists, pulling back to lift Eric's hips off the mattress. "Jack yourself off," he commanded. "I want to watch."

Eric's cock had sprung to life again, but no matter how vigorously he pulled and stroked, he couldn't get himself off. Part of him was afraid to come again. The other part of him

just wanted to lay here and take it, let Bran plow him and pound him and fuck him raw, until there was nothing left of him but a trembling, aching lump of flesh.

Bran was fucking him with insane, cruel abandon now, every stroke like being reamed with a steel bar, balls slapping Eric's sore, reddened ass. Eric's hands flew up again, gripping the headboard to keep his skull from smashing into it. Just as he'd braced himself for a hot gush inside him, Bran pulled out, gave his cock a few rough, brutal jerks, and shot all over Eric's belly and chest.

They lay there silently for a few minutes, trying to get their breath back, until Bran rolled off the side of the bed, headed for the master bathroom, and shut the door.

Eric cleaned up as best he could with the box of tissues on the bedside table, then padded down the hallway to the other bathroom. He splashed some cold water on his face and took a much-needed piss before getting dressed. There were some nice bruises already coming up on his ass. Too bad he had a tendency to heal quickly; he'd barely have time to enjoy his souvenirs of tonight before they faded.

Bran waited for him in the living room, a burgundy silk bathrobe knotted casually at his waist. "So I'll expect you at the office tomorrow, yes?"

"Absolutely."

"Good." Crossing to the bar, he poured himself a fresh drink. He didn't offer one to Eric, and Eric knew better than to ask. "But before you go tonight, there's one thing I need to make clear. I offered you a job tonight because I need your

help, and because I know you can handle the work. Fucking me isn't part of the job."

"Did I give you the impression that I thought it was?"

"No, but after last night and tonight, I had to consider the possibility that I might have sent mixed signals."

Eric shook his head. "No mixed signals here."

"Good." Swirling the ice in his glass, Bran grinned. It was a hard, feral grin, like a shark homing in on the scent of blood in the water. "Go home and get some rest, Eric. Tomorrow we start making our mark."

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Chapter 5

The next few months flew by faster than a spring tornado. Eric's new department was indeed in a state of disarray, but fortunately, given the proper resources, he discovered he had a true talent for whipping out-of-control budgets and production schedules into shape. After several weeks of late nights and working through weekends, the light of day came peeking through the gloom at last.

Amazingly, he felt good—revitalized and often exhausted simultaneously, but this time with an actual sense of accomplishment. At Courtland Industries he'd felt as if he was chasing his tail most of the time, wasting valuable energy trying to soothe his department heads' ruffled feathers and persuade them to go along with his plans. Here he didn't have that problem; he could focus on getting the job done.

Not a night went by when he didn't end up reaching for the phone to call Nick, but his hand always froze before he could dial the number. Truth be told, after their last conversation he wasn't even sure Nick wanted to hear from him. And really, what could he say? He still couldn't bring himself to confess what had happened with Bran, especially now that he'd compounded the offense. Maybe he could get away with chalking up the first time to temporary insanity, but definitely not the second.

He'd run it over and over in his mind, and every time he arrived at the same conclusion—he and Nick were simply too different to make a go of it. It had been fun between them

back in college, hot, sweet and uncomplicated, with the heady euphoria that accompanied falling in love for the first time. But the real world had thrown them too many roadblocks. And besides, Nick had never really understood him. How could he? He came from a loving family with good, solid values. No way could he ever grasp what it was like being raised by a cold, indifferent monster like Edward Courtland.

And so Eric threw himself headfirst into his work, treating it as a boon and a refuge. His punishing schedule no longer bothered him; in fact, he often remained at the office late into the evening, taking advantage of the peace and quiet.

Sometimes—although he knew he was alone—he'd lock the door, draw the curtains and jack off slowly, his last evening with Bran spiraling through his brain like some depraved porno loop. Sometimes his fantasies took off from there, wilder than anything he'd ever actually experienced.

He imagined Bran dragging him into the executive washroom, fucking him right over the urinals. He wondered how it would feel to crawl under Bran's desk and give him a blowjob in the middle of a meeting—and afterward, to have Bran order him to bend over the desk while every other man in the room took a turn.

But it didn't take long for the fantasies to wear thin. He couldn't get off anymore, no matter how flushed with lust he felt. He needed Bran's rough, bruising hands and harsh discipline, and he needed it *now*.

He got in his car and drove to Bran's apartment, his hand trembling as he rang the doorbell. Bran answered the door clad in the same burgundy robe as last time, his dark hair

tousled, squinting in the harsh light leaking in from the hallway. When he saw Eric standing there, his brow creased with concern.

"What's wrong?" he asked, opening the door to let Eric in. "Is there an emergency at the office?"

"Everything's fine, I-I just..." Eric trailed off, all of a sudden realizing how pathetic he must look. But standing this close to Bran had already started his cock twitching. No point turning tail and running now. "I wanted to see you."

"Oh." Bran let out a short laugh, running a hand over his face. "I thought we weren't doing this anymore."

"So did I, but..."

"Here you are."

Eric shrugged. "Since I've obviously woken you up, will you let me make it worth your while?"

"Just a minute," Bran said, extending a hand to keep Eric right where he was. "Let's lay a few ground rules first. We both know what this is—and one thing it's not is a relationship. If that's what you're looking for, go back to your boyfriend." At Eric's shocked look, he added, "Yes, I know all about him. Do you honestly think I would've offered you a job without having you thoroughly investigated first?"

Now it was Eric's turn to laugh. "No, of course not."

"Secondly, I don't want you turning up on my doorstep again without an invitation. I'll call you when I want to see you."

He'd lapsed into that hard, steely command tone that made Eric's skin prickle with heat, and his cock stand straight up in his pants. "All right."

"You already know this part, but I don't like condoms or safe words. I'm assuming the former won't be a problem—I'm clean, and I'm sure you are, too. As for the latter ... too bad." With a sardonic twist of his lips, he added, "You know how hard I like to play. If it gets too heavy for you, don't come back."

Eric nodded.

"Lastly, no one at the office can ever know about this. If you can't compartmentalize well enough to work alongside me without your dick giving you away, let's call this off right now."

"It hasn't been a problem so far, has it?"

"Good boy." Bran flashed him that same shark-like grin Eric remembered from last time. "Stay where you are." He stepped over to the couch and sat down, opening his robe to draw out his half-hard cock. Within a few pulls he'd coaxed it to full erectness, his eyes locked on Eric's. "You want this?"

"God, yes!"

"Then crawl over here and get it."

It took a few moments for Bran's words to sink in—and even then, Eric wasn't sure he'd heard him right. "*Wh-What?*"

"Get down on your hands and knees and crawl to me."

Eric tried to laugh, but his throat was so dry nothing came out.

"What's the matter, Eric? Too proud to crawl over here and beg for my cock? And I thought you wanted it so badly." He shrugged. "Fine, then. Feel free to leave."

He backed up to the door, his hand closing over the knob, but he didn't turn it. He couldn't. His palm slipped and slid

over the brass, coating it with sweat, but that wasn't the reason. He burned all over, inside and out, hungry for what only Bran could give him. He needed it so badly he'd do anything—even shed the last remnants of his dignity.

Dropping slowly to his knees, he crawled across the carpet, keeping his head down. He was trembling with need by the time he reached the couch; he had to tighten his jaw to keep from whimpering when Bran hooked him under the chin, forcing him to meet his gaze. "I'm taking it easy on you tonight," he said. "Next time I'll make you strip first."

There was a single perfect pearl of pre-come pooling at the tip of Bran's cock; its sweet, musky scent made Eric's mouth water.

And Bran knew it, too. "Suck it," he ordered. "That's what you're here for, isn't it?"

Salty-bitter flavor exploded on Eric's tongue like the world's headiest ambrosia, his own leaking cock now ready to burst within the tight confines of his slacks. Sucking hard, he ran the edge of his tongue along the flared ridge of the glans before sliding down, swallowing as much as he could without choking.

But apparently choking was exactly what Bran had in mind. Grabbing Eric's head, he pushed him down roughly, shoving his cock down his throat. After a few seconds of blind panic, Eric remembered a trick or two from his college clubbing days and relaxed, breathing through his nose while Bran's fingers wound painfully in his hair, yanking him up and down.

He fucked Eric's throat raw before he finally shot, holding Eric's head in a death grip until he'd swallowed every last drop. Falling back on his heels when Bran let go, Eric clambered shakily to his feet, realizing only then that his own cock was still hard enough to pound nails.

Bran saw it too, one eyebrow arched in bemusement. "You didn't lose control this time. Good." Standing up, he knotted his robe around him again. "You can go now."

Eric's mouth dropped open, but Bran's shuttered, dismissive expression warned him not to protest. They weren't here to do what Eric wanted. Bran had already made that abundantly clear.

He sat in his car afterward and jerked off, coming so hard he sprayed all over the steering wheel. A few minutes later, he finally felt clear-headed enough to drive home. He slept better that night than he had since his breakup with Nick—deeply, and mercifully without dreams.

And by the following afternoon, he was already aching for Bran to call.

* * * *

"Hey there, ace reporter."

Nick looked up into a familiar perky face grinning at him from other side of his desk. "Ally!" he cried, jumping up to give her a hug. "What brings you to the *Herald*?"

"I dropped by to say hi to Holly, and she told me you were working here, too."

"Yeah, we both got hired about a year ago."

"Lucky you." She made a show of checking her watch. "I don't suppose I can entice you away for a bite of lunch?"

"If you're buying, I'm biting."

Despite it being the height of lunch hour, they managed to snag a table at the coffee shop downstairs, ordering sandwiches and coffee. Nick had just taken the first bite of his chicken salad when Ally launched into her inevitable interrogation.

"So," she asked, "how's it going with you and Eric?"

For a split-second he considered lying, though he knew it wouldn't do a damn bit of good. Ally could always see right through him. "It's not. In fact, I haven't seen him for almost three months."

She put down her sandwich. "Wow. That's the longest you two have been on the outs, isn't it?"

"Pretty much."

"Then why haven't you called him?"

"I have. I've left messages, I've emailed..." He shrugged. "I guess it's time to face facts. Eric's moved on. I should, too."

"I'm sorry," she murmured, reaching across the table to squeeze his hand. "I know how much you loved him."

"The thing is ... Even after three years, I was never really sure how he felt about me. I mean, one minute he was begging me to move in with him, and the next he practically shoved me out the door."

"He cared too much for you, Nick. It scared him."

"Maybe. But I guess I'll never know now."

She smiled. "I wouldn't bet on that."

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Chapter 6

Bran called Eric twice within the next two weeks, but not again for another month. The frustration nearly drove him insane, though no one at work would have guessed from looking at him. He'd become an expert at painting on a mask of cool, unflappable professionalism.

But this time when Bran called him, after that long dry spell, he didn't have to order Eric to crawl to him—he dropped to his knees of his own accord, his face burning with lust and shame, choking back a sob when Bran patted him on the head like a beloved dog.

Bran was in an uncharacteristically generous mood tonight, letting Eric come at the end of their session by kneeling on the floor at Bran's feet, jacking off for his entertainment. The orgasm was so intense, black spots danced in front of Eric's eyes; he had to put his head between his knees to keep from passing out.

"You've done well tonight," Bran murmured, tousling his hair again. It was the most affection Bran ever showed him. Eric had learned to crave it like he craved the hard, stinging smack of Bran's hand on his ass. "I'm very proud."

Of course, Eric hadn't much choice. The last time he'd come without permission, Bran fucked his mouth with cruel abandon, leaving Eric's lips bruised and his throat so raw he could barely speak the next morning, then shot all over his face and sent him home with a raging hard-on.

Eric had learned his lesson that night. Now whenever Bran called him, he made sure he got himself off beforehand. Some punishments were best savored when they were few and far between.

Meanwhile, their plans to derail Edward continued steadily apace, with Bran discreetly buying up all the Courtland Industries stock he could get his hands on. But, most significantly, he and Eric had succeeded in landing a lucrative biofuel development contract with West Aerospace that Edward had been fiercely bidding on as well. Bran could barely contain his satisfaction with the deal when he invited Eric into his office for a celebratory drink.

"Are the contracts ready to go?" Bran asked, idly flipping through his own late-draft copy.

"I just got them back from legal this afternoon, and they look fine. Everything's a go for tomorrow morning."

"Actually, I wondered if you'd mind taking them over to West's hotel tonight. He wanted some extra time to look them over before the meeting."

Something in Bran's tone, an inflection he'd never heard before, made the tiny fine hairs along Eric's spine stand straight up. Was Bran nervous about something? Eric dismissed the thought as ridiculous. Bran was never hesitant or indecisive about anything, especially where business was concerned.

No, he had to be imagining it. "Of course I don't mind. But if he's worried about those changes he wanted, I've already told him there's no problem."

"I know, Eric. Your work on this project's been exemplary. There's another reason I want you to deliver the papers in person." He got up and perched on the edge of his desk, drink still in hand. "Martin's got a block of CI stock that I want to buy. It's crucial to our future plans that we get it before the year-end stockholders' meeting. I've already made an offer, but he turned me down."

"But you think he'll say yes to me? I think you overestimate my powers of persuasion."

"Not really." He set his glass down carefully—too carefully—in an obvious attempt to draw out the moment. "There are cameras and listening devices installed in his room. I need you to get him in a compromising position. I need something I can use for leverage to get him to give up that stock."

Eric stared at him, every bone in his body suddenly turning to water. Disbelief and disgust rendered him momentarily speechless. After all this time, he thought he knew the meaning of true humiliation. He thought he'd taken everything Bran had to dish out, and he'd endured it with honor. He thought he'd earned Bran's respect, both in and out of the bedroom.

Apparently he was wrong. "You son of a bitch," he spat, hurling his glass against the far wall. It shattered with a deeply satisfying crash. "You told me that fucking you wasn't part of the job. I guess I should've made you put the clause about not fucking everybody else in writing."

"Oh, don't give me that, Eric! Everybody knows you screwed half the gay guys at Columbia—and probably half the straight guys, too. What difference does one more make?"

"You don't honestly expect me to explain that, do you?"

"I need this, Eric. You need it," Bran said slowly. "If we're going to beat Edward—if we're going to win, we need this stock. It'll give us a decisive edge."

"If it's so damned important, why don't *you* do it?"

"Because you're the one he's attracted to. I saw the way he looked at you at the meeting this morning. It'll be easier than you think."

Christ, that was galling. Did Bran really value him that cheaply? "I didn't think you wanted to win like this."

"And I didn't think you'd object. What was it you said? 'There's only winning, and it doesn't matter how you do it.'"

Strung up by his own words. How fucking apropos. "So if I want to beat my father, I have to become him—is that what you're saying?"

"Don't be so naïve, Eric. Big business is a shark tank, and your father's already chummed the waters. Do you want to eat, or be eaten?" Bran gave him a hard look. "Do what you want. I can't force you."

So if they failed, the blame was on his head. All because he wouldn't do what was necessary. "Fine," he retorted, heading for the door. "This shouldn't take long."

And it didn't. In fact, as Bran predicted, it all proved pathetically simple. The ink had barely dried on the contracts before West tore open Eric's pants and fell to his knees. The man was such a sorry excuse for a cocksucker, Eric had to

fantasize about his last session with Bran to get himself off. The whole thing was over within thirty minutes.

He floored it straight to Bran's condo, pounding on the door until he answered. "Don't worry, he'll sell you the stock," Eric snapped, shoving the contracts at him. "And if you ever ask me to do anything like that again, I fucking quit."

The shocked expression on Bran's face as he stormed away was priceless.

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Chapter 7

Eric spent the rest of the night punching his pillow, sleeping so fitfully it felt like no sleep at all. Somewhere in between his morning paper, fresh fruit and black coffee, a stupendously obvious epiphany presented itself to him. Last night the deck had been stacked in Bran's favor, no matter what the result. If he'd refused to go to West's hotel, Bran would have had a firmly defined boundary, a line in the sand he knew Eric would never cross. But instead, he'd let Bran push all his buttons, dangling the carrot of potential failure and inevitable disapproval in front of his nose until he'd caved.

For years he'd longed to break away from his father, make his own life, be his own man. And now that the opportunity lay within his grasp, what was he doing with it? His career was on the upswing, but only because he'd thrown in with a man whose *raison d'être* was, like Edward's, winning at any cost. He'd thrown away the one good, true relationship he'd ever had, exchanging it for sadomasochistic sex that fed his need for punishment and fueled his conviction that he wasn't worthy of normal love—whatever 'normal' meant, in the context of his colossally fucked-up life.

He was no better off now than he'd been under his father's thumb. He'd lived his entire life inside a cage; he'd simply replaced the heavy steel bars with clear glass, and now he could see the keys sitting on the shelf just beyond his reach.

To his relief, everything appeared to be status quo at the office. Bran was his usual imperturbable self, and now that there was no reason for West to come in to sign the new contracts, the day chugged along uneventfully. Last night had apparently never happened.

But there was something different now, a new chill settling in between them—and as time wore on, the chill solidified into ice. Bran only spoke to him now when absolutely necessary, in meetings or over the intercom. He stopped dropping by Eric's office for informal lunch conferences, and sent him most of his work assignments via email. Eric wasn't sure what to make of it. Maybe Bran was simply preoccupied with work. Or maybe, in the wake of the West incident, he'd begun to harbor doubts about Eric's commitment to their pact.

Either way, Eric knew there wasn't much he could do about it—or even particularly *wanted* to do about it. He'd dealt with his father's changeable moods often enough to know there was no percentage in being conciliatory. If doing his job and doing it well weren't enough to earn his way back into Bran's good graces, nothing else would be.

His life settled back into its familiar mind-numbing pattern: work, home, bed, and more work. But one weekend he woke up with that old itching-powder-under-the-skin feeling again, and this time he knew there was only one cure for it.

He hadn't visited Midnight Sun since his senior year in college, but judging from the line snaking all the way down the block and around the corner, it was still the most popular gay nightclub in town. He didn't recognize the new bouncer, but that didn't matter; a couple of C-notes pressed to the

guy's palm got him past the line and in the door with no problem.

Blinking in the glare of harsh strobe lights, he managed to stumble to the bar and snag one of the few vacant stools. Hard-thumping dance music hammered his eardrums, so loud he couldn't hear the bartender asking for his drink order. He spied a bottle of Johnnie Walker Black behind the bar and pointed.

He'd just taken the first sip of his drink when he felt a hand on his arm, and looked up into the face of a dark-haired, lush-lipped angel. He couldn't have been more than nineteen or twenty—the same age Nick had been when they'd first met.

The kid said something, but Eric couldn't make it out, and to be honest, he didn't particularly care to. Nobody came here for the conversation. After a few minutes of observing the kid, he knew everything he needed to know: he was cute, he had a nice body—fit, but not overly muscle-bound—and if Eric narrowed his eyes, he actually looked a little like Nick.

Grabbing the kid's hand, he elbowed his way through the crush of bodies on the dance floor, heading for the back room. It was packed in there too, but he managed to find an empty patch of wall to lean against while the kid dropped to his knees, yanked down Eric's zipper, and went to work.

Bright blue fluorescents bathed the room in a sickly glow, ghosting behind Eric's eyelids. He felt a tiny twinge above his right eye signaling the imminent return of his migraine and laid his hand on the back of the kid's head, urging him to go faster.

But fast or slow, it didn't seem to matter; he couldn't get more than half-hard. The kid sucked, licked and flicked, but nothing worked. Finally he eased off, glancing up at Eric with a puzzled expression. "Guess I'm not hitting your buttons, huh?"

"You're fine," he replied tersely, zipping himself back up. "It's just not happening tonight."

"Too bad. I was hoping you'd fuck me." The kid shot him a sensual grin, and for that one fleeting moment, he could've been Nick's twin. "Maybe you're just not into the ambiance. You want to get out of here?"

The air suddenly felt thick and humid, as if he were trying to inhale soup. "Next time," he said, practically sprinting from the room. He didn't draw another easy breath until he'd hit the sidewalk. And he knew full well there wouldn't be a next time.

* * * *

On another Saturday night a month later, Bran called. As usual, he was blunt and to the point: "Come over now. I want to see you."

Eric's fingers trembled as he put down the receiver. He'd promised himself that the next time Bran called—if in fact he ever did again—he'd turn him down flat. But after weeks of nothing but masturbation and sordid memories, it was all he could do to keep from falling to his knees in gratitude.

God, he was pathetic. He berated himself for his lack of resolve, but he went anyway. And when Bran used Eric's own tie to bind his wrists to the headboard, then proceeded to lay

blow after burning blow on his ass with a doubled-back belt, Eric shuddered with a sluttish joy that disgusted him, even as he thrust his ass upward for more.

"You hate yourself for this, don't you, Eric?" Bran murmured, fingering his handiwork none too gently, giving one particularly sore welt a hard slap. "You hate yourself for wanting it, and you hate me for giving it to you." More blows, falling in a steady, inexorable rhythm, the roughened tongue of the leather slapping Eric's balls.

Eric choked back a whimper, gritting his teeth to maintain control. He wasn't going to come, and he damn well wasn't going to cry out. That would please Bran too much, and no way was he playing into his hands so easily again. If Bran wanted to break him tonight, he'd have to fucking *work* for it.

And work he did, shifting his blows lower, landing several in rapid succession on the hyper-sensitive spot at the crease of Eric's ass and thighs. This time Eric couldn't help squirming and groaning, though he managed to muffle the sound by pushing his face into the pillow.

The belt hit the mattress beside him with a solid thump, but Bran didn't follow suit. After a few hazy seconds, Eric realized he was now sitting in the armchair a few feet away, casually sipping the drink he'd brought in with him.

"A-Are you gonna untie me anytime soon?" Eric mumbled thickly, stretching with care, trying to ease his cramping wrists.

"When I'm ready."

"I'm ready now."

"Well, I'm not, so be quiet."

Now Eric was well and truly pissed. "This isn't funny anymore, Bran. Get over here and untie me."

Stony silence, followed by Bran marching over to the Eric's side of the bed, seizing him by the jaw with such force his back teeth ground together. "You don't give the orders here," Bran said slowly, succinctly, his tone straight from the bottom of a grave. "I'm the one who says when we stop."

"Fuck you!"

"You don't fool me, Eric. You love it when I beat you, and you love it when I ignore you even better, because that's the most exquisite kind of hurt. It's what keeps you coming back, even though you say you hate it." He grabbed the tube of lubricant from the nightstand and climbed up behind Eric, working his knee in between Eric's thighs to spread them wide. "Well, I don't care if you hate it, Eric. I don't even care if you hate me."

It hurt more now than it had that first night, bent over the chair with only spit for lubricant. Now it felt like he was being fucked with a broken bottle. It didn't send him into himself, to that place that was calm and peaceful. It was just pain. Pain for its own sake.

He felt Bran's breath on the nape of his neck, coming in short, heated puffs. "Did you ever tell Nick about this, Eric?" he whispered, punctuating the question with a brutal twist of Eric's nipple.

Shock shot up his spine like chain lightning, fused with a surge of lust that made his cock twitch and jump. His stomach twisted with self-disgust. "Y-You shut up about him, you—"

"You shout his name when you come, did you know that?" With a grunt, he heaved Eric over on his stomach and pushed in deeper, faster. "Is he your true love, Eric? Is he the one you wish was fucking you like this?"

"Shut. Up."

"He doesn't even know this is what it takes to get you off, does he? Did you ever try to tell him? Or were you afraid if he found out who you really are, the sight of you would sicken him?"

"Stop It!"

Bran just laughed and fucked him harder.

Eric buried his face in the pillow, choking back his rage. The blood pulsed in his head and his cock, making him move his hips like some mindless machine, desperate for release, for this nightmare to be over.

When he came, it was like shooting razor blades.

He didn't recall blacking out, but when he came to he found himself alone in the bedroom, his wrists untied. He flexed his fingers, slowly working out the needles and pins, then got up, stumbling down the hallway to the guest bathroom.

Bran was lounging on the couch nursing a drink when Eric walked through the living room. Hesitating at the door, he considered saying something, but realized it would be pointless. They both knew he wouldn't be coming back—either here, or to the office. No point rehashing the painfully obvious.

He got in his car and drove. Five minutes passed before he realized he was heading downtown, toward Nick's apartment.

He inched into the middle lane, and drove faster.

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Chapter 8

Eric had to ring Nick's bell several times before he heard someone bumping and stumbling around on the other side of the door. A few seconds later, Ally appeared, squinting owlishly, wrapped in a pink terrycloth bathrobe. She looked like a tousled cupcake. "Eric? Isn't it kinda late for a social call?"

A guilty glance at his watch told him it was closing in on midnight—and all of a sudden it dawned on him what that meant. "I-I didn't know you and Nick were seeing each other again," he stammered, backing away slowly. "I'd better go."

"No, don't!" Her hand shot out, grabbing his arm before he could move out of range. "This isn't what it looks like. Nick's not even here. He went up to the farm to visit his folks for a few days."

"Oh." Relief swept him, turning his legs to rubber. "Then if you don't mind me asking, what are *you* doing here?"

She grinned sheepishly. "I sort of ... well, forgot to pay my electric bill on time. They're not turning the juice back on until Monday, so Nick's letting me crash here for the weekend."

That made him chuckle. Typical Nick, he mused. Generous to a fault.

"Look, if you'd like to come in for some coffee—"

"I'm sure you'd much rather get back to bed," he replied. "If you'll ask Nick to give me a call when he gets home, I'd appreciate it."

"Why don't you drive up and pay him a visit? I'm sure he'd love to see you."

For a moment he was tempted, before he realized he couldn't do it. The thought of going back to Seneca Lake, with all its horrible memories, paralyzed him. "I don't think he'd appreciate me showing up at his parents' house uninvited."

"But he'd have no problem with you doing it here?"

"Allison, I—"

"Oh, for God's sake, will you both stop being such fucking idiots? You're all he thinks about, and pretty much all he talks about. So get your skinny butt up there so you two can kiss and make up, because I'm sick of seeing him moping around here like somebody just died." She punctuated her diatribe with a stamp of her foot, although the fuzzy pink slipper she wore rendered the gesture hilarious rather than indignant.

He couldn't help it—he burst out in laughter for the first time in weeks.

"Get in your car and *go*," she said firmly, "before you lose your nerve."

Eric knew better than to argue.

* * * *

Seneca Falls was still draped in darkness when he arrived; the local diner wasn't even open yet. He drove out to the lake house, only to discover the front gate chained and padlocked; luckily, he found a gap in the fence wide enough to squeeze through. He was shocked at the state of the gardens, with weeds growing wild, trees and rose bushes that hadn't been pruned or otherwise tended to in some time. The house stood

eerily still and silent, shutters covering all the windows like a blind man's dark glasses. His key no longer fit any of the locks. Obviously no one had been here in months, not even his father.

The sky was just beginning to turn gray around the rim when he pulled up beside a familiar two-story yellow frame farm house. He hesitated before getting out of the car, since the only light he saw inside was a dim single bulb shining over the kitchen sink. His hands suddenly felt like ice cubes; even puffing warm breath on them didn't help. Tucking them under his armpits, he slid down, resting his head on the back of the seat, letting his eyelids droop.

The next thing he was aware of was a light tapping at the window, with Nick's baffled face on the other side of the glass. "Eric ... What are you doing, sitting out here in the cold?"

He winced climbing out of the car, stiff all over from the long drive, his ass and thighs still aching from Bran's beating. "I didn't think your folks would appreciate me waking them up so early."

"This is a farm. We're up before five every day." With a grin and a roll of his eyes, Nick threw his arms around him—although to Eric's relief, not as tightly as he normally did. "God, it's good to see you. C'mon inside, breakfast is almost ready."

Eric had always loved the Thompson's kitchen, with its homespun Depression-era décor and amazing aromas. Nick's mother always had a pie or cake in the oven every time he'd visited. He remembered the first time he'd tasted her pot

roast; he hadn't known anything that delicious actually existed in the world.

He'd expected to see her bustling around getting her usual three-course breakfast on the table, but instead found the room empty, with the exception of waffle-makings and various mixing implements strewn all over the center island. A radio blared in the background, but Nick quickly switched it off, handing Eric a steaming mug of coffee. "You look like you could use this."

"Thanks." Eric didn't normally take sugar but he needed the energy boost, so he stirred in two teaspoons and took a seat at the kitchen table, casting a bemused glance in Nick's direction as he struggled manfully with the waffles. "Where're your folks? I didn't see your dad's truck parked outside."

"They went to a farming trade show in Buffalo, so I came up to keep things running for them while they're gone. They'll be back Monday." He poured the batter into the sizzling waffle iron and flipped the lid closed, grinning proudly at his achievement. He looked like a teenager standing there in his jeans, plaid flannel shirt and work boots instead of his usual rumpled suit, uncombed curls falling into his eyes. "It's a weekend-getaway kind of thing, I guess."

"A weekend getaway, complete with farm equipment? Your mom must be thrilled."

"Nah, she doesn't mind. It's been a long time since they've done anything like this."

They made more small talk until the waffles were ready, then tucked in like a pair of ravenous lumberjacks. Eric couldn't remember the last time he'd enjoyed a meal so

much. It had been ages since he'd actually let himself relax, but just sitting here with Nick in companionable silence, he could feel the tension starting to drain from his body.

"I guess Ally must've told you I was here, huh?"

Eric nodded. "She said you'd be glad to see me, but I have to admit, I didn't expect such a warm welcome. If I were you, I'd still be pretty damned angry."

"Well, I was for a while. But after the way I ended our last conversation, I guess I couldn't blame you for not answering my phone messages or emails. Besides, I figured your new job must be keeping you pretty busy."

"Neither of us needs to worry about that anymore. I quit."

Nick's coffee mug froze halfway to his mouth. "Why'd you do that?"

"Let's just say I had a falling-out with the boss."

Nick laughed. "Don't get mad, but I didn't think you'd last too long taking orders from somebody else."

"You don't know the half of it." He rose, scooping up their plates. "Since you cooked, it's the least I can do to clean up."

"Eric, you don't have to—"

"Contrary to popular belief, I have been known to wash a dish or two in my time. Go on, I know you must have chores to do."

"Okay, but if you break anything, you're on your own. My mom takes no prisoners." With a playful smile, he leaned in to capture Eric's mouth in a soft kiss. "I'm glad you're here."

There was a lump starting in his throat, but Eric managed to swallow around it. "Me too. I want us to have a real chance this time."

"We will. I know we will."

Drowsiness threatened to overtake him again by the time he finished washing and putting away the breakfast dishes, so he trudged the mercifully few steps to the living room to stretch out on the lumpy brown couch. Nick would wake him when he came in. Just a few minutes, and he'd feel fine.

Next thing he knew, the room was growing dark and he had a warm flannel blanket tucked around him. Nick sat at the opposite end of the couch, watching TV. When he saw that Eric was awake, he clicked off the remote. "You okay? You were really out of it."

Eric stole a glance at his watch and groaned. "I didn't mean to sleep the whole damn day away."

"It's okay, I had plenty of work outside to keep me busy. You want some dinner? I could make us hamburgers."

Amazingly, even after the trencherman's breakfast he'd downed this morning, Eric found himself starving again. They scarfed down their dinner in front of the TV, then curled up together watching old film noirs on cable.

They switched off the last movie around midnight, both of them yawning and blinking blearily. But when Nick's hand closed over his, Eric felt a sudden sharp stab of wild panic. "I don't think I'm ready for—"

"It's okay, I learned my lesson. I'm not going to pressure you," Nick murmured. "We can take things as slow as you want. If you're willing to wait, so am I."

After a few moments of awkward silence, Eric started to stretch out on the couch again, but Nick shook his head. "C'mon, you can sleep in my room, and I'll take Mom and

Dad's. You'll end up with a backache if you spend the night out here."

Eric brushed his teeth and used the facilities while Nick dug a pair of pajamas out of the clean-clothes basket in the laundry room. Eric was just stripping down to put them on when the bedroom door burst open.

"I've got an extra blanket here, in case you need—" Nick stopped short, staring at the fresh bruises and welts on Eric's back and legs left over from Bran's beating the night before.

If there really was a hell, Eric wished it would open its maw and swallow him right then and there. "Thanks," he said quietly, taking the blanket from him and setting it at the foot of the bed. "Good night."

But Nick didn't move. He'd stopped staring, but now he just looked confused and upset. "What happened? Did you get mugged?"

"I'd rather not talk about it."

"Not talk about it? Somebody beat the shit out of you!"

"Believe me, I noticed. Now, if you don't mind, I'd like to say good night."

"Do you know who did it? I'll track him down and wring his fucking neck!"

"That's exactly why I'm not telling you."

"Well, did you at least call the police?"

Eric sighed. Obviously Nick wasn't about to let this go without a more thorough explanation. "No, I didn't, and I'm not going to. There was no crime committed here. The beating was consensual."

"You *let* somebody do this to you?"

He turned around slowly and deliberately, pulling on Nick's flannel pajama shirt, hoping he'd finally take the hint that the conversation was over.

Instead, he felt Nick's arms wrapping around his waist, holding him so tightly he couldn't move. "God, Eric, I missed you so damn much," he whispered. "I didn't think you'd come back. I thought I'd never see you again."

Eric tried to fight it, blinking back the sting of tears, the horrible sensation of a sob clawing its way up from his throat. What Bran had inflicted on him, even in his most sadistic moments, was nothing; *this* was real pain. Tenderness. Affection. Love. Everything Nick had to offer him. Everything he didn't deserve.

"I don't think I can do this," he rasped, pushing at Nick's arms until he let go at last. "I know I said I wanted to give us another chance, but ... Nick, you know what I'm like. Sooner or later I'll do something to disappoint you. I used to break your heart a dozen times a day without even realizing it. Do you really want to let yourself in for that all over again?"

"Yes, I do," Nick countered. "You pushed me away because you were scared. You kept asking me to give you space, but I wouldn't listen to you. This time it'll be different. I still want you, no matter what."

"No, you don't. You really don't," he replied softly. "If you knew some of the things I've done, you'd never want to look at me again."

"What, like letting some asshole beat you to a pulp because you think you're not good enough to be loved? Maybe I know you better than you think." He closed the space

between them in two steps, pulling Eric into a kiss so fierce it left his ears ringing. "I've always loved you, Eric. And I always will."

Eric had never expected this to happen again. He'd broken up with Nick, in part, to make sure that it wouldn't. Emotions like this left him feeling raw, vulnerable. Out of control.

But when Nick eased him gently back onto the bed, he didn't protest. When Nick unbuttoned his pajama top and kissed a sweet trail down his chest and belly, Eric arched up into his lover's touch. And when Nick finally took him in his beautiful mouth and slowly coaxed him to orgasm, Eric shattered with happiness.

He fell into a welcome coma with Nick spooned behind him, snoring softly into his ear. He woke briefly when Nick slipped out of bed sometime close to dawn to tend to his early morning chores, then turned over, inhaling Nick's warm, spicy scent still lingering on the pillow before he dropped off again.

He wasn't sure how much longer he'd slept when he felt a hand on his shoulder. "Wake up, Eric. I need to talk to you."

The urgency in Nick's tone cut through his residual grogginess. "What is it? What's wrong?"

"It's your father. I was listening to the radio out in the barn. The news said he collapsed, and they had to rush him to the hospital."

"Mount Sinai?"

"Yeah, I think so."

Utter panic threatened to overwhelm him, but Eric shunted it aside. No time to indulge his fears now. He dressed quickly and headed downstairs to find Nick with his jacket on, waiting

for him. "I'm going with you," he announced, shoving a commuter-cup into Eric's hand before following him out the back door.

"Nick, you don't have to—"

"Your hands are shaking. Give me the keys, I'm driving."

He handed them over gratefully.

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Chapter 9

With morning traffic, it took them nearly four hours to get back to the city. Eric's nerves were screaming by the time they reached the hospital.

Edward's doctor met with him for a few minutes, his manner brisk and to the point. "It's stage four pancreatic cancer. It's spread throughout his abdomen and chest. We're not exactly sure how long he's had it, probably a year or less."

Eric stared at him, feeling like he'd just taken a fist to the gut. "H-How long have you been treating him?"

"We saw him here for the first time about four months ago. Of course, by that point there was nothing we could do but provide palliative care. This sort of tumor grows very quickly. Even if we'd found it earlier, I doubt we could have done much more for him."

A nurse escorted him over to intensive care. Edward looked so impossibly thin lying there hooked up to panels of tubes and monitors, a far cry from the hearty, imposing man Eric had last seen back in January. Eric wasn't even sure he was awake until his eyelids fluttered, and he croaked, "Have you come to gloat?"

"Would it make you feel better if I did?"

"Right now the only thing that would make me feel better is a bullet between the eyes." He chortled, then coughed, phlegm rattling in his chest. "Oh, come now, Eric. Don't tell me you've never entertained the notion."

Contentious to the last. He shouldn't have been surprised; Edward wouldn't be Edward any other way. "Your doctor told me you were diagnosed a few months ago. I wish you'd called me."

"And what would you have done? Cured me? No, Eric, it's better this way. You know I can't abide pity." He coughed again, harder this time, reaching in vain for the glass of water on the bedside table. Eric picked it up and held it for him while he drank. "It could be worse, I suppose," he continued, settling back on his pillows. "At least I'm not dying in some prison hospital."

The jab sailed home, but Eric simply swallowed and said nothing. It hurt, but that didn't matter anymore. There were far worse ways to hurt, and most of them he'd inflicted on himself.

"I've been following your work at Crane BioGen," Edward went on. "Impressive, Eric. Very impressive."

"I'm surprised you even cared enough to check."

"Always keep an eye on your competition. It's the only way to maintain your edge."

"I was never your competition, Dad," Eric murmured softly, bitterly. "You always had the upper hand."

"That's why you had to be forced to go out and forge your own path. I have to admit, I never thought you'd make it." He held out his hand and Eric took it, his father's grip weak but still tenacious. "But for once in my life, I'm glad to be proved wrong."

He sat at his father's bedside, watching as he fell asleep and then quietly drifted into unconsciousness. When the

monitors started beeping and screeching, the nurses hustled Eric out into the waiting room, despite his protests, to face an anxious Nick.

Edward's doctor came out to deliver the news less than an hour later. Nick wrapped Eric in his arms and held him, his eyes burning like two holes in scorched wool, until the tears came at last.

* * * *

For the next few weeks, Eric barely had a minute to call his own. Between the funeral arrangements and seeing to the disposition of Edward's estate—for which, to his utter shock, he'd been named executor, replacing Edward's attorney—he was worn to a ragged edge.

At last, on a blustery Sunday morning at the beginning of December, he found himself on Nick's doorstep, claspings a dozen red roses. Nick's gaze bounced from the bouquet to Eric's face and back again as he stepped back to let Eric in. "What's with the flowers?"

"Call it an apology for me not being around much lately."

"Accepted, but not necessary," he said, accepting a kiss as well before waving Eric into the living room. "Have a seat and I'll get us some coffee."

Eric hadn't been here in months, and yet in that time the room's décor had somehow morphed from moving-box chic to Early Bachelor Slob. Old copies of the *Herald* and a yellow legal pad with notes scribbled all over it in Nick's indecipherable hand littered the couch, his laptop perched on the coffee table atop a sloppy stack of magazines. Eric peered

around for a waste-paper basket, but failing that, cleared a space for himself by pushing everything off the couch and under the table.

"I'd send my housekeeper over here if I didn't think she'd take one look and run screaming," he said when Nick padded back in, handing him a chipped ceramic mug. He gazed into its depths for several long moments. "He left me everything, Nick. The lake house, his Courtland Industries stock ... everything."

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

"No." He shook his head slowly. "I don't want any of it. A few months ago this would've been the answer to my prayers, but now it's just ashes. I wish he'd left it all to charity."

"So I guess this means you're going back to run the company again, like before?"

"I'll stay on through the end of the year to get everything in order and help ease the transition, but come January I'm stepping down as CEO. I'm going back to finish my doctorate."

"The company's in good enough shape for that?"

"Believe it or not, my father managed to turn things around these last few months. His cronies all rallied around him and helped him raise the capital to keep the new projects I started afloat. The stock price is the highest it's been in five years. I don't know how he swung it, but somehow he brought it back from the dead."

"I can't believe the part about the new projects. I thought he would've axed those right away."

"Me too." Eric sighed. "It's just ... ironic, I guess, that he had to be on his deathbed before he'd finally admit I'd done something he approved of."

"He loved you, Eric, he just didn't know how to show it. Remind you of someone else we both know?"

He scooped up Nick's hand and pressed a soft kiss to the palm. "Point taken."

"Since we seem to be on the subject of fresh starts, I was wondering if you'd like to come up to the farm for Christmas. I've already discussed it with my folks, and they'd love to have you."

"So ... does this mean you've told them?"

"I didn't have to—they told me. They figured it out a long time ago. They were more upset with me for taking three years to bring up the subject than anything else."

"In that case, I'd love to. And by the way," he added with a grin, "that offer to move into the penthouse still stands."

All of a sudden Eric found himself pinned flat on his back with Nick on top of him, kissing him so hard it left him dizzy. "How's that for an answer?"

As perfect moments went, Eric mused, this one didn't get much better. And if this was joy piercing his heart, it was the sweetest pain he'd ever experienced, and one he wouldn't mind living with for the rest of his life.

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About Cat Grant

I've been writing off and on ever since I was old enough to hold a pencil. I still remember my very first 'published' story, a Jonny Quest adventure I penned in sixth grade. My teacher liked it so much, she had one of the other students illustrate it. That other student went on to become a Hollywood horror-film director.

I've poked around in many different genres. I've written fan fiction for a number of different TV shows, tried my hand at horror and fantasy, but in the end I came back to what I enjoy most—writing about the intimate relationships between men and women, and how love doesn't always happen the way we expect.

Back in 2004, when I became unable to work outside my home, my incredibly supportive husband suggested that I turn this setback into an opportunity, and pursue my dream of becoming a published author. Several years—and untold buckets of sweat later—that dream's finally coming to fruition.

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Series Information

Book I: The Arrangement

Book II: Strictly Business (prequel to The Arrangement)

Book III: By Change (prequel to The Arrangement)

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