

A photograph of a muscular man from the waist up, wearing a white tank top. He is standing by a body of water, with his back to the camera and his right arm raised behind his head. The water is in the foreground, and the background is a bright, hazy sky.

Carey'd Away

J. M. Snyder

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...A low wolf whistle interrupted Patrick's thoughts.

His fingers went nerveless, and the cards leapt from his hands, raining down onto the floor again. *Tell me that was not directed at me.*

"Nice ass." The man's voice was young and sexy.

From the corners of his eyes Patrick glanced around, but he was alone—there was no one else in the booth or standing nearby to whom that might be directed. No one but himself. And in his experience, sexy guys didn't whistle at him or comment on his backside. They just didn't. *Ignore him*, his mind whispered. *He'll go away.*

Bending his knees, Patrick squatted, all too aware of a hot gaze watching him move. This time as he gathered up the cards, some of them bent beneath his fumbling fingers. The guy behind him cleared his throat, and Patrick's cheeks warmed with a quick blush.

"Hey, hot stuff."

Patrick felt that blush heat up the back of his neck. A look over his shoulder showed the guy—around his age, maybe a little younger. He wore a tight black T-shirt with the word OMNI embroidered on the left breast and black jeans that hung down off narrow hips. His dark hair was shaved close to his scalp and all Patrick could see were dark blue eyes, a faint smile on full lips, and well-defined muscles along his arms and chest. Sexy didn't begin to describe him.

Guys like him don't look at guys like me. Please God, don't taunt me like this. Clearing his throat, Patrick asked, "Excuse me?" He hoped his voice sounded steadier than it did to his own ears.

Meeting his nervous gaze, the guy grinned. "You heard me. Got some junk in the trunk. I like that." He held a clipboard against his waist and tapped it with a pen as he stared openly at Patrick...

ALSO BY J. M. SNYDER

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CAREY'D AWAY

BY

J. M. SNYDER

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CAREY'D AWAY
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Carey Thornton leaned back in his chair, propped his feet on the registration counter set up inside the Jefferson Ballroom of the Omni Hotel and Conference Center, folded his hands behind his head, and closed his eyes. There had been a sign-up sheet for hotel staff who wanted to work the Richmond Annual Comic Book Convention, but for the life of him, Carey couldn't remember writing his name on it. Sure, it was overtime, but was it really worth it? After staying out way too late the night before with his friends, he didn't think *anything* was worth waking up for this morning. "It should be illegal to make me work this early," he muttered to anyone who cared to listen.

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“You’re not working,” his friend Bill Jenkins pointed out.

Though he had been one of the friends out with Carey the previous evening, Bill was too damn hyper to be tired. He *loved* comics, lived for them, and even sported a *Dawn* T-shirt today, crisp and black with a voluptuous redhead dressed in green lingerie draped across his chest. Carey didn’t see what Bill saw in pictures like that. As far as Carey knew, Bill liked guys, but sometimes? Sometimes he had to wonder about him.

To be honest, Bill was the one who was supposed to be working the registration counter, not him. Carey had pissed off the project coordinator, Shonda Murray, a few days before and ended up with maintenance detail. His job was to check the booths and make sure they were stable. He also had to keep an eye out for OSHA hazards, whatever those might be. Carey thought that might mean no frayed electrical cords or spilled drinks or kicked up carpets, shit like that.

Trouble was, Carey didn’t feel like *doing* that. At the moment he didn’t feel like doing anything—he was still feeling the club and the music beating through his head. He wondered if it were too late to call in sick.

Bill squatted over a box full of blank nametags and pens and rolls of door prize tickets, things that had to be set out across the table in a fairly organized fashion before the show started, and Carey didn’t offer to help. Let Bill do it all. *Not because I’m lazy*, he told himself, trying to pretend he could catch another ten minutes of sleep, *but because he’s anal. He’s good with the details.*

Still, that didn’t seem to fly with his friend. Pushing up his

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wire-frame glasses with one hand as they threatened to slide down his face, Bill asked, "Carey, a little help here, is that too much to ask? Why am I doing all the work?"

"I'm out of bed, aren't I?" Carey shifted in the chair, trying to get comfortable, but couldn't seem to find a way to sit that didn't make his ass go numb. "And I'm at work. Hence, I am working."

"Your logic astounds me."

Carey grinned and opened one eye to watch his friend. Bill's mousy bangs spiked up from his pale forehead, not so much as a fashion statement but because he'd run his hands through his hair so often this morning, it now stood up on its own. Behind his thick glasses, his pale eyes glared at Carey with a baleful expression. Five years ago in high school, Carey didn't spare nerdy guys like Bill the time of day. Funny how his circle of friends had changed now that he worked full time and didn't get much chance to meet people other than his own co-workers.

"What?" he asked with a shrug.

Bill shook his head and bent over the table, where he lined up a row of free Omni pens. He tapped them flush against the edge of the table to make sure they were even and straight. Carey stifled a laugh. *See? Anal.* He thought maybe Bill's boyfriend would agree. He'd have to remember to ask Tyreese the next time he saw him, just because he knew it would embarrass the hell out of his friend. To hear Tyreese joke, Bill liked it up the ass.

"If you're not going to help me..." Bill started.

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"I *am* helping." Carey grinned. "I'm supervising. You're doing great. Keep up the good work."

Bill shot him one of his patented *go to hell* looks, the ones he saved especially for him. "You can start checking the booths," he said, placing a clipboard and pen on the table between them. "Make sure everyone's here."

Carey glanced around the large convention hall and sighed dramatically. It wasn't even six in the morning yet and already the room was crowded with vendors setting up their booths. Someone dressed like Wolverine prowled by the continental breakfast Shonda had set out earlier, and Carey thought he had seen Catwoman heading for the restrooms. Everyone else was busy unboxing cards and comic books and action figures. Everywhere he looked, he saw nothing but toys. And most of them were so damned *expensive*... Carey couldn't believe some of the prices these people were trying to get away with here.

Sinking farther into his chair, he muttered, "I hate comic book conventions." He wasn't going to get up and do any work until he absolutely *had* to, that was all there was to it. Let someone else walk around and take a head count of the freaks. *Let Wolverine do it. The way he's chowing down on those croissants, he'll be busting out of those tights by noon.*

"You're just pissed." Bill laughed when Carey didn't argue. Writing his name on a nametag, he stuck the sticker onto his T-shirt and balled up the backing to toss it at his friend. It fell pitifully short, landing atop the pens on the table. "Ever since I suckered you out of *Vic and Matt* number one—

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”

“You didn’t sucker me,” Carey replied, but it was hard to keep the bitterness out of his voice. “I didn’t want it anyway.”

Bill laughed and smoothed down his nametag. “Twenty bucks!” he cried. “When you’re walking around, make sure you take a good look at what it’s going for nowadays. I don’t want to rub it in or anything...”

“Then shut up,” Carey told him.

Bill laughed again and bent over the box, rummaging for the rest of the supplies.

Across the room, Bill’s boyfriend Tyreese Jones entered the hall. A lanky, thin black man with short dreadlocks and sinewy bare arms, Tyreese wore the red vest and black pressed pants of a valet. For a moment he stopped and pushed his sunglasses up onto the top of his head, squashing down those dreads as he looked around. When he spotted Bill, leaning down in front of the registration desk, a grin like oil slid across his face and he started in their direction.

Carey watched his wolfish lope, the way he moved like water, the slight grin on his thin lips, and felt a twinge of jealousy stab in his chest. *I want someone who looks at me like that.* Not Tyreese, necessarily—the guy was a bit too intense for Carey’s liking. What he and Bill saw in each other, Carey would never know. But someone who snuck up on him, as Tyreese was doing now, who went out of his way to surprise him at times, who wrapped his arms around Carey and kissed him silly. Someone he could wake up beside, was that too much to ask? He was tired of sleeping alone.

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As Tyreese approached, he placed a finger to his lips to keep Carey quiet. Bill hadn't seen him yet, he was so intent on laying out the freebies on the registration table. Carey waited until Tyreese reached out, hands inches from Bill's hips, before he said, "Hey, Tyreese."

Bill turned, already smiling. "Hey, babe."

Tyreese glared at Carey as he eased his arms around his boyfriend's waist. "What's your problem this morning, Thornton?" he asked, his voice dangerously low.

With a laugh, Bill leaned back into Tyreese, rubbing against him. "He's still pissed about that whole *Vic and Matt* thing."

"I am not." Carey pouted. "Shut up, both of you. Go someplace else if you're going to sex each other up."

"You're just jealous." Tyreese kissed the back of Bill's neck and raised his eyebrows. "You know you want me."

Carey rolled his eyes at that. *As if*. Tyreese wasn't his type. He wanted someone with a body that wouldn't quit, someone who didn't know how hot he was so Carey didn't have to fight his way to the boy. *Someone other than anyone I'll ever meet here*. Was it five o'clock yet? Couldn't this day be over with already?

When Carey didn't respond to his taunt, Tyreese tried another method. "You know that comic you bought from him?" he purred into Bill's ear. Bill glanced at Carey and grinned. "There's one over by the door, first printing. You should see what they have it priced at. Hey, Carey, wasn't yours—"

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"Shut up," Carey growled again. When Bill laughed, Carey glared at him, too. "Don't even say it. I don't want to know."

Bill extracted himself from Tyreese's embrace. "Am I the only one working here?"

"The show doesn't open until eight," Tyreese reminded him. "No people means no cars. What do you want me to do, stand out in the parking lot when I can be in here with you?"

He nuzzled Bill's neck, eliciting a grin from his boyfriend. His hands smoothed down Bill's shirt, his fingers tucking it into the waistband of his jeans as he tried to move lower.

"You guys stop it," Carey muttered. "Get a room already."

Bill slapped Tyreese's hands away. "You *are* jealous," he said with a smile. "Of me and my boy. What a concept."

"I'm not..." Carey sighed. "Bite me. Both of you."

"Jan will," Tyreese said, winking at someone past Carey.

He turned and looked as his co-worker January Johnson came up behind him. A pretty girl with long brown curls, she now wore her hair pulled back into one thick braid. Tiny round blue sunglasses obscured her eyes, which were the same bright shade of aqua as her form-fitting tank top. Khaki shorts and clunky boots completed the outfit, and twin holsters hung low on her hips. The model scheduled to do Lara Croft had canceled at the last minute and someone seemed to have been able to talk Jan into playing the part. *Must have been Shonda*, Carey thought. *She says jump, Jan asks how high.*

Tyreese purred, "Won't you, Jan?"

Jan smiled, perplexed. "Sure," she agreed, sounding too damn chipper for six A.M. *I don't know what you're talking*

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about, her smile said, *but I'm going to go with it*. “Won’t I what? No, wait.”

Carey laughed, which earned him a smack across the back of the head.

Jan’s smile disappeared. “You guys are talking about sex again, aren’t you? God, don’t you have anything *else* to think about?”

“I’m talking about comic books,” Bill told her. He jerked a thumb at Tyreese and Carey. “They’re talking about sex.”

“*He’s* talking about sex,” Tyreese corrected, pointing at Carey, “but none of us what to hear it. When’s the last time you got a piece of ass, Carey? No, no, don’t rush. We’ve got what, two hours before the show starts? I’ll let you think about it.”

“Why do I hang out with you losers?” Carey glared at Tyreese and wondered if he should actually get to work now. Anything to get away from this harassment. He knew he was the only one in their circle of friends who wasn’t seeing anyone at the moment—he didn’t need to have it rubbed in his face. Did they have to *remind* him he was lonely?

In a loud whisper, Tyreese said, “It’s been so long, I bet you’ve got cobwebs.”

Carey kicked out at him, rocking the chair dangerously beneath his weight, but Tyreese dodged his foot easily enough. “I’ll kill you.”

With a laugh, Tyreese asked, “You want us to give you a refresher course? In, out, repeat as needed. Should I go over it again for you?”

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Carey surged to his feet, his cheeks hot with embarrassment. "Don't make me—"

But he heard the rapid *cliklikklik* of high heels and grabbed the clipboard from the table as Shonda cried out, "You *guys*! There's work to be done here."

"Doing it," Bill replied.

Jan twirled the end of her braid and bit her lip as if she could simply disappear if she didn't say a word. Tyreese let his sunglasses fall down over his face to cover his eyes and tried to look busy straightening the nametags and pens after Bill set them down. And Carey... "I was just warming up," he said, flashing Shonda a bright grin.

Despite her short stature and pleasantly plump figure, Shonda Murray was a firecracker. Whenever she stood with one hand on her hip, like she was doing now, Carey knew all hell was about to break loose. Her coffee-colored skin deepened to a cherry wood red when she got angry—Carey rarely saw her in any other mood. How a grade A bitch like Shonda managed to snag a sexy dyke like Jan, he'd never know.

Beneath the stacked tower of microbraids that covered her head, her warm brown eyes flashed with warning. "Don't play me like that, Carey," she said, giving him a push. "You ain't doing shit."

"He says he's supervising." Bill winked in his direction.

"That's *my* job," Shonda cried. "Carey!"

"Already gone." He laughed, clutching the clipboard to his chest, and dodged the small fist flung after him.

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As he headed for the front of the hall, he glanced over the clipboard and sighed. *Maybe I can find a place to hide out after I'm done. Check in all the vendors, then sneak into one of the empty rooms and go back to sleep. Six in the morning is way too early for my ass to be up.*

* * *

At the far end of the hall, down aisles hemmed in with display cases, and behind a large booth that blocked his view of the reception desk, Patrick Dix struggled with a box full of *Superman* comics and wondered how the hell he'd ever gotten himself involved with this mess. He didn't even *like* comics all that much, not really—he only helped out at the shop whenever his friend Leena Dodson needed an extra hand. So he'd thought nothing of it when his friend called him up earlier in the week and asked if he'd come to the comic book convention. "It's here in Richmond," Leena had said. "We don't have to travel anywhere. We'll just set up a booth for three days and try to get rid of some of my overstock. I'll *pay* you even, okay? How's that, Pat? Come on, please. I'm begging here."

Because he had nothing else planned for the weekend, and because he *could* use a few extra bucks, Patrick had agreed. But now...

What the hell was I thinking? he wondered as he lifted the box onto one of the tables in their booth.

Opening the box, he started sorting through the comics, not sure what he was really doing. Each book was carefully

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wrapped in a thin plastic bag to protect it. Leena had price stickers stuck on the outside of the bag, and the books appeared to be in some semblance of order, so Patrick laid them out on the table the same way he pulled them from the box. *Help me out, she says. And where is she, hmm? That's what I'd like to know. It's not helping out if I'm the only one doing the work.*

As far as he knew, Leena was still at home, probably even still in bed. "Be outside my shop by quarter after five," she'd said when she called Patrick the night before to remind him of the convention. So Patrick had showed up at 5:15 on the dot—this time of the year, it'd still been dark outside. Hell, the *sun* wasn't even awake yet at that hour.

He'd waited. And waited. Twenty minutes later he'd walked across the street and convinced the girl working the drive-thru at McDonald's to let him use her phone because like a dumbass, he'd left his cell at home. When he called Leena's apartment and got the answering machine, he hung up and called again. The groggy voice that answered bore little resemblance to his friend's usual cheery greeting. "Shit. What time is it? Give me ten minutes."

"I'll meet you there," Patrick had replied.

Now glancing at his watch, he noticed it was a little after six. *Where the hell is she again? Ten minutes, my ass.*

Pushing the comics aside, he ducked beneath the table and lifted two boxes that overflowed with trading cards. Had he mentioned yet that he didn't know jack about comics? Or that he had no clue how his friend wanted the booth set up? Or that

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Leena was late? Because she was, and getting later every minute she didn't show up. Patrick wasn't going to let her pull a stunt like this again.

He balanced the boxes one on the other as he stood...*damn, these cards are heavy.* He felt a dull anger creep into his thoughts and he tried to push it away. It took a lot to get him angry. *Which is why Leena always asks me to do shit like this, and why I let her walk all over me. "Can you help me?" It'll surprise you, hon, when I finally learn to say no.*

Suddenly the top box started to slide.

Patrick felt it wobble precariously and then it slipped, hitting the side of the table and spilling cards everywhere. A fan of *Magic* and *Pokémon* cards spread out across the comic books and fell to the ground like a proverbial house of cards. "Damn it the hell," Patrick muttered, setting the other box down.

The cards lay scattered about. They were collectors' items, weren't they? Leena always told him she made more money off *Pokémon* than anything else she sold. Patrick knew his friend must've spent *hours* sorting those cards, sticking each one into its tiny protective sleeve and pricing it out of the latest *Wizard* guide, then rearranging them in order by expansion set. And now, this.

How the fuck am I supposed to put them back right? Patrick thought, kicking the box where it rested on the floor. *You can show up any day now, Leena. Any minute.*

With a sigh, he walked around the table and bent over to

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scoop the cards together. He didn't want to do this. Couldn't he just call it a day already? *I'm leaving when she gets here.* Rapidly, he shuffled the cards together. Fuck putting them in order. *If she ever gets here.* What was taking her so long? She should've been here by now.

A low wolf whistle interrupted his thoughts.

His fingers went nerveless, and the cards leapt from his hands, raining down onto the floor again. *Tell me that was not directed at me.*

"Nice ass." The man's voice was young and sexy.

From the corners of his eyes Patrick glanced around, but he was alone—there was no one else in the booth or standing nearby to whom that might be directed. No one but himself. And in his experience, sexy guys didn't whistle at him or comment on his backside. They just didn't. *Ignore him*, his mind whispered. *He'll go away.*

Bending his knees, Patrick squatted, all too aware of a hot gaze watching him move. This time as he gathered up the cards, some of them bent beneath his fumbling fingers. The guy behind him cleared his throat, and Patrick's cheeks warmed with a quick blush.

"Hey, hot stuff."

Patrick felt that blush heat up the back of his neck. A look over his shoulder showed the guy—around his age, maybe a little younger. He wore a tight black T-shirt with the word OMNI embroidered on the left breast and black jeans that hung down off narrow hips. His dark hair was shaved close to his scalp and all Patrick could see were dark blue eyes, a faint

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smile on full lips, and well-defined muscles along his arms and chest. Sexy didn't begin to describe him.

Guys like him don't look at guys like me. Please God, don't taunt me like this. Clearing his throat, Patrick asked, "Excuse me?" He hoped his voice sounded steadier than it did to his own ears.

Meeting his nervous gaze, the guy grinned. "You heard me. Got some junk in the trunk. I like that." He held a clipboard against his waist and tapped it with a pen as he stared openly at Patrick.

Patrick felt the cards slip from his fingers again but he couldn't seem to remember how to pick them up.

"Are you Dodson?" the guy asked, and the pen said *taptaptap* against the clipboard. A grin flashed across his features, brightening his face. "Dodson, Dodson! We've got Dodson here."

Patrick glanced around, confused. "What?"

The guy shrugged. "It's from *Jurassic Park*. You know, the movie?" When Patrick didn't answer, he looked at the clipboard and frowned. "I'm guessing you're not Leena, are you? From Kryptonite Comics?"

"I'm Pat Dix," Patrick corrected. "She's not here yet."

"Do you work for her?"

The cards slid out of his hands again—the damn sleeves holding them were slick. Before Patrick could scoop up the cards, the guy knelt down beside him and swept them up with both hands. "Carey."

Patrick watched those strong hands tamp the cards into a

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neat stack. "Carry what?"

The guy's grin widened. "Carey. That's me. So you're into comics?" He held the cards out to Patrick.

As he took the stack, his fingers brushed Carey's and he pulled away quickly. His skin tingled where they touched and he thought if he ever got the chance to press his flesh against Carey's, the sensation would be maddening. *Why are you talking to me? I've waited my whole life for a guy like you to look at me, to speak to me, to even give me the time of day. And when you finally do, it's at a damn comic book convention.* Where was the justice in that?

Then he realized Carey was waiting for him to say something, but for the life of him, he couldn't imagine what it was. "What?"

His voice was barely a whisper. They both squatted on the floor, Carey mere inches away. Beside him. *When had that happened?* "I'm sorry..."

Carey laughed and prompted, "Comics. This *is* a comic book convention, right?" He waited until Patrick nodded before he said, "And you work at Kryptonite Comics—"

"Oh!" Patrick shook his head, relieved that one of them was paying attention. *I could get lost in those eyes*, he thought, staring at his hands so he wouldn't stare at Carey. "No, I'm not really all that big into comics. I mean, I'm not...no."

God. He picked at the corners of the cards he held, trying to smooth out the bends. *You think I'm an idiot. I sound like a fool. Just leave now, please. Come back in my dreams and maybe then I can be witty and charming and anything more*

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than this bumblefuck dork I'm playing at now.

When Carey didn't respond, Patrick cleared his throat and whispered, "No. I'm not into comics. Not really. I'm—"

"I get the point," Carey said.

Patrick grinned. *That means shut up.* He looked up as Carey stood, but when he realized he was eye-level with the guy's crotch and now he really *was* beginning to stare, he rose to his feet and starting shuffling together the cards on the table. He couldn't think of anything else to say. His name—got that out of the way. Did he like comics? No. Could he have his number?

He blushed at that one. *Like I'm that brave. Like I can just come out and ask a guy, any guy, for his number. Least of all this guy. That's a little beyond my scope of super powers. Right now I'm pretty sure the only thing I'm good at is looking like a dumbass. Can't even tell him...*

"Thank you," he mumbled without looking at Carey. He kept his gaze on the table and tried to pretend he didn't feel the heat radiating between them. All it would take was a step back and he'd be against that body. He wondered if Carey would move if he leaned into him like that. He wondered if those hands would find a way around his waist. What would they feel like? Warm? Strong?

What was he talking about again? "For helping me with the cards. Thanks."

"No problem." Carey stepped forward, closing the distance between them. When Patrick moved, his elbow brushed against that hard body so close behind him now. Carey's

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breath was hot along the back of Patrick's neck when he whispered, "I'm at the registration desk all day. You just let me know if you need help with something else. Anything."

The clipboard bit into the small of Patrick's back and he felt it move against him as Carey wrote something down. Then he heard the tear of a sticker peeled from paper and felt a hand, as warm and strong as he had suspected it would be, cup his ass as it pressed something onto the back pocket of his jeans.

"Here's your nametag," Carey told him. "Have fun at the show. Hope I see you around."

Patrick waited until Carey's footsteps disappeared, then pulled the sticker off his butt. *Hello My Name Is*, it read in big red letters. Beneath that, Carey had scrawled, *Pat Dix*. Under his name was written seven digits Patrick didn't recognize, and then, *Carey it with you at all times*. He laughed, shaky, relieved.

Carefully he folded the nametag, keeping the sticky sides together, and stuck it in his pocket. That hadn't just happened, had it? Some hot guy he didn't know *hadn't* just left him his phone number, had he? Patrick didn't think he'd ever get up the nerve to call but at least he had it, right? So maybe today wouldn't suck so badly after all.

* * *

When Leena finally showed up, she wore a disarming smile and a blue long-sleeve shirt with the Superman logo emblazoned across the chest. Her usual jeans had been traded

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in for a bright yellow skirt, knee-length, and her long blonde hair, normally pulled back in a tight bun to keep it out of her way, hung loose across her shoulders. "You look nice," Patrick told her. "You had to wear the Superman shirt to ruin it, though, didn't you?"

"It's part of my costume," she said, tossing her coat onto the folding chair behind their booth. She looked around and rubbed her hands together as she surveyed the way Patrick had set things up. "Looks good here. What time's it start again?"

"Five minutes ago." Patrick hoped Leena could hear the anger in his voice because he was pissed. Fucking *livid*. When eight o'clock had come and gone, when the doors at the end of the hall had opened and Leena wasn't there yet, Patrick had considered leaving. Let someone else worry about the booth and the overstock and all the other shit Leena had dumped on him.

Only he wasn't like that, he couldn't just *leave...but it's a good thing you decided to show up or I might have. Where the hell would you be then, hmm?* "What took you so long?"

Leena shook out a red bed sheet she had folded over one arm. "I couldn't find my cape."

Patrick eyed her warily. "The fact that you even have something you call your cape scares me." He watched as Leena draped the bed sheet over her shoulders and tied the ends around her neck. "Do you really have to do that? You look..."

He trailed off, unsure of whether to say *like a weirdo* or if his friend would get the point with *pretentious*. He could

almost hear Leena's reply. "Pretentious? How?"

Patrick didn't want to have to explain it to her.

"You just have to get into it." Leena held the cape out at her sides and shook it. "What do you think?"

"About what?" Patrick asked cautiously. *Please don't ask me about the cape because sure as hell you ain't no superhero. You look like a fool in a silly red sheet, that's it.*

"You should've dressed up." Leena grinned as the first few customers approached the booth, a trio of young boys who started to flip through the *Pokémon* cards. "Hey, guys. Looking for something in particular?"

One of the boys saw the cape and laughed. "Nice Supergirl getup. Do you have a first edition Charizard?"

"American or Japanese?" From under the table, Leena pulled out the binder she kept her high-dollar cards in. "Holo or non? Basic set or Team Rocket expansion?"

Patrick sighed and tuned them out. Was it just him, or did everyone suddenly lapse into a foreign language here? Moving Leena's coat aside, he sat down and stared around at the room rapidly filling up with people—mostly boys, but there were a lot of parents as well, a few single men his own age, and even a large number of girls.

Some fool in Wolverine's signature yellow tights and claws stalked the snack area. A woman with a tight tank top and holsters strapped to her thighs blew imaginary smoke from the barrel of her drawn pistol as she posed with a group of kids. Someone pretending to be Batman paced the aisle in front of the booth, his cape fluttering dramatically around his

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heels, but he just looked like an overgrown kid dressed in pajamas and a mask.

They're all weirdoes, Patrick mused. At least his friend wasn't the only one. The whole room was full of dorks. He wondered where Carey was now. The registration desk? Could he find some reason to go up there and check?

Nametags, his mind whispered. *I need a new one, right? And Leena didn't get one, so she needs one, too. I can go get us some.* Standing, he muttered, "I'll be right back."

Leena glanced up at him with a quick smile and turned back to the boys, who poured over the cards as if they were rare treasure. Patrick shook his head. *They're nothing but pictures on paper. That's it.*

Weaving through the crowd, he made his way to the registration desk. In his mind he was already talking to Carey again. That boy had a smile like the sun, and the way he had stared at him, so hungry, so *wanting*—it took Patrick's breath away to think anyone would look at him with that much blatant lust and desire and need. He wanted Carey to look at him like that again, to hear him laugh again, to see that smile.

Face it, Dix, he told himself as he crossed the convention hall. *You want to feel his hand on your ass again. You want to feel him touch you in places that haven't felt another's touch in too damn long. You want him, okay? End of discussion. You just met him and already you want him something bad.*

People pressed against the registration desk, most of them filling out information cards for the door prize drawings. Behind the desk sat a guy with a head full of brown mussed

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hair who handed out pens. He saw Patrick and handed him a pen over the crowd edging the desk. "A dollar a chance," he told him. "Great prizes this year."

"I'm—" Patrick caught himself before he said, *looking for Carey*. He looked at the guy's nametag and forced a smile. "Bill, is it?"

The guy behind the table turned toward him, raising his chin slightly to hear over the crowd of people between them.

Patrick's smile widened. "I'm with one of the vendors."

Bill laughed at that, like it was a joke or something, but Patrick didn't get it. "Yeah, okay," he said. "Did Carey check you guys in?"

Carey. Patrick nodded numbly at the name. "Yeah, he did. But we need—"

"Is everything okay?" Bill interrupted.

"We need nametags," Patrick said, though he didn't really want them anymore. They had just been a ruse to see Carey again and he tried to tell himself he wasn't disappointed. Of course he couldn't expect Carey to be there; he was at work, wasn't he? *He probably saw me coming and ran in the opposite direction. And the joke's on me, because chances are the number he gave me isn't his either. He was just being mean. I'll call it up and the guy who answers will be like, "Pizza Hut." My bad.*

"Nametags," Bill repeated, as if he didn't quite know what Patrick was talking about. Then his smile slipped a notch and he started to rummage around the papers on the desk.

Patrick nodded. "You know, it's okay—"

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"They're around here somewhere," Bill muttered. "What booth are you at?"

"One sixty." Patrick shook his head, handed back the pen. "No, really, it's okay. We'll just—"

"How many do you need?" Bill asked, scribbling down the number. "I'll have someone run them by when I find them."

Can you send Carey?

When Patrick didn't answer, Bill glanced up at him. "One sixty? How many?"

"Two." Patrick held up two fingers for emphasis. Then, before he could stop himself, he asked, "Is Carey around?"

Bill stopped and looked at him, really seeing him for the first time. His smile brightened and he ran a hand through his hair to brush it back, even though it wasn't in his face. "Don't tell me," he said. "You're Pat Dix?"

God. Patrick felt his cheeks heat up. No, he didn't tell his friends about me. What the hell did he say? "There's this boy over there who got all hot and bothered when all I did was look at him." Jesus.

"Yeah," he muttered. "Two nametags, if you get a chance. It's no big deal."

With a wink, Bill said, "I'll let him know you stopped by."

Patrick sighed. "You don't have to..."

But Bill had already turned his attention back to the kids crowding the table. "A dollar a chance," he called out. "Great prizes this year, folks. Need a pen?"

You don't have to mention it to him, Patrick thought, trying to catch Bill's eye, but the guy didn't look up at him again and

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when someone pushed him aside, Patrick headed back to the booth. *You don't even have to let him know I asked for him. What'll he think?*

What do I want him to think?

Patrick wasn't sure, but he wished he had stayed home. Damn Leena and her comics and this convention. Damn Carey and his hands and smile. Patrick just wanted to go home. *Three days of this shit?* He didn't want to think about it.

* * *

As Carey finished his rounds of the convention hall, he kept glancing over at the booth for Kryptonite Comics. He couldn't get Pat off his mind—those sandy blond curls cut so short they seemed to whorl into kinks like steel wool on top of his head, those dark brown eyes Carey swore had shimmered from the overhead lights. Those thick arms, an ass that *begged* to be touched, the way Pat's fingers had fumbled nervously. The school-boyish way he hadn't quite been able to meet Carey's gaze.

So cute. Just thinking of him made Carey sigh, and it'd been a long time since anyone he'd seen had elicited that response. He could still feel Pat's butt in his palm where he had pressed the nametag onto his jeans. Adding his phone number might have been a bit bold, but that was how Carey rolled. Why play games? When he saw something he liked, he went for it. And damn, but he'd like a piece of Pat Dix.

Or Pat's dick, he thought with a grin. Though to be honest, he suspected the guy wasn't the type to call first. The dude

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was a little on the shy side, to put it nicely. *I'll have to get his number somehow.* They were *going* to hook up—no question about that. But Carey knew it was going to be on him to make it happen. A guy like Pat would never make the first move.

Which is fine, really. I have enough confidence for both of us.

He'd swing by the booth again and see if maybe they could do something for lunch, or get together after the dealer room closed for the day. Maybe his friend wouldn't be there yet—that Leena chick? And maybe Shonda wouldn't be hanging around like a harbinger of doom, swooping down on Carey whenever he so much as leaned against something for a short break. Maybe he could sit down at the Kryptonite booth for a little bit, talk to Pat some, get to know him better and watch the way his eyes flickered whenever he looked at Carey, like butterflies afraid to light anywhere for too long.

Careful, a voice inside his head warned. *You're crushing hard on this one.*

He didn't care. It'd been so long since he'd been interested in anyone beyond a dance or two at a club that he'd almost forgotten how much he loved this fluttering feeling in his stomach, the breathless anticipation that made him horny and giddy and flirty all at the same time.

Unfortunately, he *was* at work, a fact that Shonda seemed intent to grind into him. The moment he started for Pat's booth, she was suddenly at his side, pinching his elbow between her sharp nails. "Carey," she said, raising her voice to talk over the sounds of the crowds, "there you are. The

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UltraPro people need an extension cord—can you get them one? And Cyclops over there, the bulb in his visor's burned out, he needs a replacement. And Jan needs those blanks, you know the ones with the smoke? I can't find them. Do you know—"

"Jesus, Shonda," Carey sighed. There went any plans he might have had to sneak off to the other end of the hall. "I'm just one guy."

"And you have all day," she reminded him. "Take care of Cyke first. He can't shoot mutant beams from his eyes with a blown bulb. Red, okay? Make sure it's a red light."

"Got it." An hour later Carey headed for Patrick's booth again, thinking he could at least say hey, but he glimpsed Shonda through the crowds and changed direction. She was out to get him, that was all there was to it. She took her coordinator position way too seriously—he'd have to talk to Jan about that. *Keep your girl off my back, will you? She's crimping my style.*

Behind the registration desk, Bill handed out pens to anyone who wanted to register for the door prizes. As Carey approached, he held out a pen. "Fill out one of these forms," Bill told him. "Who knows? You might win. They've got the first issue of—"

"Shut it," Carey told him, pushing the pen away. He came around the desk and sank into one of the chairs set out for the employees. "Shonda hates me, you know that?"

Bill shrugged. "I know." He looked up as an arm snaked out between the people around the desk, and then Jan

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extracted herself from the crowd. Bill handed her a pen as she sank onto the floor between their chairs. "You want to register to win?"

"I want a time out," she said, trying to catch her breath. "Damn. If one more prepubescent boy grabs my tits, I'm going to scream."

Carey laughed. "Why?" he asked, sinking lower into his chair. "They aren't real."

Jan punched him in the leg. "Hey! I didn't have to use *too* much padding, thank you."

"All you got are small handfuls, Jan." Carey leaned his head on the back of his chair and closed his eyes. "Not that I look or anything."

"You better not," she growled.

"But Shonda told me," Carey continued, as if she hadn't spoken. Beside him Bill started to laugh. "She said you have enough for a handful and we all know she has small hands."

Jan hit him again. "She didn't say shit to you about my tits."

"She hates you, remember?" Bill pointed out. "The last thing I heard her say to you was get off your lazy ass, you sack of—"

"Shut up," Carey muttered. "The last thing she said to me was get to work. She's a slave driver. That's why I'm hiding out here. I've done enough work for today."

"Me too," Jan said. "I'm tired of posing for pictures. I'm not the real Lara Croft, people. Jeez."

Bill asked, "Are you sure you don't want to fill out one of

these forms?"

"I'll tell you where you can stick those damn forms," Carey threatened.

Bill laughed. "Oh! I almost forgot." He paused, waiting for a response. When Carey opened one eye and looked over at him, he grinned and said, "Your boy came by."

Jan's eyes widened. "You have a boy? When did this happen? Where the hell have I been?"

"Raiding tombs," Carey said. "He's not my boy."

"He asked for you," Bill said.

Carey sat up, surprised. "Really? When? What did he say?"

Jan laughed. "Damn. He must be something to get a rise like that from you."

"He's cute." Bill winked at her. "Don't tell Tyreese I said that, though. He ain't all *that*."

"What did he want?" Carey asked. "Bill—"

"Nametags." Handing him two stickers and a marker, he said, "Only I couldn't find them at the time. I told him I'd send someone over when I did."

"Give them to me." Carey took the nametags and stretched as he stood. *My boy. I like the sound of that.* "I'll be back."

"Go get him, tiger," Jan said, pushing herself up into his vacant seat.

Bill laughed again. "Rawr. Ask him to come by tonight."

"Tonight?" Carey wasn't sure what his friend meant by that. "What for?"

Jan twisted the end of her braid between her fingers and

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sighed. She looked exhausted. "Shonda got us access to the pool after hours. Remember? She told us last night. We get the hot tub and the pool...Carey, remember?" He shook his head. "You said you'd have to find someone to bring. So ask *him*."

"I don't remember," Carey admitted, though truth be told, he didn't remember *much* of the previous evening. Just the clubs and the drinks and the music, and the way he had rubbed up against anyone he could out on the dance floor and *still* managed to go home alone.

"Just ask him," Bill said. "You'll be miserable if you're the only one there without someone else."

"I won't be—" Carey started, but Jan interrupted him.

"You'll make *us* miserable," she said. "If you don't ask him, I will. What's his name again? What booth is he at?"

"His name's Dix," Bill said, snickering. "I can see it now. You walking around going, Is there a Dix here? I'm looking for Dix. Anyone seen any—"

"Grow up." Carey slapped the back of Bill's head as Jan laughed. When she started to stand, he hurried around the table. "Don't bother, either of you. You'll blow whatever chance I have with the guy before I can even ask him myself."

Dodging through the crowds, Carey made his way over to the Kryptonite Comics booth at the far end of the hall. He didn't need Jan's help snagging a guy, especially one that already liked him. Leave it to her and he'd end up with a ball-crusher like the one she had. No, thank you, ma'am. He couldn't understand *what* she saw in Shonda. The woman was a pain in his ass. They wouldn't even hang out with her if she

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wasn't with Jan. Well, *he* wouldn't, anyway. *Still, if she can get us into the pool, that'd be pretty sweet.* Pat in wet boxers that clung to his ass and hips...*that* image made Carey's stomach flip.

But as he neared the booth, he didn't see Pat. A bunch of kids poured over *Pokémon* cards while two guys his own age flipped through a box of comics, and the freak dressed like Wolverine leaned against the table. He was arguing with a woman inside the booth who wore a Superman shirt and cape. "His power's from the sun," Wolverine was saying. He held a soda can in one hand and sipped from it carefully, the claws that jutted out of his suit right above his fingers scraping against his cheek as he drank. "He's nothing but an alien, that's it. I mean, so he's invincible on Earth. So what? Get him on Krypton and even Jimmy Olsen could kick his ass."

The woman in the cape laughed. Carey guessed she was Leena Dodson, owner of the comic shop. Pat's friend. "Okay, you know what, Marty?" She flipped her cape over her shoulder to straighten it out. "Wolverine's only mutant power is his healing factor, that's it. He doesn't even have the adamantium anymore."

"But the claws stayed," Wolverine pointed out. "They ripped the skeleton out and they *stayed*. That's some heavy shit. He's a badass, I'm telling you."

Carey drifted away from them, pretending to look over the comics wrapped in their protective bags that littered the booth. He spotted a familiar cover he knew all too well and kept moving before he could catch the price. Bill *knew* he wasn't

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into comics—he'd only bought a copy of the first issue of *Vic and Matt* because he'd heard it was about a gay man who got powers whenever his lover fucked him up the ass. How could a story like that *not* be good? Then Bill had seen it lying on Carey's kitchen counter and casually offered him a twenty for it. What was Carey going to do, say no? Twenty bucks for a comic he'd spent what, four dollars on? If that. *Only he forgot to tell me the bitch is worth a hundred and twenty, or two twenty, or whatever the hell it's going for now.* Sometimes he wondered how he managed to get stuck with such asshole friends.

Then he saw Pat, sitting in one corner of the booth with his chin in his hand as he rolled a pair of gaming dice around on the table. He looked bored—this was obviously the last place he wanted to be. *Maybe we can sneak away,* Carey thought, trailing his hand along the table as he closed the distance between them.

Pat didn't notice him, and didn't look up as he approached.

This is a hotel, right? There's got to be an empty room around here somewhere. Coming around the side of the table, Carey leaned down over Patrick and breathed in the soft, clean scent that rose from his hair. In a barely-there whisper, he sighed, "Hey."

Pat jumped, the dice falling from his hand to skitter across the table. "Oh, hey!" He stood up, knocked his chair to the floor, stepped back, and stumbled against it. "Shit."

Carey laughed as he caught Pat's arm. "It's okay." He picked up the chair as Pat gathered together the dice. He still

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didn't look at him, just glanced up and then looked away, as if he didn't want to stop and stare. "Bill said you came looking for me."

Pat's cheeks colored a dull red. *Damn*, Carey thought. *That's just too cute.*

"I didn't..." Pat sighed. "I mean, I needed—I didn't... Shit."

"You need nametags." Carey touched Pat chest, his hand spread against the dark fabric of his T-shirt. The tip of his fingers brushed over one hard nipple. Pat felt so warm, so firm, and he stared at Carey's hand to keep from looking him in the eye. "Where's the one I gave you?"

When Pat swallowed, a dry click Carey could hear, his Adam's apple bobbed. Carey wondered what it would feel like to press his lips against that bulge in his neck, to kiss it and feel it move beneath his mouth and lick around it while Pat moaned his name. "In my pocket," he whispered. "I didn't throw it away."

"Which pocket?" He let his hand drift down Pat's chest to his waist, and then around his hip, into the back pocket of his jeans, savoring the curve of ass in his palm. "This one?"

Pat's voice grew distant. "No."

Carey eased his arm around Pat's waist, dipped his hand into the other pocket, and squeezed the rounded flesh in his hand. "This one?" he asked, lowering his voice as he pulled Pat a little closer.

"No," he said, taking a step back. "Look, Carey—"

Carey grinned. "You remembered my name. So are you're

going to call me?"

Pat shrugged and looked away, but not before the blush coloring his face deepened. Carey liked this act, so humble, so unlike anyone he ever met at the clubs. With his hand still in Pat's back pocket, he slipped the other one into the front pocket closest to him, felt car keys and change and the hint of soft skin that he pressed against. "Here?"

Pat twisted away. "Carey, really, please," he said, taking a deep breath. He stepped back, bumped against the booth, and caught it before it could fall. "I have it, okay? It's in my other pocket. This one."

He pointed to the last pocket in his jeans. But when Carey reached for it, he turned aside. "Please. We're not alone."

"Do you want to be?" Carey took Pat's hand and pulled him closer again. "I can find us a room."

"No." Pat shook his head for emphasis and glanced around the booth as if looking for help.

I've come on too strong, Carey thought, following Pat's gaze. None of the customers paid them any attention—once or twice Leena looked their way but she was too caught up in her Superman versus Wolverine argument to come to her friend's rescue. When Carey tugged at his hand, Pat said it again. "No, really, I can't."

Carey let go and sighed. "Okay." He could take a hint. "Is it just me, or are you sending out mixed signals here?"

Pat frowned and dared to look at him for the first time all day.

Carey caught his breath. "You have gorgeous eyes," he

whispered.

"Thanks," Pat mumbled, dropping his gaze. "I think. Mixed signals?"

"Here's how it is," Carey told him. "I gave you my number for a reason. I want you to call me—"

"I will," Pat said, but he didn't sound too convincing.

"I want to get with you, okay?" Carey waited, but Pat didn't respond. He picked up the dice from the table and rolled them around in his hand and didn't look at Carey. "I'm not talking hanging out—I'm talking hooking up. So just tell me now if I don't stand a chance. If you're not interested, or if you're dating someone, or if you're just not into that whole scene..."

Quickly, Pat said, "I *am*. I'm not. I mean—" He sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose between two fingers. "You like *me*?"

Carey laughed. "Silly as it sounds, yes." Pat grinned at that. "You should smile more. What, you don't think anyone can like you?"

When Pat shrugged, Carey leaned closer and pointed over at Leena, still talking with Wolverine. "Don't tell me you're dating She-Ra over there."

Pat's smile widened. "I think she's supposed to be Supergirl, or something. But no, I'm not."

"Good." Carey ran his hand along Pat's arm, smoothing down tiny hairs that stood up beneath his palm. "So do you want to do something tonight? Maybe?"

"Like what? I'm sort of helping out here."

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"Afterwards," Carey told him. "A group of us are getting together at the pool once it gets dark. Want to come?"

A look of discomfort flickered in Pat's eyes. "I don't know. I thought you meant just us—"

"I do," Carey promised him. He slid his arm around Pat's waist again; this time, he didn't pull away. "It'll be like a date, okay? You'll be with me. Mine." He liked the way that word tasted on his lips.

"And your friends are cool with that?" Pat pressed. "With...you know, two guys?"

Carey laughed. "Dude, I *only* know gays. Seriously. It'll be you and me, Bill and Tyreese, Jan and Shonda. Three couples, that's it."

With a sigh of relief, Pat breathed, "So it's like that."

"Yeah," Carey assured him. "It's all good. But if you don't want to go..."

"No, I do." Pat smiled shyly. "You're sure you want me to come?"

Carey leered at him. "I'll be offended if you don't." *Now* the guy was getting his drift.

* * *

The rest of the day couldn't pass quickly enough for Patrick. He kept looking over his shoulder, expecting Carey to be there again. *Don't be a fool. He's busy at work. You'll see him tonight, won't you?* He still couldn't believe Carey had asked him out. *Him.*

He was a nervous wreck, a disaster waiting to happen—

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Leena had even suggested he keep away from the higher priced items after he knocked over a box of Marvel comics and spilled the books all over the floor. “Just sit down.” She had pushed Patrick’s hands away as he tried to help pick up the comics. “You’re destroying my booth.”

“I don’t mean to.” At least sitting in the chair Patrick could stare out at the crowds and think about Carey, remember the feel of his hands in his pockets, the closeness of his body, the way he had smiled and wiggled his eyebrows suggestively when Patrick asked if he was sure he wanted him to come.

The thought of a guy like Carey wanting to get with him made his knees weak. Just looking at him made Patrick feel gawky and awkward. He imagined Carey worked out, spent hours in the hotel gym lifting weights—when he had draped an arm around Patrick’s waist, it was all Patrick could do *not* to fall into that embrace, just give in right there in the booth and let Carey have his way with him.

An excellent idea.

He wondered what tonight would lead to. He’d been with guys before, but none of his relationships ever seemed to work out. The guys who usually went for him were as nervous as he was. More than one disastrous evening had ended with a handful of cum and so much anxiety, neither of them could get it up again after that. He could count the number of times he’d actually *had* sex on one hand, a fact of which he wasn’t overly proud. Maybe tonight would be different.

It will be, Patrick promised himself. If I don’t die the first time he kisses me, tonight will be amazing. I just know it.

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When the hall doors closed at eight, Patrick couldn't get rid of the remaining customers fast enough. As the last person lingered over the T-shirts Leena had for sale, Patrick came up behind her and whispered loudly, "They'll be here tomorrow."

The girl frowned at him. "I'm looking for a *Vic and Matt* shirt with—"

"Don't have any," Patrick told her.

The girl sighed. "Well, what about—"

"No," Patrick said. "What about you come back tomorrow? We're closed."

"Jeez," Leena muttered as the girl stormed away. "Are you in a hurry or what? She might have bought something."

Patrick shook his head. "She'd been looking at those shirts for a half hour," he said as he helped his friend drape the tent around their booth to protect the display. "She wasn't buying shit."

He waited impatiently as Leena packed up a few of the more expensive cards and comics to take home. He shifted from foot to foot, looked around the room at the thinning crowd, but didn't see Carey anywhere. "It's that guy, isn't it?" Leena tried to stand, the box of comics in her hands, but stepped back on the cape she wore and had to set the box down again. "Can you hold my cape for a minute?"

"Can't you take it off?" Patrick asked, but he picked the bed sheet up like a bridal train and held it out as Leena bent to pick up the box again. He studiously ignored answering Leena's other question.

But Leena expected an answer. "The guy who works at the

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registration desk. He was all over you earlier. Don't think I didn't see. Are you two getting together tonight or something?"

"Or something." Patrick didn't want to talk about it—he hadn't seen Carey since the afternoon. Part of him was afraid that if he talked it up too much, tonight would fall through and Carey would leave him hanging. He didn't want that to happen.

As Leena stood, lifting the box, she said carefully, "He's cute. I didn't think you liked that type."

Patrick laughed. "That type just never liked me." He let go of Leena's cape and followed his friend as she headed for the door. The bed sheet wrapped around Leena's legs as she walked. Cautiously, Patrick asked, "What was up with you and Wolverine?"

Leena grinned at him over his shoulder. "Anyone who dresses up for these things is a freak."

"Look who's talking," Patrick muttered.

At the door Leena stopped and waited for Patrick to open it for her. "He's cool, though."

Outside it was already dark, the lights around the hotel illuminating the half-empty parking lot. At her car, Leena balanced the box on her knee as she dug into her pocket for keys. Shaking them out, she handed the car key to Patrick. "Can you unlock the trunk for me? Marty is all about Marvel—"

"Marty? Is that Wolverine? So what, you two are on a first name basis now, eh?" Patrick popped the trunk and stood

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aside as Leena stuck the box inside. "Do you have plans for tonight, too?"

"Why don't I just say I'll see you in the morning," Leena told him, slamming the trunk shut, "and let's hope we *both* get lucky tonight, okay?"

Patrick laughed. He shoved his hands in his pockets and watched Leena climb into her car. Then he hurried back to the convention hall, where he flashed his vendor's pass to the girl at the counter. Most of the booths were covered with drop cloths, closed for the night. He wondered where Carey was right this minute, if he were looking for him, thinking about him, worried he might leave...

"Patrick!"

He turned at the sound of his name and grinned when he saw Carey, dodging through the last straggling vendors to reach him.

"God," Carey sighed, coming up to him. He took Patrick's arm and flashed him a sunny grin as he tried to catch his breath. "I thought you'd left."

"No, I didn't," Patrick told him. "I just helped Leena take some things to her car."

"So you *are* staying here with me?" Carey eased an arm around Patrick's shoulders, pulling him close.

Now that there weren't so many people around, Patrick didn't mind the contact and even dared to lean against Carey, just a little bit, his own arm coming up behind his waist. Before he could answer, Carey pressed his lips against Patrick's temple, a quick kiss that made him hold his breath

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and ache for more.

Carey started to guide him toward the door at the back of the hall that led to the hotel lobby. "Ready to swim? The pool is awesome at night."

"I don't really have anything to swim in." He hated the nervousness creeping into his voice. If it were just the two of them, then maybe he'd let himself be persuaded to skinny dip, but Carey had mentioned others, too. Girls. No, he wasn't stripping it all off, no matter how convincing Carey could be, not if they weren't alone.

But Carey leaned against him, his lips brushing Patrick's ear, and when he murmured, "Neither do I," Patrick felt a flash of lust curl through his groin. If Carey asked, Patrick didn't think there was *anything* he wouldn't do.

* * *

The hotel pool was edged with a tall privacy fence and large stadium lights, but the lights were off. As they approached the gate, Patrick could hear the steady lapping of water and quiet laughter inside the fence. Out here behind the hotel, the sounds from the street and the city were muffled, faraway, and the lights from the parking lot were just pinpricks, like the lit windows of the hotel and the stars above. After the rush of people through their booth today, this solitude was a welcome change of pace.

At the gate, Carey knocked softly. "Hey, it's me."

His voice carried easily into the night. The only response was more laughter from inside the fence.

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Carey raised his voice and rattled the gate. "Open up already, guys!" To Patrick, he muttered, "Sometimes I don't know why I hang out with them, you know?"

From the other side of the gate, a woman's voice called out. "Hold your horses."

Patrick grinned, his hand fisting in the back of Carey's shirt. He heard the splash of someone getting out of the pool, then the wet *slapslap* of footsteps on concrete. She stopped at the gate and leaned against it, her voice breathy and close in the darkness. "Did you get your Dix fix?"

"Jan!" Carey hit the gate with the flat of his hand as his friends laughed on the other side. "Yeah, I got him. Come on, let us in already."

The latch rattled again as it was lifted and the gate swung open beneath Carey's palm. A pretty girl stood on the other side, her hair in one long braid that hung damp against her back. She wore a black lacy bra and matching panties, and although it was hard to see her clearly in the dim glow thrown from the floodlights surrounding the pool, Patrick thought he should know her.

"Jan," Carey said, introducing them as he led Patrick into the pool area. "Our very own Tomb Raider."

"I thought you looked familiar," Patrick said.

Jan giggled. "Oh, *damn*." She touched Patrick's arm, her hand cold and wet. "Bill was right—he *is* a cutie. Where'd you find *him*?"

Patrick ducked his head, embarrassed, as Carey slapped her hand away. "Hands off, girlfriend. This one's mine."

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She frowned at him as she locked the gate. "Fine. Be that way..."

Letting go of Patrick's waist, Carey moved quickly and scooped her up into his arms, like a newlywed carried his bride.

"Carey!" she shrieked, kicking her legs as he picked her up off the ground. "Put me down!"

Laughter from the far end of the pool drifted over to them. Patrick saw a small hot tub set in the concrete by the deep end, the water splashing from the spa into the main pool. In the hot tub were two men and another girl, who was already climbing out of the spa with a furious expression on her face. She had thick braids wrapped into a tight knot on the top of her head.

Patrick recognized her from the show—she was the one who had come by their booth a little after lunch and finally told Wolverine to get his mutant ass back in circulation or she'd dock his pay. Now she wore white hi-cut panties and a white tank top that ended right above her belly button, the damp cloth transparent against her dark skin. Before she even reached them, she was already yelling. "Carey Thornton! Get your hands off my girl *right this instant!* I don't go feeling up your boys, do I? Jan! Don't encourage him—Carey!"

She clawed at his shirt as Carey laughed at her. "Put her *down!*" Jan giggled wildly, clinging to Carey as if afraid to fall. "Carey, I swear—"

"As you wish." With a wink at Patrick to include him in the fun, Carey twisted suddenly, flinging Jan out into the pool. She landed in the water with a splash that drenched the

bottoms of Patrick's jeans.

The girlfriend growled menacingly and punched Carey in the back with one small fist. Ignoring her, he unbuttoned his jeans and started to push them down his legs. "Pat, meet Shonda. Jan's better half."

Beside him, Shonda balled her hands into tiny fists. "That wasn't funny," she told him as Carey laughed at her. In the pool Jan came up for air, giggling and shaking her bangs from her face.

"I thought it was." He kicked off his shoes and bent to pull off his pants. "Pat attack, take it all off, boyfriend. Let's see what you got."

Patrick stared at Carey's ass, sheathed in boxers and so inviting, sticking in the air like that. He tried to think of something witty, something like Carey's own *nice ass* that had started this whole thing, but he wasn't quick at comebacks. *Pat attack*—they'd just met and what, he already had a nickname? He liked that.

To hide the goofy grin that threatened to split his face, he ducked and stepped out of his shoes. He wished he had an ounce of Carey's seemingly endless confidence. Was he expected to just *strip* in front of these people? He'd just met the two girls, and had no clue who the guys might be. *But the girls are in their underwear*, he reminded himself. *My boxer briefs are thicker than those panties*.

Without warning, Shonda launched herself at Carey. She pushed against him hard and, as he was still undressing, he couldn't fight back. With his jeans halfway down his legs, he

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fell head first into the pool, disappearing into the water with a small splash. The satisfied smirk on Shonda's face made Patrick snicker, but when she glared at him, he fell silent.

Suddenly a hand snaked out of the water and grabbed Shonda's ankle.

"Carey!" she yelled, kicking him loose. Carey pulled himself out of the pool, a predatory look in his eyes. Shonda backed away. "Don't you dare! I can't get these braids wet."

"So you can dish it out," Carey asked, standing, "but you can't take it yourself, is that it?"

His jeans were gone, left floating behind him in the pool, and Patrick tried not to stare at the way the wet boxer shorts clung to his cock and balls and outlined the curve of his ass. Now he *really* shouldn't undress...he toyed with the buttons on his jeans, undecided. He was already getting a hard-on; these people didn't need to see *that*.

Carey tugged off his shirt and tossed it aside. "Come on, Shonda," he cajoled, approaching her. She backed up farther, keeping the distance between them. "You deserve it now. That was low."

Jan swam to the edge of the pool and smiled up at Patrick. "They're always like this. You get used to it." When Patrick laughed, her grin widened, showing off dimples in both cheeks. "Don't be shy. You *are* wearing something under those jeans, right?"

"Yeah." Patrick unzipped the jeans—at least he got that far—but still couldn't find the courage to push them down.

"Jan!" Shonda called out, fear lacing her voice. "Call him

off me. Carey, your boy wants you. What's his name again? Jan!"

"Leave her alone," Jan said with another giggle.

Carey didn't pay her any attention. The look on his face was one of a predator stalking his prey. Though Patrick had just met the girls, he didn't think Carey should taunt Shonda the way he was. He'd seen her take on Wolverine earlier. Despite her small stature, Patrick suspected she could probably kick Carey's butt.

Beside him, Jan raised herself out of the pool. "I'll just help Patrick out of his jeans here..."

Suddenly Carey was there, pushing Jan back and slapping Patrick's hands away from his zipper. "Jeez, woman," he muttered as he tugged Patrick's shirt up over his head. "He's *mine*."

Patrick held his arms up, letting himself be undressed, but Carey stopped when he got the shirt up over his face and trailed his hands down Patrick's bare chest. "Hmm," he moaned, his fingers picking at his nipples. Patrick felt hot lips along his collarbone as warm hands smoothed around his back, pulling him close. No way was he taking off these pants now, not when he could feel Carey's erection press into his open fly. Against his neck, Carey murmured, "I could take you right here."

Please, Patrick wanted to say. But a splash in the pool reminded him they weren't alone. "Carey," he said, shrugging out of his shirt. He got his hands up between them and pushed against Carey slightly. "Not *here*—"

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“Why not?” Carey slid his hands into the back of Patrick’s pants, cupping his butt through his briefs, then pushed the jeans down. He kissed Patrick’s neck, his jaw, his chin. By the time his lips finally found Patrick’s, his breath came in quick little spurts and he had Patrick’s jeans down below his hips. “Do you want me?”

Patrick closed his eyes and savored the warm tongue in his mouth, the spicy taste of Carey’s lips, the sensation of being kissed again after all this time. His hands trailed up Carey’s chest to cradle his face, keeping him near. When they broke apart and Carey kissed behind his ear, Patrick wrapped his arms around Carey’s neck, hugging him close. “Do I want you?” he sighed. “God, yes.”

Carey slipped a hand between Patrick’s legs, right beneath his ass, easing his jeans down farther as he rubbed along hidden skin. “Thought so.”

He kissed Patrick again, long, lingering. His kisses were so heady, Patrick could forget he stood in his underwear among a group of strangers who watched them. Carey nibbled Patrick’s lower lip, licked along the beads of sweat dotting his upper lip, then delved between his teeth to explore more of him. Every inch of Patrick’s body seemed pressed to Carey’s, the muscles in his arms and chest just as firm as the hard cock flush against Patrick’s own.

Resting his forehead against Patrick’s, Carey stared into his eyes. For the first time since they met, Patrick found he couldn’t look away. Tiny droplets of water beaded in Carey’s eyelashes. In an intimate voice Patrick barely heard over the

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sounds of the pool, Carey murmured, "What's wrong with right here?"

"You two better not get it on here," Shonda said behind them. Patrick looked over Carey's shoulder and saw her squatting by the pool's edge to help Jan up. When Jan slipped back into the pool, Shonda turned her face away. "Don't splash me, honey. My braids—"

"My braids, my braids," Carey mimicked in a high falsetto. Patrick laughed against his neck, not quite ready to let him go yet, but Carey squatted down, pushing his jeans to the floor, and commanded, "Step up."

Patrick leaned on Carey's shoulders as he raised first one foot, then the other, and Carey tugged off his jeans, too. As he stood, he pretended to bite at the bulge in the front of Patrick's briefs. "Damn, boy," he said, hugging him again. This time when he pressed his erection against Patrick's, nothing but the thin material of their underwear separated them. The velvety crush was delicious. "You weren't lying when you said you wanted me, were you?"

Patrick hid his face in Carey's shoulder. "Your friends are watching..."

"I know." Carey kissed Patrick hungrily. "Is it too late to leave? Or did you *really* want to swim?"

From the hot tub, someone called out, "Are you going to let us meet him some time tonight, Carey? Or do we just get to watch the porn show from here?"

"Shut up, Tyreese," Carey growled, but he took Patrick's hand and led him around the pool.

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Jan was sitting on the edge of the pool now, dripping water from her closed fist onto Shonda's thighs. As they passed behind the girls, Shonda eyed them warily. Carey lunged at her as if to push her in and she shrieked.

"Carey, stop," Jan told him, wrapping her arms around Shonda's shoulders and waist protectively. "She said she didn't want to get wet."

"Then why'd she come to the pool?" Carey wanted to know.

Patrick held his hand and wrist, trying to hold him back, but Carey lost interest and continued toward the hot tub, pulling Patrick along with him. In a loud whisper meant to carry back to the girls, Carey said, "I told you she was a wicked witch. Get her wet and she melts."

"That's mean," said one of the guys.

Patrick recognized Bill from the reception desk. His dark hair was slicked back, his glasses set carefully to one side of the pool, and he blinked owlishly at Patrick as he leaned back against the other guy. Lean and ropy, his skin as dark as the night around them, the other guy gave Patrick a wolfish leer. He wore sunglasses despite the hour—starlight reflected off the lenses, making him look sinister. In the glow, Patrick could see a silver stud in his lower lip. His arms were crossed over Bill's thin chest, hands cupping his own elbows as he held Bill close.

"Pat Dix, isn't it?" Bill asked. "How you doing?"

"Okay." Patrick felt naked despite his underwear, as if he were the center of attention, and he wondered if he could just

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sink down into the spa and hide in Carey's arms the same way Bill was sheltered in his boyfriend's embrace.

Carey stepped into the spa, pulling Patrick in with him. The water was warmer than he imagined it would be, ticklish where it bubbled around his legs. "You've met Bill," he said, sitting down across from his friends. "This is Tyreese, his not-so-better half."

Patrick felt someone kick out beneath the water.

Beside him, Carey glared at Tyreese. "Hey! Don't make me come over there and beat your ass, man."

"Bill will protect me," Tyreese said. Patrick could feel his hot stare through those dark shades he wore, that gaze on his body. A look like that sliced through Patrick's briefs, making him feel flayed and naked. "You're a meaty boy. Nice ass."

"Carey pointed that out earlier," Patrick said, sinking into the water. *Can I just disappear now? Please?*

"You better not be looking at his ass." Carey stretched his arms out, leaning back against the hot tub, and draped an arm around Patrick's shoulders. "You have your own scrawny boy to freak. Keep your shifty eyes off mine."

Bill flipped his hand up out of the water, splashing Carey. "He ain't looking at much. What's he need him for? He's got me."

Carey laughed, hugged Patrick tighter. "Lucky him," he muttered. Beneath the water someone kicked at him again. "Hey! I'm warning you—"

Bill rolled his eyes. "Pat, kiss him again, won't you? Shut him up, please."

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God, Patrick thought. *I'm not that bold.* He slid lower into the water, glad it was dark so they wouldn't see the blush warming his face. And Jan said they were *always* like this? He thought he might die of embarrassment before the night was through.

* * *

As the evening progressed, Patrick had stopped shivering beside Carey and finally begun to relax a bit. Carey kept his arm around his shoulders; every now and then he touched Patrick's chin, turning his face toward him, and slowly kissed him on the lips. *I want you*, those kisses said.

Just in case Patrick didn't get the message, Carey whispered it in his ear throughout the night. He'd murmur it when Bill was asking him a question, and Patrick would have to ask him to repeat what he'd said because his concentration suddenly evaporated at Carey's breathy words.

At one point Carey slipped beneath the water. Patrick felt a strong hand on his thigh, then a mouth on his crotch, a warm tongue licking through the flap in his underwear to taste his hard dick. Patrick caught Carey's ears in his hands and pulled him up. "Don't," Patrick whispered, his gaze flickering past Carey at his friends.

"No, no, please," Tyreese said, a faint grin on his thin lips. "Don't stop on our account."

"Shut up, Tyreese." Carey climbed into Patrick's lap, kissing him possessively.

Patrick felt Carey's thick erection poke at his stomach and

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wished he were brave enough to ask if they could leave now. *I can take care of that for you*, he wanted to say, but who was he kidding? He didn't even have the balls to touch Carey—his hands hadn't gone below the boy's neck yet, despite the fact that Carey's roamed his body freely. As they kissed, Carey rubbed against him and moaned into Patrick's mouth. Patrick clung to him, dug his fingers into his muscular arms, dared to press his hips up against Carey's crotch, but when Carey moaned again, louder, Patrick pulled away. "Carey," he sighed.

Over Carey's shoulder, he saw Bill and Tyreese watching openly. One of Tyreese's hands had drifted beneath the water and Bill's lips were parted, his eyes glassy and dull.

"Carey, no," Patrick said, pushing him back.

Carey looked down at him, frowning. "Why not?" he asked, his voice soft.

Patrick covered his eyes with one trembling hand. "Your friends," he whispered, as if that were all the explanation he needed. He wasn't going to get it on in front of an audience. He *couldn't*.

With a glance over his shoulder, Carey laughed. "You guys close your eyes. My boy doesn't want you watching us."

Patrick slid farther into the water, mortified. "It's not *that*."

Bill winked at him. "Don't worry—we'll be leaving soon." His eyes slipped closed and he bit his lower lip as Tyreese's hand massaged him beneath the water. "Any minute now, actually. I hope."

"You're not leaving yet, are you?" Jan asked as she

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approached the hot tub. She'd stayed in the shallow end of the pool with her girlfriend, where there was no fear of the guys accidentally splashing Shonda's braids. Now she sat on the edge of the hot tub and eased into the water beside Patrick as she flashed him a winning smile. "How are you holding up, Pat? These boys treating you okay?"

Before Patrick could answer, Carey grabbed his crotch and squeezed gently, causing him to gasp involuntarily. "I'd say he's holding up very well." He kissed Patrick's chin, trying to get back to where they had been a few minutes before.

But Jan shoved Carey off and giggled as he fell back into the water. "Can't you keep your pants on while we're here at least? Jeez, Carey. You're going to scare the poor boy away."

Carey dove beneath the water, resurfacing right in front of her and shaking his head. She squealed as a thin spray of tiny droplets doused her. "I didn't ask you, so shut up."

Patrick suspected that was his usual response to anything he didn't have an immediate answer for. As Shonda came up behind Jan, Carey swam back to Patrick. "He's braver than you think," Carey boasted, his gaze flickering up to include Jan's girl. "He met Shonda and stayed, didn't he? If she didn't scare him off, I don't think I can."

Shonda glared at him as she sat down behind Jan, dipping her legs into the water on either side of her girlfriend. Unbraiding Jan's hair, she began to run a wide-tooth comb through the damp tresses, careful not to pull. "If it weren't for these braids, Carey Thornton," she threatened.

His laughter cut her off, so she turned her gaze to Patrick.

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"Don't look at me," Patrick muttered. "I haven't said a word."

Tyreese snickered. "You'll fit right in with us, if Carey decides to keep you around."

Patrick felt a sudden uneasiness suffocate him. *What's that supposed to mean?*

Carey stood up in the spa, anger clouding his face. The waistband of his boxers hung dangerously low on his hips, the bubbling water hiding the erection Patrick knew strained the shorts. "Tyreese! You ass! I'm going to hurt you for that."

Tyreese laughed. Pushing Bill aside, he stood up as well, his own boxers stuck to his lanky frame. Though Carey was taller, Tyreese looked deadly, like a snake coiled and ready to strike. Gesturing for Carey to come at him, he taunted, "Let's see you try it."

Carey threw himself at Tyreese, knocking him down into the water with a splash. They tumbled over the side of the hot tub and into the deep end of the swimming pool. Moving out of the way, Bill came over to Patrick and grinned. His eyes shone as he watched the fight. "Damn Neanderthals."

"Will they hurt each other?" Patrick asked, worried. Carey had Tyreese beneath the water, grimacing as he held his friend down.

Bill shook his head. "Shyeah. No." Lowering his voice, he added, "I don't know about Carey, but these mock fights make Tyreese horny as hell. We'll leave right after this, I bet you. About time, too."

Tyreese broke through the surface of the water, gasping for

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breath. He grabbed Carey behind the neck and forced him down by climbing onto his back to keep him underwater. Patrick noticed his sunglasses were gone now, and he wore a devilish grin on his face that looked downright evil. "You're not having fun?" Patrick asked Bill.

"Oh, I'm having a great time," Bill told him.

Carey bucked in the water, throwing Tyreese off him. Jan giggled as Tyreese swam back into the hot tub, brushing against her legs. Behind her, Shonda warned, "Tyreese." Warm water rained down around them when Jan kicked him away.

Wiping the water from his face, Bill smoothed his hair back and grinned. "Nah, this is a blast. But I'm ready to get out of here, if you know what I mean." He nudged Patrick with his elbow, raised his eyebrows suggestively. "I think Carey wants us to leave, too."

"You don't have to," Patrick started, but suddenly Carey was there, pushing Patrick up against the side of the spa.

"Kiss me quick," he said, breathless.

Before Patrick could reply, Carey caught him in an eager kiss.

"Again," he sighed. Another kiss. "Again."

"Come back here and fight like a man," Tyreese snarled. He grabbed Carey's leg and pulled him back toward the pool.

"I called a time out," Carey told him. "I needed kisses."

"Bullshit." Tyreese dunked Carey into the water and held him beneath the surface. Carey began to flail his arms, splashing violently.

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Patrick could still feel the damp lips warm against his. He wanted more. "That can't be good," he said, watching Tyreese hold Carey down. "He can't breathe."

"He's fine," Bill said.

Beneath the water, Carey started to kick, sending up a thick spray that showered down on them.

Patrick frowned, doubtful. "I don't think—"

"Carey!" Shonda shrieked, surging to her feet as water splashed around her. Climbing over Jan into the hot tub, she brandished her comb like a weapon and slapped Tyreese with it, the smack of plastic against skin loud in the night. "I told you not to get my braids wet!"

She hit him again, and Patrick could see dull red welts where the comb landed on his arm, relentless, stinging. Damn, that girl packed quite a punch.

"Stop it!" she ordered. "You two grow the hell up and stop *splashing* already!"

Tyreese laughed, twisted away from Shonda and her lethal comb. Carey bobbed up from the water, sputtering and already reaching for Tyreese, but Shonda hit him on the fleshy part of his bicep with a hard smack and he covered the spot with his hand immediately. "Jesus," he muttered, trying to get out of her range before she could hit him again. He slipped and went down, splashing her as he disappeared beneath the water. When he came up again, she hit his shoulder. "What did I do?"

"You got her wet," Tyreese said, winking at Patrick. Jan and Bill laughed, and even though he didn't find it particularly

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funny, Patrick smiled slightly. "Did Carey make you wet, Shonda?"

"I hate you all." Shonda flung the comb at Tyreese—it struck him in the chest then fell to the water where it floated among the bubbles. She glared around at them, her lower lip trembling, and Patrick sank down until the water covered his mouth, his breath stirring faint ripples across the surface. She looked as if she were going to cry.

Carey swam to where he and Bill sat along the side of the spa. "She's going to tell us to get out now." He knelt on the bottom of the hot tub, his body disappearing into the water until he sank to Patrick's level. He stared into Patrick's eyes, the water bubbling around his nose, and then swam closer to kiss Patrick's lips beneath the water, just a quick peck.

Do it again, Patrick wanted to tell him, friends or no friends. *Please*.

"You pissed her off." Bill splashed at Carey, who ducked behind Patrick for cover.

"I didn't." Carey slipped his arms around Patrick's waist and hugged him close under the water, the stiffness at his crotch pressing sweetly into Patrick's buttocks. Patrick could feel Carey's lips on his back, right above his shoulder blades, and he didn't think he'd be much of a shield if Shonda decided to turn her anger this way but he laced his fingers with Carey's and swore he'd at least *try* to protect him. He liked the way he held him too much to let her chase him away.

But Jan came to their rescue. Slipping into the spa, she caught Shonda in a tight embrace and pulled her back to the

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edge. "Come on, honey," she cooed, her voice soft and low. "Don't let them get to you. It's okay. It's all right. Your braids will be fine."

With a wicked grin, Tyreese raised a hand to slap at the water and splash them. Patrick wondered if the guy knew the meaning of the word *no*.

Jan threw him an angry look. "Don't you dare, Tyreese Jones. Do you hear me? Don't you *dare* make her cry."

"God," Carey mumbled against Patrick's back. "Bunch of children."

Patrick didn't think it would be smart to point out he was one of those children, not if he wanted to see Carey again. Even as he watched Jan stare Tyreese down, he was surprised to find he *liked* this...this playfulness, this camaraderie. He'd never had friends like these—they seemed so comfortable with each other, so carefree, which made them crazy and fun.

Not only did he love the feel of Carey's hands on his body, he also loved being with such a fun-loving, open group of friends. He didn't know if he could fit in with them or not, but God, he wanted a chance to see if he did. More than anything else, he wanted to fit in here, with these people. With Carey.

For a moment, Patrick thought Tyreese would strike the water anyway, just to splash the hell out of the girls, but then he climbed out of the spa and shook the water from his boxers, which were plastered, translucent, against his skin. When he turned, Patrick could see what Bill meant by horny as hell—the guy had a raging erection that stood up inside his shorts, the wet fabric obscenely pressing against the red flesh.

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"Jesus," Patrick sighed, looking away. As if he wasn't already hard enough for Carey. Seeing someone else's stiff dick made his stomach flutter nervously. "I shouldn't be seeing this."

Carey's hands, strong and cold and wet, came up from the water in front of him to cover his eyes. Tilting Patrick's head back onto his shoulder, Carey began kissing his neck hungrily.

"I was just kidding," Patrick murmured, but he liked the feel of Carey's lips on his skin, his hands over his eyes.

Bill tugged Carey's hands away. "Let the boy see a real cock. You can look but you can't touch, you hear? That one's mine."

"He doesn't *need* that one," Carey grumbled, holding Patrick tightly. He wrapped his arms around Patrick's chest and kissed the back of his neck. "He's got me. I'm more than enough."

"I'm sure you are," Patrick said quietly.

Beside them, Bill whooped. "You have to talk louder, Patman. When you have a pithy comeback, we *all* want to hear it." Raising his voice, he called out, "Jan, did you just hear—"

"Shut up," Carey said, splashing Bill to keep him quiet.

At the edge of the spa, Tyreese turned his back to them and stepped out of his boxers, exposing his smooth ass. Patrick looked away, embarrassed even if no one else was. "Get out of that water, Bill," Tyreese said, turning to flash his genitalia at the other guys before he wrapped a towel around his waist to cover his nakedness. "We're leaving."

"You don't really have to." Jan sat behind Shonda on one

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of the lounge chairs, dabbing at her girlfriend's head with a small towel, careful not to disrupt the braids coiled around her head. Shonda stared at them balefully, her eyes clearly contradicting Jan's words. *Go*, those eyes said. *Get the hell out of here, all of you*. Patrick thought that might not be such a bad idea.

But Bill stood and stretched, making no motion to hide his own erection that strained the front of his water-logged briefs. "It's okay," he said, flashing Patrick a quick smile. "It's getting late. We've got a private party to attend. I'm sure you guys understand."

Tyreese held out another beach towel. Bill ducked behind it and slipped off his underwear, then let his boyfriend wrap the towel around his waist. One large hand slapped his ass. As Bill bent to gather up their discarded clothes, Tyreese pulled him back to hump against him. "Nice meeting you, kid. Don't get Carey'd away, if you know what I mean. He bites."

With a wounded cry, Carey protested, "I do not!" Then he nipped at Patrick's shoulder playfully. "Just little bites. Nothing painful, I promise."

Patrick laughed. "Little bites might be fun."

Carey leered at him, his hands slipping down Patrick's stomach and lower until he cupped his erection. "Damn, you're hung. Let me see."

Patrick sank down into the water, embarrassed. "Not here. Your friends—"

"Tyreese and Bill are leaving." Carey turned Patrick around in his arms and called out, "Bye guys. See? Gone. It's

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just you and me.”

“And the girls,” Patrick reminded him.

At the gate Bill raised a hand in farewell and Patrick nodded to him. Then Tyreese draped an arm around his boyfriend’s shoulders, closed the gate behind them, and they disappeared into the night.

Carey looked over at the lounge chairs stretched out alongside the pool. “And the girls,” he echoed. “Be right back.”

Before Patrick could object, Carey pushed himself up out of the spa, his boxers hanging so low that Patrick could see the crack in his ass above the wet waistband. Standing, Carey hiked the shorts up and wiped his hands across his butt as if to dry them on the damp fabric. The shorts stuck to his skin, clinging to his ass and thighs, and Patrick stared as he grabbed at his crotch, trying to adjust his erection in the confines of his underwear.

Taking a deep breath, Patrick slipped below the surface of the water so he wouldn’t have to hear Carey ask the girls to leave. He didn’t want the weight of Shonda’s stare to ruin the ache in his groin and the promise of the rest of the night ahead.

* * *

As Carey approached the lounge chair where the girls sat, Shonda turned her head away and grimaced. “Can’t you cover up? Not everyone wants to see that, Carey.”

Behind her, Jan giggled. Carey looked down and saw the

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first snap of his boxers had come undone, exposing wet, curly hair. The tip of his dick poked through the opening. He shoved it down into the wet shorts, snapping them back up, even though the thin material did little to hide his erection.

He wanted Pat, had he mentioned this to anyone yet?

The guy made him hard with every little thing he said or did, every gesture, every sigh. He was still pissed at Tyreese's remark about keeping him around...he was just trying to stir shit up between them, that was it. Carey had had what, two boyfriends since Bill started dating Tyreese? The one guy he was with when Bill first hooked up with Tyreese, an asshole who cheated on him one too many times, and the other guy he met at a club, got with once or twice, that was it. So he had crappy luck with guys, so what? That could change.

It *would* change. He'd *make* it change.

He tried pushing down his erection, but that didn't work. So he just cupped it in both hands and sat down beside Shonda on the lounge chair, keeping his hands balled at his crotch to cover himself. "Listen, girls," he started, but Shonda turned her nose up at him and turned away.

"I'm not talking to you," she said. "You ruined my braids—"

"It was Tyreese that time!" Carey cried. "Jesus, Shonda, he was holding me under water!"

"I don't care." Behind her, Jan gave him a sympathetic smile as she patted Shonda's braids dry. "We're leaving soon. You guys better go."

Carey sighed. "Can't we stay here a bit?"

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She shook her head, adamant.

"Please?"

"They gave the key to me," she told him. "I'm responsible, so when I leave, this gate gets locked, and you and your boy have to be gone by then."

Carey scooted closer to touch her arm, but she pulled away from him. "Shonda, *please*. I haven't had two minutes alone with him all night—"

"That's your problem," she said. "You didn't *have* to bring him."

"Shonda, that's mean," Jan admonished. She covered her girlfriend's head with the towel and whispered, "Get back in the pool. Let me talk to her."

Carey started, "But—"

"Trust me." When she took the towel off Shonda's head, Jan studied the braids and told her, "You know, I don't think you need to redo too many of these."

Shonda's hands touched her braids experimentally, as if afraid of knocking them loose. "Really?"

Jan widened her eyes at Carey and jerked her head toward the hot tub. *Go on, get out of here*, that look said.

Carey rose to his feet, already chilly where the water was beginning to dry on his skin. "Think about it, Shonda," he said, heading back for the spa. "I'm not talking all night."

"I said no," she told him.

He glanced over his shoulder and saw Jan leaned down over her, whispering something that made her giggle. When she looked at Jan, the anger smoothed out of her face and she

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looked young and pretty, almost perky. Then she caught him looking and glared at him, the hardness returning to her eyes. *She said no*, he thought, smiling at Pat as he slipped into the spa. *Didn't you hear that, Jan? Or doesn't it mean no when she says it to you?*

"What's up?" Pat asked, keeping his voice down so it wouldn't carry over to the girls. All Carey could see was his head, sticking up out of the water, and his arms floating out at his sides.

Carey slipped into the water and hugged Pat's waist. Swimming closer, he pressed his mouth against Pat's chest and his lips found one hard nipple. He bit at it, coming up to the surface when Pat pulled away. Wiping water from his eyes, he said, "Jan's talking to her now."

Pat frowned. "You know," he said slowly, unsure, "we can maybe go somewhere else? If you want..."

"What I want," Carey whispered, wrapping Pat into his arms and kissing his throat, "is you. Right here. Right now. And I want them to leave so I can have you." His lips trailed hot kisses around Pat's shoulder, along his neck. "Unless you don't mind if they watch?"

Pat flushed at that and pushed at Carey's shoulders, trying to get away from him, but Carey held on tighter.

"I'm joking," he whispered. "They'll leave, Pat, I promise."

"Carey," Pat warned, pushing against him. "Jan's coming over here."

Carey turned and smiled at his friend as she crossed the

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concrete patio to the spa. Shonda sat on the lounge chair, a pretty pout on her lips, not looking their way. As Jan squatted down beside the hot tub, Carey swam over to the edge. "Well?"

"We're going to get some ice cream," Jan told him. "It's about fifteen minutes to Ben and Jerry's. I'll take her to the park and it'll take maybe another twenty or so to walk around and eat the cones. Then fifteen minutes back here. That's almost an hour. Is that enough time?"

Carey grinned at her. "I love you," he said, pushing himself up out of the pool to plant a wet kiss on her forehead. "I can do miracles in an hour. That's plenty of time."

She laughed. "Good. Don't leave before we get back."

"We won't." He fell back into the pool, splashing her as he kicked away from the edge.

"One hour," she reminded him, standing. She wrapped a towel beneath her arms, tucking one end into the front of her bra to secure it in place.

"I know," he told her. "Starting the minute you lock the gate."

"Starting now," she said, frowning down at him.

He stood up in the spa. "Jan! That's not fair—"

She laughed again. "I'm teasing, silly. Starting when we leave. Which is now." Turning away, she called over her shoulder, "One hour."

"Tell me again," he said, but he laughed and swam up to Pat, pushing him back against the far edge of the spa. "We have an hour."

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Already his hands fumbled with his boxers, slipping them down his legs. He kicked them free and they floated to the surface of the water behind him, discarded. Then he started tugging on Pat's briefs, eager and so damn horny, his whole *body* ached.

"They haven't really left yet," Pat told him.

But Carey heard the gate latch rattle and knew in another five minutes, they'd be alone. Finally, *alone*.

He waited until he heard the latch lock. Then he eased his hands into the tight waistband of Pat's boxer briefs. For the first time he felt cool, soft flesh balled in his palm, his fingers tangled with kinked hair, the hard thick shaft he'd been jonesing for all night long. "They're gone now," he murmured against Pat's ear.

"Hmm," Pat moaned as Carey squeezed his cock in both hands.

"Do you want to?" Carey asked.

Pat slipped his arms around Carey's neck, rested his forehead against Carey's chest, and thrust into his hands. It was all the answer he needed.

"I'm not going to push you," Carey promised, "but damn, boy, I want you so bad. Can't you feel it? Tell me it's not just me..."

"It's not." Pat gripped the back of Carey's neck, pulling him down for another kiss. "God, please."

That was all the prompting Carey needed. He ducked beneath the water, pulling Pat's boxers down as he went. Chlorine stung his eyes when he opened them and saw Pat's

smooth legs, the darkness coiled at his crotch. Slipping his hands behind Pat's knees, he spread his legs apart and pushed him up. He was almost weightless in the water. Then Carey broke the surface, grinning as he helped Pat up onto the edge of the pool. "Tell me you want me," Carey said, running his tongue down Pat's hard length.

"I do." Pat leaned back, arching his butt off the concrete as Carey's lips closed around the tip of his erection. "Oh *God*, Carey, I do. I want you *now*."

Carey draped Pat's legs over his shoulders and cupped his ass with both hands as he took him into his mouth. He tasted clean like the water, his damp flesh warm beneath Carey's hot tongue and lips. With strong hands, Carey kneaded Pat's buttocks, parting them, and rubbed his fingers up the crack of Pat's ass. His thumbs swirled around the clenched bud of Pat's hole as his tongue licked along his length. Ducking under Pat's cock, Carey nipped at the sensitive skin between his dick and balls, then scooped one of the heavy sacs into his mouth as one thumb eased into Pat's ass. He moved it around, widening the hole, and worked his other thumb in, as well. Moving onto Pat's other fuzzed nut, Carey nosed his hard dick aside and suckled greedily at his crotch.

As his wet thumbs slid in, Pat gasped and gripped the edge of the hot tub so hard, his knuckles turned white. "Oh, Carey," he sighed, breathless, his deep voice suddenly several octaves higher. "Oh, God, oh, yes, oh please yes, yes."

Kissing the base of Pat's dick, Carey massaged the stiff shaft with his lips as he made his way back up to the tip. The

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moment he took it into his mouth again, he tasted salty cum in the back of his throat. *So* close, both of them. And he wanted so much more. Placing a hand on either side of Pat's spread legs, Carey pulled himself up out of the pool. Water dripped from him onto Pat. "No," his friend breathed. "Don't stop. Please don't."

"I'm not done."

Carey crawled over him, his body pressing Patrick's against the concrete that was still warm from the day's sun. A languid stretch allowed him to snag the hem of his jeans, which lay drying by the side of the pool. He dragged them close, his hand fumbling through the cold, wet material, looking for...

His wallet.

It slipped out of the back pocket of his pants and skittered out of reach. "Can you get that?" Carey asked.

Pat leaned back, raising an arm to reach for the wallet. Carey kissed Pat's exposed armpit, then trailed nibbling kisses along his collar bone, up his throat, around his Adam's apple. When he touched a ticklish spot, Pat squirmed beneath him. "You want this?" He held Carey's soggy wallet out in one hand.

Planting a quick kiss on Pat's nose, Carey murmured, "Thanks." Inside the wallet was an old, crumpled condom, but at least the package was unbroken. Tearing into it, he rolled off Pat long enough to slip it on. Before his friend could even sit up, Carey was back atop him, one hand working his own erection. He was so close, it wouldn't take long.

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As he guided his dick between Pat's buttocks, his friend gasped, his eyes slipping shut. A groan, low and throaty, escaped him. "Yes," he sighed, his hands clenching Carey's buttocks. "Yes!"

"Please," he sighed, pushing into Patrick as carefully as he could. He held Patrick's thighs as far apart as he dared, kissed his neck and chin and mouth, and tried to kiss away the pain and discomfort flitting across his face. "It's okay, Patrick," he murmured, over and over again, as he began to thrust into him. He found a steady rhythm and savored the constricting muscles around his dick. It had been so long, *too* long. "You like that? It's okay. God, you're so *tight*. I won't hurt you, I promise. I won't."

When Pat began to move his hips, encouraging him, Carey stretched out above him, his hand between them to stroke Pat to release. He watched Pat's face as they moved together—his eyelashes fluttered every time he gasped, and each thrust opened his mouth a little farther, a little wider. His moans grew louder, more randy, until he was crying Carey's name out like a prayer flung at the stars. Who knew such a quiet man would make such a raucous lover?

Smiling, Carey kissed Pat's slack cheeks and closed eyes. He squeezed Pat's cock and balls, then caressed his stomach, urging him on. "Come on," he whispered. "Come for me, Pat, you know you want to. You like this?"

"Yes," Pat sighed, then louder, his voice ringing around the pool. "Yes!" He nodded as he dug his fingers into Carey's shoulders, his short nails scraping along his skin, and then he

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came in Carey's hand, crying out his name as his orgasm ripped through him.

Picking up his rhythm, Carey thrust into him, harder, deeper, eager to come, too. When he did, he drove in as far as he could before draping himself across Pat's sweaty body. Spent, he covered Pat's face with tired, soft kisses. "Wonderful," he told him. "You're unbelievable, you know that? Simply amazing."

"You sure like to talk a lot, don't you?" Pat whispered, clutching him close.

Carey laughed. "And you're goddamn *loud*. I so wasn't expecting that."

A frown flickered across Pat's face like a shadow. "Too loud?"

"No," Carey assured him. "I liked it. Turns me on something fierce to know I can make you shout like that. I bet—"

"Yadda yadda," Pat interrupted. Something in him had changed—gone was the shy, awkward guy who had been unable to meet Carey's frank gaze. In his place was a playful, more self-assured man who openly strummed his hands along Carey's body, no longer afraid to touch him. "You go on and on."

"I babble when I'm horny," Carey admitted. "You make me like that. I'm serious, around you? I'll talk non-stop, I just know it."

Pat grinned. "I bet I can figure out how to shut you up."

"How?" Carey asked, coy. He *liked* this bold, new guy.

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"Like this," Patrick said, and he kissed him quiet.

* * *

When the girls returned, they found Carey lying on one of the lounge chairs, Patrick in his arms, a huge beach towel wrapped around both their waists like a blanket. Jan came over to them while Shonda stayed at the gate, still nursing the remains of an ice cream cone. "Well? You boys ready to go?"

"I'm staying right here," Carey told her, holding Patrick close as he snuggled up against his back.

With a laugh, Jan asked, "Did he treat you nice, Patrick?"

"More or less," Patrick replied.

"Hey!" Carey cried, sitting up.

Patrick's shy smile made Jan giggle. "Oh, you're too cute. You have to keep this one, Carey. I like him."

"If he stops being mean to me," Carey said with a pout.

Snuggling closer to Carey, Patrick sighed. "I'm not being mean." His earlier nervousness was gone, left behind in the wake of their coupling. Now he trailed a hand down Carey's thigh beneath the towel and squeezed his stiffening cock eagerly. He wanted this guy in his arms, again, now. He couldn't wait to get him alone a second time. Leaning against Carey, he kissed the tip of his nose. "Yeah, he was good to me."

Carey's pout dissolved after another kiss. "Don't worry, Jan," he murmured, easing an arm around Patrick's waist. "I plan on keeping him. He's mine."

From her position by the gate, Shonda called out,

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“Sometime tonight, you guys.”

Patrick rolled off one side of the lounge chair, and Carey rolled off the other. As they stood, the towel fell away, revealing their nakedness. Jan turned, shielding her eyes with one hand. “Ugh,” Shonda muttered in disgust. “You guys are *gross*.”

Patrick laughed. As Carey bent to retrieve their clothes, Patrick wrapped the towel around behind himself, then used the open ends to catch Carey around the waist. He pulled Carey back against him—now it was *his* ass up against *Patrick's* groin, and the pressure was sweet and intoxicating. “My place or yours?” he asked in a low whisper.

Carey wiggled back against his crotch and laughed. “Damn, boy. I thought you’d never ask.”

J. M. SNYDER

An author of gay erotic/romantic fiction, J. M. Snyder began self-publishing gay erotic fiction in 2002. Since then, Snyder has released several books in trade paperback format and has begun exploring the world of e-publishing, working with Amber Quill Press and other e-publishers. Snyder's highly erotic short gay fiction has been published online at *Ruthie's Club*, *Tit-Elation*, *Sticky Pen*, and Amazon Shorts, as well as in anthologies by Aspen Mountain Press and Cleis Press. A full bibliography, as well as free fiction, book excerpts, purchasing information, and exclusive contests, can be found at:

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* * *

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Christian "Magic" Magdziuk is a minor league hockey player with dreams of someday heading to the NHL, and he'll do whatever it takes to make that dream come true. So he plays with the Richmond Rebels for only one short season before he asks to be traded to the Bedford Blizzard, a farm team for the

American Hockey League, where he might get a little more notice from scouts.

His attitude on the ice left him few friends among the Rebels...that is, until teammate Ronnie Niedermeyer took a liking to him. One thing led to another and the two men became lovers during the time Christian played with the team. But when he transferred to the Blizzard, he left the Rebels—and Ronnie—behind.

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