



Carolina
Valdez

Hangin' With My
Window Man

HANGIN' WITH MY WINDOW MAN

...Ryan drank in the clean scent of Boon's skin and the smoky smell of his clothes as he removed them with slow deliberation. With his lips against Boon's, he said, "I wondered if you'd have other body art." He stroked his hand over the green dragon on the silken groin. "This one's in a most strategic spot."

"Touching it's doing strategic things to me." His voice was hoarse with need.

"Is it?" Ryan looked into Boon's eyes as he continued to stroke. He delighted in Boon's restlessness, the restlessness he was creating with a single hand.

"You'd better stop. That feels too good."

"Does it?" Ryan purred. His hand gravitated from body art to a dripping cock and intensified the stroking as he wrapped his fingers around it and rapidly moved up and down.

"Please stop. I can't..."

"Can't what, Boon? Can't hold back?"

He captured Boon's mouth when he knew he would climax, and muffled his cries. With his own dick wet and dripping, he unzipped his khakis and pushed Boon's hand inside, sighing as he felt the strong fingers encircle him and milk. He moved in a dance with that hand, thrusting his pelvis against it.

"Harder, harder. I'm almost there," he groaned, straining, his lips tight as he fought for that moment of glorious release.

“Look at me,” Boon demanded.

The sensations in Ryan’s body demanded all his attention, but he opened his eyes and looked into Boon’s...

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BY

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HANGIN' WITH MY WINDOW MAN
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CHAPTER 1

A freight train roared through Century City, where there were no trains. Thirty stories above the ground, the window washers' gondola lurched. Boon Andrews grabbed the railing as one of the cables at Johnston's end broke free. Instead of remaining taut, the safety cable stretched almost full length.

"Jeezus H. Christ." Fear was an alien thing to Boon, but it slammed into his chest now like the freight train he'd just heard. His heart threatened to break though his breastbone as he fought to hold on and ride out the gondola's sway. The frame supporting the two window washers dropped down at his co-worker's end, then halted with a jerk.

He breathed again when he realized they weren't going to

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plunge to their deaths. Their personal safety harnesses and the cable at his end had held. At least for now.

The other man struggled to regain his footing on the swinging gondola.

"Don't look down, Jim! Grab my hand. I'll pull you to me." Boon slid his safety harness along the top railing as far as he could and reached a hand out to the older man. Fright had made their hands sweaty, and they lost contact when their grips slipped.

"Dry your hand," he yelled as he rubbed his on his Levi's.

Jim used his khakis. Their next attempt brought a firm hold, and he pulled Johnston up beside him, then stepped in front so his body anchored the older washer in the corner. "Really gets the old ticker going, doesn't it?"

Jim's smile was wan.

The loose cable whipped in the breeze. They couldn't take their eyes off it for fear it might slam into them.

One-handed, Boon dug into his pocket for his cell phone. The battery was dead. When he tried to punch nine-one-one, the gondola's lurch popped the phone out of his hand, and he watched in dismay as it slid out of reach to the other end and stopped.

"Damn," he swore under his breath. "You got a cell?"

Jim shook his head.

Boon screamed, "Somebody call nine-one-one!" The frame gained momentum and threatened to slam into a window. They turned their faces away and crouched.

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* * *

A shadow crept down outside the north window of Ryan Halloran's office. Memories of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center slammed into his mind. He jumped up and whirled toward the window as his heart thudded and his mouth went dry. His macchiato sent a dark stain across the papers on his desk.

Not sure whether to run into the hall or dive under his desk, Ryan stared, transfixed, as the shadow continued its steady ride down the wide pane. It had to be something being lowered from the roof four stories up.

With agonizing slowness, a rectangular framework of honeycomb metal suspended by thick wire cables on each end came into view.

Two boots, toes scuffed, descended, and then gradually the work pants of a middle-aged man showed above them. At the other end of the frame, Ryan saw black Doc Martens with white socks doubled over their tops, and strong, tanned legs covered with fine blond hair. The frayed edges of Levi's ended just above this man's knees. Ryan's gaze settled on a crotch that must hide a great hanger and balls, and a yearning swept through him unlike any he'd felt since Mason had walked out of his life eighteen months ago. As the platform continued to lower, he looked at the taut abdomen, covered with a tight T-shirt, of a man his age.

The framework protected the men only to waist level. This man's arms, bright and solid with tattoos, swept the glass with soapy water, rinsed with a natural sponge, and then used a

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squeegee with a skill that left only gleaming, spotless glass. It was killingly sensual.

Window cleaners. Not terrorists. He felt like a fool. But before he could sit down, the building circled slightly underfoot. He steadied himself by holding onto the corner of his desk. *Earthquake. Mild.*

The new high-rise was built to withstand it, but he watched in horror as the platform cable snapped on the end where the man in the khakis was working. The man's hands had clamped onto the railing and he hung on as it dropped.

Ryan yanked his phone out of its cradle and dialed.

An even voice responded, "Nine-one-one emergency. What are you reporting?"

As he talked, he shrugged out of his suit jacket, loosened his tie, and unbuttoned his top shirt button. He couldn't control the shake in his voice as he explained the dilemma of the window washers. It irritated him when the dispatcher patiently repeated what he'd said and asked for his name and location a second time.

"Get help quick! Oh, God, it's swinging toward my window!"

Ryan dove under his desk as the dispatcher said, "Stay on the line, sir."

He curled into a ball and covered his face, cradling the phone to his chest. It took three blows before the safety glass shattered, showering his office with pieces. "It's broken the window! Floor thirty, suite seven, Orion Place. Hurry!"

When no other blows happened, he ventured out from the

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desk's knee-hole.

"Are you there, sir?"

"Yes."

"Are you injured?"

"No, but here it comes again. I'm getting back under the desk!" He remembered to stay on the line. The gondola demolished much of the glass remaining in the center of the window. "I'm okay," he told her as he stood after it had retreated.

"Estimated time of arrival for fire trucks and ambulance is ten minutes, sir. Can you safely look to see if the window washers are all right? Remember to stay on the line with me."

He might be a corporate officer, but he was terrified of unguarded heights. Standing to one side of the window, where glass remained, he shouted, "I've called nine-one-one. Help will be here soon. Are either of you hurt?"

The men were wearing goggles and yellow hard hats. Doc Martens shook his head for himself, but pointed to the co-worker he supported.

"Dispatcher, the older man doesn't look good. He's clutching his left arm. We need that ambulance."

"They're on their way, sir. Estimated time of arrival is now eight minutes. You should be hearing sirens soon."

He listened, then smiled as he called to the men, "Hear those sirens? Fire trucks and an ambulance. Hang on. They'll be here soon."

The dispatcher said, "If you can, sir, keep them talking. See if you can get their names and the name of the company

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they're with. I'll notify the owners." The calm voice irritated him because it didn't reflect his panic, and yet it soothed as it offered hope everything would work out.

Why get their names? Of course—if the remaining cable broke, they'd be dead before anyone could find out who they were. Goose bumps popped up on his arms.

He called to them again and transmitted their names and that of the company to the voice on the phone. For one crazy moment, he thought of stopping the movement of the platform by looping his belt over the top railing and pulling, but, hell, he'd be yanked out of the window. Dealing with emergency dispatch was all the help he could give. It wasn't a good feeling when the need was this urgent.

"It's time to open your door and wait for the rescue team, please, but stay on the line. Don't hang up until I do."

"I'm going to the door to let the firefighters in!" he shouted out the window.

The elevator dinged, and as the door slid open, men in fire gear pushed through. He waved. "This way!"

The first firefighter's helmet was red and his uniform patch read Captain Barrington. The other firefighters wore yellow helmets. The man whose patch read Garrison seemed to be second in command. The captain briefly paused in front of Ryan to confirm this was the right room, then he signaled his crew to follow.

As firefighters carrying grappling hooks and an axe rushed past, paramedics in blue rolled two beds toward Ryan. Soon his office was swarming with men and women in uniforms,

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and the man with the axe was clearing the last of the broken glass from the sill. Another man had commandeered a broom from somewhere. He swept the glass away from the rescue and first aid areas.

"They're here," Ryan told the dispatcher. "Thank you so much. You've saved these men. Yes, I'll wait until you hang up before I do." When she did, he replaced his phone in the cradle and stood out of the way of the rescuers.

"What did you do, Boon? Gnaw that cable loose with your teeth?" Captain Barrington asked as he peered out the window at the platform.

The younger man said, "No, Bear. We're practicing for the Cirque du Soleil out here. Is Dane with you?"

"I'm here, buddy. We'll get you off there safely," the firefighter named Garrison said.

It took several tries before the grappling hook he was tossing caught. A second firefighter hooked another, and then he and three other men sat on the floor and braced their feet against the wall below the window. They pulled the gondola tight against the outer wall.

"Boon, bring Jim down to the window. Mr. Johnston, you need to release your safety harness when we have hold of you. Can you do that? Turn your back to us. Keep your eyes on Boon. On the count of three, we're going to lift you and Boon's going to lift your legs for us so we can get you over the railing and into this office. Ready?"

Fear the grappling hooks might fail, or the gondola would pull the anchoring firefighters out the window caused Ryan to

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tense up. He ordered himself to take a deep breath and relax.

One man slid his arms under Johnston's and locked his hands across his chest. The second man's arms encircled Jim's waist. "We have you, sir. Release your safety harness. That's right, eyes on Boon. One...two...three, lift!"

With amazing smoothness, Johnston cleared the frame and the window.

Ryan watched in fascination as they removed his helmet and goggles, eased him onto a bed and rolled him away from the window. A female paramedic questioned him about the pain in his arm and chest. Another paramedic took his blood pressure, pressed white circles on his chest and attached wires to them to run an EKG.

Jim Johnston was receiving good care. Ryan breathed with relief and turned his attention to the window again.

Boon sat on the railing and swung his legs over and through the window as the captain and Dane pulled him through. He removed his goggles and helmet, but refused to get on the other bed. "I'm fine. Just a little shaky."

Ryan thought he was a lot shaky. Shock, he thought. Shakiness, tattoos, and Doc Martens boots notwithstanding, he was quite a man. He'd not only kept his head, he'd protected his ill co-worker.

"It's protocol. Get on the damned bed," Barrington barked.

Boon opened his mouth as if to refuse, but then he got on it and the paramedics advanced on him. They asked what had happened, and he related hearing a freight train just before the cable had broken.

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“What you heard was an earthquake,” the captain said. “Each building has its own pitch, just like a tuning fork. When the earth shakes, it sets off the pitches of the buildings as they vibrate. Put those together and they sound like the roar of a freight train.”

“An earthquake? No wonder. The wind was minimal today or we wouldn’t have washed, so I couldn’t understand why the platform swung about as it did. The building’s movement must’ve started it when the cable broke. It may have even caused the cable to snap.”

Dane nodded. “Momentum kept it going.”

Johnston, with an IV running and oxygen flowing into his nostrils, was ready to be whisked to the hospital. Before they rolled him out, he looked for and found Ryan. “Thanks,” he said.

Ryan gave him a thumbs up.

They ran an EKG on Boon and started an IV, but when they wanted to take him to the ER for observation, he balked again. “Johnston’s probably having a heart attack, but I’m fine.”

“Hey, man, we brought all these people here, and you’re not going to let them do their jobs? Come on,” Dane reasoned with him.

The captain must have received a radio call from the rig’s owners because he spoke to his men as a thick cable with a hook dropped into view. They attached it to the gondola and then released their grappling hooks. Barrington spoke into his radio again, and Ryan watched the platform rise. The

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dispatcher had done her job well. She'd even reached the business owners.

A disgruntled Boon said, "Okay, I'll go to the ER. But, wait, I don't see the dude who called you for us."

Ryan walked out of the corner and over to him. "This is my office, but I've been staying out of the way. I saw the cable break and dialed nine-one-one. Ryan Halloran." He extended his hand.

Boon sat up and pulled him into a quick hug—man to man. "We owe you for saving our lives. Big time."

Ryan stepped back, embarrassed and a little unsettled by the hug because it felt too good. "If I'd known you were just practicing for the Cirque, I might've reconsidered."

Everyone laughed, and Boon gave him a little salute as they rolled him out.

"Be well," Ryan called after him.

"Boon and Dane and I are good friends," the captain said, extending his hand. "He's right—you saved their lives by making that call. Thanks."

"It was the only thing I could do. Otherwise, I felt pretty helpless. You and your men were the ones who brought them safely off that platform."

"Which we couldn't have done if we hadn't known they needed us," Dane said as he high-fived him.

Ryan was impressed by how nice they were. He could use more friends like that.

The quiet after the hustle and bustle of the rescue was eerie. Ryan stood alone on a floor littered with the remnants of

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torn medical wrappers and discarded alcohol wipes. His papers had blown off the desk and been trampled. They ruffled in the breeze from the hole in the window.

Seeing the ruined pages of the projected costs of the film project being considered by DreamMagic, Inc. reminded him he hadn't informed his boss of what had happened here. He'd had to remain on the line with the dispatcher, and once the rescue parties had arrived, things had moved too fast.

This mess had to be cleaned up and the window replaced. His secretary could provide new copies of the projections, but he had no place to work the rest of the day.

Work had been his salvation as he'd struggled with the crippling pain of Mason cheating on him and then moving out. Although no one in the offices knew why, everyone knew he arrived early and was the last one to leave, usually taking work home. Today, he had no desire to stay. The ordeal had left him feeling wrung out.

Maybe they should've taken me to the ER for evaluation, too.

Sitting on his haunches, he gathered up his soiled and torn work papers and put them in some semblance of order. Sinking into his chair, he called the secretary and put her on speaker phone as he buttoned his collar and tightened his tie. "Stephanie? I'm going to need fresh copies of the projections I was working on, please. Coffee spilled on them during the earthquake. No, I don't need them until tomorrow morning."

He paused to stand and slip into his jacket. "I've had a little problem here. Notify the building owners the window in

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my office is broken and needs to be replaced. Also, the office needs to be cleaned.”

He listened to her question. “Yes, the firefighters and paramedics were in my office to deal with an emergency outside my window. Listen, I’ll lock my desk and the files and take my laptop with me today, but Buck’ll want security in the office when the repairmen are here. I’m going home to check for earthquake damage, and I won’t be back today. Is Buck in?”

While he waited, he thought Buck would be more upset by his advice to turn down the costly project than he would be over two men nearly dying outside Ryan’s window.

He was right. “After Stephanie replaces the papers, I’ll go over them with you and the accountants. Just let me know when.”

CHAPTER 2

The only temblor damage Ryan found in his house was a broken glass sculpture that had toppled off his living room coffee table onto the polished hardwood floor. Had it fallen on carpet it might have survived, but the hard floor was its undoing. He picked it up and set it aside, intending to have it repaired.

He couldn't wait to shed his suit and tie. In his bedroom upstairs, he slipped into chinos and a long sleeve T-shirt. The rumble of his stomach reminded him he'd forgotten lunch in all the excitement.

Back in the kitchen, he pulled a Digiorno pizza out of the freezer and popped it in the microwave. As the smell of

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melting cheese and pepperoni filled the air, he poured himself a glass of Merlot, washed a Fuji apple and set it on a plate. When the microwave dinged, he added half the pizza and carried the wine and his meal to the living room.

While he ate, he switched on his plasma screen TV and watched news that was filled with photos of the rescue, shot from the ground up. Boon and Jim were very small as they clung to the safe end of the gondola. There were glimpses of Bear in his red helmet and Dane in his yellow one as they reached through the broken window, and later shots of Jim and Boon being loaded into the ambulance. These were interrupted when Bear and Dane casually blocked the camera's view, as if unaware they had.

Thankfully, Ryan's name wasn't mentioned. That would make Buck happy. It made him happy, too. If a Tom Cruise or a Brad Pitt received publicity for a rescue, that was great. They were already in the public eye. It would have made him uncomfortable.

He returned to the kitchen and stuck the leftover pizza in the refrigerator, rinsed his wine glass and left it on the counter. The cleaning service was due tomorrow.

Ryan opened the pantry, looking for a paper sack in which to put the sculpture and its broken piece so he could drop it off for repair tomorrow. Then he stopped.

It had been Mason's Christmas gift their last holidays together. He'd bought it, not because he thought it would please Ryan, but because he liked it. And Ryan, who hadn't liked it and was disappointed in his lover's present, had

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pretended he was pleased so as not to hurt Mason's feelings.

Here I am, a vice president of an important independent film company, and yet with Mason I was a wuss. Repair it? Hell, no. There's no reason for pretense now.

He retrieved it from the living room and dropped it into the trash can along with the pizza box. The sound of it breaking again felt good. Very good.

That evening, restless and surprisingly unwilling to be alone, he drove to the mall. There the crowds carried him along in the flow past brightly lit shops and glittering colors and smells from the food court. Passing up the fast foods there, he ate an early dinner in Eurochow in Westwood Village, and when he'd finished, he drove to the beach. The tide was out, and as the sun set in a flaring ball of orange, red, and lemon, he walked on the cool, damp sand in his bare feet, pant legs rolled up, with the sound of the sea in his ears until he felt settled.

Back in his house, he checked the phone for messages. No blinking red light. He called the hospital and learned Jim Johnston was stable, but visitors were limited to family. He left a message for him, then ordered a plant from a florist. Boon Andrews had been discharged. He had no way to contact him.

Upstairs, he stripped and stepped into the shower. As the hot jets pummeled his body, he wondered how the window men tolerated the kind of heights at which they worked and if they'd continue to wash the windows of high rises after today's horror.

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Who knew, maybe they rock climbed and scaled mountains for sport on their days off. Personally, Ryan had trouble getting up on a six-foot ladder. He'd been very brave even getting close to that open window and he'd kept his gaze on the men. He'd known better than to look down because then his fear might have driven him to jump. It was irrational, he knew, but that's what phobias were. He'd jump just to relieve the palm-sweating, breath-sucking fear. There was the illusion you could just spread your arms like wings and ride the drafts as you floated safely to the ground.

Instead, of course, you went *splat*. He shivered despite the hot water.

The image of the grim determination on Boon's face as he'd supported his co-worker on the dangling gondola hadn't left his mind. Neither had what he'd felt when Boon's arms had swept around him in a grateful hug.

He sighed. On first meeting Mason, he'd felt the same searing attraction he'd had when seeing Boon today. And he'd been so stupid, so wrong about his former lover—the guy he'd thought was to be his life partner. Since the break-up, he hadn't wanted to experience such unexpected feelings over a man again. And he hadn't. Until today. He hoped the drama of what had happened had intensified his feelings into something that wasn't real.

Still, as he scrubbed his body, he wondered if Boon's tattoos were only on his arms, or if...

* * *

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Three days had passed, and Buck was still fuming and insisting they could fund the movie Ryan and the raft of accountants who'd backed him had said the company couldn't afford. If Ryan didn't figure out a way to stop him—or find a way to save the project—Buck would destroy the company, and Ryan would be out of a job. As would everyone who brought home a paycheck from DreamMagic. No wonder he left the office most days with a tension headache and spent his evenings studying how he could make the film profitable.

The phone rang, and he picked it up.

“Mr. Halloran.”

He recognized the distinctive voice of Clyde Wills, the lobby security guard. “Yes, Mr. Wills.”

“There's a gentleman asking to see you.” He lowered his voice, and Ryan strained to hear him. “A big man. He's wearing earrings, a necklace, cargo pants and heavy boots. His hair has been highlighted, and I thought at first I should direct him to casting or to some movie set. All I can say is that he's a weird one.”

“Are his arms heavily tattooed?”

“Yes, sir. Says you saved his life.”

Ryan threw his head back and laughed. “Indeed, I just may have. He's a new friend, Clyde. Send him up.”

He opened the door himself to the man who'd rattled Clyde's conservative soul but made Ryan's light up with happiness. Boon didn't quite have to duck as he walked through the door, but his shoulders came close to grazing the sides.

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“Come in, Boon. Come in. It’s great to see you again.”

“Hey, hey, hey! Here’s my dude!” Boon’s smile was a little crooked, as if he found life amusing.

Ryan extended his hand, but found himself pulled into an energetic hug. A rush of sexual feeling for this man went through him. “You’re looking good,” he said as Boon released him and he could step back, knees a tad weak.

“And look at you in your suit and tie. Armani?” He looked more carefully. His voice softened. “No. Versace.”

The sudden softening of his voice triggered a memory for Ryan of how Gianni Versace, a famous gay designer, had been murdered on the front steps of his villa in South Beach, Florida. He’d walked a block or two to get coffee and a paper early one morning, and a mentally ill, young gay man on a shooting spree shot him and killed him. No one had ever discovered any connection between them or a reason why Versace had been targeted.

To lighten the mood, he said, “It’s his sister’s design. I hear the company’s doing well. Please, have a seat. Can I get you a drink?”

“Too early even for beer. Have you got a soda?”

“Sure. Coke, Diet Pepsi, Dr. Pepper, Sprite...water. What would you like?”

Boon accepted a sweaty can of Dr. Pepper, but instead of sitting, he carried it to the newly repaired window and stood looking out as he sipped his drink. “Man, that was close. I was scared shitless.”

Ryan laughed. “I recall the feeling.” He studied Boon in a

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manner he hadn't been able to the day of the accident. *Nose, cheekbones and chin perfectly proportioned, skin so bronzed he might have been a professional surfer. Or a beach bum.* Clyde had thought his hair was highlighted, but Ryan was sure those waves were merely sun-bleached. "Any ill effects?"

He shook his head.

"How's Johnston?"

"Doing good. The heart attack was mild, and he's at home. Not driving a car yet, so his sister does the honors. He asked me to thank you for the plant."

"Not taking on high-rise jobs yet, I hope."

Boon turned, and one eyebrow lifted slightly as his eyes twinkled. "No high-rises yet, although you know what they say about getting back up on the horse."

"If you want to start small, I have a three-story house with dirty windows." Ryan blurted the words out before he'd thought them through, but, aside from the quiver between his hips that ignited whenever he was around Boon, the fact was, he wanted to get to know this unique man. He'd never known anyone as fearless and as comfortable with himself. And, as Clyde had discovered, he was colorful, too.

Surprise spread across Boon's face, then he broke into a grin. "Great idea. I freelance when I'm not working with Window Man. I like to be paid in cash." He quoted his hourly fee, and they agreed he'd come early Sunday morning if the weather was right.

He asked if they recycled aluminum cans, and Ryan indicated the receptacle in the office's kitchenette. They shook

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on the deal, and he strode out the door as if he had a high-rise to conquer. Ryan could hear him humming all the way to the elevator.

The phone rang as the elevators closed.

“Halloran! Get down here to discuss some thoughts I have for the Benjamin project.”

Inwardly, Ryan groaned. Outwardly, he ran his hands through his hair. That was preferable to tearing it out with them.

* * *

Boon set his window cleaning equipment on the porch. Off to his left was an infinity pool, spa and cabana. The home itself was impressive—large and valuable. There were so many windows he was sure Window Man would love his business.

He rang the bell, and the door flew open, almost as if Halloran had been behind it, waiting. Ryan waved him in, and they shook hands. “Good morning! Have you had breakfast? You’ll find coffee and Cinnabon rolls on the bar. The coffee’s Seattle’s Best organic Twilight blend. I scrambled some eggs, but I’m not very good at it. I generally eat out.”

The rich, smoky scent of the coffee enticed you to taste it. “No thanks on the rolls. I’ve already eaten, but I’ll take some of that coffee. Anything that smells that good must taste good, too. Black, please. Beautiful home you have. Lots of windows.” He winked.

“I enjoy it, but I’m not here much.”

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“What do you do that keeps you away?”

“I work in the business office of a film studio.”

Boon nodded. “That’s why there were photos of classic films and movie stars on your wall. Errol Flynn, Clark Gable, Cary Grant, John Wayne, Judy Garland, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, John Travolta, Tom Cruise, Brad Pitt, Humphrey Bogart. Those are the ones I remember.”

Ryan was dressed in chinos and loafers, and Boon wondered if he ever dressed in sweats or stained khakis. He had the feeling Ryan had never been allowed to play in the dirt as a kid. He remembered the moment when he was on the gurney and Halloran had stepped over and introduced himself. Here was this man, still looking elegant even with his shirt sleeves rolled up, his collar unbuttoned and his tie hanging loose. He didn’t have the perfect, masculine beauty Dane did—he was handsome in a different way.

Now he considered how neatly Ryan’s dark hair was trimmed. With that and his clear skin and clean-cut look, even if he did dress down, he’d look like he hadn’t. He was one of those men with a naturally elegant style. And unaware of it.

Interesting how his house reflected it.

“Let me take you on a tour of the house. You’ll need to be inside to do the windows.”

Boon followed him through an elegant—what else?—but simply furnished home whose clean lines matched those of its owner. He sipped the coffee, savoring its rich, dark flavor, and inspected the windows as they went. “This is a huge place you’ve got. How big?”

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“About seventy-five-hundred square feet.”

In the doorway of a third-floor bedroom, Ryan paused, and Boon could smell his aftershave. Something faint, but dark and musky. Out of character for this man he was attracted to, he thought, but so sensual he felt his dick responding. That would not do. Boon stepped past him into the room to inspect the windows, but for a few moments it wasn't the windows he was seeing. This was obviously the owner's bedroom, and he was picturing himself in the big bed with Ryan, nude bodies intertwined and hips thrusting.

He doubted the guy had a single tattoo on his entire body. Maybe he'd be turned off by all those on Boon's. And just maybe Boon would never get the chance to show them to him because Halloran was straight. Luckily, he wasn't facing him or Ryan might have noticed the growing bulge in his pants.

He forced his thoughts to the windows and was relieved when his enlarging cock subsided. When he turned to leave, Ryan appeared to have been studying him. Boon fantasized he might have had similar thoughts about the two of them humping on the bed, and he found his gaze dropping to the crotch of Ryan's pants. If he'd had the same bodily reaction, it wasn't evident now. But, then, his wasn't either. He sighed. Most probably Ryan had been wondering why Boon dressed as he did.

“I need to look at the roof to see how I can secure my washing seat. Is there a way to access it from this floor?”

Ryan showed him and then went back downstairs.

Boon began on the windows inside the living room on the

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ground floor. This room flowed into the dining and family rooms and the kitchen. Ryan had set up his laptop in the family section, and Boon enjoyed his quiet presence as he worked. Soon he was into the rhythm of that work, and thoughts of anything but windows left his mind.

* * *

Ryan had been deeply aware of the energy and heat Boon's body had transmitted to him as they'd walked through the house. In his bedroom, his cock had threatened to stand up and point when he saw Boon's sturdy figure standing between his bed and the windows. He'd have liked nothing better than to lure him naked to his bed, to touch and stroke him into passion. To fuck him on top of, under, and between the covers.

Hell. Chances are he's straight. I have to stop thinking like this or my pants will be bulging when he turns around. How many tattoos does the man have? And why? Ryan focused on permanent body art, something he really didn't understand. In his father's day, it was the province of dock workers, truck drivers, and sailors. Not any more, it seemed. He'd always found it a little distasteful, but on Boon it only added to his mystique.

Boon had broken into his thoughts by asking about the entrance to the roof, and, thankfully, the package in the crotch of Ryan's chinos had returned to normal size.

Now Ryan worked in the family room as Boon attacked the many windows in that area. He worked quietly and was no distraction to Ryan as he wrestled with the damned Benjamin

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project. He'd thought of ways to cut some of the costs, but it wasn't enough, and he was running out of ideas. If DreamMagic took on the project and it tanked, he wouldn't be the only one out of work, but he'd feel responsible for everyone who lost their jobs.

When Boon moved to the outside of the house, Ryan set up his laptop in the pool area. The sun was bright, so he worked in the shade. Actually, he wasn't getting any work done now. He couldn't keep his eyes off Boon. He wasn't sure why Boon fascinated him. Or why his presence alone stirred something deep in his core and caused his penis to swell and ooze with pre-cum. Possibly because he'd been celibate since Mason had walked out on him.

When Boon had worked in his bedroom, he'd used the pretense of needing something from his closet for being there at the same time. He'd had a great view of tight buns as Boon bent to reach the lower windows. In that position, Boon's plaid boxers sometimes peeked from beneath his Levi's shorts. Too bad a bit of his balls and penis hadn't peeped out as well. Both would have really shocked Clyde, he thought with humor.

So now Ryan knew the type of underwear Boon preferred. He was a briefs guy himself.

Ryan had left the bedroom before his body could react to the boxers. Out here in the garden, he was safe from discovery if it happened again.

He insisted Boon stop to eat lunch. He'd ordered sandwiches from the deli, and Boon ate with the hearty

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appetite of a man his size. That his manners were good surprised Ryan—his surprise probably a result of Boon's tattoos and Ryan's biased attitude. Cinnabons were the dessert. This time Boon didn't turn them down.

Ryan's heart pounded when Boon slipped down from the roof on an individual cleaner's support. This consisted of a padded seat, only wide enough for one man. It was supported by mechanized cables on each end with which Boon controlled its movement. His bucket of water hung within reach under the platform. He wore a belt that held the rest of his tools. The yellow hard hat was in place, but Ryan was relieved when he'd finished the upper windows and returned to earth again.

It was mid-afternoon when Boon packed his supplies away and stored them in the back of his truck. He returned to the house and insisted Ryan inspect the windows.

After the inspection, Ryan pulled his wallet out. "How much do I owe you?"

Boon laughed. "Put that away. I was only teasing you in your office."

"I insist."

His voice softened, and Boon said, "What's saving a life worth, Mr. Halloran? Certainly more than one day of cleaning your windows free. I suspected you wouldn't let me do this unless you thought I'd charge you. Now, accept my small gift of gratitude and put your wallet away. Find something else to do with your money."

He leaned in and touched his cheek to Ryan's as he gave

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his shoulder a squeeze. “See you around, dude.”

Then he was gone, and, once more Ryan stood alone—as he had the day of the rescue.

He turned and looked at the gleaming windows and touched his hand to his cheek where Boon’s had brushed it. He could still feel the warmth, feel the reassuring squeeze on his shoulder. Did straight men touch cheek to cheek? He didn’t think they did.

Man, oh man. What a day.

He had the feeling this was the beginning of something new and very nice.

CHAPTER 3

“Mr. Halloran,” Clyde said.

“Yes, Mr. Wills.”

“There’s a man to see you who says his name is Jim Johnston and that you saved his life.”

Ryan laughed. “Don’t believe everything you hear, Clyde. Send Mr. Johnston up, please.”

In contrast to Boon, Jim Johnston shook his head. When Ryan offered drinks, Jim took a caffeine-free Sprite. “The ticker, you know.”

Together they approached the window and, protected by the glass, looked down.

Jim shook his head. “Boon kept saying not to look down.

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We never do, actually, but that day it was more than important. I was in such a state I might've given up and let go. If my personal safety harness had failed before he pulled me up to him, I'd have been dead. You'll never know the relief I felt when I knew you'd called for help. The sound of those sirens was like hearing Saint Peter say, 'Not today, men. Not today,' and closing the pearly gates with us on the outside."

Ryan put an arm around his shoulder and squeezed. "I think I do know that relief. I felt it when the uniforms poured in here and those grappling hooks caught. Let's sit down. You're looking much better than when I first saw you on that gondola. You were as white as soap suds and clutching your arm. Boon knew you were probably having heart pain, and I was shouting at the dispatcher to get the ambulance here quick, even though it was already on its way."

"I can't thank you enough," Jim said. "Boon says he did your windows. When I'm cleared by the doc, I'd like to do them for you, too."

"Just knowing my window men are still walking around and safe is thanks enough. Is there a way I can reach you to keep in touch? I feel I've found two new friends."

Jim gave him his phone number and address. Boon hadn't provided his, but Ryan had known he could leave a message with Window Man, Inc., and they'd pass it on to Boon.

After his departure, the room seemed to have taken on new life, even though Ryan was alone again. When Buck called and shouted at him, Ryan smiled and said, "Yes, Buck. I'm working on it."

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* * *

Late Friday, Ryan received a call from Boon inviting him to a barbecue at his house Sunday afternoon. Fortunately, Ryan had left the office at a normal hour or he might have missed him. Nothing but work in his life had been getting tiresome. Hearing Boon's voice created a tide of warmth that rolled through his chest. Knowing he would see him again sent the tide down his belly to where it settled hotly in his cock, balls, and butt.

"I've invited a bunch of friends, but not everyone will be a stranger. Bear and Dane plan to be there. I'm expecting Jim, too. Dress is casual. Jeans and cutoffs are fine. If the weather holds, we'll be outdoors."

"It's a good thing you're doing this. I don't cook."

"I'm going deep sea fishing tomorrow, and we'll have whatever I catch. There'll be steaks and hot dogs for those who prefer them. And if I don't come home with fish, I'll buy something at the fish market."

Ryan laughed. It felt wonderful to feel this free again—to have finally shaken the gloom Mason had left in his wake, and which he'd allowed to sour his soul instead of moving forward. "Sounds good. I'll be there. Give me the address and directions."

* * *

He knew he'd located the right address when he saw an ambulance among the cars parked along the street. Apparently

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everyone who'd been part of the rescue had been invited.

Dane answered the door chime, a beer in hand, and a golden retriever at his heels. "Come on in. We're out back. Dane Garrison here. And my hound is Cinnamon. I know we were in your office, but I didn't get your name the other day."

"Ryan Halloran." This was the first time he'd seen Garrison without his helmet and his male beauty struck a chord in his breast. His photo could have been on Ryan's office wall with the other movie idols. "Maybe you could give this to the cook with my compliments." He handed over two slim, brown sacks. "Since he said fish and beef, I brought an El Molino Chardonnay for the red and a Pinot Noir for white."

"I see they're from California vintners, and the best. We all thank you!" As they reached the backyard, Dane held up the bags and pointed to Ryan.

Boon, who was barbecuing, waved a spatula and called out, "Glad you're here."

Dane introduced him to everyone there, and even though it was first names only and Ryan had a good memory for names, he was overwhelmed. The ambulance crew members were in uniform, with radios on in case they were called out, but once the food was ready they ate and left. Even the 911 dispatcher made a brief appearance. Ryan noticed wedding rings on Bear and Dane, and he assumed Celeste and Marguerite, the two women with them, were their wives. Bear came over to say hello, and he was followed by a tan Bloodhound whom he introduced as Blood.

What was this with the dogs? Ryan wondered. No one else

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had one, but they seemed at home and they didn't belong to Boon.

Jim appeared with a plate of fish and vegetables and a small glass of the Pinot Noir.

As he moved along the line to the buffet table, Boon set a platter of fish down. "Market or sea?" Ryan asked.

"Sea. Yellow fin." Boon's laughter was full and free.

The sprawling house, built in the fifties, sat on a rise at the end of a cul-de-sac. Ryan had expected a small tract house, but this one must be just under half the size of his. It wasn't as luxurious or as new, but surely window cleaners didn't make this kind of money. Boon must be renting or leasing.

As he was eating, he looked down into the silent but expectant gazes of the Bloodhound and the golden retriever. He was just ready to slip them a little steak when Boon said in a stern voice, "Blood and Cinnamon, gorgeous as you are, stop begging. You know better." To Ryan he said, "These are highly trained, expensive purebreds who work with Dane and Bear on the Los Angeles County Search and Rescue team. Their diets are carefully monitored, and they know very well they don't get table scraps."

The dogs lay down and put their heads on their paws. Mournful eyes looked up at them. Ryan laughed. "They clearly know they were doing something forbidden."

A game of volleyball was in progress beyond the reach of the smoke from the barbecue. Ryan had played on the volleyball team in college and been considered good at it. Saturday, he'd purchased New Balance trainers and khakis, so

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after he'd eaten his fill, he stepped into a game after someone dropped out.

He sensed Boon's presence the minute Boon stepped on the grassy court. Sensual radar or something, he thought. He just knew. They made a great pair playing at the net. Their side won, but Ryan knew his limits and waved someone else in. That man wasn't as attuned to Boon as he'd been, and they lost the next game. Boon pleaded host chores and left the game.

Later, he took a seat next to Ryan's lawn chair. "You were great. You've played before."

"In college. It's been a long time. I've been swimming laps after work, and I walk the stairs a lot in my house. Still, I expect I'll be sore tomorrow."

They watched the sun as it set in a riot of color, and people drifted off for home. The ones who remained had settled into chairs indoors and out.

Ryan and Boon took their glasses of wine inside, heading for the living room. Dane and Bear sat together on a couch in the family room and their two female friends sat on another couch not far away. Shock riveted through Ryan when he saw them.

He stopped so fast Boon bumped into him. Ryan pulled him into the deserted kitchen and dropped his voice. "I thought Bear and Celeste were married."

Boon smiled. "And that Marguerite and Dane were."

"Yes, but the firefighters are holding hands."

"The women are just friends. Actually, they're from out of

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state and took some time off to celebrate with us. It's Dane and Bear who're the old married couple." Boon's eyes deepened in color, and he didn't speak for a long moment. When he did, his voice was low and quiet. "They're gay. Everyone here now is gay. Celeste and Marguerite are lovers."

Happiness flooded Ryan, but "Oh" was all he could get out.

"Does that bother you?"

Expectation crackled through the air as Ryan knew Boon waited for his answer. Ryan set his glass on the counter and framed Boon's face with his hands before pressing his mouth to Boon's. His tongue teased until Boon opened to him, and then he took his pleasure in the heated moisture of his mouth. When he pulled away, he said, "No, it doesn't bother me. Did that bother you?"

Boon's glass joined Ryan's on the table, and he sighed as he pulled him into his arms and returned the kiss hungrily. With his lips against Ryan's hair, he whispered, "No, it didn't bother me. It makes me damned happy. I've wanted to do that ever since I was on that ambulance bed and you stepped over to me in your office. I thought maybe it was a flush of gratitude because you'd rescued us, but when I was in your bedroom, I still wanted you. Just thinking of us naked on your bed gave me a hard-on."

"My groin was aching so much when we were in the doorway I wanted to turn and pull you against me. Hard."

"You can pull me against you now."

"I'm not sure I could stop with only that."

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Boon took his hand. "Then let's find a place where we don't have to worry about stopping."

* * *

Ryan drank in the clean scent of Boon's skin and the smoky smell of his clothes as he removed them with slow deliberation. With his lips against Boon's, he said, "I wondered if you'd have other body art." He stroked his hand over the green dragon on the silken groin. "This one's in a most strategic spot."

"Touching it's doing strategic things to me." His voice was hoarse with need.

"Is it?" Ryan looked into Boon's eyes as he continued to stroke. He delighted in Boon's restlessness, the restlessness he was creating with a single hand.

"You'd better stop. That feels too good."

"Does it?" Ryan purred. His hand gravitated from body art to a dripping cock and intensified the stroking as he wrapped his fingers around it and rapidly moved up and down.

"Please stop. I can't..."

"Can't what, Boon? Can't hold back?"

He captured Boon's mouth when he knew he would climax, and muffled his cries. With his own dick wet and dripping, he unzipped his khakis and pushed Boon's hand inside, sighing as he felt the strong fingers encircle him and milk. He moved in a dance with that hand, thrusting his pelvis against it.

"Harder, harder. I'm almost there," he groaned, straining,

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his lips tight as he fought for that moment of glorious release.

“Look at me,” Boon demanded.

The sensations in Ryan’s body demanded all his attention, but he opened his eyes and looked into Boon’s. When the tension in his body threatened to explode, he saw knowing pleasure in Boon’s eyes, and then he was aware of nothing but the searing torrent of his own pleasure raging through him so intensely he cried out Boon’s name.

Maybe it was wrong to compare men, but sex with Mason had been perfunctory. It hadn’t been magical. It hadn’t been an act of seduction and love.

Boon said, “All those images I had of us fucking in bed, and we didn’t even make it there.”

They laughed.

“Dane and Bear must’ve married before Prop Eight passed banning gay marriage.”

“They did. They worked for a small department in another county, where gays weren’t really accepted. They kept their relationship in the closet, then decided to marry when the California Supreme Court ruled it was legal. Bear had become a captain in the station where they both worked, but someone found out about their marriage and threatened to expose them. In disgust, they moved here. Things are better in a larger community.”

Words stopped as the warm comfort of being together surrounded them. They climbed into the as-yet unused bed, drifted off and slept.

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* * *

Ryan was sleeping on his left side when he felt a touch as light as the brush of a butterfly's wing tracing the line of his cheek and jaw to his lips. He planted a sleepy kiss on Boon's fingers. When Boon traced the line of his shoulder and down his forearm and to his palm, Ryan shifted without opening his eyes.

It was when Boon ran his hand over his hip and down his thigh that Ryan held his breath. By the time Boon was licking his shoulder and splaying his hand and fingers across his belly, Ryan groaned.

Boon gently bent Ryan's right knee, and Ryan let it drop to rest on the bed. Boon's hot mouth trailed kisses over his butt cheeks and slid slowly down again and again near the passage at the end of his spine. Ryan relaxed and let desire tinged with wanting surge through him. When fingers slick with warm lube massaged around his hole, then slipped forward to stroke the tender spot between his sac and anus, he thought he would die. When a finger slid slowly inside to circle and play at the entrance, he reached back to lift his butt cheek to give Boon as much access as he needed. The finger waited until the tight muscle around the opening had relaxed, and then it advanced deeper, then waited again until the next muscle had relaxed and it could enter fully.

"I'm not hurting you, am I?"

The pleasure was so intense, he could only whisper. "More."

Ryan squirmed, unable to hold back the groans of pleasure

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as the finger withdrew. Again, the careful insertion came, this time with two fingers. He wanted to let his orgasm break, but he also wanted to prolong the sensations those fingers created inside him. He bore down in order to open to them.

Boon was even more gentle and patient as he worked three fingers inside until finally he'd reached Ryan's prostate. As Boon stimulated the small gland, Ryan pumped his dripping cock fast and hard until a powerful rush of pleasure surged through him and his pulsing balls released the cream of his cum into his hand.

Boon cried out. It seemed pleasuring Ryan had so charged him that his free hand had closed on his own aching dick, and he had climaxed in tandem with Ryan. Waiting until Ryan's pounding heart had subsided, Boon slowly withdrew his fingers.

They showered together, soaping each other's bodies, shampooing one another, then standing, arms locked, kissing without urgency, taking enjoyment from each other and in the fate that had brought them together.

After Ryan had dressed, Boon, who was sitting on the bed, arms folded, and naked except for an old pair of cutoffs, said, "You are such a elegant man."

Surprised, Ryan paused. Then he leaned in and brushed his cheek against Boon's. "I could argue that point with you, but you have your own kind of elegance. Elegance of movement, of consideration, of caring. You're one very special guy, Boon Andrews. Even if you're permanently stuck with all that body art. Now walk me to the car, please."

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Arm in arm, they trudged past a nude Marguerite and a naked Celeste sleeping intertwined on the couch. The blanket over them had slipped, exposing one round butt cheek.

"Celeste?" Ryan said in a whisper.

Boon, spreading his hands and sighting through them as if measuring, whispered back, "No. I think Marguerite."

Smothering laughs, they tiptoed past a rumpled pile of clothing on the floor. Ryan figured they'd stripped in the height of passion, just as he and Boon had done.

"Dane and Bear?" he whispered.

"They're probably in one of my guest rooms. Day off. They've bunked here before."

Ryan nodded and breathed in the crisp night air as he stretched. "Thanks for a perfect night," he said. "Keep in touch?"

"Touch? You can bet on it." Boon laughed at his double entendre and then gave him a playful swat on the butt.

* * *

As Ryan drove away, Boon turned and walked back to his house, hands in his pockets. His feelings for this man overwhelmed him at times. He was proud of how easily Ryan had fit in with his friends at the barbecue—no one would have guessed how wealthy he was or that, as Boon had learned on the Internet, he was the vice president of a major film corporation. In his unassuming way, he'd fit in. Even before they'd fucked, Boon had been sure Ryan had enjoyed the people and the party. After the sex, he'd have bet on it.

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That day at Ryan's home, when he'd brushed his cheek against Ryan's, Boon had waited for any sign of disgust. Because Ryan hadn't flinched or pulled back, Boon had hoped against odds he was gay. Now it was joy itself to find he was.

The night had chilled. He sighed as he tiptoed into the living room, pulled the covers over the exposed derriere, and returned to a bed still warm with the imprint of Ryan's body and the faint scent of his aftershave. Among all the guys he'd dated, none had been as far above him on the social scale as Ryan. Based on that reality, he figured if anyone was making predictions on how long this relationship would last, they wouldn't give it very good odds.

But if he didn't go for it, reach for the golden ring, how could he know? Well, he couldn't worry about it—at least not tonight. He pulled the quilt up and fell asleep.

CHAPTER 4

Buck Collins reminded Ryan of a bull in a porcelain factory. Short, broad and lacking a neck, he chewed expensive cigars but never lit one. His hair was cut in the manner of a Marine recruit—buzz cut on the sides, short on top. Still, Ryan had always admired his business sense. It was one reason why this company had survived while others had failed. He might not dish out compliments, but he was a decent enough guy to work for. Up until recently, they'd made a good team. His inability to come to terms with the facts about the current project blew Ryan's mind.

Ryan knocked and entered Buck's office. "You wanted to see me?"

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"Sit down, Halloran, sit down." Buck's face lit up. "I've got some new ideas for the Benjamin. I think this'll really make it go."

Thank goodness. Maybe he's finally come to grips with reality on this project.

"We'll sign Will Smith for the lead, and..."

Ryan slumped in his chair and ran a hand over his face. He wanted to shout, "If we make this film, it'll go into the tank instead of by messenger service to theater owners, and we'll all be out on the street!" Instead, he assumed a thinker's position, making a tent with his fingertips and resting them against his lips. Anything to appear as if he was taking the suggestion seriously.

"No question about it, Will's certainly 'The Man' these days. Top box office draw. Great actor. Versatile. But do you think it might be a bit of a stretch to cast him in the role of a grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan? This is a serious drama you're talking about, not a farce."

"Don't you see? That twist will draw them in!"

Inwardly, Ryan groaned. "Let's see. Smith only works for top dollar. No reason to give us a break on the film we have in mind." He laughed. "It's not like we'd be raising money for a major charity. We'd like to make a profit. Keep everyone employed at DreamMagic. What's wrong with my suggestion? We could get my guy for much less, and he's an up-and-coming. If you'll recall, money's a bit of a problem here." *Or do you recall?* "I'd like to have us mull it over. Think more about this...hold off on having anyone contact Smith's agent."

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Agreed?"

"You can be such a piss-ant, Halloran. Yes, we'll think it over."

As the popular saying went, Ryan left Buck's office feeling as if he'd won the battle. But if he didn't keep on top of things, he might well lose the war and the company.

Back in his office, he sank into his chair. Something had to be wrong with Buck. By nature he was abrupt, blustery and demanding, but he'd seldom been so mistaken about a story or the financial risk. DreamMagic had never had a film that lost money. Every movie had earned its expenses back with a profit. Maybe a minute profit, but enough to keep them going until a more lucrative film came along. What was he going to do?

He picked up the telephone. "Michael, how're things?" He listened with relief to the voice of the reasonable person coming to him from the other end of the line. Michael Bodman was an entertainment attorney and could be counted on to provide sound legal advice and keep his counsel to himself. "I'm good. But there's something I'd like to know your thoughts on. Can you meet me for lunch in about thirty minutes?" He dropped his voice. "I've a place in mind people here don't patronize. Great. I'll see you there."

Ryan half rose from the booth in Hijo Mio, a small Mexican food restaurant at least five miles from the Orion. He hadn't eaten here since he'd become wealthy. He shook Michael's hand before the attorney slid onto the seat across from him.

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“What’s up?”

“I’d like to hire you.”

“Hey, come on. You don’t need to hire me, you know that.”

“Yes, I do. I need serious advice from you.” Ryan slid a dollar across the table. “That’s to ensure your professional confidence today. After you hear what I have to say, you can quote me a fee later. Okay?”

A puzzled look crossed the attorney’s face, but he accepted the dollar. “Okay. How can I help?”

“I need to know how I can keep Buck Collins from destroying DreamMagic.”

* * *

The phone rang as Ryan sat at his desk playing with his pencil and thinking. Since lunch, he hadn’t been able to accomplish anything but pondering what Michael had told him.

“Halloran here.”

“I do pools, too,” Boon said.

Ryan’s laugh came from deep in his belly. “Oh, I needed that. But I’m not going to fall for that payment trick again. Matter of fact”—he dropped his voice to low and sexy—“why not come and swim in mine? It’s hot today. The water will feel good. The sun heats it, but not too much for doing laps. When do you get off work?”

He listened to Boon’s reply. “Sounds good. Bring your suit. Come to think of it, even if you forget, we can manage

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anyway.” He wasn’t referring to the extra suits he kept on hand for guests, and Boon knew it.

Ryan was rewarded with a booming laugh from Boon.

* * *

As Boon pulled into the drive in front of the garage, his heart speeded up in anticipation of seeing Ryan again. Before he reached the front steps to ring the bell, he heard, “I’m over here.”

Ryan swung out of a hammock under a group of trees in a lush garden around the side of the house. He looked good enough in his swimsuit to devour.

Boon gave him the slow once-over. “I see we’re not swimming in the buff.”

His reward was a bleak smile, not the laugh he’d expected.

Boon was still in his work clothes, but his suit hung out of a back pocket. He wrapped his arms around Ryan and they kissed. Ryan clung to him after the kiss, seemingly reluctant to let go.

“Something wrong?”

Ryan brightened a little. “No, I’m just glad to see you again. It’s been too long. Ready to swim?”

Boon kissed him again. “You’re right. Three days is too long. I’ll be ready as soon as I change.”

They walked hand in hand, fingers threaded, to the cabana near the infinity pool, where one side of the pool was lower than the others and ended abruptly without any coping or deck. The water spilled over the edge on that side into a trough

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that recycled the water back into the pool. Infinities were planned where there was a great view from that side. Here, Boon looked out off in the distance to the Pacific Ocean. He stripped and stepped into his trunks, while Ryan pulled towels out of a cupboard for them. Outside, Ryan tossed the fluffy white towels on a chaises.

Ryan stepped under the outdoor shower.

Then it was Boon's turn. "Hey, the water's not cold. That's a pleasant surprise. The public showers at the beach are usually icy. I hate that."

Even in trunks, Ryan looked elegant. But fit, too. If Boon punched him in his abdomen, it would probably make his hand sting a little, but not phase Ryan. His trunks, *Casino Royale* boy-cut style, were perfect for his form. His legs were so masculine it made Boon want to rip his trunks off to get to what was making the bulge inside them.

"Down, man, down. Naughty, naughty." Ryan was smiling at him and wagging a finger as if to scold. Whatever had been troubling him seemed to have disappeared.

"Swim first?" Boon knew Ryan would know what he meant.

For an answer, Ryan dove into the pool. He came up with his arms together, stretched in front of his head, and he grabbed a breath as his strong shoulders broke the water. He pulled his arms up and out to the sides and then back under the water in the sweeping butterfly stoke, and his head disappeared under the water again.

Boon dove in and swam the crawl. Being slightly taller, his

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arms were a little longer and stronger because of his job. He made one long, gliding stroke to one and one-half of Ryan's, expending less energy. As he approached the wall, he circled underwater and pushed off in the opposite direction with his feet. He could feel Ryan's body as it moved beside and then dropped behind him. Knew when he hit the wall with him or just behind. Boon was only slightly stronger in the water, and Ryan touched the beginning wall moments after he did on almost every lap, but the moments added up in the end to finishing almost a minute later than Boon.

After twenty minutes, Ryan came up, pushed his hair out of his eyes with one hand and held onto the coping on the cabana side of the pool with the other. "That does it for me. Felt great, didn't it?"

Boon swam close and treaded water. Staring at Ryan's mouth, he leaned in and pressed his on Ryan's cool lips, sliding his tongue along them, probing the corners, and then nipping his bottom lip harder and harder. Grabbing the wall with one hand, he pulled back and said in a voice low and hoarse, "Open to me, damn it, Halloran. I want you. All of you."

Ryan gasped and caught him in a one-armed strangle hold, opening his mouth wide and plunging his tongue inside Boon's, even as he pulled his suit down enough to expose his stiff dick and press it against Boon. Boon moaned and pulled his own trunks down that far, still treading water but holding onto the coping.

Ryan said, "Let's get out before I die of wanting you."

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Boon paused to hold onto the steps railing as he rid himself of his trunks, letting them float to the bottom. He stopped Ryan when he would have climbed past, and finished tugging Ryan's off. Ryan's hard-on was at mouth height, and Boon took his firm butt cheeks in his hands to hold him still while he licked the cool, wet head that tasted of chlorine and pre-cum. Ryan moaned and squirmed as Boon tongued the sensitive under-lip.

Ryan grabbed his hand and pulled him up. "Up there."

They made it onto the warm cement, throwing themselves down side by side, hands at each other's groins, hungry for touches and strokes and the heat of mouths after the cool waters. Boon lifted his top leg and let Ryan slide his beneath it. Now he felt the hairs on the legs that had so turned him on. Balls to balls, elongated, swollen dick to elongated, engorged dick, hands busy coaxing and closing around them to pull up and down in frantic motion as their tongues tangoed in their mouths. They took and gave pleasure until they couldn't press any harder or milk any faster. Together they experienced the rising fiery ball of passion, of bodies tensing as they reached for that one moment when their balls would tighten and pulse, sending spurts of sperm into their hands as heat and light exploded through their bodies in the sweet ecstasy of making love.

After the sensations had faded, Ryan said, "This cement's killing me."

"I think your neighbor to the north watched us through binocs."

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Ryan chuckled. "Wouldn't be the first time. She knows I'm gay. Has watched me swim naked, too. I ignore her. If she wants to fuck her pussy and get off watching me or us, that's her business, not mine. I bet your body paint gave her a little extra titillation."

Boon was uncomfortable with outdoor voyeurism by strangers. "Maybe next time we can make it to the cabana."

"As hot as you make me, I wouldn't count on it. Maybe we should start there and swim later."

So there'd be other times, would there? Boon felt a new rush of exhilaration at the thought of future sex with Ryan, even though his body wasn't ready to react again.

After cleaning up and dressing, they pawed through the refrigerator to find something to eat for dinner.

"You must eat out a lot," was Boon's only comment.

"Mexican, Chinese or Italian?" Ryan asked as he picked up the phone.

"Mexican. Combination plate with two chicken enchiladas, and a large *horchata* to drink."

"*Horchata?*"

"Mexican drink. Cinnamon rice milk. There's sugar and vanilla in it, too. I love it with spicy Spanish food."

He insisted on paying for his share and was relieved Ryan didn't argue with him. They ate in the living room on the black leather couch, feet on the chrome-and-glass coffee table, watching baseball on the plasma screen. Then they curled up together on the couch and talked about growing up.

Boon's father had been a contractor, and he'd built the

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house he lived in. Boon had inherited it, free and clear, after the death of his parents, so his expenses were light. He enjoyed meeting people when he cleaned their windows or pools. Working outdoors appealed to him, just as did the thrill of cleaning high-rise windows, riding his motorcycle and rock climbing. He admired people like Ryan, who could tolerate working in an office all day.

"You'd be surprised at how much I make as a window cleaner. High-rises are high risk, so the pay's excellent. Not as much as you must make, of course, but enough for my lifestyle." He brushed Ryan's hair back from his face.

Ryan admitted there was nothing dare devilish about him. "I'm terrified of heights. Can't ride a roller coaster either. Space Mountain at Disneyland? Forget it. I can't even do Thunder Mountain. You'll never understand the moxie it took for me to even approach that open window and call out to you and Jim."

He described his parents, who lived in Illinois, as average, middle class Americans. His money came from his job with DreamMagic and making good investments.

"You don't sound happy when you talk about DreamMagic."

Ryan snorted. "It shows, does it? We're having some problems right now, and it's my job to solve them. In this business, one wrong step and it can all blow up in your face."

"I know a little something about that."

"Yeah, I guess you do," Ryan said wryly.

As the evening was ending, Ryan pulled him into his arms.

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Boon wondered if he'd ever get enough of the feel of his lover's body, his caressing hands or the clean scent of his skin.

"Stay here with me tonight."

"No toothbrush or clean undies with me."

"I keep that sort of thing for guests. New, of course. Please stay. I need you."

Boon's heart melted. He didn't have any jobs scheduled for tomorrow, and this elegant, wealthy man needed him. He decided he needed Ryan, too, so he stayed.

* * *

Boon wakened to the delicious smell of fresh coffee. He'd read somewhere that coffee contained a drug, separate from caffeine, that lifted your spirits, but only worked when you sniffed the beans or the freshly ground or the smell of it being made. Probably those molecules he was smelling now intensified his happiness after last night.

Ryan had already finished his laps and was dressed by the time Boon had followed the scent trail to the kitchen and poured himself a cup.

"Sleep well?" He leaned over and kissed Boon on the neck. Boon felt his groin stir.

"Sure did. But you were restless...kicking the covers off and muttering things I couldn't make out." He hated to pry, to ask, but fear created the need to either relieve or settle it. "Something going on with you?"

Ryan nodded, but said nothing.

Boon stopped breathing. Terrified of the answer because of

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the emotional investment he had in this one man, he forced himself to ask, "That wasn't about regretting us, was it?"

Ryan didn't answer. Boon felt happiness slipping away.

"Put your damned coffee down and come with me." Ryan took his hand and pulled him into a guest room off the front hall. He tore open his slacks and pushed his briefs down. His cock, large and dripping, popped out. He ripped Boon's pants off, smiling with devilish satisfaction as Boon's penis lengthened and filled instantly in front of their eyes.

Reaching into a bedside table, Ryan removed a ribbed condom and a tube of lubrication. Boon felt his knees weaken in anticipation. Ryan pushed him onto the bed. "I thought about this every lap I made this morning. I want to fuck you, really fuck you. Be inside you...a part of you. That's how much I regret what I feel about you and the sex we've had together. Do you want me to take you on your knees or your back?"

"Oh, God," Boon groaned. He rose onto his knees and watched Ryan sheath himself with the condom. He anticipated how much sensation the ribbing would create against the sensitive nerve endings of pleasure in his rectum. When he felt fingers rubbing warm cream around his opening and stroking the tender place between it and his balls, and then Ryan's cock entering him, he almost exploded.

"You feel so damned good." Boon's voice was gruff because of the sensations rioting through him, making it difficult to speak, but he wanted Ryan to know he wasn't hurting him.

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“And I’m going to hump you so good you’ll never ask that hateful question again.” Ryan’s voice was tight, and Boon knew he felt the swirling vibrations, too.

When Ryan was all the way in and he’d moved in and out gently a few times, Boon moaned and wiggled his butt to add to the feelings. “That feels so good. I think we’re going to jump to hyperspace together.”

Ryan grunted as he reached around Boon’s right hip and wrapped his hand around Boon’s oozing cock. He caressed the sensitive spot under its lip and played around the slit. Then he pumped it in rhythm with his own cock inside Boon. Faster and faster.

Desire spun out of control, knocking all thought out of Boon’s mind except the presence of Ryan’s fat cock, in its ribbed sheath, inside him and Ryan’s hand on Boon’s dick. “I’m climbing,” he groaned. Striving for release was like climbing a rock. With rope and pitons, you moved step by step up the face. And then you were up and over, and it was glorious.

He exploded with his lover in a shower of fireworks and pulsating cocks as the release rushed up through his belly and into his heaving chest.

CHAPTER 5

Buck and Marjorie Collins had been married twenty years. Their home was in a gated community in Malibu, but Ryan had been here so many times he was on the permanent list of people who could visit. White columns and a perfectly manicured lawn reflected Buck's money and Marjorie's breeding and taste. She was cultured and gracious in contrast with her rough, exuberant spouse. It was obvious she adored him and thought him cute.

The idea of Buck being cute was beyond Ryan. He paced nervously after he'd pushed the doorbell and heard the chime sound inside. The thought he was making a mistake was like a bumble bee in his mind.

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“Why, Ryan, this is a surprise.” Her face tightened into an expression of concern. “Is anything wrong? Nothing’s happened to Buck, has it?”

“Buck’s working as usual. May I come in?”

“Of course. Have a seat. Coffee?”

What I need is a shot of Jack Daniels for courage. “No, thanks. I’m fine. Buck’s okay, but I *am* here because I’m concerned about him. He’s been different in the office lately. I’m wondering if you’ve noticed anything here at home.”

She sat just across from him. Only a coffee table separated them. She looked puzzled. “Different? How?”

After Ryan had returned to his car, he felt as if he’d walked a tightrope and made it across to the other side. How successful the visit had been was anybody’s guess. Buck’s behavior seemed to be the same as always, she’d said. Her eyes told him she was telling the truth. Either his behavior had always been bizarre at home, she was very unobservant, or Buck had hidden things about the business from her. Ryan hadn’t a clue. She’d agreed not to tell her husband Ryan had visited. And if she noticed anything odd about his behavior, she’d let him know.

He sighed as he put the car in gear and drove to the office.

Legally, he could declare Buck incompetent to operate the business. Figuratively speaking, Buck would hit back with his guns blazing...and forty lawyers with assault rifles behind him. It would get nasty. And expensive. Ryan could see himself losing his home and all his savings.

Maybe he should put out feelers for another job. If the

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worst happened and DreamMagic filed for bankruptcy, I could always clean windows, he thought wryly. No, pools at ground level would be more to his liking. If he sold his home, maybe he could even move back to Illinois.

* * *

Buck had even more new ideas for the project.

At least he's forgotten about Will Smith. Thank heaven for that favor.

Ryan was fast losing his cool with his boss. Still, he held his temper in check. With calm logic, he said, "Buck, this adds a hundred thousand dollars in cost to a project that's way too expensive already. Didn't you hear what the accountants and I explained so carefully? DreamMagic could go under because of the previous projected costs, and now you want to add more?" It doesn't make sense, he wanted to add. But he didn't.

"Chickens...you're all nerveless chickens pecking around in the dirt. You're not risk takers. Real men take risks!"

Ryan picked up his papers on the proposal and left the room.

By the time he'd left the office that evening, he felt the world was closing in on him. He was supposed to have dinner with Boon, Bear and Dane at Boon's house, but he'd be bad company. While on the drive there, he glanced at his gas gauge and saw he needed to fill up. He took the next freeway off-ramp. As the gas flowed into the tank, he thought it best if he steadied himself first with a drink. A drink in a bar, surrounded by the clinks of glasses and the liquids being

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poured into them, the smell of alcohol and the taste of cherries and olives as it all blended with the muted sounds of patrons talking and laughing would break his dark mood. His day had left him with the threat of a tension headache and he figured a drink would relieve him of that, too.

* * *

Boon and Ryan had been splitting the week up staying at each other's homes. Boon was relieved Ryan hadn't suggested he move in with him. Ryan's home and his financial status were the only things that separated them. They shared the same sense of humor, honor, sense of friendship and loyalties. Ryan worked too much, and Boon not so much, but when they worked they did a good job. At least, Ryan's success told him that. He was in love with the guy, and maybe Ryan had a home most people would envy, but Boon enjoyed his own house.

"I'm starving. When are we gonna eat?" Bear asked.

"You and Dane go ahead. I don't know what's keeping Ryan, but I'll wait for him." Boon glanced at the clock. "He should've been here by now. He always calls if he's going to be this late."

No one answered in Ryan's office, and he had to leave a message on his home machine. When he dialed his cell, Ryan answered on the ninth ring.

"lo?" Hiccough.

"Ryan?"

"Yep, di-doo. Dah."

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"You sound drunk."

Hiccoughs and laughter followed. Then, words slurred, Ryan said, "That you Boon? Boony, Boony, Boon. I'm a poet." Then, as if speaking to someone in the room with him, "Tha's the place, baby. Feels sooo good."

"Ryan, where are you?" Boon couldn't have imagined experiencing the horror that flooded him now. Even the thought of Ryan being drunk was so out of character he had troubling believing this was the elegant man he knew.

"Come on over, Boony. Join the fun. Where's thiz place?" The question wasn't directed at Boon but at others with him.

Young women giggled in the background.

Boon couldn't make out the conversation Ryan was having with them.

"Sigs heil." He burped and laughed again.

What's this "Seig Heil" business? Is he a secret Nazi? No. That wasn't the Ryan he knew. The phone died. Boon called back, but his message said he wasn't available at this time. *Damn. Ryan's phone needs to be recharged.*

"Both of you eat. I'm cruising over to his office, and if he isn't there, I'll swing by his house."

As if sensing Boon's distress, Cinnamon and Blood had risen from the floor by the fireplace and padded over to sit at his feet. He knelt and scratched their heads. Their warm bodies and sensitive natures encouraged him.

* * *

The office building was closed for the weekend. Ryan's

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car wasn't in the parking structure or in his garage at home. Boon rang the front doorbell of Ryan's home over and over, but there was no answer to the chimes. He looked in all the windows at ground level, but there were no lights on or signs of movement.

He was just leaving the side garden when a security car pulled up. An overweight man in a uniform approached him. "Can I help you, sir?"

"My friend was supposed to meet me and some friends for dinner. His office is closed and he wasn't answering his phone here, so I called his cell and he sounded very drunk. He's never drunk. His car isn't here, so he must've driven to wherever he is. I need to find him and drive him home. He said he was in Sigs Hile, but the words were slurred, and now his cell's dead. I don't find any bars or clubs listed by that name. Do you know of such a place?"

"May I see some identification, please?"

Boon handed him his driver's license.

The guard returned it. "Thank you. Afraid I can't help you, sir. I'm going to ask you to leave the property now and not return unless accompanied by the owner. It's making the neighbors a little nervous."

Boon looked at his old truck, at his cutoffs and Doc Martens. The tattoos on his arms clearly showed. He did resemble some kind of derelict, but he was pretty sure he knew who had called security. He laid his head back and laughed. "Of course. The binoculars lady notified you. I was leaving anyway. Maybe Captain Barrington and Dane

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Garrison can figure out what Ryan was saying. Firefighters cover more territory than you would."

"You know the captain?"

Bingo. Boon smiled. Nothing like trying a little name dropping. "Yes. He and Dane Garrison are the friends Ryan was supposed to have dinner with at my house."

"Well, if the captain'd vouch for you, that's good enough for me." The officer pulled out of the driveway and was gone.

Boon hurried to his truck and hit the road as fast as he dared. He needed to find Ryan as soon as possible, and he didn't want to be slowed down by being stopped for a moving violation.

"Eat," Bear ordered when Boon strode through his front door.

When Boon didn't sit down, Dane put an arm around his shoulder, swept him to his chair at the table, and pressed down on his shoulders, forcing him to sit. Bear shoved a plate of food in front of him. "All of it."

Between mouthfuls that tasted like pasteboard to him, he related what Ryan had said on the phone and where he'd looked for him. "He sounded like a little boy."

He started to break down, and Bear touched his shoulder. "We'll find him."

The firefighters began to toss Ryan's words around by rhyming them with known words. Then, just as Boon had finished his dinner, Dane said, "Pigs Stile! Could that be it? It's a grubby little nightclub. Bar, dance floor, food, exotic dancers and"—he raised his eyebrows—"rooms for rent by the

hour.”

Boon cringed at the thought of Ryan in such a place. Maybe he wasn't drunk. Maybe they'd drugged him. For sure, his sixty-eight-thousand-dollar Rolex and his money were gone. “I'll try it. Where is this place?” When they had the address, he loaded it onto his GPS unit.

“You'll need someone to drive his car. I'll go with you,” Dane volunteered. “Give me something of Ryan's to give Cinnamon his scent, and we'll go in my car and take her. If he's even walked past the front door, she'll alert. And she'll know which room he's in. Trust me, they're not going to give you a room number.”

“Let me have the address and I'll log it onto my global positioning unit, too. Blood and I'll follow in my captain's car. I'll park in front in the red zone, in case you need a quick departure. Look for hidden video equipment. Places like this are notorious for photos and blackmail.”

Boon hurt in ways he'd never imagined before. The thought of what might have happened to Ryan, what might be in progress right now, blinded him with pain.

Cinnamon whimpered.

He patted her head. “It's okay, girl.”

In the car, en route to the club, Dane spoke in a quiet voice. “Bear and I didn't dare come out of the closet in the small town we lived in. One man had been drummed out just because a rumor had been spread he *might* be gay. Bear didn't want that for us. But this one firefighter began to suspect we were together. Frankly, I think he was gay and couldn't admit

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it. That only fueled his disgust for those who were. The captain's position he'd applied for was given to Bear, and he began a campaign to smear Bear's name, not as a gay man, but as a firefighter. I wanted to kill the guy. Bear wanted to move here and get married. It was a good thing we did because now the passage of Proposition 8 has banned gay marriage." He put a hand on Boon's knee. "I know how you hurt."

"Thanks for telling me your story. It helps."

"We'll try to keep this low key, but if they us give us problems when we take Ryan out, Bear and I'll badge them and casually mention their fire violations. I'm sure they'll have enough to be shut down."

As they approached the club, Dane warned him. "We need to be prepared to deal with the girls' pimp. I hope not, but if so, it may not be pleasant and we're not armed."

Dane drove around the block, past an alley at the back of the club. "See a door into the club?"

"I think so, but I'm not sure."

Dane found a parking spot not far from Ryan's car. The hubcaps and windshield wipers were missing. "Jeez, doesn't he have sense enough not to bring a Porsche into this part of town?"

"He's been very upset about something. I know it isn't our relationship. I think it's his work. I'd guess he wasn't thinking clearly when he came here. I can't believe he ended up in this part of town."

Dane was clicking Cinnamon's leash in place when Bear passed them and disappeared around the corner. "Good man,

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that Bear.”

As they approached the door of the club, Dane refreshed Ryan’s scent for the dog, letting her sniff his T-shirt. He signaled her to search. Pacing back and forth, she lifted her head and sniffed. “She’s an air scenter. Blood’s a trail scenter.”

“Once we’re inside, will she be able to smell him among all those other smells—booze and body odor, whiskey, beer and who knows what aftershaves and hair creams?”

“Oh, yeah. She’ll find him. Everyone has their own distinctive smell.” Cinnamon sat in front of the door, looked back at Dane and gave a light bark.

“Ryan’s in there. Good girl, Cinnamon.” He patted her head and scratched behind her ears.

When they approached Bear, he slipped a guide dog’s harness with a bridge handle on her. “Do Not Pet Me I Am Working” was lettered on her vest. “They can’t kick her out when she’s wearing this. Use her leash, not the handle. If anyone asks, say in training to search for dead people in water. That’ll shut ’em up fast.”

Dane took the leash and handed it to Boon, then hand-signalized her to stay with Boon. “I’ve shown you how to signal for a silent alert, and she’ll follow your command. When I see you go in a door, I’ll give you a minute or two and come in. You manage Ryan. I’ll search for the video camera. Any questions?”

Boon shook his head.

“In you go, through the gates of hell.”

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Boon felt surprisingly calm as he entered with Cinnamon at his side. The man behind the bar started to tell him no pets, then he noticed the harness. Boon asked for a Bud Light and took a couple of swallows, then ambled over toward the hall where he knew the rooms began. Cinnamon was calm as they threaded their way past noisy pinball machines and pool tables punctuated by the shouts of men when they won. The noise was greatest near the hallway, probably to muffle the cries of ecstasy. Or whatever. A man or two reached to pet Cinnamon, then withdrew their hand when they read her vest.

She tugged on the leash and turned as if to direct him to check out the front door. He smiled, reassured she'd smelled Dane through all the odors in the club. She'd surely locate Ryan for him.

Dane gestured with his fingers at his side, and the hound knew Boon was still in command. She sat and looked up at Boon. He pretended to watch a pool game for a while as he sipped his beer, then he ambled down the hall and gave her the silent alert sign.

At the fifth door, she sat and looked at him and then pawed the floor. When he didn't react soon enough for her, she pawed again.

Now Boon's heart began to thud and he heard his pulse beat in his ears. The door wasn't locked, and he opened it, and he and Cinnamon slipped inside.

Ryan was on the bed, naked from the waist down. He was in full erection, his cock sandwiched between the large butts of two young Latinas. On each side of the bed, the girls had

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bent over, and were rubbing his cock against each other's butt. Ryan was groaning and the girls were moving fast.

His stomach churned and he fought nausea. *God, what a twist on ménage.*

Ryan noticed him. "Hi, Boony Boon. They even dressed my old man. Conshiderate, huh?"

Boon could see the tip of his penis, sheathed in purple, peeking just beyond the butts.

"Can't come, friend. Got it up, but can't ejac...u..." He reached a hand toward Boon. "Help me." Desperation was written all over his face, and it wasn't about orgasm. It was about being rescued.

Boon fought the urge to scream and yank them away from his hurting partner, this smart, competent man they'd reduced to a child with their drugs. "Get off him...now. What have you done to him?"

He knew better than to touch them in any way, and he spoke in an icicle tone that sent them immediately back from the bed and to tug their skimpy skirts down. One girl tried to leave, but he saw the Rolex on her arm. "I'll take that watch."

"He gave it to me," she snarled.

"He's in no condition to give anything to anybody. Not even sperm. I asked what you've done to him." He wanted to shake her, but, instead, he was cold steel speaking through a clenched jaw.

Cinnamon growled low and deep in her throat. He stretched out his hand and the girl dropped the watch into his palm. He suggested she sit on the floor. She did.

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Dane entered the room in time to stop the second girl from leaving. From her they retrieved Ryan's cell phone. His wallet still contained money, credit cards and his driver's license. She also handed over the keys to his Porsche.

"I suppose you're going to tell me he gave you the Porsche." Boon couldn't keep the sarcasm from his voice.

She stuck out her tongue at him and wiggled her butt, but she sat on the floor on the other side of the room while Boon pulled off the offending condom and dressed a babbling Ryan as fast as he could, and Dane located the video camera and pulled out the Smart Card.

Boon saw fear flash across the faces of both girls when Dane removed the card. Their pimp would be really unhappy about that loss. *Well, tough luck, girls.* He pulled Ryan into a standing position, draped the drugged man's arm over his shoulder and grabbed him around the waist.

"Brief...ace," Ryan muttered.

Boon knew him well enough to understand. "Dane, look for his briefcase. He always brought work home with him. He wouldn't have left it in the car for fear it'd be stolen."

Dane took Cinnamon's leash, letting her know he was once more her pack leader. "Found it. Under the bed."

Bear entered the room with Blood, and the girls turned even whiter at the sight of the big hound with the sad eyes and droopy ears. Bear tossed them each a fifty dollar bill. "That's for your trouble. You girls might want to stay here for about ten minutes after we leave."

Dane supported Ryan's other side, and they shuffled their

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way into the hall.

“Tried tell 'em not ladiesh man,” Ryan suddenly said.

Boon kissed his cheek and whispered, “That’s right. You’re a window man’s man. Now shhh...we must be very quiet.”

Bear whispered, “I moved my car to the door I spotted in that alley. Let’s get the hell out of here.”

Dogs and men jammed into his car, and he drove to the Porsche. Dane and Boon strapped a muttering Ryan into the passenger’s seat, and Boon slid behind the wheel.

“Go, go, go!” Dane cried as he slammed the door.

As Boon hit the accelerator, the rearview mirror showed Cinnamon and Dane racing to Dane’s car. Soon he and Bear were following hard on the Porsche. No one was on their tail.

We’re getting the hell out of hell.

CHAPTER 6

As the drug wore off, the weakness in Ryan's legs subsided. He even tried to help Boon undress him, but shivers made his usually adept fingers fumble over buttons, belt and zipper. He gave up and let Boon remove his clothes. Boon went into the hot shower with him and scrubbed him all over. Then he dressed him in pajama bottoms and a long sleeve top and added a thick terry cloth robe to keep him warm.

Dane and Bear had prepared a nourishing broth for him, and Boon spooned it into him slowly so as not to trigger his stomach into emptying itself.

"If we'd gotten to him as soon as they'd given him the drugs, vomiting would have been important. Now it's too late.

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The drugs have been absorbed into the bloodstream and aren't in the stomach. Getting fluids into him that stay down will flush the drugs out of his system," Bear said.

Trained emergency medical technicians, the firefighters checked him out and decided the drugs were slowly losing their effect and medical intervention wasn't necessary. Going to an ER or calling paramedics would have opened a can of worms, and if it wasn't necessary it was best not to leave a public record of any of this. When they'd gotten the broth and two glasses of water into Ryan, Boon put him to bed.

* * *

Ryan wakened the next morning with a mouth that felt like cotton and a dull throb in the back of his head. Someone was holding his hand. It was Boon, asleep in a chair beside the bed. Ryan sat up, and immediately Boon rose from the chair and sat beside him.

"How do you feel?" His face was tight with concern.

"Awful. I must be sick."

"Hung over, we think. Do you remember anything about last night?"

"Didn't I join you, Bear and Dane here for dinner?"

He listened in horror to Boon's story. "Christ, I'm lucky to be alive. All I recall is being low on gas and pulling off the freeway at the nearest exit to fill up. I've been so tense lately I thought I'd be bad company here if I didn't relieve some of my tension first. I went into a nearby bar. I realized it was a dump once I got inside, but I ordered a drink anyway.

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Anything after that until now is blank.”

“Well, they must’ve slipped something into your drink that gave you a drunken high and erased the memory of what happened to you.”

He reached for Boon, wrapping him in a tight hug—the I’ll-never-let-you-go kind. “We’re even, my window man. I saved your life, and now you’ve saved mine. Thank you.”

Boon pressed his lips against Ryan’s hair. “Anytime.”

Bear and Dane had left for work, and Boon scrambled eggs, cooked bacon in the microwave and made toast. They sat down to eat. They weren’t sure if coffee would be good for Ryan because of the caffeine. Even though it was a mild stimulant, the thought of it caused a transient wave of nausea. “I don’t think I want anything resembling a drug for a while. Not even a cola.”

“I’ll go with that,” Boon said.

Ryan was ravenously hungry, and the eggs and bacon tasted wonderful. Suddenly, he stopped. “My briefcase!”

“I have it.” Boon paused as if to approach a sensitive subject.

“What?”

“While I waited to see if you were going to be okay, I opened it to see if I could tell if they’d rifled through it. If they took anything, they didn’t leave a mess.”

“I’ll be sure if everything’s there.”

Now Boon paused, as if what he was about to say would upset Ryan. “I know I shouldn’t have, but I read those papers. I read the script, and I’m afraid my opinion is it’ll be a box

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office flop. Why would people pay to see a drama of such unrelenting darkness? None of the characters have any redeeming qualities, and evil men win.”

Ryan sighed. “I know.”

“If I read your production costs proposal correctly, DreamMagic would be in serious trouble if they produced this. Probably go under. You’ve been distracted lately, and, since you assured me, in a most deliciously erotic way, that it isn’t about us, I think it’s about work. If this proposal is it, I can see why.”

Ryan reached over and squeezed his hand. “Thank you. Sometimes I thought I was crazy. You’re a pretty smart guy, Window Man, to see all of this.” Then he told him about Buck.

“Okay,” Boon said, “we agree either he’s desperate for money due to gambling debts, drugs or embezzlement, or he isn’t a well man. Did you ask his wife when he last had a physical exam? When people aren’t well they sometimes do strange things.”

“I’ve had the books secretly audited, and everything’s okay. I’ve never known him to gamble much or use drugs, but you never know.”

“You haven’t drawn the line in the sand with him, have you? You’re treating him with kid gloves. Remember the joke about the donkey the new owner was told had to be treated with kindness to get him to work. Despite the new owner’s excessive kindness, the ass still wouldn’t do a thing, and when questioned, the previous owner said...”

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“First you’ve got to hit him in the head with a baseball bat to get his attention,” Ryan finished for him.

“You’re afraid, aren’t you? Afraid of six-foot ladders and unguarded heights and of drawing that line in the sand with your boss. Yet you know if you don’t risk it, everyone will lose their jobs.”

He stood and pulled Ryan into his arms. “I thought I’d die when I heard you on the phone. And when I saw what those young women were doing to you, I wanted to strangle them. It was *my* butt that should have been caressing that sheathed cock. But more than that, I hated seeing their butts rubbing you when you were too drugged to refuse.”

Ryan took his hand and pulled him into the bedroom, where he shed his pajama bottoms and freed his engorged dick. “It can be your butt now, Boon.”

He undressed Boon one item at a time, sliding his mouth over his body as he went. First the shirt, where he kissed and licked neck and chest, tonguing Boon’s nipples and glorying in their sudden puckering. His hands followed, stroking and pinching in sensitive spots. Boon inhaled sharply at his touch.

“I love your body, even your tattoos.” When he reached Boon’s pajama bottoms, he slid down with them, licking the green dragon near his groin, running his hands down the muscled legs and up his inner thighs as Boon gasped and steadied himself with his hands on Ryan’s shoulders. He palmed the sac so tantalizingly close to his lips and sucked the globes it protected into his mouth. Then his mouth moved to Boon’s cock, which dripped from excitement and begged for

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release. He took it slowly into his mouth and slid up and back, tasting the musky pre-cum and smelling the very personal skin scent of this man he loved.

“Be careful. You may get a mouthful if you don’t move on to other places.” Boon grasped his shoulders and lifted him to a standing position. His voice low and raspy, he said, “Lie on your back.”

Ryan lay on the bed, and Boon knelt and straddled him. With care, he lowered his butt cheeks until they rested on Ryan’s hipbones. He sighed with satisfaction as their cocks met. He rocked, letting their bodies rub together in slow measure at first, then faster as he sensed Ryan’s excitement build. Ryan frantically reached for Boon’s hips to meld them even tighter together. He grunted and rocked with Boon, working with him to heighten the friction and the hot sizzling in his dick.

He tipped his head back and groaned, trying to lift himself closer to Boon. “I’m almost there, Boon. Are you with me?”

“I’m there!”

They cried out together, and Ryan knew Boon had reached the top of the mountain and seen the exploding stars as the wash of tingling sweetness raced through him.

Boon rolled off, and they lay together in the aftermath. “Thanks for letting me erase that terrible picture from my mind.” He pushed Ryan’s hair back from his face. “If it were legal, I’d ask you to marry me, Ryan Halloran.”

“And if it were, and you did, I’d say yes.”

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A week later, Ryan called Boon. "I'd like it very much if you'd accompany me to the annual producers' dinner as my guest. Black tie." Ryan hastily added, "I know that's not your style, but I really want you with me. I'll buy you a suit or we can rent one."

There was a long pause, and Ryan was terrified Boon would refuse. He relaxed when he heard Boon's laughter. "Dude, what do you take me for—some country bumpkin? I don't need a suit, and, of course, I'll go with you."

On the big night, the black Town Car pulled up in front of Boon's house, and he came striding out, one hand in his trouser pocket. Ryan's heart rose in his throat at the sight of him. A black, two-button Versace suit, black tie, a pristine white shirt. Tiny diamond studs winked in his ears. His hair had been coifed and tamed. Ryan was almost afraid to look down, but the boots were gone. Instead, he wore evening shoes that laced.

For a moment, a wave of sadness threatened. Where was the Boon he loved? As the driver opened the door for him, Boon slipped inside and leaned in to touch his mouth briefly to Ryan's. The familiar, clean scent and taste of his mouth came to Ryan and he understood this was Boon, too.

He squeezed Boon's hand. "You look gorgeous."

"I told you I've worked at many things. I guess I didn't mention magazine modeling. It pays very well."

As they entered the ballroom set up for the dinner in the Biltmore Hotel, his pride in Boon at his side was unlike any

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he'd ever felt with a man. It secretly amused him to see how easily he fit in with these powerful men in Hollywood. Here was a man so comfortable with himself he wasn't intimidated. No doubt he'd cleaned some of their windows and it was a surprise to see him in formal wear. No doubt some recognized his rugged looks from the covers of the magazines of their wives and daughters.

They bought drinks at the No Host bar, and Ryan moved through the crowd meeting and greeting, introducing Boon, talking shop or listening to jokes. He froze when a familiar voice behind him said, "Well, if it isn't Mr. Halloran. I certainly didn't expect you to be here. I thought DreamMagic would have folded by this time. You're looking good, by the way. Spiffy as ever. And who is this gentleman with you?"

* * *

Boon felt Ryan stiffen beside him and turn, right hand in his trouser pocket.

"Well, well, if it isn't Mason Wiley. I see you're back in town. New York didn't work out for you? Are you a big producer now or are you here only to meet and greet, trying to get work?"

Boon noticed Wiley's jaw tighten and his eyes glitter. It was a surprise to see how sarcastic Ryan could be. It rolled out of him like sub-zero weather on rain, creating black ice on asphalt.

"Boon Andrews, I'd like you to meet an old friend...Mason Wiley."

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Bad blood between these two was obvious. Boon was sure he'd hurt Ryan in some way—either personally or professionally. He nodded and shook hands, squeezing just enough to make Wiley hide a flinch. “My pleasure,” he said with a smile most people found disarming.

Wiley wasn't charmed.

“Call me sometime. Maybe we can do business together.” Wiley handed his card to Ryan.

Ryan didn't take his hand out of his trousers. Wiley shrugged and returned the card to his pocket. “See you around.”

“Not likely, Mason. I don't think we move in the same circles any more. Haven't for a long time, although not long enough.”

As the man walked away and disappeared in the crowd, Boon worried about Ryan. He had paled and was shivering slightly. Maybe he hadn't fully recovered from the Pig Stile episode. He threaded his fingers through Ryan's and leaned in to whisper in a pseudo-*Sopranos* voice, “Hey, boss, want me to take him out back and ruin that pretty-boy face of his?”

Ryan chuckled. And relaxed.

“Come on, let's find our seats and get something hot to drink and some food.”

“I'll tell you about him later.”

“Look, you don't owe me an explanation if it'll upset you. You've been through a lot in the last few days.”

“No, I'd like to tell you. Just not here and now.”

After that incident, it was an enjoyable evening and, for

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once at functions like this, a great meal. They walked arm in arm to the car afterwards.

On the drive home, Boon felt a piercing sadness when Ryan announced Mason Wiley had once been his lover. “I thought it was for a lifetime, but he cheated on me. More than once, I discovered from acquaintances after he’d moved out. I had no clue anything was wrong. After three years together, I came home from work eighteen months ago, and all his things were gone. No note, nothing. He was just gone. Until tonight I’ve heard nothing from him.”

“What an ass.”

“Not just an ass. A sociopath, I know now—someone unable to connect with anyone but himself. He’s charming, but manipulative. You wouldn’t believe how he wooed me. Jewelry, expensive clocks and paintings, vacation cruises to Alaska and the Caribbean.”

“The antique grandfather clock in the hall?” Boon especially like this, liked the contrast of the antique with the new in Ryan’s house.

Ryan smiled. “All his gifts to me have been sold or thrown out. I want nothing of him left in my life. After he’d deserted me, for no reason I knew, he tried to destroy me professionally. My attorney thinks it was because I’d refused to add his name to any of my assets, and I had had him sign something similar to a prenuptial agreement stating he had no claim on anything of mine.

“Mason suggested this, by the way. I think he was trying to prove he wasn’t after my estate, thinking I’d say I loved him

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and an agreement wasn't necessary. Well, it backfired on him because I made him sign one. And I didn't shower him with expensive gifts or vacations during our time together. Fortunately, he didn't have access to my bank and savings accounts or I suspect that money might have disappeared with him."

"And professionally?"

"Others weren't as naïve as I'd been and knew him for what he is. Destroying my professional reputation didn't work. But the pain of his betrayal blocked me from feeling anything for another man. Until I saw you on that gondola. Big, sexy, tattooed you, with more concern for Jim than for yourself."

"Oh, I'd say I was very concerned about myself!" He took hold of Ryan's hand and moved closer, thigh to thigh and hip to hip, taking in his warmth, giving his off to him. "I'd enjoy hurting him because he hurt you."

"I'm sure you would, but I'm a big man now, my love. I can take care of myself."

"Yes, after what I observed tonight, I'd say you can."

As the Town Car pulled up at his place, Ryan kissed him. "No, you don't need to go home with me, and I don't need to stay here with you. I'm fine. Honest. Because of you, I know what real love is. I know sex isn't just a perfunctory act, it's an expression of what you feel for and want to share with the other person. If I hadn't been with an unfeeling man like Mason before I met a man like you, I'd never have understood those things."

Boon believed him.

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* * *

“Are we ready?” Ryan looked at Michael Bodman, the team of accountants and the heads of all the departments crowded wall to wall in his office.

“This feels like an intervention team,” Bodman said.

The laughter relaxed everyone. Then they rode the elevator down to the office of the president.

“Come in,” Buck Collins called out when Ryan popped his head in the door.

He was on the phone, and when he saw Ryan, he mouthed, *Be with you in a second*. When he saw person after person follow his vice president into his office, he excused himself from the call.

Buck stood up. “What’n hell’s this? I didn’t call a meeting.”

“I did, Mr. President. In accordance with company guidelines and on the advice of Michael Bodman, an attorney specializing in entertainment corporate law. I’d like to introduce once more the corporation accountants and the heads of the departments for DreamMagic. Of course, you know my secretary, Stephanie Mardun. Ms. Mardun will record this meeting.”

Buck Collins opened his mouth, and then, speechless, shut it again and sat down.

After introductions, Ryan, Michael and the accountants drew up chairs. The others stood or sat on the floor.

“Mr. President, as vice president of DreamMagic, I’ve requested this meeting to discuss the future of the company...”

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CHAPTER 7

“You didn’t,” Boon said, checking the soles of Ryan’s shoes and frowning.

“I did. Or rather, we did.” As he pulled the stepladder out of his hall closet and set it up, Ryan told the story about braving Buck’s den. “Buck’s been relieved temporarily as head of the studio until he has a complete physical exam. The Benjamin Project has been sent to the round file, and I have a new project that’s come across my desk. It’s promising.”

“Sounds like you did great drawing that line in the sand.”

“Thanks to your encouragement and opinion, yes.”

“You should never go up a ladder wearing shoes with slick soles. Perfect recipe for disaster. Maybe you should get your

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training shoes.” He checked the ladder while Ryan went upstairs to locate his New Balances.

“Those are much better. Now, always be sure the ladder support bars are straight and the ladder’s level. You don’t want anything tippy. You also want to be sure you can back down the ladder and step away from it once you reach the floor or ground without falling over something.”

Arms crossed, Ryan took a deep breath, stepped up to the ladder, took hold and started up. One step. On the second step, he froze.

“I’m here. I’m not going to let you fall. Watch where you put your feet, and keep your eye on the target. Never step on the top of the ladder because you don’t have any support then. Easy to topple off.”

Boon’s voice calmed his irrational nerves, and he managed the third step before saying, “That’s enough. Can’t make myself go higher.”

“I’m proud of you! You aren’t going to conquer this in one afternoon. Somewhere along the way you developed this fear and it’s hung you up for a long, long time. You have good balance, so that isn’t the problem. If you want to try it when you’re alone, put the side of the ladder against a wall and you won’t feel it’s all out in the open. Then just practice three steps until we can work together again. Someday, you’ll conquer it all.”

“Isn’t the movie starting soon? I think it’s time to go.”

Boon pulled the keys to his truck out of his pocket, and they headed for the world of dreams and magic.

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* * *

"Don't look down. Remember," Boon said as Ryan nuzzled his neck.

Suspended from the third story of Ryan's house, Ryan was holding onto the cable on his left. They were pressed close together on a board meant for one man, and Boon had his arm around Ryan's waist to steady him. He didn't need to hold onto a cable—never did when working.

"I'm not looking down, I'm looking at you." Ryan's free hand crept to the bulge where Boon's legs met, and his fingers slid down the length of what he felt there. "Ooh, what's this? It's so handy, and I do believe it's growing."

Boon moaned. "Ryan, I don't think this is a good idea."

"Why not? Don't you think we should celebrate four months of training to overcome my fear of heights and instruct me in window cleaning techniques?"

"I think you need to stop that before I rip open my pants and let you hand-fuck me. Then we'll both fall off this sling."

"One of the first things I saw of you on the gondola was your package in your cutoffs. I knew you must have a big hanger in there, and I found out it was true. Being up here with you is stirring my memory and lighting my fire."

A bark cut the air below them, then the baying of a big hound.

"They're here. Now stop, Ryan."

"Hey, you two, what're you doing up there?" Dane called.

"Don't you dare say anything," Boon threatened between his teeth.

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"I'm just hangin' with my window man," Ryan called to them. "You can change in the cabana. There are towels in the cupboard. We'll be down in a minute."

Boon clicked the control and the sling slowly returned to the roof. He stepped off first and turned to be sure Ryan hadn't frozen. What he saw in Ryan's face, and the presence of the wet cock jutting out from his open pants, made him put up his hand and back away. "Not now," he said under his breath.

"Yes, now. Touch me, Boon. Hand or mouth, I don't care. Just touch me. Love me."

Desire mingled with love uncurled in Boon's belly and shot to his groin. The dick that had subsided when company had arrived was now painfully tenting his cutoffs, demanding relief.

He sighed and smiled. "I guess we won't be down in a minute." He reached for the button at his waist.

CAROLINA VALDEZ

Carolina Valdez, author of the popular Amber Heat Wave winner *Dark Stranger*, composed her first stories at the age of eight. That was about the time Santa left the first books she had in her home-abridged versions of the *Wizard of Oz* for children. She has happy memories of trips to used bookstores with her mother to locate and buy the full versions when she was ten or twelve.

Captivated by the odd characters and their adventures, Carolina wrote a letter to L. Frank Baum, the author. Ruth Plumly Thompson replied, enclosing a map of the Kingdom of Oz. Sadly, the letter and map have disappeared over the years, but the love of writing and creating her own fictional worlds have remained. Carolina has a collection of Oz books, one of which, given to her by her mother when it was new, has recently been appraised at \$350.

Before writing for Amber Quill Press, Carolina had more than sixty publications to her credit, ranging from children's stories to articles in professional journals. A public health nurse with an advanced university degree, she won *RN Magazine's* First Award for Writing, and has been published also in the *American Journal of Nursing*. She was a Guideposts Writers Workshop and Guideposts Reunion Workshop winner, and her work has appeared in that periodical and several *Daily*

Guideposts books. Among her other wins are the Soul-Making Literary Prize for Essay, the Marjorie Davis Roller Award for non-fiction, Della Crowder Memorial and Millennium awards for poetry, and the Norman E. and Marjorie J. Roller first prize for a story about a horse that can float on water.

She contributed (under the name Carol Holman) to *Mean Girls Grown Up*, a book regarding adult female relational aggression.

Dark Stranger was her first venture into sensual romance. Her first attempt into the murder genre can be read on-line at *Mysterical-E*. Her latest can be found in the 2006 crime anthology, *Landmarked for Murder*.

Valdez is a member of the Orange County, From The Heart, and Hearts Through History chapters of Romance Writers of America and Sisters in Crime/Los Angeles.

She resides with her husband in sunny Southern California.

* * *

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