



SIZE MATTERS

"Short Stories Long
Enough to Satisfy"

*Dreamspinner
Press*

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Short Stories Long Enough
To Satisfy



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Copyright 2007 by Lucia Logan

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Ever Changing
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Copyright 2007 by Connie Bailey & Rhianne Aile

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Copyright 2007 by Alix Bekins

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INTRODUCTION

We all have fantasies - dreams and obsessions that will never happen in real life.

It's healthy.

It's enjoyable.

It's arousing.

It's addictive.

These imaginings are an escape we can depend on to end happily ever after, a break from the daily tedium that saps our energy and creativity, and a boost for our emotional health when we feel drained.

For the authors, this book is a fantasy come true. They have brought a selection of stories to life within these pages – it is truly exciting for them to be able to share their passions with others.

This volume offers you quiet romance, supernatural passion, out-of-this-world lovers, kinky explorations, and heated dreams– a little taste to whet your appetite for romantic homoerotica.

It is my wish that you can take a little time to be enchanted, romanced and loved by enjoying this selection of short stories long enough to satisfy.

Because in your deepest dreams, size matters.

Lots of passionate kisses,
Madeleine Urban

SNOWFALL IN SEATTLE



Lucia Logan

www.lucialogan.com

My thanks to Emmet and Martha,
without whose prodding and encouragement
there would be no stories at all;
to Holly, for sharing so many dreams come true;
and to the women who have taught me
how much I'd missed not having sisters until now.

CHRISTOPHER Booth arched his back with a soft groan. *Not as young as I used to be*, he thought wryly, *can't go all night the way I used to without feeling it*. But the glow of accomplishment felt good – he'd gotten the outline for the next month of programming finished, and drafted half of the weekly '*Single in Seattle*' features. A glance out the window of his small office revealed only a swirling haze of white. The ubiquitous radio feed in the background had provided a steady update on the rare January snowstorm for hours, and it showed no signs of letting up any time soon. Most of the non-air staff had left early to try and avoid the worst of the inevitable traffic gridlock, but the loft apartment Chris had leased since moving to Seattle was within walking distance of the station, and Shiloh never cared how late he got home.

Rolling his shoulders, Chris blinked until he could focus on the digital clock across the room, wondering if he was going to need reading glasses soon. He was surprised to discover it was nearly nine o'clock. He'd known he'd be able to get a lot of work done without the frequent interruptions from co-workers who wanted to ask his advice or needed help with research or just wanted to shoot the breeze for a while. Not that he minded helping, or chatting for that matter, but sometimes he felt he was doing more socializing than working.

His computer shut down and his coat over his arm, Chris clicked off the office lights and closed the door behind him, nearly walking into Zak Cowan, the overnight producer, who was barreling down the hallway with even more energy than usual. “Chris!” the younger man shouted, grabbing the editor by the shoulder. “Thank God you haven’t left yet! You’ve got to help me out – we go live in ten minutes and She just called to say she can’t make it in!”

Zak didn’t have to explain who “She” was – Estrela Lopez, the temperamental host of KLTR’s most popular feature, *‘Making Love,’* was known around the station as “She Who Must Be Obeyed”. It wasn’t a term of affection. The fiery Latina was demanding, inconsiderate, and sometimes outright rude, but she drew the highest ratings of any program on the schedule with her nightly call-in show of sexual advice.

Chris shook his head in commiseration. “You need me to find a tape of one of her older shows?” he asked, tossing his coat back over a chair.

“There’s no time,” Zak wailed. “I’ve already got a dozen callers queued up on hold. You’ve gotta cover for her.”

“Me?” Chris laughed, sure Zak was having a joke at his expense. He was well acquainted with the producer’s quirky sense of humor – Zak was one of the regular foursome, along with Chris, Dave from accounting and Neal from sales, who got together for a weekly poker game every Sunday afternoon, as well as the occasional Mariners or Sonics game after work. “Very funny, Zak.”

“I’m serious, Chris,” Zak pleaded. “There’s no one else I can ask. It’s just for one night – you’ve got to help me out here.”

“Are you crazy? I’m a features editor, not an on-air personality. I can’t answer questions about sex for three hours,” Chris protested. “I don’t – I haven’t got any qualifications.”

“You write *‘Single in Seattle’*,” Zak argued.

"That's about where to go on a date, not '*making it sweet between the sheets*'," Chris objected, quoting the show's tag line. "Just put on a tape."

"A tape isn't going to move us to first in the ratings," Zak countered. It was a low blow. KLTR promoted itself as "the leader in talk radio," but it had lagged in second place in the crucial drive-time and late-night time slots for years, and Zak knew how dedicated Chris was to changing that. "It's a sweeps week, and lots of listeners are going to be stuck at home because of the weather. If they turn us off because we're playing a rerun, we may never win them back."

"But what if someone asks something I can't answer?" Chris floundered, weakening. Zak knew he had him.

"Leave that to me and Google," the producer grinned. "You don't think She comes up with all her answers herself, do you?"

Ten minutes later, Chris was wired into a studio cubicle, a bottle of water and a bank of computer monitors in front of him. Zak gave him a thumbs-up from behind his console and began the show's intro.

"It's nine o'clock in Seattle, and that means it's time for the number one show in adult talk radio, the show where anything goes and nothing is too intimate, the show dedicated to '*making it sweet between the sheets*'. Tonight we have a very special guest host, so ladies and gentlemen, enjoy '*Making Love*' ... with Christopher Booth!"

Chris swallowed around the lump in his throat that threatened to choke him and nodded for Zak to connect the first caller. "Hi, you're on the air. What's your question?" *Brilliant opening*, he cringed.

"Er ... hi," a woman's voice spoke haltingly into his headphones. *She's as nervous as you are*, Chris realized, taking a calming breath. "I wanted to ask ... I mean, I was wondering ..." she faltered.

"What's your name, ma'am?" Chris asked gently.

"Terry," she answered.

“How can I help you, Terry?”

Zak grinned as he listened to Chris putting the caller at ease. *The guy was a natural!*

“Well, my husband ... he hasn’t been very interested in sex lately ... and I was hoping ... that is ... maybe you could tell me what I could do to make him want me again?” Chris winced at the insecurity in the woman’s voice. Glancing at the website Zak had pulled up on one of the monitors, he asked, “Does your husband have any medical problems – high blood pressure, diabetes, depression? Some medications can cause a reduction in sexual drive that your doctor might be able to address...” *Sure, the magic little blue pill*, he frowned with distaste.

“No, nothing like that,” the caller answered. “He just sits in front of the TV all night, watching ESPN, and I usually fall asleep before he even comes to bed.” She laughed sadly. “I know I’m not as young and thin as I used to be, but neither is he. At least I don’t have to worry that he’s found someone else, since he never leaves that easy chair.”

Chris felt the woman’s pain twisting inside his own chest. He thought of his parents, who hadn’t been able to walk past each other without exchanging a loving touch, even after thirty years of marriage. “When’s the last time you and your husband held hands, Terry?” he asked impulsively.

“Held hands?” she repeated in surprise. “I don’t know – years, probably.”

“It sounds like you’ve gotten out of the habit of intimacy,” Chris mused. “You wouldn’t like it if your husband came home from work and wanted to have sex without any foreplay first. Think about attracting your husband’s interest again as a kind of extended foreplay. You want to make him start thinking about you, seeing you, in an intimate way again. Start with little things, that don’t have to be blatantly sexual – like touching him gently when you pass in the hallway, holding hands when you walk, dropping a little kiss on his head when he’s sitting in his chair.”

“I could do that,” Terry said, a note of hope lightening her voice.

“Let your husband know that he’s still special to you, that you still love him,” Chris prompted. “Once you remind him of that, you might be surprised at what follows.”

“I do love him,” the woman murmured. “I’ll give it a try.”

“Call back in a week or so and let us know how you’re doing, Terry,” Chris added as Zak switched to the next call.

“This is Mike,” a voice Chris suspected belonged to a teenager spoke next. “My girlfriend won’t let us have sex unless I wear a condom, and I was wondering which kind is the best for, you know, letting me feel the most.”

Zak typed a hasty note to display on the monitor as Chris paused. The show’s sponsors included two rival condom brands, and the last thing they needed was to say anything to favor one over the other.

“Your girlfriend’s right, Mike, unless you’re in a committed monogamous relationship, you both need to be safe,” Chris answered. “I’m probably not the best person to answer your question, though – it isn’t something I’ve had a lot of recent experience with. Maybe some of our listeners can give you their opinions.” Zak grinned as the phone lines lit up in immediate response to the suggestion. For the first time in a long time, he was looking forward to the rest of the night.

NEAL Kenelly set his dinner plate in the dishwasher and contemplated what to do with the remainder of his evening. Normally he’d have been heading to a club by now, if he hadn’t just gone out straight from work, but the snow had convinced him to stay inside tonight. He glanced at the clock when he heard Zak’s voice issuing from his stereo speakers. Nine o’clock. Neal usually kept the radio on in the background when he was home, but he always switched it off when Estrela came on – the woman might sell a lot of ads, but he detested her abrasive attitude and intolerant comments. He was reaching for the remote when Zak mentioned a special guest host. Intrigued, he paused with his finger on the power button as the producer invited listeners to “...enjoy *‘Making Love’* ... with Christopher Booth”. Neal stifled a

bark of laughter at the thought of the quiet, reserved features editor subbing for the sensual Latina. Stretching out on the couch, he settled in to listen, sure he'd find plenty of ammunition to tease Chris unmercifully at their next poker game.

"AND that's the last call we have time for tonight," Zak announced, once Chris had reassured the young mother on the line that devoting time to herself and her husband was just as important as caring for her newborn son. Pulling off his headset, Chris slumped into the chair, rubbing the tight knot at the back of his neck. *Thank God that's over*, he groaned to himself, straightening up when Zak bounded into the studio after signing off with the program's credits and switching to a block of commercials.

"That was fantastic, Chris!" the producer enthused. "You ought to be doing this every night – you had those callers eating out of your hand!"

"I don't think I'll quit my day job," Chris muttered, shrugging into his coat. "Just remember, you owe me – big time." Once outside, he stood for a moment with his face turned up to the sky, filling his lungs with clean, cold air until the shaking subsided. He'd done it – he'd stumbled and bluffed his way through, at times, but he didn't think he'd messed up too badly, and he might even have helped one or two of the callers. The empty streets were quiet as he walked to his apartment, the falling snow muffling his footsteps, but Chris was comfortable with silence.

CHRIS slept in the next morning, arriving at the studio around mid-day. It seemed as if everyone in the building made a point to stop by his office and comment about the previous night's show. Despite the constant interruptions, he managed to finish researching the rest of the '*Single in Seattle*' segments for the month before his rumbling stomach convinced him to start thinking about dinner. Getting ready to shut down his browser, on a whim he typed 'sex advice' into the open window, blinking in shock when it offered him nearly *thirteen million* hits in response. He was about to open one at random when a tap on the plexiglass

outside his office made him look up. Neal Kenelly lounged against the doorframe, his handsome face sporting a knowing smirk. Flushing guiltily, Chris clicked the browser window closed, even though he was sure it wasn't visible from where Neal stood.

"It's always the quiet ones you have to watch out for," Neal grinned. "I had no idea you knew that much about relationships. Or that you wanted to be on the other side of the mike."

"Trust me, I don't," Chris answered. "I was just bailing out Zak." Seeing Neal's leather jacket over his arm, he decided to walk out with his friend. "I'm surprised you even heard me," he added, logging off and retrieving his own coat from the back of his door. "I thought you never listened to the show."

"I don't, usually," the dark-haired sales exec admitted. "Estrela always reminds me how glad I am to be gay. She sounds like she should be selling used cars, not sex." He wagged his eyebrows in an exaggerated leer as they headed toward the elevators. "You, on the other hand, have the perfect voice for radio. Husky, sensual, intimate..."

"Bite me," Chris retorted wittily, earning another chuckle.

"You want to stop off for a beer?" Neal asked on impulse.

"Can't," Chris answered with regret. Thursday nights were reserved for tutoring sessions with his Little Brother, Andre. So he didn't know that all hell had broken loose until he got to the station Friday morning.

The petite blonde receptionist, Trish, waylaid Chris as soon as he walked through the double glass doors engraved with the station's call letters. "Mr. Booth, Mr. Layton wants to see you right away." She smiled at him warmly, handing him a small stack of mail. "And Zak Cowan wants you to call him as soon as you get in – well, as soon as you finish with Mr. Layton, I guess."

"Thanks, Trish," he answered distractedly, scanning envelopes as he shrugged out of his coat. "Did he say what he wanted?" He rarely had much interaction with Randall Layton, KLTR's general manager, outside their weekly editorial staff meetings.

"Didn't you hear?" Trish ignored several phone lines flashing on hold as she leaned forward, her green eyes sparkling. "Estrela

quit last night! Walked out in the middle of her show! I thought Zak was going to have a heart attack right on the air.” She leaned closer, obviously more than ready to dish some dirt, when the harsh buzz of an intercom claimed her attention. “Yes, sir, he just walked in,” she spoke into her headset with a nod toward the inner offices. “He’s on his way over right now.” ‘*Good luck,*’ she mouthed as Chris turned toward the executive suite.

“Chris! Good to see you, how are you doing this morning?” The GM was a portly man in his late fifties who always reminded Chris of a department store Santa Claus, but he was a shrewd programmer and businessman. “Great job on the show the other night – I really appreciate your stepping in at the last minute like that.”

“It’s lucky I was still here,” Chris answered, already searching his memory for a syndicated show they could slide into Estrela’s spot until they could find a new host.

“You drew a very positive response ... very positive,” the manager repeated when Chris showed no sign of having heard him. “That’s why I’m so happy to give you this opportunity now.”

“Opportunity?” Chris was fully capable of adding two and two together, and he didn’t like the answer he came up with. “Oh, no, I – ”

“Before you say anything, Chris, we received more calls and e-mails after your show than anything we’ve aired since I came to this station. Even if Estrela hadn’t offered her resignation, I would have approached you about taking over. You’ve touched a chord in our listeners, Chris, one we’d be foolish to ignore.”

“Mr. Layton – Randall – I can’t – ”

“No one has worked harder than you to make this station number one in the rankings, Chris. If we can attract more listeners to our highest-rated show ... well, that could be just what it takes to put us over the top.” He clapped the stunned editor on the shoulder. “Of course it would mean a big boost in your salary too, but I know that isn’t what will change your mind. At least promise me you’ll think about it.”

“Of course, Mr. Layton, but I really think – ”

“Good, good, that’s all I ask. Oh, and Chris? Can you let me know by three o’clock? I’d like to start the new promos by drive-time for tonight’s show.”

His head reeling, Chris had barely gotten out of Layton’s office when his cell phone started to vibrate. He knew without looking at the display that it had to be Zak.

“Did he ask you? You’re going to do it, right? You have to do it!”

“Zak, this is crazy! I managed to fumble my way through one show, but there’s no way I can fake it five nights a week!”

“But don’t you see, that’s the beauty of it – you’re not faking it! I mean it, Chris, you should have heard the callers when Estrela came on instead of you last night. After the third person in a row asked to speak with you rather than her, she totally lost it – started ranting about how she was sick of wasting her time with a bunch of losers who were too stupid to take her advice anyway.”

“She didn’t really say that?”

“Swear to God – said the fact they were sitting home listening to her instead of out getting laid proved they were beyond being helped. At least, I’m pretty sure that’s what she said – just about every other word was in Spanish by that point, and a good thing too, because some of it was pretty raw, even for her.”

The fantasy of begging Estrela to come back vanished. “That still doesn’t mean I can take over for her, Zak! For all her faults, Estrela is at least a doctor! How in the hell can I come off giving sexual advice?”

“If all people wanted were facts, they could look them up themselves on Google,” Zak insisted. “These listeners are looking for a human touch to make them feel good about themselves, and that’s what you gave them. Estrela could give them answers, but she made them feel belittled when she did it. Do you know she’d never refer them as anything but ‘caller’? I don’t know if she was just too lazy to remember their names, or if she thought it took the focus away from her. But the first thing you did with every caller was ask their name, and you used it when you talked with them.

You made them feel like they were important and that you cared about them.”

“Well, they are important, they’re the reason we’re on the air in the first place!”

“See, you really believe that! And people respond to it. You won’t be faking anything, Chris. Just think of it like another research project – I can help show you where to go for the information, and the rest is just being yourself.”

Chris felt the sickening pressure of a migraine building behind his eyes. “I have to sit down,” he muttered, heading for his office.

“I’ll be there by two so we can start planning for tonight,” Zak promised. Chris sank into his chair and buried his head in his hands, wishing he had a door that locked.

“ANTE up, everybody,” Dave demanded, scowling as he glanced at the cards in his hand. “Chris has raked in the last three pots – I need to start winning or I’ll be lucky to have bus fare left to get home!”

“Not gonna happen ’til you grasp the concept of ‘poker face’, Davey.” Zak tossed a chip into the pot. “I’m in.”

“Me too.” Chris slid his own chip forward. “I’m sure Lisette loves being able to read your emotions in your eyes, Dave, but for poker, it’s not such a good thing.”

“Besides, I don’t know why you’re complaining,” Neal added, tossing his hand down on the table. “You’re not the only one Chris has been cleaning out. I’m done.”

“Yeah, Neal’s had worse luck than any of us,” Zak chuckled.

“Only at cards,” the dark-haired man grinned, sitting back to watch the rest of the hand play out. “I have high hopes of getting lucky tonight.”

“Friday and Saturday night weren’t enough?” Zak shook his head. “It’s a good thing you don’t like women, or I’d be after you to leave some for the rest of us!”

"I think Neal gets more than I do, and I don't have to go out looking for it any more," Dave chipped in, studying his hand again with a frown.

"Maybe you should ask Chris to help you with your technique," Neal suggested, watching the light flush of color spread across the older man's cheekbones at his teasing. He was still surprised that Chris had agreed to take over as the host of '*Making Love*,' given how private he was in his own life. He couldn't remember the other man ever sharing any stories about his love life, though with his sandy blond hair, chiseled features, and warm blue eyes, he was undeniably attractive. Neal had learned more about Chris's background – raised as an only child in a conservative, rural southern town by parents who were deeply in love until his father's death some years before – from the stories Chris shared on the show than in the five years they'd worked and socialized together. The station's listeners had responded immediately to the warm, caring presence that was such a contrast to Estrela's cynical eroticism. Ratings had skyrocketed, ad sales had increased, and Neal would bet his next paycheck on KLTR moving into first place overall in the next quarterly Arbitron ratings.

"I heard Advertising wants to put your picture up in all the bus shelters," Zak met Chris's bet and raised him another chip, "with the tag line 'Seattle's *Making Love* with Christopher Booth'."

"You can't be serious," Chris groaned, flipping in another chip to see Zak's bet and running his hand through his already-tousled hair. "Can they do that without asking me first?"

"*'All reasonable promotional support'*," Neal quoted, quashing a sudden urge to smooth down the blond's silky-looking locks. "It's standard boilerplate in all the station contracts. Besides, what are you griping about? Half of Seattle's already in love with your voice. Once they get a look at your face, you'll be the city's most eligible bachelor."

"Too bad Estrela quit after this year's list of '*Seattle's Sexiest Singles*' came out." Dave flicked two cards in Zak's direction as the producer tapped the table. "Since I'm not eligible any more, you could have represented the station."

“That’s ridiculous,” Chris protested. “I’m the same person I always was. Just because I’m hosting the show now, I’m not any more ‘eligible’ than Zak is.” He dropped a card onto the felt and slid the replacement Dave dealt him into his hand. “Or Neal, for that matter.”

“I didn’t think you’d noticed.” The slight flush of color on Chris’s cheeks suited him, Neal thought; he’d seldom seen his friend this impassioned about anything. The betting continued around the table, and Chris’s luck held true, winning him one of the largest pots of the day. Neal stood as Zak raked in the cards, draining his beer and slinging his leather jacket over his shoulder. “Not that the afternoon hasn’t been riveting, gentlemen, but I’m off for someplace with a little hotter action.”

“I should be getting home too,” Dave agreed, glancing at the clock.

“Speaking of hot action,” Zak teased, all of them laughing as the red-haired newlywed broke into a predictable blush.

After helping Zak clean up the empty beer cans and bowls of chips, the friends went their separate ways outside the producer’s apartment, Dave to catch a bus to the cross-town suburb where he and Lisette had bought a house, Chris walking, as he usually did, to his loft. As Neal slid behind the wheel of his small red sports car and headed toward Capitol Hill, he found himself wondering for the first time if Chris was going home to someone. He knew from the blond’s turns hosting the weekly poker games that he didn’t live with anyone, but Neal had always assumed, when he thought of it at all, that his friend was involved in a relationship that he kept as private as all the other details of his life. The older man didn’t spend his free nights at the singles clubs the way Zak did, and someone as good-looking as Chris wouldn’t have any problem attracting women. Feeling somehow uncomfortable speculating on his friend’s love life, Neal dismissed it from his thoughts, turning his attention to finding his own companion for the evening.

“Hi Chris, my name is Steve, and I really want to drive my girlfriend crazy the next time we’re together, so I was wondering, what’s the most erogenous place on a woman’s body?”

“Well, Steve, that’s a good question, because it might not be the same for every woman,” Chris considered as he watched Zak keying into the computer terminals that lined his control room. “Sometimes I think we get too hung up on finding that one magic ‘hot spot’. After all, any part of the body can be erogenous if you touch it with love. Giving your partner pleasure isn’t a race – the goal isn’t to get her to the finish line as quickly as possible. This is one trip where the journey should be as enjoyable as the destination.” Zak flashed him a thumbs-up and displayed a screen of information on his monitor. Chris scanned it quickly and grinned back at his producer. “Instead of assuming you know where she’s the most sensitive, why not take the time to find out for sure?” he continued. “In fact, I’d say it’s worth devoting at least a week to conducting the research.”

“A week?” Steve’s response sounded suspiciously like a squeak.

“Consider it a week of foreplay,” Chris suggested. “On the first day, you can touch her anywhere on her body, but only with your hands, and all you can do is touch – no kissing, no contact with any of your other body parts. Oh, and because this is foreplay, that means no intercourse.” He could hear Steve’s groan of frustration and went on quickly, warming to his subject. “On the second day, you can only touch her with your mouth – lips, tongue, kisses, licking, nibbling – but no hands, or anything else. Day three, you get to see how much pleasure you can give her using anything but your hands or mouth. That’s your chance to get creative, Steve!” He could practically hear the man on the other end of the phone line considering the possibilities that offered. “On day four you can use everything you’ve learned up ’til now – hands, mouth, and everything else – but you’re limited to the back half of her body. Day five, you get to move to the front, but only above the waist.” Steve was making happy little ‘hmmn’ing sounds by now, making Chris smile in response. “Day six, you get to focus on the bottom half of her body, and by day seven, you

should have discovered so many ways and places to please her that when you finally make love, you'll find that the foreplay is as intense as the release."

"Man, you are a genius!" Steve crowed. "This is gonna be the best week of our lives! Thanks, Chris!"

"My pleasure, Steve," Chris answered quietly, shifting in his seat before answering the next call. "Welcome to '*Making Love*,' how can I help you?"

"Hi, Chris, this is Phil, thanks for taking my question. There's this woman I just met, a friend of a friend, you know? And I really like her. Anyway, I asked her out on a date, and she said yes, but I want to take her somewhere really different. Not the same kind of places everybody else takes her, somewhere that will really impress her, you know? So I was hoping you could suggest someplace special."

"How much do you know about her, Phil?" Chris asked. "Do you know what she likes to do, what her hobbies are?"

"Not really," Phil answered anxiously. "I met her at a lounge, but it was so noisy we didn't get much of a chance to talk."

"Maybe you should take her somewhere quieter, then," Chris reasoned, "someplace you can concentrate on getting to know each other better. What about taking a drive up into the mountains for a picnic?"

"That doesn't sound very special," Phil replied doubtfully.

"Let her know that what's special to you is just being with her," Chris countered. "My parents grew up in a very small town – most of the guys tried to take girls into the nearest big city on a date, to do something 'exciting'. My father didn't have a car when they were young, so their first date was a picnic." His voice warmed as he remembered the joy in his mother's voice whenever she recounted this story. "My father always swore it was the best 'first date' idea he ever had. It must have worked, because they got married six months later. Of course, my mother always said the real secret was his grandmother's potato salad."

"Maybe I should ask you for the recipe," the caller laughed.

Chuckling in return, Chris rattled off the list of ingredients and how to combine them. “Just remember, the secret is in the pickle juice,” he concluded. “But seriously, whether you make all the food yourself or pick up a boxed lunch from the nearest deli isn’t what’s important – it’s taking the time to really talk with her, get to know her and let her get to know you – the real you. That’s much more special than buying her an expensive dinner or taking her to the hottest new nightclub and never seeing past the superficialities.”

“I’ll think about it, thanks,” Phil replied before Zak moved on to the next caller.

“Hey Chris, this is Cody and my question is kind of different,” the young man’s voice hesitated and then went on. “I told your producer I was calling to ask about trying something new, and that’s true... I want to try rimming my boyfriend, and I was wondering if I had to be worried about using some kind of protection, and whether that would interfere with the sensation.”

Chris felt a momentary surge of pure terror, his frantic gaze imploring Zak for help. The producer was keying at a frenzied pace, rolling his chair from one PC to another as he searched for information. Stalling for time, Chris cleared his throat and asked, “How serious is the relationship between you and your... boyfriend, Cody? Unless you’re sure you’re both clean, and neither of you is seeing anyone else, there’s always going to be some risk, so you’d want to be as safe as possible.”

“Well, I haven’t been with anyone but him for a few months now, and I don’t think he’s doing the club scene any more, but I guess I can’t be 100% sure – we should probably talk about going for testing, it would be great not to have to worry about condoms any more...”

He knew he should be trying to curtail Cody’s rambling, but until Zak came up with some information for him, Chris didn’t have a clue what to say next. What the hell was taking Zak so long, anyway? Chris was about ready to interrupt and tell Cody he couldn’t help him when a screen popped up on his monitor. He stared at it for a minute, his voice drying up in his throat as he

scanned the text and helpful illustrations. Fumbling for his bottle of water, he gulped it hurriedly before considering his answer.

“I thought you were supposed to screen calls before you pass them to me,” Chris groaned when he could finally pull off his headset at the end of the night. “How the hell could you leave me hanging like that?”

“I’m really sorry, Chris, I had no idea he was going to spring that on you,” Zak apologized, running his fingers through his spiky hair as he tossed his own headset onto the console. “I guess we need to be prepared to get gay callers once in a while. ‘She’ would never talk to them, said it was ‘unnatural’,” he scowled. The producer hesitated, remembering that Chris had been raised in a rural Southern town. “I hope you don’t have that problem?”

“Problem?” Chris blinked. “Oh, no – I don’t, I mean, I didn’t mind that he was gay, just that I had no idea how to answer his question. What took you so long finding the information?”

“I’m just not familiar with many gay sites, since Estrela wouldn’t take their calls. It’s gonna take me a while to find some reliable sources that are more information than porn.”

“Then what are we going to do? I don’t want to shut out gay listeners the way Estrela did, but I don’t know enough to answer them, and if you can’t get the information for me, I’m not sure what other option we have.”

“Why don’t you talk to Neal?” Zak suggested, a wicked light sparkling in his eyes.

“Neal? Our Neal?”

“Sure, why not? He’s gay, and he probably has more experience with sex – any kind of sex – than the two of us put together.”

Chris muttered something under his breath Zak couldn’t make out, then shook his head. “You know he’ll never let me hear the end of it if I do.”

“He may ride you for a while, but he’s your friend. You know he’d do anything he could to help you.”

He could feel his face heating at the idea Zak suggested, but Chris knew the producer was right. Neal might give him a hard time, but he’d help if he was asked, and Chris didn’t see that he had any other choice.

CHRIS debated with himself for days about how to approach Neal to ask for his help. It wasn’t unusual for any of their poker foursome to ask any of the others for a casual drink after work, but this wasn’t a discussion Chris wanted to have in a noisy bar. A coffee shop would be quieter, but that would just increase the chance of being overheard, and he was nervous enough about broaching the topic with Neal, without worrying about a total stranger catching any part of the conversation.

Finally, he decided to invite Neal to stop by his apartment after work. He’d told his friend only that he wanted to ask his advice about the show, offering pizza and beer in return. Neal had raised an eyebrow at the suggestion that his services could be had so cheaply, but agreed, and so on Wednesday night the two of them sat on the saddle-leather sofa in Chris’s living room, an empty pizza box and two beers on the table before them. Shiloh, the calico Chris had found inhabiting the loft when he moved in five years ago, was comfortably ensconced between them.

The parti-colored cat nudged Neal’s hand presumptively, clearly demanding more attention. “I didn’t even know you had a cat,” Neal observed, scratching the feline’s motile ears. “She’s never come out when the whole group is over.”

“She’s more of a one-person cat,” Chris agreed, pulling one leg up and tucking the bare foot under his other thigh. “She’s convinced me this is her apartment – she just condescends to share it with me.”

“Shiloh’s an unusual name – is it to commemorate the Civil War battle?” Neal asked, remembering that Chris had grown up in a small southern town.

“My ancestors came out on the losing side of that battle,” Chris countered with a slight smile. “No, she’s named after an old song.”

Both men sat quietly for a few moments, the low rumble of Shiloh’s purring the only sound breaking the silence until Neal glanced over at Chris. “So, you wanted some advice about the show? I think you’re doing a great job, you know, and not just because you make it so much easier to sell commercial time.”

“Thanks,” Chris answered, taking another swig of his beer. *Enough stalling already*, he told himself, drawing a deep breath. “You might have noticed we’ve been getting some gay callers lately, and I – I don’t know very much about gay sex practices, so I thought...” he trailed off under his friend’s amused scrutiny.

“So you thought you’d ask an expert on gay sex?” Neal chuckled. “It’s okay, Chris, I guess I should be flattered. Sure, I’ll share the benefits of my vast experience with you, though with a few obvious exceptions, it isn’t all that much different from sex with a woman.”

“I wouldn’t really know either way,” Chris admitted softly, not looking up from the hand ruffling Shiloh’s coat.

For a minute Neal was sure Chris was putting him on, getting back at him for all the teasing he’d put him through since taking over the show, but the rueful expression on the older man’s face convinced him he wasn’t joking. “You mean you’ve never – never made love to a woman?” Neal asked, dumbfounded.

Chris shrugged. “I’ve never felt the attraction,” he murmured.

“Are you telling me – are you saying you’re gay?”

“I’ve known since high school that I was attracted to men.” Chris forced himself to look up when Shiloh butted his head with her head. “But there wasn’t any way I could act on it, not in the small, conservative community I grew up in, without my family being ostracized and gossiped about. I tried dating girls, enough times to know that the spark wasn’t there. By the time my dad died I was sure, and if I’d been able to go away to college the way

I'd planned things might have been different, but by then my mother's MS had flared up and I couldn't leave her alone."

"So you've never...?" Neal found himself uncharacteristically tongue-tied in the wake of his friend's revelation.

"After Mom passed away, I sold the house and moved to Seattle, partly because it was about as far away from my childhood home as I could get, physically and culturally. For a while I tried the club scene, tried dating, but..." Chris pushed his hair back from his brow with a frown. "It all felt ... empty, somehow. Meaningless. A fast hand job in the men's room of some bar, or a blow job from some guy I knew I'd never see again ... that wasn't what I wanted. After a while, it was easier to just take care of things myself ... I'd been doing it for enough years, and I could still look at myself in the mirror the next morning." It occurred to him that this could have sounded like a criticism of his friend, and he was quick to add, "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with that lifestyle – it's just not for me. I guess my parents' example had more influence on me than I knew. I just can't do casual sex."

"And that's all I do," Neal countered, trying to lighten the shock of Chris's confession. All the more impressed at the magnitude of his friend's accomplishment, since he was sure none of the show's listeners suspected its host's inexperience any more than he had, Neal grinned. "All right then, what do you need to know?"

It was well past midnight by the time Neal had finished giving Chris a crash course in gay sexuality. They'd pulled up a website for illustrative purposes, and Neal had walked him through the terminology, the mechanics, and the variations of male on male relationships. He'd made Chris blush more than once, but the older man had never appeared shocked, asking questions and even making a few notes about particular topics.

"I feel like I've just had 'the talk' with my teenage son, and that's not something I ever thought I'd experience," Neal laughed as he stood and stretched.

"Thank you, Neal," Chris said sincerely when their grins had faded. "I know this couldn't have been easy for you, and I really appreciate your help."

“No problem – and if you ever want to give dating another try, let me know and I’ll take you to all the best clubs,” Neal offered, though even as the words left his mouth he knew Chris would never take him up on it.

“I mean it – thanks, Neal,” Chris repeated, extending his hand hesitantly. Neal looked at it for a moment, noticing the fine blond hair that covered the older man’s forearm, before he blinked and pulled Chris into a rough hug. The warmth of Chris’s body pressed against his for a few brief seconds before they patted each other’s backs awkwardly and broke apart.

“Any time you have questions, don’t be afraid to ask,” Neal said, reclaiming his coat from the back of the chair Shiloh lay curled upon.

After letting Neal out with a final expression of thanks, Chris tossed the empty pizza carton into the trash. “That didn’t go so badly,” he told Shiloh as he rinsed the beer bottles before dropping them in the recycling bin. He’d felt himself reacting to some of the things Neal had told him, but he thought he’d been able to keep it from becoming obvious, using the excuse of taking notes to cover his lap when he’d started to get hard at some of Neal’s more graphic descriptions.

Neal slid behind the wheel of his Miata, adjusting his jeans around the swelling in his groin. Talking about sex for hours had left him hungry, but the thought of heading to a club to find some anonymous partner to fuck felt like more trouble than it was worth, especially this late. He’d just go home and take care of himself for a change. That made him remember Chris’s words, and he wondered if the other man was going to be ‘taking care of himself’ tonight too. With a muttered curse he started the car, his own need suddenly more urgent.

Chris dropped his clothes into the hamper and stepped into the shower, letting the hot water soothe away the tension that knotted his shoulders. As he rubbed the bar of soap over his torso, his mind replayed Neal’s voice explaining how to prepare a partner for penetration. Chris had plenty of experience stroking himself to orgasm, but he’d never touched himself in the way Neal had

suggested. Letting his hand drift down to his rapidly hardening cock, he stroked it a few times, his eyes closing as he heard Neal's voice describe the sensitivity of the skin behind the testicles – the perineum. Experimentally, Chris drew his finger over the smooth surface, shivering a little in reaction. He repeated the touch, his hand sliding further back, skimming over the wrinkled skin around his hole.

Neal tossed his clothes on the chair in his bedroom and fell onto the mattress, reaching for the tube of gel on his nightstand. He wondered if Chris was doing the same thing, the thought making his already stiff cock even more rigid. Squeezing the lube onto his fingers, he pictured Chris lying naked on his bed, the same golden hair he'd noticed on his forearms covering his chest and legs, his hand circling his cock, tugging on it slowly, just as he was doing.

Chris's finger felt huge as he worked it into himself, the uncomfortable friction making him bite his lower lip. He couldn't be doing this right, it shouldn't be this painful.... He remembered Neal talking about lubricant, but he didn't have anything like that in the shower, or in the apartment for that matter – all he had was his bottle of shampoo. *Shampoo and conditioner*, he corrected himself, looking at the bottle consideringly. *Necessity is a mother*, he thought, pouring enough onto his fingers to coat them before returning to circle his entrance. His forefinger slid in much more easily this time. He pushed it in to the first knuckle, the stretch less uncomfortable than it had been the first time, the feeling of fullness actually not unpleasant. He fisted his cock lazily with his free hand as he wiggled the finger around, expanding the constricting muscle until he could slowly slide the digit in to its base. The sensation of tightness in his groin was like nothing he'd ever felt before. Moving his finger in the snug channel, he recalled Neal describing the bundle of nerves that he'd said would give incredible pleasure when stimulated. *Consider it research*, he told himself wryly as his fingertip searched.

Neal's hand caressed his cock from base to tip, twisting the foreskin before sliding down again, his other hand squeezing his balls rhythmically, imagining Chris bringing himself off this way, his husky voice groaning as the tightness built, his hand moving

more and more quickly over his shaft until with a loud moan, Neal came, harder than he had in years, the image of Chris's face contorted in ecstasy filling his mind.

Forcing himself to relax so he could push in a little deeper, Chris bent his knuckle and gasped as the pad of his finger grazed a spot that made sparks of light dance behind his closed eyelids. Squeezing his other hand around his cock, he rubbed the spot again, a low moan escaping at the wave of heat that flashed through him. *God bless Neal*, he thought as he swirled his finger over the bump of nerves, squeezing and releasing his cock in time, letting the pleasure swell and spread until with a fierce cry it exploded out of him in the strongest climax he'd ever felt.

Slumping against the wall of the shower, Chris let the aftershocks subside completely before sliding his finger out of himself. As soon as he was able to think clearly, he made a mental note to thank Neal again tomorrow, and to stop on the way home from work to buy some lube.

"YOU know what my favorite call was this week?" Dave asked as he pushed his opening bet to the middle of the table. "The one where you told the couple having trouble talking about sex to describe their favorite fantasy to each other."

Rehashing memorable calls from Chris's show had become a regular part of their weekly poker get-togethers, but something in the way the redhead's voice wavered made Zak look up from arranging the cards in his hand, a knowing glitter in his eyes. "Took that one to heart, did you, Dave?"

"Lisette and I like to listen to the show together," the accountant admitted, defying anyone to criticize him. "I'm not too proud to admit we've gotten some great ideas from it. But this one was – well, it was something special."

"So what was your fantasy, Davey?" Zak demanded. "Lisette in a French maid costume?"

"Maybe Dave was wearing the costume," Neal chuckled.

"The schoolteacher and the naughty schoolboy?"

“Fuck off, you two,” Dave retorted without heat, “neither of us wore any damn costumes. Lisette’s always been a little shy about trying some things, even though I’ve told her I want her to – well, anyway, she finally told me she’d feel more comfortable if I wasn’t watching what she was doing, and I’d always wondered what it would be like to be blindfolded, and... well....” His cheeks were pink but his smile was wide as he made his discard.

“Good?” Chris asked, looking over his own hand with a smile.

“Incredible,” Dave confirmed. “Absolutely incredible. Maybe you two comedians should try it.”

“Having Lisette blindfold me? No offence, Dave, but I’ll pass,” Neal retorted.

Dave rolled his eyes. “What’s your favorite fantasy, Zak?”

“Being tops in the ratings?” The producer grinned at Chris. “Oh yeah, that one already came true.”

“C’mon, I told you mine,” Dave coaxed.

Zak spread his full house out on the table, eliciting groans from the other three men. “I’ve always thought it would be hot to make love on a beach somewhere, Hawaii maybe? You know, like that old movie, lying in the surf, the waves washing over your bodies...”

“Getting sand in uncomfortable places...” Dave chuckled as he shuffled the cards. “How about you, Chris?” he asked, offering the deck to the blond. “What’s your fantasy?”

Chris cut the cards and handed them back before answering. “I’d have to say finding a relationship like the one my parents shared,” he said slowly. “They were married for thirty years, and I think their love only got stronger over time.”

“You’re such a hopeless romantic,” Zak grinned.

Dave started dealing around the table. “Got to ask women out more often if you expect to find someone, Chris.”

Glancing at Neal, Chris flushed slightly. He’d never consciously tried to keep his preference for men a secret, but if Neal hadn’t known, chances were Dave and Zak didn’t either, and

he didn't want to hide it from them. "Not much interested in women, actually," he admitted.

Zak pumped his fist in the air and crowed. "Hah! Pay up, Davey!"

Chris stared at his friends in disbelief. "You bet on whether or not I'm gay?" His gaze returned to Neal in consternation. "Were you in on this too?"

"Fuck, no," Neal insisted, glaring at the other two men, bothered as much by the idea of their discussing Chris behind his back as by the implication he might have broken his friend's confidence. "When the fuck did this start?"

"I don't know, a while back I said something to Zak about Chris not dating, and Zak said something like, 'yeah, women or men either', and we just... hey, you know it doesn't matter to us either way, right?" Dave assured Chris. "Any more than it matters about Neal."

"It matters to me – you owe me twenty bucks," Zak protested.

Reassured by his friends' easy acceptance, Chris chuckled. "I love you guys, too – in a strictly platonic way, of course."

"So that just leaves you, Neal," Dave added. "What's your fantasy?"

Neal swallowed down his response to Chris's words. He couldn't remember the last time anyone had said them to him, let alone meant them, and he found himself wondering what it would be like to hear Chris say them without qualification. The thought shocked him. Ever since the night Chris had come out to him, he'd found himself imagining his friend touching himself, pleasuring himself – he'd even imagined himself touching Chris, but love? He glanced up to see the other three men looking at him expectantly. "I don't have any fantasies left," he snapped, unnerved by the unexpected emotion.

He could feel the warmth of Chris's gaze like a physical touch, stirring him, and he forced himself not to look up, afraid of what he might reveal to those concerned blue eyes. "Except proving

once and for all that I am, in fact, the best poker player of us all,” he added in a lighter voice, gathering up his cards.

“It would be a good idea to start winning some of the pots, then,” Dave joked.

Zak chuckled, “Talk about the impossible dream....”

The play went on, and Neal won some hands, though not enough to fulfill his supposed fantasy – a greater accomplishment than it appeared, since his attention wasn’t on his bets. He contributed enough clever remarks to the conversation to keep it from becoming obvious that his mind was elsewhere, but he couldn’t prevent his thoughts from straying back to Chris, trying to pinpoint the moment his feelings had changed from friendship to something more. Sure, he’d found himself staying home more evenings lately, stretched out on the couch listening to the show. He’d told himself it was to see how Chris handled the questions from gay listeners, which had increased as it became known that unlike Estrela, he was open to those kinds of calls. More and more, though, Neal had found himself just listening to the sound of Chris’s voice, husky and intimate. Before long, his hand would drift down to unbutton his jeans, stroking himself, picturing Chris touching him, sucking him, lying naked beneath him begging to be fucked. Now, though, his eyes kept returning to Chris’s forearms resting on the table, imagining the feel of that soft golden hair beneath his fingertips as he explored Chris’s lean body, of pushing him back on the couch and tasting him everywhere, of teaching him personally all the pleasures they’d only talked about.

Maybe he hadn’t done as good a job as he’d thought of concealing his distraction, because when Chris and Dave left at the end of the game, Zak stayed, snagging another beer from the fridge and straddling one of the kitchen chairs as Neal loaded the dishwasher. The producer took a long drink before pointing the neck of the bottle at his friend.

“Now, give. You’ve been acting strange all afternoon. What’s the problem?”

“No problem, other than never being able to win a hand from you.”

“Chris will have better luck with his fantasy coming true than you will...” Something flickered in Neal’s eyes and Zak sat forward in concern. “Neal? Are you bothered that Chris is gay? That he never told you?”

“Oh, he told me – the night he asked me for my help.”

“And is that a problem?”

Neal plopped onto a chair opposite Zak. “No, it’s not a problem! Not the way you’re thinking, anyway. I just ... ” He ran his hand through his dark curls in exasperation. “I can’t stop thinking about him, Zak.”

The producer whistled softly. “You ... and Chris? Does he know?”

Neal shook his head. “I didn’t know myself until this afternoon, not really.”

“But that’s great! So what’s bothering you?”

“You heard him this afternoon – he’s looking for a relationship like his parents had. I’ve never had a relationship that lasted more than two dates in my life. What do I have to offer him?”

Privately, Zak thought the two of them would be perfect for each other, but Neal obviously wasn’t ready to believe that yet. “Have you talked to him about it?”

“We haven’t really talked since the night he asked for my help. He’s just so damn – ” Neal broke off. He wasn’t sure if Zak realized just how inexperienced their friend really was, and it didn’t seem like it was his place to tell him. “He came to me because of how much I sleep around. How do I approach him without making him feel like he’s just the next notch on my bedpost?”

“You’d be lucky to have any bedpost left at all,” Zak quipped, ducking as Neal threw a fake punch at him. “Okay, sorry, that was a low blow. I don’t know what to tell you, though, Neal, unless...” he trailed off, a smile spreading slowly across his face. “If you want to know how to seduce Chris, then ask Chris.”

"I already told you I – " Neal stared at Zak uneasily. "Are you saying I should call into the show?"

"Why not? Who can tell you better than Chris himself what he likes?"

"That's – it would never work. He'd recognize my voice and think it was a joke."

"Not if you use your bedroom voice," Zak insisted.

"My *what*?"

"I've been to clubs with you, remember? When you see someone that catches your interest, your voice changes – it gets lower, and slower. You might not even realize you're doing it." The confusion in Neal's eyes argued that he hadn't. "But I guarantee Chris won't recognize you if you use it."

"If he finds out, he'll kill me! And how can he not, if I do exactly what he tells me?"

"So embellish his advice a little so it's not as obvious. Anyway, if it works, you can both have a good laugh over it later."

And if it doesn't? Neal thought to himself. *It could cost me his friendship as well as his love.* Still, in the end, he knew he had to risk it. He wasn't sure how long he could keep up the façade of 'just friends' anyway. Snapping some night and making a pass at Chris would be even worse. And waiting until someone else noticed what he had only begun to see, watching someone else catch Chris's regard and initiate him into the pleasures Neal longed to share with him, would be unbearable. Whatever it took to get Chris to believe he was serious, he'd do it.

"Hi, Chris, my name is Pam and I really love your show,"

"Thanks, Pam, what can I help you with tonight?"

"Well, my boyfriend, he – he wants me talk dirty to him when we make love, and I just can't do it."

"It makes you feel uncomfortable?"

“Yeah, I guess – I mean, I was taught that nice girls don’t talk that way, you know?”

“So you never use that kind of language when you’re not making love?”

“Oh, well, sometimes a word will slip out when I’m really upset about something.” Chris smiled at the guilty giggle in the woman’s voice.

“That could be just what your lover finds arousing about it, Pam – the idea that you’re so excited you lose control, that he can make you lose control because of what he’s doing to you.”

“I never thought of it like that...”

“Instead of worrying about talking dirty, why not start with just being more vocal about what you like? Let your lover know how much he’s pleasing you by letting him hear you sigh and moan. Tell him what it feels like when he touches you, when he enters you. That by itself will probably be enough to turn him on. Then, when you’re comfortable with that, try using whatever terms come naturally to describe what he’s doing, what you want him to do. Don’t force it – you don’t want to sound like a bad porn movie – just say whatever feels right. Don’t censor yourself, just let it out. Besides making your partner feel like the world’s greatest lover, by telling him what you want, your lovemaking will probably get even better for you too.”

“Mmmnn, I like the sound of that! Thanks, Chris!”

“My pleasure, Pam.... Hi, welcome to the show, how can I help you?”

Neal swallowed, trying to find the nerve to speak. He’d never had trouble approaching anyone who’d caught his interest as a potential lover, but it had never meant this much to him before. It had been bad enough dealing with Zak’s teasing innuendos when the producer had screened his call. Listening to the last few questions, imagining Chris’s husky voice moaning and whispering what he wanted Neal to do to him, already had him aching hard. He didn’t think he’d have any trouble keeping his voice deep and sultry, if he could just start talking. He wondered if this was how

Chris had felt, that first night he took over the show. Thinking of Chris's courage in overcoming his fears, despite his own limited experience, gave Neal the determination to continue with this crazy plan.

"Hello, Chris, my name is Thomas," Neal began, using the middle name he didn't think the other man had ever heard. "I have a friend, someone I work with – we've worked together for years, actually. We're good friends, in a casual way, but lately I've found myself wanting more than just friendship. I want – I'd like to try a serious relationship with him, but I don't know how to approach him. I'm afraid if I just tell him outright, I'll either scare him off, or he'll think it's some kind of joke." Neal held his breath waiting for Chris's reply.

Something about the caller's slow, deep voice touched a chord with Chris. He felt a flicker of arousal lick at him, imagining that voice lost in the kind of passion he'd encouraged his last caller to express. Ever since his discussion with Neal, Chris was finding it harder to be satisfied with his own touch. He'd even started to think about venturing into the dating scene again. Dave was right, he'd never find the relationship he longed for if he didn't start taking some risks. Thinking about how he'd like to be approached, he told the caller, "It sounds like you might have to woo your friend, Thomas. One of the ways my parents kept the spark in their relationship was by writing each other notes – nothing long or elaborate, just little love notes my mother would drop in my father's lunchbox every day, or cards my father would buy for no reason with a few words of love written inside. Why not try leaving your friend some love notes? Leave them anonymously at first to catch his interest, and be sincere in what they say. Maybe leave him a few small gifts – nothing expensive, just personal things that show you've paid attention to what interests him. Let him know what attracts you to him, what you feel for him."

Leave it to Chris to think of something so romantic! "But once I do that, how do I let him know who I am?" Neal asked. "After a build-up like that, just signing my name to a note would seem like a letdown."

“Not if he feels for you what you hope he feels – but if you want a romantic gesture, how about a treasure hunt? When you’re ready to let him know who you are, leave him a series of notes, each one with a clue to lead him to the next note. Maybe put a photo with each clue, a part of your body in a sensuous pose – see if he can start to guess who you are from the photos. Intrigue him, allure him, and when he finds the final clue, you’ll be there to give him his reward.”

“You really think that will work?” Neal asked, almost as nervous about putting a plan into action as he’d been about placing the call.

“If your friend has a romantic bone in his body, this should snare him,” Chris assured the caller.

“Thanks, Chris, if you say so, I’ll give it a try.”

“Call back and let us know how it works out, Thomas.”

“Oh, trust me, you’ll be the first to know.”

THE first note showed up in the stack of mail Trish handed to Chris a week later. He’d gotten his share of fan mail since taking over the show, ranging from requests for the potato salad recipe he’d mentioned on one call to the occasional plea for a personal response to a question the listener was too shy or nervous to ask on the air, but this note was different. There was no return address and no signature, just a snippet of poetry: “*All love that has not friendship for its base, is like a mansion built upon the sand.*” Beneath it was written, “I wish I could say I loved you from the first moment I saw you, but love has grown over time. Maybe it’s sweeter that way – I don’t think it could be any stronger.”

Chris might have dismissed it as a joke, but he found another note two days later, leaning against the monitor of his PC, wrapped around a spray of jonquils. “You mentioned once that these were your favorite flower,” the note said. “Maybe that’s a good sign, since in the language of flowers, jonquils mean ‘hoping for love’. I hope I’m the one you’ve been waiting for.” He ran a finger over the bright petals, recognizing the effort it must have taken to find

the blossoms out of season. No one would have gone to so much trouble for a joke. He asked around the office, but no one could tell him who had put the flowers on his desk.

He found the third note in Friday's take-out lunch. The delivery girl told him a man had paid for the meal and asked if he could slip a card into the bag, but she hadn't seen him – the cashier at the sandwich shop told her about it when she picked up the last round of orders. The note said "*Love is not all – it is not meat nor drink* – but just in case it's true that the way to a man's heart is through his stomach, I thought this couldn't hurt." Chris couldn't help but grin as he bit into his pastrami sandwich – his mysterious admirer had a sense of humor, too.

He'd kept the first note to himself, afraid to find out it was just an elaborate practical joke, but as they'd continued coming and he sensed the sincerity behind them, Chris grew determined to find out who they were from. He didn't recognize the handwriting, and other than their all arriving at work, there was no hint to the identity of the sender.

"At first I thought it might be one of you jokers, but you'd never be able to keep quiet this long, and anyway, they feel too honest to be a put-on," Chris said at the next Sunday poker game. "It has to be someone at the station, but I can't imagine who it is."

"It wouldn't have to be someone from the station," Dave objected. "Whoever it is might just be using someone at the station to help get the notes to you. I bet Trish would be willing to play Cupid if she trusted the guy."

"How do you even know it's a guy? It could be Trish herself," Zak countered.

"Trish just got engaged to that Microsoft engineer she's been dating," Chris replied. "Anyway, the girl from the sandwich shop said it was a man who gave them the note."

"It could be a listener, someone who fell in love with your voice and your face on the posters," Neal suggested.

"There was that caller a few weeks ago who asked about wooing someone he worked with," Chris mused. "It's as if he was using my own advice on me."

“Maybe someone else heard the show and the call gave them the courage to try something they’d always wanted to do,” Zak said. “Anyway, is it working? Would you be willing to give this guy a chance?”

Chris smiled as he collected the contents of the pot. “He’s definitely piqued my interest,” he admitted.

“I can’t believe you talked me into doing this,” Zak complained as he fiddled with the camera setting.

“This whole thing was your idea in the first place. If Chris wants sensuous photos of my body parts, you’re going to be the one taking them,” Neal insisted. Stripping off his jeans and shirt, he arranged himself on the deep blue bedsheets, clad in only a pair of tight-fitting black knit boxers. Just the thought of Chris lying there with him someday was enough to start his cock hardening.

“At least you know it’s working,” Zak said encouragingly as he peered through the viewfinder. “Chris is definitely intrigued.”

Neal couldn’t argue with that – he’d seen for himself how eagerly Chris anticipated each new note. He only wished he could be sure of Chris’s reaction once he knew who was sending them. Would he believe that Neal was serious? Would he be able to accept his promiscuous past, or would he decide that he couldn’t trust someone with his track record to remain faithful? Neal hadn’t even considered picking anyone up since he’d recognized his feelings for Chris, getting more satisfaction from his own hand accompanied by Chris’s voice on the radio than he could from any meaningless fuck. But would Chris believe that? He’d just have to hope that if these photos really led Chris to him, he’d be able to convince him to give them a chance together.

In the end, they settled on a half-dozen shots – images of the dark hair dusting Neal’s calves, his parted thighs, the fingers of one hand teasing a nipple, the curve of his back, and (to Zak’s loud protests) the swell of his bare ass. The last picture was a close-up of Neal’s parted lips. “And if these shots aren’t enough to whet Chris’s interest, then he’s been wrong all along and he’s not gay

after all,” the producer asserted. “Hell, even I have to admit you look good.”

“If this doesn’t work, I may take you up on that,” Neal deadpanned, breaking into laughter at the mock-panic on Zak’s face. “Don’t worry, your heterosexuality is safe with me,” he promised, his expression growing serious. “But if this doesn’t work...”

“It’ll work,” Zak reassured his friend. “How can it not? You’re giving Chris just what he asked for.”

“AND that’s the last call for this week,” Zak announced as Chris arched in his chair, his hands rubbing at the small of his back. “Here’s hoping you all have a great weekend, and don’t forget to tune in again next Monday at nine for more *‘Making Love’* ... with Christopher Booth!”

“I thought this week would never end,” Chris groaned once he was sure they were off the air. Privately, he had to admit that not getting another note from his mysterious admirer all week had made it seem twice as long.

Zak bit back a grin at the dejection in his friend’s voice. He didn’t enjoy seeing Chris disappointed, but it had taken all his persuasion to convince Neal that making Chris wait to hear from him again would strengthen his interest, and it was sweet to be proven right. “So, got any plans for the weekend?” he asked as they walked down the hall to pick up Chris’s coat from his office.

“Nothing special,” Chris admitted, his voice trailing off when he spotted the envelope leaning against his PC. He couldn’t stop himself from reaching for it and breaking open the flap, dropping into his chair as he quickly scanned the contents.

The expressions flickering over his friend’s face as he read the note and then turned to the second item in the envelope were priceless. “Is it another note from the same guy?” Zak asked, though he’d propped the envelope there himself during an earlier commercial break.

“Yeah, I – he – ” Completely flustered, Chris held the two pieces of paper out for Zak to examine.

“*By now you’re probably wondering who I am,*” Zak read aloud. “That’s the understatement of the year, isn’t it?” he grinned at Chris. “*“Can you wait one more day to find me? I’ll leave you a few clues to help you figure it out. Here’s the first – it may be a bit of a cliché, but just like we never visit the tourist sites in our own city, I didn’t see what was right under my eyes. I hope you’re more observant than I was. I won’t make you walk all 605 feet – just ask at the window at noon tomorrow.”*” He glanced at the photo he’d taken of Neal’s legs before handing the papers back to the older man. “It’s a scavenger hunt!”

“It’s got to be that guy who called a few weeks ago,” Chris muttered, staring at the picture of firm, shapely calves – male calves – dusted with a light coat of dark hair.

“Are you going to do it? Follow the clues, I mean?” Zak asked.

“How can I not, after he went to all this trouble? I just hope...” Chris frowned, still focused on the photo. “This first clue has to be the Space Needle,” he mused. “That’s not too far from my apartment. What would it hurt?” he asked, his uncertain gaze meeting Zak’s. “I mean, it’s a public place in the middle of the afternoon. I can always walk away once I meet the guy if he isn’t who – what I expected, right?”

“Sure you can,” Zak agreed. “You can stop any time you feel uncomfortable, but I think you’d always second-guess yourself if you don’t at least give this guy a chance.”

“Yeah,” Chris said quietly, sliding the papers back into the envelope and tucking it into his pocket. He knew he’d find it hard to sleep tonight, anticipation already quivering through him at the hope of meeting someone he could truly care about, someone who would offer him the same commitment in return. “Wish me luck?”

“You know I do,” Zak acknowledged as they headed toward the elevators. *I wish you both luck*, he added silently to himself.

CHRIS kicked off the covers with a sigh, reaching again for the photo on the bedside table. In the dim glow that filtered in from

the streetlights, he traced a finger over the curve of the man's calf muscle, his mind conjuring an image of the rest of the body he dreamed of. *Don't let your hopes run away with you*, he told himself firmly, but he couldn't resist running his fingers gently up his own leg, wondering if the other man was lying awake too, thinking about him. His cock hardened again as he thought about everything Neal had described to him, about sharing that intimacy for the first time. It had been so long since anyone had touched him. Could he really make himself that vulnerable again? Would the other man understand that he needed more than just a quick physical release, that he wanted, needed something more? Something real, a future with the two of them together, sharing a love like the one his parents had known? His hand closed around his cock, his back arching as he bit his lip, afraid to hope that tomorrow it would be another hand touching him, another body warm against his, one who would cherish his heart as well.

The next morning Chris forced himself to follow his usual routine, shopping for groceries and cleaning the apartment before taking a shower. He stood naked in front of his closet for so long that he finally grabbed the two nearest hangers and slammed it shut, pulling on the denim shirt and khaki pants with shaking hands. When he stood on the street outside the loft, he calmed himself with several deep, slow breaths, glad for the cool air on his heated skin. He debated walking the few miles to the Space Needle, but he didn't know if there would be more clues after that, so he finally decided to drive. Pulling into a parking lot near the tower a little before noon, he spent the next ten minutes walking back and forth on the sidewalk before he could talk himself into going inside and approaching the ticket window.

"My name is Chris Booth," he told the young woman behind the glass, feeling incredibly awkward. "I think you may have something for me?"

"Oh, Mr. Booth, I'm a big fan of your show," the woman smiled at him. "Would you mind – could I ask for your autograph?"

"Sure, Kelly," he answered, reading her nametag as he scrawled his signature on the slip of paper she offered him. It

wasn't the first time he'd been asked for his autograph; though he still hadn't gotten used to it, it no longer filled him with embarrassment the way it had in the beginning. Feeling a little more confident, he slid the paper back to her and took the envelope with his name on it she handed him in return, along with a ticket for the observation deck. "It's on the house," she told him with a wink.

Chris blamed the elevator's rapid ascent for way his stomach quavered as he stepped into the glass-lined panorama of the O deck. He walked around the circular platform, looking in vain for a quiet corner, before stopping in front of a cloud-wreathed view of Mt. Rainier and opening the envelope.

The second photo was of the same long legs, higher up this time, the thighs parted in invitation but cut off before they reached their juncture. Chris felt himself stiffening against the zipper of his pants and quickly covered the enticing picture with the second sheet of paper.

"I hope you won't think I'm getting fresh if I toss you another suggestion," he read. "I'm not fishing for compliments, but I hope you like what you see and want to take this further."

Chris had to smile at the bad puns. The clue obviously referred to the Pike Place Fish Market. Pocketing the note and the photo, he rode the elevator back down and reclaimed his car, heading south to the popular shopping area. Saturday afternoon crowds filled the parking lots and he had to circle a few times before he found a vacant spot. Heading to the distinctive store underneath the Market clock, he queued up in the line snaking around the iced display cases, wondering how he would find the next note in this chaos.

He needn't have worried. No sooner did he reach the front of the line than one of the counterman called out to him loudly.

"Well, look who the cat dragged in! Haven't seen you around here in way too long, Chris!"

"Hey, Kano," Chris greeted the younger man with a broad smile. "I know, with this new schedule it's been hard to get over here as often as I used to." Shopping there regularly for the

freshest fish in Seattle, he'd gotten to know several of the fishmarket's very personable staff long before he'd gone on the air.

"Speaking of cats, I'm surprised Shiloh hasn't kicked you out by now for neglecting her," the fishmonger grinned. Raising his voice, he shouted loudly enough for the entire store to hear, "May I have your attention, please? Today we have with us a very special customer, the well-known radio talk-show host Christopher Booth!"

A spontaneous round of applause broke out among the customers, and several of the counterwomen broke into a loud chant of "Chris! Chris! Chris!" until the blond's cheeks were flaming. Taking pity on his friend, Kano grabbed his arm and pulled him behind the counter until the commotion died down.

"I'd send you something to take home to her, but I have a feeling you're not heading straight home, are you?" the counterwoman grinned.

"What do you know about – " Chris raised his hands automatically as Kano lobbed a paper-wrapped parcel at him, fragments of ice still clinging to it. Catching it quickly, he wasn't surprised to see a familiar envelope taped to the top.

"Enjoy it with my compliments, and come back some time when you can stay and talk," Kano urged. "I expect to hear all the details." He pushed Chris toward an employee entrance that let him out into a quieter back corridor of the Market.

Finding an unoccupied bench, Chris unwrapped the paper to find a tray of supremely fresh sashimi, complete with chopsticks and wasabi. Popping a slice of ahi into his mouth and humming with pleasure at the silky texture against his tongue, he opened the envelope to pull out his next clue.

His eye was drawn immediately to the erotic image of a smooth, shapely chest and the fingers tugging at a distended nipple. The moan it surprised out of him was one of pure desire. Glancing around quickly to be sure there was no one close enough to have heard him, he touched the photo reverently, his mouth suddenly dry. *Please let this be real*, he thought, feeling his own chest tighten in reaction beneath his chambray shirt. He could

almost feel those fingers touching him in return, almost taste the pebbled flesh of that nipple under his mouth. Drawing a shaky breath, he glanced at the note, hoping the next clue might lead him to the man he was more and more anxious to meet.

“Are you getting warmer? I am,” the note read. “Finish your fish, then look for the Mariners next. Pitcher or catcher – are you game to find out?”

A wave of heat washing through him, Chris couldn’t help but look around again, wondering if the note’s author was somewhere near, watching him as he found each clue. This one must be directing him to Safeco field, but as for the rest... Neal had explained the terms to him, and the thought of either was as arousing as the suggestive photo that accompanied it. Refusing to allow the increasingly insistent demands of his body to overwhelm him, Chris ate the rest of his lunch slowly, but he couldn’t stop the images from filling his mind – images of sinking into his lover’s tight body, or being filled by his lover’s hard cock, feeling it stroking over his sweet spot as they moved together...

Shaking his head at his own wayward thoughts, he stood and tossed the empty carton into a trash can before hurrying back to his car. The temperature was dropping, the sky turning overcast as the sun sank toward the Sound on his right while he drove south along the docks.

NEAL paced his apartment, glancing at his watch for what had to be the fifteenth time in the last hour. Chris should be just about finishing lunch by now, he knew, since Kano had called from Pike Place Market to let him know he’d arrived. Dropping onto the sofa, he wished he knew what the other man was thinking as he found each clue. Zak had told him how excited Chris had been when he’d found the note last night. It had been difficult for Neal to sleep after that, teetering between anticipation and anxiety over what tonight would bring.

Stirring restlessly, Neal pictured Chris lying in bed last night looking at the picture he’d included with the first clue, the one of his legs. Chris’s legs were covered with golden hair, he knew from

seeing him in cut-offs over the summer. Neal could envision their legs tangling together, light hair rubbing against dark, feel it rasping against his hips as Chris wrapped his legs around him. His cock throbbed at the image and he spread his thighs, just like in the second picture. Would Chris part his thighs for him that way, letting Neal's hands explore him? Would he let Neal's fingers comb through the heavier coating of hair on his chest, let him tug at the small pink nipples the way he was pulling his own in the photo Kano had just delivered?

Neal's hand drifted to cover his hardened shaft, cupping it as tried to visualize Chris's reaction to the next two photos. His own reaction was becoming more forceful as he imagined rolling Chris over to kiss his way down the powerful planes of his back, following the curve of his spine until he reached the swell of his ass. He could almost hear Chris moan when he'd part his cheeks to rim him, using his lips and tongue to relax him, wet him, open him to his fingers and finally, when he'd stretched and prepared him completely, sinking into that tight, sweet hole for the first time...

His grip tightened instinctively when his cock jumped against his palm. Neal knew it wouldn't take much to bring himself off, but with the prospect of being with Chris finally in reach, the touch of his own hand would be a poor substitute. He'd rather wait for tonight, when he hoped he'd be able to have what he really wanted. Sighing uncomfortably, he stretched his legs out on the couch and tried to will the hours to pass more quickly.

THE sky was a leaden grey by the time Chris parked in a deserted lot outside Safeco field. He thrust his hands in the pockets of his khaki's to keep them warm as he walked toward the circular main entrance, the pull of the fabric stimulating his already-sensitized groin. His arousal had subsided slightly as he'd driven from the Market, but even the growing cold wasn't enough to keep him from quickening in anticipation of the next clue – and the photo that would accompany it. At the will-call window, he found the expected envelope wedged beneath the metal grate. It

took all his self-discipline to wait until he was back in his car to tear it open.

“Would you go down for me?” the note asked. *“Down 36 feet, more or less? If the tour’s getting old, don’t give up now – like the pioneers, you’re getting closer to your goal.”* Unlike the earlier notes, Chris didn’t immediately know where this one was directing him. He read the clue several times, so focused on trying to solve the puzzle that he forgot at first to look at the enclosed photo. It was nearly enough to drive all thoughts about the clue out of his head. His mystery man was lying on his stomach against midnight-blue sheets, the picture cropped at the shoulders and waist to show only the smooth planes of his back. Closing his eyes, Chris could imagine spooning against that warm skin, kissing his way toward the dimples at the base of the arched spine, slipping his hand under the tantalizing black waistband he could just make out at the bottom of the photo.

Forcing his attention back to the note, Chris examined it again, hoping for inspiration to strike. What would happen if he couldn’t find the next clue? Would his pursuer think he had given up or lost interest? Did he even know whether Chris was looking for him? He read the note again in growing desperation. The only guess he could make was that it was referring to Pioneer Square. So far the clues had been leading him steadily south, but that was back in the direction he’d just come from. Did that mean his guess was wrong, or were the clues leading him in circles? He couldn’t sit here all night trying to decide – it was already starting to get dark. He’d just have to head for Pioneer Square and hope that something there would point him in the right direction. Glad the Prius had a full tank of gas, Chris started the engine and headed back north.

He was beginning to second-guess himself by the time he pulled into a lot near Pioneer Square. Turning his collar up against the increasingly cold wind, he crossed First Avenue to stand under the iron pergola, glancing around for something to guide him. His gaze rested on the fancifully carved totem pole in the center of the small park before it was caught by an advertisement on a nearby building.

“Roam the subterranean passages that once were the main roadways and first-floor storefronts of old downtown Seattle. Let our Seattle Underground Tour guides regale you with humorous stories our pioneers didn’t want you to hear.” Sure this must be the clue the note was referring to, Chris breathed a sigh of relief and walked across the cobblestoned pavement to the ticket booth.

“The last tour has just started, but if you don’t mind hurrying to catch up with them, I’ll let you in for half price,” the young girl in turn-of-the-century costume offered. Accepting gratefully, Chris pulled some bills from his wallet and followed her directions down an uneven stone staircase to a dimly lit, brick-lined chamber. He could hear voices, presumably the tour guide and his group, echoing down a shadowy corridor to one side, but his attention was caught by a rickety wooden wall that had been covered over the years with a variety of posters and graffiti. Pinned between a faded handbill advertising a bounty of ten cents for each dead rat delivered to City Hall and a poster for a modern grunge band, Chris spotted a familiar envelope.

Retrieving it gratefully, Chris sprinted back up the stairs and outside, taking a seat on one of the wrought-iron benches facing the small park. Ripping open the envelope, he pulled out the note and the photo, his breath catching in his throat at the image: the perfect, taut globes of a man’s buttocks, legs spread wide in invitation. A flare of desire shot through him, so raw it shocked him with its intensity. The other photos had been as artistic as they were erotic, but this – this was pure sex, unadulterated carnality. Chris ached to run his tongue between those firm cheeks to taste their muskiness, to sink his teeth into that muscle, to sink his cock into that tight sheath. His own ass clenched at the thought, and he remembered how it had felt to stretch himself with his fingers, imagining this man – who was going to be his lover, he no longer had any doubt – stretching him that way, taking him, claiming him. He bent his head to his knees, his breath rasping from his throat, so hard that for a moment he thought he might come just from his own fevered thoughts.

When he had sucked enough cold air into his lungs to allow himself to sit back up without feeling as if he were going to burst, Chris unfolded the note, blinking until the words came into focus.

"It's too cold for our first date to be a picnic, or I would ask you to meet me here, where beauty thrives even in the coldest season. Who expects flowers to bloom in winter, or friendship to blossom into love?" Chris had no doubt at all where this clue was leading him. He'd spotlighted the University of Washington Arboretum's winter gardens in his last *'Single in Seattle'* feature. With the surge of lust the photo had incited, he'd hoped this would be the last clue, but the note made it clear he wouldn't find his lover in the gardens. Hurrying back to his car, he headed north again, hoping the hunt wouldn't last much longer. He didn't know how much more he could take.

Dusk was falling by the time he reached Washington Park, and a few scattered snowflakes were starting to flutter from the darkening sky. He'd broken the speed limit the last few miles on Madison, afraid he'd arrive after the gates were locked for the night, but they still stood open when he arrived. Fortunately the winter garden wasn't far from the main entrance. He passed a few joggers and cyclists as he trotted up the trail, but the park was emptying for the evening, and the clearing of winter-flowering plants enclosed in a copse of fir and cedar trees was silent except for the trill of birdsong. Here and there, signboards listed the plants found in each bed, and at the third marker he found the envelope he'd been expecting. Dropping onto a nearby bench, he opened it.

"I've kept you waiting a long time, haven't I, Chris? I hope you can forgive me, especially if I promise no more games. Meet me at the Blue Moon jazz club on Pine Street, just off Broadway. This time I'll be waiting for you." The last photo was a close-up of a pair of thin, perfectly curved lips. Chris could make out a hint of dark stubble lining the upper arc, and just the tip of a pink tongue peeping out to moisten them. He licked his own suddenly dry lips, then touched a finger to them and pressed it to the image. "Wait for me," he said out loud. "I'm on my way." A flurry of snowflakes danced around him as he raced back to his car.

The Blue Moon wasn't as large and loud as some of the clubs Chris had visited when he first moved to Seattle. Located in a block of Capitol Hill that contained several small art galleries and

other shops, it attracted a slightly older clientele, and Chris saw as many mixed as same-sex couples sitting at tables or dancing to the trio that played at the opposite end of the room from the bar. Still, since it was Saturday night, the club was crowded, and it took Chris a few minutes to catch the bartender's attention and order a Hefeweizen. He glanced around while he waited, trying to calm his racing pulse when he didn't immediately spot anyone he recognized. *Maybe he's not here yet*, Chris rationalized, his eyes making another sweep of the club as the bartender set his beer in front of him. *Maybe he's in the men's room. Maybe* – His gaze was caught and held by an attractive dark-haired man seated at the other end of the bar. Smiling, the man raised his drink in a silent toast, then stood and worked his way across the crowded room to Chris's side.

"You look like a man who's looking for someone," the stranger said, his voice rich with humor. "Could I be the one you're looking for? I've been waiting for you."

Chris swallowed, feeling suddenly nervous. He'd been so certain the notes had come from someone at the station, someone he knew, and he was sure he'd never met this man before. But he said he'd been waiting for him... Smiling hesitantly, Chris nodded. "I guess maybe you are," he said softly, extending his hand. "I'm Chris."

"Matt," the other man answered, taking Chris's hand in a strong grip. "I know who you are, you know. I've been listening to you ever since you started on the air. In a way, I feel like I know you already."

NEAL awoke with a start to a darkened apartment. Glancing at the clock, he jumped to his feet, cursing. After how little he'd slept the night before, he must have dozed off. Chris was probably at the club already, wondering where he was. *Shitfuckdamn!* How long had Chris been waiting? How much longer would he wait before he started to think he'd been stood up, or that the whole thing had been an elaborate practical joke? Neal knew in his gut that he'd never get another chance like this with Chris. Pulling on his jacket, he grabbed his keys from the table and ran out the door,

skidding to a stop when he hit the sidewalk. Everything around him was coated in white. Snowflakes swirled thickly in the air and covered his car in an icy blanket. Losing precious minutes clearing the windows and mirrors before sliding behind the wheel, he found the pavement too slippery to drive as fast as his nerves screamed at him to go. It was nearly half an hour later before he found a spot to park the Miata and walked into the club, praying that Chris would still be there.

Chris took another sip of beer as he listened to Matt describing his job as a photographer – “freelance mostly, though I do sell pretty regularly to a couple of monthly regional magazines” – trying to still the nervous roil in his stomach. This was what he’d been searching for, not just this afternoon but all his adult life. It was no wonder he was nervous, but he wasn’t going to let that stop him from taking a chance with this man who seemed to be everything he’d dreamed of. His eyes fell to Matt’s lips, comparing them to his memory of the last photo that was still tucked into his back pocket. The shape seemed the same, the hint of a five-o’clock shadow accenting the upper lip, the tongue moistening the bottom lip as he spoke...

“Do I have something caught between my teeth?” The chuckle in Matt’s voice reclaimed Chris’s attention from his reverie. “The way you’re staring at my mouth...”

“Oh, no I – I was just admiring your lips,” Chris stammered truthfully.

Matt laughed, leaning forward to brush a finger against the side of Chris’s mouth. “You’re certainly straightforward – I like that in a man. And your mouth is pretty damn tempting itself.”

Neal was stamping the snow off his feet at the front entrance when he spotted Chris at the bar, seated next to another man he didn’t recognize. Their heads were bent together, well into each other’s personal space, and even from where he stood, Neal could see the flush of color that tinged Chris’s cheeks. As he watched, the other man laughed at something Chris said and his fingers caressed the side of the blond’s mouth in an unquestionably intimate gesture. Neal’s gut clenched in panic. This was his worst

fear come true – he'd waited too long, and someone else was taking Chris away from him. *Be damned if he was going to let that happen!* Threading his way through the maze of tables and couples between him and his goal, Neal approached from behind Chris's back, clapping his friend on the shoulder. "Chris! It's good to see you getting out for a change!"

Pulling away from Matt's touch, Chris pivoted in his seat, his pulse racing at the shock of hearing Neal's voice. His eyes flickered between the two men, then his back straightened and he nodded at Neal with a tight smile. "Wasn't expecting to see you here, Neal."

"I can tell ... introduce me to your friend?"

Chris glanced between the two again and cleared his throat. "Matt, this is Neal Kenelly. He – we work together at the station. Neal, this is Matt –" he fought down a wave of panic as his mind refused to supply the other man's last name.

"Matt Petersen," his companion broke in, extending his hand. "Pleased to meet you, Neal."

Neal shook hands briefly, his gaze lingering as he tried to decide if this was someone who'd appeal to Chris. Tall, with a build that hinted he worked out regularly, dark hair cut shorter than Neal's own, hazel eyes that met Neal's in frank acknowledgement of his challenge. Before Chris, Neal might have made a play for the other man himself; right now, he wouldn't be able to get rid of him fast enough. "So tell me, Matt, have you known Chris for long?"

The sarcastic drawl in his friend's voice set a knot of pain throbbing in Chris's chest. *What the fuck was Neal doing?* There was no mistaking the blatant interest in his eyes as he looked Matt over. Disillusionment flared into anger and Chris pushed to his feet, interrupting Matt's response as he seized Neal's arm. "Excuse us for a minute, will you, Matt?" he muttered. "Neal and I have to talk – about work," he added, dragging the other man with him, far enough away that their voices wouldn't carry back to the bar.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” Chris hissed at Neal, his pulse pounding. “I thought you were my friend! I don’t care if you fuck someone different every night of the week, but do you have to go after the first man to be interested in me in years?”

Startled by the vehemence of Chris’s attack, Neal could only stammer in response. “Chris, I – you only met this guy, you can’t –

“The fuck I can’t! In case you hadn’t noticed, I’m way over twenty-one, and who I fuck is none of your god damned business! Now get the fuck out of here before I forget we’re supposed to be friends.”

Clenching his hands into fists to stop them from shaking, Chris stormed back to the bar and Matt’s interested gaze. “I’m sorry, would you mind if we went somewhere else?” he asked. “I don’t care where, I just have to get out of here.”

“Sure,” Matt shot a quick glance at Neal before rising and pulling on his coat. “My apartment’s only a few blocks away, we could go there if you’d like. I could open some wine and show you some of my photos.”

“I’d like that,” Chris agreed, refusing to look back as they headed toward the door. As soon as it closed behind them, Neal slumped into the seat Chris had vacated. Picking up the blond’s half-finished beer, he drained the glass, hoping that wouldn’t be as close as his lips would ever get to Chris’s. “Way to go, you fucked that up completely,” he groaned, burying his head in his hands.

The cold air outside felt good on Chris’s flushed skin as they headed toward Matt’s home, close enough for their hips to brush together as they walked. He would have liked to hold Matt’s hand, but he felt too unsure to reach for it. The other man had been open in expressing his attraction, but so far he hadn’t displayed any of the romance his notes had hinted at. Maybe he was just as nervous as Chris was himself. Taking a deep breath, Chris threaded his fingers into Matt’s, feeling a twinge of relief when his partner smiled at him and squeezed back.

Matt’s apartment on the upper floor of an Olive street high-rise was spacious and modern, but Chris barely had a chance to take off

his jacket and look around before he found himself pressed back against the doorframe being thoroughly kissed. Matt's lips were firm and demanding and Chris opened to them willingly, his eyes fluttering closed as the other man's tongue plundered his mouth. How long had it been since someone had kissed him this way? Most of the men he'd been with in his early days of experimentation hadn't been very interested in kissing, but Chris loved it. He followed Matt's tongue back into his mouth, doing some exploring of his own. They were both breathing heavily when Matt pulled back at last with a grin. "Been wanting to do that from the minute I saw you in the club," he said, leading them to a wide sofa overlooking a panoramic view of the city. "You are a very tempting man, Christopher Booth," Matt purred, settling Chris into a corner of the upholstery and bending over him to reclaim his mouth.

They kissed until their lips were swollen, but when Matt's fingers started to work open the buttons of his shirt, Chris sat up slightly and ran a hand through his hair. "I really would like to see some of your photos," he said, as nervous about what was coming next as he was longing for it. *There's no need to rush*, he told himself. *This isn't another one night stand with a man you'll never see again. You can take your time.*

If Matt was disappointed, he did a good job of hiding it. "Sure," he said, rising to open a cabinet under the entertainment system on one wall. "Here are a few albums for you to look through – go ahead and get started while I open that wine I promised you."

Chris's tumultuous nerves calmed quite a bit as the two of them sat on the sofa, sipping wine as they paged through the albums. Matt rested an arm over Chris's shoulders, their hips pressing together, his other hand tracing lightly over Chris's thigh when it wasn't turning a page or pointing out something about a particular picture.

"These are really good," Chris smiled at a group of young boys playing a pick-up basketball game in a neighborhood park, the focus on a young man watching them through the wire fence.

“You can just imagine him dreaming of becoming the next Michael Jordan or Ray Allen.”

“I like shooting candid, getting inside people’s heads,” Matt admitted, closing the album and cupping a large palm around Chris’s cheek. “I’d love to do a photo shoot of you,” he added in a husky voice before mating their lips again, holding Chris still as his other hand roamed down his side, over his khaki-covered thigh and up again, stroking his chest and moving once more toward his shirt buttons.

Instead of feeling aroused, Chris was beginning to feel trapped. This was all moving so quickly, and as much as the notes indicated Matt felt for him, Chris couldn’t yet feel the same emotional connection. Stalling for time, he broke free of the kiss, asking somewhat breathlessly, “Did you take the photos yourself, with a timer or something, or did you have someone take them for you?”

Blinking at the seeming *non sequitur*, Matt sat back slightly. “Which photos are those?”

“The photos – the ones of you. In the notes,” Chris stammered, a sick sensation growing in his chest as Matt continued to stare at him in confusion. “The notes you left for me,” he added, reaching into his back pocket to pull out the last envelope. A conviction that he had just made the biggest mistake of his life swept through him as he held out the photo, keeping back the note he was now sure this man hadn’t written.

Matt studied the close-up of a pair of lips that weren’t his own with a critical eye. “I would have used a different lens and tweaked the lighting a little,” he said, handing it back to Chris with a small smile. “I’m sure I’m going to regret admitting this, but I didn’t send you that photo.”

“Oh, shit,” Chris groaned, dropping his burning face into his hands. “I can’t believe I did this. I’m so sorry, Matt,” he raised his head, meeting the other man’s eyes and hoping he could keep from embarrassing himself even more by being sick. “I can’t do this. I thought you – I thought you were someone else, someone who – I didn’t mean to make you think I – I’d better leave,” he rose to his feet unsteadily, looking around in agitation for his coat.

“Hey, Chris, it’s okay,” Matt stood as well, clasping the blond’s shoulders and holding him still. “No harm, no foul. I’m sorry I’m not the guy you were looking for – whoever he is, he’s a very lucky man.”

Chris wasn’t sure afterward how he’d made his way out of Matt’s apartment, back to his snow-covered car, across town to his own loft. He felt as cold inside as the wind still moaning outside his windows as he huddled on his bed, Shiloh curled comfortably beside him, purring softly. “I fucked up,” he whispered as his fingers stroked through her long fur. “I fucked up everything.”

THE afternoon poker game was unusually quiet the next day. Lisette had prepared a variety of treats for the four men before heading out to spend the day shopping with friends, but Chris barely poked at the contents of his plate, and Neal admitted he was too hung over to even look at food. The conversation during the game itself was stilted, too. Chris was always the quietest of the group but today he was practically silent, hesitating over his discards until even easy-going Dave was tempted to tell him to just throw down a card already. Neal always had a ready comment when addressed, but Zak could see him watching Chris whenever the older man’s head was down, though he always looked away before the blond could notice his attention.

“Something’s wrong, isn’t it?” Dave asked quietly when he and Zak both headed into the kitchen for cold beers at the same time. “I’ve never won as many pots as I have today. Did they have a fight or something?”

“I don’t know, Davey, but I don’t think we ought to let on that we’ve noticed, it would probably just make things worse,” Zak answered, having his own suspicions of what the problem was. He didn’t know what had gone wrong, but the two obviously hadn’t spent the night together. He’d tried pulling Chris aside to ask how the treasure hunt had gone when he first arrived, only to receive a withering glare and a muttered “don’t ask”, after which Chris had seemed to lose the ability to speak in more than monosyllables. Zak decided to wait until after the game broke up, much earlier in

the afternoon than usual since none of them seemed inclined toward their usual small talk, to approach Neal.

“What the hell happened yesterday?” Zak asked after Chris had driven off with the shortest of good-byes, leaving the other two men standing in Dave’s driveway.

“I fucked everything up, that’s what happened,” Neal growled, stalking to his car. “I fucking fell asleep, and by the time I got to where I was supposed to meet Chris, he’d already hooked up with someone else.”

“Didn’t you try to talk to him?” Zak asked, shocked at the bitterness in Neal’s voice.

“Of course I did, but he somehow got the idea I was hitting on his new boyfriend, and he wouldn’t let me get a word in edgewise. Told me to mind my own fucking business and took off before I could explain.”

He knew it wasn’t funny, but Zak couldn’t help breaking into a peal of laughter at Neal’s narrative. “Only you could manage to come across as trying to pick up the wrong man,” he chuckled, his expression sobering as Neal showed no sign that he found anything humorous in the situation. “Did he really leave with this other guy?”

“Probably spent the night fucking his brains out until he was too tired to talk,” Neal muttered. “I, on the other hand, went back to my apartment and got completely and utterly shit-faced.” He’d hoped with each drink that it would stop him from seeing the look of disdain in Chris’s eyes when he’d told him off, keep him from picturing another man’s hands on Chris’s body, another man loving him the way he’d dreamed of doing. It hadn’t worked, and he’d finally passed out on his sofa, waking up that morning with the mother of all hangovers.

“I don’t know what Chris did last night, but I doubt it included fucking his brain out,” Zak insisted. “He didn’t look like a man who’d just had all his dreams come true. In fact, he acted as if he’d just lost his best friend.”

Neal shook his head. “Maybe we both have,” he admitted softly. “I fucked up so bad, Zak, and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Ask him,” Zak answered, pulling his friend into a tight hug. “All you can do is ask him.”

“Hi Chris, this is Tina.” The next caller’s voice sounded forlorn in his headphones, as if she was struggling not to break into tears. Or maybe he was just projecting his own bleak mood onto the woman. Chris had tried his best not to let his own depression carry over into the advice he gave his listeners, but it seemed as if every call tonight had been someone in pain, and who the hell was he to tell them how to solve their problems when he’d screwed up his own life so royally? Maybe it was time to think about moving on, somewhere he could start fresh. Somewhere that wouldn’t constantly remind him – shaking off his dark thoughts, Chris forced himself to focus on the woman on the phone.

“I’ve been dating this guy, Paul, for a few months now. I thought we were starting to get serious, at least I was, and then all of a sudden he just broke things off for no reason – he stopped calling, and he doesn’t return my calls, and I don’t know if I did something wrong, or if he met someone else, and I just want things to go back to the way they used to be, you know? But I can’t even get him to talk to me, and I don’t know what to do.” The woman’s voice trailed off into sniffles, leaving no doubt that she was crying.

Chris closed his eyes for a moment, struggling against the ache in his own chest. “I know how much it hurts,” he said softly, “and I wish I could give you some advice that would make it better. Sometimes people do things for reasons that have nothing to do with the people around them, but that wind up hurting them anyway. And sometimes people are looking for something, or someone, and a misunderstanding can make them think they’ve found it. When they realize they haven’t, they have to move on and keep looking, because it wouldn’t be fair to either of them to stay.” He drew a deep breath, his voice as warm as he could make it. “I don’t know if that’s what happened in your case, Tina – only Paul can tell you that for sure. Keep trying to get him to talk to

you, but if he can't or won't explain, then you may just have to accept that and go on with your life. You sound like a very caring woman – somewhere, there's a person who's right for you. You just have to keep looking until you find each other."

He didn't know if he'd helped the listener or made her feel even worse, but before he could regroup his thoughts, the next caller was already on the line. "Chris, this is Thomas – I called a few weeks ago, about trying to get my co-worker to notice me?"

Chris bit back a groan, afraid to trust his voice to any kind of answer. Was this someone's idea of a sick joke? *Don't jump to conclusions*, he told himself. *You thought you knew what was going on last Saturday, and look how wrong you were. This guy's probably exactly what he seems to be – don't project your own problems on him.* "I remember, Thomas," he managed to force out. "How did things work out for you?"

"Your advice worked just fine," Neal admitted, his voice hoarse with emotion. He'd managed to avoid seeing Chris all afternoon at the station, but the hours had seemed endless as he waited for his chance to call into the show. Zak had urged him to go have a beer and relax, but after Saturday night, just the thought of drinking was enough to turn his stomach. He'd opted for waiting at a coffee shop near the station, unable to face another night alone in his apartment. "It got his attention, just the way you said it would. But then –" his voice broke and he continued quickly, before he could change his mind, "– then I did something that drove him away again. I didn't mean it the way he took it, but I fu– I ruined everything, and I don't know how to make it right again."

"Tell him the truth," Chris said, knowing without doubt that there was no other answer he could give. "If you really care about him, don't let a misunderstanding keep you apart. Maybe he can forgive you, maybe he can't, but you'll never know unless you're honest with him."

"I care," Neal murmured. "I care so much more than he knows."

"Then tell him," Chris insisted.

“WHOSE brilliant idea was it for me to do this show?” Chris asked as he disentangled himself from his headset and rubbed his aching neck. “Another night like that and you’d be better going back to playing Estrela’s reruns.”

“Listen, about the show – there’s something I need to talk to you about. How about grabbing a cup of coffee before you head home?” Zak asked.

“I don’t feel much like socializing tonight, Zak,” Chris protested. “Can’t it wait until tomorrow?”

“I’d really like to work it out tonight if we can,” Zak urged. “Look, I have a few things to clean up here – how about I meet you at Tully’s in twenty minutes?”

“All right, if you’re sure it can’t wait,” Chris agreed reluctantly. “I’ll go order us a couple of cappuccino’s.” It wasn’t like he had any reason to hurry back to his apartment anyway, not if all he was going to do was relive every hellish moment of last Saturday the way he had the last two near-sleepless nights.

“You’re really something, you know that?” Zak hugged Chris spontaneously before turning back to his sound board. “Go enjoy your coffee.”

Picking up his coat from his office – and checking one last time, in vain, for another note to have miraculously appeared – Chris walked slowly to the coffee shop near the studio that stayed open all night long. He’d just placed his order at the counter for a cappuccino, deciding to wait to order Zak’s until the producer actually arrived, when a voice from a corner table interrupted him.

“Make that two, would you? My caffeine level has dropped below total saturation.” Chris spun around to see Neal hunched over a table littered with empty mugs and crumpled napkins.

His heartbeat speeding up in a way that had nothing to do with the coffee in his hand, Chris took a seat opposite Neal at the small table. “Not one of your usual hang-outs,” he observed, trying to keep his voice level. “Picking up baristas now?”

“I probably deserve that, but not for the reason you think,” Neal retorted, trying not to let Chris see how much the casual taunt had hurt him. “I know you don’t believe it, but I really wasn’t trying to hit on your – friend – Saturday night.”

“Matt. His name was – is – Matt,” Chris shot back.

Neal ran his hand through his already disarranged hair with a sigh. “Look, Chris, somebody a whole lot smarter than me told me to just tell you the truth, so just let me say this, okay? Matt didn’t leave you those notes. I did.”

Chris closed his eyes, breathing in and out once, twice, before he could speak. “Why?” he finally whispered, looking up to meet Neal’s troubled brown eyes. “Why would you do that?”

Neal met Chris’s stormy eyes and took the bravest step of his entire life. “Because I love you,” he said. “I didn’t know how else to show you.”

The smile that lit Chris’s face was bright enough to turn the night outside into day. “You need to work on your delivery,” he said unevenly, stretching his hand across the table to grasp Neal’s. “That wasn’t quite the message I got Saturday night.”

“What did you expect?” Neal answered, his own voice just as unsteady as he crushed Chris’s hand in his. “After all my hard work, I’m a few minutes late and find you practically making out with a total stranger.”

“I thought it was you,” Chris admitted, his face turning red as he remembered what he’d said to Neal, how angry he’d been. “At least, I hoped it was you, I’d hoped for so long – and then you weren’t there, and he said he’d been waiting for me, and I thought it was him, and I – ” He took a breath and continued, a bit more slowly, “When you finally showed up, I think I was as angry that it hadn’t been you as I was at anything you did.”

“But it was me.” Neal reached across the table to take Chris’s other hand in his. “We’re a couple of idiots, aren’t we?” he asked, smiling.

"You sure know how to sweet talk a guy," Chris answered. "No wonder you're – " he broke off, swallowing, and Neal squeezed his hands again.

"There's so much I want to say to you, but do you think we could do it somewhere a little more private?"

"We can go back to my place, except – shit! Zak's supposed to meet me here any minute," Chris muttered, glancing at his watch.

"See, that's one of the things I have to tell you about. Zak isn't going to be joining us," Neal admitted. "He just kind of told you that to get you over here. I was afraid you wouldn't want to talk to me otherwise."

Chris rose to his feet, shaking his head as they walked out of the coffee shop, still hand in hand. "How much of this does my producer know about?"

"Pretty much all of it," Neal confessed. "It was his idea to call you for advice."

"So you're 'Thomas'?"

Neal nodded. "My middle name, so I wasn't really lying."

"But why did you have to go through all of that in the first place? Why didn't you just tell me that..." Chris's voice trailed off, as if he still couldn't believe the words.

"...That I love you?" Neal stopped walking, the urge to pull Chris into his arms and kiss him almost overwhelming, but he was afraid once he started, he'd never want to stop. "I didn't realize that I did, until after the night you asked for my help. Would you have believed me if I told you then? I was afraid you'd think I was joking, or that I just wanted to get you into bed." He cradled Chris's head in his hands, his desire clear in his eyes. "Not that I don't want you, but you mean so much more to me than just that, Chris."

"Can you walk any faster? Because otherwise I'm going to back you up against one of these buildings and kiss you senseless."

They were practically racing by the time they reached the entrance to Chris's loft. Too eager to wait for the elevator, they

ran up the stairs, their pulses pounding as Chris finally unlocked the door to let them inside.

Before Chris could even hang the keys on the hook next to the door, Neal's lips were on his, coaxing his mouth open, their tongues meeting, sliding together. Chris tangled his fingers in Neal's hair to pull him even closer, tasting him hungrily, a flare of heat like nothing he had felt while kissing Matt rushing through his veins. "How much coffee did you have while you were waiting?" he gasped when they broke apart long enough to breathe. "I'm getting buzzed just from kissing you."

Neal laughed for sheer joy, kissing Chris again and again, short sweet kisses as he maneuvered him out of his coat, shrugging off his own jacket and leaving them laying on the floor as he walked Chris into the living room, their lips never parting for more than a moment.

Their kisses had Chris trembling, his desire so strong that it swept away any nervousness. This was Neal in his arms, Neal kissing him in ways he'd never dared to dream about, Neal who'd told him he loved him. Pulling him closer, Chris broke off the kiss and met Neal's eyes, his own darkened with passion. "Want you," he murmured. "So much... Take me to bed, Neal."

Chris's words, and the hard pulse of his arousal against Neal's thigh, were almost enough to overwhelm his control, but Neal forced himself to take a deep breath, putting a little space back between them. "I want you so badly I ache," he admitted, shifting his hips to leave Chris in no doubt of his own desire. "But you aren't just someone I picked up in a bar for the night, and I won't treat you that way. We need to talk first."

"So talk," Chris retorted, letting his lips wander across Neal's cheek and linger at the base of his jaw. "But make it fast – I'm not sure how long I can wait."

"In the coffee shop," Neal began, moaning when Chris's tongue started to trace the whorls of his ear. "Did it – does it bother you, how many men I've been with before you?" The delightful exploration paused, and Neal turned his head to meet Chris's gaze again. "I can't change my past, however much I'd

like to, but I haven't been with anyone since the night you asked me for my help," he averred. "It was as if I'd been blind all my life, and never even realized it until suddenly I could see. I couldn't stop thinking about you, thinking about being with you. I couldn't even imagine being with anyone else."

"I think I've wanted you from the first day I met you," Chris confessed. "But I knew you weren't looking for the same thing I was. I'd had enough empty encounters. I wouldn't let myself think about you that way." He closed the distance between them, taking Neal's lips in a slow, soft kiss. "I think I knew how easy it would be to fall in love with you."

"I'm ashamed to say it took me a lot longer to realize that about you," Neal conceded. "I didn't think I was missing anything, wasn't sure I could love anyone, wasn't even sure I wanted to. Then I realized what it was I really felt for you." His fingers tightened around Chris's hips. "I watched you leave that bar with another man, and there wasn't enough whiskey in the world to stop me from imagining him touching you – loving you." He blinked rapidly, his eyes swimming suddenly at the memory. "I came so close to losing you before I ever had you."

"I'm here now, and I'm not going to let you go," Chris assured him. "I didn't do anything more than kiss him, Neal. I wanted to – I wanted to want him, but I couldn't. He wasn't you."

Neal's kiss was ravenous, pouring all his love and hunger into a demonstration impossible to misunderstand. They were both breathing raggedly by the time they finally managed to separate from each other. "Have we talked enough?" Chris asked shakily. "Can we please go to bed now?"

"Oh, yeah," Neal agreed, for once in his life without a smart answer.

Chris had dreamed about this moment for so long that he couldn't get Neal's clothes off fast enough, pressing short, hard kisses to each bit of flesh as he uncovered it. He moaned when he slid Neal's jeans down his legs and realized he was wearing the same kind of tight black boxers he'd glimpsed in the photos. Kneeling on the bed, he mouthed Neal's arousal through the soft cotton knit, tasting him through the fabric until it clung damply and

Neal was trembling. Pulling Chris upward, he kissed the blond fiercely, his tongue skimming over teeth and teasing soft, moist tissue until he knew the contours of his lover's mouth as well as he knew his own.

When Chris's fingers started to tug at his own shirt buttons, Neal rolled them over, pinning the other man beneath him. "That's my job," he asserted, holding the hands still.

"You're taking too long," Chris protested, arching his hips to chase after more contact.

"You're worth taking time over," Neal insisted, tracing the vee of skin below the open collar button with lips and tongue before slipping the next button free, lavishing the same attention on the next bit of skin this revealed. It took several minutes of this slow progress before the shirt was open completely, baring Chris's chest to Neal's appreciative gaze. He skimmed over the expanse of golden-haired flesh, his fingers finding the peaked nipples, rolling them between thumb and forefinger, tugging gently until Chris groaned with pleasure.

"So good," he panted, wrapping his legs around Neal's calves to give himself more leverage. "Never dreamed – when I saw – that picture – that it could feel – this good..." His hips rocked in time with the tug of Neal's fingers, his hand splayed over the warmth of Neal's back. "Please... need more..."

"What do you need?" Neal asked, sliding down to circle his tongue around Chris's navel, nipping at the silky hair at the start of his treasure trail. "Tell me."

"Touch me," Chris pleaded, one hand holding Neal's head in place as the other fumbled to undo his belt. He lifted his hips to help Neal push the cloth of his slacks and boxers down to his feet, but Neal didn't return immediately, kissing a meandering path up the long legs, switching from one to the other, pausing over especially sensitive spots until Chris was moaning at each touch of his lips.

Chris spread his thighs and tugged at Neal's shoulders, and something swelled in Neal's chest. "Roll over," he whispered,

smiling at Chris's mewl of protest. "Please," he urged, "trust me. Trust me to make it good for you."

When Chris slid onto his stomach, bending his knees to hold his cock away from the sheets, Neal kissed the hollow at the base of his spine, his hands parting the creamy globes of his cheeks. Chris's groan as Neal's breath ghosted down his crease made Neal's own cock jump in response, and when he followed the same path with the flat of his tongue, tasting the musky flavors of sweat and desire, they both groaned together. Nothing Neal had imagined even came close to the reality of loving Chris this way.

Neal licked at the wrinkled skin until it was clenching beneath him, pulsing his tongue against the flexing portal. "Neal," Chris moaned, "oh, fuck, Neal, please..." Neal's tongue stabbed into the opening and Chris wailed, pumping his hips upward and panting Neal's name as the wet muscle worked inside him. "Oh god, Neal, please, so good, don't stop ... oh god ... please, more ... need you ... fuck me, Neal, please, fuck me now..."

Neal sat back on his heels, gasping to catch his own breath, stroking up Chris's sweat-damp back before coaxing him to roll over again. "Chris," he whispered, "my beautiful, responsive Chris..." The blond pulled him down against him, bringing their bodies into full contact as he drove his tongue into Neal's mouth, tasting himself in the moist depths. "Please, Neal," he repeated, his hand reaching down to encircle Neal's straining cock, "need you to fuck me."

Neal shook his head, though he couldn't stop his cock from surging into the press of Chris's fingers. "I want to feel you inside me," he countered.

His eyes widening with surprise, Chris searched Neal's face. "I thought you'd want – you're so much more experienced than me, you know I've never –"

"I already know how to fuck," Neal admitted softly. "I need you to teach me how to make love."

"I'd say you've been doing just fine so far," Chris rejoined, leaning over to open a drawer in the bedside table and take out a bottle of lube.

“Condom, too,” Neal insisted. “I know you’re clean, and I’m sure I am too, but until I can have myself tested to prove it to you, we’re not taking any chances.” He reached up to smooth the frown lines from Chris’s forehead. “I don’t want to feel anything between us either, but I love you too much to put you at even the slightest risk.”

Pressing a kiss to the palm of Neal’s hand, Chris nodded, and dug in the drawer until he found a sheet of condoms. “Samples from a sponsor,” he explained with a grin. Setting the packet off to the side for the moment, he let his gaze rake over Neal’s nude body consideringly.

“Lean back on your elbows,” he requested, smiling as the pose pushed Neal’s smooth chest forward. “I’ve been wanting to do this ever since I saw those photos,” he confided, bending down to close his lips over a tawny nipple.

It tasted just as good as he’d imagined it would, and Neal’s gasp of pleasure was the sweetest music to Chris’s ears. He suckled until the nub was hard and swollen beneath his teeth, teasing it with his fingers even as he took the other into his mouth, gifting it with the same attentions. When Neal was moaning for more, Chris trailed a series of love-bites down his toned abdomen, his hands working patterns on Neal’s parted thighs. This time when he took Neal’s cock in his mouth there was nothing to mask its flavor or the silkiness of the skin that covered it. Chris couldn’t get enough of it, licking it from base to tip, swirling his tongue around the ridge of skin that defined the head, letting the bulbous tip slide in and out of his mouth and lapping up every drop of fluid that leaked from the slit. When he closed his mouth around it completely and slid slowly downward, taking it in until the head hit the back of his throat, Neal stiffened and pulled him up again.

“Too much,” he gasped, squeezing tightly around the base until the throbbing need to come lessened slightly. “Don’t want to come until you’re buried inside me.”

Chris didn’t know how much longer he’d be able to wait himself. “Roll over, then,” he urged. “That will make it easier for me to prep you.”

Trying to keep his cock from rubbing against the smooth sheets, Neal complied, groaning when a slick finger circled his entrance and gently worked its way inside. A moment later he felt a moist tongue lapping at his balls and over the delicate skin of his perineum. "Feels good," he moaned, willing himself to relax when a second finger joined the first, burning a bit as they stretched him. Before he could draw a breath his balls were sucked into Chris's mouth, his lover's agile tongue circling and pressing against them until he could feel them tightening in response.

"Thought you'd never done this before?" he protested.

Letting Neal's delicious fullness slide from his mouth, Chris grinned. "I had a very good teacher," he retorted, squeezing more lube onto his fingers. "And I practiced a lot when I was alone."

Neal couldn't help but chuckle, even when he felt a third finger breaching him. "More," he groaned as they wriggled and scissored in the tight channel. Then one of the digits brushed over the bump of his prostate and he cried out, his hips bucking involuntarily to force the pressure deeper, harder. "Now," he panted, "oh fuck, Chris, do it now..."

Easing his fingers free, Chris tore open the condom and rolled it down his shaft, holding his breath as he coated the latex liberally with cool gel. Giving in to temptation, he bent forward and sank his teeth into the firm flesh of one tawny cheek before stretching over Neal and aligning their bodies, back to chest.

"The fuck?" Neal growled as Chris rubbed his cock down the length of Neal's cleft.

"That bit has been tempting me ever since the picture at Pioneer Park," Chris confessed in a voice thick with desire. He held Neal's hip with one hand as the other guided his cock, gasping when the head found the slickened opening and pushed inside. The pressure that squeezed him despite how well he thought he'd prepared Neal stunned him and he paused. "Okay?" he asked softly, fighting his body's urge to thrust deeper into the clinging channel.

"More than okay," Neal assured him, rocking his hips upward. "Please, baby, let me feel all of you."

The endearment squeezed Chris's heart and he pressed forward slowly, letting more of his weight down on Neal's body until he was sheathed completely. "Oh, fuck, Neal, I'm inside you..."

"I know, baby, you feel so good," Neal panted, his hand reaching to find his lover's. "Move, Chris, please..."

Covering Neal's hands with his own, their fingers weaving together, Chris kissed the side of Neal's neck as he shifted inside the tight heat, pulling back slightly and pushing in again, the motion just enough to rub the head of his cock over Neal's prostate.

"Fuck, Chris, right there," Neal moaned, rocking his hips back and clenching around the thick shaft. "Oh fuck yeah, just like that, so good..."

Squeezing Neal's hands as he fought for control, Chris rocked in short, hard thrusts, each move just enough to drag over Neal's sweet spot. The friction against the head of his cock was driving him crazy, the heat pooling in his stomach and spreading through his limbs, each thrust fanning the flames until he could feel it consuming the last of his control. "Close," he gasped, "oh god, Neal, so close...:

"Touch me, baby," Neal pleaded, "almost there, just need you to touch me..." Chris's hand slipped underneath them to circle his shaft and he was lost, the gentle glide of his lover's palm sending him over the edge, his release pulsing hot and thick over Chris's hand as he cried out his name.

Neal's hoarse voice calling his name and the rippling of his channel as his orgasm claimed him triggered Chris's climax, wave after wave of pleasure washing over him and through him. He sank against Neal's back, their chests rising and falling together until their breathing slowed and their pulses settled back to a normal rhythm.

"I could fall asleep just like this," Chris murmured.

"Get rid of the condom and then you can," Neal agreed. "But maybe we can roll over to the other side of the bed so we're not in the wet spot."

“You’re not going to be a high maintenance lover, are you?” Chris chuckled as he carefully slid free. “I’ve heard all the horror stories from my callers, you know.” He padded to the bathroom to dispose of the condom and returned with a warm washcloth, bending down to kiss Neal’s stomach before wiping it clean.

“Just keep doing that every night and there won’t be any problems,” Neal suggested.

“Mnnn, next time I expect you to do the pitching,” Chris said sleepily, spooning against the warmth of Neal’s back.

“It’ll be my pleasure,” Neal promised, tucking one of his lover’s hands against his heart. “Love you, Chris.”

A soft mumble that could have been “love you, too” was the only reply. It didn’t matter. Neal had no doubt how completely he was loved.

“YOU never showed up for coffee last night,” Chris complained.

Zak grinned unrepentantly as he ran a sound check. “Didn’t think you’d even notice,” he replied. “Anyway, I got held up by the snow.”

“Snow job, you mean,” Chris chuckled. “You pull everybody’s strings around here, don’t you?”

“Yeah, but I’ve sworn only to use my powers for good.”

Catching his producer’s gaze as he pulled on his headset, Chris said seriously, “Thank you, Zak.”

“Hey, I owed you one. And you’re on the air in three, two, one—”

“It’s nine o’clock in Seattle, and that means it’s time for the number one show in adult talk radio, the show where anything goes and nothing is too intimate, the show dedicated to ‘*making it sweet between the sheets*’. Ladies and gentlemen, enjoy ‘*Making Love*’ ... with Christopher Booth!”

BACK in Chris's loft, Neal stretched out on the couch with Shiloh on his lap and prepared to do just that, for the rest of their lives.

HEALING IN HIS WINGS

Ariel Tachna

www.arieltachna.com

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PROLOGUE

PERSONAL Log, First Officer Ryan Nelson, on board the *Starfire*, sector 10, beta quadrant, January 25, 3510, standard Earth time

Herdy died today. I'll miss her laughter and her sharp wit. She's the tenth in as many days to this damnable plague that Dr. Shelton has yet to identify. Ten dead and only two on the mend, and no explanation for why they survived when the others did not. We're a pretty heterogeneous crew. Humans, Altarians, Sirians, Regulosians, and more, but that doesn't seem to make any difference or play any role in who lives and who dies. Captain Rusk has ordered all but essential personnel to their quarters in the hope that a strict quarantine will stop the spread of the disease. I didn't question her – I would never question an order once she's given it, no matter how much I might argue against it while she's making up her mind – but I don't see how it will help. We're all breathing the same recycled air.

I guess we all knew the risks when we signed on for a five-year tour exploring aboard the *Starfire*. I mean, you never know what you'll discover in the outer reaches of space, but this certainly

wasn't on our agenda. Dr. Shelton is supposed to be an expert at dealing with rare and unknown diseases, and Dr. Pauly, his assistant, is the expert on space-induced conditions, like gravity sickness. Neither of them can get a handle on this one, though, at least not yet, even with the help of the most advanced technology available to Amalgamated Exploration. We all took for granted that it would be enough since spaceflot has it that not even the military has better equipment than A.E.

We plotted a planet yesterday, and Captain Rusk hopes we'll find someone or something there to help us. I want to believe she's right, but my optimism seems to have died along with Herdy. I'm worried we'll pass this damn plague to the inhabitants of that planet, if there are any, and then we'll have genocide on our hands. Even though A.E. is a commercial concern, I think they'd frown on wiping out an entire population. It might be bad for business, given how they vaunt their environmental record.

She's calling officers to the bridge. I'll finish this later.

CHAPTER 1

CAPTAIN Portia Rusk sat alone on the bridge, the lights dimmed at all but her station, her usually smooth, pale skin wrinkled with worry as she pondered the various options open to her. They had gone from few to almost none in the ten days since this plague of unknown origin had begun killing her crew. Dr. Shelton continued to insist that he could find a cure given more time, and she believed him, but she had no more time to give him. Her crew was dying. When their sensors had detected the planet yesterday, she had grabbed onto it as a new option, a new hope for her people. They had only been able to tell for sure that it was capable of supporting oxygen-breathing life, not whether it actually did, or if so, of what level of technological advancement, but she had not been able to shake the gut feeling that this was their salvation. She did not say anything aloud, not wanting to raise hopes prematurely, but she had immediately ordered the quarantine in hope of slowing the disease's progress through the crew and giving them a little longer to see what the planet had to offer. They had sent out the standard introductory message on every frequency available to them, hoping for a positive response that could perhaps lead to some assistance, either academic or practical.

A beeping on the screen in front of her drew her attention. It seemed that someone was, in fact, listening. Quickly, she called her first officer, the communications officer, pilot, and chief xenologist to the bridge. It was not the full complement of bridge crew, but she did not want to break quarantine more than necessary until she knew if her instincts were right.

Rising with careful poise, she brushed her hands over her uniform, making sure she was the picture of command, not a hair out of place in the blond chignon she wore, her green eyes serene. Her officers would know it was a mask, for they had seen her sick with worry, as distraught over each death as if she had lost her own children, but her mask was not for their benefit anyway. She would not allow her fear and grief to show when dealing with an alien race for the first time.

“We’ve been hailed,” the captain informed her officers when they had all filed in and taken their places. “Pontil, bring up a link.”

“Yes, ma’am,” the Altarian replied, identifying the signal coming from the nearby planet and keying their communications equipment to match it. “Link completed, ma’am,” the blue-haired man informed the captain.

Captain Rusk punched the button next to the screen and brought up the video link, allowing her to see as well as hear the person on the other end, assuming the other person’s technology was compatible with theirs. She had been pleasantly surprised at how many times it had worked. The image was fuzzy at first, then cleared to reveal a silver-haired male with dark skin and a serious face.

“I am Teo-ta-dar-ri, Chair of the Governing Council of Petarus,” he informed her. “We received your message.”

“Thank you for replying, sir,” the captain replied, hiding her relief that the ship’s translator could make out the language. “I am Captain Portia Rusk of the *Starfire*. We are explorers under the aegis of Amalgamated Exploration tasked with plotting areas of space previously unexplored by our home world.”

“We are not in need of exploration, Captain,” the Petari said abruptly.

“Wait,” Captain Rusk pleaded. “We contacted you in the hope that you might be able to assist us. We have been struck by a plague of unknown origin and my crew is dying. We hoped your doctors might be able to help us.”

Teo-da-tar-ri frowned. “This is a most unusual request, and not one I can grant without consultation with the Council and our healers.”

“If there is information we can provide that will help them make up their minds, we will do so gladly,” the captain promised. “Just tell us what you need to know.”

The sound stopped on the transmission as Teo-da-tar-ri spoke to someone not visible to those on the ship. When his voice began transmitting again, he said, “Send records of your travels over the past month as well as all medical records pertaining to this so-called plague. Our healers will look at them while the Council discusses your request. I will contact you again when we have reached a decision.” He signed off before the captain could reply.

At her side, Ryan murmured, “Let’s hope they talk fast or it won’t matter what they decide.”

“At least they’re willing to discuss it, Ry,” Pontil chimed in. “You know as well as I do that a lot of the species we’ve met wouldn’t have even considered it.”

“I know, Narshan,” Ryan retorted, “but a discussion like the one he mentioned could take weeks. You know what governments are like. The Altari government is as bad as the Earth government. And while they’re flapping their gums, we’re up here dying.”

“Gentlemen,” the captain interrupted calmly, “we can’t do anything to speed up their council meeting except give them the data they requested that hopefully show the urgency of our problem. Mr. Pontil, get the ship’s travel log ready to send while I ask Dr. Shelton for the medical records. Let’s not make them wait for us.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Pontil replied, though he shot Ryan a cheeky grin as he carried out his orders.

Captain Rusk barely refrained from shaking her head. If her crew were not so damn good, she would have them all up on insubordination charges. Reminding herself that they had no time to lose, she used the ship’s intercom system to contact Dr. Shelton who promised to send her the records immediately.

“I have the medical records, Captain,” Pontil informed her.

“Then send them on to the planet,” she directed before turning to Dr. Stanovitch, the Chief Xenologist for the ship.

“Thoughts, Doctor?” she asked the tall albino. Like most of her race, the Regulosian had no pigment in her skin, an evolutionary trait developed from their subterranean existence.

“I only have a little to go on, of course,” the xenologist replied, “but they are technologically advanced enough to communicate with us through space and organized enough politically to have a governing council. That suggests we’re dealing with an advanced civilization that we would do well to approach as equals.” She knew the captain did not need to hear that caution, being one of the most open-minded explorers she had ever had the chance to work with, but it bore stating for the less open-minded crew. Not that any of them were currently on the bridge. Captain Rusk chose her officers for a variety of reasons, not purely for their skills. “As for the rest, only time and more contact will tell.”

Captain Rusk nodded. They were much the same conclusions she had reached herself, but it never hurt to have her thoughts confirmed by their resident expert. “Anyone else have any comments?”

They all shook their heads. Ryan might have added something had it been one of the other xenologists speaking, but he found it difficult even after all these months to look at Dr. Stanovitch, much less interact with her. Everything about her reminded him of Nikolai.

“Very well. Dismissed. Return to your quarters, then. I will call you when we hear back from the Petari.”

They all obeyed the order except Ryan, who lingered on the bridge after the others were gone.

“Mr. Nelson?”

“It’s just us now, Portia,” Ryan admonished. “Talk to me.”

“About what?” she asked. “How desperate the situation is? You’re as aware of that as I am. How scared I am that the Petari won’t be able to help us even if they agree? We’ve worked together too long for me to need to tell you that.”

“Hey,” he cajoled, “where’s my ever-optimistic captain?”

“In stasis with the ones we couldn’t save,” she replied sadly, the tears she refused to shed glittering on her lashes despite her determination not to show any weakness.

“Foolish woman,” Ryan scolded, setting aside all shipboard protocol and embracing her firmly. “Go ahead and cry so you’ll be done with it and can deal with whatever the Petari say. I did.”

Captain Rusk looked up at the strong face of the man who held her in disbelief. Ryan Nelson was the epitome of stoicism. The thought of him giving in to his emotions that way was almost beyond her. His clipped mustache twitched as he smiled down at her, making her laugh. “You’re having me on.”

“No, I’m not,” he promised, “but a laugh will do just as well, and I’m much better at dealing with those than with feminine tears.”

“Than feminine anything,” she retorted, knowing Ryan’s preferences ran to his own gender. In some ways, that made their jobs easier, with no sexual tension between them to muck up the works. She could admit, privately, that he was an attractive man, with his sculpted features, dark hair, and surprisingly blue eyes, but she did not have to worry about his looks, or her own, interfering with their working relationship.

“Touché,” Ryan quipped. “Are you all right now?”

Captain Rusk nodded. “As well as I can be with people in the infirmary, probably dying as we speak, and only the barest

possibility of hope from a planet whose people I know nothing about.”

“We’ll find a way through this, Portia,” Ryan insisted with a hope he was not sure he truly felt. “The Petari would have to be heartless to refuse us aid if it’s in their power to give it, and if it’s not, we’ll keep looking. This isn’t the only planet in the sector. We can’t give up hope.”

“I know,” she sighed.

“Get some rest,” Ryan suggested. “I don’t think you’ve slept since Corm got sick, and that’s been ten days ago. I don’t know why you don’t look like hell, but you won’t do us any good if you’re too tired to negotiate with the Petari when they call back.”

“If I lie down now, I won’t wake up for a week,” she protested.

“All the more reason for you to rest,” Ryan insisted. “I can handle them if you want me to.”

“I know you can,” she agreed, “but this is my responsibility. I will go rest, though, until they hail us again. I’ll be in my quarters.” She pulled from his loose embrace and headed toward the hatch that led to her cabin, turning back when she reached the door. “Do not fail to notify me, Mr. Nelson.”

“As you say, ma’am,” he replied, the very image of a responsible first officer again.

She gave him a curt nod and disappeared, leaving Ryan alone on the bridge. He settled in to wait, knowing it could be a long vigil.

SEVERAL hours later, the beeping of an incoming signal roused Ryan from his light doze. Glancing at the comm pad and seeing the same signature as earlier, he buzzed the captain’s cabin. “Incoming signal from the Petari, ma’am,” he informed her, hope dancing along his nerves despite the uncertainty of what the decision would be. The Petari could still reject them and send them on to die alone in space if Dr. Shelton did not find a cure. He knew that, but his pulse sped up anyway.

“On my way,” she replied.

A minute later, she strode onto the bridge, her face its usual carefully composed mask. Ryan could see a hope to match his own, though, in her eyes. “Bring up the link.”

Ryan hit the button and stepped back, leaving the captain center stage. “Teo-ta-dar-ri,” she acknowledged with a short bow, her voice deliberately even.

“Captain Rusk,” the Petari leader replied, inclining his head. “We have considered your request and our healers tell us they can help you. They also stress that time is of the essence. The Council, however, still has some concerns about letting your ship land, possibly releasing this plague on our populace. Therefore, the Council has some stipulations. I will let you talk with the healer who will be coordinating the relief effort. He understands the limits placed by the Council.”

“Thank you, Teo-ta-dar-ri,” Captain Rusk replied emphatically, relief surging through her. She wanted to shout with excitement, jump up and down like a little kid on Christmas morning, hug her first mate and the rest of the crew besides, but she kept her face unchanged and her voice level. “We will do our best to comply with anything your healer or the Council requests. As you say, the situation has grown urgent.”

She gestured for Ryan to page the doctor to join the transmission. Moving softly out of the sight of the video feed, Ryan called the infirmary, getting Dr. Shelton almost immediately. “The Petari healer wants to talk to us,” he said quietly, his voice reflecting the joy he felt nonetheless. “They think they can help us.”

“Thank the gods,” Dr. Shelton breathed softly. “What do they want us to do?”

“I don’t know yet. The captain is waiting for the healer. She wanted you to listen in, too.”

“Captain Rusk? It is an honor to meet you.” The image on the screen changed, Teo-ta-dar-ri’s sour face replaced by one even more lined and careworn, but with a kind smile and a mischievous

spark that Ryan immediately liked. He could not have explained it rationally, but while Teo-ta-dar-ri raised his hackles, he trusted this one instinctively.

“I am Pol-ta-dar-ri,” the man continued. “I understand you have contracted a case of Mardonese plague.”

“If that’s what it’s called, then yes,” the captain replied, returning the man’s smile without even realizing it.

“That is our name for it anyway,” Pol-ta-dar-ri agreed. “We can help you, but Petari medicine is unique as far as we know, and is not something we can simply give you. I won’t bore you with the details, though I will be glad to share it with your healer.”

“Dr. Shelton?”

“I’m here, Captain,” the doctor’s voice came through the system.

“Very good,” the captain said, stepping back and letting Dr. Shelton’s face replace hers on the video screen. “I will let you and your esteemed Petari colleague work out the details then.” As soon as she knew the Petari could not see her, she turned to Ryan, her grin wide. His smile matched hers as he crossed the room to her side, checking to make sure they were off-screen before pulling her into a bear hug and twirling her around. “Stop,” she whispered. “They’ll hear us.”

“Dr. Shelton, is it?” Pol-ta-dar-ri verified. “Given our methods and the limited resources the Council is currently willing to free up to assist you, we need to determine which of your patients should come to the surface first.”

“Is that necessary?” Dr. Shelton asked, concern clear in his voice. “Could you not simply send me the antidote?”

At the mention of people going to the planet’s surface, the captain’s face grew serious again as she mentally rejoined the conversation. She would not intervene unless something the two doctors discussed seemed dangerous in her opinion, but she wanted to be aware of the course of their negotiations.

“Ah, if only it were that simple, doctor,” the Petari healer sighed. “Unfortunately, we do not use serums and pills and the

sort of antidotes that are common among other civilizations. Our healing is more... natural, and requires a personal touch. We can help you, rest assured, but only a few at a time. My preference would have been to have your ship land near the village where I live, but the Council is concerned about overtaxing the delicate balance of our medical system and so has insisted we bring only those patients we can treat at any one time. Once someone is cured, we can bring someone else."

"It seems like an awfully slow system," Dr. Shelton commented. Silently, Ryan agreed, but then, he freely admitted he knew nothing about medicine. If Pol-ta-dar-ri said this was the only way it could be handled, he would certainly not be arguing.

"By your standards, it undoubtedly is," Pol-ta-dar-ri agreed, "but it is the only system we have and it works quite well for us. If you can send blood samples of the patients you are currently treating, I can determine which are the most urgent. Eventually, we will need to scan the entire crew to make sure there are not any latent cases remaining before you return to your explorations."

"I have fifteen patients currently in the infirmary," Dr. Shelton told the Petari. "I've done standard analyses on blood samples of the entire crew. Would you prefer I send those rather than the actual samples? It would be faster."

Pol-ta-dar-ri nodded. "Transmit the data and I will look at them. If I need more information, I will contact you. As you say, it would be faster than if I had to redo work you have already done."

They could hear beeping through the comm as Dr. Shelton worked. "They're sent," he told the Petari healer. "I flagged the crew currently in the infirmary showing symptoms."

"Very good. It will take me an hour or two to evaluate them and determine which ten we will help first. I do wish we could bring them all, as I said before, but the Council is adamant. Does your ship have docking capacities, Captain?" the healer asked, turning his attention back to Rusk.

"It does," Captain Rusk confirmed, her mind racing as she considered the situation. It seemed they had no choice but to

transfer the stricken to the planet's surface, but she had no intention of letting them go alone. Her place was aboard the *Starfire*, but she trusted Ryan to act in her stead.

"We will need to have a small shuttle dock with your vessel so we can bring the patients to the surface," Pol-ta-dar-ri explained.

"That can be arranged," she assured him. "I know we are in no position to make demands, but would it be possible for my first officer to accompany the patients? Most of them are quite ill and I would feel better knowing there is a familiar face with them while they're receiving treatment."

Ryan frowned when he heard the captain's plan, but he could see her logic. It bothered him, though, that he would be taking a seat on the shuttle that could be filled by someone in need of treatment.

Pol-ta-dar-ri nodded. "I understand your concern perfectly, Captain. If you would be good enough to give me the name of your first officer, I will check the blood sample. If he is uninfected, he is welcome to come. Otherwise, we will have to insist it be someone else, as the Council has clearly stipulated no more than ten patients at a time."

Captain Rusk gave Ryan's name as Ryan relaxed. His presence would be in addition to those who were ill. In that case, he had no hesitations about accompanying them. He trusted Pol-ta-dar-ri, but that did not mean he wanted his friends completely alone on a strange planet.

"Very good, Captain," the healer said. "Let me do my analyses and I will be back in contact within the hour. In the meantime, I have transmitted some recommendations to help slow the spread of the plague until we can work our way through your crew."

"Thank you, Pol-ta-dar-ri. We've received the file and we'll await your contact for the next step."

"We will notify you as soon as we're ready to proceed."

The screen went blank and Captain Rusk sagged back against her seat in relief. "It's going to be all right, Ryan," she said softly,

looking up at her first officer. “I finally believe it’s going to be all right.”

CHAPTER 2

MOST days, Juo-ta-ri found his role as an apprentice healer a lot less interesting than he had dreamed of it being as a child. Despite being an innate gift that all Petari possessed to some degree, healing was a science in the view of his people, something to be studied and mastered by those who chose that route. Juo-ta had long since grown tired of the dry lessons, but Pol-ta-dar-ri, his mentor, was insistent. Juo-ta would be allowed to move on to the practical side of healing only when the older man decided he was ready.

“Juo-ta.”

The sound of his mentor’s voice calling his name drew the young Petari out of his musings. “Yes?” he asked, his voice sheepish at having been caught daydreaming when he should have been studying.

“I need your help,” the old healer replied, “and I think for once you will enjoy the task.”

“Helping you is never a burden,” Juo-ta insisted.

“Perhaps, perhaps not,” Pol-ta-dar mused, “but you would rather be doing practical studies, I know. This is your chance. We have fifteen patients with the Mardonese plague and we can only

treat ten of them at a time. I want you to figure out which ten are most in need of our help.”

“Mardonese plague?” Juo-ta repeated. “But there hasn’t been an outbreak of that in two centuries. Who is sick?”

“Space explorers,” Pol-ta-dar replied with his typical smile. “They have asked for our help.” The older man watched with great amusement as his apprentice’s eyes grew wide. The young man’s mouth opened and closed reflexively several times before he managed to squeak out a reply.

“Space explorers?” His face darkened. “You’re making fun of me.”

Pol-ta-dar shook his head and handed his apprentice the data pad. “Find the ten we need to help most, and then check the data on Ryan Nelson. We need to make sure he is not infected.”

Juo-ta took the pad and stared at the numbers in front of him for a moment before they registered. Foreign names... unusual blood patterns. “You’re serious!”

“Yes,” Pol-ta-dar replied, a tinge of impatience now coloring his voice. “Hurry. They expect to hear from us within the hour.”

Nodding, mind already lost in data that was real and not just another practical exercise, Juo-ta grabbed another data pad and began making notes as he looked for the key indicators of the disease, his mind racing as he tried to remember everything he had read on the relatively obscure plague.

It took him every bit of the hour Pol-ta-dar had allowed him, but Juo-ta finally came up with the list his mentor had requested. He flew into the other room, his voice trembling with excitement. “I did it, sir. I got the list together.”

Pol-ta-dar took the list from his apprentice and examined it carefully. He had come up with the same list of names. “Well done, Juo-ta. Now, if you hurry down to the landing pad, there is a group of soldiers waiting to fly you to the explorers’ ship to collect our patients.”

“Me?” Juo-ta asked. “But why me?”

“Because the rest of us have things to get ready here,” Pol-ta-dar replied honestly. “The Council has only agreed to allow ten of us to treat them, which means we must be involved in the preparations, but I don’t want them traveling without some medical assistance. The Council said ten healers. It didn’t say anything about apprentices.”

“Thank you, sir,” the young man exclaimed, throwing his arms around his mentor before launching himself out the door toward the landing pad where, as promised, a small shuttle awaited.

“When you’re strapped in, Healer Juo-ta-ri, we can take off,” one of the soldiers said respectfully.

Trying to hide his surprise at the courtesy, Juo-ta fumbled with the unfamiliar straps until he was finally ready to go.

Hearing the shuttle take off, Pol-ta-dar opened a link to the *Starfire* and waited for someone to respond. A few moments later, Captain Rusk’s fair face appeared on his screen.

“As promised, Captain,” the healer said, “here is the list of names we will treat first. A shuttle is already on its way to collect them. And your first officer is welcome to join them. He will need to stay planetside until the epidemic is under control so he does not risk becoming infected by his return to your ship.”

RELIEF flooded Ryan, though he hid it carefully, at hearing that he was free of the terrible disease. It did not make him less aware of his comrades’ plight, but it did free him of one worry, leaving him ready to concentrate entirely on making sure his friends got the best possible care from the Petari. Looking at Captain Rusk for permission, he stepped into range of the conference feed. “How long do you think I’ll be there for?” he asked. “So I know what to bring.”

“At least a few weeks,” Pol-ta-dar-ri replied. “It will take that long to help those who are already sick and make sure no traces of the disease remain among your crew.”

“That is quite a stay,” Captain Rusk interrupted. “I assume you have suitable quarters for Mr. Nelson.”

“The healers have space on the outskirts of town,” Pol-ta-dar-ri explained. “I can arrange for your officer to stay in town in private quarters, but it is a fair distance from where the patients will be. The other option is for him to share quarters with my assistant. The apprentices and junior assistants live on the grounds of our hospital, and Juo-ta-ri is currently without a roommate.”

The captain looked at Ryan, her eyes telling him the decision was his to make.

“I’ll stay with your assistant if that’s appropriate,” Ryan replied, wanting to be as close as possible to his crewmates.

“I would not have offered otherwise, Mr. Nelson,” the healer pointed out gently.

“Just checking,” Ryan muttered, feeling his face flush at being reprimanded, however kindly, by the Petari.

“Bring lightweight clothes as it is rather warm here this time of year,” Pol-ta-dar-ri went on as if Ryan had not spoken. “Linens for the bed will be provided as well as towels for the fresher. You can eat with the healers so you need not worry about supplies unless you have a restricted diet of some kind.”

Ryan shook his head. “I eat pretty much anything. How soon will the shuttle be here?”

Pol-ta-dar-ri looked away, clearly consulting a chronometer. “You should have about an hour,” he replied. “There is no rush except in how quickly we can get treatment to your crew.”

“And that is quite pressing,” Captain Rusk interjected. “We will be ready when your shuttle arrives.” She glanced at Ryan. “Dismissed.”

“Ma’am,” he acknowledged with a nod to her and one to the Petari healer before leaving the bridge. Reaching his quarters, he pulled out an old bag left over from camping trips with Nikolai. Thinking of his lover still hurt, the memories as fresh as they had been the day the news reached him that the other man had died in a climbing accident on Regulus. Ryan never did get all the details, not being considered a member of the family in the eyes of Nikolai’s conservative kin, but he knew it was something stupid,

some little oversight that his lover, an experienced climber and native of that planet, had overlooked because he was overconfident. "I miss you, Nikki," he murmured, his fingers tracing the strong lines of the albino face in the photo he still carried with him.

Pushing those thoughts aside, he began gathering his lightest weight uniforms and folding them neatly into the duffel. He and Nikolai had talked about what would happen if something happened to him when he shipped out with A.E. He had made Nikolai promise not to grieve too long. The grief was no longer fresh in Ryan's heart, but he had not been able to force himself to move on. He had tried. He had looked at every port they stopped in, searched among the crews he served with, trying to find someone, anyone to catch his interest. He occasionally felt a spark, but his guilt at Nikolai's death and his sense of betraying his lover despite the promises they made kept him from acting on the moments of passing interest. Trying to remember now, he could not picture a single face that had caught his eye since Nikolai's death.

He gathered a few toiletries as well, not sure what would be available for him on the planet's surface. Pol-ta-dar-ri had mentioned linens, but not soap and the like. Better to be prepared than to have to do without. He supposed he could have Captain Rusk send anything he needed from the ship down with the second group of patients, but he had no idea how long that would be, given what Pol-ta-dar-ri had said about the time required for healing, and he did not relish doing without toothpaste for weeks. Chuckling at that image, he finished his packing, debating for a moment whether or not to slip Nikolai's picture in his bag as well. He had not been without it for more than a few hours since his lover's death, but he had spent the vast majority of that time either shipside or at his apartment on Earth. This would be neither and he did not want anything to happen to it. He also had no idea what the Petari's attitude toward same-sex or inter-species relationships would be, and offending those who had offered to help them seemed less than wise. Tucking the photo back in its spot, he traced the other man's features one more time before shutting the

bag and hefting it to his shoulders. "See you in a few weeks, lover," he murmured, leaving the room to meet the incoming shuttle.

He arrived at the docking platform at the same time as Captain Rusk and Dr. Shelton.

"The shuttle will arrive in a few minutes," the captain informed them. "I hope we will not offend our new friends by not arranging a full diplomatic welcome, but I would rather maintain the quarantine."

"You're most right in that decision, Captain," Dr. Shelton affirmed. "I have been going over the protocols the Petari healer sent for containing the plague and quarantine is the first and most important. He also suggested some ways to purify the recycled air so it will not be spread that way. As soon as the transfer of patients is complete, I will institute those suggestions as well."

"Do that," the captain agreed, "and anything else he suggests. I refuse to let this plague take any more of my people if there's a way to stop it."

"It will mean making a few adjustments to the ship's climate system," the doctor warned.

"You have my authorization to do whatever needs to be done," Captain Rusk told him as the warning klaxon sounded to inform them of an approaching ship. "Call on whomever you need. I trust you not to break the quarantine except when absolutely necessary."

The doctor nodded, but the captain's attention was already focused on the sleek shuttle executing docking maneuvers with the *Starfire*. The pilot was clearly competent, the shuttle sliding into place with no hesitation, an airlock arm extending to match up with the portal on her ship. Captain Rusk nodded to her first officer, who sealed the airlock. "Open the iris," she directed when she saw the green light come on, indicating a successful seal.

Ryan flipped the lever that would open the seal and prepared to meet the beings who would save his friends. The iris opened, allowing the Petari to board the ship.

“Captain Rusk,” Juo-ta said with a formal bow as he paused at the entrance to the ship. “Permission to come aboard?” The soldiers had coached him on their protocols in transit. He only hoped they would be appropriate for the explorers as well. He reminded himself that they *were* explorers and thus had experience with many different races from many different planets. Surely they would be willing to accept his overtures in the spirit they were offered.

“Permission granted,” the captain offered immediately, returning the bow. Behind her, Ryan and the doctor offered bows of their own. “Forgive me, but Pol-ta-dar-ri did not tell us your name, only that his assistant would be on the shuttle.”

Juo-ta blushed, though the color barely showed on his honey-brown skin. “Juo-ta-ri, at your service, Captain Rusk,” he said, introducing himself even as he blinked in surprise at having been promoted to Pol-ta-dar’s assistant. His mentor had not informed him of that.

“Welcome aboard, Juo-ta-ri,” the captain said. “Allow me to introduce our doctor, Dr. River Shelton from Sirius, and my first officer, Mr. Ryan Nelson from Earth.”

Juo-ta could not figure out where to look first without fear of seeming rude or provincial. The explorers were all so different, from him and from each other. The captain was tall and slender, so light of skin and hair that she seemed almost colorless to him except for her vivid green eyes. The doctor was shorter and stout, his green skin nearly matching the captain’s eyes, with almost no hair at all. The first officer was slightly taller than the captain, but with darker hair that covered not only the top of his head but his upper lip as well. “Doctor River Shelton, Mr. Ryan Nelson,” he acknowledged, bowing again though not as deeply as he had to the captain.

“Juo-ta-ri,” the two men replied with matching bows.

“Call me Ryan,” the first officer added, his eyes studying the Petari. He already knew they were a humanoid race, but while Pol-ta-dar-ri had been kind and Teo-ta-dar-ri had been distinguished, they were both older. The Petari standing in front of

him now was young and willowy. His dark hair fell to his shoulders and curled around his face, making Ryan's fingers itch to touch, just to see if it felt as silky as it looked. He saw no trace of facial hair, but neither of the other Petari had any either, and many of the aliens they had met over the past three years had been fascinated by his mustache, so that did not strike him as odd. A slight movement behind the Petari drew his attention and he shifted his weight slightly to the left to get a better look. He managed to keep his jaw from dropping only by force of will.

Wings!

Black, feathered wings folded tightly against Juo-ta-ri's back. "If we're to be roommates for my stay planetside, we may as well do away with all the formalities. I can barely stand for the captain to call me Mr. Nelson all the time, much less anyone else," he added by way of explanation when he realized he had been caught staring.

"Roommates?" Juo-ta asked, not sure what the man meant.

Captain Rusk could have smacked her first officer, but she refrained in the presence of the stranger. "Pol-ta-dar-ri offered Mr. Nelson accommodations within the hospital, saying there was an extra bed where he could stay near our crew. I take it he did not ask you if that suited before he offered."

"No," Juo-ta answered honestly, "but I do not mind. It is not as if I spend much time in my room anyway. Pol-ta-dar-ri keeps me quite busy." Turning to the first officer – Ryan, he reminded himself – he added, "If we are dropping the formalities, then please call me Juo-ta. As you say, hearing my full name becomes tiresome after a time."

Ryan smiled, his eyes still fixed on his new roommate's wings. Were all Petari winged and they simply had not noticed it over the video feed? Or was this something unique to a smaller segment of the population? He supposed he would find out soon enough. Unless Juo-ta was pilot as well as healer, there would be other Petari on the shuttle.

"If you will come this way," Dr. Shelton interrupted, "we can arrange for the patients to be moved."

Juo-ta nodded and the four of them walked through the ship toward sickbay.

ADJUSTING the straps on the harness the Petari soldiers insisted he wear, Ryan looked across the cabin at his companion. He had the answer to one of his questions. The Petari had wings. Thick, dark, feathery wings whose movements said as much about their moods as their faces did. He had already picked out the solicitous gesture Juo-ta had used as he worried about the patients and that the soldiers had mimicked as they oversaw the loading of the patients and his own seating. He thought he had seen a bit of annoyance in a couple of the soldiers at Juo-ta's insistence that the patients be arranged just so. He had also, to his relief, detected a stubbornness in the healer that he respected and admired. Though clearly younger than the soldiers, Juo-ta had refused to be bullied or in any way compromise what he considered best for his patients, and while the soldiers had been annoyed, they had given in eventually, arranging things to the healer's satisfaction.

"So give me an idea here," he said, turning his attention to the Petari sitting next to him. "How long will it take to help the people we're bringing with us? How long before we can get to the ones we had to leave behind?"

Juo-ta flushed slightly at the question. "I don't really know," he replied honestly. "Pol-ta-dar-ri overstated my position when he called me his assistant. I'm really just a senior apprentice, and all I know about the Mardonese plague comes from a textbook on eradicated diseases. Even then, the patients were Petari. I have no idea if your crew will react as quickly to our therapies. Pol-ta-dar-ri could give you a better idea perhaps."

Ryan had to appreciate the other man's honesty, the trained part of his brain reminding him that he had no idea if the Petari were divided into male and female. They had met one race of hermaphrodites who had no concept of gender. Ryan had found the mix of male and female characteristics disturbing, though he had kept those feelings to himself. He had seen no such mix from

the Petari, everything about those he had met clearly in line with his idea of the male gender.

“So tell me about Petarus,” he said, changing the subject from the issue of healing. There was no point in pumping Juo-ta for information he did not have, after all.

“What do you want to know?” Juo-ta asked, the question so vague that he hardly knew where to start.

“Well,” Ryan began, trying to decide exactly what to ask, “do all Petari have wings? I’ve met a lot of different races of people in my travels, but you’re the first I’ve met with wings.”

He tried to keep his voice and face neutral, but the sensual curve of the feathery appendages fascinated him. He wanted to see if they were as soft as they looked, if they were sensitive to the touch, telling himself it was professional curiosity.

Juo-ta’s wings rustled self-consciously, only adding to Ryan’s fascination. “Really?” he asked. “You’re the first person I’ve ever met without them.”

Ryan chuckled self-deprecatingly, turning enough that Juo-ta could see his back. “Nothing interesting here,” he joked. “Just a plain old back.”

Juo-ta disagreed. The unbroken line of muscle intrigued him. Before he realized what he was doing, his hand had reached out and traced the curve of the other man’s spine, wondering what it would be like to live without wings, to be free of their weight and bulk. Most of the time, he did not even think about them, but now, seeing Ryan lounging comfortably against the bulkhead, he tried to imagine moving without wings, wondering how the other man kept his balance. Then he thought of home and all the times he used his pinions and realized that, on Petarus at least, not having wings would be a real disadvantage. “We’re fortunate that my room is on the ground floor of the residence,” he informed the officer. “You’ll be able to come and go as you please. It’ll be more difficult at the hospital though.”

Ryan looked confused for a moment before comprehension dawned. “No stairs,” he murmured.

“No what?” Juo-ta asked, and Ryan realized he had found the limits of the universal translator embedded in his brain. It could not translate a word or concept that did not exist in one of the languages.

“Stairs,” Ryan said again. “It’s how I walk from one floor to another.” He sketched them out with his hand, but no comprehension dawned. “When we get to the surface, I’ll draw them for you so you can see,” he said finally.

The announcement that the shuttle would be landing soon ended their conversation, leaving each man alone with his thoughts. Their discussion had focused Juo-ta’s thoughts squarely on the problems that would arise given the man’s lack of wings, trying to come up with alternate solutions while all the time wondering what it would be like to carry him from floor to floor.

Ryan kept replaying the touch of the Petari’s hand on his back. He had been touched countless times since Nikolai died, by friends and strangers alike, those who attracted him, as honesty compelled him to admit Juo-ta did, and those who had no effect on him physically. None, though, not a single touch since he had kissed Nikolai good-bye three years ago, had set his nerves singing the way the simple touch of the Petari’s hand down his spine had done. He chided himself for being ridiculous, for reading anything into the action but a healer’s fascination with an alien species. He had felt that fascination; he knew the power of its draw. He could not let himself begin to imagine that it was more than that.

For either of them.

CHAPTER 3

RYAN stood against the back wall of the clinic, watching the ten Petari healers tending to his friends, Juo-ta assisting when and where he could. The dynamics in the room intrigued the spacer. Pol-ta-dar-ri was clearly the senior healer in the room, everyone deferring to him consistently. He had recognized the healer immediately from the video feed, and he could keep track of Juo-ta easily, but he found it difficult to distinguish between the other nine Petari. They all had the same dark hair, dark skin, and dark wings that Juo-ta possessed. Pol-ta-dar-ri's silver mane made him easy to find among the crowd, and Ryan was surprised to realize he could already pick out Juo-ta's body language, even when his back was turned, but the others, moving, shifting, working with no introductions, were a blur of wings and little more. He detected a universal competence, though, and that was enough for him. He did not need to know each of the healers personally. They worked with deliberation and confidence, settling their patients in individual beds within an empty wing of the hospital. He had been even further impressed when they had him step through an arch which, they had explained, was a metabolic sensor, allowing them to generate a list of native substances that would be dangerous to

him. He had relaxed at that moment, convinced they truly were in competent hands.

Eventually, Pol-ta-dar-ri murmured something to Juo-ta and the younger healer nodded, leaving the others and approaching Ryan. “They’re all settled now. All that remains is to begin the treatment regimen. Pol-ta-dar-ri suggests we have dinner and get you settled. We can come back before we go to sleep, if you’d like, to make sure everything is well here.”

It was earlier than Ryan would have eaten if he had been on the *Starfire* still, but he would be living on Petarus for the next several weeks, which meant adapting his internal clock to their schedule. “That sounds good,” he agreed, wondering what new and interesting foods he would discover during his stay. His tour with A.E. had greatly expanded his repertoire of edible dishes.

Juo-ta led Ryan through the hospital complex to the entrance. “We have two choices,” he told the other man. “We can see what’s being served in the apprentices’ cafeteria or we can borrow a transport and go into town to one of the eateries there.”

Ryan heard the longing in the Petari’s voice. “An eatery sounds good,” he replied immediately, “but I don’t have any way to pay.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Juo-ta insisted. “Pol-ta-dar-ri told me we could charge it to the hospital’s account.”

Ryan blinked in surprise. It was one thing to allow him to stay on the planet, in free lodging, but to offer him *carte blanche* seemed beyond the call of duty. “Are you sure that’s all right?” he asked.

“He said you shouldn’t have to suffer through cafeteria food your first night on the planet,” Juo-ta explained. “Tomorrow, it’ll be back to the usual tasteless mush they try to pass off as food.”

Ryan laughed. “It sounds like every cafeteria I’ve ever eaten in.”

The sound of Ryan’s laughter was delightful, bringing a smile to Juo-ta’s face before he even realized he was reacting. He glanced at the spacer, taking in the humor lighting up his eyes, the

smile crinkling his face. Ryan was paler than Juo-ta's people, his skin lightly golden, his dark hair shot through with reddish brown, the underlying tones setting him apart yet again from the Petari's typically brunette locks. "Do all your people have hair on their faces?" he asked suddenly, his curiosity getting the better of his tact.

Ryan's hand went automatically to his mustache. "Not all of them," he replied, "and even then, only the men. Some men choose to shave," he paused as he saw the blank look on Juo-ta's face, "remove the hair as it grows," he amended, stroking his hand down his cheek in imitation of the act of shaving. "Others let it grow in even more than I have, so that it covers their cheeks and chin as well."

"How often do you have to... shave?" Juo-ta asked, stumbling over the unfamiliar word.

"Every morning," Ryan explained. "Remind me in the morning. I'll show you."

"You don't mind?" Juo-ta checked excitedly, reminding himself of his manners nonetheless. "I wouldn't want to intrude on anything... private."

Ryan chuckled. "I'll let you know if I need my privacy," he promised. "Now, you said something about food?"

Juo-ta nodded and led Ryan through the still-sweltering summer twilight to a small shelter where several small vehicles rested. Opening the door on one, he gestured for the explorer to climb inside. Following him into the vehicle, he could not stop himself from stealing surreptitious glances at the muscular body beneath the thin uniform. He reminded himself that Ryan would be leaving as soon as the plague was stopped, but that seemed to have no effect on his libido.

Once settled in the bucket seat, Ryan looked around in fascination, taking in all the details of the alien technology. He knew the engineers confined to the ship would pump him for information when he got back. He watched with keen interest as Juo-ta manipulated the controls, lifting the vehicle a few feet off the ground and steering it toward the nearby town. By the time

they reached the restaurant, he thought he would be able to pilot it himself. He was not as talented a pilot as Darsit, the *Starfire*'s pilot, but Ryan had never met anyone who took to new machinery the way the Altarian did. He was, however, a decent pilot and this shuttle did not seem complicated.

It took almost half an hour by Ryan's mental calculations for them to reach the town, making him glad he had decided to stay with Juo-ta on the hospital grounds. This was time he would not have to spend each morning and evening traveling to check on his friends. The town surprised him, though he told himself he had to stop making assumptions based on Earth standards. While the enclave was small, little more than a hamlet in comparison to the metropolises that dominated Earth's landscape, the buildings struck him as incredibly modern. There was no sign of the neglect that had become so common in rural areas on Earth, those buildings being left to crumble into ruin while all new construction took place in and around the major urban centers. He saw nothing run down, nothing abandoned. "This small town supports the entire hospital complex?" he asked curiously.

"The hospital serves four towns of about this size," Juo-ta replied absently, maneuvering the shuttle into an empty spot on the area set aside for outside vehicles.

"Is this fairly representative of towns on Petarus?" Ryan continued, wanting to see how this area compared with the rest of the planet. He could well be the only healthy crewmember from the *Starfire* allowed on the surface, and he wanted to bring as much information back as possible. That was, after all, their mandate and mission.

"Pretty much," Juo-ta answered, turning his attention to his companion. "Why? Are towns very different where you come from?"

"A little," Ryan replied, chuckling internally at the understatement. "And is there a lot of communication between towns?"

Juo-ta wanted to ask more about Ryan's home, but he could sense the spacer's interest in Petarus. He would answer the

questions as best he could and see if he could indulge his own curiosity later. "Quite a bit," he replied. "And young people are encouraged to travel to other areas for their schooling. The town of my birth is on the other side of the planet."

"And how long have you been here?" Ryan asked.

"Six years," Juo-ta told him. "I have six more months of my apprenticeship and then I will be free to seek a position as a healer anywhere on the planet."

"And do people usually return home or move elsewhere?"

"It depends on the individuals and the openings in their field," Juo-ta explained. "Some people return home or nearby. Others choose to break completely and start anew somewhere else." He pushed open the door to the shuttle and stepped out, his wings unfurling to help him keep his balance.

Trying to imitate the Petari's careless grace, Ryan climbed out the hatch, stumbling awkwardly as he lost his footing on the narrow threshold.

Hearing a muttered exclamation, Juo-ta turned in time to see the man stumble. He reached out, steadying him without even thinking, his hand connecting with Ryan's arm. The first time he had touched the spacer, he had been so absorbed with the missing wings that he had not paid attention to anything else. Now, though, feeling his hand close around the strong muscle of the other man's arm, he was incredibly aware of the electric jolt that went through him at the contact. His eyes flew to Ryan's face as he held on a moment longer, waiting for the explorer to step down next to him.

Ryan felt Juo-ta's eyes on him, his face flushing with embarrassment. He only hoped that hid the flash of desire that shot through him at the Petari's touch. This was the second time he had felt Juo-ta's hand and the second time he had reacted to it inappropriately. This had to stop, now. He was here on a mission, with a job to do, and however much he played fast and loose with rules that struck him as pointless or inane, falling for an alien on a planet he would probably never see again was just plain stupid. Not to mention that he was here because his friends were fighting

for their lives, on the planet and on the ship. He would not do them the disservice of forgetting that to indulge in a gratuitous affair.

Pulling away now that he was steady on his feet, Ryan turned his attention to the rest of his surroundings, looking for what might be the restaurant Juo-ta had mentioned.

Not sure what to make of Ryan's withdrawal, Juo-ta reminded himself he was supposed to be guiding the man around and finding them something to eat. "The restaurant is just over here," he said, remembering at the last minute to walk across the open space rather than vaulting into the air as he normally would have done.

They settled at a table with menus in front of them. "You'll have to order for me," Ryan told Juo-ta. "My translator device only works on spoken language. I can't read the menu."

Juo-ta looked up in surprise, not having thought about the mechanics of their communication. He understood what Ryan said, at least most of the time, and had simply accepted that fact and gone on.

"I could read it to you," he offered.

Ryan shrugged. "I probably wouldn't know what anything was anyway," he reminded his companion. "Just pick your two favorite dishes. I'm a pretty adventurous eater."

Juo-ta nodded and selected two dishes from the menu, though not his favorites, since one of his favorite foods contained an ingredient on the list of dangerous substances for the spacer. "What's it like to be an explorer?" he asked as they waited for the food to arrive.

"Long hours of boredom punctuated by moments of wonder and excitement," Ryan replied succinctly. "It's certainly interesting when we find a new planet, but there are days and weeks of routine flying, most of which is done by the ship's computer, leaving us with nothing to do but monitor the sensors. People always think of it as being exciting, and it has its moments, for sure, but it's not constant adventure." He shook his head, remembering a conversation he and Nikki had once had, as they

had considered their future. Nikki had been fascinated by the possibility of new adventures at Ryan's side, but he had balked after hearing about the downtime, choosing instead to stay on Regulus and pursue his life as a climbing guide. It had been a waste of his talent and education, but his thirst for adventure had outweighed everything else, even his love for Ryan, and that choice had ultimately killed him.

"It sounds amazing," Juo-ta insisted, a faraway look coming into his eyes as he imagined it, imagined traveling among the stars, visiting other planets, meeting new races of people. The Petari had long ago developed space faring capabilities, but they used them rarely, generally staying within their own area of space.

"It can be at times," Ryan admitted, his usual bored cynicism fading in light of Juo-ta's enthusiasm.

"Tell me about your favorite planet," Juo-ta suggested, wanting the other man to keep talking, wanting to hear more about a world he would probably never know.

Ryan paused for a moment, considering his options. He had visited many fascinating planets in his time aboard the *Starfire*, all of them with something unique and fascinating, all of them worthy of a description far beyond his capabilities. His expertise was in writing concise, complete reports that could benefit A.E. and whomever they chose to share the information with, not in any kind of poetic ode to the beauty of a place. In the end, he settled for describing his home, evoking with words the variety and beauty of the different landscapes.

At the end of the meal, Ryan could not even have said what he ate. He and Juo-ta spent the entire time deep in conversation, the Petari asking question after question, drawing every detail he could from Ryan's memories of Earth.

"Ready to see your home for the next few weeks?" Juo-ta asked when they had finished their meal.

"Sure," Ryan agreed, rising from his seat. They walked back to the transport, Ryan taking care not to lose his balance as he climbed in, not wanting to embarrass himself again.

The trip back to the hospital passed in companionable silence, both men thinking about what they had learned that evening. Juo-ta deftly parked the vehicle back on hospital grounds and led Ryan inside to his room.

Ryan looked around curiously, eyes taking in his surroundings. He chuckled as he realized that, other than the decorations, this room was almost identical to his college dorm room: two beds, two chests, two desks, two workstations, a sink outside a door that certainly led to a private bathroom.

“Would you like something to drink?” Juo-ta offered, feeling the weight of hospitality.

“Sure,” Ryan replied, walking toward the bed where his duffel rested. Though slightly cooler than when he had first arrived, the climate was definitely tropical in this season, leaving him feeling parched despite the liquid he had consumed with dinner. “What do you have?”

“Nothing terribly interesting,” Juo-ta answered honestly. “Just some parberry juice. I haven’t had time to go buy anything else recently.”

“Juice is fine,” Ryan agreed, looking forward to something crisp and refreshing as he settled himself on the bed and relaxed back against the wall.

Juo-ta poured the yellow juice into two glasses, offering one to Ryan before taking a seat on his own bed, intending to continue their conversation where it left off.

JUO-TA’S hands shook as he unfastened the buttons on the spacer’s tunic. They had been talking, just as they had at dinner, enjoying their juice and relaxing. Then Ryan had grown quiet. When his question went unanswered a second time, Juo-ta looked up to see his new friend slumped against the wall, face lax, eyes barely open. A pointed query had earned the response that he was simply sleepy, and Juo-ta’s healing senses did not indicate a more serious problem, but he could not let Ryan sleep in his confining clothes. Reminding himself to act with professional decorum, he

worked the fabric down the broad shoulders, relieved not to have to struggle with wings. He kept his hands from lingering, from touching in any way that might be considered inappropriate, but he could do nothing to stop his eyes from roving over the slowly revealed skin, covered in a light pelt of hair, much thinner than the one on Ryan's upper lip, but no less fascinating in its newness.

Eyes focusing through his stupor, Ryan zeroed in on the Petari's face. "You're not Nikki," he slurred. "No one's undressed me since Nikki died."

Juo-ta had no idea how to reply to that statement so he simply continued his work, removing the light boots and pulling the shipsuit off. He told himself he was relieved that the other man wore an undergarment beneath it. He wondered who Nikki was, if he? she? was Ryan's mate. The thought bothered him, not only at the idea that Ryan might have found his mate but also that he had lost the one he loved.

"You don't look at all like Nikki," Ryan mumbled. He blinked his eyes a few times and some clarity seemed to return to his thoughts. "Doesn't mean you aren't attractive," he added. "Best looking man I've seen in three years."

Before Juo-ta could decide what to say, the explorer's eyes closed and a gentle snore passed his lips. More than a little confused, Juo-ta did his best to settle his new roommate comfortably on the bed, hoping the morning would bring an explanation. Or several. His confused thoughts followed him into his dreams, though, nebulous images of bodies entwined in passion, curling around one another protectively, possessively, lovingly.

CHAPTER 4

THE sound of groans pulled Juo-ta out of his restless sleep. He sat up quickly, eyes landing on Ryan's bent-over form. The man sat on the edge of his bed, elbows on his knees, head down as he panted, clearly suffering. Panic assailing him, Juo-ta flew from his bed, kneeling next to his roommate.

"What's wrong?" the Petari asked, his wings fluttering forward automatically, assessing the other man's condition.

"Head," Ryan groaned, his stomach roiling and his head pounding. He knew all he drank last night was the juice Juo-ta had in the room, but he felt like he had gone on a world-class binge. "Nauseous."

Juo-ta relaxed marginally. These were not the symptoms of the Mardonese plague, so that was not the problem. "Let me help," he requested, his wings hovering near Ryan's skin without actually touching.

Ryan nodded, fighting down another wave of nausea. He had no idea what the healer could do, but anything was better than dealing with what felt like a hangover.

Permission granted, Juo-ta let his wings settle over the bare skin of Ryan's back and shoulders, enfolding the spacer

completely. His eyes closed as he worked to bring order to the sensory data he received even as his wings drew out the toxins in the other man's system, easing the pain in his head and the cramps in his stomach, slowly helping his body to find its balance again. They sat like that for nearly ten minutes before some sense of well-being radiated from Ryan again.

Sitting back on his heels, Juo-ta watched the color return to Ryan's face as he lifted his head. "You're still dehydrated," he told the explorer. "I can draw out the pain and toxins, but I can't put anything back in."

Ryan nodded mutely, trying to assimilate the sudden absence of discomfort and the incredible intimacy of having been surrounded by the dark feathers that had fascinated him since he first saw them. It was more contact than he had allowed himself with anyone since Nikki died, and long-buried emotions and desires sprang to the fore. He pushed them aside, telling himself again they had no place here, with his friends sick and himself on duty, reminding himself that they would be leaving sooner rather than later and he would be alone again. None of his self-directed words did any good, though, against the sudden violent longing for companionship, for contact. He lifted his head and met Juo-ta's eyes, sure his feelings must be written clearly on his face, but he had to know, had to see if the Petari felt any echo of the emotions wracking him now. If not, he would bury them as he had buried his grief at Nikki's death, pushing them down deep within himself, to be examined only during the dark of night, when he had nothing else to occupy his mind.

He did not know what he would do if, on the other hand, Juo-ta's eyes reflected his own desires.

He saw concern in the dark gaze as the healer handed him a glass, but while he thought other emotions glittered there as well, he found himself unable to decipher what they were. Resigning himself to going on alone, he took the cup and mustered a smile.

Juo-ta's breath caught in his throat at the naked longing he read on Ryan's face. He wanted to lean forward and kiss away the desperation, the loneliness, to wrap his wings around the other man

for comfort rather than for healing, but his memories of the night before held him back. The first officer had clearly suffered a loss, and for the healer to take advantage of that, to press his suit when the other man was far from his best, struck him as wrong. "Here," he murmured. "Drink this."

Ryan took the cup and sniffed at it. As soon as he smelled the parberry juice from the night before, his stomach curled and he shook his head. "Not that. That's what caused this. Can I have some water?"

Juo-ta's frown deepened as he fetched a cup of water. "Parberry juice is harmless. How could it have made you so sick?"

"I wasn't really sick," Ryan replied, taking the water and sipping slowly. When his nausea did not return, he drank a little more. "The juice just seems to be an intoxicant."

"What's that?" Juo-ta asked, clearly confused.

Ryan frowned. "Some substances react with my blood chemistry to produce the symptoms you saw this morning. It doesn't hurt me, just... loosens me up a little, lowers my inhibitions. And enough of it can leave me with a headache, some nausea, and some dehydration the next day. It goes away within a few hours usually."

"But it wasn't on the list of things you weren't supposed to have," Juo-ta worried aloud. "If there's a problem with the scanner, I need to notify Pol-ta-dar immediately!"

"Intoxicants aren't dangerous to me," Ryan repeated. "In fact, they're often served at the end of day to help people relax or as a complement to a fine meal. I just drank too much since I didn't realize what it was."

"It doesn't have that effect on us," Juo-ta protested.

Ryan shrugged. "Different metabolisms, I guess." He grinned lightly. "We'll see how you do with a glass of Altarian ale or a good Burgundy wine."

"Those are also... intoxicants?" Juo-ta asked, stumbling over the unfamiliar word.

Ryan nodded. "My personal favorites. A glass of one or the other at the end of a long day makes the evening much more relaxed and enjoyable."

Juo-ta considered the idea. "You did become much more... open in your words as the evening wore on last night," he agreed, "though I'm not sure that would always be desirable."

"I also drank a lot more than just one glass last night," Ryan pointed out, flushing slightly as he remembered Juo-ta undressing him and the highly revealing comments he had made at the same time. "And I've always been a painfully honest drunk. One of the many reasons I limit it to a glass and that I don't drink except in the company of friends."

Juo-ta almost asked if that meant Ryan really was attracted to him, but the rest of the comments, the ones about Nikki, held him back. "You'll want to clean up, I imagine," he said, completely changing the subject. "It's not as hot as it has been, but it's still miserable, even for us and we're mostly used to it. I'm sure your ship isn't this hot."

Ryan brightened immediately at the offer of a shower. He felt rank, from the heat and from the hangover. Rubbing his hands briskly across his face, he realized he would need a shave as well, which brought back their conversation from the evening before and Juo-ta's interest in that process. Flushing again, he rose slowly from the bed, assessing his steadiness automatically. It had been awhile since he had gone on drinking binges with any regularity, but he had not completely forgotten the effects on his body. Despite the earlier symptoms, the rest of the effects – the shakiness, the aching joints, the vertigo that usually assailed him – were absent. He glanced at his companion again. "So how exactly did you cure me just now? I've never gotten over a hangover this fast."

Juo-ta shrugged diffidently. "The same way I – we heal everything else. Our wings draw out impurities and allow a transfer of psychic energy to speed our patients' healing."

Ryan's mind boggled as he considered the implications. "So my crewmates...." He trailed off, not even sure what he was trying to ask.

"Each of them has been assigned a healer who will treat them much as I did you," Juo-ta confirmed. "The Mardonese plague is a much more complex problem than your... hangover, so it will take more than a few minutes of treatment. Depending on how sick they are, it could take a week or more of treatments to cure them completely. When they are well, we will bring more people who need help down from your ship."

Ryan nodded mutely. It certainly explained why the Council had been unwilling to have more than ten patients at a time. He was sure, having seen the hospital yesterday, that the healers had taken appropriate measures to keep the disease from spreading to the local population, but the Council had to think of all eventualities, not just the best case scenario. "You mentioned a shower," he said, changing the subject. He would think more on the manner of Petari healing later, but for now, he wanted to check on his friends.

"Of course," Juo-ta said, gesturing to the smaller door in the room. "The fresher is through there."

Ryan gathered his toiletries and stepped into the small room. It was pretty basic, toilet and shower, but that was all he really needed. He stripped off his boxers and turned the water on. He usually needed a hot shower after a hangover to wash away the cobwebs, but with the heat and Juo-ta's healing, he decided on cooler water instead. Scrubbing away the sweat from the heat and the hangover, Ryan let his thoughts drift back to the night before and his ill-advised but undeniably true comments to his roommate. Juo-ta was Nikki's polar opposite in looks, younger than Ryan where Nikki had been older, dark where the Regulosian had been pale, but there was no denying his attractiveness. The dark curls that fell to powerful shoulders framed a face that would be considered handsome by any of the races aboard the *Starfire* and probably many others as well. The Petari's dark eyes seemed bottomless, revealing far more than Ryan knew how to read. He ached for the chance to learn, but knew that was fruitless. The

Starfire would be leaving as soon as her crew was well, and Ryan would be aboard as always. It would be far better for him to simply forget about his devilishly attractive roommate and focus on his job.

If only it were that easy.

With a grimace, he turned off the water and reached for the towel, running it swiftly over his body to wipe off the worst of the wetness. Wrapping it around his hips, he climbed out of the stall and dug in his bag for his shaving equipment. There was no sink in the little room, leaving him no choice but to step back into the bedroom to shave. He wished he had thought to bring a change of clothes with him into the bathroom, if only so he did not have to worry about the towel falling while he shaved, but it was too late for that now.

When the door opened, Juo-ta looked up from his seat at the workstation where he had been researching everything he could find about intoxicants. There was precious little in the database and all of it was from off world sources, making him wary about the accuracy of the information. Perhaps Pol-ta-dar would authorize him to request additional information from the healer aboard Ryan's ship. He knew what Ryan said about the reaction he had to the parberry juice, but he was not completely convinced it was harmless. Surely it could not be when it caused the sort of reactions he had treated that morning. All thoughts of illness and professional curiosity went out of his head when he caught sight of Ryan in the doorway.

The spacer came back into the room, looking somewhat uncomfortable. Juo-ta knew he should have offered to leave, to give Ryan some privacy, but there was no way he was about to leave, not now. His eyes wandered as boldly as they had the night before, taking in every detail of muscle and sinew, noting where their bodies were similar and where they were different. Other than the officer's obvious lack of wings, the only difference of note seemed to be the dusting of hair that covered Ryan's chest and legs. Juo-ta's fingers itched to touch, to learn the no doubt intriguing sensation of that light pelt under his hands.

The towel wrapped modestly around Ryan's waist hid the same area the man's shorts had covered the night before, keeping Juo-ta from satisfying that last little bit of curiosity, but he noticed almost immediately a swelling under the front of the linen that had not been there the night before. On his own body, such a swelling would be one of several signs of desire. He certainly hoped it meant the same for Ryan.

Ryan could feel Juo-ta's eyes on him as he came out of the bathroom, setting his shaving kit on the sink and beginning to lather his stubbled cheeks. The Petari's gaze was as strong as a physical caress, provoking the same reaction in the man's groin that a touch would have done. He could feel his erection growing under the intense perusal, despite his attempts to focus his thoughts elsewhere.

A quick glance revealed that the Petari had changed tunics while Ryan was in the bathroom, the observation sending a fresh surge of lust through him as he imagined the object of his interest shirtless. He had seen Juo-ta flex his wings climbing in and out of the shuttle yesterday as they went to eat, had seen other Petari flying, and knew the muscles of their chests had to be incredibly well-developed. Nikki's upper body had been strong from climbing, but it was his legs that had been the most powerful, yet another difference between his dead lover and the being in front of him.

Returning his focus to the task at hand, Ryan picked up his razor and began to run it over his foamy skin, removing gel and stubble with each pass. He could hear Juo-ta standing and coming closer, but he forced himself to pay attention to what he was doing. His roommate had healed his hangover, but that did not mean he could heal a cut face. As many ways as there were to inhibit the growth of hair on his face, his desire to keep his mustache meant doing this the old-fashioned way.

Juo-ta was glad, not for the first time, that his room had a private fresher, a privilege afforded only to the senior apprentices. Most of the younger apprentices used the communal facilities down the hall. Watching Ryan now, naked except for the towel that hung dangerously low around his hips, threatening to fall at

any second, the Petari was jealously possessive of the sight. Not to mention that any of his colleagues, seeing him now, with the feathers of his wings fanning out, would immediately recognize the lust riding him hard. There was no particular shame in the display, as instinctive a reaction as the swelling of his shaft, but he had no interest in sharing his desire or its object with anyone else, especially not like this. His sensitive nose also detected the scent of his own desire. He wondered if Ryan could smell it as well, could feel the tension charging the atmosphere. A deep inhale revealed another scent in the air, one Juo-ta did not recognize. His eyes raking over his companion's form and taking in the tightly peaked nipples, he wondered if he was smelling Ryan's own pheromones. The thought increased the lust riding him, driving him a step closer to the spacer, so close that they were almost touching.

Ryan finished the last stroke across his face, bending to wash away the traces of lather and whiskers that remained, the movement shifting the towel precariously. As he stood and stepped back, he found himself once more close against Juo-ta's chest, their bodies brushing much as they had when the Petari had used his wings to cure Ryan's hangover, except that this time, Ryan was not feeling ill, eliminating the excuse that had allowed him to accept the intimacy with relative ease. Their eyes met in the mirror, blue orbs and brown disks dark with desire.

Ryan started to lean back, to invite the contact that would certainly lead to more, when the distinctive crackling of his comm distracted him. He almost ignored it, almost pretended he had not heard it, when Captain Rusk's voice came through, calling his name.

With a muffled curse, he pulled away from the near embrace and dug through his clothes until he found the comm. Not realizing the knot in the towel had loosened, he stood again to answer his captain, the fabric slipping from his hips, giving Juo-ta a view of his naked backside. He would have cursed as he fumbled around looking for a pair of boxers if he had not been trying to answer his captain at the same time. Giving up, he sat

down on the bed and pulled the sheet over his lap. "I'm here, Captain," he answered finally.

"I was beginning to think the communications system didn't work on the planet," Captain Rusk commented drolly.

"I was taking a shower," he answered by way of explanation, refusing to look up and meet Juo-ta's gaze.

Juo-ta's eyes widened when Ryan bent over, the towel slipping from his hips to reveal tight, hard buttocks the same honeyed shade as the rest of the spacer's skin. His hands itched to touch, his lips ached to taste. Then Ryan turned and sat, pulling the sheet over himself modestly, but not quickly enough to keep Juo-ta from catching sight of the hard length of flesh between his legs.

Feeling like he was intruding now that the Captain's presence had invaded their privacy, Juo-ta turned away, his mind replaying that brief glimpse, imagining what it would feel like to stroke the upstanding shaft, to close his lips around it and taste it. Would Ryan like the same things he did? Would the spacer even be willing to try? He did not know, but he intended to find out.

THEY walked back from the hospital, the sunset brilliant behind them, their hands and shoulders not quite brushing.

"Let's not go inside yet," Ryan said, taking a deep breath of the fragrant air. The rainstorm that afternoon had lowered the temperature and washed away the dust and pollen that had lingered in the air, leaving the world fresh and new.

Juo-ta nodded and started toward the wooded park that sat on one side of the hospital complex. Recovering patients were often encouraged to walk there during the morning before the heat reached intolerable levels. At this hour of the evening, though, it would certainly be deserted, giving them a level of privacy only surpassed, maybe, by their room. The tension between them had been simmering since the morning, two days before, when he had watched Ryan shave, in shared glances and small touches, not even enough to be called caresses, but simply contact, a mutual acknowledgement of awareness and desire.

The incarnadine rays from Petarus' hot sun bathed them in a gentle glow as they moved beneath the sheltering trees. Ryan could feel himself gravitating toward Juo-ta, a comet caught by the other man's magnetism, the presence of the Petari heating him like a sun after so long in the dark and cold that was his grief at Nikki's death. Drawing closer would, he knew, cause him to burst into flames, to be burned away, in part, by the other man's heat. His only fear was his return to space, his departure from his current orbit. The emptiness he would feel, having known what it was to live again, would seem even colder after this, but he could not bring himself to regret it. Not when he no longer dreaded the start of a new day. Not when he found himself looking forward to the end of the work schedule so he could spend time alone with Juo-ta. Not when he found himself smiling again for no reason other than that he was happy.

As they passed out of sight of the hospital, Juo-ta relaxed the control he had been struggling for all day, letting his wings spread slightly, feathers splaying as he glanced sideways at his companion. He still did not know if Ryan recognized those signs of his desire, not having actually discussed it with the spacer, but they were signs Juo-ta had no interest in hiding. He wanted Ryan to know how he felt, wanted to know if Ryan felt the same way. He thought the explorer returned his interest. Certainly, the same behaviors he had observed over the past two days from a fellow Petari would have indicated a reciprocity of feeling. Glancing around the mostly enclosed copse, he thought perhaps the time had come to find out for sure.

Reaching out slightly, he brushed the back of his hand against Ryan's, waiting to see what reaction he would get. Almost immediately, the spacer's hand turned toward his, their fingers interlacing, hands hanging gently between them, bumping their thighs as they continued to walk slowly through the trees.

The first overture accepted, Juo-ta took a nervous breath and extended his right wing, draping it casually across Ryan's shoulders. He had no idea how the explorer would interpret his gesture. Another Petari would understand perfectly, not just the invitation, but the other implications as well. He almost pulled

back to explain everything to Ryan, but then the officer stepped closer to him, leaning against his shoulder and slipping his arm around Juo-ta's waist. All thoughts of pulling away fled completely.

The feeling of the soft, dark feathers brushing against the nape of his neck sent a frisson of desire down Ryan's spine. His body stirred in immediate response, something he had grown used to in Juo-ta's presence. He had fought it at first, but it felt so good, so right to live again that he had stopped repressing his reactions, his desires. Nikki would understand. With a gentle sigh, he stepped even closer, tightening his arm around Juo-ta's waist, feeling the silky wing brush his skin. He only hoped such a gesture would not be misinterpreted, that he was not misinterpreting the invitation in his companion's actions. If it had been another human or even one of the other races aboard the *Starfire* walking next to him, he would have known for sure. Now, he could only hope.

They walked on, the silence between them so taut with desire that neither dared speak for fear of shattering the spell. Juo-ta ruffled his feathers lightly, a whisper of a caress along the skin of Ryan's neck and just beneath his ear. The explorer was responding as ardently as he could have wanted. Pushing aside the last lingering doubt, he stopped, using his wing to turn Ryan toward him. Meeting the spacer's eyes, he slowly tipped his head, brushing their lips together lightly.

"Juo-ta," Ryan murmured, the name an invitation and a plea in one, his eyes closing as he let himself relax in the circle of arms and wings that cradled him. His slowly thawing heart burst into life again, resuscitated by the tender care bestowed upon him, the simple kindness the healer had shown to all his patients, the laughter they had shared over the past two days that had balanced out the moments of tense fear when they had nearly lost another crew member to this bedamned plague. He leaned closer, resting in the embrace, his lips blindly seeking another kiss.

His name on Ryan's lips both warmed and jarred Juo-ta. Another Petari would have instinctively dropped the second half of his name, the intimacy of the kiss allowing it. Ryan could not have known that, though. "Just Juo," he murmured in reply, nuzzling

the explorer's neck, inhaling the scent of the man, so very different than his own race's, yet so incredibly alluring. Before long, though, he returned to Ryan's mouth, learning the texture of the other man's mustache against his lips, learning the taste of the other man's mouth beneath his own. His wings tightened, pulling Ryan closer against him, letting the spacer feel the growing bulge at his groin.

Feeling an answering hardness between Ryan's legs, Juo fought the urge to push the other man against one of the nearby trees or else to scoop him in his arms and fly back to their room. A single night of mindless sex was not what he wanted and he would not send that signal, even if he was not sure the explorer would see it that way. He wanted a lover, not a one-night stand, and that meant courting Ryan properly, even if he was the only one who understood what he was doing. Gentling his touch, he continued to scatter tender kisses over the other man's face, focusing primarily on his mouth, but exploring the line of his cheekbones, the expanse of his forehead as well, trying to convey his continued interest while still easing the compulsion between them.

Ryan felt the mood between them shift, felt the urge to hurry ease, yet the feeling of being desired did not fade. He wondered why Juo was slowing things down. Surely the Petari had felt the answering response when their bodies brushed together. A small part of his mind threw up the memory of Nikki and their whirlwind courtship, the Regulosian determined to get Ryan in bed and stake his claim as quickly as possible. Ryan had not protested, the sense of being desired so strong that he had not ever doubted Nikki's intentions. As Juo finally separated their mouths, Ryan told himself firmly to stop comparing the two men, both in honor of Nikki's memory and in fairness to Juo. Even then, though, the contrast made him wonder what the Petari's actions meant. There was no sense of withdrawal or rejection – not with Juo's wing still around his shoulders and Juo's arm still around his waist, not with the Petari keeping him close to his side as they turned back toward the dorm. The deeply buried romantic core of his heart whispered that perhaps the Petari believed in a slow, tender courtship. Certainly, he had seen enough elaborate rituals in the various

cultures they had studied to be familiar with the idea. Unfortunately, short of asking, he had no way of being sure now. When he was doing an anthropological assay, he could ask those questions, but now, with his own heart becoming engaged, he dared not, for fear of hearing that the depth of his interest was not returned.

CHAPTER 5

HOT.

Nervous.

Jittery.

As Ryan walked back toward the dorm, his nerves jumped with excitement. Despite his earlier qualms, he had no doubt what would transpire that night. Matters between Juo and himself had reached the point where there was only one logical conclusion. Before the night was over, they would be lovers.

His heart and loins jumped at the thought, fired by the kisses they had shared whenever they were alone since their walk in the park, by the tender caresses they shared whenever they passed during the day, by the vision of Juo walking out of the fresher that morning attired in absolutely nothing, all but inviting Ryan to look and touch his fill. Duty had kept them from more than a kiss and a few loving gropes that morning, but nothing would stand between them that night.

Letting his thoughts drift inward, he called up the sight that had haunted him all day: Juo's body revealed to him. His gaze had raked over the powerful muscles of his lover's chest, then lower to a trim waist and narrow hips, still well-defined but without the

bulk of his upper body. His curiosity satisfied on one count, he now knew that Juo's wings were the only difference of note between their physiognomies, the healer's cock an eager match for his own.

Reaching the room he and Juo shared, Ryan let himself in and lay back on his bed, hoping the healer would hurry. They had planned to meet at the end of the work day and come home together, but when he arrived, Juo was still deep in a conversation with Pol-ta-dar-ri. His lover's eyes had held the promise of the evening as he urged Ryan to return to their rooms to wait for him. Suddenly too flustered to do anything but agree, Ryan had left the building, eagerness building as he walked, his nerves aflame with desire and anticipation.

Opening his uniform against the oppressive heat, Ryan lay back and let his mind wander, let himself imagine what the night would bring. He already knew Juo would be a tender, attentive lover. His care with his patients attested to that as did the gentle way he held Ryan each time they embraced, each time they kissed. Tonight, he would know the full scope of that tenderness.

The door opened and Juo walked in, his wings spread slightly in the posture Ryan had come to associate with their intimate moments. His eyes caressed his lover's body, seeing again in his mind's eye the vision of that morning, the healer's smooth, chocolaty skin glistening damply from the fresher. He wondered if the lack of body hair made Juo more sensitive or if he was so used to it that he did not even notice. Before the night was over, he would know. He sat up and reached for his lover.

The flush staining Ryan's cheeks surprised Juo, but he reminded himself that his lover was not a Petari and that the signs of his desire could well differ from those of Juo's own race. Crossing the room, he sat on the bed next to the spacer, moving into the open arms and leaning forward to kiss Ryan eagerly. The skin that met his lips burned hotter than he had felt during any of their other encounters. Concern growing, he let his wings settle forward, a simple embrace if nothing was wrong, but it would allay his fears one way or the other. The heat of a fever hit his senses immediately. Anxious now, he pushed Ryan flat onto the bed, his

wings fluttering up and down the explorer's body, searching for other symptoms to explain the fever.

Ryan writhed gently beneath Juo's touch, relishing the feeling of the feathers brushing his skin. "More," he pleaded, fumbling with his clothes, trying to bare more of his flesh to the evocative caress.

"Easy," Juo soothed, his unease mounting as he realized Ryan was not even aware of the fever wracking him or the growing congestion in his lungs. "Lie still a moment."

The words barely penetrated the fog surrounding Ryan's mind, his awareness focused on the heat burning through him, a heat only Juo could assuage. He moaned wantonly at the feeling of Juo's hands parting his uniform, of Juo's wings sliding lower across his belly, barely brushing his cock before drifting down his legs. "Please," he begged. "Touch me."

Juo wanted to. He wanted to tuck his wings behind him, pretend nothing was wrong, and ravish his lover the way the wanton writhing declared Ryan desired. The horrifying realization of what was wrong tore through him, extinguishing his desire, his healer's ethics too strong, though, especially after all the studying he had done the past week on the Mardonese plague. The infectious agent in Ryan's blood fed on the heat of his body. Increasing that temperature, either by making love or by any other means, would only hasten the progress of the disease, adding to its malignancy and increasing the likelihood that it would claim Ryan's life. "No!" Juo hissed virulently, heart clenching at the thought of his lover prey to the vicious disease. "I won't let it take you."

Rising from the bed despite the clinging of Ryan's arms, Juo went into the fresher and turned the water on as cold as it would go. Given the heat outside, it would take a few minutes for it to cool down enough to be effective in lowering Ryan's body temperature. That gave him a few minutes to convince his lover that moving away from the bed and into the cold water would be a good thing.

Ryan tossed restlessly on the bed when the comforting touch of Juo's wings left him. He called his lover's name, desperate for more contact. His vision blurring, he tried to push up to a sitting position, looking around frantically for the Petari. "Juo!" he called again, panic entering his voice as visions of being abandoned popped into his head.

Hearing the fear in Ryan's voice and knowing that delirium often accompanied the plague, Juo hurried back to Ryan's side, enfolding the explorer in his wings, hoping that contact, both desired and therapeutic, would help steady his lover until they could get him into the shower. "I'm here," he murmured gently. "I was just turning on the water."

"Water?" Ryan asked, trying to make sense of the conversation. What did they need water for? They were about to make love. His face clouded in confusion. Weren't they?

"You're sick," Juo told Ryan gently. "You have a fever and we need to get it down. We're going to go stand in the cold water for a few minutes until you feel a little better. Then you're going to sleep and I'm going to take care of you." He put his arm around Ryan's back, helping him to stand slowly.

"Sick?" Ryan repeated. "But Pol-ta-dar-ri said I wasn't sick."

"You weren't," Juo agreed, "but now you are. Come on, let's get you cooled off."

Still too confused to do anything but go along, Ryan let Juo help him into the fresher. The air was noticeably cooler there than in the main room, letting him catch his breath a little. He shook his head, trying to clear it, to no real avail. "What's wrong with me?" he asked, enough awareness coming back to him that he understood this was serious.

"You caught the plague," Juo answered honestly, helping Ryan to sit for a moment while he stripped off his own clothes. "You must have contracted it from your crewmates while we were in the hospital." Naked now, he helped Ryan to stand again and led him into the cold spray.

Ryan's body arched in agony the moment the water hit it, the droplets like needles of ice jabbing his burning skin. He struggled weakly against the confining arms, but Juo's grip was implacable. "Hurts," he groaned, leaning back against the body behind him.

"I know," Juo murmured, his hands running gently up and down Ryan's arms, spreading the cooling water along the trembling limbs. "But it's the fastest way to get your temperature down, and that's the best way to slow the disease."

Visions of his dead crewmates flashed before his eyes as he shivered under the lash of cold water. "I don't want to die," he whispered plaintively.

Juo's grip tightened, his wings coming forward of their own volition to wrap around Ryan, heedless of blocking the water. "I won't let you," he swore vehemently. "I won't let it take you from me."

Not thinking about contagion or anything other than the surge of emotion those heartfelt words evoked, Ryan turned his head, desperately seeking a kiss. Juo knew the danger he ran by closing his lips over his lover's even for so short a time, but he could not deny the spacer this small measure of comfort. He pulled back, though, when he felt Ryan's tongue probing the seam of his lips. As good as it would feel – as good as it had felt each time they kissed that way – it would put him at a far greater risk of contracting the disease himself. That impulse lasted until he heard Ryan's moan of protest. They had both spent the week at the hospital. He could just as easily have been exposed to the disease as Ryan had been. One kiss of comfort was surely not that big a risk. Tilting his lover's head back against his shoulder again, he gave in and offered the kiss the explorer desired, teeth and tongues clashing briefly as he sealed his promise to keep his lover safe.

Feeling Ryan's skin heating again, Juo muffled a curse and parted his wings, letting the cold water hit his lover once more. He hated the way Ryan arched in agony, but there was nothing else he could do. He had to get the explorer's temperature down fast. "Just a few more minutes," he murmured soothingly. "Let the

water bring your temperature back down to normal and then you can go back to bed.”

His hands continued to move as he spoke, rubbing the water into Ryan’s skin, trying to ease the sting as best he could without decreasing the effectiveness of the treatment. Even now, knowing how deadly the situation could become, he could not stop himself from admiring the hard planes of muscle as he worked, could not stop himself from noticing the way the light dusting of hair gently abraded his skin, setting his own nerves twitching in anticipation. He and Ryan had kissed with increasing passion over the past few days, but this was the first time he had dared to touch so openly, so thoroughly. That it was happening now because Ryan was ill only marginally decreased the sense of wonder he felt at being allowed the intimacies of a lover. Even sick, he doubted Ryan would accept such touches from any other healer, at least not without protest.

As his body slowly cooled, Ryan became aware finally of more than just the painful pounding of the icy water. Behind him, Juo’s body offered a comforting strength and solidity, giving him something to lean against without hesitation. The sensation of smooth skin against his back, of tender hands moving over his body penetrated the fog that had clouded his mind. A shiver wracked him again, though from the water or desire he could not have said. “I’m really sick, aren’t I?” he asked.

Hearing the lucidity in Ryan’s voice, Juo tilted his lover’s chin to meet his eyes. Free for the moment from delirium, they reassured the healer as nothing else could. The worst was far from over, had probably not yet even begun, but for the moment, Ryan was with him and could help him decide what steps to take next. “Yes,” he replied honestly, “but your fever came down, which is a good sign.” He paused, then asked, “Do you want me to call one of the healers from the hospital? They’re far more experienced than I am.”

Ryan considered the question seriously, understanding Juo’s concerns. “If you call one of them, they’d have to split their time between me and one of the other patients from the *Starfire*, right?”

“That’s right,” Juo agreed, bracing himself to hear that his lover would prefer another healer, an experienced healer.

“You know how to heal this, though,” Ryan continued, his words not a question this time.

“Of course!” Juo snapped, his reaction as much an indication of his own lingering self-doubt as of his fear of losing Ryan to the plague. “If I didn’t, I would have called for help immediately.”

“Then there’s no reason to call for another healer,” Ryan added as if Juo had not spoken. “I don’t want anyone else touching me. I don’t want anyone else’s wings around me. Only yours.”

Pulling Ryan out of the cold spray, Juo wrapped those wings around his lover, checking the progress of the disease even as he gave them both what they wanted. “It’s going to be a rough few days,” he warned, “but I’ll do everything I can to make it easier.”

“I trust you,” Ryan replied, turning in the tender embrace and laying his head on Juo’s shoulder. It was a measure of how ill he was, even with the fever temporarily abated, that he only barely reacted to the brush of their cocks together as they stood chest to chest with nothing between them for the first time.

Those three simple words meant more to Juo than almost any others possibly could. Even the wash of desire as their bodies brushed so intimately could not distract him from the swell of emotion. Tenderly, he tilted his head and brought their lips together again. “I won’t let you down,” he promised. “Now, we should get you in bed.”

Ryan’s grin was lopsided as he reacted to the kiss. “I knew you were just after my body.”

“It’s such a remarkable specimen,” Juo agreed, his hand running down Ryan’s back to settle on the swell of his buttocks. “But that’ll have to wait until you’re well.” He proceeded to outline the reasons. To his relief, Ryan accepted them immediately.

“I’d much rather wait until we can make love without worrying it might make you sick, or me worse. Besides, if the delirium returns, I wouldn’t know what we were doing anyway, and I’d

prefer to be fully aware of every sensation the first time you slip inside me.”

“Maybe I’d rather have you strong enough to slide into me,” Juo retorted teasingly, leading Ryan back into the main room and toward his bed. “Either way, though, it’ll have to wait until we know you’re well.”

Ryan settled back onto his bed with a sigh of relief. Despite the fever being gone for the moment, he felt far weaker than usual, and lying down was fast becoming necessary. He caught hold of Juo’s hand, clinging to it as he tried to get comfortable.

“Scoot over,” Juo urged, seeing Ryan’s restless squirming. “Let me see if I can make you more comfortable.”

Ryan shifted on the bed to make room for Juo beside him, thankful once more that the beds here were wider than his bunk on the *Starfire*. He figured they were designed to allow for the Petari’s wings. Regardless of the reason, it gave them room to lie on the bed side by side, Juo’s upper wing resting across his body.

Almost immediately, the prickling along his nerves eased, his muscles relaxing as he drifted near sleep. “Sleep while you can,” Juo urged, feeling Ryan relax. He had no idea how long it would take before the nerve spasms would get too strong for him to ease them completely, but he knew it would reach that point before Ryan completely recovered. In the meantime, he would do what he could.

Juo stayed at Ryan’s side, wing draped over him, as long as he could, but eventually the demands of his own body drove him from the bed and back to the fresher to relieve himself. He was washing his hands when the pained scream echoed through the room. Cursing volubly, knowing Ryan probably could not hear him, he flew back to the bed, pulling Ryan into his arms so he could wrap both wings around his lover. Immediately, he could feel the agony that wracked the explorer’s body, the disease attacking his nerve endings viciously.

Closing his eyes, Juo concentrated on transferring as much healing energy as he could to the man in his arms. He hated to see anyone suffer, but this was different. This was not just anyone

suffering. This was Ryan, his lover, quite possibly his love. He had not said as much to the spacer, not knowing what degree of commitment interested the other man, but now, fighting for his lover's life, he admitted to himself that this was far more than just a casual encounter. That realization pushed him to redouble his efforts, expending every ounce of energy he could spare to fight the insidious infection, to push it back and deny it any foothold in his lover's body.

Eventually, the painful spasms eased, leaving Ryan panting in Juo's arms, tear tracks staining his face. "Can I have some water?" he asked, his voice hoarse from screaming.

"Lie still," Juo said. "I'll get it and come back."

Ryan nodded weakly, wondering how much more of this he would have to endure. Already, it felt like his skin was being flayed from his body, the pain so intense he had nothing to which to compare it. He knew Juo had helped him through the spasms. Even in the midst of the pain, he had felt his lover's wings around him. He did not want to think how much worse it would have been if Juo had not been there to help. How much worse it had been for his crewmates who had contracted the disease and died.

Juo filled a glass with fresh water and brought it back to Ryan, helping him to sit up. "Can you sit up and drink it on your own? I should really let Pol-ta-dar know what's going on."

Ryan nodded again, reclining heavily against the pillows Juo arranged behind him. He took the glass and sipped at it gingerly, not sure how his abused system would react. His stomach stayed steady, though, so he took another sip. "Do what you need to do," he croaked out. "I'll be okay here for a few minutes."

"I'm not going far," Juo promised, "just to the computer so I can call Pol-ta-dar. If you start feeling bad again, just say so. I'll be right here."

Ryan nodded a third time, sipping slowly at his water. The cool liquid felt good against his parched mouth, easing the dryness of his throat. The nerve pain remained absent, and he closed his eyes, relaxing a little, hoping perhaps he could sleep again.

Nervously, Juo keyed in the connection to the hospital and his mentor. When Pol-ta-dar's wizened face appeared on the screen, Juo began to explain what had happened. "I thought about bringing him back to the hospital," he added, "but he can barely walk on his own, and moving him would potentially expose others to the disease as well."

"How advanced is the disease?" Pol-ta-dar asked with much concern.

"I felt his fever as soon as I got home. It was high, but he wasn't having hallucinations, just a little confused. I got it down immediately. He's had one bout of muscle spasms, and it was bad, but not as bad as some of those that I've read about," Juo replied. He hesitated, then added, "I know sending a healer here would add to your work at the hospital, but I want him to have the best possible care."

"You *are* the best care he can have, Juo-ta-ri," Pol-ta-dar said firmly, placing great emphasis on his apprentice's full name. "You are one of the most talented healers I've ever trained. I expect to hear from you at meal times with reports on your progress and if anything happens you do not feel like you can handle, I expect you to call for assistance immediately, but I would expect that of any healer."

"I will," Juo promised. "I won't let you down, and I won't let anything happen to First Officer Nelson."

Pol-ta-dar smiled. "You mean you won't let anything happen to Ryan," he corrected gently.

Juo's wings rustled with embarrassment at having been caught by his mentor. "That, too," he conceded.

"We will talk more about that when he is well," Pol-ta-dar declared. "For now, you should see to your patient."

"Yes, sir," Juo replied, closing the connection and returning to the bed. Ryan's eyes were closed and he appeared to be resting. Breathing a sigh of relief that the disease was allowing his lover some respite, Juo took a moment to prepare himself something to eat. He and Ryan had planned to have dinner together after he

finished his shift at the hospital, but the onset of the plague had scuttled those plans. His fear had kept his appetite at bay when he first realized the explorer was ill, but he knew he needed to keep up his own strength if he was to have any hope of helping his lover.

He ate quickly, his eyes never leaving Ryan's recumbent form, not wanting to miss any new or returning symptom. The Mardonese plague was an insidious disease, attacking subtly and repeatedly until the stress of the high fever and nerve damage killed its victims. The longer treatment for each bout was delayed, the more likely permanent damage or death would occur. The Petari healers had managed to save everyone from the *Starfire* but one person so far, a patient with the illness so advanced that even a constant input of healing energy could not undo the damage, but Juo was not sure what kind of lingering effects several of them might have. It was a concern, but not an immediate one, and not one that would involve the Petari since the crew members would leave when the *Starfire* did. His concern was making sure there was never a delay in Ryan's treatment so that his lover would recover fully, with no side effects from the plague.

When he had finished eating, Juo returned to the bed again, lying down next to Ryan and resting his wing across his lover's body. He, too, needed to sleep, and he would have to do so in snatches whenever Ryan did. Letting his eyes close as his healing senses continued to monitor the spacer automatically, he drifted into unconsciousness.

His time sense informed him two hours had passed when Ryan's fever began to rise again. Not wanting to wake his lover if he could help it, Juo concentrated on trying to diffuse the heat through his wings, shifting up so he knelt over Ryan's hips to allow both wings to surround the other man's body.

The sudden absence of the warmth behind him roused Ryan slightly from his sleep, the fog of delirium returning along with his consciousness. He rolled onto his back, his arms reaching blindly for the body above him. "Juo," he murmured, his eyes never opening to see who was actually with him. The fever-induced images that moved across the backs of his eyelids seemed far too

real for him to question whose hands touched him, whose body covered his.

“I’m here,” Juo assured his lover, not realizing that Ryan was hallucinating.

Ryan’s hips rolled upwards, seeking friction for his aching cock. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he knew this was a bad idea, but he could not spare the concentration to remember why. All his attention was focused on the dark man hovering just out of reach. “Come on,” he cajoled huskily. “Touch me, Juo. You know you want to.”

Juo froze, the unexpected words, however true, jarring him from his sense of security. It seemed the hallucinations had started after all. Pulling an unresisting Ryan from the bed, he carried him back into the fresher, turning the cold water on full again, listening to the increasingly explicit requests falling from his lover’s lips. Despite his best intentions, he could feel his body reacting, feel his cock swelling at the blatant invitation in Ryan’s words. He would not give in to that desire, but he could not help wishing the disease was past so that he could.

Even the icy water did not break the delirium holding sway of Ryan’s mind. His body reacted just as it had the first time, but his mind remained trapped in the erotic images conjured by the fever. He stood in Juo’s arms under the cold spray, writhing back against the hard cock he could feel probing his crease, his hands moving frantically over his own flesh, providing the stimulation his lover would not.

Seeing Ryan’s hand close around his own cock, Juo frowned and captured his lover’s wrist, lifting the explorer’s fingers to his lips. “No,” he said firmly, not releasing the limb even after Ryan calmed in his arms. “I won’t let you hurt yourself that way.”

“Please,” Ryan pleaded, “I need you.”

“I know you do,” Juo replied soothingly, “and I’m here. I’m taking care of you.”

“Please,” the spacer said again, “touch me. Fuck me. Love me.”

“I do,” Juo murmured, his heart quailing at the thought that Ryan might mean his words in only the most physical of ways. “I will,” he said more loudly, “as soon as you are well. Just think how much better it will feel when you aren’t sick and can enjoy every touch, every caress, every kiss.”

Ryan sagged back against him, the fever leaving him and consciousness along with it. Juo pressed a tender kiss to his forehead and carried him back into the main room. Sitting on a chair, he dried his lover gently, then settled him back in bed, waiting to see what the disease would throw at them next. Lying back down behind Ryan, wing in place as always, he kissed his lover’s cheek one more time. “Help me fight this,” he pleaded softly. “I want to hear you ask me again to love you when you’re in your right mind.”

CHAPTER 6

THEIR days and nights fell into a rhythm, snatches of sleep broken by bouts of fever or nerve spasms. Juo checked in with Pol-ta-dar every few hours as he had promised, hearing each time that the disease and the healing were progressing exactly as expected, if somewhat faster than with the other patients from the *Starfire*. Juo had been concerned, fearing that was an indication of a problem.

“On the contrary,” Pol-ta-dar assured him. “You know this virus fights against our healing. The more effective your treatments, the faster the bouts will come. Ryan will be well again in no time. As I said before, your feelings for him make you the best healer he could possibly have, for the transfer of healing energy will be smoother and more efficient than with any other healer.”

“Do these offworlders seem more sensitive to our healing than our own people?” Juo asked, having noticed that, awful as they were, the symptoms of the plague, when they struck, lasted less time than in the case studies he had read.

“It is certainly a possibility,” Pol-ta-dar agreed. “Their bodies are used to chemical treatments rather than the methods that are

natural to us. It makes sense that they would have no built-up immunity to our healing the way our own people do. Why do you ask?"

"Curiosity," Juo replied quickly, not ready yet to admit his desire to go with the *Starfire* and perhaps experiment more widely with the effects of Petari healing on other races. He did not even know if Ryan's captain would agree. He knew only that he did not want Ryan to leave him behind.

RYAN ran through the woods, eager to see his summer playmate again. Each summer, they came to visit their respective grandparents in the woods of north Georgia. And each summer, they met at the little bridge across Mossy Creek, coming there every day until the other arrived. After that, they were inseparable for the length of the summer, often sleeping at each other's houses rather than part even for the night. He was later arriving than usual this summer, bad weather having extended the school year beyond its normal ending. His grandparents knew, of course, but he did not know if they had told his friend's grandparents. He hoped so, not wanting his playmate to think he had abandoned him. His anticipation grew as he ran, each step taking him closer to the bridge, closer to summer, closer to freedom.

Coming out of the woods into the meadow where the creek ran, Ryan breathed a sigh of relief at seeing the familiar silhouette on the bridge. Something was different, yet he could not put his finger on what. A little taller, perhaps, but then so was he. A little more muscular, but then, so was he. Even so, there was no possibility of mistaking his friend for anyone else. "Juo!" he shouted, eager to see his friend's smile and for their summer adventures to begin.

Juo turned and smiled, his wings fluttering wide behind him as he took off from his perch on the bridge railing and flew across the field to embrace his friend. "I didn't think you'd ever get here!"

"Me either," Ryan admitted as he was pulled off his feet and off the ground, floating weightlessly in Juo's arms, "but I'm here now, with nothing to do but spend time with you until August."

“Me, too,” Juo replied emphatically, yet even as he spoke, his body in Ryan’s arms began to fade, becoming less and less real. “No!” he protested. “Don’t go. Don’t leave me, Juo.”

JUO eased Ryan back onto the bed after the latest round of fever and delirium. This one had been different, calmer than the earlier ones had been until the very end. He hoped that was a good sign, proof that Ryan was getting better. He could make almost no sense of what little the spacer had said in the grip of his hallucinations, but two things were clear: he had been excited to see Juo, and he did not want them to be parted at the end.

He was still trying to calm his fluttering heart when the beeping of Ryan’s comm unit drew his attention. He hesitated, not sure whether he should answer it, but when it continued to demand attention, he gave in and rummaged through Ryan’s discarded uniform until he found it.

“Juo-ta-ri,” he answered formally, not sure what would be the appropriate way to respond.

“This is Captain Rusk,” the woman’s voice came over the comm. “Is Officer Nelson unavailable?”

“He caught the plague,” Juo explained apologetically, his hand reaching automatically for Ryan as he spoke. He realized with a shock that he had not even thought about notifying Ryan’s captain when he fell ill. If he had thought about it, though in truth he had thought of nothing but taking care of Ryan, he would have assumed Pol-ta-dar would have done so in his capacity as head healer for the area. Now, he wondered if Pol-ta-dar had expected him to contact the captain. Either way, clearly no one had informed her. “I’m taking care of him and he’s responding well to treatment, but he’s unconscious most of the time still. Is there anything I can do for you?” He did not know the captain well at all, having only met her on the *Starfire* once, but he had heard Ryan talking to her, even teasing her, so he hoped she would not be offended by the question.

“I wanted to have him find out how soon the rest of the crew could be scanned for contagion,” the captain explained. “The last

of the crew showing symptoms were brought to the planet, as I'm sure you know, but today, our assistant medical officer didn't report for duty. When Dr. Shelton went to check on him, he found Dr. Pauly suffering from the nerve spasms associated with the plague. By the time he got the new patient to sick bay, he had succumbed to the disease."

Juo frowned, though he knew the captain could not see him. "That seems incredibly fast," he commented, his mind searching for an explanation.

"He was an Andromedite," Captain Rusk informed Juo. "Dr. Shelton thinks the plague might have interacted with his physiology differently than with the rest of the crew."

"That makes sense," Juo agreed. "Are there any other of his race on board?"

"No, he was the only one, but that doesn't mean other people aren't carrying the disease," the captain replied.

"Of course," Juo answered quickly. "I'll relay your message to Pol-ta-dar-ri and have him contact you as soon as he has an answer to your question." Beneath his hand, Ryan began to stir restlessly. "Excuse me, Captain, but Ryan needs my attention."

JUO lay flat on the bed, wings spread wide, nothing between his strong back and his lover's hands. Ryan took full advantage of the pose, exploring every hollow and plane, caressing gently at first, then more firmly when his attentions were welcomed.

The dark feathers splayed wide as the Petari began to undulate slowly, angling his body this way and that, seeking more attention in one spot, then another. Ryan obliged eagerly, learning the textures of his lover's skin and wings. Especially his wings. The feathered appendages had fascinated him since the moment he laid eyes on them and now, finally, he had the freedom to explore them to his heart's content. Closing his eyes to better appreciate the sensation of the plumage beneath his fingers, he stroked the strong pinions tenderly, his fingers burrowing deep into the feathery curtain, letting them surround his hands.

Juo began to move more deliberately beneath him, the caress clearly ratcheting up his desire, his smooth buttocks rubbing provocatively against his lover's groin. That suited Ryan perfectly, his own passions burning as brightly as a supernova. He only hoped it would not burn them both up in the end. He ground down against the silky flesh, his burgeoning erection slipping easily into the sweat-slick crevice between the two globes. Lowering his lips to the curve of Juo's wing, he let his hands wander down to cup the dark cheeks, kneading them firmly, his thumbs slipping between them to tease at the tight entrance.

"Open for me, my love," he pleaded, his lips still caressing the feathers, feeling the body beneath his hands tense. "Let me love you."

He was close... so close. If only he could feel Juo's body wrapping around him...

He felt the form beneath him opening, giving in to his need. He leaned forward, sliding their bodies together, working his way inside.

Tipping forward, he lost his balance and fell, expecting to land against Juo's tempting body, laugh a little, and resume. Instead, he kept falling, nothing beneath him to catch him.

"Use your wings," he heard Juo's voice say from far away.

"But I don't have any," Ryan protested as he fell further and further into the darkness, reaching helplessly, hopelessly, for a lover far out of reach.

"JUO?"

The sound of Ryan's voice, cracked with thirst and disuse, but not colored by fever or pain, brought a huge smile to the healer's face as he spun his chair around. "Don't talk yet," he directed immediately. "Let me get you some water."

Ryan nodded and waited quietly while Juo fetched a cup of cool liquid. He drank carefully but deeply, feeling the water ease

the scratchiness in his throat. "How long have I been sick?" he asked when he had finished.

"Two days," Juo replied. "I think the worst is past, but it will probably be another two days before the fever goes for good."

Ryan considered that information. "I should probably contact the captain and let her know I'm sick," he decided.

"I talked to her this morning," Juo explained. "She called wanting you to take a message to Pol-ta-dar."

Struggling to get up, Ryan looked around for his communicator. "What message?" he asked sharply. "Can I use your work station? I need to..."

"You need to lie back down and rest," Juo interrupted firmly, pushing Ryan back down among the pillows. "I passed the message on to Pol-ta-dar and he promised to communicate his answer directly to the captain since you are still ill. Now, if you promise to stay still, I'll tell you what they both had to say."

Still too weak to do anything but obey, Ryan relaxed and nodded.

"The captain was calling because there was another death aboard the *Starfire* this morning," Juo explained. "She wanted to know how soon we could start scanning the crew for exposure to the plague."

"Who died?" Ryan asked, heart clenching at the thought of losing yet another of his friends.

"Dr. Pauly, the assistant medical officer."

Ryan's face fell. The young doctor had been a strange one, reserved at times, but that was a trait of his culture more than anything else. The Andromedites had faced discrimination as they tried to join the alliance of worlds because of their unusual physiognomy. Humanoid in the sense that they walked on two legs, they were nonetheless alien compared to the other members of the alliance, with tentacles rather than hands and a piscine head that made their expressions incredibly hard to read. They were loyal to a fault, though, and more than once, Dr. Pauly's insights had saved lives aboard the *Starfire*. He would be missed.

“How?” Ryan asked. “I thought we’d brought down everyone who was sick.”

“So did we,” Juo assured him softly. “Apparently, Dr. Shelton went to check on him when he didn’t show up for duty and found him already suffering from nerve spasms. By the time he got Dr. Pauly to sick bay, he had died. Either the disease worked in him silently for some time before he showed any symptoms or something about his physiology couldn’t stand the strain of even the first bout.”

“He was... unique,” Ryan agreed with a sad smile, thinking how much he would miss the man’s dry wit at the Captain’s Mess once a week. He had come to appreciate that about the same time he had come to appreciate the beauty of his iridescent blue skin. “So what did Pol-ta-dar-ri say?”

“That he would have Dr. Shelton send fresh blood samples from the rest of the crew and put several other assistants to analyzing them immediately,” Juo replied. “I know it doesn’t always seem that way because of the strictures the Council placed on us, but we don’t want your friends to die any more than you do.”

“I know that,” Ryan insisted. “The healers have been the epitome of caring and concern. And I made sure Captain Rusk knew it, too. Nobody is blaming any of you for anything.”

Juo nodded in relief. He had been a little concerned about that, given the rest of his conversation with Pol-ta-dar. Though he was not ready to mention it to Ryan yet, his mentor had told him that his healing of Ryan would be enough to qualify him as a full-fledged healer, and as such, he could choose his own posting. Pol-ta-dar had mentioned several to him, including one at the hospital where he worked now. Juo had promised to consider all his options, but the one that tempted him most was not one Pol-ta-dar had proposed. Working with the off-worlders had sparked an intellectual curiosity within him that could not be assuaged on Petarus, and the *Stafire* was now lacking a medical officer. Pol-ta-dar had been surprised at the suggestion but had agreed to provide

Captain Rusk with whatever references and reassurances she requested if Juo decided to broach the subject with her.

Juo's silence perplexed Ryan. "Juo?" he asked softly. "Are you all right?"

Juo shook himself out of his thoughts and smiled. "I'm fine. Just tired."

"You've been taking care of me non-stop, haven't you?"

"Yes," Juo replied, "but that's part of being a healer. You work when the patients need you."

"Is that all I am to you?" Ryan murmured under his breath, not expecting Juo to hear him.

"No!" Juo replied vehemently, moving to kneel at the edge of the bed so he could take Ryan's face between his hands. "You could never be just a patient to me, but you *have* been sick and so have been my patient the past two days. Once you're well, I'll show you everything else you are to me."

Before Ryan could answer, a huge yawn overtook Juo. Ryan chuckled and scooted to the far edge of the bed. "Lie down. You've been taking care of me. Let me take care of you for a bit."

Juo nodded, his fatigue nearly overwhelming, and climbed into bed, his head settling on Ryan's shoulder, his wing moving automatically to cover his lover's body as well.

Gently, Ryan brushed Juo's hair off his forehead and pressed a tender kiss there. "Sleep."

"You, too," Juo insisted through another yawn. "You're the one who's sick."

Ryan chuckled again and nodded, eyes closing as he enjoyed the simple comfort of holding and being held again after being alone for so long.

"STOP showing off, Nikki," Ryan scolded from the base of the wall they planned to climb. "I know you're good and you're not

going to convince me you're invincible, so just stop it and put on the safety harness."

"Spoilsport," Nikki teased from halfway up the steep rock face. "When did you get to be such a stick in the mud?"

"The same time you turned into a reckless daredevil," Ryan retorted, though there was no heat in his voice. He had always known Nikolai was a risk-taker. He could just usually cajole his lover into not doing so while he was around. Today, that did not seem to be happening.

"I've always been a daredevil," Nikki replied with a cocky grin. "What's your excuse?"

Ryan just sighed and fastened the safety harness around his waist and thighs. He enjoyed climbing, with Nikki or with others, but he refused to take the kind of risks his lover so enjoyed. He preferred to come back from his climbs in one piece. Beginning his ascent, he looked up in time to see Nikolai work his way across the underground cliff toward the next ascent. This was, from what Ryan could tell, the most difficult section of the climb, with hand and footholds few and far between. "Nikki, please!" he called again.

"Ryan," his lover groaned with exasperation. "I've done this ascent so many times I could do it in my sleep. Nothing's going to happen."

Ryan shrugged and started working his way up the cliff. He had done all he could. He could not force Nikki to use safety gear. He had traversed another few feet when the sound of falling rocks drew his attention upward again. Nikki hung precariously by one hand, his feet scrambling futilely against the smooth rock.

"Shit!" Ryan cursed under his breath. "Hang on!" he shouted. "I'm coming as fast as I can."

Moving as rapidly as he dared, Ryan worked his way up the cliff, trying to get to Nikki before his grip failed and he fell the thirty feet to the cave floor. He pushed his body to its limits, reaching further, straining harder than he ever had on a climb, trying desperately to reach his lover. He could attach his own

backup safety gear to Nikki's harness and get them both down that way, if only Nikki could hold on long enough.

Forcing himself to think only of the rhythm of climbing, Ryan worked his way up the cliff, closer and closer to where Nikki hung. Stretch, grab, pull, lift, repeat. He refused to let any thoughts but those enter his mind as he ascended. Anything else, any thought of Nikki, of him falling, would either make him reckless or paralyze him, neither of which would do his lover any good. He reached the ledge and began the sideways crawl, slowly approaching his lover. Another two feet and he would be close enough to reach the other man. He reached for the next handhold, making himself focus on the climb, not his lover, when he heard the piercing scream.

"No!"

Pushing off the cliff, he rappelled down as quickly as he could, the kind of long jumps he twitted Nikki about. None of that mattered now. All that mattered was reaching his lover's side.

Feet hitting the floor, he flipped the emergency release and ran to Nikki's side. Blood welled from his lover's mouth, staining the white skin. "Nikki," he pleaded, brushing the hair back from the strong face. "Don't leave me."

"I love you," Nikki rasped, the rattling in his voice indicating bleeding in his lungs. "When I'm gone, find someone and be happy."

"No!" Ryan cried again, lowering his head to Nikki's forehead, as if he could somehow will his lover well. Tears falling freely, he lifted his head again, looking around for anything he could use to make Nikki more comfortable. To his shock, the pale skin was gone, replaced by another familiar, beloved face. "Juo?" Ryan asked in confusion.

The dark eyes opened, wracked with pain. Beneath the prone form, black wings fluttered fitfully. "Help me," he pleaded. "Wrap your wings around me and help me heal."

"I can't!" Ryan cried. "I don't have any."

"Then there's no hope left," Juo coughed, tears welling in his eyes.

“Juo, no,” Ryan begged, stroking the broken wings gently. “Don’t leave me, Juo. I can’t lose you, not now. I only just found you. Please don’t leave me.”

Juo’s eyes closed, his breath still rasping painfully in and out. Ryan gathered his lover’s body in his arms. “I love you,” he whispered. “Stay with me. I can’t go on alone.”

TEARS streamed down Juo’s face as he listened to Ryan’s impassioned pleading. He had no idea what nightmare controlled his lover’s mind, but whatever it was, it did not come from the plague this time. He could detect no trace of the disease now, yet Ryan seemed as caught in this dream as he had been in the delirium from the plague. The pain in his lover’s voice tore at his heart, strengthening his resolve to do everything he could to avoid being separated from Ryan.

“I love you.”

Juo gasped at hearing those words from his lover’s lips. Yes, he was dreaming, but he was dreaming about Juo. “I won’t,” Juo whispered, pulling Ryan tightly against him. “I won’t leave you.”

Ryan did not wake, but the whispered words seemed to soothe him and he settled into untroubled sleep. Juo, however, was too overwrought to sleep again. Rising carefully from the bed, watching to make sure his movement did not disturb his lover, he sat at his workstation bemusedly, trying to look for flaws in his plan. Not finding any, he reached for Ryan’s comm unit and called the *Starfire*.

“Juo-ta-ri?” the Captain asked when the communications officer transferred the call to her. “Is something wrong?”

“No, ma’am,” Juo hastened to assure her. “Could we talk privately?”

“Give me a minute,” she replied.

Juo’s foot tapped nervously as he waited for her voice to return.

“All right, I’m in my ready room,” the Captain said. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Ryan,” Juo said succinctly.

“Is he all right?”

“He’s recovering,” Juo replied. “It will be a few days before he has all his strength back, but I can’t detect any sign of the disease in him any longer. That’s not what I wanted to talk about, though. I was wondering if you’d be interested in a new assistant medical officer. A Petari one.”

CHAPTER 7

RYAN woke slowly, dreams, nightmares, and delirium all swirling in his head along with his fragmented memories of the past few days. The first thing he knew for sure was that he was alone in bed. Even before he opened his eyes, he felt the absence of the soothing wing over his torso, the lack of heat from his lover's body behind him. The second thing he realized was that while still feeling weak and wrung out, he no longer felt sick. Slowly, he opened his eyes, looking around the room for the Petari. "Juo?" he called when he did not see the other man.

Silence greeted his words.

Ryan shrugged. He could come up with a dozen simple explanations for his lover to be somewhere else, particularly since he was well now. With a sigh, he relaxed back against the pillows, wanting a shower, though he had vague memories of being doused repeatedly with cold water over the past days, but too shaky to get up and negotiate the fresher alone. He would wait for Juo to return and suggest it then.

His eyes drifted shut lazily as memories of the past few days assailed him. Some were clearly hallucinations – like meeting Juo at Mossy Creek instead of his childhood friend Peter. Others were

clearly real, like the feeling of Juo's wings around him, soothing and holding him. And some, like Nikki's death, were clearly nightmares. He forced himself to examine the last dream in detail, to find every ounce of meaning in the images.

He had no idea if the circumstances of Nikki's death in any way resembled the nightmare, but he would not be surprised if they did. That was less important, though, than his guilt over not being there, not being able to stop it. He had thought himself past all that, but his dream suggested otherwise. Conjuring Nikki's laughing face the last time he had seen it, he studied the lean, strong lines. "You told me to find someone else," he whispered to the face in his mind and the empty air. "Now that I have, are you happy for me?"

Nikki's smile never dimmed, never changed. Lifting his fingers to his lips, Ryan blew a final kiss to his lover's memory and let him go.

Thinking about the rest of his dream, about the very real possibility of saying goodbye to Juo in a few days, Ryan realized he had another decision to make. Could he give his heart knowing he would be leaving? His whispered words in the dream came back to him and he knew the question was moot. His heart was given. All that remained was to decide what to do about it, and even that was far easier than he expected. He did not know how much time he had left with Juo, but he knew that every minute was precious. He refused to waste any of them on regrets or futile hopes. He and Nikki had planned a lifetime together, only to be granted a few short years instead. Regardless of his desires, no matter what plans he and Juo made, they might only have these next days together, and he intended to cherish every one of them. It seemed the least of lessons he could learn from Nikki and his death.

The door opened and Juo walked in, a heavy bag in hand. "I thought you might like something to eat besides gruel," he announced cheerfully, setting the bag on the table and opening it to release a succulent *mélange* of aromas.

Ryan's stomach immediately growled. He laughed, relieved at being well enough to have such simple appetites again. "It smells wonderful. What is it?"

"I hope it'll taste good. Your captain sent down your favorite recipe. A friend of mine is a chef and agreed to make it for you. He had to substitute a few things since we didn't have all the ingredients, but he said it tasted good to him."

Ryan's eyes widened in surprise. "You didn't have to do that!" he exclaimed.

"Maybe not," Juo demurred, "but I wanted to and Pan is always looking for new and different recipes to try. If I know him, he'll experiment with this one for another week or so and then introduce it in the restaurant where he works."

"So what did Captain Rusk say is my favorite dish?"

"Chana Masala," Juo replied, pulling out the dish, "extra spicy."

Ryan laughed again. "Okay. I guess she does know me pretty well."

"Is this traditional where you're from?"

"Not really," Ryan replied. "I mean, it's from my planet, but not from the area where I grew up. I had a neighbor growing up from a different part of our world, and this was a traditional dish for her. Once she realized I liked it, she would make a big batch about once a month and share it with my family."

"Your home sounds more and more interesting," Juo mused, thinking about his conversation with Captain Rusk. "Not at all like Petarus."

Ryan felt a pang of regret as he wished he could show Juo his home. He did not know how to make that possible, though, unless he could find someone to bring him back here after his tour with A.E. ended. He had eighteen months left. Then he would be free to return. He wondered if Juo would be willing to wait for him. Still thinking about that, he took the plate Juo offered him and began to eat. The dish was not quite what Reshma aunty always

made, but it was delicious nonetheless. "Pan did a good job," he praised when he had swallowed the first bite. "This is wonderful."

"I'm glad you like it," Juo replied with a smile, joining Ryan on the wide bed. He took a bite himself and paused to savor the explosion of spices in an unfamiliar combination. It made his eyes water a little, but he found himself wanting more.

They ate in companionable silence, easily finishing off the food. "Thank you," Ryan said again when they were done.

"You're welcome," Juo replied, leaning over to kiss Ryan softly. "I'm just glad you're well again."

Ryan leaned into the kiss, the contact sparking another hunger, but conscious of his bouts of fever, he pulled back. "You know what I'd really like now?" he asked.

"What?"

"A shower that isn't freezing cold. I feel sticky and sweaty despite what must have been repeated dunkings. I'd really like to be clean."

Juo smiled. "That's easy enough." He rose and offered his hand, eyes raking his lover's naked body. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Ryan chuckled huskily. "You have to ask?" he teased. "It's not like you haven't been in there with me before."

"Maybe, but then it was as your healer." He pulled Ryan into a firm embrace, running his hands down the smooth back to settle on the swell of taut buttocks. "Now it will be as your lover."

Ryan's gaze grew dark with desire as he pressed against the Petari. "There's nothing I want more."

Juo's eyes darkened as well, his lips closing passionately over Ryan's as he claimed his lover's mouth the way he would soon claim his lover's body.

Not to be outdone, Ryan slid his hands up Juo's back, seeking the closures in his lover's tunic. Opening them, the placket between Juo's wings falling away, Ryan felt bare skin, his hands caressing eagerly, encouragingly. Yes, he wanted a shower, but

that did not preclude enjoying Juo's body, Juo's presence at the same time. And hopefully, Juo would enjoy him as well.

His hands burrowed into the thick feathers that had held and healed him so tenderly over the past week. He knew how they felt around him, but he had never taken the time to explore them at his leisure.

"I thought you wanted a shower," Juo teased, wings arching into the long desired touch. "If you keep that up, you're not going to get one."

"Why not?" Ryan teased back, stroking the soft down beneath the heavier flight feathers. "Don't tell me you can't make love to me in the shower."

Juo could. He could push Ryan up against the wall and drive them both to release, probably faster than either of them really wanted, but this was not some casual fling for him, and he thought Ryan felt the same way. Though the spacer did not seem bound by the cultural strictures that affected Juo, the Petari was a product of his upbringing and he simply could not make himself treat his mate that way their first time as lovers.

Instead, he urged Ryan gently toward the fresher. They would bathe and then they would return to bed and make love rather than rutting mindlessly against the shower wall. When they stepped inside the smaller room, Juo released his hold on his lover and leaned into the cubicle to start the water.

The sight of Juo's bare back, skin dark between darker wings, tempted Ryan to see more. Reaching for the rest of the fastenings, he removed Juo's tunic before reaching around and divesting him of his trousers. Nuzzling the nape of the Petari's neck beneath the fall of dark curls, he let his hands explore the expanse of hard muscle and smooth skin that was his lover's chest. He had always loved a man with a muscular chest, and he took his time now exploring the prime example beneath his palms, learning the curve of sinew and flesh, stroking repeatedly as Juo leaned back against him. "I think I could stand here all day just stroking your chest," he murmured, kneading more firmly.

Resting his head on the curve of Ryan's shoulder, Juo smiled slightly at the compliment, his nerves beginning to dance from the touch of his lover's rough palms on his smooth skin. While not inexperienced, his previous partners had been healers like himself, their skin kept smooth by the constant purification required by their jobs. The calluses on Ryan's fingers and palms were completely outside his realm of experience, and he found the new sensations irresistible. "I wouldn't complain," he replied honestly, his fingers trailing along the backs of Ryan's hands and up his arms, not guiding but simply encouraging. Remembering how his wings had fascinated the explorer from the beginning, Juo brought them forward slightly as well, letting the tips brush the encircling arms, hoping to provide a layer of stimulation for his lover even as Ryan pleased him.

The touch of Juo's wings distracted Ryan from the tantalizing chest beneath his hands, bringing his focus back to the dark pinions. Urging Juo into the shower ahead of him, Ryan bent his head and rubbed his cheek along the camber of one wing and then the other, back and forth between the two, letting the accumulated stubble from his illness catch on the soft feathers. "How sensitive are your wings?" he murmured, not wanting to abrade them if they were too delicate.

"Exquisitely," Juo gasped, rubbing his wing against the hair-roughened flesh. Before he fell ill, Ryan had shaved conscientiously every morning, making the healer suppose it was part of the uniform code for his job, but he would miss the friction when it was gone again. He wondered if he could convince Ryan to let it grow back from time to time.

"Good," Ryan declared, stepping forward so the warm water cascaded over them both, wetting their hair and Juo's wings. He watched, fascinated, as beads of water ran from the sodden curls down Juo's delicately arched back, between the darkening wings to disappear into the crevice between the smooth globes that drew his eyes and his hands.

Juo moaned again, pressing back into the caress, thrilled and aroused by this new, unrestrained side to his lover. Always before, he had taken the initiative, Ryan following willingly but never

starting their interactions. Whatever had held him back seemed to have disappeared now. Ryan was not waiting for anything. Juo could feel his wings swelling with water and arousal, the heavier outer feathers lifting, revealing the softer, lighter down beneath.

Ryan had come to recognize that particular movement of Juo's wings as a sign of desire, and it had the same effect on him now as it would have had on a Petari in the same situation, his own lust rising to match Juo's. His fingers slid between the layers of feathers, a different kind of sensual frottage that clearly had the intended effect on Juo, which in turn aroused Ryan more.

Juo stood still beneath the hot spray for as long as he could stand, letting Ryan caress and explore, letting him build the passion between them to the highest point yet. Only when he feared for his control did he turn, extricating his wings from Ryan's tender caresses and spinning his lover beneath the stream of water. "Shower," he growled, reaching for the shampoo and applying it to his lover's hair.

Ryan grabbed the soap and handed it to Juo before starting to wash his own hair. Juo took it immediately, hands flying over the explorer's skin. He had touched every inch of it before, when Ryan was sick, but this time was different, special, because this time, Ryan was aware of every touch, every caress, reacting to them because of his own sensitivities rather than from some delirious prompting that might have had nothing to do with Juo's touch. He noted every sensitive spot as he passed, storing the knowledge away for later, when it was his turn to tease and tantalize his lover.

When Ryan was clean, he grabbed the soap, intending to return the favor, but Juo shook his head. "I'm here because you are," the Petari explained. "Let's take this to bed."

Ryan nodded mutely, his throat suddenly dry with anticipation. He switched off the water and reached for a towel, but Juo took it out of his hands, rubbing the thick cloth over his body quickly, whisking away the worst of the water. A quick pass of the same cloth over the healer's body, and Juo was done, throwing the towel

across the bar haphazardly as he urged Ryan back into the bedroom.

Ryan landed face down on Juo's bed, turning immediately to face his lover. This was not just about sex, and he wanted to watch Juo's face, wanted the connection that meeting his lover's gaze would bring. He did not know when Captain Rusk planned to leave the planetary system, and he wanted to store every single memory against that moment. Opening his arms, he welcomed Juo down on top of him, bringing their bodies into full, delicious contact.

Juo shifted atop his lover, letting their skin rub against each other, smooth and hair dusted. Every little movement sent sparks dancing down his nerves as he absorbed the gentle friction of hair against his smooth skin, teasing his nipples, his thighs, his cock. He thrilled at the thought that while the whiskers on Ryan's face might disappear with his return to duty, the rest would remain, waiting to tantalize Juo the next time they made love.

Sliding his hand down Ryan's side, feeling every line of muscle as he went, he urged his lover's legs to part so he could settle between them. The explorer obliged immediately, making space for Juo to pull his knees beneath him and push up onto his elbows. He leaned forward and captured Ryan's mouth, the mustache and stubble prickling his lips most pleasurably. Ryan's lips parted beneath his immediately, beckoning him inside, tongue darting out to tease and encourage. Juo did not hesitate, plunging inside the welcoming cavern, relearning every contour.

Pulling away finally, the Petari worked his way lower, lips trailing across Ryan's neck to his collarbone and then lower, brushing over the dusting of hair that covered his lover's chest. His fingers explored as well, twining in the short strands, combing through them curiously as his mouth honed in on one pink, puckered nipple.

Ryan's back arched off the bed when he felt Juo's lips surround his taut flesh. He had always loved attention to his nipples, a fact Juo seemed to realize instinctively, his fingers lavishing pleasure on the other tight bud, plucking and rubbing in

time with the enticing suction of the Petari's mouth. He burrowed his fingers into the damp curls, silently encouraging the ministrations. "More," he whispered, in case Juo had missed his other cues.

Nipping gently on the bud already in his mouth, Juo shifted a little, bringing his wing up to cover his hand, the feathers replacing his fingers, brushing back and forth lightly across the stiff flesh.

A sharp cry of pleasure tore from Ryan's lips. "Not... fair," he gasped even as he sought more of the teasing caress. "I don't have wings to tease you with."

Juo chuckled and lifted his head. "No," he agreed. "You have this lovely hair instead."

Ryan thought privately that his body hair did not even begin to compare with the magnificence of Juo's wings, but he did not contradict his lover, reaching up instead to pull the healer's head back down to his chest.

Shifting to the side, even as he kept his lips where Ryan wanted them, Juo searched blindly in the chest beside his bed until he found the tube of gel he needed. Squeezing some onto his fingers, he shifted again, spreading his knees wider, parting Ryan's legs to give him access to the shadowy recess between.

"Yes," Ryan gasped, bending his knees and parting his thighs even more. He clutched frantically at Juo's shoulders as he felt the cool slide of fingers against his most private flesh. It had been three years since anyone had touched him this way, and his body was starved for the contact, arching up, the tight muscle clenching and relaxing reflexively in invitation.

Feeling the enticing spasms, Juo did not hesitate, slipping his finger through the tight ring, letting it massage his digit as he massaged the velvety passage, seeking the spot that, if Ryan's physiology mimicked his own, would set stars dancing behind his lover's eyelids.

Ryan bit his lip reflexively as Juo's finger found his prostate, rubbing repeatedly across it. Almost immediately, soft lips closed

over his, an insistent tongue pushing his teeth away and soothing the red bite mark.

“Am I hurting you?” Juo asked in concern, his wings fluttering forward instinctively.

“No!” Ryan gasped emphatically. “Feels amazing!”

A smile replaced the apprehension as Juo probed lightly at the tight entrance with a second finger. “Want more?”

The look Ryan sent, both fiery and disbelieving, left Juo in no doubt. With another light kiss, he turned his attention back to preparing his lover for their mating, for in his mind, no other word applied. A second finger joined the first, scissoring gently as the guardian muscle relaxed to admit him. A part of him wanted to delay, to savor every moment, every possible experience *now*, but he knew his own control would never sustain that kind of extended foreplay, even if Ryan’s would. Better, he decided, to save the other delights of Ryan’s body for a time when he had the leisure to enjoy them. His eyes trained on his lover’s face, wings fluttering up and down Ryan’s torso, he added a third finger, searching for any sign that he was hurting the other man.

Ryan’s head tossed back and forth restlessly, his hands reaching for Juo. He did not even care what part of the Petari he touched. He simply needed contact. His hands found the heavy wings, burrowing beneath the outer feathers, searching for the strong bones on which to cling.

Sliding his fingers from the moist haven that had stretched to accommodate them, Juo squeezed more of the slippery gel from the little tube, anointing his cock and positioning the tip at the entrance to his lover’s body. Needing one last bit of reassurance, he met Ryan’s eyes again. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes!” Ryan exclaimed, pushing his hips up against the hard shaft. “I want you – *need* you – inside me... now!”

Juo obliged immediately, equally desperate to be joined. Aligning their bodies from lips to groin, he pushed inside the welcoming heat as he claimed Ryan’s mouth again, rejoicing when both orifices opened to accept him.

Even with the time he had spent on preparation, Ryan's sheath still squeezed him firmly, making Juo wonder when his lover had last let anyone take him this way. That discussion would have to wait, though, because the moist pressure robbed him of speech and of most coherent thought. He cared only about returning the pleasure he was experiencing buried deep inside his mate's body.

Angling his hips, he sought the spot that had brought Ryan such pleasure when his fingers had stimulated it.

"Right there," Ryan gasped as the tip of Juo's cock brushed across his bundle of nerves. "Oh, gods, right there!" Had sex always been this explosive and he had simply forgotten during his self-imposed celibacy, he wondered in the still rational part of his brain? Or was the chemistry between them really more powerful than anything he had ever felt before?

Juo shunted his hips back and forth in abbreviated thrusts, applying constant pressure to the sensitive bump, Ryan's moans spurring him to greater efforts. Shifting to his knees, he lifted his lover's hips between strong, sure hands, giving him greater control of their movements.

Ryan writhed helplessly beneath the onslaught of sensation, his counterthrusts stilled by Juo's steady grip. His passion built and built, spinning wildly out of control, leaving him shaking from an explosive climax strong enough to rival any quasar.

Ryan's responsiveness overwhelmed Juo's control as well, sending him spinning into orbit, his orgasm flashing through his system like a shooting star, leaving him breathless and trembling in its afterglow. Every emotion, every sensation was imprinted on his soul, to be called up simply by closing his eyes, the afterimage of their bonding.

Slowly, he let Ryan's hips settle to the bed again, stretching out beside his lover, his head coming to rest on the lightly furred chest. He rubbed his cheek back and forth over the soft mat. "Stay with me," he murmured.

Ryan's heart constricted. He wanted to. Gods, how he wanted to! But he had a contract to fulfill, people depending on him. He took a deep breath as he struggled to find a way to explain, to ask

Juo to wait for him. Before he could formulate the words, though, the soft snuffle of his lover's breathing alerted him that Juo had fallen asleep.

His thoughts chased themselves around his head, one emotion following another. He knew his own heart – he loved Juo completely. He had not said the words aloud, though, had not heard them in return. He wanted to believe Juo felt them, for why else would he ask Ryan to stay, but he needed that confirmation before he committed to such a drastic change in his life. He loved Petarus. The people at the hospital had been wonderful to him and the rest of the crew, but to live here permanently, always a misfit, always standing out because of his lack of wings was a huge step. Would Juo grow tired, someday, of having to wait for him as he walked rather than flew? And how would he earn his living? He could not simply depend on the largesse of the healers as he had the past weeks. He needed to contribute to whatever society he called his own. On the *Starfire*, he had useful skills, but he had no idea what he could do here. Even his skills as mechanic, basic as they were, would probably be of little use here with the alien technology. Taking a deep breath, he forced himself to push his fears aside. His mother had always said, “Where there's a will, there's a way.” They would find a way, since he certainly had the will!

In the morning.

They would talk in the morning and decide.

CHAPTER 8

RYAN sat in the shuttle, staring blindly at the wall, not wanting to look back at the receding planet. Somewhere down there was the one he had fallen in love with, the one he had made love to, and he was leaving without even saying goodbye. He had tried. He had spent the early hours of the morning looking for Juo despite Captain Rusk's haranguing over his comm unit, insisting he had to get back to the ship or they would not make it in time to observe the confluence of planets that A.E. had ordered them to watch. All the remaining crew were back on board, she insisted. He was the only one left on the planet's surface.

For the first time in his life, he had considered going AWOL, simply letting them leave him behind. He had fallen in love with more than just Juo during his weeks on Petarus. The people had been warm and welcoming, making him feel comfortable there despite his lack of wings. And Juo.... The healer's gentle ways and tender touch had won Ryan over despite his misgivings, despite his determination to leave the planet heart-whole. He had only to close his eyes and he could feel the dark wings closing about him, holding him, healing him, making him complete as he had not been since Nikki died. In the end, though, duty and the

lack of opportunity to ensure Juo wanted him to stay had driven him onto the shuttle, leaving the planet and his lover behind.

The shuttle docked with the *Starfire* and Ryan said his final goodbyes to the Petari. "If you see Juo-ta-ri," he said to one of the soldiers, "tell him...."

Ryan paused. What could he say? What message could he possibly give his lover of one night that would make up for his departure? That he would come back? Maybe, but why should Juo believe that? That he loved him? He certainly did, but he could not let a soldier say those words for him when he had not said them himself. "Never mind."

The soldier shook his head indulgently. "I'll tell him you had to leave."

Ryan did his best to muster a smile. "Thanks."

With one final glance at the winged beings, he stepped through the airlock, back onto the ship that had been his home for three and a half years and now seemed like a prison instead. Shoulders sagging, he trudged toward the bridge, wondering how he would manage to feign any interest in his captain's orders. This was even worse than when Nikki had died. Then, at least, there was nothing he could do, nothing he could have done. This time, he had simply run out of time, the demands of his job dragging him away. "First Officer Nelson, reporting for duty," he said dully, stepping onto the bridge.

"Welcome back, Mr. Nelson," Captain Rusk said from her seat on the bridge. "You're out of uniform."

"Yes, ma'am," he agreed, not really caring any more.

Smiling sympathetically, the captain gestured toward the lift. "Go clean up and get yourself back together. The bridge crew can do without you for a few hours."

"Yes, ma'am," he repeated, starting for his quarters, dreading the emptiness he would find there after the weeks spent sharing with Juo. It would not take the few hours the captain had offered to clean up, but he thought maybe it would not be a bad idea to take the time anyway, to grieve, perhaps to compose a message he

could send back to his lover. He had known when he and Juo became lovers that they might only have a limited time together. He had just not expected it to only be one night. He had thought to have time to talk, to make plans, to offer a commitment and ask for one in return. Instead, he had awakened alone and confused. Had he done something wrong? Offended Juo somehow? Had he driven his lover away by some unintentional word or deed that trampled a cultural more he was unaware of? Or was there perhaps some custom, some ritual the Petari performed the morning after a night spent making love that had taken Juo away from him? He cursed silently, thinking he should at least have left his lover a note explaining that the captain had ordered his departure. With no plans or promises between them, Juo could well return to their room and think Ryan had abandoned him! *Shit!*

More determined than ever to get a message to his lover somehow, Ryan keyed the entry to his quarters and strode inside, a scowl on his face.

“Are you really that unhappy to see me?”

The voice, the unexpected, beloved voice, had Ryan spinning around, searching for the source. There, in the corner of the room, sat Juo, a pair of A.E. uniform trousers on his legs, a tunic sitting on his lap, leaving his chest bare.

It took a moment for the reality of what he was seeing to penetrate Ryan’s brain, a moment of confusion when he wondered if he had fallen ill again, returning to the delirium of the plague. Praying this was real, he threw himself across the room to pull Juo into his arms. “You’re here,” he whispered. “How are you here?”

“Dr. Juo-ta-ri, assistant medical officer of the *Starfire*, at your service,” Juo answered with a huge smile. He would have accompanied the words with a formal bow, but Ryan’s arms held him too tightly, and he had absolutely no intention of pulling away. Instead, he leaned forward and kissed his lover passionately, his own arms wrapping around Ryan’s waist.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Ryan asked when they finally separated enough to breathe.

“I wasn’t sure until this morning,” Juo explained. “Captain Rusk and Pol-ta-dar agreed earlier in the week, while you were still sick, but the Council had some concerns and those weren’t resolved until this morning. I didn’t want to get either of our hopes up in case they said no. By the time it was a sure thing, the shuttle with a group of patients was ready to leave and Pol-ta-dar ordered me aboard to accompany them. There wasn’t time to get a message to you. I didn’t mean to worry you.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Ryan decided, dismissing the concerns of the morning. “It’s over and you’re here now. With me.”

“With you,” Juo agreed firmly. “There are a couple of little problems, though,” he added mischievously.

“What?” Ryan asked, tensing again.

“Well, there’s the issue of quarters. The previous doctor’s space was tailored to suit his needs and isn’t really appropriate for me.”

Ryan scowled. “You’ll stay right here with me, where you belong,” he insisted, his arms tightening as if to keep Juo there.

“I hoped you’d say that.”

“You said a couple of problems,” Ryan reminded him.

Juo chuckled. “The other one might not be so easy to solve. I can’t seem to get this tunic to fit right. I think I’ll need some help.”

Now Ryan laughed openly. “And why would I help you get dressed when I’d much rather get you undressed?”

“Dr. Shelton did say he didn’t expect to see me until dinner at the Captain’s Mess tonight,” Juo commented with deceptive innocence. “He said I should use the time to settle in.”

“I’ve got a few hours myself,” Ryan observed slyly, his hands sliding over Juo’s bare back to cup the lightly-clothed buttocks. “I think it’s my duty as first officer to make sure you’re comfortable in your new environment.” He leaned forward and nuzzled the smooth jaw line, nipping lightly at Juo’s earlobe. “How can I help you settle in?”

Juo pressed his rapidly filling erection against Ryan's hip. "Take me to bed and make love to me."

"With pleasure," Ryan breathed fervently, guiding Juo toward his bunk. He would have to talk to Captain Rusk about moving to one of the family cabins. His own bunk was far too cramped for two, even without Juo's wings. For now, though, it would do just fine, giving him a horizontal surface on which to stretch out his lover for his delectation. If last night had been hurried, the passion between them heated beyond their control, he was determined this morning to take his time, to worship his lover from head to toe, showering him with the love that filled his heart so that Juo would never doubt the wisdom of coming with him.

He stood there for a moment and just stared at the vision on his bunk. Dark skin, dark hair, dark wings contrasted with the light blue sheets, the expression on the beloved face both soft and sultry, the lines of the other man's visage classically sculpted. He thought he had never seen anything, anyone so beautiful in his life. Reverently, he reached for the fastenings of Juo's trousers, working them open and off so that nothing obscured his view of the masterpiece that was his lover. Eyes and hands drawn to the smooth expanse of skin and the swelling cock, its root unhidden by any nest of curls, Ryan trailed the tip of one finger up the gently curved length, remembering with a jolt of lust how it felt to have the hard flesh inside him. He wanted that again, soon and often, but first, he intended to kiss and caress every inch of the smooth, muscular body.

Remembering the night before, his fascination with Juo's wings and Juo's equal fascination with his hair-roughened skin, Ryan settled on a plan of action. He had shaved that morning, no longer having the excuse of his illness, but his mustache remained, and he would use it to tantalize his lover for as long as they could stand. He did not remove his own clothes yet, knowing his control would never hold as long as he wanted it to if his skin touched Juo's directly. Despite – or perhaps because of – his climax the night before, his body was starved for attention after his long bout of celibacy, and he wanted to focus on Juo first.

Lowering his head to the strong, elegant curve of Juo's collarbone, he brushed his lips across the smooth skin, thrilled when Juo shifted beneath him, moaning his name softly. Angling his head, he nipped lightly along the arc of bone, making sure his mustache stayed against the healer's sensitive flesh.

Juo's head tossed restlessly on the pillow as Ryan's lips worked their magic on his skin. He buried his fingers in the short chestnut hair, his body arching into the welcome touch, made all the more enticing by the gentle rasp of his lover's mustache. He tensed as Ryan's lips slid lower, across the powerful flight muscles toward the chocolate circles of his nipples. Even as he reacted to that touch, body trembling furiously at the exquisite friction of the mustache and wet heat of the mouth, he wondered hopefully if Ryan would kiss him this way all over. His cock jumped at the thought, a drop of viscous fluid seeping from the tip.

Ryan lingered on the walnut-colored disks, licking and nibbling, biting and sucking, learning Juo's preferences as he experimented. Gaining confidence as he felt his lover reacting to the same caresses he most enjoyed, he feasted on the sensitive peaks until they were as hard as the diamonds of Spica and Juo was trembling beneath him. His own body clamored for attention, his cock pressing hard against the fabric of his trousers, but he ignored it as best he could, focusing on pleasing his lover.

Eventually, he abandoned the taut nubs for the flat plane of the healer's abdomen, tracing the lines of muscle with his tongue as he drifted steadily lower. He lapped swiftly at the creamy droplets that dotted Juo's stomach, learning the Petari's spicy flavor before flicking his tongue quickly over the leaking tip, tasting Juo from the source.

"Please!" Juo gasped.

"Not yet," Ryan answered, lifting his head. "If I start that now, I won't be able to stop, and I'm not done with you yet."

Juo moaned but lay back, curious enough as to what Ryan intended to let his lover take the lead. He shifted on the narrow bunk, his legs parting slightly as he settled again, body on offer for his lover.

His own desire mounting with some urgency, Ryan worked his way down Juo's legs, teasing his inner thighs, the side of his knees, the curve of his ankle and instep. Experience had taught him well that not all races had the same erogenous zones and he intended to find every one of Juo's regardless of whether the spot was sensitive on his own body. When he reached the Petari's feet, he urged the healer to roll over onto his stomach, baring his strong back, his sculpted arse, and his beautiful wings to Ryan's touch and gaze. The spacer worked his way slowly back up his lover's body, hands and lips exploring thoroughly.

He paused again when he reached the globes of his lover's buttocks, brushing his mustache teasingly over the smooth flesh. Juo's legs parted immediately, his hips lifting to urge Ryan closer. The heady scent of desire surrounded him, making him want to bury his face between the dark cheeks and feast on the bounty they concealed, but Juo's wings beckoned as well. *Later*, he promised himself.

Lifting himself up on his knees and bending over his lover's bare body, Ryan buried his face in Juo's wings, nipping at them, biting gently along the top ridge, his cloth-covered body rubbing against the Petari's back.

Juo could feel his patience unraveling, yet he appreciated the time and care Ryan was taking, especially after the rush last night had become despite his best intentions. Turning his head so he could meet the explorer's gaze over his shoulder, he murmured, "You feel so good against me, your lips on my skin, your mustache teasing and tickling. I want to feel your skin against mine, though, the hair there rubbing against me everywhere. Will you give me that? Will you lie naked above me and let me feel you?"

Ryan groaned at the provocative words. A part of him wanted to delay longer, but he could not refuse the husky voice of his lover. Pulling back, he stripped the uniform away efficiently, baring himself to Juo's lustful gaze. His cock jumped against his stomach as he watched his lover pull his knees beneath him, canting his arse in the air invitingly.

“Now,” Juo purred, spreading his knees to partially expose the tight orifice that craved his lover’s touch, “come put that mustache to good use.”

Ryan’s knees buckled as he sank back to the bunk, his hands settling on the slim hips, his mouth seeking the dark crevice eagerly. His tongue snaked out and teased along the smooth skin, working his way down from the dimple at the base of Juo’s spine into the musky depths of his lover’s arse.

“Yes!” Juo hissed, his wings fluttering with the intense desire wrought by Ryan’s mustache skimming along his sensitive flesh. Needing his hands to keep himself balanced, he stretched his wings as far as he could, letting the tips fold around Ryan’s head and shoulders to encourage him.

Even the addition of Ryan’s tongue, circling his opening and then pushing tentatively inside could not compare with the exquisite stimulation of his lover’s facial hair rasping across his puckered flesh. He squirmed beneath the sublime sensation, his breath rushing in and out in harsh gasps as his lover drove him closer and closer to a galvanic climax. He wanted to come, needed to come, but he needed Ryan with him even more. “Inside me, now,” he gasped. “Please.”

Despite the invitation to rim him, Ryan had still expected Juo to top when the time came, none of his past lovers ever having been willing to switch roles. Pushing aside the bite of shock and the thrill of desire, he rolled Juo to his back and reached for the container of gel he kept under his bunk for the nights when his loneliness became more than he could bear. Squeezing some on his fingers, he slid one finger into the saliva-slick pucker, lowering his head to lick again at Juo’s cock. “Tastes good,” he murmured, sucking lightly at the orbiculate head.

Juo shifted restlessly, trying to tempt the finger deeper inside him. “More,” he pleaded, canting his hips eagerly. Ryan obliged immediately, adding a second finger and beginning to establish a rhythm of thrust and withdraw. Juo’s hands clutched at his shoulders, pulling his lover up to cover his body, needing the friction of the hair-roughened skin against him.

Ryan moved as Juo directed, his body aligning with his lover's from mouth to knees as he nibbled on the kiss-swollen lips. "Stop teasing," Juo insisted, breaking away from the tantalizing kiss long enough to make his demands. "I want you inside me."

Pulling back enough to smear the lube from his fingers and the fluid from his cock over the hard flesh, Ryan settled between the long legs spread wide in welcome, seeking the snug ingress, docking his shaft in the narrow port with slow, steady precision.

As soon as their bodies were fully joined, Juo wrapped arms, legs, and wings around Ryan, holding his lover tightly against him so that only the smallest of movements was possible. Ryan did not seem to mind, though, settling easily into a pattern of abbreviated thrusts that kept a constant pressure on Juo's prostate. "So good," the Petari moaned, undulating beneath his mate so that he felt Ryan's body hair against every inch of his skin.

Sliding his hands down Ryan's back, Juo cupped the taut buttocks that clenched and released as he shunted his cock within the Petari's velvety passage. Encouraged by Ryan's gasping moan, Juo captured his lover's lips again as he parted the muscular globes, dragging the tip of one wing repeatedly over the rosette he had plundered the night before.

Ryan's hips jerked forward reflexively at the unexpected stimulation. Beneath his lips, he could feel Juo smile. His own smile threatening in return, he lifted his head and met his lover's eyes, still struggling to believe that this was real, that Juo was there with him as the *Starfire* left orbit rather than left behind on Petarus. "Do that again," he requested, lust sparking in his eyes.

Pulling Ryan's mouth back to his, twining their tongues together, Juo complied, digging his heels into the mattress between Ryan's knees so he could push up against the next downward jerk of his lover's hips.

They stayed like that, suspended in time, bodies shifting minutely against and within one another, gazes locked as they slowly drove each other to the brink of ecstasy and then over the edge, their orgasms rolling through them like solar shock waves, all the more powerful for their silence.

They clung to each other through the initial release and the shuddering aftershocks, bodies as tightly locked as at the height of their passion, until their pulses slowed enough for Ryan to begin to worry about crushing his lover beneath him. Rolling to his side, he laid his head on Juo's shoulder, not wanting to separate any more than that.

Still overcome by the power of their mating, Juo stroked Ryan's hair and face gently, trying to put his world to rights again. Finally, he lifted his head to meet his lover's gaze. "I miss the stubble," he said softly, stroking the smooth cheek where the explorer had clearly shaved that morning, "but I think watching you shave every morning will more than make up for it."

Ryan tensed slightly in the gentle embrace. "Will you be here every morning to see it?" he asked softly, not sure how to bring up the issue of a commitment they had never discussed.

"Of course I will be," Juo protested. "I love you!"

Ryan's heart leapt at the words. "I didn't know," he said softly. "You hadn't said. I mean, we didn't have time to discuss any kind of commitment. One day I was still sick, and the next, here you are on board my ship, in my bunk...."

Juo's smile was tender. "You said you loved me. That was all the commitment I needed."

"When...?" Ryan began, his voice trailing off as he remembered his nightmare. "In my dream," he answered his own question.

Juo nodded. "You pleaded for me to stay with you, told me that you loved me. I spoke to Captain Rusk that afternoon." A terrible thought suddenly occurred to him. "You do feel the same, don't you?"

"Gods, yes!" Ryan exclaimed, pushing up to his elbow and leaning down to kiss Juo with all the emotion in his heart. "I love you, Juo-ta-ri," he said firmly when he lifted his head, not wanting there to be any room for doubt.

Juo's smile rivaled the brightest star in the sky. "And I love you, First Officer Ryan Nelson."

EPILOGUE

PERSONAL Log, First Officer Ryan Nelson, on board the *Starfire*, sector 2, beta quadrant, January 25, 3511, standard Earth time

It's hard to believe a year has passed since our arrival at Petarus. So much has changed since then it seems impossible for it to have been so little time. I wouldn't wish that disease on my worst enemy, much less my friends and crewmates, but I can't complain about the result, not when it led me to my soon-to-be husband.

It took Juo awhile to get used to the idea of making our relationship officially sanctioned in any way. On Petarus, such a concept doesn't exist, the commitment of the two individuals involved all that's needed to create a permanent union. I appreciate the sentiment, and I won't love him more in a few hours for having stood in front of Portia and made those vows. He understands that now, I think, understands that this is a formality

because I want our relationship recorded for his benefit should something happen to me. A.E. is a relatively forward-thinking company, but I don't want there to be any question of beneficiary should I die in the line of duty.

We've both signed up for another tour, another five years on the *Starfire*. Juo loves every aspect of the exploration we do, even the parts that grew tedious for me years ago. They *were* tedious, that is, until I got to discover everything again through his eyes. At his side, everything's new again, and I look forward to the next five years, and the five beyond that, and the five beyond that. Maybe a time will come when we decide spacefaring is no longer for us, but it won't be any time soon.

The captain's calling. Everything's ready for the ceremony. When I write my next log, it will be as a married man.

EVER CHANGING

Shay Kincaid

www.shaykincaid.com

This story is dedicated to Holly and Jessica.
Without your unwavering friendship
and unconditional support,
I would not have had the courage
to share my first story,
let alone continue writing.
You two wonderful ladies
will always have a special place
in my heart.

BLUE eyes surveyed the throng of swaying bodies as their owner wondered what the night would bring. He loved visiting New York's various – and varied – clubs, immersing himself in the music, losing himself in a warm, willing body. Would tonight's conquest be blond, brunette, or have hair the color of midnight? Would the body be slight or toned; would he be tall or of average height? A grin played on his lips as he perused a few unsuspecting candidates.

Setting his empty glass on the bar, Chase made his way onto the dance floor and was immediately surrounded by gyrating bodies. Anonymous hands roamed at will, touching, stroking. Chase's eyes slowly closed as his body responded to the welcome touches, his lithe frame moving to the heavy beat of the music. He felt his partners changing places around him and smiled when he felt a pair of lips at his throat, a warm tongue teasing its way up his neck; a provocative invitation issued with a sinfully deep voice.

Hours later, Chase dressed, slipped silently from an unknown apartment and made his way back to his own place. Tossing his keys onto the table in his entry hall, the sandy-blond hair of an exhausted Chase darkened to midnight black, his sky blue eyes shifting back to emerald green.

Born a Changeling, Chase Spencer could alter his appearance at will with a single, whispered word. Some Changelings could

imitate one or two other appearances, or could replicate someone they had seen. More proficient than most of his kind, Chase's skills didn't appear to be limited that way. Just picturing a feature in his mind, he could alter his look instantly.

Being a Changeling had always been a game to Chase. Young and precocious, he had attempted to see how many people he could fool with his altered appearances – teachers, playmates, even his parents. As he reached adulthood, however, the games took on a whole new meaning. Each weekend found Chase in a different club, with a different face, a different body and a different attitude. And of course, a different partner.

This was his life - a never-ending string of nameless partners who served to pass the time and amuse him. He knew that one of these days he would tire of the endless parade of bodies, but until then, he would enjoy each and every one of them – no strings attached.

And so it continued - club after club, one warm body after another.

TONIGHT, Chase had decided to visit one of New York City's premiere hot spots.

Dressed in a sheer white shirt, unbuttoned so that it showed off sculpted abs, and black leather pants that hugged him like a second skin, *Derek* knew he looked good. Add his athletic build, blond hair and blue eyes, and he was practically guaranteed at least one fuck that night, possibly more if things went well. This persona was a hard-core bad boy, one who took what he wanted, and didn't care whose toes he stepped on to get it. If someone caught his eye, he made his intentions known and nine times out of ten, he ended up with either a blowjob or quick fuck out of the deal. Not too bad, in his opinion.

From his place on the dance floor, *Derek's* gaze landed on a new challenge. His normally relaxed smile turned calculating as he extricated himself from his dance partners and made his way to the bar. A few minutes later, a drink had been delivered and he sat back – waiting – nursing his own drink – watching.

Seated at a table in a darkened corner with his own collection of willing bodies draped over and around him, Thomas Bradford scowled at the waiter who dared to interrupt him. An extremely skilled pair of lips sucked his cock, bringing him closer to completion, making him groan at the intrusion.

“Compliments of the young man at the bar,” the waiter offered as he set the drink on the table and motioned to where *Derek* was standing. The server disappeared, absorbed back into the crowd.

Steely gray eyes took in every detail of the young man the waiter had pointed out. Starting with the sandy blond hair, his gaze traveled over a very generous set of lips that would look perfect sucking his cock, down a toned and tanned body. The stranger at the bar turned to order another drink, presenting Thomas with an unobstructed view of his sculpted ass. His fingers flexed in the dark hair covering his lap and Thomas’s latest toy renewed his efforts. Leaning back in the booth, his head resting against the seat, Thomas’s eyes closed as he pictured the blond man’s lips wrapped around his cock, coaxing his orgasm from him.

Derek finished the drink he ordered and then slowly wound his way around to where Thomas was seated. Instead of stopping at the blond’s booth, he continued on to the next table where he picked up another partner, asking him to dance.

Thomas watched the pair as they melted into the crowd, catching sight of them moments later as they turned the corner, heading down the hall into the men’s restroom. Unable to resist, he pushed the forgotten pick-up off his lap, excused himself from his group of hangers-on and followed. Opening the door, he watched as his benefactor’s cock slid repeatedly into the body pinned against the wall and knew that he had just found the man worthy of fucking him tonight.

Derek’s gaze never left Thomas as he continued to fuck the man he’d picked up just to cement Thomas’s interest. But a fuck was still a fuck and this one had a nice, tight ass. He felt his orgasm approaching and with a few final thrusts, he groaned through his release. His forehead fell onto the twink’s back for a few moments as he regained his breath. When he looked up again,

his target was gone. A smug smile graced *Derek's* lips as he quickly righted himself and opened the door, fully expecting to find the gorgeous blond waiting.

"Very nice," Thomas commented as *Derek* passed him in the hallway. "How long will it take you to get it up again?"

Derek gave Thomas a long, lingering look and smiled. "For you? Not long at all," he stated.

"Prove it," Thomas said as he turned and made for the exit.

"Oh, absolutely," *Derek* said to himself, his smile growing as he followed Thomas from the club. Once outside, they waited together in silence as the valet brought Thomas's black Jaguar XK convertible around.

In less than twenty minutes, they pulled into the parking garage of Thomas's condo and rode the elevator up to the penthouse suite.

Derek took in his surroundings, noticing first the floor to ceiling windows that overlooked Central Park. He let out a low whistle. "Nice digs."

Stormy eyes turned to the man he'd brought home. "I didn't bring you here for your decorating advice," Thomas declared as he walked down the hallway, not bothering to see if his companion was following.

Derek entered the sumptuous bedroom to find the intriguing blond stripping and took a moment to enjoy the show. If Thomas Bradford looked good in clothes, he was spectacular out of them. His gaze roamed over the slender body and his cock stirred at the thought of touching, tasting, taking what was on display before him.

"Well?" the blond challenged. "Planning on staring all night or were you going to fuck me?" He lay back on an enormous four-poster bed and slowly stroked himself.

Quickly divesting himself of his own clothes, *Derek* moved to stand between Thomas's open legs and swatted his hand away.

"This is mine tonight," he said as he gave Thomas's cock a gentle squeeze. "You're mine."

A well-manicured eyebrow arched. “That is where you are wrong. I brought you home which means that I own you,” Thomas corrected, causing *Derek* to remove his hand.

“I will never be owned by anyone. The reason you brought me here is because you want my cock up your ass, plain and simple. So decide now – if you want my cock, I’m in charge. If not, then I have no problem with leaving,” *Derek* declared, starting to move away from the bed.

Thomas sat up and wrapped his legs around *Derek’s*, preventing the other man from retreating. “Fine, you’re in charge. But it better be worth it,” he said as he pulled *Derek* onto the bed with him.

“I wouldn’t be here if you thought otherwise. I’ve already auditioned, remember?” *Derek* stated as he settled himself between the open thighs.

“Touché,” Thomas countered as he raised his knees and planted his feet firmly on the bed, an invitation that *Derek* had no intention of ignoring.

Guessing that Thomas kept his supplies handy, *Derek* reached over and opened the bedside drawer, retrieving a bottle of Wet and a handful of condoms. He quickly slicked his fingers and prepared Thomas, making certain he wrung a series of impassioned cries from the writhing body as he ghosted his fingers over Thomas’s prostate.

“Enough!” Thomas finally screamed. “Fuck me now or get the hell out!”

For a brief moment, *Derek* considered taking Thomas up on his bluff and leaving the spoiled blond in his current state, but quickly discarded that notion. His revenge would be so much sweeter, knowing he had literally and figuratively fucked Thomas Bradford.

Covering his cock with latex and gel, *Derek* slowly pushed past the guardian muscle and into Thomas’s body. Once seated, *Derek* grabbed Thomas’s slender legs under the knees, pressed them back towards the pale body and rode the man beneath him for all he was worth. This was what he’d been brought here to do and there was

nothing kind or gentle about it. He was going to fuck Thomas Bradford into oblivion.

Over and over, he drove himself into the willing body below him, mindless of what his partner wanted or needed. He buried his face into Thomas's shoulder and groaned, the intoxicating scent of the blond invading his senses. *Derek* only came back to himself when he heard the keening wail of his partner's completion, and felt a splash of Thomas's release covering their stomachs. He smiled into the pale shoulder. Thomas had come untouched. *Derek's* hands were still pressing Thomas's legs back into his body while his partner's hands were now raised above his head, fingers twisted in the black satin comforter, knuckles white.

Derek slid his hands from the crook of Thomas's knees to the bed and pushed himself off of the body below him. Before Thomas registered what was happening, *Derek* had flipped him over and slammed his cock back into the molten heat.

"Fuck!" Thomas screamed, causing *Derek* to chuckle quietly.

"Not used to being man-handled?" *Derek* asked as he continued his deep, penetrating strokes, slapping one side of Thomas's ass for the sheer pleasure of it, earning a moan and a glare from the man beneath him.

When no answer was forthcoming, *Derek* pinned Thomas flat against the sheets and continued to move. Over and over, he plunged his cock into the body beneath him until he felt his orgasm approaching. He pressed his forehead between Thomas's shoulder blades, his mouth open in an effort to take in more oxygen, his tongue lapping at the sheen of sweat that had covered his partner's body. When he finally let himself go, *Derek* filled the condom. He wasn't sure whose scream he heard - it could have been either of theirs - but it really didn't matter. He had just fucked the living daylight out of Thomas Bradford, the smug prick who had made his life hell since grade school.

They lay connected for several moments, both trying to control their erratic breathing. Finally, *Derek* moved away, flopping on his back, one arm flung over his eyes. His breathing slowly returned to normal. He felt Thomas slide from the bed and, a few seconds

later, heard the sound of a door closing. *Derek* raised his arm and looked around, spying the telltale strip of light under the door of what he assumed to be the bathroom. When Thomas still hadn't returned a few minutes later, *Derek* disposed of the used condom, gathered his clothes and started to dress.

"Leaving so soon?" came a voice from the doorway as *Derek* stepped into his black leather pants.

"My job here is done," he tossed over his shoulder as he continued to dress.

"Says who?" Thomas asked as he slowly approached the other man. "I'm not done with you yet," he said matter-of-factly.

Derek reached down and grabbed his shirt from the floor. "And I said that I'm in charge, in case you've forgotten," he said as he slid his arms into the silk shirt.

Thomas made his way around to stand in front of *Derek*. He slowly lifted his hands to the toned chest, gently brushing over the pebbled nubs. A set of sated eyes peered at his partner from beneath the fringe of blond hair. "I haven't forgotten. I'm just not ready to let you go yet. I only share my bed once with someone and I plan to make the most of it," he said smugly.

"Oh really?" *Derek* asked with a raised eyebrow.

"Really," Thomas answered as he slid his hands up to *Derek's* shoulders and gently pushed the shirt back so that it slid down the sculpted arms to land back on the floor. Long, tapered fingers moved to the waist of the leather pants and slowly unbuttoned them. "I'm not done with you by a long shot."

In no time, *Derek* was reclining on the leather chaise lounge, watching as his cock disappeared between Thomas's perfect lips. Blond hair wound tightly around tan fingers as he guided Thomas's movements. Before he was too far gone, he tightened his grip and pulled the skilled mouth off of him.

At Thomas's questioning look, *Derek* released him and smirked. "Ride me," he said as he stroked himself, but Thomas quickly caught the hand and slid up his partner's body.

“With pleasure,” Thomas agreed as he reached for the bottle and another condom lying on the floor beside them. After covering and coating *Derek’s* cock, Thomas moved into position and slid down on the upstanding rod.

“Fuck, I love your cock,” he said as he started to move, his hands gripping *Derek’s* shoulders, eyes closed and his head thrown back, exposing the long column of his neck to *Derek’s* gaze.

Never one to pass up an opportunity, *Derek* leaned up and licked a path from Thomas’s sternum to his Adam’s apple, sucking on the nodule for a moment before sliding his lips to the tender skin next to it. *Derek* alternated between sucking and gently biting Thomas’s neck, grinning when he pulled away to survey his work.

The blond’s head fell forward and *Derek* smiled when a pair of soft lips brushed his own. His lips parted willingly as his partner’s tongue invaded the recesses of his mouth. Hands came up to cradle Thomas’s face and then *Derek* took over. By the time he finally released the tempting mouth, both were panting, their lips swollen and blood red from the assault.

Derek splashed a few drops of the lubricant into his hand and reached down to stroke Thomas’s cock, teasing at first, then more insistently.

Thomas buried his face in the crook of *Derek’s* neck as he gave in to his desires. He groaned as his cock twitched and erupted in *Derek’s* hand, several drops of the milky-white substance landing on his partner’s chest. *Derek* followed a few minutes later, his own essence filling the snug passage that pulsed around him. Tan fingers lifted Thomas’s chin and *Derek* caught the other man’s lips in one final kiss.

“You know where the door is,” Thomas said dismissively as he lifted himself off of his partner and disappeared into the restroom once again, leaving *Derek* alone in the quiet room.

“I certainly do,” *Derek* said calmly. After rising from the chaise lounge, he went in search of his clothes. This time when he dressed, he knew Thomas wouldn’t stop him, and that was just fine with him. He left the bedroom, making his way back down the

long hallway and into the living room where he pulled out his cell phone and called a cab.

Arriving back at his own place and slipping into his own skin like a pair of well-loved pajamas, Chase took a quick shower before crawling between cool, crisp sheets. As he drifted off to sleep, he congratulated himself on a job well done. He had just fucked – and fucked over – not only the son of his father’s fiercest competitor in the business world, but the rival who had made Chase’s own blood boil since childhood. Not that he could brag about it to anyone, but that didn’t even matter – just knowing that he had done it was enough for him. His mind drifted back to the first time Thomas Bradford had bested him.

ELEVEN-year old Chase eyed the tournament bracket for his age group – under fourteen - wondering which two players would make it to the finals. He didn’t really care who the second name was as long as his name was one of them. The previous year he had made it to the semi-finals, only to be beaten in the last set by someone new to the Weston Lakes Country Club, a blond brat who went by the name of Thomas Bradford.

Chase had won the first set, six games to four, then snagged the first two games of the second set. Bradford had come back and won two of his own, making the second set tied at two apiece. After a somewhat questionable call by the official, Bradford was up three games to two. Chase rallied and won the next two, only to have the blond tie things up at five games each. Angry at himself for not putting the new kid in his place early on, Chase’s attention wandered at the wrong moment and he ended up losing the game, which only angered him further, making him careless. If he lost the next one, he’d be out of the tournament.

When the final point played out, Chase wanted nothing more than to wrap his racket around his cocky opponent’s neck. In a play that was more luck than skill, Bradford had somehow returned Chase’s serve, the ball catching on the net and falling immediately to the ground... on Chase’s side. It was a poor play - a mistake - that had worked out in Thomas’s favor. There was no

way for Chase to get to it since he had been standing on the baseline, ready to return whatever Bradford threw at him. Or so he thought.

Returning to the sidelines expecting to commiserate with his family over the unfair call and even worse luck, Chase had been stunned by his father's heated attack, unable to even summon his voice to defend himself. After the elder Spencer had stormed off the court, Chase's mother had tried to explain - lost contracts, competition between his father and Mr. Bradford - but all Chase could focus on was the blond on the other side of the court being hugged and congratulated by a tall broad shouldered man with the same white-blond hair.

That was the first of many times they would meet across the expanse of asphalt, and while Chase managed to come out on top on a few occasions, it was Thomas Bradford's name that dominated the winner's plaques that graced the walls of the Weston Lakes Tennis Pro Shop - a fact his father never let him forget.

SHAKING off the pall of inadequacy that always accompanied thoughts of his childhood, Chase searched his mind for something happy to focus on as he fell asleep. Inexplicably, his thoughts returned to the look on Thomas's face as he'd fallen apart under Chase's touch earlier.

THE following weekend, Chase stood naked in front of the full-length mirror, contemplating his attire. Each of his personas had their favorite outfits, ones they felt more comfortable in than others, thus ensuring Chase a full-to-bursting closet of clothing. In the mood to be dominated, he mentally ran through *Adrian*, his favorite twink persona's, wardrobe, picturing each outfit in his mind. Deciding on a pair of green, low-rise leather pants that laced from hip to ankle and a sheer black shirt, chosen to both tease and tantalize, he *changed* into the smaller body frame and dressed. His eyes matched the exact shade of his pants and his normally shoulder-length hair was styled into a close cut and gelled just so.

With a last approving glance in the mirror, he headed out to a hot, up-town dance club.

Slouched deep in the booth surrounded by a group of friends, *Adrian* sipped his drink, his discerning eye scanning the club's patrons. His mind drifted back to the previous weekend, to the night he had spent with Thomas. At first, his thoughts focused on the revenge he had extracted without the other man's knowledge. Chase's adolescence had been one constant competition with Thomas Bradford, a situation encouraged by their fathers at every opportunity. Multi-million dollar corporate moguls in similar fields, the senior Bradford and Spencer traveled in the same business and social circles and enjoyed pressing their sons to compete in the same way they did. Unfortunately, Chase always seemed to come out number two. Last weekend's golden opportunity to screw Thomas Bradford had just been too good to pass up.

The problem arose when his traitorous mind kept switching gears to memories of the way Thomas's body had felt as Chase pushed into him, so hot and tight, so utterly perfect. In all his years of nameless fucks, no other body had felt as incredible as Thomas's surrounding him, pulling at him, coaxing him deeper. He grimaced as he felt the first stirrings of arousal and decided the best way to get his mind off of Thomas Bradford was to find someone to fuck him - the harder the better. His cock jumped again. And fast.

"Let's dance," *Adrian* said, finishing off his drink and then making his way to the dance floor, his friends following. Surrounded by the writhing mass of bodies, he became one with the music and let all of his cares and problems drift away. He smiled as he pulled one of the others against him at the same time he felt another move behind him. His head fell back to rest on his partner's shoulder and his eyes slid shut as the music washed over him.

Body swaying, *Adrian* felt a wash of awareness like a warm wave. Opening his eyes, he found the one person he was trying to forget standing less than an arm's length away.

A sly grin decorated Thomas's sculpted lips as he moved closer. Shooting *Adrian's* current dance partner a look that spoke volumes, the cowed man melted into the crowd.

Adrian could play this one of two ways, Chase decided. One, he could reject Thomas's obvious interest in him by turning and heading the opposite direction, or two, he could move into Thomas's arms and play the game one more time. Regardless of the animosity he felt towards the other man, a wave of desire rushed through *Adrian's* system when Thomas reached up and brushed his knuckles against *Adrian's* flushed cheek.

One more time it was.

Adrian smiled at the newcomer and went willingly into his arms, their bodies moving sinuously to the music. Thomas's hands slid down *Adrian's* back and cupped his ass, bringing him closer to the blond. *Adrian* relaxed against Thomas's chest and let him take the lead.

Pale hands slid under *Adrian's* shirt and teased the warm skin beneath with light, yet knowing touches. In turn, *Adrian* kissed the pale skin before him, starting at the open collar of Thomas's shirt and working his way up the long expanse of neck. They continued to move together to the sultry beat, pushing each other higher and higher. Suddenly the music changed and Thomas ushered him to a table where several others sat and drank. A few, he recognized from the previous weekend.

Thomas took his seat and pulled his new toy down into his lap, covering the enticing lips with his own. *Adrian* wrapped his arms around Thomas and melted into the kiss. Their tongues touched briefly before retreating, only to plunge forward again. Pale fingers framed *Adrian's* face and pulled him closer. Ever the accommodating bottom, *Adrian* lifted a leg and straddled Thomas's lap. Firmly seated, his fingers slid into the silky blond tresses, holding on as Thomas kissed him to within an inch of his life.

Adrian pressed his hips against Thomas's and smiled as he felt a matching hardness. He idly wondered how long it would be before Thomas fucked him. He was burning with an unmet need,

but *Adrian* wouldn't suggest they leave. Thomas was the one in charge tonight and *Adrian* would abide by his rules. The downside of this twink persona was that there was always the chance that someone hotter would come along and push you out of your spot. It had happened before and it would happen again, but not tonight, *Adrian* vowed. Tonight, he would go home with Thomas and find out what his nemesis was like as a top. The thought of an aggressive Thomas pounding his ass made him whimper into the blond's open mouth, and he felt the body beneath him press up.

Thomas pulled out of the kiss and tucked *Adrian* by his side, one pale arm draped possessively around the smaller man. He had chosen wisely tonight. This one promised erotic delights with his mouth and body. Thomas was almost certain the boy had no idea he was even doing it – a natural bottom. When Thomas felt a pair of warm lips caressing his neck, combined with a purposeful hand sliding its way over his thigh to scrape lightly against his hard length, he amended his earlier statement. This one knew exactly what he was doing which made him that much more alluring. Thomas's eyes closed as he rested his head against the back of the booth and enjoyed the boy's touch.

"May I?" *Adrian* asked, just barely biting back the word 'master', as he toyed with the button of Thomas's leather pants. He didn't want to over-play his hand.

"By all means," Thomas answered. A few practiced moves by his newfound toy left his cock briefly exposed to the cool air before being surrounded by a gentle hand.

Adrian leaned up and placed a kiss against Thomas's neck. "Does my touch please you?" he asked and then blew on the moist skin, causing a shiver to wrack Thomas's body.

"Yessss," the blond breathed before turning his face a bit and capturing those teasing lips again. This one was going to drive him mad before the night was through. The small hand worked his cock like no other had before. If Thomas didn't have his self-imposed rule of no repeats, this one might bear keeping tabs on.

Thomas reluctantly broke the kiss. With the barest pressure against his toy's back, he watched the dark haired boy lower his

head into his lap. A brief hitch in Thomas's breathing was the only outward appearance that his cock had just been swallowed to the root. That was NOT what he'd been expecting, at least not right away, but he wasn't about to argue. In fact, words of any type were unlikely at the moment. He felt the boy's throat contract around him and fought to maintain his composure, unsuccessfully.

The cool blond had been hard since the moment he spotted the temptation currently decorating his lap sitting with his friends earlier. When the young man rose from the table and wound his way to the dance floor, Thomas's cock throbbed painfully. He knew then he had just found his toy for the night. Just what he needed to erase the lingering presence of the man he'd brought home last weekend.

Adrian's lips, mouth and throat worked Thomas's cock relentlessly. He felt a slight change in the blond's breathing right before long fingers clenched his hair tightly. Thomas came violently down *Adrian's* throat, the young man swallowing everything he had to offer. *Adrian* continued to suckle until the organ was limp, releasing it reluctantly from his lips.

Thomas pulled *Adrian's* mouth back to his and claimed the swollen lips in a kiss that bordered on violent. He needed more of this lovely creature and he needed him now. The kiss ended as quickly as it started. Tucking himself away, Thomas took *Adrian's* hand and dragged him through the crowded club towards the exit, *Adrian* happily complying.

The two of them were naked just moments after arriving at Thomas's condo. Falling to his knees, Thomas returned the favor by putting his own mouth to work, shuffling his bed partner backwards at the same time.

Adrian found himself on Thomas's large bed once again with the blond pushing him closer to completion even more quickly than he had the weekend before. *Adrian* was a pleaser, a trait of this particular persona. If Thomas had told him to come right then, he would have, but with no instructions, he held back and enjoyed the attention that Thomas was lavishing on him. It was only when he felt the teasing touches at his entrance that he allowed himself

to let go. He smiled when Thomas crawled up his body and pressed a kiss to his panting lips, tasting himself on his lover's mouth.

"You are magnificent," the blond cooed. "Are you ready for me?"

Still stunned from his explosive climax, *Adrian* could do nothing more than nod.

"Turn over," Thomas gently commanded as his hand pressed against *Adrian's* side, helping the young man to roll to his front.

Teasing kisses were scattered over the expanse of skin that greeted Thomas's gaze. The boy was small, but toned. He liked a lover that took pride in his body like he did. Countless hours spent with a personal trainer on top of a childhood filled with sports had given his body the right amount of muscle. He was vain enough to know that he looked good and to want to keep it that way.

Thomas worked his way down the boy's spine with teasing kisses and nips, enjoying the small sounds coming from his partner. He especially loved the mewl that slid from between those adorable lips when he gently bit one side of the perfect pale globe he was caressing. "You like that?" Thomas queried before laving the bite with a swipe of his tongue and a gentle kiss.

"Yes," came the muffled answer as *Adrian* moved on the bed, trying to shift his renewing erection into a comfortable position. Actually, like was not a strong enough word for it. He loved it. Not that he'd voluntarily admit that. At least, Chase wouldn't. *Adrian* would say anything if the glorious erotic teasing would continue. He tried to decide if he loved the act itself or the fact that it was Thomas doing it to him. Coherent thought beyond him, he decided that he really didn't care. As long as Thomas fucked him sometime soon, he would be fine.

As if the thought produced the action, *Adrian* felt fingers teasing his entrance and knew that he wouldn't have to wait much longer. After a very thorough preparation, filled with heart-felt cries and considerable pleading, the latex-covered head of Thomas's cock nudged *Adrian's* entrance. His world shattered as the thick cock breached him, pain and pleasure warring within him.

Soothing words slipped from Thomas's lips, calming his racing heart and letting him relax. Something inside of *Adrian* shifted, and he felt a strange pull towards his lifelong rival.

Then *Adrian's* thoughts shut down. Thomas was inside of him, making love to him as if they had been lovers for years. The blond was attentive and caring, which surprised him. He figured that Thomas would be the same irritating self-centered person in bed that he'd been in the classroom and on the tennis courts. *Adrian* felt Thomas's chest press against his back, felt the slender hand slide under his chin and lift his face so that he could kiss him again. The moment their lips met, *Adrian* knew he had made a mistake by coming here tonight.

"I want to stay inside you forever," Thomas breathed into *Adrian's* ear when he pulled away. "So hot and tight. How can you feel so perfect?" he asked as he continued to move inside the snug passage, not really expecting an answer.

Adrian quickly shut off the emotions those first words stirred. He was getting what he wanted - revenge - and then he'd be done with Thomas once and for all. Besides, Thomas had told him last weekend, or rather, told *Derek* that he only slept with someone once. But holy fuck, if Thomas loved everyone this way, he was sure there was a string of broken hearts all over the eastern seaboard.

Thomas slowed his motions, rolling *Adrian* onto his back, the blond sliding back into his body almost immediately. "So perfect," he whispered before laying claim to *Adrian's* lips again.

Their movements remained unhurried until *Adrian* could take it no longer. "Please," the dark-haired young man said as he brought Thomas's hand to his weeping shaft.

"Please what?" Thomas asked, knowing full well what his partner needed.

"I need... oh fuck... I need to come. I want you to make me come," *Adrian* said and then nearly wept with relief when Thomas's hand started to move. Together they stroked his flesh until he spilled over their joined hands.

“Beautiful,” Thomas said as he lifted their hands to his lips and licked them clean. After holding his lover’s eyes with a smoldering look that seemed to last forever, he turned his attention back to *Adrian* and started to move again. This time, his thrusts were quicker and deeper as he sought his own release. It wasn’t long before Thomas spent himself in the body beneath him. He rolled off of *Adrian* and pulled the smaller man against his side.

Neither fought it as they lazily dozed.

Warm lips on his neck woke *Adrian*. He knew he should leave, knew he was skating on thin ice with this charade, but instead reached up and caressed Thomas’s face, earning a smile in return. He’d deal with it all later.

They made love once more just as the sun was rising. With a body full of pleasant aches and a heart full of regrets, *Adrian* dressed and slipped from the bedroom, leaving a sleeping Thomas behind.

Once he was safely back in his own skin, Chase decided that the game was over. It had gotten out of hand and he knew that he could never, EVER, let it happen again. In the past, it had been fun and challenging to be with a lover as his different personas, but there was something about Thomas Bradford that was calling to him, awakening feelings that Chase had tried to avoid. He had never seen the appeal of settling down with just one person when there were so many tasty treats out there yet to be sampled.

As he drifted off to sleep that night, Chase knew that he could not allow those feelings to take hold.

Especially not with Thomas Bradford.

CHASE sat in his office and stared blankly at the report before him, his eyes unfocused, and his mind a million miles away. From the vacant look on his face, his concentration didn’t seem to be coming back anytime soon. He should have listened to the little voice in his head that told him he was making a big mistake with his latest actions but he had assumed he could treat his time with

Thomas Bradford with the same casual flair that he did with everyone else he toyed with.

Fate, it seemed, had other plans.

The feelings that *Adrian* had felt with Thomas were akin to an ‘awakening’, something that mature Changelings experienced when they found their predestined mates. Chase’s parents had explained it to him when he was younger, but he had brushed it off in typical young, single male style, saying that relationships were not for him, that he’d rather play the field and experience life to the fullest, which he had. Chase could not say how many men he had been with, as himself and his personas.

One night with Thomas Bradford, and the walls that Chase had erected around himself had started to shake. Two nights with his enemy, and the walls were crumbling.

There would be no third.

In an effort to banish all thoughts of Thomas Bradford, Chase *changed* into a little used persona and went in search of someone who did not have blond hair and gray-blue eyes that promised hours upon hours of pleasure and made his stomach twist into uncomfortable knots.

Gasping for breath, sandwiched between a set of dark-haired twins, Chase decided that these two were exactly what he needed to drive the images of another from his mind. Releasing a sharp cry, his back bowed, body completely at the mercy of the duo who seemed to move in tandem. Not coming simply wasn’t an option. Collapsing forward onto the twin under him, he reveled in the weight of the twin resting against his back. Oh yes, these two were definitely what he needed.

It was only after Chase had imposed his mandatory ‘no one spends the night rule’ and driven the matching lovers from his bed, falling into a fitful sleep, that the ghostly images dared to reappear. They came at him with a vengeance and he was helpless to stop them. In his dreams, it was not the set of dark-haired twins who were teasing him but a set of twins that Chase knew for a fact did not exist. He awoke the next morning screaming Thomas’s name as his cock erupted in the tangled sheets. Thoroughly disgusted

with himself, he stepped into a scalding shower and scrubbed his body frantically, trying to wash away his thoughts.

Weeks went by like this, more nameless partners, more meaningless fucks, more haunting dreams. It was becoming increasingly clear to Chase that no matter whom he was with, he subconsciously found himself comparing them to the one he was trying to exorcise from his thoughts.

And he always found them lacking.

Chase hated the fact that his blond nemesis was controlling his thoughts and actions and was determined to make him pay, which was why *Sean*, yet another one of Chase's personas, was back at the same club where *Derek* had run across Thomas the first time. Sitting at the bar, his dark eyes scanning the crowd before him, he felt a presence behind him and knew, without a doubt, that Thomas had just arrived. He watched as the other man and a few of his friends passed him in search of a table, the gray-blue hooded gaze assessing the men as he crossed the Changeling's path.

Biding his time, *Sean* watched as one person after another tried to pick up the blond. Each time, his pulse quickened when he saw them leave the table, their offers rejected. He briefly wondered if Thomas was sick. Chase knew that the blond had varied tastes. Surely at least one of the men had caught his eye, but Thomas turned them all away. Was the blond in no mood to play tonight? That could ruin his plan.

It seemed that his suspicions were confirmed when not even a half-hour later, *Sean* watched as Thomas slid from the booth and headed for the doors, his head shaking in what *Sean* assumed was disgust. The shaking stopped, however, as the blond's assessing eyes locked with *Sean's* sienna ones. With a half-smile and a lift of his glass, the Changeling moved to a shadowed corner near the bar.

Sean was sitting with his back to the bar trying to suppress a smile when Thomas slid into the vee of his open legs, pale fingers trailing up his well-muscled thighs. A perfectly manicured hand took the drink from *Sean's* grip and downed it in one swallow, not bothering to ask what it was or even if he could even have it. Smug

bastard, *Sean* thought to himself and then all thoughts ceased as Thomas pressed himself against *Sean* and captured his lips.

“Come home with me,” *Sean* offered, breaking the kiss, his lips still brushing lightly against Thomas’s.

The blond nodded, following the other man out of the club.

As soon as the door to *Sean*’s apartment closed behind them, *Sean* pushed Thomas against the wall and ravaged his mouth. Weeks of pent-up want and need rushed to the surface. In a matter of seconds, Thomas’s shirt lay in tatters on the ground at their feet.

The blond broke the kiss just long enough to mutter, “You owe me a shirt.” Pinning *Sean* firmly to the wall, Thomas’s lips attacked *Sean*’s neck. *Sean*’s similarly torn shirt landed on top of Thomas’s moments later.

“I’ll buy you a whole fucking closet full if you want,” *Sean* offered. “Just don’t stop.”

Elegant hands were roaming over *Sean*’s toned body, pulling the most exquisite sounds from him. “Hadn’t planned on it,” Thomas breathed against the tender flesh.

“Good,” *Sean* replied as his hands fell to Thomas’s waist and pulled him closer, groaning when he felt Thomas’s length pressing against his own. Deciding that they were through talking for the moment, he claimed the blond’s lips again.

Thomas was fast approaching the point of no return. He quickly unbuttoned his pants and pulled his leaking cock free of its confines, stroking it a few times before he felt an additional hand. He linked their fingers together, setting the rhythm.

“Oh yeah ... like that,” Thomas cried as they quickly worked his cock in unison. “Oh fuck ... Yeah ... I’m almost ... OH ... FUCK ... YEAHHHHHHHHH!” he moaned as his orgasm crashed over him and his cock erupted. The blond sagged against *Sean*’s frame for a few moments as he came down from his high.

Sean had other ideas. Bodily carrying Thomas over to the leather couch, he quickly divested him of his shoes, socks and pants, tossing them over his shoulder to land somewhere behind him. With that done, *Sean* stood and quickly undressed, kneeling

between Thomas's spread legs. Too relaxed to sit up, Thomas slumped on the couch in a very undignified pose. *Sean* wished he had a camera to capture it on film.

The brunette smiled as he propped the blond's feet up on the cushions and leaned over to retrieve the small bottle and foil wrappers he kept in the table beside the couch. Slicking his fingers, he carefully prepared Thomas, earning a few quiet moans from the blond, a careless hand slicking his own cock as almost an afterthought.

Pulling Thomas's hips to the edge of the couch, *Sean* positioned the head of his member at the slicked entrance and slowly pushed inside, only allowing Thomas a few moments of adjustment before he started to move with determined strokes. There would be time later for a long, drawn-out round of sex, possibly two or three if he had his say, but right now he needed release.

Sean slid his hands under Thomas's shoulders and pulled the blond even tighter against his body, his hips thrusting with a single-minded focus. "Are you going to come for me again?" he asked as he leaned down and caught a dusky nipple between his teeth, biting lightly.

Thomas's back arched off of the couch as he groaned. "It's very possible," he admitted.

"Then touch yourself," *Sean* said as he continued his movements. "I want to watch you."

Pale lids closed over silver lust-filled eyes as Thomas's hand slid down his stomach and surrounded his reawakening shaft. In no time at all, he was hard again and stroking himself in time with his partner's thrusts.

"You look so fucking hot like that," *Sean* said as he fought to hold off his impending orgasm. He wanted Thomas to come with him. "Stroke yourself baby... yeah... like that... I want to see you come all over that pretty stomach of yours," he panted. "Come for me... and I'll lick you clean."

Thomas groaned loudly. “Fuck me harder and you’ll get your wish,” he stated as his fist worked his needy flesh. Within a few minutes, he felt the familiar stirrings in his lower belly and, after a few vicious thrusts, did exactly what the brunette wanted. His cock erupted and sent pearlescent streams onto his stomach and chest.

Seeing Thomas bringing himself off like that was exactly what *Sean* needed. He threw his head back and moaned as he filled the other man’s sheath, his hips jerking as he rode out his orgasm. He stayed buried in the warm body until his breathing had slowed and then pulled out, mouth lowering to the pale skin to make good on his earlier promise.

Thomas gasped as he felt the warm tongue glide across his heated skin and arched into the feeling. *Sean* grabbed Thomas’s hips and pinned them to the couch, giving the pale body a thorough cleaning.

When he was done, *Sean* led Thomas into the bedroom where he made love to him several more times, all the while trying to ignore the unwanted feelings that were slowly building inside him. He had brought Thomas home in an attempt to fuck him out of his system. Instead, the opposite was happening, and as much as he wanted to stop things, a small part of him wanted them to continue.

Exhaustion eventually claimed both men, both mentally and physically in *Sean*’s case, and they slipped into sleep’s embrace, neither waking until morning.

SUNLIGHT streamed through the vertical blinds of Chase’s bedroom, casting strips of golden light across the two bodies, still sound asleep at eleven the following morning. A late start was nothing new to either of the bed’s occupants as their late night activities frequently resulted in missing the following morning, sometimes not rising until well after noon. What WAS new, however, was the fact that they were still in bed - together.

Still in his *Sean* persona, Chase was the first to stir from his slumberous state, several things hitting him simultaneously. One, he was not alone; there was a warm body nestled against his back. Two, he knew exactly who the warm body belonged to without

having to look at the pale arm draped over his side. And three, the first two thoughts didn't bother him nearly as much as they should.

Slowly turning onto his back, *Sean* studied the man who had somehow broken through his defenses. Something had replaced the hostility he'd always felt for Thomas, something he had been avoiding for as long as he could remember. The question was - what was he going to do about it? He could continue the charade, knowing that at some point it would end, and probably end badly, or this could be the last time he allowed himself to play this game with Thomas. Already, his heart was denying that it was just a game.

It seemed that the spider had been caught in his own web of deceit.

Thomas stirred next to him and *Sean* decided that he wasn't ready to face the day just yet, closing his eyes and drifting back to sleep.

It was an hour later when a cool draft replaced the warmth behind him, causing *Sean* to rouse again. He watched covertly as a very naked and delicious-looking Thomas Bradford slid from the bed, carelessly tossing the covers back towards the pillow. *Sean's* cock twitched as his sienna gaze raked over the blond's form as he quietly searched the room for his clothes.

"They're in the living room," *Sean* offered as he sat up in the bed, his husky comment startling the blond.

A quietly murmured "thanks" was tossed his way as Thomas left the bedroom. And equally naked *Sean* followed a few seconds later. He wasn't going to let something so gorgeous get away that easily. Leaning against the corner where the hallway met the living area, completely unconcerned about his state of undress, *Sean* watched as Thomas picked through the scattered items and started to dress. The shirt, or what used to be Thomas's shirt, was on the floor beside *Sean's* foot and he reached down to retrieve it.

"I owe you a shirt," *Sean* said as he held up the tattered piece of silk.

“Don’t worry about it,” Thomas offered as he leaned down to tie his left shoe.

So this is what an awkward ‘morning after’ feels like, *Sean* thought as he watched Thomas prepare to leave. His chest tightened. He wanted Thomas to stay - wanted to drag him back to bed, but *Sean* knew, deep down, that this was the way things had to be. He’d be acting the same way if he’d woken up in Thomas’s bed. Never stay the night, slip out under the cover of darkness - that was his creed - one he had broken last night.

Sean moved over to where Thomas was standing and handed him the shredded garment. “I said that I owe you a shirt and I don’t renege on deals I make.”

“Do what you want,” Thomas said curtly, standing and snatching the mangled article out of *Sean*’s hand. Before he could move away, however, he found his wrist captured in a vice-like grip.

“In that case,” *Sean* said as he pulled Thomas back to him, winding his free arm around the blond’s back, holding him immobile.

“What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” Thomas swore, scowling as he attempted to extricate himself.

“You said, ‘Do what you want,’” *Sean* said before brushing Thomas’s lips with his own.

Thomas stiffened in the embrace, thawing slightly as the warm touch of his partner’s tongue lapped at his lower lip. Before he realized what he was doing, he found himself opening his mouth, his own tongue seeking its playmate. An irresistible hardness pressed against his hip and he shifted his body until it was pressing against him intimately. Sliding his free hand into *Sean*’s auburn tresses, he held him immobile, taking over and smiling when he felt the other submit. The scrap of red silk fluttered unnoticed to the floor. When both felt the burn from lack of oxygen, they slowly broke apart, Thomas resting his forehead against *Sean*’s, their breaths mingling in the small space between them.

Deciding to take chance, *Sean* quietly asked, "Stay for breakfast?" He'd already broken all his rules. Why not one more? Thomas inhaled quickly and *Sean* hurried to add, "Nothing fancy, just juice and toast."

"I've never..." Thomas started to say only to be stopped by a pair of long fingers pressed against his lips.

Sean chuckled ruefully. "I've never – either. Just breakfast. I'm not asking you to move in."

Thomas closed his eyes and fought the temptation to give in. It was such a simple request, but it went against all of his self-imposed rules: He never slept with the same man twice; he never stayed the entire night and slept half the day away with someone cradled in his arms; and he certainly never shared breakfast with someone the next day. Those were situations that screamed 'relationship', something Bradfords didn't do with men picked up in bars. But even knowing his own rules, Thomas found himself nodding.

"Perfect." *Sean* released the breath he'd been holding against kiss-swollen lips and ushered Thomas into the open kitchen. "Sit here while I go throw on some clothes," he said, depositing Thomas at the breakfast table with a cup of fresh coffee from the automatic coffeemaker. Making a beeline down the hallway, he threw on the first thing he found – a pair of well-worn jeans and an emerald green t-shirt that would have matched his eyes perfectly, if he weren't playing *Sean*. He couldn't trust Thomas not to leave if he left him alone too long. As an afterthought, he grabbed a second shirt for Thomas and returned to the kitchen.

Thomas sat at the small, round table, wondering what in the hell had gotten into him. He hadn't made one sane decision since he decided to rest his eyes before heading home and fell asleep snuggled around the bewitching gypsy he had picked up last night. Rational thought had returned with the light of day and he'd been all set to make a hasty departure that had been derailed by a series of intoxicating kisses and an invitation to stay for breakfast. He didn't even eat breakfast!

“Sorry,” *Sean* said as he handed the shirt to his guest. “It’s probably not up to your standards, but it’ll have to do.”

“What’s wrong? Can’t handle me sitting here half dressed?” Thomas quipped as he took the offered shirt and slid it over his head, the worn cotton clinging to his defined muscles.

Sean let the question hang between them as he threw together a quick breakfast of eggs, freshly squeezed juice, and toast. “My name is *Sean McKenzie*, by the way,” he tossed over his shoulder as he pulled the toaster out of a cabinet.

“Thomas Bradford,” the blond offered as he watched *Sean* move efficiently around the kitchen, showing his comfort in the room. Thomas knew for a fact he could not say the same thing for himself. Yes, he might have a state-of-the-art kitchen in his condo, but it was very rarely used and never by him.

Reaching into the refrigerator, *Sean* retrieved the butter and a several jars of jam. In doing so, the hem of his shirt rode up to expose a swath of bronze skin.

Thomas’s gaze locked onto the enticing denim-clad ass as *Sean* bent over, rising quickly to the waistband of the jeans and higher as the strip of flesh was revealed. He had explored every inch of that body last night and felt the urge to do so again. Shaking off that particular thought, he turned his attention back to his surroundings. His eye caught a neon green flyer tacked to a corkboard beside the phone. “Are you planning on going?” he asked, earning a strange look from *Sean*.

“Excuse me?”

“The grand opening of Club Xcape? I see you have a flyer for it,” Thomas said, motioning to the paper.

After preparing two plates full of eggs and toast, *Sean* topped off Thomas’s coffee and then slid into the seat across from his guest. He watched as the other man poured an ungodly amount of sugar and cream into his coffee.

“What?” Thomas asked when he looked up to find *Sean* watching him.

“Nothing,” the brunette answered with a shrug. “Just never seen anyone use that much sugar before. I’d be bouncing off the walls if I put that much in mine,” he said, adding a single spoonful to his own cup and stirring.

“Good thing you’re not me then,” Thomas said as he lifted the brew to his lips and blew a stream of air across the top in an attempt to cool the liquid. “So, Club Xcape?”

Sean turned in his chair to see the flyer Thomas was indicating. He had forgotten that it was there. “Next weekend, right?”

Thomas nodded. “I hear it’s going to put all of the others to shame,” he said and then went on to recount the snippets of reviews that he’d heard, *Sean* adding the occasional comment.

“Makes you wonder what the other clubs are going to do to keep people coming back, if Xcape turns out to be everything they’re hoping for,” Thomas commented before lifting his coffee cup to his lips.

“I’m sure a few of the lesser-known ones will end up closing,” *Sean* offered. “They don’t have the financial backing to compete with the larger clubs. And that’s a shame because I happen to enjoy the smaller ones.”

“Why is that?”

“More personal, I guess. Not as much competition to be the top dog.”

“Being at the top isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” Thomas admitted quietly, surprising not only *Sean*, but himself as well.

Dark eyebrows rose. “From what I’ve seen, you seem to enjoy being the center of attention.”

“In certain circumstances, very much so,” the blond admitted with a knowing smile. “Others, not so much. And if you think the competition is fierce in the clubbing scene, it’s nothing compared to what goes on behind the private gates of the country clubs. At least in the dance clubs you can lose yourself, imagine that you’re just like the person next to you, that you don’t have a care in the world other than who’s taking you home that night. In the

country club scene, everyone knows exactly who you are, who your father is, what's going on in the business world and where you fit into it all. It's like living in a petrie dish. Every action is observed, judged and reported on. My father wasn't always happy with some of those reports."

The meal was finished in silence, each man lost in his own thoughts. *Sean* had been surprised that Thomas had revealed so much about himself, but was secretly glad. It made him think about what life must have been like on the other side of the Bradford/Spencer fence. He briefly wondered if things had been different... no, don't go there, *Sean* told himself. It was going to be difficult enough when it came time for Thomas to leave.

Before they realized it, the big hand on the clock had made a full rotation, the food had disappeared and *Sean* was making a second pot of coffee for them.

"Don't bother with that. I need to be going. I've stayed longer than I had planned," Thomas said as he slid from his chair.

Sean turned from the coffeepot to find Thomas standing in the open space looking very unsure of what he should do next. Making the decision for him, *Sean* closed the distance between them and ushered the blond back into the living room, stopping only briefly to nab the remnants of Thomas's shirt off of the floor.

"I'm sorry about that," he said as he handed it to Thomas. "Things got a bit out of hand last night."

Thomas nodded. "I'd say that's a pretty fair assessment," he answered with a small smile and watched as *Sean* moved closer to him.

"Well, here's to another 'I've never'," *Sean* said before leaning in and brushing a gentle kiss against the pale lips. "I enjoyed not only last night, but today as well. I just wanted you to know that."

"Me too," Thomas quietly admitted as he fought the urge to deepen the kiss, instead slowly stepping away from *Sean*. "See you around," he said before offering the other man a small smile and heading for the front door.

Dark eyes lightening to green, Chase realized exactly what Thomas had said. *See you around.*

Thomas had not given him the 'one time only' speech.

He wasn't sure what to make of that.

TIME did not lessen Chase's confusion. Two days later, he walked into his favorite clothing store, intent on keeping his promise to the infuriating blond. He knew what styles of shirts looked good, exceptional really, on Thomas's slender form and conveyed his wishes to the sales clerk. Unable to choose just one, Chase exited the store with a bag full of shirts he felt would compliment Thomas's pale features - black, silver, midnight blue, crimson, deep amethyst, and emerald green. The latter was chosen for his own selfish pleasure.

Throwing his purchases in the trunk of his car, he headed back to his apartment. Pouring himself a glass of wine, he climbed into his favorite chair, his mind a whirlwind of thoughts of what to do next.

There was something between them. Something special. He just had no idea what to do about it. As he looked out over the city, day faded into night, the light of the sun replaced by millions of sparkling multicolored lights.

Refilling his glass, Chase tried to be brutally honest with himself. Looking back, he realized that he should have seen this coming. He had felt a growing attachment for Thomas as both *Derek* and *Adrian*, but had ignored it. If he'd acknowledged the feelings, he would have had to put a stop to this crazy game - which would have meant giving up any future contact with Thomas. Instead, he'd become *Sean*. *Sean's* persona was as close to his own as he could get without giving himself away. Not surprisingly, the pull he felt for Thomas had been even stronger as *Sean*. Not just when they were fucking, though that had been amazing, but sitting across from Thomas the morning after, discussing the pros and cons of the clubbing scene. One, he could rationalize, but the other... it meant something more.

Chase suspected that he wasn't the only one having conflicting feelings. Thomas could have easily turned down Sean's invitation to stay for breakfast and sent a clear message with his 'one time only' speech, but he hadn't. The blond had actually said, 'I'll see you around.' Could Thomas feel the same way? Chase wished he knew.

Deciding that he had a natural way to find out, without revealing his own hand, Chase moved to his desk and pulled out a piece of blank stationary. A multitude of words ran through his mind as he tried to compose the perfect turn of phrase. It was risky, what he was about to do, but he had to know. What Thomas had NOT said gave him courage and the perfect opening.

With a determined breath, Chase put pen to paper.

Please accept the attached gift with my sincerest apologies - for the destruction of your shirt, not the end result.

To go along with this gift, I would like to extend an invitation for dinner this Thursday evening. Nothing formal. You've seen the kitchen. I know it's short notice, but I feel the need to make amends for my hasty actions. My number and address are on the back of this card in the event that you've forgotten the way.

And in case you were wondering – yes, this is another “I’ve never” I can strike off my list.

Sean McKenzie

Before he could change his mind, Chase quickly folded the note and slid it into the envelope. Lifting the phone, he called for a courier to deliver it. If his sister knew what he was up to, she'd lock him away somewhere, for 'his own good.' She'd warned him time and time again that at some point, someone was going to catch on to his charade and his games were going to backfire on

him. Truth be told, Chase was surprised it had taken this long for her predictions to come true.

THURSDAY morning dawned with a sky full of gray, low hanging clouds that promised a thorough drenching at any moment. As Chase dressed for work, he wondered if it was an omen. He had yet to hear anything from Thomas. Running long fingers through his unruly hair, his hand settled on the back of his neck, a sure sign of frustration. He should have known. Even without the words, he should have known that Thomas would still play by his 'one time only' rule. By offering the dinner invitation, Chase had just set himself up for disappointment. Maybe having his gift and invitation completely ignored would allow him to break free of the invisible hold Thomas Bradford appeared to have over him. Nothing else had seemed to work. Certainly, continuing to pursue his arch rival defied all logic and common sense.

Depositing his empty coffee cup into the sink, he jumped when his cell phone beeped on the kitchen counter. Text message. His heart pounded in his chest. Thomas? Taking a deep breath to steady his hands, he lifted the phone and flipped it open.

See you at seven.

Chase's pulse raced. Glancing out the window, he watched a beam of sun break through the dark clouds, swirling rainbows across his kitchen as it reflected through the raindrops on the glass. He grinned. Definitely an omen.

STANDING in front of the cook-top stirring the pasta sauce, Chase watched it thicken as it simmered. Ziti boiled in another pot. He reached over and swirled it through the bubbling water. Returning his attention to the sauce, he dumped in the onion that he'd diced earlier and stirred, watching as the pieces disappeared into the thick white topping. Steam curled up from the pasta, coating the stove front with condensation and he lowered the heat a bit, watching the tender ziti roll and cook.

A jazz CD played in the background, its melodies familiar and soothing, which was what he needed right now. While ecstatic that Thomas had just broken another of his rules, he didn't want to get his hopes up too high. It was just dinner, he reminded himself, but in the back of his mind, he was secretly hoping for a generous portion of Thomas Bradford for dessert.

His cock stirred inside the low-riding cargo pants he was wearing as he thought of laying Thomas out on the table and... No, don't go there, Chase, he warned himself. It's just dinner, nothing more.

The doorbell rang a slow, deep tune and Chase tensed, knowing exactly who was on the other side of the door. Why had this seemed like a good idea? Checking the fire under both pots, he *changed* as he walked toward the front door to greet his guest.

Thomas looked like he'd just stepped from the pages of a men's fashion magazine. He was immaculately dressed in a pair of navy pleated wool-gabardine pants and burgundy plaid poplin shirt, not a hair out of place. The blond's hands gripped two bottles of wine, only the white of his knuckles revealing that Chase wasn't the only one who was nervous.

"I brought wine," Thomas said, lifting the two bottles he was holding to eye level. "I wasn't sure what you had planned for dinner so I brought one that works with almost anything."

Sean nodded and took the proffered gifts. "Thanks. Come on in," he said and then stepped aside, pressing his back against the door, allowing Thomas to enter. "Dinner is almost ready if you want to come sit with me in the kitchen," he offered as he closed the door and headed back, setting the bottles on the table.

Peering into the steaming pots, Thomas opened the bottle of Chardonnay. Next time he'd bring some of the '99 Saint Veran he had at home. Going through the familiar routine of opening the foil and removing the cork, Thomas wondered about the direction of his thoughts. He shouldn't even be here now, let alone be thinking about a next time. Pushing all the conflicting thoughts to the back of his mind, he filled two glasses that *Sean* had set on the table, turning to offer one to his host. *Sean* looked up as

Thomas extended the glass, smiling as he poured the sauce over the pasta. The blond's pulse jumped. Oh, he was in serious trouble.

Food served, the two men moved to the solid oak table, taking their seats. Thomas filled his plate, lifting a fork full of pasta to his mouth. He was pleasantly surprised to find that *Sean* was an excellent cook, a trait that didn't match the club hopping party boy persona that had been Thomas's first impression. He frowned. Normally an excellent judge of character, Thomas didn't like being wrong. There was something about *Sean* that sent conflicting signals.

"Thank you for the gift, even though you didn't have to," Thomas said, looking up from his plate.

"You're welcome, but I was only following ord--"

Thomas interrupted *Sean* before he could get too far. "Yes, I know what I said, but before I left, I said you needn't bother."

"No, you said for me to do what I wanted," *Sean* said with a grin that left little doubt as to what he wanted.

"I meant about the shirt," Thomas said pointedly.

"I knew exactly what you meant."

"Then why did you..." he trailed off, not really wanting to finish that sentence but at the same time wanting to know.

"Why did I kiss you again?" the brunette teased. "Several reasons. Because I wanted to. Because I could. Because I didn't want you to leave just yet. Take your pick."

A pleasant tingle spiraled out from Thomas's stomach. Not wanting to think about why *Sean's* words caused such a strong reaction, he quickly changed topics and the two men spent the rest of the meal talking about everything from sports to politics.

"That was really good," Thomas said a little while later as he took one last bite and pushed his plate away.

"Thank you," *Sean* answered, slightly amused. Standing, he started to clear the table. "It surprises you that I can cook," he stated.

"I guess so. I can toast a bagel and open a bottle of wine, but for more than that, I go out. Need some help?" Thomas offered as he leaned back in his chair and sipped his wine.

"No thanks. Won't take but a couple of minutes to load the dishwasher."

By the time *Sean* had the dishes rinsed, Thomas was gone. Picking up his wine glass and turning off the lights, he went in search of his missing guest. The apartment wasn't large so there were only a few places Thomas could be. *Sean* was somewhat disappointed to find him lounging against the porch railing, looking out over the city. He'd have much rather found him sprawled naked across his bed, but he hoped to rectify that before too long.

"It's beautiful here. So peaceful," Thomas offered as *Sean* joined him.

"Precisely why I chose it. I'm willing to bet the view from your place is magnificent. You don't strike me as the type that settles for second best," *Sean* said, taking a sip of his wine.

"It is," Thomas offered as he caught *Sean* looking at him. "What?"

"Nothing. Just trying to figure out what the protocol is for a second meeting."

"A delicious dinner and then a marathon of hot sex," Thomas suggested, moving closer, their bodies scant inches apart.

"You were invited to dinner, nothing more," *Sean* said. "I like your idea of dessert, but I don't want you to think getting you in bed was my only intention. I don't normally do second dates so this is all new to me."

"It's all new to me as well. And for the record, dinner I can get anywhere," Thomas informed the other man as he reached up and traced the outline of *Sean's* lower lip.

"Sex you can get anywhere as well," *Sean* added.

Thomas grinned. "True, but you, on the other hand... Tonight I wanted dinner and sex with you," he stated, his voice barely above a whisper.

Sean's stomach clenched with need for the man standing in front of him. He raised his hand to Thomas's face, brushing a strand of blond hair away from the storm gray eyes, a thumb caressing his cheekbone. Unable to wait any longer, *Sean* leaned in and brushed his lips against Thomas's. He carefully set his wine glass on the patio table, avoiding spilling its contents all over Thomas as the kiss deepened. An unbidden image came to mind of Thomas laid out before him, the golden wine running in rivulets over pale skin, *Sean's* tongue collecting each and every droplet. He groaned into Thomas's mouth and pressed his erection against the other man, pleased to find matching evidence of the blond's arousal.

Thomas slowed the kiss, setting his own wine glass down. Backing the brunette into the apartment, his fingers worked the buttons free on his shirt, lust-filled eyes never leaving *Sean's* as he walked them towards the bedroom.

"Thomas, stop," *Sean* said.

Long, elegant fingers paused on the third button. "Why?"

"Because I want to do it," *Sean* said. "Last time, I ripped your shirt to shreds. I want to do it right this time."

The next button slid through the buttonhole. Thomas shook his head, his blond hair caressing his neck. "I'm not sure I can trust you," he teased. Thomas turned the corner, almost to *Sean's* bedroom. "Last time, you destroyed my shirt."

"And I bought you six in return!" *Sean* objected, his body vibrating with need from the tantalizing striptease.

"Not my fault. I said you owed me 'a' shirt, not an entire rack," Thomas said as he reached for his belt and unbuckled the piece of leather. He pulled it through the belt loops, dropping it on the floor, his fingers pausing at the button of his pants.

“Fuck,” *Sean* swore softly as Thomas’s body brushed against his, continuing to drive him towards the bed. A few more steps and the backs of *Sean*’s legs hit the mattress.

Thomas watched as *Sean*’s eyes went from swirling with want and need to glinting with determination. Grabbed firmly by the hips, he suddenly found himself spun onto the bed and pinned underneath the solid weight of *Sean*’s body.

“You fucking tease,” *Sean* said as he grabbed Thomas’s hands and pinned them above his head, his lips descending on the blond’s. Locking Thomas’s wrists together, he held them securely in his left hand, his right hand moving down Thomas’s torso, blunt nails scraping across his left nipple before moving farther down to unbutton the two remaining buttons of his shirt.

Thomas felt the calloused fingers at his waist lowering his zipper and then *Sean*’s fingers were delving beneath the elastic band of his boxers, stroking the heated flesh to full hardness. Thomas moaned into *Sean*’s mouth as he bucked his hips upwards, begging for more.

Sean broke the kiss long enough to whisper, “Now it’s my turn,” before latching onto the pale skin of Thomas’s neck, his hand still working the swollen flesh.

The blond writhed under *Sean*’s expert touch, his hips moving quickly as he felt his orgasm build to the brink of release.

Sean felt every muscle in Thomas’s body begin to tremble and gripped the base of his shaft tightly, preventing his release.

“You sadistic bastard,” Thomas cried out. “Finish me!”

Sean kissed Thomas’s neck. “Two can play the teasing game,” *Sean* said as he nipped at the disgruntled man’s earlobe.

“You will pay for this, *McKenzie*,” Thomas panted.

“Looking forward to it, Bradford,” *Sean* retorted, releasing Thomas’s shaft to completely undress the lithe body beneath him. Stepping back, he quickly shed his own clothes, reaching into the bedside table to retrieve a condom. Instead of covering his own erection with it, he rolled it down Thomas’s shaft.

“What...” was all Thomas managed to say before *Sean* straddled his hips, his right hand reaching behind him to grasp the upstanding rod.

“Wait, *Sean*! You need to...” Thomas objected as he watched his cock disappear easily into *Sean*’s obviously prepared body.

Sean groaned as Thomas’s length slowly filled him. “Already taken care of,” he confirmed, lowering his lips to Thomas’s. His tongue delved into the panting mouth in search of its mate.

“Sneaky bastard,” Thomas moaned when their lips parted.

“Undoubtedly. Now I think you promised to make me pay?” *Sean* taunted against the kiss-swollen lips, mentally bracing himself for the punishment he was about to receive.

“With pleasure,” the blond stated, immediately rolling them over. Pushing *Sean*’s legs back against his body, he proceeded to pummel the receptive body.

Sean moaned, writhing under the unrestrained fucking. He had already seen the tender side of Thomas’s passion and now he wanted the animal side, the wild, untamed beast breaking through the blond’s normally reserved facade. Over and over, Thomas thrust into his eager body, nonsensical words and phrases tumbling from his mouth.

Thomas felt the rush of impending orgasm for the second time and fell headlong into it, his rhythm faltering as spasms racked his body, his seed unfurling inside the body below him. Never a selfish lover, he quickly slid from *Sean*’s passage and lowered his head, sucking *Sean*’s weeping shaft deep into his throat. That was all the stimulation it took and the brunette came with a scream. Thomas took everything *Sean* had to offer without spilling a drop, collapsing in a heap next to *Sean*. His labored breathing slowed, his tongue tingling with the taste of his lover.

Sean brushed the sweat-soaked strands of blond hair from Thomas’s flushed face, his finger trailing over high cheekbones, caressing the swollen lips. “Thomas?” he said quietly.

“Hmm,” the sated blond answered, straining to open heavy eyelids.

“Feel free to punish me like that anytime you like,” *Sean* said with a grin before stealing a kiss.

“Next time you might not like it,” Thomas said, curling closer to *Sean’s* side.

“As long as there’s a next time, I’ll like it,” *Sean* said, hoping he hadn’t just pushed too far.

Thomas’s hot breath brushed against *Sean’s* neck. The blond placed a kiss on the heated skin. “Anything is possible, As much as I hate to do this, I need to go. I have an early appointment tomorrow and need to take care of a few things tonight to get ready,” he said as he slowly pulled away.

Sean sat up, trying unsuccessfully to read Thomas’s face. He climbed out of bed as Thomas was dressing. Pulling on his cargo pants, he closed the distance between them, stepping into Thomas’s personal space. “Anything I can do to change your mind?” he asked, lifting Thomas’s hand and kissing the palm.

“I’m sure there are plenty of things you could do to change my mind,” Thomas sighed, cupping *Sean’s* cheek. “But I really have to go.” Leaning in, he captured *Sean’s* lips with his own. The passion rose instantly between them. Before things could get out of hand, Thomas broke the kiss. “*Sean*, you’re making this very difficult,” he admitted.

“Good. Punish me again,” *Sean* teased, earning a loud groan from Thomas who stepped away from the temptation reluctantly.

“As inviting as that sounds, I have to decline,” the blond said as he took *Sean’s* hand in his. “Walk me to the front door. Are you still planning to attend the grand opening of Xcape Saturday night?” Thomas asked as he pulled *Sean* into one last embrace.

The brunette nodded. “I’ll be there. What about you?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Thomas said before placing a light kiss on *Sean’s* lips. “So I’ll see you Saturday night then. Thanks again for the shirts and dinner.”

Sean stepped away. “You’re quite welcome and I enjoyed it. Especially the dessert. See you Saturday.”

The door closed behind Thomas and Chase turned, smiling as he pushed his fingers through his messy black hair. Retrieving their forgotten wine glasses from the balcony, he rinsed them out and placed them in the sink. Saturday. Apparently a second date was going to turn into a third.

Once back in the bedroom, Chase shucked his pants and crawled into bed. He could still smell Thomas's scent lingering on the sheets and pulling a pillow to his face, he breathed deeply. Sex and Thomas Bradford – a very lethal combination, Chase thought as he turned the lights out and drifted off to sleep.

CLUB XCAPE was everything Thomas had heard and more. The upper level had a railed balcony that overlooked the dance floor below, a set of transparent stairs situated at each end with dancing platforms at multiple levels. Tables, chairs and couches dotted the area across the back, giving patrons a place to 'get away from it all and get comfortable'. On the lower level, a bar covered the back wall with tables and chairs situated in front and to the sides. Two-dozen high-backed, half-circular booths flanked the dance floor, providing more seating for the patrons.

As Thomas descended the staircase, he once again scanned the area for a familiar crown of dark curls. As much as he hated to admit it, he was looking forward to seeing *Sean* again, if the man ever showed up. He had finally come to terms with the fact that he liked spending time with him, both in bed and out – something he wasn't quite sure what to do with yet.

The impromptu breakfast they had shared that first morning had been somewhat of a strain, never having been in that situation before. Dinner later that week had been easier, the two finally finding their footing, although it was still a bit shaky. He wondered what tonight would bring.

Lost in his search, the blond failed to see the young man ascending the stairs and Thomas bumped into him. His pale arms automatically reached out to steady the smaller person.

"Sorry about that," the young man said as he quickly righted himself.

“No, I should apologize. I wasn’t...” Thomas’s words stalled as he recognized the man he was still supporting. His stomach clenched with desire as he looked into the vivid green eyes of the twink he had taken home several weeks ago. Catching himself staring, he quickly shook his head. “I’m sorry. I wasn’t watching where I was going.”

Adrian smiled and lifted a hand to Thomas’s cheek. “I was wondering if you would remember me,” he said as he moved to stand on the same step with Thomas.

Oh, Thomas remembered everything, no doubt about that. “Yes,” he said with a small smile. “I remember.”

“Have you found a companion for the evening? I’m available if you’re interested,” *Adrian* said, tilting his head provocatively as he pressed himself against Thomas’s side, a knowing hand sliding beneath the silver button-up to caress the toned stomach.

Thomas was surprised when he hesitated over the answer. A bird in the hand had always been his motto and he hadn’t even seen *Sean*, but he’d come to a point in his life where he actually had to think about his answer. Instead of focusing on the warm body pressed to his side in blatant invitation, he was thinking about someone else. Several questions popped into his mind. What if he took this young man up on his offer and *Sean* showed up? What if he turned him down and *Sean* didn’t show?

Despite the darkness on the stairs, *Adrian* watched the gray eyes closely and could almost read the indecision running through Thomas’s mind. If he had been faced with the same dilemma, he’d have had to stop and give it some serious thought as well – take what was being offered or pass in hopes that the one you wanted would show up at some point during the night. At least, Chase hoped Thomas was thinking about *Sean*.

Thomas reached up and cupped *Adrian*’s cheek, his thumb teasing the plump lower lip. “As much as it pains me to do this, I’m going to pass on your offer. I’m waiting for someone.”

Adrian’s green eyes widened with surprise. He had hoped that he would have Thomas one way or another tonight, either

as *Adrian* or as *Sean*, but the fact that he turned *Adrian* down in favor of *Sean* meant so much more. Chase's pulse jumped. "So someone has finally caught the attention of Thomas Bradford. He's one lucky man." *Adrian* leaned forward and pressed a light kiss to Thomas's lips. "I hope he realizes that."

The dark haired twink glided down the stairs leaving Thomas standing alone, his mind reeling with his decision to pass on a sure thing in favor of the unknown. How far out of his comfort zone was he going to step for *Sean McKenzie*? Again, his eyes scanned the crowd below in hopes that the one he wanted would suddenly appear. Turning, he walked back up the stairs to get a better look.

Adrian strolled confidently through the doors marked 'employees only', snatching a bag out of a row of metal lockers and ducking into a cubicle in the men's room. He'd learned at an early age that if you acted like you knew exactly what you were doing, no one ever questioned you. In the seventh grade, he had walked right into the teacher's lounge and taken the Biology final. All the teachers had assumed the science teacher had sent him on an errand to fetch something. Stripping out of *Adrian's* clothes, he stood naked, hair and eyes darkening as his face and body became *Sean*. Dressing in the clothes from the bag, he stuffed the smaller sizes away and walked back out the way he had come. Stepping back into the crowd, he went in search of Thomas, finding him on the upper level, staring over the railing.

"Looking for someone?" he asked. His voice, so near, startled Thomas.

Gray-blue eyes met brown. "Possibly," Thomas said with a grin as he gave *Sean* an appraising look. Black leather trousers topped with a crimson button-up hid the body Thomas craved. "But until I find them, you'll do."

"Thank you ever so much, Mr. Bradford," *Sean* said with a smirk.

Thomas ran his hand over the silk, pale fingers a stark contrast against the blood red of *Sean's* shirt. He felt the tiny

nub beneath the smooth fabric harden from his light touch. “For your information, I just turned down a very tempting offer.”

“Maybe you should have asked him to join us,” *Sean* teased as he removed the roaming hand and pressed himself against Thomas’s body. “I guess I should be honored that you thought I was worth waiting for,” he added, capturing the alluring lips in a sensual kiss that left both men wanting more.

The raucous club slid away as they lost themselves in the kiss. Thomas turned *Sean* so that the balcony railing pressed against his lower back, Thomas’s weight settling against the other man. The blond was used to doing what he wanted, when he wanted, and laying claim to *Sean’s* lips in front of anyone who cared to watch was what he had been craving since they’d made plans to meet at the club that night. Actually, he wanted more than that, but the other could wait until they reached the privacy of one of their homes. Something that was going to occur in the not too distant future if *Sean* kept rubbing up against him that way.

Sean felt the hard length pressing against his own swollen cock. He reveled in the fact that it was his to touch, that the man who was now sucking on his lower lip, his hips oh so slowly rolling against *Sean’s* own, was his lover. Thomas Bradford had waited for him to arrive. “If you don’t stop that,” *Sean* said, his hands stilling Thomas’s hips, “I won’t be responsible for my actions.”

Thomas drew back, pupils dilated, his eyes nearly black, as desire swept through his system. “Close to losing control, *McKenzie?*” he taunted.

“No more than you, Bradford,” *Sean* sneered, his hand cupping the blond’s erection and squeezing until his head dropped back with a moan.

Thomas surged forward, licking at the corners of *Sean’s* mouth. “Home, now, or I’ll be fucking you in a dark corner,” he confessed.

As much as *Sean* wanted to leave as badly as Thomas did, he pulled away. “Didn’t your mother teach you that good things

come to those who wait?"

"I'm an only child and used to getting what I want," Thomas said as he nipped at the smooth skin of *Sean's* neck. "And right now I want you naked - preferably under me with my cock buried in your tight ass."

Sean chuckled, his hips canting forward of their own accord. "Oh, we'll get naked, but since we've gone through all this trouble to get dressed up and meet here at this wonderful new club, why not enjoy it?"

"Because I already have what I came for?" Thomas suggested, his voice dripping sarcasm.

"Aw, come on, Thomas. Indulge me. We'll stay for a little while and then we'll go," *Sean* bargained. "I'll let you punish me when we get home."

"You enjoy me fucking you too much for it to be punishment," Thomas quipped, slapping *Sean's* ass, but he acquiesced. Chalk up another first. Usually it was a point of pride that he made the rules. "Half an hour, no more."

"Deal," *Sean* said, grinning as he took Thomas's hand and led him down to the stairs and onto the dance floor.

Time passed quickly as they danced and drank. Staking out a table at the edge of the dance floor, *Sean* and Thomas collected a group of several of *Sean's* friends. Stories and tall-tales flew back and forth like mis-aimed tennis serves, each person trying to one-up the other. Thomas listened carefully to each one, though he paid special attention to those involving *Sean*, trying to learn a bit more about the man who had captured his attention.

"Don't believe anything they say. They're just trying to impress you," *Sean* said, leaning in close, his warm breath teasing the shell of Thomas's ear.

The blond's eyes closed, swept away by a wave of lust.

"Thomas, dude, you okay?" Steve asked from across the table. "You went all funny there for a second."

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Thomas managed to choke out, reaching for his drink.

“*Sean*, what’d you do to him?”

Sean turned and looked at Thomas, noticing the way his lover was avoiding his gaze. He suspected what was going on and decided to see how far he could push the ice prince. *Sean* moved in close, his mouth almost touching Thomas’s ear. “Well, this is an interesting discovery, if I do say so myself. I bet that if I slid my hand beneath your shirt, your skin would be hot to the touch, your nipples drawn up into hard little buds. What would I find if I moved my hand lower? Are you hard for me?”

“Bastard,” Thomas mumbled into his glass.

True to his word, *Sean* slid his hand over the bulge in Thomas’s pants and pressed firmly, causing Thomas to whimper slightly. “Want me to take care of that for you? Want me to suck you off, right here at the table? Or maybe we can go upstairs and I’ll fuck you against the railing. No one would ever guess as we watch the dancers on the floor below.” *Sean* rubbed himself urgently against Thomas’s hip.

Desire flashed red hot in Thomas’s veins and he captured *Sean*’s lips in a searing kiss that left no question as to what he wanted. He tuned out everything around him, ignored the catcalls from *Sean*’s friends, and focused on pushing the other man to the brink. He groaned when *Sean* pulled back and put a few inches between them.

“Ready to make me pay for that?” he asked with a smirk.

Thomas’s pulse raced. “Ten times over, *McKenzie*. Gentlemen,” he said to the table at large, “thank you for an interesting evening. I think it’s time we take our leave.”

The two men rose from the table and then Thomas took *Sean*’s hand, leading him through the crowd towards the back of the club instead of the front.

Where in the hell were they... *Sean*’s train of thought stopped there as they approached the men’s restroom.

“Couldn’t wait until we got home?” *Sean* taunted the other man.

“You’re just begging for it, aren’t you?” Thomas shot back at him. “Winding me up like that in front of your friends.” He pushed *Sean* through the doorway ahead of him and glared at the few men who were washing up at the sinks. “Everyone out!”

Several heads turned their way, immediately recognizing Thomas Bradford. Hastily, they did as they were told, no questions asked. Once they were alone, Thomas locked the door and turned on *Sean*.

“You have less than ten seconds to drop your pants and brace yourself against the countertop. Don’t say a word and don’t move,” Thomas commanded as he started to open his pants.

Sean whimpered, hurrying to do Thomas’s bidding. The blond’s forceful side was extremely arousing. He did exactly as he was told. Hearing Thomas shuffling behind him, he looked up, watching the other man in the mirror. He saw Thomas slide a condom over his engorged cock, then open a silver sachet, applying gel to the latex before slicking his fingers with the remainder.

Sean closed his eyes and braced himself for what was coming next. With no warning, Thomas slid two fingers into his body, causing *Sean* to cry out at the sensation. Silver eyes met brown in the mirror and when Thomas detected no pain in the sienna gaze, he continued to breach and stretch the tight hole. As caught up in his passion as he was, hurting *Sean* in his rush was not an option.

After a rapid but thorough preparation, Thomas lined his cock up and pushed in. This was not going to take long, for either of them. Thomas had been hard from *Sean*’s previous teasing, and *Sean* was dealing with sensation overload from the dominant nature Thomas was exhibiting.

Over and over, Thomas plunged into the tight heat of *Sean*’s body, each thrust carrying him higher and higher on a wave of ecstasy. *Sean* wanted to touch himself, to push himself over the edge and end this exquisite torture, but trying desperately to

please his lover, he kept his hands firmly planted on the marble countertop as instructed.

Thomas felt his balls drawing up tight and increased the pace of his thrusts. Reaching around, he pumped *Sean's* cock several times, watching in the mirror as the other man fell apart with the tremendous force of his orgasm.

Literally. The brunette fell apart. Gone was *Sean McKenzie* and in his place, still wrapped snugly around Thomas's cock, was Chase Spencer.

Thomas gasped in horror and pulled out of the still-throbbing passage, his erection wilting in a matter of seconds.

"Thomas?" Chase queried when he felt the other man withdraw. Green eyes opened and registered the shocked look on his partner's face. "What... oh fuck," he muttered as he caught sight of his own reflection.

"You son of a bitch!" Thomas said, spinning Chase around and punching him square on the jaw. Chase fell back against the wall beside the washbasin. Thomas tore off the condom, throwing it carelessly towards the trash bin as he hurriedly dressed. "I knew you were a bastard, Spencer. But this? This is low for even you."

Chase gingerly touched the left side of his face, completely at a loss for words. What did you say when you knew that you'd fucked up? He'd known that he was playing with fire when he started this charade. Was it any surprise that he'd gotten burned in the process? He deserved the punch and more.

Thomas turned to leave, pausing with his hand on the door. "I'm going to say this one time and one time only. If word of this gets out, you and your entire family will be ruined. Are we clear?"

Chase nodded.

Thomas unlocked the door and disappeared into the club, abandoning Chase to his thoughts.

Chase knew he should have stopped after the first night with Thomas, but the blond's attention was like a drug. The more he

got, the more he wanted. Now it looked like he was going to have to go cold turkey.

Later that night, Chase lay in bed, alone and missing Thomas. He made a promise to himself. No more playing games. This debacle with Thomas had reinforced what his parents had tried to instill in him since childhood - every action has a consequence.

Chase had played for keeps and failed. Now he had to deal with the fallout.

“OKAY, little brother, enough with the long face and sad sighs. Spill,” Janae ordered as she joined Chase on the couch, handing him a freshly opened beer. The slender woman curled into the opposite corner, pulling her feet up underneath her body.

“Nothing to tell,” Chase replied morosely.

“Don’t play me, Chase Spencer. It’s a Saturday night and you’re at your sister’s house instead of out duping yet another unsuspecting fool. Something is definitely up. So spill it or I’ll have to resort to more serious interrogation techniques.”

Chase shivered, thinking of some of the ways his sister had coerced him while they were growing up. He took a deep draw of the amber liquid. Usually confiding in his sister was a relief. Janae knew about the games he played, but it was harder coming clean about his latest charade. Janae knew Thomas and his family. Chase had no doubt what her opinion was going to be - that Chase was an idiot for even entertaining the idea and that nothing good ever comes from revenge, no matter how utterly fuckable the target is.

Even knowing she was going to blast him, Chase knew he needed to talk about it. The voices in his head were driving him crazy, and if he couldn’t talk to his sister and best friend, who could he confide in?

Rising from the couch, Chase walked over to the patio door and peered out into the night, the darkness matching what he felt inside.

“In a nutshell, I fucked up. You know how I’ve always avoided romantic entanglements by sticking to my number one rule of never sleeping with the same person twice.” Chase turned and looked at Janae, who nodded in gentle encouragement. “I’ve been with one guy five times in the last two weeks.”

Janae smiled. “But that’s great. I always knew it would happen eventually. You’ve finally found someone that you care—”

“It’s Thomas Bradford.”

Janae choked on her beer. After taking a few moments to catch her breath, she finally managed to splutter, “You... you and Thomas Bradford... did I just hear you right?”

Chase nodded.

“Have you lost your fucking mind?” she fairly shouted.

“Apparently so.”

“You’ve got some serious explaining to do, little brother,” Janae said as she leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees.

Another nod. “I ran into him at a club. I was out as *Derek*. There was a spark of attraction and I saw a way to have a little revenge. You know how things have been between us since we were kids, so I figured what the hell. *Derek* picked him up and we ended up back at his place. I honestly thought that would be it. But the next weekend, Thomas found *Adrian*.”

Janae sighed. She knew each and every one of her brother’s personas and knew what that meant. “Thomas found *Adrian*, or *Adrian* found Thomas? Couldn’t say no, could you?”

“I thought about it. I could have walked off that dance floor and found someone else, but something inside wouldn’t let me pass up another chance to fuck him over.”

“Somehow I can’t picture *Adrian* topping,” Janae snorted.

Emerald eyes narrowed. “You know what I mean,” he said, walking back to the couch. “Anyway, that night... something... happened. I honestly thought that I just didn’t have it in me to feel anything deeper than lust, but Thomas...” Chase shook his head. “Anyway, once I got home, I decided that it couldn’t happen again.”

Janae leaned back and relaxed into the leather, taking another pull from her bottle of beer. “That was two. You said five.”

“I didn’t go looking for him again. Honest. But a couple of weeks later, I, or rather *Sean*, ran into him at the Atlantian. He didn’t see me at first and I didn’t approach him,” Chase hastened to add. “But as he was leaving, our eyes connected. One thing led to another and he woke up in my bed the next morning.”

“Oh, shit,” Janae mumbled, realizing all that comment entailed. Her brother didn’t invite his *friends* to sleep over. They were lucky to make it back to his apartment, let alone into his bed.

“Yeah, oh, shit. But the really strange part is that it didn’t bother me. In fact, I didn’t want him to leave. I even invited him to stay for breakfast,” Chase admitted.

Janae shook her head in disbelief. “Only you, Chase. Only you would choose to finally open your heart to the man who made your childhood a living hell. You’re not done yet, are you?” she guessed.

“Almost.” Chase cringed. “I invited him over for dinner one night and then we met up at a club a couple of nights later. That’s the night that it all blew up in my face.”

“Someone tell him the truth?”

“He saw it with his own two eyes.”

Janae knew there was only one way that Chase lost control over his Changing ability.

“That good, huh?”

“Mind blowing doesn’t even begin to describe it.” Chase couldn’t help but smile as he remembered Thomas’s complete dominance and the cataclysmic orgasm. “I didn’t even have the chance to enjoy it. The second he saw my face, he punched me.”

“Ouch,” his sister said with a wince. “So then what happened?”

“He left. I haven’t seen him since,” he stated.

“Has he been avoiding the clubs, too? That could be a good sign.”

Chase shrugged. “I haven’t been out.”

Janae knew her brother well enough to read between the lines. “You really fell hard, didn’t you?”

Chase nodded. “It’s too little too late, but I made a promise to myself that I’m not going to play games anymore.”

“So go out as yourself. There are plenty—” Janae started but Chase interrupted her.

“I can’t. Not right now, J. Even after *Adrian*, when I was trying to stay away from him, I couldn’t get him out of my mind. Every guy I talked to, I compared to him. I ended up fucking people just because they looked completely different than he did. I don’t want to do that again. I’m just better on my own for a little while.”

Janae reached out and took her brother’s hand. “For what it’s worth, I’m sorry.”

Chase linked their fingers together. “I knew that second night that this was going to end badly, but I couldn’t make myself give him up.”

“Have you tried talking to him, tried to explain everything?”

Chase snorted. “Yeah, I can hear that conversation. Thomas, I know you’ve hated my guts for well over a decade, but do you think you might overlook the fact I duped you with my Changing ability and give a real relationship a chance? That’ll go over like a lead balloon. No, I think we’ll stick with the

original ending. The beautiful prince can ride off into the sunset and the magical troll will get over it.”

“You are not a troll,” his sister stated firmly, though Chase noted she didn’t argue about his characterization of Thomas as a beautiful prince.

He sighed. “I’ll be okay, eventually.”

“I know,” Janae said, her fingers brushing through the messy black spikes. “I just hate to see you hurting.” Silently, she hoped that Thomas hadn’t taken so much of her brother’s heart that there would be nothing left for Chase to offer someone else.

THOMAS had attended several functions at the well-known Ashton Gardens over the years and was inured to the extravagance that surrounded him. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooked an illuminated courtyard and the private 20-acre forest beyond. Austrian crystal chandeliers above coupled with candlelit centerpieces gracing each linen-covered dinner table, created the perfect romantic atmosphere for the wedding reception celebrating the union of Jennifer Whitworth and Kevin Hadley.

The couple’s nuptials had been touted as the event of the season by not only the press, but the business world as well. Thomas had met both the bride and groom at several other functions, thanks to his father’s business dealings. They were more acquaintances than friends, but Thomas was judging relationships on a different scale than he had been a month ago. Either way, to miss this particular event would be social suicide with long-ranging political implications for his father’s business, and a Bradford learned early on that nothing was as important as the family business - not illness and certainly not a broken heart.

The wedding ceremony had been held in the Grand Ballroom with the guests being ushered into the Palm Room for cocktails and hors d’oeuvres while the wedding party finished their photo shoot. Playing the dutiful son, Thomas followed in his parent’s wake, forcing a smile as he greeted business

acquaintances and their families. He couldn't quite manage polite small talk, so he always moved on quickly.

Catching a glimpse of coal black hair that looked like it had been styled with an egg beater, Thomas's gut clenched. On a conscious level, he knew that the Spencers would be in attendance. It was expected. He had convinced himself that he could push Chase to the back of his mind and just ignore his presence. The knot in his stomach and tightness in his throat made mockery of that assumption. He wasn't sure why he'd thought facing the man that had sent his life into a tailspin was going to be bearable. Chase Spencer was never far from his thoughts and seeing him in the flesh was like prodding an open wound.

The blond started as an unexpected hand gripped his arm. "You are standing in the middle of the room, staring into space, darling," his mother's genteel tones sounded quietly in his ear.

Smiling like he knew he should, Thomas turned and looked into a concerned set of eyes as gray as his. "Sorry, Mother."

"Come. Let's find a quiet corner," Eva Bradford suggested.

Nabbing two glasses of champagne from a passing waiter, the striking couple wound their way through the tables, choosing a tufted settee partially shielded by a large palm. "Now tell me what's wrong," Eva prompted gently.

A burst of raucous laughter caught Thomas's attention, drawing his eyes to two men in their mid-fifties. Everything about them was polar opposites: their hair soot black and moonlight blond, their skin tanned and pale, one tall and slender, the other short and stocky. But no matter how hard he stared, the scene didn't change. There in the center of the room and currently the center of attention stood his father and David Spencer, acting like lifelong best friends.

Thomas's eyes widened as he tried to make sense of what he was seeing. "Mom... what...?"

Eva smiled fondly. "Those two and their games. I never know if an evening is going to be a glaring contest or filled with

laughter. Given the happy occasion, I'm glad it's the latter - it fits in better."

"But how... when...?" Thomas ungracefully stuttered, stopping to take a deep breath. "What I mean is how long has this been going on? I thought they were always at each other's throats."

"Appearances can be deceiving," Eva explained, her hand resting on her son's leg.

Those words hit a little too close to home and Thomas cast a surreptitious glance around the room, zeroing in on the young man who made his pulse race. He knew that one from recent experience.

"They've always had a love/hate relationship, as far back as I can remember. And trust me when I say that the nights of glaring daggers at each other far outweigh the ones filled with laughter. Still, it's nice when those two decide to play nice for the evening. Makes both Crystal's and my life easier for that small stretch of time."

Thomas tried to assimilate the latest addition to his out of kilter world. "If they've been friends all this time, why...?" He paused, his eyes flicking from his mother to Chase and back. "For as long as I can remember, Dad was always taunting me with Chase Spencer's accomplishments, pushing me harder to do better than him, pointing out his flaws, encouraging my dislike of him. Why?"

Eva's eyes softened. "To say that your father is competitive would be the world's biggest understatement and we all tend to repel those too much like us - just like two positive ends of magnets push away from each other. Tom probably just assumed that you and Chase would be just like him and David. Neither one would have gotten as far without the other driving him on. Yes, there is tension, but there is also a healthy dose of respect. I'd even go so far to call them friends, but if you repeat it, I'll deny saying it."

Thomas made no effort to hide the fact that he was openly staring at the younger Spencer, now.

Eva got his attention by moving her hand to his arm. “We never intended to start a family feud. I tried to stop your father from encouraging your competition early on. It felt destructive to me, but he saw it differently. He was convinced that the two of you would find your own equilibrium and would bring out the best in each other, just like he and David did.”

A sudden thought crossed Thomas’s mind. “Did you know that Spencers are Changelings? Did that influence Dad?”

“You know, son, I’ve long suspected that there might be something in their past. You know that they were in boarding school together. I’m sure David got up to his share of mischief with his talent, but every time I’ve asked, your father’s answer is always the same – a big, resounding no. Your father and David Spencer are driven by the need to succeed and it just so happened that they found a kindred spirit in one other.”

Thomas nodded thoughtfully, his mind racing. He needed to find someplace quiet, someplace he could think without the distracting presence of Chase Spencer in the background. People were still milling about waiting for dinner to be called, so he could reasonably escape for a few minutes. Excusing himself from his mother, he placed a quick kiss on her cheek and slipped out of the room.

JANAE had been watching her brother throughout the wedding. The naked longing on Chase’s face when he first spotted Thomas confirmed just how deeply her brother had fallen. He’d confessed his feelings that night in her apartment, but hearing it and seeing it were completely different. She had no doubt that this was something he wasn’t going to ‘get over’, which left her with only one thing to do.

She walked over to her brother’s side. “Go to him, Chase. Apologize and tell him everything.”

“I can’t,” he said quietly.

“Yes, you can. In fact, you have to,” Janae said, giving him a gentle push. “I’ll be right here if you need me.”

Chase sighed. He knew his sister was right. She was always right. Even when he didn't like what she was saying, he could always rely on Janae to center him. This situation with Thomas was no different, although he had been fighting it with everything he had. He reached out and squeezed her hand. "Promise?"

"Have I ever let you down?" she asked as she squeezed back, watching as Chase left the room through the same door that Thomas had ducked out of earlier.

THOMAS wandered the grounds aimlessly, his mind still trying to absorb the fact that his father and Chase's were not the mortal enemies they proclaimed to be, and that his mother had tried to step in and intervene on his behalf when he was younger. It made him wonder if things would be different if his father had not pushed him like he had. Could he and Chase have been friends? If they had met under different circumstances, could they have been more? He had certainly felt an instant affinity to *Sean McKenzie*, both in and out of bed. It made him wonder how much of Chase changed when his looks did.

Like his mind had conjured him, Thomas looked up to find the object of his thoughts in front of him, hands resting on the balcony railing, looking out into the night. A rush of longing flooded his system as he fought the urge to join him, instead opting to observe him from his secluded spot on the porch. The night was warm and Chase had removed his suit jacket, rolling the sleeves of his dress shirt up his forearms, the starch white of the shirt setting off Chase's tan skin perfectly in the moonlight. The pants were snug across the brunette's backside and Thomas's cock started to swell.

"You can stop lurking. I know you're there," Chase said, his voice unnaturally hushed. He didn't have to turn around to feel Thomas standing a few feet behind him. All evening he had been aware of Thomas's presence, no matter where the other man had been. It was like he had radar when it came to the handsome blond.

Thomas's eyebrows rose in surprise. "How did you know I was here?" he asked, pushing away from the wall and slowly approaching the other man.

"I guess some would say that it is part of my gift. Though where you and I are concerned, I'd say it's more like a curse," Chase offered.

Now Thomas was confused. "What do you mean?"

Emerald eyes turned to the blond standing beside him. "Why are you talking to me? Or is it just a ruse to get close enough to deck me again?"

Thomas chuckled quietly. "No. I'm just trying to carry on a conversation."

"Why?" Chase asked warily.

"Because I want to? Because I can?" Thomas threw back an abbreviated version of his conversation with *Sean*. "Isn't that *Sean's* motto?"

Chase turned around, resting his backside against the marble railing. "Let me guess, your next question will be, 'Why did I do it?'"

Thomas nodded. "And you'd be correct. So?"

"Truth?"

"If you can manage it."

Chase grimaced, but knew he deserved the jibe. "Growing up, I felt like I was always in your shadow. No matter what I did, or how well I did it, I always came in second to you. Not a day went by that my father didn't mention your name, or something you had accomplished, and I began to hate you. When the opportunity to screw you over presented itself, I took it."

"Literally," Thomas added, though there was no malice in his voice.

"Yeah," Chase said with a grin. "My sister always said that one of these days the games I played would backfire."

“You’ve done this before?” the blond asked.

Chase shook his head. “Not like you mean. I’ve never used my changing ability to have sex with someone I knew. I’ll tell you what she meant if you’ll tell me why you’re playing nice all of a sudden. I had the definite impression the last time we were together that you were through with me - in all my forms.”

Thomas took a deep breath. “I had a very interesting conversation with my mother earlier. It seems that our fathers aren’t the enemies they claim to be. They seem to fight more because they enjoy it than because they dislike each other. I watched them tonight laughing like old golfing buddies,” he said, motioning to the building with a nod of his head. “Seeing them together like that threw me. It made me wonder if we hadn’t been brought up the way we were, would we have been friends?”

“I guess we’ll never know,” Chase said with a slight shrug.

“Guess not. So explain the game comment you made earlier,” Thomas said.

“You sure you want to know?” Chase’s pulse raced. All this talking made him hopeful that Thomas might not be as out of reach as he had thought.

Thomas nodded.

“Long story short, as soon as I reached legal drinking age, I would *change* and go out to pick up men,” Chase explained. “Each person I turned into had different traits, different wants and needs, so it was a way I could enjoy the different aspects of sex. I had personas who were dominant, some who were submissive, some who enjoyed a little bondage, and a few who actually liked the tender side of sex. Before you ask, *Sean* was one who enjoyed it all.”

Several months ago, Thomas would have sworn that he and Chase Spencer were incapable of carrying on a civil conversation - let alone one about sex. After the betrayal he felt watching *Sean* dissolve into Chase, he would have bet his family fortune that they would never speak again. Yet here he

was, listening and hopeful that Chase's explanation would make a difference. Something about this man made him act in ways completely alien to his nature. "Interesting," Thomas admitted honestly. "It sounds like the ideal set up - a guarantee of no strings affairs and you certainly managed to get back at me. So why so glum?"

Chase panicked. Thomas wasn't getting what he was trying to say at all. "Don't you get it? That's NOT what I want. I haven't *changed* since the night you decked me."

Blond eyebrows drew together. "Why not?"

Taking a deep breath, Chase finally decided to take Janae's advice and go for broke. "Because that night I hurt someone I had come to care about. It wasn't a game anymore, and it sure as hell wasn't about revenge. I just didn't think there was anyway you'd want to be with me."

Thomas started to say something but Chase cut him off. "Wait! There is one more thing I need to get out. *Sean* wasn't the only one I had *changed* into with you. There were two others, as well."

Now the blond eyebrows rose in surprise. "You're kidding!"

Thomas had never seen someone truly *change* before. When Chase had suddenly appeared that night, Thomas's mind had been focused on the pleasure of fucking *Sean*. He didn't see the actual change, just the end results. To see it happen was an interesting sight. One moment Chase Spencer was standing before him, then the image became distorted, like looking at something on the bottom of a swimming pool, and in the next instant, someone new was standing there.

Gray eyes widened as Thomas came face to face with *Derek*, the man who had played his body so expertly. "I remember you," he admitted.

"That was the first time I *changed* with you. Well actually I was out as *Derek* and just happened to run into you. *Adrian* was the second," he said, as he *changed* again, this time into

Adrian's persona. The dress shirt that was tailored to fit Chase hung on the much smaller frame, making him appear waifish.

Thomas's sudden inhalation caused *Adrian* to smile. "You remember me as well, don't you?"

Thomas nodded. "You tried to pick me up that last night. Hedging your bets?"

Adrian changed into *Sean*. "I was going to have you one way or another that night. Just wanted to see which one you preferred," he said before *changing* back to himself.

Thomas's mind was spinning. His night with *Derek* had been interesting, but *Adrian*? *Adrian* had made him seriously rethink his no repeat rule, a rule he had chucked out the window when met *Sean*. All three had been amazing in their own way.

"So why did you stick with *Sean*? Why not just change your appearance again if you weren't through fucking me over?" Thomas asked.

"The changing was never about getting back at you, though I told myself it was - it was about wanting to be with you. After that first night with *Derek*, I couldn't get you out of my mind. I had to be with you again. I didn't even know you were in the club the night I was *Adrian*. You found me, remember? I told myself that I should say 'no' and walk away, but I couldn't turn down the chance to be with you again. Something happened that night with *Adrian*, something that I didn't think would ever happen to me."

Chase turned away and looked back into the dark night. "A Changeling instinctively knows when they've met someone compatible. There's an awareness where the other person is concerned, and it's heightened if strong emotions are involved. The night you were with *Adrian*, I felt it. Something inside me recognized you. Up to that point, I had purposely avoided situations that might lead to the recognition of a mate. One of the reasons for my own 'one time only' rule." He looked back at Thomas. "I was looking for you the night I changed into *Sean*, and I picked him on purpose because he's as close to the real me as I could get without giving it all away. I knew the precise

moment you walked into the room tonight, just as I knew you were standing behind me earlier.”

“That would be the gift you were referring to earlier, right?” At Chase’s nod, Thomas continued. “And now that you’re you, is it worse than it was as *Adrian* and *Sean*?”

“Much, but not because I’m me. I’m always me. Changing only alters the outside. It’s killing me because I know I fucked up something that had the potential to be incredibly special.”

Thomas listened not only to Chase’s confession, but the way he had declared his feelings, and realized that the other man really did care for him. Maybe it was time for him to make a confession of his own.

“What would you say if I told you I haven’t been with anyone since that night?”

“Have you?” Chase asked, his voice reflecting his hope.

“No,” Thomas answered honestly. “I went out with the intention of fucking you out of my system, but I couldn’t find it in myself to pick anyone up. I think *Adrian* had it right that night. It seems that someone HAS caught my attention,” he said as he slid his hand forward on the railing and brushed his thumb across the soft skin on the back of Chase’s hand.

Chase felt the world melt away as Thomas touched him. Such a simple thing, the brush of a thumb against his skin, but it was so much more. It was the confirmation that he was hoping for, that he hadn’t completely screwed things up beyond all repair. Unable to resist trying for a stronger connection, he linked their fingers together.

Thomas slowly lifted his right hand and brushed Chase’s cheek with the back of long fingers before they inched their way into Chase’s ebony locks, his thumb caressing his cheekbone.

“Just make me a promise,” the blond whispered.

Chase’s gaze held Thomas’s. He’d make all the promises in the world if it meant they might have a chance together. “Anything,” Chase said as he slowly turned his head and placed a gentle kiss in Thomas’s palm.

Thomas lifted their joined hands from the balcony railing, holding them against his chest as the hand resting at the back of Chase's head brought him closer. "When you make love to me tonight, it will be as Chase Spencer, not someone else," he said with a shy smile.

Thomas was holding him and nothing had ever felt more right. Chase closed what little distance there was between them and claimed the mouth of the man who claimed his heart.

Janae smiled when she saw two bodies silhouetted by moonlight, not an inch of space between them. "Way to go, baby brother," she whispered into the night. "Way to go."

CHASE'S hands trembled as he reached for the buttons on Thomas's white silk shirt. His fingers refused to cooperate as he tried to slide the pearl buttons through the stitched buttonholes.

The blond just watched, an unreadable look on his face, his hands hanging motionless at his sides.

After several long, embarrassing moments, Chase finally parted the two pieces of soft material, exposing his lover's chest to his hungry gaze. Bending, he bestowed gentle kisses to the pale skin as he slid the silk back over Thomas's shoulders and down his arms, unconcerned as it floated to the floor. His lips traveled up the long neck, stopping ever so often to sample the warm flesh. Chase's hands went to Thomas's belt, efficiently unbuckling and removing it before moving on to the black Armani slacks. With every inch of his lover's body revealed, he grew more impatient, the remainder of the blond's clothing joining the growing pile on the floor.

Closing his eyes, Chase concentrated on Thomas's touch as the blond reached out to undress him, hoping to ease his nervousness. Without the protective layer of one of his personas, he felt vulnerable. He moaned quietly when long fingers brushed over his already pebbled nipples.

Thomas brushed his hands down Chase's stomach, dipping into the hollow of his navel for a moment before moving on. A low

gasp blew past his ear as the blond's tongue teased the fleshy lobe of the Changeling's ear. "I take it you like that?" Thomas said as his teeth closed and tugged gently.

"Mmmm," Chase answered, his fingers winding into the silky fine white-blond hair. In no time, his clothes joined Thomas's pile on the floor.

Tilting his head, Chase caught Thomas's lips in a passionate kiss, their tongues dancing slowly, their engorged shafts pressed together between their bodies. He felt like he was drowning, the feelings coursing through his body making him gasp for air. If this is what a kiss between Thomas Bradford and Chase Spencer felt like, they were fools for waiting so long. Chase seriously hoped he'd survive what was still ahead of them. The dramatic thought made him chuckle.

Breaking the kiss, Thomas pulled back a little, brows drawn together as if he thought Chase might be laughing at him. "What?"

The Changeling reached up and smoothed the worry from the features of Thomas's face. "Everything is so much... more... now. Clearer. Sharper. It's hard to explain," he said as he leaned in and captured Thomas's bottom lip, sucking gently.

"Because it's you and not the others?" Thomas asked when Chase finally released him.

Chase nodded, linking their fingers together and leading Thomas to the bed. "I've never..." he started to say and then laughed again as they climbed onto the bed together.

Thomas made himself comfortable in the mound of pillows and pulled Chase's body on top of his. "You've never what?" he asked as their bodies pressed together from thigh to chest.

"Well, I've never actually made love as myself," he answered as he motioned to the two of them. "In fact, I've never actually *made* love at all, but that's not what I was laughing about. Those two words are what brought us together. Or rather, you and *Sean*, anyway."

Thomas nodded in understanding. "Yeah, but I'm beginning to see that you were there as well, lurking just beneath the surface

of all three men,” he said as he tenderly caressed Chase’s cheek. “Now, are we finished talking because I really want to know what it’s like to be loved by Chase Spencer. The others were good, but they were only a part of you. I have a feeling that the combination will be spectacular.”

Chase dropped his forehead onto Thomas’s shoulder and groaned. “Oh, great. Think you could put a little more pressure on a guy?”

A soft hand reached between them and took hold of Chase’s hard cock, squeezing the shaft gently. “I really don’t think it’s going to be a problem. Do you?” he asked as he started to move his hand up and down slowly.

“Not with you,” Chase admitted before placing a kiss against his lover’s lips. He moved down Thomas’s body, nipping at the pale skin, leaving a trail of faint red marks in his wake. By the time he reached Thomas’s cock, clear liquid had gathered at the tip and Chase lapped at it like a kitten with a bowl of cream. Cutting off Thomas mid-protest, Chase took him into his mouth, his tongue working the underside of his cock as his head moved up and down expertly.

“Oh... Jesus Christ, Chase!” Thomas exclaimed as he gripped the blanket tightly, his knuckles turning white from the strain. “If you’re looking to make me come immediately, you’re definitely on the right path,” he said as he tried to keep himself from thrusting into the talented mouth.

Chase hummed, the hard length still between his lips, causing another convulsion from Thomas’s body. “Maybe not quite yet,” he mused, his lips grazing the slick wet head. “I want to be inside of you when that happens.” Chase pushed the long legs back and nuzzled the fleshy sac for a moment before moving lower, his tongue lapping at the pink rosette that was clenching with each pass of his tongue. His own neglected cock throbbed insistently, but he ignored it. Nails scrabbled against his arms and he looked up.

“Now, Chase. I need you now,” Thomas panted, sitting up to reach his lover’s lips, groaning and sucking the taste of his body

from Chase's tongue.

Chase reached into the bedside table, retrieving what they needed. He quickly slicked his fingers as Thomas bent his legs, bracing his feet on the comforter.

Thomas groaned when he felt the first finger circling his entrance. "Fuck! Don't tease," he whined, pushing into the touch. When a second finger joined the first, he grabbed the base of his weeping shaft tightly to keep from coming. "Chase, fuck! Enough... won't last... much longer," he managed to get out as his lover's fingers stretched him.

"Sure?" Chase teased, crooking his fingers and grinning as Thomas's hips jumped off the mattress.

"Fucking positive!" Thomas watched with passion-glazed eyes as Chase readied himself.

Chase's heart hammered inside his chest as he slid between Thomas's legs and rolled the condom onto his cock. He quickly added a coating of lube and leaned forward, one hand braced on the bed beside Thomas's head, the other guiding his stiff cock into place. Chase pressed a light kiss against parted lips. "Ready?"

"God, Spencer! Quit stalling," Thomas ordered, hooking his legs behind Chase's ass and hauling him closer.

Chase pushed slowly but steadily forward, his eyes never leaving Thomas's. "Oh, God," Chase hissed as the head of his cock breached his lover. Inch by agonizing inch, he slid into the tight heat of Thomas's body, until he could go no further. He paused for a moment to catch his breath, feeling everything – from the way Thomas's body clenched around his cock to the almost-palpable connection between gray and green eyes. Chase knew without a doubt that he had just found the missing part of himself.

"Chase? You okay?" the blond asked, reaching up and gently touching Chase's cheek. "You aren't having second thoughts about this, are you?"

"Never," Chase whispered, brushing his lips against Thomas's as he slowly backed out of the tight passage before plunging in once again. "How about you? Want me to stop?"

"I'd... have... to kill... you," Thomas gasped as he lifted his hips experimentally and the thick cock slid deeper into his body. "Make me yours," he said, pulling Chase's lips down to his.

"Mine," Chase affirmed as he began to rock his hips against Thomas, building up a slow and steady rhythm. He forced himself not to rush. He wanted to savor every moment of this first time. The first time he ever... they ever made love.

The slow pace that Chase set continued way past the point that they both wanted more, but hypnotized by the look on Thomas's face, Chase wanted to draw out every moment of this first time.

Thomas felt the stirrings in his lower belly again and tried to hold them at bay, but the warmth spread quickly throughout his body and before he realized it, he was clutching at Chase, begging for his release. "Please, Chase, faster... take me faster," he cried as he pushed up against his lover.

Unable to resist the lure of his own orgasm tightening in his lower body, Chase complied and increased his speed. "Harder? More?" Chase asked as he thrust into the tight body writhing beneath him.

"Yesssss," Thomas hissed as his back arched away from the bed, his prostate being crossed with every thrust now. "Fuck me, Chase," the blond cried. "Make me come," he panted as Chase thrust into him, hard and fast.

Long, tan fingers wrapped around Thomas's erection, pumping it in time with Chase's strokes into the tight body. "Oh... yeah... almost... there..." Chase panted as he felt his own orgasm about to explode.

Stars exploded behind Thomas's closed eyes as his release hit him, creamy fluid splattering across his chest and stomach in streams as his cock pulsed in his lover's hand.

The sight of Thomas falling apart beneath him and the velvety walls caressing his cock pulled Chase's orgasm from him. With a hoarse cry, he gave into his own passion. In that moment, his world shattered. Images flashed before him, a montage of past, present and future – Thomas lounging in the doorway of the

bedroom, laughing at something; the two of them curled up in front of a roaring fire; a tri-colored band sitting securely around a long, pale finger.

Chase collapsed onto Thomas's chest, his breathing erratic. It took several minutes to slow his racing heart. Moving wasn't possible or even desirable. Long minutes passed before Chase braced himself on his elbows, taking a portion of his weight off of the body below him. He looked down into the face of the man who held his heart. "Are you okay?"

Thomas reached up and caressed Chase's face. "Perfect," he said, surprised at how true it was.

Chase slowly slid from his lover and padded to the bathroom to dispose of the condom and grab a damp washcloth. After a quick cleanup, he tossed the rag aside and joined Thomas on the bed, gathering his lover in his arms.

"So that's what it's like to make love with the real Chase Spencer," Thomas mused with a smile as he settled himself against his lover's side. "Not so different from *Sean*. Maybe a bit more intense, though that might be the shared history."

"Yeah. It was very different for me – almost like having a first time again," Chase admitted with a sigh. "For a minute there, I thought I was going to black out. The connection between us was nearly overwhelming. It may be part of the Changeling bond. I don't know since I've never experienced it before." He placed a kiss on Thomas's forehead. "Describe what you mean by intense?"

Thomas propped himself up on one elbow and looked down at Chase. "I felt more with you than I had with the others. Does the awareness work both ways? I mean... when a Changeling finds someone compatible, does that person also feel it?"

"I'm not sure. Both my parents are Changelings, which meant they knew instantly. I don't know how it works with a Changeling and a human," Chase admitted.

"Guess we need to do some research, then," Thomas said as he leaned down and brushed his lips against Chase's. "I know what I felt when you were inside of me. How about we find out what it's

like to be on the other side of things?"

Chase's fingers wound tightly in blond hair. "I love the way you think," he said. "All in the name of research, of course."

EPILOGUE

Eight months later

Stepping from the shower, Chase heard a beep from his cell phone, signaling a missed text message. Quickly drying off, he reached for his phone.

Just landed. Be home soon.

He glanced at the clock, judging that he had about a half-hour to prepare for his lover's arrival. Thomas had been out of town on a business trip for the past three days and Chase had a surprise planned.

Padding naked into the walk-in closet, Chase opened the top drawer of the built-in bureau and retrieved a leather collar and set of cuffs he had bought the day before. His body reacted naturally, immediately knowing which persona would be using them that night. After *changing*, he applied a light sheen of oil to his lithe body, and prepared himself to take whatever his lover could dish out. Control, he repeated as he fought the urge to pleasure himself while preparing for Thomas's arrival. He knew it would be worth

the wait.

THOMAS sighed as his building came into view, glad to finally be home. Stepping out of the chauffeured limousine, his eyes searched the top floor, hoping to catch sight of Chase waiting for him on the balcony. Nothing but darkness. No lights shone from any of the windows and Thomas wondered where his lover might be. Maybe he hadn't made it home yet. Chase had said his team was working on a large project at the moment, so maybe he was still tied up at the office. Thomas hoped not. He had missed Chase more than he thought possible and wanted nothing more than to spend the night making love to him.

The blond rode the elevator up in silence, contemplating calling Chase again, wondering if he had received the first text message. There hadn't been a reply. He sighed, inserting his key into the lock and deciding that if Chase wasn't home, he'd try him at the office.

Stepping over the threshold, Thomas felt the other man's presence and knew immediately that Chase was there. A sly smile played on his lips as he dropped his bag in the living room and followed the line of candles down the long hallway and into their bedroom.

Entering the bedroom, he lost his breath. Candles graced every available surface, illuminating the room with a soft glow, the perfect accent for what was waiting in the center of his bed.

"Welcome home, Master," *Adrian* said quietly, kneeling on the duvet, head lifted proudly, the black leather collar reflecting the candlelight, hands linked behind his back, his cock standing proudly from its nest of dark curls.

Thomas was instantly hard. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined this. Well, yes he could... and had. He had just never mentioned it to Chase. He briefly wondered if mind reading was another facet to being a Changeling, one that his lover had neglected to inform him about.

"Jesus..." Thomas managed to whisper as lust surged hard

and fast through his system. His body temperature spiked, the room entirely too warm.

“Do I please you?” *Adrian* asked submissively from his kneeling position, forest green eyes filled with mischief.

Thomas slowly approached the bed. “More like surprised,” he said as he reached out and trailed a finger down his beloved’s face, causing *Adrian* to lean into the touch. “But, yes, very pleased.”

“I am here to serve you,” *Adrian* said as he slowly brought his hands forward, resting them on his spread thighs. “Command me.”

The blond crawled onto the bed with *Adrian* and caught the young man’s lips in a kiss that threatened to consume the both of them. Their separation was a large part of it, but the game they were playing fueled the fire. Long, slim fingers cradled *Adrian*’s face as Thomas’s tongue dominated the kiss, just as he would dominate his partner’s body shortly. He broke the connection long enough to whisper, “You may touch as you like.”

He sighed when he felt Chase’s, or rather *Adrian*’s, hands on him. Pulling the smaller man into yet another kiss, his own hands roamed over the soft skin, lingering longer in places he knew turned his lover on. He had learned that Chase was especially sensitive behind his knees, the crease of his inner arms, right below his ribs and the juncture where torso met thigh and figured that *Adrian* would be, as well.

Adrian felt Thomas pushing his limits and pulled out of the kiss, resting his head on Thomas’s shoulder, panting through kiss-swollen lips.

“Too much?” Thomas asked smugly, knowing exactly what he was doing to the other man. “How about we slow things down a bit then? Undress me,” he said as he tipped *Adrian*’s face up to his, bestowing one last kiss to the tempting lips and releasing the restraints before moving off of the bed.

“Yes, sir,” *Adrian* said quietly, moving to stand before Thomas. With shaking hands, he did as instructed. His lust-filled

gaze never left his lover's as he unbuttoned the shirt, his trembling fingers caressing every inch of skin exposed. When the last button slid free, *Adrian* parted the shirt, revealing his lover's torso. Thomas's stomach muscles clenched as he tried to control the desire that ran rampant through his veins. Moving to his knees, *Adrian* reached up, unbuckled the belt, and slid it from the loops, moving on to the button and zip.

Mischievous eyes looked up, making Thomas wondered what his lover was up to. He had his answer when *Adrian* leaned forward and placed a kiss to the right of Thomas's navel, licking and teasing the ticklish flesh as he slowly tugged the dress pants and boxers down. Thomas toed off his loafers and then stepped out of the material gathered at his feet. With a pointed look, *Adrian* removed the socks, as well.

"Up on the bed with you," Thomas said and gave his partner's ass a well-deserved swat.

Adrian gasped at the sensation but did as he was told and reclined back on the pillows, eager to see what Thomas had in store for him.

Thomas crawled onto the bed with him, hemming *Adrian* in with an arm and leg on each side of his body, their faces just inches apart.

"Kiss me," Thomas breathed. *Adrian's* hands came up to frame Thomas's face as he sucked and licked at his lover's lips, taking command of the kiss only because Thomas allowed it. His tongue plunged into the welcoming mouth, roamed over two rows of straight teeth. Snatching a breath, he nipped at kiss-swollen lips. Over and over, he assaulted Thomas's mouth, reveling in the fact that he was allowed this freedom. His cock seeped with need, the clear fluid dribbling down the shaft and settling on his stomach.

Thomas shifted his weight onto his left arm as his right hand settled on *Adrian's* clavicle, his fingers caressing the flushed skin. *Adrian* moaned into the kiss, urging more contact. The Changeling smiled against Thomas's lips as he felt the hand moving lower to his chest, groaning when knowing fingers twisted a sensitive nipple.

Thomas rolled the rose colored bud between his thumb and forefinger, squeezing none too gently. "Like that?" Thomas asked.

"Fuck... yessssss," *Adrian* hissed in pleasure.

Thomas's hand traveled across to the opposite nipple, pinching and flicking it with his nail. "And this?" he asked.

Adrian's head thrashed from side to side. "Ah..." His breath caught. "Oh, yes, Master," he cried.

Thomas grinned at the wanton abandon. "Little slut," he teased affectionately. "It amuses me to indulge you," he purred, lowering his mouth to the tormented peak, biting and rolling it between his teeth. *Adrian's* hips bucked upwards uncontrollably, his cock brushing Thomas's. Biting harder, Thomas pulled up on the swollen nub of flesh until *Adrian* moaned and writhed under him. Dragging his tongue across the smooth, narrow chest, he taunted both nipples until his lover was begging to be taken.

"God! Fuck!" *Adrian* screamed, fingers twisted in the sheets. "Fuck me! Please, Master, fuck me!"

Thomas ignored the pleas, moving lower and placing open-mouthed kisses in a line over *Adrian's* quivering abdomen. He smelled *Adrian's* arousal, a thick and heady scent that made his own cock surge with need.

"Eager, are we, my little cock-tease?" he asked as his tongue lapped the clear fluid from the taut stomach, causing *Adrian* to gasp in pleasure. Nuzzling the fine hair surrounding the base of the weeping cock, he breathed deeply. "Do you have any idea what your scent does to me?"

Adrian knew exactly what it did to his lover and continued to push his buttons. "Hot. So hot... only for you," he whimpered submissively.

Thomas gently tugged at the soft hair with his lips, causing a deep groan to spill from *Adrian's* lips. "Like that?" Thomas asked.

Adrian's head fell back onto the pillow, his eyes closed tight. "Yes, Master. So good. I don't deserve—" His words changed to a pained moan as Thomas swallowed his cock.

Thomas teased the sensitive skin right below the flared head, sucking gently on the tip, his tongue massaging the large vein as he took his lover deep into his mouth once more. Reaching blindly for the nightstand, Thomas reached for the lube. A strong hand closed around his arm.

Adrian looked up at his lover through a thick fringe of eyelashes. "Take me, Master. I don't deserve more than you've already given me."

Thomas read his lover's signals clearly. Chase had obviously prepared himself before the game began. Raising both hands over *Adrian's* head, Thomas held both slender wrists clamped in one hand. "I'm going to fuck you so hard that you'll never forget who you belong to," he growled menacingly. With a sharp jerk, he tossed the green-eyed blond onto his stomach, forcing his legs apart with his knees. "Wider!" he ordered.

Adrian whimpered, spreading his legs wide and bending his knees, raising his ass up in the air. Just to add to the excitement, he struggled, more to move his body under Thomas's than to actually get away.

"Still!" Thomas barked, slapping a pale cheek, the hand running up the graceful curve of *Adrian's* back. He moved into position and with one sure push breached *Adrian's* body, fighting the urge to come as the young man's sheath tightened around him.

"Fuck! Not going to last long..." Thomas panted out. "Missed you too much," he said, slipping out of character as he started to thrust into the receptive body beneath him. He rode *Adrian's* body stretched out beneath him for as long as he could. With a final series of hard and fast thrusts, their orgasms were suddenly crashing over them, around them.

Falling to the side, Thomas pulled *Adrian* into his arms, their breathing and pulses slowly returning to normal. He lifted one small wrist and placed a kiss to the leather cuff. "This was a nice surprise," he said, examining the black leather, noticing the buckle closure. "Adjustable sizing? Planning on turning the tables on me, my little minx?"

Adrian pressed himself tighter against his lover. "If Master

wishes it.”

Thomas extricated himself from the young man’s grasp, unbuckling the young man’s matching collar. *Adrian* felt naked without his collar. Thomas noticed the crestfallen look and captured his lover’s lips one last time. “We’ll play some other day, *Adrian*. Right now I’d like to see the real you.”

In the next instant, Chase appeared and Thomas found himself flat on his back. “Fuck, I’ve missed you,” the dark-haired man said as he kissed Thomas to within an inch of his life.

“Missed you, too. Not that I’m complaining, but what in the hell brought this on?” he asked as he picked up one of the leather cuffs.

“I did some thinking...”

“Never a good thing when you’re unsupervised,” Thomas teased.

“Ass. Anyway, I was thinking about my decision not to *change* and play games any longer, but...” Chase said as he nuzzled the other man’s neck. “Since I’m not out on the prowl, I thought maybe we could play here? There have to be SOME advantages to being mated to a Changeling, don’t you think?”

Thomas never could say ‘no’ to a determined Chase. Obviously, their already interesting life was about to get even more exciting. “You know, it just occurred to me another use for adjustable sizes,” he said, fastening the stiff leather around Chase’s larger wrist.

“Oh, I like your ideas.” Chase grinned.

DREAMSCAPE INTERNATIONAL

Connie Bailey
Rhianne Aile

www.conniebailey.com
www.rhianneale.com

Thanks to all our sisters.

CHAPTER ONE

THE sleeper turned from his side onto his back, one arm bent over his head on a pillow that glowed like an afterimage in the moonlight. By argent alchemy, the pale rays turned the slumbering man's golden hair to silver, and emphasized the angular beauty of his high-planed face. The sheet slid down his broad chest to pool around slim hips, mounding slightly over his groin.

He slept on unaware as a wisp of fog appeared above the bed, fading in, coalescing into a human figure hovering over the dreamer as though weightless. Dressed in the formal attire of the Victorian Era, with an ethereally beautiful face framed by rippling sable hair, floating on an unfelt breeze, the visitor had every appearance of a classic ghost. The phantom stretched out a hand, touching the sleeper's forehead in a gesture of loving comfort, and the man's eyes opened.

There was no fear in the face of the man who sat up and opened his arms to the lovely apparition. The ghost's apparel evaporated like mist in the sun of the man's desire, and naked, the vision descended to bring their lips together in a brush of cool flesh against warm. The dreamer reached up and pulled the specter into his arms, heating the marmoreal flesh, bringing a rosy tint to the ivory skin. Just as the linen slipped all the way down the man's hips, and the exquisite ghost settled astride him, the tableau brightened until the inky shadows were bleached away and the scene became a cube of glowing, pulsing silver. Within the mother of pearl radiance, a corporate logo appeared: a simple spiral in velvet black like the iridescent spots on a butterfly's wing, and the

name Dreamscape International in whatever language the viewer had chosen.

Lucien Clarke stood in the hangar-sized lobby and gazed raptly at the holographic display as a buttery voice with a vaguely British accent imparted a discreet description of the services offered by the multinational firm: fantasies fulfilled, dreams by design, the client's desires identified, mapped, and woven into a scenario Spun by a professional Dreamwalker under entirely safe and confidential conditions. Prices available upon inquiry.

Lucien's mother was fond of saying that if they didn't tell you the price up front, it was bound to be more than you could afford. Dreamscape's fees were very high indeed, but Luc wasn't here to buy a dream; he was hoping to be hired to Spin them.

THE chime sounded for the 69th floor and the elevator doors opened on a panoramic view of the bay through a two-story wall of glass. The man who got out of the elevator pulled his gaze from the breathtaking view, his eyes widening even further at the opulence of the lobby. He knew that Dreamwalking was profitable, but the sheer amount of money represented by the furnishings was staggering. In front of an atrium that held a miniature forest was a sweep of burnished mahogany large enough to seat twelve that served as a reception desk. The rich jewel tones of the brocade and velvet upholstery, the soft gleam of gold-leaf accents and the original artwork adorning the walls kept the visitor from noticing the receptionist until the man spoke. "May I help you, sir?"

The visitor focused on the slim, impeccably attired figure behind the desk. With growing dismay, he glanced down at his best trousers and his only button down shirt, comparing them with the other man's obviously hand-tailored suit, and wondered how he hoped to impress these people if this was how the secretary dressed. Reminding himself that he had a unique talent, he drew himself up to his full height and crossed the floor, heels clicking on the Italian marble. "I have an appointment. Lucien Clarke?"

“Right on time, Mr. Clarke.” With an elegant gesture, the receptionist indicated a pair of mahogany doors at the end of the hall to his left. “You can go right in.”

Lucien’s eyes followed the manicured fingers, and he left the hard marble of the atrium behind, feet sinking into the deep burgundy carpet of the hall. Turning the brass knob, he entered a room that immediately put him at ease, just as it was designed to do. The walls were painted a soothing plum and a pair of large, overstuffed sofas faced each other over a low table. A young man was already seated there, his red-gold hair haloed by the floor lamp behind him. The friendly smile he offered dispelled the doubt instilled by the intimidating décor of the lobby. Lucien was relieved to find someone he could relate to and relaxed for the first time since he’d entered the corporate offices of Dreamscape International. Giving the other man a bright smile in return, Lucien crossed the room and extended a hand. “Lucien Clarke,” he introduced himself. “Everyone calls me Luc.”

“Grey Daley.” The redhead took Luc’s hand in a firm grip and released it.

Assuming Grey was another applicant, Luc plopped down in a chair and let his legs sprawl. “Wow. I had no idea what this place was like. That secretary guy out front was wearing a suit that probably costs more than I make in a year.”

“Well, that could change if you get a job here,” Grey said.

“I hope so,” Luc said, feeling a need to impress a possible rival. “I tested well.”

“Well, test scores aren’t everything, you know. They say that Dreamwalking is art married to science; the talent is inherent, but intuition to use it can’t be taught.” Pulling a leg up underneath him, Grey turned to face Luc in a pose as casual as the other man’s. “What’s your specialty, anyway?” he asked, as though he didn’t already know the answer.

“Homoerotic,” Luc answered immediately. “But I can do women,” he added, though the look on his face said it wouldn’t be first choice.

Grey laughed. "I don't think anyone around here will ask you to do anything you aren't comfortable with. This company was founded expressly to fulfill fantasies; coercion isn't in the mission statement that I read. Have you been Dreamwalking long?" The astonishingly attractive young candidate had to be a recently discovered Spinner. An experienced Dreamwalker could reasonably be expected to know that Dreamwalking under duress, or without the consent of both parties, was nearly impossible and highly illegal.

"I started Walking when I was fourteen," Luc answered. "Though I didn't know what I was doing at first."

"So it's probably not hereditary then."

"No one in my family ever showed the slightest inclination until me. Of course, they all got tested when my ability was diagnosed, but there's not a Spinner in the bunch. I was given the option of a mentor, but Mom didn't want me to have one."

Grey frowned slightly at the ingenuous disclosure. He'd seen Luc's scores; they were excellent, off the chart in fact, but it appeared that the boy was completely untrained. Grey sighed; no use wondering why Mrs. Clarke hadn't wanted a mentor, but it meant Grey had his work cut out for him. Fortunately, it was extremely pleasant work for the most part, and he got right back to it, giving the applicant his attention again.

Luc's mother told people that her charming son had never met a stranger, and he proved it as he continued to ramble candidly, unaware of his companion's brief distraction. "A friend of mine told me about Dreamscape after his father was given a dream for his fiftieth birthday. Not an erotic one; it was mountain climbing in the Himalayas. He said it was really expensive, but worth every penny. I can still see the smile on his face. I've wanted to work here ever since, to go into people's dreams and make them happy like that. I couldn't believe it when I made it past the initial screening, but here I am."

Grey smiled at the earnest eagerness in Lucien's dark eyes and left off the charade. "Dreamscape is a great place to work," he said. "We're on the cutting edge in terms of Spinning. Of course,

Dreamwalking as a profession is relatively new and the slightly more controversial field of erotic fantasy has only been legally sanctioned in the last few years.”

“We?” Luc asked, straightening to a more formal posture. “You mean you work here? I thought you were a candidate like me.”

“I’m the director of Boys’ House and this is your first interview.” Grey had been chosen for his position precisely because of the trust he inspired, and he put Lucien at ease again, reaching over to touch the younger man’s thigh. “You’ll have to forgive me for not identifying myself right away, but I like to form an impression of new boys before they realize they’re talking to someone with authority. You can relax. You’re doing just fine.” Luc relaxed, but Grey could still see tension in the set of the applicant’s shoulders.

“Boys’ House?” Luc spoke to cover his anxiety.

“Spinners employed by Dreamscape live on the company campus in houses based on individual specialties, sort of like family groups. Don’t worry, though; it’s not like a dormitory. There are seven single apartments in each house. The Boys’ House is what we call the building you’ll be in if you’re hired. There are four other houses, each with its own specialty: heterosexual, dominant/submissive, exotic fetish and supernatural,” Grey explained.

Luc blinked.

“The apartments are really very nice,” Grey added. “But I don’t suppose that’s uppermost in your mind at the moment. Ready to go on?”

“Definitely.”

Grey couldn’t suppress a smile at this candidate’s enthusiasm. Luc was a natural with an innate sensuality implicit in his smallest gesture, and the director was beginning to feel something he hadn’t felt in a while: enthusiasm. “All right, then; shall we get started?”

“What? Right now? Here?”

“You’ve taken pop quizzes before, right?”

“Well sure, but,” Luc paused, changing his mind mid-thought. “Let’s get started.”

“Good answer. Why don’t you get comfortable? Kick off your shoes, or whatever you think will help you relax enough to fall asleep.”

“Um, I’m fine. Should I lie down here on the couch?”

Grey moved back until he was sitting in the corner of the soft sofa. “Put your head in my lap, and I’ll guide you into the first stage. After that, it will be up to you to enter the sleep of a prepared subject in another room, intuit his desires and Spin a fantasy for him. Any questions?”

“About a million,” Luc said as he toed off his shoes. “But I’m ready, and there’s no point in wasting time.”

“That’s a great attitude,” Grey said as Luc stretched out. The director cupped the young man’s skull in his hands, ignoring the sensuous slide of silken curls over his fingers, remaining detached and alert. “Just breathe and let yourself float. I won’t let anything disturb you.”

Luc looked up and Grey felt a desire to earn this boy’s trust and friendship. Shaking his head at the power the young man wielded unaware, the director cleared his thoughts and let his breathing fall into the same rhythm as the Spinner’s. In moments, like the instinctive Dreamwalker he was, Luc drifted into sleep. Putting forth the gentlest tendril of his own talent, Grey nudged the candidate from his quiescent state. During training, Luc would learn to do this on his own, but for now, it was safer to guide him. Encircling Luc’s wrist with his thumb and forefinger, Grey monitored the young man’s pulse and felt the flutter that indicated Dreamwalking had commenced.

Luc opened his eyes. The office he was in looked like a room in one of those genteel men’s clubs in old movies, tobacco brown leather upholstery, rows of books with gold stamped spines, a crystal decanter of amber liquor, everything glowing in the rays of sunlight that lanced through the bay window. On the other side of the room, a man slept in a burgundy leather wing chair with his feet up on a desk of polished teak.

Luc's impetuous heart stumbled in its steady beat as he gazed on the subject. How had Dreamscape known what his dream man looked like? Was this part of the test or their way of trying to make it as easy as possible for him? Or was it just coincidence that the sleeper was as ruggedly handsome as a Viking raider crowned with a thatch of antique gold and that he exuded an aura of absolute maleness even while unconscious? Wondering suddenly if he were being timed, Luc crossed the room and moved behind the desk. "Are you ready for me?" he asked softly.

The man's eyes opened, as green as coastal waters, and Luc felt the tender ache of sexual attraction behind his pubic bone. "Who are you?" the blond man asked.

"Your fantasy," Luc said, gazing deeply into the subject's eyes, easily divining his desires. Picking up the man's feet, the Dreamwalker placed them gently on the floor. The subject didn't protest by word or deed as Luc knelt between his thighs and reached for his belt buckle. "I'm going to make this so good for you," Luc murmured. "Your dreams come true."

The green-eyed man didn't speak, but let his head fall back against the chair as slim fingers deftly unfastened his trousers and bared his arousal. He was already hard as iron and leaking a bit as the young man's sculpted lips touched the head of his shaft in a kiss that was almost reverent. A groan escaped the sleeper's mouth as a firm fist shuttled up and down his taut hardness. Luc smiled as he took the sensitive tip in his mouth and ran his tongue around the weeping slit. This was a fairly common fantasy for the type of powerful man that would have an office like this: being serviced at work by a beautiful, willing underling without having to move a muscle. Well, maybe one muscle, Luc amended, as he engulfed the thick shaft down to the root.

The subject's breathing became labored as Luc lavished attention on his cock, balls, and all points south. The Spinner tried to make it last as long as he could; this was as enjoyable for him as it was for the drowsing executive, but even in dreams, there is a point past which pleasure can no longer be sustained. Luc felt the hot, hard head pulse against the back of his throat and pushed a finger deeper into the man, pressing insistently against his sweet

spot. The long shaft jerked and the blond came with a choked-off cry, filling Luc's mouth with salty-bitter seed.

Luc swallowed it down, invoking another groan of sheer ecstasy. Gently massaging the man's inner thighs, the Dreamwalker let the spent rod slide slowly from his mouth. He was getting to his feet, when the subject unexpectedly swept him up in his arms, and he found himself crushed against the broad chest in a fierce embrace. Lips framed by a rough beard sought his, burning his skin, and sparking an answering fire in his loins. Gladly, he gave up his mouth to be plundered by a tongue that savored of scotch and pipe tobacco. A soft whimper rose in his throat as big hands massaged his buttocks.

"Luc?"

Luc looked up into Grey's bright blue gaze. He was disoriented, but only for a second. Swinging his legs to the floor, he sat up and ran a hand through his disheveled hair. "How'd I do?" he asked, trying to ignore the yearning erection that pressed into his thigh.

"I'm not sure you did anything," Grey answered. "I linked with the test subject, but you never showed up. Where did you go?"

Luc's guileless face revealed his shock. "I felt a pull that I assumed was you guiding me. It led me to an office. There was a man asleep in a chair, and I gave him the blow job he wanted."

"That's wrong, completely wrong. I don't know where you went, but it wasn't where you were supposed to go."

"I don't understand."

"I don't either, but it's not a good sign. I'll have to ask if we can—" Grey's words broke off as a door opened behind him and his name was called. "Yes, sir?" he responded, getting up from the couch. Before he could take a step, a man came into the room looking as confused as was humanly possible. And then he saw Luc.

"What the bloody hell?" the man exclaimed, staring at Luc as though the boy held a gun on him.

"This is the new candidate, Mr. Sparks," Grey said. "Are you all right?"

Luc froze like a deer in the headlights. This was Alexander Sparks, Head of Human Resources, the man that could make his career, or end it right here. And he was the mystery man of Luc's recent attempt at Dreamwalking. Grey was right; this wasn't a good sign at all.

"No, I'm bloody well not all right!" Mr. Sparks said sharply. "Were you conducting a trial Dreamwalk out here?"

"It's on the schedule, sir," Grey said, less confidently.

"This isn't right," Alexander Sparks mumbled. "Not right at all."

"I assure you; it was all approved and conducted according to--"

"I'm not impugning your ethics, Grey, though if I find that this was one of your infamous pranks I'll... I don't know yet what I'll do, but you won't like it, that I can promise you."

Grey's fair brows drew together in a frown. "If you tell me what went wrong, Alec, maybe I can figure out what happened."

Two spots of red appeared on Alec's high cheekbones. "I..." He glanced at Luc and his demeanor underwent a sudden change. "I'm Alexander Sparks," he said briskly. "And you're the candidate the examiners are so excited about. Lucien Clarke. I'd appreciate it if you'd go wait in my office while I talk to Grey for a moment. Just make yourself comfortable, Mr. Clarke, and I'll be right in."

Luc nodded, for one of the few times in his life doing as he was told without argument. Alec waited until the door closed behind the candidate, before turning to Grey. "How did you lose control of the Dreamwalk?" he asked.

"Alec, I... As far as I know there was no Dreamwalk. Are you saying there was?"

Alec opened his mouth and closed it again. "I may have misspoken," he said. "I meant that you should take more care to stay with the Spinner, especially a novice like Clarke. What were

you thinking letting him off the leash without a guide? You've been given a position of great responsibility and I'd like to see you take it a bit more seriously. Are we clear?"

"Of course," Grey said, feeling he didn't really deserve this dressing down. However, he'd never seen his superior this shaken and didn't make an issue of it.

"I'm going to have a word with young Mr. Clarke, and then you can show him around the campus," Alec said before he turned away.

Luc wasn't surprised to see that the office he entered was the one from his recent Dreamwalk, and he automatically looked around to see what details the sleeper had changed or left out. The far wall was indeed lined with books, but the wing chair was deep green instead of burgundy. Raising his eyes, Luc spotted a framed photograph behind the desk that hadn't appeared in the dream. Intrigued, he walked over to examine the picture.

Two handsome blond men, one of them Alexander Sparks, stood on the deck of a large sailboat. They were smiling broadly and had their arms around each other, the pleasure they felt in one another's company almost palpable. The physical ease implicit in the pose led Luc to wonder if they might be lovers, although his recent peek into Mr. Sparks's subconscious told him the man preferred a younger partner. He felt an irrational sense of jealousy and reached out to touch the face of the other man in the photograph. The one with the vivid blue eyes that stared right through the viewer. The door opened as Luc's finger touched the glass, and he started back guiltily.

"Hi, Lucien. We've not really been introduced; I'm Alexander Sparks. Welcome to the U.S. corporate headquarters of Dreamscape International."

"Thanks for this opportunity, Mr. Sparks," Luc stammered as he had a quick flash of being on his knees between this man's thighs. True, it was only a dream, but....

"You're welcome," Alec said, without a trace of embarrassment. "And we're not so formal around here. You can call me Alec."

"I'm incredibly excited about this opportunity. I've wanted to work here ever since I heard about the company."

"Thank you," Alec said. "And you can relax. I'm not going to hold an innocent mistake against you." He gestured, inviting Luc to sit, and the young man sank into the supple leather, breathing in the earthy scent. Alec sat opposite, their knees nearly touching, and fixed the applicant with his sharp, appraising stare. "Do you know what just happened?"

"I guess I was in the wrong dream."

"Too right you were. I've spoken to Grey about supervising candidates more closely. If I were a client that paid for a Dreamwalk and the Spinner never showed up, I'd be properly pissed off."

"I'm sorry," Luc said.

"No need to apologize," Alec said smoothly. "It was a mistake, and it's hardly your fault that I'm not homosexual."

"I really thought I was doing what you wanted me to," Luc said ruefully. "I can't believe I was that far off in reading your desires."

Alec cleared his throat. "Let's put this incident behind us, shall we? I'm going to have Grey show you around, and after you've had a chance to rest and clear your mind, we'll try another session. How does that sound to you?"

"More than fair, sir," Luc stood, sensing the interview was over.

"Don't worry too much about this," Alec said kindly as he walked the boy to the door. "Grey will explain the rules to you and show you where you'll be living if we're happy with one another after the new test run."

Luc walked out of the office to find a somewhat subdued Grey waiting to give him the grand tour.

CHAPTER TWO

WHITLOCK JENSEN switched off the acetylene torch, pushing his goggles up on his forehead and mopping the sweat off his face with the cleanest part of his sleeve. The shrill ringing of a telephone cut into the sudden silence. Torn, the artist looked from the metal sculpture to the phone on the far wall. With a sigh, he pulled off his heavy leather gloves and dropped them to the floor. Before Whit had the receiver to his ear, he could hear the caller ranting.

“Don’t you ever answer your bloody phone?”

“Calm down, Alec,” Whit said. “How long has it been ringing?”

“At least five minutes. Sane people have answering machines, you know, voice mail, things of that nature.” Alec ran a hand through his hair, as he sat back and propped his feet on the desk. The position reminded him of the unintentional visit from Lucien Clarke and he sat bolt upright with a curse. “Fuck!”

“Alec? Are you okay?”

“Yes! No. Fuck it all to hell. Who knows?” Alec snapped, standing and beginning to pace.

“What the hell’s wrong?” Whit demanded to know.

“I’m just having a bloody awful day. I need a drink. In fact, I need several. Want to meet me at O’Malley’s?”

Whit gazed longingly at the sculpture cooling at the other end of the studio. It wasn't always easy having friends. "Yeah, sure," he sighed. "What time?"

"I'm heading there now. Meet me when you can."

"Okay. I'll see you in ten." Hanging up the phone, Whit cleaned up, grabbed his wallet and headed out the door. His studio was next door to the Dreamscape International headquarters, so if he hurried, he might catch his friend on the sidewalk. There wasn't much that could shake up Alexander Sparks and if the hard-nosed executive wanted a drink this early in the day, it gave Whit cause for worry. He didn't find Alec on the two block walk to O'Malley's. Moving from the bright sidewalk to the dim interior of the pub, the artist paused to let his eyes adjust. Alec was seated in a booth at the very back, staring into an empty glass. "Must have been a shitty day if you've already drained a scotch. What'd you do? Call me from your cell?"

Alec didn't look up. "It's my second drink," he announced dourly, ignoring Whit's question.

"Fuck, Alec." Whit slid into the booth just as the bartender set Alec's next drink on the table. Shaking his head at the waiter, Whit indicated that he didn't want anything. It looked like he'd be driving Alec home. Slipping his shoes off under the table, he propped his feet on the opposite seat and sat back to wait. Alec wouldn't have invited him for a drink if he hadn't wanted to talk.

Most of the third scotch was gone before Alec was finally ready to speak. "We hired a new Dreamwalker today."

Whit nodded and waited for more.

"The lad made the highest scores I've ever seen on our screening test."

Whit raised an eyebrow. "And this would be bad how?"

Alec started at Whit's comment as though he'd forgotten his friend was sitting there. "During a trial Spin this morning, Clarke ended up in my dream."

Whit still hadn't heard anything that would cause this much distress in his normally unflappable friend. "So the kid needs to learn some control."

"He blew me," Alec said, his tone completely flat.

Whit leaned forward, his feet hitting the floor. "What? But I thought..."

"Thought I was straight?" Alec finished, his fingers sinking into his hair as he tried to squeeze the memory from his mind. With his eyes tightly shut, he couldn't see the speculative look on his best friend's face.

"Actually, I was going to say that I thought a Dreamwalker had to be invited in."

Alec looked up, his gaze tormented. "Usually they do, but the invitation doesn't have to be conscious. A really talented Dreamwalker can read desires and needs buried deeply in the unconscious. Luc couldn't have shown up in my dreams if I didn't want him there." Alec stopped and searched his friend's face for a reaction to his words: shock, anger, or even betrayal. However, the look on Whit's face was one Alec had seen a hundred times as the artist walked around a piece of sculpture, examining it from all angles as he decided what to do next. The silence stretched until Alec snapped. "God damn it, Whit. Say something!"

"What do you want me to say?"

Alec glared at his friend's serene expression. Whit's inner calm drained Alec's anger and Alec wasn't ready to face this situation rationally yet. He reached for his glass, and finding it empty, signaled to the bartender. If he couldn't rage blindly, he could at least be numb. "Doesn't it bother you at all that for years I've told you that I'm straight, and then I let some complete stranger go down on me?"

Whit shrugged. "Am I supposed to be disappointed that you didn't give me the honor? I mean... I love you, man, but frankly you're just not my type."

Alec stared suspiciously at his friend until the side of Whit's mouth eventually twitched. "Fuck you!" Alec laughed along, reaching across the table and cuffing the artist's shoulder.

"Ready for that, are you? You're moving pretty fast for someone who just had his first blowjob from a man this morning."

"This isn't fucking funny, wanker."

"Oh yes... yes it is." The young waiter shot Whit a strange look as he dropped off Alec's drink. Taking a deep breath, the artist tried to rein in his amusement. "I'm sorry, but Alec, just because I'm gay doesn't mean I've been secretly pining for you."

Alec's cheeks flushed. "That's not... aw fuck..." He took a swallow of his scotch.

"This has really thrown you," Whit said. "Have you ever had any feelings for a guy?"

"No! Well, I mean, the normal aesthetic admiration of a fit bloke in the locker room, but I've never touched a man sexually or had one touch me before today."

"So how'd it feel?" Whit asked gently.

"Fuckin' brilliant," Alec admitted, rubbing at his neck.

"It doesn't make you gay, Alec. Just take some time and think about it. You've probably never even considered being with a guy before. Maybe your subconscious is trying to point out something you've been ignoring."

Alec cleared his throat, shifting in the booth. "Actually I have."

"Have what?"

"I've considered being with a bloke."

Whit looked genuinely shocked. "Who?"

"You."

Stunned, the sculptor stared at his friend. "You're kidding. When?"

"One night I was thinking and it just sort of made sense in a warped sort of way. I've fucked up both my marriages. My

friendship with you is the best and longest relationship I've ever had. You haven't even looked at anybody else since Tim died. Neither of us have anyone to go home to. What kind of life is that? So, it occurred to me that if we were together, we'd both have someone," Alec explained, grabbing his glass.

"But we aren't in love, Alec. I don't even know if I could ever love someone else the way I loved Tim, but knowing what it can be like, I'm not willing to settle for anything less." Whit paused. "You've been married, true, but I'm not sure you were in love with either of your wives. You did it because you thought it was the right thing to do, like your parents, and their parents before them. But can you honestly tell me that you felt a great passion for any of the women you've been with? Did your heart ever threaten to thump right out of your chest when they walked in the room? Did your stomach ache when you had to be apart for more than a night? Did you ever race home to catch them at some ordinary task just so you could think: they're doing that because they love me?"

Alec stared at his friend in wonder. He imagined that the love Whit spoke of would feel like being wrapped in a sweater woven of sunbeams on the coldest night of the year. He remembered seeing Whit and Tim sitting on opposite sides of the same couch, reading or sketching, completely engrossed in whatever they were doing, but always connected somehow. Whit's hand would lie on Tim's thigh, or Tim's feet would be wedged under Whit's leg for warmth. There wasn't anything sexual about it; they just needed to be touching. Alec knew without doubt that he'd never experienced the soul deep love and consuming passion Whit and Tim had shared, but he knew with equal certainty that he wanted it. Wanted it with all his heart and soul. And he wanted Whit to have it again.

"I'll make you a deal," Alec said. "I'll consider what it would like to be with another guy if you'll do the same."

GREY punched a code into the keypad mounted to the right of the door. "Everyone has his own code," he told Luc. "A computer log is kept for security purposes. Dreamwalking is a coveted talent and some people are less than scrupulous when it

comes to obtaining the services of a top-rated Spinner. This isn't a prison, however, the precautions are for your protection. You're welcome to have friends and family here at any time. This is your home... or will be as soon as you're officially hired, which I don't doubt for a second."

Luc followed Grey into a large open room that appeared to take up most of the first floor. Several men with nothing in common beyond uncommon good looks glanced over from various locations around the room. A tall dark-haired man was stretched over the side of a pool table, lining up a shot while his strawberry blond partner leaned on his cue. A muscular blond on the couch looked over his shoulder, and called out to Grey. "Hey sucker. You're gonna owe me twenty bucks when my guys make this field goal."

"Fuck you, Casanova," Grey said good-naturedly. "Unlike you, your so-called quarterback has missed more passes than he's completed this season."

"Is his name really Casanova?" Luc asked.

"No, that's Brad Engstrom, but most of us have nicknames inflicted by our brethren. It's like a frat house around here sometimes," Grey rolled his eyes and kept walking.

As they rounded the corner of the couch, Luc froze, his mouth falling open in astonishment. While Brad watched the ballgame, a young man with dark curls was kneeling between his legs, sucking his cock. The blond massaged his benefactor's bobbing head absently, thumbs caressing the delicate ears.

"Engstrom!" Grey yelled.

"What?" Brad sat up abruptly, dislodging the kneeling man, his arousal slipping from between pouting red lips.

"How many times do you have to be told? No fucking, or fellatio, in the common room. That goes for you too, Toby. Now take it upstairs," Grey snapped. Turning to Luc, he tried to explain. "There's no rule against Dreamwalkers sleeping together, but we try to be a little more discreet than that. It's not always easy, given the nature of our work."

Luc nodded in what he thought was a sophisticated manner as the lovers played grabass up the spiral staircase. "I'm not offended. Who's the kid?"

"That was Toby Blue-Eyes. He's twenty, but he looks a lot younger, doesn't he?"

"I would've guessed sixteen," Luc agreed. "Those eyes look so innocent."

"And that's his specialty," Grey winked. "Let's introduce you to the rest of the guys."

A dark-haired man with a five o'clock shadow framing a sensual mouth appeared from around a pillar, startling Luc. Stepping well inside Luc's personal space, he looked down at the newcomer through hooded eyes. "Well, well, what do we have here," he drawled. "Fresh meat?"

Luc moved away from the almost overpowering presence, stumbling into the low table behind him. Grey put a hand on the other man's shoulder, preventing him from following Luc. "Down, Lassie," he said lightly.

"I'm not a dog," Cutter Gillette snarled, his reaction out of all proportion to Grey's words.

Grey met Cutter's angry stare evenly. "Then don't act like one."

"You're not the boss of me."

"Actually, I am, and, as long as I'm director of this house, you'll do as I say."

Cutter loped off, giving Grey a dark look over his shoulder that promised reprisals.

"What's his problem?" Luc asked.

"Don't mind Cutter," Grey said. "He's a little in love with himself. He handles the rougher trade, and he thinks he's a hard-ass in realtime, too. Of course, he is one of our best Spinners, so he gets a lot of slack from admin. Honestly, though, he comes on to everybody. Would you like to see the pool?"

Luc's face brightened. "There's a pool?"

“Oh, there’s a pool, all right. It goes from indoors to outdoors and wait ‘til you see the size of the hot tub.”

“Hot tub?”

“Yep,” Grey grinned. “Just the thing for chilly nights when you’re feeling romantic or need to unwind.” He led Luc around the stairs to the far side of the enormous room where there was indeed a pool that passed under a glass wall to the outside. The hot tub was set slightly higher with an overflow like a miniature waterfall. Steering Luc back towards the pool table, Grey said, “Come on. Let’s meet Karl and Davis and then I’ll show you the apartment.”

By the time Grey showed Luc to the second floor apartment that would be his, the candidate was approaching sensory overload and ready for a rest. Grey seemed to expect this and left Luc after telling him that there was only one other flat on this floor and that it belonged to Toby. The door closed behind the director and Luc looked around, unable to believe that these luxurious surroundings were to be his living space. It was easily large enough to hold four apartments the size of the one he currently occupied, and this was only the front room. The Dreamscape campus had everything Luc could want, and in this environment, he wasn’t just some good-looking young guy; he had a skill that was highly valued. Even better, there were others like him to talk to and make friends with. It looked like he might have found his place at last.

“LUC?”

Luc woke to the sound of his name. Looking around, disoriented, he finally noticed the intercom on the wall by the bed. Reaching up, he hit the red button. “Grey?”

“Yes, it’s Grey. Can I come in?”

“The door’s not locked,” Luc said as he rolled off the king-sized bed and reached for his shirt. He’d only intended to lie down for few minutes, but his watch told him it had been three hours. “Sorry, Grey,” he said, as he walked into the living room.

“No trouble,” Grey said. “Feel up to making another hop?”

Luc stopped doing up his buttons. "Sure," he said with more confidence than he felt. "Do you want to go into the bedroom?"

Grey sighed deeply. "On your lips, those might well be the sweetest words ever uttered, but I think we'll be just fine on the sofa."

Luc smiled uncertainly, and then laughed. "Oh I see, you thought I meant... but no, of course you didn't. You're joking with me, aren't you?"

"Sadly, yes. Told you sometimes it was like living in a frat house. You'll get used to it." Grey sat down on one end of the enormous couch and patted his thigh. "Come on. Take a lap."

Luc put himself into Grey's hands. Subtly massaging the young man's scalp, Grey projected an aura of calm and security. As Luc opened himself to the invisible world, Grey let his consciousness brush against the other Spinner's, keeping him close after the first debacle. The boy's breathing was deep and even, his demeanor completely relaxed; Grey judged the candidate ready to make the journey and let off on the brake. An outside observer would have seen nothing but two young men napping, one with his head in the other's lap. Grey and Luc saw a brief sunburst against their retinas and opened their eyes in another place.

"This is Brad's room," Grey said.

Luc looked startled. "This is weird. I've never... It's just weird that you're here with me because..."

"Why is it weird?"

"I guess because you know it's a dream, too. On my other Dreamwalks, I was the only one aware that it wasn't really happening, you know?"

Grey nodded. "Hope it doesn't throw you off, but Brad is very aware that this is a dream."

"You sure got that right," Brad said.

Luc spun around to see the golden stud sprawled in a suede-upholstered recliner, feet up, lazily stroking his upstanding shaft. Eyes like the Mediterranean met Luc's and the novice Spinner

divined the sleeper's desire. He took two steps toward Brad and then paused to glance back at Grey.

"Trust your instincts," Grey told him.

Luc nodded. Relax, he told himself. You've done this lots of times on your own, before you ever heard of Dreamscape or training. Don't think about it. Just go over there and do what you do best - please your partner. Assuming the cock-sure demeanor of a man-eating looker that knows everyone wants him, Luc strutted across the room.

Grey felt the shift in the younger man's mind-set and allowed himself a self-congratulatory moment. Despite the earlier mix-up, the director knew in his bones that Lucien Clarke was like no Dreamwalker he'd ever met. The kid was an unknown quantity and if he ended up changing the way everyone thought about Dreamwalking, Grey would not be surprised. Reminding himself that he was supervising, Grey gave his attention to what was happening across the room.

Slowly, sensuously, Luc shed his clothing as Brad watched through hooded eyes, hand shuttling languidly up and down his rigid shaft. With a shy smile, Luc took hold of his own cock and squeezed gently. Brad's breath caught in his throat as cloudy bead of pre-come formed at the tip of the Spinner's handsome rod, proof of this vision's desire for Brad. Licking his lips, the blond let his legs drift farther apart.

"Look how hot you make me," Luc crooned. "I'm ready to come just looking at your big cock."

"Oh yeah," Brad moaned. "Talk to me."

"I'll do a lot more than that," Luc sauntered closer. "I'm going to ride that cock to the moon and back. It's so big and so beautiful; I can't wait to feel it stretching me."

"Yeah, baby. That's it. Come to papa."

Luc moved between Brad's muscular thighs, wrapping his fist around the other man's arousal. "It's so hard," he purred. "So hot and so long. I'm not sure I can take the whole thing."

“Oh, you’ll take it,” Brad said. “I’m gonna make you come so hard you’ll see stars.”

Luc knelt on the chair with his knees on either side of Brad’s hips and looked down, his face framed by tousled curls. “Make me come,” he challenged. “Better men than you have tried and I’ve ridden them to a standstill. If you think you’re the one to tame me, then bring it, stud.”

Brad groaned as Luc gripped his aching length and gave it a couple of rapid pumps. “Quit stallin’,” the blond said.

“You think you’re ready for me?”

“Hell yeah. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Luc flexed his thighs, lowering himself until the tip of Brad’s cock was at his entrance. This was dreamtime, no lube, no preparation necessary. Luc worked the head through the tight ring and paused to look down at Brad again. His dark eyes gleamed with a complicated emotion as he began to sink onto the hard shaft. Brad took a breath and held it as his arousal was enveloped in the boy’s tight heat. He let the air out in a big sigh as Luc settled onto his thighs.

“Told you you could take it,” Brad said.

“It’s so big,” Luc panted. “Just let me have a minute to get used to it.”

Brad raised his ass, pushing deeper and Luc gasped. “Feels good, doesn’t it?” the blond asked.

Luc nodded, giving Brad what he wanted. He knew the scenario would change soon, he could read it in the other man’s turquoise eyes. This lap dance was a trace fantasy left over from Brad’s adolescence. All Luc had to do was wait for the right moment to break through the subject’s façade of superficial desires and Spin the dream into the realm of the blond’s truest fantasy. This Brad was a swaggering stallion challenging a rival, but Luc could see deeper, straight into his soul.

“Not so cocky now, are you?” Brad asked.

Luc shook his head, teeth catching at his lower lip as he levered himself up.

“Where you goin’?” Brad’s fingers sank into Luc’s skin. “Let’s get busy.”

Luc leaned forward, dipping his head toward Brad’s. The blond tried to avoid the kiss, but Luc brushed his lips over the other man’s face until their mouths met. Luc ran his tongue around Brad’s lips until he opened up. Feeling his way carefully, Luc put his hands on Brad’s shoulders, tilting his face for better contact, and tasted the other man like he was some exotic dish. Brad moaned as the other Spinner tongue-fucked his mouth slowly and sweetly until something broke open inside him. Easing his grip on Luc’s hips, he surrendered to the exquisite sensation. Luc let go as well, allowing himself to be swept up with his partner in the warm wave of pure lust. He felt his spirit merge with the other man’s for a moment of perfect awareness and then the storm of erotic sparks flared, setting them both alight.

Carefully, Brad lifted Luc off his cock and carried him to the bed. Luc held his arms up and Brad lay down with his head on the Spinner’s shoulder. Nuzzling the young man’s neck, Brad snuggled in, pressing his full length against Luc’s. Tenderly, Luc stroked the tumbled golden locks as Brad ran his hands over every part of Luc he could reach. Luc responded in kind, lightly caressing Brad’s back and shoulders, running his fingers through the mist of hair on the broad chest.

Grey had taken a seat after Luc cleared the first hurdle, but now he sat forward and watched with interest. It seemed that the rookie Spinner had reached a deeper level of Casanova’s fantasies than Grey had suspected existed; this affectionate cuddling was definitely not in Brad’s known repertoire. Grey stared in amazement as the two men exchanged several slow, deep kisses without making a move toward one another’s cocks. Shaking his head, he bid silent farewell to the lovers and left them to it. Some things were not meant to be shared, even in a dream.

Luc was aware of his guide’s departure, but Brad was conscious of nothing but the unconditional love that was being

lavished on him and his impulse to match it. Ardently, he stroked, licked, and sucked at Luc's flesh, working his way down the willowy body at a pace that said he had all night and intended to do a thorough job. Luc had the feeling that he could call this off now without any repercussions, but to his surprise, he felt a desire that was nearly the equal of Brad's. As his arousal was engulfed in warm wetness, he gazed down at the other man's thick blond hair and felt a strong pulse in his groin. Brad was his type: fair and well built with an undeniable masculinity that could not be acquired, but was inborn.

However, Luc knew that Brad was not The One the same way he knew that grass wasn't red. Brad was just a beautiful, golden-haired man that he was sharing a fantasy with. Stop it; he berated himself. You aren't on your own time; do your dreaming later. Brad rolled Luc underneath him, rubbing their hard cocks together, and Luc pushed his own desires aside to concentrate on the task at hand. But some day, he thought, some day I'll know what this feels like for real when I find my dream lover.

CHAPTER THREE

LUC woke and realized that Grey must have undressed him and put him to bed. He wasn't surprised that he didn't remember. The session with Brad aka Casanova had wrung him out like a dishrag. He'd been loved up and no mistake. There were no physical symptoms, no bruises, no hickeys, no ache in his ass, but he had what amounted to a sex hangover. He swung his legs over the side of the bed with a groan as the intercom squawked at him.

"Wakey wakey," Grey said with what Luc considered unfair cheeriness.

"Come on in," he said. "I'm going to have a quick shower."

"Make it fast," Grey said. "Unless you're in no hurry to sign your contract."

Luc let out a shout and heard Grey chuckling as the director walked away from the speaker beside the door. Running his hands through his sleep-tousled hair, Luc turned the shower on full blast and stepped under the stinging spray. Fifteen minutes later, thanks to the resilience of youth, he was breezing into the living room, fully dressed, and ready for another day. "How do I look?" he asked exuberantly.

"Like a new penny," Grey said. "Ready to join the ranks of Dreamscape?"

"So it's official?"

"You passed with flying colors. Brad tells me he's never had better sex, asleep or awake."

Luc looked down at his shoes. "I don't know what to say."

"You don't have to say anything. Your talent speaks for you. Come on; let's not keep Alec waiting."

The intimidating receptionist Luc remembered from his first day granted them access to Alec's suite, and Grey knocked on the inner door. Alec called out, and they entered, sitting down to wait until the V.P. finished his phone conversation and acknowledged them.

"So Mr. Clarke," Alec said. "It appears Dreamscape would be better with you than without."

"Thank you, sir," Luc said. "I'm glad you think so."

Alec cleared his throat. It was nearly impossible to look at Luc without remembering the feel of that sweet mouth around his cock, but Alec was made of fairly stern stuff. Manfully, he faced Luc and slid the contracts across the desk. Uncapping a Mont Blanc pen, he handed it to the young man. Luc gave the print a cursory glance, but Grey had already explained the standard clauses to him. They sounded more than fair, and he had no qualms about signing his name on the bottom line. As he gave the pen back to Alec, their fingers touched briefly. Alec pulled back and the pen fell to the leather blotter with a soft thud. Luc sat back with stricken look.

"I'm sorry," Alec said. "Luc, please don't let my foolishness affect you. It's not your fault."

Before Luc could answer, the door opened and someone called out. "Hey, Alec. Did you forget that you were supposed to meet me downstairs? Oh, sorry. I didn't know there was anyone with you. I'll just wait out here."

Luc had a jumbled impression of hair like golden jackstraws, Siberian blue eyes and bone structure like geometry. He instantly recognized the man as Alec's friend from the sailing picture, but it was the voice that transfixed him, entering through his ears to travel down his spine and setting off a sympathetic vibration in his groin that made his cock stir against his thigh. And then the stranger was closing the door, leaving Luc thunderstruck.

“Well,” Alec said. “I believe Grey can take it from here and I’ve got a lunch date. Luc, welcome to the Dreamscape family.”

“Thank you,” Luc said, rising to his feet as Grey and Alec stood. They went to the door and Grey held it open for the other two. Luc searched the outer room, but Alec’s lunch date was nowhere to be seen. He didn’t feel quite confident enough to ask after the man, and before he knew it, Grey was gone and he was in the elevator by himself on the way back to the dorm. Left to his own devices, he decided to take a nap, but a pair of vivid blue eyes haunted his thoughts and he found no rest. He paced around his new home trying to find a comfortable place to settle. His last apartment might have been a lot smaller, but he had all his favorite spots: the chair at the kitchen table that had overlooked the alley and the recliner that seemed ready for the dump, but fit his body perfectly. He sat briefly on the sectional leather couch, picking a book up off the coffee table and putting it back down without opening it. Glancing at the entertainment center, he wished for his CD’s and movies. Maybe tomorrow he’d go pack. He wondered briefly if the company would have a fit if he moved in his ratty recliner.

Luc decided to see if anyone was downstairs. Maybe he could scare up a game of pool, or go soak in the hot tub. The hot tub sounded like the better idea. Ten minutes later, Luc grabbed a towel off the rack in the changing room, draped it around his neck, and went down to the deck. Lowering himself into the water, he let his head fall back, closed his eyes, and let his thoughts drift until someone else got into the tub, almost sitting on him. Jumping up with a curse, he sloshed water over the edge.

Davis Dorchester chuckled. “Relax, Sleeping Beauty.”

“Sleeping Beauty?” Luc asked, slipping down in the seat.

Davis grinned. “Have you looked in a mirror lately? You should see yourself: face flushed, wet curls. Damn. You’re the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen.”

Luc’s eyes closed as he relaxed into the strong jet at his back. “Fuck off, Petal.”

“God, you learn fast. Where’d you hear that already?” Davis replied, not at all fazed by the retort. “Besides, I don’t plan to fuck off until nine.”

Luc perked up slightly. “You’ve got a Dreamwalk tonight?”

Davis’s mouth spread into a satisfied grin as he leaned back and closed his eyes. “No, I’ve got a date. There’s nothing like making love in hot water, and then jumping into the pool. Do you have a boyfriend?”

“No.” Luc settled deeper in the water and shifted his cock. Talking about sex always made him hard. His high school buddies had teased him about how easily he was aroused. “I want to save my Dreamwalking for my job, at least for a while.”

Davis opened his eyes and focused on Luc through the steam. “You’ve Spun dreams for your past boyfriends?”

“Of course. I’m not a virgin.” Luc sounded indignant.

Davis pulled himself slightly out of the water, hooking an elbow over the side. “So what have you done?”

“Well, I lost my virginity with a friend, almost accidentally, when I was fourteen. Since then, I’ve had sex with men and women, but I definitely prefer men. I’ve topped, I’ve bottomed, tried bondage, used toys, had multiple partners, some S & M, role-playing...”

Davis stopped Luc in mid-list. “Are you speaking of actual experiences, or was all this in dreamtime?”

“Dreamtime,” Luc answered.

A niggling suspicion began to bother the older Dreamwalker. “What experience do you have in realtime?”

“Never wanted any,” Luc answered, “There’s so much freedom in dreams. You never have to worry about condoms, or lube, or any of the other mess of realtime intercourse.”

Davis winced at the clinical term. He personally saw Dreamwalking as a job. You made love in realtime. “Are you telling me you have no realtime experience at all?”

“What would be the point?”

Davis sat back again with a knowing smile. "That's something that only the right person can teach you."

An image of the striking man from Alec's office crept into Luc's mind like a cat burglar. When Luc fell silent, Davis shot a glance at the gorgeous newcomer. He felt a little guilty, but he wasn't really betraying a confidence. For Luc's own well being, Davis felt he should tell Grey about the boy's lack of realtime sexual experience. Right now, he intended to enjoy his new colleague's charming company, until it was time to meet his lover.

LUC grinned as he managed to punch in his recently-issued security code without pulling the cheat sheet out of his wallet. He wandered into the common room, surprised to find almost all of his housemates hanging around drinking beer and munching on snacks. "Is it somebody's birthday?" he asked, taking a handful of pretzels and grabbing a mug.

Grey walked up and handed him an envelope. Reluctantly setting down the food, Luc withdrew a single sheet of paper. His smile grew as he scanned the page. "I'm done?" he asked, excitedly.

"Yep," Brad said in. "No more late night visits to my room." He paused long enough to waggle his eyebrows at Luc in an exaggerated leer. "Unless you really want to."

Luc whooped, throwing his arms around Grey. "I'm a fully licensed Dreamwalker! When do I get my first job?"

"Tonight," Grey answered, handing Luc a disc. "I can guide you in if you want."

Luc almost refused automatically, but gave the offer some thought before he answered. He was confident he could do it without assistance, but a little extra supervision, just in case, wasn't a bad thing. Somehow, without being aware of it, he had matured in the past few weeks. "I'd like that," he answered. "Thank you, Grey."

"You should've have let the bloodsuckers throw Luc's party," Toby interjected, walking up and slapping Luc on the shoulder.

“Bloodsuckers?” Luc asked, looking puzzled.

Karl Heiss laughed, ruffling Luc’s curls as he walked past on his way to refill his beer. “The supernatural guys always throw a kick ass party! Nothing beats a Halloween bash hosted by vampires.”

“But they aren’t really vampires, are they?” The other Dreamwalkers laughed at the worried look on Luc’s face.

“Vampires, werewolves and spooks, oh my,” Brad smirked. “But only in dreamtime. It’s a Dreamscape party: anything goes and no messy clean up. You’d love it!”

The possibilities swarmed through Luc’s mind, making him a little dizzy. Sipping his beer, he looked around the room. “Where’s Cutter?”

As if speaking the man’s name conjured him like a demon, Cutter walked off the elevator. “Beer? And no one invited me?”

“You should have received notice this morning when Luc’s official documentation came in,” Grey said. “The subject line was Celebration.”

“What’s there to celebrate? Luc losing his training wheels? Big deal,” Cutter patted Luc’s ass. “When you’re ready for a real man, Sweet Cheeks, come and find me.”

As the brooding Dreamwalker walked away, Luc gave an exaggerated shudder. Davis appeared at his side, glaring at Cutter’s back. “Don’t ever take him up on that,” he warned. “He only comes on to men he thinks he can bully.”

“He can’t bully me,” Luc said. “I may be younger than he is, but I’m no pushover.”

The redhead grinned. “Can this super-confident Dreamwalker really be my naïve little Beauty?”

The group laughed, dispelling the last of the gloom Cutter had brought in with him. The conversation turned to Luc’s accomplishments and his upcoming date, as Brad insisted on calling the assignment.

“Who’s the client?” Davis asked.

“You’re going to love this, Petal,” Grey said. “It’s Mr. Teller.”

A chorus of high-pitched oohs and ahs from his colleagues made Luc suspicious. “What’s wrong with this Teller guy?” he asked.

“Not a damn thing,” Brad said. “If you’ve got good lungs.”

“Nothing wrong with yours,” Toby remarked, batting his eyes at Brad.

“Morgan Teller is a dream, if you’ll excuse the expression,” Davis said. “He loves sex and plenty of it, but his fetish is underwater action.”

“The man owns a deep sea salvage operation,” Karl put in. “I’d love some time with him, but he likes a more... willowy partner, someone a bit... fem.”

“Oh come on, Karl,” Davis said. “You know that ‘s not true. Morgan isn’t attracted to feminine men... just extremely good looking ones.”

“Are you saying I’m not good looking?” Karl glowered.

“Pull in your horns, Cupcake,” Grey said. “We all know you’ve got a soft center.”

“Don’t be giving away all my secrets,” Karl leered, and Luc saw that the brooding demeanor was an act. The big man was a lamb in wolf’s clothing.

Looking around the room, Luc realized that these were his peers; they understood him better than anyone ever would and this could be his home if he chose. Somewhere in the back of his heart, he had the idea that there could be something more, a deeper, more complete connection, and the face of Alec’s friend came to mind again. Putting the man out of his head, Luc listened to his new comrades share anecdotes about Morgan Teller. Soon, he’d have stories of his own to tell.

THE sun was high overhead, chipping flakes of crystal off the rolling waves. Luc breathed deeply, savoring the salty tang of the sea air as he looked around to orient himself. He stood upon the

deck of an eighty-foot yacht gliding proudly over the ocean on a cruise that was strictly for pleasure. Her captain made his living from the sea, but that had not marred his enjoyment of all things nautical. Luc was well aware of this; he had studied the client's dossier conscientiously, wanting to shine on his first real assignment. The brash cockiness of his amateur days, relying on raw talent, had been replaced by a confidence in the techniques he'd learned.

The ship sailed on in dreamtime without need of a crew to keep her on course, but Luc knew he would find Morgan Teller at the helm. It was not something he had read, or been told; he simply knew it, because he was now connected to the man's psyche by the invisible threads he wove. Glancing down, Luc exerted his will and rid himself of all residual clothing representation. His skin was now as pale and luminous as alabaster and his hair was waist-length, tangled by the winds of passage. Around one slim ankle was a circlet of gold links shaped like doubloons, a grace note that the Dreamwalker was confident the client would appreciate.

Morgan Butler turned from the wheel to look over his shoulder, eyes widening in disbelief as the beautiful young man approached. The salvager was fascinated by the legends of the sea, especially tales of mermaids and selkies, and though he knew intellectually that the fanciful tales were made up by men too long at sea, in his soul he wanted them to be true. As the lithe figure came closer, skin glistening with pearls of water, dark eyes shining like a treasure trove, Morgan's heart began to beat faster with wild hope. Facing the stranger that moved with the fluid grace of an underwater creature, Morgan smiled invitingly. "You're supposed to ask permission before coming aboard," he said.

Luc smiled back, but didn't say a word. He had the client's measure now and went deeper, sculpting in smaller strokes, reinforcing the initial impression, allowing the man's buried fantasies to guide the Spin. Tilting his chin down, Luc looked at Morgan from under his long lashes, an expression Toby had told him was damn near irresistible. His tongue flicked out to moisten his lips as he held the man's eyes. Running his hands down his sides, he drew Morgan's gaze to his midsection: the flat belly

divided by a silky line of sable hair, the slim hips and the handsome cock curving up in anticipation of a caress. The client took one step, and then another, until he was close enough to touch. Luc lifted his head and Morgan's eyes followed the exquisite curve of the long neck, eyes widening as the stranger's hair blew back, and he noticed the delicate pink gills behind the pointed ears. "Who, or what, are you?" Morgan breathed.

Luc's smile turned impish. Beckoning with his forefinger, he backed toward the rail. With a last lingering stare at the sailor, the Spinner dove overboard, entering the water as cleanly as the blade of a knife. Breaking the surface, he looked up at the ship. Morgan hesitated for a moment, but when Luc raised a hand, the client shucked his clothing and joined him in the sea.

The salvager took a deep breath as the boy grabbed his hand and pulled him beneath the waves. The selkie's flesh was cool to the touch, but warmth spread through Morgan's body from the point of contact, and the chill of the water faded away. Deeper and deeper, the merman drew the sailor until they neared the limits of the man's lung capacity. Morgan tugged on the hand that gripped his so strongly, indicating that he needed to return to the surface, but the boy continued to dive. Beginning to worry in earnest, Morgan tried to free himself to no avail. The creature was far stronger than he looked and determined to take his new friend to the ocean floor. Lungs burning, desperate for oxygen, Morgan struggled frantically, and the selkie halted at last. As the last breath left his body, Morgan gazed into the merman's fathomless eyes as the beautiful being floated closer. Lips like petals covered the man's and air rushed back into his lungs. The selkie grinned, turned and dove deeper in a clear invitation to the chase. Kicking hard, Morgan followed the glimmer of opalescent skin until they reached the bottom and the boy vanished. The sailor panicked until he saw the crevice and floated through into a scene from his adolescent dreams.

The sea cave was dry and held no more water than the pool the merman was climbing out of. The air was warm, and shimmered with a vagrant light that danced at the periphery of Morgan's vision, as if the edges of the cave disappeared into a silvery mist.

The man hauled himself up onto the soft sand and took several deep breaths as he looked around. In every corner were open chests and strongboxes spilling golden coins and bright gems into piles that were knee-deep in places. It was as though the holds of a hundred treasure ships had been dumped here, and yet, the entire inventory could not compare to his guide's rare beauty. The lithe selkie lowered himself to recline on a bed of doubloons and jewels, his skin shining like the inside of a shell, garlanded by the ropes of his wet hair. As Morgan stared, the vision parted his long legs and gave the man a glimpse of the gate to paradise.

Luc was expecting an enthusiastic response to his provocative gesture, but the client surpassed all imagination, coming across the sandy floor at a dead run to throw himself to his knees at the Spinner's side. Delving even deeper, Luc added a few more gossamer strands to the fantasy, strengthening the impressions of smell and taste to match those of sight and touch.

Morgan leaned in, breathing deeply of the scent that rose to delight his nostrils like incense from the temple of Neptune. Cool fingers cupped the back of his neck, drew him in, and he eagerly joined his mouth to the boy's, savoring a new wine. Feeling instantly, euphorically drunk, Morgan pulled the selkie into his arms and took control of the kiss.

Luc gave up his mouth, opening completely, wrapping lissome limbs around the client. With a deep groan, Morgan lay down atop the slender body, completely immersed, living his fantasy with no notion that it was anything but real. With mouth and hands, the sailor greedily explored every curve and hollow of the myth become flesh, and Luc responded with a pitch perfect performance. Under the man's touch, his skin took on a rosy hue, his lips reddened and his eyes shone with a dew of desire. Morgan ran a hand over Luc's hair and it dried in the wake of the caress, floating out in tresses lighter than thistle down. "God, I wish you could talk," the man said, framing the selkie's face between his palms, drinking in a beauty too flawless to be human.

Luc's expressive eyes told the man that they didn't need words and brought their lips together again. Running his hands down Morgan's shoulders and upper arms, he admired the hard muscles

in quick little squeezes as the client's grip on him tightened. Reveling in the sailor's adoring lust, Luc let the smoldering coals of his desire flare to life, matching his partner caress for caress. When Morgan lowered his head to nuzzle and nip at the merman's pointed nipples, Luc threw back his head and raised his ass, rubbing his hard cock against the other man's. Luc's enthusiasm lifted the client to an even higher level of arousal that would brook no further delay.

Kneeling between the Spinner's thighs, Morgan took hold of his cock. He had never felt so long or hard in his life, not even as a teenager. Working up some saliva, he was about to spit in his hand, when the selkie sat up. The lovely creature grasped Morgan's shaft and tugged gently, placing the head against his opening. Unable to resist the urge, Morgan pushed and his length sank effortlessly into a socket that gripped him like a fist in a wet velvet glove. Though he had made love to many women and men in his life, he had no words to describe the sensation. Luc lifted his pelvis, encouraging the client to thrust and Morgan pulled back a bit, breath hissing through his teeth at the heat and friction generated by the action. The selkie whimpered softly, watching every tiny change of expression on the man's face as he rocked forward. The small sound was a clarion call to the sailor. Smoothly, Morgan thrust and withdrew, his pleasure mounting with each stroke, sure that the next one would send him over the edge. And then it got better.

Homing in on the client's most cherished sexual fantasy, Luc surged up from the floor, taking Morgan by the shoulders and pinning him down on his back. Crouching astride the man, palms braced against the broad chest, the Spinner rose up and bore down, riding the upstanding cock. Looking down into the client's eyes, Luc saw how much this meant to him and drew out the sweet tension as long as he could. It was obvious to him now that this was much more than some jaded rich guy looking for a new way to get off. For Morgan, this bordered on the sacred, as though he made love to the sea itself, and that reverence transferred to Luc through the web he'd spun. Anxiety over his technique and worries about whether or not he'd impress his superiors faded from

Luc's consciousness. The only thing on his mind was fulfilling the promise he'd made when he lured the sailor into the sea.

Morgan thrust harder, seeking relief from the tension that coiled tighter and tighter, spiraling ever upward until he felt he could take no more. Luc sensed the penultimate moment and came with a wild cry like whalesong, dappling the client's belly with foamy, pearlescent come. Morgan's arousal jerked strongly and shot a powerful stream of seed, as his climax stretched out and out, until he went limp on the sand, sated with a surfeit of pleasure. Luc leaned over him, curtaining Morgan's face with his long hair, crooning wordlessly in his ear, and basking in the knowledge that he had done this. He had given Morgan what the man wanted most, had made him happy, and left him with a memory he would treasure until death. Now Luc understood why this was more than just a good paycheck and a chance to show off his skills. It was an avocation, not a career, and he was glad he'd been called to it. This was what he'd been born to do; he had no doubts now at all.

CHAPTER FOUR

ALEC squinted at the horizon like a gunslinger staring down a rival. The swells were gentle today, lifting the boat and letting it back down in a soothing motion that didn't have its usual calming effect on Alec's inner turmoil.

"You don't have a lot to say," Whit said, nudging Alec's arm with a fresh, cold bottle of stout, already opened.

The Brit smiled up at his friend, balancing his fishing pole against the rail as he took the beer. After a long swallow, he rolled the cool glass over his forehead. "Sun's strong today."

Whit sat, propping his feet on the rail, not deflected by Alec's attempt to change the subject, but willing to bide his time. "It's been too long since we've been out on the water."

"I've been spending a lot more time at the office," Alec explained, setting his drink on the deck. Picking up the rod, he focused on the glistening surface of the water.

"How's the new Spinner working out?" Whit persevered.

"Which one?"

Whit rolled his eyes. "Someone else, Alec. That line might work on someone else. I know you too well."

With a sigh, Alec sank back into the molded plastic seat. "The kid's bloody brilliant. He completed his training in record time, handles a workload that would exhaust our most experienced Spinners and has charmed everyone from the boardroom down to the janitorial staff. I've got an entire file drawer that is nothing but

letters singing his praises and he's only been working for three months. This kid is the fucking Leonardo da Vinci of dreams and desires." The Brit shook his head as he reached for his beer.

Whit rotated his seat until he could see Alec's expression. "Sounds like he's great for business," he said neutrally.

"Oh, he is. The big boss is thrilled. He actually flew in from London to meet the kid personally. The head of Dreamscape International! He hasn't left London in years."

"You should have just sent the kid to him in a dream." Whit chuckled into the bottle as he raised it to his lips and drained it.

Alec glared, dropping his fishing rod to the deck with a clatter and getting up for another beer. Pulling two bottles from the melting ice, he opened them and handed one to Whit as he sat back down.

"You gonna make me ask?" Whit said, eyes focused on the water. When Alec continued to glower silently, the artist plunged ahead. "Why does it piss you off that this kid is so good?"

The silence stretched until Alec swore he could hear the movement of the molecules of air around him. "Because," he sighed, "if Luc really is that bloody brilliant, and he is, make no mistake about that, then... he's probably not wrong about me."

Whit pursed his lips, nodding slowly. "I thought we'd already sort of decided that."

"You!" Alec clarified. "You decided that."

"We, Alec. We decided that you were going to be open to the idea of a relationship with a man, remember?"

"As I recall there was a second part to that agreement," Alec said, reaching for his fishing pole. "Been out on any dates lately?"

Whit put his feet back up on the railing, beer bottle resting on his stomach, the condensation pooling on his tanned skin. "We really are pathetic, aren't we?"

"Well," Alec grinned. "At least we have each other, mate. It could be a lot worse."

BOYS' HOUSE was quiet. It was a week night, and the Dreamwalkers that had clients had completed their Spins and turned in. A few of the occupants were downstairs in the game room, and a couple were in the hot tub, but it was a subdued evening without the usual boisterous sounds of young men hanging out. Only Luc was still working; the popular Spinner was pulling a double tonight by his own choice. The first Spin was repeat business, an aging rock star that liked Luc to pretend to be an adoring groupie, strictly an oral fantasy that usually left Luc in the mood for more. The second client was a regular customer of Dreamscape, but new to Luc. Dixon Behr, the epitome of a Wall Street turk, had heard about the hot new Dreamwalker and had to try him. After the first fantasy ended at ten o'clock, Luc got up, drank some water, took a piss and lay back down on the couch. Sometime around ten forty-five, he entered the second dream.

At eleven twenty by the bedside clock, Grey woke from a sound sleep, clapping his hands to his ears as if he could shut out the searing pain in his skull. He stood and experienced a wave of vertigo so strong that his stomach rolled over and gave up its contents. Warm vomit splattered the director's bare feet as two more spikes of white-hot steel were driven into his temples. Moaning unconsciously, he staggered to the door and scrabbled at the knob until it opened. As he half-fell into the hall, he batted at the elevator remote switch. The doors swooshed open well before he managed to crawl the length of the entry, but they obligingly waited for him before closing again. He curled up in the corner around the agony at his core, a shrieking in his head reverberating like a fire alarm: a wordless cry for help that could not be ignored.

The doors opened on the second floor and the first thing Grey saw was Toby slumped in his doorway, holding his head. The Dreamwalker's childlike face was contorted in anguish, but he opened his eyes when Grey brushed his shoulder. The suffering that shone so clearly from Toby's gaze almost made Grey collapse beside him, but Toby shook his head. 'Luc,' he mouthed. 'Help, Luc.' Grey nodded, fighting off the dry heaves as he crawled through the open door of Luc's room. In the dimness, he could see the object of this compulsion on the couch, writhing as though he

lay atop hot coals. Brad knelt beside him, one hand on Luc's arm, shaking as though he had grabbed a live wire. And that desperate cry for help continued to bell in Grey's head.

Incredible as it was, the sleeping Spinner seemed to be broadcasting an alarm to everyone with the power to pick up the signal. Stunned by the implications, Grey caught hold of the waistband of Brad's boxers and pulled backward, using all his weight to break the connection between the Dreamwalkers. Brad toppled to the carpet and lay without moving. Grey hauled himself up by the arm of the sofa and looked down. His heart contracted painfully at Luc's agonized expression, like a plaster death mask of a martyred saint. Licking his lips nervously, Grey stretched out his hand in one of the bravest acts of his life.

The director's fingertips brushed Luc's forehead. He felt fear and the adrenalin of panic like ice water in his veins. His mouth was dry and full of wadded cloth, and when he tried to swallow, he tasted copper. He tried to open his eyes and realized he was blindfolded. Something brushed the skin of his inner thigh and he lost it. Oh God! No! Please! Not again! A scream shredded Grey's throat, as he began to tremble uncontrollably. No. No. He couldn't take it again. He'd reached the limit of what he could bear. He'd go mad if the monster forced him one more time. Grey screamed again, long and loud, at the sense of inexorable pressure at his misused opening. No. No! No! Grey's thoughts dissolved into the blank static of white noise.

When Karl entered the room on hands and knees, slightly less affected than his brothers, he found Grey bent over Luc, hoarsely shouting one word over and over. "What the fuck?" the big man groaned as the rising spiral of pure terror hammered him to the floor. Clutching one of Grey's ankles, Karl yanked the other man down beside him. "What do I do?" Karl asked hopelessly. He got no answer from Grey. The director was in a fetal ball on the rug, moaning low in his chest.

"Shit!" Karl dug his cell phone out of his jeans, and hit the emergency number that hadn't been used once in his four years at Dreamscape. He listened to the calm voice that answered, nodded, and dropped the phone like a piece of litter. Leaning close to

Luc's ear, he whispered the unique failsafe phrase that had been implanted during training. The mental barrage ceased as Luc's eyes sprang open and he sat up, gasping for air like a man saved from drowning. His harrowed gaze met Karl's and his face crumpled under the sudden storm of tears. Karl opened his arms and after a moment's hesitation, Luc slid from the couch into his embrace. Moments later, Dreamscape medical personnel arrived and took charge in their ruthlessly efficient manner.

"WHAT in hell happened, Grey?" Alan Adair McManus asked, setting down his tumbler. There was no point in beating around the bush. Grey had been pronounced fit by the med staff, and looked well, if a bit pale and shaken. The amenities were out of the way, and both men were fortified with the warm glow of a truly noble single malt. Never mind that both had been up for considerably longer than twenty-four hours now. It was time for some answers, and as the Director of Operations, Adair expected them to be forthcoming.

"I was there with Luc," Grey said, ice rattling in his glass. "Not just in the dream. I *was* him. And when Brad wakes up, I'll bet he tells you the same thing."

"I'll take your word for it." Instead of returning to sit behind his desk, Adair folded himself into the leather chair next to Grey. At six feet four inches, the director made standard-sized furniture look suited to a child's room.

"Luc broadcast a distress signal that every Spinner heard, to a greater or lesser degree," Grey said. "It doesn't seem to be related to the level of talent, though. Maybe it has something to do with how well your talent meshes with Luc's or... Sorry, sir, I didn't mean to digress. It's just that... this isn't easy to talk about."

"Take your time."

Grey breathed deep and plunged in. "I was bound. Wrists and ankles together. Hog-tied, you know? There was a bar of metal holding my knees apart and I was gagged and blindfolded. Jesus! My heart's beating fast just remembering. I felt so fucking helpless."

Adair didn't turn a hair at the crude expletive. "I don't understand. I saw the dossier on this client less than an hour ago. There's nothing in there about bondage fantasies. Not one word."

"That's because Dixon Behr has never ordered a B & D Spin in the three years he's been patronizing us. He's a moonlight and roses kind of guy, the exact opposite of the shark he is in realtime. The wildest he ever gets is doing it al fresco. He likes ski lodges and making love in the snow without worrying about frostbite. There has never been the slightest indication that he enjoys... I feel a bit queasy."

"Take deep breaths. Better?"

Grey nodded, taking a measure of comfort from his boss's calm demeanor. "It wasn't just bondage for kicks. It was rape. There was a layer in Mr. Behr's sexual profile that was so deeply buried that I didn't see it, but Luc did. When he connected with the client, he tapped into it and triggered the scenario. His fear and pain fed Behr's hidden fantasy until they were caught in a loop." Grey shuddered. "It was horrible beyond anything I've ever imagined, but I'll get over it. I'm not so sure about Luc. Though it was vivid, I really only caught the spillover; Luc lived every second of it."

"I want a full investigation, of course. We have an agent at Mr. Behr's apartment handling damage control there, but this will not be over for some time, I fear. No indeed. I feel the weight of calamity just starting to settle." Adair pinched the bridge of his nose. "Go get some rest, Grey. None of this is your fault. In fact, you're one of the heroes of this disaster. Well done, lad. Very well done."

"Thank you, sir," Grey managed to say despite the sudden tightness of his throat. He smiled at the man who had conducted his tests when he'd first joined Dreamscape. There was no one he trusted or admired more. Closing the door gently behind him, he trudged from the administration building and caught a ride to the dormitory. He was grateful that his fellow Dreamwalkers didn't bombard him with questions when he passed through the ground floor. He felt like he could sleep for a week, but he knew no

amount of rest would ease the weariness in his soul. Only seeing Luc whole again would heal Grey's conscience. For no matter what anyone said, Grey was responsible for the Spinners in his House, and he had let one of them down. The tears came then, soaking into his pillow, until exhaustion overcame him.

THE first thing that Luc became aware of was a steady beeping sound. The rhythmic noise had almost lured him back to sleep when a soft cough jerked him back to consciousness. Forcing himself to stay awake, he blinked until his eyes adjusted to the harsh light.

"Luc?"

Luc turned his head, surprised when it didn't hurt. He remembered everything that had happened in the Spin that went bad. His body should feel like he'd been hit by a train, but the lack of physical damage was the only upside of being raped in a dream. Luc shuddered at the thought and focused on the man next to him. "Davis," he croaked, his dry throat closing up before he could speak two syllables.

"Just a second!" The other man jumped up and fetched a glass of water, holding the adjustable straw to Luc's lips.

Luc struggled to rise up on his elbows. "Thanks," he sighed.

"Here... let's raise the bed up a little," Davis suggested, pushing a button on the rail and working to arrange Luc's pillows. "Better?"

The young Dreamwalker smiled his gratitude, his eyelids drooping. It took too much effort to keep them open. "Am I on drugs?" he asked, letting his eyes close so he could use his energy to talk.

"Yeah, the good ones. You've been asleep for almost three days."

Luc's eyes flew open. "What? That's... impossible. It just happened."

Davis put a restraining hand on Luc's shoulder. "Careful. We don't need you passing out." When Luc relaxed back against the pillows, Davis filled him in. "Karl used the failsafe to bring you out, but you were hysterical and the med techs had to sedate you. Each time you've woken up, you've reacted with panic, so they've been keeping you sedated until your subconscious mind could work on accepting the... accepting what happened. This is the first time I've seen you with your eyes open that you weren't screaming." Taking Luc's hand, Davis continued. "We've all been worried sick about you. Someone from the boys' house has been at your side every minute since you were brought in."

"Sure, I can see Cutter as a ministering angel." Luc's chuckle turned into a hacking cough, and he leaned forward as Davis patted him on the back.

Davis sat on the side of the bed, offering Luc more water. "He did it, though. We all did. Without our Beauty, we're just a bunch of Beasts."

Luc started to laugh again. Coughing, he reached for the water. "Oh God, Davis, don't make me laugh."

Davis grinned. "Sorry. It's so damn good to hear it again that I can't help myself."

Luc took a sip as his expression grew serious again. "Is the client okay?"

Scuffing his foot on the floor, Davis picked at a nub of thread on his jeans. "Yeah, I think so. Dixon Behr was as damaged by this as you were, and he doesn't have the solace that he was the victim."

"He is a victim," Luc disagreed. "I was too full of myself. I pushed too hard... went too deep, and then didn't know how to handle it. If I'd been more experienced..."

"Don't say that!" Davis squeezed Luc's hand. "You have more talent in your little finger than the rest of us put together. We couldn't even handle the overflow of what you were going through. If it hadn't been for Karl... God love him."

“That’s what I like to hear,” came a booming voice from the doorway. “Don’t let me interrupt. You were finally admitting that I’m a god and that you’re wildly in love with me,” Karl chuckled, walking into the room with an armful of flowers.

“Crazy fucker,” Davis threw back, grinning.

Karl winked. “So you only want me for sex? Works for me.”

Luc smiled at the banter, truly relaxing for the first time since he’d woken up. He felt like it was going to be okay. The world hadn’t changed. He just had to learn to interact with it again. And the first thing he needed to do was make another Dreamwalk. When you fall off the horse, you get right back on. Taking into account how comfortable he felt with Davis and Karl, he asked for a favor.

“Hi, Beauty,” Karl said, shifting lazily in the hot tub, making it apparent that he was naked and aroused.

Luc came to the edge and stared down into the roiling water, wisps of steam curling over his bare toes. “Hello, Cupcake,” he said automatically, his voice stripped of its usual teasing tone.

Playfully, Karl patted the surface of the water over his crotch. “Come on in; the water’s hard.”

A vagrant breeze slid over Luc’s skin, carrying enough of a chill to raise the fine hairs all over his body. The hot tub was inviting and so was Karl, giving off a delicious heat the young Spinner could feel from where he stood. There was no reason for his hesitation. He knew this location and this man; he was comfortable with both, and he was the extraordinarily gifted Lucien Clarke, the baddest Dreamwalker to ever Spin a fantasy.

Karl lowered his chin, looking up at his Housemate from under his brows, giving Luc his best glower. “Come on,” he said. “Before I turn all this water into steam.”

Luc stared into the other man’s smoldering gaze and straight through it. Willing himself to relax, he unfurled his talent, sending a tendril questing through the strata of Karl’s subconscious mind.

At least, that's what should have happened. However, all that actually happened was that Luc woke out of sorts with tears of frustration standing in his eyes. He got up from Grey's lap and the tears spilled over, winding slowly down his cheeks. Flinging away the director's sympathetic hand, Luc stalked to the window and looked out without seeing the view beyond. "I failed again," he said numbly.

"It's not a failure," Grey answered. "You've suffered a terrible blow to your psyche. I'd worry if you bounced back too fast. I really hoped that since you'd formed such a strong mental and emotional bond with Karl that..." Grey sighed. "I should have known when you couldn't relax with Davis that you wouldn't be able to let down your guard with anyone... yet."

"You don't have to baby me."

"But I enjoy it so much. Come on, Luc. Come away from the window. Put on your shoes and let's go have a drink, or two, or three."

"I don't think I feel like getting drunk."

"Oh dear. I'm beginning to think you really do have a problem. Come on. Put on a bright scarf. We'll find Petal and Cupcake and drag them out with us. When was the last time you left the grounds?" Grey was watching Luc carefully and didn't miss the look of dismay that flashed in the Spinner's dark eyes before it was veiled. "I'm not going to bully you, but I do wish you'd come out and blow off some steam."

"Are you going to nag me until I do what you want?"

"Of course."

"All right then. Call the others and I'll meet you downstairs." Luc slipped into his loafers and ran his fingers through his hair, grabbing a scarf as he walked out the door. He wasn't feeling colorful, but it was easier to wear the bright length of material than to bear the understanding look Grey would give him. "Pathetic," he muttered as he stepped out of the elevator in the common room.

"Oh my," Davis said, from the bar. "He walks in beauty like the night."

Karl put down his mug, nuzzling Davis's nape. "Mmm," he purred. "Luc's hot for sure, but strawberry blonds taste better."

"That's good to know," Davis murmured, beckoning Luc to join them. "But back off."

"Hi," Luc said, accepting a beer from Karl. "I didn't know you two were an item."

"We aren't," Davis said. "Karl was just horsing around."

Luc looked at Karl inquiringly, and Karl shrugged. "Petal was sitting there looking good enough to eat and you know us growing boys. We eat like horses. Some of us are like horses in other ways, too," he leered.

"Where's Grey?" Luc asked, ignoring the vulgar remark.

"Slight change of plans, Beauty," Davis said. "Grey got a call from admin and had to leave. Afraid you're stuck with us."

"Maybe we should just..." Luc began.

"No," Karl said firmly. "Grey said to take you out and that's what we're going to do. Get your gorgeous ass in gear, because I am going to show you the town tonight."

"You'd need a map and a flashlight just to find your own ass," Cutter said from the other side of the bar. "How are you going to show our little Beauty a good time?"

"I suppose you could do better?" Davis arched an eyebrow at the annoying Spinner.

"Than him?" Cutter met Karl's resentful stare. "Of course, I could. Never send a boy to do a man's job."

Karl jumped to his feet, but Davis stopped him with a hand on his arm. "Not worth it," Davis said. "Why do you respond when you know that's what he wants?"

"Where are you thinking of going?" Cutter asked.

"Blackie's, or maybe Madame Fifi's," Davis answered.

Cutter snorted. "Those places are for infants. Let me take you to a man's bar."

“Great,” Karl took up the challenge. “I’m dying to see what you consider a real man’s bar.”

One cab ride later with Cutter up front beside the driver, they slammed to a stop at the curb on a quiet city street. “Oh yeah,” Karl said with heavy sarcasm. “This joint’s really jumpin’.”

Luc smiled faintly, as Cutter led the way to the door. “I told you,” Cutter said. “This place isn’t for children that need bright lights and loud music to entertain them. This bar is for men that want to enjoy an excellent libation in an atmosphere where they can hear themselves think.”

“Then I don’t understand its appeal for you,” Davis teased.

“Hardy-fuckin’-har,” Cutter replied, holding the door for Luc. “Welcome to O’Malley’s, gents.”

The four men found a booth and a waiter came on silent feet to introduce himself as Jeremy and take their orders. Cutter insisted on buying the first round, and arrogantly ordered for everyone. Since he requested four black and tans with a shot neat on the side, no one complained. The young man waiting on them walked away with a murmured, “Excellent choice,” and Cutter frankly ogled his ass.

“Take a picture,” Karl suggested.

“Eat me,” Cutter said. “That kid’s got moves and don’t tell me you didn’t notice.”

“Oh, I noticed,” Karl said. “I just did it discreetly instead of panting like a dog.”

“Our waiter is very attractive,” Davis said in a conciliatory tone. “Don’t you think so, Beauty?”

“What?” Luc wrenched himself out of his trance. “I’m sorry; I wasn’t listening.”

“Never mind,” Davis said, following the line of Luc’s fixed stare. “I see you’ve noticed him, as well.”

“Who?”

“Our waiter. Isn’t he what you’re looking at?”

"I wasn't looking at anything. I was... I don't know where I was. My mind drifted," Luc was suddenly aware that he was the center of attention. "Maybe drifted isn't the right word. It was kind of like my mind got snagged by something and pulled away. That sounds absolutely insane, doesn't it?"

"It might if we weren't Dreamwalkers," Davis answered. "It doesn't sound crazy to me, but it is worrisome. You ought to let Grey know if it keeps happening."

"It hasn't happened before," Luc reassured his friend. "Just the once, just now."

"Pardon me," Jeremy said, as he came back to the table. "Your drinks, gentlemen."

"I hope you brought one for Cutter, too," Karl teased, "and not just for the gentlemen at the table."

"Then I guess Luc and I have two drinks each," Davis drawled, earning a reproachful look from Karl. "Oh honestly, Cupcake. Give it a rest for tonight. Let's just enjoy ourselves and not snipe at one another."

"Would you like a tab, sirs?" the waiter asked. "Or pay as you go?"

"This is my round," Cutter said, making a show of opening his wallet and displaying the thick sheaf of bills. "Here you are and here's something extra for you." Cutter handed the waiter a twenty, about a fifty per cent tip.

"Thank you," Jeremy said. "Very generous."

"You take care of us, and I'll take care of you," Cutter winked.

"The customer is always right," the waiter said neutrally. "Enjoy your drinks."

"What a hottie," Cutter leered as their server made his way back to the bar.

"Pretty blue eyes," Karl said. "They remind me a little of Toby's."

"Now there's a tasty morsel," Cutter said. "A pity Casanova bagged him first. Blue-Eyes hasn't looked at anyone else since."

"I think it's very sweet," Davis put in.

"You would, Petal," Cutter chuckled. "You're got a nice sugary coating yourself. Mind if I have a lick?"

Davis grabbed Karl's knee under the table and squeezed hard. To his great relief, Karl took the hint and didn't render Cutter incapable of using his tongue for licking, or anything else. "Sorry, Lassie," Davis said softly. "But a guy's got to have some standards."

Cutter responded to the ribbing in his usual manner: a scowl, a shrug and a long swallow of his stout. Wiping his mouth with the back of his hand, he picked up his shot and waited for the others to do the same. "To Sleeping Beauty," he said. "From what I hear, the most powerful Walker ever to Spin a wet dream."

"To Luc," Davis said. "And to his health."

"To Luc's mouth about which I've had numerous fantasies," Karl said.

"To my friends, present and absent," Luc raised his glass.

Everyone tossed back their shots and took sips of their beers. Their waiter looked over from the bar, eyed the level of their drinks and went back to putting clean wine glasses in the rack. Luc dropped his head into his hands with a small sound of discomfort that drew his companions' attention.

"Feeling all right?" Karl asked.

"I don't know," Luc answered slowly. "I feel... strange. Like a boat dragging an anchor. There's somewhere I want to go, but I don't know where it is, and I have weights tied around my ankles."

Davis and Karl exchanged a concerned glance. Cutter was looking speculatively at the top of the young Spinner's curly head. Luc was oblivious, as he struggled with the compulsion to be somewhere else that wanted him on his feet and moving, a restlessness that had settled in his bones and couldn't be shaken out. It had been growing since the Dreamwalk that had gone so terribly wrong, and tonight it was so strong that he felt a disorienting sensation of being in two places at once, as though he

was walking in someone else's skin. The vague queasiness in his middle upgraded to nausea that couldn't be ignored.

"I feel like I'm going to be sick," Luc said, as he stood up.

"Bathroom's that way," Cutter pointed.

"No, I want to go outside. I need... air."

Davis and Karl got up as Luc hurried to the door. "Maybe we should head home," Davis said. "I'm going with Luc and make sure he's all right."

"I'm coming, too," Karl said. "I'm just not in the mood for drinking tonight. Cutter?"

"I don't need to be in a mood to drink," Cutter replied. "Besides, I'm taking a shot at the waiter. I just hope he lives nearby."

"I guess we'll see you in the morning then," Karl said, as he followed Davis. "I'd tell you not to do anything that I wouldn't do, but that would be a waste of breath."

"Too right," Cutter raised his mug in farewell. "There isn't much I wouldn't do." As the door of O'Malley's closed behind his House-mates, Cutter turned to regard the young man at the bar like a wolf separating his prey from the herd. He'd seen enough of Lucien Clarke tonight anyway. It was apparent that the new bright star of Dreamscape International was as powerful as everyone claimed, but he was also damaged, badly and perhaps beyond repair. Cutter wouldn't have to worry about him as a rival for a while. And since Cutter had some free time, he might as well enjoy it. "Oi, Remy, lad!" he called out. "Another round over here, if you please."

CHAPTER FIVE

A connection was made and a cool, sexless voice answered on the other end. “Since you’re taking the risk to call from inside Dreamscape, I assume you have good news.”

“That depends on what you’d consider good news.”

“You have Lucien Clarke sedated and ready to deliver to us.”

“Then no, it’s not good news. In fact, it’s rather bad. The hit Clarke took on that Walk that went bad might have damaged him beyond repair. At least that’s the gossip around here.”

“That’s very, very bad news. The client was most specific. The client wants the best and we’ve already informed the client that we’ve found the best. If we don’t deliver, our reputation will suffer immeasurably.”

“Oh. Well, we can’t have that, can we?”

“Your insolent attitude has been noted on previous occasions. While you are uniquely placed to be of utmost value at the moment, it may not always be so. Must a more overt threat be made?”

“Not at all. I get the point. May I ask a question?”

“Go ahead.”

“Do you want Clarke no matter what shape he’s in?”

“That would be best. After all, we are scientists as well. Perhaps this disaster is an opportunity in disguise. Who knows what we can do with Mr. Clarke while he is vulnerable? It could be the perfect chance to rebuild his psyche to our specifications.”

“That’s why you’re on the phone and I’m in the field; you’ve got the smarts. All right, I’ll deliver him as quickly as I can, but you have to understand that it’s going to be very difficult. Luc is everyone’s darling, and he’s hardly ever alone.”

“Where there are no opportunities, a good operative creates them.”

“That’s a good one. Maybe you should put together a book of quotes for double agents.”

There was a click of disconnection and the agent realized his contact had hung up on him. That didn’t bode well, but fortunately he knew how to get back in the good graces of his employers. All he had to do was give them Lucien Clarke.

“HOW is he?” Adair McManus asked, elegant even when pacing nervously, his steps silent on the thick carpeting.

Grey didn’t ask whom the tall man meant by ‘he’. One person was on everyone’s mind right now and Grey had known when he got the summons exactly what the senior executive of Dreamscape International wanted to talk about. He might be fooled into thinking that Adair was angry, if he didn’t know that the director was more concerned with the welfare of the men in his employ than the fiscal bottom line. Adair’s official title was Director of Operations, and he was responsible for all the Dreamwalkers employed in North America. It was a responsibility that he took very seriously. Shaking his head, Grey met his superior’s pale blue-gray eyes and made his informal report. “It’s not good. I wouldn’t expect anything different after his experience, but he hasn’t progressed as I’d hoped.”

“Tell me everything you’ve tried.”

Grey pulled a file out of the leather briefcase at his feet. Flipping it open, he scanned the first sheet. He knew the timeline by heart, but it helped to have something to do with his hands while he talked. “Initially, we just gave him time. He saw a counselor daily for the first two weeks and then at least three times a week after that. Luc really wants to get back on the active list,

but six weeks after the incident, he was still unable to sleep without aid. He doesn't like depending on the drugs, but simply can't fall asleep without them. He went over seventy hours once before Davis coerced him into taking the pills."

"Insomnia is hard on a Dreamwalker."

Grey nodded, continuing. "About four weeks ago, he started cutting back on the meds successfully, only having to take something once or twice a week. He asked if he could try a guided Spin, like we did in training. We tried Brad first, since he was Luc's training partner at the beginning. Luc entered Brad's dream just fine. Didn't need my help at all, but once he was there, he couldn't read him."

Adair considered, elbows on the arms of the chair, long fingers steepled, tapping absently against his lips. "Did you try anyone else?"

Anticipating that question, Grey smiled faintly. "Of course. We tried three others from the house, including me. We even made an attempt with two of his repeat customers that were willing to help. The kid has quite a following. We have people offering to pay for his company even if he can't Spin a dream for them."

"Anything else?"

"I'm afraid not. We haven't tried anything new for several days, not because Luc isn't willing, but because I'm out of ideas."

The director focused on the wall of windows behind his desk overlooking the Dreamscape campus. "Let's move to the next conventional step. Bring him in for a guided Dreamwalk in the center where we can hook him up and monitor his brain activity. Maybe that will give us some clue as to what is going on."

"Okay." Grey got to his feet, giving voice to the thought on everyone's mind. "I'd really hate to lose Luc," he said. "He's the best Dreamwalker we've ever had."

"I know, but we have to be prepared to accept that what happened with Mr. Behr may have permanently closed a circuit in Luc's brain. We don't really know how the Dreamwalking gift works, so we can't predict how a trauma like Luc's will affect it.

Typically the talent protects itself by not working non-consensually, but there are loopholes to everything. The black market has been exploiting them for decades.” Adair got to his feet, resting a hand on Grey’s shoulder. “Don’t worry. We’ll exhaust every option to try and help Luc.”

“I know. How did things end with Mr. Behr?”

“He’s seeing a therapist,” Adair said. “He doesn’t blame Dreamscape at all; in fact, he was horrified by what he’d done, even after being assured that he was in no way responsible. We were very lucky there. A different man might have used the situation to reap a profit in court.”

“I’m not that bad a judge of character.”

“Of course you aren’t,” Adair said, walking Grey to the door. “Keep me posted.”

“I will,” the younger man promised, anxious to give the new plan a try.

He called the Dreamscape lab, expecting to be given the run around about wanting to schedule space so quickly. They were backed up for months with testing of potential Walkers, but the mention of Luc’s name got him a private room for that night. As Grey got in the elevator to pick up the damaged Dreamwalker, he shook his head at this new evidence that no one was immune to Luc’s charm.

Grey stopped and waited as Luc walked out of his door, a leather duffel bag in his hand. “Are you taking up mindreading?” Grey asked. “How did you know I made the appointment and was on my way up?”

“Brad called up when you walked through the common room. You know there’s no privacy around here,” Luc teased. The camaraderie of the house was one of the things he’d miss most if he had to leave. Luc turned his thoughts aside, refusing to let them go down that road. For six months, he’d lived his dream and he wasn’t going to give it up without trying every solution offered. His inability to Spin had to reverse itself. Aside from his career,

he wasn't sure he could remain sane if he were cut off from that part of himself.

"You okay?" Grey asked. With each new attempt that failed, Luc seemed to withdraw further inside himself, his trademark smile dimmed by several megawatts.

Luc took a deep breath and summoned up a genuine smile. "Yeah. I'm okay. It's just the lack of sleep. I'm still not dreaming and it's really affecting me. It's like my body wants to Dreamwalk and is frustrated that it can't. I wake up feeling anxious and more tired than I did when I went to bed."

Grey nodded, leaning back against the mirrored wall of the elevator. "I can understand that. Hopefully we'll find some answers tonight."

Walking across the Dreamscape campus, the two men chatted about the plan for the evening. Entering the building that resembled a four star hotel more than a laboratory, they checked in with the front desk and were escorted to a large suite. Except for the one-way observation window and the extensive electronics mounted into the wall, it could have doubled for the master bedroom in a very upscale home. The staff left Luc to change into a pair of well loved sleep pants and climb into the big, comfortable bed, before coming back in to attach the required leads.

After they left, Grey took a seat on the side of the bed and held one of Luc's hands in his lap. "You all right?" he asked, looking into the young Spinner's eyes.

Luc grinned. "I've been to sleep before, Grey. I'll be fine."

The older Dreamwalker rolled his eyes. "Little shit."

Luc's impish grin dimmed, leaving his face serious. "I know you're worried about me, and... it means a lot that you care so much. I'll get past this, Grey. I have to."

Grey nodded. "Well then, let's get started. We'll call the client Harper, but I'm not telling you if it's his first name or last, or anything else about him, so we can see if you can read him cold. Just like before: I'll lead you in and stay to observe. If you need me, I can intervene. Otherwise, I'll just try and stay unobtrusive.

Since familiar didn't work, we picked someone that has been prescreened heavily, but that you've never Spun for, okay?"

Luc nodded, closing his eyes. Taking a deep breath, he let Grey take him down through the stages into sleep and then he passed alone through the diaphanous veil he visualized when stepping into someone's dream. He could no longer sense Grey, but he trusted that the senior Dreamwalker was there, ready to pull him out if it went bad. With that assurance, he opened himself up. The first thing to come through was color - large blasts of brilliant color that slowly coalesced into paintings, photographs and large sculptures. Turning in place, he took in the pleasing chaos of a messy studio. The artist himself peered around the side of a large canvas on an easel and Luc's breath caught in his throat.

It was the blond man from the sailing picture on Alexander Sparks's wall. The Dreamwalker felt a tightening of anticipation low in his belly. He never dreamed he'd be offered this chance.

"What are you doing here?" Alec's friend asked in a voice as soft as silk.

"I'm here for your fantasy," Luc answered, feeling another piece of his old confidence return, as he walked towards the man of *his* dreams.

"I'm dreaming?" the artist asked, his brows drawing together.

"You have to be, or I couldn't be here."

"I must have fallen asleep on the couch." Whit looked toward the big piece of furniture, crumpled worn cushions revealing that it wouldn't have been the first time it had been used as a bed. "Did Alec send you?"

Luc paused, instinctively looking over his shoulder for Grey. Had Alec set this up? The Dreamwalker didn't know, but given the director's relationship with the artist, Luc wouldn't doubt it. Taking a leap, he nodded an ambiguous affirmative, one hand reaching out to run down the artist's arm, surprised by the hard muscles under the soft cotton. He hadn't realized that creating art was such a workout. Holding the man at arm's length, Luc took a few minutes to examine the face that haunted his dreams. Light

lines radiated from the corners of the summer-sky eyes and the expressive mouth. He smiles a lot, Luc thought, brushing his fingers over the slightly stubbled cheek. Whit's eyes widened at the touch and Luc's heart soared. He could read the man's desires. "So what do you want tonight, Whit?" Luc asked, tasting the unique name like an exotic flavor. It fit the man that stood before him.

"I... ah..." Whit stammered.

Luc focused on the feelings Whit was projecting, sensing the conflicting impulses. Whit was attracted to him, strongly, but beneath that was a jumble of other images and desires. Taking his time, the Spinner unraveled them one by one, until he had an accurate picture of what this very special client wanted. He could feel a barrier to an even deeper level, but after his experience with Dixon, he wasn't eager to push too hard. "Shall we take a walk?" he suggested, standing and holding out his hand.

Whit stared at the young Dreamwalker, stunned. "You want to go for a walk?"

"No," Luc answered with a smile. "You do."

"I think it's raining." The artist looked toward the window.

Luc chuckled. "Whit, this is a dream. We can walk wherever you want. Picture a place in your mind," he instructed.

Whit closed his eyes. He focused on the warmth of the Dreamwalker's hand in his. It felt nice; it felt right. "Tell me your name," he rasped.

"I'm Luc." When the Spinner opened his eyes, they were standing at the base of a tall mountain; a narrow path disappeared into startling emerald foliage, splashed with the vivid pigments of tropical flowers. "Where are we?" Luc asked, looking up at the flat top of the mountain.

Recognizing the location instantly, it was Whit's turn to smile. "Hawaii. Come on," he said, pulling Luc behind him as he stepped onto the path. "There's a beautiful waterfall over this way."

Luc concentrated, and Whit's jeans and button-down shirt were replaced with a pair of cargo shorts and a T-shirt. He left the

artist's feet bare because he sensed the other man preferred to walk that way, connected to the earth. For himself, he chose a similar pair of shorts and sturdy hiking boots.

Surprised, Whit paused, looking down at himself and then over at Luc. "Thanks. How come you don't have a shirt on?"

The Dreamwalker flushed slightly, dropping his head. Whit watched as the young man's nipples tightened as though Whit's fingers had brushed them, instead of his eyes. "Can't blame a guy for trying," Luc shrugged, looking up with a coy grin. A shirt appeared, only to disappear almost immediately as Whit's desire to have it gone flooded the psychic link. Luc could feel Whit's reaction to his smooth, tanned skin and it was making the Dreamwalker hard. If it weren't for Whit's equally strong desire to take things slow, Luc would be leaning close to kiss the other man.

"You're beautiful just like that," Whit said, entwining his fingers with the Dreamwalker's again and starting up the path.

It was not an easy climb and Luc was glad they were in a dream, or he'd have been out of breath by the time they reached the summit. The trees opened up, revealing a narrow waterfall cascading from a higher ledge. Whit looked down over the valley, taking several deep breaths of the cooler air. The sun was beginning to set and the warm, orange light was creating rainbows in the mist from the water.

Luc tugged on the hand he was still holding, pulling Whit to a flat-topped rock to sit down. Like they'd been doing it for years, Whit sat first, leaning back against a large tree and pulling Luc down and back to lean against his chest. The Dreamwalker relaxed into the embrace and they watched the sunset until the sky was almost completely dark.

"Now comes the hard part," Whit said, "walking down the mountain in the dark."

Luc turned towards Whit, hearing the words and feeling the vibrations of the artist's voice against his back. He meant to teasingly say, "Dream. Remember?" But finding Whit's lips only inches from his, he froze. *Kiss me, kiss me*, he chanted silently, wishing Whit had the ability to read *his* desires. He could feel

Whit's need to be the one in charge, setting the pace, so he held back, waiting for the older man to make the decision. It seemed to take forever for Whit's lips to touch his and in that eternity of moments, Luc memorized every little thing about the artist. He watched the older man's eyes dilate until only the barest rim of blue showed. A pink tongue darted out to wet Whit's lips and they remained parted on a held breath. Whit's head tilted and his eyes drifted shut just as their mouths met.

It wasn't a passionate claiming, but a gentle exploration. Tasting. Touching. Retreating and pressing together again, a perfect fit. As it continued, Whit felt the icy knot he had carried inside him for so long begin to melt and slip. His muscles clenched as he tensed, afraid to let go of the pain for no matter how unpleasant it was, it was familiar and his last link to Tim. A small sound of pleasure whispered from Luc's lips and Whit relaxed, his arms tightening around the slender frame. Reluctantly, he pulled back, staring down into Luc's unfocused eyes. "Thank you."

And Luc knew their time together was at an end. He could feel the artist retreating, needing time alone to think, but the Dreamwalker was so reluctant to let go. Forcing himself to smile, he ran a ghosting touch over Whit's face, closing his eyelids. "Sleep."

LUC woke, feeling incredibly relaxed and a little lightheaded. Blinking his eyes and willing himself to focus, he looked at Grey's worried face, unable to suppress the smile beaming out from his soul. He could still Dreamwalk! When Grey's expression didn't change, Luc tilted his head, puzzled. "What's wrong? It worked!"

Grey looked doubtful. "It did? I didn't... you weren't... what happened?"

Scooting up in the bed, Luc pushed the pillows up behind his back. "I found him in his studio. Apparently the man is an artist, at least in his dreams. Was it Alec's idea?"

"I don't understand."

“Was it Mr. Sparks’s idea to send me to his friend?” Luc elaborated.

“Luc, you aren’t making any sense. To my knowledge, the man you were supposed to visit has no connection to Alexander Sparks.”

“His first name isn’t Whit?”

Grey shook his head.

“Shit. I ended up somewhere else again.” Luc looked crestfallen, but then brightened. “But I could read him! Something must have happened like the time I ended up in Alec’s dream.”

A strange look passed over Grey’s face, the pieces falling into place, explaining the executive’s outburst outside his office. Trying to gather all the facts, he said, “So you ended up in Alec’s dream by mistake and now Whit’s?”

“I felt the same pull both times.”

Mind racing to catch up, Grey extrapolated. “It must have something to do with the energy the dreamers are sending out... connecting with you... a stronger impulse that pulls you to them instead of your intended client,” he mused.

Luc shook the distracted man’s shoulder. “But, Grey, you’re missing the point: I could READ him!” Luc was so excited he was almost bouncing on the bed.

Pulling Luc into a hug, Grey squeezed him tight. “You’re right. We should go back to the house and celebrate. There’s plenty of time to figure all this out.”

WHIT woke with a start, sitting straight up on the couch, body tingling and aroused, the dream still glowing brightly in his mind. If Alec weren’t his best friend, he’d write the experience off as a particularly vivid dream. He lifted a trembling hand to his lips, still tasting Luc, feeling him in his arms. His body ached. Getting to his feet, he reached for the phone to call Alec. Getting his friend’s voicemail, he hung up and tried the office where he got

Alec's assistant and declined to leave a message. Hanging up, he tried Alec's cell number and got another voicemail. "Don't you ever answer your fuckin' phones?" he swore into the recorder. "You have more phones than Ma Bell and you don't answer any of them. Call me!" Deciding he needed a drink, he snatched his coat off the chair and opened the door just as the phone rang. "Alec?" he answered, hoping he was right.

"Whit? What's wrong? Are you okay?" Alec asked with genuine concern.

"Who knows?" Whit snapped. "Your Dreamwalker paid me a visit."

"My Dreamwalker? You mean Luc? Are you certain?"

"Yes, I'm absolutely certain it was Luc!" Whit yelled like Alec was being deliberately obtuse. He wasn't sure why he was reacting so strongly. The dream had been wonderful. He had felt warm and loved. The artist ran an agitated hand through his hair. Maybe that was the problem; the dream was too wonderful. He was only supposed to have felt that way with Tim, right? One soulmate per lifetime was how it was supposed to be, but after spending only a handful of hours with Luc, it had felt so... so... right.

Alec was trying to keep up and failing. "Start at the beginning."

"Meet me at O'Malley's. I need a drink!" Whit waited for Alec's affirmative answer before hanging up the phone and leaving his studio for the pub.

Whit was just signaling for his second scotch when Alec walked in the door. Sliding into the booth across from his friend, he nodded to the waiter to make it two. "What happened? I didn't know you ever used Dreamscape's services."

"I don't... I haven't... All I know is that I took a nap in the studio this afternoon and ended up in Hawaii with Luc," Whit muttered, draining his second scotch in two swallows.

"You didn't order a Dreamwalk?"

“Hell, no!” Whit grimaced when his voice came out louder than he’d intended. “No. I mean, it’s nothing against your services, but it just isn’t me, you know?” Alec nodded and Whit continued, “I thought... how did he end up in my dream without me requesting it?”

Alec rubbed his neck, trying to dispel the tension building there. “I don’t know. He’s not supposed to be able to, but he’s done it twice now that I know of. I guess it’s my turn to ask... did you want him there? Luc is in a class by himself when it comes to reaching people’s deepest desires.”

Whit paused, thinking, pushing himself sideways in the deep booth and pulling his feet up onto the seat. “I’ve been thinking more and more about what you said,” he started. “I think maybe I am ready to open up again. I miss having someone in my life.” When Alec thought he had finished, Whit added one more unexpected comment. “I have to admit that when I saw Luc in your office that day, I felt a surge of attraction I haven’t experienced since Tim died. I wrote it off at the time as a reaction to an incredibly good looking man, but after spending some time with him....”

“Careful, mate. Remember you were in a dream with an incredibly talented Dreamwalker. That is what they do: read a person’s desires and mold themselves to be the perfect fit,” Alec warned, remembering how fast his friend had fallen for Tim. The last thing he wanted was for Whit to decide to risk his heart again on a mirage.

A sharp pang hit Whit in the gut at the idea that the time on the mountain had been nothing but a job for Luc. He’d felt so connected to the young man. “If there is a chance that it’s more... the reaction in your office felt more than just one-sided and I wasn’t asleep then. I need to see him, Alec.”

The Dreamscape executive frowned. It was strictly against company policy to put people in contact with the Dreamwalkers outside of the dream realm. Alec knew that Whit would never hurt or take advantage of Luc’s skills, but he didn’t want to risk his job either. “Make an appointment. If what you truly desire is to have

a discussion about a relationship in realtime, Luc will be able to read that and you can talk. There aren't any restrictions on Spinners having lovers, but it has to be initiated by Luc. Due to the nature of the work, too many clients fancy themselves in love with their Dreamwalker. You want another scotch?"

Whit shook his head, digging out his wallet. "No, I have an appointment I need to make." He slid out of the booth. Alec's warning weighed heavily in his mind, but he was certain there was more to this than fantasy and was eager to find out if Luc felt the same. "Thanks, Alec. I guess I'm ready to take that next step." Laying his hand on his friend's shoulder, he squeezed. "Your turn."

Alec placed his own hand on top of Whit's and smiled. "Yeah, I guess it is." When the artist left the pub, Alec signaled to Jeremy for another scotch. Taking the next step was a lot easier said than done.

It took less than an hour for the lab staff to check Luc over and pronounce him ready to leave. Grey excused himself to update Adair and Luc got dressed, feeling so light that he was almost skipping back across the campus green. Bounding into the common room, he found Karl sitting in one corner of the couch, reading yesterday's paper.

"Don't you look like the kitten that got into the spilled cream," he greeted as Luc entered the room. "Have a good night?"

"You could say that," Luc answered, taking a seat at the opposite end of the couch.

"I take it you're Walking again. Must have been great sex."

"Actually, we really did take a walk."

"Must have been one hell of a walk," Grey chimed in unexpectedly from the door. "A request just came in via email from a *Whitlock Jensen* for tomorrow night, provided you were free. If you aren't, he says to schedule it as soon as possible."

Luc sank back against the cushions. "Well, we watched a sunset, too," he grinned. That was as much as he was willing to

share. The rest of his time with Whit belonged to him and he couldn't wait to see the man again.

CHAPTER SIX

LUC turned the last corner of the switchback trail leading to the top of the mountain where he and Whit had walked last night. He was having trouble breathing, but it was from anticipation, not the climb. The artist was lying on his back on a flat rock, dressed in khaki cargo shorts and nothing else, his skin tan and the hair on his body sun-bleached to platinum.

“You must like this place,” Luc said to draw his attention.

Without moving or opening his eyes, Whit answered, “I can’t get it... or you... out of my dreams.”

The Dreamwalker sat on the edge of the rock. “Well, you seem to have us both at the moment. What are you going to do with us?”

The artist’s cerulean eyes opened, locking on Luc’s. “Ask you out on a date?”

“What?” Luc’s brow furrowed, puzzled. He could read the desire coming from Whit, but he hadn’t picked up on that. The images forming in his mind as he read the artist’s desires were of long slow kisses, not dinner and a movie.

“I’m not much for this whole Dreamspinning thing,” Whit explained, sitting up and leaning back on his arms.

The muscles in Whit’s chest contracted, distracting Luc. “Huh?” he murmured, having trouble paying attention to the artist’s words.

“I’d rather see you when I’m awake.”

Luc's pulse fluttered. "I don't understand. Why'd you book a Dreamwalk if you don't...?"

"Alec wouldn't give me your phone number," Whit stated simply. He raised a hand to run up the Dreamwalker's bare arm, smiling as chill bumps appeared in the wake of his touch.

"I... uh...," Luc swallowed. There had been a whole chapter in the Dreamscape International handbook about clients falling for their Dreamwalkers, but Luc didn't think it applied to this situation. All they'd done was take a walk and share a kiss. His expression softened at the memory. It'd been one hell of a kiss, but hardly enough to cause Whit to fall in love with him. Then there was the whole issue of Luc wanting Whit, probably more than Whit wanted him.

"Hey," Whit said, breaking into Luc's escalating spiral of thoughts. "There was smoke coming out of your ears," he teased, tugging on one of Luc's earlobes before trailing his fingertips down the curve of his neck. "There's some policy that says you should say 'no' to me, isn't there?"

Luc nodded.

"Do you want to? Say 'no' to me, that is."

Whit was very close. Luc could smell the woodsy scent that he would forever associate with the artist. He let himself sink into the intense blue gaze, swaying closer until their lips were only a breath apart. "No," he whispered, sensing the artist's desire for the truth, his lips brushing softly over Whit's, the slight prick of two day-old stubble intensifying the touch. "I really wanted to see you again. I could hardly wait for tonight."

The artist's hand cupped the back of Luc's neck, holding him close, their foreheads resting together, the Dreamwalker's admission spurring him on. "So you'll go out with me? I don't want to get you in trouble."

Luc turned his head, needing more contact. "Don't really care. It isn't forbidden, just frowned on," he said, his mouth grazing Whit's jaw in an open-mouthed kiss that followed the contour back to his ear. "But since we're here, it'd be a shame to waste a good

sunset in Hawaii.” It was so easy to start Spinning Whit’s dreams, since they so closely matched his own longings. He shifted closer, their chests resting together as their mouths met again. He debated dissolving his shirt, wanting to feel Whit’s bare chest pressed against his, but he held back. Whit’s hands skimmed the Dreamwalker’s waist, rough fingers brushing under the hem of the red T-shirt, grazing his skin and causing audible hitches in his breathing. He could sense the artist’s excitement and anticipation and it was hard to concentrate on Spinning the dream, when all he wanted to do was close his eyes and let Whit take control.

Whit swallowed every gasp, sucking at Luc’s tongue. He was so hard, he felt ready to burst, but the feeling was so exquisite that he had no desire to push it to climax and have it be over. It was so arousing just to hover here, the warmth of Luc’s body filling his arms, the taste of Luc’s mouth thrilling his taste buds. He could only imagine what it would feel like to roll the lithe body beneath him and sink deep inside its clinging heat. Luc moaned as Whit’s thoughts were transmitted through their link, painting images in his mind. He wanted to put them naked in a big fluffy bed, but that was his dream, not Whit’s, and a Dreamwalker fulfilled the client’s desires, not his own. He could sense the artist holding back even as the idea developed clearly in his mind; Whit wasn’t ready to actually make love, though Luc couldn’t quite discern why.

The artist’s hands traveled up Luc’s sides under his shirt, calloused thumbs brushing over the contours of each rib. Sitting, he let his feet dangle over the edge of the rock, pulling the Spinner between his legs and intimately entwining their bodies. “This... isn’t what... I want,” he panted, dragging his mouth from Luc’s, only to latch on to the tempting neck.

“It isn’t?” the Dreamwalker asked, body bowing for maximum contact, rubbing the hard evidence of his desire into the juncture of Whit’s thighs.

“Oh, God,” Whit exhaled, returning the pressure, hands gripping Luc’s hips firmly, neither pushing him away or pulling him closer, but stilling his motion. With a deep breath, he continued, “No. I want more. I want the real you. I already have you in my dreams. I want you in my arms.”

“You only met me twenty-four hours ago. How many dreams have you had?” Luc joked, attempting to lighten the mood and the ache that the artist’s words caused. He’d fallen a little bit in love the second his eyes landed on Whit’s picture in Alec’s office. From the moment he’d Walked into Whit’s studio yesterday, it had been an all out free fall. The idea that Whit might feel the same way about him stole his breath and scared him to death.

“I daydream a lot.” Whit grinned. “But it was worse today. I couldn’t think of anything but you... and the kiss we shared.”

Luc trembled, nuzzling the hollow under Whit’s jaw. “So kiss me again. It’s no less real in dreamtime and dreamtime definitely has its advantages. Let me show you.”

“You could tempt a pope,” Whit growled, pressing their lips together in a fierce kiss. “Let me wake up and kiss you for real.”

“This is for real. Can’t you feel my lips on yours?” Luc moved Whit’s hand until it was pressing down on the bulge of his hard cock. “Can’t you feel what you do to me?”

Whit closed his eyes and pictured a sleek catamaran anchored in a Caribbean bay, rolling gently on the waves as he and Luc stretched out on the deck. When he opened his eyes, they were there, dressed in nothing but swim trunks and the scent of suntan oil. “Don’t you see?” Whit gestured at the gleaming white boat. “This is not real. If I want to make love to you on a sailboat in the Caribbean, I want us to plan, save, anticipate and board the plane together, holding hands.” The artist’s fingers, still cupping the Dreamwalker’s cock, squeezed gently. Luc’s head fell back and he moaned. Whit’s body surged with a desire to coax more noises like that from the willowy brunette, but he resisted. “I want to know that when I stroke your body, you’re reacting to me, not to my desire to see you close your eyes and gasp in ecstasy. Wake up and meet me somewhere. I promise to kiss you all you want... and more.” The artist’s voice was vibrant with promise.

This was without a doubt the most surreal conversation Luc had ever had. None of his previous lovers had complained one bit about making love in dreamtime. In fact, most of them had been all for it. Who would turn down a lover that could make your

every whim a reality? Apparently, Mr. Whitlock Jensen would. “Okay,” Luc finally agreed. “What if you don’t wake up until morning?”

“I promise you that nothing will keep me away from you.”

Luc shivered at the raw hunger in Whit’s eyes. “867-555-9090. Don’t forget it,” Luc warned.

“I won’t.” Whit rubbed his thumb over Luc’s lips, parting them and then claiming them with his own.

Luc pulled back reluctantly. “Call me when you wake up and tell me where and when to meet you.”

Whit nodded.

Luc’s hand passed over Whit’s face. “Sleep,” he murmured. Closing his own eyes, the Dreamwalker turned over, finding himself in his own bed, the phone on his nightstand already ringing. He reached for it, grinning. Holding it to his ear, he answered, voice raspy like he’d been asleep for several hours. “You’re a man of your word.”

“Always,” Whit whispered. There was something about middle of the night phone conversations that called for soft voices. “Still want to meet me?”

“Always,” Luc echoed back with a goofy grin. Since hardly anything was open at two in the morning and they didn’t want company anyway, they agreed to meet at a nearby park. Luc bounded out of bed, tossing on some clothes as he brushed his teeth, but despite his hurry, Whit was already waiting when he arrived. The benches were wet with dew, and the man leaned against a giant oak in the moonlight. “Am I late?” the brunette asked, pressing his body against the artist’s in much the same way he had in the dream.

Whit shook his head, his nose brushing against Luc’s and his mouth curving up ever so slightly. “No. I was just anxious to see you.”

“I like that in a man.” Luc swept their cheeks together, shivering as the rasp of stubble scraped against his skin. Out of habit, he reached out with his mind to sense what Whit was

feeling. Nothing. Not a dream, he reminded himself. The artist's warm breath tickled his ear and he bent into the sensation, left with nothing to focus on but his own feelings and reactions to Whit's touch. He mewled as sharp teeth grazed his ear, leaning into Whit's strong, warm body to lend him support as his knees shook. "Whit," he whimpered, burying his face in the artist's neck.

Whit nuzzled Luc's ear. "Shhh... I've got you." He had guessed from Luc's reaction to his suggestion that the Dreamwalker hadn't done a lot of this outside of the dream realm. "Tell me how it feels... what you like."

Luc whimpered again as Whit's hard thigh slipped between his legs, pressing up exactly where he wanted it. "I... oh..." He swallowed and tried again. Every touch, every feeling was more intense than the last.

Whit's fingers burrowed into Luc's thick, silky curls. "You feel as good as I knew you would," he purred, taking one last look at the wanton expression of bliss on Luc's face before he captured his mouth in a gentle kiss. The tentativeness of their first kiss on the mountain remained, but only fleetingly. Whit could feel Luc pressing into the caress, the yearning palpable as their lips moved together, finding an easy rhythm.

Luc parted his mouth, his tongue reaching out to lick Whit's lower lip. When he felt Whit's tongue slide against his, he pushed closer, slipping his arms around the artist's body, his hands flat against Whit's lower back. Whit followed Luc's teasing tongue back inside his mouth, trying to keep the kiss careful and slow. They'd never get another first kiss and he didn't want to rush through it to what was next instead of enjoying what was happening now. He explored the warm mouth as if he had never tasted it before, and yet he had. It had been in a dream, but the taste... the touch was familiar. He knew every luscious crevice of Luc's mouth, had kissed him deeply and that knowledge only made him ache for more.

Luc's hands traveled up and down Whit's sides as the artist's tongue stroked and twined with his, causing his cock to harden beyond what was comfortable. He moaned into Whit's mouth,

resisting the urge to climb Whit's body like a tree and wrap his legs around the other man's waist. He desperately wanted more. If a simple kiss felt this good, how good would it feel to have Whit touch him, or more? Relaxing, he forced himself to let Whit take the lead. They weren't in dreamtime anymore and here Whit was the one with more experience. Settling into the kiss, he let himself be devoured as he continued to work his hands higher under the artist's shirt, skimming the strong, furry chest.

Whit caressed every last inch of Luc's mouth before easing back from the kiss, still supporting Luc's weight against him, his hands moving in soothing strokes up the Dreamwalker's back and down his arms. They both panted, warm puffs of breath against each other's lips as they tried to catch their breath. Dragging his hand down the side of Luc's face, Whit cupped it gently. He looked at the light of desire dancing in the Dreamwalker's coffee-colored eyes and couldn't contain the grin that broke across his face. Guiding Luc's head to his chest, he held him close. "The fountains are beautiful by moonlight," he said. "Want to take a walk?"

Luc chuckled, cuddling into the possessive embrace. Whit's racing heartbeat thumped against his ear, confirming that he wasn't the only one affected by their kiss. "You have an unnatural obsession with walking."

"So you've noticed," Whit laughed, taking Luc's hand and heading up the gravel path.

"I'M ready," Luc said the next morning, between one sip of juice and the next.

Grey paused with a spoonful of oatmeal halfway to his open mouth. "This is a bit Twilight Zone-ish, but I was about to broach that very subject. In fact, I was going to call you right after breakfast."

"Let's do it."

“Just like that? You’ve only had the two Walks with Whit and quite honestly, I’m not sure the first one counts since you were in the wrong dream. Are you sure you’re ready?”

“I’ve made up my mind. I don’t think any amount of time is going to make a difference. Either it’s going to come all the way back, or it isn’t. Based on what I’ve experienced with Whit, it is, but I need to try it out on a regular client.”

“I don’t want to see you in pain again,” Grey said. “None of us do. You’ve made a lot more friends here than you probably realize, and no one wants to rush you. It may seem a bit crass, but you’ll continue to draw a weekly wage whether you’re active, or not. Everyone just wants you to be well, okay?”

“I don’t know what to say. When I applied for testing, I was frankly looking for a job I enjoyed where I wouldn’t have to work too hard. I never dreamed I’d find a family. I’m...” Luc’s voice cracked. Grey stood and came around the table, placing his hands on Luc’s shaking shoulders. Luc turned and put his arms around Grey’s waist as the other man stroked his hair soothingly. “I’m sorry,” Luc said haltingly. “My emotions seem to be in constant turmoil right now.”

“You’ve nothing to apologize for,” Grey assured him. “You’re unique, Luc; even among a group as unusual as ours, you stand out. I’m not polishing your ego; I’m just telling you how very special you are. I doubt anyone really understands just how special you are yet.”

Luc looked up, his dark eyes dewy with tears. “It’s a little scary to know people think of me that way. When I look in the mirror, I see a pretty average guy with a random gift.”

Grey thumbed the wetness from the younger man’s cheeks. “We don’t get to choose,” he smiled faintly. “But there’s no doubt that any great gift comes at a great price, even if it seems free.”

“I’m learning,” Luc said. “I don’t think I want anything else to eat. How soon do you think I can hook in?”

“Looks like you’ve learned the slang fast enough. Go gather what you need, and I’ll make the call.”

“Thanks.” Luc turned and headed for the elevator. “And I never thought you were helping me just because I’m a valuable commodity to the company. You aren’t that sort of person.”

“Go on now before we have another Hallmark moment,” Grey said lightly, reaching for his phone.

“WELCOME, fair visitor, to my family’s ancestral home.”

Luc was a little surprised, but recovered right away. He wasn’t used to the client responding so quickly and coherently when he started the Spin. This guy, Rob Claypool, came on like a light bulb when the switch is thrown. He was standing on the creamy marble steps of a sweeping double staircase with banks of blossoms on either side. The handsome blond man wore a dark blue uniform with two rows of pewter buttons blazoned with a royal crest. The hand he held out to Luc was encased in a white kid glove. Luc smiled and unfurled his gift almost without thinking about it. He easily read Rob’s desires and saw immediately how best to please him, but oddly, he didn’t feel the joy that was usually attendant on this moment in the Spin. He felt a sense of accomplishment. He was happy that it was going well, and he intended to give the client the best experience possible, but... he just didn’t feel the rush anymore. Snap out of it, Clarke, he scolded himself. You’re on company time. So what if it isn’t mind-blowing for you? Do your job.

“Prince” Rob smiled with delight as the beautiful young man came timidly forward. Luc was dressed in shabby, much mended clothes that were a soft patchwork of faded colors. His chestnut hair fell in ringlets to his shoulders, tangled and adorned with a blue jay feather. The burlap sack hanging over his shoulder held all his worldly possessions. When he’d stopped at the gates of the palace to ask if there were any service he might perform to earn a crust of bread, he’d been thinking of the stables, not the royal bedchamber. However... Luc suppressed his smile before it showed on his face, maintaining an expression of awed trepidation, but he loved this scenario and was prepared to play his role to the hilt.

“You may speak freely,” Rob said, attempting to allay the young peasant’s understandable nervousness.

“My lord, I know not how to address you.”

“My lord will do, but I would rather you called me Rob.”

“I could not,” Luc’s velvet brown eyes opened wide in shock at such disrespect.

“But I insist,” Rob said, drawing him up the stairs by the hand. “Come, sit with me and give me the pleasure of your company.”

“Why do you honor me thus?” the Spinner asked, falling deeper into the fantasy.

“Have you never seen your image in the water, or a piece of polished metal?”

Luc ducked his head. “I am not worthy of your regard.”

“I say what is worthy and what is not in my kingdom. Do you dispute my right to do so?”

“No, my lord,” Luc gasped, kneeling at the man’s feet, looking up in appeal. “Forgive me.”

“How can I resist those eyes?” Rob cupped the young man’s chin on his palm. “Or those lips. How I long to see you dressed and bejeweled as you deserve. Come; there is a bath prepared for you.”

Perfectly in tune with the client’s wants, Luc went docilely up the stairs, doffed his rags and climbed into the large wooden tub. He sat in the hot water and let the nobleman tend to him. Rob plied soap and a nubby cloth to every inch of Luc, taking his time, and doing a thorough job that left the young man pink and aroused. When the prince signaled him to stand, the Dreamwalker pretended embarrassment. Rob took his hand and hauled him from the water, an appreciative look softening his features when he saw Luc’s state of excitement.

“You’ve a handsome set of tackle,” Rob said. “And it is even more beautiful when it is standing.”

Luc let his eyelids drift down as if mortified and stood awaiting his fate.

“There is no shame in it, boy,” Rob said. “It is a compliment to me. I would very much like to touch you again. While it is true that I could command you to my bed, I prefer that it be by your choice.”

Hooked in to the client’s psyche as he was, Luc could see that Rob was telling the truth and allowed his persona to see it, too. Shyly, the young peasant took the prince’s hand and guided it to his hip. Rob’s large hand slid over smooth, wet skin, reveling in the texture and the freedom granted him, moving to stand behind Luc. Luc shivered as long fingers spread across his lower belly, the tips just grazing the top of his pubic pelt. The buckle of the man’s belt and the pewter buttons were cool against his back, but the heat of the man’s arousal burned against his buttocks.

“My lord, you make me feel so strange,” Luc murmured.

“Have you not been with a man before?”

Luc heard the infinitesimal, telltale quiver in the client’s voice. This was his rather mundane, but deeply cherished fantasy: the sexual education of a beautiful, willing virgin. “I have never been with a man,” he said. “I have taken certain pleasures with other boys and maidens, but I have not...” Luc willed a blush to his cheeks.

“You have not given yourself? Do not fear; I will do nothing you do not wish.”

“How can I deny you anything, my lord?”

Rob stripped off his tunic and the white shirt underneath to reveal a powerful chest with patches of light brown hair and pink nipples that made Luc’s mouth water. The Spinner knew exactly who the client reminded him of and it was brought home to him just how attracted he was to Whit. Reminding himself to have a little discipline, he filed his own fantasy away to be taken out and drooled over later. He fixed his gaze on Rob’s hands, as the nobleman opened his trousers, letting his eyes widen again at the sight of the man’s equipment. Rob didn’t have any wish to appear bigger in his dream, so Luc left him just as he was, which was very nice indeed. With a last stray thought that no one was going to be able to measure up to Whit, Luc reached out to his client.

Rob stepped closer, lifting a wing of Luc's glossy hair to let it run like water through his fingers. "You may touch me," he said. "As you would if you wished to pleasure yourself."

Luc nodded, wrapping his fist around Rob's cock. With a glance upward for permission, he began to stroke the hard suede-skinned rod of flesh, hesitantly at first, but faster and with a firmer grip as his confidence grew along with the volume of Rob's moans. "May I kiss it?" he asked.

"That would please me greatly," Rob sighed as the boy's perfect lips touched the tip of his shaft, the moment charged with erotic electricity that shot from Rob's cock to his pleasure centers and back again, helped along by Luc's light touch on the controls. The Spinner continued tentatively, drawing out each caress as if it were the first time he'd ever had his mouth on a cock, and was finding out just how good it tasted. Luc felt the waves of bliss radiating from the client, growing stronger by the moment as the Spinner fulfilled each and every detail of the fantasy to perfection. He sensed the moment when the stimulation was no longer enough and looked up inquiringly. Rob gazed dreamily into the doe eyes turned up to him and smiled. "You have a talent for love play," he said.

"Thank you, my lord."

"Lie back, my beauty. Let me show you a new bliss."

With trust shining in his eyes, Luc let himself relax against the massed pillows of the great bed. "Show me, my lord."

Rob sat on the side of the bed, running his hands up the long legs until he reached the place where they joined. Luc's lips parted on a soft sigh as the man ran a forefinger down the underside of his stiff flesh. The light touch trailed down over his perineum to his opening and back to the head of his arousal.

"That feels very good, my lord," Luc said breathlessly.

"It will feel even better very soon," Rob said. "I am going to oil my fingers and put them inside you. Have you done this?"

"Nay, my lord," Luc told the client what he wanted to hear. "Will it hurt?"

“Not for long. Can you be brave for a few moments? If so, you will be rewarded with great pleasure.”

“I am ready.”

“Good lad,” Rob said, taking up a bottle of lubricant that hadn’t been on the table a few seconds ago. The man poured some of the sweet smelling oil over his fingers and shifted position on the mattress so he was leaning on one elbow. “Put your right foot on my shoulder,” he said, pushing Luc’s left knee to the linen. “I’ll swear any oath you like that you are the most beautiful sight I’ve ever seen,” he said, gazing the length of the boy’s inviting form. “Try not to flinch, or tighten your muscles, and it will be easier for you.”

Luc nodded, licking his lips and watching the reaction on the client’s face. There was no doubt that the Spinner was playing his role flawlessly, or that Mr. Claypool was getting his money’s worth and more, but somewhere deep down, Luc wished he took more satisfaction in his success. No matter how convincing he was, or how intense the orgasm, he knew it was going to feel somehow hollow. It added a bittersweet element to what had always been a bit of a romp for Luc. Was it possible he was gaining some more of the maturity that Petal seemed to think he needed?

Rob’s finger nudged Luc’s hole again and ended the brief reverie. Luc made a small sound as the tip of the digit eased into him and continued moving forward. “Shhh, my pretty one. It’s just the end of my finger. Take a moment and get used to the feel of it inside you.” Rob moved his finger gently, describing lazy circles on the walls of the resilient channel. Luc fidgeted, moving restlessly against the sheets as the client probed deeper. Rob leaned his cheek against Luc’s inner thigh and kissed the smooth skin. “Easy, lad; I am almost... Ahhh, there.”

“My lord!” Luc exclaimed, clutching fistfuls of the sheet. “What are you doing to me? I have never felt anything like this.”

Rob smiled, and leaned forward to lick a wet stripe up the boy’s taut arousal. Luc cried out in pleasure and surprise as his back arched off the mattress. The client beamed as he bent his

neck to take the head of the peasant's cock in his mouth. Luc moaned and gasped for breath as the man sucked strongly at his shaft while stroking his prostate. Rob delved deeper on each pass and when the entire length of his finger sank into the tight channel, he added another. Luc whimpered as he was stretched, instinctively trying to move away from the discomfort, but it was brief and he was soon panting with the intensity of the pleasure he was feeling. Even though his lover in this dream was not the one Luc dreamed of, Rob was skillful and cared what his partner was feeling. So why couldn't he just let go of the sun-gilded image of the artist that touched him so reverently, as though sex were some holy thing to be approached with awe and thankfulness? Annoyed with himself, Luc tried to put his heart into his performance.

"Ah, my lord, that is so sweet. You must have witchcraft in your hands."

"It is not black magic," Rob said. "I will show you how to do it yourself, but not just now. Now I must be inside you or burst."

"Your manhood is much larger than two fingers," Luc said, letting a flash of apprehension show in his eyes.

"It will be a bit uncomfortable for a moment, but I have prepared you well. Indeed, you may find that you are able to achieve release like this."

Luc took a deep breath. "You have spoken the truth to me thus far. I will trust you again."

Rob leaned in, bending Luc double, and claimed a kiss from the sweet lips. "I will mount you now," he said. The archaic phrase made it difficult for Luc to keep a properly anxious look on his face, as the client rubbed the tip of his cock against the boy's glistening opening.

"I want you inside me, my lord," the Spinner said, getting back into character.

Rob pushed and the head of his arousal entered the boy's velvet heat. Luc cried out and tensed, his knuckles as white as the linen. Rob took up the young man's neglected shaft, but did not halt his progress until half his length was sheathed.

"I have... changed my mind," Luc said in a strained voice. "Take it out, please."

"Is it truly so painful?" Rob asked as he began to withdraw.

"Wait!" Luc gasped as the blunt head of the man's cock dragged across the slight swell in the front wall of his passage.

Rob rocked back in and immediately pulled out to the threshold. Luc squirmed, tilting his pelvis, in a blind attempt to take in more of the hard rod and feel that bolt of dulcet lightning again. The nobleman obliged the peasant lad, pulsing his hips in the shallowest of strokes, rubbing persistently against the young man's trigger point. "Shall I stop?" Rob asked.

"Nay, please do not stop, my lord. I find that it is not so bad after all."

"Then I shall give you as much pleasure as I am capable of," Rob said. "For to give pleasure, pleasures me."

"You are a most unusual nobleman," Luc said. "And for that, I am glad."

"Only glad?"

Luc grinned as the client's cock rubbed him the right way again. "If you would hear it, my lord, then I will tell you that you have given me such bliss as I did not dream was possible this side of heaven."

"And you have given me a gift without price," Rob said, increasing the speed of his stroke. "How like you this?"

Luc's response was a series of gasps, punctuated by a few enthusiastic yelps. Rob's smile grew wider as he thrust in a steady rhythm, seeking to bring his partner the same joy he felt in this joining. "Come for me," he crooned. "I want to see your face as you find your release."

"You have not long to wait," Luc said breathlessly. "Do that but a few times more and I shall surely spill my seed."

"Ah, what a fine, brave, comely lad you are," Rob said, pumping the young man's straining length. "I give thanks that the Fates led you to my door."

“It was hunger brought me here,” Luc corrected, forgetting to add the man’s title as the precursors of his climax rippled through his groin.

“Then you shall feast to your heart’s content as soon as we have done, but I wish that this could go on until the end of time.”

Touched, Luc looked the client in the eyes and paid tribute. “To do this with you forever would be bliss indeed, but I burn for release.”

Looking as pleased as it was possible for a man to look, Rob shuttled his hand rapidly up and down Luc’s arousal. Luc threw back his head and wailed in unabashed abandon as his balls tightened and he spurted powerfully. Rob lengthened his stroke, pushing deeper into Luc as the quaking channel contracted around his plunging shaft. Luc bucked and writhed against the costly fabric of the coverlet as the man drove into him in single-minded pursuit of his climax. Each thrust extended the orgasm that reverberated through Luc’s lower half, making him giddy with pleasure. The boy’s obvious delight sent the nobleman over the edge, tumbling headlong into clouds of transcendent bliss. Never had Rob felt such a sense of completion, such profound satisfaction that he needed for nothing else as long as it lasted. Reluctantly withdrawing from the snug port, he wrapped his arms around Luc and rolled so that the boy was topmost.

“That was a foretaste of Paradise,” the man said softly.

Luc let his forehead rest against the client’s. “Truly,” he agreed.

“Will you stay with me? You would want for nothing.”

“I am a Gypsy, my lord.”

“I would not cage a wild bird,” Rob said. “But I would be willing to take the time to tame you to my hand.”

“Let us enjoy this moment, and not mar it with plans for a future that does not even exist.”

“As you wish,” the blond man said.

“Close your eyes, my lord,” Luc said, kissing the full lips. “And may all your dreams be sweet.”

“Well done,” Grey exclaimed as Luc’s eyes opened. “A flawless run.”

“Were you there for the whole thing?” Luc asked dazedly. “I couldn’t sense you.”

“I was there up until the bath,” Grey said, laying a hand on Luc’s forehead. “After that, I was just watching screens with the technicians. Everyone thinks it went really well.”

Luc took a deep breath and let it out slowly as he sat up. “It was a good Spin for me, too,” he said. “Only...”

“What?”

“It’s not important, really.”

“Everything’s important, nothing’s trivial. That’s your new motto,” Grey tapped Luc’s forehead.

“I just didn’t feel... Forget it. This is a job. It doesn’t matter if the earth moves for me or not.”

“But did it?”

“Physically it was eleven on a scale of ten, but there was no real depth to it. I can’t engage my emotions like I used to. I can do my job, and please the client, but I’m aware that there’s something lacking. I think it’s the thing Davis tried to explain to me once.”

Grey raised his fox-colored eyebrows. “You’ve lost me.”

“Oh, I hope not,” Luc stretched and swung his legs over the side of the clinic’s bed, dislodging sensor pads and setting off alarms. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Stop it,” Grey’s smile was genuine for the first time in a long time. “You don’t have to butter me up.”

“I might enjoy that, though,” Luc’s expression could best be described as impish.

“Take a number,” Grey quipped. “Get dressed and I’ll buy you an ice cream.”

Luc hopped down to the floor, grimacing at the chill on his bare feet and hurriedly dressed as Grey went to talk to the techs. The young Dreamwalker emerged a few minutes later, not exactly bubbling over, but serene in the knowledge that he wasn't ruined forever. He could still work his magic, and had confidence that he would be as good as new soon.

CHAPTER SEVEN

“GOOD news,” the double agent said into the cell phone.

“What do you call good news?” said the disembodied voice on the other end.

“Our boy is back. Clarke is cured according to my sources at the lab. When I bring him to you, he’ll be a fully functioning Spinner.”

“That is good news. May we have an estimate as to his shipping date?”

“Negative. He’s well-protected, not just by the security force here, but by virtually everyone.”

“You’ve mentioned that before.”

“I’m just trying to explain the difficulty of the task. Clarke is never alone, not even when he’s asleep. Most nights, one of the other Walkers in his House bunks in with him.”

“Could they somehow have got wind of the abduction?”

“Impossible. No, they’re just a very affectionate bunch, always cuddling like a pile of puppies. It’s about to drive me crazy.”

“That’s... hard to believe, given your propensities. I don’t think you can drive someone crazy who is technically already insane.”

“You’re going to hurt my feelings if you talk like that.”

“You won’t be needing them for this job anyway. Have you anything else of interest to report?”

“I’m thinking of growing a goatee.”

“Nothing then? Very well. It’s good to hear that Clarke is working, but don’t call again unless it’s to report his capture. Good day.”

“Rude bastard,” the operative said, but not until he’d closed the phone. “Some day we’re going to meet face to face, and then we’ll see how high and mighty you are.” Dropping the cell in his pocket, the double agent walked away to continue his surveillance.

LUC pulled a clean T-shirt over his head and slid his feet into a pair of shoes as he flew out the door. He was supposed to meet Whit for dinner and he was running late. First, he’d overslept and then Cutter had cornered him in the kitchen with a long string of questions, instead of his usual lewd comments. He had actually seemed interested in how Luc was and what he was doing, and Luc hadn’t the heart to cut him off. With a curse, Luc darted back inside, grabbing his wallet. Choosing the stairs over the elevator, he exited directly onto the quad, practically running. He could have kissed the taxi driver when the man took him at his word and broke every speed limit on their route. In fourteen minutes, they were pulling up to the curb in front of O’Malley’s.

Out of breath, Luc slowed as he caught a glimpse of Whit through the plate glass window. The chiseled features were arranged in a subtle frown of concentration, intent on capturing some image of beauty, as the artist sketched something on a napkin. After two weeks of dating, this habit, that Luc found incredibly endearing, had become a familiar sight. Whit had scraps of paper, receipts, menus and any other piece of trash that would hold an image all over his apartment and studio, decorated with sketches and ideas. More than a few were of Luc, sleeping, reading, smiling.

The Dreamwalker had one taped to the mirror over his dresser. Whit had sketched it about a week ago as they’d eaten Chinese take-out in the park. He had looked up to find Whit staring at him and smiled. It had been an ordinary moment, but the artist had put down his chopsticks and sketched Luc on the take-out bag. As

they cleaned up their trash, Luc had found it, secreting it away in his backpack. Whit had captured every nuance of Luc's feelings for him, his dark eyes practically swimming in love. Just looking at it made his body tingle. He had never felt anything like what he felt when he was with Whit. The man didn't even have to touch him to make his body respond, but when he did... well, Luc hadn't been this constantly aroused since he'd left his teens.

Walking in the door of the pub, he was surprised to see Alec taking a seat at the table with Whit. They'd done a few things together since Whit and Luc had started seeing each other, but Luc hadn't known that Alec was joining them tonight. Luc had hoped that tonight might be the night that Whit would finally make love to him. They'd done just about everything else, and though the artist never left Luc wanting, he always stopped short of actual intercourse. Trying to hide his disappointment, he greeted the other two men, "Hi. Sorry I'm late."

Whit looked up, eyes bright with that glow that made Luc feel like the only person in the world. "Missed you today," the artist said, sliding over so Luc could sit next to him in the booth. Whit's freedom with his affection was a big part of his allure for Luc. Most of the men he'd known had trouble showing their feelings, especially the tender ones, in public. Whit behaved however his mood moved him, and he not only didn't care who was watching, he didn't even notice. He didn't live his life according to the opinions of others and his courage was catnip to Luc.

"Missed you, too." Luc snuggled into his boyfriend's side, kissing his neck before tilting his face up for a real kiss.

Alec watched them with an indulgent smile on his face. He was happy beyond measure to see Whit act this way again. The cool, detached, eccentric persona the artist had adopted after Tim's death was what the art-buying crowd expected, but it wasn't really Whit. It was merely a protective facade, but it jarred and saddened Alec with its *wrongness*, the same way that the scared, tentative Luc who had woken from the bad Dreamwalk had dismayed him. However, it looked as though Alec could stop worrying. They seemed to be healing one another - each bringing out the best in the other. The only down side was the ache in his chest that he felt

every time he was around the pair. It was no mystery any more what caused it; he wanted what they had. "I can leave if you want to jump each other's bones right here," he offered, only half-teasing.

Whit and Luc broke apart, breathless and unrepentant. "Let's order dinner. I'm famished," Luc announced, sitting up straight and reaching for a menu. "I hope the food here is as good as the drinks." Whit and Alec exchanged a glance, and chuckled indulgently. Luc was always hungry, ate like a horse, and never gained an ounce.

The waiter arrived to take their order, and Luc recognized the blue eyes and dark hair standing up in tufts. "Jeremy, right?" Luc said.

"That's right, but you can call me Remy. I waited on you and some friends a while back. You left kind of suddenly."

"I'm surprised you remember. You must wait on a lot of people," Whit said.

The waiter gave a little roll of his eyes. "Me and my big mouth. I didn't mean to get too personal."

Alec looked up from his menu and stared at the server like he'd never seen one before. Luc noticed Alec's reaction out of the corner of his eye. Alec wasn't asleep, but it didn't take a Dreamwalker's talent to read the man's interest, and it wasn't exactly innocent. Luc listened to Whit charm the waiter, whom Luc remembered quite well from his earlier visit to O'Malley's; Cutter had been lusting after the handsome young man. Back then, Luc had been a wreck, not even sure if he'd ever Dreamwalk again. Now, he was happy and complete, and not even sure he wanted to Dreamwalk professionally anymore. He'd been a boat without a rudder, drifting on a dark sea, feeling as though he was dragging an anchor across the ocean floor, feeling drawn like a magnet to steel, it was so close, the thing that called him... so close... Luc blinked, and turned to Whit.

"Are you ready to order, babe?" Whit asked again. "You were a million a miles away."

Luc's gaze lost the soft, unfocused look as he told Remy what he wanted to eat. Whit looked curiously from Luc to Alec and back, as the waiter walked briskly away. Both his companions seemed mesmerized by the departing figure.

"Should I be jealous?" Whit asked.

"What?" Alec and Luc said at the same time.

"You seem to find our waiter's ass fascinating."

Alec and Luc cried out simultaneously again, with matching indignation.

"Really, Whit," Alec said with mock primness. "Do you always have to take it down to that level?"

Luc smiled, looking speculatively at Whit. He knew the man had been joking, but there was a hard tone in his voice, just an edge of jealousy that thrilled Luc. It meant Whit thought of Luc as his, and that was very interesting indeed.

Remy returned with the open-face corned beef sandwiches O'Malley's was famous for, and a little later, homemade pie and coffee were delivered. The three men talked and laughed as the meal was consumed: Alec sharing funny stories about Dreamwalking candidates who were less than adept; Whit describing a time when he'd been welding a sculpture, only to find himself caged in by the metal. Luc added tales of Spinning dreams for his friends before he'd really understood his talent. One particular incident involving an elephant, the daughter of a tribal chief and a charging rhinoceros really stood out. Several times they had to stop to catch their breath, sides aching from laughter, until finally the meal, as all good things must, came to an end. Wiping tears away, Luc followed Whit with his eyes as the man went to pay the bill.

"I knew it would happen eventually," Alec said. "I hoped you'd be with Dreamscape a little longer, but you're in love with him, aren't you?" Alec watched as his friend turned from the counter to smile at Luc, as though five minutes was too long to be away from him.

"Is it that obvious?" Luc asked.

"I may not have your talent, but I've got my own intuition," Alec said. "The way you looked at that picture of us in my office and the first time you saw him in person, it wasn't exactly a leap."

The Dreamwalker looked at his boss. "That long ago?"

"Yeah. Funny, isn't it? I can spot the signs in someone else, but not myself." Lifting the striped mug, he took a sip of his lukewarm coffee.

Luc followed Alec's line of sight to the dark-haired waiter who had served them. "Mmmm..." he answered noncommittally "I don't know... I think it's easier to see something when you aren't the one experiencing it, and you're not going to lose me yet. I can love Whit and still work. If there's anything he's taught me, it's that there is a difference between what goes on in dreamtime and what we have in realtime."

Alec didn't answer, smiling vaguely over Luc's shoulder, as he watched their waiter flirt with a six-month-old baby. There was a reason that all the Erotic Dreamwalkers were single, but Luc would find that out on his own.

Whit returned to the table, dropping a handful of bills in the center. "Ready to go?" he asked, extending his hand to Luc.

Luc allowed himself to be pulled from the booth into a hug. "Yeah. Where to now?"

"I thought we'd go back to my loft," Whit said, raising an eyebrow at Alec who was adding several bills to the already generous tip. "Wanna come watch a movie, or something?"

Alec shook his head. "No, this is where I make my graceful exit and leave you two lovebirds on your own to do all sorts of things I'm sure I'd be jealous of." He grinned, walking outside with them before turning in the opposite direction, saying he had some shopping to do. Luc watched as Alec glanced back through the glass front of the restaurant at their waiter, in much the same longing way that Luc had stared at Whit earlier.

"So is a quiet night at home okay with you?" Whit raised Luc's hand to his lips, kissing his knuckles.

“Perfect,” Luc answered, leaning into Whit’s side as they walked. Obliging, the artist wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

The loft was only a couple of blocks from O’Malley’s and neither man felt any desire to fill the soft spring evening with chatter as they walked. Words just weren’t a necessity between them. In silence, by mutual consent, they entered Whit’s apartment building, kissing their way down the hall and up the stairs until they could get horizontal.

Whit lay on his back, his head pillowed on the arm of the couch, one foot resting on the floor. Luc sprawled atop him, hands inside the artist’s shirt, stroking the broad, muscular chest. They weren’t even pretending to watch the movie playing soundlessly in the background. Whit had hit the mute button two commercials ago and now they were using it primarily as a flickering night-light that allowed them to see each other as they reveled in extended foreplay. Luc rocked his hips between Whit’s thighs, teasing both their cocks with the friction of the denim that separated them.

“Make love to me, Whit,” he pleaded breaking away from the possessive kiss.

“Am making love to you,” Whit murmured, rolling Luc to his side and pinning him between his body and the back of the couch. Strong fingers kneaded the muscles of the Dreamwalker’s ass and thighs. Sliding lower, Whit captured a nipple between his teeth, pulling and sucking it into his mouth. Gasping, Luc bowed his body, his hands holding Whit’s head to his chest, his hips thrusting forward, rutting against the artist’s firm belly. He still wasn’t used to the feeling of being touched this way. In dreamtime there had been no surprises, he always knew what his partner was going to do before he did it. The anticipation of the unknown made Whit’s caresses so much more intense.

“Please,” he begged, squirming to get closer to his lover.

“Please what, baby?” Whit soothed, his hands running up over Luc’s chest as he slid even lower, his mouth hovering over the hard ridge in Luc’s jeans. Mouthing the head through the denim,

he ran his teeth along the shaft, increasing the pressure until Luc whimpered.

Clutching at his own hair in his ecstasy, Luc threw his head back as Whit teased him, the pressure building in his groin until it was almost unbearable. "Fuck... Whit..." he panted, trying to turn to get some leverage and push his hips up into the delicious torment. "No more playing. Please fuck me!"

The artist chuckled, the deep vibrations almost setting off Luc's orgasm right then. "Such an impatient boy," Whit hummed, pulling open the Dreamwalker's jeans. As he nuzzled the hot, musky cock, his fingers slipped inside the loose denim and brushed Luc's hole. "So you want me inside you?"

"Yes! Fuck! Please." The young man thrashed, his hands moving to Whit's head as the artist swallowed his cock, sucking until his cheeks hollowed. "Ahhh...aghr..." Luc choked out.

Whit wrapped his fingers around Luc's erection, slipping them into his mouth to wet them. Luc had learned to relax as Whit fingered and rimmed him, but realtime sex was still different than the self-lubricating, easy, no pain sex of dreamtime. Whit desperately wanted to make love to Luc, but he didn't want the Dreamwalker to be disappointed. He felt like he had one chance to convince Luc and if he failed, the young man would write off realtime sex... and Whit along with it.

Teasing Luc's entrance with his wet fingers, the artist swallowed around the hard length, drawing it deeper into his throat. Luc could never hold back when he did that, combined with a little pressure on his prostate. Sliding the slick finger into the clenching passage, Whit stroked the smooth walls, finding the tender nub and massaging it lightly. Luc's heels pressed into the soft cushions, his hips bucking off the couch as he shot his load down Whit's throat. An erratic jerk of his pelvis accompanied each pulse as he slid in and out of Whit's wet swollen lips. "God! Fuck!" He swatted at Whit's shoulder weakly as he finally collapsed, limp and sated. "You fucker! I didn't want to come yet."

Whit chuckled again, nuzzling the damp curls and suckling the softening shaft. "Your body sure seemed ready." Stretching up, he licked at Luc's lips, requesting entrance and kissing him deeply.

It was only then that Luc noticed that the older man's jeans were undone and he'd obviously come too. Running a hand down Whit's chest, he fondled the spent cock. "I wanted to do that," he whined, his lower lip sticking out in a petulant pout. Whit nipped at the protruding lip. Luc yelped and sucked it out of harm's way.

"Sorry, baby. I couldn't wait. You're just too damn sexy." Whit's eyes grew dark with renewed desire and he pushed himself to his feet. "I'll be right back," he said, walking towards the bathroom.

Luc watched him leave, spent but frustrated. The last few nights had been like this. Luc would ask to make love and Whit would bring them both off before it happened. Whit never actually said 'no' and Luc knew that he wanted to, so he didn't understand the reluctance. Staring at the closed door, a plan formed in his mind. He'd just have to break through Whit's control.

Getting to his feet, the Dreamwalker quickly shed all of his clothes. He wanted no barriers between him and Whit when they finally made love. Taking a sip from the wine glass on the table for courage, he strolled into Whit's bedroom, climbing onto the bed and posing himself against the pillows, legs splayed invitingly. He might not have much experience in realtime, but he'd been seducing men in their dreams for a decade.

Whit walked out of the bathroom, his shirt gone and jeans open, running a hand towel over the exposed skin. He was headed into the bedroom to grab a clean shirt, but his eyes were irresistibly drawn to the couch for a glimpse of his lover. Just the thought of how Luc looked freshly ravished made his cock jump under the terrycloth. But there was no Luc on the couch. It wasn't like his lover to move that soon. The Dreamwalker was typically as lazy as a cat in a sunbeam after sex. Puzzled, Whit called out, and an answering moan made his cock jump again at the needy sound. Following it to the door of his bedroom, Whit froze.

Luc watched the doorway through hooded eyes. He had one hand wrapped around a rung of Whit's headboard and the other had an equally firm grip on his cock. His back was arched, legs open, knees bent, hiding nothing of his sculpted, tanned body from his lover. It hadn't taken much to tease his cock back to a full erection and the slow, lazy strokes were entirely for Whit's benefit. Swirling his thumb over the leaking slit, Luc moaned loudly.

Whit echoed the sound, the forgotten towel falling from his fingers to the floor. His own stiff cock stood proudly from the opening of his jeans. "Oh fuck," he breathed, his feet moving him towards the bed, eyes locked on the erotic tableau.

The artist's knee hit the bed and Luc opened his eyes, catching the ice blue gaze. "Touch me." He wasn't going to say a thing about making love until they were doing it. Whit was getting no advance warning this time.

Whit crawled onto the bed, his hands immediately going to the smooth planes of skin spread out before him. Luc grabbed his hand, guiding it to his cock, and the artist immediately moved his mouth over the head, swiping the beading liquid with his thumb.

Luc moaned and made a shallow thrust into Whit's mouth before winding his fingers in the long blond hair and pulling him up for a kiss. "Don't want that. Want you here... want to feel your weight against me." His hands scrabbled to push Whit's jeans lower, finishing the job with his feet and kicking them to the floor. Both lovers sighed as their naked bodies aligned and pressed together for the first time. Luc's legs opened, welcoming Whit into the intimate embrace of his body. He burned to be closer... to be joined. Rubbing his foot against Whit's shin, he hooked his leg around the back of Whit's calf and pulled his body in tight. "You fit me just right," Luc murmured against Whit's lips.

"We're two halves of a whole," Whit echoed. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

Luc saw the muscles in Whit's jaw tense momentarily, felt a tremor flow through his body. Not wanting the artist to have the time to reconsider, he whispered the only thing that came to mind. "I love you." The admission surprised Luc as much as it did Whit.

The artist cupped Luc's face gently in one hand and opened his eyes. The depth of emotion the Dreamwalker saw in Whit's blue-gray eyes took his breath away.

"You're my lover, Luc," Whit said, locking eyes with Luc. "And I love you."

"Yours... all yours," Luc breathed. Whit's lips met his and Luc lost all desire to control or seduce. He just felt. He knew without a doubt that he was the most treasured human being on the entire planet. There was no plundering of his mouth or desperate, rushed touches, only gentle, thorough caresses. Whit worshiped Luc's body with his hands, touched and teased and stroked him inside and out until Luc was trembling with need. When the young man was as open and ready as Whit could make him, the artist knelt between his lover's thighs and took himself in hand. He met Luc's eyes as he slid into him, holding the boy's gaze, watching the velvet dark eyes widen as he was filled. Luc's groan of approval was muffled as Whit leaned in to capture his mouth in a passionate kiss. The last coherent thought Luc had was, 'Davis was right. There is no comparison.'

Whit moved inside Luc with slow, steady thrusts that stroked every nerve, sending the Dreamwalker higher and higher. He gazed down at the beautiful young man who opened to him so sweetly, eyes wide and filled with such tenderness. Whit tried to slow his breathing, trembling with the effort. He was so close. He'd wanted this for so long, but he wanted to watch Luc come first, wanted to watch the Dreamwalker's first real climax take him.

Luc's breath caught in his throat, stolen by the very fact that they were finally making love. He was so transported by bliss that it was some time before he realized that Whit was holding back. Despite the fact that they were wide-awake, Luc was astounded to feel his gift unfurl. Putting his shock aside for the moment, the Spinner intuited that his lover was waiting for him to come first. Catching Whit's head between his hands, he pulled their mouths together. The kiss was pure passion... pure fire... pure need. Whit moaned into Luc's mouth and shuddered, but still he held himself in check.

“Come for me, Whit,” Luc whispered into the man’s mouth, reaching between their writhing bodies to stroke his own erection. “Come with me. I want to feel you come inside me. The first man ever inside me.”

Everything spiraled into a whirl of snatched moments and intense sensation. Luc felt his arousal being stroked, firm, insistent caresses of Whit’s calloused hand. He felt the familiar rush building in his body and clamped his legs around Whit’s waist. Whit groaned, his arms trembling as he held himself over Luc, his head thrown back, his mouth open, eyes closed in bliss. He thrust strong and fast, losing control for the first time since Tim fell ill, surrendering to the desire to be one with Luc.

“Luc...” Whit drew the name out in a cry of release as he came.

The feeling of Whit pulsing inside him and the warm rush of his release was enough to push Luc over the edge, and his cries joined Whit’s as his climax raced through him, leaving him trembling under his lover. The intense orgasm loosened his every joint, humming along his veins, leaving his skin hypersensitive as the waves of pleasure gradually faded. “Damn,” Luc said when he could think clearly again. Whit was a limp weight on his chest, but Luc didn’t mind at all. Threading his fingers through Whit’s damp hair, he let out a big breath. “That was amazing.”

Whit lifted his head and looked at Luc. A slow grin spread across his face. “You’re amazing... the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen,” Whit said.

Luc felt a blush coloring his cheeks, strange after everything they’d just shared. It wasn’t the first time a man had called him beautiful, but Luc knew Whit meant it with every fiber of his being... and loved him. Luc examined the new feeling inside him, poking at it, turning it over and looking at it from all sides. If he took a deep breath, he felt his heart might swell until it exploded.

Whit rolled away, leaving Luc’s body reluctantly. Pulling the slender body into his arms, he kissed the dark curls. “You okay?”

Luc tilted his face up, putting all the emotion he’d just been exploring into his smile. “I’d tell you I was pissed that you’ve held

out on me this long, but I'm entirely too blissed out to be angry. Just promise me that we get to do it again soon."

Laughing, Whit hugged Luc to his chest. "As often and for as long as you'll have me," he promised.

Luc bit playfully at the nipple so tantalizingly close to his mouth. "You don't know what you're promising, old man. When it comes to you, I may very well be insatiable."

Whit's voice dropped to a sensuous purr that made Luc's cock harden against his thigh. "I'm counting on it."

CHAPTER EIGHT

“ALL systems go,” Luc said under his breath, as he stretched out on the couch in his sitting room. He felt good after a day of biking, swimming, studying the client dossier, enjoying the camaraderie of his Housemates, and the barbecue Brad had organized. With his belly full and his bladder empty, he was content and in the perfect frame of mind for a Walk. He even felt a stirring of the old excitement he used to feel when preparing to Spin a dream. “Hold onto your hat, Mr. Craig Melbourne,” he murmured, as he closed his eyes. “I’m about to knock your socks off.”

“Get down,” the man with the sword bellowed, as the boy appeared at his side.

Luc didn’t waste time asking why; he hit the dirt, his face inches from the big man’s boots. Melbourne was a gamer, addicted to role-playing, and more recently, Dreamwalking. According to the latest questionnaire the client had filled out, he didn’t even bother with sexual encounters in realtime anymore, preferring the limitless possibilities to be found in a bought and paid for custom-designed fantasy. Nothing compared to a Spin that allowed him to become the barbarian mercenary character he’d invented for himself in the cyber world.

Centering himself, Luc deployed his gift, adding small details and deepening the broad strokes of the dream Melbourne was already having. Now the snow was not merely white, it was cold. The sketchy trees became full-skirted green-black firs with a burden of snow dragging their branches downward. A chill wind

whispered through the evergreens, carrying the stench as well as battle cries of the ax-wielding warriors that ran toward Melbourne's position on the hillock. Luc glanced up and saw a grin of glee on the client's face as Melbourne's fist tightened on the leather-wrapped hilt of his enormous broadsword. The Spinner smiled too, at the symbolism inherent in the size of the weapon, but then the first throwing ax parted the air above him, and Luc got serious.

Craig Melbourne didn't want a damsel in distress to rescue; he wanted a partner to fight at his side, and Luc had come mentally prepared. His costume, despite the frigid air, consisted of little more than a loincloth, a cloak slung around his shoulders, and the various leather straps that made up his battle harness. Drawing a knife from the sheath on his left hip, Luc threw it straight and true to lodge point first in the throat of the enemy leader. He pulled another throwing dagger from the belt across his smooth chest and another charging warrior went down. Melbourne, in character as Krag the Merciless, threw his companion a fierce grin and then the foe was upon them. A few breathless moments later, Luc and Melbourne's eyes met across the field of battle, strewn with the corpses of their attackers. The heat of battle flared higher; blood lust became simply lust and the two men lunged at one another. The big mercenary caught his lithe companion in brawny arms and their mouths came together with a force that split Melbourne's lower lip against Luc's front teeth. Luc sucked greedily at the small wound, as his barbarian lover kneaded the cheeks of his ass in a most arousing manner. Winding his arms around the warrior's thick neck, Luc pressed his near naked length against Melbourne's.

Melbourne growled his delight, lifting Luc from his feet and carrying him from the red slush of the hillock. The heavily muscled warrior threw his shield mate into a snow bank in the hollow behind the rise, knocking snow from the branches of the evergreens. Luc laughed at this display, shaking snow flakes from his disheveled battle braids, challenging his lover to do better. He rolled aside as Melbourne pounced; it wouldn't do to make it too easy for the client. That's not what this was about. This was about an alpha male claiming his mate after fighting for him against

seemingly impossible odds. Luc had seen beyond the rather cliché scenario and refined the fantasy to make his persona less passive. He had intuited Craig Melbourne's hidden desire for a partner who was his equal, who would not submit easily, if it all. To emphasize this point, he delivered a stinging backhand to the other man's cheek, when Melbourne tried to turn him over. It was obvious that the client had every intention of mounting without further delay, but that wasn't what he really wanted.

Luc eluded Melbourne's grab at his wrist, rolling away to come up in a crouch. "I am no slave taken in battle," he said. "You do not own me."

"You are mine," Melbourne said, having the time of his life. "Come to me, boy."

"Nay, you must come to me."

"Do not play with me. I am roused."

"So I can easily see," Luc dropped his eyes to the barbarian's crotch. "But I will not be taken as though I have no choice."

It was Melbourne's turn to laugh. "Guard yourself," he said, leaping at Luc on the last word.

Knowing what the client was going to do was a great advantage. No matter how hard Melbourne tried, he couldn't lay a hand on the agile young man. Luc's mocking laugh was the only thing he caught. "Enough," the mercenary bellowed in frustration. "Please stop."

"Please?" Luc tilted his head at the unfamiliar word. "Do you beg for my favors?"

Melbourne dropped to his knees. "Will it help?"

Luc moved closer, framing his lover's face between his hands. "All you need do is ask," he smiled.

"You are the most maddening, the bravest, most beautiful boy in all the world," Melbourne said, gazing up in baffled affection.

"Then we are a good match," Luc smiled mischievously. "Now, take me... if you are man enough."

“Little devil!” Melbourne exclaimed, sweeping Luc into his powerful arms. “I will make you pay for teasing me, and the coin I require is the sound of your moans as I pleasure you.”

“I may not be in the mood to moan today,” Luc said.

“I will leave you no choice. You will be begging me soon, begging me to let you come.”

“I will believe that miracle when I witness it.”

Luc basked in the aura of delight and satisfaction beaming from the client, but it was only reflected light and held no real heat. He was in total control of the Spin. Melbourne’s dominant tendencies had raised the specter of the Dreamwalk that ended so disastrously, but Luc had dismissed it without a second thought. He was past that, fully healed, and yet, despite his recent successes, he couldn’t recapture the fulfillment he once found in Dreamwalking. It just wasn’t enough anymore. As Melbourne pinned Luc to the fur cloak that appeared on the snow, and groped under his loincloth, the Spinner realized he couldn’t finish the Spin. There was no question of trying to see it through. He just couldn’t do it. The thought of any man but Whit touching him intimately, even in dreamtime, was so fundamentally wrong that he couldn’t continue.

“Sorry about this,” he murmured, as he reversed the dagger in his hand and drove the weighted hilt against the side of the client’s head. Melbourne’s eyes rolled up, and he went limp. Luc made a mental adjustment and brought himself back to realtime. “This is just great,” he said under his breath. “What am I gonna do?” A burst of music from across the hall snagged Luc’s attention and he leaped for the door.

“Luc!” Toby looked up as his door opened. “Too loud? I can put on my earphones.”

“I need you to finish a Spin for me,” Luc said without preamble. “Please? I’ll owe you one.”

“Damn right, you will. This is my day off,” Toby said, the sparkle in his eyes belying the cranky tone. “So what’s up?”

“I just can’t finish,” Luc said.

“Why not?” Toby asked suspiciously.

“It’s not the client. It’s... something else. And before you ask, it’s personal.”

“Then it’s a guy,” Toby said. “Good for you.”

“Yeah, good for me, but what about my career?”

“Well, maybe you’ll find out that it gets easier after the first rush of being in love wears off.”

“I don’t think so,” Luc said. “And who said I was in love?”

“I think you just did,” Brad said from the doorway.

“Oh good,” Toby said. “Come on, Caz; you can give me a hand.”

“That was my intention when I came down to your place,” Brad said. “What’s going on?”

“Just come sit with me while I do a quick Spin,” Toby said. “When I wake up, we can do our own thing.”

Brad raised his eyebrows. “That’s kind of kinky. I like it, Blue-Eyes.”

“You go find whoever it is that scrambled your brains,” Toby told Luc. “We’ll take care of things here.”

Luc looked at the slender Dreamwalker and his muscular companion in gratitude that he had such friends. Quickly, he laid out the scenario for them and then bolted from the room.

WHIT was a little stunned at the way the boy came at him hard and fast, like a human whirlwind, brooking no refusals. Luc burst into the studio, yanked down the zipper of Whit’s coveralls and pushed them off his shoulders. Running his hands up Whit’s chest to frame the man’s face, Luc brought their mouths together, desperate for Whit’s unique taste. As Luc broke the greedy kiss, he grabbed the front of Whit’s work clothes and shoved him backward. The backs of the artist’s knees hit the old sofa and he went sprawling. All the air went out of his lungs in a rush as Luc

landed atop him, pressing feverish kisses to his neck and collarbones.

“I’m not complaining,” Whit said. “But to what do I owe this ravishing?”

“I love you so much,” Luc’s words were muffled against Whit’s right pec.

“And you just had to come prove it to me?”

“Hope that’s not a problem.”

“I’m hoping it becomes a habit,” Whit’s words trailed off in a groan as strong, white teeth teased his nipple. Relaxing against the worn cushions, he let Luc set the pace until he became too aroused to remain passive. Joining in the feverish tango, he inspired his lover to even greater heights of pleasure. Nearly an hour later, the sound of Whit’s phone evoked a drowsy protest from Luc as he curled closer to Whit’s side, limp and sated with more sexual satisfaction than one person could take.

Admitting to Whit that he was the only one Luc wanted to make love to, in realtime or dreamtime, had added a deeper dimension to their lovemaking. Luc had waited until Whit was snugly ensconced inside him to tell the artist how he felt, and the tears that made Whit’s eyes shine touched the Dreamwalker’s hostage heart. The young man had given himself completely for the first time since the bad Walk, and the first time ever outside of dreams. He couldn’t imagine how he could ever be happier than he was at this moment. Then Whit ignored the phone and pulled Luc even closer in his sleep, and Luc realized that his happiness had no limits. He felt so content and protected that he was halfway into Whit’s dream before he knew it.

They were riding horses, Whit in the lead on a beautiful paint, galloping down a gentle slope towards a tree-lined creek. Luc’s legs tightened, urging his bay from a canter to a gallop to give chase, laughing as the wind pushed his hair back from his face. Reining to a stop, Whit dismounted in a smooth arc, giving the horse its head to drink from the sun dappled water. Turning, he eased Luc to the ground in one long, slow glide down his body.

Trapping the younger man against the solid weight of the horse, he bent his head to join their lips.

Luc felt the adrenaline from the ride mixing with the passion of their kiss. A blanket and a cooler appeared under the sweeping branches of a nearby tree and Luc began to guide them toward it. The Dreamwalker sensed the rubbery resistance of a mental barrier and instinctively began backing away from it, but stopped and made himself consider. This was Whit, not someone who wanted to hurt him, and dissolving barriers to the artist's deepest fantasies could only bring them closer. The Spinner's new resolve broke through the obstacle easily, but once he was on the other side, he felt disoriented, as if viewing the scene from above, no longer directly involved.

Whit sat on the blanket, his back against the tree, with a stranger in his arms. Tears pooled in Luc's eyes at the love and intimacy implicit in the scene, and at the sharp pain in his heart at being displaced in Whit's embrace. The artist held the slender, curly-haired man securely, his fingers tracing random patterns on the tanned chest as his lover dozed. Whit dipped his head to nuzzle behind the other man's ear, nipping playfully at his earlobe. The drowsing man's mouth curved, his hand coming up to hook blindly around Whit's head and pull him close. Lips melded, their bodies shifting until Whit lay on top of the other man.

With a start and a small cry, Luc woke up, waking Whit as he pushed away from him. The Dreamwalker's entire body shook. Sitting at the far corner of the bed, he pulled his knees to his chest and wrapped his arms tightly around them. "Who?" he asked, too miserable to form the entire question.

Whit struggled to sit up, his body still sated and sleepy. He leaned back against the headboard, his eyes focused on an invisible scene, filled with heart-breaking sadness. "Tim." His voice was rough as he spoke. He reached out and laid a hand over Luc's foot, sensing that Luc needed physical reassurance, but that anything more would make the younger man pull away. Blinking away the remnants of the dream, the artist moved closer to Luc. "Tim was my lover for twelve years."

Luc's heart alternated between racing and stopping as Whit spoke.

"Tim died. January 8th. Four years ago. Bone cancer." The short statements were delivered with a complete lack of emotion, like a computer programmed to provide simple, historical facts. Whit was completely off balance. Luc's arrival and announcement, the dream about Tim, and now waking to this emotional rift... he felt like he was walking a narrow ledge in dense fog, one misstep and he'd lose Luc as surely and irrevocably as he'd lost Tim.

"You loved him. You still love him," Luc said, taking deep, even breaths to keep nausea at bay.

Whit nodded slowly, his eyes never leaving Luc's. "Yes. A part of me will always love him."

Luc swallowed hard, still feeling the deep, all encompassing love that Whit and Tim had shared and made himself say the selfless words, though they cut him like rusty razors. "I can give him back to you," the Dreamwalker offered. Stemming his tears, Luc continued in a professional tone. "You can hold him, love him again, and it will feel real; I promise you." Inside, he was screaming at the unfairness of having his happiness snatched away just as he'd found it, but he let none of his agony show in his face.

"Come here. Please," Whit coaxed gently, opening his arms. "You're the one I want in my life, Luc, in my arms, in my heart and in my bed."

With a choked sob, Luc fell into Whit's embrace, pressing his face against the artist's chest to hide his tears.

"Why would I want Tim in a dream when I can have you in reality?" Whit kissed the top of Luc's head, fingers sinking into the silky curls and tipping Luc's face up so their eyes could meet. "I love you. My love for Tim doesn't diminish that in the least. If anything, I think I know how to be a better partner because of what I had with him. The man you saw in my dream didn't even exist at the end of our relationship. What you saw was an ideal. The way I remember him: an amalgam of all of our good times, distilled

into one perfect moment, but it fades into memory, as it should, when I look into your eyes.”

Luc melted in the heat coming from Whit’s gaze, sinking deep into the embrace, his ear pressed to the steady beat of Whit’s heart. With startling clarity, he realized what had happened today - they had both been offered a dream and had chosen reality.

THE rogue Dreamwalker dialed and waited for his liaison to pick up. “Sorry to bother you,” he said with a marked lack of sincerity.

“Perhaps not yet, but you soon might be,” the crisp, dispassionate voice of the contact was as unruffled as ever.

“I’m betting what I’m about to say will make you forgive me. Lucien Clarke has a new habit that’s going to give me the opportunity I need. When he stays overnight with his new friend, he wakes up early to go to a coffee shop around the corner so he can bring his lover breakfast in bed. Such a sweet boy.”

“Good. We’d prefer you acquire Clarke off Dreamscape property.”

“Prefer?” the Judas snorted. “It’s the only way it’s going to be possible. Thank your lucky stars the kid fell in love.”

“We’ll be sure and do that; just as soon as Clarke is in our possession.”

“Big payday coming, huh?”

“We believe you’ll be pleased with your compensation. The final bid accepted was for fourteen million.”

The renegade Dreamwalker smiled. His cut was ten percent. He’d set a bottom line of one million, but the extra four hundred thousand sweetened the deal considerably. “That’s what I call incentive,” he said. “The next time you hear from me, I’ll be en route with Clarke under wraps.”

“Very well. I’ll give you the coordinates of the drop off point then.”

“No. I deliver Clarke myself, or the deal’s off.”

“Very well. It makes no difference to us. Co-ordinates will be sent to your phone.”

The connection was broken abruptly, as usual, and the renegade Spinner was left with an unuttered good-bye on his tongue. The cool, detached voice was his only link to the organization that hired him, so he couldn’t afford to alienate the contact just yet, but his resentment of the smugly superior tone was growing. He was not a man to be taken lightly, and some day everyone would know that.

For now however, he had a job to do, and one that served his purposes as well as those of the company that hired him. After all, why would he want a Dreamwalker of Luc’s magnitude running around loose? He’d have to eliminate Clarke eventually, no matter what happened. Getting paid for it was a nice touch that thoroughly appealed to his sense of irony. As he flipped the phone closed, he was already checking his mental map of the Coffee Stop, the streets and stores around it. An early morning abduction meant fewer witnesses, and it shouldn’t be hard to get Clarke into a car. After all, he was a colleague.

“WE should have stock in this place,” Luc said, as they sat down at what was fast becoming “their table” at O’Malley’s.

“What makes you think we don’t?” Whit asked, thrilling his lover with a simple choice of pronouns.

“Whit’s a silent partner,” Alec confided, as the waiter Luc thought of as “their waiter” arrived. Whatever Alec was going to say next was lost as he met their server’s eyes. He looked quickly away from all that blue, pretending to be intensely interested in the wine list.

Luc smiled to himself. “I thought we’d decided on a pitcher of Guinness.”

Whit glanced from his lover to his best friend and noticed the pink tinge to Alec’s cheeks. “Maybe Alec’s changed his mind,” Whit said to Luc. “Maybe he’s ready to try something new.” Alec

gave Whit a look over the top of the wine list that threatened reprisals for any teasing. Whit blithely ignored him. "So... are you ready... to order?" the artist purred with comic timing.

Alec looked to Luc in appeal and saw no help there. "Ganging up is not fair," he said.

"Luc and I do everything together now," Whit said.

"Smugness doesn't suit you," Alec observed, with the feeling of having scored one.

"Whenever you're ready, sir," the waiter said, destroying Alec's newly regained equilibrium.

"Give us a minute, Remy," Luc said. "I'm not sure that what Alec wants is on the menu."

Remy smiled at his favorite customer. "If you don't see what you want, I could ask the kitchen to fix something for you."

"I'm not here to make your job harder," Alec said, with another hard look at his friends. "A pitcher and three mugs will do for now."

"My pleasure," Remy said as he moved away.

Luc and Whit pretended not to know what Alec was talking about when their friend asked them to lay off. Luc changed the subject to the new item on the menu, snow crab legs, and in another moment, Alec and Whit were planning a boat trip. Staying out of the conversation, Luc mused on the attraction he sensed between Alec and Remy that grew stronger each time they interacted. The Dreamwalker also intuited Alec's resistance and Remy's unwillingness to step across the bounds of etiquette. Someone was going to have to give them a gentle nudge, and Luc thought he'd do as Cupid in a pinch. After all, he was going to need a new job since his love for Whit made it impossible for him to go on fulfilling the sexual fantasies of strangers. And if he couldn't be everyone's perfect dream lover, maybe he could help them to find their real life soul mates. Yeah. He liked the sound of that.

"What does that Mona Lisa smile portend?" Alec asked, breaking Luc's reverie.

Luc's smile became a grin as Whit reached over without thinking to caress his cheek. "I think I've found a new vocation," the ex-Spinner said.

Alec gave Whit a mock-hostile look. "Thanks again, mate," he said. "The greatest Walker ever to Spin a dream and he's retiring before his career really gets started."

"I'm sorry," Luc said. "There's only one man I want to satisfy that way."

"Okay, that's enough information," Alec said quickly. "No need to explain it again."

Luc and Whit exchanged a smile that should have lit every candle in the room. "Maybe you'd prefer a demonstration," Whit drawled.

"Shameless," Alec said, as their server set the pitcher down.

"Well, I hope not, sir," Remy said. "But I'm not exactly a prude either."

The quickly hidden expression on Alec's face made up Luc's mind. Maybe he was meddling, but he couldn't let Alec be so lonely, especially since he was taking up so much of Alec's best friend's time these days. When the meal was over, Luc faked a need for the men's room. As he passed the bar, he gave Remy a not so subtle signal that he wanted to talk. The waiter met him by the pay phone in the rest room alcove, a look of understandable curiosity on his face.

"Look, I'm not going to dance around this," Luc said. "I get the idea that you like my friend Alec. I know matchmaking is a dangerous game, but I happen to know that he finds you attractive. So what I want to know is whether or not you'd agree to meet Alec just to talk? It would be in a public place. I swear we're not a bunch of pervs trying to lure you into our clutches."

"Aw, and I was kind of hoping you were," Remy answered. "Just kidding. I take it that Alec doesn't know you're setting this up?"

Luc shook his head. "I don't like tricking him, but knowing how happy this is going to make him... Let's just say that I can deal with the guilt."

"Where and when?"

"You know the Coffee Stop a couple of blocks over on Balboa?" Luc asked, thrilled by the note of eagerness in Remy's voice.

Remy nodded. "Yeah. I go to Krispy Kreme, so I haven't been in there much."

"Be there tomorrow morning at seven thirty and I can almost guarantee you'll get something sweeter than a glazed donut."

"You can't win if you don't play," Remy said. "I'll be there. Better get back to work now."

Luc walked out onto the sidewalk with the air of someone who just found the best present in the world for a friend's birthday. His gaze found Whit and Alec, talking with broad hand gestures that told Luc they were discussing sailing. The last light of setting sun polished the gold of their jackstraw hair, and turned their tanned skin to bronze. Except for the modern clothing, they could have been two heroes from the Golden Age about to set sail for undiscovered lands. Luc smiled as he went toward them; they were all sailors on a vast sea searching for lands as yet unknown to them. And once in a while, they found a great treasure. Possessively, the former Dreamwalker took his lover's hand and touched his lips to the paint stained knuckles.

"Let's go home," he said.

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Thank you to Cindy Lou,
for always believing in me.
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their support and help.

RODRIGO bounced up the stairs to the fourth floor, his long legs easily taking them two at a time. He was in a hurry, not quite late yet, but hadn't left himself enough time to get the materials he wanted and then rush across campus for his meeting. The last thing he needed was to make a bad impression; Professor Sullivan was one of the most demanding faculty in the Art History department.

He grumbled to himself. All of the computer terminals had been commandeered by undergrads researching their first midterm projects. Shaking his head and feeling even more annoyed with himself for looking up the information at home but failing to write it down, he made for his usual area in the stacks and hoped he could just find the books he needed by sheer luck.

It was weird that he'd forgotten that it was midterms week, he mused. He really ought to have known, but this was the first semester that he wasn't a TA, and that had been a last-minute change. As usual, the department hadn't asked him if he wanted to be Professor Sullivan's research assistant so much as told him that he was going to be. He wouldn't have refused. Like everyone else, he was a bit intimidated by the man but their academic interests were similar enough that he didn't mind the assignment.

Not to mention the facts that Professor Sullivan was utterly gorgeous and that his slight Irish accent made Rodrigo's mouth water.

That combination proved nearly disastrous. At their first meeting, Rodrigo had been so tongue-tied with his attempts to fight off inappropriate arousal that he'd barely said a dozen words and had most likely come across as either terrified or dim-witted.

And now he was going to be late for their second meeting unless he could quickly find the books he needed, something about tools used in archaic Greek sculpture. Too bad he couldn't remember the titles.

Or authors.

Or anything other than that it was the one topic Professor Sullivan had specifically requested he bring some materials on.

After five minutes of scanning titles on the shelves, Rodrigo was ready to admit defeat. If he couldn't find what he was looking for soon, he'd have to go look it up on the terminals downstairs.

Rushing through the stacks, he turned a corner and ran into one of the most gorgeous backsides he'd ever seen. It was round and firm and filled out the jeans encasing it as if it had been poured in and molded by God himself. Or perhaps Eros. Rodrigo couldn't see much else of the man the butt belonged to, but the jeans fit his legs well and were complemented by work boots and a black t-shirt. He had messy reddish-blond hair and was humming as he pulled books off the bottom shelf.

Unfortunately, Rodrigo literally ran straight into his upturned ass.

He only had a split second to notice the other physical details before he slammed into the bent-over man and knocked them both off balance. One of Rodrigo's hands shot out to grab the shelf. The other graciously reached out to stabilize his victim, grabbing him by the nearest possible body part. Which was, of course, his ass.

It was a nice and firm ass, too. And its owner didn't pull away from the touch of his hand the way a straight man would have.

Once the owner of the luscious ass and Rodrigo were both upright he apologized profusely, both for the collision and the unplanned groping. He was relieved that the other man kept laughing rather than looking like he wanted to slug him; brawling in the library wasn't likely to help his academic career. Furthermore, it had been quite a nice ass to grope, even by accident, and it was attached to a great body as well. The sense of humor simply topped off the package and sent an enjoyable frisson of arousal down into Rodrigo's groin.

His victim reassured him that he was fine. His eyes darted to Rodrigo's backpack, which had had fallen on the floor face up, rainbow triangle patch on display. "I don't usually let people get that far without at least buying me a beer first," he teased.

"Maybe some other time then?" Rodrigo grinned, getting a smile in response.

They both knelt at the same time to pick up the books that had fallen and laughed again as they almost bumped heads. Rodrigo backed off, pulling a few towards himself. Some of them had opened and he glanced at the pictures as he closed and stacked the books neatly.

"Wait! Is this Greek art? About armatures and sculpting tools and stuff?"

The man's eyebrows raised. "Yeah. It is, actually. Do you need that book for something?"

"Yeah, it's one of the ones I was looking for. Looks like I ran into the right guy. Sorry it was so literal."

"No problem," the man chuckled.

"So... Are you using it?" Rodrigo asked, getting to his feet.

"No, I work here. I was just putting them back."

"Awesome," Rodrigo grinned. "I feel really awful for just running off like this, but I'm horribly late for an appointment with a professor. Can I just take it?"

"Sure. I assume you know where the Circulation desk is?" At his nod, the librarian smiled and got back to re-shelving the books.

“Great. Well, let me know if there’s anything else I can help with. I’ll be at Reference if you need me,” he offered with a wide grin and a glint in his eyes.

Rodrigo grinned back. “Thanks. And really, I’m sorry to just bail like this; I don’t usually hit and run,” he apologized, grabbing his backpack.

They exchanged rushed goodbyes, and Rodrigo raced down the stairs and through the check-out at the Circulation desk. In moments he was out the door and jogging down the hill to Professor Sullivan’s office.

THAT’S one hot librarian, Rodrigo thought, heart pounding as he reached the Arts building. Nice ass, nice body, cute face, and really easy-going. Hardly the stereotype of the stern and repressed or quiet and bookish librarian. Nope, this one was kind of sexy, and if they’d met in a club or a bar, Rodrigo would have definitely been checking him out. If he’d had enough to drink, maybe even going over and trying to pick him up...

On that note, he realized he was standing in a hallway he believed to be his destination and that he really needed to get his brain out of his pants and try to remember what office number Sullivan was in. Last time they had met at the Student Union, grabbing a few minutes between their respective classes.

It wasn’t that difficult to find; not only was the door ajar with Professor Sullivan waiting inside, but it was the only office door framed by a collection of postcards of various Greek sculptures. All male nudes, part of Rodrigo’s brain noticed. Interesting.

The decor on the interior of the office was the same – not one female figure in the bunch. One might almost suspect his professor and he had something in common aside from their academic interests.

In his own office, Professor Sullivan (“Call me ‘Daniel’”) was much more approachable. They mapped out the specific topics he wanted Rodrigo to hunt down and gave him a list of resources that might be helpful, as well as a list of the books he already knew

were dead ends. Sullivan made it clear that he'd be relying on Rodrigo's greater experience with computers, admitting that he was a bit of a Luddite.

All in all, it was a successful meeting. Until the end, when his professor got up and walked him out of the building, bringing one large hand to rest on Rodrigo's shoulder. The heat from his professor's hand sent an undeniable bolt of arousal down to his crotch. Something about the older man threatened to turn him on unbearably if Rodrigo let it, and he knew the rest of the semester was going to be torture of the most delicious kind.

Damn, he really needed to get laid, he thought to himself on the bus ride home.

It had been four months since his boyfriend of almost two years had moved out and he still felt a little bruised, hesitant to go out anywhere where he might run into Todd. And though he was tired of his own right hand, he wasn't much interested in picking someone up at a bar just for sex. That was how he'd hooked up with Todd in the first place. Once bitten, twice shy and all that.

Although frankly, if his dick was going to think every man he ran into was worth getting hard over, maybe he'd have to reconsider that option.

Then again, maybe those two particular men were just special...

TWO days later, Rodrigo was back at the library, this time with notes on exactly which books he was looking for, with the call numbers and everything. Once he'd pulled all the books he wanted and checked their bibliographies to see if the library had any of those books as well, he even managed to score a computer terminal. He found everything he was looking for again, with the exception of one item.

After checking the stacks, the reshelving area, and double-checking the online catalog to confirm that the book's status was indeed "checked in," he admitted defeat and headed downstairs to the Reference desk.

“Hey, it’s you again,” the man he’d literally run into two days ago grinned. “Come here often?” he winked.

Flattered for a moment before he remembered that really, any man was unlikely to have forgotten being almost knocked over and having his ass grabbed in the middle of the library, Rodrigo laughed.

“Yeah, I practically live here, I think. Haven’t seen you around, though...?”

The cute librarian shrugged. “I’m Ian. No, I took a couple months off of working the desk to help with the digitization project.”

“Ah,” was all Rodrigo could think of to say to that, once he’d offered his own name, knowing absolutely nothing about any such project. “Uh...”

“So what can I help you with?” Ian asked, saving him from the awkward moment.

He showed Ian what he was looking for, explaining that he’d looked on the shelves, in the sorting area, and even on a few book-carts that he’d walked past. They checked online again, confirming that yes, the book was indeed supposed to be somewhere in the library.

Ian gave him an odd look when he pulled up the title. “Is this a pet project of yours?”

“No; I’m Professor Sullivan’s research assistant this semester,” Rodrigo explained.

“Really? I’ve assisted Daniel with research before. It’s nice to see that the department has finally decided to give him a slave, er, *grad student* of his own,” Ian said, eyes sparkling with amusement.

They talked for a while, about art and sculpture in general. Ian showed him the new resources the digitization project offered, photos and texts from libraries all over the world scanned in for shared use. Some of the images online were better reproductions than in the books they came from, and could be enlarged and magnified to get details impossible to see on paper.

Rodrigo couldn't help grinning as an old favorite came up, a sculpture of a man hunting with a javelin, but missing the weapon.

"What?" Ian asked, seeing his reaction.

"Nothing, really. It just always makes me think he looks like he's surfing or something."

"I'm no expert, but I don't think they had surfing in ancient Greece," Ian joked.

"No, but look at the way he's balanced..." Rodrigo explained, pointing at the posture of the arms and legs.

"Hm. I don't know. I'm just learning to surf, myself," Ian shrugged.

"Yeah?"

A hot, queer librarian who surfed? Could this guy get any better?

"Ever go to Lighthouse Point?" Rodrigo asked, trying not to think too much about what Ian's body would look like in a wetsuit.

That started off a long conversation about surfing, the best places to go both for the waves and to get away from the tourists. Rodrigo left without the book he'd been looking for, but a whole list of things to show Professor Sullivan online, and something more than just a simple lust-fueled crush on Ian.

THE next time Rodrigo met up with Ian it wasn't quite an accident. He'd been at the library all afternoon, screwing around, checking things that didn't need to be checked, before finally admitting to himself that he was waiting to see if Ian was working.

It turned out he was. Rodrigo knew it would be way too obvious if he went to him with yet another question, so he waited until almost closing time and then strolled leisurely past the desk, hoping to catch Ian's eye with his bright yellow t-shirt.

It worked.

Ian called him over and they chatted for a few minutes before the five-minutes-until-closing warning bells rang.

“Hey, want to go grab a beer at the Student Union?” Ian suggested. “I have to stay until closing, but I bet I can skip out right after, if you’re interested.”

Oh yeah. Rodrigo was interested.

“Sure, why not?” he managed to say. They agreed he’d grab a table and wait for Ian there.

Damn, this was going to be dangerous, he thought to himself as he walked up the hill to the Union. He’d have to be careful not to come across as too desperate. Maybe Ian was just being friendly. Even if he was gay, there was no reason to think he was into Rodrigo. Maybe he was just flirty.

And hot.

Rodrigo groaned to himself, walking over to a table to wait.

Absolutely fucking hot.

Fuck, he needed to get laid.

THEY’D had a good conversation, talking about everything as they got to know each other. It sure as hell felt like he was being picked up, Rodrigo thought, but maybe it was all in his head. Ian flirted but never seemed to be more than just friendly.

They met for drinks a couple more evenings, with Rodrigo timing things so he finished his research for the day just as the library was closing, and it became a semi-regular thing for them over the following weeks. A thing. Not a date.

At any rate, making a new friend was great. Ian was great. And fucking hell, the flirting was great. Rodrigo knew he was attractive, but it was nice to have a guy talk to him about real things too, like art and history and travel, instead of just seeing him as a piece of ass.

Finally he worked up the nerve to ask Ian if he wanted to go surfing some time. They made a date for Sunday morning and Rodrigo tried not to spend the next three days picturing Ian struggling into (and out of) his wetsuit.

Clinging, black, tight...

And failing most enjoyably.

IN addition to the excitement of being around Ian and the usual stress of classes, Rodrigo also found himself struggling to fend off his inappropriate feelings towards Professor Sullivan.

Daniel.

No, *Professor Sullivan*. There was just something about the older man that resisted informality, no matter that he'd invited Rodrigo to use his given name. There was just something too commanding and inarguably "in charge" for such casualness.

Sometimes the strangest images would pop into his head, of Professor Sullivan holding a young man (who coincidentally looked an awful lot like Rodrigo) up against a wall and jerking him off, right in the middle of the local gay dance club. Whispering dirty things in his ear, telling him what a slut he was. Huge hands on his wrists and cock, making him writhe with embarrassment and excitement mixed together in equal amounts...

After the second time his mind flashed those images while he was jerking off in the shower, Rodrigo found it difficult to meet his professor's eyes. He swore he almost blushed once, in the middle of another meeting, as Rodrigo's gaze lingered on a poster featuring an urn depicting a mature man with a young boy. The boy looked like he was trying to get away from the man's rampant cock and Rodrigo couldn't help but think that the boy was a fool; he'd give anything to have the attention of a guy as well-endowed as that.

He sighed. Christ, he needed to get laid.

Every meeting with his professor spawned new fantasies, shadowy and dark and resulting in the most intense orgasms from masturbation that Rodrigo could remember having since high school. Something about Professor Sullivan just set all of Rodrigo's body shivering; he was clearly gay, unbelievably hot, and that sexy voice... Liquid and smooth, the lilt of his Irish

accent shaping the vowels into something that made Rodrigo ache to hear him whisper orders for Rodrigo to go down on his knees...

It was confusing, though. Not only was he falling into some really bad thought-habits about his professor - thoughts that were only going to get him in trouble someday even if that trouble was only the disappointment of unrequited lust - but he also genuinely liked the man. Professor Sullivan was witty and funny. Under the layer of stern expectation that made Rodrigo feel like shit any time he even slightly disappointed Sullivan by being late or forgetting to bring something to their meetings, he was actually pretty easy-going.

He learned that Professor Sullivan was a bit older than he looked. He was in his late forties, but still in really good shape. He jogged and said that he used to surf and still did sometimes, but these days he mostly just splashed around or lay on the beach watching people while he read. He'd grown up in Galway and moved to California in his twenties for the university and he swore he'd never move back to the cold winters.

Although Professor Sullivan never talked about his personal life explicitly, the hints and occasional plurals made Rodrigo think he had a boyfriend. Lover. Partner. Whatever. Which was too bad, but maybe it would at least help Rodrigo let go of the fantasies about his professor bending him over and fucking him until he screamed...

Maybe.

It was getting a bit too confusing, inside his head. Intensely lusting after his professor while at the same time doing whatever he was doing with Ian. Becoming friends. Falling for him, probably.

Falling for both of them, kind of, he feared. He tried not to let himself think about it too much.

And as usual, he suspected everything would be much simpler if he just got laid.

AFTER three days of imagining it, it was gratifying that Ian was not at all subtle about checking out Rodrigo's body while they struggled into their wetsuits in the parking lot. Ian offered to zip up the back for him, and Rodrigo was pretty certain that the hand brushing the top of the swell of his ass and the light tickle of fingertips up the vee of the zip weren't accidental.

Thank fucking God. He'd been so worried that this crush or whatever was totally one-sided. Evidently not.

They had a great morning of surfing even though the ocean wasn't being especially cooperative. The waves were far apart and not big enough to be very exciting but that meant that aside from two or three other dedicated surfers, they were the only ones out in this particular cove. It also gave Rodrigo the opportunity to give Ian some pointers, which was fun.

Not to mention that it was just great to hang out together doing something active. Knowing that the attraction he felt was returned freed Rodrigo up to enjoy it more. Their flirting became far more bold; innuendo and barely-concealed groping that made Rodrigo's heart pound.

He would have sworn that his cock spent the entire morning somewhere between half and fully hard. The icy temperature of the ocean was no match for the anticipation of getting Ian alone somewhere and peeling him out of the clingy neoprene.

Clingy, smooth, tight... The wetsuit hugged every curve of Ian's delectable ass, the broadness of his chest and shoulders, those firm thighs. Not to mention the substantial package between them...

Nope. The ocean temperatures would have to be far more frigid to have any effect on Rodrigo's impatient erection.

When they were exhausted and hungry, they decided to call it quits. They grabbed some lunch at the taqueria right by the parking lot, and then Ian offered to give Rodrigo a lift home. Relieved that he didn't have to call someone to give him a ride and hoping to get Ian all alone, he gratefully accepted.

He started to nod off a bit in the car, body finally uncoiling from the excitement of the morning. “Fuck,” he yawned. “Adrenaline always kind of wears me out.”

Ian glanced over to look at him, sprawled out on the passenger seat. “Really? Makes me horny,” he said, wiggling his eyebrows.

Rodrigo grinned. “Well, yeah. That too.”

They exchanged a look, and at the next stoplight, Rodrigo gathered his courage and twisted over to kiss Ian.

To his dismay Ian pulled back.

Before Rodrigo could apologize or freak out, Ian put a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Wait just a second. I um, I just thought you should know before we, you know, go any further, that I’m seeing someone,” he said.

Rodrigo blinked. “What?”

Ian had the grace to look uncomfortable. “Yeah. I just kind of thought you should know.”

Rodrigo blinked again, still speechless. “Well, I... That *is* a surprise.”

“I’d still like to go home with you,” Ian said quickly.

“What?” This was getting way too weird.

The light changed and Ian had to start driving again.

“Look, I’m with him, but it’s not... Well, it’s not that it’s not exclusive, because it mostly is. It’s just that I’ve talked about you a lot over the last few weeks and he knows about you and that we’re friends and that I’m, uh, attracted to you...” Ian shrugged.

There was a very long pause.

“So you’re saying he’s ok with this?” Rodrigo asked, not quite sure whether or not to believe him.

“Yeah,” Ian nodded.

Rodrigo thought about it as they drove about a half-mile. “Why didn’t you ever mention him before?”

Ian shrugged, a little smile pulling at his lips. "Well, I was interested in you, and I was pretty sure you were interested in me. I didn't want to scare you off by making you think I was unavailable." His smile faded a bit. "Or by taking the risk that you wouldn't be all right with it."

"I see." Rodrigo was quiet for another few blocks, thinking as he gave the occasional direction to Ian. "Well, I don't know if I am. I mean..." he sighed. "It's just odd to think of you being someone else's. I mean, not that you *belong* to him," he corrected himself.

Ian laughed a bit harder at that than seemed reasonable.

"Oh, you know what I mean," Rodrigo muttered.

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Ian said, pulling up in front of Rodrigo's house. He turned off the car and twisted to look at Rodrigo. "Well?"

Rodrigo wanted to pretend that he was thinking about it, giving the decision due consideration. But Ian was offering to have sex with him and he'd lusted after him for almost a month; who was he kidding by pretending he was going to say anything other than "yes"?

"Hell yeah," he said, pulling Ian close by the back of the neck. Their lips met in a kiss that was more hungry than awkward and definitely messy. There was no teasing as their mouths opened, eager for the taste of each other, tongues stroking and teeth nibbling as their urgency grew. One hand was on the back of Ian's neck and the other on his thigh, and Rodrigo cursed the seat-belt holding him back from crawling into Ian's lap to rub their bodies together.

They reluctantly pulled away from each other, both scrambling to get out of the car and into the house as fast as possible. Ian pressed up against his back as he struggled to get the door unlocked, hands gripping his hips as Ian rubbed his cock against Rodrigo's ass and nibbled at the back of his neck. Rodrigo groaned and almost dropped the keys.

Once inside, they wrestled their wetsuits off as fast as they could. Ian had him backed up against the wall, licking rivulets of water from his hair off of his neck and shoulders before Rodrigo had even finished untangling his feet. He shivered, torn between being so aroused that he felt like he might come any second and being cold and wet and starting to itch from the saltwater.

As if he was psychic, Ian licked his neck one last time and mumbled, "Let's move to the shower and get warmed up, yeah? I want to taste you, not the ocean."

"Excellent," Rodrigo agreed, pushing Ian away and leading them into the bathroom. Once there, he threw back the shower curtain and promptly froze with embarrassment.

Ian laughed, having wrapped his arms around Rodrigo's waist and peered around his shoulder. "Well, that's handy," he said, looking at the shower caddy filled with shampoo, conditioner, soap, waterproof lube, and two silicone dildos. "Very handy. Do you use these on yourself?"

"They wouldn't be here if I didn't," Rodrigo answered, trying to regain his composure.

"You keep condoms in here too?"

Rodrigo cursed, then hurried into his bedroom to get some as he heard Ian start the water in the shower. He returned to the gorgeous sight of Ian, naked and hard, holding a bottle of lube in one hand and reaching out with the other to pull Rodrigo into a welcoming embrace.

The heat and steam slowed their urgency somehow, as they soaped each other down, lips tasting clean skin while hands roamed all over each other, bodies twisting and rubbing until they were both breathing raggedly.

Ian pressed into Rodrigo's mouth, opening, tasting, and teasing with his tongue before sliding inside for a deep exploration. His hands gripped Rodrigo's waist and pulled their bodies together in a slow grind. The combined pleasure made Rodrigo's knees weak and a low moan reverberated in his throat.

Ian gently pushed Rodrigo back against the tiles, their bodies coming together in a more purposeful frotting. The feel of their pricks sliding against each other, all slick warm skin, made Rodrigo's head fall to the side as he panted for breath. His gasps of pleasure increased as Ian nibbled and then bit the exposed stretch of his neck.

His hands came up to push Ian away. It was too much, too good for Rodrigo to last much longer unless they stopped, but Ian was having none of it. He held Rodrigo's wrists pinned to the wall, and after a second of struggle that only proved that Ian was stronger than he looked, Rodrigo gave in. His hips thrust forward against Ian's, excitement building with the friction until he was gasping and writhing, reaching for his orgasm, almost there.

"Come for me," Ian commanded, biting on his earlobe. "I want you to come, now. I'm going to fuck you so hard after you come all over us..."

Before Ian had finished speaking, Rodrigo was spilling hot fluid between their wet bodies, convulsing and jerking with a strangled yell. His eyes rolled back in his head and his knees went weak.

"Oh yes," Ian crooned into his throat, holding him up against the wall. "God you're fucking gorgeous. I knew you'd be so hot when you came. I loved watching you, feeling you tremble, because of me." He licked his way across Rodrigo's jaw and kissed him, delving into his slackened mouth, consuming him even as he kept their hips moving, sliding their bodies together and wringing every last ounce of pleasure from Rodrigo's quivering body.

After a minute Rodrigo pulled away, head falling to the side so he could get some air. Ian kissed his cheek, taking a step back to look at him.

"You ok?"

Rodrigo nodded. "Yeah. Fuck, that was intense," he said, a contented smile pulling at his lips.

Ian grinned back, one hand trailing down his chest to stroke his own erection. "It was great. You're great."

Rodrigo licked his lips. Slowly, holding Ian's eyes, he turned around, pressing his chest to the shower tiles and arching his back as he looked over his shoulder. "Still want to fuck me?" he asked with a coy smirk.

The way Ian's eyes glazed over was beyond gratifying. Rodrigo felt his cock, not fully softened yet, give a twitch of interest and he reached down to encourage it back to hardness.

The waft of cold air as Ian opened the door to get the condoms from the bathroom sink made Rodrigo shiver, but then the press of Ian's hot body against his back was all that much more delicious. He spread his legs apart eagerly, growing impatient as Ian fiddled with the condom and lube. Finally slick fingers pressed against his entrance, two sliding inside, urgent and just this side of rough. Thrusting into him, deep and sure.

In no time at all Rodrigo was panting again, every exhalation a deep moan. His arms tensed, pushing his body back onto Ian's fingers, wanting more. He wasn't surprised to hear himself groaning and asking for more.

Begging, he supposed, if you wanted to be strictly accurate.

"Come on, Ian. Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me, please," he groaned.

Ian laughed behind him and the fingers were slowly pulled out and replaced with the much larger rounded head of a cock. The slide in burned and stretched more than usual, since it had been a while, but fuck, it felt so wonderful to be fucked again that it didn't matter. In fact it might have made it better even, sharper and deeper. He felt every millimeter of cock as Ian slid into his ass, groaning at the steady push inside until he felt Ian's balls against his ass.

And then the fucking started.

Ian had held himself back for a long time, letting Rodrigo come first and even giving him a few minutes to catch his breath after, but he was clearly done holding back now and was just fucking the

living hell out of Rodrigo. And it was perfect, exactly what he wanted, raw and urgent and *sex*, the way it only is when it's been a long time since you've gotten laid. Ian gripped Rodrigo's hipbones like they were handholds, using the weight of his body for leverage and making soft little growling grunts with every thrust as their rhythm increased.

It was unbelievably fantastic. Rodrigo's hand yanked on his own renewed erection, struggling to stay upright when the other hand slipped on the wet tiles as Ian pounded into him over and over. Just as his balls started to tingle and he knew he was getting close to coming again, Ian reached down and grabbed Rodrigo by the wrist, pulling his hand back up to the tile.

"Not without me," Ian said in a voice that had an edge of animal growl.

The assertiveness of his voice made Rodrigo's knees buckle. Ian held him there, up against the wall, fucking him hard and deep as they both lost control. It was the most overwhelming sex Rodrigo had ever had. He felt himself go weak and unresisting in Ian's embrace, surrendering completely.

He didn't even realize he was begging again, as an endless litany of pleading spilled out of his mouth. He was so close he could feel it in his toes, in his *teeth*, as Ian hit his prostate with every stroke.

Finally, after what felt like a blissful eternity, Ian's hand dug into Rodrigo's hips and the other reached around to pull at his cock. That little bit of extra stimulus was all it took and Rodrigo's second orgasm hit him like a truck, as he shouted his climax. Ian thrust hard a few times and let out a guttural moan as he came a moment later.

They stood slumped against the tile, warm water still raining down on them, slowly coming back to their bodies. The only thought in Rodrigo's head was that *fuck* he'd needed that as he grinned at the shower wall like an idiot.

Eventually Ian pulled out, disposing of the used condom. He leaned forward to give Rodrigo a kiss and a grin. "God that was amazing."

“No kidding. I don’t think I’ve ever had sex that felt like that,” Rodrigo moaned, shutting off the water.

They towed off and went to Rodrigo’s bedroom, where they had a short nap. Well, Ian had a short nap; after the better part of an hour, he got up and dressed, saying he had some things to do. Rodrigo stayed in bed and watched as Ian did a reverse strip-tease that would have gotten him hard for a third time if he’d been any younger.

Ian kissed him good-bye, which turned into several long kisses and hands roaming everywhere. It was pretty clear that if he’d put up much of a fight, Ian would have stayed, but Rodrigo let him go, with a promise to return.

Better to leave more for later than rush into things too fast, he thought. At least, he’d heard that was true and it felt like this was worth giving that theory a try. He knew the other way didn’t work so well, and if the friendship was this good and the sex this fucking fantastic, then he definitely didn’t want to mess things up with Ian.

Hearing him close the front door behind him as he left, Rodrigo set the alarm clock, pulled up the blankets, and went back to sleep. When he got up later that afternoon, he couldn’t stop grinning; Ian had left him a note with his phone number on it and a request to get together tomorrow.

THE next few days brought evenings that were an awful lot like dates: classes and research and time spent at the library, then drinks at the Student Union or dinner at a restaurant near Rodrigo’s apartment, followed by phenomenal sex. Ian never spent the night, and the one time Rodrigo asked if it was ok with Ian’s still-unnamed-boyfriend that he was taking up so much of Ian’s time, the conversation took a brief detour into the question of trust. It wasn’t a fun conversation but it was necessary, and Rodrigo was glad to have gotten it out of the way. He did trust Ian, and decided to let go of feeling weird about the shadowy “other boyfriend”. He had Ian’s attention for now and things were great.

And did he mention that the sex was fucking phenomenal? Yeah. It was.

Phenomenal.

Ian fucked him just how Rodrigo liked it, every single goddamned time. If he was tired, Ian was undemanding and fucked him slowly; if he was stressed out, Ian pounded into his ass until his brain melted and he begged for more. It was like Ian could read his mind or something, like he knew what Rodrigo needed and was more than happy to give it. He hadn't even made a fuss at all the one night Rodrigo had wanted to top; it genuinely hadn't seemed like it was a big deal to Ian at all.

He was the best fuck Rodrigo had ever had. And, not to brag, but that was saying something.

The one thing Ian didn't do, though, was hold him down again. Other than the usual wrestling and positioning that went with sex, he hadn't pinned Rodrigo down and held him there or commanded him to come since that first time they'd fucked in the shower.

Rodrigo had really liked that.

Which was a little surprising, since no one had ever done that to him before. Sure, the occasional guy had been a little rough, especially when Rodrigo was younger and had preferred older men, who weren't always terribly gentle. So being held down and fucked was strange for Rodrigo to want, but it had been so different with Ian that he sort of wanted to try it again. He'd known that he preferred bottoming in general, of course, but he'd never thought of himself as submissive. He didn't like to feel manipulated or out of control. And he'd never really trusted anyone enough to willingly relinquish control.

But for some reason, he trusted Ian.

He knew he was still kind of falling for Ian. More than kind of. And more like past tense, had fallen. Splat. Rodrigo didn't want to think the "L" word, but it was there somewhere, lurking in the back of his brain.

And of course Ian was with this other guy, who he wouldn't even talk about. The first few times Rodrigo had asked about him,

Ian had changed the topic. When he'd finally pushed it, Ian said his partner didn't want Rodrigo to know who he was; the boyfriend was someone else who worked at the university was all Ian would say and that was that.

Fucking frustrating was what it was.

But it wasn't like Rodrigo was going to break up with him over it. It was just weird.

Aside from that, though, things between them were great. They had a good time hanging out, and despite the fact that the sex was so amazing, they still actually had real conversations. They went surfing a few more times and fell into a pattern of spending one weekend day together and one or two evenings during the week.

Which was about all Rodrigo could handle anyway, with his classes. Aside from the fact that Ian never spent the night, ever, it was just like having a boyfriend.

Ian laughed when Rodrigo told him that. "Just like, huh? I'm not sure if I should feel flattered that you're happy or insulted that you don't want more."

Of course he wanted more. But it wasn't like he could come out and say that, Rodrigo thought.

"Maybe I've just had shitty boyfriends before you," he said instead.

And maybe it was true.

SHOCKINGLY enough, getting laid had *not* fixed everything in Rodrigo's brain. Every time he met with Professor Sullivan, he still felt weak in the knees like an awkward, fumbling schoolboy. The man's voice, his aura, his presence, or something equally intangible, aroused Rodrigo beyond belief. Even the regular sex with Ian was doing nothing to quell his inappropriate reactions to his professor.

It was also frustrating to Rodrigo that he couldn't bring himself to even think of the man by his first name, let alone call him by it.

It gave Rodrigo a thrill inside to think “Daniel,” but that was because it felt wrong, like he wasn’t allowed to say it despite being specifically invited to do so. The first time he’d stumbled over the name and then reverted back to “Professor Sullivan,” the older man had given him a look that made something flutter in Rodrigo’s stomach. He had an almost unbearable urge to call him “sir,” but that would just be bizarre; he’d never called any other teacher “sir” and he had no idea where such a weird impulse was coming from.

All in all, his meetings with Professor Sullivan were getting more confusing rather than less. And even the wonderful distraction of being with Ian and being fucked by Ian was having no effect on the situation.

Shit.

As the semester wore on, Rodrigo found himself more and more fascinated with the subject he was researching. The early period of Grecian art had never intrigued him this much before; sometimes he wondered if it was the topic itself or the man he was working with that so compelled him.

After all, he’d originally been drawn to Art History because of a really sexy TA in an undergraduate survey course he’d just happened to take. Maybe this was the same thing all over again, a crush and shared interest seeming like it was more than it really was. *Lots* more.

Still, it was nice to be so excited about the research topic.

Stimulated.

Aroused.

Rodrigo sighed. It was getting to the point where he was feeling an unhealthy amount of obsession and thought he ought to confess his feeling about his professor to Ian. Which was lame; he and Ian obviously weren’t exclusive and Ian wouldn’t have a leg to stand on if he was jealous, given that he was living with someone else and Rodrigo was his “little bit on the side.”

Nothing was happening with Professor Sullivan anyway. Sure, it was clear that he was gay, and while Rodrigo knew he was easy on the eyes, the man seemed to have some lifetime-commitment

kind of boyfriend and he wouldn't be interested in a dorky kid like Rodrigo who didn't even have the balls to call him by his first name anyhow.

After being asked to do so.

God, he was stupid.

On Thursday, he opened a beer as soon as he got home, throwing himself on the couch and turning on the TV.

Today had just been bad. Professor Sullivan had knelt on the floor in his office, getting some books from a low shelf. There was no way in fucking hell that Rodrigo could have kept from drooling over the way those threadbare jeans molded to his professor's ass and thighs. His legs were so unbelievably long; he was a very tall man, over six and half feet, and everything about him was huge. Which of course made Rodrigo think about his cock and, well, that wasn't a good thing in the middle of a cozy meeting in his office.

He'd been caught. When Professor Sullivan turned around, Rodrigo was so far into fantasy-land that he'd been caught not only openly leering at his professor, but with a pretty damned obvious bulge in his jeans.

And then, to top it off, he'd *blushed*, like some girl. Rodrigo couldn't remember having felt so embarrassed since he was a kid.

And Professor Sullivan... Well. He'd given Rodrigo this look, somewhere between amused and stern, and said, "Focus, boy. This isn't the time or place."

He'd wanted to die of humiliation, not even being allowed the polite lie of his professor pretending not to notice.

The man was a sadistic bastard.

Yet, somehow, those eight words had made Rodrigo even harder. Especially being called "boy" like that. The sudden urge to run away and prayers to higher powers for spontaneous combustion had had no effect on his cock at all. Usually mortification like that would wilt even the most persistent erection, but not today.

Not with Professor Sullivan.

Hence the drinking at three in the afternoon. God he needed to get drunk. Blindly, falling down, blacking-out-the-entire-day drunk. Luckily he had two six-packs and afternoon television to help him out.

BY the time Ian came over that evening, Rodrigo was pretty comfortably anesthetized. He'd been pacing himself, deciding to shoot for a long-term feeling of numbness rather than passing out and getting sick.

Ian, of course, being a nice man as well as a great fuck, wanted to know what was wrong.

And Rodrigo, being totally wasted, heard the whole story come spilling out of his mouth as if someone else was doing the talking and he was just listening from another room, and not really even paying attention at that.

"Ya know Pr'fessor Sullivan, right? Big Irish guy in Art Hist?"

Ian opened one of the remaining bottles for himself. "Yeah. Told you a long time ago I'd helped him do research."

"Yeah. Well. He's fuckin' hot. And I'm trapped, like, in this tiny little office with him every week or so. An' today he bends over... The ass on that man..."

Ian laughed. "It is nice, isn't it?"

"You noticed?" Rodrigo asked, awed.

"Of course I did. As you said, he's fucking hot. Of course I checked him out," Ian grinned. "The rest of him is pretty damned nice too."

"Yeah..." Rodrigo agreed with a dreamy sigh. Ian nudged him after a minute to continue his story. "Right. Ass. Kneeling. So of course I got hard. Not on purpose, like, but ya know. Sometimes it just does what it wants," he said, scowling at his lap.

Ian snickered. "And then?"

“And then... And then he gave me this *look*, like he was kind of angry but also thought it was funny. Told me to cut it out, basically. And called me ‘boy’,” Rodrigo finished in a tone of voice that was too drunk to sound as outraged as he wanted and instead was mostly just humiliated.

Ian laughed for a long time. Rodrigo tried not to pout, failed, and let himself fall over sideways onto Ian’s shoulder.

“And I was still fucking hard,” he complained into Ian’s shoulder. “Like I was totally mortified and wanted to die and my dick was so into it. Like it was getting off on the whole humiliation thing.” He glared at his crotch again. “Stupid dick.”

“Yeah,” Ian agreed when he stopped laughing. “They definitely don’t always react the way you think they will.”

“What the fuck is wrong with me?” Rodrigo groaned, closing his eyes. “I like you. A lot more than I should. And the sex is great. But he totally makes me all... horny as hell. Can’t stop thinking about it, how embarrassed I was and how much I wanted to be on my knees with his cock in my mouth...”

There was a long silence.

Rodrigo played over what he’d just said and realized he probably shouldn’t have said most of it. “Uh... I, um. Fuck.”

Ian wasn’t pushing him away though, and while he wasn’t speaking, he hadn’t tensed up. That was a good sign, right?

“I’m sorry?” Rodrigo offered.

The arm around his shoulders gave him a squeeze. “No, it’s fine.” Ian cleared his throat. “I, uh, like you a lot too. Also more than I probably should. And I agree that sex with you is fucking wonderful. And yeah, I’m also totally with you that Daniel is an incredibly sexy man. You’re not the only one to have picked up on that dominant vibe he gives off, and certainly not the only one to ever have felt embarrassed and aroused at the same time.”

Rodrigo struggled with his uncooperative limbs to untangle himself from Ian so he could look at his friend’s expression. “I’m not? You’ve felt like that too?”

Ian blinked for a moment, then his face broke into a shit-eating grin. "Um. You could say that, yeah." He seemed to be trying not to laugh for some reason.

Suddenly there was a loud rumble. It took Rodrigo a minute to realize that it had come from his stomach.

"Did you eat anything today?" Ian asked.

"Um..."

"I'm going to order some Chinese, all right? I'm starving too. And you should eat something before you go to bed."

Rodrigo gave him a pathetic look. "But what about sex?"

Ian tousled his hair as he got up to find his phone. "Food first, *boy*," he grinned.

ALTHOUGH sex that night was fairly vanilla and not particularly crazy (at least from what Rodrigo remembered), the subject came up again a few nights later, in a non-verbal kind of way.

Rodrigo had pushed Ian against the wall in the bedroom, using his extra few inches of height to his advantage, pressing Ian's arms against the wall while they kissed each other senseless. Their tongues slid together as Rodrigo devoured Ian's mouth as aggressively as he could. He could feel Ian melting against him after a brief pause, and relished the little thrill of power it gave him.

After a few moments, though, their mouths consuming each other and bodies grinding in a slow rhythm, Rodrigo changed his mind. He didn't want to be the aggressive one. He wanted to feel like Ian was in control, wanted to not make the decisions, not have to think.

To be used.

He slid down Ian's bare chest, licking and sucking as his hands made quick work of both of their jeans. Rodrigo's mouth was watering by the time he knelt, burying his face in the soft curls

above Ian's hard cock, wanting it like a starving man with a banquet set before him.

For some reason he waited, hovering in a daze of strangled lust until he felt Ian's hands fall lightly onto the back of his head with the order, "Suck me."

Rodrigo set to the task with relish.

Opening his eager mouth, he took in Ian's cock, a slurping, wet, messy blowjob full of enthusiasm and tongue. Just how Ian liked it. His hands resting on Ian's thighs, Rodrigo lost himself in the sensations of giving pleasure, of providing, of serving. He moaned and heard an answering echo from above.

But he wanted more.

Rodrigo let his hands nudge at Ian's hips, wanting Ian to thrust into his mouth, to push that thick cock all the way back into his throat. To make his eyes water while he struggled to breathe as Ian held his head in place and fucked his mouth.

To have it be just this side of brutal - raw, unrestrained and utterly sinful.

Rodrigo thought he might come just from thinking about it.

He opened his eyes as he heard Ian chuckle, somewhat breathlessly, above. "Oh you like that, don't you, you little slut? You want me to fuck that pretty mouth?"

The words overwhelmed Rodrigo. He had to close his eyes against the sight of Ian with a wicked glint in his eyes, gorgeous body shimmering with sweat as he pushed his cock deeper into Rodrigo's mouth. His only answer was a moan which Ian rightly interpreted as agreement.

Ian's hands tightened on his skull, gripping as he thrust forward sharply. Rodrigo stroked with his tongue and sucked hard, giving Ian everything he'd ever learned about cocksucking. He felt a thrill like no other when Ian shoved in deep twice, bruising Rodrigo's lips against his teeth and scraping the back of his throat as Ian gave a harsh shout and poured his release down Rodrigo's throat.

Rodrigo sat back, eyes watering, drool and come dripping down his jaw as he gasped for breath. He was shaking with adrenaline and something he didn't quite understand and so fucking hard he felt like he could die.

Ian crouched down next to him, one hand reaching for Rodrigo's shoulder to roll him onto his back while the other hand found his erection and gave it less than a half-dozen perfect strokes that had Rodrigo screaming bloody murder as he climaxed so hard his vision grayed out.

They lay there, on the floor, Ian wrapped around Rodrigo like a spoon, until they both got their breath back. Ian let go for a moment, but only to pull the comforter off Rodrigo's bed and tuck it around both of them before they could get chilled.

Rodrigo didn't know what to think. So instead he let himself doze, warm and safe in Ian's embrace.

THE next day Rodrigo got a text message from Ian saying he wanted to meet him for dinner, and suggested the Barking Mad Dog, a local British-style pub. That seemed a little odd; usually Ian just called to say he was on his way over and then they either went out or ordered food in or sometimes one of them would actually cook. Ian had a real weakness for Rodrigo's mama's enchiladas recipe and they'd spent a few weekend afternoons making and then eating a whole platter of them after surfing.

Anyway, a planned date was weird and made Rodrigo wonder what was up. In light of the unusual but fucking mind-blowing sex the night before, he started to get nervous and wonder if Ian was going to want to Have A Talk.

Having A Talk was never good.

So far they hadn't had more than a few serious Talks, mostly about that whole monogamy thing and Ian and his boyfriend, and Rodrigo was happy keeping it that way. He was a big believer in the "if it ain't broke, don't fix it" approach to relationships and aside from some residual confusion in his head, he was fine. Fine with who he was and fine with Ian.

So what the fuck was going on in Ian's head that he wanted to talk about?

Rodrigo's stomach was in knots by the time he got to the pub. Ian was waiting for him in a corner booth in the back. Far away from everyone. Intimate.

There was going to be a Talk, Rodrigo could tell.

And there was. Ian let him order his food and the pretentious Belgian beer Rodrigo liked best, and then ruined it all after Rodrigo's second swallow. Just as he was starting to relax and think maybe he'd been wrong.

"So about last night..." Ian began.

Shit, Rodrigo thought. "Yeah?" he said, taking another large gulp.

"I thought we should talk about it," Ian said, a concerned look on his face.

Sighing, Rodrigo waved at the waitress to bring another round. "Do we have to?"

Ian snorted. "We don't have to. But I think we probably should," he added when Rodrigo's expression started to look too relieved.

"Fine. What's going on in that little reddish-blond head of yours?"

Rodrigo got a kick under the table for that.

"I *thought* since it all seemed pretty new for you, that it would be a good idea to spell some things out, smart-ass," Ian glared.

"Yeah, all right. You're probably right." There was a long pause and he had no idea what Ian was waiting for him to fill it with. "So....?"

Ian rolled his eyes. "So. You've never really had kinky sex before, have you?"

"Well..." Rodrigo toyed with denying it and then decided Ian would see through him. "Not really, no."

"Did you want to or is this a recent thing?"

Rodrigo shrugged. "Recent, I guess. I mean," he took a deep breath, "aside from the usual stuff that happens when you're an innocent little twink. No one ever forced me or anything, but after a few times of being man-handled and shoved down to my hands and knees, I wasn't exactly into it anymore, no matter how good the sex was."

Ian nodded. "Yeah, I know what you mean. And you're awfully damned pretty so you probably got it even worse than I did."

That was why Rodrigo liked Ian; no big deal made about it, no sympathy, just calm understanding. "Yeah. So, no, I've never really been interested in it before now. I mean, I guess I think about kinky sex sometimes, but everyone does, right?"

"Probably," Ian grinned. "So tell me what you think about what happened last night, how it made you feel."

Their food arrived and Rodrigo took the opportunity to try and get his thoughts in order. When they were alone again, he took a few bites before answering, still thinking.

"I liked it, I guess. I mean, obviously. Yeah. It was good. I felt... I dunno. I liked pushing you up against the wall for a little while, but then I almost wanted to be in your place or something. And you, uh, seemed to sense that and then when I started to blow you, you did just what I wanted you to do... It was good?" he finished, looking up from where his gaze had been fixed on the table, to see what Ian thought of Rodrigo's answer.

Ian nodded. "Yeah, I liked it. I want to know more about how you felt during it and after, though. Right after, as well as all day today," he clarified before Rodrigo could answer.

"Uh, ok. During it... I felt like... I don't know, like I was being used or something. In a good way, though. Like you, uh, wanted me. I mean, I know you *want* me, but wanted me *there*, like that," he stuttered, feeling his face flush. "On my knees. For you." He stared at the table again, avoiding Ian's eyes in embarrassment.

Fingertips brushed his cheek lightly. “And how did you feel afterwards, thinking about it?”

“Really overwhelmed,” he confessed. “Like, I don’t know. Like there’s something big and, um, maybe sort of scary about it?” He glanced up and met Ian’s gaze, which was reassuring. “Like, it was really fucking fantastic, intense and so hot, but um. Yeah. A little dangerous.”

They sat for a moment, Rodrigo half thinking about in what way it was dangerous and half berating himself for sounding like such a flaming little twink. He took a few deep breaths.

“I guess it’s just something I haven’t thought about much and I don’t know what I want or what you want or even what’s possible,” he blurted. “And I don’t like thinking of myself as submissive, either.”

Ian grinned. He glanced around the pub, then leaned forward and gave Rodrigo a quick kiss. “You’re not being a pansy. You’re awesome for being so honest. Thanks for trusting me.”

Rodrigo squirmed, with an undoubtedly dorky little smile on his face.

They finished eating, drifting to other topics but mostly each lost in their own thoughts, companionably quiet. Ian ordered another round when their plates were cleared.

As the drinks were delivered, he gave Rodrigo a searching look. “So. Do you think you want to do more?”

“Yeah.” The answer was out of Rodrigo’s mouth before he’d thought about it at all. “Do you?”

Ian nodded. “Yeah. I could show you some stuff. It would be fun. Not scary, I promise. Just whatever you want it to be.”

“You’ve done this before,” Rodrigo realized all of a sudden.

He got a chuckle. “Um, yeah. My boyfriend and I mostly have kinky sex. I mean, things are really equal outside the bedroom. But definitely not inside it,” he grinned. “And there were other guys before him, too; I’ve always been a bit of a sub. I like letting go.”

Rodrigo blinked at him, about to ask a question before Ian interrupted.

“But I like to switch, too. Sometimes. Depends on who I’m with. I could never top, uh—” he stumbled for a moment, “my partner. But sometimes we invite other guys to play and sometimes I top them while he watches. Or I sub for both of them.”

Rodrigo blinked. “Wow. That’s, um... Really fucking hot.” The visual images that popped into his head at that thought were *incendiary*. Rodrigo shifted, suddenly noticing he was getting hard.

But then something else occurred to him. “Wait, have you been, like, bored this whole time, just having plain old vanilla sex with me?”

Ian laughed. “Sex with you isn’t plain or boring, or I wouldn’t have come back,” he said, reaching across the table to tousle Rodrigo’s curls in a really annoying way. “You’re hot, sexy, great in bed, and even fairly interesting to talk to,” he teased.

Rodrigo swatted away the hand in his hair. “So then tell me more about what it’s like, with your, um, with that other guy,” he demanded. “And how come you two ask other men to play with you but not me?”

Ian gave him a grin that was equal parts teasing and challenging. “Patience, my friend. Until then, I’ll give you the beginner’s course,” he winked, as they got their coats and went to pay the bill.

SEVERAL days later found Rodrigo zoning out in the middle of his seminar on Representations of Amazons in the Ancient World. It was an interesting class and had an engaging teacher, but no fucking way could it compete with his memories of the night before.

A week ago, Ian had brought over two sets of fleece-lined leather cuffs and shackled Rodrigo to the bed, wrists and ankles spread to each corner. Then he’d blindfolded Rodrigo and teased

him everywhere, licking and biting and trailing his fingertips in a touch that tickled almost unbearably until Rodrigo begged him to stop.

Or maybe for more - it was hard to tell what exactly he'd been begging *for*. Ian seemed to know what he needed, though, and gave it to him. He'd used pillows to arch Rodrigo's hips up off the bed and then rimmed him until he was an incoherent mess of neediness. Only then did Ian fuck him, filling his hungry body with maddeningly slow strokes and telling Rodrigo not to come, no matter how much he pleaded, until tears of frustration were streaming down his face and he thought he might actually somehow die.

When Ian finally let him climax, Rodrigo had shouted himself hoarse and sort of almost passed out as he shot sticky fluid all the way to his own neck. It was a mess.

A glorious, wonderful, fantastic mess that had left Rodrigo grinning for days.

But then last night, well. That had been something even more earth-shattering.

Last night Ian had spanked him.

He'd used the cuffs again, after "making" Rodrigo strip for him, being stern and finding fault with everything. Ian had told Rodrigo to crawl across the floor, admiring his body, talking about him like he was oblivious, like a pet. Which had been a little bit degrading but also kind of fun and somehow totally different from being treated like a piece of meat at a dance club. It made him feel sexy and very turned on.

After that Ian had arranged Rodrigo on the bed and cuffed his wrists to the headboard while he knelt on hands and knees. And even though they'd talked about it and Rodrigo had agreed to give it a try, he'd been pretty surprised at just how painful it was to be spanked like that – an awful lot harder than he remembered from being swatted as a kid. The sound of Ian's hand smacking his ass, the sting and the burn, and the fact that it was supposed to somehow be sexual made it a totally different experience.

But then something had happened in Rodrigo's body or mind and everything had changed. The spansks hadn't stopped hurting, but they'd started hurting in a *good* way. A way that had made Rodrigo stop bracing himself against it and start relaxing into it. A way that made him shiver and gasp and feel like his skin was on fire everywhere, every nerve alert and on edge.

A way that made him hard as a fucking rock.

When Ian had rolled him over, the roughness of the blankets against his sore cheeks made him whimper. His bound hands were crisscrossed above his head, shoulders straining against the uncomfortable position as his raw backside throbbed. Ian straddled him and unrolled a condom onto Rodrigo. A moment later Ian was sliding down his cock, riding him with an evil grin. Rodrigo's groans were strangled as he was overwhelmed by the stinging in his ass and the fantastic hot tightness surrounding his cock. Ian rocked up and down like Rodrigo's only purpose in life was to give Ian pleasure, not touching him at all and not making eye contact after he'd ordered Rodrigo not to come until Ian had finished.

It almost killed Rodrigo to obey.

He was *so* close, body straining, every muscle taut and waiting, barely holding onto his control, afraid he'd lose it any moment. His wrists ached from pulling against the cuffs, his arms were overstretched, and every time Ian sank down on his cock the pressure on his sore ass made him wince. Stacked against this mountain of pain and discomfort was the ecstasy of being buried in the welcoming embrace of Ian's body, watching Ian as his hands stroked down his own chest, played with his nipples, and then finally jerked himself off while grinding onto Rodrigo's cock.

By the time Ian came, Rodrigo's breathing had taken on a high-pitched keening sound. When he finally sprayed his release all over Rodrigo's stomach and chest and then *stopped moving*, just sitting there for a moment to catch his breath, Rodrigo was desperate to come. His toes hurt, his eyes hurt, his fucking teeth hurt with the effort of holding it in. At last Ian leaned back and gave him that deliciously sadistic little grin as he said, "Ok, you

can come now,” and flexed his inner muscles, squeezing Rodrigo’s cock.

This time Rodrigo actually *did* lose consciousness for a few moments when he came.

He’d also apparently yanked really hard with his left wrist, because it was a little sore today and had left a reddish bruise encircling most of his hand. Not to mention screaming himself hoarse. But holy Christ, it had been worth it.

Rodrigo kind of liked the bruise. It made something in his insides twist up in a pleasant way every time he saw it and remembered, to say nothing of the tingle in his pants. He wondered idly if orgasms like that caused brain damage; it had felt like a bit more than just a “little death” to him. And he’d definitely never come so hard he’d blacked out before...

He grinned to himself again and tried to refocus on the discussion around him.

BY the time class was over all Rodrigo had to show for it were a few pages of notes and a couple of glares from his fellow classmates for obviously spacing out. He needed to get his head together before his meeting with Professor Sullivan, so he grabbed a quick cup of coffee and drank it on the way to the library. He planned to pick up some materials he’d requested through Inter-Library Loan.

He filled out the necessary paperwork, then shoved the books and copies into his backpack as he walked away from the ILL desk. A hand shot out from between the bookshelves and pulled him abruptly into an out of the way corner and up against a familiar body. Before Rodrigo could do more than open his mouth to protest, Ian was pressing their lips together in a ravenous and unmistakably claiming kiss.

Three minutes later, thoroughly kissed, licked, groped, and aroused, with his lips swollen and tender, Rodrigo staggered out of the library in the direction of the Art History department. Ian

hadn't answered his "What the hell?" with anything more than a wink and a wave as he'd walked back to the library office.

Now Rodrigo was almost late to see Professor Sullivan again.

They were making a lot of good progress on uncovering some hidden aspects of the sculptures in question, and Rodrigo felt more proud than he thought he should when Professor Sullivan said that he was pleased with their work. They'd found some evidence that a particular set of carvings had been made with some unusual tools, and that therefore the artist might have been a foreigner. Some of the prints that Rodrigo had found through the digitization project that Ian had pointed him to had lent support to Sullivan's theory, and it looked like there was enough information that the idea would turn into a whole chapter in his book.

He tried not to squirm like a dork when Professor Sullivan smiled and said he'd be sure to give Rodrigo due credit for his research assistance.

When he got up to leave at the end of the meeting, he was a little thrown mentally off-balance when Professor Sullivan stopped him, one hand on his shoulder and the other one held out to shake Rodrigo's hand.

"Thank you for all of your work. I know a lot of my colleagues think this topic is dreadfully dull so I'm quite glad to have been assigned an assistant who actually finds it interesting."

Professor Sullivan's large hand gripped his, somehow making him feel small and almost fragile. When fingertips pressed into Rodrigo's wrist, touching the abrasions from the night before and making him gasp, the other man's brow wrinkled. Rather than letting go, Sullivan held on more firmly, pulling Rodrigo's hand towards himself and turning it over.

Rodrigo didn't resist.

He stood there, silent and somehow a combination of excited and embarrassed and aroused and afraid as Professor Sullivan pushed up Rodrigo's sleeve and looked at the raw band of reddened skin. Neither of them said anything. The sound of Rodrigo's heart pounding in his ears was almost deafening.

Several moments passed before Professor Sullivan pulled Rodrigo's sleeve back into place, turning his wrist over. Before he let go, his fingers gave one slow stroke over the chafed flesh. Rodrigo was almost positive his knees would have buckled if he'd been some swooning maiden in a romance story, from the intimate sensation. He managed to strangle the whimper that his professor's touch caused, but he couldn't hide the hard-on straining against his jeans like a divining rod.

Not knowing what to say or do, Rodrigo gave a jerky little nod and fled.

Two floors down, he locked the main door of a seldom-used bathroom and had his jeans around his thighs before his backpack was even on the ground. Less than a half-dozen strokes had him coming so hard against the back of the urinal that he had to bite his lips to keep from shouting.

He stood there, one hand wringing the last of the sensations from his cock, the other braced against the wall to keep him from collapsing face-first against it. The discolored skin on his wrist mocked him. Rodrigo's eyes closed, images of Ian and Professor Sullivan flickering back and forth through his brain, strong fingers and impish grins and commanding voices and hands all over his body...

Rodrigo groaned. This was not good. This was so very not good. He'd just beat off over being touched on the wrist by his professor, still slightly turned on from being groped in the library by his boyfriend and daydreaming about their kinky sex the night before during class.

Definitely not good at all.

LIFE continued along its normal pattern for the next week. Ian came over a few times, they ate dinner, they had sex. They planned to go surfing on Sunday afternoon but the surf advisory's storm warnings kept them inside. Instead, Ian fucked Rodrigo over the back of the couch with the window-shades drawn wide open.

Rodrigo didn't think anyone had seen them, but after about five minutes he hadn't cared at all one way or the other. Ian's voice whispering naughty things about the frazzled young stay-at-home-mom across the street watching them had turned Rodrigo on more than he would have expected, as a self-labeled 100% homo, but it was really Ian's total control that got him off. Apparently Rodrigo really *liked* being put into uncomfortable positions or unusual situations and being told what to do, teased until his balls were ready to burst, and not being permitted to come until Ian was satisfied that his begging and pleading was desperate enough.

"*Liked*" being a massive understatement. He fucking loved it.

It was also nice that there was some balance: during the kinky scenes Ian was always in control and that was how Rodrigo wanted it. But most of the time when they were just fucking, either one of them might top or bottom, might initiate sex or be more passive. And they had a good time together, hanging out, watching TV or movies, cooking, and occasionally going out to eat. Rodrigo was still avoiding the clubs, but he thought that if he was with Ian he might be willing to risk running into Todd and his new boyfriend.

Not that Ian was Rodrigo's boyfriend.

Well, he sort of was; Rodrigo wasn't seeing anyone else, aside from his frequent fantasies about Professor Sullivan. And Ian said he wasn't seeing anyone else aside from his partner. Rodrigo was beginning to want to ask Ian to spend the night some time, but wasn't sure how to bring it up...

He really liked Ian. Really really *really* liked him. A lot. Not in a giddy, swooning, I'm-so-in-love kind of way, but in a comfortable, easy, friends-but-more kind of way. He'd thought the "L" word a few times without meaning to but had never said it. He didn't plan to; it was just too weird with Ian having this other lover. It sort of pissed Rodrigo off to still not know who this other guy was.

Also, Rodrigo was becoming even more upset with himself about how he was acting around Professor Sullivan. Their weekly meetings had increased to almost every two days after the "wrist incident," as Rodrigo thought of it. He was so frustrated at his

body's reactions to the older man, who almost seemed to be teasing him or something. He would give Rodrigo these intense looks, his eyes just eating Rodrigo alive, making him sweat and stutter and lose track of whatever they were talking about.

Not to mention all the casual touches that got Rodrigo hard as a rock. Stopping to jerk off in the downstairs bathroom was becoming a regular thing for him after their meetings.

On a Wednesday near the end of the semester, a strange thing happened. All of the Arts grad students got together once a week to drown their sorrows at a local bar, but this week one of the girls had wanted to check out a different place. Poor Paul's Alehouse was darker and skuzzier than their usual bar, and the clientele was older. There wasn't any loud rock music playing in the background; instead of a dance floor Paul's had dartboards. After a few drinks the idea of hurling sharp projectiles somehow seemed less dangerous than it had when they were sober, and everyone in their crowd was playing.

Flushed with the victory of having just defeated a Theater PhD candidate he disliked, Rodrigo headed back to the bar to get one last drink for the evening. As he walked past a booth, he thought the blondish-red head facing away from him looked familiar, but it was the man sitting opposite that definitely caught his eye: Professor Sullivan. Rodrigo forgot all about the blond.

He took a slight detour and went over to make a polite greeting. "Hello, uh, Professor Sullivan," he said, a bit shaken at seeing his mentor off campus.

Professor Sullivan smiled and raised his pint glass in a toast-cum-greeting. "Good evening Rodrigo. I see you beat Andrew," he said nodding toward the scoreboard. "Congratulations."

"Thanks." He was embarrassed that he sounded so pleased.

There was an amused cough next to his elbow. Rodrigo turned to see Ian, who looked like he was about to explode with laughter.

"Hi," he said, clearly waiting to see what kind of excuse Rodrigo could possibly come up with for not only ignoring him but

forgetting there was even someone else sitting at the table with the older man.

“Shit!” he breathed. “Um. Hi Ian?”

Ian couldn’t hold back any longer and laughed, loud and long, until everyone in the bar was looking at them. Professor Sullivan looked like he was having a hard time not joining him, and even Rodrigo was amused. Chagrined and a little humiliated to be sure, but still aware that it was funny.

“Sorry I, uh, didn’t see you,” he said once Ian had calmed down some. “What are you doing here?”

Ian’s eyes flickered to Professor Sullivan for a moment. “I told you Daniel and I were friends, right? Met each other doing research together, like how I met you.” Ian’s eyes twinkled. “Daniel was in the library and mentioned that he’d found a publisher for his book so I thought we should celebrate.”

Rodrigo smiled at Ian’s thoughtfulness. “That was nice of you.” Turning back to the other man he said, “Congratulations to you too, then, Professor.”

Ian snorted. “What’s with the ‘Professor’ business?”

Rodrigo felt his face flush as the man in question chuckled. “I’ve told him to call me ‘Daniel’ but he never does.”

“Let me buy you a round?” Rodrigo offered, hoping to create a diversion before they teased him any more.

“I’ll help,” Ian offered.

They placed their order quickly. As they waited for the drinks, Ian nudged Rodrigo into a corner, away from the rest of the crowd.

“*Professor?*” he smirked. “Are you always so formal with him?”

Rodrigo could feel his face flush again. “Uh. Yeah, I guess. He’s just so... You know. Commanding...”

“Yeah. I know,” Ian murmured, pushing his body against Rodrigo’s. “He makes you hot.”

The bartender put the three drinks down on the counter and Ian held out some money. "Keep the change," he said, not looking away from Rodrigo. When they were alone again he leaned in even closer, licking his lips.

Slightly tipsy, relaxed and happy despite being flustered by Professor Sullivan, Rodrigo's cock reacted with its usual enthusiasm to the expression of lust in Ian's eyes. He tilted his head back, willing to submit as Ian leaned forward and pressed their mouths together, hoping to God that the bar was gay-friendly.

He groaned as Ian devoured his mouth, winding his arms around his boyfriend's neck. Ian pressed his hips forward, grinding their bodies together as their tongues tangled. The kiss was messy and hungry and Rodrigo forgot they were in public, forgot his school colleagues might be watching, that the bartender was nearby, and almost totally forgot about Professor Sullivan.

Almost. Until he opened his eyes and saw the older man boldly staring at them as Ian nibbled down the side of Rodrigo's neck.

"Oh my God," he mumbled, starting to push Ian away.

Ian tightened his arms. Rodrigo could hear the smirk in his voice as he asked, "Is Daniel watching?"

Rodrigo whimpered. "Fuck. I have to go." He was suddenly so aroused by Professor Sullivan watching him get kissed and groped that he felt like he was about to come, right then and there. Full of shame, he ran out of the bar.

One thirty-minute walk home and an unsatisfying solitary orgasm later, Rodrigo had a thought pop into his head. Why had Professor Sullivan been watching them like that? His expression had been openly hungry as he'd watched Ian and Rodrigo kissing, but also almost satisfied rather than jealous or at all surprised. Did he know the two of them were together?

Ian must have mentioned Rodrigo to him. But if they were such good friends, how come Ian had never talked about Professor Sullivan very much before?

Rodrigo realized he didn't know a lot about Ian's friends, or his life outside work, surfing, and himself. Weird, he thought. He'd have to fix that, he decided as he turned out the light and let sleep claim him.

OVER the next few weeks Rodrigo sought to remedy what he felt were the gaps in his relationship with Ian, asking more about Ian's friends and his life outside work. When Ian turned the questions back on him, Rodrigo had to admit that he'd lost most of his non-school friends in the split with Todd. Ian was sympathetic; everyone had that happen to them at least once, he said. He offered to introduce Rodrigo to some people over the semester break, pointing out that some of the guys he rode motorcycles with surfed too, so they might even know some of the same people already.

Rodrigo asked about Professor Sullivan too, but Ian deflected the conversation. When Rodrigo mentioned Ian in his next meeting with Professor Sullivan, he got brushed off again and drew the conclusion that they evidently must not be all that close after all. Probably Rodrigo had been more drunk than he'd thought on that Wednesday night.

A week and half later and Rodrigo was buried in end-of-semester papers, putting in long hours at the library doing his own research, as well as some minor last-minute fact checking for Professor Sullivan. Their meetings became brief and focused; the professor knew how busy the end of the semester was for students and was satisfied with the work Rodrigo had done during the previous few months. He suggested they go out for a drink after the term was over, to celebrate.

Rodrigo barely even had time to see Ian anymore, although he was fantastic about it and showed up at Rodrigo's place with dinner almost every night. They ate together and sometimes had a quick handjob or just made out on the couch for a while until the nagging of Rodrigo's unfinished papers called him back to task. He was looking forward to having more time to spend with Ian, but was also secretly touched at how patient Ian was. One of the

things Todd had thrown at him when he left was that he couldn't stand being ignored at the end of every semester when Rodrigo got overwhelmed with work. Ian wasn't like that though. He was patient and giving, thoughtfully bringing over food and leaving the leftovers, and understanding about how much pressure Rodrigo was under.

The only thing he wanted that Ian didn't provide was the comfort of a warm body sharing his bed while he slept. Aside from sex, Rodrigo found himself craving Ian's presence on the nights when insomnia kept him awake. But he couldn't ask him to stay when he never had before, and certainly not now when Ian was being so great about everything else. Maybe once the semester was over, he would ask him...

After three days of working around the clock, fueled by coffee and energy drinks, the semester was officially over. Everything was handed in: papers completed, presentations finished, and the proposal for his dissertation had been submitted. Seventeen hours of sleep, a hot shower, and a handful of vitamins had Rodrigo feeling like a new man. He had a date with Ian for dinner, which he hoped would be followed by a thorough pounding into the mattress, the kind of sex that left him aching and sore and immensely pleased with himself for the next few days.

Ian picked him up and drove downtown, refusing to say where they were going, just that he had a surprise for Rodrigo. The impish gleam in his boyfriend's eye was somewhat scary, but he figured it couldn't be that bad; so long as there was food and beer and eventual sex, he didn't care what Ian had up his sleeve for right now.

They ended up at one of the more expensive restaurants in town, which Rodrigo had only been to once before with an older man who had been trying to seduce him. Ian laughed at that, teasing that he was pretty sure Rodrigo would put out.

When the hostess seated them, someone was waiting at their table.

Professor Sullivan.

Rodrigo wasn't sure if this was the celebratory "thank you" that his professor had promised or just some weird coincidence or what, but a little thrill went through his body at seeing him again. It had only been about a week since their last meeting, but it felt like ages now that Rodrigo thought about it.

Damn, did the man clean up nicely. He wore a simple grey jacket that somehow made his blue eyes even more captivating than usual. It also did rather wonderful things to his shoulders, accenting their width and making Rodrigo even more aware of the several extra inches that his professor towered over him as he stood to greet them.

Next to him, looking both suave and relaxed, Rodrigo felt gangly and awkward in jeans and a button-down. "You should have told me we were going somewhere nice," he mumbled, glancing at Ian.

"You look gorgeous, as always, Rodrigo," Professor Sullivan surprised him by saying, as he stood to make room for Ian to get past him to the seat in the corner.

As he moved around the taller man, Ian reached up, put his hands on Professor Sullivan's shoulders, and pulled him down for a kiss. Not a vaguely-European-hello, or a pretentious flamingly-gay smooch on the cheek, but a lingering we've-definitely-had-sex-before lovers' kiss.

Rodrigo was glad he had already sat down or he probably would have fallen down. He was aware that his eyes were huge as he watched the two of them and the only part of his mind that wasn't stunned senseless was struggling to keep his jaw from dropping literally.

He made a gurgling noise.

Ian broke away from Professor Sullivan and they both sat down, respectively grinning and smirking at him, both quite pleased with themselves. Rodrigo just sat and blinked, waiting for his brain to re-engage.

The waiter chose that moment to come by and fill their glasses with the wine that Professor Sullivan had ordered, explaining that

the older man had also ordered their meal. The interruption gave Rodrigo a chance to get his brain working again because, well, wow. Not only had his boyfriend just kissed his professor, but the way they'd reacted to each other made it clear that that wasn't their first kiss or even their hundredth.

The only logical conclusion was that Ian's live-in boyfriend was Professor Sullivan.

And that the lover Professor Sullivan had sometimes alluded to was Ian.

Which meant that Rodrigo was fucking his professor's boyfriend, and his boyfriend was fucking his drool-worthy professor. Which was confusing and weird and unbelievably fucking hot.

Rodrigo drank most of his wine in three swallows, unable to care that gulping good wine was poor manners. He needed it to calm his nerves too much.

When he put his glass down, Ian refilled it, an anxious look on his face. "Uh, you all right, man? Didn't mean to shock you into silence."

Rodrigo nodded, paused, then shook his head. He cleared his throat, reaching for the water glass instead. "I'm fine. Just a bit... surprised. So you're, um, with Professor Sullivan?"

The older man gave him a stern look, although a hint of a smile lit up his eyes as he said, "I think it's about time you called me 'Daniel,' despite how much I enjoy hearing you call me by my title."

Rodrigo flushed a bit but nodded.

"Yeah," Ian said, answering his question. "I thought you'd figured it out after that night at Paul's but I guess not. Maybe you were just too busy with the end of classes," he said, reaching across the table to touch Rodrigo's hand.

"I guess so," he agreed, although now that Rodrigo thought about it, he found that he wasn't surprised. Sure, seeing Ian kiss *Daniel* like that had been a shock, but it was also hot. Maybe his

subconscious had already figured it out or something, but regardless, he wasn't feeling too upset about it.

"So all this time..." he said, glancing across the table at his mentor. He thought about the way the older man had looked at him, the hints of innuendo in their conversations, and especially the day he'd touched Rodrigo's chafed wrist, stroked across the bruise as if assessing it.

Daniel nodded. "I didn't want you to know about my personal relationship with Ian until our academic relationship had ended. I am sorry that you were kept in the dark but I didn't feel it was right to do otherwise."

"No, I agree," Rodrigo nodded. "It would have been really weird for me to be dating," he blushed, "or whatever with Ian, and then working with you as your research assistant all semester. Even without," he made a hand motion between the two of them, "any, um, tension between us."

Daniel chuckled. "Indeed. It was difficult enough having Ian come home late at night and torture me with stories of all the things the two of you were doing to each other."

Rodrigo squirmed at that, unconsciously rubbing his left wrist. Daniel's expression turned hungry and Ian laughed.

"Yeah, the old man here has definitely been getting off on the things I've told him. I'm impressed that he managed to hold himself back from accosting you right there in his office. I know I certainly wouldn't have," Ian grinned.

"You didn't," Rodrigo pointed out, pretending to pout. "You mauled me in the library more than once, remember?"

Ian nodded. "Well, with an ass like yours, who can blame me?" he said, lifting his glass in a toast. Daniel also raised his, giving Rodrigo an appreciative look.

Rodrigo flushed at the clink of their wine glasses toasting his ass. "All right then, what about you two?" he asked. "What is this, then? Just a 'coming out' party with all secrets revealed or, um, something else?" he blurted out, trying not to lose his bravado

as he wondered where this dinner was going to leave him, with Ian or without him.

“That depends,” Ian answered in a serious tone. “I like you. I’d like to keep seeing you. In fact, I think I might want to see you more,” he said, glancing at Daniel as if uncertain.

The professor nodded. “Yes, I’d gathered that your feelings had grown a bit beyond simply enjoying the many pleasures of Rodrigo’s young flesh,” he smirked. “I’d like to get to know you outside the university,” he said, turning to Rodrigo. “On whatever level you feel comfortable with. Although I do confess I wouldn’t mind at least seeing some of the many encounters Ian has described for me.”

Rodrigo swirled the remaining wine his glass, thinking. There had to be a catch somewhere. While he was engrossed in his thoughts, their food came and they began eating in relative silence, the other two chatting in a companionable way. When they had almost finished, Daniel excused himself to go talk to the chef, whom it turned out he knew.

“Rodrigo?” Ian said, touching his hand again. “We don’t mean to pressure you, you know. You can think about it for a while if you want. And you don’t have to do this at all. You don’t even have to keep seeing me, if you don’t want to, of course. I just thought, the way you talked about him, that you were interested in Daniel, too...?”

“No! I mean, I am. Of course I’m interested in him,” he said, remembering with some embarrassment all the times he had told Ian how sexy he thought Professor Sullivan was. “It’s just a little weird, you know. A lot to process, finding out who your boyfriend is, who *his* boyfriend is, and um, being invited to... Well. Whatever you’re inviting me to do,” he finished, feeling dumb.

“We’re inviting you to do whatever you want,” Ian answered. “It can just stay us. Or Daniel can be involved too. To whatever extent you want.”

Rodrigo took another sip of wine, thinking. “What’s it been like before, when other guys have joined you?”

“Well, not like this, for one thing,” Ian snorted. “It’s pretty much always been a threesome from the beginning, and just a fling, never anything serious.”

Something in Rodrigo’s stomach fluttered.

“Anyway. Sometimes Daniel just watches, if the new guy isn’t into kinky stuff. If he is, then all three of us play. Sometimes I top the new guy but usually I’m the subbiest sub,” Ian grinned. “I can top, but I’d much rather be submissive. I liked teaching you, though,” he teased, leaning over to kiss Rodrigo’s cheek as Daniel rejoined them.

Daniel winked, overhearing the last part of the conversation. “Ian’s heart just isn’t into the job when he tries to be dominant; he’s too jealous of whoever gets to be more submissive.”

Struggling not to get too flustered again, Rodrigo asked, “What about you, then?”

Daniel gave him an appraising look. “I top. Always,” he replied in a growl that made Rodrigo shiver, jeans suddenly far too tight in the crotch.

“Ian’s been telling me all about your... escapades,” Daniel continued. “Or shall we say, your lessons? Are you interested in showing me what you’ve learned?” he invited, eyes focused on Rodrigo in a way that made his skin feel like it was on fire.

He shivered. It was amazing how he responded to Professor Sullivan’s voice, for the first time obvious in its sexuality and dominance. Struggling to remember they were in public, he wrenched his eyes away from Daniel’s, heart pounding and aroused like he hadn’t been since that night in the pub.

With Ian and Daniel.

Together.

He took a long drink of water, hoping the other two wouldn’t notice how much his hands were shaking. He lifted his eyes to see them both looking at him as if he was the tastiest item on the menu.

“Ok. I’m in.”

Ian grinned. "What does that mean, exactly?"

Blinking, Rodrigo answered before he could stop himself and over-think it. "Whatever you want. I really like you," he said, looking at Ian and letting the depth of that feeling show in his eyes. "And I really fucking want you," he continued after a moment, turning his gaze to Daniel. "I'd like to get to know you better. So, um, yeah. Anything you want. I trust you."

As he finished talking, Rodrigo felt nervous and yet exhilarated to have laid it all out like that, on the table so to speak, giving up control of what happened next.

He knew they would take care of him.

THE drive to Ian and Professor Sullivan's house was mostly silent, as had been the last few minutes in the restaurant. The other two had talked some, arranging the settlement of the bill. Rodrigo's ears were ringing, blood pounding, everything he had to say already said in those few plain words.

He trusted them.

Once inside, Ian took his coat but handed it to Daniel to put away, taking Rodrigo's nervous body into his arms. The comforting smell and familiar embrace relaxed him more than he would have ever thought. Ian brought their mouths together in a slow kiss, and although Rodrigo knew it was meant to be calm and reassuring, being treated so gently, it was also letting him unwind enough to notice how fucking turned on he was. He felt like he'd been hard since he saw Professor Sullivan sitting at their table, and now...

Now they were all three together.

Ian's kisses grew more fevered, responding to the way Rodrigo pressed closer, rubbing against Ian, grinding their bodies together. It had been a damned long few weeks, with not nearly enough sex, and Rodrigo was afraid he was going to come way too early in the game if they continued along like this. Plus, where was Daniel?

He opened his eyes to see the older man leaning against the wall, arms crossed, watching them with a patient yet hungry expression. Rodrigo pulled his mouth away, breaking the kiss. Ian held on, nibbling down his neck to his collarbone as Rodrigo held out a hand, inviting Daniel closer without a word.

After all, he'd said "anything" and meant it; he'd try anything they wanted. And what he, Rodrigo, wanted right now was to *finally* feel Daniel, to smell him and taste him and know that the unbelievable lust he felt for his former professor was returned.

Watching Daniel cross the few feet that separated them, while still being caressed by Ian, was the hottest thing Rodrigo had ever experienced. Daniel's eyes looked like they had darkened somehow, the deep blue full of mystery and danger and promises soon to be fulfilled. When Daniel's hand curled around his head, fingers carding through Rodrigo's curls, his hips gave an involuntary jerk forward, needing contact and finding it against Ian.

Ian chuckled. "Here, allow me," he offered, moving aside.

Rodrigo vaguely noticed Ian leaving the room and disappearing into a dark hallway, but was far more focused on Daniel. Right in front of him. Hands huge and warm on his skull. Pulling him closer and closer as he bent down to almost bring their lips together. Daniel's breath teased Rodrigo's lips until he couldn't stand it any more and with a small moan, stretched upwards for the kiss he'd been craving for months.

"Powerful" was the only word Rodrigo could think of to describe how Daniel kissed, much later when he could think again at all. Lips covered his, taking, claiming, devouring. He'd been kissed passionately of course, and he loved how Ian kissed, but this was different. This was the most domineering, dominant, *powerful* kiss Rodrigo had ever received. It took and it gave, but there was no arguing, no question of who was in charge or directing this kiss, nor who would be in control of all the actions that followed it.

Rodrigo's knees, much to his dismay, actually gave out on him like some swooning fairytale princess. He collapsed forward with

a groan that came from low in his belly, and the resulting pressure on his cock as he fell against Daniel almost made him come.

Strong hands held up him, putting some space between their bodies while Rodrigo gasped for air and tried to get his head to stop whirling. He felt drunk with lust, with having Daniel at last, with Ian, wonderful Ian, somewhere near by, and with the unspecified promise of what was next.

Dragging his eyes open, Rodrigo was somewhat disturbed that the world was grey and tipsy for a moment before righting itself. His entire body was shaking and he didn't think it was an exaggeration, for once, to be fairly certain that the slightest touch to his erection could make him come right there, in his jeans, still in their living room.

Without a word, Daniel backed him up against a wall. Grateful for the support, Rodrigo leaned into it, closing his eyes as he felt one of Daniel's hands slide from his head to his neck, then down over the front of his shirt. Fingertips briefly pulled at his nipple before caressing down his side and waist, ending clutched at his hip. That one hand was the focus of Rodrigo's entire being. A moment later it made its way purposefully across the front of his jeans to his cock. Rodrigo moaned, helplessly trying to restrain himself as he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Rodrigo," Daniel whispered. "You can't wait, can you? So gorgeous, so delicious, and so out of control. You're shaking; did you know that? You're so close to losing it," he taunted, giving Rodrigo a squeeze. The entire hand seemed to engulf him, fingers on his balls, Daniel's palm pressed against the entire length of his prick.

He shivered, hands curling into fists as he panted for air, trying to hold on.

"You're almost at the edge, aren't you?" Daniel teased, hand flexing as he rubbed and massaged Rodrigo's hard length. "You can barely control yourself. It's all right, Rodrigo. For now. Because I'm in control. I tell you what to do and when."

Rodrigo groaned.

Daniel pressed closer, his voice commanding. "I'm telling you to come. Now, Rodrigo," he said, nuzzling his neck. "Give it to me. Right. Now."

With a convulsive jerk against Daniel's hand, his body obeyed. He climaxed with a wordless cry, writhing, shameless, letting the sensation completely overwhelm him as pleasure wracked his body. He gasped for breath, rapturous.

After a few moments of heavy breathing, some of the daze cleared from his head and Rodrigo became aware of his surroundings again. He was anchored to the wall by Daniel, one hand on Rodrigo's shoulder and the other still encouraging the last pulses from his cock. He'd just come. In Daniel's, in *his professor's*, hand.

At his command.

It was all a bit much to take in. Semen started to drip down his jeans.

Daniel chuckled and Rodrigo's gaze shifted over to meet his eyes. "Wonderful," Daniel said, leaning in to kiss his cheek. He mouthed down his jaw until their lips met for another, barely less devouring, kiss.

Another laugh caught his attention as Ian came back into the room. "I see you're feeling a bit less nervous," he teased.

Rodrigo felt his face flush, instinctively embarrassed for a moment at having been caught in such a compromising position with Daniel. But then, wasn't that the point of all this? It was *supposed* to be the three of them, and it would be fun, he told himself, taking a deep breath to calm down. It would be great.

Ian came closer and leaned in on the other side of Rodrigo, kissing him. "Hmmm... Someone smells like come," he grinned. "Let's move to the bedroom; I'll give you a tour of the house later."

They lost Daniel as they made their way to a large bedroom, decorated in dark earth tones. Two oil lamps were lit in opposite corners, brighter than candles but softer and warmer than electric

lights. A variety of sex toys and supplies were spread out on a dressing table.

Ian grinned, seeing Rodrigo's eyes widen as he looked at the restraints and other items. "Don't worry about any of that stuff yet. Tonight we're just going to see how we all work together, ok?" He pulled Rodrigo into an embrace maybe meant to comfort but which also allowed Ian to rub his hard cock against Rodrigo. "If you don't like anything Daniel asks you to do, just say so. It'll be fine, you'll see," Ian reassured between soft kisses and then with more hunger. "It'll be fucking awesome, I think,"

Daniel entered the room to find the two of them progressing from kissing to outright groping in the middle of the room, both aroused by each other but also with the anticipation of what was going to happen next.

"Starting without me?" he growled, although Rodrigo could hear the smile in his voice, too. "Go on then, undress each other. I'll watch."

Both men toed off their footwear as they unbuttoned each others' shirts, uncovering familiar skin, kissing and touching along the way. Ian's hands unfastened his jeans and started to pull them down, suddenly reminding Rodrigo that he was wet and sticky. Almost before he finished the thought, Daniel handed Ian a damp washcloth.

With a naughty smirk, Ian slid down to kneel in front of Rodrigo. He peeled off the wet clothes and set to cleaning Rodrigo quite thoroughly. So thoroughly that Rodrigo was already getting hard again by the time Ian had finished, although the proximity of Ian's talented mouth, so full of mischief and promise, also had a lot to do with it.

Daniel had crossed the room to sit in a comfortable-looking chair, legs spread as he watched the action in front of him. Seeming to decide that Rodrigo was clean enough, he gave them more instructions. "Rodrigo, go stand against that wall, facing us. Put your hands above your head, yes, like that. Don't move until I tell you to."

He looked at his lover and frowned. "Ian, you're still half dressed. Did you get distracted, cleaning the spunk off of Rodrigo?"

Hanging his head like a disobedient child, Ian nodded. His posture was humble but Rodrigo caught the little wink Ian gave him and knew everything was all right.

Apparently so did Daniel. "Brat. Get naked and put on a little show for us. Prove to us what a greedy little slut you are, how much you've wanted both of us, together, looking at you. Wanting you. Go on, pet."

The command seemed to make Ian happy, reminding Rodrigo of what an exhibitionist he was, how comfortable Ian was with the idea of someone watching him. Ian's whole stance changed, from pretending to be chagrined into the poise and self-assurance of a stripper before an eager audience.

Ian backed away, turning slightly so they both got a side view. His hands caressed his chest, lingering on his nipples, pulling and squeezing them until they stood out red and hard, even from where Rodrigo was standing. The front of his chinos was tented, his arousal obvious, as was his pleasure in sharing it with the two of them.

Daniel cleared his throat, prompting Ian to keep going, and he shot a little smile at his seated lover. Coyly, he unfastened his pants, pulling the material apart in a slow tease as it became obvious he wasn't wearing underwear. Graceful and confident, he bent over to pull them off his legs and step out, taking the opportunity to twist first one way and then the other, making sure both Daniel and Rodrigo got a good look at his toned ass.

Rodrigo wasn't sure if he was allowed to laugh so he restrained himself to a smile, amused as well as aroused by Ian's display.

The laughter died a sudden death as Ian stood, hard prick sticking straight out from his body. Rodrigo's mouth watered as Ian took it in hand, stroking his shaft with a blissful expression on his face. Without thinking, Rodrigo started to move forward, wanting to touch and taste all that Ian was so shamelessly offering.

A scolding “tsk” from across the room pulled Rodrigo back against the wall as if held by invisible chains. He wanted Ian, but he didn’t want to displease Daniel even more. He bit his lip, uncertain.

“It seems our guest is becoming impatient, pet. Why don’t you crawl on over to him and give him some satisfaction?”

Ian dropped to his knees as if it was a position he spent a lot of time in, and prowled toward Rodrigo like a hungry young lion approaching his prey. Rodrigo shivered, and then shivered again as he felt Ian’s mouth on his ankle. Ian teased with open-mouthed kisses and bites, making his way up Rodrigo’s legs without rush.

Glancing over his shoulder briefly and getting a nod from Daniel, Ian continued upward, hands coming to rest on Rodrigo’s hips, holding him back against the wall. Rodrigo’s eyes fell shut as Ian’s path trailed over the arch of his hip, briefly darted a tongue into his navel, and then moved up to his chest. Rodrigo’s nipples were licked and nipped and nibbled until he moaned.

Ian continued up to Rodrigo’s collarbones and neck, breath tickling his ear for a moment before moving to his jaw. Rodrigo’s head fell to the side in surrender. He opened his eyes with a gasp as Ian bit into the side of his neck, one of his weak spots that Ian regularly exploited. Daniel was smirking, leaning against the wall beside him, close enough that Rodrigo was embarrassed not to have noticed.

“Good, isn’t he?” he observed conversationally. “But I don’t need to tell you that.” Redirecting his attention, Daniel put a hand on Ian’s shoulder. “Down,” he ordered, with a slight push.

As they shifted positions, Daniel’s mouth descended on Rodrigo’s at the same moment Ian sucked his cock inside. It was hard to tell which sensation was more breathtaking; both together were mind-blowing. Combined with the grip Ian had on his hips and Daniel’s hands pressing his wrists against the wall, it was getting to be overwhelming again at a rapid pace.

Rodrigo whimpered. Everything inside him wanted to give in, to submit. To be good for these two men he felt so strongly for.

To be cherished and taken care of by them. And to be tormented with pleasure until he screamed.

But it was unbearably intense, too, and he didn't want to come again so fast. Struggling against mouths and hands, he managed to murmur "Wait" against Daniel's lips.

In an instant, both mouths pulled back, two sets of eyes searching his face with concern.

"I'm fine," he reassured them, breathing hard. "Just, uh, I don't want... I'm going to come again if you keep that up," he admitted.

A relived laugh came from Daniel. "Well, we wouldn't want that to happen, now would we? Perhaps it's time to torment Ian some?" he suggested, a wicked look in his eyes. "Why don't you show me how grateful you are, how much you've enjoyed things so far by getting Ian ready for me to fuck?"

Ian threw himself across the side of the bed enthusiastically, arms stretched across the mattress in an eager grip. Rodrigo picked up a bottle of lube from the dressing table and slicked up his fingers as Ian spread his legs.

He looked over his shoulder at Rodrigo, impatience written all over his face. "Come *on*. Give me your fingers, damn it, I'm so fucking ready."

Rodrigo gave him a playful little slap on one cheek, laughing. It surprised him, although he guessed it shouldn't have, when Ian groaned and thrust his ass back up in the air, wanting more. He glanced at Daniel to see what he should do.

And groaned out loud himself at the sight of Daniel undressing. Forbidding and welcoming at once wearing just boxer briefs, body graceful and tanned and toned and obviously aroused, erection straining against the cotton. Without really noticing what he was doing, Rodrigo's slick fingers pressed against Ian, two slid in, gripped by welcoming heat.

"Oh yeah," Ian gasped, pushing back. "More, give me more." Rodrigo obeyed, twisting a third finger in as Ian rocked back and forth, impaling himself on Rodrigo's hand. "Fuck, look at him,

Rodrigo,” Ian grunted as Daniel joined them beside the bed. “God, you’re so fucking hot, Daniel. I’m going to die if you don’t fuck me soon. Please,” he moaned.

Rodrigo twisted his fingers, stroking against Ian’s prostate to remind him of whose fingers were actually *in* his ass. He was gratified when Ian yelped, then pushed back on him.

Daniel smirked.

“Or let Rodrigo fuck me. He’s so good at it,” Ian suggested breathlessly.

“No, I think I get your greedy hole tonight,” Daniel said, pushing off his final piece of clothing. He stood naked, aroused and proud, and Rodrigo thought he might choke on his own drool at the gorgeous sight.

Daniel stilled Rodrigo’s hand. He took the cue to withdraw, wiping his hand clean on the washcloth from before. He stood beside them and just watched.

The sight of Daniel’s cock sliding into Ian’s welcoming body made Rodrigo whimper; this was better than any porn he’d ever seen, hotter than any random guys making out at a party or fucking in the bathroom at a club. These were two incredibly sexy, gorgeous men that he knew and respected and admired and *wanted*, having sex right here in front of him.

Well, making love. If something that unbelievably hot could be called something so girly, but it was definitely sweeter and more intense than just an average fuck.

Rodrigo felt honored to be allowed to see it.

As well as horribly turned on. Not only were the visuals amazing, but the sounds were so erotic too. Ian kept up a nonstop groaning that Rodrigo knew meant he was close to orgasm, just barely holding back. Daniel was quieter, deep little grunts and growls accompanying each plunge into Ian’s body.

As the volume increased, Daniel gave Ian a swat on the ass. “Don’t come, Ian,” he instructed in a tone that allowed no argument.

Sweat broke out on Ian's skin as his eyes opened, hands clenching the edge of the mattress. He tried to regain a measure of control over his body while still being stimulated at an unrelenting pace.

It was so hot that Rodrigo's hand was on his cock before he even realized it.

Daniel glared at him. "Keep touching your prick and you'll have to face the consequences," he promised in a voice thickened with Irish accent.

While that was an intriguing idea, Rodrigo knew he was way too overwhelmed by the evening so far to up the intensity. Maybe he'd disobey on purpose some other time, he thought, stilling his hands.

The pace of the two men in front of him increased and Rodrigo knew they were close. Daniel jerked Ian's hips back onto his cock, driving in deep and hard as the older man suddenly cried out in a harsh growl, spilling himself in his lover.

Everyone froze for a long few moments, Rodrigo and Ian both quivering with anticipation and need. Daniel took some deep breaths to come back to himself, as he indulged in letting the pleasure overtake him for a few seconds.

Rodrigo watched Daniel out of the corner of his eyes as he stealthily reached for Ian's leaking erection.

Daniel blinked, then narrowed his eyes in a familiar amused glare. It was an expression that Rodrigo knew from school, from the first day Daniel had caught him staring. He was somewhat startled to see in the bedroom, but it also made him shiver.

Pulling out, Daniel growled, "Let's see how well you multitask, then, Rodrigo. Sixty-nine with Ian until he comes. You, however, were bad and have already come once anyhow, so you get to wait."

"Evil, isn't he?" Ian whispered, grinning as they shifted around on the bed.

Very much so, Rodrigo thought as Ian's mouth closed over his dick, sucking ravenously. He applied his own to Ian's, the familiar taste and scent of him doing nothing to decrease Rodrigo's arousal.

Lucky for him, Ian had just been fucked hard, struggling to hold back against the stimulation on his prostate for so long that it didn't take more than a couple of minutes until he was on the edge again. When two of Rodrigo's long fingers slid into his opening, Ian pulled his mouth back, howling as he shot his release down Rodrigo's throat.

Without pause, Daniel rolled Rodrigo onto his back while Ian moved to the side, still gasping for breath. Daniel's eyes silently asked permission as he pushed Rodrigo's legs up and apart. Rodrigo nodded.

"Ian told me what a hungry little bottom you are," Daniel murmured, reaching over to the table with the toys on it. "And I know it's been a few days since he last had you. Do you want to get fucked?" he asked, holding up a sizeable dildo.

Rodrigo nodded, knowing the hunger showed on his face as Daniel took his time unrolling a condom onto the dildo and then slathering it with lubricant.

Two wet fingers probed at Rodrigo's opening and he glanced down to see Ian giving him a smug grin. His lover prepared him while Daniel watched. At last Rodrigo could let himself relax the tight hold on his arousal, shamelessly writhing on Ian's hand every bit as much as Ian had on his.

It wasn't long until the probing fingers were withdrawn and replaced by something far more fulfilling. Rodrigo spared a thought that he was sorry it wasn't either one of his lovers' cocks inside of him, but he was so close that it didn't matter all that much. He knew he wouldn't last long at all as Daniel began working the thick dildo in and out of him.

Eyes closed in ecstasy, the tickle of Ian's hair on his belly was all the warning Rodrigo had before his cock was sucked back into the warmth of Ian's mouth. He moaned, rocking back and forth between the two men. He felt helpless, like he was flying, and it was glorious.

“Oh fuck yeah!” he cried, as his body clenched around the toy pounding into him and he exploded into Ian’s mouth.

Warm bodies held onto him. His body tingled.

A leftover shock of pleasure jolted through him as Daniel’s voice whispered, “That’s it. Just like that,” as Rodrigo began to come down from the magnificent high. “I knew you’d be wonderful.”

Ian’s voice was smug. “I told you.”

“Indeed,” Daniel chuckled. “It’s too bad we had to wait so long.”

Rodrigo opened his eyes. He grinned at his two lovers hovering over him. He smiled, throat feeling scratchy, body pleasantly sore. “Well, good things come to those who wait, my grandmother says.”

Ian kissed his cheek, snuggling in next to him. “Definitely. Washcloth, Daniel? And a blanket too, if you wouldn’t mind?”

Daniel gave them both an indulgent look as he retrieved the requested items and extinguished the lamps. “Is this just a nap or are you staying?” he asked.

Rodrigo bit his lip, looking at Daniel, then Ian. “I’d like to stay,” he answered, hoping they’d know he meant for much more than just the one night.

“Excellent,” Ian murmured, settling the blankets around the three of them. “I think this is going to work out very nicely.”

Quiet laughter filled the silence of the darkened room. The last thought that flickered across Rodrigo’s mind before he fell asleep was that he’d never been so glad for a semester to end.

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