



Drive Me Home

Chrissy Munder

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To Gary—thank you for the love and laughter you brought to my life despite the fact you didn't know what you were getting into. It's amazing to think the best adventures are still ahead of us. After all these years, you are still my keeper.

To Aimee, Karen, Renee, and Susan—bless each one of you for your stalwart support and friendship.

To Floyd, Walter, and Vache—priceless.

The meeting of two personalities is like the contact of two chemical substances: if there is any reaction, both are transformed.

Carl Jung (1875-1961)



Prologue

THE music pounded its way into Eric's ears and chest. Each thud of the deep bass reverberated through his ribs and vibrated out his fingers. The sound overpowered even the background rumble of too many shouted conversations. He sat at the far end of the bar, perched precariously on the small stool, and watched the crowd with alcohol-dazed eyes.

He'd had too much to drink. Again. Once upon a time his brother Keith would have been mad and given him yet another lecture on his irresponsible behavior. Eric grimaced and stared at the writhing bodies that filled the tiny dance floor. Once upon a time only happened in fairy tales.

The flashes from the overhead lights were disorientating, the brilliant bursts of light painful and blinding as they cut through the dimness and seared across his vision. Eric swayed rhythmically as he tried to follow the flickering colors that kept time with the driving beat.

This was a mistake. He should have gone home once he left the cemetery. No, Eric corrected himself. Not home, the tiny apartment could never be home. He didn't have one anymore. He had to face that every time he stood before the graves of his father and brother. Everything and everyone that had given his life meaning were gone, and there was nothing waiting for him but the empty and accusing silence.

Eric lifted his drink and brought it to his lips. Wetness splashed along his neck; he fumbled before he gave up and watched the glass hit

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the tiled floor beneath his feet and shatter. Whatever liquid hadn't spilled down his shirtfront sprayed out in slowed motion onto the legs of those nearest to him.

No one noticed.

He slipped off the stool and braced himself with a hand on the wet surface of the bar. What would happen if he gave voice to the turmoil and pain inside him? Would the crowd turn and stare if he let loose and started screaming? Eric wanted to laugh, but he was afraid he'd start to cry instead. Christ, there was nothing worse than a maudlin drunk.

A hand gripped his arm. The tight grasp steadied him. Eric stared down, and his focus sharpened, allowing him to see the DayGlo bar stamp on the back. The fingers were broad; thick, untrimmed cuticles hid the white half-moon. Eric peered through the fog of alcohol and tried to see the face of the man who held him, but all Eric could distinguish between the flashes of light and dark were the thin lips that moved with a question it didn't matter if he heard.

The hand pulled. It tugged Eric toward the back exit.

Eric looked at the mess he had left on the bar. Shreds of napkin and empty glasses surrounded the small pile of change that floated in the puddle of booze he had spilled. With a tiny measure of clarity Eric knew once again he had a choice. He could go along with the insistent hand and its owner in search of a brief moment of oblivion, or he could go home.

Alone.

THE alley behind the bar was a dark space, a void both black and fetid. Trash pickup was still days away, and the narrow area was filled with the ripening odors of rotting food and stale beer trapped within the brick walls, unable to escape into the atmosphere. Overtop of it all lay the sharp, acrid smell of urine.

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It couldn't be called romantic by any stretch of imagination, but then, romance wasn't what Eric was looking for. He turned his face to the side when the thin lips sought his.

"Come on, don't be shy." The voice panted into Eric's ear, ragged with a mixture of lust and adrenaline that was palpable. The man stank of it almost as much as he stank of beer and sour sweat. Eric didn't struggle or protest as his pants were unzipped, and the now familiar-hand ran over the bared skin of his ass in a token caress.

The handle of the trash can lid pressed uncomfortably into his stomach as Eric's pliant body was spun around, bent, and held still. Any more force and he would have vomited. Eric didn't want that. He needed to keep the alcohol he had consumed in his system. It was cheap anesthetic for life's pain.

His arms dropped down by the metal sides of the can, and his knuckles brushed against the gritty pavement. Gravity strained his shoulders and forced his head further down. Eric grunted as his head spun with the sudden rush of blood.

Eric could hear the voice of the man standing behind him; the rough exclamations of anticipation and want. He needed the noise. It was the only thing he had found that would block out the voices in his head.

A perfunctory prep and then Eric arched upward at the overwhelming sensation, the dry scraping pain. He could feel the excitement of the stranger increase with the illicitness of the act. Eric just welcomed the burn and closed his eyes. That was his mistake. Without the external stimulation he was trapped in his head, held captive by his memories and falling into them with nothing to keep him safe.

The sounds around him blended, merging with the voices in his head, and despite his efforts to stay present, to stay connected to the pain of the stranger's rough embrace, Eric felt himself slipping away until he was back in the courtroom listening to noise of the crowd behind him as he watched the Family Court Arbitration Team file back in.

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It should have been quieter in the courtroom, shouldn't it? Even after all this time the question still wore on Eric. Shouldn't moments that held such momentous sway in a person's life occur in an atmosphere of quiet and somber dignity? But that wasn't the case.

To most it might have only been deemed background noise, but to Eric it was a constant din he couldn't block out no matter how he tried. It rose and fell; an ocean of words, swells of conversation that he couldn't ride out, that had no place in this moment. It went on and on, sweeping over him until he couldn't focus on anything else, until he just wanted to scream for it stop. But he didn't.

The door to the bar's kitchen opened, allowing a narrow band of light to shine into the alley. Eric could hear the music spill out from the bar before whoever opened the door finished their cigarette, threw the butt on the ground, and headed back inside. The smell of the smoke lingered, momentarily masking everything else.

It was difficult to believe the majority of court proceedings, including this case dealing with a minor, were open to the public. Harder still to believe just how many observers showed up for the free entertainment.

Bread and circuses, Eric thought with disgust. There was a sudden burst of music behind him, some song he didn't recognize. Cell phones were supposed to be turned off, but there always had to be one asshole in the crowd.

He tried not to fidget, tried to keep his hands flat on the surface of the wood table he was seated behind no matter how much they trembled. He hadn't thought it would be so much like the movies. But it was. Even the courtroom was pretty much a copy of what he would expect to see on some cheesy television movie of the week or sitcom. Except this wasn't funny, and Eric wasn't laughing.

He still couldn't believe this was happening.

His dick ground painfully into the cold metal of the lid beneath him. Eric wasn't hard; this wasn't about his getting off. He let the filth of the alley, the emptiness of the moment seep into him. Was it too much to hope it would finally replace the pain? He had tried before, but

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it was never enough. Surely he could forget now. Surely he could finally stop thinking about anything but right here and now.

Bonnie was seated in the row behind him. She and her new husband. Sara wasn't anywhere to be seen. They wouldn't let her come. They wouldn't let him see her even this last time. Unable to help himself, Eric twisted in his seat, looking behind him for his sister-in-law.

Ex-sister-in-law, he guessed was the more appropriate term.

She wouldn't look at him, wouldn't meet his pleading eyes. She just sat huddled next to her new husband and cried softly into her handful of tissues. This was tearing her apart. That's what she had told him when he had managed to corner her in the hallway outside the courtroom.

What the fuck did she think it was doing to him?

McMasters glared at him from her side. Excuse me, Eric thought bitterly. The Reverend McMasters. And there, as they say, was the rub. Eric knew that the good Reverend had instigated all of this, this entire sideshow. He had even warned Eric and told him what he would do, but Eric didn't believe him, didn't think he could really get away with it in this day and age.

Eric had been wrong.

He didn't look up, didn't try to respond to the hand as it groped between his legs and gave him a half-hearted squeeze. This wasn't about forming a connection. Finally the stranger gave up and concentrated on his own ragged thrusts, his innate desire to dominate fueled by the alcohol he had consumed and the unexpected opportunity for casual cruelty Eric laid before him.

His lawyer nudged him, trying to get his attention to turn him back to the front of the courtroom, but Eric was held fast, stunned by the look of triumphant hatred directed at him from the bench that housed the Reverend and several of his uncharitable flock. Eric still couldn't believe it was nothing more than his very existence that incurred such enmity.

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Finally Eric allowed the lawyer to turn him around. The man spoke into his ear, words low and sharp, words that he didn't hear and wouldn't understand even if he had. Eric ran his finger around the collar of his shirt and tried not to notice how heavily he was sweating. So much was riding on this decision. The ruling of these strangers could change his whole life and everything that had given it meaning since the death of his father and brother.

After the accident, Eric's lifestyle, as it was now being called, hadn't mattered to anyone. Bonnie had been devastated. Without Keith she had crumbled. Eric had done what he thought was right and stepped in to take care of the family he had left. Unspoken was the knowledge that it was the only thing keeping Eric from crumbling as well.

It was one of life's sad little ironies that it took his father's and brother's deaths to make Eric attempt to assume the mantle of responsibility they had always wanted him to wear. It would seem that sorrow and guilt were more powerful motivators than all the poking and prodding they had done when they were alive.

Moving his new lover of only few weeks out and the pregnant Bonnie in had seemed like the right thing to do. She and his unborn niece were all Eric had left of his brother. At the time, Bonnie had been grateful for the support, both emotional and financial, that Eric provided. It was left unstated that she expected nothing less.

It had taken time, but gradually they had been able to function again. Eric and his sister-in-law had never cared for one another, but that didn't matter now. They could pretend to be a family, and now his niece Sara was at the center of Eric's heart. God, but she looked so much like Keith. She had his dark eyes and his obstinate manner. Eric loved her on sight.

Did it make any difference that deep down Eric had viewed this as his only chance to make things right? A way to move past the conflict that had always tarnished his relationship with his big brother? A way to change those things that couldn't now be undone?

"God damn, you're tight." Eric could feel the stickiness run down his inner thigh as it was pushed out by the repetitive movements to join

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whatever rank fluids already coated the ground on the alley. God, he wanted to puke. He choked as the metal handle dug into his stomach once again, and the alcohol swirled in his gut. But the pain wasn't enough to block out his memories, and moisture leaked from the corner of his eyes as he wondered what it would take before he could finally forget.

When Bonnie had first started dating it had been difficult. There was something about her, some incandescent spark that drew men to her. It was what attracted Keith, and Eric could only view her sharing it with another as a betrayal of his brother. Despite his feelings, Eric babysat for Sara like always, unwilling to let some stranger spend the time with her.

That was when the arguments had started. The yelling. Bonnie was still a young woman; she wasn't the type to spend her time alone. That was her favorite refrain. She deserved to move on with her life even if Eric was content to stay buried in the past. Eric didn't agree, but then, he didn't have to. He had no legal standing in Sara's life. Bonnie held the winning hand.

At least until Bonnie had become engaged to the Reverend. He was handsome, with blond hair and a husky physique that hinted at his days of college football. A stable man, he was the direct opposite of Bonnie and her need for excitement, and Eric couldn't understand their connection.

Even though Thomas McMasters seemed to ground Eric's flighty sister-in-law, Eric could only wonder about what Bonnie was thinking. Eric didn't even know how they had met. A widower himself, the Reverend had moved slowly, giving Bonnie the time she had said she needed to adjust and get used to his ways.

It was only later that Eric understood that not only was McMasters a wealthy man, but that Bonnie was playing a part, seeing herself through McMasters' eyes as the grieving widow and visualizing herself as his calm and capable helpmate, respected and loved by his welcoming congregation. Perhaps it was that promise of an outpouring of unconditional love and respect that swayed her.

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Things hadn't changed for Eric until Bonnie had acknowledged to the Reverend that her brother-in-law, the man she lived with who had practically raised her daughter, was bisexual with a stronger preference for the male of the species. Bonnie had never been able to understand that gender characteristics were less important to Eric than the emotional connection, and he could only wonder what she had told her fiancé.

Hell, Eric still didn't know how his sexuality had even come up; but apparently it did. And hadn't things gone to hell in a hand basket then?

The campaign against Eric had started just as slowly as the courtship did. "Insidious" was the word Eric used to describe it to his lawyer. There was nothing overt at first, nothing too obvious during the engagement. Even the wedding had gone smoothly enough. But afterward, once they were married and Bonnie and Sara moved from Eric's house into the McMasters' household, well, things had certainly changed then.

Suddenly Eric's phone calls weren't returned, his messages were lost, and his calls dropped. Eric's visits with Sara became few and far between. How could he argue when she was playing with friends, having fun and being a kid? Bonnie had demanded. Was he really that selfish? Eric had heard it all. Before he had realized it, he had become an outsider in his niece's life.

Perhaps Eric could have handled things differently. Maybe given time there would have been some common ground he and the Reverend could have found. Honestly, if Eric really would have believed things were this serious, he might even have gone out and found himself a girlfriend to smooth things over.

But he had been hurt and angry, lost without Keith as his voice of reason, and now it was too late for any of that. Here he was with two restraining orders against him and this hearing in Family Court to decide his right to see his own niece.

Eric felt chilled. They were taking Keith's daughter away from him. And there wasn't a damn thing he could do about it.

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“All rise.”

Eric heard the words, but they were distorted, the syllables drawn out and indecipherable. His lawyer nudged him, finally taking him by the arm and pulling him upright when he didn't respond.

Someone else was talking. Was it the arbitrator? The Family Court therapist? Did it even matter?

A drop of sweat rolled down the pale and pimpled forehead of the lawyer who stood beside him. Not a good sign. Maybe that's something else he should have done differently. Would a better lawyer have helped? Eric had been forced to sell his house to hire this one, and even then he still owed him money. Money he didn't have.

More words. Should he be paying attention?

“Based on the claims presented by the minor child's mother and adoptive father, the Court feels that it will be in the child's best interest not to be exposed to the confusion and chaos of the defendant's alternative lifestyle.”

Were they really talking about him? Eric wanted to laugh. What kind of alternative lifestyle had he been able to have in the past several years while raising an infant? People talked about the problems single mothers had trying to get a date; they had no clue what it was like trying to find a man willing to come over and wait until he could get Sara down for the night.

Suddenly the flow of words was interrupted by a low noise; Eric thought it was a groan. Was someone hurt? He wanted to look around, but he was trembling too much; legs and arms suddenly awkward and uncoordinated.

He was going to be sore tomorrow. Eric knew that. His body felt bruised. This guy had been a biter, and even now his shoulder stung. It would take time for his body to heal. But heal it would. It always did. He couldn't say as much for the rest of him.

It was only when the words burst out of his mouth that Eric realized the noise had come from him. It was the sound of his heart breaking.

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“No!” Eric yelled. “You can’t do this. Bonnie!” He turned to the seats behind him, searching for Sara’s mother. “Bonnie, please!” There was no pride left as he pleaded. “She’s all that’s left of Keith. You can’t take her away from me. You can’t.”

Bonnie was crying harder now, and he tried to go over to her, to talk to her, to make her understand, but there were hands pulling at his arms and then an arm around his neck, choking him, cutting off his air and his ability to speak.

“Don’t be foolish!” his lawyer hissed in his ear. “You’re only making things worse.”

The rest was a blur. Voices. Hands. Confusion swirled around him. His lawyer tried to get him to sit back down, brushing away the court officers and pushing him behind the table once again.

The flow of words continued to roll over him, pulling him under; drowning him beneath their weight, but Eric wasn’t listening anymore. The sound of the gavel was loud and decisive, but he couldn’t hear it.

“Hey, man. You okay?” Rough hands pulled Eric off the trash can, rolling him onto the ground. He lay there motionless, uncaring of his disheveled state, just another piece of discarded garbage in the alley. It hadn’t worked. His brain wouldn’t shut off. He couldn’t manage to forget no matter how he tried.

“Come on, snap out of it.” Rough hands slapped at his face. But they may as well have been smoke ghosting over him for all the impression they made. The distance between reality and the small, quiet space he had retreated to in his mind had become too great to cross.

Eric didn’t move. He could hear the footsteps as they hurried away; later the shrill sound of the sirens after he was found. But he couldn’t respond. He was lost inside his head, too busy trying to explain to the ghost of his dead brother how he had fucked things up once again.



Chapter 1

“THE come stains are the worst, you know.”

The voice came from behind a startled Eric. He instinctively stood up, only to wince and rub his head where he hit it against the top of the limo’s unforgiving metal doorframe.

“Yeah,” the voice continued. “I hate them worse than puke. Come stains always mean somebody had a much better time than I did.”

Eric managed to stand up without further damage and turned to face the voice. One soft brown eye winked at him and then gave him an obvious up and down the likes of which he had not experienced in years. With that look the guy probably knew everything up to and including the length of his dick when hard.

“Hey.” Eric lightly protested the thoroughness. “Leave a guy some secrets.”

“Sorry.” The unrepentant smirk under the tousled dark curls didn’t match the sentiment, and Eric was unable to keep himself from smiling back. Even though the unknotted tie was in danger of sliding off one shoulder, the black pants, vest, and white shirt immediately identified the newcomer as a fellow driver.

There were six of the stretch limousines parked in the big open bay of Discreet Limousine’s garage complex. Eric had seen a couple of the other drivers in passing when he showed up early for his new job, his intent to familiarize himself before the start of his shift. This dark-haired beauty hadn’t been one of them.

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“You the new guy?” Long eyelashes fanned down over the sideways glance as the newcomer inhaled on his cigarette. The wisps of smoke curled up as he pursed his lips slightly on the exhalation. Oh yeah, Eric thought. Definitely a real charmer.

“Yeah, that would be me. Name’s Eric, Eric Moss.” Eric politely stuck his hand out and watched as the smirk deepened but no hand was extended in response, just another exhalation of blue smoke.

“I’m Christopher Walsh. But if it’s all the same to you, I’ll wait to shake until after you wash up.”

“What?” Eric stared at him, his grey-green eyes clouded with confusion. What was he missing?

“And just so you know, there are rubber gloves on the back shelf. Brad thinks it’s funny to hide them from us, but wading elbow deep in strange DNA is not part of the job description.”

“Fuck,” Eric swore glumly as Christopher’s initial greeting finally made sense and he looked at the suddenly suspect stains on the backseat in the vehicle. The very same backseat he had been scrubbing on his knees only moments before.

“Exactly.” Christopher just laughed at the look on Eric’s face and dropped his cigarette on the concrete floor of the garage. He ground the butt out with his booted foot, uncaring of the mess left behind. “New to the business?”

“Like it doesn’t show?” Eric replied in disgust, amazed at his ignorance.

“You’re smart enough to clean your ride before your first trip out, that’ll help avoid some first-night surprises. One of the reasons Dino didn’t last was that he didn’t keep his ride clean and the boss was getting too many complaints from the customers.”

The slender hips shifted, pressing against the gleaming side of the limo, pulling the already close fit of the trousers even tighter and offering Eric a better view of some very nice scenery.

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“What were some of the other reasons?” Eric asked, curious about his predecessor even as he convinced himself there was no harm in looking at the show playing out before him.

Christopher avoided the question, just shifted his hips once again; smiling as Eric’s grey-green eyes automatically followed the motion. “Some of us go to the dive across the street to wind down when the shift’s over. Why don’t you come with us?”

Eric hesitated. The young man was friendly enough, certainly a flirt, but it had been hard enough to snag this job with his background, and he didn’t want to do anything stupid just yet.

“Don’t worry,” Christopher assured him. “I’m not asking you to go steady or anything. Just some coffee with your fellow drivers.”

“Sorry.” Eric looked sheepish for a moment. “Yeah, sure. That’d be fine.”

The overhead intercom crackled to life, and an impatient voice echoed through the garage.

“C’m on, Walsh, stop eye-fucking the new guy and get ready to roll.”

Eric could only smile once again as he watched Christopher give the overhead speaker the finger before sauntering off with a wave. Realizing he had laughed more today than he had since his arrival in Las Vegas, Eric admired the young man’s slender hips as they provocatively swiveled their way out the door before he headed to the back of the garage where the cleaning supplies were kept.

He was determined to find those rubber gloves and finish cleaning things up before he took the big stretch out. God, he was nervous. It was his first night driving the busy Vegas streets, and he wanted everything to go smoothly.

Eric needed to keep this job. He didn’t have anything or anyone to fall back on.

Just like Christopher had said, there were boxes of latex gloves piled up behind an assortment of red shop cloths. Not the best hiding place, but if you didn’t know to look, like Eric hadn’t, it was easy to

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

miss them. He wondered about the asshole who thought it was a joke to hide them.

“You learn fast.”

Eric spun around and waved his hand at the cloud of cigarette smoke that filled the air behind him. Did everyone who worked here smoke?

The man standing behind him might have been attractive beneath his covering of grease and grime; it was hard to say. He was wearing overalls so encrusted with dirt they probably could have stood up by themselves, and Eric couldn't tell what color the hair was underneath the filthy bandana that covered his head.

But the eyes. Damn. What a pair of eyes. If Christopher was all warm and cozy, this guy was pure ice. Eric felt immediately exposed, naked beneath the laser sharp focus of the pale blue eyes that traveled over his body.

The touch of those eyes burned.

“Hey,” Eric replied. He felt awkward and fumbled for the right words. “I was just looking for these.” He flapped the gloves in his hand and immediately flushed at how stupid that was. It was obvious what he had been doing.

“You the new guy?” The words were the same as Christopher's, but the tone, the intonation, hell, the very lips that shaped the words were different.

Eric couldn't ignore the pull of the other man. All of Christopher's flirting hadn't struck him the way one glance from this man did. It was like a signal his body was trained to receive and one he had hoped never to receive again. Right now everything inside Eric was pinging madly away, begging for a chance to feel those callused hands on his bare skin, pressing on his throat, holding him down. This guy was dangerous.

Eric wanted him.

“Yeah.” Eric forced a smile onto his face in an effort to hide his instinctive reaction. “I'm Eric Moss.”

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

Unlike Christopher, this guy had no compunction about taking Eric's hand in his and giving it a firm shake. Eric was breathless, energized by the feeling of the warm skin touching his. His cock twitched in his pants, stirring with an interest he had thought lost to him along with everything else in his life.

Eric forced himself to draw his hand back slowly, fighting both that unexpected jolt of desire and the rudimentary sense of self-preservation that demanded he run from this man as fast as he could.

"I'm Brad Torres." Pale eyes watched as Eric stared down at the grease covering his palm in silent fascination. "Sorry about that."

Eric felt marked. There was no other word for it. He grew even harder as he acknowledged the feeling. He knew he should move away, but he couldn't manage to do anything but stare wordlessly at his outstretched hand.

The moment of silence lengthened, and then Brad took a red shop cloth from out of his pocket and cradled Eric's hand in his. The mechanic steadily wiped the grease away before rubbing his thumb over Eric's palm without comment.

"You'd better get going." Brad finally released Eric's hand and gave him a gentle push toward the open bay. "Almost time for you to roll."

It was still early in the morning, the last few songs someone had selected on the decrepit jukebox were approaching a world class level of bad, the noise in the diner was practically ear-splitting, and the ancient waitress (Eric thought she might be a matched pair with the jukebox) was one scary-looking broad. But the coffee was hot and damn good, and after his first nerve-wracking night of driving Eric was almost in heaven.

"Hey!" Somebody pushed at his elbow resting on the table, and Eric's eyes jerked open. "You've not gone to sleep on us have you?"

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

“Nah.” Eric inhaled the wonderful aroma from his mug once again. “Just enjoying the moment.”

Blue eyes widened, and then the driver, Warren, Eric thought his name was, began to mock him. “Ooooh, enjoying the moment.” His impersonation of Eric was accurate enough to send the rest of the table into peals of laughter, and even Eric had to join in, amused at the ease with which the young man imitated him.

“At least you’re drinking coffee instead of that other crap like Christopher.” That was from the tall African-American man with the shocking bleached blond Afro sitting across from him.

“What kind of crap is Christopher drinking?” Damn, he had been half-asleep when introduced to everyone sitting at the table, and he couldn’t remember anyone’s name. Eric looked over at Christopher, but the young man was staring down into his plate, quite a change from the outgoing flirt he had been earlier.

“Some God-awful shit he claims is decaf, but I tried it once, and I think it’s actually dishwater. I’m Rob by the way.”

Eric nodded his thanks at the reminder and sipped gratefully at his own strong mug of coffee. He was going to have to do better on the names. It was funny, after the first cup the waitress didn’t look quite so scary. Was there such a thing as coffee goggles?

“And I’m Daniel,” a new voice added. “Don’t sweat it. You’ll catch on. Focus on the first names and forget about the rest. Half the time we don’t remember them ourselves.” With a cocky smile, Daniel (another blond, but natural, Eric registered) stood and waved his arm over the heads of the group seated at the table.

“We’re a mixed group here. If it helps you can remember that Warren and Christopher are our token brunets, and despite his efforts to look like an escapee from the NBA, Rob and I are the attractive ones of the bunch. Being a redhead like you are, I’d say you’re on your own.”

“What about Brad?” Eric was unable to keep from asking, curious about what had been hidden from him under the bandana. The other men just looked at each other.

Drive Me Home ★ Chrissy Munder

“You new to town?” Daniel noisily drained the last of the coffee from his mug, ignoring Eric’s question.

“Sorry?” It took Eric a minute to follow the shift in topic. “You could say that.” This guy’s attitude was irritating to say the least.

“So do you screw gals or guys?” Daniel sat casually back in his chair while the rest of the table erupted into a chorus of protests.

“What the fuck?” Eric’s heart rate increased. He didn’t need this kind of problem. “You just an ass or are you looking for a date?”

“Just want to know where things stand.” Daniel shrugged and gave the rest of the guys the finger as they continued to ride him.

Rob, the obvious peacemaker of the group despite his size and imposing appearance, broke in. “Never mind Daniel; he comes by his ignorance naturally. Me, now I can’t drink anything with caffeine myself after a shift if I plan to get any rest. And Warren hates the way I toss and turn when he’s trying to sleep.”

“Oh.” Eric nodded, understanding clear on his face. That had been pretty polite as far as “no poaching” signs went, and it went a long way toward reassuring him after whatever had just happened with Daniel. He looked at the two men and wondered what the story was between the interesting couple.

“How was your first night?” Warren asked as he leaned across the table to steal a slice of toast off Rob’s plate, narrowly avoiding the stab from the fork that tried to fend off his attack.

“Not too bad.” Once he had met Brad, Eric hadn’t had any more trouble with his nerves; all of his focus had stayed centered on his brief moment with the mechanic. “I was surprised to have to do so many different runs. Somehow I always pictured one long assignment.”

“Not like the movies, huh?” Daniel had apparently gotten tired of being ignored, and Eric felt uncomfortable at the cynical sound of his voice. “Yeah, ’stead of one rich client it’s just a constant stream of poor schmucks trying to score as they go between casinos. That or it’s just a bunch of drunken old broads. I swear if I have to take another herd of

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

grandmothers to the Liberace museum I'm just going to scream." He shuddered while the rest of the men at the table laughed.

"Yeah, but with Dino gone, you're the one that gets the extra runs," Rob pointed out.

"Extra runs?" Eric was lost. He felt like the other drivers were speaking a different language.

Daniel glared at Rob. "We have some clients that like to book a ride for a couple of days—do something a little special."

"How much head did you get?" Warren leaned forward on his elbows.

"What?" Eric was taken aback by the abrupt change of subject. He was going to need more coffee to keep up with this group.

"You know, how much did you get to see?" Warren took another swallow out of his mug. "I always feel like I'm missing out when I work dispatch instead of driving."

"I was pretty busy just learning the routes. The crowds here are dangerous," Eric said before he gave in and had to ask. "Do people really do that?" Surely these guys were pulling his leg?

"Statistics show that sixty-seven percent of people who rent limos do so to have some variation of the sex act in said limo. It's a proven fact." Christopher joined in with a half-hearted smile.

"And lucky us," Rob chimed in with a wink. "We get to watch the majority of it. Got to admit it sure beats driving back and forth between the dolphin habitat at the Mirage and the gondola rides at the Venetian."

"Christ." Eric grimaced. "Do I want to know what the other percent do?"

"Not really." Apparently the look on his face was worthy of another burst of laughter from the entire table.

"Mind if I join you?" Everyone's laughter stilled, and they looked up at the new voice.

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“Hey, Brad.” There was a chorus of greetings, and then Eric was shoved up against Christopher’s side as the guys shifted to make room for the newcomer. Eric barely recognized this stylishly dressed blond as the garage’s head mechanic—the guy that had hid the gloves. But the tangible pull of those pale blue eyes remained the same.

“Everybody pay up.” A cigarette dangled dangerously from the corner of Brad’s mouth, and he blew a kiss to their waitress when she brought him some coffee without waiting for an order.

Despite the grumbles from the group, wallets were opened and bills shoved across the table.

“Thank you, Mr. Moss.” The cigarette bobbed in Eric’s direction. “You made it through your first night.”

“What?” Eric was amazed he could speak somewhat naturally past the unexpected surge of lust that left his mouth dry, his heart pounding, and his cock as hard as a rock and hopefully unnoticeable under the table. “You fuckers bet on it?”

“This is Vegas, baby.” Those ice blue eyes, so startling in the dark tan of Brad’s face, stared at Eric through the haze of smoke. “We bet on everything.”



Chapter 2

MORNING.

Again.

Eric rolled over, the thin futon pad he called a bed shifting beneath his weight. He blinked, dazed from only a few hours sleep, and stared at the bright sun streaming around the crooked blinds that did a remarkably shitty job of covering the window of his empty bedroom. Looked like it was another hot and dry one.

Welcome to Las Vegas.

Yesterday he had been almost human. It had felt good to laugh and be a part of a group. But today Eric woke feeling empty again. His restless dreams had only reminded him of his gnawing loss and the depths to which he had sunk in his efforts to forget it.

It had been the ocean again last night; dark and beckoning. Filling his dreams and reminding him of all he had left behind. He had been right there, able to feel the mist on his face, hearing the sound of the waves. Surfing. Damn, but he missed surfing. Eric could remember the crisp air, the chill of the water in the early morning, the sting of the salt and....

Don't go there. No sense in going there. The whole point of leaving that all behind was to get away from anything that could remind him of what had happened before. Not that it had worked. Vegas was where the little money he had been able to keep from the

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lawyers had finally run out, so Vegas was where he had settled for now.

Eric grunted, scratched his chest, and then yawned as he stumbled to the bathroom for his morning piss. After recovering from his initial self-destructive spiral and the resulting stint in the hospital and recovery center, he had wandered for a while. Without any real purpose, he drifted from job to job, town to town. This one seemed like it could work.

For a while.

Eric kept his eyes closed as he listened to his stream hit the bowl and thought once again that without Bonnie, without Sara in the apartment, there was no reason to put the goddamn seat down. No reason at all.

His cell rang when he was sitting on the apartment's small balcony dressed only in a pair of boxer briefs that might have been able to masquerade as a pair of shorts if he squinted. The small ledge overlooked the busy city street below, and Eric stared blankly out at the traffic and ignored the sound of the ringing phone.

The sun was hot even at this hour, and Eric baked in the scorching rays like a lizard on a desert rock, letting the sweat roll down the muscles of his still too-thin back and pool at the base of his spine before it continued down into the crack of his ass.

He had felt cold for so long, both inside and out, and the sun here was so all consuming it felt as if he would burst into flame if he sat there long enough. Would the resulting fire purify him? Eric idly wondered. Could it do what all the pills and head shrinkers couldn't? Could it make him whole again?

Damn, but this town was hot. It was going to take some getting used to. At least it's a dry heat, Eric told himself mockingly. Sometimes he thought he would kill for just a hint of a cool ocean breeze, the biting chill of early morning surf the very color of Brad's eyes.

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Eric looked down at his palm, reliving the feel of Brad's thumb stroking his flesh. He could still see the stain of grease left on his palm. It had looked just like a bruise, and he had wanted more.

Coffee in hand he watched the traffic flow by on the street below. *Don't go there.* He warned himself. It was better not to think things like that, better not to have any thoughts at all. Eric knew he wasn't going to get any more sleep, but he rarely did since he had thrown away all the pills he had been given when he had left the hospital.

It was a weird fucking kind of day with a weird fucking vibe to it, and Eric just stared at his cell phone while it rang, gathering the energy to finally go answer the insistent call.

ERIC had thought his boss a rude old bastard the first time he had met him, and nothing he had seen so far had changed his opinion. John Gardner, the owner of Discreet Limousine, was short and thick around the waist, had cheeks pockmarked with the remnants of teenage acne, and was usually dressed in a dark suit that looked like it was left over his glory years in the '70s.

Still, there was something about the dark eyes that kept him from being a figure of fun. Usually cool and unflappable, it was strange for Eric to see him so agitated. Tufts of grey hair were standing up instead of being slicked back, and the old man was pacing and muttering to himself when Eric showed up. Had Eric only been an observer it might have been amusing.

Instead, Eric had to stand there silently while the owner twitched around him. Gardner straightened Eric's tie and attacked the back of Eric's jacket with a lint brush pulled out from the bottom drawer of his desk, all the while bitching in a mixture of Spanish and English, most of which went over Eric's head.

Who the hell kept a lint brush around in this day and age?

"You have no idea how much is riding on this, Moss. I don't know what happened to the agency they normally use, but I'm not

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passing up this chance. I'd do it myself, but I'm due in court in less than an hour. Damn Dino and his DUIs!"

More straightening, more twitching. Eric looked down, bemused as his normally unflappable boss knelt to pull at his pant legs and take a cloth to the tops of his shoes. He didn't know where the day-shift drivers were, he could only assume they were already out on the road and Gardner was either unwilling or unable to pull them back.

"And don't even get me started on the rest of those *pendejos* you work nights with," Gardner snarled. "What were they thinking, finishing off a seafood tray that'd been sitting out for God knows how many hours? Who do they think is going to clean up the mess in these damn bathrooms? Fucking assholes couldn't even wait till they got home to be sick."

He twitched impatiently at the cuff of Eric's pants, another muttering of Spanish rumbling from his chest. "Do you know how much Pepto they've gone through already?" Eric assumed it was a rhetorical question and stayed silent. "They'd better get it together. What the hell are we going to do for tonight's assignments if they don't?"

Eric just nodded, letting the stream of complaints wash over him. He had known it was going to be a weird day. Instead of being sacked out by the pool, he was back at work with only a few hours of hard-won sleep under his belt. Better not mention that to the boss. The old guy looked like he was going to have a coronary as it was; his face was all red and sweaty from his exertions.

"Just keep your mouth shut and your back straight." Gardner looked up and caught Eric's eyes. "I've been courting Evans Enterprises for the last two years. I can't believe I finally get my chance, and my most experienced drivers are in the fucking john."

He was yelling at the end of the sentence, making sure his crude words could be heard in the garage bathroom over the collective groans that issued from its depths.

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Gardner stood now, the normally composed businessman flushed and right up in Eric's personal space as he carefully placed the hat atop the wealth of fiery hair.

"Don't fuck this up, Moss."

THERE was just something intrinsically wrong with Vegas in the daytime. Maybe that's why Eric liked working the night shift so much. The neon displays so seductive at night were just gaudy daubs of color during the day, unable to compete with the blazing sun. Days here were too bright. Too bleached and burnt, just like the rolls of exposed skin belonging to the tourists that jammed the streets and blocked his way to the Evans Casino.

Everybody in Vegas knew the Evans Casino, even a newcomer like Eric. It was the tallest, brightest, and richest casino on the Strip. Owned by one man, built by one man, run by one man. The iron man.

Eric had heard plenty about it and the owner in the short time he had been in Vegas. He had even walked into the place one weekend to check it out and had been dazzled by the chaotic beauty of the interior. It had been everything they said it was but offered nothing he was interested in.

The driveway was long and wound its way through an impressive display of sculptured art. He pulled up to the top of the circular drive, coming to a stop before the main entrance. Eric briefly admired the art deco fountains and the glass front of the entrance as he dialed the number he had been given. Before he had even put the cell phone down he was pulled out of the limo and fussed at by some overly stressed personal assistant corporate clone.

The man gave Eric a cursory glance, his opinion obvious in the brief sniff he gave. Eric held his tongue. Maybe he wasn't up to this guy's standards, but Gardner had asked him not to fuck it up, and Eric was going to give it a good shot.

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“I assume you are aware of the proper etiquette required when driving a client of Mr. Evans’s stature?”

Then again....

Eric just nodded and tried to stare over the guy’s balding head.

“I can’t say much for the state of your uniform.” The short little fuck wasn’t going to let it go. “And your hair is totally unacceptable.”

That was it. “Well, at least I still have all of mine.” Eric grinned down at the man and the obvious bald spot he could see easily see with the advantage of his greater height. The PA flushed and stepped closer into Eric’s personal space.

“Now listen. You don’t look at Mr. Evans; you don’t talk to Mr. Evans.” Stubby hands gestured in front of his face. Eric hated finger pointers, and this officious little prick was a finger pointer. “You don’t look at Mr. Evans’s associates; you don’t talk to Mr. Evans’s associates. You got that?”

THERE was nothing special about the route he was given. Eric just had to make sure to bypass the tourists that lumbered out into the streets and crosswalks like wandering herds of sacred cattle, unseeing and unknowing of the dangers they faced.

The finger pointer had given him the evil eye and raised the partition before Eric had even gotten a chance to do more than glance at his cargo: five, maybe six Asian types in expensive suits. Of the elusive Mr. Evans, Eric hadn’t the opportunity to do more than catch a glimpse of a powerful back clad in a well-tailored suit.

The next stop on the schedule was yet another office building. That was the third in the last two hours. Real estate deals, no doubt. Thanks to time spent with a Japanese brother/sister duo when he was younger, Eric had a pretty good grasp of the language, especially some of the more crude and colloquial expressions. He had to hand it to Evans; from the little he had heard the man spoke it gracefully.

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Eric forced back a yawn; it was time to hold the door open again. He knew the drill, a slight bow, eyes down—nothing to look at but his shoes, still shining from Gardner’s impromptu polishing. One of the older gentlemen stumbled on some rough pavement, and Eric reacted instinctively.

“*Sumimasen*,” he murmured as he reached out to unobtrusively offer his support and utter his apologies for touching the elder without permission in a low, respectful tone. Eric’s Japanese was rough from disuse, but acceptable.

The small group froze for barely a second, and then momentum resumed as if nothing had happened. There were two more office buildings and a longer break for what Eric presumed was a late lunch. He was looking forward to some peace and quiet while he waited for their return.

“You’re toast. You’re fucking toast. You only had two simple things to remember, and already you screwed one of them up.” The PA was back in Eric’s face. He had waited until the larger group was out of earshot and then unloaded on Eric, spit flying as he screamed. “Your boss is going to hear about this, let me tell you.”

Still dazed from his lack of sleep and the disruption to his regular schedule, Eric silently debated just which of the pudgy fingers waving under his nose he would take pleasure in breaking first. The moment was broken only when an arm interceded between them and the officious little prick was silenced in mid-spit.

Eric admired the expensive watch the muscular, suit-clad arm wore, even though it was probably even now ticking down the hours left of his employment. Hell, he didn’t want to have to look for another job.

“Enough.”

The command was simple. Stated in a rough, deep voice that brooked no argument. With a gesture of command, the voice and its owner headed back to his clients followed by the fuming PA. Eric was left alone, standing silent in the shimmering heat radiating off the surrounding concrete.

Waiting.

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THE majority of the cargo had been dropped off at an exclusive club on the Strip for later pickup, and Eric tiredly maneuvered the long stretch of vehicle through the thickening crowds of neon and traffic. He still couldn't decide if the streets were busier during the day or the seemingly endless Vegas night.

It was evening now, and the stealthy approach of the desert darkness forced a deepening of the glowing lights that surrounded him as the neon colors began to take on their bright and seductive appeal once again.

Eric stifled a yawn and wondered if Gardner expected him to work his usual shift tonight. He was beat. The idea of chauffeuring drunken tourists for another several hours was unappealing. Eric risked a quick glance behind him. The separating partition on the limo was still up, and he didn't know what to expect from Evans or the little prick after the long day.

Was he still going to have a job when this ride ended? Eric didn't know his boss well enough to be able to make that call. It seemed that all too soon he was back at the long drive of the imposing casino. He would just have to take his chances.

There was a momentary silence when he switched the engine off, just the ping and tick of the cooling motor and a satisfying crack from his back as Eric straightened. He had been driving this group around for... eleven hours now, according to his own cheap wristwatch. He wanted to laugh. It looked like he was late for work.

Time to open the door again. He bowed politely to the Asian businessman who stepped out first; apparently this one had decided to pass on the evening's entertainment. Perhaps there was something better waiting for him upstairs. Eric ignored the PA and decided he had nothing to lose at this point, so he watched openly as Marc Evans himself slowly unfolded from the back of the stretch.

Eric started down at the well-shod feet, allowing his glance to move upward. The legs were long and lean. That was nice, just the way

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he liked them. The muscular form was accented by the sophisticated cut of the suit, and Eric allowed himself to briefly wonder how Evans would look without it. The tie was off now, collar wrenched open, allowing Eric's gaze to linger at the hollow of his throat.

The exposed Adam's apple protruded slightly beneath the strong line of jaw. Rather thin lips curved into a secretive smile as Evans stood there, letting Eric look his fill. In contrast to the man's rather rough and battered face, the almost delicate ears were slightly pointed; the expensively shaggy blond hair was pushed back and rumped after the long day. It would look like that after a night abed as well, tangled and slightly darkened with sweat.

This guy was definitely the stuff dreams were made of.

Green eyes locked onto his, and Eric felt everything come to a stop—the color of the eyes were different, warm and earthy compared to the icy paleness of Brad's, but the impact felt the same. There was a moment of stillness, a nod, and then Eric was once again staring at the man's back as he walked past him and into the casino that bore his name.



Chapter 3

THE bedroom was quiet, filled with nothing but oppressive darkness. Even so, the vibration of the cell phone would have gone unnoticed by most, but not by the man who lay sleepless on the bed. He had been expecting the call, staring blindly at the ceiling overhead while he waited.

With a grunt he reached over and grabbed the phone without looking. It wasn't his personal phone but a prepaid unit that would be used only for this one call. There would be a new one waiting at the usual spot. This one would end up in pieces scattered across the Nevada desert with all the others.

"Yes." His voice was crisp and clear, no hint of drowsiness to be heard despite the early hour.

"What do you have for me?" The voice on the other end was just as crisp and expressionless, but to the man listening, it was a welcome connection to his real life and the one constant in the uncertain deception of his current assignment.

"There's a new driver. I'll need you to run him." He thought again about the redhead Gardner had just hired and the unexpected way his insider had responded to him. That was an unexpected complication. He fucking hated complications.

"Do you think he's a player?"

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“It’s hard to say at this point.” The man on the bed hesitated. Should he say anything? “I don’t think so. But it’s too early to tell. The guy just showed up.”

“Did something happen?” The voice on the other end had gotten smoother. The man on the bed grimaced and rubbed at the back of his neck with his free hand. Damn. Somehow the bastard had picked up on his unease.

“Nothing happened. He’s just different.”

“Different how?” The pitch of the voice on the phone changed, becoming softer, more cajoling. It didn’t matter that the man on the bed knew how the different voices were deliberately used on him; he couldn’t help reacting. It happened when you were out in the field, away from everything that was familiar. They counted on it.

“He looks like another drifter, but there’s something behind his eyes. Something’s got a hold on him, eating at him from the inside.” He couldn’t believe he was saying any of this, but the words were spilling out. It had become difficult to hold everything inside all the time. It meant he had been under too long. He knew that. The interim meets weren’t enough anymore.

“You going all Zen on us now?”

“Fuck you.” He struggled to keep his voice dispassionate. He knew the tape would be analyzed later for vocal stress levels and the results carefully recorded in his file. SOP. That’s why he was the only one who made phone contact. He had more control, more experience with these bastards.

“You guys still solid? It’s been a long haul.” If he didn’t know better he might think that was actual concern in the voice on the other end of the line.

“We know how fucking long it’s been.” He fumbled for the pack of cigarettes on the nightstand beside the bed. At least *he* did. He didn’t want to think about his partner in this operation.

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“Dino is singing like the bird you said he was. We’re getting it all: names, routes, warehouses. Hopefully your buddy can come up with something even better. Gardner suspect anything?”

“Doesn’t seem like it. But he’s sweating over the stretch being impounded; worried the junk will be found. The DUI arrest was a good cover.”

“When’s the next delivery?” Well, so much for any token concern. Time to get back to business.

“No date yet. I’ll let you know.” He dropped the lighter back onto the nightstand and exhaled the rich smoke, ignoring the way his hand holding the glowing coal trembled.

“You both need to stay focused. We’re closer now than we’ve ever been.” It was a warning. Subtle, but still there.

He must be slipping. Somehow he was giving something away. Without saying anything further he ended the connection and threw the phone on the bed beside him. The voice on the other end had been right. He needed to focus. He had put too much into this to fuck it up now.

ERIC gave the waitress a quick wink as he sat down, joining the other drivers at their usual table. He was getting to be an old hand at this. Another shift down; it was time his reward. Time for another heavenly cup of coffee.

The music playing on that damn jukebox was just as bad as always, but the crowd didn’t seem as loud this time, and after three weeks of driving everyone and their grandmother around Vegas, Eric was amazed at how Connie, the waitress at the diner, seemed to get better looking every morning.

Three weeks of normalcy. Well, as normal as things could be driving the hordes of tourists, wedding parties, and drunken businessmen and women around town. Eric had almost managed to

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pretend he had forgotten about the strange day driving Marc Evans around and the mesmerizing appeal of those green eyes.

Gardner had grilled him when he had returned, yelled at him for not answering his cell during the assignment, and then ignored him, leaving Eric dazed and silent while he tried to sift through his thoughts. Eric didn't know what had happened with the PA or his threats, but he still had a job, and that was fine by him.

What wasn't so fine were the feelings that wouldn't leave him alone. Eric felt strange. He hadn't been attracted to anyone since the accident that killed his father and brother. Now Eric had met two men here in Vegas who he couldn't seem to forget. Despite the differences between Marc Evans and Brad Torres, there was a common element, something inherent to each of them Eric found he couldn't help but respond to.

Luckily, he didn't have much contact with either of them. Brad would almost always be in Gardner's office when Eric came on shift, but that just meant seeing the overall-clad mechanic through the glass window before Gardner noticed Eric looking in and promptly closed the blinds. The abrupt action always left Eric feeling unsettled.

It seemed everything in his life lately was leaving him feeling unbalanced. Eric just hoped that given enough time and enough tourists on his nightly shifts he might manage to forget how day after day he would wake with his cock stiff and aching from the images that filled his dreams.

In the past he'd had friends who swore there was symbolism to be found in someone's dreams. Hell, maybe he should buy a book. Lately his dreams were full of eyes, eyes that watched him, shifting from dark green to ice blue. Eyes that he couldn't escape. Eyes that he didn't even know if he wanted to escape.

A solitary quick rub-off was his only option for release as he lay there half-awake, hard as a rock and gasping for air. It worked, at least until the shift was over and it was time to try and sleep once again among the thoughts that twisted and turned their way through his brain.

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These were still better than the dreams he had before arriving in Vegas. Those dreams left him trapped in the courtroom, reliving the moments he couldn't ever seem to forget. These dreams at least gave Eric an opportunity for a fleeting moment of pleasure.

Eric shoved his thoughts aside and sipped gratefully at his steaming mug. He looked at Christopher sitting quietly beside him; he missed the flash and flirtation he had come to expect from the younger man. "You okay? You've been pretty quiet lately."

"Just ignore him." Warren offered from across the table. "He's just out of sorts because his boyfriend hasn't shown up this month."

"Boyfriend?" Eric questioned in surprise as he watched a deep blush cover Christopher's face.

"Wessssslllleeeey!" Daniel joined in as he set his coffee mug down, stretching the syllables of the unusual name out for emphasis. "Some really creepy artist-hermit type. We've never met him. He lives in some shack out in the middle of nowhere. Guy comes into town once a month to let Christopher drive him around all night. Nothing but a mobile booty call, if you ask me."

"Don't be such an ass." Rob shook his head at Daniel's crude remark.

"Wesley's not creepy." Christopher looked down at the table, tracing the spilled sugar with his fingers as his dark hair fell across his face. "He just doesn't like crowds."

Rob leaned across the table and whispered quietly to Eric. "They don't really go anywhere, you know? They just stay in the car. He's been doing it for a while now."

"It's really sad. Christopher thinks he's in loooovvve." Warren stretched out the words as well. "I'd at least make the guy cough up enough clam for a motel room."

The other guys at the table just cracked up, laughing and joking. But Eric could see the flash of expression that crossed Christopher's face, and he remembered his own restless nights and his sudden, obsessive dreams. Given the opportunity, would he be any different?

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Eric tried to change the subject. “How long have you guys worked for the company, anyway?”

“We’ve all pretty much been with Gardner since he started, other than Brad and Christopher. They showed up maybe a year ago, maybe less. Brad was the last new hire before you, but he’s definitely on Gardner’s good side now,” Daniel answered with a sneer.

“Really?” Eric was surprised. “I would have thought there’d be a higher turnover in this business.”

“Not with Gardner at the helm. He says the clientele he goes after prefers familiarity,” Warren added confidently.

Rob broke in. “You’ve heard the three rules, haven’t you?”

“Rule number one,” Daniel began in a gruff impersonation of their boss’s voice that seemed out of place with his shaggy blond hair. “Don’t let me catch you doing drugs or alcohol.”

“Rule number two,” Warren chimed in. “Don’t ever talk about our clients to anyone outside the garage.”

Rob drummed his fingers on the table. “Rule number three. Don’t let me catch you fuckin’ the clients. I’m not running a brothel.”

“Follow those three rules, and you too can drive for Discreet Limousine.” Warren lit up another cigarette.

Eric grimaced at the last comment, which in light of his restless nights hit closer to home than he was comfortable with. “Anybody ever break those rules?”

“Everyone breaks number one and three. I mean, come on, just look at Christopher.” The dark curls ducked down again as everyone swiveled to look at him. “And God knows, Daniel fucks every woman he can get drunk enough to pass out in his ride.”

Eric looked over at Daniel who just smiled proudly.

Warren gestured with his cigarette. “That’s the beauty of working for Gardner. He just says ‘don’t let me catch you’. But Rule number two—that’s the biggie. Get caught talking trash about the client or anything about the business, and he’ll cut your balls off for sure.”

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“So this isn’t like a side line for any of you?” Eric questioned, trying to ignore the painful mental image of his boss castrating anyone. “You guys are all pretty happy driving?”

Rob and Daniel both groaned as Warren sat up straighter at Eric’s words. “No...,” they pleaded in unison. “Who’s got the gag? Make him stop!”

“Ignore those two.” Warren beamed a happy smile at Eric. “I’m happy you asked that, Eric. Sometimes I think this is the best job in the world.”

Pieces of toast, napkins, and anything else that could become a projectile came hurtling across the table toward Warren and Eric.

“Really?” Eric dodged the barrage.

“Really.” Warren nodded in agreement. “All kidding aside, you may have realized that a lot of us working for Gardner and a fair share of our clients are of the light-hearted persuasion, shall we say? That’s important to me.”

“Is that deliberate?” Eric asked.

“Gardner goes where the money is. He got Discreet featured on one of those cable channel gay travel shows, so we get a lot of calls from that,” Warren said.

“Yeah, then he gets Daniel to use his gaydar on the drivers.” Daniel snorted at Rob’s joking comment. “He’s pretty good at it.”

“No way.” Eric had to laugh.

“Well, I’m sure of everyone right now except you, despite Daniel’s attempts to skew the bet on your first night, and we’ve decided Brad humps anything with a pulse and everything without one given enough tequila.” Warren looked at Eric speculatively. “You did seem to enjoy The Christopher Show on your first day, but that’s not the point.”

“Here it comes.” Rob began to knock his forehead loudly against the tabletop.

“Fucker,” Warren cursed affectionately. “You can make a real difference in people’s lives doing this job, you know?”

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Eric just tried to avoid the chunks of ice Daniel picked out of his glass and tossed at them. He had worked with these guys long enough that he was no longer surprised to hear to that his sexual preferences had already been bet on.

“Take me, for example. I had one of the most important days of my life ruined by a shitty limo driver.”

“You were married?” Eric asked. Warren seemed so young compared to the rest of the drivers, and Eric didn’t think he was bi.

“No stupid, it was my high school prom.” Warren’s earnest gaze focused on Eric. “I had the boyfriend. I had the tux. I had the corsage. I had a gallon of lube. I had all the makings for a perfect night. But we had a homophobic limo driver. I’ll spare you the details because of the rest of these fuckers. But you have no idea how much that experience damaged my young and sensitive psyche.”

Eric ignored the catcalls from the others and thought about the younger man’s words. “I can see where you are going with that, but some of these people—”

“Just ignore the tourists.” Rob raised his head from the table, a huge welt visible even on the dark skin of his forehead. “They’re just filler on our client food chain. The real meat is our repeat clientele and businessmen. You gotta love the businessmen.”

Eric could only shake his head and smiled gratefully up at Connie when she magically appeared to fill his mug once again.

“So where’s the lost and found?” He changed the subject again, this time to one that had been bothering him for a couple of days.

“Starting a collection?” Christopher smirked, even though Eric noticed the smile didn’t reach his eyes.

“I’ve got a box of stuff already,” Eric agreed. “What the hell do I do with it?”

“Well, the underwear and other stuff like that usually just gets tossed. Nobody ever claims any of that.” Daniel shrugged.

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“Unless it’s a super huge pair that I can use for a joke.” Warren turned to Rob. “Remember that nasty purple thong I put in Dino’s glove box? Man, was his old lady mad!”

Ignoring his friends, Christopher continued. “Anything of any real value goes to Gardner. He always prefers to return items when possible, helps with client trust, you know? Like when some idiot leaves a priceless violin in a cab.”

Rob rubbed at his forehead before turning to Warren. “Hey, how bad is this?”

“But if it’s drugs or other stuff you’re not sure of, that’s different.” Christopher lowered his voice as the others became occupied discussing Rob’s injury. “Best thing to do is give it to Brad. He’ll take care of it, and once Gardner takes his share, Brad’ll give you a cut of anything he gets off it.”

“You’re shitting me,” Eric said in disbelief.

“Keep it down.” Christopher looked around the dinner and then glared at Eric. “Somebody leaves their stash in your ride, what else you going to do with it? Hopefully you don’t do any of the shit yourself. Why do you think Brad always insists you use a clean filter when you vacuum it out end of shift?”

Breaking off from his sympathetic critique of Rob’s forehead, Warren took pity on Eric’s dumbstruck expression and the conversation the rest of them had been studiously ignoring. “There’s a world of opportunity here in Vegas, man. You just got to know where to look.” To Eric’s newly opened eyes, the young man’s voice and expression were suddenly more solemn and mature.

“Scoot over, runt.”

Eric looked up as the subject of their discussion joined them at the table, blond hair slightly disheveled about the strong angles of his jaw, the ever-present cigarette dangling from the corner of his mouth. Connie was at his elbow without a second wasted.

Eric didn’t have time tonight to consider how Brad always looked so different here from the grime-covered mechanic that grunted

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directions to him before each shift. Without a word, the other guys at the table opened their wallets and pushed crisp bills across the cluttered table.

“What was this one?” Eric couldn’t help but ask, recognizing the signs of a lost bet.

“Warren’s prom story. I can tell by the marks on Rob’s forehead.” Brad just smirked at Eric, who couldn’t help looking back at him with curious eyes in light of Christopher’s revelations. Was Brad really a drug dealer? Did it make any difference to the attraction Eric felt?

“Well, if you fucks are going to keep betting on me, when do I get a piece of the action?” Eric managed to indignantly respond, not wanting Brad to question his intent observation.

Groans were audible as the wallets opened again.

“Right about now, I’d say.” Brad saluted Eric with the stack of money and a skillful smoke ring as he counted out a number of the bills he’d collected and pushed them across the table toward Eric.

“Now that we’re all here, who’s up for today?” Warren asked, looking around the table as if to encourage any takers.

Christopher shrugged. “Not me, I’m heading home to bed.”

“Rob? Daniel?” Warren looked eagerly at the two men.

“Honestly babe, do we have to?” Rob looked like he was going to fall asleep in his chair.

“Yeah, we really do.” Warren looked over at Eric. “How about you? Want to take a road trip?”

Eric looked at his coffee and then over to Brad’s eyes, pale and shuttered behind the veil of smoke. He opened his mouth to refuse, but as he sat there staring at Brad the words he meant to say were somehow replaced by a silent nod of agreement.



Chapter 4

THE four-wheel-drive Suburban was roomy, and the air conditioner worked like a champ. That's all Eric could vouch for as he lazily dozed in the front seat, his eyes fluttering shut despite his intentions to stay awake. They all piled in, even Christopher, who hadn't wanted to come along in the first place. Eric still wasn't sure who the vehicle belonged to.

Eric sat in the front with Brad, who was firmly ensconced in the driver's seat, blue eyes hidden behind dark and mirrored sunglasses. The other four men were sprawled out in the back in various stages of sleep. Daniel's blond head was currently resting on the cooler of drinks they had stopped for earlier.

He didn't think he would be able to sleep, not being this close to Brad, but Eric must have been more tired than he thought. Once his eyes closed, not even the casual brush of Brad's arm against his on the shared armrest had been able to do more than make his skin tingle. But he was awake now and feeling restless. Eric looked at the map in his lap then over at Brad.

"So tell me again how the new guy ended up playing navigator?" Eric asked, amazed at his body's response to Brad's closeness. He had felt so numb for so long.

Brad just smirked, the twist of his lips drawing Eric's stare. "Try so that we would have someone new to blame when we got lost."

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“Great.” Eric held the map up and squinted at it. He needed to look at something besides Brad, because otherwise this was going to end up being one long fucking trip.

“You awake now?” Brad asked him quietly. “You were pretty knocked out for awhile there.”

“Yeah, I think so. Did I miss anything?” Eric didn’t want Brad’s unexpected concern to make him feel so good. He rotated the map and squinted at it again, trying to distance himself from his emotions. “Fuck.”

Brad laughed at Eric’s efforts with the map. “You missed nothing but a few miles of scrub. You weren’t asleep that long, trust me.”

“Right.” Eric tossed the map to the floor, pushing his braid back over his shoulder as he stretched and looked behind him. “You work with these guys long?”

“Long enough,” Brad answered with a sidelong glance. “Sometimes folks stick around. Sometime they don’t.”

Eric grunted. He wondered if there was a deeper meaning behind the casual words.

“Good guys, though,” Brad continued. “Hey, light me a cigarette, will you?”

Eric looked at him sharply but shook one loose from the pack that was hidden under a mess of papers on the dashboard, grabbing up the lighter and bringing it slowly to his lips. The rush of nicotine on the inhale made his head spin. He took the cigarette from his lips and handed it over to Brad. It seemed an awfully intimate action in the closed space.

“Thanks,” Brad grunted as he shifted the gears. The bounce of the vehicle over the rough road beneath them sent the papers on the dash scattering over the front seats. Eric grabbed for as much as he could, finally shoving them together into a pile and tossing them on the floor in disgust to join the map.

Brad just laughed again, the flash of white teeth catching Eric’s eye. Brad was more relaxed than Eric had ever seen him, and there was

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an amazing wealth of golden, tanned skin on display that Eric's fingers ached to explore.

The T-shirt and shorts covering the fit, defined body were a far cry from the filthy overalls Brad wore at work. Eric tried not to stare at the beaded hemp cord around Brad's neck and the way it accented the sharp jut of his Adam's apple. He could image Brad taking it off and tightening it around Eric's own neck.

"So where are we going again?" Eric asked as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat and tried to inconspicuously adjust himself. He had always had a thing for a prominent Adam's apple.

"Well, Warren has a burr up his butt about Lake Mead." Brad waved his cigarette toward the backseats. "It's this huge-ass recreation area. All kinds of stuff to do: fishing, sight-seeing, ruins."

"There a ghost town under the lake you know," Warren piped up from the backseat, their conversation having woken him. Eric tried to stifle his laughter at the dark spikes of hair sticking up on top of Warren's head as he leaned forward between their seats. "St. Thomas. It was buried when the Hoover Dam filled the Lake Mead reservoir."

"That sounds interesting." Eric thought he remembered a movie that had something similar in its plot.

"It's only underwater part of the time," Brad explained to Eric. "But if you're interested, you can walk out along the shoreline where the Muddy River discharges into Lake Mead. There's a lot of trails out there, all dried up and crunchy to walk on."

"I'm not walking out there." Christopher muttered his contribution even though his eyes were still shut. "Fucking tamarisk'll tear you right up."

"Tamarisk?" Eric asked.

"Nasty ass plant; you can't avoid it. The branch spurs are so sharp they will cut you, and it oozes this salty shit that will burn the crap right out of you once it gets into the cuts," Brad answered once again.

Eric looked down at his bare legs and flip flops. "Doesn't exactly sound like I'm dressed for it."

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“Well, it’s not everyone’s idea of good time,” Brad agreed, his head turning to check out Eric’s legs as well. “Hey, do you see the hawk?”

Eric looked out his window, following the direction of Brad’s finger as it pointed to the sky, and he could just see the dark speck lazily circling overhead.

“We’re close to the fall migration path. If you go further north, up to the Goshute Mountains there’s a Watchable Wildlife Area open to the public that’s pretty cool.”

“It sounds interesting.” Eric wouldn’t ever have pinned Brad Torres for a birdwatcher.

“Did you get a hold of your friend at the dive shop, Brad?” The sound of the beer being opened was a dead giveaway that Daniel had woken up.

Brad shook his head, and the mirrored sunglasses turned away from Eric to stare out the front windshield. “He’s out of town this week. No luck.”

“Well, what the fuck are we doing out here then?” Daniel swilled beer from his can and then burped loudly. “I passed up a seat at a game.”

“I’m beginning to think you’d rather gamble than get laid, Daniel,” Warren muttered.

“Screw you. At least I don’t have to wave my sex life around in front of everybody,” Daniel shot back in reply.

“Haven’t you ever heard of out and proud?” Christopher shifted in his seat and yawned.

“Fuck that.” Daniel finished his beer and tossed the empty can at Christopher, barely missing his head.

“I always wonder why you hang out with us,” Warren said. “Aren’t you afraid it’s going to rub off on you?”

Daniel just leered at him. “Chicks, man. Chicks love you gay guys, and I get to console them when you won’t put out.”

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The rest of the guys laughed, and even Eric had to smile.

“So what are we doing out here again?” Daniel rummaged around in the cooler for another beer.

“We’re taking a road trip,” Warren said, like that explained everything.

“How can it be a road trip with no real fucking purpose?” Daniel demanded. “I thought we were going to dive the B-29 this time. You dicks dragged me out here for nothing.” He wiped his hand across the scruff on his chin.

“Sorry, no can do,” Brad replied before he took pity on Eric’s confusion. “There’s a B-29 Bomber in Lake Mead. They found it back in 2002. Dives are federally restricted, and a friend of mine runs one of the few dive shops that received a commercial-use authorization from the government.”

“Pretty cool,” Eric commented, no longer surprised at Brad’s connections. “I’ve not dived for a few years.”

“We try to come out here once a month or so just to keep our skills up.” Daniel yawned and then burped. The sour smell made Christopher wrinkle his nose and turn his face away in disgust. “So far we’ve hit the Gypsum beds and the cavern. Last time we tried the Trojan.”

“What?” Eric figured his leg was being pulled yet again.

“Get your mind out of the gutter.” Daniel snorted. “It’s a wooden boat that went down during a storm in the ’60s. It’s supposed to have been carrying a butt-load of casino chips, but Rob’s the only one of us that’s found any.”

“You’ll have to come out this way with me again,” Brad commented quietly. “Lake Mead is a pretty amazing dive spot.”

Eric could smell the faint hint of sweat and dark musk that rose from Brad’s skin, and for a moment it made him almost as dizzy as the nicotine. “Sounds like fun.”

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“You should be honored, Eric.” Warren moved Rob’s head to a more comfortable position on his shoulder. “Brad doesn’t invite just anyone.”

“Shut up, Warren.” Brad hit the Suburban’s turn signal and pulled into a gas station that appeared like a mirage out of nowhere. His voice was flat and unemotional. “We need gas. Who’s got to piss?”

Everyone but Daniel and Christopher piled out of the ride. Christopher’s cell had rung, and from the brilliant smile on his suddenly wide-awake face and his whispered conversation, Eric figured it was the mysterious boyfriend. Daniel just waved his hand irritably at them and grabbed another beer.

From what Eric could see, the gas station out in the middle of endless desert wasn’t crowded, just a couple of scruffy-looking guys gassing up their truck. The pair gave Warren and Rob a searching glance and then nudged each other.

Inside the air-conditioning Eric watched as Warren and Rob argued over what kind of additional snack foods they should buy and the merits of each. Brad came out of the restroom and paid for the pair while Eric took a look around the store and some of the more colorful tourist items for sale.

“Put the word Vegas on a turd and it will become a souvenir.”

Eric wasn’t sure how he had known it was Brad who had walked up behind him, but somehow he did. “Man, you’re quiet.” He set the boxed set of coasters back on the shelf and stepped away, brushing against Brad’s chest as he did so.

“Ready to go?” Brad asked. He didn’t flinch or move away from Eric’s unintentional intrusion into his personal space.

“Yeah.” Eric wondered what would happen if he asked to stay there, barely touching, just for another moment or two.

In the end they walked out of the gas station together. Rob and Warren were almost up to the Suburban already, and when they opened a door to get in the guys at the next pump started heckling them.

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“Be sure to help your girlfriend into the back now, sweetheart,” one of the men called out in a taunt. “A nice hand on that tight ass would be a good start. Or do you want me to come over there and show you how a real man does it?”

Eric could see Warren flush, but he just shook his head at Rob and muttered something about not making trouble as he hauled himself into the vehicle. Rob protested, but Warren kept his hand on Rob’s arm and pulled his lover in behind him.

While Rob and Warren argued Brad walked over to the two men, and Eric followed, unsure of what was going to happen next.

“You fellas got nothing better to do than hang out and bother folk?” Brad’s lazy drawl sounded slower and more pronounced than Eric had ever heard it. Something about it made him shiver.

“Fuck you, queer bait,” the loud-mouthed one sneered back at him. “You don’t know how to shut your mouth. I’ll find a way to keep it busy.”

It happened so fast Eric didn’t get a chance to really see what happened. One minute Brad was standing there beside him, casually baiting the two men, and the next they were on the ground moaning and Brad was standing with his fists clenched, the muscles in his arms bunched, not even breathing hard.

The attack had been fast and vicious; the blood pouring from one of the men’s nose gave testament to that. Eric thought Brad had hit him in the face with the nozzle for the gas pump, but he wasn’t sure.

The other man was hugging his gut where Brad had kicked him, and his hand was bent and bleeding where it had been stomped upon. It had only taken scant seconds for Brad to put two men down on the ground without a sound. Eric stood there and stared at the bleeding men, stunned until Brad put his hand on Eric’s arm, the soft grip a startling contrast to the savage way he had exploded just seconds before.

“Let’s get going.” He urged Eric over to the Suburban, his manner and voice calm as if nothing had happened.

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“Yeah.” Eric looked up at Brad, searching but unable to see his eyes through the dark glasses. “Sure.”

THE call in the early morning was unexpected. He wasn't due to make a report for another three days. He didn't like surprises, but it was better than lying there touching himself and thinking about things he couldn't have. Things he wanted to do. Skin he wanted to touch.

“Yes.” His voice was just as crisp as always despite his trepidation. He knew the importance of keeping up appearances.

“We heard there was an incident.” Was it his imagination or was his lifeline's voice on the cool side this morning?

“Checking up on us now?” They had left the scene before any local boys had shown, but a report must have been filed anyway.

“We just want to make sure everything's still a go on the next shipment.”

“Of course it's a go. It's been a fucking go all these months. Why wouldn't it be a go now?” He was getting fed up with this shit. He wanted this assignment over.

“You sound tired.” The voice poked at him again, probing for information he didn't want to give.

“I just want this over.” Damn right he was fucking tired.

“Just a couple more runs, and we should have enough to take down the whole network. You guys are doing great work.” The voice was soothing again. It must be tough having to manage the talent. “You just have to be sure you keep things under control. We don't need anything stupid to happen now.”

“We finish this one and we're out.” He didn't know where the words came from, but suddenly they were there in the open, and he realized he didn't want to take them back.

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“We’ll talk about it.” He smiled with bitter satisfaction at the alarm his words suddenly brought to the voice.

“Talk, shit. I’m tired of talking. Just make sure your guys do their job.”



Chapter 5

IT was the overwhelming sense of déjà vu that struck him first. Next was the quivering feeling in his stomach that he tried to suppress when he realized it was anticipation. Eric was back behind the wheel of the stretch, and he was back at the winding drive of the Evans Casino.

Unlike the first time he had ended up outside the imposing structure, Eric hadn't received any form of early warning. There hadn't been anything about this morning to tell him that today was going to be different.

Eric had gone through the motions of his routine and spent the majority of the day dozing around the pool, baking in the sun to make up for the lost sleep he hadn't been able to find and trying with little success not to think. He had gotten into work a few minutes early that night, nothing unusual.

It was still his favorite part of the day, those last few moments when the sun battled with the neon of the Vegas Strip for supremacy before it finally gave up and drifted off to sulk until the next morning. Eric lingered in the parking lot for a few extra minutes, watching the sun disappear from the city skyline as best he could before heading inside the garage.

What had been strange about today was the welcoming party waiting for him. Rob and Warren had been excited when they saw him, rushing him into Gardner's office before he had even had a chance to ask why they were there.

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

There had been a noticeable distance between Eric and the other drivers over the last several weeks. Eric hated to admit it, but he was still troubled by the events of the road trip they had all taken and the fact that once they were back in the Suburban no one had said a word about what had happened.

The cooler had been opened, and beer and soda had flowed while they ended up just driving aimlessly around the desert outside Vegas, getting out to kick some rock and scrub, piss on the dry vegetation, and then drink some more until the beer was gone. It was like the incident at the gas station had never happened.

At least for everyone except Eric. Now every time Eric looked at Brad all he could see was the total lack of expression on the blond's face after he beat the shit out those two guys. It bothered Eric. Mainly because he couldn't stop thinking about how turned on the damn episode had left him.

He no longer thought about Evans and the man's green eyes when he slept. That brief fantasy had been pushed aside by the other dreams that now filled his thoughts. Dreams full of danger and violence... and Brad. It made for a strange, erotic cocktail that Eric was drawn to and wanted more of, no matter how he feared it.

The rest of the guys seemed undisturbed by the episode and things had been business as usual since then. Still, Eric had only gone out for coffee with them, not on any more road trips despite a few offers. But right now, as confused as the thought left him, Eric would have rather been back at that gas station than in Gardner's office.

"They sent this suit over for you." Gardner was wearing his predatory grin as he held up a garment bag. "It's a designer original, unless I miss my guess. They definitely want you to look the part."

It was strange to see Gardner smiling. For the last several weeks things had been tense around the garage. Daniel had been out on some special assignment, and with staff short, so were tempers. It had added to Eric's feelings of unease. He had asked Christopher if he knew what was going on, but his fellow driver had just shrugged and mentioned Gardner was having trouble with "business" and left it at that.

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

“Did you see the buttons?” That was Warren, his blue eyes amused as he sat on the edge of Gardner’s desk, ignoring the boss man’s frown.

“Buttons?” Eric repeated.

“Little Es, get it?” Warren poked him in the ribs. “Cool, huh?”

Gardner stood there with his hands on his hips and looked Eric up and down with a wide smile Eric found particularly disturbing. “I really wish you’d cut your hair, but the request was very specific.”

“Hey!” Eric reached a protective hand towards the unbound length of his hair, still wet from his quick shower. “What request?”

“Haven’t you been listening, Eric?” Warren took a cigarette out of his pack only to put it away again after a sharp look from Gardner, whose unexpected good humor in the face of new business still only extended so far.

“So far nobody’s said anything that makes any sense!” Eric’s frustration finally spilled over. He had woken up hard and aching again; blue eyes, golden skin, dust, and blood all racing through his sleeping mind.

Eric couldn’t escape Brad’s eyes during his dreams. Pale eyes that would stare into his, encouraging him to moan and gasp as fingers twisted painfully into his auburn hair and a hard, muscled body thrust again and again into him as he spread himself willing and open beneath his dream lover.

When Eric was awake he alternated between wanting to see more of Brad and wanting to hide from his knowing eyes, unsure if he wanted the other man to recognize his helpless lust. He found himself noticing how much time the blond spent in Gardner’s office, and he jealously wondered just what the story was between the two men.

“You’re driving Mr. Evans tonight, Eric,” Gardner pronounced in a victorious voice. “You were specifically requested, and they sent you a new uniform. Go ahead and strip, let’s see how it fits.”

Eric barely heard the rest of Gardner’s words; his attention had focused on the first sentence and the unexpected thrill that shot through

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him when he heard that Evans had specifically requested him—a thrill that was quickly followed by self-disgust. God, what was wrong with him? He had just been thinking about Brad.

Eager hands reached to help Eric out of his clothing, and he backed away from them quickly.

“Hey now,” he protested light-heartedly, his mood doing a 360-degree turn. “Don’t I get any privacy?”

“Don’t be such a puss, Eric.” Warren lunged at his fellow driver once again. “We just need to see if it all fits.”

“Maybe he needs some incentive.” Rob looked at Warren, and they grinned at each other.

“You’ve got to be joking!” Eric exclaimed as they tuned in some music on Gardner’s radio, and Rob and Warren started holding up dollar bills in eager anticipation.

“This is Vegas, after all.” Warren laughed at Eric, and Eric found himself laughing back, caught up in their excitement and almost giddy himself at the thought of doing something other than driving tourists around tonight and obsessing endlessly about Brad without having the balls to do anything about it.

“Come on, Eric!” There was a wolf whistle from the doorway as Christopher and Brad looked in, drawn by the commotion. Gardner’s protests were lost in the noise as Warren turned the music higher, and Eric really felt a part of this group for the first time since he started the job, relaxing enough to let go of some of the burden that weighed so heavily on him.

It was a younger Eric, a man he had almost forgotten, an Eric who couldn’t remember the cost or consequence of his actions that let himself get caught up in the music and begin swinging his slim hips, bumping and grinding as he unbuttoned his shirt and danced his way over to Warren and Rob. He laughed with pleasure in the moment as he shimmied just out of reach, moving closer towards their waving money and then backing teasingly away.

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“All right, Eric!” Christopher whistled again, pulling out his own wallet while Eric’s attention was caught and held by Brad’s suddenly intense gaze and unable to help himself he started dancing toward Brad.

“Enough!” Gardner had to shout to be heard over the music, and he gestured abruptly at Warren, who grimaced at him as he shut the radio off.

Eric swung around, surprised by the sudden quiet and by the way he had let himself be drawn into the fun.

“I realize it’s practically impossible for you assholes to take anything seriously, but I need Eric to pay attention.” Gardner regarded them with a fixed gaze. “The rest of you need to get back to work. Christopher, unless I’m mistaken, you are already late for your first assignment.”

“Yeah, sorry, Boss,” Christopher sheepishly replied as he walked back into the garage, followed by Rob. They muttered as they passed their boss but were careful not to speak too loudly. Brad stood in the doorway and took the forgotten money from their hands as they shuffled past.

Brad winked as he shoved the bills into the waistband of Eric’s pants and smiled knowingly at the shiver that traveled through Eric’s body when he let his fingers linger against the smooth skin of Eric’s flat stomach before he turned away. The quick caress left a smear of grease in its wake, and Eric placed his hand instinctively over the mark.

Warren shut the door firmly behind them. “Now, we still need to get you changed.”

Before Eric could make any further protest he was being stripped down to his navy boxer briefs and redressed in the clothing sent over by the Evans Casino. He had to admit the silk of the shirt felt amazing against his skin, even though it did seem sheer.

“Look at the fit.” Warren whistled even as Gardner placed the jacket on Eric’s shoulders and directed him to turn around with a commanding gesture. “Who’d you give your measurements to?”

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Eric flushed again as he remembered how his eyes had traveled over the handsome entrepreneur's body and the scorching glance that had been returned.

"Look at this shit." Gardner held up a strip of leather. "It's for your hair."

Warren raised an eyebrow. "Hair bondage. Somebody's thinking nasty thoughts."

"Enough," Eric growled as he swiped the piece of leather from Gardner and wrapped it around his fall of hair, hoping the two men didn't notice the trembling in his fingers.

"It's not a contract yet, Eric. But it's definitely a start." Gardner's smile was beginning to remind Eric of a shark he had once seen from atop the precarious safety of his surfboard; it also left him with the same feeling of disquiet. There were depths beneath the practiced exterior, of that Eric had no doubt, and suddenly he didn't want to discover any more.

Gardner gave Eric's shoulder a quick squeeze, his fingers digging in sharply once he finished adjusting his tie. "Whatever it was you did the other night, be sure you do it again."

ERIC took a deep breath, stepped out of the limo, and walked toward a small, almost unnoticeable entrance to the side of the main doorway. Instead of being met by the same officious little prick as last time, he was greeted by a tall, slender woman dressed in a casually elegant suit. Her blonde hair was twisted up in a complicated knot, and she greeted Eric in a calm, professional manner.

"Mr. Moss." She nodded her head and held out a folder with a graceful hand. "I'm Laura Young. I'm Mr. Evans's new personal assistant. I'd like you to review these documents and sign where indicated, please."

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Eric took the folder and gave the contents a quick glance. “I already have a confidentiality agreement on file with Discreet Limousine.”

“That’s true.” The blue eyes behind their professionally applied makeup gave nothing away as they looked at him. “This, however, is between you and Evans Enterprises. It’s standard procedure for our company. You should have been given one to sign the last time you drove Mr. Evans, but Seymour must have forgotten.”

“Seymour, huh?” Eric used the offered pen to blindly sign the documents, the expensive instrument heavy in his fingers. “And just where is Seymour this evening?”

Laura smiled politely as she chose to ignore his sarcasm. “Seymour is on an extended sabbatical. Working as Mr. Evans’s personal assistant can be very stressful, and it was deemed best for all parties involved for him to take some leave.”

There was a pause, and her eyes sharpened with curiosity. “Mr. Evans did ask me to extend his personal apologies for the unfortunate incident that occurred the last time you drove for him. Rest assured, it won’t happen again.”

“Really.” Eric kept his own face expressionless as he met her gaze, refusing to feed her interest. “And how long will you be working for Mr. Evans before you take an extended sabbatical?”

“Let’s hope it will be quite a while before that is necessary.” Laura smiled briefly as she handed him another folder. “Here is the itinerary and route for the evening. I suggest you review them thoroughly.”

“Thank you,” Eric responded automatically, his stomach starting to quiver with unexpected nerves once again.

“Mr. Evans and his party will be down shortly.” Her eyes met his once again. “I’d try not to disappoint him.”

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“YEAH.” He kept his voice quiet and emotionless as he picked up at the first ring. He promised himself he wasn’t going to rise to the bait this time.

“Things didn’t quite go according to plan.”

“Different driver. You had to expect that.” Christ, where did they get these morons?

“The route was quite a bit different from what Dino had told us.” How could a voice express so much displeasure simply by its tone?

“So you had to improvise. Isn’t that part of the job?” He exhaled the smoke from his lungs and resisted the urge to cough. How fucking hard was it to tail a limo? “Just tell me you got it all.”

“Picture and sound the whole trip. With the documentation the two of you have provided over the last year and Dino’s confession we should be golden.”

That’s what he wanted to hear in his contact’s voice: approval. He closed his eyes with gratitude. “So bring us in.” Even as he said the words he wondered if he were really willing to give up on the rest, really ready to let bygones be bygones after all his careful planning.

“Not yet. You’ve just scratched the surface. We want you to keep going.”

The rush of satisfaction took him by surprise. There was his answer.

“I’m starting to get questions, and he’s getting restless.” Was that really it? Or was he starting to get tired of not having a life and wanting something for himself?

“So handle it. Handle him. It’s what you do, right?” The voice hardened. “Remember, you came to us.”

He hesitated at that reminder. Shit.

“Maybe we should let you bow out gracefully and just deal direct with your boy. Do you think he would like that?” The voice was smooth once again. Light.

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The fuckers. He clenched his hand around the plastic of the phone and heard the faint creak as it compressed. Time to change the subject. “Do you have the information I asked for?”

“The files have been downloaded. You can access them at your leisure.” It was the voice’s time to hesitate. “Not quite Gardner’s usual type. Much more your buddy’s, if you know what I mean. Does that bother you?”

“Fuck off.” He hadn’t known they knew about the history between the two of them. But he shouldn’t have been surprised. They knew everything. The trembling in his hands was back, and he wondered when he saw it how much longer he could keep this up. He pushed the thought aside; he had to see this through. Then he could rest.

“Just as long as you two don’t fuck up.”



Chapter 6

...returning said box to you. While my client is aware that such attempts at contact with the minor in question are in direct violation of the court's decision, she has against our advice requested that we do not notify the court of your repeated violations. Instead my client only further desires that you refrain from any future efforts."

The print swam before Eric's eyes, and he crumpled the piece of paper in his fist before angrily throwing it against the wall and letting it join the box already crumbled on the floor.

"Damn her!" Eric cursed in frustration and clenched his fists. He had been waiting, mentally drifting until the sight of the returned box outside his apartment door had broken through his strange fog. It had mocked him, the multitude of colored labels and stamps telling of its long journey and back again.

It happened every time. He would find the perfect present for Sara, wrap it up, and send it out. Then he would fall into some strange, uncaring funk until it was returned to him, and the frustration over his failure to keep his promise to Keith and take care of his family would sweep over him again. Eric knew the package would be returned to him—it always was—but he still had to try.

It amazed Eric how attached he had become to Sara once she was born. He still thought he and Bonnie had done a good job raising Keith's daughter to be healthy and happy despite their differences and the fact the little girl would never know what an amazing man her father had been.

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Maybe it was those memories; those special times the three of them had shared before Bonnie had started dating again and finally remarried that kept Eric thinking his ex-sister-in-law would relent and let him be a part of Keith's daughter's life, no matter how small that part might be.

The problem was that Bonnie was a chameleon. She was always changing to suit the needs of the man currently able to hold her attention, discarding any elements of her old life that didn't mesh with the new. Eric certainly didn't fit into her new role as the Reverend's wife.

Eric sat on the couch, his head in his hands as he tried to control his temper. He had the telephone number to their place in Michigan; the detective he had hired with his last bit of extra money had given him that as well as the address. But even if he dialed, chances were Bonnie's husband would answer, and that was really where the problem lay, wasn't it?

He stood up, restless and agitated. Eric was tired of sitting around the apartment, tired of not being able to sleep, and aching tired of being alone. With the on-call schedule he was working for Evans Enterprises day and night, it had been awhile since he had seen the rest of the night shift guys, and he couldn't help but think about Brad with his usual mix of uncertain need and longing. A few glimpses of the overall-clad frame in Gardner's office weren't enough to satisfy his continuing obsession with the blond mechanic.

Eric decided to head up to the diner and see who was around. As messed up as his schedule was he wasn't going to get any sleep, and the company would do him some good.

He told himself he wasn't looking for Brad.

CHRISTOPHER looked up with a broad smile and gave him a wave as Eric entered the restaurant. Even before he had made his way across the crowded floor to their table, Connie was pouring him a fresh cup of coffee.

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“Hey stranger.” She greeted him on her way back to the counter. “Been a while since we’ve seen you.” Eric gave her a kiss on the cheek as she passed and tried not to wince when she responded with a not-so gentle pinch to his rear.

“That’s harassment, just so you know!” he called after her retreating back, rubbing his abused backside.

Christopher shook his head at the bit of play; his dark curly hair was its usual tousled mess. “How do you and Brad do it?” he asked as Eric sat down.

“What?” Eric gratefully wrapped his hands around the streaming mug, ignoring the leap in his pulse at Brad’s name. That wasn’t what he was here for, he told himself again.

“Both of you have Connie wrapped around your little fingers. You don’t ever see her come rushing over to pour me a fresh cup of coffee as soon as I darken the doorway.” He twisted around in his seat, checking out the distance between the counter area and the front door.

“That’s because you don’t drink coffee.” Eric closed his eyes and let his head drop closer to his mug.

“I do too!” Christopher exclaimed.

“Not real coffee,” Eric grunted in reply.

“How did she even know you were there, anyway?” He leaned in closer to Eric and gave a deep sniff. “Do you think she can smell you?”

“What the hell?” Eric opened his half-closed eyes to glare at Christopher.

“Wake up, guys. Christopher and Eric are getting kinky at the breakfast table.” Daniel yawned as he jostled the two men dozing beside him.

Warren raised his head from the table where he and Rob had been snoring; their half-finished plates pushed to the side. “I get to watch,” he called out groggily before looking around and dropping his head back down when he didn’t see anything interesting.

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“Hey, Eric,” he mumbled as an afterthought.

“Hey, Warren,” Eric responded. “Tough night?”

“You have no idea.” Daniel yawned again, showing his back molars and forcing Eric and Christopher to look away so as not to identify what he was chewing. “Even with you driving for Evans Enterprises all the damn time, fucking Gardner refuses to hire another driver.”

“That’s just gross, man.” Christopher shuddered at Daniel’s show, and Warren just started snoring again.

“Reminds me of my niece.” Eric froze as the words slipped past his lips and then relaxed as none of the guys seemed to find anything strange in his comment. It must just be the damn letter from the lawyer that left him feeling so raw and exposed.

Daniel laughed before shoveling another forkful of food into his mouth. “Aren’t kids great? Thanks for reminding me why I don’t have any.”

Warren snorted in his sleep, the noise waking him, and his head jerked up again. “Hey Eric,” he said sleepily, rubbing his eyes. “When’d you get here?”

Christopher and Eric looked at each other and shook their heads. Warren nudged Rob with his elbow.

“Dude, look alive. Eric’s here, we can ask him about driving the very rich and famous Evans.”

Rob just waved an irritable hand and continued to drool on the table. Daniel laughed again.

“I need to piss,” Warren announced as he suddenly left the table. Daniel watched to make sure he didn’t turn around.

“Hey, watch this.” With a smirk Daniel took one of Warren’s crushed cigarettes from the ashtray and placed the ash-smeared butt far back on Rob’s tongue.

“Wake up, Rob!” he yelled in Rob’s ear.

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With a gasp, Rob sat up, choking and then instinctively swallowing as he came to consciousness. “What the fuck?”

Daniel pounded the table as he laughed, eggs spilling out of his mouth in his exuberance.

“You’re such a pig, Daniel. You wouldn’t do that if Warren was sitting here. He’d kick your ass,” Christopher said as he tended sympathetically to Rob and held him back from his angry attempts to punch Daniel.

“Screw him.” Daniel slouched back in his sit and stared at Eric. There was no mistaking the aggressive challenge in his brown eyes. “So what can you tell us about Evans? Sex? Drugs? Let’s hear it. What’s the big guy’s kink?”

Eric just stared, not looking away until Christopher turned his attention back to Eric, leaning closer into his personal space and sniffing again. “I don’t smell anything different; is there such a thing as a bi-guy vibe? Maybe that’s what it is.”

“Get off.” Eric pushed Christopher away and looked at the other men, the closest he had to friends right now, sad as that statement was, and wondered what he could tell them about what it was like to drive Marc Evans. How could he make them understand the strange pull he felt towards the vital and successful entrepreneur and the way he had become a focal point in Eric’s life?

Eric couldn’t deny the anticipation that filled him every time he pulled the stretch into the winding drive at the Evans Casino. He never knew what to expect; where they would be going or what they would be doing. It might be as simple as driving some of Evans’s clients to different locations on the strip or further out to some of the more tourist-friendly spots; it might be something totally different.

But there was something else. Something Eric didn’t know how to explain.

The strange tone of their relationship had been set that second trip. Once Laura, the new PA, had walked away, Eric had gone back out to the limo and studied the itinerary provided. It had been pretty straightforward, a few different clubs with an estimated waiting period

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provided as well as the preferred routes Evans's security wanted him to take.

Surprisingly enough his cargo had appeared at the main entrance on time, an almost unheard of occurrence in Eric's short career as a driver. This time the group was eastern European. Evans sure got around. Eric had ushered everyone into the car and had stood there, holding the door open when the entrepreneur surprised him by hesitating before entering the vehicle.

"I'm glad to see the suit fit." The timber of the rough voice was lower than before, more intimate, and Eric shivered as the sound of it went right to his gut.

"Yes," he managed to say without stammering. "Thank you. I'm sorry my other uniform wasn't up to your standards."

Evans just smiled lazily at him, letting his gaze travel over Eric with satisfaction before he frowned. "No. That's not right at all."

Before Eric knew what was happening he had been spun around, and he felt the strip of leather being untied from where he had clumsily pulled his hair back. Eric let his eyes close in disbelief as Evans' hands combed through his hair, the elegant fingers rubbing his scalp and gently tugging at the auburn strands that fell so sensuously through his fingers.

He couldn't help the pleasure that zinged through him. Eric found the sensation of the strong hands in his hair unbearably erotic. It had been so long since he had been touched with anything other than impersonal kindness. The rest of their surroundings disappeared. The crowds moving in and out of the casino, the clients already seated in the limo—all of it ceased to exist.

Eric's world narrowed until it included nothing but the man standing behind him, humming slightly under his breath as he took up the strip of leather and starting at the base of the rope of hair he held captive, began wrapping it in the leather before tying off the ends.

"There, now," he announced with satisfaction. "That's how I want you to wear it."

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As if nothing untoward had happened Evans entered the limo, leaving Eric standing there, mouth agape and one hand reaching behind to feel the new arrangement of his hair. Warren's words ran through his mind, and he had to give himself a shake before closing the side door and moving back behind the wheel.

Each assignment had only become more surreal after that. Unlike before, the partition was never raised. It didn't matter who Evans was with or whether they were occupied in business or pleasure, he never raised the barrier between them. Eric could always look up into the review mirror and find those green eyes fixed on him with an intensity that was almost tangible.

At first it made him uncomfortable, catching the other man's eyes every time he looked up. It reminded Eric of Brad and the way his pale blue eyes were always watching him around the garage. Worse yet, Eric felt the same unmistakable and instinctive desire to please Evans that he did with Brad.

As time passed Eric found he looked forward to knowing that no matter what else was going on, there was always a portion of the entrepreneur's attention that remained fixed upon him. Eric found himself thinking of him as Marc now, unable to keep him at an emotional distance.

The driving schedule had become more and more erratic. Did the man never sleep? Or is that part of how he became so successful? Eric would drive Marc around till early morning, watching him drink and entertain his clients, and then be called back in three hours to drive the unruffled executive to yet another business meeting across town.

After the first such request and Eric's unmistakably rumpled appearance had resulted in a lifted eyebrow, Laura had arranged for five additional custom-fitted uniforms and a pass to use the employee locker room at the casino. Eric didn't want to disappoint Marc again and had even found a lint brush of his own to keep in the locker.

Gardner was in heaven, or so he continually assured Eric. A signed contract between Evans Enterprises and Discreet Limousine had yet to appear, but apparently they had reached a payment arrangement

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that was satisfactory enough for Eric to be taken off the regular schedule and kept strictly on call for Evans Enterprises use.

He had even gotten a raise out of the deal, which had made Eric wonder just how much money Gardner was making off him. Christopher, cheerful again after a weekend visit from his boyfriend, had told Eric that Gardner was worried Evans would try to hire him away from the company and wanted Christopher to pump Eric for information.

To Eric's eyes Gardner didn't seem worried about anything other than some mechanical problems with a couple of the limos, but then Eric didn't pay attention when the other drivers gossiped. He spent his time focused on Marc Evans when he was at work and Brad Torres when he was off work.

Eric couldn't seem to think about anything but the two men, and while he was getting to know Marc Evans, Brad Torres was still a mystery. Eric wanted to know everything about him. Where did he live? Was he involved with anyone? What kind of music did he like? What would that hard muscle feel like under his fingers?

Fuck, he had it bad. Warren's joking aside, Eric wasn't even sure of Brad's preferences despite the way he felt those blue eyes linger. Every time Eric's eyes closed, every time he lay down to rest, all he could do was think of the compelling blond and the attraction of his pale blue eyes. Those thoughts had a harder edge of darkness and violence that left him breathless and needy, unable to forget no matter how much he wanted to.

Sometimes Eric just wanted to beat his head bloody against the steering wheel as he realized he was spending all his time trying to please the two most unavailable, yet sexually compelling men he knew. Hell, he thought with disgust, maybe that was their draw.

He now understood the need for the extra confidentiality agreement for Marc. There was a whole lot of sex that went into some of these so-called business meetings. Sometimes there were pros involved and sometimes not. It Vegas it was hard to tell the difference. Drugs were a factor too, more than Eric was really comfortable with, but he told himself he wasn't being paid to be the morality police.

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It was a wonder he hadn't wrecked the limo the way his attention would fixate on the activities that took place in the back of the stretch. Eric hadn't thought there was much left that would shock him—he was wrong.

At least things here were different than they had been at home, and if he wasn't happy at least he was coping. In an odd way it took both Brad and Marc to fill the void in Eric's life and give him purpose, and Eric gratefully did his best to anticipate the needs of either man whenever he could.

"Hey, Eric!"

Fingers snapped under his nose, and Eric looked up in shock, realizing he was still in the diner. "What?"

"Forget it, guys," Daniel sneered. "We're not going to get anything out of him. He's got the same look Christopher has when he drives Wesley around."

Eric looked back down at his coffee. "The guy's really busy and doesn't sleep much," he offered, aware just how lame of a response that was.

"Never mind, keep your secrets. Just don't start fucking him like some of these other losers."

Before Eric could respond to Daniel's jibe Warren had made it back to the table, yawning as he sat down. "I'm beat, gonna head home. Rob and I are having a barbecue tomorrow, Eric. You want to come over and eat some charred flesh?"

"Yeah, I'd like that." Eric smiled at the cheerful young man. It would be better than sitting at home.

"Cool. Christopher will fill you in, right?" At the other man's nod Warren shook Rob's shoulder to wake him up again and dragged him out of the diner.



Chapter 7

THE solitary figure stood outside the garage and closed his eyes; his face turned up to the night sky. He needed a breath of air, a breeze that could blow freshness back into his life. He was drowning in the filth that surrounded him.

God, but he hated this time of year. The reminders. He told himself it was almost over. But relief wasn't in sight. Not yet. Would he have agreed to go along with this if he had known what it would take? Really known?

He rubbed his hand over his face. He needed to concentrate. He needed to remember why they were doing this and who they were doing this for. But he couldn't stop the questions that wouldn't let him rest. Had they done enough? Could they walk away right now and feel complete? The voice on the other end of the phone was right, he had gone to them. He had asked for this.

What would he decide to do if his partner in this whole damn mess walked away before he was ready to play out the final act? The strain was wearing on him; he could see it. He had only brought him in by playing on his feelings of guilt, and it didn't help when he deliberately made it hard for the other man. But he couldn't stop pushing. He needed him to pay for what he had done.

So far his partner had taken the punishment well. Better than *he* would have, being cut off from everything familiar. Guilt was a powerful motivator. He knew he had it easy in comparison; he didn't have the direct contact with the scum. He had his interim meets and a

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sense that he was going to have a life when it was over, but he still needed to be careful

Revenge. The very word was ugly. The results became even uglier. He had thought it didn't matter what happened to his partner, that's why he had sought him out and brought him in. The man needed to pay, to live everyday in the hell she had. It made him angry that the other man had now found something worth living for.

I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

He didn't know what he was apologizing more for—for what had happened all those years ago or for his partner's newfound desire to move beyond the past. He stood outside the garage and waited, hoping for a sign, for anything that would tell him his words had been heard. But even if the dead could hear, they weren't willing to speak, and finally he turned and walked back inside. He had to get to work.

ERIC stood beside the opened passenger door and nodded politely as guest after guest spilled out of the limo, laughing and talking as they made their way past him to the entrance of the casino.

When it appeared the last of the glittering group had exited, he moved to shut the door, only to be stopped by the sound of a husky voice.

“Eric.”

The voice flowed over him like molasses, rich and dark with just a bite of sulphur. Eric shivered as heard the deep voice shape his name.

“Come here, Eric. Join me. I'd like to talk to you.”

Ignoring the sense of unreality that washed over him, Eric bent and fumbled his way into the limousine.

“Shut the door.” There was a calmness behind the soft-spoken command that Eric responded to, letting it soothe his uncertainty.

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Once he was seated Eric heard the automatic door locks engage. He took a deep breath as he looked around the interior of the vehicle. The darkness seemed thick, almost alive as he struggled to see the man seated before him.

“Have you ever been in the back of one of these before, Eric?”

“Only to clean it.” Eric’s smile was rueful, but he was still struggling to see in the dark, not sure why he was back here.

“It’s like being in another world.” The rough voice was quieter now, softer. “Look up. Do you see the stars?”

It was hard at first; looking past the city lights, but as Eric obeyed the command his eyes adjusted, and he could begin to pick out the small lights in the sky through the limo’s glass roof.

“Yes,” Eric breathed softly; afraid of breaking whatever spell was being woven around him.

“Relax for me. Just remember, you can see out into the world but no one can see in. We are quite alone.”

Eric let himself sink back against the soft leather as he looked around once again. They were still parked in the winding drive of the Evans Casino, and he could look out through the tinted windows at the bustle of the crowd moving around the length of the vehicle as they streamed towards the entranceway. He could hear them as well, their laughter and conversation muffled by the steel and fiberglass that cocooned them.

“It’s quite liberating, this feeling, isn’t it? Being able to see and hear them, close enough to touch yet knowing they can’t see or hear you unless you want them to?” The voice was closer to him in the blackness, and Eric licked his suddenly dry lips.

“Would you like something to drink?” The voice backed away, and Eric wanted to whimper with disappointment, but he wasn’t sure why.

“Yes,” Eric croaked out, looking again through the shrouded darkness and finding for the first time the eyes that glinted back at him like some mystical creature in the endless night.

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“Why am I here?” Eric asked as he took the proffered glass with a slightly trembling hand. He took a sip, feeling the burn of the alcohol against the back of his throat.

“Why do you think?” There was lazy amusement now in the voice, and Eric felt a flare of anger.

“Is this some rich man’s game?” he blurted out.

“No games, Eric.”

The voice was closer again; Eric could feel the heat of the other man’s body and could smell the clean, faint odor of cologne and the tantalizing hint of aroused male beneath that. Eric shuddered as he felt the blood begin to pool in his groin.

Lips touched his neck gently, parting to let the warm wetness of a tongue slip through and lick him slowly and seductively under the ear. Hands reached behind his head, pulling free the leather tie that held his hair back.

“What...?” Eric gasped as the glass of liquor dropped from his suddenly nerveless hand. I’ll have to clean that up, he thought dazedly.

From the darkness beside him came a guttural sound, and the soft caress of lips was replaced by the sting of teeth. Eric’s body bowed helplessly upward, his head tilting to the side as the seductive pleasure filled his body.

“Good boy.” The husky voice praised his response even as a large hand reached down between Eric’s legs to firmly grasp the hard length through his trousers.

Eric groaned at the tight squeeze, his hips thrusting forward; already he wanted more, needed more. Wanted to please the owner of the voice and hand that gave him such pleasure.

“Have I ever told you how good you look in this suit?” The low voice continued to surround him, hypnotizing him with its warmth. “I knew you would look like this.”

Eric whimpered as the firm hand gave his cock a final squeeze and then moved upward to his suit jacket, undoing the buttons with

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practiced ease. He reached out blindly towards the body pressed close to his only to be rebuffed.

“My time to play.” The voice was commanding, and Eric let his arms fall back by his side even as his breathing increased in tempo. Eric felt himself lowered against the seat and wondered at his unquestioning obedience as he stared up at the stars visible through the glass set into the roof above.

The crowds were still moving about the vehicle, and Eric felt an amazing sense of freedom as his right nipple was mouthed through the silk of the shirt. The fine coating of saliva turned the already sheer material transparent, and the feel of teeth worrying at the aroused nub made him cry out in wonder as the teeth bit down.

The firm body pressed even harder against him in response to his cry, overwhelming him with weight and heat, and Eric whimpered again.

“You sound so sweet.” The words were whispered into his ear as he felt the thrust of a hard cock against his own, hot and demanding through their layers of clothing. There was a pinch of fingers on his tender nipple, and sharp nails dug in before they twisted and pulled to distend his already aching flesh. “Let me hear you again.”

Hands on his belt now, the sound of his zipper being pulled down, and then the coolness of air against his stomach for a moment before the heat of a hand closing around his balls made Eric cry out again and arch upward, seeking more of the delicious contact.

“Open your eyes for me, Eric. I want you here with me.” The clever fingers stretched behind the sac they held and gently caressed the tender skin found there.

Eric couldn't refuse that voice anything, and he stared up into the eyes so close above him, the pupils huge in the darkness of the limo. There was a cruel smile on the lips hovering over his, just parted enough for Eric to feel the brush of their softness and make him lunge to try and capture more of their touch.

Eric felt possessed as rough lips opened his forcefully, the tongue thrusting deep and finding every secret he had hidden within for

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safekeeping. One of those large hands gripped his throat, holding his head still and tightening as it curved around to cradle the base of Eric's neck. Eric again looked up toward the stars, caught by the shadows of movement from the people separated from him by only the brief shell of metal.

He had never thought of himself as an exhibitionist, but here, now, as the lips left his and kissed their way down his shivering stomach Eric felt like he was laid out in the middle of the pavement. Open and exposed to the crowd, excited that the passing eyes could watch his every quiver and hear his every gasp.

Eric cried out as the moist, wet heat seemed to swallow him whole. He was panting now, whimpering and wriggling as the suction increased in speed, and he knew he wasn't going to last. The heat and pressure suddenly stopped, and Eric groaned his frustration, his hips straining against the weight that held him down, his hands scrabbling across the smooth leather of the seat.

"I want to hear you." The dark voice commanded his very soul, and Eric could do nothing but obey. "I want them to hear you."

"Please...", Eric begged. "Please... more... give me more."

"Louder, Eric."

There was the sharp graze of teeth against his soft skin, seeking purchase as his whole length was swollen with blood and straining for release, before he was engulfed once again by the dark warmth.

He was owned.

Eric could hear his own cries, his moans as he pleaded for anything the dark voice would deign to give him. He was mindlessly twisting, thrashing about as he sought friction and pressure and pain. Anything that would send him over the precipice.

It was so close, and Eric could only beg now in unintelligible sounds.

So close—

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The pounding on the door woke Eric. He snapped abruptly from dream to reality, a sweaty, panting mess, crumbled sheets tangled about his hips, leaving him trapped.

“Fuck!” he exclaimed as he pushed his mass of hair out of his eyes with a trembling hand. The dreams were getting more intense.

“Eric!” He could hear his name being called through the cheap door of his apartment as he struggled to rise.

“Damn.” It was Christopher. They had decided it would be easier for Christopher to give Eric a ride to the barbeque when it had become apparent that for someone who made their living as a driver Christopher’s ability to give directions was absolute shit.

Eric grabbed the twisted sheet from the bed, wrapped it around his hips to hide his still painfully swollen hard-on, and stumbled his way to the door, struggling to get his breathing back under control.

“C’mon in,” he grunted, stepping back from the brilliant light and cigarette smoke that streamed in behind Christopher.

“Late night, Princess?” Christopher inquired sweetly, eyeing Eric’s lean, bare chest with appreciation.

“Fuck you. And leave the smoke outside.” Eric yawned. “Had to drive Marc to the airport this morning.”

“Marc is it?” Christopher looked around at the nearly empty apartment. “Love your decorator; they were really into the minimalist thing, huh?”

“I gotta shower.” Eric ignored Christopher’s comment and waved his hand toward the stools by the kitchen counter, the only place to sit in his apartment other than the floor. “Have a seat.”

“Sure.” Christopher watched Eric stagger back into the bedroom and headed into the kitchen hoping that there was a coffee maker despite the barren look of the apartment. It was obvious Eric was going to need some help being social today.

Once he was alone Christopher dropped his sunglasses on the counter and let his gaze travel around, seeking answers to the puzzle

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that was Eric Moss. Some people opened bathroom medicine cabinets; Christopher preferred to look at the big picture. But there wasn't a damn thing here to help him. The apartment was bare, not even furnished with the basics when it came to furniture.

Certainly there was nothing of interest other than the box and papers crumpled against the damaged wall beside the door. Now that was curious. As the coffee machine started to loudly burp Christopher wandered over to the coat closet, opening it up and whistling softly.

Now here was a story Christopher would like to hear. There were three, maybe four packages of various shapes and sizes tossed to the back of the closet. Christopher leaned in closer and sure enough, they all bore the same address. Most had "refused" stamped across the surface.

Christopher could hear the shower cut off, and he shut the door carefully, heading back to the kitchen and pulling up a stool. It was only a moment later when Eric came out, tossing his long, damp hair over one shoulder as he pulled a T-shirt down over his defined chest.

"Coffee?" Eric's eyes, more grey than green this morning, lit up when he saw the pot of coffee, and Christopher swore that if he wasn't Wesley's man his heart would have stopped. "You're a real lifesaver."

"I just know how horrible you are until you get caffeinated." Christopher shrugged.

"You noticed that, huh?" Eric looked over his shoulder as he grabbed a mug off the side of the sink. He gave the interior a suspicious glare before pouring the fresh coffee into it. "You want some?"

"Not even."

Eric leaned back against the sink and took his first grateful sip. He was still shaken by strange dream and the way his mind had conspired against him. "Not bad, thanks." He took another drink. "So what did I let myself in for here?"

"It's pretty casual. People will come and go. Gardner and Brad usually end up doing the cooking, if you can believe that. Warren and Rob just supply the entertainment."

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“Sounds... fun,” Eric ventured cautiously. He couldn’t believe the way his pulse started racing at the mere mention of Brad’s name. It all seemed so wrong; he had just had some weird-ass dream about Marc.

“Well, don’t sound so damn enthusiastic.” Christopher laughed. “You ready to go?”

Eric gestured to his mug. “Do you mind?”

“Go ahead and bring it.” Christopher just laughed harder. “If you spill that, it might cover the smell of puke from Daniel’s last trip in my car.”



Chapter 8

ERIC relaxed back in the lounge, enjoying the feel of the sun's heat on his face and watching the crowd with a tired sigh. It had been longer than he cared to remember since he had done anything this damn normal.

Warren and Rob had an amazingly large circle of friends, either that or word of the party had spread. Eric was mildly interested to see that there was a mixture of both racially and sexually diverse couples peppered throughout without any of the separation into sides he had seen so many times before.

The simple ranch-style house Warren and Rob shared had surprised Eric until Rob explained it had belonged to the younger man's parents, and rather than selling it when they moved, they let the two men move in and assume the mortgage. Eric had to agree with Rob's comment that it was better than an apartment, even if the suburban vibe didn't fit their images.

It did, however, have a great backyard pool and a nice-sized brick patio surrounding it. Eric had no trouble believing it was Warren and Rob who had hung the delicate pink and white fairy lights around the fencing as well as the larger ones shaped like various farm animals, some of which were positioned in questionable poses. He decided he wasn't going to ask about those.

He had gotten a hug from several people he didn't know when he and Christopher had showed up. Warren explained that it was simply joy he had made it alive what with the way Christopher drove anything

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but a stretch. Everyone within earshot had laughed at Christopher's indignant proclamation that he "was a professional, you know!"

There had been the usual two-cent tour of the house with the bathrooms pointed out to him, and it had taken everything Eric had to nod politely to a casually dressed Brad and not so casually dressed Gardner standing next to each other beside an enormous stainless grill. He didn't see Daniel anywhere in the crowd and idly wondered about his absence.

At first it was difficult to look across the expanse of concrete and see Brad and Gardner standing together. They looked surprisingly intimate despite all evidence to the contrary. That was all Eric could think.

His traitorous mind began playing over and over the mornings he would come in and find Brad in Gardner's office despite the fact he had never received a hint from any of the other drivers that there was something between the two men.

All Eric had to do was think about his dream, and the powerful surge of want and need would sweep over him again, leaving him breathless and unsure. It didn't matter that Marc had been the one in his dream, this time the want was directed toward Brad. He fought against the overwhelming desire to stride over and demand Brad's attention.

Fuck, but he was confused.

In the end it was simply better to sit back on the lounge with a drink in hand and watch the crowd. He tried to smile at Warren and Rob's raucous antics as they mixed and mingled with their friends, but he kept looking over at the grill where Brad and Gardner stood, his gaze drawn back again and again.

When Gardner rubbed his hand up and down Brad's upper arm and patted him on the back Eric thought he was going to be sick. He could only stare; knowing his misery was openly displayed and unable to mask it. He waited for Brad to look up and catch him.

There was a small group dancing to the music that poured out of the speakers precariously balanced in the open windows overlooking

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the patio, and Eric thought about getting up and joining them. It would be better than torturing himself by watching Brad.

He could see various circles where others were occupied playing cards (it was Vegas, after all, Eric reminded himself) and in between it all were happy, laughing, *normal* people all involved in nothing more than having a good time. And here he was—anything but.

“Ready for a refill?”

Eric looked up, surprised to find Brad standing beside him. “Yeah, thanks.” He took the proffered bottle, noticing that it was the same label as the one he had just finished.

“Not too many drinking that brand,” the other man muttered, tossing his longish hair back over one shoulder and gazing off into the crowd. “Do you mind if I smoke?”

“No, thanks for asking, though.” Eric settled back in the lounge, the condensation from the chilled glass bottle dripping onto his fingers. He lifted them to the back of his neck with a contented sigh; suddenly everything in his world was better.

“You need to be careful if you’re not used to the heat here,” Brad offered quietly, exhaling a smoke ring before settling down on the brick beside Eric’s lounge.

“Hmmm,” Eric murmured happily as he took a sip of the cold brew. “That’s a nice trick with the smoke. How long did it take you to learn that?” The smell of the smoke didn’t bother him like it did with Warren or Christopher. He wondered if it was the different brands of cigarettes or just because it was Brad.

“Ages.” Brad laughed at the question. “Sign of a misspent youth.”

“Is there any other kind?” Eric responded.

A small but comfortable silence settled between them as they sat and watched the crowd. A friend of Warren’s had drunk too much already and was hanging on Gardner, one of her hands around his neck, the other groping around his waist to grab at his ringing cell phone.

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Eric looked over at Brad to see what he thought about that and found Brad watching him quietly with those intense pale blue eyes, not paying any attention to Gardner. Before Eric could say anything, Gardner's voice carried across the patio.

"Brad! Daniel has a question." There was more than a hint of frustration in his voice as he struggled to remove himself from the young woman's clutching grasp while he held the cell phone out.

"Duty calls." Without using his hands for support Brad rose effortlessly to his feet, the flexing of his thigh muscles noticeable even through his baggy shorts.

"Thanks again for the beer." Eric looked up from the lounge, his eyes lingering on the taut strip of skin exposed as Brad's shorts sagged down past the sharp jut of his hipbone. Eric's senses spun, dizzy under the bright sun. He couldn't help but wonder how that sharp bone would taste beneath his tongue.

"Looks like I've got chef duty. There's steak and ribs. Just tell me what you want." Brad hesitated for a minute as if he might say something more, and then he turned and walked toward Gardner.

"You," Eric whispered as he watched Brad walk away from him and take Gardner's cell. "That's what I want."

"Talking to yourself now?" Christopher's voice was bright and cheerful, as was the frosted mug he clutched in one hand. The tiny umbrella hanging off the mug shook as Christopher flung himself down in the lounge beside Eric, but nothing spilled as he juggled his drink and cigarette.

"Picked it up from you, didn't I?" Eric fired back, wrinkling his nose at Christopher's smoke cloud. He wasn't sure what the strange quiet he had shared with Brad meant. He just knew he seemed to be noticing the other man more instead of less.

"Having a good time? Happy you came?" Christopher took a deep gulp of his drink.

"What are you, the hostess with the most-ess? I thought that was Warren's job," Eric said. He wondered what Christopher would say if

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he questioned the relationship between Gardner and Brad or told him about the weird dreams he kept having about Marc.

“Just doing my part to help you smile. You don’t seem to do a lot of that.” Christopher shrugged just a little too off-handedly as he took a puff off his smoke.

Eric looked at Christopher and felt his mood lift. Insanity apparently was catching. “What is this, another bet?”

Christopher blinked, long lashes fluttering down over his smooth cheek. “I’m crushed; I truly am.” He placed a hand on his chest for emphasis.

“Save it for someone else.” Eric took a deep swallow from his beer. “What are the odds and who’s in so far?”

“You know I can’t divulge that,” Christopher said indignantly. “That wouldn’t be fair. Ask me something else.”

“Okay.” Eric hesitated and decided to only ask part of his question. “What’s the story behind Brad?”

“Ooh, our favorite grease monkey?” Christopher smiled mischievously and raised one eyebrow. “I’ve got naked pictures, do you want to see?”

“Where’d you get...?” Eric broke off when he saw Christopher was teasing him. “Bastard.”

Christopher laughed with glee. “Gotcha! He does clean up awfully fine, doesn’t he?”

“Seriously, Christopher.” Eric didn’t know what was making him push like this.

Christopher looked over at Eric. “All joking aside, Eric? Everybody comes to Vegas for their own reasons. Usually private ones, understand?” Christopher cocked his head to one side, remembering the closet at Eric’s apartment. “If you don’t want someone poking around in your reasons, best not be asking about theirs.”

“Understood.” Eric let his eyes follow Brad for a moment as he stood beside the grill with Gardner. They both held long, silver tongs in

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their hands as they moved the meat over the flames, but neither man was smiling.

“Just so you know; be careful, okay, Eric?” Christopher caught Eric’s eyes again as he warned him. “Brad’s an interesting guy and all, but he’s in a whole different league than the rest of us.”

“Sure, man.” Eric nodded before changing the subject even as he wondered about Christopher’s statement. But he had better shut up before he exposed something he would rather keep hidden. “Tell me more about this Wesley character.”

Christopher smiled happily, Eric’s questions about Brad apparently forgotten in his desire to take advantage of a rare opportunity to talk about his long-distance lover.

“He came into town this last weekend,” Christopher confided. “He’s so tan and muscular from the work he does out at his ranch. I almost didn’t recognize him. Did I tell you he calls me now? Almost every weekend, when he remembers where he left his cell....”

Eric let Christopher’s words wash over him, nodding periodically as his eyes returned to where Brad now had his arm around an attractive brunette, not looking away when this time the pale blue eyes stared back.

THE party had been going on for hours, and Eric was drunk. He knew he was drunk because he was well past that comfortable floating feeling and incapable of anything other than vague coherency. He couldn’t remember when he had last felt like this, his senses spinning and his fingers numb.

He hadn’t meant to drink so much, but not even the day’s humorous distractions had kept him from thinking about Sara, or if not her, then Brad, and if not Brad, then Marc. Or he would think about how long it had been since he had felt anything other than the touch of his own damn hand, and he would drink some more.

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It was a smaller, more intimate group that now sat around a fire pit on the patio. Ridiculous really, considering the heat that still radiated off the cement. The party had thinned considerably as guests left to take advantage of the Vegas nightlife.

He had lost sight of Brad and Gardner earlier in the evening. The two men had been walking closer to the house. They appeared to be having an argument; Gardner kept waving his hands in front of Brad's expressionless face.

Eric had felt like a voyeur watching the uncomfortable moment, so he ended up sitting next to Christopher, and the two of them had been singing disjointed limericks to the applause of their audience who didn't care that they couldn't remember most of the words.

"Need something to drink." Eric stood slowly, wobbling as he found his balance.

"Have one of mine." Christopher blinked owlishly up at Eric from his reclined pose, an open beer in each hand.

"Nun... non... alcohol," Eric murmured as he stumbled over Christopher's legs and headed for the house. It was dark, just a few lights left on in the restrooms to help him navigate. "Shit," Eric muttered as he ran into a wall.

He found his way into the kitchen and pulled open the fridge. The light streaming from the open door illuminated the door to the pantry, and Eric looked up, surprised to see Brad leaning against the door while both the brunette he had been snuggling with earlier and a blonde woman pressed up against him as they all kissed. Eric could see Brad's hand as it kneaded the brunette's breast through her shirt.

"Sorry." Eric swayed in the open door of the fridge, unable to tear his eyes away from the trio so intimately entwined and feeling himself start to harden despite the amount of alcohol he had consumed. "Just be a sec."

"S'alright, Eric," Brad slurred as he pulled his mouth away, letting the two women continue to kiss each other with every sign of enjoyment. "C'mere."

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Eric blinked in surprise. Had he heard right? Brad's hand lifted from the blonde's ass and beckoned to him. Eric was unable to refuse, and the door to the refrigerator closed as he shuffled over to Brad.

"Having a good time, Eric?" Brad asked softly.

"I'm drunk," Eric confessed with a bashful grin. "Haven't been this soused in ages."

"Perfect." Brad grinned back at him. "I've got my hands full here, want to help?"

"What?" Eric swayed some more, feeling his world spin around him.

The blonde pulled her lips away from Brad's brunette and gave Eric a closer look. "He'll do just fine." Before Eric could gather his scattered wits, she dropped to her knees, pulled him forward, and then pushed his unresisting body against the pantry door beside Brad. "You know I have a thing for red hair."

Eric looked down at the top of the blonde head nuzzling against his crotch in the dim light and then back up at Brad's eyes. He had never seen them like this, warm and full of laughter. "Fuck!"

"Not quite." Brad smirked. "But maybe later." He used his hand to urge the brunette down to her knees in front of him and leaned his head back with a sigh. "Thanks for helping me out. I was afraid I was gonna have to really do some work here."

"You're such a lazy bastard, Brad." The brunette laughed up at him before reaching into the back pocket of her jeans. She pulled out two foil packages and handed one over to the blonde. "Time to wrap those rascals."

His head was swimming, and Eric didn't have it in him to protest when warm hands unzipped his fly and pulled his half-hard cock through the opening. He didn't even wonder about the strangeness of the situation. It had been so long, and it felt so good to be wanted, if only for a few minutes.

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“Christ,” Eric hissed as the latex was rolled over him and he was engulfed in warm, wet heat. His head hit the wood behind him with a painful thud, and the world continued to spin around him.

“She knows what she’s doing, huh?” Brad looked over at Eric, one hand resting in the hair of the woman on her knees in front of him as his hips moved steadily, pushing deeper into her mouth.

Eric mumbled incoherently in reply, and Brad laughed again, reaching over to ruffle Eric’s hair. “You look hot like this.” Brad leaned in closer to Eric’s ear while the two women continued to work them. “It’s a good look.”

His breath was warm on Eric’s ear, and Eric shivered as he opened his eyes to find Brad staring back at him. Without a word Brad closed the distance between them and pressed his lips gently against Eric’s.

This was so unreal, Eric thought. But, God, it was wonderful. Better than his dreams, even. The feel of the warm mouth suctioning him, Brad’s lips on his.... Eric let his own lips part, let Brad’s tongue find its way inside, and moaned at the slick and heated sensation.

Am I going to regret this morning? Eric thought dazedly. *Hell, do I even care?* Somewhere in the back of Eric’s mind he could hear Keith’s voice during one of their many arguments, telling him how he never thought things through and how he always ended up in stupid situations.

I wonder what my big brother would think of this?

“Shhhh,” Brad whispered against Eric’s lips, instinctively soothing Eric’s unrest while one hand traced the line of Eric’s jaw. “Whatever it is, don’t worry about it.”

Brad’s lips found Eric’s once more; sharp teeth nibbling and sucking the fullness of Eric’s lower lip into the welcoming warmth of his mouth, and soon Eric wasn’t thinking anything at all.



Chapter 9

ERIC yawned as he stood beside the front tire of the stretch, once again waiting for Marc and his guests to leave the nightclub. He nodded to a couple of drivers of rival companies he recognized from other nights spent aimlessly waiting outside for his cargo. Sometimes he didn't know why Marc just didn't stay at the Evans Casino and spend time entertaining at any one of the many clubs there.

Of course, if they did that, then he wouldn't be making a nice bit of change driving them around, would he? Eric rubbed the back of his neck. He was just... just what? Peevish? Distracted? He just didn't fucking know.

Well, he did actually. How about confused with a capital C?

Eric's cell rang, and he fumbled in his pocket, checking the screen display before flipping it open. "Hey, Christopher," he mumbled.

"Where are you?" Eric had to strain to hear; Christopher seemed to be whispering.

"Outside a club, waiting for Evans." Eric yawned. "What's going on?"

"Man, there is some shit going down here. Gardner is screaming to beat the band." The excitement in Christopher's voice was palpable.

"Who is it this time?" Eric's mind flashed to the argument Brad and Gardner had at the party.

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“Fucking Daniel....” Christopher’s voice faded out again. “...ever since Brad and then, you know....”

“What?” Eric pulled the phone from his ear and stared at the display. Stupid, he knew, but instinctive. There were plenty of bars indicating signal. “I’m losing you.”

His only reply was static, and Eric shut his phone. He really didn’t care about the drama at work and tried to stay out of it. But it was getting more difficult. Of course, Christopher had to mention Brad.

Eric didn’t know what he had expected after the party, but apparently it had been more than he thought. To his disappointment, Brad had been just as casual as ever around him, like it was no big thing.

There was no indication that Brad wanted to repeat those mind-blowing kisses or touches as much as Eric did. Christopher’s warning about Brad kept running through his head, and Eric even wondered jealously exactly what Christopher knew and how he knew it.

Faced with Brad’s nonchalance, Eric’s self-defense mechanisms kicked in, and he played it back just as casually to Brad, no matter how much he wished otherwise. Still, he had to remember they worked together, and that was the one thing he couldn’t afford to fuck up.

But that wasn’t the worst of it. Eric just wanted to bang his head against the side of the car to see what kind of brain matter, if any, would fall out, but he stayed standing, looking perfectly professional on the outside despite his inner turmoil. No, the worst of it was the hangdog, guilty feelings that swept over him now every time he saw Marc.

Eric couldn’t believe it, but there was no mistaking just difficult it was for him to meet Marc’s eyes in the rearview mirror now. He felt like he was sixteen again, caught sneaking into the house after his first blowjob and being busted by his big brother. Given what was usually going on in the back of the limo, well, in some ways that was just totally fucked up.

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Okay, so what he really meant was that *he* was totally fucked up. When he thought about it, Eric knew he had changed ever since he started driving for Marc, and not necessarily in a good way.

Before Evans, Eric had been making friends with the other drivers, just starting to relax and feeling he could belong there. Now with the erratic schedule for Evans Enterprises and his desperate crush on Brad, Eric was feeling even more isolated and alone than when he first started.

Ignoring every other weird thing about the whole situation, he needed to remember that he was, after all, just the limo driver. Marc Evans was the client; it was best to keep that in mind no matter what kind of weird vibe the guy gave off and Eric responded to. Not only that, he was a multimillion dollar client who could buy and sell Eric with the money he undoubtedly paid just for his socks.

Eric really needed to pull his head out of his ass.

Having reached that conclusion it was suddenly back to work; time to open the door and allow Marc and his guests to enter the big stretch once again. Over the last several weeks Marc had been pleased to use Eric and his knowledge of the Japanese language in the wooing of his clients, and tonight was no exception.

Eric smiled and bowed; most of the time he actually enjoyed this part of the job. It was always a thrill to see the visiting businessmen's eyes open wide at his ability to speak their language, and it gave him a jolt of pride to know he did it well.

Realizing a couple of the younger businessmen had too much alcohol in their system and were checking out some of the tourists passing by, Eric herded them back to the car and urged them to get in.

Through it all, Eric knew Marc was observing him carefully. Just a few weeks before it would have thrilled Eric to have those eyes on him; to know that Marc watched him. But now he felt uncomfortable as he remembered how easily he had given in to his loneliness with Brad and just how much he wanted to repeat the experience.

It would seem that despite his efforts at starting over, he wasn't all that different than the man he used to be. He was still the man his

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brother said he could never depend on. The same man who would drop into a bed or onto his knees for anyone who said a few kind words. The very same man who had been unable to keep his promise to watch over his brother's daughter.

His guts clenched, and Eric made the drive back to the Evans Casino in record time. He needed the evening to end so that he could find a way to clear his head and get past this latest bit of baggage he had managed to acquire. Maybe he would see if Christopher wanted to come over and have a few beers on his small balcony.

It was all he could do not to let his impatience show as Marc's clients fumbled and stumbled their way out of the limo with drunken exuberance. Usually he found it amusing and he and Marc would exchange wry glances at their antics, but this morning Eric just wanted them gone so he could be on his way.

Except things weren't going to be that easy.

As usual, Marc was the last to exit; most of the time they would just nod to each other. Sometimes if Marc were particularly pleased with the events of the evening, he might make a comment or two to let Eric know. But today he stopped directly in front of Eric, waiting.

Oh shit.

Eric kept his eyes fixed on the collar of Marc's shirt, loosened by this time of the morning, but still rather crisp and sharp-looking despite his many exertions. Eric couldn't help but wonder if that shirt alone cost more than his monthly rent.

"Is everything okay, Eric?" The man could make a fortune doing nothing but voice-overs. Eric didn't know what it was in particular that made Marc's voice so appealing—the timber, the pitch? And strange as it was, he might think he was hearing real concern.

"Yeah, I mean, yes." Eric nodded sheepishly. "Everything's fine."

A strong hand took hold of his chin and gently raised it until his eyes were forced to meet Marc's green ones, less piercing this morning, more concerned.

"Are you sure? You've not been yourself."

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Eric shrugged, unable to look away and unable to lie when he was staring into Marc's eyes. "Just some... personal stuff. Nothing I can't handle."

"You'd come to me if there were a problem, wouldn't you, Eric?" Marc's hand moved up to cup his cheek, and Eric had to resist the urge to turn his face into that rough palm. *Just a few minutes' comfort, that's all he wanted.* Instead he focused on trying not to groan every time he heard that rich voice say his name; it felt like Marc was stroking his every nerve ending simply with his voice.

"I mean it, Eric. I want you to know that you can come to me." The large hand left Eric's cheek and moved to caress the nape of his neck, applying pressure for a brief moment and then sliding down Eric's chest before finding its way back to its own pocket. "For anything."

Eric wanted to protest the removal of the warm hand from his skin, but he was too shocked at Marc's unprecedented touch to do more than nod and watch as the blond strode confidently into the casino.

Oh shit was right.

THE garage area at Discreet Limousine was practically deserted when Eric finally pulled in. Marc's late nights were turning more and more into early mornings, and most of the night crew had already finished and left for the day while the majority of the day-shift drivers weren't due to show for another two or three hours.

Warren and Rob had been working double sixes and were probably already home tucked safely into their bed. Daniel had been alternately absent or increasingly moody, and after Christopher's call Eric was happy not to have to listen to him in his own agitated state. Gardner would be in shortly, but Eric wanted to avoid his boss. He wasn't in any mood to deal with Gardner's constant probing for indications on how things were going.

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He knew Gardner wanted to tie Evans Enterprises up in long-term contract, but so far Marc had optioned Discreet for his personal driver only, and that was only as long as it was Eric. Gardner was getting more and more frustrated with the situation. It was the most common state of mind around the garage lately. Marc seemed to find the whole mess horribly amusing, and Eric just wanted to stay out of the middle.

The men's room at the garage was deserted, and Eric gratefully stripped off his suit and shirt and pulled on the spare tank and jeans he kept in his locker. He could have used the facilities at the casino, but he had been too stunned to do anything but let habit take over, and he had driven back here purely on autopilot.

Easy strides took him to the back for the cart with his cleaning supplies. He nodded longingly to Brad, who gave him a casual smile in return before the man turned his attention back to the vehicle he was working on. Come to think of it, just what hours did Brad work? He always seemed to be there whenever Eric was, no matter what the hour.

It didn't take Eric long to get his ride cleaned and restocked, not like it had in the beginning. Not that he scrimped on anything either. He never wanted to give Marc a reason to be embarrassed by him or, by extension, his ride. It had all become second nature.

Eric's thoughts kept returning to Marc and his comments. His invitation? It was easy to swap out the heavy crystal glasses for clean ones and wipe down all the bottles and stoppers without paying attention. Next on his unconscious list were cleaning the interior and exterior windows, vacuuming the carpets and ashtrays, and wiping the leather seats and wood trim until everything glowed.

It was when he was vacuuming that he came across a leather bound planner of some sort that had fallen down between a couple of the seats. It wasn't very large, and without looking at it further Eric shoved it into the back pocket of his jeans to give to Gardner later.

"Hey, man." Christopher had breezed in and out of the garage while Eric worked, and this time he sauntered over to yell over the noise of the vacuum. "How's it going?"

Eric grunted. "It's going."

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“Well, that’s positive at least.” Christopher put his hand on Eric’s back and leaned his head into the limo. “What are you up to today?”

“Nothing much.” Eric turned off the vacuum so he didn’t have to yell and looked up into the dark eyes. “You want to come over and drink some beer when I’m done?” Maybe the company would make him feel better.

“Sure.” Christopher patted Eric familiarly on the ass. “I’ll meet you over there; you’re almost done, right?”

“Right.”

There was no telling what Christopher had been doing there that early. He was probably just digging for more dirt, but at least his eager agreement meant that Eric wouldn’t be alone and brooding on his balcony this morning. Eric knew that part of Christopher’s eagerness was really because no one else would listen to him talk about Wesley the way Eric did. That was fine; it was better than being alone.

Eric was just finishing up and hauling his cart to the back when Brad straightened up and gave him a wave to slow him down.

“Hey, Eric.” His voice wasn’t rich with texture like Marc’s was, but it was low and pleasing, the soft drawl able to send shivers of remembrance down Eric’s back. The two men were so different, but each struck a chord within Eric he couldn’t ignore.

“Hey yourself.” Even though he was mad at himself for being so attuned to both Marc and Brad, Eric couldn’t help but smile at the memory of how Brad tasted. He let his eyes linger on the small vee of skin where the zipper of the greasy overalls was left open. Very warm and soft skin from what he could drunkenly remember.

“You about finished?” Those blue eyes were looking down at the wrench Brad held in his hand, polishing it with one of the ever-present red cloths that seemed to be everywhere in the garage.

“Yeah, I’m looking forward to some down time.” Eric couldn’t help but yawn and stretch as he spoke, thinking of just how good that idea sounded. He flushed as Brad’s eyes intently followed his

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movements and felt himself start to harden in response to the touch of those eyes.

“You want to go have some coffee before you head out?” The words were said slowly, almost as though Brad was trying to hold them back.

Eric just blinked. “Uh... yeah... wait, oh shit!” He cursed as he remembered. Of all days! For a brief, frozen moment Eric struggled with the thought of just ditching Christopher. He had done things like that a hundred times before.

In his life before.

“Sorry, Brad, I promised to meet Christopher. Maybe another time?” Even though he knew it was the right thing to do, the only thing he could do, the words that came out of Eric’s mouth tasted bitter and had nothing to do with the longing for whatever he could get right now. Nothing to do with the fear that if he didn’t take Brad up on his offer, it wouldn’t come again.

“Yeah.” Brad just smiled and turned back to the engine as if Eric’s answer didn’t matter. “You bet.”

Eric stood there for a brief moment, angry and confused all over again, and then he slowly walked back to the stretch to gather his keys and the rest of his gear. *Fuck this.* He thought angrily as he grabbed his shirt and threw it on over his tank, heading out to his truck with rapid strides.

He pushed the door open, letting it slam against the exterior wall and surprising two men who were walking up to the door. Even in his distracted state something about them made him uncomfortable. They sure didn’t look like customers, and this wasn’t exactly a walk-in kind of business.

“Hey, you.” The taller of the two men spoke. His eyes shifted from Eric to the door behind him. “We’re looking for Torres. He here?”

Whatever this was, Eric didn’t want any part of it. He jerked his thumb towards the open door and kept walking.



Chapter 10

THE two men rested up against the wall, pelvis pressed against pelvis in a motionless mimicry of the sex act. Legs meshed and arms entwined, one lone hand rested in the back pants pocket, the other pressed up against a lean cheek. Their bodies were hidden and throwing only faint shadows against the concrete wall.

If anyone were determined enough to walk into the darkness and try to see what they were up to, they wouldn't have been able to recognize just who it was in the corner of the big bay. It could have been any couple seeking a moment alone.

"I thought we said we'd never do this here, man." The voice of the man up against the wall was rough and low, deliberately so to keep the sound from traveling. "What's up with you?"

"You need to stay away from him." The hissing voice was full of anger and uncertainty.

"They checked him out. He's clean." The shrug was just as infuriating now as it had ever been.

"He's trouble. It follows him, and we don't need it."

"It's been a while since you've known just what it was I needed." The man against the wall shifted slightly, letting his muscular thigh press and rub between the legs of the man pinning him. "Or were willing to give it to me."

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“Don’t do this to me.” Foreheads pressed together as the voice softened and pleaded. “I’m so fucking tired.”

“I know.” Remorse filled the man against the wall, and he let his hand slip out of the back pocket and glide up to the nape of the neck bowed before him, remembering the feel of the soft skin. “I’m sorry. But fuck, man. You at least get a break, you know? I have to be on all the time.”

“I know. I know.” He felt a rush of satisfaction. It was so easy to play him; it always had been.

The two men stood there in the dark, each of them remembering what had brought them to this point.

“You never let me tell you how sorry I was. For everything.”

“I couldn’t.” Silence stretched between them once again. “So you’ll stay away?”

“I’ll think about it.” He paused before he decided to speak the truth. “But I don’t know if I can.”

There was a sound from the garage, a door banging, and the two men broke apart and headed in different directions, the moment between them gone as if it had never happened.

THE traffic light hung like a bloody red eye above the deserted street, but there was nothing other than some windblown trash for it to rest its gaze upon. At this hour of the morning there was little traffic on the Vegas roads, nothing but quiet emptiness on all sides of the intersection, and Eric fumed as he sat behind the wheel of his truck and waited for it to change.

Why in the hell wasn’t this light at least blinking to indicate a four-way stop? His fingers tightened their grip on the steering wheel, turning white with restrained impatience, and for a few seconds Eric toyed with the idea of just driving through the light.

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No one was around to see, and anything beat just sitting there motionless waiting for the light to turn. Eric felt like he needed to move, to do something, *anything* that would get rid of this feeling that he was going to explode.

His foot feathered on the gas pedal, and for few anxious seconds Eric's heart raced along with the engine as he actually contemplated mashing his foot on the gas and saying the hell with it all. It was building up again inside him, struggling to find a way out. Fear, anxiety, anger. All of it churning below the surface and just waiting for a chance. Eric was afraid of where those feelings could lead him.

A horn blared unexpectedly behind him, loud in the silence of the morning, startling him out of his daze, and as he looked up Eric saw the fickle light had turned green on him anyway. He drove slowly through the intersection, putting his blinker on and pulling off to the right and into the empty parking lot of a darkened drug store.

The other car drove past him as he turned, horn sounding again, and from his rearview window Eric could see the passenger's extended hand and raised middle finger as the car sped by. *Assholes*.

Eric sat in the parking lot and rested his head on the steering wheel. He was breathing heavily in short pants that did nothing to clear his head, and it took a few minutes to acknowledge that he was gripping the wheel once again, plastic indents forming on the soft flesh of his palm. Fuck, he needed to calm down before he got back on the road.

He closed his eyes and pried his fingers free, letting the painful bite of the steering wheel absorb his attention. Driving was his livelihood. He couldn't afford to get a ticket. Of course, Eric thought wryly, it would be the perfect way to self-destruct, wouldn't it? Lose his job and watch the rest of his world crumble in the resulting chaos.

Except this time Keith wouldn't be around to pick up the pieces and give him a fresh start. *Christ!* Eric let his head bounce off the wheel. He thought he had gotten over such shit. Abandonment issues, Keith had called it. The shrink at the hospital had agreed, tacking on some other bullshit that Eric couldn't even remember.

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Eric didn't know what to call it, and he didn't care. All he knew was that there was a sharp pang and a twist of fear deep inside that told him, no matter how irrationally, that if he didn't go along with Brad right then and there he would never get another chance. And God, but he wanted another chance.

He had been drunk that night, his head spinning, his senses reeling from the overload of sensation, but Eric could remember the tang of Brad's sweat, the sour taste of beer and cigarettes on his breath and tongue, and the gentle strength of his hands on Eric's jaw, holding him captive even though escape had been the last thing on Eric's mind.

Christopher was the closest thing to a friend he had anymore and had been one of the first people he had connected with here in Vegas. Eric still wanted to scream and vent his feelings of frustration and anger at the younger man.

While logic told Eric it was just the way things were, emotionally it was as if somehow this situation was Christopher's fault for agreeing to come over that morning. It didn't matter that Eric had invited him. Christopher's acceptance meant he was the one making Eric choose between what he knew was the right thing to do and the empty hole inside; the monster waiting behind a door he had never been able to close. It was there, waiting, dark and unrelentingly hungry no matter how he tried to ignore it.

Eric pressed his forehead even harder against the wheel. It made it easier to pretend that way that the sting of moisture in his eyes and the pain that caused it were from his own actions. He took a deep breath and then another. He was too old to be acting so childishly, he tried to tell himself. But the familiar clawing fear inside him was difficult to ignore.

It was always the same, no matter what he did, no matter what he tried. Every time, every single time he tried to get close to someone or let them get close to him, they would end up leaving. His parents, past lovers, and in the end even Keith, Bonnie, and Sara. Was it better to let whatever this was with Brad end now before it even had a chance to start?

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Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Each bitter curse was punctuated by the thump of his head against the hard plastic beneath it. *Enough.* Eric pulled his head away from the steering wheel and wiped at his face with both hands like a child; drawing air in through his open mouth.

He was going to head to his place, have a few beers with Christopher, let the guy ramble on about his boyfriend, and forget about all this shit. Eric glanced over into the passenger seat where he had tossed his gear when he had gotten in the truck and saw the missed call indicator on his cell.

Now what?

It'd better not be Gardner. That was all Eric could think even as he hit the button to play the voice message without bothering to check the number. To his dismay the message was from Christopher.

Hey... uh... Eric... I'm really sorry about this, but Wesley just called, and he just got into town, and I wasn't expecting him, and I was wondering if I could, you know, have a rain check on that beer? I mean....

The gist was obvious even without the rest that followed the disjointed message. Christopher's laughter, soft but unmistakable, and a deeper voice Eric couldn't quite make out. Eric could only smile bitterly at the irony.

He should have just gone ahead and blown Christopher off. He could have been with Brad right now. Instead, here was his reward for trying to do the right thing. This was his reward for wanting to become a better man. *He always ended up alone, every single time.*

A lone garbage truck rumbled down the road in front of him. Eric stared out at the street, watching the black smoke that trailed along behind it. He thought about heading back to the garage and seeing if Brad was still around, but it just seemed too desperate, too needy. He wanted Brad to think better of him.

Besides, he had made his call, now he had to hang with the consequences. If that meant going home alone to his empty apartment and drinking himself into a stupor just to get some sleep, than then so be it.

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Eric pressed his back into his seat, twisting in an attempt to pop the vertebrae, and he felt the dig of something unyielding against his back. He reached a hand down to his back pocket and grimaced as he pulled out the small leather planner he had found in the limo earlier. *Shit*. He had meant to leave it in Gardner's office to be returned to Marc.

But hey, he had nothing going on right? Nothing to do and no place to be. Without further thought Eric put the truck in gear and headed to the casino.

ONCE he removed his sunglasses, the overhead lighting in the employee garage hurt his eyes. It was only as he sat there in the parking structure of the Evans Casino that Eric debated the wisdom of his actions. He wasn't in his uniform anymore, and his personal vehicle didn't have the casino sticker that the stretch did.

The only reason he had even been able to access the gated lot was because he had his casino ID—even that may not have worked if the guard on duty hadn't recognized him and bought his story about leaving something in his locker.

Maybe this wasn't the right time. Eric looked at the planner on the seat beside him and picked it up curiously. He flipped through a few of the pages, realizing as he did so that the writing was Japanese. It belonged to one of Marc's clients, then.

His written grasp of the language wasn't as competent as his verbal, but Eric knew enough to figure out that this should be back in Marc's hands, not Gardner's. Let him decide what to do with it.

Once his mind was made up the rest was easy. Eric entered the casino through the employee entrance without pause. He was no longer distracted by the flash and sparkle of the casino's expensive interior.

He recognized several of the security staff on duty and stopped briefly when they greeted him. Eric had been there enough in the last

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several months that despite his casual attire no one challenged him when he made his way to Marc's private elevators.

It was only when he was outside the penthouse door that Eric hesitated. He wiped his nervous hands down the sides of his pant leg. What was wrong with him? It wasn't like this was his first time at Marc's private residence. It might be considered outside the scope of his normal duties, but he had often come up to this level to escort clients.

He didn't know what he was so balled up about. The maid would answer like usual; Eric would flirt with her just a little and then hand the planner over. Sure. Maybe it was the daylight, maybe it was his casual clothing. Or maybe it was just his unsettled state of mind.

Before he could decide to either ring the bell or change his mind and leave the door to the penthouse swung open, and Eric stared down into a pair of very surprised hazel eyes.

"Wow!" The eyes belonged to a little girl. She wore a stretchy purple outfit with a cartoon character on it that Eric remembered as one of Sara's favorites. He would have guessed she was maybe around ten, and her wide eyes traveled from his booted feet all the way up to his hair hanging loose around his shoulders.

"You're really tall!" Without pausing for breath she smiled and continued chatting. "You've not seen my kitten out here, have you? She got away from me, and I'm always afraid she'll get out. Are you here to see my dad?"

A response deemed unnecessary she turned back to the suite and yelled, "Dad! Someone's here to see you."

"What?" The voice that yelled back a reply was tired and even sounded surly, but it was unmistakably Marc. Eric couldn't help but smile; it had only been a few hours since Eric had dropped Marc off, and it was obvious he hadn't gotten any rest.

"What is it now, sweetie? You know I just want to get some sleep." Eric recognized the rough voice, that was for sure, but the figure that came to the door wasn't one Eric had ever seen. It must have been Marc; at least, the bloodshot eyes and tousled blond hair definitely

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belonged to Marc. But the rest, barefoot and clad only in jeans that sagged low beneath his navel, wasn't the man Eric had ever imagined.

Eric stood there speechless, letting his eyes absorb the sight of Marc shirtless and casual in a way that only made him more attractive, especially in his vulnerable state.

This wasn't the smooth entrepreneur, the controlled businessman who Eric was in awe of. Here was the real man kept hidden behind the professional mask, and for some reason, this man looked happy to see him.

"Eric?" Marc's long, almost prehensile toes dug into the deep pile of the carpeting. "Is everything okay?"

Marc's daughter looked between the two men before shrugging and taking off for the interior of the penthouse, calling for her kitten and leaving the two men staring silently at each other.

If Eric was taking in every aspect of Marc's changed appearance, Marc was drinking in the sight of Eric in his jeans and tight tank visible under the opened plaid shirt.

"Your hair's loose." Marc reached up, apparently too tired to censure himself, and touched the auburn curtain of hair that swung beside Eric's sharp cheekbone, tucking it behind Eric's ear and smiling with pleasure at the silky way it felt in his hand. "C'mon in, please."

Marc's touch broke the spell his sudden arrival had placed on Eric, and Eric flushed and backed away into the hall, embarrassed at his near stupor. "No, really. I'm sorry... I just found this... and... well...." Eric felt like an idiot. He should have just gone home. He held the small planner out in front of him like it was a shield that could protect him until Marc took it from him, flipping through the pages and whistling.

"Koshi will owe me for this one." He grinned at Eric, his tiredness disappearing for a brief moment. "Please, come in and let me thank you properly."

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“Well....” Eric hesitated, but before he could find a graceful way to beg off, he was following Marc into the penthouse’s foyer, and the heavy door swung closed silently behind him.



Chapter 11

HE was pacing as he waited for the phone to ring this morning, barely able to control his anger. The ashtray by the bed was overflowing with butts, a sign of the long, restless night behind him. He looked at his phone again, willing it to ring with such intensity that when it did he jumped with surprise.

“What the hell’s going on?” he snarled into the tiny phone.

“Good morning to you too.” There was an unprecedented humor in the voice on the other end, and it angered him further.

“Are you guys trying to blow our shit here or are you just that stupid?” He picked up the pack of cigarettes from the nightstand and cursed when he found it was empty. He crumpled the cellophane in his hand and tossed it to the floor in disgust.

“Slow down.” The humor was gone. “What happened?”

“What happened? How about those two limos showed up with brand new easily recognizable federal GPS trackers attached!”

“I didn’t know anything about that.”

“Bullshit.” He grabbed a fresh pack of cigarettes from the dresser, cradling the phone between his neck and ear while he tapped the end of the pack on the inside of his wrist. “You know everything that goes on. We barely got those fuckers out of there before they were found.”

“Listen—”

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“No. You listen.” He was breathing heavily, the memory of how close he came to having his cover blown leaving him on the edge. “You don’t trust us anymore; you want to shut our operation down, fine. But you don’t ever put our asses on the line like that again without telling me first or next time so help me God, next time we will just walk away. And that’s from both of us.”

ERIC followed Marc through the large penthouse suite to an outer, glassed-in atrium. He didn’t look away from Marc’s broad back, but then he had already seen enough of the suite on his prior client pickups to know it glowed with dark, rich woods and deep jewel tones.

Decorating may not have been high on his list, but Eric knew it took a lot of cash to create such a deceptively casual Mission style that was attractive in its sheer simplicity. The first time he had been here he had been surprised at just how unostentatious it was; another piece of the Evans puzzle.

“Have a seat, Eric.” Marc gestured to a comfortable-looking chair partially out of the direct sunlight and close to the wicker loveseat he lazily stretched out on. Newspapers were scattered about the rough tile floor and a thermal carafe sat on the end table along with some heavy mugs. It was obvious that this was where Marc had been when his daughter had yelled for him.

Eric sat down gingerly, sinking into the soft cushions, and Marc watched him as his face tilted instinctively upward to catch the warmth of the sun, auburn hair falling loosely back, sparks flaring where the rays of soft light touched the shining surface.

There had to be a fountain somewhere in the lush greenery; Eric could hear the faint, musical sweetness of the water moving over rocks. He could understand why Marc was winding down out here rather than in a darkened room behind curtains somewhere. It was peaceful and relaxing, and Eric felt the hard knot of confusion within him begin to loosen.

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“Would you like some coffee?” Marc grinned almost sheepishly at Eric. “You’d think I’d be better off drinking warm milk if I want to get some sleep, but the caffeine has never disturbed me.”

“Yes,” Eric replied huskily, still feeling dazed from the events of the morning and now seeing this side of Marc, so different than the man Eric saw night after night. “That would be nice.”

Marc turned an extra mug face up and proceeded to pour some of the dark, fragrant liquid into it. “Cream or sugar?” he asked politely. His manners seemed at odds with his casual appearance.

Eric just shook his head. He could hear the words, but they were muffled, dulled by the distance they traveled to reach him. God, this was strange. He had planned to spend his morning getting drunk with Christopher, listening to tales of the younger man’s absentee boyfriend and tossing ice cubes down on the pedestrians below his balcony for a few laughs.

Now here he was, sitting in a garden paradise across from a half-naked Marc Evans, drinking the best coffee of his life and apparently expected to make polite conversation. Eric swallowed past the lump in his throat and wondered if he would be able to speak at all.

“I’m glad you brought that planner over.” Marc handed Eric the mug, and Eric shivered slightly as their fingers brushed. Just barely an hour ago he would have killed to spend time with Brad. He didn’t understand what was wrong with him.

“Not only did you just score me some major points on what’s shaping up to be a difficult deal, but it gives us a rare chance to get to know one another better.”

Eric nodded silently. He was amazed by the implication Marc was interested in getting to know him. He looked around the open, sunlit space filled with a rich assortment of greenery he didn’t recognize. It was as different from his minuscule apartment balcony as night was from day. “This is amazing,” he commented hoarsely.

“You should come see it at night.” Marc took a swallow off his own mug and sighed with obvious satisfaction. “I’ve put some lights up

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at the girls' request, but you can still manage to see some stars, even over the glare of the city."

"The girls?" Eric asked. His brain stuttered over the mention of stars, images of the glass roof in the limo flashing into his mind.

"My daughters." Marc leaned back and shifted to get more comfortable, the change in his position drawing Eric's attention to his taut stomach and the fit of his worn jeans. Eric's mouth suddenly felt dry. "I have two daughters." Marc paused. "Do you have any children?"

"I have a niece, Sara." Eric hesitated, surprised at his sudden desire to expose himself to this man. "I helped raise her when my brother died."

"I'm sorry," Marc said. He leaned forward and placed his hand over one of Eric's. "It's difficult to lose someone you love."

Eric gazed down at the warm hand on his skin and then back up at Marc, meeting the darkening green eyes and wondering if the helpless longing for comfort within his own was visible. What was happening to him?

"Does she live with you?" As quickly as it had touched him Marc's hand was gone, safely tucked back in his lap where Eric could only imagine being.

"No." Eric's hand felt cold and alone with its covering of Marc. "Her mother remarried and there were... difficulties."

"Ah, I'm sorry." Marc appeared to understand that there was more unsaid.

"So how did you end up in Vegas and, luckily for me, driving a limousine? You're not from here originally?" Marc's voice was cheerfully inquisitive.

Eric shrugged. "Is there anyone living in Vegas that's from here? Just luck in the end, I guess. You know the saying; it seemed like the thing to do at the time." He wondered what would happen if he told Marc the truth, that when he had been released from the hospital he

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couldn't face living in the city that held so many memories. With nowhere to go, any place was better than where he was.

"Is that your personal motto then?"

Eric paused, struck by the sudden low note in Marc's voice. "I don't think I have a personal motto. How about you?" Eric asked, changing the subject. He was afraid of what he would reveal if Marc kept probing. He slouched back in the wicker chair and stretched his legs out, one hand holding the mug while the other dropped down over the arm of his chair, unaware of how the movement accented the lean lines of his body. "What part of the Evans myth is just that, and what is real?"

Marc laughed, his eyes crinkling with honest humor. The little lines that appeared in the corner of those green eyes fascinated Eric. "There's a myth, is there? Bullshit, all of it! Just hard work and the desire to never be poor again." Marc grinned again and winked at Eric. "Well, that and Lady Luck of course, can't forget her. This is Vegas after all."

"You've been poor?" Eric couldn't help sounding surprised. He had thought that working-class stiff made good was simply part of the legend.

"I've been poorer than I ever want to be again." Marc folded his legs up under himself, feet tucking under the shins as he ended up sitting cross-legged in the loveseat. "I won't have that for my girls."

Eric was suddenly reminded of Keith. "A father always wants better for his daughter." He swallowed his memories with a sip of the hot coffee. "So what brought you to Vegas rather than some other more industrial city?"

"Opportunity." Marc's face changed, the pleasant mien giving way to one more powerful and confident. "It was all here just waiting for someone with the strength and will to take it."

"And that was you?" Eric didn't want to think about how comforting he found Marc's inner strength, how much he wanted to lean against him and rest for just a short while, how weak he felt in comparison, and how much it reminded him of his brother.

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“For the moment.” Marc shrugged. “Someone else will come along soon enough. All I can do is take what I need and make sure I have enough to do what I want when I’m done. That’s the real trick. Knowing what enough is.”

“Are you there yet?” Eric felt warm and drowsy despite the coffee, the sun soaking into his flesh.

“Almost. But that’s enough about me. How about you? Do you like driving?” Marc leaned his head against the back of the loveseat, the sun having the same apparent lulling affect on him that it did on Eric. His eyes closed like a cat’s in the heat, the action baring his throat to Eric’s suddenly interested gaze.

“It’s okay,” Eric stuttered slightly, disturbed by the feelings Marc aroused in him. “It’s definitely different driving for you rather than driving the tourists around.”

“I like having you drive me,” Marc said quietly. “I always feel comfortable when you’re at the wheel. It’s like there’s some kind of connection between us, like you’re a part of me. I always know you’re there, looking out for me.”

Eric hesitated as Marc put into words the very feelings he had tried so hard to deny. He hadn’t been wrong. Marc had felt it too.

“Some might say I’m foolish, but I’ve learned to always go with my gut. Will you come and work for me, Eric?” Marc’s casual tone suddenly became more businesslike, the green eyes opened, suddenly sharp and piercing.

“I do work for you.” Shocked at the sudden change, Eric was upset as well. So Gardner was right. Eric was surprised at the hurt he felt. All of this getting-to-know-you bullshit was just that; a way to soften him up.

Nothing personal, just more business.

“You know what I mean.” The determined green eyes met his. “I want you to leave Discreet and come to me. Only me. You’ve become important to me, Eric. I won’t deny that. I’d feel better knowing you couldn’t leave me.”

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“Are you talking about employing me or owning me?” Eric was confused, struggling to keep up with the changes around him.

“Whichever you would prefer.”



Chapter 12

“HOLD on!” Eric yelled as the heavy pounding on his front door woke him up. He held his head and grimaced as he felt the vibrations rumble through his skull. “Hold on already!”

It was really only a soft knock, but the way Eric’s head felt—well, right about now a mouse fart would have been too loud. Eric pushed himself up off the floor and ran his hand over his face. Christ, he must have been drunker than he thought when he had finally left the bar last night. At least he had made it inside his apartment, even if he must have dropped to the floor once he was inside the door.

What a way to waste a couple of days off.

Eric hadn’t known what to think after he had left Marc’s. He had been sitting there too stunned by the other man’s words to respond when Marc’s daughter had come out to the atrium. She had curled up on the loveseat next to her father, and Eric found himself being watched by two pairs of discerning eyes.

Small talk had never come easy to him, and the little girl’s presence reminded him of the relationship Sara and Keith could never have. It all became too much; all the guilt and confusion and everything else all tied up. He had made his excuses and left Marc’s in a daze only to find himself at a loss at what to do next.

Marc’s parting words still rang in his ears, and Eric knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep.

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“Think about it, Eric,” the other man had urged. “I want you by my side.”

That was great for Marc, but what about Eric? He had no real idea just what it was *he* wanted. Eric thought he knew what Marc represented to him: safety, security, a place to call home that had been lacking since the death of his father and brother. But he also knew it was foolish to hope for anything. If he really thought about it, just what was the entrepreneur offering him?

Then there was Brad. Who asked for nothing and promised even less in return.

How could he be drawn to two very different men at the same time? What did that say about him? Restless from the turmoil within, Eric had wandered around Vegas. He tried to lose himself in the massive swell of humanity that filled the streets and shops, letting the crowd push him one way and then the next, playing tourist for the first time since he had arrived.

But not even the mindless anonymity of being one of the crowd would shut down his brain, and he ended up sitting in some hole of a bar off West Cheyenne, afraid he was falling back into old and dangerous habits but unable to stop himself.

Eric looked at his watch and blearily tried to focus his eyes. None of thoughts circling through his abused head answered the question of just who was knocking on his door at such an ungodly hour of the morning.

Maybe it was Christopher. Who else would come by his apartment? He breathed into his hand, letting the exhalation of air bounce back into his face. Damn, but his breath was foul. Too bad for whoever was at his door.

Without bothering to look though the little peephole in the apartment door, Eric just pulled it open and squinted at the brightness of the Vegas early morning sun.

“Brad,” he said stupidly as he looked at the man in his doorway, one muscular forearm extending a cup of coffee in his direction. Eric took the coffee automatically.

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“Hey, Eric. I come bearing caffeine.” The blond looked amused as he let his gaze travel up and down Eric’s wrinkled form. “Rough night? What does the other guy look like?”

“Huh?” Eric tried blinking to see if that would help kick-start his brain.

“Never mind.” With a soft smile Brad reached out and pulled at Eric’s already disheveled hair. “Can I come in?”

“What?” Eric blinked again, but it wasn’t working. “Sorry, sure.” He stumbled backward into the apartment. Brad followed with easy grace, taking a sip off his own Styrofoam cup.

“I’m at loose ends this morning,” Brad offered up as he looked around the empty apartment. “Thought I’d see if you wanted to take a drive.”

Eric still felt dazed. Brad was here?

“Yeah. Sure. Okay.” Eric looked down at himself. “Let me take a shower first.”

Brad waved him off, settling himself on one of the stools by the breakfast bar much as Christopher had done on his first visit, and Eric stumbled off into the bedroom. He peeled off last night’s clothes, wrinkling his nose at the stale odor of cigarette smoke and beer and dropping them to the floor. Thank God he hadn’t brought some stranger home with him.

“Not much for decorating, are you?”

Eric should have been startled by the sound of Brad’s voice so close behind him, but he wasn’t. It just seemed natural that he would be there. The room was small, the air close, and Brad seemed to loom over him in the confined space.

The blue eyes were warm today, and as Brad’s hand closed on the back of Eric’s neck Eric ignored the fact he was naked, ignored everything that had happened to him recently, and let himself be drawn close to the other man. It was where he wanted to be, after all.

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“I’d kiss you. But the way you smell then I’d have to kill you.” There was no mistaking the amused affection behind the rough words.

Eric couldn’t help the bark of laughter than left his lips or the groan as the movement jarred his aching head. “You’d have to be a brave fucker to kiss me right now,” he agreed as he rested his forehead against Brad’s neck, breathing deeply and feeling his tension and uncertainty dissolve. “Christ, but I’m all fucked up.”

Brad gave him a push toward the bathroom, his hand lingering on the skin of Eric’s lower back in a gentle caress. “Go shower. Drink your coffee. Then we’ll go for a drive.”

THEY were out in the desert. Somewhere. All this rock and sand looked alike to him. Despite the coffee Eric had fallen asleep again. Apparently dozing while Brad drove was his new vice, or at least a good cure for hangovers. Maybe it was the soothing movement of the truck or the coolness of the air conditioning that his apartment’s tiny unit never could achieve.

Maybe he just felt safe.

Eric was drifting, enjoying the vague sense of unreality. Rather than thinking so hard, it was easier to let events unfold around him. They were on Highway 160. He let his eyes open enough to read the road markers. But the only clues to where they were headed he had seen were some touristy billboards advertising Death Valley.

“We going to California?” he asked drowsily.

“You ever been?” Brad asked. He took one hand from the steering wheel and ran it through Eric’s hair. He seemed drawn to it, to letting the silky strands fall through his fingers.

“Hell, that’s where I came from. Northern though.” Eric leaned into the touch. “Made my big escape and drove till my money ran out.”

“You didn’t get very far.” The observation was made quietly and without judgment.

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Eric snorted. “I didn’t have that much money to begin with. How about you? Where are you from?” He remembered Christopher’s words, but he just couldn’t help himself.

Brad’s hand returned to the steering wheel. “Born and raised in Vegas.”

Eric’s eyes widened as Brad actually answered his question. “I didn’t think anyone was really from here. Or is it simply an urban legend that everyone in Vegas is from somewhere else?”

Brad shrugged. “I left for a few years. Tried the old grass is greener on the other side thing. Guess I had too much sand in my blood to really fight it for long. Sometimes it’s just easier to go with the flow.”

“What about your family, lovers?” Eric couldn’t help but ask.

There was a long pause and Eric regretted he had raised the subject. Finally Brad answered quietly. “Sometimes family isn’t enough, Eric. Sometimes love isn’t enough.”

“That sounds like a story.” Eric kept his own voice soft in response.

Brad took a deep breath, and his fingers tightened on the steering wheel. Eric watched, remembering the way the pain had cleared his own mind. “Are you sure you really want to hear this, Eric?”

Christopher’s words at the party ran through Eric’s mind. *Everybody comes to Vegas for their own reasons. If you don’t want someone poking around in your reasons, best not be asking about theirs.* What right did he have to pry?

Eric dared to reach out and lightly cover one of Brad’s hands with his own. He was amazed the way it trembled under his touch. “Never mind. I don’t mean to....”

“It’s alright.” Brad took a deep breath and captured Eric’s hand in his, dragging it down to his lap and gripping it tightly, gathering his nerve. “Short version is I got into drugs when I was younger. Some bad men, some bad situations.” He shrugged. “I left town. Thought I had it

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

handled. Turns out my boyfriend's little sister decided to follow in my footsteps."

"Shit." Eric found he was gripping Brad's hand as well, the two of them locked in a contest of shared emotional pain.

"She didn't get out. Her brother blamed me. My folks blamed me. I blamed myself." Brad looked down at their hands before he consciously loosened his fingers and rested Eric's hand on his thigh, rubbing the whitened fingers, watching the flush of circulation return. "We don't see each other. It's better that way."

"I'm sorry." Eric couldn't think of anything else to say.

"I am too." Brad gave a funny half-smile. "You have no idea how much." He raised Eric's hand up to his lips and brushed them softly across the back of Eric's knuckles. "So yeah, I've been gone and back."

When Brad kept hold of his hand this time, gently entwining their fingers and letting it rest on Eric's thigh, Eric let his head loll back against the seat cushion and thought of Sara and Keith. "So now that you're back, do you know what you want?"

Another shrug was his response. "For the most part. Mainly I know what it is I don't want, and I'm good with that. How about you?"

They drove in silence for a few minutes. Eric watched as they passed another highway marker. "I thought I did. Now I just don't know anymore." He turned his face back to Brad. "I always did the expected thing, you know? It didn't matter if the expectation was that I'd succeed or that I'd fuck up; it was all the same."

Brad squeezed Eric's thigh, his silence encouragement for Eric to continue.

"It's a spin on that old question. If there's no one to expect anything of me, then what do I do next? Do I even exist, or did I die along with all their expectations?" It felt weird to verbalize his inner doubts, but good as well.

"You know what, Eric?" Brad paused as if searching for words, and Eric looked at him intently. "You were right. You are definitely fucked up."

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Despite himself Eric felt his mood lighten as he collapsed with laughter. “Asshole.” He stretched out, relaxing even more in his seat.

“I tried to stay away from you.” Brad stared at the road in front of him. “I’m not a good person to know. You deserve better.”

Eric was stunned by Brad’s statement, by the words that might have come out of his own mouth. He swallowed. “I’ll take my chances.” He paused. “So what is this here?” Eric felt brave as he gestured between the two of them and felt even better when Brad sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck before clasping Eric’s hand once again and answering.

“Fuck if I know.”

There didn’t seem to be anything else to say, and they drove further in this new and comfortable silence. The view was shifting; never the same and yet always constant; nothing around them but desert, rock, and sand, and it lent a quiet peace until Brad finally broke it.

“Since we’re being all kinds of honest and shit, what’s with you and Evans? I can tell there’s something going there.”

Eric considered the question and finally settled on the truth, feeding Brad’s words back to him.

“Fuck if I know.”



Chapter 13

“WHERE are we?” Eric asked as they drove into what appeared to be a small town in the middle of a desert basin. Large, purple-tinted hills rose around them, remnants of the area’s history as a Pleistocene lake. The shadows cast a welcome shade on the few buildings he could see. They had driven past a school and turned right before an apparently deserted post office.

“Welcome to Tecopa, California,” Brad said as he gestured toward the open road before them, half-covered by drifting sand.

“And what exactly is here?” Eric couldn’t help but question as they passed some buildings clustered together. He read the signs; there was an art gallery and café, the library and fire department on one side of the road. On the other was a community center and....

“You’re kidding me, right?” Eric laughed with sudden delight.

“Nope. Eric, my man, we are here to take the waters.”

Brad pulled into the lot for the Public Hot Springs and Campground, the sand and gravel crunching under his tires as he put the vehicle in park in front of two low, concrete buildings.

“You brought me to a bathhouse?” Eric asked bemusedly.

“Best cure I know for a hangover and anything else that ails you. Give me your wallet and anything in your pockets.” Brad put everything in the glove box and then waited for Eric to get out and stretch his legs before locking the vehicle. The sun was hot, and Eric’s

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brain was still rolling around unpleasantly inside his skull despite his attempts at hydration.

“Be right back.”

Eric let his gaze follow Brad while he walked over to a small building across the parking lot. That really was a fine ass. Turning away, Eric took a look around. The building he was in front of was marked “men.”

Sure enough, when he looked over at the other it was marked “women,” Okay, that was kind of interesting. Also interesting was the total lack of cars in the parking lot. Business wasn’t so hot? Ouch, Eric admitted. That was a really bad pun, even given the state of his shriveled and alcohol-soaked brain.

It only took a few minutes before Brad came back and handed Eric a small wristband which Eric put on without question when he saw the mate on Brad’s wrist. There were two dressing areas inside the building they entered: one open to the sky, the other with a roof over it.

He followed Brad into the shaded and roofed room, his bloodshot eyes grateful for the welcoming darkness, and watched as Brad began removing his clothes and hanging them on the wall hooks without concern.

There was no else around, and with a shrug Eric took off his own clothes, trying not to gawk too openly at Brad’s decidedly muscular body. There wasn’t anything resembling an ounce of body fat under the golden skin, and it was only Eric’s headache and uncertainty that kept him from getting hard at the arousing sight.

Brad’s putting their belongings in the glove box began to make sense when Eric saw that there weren’t any lockers.

“Catch!”

Eric managed to hang on to the bar of soap Brad tossed at him, and the two men walked into a small restroom complete with a couple of shower stalls.

“It’s mandatory to shower before we enter the hot springs. That and being nude.” Brad winked at Eric. “This is probably the only

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recreation area in the U.S. where you'll get hassled for wearing swimwear."

"How'd you hear about this place?" Eric asked as he soaped himself down. The water from the shower was almost uncomfortably hot, and he danced backward out of the spray. He looked for a cool water knob with no success.

"I once spent a summer riding my bike along what they call the 'Old Spanish Trail', and this was one of the stops along the way. If you like it we'll have to come back by at night, there's a pool open to the sky, and the view is fantastic."

"It's not too crowded." Eric shuffled along the small corridor behind Brad, admiring the firm ass in front of him once again. This time it was uncovered, allowing Eric to see the clench and play of muscle with each stride and the dimples on the side of each flank.

The facility seemed deserted, a fact he appreciated. Eric didn't necessarily have a problem with nudity, but he was having a difficult enough time appearing casual around a very naked and appealing Brad.

"Competition. This used to be the only game in town, but there are a couple of private resorts and touristy type places that have opened up here as well. You know, RV pits. Hot springs are big business with the arthritic set. These are the baths the locals use, and as you can tell, there aren't too many locals."

The two tubs were large and made of what appeared to be smooth painted concrete. One was labeled "cool" and the other "hot"—Brad, of course, headed straight for the hot one. Eric had expected some type of smell or discoloration, but the water was clear, clean-looking, and there was no sulphur smell at all. He held onto the handrail as he descended the shallow steps.

"What's in this?" he asked as he lowered himself gingerly into the water with one hand cupped over his balls. Christ, it was hot. "And how hot is it?" Eric didn't see any kind of thermometer.

Brad settled into the water with a low sigh of satisfaction and no sign of discomfort. "State regulations say they can't be over 104

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degrees Fahrenheit. The cool pool is, of course, a couple of degrees cooler, but I never saw the point.”

“Sure,” Eric grunted as he finally dared to risk exposing his package to the heat. It was almost painful to move.

“Mainly the water has salts in it, some minerals. It’s pretty low alkaline. The water here is supposed to be on par with the springs at Baden Baden.”

“I’ll keep that in mind next time I’m in Baden Baden.” Even as Eric joked he could feel himself relaxing in the water, the warmth melting away his discomfort.

“Did you know that there’s a scientific field of study on naturally occurring mineral waters? It’s called balneology.”

“Uh huh,” Eric murmured drowsily in reply as Brad’s commentary floated over his head.

“Overseas it’s considered part of the health system. You see a doctor, and he’ll write you a scrip to come bathe.”

“Uh huh.”

“You should be here when it’s busy; all these old guys sit around in here and tell stories about their prostate problems. It’s a real trip.” Brad looked over when there was no response from Eric to find the other man’s eyes closed and his head back against the side of the pool. He smiled and stretched his arms out along the edge; letting his fingers brush the wet ends of Eric’s hair away from his slack face.

AS Eric drifted back to consciousness he could feel someone touching him, firm hands stroking tenderly through his hair and tugging slightly through the ends. He sighed happily. “Nice,” he murmured without opening his eyes.

“You feeling better?” Eric recognized the voice now and remembered that he wasn’t floating peacefully in his apartment’s tiny

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bathtub but was in some hot spring somewhere with Brad. He let one eye crack open and could see Brad sitting close to him in the hot pool.

“Almost human,” Eric replied softly, wondering how long he had been asleep. Up close like this he was struck once again by the amazing beauty of Brad’s face. It shouldn’t be, as it was all angles and planes, but the very strength of the features lent to the man’s appeal.

“That’s good.” Brad’s head was close to his, their temples rubbing together, red and blond hair melding and spilling into the water to drift around them. “You need someone to look out for you, Eric.”

“Do I?” Eric wasn’t sure why he was whispering.

“You do,” Brad affirmed as he closed the distance between them, one hand rising from the water to caress Eric’s cheek as he brought their lips together.

There was just something about kissing another man, Eric thought through the haze of pleasure. It was different than kissing a woman, different and infinitely more arousing. Brad’s lips were soft, but they were also firm and knew how to best coax a response from Eric.

Eric sighed, the breath leaving his lungs and mixing with Brad’s as the other man invaded his mouth with a flickering tongue that seemed determined to seek out his deepest secrets. It seemed so long ago that he and Brad had first kissed. Even then Eric had been drunk and unsure of his memories.

This was definitely worth remembering.

Eric turned his body toward Brad. The sound of the water sloshed around them, faint and distant beneath the thrumming pulse of his blood as it raced to his groin. Either he was used to the heat, or he was going to risk scalding a vital part of his anatomy. Perhaps it was simply that the feel of Brad’s skin under his wet hands was hotter than the water or that the feeling of being alive for the first time in days was worth the risk.

The kiss deepened as one of Brad’s hands traveled behind Eric’s head and the other down onto his lower back to pull their bodies flush. Eric groaned at the sensation and rubbed his stiffening cock against

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Brad, seeking friction through the liquid that surrounded them, only to slide off the firm, wet muscles.

Brad's hand moved down under Eric's ass, cupping his cheek and easily lifting him, the mineral salts in the water aiding Eric's buoyancy. He grunted as Eric responded eagerly, wrapping his legs around Brad's waist and letting Brad's erection rub against the underside of his balls.

"Oh God," Eric groaned again, their lips still mashed together in what had become a sloppy and energy-stealing kiss. He rested his arms on Brad's shoulders and let his legs slide down, trapping Brad's cock between his thighs and squeezing when he felt the instinctive thrust forward from Brad in response.

"Is this what you want?" Brad gasped as he broke the kiss, his face buried in Eric's neck as he panted and trembled in Eric's arms with the tension of holding back.

"Hell, yeah," Eric grunted into Brad's ear. "Give it up for me."

"Squeeze tighter." Brad ran his hands down to Eric's hips, tightening his grip as he thrust deep between the strong thigh muscles, pulling Eric toward him at the same time. "Oh God."

They were anchored in one of the corners of the pool; Brad tucked into the vee with Eric's body weight holding him pressed against the cement. They kissed again, deep, devouring kisses as they grunted and groaned into each other's mouths.

Hips rocked and ground together while the water splashed around them. Eric worked at tensing his thighs, feeling the smooth heat of Brad, hotter than the water, hotter than fire, as he slid back and forth against the soft and secret skin high up and between Eric's legs.

"Now. Touch me now!" Brad's fingers dug deep into Eric's skin, bruising with the intensity of the hold like he was afraid if he let go, Eric would slip away in the water and leave him hanging on the edge. Eric reached down between his legs and took hold of Brad firmly, squeezing the head so that when Brad came with a muttered curse the creamy fluid coated Eric's hand under the water.

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Brad sagged against the corner of the pool, fingers reaching up to stroke Eric's hair and tangle in the silky wet strands. Even as he panted and murmured Eric's name, Eric was coming. He released Brad's cock and stripped his own with hard, brutally short strokes that were all he needed to bring himself off as well.

Eric felt drained and let his forehead rest against Brad's as the two of them floated together without words.



Chapter 14

THE phone kept ringing. He stared at it, looking away from the road ahead of him and debating whether to answer. With no voice mail it just continued to ring and would do so until they hung up. But they weren't going to hang up. He knew that.

"Yes." He blinked, disorientated. How long had he stared at it before he answered?

"Where have you been? You don't call, you don't write. We were getting worried." That wasn't worry in the familiar voice.

"I've been busy."

"And your friend?" There was something behind the question, he could hear it.

"He had some shit to take care of." He kept his voice low. He knew the other man shouldn't have risked the time away. He had warned him.

"And apparently people to do. Don't let him start thinking with his dick at this point. It only leads to trouble."

Fuck. They knew. "Leave it alone."

"Touchy, touchy." It was the mockery in the voice that made him angry. Who were they to judge? "Does this mean I don't get invited to the wedding?"

"What do you want?" He snarled. He refused to discuss his partner with them. He had decided the redhead was something the other

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man needed, a reward if you will, in memory of a time long past. A token before this all came to the inevitable conclusion and he forced him to pay for his sins.

“We’re set. The decision has been made to roll it out next week.”

“What?” He was stunned. They had waited for this day, longed for it. But now? It was too soon. “I thought we were holding?”

“There’s concern at some of the higher levels. They’re afraid this whole thing is going to fall apart. Your threats are making them uneasy.” The voice paused. “The word is you’re becoming unreliable.”

“Fuck.” He ran his hand through his hair. He couldn’t think. A week. Shit. “I thought they wanted it all?”

“With the size of the shipment coming in and what we already have it will be enough for a win. Nobody wants to risk this falling down around our ears when we are so close.”

Was this the sign they had been wanting? His hand was trembling again. “Give me the playbook. I’ll get a hold of him.”

He pulled off the road, lighting a cigarette and talking through what was going to go down. He was going to have to move up his own timetable. He didn’t really have a choice, did he?

THE light in the room was dim, the crooked blinds managing to block out most of the Vegas sun despite their awkward angle. Brad fumbled for his cell, trying to remember where it had landed in their frenzied haste to get undressed.

He rolled off the futon pad, shifting the still slumbering Eric and bringing him closer to consciousness. With a grunt Eric rolled, his naked body moving into the warm spot now open and empty beside him as Brad reached out and silenced the ringing.

Brad flipped the phone open, cursing quietly as he read the text message displayed on the small screen. Things were moving too fast,

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and now he had let Eric become a complication. Brad cursed again as he fumbled for his shoes. He had to get moving.

“Hmm?” Eric made some type of interrogatory noise, nothing coherent but enough to catch Brad’s attention.

“Shhhh. Go back to sleep, Eric.” Brad found his missing shoe, and unable to help himself, leaned in, stealing a quick kiss from Eric’s chapped and swollen lips, trying not to be distracted by the memories of just how they had gotten that way.

“Brad?” Eric murmured drowsily. The air was thick with the smell of sweat and sex, and his lips curved in a sweet smile at the images coming slowly back to his sleep-fogged brain even though his eyes refused to open.

“I got to go, babe.” Brad wondered if he could say anything. If he should say anything. He had tried to stay away from Eric, tried not to give in to the strange connection between them and his desire to bring a light back to those shadowed grey-green eyes.

Damn, he fucking knew better than this.

“I didn’t mean to wake you.” Brad kept his voice low and soothing.

“You didn’t.” Eric’s voice was sleepy, his eyes still closed and his hair a tousled mess as he pushed his face into the pillow where Brad’s head had rested.

Brad laughed softly and stood up from the pad, pulling the sheets up over Eric’s relaxed body. He turned away and then hesitated before turning back toward his lover of the last few hours.

“Eric,” Brad said, his voice urgent, but a loud snore was his only reply.

“Fuck.” It was a long way down, but Brad bent and kissed Eric again. He walked into the empty living room and kitchen, looking for something he could write on, but there wasn’t anything he could lay his hands on and he didn’t have time to waste looking further.

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“Damn it.” He headed into the bathroom and fumbled in the medicine cabinet until he found a can of shaving cream. Thankful it wasn’t gel, he shook it up before spraying it on the mirror. It would have to do. Once back in the kitchen he picked up Eric’s cell, punching the numbers into his own before he let himself out of the apartment.

It was going to be a hell of a day.

HE was late for work. Damn it. Of all days. Eric shut the door to his apartment behind him and hurried down the steps to his truck. He had wanted to get there early and see Brad. Nothing special, just *see* him. Okay, maybe steal a kiss and tease him about the initials he had found written on his bathroom mirror with shaving cream.

Eric could tell he was grinning just at the thought of Brad and the time they had spent together. Well, he was flushing too, the color immediately visible under his pale skin. He was acting like a teenage girl, and he knew it. Keith always told him he jumped into things without thinking.

But he didn’t want to think about Keith right now. Besides, how could it be wrong when he felt so alive? Shy and nervous, yes, those things as well, but also tingling with life and energy for what seemed like the first time in ages despite his lack of sleep.

They had made the drive back to Eric’s apartment in record time; talking, sharing. Eric had told Brad about Keith, about Sara. About the bad time, as he had come to call his self-destructive period and his resulting stay at the hospital. Brad hadn’t judged him, hadn’t thought him weak. Brad had simply reached out and touched his cheek with a gentle hand, letting him know without words that it was okay.

When they had finally arrived at the apartment, it was almost comedic how quickly they undressed, falling onto the futon without hesitation with only a few complaints from Brad about wanting a real bed.

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The only sleep Eric got was when Brad had leaned over and kissed him fiercely one last time and said he had to go. Only then, exhausted and sticky, covered with a mix of sweat and come, had Eric really fallen asleep.

In the back of his mind there was part of Eric that was afraid to hope and afraid to trust that kept telling him this had been a hit and run, that he was just a novelty or a way for Brad to kill time. Despite Christopher's words of warning, Eric didn't want to believe that. He couldn't let himself believe that the man who had been so tender was just playing him.

Eric thought back to the moments in the truck and their conversation, Brad's hesitant uncertainty and quiet support, and while they were in the hot spring, his questions to Eric about what he wanted. Those weren't the actions of a user. There was something building between them; Eric knew there was.

Damn, but he couldn't wait to repeat the experience. Eric's face flushed again as he remembered some of the things they had done. It was going to be hard to spend time driving Marc and whatever client he was trying to impress around tonight when all Eric wanted to do was get a chance to spend more time with Brad.

Despite all the emotion Eric was feeling, it was just another night at the garage, and the rest of the drivers were coming in to start their shifts. He could see Rob and Daniel over by the men's room door, deep in discussion.

"Hey guys." Eric waved to them as he entered the garage and headed over to where his stretch was parked.

"Hey Eric." Rob waved back pleasantly, but to Eric's surprise, Daniel just scowled and shoved his hands deeper into his pants pockets. "Where you been lately?"

"Just been working some weird hours. You know." Eric felt another grin break across his face, he just couldn't help it. He felt so damn good.

"No, I don't know," Daniel said bitchily. "All I know is that I'm getting tired of working doubles so you can drive Evans around all the

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fucking time. Why don't you let the rest of us soak up some of that gravy?"

Eric looked at Daniel in surprise, stung by the sudden attack. "What? Hell, talk to Gardner if you want, Daniel. I don't give a shit." Jesus, what had crawled up his butt?

"I've tried that already, fucker says Evans only wants you, and I don't buy it! You got to have something on Gardner!" Daniel's tone was belligerent, and Eric could smell the liquor on his breath as Daniel moved closer into his space. "You waltz in here and get the best ride in town while I've been busting my ass all these years for what?"

"Leave it alone, man." Rob tried to get between Daniel and Eric, but Daniel kept pushing him away.

"I'm tired of leaving it alone." Daniel was practically yelling now, and Eric just looked at him with disgust. He didn't have time for this.

"Christ, man, go home and sleep it off, why don't you?" He turned away from Daniel, eager to find Brad.

"Don't you fucking turn your back on me!" Instead of the punch Eric was expecting, Daniel's shoulders slumped, and his aggressive mood changed, his voice turning plaintive instead of argumentative. "Everything's changing, man. Everything's different."

"Go have a seat, Daniel," Rob urged him into the restroom. "I'll tell them you're sick tonight, okay?"

"Yeah, yeah." Suddenly Daniel slung an arm around both Rob's and Eric's necks. "I really like you guys, you know?"

Eric patted him awkwardly on the back, turning his head to avoid Daniel's breath and wondering what the hell had brought this on, looking at Rob for some clue. "Sure, man. We like you too."

Rob pushed him into the restroom and then turned and faced Eric with a sigh, rubbing at the back of his neck. "Sorry about that. He's upset."

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“I see that.” Eric tried not to be too obvious as he looked over Rob’s shoulder to the tool pit. Instead of Brad’s familiar bandana there was some big guy, his bald head shining a dark chocolate in the overhead lights. Eric squinted to get a better look. “What’s going on?”

Rob looked around quickly before he leaned in closer to Eric and whispered, “Christopher’s giving his notice. We just found out this morning.”

“What?” The stranger in the tool pit was momentarily forgotten as Eric stared at Rob in shock. “When did this happen?”

“Well, it hasn’t happened yet, but Warren saw the paperwork on Gardner’s desk, and he called me, and I told Daniel, and Daniel’s being all weird.”

“Fuck,” Eric breathed. “Where’s he going? What’s he doing?” He tried to remember the last time he had actually seen Christopher, much less heard from him.

“It’s Wesley, I guess. He’s finally talked Christopher into moving out to the desert with him or some bullshit. Crazy, huh?” Rob tensed as the office door opened and then relaxed when he saw it was Warren.

“Fuck,” Eric repeated as Warren walked up and wrapped his arm around Rob.

“Hey guys.” He leaned his head on Rob’s shoulder and looked at Eric. “You heard, huh.”

“I’m stunned,” Eric admitted.

“We all are.” Warren nodded. “Daniel’s taking it pretty hard. Gardner’s been all over his ass about some special run he did, and now this just set him off. Kinda sucks, but who knew?”

“Yeah,” Eric agreed.

“But hey, look at you, all smiles and spiffed up. You get some or what?” Warren nudged Rob, and the two men laughed as Eric’s face turned bright red.

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“Oh yeah, you are so going to have to tell us about it,” Warren crowed. “Inquiring minds want to know.” He pushed himself up against Rob and leaned the two of them over toward Eric.

“Fuck off.” Eric laughed. He was unable to be mad in face of Warren’s enthusiasm, and frankly, the two of them looked ridiculous side by side; Rob tall and big and Warren so short and slim. “Hey, you guys seen Brad? I need to ask him about my ride before I head out.”

Warren had turned toward the office, his arm still around Rob when he heard Eric’s question. “Brad? Oh he’s gone. Took off this morning for one of his mystery jaunts for the boss. Gardner said he’ll be back when he gets back. No one ever really knows until he just shows back up.” Warren shrugged. “Antoine is back in the pit; he usually fills in when Brad disappears like this. Go ask him.”

“Yeah, thanks,” Eric managed to reply over the sudden frozen feeling in his chest before he stumbled to the men’s room and brushed past a surprised Daniel. All of his earlier fears and concerns rushed back into his mind. A lifetime of doubt mocked his tentative hopes and certainty. Eric’s knees hit the cold tile only seconds before he lost the churning contents of his stomach into the stained bowl.



Chapter 15

THE sun was hot, the rays piercing through the thick glass panes of the atrium and then deep into his flesh, leaving him sweating and breathless. Eric was sitting in the wicker chair once again, sprawled out on the soft cushions, wondering just what exactly he was doing there.

“Whichever you’d prefer.”

Marc’s words rang in his ears, and Eric could only stare over at him. Did he mean it?

As if in answer Marc rose gracefully from the loveseat and stretched his hand out to Eric. “Walk with me, Eric.”

Could this be considered making a deal with the devil? Unable to refuse, Eric reached out and took Marc’s hand with trembling fingers, letting the other man pull him up from the chair and close to his side.

Fingers, long and graceful, wrapped themselves around Eric’s hand before tightening to an almost painful grasp that didn’t release as they began to walk slowly through the atrium.

The atrium garden was well kept; trees in pots and flowers planted in beds surrounded them. It was an unexpected oasis in the city of sand, glass, and steel where neon and the glare of a hundred thousand light bulbs were normally the only relief.

The tile walkway was heated by the sun that streamed through the overhead glass roof, and Eric was hypnotized by each delicate step of

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

Marc's bare feet. First the heel, then the roll forward over the arch to the ball of the foot and slight grip of the long toes.

They didn't speak at first. Didn't do anything but walk slowly and silently on the warm tile, breathing deeply until Eric understood it was more than just a path, that it had been laid out with purpose.

"What is this?" he asked quietly, unwilling to disturb the fragile connection between them.

"A meditation labyrinth." Marc smiled, pleased that Eric had noticed. "I based it on the one at Chartres. It's an eleven-circuit design, divided into four quadrants. Sometimes I walk the whole path, sometimes just parts. I find it calming."

The sound of moving water grew louder until they stood in front of a waterfall cascading artfully down one wall and over a series of rocks into a clear pool filled with colorful koi. Marc leaned over and moved his fingers in the water, beckoning the fish toward him.

Eric could see through the clear glass of the atrium and over the edge of the penthouse roof into the city below; the sunlight caught and flared off the glass of the surrounding hotels like fire trapped within a diamond and blinded him to the desert hills that surrounded the valley of sin. Forgotten lessons from his youth filled his thoughts... all this could be his, if only he would kneel....

Marc raised his wet hand and placed it on Eric's forehead. A blessing. A sacrament. A mark of ownership. Was this what he wanted? Something deep within Eric stirred in protest. The water trickled down Eric's face to pool in the hollow at the base of his throat. Eric shuddered at the contrast between the cool water and his hot skin.

One long finger traced the water's path down Eric's flesh, and his head fell back as the finger traveled slowly over his Adam's apple and paused at his sternum. Eric's breath caught and his eyes closed briefly as Marc's warm tongue licked at the pool of water, the touch hot and branding on the flesh of his neck.

Eric trembled once again, trapped between his desire and his fear. Marc's other arm moved around his body, hand spreading over

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

the small of his back and pulling him close against the hair-roughened skin. "Look at me, Eric." There was that commanding voice again.

But it wasn't Marc's voice any longer.

The voice had changed. Suddenly it was Brad's voice, the voice that Eric would do anything to hear close to his ear once again with breath puffing slightly against his skin and sweat rolling down their bodies, gluing them together.

This voice was sheer temptation.

Eric raised his head and opened his eyes. He knew they were dilated and dark with desire just like the pale blue eyes that stared back so intently, reaching into his heart and reading his deepest fear.

Eric could feel the sharp bite from the button of Brad's jeans as it pressed into his belly, the firm bulge below swelling against his hip. He shifted slightly, seeking to relieve the pressure of his own jeans, and gasped as the seam pulled tight, but he was unable to look away from Brad's passion-darkened eyes.

"Tell me what you need, Eric." It wasn't fair, the way that voice could take control of his senses, the way those eyes could look into his very soul. "Tell me what I can do for you."

The spray from the waterfall covered them in a fine mist. It glistened on Brad's bare chest, and Eric sank to his knees, sliding through the circle of Brad's arms, down that hard and heated skin until he pressed his face against the front of Brad's jeans. Just breathing in.

"Let me...." His voice was rough, barely audible over the music of the water, but Brad heard anyway, or maybe Brad understood just what Eric was asking from the desperate pressure of Eric's fingers as they dug into his hips.

Brad spread his legs slightly, shifting his weight as he used his thumbs to pop the buttons on his jeans and letting gravity slide them slowly off his hips. Eric smoothed his cheek over the juncture of Brad's groin and thigh, his lips whispering words he couldn't hear and didn't understand into the golden skin.

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

Whatever pleas he uttered against the soft flesh were answered by the swell and jut of Brad's response, hot and swollen against Eric's parted lips. Eric opened further and let Brad take possession of his mouth, the taste bitter salt and sweat and nothing short of perfection.

Here finally was the home he had been searching for, the completeness. The way Brad filled the dark cavern within him was like nothing else he had experienced. He had wanted this before he had even realized it. The feeling overwhelmed him, shut out the fear and confusion, and filled him instead with a sense of peace—

“Fuck!”

Panting and breathless, Eric fell back against the pillows. Another dream. Another damn dream. God, he just wanted to get some sleep. It had been a week already, long, drawn out, and wearing. A week since his conversation with Marc, and a week since his drive out into the desert with Brad.

A week since he and Brad had been together.

Eric had made it through his shift that first horrible night; he still wasn't sure how. He had stumbled to his feet in the men's room, wiped his mouth, and somehow pretended his world hadn't just crashed around him once again.

Eric had wanted to cry, he had wanted to scream, he had wanted to strike out at the fates that kept promising him something, anything, only to wrench it away every time. He didn't do any of those things though, he just went through the motions, did his work, and tried to ignore the raw hurt that consumed him, clawing at him like a living thing.

Marc had been busy that first night; preoccupied and strangely remote. It had made things easier. There was no sign that he wanted any kind of decision from Eric immediately. Eric didn't think he had one to give. The lights and neon that usually seemed so bright and full of promise as he drove past now appeared tawdry and cheap. Hollow, just like the promises they made.

Eric had debated leaving Vegas. Just packing it up and running away. It's what he would have done in the past. He could do it again. It

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

would be easy. But that would mean that he hadn't managed to change even a little. That after everything he had been through he hadn't managed to become a better man and was still the same scared child he had always been.

There was also the message on his voice mail. He hadn't recognized the number so he had just let the phone ring while he stood numbly outside the Mirage while Marc was inside with clients. Finally he had listened to the voice mail, not out of any curiosity, but because it was the thing to do.

It had been Brad. The numbness had left Eric's body, the razor sharp pain and hurt streaming back in, consuming him when he first recognized the voice and preventing him from hearing the words. He had to play the message again and again to comprehend any of it.

"Hey, Eric. It's... I... Fuck. Look, I'd wanted to tell you, but... I'll be back soon, okay? We'll talk then."

The words were soft, hesitant. Like every one of Brad's actions lately. It was funny; Eric had always viewed the other man as being so sure of himself. So mysterious and in control. Reality was proving Brad Torres different than he expected. It gave Eric plenty to think about during his sleepless nights.

Eric felt he was at a crossroads. A decision was being demanded of him regardless of whether he wanted to choose. Brad or Marc. One or the other. Keith had always given him a direction, a path to follow, so Eric tried to be logical, tried to follow Keith's voice in his head that told him to think of the future and go for the sure thing. The only sure thing ahead of him was Marc.

The problem in Eric's mind was that Marc was only a dream, a fantasy figure that could make everything better while Brad, well, Brad had become a hot and hard reality. One that would be messy and complicated. One that raised more questions than it answered and opened Eric up to nothing but risk and even more hurt.

Eric wanted that reality. That mess. That complication.

He lay on his back, face turned up to the blank ceiling, sweating again in the heat that never seemed to leave his apartment anymore.

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

Sometimes he thought the omnipresent atmosphere was going to drive him insane. His cell rang, and he stared at it dumbly for a moment before reaching out to pick it up.

“Hello,” Eric growled into the receiver.

There was nothing but silence at first. Then the faint crackle of electronic connections and the ghosts that used them to travel from one realm of existence to the next. “Hello?” Eric demanded again. Just as he was about to hang up in disgust he heard a sharp intake of human breath on the other end of the line.

“Who’s there?” It wasn’t Brad. He knew it wasn’t. He would feel it if it was.

“Eric?” The voice was tentative, soft, almost sobbing.

Eric froze. That voice. He knew that voice. Memories swept over him, a rolling tide that threatened to sweep him under and never let him come up for air. He couldn’t breathe as suddenly he was back in the courtroom and then back in the alley—used and tossed aside.

“Eric? Are you there?” The voice poked at him, prodding. It sharpened, demanding his attention.

“Bonnie?” Eric forced his lips to move past his fear. What had happened? Why was she calling him? Despite the heat he suddenly felt chilled. “What... what?” He couldn’t form the words he didn’t want the answer to.

“I need your help, Eric. It’s about Sara.” It was definitely Bonnie’s voice. He wasn’t hallucinating, wasn’t having a flashback to a time he had thought he had almost managed to forget.

“Bonnie?” Eric’s voice became stronger, despite his fear—maybe because of it. “Where are you? What about Sara?”

At first there was only the silence, then instead of information Eric could hear the low crying over the small receiver he held tightly in his hand. This time the wave that swept over him was pure anger. It felt good, raw and purifying.

Goddamn it, she always seemed to be crying.

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“Don’t play games with me, Bonnie,” he snarled. “What the fuck is going on? Where’s Sara?”

“I... I don’t know what to do, Eric. I need your help.” The crying became louder, the words more distorted. “You have to help me, Eric. There’s nobody else. You have to.”

Just like that the anger was gone. Vanishing as if it had never existed, and just like after Keith died, Eric found himself instinctively soothing his ex-sister-in-law even as he fumbled about the floor for some paper, a pen, anything he could use. “All right, all right. We’ll figure it out, Bonnie.”

Eric took a deep breath and faced the moment he had both hoped for and feared since this all began. “Tell me where you are.”



Chapter 16

ERIC made the drive to Discreet Limousine purely on autopilot. Part of his mind was aware of the road ahead of him. It watched the traffic and made all the right motions, the turns and stops required to navigate. The other part was busy trying to figure out options, trying to make decisions and figure out just what the hell he was going to do.

Bonnie's phone call had come out of the blue. It pulled his past out of the hidden places of his mind and forced him to confront the differences between where he had been and where he was now. At first he wanted to push it away and pretend Bonnie hadn't called. There was already so much going on that he didn't know how to deal with. What did he think he could do about this? What did he know that could help?

But this was Sara, and he couldn't hide from his responsibility or his promise.

Eric knew he wasn't the smartest man. When they were alive his father and Keith had certainly told him that often enough. His track record also spoke volumes. Somehow, some way, he always seemed to make the wrong choice. But in this instance he needed to be smart. He needed to be careful.

He needed a plan.

Eric didn't know how or why things had come full circle like this. Was it only this morning that he had been wondering what was going on in his life, and now all of that was pushed aside in his need to look after Keith's daughter once again?

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He couldn't escape the similarities to that night, the night Keith and his father had been killed. This was the second time his life had changed after a phone call. Maybe it was fitting that his life was in such turmoil. He wasn't any closer to figuring out what either Brad or Marc wanted from him. More importantly, he wasn't any closer to figuring out what it was *he* really wanted.

All he knew was that he couldn't allow himself to think about Marc or his offer, whatever it was the man was offering. Nor could he think about Brad and how the reality of his touch now meant more than the security offered by Marc ever could.

The only thing he could do was get to Bonnie as quickly as possible and find out what he could about Sara. He would never forgive himself if something happened to Keith's daughter, and in light of that, everything else in his life had become irrelevant.

Just like before, the traffic light he was stopped at seemed to stay red forever. "Dammit!" Eric exclaimed, hitting the steering wheel with his fist. He didn't have time for this. He had already called the airport and booked the earliest flight to Michigan he could.

Now he needed to be prepared. One thing he knew from experience: if Bonnie was involved he needed money. Cash, preferably, and lots of it.

Eric had tried Christopher's cell, but there was no answer. He couldn't remember the last time he had seen Christopher either. Eric had been too wrapped up in his own pain to pay much attention to what was going on around him, and somehow in the events of the last week he had lost touch.

Probably he was shacked up somewhere with Wesley, celebrating the start of their new life. It was just as well; Eric didn't even know if their tentative friendship would bear the weight of his asking for a loan—assuming Christopher had any cash to spare.

Eric thought briefly of Marc and his repeated offers to help but couldn't make himself go and ask the man for money. However foolish it might be, he still had some remnants of pride. Whatever decision he

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was going to have to make, he didn't want to have that kind of debt between them.

That choice left him with few options. He only hoped Gardner was in an agreeable mood.

DESPITE this being Vegas, it seemed Lady Luck wasn't on his side.

"What the hell?" Gardner exclaimed. He had been on the phone when a disheveled Eric forced his way into the office and told him what he needed. Gardner pushed himself back from his desk and looked at Eric in disbelief. "I don't keep cash lying around. And I certainly wouldn't give you an advance of that amount."

"I'll take anything you can give me." Eric tried to keep a tight rein on his temper, but it was difficult. He was too frustrated, and he knew Gardner was lying. He had seen the safe. "I told you I'd pay you back."

"Yeah? And I'm the mayor of Las Vegas. When exactly are you planning to do that? You think I was born yesterday? Whenever you get back from wherever you have to go in such a hurry? For what? A niece? You expect me to buy that? And what about tonight? What about Marc Evans? Do you realize that if you don't show we could lose the deal?" The words were spit out rapid fire one after another.

"I don't give a shit about any deal!" Eric finally exploded. He was fragmenting under the pressure, pieces of who he thought he was spiraling away from his control. He could only watch as one of his hands slammed down on Gardner's desk for emphasis and caused the older man to jump. "I need a favor. I need time off. I need money, and I need it now." Eric struggled to level out his voice, to hold on to himself amid the shaking.

"You'd better get a hold of yourself, Eric, before I'm forced to call someone." Gardner's voice changed, deepening and roughing around the edges. "You're acting crazy. You on something?"

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“Dammit!” Eric yelled again, his control long gone. “You’ve made a mint off me and this Evans thing. All I’m asking for is an advance.”

“And if you leave you’re going to lose me the Evans thing.” His patience also at an end, Gardner stood and yelled back, his surface layer finally falling away, revealing a tough and steely interior. “Do you have a clue just how many limo companies there are in Vegas? Do you know how many drivers there are in Vegas?” The older man snarled nastily at him. “Drifters like you are a disposable commodity, Eric, and I can replace you with a snap of my fingers.” He sneered and snapped his fingers for emphasis, angry that his plans for getting control of Evans Enterprises’ business were thwarted. “For some reason you’ve been Evans’s flavor of the month, but that can change.”

Gardner reached for a way to bring Eric back in line. “Trust me, you have to ride this out until he’s tired of you and moves on. Then we can talk about some other options. I can use a smart guy like you.”

“Please....” Eric had sworn to himself he wasn’t going to beg, but he found himself pleading anyway.

“I can’t help you, Eric, and if you leave here now, don’t bother coming back.”

Eric could tell there was no arguing. “Just fuck you, then.” Eric knew it wasn’t the most brilliant of responses, but it was all he could muster as he shoved the stacks of papers off Gardner’s desk, watching with bitter satisfaction as they swirled about the office. “Fuck you very much.”

He turned and strode out the office door, pushing his way past the curious onlookers who had been drawn by the raised voices. Rob and Warren backed away from him, and Eric wondered what he looked like. He made it to his truck and leaned against it for a moment, letting his head bang against the hot metal. *Pull it together, Moss. They’re depending on you. Don’t fuck this up.*

What was he going to do now?

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“Eric! What are you doing here?” The words were urgent and harsh, but the touch of the hand on his arm was soft and caressing. Eric looked up, startled, into pale blue eyes.

“Brad!” Eric fought to keep his voice even. “When did you get back?”

“I just got in. Came to talk some business with Gardner.” Brad looked around; if Eric didn’t know better he would have said the other man seemed nervous. “You aren’t supposed to be here during the day. What’s going on?”

“Just....” Eric couldn’t force the words from his tight throat, and Brad leaned in closer.

“You okay, man?” The touch turned into a comforting arm that stretched across his shoulders and pulled him close. “I go away, and look what happens. I told you, you need someone to look out for you.”

Oh fuck.

If only, Eric thought. If only he could lay all his troubles on Brad’s shoulders. How easy that would be. But wouldn’t that be what he had always done? Except, Eric told himself, Brad was just offering him support in whatever way he chose to take it. God, did he need it.

“Yeah.” Eric struggled for composure. Brad smelled so good, like home and comfort and just a hint of soapy water that would now forever make Eric hard. “It’s... just a disagreement with Gardner.” He didn’t know who he was trying to kid; Brad had to have heard the fight. Everyone in the garage had to have heard.

“One hell of a disagreement,” Brad contradicted him as he reached his other arm around Eric’s waist and held him even closer. “What’s going on? What can I do to help?”

Eric took a deep breath. It was hard to concentrate, Brad felt too damn good pressed up against him. “Uh... family stuff. Sara, you know? I... uh... got to go.”

“Look....” Brad started to speak and then paused as his cell rang and stopped, and then rang and stopped again. “Damn it! Wherever you’re going I want you to go now, and I want you to stay gone for a

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couple of days. You got that?” Brad’s voice stayed soft and comforting, but the grip of his fingers on Eric’s waist tightened. “Can you do that for me?”

“I... I don’t know. I don’t know what’s going on.” Eric felt his shuddering slow as he responded to Brad’s warmth.

“Right. Okay.” Brad rested his forehead against Eric’s, nuzzling the side of his temple, his words spoken low enough that only Eric could hear them. Eric shivered as Brad’s warm breath puffed lightly against his ear. “I just need you to listen to me, Eric. You go take care of your business, but you don’t come back to work until I call you and tell you it’s okay.”

“What’s going on, Brad?” Brad’s strange behavior was starting to break through the fog Eric was in.

“I can’t talk about it right now. Not here. But I will. Soon. I promise,” Brad answered, one large hand lightly stroking Eric’s back with a soothing motion. “Just promise me you won’t come back here until you hear from me.”

“It’s not like I’ll have a job anyway.” Eric tried to keep the bitterness out of his voice.

“We’ll worry about that later. Together, okay?” Brad took Eric’s chin in his hand; his pale eyes found Eric’s and held fast. “Promise me.”

“What... I promise.” Eric heard the rest of the drivers gather at the open bay door, watching them and murmuring to themselves. Had Brad really said together?

“I really need to go, Brad.” Eric wanted to stay close, wrapped up in these strong arms, but he forced himself to push away from Brad’s comforting heat. “I’ve got to catch my flight.”

“Okay, babe.” Ignoring the onlookers Brad leaned in and gave Eric a lingering kiss, long fingers pushing the fiery hair away from Eric’s face; his lips smooth and soft on Eric’s. “Here. Take this.” Brad held out a thick roll of bills, pressing the cash into Eric’s hands.

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“I can’t take this!” Eric protested, shocked at the size of the roll as well as the unexpected endearment. “Not from you.”

“Better me than Gardner. I’ll charge you a lot less interest.” Brad smiled into Eric’s grey-green eyes. “Don’t worry about it, Eric. Go on.”

Eric wiped at his face, staring into the blue eyes so close to his, trying to read what wasn’t being said. “I’ll pay you back,” Eric said determinedly. “I will.”

Eric didn’t know where Brad had gone or what he had been doing for Gardner. All he knew was that the one man he expected nothing of was the first man who had ever come through for him.



Chapter 17

THE drive through the tunnel, the stretch of highway that ran under the runways and desert of McCarran International Airport, seemed to take forever. The overhead fluorescent lighting lent a greenish-blue glow to the concrete walls, and Eric felt he was entering some strange underworld. Would he emerge on the other side, or was this to be the end of his journey?

He tried to shake off his fanciful imaginings. He had traveled this same route time after innumerable time while driving for Discreet and Evans Enterprises. But this wasn't business as usual. This was different.

Eric wondered again just what he thought he was doing but couldn't come up with any real answer other than he owed it to Keith for all the times his brother had been there for him. Eric wondered what Sara looked like now. Would he still recognize her? Would she still recognize him?

He followed the signs that directed him to the long-term parking. He didn't know how long he would be gone, despite his bold words to Brad, and the uncertainty bothered him. His hands trembled as he shifted the gears into park and stepped on the emergency brake.

Brad.

Eric was amazed by the wave of longing that washed over him at the mere thought of his name. Eric still wanted to be with him, still

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wanted another opportunity to taste and to touch that wealth of golden skin. He wanted more despite the mysterious way Brad had taken off.

Despite everything.

But the questions still remained. Where had Brad been? Where in the hell did he get all that money? Was it drugs, like Christopher seemed to hint? Was it something else, something worse? Eric pulled his small duffle out from behind the driver's seat and picked up the wad of cash he had dropped onto the passenger seat.

Christ, that was a huge roll.

Eric checked the time on his watch and separated a few of the bills from the top, placing them in his wallet before shoving the rest into the duffle. He had never held so much money in his hand before.

The shuttle to Terminal 1 seemed to take forever to arrive, and Eric could feel the sweat pooling around his waistband, soaking into the fabric of his jeans and into the leather of his belt as he waited under the shaded overhang.

The Vegas sun baked the asphalt and concrete surfaces that surrounded him. Eric watched as bits of the black tar used in patching bubbled and cracked beneath the burning rays. He felt much the same, his surface cracking and the insecure and frightened young man he had been bubbling out despite his efforts to keep the past contained.

In contrast the blast of air conditioning felt too harsh, leaving him shivering and adding to his dreamlike daze. The terminal was as crowded as usual, throngs of tourists milling in the open areas in front of the display and ticketing counters.

The traveling businessmen had already cleared out of the terminal, their flights scheduled earlier to avoid this confusion. Eric brushed aside the questioning hands and varying accents that held cameras out to him, asking for pictures under the neon and metal "Welcome to Las Vegas" archway.

McCarran had automated check-in kiosks, but people seemed to distrust the automation, preferring to queue up for the opportunity to be

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ignored by a real person. Eric was one of them and fumbled for his identification and credit card when it was his turn.

He refused the unsmiling clerk's offer to check his baggage despite the sales pitch of the radio-frequency identification tags and tracking system, and he mechanically answered the initial series of security questions before joining the lines in front of the main screening area.

He waited out the additional delays as he watched tourists who had flown in with the same restrictions fumble about with their bottles and bits that—surprise—they suddenly couldn't fly out with. There were the usual complainers about the shoe and belt regulations, and Eric felt the same vague satisfaction as the rest of the crowd when a man who had been the most vocal about the invasion of his civil liberties was removed by security for a more thorough screening.

He wondered how the wad of money in his duffle would show up on the X-ray machine. Would it just be a shadow or would the bills show crisply in shades of black, white, and green? Eric shrugged uncaringly to himself. This was Vegas. They had seen stranger things.

Once he was through the security checkpoint, Eric was too restless to take the tram to his gate or even to join those standing motionless on the moving walkways, preferring instead to stride through the terminal, dodging past the travelers who stopped suddenly in front of him and those who moved at a slower pace and juggled their bags and kids and cell phones.

There was plenty to dazzle and confuse the crowds throughout the airport. Eric could understand why. His first time there he had been mesmerized by the overhead displays from the Howard W. Cannon Aviation Museum.

In addition there were murals painted by various artists and a series of large wildlife statues by David Phelps that children liked to climb on. Like the rest of Vegas, the airport itself was a hell of a show.

But he wasn't interested in the exhibits or in people watching. Eric just needed to find his gate and get on the plane. He quickly strode past the assortment of shops, eateries, and of course, the slot machines,

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the bright colors and groups of tourists lured in by the chiming noises barely registering. Finally he was at his gate and able to join the line at the counter.

He was too early for his flight. Eric shifted his weight uneasily and tried not to look at the little girl standing with her father a few places in the line ahead of him. She was resting trustingly against her father's longer legs, her face peering around one side of him and then the other as she gazed at the gathered crowd.

Eric wanted to smile at the solemn look in her wide eyes, but he felt like crying instead and looked over her head at the wall in front of them. He couldn't seem to manage to look at a child without thinking of his niece.

It was finally his turn. The dark face of the woman at the check-in counter didn't change as she looked at his driver's license and ticket.

"It will be just a moment, sir."

As Eric watched she tapped at her keyboard, undoubtedly entering in his personal information for what had to be the seventeenth time in the last hour and a half. He answered her questions in the same monotone in which she asked them.

No, he hadn't left his bag unattended at any time since he had entered the terminal. No, no one had given him anything else to carry for them. He was surprised when her gaze shifted beside him, and he found two members of the airport security had joined him.

"Will you come with us please, sir?" The words were said in a tone that was both quiet and solemn, and Eric stiffened as he felt his arms taken in a firm grasp.

"What the hell?" His head swiveled back and forth between the two somber-looking security men, one at each side of him. Their crisp uniforms lent them a stark authority that he instinctively railed against.

"Please, sir. If you would just come with us." The grip on his upper arms tightened as they recognized his initial protest. "Don't make this any harder than it has to be."

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“I’ll miss my flight,” Eric protested. He looked into the eyes of the clerk and found them just as blank and unsympathetic as those of the two men who even now had taken advantage of his surprise and pulled him away from the counter. His place in line was filled before they even had him over to the side.

“Can you tell me what this is about?” he asked as they walked him down the carpeted hallway, this time the crowd parted miraculously in front of them, and Eric found he had to hurry not to trip over his feet.

“Your name was flagged.” The two men still didn’t look at him. They had heard it all before. Their eyes merely scanned the crowd ahead.

“Flagged?” Eric was surprised. “What does that mean?”

They paused in front of a plain white door set into the wall of the terminal corridor, and Eric watched as one of the men slid a keycard through the slot and with a wink of green the door opened into another, plainer corridor that ran parallel to the main passenger area.

“It means you’ll need to wait here, please. Someone will be with you shortly.”

Eric was escorted into another secured room, and once he entered found the door shut and locked behind him. The room was empty save for a desk and two metal chairs. There wasn’t even a telephone.

Even though he had just looked at his watch, Eric couldn’t help but look at it again. Damn it! All he could do was pace from one end of the small room to the other. His flight should be boarding now.

If he missed this flight he would need to let Bonnie know he had been delayed. As he stared at the scuffed white walls and ceiling of the empty room Eric couldn’t help the feeling of paranoia that crept over him.

Was it McMasters again? Had Bonnie set him up? Eric pulled out his cell and hit the button to redial her number, but the phone only beeped in his ear. Great. The security areas must really be secured.

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Frustration boiled up inside him, and he thought he was going to explode with the force of it all. There was no escaping it; his feelings when he found out Brad had left without saying anything, his fight with Gardner, the uncertainty of what was happening with Sara.

It was all coming to a head.

When the door opened again Eric swung around, his fists clenched, this time ready to assert himself with the next person he saw. But he didn't expect the man who stood there looking back at him, and Eric's bluster deflated.

"Marc?" Eric questioned blankly as instead of more men in uniform it was merely the entrepreneur, casually dressed once again in a pair of jeans and a striped, button-down shirt.

"Sorry for all this." Marc Evans waved one hand at the air. "I couldn't take the chance you'd get on the plane before I could get here." His lips quirked in a half-smile as he looked at Eric. "I didn't have my usual driver."

"What are you doing here?" Eric looked around him but nothing in the depressingly sterile room had changed. "What's going on?"

Marc walked into the room and ran his hand over Eric's cheek, patting the growing scruff with curious affection. "I got a call from a friend of yours. He told me you could do with some help." The entrepreneur spread his arms wide. "So here I am."

Eric sat down in one of the metal chairs. He had thought he was confused before, he didn't know what to think now. "Who called you?"

"A resourceful young man by the name of Brad Torres, I believe." Marc paused at the obvious impact the name had on Eric. "Is he a close friend of yours?"

"I don't understand." Eric shook his head at the thought that Brad had managed to get through to the aloof businessman. "You just can't take off like this. What about the dinner meeting for tonight?"

Marc looked steadily at Eric. "If this is important enough for you to walk away from your responsibility to me tonight, I could only decide it's important enough for me to miss as well."

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Eric laughed in disbelief. “What, you are walking away from your meeting and coming with me to Michigan?”

“No.” Marc walked over to the door and rapped on it sharply. “*You* are coming with *me*. My jet is waiting as we speak. I’ll just need to get a few details from you so the pilot can file the flight plan.”

“You’re serious.” Eric could only stare as the door was opened from the outside.

“Of course I am, Eric.” Marc confidently held one large hand out for Eric. “Let’s get going.”



Chapter 18

THE interior of the sleek jet was amazing, and Eric couldn't help but stare. He had never experienced anything on this level the few times he had flown before. Though small, the aircraft was smartly designed and decorated with the same understated sophistication he had come to expect from everything Marc Evans owned. It was more like walking into an expensive office suite than a jet.

Marc had given him a brief tour when they boarded and then left Eric to take a phone call in private. After nervously waiving off the flight steward's offer of a drink, Eric had ended up sitting at one of the conference room tables that had replaced the more usual rows of seating, and he looked out the window at the clouds surrounding the jet.

His life seemed to be turned upside down once again, this time in a direction he couldn't have predicted. Eric's leg twitched nervously, bouncing up and down in his nervousness. Why was Marc doing this? Why had Brad called him?

What did they know that he didn't?

"I apologize for that." Marc re-entered the small cabin and joined Eric at the table. He was carrying a large file, and he placed it on the table before him. "We won't have a lot of time, so I need you to fill me in on what's happening."

Eric stared blankly at Marc. He wasn't sure he wanted to get into any of this with him. "I appreciate the flight and the jet and everything." Eric looked around again and waved his hand. "But really.

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I'm fine. I've got some family business to take care of, that's all. I'm sorry if Brad made this a bigger deal than it is."

Marc sat back in his chair and regarded Eric calmly. The directness of his gaze made Eric squirm in his seat. "Well, if you are set on dealing with the Reverend McMasters, it is a big deal."

"What? How do you know...." Eric's shocked words trailed off as he looked down at the file on the table between them. Without further comment he pulled it towards him and started leafing through it. His hand shook as he let the papers fall onto the gleaming surface of the table before he dropped the open and empty file beside them. There it was in all its pathetic glory.

His life.

Eric ran his hands over the pages. That it was all there he didn't doubt. Evans would have only the best working for him. There was probably more about Eric in this file than even Eric could remember. Everything condensed down to a few marks on paper. His past and his present.

Eric flipped through a series of bank documents, balances before the trial and balances after. That was amusing. There was the documentation on his juvenile acting out and arrests that were supposed to have been sealed by the courts. Transcripts from the colleges he had attended and dropped out of. Oh God, even the hospital reports. From after.

If he looked at it all dispassionately he might, based on all appearances, call it a life lived without direction. But Eric couldn't pretend he didn't care. The time that it would have taken to gather this information, the realization that others had been crawling through the tangled threads of his life—it left him feeling sick. Sure, he had hired a private investigator after the hearing, but that had only been to find Bonnie and Sara, not to pry into McMasters' life.

It was the death certificates that were hardest to look at. His mother, though he barely remembered her. His father. Keith. Eric refused to look at any of the pictures, shoving their glossy surfaces

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together so he didn't have to see the eyes of his loved ones or his old friends staring back up at him.

A photo of him and Brad outside the bathhouse lay on top of the stack. Eric took momentary comfort in the pale eyes, intent even when reproduced in black and white. The implications in the last picture made him feel even sicker. He had been watched.

Recently.

Eric sat back and drew in a deep breath. He spread his trembling hands carefully on the table before him, unaware that he had done the exact same thing in the courtroom that bitter day.

"So you had me investigated." He refused to look up into Marc's eyes, letting his gaze light instead on the open sky visible through the small windows. "Learn anything interesting?" His tone was bitter as he recalled Marc's questions in the atrium. The entrepreneur had been delving for answers he already knew.

"It wasn't personal, Eric." Marc's voice was quiet. "It's just standard procedure for anyone that gets close to me or my family."

"It feels pretty fucking personal from where I'm sitting. Besides, I'm just your driver. How close did I really get?" Eric told himself that it was the glare from the sun on the wings of the small plane that pricked at his eyes.

"Closer than most."

"But not as close as some." Eric stood up and paced up around the small conference room, his auburn hair loose and swinging around his shoulders. He didn't know why this upset him so much. But it did. Marc had become the replacement for Keith in his life, his moral compass and perhaps something else as well. This... this hurt.

"You don't need me to answer your questions. You know everything there is to know right there." Eric pointed at the papers scattered on the table surface with disdain.

"Why are you going to Michigan in such a hurry, Eric?" Marc leaned across the table and shoved the papers back into the file, closing it and pushing it aside. "I don't know that."

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Eric sat back down at table his palms outstretched this time and open to ceiling. “Bonnie called me.” His shoulders slumped and his voice sounded as tired and old as he felt. “I don’t know more than that. She was crying and upset, and all I could make out was something about McMasters and Sara.”

“So you saddled up your white horse, and here you are.” Marc’s voice was almost mocking as he shook his head at Eric’s actions.

“She’s my niece.” Eric’s temper flared and his fists clenched. Who the fuck did Evans think he was, making fun of him? “What else am I supposed to do?”

“You don’t have a clue what you are walking into, do you, Eric?” Marc shook his head again. “While you’ve been recovering from your attempts to self-destruct, McMasters has been transforming his small congregation into an army.”

Eric just crossed his arms over his chest and stared back at Marc. This was getting ridiculous.

“Listen to me.” Marc leaned across the table. “Did you know they’ve moved into an isolated compound in northern Michigan? Did you know that members of McMasters’ church have been arrested on gun charges? That they’ve been linked with some fundamentalist second amendment groups?”

“So?” Eric responded. None of this was making any sense. Sure he knew Bonnie and McMasters had moved. His last private detective had gotten him that information. What of it?

“Do you remember Oklahoma City, Eric? The men arrested had ties to some Michigan organizations. Prior to the bombing those organizations and others like them were becoming more and more legitimized.” Marc sighed and wiped his hand across his face. “There are some in law enforcement who still believe that the bombing was an internal fundraiser, a way to draw the nation’s attention to the impending threat of domestic terrorism and a way to push right-wing groups like this one back out to the fringe.”

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“Apart from the fact that that’s just sick, what does any of that have to do with me or Sara?” Eric asked in protest. “That’s conspiracy nuts at work, not real life.”

“McMasters and his group are isolated now; protected. If he has your niece you’re not going to be able to just waltz up to the door and demand he give her back. Families have been complaining to the attorney general for months that they are unable to get in touch with their loved ones.”

“How do you know all of this?” Eric tried to ignore the twisting feeling in his stomach. Was any of this stuff even possible?

“Money can obtain almost anything, Eric. Especially information.” Marc leaned back in his chair, his mouth twisted for a moment. “You should see the file I have on your friend Brad.”

Eric’s curiosity sparked, and then he remembered how it had made him feel seeing his life spread out for the taking. Exposed. Violated. He wasn’t going to do that to Brad. “I’m not interested.”

“You should be.” Marc looked at him intently. “You definitely should be.”

“I know what I need to know about Brad.” Eric could hear the mulish tone in his voice, the one that had always made his father and Keith so mad.

Marc’s hand smacked down onto the table, making Eric jump. “You know nothing!” The older man exclaimed in exasperation as he rose from his chair and walked around to stand in front of Eric with his hands on his hips. “Your whole life has been spent aimlessly wandering from one stupidly mistaken choice to another. What is it that you are looking for, Eric?”

Eric angrily stood to face him, their chests almost brushing. At last he was hearing what Marc really thought of him, and as much as it hurt, he welcomed it. He had never backed away from his father or Keith; he wasn’t about to back away from Marc Evans. “At least they’ve been my choices. What do you care?”

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Marc's green eyes narrowed, boring into his as long fingers reached behind Eric's head to grasp a handful of his auburn hair and hold him still. "I care. As much as I can, I do care!" He bit out the words harshly before he closed the brief distance between them, and his lips took possession of Eric's.

Eric was stunned. Despite the strange connection he had felt with Marc, despite his sexual fantasies about the other man, he had never imagined that Marc might possibly want him in return. Or if he did, that Marc would act on those feelings. The handsome businessman had been a safe outlet for his desire.

Until now.

But was it desire? The kiss was pleasant. Marc Evans certainly knew how to kiss; his lips moved knowingly over Eric's mouth, teasing and coaxing him to open and admit his questing tongue, but Eric felt detached from the experience. It was as if he were standing outside of his body, watching two men in front of him rather than participating in the heat of the moment.

He could feel the cool touch of Marc's breath against his lips; feel the warm press of the soft skin against his own. Marc's hand was firm on the curve of his skull, cradling his head as he attempted to overwhelm his senses.

Marc's body felt good pressed firmly up against him, and he knew that he could relax and rest easy against the other man. Marc would take care of him. All Eric had to do was give in and let him take over. Once upon a time that would have been everything Eric wanted. But things weren't the same now,

Eric wasn't the same.

That feeling, the certainty that he could give up control to Marc, while warming, didn't leave him feeling safe in the same way just standing next to Brad did. Instead, the very thought now seemed stifling. Eric could only wonder what that kind of protection would cost him.

Perhaps what drew Eric to Brad was the fear of not knowing what Brad wanted or expected from him. For all Eric knew it was the hint of

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untamed violence and the darkness he sensed inside of Brad that drew him so fiercely because it matched the same depths within his own psyche.

Or perhaps, like Keith always said, Eric was just born to make mistakes. Eric knew that Keith would have encouraged him to go along with Marc. That Keith would have felt better knowing that Eric was finally being “handled.”

But there was a fundamental part of Eric that neither Keith nor their father had ever understood. It loomed larger than his fear of failure, larger than his fear of the unknown. It was simply the fear of regret. It was the force that had driven him to act time and again in his life.

Right or wrong, Eric felt he owed it to himself to find out just what Brad meant to him and what they might become together. Even if it meant losing the help and backing of Marc Evans.

Eric leaned back, his arm coming up to Marc’s chest and pushing at the other man. Marc broke off the kiss and looked into Eric’s eyes before he moved back and wiped his hand across his mouth.

“Not interested?” The tone was light, despite the way the other man was panting, his body tense with the unfulfilled need that Eric had felt pressed up against him. A need that Eric was surprised to find he didn’t return.

“I’m sorry, Marc.” Eric looked down at his hands. He was amazed to find that for the first time in his life, he didn’t question his decision even though he knew what it might cost him and Sara. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything.” Marc stood even straighter, shoulders broad and pride stiffening his spine. “Life’s a gamble, and it would appear I’ve lost this hand.” His eyes glinted with challenge. “It doesn’t mean I’ll lose the next.”

Eric stared at Marc in surprise, but before he could speak the blond turned away. “You’d better get some rest. We’ll be landing soon enough.”



Chapter 19

THE cushion of the leather chair was soft and inviting; Eric relaxed back into the padded seat and let his eyes drift lazily shut. If he had thought about it, he might have wondered why he didn't feel any more awkward about the situation than he did. In the past he would have rehashed the conversation, dwelling on each sentence and trying to figure out what he could have done, what he could have said.

But for once, his mind was at rest. Eric could only feel joy, no matter inappropriate in the moment, that his confidence in the decision he had made was so firm, so unshakeable. He wasn't at the mercy of the world around him any longer; he no longer floated from place to place, wherever the fates chose to take him. He had found his center.

Just the fact that he had continued to analyze the situation when Mark was kissing him rather than letting himself be swept away helped him to believe he was on the right path, wherever it might lead him.

A soft chime disturbed him and the unobtrusive flash of the seat belt sign announced that they were starting their descent. As Eric fastened the latch on his seatbelt, he wondered what he would find when they landed.

"TWO months?" Eric was incredulous. "My niece has been missing for two months, and you're just now letting me know?"

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The room in the rundown motel was small, barely enough room for the bed and a pressboard dresser with a late-model television claiming the place of honor on top, but Eric managed to pace the few feet of open space between the door and the bed and back again in his agitation. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Bonnie didn’t answer him, she just kept crying into her handful of tissues. Some things never change, Eric thought bitterly. As his brother’s wife she had never been able to appeal to Eric with her obvious femininity despite her best efforts, so all she had left were the tears.

“Will you quit crying, for fuck’s sake?” Eric snapped at her even though he knew it just made things worse. They weren’t going to get anything else out of her until she calmed down, but he couldn’t help himself.

The room was thick with the smell of Bonnie’s expensive perfume; it clogged Eric’s senses, and while he had already refused Marc’s advances, he wasn’t prepared for his feelings as he watched the older man turn his considerable charm on Eric’s attractive ex-sister-in-law. For just a few, brief seconds the familiar old fear clawed at him again. The panic filled him, rising up and threatening to consume him, urging him to push his way between Marc and Bonnie and demand Marc’s attention for himself.

That was crazy. Eric took a deep breath, and for the first time in his life, rather than pushing the fear away and hiding it where it could come back when he least expected it and blindside him, he forced himself to let it go. He had already made his choice. It was not that it was Brad necessarily, but simply that whatever choice he made he was going to stand by it.

“Let the lady be, Eric.” Marc shot him a warning glance, and Eric pressed his lips together tightly as Marc shifted closer on the bed and gathered Bonnie to his side. The handsome businessman patted her gently on the back with the same large hand that had caressed Eric just hours before. Eric wondered what Bonnie would think about that if she knew.

“You can see how upset she is.”

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Yeah. Eric could see how upset she was. So upset she had even remembered to put on waterproof mascara this morning so there wasn't a smear or smudge in her carefully applied makeup to be seen despite the flood of tears.

He ran his hand through his hair, tugging at the loose strands as he walked the small length between the end of the bed and door once again. "What are you doing living here?" Eric asked in a calmer voice.

"I had to stay somewhere." Bonnie looked up at Eric with the childlike gaze he remembered so well. "This is close to my work."

"Where do you work?" It was Marc that asked the next question, and Bonnie turned her eyes away from Eric to stare up at him.

"There's a bar down the street. It's called The Blue Ruin; you probably drove past it on your way here."

It was a weird moment of déjà vu for Eric. Marc wasn't as big of a man as Keith had been, but seeing Bonnie pressed up against him, her blonde curls against his shoulder, was eerily familiar.

"What about your husband?" Marc continued to press her carefully for information. "Your daughter?"

Sensing a more sympathetic ear Bonnie wiped at her eyes. "Sara's not *missing* missing!" The emphasis she put on the word was obvious to both men. "She's staying with her stepfather while we sort things out."

"What?" Eric couldn't believe it.

Bonnie sniffed and looked up at Marc again. "Have you ever been married?"

"Yes, and divorced as well." Marc handed her another tissue as he nodded.

"Well then, you'd understand better than Eric." There was triumph in the small grimace directed at him. "Sometimes a couple just needs space to work things out. I only started working at the bar because I was bored sitting around here all day."

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Of all the things Eric might have expected to find, Bonnie living on her own in a motel apartment that catered to transients while working as a cocktail waitress for the last several months while Sara stayed with McMasters wasn't one of them. Of course, her perception of events was a bit different.

There had been no response when they had knocked on Bonnie's door, but Eric had a good idea where to find her. He had watched Marc from the corner of his eye, observing his reactions to their surroundings as they made their way to the courtyard. The motel may be old and tired looking, but Bonnie wouldn't stay anywhere without a pool.

The sight of his ex-sister-in-law gracefully arranged on a lounge chair and casually taking in the sun with Sara nowhere to be found had only angered Eric. The sudden interest evident in Marc's eyes when he caught his first glimpse of Bonnie hadn't helped matters.

They had arrived early, thanks to Marc's jet and his ability to bypass the normal airport congestion and go right from the private hanger to the private car he had arranged for. Eric was sure that if he had he shown up when Bonnie expected him, he would have been presented with a different and more sympathy-inspiring picture.

Eric stopped his pacing and slouched against the wall of the small room. He had to hand it to her, Bonnie was never one to fluster easily, and while startled to see Eric so soon, she had perked up visibly when she took an admiring look at Marc. Eric could only watch as she proceeded to shower the entrepreneur with the same helpless behavior that had won Keith over so easily.

She had always been a good judge of men. Except, it would seem, in the case of Reverend McMasters.

"So how do you know Eric?" Bonnie wiped her eyes again and gave Marc a measuring glance and a small smile. Despite his casual appearance the businessman couldn't mask his air of confident authority, and it was unmistakable to someone like Bonnie.

"Let's just consider me a concerned friend of the family," Marc replied smoothly.

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“Oh.” Bonnie’s smile grew wider, and she sniffed delicately. “So you two aren’t... together?”

“No, Bonnie,” Eric interjected dryly, not sure what Marc would say. “We aren’t.”

“Tommy and I were making progress, you know? Talking things out.” Bonnie was looking at Marc again, her tears dried as if they had never happened. “Then a couple of weeks ago his check didn’t come and there was no answer when I called his phone.”

She turned back to Eric in appeal. “I only called you because I got scared and didn’t know what else to do.” Bonnie’s gaze dropped back to the tissues twisted between her fingers. “I’m not strong like you are, Eric, I never have been. I’m no good at being alone.”

Eric was stunned at her casual summation of his character. Strong? He had always thought of himself as anything but that. Even Keith and his father, the two in life who knew him best, had always told him he was weak and easily swayed.

Hell, perhaps that’s what he had never liked about Bonnie. Perhaps he always felt looking at her was like looking at an unflattering portrait of himself. He knew the games she would play because hadn’t he played them all in his own past?

Bonnie was talking to Marc again, and Eric forced himself to pay attention.

“It was all because of a couple of those nosey old bitches from the church. They never liked that Tommy married me. Somebody always wants to stir up trouble. See things that aren’t there to be seen.”

Eric closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the wall. It would seem that the appeal of being the wife of the good Reverend and serving his flock had worn thin, and, as always, without a thought to the consequences, Bonnie had cast around for a diversion.

McMasters, while fond of his bride and proud of how her appearance reflected on him, was no fool, and after she had one too many meetings with a young and handsome parishioner seeking “pre-

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marital advice” and despite her protestations to the contrary, he had listened to his advisors and thrown her out.

Of course, that wasn’t exactly the story as Bonnie had told it, words choked out slowly while she gazed up at Marc from downcast lashes, held gently in the protective circle of his arms. But Eric knew her well enough to figure out what wasn’t said.

He wondered how long she would have managed to stay faithful to Keith had he lived—or even if she had while he was alive. At least his brother had died happy, secure in his love of his wife and the joy of his expected child. At least she had given Keith that.

“It’s not like Tommy would hurt Sara either.” Bonnie’s words made Eric’s head jerk forward. “He really loves her like she was his own kid.”

“So where is she?” Eric asked quietly. His anger and frustration were spent now. It had all drained away with the understanding that things weren’t as black and white as he might want or need them to be. Bonnie wasn’t some one-dimensional villain. She was just another human struggling to get by. No better, no worse.

“Well, that’s what I tried to tell you over the phone.” Bonnie seemed to be able to sense that Eric had calmed down, and she smiled at him like nothing bad had ever come between them. “I don’t know.”

Eric’s head was beginning to hurt. “Bonnie, I’m trying to understand here. What do you mean, you don’t know?”

“Well, when his check didn’t come, and I couldn’t get through on the phone, I had a friend, you know.” Bonnie gave a small shrug. Yeah, Eric knew. “He works in the Clark County Sheriff’s office. Well, I had him take me on out there, and there’s no one left.” Bonnie shrugged and surveyed her nails before she rested one manicured hand lightly on Marc’s thigh.

“Everyone?” Marc broke in before Eric could voice the words trembling on his lips.

“The whole place.” Bonnie nodded eagerly. “It’s like they just pulled up stakes and moved on. Everyone involved in the church is just

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gone.” She paused. “Well, maybe a couple of guys are still cleaning out the building here in town. But everyone else, all the families that had moved out to the farm with Tommy have left.”

“We’ll probably want to talk to your friend, if we could, Bonnie. As well as anyone still associated with the church.” Marc was staring at Eric, obviously willing him to stay silent, and Eric forced himself to bite back the words he wanted to say.

“But you can’t stay here,” Marc said. He rose from the bed, the springs squeaking under his weight, and Eric wanted to laugh at the images that raced through his mind at the sound. “I’d like you to come with us. There’s plenty of room over at the hotel, and I’ve already arranged for a couple of suites. Easy enough to make room for one more.”

“Really?” Bonnie looked over at Eric with trepidation. “You won’t mind?”

“It would seem we are all in this together.” Eric managed a quick grimace that would have to pass for a smile. “Let’s pack up your things.”



Chapter 20

BRAD had been back in the tool crib when it all began. He had been looking in one of the bins for a fitting for an air compressor, and as he dropped the cool piece of metal and raised his shaking hands in response to the shouted demands, all he could do was close his eyes and be relieved that Eric wasn't there. Anyone caught in the facility would be detained, processed first and questions asked later.

He had done what he could to protect the man he had so unexpectedly come to care for. Evans would make sure he was all right. Brad didn't like it; he should be the one who was there for Eric. But in the end he could only be grateful that Eric wouldn't be alone. A rough hand on his shoulder brought him back to the present, and for the next several moments Discreet was a whirling maelstrom of light and sound.

Controlled chaos surrounded him. Brad's vision was filled with men in dark jackets with letters in reflective tape on the back, guns raised and orders barked out in rough voices that shook with adrenaline overload. Others were in uniform, lights flashing from the top of their patrol cars as they surrounded the garage and the office area. Music played through his head. A driving metal soundtrack fueled by the commotion.

The dirty concrete floor was cold against his cheek, the smell of oil and dust filling his nostrils as the knee dug sharply into his back with unnecessary force. Brad had spent more than a year of his life walking these floors.

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Face down, Brad had to twist and turn his head to check on the others. Gardner was dragged out of his office screaming a tangled mixture of Spanish and English obscenities, demanding to see warrants, demanding his lawyer.

Gardner kept demanding they leave right up until the moment the plastic ties were zipped tightly on to his wrists, and then his face collapsed with abrupt acceptance of the knowledge that he was done. His bluster drained away in an instant, replaced by a sullen silence.

It was so fucking unreal. Brad had waited for this moment. Dreamed of how it would be. Yet here he was, disassociated from the reality. He stayed silent, shuffling along with the others to waiting vehicles.

The bust would take all day. As each driver came in they would be taken down and brought in to be compared to the lists he had so carefully prepared in a bizarre twist on who's naughty or nice. Some would be questioned and let go, others would be held and their rides stripped down to the frames as they were searched.

It was a long list.

The air in the transport was thick, the reek of fear and sweat mixing with the stench left by prior occupants. Rob and Warren huddled as close together as they could on the hard metal bench. Daniel and Gardner simply stared at their feet. Brad looked around at their pale faces. He had laughed with these men; drank with them, been friends with them. Now he had betrayed them.

He hadn't expected he would feel this way.

ERIC let the back of his head fall over the edge of the overly cushioned mattress, his wet hair tumbling down to the floor. He closed his eyes and let the blood flow down into his scalp until he could feel the pounding of his pulse behind his eyes. At least now his head had a reason to hurt. What a fucked up day.

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The towel he had wrapped around his waist slipped, falling down past his hipbones and barely covering his groin. The nudity felt good, the hotel's efficient air-conditioning system pumped out frigid air even if it wasn't needed. The flow dried the water drops left on his skin though he had already soaked the bed coverings.

He had spent what seemed like forever in the shower, just standing under the pounding spray until his skin was red from the heat and the force of the spray. No matter how much Eric scrubbed, he could still smell Bonnie's perfume and the stink of failure on his skin.

So what to do now? Marc was right. For all his good intentions, this situation was leagues out of his experience, and Eric didn't know where to turn next in his search for answers. For right now it appeared that he wouldn't have to make any decisions. Marc was still in the picture. The only question was: for how long?

Bonnie had latched onto Marc like nobody's business. It could have been his sympathetic ear; it was probably his more-than-evident wallet, Eric thought cynically, though he tried not to blame her. In a life that had been filled with even more uncertainty than his own, she would be foolish to pass up any opportunity for a meal ticket, no matter how small the potential. And Marc Evans was no small potential.

It had made dinner uncomfortable, at least for Eric. He had sat there in the hotel restaurant watching Bonnie and Marc as they talked and teased and laughed with each other with all the appearance of not having a care in the world. Eric could only think about Sara out there somewhere and his promise to his brother that no matter how hard he tried he couldn't manage to keep.

Despite his intentions to remain emotionally independent, Eric wanted to call Brad so badly that the desire was almost impossible to resist. He just wanted to hear Brad's voice and regain some of his equilibrium. Eric stared over at the desk where he had tossed his cell phone. What would he say if Brad answered? Was there anything he could say without sounding too needy?

His thoughts twined around each other, twisting and drawing the knot tighter until they were interrupted by a low tap on his door. Eric groaned as he slid off the bed and onto his feet. He walked lightly over

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to the door and peered through the security peephole as he wrapped the towel more securely about his waist.

Think of the devil and he shall appear.

“Marc.” He cautiously greeted the businessman as he opened the door. Eric could feel the green eyes as they danced over the pale skin of his bared chest and lingered at his narrow waist and the towel’s precarious knot. “Where’s Bonnie?”

“She’s gone to her room to rest for a while. May I come in?”

Eric nodded and stepped back, allowing Marc to enter. “Thank you again for putting us up. The room is great.” For a self-conscious moment Eric thought about grabbing his clothes, but he had already made his point with Marc and the last thing he wanted to do was seem foolish.

“You’re welcome.” Marc chose to sit on the small loveseat in the suite’s sitting area, and Eric took a seat across from him. There was silence for a moment as the two men stared at each other.

“What do you think?” Eric finally asked. Here was the awkward moment he hadn’t felt on the plane. He didn’t know what to say to the man sitting across from him.

“I think we’ve got a fine mess ahead of us.” Marc leaned back in the loveseat, one arm draped casually across the back. “They aren’t going to be easy to find.”

“I think you’re right.” Eric fumbled mentally as he tried to get his thoughts in some kind of order in the face of Marc’s use of the plural. “So, I’m sorry, but I don’t know what to expect here from you.”

“Ah.” Marc leaned forward at Eric’s comment. He clasped his hands and rested them on his knees as he looked steadily at Eric. “I want you to think of me the same as you did before. As a friend. As someone who wants to help.”

Eric couldn’t help but press again. “But why?” He wanted to be convinced, wanted his doubts silenced. “I’m your driver.”

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“Because it’s the right thing to do?” Marc smiled; a twist to his lips as he read Eric’s expression in reaction to his words. “Because I want to?”

“A whim?” Eric questioned tiredly.

“Perhaps,” Marc replied. “Perhaps not. I’m not asking you trade your virtue for my help in finding your niece, Eric. That was never my intention. I truly thought we were friends after all this time, and I want to help you. What if it were one of my girls? Wouldn’t you come to my aid?”

“You wouldn’t be in this position if it were one of your girls.” Eric relaxed, some of the tension leaving the set of his shoulders, his fears eased as a result of Marc’s bluntness. “Would you like a drink?” Eric’s voice wobbled as tiredness filled the void his uncertainty had left.

“I could certainly use one.” Marc rubbed at the back of his neck as he commented. “Your sister-in-law is a damn fine-looking woman, you know. You never mentioned that.”

Eric shrugged as he pulled a couple of beers out of the suite’s small refrigerator. He knew it wasn’t Marc’s usual preference, but it would do. “If you like the type. She plays it.”

Marc laughed in agreement and nodded his thanks as he took the offered bottle. “I’ve nothing against anyone using what they’ve been given to get ahead. We all have different talents, and as you know, I’m pretty flexible in my tastes.”

Eric tried to avoid the implications in Marc’s comment as he pulled the towel tighter around his waist and sat back down across from him. There was still something that ate at him, and he couldn’t help but ask the question that was forefront in his mind. “Do you think Bonnie was right and McMasters really does care for my niece?”

“We talked further after you left. Bonnie told me that McMasters couldn’t have children of his own. That he views Sara as a replacement for the child he would never have.” Marc took a swallow of his beer. “I’d say she’s right.”

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Eric sighed and took a pull off his own beer, the cold liquid moistening the dry tissues of his mouth. "If that's the case, wouldn't Sara be better off with McMasters rather than Bonnie? All biological rights aside, Bonnie isn't ever going to be able to provide the most stable environment for her to grow up in. I realize that now."

"So what are you saying?" Marc leaned his head back and thirstily drank his beer with every sign of enjoyment.

"I know I've probably lost any chance I might have of getting custody of Sara, even with Bonnie's backing. If Sara is happy with her stepfather, if she's cared for, wouldn't it be better to just leave her be?" Eric felt odd voicing his thoughts. Weren't they a betrayal of his promise to his brother?

"Would you be able to live with that?" Marc quietly questioned, his raised eyebrow the only outward sign of his surprise.

Eric appreciated the way Marc didn't jump on his words, and he struggled to find the way to explain his jumbled thoughts and feelings, so different suddenly from what he had imagined.

"I'm not sure. I want to be able to see her, to be involved in her life. But isn't it more important that she be happy than I be happy?"

"Spoken like a true father." Marc raised his bottle in a small salute to Eric. "What accounts for this sudden onset of maturity?"

Eric ran his hand through his wealth of hair, shaking the last of the moisture out and not noticing in his distraction how Marc's eyes followed the movement. "Seeing Bonnie again... I don't hate her anymore. Not really, even though I can't help but feel that she sold my niece." Eric grimaced. "I mean, she didn't call until the checks stopped. But it's almost that I understand her now. She's not going to be able to help herself from getting into situations that probably won't be the healthiest for Sara." Eric looked up at Marc. "What happens if the next man she hooks up with doesn't care for Sara like his own child? Or worse?" Eric couldn't hide the fear in his voice. "You hear about this stuff every day. What if she doesn't call me the next time?"

"That's a good point, but didn't you hear anything I told you about McMasters and his group? Is he really the better option?" Marc

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shifted on the loveseat as he finished his beer and placed the empty bottle on the small table between them.

“What other option is there? Besides, how much of that is really true?” Eric replied as he stood up and started pacing again, his hands gesturing in his agitation. “Just because someone’s beliefs are different than mine doesn’t automatically make them a bad person.”

Marc’s laugh was hearty, his head falling against the back of the loveseat. “I would never have thought after all you’d been through you’d still be such an idealist.”

“Different isn’t necessarily wrong.” Eric flushed as he stubbornly reiterated his belief. He had forgotten for just a moment that Marc already knew everything there was to know about him.

“And where did that viewpoint land you before?” Marc stood up as well, one large hand rubbing over his mouth. “Christ, Eric. Whatever am I going to do with you?”

The words were so reminiscent of Brad’s last comment that Eric stopped and stared at Marc. The green eyes glittered, and as Eric watched, Marc moved closer to him. There was a tension building in the room, one that Eric didn’t welcome.

“I’m trying to respect your wishes, Eric. I truly am.” Marc shook his head, his voice low and deep. “But you’re making it so damn hard.”

“Marc....” Eric held up a warning hand, made nervous suddenly by his closeness.

“What do you expect?” Marc muttered as his hands reached out to grasp Eric by the shoulders, and his fingers smoothed over the soft, pale skin before tightening over Eric’s biceps. “I’m only human. To see you like this, it’s practically impossible to keep my hands off you.”

“I don’t want this,” Eric said, disturbed by the heat of those strong hands on him.

“I think you do.” Marc pulled Eric closer. “And if you are honest with yourself you’ll admit it.”

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It was the knock at Eric's door that interrupted the moment and proved to be his savior. Eric wasted no time moving away from both Marc's persuasive presence and his own unease about how far Marc would try to push, and he hastily opened the door.

"Hey Eric." Bonnie stood outside, all her best assets front and center. She had changed her clothes again and was obviously ready for some entertainment out. "Have you seen Marc? I thought I'd show him a little of the local nightlife."

Eric silently stepped back and let Bonnie see Marc in his room.

"There you are." Bonnie pushed past Eric and took Marc by one arm. "Are you ready to go?" Her manner immediately softened and became more feminine as soon as she was in his presence, and Eric wanted to laugh at the unexpected drama he suddenly found himself in the middle of.

"How can I say no?" Marc smiled tightly at Eric, the flush of desire still high upon his cheeks. "Eric and I can finish our conversation another time, can't we?"

"Yeah," Eric replied, licking his dry lips. "Sure we can."



Chapter 21

THE setting sun reflected off the surrounding clouds, bright shafts of gold and orange that gleamed and sparkled off the metal of the jet's wing. Eric just sat in his seat, staring out the window and feeling empty and alone as the aircraft chased westward after the sun.

He had failed his brother once again. Failed Sara.

They had driven out to the compound today. Having always wondered just what exactly constituted a compound, Eric had been interested to see it didn't live up to his mental picture of a small fortress enclosed within tall walls and iron gates, perhaps something with a Moroccan influence.

Actually, it had resembled nothing more than a rural university or a small village nestled in the green and forested countryside. There had been some individual houses on the massive amount of acreage. Land was cheap here, Bonnie's friend the deputy told them, and the church had bought up the surrounding land and then leased it back out to their followers. There were also community buildings that Bonnie told them housed the single dormitories, dining hall, library, and school.

He looked around, surprised that Bonnie had lasted as long as she had out here. It was such an obvious slice of rural life. Eric was amazed by all the necessary storage for the farm animals and equipment required to run an operation of this scale. There was even a community grain elevator and dryers, not that he had known what they were at first.

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The “For Sale” sign at the end of the entrance to the main drive had made him nervous, and the total absence of life had done the rest. The silence bothered him, the sense of waiting. It resembled nothing more than a scene from some horror movie he had watched on late night television, and he shivered at the thought of what could lay behind the locked doors.

His imagination was working overtime, seeing shadows given life by his fears in the bright light. But they drove through the deserted streets without incident; there was nothing to stare at but the carefully secured and closed-up buildings.

Eric closed his eyes to picture Sara on the playground equipment behind the school building. It was better than imagining her crouched low inside one of the abandoned houses watching them pass by in predatory silence. All irrational fears aside, he could see how this would have been a peaceful place, and Eric hoped like hell Sara had been happy here.

Bonnie’s deputy, sandy-haired and soft around the edges, had been practically tongue-tied in Marc’s presence. Based on his reaction, Eric didn’t want to know what kind of strings the entrepreneur had pulled to arrange for this guided tour on such short notice. Bonnie had been right, the group had moved out and left little if anything behind to mark their passing.

“You guys aren’t the first to come by and want to know where they went.” Deputy Samuelson had relaxed once Marc and Bonnie had walked on ahead of them and Eric had a chance to talk to him on his own. “Lots of families seem to have lost touch. Seems sad if you asked me. These were fine people, friendly and Christian. They kept to themselves, but there’s nothing wrong with that.”

Eric could only nod his agreement, his throat tight at the deputy’s clumsy attempt at reassurance. They stopped in front of the deserted library; its windows still gaily decorated with bright murals that had obviously been painted with childish hands. He couldn’t help but wonder if Sara had helped.

It was a dead end. There was nothing here to help them, nothing to point them in the right direction. Eric had felt hollow as he looked

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around; the silence and the emptiness made the loss of Sara seem that much more final, and he could feel himself start to panic.

“Don’t worry, Eric.” Marc stepped up beside him and placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. Still uneasy at Marc’s actions the night before Eric tensed at the initial touch, and then he relaxed, accepting the comfort as it was given. “We’ll find her. It will just take some time.”

“Time.” Eric shook his head in dismay. “How much time?”

Eric looked around for Bonnie and saw her talking to her friend the deputy—all smiles and obvious flirting—and his fists clenched despite himself.

“Easy.” Marc covered the fist with one of his own hands. “Everyone copes in different ways, Eric. Remember that.”

“Why?” Eric gestured around, confused once again by Marc’s actions. “Why are you helping me?”

“After you turned me down, you mean?” Marc smiled and shook his head. “I already told you, Eric, I’m your friend, and maybe someday, something more.”

“I can’t...” Eric grimaced and freed his hand. “It’s not fair to you. I can’t use you like that.”

“Everyone uses someone, Eric,” Marc said. “I keep forgetting what a foolish romantic you are.”

Before Eric could reply Bonnie had joined them once again, tucking herself into the crook of Marc’s arm as if she belonged there. She was perfectly put together as usual, no sign of grief or distress over her daughter’s disappearance. For that brief moment Eric hated her as she stood there, impervious to the implications of the deserted streets. “What are you two so deep in discussion about over here?”

“Just considering our options, Bonnie.” Marc tightened his arm around her and stared at Eric as if waiting for him to say anything.

“Well, what did you two come up with?” Bonnie smiled up at Marc, her frosted lips gleaming.

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Eric turned away, unwilling to watch Bonnie's blatant attempts at manipulation. "There's nothing for us here." Without looking to see if Marc and Bonnie followed, he headed to the patrol car where Deputy Samuelson leaned against the door waiting for them, much as Eric had spent hours of his time waiting for Marc.

"ERIC?" Bonnie's voice broke into his thoughts, and he forced a tired smile to his face as she sat down across from him and turned his attention away from the images he found in the clouds outside the jet and their illusion of peace.

"What is it, Bonnie?" Without Sara to consider, Eric wearily wondered if he really had it in him to try and take care of Bonnie once again.

"Marc has asked me to stay with him a while. You know, to get me back on my feet." Bonnie looked down at her unblemished manicure, a gesture Eric was beginning to recognize as a nervous tic. "He wants to try a subpoena to get any forwarding addresses for the congregation and thinks my input would help."

"Okay?" Eric couldn't help the unspoken question in his voice.

"I just wondered what you thought about that. Would it be okay with you? He is your friend and all." There was no mistaking the calculation in her upward glance at Eric.

Eric forced himself to remember that Bonnie wasn't as stupid as she let on. "Actually Bonnie, he's my boss. Kind of." Eric sighed. "Christ, I'm not sure what the hell he is anymore."

"But he's got the money and connections to find Sara, right?" Bonnie dropped her pose and looked at Eric intently, for the first time letting him see the real woman behind the doll-like presentation. "More than you or I ever will."

Marc's words rang in Eric's ears: *everyone uses someone*. "You're right about that."

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“And we don’t know how long he’s going to be willing to help, do we?” Bonnie prodded.

“Bonnie, do you really....” Eric began to speak, but then he stopped himself. Marc was a big boy. “It’s fine, Bonnie. You do what you need to do.”

ERIC was finally alone in his empty apartment. He knew he hadn’t been gone from Vegas that long, but everything seemed different, the sun brighter, the heat more intense.

Despite his tiredness and his promise to Brad, he had driven by Discreet in search of something familiar and had been shocked to find the building locked and surrounded by fluttering yellow tape. This time of the evening it should have been full of activity as the drivers prepared for the busy night ahead.

He ducked under the tape and walked around the abandoned building, trying the locked doors and looking in the windows, not sure what he was hoping to see. Something about the emptiness was strangely familiar, and it wasn’t until he had given up and driven away that Eric realized that it reminded him of the deserted compound in Michigan.

There was no answer from any of the telephone numbers he tried, and there was no one he recognized at the diner when he stopped there. Even Connie wasn’t anywhere to be seen. Like something out of a movie, it felt as if everyone he had known had vanished during his short time out of town.

Eric stared dazedly at his reflection in the bathroom mirror; the image was broken and distorted by the dried shaving cream he hadn’t been able to bring himself to clean off. Had it all been some kind of bad dream?

Brad had known. Eric clung to that thought for reassurance. Whatever had happened, Brad had known about it; that’s why he had told Eric to stay away until he called. But there was no call on his cell,

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no message in his voice mail. Nothing to let him know what was going on.

Eric knew he could have called Marc; he would have answers if anyone would—or at least know where to find them—but after saying his awkward goodbyes at the airport, Eric knew he wasn't ready to face Marc or Bonnie again.

Although, with Discreet apparently out of business it looked like he was going to have accept Marc's offer of employment until he could figure something out. Eric was uncomfortably unsure he wanted to be obligated any further than he already was.

Hunger was the farthest thing from his mind, but Eric forced himself to pick something up from a fast food place on his way back to his apartment anyway. The bag ended up sitting on the kitchen counter next to his coffeemaker, unopened.

Sleep wasn't to be found. Eric lay sweating and naked on the futon pad in his room that felt empty without Brad in it, staring at the moon as it shone through his crooked blinds. One of these days he was going to have to replace those damn things.

The musky odor of Brad and their coupling was still on his bedding, the scent faded and indistinct. Eric was afraid that when it was gone, the loss would leave him with only his imperfect memories until eventually they disappeared as well.

Eric held his hand up to the individual shafts of half-light, letting them form lacy, hennaed patterns of mystery on his skin. It was late, the hour of night when shadow selves roamed free, and all he had left were questions.

He waited for answers that didn't come.

MORNING found Eric sitting out on his balcony even before the sun. A cup of coffee sat untouched on the small table beside him while he looked within himself and tried to decide what to do next. The orange ball of the rising sun climbed upward in the sky, the rays touching his

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face with gentle warmth. No decisions had been reached when there was an unexpected knock on his front door. Eric pulled it open without a second's thought.

"Christopher." Eric was surprised to see his friend there. "What's going on? I haven't been able to get a hold of you or anyone. Work is locked up, and...." Eric let his words trail away into silence as Christopher just stood in his doorway.

"Can I come in, Eric?" Christopher asked stiffly, the conversational standoff ending as oddly as it began.

"Sure." Eric stepped back, watching as Christopher walked into the apartment. There was something different about the young man, something unfamiliar and foreign.

Christopher walked past Eric with calm authority rather than his usual liquid grace, and Christopher pulled his sunglasses away from his face to reveal a man who was older and more mature than the youthful and exuberant young man Eric thought he knew. Even Christopher's clothing was different, the T-shirt and jeans still casual but no longer chosen to show off his body or attract attention.

"What's going on, man?" Eric stood there with the door handle in his hand. He twitched with sudden unease.

Instead of answering, Christopher shook his head and looked around the empty apartment as if he had never been there before. "Still no fucking place to sit. Balcony?"

"Sure." Eric managed to put himself in motion, closing the front door and following Christopher out on to the small ledge with the cheap plastic chairs they had shared so many times before. "You want something to drink?"

"Maybe later."

At first they sat in silence and watched as the traffic flowed beneath them like always. But this time was different. Their casual friendliness was gone. Neither man seemed to know how to reach across the sudden distance that yawned so widely between them. Finally Eric couldn't take it.

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“Where is everyone? What happened?” He kept his voice tight and quiet, as if that would help contain his fear.

Christopher sighed and leaned forward, his hands clasped and dropped between his knees. “Fuck, I don’t even know where to start.” He sat back once again, his inability to stay still finally something familiar.

“Discreet was busted by the cops while you were gone. Gardner had been using it as front for drugs, money laundering, other shit.” He grimaced at the blank look on Eric’s face and scrubbed his hands across his face. “Arrests were made. The business... everything has been seized. There’s still some doubt as to if the judge is going to offer bail to anyone due to the flight risk.”

“Daniel?” Eric said in stunned disbelief. “Warren? Rob?” He couldn’t help his surprise. “You’re kidding me.”

Christopher just looked at him, and Eric felt his stomach clench as his concern for the other men dropped away beneath a need to know much more imperative.

“Brad?” Eric whispered. Things began to make sense: no phone call, no voice mail. Here was the answer he had been so afraid of. “What happened to Brad?”

“Eric—”

“Wait,” Eric interrupted. “How come you aren’t with them? What are you doing here? Why aren’t you in jail too?”

“What do you want me to say?” Christopher swore again and ran a trembling hand through his dark curls. “Christ, I didn’t think it was going to be this hard.”

“Just fucking tell me,” Eric demanded. He could hear the sharp, desperate sound of his voice, and he felt cold despite the sun; clammy and faintly nauseous. This was why Brad had sent him away.

“This thing between you and Brad, how much has he really told you? About his past? About who he really is?” Christopher asked challengingly.

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“Enough,” Eric said. He felt old all of a sudden. Tired. Afraid as Christopher pointed out just how flimsy the foundation of Eric’s tentative relationship with Brad really was. “I know he was involved in some shit years back. I know he left Vegas to get away from it all. I know someone he cared about died.” *I think I love him.*

“Emily was my little sister.” Christopher stood up and leaned over the flimsy rail, preferring to look down at the traffic below rather than look at Eric. “I joined the Vegas PD after she died. Undercover work; mainly narcotics, sometimes vice. When the Discreet assignment came up, I talked Brad into coming in on it with me, got him a special deal with the DA. He had the background cred already with his history, the connections. It was easy.” He shrugged his shoulders. “He owed me.”

“You blamed him.” Eric remembered what Brad had told him. “You guys had been together, and you blamed him for her death.” *Everyone uses someone.* Eric could hear Marc’s mocking voice once again.

“She wouldn’t even have known what any of that shit was if it wasn’t for him.” Christopher’s hands gripped the rail. “He walked away free and clear and left her in that life with those bastards.”

“That’s bullshit. It was her choice all the way.” Eric understood Christopher’s pain, but he also began to understand the pressures Brad had been under, the weight of the guilt that had shadowed his eyes. “She could have walked; she could have talked to you.”

Christopher just made a dismissive gesture with his hand.

“Was everything about you a lie? What about this Wesley character? Where does he fit into all this?” Eric asked numbly.

“We all hide things, Eric. And we all lie.” For just a moment Christopher’s face softened, resembling once again the young man Eric thought he had known. “As for Wes, he saved me after Emily died. He’s been my lifeline all through this, just waiting for me to move on. I really am leaving the force and going to be with him.” He smiled at Eric tiredly. “At least that much was true.”

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“Who was Brad’s lifeline during all this time? Who did he have to turn to while you kept him dancing to your tune?” Eric questioned bitterly, already knowing what the answer was. “Where is he? I need to see him.”

“Clark County lockup probably. It looks like there’s a problem with his immunity deal. Something about the paperwork, and well, let’s just say his part of the operation was more hands-on than mine.” Christopher looked back out into the sky, closing his eyes for a moment against the sun’s strength. “From what I saw the list of charges is pretty impressive.”

“You fucker,” Eric breathed as the truth finally hit him, the real reason Christopher had asked for Brad’s help, knowing his guilt wouldn’t let him refuse. “You’re hanging him out to dry.”

Christopher turned to face Eric, placing his sunglasses carefully back on his face to complete the calm façade, once again transformed into a stranger Eric didn’t know behind the polarized mirrors. The distorted reflection echoed the darker places of a soul that Christopher didn’t bother to hide anymore. “What can I say? Paybacks are a bitch, and I’ve waited a long time for this one.”

He left the balcony and walked into Eric’s small apartment, heading for the door before he stopped and turned back around. “Look, you’re new to Vegas. I talked to the guys in charge, and since you drove for Evans the majority of the time you’re not under any suspicion. But they’re still going to want to talk to you.”

“Am I supposed to thank you?” Eric asked bitterly, his fists clenched as he struggled to keep himself from pounding the smooth mask of Christopher’s face into something or someone he might recognize.

“I told you to stay away from him, and I didn’t have to come here today. Remember that.” Christopher paused and looked back at Eric as if there was something else he wanted to say before he just shrugged again and walked out, the door shutting quietly behind him.



Chapter 22

ERIC leaned against the side of the limo parked neatly in line beside the others in the lot and ignored the brilliant colors of the Strip reflected in the waxed surface. It would be easy to get lost in the changing image that shone back at him, but he looked past the bright, glowing neon that surrounded him and up into sky above.

His hat was off, and his red hair was a loose curtain about his shoulders. Marc had other things to worry about now and no longer insisted Eric tie his hair back. Eric stared harder at the blackness. There were stars there, he knew there were. He just had to look upward, away from the pull of earth long enough for the city lights to fade and the stars shine through.

God, he was tired tonight. Eric looked at his watch with a sigh. It was late—or early, depending on your point of view. Once again he was waiting outside a club on the Strip for Marc and his party. Eric wondered if it was a sign of weakness on his part that after everything that had happened, he was still driving for Marc. What could he say? The money was good, and he definitely needed the money.

It wasn't that he hadn't looked for another job—he had. But even though Eric had only been questioned in connection with the raid on Discreet, he was still viewed with suspicion by the other limousine companies in town, and no one that paid a decent wage was willing to take a chance on him, especially not with the investigation still being newsworthy.

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Eric nodded to a couple of other drivers in the lot, stationary beside their own vehicles in their usual fraternity of stand and wait, but kept his distance. He didn't blame them for not responding. He was tainted, or at least that's how the other drivers treated him. Either he didn't have anything to do with the drug business and Gardner—in which case he was a snitch for the Feds—or he did, in which case he was still under suspicion and no one wanted the resulting guilt by association.

Hell, he was probably still being watched. Only time would tell.

So they stayed away from him, and he stayed on with Marc. It was difficult. Eric guessed that was the best way to put it. He still admired the busy entrepreneur, and he was grateful for what the other man had done for him, what he was still doing for him. But Eric had decided he wouldn't ever know the reasons behind Marc's help and because of that he couldn't really trust him.

"Do you see your future in the stars?" Lost in his thoughts Eric hadn't noticed the quiet footsteps.

Eric stiffened before he turned and smiled at Marc, who must have had walked from the nightclub to the parking lot. "I'm sorry, I didn't hear the phone." Usually Marc would call and let him know he should bring the stretch around front to pick everyone up.

"I didn't call." Marc shrugged, his shoulder muscles flexing under the fine material of his suit. "I needed some fresh air and a chance to stretch my legs." He leaned against the side of limo, next to Eric.

"Were you lucky tonight?" Eric asked, curious as to what Marc was up to now. It was as exhausting as ever to try and keep up with the dynamic blond.

"A little. Not enough. The cards weren't smiling on me, and Russell hasn't made up his mind on whether he wants to cement the deal or not. But he will."

"Win some and lose some." Eric smiled at Marc's certainty. "What's the plan for the rest of the evening?"

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“We’ll let them finish and then head back. I need my rest. It will be a busy day tomorrow.” Marc casually leaned a little closer to Eric. If it weren’t for the glitter in the green eyes Eric might have even believed it was accidental. But he knew better.

“Marc,” he said reprovingly. Eric’s hair swung out behind him when he shook his head at the constant game.

“I know. I know.” Marc laughed. “But you can’t blame me for trying.” He raised his hands mockingly and slid back away from Eric, his eyes following the movement of Eric’s rich, auburn hair, darker and shining in the street lamps. “One day, when I least expect it, you might say yes.”

“I’m flattered, really I am, but I don’t think that’s going to happen.” Eric smiled despite himself. He still thought Marc Evans a dangerously attractive man and would catch himself objectively admiring the taut muscles, but he no longer felt the desire to act on his feelings.

“Never hurts to be prepared. That’s how it starts, first you’ll smile at me, and then next thing you know....”

Eric had to laugh at the exaggerated leer, and he relaxed now that he knew what kind of mood Marc was in. It was always easier to deal with Marc when he was being playful like this. Deep down Eric believed he was simply a challenge to him. Probably if he gave in, the thrill would be gone, and Marc’s interest would end. But he wasn’t willing to test his theory.

“See, I made you laugh.” Marc smiled with satisfaction. “So what are the stars telling you?”

“Nothing much.” Eric let his head fall back, and he stared upward once again. “Nothing that will help.”

“We’ll find her,” Marc said. “I have no doubt that we will, but it will take time.”

“I appreciate the confidence, but that wasn’t what I was thinking about.” Eric wondered why he was opening up to Marc once again, but even amid the organized commotion that was Vegas nightlife, they

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were caught in the illusion of a still and quiet bubble, alone in the night in a way that made it easy to express himself. “I went up to the Clark County Detention Center today.”

“I see.” Marc sighed and ran a hand through his blond hair. “You just can’t leave it alone can you? Always the romantic, Eric.”

“I just don’t understand why,” Eric protested. “It seems important that I know.”

“What difference will it make to how things turned out?” Marc shook his head. “Money, probably, excitement. Hell, maybe it was just for fun.”

“Warren is scared. I feel bad for him,” Eric confided as he remembered the strained expression on Warren’s pale face as they had talked earlier that day in their grim surroundings. Eric had tried not to compare the dingy walls of the lockup to the ones in the hospital he had stayed in, but the whole episode had left him on edge. He wanted to help, but just like with everything else, he was helpless. “He hasn’t seen Rob since they were arrested.”

“Don’t let yourself be caught passing anything between them,” Marc cautioned.

“I just....” Eric gave up and shook his head. He didn’t want to explain his motivation for trying to help Rob and Warren.

“If it makes you feel any better, I’ve talked to the DA. It’s Gardner and Daniel and a couple of the others that they want. Your friend Warren can make a deal easily enough. All he has to do is start talking.” Marc shrugged as if to say *See how easy that was?* Problem solved.

It probably *was* that easy in his world, Eric thought. A group of tourists walked past. It was obvious they felt daring being out so late, safe as long as they stayed on the sidewalk and ignored the darkness that shrouded Eric and Marc and the harsh reality of living under the desert sun that was Vegas.

They were happy and excited; carrying their souvenirs and pointing at the lights and displays designed to entertain them. Their

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carefree laughter rose above the rest of the street noise as Eric watched them pass. He couldn't remember anymore when he had last felt that young. "I don't even know if Warren really knows anything. He's just a kid."

"You always want to believe the best about everyone, Eric," Marc said. "After everything that has happened, you still do. I can show you information about that young man that would change your mind."

Eric tensed at the reminder of just who it was he was standing next to. "You and your files. I can't imagine what it's like to have to distrust everyone on principle."

"Don't be so dismissive of my methods, Eric. Information is the key to success in life." Marc smiled knowingly. "I still have one that I know you'd love to get your hands on."

"Let's agree to disagree, Marc. I don't want to have this argument again." Eric fidgeted, wondering once again just why Marc had sought him out tonight.

Marc's cell rang, and he answered it quickly. "Hello?" Eric started to move away, giving him his privacy, but Marc held up a restraining hand. "Yes, if you're ready to go I'll have Eric bring the car around... Of course... Fine."

"Bonnie ready to go?" Eric questioned when Marc hung up. He already had the keys out and hit the remote to deactivate the alarm. He didn't mention the obvious; that Marc hadn't told Bonnie he was already outside with Eric. Would it really make any difference if she knew or was Marc so used to playing games he did it without thinking?

"Duty calls." Marc smiled as Eric held open the passenger door for him and entered the stretch with his usual athletic grace.

BONNIE was chatty tonight. Eric let his eyes drift away from the road and into the back where she was curled up against Marc's side and busy letting him know just what she had been up to all evening while he had talked boring old business. Marc's green eyes met his, and Eric was

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surprised all over again at the patient good humor he saw there. Of all the things Eric might have expected, Marc's ability to tolerate and even encourage Bonnie hadn't been one of them.

She looked good. Not only tonight in her expensive evening gown, some designer number covered with sparkles, but all the time. Eric had to admit that. Better than when she had been married to Keith. With Marc footing the bill Bonnie had free rein to indulge herself. Of course, she was playing another role. This time it was arm candy to the successful entrepreneur. The role suited her.

It was a small enough price to pay for Marc's help in finding her daughter. That's what Bonnie had told Eric in a rare moment of candor. Marc Evans was attractive, wealthy beyond anything she had ever imagined, and willing to help fund the search for Sara. Why would she even think to refuse? The reasons behind it all didn't seem to trouble her the way they did Eric. She was living with Marc now in the penthouse. That had surprised Eric, but Marc's daughters had taken a liking to Bonnie and insisted.

In return Marc held up his side of the unspoken bargain. There were several investigators on the Evans Enterprises payroll whose only task was to find Sara. In addition, Marc's lawyers had been busy pulling together the paperwork that would be necessary to initiate divorce proceedings as well as deal with the resulting custody and dissolution of adoption issues. Eric didn't know exactly how all that worked, what with their lack of success in finding McMasters, but that's what the lawyers were for. He guessed it was all just preparation anyway.

Sometimes Eric wondered if Marc would end up marrying Bonnie. They seemed to get along well enough. Then Marc would catch him alone, and Eric would feel the heat of those green eyes as they traveled across his body, hear the hunger in Marc's voice, and he would question Marc's motives and involvement in their sordid little family drama all over again. But wasn't he taking advantage of Marc's attraction to him as well?

Everyone uses someone. Even, it seemed, him.

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

But what else was he supposed to do? Eric asked himself that time and again during the long and sleepless nights. He was drifting again; he knew it. But he couldn't help himself. Even though he was able to visit Warren and Rob, even though he kept searching in the system, he hadn't yet found Brad.

None of the other drivers from Discreet he had talked to had seen Brad since the day of the bust. Eric knew now that Brad had been moved from the Clark County Detention Center, but no one would tell him any more than that. He wouldn't even have gotten that much information without Marc's influence behind him.

Eric would lie there alone in his apartment during the long, empty times when he wasn't working, and sometimes he was afraid that Brad was just a dream. Just a mirage that he had made up and he would grow old searching for. He still hadn't cleaned his bathroom mirror; the dried and flaking foam the only proof he had of their trip out to the hot springs and their time together afterward.

He was empty inside. With no sign of Sara and no way to know if Brad was anything but an illusion, Eric struggled against his constant fear of being alone and abandoned. Other times Eric would feel his frustration and anger at Christopher and the havoc the embittered man had left behind until he thought it would drive him crazy.

"Eric?" Bonnie's voice from the back interrupted his thoughts. "Did Marc tell you about the latest report from the investigator?"

"No." Eric looked into the review mirror, meeting Marc's eyes and continuing their unspoken conspiracy of silence. "He didn't have time."

Marc patted Bonnie's hand. "There's nothing new. Just a couple more dead-ends that they've followed through. It looks as if McMasters has gone underground. Perhaps he has even changed his name. But every lead that we check out is one more out of the way, so we are getting closer. I have faith that if we don't find him soon, the IRS will."

"Really?" Eric said. "What makes you think that?"

"I got a letter," Bonnie replied. "Marc's people are handling it."

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Marc laughed. "Apparently the good Reverend has been a trifle remiss in his filing his personal taxes. One of the groups involved in his church has a whole dogma about how income taxes are illegal and were a war-time measure that should be repealed."

"I thought churches were tax-exempt anyway," Eric said in confusion.

"The church, yes. But there's still the personal liability issue that he's been a bad boy on." Marc smiled. "It practically restores my lack of faith in my fellow man."

"How about you, Eric?" Bonnie dabbed the tears from the corner of her eyes and then smiled brilliantly at Eric. "Have you heard anything about your friend?" Eric hadn't shared much about Brad with Bonnie. Just that he had lost touch with someone important to him and was searching for him as well as Sara.

Once again Eric's eyes met Marc's in the rearview mirror. Marc never asked. He never pushed Eric, but the raw interest that blazed in the green eyes let Eric know that Marc wanted to know the answer. He could hear the sound of the engine over the sudden silence and he swallowed. "No. Nothing yet."

"I'm so sorry." Bonnie patted Marc's thigh. "You really should let Marc help you with that."

"Thanks, Bonnie. But this is something I need to do on my own." Eric repeated the words he had said so many times before, unable to help the sick feeling in his gut that told him Marc already had the answers to all his questions and was just waiting for him to ask.

"Can you imagine what the two of us would be doing without Marc?"

Eric shook his head. The truth was he had no clue, and that fact bothered him more than he let on.

"Didn't you say your friend was a mechanic? Maybe when he turns up you can get him a job in the casino garage." She looked up at Marc with what even Eric had to agree was award-worthy admiration. "What do you think?"

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“Anything’s possible,” Marc agreed with a hard-edged smile as he held Eric’s gaze. “All Eric ever has to do is ask.”



Chapter 23

THE Nevada sun blazed hotly, scant clouds visible in the morning sky as the pickup truck made its way on U.S. Route 95. There wasn't a lot of traffic at this hour of the morning, as any and all travelers were heading to the same destination. Not much sense in getting there early. Daily processing times didn't start until eight and depending on the block visiting hours were after that.

Eric restlessly fiddled with the radio controls. He had left KWNR out of Vegas behind him, and he kept switching between the alternative music on KXTE out of Pahrump and the Spanish station KQMR out of Indian Springs.

He was almost there.

Eric was nervous about what might be waiting for him, but he wouldn't let himself dwell on that. He just let his thumbs keep time with the music on the steering wheel and tried not to see anything other than the scrub and desert scenery that blurred as he drove past.

There was a small road sign for Cold Creek Rd/NV-172, and below that in smaller print were the words spelling out his destination: High Desert State Prison. Eric swallowed. The sun hit the reflective paint of the words and flashed across his corneas like the afterglow of a dying star as he turned left off the highway.

It had taken him time to wade through the maze that was the Nevada Department of Corrections. Even then Eric was sure the complexities of the NDOC system would have escaped him without the

Drive Me Home ✶ Chrissy Munder

help he had found in an online forum appropriately known among its members as “prisonchat.”

The stories that were posted out there, the struggles of those on the outside, were just as heartbreaking as those of the incarcerated, and Eric had been able to relate to the all-encompassing sense of loss and confusion so prevalent in them all. Even with their help, it had taken him close to a month just to find out where Brad had been sent once he left the Clark County Detention Center in Las Vegas.

Based on everything Eric had learned about the system, Brad shouldn’t have even been kept at High Desert. The new-generation correctional facility was set up to serve as the reception and intake center for all inmates from the jails and courts of southern Nevada.

Brad should have received his orientation to NDOC, his intake examinations and initial classification, and then been transferred out to any of the other facilities; maybe Ely, Lovelock, Southern Desert or if he had been lucky, the Tonopah Conservation Camp.

But then nothing had gone the way it should have. In Eric’s mind, Brad shouldn’t have been there at all, and once again he uttered a curse over the results of Christopher’s bitter desire for revenge. Eric fidgeted in his seat, sweating even with the air-conditioning vent directed below his waist. The black dress slacks he had on stuck to his legs, and his balls were swimming in the briefs the dress code required him to wear instead of his usual boxers.

Blue denim or blue clothing of any kind that resembled state issue was not allowed. Eric had learned that, along with the other sobering rules that applied to visitors to the facility, in the five-page printout of regulations he had gotten his hands on in hopes that Brad would relent and apply for visitation. Eric’s first response as he read the requirements had been total disbelief that had finally given away to grim understanding. It was all about control. Both of the inmates and those in contact with them.

Eric drove past two of the five perimeter towers on his way to the main visitor parking lot. His identification lay on the dash, ready for each steely-eyed challenge. The electric fence gleamed in the Nevada sun, the silver sheen of the wire beautiful in its deadly purpose. They

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needed rain; the ground of the no-man's land inside the fence was cracked and split from lack of moisture where the dry, desert vegetation had burned away.

If it weren't for the tower officers on observation duty, he might have been sitting on his small balcony baking in the hot rays the way the sweat rolled down the back of his neck, soaking his shirt under the arms and at the waist. But it was a cold sweat, and it reeked of fear that wasn't caused by the weapons trained down upon him from the towers.

Brad didn't know Eric would be there.

When a sentence "expired"—Eric didn't think he would ever get over that term—the normal procedure would be for the prisoner to be transported from the incarceration site back to their main intake point. In Brad's case, Las Vegas.

But this case was different. Brad hadn't actually been sentenced, he had only been held while the district attorney, the Las Vegas Police Department, and the very expensive lawyer Marc had recommended to Eric battled out the difficulties with his original immunity deal. The lawyer was the only help Eric had finally accepted from Marc. He told himself it was okay because it was for Brad.

Nothing about Eric's own experiences or his brief exposure to NDOC and this whole mess had rid him of any lingering resentment toward the legislative process. He could respect the men doing the job, but once it was turned over to the system itself, well, that was a whole different ball of wax.

Eric fumbled with the air-conditioning control. Shivering now as his sweat dried, and he debated whether he should just go to the main entrance. Before he could decide, a lone figure carrying a large manila envelope in his hand stepped forward from the shade of the reception center into the bright glare of the parking lot.

Even at this distance Eric recognized him. Despite the state-issue jeans and button-front blue shirt, despite the shorter hair, there something about the man standing still and alone looking skyward that sent everything inside Eric pinging away like a signal his body was

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trained to recognize. One he had been afraid he would never receive again.

The door to the truck wouldn't open. Eric's hand fumbled on the handle before he could remember how it was supposed to work, and he stepped out of the truck, his body stiff from both the drive and with uncertainty. He stood there and waited.

Eric was swamped with emotion as Brad walked slowly toward the truck. He wanted to reach out, wanted to bury himself in Brad and reassure himself that it was really him, but he held back, hesitant. He needed to respect Brad's feelings as well, whatever they would be.

Dark shades hid the icy blue eyes from Eric's stare, but the lips were the same, and they parted to silently form Eric's name. Eric nodded, and Brad walked to the passenger side of the truck, opening the door and folding himself into the seat without fuss or conversation. He held the manila envelope upon his lap.

Eric's hands trembled on the steering wheel, and he clenched them tight to keep from touching Brad, who was so close but still so distant. There was a new quietness, a stillness Brad exuded that precluded such an action. The danger Eric had instinctively recognized at their first meeting was closer to the surface, layers of the pleasant exterior peeled away.

They sat next to each other in the silence, Brad looking straight ahead as Eric started the truck. The Latin music blared loudly until Eric quickly turned it off, and they slowly drove back through the checkpoints Eric had just passed. He could feel Brad tense at each stop, and it wasn't until they had cleared the last and turned back out onto Nevada Highway 172 that Brad gave a shuddering exhalation and his shoulders lost some of their tightness.

Even so the silence wasn't broken until they were accelerating down U.S. 95 and Brad seemed to really breathe for the first time. Eric remembered how he had felt when he finally had been released from the hospital, and while he knew the two didn't compare, he thought he had some understanding of the disorientation Brad was experiencing.

"I didn't expect to see you there."

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Those were the first words Brad had said to him since that day at Discreet. The voice was the same; perhaps a little lower; huskier.

Eric struggled to keep his emotions in check at the sound of it. "I wasn't sure you wanted me there, after everything," Eric replied. He tried to keep the anger and hurt at Brad's refusal to let him visit out of his voice, but he knew he didn't totally succeed.

There was quiet again in the truck, the only sound the thrum of the wheels as they ate up the road beneath them.

"I didn't want you to come see me in that place." Brad looked out the passenger window as he spoke. "I needed to keep everything separate until I knew what was going on."

Eric bit his lip. *What about what I needed?*

"Thanks for the letters though," Brad said, turning his face to Eric for the first time. "They helped."

"Yeah? I'm glad." Eric tried again to catch a glimpse of Brad's eyes behind the sunglasses, without success. He was as much a stranger now as he had been the first time Eric had met him. Except on that day Brad had touched him, and nothing in Eric's life had ever been the same.

Thinking of the first day he met Brad made Eric think of Christopher. As much as he missed the friend he thought he had made, Eric was still angry at the way Christopher had offered up what seemed like a chance for redemption for Brad, when all the while it was nothing but Christopher's opportunity for revenge. "Have you seen or heard anything from Christopher?"

"Don't be too hard on him," Brad said quietly. "He was only doing what he thought he had to."

Brad was avoiding his question, and Eric wanted to press further, but he was still feeling his way through this moment, still trying to find the way to connect to the man sitting next to him. But Brad was so isolated and shut down he may as well have been in the next state.

"Anything new on your niece? How's Evans doing?" Brad's words were casual, but his body tensed again.

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Eric decided right then that—assuming he had a later with the stiff figure occupying the passenger seat beside him—that it was going to be *much* later before he ever tried to explain things to Brad. Among them that while the lawyer had presented himself to Brad as being court-appointed, Marc had arranged his services, and that Eric had worked out a salary deduction to pay the entrepreneur back. It might seem silly, but it helped Eric feel like he still had some measure of independence.

“There’s been nothing solid to go on yet with Sara and McMasters. At least, nothing new since my last letter.” Eric shrugged. Not knowing what else to write about, he had sent Brad letters rich in detail about the trip to Michigan and his feelings about Sara’s continued absence.

Not knowing where Sara was or how she was doing continued to eat away at him, but at least Eric knew that the best men money could buy were searching for her. “The investigators are wondering if McMasters didn’t get them false identities, social security numbers and the whole nine yards.”

“Evans still paying for it all?” Brad’s hands, held so carefully still, suddenly crumpled the envelope on his lap.

“I’ve stopped asking questions,” Eric replied. “That’s between him and Bonnie—who’s living with him now by the way. I’m just the driver.”

Brad finally took his sunglasses off, folded them up, and placed them in his shirt pocket. The atmosphere inside the truck changed; the rest of the tension finally left Brad, and he faced Eric full on for the first time. “What are you saying? You and Evans....” Brad gestured aimlessly with his hand. “You guys aren’t together?”

“No.” Eric tried to look back at the road in front of him, but the dawning hope in Brad’s eyes was too much to ignore. Eric dared to take his right hand off the steering wheel and reached out to lightly stroke the line of Brad’s cheek, the sharp jut of bone even sharper now because of the weight he had dropped over the last several months. “Is that what you tried to do when you called him that day?”

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Brad leaned into the touch, his eyes closing. “I didn’t know what was going to happen; I needed to make sure you were taken care of.”

“That was a nice thought,” Eric said quietly. “But I needed to learn to take care of myself.”

Brad exhaled heavily and sat back in his seat as Eric’s hand slid down to rest on the armrest between them. “It’s so strange to be sitting here, talking with you. Being with you. It’s all I could think about.”

Eric nodded, not trusting himself to speak.

“I’m sorry about the visitation thing,” Brad finally blurted out. “I just couldn’t handle it. Being in that place, seeing you, not being able to touch you. Separated by glass and not able to smell you.” He reached out and enveloped Eric’s hand in his. “I thought I was going to go crazy if I couldn’t do this again.”

“If you want to talk about it....” Eric let his words trail off. He was staggered by what Brad had already revealed to him and didn’t want to press for anything more. He remembered what he had read on the chat board about the difficulties that could arise in the adjustment period. He didn’t try to fool himself that it was going to be easy. This thing between them had been complicated right from the start.

Eric could feel Brad’s hand trembling as the long fingers twined with his own, and for the first time in months, Eric felt complete. It didn’t matter that they hadn’t kissed or hugged or done anything yet other than touch and hold hands. He could breathe again, and they could go on from here.

“Sometime. Maybe,” Brad said tiredly, his eyes closing as he finally began to allow himself to truly relax for the first time in months. “Right now I just want to forget. I want a bath and some of Connie’s coffee and a week in bed with you—once we get rid of that fucking futon. You’re the driver. Just drive me home.”

“I can do that.” Eric smiled slowly, and he let his foot press heavier on the gas pedal. Home. The word had never sounded so good. “I can do all of that.”

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“It’s not going to be easy you know.” Brad’s drowsy words were an eerie echo of Eric’s thoughts.


“It never is.”

“Do you think we stand a chance?” Brad’s words were so low Eric barely heard the words; the hope struggling beneath the fear.


“This is Vegas, baby,” Eric replied confidently. “I’m willing to bet on it.”

The joke in **CHRISSY MUNDER'S** family is that she was born with a book in her hand. Even now, you'll never find her without a book or seven scattered about. Forced to become a practicing realist in an effort to combat her tendency to dream, her many years of travel and a diverse assortment of careers have taken her across most of the U.S. and shown her that there are two things you can never have enough of: love and laughter.

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