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By *Chance*



By the author of *The Arrangement* and *Strictly Business*

Cat Grant

By Chance
by Cat Grant

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Book III: Courtland Chronicles Series

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By Chance
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Dedication

As always, for Don, whose faith in me has never wavered.

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Chapter 1

January, 1995

Eric Courtland had tangled with more than a few naked men in his twenty years, but the dripping-wet hottie stepping out of his dorm room shower left him momentarily speechless. "H-How the hell did you get in here?"

The guy whipped a towel off the rail and around his waist in a flash, much to Eric's relief. He was already having a hard enough time keeping his eyes on the guy's face. Something rang familiar about him, though Eric couldn't quite place it. High cheekbones, a straight nose, lush lips and dark, wavy hair sat atop a muscular, well-defined athlete's torso—and if Eric's quick glimpse of the guy's crotch hadn't deceived him, he was every bit as well-built below the belt.

So he was good-looking, not to mention hung. That still didn't mean he belonged here. "You going to answer me?" Eric prompted sharply, "or do I have to call security to throw your ass out of here?"

The guy blinked, raking back a handful of damp curls from his forehead. "Look, I'm sorry if I startled you, but I was assigned to this room this morning."

"What, you're saying you're my roommate?" Eric put out a hand to stop the guy from pushing past him. "I'm not supposed to have a roommate. In fact, I paid extra to make sure of it."

"Then you'd better ask for a refund." Nudging Eric out of his path with ease, the guy marched into the living room,

leaving Eric no choice but to tag along. He rummaged around in a battered canvas messenger bag, pulling out a crumpled sheet of paper to shove under Eric's nose. "Room Five-D, Watt Hall, upperclassmen's wing. Unless I'm going blind, that's what it says on the door to this room."

Eric stared at the paper, the heat of budding rage inching slowly up the back of his neck. "Don't get too comfortable," he snapped, ripping the letter out of the guy's hand before heading for the door.

Bypassing the packed elevators, he barreled down the stairs two at a time until he reached the dorm administrator's office on the third floor. A line of bedraggled, plainly pissed-off students stretched down the hall and around the corner, most of them still bundled up in their winter coats, with suitcases and backpacks piled at their feet. Gut tightening at the sight of so many people in a confined space, Eric managed to ignore their indignant protests long enough to elbow his way to the front of the line and into the office.

Mickey, the dorm administrator—pudgy, middle-aged and perpetually harried—clutched a clipboard in his sweaty hands, frantically flipping pages as two frazzled coeds glared at him. He took one look at Eric, scribbled something on a piece of paper and thrust it into the girls' hands before hustling them out the door, then flipping the lock behind them. Angry fists immediately began pounding on the glass.

"I know what you're gonna say, Eric, and I'm sorry," he said, flopping into the nearest creaky office chair, "but I got a situation here. The pipes burst over at Ruggles Hall during the holidays. We didn't find out till everybody started checking in

this morning. I got over a hundred students I need to find places for."

"Then it won't be much more trouble to find another place for that guy you sent to my room."

Mickey stared at him. "You fucking arrogant prick. You got no idea how many hoops I had to jump through to snag you that private room—"

"And for the amount of money I've been slipping you every month, I expect it to stay private."

"Yeah, well, you better be glad I haven't sent another couple of guys to sack out on your floor in sleeping bags. That's what I'm gonna have to do with everybody else, because guess what? We don't have enough rooms!"

Eric was about that close to letting fly with a few choice words, but instead he clenched his teeth and counted to ten. Being told to 'suck it up' rankled, even if he knew he was on the wrong side of the eight-ball. As a junior, he wasn't supposed to have a room to himself. He and Mickey could both be in hot water if Mickey's higher-ups found out. "Fine. How long's this supposed to last? Two weeks? A month? All semester?"

"Who the hell knows? I'm just trying to put out fires." Mickey stood up, sucking in a gusty breath. "Give me a couple of weeks, and I'll find your guy another spot to crash, okay? But for right now, you're gonna have to deal with it."

Grumbling inwardly, Eric beat a rapid escape from Mickey's office and the crowd engulfing it, then trudged the rest of the way downstairs and out the dorm's front door, turning his jacket's thick wool collar up against the bitter January chill.

He ducked inside the Greek deli across the street for a cup of coffee, sitting at a postage-stamp-sized table stirring in a dollop of cream while he brooded. Mickey's righteous tirade had scorched the edge off his own anger, though lingering irritation still pricked at him. Maybe he couldn't get his unwelcome guest kicked out through official channels, but what if the guy decided to leave on his own?

Eric knocked back the rest of his coffee with a grin. He had a pretty good idea how to manage that.

By the time he got back to his room, his new roomie was fully dressed, and busily shifting Eric's clothes around in the closet to make room for his own. Eric had to bite down hard on the inside of his cheek to keep from snapping the guy's head off.

He settled for slamming the door instead. "Looks like you're in for the duration."

"Sorry for all the confusion. I probably should've waited for you to show up before I started taking advantage of the facilities." His roommate held out his hand, flashing a toothy grin. "I'm Nick Thompson, by the way."

Now Eric remembered where he'd seen him before. His glance flicked from Nick's face to his hand and back again, but other than that, he didn't move. "The new quarterback—also known as the reason I lost a bundle on the Dartmouth game last semester."

"If it's any consolation, you're not the first person who's told me that."

"Serves me right for betting on the home team. Columbia's always stunk on the gridiron." To his chagrin, his stomach

picked that moment to let forth an undignified growl, roiling with acid from the coffee. Rubbing a hand over his face in a vain attempt at mitigating his embarrassment, Eric headed into the tiny efficiency kitchen to forage in the cupboards, hoping he'd left behind something edible from before the winter holidays. He found a lone can of vegetable soup and set it to heat up on the stove. Tomorrow he'd have to hit the little mom-and-pop bodega down on the corner for fresh groceries, or else steel himself to brave the noisy, overcrowded campus dining halls.

Watt was far from Columbia's most luxurious residence hall, with its old-fashioned fire escapes and hardwood floors making the rooms uncomfortably chilly during the winter months. Eric's room had come mostly unfurnished, but with his mother's help, he'd found a good secondhand couch and armchair, and that, along with a sturdy desk, coffee table and a few faux-Turkish throw-rugs, made the place look almost like a typical Manhattan studio apartment. Luckily, what it lacked in plush amenities, it more than made up for in peace and quiet. And after the awful Christmas break he'd just had, Eric found himself in desperate need of a little solitude.

He was starting to dig into his spartan supper when Nick appeared in the doorway. "Um, they told me this room had two twin beds. You've got them pushed together."

"And they're staying that way," Eric replied curtly.

"But where am I supposed to—"

"You're only going to be here a week or two. Sleep on the couch. It's plenty comfortable."

"Look, I know you don't want me here any more than I want to be here, but can't we try to make the best of it?"

"That's exactly what I'm doing."

Nick chuckled ruefully, shaking his head. "If this is your idea of cooperation, I'd hate to see you when you're being difficult."

"Well, if you're dead-set against the couch, feel free to curl up in bed with me."

Nick's smile faded. "Anyone ever tell you your jokes suck?"

"Who says I'm joking?" He'd expected another rejoinder, but instead Nick's gaze dropped to the floor. Triumph curled in Eric's belly, warming him better than the soup. One more nudge, and he'd have his room to himself again. "You're the type I usually go for. I can't say I'm especially enamored of you right now, but what the hell—angry sex can be pretty fucking hot. Besides, didn't you just say we should try to make the best of the situation?"

"That's not what I meant."

"Whatever." Eric rose, scooping up his dishes to put them in the sink. "Can't blame me for trying. I mean, you *are* a football player. That's barely even in the closet these days."

Nick drew back, folding his arms across his chest, his jaw tightening as Eric sauntered past him back into the living room. "I'm not gay."

"If you say so." Damn. Nick the quarterback was made of sterner stuff than Eric had given him credit for. Most jocks would have either run screaming for the door or punched his lights out by now. "But for the record, I *am* gay. If you've got a problem with that, find another place to sleep."

"I don't have a problem with it, as long as you're not hitting on me every five minutes."

Eric actually found that the tiniest bit insulting, though he managed to conceal its sting with a sardonic chortle. "Don't go flattering yourself. I don't need to force myself on anyone. But if you're that worried, you might want to use the communal bathroom down the hall. Wouldn't want me to get another eyeful of that tight virgin ass."

"I can see what you're trying to do here, and it's not going to work," Nick snapped, his tone genuinely angry for the first time since they'd started this conversation. For a second or two, Eric thought his roommate really would haul off and hit him. "I've got nowhere else to go, so it looks like we're stuck with each other. Take my advice and knock it off." He turned away, then snatched a book from his messenger bag and flopped down on the couch.

Cursing silently, Eric gnawed at his lower lip, barely managing to keep from kicking the nearest piece of furniture. He'd taken what he thought was his one sure shot, never dreaming it would fly so wide of the mark. He'd screwed up royally, and screwing up wasn't something he was used to.

Deciding to drown his misery with a shower, he grabbed a clean pair of sweats from his bag, then remembered he needed to call home. Luckily, the phone had an extra-long extension cord; he hauled it into the bathroom, closing the door and starting the shower to make sure Nick couldn't overhear.

When he dialed the private extension to his mother's bedroom, his leaped into his throat for three, four, then five rings, until she finally picked up. "H'lo?"

She still sounded a bit groggy, but since she'd spent the past weekend recovering from a handful of Seconals washed down with vodka, he supposed that was to be expected.

"Hey, it's me. Just checking in to see how you're feeling."

"Much better, thank you, sweetheart." She spoke more slowly now, making an obvious effort to enunciate her words. It hurt just listening to her; Eric had to squeeze his eyes shut for a moment. "But you didn't have to call me tonight," she added. "I know you must be busy settling back in."

"It's no problem, you know that."

"You needn't worry about me. Your father's being very sweet and attentive."

Of course he was. Amazing what a little guilt could do. But it wouldn't last. It never did. "G-Good," Eric managed to croak. "Glad to hear it."

"Have a good week at school. I'll be thinking of you."

He had to bite back a chortle. She was the one who'd almost died, and yet here she was, trying to reassure *him*. "I'll try to catch the train up to the lake house this weekend. We didn't get to spend much time together over the holidays."

"N-No need, but if you wanna come..." She was fading already, her words slurring a bit around the edges. "I'd I-love to see y-you."

"I remembered to give you my pager number, didn't I?"

"Right h-here on my bedside table. G'night, dear."

"Call me if you need any—" But the line had already clicked off.

He climbed gratefully under the hot spray, bowing his head to let it pound his shoulders and the back of his neck. Usually a shower energized him, but tonight his whole body felt as if it were made of lead, with a slow throb starting over his right eye as an added bonus. Another fucking stress headache. He stepped out and toweled off as quickly as he could before chasing down three aspirin with water from the tap.

He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and sighed. An entire month off, but no one would ever guess from the hollows under his eyes. He'd had his hair cut to please his mother, even if he thought the short-cropped new style was a bit severe. It made him look even thinner than usual, his cheekbones and jaw line jutting out like razor blades. Although he hadn't spied any gray yet—a miracle, all things considered—his sandy-blond hair and pale complexion had saddled him with a deceptively fragile appearance that never failed to annoy him.

With another sigh, he started tugging on his sweats. If he couldn't help being exhausted, at least he could be comfortable.

Nick wasn't in the kitchen or the living room when he came back out. Eric figured he must have traipsed down to the dining hall. It was closing in on nine o'clock; they'd stop serving dinner in another half hour. His own stomach grumbled again, and for a moment or two he considered heading to the vending machine down the hall for a snack,

but he was too damn tired. All he wanted was to roll into bed and let oblivion claim him.

Eric managed to dredge up enough strength first to unpack his bag and hang up everything in the closet. If he let it go another day or two, he'd never get around to it, and he hated living out of a suitcase. His reflexes were so sluggish he banged his hand against the top shelf, sending an extra pillow tumbling down to hit him square in the face. He tossed it on the couch, then figured he might as well pull down an extra blanket while he was at it. His new roommate would need it.

He collapsed into the overstuffed armchair, letting his head fall back against the cushions. Now he could have kicked himself for playing the gay panic card with Nick. He'd never been ashamed of his own sexuality, but using it as a cheap ploy to get his own way was just plain low. Still, Nick seemed like a decent enough guy. Hopefully he wasn't the type to hold a grudge.

A key rattled in the lock and then the door opened, jolting Eric abruptly from his reverie.

"Hey," his roommate said in a tight, terse tone, stopping short when he saw the pillow and blanket stacked neatly on the couch. "Thanks."

"Not a problem." Blinking, then sitting up straight, Eric sucked in a deep breath. "Look, if I offended you earlier, I'm sorry. This hasn't been one of my better days."

"Mine either," Nick replied with a lopsided smile. "Believe me, the last thing I wanted to do this morning was stand in line for three hours waiting for a new room assignment."

"Point taken. However, I should probably still warn you that getting along with people's never been my strongest suit."

"Gee, I never would've guessed."

Eric laughed. "Okay, I deserved that."

Nick's smile widened into that same toothy, dazzling grin he'd flashed earlier that afternoon, and the momentary tightness in Eric's groin made him profoundly grateful that he was both sitting down and wearing baggy sweat pants. "Tell you what—why don't we make it a do-over?" Nick extended his hand. "Hi, I'm Nick Thompson. Pleased to meet you."

While the solid warmth of Nick's fingers did nothing to alleviate Eric's current condition, it still felt amazing. With the exception of brief, faceless encounters in public toilets and darkened dorm rooms, Eric usually avoided touching other people. He couldn't be sure of controlling his reactions, a point his body was now hammering home.

"E-Eric Courtland," he replied. "Glad to have you aboard—er, so to speak."

Nick's eyes went wide. "You any relation to Edward Courtland, the bigshot CEO?"

The mere mention of his father's name made Eric recoil, but he prided himself on not letting it show. "I'm Bigshot CEO Jr."

"Wow. But I guess I shouldn't be all that surprised. This school's packed to the rafters with the super-rich."

"Be glad you're not one of them. I can sniff out the type blindfolded at a hundred paces."

"What do they smell like?"

"Let's see, how about snobby, uptight, insular, homophobic ... Any of those words ring a bell?"

Nick's expression went immediately serious. "I'm really not uptight or homophobic, despite the way I acted earlier."

"Don't worry about it. We got a do-over, remember?" Eric forced a smile. "As long as you clean up after yourself and don't blare your music at ninety decibels, we should get along fine."

They turned out the lights a little while later. Despite Eric's exhaustion, he didn't drop off immediately. Instead, he lay there listening to Nick's soft snores from the other side of the room, and tried to ignore his own aching hard-on.

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Chapter 2

The dining hall roared with chattering voices and the sharp clank of plates and silverware. Nick spied the top of Ally's petite head from across the room, waving her over to his relatively quiet corner table. As usual, she had her hands full, so he nudged out the chair opposite him with the toe of his boot before standing up to help her with her backpack and lunch tray.

"These last few days have been insane!" Standing on her tip-toes, she gave him a quick peck on the cheek before dropping gratefully into her seat with a gusty sigh. She looked a bit windblown, her short blond hair tousled, cheeks bright pink from the outside cold. After shucking her wool gloves and flexing her fingers to get the blood pumping again, she scooped up her fork, attacking her salad with ravenous abandon. "I can't believe this is the first time I've seen you. I got worried when we missed each other at check-in the other day."

"Me too. So where'd they end up sticking you?"

"Nowhere, thank God. Holly's sister's investment firm's sent her to London for the next six months, so Holly and I scored apartment-sitting duty."

"Lucky you. I'm sacking out on a guy's couch over in Watt."

"Wow." Eyes wide, she took a long sip of her coffee. "But that's not too bad, is it? Don't they have their own kitchens

and bathrooms? The kind you don't have to share with eight other people, I mean."

"Honestly, I'd rather have the eight other people. Eric's not exactly Mr. Warmth." Nick shrugged. "Doesn't matter. It's only for a little while, right?"

"Um, well..." She glanced around nervously before leaning in closer. "*The Spectator's* holding the story till next week, but I might as well warn you, it doesn't look good. I interviewed one of the top guys with building administration, and they've had contractors and insurance adjustors in for the past few days assessing the damage. The hall's going to need a complete re-pipe job, not to mention all the flooring and drywall they've got to replace. They're estimating repairs will probably take most of the semester."

"Oh, *great*." As if he didn't already feel like bashing his head against the nearest wall. "Fuck! What am I gonna do now?"

"Wait a minute. Didn't you say you've got a place to crash?"

"Yeah, but Eric's none too happy about having me there. I guess I can't blame him. If I came back from Christmas break to find a total stranger using my shower, I wouldn't like it either."

"You're kidding." Ally's coffee mug froze barely an inch away from her mouth. "That's how the two of you met?"

"You think I could make something like that up?" She burst out giggling, and while he did his best to shame her with a glare, it was a losing battle. "Go ahead, laugh. You're not the one who'll be sleeping in a cardboard box on the street."

"Oh, c'mon, you don't really think this Eric guy would kick you out, do you? I mean, he can't—not legally, anyway."

"No, but he could decide to make the next few months pretty miserable for me."

"Look, I can ask Holly if it's okay for you to stay with us for awhile, but you'll probably have to sleep on the floor."

"That's okay. I'll grit my teeth and get through it." He shrugged. "Eric isn't such a bad guy. I mean, we had kind of a touch-and-go moment there at the beginning, but we got it ironed out. He's just not very sociable. And he's kind of a neat freak."

She rolled her eyes. "Lucky him, snagging the King of Slobs as a roomie."

"He's been pretty cool with it, as long as I keep the bathroom picked up and don't let my mess migrate over to his side of the living room. Could be a lot worse, I guess."

"Isn't that what they said about the Black Plague, when it only killed half of Europe?"

They were both through with classes for the day, so Nick invited her over to take a look at his new digs. It took him about three minutes to give her the grand tour. Her gaze ping-ponged between the couch, strewn with clothes, rumpled bedding and books, and the opposite side of the room, with its neatly-made double bed and a sturdy oak desk so spotless it looked like no one had ever used it.

"Oscar and Felix, together again," she quipped with a grin.

As if on cue, the door opened. Eric shut it behind him and froze, glancing pointedly from Nick to Ally, then back at Nick. "I wasn't aware we were expecting guests."

Nick's stomach sank. Shit! The last thing he needed was to get Eric pissed at him again. "Eric, this is Ally Taylor," he said, pasting on a shaky smile. "We used to be suite-mates over at Ruggles. Ally, meet Eric Courtland."

"Wow." Ally reached out to grasp Eric's proffered hand. "I had no idea Nick was hanging out in such rarefied company."

One corner of Eric's mouth tugged upward in an ironic half-smile. Nick wasn't sure whether to be relieved or nervous. "What exactly has he told you about me?"

"It's more what he neglected to mention. Not all of us are lucky enough to land multi-millionaire roommates."

Eric laughed, though to Nick's ears, it sounded strained and brittle. "My dad's the multi-millionaire. I'm just a poor student."

"Pretty nice room for a poor student."

"A poor student on an allowance. And now if you'll excuse me," he added, slinging his backpack off his shoulder and onto his desk, "I'm going to fix myself some lunch." And with that, he disappeared into the kitchen.

Ally shot Nick a wide-eyed glance, sidling up to him to mutter, "You weren't kidding about the not-sociable part."

Nick shrugged. What else could he say? Eric was just ... being Eric.

"I should probably get going," she said in her normal tone, scooping up her backpack from where she'd left it on the couch. "Oh, before I forget—you took Stevenson for early twentieth-century US history last semester, right? I was wondering if you still had your notes. He talks so fast I can't keep up with him."

Coming from Ally, that was especially ironic, though Nick bit his lip long enough to stifle the urge to laugh. He dug around in the closet until he found the notes bundled up with a pile of other old papers and notebooks he'd planned to recycle this semester. He'd gotten into the habit of using both sides of every sheet of paper a long time ago. School supplies were too damned expensive to let any part of them go to waste.

"Here you go," he said, ushering her out the door. "Listen, save me a seat in Mitchell's class tomorrow, otherwise we'll end up missing each other again."

"Will do." She grinned. "And good luck in there with Chatty Cathy."

"Shut up." He closed the door, then headed into the kitchen for a soda. Eric was sitting at the table, eating yet another bowl of soup, a thick textbook spread out open-face on the table. He glanced up briefly when Nick came in, but didn't say anything.

Nick sighed. He was getting tired of always being the one who had to break the ice. "Sorry about that. I should have asked you if it was okay before I started inviting people over."

"As long as you keep it to one person at a time, it's fine with me." Eric finished off his last spoonful of soup before pushing his bowl away, then leaned back in his chair to stretch. "I'll probably be gone this weekend, so you and your girlfriend can have the run of the place."

"Ally's not my girlfriend."

"Really? You two seem so ... comfortable with each other."

"Friends usually are."

"My mistake." Eric dog-eared a page in his textbook before flipping it shut. Nick couldn't resist glancing at the cover.

"Economics, huh? Is that your major?"

"Double-major, actually, with political science."

"Wow." Nick was impressed. Most of the well-off guys in his classes skated by on 'gentlemen's C's,' but even in the short time they'd been roommates, he'd never seen Eric go more than an hour or two without burying his nose in a book. "That's pretty heavy-duty. Guess you're getting ready to follow in your dad's footsteps, huh?"

Eric's lip curled as if he'd tasted something sour. "Hardly. I want nothing to do with Courtland Industries, or anything else my father's involved in. Lately I've been considering a career in politics."

"What, you mean you want to run for senator or something?"

"Eventually." Eric smiled. "After I get my doctorate out of the way."

"Why do I get the feeling that if I open the dictionary to the word 'ambitious,' I'll find your picture?" To his surprise, Eric laughed—and this time, it sounded genuinely sincere. Taking it as a favorable sign, Nick yanked out the other chair and plopped down on it. "Mind if I ask you a personal question?"

Eric pondered it for a moment, then nodded. "Go ahead."

"For somebody who says he's interested in running for office, you really don't seem to ... *like* people that much. I mean, I don't think I've seen you down in the dining hall once."

"That's not a question, it's an observation."

"Okay, then. Why do you avoid people?"

Obviously Eric wasn't expecting him to be so blunt, because he flinched as if Nick had jabbed him with a needle. "I-I'm not especially fond of crowds."

"Seems to me that's a pretty big handicap for an aspiring politician. You'll have to give speeches in front of huge crowds when you're campaigning."

"True." Eric flashed him that same tiny half-smile that had made Nick nervous earlier. He still wasn't quite sure what to make of it. "Since you're apparently so astute at diagnosing my problem, how do you suggest I cure it?"

"What time's your first class tomorrow?"

"Ten, I think."

"Good. The dining hall's pretty deserted after nine. C'mon down with me tomorrow, and we'll have breakfast."

"I don't normally eat breakfast."

"I've noticed." He nodded at Eric's bowl. "Is this what you live on all semester? No wonder you're so skinny."

"Your concern's flattering, but there's no need—"

"You've got a meal card, right?"

"It comes with the room."

"Just humor me, okay? One meal downstairs won't kill you, I promise. Who knows, you might end up liking it."

Eric grinned this time, really *grinned*, a big, wide grin that split his face like dawn peering over the horizon. "If I had a nickel for every time I've heard that, I wouldn't need a trust fund."

Nick's stomach did a strange little flip-flop.

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Chapter 3

Five minutes in line, and already Eric was itching to bolt. Clutching the tray Nick had handed him, he looked over the morning's breakfast menu with a distinct absence of enthusiasm. "God, this place stinks like rancid grease."

"That's one reason to avoid the scrambled eggs and bacon," Nick replied. "Aside from the fact that they're powdered eggs."

"Then what would you recommend I choose from this bountiful repast?" He managed to refrain from rolling his eyes, but Nick's lopsided smile told him his roommate had picked up on the sarcasm in his tone.

"I usually go for the oatmeal, and milk instead of coffee."

"Fine with me." He let Nick order for both of them, then slid his tray down to the next station, reaching over the counter to take the steaming bowl handed to him by a dining hall worker.

A very familiar-looking, dusky-skinned, well-built dining hall worker who winked at him and said, "Hey."

And from the puzzled crinkle between Nick's eyes, he'd obviously picked up on that, too. "You two know each other?" he asked, pushing his tray up behind Eric's as they moved to the end of the line.

"Only in the Biblical sense."

"O-Oh." Twin spots of high color sprang to life on Nick's cheeks. Eric actually found it quite charming. He didn't think

there was anything left in the world that could make him blush. "Sorry. None of my business."

Eric chuckled. "Don't worry about it."

Baskets of assorted apples, oranges and bananas stood next to the cash registers. Nick grabbed two apples and two bananas, putting one of each on his and Eric's trays. "For snacks in between classes. They're a lot healthier than chips or candy bars."

"You've got this down to a science," Eric observed, handing his meal card over to the cashier.

"When you've been on a training diet off and on for six and a half years, you learn a few things. C'mon, let's go find a table."

Eric sucked in a breath as they entered the dining room, but to his relief he discovered that, true to Nick's assurances, the place wasn't that crowded. He made a beeline for a table within a few short steps of one of the glassed-in doors leading outside, and took a seat facing it.

"I was about to suggest sitting over in the corner," Nick said, still standing up holding his tray. "It's quieter."

"This is fine. I prefer to sit where I can see outside." He shrugged. "City-dweller's paranoia, I guess."

"As long as you're comfortable." Nick pulled out his chair and sat down, then started digging into his breakfast.

Eric spooned up a healthy mouthful, chewing it a few times before realizing it was a leaden, flavorless mess. It stuck to the roof of his mouth like peanut butter on steroids, so thick he could barely work his teeth through it. Finally he managed to swallow, chasing it all down with a generous slug of milk.

Nick glanced up from his own bowl. "What's the matter?"

"This stuff tastes like that paste they give you in grammar school art class, only hot."

"Here." Nick picked up a salt packet and a pat of butter from his own tray and handed it to him. "Try some of this."

It did help a little. At least, the salt made it marginally palatable, and the butter helped it go down easier. Eric shrugged and took another bite. It was all just fuel anyway. And, weirdly enough, now that he'd started eating, he realized he really was hungry.

"Do you eat this slop every morning?" he asked, training his incredulous gaze on Nick's already half-empty bowl.

Nick laughed. "Every winter since I was a kid, but my mom's oatmeal's a lot better than this. It's the only thing that keeps you warm when you're out in sub-zero temperatures milking cows."

"You grew up on a farm?" With a sudden odd pang of shame, it dawned upon him that he hadn't shown the slightest iota of interest in Nick's background until now.

"Yeah. My folks own a dairy operation upstate, a few miles from Seneca Falls."

"You're kidding." Eric set down his spoon, darting a glance around the room to make sure Rod Serling wasn't lurking in a nearby corner. "I grew up on the other side of the lake, in Geneva. My mother still lives there."

"Get out!"

"It's the truth, I swear."

Nick laughed. "So here I am, rooming with a guy who's lived ten miles away from me my entire life. What are the odds?"

"We didn't move there until I was ten. I was actually born right here in the city."

"And I'd only visited the city a handful of times before I got accepted here. I'd never even ridden the subway before." Nick shook his head. "This is too bizarre."

"If you don't mind me asking, how'd you end up here?"

"You mean, how'd the hick farm boy get into an Ivy League university? Two words—athletic scholarship."

Of course. Eric felt slightly mortified that it hadn't occurred to him sooner. "You must either really love or really hate football to come here and play for this team."

"I got scouted by Berkeley, Cornell and here. Columbia's the only one that offered me a full ride. If they hadn't, I'd still be stuck on the farm, milking cows." Nick sat back in his chair, wiping his mouth with his napkin. "To be honest, I don't like playing that much anymore. It was fun back in high school, but now it's just a whole lot of work. At least during the spring semester I can concentrate on my studies, but in the fall, when the season's going full swing, it's like having two full-time jobs."

"I take it you're not interested in going pro?"

"No way. I'll play for another year until I graduate, then that's it. I'm ready to move on."

"To what, exactly? I couldn't help overhearing you talking to your friend Ally about Stevenson's twentieth-century

history class. That's one of the hardest courses in the department. Are you majoring in history?"

"English, with a minor in history, if I can rack up enough units."

"What're you planning to do with a background in sports and liberal arts?"

"I could get a teaching credential, I guess. But what I'd really love is to stay here and go to journalism school, if I'm lucky enough to get accepted into the grad work-study program."

This breakfast had turned into quite the eye-opener. Eric had assumed at first glance that Nick was a stereotypical dumb jock, but upon scratching the surface, he'd discovered a serious student cloaked in gridiron drag. It was a bit disconcerting to find his own judgment so profoundly out of whack.

"Why, Nick Thompson," he drawled, "you have unsuspected depth."

Nick laughed, then looked away. For a moment, Eric couldn't help thinking he looked nervous.

"What about you?" Nick asked finally. "Columbia's a good school, but with all the hours you spend studying, I would've thought you could get into Harvard."

"I did get into Harvard," Eric replied. "I got into Yale, Brown and Oxford too. But my mother's had some ... health issues for the past few years. I wanted to stay close to home."

"Sorry to hear it."

"Thanks." He stared down at his hands, clearing his throat. "My father wasn't too pleased with my decision. For him, it was Harvard or nothing. When I told him I was coming here, he cut me off."

"Wow. So how do you pay for your tuition, or your room over in Watt?"

"My mother's the keeper of my trust fund. She pays all my expenses here, and gives me an allowance. I gain control of it when I turn twenty-one next year."

Nick let out a long, slow whistle. "Must be nice."

"Believe me, there've been plenty of days when I wished I could be a regular kid growing up on a farm."

"That's the first time anybody's ever told me they envied my life."

Eric just smiled, and changed the subject.

* * * *

Eric got up at five on Saturday morning to catch the train upstate. He'd brought along his economics textbook to occupy him on the long ride, but instead found himself sitting in the semi-deserted car staring dully out the window, watching miles of snow-covered scenery zip by.

The train pulled into Rochester a few minutes before noon. Eric rented a car and drove the remaining thirty-seven miles to Geneva. A paradoxical flood of relief mixed with apprehension washed over him as he pulled through the front gate and onto the freshly-plowed and salted private road, then swung around to park in the garage adjoining the house.

His mother's sleek black Mercedes sedan sat nearby, a fine layer of ice coating the hood and windshield. Mom hadn't driven it herself in ages; she usually sent the housekeeper out to pick up groceries or other supplies she needed in town.

Circling around the back, Eric let himself in at the kitchen door. The spicy aromas of garlic, sweet basil and standing rib roast wafted over him as he stepped inside. "Hey," he said, giving Estellita a wave and a smile.

His mother's housekeeper looked a bit startled at first, then shook her head, hands planted on her hips in mock consternation. "As usual, she didn't tell me you were coming."

"She probably didn't remember. She was pretty of out of it when I talked to her the other night."

With a sympathetic nod, Estellita held her arms out to him, and Eric sank gratefully into her warm, well-padded embrace. She'd worked for them ever since his parents bought the lake house ten years earlier. Countless times Eric had hidden out down here in the stout, good-humored Puerto Rican woman's kitchen, sitting at the counter reading while she puttered about peeling potatoes or baking him his favorite butterscotch cookies, singing softly to herself in Spanish. When he was twelve, he'd practically begged her to adopt him.

"How's everything going?" he prompted at last.

"I poured out all the bottles I could find, and flushed the pills," she replied, wiping her hands on her apron. "But you know she always gets more. The next time she goes back up to the city, that doctor will write her another prescription."

He sighed. "We'll deal with that when it happens, I guess. Thanks for taking such good care of her."

"She hasn't been feeling quite so grateful these past few days. I keep dodging slippers every time I bring up her meals—not that she's eaten enough to fill up a thimble all week." She pushed back a lock of gray-streaked hair with a resigned smile. "Ah, well. I'm used to it by now."

He headed up the short flight of stairs into the main part of the house, his footsteps tapping eerily down empty hallways. He paused to spare an admiring glance for his favorite Monet seascape in the foyer before climbing another flight of stairs up to the house's second floor, pausing outside his mother's room before knocking. "It's me," he said, opening the door slowly.

She was reclining in the window seat, a down blanket tucked around her legs, a book open on her lap. Her face lit up the moment she saw him. "Sweetheart! Why didn't you tell me you were coming?"

He almost reminded her of their phone conversation last weekend, but managed to stop himself. There was no point. She'd get confused and defensive, and he'd spend the next half hour trying to smooth it over. Instead, he gave her a quick kiss on the forehead, then sat down on the edge of the seat next to her.

She wore her favorite robe, a deep green shantung silk that brought out the darker hues in her hazel eyes. The harsh winter glare now flooding the room only served to highlight how fragile and pale she looked. Her hair was brushed back into its usual chic shoulder-length bob, but there were a few gray strands woven in with the golden blond that Eric hadn't noticed before. Fresh lines pulled tensely at the corners of her

mouth, with purplish circles under her eyes livid as bruises. Forty-eight years old, and she could have easily passed for a decade older.

He cast a quick look around the room, alarmed at the messy bedclothes spilling onto the floor, half-empty coffee cups and a bottle of aspirin littering the bedside table. The air smelled stale and sour, and if he squinted, he could still see the spot on the carpet where she'd vomited last weekend. Obviously she'd spent the better part of the past week holed up in here.

"Why don't you get dressed and throw on your coat, and take a walk outside with me?" he asked softly, giving her hand a tiny squeeze. "Give Estellita a chance to clean up the room."

"Oh, I don't know ... It looks terribly cold."

"Actually, it's pretty mild out today. At least we're not knee-deep in snow like we usually are this time of year. Let's take advantage of it while we can." He smiled the widest smile he could muster. "C'mon, I could use a little fresh air myself after a whole week cooped up in stuffy classrooms."

She thought it over a moment, then nodded, albeit a touch reluctantly. "All right. Give me a few minutes to get dressed, and I'll meet you in the foyer."

He stopped in his room two doors down to deposit his backpack and pull on a pair of snow boots and a heavier jacket. The room looked exactly as he'd left it last weekend, books and CDs lining the shelves on either side of his desk in perfectly even rows, the bed neatly made, every visible surface pristine and free of clutter.

Usually he found such order comforting, but today, for some strange reason, it annoyed him. It looked as if no one had ever lived here. Ironic, since he'd spent more time in this room in the past decade than most prison inmates spent in their cells. He'd once regarded this place as his sanctuary, but now he saw it for what it really was: a place to hide.

On the other hand, he mused while slipping on his fleece-lined leather gloves and heading back downstairs, maybe he was just getting used to Nick leaving his mess everywhere.

His mother joined him a few minutes later, dressed now in a cable-knit turtleneck sweater the color of blackberries and black wool slacks tucked into knee-high snow boots. An artful application of makeup had effectively concealed the dark circles and given her a touch of healthy color. Eric smiled softly. No matter how much of a mess she was otherwise, she never left the confines of her room without looking absolutely stunning.

Her black sable coat hung in the foyer closet. Eric helped her put it on, draping a cashmere scarf over her hair before ushering her out the door into the frozen January afternoon.

"You're right, this is rather ... refreshing," she murmured, tucking her own gloved hand into his arm as they strolled along. The sun had come out at last, peering down on them like a giant white eyeball, slowly turning the previous night's snowfall to slush. She held on tighter to keep from slipping.

"It's okay," he reassured her. "I've got you."

Boots crunching on fresh salt, they put on their sunglasses and followed the garden path leading down to a small frozen-

over pond, flanked by gnarled oak trees. "We used to ice-skate here." She smiled at the memory.

Eric remembered too. It had once been their own private winter tradition, until the accident that had put her in and out of surgery and physical therapy for well over a year. His father had never come near the place. He'd never learned to skate, and he had an awful fear of water.

"Mom," he said quietly, "there's something we need to talk about."

She looked at him as if she had no idea what he meant, but he knew better. "Darling, we're having such a nice time. Why do you want to—"

"Look, this has been preying on my mind for a long time. I can't let it go any longer." He stared down at the wet pavement for a moment, then sucked in a breath and forged ahead. "How many times have you overdosed now? Five? Six? Even I've lost count."

"I-I can't help it, sweetheart. Sometimes I forget how many tranquilizers I've taken. You know I need them when my back gives me trouble."

He knew this would be rough. Denial had long since become her default setting. But it had taken him weeks to screw up enough courage to broach this subject. He wasn't about to back down now. "Maybe the first time was an accident, but not the rest. We can't keep on pretending nothing's wrong. You need help, Mom. Professional help."

She stared at him. "A psychiatrist, you mean?"

"That, or maybe even rehab."

Her chin quivered. "I-I won't do rehab. I've been in enough hospitals to last me the rest of my life."

"Then we'll find you a good therapist. Somebody who'll help you get off the pills and the liquor for good."

"We're private people, Eric. Your father has an important position to protect. I doubt he'd approve of me sharing the intimate details of our lives with some stranger."

He'd tried to be patient, but this was beyond the fucking pale. "Oh, for God's sake, what do you care what he thinks? He's got no right telling you what to do. You two haven't even lived together in five years!"

"Stop it!" She backed away from him, shoulders set stubbornly, hands shoved in her pockets. Wobbling, she nearly lost her footing on a slippery patch, but Eric darted forward just in time, catching her by the elbow. "Wh-Why are you saying these things to me?"

"Because someone has to. I can't stand watching you destroy yourself over him."

"Your father has nothing to do with my ... problems."

"He has *everything* to do with them." It took his last shred of will to keep from shaking her. "I don't understand how you can still love him after the way he's treated you. I don't understand why you didn't divorce him the first time you caught him cheating."

"You just don't understand love, Eric," she replied, with all the firmness and certainty of the completely deluded.

"If this *farce* I've been compelled to witness for the past decade is what you call love, I don't want to understand it!"

She studied him for a long moment, eyes brimming with pain. "A-All right," she said at last, "I'll give it some thought. I was planning to spend next month in the city anyway. I've got a board meeting to attend at the Metropolitan, and ... Well, I know Anne Burroughs sees someone. Perhaps she'll give me a referral."

They walked back to the house arm in arm, spending the rest of the afternoon in calm conversation in the living room. His mother grew genuinely animated as she filled him in on her charity work, most of which Eric found incredibly dull, although he was pleased to hear she'd have something to occupy herself for the next few months. Hard to believe this was the same woman he'd had to sweet-talk out of her own bedroom a couple hours earlier. But, as was typical with her, all it took was a little special attention to perk her right up.

Estellita called them in to dinner at six. The long train trip, combined with no lunch and the stressful conversation that afternoon, had left Eric ravenous. He devoured two servings of the delectable medium-rare roast, along with sautéed asparagus tips and garlic mashed potatoes. To his relief, his mother's appetite had apparently reasserted itself, and she finished half her entrée, followed by a small bowl of Estellita's winter fruit compote for dessert. Usually it was all he could do to cajole her into a few listless bites before she pushed her plate away.

They retired back to the living room afterward, sitting quietly side by side, sipping after-dinner coffee, lost in their respective books. At the end of the evening, she reached over, grasping his hand tightly.

"Thank you for the visit, dear," she murmured. "You may not believe me, but I do appreciate everything you've said."

"I'm glad. I was afraid you might still be angry with me. I didn't mean to speak so harshly."

"Of course not. I know you only did it because you care." Closing her book, his mother stood up. "It's past time I was in bed."

He tried to read on till the end of his chapter, but within a few minutes, his eyelids started to droop. Sighing wearily, he headed upstairs.

There was still a light on in his mother's room; he could see it shining beneath the door. He was about to poke his head in to check on her when he heard her voice, low-pitched yet urgent, and realized she was on the phone.

"Yes, Edward, I have the papers right here, the courier brought them yesterday, but I don't ... Look, there's no need to take that tone, I'll review them when I have a spare moment ... Eric is here, if you must know. No, of course I haven't told him. We've been visiting, but I don't see why ... I will not be told what I can and cannot say to my own son!"

Christ, not again. Even at long distance, his father kept on poisoning her life. Eric's hands curled into fists.

"For the last time, no! You don't need this proxy until the quarterly meeting in March, so stop trying to rush me!" She slammed down the receiver with such force it startled him, making him bump his head on the door.

Seized by momentary panic, Eric bolted for his room. He perched on the edge of his bed clutching a pillow for several minutes, until his pulse steadied and his breathing returned to

normal. He'd thought he was through with this, with running away, cowering like a frightened rabbit every time his parents had another fight. He'd thought he'd learned to be stronger, more self-reliant. He'd thought he'd trained himself not to need people so much.

At school, he could maintain the illusion of being distant, detached, an island unto himself. Nobody there had ever seen him like this. Nobody there knew how weak he really was.

And if he had his way, nobody ever would.

* * * *

Eric spent most of the night tossing and turning, and punching his pillow. Around four o'clock he switched on the light and sat up reading until the sun rose. On a whim, he threw on his sweats and sneakers and padded down the hall to the exercise room. He hopped on the treadmill, jogging until his sweats were soaked through. By the time he was finished, an eerie sense of calm had enveloped him. He felt more focused than he had in days.

Heading back to his room, he peeled off his sweats and left them where they fell before padding into the adjoining bathroom for a shower. He dialed up the water to near-scalding and stepped in, breath hissing sharply through his teeth as the pins-and-needles spray slammed into him.

He took his time soaping up, savoring the slippery sensuality of it, the smooth feel of his own skin beneath his fingers. School had been kicking his ass this year, but if a little exercise could make him feel this good, he'd have to clear some space in his schedule for it.

He wondered what Nick did to stay in shape during the off-season. Did he run? Hit the campus fitness center? Eric made a mental note to ask him. Exercising was a lot more productive—not to mention safer—with a partner. Eric wasn't about to take off jogging down the streets of Manhattan by himself.

His hand drifted down to grasp his semi-hard cock, bringing it to full erectness with a few long, slow strokes. He hadn't had much time for this lately either. Every morning for the past week he'd had to rush through his shower because Nick's alarm always went off first, and once his roommate got in the bathroom, an atomic blast couldn't dislodge him.

Head lolling back against the cool tiles, Eric breathed in deep, spreading his legs wider to allow his hand access, one finger circling his hole, then gently breaching it. An image took form in his mind: dark, wavy curls coupled with a dazzling smile, broad shoulders tapering down into well-muscled abs and powerful thighs, a thick, meaty cock rising to meet Eric's own greedy lips, salty-bitter pre-come bursting onto his tongue as Nick let loose with a full-throated growl, grabbing him by the back of the head to thrust in all the way...

Eric plunged his finger in deeper, grabbing his own cock with his other hand, pulling hard. He was close now, teetering on the fucking brink, until he brushed his fingernail across that ultra-sensitive spot beneath the head that never failed to send him over.

Orgasm crashed into him like a runaway train, wrecking and unraveling him. Slumping against the slick tile, his vision

blurred for a moment before the world righted itself at last. He dialed the water down to cool, letting it beat down on him until the blood stopped roaring between his ears.

He climbed out, dried off quickly and shaved, taking care to avoid his own gaze in the mirror. So this was what a month of not getting laid had apparently reduced him to—a sleazy, soft-focus porno-loop fantasy about his own roommate. An exceedingly *hot* fantasy, even if it left him feeling ... weird. Rattled. Dirty, in more ways than one.

The kicker was, if he'd met Nick in another place or time, he would've jumped his bones in a second. But now they were ... well, not close enough yet to be called friends, but definitely friendly acquaintances. They had to share space, see each other every day. Despite their inauspicious first day, they'd learned to get along fairly well. Eric didn't want to jeopardize that.

He liked Nick. He liked him too much, and certainly in the wrong way. But nothing would ever happen. He wouldn't let it. He didn't fuck people he knew. It had been years since he'd fucked anyone he wanted to talk to afterward.

And if there was a more pathetic commentary on the state of his life, he couldn't think of one.

Eric repacked his bag, depositing it with his jacket in the foyer when he went downstairs for breakfast. He was surprised to discover his mother already in the dining room, sipping coffee and thumbing through the *Sunday Times*. It was a hopeful sign, he supposed, that she'd come down without being coaxed.

He got himself some coffee, toast and fresh fruit from the sideboard, then sat down before reaching for the financial page. A quick glance at his mother told him she'd had a restless night as well, no doubt for the same reason.

He might as well bring it up now and get it over with. "I overheard you on the phone with Dad last night."

"Did you?" Her tone was cool, though the tight lines around her mouth grew even tighter. "I should probably remind you that eavesdropping is a very rude habit, but at this point I suppose it's irrelevant."

"I also heard you say something about him wanting you to sign some proxy papers. What does he want with them?"

"It's nothing. He just wants my signature on file in case I'm not available to vote my stock at the quarterly meetings."

"You mean, he's pressuring you to give him control of your third of the company."

"Which I have no intention of doing."

"That's not what it sounded like last night."

"Eric, I'm not a complete weakling, despite your belief to the contrary. I'm perfectly capable of handling my own business affairs."

Picking up his coffee cup, he took a slow, deliberate sip, using every millisecond to try and regain his earlier Zen-like calm. "You know he'll just keep browbeating you until you give in. It's what he always does."

"Then I'll stop taking his calls."

"Then he'll drive up here in person again, which is exactly what *you* want."

Her mouth dropped open. "Eric!"

"That's the real reason you keep overdosing, isn't it? It's a pathetic, manipulative ploy to get his attention." So much for calm; now he could barely keep from hurling his plate across the room. "He's never coming back to you, Mom. Why should he? He's got a majority stake in the company now. He doesn't need you or your money anymore."

Now she looked like she was about to burst out crying—and that was a manipulation too. "Wh-What a horrible thing to say."

"It's the truth." He pushed back his chair and got up. "You know, I've just realized something. I can't save you, Mom. You don't want to be saved. You want to drown in your booze and your pills so that everyone will pity you. Well, I don't pity you. If you don't want to lift a finger to help yourself, so be it. But I'm not hanging around here anymore to watch you commit suicide by slow degrees."

He headed for the foyer, where he threw on his jacket and grabbed his bag before marching down the front steps of the house to the garage. He waited there a few minutes, in the vain hope his mother would emerge and try to smooth things over. It dawned on him that he hadn't said goodbye to Estellita, but no way was he going back inside. He'd drop her a note once he got back to the city.

He arrived in Rochester in time to catch the ten o'clock train. Sundays were typically busy travel days, but he managed to find a seat in a relatively quiet car and promptly buried his nose in his economics book.

It was already dark when the train pulled into Penn Station around four. Eric waited until the other passengers

disembarked, securely zipping his jacket, clutching his backpack close to his body before stepping out onto the platform.

He ambled along toward the stairs at the far end, giving a start when someone brushed past him, bumping his shoulder.

"Sorry," the guy said, glancing back at Eric, making eye contact. *Very pointed* eye contact, in fact.

He was about six feet tall, with dark, wavy hair and olive skin, dressed in a clean pair of jeans, sneakers and a navy blue parka. Eric kept his gaze locked on him, but the guy didn't look away. Instead, he dropped his hands to his belt, thumbs wound in the loops, hitching up the crotch of his jeans in open and unmistakable invitation.

There was a men's room a few steps ahead at the end of the platform. Eric cocked his head toward it, and the guy ducked inside. Eric reached it a few seconds later, glancing around on the lookout for stray security guards. The coast was clear.

The place reeked of stale urine and hand soap, the usual public toilet bouquet. The guy stood at the last urinal, fly open, peeing like a racehorse. Eric ambled up beside him and unzipped, pulling out his own cock. Checking out each other's equipment beforehand was part of the ritual. It also afforded them an extra minute or two to make sure no one else was lurking in the stalls.

The guy had a nice, average-sized cock, with a pretty pink head and lots of foreskin. He finished his marathon piss and shook off, moving his hand up and down the shaft several times. Eric's mouth watered.

"See something you like?" the guy asked, licking his lips.

Enough teasing—Eric was ready for the main event.

Grabbing the guy's hand, he bolted for the handicapped stall and flipped the latch. The guy had him pinned against the cracked tiles before Eric could suck in another breath, his hand snaking down to grasp Eric's cock, jacking it brutally until it stood up and saluted.

"How do you want it?" the guy prompted, reaching inside his parka.

"Up the ass," Eric rasped. "I've got some condoms and lube in my pack if you can't find—"

"That's not what I'm looking for." The guy's tone suddenly shifted from seductive to harsh, and a split-second later, Eric felt something very sharp and cold pressed under his ribcage. "You dirty queer," he spat, getting right up in Eric's face. His breath stank of cheap beer and something else, something even sourer and more revolting. "Who the fuck d'you think you are, huh? You think you can come on to me and get away with it?"

Oh, Christ, oh, Jesus, oh, fucking *shit*. This guy was nuts.

"M-My wallet's in my b-bag," Eric stammered, abject terror gripping him so tightly he could barely squeeze out the words. There was no guarantee that this whack-job wouldn't hurt him no matter what Eric offered him, but he had to try. "It's got a couple hundred bucks in it. Take it."

"I plan to."

"Th-Then ... let me out of here, okay? I won't tell anybody. I won't even remember your face in five minutes."

"Is that what you say to all the fags you fuck in public johns?" The knife jabbed in harder.

Eric waited for his life to flash in front of his eyes, but all he got was dead air. Jesus, he was going to fucking *die* in here with his pants around his ankles, murdered by some deranged homophobe who probably thought God told him to do it. He could just imagine the look on his father's face when they called him down to the morgue to identify his body. "I won't breathe a word to anyone, I swear."

"Don't worry, I'm gonna make sure of—"

There was a sudden swooshing sound that Eric recognized as the outside door swinging open, followed by running tap water.

His potential murderer's gaze bounced from the knife to the stall door and back again, apparently weighing his options. But when Eric started to call out, the guy's fist smashed into his cheekbone. "You just got lucky," he sneered, snatching up Eric's backpack before fleeing.

Eric was too busy blacking out to be grateful.

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Chapter 4

An abrupt pounding at the door jolted Nick awake, the book in his lap sliding to the floor as he stood up. Blinking hard, he got up to answer it, his jaw practically hitting his chest at the sight of Eric standing there, a huge shiner in full bloom around his left eye, looking like he was about to collapse.

"Jesus, Eric, what happened to you? I thought you'd be back hours ago." In lieu of replying, his roommate pushed past him, making a beeline for the kitchen. "Why didn't you use your key?"

"I would've, if I still had it." He put on the tea kettle, then grabbed a box of wheat crackers before sinking gratefully into the nearest chair.

"You lost your keys *and* your bag?"

"Yeah. I walked into a door, and they disappeared."

"Since when did they start building doors in the shape of fists?"

Eric tried to smile, but ended up grimacing instead. "I got mugged at Penn Station this afternoon."

Nick glanced at his watch, shocked to discover that it was closing in on midnight. "I wish you'd called me. I could've ... helped."

"There was nothing you could've done, unless you enjoy cooling your heels in emergency rooms for hours on end."

"Let me have a look." He slid one hand gently under Eric's chin, tilting it upward for a better view. There was a small

stitched-up laceration on his cheekbone a mere half-inch from the outside corner of his eye, but aside from that, it looked a lot worse than it was. "It'll take a couple of weeks for that black eye to fade, but all in all, I'd say you were lucky. I'm assuming they checked you for concussion?"

Eric nodded. "I was out for a couple of minutes after the guy hit me, but other than the million tiny elves playing percussion on the inside of my skull right now, I feel okay."

"After all the times I've been knocked out on the field, I know the feeling. Did they give you anything for the headache?"

"Just regular Tylenol. They offered me something stronger, but I don't like taking pills if I can help it."

"Wait a sec." Opening the freezer, Nick rummaged in the ice tray for a few stray remaining chips, then wrapped them in a paper towel and handed it to Eric. "See if this helps."

The kettle chose that moment to start screaming, but Nick waved Eric back to his seat and fixed the tea himself, a mug for each of them. All they had was some exotic herbal mixture Eric liked, but Nick figured enough sugar would make it tolerable. He stirred two teaspoons into both.

"I take mine plain," Eric interjected.

"Not tonight, you don't. Your blood sugar's probably in the basement. Something hot and sweet'll do you good. Have some of those crackers too."

He handed a mug to Eric before sitting down across from him. He couldn't help noticing his roommate's fingers trembling as he wrapped them around the mug handle; for

some reason, that alarmed Nick more than the cut near Eric's eye.

"What happened?" he prompted finally.

Eric shot him a momentarily blank look, his lips twitching. "I, uh ... ducked into the men's room to take a leak, and the guy jumped me. It was my own fault, I wasn't paying attention. After all the train stations I've been in, I should've known better."

"Why do I get the feeling that's not the whole story?"

"What do you mean?"

"Eric, you're the world's lousiest liar. You've got so many nervous tics, I can't even count them all. C'mon, cut the crap and tell me what really happened."

"Okay, but remember—you asked." He blew on his tea to cool it, then took a sip before continuing. "I went into the men's room to get fucked by this guy I ran into on the platform. He flipped out and pulled a knife on me."

"Jesus!" Nick's hands jerked in shock, nearly overturning his tea. "You're lucky all you lost was your backpack."

"The thought had occurred to me."

"Did you report it to the cops?"

"They took me to the ER and I gave them my statement while I was waiting, for all the good it'll do. I doubt they'll catch the guy."

"Does this kind of thing happen to you a lot?"

"You mean, sex in public places, or getting the crap kicked out of me?"

He could see Eric was trying to put a brave face on what must have been a terrifying situation, and part of him

empathized. But another part was starting to find his flippant, defensive attempts at humor highly irritating. "Since you don't come home every day looking like you just went six rounds with Mike Tyson, let's assume I meant the former."

Leaning back, Eric scooped up the paper towel, dabbing it gingerly on his cheek. "I've had my fair share of anonymous sex, but nobody's ever tried to kill me before."

"Well, at least you're ahead of the odds."

Eric shrugged.

"Have you ever considered that this type of behavior might be interpreted as ... self-destructive?"

"Looks like somebody paid attention in freshman psych class."

"Eric, c'mon. Be serious."

"Okay, okay," he replied, obviously more exasperated than chastened, "I'll be more careful next time."

"That's not what I meant." Nick sighed. "You know, I find it ironic that a guy who admits to not liking people very much takes such wild chances with complete strangers."

"I've got a sex drive, like everyone else. How I choose to satisfy it is my business."

"I actually agree with you there."

"You do?" Eric's tone dripped with skepticism.

"Look, I'm not judging you. I'm just trying to understand why you prefer ... doing what you've been doing, when there must be plenty of guys out there who'd love to date someone like you."

Eric fished a cracker from the box and nibbled absently at it. "I don't do relationships."

"What, you mean never?"

"Let's just say my background's made me a bit gun-shy."

"So that's it? You won't even try?"

"For the record, I have tried. I dated someone in high school, and I screwed it up royally. We'd been good friends since we were kids, but after the way I hurt her, she never spoke to me again. I have no desire to repeat that experience."

Nick's eyes went wide. "*She?*"

"Believe it or not, I have slept with women. I've even enjoyed it."

"Then ... what made you—"

"Turn queer?" Eric supplied. "Technically, I'd probably be classified as bisexual, but I prefer men. They don't make an issue over sex for its own sake. Every woman I've ever slept with thought it meant I owed her a commitment. I got tired of the hassle."

"So, men are just easy?"

"I prefer 'uncomplicated.'"

"Except for the ones who pull knives on you."

"Touché." The ice now apparently melted, Eric put down the sodden paper towel and scooped up his mug again. "You seem fairly wise about relationships for somebody who isn't in one."

"How would you know?"

"Well, you've been living here for a week now, and the only woman I've seen you with is Ally. I thought you football heroes had to beat the girls back with a whip and a chair."

Nick laughed, though to his own ears it sounded distinctly forced. "Between practice and studying, I've got enough on my plate. I don't need to add a girlfriend to the mix."

"So you've never taken advantage of the post-game frenzy to blow off a little steam with a cute jock groupie?"

"I did once, my senior year in high school. I had a couple of beers at the homecoming game party, and this cheerleader dragged me into a bedroom and went down on me. It was all over school the next day."

"Some people would find that kind of attention flattering."

"Not me."

"Then you're planning on spending the rest of your college career making love to your hand?"

"It hasn't complained so far." Eric looked like he wanted to say something, but stopped himself. "What?" Nick prompted.

"I think you're missing out on a great opportunity. College is supposed to be a time of experimentation."

"I'd rather wait for the right person."

Eric stared at him for a long, uncomfortable moment. "You mean, you've never—"

"What, is there something wrong with that?" Nick hadn't meant for it to come out sounding so defensive, but all of a sudden he really, *really* wanted this conversation over.

"God, a romantic!" Eric chuckled, then winced, touching his cheekbone. "I didn't think there were any of you left."

"And there won't be anything left of either of us tomorrow if we don't get some sleep," Nick said, getting up to put their mugs in the sink.

Eric took the first turn in the bathroom, emerging clad in a pair of thick sweats and two pairs of socks. Nick ambled over to the thermostat and nudged it up a few degrees before going to brush his teeth and throw on a long-sleeved t-shirt and flannel pajama pants.

The light was still on in the living room when he came out. Eric lay on his bed with his eyes closed and the covers yanked up to his chin. He was shivering so hard the bedsprings creaked.

Nick snagged his own blanket and pillow from the couch, then padded back to Eric's side of the room. "Scoot over," he said softly, already sliding under the covers.

Eric's eyes flew open. "What the hell are you—"

"No arguments." He smoothed his own blanket out on top of the two Eric already had over him, then reached for the lamp on Eric's desk and flicked it off. "You're having a delayed stress reaction. After what you've been through, I'm not surprised."

"Y-You don't have to do this."

"Yeah, I do. Now shut up." Rolling over behind Eric so they spooned, Nick rubbed his hands up and down his roommate's arms, trying to warm him up. Instead, Eric's entire body went as rigid as the proverbial board. "This won't work if you don't relax."

"How do you expect me to do that, with you lying right next to me?"

This seemed to be his night for one shock after another. So Eric was attracted to him. He'd suspected it from the day he'd moved in, but having it confirmed was still a bit

disconcerting. Well, it didn't matter now. He had to do something to keep Eric from ending up in the emergency room again.

"C'mon, lean back against me," Nick whispered. "You need to get warm."

With a shaky breath, Eric sank back into Nick's arms. Nick pressed close, chin hooked over Eric's shoulder, rubbing his roommate's arms and chest with both hands. Within a few minutes, Eric's shivering began to subside.

Unfortunately, that couldn't be said for a certain part of Nick's anatomy. He breathed a silent prayer of gratitude for the doused lights; having Eric see his fire-engine blush would put the final capper on his embarrassment.

"It's not very sporting to be teasing me at a time like this," Eric chided gently. His hand closed over Nick's, giving it a comforting squeeze. "But for the record, I'm flattered."

"Sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"Don't be sorry." He turned his head until his mouth was so close to Nick's, they could feel the soft puff of each other's breath.

Nick hesitated a split-second before pressing his lips to Eric's, darting his tongue inside. He whimpered at the taste of him—hot, wet and unbearably sweet. Eric's tongue entwined with his for a moment, sending Nick's pulse spiraling, blood roaring between his ears like a caged lion. He felt Eric's hand cup his cheek, fingers threading briefly through his hair. Then, with a tiny broken moan, Eric drew back, his warm breath still wafting over Nick's skin.

"I-I don't think this is such a good idea," he murmured.

Nick squeezed his eyes shut, trying to quell the sharp pain sailing through his heart. "You're right. We shouldn't ... complicate things." He sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed, reaching for his blanket. "You should be warm enough now."

"I didn't mean that ... You don't have to go."

Was that pity in Eric's voice? As if Nick wasn't mortified enough already. "Yeah," he whispered sadly, "I do."

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Chapter 5

Eric overslept the next morning, and had to sprint to make it to his first class on time. To his relief, Nick was already up and gone. At least that would give him a few extra hours to figure out how to deal with what had happened between them last night. The thought of Nick seeing him in such a vulnerable state still made him tremble, and that, coupled with the vivid memory of his roommate's kiss, had left Eric so disconcerted, he could barely concentrate on his lectures.

Finally he decided to declare the day a wash. He cut his last class to go over to the campus bookstore and see about replacing his economics textbook, only to discover they were sold out. With a sigh, he headed over to the library, where he found a single remaining copy standing on the shelf. It'd be a pain coming back in to renew it every couple of weeks, but maybe he'd get lucky and find a copy at one of the used bookshops downtown.

His stomach now rumbling, he considered stopping in at the dining hall—until he remembered he didn't have a meal card, or any cash on him either. And if Nick hadn't returned to the room yet, he had no way to get in. Teeth clenched in frustration, he trudged back to his dorm and up the three flights of stairs to Mickey's office to beg for a replacement key.

He stopped short when he finally opened the door to his room, poleaxed by the sight of Nick yanking clothes out of the closet and stuffing them into his suitcase.

For a moment, Eric wasn't sure whether to feel relieved or upset. Having Nick out of the picture would solve his immediate problem, but, with a pang, Eric realized he didn't want Nick to leave. While it still hurt remembering their intimate encounter from the night before, the idea of spending the next few months alone in this room hurt more.

Shutting the door quietly, he stepped inside. "Nick, c'mon. You don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do," Nick replied, sparing him a brief glance while he zipped up his case. "I've imposed on you long enough. Ally's offered me a sleeping bag on her floor. It'll do until something better turns up."

"There isn't a single unoccupied bed anywhere on campus. As for off-campus ... Well, if you start scouring the obit column now, you might find something by June. Although you may have to rob a bank to pay for it."

"Don't worry about it. It's my problem. I'll deal with it."

So much for the humorous approach. "Look, I don't want you to go. Believe it or not, I've grown used to having you here."

Nick grabbed something from the coffee table, thrusting it under Eric's nose. It was the current week's issue of *The Spectator*, sporting the headline, '*Ruggles Hall to remain closed for repairs for rest of term.*'

Eric gave the accompanying article a quick skimming before shaking his head. "It doesn't matter. You can still stay."

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

Hoisted on his own words from the night before. That stung. "Nick, I don't know what I would've done if you hadn't been here last night," Eric said softly. "I was in bad shape, and you looked after me. I didn't even want you to, but you did it anyway. Nobody else here would have."

"Of course they would." Nick was looking away now, fumbling with an invisible stray thread on his sweatshirt, those adorable pink spots dancing high on his cheeks again. "All you have to do is ask."

"That's not something that comes easily for me, but if you insist..." He inhaled sharply. "Nick Thompson, I'd consider it a favor if you'd remain my roommate for the rest of the semester. Will you please stay?"

Nick's blush deepened. "But ... what about—"

"Look, as far as I'm concerned, it's forgotten. All right?" He grinned widely at Nick's relieved nod, his own heart suddenly feeling fifty pounds lighter. "Okay, then. Better grab your meal card. I haven't had the chance to get mine replaced yet, and I'm famished."

"Oh, that reminds me—a guy from the Penn Station security office called. They found your backpack in one of the trash cans this morning." Nick nodded toward Eric's desk. "I took down all the particulars."

Eric stared at the scrap of lined notebook paper Nick had scrawled the note on, his mind quickly calculating the amount of time required to get down to Penn and back on a weekday morning. The answer didn't thrill him. "I'd better go pick it up tonight. My first class is at nine tomorrow, and I'm busy pretty much all day after that."

"If you don't mind me tagging along, I know a really good pizza joint on the way back."

Right on cue, Eric's empty belly snarled like a jungle beast. He glanced down at his boots, wondering if the laces were edible. "Sounds good, if I can keep from passing out that long."

They hopped the subway downtown, but with the evening rush hour now in full swing, they ended up strap-hanging the entire way. The security office was at the front of the station. Eric went inside to claim his bag, pleased to discover his economics textbook still inside, along with his keys and his wallet, intact except for the cash. He was grateful his assailant had left behind his debit, credit and meal cards, driver's license and student ID. He hadn't been looking forward to the hassle of replacing them.

Nick was waiting for him outside near a bank of pay phones. "That was quick. Ready for some dinner?"

"If I was any readier, you'd have to carry me to the damn restaurant. Let's go."

They made a brief detour for Eric to use the ATM, then caught the subway back uptown. Getting off a couple of stops before the campus, they walked up Amsterdam to a tiny, hole-in-the-wall place with a flashing red, white and green neon sign over the door proclaiming it as 'Alfredo's.'

Inside it was warm and noisy, abuzz with voices and the TV blaring a newscast over the bar. There were a few packed cocktail tables in front; plush, leather-upholstered booths covered in traditional red and white checkered tablecloths

lined the rear wall. Drippy red candles stuck in old wine bottles sat on every table.

"Over here!" came a familiar voice from a few feet away. It was Ally, waving them both over with a huge smile. "I saved us a table."

"So I see," Eric observed, smiling back, then shooting Nick a look. "I didn't realize we were making this a party."

"Okay, you got me," Nick admitted, tossing his bag into the booth before sliding in himself. "I called Ally from Penn. We both figured after your rotten day yesterday, you could probably use some cheering up."

Eric stared at him for a long moment. "You told Ally about my—"

"Look, it's not Nick's fault," Ally interjected, reaching over to give Eric's hand a squeeze. "I could tell something was bothering him, so I kept hammering away until he spilled. Blame it on reporter's instinct." She bit her lip. "But once he told me, I felt like a grade-A heel. Believe me, I have no intention of repeating your story."

"Thank you," Eric said quietly. "I appreciate that. To be honest, today I feel more embarrassed about what happened than anything else."

"If it's any consolation, I've been there myself. I got my purse snatched my first week in the city. There I was, walking around downtown without a care in the world, and suddenly this guy dashes down the street out of nowhere, yanks my bag off my arm, and he's gone. Of course, it was my own fault. I shouldn't have been carrying a shoulder bag down in the Village. I felt like such a fucking rube."

"Happens to the best of us, I guess," he replied, relieved at the realization that Nick had apparently left out the more mortifying details of his assault. Flipping open a menu, he added, "So, what's good here?"

They ordered the nightly specials: Caesar salad and double-pepperoni pizza with a carafe of house red. Eric was amazed to see Nick pull a fake ID out of his wallet when the waiter asked to check them. Evidently his roommate did indeed indulge in at least one traditional college vice.

Despite the place's hokey atmosphere, the food itself was a revelation. First came the salad, tossed to perfection by their waiter, then sprinkled with shaved parmesan. It melted on Eric's tongue like a snowflake. Next came the pizza, covered so densely with pepperoni, he wasn't sure they'd remembered the cheese. It was pure ambrosia—hot, thick, spicy and decadently rich. Eric had to call a halt after three slices. Hard to believe he'd been ready to scarf down his own shoelaces a little while ago.

Ally peered at his plate, then Nick's, with a bemused grin. "As usual, when the food arrives, all conversation ceases."

"What d'you wanna talk about?" Nick asked, words muffled by the mouthful of pizza he was still chewing.

"Oh, I don't know, something besides football or school. I get bored with the same old crap all the time."

"At the risk of boring you further," Eric began, "I noticed your byline on that Ruggles Hall article in *The Spectator* today. How long have you been on staff?"

"Since this past fall, but I've been interning for over a year now. I was lucky to land the gig. They don't usually hand them out to undergrads."

"So I've heard." He took another sip of his wine, savoring the pleasant buzz now spreading through his veins. It was a tad robust for his tastes, but it got the job done. "Do you plan to apply to journalism school here, like Nick?"

"Like Nick?" she echoed, fixing their dinner partner with a pointed glance. "Nick hasn't said a word to me about it."

"I haven't made up my mind yet," Nick replied, shooting Eric a sharp look. "I was just thinking aloud when Eric and I were having breakfast the other day."

"Consider yourself privileged, Eric," Ally said archly. "He obviously tells you a lot more than he does me these days."

"Ally, c'mon..." Nick protested.

"Oh, stop! You know I'm kidding." Pasting on a tight smile, she waved down their waiter, signaling for the check. "Sorry to be such a party pooper, guys, but I've got an article I need to research tonight."

Eric offered to pay for the entire check, but neither Nick nor Ally would hear of it. They parted ways at the corner, Ally heading to her apartment downtown, Eric and Nick in the opposite direction. Eric insisted on springing for a cab, rather than brave the murky depths of the subway after three glasses of wine. He'd left the restaurant feeling fine, but by the time the cab pulled up in front of Watt, it was a challenge to keep his eyes open.

Fortunately, Nick didn't seem to mind half-carrying him to their room. His roommate didn't act the least bit inebriated,

and he'd had as much wine as Eric. Being built like the Incredible Hulk no doubt helped. Nick could probably polish off a whole bottle by himself and not even feel it.

They took their respective turns in the bathroom before Eric flicked off the light. Then he suddenly remembered something, so he flicked it back on. "Do you want one of the beds for yourself?"

Nick blinked at him. "What?"

"The day you moved in, you said you wanted one of the twin beds."

"Oh. Um ... Yeah, I guess so. But let's not start moving stuff around right now. We're both too tired."

"Kay." Off went the light again. "Nick?"

"What?"

"You sure you and Ally never dated?"

"I think I would've remembered."

"Huh. Well, you do realize she's got a thing for you?"

Nick snorted. "Yeah, right."

"Why do you think she got all testy when she found out you told me about applying to journalism school, but not her?"

Nick fell silent for a moment. "You really think so?"

"She wants you to ask her out. Why haven't you?"

"I don't know, it just never occurred to me. I've known her forever, and when we first met, she was dating somebody else. I guess I got used to thinking of her as a friend."

"Well, she definitely thinks of you as more than that."

"Eric, you're drunk."

"Doesn't mean I'm not right."

"Go to sleep."

It didn't take long before Eric started drifting. His last thought before unconsciousness enveloped him was that he'd spent the entire evening in a busy restaurant—and for the first time he could remember, being around people hadn't bothered him a bit.

* * * *

The next few weeks flew by in a blur. Eric's life settled into a busy routine of classes, studying, working out in the campus fitness center with Nick, meals down in the dining hall with Nick—and sometimes Ally—and, for the first time since high school, an actual social life.

The three of them became inseparable, making off-campus excursions to the Metropolitan and Museum of Natural History, exploring neighborhoods like hip, funky Chelsea and upscale Tribeca, and poking around in old bookshops down in the Village. Every Friday night, it was dinner at Alfredo's, followed by a foreign-film double bill at one of the classic old revival houses downtown. Eric had forgotten what having that much fun felt like.

He and Nick would invariably stumble back to their room long past midnight, falling into their respective twin beds so exhausted, he could hear Nick start to snore before the lights went out. It never failed to send Eric off to dreamland with a smile on his face.

As far as what had happened between them the night Eric was mugged, it did indeed appear to be forgotten. Eric still wasn't sure how he felt about that. His attraction to Nick

hadn't gone away, but other than discreet jerk-off sessions in the shower a couple times a week, he managed to ignore its effect on him. He hadn't indulged in any reckless encounters either, much as he'd been tempted otherwise.

The hot dining hall worker had tried to entice him into another bathroom blowjob, but when it came time to drop to his knees, Eric couldn't bring himself to go through with it. Nick wouldn't like it, and for some weird reason, that had become very important. Nick's good opinion had come to mean the world to Eric over the past few weeks. But there was another reason too. Quite simply, the thrill was gone.

Late one Friday afternoon at the end of February, he dashed back to the room after his last class to get ready to go out. But he froze the second he opened the door. Nick and Ally sat on the couch with his mother in between them, crisply regal in her sable coat and matching hat. They were chatting like old friends catching up after years apart.

"Hello, dear!" his mother chirped, beaming brightly at him as if they hadn't had a horrible argument the last time they'd seen each other. Of course, in her mind, it was ancient history, tucked away and compartmentalized—that is, if she remembered it at all. "Your friends and I have been having a lovely talk."

He came in and set his backpack down carefully on the desk, taking a few precious seconds to bring his conflicting emotions under control. Part of him felt guilty that he wasn't happy to see her; another part wanted to scream at her for showing up out of the blue like this. It never failed—every

time he managed to pick himself up, along came his family to knock him down again.

"How long have you been in town?" he asked, pulling out his desk chair to sit on, even though the armchair next to the couch was empty. "It would've been nice if you'd called first. I might not have been here."

"Oh, I'm sorry!" She glanced from Eric to Nick to Ally and back again, looking genuinely mortified. "I forgot this was Friday night. I should have realized you'd all be getting ready to go out."

"It's no problem, really," Nick replied, shooting Eric a somewhat confused, yet definitely pointed look. "Ally and I can go on ahead, and let you two have a chance to talk. Eric knows where we'll be if he wants to join us later."

"That sounds like a good idea." Ally hopped up, nodding for Nick to do the same as she grabbed her own bag from the coffee table. "C'mon, Nick, let's give Eric and his mom time to catch up. Good to meet you, Mrs. Courtland!" And with that, she caught Nick by the hand and whisked him out the door with her.

"Well," his mother continued after an excruciatingly silent moment, "she's quite the vivacious young lady."

"That she is."

"And Nick's not only handsome, but smart as well. Which one of them are you dating?"

"Mom!"

"Or is it both of them?"

"I am not discussing my sex life with you, so you might as well drop it."

"Maybe I should have asked them," she added mischievously.

He glared at her. "Is that why you came over here, to interrogate my friends?"

"No, of course not. Can't a mother pay her own son a visit, especially when she hasn't seen him in over a month?"

"Like I said, you could have called first."

"Eric, please. I'm sorry about what happened last time. I wish you wouldn't still be angry about it."

So she hadn't forgotten. Was this a hopeful sign, or merely a fluke? "I-I'm not angry, I just ... I can't keep riding this merry-go-round with you, Mom. It's too hard."

"I know," she replied quietly. "And for what it's worth, I regret all the pain I've put you through. I came here tonight to tell you that I've taken your advice. I had my first appointment with my new therapist today."

For a few moments, everything went so perfectly still, Eric thought his own heart had stopped beating. "You went? You *really* went?"

"Yes, and I plan to continue twice a week for the next few months. I've moved down to the city through the summer. I'll be staying at my suite at the Pierre."

"Have you told Dad?"

"No, and as far as I'm concerned, there's no reason to tell him. I don't need his permission."

He flashed her a shaky smile. "That's some self-confidence, after only one session."

"I've had a lot to think about these past few weeks. It's time I took control of my life." She rose, holding her arms out

to him, and he walked into her embrace with a hopeful sigh, eyes clamped shut to hold back sudden tears. "Things are about to change, and it's all because of you, darling."

Her eyes shone with their own moisture, clear and undilated for the first time in Eric's recent memory. "Y-You haven't taken any pills—"

"No pills or liquor since my last time in the hospital, I promise."

"Good. Do me a favor and don't go see Dad, okay? Every time you do, it ... triggers all the awful stuff."

"I have no intention of seeing or talking to your father. If he has business to discuss, he can contact my attorney." She smiled. "I should go now, and let you join your friends."

Eric sat alone on the couch for a long time after she'd left, staring at nothing, trying to absorb it all. When he finally got around to checking his watch, he realized he'd missed dinner and probably the beginning of the movie. If he hurried, he could make it to the theater before it was over, but he hated walking in on the middle of a movie, even if it was one he'd already seen.

His mother usually brought nothing but chaos into his life, but now a strange sense of calm had come over him, like that day back at the lake house, when he'd exercised himself to the point of exhaustion. Like the way he felt whenever Nick was around.

The revelation shook him to his core. He'd never felt more peaceful, more centered than he had with Nick here these past few weeks. Nick *got* him in ways no one else ever had. Sometimes they'd be sitting together studying, and even

when neither of them had said a single word, it felt as if they'd had an entire conversation. A simple look between them spoke volumes.

What he felt for Nick wasn't just physical attraction, not anymore. No wonder he'd stopped seeking out sleazy, meaningless encounters. They no longer fed his need.

He'd fallen in love.

And suddenly he felt more frightened than he'd been with a mugger's knife pressed to his ribs.

* * * *

Nick fidgeted and squirmed in his seat all the way through the first movie, barely paying attention to the subtitles. He'd figured out that it was about an itinerant circus strongman and this naïve young woman traveling with him, but aside from that, he was lost.

He shot out of his seat as soon as the end credits started rolling. "I'm heading back to the dorm."

Ally stared up at him, her mouth pressed into a tight line of exasperation. She'd been looking at him like that off and on all evening. "I thought you wanted to see the next movie."

"Eric should have shown up by now. I need to check and make sure he's okay." Grabbing his jacket, he strode up the aisle and out into the lobby.

"Nick, wait!" She had to run to catch up to him, snagging him by the arm as she tugged on her own jacket. With the front door constantly swinging open, the lobby was much chillier than the rest of the theater. "Look, don't freak out. He and his mom probably decided to go have dinner."

"Did it look to you like he wanted to spend that much time with her?"

"I think he was just a little annoyed about her showing up unannounced. You've heard the way he talks about her. Obviously they're very close." Flashing her toothiest smile, she tried to steer him back inside. "C'mon, let's grab some more popcorn and go watch the second feature."

He thought about it a moment before shaking his head. "To be honest, I'd rather go. I'm not into it tonight."

"Really? I hadn't noticed," she replied acidly.

Normally he'd let her sarcasm pass, but tonight it had been burrowing under his skin like itching powder. "What the hell's wrong with you? You've been making snotty remarks like that ever since we left the restaurant."

"Oh, gosh, I don't know. I guess I thought maybe you might actually be glad to spend some time alone with me for the first time in over a fucking month."

"What are you talking about?"

"We haven't gone out by ourselves once since you moved in with Eric. You do realize that, right?"

Actually, he hadn't. But now that she'd brought it up, he had to wonder why. "What're you trying to say, that you're jealous of Eric? He's my roommate. Of course we spend a lot of time together."

She stared at him, then burst out laughing. "Oh, God ... You don't get it, do you?"

"Get what?"

"Nick, Nick, Nick. You make that poor retarded girl in the movie look like a Rhodes scholar." She shook her head. "If

you can't figure it by yourself, there's no way I can explain it to you. See you in class on Monday."

He stood there watching her walk away, then, shoving his hands in his pockets against the outside cold, headed out the theater door and up the street to the subway.

He was halfway back to the dorm before the proverbial light bulb flicked on over his head.

* * * *

A chill had fallen over the room that had little to do with the weather. Shivering, Eric went into the kitchen and put on the tea kettle, then pulled a blanket from his bed and curled up on the couch.

The kettle started whistling at the same moment as the door opened. Nick stepped inside, forehead already wrinkled before he even saw Eric. "You okay?" he asked, rubbing his hands together, his tone a bit more urgent than the situation warranted.

"A little chilly. But you look frozen all the way through." Eric cocked his head toward the kitchen. "There should be enough water in the kettle for two cups."

A couple minutes later, Nick emerged from the kitchen with two steaming mugs. Eric sat up straight to take his, blowing on it before taking a sip. It burned his tongue, but at least this time Nick hadn't drowned the tea's natural herbal flavor in too much sugar.

"You're back early," Eric observed, his gaze focused on the depths of his mug.

Nick shrugged. "Guess I wasn't in the mood for Fellini tonight."

"Fellini's always been one of my favorites. Which ones were they showing? I forgot to check the schedule."

Nick pulled the schedule out of his pocket. "Tonight it was *La Strada*, and ... um, *Juliet of the Spirits*."

Eric couldn't help smiling. Irony had certainly put on the gloves for him tonight. "What did you think of the second film?"

"I didn't see any of it. I decided to leave after the first one ended."

"Do you know what *Juliet of the Spirits* is about?"

Nick shook his head. "Tell me."

"It's about a rich woman who has a nervous breakdown when she discovers her husband has been cheating on her. Also known as the story of my mother's life."

"I'm sorry," Nick said softly. "It's not fair that such awful things happen to people who've done nothing to deserve them."

"I don't think I'd go that far. She married him knowing he only wanted her money. She was the one who bankrolled Courtland Industries back when it was a startup. I'm not sure if he ever really loved her. But her tragedy is that she can't stop loving him." He sighed. "Sorry. You don't want to hear this."

"Sure I do. It actually explains a lot."

"All my neuroses revealed?" Eric let out a short laugh. "I'll end up scaring you away."

"Not a chance. Go on, tell me the rest."

There was something about Nick's tone that disturbed rather than reassured him. The tea had already warmed Eric up quite a bit, so much so that his palms were starting to sweat. He pulled the blanket off and set it aside.

"Five years ago, my mother and I went ice skating on this tiny pond behind our house," Eric began slowly. "We should've known better. It was nearly spring. The snow had already started to melt. She fell on a weak patch of ice and went crashing right through."

"Jesus," Nick breathed. "That must have been horrible."

"The horrible part came later." Draining his mug, he set it on the coffee table. "She was in a coma for three days, and woke up in a body brace with three crushed vertebrae. For a while they weren't sure she'd ever walk again. It took five surgeries and a year of physical therapy to get her back on her feet. Of course, by then she was hooked on painkillers and tranquilizers."

"That is pretty horrible."

"Oh, I've barely gotten started." He sucked in a breath. "I think by then she already knew my father hadn't been faithful to her for a very long time, but after the accident, he didn't even try to hide it anymore. Except for Christmas holidays, when he'd show up on our doorstep with a bunch of his cronies, and expect us to play the perfect happy family for their benefit. And every Christmas holiday for the last five fucked-up years, my mother's downed a fistful of pills with a Stoli chaser."

"Eric, I don't know what to say," Nick murmured. "I can't begin to imagine what living like that's been like for you."

"Well, if you're still wondering why I was in such a foul mood the day we met, now you know."

"But your mom ... She seemed okay tonight. I mean, she didn't look drunk or stoned to me."

"It runs in cycles. She'll be fine for a few months, then something will happen to trigger another episode. It's usually something to do with my father. She acts out, and he comes running. But tonight she insisted that's all over. She's seeing a therapist, trying to get her life back on track. We'll see, I guess."

"What, you don't believe her?"

"I believe she's sincere about it now, but in two or three months, who knows? I want her to get well, I really do, I just ... I can't take being disappointed by her again." He tugged a hand through his hair, forcing a smile. "So there it is. Feel free to run screaming."

"I'm not going anywhere," Nick murmured, sliding his hand over Eric's, entwining their fingers. The pulse in his wrist throbbed against Eric's skin like the beating of bird's wings.

Eric's own pulse skipped wildly in response. "Wh-What are you doing?"

"Something I've been wanting to do since the night I kissed you." Nick inhaled deeply before pressing on. "I did some thinking on the subway home tonight, and it's occurred to me that there's a very good reason why I've never been that interested in dating girls."

"So this came to you right out of the blue?"

"It's been staring me in the face for a while now, I just didn't want to look. All I know is, I've got feelings for you that

go way beyond friendship. And maybe I'm wrong, but I think you feel the same way."

No point fighting it now—and, Eric realized with a sense of relief so profound it nearly doubled him over, he no longer wanted to. "You're not wrong," he said simply.

Their lips met softly, tentatively at first. Eric felt like a clumsy teenager making out with a first date under the school bleachers. He wasn't used to this kind of intimacy. He'd avoided kissing with his casual encounters, preferring to use his mouth on them in other ways. Still, it was a bit dismaying to discover that his skill in one of the most satisfying preludes to lovemaking was so deficient.

To his surprise, Nick laughed as they broke apart. "Relax, okay? We're not running a race here."

"I'd still rather not be left behind." A gentle shove had Nick flat on his back with Eric climbing on top of him, kissing him more deeply now, and with greater urgency. Nick tasted like sweetened tea with the faint tangy undertone of Alfredo's house red, although Eric had a feeling it wasn't residual wine fumes that were making him dizzy.

Then he remembered that Nick had virtually no experience at this. "Wh-What do you want to do?" he stammered. "I-I mean—"

"I know what you mean," Nick replied, reaching up to caress Eric's cheek. His calloused palm felt wonderfully cool against Eric's flushed skin. "C'mon, slow down. We'll get there."

"I don't want to disappoint you."

He rolled onto his side, tugging Eric down beside him. "The only way you could disappoint me is if you got up and left. Call it a hunch, but something tells me that's not gonna happen."

"How can you be so calm about this? I'm shaking all over."

"Shh..." Nick pressed soft, gentle kisses to Eric's forehead, both cheeks, and finally, his mouth. "I promised myself that when I found the right person, I wouldn't rush it. I've already waited this long. I can hold out a few more minutes."

"I'm not sure *I* can," Eric joked weakly. At the risk of being judged too pushy, he caught hold of Nick's hand, placing it over the hard bulge at his own crotch.

Nick's eyes went wide. "Looks like you need some help with that." Easing down Eric's zipper, he reached inside, drawing out his cock, rubbing his thumb along the leaking head. "Very nice," Nick murmured, licking his lips as he stroked him. "I knew you'd have a pretty cock."

"Jesus," Eric hissed. Nick had exceptionally large, strong hands, perfect for jacking off. Problem was, if he kept doing it this well, Eric wouldn't last much longer—and despite his prior protests, he had no desire for their first time together to be a quickie.

"My turn," Eric whispered at last, giving Nick's shoulder a firm nudge. "On your back, sailor. I want to have some fun."

Nick complied with a bemused grin, raising his arms to let Eric tug off his jacket and t-shirt. Eric took his time running his fingertips along the well-muscled planes of Nick's chest and belly, nails lightly scoring his skin, leaving faint pink marks and shivers of delight in his wake. His lips following

along, he kissed a hot, moist trail from Nick's collarbone down to his navel, then stopped, swirling the tip of his tongue inside the puckered indentation.

Now Eric wasn't the only one with an impressive bulge in his jeans, though Nick's gave a whole new meaning to the phrase. He was hung like a god, long, thick and meaty just like in Eric's shower fantasies, topped with a fat mushroom head the same bright shade of pink as Nick's cheeks when he blushed.

Which was exactly what Nick's cock was doing right now, as Eric caressed and stroked him. "Bashful fellow, isn't he?" Eric teased, reveling in Nick's ecstatic moans. "Perhaps he'd like a kiss."

"G-God, Eric, I don't think I can..."

Leaning down, Eric swiped his tongue along the crown, warm, salty bitterness exploding onto his taste buds. He took the head between his lips, sucking hard for a few precious moments before sliding down, taking as much of it as he could comfortably hold. Moving slowly, he bobbed his head up and down, trying to draw it out for as long as he could. He loved how incredibly powerful he felt whenever he did this, the sweet exhilaration of controlling his partner's orgasm. It was his favorite part of sex.

He kept on until Nick was practically speaking in tongues, begging for release. Salty cream spurted onto his tongue a few moments after he sped up, accompanied by a yell from Nick loud enough to shake the walls.

Eric lifted his head in time to see his lover slouch back heavily against the couch cushions. "I guess I don't need to ask if you liked it."

"Th-That was fucking amazing."

"Worth the wait?"

"Oh, God, yeah." Nick took a few moments to catch his breath. "But what about you?"

"Why don't we keep it simple this time?" Straddling Nick's thighs, Eric grasped his own cock and started stroking, faster and faster until he shot all over Nick's chest and belly.

Black spots dancing in front of his eyes, he slumped forward into Nick's encircling arms, amazed at their warmth and solid yet gentle strength. When Nick's soft lips brushed his forehead, Eric had never felt more cherished.

"Looks like we'll have to push the beds back together" was the last thing he heard Nick mumble a second or two before they both tumbled into a spent, blissful coma.

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Chapter 6

"I have a confession to make," Eric whispered to Nick one morning about a week later. "You're the first person I've ever spent the entire night with."

"Really?" Nick studied him for a moment. "I guess I should be flattered, but when you think about it, it's actually kind of sad."

"I know, but I didn't used to think so. It was another way of keeping people at arm's length. Getting too close scared me."

"It doesn't look like it's scaring you now," Nick grinned, swooping in for a kiss.

As usual on these more recent mornings, they had to rush to get down to breakfast, and then to their respective classes on time. They saved water, if not actual minutes, by taking their showers together. Eric loved watching the hot, steamy spray pour down Nick's body like rain on marble.

He especially loved soaping up his hands, grasping Nick's cock and jerking him off slowly. This morning, however, when he reached for his lover, Nick was ready for him. Pinning Eric to the slick tiles, Nick kissed him until the blood roared between Eric's ears, then started rubbing up against him, cocks sliding deliciously on slippery skin, until they both came with a shout.

They ended up skipping breakfast altogether.

The next time they saw each other was at dinner that night in the dining hall. Both ravenous, they didn't say a word

until they'd attacked their respective dinners and left them for dead. When they looked at each other at last, they burst out laughing.

"We should've made a more concerted effort to get down here on time this morning," Eric observed. "All I've had today was an apple and a cup of coffee."

"Yeah, I finally caved and got a candy bar from a machine. I felt okay for awhile, then I ended up with a headache."

"I'm starting to look forward to spring break next month. It'll be nice having a whole week to sleep in and eat whenever we want."

Nick glanced up sharply. "It's next month already?"

"Yeah, the first week of April—the same week it's been for the past two years we've been going here."

"Huh. I would've thought you'd be jetting off to Florida or Cancun or someplace like that."

"My allowance isn't that generous. Besides, I've got better things to do than sit around getting drunk and sunburned." He took a sip of his coffee. "Why, did you have something planned?"

"I sort of forgot until you reminded me, but I promised my folks at Christmas that I'd come up to the farm and work that week. They're taking a road trip to Ohio for my grandparents' fiftieth anniversary, and they really can't afford to hire an outside guy to take over for that long. So I told them I'd do it."

"Oh." Naturally it was a disappointment, though Eric did his best not to let it show. However, judging from the concerned look Nick was shooting him, he obviously had a

lousy poker face. "Look, don't worry about it. I can amuse myself for a week. It's not that big of a deal."

"You're welcome to come up with me if you want, but there's not much to do, other than watching me bale hay and milk cows."

"How much would I have to bribe you to do your chores in the nude?"

Nick nearly choked on his soda. "When it's freezing out at five o'clock in the morning? How deep is your trust fund?"

"In that case, forget it. Getting up that early isn't my idea of a vacation. Besides," he added, leaning in closer, "I plan to see you naked every day we're there anyway."

They were so busy laughing and talking, they didn't notice Ally approaching with her own dinner tray. She had to clear her throat to get their attention.

"Nice to know you both missed me," she snarked, plopping down in a chair Nick snagged from a nearby table. "What've you two been up to? I haven't seen you in days."

"Studying and going to class. Same old, same old," Nick replied, keeping his eyes trained on his nearly-empty plate.

"I've missed you in Mitchell's class both times this week. Guess you keep coming in late."

"My alarm clock's broken."

"Uh-huh." She speared a baby carrot from her salad, chewing it carefully before continuing. "I'm assuming we're still on for Alfredo's and François Truffaut this Friday?"

"Absolutely," Eric answered.

Her gaze flicked from Eric to Nick and back again. "Cool."

They finished their meal and were about to go their separate ways, when Ally suddenly remembered she needed to borrow another one of Nick's old class notebooks—which of course meant that she had to come back to the room with them.

One look at their unmade double bed confirmed her all-too-obvious suspicions. While Nick started digging in the closet, Eric made a lame excuse and darted into the kitchen. Ally followed, like he'd known she would. He didn't mind getting into it with her, but he wasn't about to do it in front of Nick.

Fortunately, she had the presence of mind to shut the kitchen door behind her before lighting into him. "I hope you know what you're doing. He's not some trick you can discard after a couple of weeks, once you get tired of him."

"What makes you think I'll get tired of him?"

"Cut the bullshit, Eric. Everybody at this school knows your reputation. There's a men's room wall over in the science building that lists all your specialties. Every time the three of us go out together, we run into another guy you've fucked."

"If I told you that was all over, would you believe me?"

Her eyebrows arched. "What, are you trying to say he's the one? That you actually have feelings for him?"

"Yes, I do." Leaning against the counter, he folded his arms over his chest. "In fact, I care for him a great deal."

Her expression still remained skeptical. "Are you sure?"

"As sure as anyone can be about these things." He tried to smile, but feared it looked more like he had gas. "Look, Ally, I know how you feel about him. Believe me, I have no intention

of interfering in your friendship. I know how much it means to both of you. But as for the rest ... Well, Nick's made his choice."

She gave it due consideration before nodding. "Fair enough. But just so you're aware—if you break his heart, I will rip yours out of your chest with my bare hands."

At least now he knew where he stood. "Fair enough."

She studiously averted her eyes this time as she scooted past the bed, picking up the notebook from Nick before making a mercifully quick, if somewhat awkward, exit.

Nick ushered her out the door, then turned back to Eric with a puzzled expression. "What was that all that about?"

Eric smirked. "Marking territory."

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Chapter 7

Eric's breath caught as he swung his rented Camry into the driveway flanking the Thompson residence. A classic white picket fence surrounded it, with a narrow path leading up through a row of budding rose bushes to a two-story yellow frame farmhouse. It looked almost too perfect to be real.

"You didn't mention that you grew up in a fairy tale," he teased as they climbed out of the car and grabbed their bags from the trunk.

"As long as you don't mean *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, I'll take it as a compliment," Nick replied with a grin. "C'mon inside. I can't wait to show you the place."

The kitchen was every bit as impressive as the outside, with shiny hardwood floors and glassed-in cabinets that reminded Eric of photos he'd seen of Depression-era houses. The kitchen table appeared to be a real antique, all heavy oak, covered with a pretty embroidered tablecloth.

Family photos lined the hallway; judging from the clothing, hairstyles and yellowing paper, most of them went back a number of generations. One more recent photo of a dark-haired young boy in a football jersey standing in between his proud parents made Eric bite his lip and blink hard.

The living room lay right off the hall, with a comfortable-looking couch and recliner, issues of *Sporting News* and various women's magazines stacked neatly on the coffee table. A cabinet with a stereo and a twenty-inch TV stood a few feet in front of the couch. There was a fireplace too, a

stack of fresh-cut wood right beside it. The sharp pine scent stung Eric's nostrils.

"I guess it's not as fancy as what you're used to," Nick said with a shrug.

Eric cleared his throat. "It's fine."

"You don't have to say that just to be polite."

"No, I mean it. You know what's hanging in the foyer of the house I grew up in? Impressionist art. I don't think we even *own* a photo of me and my parents together." He sighed. "Where are your parents? I was looking forward to meeting them."

"They, um ... They left first thing this morning. It's a long drive to Ohio."

"Oh." He could've kicked himself the second he'd spoken the word. It wasn't like him to reveal his disappointment so openly.

"I'm sorry. If I'd known it was that important to you, we could've come up last night. I just—"

"It's okay, I get it," Eric replied softly. "It's too soon to tell them about us. And besides, you're not out to them yet, are you?"

Nick shook his head. "And after all these years, I should be."

"All these years?' I thought you only figured it out for yourself a few weeks ago."

"That was the denial talking." He leaned against the wall, chuckling ruefully. "Truth is, I had a major-league crush on the second-string wide receiver back when I was still riding the bench freshman year. I even had myself halfway

convinced that I was catching the same vibe from him. Then one day in the locker room, he caught me staring at his naked ass. He yelled at me and called me a fag in front of everyone."

"Jesus. I guess that's enough to scare anybody back in the closet for a few years."

"I wish I could be more like you, and not care what anybody thinks. But I honestly don't know how they'll take the news, and I'd rather not hurt them."

"It's okay. You'll tell them when you're ready."

They carried their bags up a short flight of stairs to Nick's room. It was roughly a third of the size of their living room back at the dorm, with a small window overlooking the main pasture. Cows milled around in the distance, chewing on spring grass poking up in between patches of melting snow. A bureau, a bedside table and a double bed with a stunning hand-carved headboard filled up the rest of the space.

Eric sat down gently on the edge of the mattress, relieved to discover that it was appropriately firm without being lumpy. The head board was, to his wide-eyed amazement, an actual work of art, depicting the farmhouse from an earlier era, before the picket fence or the roses. Eric ran his fingers over it in open admiration.

"My grandfather carved it," Nick said. "It was his wedding gift to my grandmother."

"And now we'll sleep in it together. How apropos." Catching Nick by the hand, he tried to tug his lover down beside him, but Nick shook his head.

"Let's go outside. I want to show you the barn."

"Don't you want to see if the mattress will hold both of us first?"

Nick laughed. "We've got a whole week to put it through its paces. C'mon, I promise I'll make it worth your while."

With a mock groan and a roll of his eyes, Eric followed him outside. The weather had warmed up considerably in the past few weeks; while they still had a bit of snowfall, usually at night, most days it was mild enough for a lightweight jacket.

A slight chill still clung to the air even inside the barn, but now it was crisp rather than damp and freezing, tickling Eric's skin instead of stinging it. Farm equipment, bales of hay and a few stalls took up the entire area.

"This is what you were so eager to show me?" Eric asked incredulously. "Don't tell me you've got a kink about doing it in one of those stalls, because that's where I draw the line."

"Shut up and follow me," Nick retorted, grabbing his hand and dragging him toward a nearby flight of stairs.

The barn's upper floor was like another living room, with a thick rug, scarred-up coffee table, and a couch long enough for Nick to stretch out and still leave room for Eric to sit at the other end. A small desk stood off to one side, a bookshelf with a bunch of paperbacks and a set of battered encyclopedias beside it.

Eric smiled. "One clubhouse, no waiting."

"Well, I had to have somewhere to study and hang out with my friends. There's not exactly a lot of extra space in my room." Nick ambled over to the couch and sat down, patting the cushion next to him.

The couch was nowhere near as comfortable as Nick's bed. Springs creaked and groaned every time they moved, and if Eric wasn't mistaken, there was one jabbing him in the left buttock. Shifting his weight didn't help a bit.

"Speaking of kinks," Nick murmured, leaning in for a kiss that nearly made Eric's heart skid to a halt, "I've got one."

"Yeah?" It would've been more arousing if he didn't feel like he was sitting on a nail, but this was the first time Nick had ever uttered the word 'kink' in his presence. Eric wasn't about to tell him to shut up.

"Ever since we made plans to come up here, I've been having this fantasy about you fucking me right here on this couch."

For a moment, Eric wasn't sure how to respond. Up till now, they'd been content to take it slow, engaging mostly in frottage and mutual masturbation. He gave Nick an occasional blowjob, but thus far Nick hadn't reciprocated. Eric wasn't inclined to push; as long as their activities satisfied them both, that was enough for him. They'd take it to the next level when they were ready.

And that, apparently, was what Nick was trying to tell him.

"Just to be clear," Eric said finally, "you want—"

"Your cock in my ass. Clear enough?"

"Crystal." God, his pulse was already racing, and they'd only kissed once. "I don't know if I've mentioned this before, but in the past I've usually bottomed."

"You mean, you've never fucked anybody?"

"No, no, I have. But it's been awhile." Seizing a fistful of dark curls, Eric dragged him down into a much deeper,

rougher kiss. Nick's tiny whimper made Eric's cock twitch. "Don't worry, I'm going to make you happy."

"My turn first." Lush lips descended on Eric's throat, sucking at the pulse-point right beneath his jaw line. Nick's strong, thick fingers worked at the buttons on Eric's white cotton dress shirt for about thirty seconds before ripping it open in impatience. "Sorry."

Eric laughed. "I've got a dozen more like it at home. Keep going."

Nick did as he was told, and the laughing stopped, replaced by moans, groans and the occasional gasp. By the time his lover had kissed, licked and flicked his way down to Eric's fly, then eased down his zipper, Eric was ready to expire on the spot.

When Nick's warm, delectable mouth closed over Eric's cock at last, it was too much, too late—Eric came within seconds, shooting between his lover's lips before Nick even had a chance to taste him. The fact that most of it ended up dripping down Nick's chin only added to Eric's embarrassment.

"Shit," he muttered, pulling out his handkerchief to help Nick clean up. "Sorry. I'm not usually so quick on the draw."

Nick wiped a drop from the corner of his mouth, sucking it off his fingers. "You taste sweet." Then, swooping down for another scorching kiss, he added, "Don't beat yourself up about it. If it helps, I consider it a tribute. Who knew I was so sexy?"

"Have you looked in a mirror lately?"

Nick stood up with a chuckle, yanking a short strip of condoms and a packet of lubricant from his jeans pocket. "C'mon, time to get me ready."

They undressed and rolled back onto the couch, with Eric on top of Nick this time. The couch's frayed upholstery felt scratchy on Eric's skin, but within a few minutes that was the farthest thing from his mind. He sucked Nick's cock until it stood up in his mouth, and thankfully, it didn't take long for his own cock to respond in kind.

Nick noticed immediately, spreading his legs in invitation. But Eric shook his head. "The couch isn't wide enough for me to get in at that angle. Get on your knees and drape yourself over the back."

Nick obeyed while Eric stepped away for a moment, rolling on a condom and slicking it generously. "Relax," he murmured, stroking Nick's trembling back before easing one lubed finger inside him. He was trembling himself too—but luckily, only on the inside. "How's that feel?"

"Good. I mean, weird, but ... still good."

"Okay." He slid his finger out, then back in. Nick's sharp huff of breath told him all he needed to know. Adding more lube, he pushed two fingers back in, scissoring them slowly. His lover felt hot as a coal, and incredibly tight. For the first time in his life, Eric was grateful to be only averagely endowed. "I'll try to go slow, but it's normal for this to hurt, especially the first time. If it gets too intense, let me know and I'll stop."

"Kay."

Dropping a quick kiss on Nick's shoulder, Eric grasped his cock and guided it to Nick's hole, nudging his hips forward until the head popped inside. Nick gasped again, both hands twisting in the cushions. A fine sheen of sweat covered his back, as if it was ninety degrees in here, instead of closer to sixty. For some strange—and undoubtedly perverted—reason Eric didn't want to examine at this juncture, he found the notion of Nick's toned, athletic body straining to accommodate him wildly exciting.

"Keep going," Nick breathed. "God, please don't stop."

There was no fighting it now—Eric's last shred of control went flying away like a scrap of paper in a hurricane. He thrust all the way in one long, brutal lunge and started moving, faster and faster, balls slapping against Nick's ass. Nick moaned loud enough to be heard in the next county, finally shoving his own fist in his mouth.

"You okay?" Eric asked raggedly, desperately hoping for a yes. He didn't think he could stop now even if Nick begged him to.

Nick's sole reply was to start thrusting backward, meeting Eric with equal frequency and force. A few more erratic strokes, and orgasm slammed into Eric like a crashing plane, leaving him in freefall. He opened his eyes to find himself glued to Nick's sweat-soaked back, both of them still panting.

He rolled off gently before helping Nick resettle himself. His lover looked a bit dazed, blinking hard, face bright pink.

"I didn't mean to get so carried away," Eric said with a sheepish smile. "Hope it wasn't too rough a ride."

"It was great, but I..." Nick gestured at his now-limp cock. "I lost my hard-on right before the end. I loved everything you were doing, I just couldn't ... finish."

"It happens to a lot of guys—even me, more than once. And it's got nothing to do with how good it feels. Sometimes you can't get over that last hurdle."

"Well, you've gotten me over plenty of hurdles lately, so I guess I shouldn't be too worried."

"Of course not. You were perfect." Grinning, Eric leaned in for a slow, gentle kiss. "But next time, let's do it in that big comfy bed of yours, okay?"

* * * *

The next few days passed in a heavenly, lust-soaked haze. Between sex, sleeping in, sex, stretching out on the living room couch for long naps, sex, taking breaks for meals, and more sex, Eric was starting to feel positively debauched. Nick might have been a late bloomer in the ways of lovemaking a few short weeks ago, but he was certainly catching up now. Eric hadn't been this sore since his own first affair when he was sixteen.

Nick got up before sunrise every morning to go out and take care of his chores, leaving Eric to wake up alone. This morning, he took his time carefully stretching out the knots and kinks in his muscles before heading downstairs for coffee and the local paper. He sat at the kitchen table sipping absently at his cup and staring out the window at the frost-covered driveway, when something suddenly occurred to him.

The heavy clump of boots on the kitchen porch jolted Eric from his reverie.

"Hey," Nick called with a grin, coming over to give Eric a quick kiss, then making for the coffee pot to pour himself a cup. "How long have you been up?"

"Not long. To be honest, I don't know why I don't stay up there all day, naked and spread-eagled."

"I like the sound of that." Plopping down in the chair next to Eric, Nick wagged his eyebrows at him. "So, you wanna?"

"Easy, tiger. We've still got a couple of days left to fuck our brains out. I was wondering what you wanted to do for dinner tonight."

Nick shot him a puzzled look. "What's wrong with what we've been having?"

Eric sighed. "Not that I mind simple meals, but I'm getting a bit tired of canned soup and grilled cheese sandwiches."

"There's not much else I know how to make. But if you want, I guess we could hit the diner in town."

"I was thinking of something a bit more romantic. How about a couple of rare steaks, a tossed green salad with vinaigrette, garlic mashed potatoes and a nice bottle of wine?"

"Sounds great. Who're you going to get to cook it?"

"How about me?"

Nick's mouth dropped open. "Y-You know how to *cook*?"

"Spend your childhood hanging out in the kitchen with the housekeeper, and chances are you'll pick up a few things."

"Wow. Well ... sure, if you want to do it, I'm certainly not going to object. Except we don't have any of that stuff in the fridge."

"I'll make you a grocery list."

It took Eric most of the afternoon to prepare the meal, in between emergency cooking advice calls to Estellita and shoos Nick out of the room. He'd forgotten how time-consuming boiling, peeling and mashing potatoes could be, and mixing the perfect vinaigrette was a lot trickier than Nick's mom's copy of *The Joy of Cooking* made it look. However, with sheer determination and a generous dollop of elbow grease, he prevailed. Around five o'clock, everything was ready.

Nick poked his head in one more time, so Eric let him set the table. "God, it smells great," he said, sitting down. When Eric shot him a sharp look, he added, "Oh, sorry. Did you want me to do something else?"

"As a matter of fact, I do. I want you to go upstairs and get dressed."

Nick peered down at his plaid flannel shirt, faded jeans and work boots. "I am dressed."

"Not for dinner, you're not. You can at least put on slacks and a sports coat—and a tie."

"Oh, c'mon, you're fucking kidding me!"

"I've spent the last three hours fixing this meal. If you can't spare ten minutes to make yourself presentable, I guarantee you won't be getting any more *fucking* tonight."

Nick stared at him, then sighed and trudged upstairs. Eric poured himself a glass of wine and sat down at the table,

tracing patterns on the placemat with his fork. He was about to go see what was taking so long when he heard Nick's footsteps clomping downstairs. "Do I look okay?" he asked nervously.

Eric swung around in his seat, and froze. Nick looked a lot better than okay—he looked positively *edible*. He didn't recall seeing that dark gray suit in his lover's closet, but it showed off Nick's powerful build far better than the oversized work shirt he'd been wearing. His black shoes gleamed like freshly-polished glass, and—miracles of miracles—he'd even combed his hair. He looked like a hot business exec, instead of a college kid playing dress-up for his boyfriend.

"Eric?" he prompted. "You gonna say something?"

"Um ... wow. How's that?" They both burst out laughing, while Eric got up to give Nick a more thorough once-over. His nostrils twitched at the familiar spicy scent of his own aftershave; Nick didn't usually wear it. "You really went the extra mile," he added appreciatively.

"I wanted to look nice for you."

"And you do. I'm quite impressed."

"Good. Can we eat now? I'm fucking starving."

Eric was planning to go change himself, but figured he'd made Nick wait long enough. He'd already plated both their dinners and put them in the oven; Nick's eyes widened as Eric set his in front of him, then went back to the refrigerator for the salad.

For the next few minutes, they were too busy stuffing their faces to keep up a conversation. Eric hadn't realized how hungry he was until that first bite of steak hit his tongue,

tender and juicy. The mashed potatoes had the exact right amount of garlic; the salad was so light, it was barely a whisper on the lips. Not bad, considering it was the first meal he'd prepared in almost a year.

They retired to the living room with their wine when they were finished. Eric was more than ready to collapse on the sofa with Nick's arms wrapped around him, but as it turned out, Nick had other ideas. He lit the fire already laid in the fireplace, put on a CD of cool, melodic jazz, took off his suit jacket and tie, and held out his hand to Eric. "May I have this dance?"

Eric tried to hold back his bemused smirk, but it was a losing proposition. "You can *dance*?"

"Yeah, I took a ballroom dancing class with my mom last summer. Turned out to be pretty useful for football, too." He crooked his fingers. "Come on. Your date's waiting."

Eric stepped into his lover's arms, bracing himself to get his toes mashed. To his utter shock, he discovered that Nick was quite light on his feet, especially for a man of his size; after a few minutes, Eric let forth a contented sigh and laid his head on Nick's shoulder, melting into his embrace as they swayed in a gentle slow-dance.

"Thank you for dinner," Nick whispered. "Nobody's ever done that for me before."

Eric smiled. "It was my pleasure."

They ended up naked on a pile of blankets in front of the fire. Eric marveled at the golden glow of Nick's skin in the firelight as his lover bent to take him in his warm, luscious mouth. Luckily, this time Eric managed to hold on longer than

ten seconds, winding his fingers in Nick's hair to urge him on. What his technique lacked in elegance, it more than compensated in enthusiasm; the yummy sounds he was making sent Eric right over the edge, shooting hard down Nick's throat. And this time, Nick didn't spill a drop.

They lay there spooned together for a long while, happily spent. At last Nick murmured, "It's too bad we have to leave in a couple of days. I could really get used to this."

"Me too." Eric sighed. "Thank you for inviting me. I don't think I've ever had a more enjoyable spring break."

"Sleeping, eating and fucking. That's the life." They both laughed. "Well, it's not like we can't do this back at the dorm, except for the home-cooked meal part."

"What would you say if I told you I was considering renting an off-campus apartment next fall?"

"I'd say, good for you. Will you invite me over and cook me dinner every now and then?"

"How about every night?"

Nick looked at him, then shook his head. "I can't."

"Why not? We're living together now. We might as well make it official."

"But now everybody thinks we're just roommates, except for Ally. Coming out as a couple ... well, that's different."

"We're hardly the only gay couple on campus," Eric replied a touch more sharply than he'd intended. "This is the nineties. It's not that big of a deal anymore."

"Maybe not for you. But have you thought about at all about what it would mean for me to come out to the team? Some of the guys still remember that incident back in

freshman year. I can't take my own teammates calling me a fag again."

It was on the tip of Eric's tongue to urge Nick to quit the team, until he remembered that Nick didn't have the luxury of quitting. If he did, he'd forfeit his scholarship, along with any possible shot at going to journalism school.

"Look, I'll think about it," Nick murmured. "But that's all I can promise right now."

Eric just nodded, and squeezed his eyes shut.

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Chapter 8

They got back to the city late Sunday afternoon and headed straight for the dining hall. The place was fairly crowded, but, to Eric's great relief, they didn't run into Ally. He was still basking in the idyllic hangover of his week in the country with Nick, and the last thing he needed was a metaphorical bucket of icy water dumped over his head.

Trudging back to their room, they unpacked their bags and threw their clothes in the closet before collapsing on the couch together. The five-hour train ride, combined with their generous evening meal, had conspired to make them both incredibly drowsy.

Finally Nick sat up and stretched, forehead crinkling as he glanced over at Eric's desk. "Looks like we've got some messages on the machine."

Eric sighed. "It's probably my mother. I told her I was going out of town, but I forgot to call from the farm to give her the phone number." He got to his feet with a groan. "I'd better see what she wants."

He leaned over the desk, hitting the 'play' button. "Eric, darling, I haven't heard from you in a few days. Please give me a call. Oh, it's Mom. Talk to you soon."

The machine beeped.

"It's Mom again. Hope you're having a good time, dear. Remember, I get worried when I don't hear from you. Call me, all right?"

Beeeeep.

There was a strange noise that Eric didn't recognize for a moment, but then he realized it was someone sobbing. "E-Eric, I really need to t-talk to you. S-Something's happened, and I-I..." More crying, paired with the distinctive gurgle of liquor being sloshed into a glass. "I-I'm not f-feeling well tonight. Please call. Why won't you call me?" Then came a loud thump and crash, right before the line clicked off.

The machine beeped again.

"Mr. Courtland, this is the intensive care unit at Mount Sinai Hospital. We have you listed as the emergency contact for Elizabeth Courtland. She's been admitted in critical condition. Please get in touch with us at your earliest opportunity."

The machine beeped once more, followed by dead air.

Blind panic coupled with guilt would have sent Eric's knees buckling, if not for Nick's firm grip on his shoulder, calming and steadying him. "It's okay, I'm here," Nick said quietly. "C'mon, let's get to the hospital."

They sat there in the waiting room for over an hour before a doctor finally ushered Eric into the ICU.

"When exactly was she admitted?" Eric asked, mortified that he even had to. "I didn't receive the hospital's message until a little while ago."

The doctor scanned the chart she was holding. "They brought her in this morning. Apparently one of the hotel maids found her collapsed in the bathroom."

"Will she be all right?"

"Physically, she'll recover. We've managed to stabilize her heart rate and blood pressure. She's been drifting in and out

of consciousness, but that's not unusual. Mentally and emotionally, we're not as optimistic. She's still very shaky. I see here that your mother has a long history of suicide attempts?"

Eric nodded. "There was another incident at Christmas, but ... She'd started seeing a therapist. I thought she'd be okay."

"Can you give me the name of her therapist?"

Something else he should've known, and didn't. "No, I'm afraid I ... No, sorry."

"Not a problem. I'll make a note to ask her myself the next time she's awake."

The duty nurse showed him down the corridor to his mother's room. Eric's throat clogged with anguish at the sight of her lying there, hooked up to an array of monitors and IVs. He'd witnessed this scene too many times already, and it never failed to fill him with anger and despair.

But when he came closer, he noticed bandages wrapped around both her wrists, dotted with seeping blood. Eric reached for the nearest chair, dropping into it with a shocked gasp. Her previous attempts had been obvious pleas for attention. She'd always made sure to time them so she'd be discovered before she'd absorbed too many pills. But this ... this was serious. This time, she'd really wanted to die.

He sat at her bedside for a long time before she finally stirred, opening her eyes. "E-Eric?" Her voice sounded raw and scratchy. Eric gave her some water and held her hand until she felt like continuing. "I-I tried to get in touch with you, but you weren't answering your phone."

Talk about twisting the knife. "I'm sorry. I should've given you the number where I'd be." He swallowed hard. "M-Mom, what happened? The last time we talked, you were doing so well. I thought the therapist was working out. H-How did this—"

"I had lunch with Dorothy Gannon yesterday. You would have been proud of me. Dorothy sat there downing one drink after another, and all I had was a club soda." She sniffed. "Then she let it drop that your father's ... Well, apparently he's living with another woman." She picked listlessly at her bandages, her eyes welling up. "I didn't believe it at first. I couldn't. So last night, I called his apartment, and a woman answered."

"How do you know she wasn't the housekeeper?"

"I've talked to his housekeeper before. She's sixty years old if she's a day. This woman was ... younger. Much younger."

Eric wasn't the least bit surprised. He knew his father's tastes. He liked them young, pretty and not very bright—which, sadly, had probably been a good description of his mother back in the day. Now she was middle-aged, fading and somewhat wiser, albeit at the expense of her own health and happiness.

"Mom, you've got to stop this. You've got to let him go," Eric implored. "He's not coming back, you know that. You have to forget about him and move on." Grasping her hand, he gave it a tiny squeeze. "I don't want to lose you. I love you too much. You *have* to get well. You have to do it for me. All right?"

She burst into tears at last. "I-I want to, but ... everything *hurts* so much. It's too hard to get through the day, when it all seems so empty and pointless. Your father's got his own life, you've got yours. What do I have? An empty house full of old paintings and a bunch of charities that only keep me around for a donation. If I died tomorrow, no one would notice."

"I would."

"You'd get over it, like your father has. I asked the nurse to call him, but he's refused to come see me. I can't really blame him. Apparently this time I've pushed him past his limit."

A red haze of rage descended over Eric's field of vision, his hands curling into fists. He'd often fantasized about how it would feel to give his father a swift kick in the gut, but now all he wanted was to tear the man apart—very, very slowly.

"I'll talk to him," Eric said in as calm a tone as he could muster.

"No, don't. If he doesn't want to be here—"

"Don't worry, I'll take care of it." Rising, he leaned over to give her a soft kiss on the cheek. "I want you to concentrate on getting well. Can you promise me that?"

She gave him a wan smile. "I'll do my best."

He couldn't meet Nick's gaze when he stepped back out into the waiting room. Humiliation had washed over him like a filthy wave, making his stomach roil in revulsion. He didn't want Nick seeing him weak and vulnerable like this. What he wanted was to crawl in a hole by himself and scream.

He marched from the room without a word, letting his lover trail behind him, asking unanswered questions. The stony silence continued until they got back to their room, at which point Nick had to block Eric's path to the kitchen to get his attention at last.

"Look, I know you're going through some serious shit here, but don't shut me out, okay? I want to help."

"You can't help," Eric replied curtly. "There's no way you could understand."

"How do you know, if you don't explain it to me?"

"Believe me, you don't want to know."

"Yes, I do." He stroked Eric's shoulder for a moment before steering him toward the couch. "C'mon, let's talk this out."

Eric recounted his visit with his mother, noting how pained Nick looked at the news of her latest suicide attempt, and his utter shock at Eric's father's failure to put in an appearance at the hospital. Reliving the experience didn't help Eric feel any better. In fact, it only made his anxiety and shame that much worse.

Nick stared down at the floor for a long moment after Eric finished talking. "Can I ask you something?"

He suppressed a sigh. "Go ahead."

"I don't get why your parents are still together. I mean, they don't even live under the same roof anymore. Why don't they just get a divorce? Why does your mother keep letting him put her through this hell year after year?"

"They almost divorced once, a couple of years ago. Dad had a different girlfriend back then, and he was dying to marry her. Mom said she wouldn't fight him on the settlement

as long as he agreed to buy out her third of the company for cash. It's worth about a hundred and fifty million. But Mom knew all my father's assets were tied up in stocks and other investments, and he would've had to liquidate most of them to pay her. He decided to call the whole thing off instead."

Nick's mouth dropped open. "So they've sentenced themselves to a lifetime of misery, all because of *money*?"

"That's the way it is in my family. Not all of us are lucky enough to grow up in the little house on the prairie."

Nick flinched. "That's kind of a cheap shot."

"What the hell do you want me to say, Nick? I was right—you don't understand, and you never will." He jumped up, grabbing a pair of clean sweats from the closet before striding to the bathroom.

Nick was still sitting there on the couch when he came back out. "Would you rather I slept over here tonight?"

He thought about it a moment, then nodded. "That's probably a good idea."

* * * *

It seemed as if Nick had only been asleep ten minutes when the door slamming shut jolted him awake. A quick glimpse of his alarm clock told him it was a little before seven. He lay there staring at the ceiling for a few more minutes before getting up and heading into the kitchen for some tea.

The last few days—or more accurately, the last few hours—played over in his head, puzzling the hell out of him. Just when he thought he had Eric figured out, along came

another emotional boomerang, knocking him for a loop. The caring, passionate lover Nick had spent the past few weeks with had vanished last night, retreating back inside Eric's hard, protective shell.

Eric's harsh words still stung, but what hurt Nick more was the awful feeling of helplessness now sweeping over him. Nothing he'd said to Eric last night had comforted him at all. Obviously he didn't understand Eric's family's screwed-up dynamics, but he still wanted to be there for him. Eric's problem was that he saw accepting help as a sign of weakness.

Now that Nick had seen firsthand what Eric's horrible home life had done to him, it was no wonder his lover had spent the last few years pushing everyone away. When the people you loved most kept letting you down, it became too hard to trust anyone. Better to hurt them before they hurt you, or never let them get close enough to hurt you at all.

He muddled through the rest of the day in a funk, barely paying attention to any of his classes. He came back to the room around dinnertime, disappointed to find Eric still gone. He considered waiting, but the feral growl of his empty stomach got the better of him, so he traipsed on down to the dining hall.

He almost dropped his tray when he spied Eric sitting alone at their usual corner table. "Hey," he said with a forced smile, sitting down across from him. "You were up early this morning."

"I had some errands to run before my eleven o'clock class," Eric replied wearily, flipping idly through his economics

book, then closing it with a sigh. "And I wanted to stop by and see my mother too."

"How's she doing?"

"Better, thankfully. The nurse told me they were moving her to a regular private room this afternoon. I'm heading back there again once I finish my dinner."

"Want some company?"

Eric smiled ruefully, shaking his head. "You sure you want to, after last night?"

"Of course I want to." Nick started to reach over to grasp Eric's hand, until he remembered where they were. Their eyes met for a moment before Eric looked away at last. "Is it all right if I come in and say hi to your mom?"

"If she's not too tired. There're a couple of things I need to talk to her about first."

They hailed a cab to the hospital and found Eric's mother's new room on the eighth floor. Eric went in to see her while Nick cooled his heels in the nearby waiting area, thumbing through a tattered, six-month-old issue of *People*. He sat there by himself until an imposing gray-haired man in his late fifties strode by, stopping at the nurses' station.

Evidently the nurse wasn't saying what the man wanted to hear, because he was becoming a bit steamed, raising his voice, his face almost purple with anger. When the nurse threatened to call security, Nick got up to see if he could help.

Then the door to Eric's mother's room opened, and out came Eric. "Lower your voice, Dad," he said in an amazingly quiet yet firm tone. "There are people trying to rest here."

Eric's father swung around, skewering him with an icy-blue glare. Now that Nick knew who he was, the resemblance popped right out at him; Eric had the same prominent cheekbones and Roman nose, but luckily, not the cruel set of his mouth.

"What is this?" the older man bellowed. "This incompetent woman's just told me I've been barred from my own wife's room!"

"She doesn't want to see you," Eric replied. "And from what she told me yesterday, I thought you didn't want to see her. So why are you here?"

"I have important company business to discuss with her. It can't wait."

"Oh, you remembered her stock proxy?" Reaching inside his jacket, Eric pulled out an envelope. "She's signed it over to me, along with her power of attorney."

His father gaped at him in impotent rage, hands opening and closing as if he were actually considering decking his own son in the middle of a busy hospital hallway. "I can't believe you'd stab me in the back like this."

"And I can't believe you weren't expecting it. It's been a long time coming, Dad. I've been looking forward to this day ever since you moved out of the house." He flashed his father a smile so completely empty of affection or pity, it sent a bone-freezing shiver throughout Nick's body. "Stay away from her. You've poisoned her life long enough. She's done with you now. We both are."

"You haven't heard the last of this, either of you. I have my rights. That house she's living in is still in my name."

"Tell it to her attorney."

They stood there nose to nose for what seemed like forever, until Eric's father unclenched his fists at last and backed away. Straightening his tie, he turned and marched back down the hallway to the elevator, muttering angrily to himself.

Eric's eyes locked on Nick's as he beckoned him over. "Come on in. She'd love to talk to you for a few minutes."

Eric's mother was a bit upset at the conversation she'd obviously overheard, but a few calming words from Eric appeared enough to reassure her. They stayed for about half an hour, chatting with her about school and other safely inane topics. She seemed oddly cheerful for someone who'd been at death's door not too long ago, but Nick chalked that up to Eric's presence. She beamed at her son adoringly, as if he were the sun, the moon and the stars.

Nick understood exactly how she felt.

Piling gratefully into a cab, they headed back to Watt. It wasn't until they pulled up in front of the dorm that Nick realized he hadn't listened to a word Eric had said during the ride home.

"Sorry about that," he murmured sheepishly, once they were back in their room. "I didn't mean to ignore you."

"I'm the one who should be apologizing." Eric dropped onto the edge of the bed with a sigh. "I'm sorry you had to witness that showdown with my dad. I wasn't expecting him to turn up."

Nick pondered the question now hovering at the front of his mind. It would probably make Eric mad at him again, but

after tonight's touching little scene, he had to know. "Do you usually talk to him like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like he's a stranger. Like he's someone you hate."

"I do hate him," Eric stated flatly. "He's done nothing to earn my love. Being a glorified sperm donor doesn't qualify."

"You see, that's what I don't get." Perching on the arm of the couch, Nick rubbed his suddenly sweaty palms on his jeans. "I can't understand how somebody could hate his own father."

"You'd understand if you'd spent twenty years living with him. All I've ever heard from him my entire life is what a disappointment I am. I've given up trying to prove him wrong."

"Look, I know it must've been hard to tell him you're gay, but—"

"It has nothing to do with being gay." Eric fixed Nick with an icy stare that reminded him of the same look Eric had given his father a little while ago. "Or is that the only thing you think I've done that he could possibly disapprove of?"

"No, of course not, but—"

"It took me a while to figure it out, but now I know what the main difference is between you and me. I'm not ashamed of who I am, but you are."

Nick's entire body suddenly turned to water. "Th-That's not true."

"Of course it is. You don't want to tell your parents about us. You don't want to tell *anybody* about us. You won't even hold my hand when we're out in public together."

"You know why I can't, Eric. We talked about it. I thought you were okay with it. I can't let the team—"

"So I'm supposed to fade appropriately into the background and not compromise your macho heteronormative street cred?" Eric snorted. "Think again. I've been out of the closet for two years. I'm not about to go back in again, even for you."

Jesus, now he was trembling all over. He'd folded his arms over his chest, and he still couldn't stop. "What're you trying to say?"

"It's been fun, but we both know it'll never work. We might as well cut our losses now, before it gets too messy."

Nick's heart plummeted, but from the impassive expression on Eric's face, his lover didn't appear affected at all. How could he be so cold? "You make it sound like a business deal."

"No point getting upset over something we can't change. Besides, I've already endured more than enough screaming matches in my life."

"Fine." Climbing shakily to his feet, Nick stumbled to the closet, pulled out his bag, and started shoving clothes into it. "Give me an hour, and I'll be out of here."

"You don't have to do that," Eric said tightly.

"*What?* You just said—"

"What I meant was, you don't have to do it tonight. I'm not about to throw you out on the street."

Oh, that was rich. For a few precarious seconds, Nick had to battle the temptation to slug him. "I can take care of

myself," he snapped. "Now get out of my fucking way and let me pack my bags in peace."

He caught the downtown subway, sitting there clutching his luggage and staring blankly at the scuffed, filthy floor. Once he reached his stop, it took him another half hour to find the address Ally had scrawled on an Alfredo's cocktail napkin weeks ago.

The stunned expression on her face when she opened the door was priceless.

"Hey." He tried to smile, but his face felt like a block of cracked ice. "Still got room on your floor for me?"

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Chapter 9

"I'll wring his fucking neck," Ally declared, plonking down a steaming mug of coffee in front of Nick before parking herself on the kitchen chair opposite him. "No, wait—I'll rip his heart out. That's what I told him I'd do if he ever hurt you. I'll rip out his heart and feed it to him, *then* I'll wring his neck."

"Take it easy, Al. It's not all his fault." He rubbed the space between his eyes with his thumb, trying to stave off one mother of an incoming headache. Now that he'd had the chance to decompress, his anger and devastation had faded, replaced by a bone-deep weariness. "This situation with his mom's really done a number on him. He's so stressed, I barely even recognize him anymore. Then there's the part about me turning down his offer to move in with him next fall."

Her eyes went wide. "He asked you to move in with him?"

"Yeah."

"I didn't think you two had been together that long."

"We haven't. It threw me for a loop too."

"So ... it's not just a sex thing?"

"We spent spring break alone together at my parents' house up in Seneca Falls. It was the best week of my life," he admitted softly. "I really did fall for him. I thought he felt the same way about me."

"God, I'm sorry. Now I feel like such a fucking idiot."

"What for? Or is this a multiple-choice test?"

"Har har," she retorted, sticking her tongue out at him. "Remember the last time I came to your room, to get those class notes? Eric and I had a little talk. He probably told you all about it. I assumed he was just fucking around with you, having a little fun, the way he always has. He told me he had feelings for you, but I still didn't believe him. Evidently I should have."

"Well, it's all over now."

"You don't think the two of you can patch it up, once this crisis with his mom blows over?"

"I doubt it. There're a couple of pretty big issues we can't get past."

"Only a couple?"

Now it was his turn to stick out his tongue, only it turned into a huge yawn. "Sorry," he added with a smile, "you're really not that boring."

"Looks like your cheesy sense of humor's survived intact," she retorted, getting up to put their mugs in the sink. "C'mon, sleepyhead, let's get you bedded down for the night."

Naturally, once he'd downed a couple aspirin, thrown on his t-shirt and pajama pants and crawled inside his sleeping bag, he lay there wide awake, an awful depression suddenly sweeping over him. He sat up in surprise when Ally emerged from the other room a few minutes later with a blanket and pillow and started making up a bed for herself on the couch.

"You don't have to sleep out here tonight on my account," he said. "I haven't been scared of the dark since I was ten."

"This is where I sleep every night," she replied. "There's only the one bedroom, and since this is Holly's sister's place, Holly gets dibs. It's not that bad. At least the TV's out here."

They flicked out the lights, but after an hour of them both tossing and turning, they ended up bundled together on the couch watching Leno and Conan O'Brien. Holly poked her head in once on her way to the bathroom, blinked blearily, then disappeared.

When the last show ended, Ally flipped off the remote with a contented sigh. "Man, it's been a long time since we've stayed up late watching talk shows. It's one of the things I miss about not being suite-mates at Ruggles anymore."

"Yeah, me too," he replied, suddenly realizing it was true. Except for Ally, he'd completely lost track of all the people he used to hang out with. Eric had taken over his life from the day he moved in. "I'll tell you what else I miss—short-sheeting the towels from the communal bathroom whenever that dick Todd Hobart took a shower."

She burst out in giggles. "Oh, my God, I remember the first time you did that! He screamed his fucking head off, then he ran drip-drip-dripping down the hall with his hands clamped over his teeny-tiny balls, because you'd swiped his clothes too!" Wiping at her eyes, she added, "How many times did you do that to him? Did he ever figure out it was you?"

"Nah, he's just as stupid as he is mean. Besides, I'm far from the only guy he's called a fag. He's probably got enemies all over campus."

"He *what*?" She sat up straight. "You never told me that."

"Didn't you ever wonder why I hated the guy so much?"

She shrugged. "I guess I just assumed it was because he was an asshole. But since we're on the subject, there's a juicy bit of gossip about him you might be interested to know."

Leaning in closer, she whispered, "There's a men's room over in the science building that's one of the most notorious gay cruising spots on campus. Evidently Hobart's quite the habitu  . In fact, there's a list of his greatest hits prominently scrawled above the second urinal from the end."

He stared at her. "You're kidding me."

"Scout's honor, I swear. I mean, how hilarious is that? The most dim-witted, uber-macho, homophobic fucktard on campus turns out to be a big, fat closet case. Projecting much, Todd?"

They burst out laughing again. "I wish I'd known freshman year," Nick added, once he could finally squeeze out the words. "I could've made his life a lot more interesting."

"What's stopping you from doing it now?"

"No, thanks. I'm fucking tired of drama. All I want to do is keep my head down and get through the next couple of months."

"That sounds nice and boring." She laid her head on his shoulder, rubbing her hand gently over his chest. "I've always sort of wondered why we never ... got together."

Nick chuckled. "You know, Eric told me once that you had a crush on me, but I didn't believe him."

"Why not?"

"I've always thought of you as a friend first."

"There are friends, and there are friends." Her hand moved lower, and Nick had to admit, what she was doing felt good. His cock was starting to think so too. "You know how long I've been broken up with Jeff? Six months. I haven't gotten laid since."

"The last time I got laid was two days ago."

"Lucky you." She grinned. "Okay, Nick, cards on the table. I've wanted you for a long time. Since the more subtle approach hasn't worked, I guess it's time for the proverbial whap on the skull with a two by four." Grabbing a rough handful of t-shirt, she dragged him down for a long, deep and amazingly hot kiss.

They were both breathing hard when they broke apart, faces flushed with rising excitement. But it was only when Ally's hand floated down to cup his crotch that Nick realized he had a huge hard-on. "W-We shouldn't do this."

"Why not? You're broken up, I'm broken up. We're both free as birds." Taking his hand, she slid it under her nightgown and between her thighs. He groaned when he felt how wet she already was. "See how much I want you?"

This time he kissed her, darting his tongue inside to savor her light, sweet flavor. Instantly, his last shred of resistance went sailing out the window. Maybe they'd both end up regretting it tomorrow, but for now this was all that was keeping the cold, empty feeling of despair inside him at bay.

She moved to straddle his lap, but his hand on her shoulder stopped her. "I-I, um ... think we need something," he mumbled, his face flushing even redder.

"Shit!" she breathed. "I don't think I have any condoms."

"I do. Look in the front zipper on my messenger bag."

She skipped across the room in four swift steps, returning with her shiny prize. "This'll probably be more comfortable if we're lying down." She pointed at his sleeping bag on the floor. "C'mon, on your back. I want to be on top."

His hands shook so badly he could barely get his flannel pants unlaced. With a bemused grin, Ally took over, hooking her thumbs in both the pajamas and his boxers, skinning them down over his hips. And then she stared, eyes wide, mouth open.

"Wow," she marveled. "I really hit the jackpot tonight."

He'd thought he couldn't possibly blush any hotter. He was wrong. "Ally, c'mon..."

"Oh, how adorable—you're embarrassed!" Giggling, she angled up on her toes, giving him a kiss on the cheek. Then, seeing how genuinely uneasy she'd made him, she added, "God, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—"

"You can apologize later." Grasping her hand, he tugged her down to the sleeping bag. It took them a few moments to get in the right position with her straddling his thighs, gazing down at him with an expression of unbridled, exuberant lust. Biting open the condom packet, she quickly rolled it on his cock before lifting herself up to guide him inside her.

She slid down slowly, letting out a deep moan, propping herself up with both hands pressed against his chest. Nick gasped, his breath coming in short, rapid puffs as she enveloped him. He'd never felt anything so perfectly hot, tight and slippery before. It made him regret never asking Eric if he could fuck him.

"Y-You really are a b-big boy," Ally murmured, starting to move faster now, impatiently yanking her nightgown over her head and tossing it aside. Her breasts bounced with her every thrust, nipples drawn up into hard little knots, dappled with sweat.

He could see a soft pink flush spreading across her chest, and when she slipped two fingers in her mouth to wet them, then slid them down between her thighs to diddle her clit, it didn't take long before she started moaning and yelping loud enough to wake the neighbors.

She floated down from her ecstatic high at last, sporting a soft, dreamy smile. "Round one, check. Now, time for round two."

"No fair. C'mon, I want to get on top now."

"What, because I went off without you? I usually come more than once. Lots of women do."

"Well, this man'll count himself lucky if he can get one in edgewise with you." Both laughing, they shifted over until Ally lay on her back, legs wrapped around Nick's hips. This time when he sank inside her, it took his last frayed scrap of sheer will to keep from shooting on the spot.

But once he saw the fresh desire shining in her eyes, that was it—he couldn't help himself. Sliding his hands under her ass, he held her in place while he pounded her, thighs slapping together, animal sounds ripped raw from both their throats.

"Now, Nick, *please*," she pleaded raggedly, legs tightening around him, drawing him in deeper. "With me, this time..."

Another few fast, brutal strokes and he was coming so hard, the room went dark for a moment or two. At least he had the presence of mind to roll off to one side to keep from crushing Ally, who lay there next to him looking like she'd been hit by the world's friendliest train.

"Not bad at all," she murmured, "especially for your maiden voyage with the fairer sex."

"H-How did you know—"

"Oh, c'mon, it wasn't that hard to figure out. We've known each other for two years now, and you never made a move on me or any other girl that I know of. Most guys would've been right in there pitching, whether I had a boyfriend or not."

"Aren't you forgetting something that's painfully obvious, especially after the last few weeks?"

She propped herself up on one elbow, flashing him a pointed look. "I consider it exceedingly bad form to play the gay card with a woman you've just made see God twice in a row."

"Only twice? I'd better work on my technique."

"Your technique's fine. As for your orientation ... Well, I'd say you're probably leaning a bit more toward the middle of the Kinsey scale than you were yesterday."

"Ally, I..." There it was, that emptiness and despair again, coming back to embrace him. All of a sudden, he felt incredibly guilty. "I can't help feeling like I've used you."

"Really? And who came on to whom here? As I recall, it was me."

"And I should've said no."

"Oh, *please*. I call a big bucket of bullshit on that. Look, we're both adults here. We knew what we were doing—and I, for one, don't regret it for a second. There's nothing wrong with us being there for each other sexually as well as emotionally."

"Wow," he murmured, "I guess I'm not the only one who paid attention in freshman psych."

With a grin, she yanked the blanket off the couch to cover them both. "Go to sleep, you big dope."

And, with a gigantic sense of relief coupled with complete exhaustion, he did.

* * * *

Eric regretted their fight the second after Nick left. He spent the entire night alternating between punching his pillow and pacing the floor. When the sun started poking through the curtains, he gave up and decided to go out for a walk. At least outside, he could get fresh air and a healthy dose of noise. Inside, it was too damn quiet.

The Greek deli across the street had just opened, so he dashed inside for some coffee. The proprietor smiled at Eric and called him by name, which surprised him. He hadn't realized till now that he'd been coming in often enough to be considered a regular.

He paid for his coffee and headed on down the street, his free hand shoved in his pocket against the morning chill. There was a garbage truck picking up cans the next block over, buses and taxicabs sailing up and down the avenues even at this early hour. Strange, how even though he'd lived

here in the city off and on his entire life, he'd never paid much attention to these things before. He'd always been so aloof, closed off—an island unto himself, and content to stay that way, until Nick had come along and helped to ease him out of his shell. The man Eric had been back in January seemed completely alien to him now.

Their argument churned in his mind, the memory alone making him cringe. The old Eric had come back in full force last night, cold and unfeeling, ready to inflict hurt in order to deflect it from himself. But the pain of watching Nick pack his bags and leave had finally burrowed beneath his armor—unfortunately, not soon enough to prevent him from making the biggest mistake of his life.

Part of him wanted nothing more than to find Nick and beg his forgiveness, for all the good it would do. After the brutal truths he'd delivered last night, not to mention the awful, icy tone he'd used, Nick would probably tell him to go to hell before walking away. Eric knew he deserved as much. Part of him considered seeking Nick out anyway, simply to put this one last agony behind him. It would be a knife through his heart, but at least that way he could get it over and done with quickly.

Instead, he mused with a sigh, here he lingered, trapped in a perfect purgatory of his own device. Dante would no doubt be proud.

In between classes, studying and going to visit his mother, he managed to keep insanely busy for the better part of the next week. On Wednesday evening, ten days after she'd been

admitted, he arrived to find her sitting up in bed looking amazingly well and sporting a huge smile.

"Good news," she announced. "My doctor's finally agreed to discharge me tomorrow."

"That's wonderful," Eric replied, pulling up a chair next to her bed. They'd kept her much longer than usual already, with the past week spent on suicide watch while she underwent various tests, drug and alcohol detox and intensive psychotherapy with a new psychiatrist the hospital had recommended. While he supposed it was a good sign that she'd made such rapid progress, he still couldn't entirely dismiss his concern. "It'll be in the morning, right? I'll have to skip my first class, but—"

"I'm touched that you want to be here, darling, but there's really no need. I've sweet-talked Estellita into coming down for a while to help me settle back in at the hotel. Please don't miss any more school on my account."

"That's all fine, but I still want to talk to your doctor one last time before you leave. There's your future therapy to discuss, medication, all kinds of—"

"Is that what you're worried about? That they've given me more pills?"

It was on the tip of his tongue to deny it, but he managed to stifle the urge. He'd been treating her like fine porcelain ever since she'd been admitted to the hospital, but now there was no point in coddling or trying to protect her any longer. If she really did want to get well, she'd have to face some hard facts.

"Yes, Mom, I am worried," he said firmly. "You would be too, in my position. I don't want to see you back here again in another few months. To be honest, I'm not sure I could take this happening again."

"The only new medication they've prescribed is for heart murmur. They've weaned me off everything else—no tranquilizers or painkillers. I've already scheduled appointments with my new therapist starting Monday. So relax, dear. This time it's going to take, because this time I actually *want* to be all right."

Something in what she'd told him rang a warning bell. "Heart murmur? You've never had that before."

"It's nothing. According to the cardiologist, it's not that uncommon. My father had the same thing, and he lived with it for over twenty years. I don't even remember it bothering him that much."

"Until he died of a heart attack."

She skewered him with an exasperated look. "Be that as it may, I should probably tell you that I've decided not to go back up to the house this summer. I'd rather not interrupt my therapy when I've just gotten started. I've also made an offer to buy an apartment. Hotel living's grown rather wearisome, and besides, you'll need a room of your own once school lets out."

A sharp pang of disappointment sailed through him, but as usual, he choked it down. Only a couple weeks ago, he'd looked forward to spending the summer in Geneva, with Nick only a few miles away. But of course, if he went up there now it would be sheer torture. He wasn't sure whether or not to be

grateful that the decision had already been taken out of his hands.

Heart still scraping the pavement, he hailed a taxi back to campus and trudged wearily to the dining hall. He was about to pick up a tray when he saw Nick and Ally standing toward the front of the line. Freezing momentarily, he realized they hadn't seen him yet. He turned on his heel and headed back outside.

There were some outdoor tables arranged within easy view of the floor-to-ceiling windows surrounding the entire dining hall. Eric sat down, yanking up the hood of his jacket although it was a sunny day out. Peering inside, he trained his gaze on their usual corner table.

Sure enough, there were Nick and Ally, eating and chatting away. They looked like they hadn't had much sleep the night before, but aside from that, everything seemed fine. Normal. Like nothing at all unusual had happened over the past few days.

His breath stopped in his lungs when Nick burst out laughing at something Ally had said, then reached over to pluck an invisible speck off her cheek. The way their eyes met spoke volumes.

He knew he should have gotten up and left before they did, but he remained rooted where he was until he saw them exit the hall hand in hand, strolling away toward the library. When Ally stood up on tip-toes to give Nick a kiss on the mouth that went on a few seconds too long to be considered platonic, Eric fled at last, racing back to his room on legs so wobbly, he nearly fell flat on his ass climbing the stairs.

He made himself some tomato soup and a cup of tea, then sat down at the table and tried to relax, but it was impossible. The silence drove him crazy. He turned on his alarm clock radio, but even after twisting the dial up and down in both directions, all he found was the news, talk shows and droning, banal pop music.

Studying didn't go much better. Words shimmied and swam on the page, and he ended up having to reread long passages because he couldn't recall key points from one paragraph to the next. At last he gave up, slamming the book shut with a grunt of disgust.

Flopping down on the bed, he let his eyes drift shut, one hand moving lazily toward his crotch. It didn't take long before he had a decent half hard-on, but for some reason the thought of solitary self-abuse struck him as especially pathetic.

Suddenly he recalled a club he, Nick and Ally had strolled past on their sporadic explorations down in Chelsea. He'd spied long lines snaking around the block; obviously the place was hugely popular. He'd never explored the gay club scene before—nor the straight club scene, for that matter—but what the hell. It still had to be better than laying here with his half-imp cock in his hand, brooding over the former so-called love of his life, who'd evidently taken a grand total of ten days to mourn the demise of their relationship before moving on.

He didn't remember the name of the place, but luckily, the cab driver knew where it was, and half an hour later, Eric found himself striding up Eighth Avenue toward Midnight Sun. Standing in line got old quickly, so, following popular advice

as well as his own instincts, he headed straight for the main entrance. The bouncer pocketed his discreetly proffered bribe, giving his fake ID a cursory glance before waving him inside.

The place was fairly crowded for a weeknight, with bodies pressed in like sardines on the dance floor and stacked three-deep around the bar. Music pulsed, pounded and swirled through the sound system, loud enough to make Eric's hair hurt. The lights were dialed down low, with the exception of over-bright, multi-colored strobes that left him muttering a grateful prayer that he didn't suffer from epilepsy. It was all very clever, though somewhat pointless, window-dressing. He hadn't come here for the atmosphere.

He felt a momentary twinge of anxiety as he fought his way through the crush of bodies around the bar, but fortunately, the bartenders here were lightning-fast, not to mention exceptionally hot.

Eric slipped a generous tip to the tall, dark-haired guy in skin-tight jeans who'd poured his double scotch, and to his surprise, received a genuine smile of thanks in return. When he circulated back to Eric's end of the bar a few minutes later, he leaned across and asked, "Not to sound terribly cliché, but have we met someplace before?"

Eric chuckled. He felt a lot less jittery now that he'd downed half his drink. "If that's your way of asking if this is my first time here, the answer's yes."

"Ah, a virgin. I like that in a guy." The bartender licked his lips, and the crotch of Eric's pants grew suddenly tighter. "If you're interested, I get off work in about half an hour."

At first, Eric thought the guy was inviting him for a drink or a dance, but the lustful gleam in his eyes promptly disabused Eric of that notion. "Are you the official welcome wagon, or did I just win the trifecta right out of the gate?"

"Working up front here, you get first crack at all the hot new guys. It's one of my favorite fringe benefits of the job." He grinned. "Along with tips and free booze, of course. Anyway, how about it?"

So it was more that he was fresh meat, rather than anything special. Oh, well. As long as it got his itch scratched, Eric didn't give a fuck. "If I'm still sitting here when you get off, consider it a date."

"I'm counting on it." With a wink, the bartender wandered off to make more drinks.

Eric was indeed still sitting there a half hour later. The place had gotten a lot noisier and much more crowded since he'd arrived, the dance floor so dangerously packed that if somebody fainted, they'd probably be held upright by the crush of bodies. Eric inhaled deeply, trying to tamp down his rising nervousness before knocking back the last mouthful of his second scotch.

"Hey," the bartender appeared, this time on the customer's side of the bar, minus his apron and bar towel. He'd changed out of the club t-shirt he'd been wearing into a tight blue tank top that looked painted on, his nipples poking up through the fabric like steel rivets. His hands skimmed Eric's hips, drawing him in closer, rubbing their crotches together. It was apparently the same routine here as in any

men's room pickup—see what you want, and reach for it.
"Wanna take a walk to the back?"

Silly question. What the hell else was he here for? "Sure."

The music was much louder at the rear of the club; it practically made Eric's fillings rattle. By the time they'd made it to the dank, urine-reeking corridor leading to the back room, another stress headache was starting its slow, dull throb over his right eye.

The back room itself wasn't much different from any public toilet he'd been in, except here nobody bothered ducking into a stall for their fucks and blowjobs. Writhing, naked flesh shone a sickly blue under harsh fluorescents, the air punctuated with guttural moans and yelps and the unforgettable stale sweat-sock stink of poppers. It was like walking in during the middle of a sleazy pornographic stage play.

There was apparently no etiquette here, other than finding an empty patch of wall and staking it out. The bartender cocked his head toward a likely spot, and Eric followed.

"What d'you like?" he asked, leaning in for a kiss. Eric turned his head in time to avoid it, thankful that the guy hadn't insisted on exchanging names. "Guess that answers that question."

"No kissing. Fucking, sucking and rimming, that's another story."

"Top or bottom?"

Eric hesitated a moment, eyes squeezed shut, mind spinning back to where he'd been two weeks ago, and with whom. "Bottom."

"Cool." Rummaging in his pocket, the bartender pulled out a condom and lube. "Since it looks like you're not all that hot on the preliminaries, why don't we get right to it?"

It was every bit as romantic as his last time in a public toilet too. At least this guy didn't have a knife stuck in his ribs. Eric turned and dropped his pants before bracing himself against the wall with both hands, tuning out everything except the roar of blood in his ears and the cock entering his ass.

How perfectly fucking ironic that, a few short months ago, he would never have dreamed of visiting a place like this. One more thing he had Nick to thank for.

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Chapter 10

The last few weeks of the semester flew by in a flash. Nick spent it camped out in a sleeping bag on Ally and Holly's living room floor, with Ally usually curled beside him. Their impromptu one-night fling had soon blossomed into a sweet, low-key affair. Neither of them had promised the other anything, but that didn't make Nick's packing up to head home for the summer any less awkward.

"Looks like that's it," he said, zipping up his last suitcase with a sigh. "One junior year, shot to hell."

Ally giggled, coming up to wrap her arms around his waist. "Shall we celebrate one last time before you go?" Grinning, she cast a pointed glance at the couch.

He pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. "I-I don't think that's such a good idea."

"It's okay," she murmured. "We both knew what this was when we started. But just so you know, I wouldn't take back a minute of it."

"I'm glad," he replied, genuinely relieved. "I was afraid that you'd ... Well, I wasn't sure how you'd feel if I brought it up first."

"Look, I know we're not going to pick up where we left off when we come back next fall. As much as I'd love for this to be a long-term thing, I can see the expiration date on the package. You needed somebody these past few weeks, and so did I. Besides, you're still hung up on Eric. No way can I compete with that."

He was about to open his mouth to deny it, but figured there was no point. "Is it that obvious?"

"You should have it tattooed on your forehead." She looked at him for a long moment. "But failing that, what do you plan to do about it?"

"What can I do? I'm sure he must know I'm staying here, but he hasn't called. I saw him walking across the courtyard to the dining hall once, but when he saw me, he turned and walked away in the other direction. He obviously doesn't want anything to do with me."

"I wouldn't be so sure of that. You know Eric. Give him a chance to retreat from his feelings, and he'll grab it like it's a brass ring. Why do you think he's spent the last three years fucking guys in restrooms? It's easier for him that way. He gets away clean."

"Metaphorically speaking, of course."

She smiled a tiny little half-smile. "You got to him, and it scared the shit out of him. If you're still wondering if he ever really loved you, there's your answer."

There it was, that awful, empty despair he'd barely managed to stave off even with Ally's help, coming back to claim him again. "Ally, what am I going to do?" he whispered thickly. "I still love him, I just ... I don't think I can—"

"Go see him before you leave. What have you got to lose?"

"You mean, aside from my dignity, and every last ounce of self-respect?"

"Does any of that really matter?"

He let out a short, shuddery breath. "I-I can't think of a thing to say to him that he'd want to hear."

She held him tight until he stopped trembling, then led him into the kitchen for a quick breakfast before sending him on his way. He was waiting on the subway platform for the train to Penn Station when he suddenly remembered the box of old textbooks and class notes he'd left behind in Eric's closet. Up till now, he'd considered them abandoned, even though a couple of them had cost close to a hundred dollars apiece when he'd bought them new. His scholarship covered all his class materials, but he usually sold back most of his used textbooks to the campus bookstore once the semester was over. It was all the pocket money he had during the school year, other than what he earned working on the farm every summer and on holiday breaks. He honestly couldn't afford to let it go.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he tossed his bags in a locker, caught the next subway uptown and headed back to Watt. His heart leapt momentarily into his throat when he spied the door to 5D yawning open. God, had Eric left already?

The room was most definitely still occupied, but obviously not for much longer. Boxes were stacked everywhere, clothing and books spilling messily onto the floor, throw rugs all rolled up. Most of the furniture, except for the two twin beds, was covered in plastic and tagged for professional movers.

Eric chose that moment to emerge from the kitchen, toting a box of tea mugs and various other utensils. He took three steps into the living room and stopped dead. "You're the last person I expected to see."

"Sorry. I know I probably should've called first," Nick said, nervousness making him rush his delivery. "I, um ... wondered if you still had that box of old books I left."

"Over there." Eric nodded to a stack of already packed and sealed boxes in the corner. "They should all be clearly marked."

Nick's box was buried in the middle of the stack. He heaved it under his arm, amazed at how heavy it was. He'd have to rent a luggage cart at Penn, otherwise he'd kill himself getting all his stuff on the train home. "How've you been?" he asked, before he lost his nerve.

Eric stared at him as if he'd caught Nick picking his nose. "Fine," he answered tersely. "Why do you want to know?"

"Just curious. We haven't seen each other in awhile."

"Really? I've seen you several times. Most of those times, you were with Ally. How is Ally, by the way?"

There was a hard, prickly edge in Eric's tone that made the hair on the back of Nick's neck stand up. "She's great. In fact, we were talking about you this morning."

"Enjoying a good joke at my expense, no doubt," he snapped. "You can drop the wide-eyed innocent act, it's wearing a bit thin. For the record, I saw you kissing her a few days after we broke up. Didn't take you long, did it?"

Nick swallowed hard. "It wasn't what it looked like."

"From where I was standing, it looked like the two of you had gotten quite cozy. Or did I completely misinterpret you sticking your tongue in her mouth?"

"Okay, we were sleeping together," he admitted. "But it's over now. We never intended for it to go long-term."

"Seems to be par for the course for you, doesn't it?" Eric set down the box he was still holding on top of his desk. "Look on the bright side. Now you can tell yourself you were straight all along, and chalk up our little interlude as an aberration."

He shouldn't have come, Nick realized now. He should have listened to his instincts and stayed away. He should have known they'd end up fighting like this. Wielding words like razor blades was one of Eric's special gifts. Nick's skin smarted all over, already feeling raw and flayed.

"It wasn't an aberration," he denied hotly. "You know it wasn't."

"I don't know anything, except what a fucking fool I was. I can't believe I actually fell for you playing the virgin card."

He should've been ready for such a low blow, but he wasn't. It struck him like a fist to the solar plexus, nearly doubling him over. "I-It's the truth. You were my first. I can't help it if you don't want to believe me."

"Oh, please. A straight guy taking an experimental walk on the queer side's the oldest cliché in the book. I should've seen what an ass I was making of myself. That's a mistake I won't repeat."

No point trying to argue against that. Eric was obviously determined to believe the absolute worst of him. Blinking hard, he turned and fled, practically sprinting the long city blocks back to the subway, where he retrieved the rest of his bags and caught the next train downtown to Penn. Somewhere in the middle of it all, he managed to stop shaking.

He was halfway there when he remembered about selling his old books. Well, he wasn't hauling his ass all the way back to campus now. He'd have to bring them with him to sell next fall.

The upstate train was running late when he arrived at Penn. Nick took the welcome chance to sit on the platform cooling down from his marathon trudge from the subway station with three bulky pieces of luggage in tow. More out of boredom than anything else, he took out his penknife and sliced open the top of the box.

All his expensive history texts were there, as well as his old class notebooks. And, right there at the bottom, lay Eric's economics textbook. Stunned, Nick scooped it up to leaf through it, fingers skimming the tiny, cribbed notes Eric had scribbled in the margins. His lungs grew suddenly tight and heavy.

Clutching the book to his chest, Nick sat there staring at nothing, trying very hard not to scream.

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Chapter 11

Eric left Midnight Sun that evening after only an hour. The August heat had turned the city into a stifling, humid mess, and inside, with all those bodies pressed together dancing, jostling and fucking, it was a literal hellhole. It didn't take long before Eric had rivers of sweat pouring into his eyes and gluing his shirt to his back, the ice in his scotch already completely melted. At last he gave up and strode out to the curb to hail a cab.

He rode in silence for several minutes before he realized he wasn't in the mood to head home yet. On a whim, he told the cabbie to swing up Amsterdam, depositing him in front of a familiar old haunt with a red, white and green neon sign.

It had been months since he was here last, apparently long enough that none of the staff appeared to recognize him. The hostess ushered him to a quiet booth in the back and handed him a menu. Eric didn't even bother looking at it. He knew exactly what he wanted.

He ordered his old stand-bys: Caesar salad, a small double-pepperoni pizza, and a bottle of the house red. The food arrived promptly, and tasted every bit as heavenly as he remembered. The only thing missing, to his aching regret, was the right company.

He sat there for the rest of the evening, nursing his wine and listening to Sinatra, Dean Martin and Tony Bennett crooning over the restaurant's tinny sound system. Soon he was the last customer left. When the manager started

stacking chairs upside-down atop the cocktail tables, Eric took it as his cue to leave.

Grabbing a cab back to his mother's new apartment on Fifth Avenue, he tried to let himself in as quietly as he could in an effort not to wake her, but he needn't have bothered. There she was, stretched out on the couch with a book in hand and a light blanket over her legs. The room's air-conditioned cool gave him a shiver.

"Hello, dear," she said with a smile, holding her hand out to him. He brushed a kiss across her knuckles, sitting down at the end of the couch and pulling her feet into his lap. "You're back earlier than usual."

"And you're up later than usual. Is everything okay?"

"Oh, I've haven't been sleeping too well lately. It's probably that new heart medication. They've changed it twice already, and it still doesn't seem to be doing any good. I wish they'd figure out what the problem is."

"I'll come with you to your next appointment, and we'll get to the bottom of it."

"There's no need for that, darling. I'm sure it's nothing. Apparently they've got a whole battery of different medications they can try. They just have to find the right one for me." She sighed. "I suppose you're looking forward to school starting up again in another week. You've seemed rather ... well, restless and bored this summer."

He forced a smile. "And I thought I'd done such a great job hiding it."

"You must miss your friends, especially that handsome young man who came to the hospital with you to visit me."

From the way you looked at each other, I could tell there was something very special between you." She grasped Eric's hand, giving it a tiny squeeze. "I haven't heard you mention him in ages. Did something happen?"

"We were ... together for awhile, but it didn't work out."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. You seemed so calm in his presence. Peaceful. I can't remember the last time I've seen you that content."

With a bitter chuckle, he replied, "You know me, Mom. If there's a way to screw up a relationship, count on me to find it. Nick and I were friends first, and now I wish I'd kept it that way. At least he'd still be talking to me."

"It can't be that bad."

"Trust me, it is." He inhaled sharply. "After the things I said the last time I saw him, he probably wishes I was dead."

"There is this little thing called an apology."

"He'd never listen to me. I accused him of lying, and worse things. Much worse. Think of all the horrible things you and Dad say to each other when you fight, and multiply it by ten. It was that bad."

"Do you believe he really was lying?"

To his utter shock, he didn't even have to stop to think about it. "No. I just had to tell myself that so I could let him go."

"It doesn't sound to me like you have, darling."

"Maybe not, but there's nothing I can do about it now."

"Of course there is. As long as you still have feelings for this young man, there's hope. You certainly wouldn't have gotten so angry with him if you didn't care."

"The way I feel doesn't matter anymore. Not that it ever did."

"Dear God," she breathed. "You love him. Does he know?"

Eric shook his head, averting his eyes. He wanted to look at her, but he didn't. He couldn't. "I didn't tell him when we were together. He's not going to listen to me now."

"Eric, please. You must tell him, no matter how painful it is. You'll regret it for the rest of your life if you don't."

"Ironic words, coming from someone who's spent twenty years of her life with someone who's come to hate her."

She flinched, but managed to recover quickly. "That's where you're wrong. You don't understand your father, but I do. And he doesn't hate me—or you, for that matter. He simply doesn't know how to show love, although he wasn't always like that. The man I married was gentle, considerate and very loving. But somewhere that man got lost, and he's never found his way back to me." Blinking, she pulled a tissue from her pocket to dab at her eyes. "You probably don't remember this, but one winter when you were five, you became very ill. It started out as a cold, turned into bronchitis, and finally pneumonia. You spiked a dangerously high fever and ended up in the hospital. For three or four days, we weren't sure you'd make it. Your father stayed at your bedside the entire time."

Suddenly the air tasted so thick, Eric could barely suck it into his lungs. "Y-You're right, I don't remember any of it. But I wish I did."

"Something else happened about a year after that, something I've never told you about. I became pregnant

again. It was a bit of a surprise, since I'd had such a difficult time carrying you, my doctors told me it was unlikely I'd ever conceive again. Your father and I were both overjoyed at the news, but before the end of my first trimester, I miscarried. I was running upstairs, and I took what I thought was a minor spill. By the next morning, it was all over. I don't think your father's ever forgiven me."

"I'm sorry," Eric murmured. "Why did you wait until now to tell me?"

"You take things like this so much to heart, dear. I didn't want to burden you." She stared down at their enfolded hands for a moment before continuing. "After that, I think he decided that it was simply too painful to go on caring for those who could be so easily taken away from him. He began withdrawing from me, and the affairs started not long after. That's the way it's been for the last ten years."

Stunned, all Eric could do for a very long moment was shake his head. "I-I had no idea."

"So now you know none of this was your fault. Children from broken homes take on such terrible guilt, and you've always been more sensitive than most. I know you blame yourself for not being there every minute for me, for not rescuing me from myself, but there's no need. You're a wonderful son, Eric, and I see so much of your father in you."

"Don't say that."

"It's the truth. You're like him in practically every way, including your tendency to run away and hide when emotional matters become too difficult to bear. Please, don't make your

father's mistake. If you truly love this young man, don't let him slip away."

"I'm scared, Mom," he whispered, trying to swallow around the sudden obstruction in his throat. "What if Nick and I end up like you and Dad? All that heartache, and for what—a few happy years at the beginning? Was it really worth it?"

"Of course it was. I could have gone my entire life without meeting anyone I loved as much I still love your father. Some people aren't lucky enough to get even a few years of happiness. If I had it all to do over, I wouldn't change a thing."

"Wish I could say the same."

"Well, you've still got time to fix it."

And, at that precise moment, Eric realized everything she'd said was right. It was time to put all his fears and cynicism to rest. He couldn't go through another month of dodging Nick every time he saw him in line at the dining hall or walking across the quad, much less another year. He couldn't stand living with this awful crushing emptiness that enveloped him every minute. And he couldn't stand the thought of another sordid evening in the back room at Midnight Sun, getting his cock sucked and his ass fucked by guys whose faces he couldn't recall five minutes later, while the face of the one man who'd ever mattered a damn to him danced in his head.

Maybe it was already too little, too late. Maybe Nick would take one look at him and slam the door in his face. Eric knew he was most likely setting himself up for another devastating blow. But if there was still a chance in the world, he had to try.

* * * *

Eric bypassed his usual five-hour train trip and drove up to the Thompson farm the next day, the late summer sun beating down on his rented Mustang convertible. He slowed down when he spied a figure working at the side of the unpaved country road leading up to the farmhouse and barn, pulling over when he saw that it was Nick, evidently fixing some broken fence posts. He sucked in a breath and climbed out of the car, hands shoved deep into his jeans pockets.

Nick stared at him as he approached, mopping his forehead with the back of his wrist. Sweat-rings stained his t-shirt at the neck and underarms, his jeans caked with dirt from kneeling on the ground. Yanking off his thick work gloves, he growled, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Eric held up both hands as if in surrender before stepping any closer. "I needed to talk to you, and I figured it would be more private here than at school."

"Yeah, well, I don't want to talk to you. Get back in your car and go."

Eric had known this wouldn't be easy. While he'd hoped Nick had gotten past the worst of his remaining anger and hurt, he'd prepared himself for the near-certainty of a firm rebuff. Still, he wasn't about to turn tail and run without one more try.

"Nick, c'mon. I've driven a long way. Can't you spare me even five minutes?"

"Why should I?" Nick slapped at his jeans, sending up plumes of dust. "In fact, you've got a lot of nerve showing up here at all, after what you said to me last time."

"I know, and I apologize—for today and for what happened then. I wanted to tell you in person. But if you don't want to listen, I understand." He started backing away slowly. "I'm going now."

He'd turned to walk back to his car when he heard Nick call, "All right, I'll listen. But only for five minutes." When Eric faced him again, he added, "We can't use the house or barn. My folks are home, and I don't want them overhearing us."

"Fine, then. Get in the car, and we'll go for a drive."

"I know a better place. C'mon."

Ducking through an unrepaired patch of fence, Nick led him down a footpath winding around to a narrow creek nestled beneath a thick copse of trees. Eric took a seat on the grass while Nick wandered down to splash cool water on his flushed face and neck before joining him.

"Can't get more private than this," Eric observed.

Plucking a stalk of grass, Nick twirled it idly between his fingers. "What did you want to say, other than you're sorry?"

"Just that I regret what I said to you the night you left and that last day when you came back. I regret calling you a liar, because I know everything you told me was true. I regret raking you over the coals over what happened with Ally, when I've hardly been a monk myself these past few months. But most of all, I deeply regret letting you walk out that door."

"What, did this all occur to you out of the blue a few days ago? Because I waited for you, Eric. I waited for you to call

me at Ally's, and you didn't. I waited for you to say something to me that day when we saw each other near the dining hall, but you walked away. Obviously you weren't regretting it too much then."

"I was. Believe me, I was. I've been miserable for months. I haven't had a good night's sleep since you left."

"So what do you want me to say—that I forgive you? Is that why you came all the way up here? To salve your conscience, make yourself feel better? Fine, then. Consider yourself forgiven."

"No," Eric replied softly. "That's not why I came. I know you don't really forgive me. How could you? The things I said were ... awful. Reprehensible. If you detested me for the rest of your life, I'd understand."

"Why, then? I thought I was starting to get over you, and now here you are again, and..." He ground the heel of his boot in the grass until he'd loosened a clump. "You can't just show up like this, Eric. It's not fair."

"All right, I'll say what I came to say, and then I'll go." Eric stared down at his own clasped hands, summoning up his last shred of courage before looking Nick in the eye. "Nick Thompson, I've been in love with you since that night you first kissed me. I'm sorry I didn't tell you before. I should have, but I was too fucking afraid."

Nick stared at him. "You bastard," he breathed. "How do you expect me to respond to that?"

"Evidently there's my answer." Eric started to get up, but in the next second he felt Nick's hand close over his arm, dragging him back down for a kiss so hard, deep and

scorching hot, Eric's eyes nearly rolled back in his head. His own voice failed him once they broke apart, but the tears welling in Nick's eyes told him all he needed to know.

"Ambushing me like that was a dirty trick," Nick whispered. "I should be fucking pissed at you."

"I-I don't care if you are, as long as you love me, too."

"I do. You know I do." Then came another kiss, much slower and sweeter this time. Eric threaded his fingers in Nick's dark curls and held on, as if he expected him to vanish in a puff of smoke any second.

They fell to the grass and lay there wrapped in each other's arms, kissing, touching and reacquainting themselves. Eric's heart soared with happiness, even as he came to the annoying yet undeniable realization that they still had an issue or two left to iron out.

He levered himself up on one elbow with a sigh. "Listen, my mom's realtor's found an apartment for me. It's a tiny one-bedroom, but at least it's within walking distance of campus. If you want, that invitation to move in still stands."

Nick thought about it momentarily before shaking his head. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I think part of our problem before was that everything happened too fast. I mean, how long were we together last semester—two months? It's early days yet. Besides, the scholarship office has already paid for my dorm room this year."

Eric started to say something, but managed to stop himself. The last thing he wanted was to provoke another fight, although controlling his disappointment was a hard struggle. "If this is about coming out to the team, that

doesn't matter to me anymore. You can do it in your own time, or not at all. I won't pressure you."

"I don't think that'll be a problem. I recently found out a thing or two about that jerk who gave me grief back in freshman year. Turns out he's even deeper in the closet than I am. If he gives me shit this time, I'll give it right back to him. But I doubt he will. As the starting quarterback, I'm a lot more valuable to the team than he is."

"Bravo." Eric gave him another soft, sweet kiss. "Although honestly, I'm a bit amazed."

"What, you didn't think I had it in me?" Nick replied with a laugh. "I've had a lot of time to think this summer, and I've decided I'm not spending my senior year hiding. I mean, I'm not planning on taking out a full-page ad in the *Spectator*, but I'm not going to lie about who I am anymore either."

"And yet, the question still remains," Eric persisted. "Why don't you want to live with me?"

Nick sighed. "Look, we've already lived together. We know we're compatible. Emotions aren't the issue, space is. I need mine, and so do you. Like I said before, it's still early days. How do we know we won't get sick of each other if we're stuck together in such close quarters till next June? Actually, I was thinking we should try some good, old-fashioned dating."

Eric rolled his eyes. "Spoken like a true romantic."

"Oh, c'mon, it'll be fun doing our regular Friday thing at Alfredo's—or even better, me coming over to your apartment for dinner. And of course, there'll be sleepovers. Lots and *lots* of sleepovers."

"Well, thank God for that."

"You know you'll love it." Nick flashed him his trademark gorgeous, toothy grin. "It's our senior year, Eric. Let's make it the best one yet, for both of us."

Eric grinned back, leaning in for another kiss. "As far as I'm concerned, it already is."

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About Cat Grant

www.lyricalpress.com/catgrant.html

I'm lucky enough to live by the sea in gorgeous Monterey, California, with husband, cat and an apartment-full of books and DVDs. Most of the time I tend to be a rather quiet person, so you won't see me much on chat loops—I prefer to save my words for my books.

Thus far, my career's worked out better than I'd ever imagined. If someone had told me at this time last year that I'd have three books out by my next birthday, I would've either laughed or popped him in the nose—probably both!

I've got two more books planned in my 'Courtland Chronicles' series, which should keep me busy for most of 2009. Then, of course, there's that m/m urban fantasy I've been researching. Suffice it to say I'm going to be around for awhile!

A big "thanks" to all of you who've helped make *The Arrangement* and *Strictly Business* so successful. Your support has touched me deeply.

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By Chance
by Cat Grant

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Book I: The Arrangement

Available now in ebook and print from Lyrical Press

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Book III: By Chance

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