

*a going for the gold* novel

# Bases Loaded

*sean michael*



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Bases Loaded: Going for the Gold  
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# ***Bases Loaded: A Going for the Gold Novel***

## ***Prologue***

Benj wiped down the kitchen counters one more time and then filled the watering can. He carefully checked each plant and added a bit more water to most of them.

It probably wasn't necessary, Jennifer was coming by once a week to give them some loving, but it kept him busy while they waited for the limousine. It also gave him an excuse to come into the den where Brett was flipping channels, swirling the amber liquid in his glass. He stopped a moment, just to stand and watch.

His lover was a beautiful man.

They'd been young when they'd first met, Brett the up and coming ball player, a good-looking hotshot, all stud. Benj had fallen hard.

The years had been kind to Brett, the man in his prime now.

The shoulder injury that had halted Brett's meteoric rise to the top, however, had not been so kind.

The lines in Brett's face were becoming more pronounced, the trim mustache no longer neat, cared for. Two operations had left Brett almost skinny, and his shoulder still not good enough to continue playing, hitting, doing what he did so well and loved so much.

Benj put down his watering can and went over to stand behind Brett's chair, hands sliding down to stroke over Brett's shoulders. His fingers slid through blond hair that was curling around Brett's neck for the first time in all the years they'd known each other.

"The limo should be here for us soon, love."

"I'm surprised the club sent one. Usually the down-and-outers rate a cab." God, that bitterness never went away these days. Never.

He squeezed Brett's shoulders, carefully working his fingertips over scars and tissue he knew were still sore, despite everyone's best efforts. "They want you back, love. You know that. Mr. Chives himself set up this retreat for you." He didn't need to mention it was their last hope.

"Yeah. The whole off-season in the fucking boonies. You going to be able to stand it?"

To get his Brett, his kind, generous, stud of a man back, he'd spend more than just the off-season in the boonies. Hell, he just wanted Brett to be happy again.

"I'll manage, love. Who knows, maybe I'll learn to love nature."

That got him a soft chuckle, an almost real laugh. Almost. "I'd like to see that."

Benj smiled and rubbed his cheek against the top of Brett's head. "Yeah? Maybe you should buy me one of those flute thingies and a pair of hooves, and I'll dance about like Pan."

Oh. Oh, that was a real laugh, deep and hard and long. Oh, God. Yes.

He didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and he let a chuckle out and then another and it felt so good to laugh with Brett.

"Love," he murmured, kissing the top of Brett's head.

"Yeah. Yeah, Benj. I love you, huh? Still."

"I know, Brett." He did. It was the reason he was still here, why he wouldn't give up on his lover, even when Brett told him he should.

"I've done some research into this place we're going to," he said softly. "I really think they can help us."

The tension started creeping back into those shoulders. "It's my last chance. If I can't play, it's over."

Benj massaged, working at the tension, trying to fight it. "Your ball career is over if you can't play, love. Not your life. Besides, if they didn't believe they could help you, they wouldn't have asked you to go."

"I hope you're right, baby." Brett finished his drink, poured the last couple of fingers left in the bottle. "I hope you're right."

He tilted Brett's head back and took a soft kiss, ignoring the burn of the alcohol as his tongue dipped in for a taste of his lover. "I am." The alternative just sucked too badly for him not to be.

Brett held him, kissed him back with passive heat, a lack of passion that broke his heart. These days, all Brett did was rage or die.

The buzzer sounded while they were kissing, and he slid his tongue across Brett's lips one last time. "Come on, love. Help me take our bags down."

"You sure you want to do this? You sure you want to spend the winter away from everything? Away from family?"

"I'm sure I want to spend the winter finding you again, finding us."

The buzzer sounded again, longer this time.

"Come on, before they think we've changed our minds."

"Okay. Go get the door. I'll grab the bags and shit." Brett stood, finished his drink. "Let's get this circus on the road."

"Kay, love." He smiled and nodded, loving the flashes of the 'old Brett' he'd get now and then, the ones keeping his hope alive.

He went to the door and pressed on the intercom button. "We'll be down in a minute."

"I can help with your bags if you have any, sir."

"Oh, no, thanks. We've got them."

Brett came rolling the cart with the duffles, the odds and ends. "You got everything you need?"

He fluttered a moment, mind flying through the packing job he'd done. Twice. His heart pounded. "I think so?" He resisted the urge to open the bags and double check. God, he hated the lead-up to going somewhere. He'd managed to avoid a lot of the last minute stress just by focusing on Brett.

"Hey. Baby." Those bright green eyes met his, suddenly sure, warm, strong. "Whatever we forget, I'll get you."

Oh. Oh, there was his man. He melted against Brett, just holding that gaze. "Okay, love."

"Downstairs. Let's go." Brett looked around, shaking his head a little. "Let's get out of here."

He nodded and locked the door behind him, hand sliding into Brett's as they headed for the elevator.

God, he hoped this worked.

## *Chapter One*

"Lâche pas la patate! Et toi, et là-bas. Zydeco Gumby Ya Ya. Don't say you got feet of clay, laissez les bon temps roulez!" Jean stirred the pot, singing at the top of his lungs. Hoo boy! Gonna get them a new boy tonight. A pure-D challenge, too. Nothing he loved better than a challenge and a good, hard fight.

He added some okra, shaking his ass before he checked on the bread and the gâteau de sirop. Hoo boy. Sweeten Brett McCallister's frowning little ass up for him and his beau. Speaking of. "Ralph? Cher 'tit chou? You here?"

Jean was needing him some kissing.

Ralph's deep chuckle sounded from the mudroom. "Just taking off my boots and washing my hands. I know better than to track mud into your kitchen."

"Gar ici! The man can learn." He hooted and spooned up some gumbo. "Wan' a taste, you?"

"I do." His big lover came in, wrapping large hands around his waist. "Of you."

Oh, yeah. He wanted him some of that. Jean leaned up, purring low at his beautiful one. "Anyt'ing you want, mon cher. 'M yours."

"I want a big old sloppy kiss, Jean. Maybe two. Maybe even three." Those blue eyes twinkled at him.

Jean pushed right up, taking Ralph's mouth good and hard, tasting a hint of chocolate, stolen from the stash Ralph didn't think he knew about.

Ralph just opened wide, tongue twisting with his, a low sound vibrating between them.

Oh, fuck the gumbo. He crawled up the long body, legs wrapping around Ralph's waist. Ralph's hands slid around to his ass, cupping it, supporting him.

"Maybe more than three, yeah?"

"Maybe, yeah." He kissed again and again. "I made y'all some bread, some sweet."

Ralph was backing up, only stopping when he hit a wall. "It'll keep, yeah?"

"Yeah. Yeah. We got us some time, now. We do." He arched back, rubbing, eyes closing. Fuck, he loved that, the heat.

"Good."

One of Ralph's hands slid into the back of his pants, grabbing a big handful of his ass.

"That's mine, now." Oh, more. He wanted more, right now.

"You better have the other one, too, then." Sure enough, Ralph popped the button on his jeans, pulled down the zip, and pushed that second hand down the back to grab the other cheek.

"Yeah. Yeah." He grinned up, feeling a little wild. He didn't hate being just the two of them in the main house, just Gillian and Wes stopping by once a day.

Ralph rubbed him against all those muscles, hands squeezing his ass enthusiastically.

"Gonna make me spoil your clothes, cher. Gonna." He moaned, tongue sliding over his lips, wetting them.

"They'll wash, babe." Ralph's tongue followed his, fingers sliding along his crack.

"Mmm... wash 'n wear." They chuckled together, the heat still good after five years of living together, working together. Still strong.

"Come on, babe, give me a reason to need to wash."

His hips shifted, moved just enough so that his balls caught on the seam of his jeans, making them burn. "Oh. Oh, cher 'tit chou. Soon, yeah? Soon."



"Yeah, babe? Show me? Show me how much I make you feel." Ralph's voice got that little hitch it got in it when he was close, those blue eyes shining for him.

He nodded, bucking like a pony. The seed poured from him, spraying up over Ralph's belly. Ralph's eyes closed and his body shook and Jean knew his lover was coming, too, just like that, just for him.

"Mmm... c'est bon, oui? So good, us. So good." He just melted.

"Yeah, babe. We're good." Ralph chuckled, the sound happy, sated. Those strong arms didn't falter, though, Ralph holding on to him.

"You ready? This new one, them says he's a gros chien, you know? Piss and vinegar. On the bottle, too." The food part was his job. No one would have believed a gui-gui like him would be telling peoples how to eat.

"Aren't they all, babe?" Ralph was working on his neck, soft, wet kisses pressing along his skin. "This one have a wife to bring?" Ralph usually only read the files after meeting their clients, something about not wanting to pre-judge.

"The bossman, he says 'partner' with a sigh and a warning to keep the camera folks out. So I'm thinking no."

One of Ralph's eyebrows went up. "We don't get many like us here."

"I know. Interesting, yeah? Ours 'til March. Six months."

"At least we don't have to walk carefully all that time, yeah?" Ralph's stomach growled, and he chuckled. "They're coming in for dinner, so I'd better go change. There's not having to walk carefully, and then there's coming to dinner with a mess in your pants."

"I need to put the file in the gumbo and set the table." He took another kiss, sighing as he climbed down.

Ralph gave him yet another kiss and patted his ass. "They'll be here soon. I'll just be two shakes, babe."

"No dawdling. Turn the music on, yes?"

"Don't you worry, Jean, I won't leave you alone with the sore-pawed bear."

His ass was swatted this time, and he was treated to the view of his truly fine man moving away.

"Lord lord lord, I do love me some of that ass." He grinned and went back to cooking, singing with the radio as it came on.

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Ralph showered and changed and went to double check that the two rooms that made up the "blue wing" were ready for occupants. There was even a small fire going in the fireplace, and he blessed Gillian happily. She took good care of them.

He headed downstairs as soon as he heard the doorbell, eager to meet Brett McCallister before he could form anymore impressions based on what he'd heard, what he'd read in the papers. It was important he didn't pre-judge people, didn't think he knew them before he did.

He opened the door wide. "Hello, hello, welcome."

He got a short nod, the man's eyes bloodshot and unhappy. "Hey. Brett McCallister."

"Ralph Swaney." He met the man's eyes and offered his hand.

"Swaney. Hey. Benj, come on, I'll deal with the fucking bags."

"You can call me Ralph. Six months together, we'll be getting to know each other well enough, I'm sure." He smiled past Brett to the man behind him. "Hello there, welcome."

"Oh, hi. Benj. I'm Benj." This man's eyes were unhappy as well, but more tired and worried.

"Six months at the longest, yeah. Where should I put the bags?"

"Just leave them by the door and I'll bring them up for you after dinner. It's late enough, you both should be hungry."

Benj nodded, brown hair framing the slender face and wide, brown eyes. "Starving, actually."

"Welcome, y'all! They gumbo, she's on the table. Come. Come." His Jean came in, black eyes and hair bouncing, smile bright as sun.

He just beamed at his lover. Jean made him happy, as simple as that.

"This is Jean; he's our cook and a damned good one at that."

Benj smiled. "It smells very good. Doesn't it smell good, Brett?"

"Cook, nutritionist, herbalist, all-around bonne homme, oui?"

Jean beamed, and Brett sighed. "Nutritionist? I'm not eating weird shit, Benj."

Benj reached for Brett's hand and squeezed it briefly. "He said gumbo, love, I know you like that."

Ralph watched closely while pretending he wasn't.

"I do." Brett sighed again, nodded. "Sounds good. Thanks."

Benj beamed like Brett had been effervescent.

Ralph got everyone seated, sitting across from his Jean. "We're lucky to have Jean," he told their guests. "He's magic in the kitchen."

"Oui. Three meals a day, except Sunday. Sunday, she is our day off."

"We're going to get spoiled," murmured Benj.

"I'll miss your cooking, baby." Brett ate listlessly, eyes on the table.

"I'll still burn food on Sundays I imagine." Benj's hand fluttered for a moment, obviously wanting to touch. Benj didn't, though he did fuss, suggesting salt or pepper, passing over some of his meat.

Ralph just ate, his attention split between watching the newcomers and smiling at his man.

Jean chattered idly, discussing the features of the place -- the pool, the weight room, the batting cage, the lake, the track. Or, as Jean said, "De poo', dat dere room wit' da weights, da cage du ball, du lac, de runnin' track."

"Sounds great, doesn't it, Brett? You'll be back in regular shape in no time." Benj was trying, you could see it.

"Yeah. When do we start?"

"First thing in the morning. I'll see you first, check out your shoulder, put together a regimen. Then, as long as it's not still too early, Jean'll interview you, talk to you about your diet -- you'd be surprised how different types of foods can help the healing process."

It was half new age medicine, half Cajun-voodoo, but his Jean's diets had a magic all their own.

"Oui. Then Michael comes to shrink your head and Doctor Trelaine comes. And Benj? You have the television, the movies, the run of the place while your man, he is busy."

"Do you have a library?" Benj asked.

"There's a few books," Ralph answered. "I don't know if you'd call it a library. There's board games as well. Dominoes are my game, but Jean will beat you blind at rummy."

Jean grinned, nodded. "I like playing. Well, I like to win, playin' she is a necessary evil."

"Brett's pretty good at card games." Benj gave his lover a smile, and you could see the love there, worn right on Benj's sleeve.

"Is Benj short for Benjamin?" Ralph asked suddenly.

"Yeah, but no one ever calls me anything but Benj."

Brett finished eating, eyes watching them all. There were deep lines around the man's mouth -- pain or anger or frustration or all three.

Benj ate slowly and put down his spoon almost as soon as Brett was done. "That was very good, Jean, thank you. I'm going to get fat if all the food's as good."

Ralph kept eating -- there wasn't much that put him off his food, not even the tension of having a very unhappy man sitting at the table.

Jean looked back and forth, a little pursed look on his face. "So. Benj. Do you have a sweet tooth?"

"Oh, I do." Benj nodded. "I'm a bit of a gourmand when it comes to sweets."

"Yes? You will have to spend time with me, then. I love to search, to find new recipes." Oh, Jean turned that thousand-watt smile on Benj. Lucky man.

Benj smiled back, seeming to open like a flower under the kind attention. "If I wouldn't be in the way, that would be great."

Ralph grinned. When Jean found himself a cause he made it his priority.

Benj wouldn't be in the way.

"In the way? No. No, never. We can sample say-so and doberge and pecan pie. Mmm."

"Well, I know what pecan pie is." Oh, Benj was a pretty one when he smiled, eyes twinkling.

"You'll learn all the others and teach me more."

"It sounds like fun, Jean, thank you." Benj turned to Brett again, still smiling. "There, when we go home I might be able to cook you all sorts of desserts."

"Going to make me fat and lazy?" Brett's words were harsh, the smile and wink Benj got promising.

Benj's smile grew, his laugh soft. "Oh, I can think of some ways to make sure the fat stays away."

Ralph chuckled. "So can I. Trust me, no one's getting fat on my watch."

"No, no. My Ralph, he is ver' inventive in his exercises."

He hummed softly, eyes on Jean's trim form. There certainly wasn't any extra fat on his man, despite the taste tests.

Benj was looking between him and Jean, and it looked like he was putting it together.

Brett's lips quirked. "I'm sure he is."

Wow, that was almost a grin from the dour man. Ralph smiled. "You'll find out soon enough, Brett. We'll get started tomorrow. I'm inventive and exhausting." He winked. "Isn't that right, Jean?"

"I don't know, cher 'tit chou. I don't *feel* exhausted."

Benj giggled softly, looking delighted.

Jean's laugh joined with Benj's, and Brett just watched, a tired, bittersweet look on the man's face.

"So, Brett. I'll show you to your rooms after dessert. In the meantime, do you have any questions?"

"What's your experience with AC injuries?" Blunt. To the point. Impressive.

"About a third of our clients coming through here have shoulder joint injuries. And we've had good success." He leaned forward. "I'm not going to give you any guarantees, Brett, that would be foolish, but I can promise you that you'll get the best care available in the country, and that if you work as hard as you need to, this place is your best shot at being able to play again. And if you can't, then we've got the tools to help you with that, too."

"If I can't, there's nothing here I need."

Benj started fluttering, smoothing Brett's napkin and touching his hand, his arm.

"We'll cross that bridge *if* we come to it," Ralph suggested.

"You want to come back with me, petit? I have a dessert to serve." Jean stood, hand held out to Benj.

"Oh, I. Brett?" Benj petted Brett's hand.

He answered before Brett could. "Go ahead, Benj. I'm sure Brett has more questions. We'll be fine."

"Go on, baby. It's cool."

Jean wrapped a single arm around Benj, chattering all the way out toward the kitchen.

"So was he asking your permission or worried about leaving you alone?" Ralph couldn't resist asking.

"You'd have to ask him. What's the first thing on my schedule tomorrow?"

"Breakfast." He winked and then sobered. "You'll see me, and I'll go over your medical records with you, do some tests on your shoulder, see what your range of movement is. I'll likely hook you up to the electricity while I start putting together a therapy routine."

Brett nodded. "When will you know whether you can help?"

"Well, if I can't do anything for you, that should be apparent right off the bat. How much a success we have with any course of action will take longer to calculate because only time will tell, yeah?" He leaned forward. "Time and commitment to the program -- the whole program. You'll need to work with all of us and follow our instructions -- that includes Jean as well as those of us with letters behind our names."

"I'm here until it's worthless." Brett sighed, nodded. "I know how to work."

"Good man." He nodded. If Brett wanted it badly enough, he'd do the work he needed to.

Ralph grinned as he heard Jean and Benj coming back. "Ah, I think our dessert is coming. My favorite."

"I'd really just like a drink, honestly. I'm tired." Brett wasn't whining, wasn't being nasty. Just... exhausted.

"Sure. Coffee? Tea? Some Ovaltine or warm milk?"

One eyebrow rose. "Whiskey, preferably. Although I can drink scotch."

"We don't keep alcohol for clients."

Benj slid into his chair as Jean served plates of beignets covered in powdered sugar.

"None of the hooch here, man. No, no. It's bad for you. Bad for healing."

Jean shook his head, but Benj looked a little pale.

"I'll provide my own."

"No. You heard the man. It's bad for you, bad for healing."

They didn't necessarily run the place dry, but the bottle was the first place for people to hide.

Brett's lips tightened. "No one said anything about me not having a drink now and then."

"No, I imagine now and then won't hurt anything. So let's say Sundays when Jean doesn't cook?" He turned to his lover. "What do you think, babe?"

"One or two, but no more. It's poison, and they build and build inside you."

"There you go, Brett. A drink or two on Sundays. You see? We're all about compromise and building a program to work *with* you." Ralph knew that wasn't how Brett was going to see it, but it was for the best.

"I'm going to take a walk. Work off my supper. Benj, stay here and enjoy the dessert. Save me one."

Then Brett was up. Gone. Out the door.



Benj blinked in the direction Brett had gone, hands opening and closing. "Oh." He bit his lip and looked down at the beignets.

Ralph rumbled, fighting the urge to go after the man and knock some sense into him.

Jean clucked softly, reached out to pat Benj's hand. "The strong ones, they hate being weak, yes? It eats at them."

Benj nodded. "It's eating him alive. This place is our last hope."

"Oh, we've dealt with guys like Brett in the past, Benj." Ralph smiled, Jean was good with the hand patting, with helping the spouses find their footing as well.

"He'll come around. Especially when we start seeing some results from the physio and the diet changes."

"And you, yeah? You should not have to face it all alone, oui? You should have a bon ami comme moi to help." Dear Jean.

Benj turned his hand and squeezed Jean's briefly. "Thank you. He's a good man; this has just been so hard on him. Not being able to do what he was made to do."

"It will ease. Things need to, yeah? For both of you." Jean nodded and smiled. "Until then? Eat."

"We've both been off our food," admitted Benj, digging into the beignet, laughing as he got powder all over his fingers.

Ralph grinned. There was nothing like good food to help with the healing.

Jean hooted. "I'll fix that, won't I? Good food. Good juice. Good sunshine, non? We'll fix that."

"I wish it was all that simple." There was a look of hope, though, in Benj's eyes that hadn't been there before.

"So you two are together?"

Ralph nodded and smiled at his Jean. They were indeed.

"This is a good place, you know? Lagniappe, my mama would say."

"Lagniappe?" Benj asked around his beignet.

Ralph munched on his own beignet. He was going to have to work out tomorrow because he was going to have a second and maybe even a third.

"Uh... special, you know? Like thinking you buy a dozen cookies and the lady she gives you an extra?"

Benj chuckled. "So you're the extra cookie, Jean?"

Ralph laughed, good and long. Oh, he liked this Benj, with the sweet eyes and the growly man. Yes, he did.

"There. There we are. We understand each other. I? Am the extra cookie."

"No wonder I'm so fond of dessert." Ralph winked at his Jean, making Benj giggle a little more, a light flush on those cheeks.

"Oh ho! He is a wicked one." Jean laughed, including Benj in the joke. Ralph saw Brett outside in the window behind Benj, looking in.

Benj was still laughing, nodding. "He is."

Ralph wondered if Brett would come in, drawn to the laughter, or if it would drive him away. Come on, man, he thought. Show me where your head is.

Brett watched for another minute, then just turned away, heading down toward the lake.

Ralph grunted and got up. "Jean, will you show Benj to his rooms, help him with his bags?"

"Of course, cheri. Come, I'll give you the tour as we go. Tell you all the house's secrets."

Confident that his Jean would take care of Benj, Ralph went out to find Brett. There was no reason he couldn't begin his therapy tonight.

## *Chapter Two*

Well, at least Benj was having fun.

Christ, twenty years of working it, practicing, fighting, and one line-drive to the shoulder sidelined him. Fuck. Jack and Frankie were being decent about it, but he could feel the popping, the tugging. One season. He needed one more season for his contract, then he could retire. Retire at the top of his fucking game.

Fuck.

Fuck fuckity fuck fuck fuck.

Brett pulled a flask out of his pocket and drank, wandering around the edge of the lake.

"I thought you said you were willing to work with us." The voice came from behind him. Ralph. The therapist.

"I thought you said we were starting in the morning."

Ralph chuckled. "All right. You can finish that flask off tonight. But I'm not going to be babying you if you've got a hangover in the morning."

"I don't get hung over." He sighed, watching the sunset over the water. "I didn't mean to call you away from dessert."

They'd all looked happy.

"Oh, my gut doesn't need more than one beignet, and I would have eaten another two at least if I'd stayed. I'm sorry you didn't join us. Your man was missing you."

"I was afraid he'd be lonely here. His clients will miss him."

"Did you consider leaving him at home?"

"For five months?" For the holidays? For their birthdays? No. No, he hadn't.

"So, you'd be surprised to know that a number of our clients have wanted to attend without their partners?" Ralph was looking out at the setting sun. "I think it's a good sign that you didn't."

"I know he's unhappy; I didn't force him. I wouldn't." He knew that he was a disappointment to Benj. He couldn't help it.

"Why do you think he's unhappy, Brett?"

"Why wouldn't I? Why wouldn't he be?"

Asshole.

"Oh, I think it's very natural that he's unhappy. I just don't believe he's unhappy for the reasons that you think." Ralph looked amused.

He swallowed his growl, drowning it in another drink. He didn't need some man he'd just met making judgments on him and Benj, laughing at him.

"Do you see how you're hiding behind your drink? You'll feel better after you've let out some of that emotion you're pushing down."

"I thought you were a physical therapist, not a shrink." He couldn't hide the wince, the frown.

"Oh, I don't have a head-shrinking degree, but I know people, and I've worked with a lot of athletes, Brett. I think I know the breed." Ralph's arm went around his shoulders, turned him back toward the old farmhouse. "I'll bet your man is starting to wonder if I pushed you in."

"More wondering whether I picked a fight." He'd picked more than one in the last six months. More than a handful, even.

Ralph actually grinned at him. "You struck me as a fighter."

"Did I? The last one made the news. Got me sent here." Got the other guy sent to the ER and got his manager, Donna, in a huge snit.

Ralph nodded. "You need to channel that into getting better, Brett. You're so busy fighting the world, you don't have time or energy to focus on the real problem."

"The real problem is this fucking shoulder. This stupid motherfucking shoulder."

"Yes, that's the bulk of it." Ralph started walking them back toward the farmhouse. "Your attitude could use some adjusting as well."

"You aren't here to fix that. I can be as pissed off as I need to be." And he did need to be. Otherwise, there was just...

Nothing.

"No, Michael will be seeing you several times a week I'm sure -- it's his job to fix that." Ralph gave him a wink.

"Christ. Can't I just exercise a lot and Benj can talk to him?"

Ralph laughed. "You're a man of action, Brett. You and I are going to get along well."

He smiled over, offered the flask. "You think?"

Ralph took the flask and had a drink. "Jean will lecture me."

"You'll probably enjoy it." Benj would just blink at him with hurt eyes.

Ralph laughed. "Oh, the lectures can be tedious, but they always lead to making up, and that I will enjoy very much." He was given a look, stopped on the porch as the last of the light disappeared. "When was the last time you made love to your man?"

His back went right up. "What the fuck business is that of yours?"

That had Ralph chuckling again. "It isn't. But nothing relaxes like it, and you both look like you could use the relaxation, the connection. And if I know my Jean he'll be prescribing it as a part of his homeopathic cure tomorrow. Hell, I imagine Michael might even suggest it."

Jesus. What kind of fucked-up place was this? "My dick's my business."

"You don't think how you interact with your partner affects your ability to heal? Your mood? His?"

"You don't think about fifty push-ups count as 'against doctor's orders' exercise?" Asshole.

"Fifty push-ups... You know, Jean bought me *The Gay Kama Sutra* for Christmas a few years ago -- I think perhaps you need to borrow it if you think that that's the only way to do it."

Oh, now, the asshole was laughing at him again.

"Fuck off, man." He was blushing deeply, completely unused to the ribbing. Most of the guys never so much as acknowledged Benj. Never.

"Yes, yes, that's exactly what I plan to do. What you should do." Ralph winked and then opened the door. "Come on, I'll show you to your room, and you can tell Benj what an asshole I am. Though I imagine you'll think I'm an even bigger one after tomorrow."

"What time do we start?" He looked for the bags, but Benj must've grabbed them.

"You'll meet me out at the therapy room in the barn at nine a.m. Jean will be serving breakfast anytime after seven. And I expect you to show up having eaten. You can't do anything on an empty stomach."

Ralph led him up the stairs.

"I don't eat breakfast, man. No bullshit. Huge lunch. Big dinner. Midnight snack."

Ralph was shaking his head. "Jean can make you a protein drink if you can't stomach anything in the morning. And I'll let him know to leave you something out for tonight. Tomorrow you'll have to work out your menu and meals with him, but you can't come to my sessions on an empty stomach."

"We'll talk about it tomorrow." Fight about it tomorrow. He needed to work harder before he started eating heavy again.

They went right at the top of the stairs to a light blue door. "This is your rooms. You and Benj have a bedroom and a sitting room, with an en suite bathroom. Jean and I are on the next floor. If you need anything you can come up and knock on the red door."

"We'll be fine. See you tomorrow." He finished his whiskey and gave Ralph a nod. "Sleep well, man."

"You, too, Brett. I'll see you tomorrow."

Ralph clapped him on the back and headed to the stairs, taking them two at a time.

"You in here, baby?" He opened the door to a decent-sized sitting room. "You okay?"

Benj came out of the bedroom, a shirt in his hands. "Hi, love. I was just unpacking, putting our stuff away."

The shirt was tossed over one of the La-Z-Boys, Benj all smiles and open arms. "I was wondering where you'd gotten off to."

"I walked. There's a lake. That Ralph? Nosy bastard." He found a smile, went to give Benj a hug. "Next time you should come with me."

Benj's arms wrapped around his waist, Benj fitting just right against him, head resting on his shoulder. "A lake? It sounds nice. I think we'll have some free time everyday, from what Jean was saying."

"You dreading that?" He'd been a prick; it wouldn't surprise him if Benj said yes.

"What?" Benj straightened, eyes soft with worry. "Of course not, Brett." Benj's long, agile fingers stroked his cheeks. "Of course not."

"Good. I'm sorry about all this mess, baby. It shouldn't be like this."

They should be on a plane to Hawaii, off-season on the beach, just like always.

"No, you should be whole and healthy. It isn't fair that you aren't." Benj kissed him suddenly, lips soft and warm, sweet with the hint of sugar.

"Mmm..." He blinked, the kiss unexpected; they'd become almost rare. "You taste like dessert."

Benj's fingers continued to stroke, to slide on his face. "Beignets. They were covered in powdered sugar. You should have stayed and had one."

"Kiss me again. I don't care about the beignets."

"Oh. Oh, yes, Brett." Benj's eyes were soft and hot, and he moved slowly, bringing their lips together. "Oh, Brett."

Brett just enjoyed the touch for a minute, the peace, the quiet. Benj's tongue slid along his lips, his lover's breath sweet, hot. The fingers on his face slid into his hair, stroking his head.

He hummed, searching Benj's eyes, looking for desire, for love, for need. Benj's eyes fluttered at the sound, body pressing close, kiss becoming deeper.

Oh.

Oh, baby.

He wrapped his good arm around Benj, tugging his baby closer. Benj made the sweet noises he hadn't heard in too long, eyes clinging to his, such need in them, not just need for touch, but for *his* touch.

"Still want me? Even now that I'm broken?"

"What? Brett, no, you're not broken. And of course I want you." Benj pressed close again. "I want you, love."

"Want me?" He chuckled, shook his head. New place, new people, new situation, less stress.

"I never stopped, Brett. You've just been so... unapproachable."

He sighed, stepped back a little. "I'm sorry, baby. It's been tough."

"It wasn't a recrimination." Benj pressed close again.



"No? What was it?" He hugged his lover, tugged them together.

"Just..." Benj shook his head, arms wrapping around him. "Just hold me, Brett."

"I can do that." He nodded. "Are you happy you came?"

Benj nodded, their noses rubbing together. "I think it's a good place, Brett. I think they can help you."

"I hope so. I don't want to be a wash up already."

"You won't be, love." Benj kissed him again. "You won't be."

"You should have sugar-coated kisses more often."

"I'll have sugar every night if you want. Anything you want."

"You." He just wanted Benj, if only for a little while. Just Benj.

Benj moaned softly, mouth covering his again, hands clutching at his back. He let himself take Benj's mouth, kiss it hard and long like he needed to. Wanted to. Benj melted against him, those sweet noises starting up again as his lover rubbed against him.

"Love you, baby." He took another kiss, then another, tongue pushing in deep.

Benj opened wide, taking him in, each sound begging him for more.

He chuckled, walked them over to the sofa. "Hungry thing."

"I am, Brett. I love you." Benj nodded, cock rubbing against his thigh.

He sat, let Benj get settled against him. "Good. Someone needs to."

Benj rubbed against him. "I do. Always have. Always will." Those sweet lips were raised for another kiss.

"Greedy." He almost smiled. Almost.

"Yours, Brett." Oh, those eyes were warm, they adored him.

Brett nodded, leaned closed enough to rest against Benj. "Yeah."

Benj's lips slid against his, long fingers slowly working open his shirt like they had all night long.

"The physical therapist thinks we're not getting enough sex in our diet."

"What?" Benj squeaked.

"He said you needed more fucking." He winked, lips brushing Benj's cheek.

Benj sputtered a little and then laughed. "Are you going to do what he says?"

"I don't know, baby. Do you agree with his assessment?"

Benj looked off into the distance, fingers sliding over his cheek, his hair, then his lover's eyes met his. "It's not just the physical, Brett. You've pushed me away. No, that's not it -- you've... gone into yourself."

"I'm..." Hurting. Angry. Sorry. Sick.

"Shh. Shh. I know, love. I know. I just want to help you." Benj's eyes became a little wet. "I just want you to be happy."

"Now, now. None of that shit." He grinned, shook his head. "There is no crying in baseball."

"I'm not crying." Benj blinked and shook his head. He shook his head again. "I'm *not*. I'm... I'm... using my wiles to seduce you."

"Ooooh. Seduction." He chuckled, leaned back. "Seduce me, baby."

"Yeah? I was hoping you'd say that." Benj's fingers went back to undoing his shirt, pushing it off his shoulders as Benj bent to suck on one of his nipples.

"Fuck." He shifted, arching. "Fuck, Benj."

"Oh, yeah. I remember how much you like that." Benj licked around his nipple and then started sucking again, his other hand petting Brett's belly.

He leaned back, spread his legs a little. "Don't stop."

"Okay, love. I won't." Benj's eyes shone up at him for a moment, and then Benj turned back to his nipple, tongue playing over it.

His breath got short, his cock filling. "Baby..."

Benj moaned, slowly licking a trail over to his other nipple. The long, slender fingers teased along his waistband. God, he loved that, the tease, the heat, the way Benj rocked on his lap.

"You taste so good," murmured Benj. "Better than any food."

"You've always had a hungry mouth, always, baby." He winced as he raised his hand and his shoulder pulled.

Benj's fingers opened his jeans, teased the top of his cock. "Brett? You okay?"

"Yeah. Don't worry, okay? Not tonight?"

"Okay, love." Benj bent to kiss his belly, slipping off his lap and between his legs. "I want you, want this."

"Oh... Oh, fuck, baby." He just sort of blinked, watching. Looking.

Benj smiled up at him and then got his jeans open, fingers tugging out his prick. "Oh. Oh, Brett, you're beautiful."

Bending, eyes closed, Benj licked at him.

The sound that left him was deep, low, almost starving. "Benj."

Benj's moan echoed his. "I know, love. You taste like heaven." Another lick, this one across the tip of his cock, and then Benj blew, the air warm and then cool when it was only the breeze from an open window.

Tongue trailing down along his cock, Benj licked his way down to Brett's balls, taking one into his mouth.

"Oh. Oh, fuck. So good." God, why hadn't they done this more, sooner, anything?

Benj hummed, heat and vibrations moving through his sac. Then his baby gave the other one the same treatment, hands sliding on his thighs, tugging his jeans down a little more. He leaned back and gave it up with a deep, needy sound.

Benj let go of his balls and slowly licked along his cock again, mouth closing over the tip, sucking, pulling. His lover's fingers slid up over his belly to his nipples, to tease and tug.

"Oh, Jesus." He shuddered, about to go off in a hurry. "I can't hold it, baby. I'm sorry."

Benj's mouth slid farther down his cock, taking him all in until Benj swallowed around the tip.

His orgasm hit him in a wave, slow and sure and deep, enough to make him sob.

Benj swallowed and swallowed again, taking him all in, only stopping when the shudders had passed. Even then, Benj's tongue teased over the head of his cock, pulling out aftershocks, stretching out the pleasure.

His breath huffed out of him, entire body shaking. Damn.

Moaning, Benj let his cock slide away, rubbing a lightly stubbled cheek against it. "Love you." The words were whispered softly, an equally gentle kiss pressing against his belly.

"Uhn." He nodded, moaned, heart pounding.

Benj kissed a path up along his belly to his nipples, climbing back into his lap and rubbing against his belly. His baby's eyes were soft, glazed as their mouths were brought together in a hungry kiss. Brett fucked those pretty, soft lips. Benj whimpered, hand pushing between them to undo his pants, let out Benj's hard cock. Sliding against him, Benj's cock rubbed hotly along his belly.

"Still fucking love you, baby." He did, even if he was a growly old bastard.

"Oh!" Benj shuddered, eyes rolling back in his head as heat sprayed against Brett's belly.

Another soft ripple moved through Benj's body, and then Benj collapsed against Brett, breath soft and hot on his neck. Brett wrapped his good arm around Benj, holding them together, rocking them a little.

Making soft, happy sounds, Benj put random kisses on his skin. "I like this place already."

"Yeah?" He kept petting, rocking, loving his baby.

"Yeah, love, I do."

He could feel Benj's smile against his skin, felt the rightness of Benj's body melted against him.

"Okay, then." He let his eyes close; they could head to bed in a bit. Together.

## *Chapter Three*

Benj woke up, cuddled against Brett's good side. It had taken some getting used to, the injury forcing them to switch sides on the bed. But it felt right now, good. Especially given they'd made love last night. It wasn't like they hadn't jacked each other off some before this, but it had been more perfunctory, more taking care of a necessary bodily function than from real desire, and Benj was absolutely thrilled to have some of that desire shared between them again.

He kept his eyes closed, enjoying Brett's strength and warmth, enjoying the weight of the comforter on top of them, the bed beneath them firm, comfortable. He finally let his eyes open and noted it was almost eight. Jean had been very sure that Brett needed to have breakfast before his appointment with Ralph at nine. Benj had been equally sure that Brett wasn't going to like that one little bit.

Still, they had to get used to the routines here, had to start to do what they needed to do to heal.

He sat up and stretched before leaning back over Brett, smiling down at the familiar, much-loved face. The lines around Brett's eyes and mouth were less pronounced while he slept, Brett's face almost youthful.

Benj brushed his hand along Brett's short curls and bent to kiss him softly. "Time to wake up, love."

"Mmm... 's it eight forty five already, baby?" Brett smiled, leaned toward him.

"Not quite," he murmured, letting their lips slide together, eyes smiling into Brett's.

God, Brett was beautiful still drowsy, still half-dreaming and happy. "Oh, good." That hot tongue slipped across his bottom lip.

Oh. Oh, how was he supposed to be good and get Brett up when the man was doing stuff like that to him?

He decided that if Ralph had been ballsy enough to suggest that he and Brett needed to do it more often, well then that would make a perfectly good excuse for Brett being late down to breakfast.

He cuddled in a little closer, mouth opening for Brett. Fingers brushed against his lower back, petting his ass, as Brett's tongue slipped in to kiss him. His cock bloomed to life, his half-hard morning wood going full-on hard. He rubbed against Brett, eager, wanton in a way he hadn't been in too long.

"Mmm... morning baby."

He smiled and licked at Brett's lips. "Morning, love." It felt good, warm and right. And if he didn't think about too hard, it was easy to pretend everything was normal.

Except that there was a huge banging on the door, "Bon matin, chers! Up up up! The breakfast is waiting!"

He groaned, burying his face in Brett's chest. He would have liked just a little longer.

"Go 'way! It isn't eight forty five yet, you lunatic!"

Benj laughed, snuggling in, enjoying Brett's grouchiness for a change. "Do you think that'll make him go away?"

"Fucking hope so. I'd hate to have to kill him."

"There's eggs and andouille, coffee and beignets."

Benj chuckled, knowing that his Brett and food in the morning just didn't mix. "He mentioned something last night about breakfast being the most important meal of the day. I tried to explain, love, really I did."

"They'll learn, baby." Brett pulled the covers over them both. "They'll learn."

He just burrowed in, happy to let Brett make this decision as he didn't want to be anywhere else.

There was more banging, Ralph's voice deeper, louder than Jean's. "Don't make me come in there and drag you down to the table, Brett."

"You said nine o'clock." Brett snuggled in. "Christ, they're chipper. Too much coffee, I think."

"I said nine o'clock and fed, and if you aren't out here in sixty seconds I'm coming in!"

Brett rolled his eyes, shook his head. "It's like feel-good boot camp."

Then he got a kiss, long and slow and perfect, Brett's tongue fucking his lips. He clung to Brett, everything else tuned out, just enjoying the kiss.

Enjoying it until the covers were pulled off, leaving him and Brett exposed.

"I told you last night I was serious about this, Brett."

Benj squeaked and buried his face in Brett's chest.

Brett hauled him close, the growl deep and rough and serious. "And I told you last night I don't eat in the morning."

"That's just too bad. You need to eat to do the work we're going to be doing. Jean is a proponent of breakfast, and he's your nutritionist. So unless you want to embarrass your lover further, I suggest you haul your ass out of bed and get it downstairs for breakfast."

Oh, lord, this wasn't going to be pretty. Benj just closed his eyes and waited.

Brett surged up, tore the blanket from Ralph's hands. The blanket fluttered down over Benj. "I did not embarrass my lover. I was in a private room, in bed, with my lover."

Stark naked, Brett growled, herded Ralph backward, a dull flush spreading over his back. "And, I suggest, unless you want me to lose my motherfucking legendary temper, you *never* barge into these rooms again."

Ralph stopped moving back as soon as he was out of the bedroom. "You don't want me in here, then I suggest you get the hell up and come downstairs for your breakfast, Brett."



The door slammed, the entire room just vibrating. "Baby, while I'm working? You drive down to a fucking hardware store and buy a new lock and a screwdriver."

"If you aren't downstairs in five minutes you're packing your bags and going home."

The words were called through the door, and Benj looked over at Brett, eyes wide, waiting for what his lover would do. He didn't want to leave, not as long as there was a chance Brett could find what he needed here.

"Pack your fucking bags." Brett grabbed his jeans and a T-shirt, the peace completely gone. "Move, baby."

He got up and put his hand on Brett's arm. "Love. Please. How about you give this breakfast thing a chance? Frank really wanted you to give this an honest try." If they left now, the team would probably sue Brett for breach of contract.

Brett gave him a look, part fury, part hurt, and then the door swung open again, hard enough to knock it off the hinges. "Where's the motherfucking food that's so motherfucking *vital* I eat?"

Benj winced, hating to have that look aimed at him, hating that Brett thought it was a betrayal.

Ralph was standing outside the door, looking calm, arms crossed. "Downstairs. Same place you had your dinner last night."

Benj hurried into his clothes.

Brett took the banister with his good arm and swung over and dropped. No matter how many times Benj saw the trick, it made him wince, especially when Brett was pissed.

"Jesus fuck, man. Are you trying to put yourself out of the game for good?" Ralph headed down the stairs, and Benj followed more slowly, biting his bottom lip, wanting things to go back to the way they'd been last night: hopeful, loving. Hell, he wanted things to go back to how they'd been before Brett had gotten hurt.

Brett was standing at the table, glaring Jean down. "Tell me what exactly I have to eat to get the fuck away from all this shit."

"Six hundred calories. Protein. Carbs. Four hundred calories if you eat at eight and snack at ten thirty."

"Fine." Brett grabbed a bowl, filled it with scrambled eggs and dumped sugar over it, eating it with military precision. "Protein. Carbs. Eight fucking fifty seven. We all happy? Excellent."

Well, Benj wasn't, but he wasn't going to say so. This wasn't his fight. To his shock, Ralph was chuckling. "Indeed. I'll see you at my office shortly."

The bowl crashed to the floor, shattering. "I'll be there."

Then Brett was gone, out the door with a crash.

"Lawd, lawd, he's a right gator, he is. Protein shakes, then, I think."

"I tried to explain last night," Benj said softly, just miserable. "He doesn't eat in the morning. He never has."

"Oh, cher, not to worry." Jean came around the table, pulled out a chair for him. "His muscles need constant, good food to help. We'll start small and build." He got a wink, a chuckle. "Perhaps I'll just leave the shake outside your door in the morning, yes? And he can have it with you in the bed."

Benj blushed a little as he sat. "You got quite the eyeful this morning."

Jean grinned, dark eyes just twinkling. "Oui, it was a lovely wake up."

Oh, that had him blushing harder, and he looked down at the table, cursing his fair skin. He turned the plate in front of him and straightened the fork. "He really is a good man."

"Of course, he is just an ancrecule, yes? He does not believe things will heal."

"It's been very hard for him. He's had his hopes dashed twice already." They both had.

"Come, come. My Ralph? He fixes everyone. You? Eat and chat with me, yes? You tell me the things your cher eats, and we will treat him."

He nodded and smiled. Jean was just so cheerful and friendly, Benj couldn't stay uptight and embarrassed and unhappy around the man. "He loves steak, just not for breakfast."

"Is there nothing he likes in the mornings? Is there a reason? And you? You are a pancake person, sweet and creamy with the butter, yes?"

"That's my favorite!" Benj thought Jean was something else; truly magic when it came to the kitchen, he could see that. "And Brett's never eaten breakfast. You'd have to ask him why. When we first started seeing each other I made him this big breakfast the first morning we um... you know. And he said 'Baby, I appreciate the effort, but I just don't do breakfast'. And he never has."

"Well, we will fix this, yes? And until we do? Pancakes." Jean winked and started sweeping up the bowl. "Does the gator-man eat late at night?"

"Gator-man?" He chuckled. "Yeah. Midnight snack. Oh, and he missed last night! We um... well, he missed it."

There was something about Jean that just invited confidences.

"Uh-huh, A cocodrie, your man is. Bite and teeth. And see? His body knows and fights the mind." A bit of egg had bounced onto the table and Jean tasted it, obviously curious. "Oh, mon dieu! That? Tastes as foul as the end of the chicken Mr. Egg slid from."

"It looked pretty nasty." Benj reached for the pancakes, putting three on his plate. Oh, he hadn't had an appetite like this in a long time.

"He has a temper. Always? Or just since the hurt?"

"Oh, he's always had a temper -- he's a very passionate man -- but... well, since he got hurt... it's more frequent." Benj shrugged, trying not to feel like he was betraying Brett, talking about him like this.

Jean nodded. "I? Can rage with the wind. Stomp and scream and fuss. And Ralph? He just watches and brings me back to ground."

Benj nodded. "I didn't do too badly at that myself before Brett got hurt." He shrugged, trying to articulate his frustrations, knowing they were tied in with Brett's. "There's not really anything *I* can do to make his arm better, though, and he knows it. I know it. Do you really believe that Ralph can get Brett back to playing baseball?" He needed that. Brett needed it. And he wanted to believe that here was where it could happen.

Jean sat down, took his hand. "He's not a babe, you know? His body won't play the ball forever. I know we can help him play long enough to retire because *he* wants to, yeah? To leave because the time is right."

Benj was surprised by how much comfort holding Jean's hand was giving him. He'd cut way back on his massage clients since Brett had gotten hurt, and he hadn't realized how much he'd been missing the casual touching, one human being to another. If he and Brett had been fucking like monkeys, like they used to, it probably wouldn't even have mattered.

"He was thinking about retiring, maybe getting into coaching once his current contract was up. But now, like this..." Brett felt unmanned. Benj wouldn't say that, though, wouldn't put Brett in the position of having that voiced, out there. He was still struggling with how anything he said felt like a betrayal, but it was just so good to have someone to talk to, not to have to carry it all on his own.

"One more good season, eh? One more run of glory and then he walks away proud, *comme un homme*, you know? Not crawling." Jean's eyes were warm, sympathetic, smiling. "And maybe some peace for you, then. Some quiet in your soul."

Benj nodded and squeezed Jean's hand. "You understand."

"It is our life here, to understand, to heal. It is yours, too, yes? You give the massage?"

"I do massage, yeah. It's not quite the same thing, but it does help people feel good." He squeezed Jean's hand again and then slid it away, started to eat. "Oh, these are great. Brett likes the really thin ones you put things in. Crepes? I've tried making them, but they always fall apart."

"I'll show you how." Jean poured more coffee, drinking deep. "Have you massaged the shoulder much?"

"As much as Brett'll let me." Not nearly as much as he'd wanted to. If he'd had his way, he'd massage Brett all over every day, just to keep the tension out of the beautiful muscles, but Brett was touchy, angry, frustrated and the words "just leave me alone" had stung every time Benj heard them.

"Talk to Ralph. He'll have exercises and massages, you know? Why have the stranger do them when you can help him?"

"Oh, that would be wonderful." He nodded happily. Jean made him believe this place and these people could help Brett, could help them both. He only hoped that between Ralph and Jean they could convince Brett as well.

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Jean started gathering up the food, whistling as he put a plate together to take to Ralph at ten. Lord, lord, what a morning. Slamming and yelling and broken dishes and curses -- it was enough to make a Cajun homesick, yessir.

Something easy and simple for lunch, he thought. Brett would be hurting, with the fury and the working. He knew Ralph, the afternoon would be in the pool, then the hot tub. So cool and refreshing for supper. Steak salad maybe...

Benj came in with his breakfast dishes. "Those were wonderful pancakes. Can I help you clean up?"

"If you'd like, but you're not required. I'd love the help."

"I have to make a trip into town before lunch, but aside from that I don't really have anything to do. I'd love to feel useful."

Benj started bringing in the rest of the stuff from the dining room.

The kitchen was huge, well put-together, everything he wanted, and he hummed as he worked.

Benj moved with a quiet grace, and almost silently, as if he was used to being quiet, to tiptoeing about.

Jean leaned over, nudging Benj gently. "I promise I won't bite."

Benj's eyes flew to his, surprise widening them. "What? Oh. I don't want to be in your way."

"You, cheri? You're not in anyone's way." Not at all. Pretty thing.

Benj blushed slightly, smiling and pleased. "Good to know. Is there anything else I can do to help? This was the last of the dishes in the dining room."

"You can dump the old coffee and make fresh. Everything you need is in this cabinet." His kitchen was balanced, everything where it belonged.

"You're really well-equipped." Benj worked well with him, definitely not in the way, hands touching everything.

"It's something, yeah? All the things you need, right here." He started showing off the place, cookbooks and gadgets, stores and dishes.

"Wow, look at your spice shelves! I don't even know what half that stuff is." Benj leaned slightly against him, getting a closer look.

"Spices are the secret to life, cheri. File for gumbo. Cayenne and onion and achiote. Good stuff."

"Do you match your meals to people's ailments?" Benj reached for a bottle, opening it, feeling the spice, smelling it, before moving onto another.

"Sometimes." He hopped onto the counter. "See your man? He needs things to soothe, to cool the heat in his blood. Then, when he tires -- and he will, they all do -- then we heat the blood."

Benj giggled softly. "Oh, that sounds kinky."

He hooted. "Ah, oui. The sex? She is very healing." Not to mention, plain out fun.

"That's what Ralph told Brett. Well, that we had to have more." Benj was blushing again.

"It's good for you both. Makes you close. Happy. Relaxed." And made for pretty fantasies.

Benj nodded, smiling down at the ground. "I haven't slept that well in a long while."

"Well, tonight? When he's exhausted and growling? Push him down and do it again."

"Oh, I don't know, he was pretty relaxed last night. He doesn't like being crowded when he's tired and growly."

"But maybe he needs it, yes? Needs to be crowded."

"I suppose I can tell him it's doctor's orders." Benj looked up, eyes twinkling. "So far this is my favorite thing about this place."

"What's that, cher? The kitchen or the prescription for fucking?"

"The second one, although your kitchen is pretty cool."

He chuckled, nodded and agreed. "Indeed it is. Now. You said you were going to town? Can I ride on your tail, please? I have steak and romaine to buy."

## *Chapter Four*

Ralph whistled as he opened up the barn, turning on the lights and firing up the heat. It was just cold enough overnight that the barn wasn't comfortable if you were going to be sitting.

Now, Brett wasn't just going to be sitting, but he was going to have his shirt off for the acupuncture and ultrasound therapy.

Ralph was pretty sure Brett was only a minute or two behind him, so he just took the time to check for messages, sitting on the edge of his desk, letting his leg swing casually.

Brett stormed in, eyes flashing, cheeks red as fire. "What first?"

Ralph chuckled. "You strip."

"What? You didn't get a good enough look this morning?" The T-shirt came off, exposing the solid, athletic body.

"You can leave your underwear on," he told Brett. Man looked good naked, looked good half-naked *and* dressed.

"There's nothing wrong with my legs." No, no, there wasn't, although the ropy surgical scars covering the man's shoulder were out of place.

"Brett, I need to take your weight, your measurements, watch how you walk, etc. We heal the whole body here." Lord, lord, this one was going to fight him every damned step of the way.

The jeans dropped without drama, kicked over to the side. "Next?"

Ralph picked up his clipboard, patient form already waiting to be filled out. "Step on the scale, please."

Brett followed instructions, lips tight, muscles tense and vibrating.



"Two ten. Is that up or down since your last weigh in?"

"Down by twenty."

"And when was that last weigh in?"

"Before the surgery and shit. June."

"All right. Let's get your measurements and body fat content." He grabbed the body fat reader and the tape measure.

There wasn't a lot of fat on the man, just miles of lean muscle. Seven percent was about half what a baseball player averaged, closer to a skier, a cyclist. Ah. Body-building.

"You still working out a lot, Brett?" There was a lot of stuff Brett could do in that regard to keep fit without hurting his shoulder, and a few things that could help strengthen those muscles specifically.

"There's nothing else to do."

"Nothing?" Ralph could think of a whole lot of things himself...

"Man can't watch TV twenty-four hours a day."

"We don't have TV here, Brett." He grinned and shook his head. "There's books, taking walks, taking with your man. Making love to him."

"I suggest you keep your mind on your work and off Benj." That was a clear threat, arms tensing. "What I do with my free time is no one's business."

Ralph let his eyebrows go up. The man sure was touchy when it came to his pretty lover. "While you're here, your free time is my business, Brett. This place is the total package, from how much you sleep and how much you eat to how often you work out."

"What. Next." Brett's nostril's flared, teeth grinding, and Ralph knew it was pure will that kept the man still.

"Up on the exam chair. I'm going to manipulate the shoulder, check out the damage by hand. Then I'm going to set you up on the ultrasound, work the area."

Brett was going to fight this place and himself every step of the way, Ralph could tell.

It was like watching a panther stalk, lean and furious, hopping up on the table. "Sitting up or lying down?"

"Sitting is good."

He examined Brett's shoulder, feeling the bones and muscles, the sinews and tendons beneath the skin. There was scar tissue that would need to be broken up, but he'd seen worse problems and seen them overcome.

"You did a good job messing your shoulder up, Brett, but it's not insurmountable."

For the first time, those eyes closed, the slightest bit of relief easing the muscled body.

"You'll need to work hard, and I don't think you'll ever be able to stop the stretching and loosening exercises, but I'm guessing that'll incorporate easily into your workout routine."

He ran his hand over the warm skin of Brett's shoulder again. "Okay, I want to set up the ultrasound on here, start working on this scarring. You'll need to lie down on your front now."

Brett turned, settled. The lean back was covered in ink. White ink, just barely visible. White tigers.

Ralph could no more have stopped his fingers from sliding over the tigers than he could have stopped breathing. It was fucking stunning. "This is something else, Brett."

"Thanks. I have a good artist. We were in school together."

Ralph hooked up the ultrasound. "This'll be warm after a bit, but it shouldn't hurt."

"Okay. Do I have to just lie here?"

"Yep." He grinned and grabbed a chair, turning it around and sitting a few inches from Brett. "It'll give us a chance to discuss anything that's bothering you."

One blond eyebrow rose. "Bothering me?"

"Yep. Bothering you."

"You're not serious."

"I'm deadly serious, Brett. You bottle everything up and push it down and then you explode in anger. It's not good for you."

"You've known me how long?" Brett closed his eyes, deep lines on his face.

"Less than a day." He reached out and touched one of the lines. "But it's written all over your face."

Bright eyes flashed open, almost pinning him to the wall. "Why do you care? Your job -- unless the team owner told me wrong -- is to either say I'm fucked so they can cancel my contract or make the shoulder well enough to play another season without blowing out again. I'm a bitter, angry, unpleasant drunk who plays ball. There's really not much else to know."

"Really? Nothing? Is that how your man would describe you? And I can't help anyone if I don't care about them, Brett. You're here, you need help; that makes me care, makes me want to help. I've met Benj, he's a very sweet guy, and I don't believe he'd be with someone who was nothing more than a bitter, angry, unpleasant drunk."

Ralph knew well how being hurt and scared and pissed off built a shell around people. He'd had to crack more than one in his time here, where honestly he wasn't just a physical therapist. He knew people.

"Okay, I'm a bitter, angry, unpleasant drunk who's good in bed."

Ralph laughed. "Tell me one nice thing about yourself, Brett."

"I'm really good in bed."

"So you claim." Not that Ralph would mind if the man wanted to prove it. Brett was a lovely specimen of male. "So tell me one other good thing about yourself."

"My stats are good."

Stubborn ass.

"One good thing that isn't about sex and isn't about the game, Brett. One good thing about *you*."

Brett almost smiled. "I'm not a cannibal."

Ralph laughed. Oh, stubborn and *teasing*. He imagined that was a deadly combination when Brett wasn't so busy being an asshole.

"You want to try one more?"

"I didn't kill Benj when he made me sit through all the *Lord of the Rings* movies."

"See? That wasn't so hard, was it?" He winked. "Are you going to give the psychologist this much trouble?"

"More. I don't like being fucked with." Brett shifted, shoulders rolling, a faint wince crossing his face.

Ralph glared. "I'm not fucking with you, Brett. I'm trying to help you. We all are. We're on your side here. Not the teams -- yours."

He checked the readouts on the ultrasound machine and made sure the leads weren't too hot against Brett's skin. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine, just uncomfortable. How much longer?"

"Another ten minutes or so, and then we'll move onto the acupuncture. Jean'll be bringing by a snack around then." Yeah, he was getting a little hungry, for a kiss or two as well as food.

"Are you going to bitch and expect me to eat before you stick pins in me?"

"Whether or not you eat will be up to Jean, but I'll back him up one hundred percent. What have you got against eating, anyway?"

"Nothing. I eat when I'm hungry. I don't eat because the clock turns a certain hour. I'm hungry at night."

"Well, I imagine Jean will take that into account when he puts together your schedule, but I know for a fact, you can't do a good job with your exercises on an empty stomach. I'm sorry, but that's just the way it's going to be. It would be easier for everyone -- you, Jean, me, Benj -- if you tried to accept the fact with a little grace."

The tanned cheeks flushed dark again. "You know, I've been an athlete -- a successful fucking athlete -- for a long goddamn time. The least you could do is *pretend* that my body is just that. Mine. And that maybe, just maybe I'm not an utter moron." Brett sat up a little, growling. "You call Johnson down at the trainers. You ask him if I missed one training session. If I ever gave him less than a hundred and ten percent."

"Nobody thinks you're a moron, Brett. Not one fucking person here thinks that -- a stubborn asshole, yes, a moron, no. But tell me this -- have you tried *everything* you know to do and still aren't getting what you need out of your arm? Because just maybe we aren't trying to take control or play with your mind or any other thing you think we're trying to do. Maybe we're just trying to get you healthy and back on that ball field." He stood, looming over Brett and putting his hand on the man's back. "Now lie still and let the ultrasound do its job."

"You forgot drunk and bitter." Brett sighed, settled.

Ralph snorted. "No, I didn't forget."

He took his clipboard back to his desk and took a few breaths. He usually didn't let the clients get to him. He usually didn't let much get to him at all. Brett had gotten under his skin.

Brett relaxed, breath easing up, the sorry bastard going from pissed off to dozing, just like that.

Ralph shook his head and glanced at his watch, setting his little timer so he wouldn't forget to move Brett from the ultrasound to the acupuncture. His poor

Jean had to meet up with the man today. Ralph pursed his lips, telling himself he didn't need to be there to loom. His Jean could more than take care of himself.

And was even pushier than Ralph was in his own way.

Ralph chuckled, his tension easing. Now that would be a showdown to be seen.

## *Chapter Five*

He heard the damn Cajun coming a mile away, the needles in his face and arms and feet -- oh, he was fucking going to *murder* that fucking therapist -- vibrating.

"Hey cher 'tit chou! You starving for something sweet and tasty?"

Ralph pushed back from his desk and patted his lap. "I am, babe. Gonna eat you right up."

"Oo-ee!" A plate of fruit and cheese and danish were set aside, Ralph given a warm kiss. "How's your morning?"

Ralph wrapped his big hands around Jean, beaming up at his lover. "Not bad at all, babe. Not bad at all. Is this all for me?"

"Mostly. I thought I'd offer some to Brett." He got a bright grin. "I have some pineapple, some grapes, some smoked cheese."

"You've been talking to Benj." Those, along with steak and anything cinnamon-y, were his favorites.

Ralph chuckled. "Jean knows the way to a man's heart. Let me take all those needles out and you can snack and talk turkey with Jean."

Jean nodded. "I don't like making men pissy, me. I like feeding people."

Brett rolled his eyes, but didn't argue. Whatever. He just wanted to know what to do, damn it.

"How are you feeling? The needles hurting any?" Ralph came over.

"The one under my ear hurts."

Burned, really. He did feel less tense, but he was dying to get them out, to move.

"Okay, we'll start with that one, then. Don't move, just relax and let me get them out. Then I'll give you a quick rubdown while Jean talks meals and shit with you. Oh hey, Jean, is Benj around? A real massage would work even better."

"Yup. I'll grab him. He peeked in and turned green at the needles."

Brett actually laughed. That was his baby.

"Let's see if I can get them all out before they come back." Ralph grinned at him, the needle beneath his ear going first, the others coming out quickly one after the other.

"Oh, thank God." He sat up, rubbing at his skin, almost shivering.

Ralph nodded, hands sliding over his shoulders. "That's why I do the rubdown after. A real massage, though, that'll be even better."

"Brett? Jean said you needed me." Benj came in with Jean, looking concerned.

"Hey, baby. Mr. Pokey here said he was going to give me a rubdown. Your hands sounded *much* better."

"Oh! That would be wonderful!" Benj beamed at him. "I should wash my hands. Do you have oil, Ralph? Something light and not too smelly?"

Ralph chuckled and showed Benj the sink, a small collection of oils.

It felt pretty damned good, Benj's smile, the enthusiasm. "So, Jean. What am I supposed to talk about with you?"

Ralph chuckled. "Jean is all about the food, Brett."

Benj laughed softly, hands sliding on his skin, warm and slick. "That's true. He even spices things according to certain needs. You should see his spice cupboard!"

Jean chuckled. "I think we start with the worst, yes? Would you eat a smoothie in the morning? Something tart and sweet?"

He sighed. "I really don't like breakfast, but... yeah. Yeah. I can do that."



Benj made a soft sound and a kiss dropped on the back of his neck.

"Nice one, Benj -- very good incentive."

"Fuck off, Pokey."

Jean just chuckled. "Favorite food?"

"Steak."

"With those big, thick fries and salad," Benj added, fingers working him just like he liked it, wiping away the shivery sensations the needles had left behind.

"Those fries you won't get here. I don't have the deep fryer. But if you'll eat baked?"

He nodded. "I'm not a picky eater. I just don't eat in the mornings."

"What about his midnight snack?" Benj asked, the massage changing a bit, his baby just touching him now, fingers sliding on his skin.

He started to truly relax, eyes closing.

Jean chuckled. "What does he like best, cher?"

"Sandwiches," Benj answered, voice soft. "Lots of flavors mixed together."

*Yeah. Yeah, baby. You know.*

"So big lunch? Little lunch?" Jean was scribbling hard.

He grinned. "I like lunch. I love Sunday brunch."

"Oh, yeah..." There was heat in Benj's voice, and he knew Benj was thinking of lazy Sundays spent before he got hurt, getting brunch delivered and feasting on it and each other in bed.

"Now look at that," murmured Ralph. "Look how you make him glow, Brett."

"Me?" Brett wiggled, knowing Benj would see it. "He's thinking about mimosas."

Jean hooted, clapping. "Oh. Oh, yes. Mimosas are heaven."

One of Benj's hands slid down over his ass. "I'm thinking about drinking a mimosa *with* you."

"On Sunday's; that's the only alcohol day, remember." Man, Ralph was a wet blanket.

"Don't you two have something to do? Lunch to eat? Other men to torture?"

"Too early for lunch, and you've got a workout scheduled after your impromptu massage."

"Fucker." He really didn't like Ralph. Really.

Ralph nodded and grinned, looking completely unconcerned. "You aim all that at me, where it belongs."

Benj's hands had started fluttering on his skin.

"Breathe, baby, yeah? This is upsetting you, you don't have to stay."

"I'm okay, love. I can do this as long as you need."

He just nodded, let Benj touch as he looked at Jean. "What else?"

"There will be vitamins, supplements..."

"No."

He shook his head. No way. He'd seen too many guys test positive on those fucking things. Not a fucking chance. A man could lose his future.

Benj's fingers slid over his back, soothing, warm.

"Are you going to fight us on *everything*?" Ralph asked.

He sighed, shook his head. "No. Why the hell would I worry? Why would I fight?"

Benj's hands petted his back and his baby spoke up for him. "They test the players constantly, Jean. They're not allowed to have anything in their systems. There was a scandal when we first met. One of Brett's friends had a cold and took some cough medicine and failed his drug test."

Ralph grunted. "We *have* been asked to send urine samples in once a week."

"Well, if they peg me with something? I lose my contract, my reputation, everything."

"Jean? What do you think, babe? Let him off on the vitamins and supplements?" Ralph looked sympathetic.

"Then you'll have to eat them in your veggies and food. Fair?"

Okay, that was almost too easy.

"Good job. You see? We can all get along just fine when we try." Ralph was just grinning. "What else, babe? You got some holistic meditation eating grass stuff you want to talk about?"

"Well, you actually like real food, yeah? Blows my fun. But the drinking, oui? You need to stop it; let it work out of your system."

"I already said only on Sundays."

"I think altogether."

Ralph chuckled and winked. "And you thought I was tough."

Benj's hands had stopped, were resting silently on his skin, and he could feel his baby waiting for his response.

"I've made my agreement."

"So, what? You can't give it up?"

He growled, tensed. "Did I say I couldn't? For fuck's sake. I'm a grown man."

Jean nodded. "You are, and if you don't need it, give it up."

"Oh, and does that go for you, too? You don't need coffee, give it up. You don't need chocolate, give it up. You don't need to ride my fucking ass. Give. It. Up."

Benj's fingers curled on his back as Ralph shook his head.

"You're the only one being treated here, Brett, which is why you're the one being asked to give things up, change your habits. We aren't doing this to screw with you, remember that."

"That's not fucking logical." He met Ralph's gaze dead-on. "If there's not a direct -- and I mean a direct connection to my shoulder -- then it's a general health thing. If it's just a general health thing and the man doesn't practice what he preaches? He's a fucking hypocrite."

Ralph growled. "There's a hell of a difference between alcohol and coffee and chocolate, Brett. The alcohol is affecting your body, your mood, everything."

"And caffeine doesn't? Sugar?" Oh, don't even fucking try intimidation. Brett was so not scared.

"I don't see Jean growling and bitching at everyone and everything. I don't see him *dosing* himself with the caffeine and sugar to numb the pain."

Benj was fluttering at his back again, fingers alternately rubbing against his skin and twitching.

"You don't see dick with me. You've had exactly three fucking conversations with me, which is one more conversation than he has. We've shared half a meal and a quarter of a walk, and if this is all the respect you have for me then fuck off. I'll call the team, tell them I'm done and go home."

"That's right," Ralph said softly. "You're scared. You should quit. Then you can't fail."

"I don't need this shit." His head hurt, his shoulder hurt, and he was arguing in his fucking tighty-whities.

"No, this shit is exactly what you need. You need to clean your body and your mind and work on getting well. You need to stop fighting yourself and everyone

around you every single step of the way." Ralph shook his head. "Enough. You need to be here and you know it. You either follow the rules or you don't, but you don't follow them and we can't help you. Okay. Everybody out, the man needs to do his workout."

Brett felt Benj hesitate, and he sat up, drew his lover in for a quick hug. "You go on, baby. I'm fine."

Benj hugged him hard and whispered, "I believe you can do anything you set your mind to, Brett." He was given a quick kiss, and poor Benj all but ran from the room.

"You going to let me put my sweats on to work out?" He was this close to putting his fist through a wall.

"If that means you're staying, then yes. Jean, are you done for now?"

"I reckon. I'm going to take the wee cher down to town."

The Cajun sounded subdued. Brett just couldn't bring himself to give a shit.

"Get dressed and I'll set you up with a routine." Ralph put his arm around Jean and walked him out, head close, talking softly.

Brett sighed and got down. Seven hours before he could go to the bedroom. Seven hours before he could just be by himself for a little while.

Fucking shoulder.

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Benj left the barn and headed for the lake, hands opening and closing as he tried to catch his breath.

He didn't like the tension, but he was even more worried about leaving here, about Brett giving up.

If Brett failed, that would be one thing. If Brett gave up... Benj didn't want to contemplate it, and really, if he thought about it, he knew his Brett wouldn't quit. Brett just didn't have it in him to give up.

That actually made him feel better.

Footsteps sounded behind him, Jean catching up. "Are you... Am I bothering you?"

He shook his head. He liked Jean. "No, it's fine."

"He's just scared, just angry. It gets easier."

"I hope so. I hate seeing him hurting like this." Benj stopped and looked out over the water. "It really is beautiful out here." He was surprised; he wasn't an outdoorsman at all.

"He's very strong, you know? Ralph likes him, respects him, I think."

He stopped and turned to Jean, more than a little shocked. "He sure doesn't act like it!"

"No? He likes the ones that fight back, that aren't dead inside."

"So the fighting is good?"

"Better than dull zombie blinking, oui?"

Benj nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, he did nothing but that for a bit. Scared me more than the yelling and growling ever did."

Jean nodded, eyes warm and dark. "Part of that's the drugs, yes? The painkillers."

"Oh, yeah, Brett stopped taking those sooner than the doctor even wanted."

"That could be a problem. The doctor may give him some cortisone shots, some pain pills, for the first few weeks."

"Well, he'll have to fight it out with the doctor. I won't go against him."

"Of course not!" Jean actually looked shocked. "Your job is to support him, love him."

Benj nodded, relieved that going against Brett wishes wasn't going to be asked of him. "I just thought you should know." He turned and they headed back toward the house. "I really do need to get to a hardware store."

"I need to buy pineapple and orange juice. Want to share a ride?"

"Seeing as I have to rely on you for travel, do I have a choice?" He winked to let Jean know he was teasing. Not having a car there had put Brett's back up more than his own.

"Of course you do. There are vehicles you can drive." Jean winked. "The driving? Not good for the shoulder yet. So, not for your homme."

"Oh, that's good to know, thank you. I'm not fond of driving -- if you're coming with me anyway, would you mind doing the actual driving?"

Brett had always driven when he was around, and when he wasn't, Benj would walk or take taxis. There were a lot of things he'd come to depend on Brett for.

"Sure, no problem." Jean nodded. "I like the drive."

"How far and how big is the nearest town?" Benj asked. He was finding it wasn't so awful being out of the city, at least not after just a day, given all the conveniences this place boasted.

"Big enough for a grocery store, a steakhouse, a hardware store. It's a thirty minute drive. Come, Ralph knows where I leave lunch. We'll eat in town."

"Do you think they'll be okay if we leave Brett and Ralph alone?"

"Ralph won't hurt him." Jean's head tilted. "Do you think Brett will hurt Ralph?"

Benj shook his head. "Well... he might slug Ralph if Ralph pushes too hard, but he wouldn't deliberately hurt him."

"Well, then. They'll be fine." Jean looked wicked, mischievous.

"How come I suddenly expect to come home and find them both sporting black eyes?"

"We'll buy a few extra steaks."

That surprised a laugh out of him, and he shook his head. "I like you, Jean."

"Good. I think we can be friends, you and me." He got another grin, a wink. "We can be athletic supporters."

Benj laughed hard, stopping to hold his stomach. "Oh, that's good. I'm going to have to tell that one to Brett -- that I'm his athletic supporter."

"You know it." Jean just looked tickled, happy, genuine and easy. Jean led him to a sporty little coupe.

"Oh, this is nice."

"You know it. My baby. Slide on in, we'll go play."

Still chuckling a little, Benj got in, pulled on his seatbelt. He felt a little guilty, going off to have fun while Brett was battling his demons.

Jean patted his knee. "He'll be here after to melt, cher. No worries."

He blushed. "I'm pretty sure the mood will be long gone by tonight."

"So? Surely you know how to bring it back? It will ease him, relax him. Center him."

"Doctor's orders." He nodded. He would give it a try, anyway. Last night had been... so missed.

That taste...

"Yeah. You've got the hunger for it. I can see."

He felt his cheeks go even warmer, but he smiled. "I love him." It was as simple as that.

"Good. He loves you, too, I think. You eased him."



"Oh, yes. He does. I have never doubted that." He watched the road zip by. "How long have you and Ralph been together?"

"Five years. We met in New Orleans at a conference. I left with him. Never went back."

"Love at first sight? Brett would say it doesn't exist." He knew better, though.

"Good thing I didn't fall in love with him on first sight."

"No? But you said..."

"I meant Brett, cher. Ralph was mine from the start."

"Oh!" Benj laughed. "No, Brett's mine; no falling in love with him."

"I'll put it on my list. No falling in love. Buy steaks and andouille. Change oil in car."

"Just you wait -- you think it's easy because he's such a grump, but when my Brett is feeling a hundred percent? Oh, even seventy-five percent -- he's a charming, gorgeous stud, and people fall for him left and right."

His Brett was a pin-up. All the ladies who followed ball wanted him.

"And you? Who falls for you, cher?"

"Me?" Benj laughed softly. "People don't fall for me! Well, Brett did." He smiled, remembering the intensity of Brett's regard, the full-out way the man wooed. Benj had been totally swept off his feet.

"Yeah? I can see people falling for you." Jean grinned over. "How did you meet?"

"I had an interview with the ball club he was playing for, to be put on their massage list, and we ran into each other, literally, in the hall. I fell hard right from the start."

"Did he fall on you?"

"Actually, he saved me from landing on my ass. Such lovely, strong arms." He licked his lips, breath coming a little faster as he thought about Brett and those strong arms.

Jean made an appreciative, soft sound. "You need to make sure to seduce him tonight."

He wiggled in his seat. "Yeah. Yeah, I think maybe I will."

"Oh, no. No maybe. You want him. He needs to feel strong, you know? Hard and male."

"He is," murmured Benj, his own cock growing hard. "He really is."

"It's good for him, to remember one shoulder isn't the man." Jean's nostrils flared.

"I have tried, Jean." Last night, though, he'd done more than try; they both had. His hands dropped to his lap as he tried for modesty.

"It's difficult, but this morning? You could see that he wants you."

Benj snorted. "There wasn't much left to the imagination this morning." That had been embarrassing, though mostly it had been worrying because Brett had been so upset.

"No. And Ralph should have given him some privacy. Ralph is... stubborn."

"Yes, so is Brett." He kept watching the road. "He asked me to get a new lock for the door."

"I think that seems fair." Jean nodded. "I'll bring breakfast up and speak to Ralph about being more flexible."

"I think that would help. Brett keeps having things taken away because of this injury, and I know Ralph isn't hurt, isn't the one here to heal, but it can't be easy to be always told no no no and you have to do better and you have to do more and he is trying very hard."

Jean nodded, "Sometimes Ralph needs to push someone into working. I think this is not your Brett's problem."

"No? What do you think it is?"

"I think he needs to let the injury heal. I think he is not allowing himself to breathe, you know?"

"He's not the kind to sit around, waiting for things to happen." Not his Brett, Mr. Go and Get 'em.

"Then that is what Ralph will teach him." Jean nodded. "Give them the afternoon together, yes? Ralph will begin to understand."

"I hope so. Brett really needs this." And so did he. Because he had no clue how to help Brett, and he was, quite selfishly, scared he was going to lose his man over this.

"You do know he'll have to stop eventually, don't you?"

"Oh, yes, but like this? It's not his choice, not the way he wants to go out. Like he was beat."

"And if this is it? Do you know what you'll do?"

Benj shook his head, trying not to let the panic take hold. He tried very hard not to think about that, because he was terrified Brett would sink into the bottle and disappear.

"Well, now. You need a plan." Jean glanced at him. "Not because I don't believe, but because you need a plan. You need to be able to cope, cher."

He nodded, blinking away sudden tears. "I try, Jean. I just don't know what to do."

"Chut-chut. That is why we are here, oui? To help you learn."

He nodded and sniffed, wiping his eyes. Brett wouldn't be happy to see him crying. "There's no crying in baseball, baby." He could hear the words as plain as day in his mind.

Jean patted his knee. "All will be well."

He reached out and took Jean's hand, squeezed it. "Thank you, Jean. Truly."

"No more worries today, cher. Only sex and laughter."

He laughed through his blush. "Okay. I can deal with that." Benj squeezed Jean's hand again and then let it go.

He thought he could, really, deal with that.

## *Chapter Six*

Brett did every fucking exercise Ralph asked him to do. Didn't bitch. Didn't complain. Just poured himself into them, one after another after another, letting his muscles scream.

He just kept counting down the clock, waiting until he could go take a shower, have a minute to be alone.

It was a minute from noon when Ralph finally stopped him. "You'd go until you fell over, wouldn't you? How does this compare to the training you've been doing since you hurt your shoulder?"

"It's comparable." His regular training didn't include the screaming and anger, but he couldn't have everything.

Ralph snorted. "No wonder you're not healed yet -- you're pushing yourself far too hard!"

"You're the one who said to do them." He couldn't resist.

Ralph nodded. "I did. And then I watched you do them, watched your muscles screaming, and still you pushed, and then you tell me this is the kind of workout you usually do." Ralph went over and picked up one of the free weights. "If I'd told you to do arm curls with this with the sore arm, would you have?"

"You're the professional." The coach said to do what the trainers said.

"Do you never listen to what your body says?"

Brett counted to forty. "This is like being married without the fucking."

"Is that a proposal?" Ralph asked, giving him a wink.

He chuckled. "Sorry. I'm spoken for by someone who actually likes me."

"Oh, I've seen the way he looks at you, Brett. That's a lot more than like." He was given another wink before Ralph sat next to him. "Look, you need to listen to your body, to hear it when you're pushing too hard and back off, give it time to rest, to heal. If you've been working out as hard every day as you did for me just now, then you're pushing too hard. There's a balance, and you haven't been finding it."

"Look. I'm just trying to get better. You said to work. I'm working."

"Fair enough. Now I'm saying not to work so hard. Look, I'll work out a routine for you. I want you here for electrical impulses and acupuncture and ultrasound every day. Stretches, walking, making love are all acceptable and encouraged. So is sitting and reading, talking, you know, relaxing, enjoying. Swimming every second day, but only gentle laps. I'll let you work everything but your bad arm every second day for twenty minutes." Ralph stood again. "Come on. We're done. Come back to the house for lunch, and you've got an appointment at two with Mike, the headshrinker. He usually uses my desk, so you can meet him here."

"So swimming one day, exercise the next?" Lunch sounded good.

"I've changed my mind. I think swimming every day, and you can exercise every second day or not as you wish, but not the sore arm and not for more than twenty minutes."

Ralph's fingers slid gently over his shoulder. "And if this starts bothering you, you stop and come see me."

His eyes actually closed. Christ, he hurt.

"Jesus, man. You need to let people help you -- you can't carry this all on your own. I'm a tough old dog, Brett, and I'm going to push you to do things you don't want to, like giving up the alcohol, like showing up here everyday for the acupuncture, but I can help you with your load, yeah?"

"I'm just fucking tired of it hurting, man." So fucking tired.

"I'm not surprised. You need to heal. Come on, let's go eat. I know you're skeptical, but I tell you Jean's cooking is a medicine all its own."

His stomach growled, and he nodded. "I'm starving."

"Excellent. We'll go eat, and you can tell me all about yourself. As a friend -- not for the job."

He slid up off the bench, grabbed his shirt. "There's not much to tell. I play ball. I watch movies. I paint."

"Walls or pictures?" Ralph ambled along toward the house.

"Pictures." He'd been an art major in college, been painting for years.

"Very cool. Why don't I get Jean to pick you up some art supplies?"

"Oh, I don't know. That's something I planned to do when I retired."

"Well, you've got lots of time now to relax, take it easy. Do you and Benj play cards? My Jean plays a wonderful hand of rummy."

"We like to play games sometimes, yeah. Benj likes to read, bake. We both like music." They liked to dance. To go look at shit.

"Oh, we have an excellent sound system back at the house. Decks of cards. We'll have fun, Brett. You'll see." Ralph gave him a grin.

"It would be better if I was here just to vacation, man." He tried to grin back.

"So think of it like that's what it is. A vacation." Ralph winked, nudged him. "With a warden."

"Oh, handcuff and bars." He rolled his eyes, but laughed -- a real laugh. "What's for lunch, Ward?"

"We'll have to see what Jean left us. And the name's Ralph. Please." He was given a mock glare.

"What's the norm, though? Sandwiches? Dogs? Nachos?" Mmm... nachos...

"Gumbo, steak, salad. Whatever's taken Jean's fancy at the market."

Someone was spoiled. He grinned, shook his head. "I usually grab whatever, wherever."

Ralph grinned back at him. "There are advantages to having a cook as your lover. Let's see what he has for us today."

The refrigerator coughed up chicken subs and fruit and pasta salads. "Oh. Yum. There soda here?"

Ralph laughed. "Oh, Brett, he's even more against soda than he is alcohol."

"Ralph, man, you're killing me."

Ralph chuckled. "Trust me. He's a good enough cook that you'll soon realize the sacrifices are worth it. Well... he's damned good in bed, too, and I'll eat whatever he puts in front of me to keep him happy." He was given a slow wink.

"Well, given I'm not likely to have him in bed, there better be something with caffeine." He chuckled, shook his head.

"I bet there's a pitcher of iced tea in the fridge."

"That works." He poured two big glasses, drinking the first down before pouring another.

Ralph sat at the big table in the kitchen rather than going out to the dining room.

"The dining room seems rather formal with just the two of us."

"That's cool." He opened the fridge, looking for pickles to go on his sandwich.

"Eat your food the way Jean made it, Brett. Trust me on this one."

He looked at Ralph. "Are you saying I can't have a pickle?"

"I'm saying if there's no pickle on your sandwich, then you should just eat it without a pickle." Ralph opened his mouth and shoved in one end of his sandwich, eyes just twinkling.

"Okay. But I still want a pickle." He had a taste for it now.

Ralph nearly choked on his submarine.



"God, Brett, warn a man before you start with the jokes."

He snorted. "Who? Me? Joke? No..." He found a jar of kosher dills, pulled one out.

"You realize that's the most suggestive thing going, right?" Ralph's eyes were still twinkling at him.

"Only because there aren't any frozen bananas." He licked the side of the pickle, winked.

Ralph laughed again, the sound rich, deep.

Brett sat and ate, enjoying the pasta salad and the sandwich.

Ralph ate with enthusiasm, humming over this bite and that forkful. "You see? He's a genius, my Jean."

"It doesn't suck entirely." He winked, grabbed the salt, and dusted his honeydew.

"Better not let him hear you say that, or he'll put you on bread and water."

"I wouldn't dare to." He wasn't evil or stupid. Just grumpy.

"He's a fiery one, my Jean. A dynamo." Ralph leaned back, patting his belly happily.

"I can see that." Brett stretched, wincing as his shoulder pulled. "Benj likes him."

"Your Benj is a sweetie. You should let him massage you every day; it'll help your shoulder."

"He's done it quite a bit. I don't want to bother him with it. It bothers him."

Ralph's eyes went wide. "It does? It certainly didn't seem to bother him this morning."

Brett shrugged. Maybe not, he hated being weak.

"Maybe it's you it bothers," suggested Ralph when it became clear he wasn't going to say anything else.

"Maybe. Things have been different." He finished his fruit salad.

Ralph put his dishes in the sink and started rooting in the freezer. "Yeah? What's changed? How did things used to be?"

"Well, I wasn't injured, and he didn't worry." He put his own plate away, rinsed it, and filled up his glass.

Ralph crowed and pulled out two Popsicle shaped Tupperware containers. "Want one?" Ralph asked, working off the plastic top.

"Sure, what is it?" He peered over Ralph's shoulder.

"Homemade Popsicle. I'm not sure what all Jean puts in them, but it's sweet and got chunks of fruit and he doesn't make a face if I want one." Ralph gave him a wink and handed over the pinkish-purple frozen treat.

"Oh, I'm so there." Sweet. Fruit. Cold. Yum. He licked and sucked, feeling almost okay, almost good.

Ralph nodded and attacked his with almost obscene pleasure, slurping and licking, sucking the thing but good.

"These things are good." And perverse. And led a man to think of things.

Ralph winked at him, lips stained dark. "They are. Refreshing, renewing." Ralph sat back down, still working on his popsicle. "Tell me, Brett. Is your injury the entire focus of your and Benj's life these days?"

"Yeah." No reason to deny it. No reason at all.

"Wow. That's pretty... So your entire lives are on hold until this is cleared up? That's a lot of pressure."

"Playing ball isn't fun and games, Ralph." He winked over, aware of the irony of his words.

Ralph didn't seem terribly amused. "Well, no, but surely there was more going on in your lives? Stuff that's got nothing to do with playing ball. I mean, there's an off-season, after all. Did everything grind to a halt?"

"Benj works. I work out. We travel. The team keeps us busy."

"What are you going to do when they don't?" Ralph didn't wait for his answer, though. "You have any questions for me, Brett?"

He shook his head. What was there to ask? "I don't think so. I just need my schedule. And some aspirin, my head's killing me."

"Did you bring any with you?" Ralph gave him an apologetic look. "Jean's got homeopathic stuff I could give you, but there's no aspirin or Tylenol or any of that kind of thing."

"How about a car and directions to a drug store?"

Ralph checked his watch. "You haven't got time before your appointment with Mike. Who might have some aspirin. Or you could try a shower or a cold compress while you close your eyes for a bit."

"I might go sleep in the tub. That sounds good. Cold." Wet. Quiet. Relaxing. Sleepy.

"As long as you don't drown. I think the team might hold me liable, if you do."

"I'll keep that in mind." He nodded, waved, and headed up to his room. Christ, he was tired. Worn out. Sore.

And he really needed a drink.

\*\*\*

Ralph was sitting on one of the deck chairs by the pool with a book, more dozing than reading. Not only was it siesta time, but he'd been kicked out of his office by Mike so he didn't have to even pretend to feel guilty that he wasn't busy working.

It was a beautiful day, not even cold enough yet for them to start heating the pool water, though he imagined Brett might find his daily swims a tad chilly. He'd have

to remember to ask about that. If this morning's grin and bear it attitude was anything to go by, Brett wouldn't say anything about the temperature of the water, he'd just "muscle through it."

He wondered idly how Mike was doing with Brett. The session seemed to be taking quite a while, but he hadn't heard any shouting, so he took it as a good sign.

He glanced at his watch. Jean should be back soon.

"Mmm... cher 'tit chou. You look comfortable." Jean landed in his lap, dark eyes warm. "No one's dead? I'm so proud."

He laughed softly, arms looping around Jean's thin frame. "No one's dead. In fact I was even friendly. Shared one of the last Popsicles with him."

"And was the growly bear properly appreciative?"

"Actually, he was. Very appreciative. Until he needed some aspirin and I didn't have any to give him. You want to have something for supper that'll help his head, babe?"

Jean nodded. "White willow bark will do it up. It's the booze. You need to talk to Trelaine, though. I think he needs to be on pain meds. I think that's why he's drinking."

Ralph nodded, not terribly surprised. "He hadn't been resting, healing, Jean. He's been pushing himself, working out as if there was nothing wrong with him -- it's no wonder that shoulder hasn't healed!"

"He's stubborn, and Benj is a lover, but... not terribly strong, you know?"

Jean was so nice. "A pushover, you mean."

"I mean I think Brett made all the decisions, took care of things, took care of Benj."

"And now they're floundering because they're trying to carry on as before and it's not working." Ralph shook his head. "Their entire lives came to a halt when he got hurt. They need a lot of help, Jean. A *lot*."

"That's why they're here, oui? For us to help?"

"Yeah. And if we can get Brett to relax and Benj to help him with that? He just might be able to play another year or two."

"I think they'd both like that."

Ralph nodded, hands sliding on Jean's back. "Yeah. You really like Benj, don't you?"

"Mmmhmm... he's edible, love. Sweet as good beignet."

He chuckled. "And his partner, Jean? What foodstuff would you compare Brett to, babe?"

"Bitter cafe?" Jean licked at his lips, humming low.

"Oh, now, there's a good man under all that hurt, Jean." He opened his mouth, chased Jean's tongue with his own.

"Mmm... and beignets need it..." Jean moaned, the kiss going deep and long.

He was happy not pursuing the conversation with words. Oh, yeah, their tongues and lips had much more important things to discuss. Groaning, he opened wide, hands sliding down to grab Jean's ass. Jean pressed close, diving into the kiss, reaching to stroke his cheek.

"Babe. Yes." He nodded, tugging Jean in close.

"Is there time?" Jean was hard as a rock, rubbing against him, wanton.

"Where did you leave the little beignet?" He didn't figure it would shock Brett, but the little one would blush.

"Upstairs to bathe. Where's the bear?"

"Talking to Mike. I think we're safe." He chuckled. "As long as the chair doesn't give out."

"We've broken all the ones that were weak, cher." Jean winked, pressed down against him.

His chuckles turned to laughter, the sounds swallowed up by Jean's mouth.

There was nothing like the passion of his Jean.

Jean's fingers found his waistband, his cock, his balls. "Mmm... So hot."

"You make me hot. Make me need." He pushed up against Jean's hand, hips working.

"Good." Jean nipped his bottom lip, dark eyes burning.

"Gonna ride me, babe? Gonna test this chair hard." He worked Jean's pants open.

Oh, someone liked that, lean muscles going hard against him. "Yes. Ooh, yes. Wan' gimme some of you, cher."

"More than some, babe." He tugged the pants down, helping Jean shift to get them right off so he could get to Jean's heat.

"Gon' make Mike blush." God, he loved the way need roughened Jean's voice.

"Don't care. Need you."

His own prick was bare in a moment, and he rubbed it along Jean's, his fingers gathering the liquid that dripped from both of them.

"Yes." Jean's face cuddled into his throat, legs straddling his waist. "Yes."

His fingers slid behind Jean's balls, searching for that tight little hole.

"Deep. Going to ride you, take you deep."

"God, yes, babe." He nodded, fingers pushing, pressing into his version of heaven.

Jean's head fell back, throat working, lips parted as he started moving. Ralph watched as his Jean rode his fingers, moving like something magical. He reached

with his free hand, sliding it over Jean's face. That earned him a purr, a smile, Jean cuddling into his touch.

"Love you, Jean." He tugged his fingers away and slid his cock along Jean's crack, the want making his balls ache.

"Love. More. In me." Jean nibbled on his thumb.

He would not refuse Jean. He could not. He put one hand on Jean's hip, tugging him a little higher and then pushed against that tight, hot hole. Jean sank back down onto his cock, the little cry joyous, happy, as sweet now as the first time.

Ralph whimpered, a shiver going through him. "Jean. Oh." Nodding, he curled his fingers tight around Jean's hips and started moving his lover.

"Uh-huh. Oh. Oh. Love." Jean shuddered, nodded. "More."

"Anything for you, babe." Ralph started moving his hips, pushing into Jean over and over.

The chair rocked and creaked, groaning under their weight, but holding. He loved that sound, the abandon that it heralded. The pleasure was good, hot and intense, and he could see what he felt in his cock, in his balls, echoed in Jean's face.

"Good..." Jean reached for his own cock, started pumping in time.

"Yeah, babe." The sun was hot, but couldn't compare with the heat of Jean's body around him, the heat between them.

He slammed up harder, and one hand snuck up under Jean's shirt to rub his nipple.

"Fuck!" Jean rippled, coming hard, body squeezing his cock.

He followed eagerly, his body bucking as he filled Jean with his need.

"Oo-eee. You make a man fly, you do." Jean slumped down against him.

He wrapped his arms around Jean, chuckling happily. "As long as you're tethered to me, you can fly as high as you like."

"Mmm. I like what you say, cher."

He tilted Jean's head and took a kiss. "Good -- I'll keep talking then." Jean tasted sweet, rich, somehow spicy. He hummed. "Gonna eat you up, babe."

"Promises, promises." Jean melted against him and moaned happily.

"It is a promise, babe. One you can take to the bank."

He heard the door open and close, and he reached, finding a towel and casually draping it over Jean's ass.

Jean kissed his cheek in thanks. "Good to me."

"I know which side my bread is buttered on, babe."

He returned the kiss, settling happily.

Yeah, it was a good day to sit by the pool and soak up the sun before it started getting cold.



## *Chapter Seven*

Well, the growly one had survived his first day. Jean had seen the man heading up the stairs, quiet and grey and unhappy. Of course, that begged the question. Big steak dinner? Little dinner taken up to their room? He fretted a little, flitting from fridge to phone to stairwell, trying to make a decision.

Ralph came in the back. "Taking off my shoes, Jean. Do I get the same reward for remembering I got yesterday?"

"Mmm... maybe. Answer me a question? Quiet dinner in the suites, or big meal? How does he feel?"

"He's tired and hurting and cranky as hell. Make him eat with us -- he could use the energy a big meal will give him." Ralph dug in his pocket and handed over two small sample-sized pill boxes. "Painkillers. Doc Trelaine phoned in a prescription you or Benj can fill tomorrow. Serve it with supper, we can see if it improves his mood any. And I promise to be nice." Ralph gave him a wink.

"Okay. No meanness, though. You don't need an upset stomach." Neither did he. Or Benj.

Ralph tugged him close and gave him another kiss. "You take such good care of me, Jean."

"It is my job, my calling." His life. He loved Ralph with a passion he couldn't even explain.

Ralph's hands cupped his face. "And I am blessed by the gods because of it." He was given another kiss, their passion interrupted by a soft, clearing throat.

"I'm sorry to interrupt," murmured Benj, the pretty cheeks flushed. Jean wondered if they ever weren't. "When did you want us down for dinner?"

"Is seven-thirty too late? That gives you both a chance to rest. Relax." Make love.

"Oh, that would be fine." Benj glanced at his watch. "Is there a little something I could take up for us to snack on? And maybe some juice or something. Brett usually has a drink before supper..."

"How about some fruit and cheese with a sparkling juice?" Something festive and light, to be shared.

"Oh, that would be lovely." Benj beamed at him.

Ralph chuckled and gave him one more quick kiss before moving over and getting a tray down for him.

He found a few cheeses, a kiwi, pineapple, and an apple, making a tray quickly, something beautiful and tasty.

"Wow, that's amazing," murmured Benj. "You really love cooking."

"I do. You both enjoy. If you need anything, you call three on the house phones."

Benj took the tray from him, fingers warm as they briefly touched his own. "Thank you, Jean. We'll be down for seven thirty."

"See you then." He smiled, then turned back toward Ralph, offering a stolen piece of pineapple to that hungry mouth.

Ralph hummed, lips sucking at his fingers.

"You can't be hungry again, cher." The steaks would cook quickly, the potatoes, too. They could go upstairs...

"Why on earth not? Look at what I've got to eat!" Ralph's hands slid over him, inviting, enticing.

"Bed? Fucking? Deep and hard?" He wasn't above begging.

"Yes, yes, and yes." Ralph bit at his lips and started leading him back toward the stairs.

He hooted, following easily to their big room, their big bed. The scent of them strong in the room.

Ralph's hands knew him, knew where to touch to make it fast and how to touch to make it last. Those big hands slid beneath his shirt and tugged it slowly up over his head.

His nipples with their tiny barbells drew tight, begging Ralph's touch, Ralph's tongue. His Ralph went for them immediately, thumb brushing over one as the other was taken into Ralph's hot mouth.

"Cher!" The jolt of electricity shocked through him, his cry too loud, ringing out.

Ralph hummed around his skin, his cher's tongue tugged at the barbell.

"Oh. Oh, more." His head rolled, his nipples throbbing.

"Everything you want," moaned Ralph, biting at his nipple, tugging the other barbell with eager fingers.

Ralph was the only man to give him what he needed -- heat and love and want. Mouth moving over to his other nipple, Ralph's fingers slid down along his sides, his belly, tugging open his pants and pushing them off.

"Can't still be hungry for me. You are like a man with a spell." A beautiful man. His beautiful man.

"You're the one with the spells." Ralph pushed him down onto the bed, pulled his jeans right off and climbed up after him. "Put gris gris on me to make me want you so bad."

"Mmm... me an' my mojo bag, shaking it for you."

Ralph laughed, the sound rich, husky with passion. "You can shake this mojo bag any time of day or night." Ralph's fingers slid around his cock, tugged at his balls.

He groaned, bucking up into the touch, the ache sweet. Ralph's mouth dropped over his again, tongue fucking his mouth eagerly. Jean opened, wanting it all, the passion between them balanced.

"Get yourself ready, babe," growled Ralph, eyes hot.

"Cher..." He moaned, thighs spreading, belly going tight.

Ralph leaned up and chose a pot of oil. "The one that heats, babe."

His hands were a little clumsy, fingers dipping in the oil that was cool for the moment, but would burn and spark deep down. Ralph's lips and tongue were distracting him, sliding over the skin of his neck, breath hot with each of Ralph's breaths. He groaned, fingers circling his hole, pushing deep, pushing in and slicking himself for that heavy cock.

Ralph pulled away from his sucking kisses to watch, eyes hooded, hot. "Jean... oh, babe. Look at that."

He loved that, loved being watched, being seen. Jean spread, cock full and wet-tipped, leaking on his belly. A low, hungry sound came from Ralph, those eyes getting hotter, the need strong between them. He rode his fingers, head rolling, hips pumping, giving the best show he could.

"Oh, yeah, Jean. Make me want so hard. Hurry now. I need to be in you."

"Now." He turned to hands and knees, balls swinging, aching, hole burning.  
"Now."

"Yes. Yes."

He could feel Ralph's heat as his cher settled between his legs, those big hands grabbing hold of his ass and spreading his cheeks wide. The heat of Ralph's prick was incredible as it nudged against his hole. Jean whimpered, hips tilting, begging for it like a whore.

"Oh, babe..." Ralph groaned, and pushed right in, that heat filling him, hotter than his fingers, hotter than the oil that was heating his skin. It felt so good, Ralph's thumbs spreading him wide, focus on his ass. "Oh, Jean. Love this. Love you." Ralph's cock slid away and then pushed against his hole again, and in.

"Yeah..." He pushed back, entire body rippling, his cry loud and sharp.

Ralph did it again, pulling another cry out of him, and then his cher began to move, giving it to him good and hard. He babbled, soft words of need and heat and love.

"Yes. Yes." Ralph murmured and grunted, hands still hard on him, cock pushing into him in a strong rhythm.

Jean bucked, just fucking himself, eyes rolling. "Cher. Cher, I need..."

"I got what you need, babe." Ralph pushed him harder, making him rock, fingers digging bruises into his hips.

"Yes. Yes. I need." His body jerked, balls drawing up tight.

Ralph just grunted, one hand coming around to take his cock. It only took that, that one touch to make him shoot, seed spraying.

"Jean!" Ralph's cry rang through the room as his cher jerked inside him, filled him with scalding heat.

He purred, easing down on the bed, curling beneath Ralph. "Love."

Warm and solid, holding him close, Ralph nuzzled into his neck. "Yeah, babe. Love you." A soft kiss slid over his cheek.

He smiled, winked. "Maybe we should order pizza."

Ralph laughed. "I was that good, was I?"

"Mmmhmm... Perfect."

"I'll grill the steaks for you, babe. But we have time."

Ralph cuddled closer, hand sliding along his hip. "We have time."

"Yeah. We have time, cher. Plenty of time." God, he loved his life. Loved it.

Ralph hummed, kept stroking his hip. "Good." Another kiss landed on his cheek, this one closer to his ear. "Good."

Yeah. Oh, yeah.

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Benj carried the tray up and let himself in. Brett was still in the shower, so he moved everything from the tray to the coffee table and went to get his oils. Brett had looked utterly exhausted; a massage was the least Benj could offer.

He slipped out of his clothes, put on a pair of sweats, and warmed the oil between his hands.

It didn't take long before the water turned off and Brett came out, wrapped in a towel. "Hey, baby."

"Hey, love. Come lie on the bed and I'll work out some of the aches." *Say yes, love.*

"You don't mind?" Those pretty, warm eyes met his, so tired, hurting. Down.

"Not at all, Brett." He went over to his lover and put his hand on the muscled chest. "I love touching you. And I want to make you feel good."

Brett leaned down, gave him a slow, deep kiss. "You do. You do, baby."

He smiled up at Brett, fingers curling against the warm skin. "Oh. Good. Lie down, love. Let me touch and love you."

Brett nodded, moving slowly, stretching out on the bed for him, those beautiful white tigers offered for him to touch.

He climbed up and straddled Brett's ass, sitting just below it. "This okay, love?" he asked, fingers already sliding on the tigers, tracing them.

"Mmm... 's fine, baby. Just fine."

"Good." He moved from just tracing the tattoos to working Brett's muscles, fingers sliding on the warm skin, finding which muscles were tightest. Those shoulders were tight as boards, Brett moaning low as he touched them. "Oh, love." He spread oil on his fingers and went to work.

"Benj..." Brett went boneless, poor muscles shaking as they fought to relax.

"Just let go, love, let me make you feel better."

He kept working, fingers digging in, insisting Brett relax, ease. He almost cried when it happened, Brett whimpering, muscles giving in to him.

"There, love, there." He bent and kissed the back of Brett's neck, fingers still working, refusing to give up the ground he'd gained.

"Oh, God. Baby..." There was a mixture of tears and joy in that voice.

"Shh. Shh, love. I have you." Oh, it felt so good, the sensation of Brett's muscles easing, the fact that he was the one helping.

"Kay." Brett took deep breaths, melted for him.

Benj moaned, rocking slowly as he worked, hands expanding the route they took, exploring the tattoo, all the muscles beneath them. Brett was beautiful, strong, his. Another moan was drawn from him and he bent, kissing the top of Brett's neck again, lips lingering. Brett almost purred, eyes closed, breath coming steady.

Benj spent ages exploring with his fingers, with his mouth, breathing in the scent that was his Brett. So good, so warm.

"Tell me we can stay like this all night."

He kept touching, stroking, cheek rubbing along Brett's back. "Aren't you hungry?"

Brett shook his head. "Not enough to move. Haven't felt so good in weeks."

"Then we'll stay here, love. Oh! There's a tray. With fruit and cheese and stuff. I can get it." He leaned down and nibbled at Brett's ear. "Feed you."

"That works." Brett smiled, shivered just a little.

"Okay." He gave Brett a soft kiss. "Get comfortable, love."

He went out to the sitting room and put everything back on the tray before carrying it into the bedroom to his Brett. He didn't see the pretty wallpaper or the lovely comforter. All he saw was Brett. Brett had turned over, bracing himself with pillows, eyes bright, warm. For him.

He beamed at Brett as he put the tray on the side table and then shucked off his sweats and climbed onto the bed, snuggling against the warm, beautiful body. He snagged a piece of pineapple and held it up to Brett's mouth.

"Mmm... hey, baby." Brett nuzzled, nibbled, held him. "So good."

"Yeah, you're not too bad yourself." He nabbed a piece of cheese for himself and then passed one over to Brett.

"Just your old man." Brett smiled, winked. "Did you have a good day?"

He poked Brett in the stomach. "You're not old, love. And I did. Jean is so nice. He took me out to lunch and gave me lots of advice."

"Yeah? What was lunch?"

"Oh, I had the most amazing Caesar salad. It was just enormous and the dressing was incredible. And we shared breaded calamari first." He wrinkled his nose.

"Well, I had a small bite."

Brett's laugh was deep and sexy, fond. "Too rubbery for you."

He grinned up at Brett, delighted with the laughter. "Yeah. Ick." He hugged Brett. "What about you, love? How was your day?"

"Hard. Really frustrating. I'm glad it's over."

He leaned up and gave Brett a kiss. "They'll get better, love."

"You think so? It'd be nice for things to get better."

"They will. I have faith in you." Smiling, he offered another piece of fruit, fingers sliding it along Brett's mouth.

"Mmm." Brett sucked and nuzzled, licking his fingers.

His cock started to fill, and he blushed a little. "You're so sexy, Brett."

"Me? I'm on the injured roster."



"You're the sexiest guy on that roster." He took another piece of pineapple and rubbed it over Brett's nipple before bending and licking the juice off.

"Oh." That's right. Oh. Sexy man.

Benj gave the other nipple the same treatment, moaning as the flavor of the pineapple gave way to the flavor of Brett himself. Brent shuddered, shifted beneath him. Those nipples were so sensitive, so hot. He pulled back a little and blew on them both before flicking his tongue across the hard tip of the closest one.

"Benj." Brett groaned, lips parted and wet.

"You like?" he asked, rubbing his cheek against Brett's ripped abs.

"More than like. More. Love."

Oh, yes.

He beamed up at Brett and reached to tease one of the sensitive little nipples again as he pressed kisses over Brett's stomach. Brett's fingers brushed through his hair, shaking, careful. He moaned softly, letting Brett know he liked the touches, and tugged the blanket down off Brett's lap.

"Been hard more times in the last twenty-four hours than in the last month."

He nodded, eyes wide as he took in the sight of Brett's cock, stiff and red. He licked his lips. "I like it."

"I do, too. I was beginning to worry." Brett pumped it, once, the scent of need hitting Benj.

He moaned, reaching out to slide his fingers across the tip. "So hot. Need you, love."

"How, baby? What do you want?"

He moaned again. He wanted Brett inside him. So badly. It had been so long. He licked his lips, looking up at Brett.

"You going to ride me?" Oh, yeah. Brett knew what he needed.

He nodded. "Please, love. I need you so bad."

"I'm all yours. Every inch." Brett rumbled, moaned for him. "Every fucking inch."

"Oh, lucky me -- that's a lot of inches." He leaned forward and licked Brett's cock from bottom to top, tongue swirling around the head. God, he loved that sound from Brett, loved that he was hearing it now.

"Baby. Benj." Brett spread, thigh muscles shaking.

"Just relax, love. I'm going to take care of everything." He'd do all the work, all of it. He just wanted to love on his man. And get fucked.

"Been so long since I've felt you, since you've been on my cock."

"I know." He put his mouth around Brett's cock and slid down over it. Oh, it tasted so good, was so hot in his mouth.

"Don't. Don't make me come, baby. Please."

He pulled off slowly, a soft sigh leaving him. He pressed a kiss on the tip of Brett's cock and then kissed his way up along Brett's belly and chest, headed for his lover's lips.

"Later. Later tonight, baby. Your mouth is perfect, but I need you."

He nodded as he brought their lips together. "I know, love. I need you, too. Want to feel you inside me." He pressed close, rubbing against Brett's body, mouth opening against Brett's lips.

"I'm sorry I haven't before..." Brett moaned and took his mouth, shut them both up.

His tongue tangled with Brett's, and he curled one hand around Brett's good shoulder, the other sliding through Brett's hair, touching, stroking. Brett was relaxed, hungry, happy beneath him. It was worth coming here, just for this.

He fumbled with the side-table drawer -- Jean'd told him there was lube there -- and sure enough, his fingers came across a tube, and he pulled it out. He pressed the tube into Brett's good hand, wanting those knowing fingers to get him ready.

It wasn't long before Brett's fingers were slick, sliding behind his balls, circling his hole. He whimpered softly, head resting against Brett's good shoulder. "Please, love. Don't tease."

"Not. 'M touching." Oh God, that smile. That happy, horny smile.

Benj laughed softly, pushing his ass back against Brett's fingers.

The touches gentled, stroking, pushing in, petting. "This is teasing."

"Brett... oh, mean, mean man." He shuddered, whimpered again.

"Yours." Two fingers pushed in deep, then slipped away.

His eyes rolled in his head, his body needing so fucking badly, just spasming around air. "God, Brett. Need you."

Fingers pushed in again, then again, fucking him. He rolled his hips, riding Brett's fingers, breath catching in his throat as the sensations zinged between ass and balls and cock.

"Tell me when you're ready for me." Brett's voice was rough, raw, harsh.

"I'm ready. God, Brett, I'm ready."

He shifted, rising up and reaching back for Brett's cock. Brett was ready, too, hard and dripping, hot for him. He found Brett's eyes with his own, watching the heat and love there as he slowly sank down onto Brett's cock.

"Baby..." Brett's eyes rolled, a whimper sounding.

"I know. Oh, God, you feel so good." It had been so long since he'd felt Brett's cock filling him, since that amazing heat spread him wide.

He sank all the way down, hands holding onto Brett's shoulders.

Brett nodded, one hand wrapping around his hip, holding him. "Fucking love you. Sweet Christ."

He nodded, licked his lips, thighs starting to tremble with the need to move.  
"Ready, love?" Please. Oh, please.

"Ride me." Brett nodded, leaned back to watch.

He leaned forward and kissed Brett hard before straightening, body rising and then dropping again. "Oh, yes!"

"More." Demanding man.

Beautiful man.

His man.

With a cry, he let go, let himself move and move, rising and falling on that thick, hot cock, riding with everything he had. They worked together, Brett's hand wrapping around his cock, hips rocking beneath him. He shifted, knees finding a better purchase, and that sent Brett's cock right against his gland, making him shout. He rocked harder, moaning and whimpering as it all built to incredible tension.

"Close. Close, baby. Gonna shoot." Brett's thumb scraped the end of his cock.

"Brett!" He shouted his lover's name, whole body going tight as he shot over Brett's hand and his back bowed with pleasure.

"Beautiful." Brett's eyes rolled. "Beautiful Benj."

He whimpered as heat filled him, collapsing forward onto Brett's chest, breath panting from him like a steam engine. Brett held him, eyes closed, rocking him just a little. He stroked Brett's chest, his side, fingers idly touching the warm skin. He felt so good, all soft and lazy and sated deep down.

"We should do that again. Soon."

"Mmmhmm." Brett was almost asleep, relaxed, quiet. "Tell them I'm not coming to dinner?"

"I will, love." He kissed Brett's shoulder and shifted, losing the softening cock from inside him.

He sighed softly and then stood, staring down at Brett. His man was beautiful and, if he wasn't mistaken, there was an ease to Brett's face that hadn't been there in quite awhile.

He didn't linger too long; he figured he'd better go tell Ralph and Jean that Brett wasn't having supper before one of them came to fetch them and there was a repeat of sorts of this morning.

He slid into a pair of sweats and one of Brett's T-shirts and headed downstairs to the dining room. The smell of meat cooking was mouth-watering, strong, Jean and Ralph laughing, joking around together.

"Hey," he said softly, smiling at them. They were lovely together, surprising and sexy.

Jean's eyes were warm, happy to see him. "Ooo! Someone got some!"

He blushed hard as Ralph chuckled.

"Um... well, yes. You told me we should. I mean. I." He shut his mouth as Ralph's laughter got louder. "Brett's asleep."

"Sleeping the sleep of the deserving?" Jean winked, clapped his shoulder.

That wasn't helping his blush any, but he nodded. "And he was exhausted." He aimed the last at Ralph, along with a frown.

Ralph only chuckled again. "I'll dare say he is. He pushes himself, your man. He needs more of what you enjoyed tonight and less of the pushing, pushing, pushing."

"Did you get him to eat, cher? He'll need something."

"Yeah, he had some of the fruit and a bite of cheese. Can he have a steak later or something? He's going to be hungry when he wakes up."

Jean nodded. "I'll make him up a plate. The doctor wants him to take some muscle relaxers, pain pills, but those are for right before he's out for the count."

"Thank you. I hope they help." Benj sniffed. "Something smells really good."

Ralph grinned, winked. "Your man's favourites, if I'm not mistaken. Too bad he's going to miss it."

"Maybe he'll smell it. We've still got half an hour." Jean chuckled. "Of course, he might not want our company."

"Oh, no. It just... well, it wasn't the easiest of starts."

"Easy's not going to help him, Benj." Ralph offered him a seat on the couch. "He needs our help, and accepting that isn't going to be easy for him. He's proud, stubborn, used to being able to do for himself I'll bet."

"He's a ball player, cher. Of course he's stubborn. They are like the bull."

Benj nodded. "I think... I think it feels to him like you're trying to strip him of all his pride, his manhood."

Ralph tsked. "No, no. We aren't trying to do that at all. Just in my experience, you have to lay it all out at the start, how it's going to be, and you have to stick to it. I'll tell you a secret, Benj. I like Brett. I'd like to see him get back on the field, doing his thing."

Jean snorted. "Such a secret, that is." Those dark eyes twinkled over at Ralph, playful, mischievous.

Benj laughed softly, warmth curling in his belly, soft and gentle as Ralph reached out a hand and grabbed hold of Jean, pulled the Cajun down to sit between them on the couch.

"Next you'll be saying I'm a softie."

"Soft? Cher... I would never say that..." Jean leaned over, face lifted for a kiss.

Benj gasped softly at the implication, at the way Ralph's mouth covered Jean's, the intimate passion in the kiss. He thought he should look away, but he couldn't. Jean melted into Ralph, sensual and needy, wanton. The warmth in his belly curled, his breath catching as his cock started filling. Oh. Oh, fuck, he shouldn't be watching this.

Jean purred, leaned back against the cushions. "Mmmm... cher 'tit chou..."

"I'll show you little," murmured Ralph.

That had Benj eeping, and it unfroze him. He got up, eyes finally averted.

Jean looked over, lips parted. "Oh, sorry, yeah? I didn't think to embarrass you."

His color was high, but he nodded. "I know. I didn't meant to..." Enjoy it? Want to watch? "Stare."

Ralph chuckled. "No one can keep their eyes off my Jean."

"Flatterer." Jean blushed, chin ducking.

Benj was so pleased he wasn't the only one who could blush. "He's right. You're... well, good-looking, but you have a joy that comes from inside."

That blush got darker, the black eyes dancing. "You're gon' make my head swell."

"It's not your head that's swelling, babe." Ralph's hand slid over Jean's crotch, not even subtly.

Benj thought maybe his eyes were going to pop right out of his head.

Jean's lips parted, tongue flicking out. "Oh..."

He shouldn't keep watching, Benj *knew* he shouldn't. And here he was, staring, watching as Ralph's hand slid over Jean's crotch again, as their mouths met in another passionate kiss.

He bit his lip as his own prick surged against his sweats at the sight.

Brett's voice made him jump. "The steaks smell good." One eyebrow lifted, then Brett headed toward the kitchen, barefoot, wearing only a pair of shorts.

Benj was sure he'd jumped about a mile, and he made a soft sound, hurrying after Brett, cheeks flaming, cock flagging (thank God), and his stomach churning. He'd

been caught watching, which he shouldn't have been doing in the first place, and now if he'd hurt Brett's feelings, too...

"Love?"

Brett looked over, making himself a plate. "Mmmhmm?"

"You okay?" he asked, pulling down a plate of his own and taking the littlest of the steaks. A part of him wondered how Jean did that, how the man just knew what Benj would eat, but mostly he was concerned about Brett.

"Had a little nap. My shoulder aches. Got to missing you."

Ralph and Jean came in before he could answer, Ralph's arm slung around Jean's shoulders. "Sorry about that, guys. It's unusual that we're able to be 'out' with the clientele and we kind of got carried away."

"It's okay," Benj said, cheeks going hot again. "I just didn't know where to look."

Brett snorted, eyes twinkling. "Eh, I knew you were pervy horndogs. Probably into kink, the way you're evil to me."

Benj started giggling, and Ralph laughed out loud. "You hear that, babe? We're evil pervy kinksters. Somehow, I'm not insulted."

"I'm not evil, cher. I'm Cajun." Jean stuck his tongue out, wagged it. "Spicy!"

"Maybe we're just boring, Brett." Benj caught his lover's eye and smiled. "No, not that."

Brett snorted, chuckled. "No, not that."

Ralph got down two more plates and handed them to Jean as Benj dished himself up a bunch of salad. "You want some, Brett? The dressing smells divine."

"Sure, baby. Pile me up."

Jean nodded happily. "Eat as much as you want, Brett. It's all good."



He gave Brett a generous helping. "I'm going to get fat," Benj noted. Not that it was a complaint, the food was just amazing.

"I know what you mean," chuckled Ralph, patting his definitely not fat belly.

"I'm not. I worked my ass off." Brett winked over at him, grinned.

"I like that ass, so hopefully not right off."

"It is a nice ass," agreed Ralph. "And I promise I won't let him work it right off, Benj."

Jean hooted and Brett stuck his tongue out and suddenly they were all laughing. Laughing. Oh. Wow.

Wiping the tears from the corners of his eyes, Benj watched Brett's face, just thrilled all the way through. Brett still looked tired, but the utter exhaustion and growing depression were missing. And Benj thought just maybe he'd give anything to keep that trend going.

Jean nodded toward the kitchen table. "We could just sit here together. Nice and easy, yes? Access to more?"

Brett nodded. "Works for me. I don't need formality."

Benj nodded happily and they all sat and he slid his hand along Brett's thigh, smiling over at his lover again.

Brett squeezed his hand, digging in, sore arm cradled in his lap.

"Love you," he murmured quietly, knowing his heart showed in his eyes.

Ralph made a noise. "Now look at that. The way you make Benj glow with just a look, Brett. As long as you can do that, I don't see how you could think anything else was all that important."

"Hush." Brett dismissed Ralph with a wave, focusing on him.

He heard Ralph's chuckle, and maybe Ralph said something indignant, but it didn't matter; nothing mattered but the way Brett was looking at him like he was the center of the universe.

Benj could remember the first time Brett had looked at him like this. He'd known then he was well and truly hooked.

He squeezed Brett's leg beneath his hand, entirely caught up in those eyes.

"Eat, baby. Then we'll go back upstairs and leave the pervs to their games."

"Oh. Okay." A shiver went down his spine, the promise in Brett's eyes entrancing.

Brett nodded, leaned close. "Or we could just skip supper."

Jean tsked. "No skipping."

Benj pouted. "There's always that midnight snack."

God, he was being greedy, wanting Brett again after having him more in the last twenty-four hours than he'd had all month. He took his hand back and set to eating, determined to be good. He could try his hand at seducing Brett again later if need be. From the look in Brett's eyes, it wouldn't be.

Brett ate, feet teasing his calves, eyes focused on the plate. Benj was fluttering. He couldn't help it; he felt all wanting and wanton.

He managed a bite or two of his steak and nibbled at his salad, not really hungry. Not for food. He ate a bite and took a sip, hands moving from fork to glass, picking up the knife and putting it back. He felt like he was twenty again and in love for the first time. It was heady.

Brett, on the other hand, was eating eagerly, hungry for the first time in a long time.

Ralph was eating just as eagerly, though he was managing to make conversation as well, teasing Brett and complimenting Jean, from the tone of his voice. Benj wasn't paying attention to the words, though.

It felt so good, floating on happiness and arousal and anticipation.

Jean brought out some strawberries and cream for dessert, and Brett actually moaned. "Look, baby. Midnight snack."

Benj licked his lips, remembering more than one session where Brett had eaten strawberries off him. His cock was pushing at his sweats again. "I'm not sure I want to wait until midnight."

"No? You want a bowl now, cher?" Jean's eyes were dancing.

"A bowl? Oh! No! I mean." He felt his cheeks go bright again, and he looked over at Brett, focusing on the want there, knowing he wasn't alone in his need.

"We'll take a big one. To go." Brett smiled, licking salad dressing off his lips.

"Oh, yes. With some cream." It had been too long since he'd lapped it off of Brett's belly as if Brett were the biggest, best bowl and he a sexy, slinky cat.

Ralph laughed. "And he called you and me pervs, babe."

Benj blushed and tried not to flutter, but he was turned on and wanting and just buzzing with the promise in Brett's eyes.

"What we do behind closed doors is none of your business." Brett's lips twisted. "Perv."

Ralph just laughed harder. "Well then I suggest you go find those closed doors of yours. Not that I'm trying to rush you -- you're a beautiful pair."

"Yep. Go fuck your cook, Mr. Pokey. I have plans."

"Oh, it looks to me like we're both Mr. Pokey tonight, Brett." Ralph winked and reached to goose Jean as he walked by with a large bowl of strawberries.

Brett took the strawberries from Jean, "Thank you. Baby, say good night to Mr. Pervy Pokey."

Giggling, hands fluttering over Brett's arm as he stood, Benj spared a quick glance for Jean and Ralph. "Good night."

Jean laughed, waving happily. "Try to keep it down, boys."

Benj blushed hard at that, he hadn't even been paying attention to how loud they'd been before. "We will," he squeaked.

Brett snorted. "Hello pot, I'm kettle. I seemed to hear a shitload of screaming from down the hall..."

"Brett!" Benj's eyes widened, but Ralph was chuckling.

"That's how I know I'm doing it right."

"Well, if you don't know..."

Benj felt like his eyes were going to pop out of his head at that.

"Well, the eruptions are another clue." Ralph winked, not looking in the least put out.

Brett patted Jean on the back. "Good man, giving him clues."

Benj was caught between giggling madly and being shocked.

Ralph looked like he couldn't decide between spluttering and thumping Brett, but settled finally on laughing. "You're a prick, Brett."

"No, I have a prick. I am a first baseman."

Benj was amazed at how unflappable Ralph seemed, still chuckling, coming over to put his arm around Brett. "Thank you for clarifying. I need help with that sometimes, too."

"And they let you have *needles*, Mr. Pokey?"

"Oh, they let me have more than that, Mr. First Base." Ralph winked at him and Jean. "Like home."

Brett snorted. "Yeah, sure they do... You stunned them with your perviosity."

Jean giggled. "Pervitude."

"Oh, no, I thought I was an evil kinkster -- no demoting me!"

Benj just watched, laughing softly, amazed by the happiness in Brett's eyes. Brett was *enjoying* himself, enjoying the verbal sparring.

Brett poked Ralph good and hard in the breadbasket. "You're an ass, man."

"Now who's poking who? And thank you for noticing my ass." Ralph turned in a slow circle, shaking his ass.

Jean hooted, tackling Ralph with a happy cry.

Benj held onto the bowl of strawberries with one hand and tugged at Brett's arm with the other as Ralph's arms went around Jean. "Let's go while the going's good, love. I've got the berries..."

"Sorry, Mr. Pokey. You can't compete with my baby."

That earned Brett another laugh, though it was distracted. "As it should be, First Base." Then Ralph's hand cupped Jean's ass and Benj averted his eyes.

Of course it didn't matter much, because Brett scooted him right out, heading for the stairs. He went along eagerly, loving seeing this side of Brett again.

Once they were up the stairs, he slid his hand along Brett's ass. "Yours is better."

"You think so?" Brett smiled back. "I'd hope you'd think so."

"Oh, I know so. You've got the best ass in baseball." Wow, it felt like forever since he'd flirted with Brett. And it felt good.

Brett smiled, shook it a little. "You sure about that, baby?"

He managed somehow not to moan. "No, I think I need to amend that statement. You've got the best ass. Period." He hurried the rest of the way to their room, wanting to find some privacy and somewhere to put down the damned bowl of strawberries. Now.

Brett let him get in front, one hand on his ass. "No. This is the finest ass on earth, baby, and it's all mine."

Oh. Oh, yes. He did moan this time, and as soon as they'd cleared the door, he pushed back against Brett's hand. "It is, love. It's all yours."

He heard Brett's knees hit the floor, felt the warm mouth on his ass.

Benj gasped, legs trembling, the stupid bowl in his hand suddenly heavy and threatening to fall. "Love... oh."

"Shh." Brett worked his pants open, mouth so hot, so good.

Whimpering, Benj curled both hands around the bowl, legs spreading a bit, knees locking into place. His eyes closed, his breath growing short as his cock throbbed.

That tongue worked him, spread him, one hand wrapped around his prick.

"Brett!" His eyes closed, his body moving between Brett's mouth and hand, shudders working through him. He felt Brett's pleased chuckle, the soft chuff of breath. Oh, Brett was enjoying himself, too. Good. Good. He shivered. Oh, yes, very good.

Of course, another few strokes and Benj didn't much care. All he wanted was for it not to stop. He didn't care about how noisy he was, either, his cries going from soft to loud, the bowl of berries crashing to the floor as he reached for something solid to hold onto.

Brett's hand worked him furiously, jacking him off, demanding his pleasure.

"Brett!" He cried out his lover's name again as he came, body shaking, cock spurting as his ass clamped down on Brett's hot tongue.

"Mmm..." Brett's lips brushed the small of his back. "So hot, baby."

He shivered at the kiss, his cock jerking. "Me? God, Brett, that was unbelievable."

"Mmm... help me up."

He turned and reached for Brett. "You okay, love?"

"Yeah. Just needed to move and didn't want to strain the arm." Brett's lips were swollen. It was a good look on him.

"I ruined the strawberries," Benj told him, giggling. "I dropped them and then sprayed spunk all over them." He leaned in for a kiss, those swollen lips drawing him.

"Perv." God, Brett's eyes were happy.

He giggled harder. "I think I'm only a perv if I try to push them up your ass."

"I am not squirting berry juice out my ass for a week just for your edification, Benjamin."

He just laughed, arms looping around Brett's neck, rubbing. "No? You wouldn't do it for me?"

"Nope. Not even for you." Brett kissed him, tongue pushing into his lips.

He opened wide, wanting, needing to give Brett everything. Brett hummed, fucking his lips, taking him. His hands slid around to Brett's front, fingers fumbling with Brett's buttons. He wanted skin on skin; he wanted to rub against all those great muscles.

"Bed, baby. Don't step on the strawberries."

"Ew." He stayed close to Brett, walking backward and watching where his feet went.

By the time they reached the bed he was stumbling, and he fell back, laughing up at Brett. Brett reached out, tickling, teasing. He squirmed, trying to get out of the way and trying to push harder into Brett's fingers at the same time.

Brett laughed, pushing harder, smiling down at him. He tugged, wanting that weight on him, desperate for it. Brett slipped, landing hard on both arms, wincing as his body jerked, shoulder taking his weight.

"Oh!" Benj slid his hand over Brett's shoulder, fingers sliding soft and gentle.

"Love?"

"Yeah. Slipped on a strawberry." Brett's lips were pressed together, but at least Brett wasn't growling, wasn't pulling away.

He kept touching, massaging the shoulder. "Lie next to me, love. Take the weight off it."

"Hate that I can't just catch myself."

"You'll be able to soon enough, love. You *will*." He believed it with all his heart. He had to.

Brett settled back, letting him rub and love. "Made you feel good, though."

"Oh, God, Brett. You made me feel amazing. Blew my mind."

He pressed close and kissed Brett's lips. Brett kissed him back, passion quieter, but still there. He relaxed into the kiss, returning the banked passion, hoping to recapture the mood, the need between them.

Brett's cock was warm, half-hard against his thigh.

He rubbed gently, sliding against Brett's heat and muscles. "You're so sexy, Brett. Always were. Still are."

"Doesn't feel like it, sometimes."

"I'm sorry," Benj said softly. "I haven't done a very good job of taking care of you."

"Oh, stop it." Brett frowned, growled low.

He smoothed his fingers over Brett's forehead. "Shh. Shh. I didn't mean to upset you."

"You've been a champ, putting up with my growly ass."

"I love that growly ass, remember?" He kissed Brett hard, fingers curling around the muscled shoulders.



"Still?" Brett searched his eyes.

"Oh, love. Yes." It broke his heart that Brett could think maybe he didn't anymore.  
"Yes."

"Good." Brett smiled, kissed his nose. "Good."

"Why don't you lie back and let me show you just how much?" he murmured, fingers trailing down over Brett's body.

"Mmm... You're good to me." Brett shivered, moaning a little.

"No, I just love you." He pushed Brett over onto his back and leaned over him, smiling down into the warm eyes. "A lot."

"You sure?" Brett asked again, relaxed, smiling

"Yep." Grinning, he gave Brett a kiss, and then another. "Gonna blow your mind, love. Make you feel so good."

"Gonna be better than strawberries."

"I sure hope so." He dragged his tongue along Brett's jaw, ending at Brett's ear, which he nibbled.

That earned him a laugh, a soft moan. Benj hummed happily, determined to pull more of the sweet sounds from Brett. His tongue circled the shell of Brett's ear, his fingers sliding across the firm chest, fingertips dancing over Brett's nipples, making them harden.

"Tease." Brett shifted, legs moving.

"I'm not teasing." He nipped at Brett's Adam's apple before looking up at him. "I'm just being thorough."

"Yes, but thorough-boy doesn't roll off the tongue like tease does."

Benj giggled. "Thorough-boy? That makes me the sidekick, doesn't it? So what are you? Stud-Man?"

"You know it. Driving 'em home."

Benj purred. "Driving me home." He went back to kissing and licking, tongue tracing Brett's collarbone, the muscles of his chest. His hands slipped Brett's boxers off.

"Horny little devil." Brett hummed, cock starting to fill.

"It's your fault, you know." He kept kissing, moving downward.

"Hmm? My fault?"

"Yeah. For being so sexy. You know -- Stud-Man." He licked at Brett's navel, tongue circling it.

"That's my fault." Brett arched, stretching out, moaning, the scent of need sharp in the air.

"Uh-huh. That's your fault."

Brett's cock bumped against chin, rubbed along his neck, and he moaned. Benj couldn't resist turning his face and taking in the tip of Brett's prick. He licked at the tip and teased it with his tongue. He wanted the hot drops of pre-come on his tongue. He craved Brett's flavor.

"Baby. Your fine fucking mouth." That growling sound made his belly ache.

He sucked harder, only to cry out around Brett's cock as that amazing flavor began to leak on his tongue. Brett's hand was hard on the back of his head, not tentative at all, and those strong hips pumped, pushing into his lips in shallow, careful thrusts. He moved faster, head bobbing. He sucked as hard as he could; he wanted to give Brett everything.

"Baby..." Oh, he could feel Brett, swollen and hard on his tongue, pushing into his throat.

He reached down and rolled Brett's heavy balls. He wanted Brett's taste in his mouth.

"Close." He knew, he could feel it, how badly Brett needed him.

His tongue slapped the tip of Brett's cock, and then he went down deep, taking his man into his throat.

Spunk filled him, Brett's cry loud, echoing in the room.

Benj swallowed it all down. The taste was so good. God, he'd missed it, missed this.

Brett gave it up to him, breath huffing out.

He kept sucking, easing Brett down.

"Oh, damn. Damn, baby." Brett moaned, fingers tangling in his hair. "You rock my fucking world."

He pushed into Brett's hand and beamed. "I want to, Brett."

"Shit, baby. Don't you know you always have?"

"Yeah?" He slid up to lie on Brett, pushing in close. "Even the last while?"

"You are the only good thing, sometimes."

"Oh, love. It's going to get better. You'll see."

"Yeah? What're you going to do when I retire?"

"I've got plans for you. For us." All sorts of trips, and he wanted to convert one of their rooms into a studio for Brett.

"Yeah?"

He got a quick, curious look.

"Uh-huh. Trips like to the wine country, redecorating the condo..."

Brett relaxed back into the pillows, kept him close and grunted, which he took to mean, keep going.

"I thought we could have a studio for you. You know, for your painting."

The happy little sound that Brett gave him made him smile.

"I want to go to Europe. Paris, Amsterdam, Rome -- all the places with famous paintings -- so we can go to the galleries."

Benj knew there was plenty of money saved up, but if Brett couldn't come back and satisfy his sense of self that he'd quit on his own terms, he might never be willing to go do these things. Benj knew that.

He wasn't asking for much, was he? Just that Brett finish out his career with pride.

"You'll like Rome, baby. It's fucking cool. We should go this winter for a few weeks."

"That would be so cool." His smile faded as he realized they were going to be busy this winter, working here on getting Brett well enough to play again come spring training.

"Maybe next winter?"

Brett sighed. "Maybe. You know, there's a chance it's just over. That there's no reason to stay."

He petted Brett's chest. "I know that's not what you want, love."

"No, it's not." Brett's eyes closed a little. "They want to get me pain pills and stuff, just for a while."

"There's no shame in taking a few pills to stop hurting." His beautiful lover was so stubborn. "You are hurting a lot. I know you are."

"Yeah." Well, that was something, wasn't it?

"I think..." He took a breath and continued. "I think it's a safe place here. Ralph and Jean want to help us."

Brett just had to let them.

He got another nod, heard the soft sigh.

"I love you, Brett McCallister."

"I know, baby. I know."

"Okay. Good." He let his eyes close and simply held on, held tight.

He was more hopeful this evening than he had been in a long time.

## *Chapter Eight*

He woke up with Benj lying on his shoulder, the joint screaming with pain.

Oh, fuck.

Oh, fuck.

Brett slid out from under Benji and off the bed, sweating with agony, shaking with it.

He needed a fucking drink.

Now.

Something.

Anything.

He stumbled downstairs, almost whimpering with it.

"I thought I heard someone stumbling around down here. You okay, man? Looking for food?" Ralph came up behind him, wearing nothing more than a little pair of boxers.

He shook his head, hurting too bad to talk.

The light came on and Ralph swore. "Damn, you're white as a sheet." Ralph went to one of the cupboards and pulled down a little bottle. "Doc Trelaine left you a couple samples until your prescription came through. He knows your concerns with testing and these don't have any banned substances in them." Ralph opened one of the bottles and took out a pill. "Here. Take it."

He nodded, swallowed the pill dry with a grunt.

Ralph handed him over a glass of water.

"Thanks. Sorry."

"S'okay, man. I was up, anyway, looking for some leftover pudding. I meant to give you the pills before you went to bed." Ralph handed over the little bottle. "Jean and Benj can go fill the prescription in the morning so you've got them on hand. One every four to six hours as needed."

He nodded, headed for a soft, comfy chair.

Ralph followed, muscled body seeming to loom as he sat. "You want a massage or a compress?"

"Don't touch it." He was shaking, heart pounding violently. "I'm gonna be sick."

Ralph disappeared, coming back a moment later with a bucket. "It'll take the pills a few minutes to kick in."

He nodded, closed his eyes and breathed deep. "Go back to bed. I'm okay. I'm okay."

"I can keep you company 'til you're feeling well enough to go back to bed yourself." Ralph sat on the couch and gave him an assessing look. "You ever try to figure out a sleeping position that doesn't strain the shoulder?"

"Tried. That's..." His cheeks heated and he took a deep breath. "That's where Benj sleeps."

"Well, why on earth doesn't he sleep on the other side, then?"

"He does. Shit, man. I just like to give him something normal."

"You think he minds it that much?" Ralph put up his hands. "I'm not trying to be an asshole here, Brett. It just seems to me that you're the one fighting changes more than anyone else."

"I'm not fighting the change. He leans, he falls asleep, my arm is there. Simple as that."

"Then move him, man. That shoulder needs rest. *You* need rest. You need some pain-free days. Lots of them. In a row."

"Yeah." He sighed, blinked a little.

"We're going to do our best to give you that. To help you heal and get you back into fighting shape. In private. No one else is booked out here, and I imagine we'll keep it that way until Spring Training rolls around. You and your man can just be and get better."

"I." His head bobbed, the room going fuzzy.

"Oh, careful there." Ralph was suddenly in front of him. "I think we should get you back to bed, hmm?"

"I c'n sleep here..."

Brett thought he heard Benj's voice.

"You could, but your man's coming looking for you."

"Benj..." He tried to stand up, stumbled forward.

"Whoa." Ralph caught him, an arm going around his waist, letting him lean against the strong body.

"Brett!" Benj came rushing over, clearly fluttering and upset. "What's wrong?"

"Shh. 'S okay..."

"He was hurting and came down for some painkillers. It's a good thing, Benj, but I think they just hit. Why don't you help me get him back up to your room?" Ralph got them moving.

"M fine. I just... Fuck. Fuck, the room's moving, baby."

He couldn't do this, not to Benj.



"There's a bed in the room off the kitchen. Jean uses it sometimes if he gets late in the kitchen. Let's settle you there for the night."

"Come on, love." Benj's hands petted him. "You can make it."

"Uh-huh." His feet felt so heavy

It seemed almost like he was floating and then the ground went out from under his feet and he was looking up at the ceiling.

"Baby?" He tried to sit up, find Benj.

"I'm right here, Brett. Just lie down and we'll go to sleep." Benj's hands slid on him, gentle and knowing.

"I don't feel so good, baby."

"It'll be the pills. We'll try a half dose next time." That wasn't Benj.

Those hands on him were, though. "It's okay, love. The meds are strong."

"Okay. You stay here, baby." He lowered his voice. "You stay here with me."

"Of course." Benj's kiss, soft and sweet, landed on his shoulder, and then Benj lay down next to him, cuddled into his good side.

"Give us a shout if you need anything."

He thought he heard Benj answer, but he didn't matter, he was sound asleep.

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Ralph turned off the light in the tiny room and headed back upstairs to Jean.

Man, he should have guessed that Brett might react hard to the painkillers, given the man wasn't in the habit of taking them. Still, the dosage had been prescribed by Trelaine based on Brett's weight; he couldn't have known.

He tugged off his boxers and slipped into bed with Jean.

"Mmm. Everyt'ing all right, tit'chou?" Jean wrapped around him, humming softly.

"I think it will be. I gave Brett a painkiller -- it worked a little too well."

"Did you feed him? He didn't eat much of nothing at the supper table."

"No, he was hurting too bad -- he barely got the pill down."

Jean nodded, cuddled in. "Next time, feed the man. That'll help."

He grinned. "Yes, boss."

The swat to his ass was half-hearted, at best. Laughing, he rolled onto his back, bringing Jean with him.

"Mmm. Lookit you..." Jean smiled, dark hair falling around him as he took a kiss.

"I'd rather lookit you," he teased, before turning one kiss into another and then another.

"Mmm." The kisses went on, then Jean settled against him, cuddled in.

His fingers reached down to find his sweet lover's ass, cupping it, rubbing them both together lightly. "I think it'll just be us and them for the winter this year."

"That will be good, eh? Quiet times. Snow. Peace."

"Yeah. As long as we can convince our baseball player to enjoy it, hmm?"

"He needs time without the pain. That will do it."

"You always know what they need." Jean could read people better than anyone he knew.

"I do." Jean pulled the blankets up around them, snuggling them in a warm, dark cocoon.

"You know what I need, too." He nibbled on Jean's neck, the smell of his lover strong under the blankets.

"If I forget, may God strike me."

"No, no striking you." Ralph wrapped his arms around Jean and shifted, moved his legs to get their groins settled together just right.

"Mmm. Randy man, like a goat, hmm?"

"Did you just call me a goat, babe?" He wasn't sure whether to be insulted or laugh. With his Jean the laughter usually won out.

They started laughing together, the sounds muffled and soft and shared under the covers. As they laughed, Ralph slid one hand behind Jean's head, the other cupping that fine ass. There was nothing like laughing and loving with his Jean.

Jean chuckled, fingers sliding over his ribs, tickling.

The tickling made him hoot and holler, and he bucked, which made their cocks slide together.

"Chou. Good."

"Yes. Yes." He bucked again, his mouth finding Jean's in the darkness.

"Ain't we too old for this stuff, love? Humping under the sheets?"

Right, like their food wasn't laced with aphrodisiacs. He squeezed Jean's ass, pulled him down harder. "You don't feel too old to me, babe."

"You sure?" Jean was like a warm coal against him.

Their cocks slid together, and he nodded. "Very sure. You make me randy like goat, remember? I return the favor."

Jean bleated softly, sending them both into soft gales of laughter again.

He could feel his orgasm coming, the pleasure beginning to wash over him in waves like the laughter.

"Love you, Chou... C'mon now."

Nodding, he bucked one more time, his come pouring out of his dick.

Jean stroked him, held him through the orgasm.

Moaning, he stroked Jean's head, his back. "Oh, babe. That was awesome."

"Mmmhmm. It was. Orgasm through laughter." Jean moaned softly, eyes closing.

He slid a hand between them and wrapped his fingers around Jean's prick. "Yeah. Gimme yours."

Jean leaned up, lips soft and warm on his cheek. "Chou..."

"Le tien, babe. Yours."

"Oui..." Jean gasped, then moaned as he bit one earlobe.

"Gimme, gimme, gimme."

He pulled with his hand, Jean's hot flesh sliding through it.

"Uh. Uh-huh..." Jean moaned, shivering as heat slid over his hand.

"That's it, babe. That's it." God, he loved that smell, he loved the way Jean turned all melted and boneless on him.

Jean's lips opened and closed, but the words were too soft to hear.

He patted his lover's ass. "Love you, too, babe."

"Uh-huh." Jean sighed softly, already sound asleep.

Ralph closed his own eyes and let sleep take him. He had a busy day tomorrow.

## *Chapter Nine*

Benj groaned at the light coming into the room and shining in his eyes. He rolled over to get away from it and promptly fell out of bed with a thump and a cry.

He lay on the cold, concrete floor, blinking up at the little bed he'd been in. Where was he?

"Benj? Benj? What's up?"

"Brett?" He sat up, looking up at his lover on the mattress, and last night came flooding back to him: Brett going down for pills and feeling wonky after he took them.

"You okay?"

Brett still looked pale, a little under the weather.

"I'm fine." He rubbed his ass, which was a little sore, and climbed back into the bed. "You wanna go back up to our bed?" He thought maybe Brett could use a day off.

"I do. This bed isn't ours." Brett felt bad enough that he let Benj help him get up and moving.

There was noise coming from the other side of the door and Jean was there as they went out.

"Cher! Y'all sleep good?"

"I'm afraid we didn't have a good night, Jean. We're going to go back to our room and try to get some more sleep."

He knew Ralph had said they were supposed to start by nine a.m., but surely that didn't count when Brett wasn't well.

"Are you hungry?"

Brett shook his head. "No, man. Sorry."

"Can you tell Ralph he'll be late, please?"

"Sure, cher. I'll talk to my man." Jean took his arm and whispered. "Food will help."

"He's feeling nauseous, but if you send something up that will sit well, I'll see if he won't eat."

"I'll send a smoothie and some almond butter on toast, oui?"

"Thanks, Jean." The man was so good to them.

Jean patted his shoulder and let him go on.

He caught up with Brett at the door and slipped his arm around his lover's waist. Brett could lean on him going up the stairs.

"Sorry 'bout this, baby. I jus' don' feel so good."

"It's okay, love. It's the pills, yeah? Jean said food would help."

Brett grunted, but it didn't sound angry, really.

They moved slowly up the stairs, and Benj didn't flutter, not one bit; he was there for his lover.

They met Ralph at the top of the landing, Brett grunting in greeting.

"He's not feeling well." Benj said it almost belligerently. He would protect his man.

Ralph frowned. "What do you need, Brett?"

"Bed."

"It's not his shoulder -- look at his face, he's pale. He needs to not be walking around and doing stuff."

To his surprise, Ralph nodded. "I'll have some food sent up. Please let me know if he still feels bad later? I'll have the doctor in."

A knot he hadn't even realized was inside him loosened, and Benj smiled, nodded. "I will. Thank you."

He squeezed Brett's waist. "Come on, love. We're almost there."

"You want some help, Benj?" Ralph offered him a smile.

He gave Ralph one back; he appreciated the offer, but he was willing to bet Brett was unhappy enough about needing help from him, let alone anyone else. "I think we're good." Then all his attention was on Brett again.

Brett didn't pull away. In fact, on the way into the room, Brett leaned on him.

It both broke his heart and made him happy. Brett had to be feeling really badly to lean on him and at the same time, his lover was trusting him with this, was silently admitting to needing help and that was an important step.

"Here we are." Thank God -- the short walk from the stairs to the bedroom had felt like it was miles long.

"Man, I'm tired, baby, bone deep."

"I know, love. You can sleep." He bet the lack of drink wasn't helping that either. He helped Brett into the bed and crawled in, pulling the covers up around them. "You can sleep."

Brett sighed softly, eyes dropping closed. It couldn't have been too long before the softest rap came to the door, Jean peeking in. "Cher? I brought some food and some more pain pills. Also, some pillows for his shoulder, if you need."

"Oh, thank you." Jean was being so nice to them. Benj slipped out of bed and took the tray from Jean. "I think the pillows would be good." He lowered his voice. "I fell asleep on his bad side last night -- this is all my fault."

"Nonsense. Life happens." Jean hugged him with one arm. "Go feed him, relax. Ralph will be up later, just to check on him."

Impulsively, Benj wrapped an arm around Jean and hugged him tight. "Thank you."

"Mmm. Cher. Get some rest, eh? There's food for you, too, hmm?"

He nodded, letting Jean go slowly; the man made everything seem better, like there was nothing that was impossible.

He took the pillows and tray back to Brett. "Are you awake, love?" he asked softly.

Those tired eyes cracked open. "Some, yeah. They want me up?"

"No, no. Jean brought up a smoothie for you. Do you think you could manage some, love?"

He put the tray on the bedside table and sat on the bed next to Brett. He stroked the stubbled cheeks.

"Strawberry?"

Benj dipped a finger into the smoothie and hummed at the taste. "Yes. It's good."

Brett let Benj sit him up, lips wrapping around the straw.

He encouraged Brett to drink as much as possible, fretting silently. It was the fact that Brett was being so easy about letting him help that had him most worried.

"That's enough." Brett shook his head, then fell almost immediately back to sleep.

"Oh, love."

Benj pressed a kiss to the side of Brett's mouth.

Then he cleaned up a little and settled next to his man with a book.

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Brett woke up to the sound of Benj talking to someone, the sound irritating, like little bugs buzzing around.

"I don't think we should wake him -- he had a horrible night and then he looked like death this morning."

"He can't sleep the day away, Benj."

"He's not feeling well!"

"Baby?" He sat up, took a deep breath.

"Brett!" Benj came right over and sat next to him, Ralph following along behind. "How are you feeling, love?"

"Better, a little. Sorta groggy. What's up?"

"It's time for you to get up and do a few laps or something. I know the pills knocked you for a loop without any food in your stomach, but the best way to counteract that is to get up and be active, eat, drink lots of water."

Benj rolled his eyes. "I told him you were sleeping."

"Uh-huh. Sleeping." He turned over, stretching his calves. The man was a nutcase. One second it was relax, the next it was up up up up.

"You need to eat. You need to get up and walk around. Ultrasound, electric therapy. And you need to eat -- Jean's worried about you getting enough food to keep your strength up."

Ralph didn't look like he was going anywhere.

"Didn't you lock the door, baby?"

He really wasn't pissed, not really.

"No, I didn't. Ralph, I think you should go." Benj stood and made fluttery shooing motions at Ralph. "Jean brought some crackers and stuff -- I'll make sure he eats and takes his pills, and if he's feeling better we'll come down later, okay?"

Look at his Benj, sticking up for him. It was cute.

Ralph opened his mouth, but Benj shook his head. "He's not being stubborn about this. He needs a break."

Ralph put up his hands and started backing away. "Okay, okay. But try to come down at some point, okay? Or Jean will start to think he's done something to upset you." With that, Ralph saw himself out.

Brett leaned back, admiring his lover. "Mmm. Mmm. Mmm."

"What?" Benj looked over at him and smiled

"That's kinda hot, baby."

Benj tilted his head and then looked around. "What is?"

"You. Taking care of me. Standing up for me."

"Oh." Benj blushed lightly and smiled. Coming closer, Benj curled up with him again. "It's my turn."

"Your turn, baby?" Fuck, his baby smelled good.

"Yeah. You always take such good care of me, and now it's my turn." Benj gave him a quick kiss. "You're looking a lot better than you did earlier."

"I feel less stupid, that's for damn sure."

"It was the pills, love." Benj's fingers slid over him. "How's your shoulder feeling?"

"Sore, but it's not screaming."

Benj leaned up and kissed it and then sat cross-legged next to him. "How about your stomach -- I bet you're hungry."

"I..." He opened his mouth and his stomach made this great, rumbling, growling noise.

Benj started giggling, the sound blooming between them. They started laughing together, both of them cackling.

Benj's laughter faded away on a soft sigh. "God, I love you."

"That's handy, baby." He patted Benj's butt, still grinning.

Benj smiled up at him, and he could feel the love and adoration in Benj's gaze. "Do you want crackers and cheese or a sandwich?"

"Crackers and cheese, please."

"Sit up a little." Benj fussed with the pillows and put an arm around his waist, helping him up.

He took advantage of the position to steal a kiss, then settle.

Benj beamed at him and then brought the plate of crackers and cheese between them. "Look at all these neat cheeses. Jean really is a foodie."

"Are there any non-stinky-feet types?" he teased. God, when was the last time they'd spent a morning in bed?

Benj giggled and put a piece of hard, yellow cheese on a square cracker before handing it over to him. "I like the stinky-feet types."

"I know, but you're a freak of nature."

"Me?" Benj made an offended noise, but his eyes were dancing happily.

"Uh-huh. Freak. Of. Nature." The cheese wasn't too bad.

"Just for that I'm eating the stinky-feetiest on the plate!"

"Ew. Ew! Cheese breath!"

Benj laughed harder, leaning into him and breathing on him.

He pretended to gag and retch, before settling back and eating some more.

Benj fed him a variety of cheeses and crackers and kept offering him a large glass of juice to drink from.

He ate heartily, both of them leaning together and just chatting -- not about the fucking game or his fucking shoulder, just about normal shit. Holidays and autumn coming so fast and the best take-out pizza.

Benj cleared up when they were done and then curled up next to him again. "You look like you're feeling a lot better."

"I am. I slept wrong yesterday, that's all."

"Did you want to get up? We could have a shower..."

"In a minute." He didn't want this to stop yet. "Right now, I just want you to sit with me."

"Oh, I could do that." Benj pressed a light kiss on his lips.

He got settled, eyes on the gray skies outside the window. "You think I'm going to get well enough to play out my contract?"

"I do, Brett. I know you -- if anyone can do it, it's you."

"Yeah? I just want to retire on my feet, you know?"

"I know. One more year." Benj had begun tracing his muscles, fingers running slowly over his arm, his chest.

"Yeah. Even with the stock market, we're solid."

"Yeah? You always take such good care of me."

He grunted. Of course he did.

Benj smiled and leaned in, lips teasing gently against his.

"Mmm. Hey."

"Hey." Benj looked happy, his eyes shining and full of adoration.

He took a kiss, then pinched Benj's butt. "We should go buy pumpkins."

Benj eeped for him, jumping, and then laughing. "Pumpkins?"

"Pumpkins. I mean, not today, but for Halloween."

"Oh, that would be fun! I bet Jean's got all sorts of neat things planned for Halloween."

"Weird voodoo stuff, I bet."

Benj giggled. "Yeah, maybe. He's nice, though. I bet if we want something in particular, he'll help us get it."

"I vote we just take a car and get them."

"Are we allowed to do that?"

"We're not prisoners, are we?"

"Well, no. I suppose not, but..." Benj tilted his head. "There's a regimen."

"If that says no pumpkins for Halloween, I quit."

"I'll talk to Jean. I'm sure it won't be a problem, as long as we don't go when you're supposed to be doing work with Ralph."

"I vote we tie Ralph up and throw him in a closet."

"He's a nice guy, Brett." Benj giggled.

Brett snorted. "Like Godzilla was a nice lizard, baby."

"But he is. Jean's a sweetheart, and he'd never be with anyone who wasn't nice."

"You've got a crush." He could tease, a little bit anyway.

"What? Me? No." Benj blushed a little, laughed. "He's been very good to me, though."

"Uh-huh. Don't make me go beat him, baby."

"That wouldn't be very good for your arm, love." Benj gave him a sideways glance. His baby was teasing him, flirting with him.

"Could be therapeutic..." He could flirt right back.

Benj's mouth dropped open a moment, and then he giggled. "You'd fight for me? Still?"

He stopped, stared. "Baby, I would kill for you, if I had to."

"Oh..." Benj pressed hard against him and pushed their mouths together.

He wrapped his arm around Benj's waist, hand sliding down on his lover's ass.

Benj made a sweet noise against his mouth; he could feel Benj's sweet prick growing against him.

"Mmm. Baby." He leaned back, taking more of Benj's weight.

"You feeling randy again?" Benj looked slightly awed and also very happy about that.

"Some. We don't have to get acrobatic. We have all morning."

"I could ride you." Benj kissed him all over his face, lips warm and wet as they sucked slightly at his skin.

"Mmm. You could." He let his hand wrap around Benj's hip, thumb on the heavy cock.

"I'd like that, love." Benj groaned and pushed against him.

"You still want this grumpy old man?"

Benj looked around, frowning. "What grumpy old man?"

"Dork." He swatted Benj's butt playfully.

Benj grinned and leaned in. "I will always want you, Brett. No matter what."

He chuckled, kissed the corner of Benj's mouth.

Benj's tongue came out to trace his lips, and his lover's fingertips slid over his chest.

"I miss our bed, huh? Our view of the city?" He rubbed their noses together.

"Yeah. I mean, this isn't as bad as I was expecting, but it's still the middle of nowhere."

He nodded. "It's very rural. No bars in sight."

"No, nothing in sight aside from Mother Nature."

"And you." He could appreciate it.

"You'll always have me as part of the view." Benj leaned in and they kissed.

He loved the way Benj's lips tasted, warm and soft, but still firm. Male. They opened, letting him in, and Benj's tongue slid alongside his, tasting him back. Lazy and relaxed, Brett let the kiss go on and on.

Benj didn't seem inclined to stop it anytime soon. In fact, his lover climbed over his body and began rubbing against him.

He let his hands map every inch of Benj's body, relearn it, adore it.

Benj moved over him, fluid and wanton. "Brett. God, you make me want."

"Good." It might be all he was good for, one day.

Benj leaned in and licked at his nipple, mouthing it.

"Hungry baby." He groaned a little as the suction got harder.

Shifting, Benj straddled him properly. That lined their cocks up just right, and Benj began to rock slowly.

He reached down, loosely circled their pricks in his looped fingers. Smooth. Hot.

Fine.

His lover moaned for him, shifting and rolling against him.

"You're good, baby. No hurries." None at all.

Benj nodded and brought their mouths back together again, tongue pushing into his mouth.

That made his eyes roll a little bit, his hands wrapping around Benj's hips.

In and out, Benj tongue-fucked his mouth. His hand started moving in time with Benj's tongue -- in and out, up and down.

"Yes," Benj whispered. "Yes. Yes."

They moaned together, staring at each other as the heat built between them.

"Brett."

He could hear so much in just his name. "Yeah, baby. It's good." It was. Even with his fucking shoulder and everything. This was good.

Benj met his gaze and held it as they moved together.

He was going to start every morning. Just. Like. This.

Benj's mouth closed over his again, tongue moving faster now. He started rubbing the slits of their cocks on every upstroke, working both of them hard. Moans and whimpers filled his mouth, his Benj beginning to go crazy.

"Come on. Come on. Come on me, Benj."



"Brett!" His sweet Benj cried out, and heat sprayed up between them.

"Oh, fuck. Fuck, yeah." He grunted and kept his hand moving, his balls going tight.

"Your turn, Brett. Let me smell you."

"Fuck." His eyelids got heavy as hot spunk spurted out through the tip of his prick.

Groaning, Benj ran a hand through the mess on his belly and then brought his fingers up to be licked off.

They kissed around Benj's fingers, still staring.

At long last Benj sighed, the sound satisfied and happy, and then collapsed down against him.

"God, I love you."

"Good." He wrapped one arm around his lover and held on.

He might live.

Maybe.

## Chapter Ten

Ralph glanced at his watch and headed back to the house. It was nearly eleven and still no Brett. He was trying to be nice because the man had had a bad night, but this was not how he wanted things to progress at all.

He went in through the kitchen because he was feeling grumpy about the wasted morning and figured his man could help find him a better mood.

"Jean?" he called as he went in.

"Oui, Chou?" Jean was whistling happily, making lunches, Benj working alongside him.

"Hey, babe. Oh, hi, Benj. Where's that man of yours?"

Benj smiled at him. "The pool or the shower, I think. He was going to do laps and then get clean."

Ralph grunted. "Okay." Well, it might not have been coming down to see him, but he could hardly fault the man for actually following some of his advice. "Is he better?"

"I think so. I think so a lot, actually." Benj was beaming, bouncing.

Ralph chuckled. "Well, all right, then. I do believe *that* was part of the prescription." He gave Benj a wink. The guy was really a sweetheart.

Jean grinned. "Someone got himself laid."

"I can see that."

Benj's blush was sweet.

"You two leave him alone." Brett came in, towel around his waist. "I'm going to hit the showers. How long before food?"

"We were just teasing him, man. He looks happy."

Ralph thought Brett looked pretty good, too.

"Good." Brett winked. "Food?"

Jean chuckled. "Ten minutes."

"Got it."

Brett sauntered off, Benj's eyes on the towel-covered ass.

"He's a good-looking man." Ralph grinned as his words had Benj blushing some more. The man looked proud, too, though.

"He is."

"You could go clean up too, cher." Jean's eyes twinkled. "For lunch."

Benj's breath hitched, and he tugged off his apron. "How long do we have again?"

"Twenty minutes." At his look, Jean's smile widened. "What? Ten is not long enough."

Benj's color rose, but his smile was beautiful. "Thank you, Jean. We'll be down in time."

Ralph watched him leave and came over to swat Jean's ass. "You're incorrigible."

His Cajun snorted, offered him a smile. "Chou, you said they needed to. Help me chop."

"And they do. They both look much healthier -- happier -- this morning, don't they?"

He went over and stood behind Jean, pressing up against the lean body. "What is it you need help with?"

"The berries and pineapple." Jean leaned back against him and popped a bite of banana between his lips.

"Mmm..." He munched on the banana and rubbed against Jean's back. "Are you sure that's what you want help with?"

"Mmm. Oui. Perv. We're cooking."

Jean swacked his leg.

"Ow!" He pouted and stepped over to work beside Jean. "Sometimes that means something else, you know."

"What?" Jean started cooking.

"We're cooking?" He bumped hips with Jean and waggled his eyebrows. "It can mean doing things without clothes."

"Oh, ho. It can."

"Yeah, it can." He started chopping up the pineapple.

"I think we should grill chicken tonight. Something light, but protein-y. Then a big salad."

"Does that mean you want me to fire up the grill, babe?" He loved grilling meat and then teasing Jean that he'd made the meal.

"Mmm. 'S a brilliant idea, Chou." Jean licked juice off his lips, the pink tongue flicking.

"Of course it is -- I only have brilliant ideas." His own tongue slid out to touch Jean's.

"You... ow!" Jean jerked back, blood spurting from the base of his thumb.

"Oh, babe! I'm sorry." He reached for the first aid kit they kept in one of the cupboards. "Put pressure on it."

"Uh-huh. I got it." Jean was a little pale around the edges, but still grinning.

"How bad is it?" He turned the water on and brought Jean over to the sink, put the man's hand under the flow.

"I didn't look." Jean looked up at the ceiling.

"Then I will." He rubbed Jean's back for a moment and then leaned in to take a look.

The cut was long, but not deep, bleeding heavily, but not enough to need stitches. Just enough to give him a reason to baby his lover a little.

He kissed the top of Jean's thumb. "I think you're going to live, babe. It does need some TLC, though."

He grabbed a piece of paper towel and wrapped it around Jean's thumb to dry it and stave off the bleeding until he could get a Band-Aid on it.

"There's some Lanacaine to spray on it."

Ralph nodded. "I've got it, babe. Don't you worry."

He got the finger sprayed and bandaged and then pulled Jean into his arms. "You need to be more careful with my man."

"Uh-huh. You gon' kiss me and make it better?"

"Of course!" As if Jean needed to ask. He kissed the tip of the injured thumb again and then took Jean into his arms and kissed his lover on the lips.

"Chou." Jean hummed into his kiss, dark eyes going all heavy-lidded.

"Maybe we have a few minutes to, uh, get clean, too, hmm?"

He wrapped his hands around Jean's waist and took another kiss.

"Maybe." Jean kissed his nose. "Clean me up and kiss it all better, hmm?"

He nodded. The fruit would wait.

## *Chapter Eleven*

Jean watched the skies, the dark clouds rolling in. Oo-eee, there was a whopper coming on.

He thought an anti-inflammatory smoothie for a snack, then cod and sweet potatoes for supper. The pressure would be bothering their patient.

"Mmm, something smells good in here, babe." Ralph came in through the back.  
"And I don't mean the food."

"There's a storm coming. Brett hurtin'?"

"Yeah, it felt like we'd fallen back to the first day he was here. I've got him walking around the lake with Benj. They won't be long."

"I'll make smoothies. You could use one yourself, hmm?"

"You know I'll eat whatever you put in front of me. I believe in your voodoo with the food."

He reached out, patted Ralph's butt, then jumped as thunder clapped.

Ralph's arms went around him, and he was pulled against his chou's muscles. "I've got you."

"You're good to me, Chou..."

He heard something... someone yelling. He frowned, looking down the road. Benj was running, waving his arms. "I need some help!"

"Oh, that can't be good." Ralph headed toward Benj at a run.

"It's Brett! Please, help!"

"What happened, cher? He hurt?"

They both caught up to Benj about the same time.

"Please! Please!" Benj started running in the other direction again, pointing and gasping out words. "Fell. Water. Please."

Ralph looked in the direction Benj was pointing and saw Brett in the water about twenty yards out. "Shit." He ran faster.

"What happened?" The rain started coming down like the sky itself just opened right on up.

"Fell." Benj was fluttering badly. "Brett. Help him!"

Ralph came up onto Brett, who was alive -- treading water by the looks of him. Thank God.

"He hurt, Chou?" Jesus, that rain was cold.

"I don't know. Brett, man, come on out of there."

"He can't!" Benj was near tears. "I've tried to help him, but I'm not strong enough."

"Get your ass down here and help me, man!" Brett sounded pissed. "I'm scared I'm going to tear my shoulder up if I use it too much."

Ralph grunted, gave him a kiss, and then slipped right into the water and swam out to Brett.

"Careful, Chou! You want me down there?" He was a strong, strong swimmer.

"I probably should have made you come in while I stayed on shore and pulled." Ralph moved up to Brett, supporting the man. "Give us a minute to make the switch, man, okay?"

"Sure. I'm not hurt. Just stuck." Brett actually looked a little shocked. "That fucking edge just gave way."

Ralph climbed out of the water. "Oh, yeah, I can see exactly what the problem is --



this is all in the shoulders. Come on, babe, in you go -- you support and see if you can lift him at all, and I'll get him by the waist."

"You got it." He slid in, landing beside Brett with a splash. "Bonjour!"

Brett chuckled. "Hey, cookie. Did you request the rain?"

"I did. It's early."

Ralph lay down with his upper body hanging out over the edge of the lake. "Hey, Benj -- sit on my thighs so I don't fall in, okay?"

"O-okay." Benj got down onto Ralph's thighs, watching with worried eyes.

"I'm cool, baby. Wet and muddy, but cool." Brett looked at Jean. "You gonna give me a boost?"

"Yep. On three. One. Two."

On three, he shoved.

Ralph pulled while he shoved and it wasn't pretty, but they got that man out of the water.

"Don't you leave my skinny butt down here, now!" He reached up, wet as a drowned rat.

Ralph grabbed hold of his arm and hauled him up as well. All four of them were on the ground, soaked to the skin and panting.

"Christ, it's cold. We all need to get back and get warmed up before someone gets sick."

He nodded. "I'll make some chicken soup for tonight, too."

The lightning crashed, they all jumped, and he damn near went backward into the water, arms wind-milling.

Ralph grabbed hold of him, pulling him up against the strong body. "Careful, babe. Come on, everyone. Double time -- this storm's not letting up any."

"No. No, in fact it looks like it's getting worse." Brett wrapped one arm around Benj. "Come on, baby. Hustle."

The wind started howling, and they all ran for the house.

The hail hit just before they got in, quarter-sized pieces of ice that hurt as they hit.

"Christ! Y'all!" He shook his head, winced. "Get in!"

The electricity went out as they went in.

"Damn it," growled Ralph. "Jean, get everyone settled with blankets in the den and light the fire. I'm going to go see if it was just the fuse box."

"Oui, Chou. I got it." He patted Benj's butt. "Strip off, eh? I'll find towels."

Benj nodded, teeth chattering. Still, the sweet little thing helped Brett strip off first.

He grabbed a bunch of towels, filled the kettle, and grabbed some wood for the fire. The gas lighter got it well started, then he ran for blankets.

Ralph met him at the closet. "It's the incoming power. We're out until they can fix it. Why are you still in wet clothes, babe?"

"I'm getting blankets, Chou, like you said."

"Right. Right. Come on, quick. I don't want you catching your death."

Ralph grabbed a pile of blankets and manhandled him back into the den where the fire was blazing. Brett and Benj had dragged the couch in front of it and were sitting together, shivering.

He plopped the blankets on Brett and Benj, then reached for Ralph. "Come, Chou. Off with those."

"You first." Ralph started tugging at his wet shirt and jeans; the material felt like it was glued to him.

Between them, they stripped off, and he got a towel, cleaning them off.

Benj had his head buried in Brett's neck, but the two of them weren't shivering anymore, which was a good thing.

He wrapped a towel around his waist. "Go sit, Chou. I'll bring coffee and a snack and then get clothes for everybody."

"No, you sit and get warm first. I can't run this place without you." Ralph caught him around the middle and pulled him down onto the couch next to Brett and Benj.

Benj gave him a soft smile as Ralph covered them both with a pair of blankets. "Does this happen often?"

"In the fall, sometimes. Not like home." He snuggled in, shivering and cuddling. "But my man, he like himself the snow."

"That's because there's usually heat inside, and I don't get soaked by the snow." Ralph held him close, rubbing his skin with those big hands.

Jean nodded, cuddled in, humming softly.

Ralph gave the ball man a look. "You doing okay, Brett?"

"Gonna be fine." He could see tension in the man's jaw. Tomorrow was going to be sore.

"You sure? We could get you to the hospital to get checked out if anything doesn't feel right. Storm or no, I don't want this aggravating your injury."

"No. No more hospitals, huh?"

Ralph aimed a so-serious look at Brett. "I'm going to take your word that nothing out of the ordinary is hurting. Hating hospitals or not, if you've worsened your shoulder or injured something else, you need to be up front about that."

"It's going to be sore, but not any worse than normal."

Ralph and Brett looked at each other a moment, and then Ralph grunted and settled back, tugging him closer. "I don't suppose you have weenies we can roast over the fire, babe?"

"Uh-huh. And marshmallows. There's tea for the kettle, too."

Benj perked up at that. "Oh, marshmallows? Really? Oh, Brett -- that would be fun, wouldn't it?"

Brett chuckled. "Camp out food. I can handle that."

"I hate camping," Benj admitted. "But I do like the food."

"I'll go grab the food." In a minute. He was perfectly, wonderfully comfortable.

Ralph held tight to him. "I think we can all wait and work on getting warm."

"Yeah?" He cuddled harder. "Okay, Chou."

"This is nice." Benj looked blissful, happy. Sweet little thing.

Brett's eyes were closed, the man dozing, wrapped around his lover.

Jean nodded. "Quiet, eh? Maybe later we can play a game?"

A rumbling sound that might have been a yes came from Ralph before his big lover answered with words. "Yeah, that sounds good. Who knows, maybe this whole thing was a blessing in disguise."

"Hmm? How so?" He kissed Ralph's jaw, warm and happy as the storm raged.

"Disaster happened. Brett fell into the water and couldn't get out. There's a terrible storm and we lost power. And yet, here we all sit, happy, warm, good."

He chuckled, shook his head. Ralph was a nutburger.

"It's true, babe. The worst happened and we're all okay. It proves to Brett that bad things can happen without terrible results, you know?"

He shifted, pulled the blankets tighter around them, settling in for a nap. "Yeah. It's good, Chou. Easy."

Benj smiled at them, and then his eyes closed, the little one joining his lover in sleep.

Ralph chuckled. "They're a cute couple."

"They are. It's gonna be a decent winter, I think."

"Yeah. It'll be good. Just the four of us. And we don't have to be discreet -- no one's going to be pissed we're a couple. I can kiss you when I want."

His chou liked that. "Mmm. You can. You don't think your growly bear will hate that?"

"He's got his own man to kiss, right?"

"Mmhmm... C'est bon, kissing." He lifted his face for one.

"Very bon." Ralph's mouth came down gently on his, the kiss opening his mouth.

He pulled the covers over them, surrounding them.

His chou. Ralph tasted warm, like sweet water. Ralph gave a happy rumble and deepened the kiss, hands beginning their wandering. They couldn't do this. Not here, but it was so warm and nice...

"Jean. Babe. Oh, man, kissing is one thing, this is... we shouldn't." Still, his Ralph kept kissing now, didn't he?

"Mmhmm. Shhh..." he murmured softly, humming into Ralph's lips.

Those wandering hands found his ass and shifted him so they were rubbing nicely together.

This was a terrible idea. Awful. He chuckled, fingers sliding on Ralph's side.

"What're you laughing at, Cajun?"

"Us." He licked Ralph's lips.

"You mean the fact we're like sex-starved jackrabbits? Is that what you're laughing at?"

He could hear Ralph's own laughter trying to bubble up.

"You got it, Chou. You an' me, we's bunnies."

Ralph's laughter rang out.

He heard Brett wake up, snort. "You two... be good."

"Oh, I'm always good," Ralph replied. "Just ask my man here."

Jean started laughing, chuckling deep in his chest.

"Psst. Babe. You're supposed to be talking me up here, not laughing."

That just made him laugh harder, leaning against the best thing that had ever happened to him.

Ralph's arms held him close, the big hands patted him. "You just keep laughing, babe."

"Always, Chou." He was happy.

"Yeah, I know." Ralph kissed his nose.

He beamed, legs wrapping around Ralph, holding on. The next kiss found his lips, Ralph opening his mouth with that hot tongue. He heard the sweet one give a soft sigh.

"You two stop that now." Brett growled, but it didn't sound mean.

"Hush," whispered Benj. "They're lovely."

"They're horndogs, and you're a... a... lookeeloo."

Benj started to giggle. Even his Ralph was silently laughing, chest moving against him. Soon they were all cackling, the laughter loud enough to drown out the storm.

"Lookeeloo." Benj hit Brett's good arm. "You nut."

"Well, you are." Brett stretched out and sighed.

"Only if they're cute. Which they are." Benj was back to giggling.

"Dork."

That made Jean snort a little, look over Ralph's shoulder. "Stick in the mud."

"Oh, he's not!" Benj came immediately to his ball man's defence.

"Pshaw. He ain't friendly at all..." He lifted his head from the blanket, winked at Brett.

Benj looked like he was going to say something else, but Ralph chuckled and Benj's face relaxed.

"We oughta get some clothes on, huh?" He really didn't want to move.

"Anyone have a glaring need to get dressed?" Ralph asked.

"The blankets are warm," Benj pointed out.

"They are, and the fire is." He gasped at the thunder shook the house.

Ralph tugged him closer. "That storm's going from bad to worse. You better stay where you are, babe."

He shivered and pressed in. "You think?"

"I surely do."

Benj nodded. "Yeah, Ralph's right. We're all good right where we are. Aren't we, Brett?"

The sweet thing sure did love his man.

"Yeah, babe. I'm cool."

Look at that. They were cute together.

Ralph patted him, his big man almost snoring.

He found the perfect place for his cheek, tugged the blankets tighter around him.

Ralph's hand patted again, the softest "love you" sounding.

"Love." His eyes fluttered closed, the warmth and dark and Ralph making the world a better place.



## *Chapter Twelve*

Ralph finished his breakfast and glanced from Brett's smoothie to the clock over the mantle. Eight-forty. That gave the man twenty minutes to haul his ass down here, finish his drink, and get out to the workout room for his treatments.

Benj's place was set, but the food was still in the kitchen, keeping warm. Of course, Benj could take as long as he wanted to eat. Brett had a schedule to keep.

He tried not to growl -- Brett wasn't late yet. Hell, the man could probably come down at five to, down the drink quickly, and run to get to therapy in time. Of course, that would likely make Brett throw up, which would defeat the purpose of him having breakfast to begin with.

He had another sip of Jean's excellent coffee and debated asking for another beignet to distract himself.

"What's eatin' you, Chou?" Jean's hand trailed down his back.

"Oh, I'm just worried over nothing, I'm sure." He gave Jean a smile. They hadn't had time to establish a good routine yet, though, and it itched at him. He glanced at the clock again. Seventeen minutes to go.

"He ain't like some, Ralph. He don't follow the rules good."

"He's still mad at the world, babe." Brett needed to get past it, though. He needed to accept their help and not think it made him any less.

"They always are." Jean shrugged and grabbed a bite of pineapple.

"Don't talk about me when I'm not here, huh?" Brett looked at the smoothie.

"What's in it?"

"Pineapple, strawberry, mostly."

Jean opened his mouth to continue on, but that was obviously enough for Brett, who chugged it.

Ralph couldn't resist teasing. "Good thing he didn't let you get to the alligator and eel, babe."

"Like he'd care. He don't taste the food."

"Hey, he's eating -- well, drinking -- it, right? Gift horses and all that."

Benj appeared in the doorway, yawning and blinking. "Who's gifting horses?"

"The Cajun." Brett burped. "Mornin', baby."

Benj walked up and hugged Brett tight from behind. "Hey, love. Something smells good. Aside from you."

"I bet they made you real food." Brett winked. "I have to go be a torture victim while you enjoy your life of leisure."

"Hey, man. Jean's making what you'll eat. You want 'real' food, I imagine he'd be more than happy to make it." Ralph shook his head. Brett wasn't going to get away with dissing his man.

Brett arched an eyebrow, looked at him. "Are you always this bitchy in the morning?"

"I'm not bitchy if everyone follows the routine."

Brett's smile disappeared, finger pointing to the clock. "I have seven minutes to be outside. Seven. My ass is here. I drank the fucking smoothie." The glass hit the counter, cracking all around the bottom. "See you at five, baby. Have a good day."

Ralph sighed and rubbed his face. "Still touchy, I see."

Benj fluttered. "He's trying. Really."

Jean cleaned up the glass without a word. Benj kept hovering, offering apologies and trying to help.

"Cher, relax. Let the big dogs snarl and snap. They mean nothin'."

"This is his last hope. Please," Benj turned to him. "You have to help him."

And he was trying to, but the stubborn son of a bitch was just not helping. "Patience is a virtue, yeah?" And they all needed to pray for some.

He got up and patted Benj's shoulder before leaving the guy to Jean's care.

Brett was at the weights, doing reps, counting under his breath.

"Hey, let's have a conversation when you've finished those reps, man."

"Sure." Brett glowered at him, muscles bunching and jerking and pulling.

Ralph sighed and went to sit at his desk, pretending to be busy as he tried to figure out how to reach past Brett's anger and fear.

When the weight was put down, Brett came to stand in front of his desk. "Talk."

"Can you sit?"

"Sure." Brett lowered himself down into a chair.

"I don't want to fight with you, Brett. Truly. Me and Jean and the others -- we're here to help you. We all have the same goal -- get that shoulder healed and you back in the majors."

"What have I done this morning to fight? I was on time. I ate. You were a prick from the second I came down."

Ralph shook his head. "I wasn't, Brett. But it seems everything I say sets you off."

"I wasn't set off until you accused me of not working."

"When did I do that?"

"You said I won't follow the routine. I have."

"We've had so many interruptions, there haven't been three days in a row for you to follow it -- not your fault, but I worry that we haven't got one going yet. That doesn't mean I think you're not working."

"I am working. I've done everything you said."

"What about your attitude?" Ralph asked softly. He didn't want to piss the man off, but Brett still clung to all his anger.

"What about it? I'm trying, man. I'm trying to do all the shit you ask me to."

"You're not doing yourself any favors by hanging onto your resentment, man. I know it sounds cheesy, but a positive attitude helps."

"Am I doing my job?" That rage was right under the surface.

"I know you're trying, man. I just don't think it's enough." He needed to talk to Michael. The head-shrinker might have some ideas for how he could help Brett let go of that anger.

"Fine." Brett's jaw went tight as a stone. "Call management and I'll pack. Thanks for your time."

Then the man turned on one heel and headed for the door.

"God damn it, Brett, get back here." Ralph snapped the words out. "I didn't say we were giving up on you -- I'm trying to tell you where we are. I'm trying to help you here, damn it!"

"You said you didn't think it was enough." Brett turned on him, fury written on the tanned face. "Quit fucking playing games with me, asshole. I've done every motherfucking thing you've asked."

"I'm *not* playing games, Brett. And you have done everything we've asked you to do -- physically. You need to lose the anger, though, man. I mean, you're so angry there are days I'm surprised your head doesn't pop right off."

"Fuck you." The air between them was charged, violent. Vicious.

"You need someone to unload on, Brett? Is that it?" He stood up and puffed up, taking a step forward. "Then you take it out on me, because I can take anything you can dish out."

"What the fuck is wrong with you, you psycho bastard? Why are you fucking pushing?"

"Because if you don't deal with how pissed off you are, it will kill you. Come on, Brett -- you can't heal while you're all twisted up inside."

"Stop with the new age, crystal and light healing horseshit!"

"It's part of the package, man. And it isn't horseshit. With the anger you're carrying your whole body is tight, you overwork when you do your exercises, and you don't sleep right."

Brett might not believe it, but his anger was affecting everything.

"I'm doing what you ask!" Brett flexed, muscles rippling.

"So if I ask you to stop being so angry, will you do that?" Of course, if it was that easy, they'd all be out of a job.

"I'm not ANGRY!"

Right.

Ralph managed not to snort or say anything sarcastic. Barely.

"No? What do you call it, then?"

"I'm fucking tired, man."

Oh, it was more than that, and Brett knew it. "You always shout when you're tired?"

"Yes. Quit pushing or I'm going to beat your ass."

And maybe that's just what the man needed. "But not because you're angry."

"What?"

"You keep saying you're not angry, and then you tell me you're going to beat my ass – ass-beating is usually accompanied by anger."

"I'm going for a walk."

"I think that's a good idea. And Brett. Please. Think about what I've said."

Brett flipped him off and stormed out the door.

Ralph growled and went over to the boxing bag, punching it hard.

God damn it.

He needed to talk to Michael, get some tips on getting through to Brett. Because he and Brett were just going in circles, and that wasn't helping the man at all.

Jean appeared, two glasses of juice in hand. "I sent the wee one after him. What's up?"

"He's angry. He won't admit it, and he needs to."

He took one of the juices and drank it down, the taste sharp in his mouth. "Thanks, babe. This is great."

"Maybe he don't understand you, Chou. Little Benj swears he's working real hard."

"Oh, he's working hard. Physically, he's being a star -- hell, I'd say he's even overdoing. But he's just so angry, and it's affecting everything, and I can't get him to just admit it."

"Isn't he supposed to be angry?"

"Of course he should be angry. But he won't admit it, and if he won't admit it, how can he work to overcome it?"

Jean looked at him. "Well, Chou. Maybe he don't know he's not wrong to feel it."

He looked back at Jean, a slow smile pulling at his lips. "Babe, you're a genius."

His lover leaned in, kissed him. "Yup."

That made him laugh. He kissed Jean back. "You're modest, too."

"Don't forget cute. I'm incredibly cute."

"Oh, that goes without saying." He rubbed their noses together. "You're very, very cute."

"Love you, Chou. You go get your patient. Do your thing. Then... maybe we have a long lunch?"

"Mmm... a long lunch. I like the sound of that."

Jean's tongue flicked out. "Long and slow enough to make me scream, Chou."

He groaned as his cock began to fill, eager to respond to Jean's touch, Jean's words.

"Lunch." Jean backed off, prick outlined in the baggy slacks.

"You're evil."

His own prick throbbed eagerly.

"I'm yours."

"You know it, babe."

He watched Jean go and then gave his cock a moment or two to get back to business. Once he was decent, he headed out. He could see Brett and Benj about a quarter of the way around the lake, and he jogged lightly to catch up to them.

Brett's body language was clear -- the man was pissed and hurt.

He called out as he got near, so they wouldn't be surprised by his sudden appearance.

Benj crumpled a little bit, looking back with a wave.

"Hey, Benj, how're you doing? Can you give us a few minutes, please?"

"Are you going to tell him to leave? Because if you are, I'm staying with Brett."

"No, I'm not going to tell him to leave. In fact, I'm going to take another whack at trying to convince him we not only can help him, but we've got his best interests at heart."

"Oh. Okay. I'll see you at lunch."

Brett nodded, once. "Yeah, baby."

"Thanks, Benj." He gave the sweet man a smile and fell into step with Brett.

They walked quietly for awhile, and then Ralph cleared his throat. "It's been brought to my attention that I've neglected to give you a crucial piece of information."

"What's that?"

"It's okay if you're angry. It's understandable and allowed, and I'd be surprised if you weren't. I mean, we need to deal with it -- you need to work through it and find a way to not be angry anymore, but no one is saying that it's wrong for you to actually be angry."

Brett's head tilted. "Are you speaking English, man?"

"I'm trying to. It makes sense in my head. Look, you're angry -- I know you are, but you keep denying it. And maybe that's because you think you shouldn't be or something."

He'd never had as much trouble communicating with anyone as he seemed to with Brett.

"It's you who thinks I shouldn't be pissed off. You keep saying it has to stop. Why? Why can't I be mad that my fucking body is getting old? Why can't I be mad that I hurt, and that I might not be able to play ball?"



"You can be mad, but you've got to work through the anger. You can't just hold onto it. If you stay at angry, nothing'll change, man. And none of us want that. We want you to get better."

"Look. I don't know what you want from me. Tell me what you want!"

"I want you to get healthy, Brett. Healthy and happy." He didn't know why he wasn't getting through to Brett. It just didn't make any sense.

"No. Listen to me!" Brett grabbed his arm. "You tell me what you want. You want me in the gym at nine. You want me in the pool twice a week. You want me to lose ten pounds. Tell me what I have to do."

He tilted his head. "I've drawn you up a schedule, but you need to work on your emotional state, too, and that's not as easy as 'do a hundred push-ups.'"

"'Work on your emotional state' is not helpful. I'm a man. I don't have feelings."

"Bullshit."

Brett snorted. "Tell me something concrete. Something I can accomplish."

"You can tell me what you're angry about."

"Dude, I'm here. I'm hurt. Isn't that enough?"

"I don't think it's going to be." He put his hand on Brett's good shoulder. "That anger's eating at you, man. It's tearing you up inside."

"I don't understand what you need from me."

"I need for you to face your emotions. The first step would be to admit that, even though you're a man, you've got them."

"Okay. I have them. Can we work now?"

Ralph chuckled. "Sure, man. I want you doing the electrical current this morning. We can talk again when you're done."

"Cool." Brett headed back to the workout room, jogging easily.

Ralph followed and got Brett set up with the electrodes all over Brett's shoulder. "Did you want to read or something?" Although just relaxing wouldn't be a bad way to spend the time, either.

"Nah, my head hurts."

"You want something for it?"

"Shit, I don't think anything will stop it, man. It never has."

"You've been mostly medicating it with alcohol, though, right?" Man, would suggesting meditation have Brett finally slugging him?

"It helps and don't give me shit about it."

"I won't -- I trust that you'll not have any except on Sundays as we agreed. How about some white willow bark for your headache, though? And I'd really like to set you up with some meditation. And before you say no outright, I'm thinking maybe an hour every day in the afternoon -- I'll do it, too, and Benj can join us. We'll let Jean lead the sessions, but mostly it's just being quiet and relaxing."

"Whatever you say, man. I'm just the body here."

"Healing is about more than just your body, though. It's about your mind, too, and your emotions." He gave Brett a grin. "Your spirit."

"I don't have one of those, either." Brett winked at him. "Gimme the Tylenol, man."

"Jean swears his food is good for the soul, so I hope you do because he's a hell of a chef. He also swears by willow bark." He grabbed some willow bark powder, added it to a bottle of water. After mixing it up, he handed it over.

Brett finished the water, then asked for another bottle.

This time Ralph handed over a large one. It was possible dehydration was playing a role in Brett's headaches as well. Especially as most of the liquid he'd been imbibing had been alcohol.

Then he left Brett alone for some quiet time while the electricity did its work.

He could only hope that, with a new understanding of Brett's ideas of what was manly and what wasn't, he'd be able to help with the non-physical aspects now without it sending them into fits.

## *Chapter Thirteen*

Feelings.

Jesus.

He worked through another set of reps, knowing that as soon as he was done, Ralph would want to talk more.

Or meditate.

Or something.

Shit.

How could a guy named Ralph want to talk about feelings so fucking much?

"Brett?" Benj poked his head around the corner.

"Hey, baby." He smiled at his lover.

"Hey. Are you ready for lunch? Jean said we were going to all meditate together afterward."

"And you didn't talk him out of it?" He put the dumbbell down and grabbed a towel. He could eat. In fact, he was starving.

"I thought it might be nice to spend some quiet time together."

"We don't need that to be together, baby." He winked and wiped down, then let Benj lead the way.

Benj giggled for him, hand slipping into his. "Yeah, but this is in the middle of the day, and they're calling it 'work.'"

"Uh-huh. You just nudge me if I start snoring, huh?"

That earned him another laugh, Benj bright-eyed and smiling. "I promise."

"Then we're good." Fuck, he did like having Benj all grinning.

Jean and Ralph were already in the dining room when they got there, and Benj breathed in deeply. "Something smells really good."

"Mmmhmm." Jean could cook, he'd give the man that.

"Just something light today, I imagine." Ralph came in behind them, clapping him on the back. "Don't want you too full for meditation."

"Chicken sandwiches and fruit salad." Jean came out with four plates balanced on his arms.

"Oh, that sounds lovely." Benj moved to 'his' chair at the table, sitting eagerly.

"Are there pickles?" Brett was feeling a sincere lack of pickles.

Jean chuckled. "For you, Mister Gator, there are."

"I told Jean you loved them." Benj smiled at him as he sat. "Like, insanely loved them."

"Pickles are a gift from God." Brett believed that with all his heart. He ate pickles before every game.

"They're his good luck charm," Benj whispered loudly enough they all heard it.

"Hush." He grinned, poking at Benj's leg.

His lover's sweet giggle sounded. Benj was in a good mood; the worry lines around his eyes had eased.

He dug in, eating all of one and half of another sandwich before he could slow down enough to taste. Benj ate more slowly, looking more pleased with every bite he took. Come to think of it, Ralph was smiling as he ate as well.

He thought about asking what the fuck everyone was grinning about, but shit, he didn't really want to know.

The food was good, and halfway through dessert Benj slipped him a couple of Tylenol.

He arched an eyebrow, curious, but he took them.

"For your head. And your shoulder." Benj smiled. "So you don't have any pain while we're meditating." His voice lowered, "I picked the pills up in town."

"Thanks, baby." He leaned over before he thought, almost kissing Benj's cheek.

Benj turned his head and pressed their lips together.

"Benj." His eyes went wide, but he didn't pull away, just gave Benj a soft kiss.

His lover's eyes were warm and happy.

"This is going to be fun, love."

"Sitting and thinking? Weirdo."

"It's to help relax you and make you feel better."

Ralph nodded. "It does. I know it sounds tutti frutti, but it works."

He nodded, squeezed Benj's hand. "Yeah, yeah."

Benj leaned close and whispered, "If nothing else, you can have a nap."

He nodded. "That sounds great, actually."

"There you go!"

Benj reached over and grabbed a slice of pineapple, handing it to him.

He ate it, but refused another. "I'm full, Benj."

"Okay, love." Benj's hand slid over his, warm and soft.

He met Benj's eyes, winked. "You flirting with me?"

"Maybe." Benj actually fluttered those eyelashes at him.

Brett chuckled, grinning as Jean laughed out loud.

"Don't tell me we need to have a 'break' before starting the meditation." Ralph waggled his eyebrows.

"Don't be a perv." Brett stood, back popping. "Where are we doing this?"

Ralph shook his head. "In the flower garden out back. It's quiet, private, and pretty."

"It won't be warm enough to do that for much longer, huh?" He held one hand out for Benj.

"No, it won't. We can do it inside, though. In front of the fire." Ralph put his arm around Jean and led them outside.

There were four pillow deals and long mats spread out. God, this was weird.

Ralph and Jean and Benj each sat cross-legged on a mat. Benj smiled up at him and then patted the pillow next to him. "Come on, love."

He eased himself down. "You're sure this is important?" He wasn't sure who he was asking.

"I am." Ralph was the one who answered.

Brett sighed and nodded, getting comfortable.

Benj's hand slid onto his thigh, patted it, and then stayed.

"All right, everyone close your eyes, clear your mind, and follow Jean's breathing." Ralph closed his eyes, his face slowly going lax.

Benj followed suit next to him.

This was insane.

He sat there, watching. How were you supposed to clear your fucking mind when there wasn't anything to do but think?

Benj was already breathing in sync with the slow and quiet "in" and "out" coming from Jean.

Ralph seemed to be as well, but a moment later he cracked one eye open. "Psst. Brett. Eyes closed, man."

"You can't tell if mine are open if yours are closed..."

"Brett, just get with the program."

"Shh." Jean hissed at them.

Benj started giggling, and he fought his chuckles with all he was worth. Benj's hand squeezed his thigh, and his lover hiccupped and then went quiet again. Benj's eyes peeked open, though, and Benj blew him a kiss.

He winked, rolled his eyes, then closed them. Benj's hand squeezed his thigh again.

Then it was all quiet, just the sound of the four of them breathing. Breathing as an exercise.

Jesus.

He wanted to go for a walk or a run or something. Just move and stop sitting here.

"Clear your mind of all thoughts, of all emotions." Jean spoke softly.

Wait. Wasn't this whole thing because he was supposed to have emotions?

"Find each one, look at it, and put it away so that your mind is clear, at peace."

Oh, for fuck's sake.



He amused himself by going over stats. First his. Then the team's, starting with this year and working backward.

Benj all of a sudden leaned against him, head bumping onto his shoulder.

His eyes flashed open and he looked over.

Benj's eyes were still closed, his mouth half open. A little snore sounded from his lover.

Oh, now. That was cute.

Really cute.

Benj kept right on sleeping even as Jean started murmuring something else about peace and quiet and finding his center.

He looked over at Ralph; he was pretty sure Ralph was sleeping, too.

Then Jean stopped talking and there was nothing but the sounds of nature and the occasional snore from Benj. For, like, a long time.

He sat for at least ten thousand innings of baseball before he shifted, easing Benj onto the ground and sliding up to go run.

Dorks.

All three of them.

Sleeping dorks.

\*\*\*

Benj woke up when Jean shook him awake, and he blinked and looked around. Brett and Ralph were already gone.

"I fell asleep," he admitted, feeling a little foolish.

"We all did, cher. 'Cept your man." Jean held one hand out to help him up.

That made him laugh. "Really? Poor Brett."

He grabbed Jean's hand and let himself be hauled up.

"He's out on the track, running hard."

"Isn't he supposed to be taking it easy?" He knew that wasn't easy for his lover, but he'd been hoping Brett would stop pushing himself so hard.

"Oui. 'S why Ralph's out on the track, stopping him."

"I'm sorry I fell asleep. Maybe if I'd stayed awake he would have stuck around." Maybe Brett would have fallen asleep instead.

"Don't. No guilt, eh? Come help me start supper."

"Oh, I'd like that." He enjoyed Jean's company a lot.

Jean smiled at him, and they headed for the kitchen. "Things are better between you both, yes?"

Benj nodded, feeling his cheeks heat a little as he thought about exactly how much better things were in certain areas. "We're... communicating a lot more."

That caught up feeling he'd been carrying for so long had eased. Not to mention he knew now that Brett still wanted him.

It made a huge difference.

"That's good. You need to, eh? Connect. Communicate. Fuck like bunnies."

The heat in his cheeks flared.

"Now, now. We both know you should. It's good for you."

He couldn't meet Jean's eyes, but he nodded. "It feels so good to have him see me again."

"You'll help him, cher. You'll help him heal."

"I want to. More than anything I want to help him feel better."

Jean nodded and pulled out onions and peppers, handed him a knife. "We are. You are."

He beamed at Jean. The man made him feel like he was important here, that he had a role to play.

"Slice the onions up, nice and thin." Jean moved to the stove. "Did you talk to him about taking the better drugs for pain?"

"I talked to him a little bit about it. You have to remember we're going from nothing to something here." Besides the booze. He bit his lip, worrying it.

"Stop it, now. He'll feel better, off the booze."

"He doesn't feel any better yet, if you listen to him tell it." He knew better, though. Brett might not want to admit it, but he was already a little more at ease. Their lovemaking proved that.

"The massages are helping. The cold weather that's coming won't."

"Well, I'll just have to give him extra ones, then." He peeled the onions and started cutting them. He could feel the fumes starting to make his eyes burn.

"Do you have plans for tomorrow? I was going to drive to town, get supplies."

"Oh, I'd love to go into town!" While being out in the country wasn't terrible, he was a city boy at heart.

"Excellent. We'll make a day of it." Jean came over, bumped hips with him.

He bumped back, giving Jean a warm smile. He really liked the man.

"Do y'all dress up for Halloween?"

Benj nodded eagerly. "We do! And we carve pumpkins, and I usually decorate the apartment. Brett was just mentioning he'd like to pick up some pumpkins. It would be fun if we could do a little party."

"Sounds good to me, cher. This should be like a home, hmm?"

"Thank you -- I know you've worked hard to make us feel comfortable."

"It's my job. Besides, cher, you're dear."

His cheeks warmed again, and he chopped the veggies harder. Before long, they had a soup cooking, the smells in the kitchen a little overwhelming.

"Could I have a glass of water?"

"Anything you want, cher. You okay?"

"I'm just a little dizzy -- I think it's been too long since I ate." He grabbed a glass and filled it with water, moving to sit at the table.

Like magic, a sandwich and a plate of fruit appeared in front of him.

"Oh, Jean, you didn't have to do this."

"Shh. Eat." Jean patted his head.

He smiled up at Jean and began to eat. The food, as always, was amazing. The sandwich settled him immediately, left him relaxed and easy. He speared a piece of pineapple. "What else can I do? To help, I mean."

"Eat. Keep me company. Help me plan the holidays."

It was going to be a long, long winter.

## *Chapter Fourteen*

Ralph jogged out to the track and set himself in the middle of it, waiting for Brett to come around. The asshole was running hard, pushing himself. Instead of meditating. Hell, the rest of them had fallen asleep -- a nap would have done wonders for Mr. Hurting and Grumpy.

He crossed his arms, watching as Brett ran.

The man looked good -- muscled and solid, head down as he drove himself.

If it wasn't for the shoulder, he'd have bet Brett had another five years in him, easy. Five good years at that.

Sometimes life was a real bitch.

"Start cooling down," he called out.

The hard-driving rhythm slowed, turning into a lazy, slow jog after another half-way round the track.

He started rehearsing what he was going to say in his head, and then stopped. He and Brett seemed to speak different languages, and he imagined he'd get farther playing it more off the cuff. Men don't have emotions, he reminded himself with a chuckle. Brett liked to pretend he didn't, anyway.

Brett finally came to a stop, breathing hard. "You have a good nap, man?"

"Yeah, and I feel a hundred times better. The question is, why didn't you stick around?"

"Uh... you were all sleeping?"

"So? You could have slept, too, or just sat and relaxed, moved to one of the lawn chairs for extra comfort if you'd wanted. I was just hoping you'd get a couple of

hours of relaxation, of not thinking about your shoulder or baseball or much of anything, really."

"I wasn't sleepy. I was bored."

"Have you never just sat quietly -- just for the sake of the quiet, or the sitting, or just to have a few minutes of peace?"

Brett looked at him. "Sure. A few times. I'm not much for sitting on my thumbs."

"Your body needs rest as much as anything else, though, Brett. I'm not saying you're not expected to work out, to run the regimen that I've drawn up for you -- but did you notice there were plenty of places for rest and relaxation, too?"

"I was relaxing."

"If you're sweating -- which you are -- then you're not doing it right." He winked to show he wasn't trying to be argumentative.

"Look, man. I need things to do. I don't nap."

"Do you whittle?"

"Do I what?"

"You know, carve things out of wood with a knife? Or read, or whatever. Something hobby-ish so you can relax without it being 'napping.'"

What the hell did Brett do for downtime?

"I told you, man. I'm a painter. I went to art school."

"Well, all right, then. Make me a list of what you need and Jean will go get it. You can spend a couple hours a day painting."

"The club'll pay for it?"

"It's part of your therapy, so yes."

"Yeah?" Ralph almost stepped backward. Brett looked... tickled.

"Yeah. Hell, if I said truffles were necessary for your therapy, the club would pay for it, so if you've a hankering for something fancy for dinner." He offered Brett a wink with the words.

"I wouldn't mind some more grapes."

"I'm pretty sure Jean already noticed you ate all of those every time he served you fruit, but I'll be sure to mention it to him. Now, is there any other hobby you'd be interested in pursuing?" Ralph was jazzed that he'd managed to have a conversation that included Brett smiling, and that they'd found something that might encourage the man to take it easy.

"We like to play cards, me and Benj."

"Yeah? Jean's a wicked rummy player, but we enjoy euchre, hearts, bridge, all sorts. Maybe we should play some afternoons." Anything to get Brett to not push his body just as hard as he could.

"Sure. We play a lot of spades." Brett nodded. "Benj is good at it."

"Cool. I can be a little competitive," he warned. "Though I do try to not make it a big deal."

Brett chuckled. "I'm not a competitive man. Not at all."

"Uh-huh. I bet you've got a bridge or two to sell me, too."

"Hmm?" Asshole. He chuckled at the look on Brett's face.

"Come on. How about we go see what our two guys are up to? I do believe we'll have to eat the results of whatever it is."

"Oh, God. Benj is not a cook, man."

Ralph just laughed. "Jean might change that."

"That bodes well for the rest of my life."

This time he nodded. "Yes. That's the whole idea of this place, you know."

"Yeah, I know, man." Brett rubbed his forehead again.

"Man, is your head bothering you again?" If a couple more days of working in good food and relaxation didn't ease the headaches, he was going to recommend a CAT scan.

"Yeah. It always does. Don't stress it."

"Always? Like, since your shoulder got screwed up, or before that?"

He slowed their pace, wanting to keep talking, keep it casual.

"Before that. Years. Shit, man, look at that." Brett pointed at a deer, out on the very outskirts of the property.

They both stopped to watch as the deer foraged for food, and Ralph mulled that over. Years. The man's head had hurt for years and he was more or less just ignoring it.

"Years, huh? Like since when?"

"I don't know, man. A long time."

"Did you get hit by a baseball or have a fall or something?"

"Uh... I've been hit by a lot of balls."

"Occupational hazard, huh?" He chuckled, and they started walking slowly again.

"Can you remember about how old you were when you started having the headaches?"

"Mid-twenties, I guess. Before Benj."

Shit, and Brett was just living with it? "You ever tell anyone about it? Does Benj know?"

"That I have headaches? Sure."

"Have you been tested for anything? Had a CAT scan, that kind of thing?"



"Huh? Why're you worried about my head, man?" Brett frowned, shook his head. "Don't stress it. It's a headache."

"A headache that you've had since you got here. A headache that's been recurring since you were in your early twenties. That's not something you should just ignore."

"Eh." Brett brushed it off. "I'm used to it."

Ralph shook his head. He'd talk to the doc, get some tests, and see what was going on with this.

The smell of Jean's food hit him as they walked into the house. Spicy, rich, good. He approved.

"Babe, it smells like heaven on earth in here." He let Brett into the kitchen. When he had a chance, he'd have to tell Jean about the headaches -- his man would have some crazy Cajun remedy that just might work.

"Me and cher there been cooking up a storm." Jean offered him a grin, a wink.

"Oh, I've just been chopping." Benj smiled shyly at him and more widely at Brett. "I'm not much of a cook."

"You do fine, baby." Brett's response was completely automatic.

It was nice to see how devoted they were to each other.

Benj beamed at Brett and came over for a kiss. "Jean's trying to teach me."

"Cool." Brett brushed his lips over Benj's hair, patted the man's butt. "How long 'til food? I could grab a shower."

"Jean was saying it can sit, so we could go and get you unsweaty."

Ralph grinned and left them to it. "Hey, babe. I think supper's going to wait a half hour or so."

"It's soup. It'll wait."

"Cool." He watched from the corner of his eyes as Benj and Brett made their way out of the kitchen. "You got any magic in here for headaches?"

"You got one?" Jean moved to the cabinet, started digging. "Stress, sinus, or pressure?"

"No, not me. Brett. He's had headaches for years, babe. He can't even remember when they started."

He still couldn't believe the man was just living with that.

"Huh. That needs a doctor, honey. That's serious."

"I know. I'm going to talk to Trelaine and see about setting him up with a battery of tests. Whatever the doc thinks would be worth checking out. But in the meantime, if you've got something that can ease his pain..."

"White willow bark helps. I'll put some in the coffee. No one will know."

"You're the best, babe." He kissed Jean's nose. "You busy?"

"Nope." Jean leaned against him, just for a moment. "You?"

"Not just right now. I could be, though. I'd like to be busy with you." He slid his hand over Jean's belly.

"Chou..." Jean grinned at him, pleased, cheeks pink.

"Yours." He grinned back, rubbed their cheeks together to feel the heat in his lover's.

"Mmm. Mine. Come to the room?" Jean turned the stove down low-low.

"I thought you'd never ask."

Those dark, heated eyes pinned him. "I always ask."

Ralph's cock, already half hard and interested, surged in his sweats, tenting them. "You do."

"I want your cock." The quiet, bold words made him shake.

"Come on." He held his hand out to Jean, eager to drag his lover up to their room like a caveman.

Long fingers slid into his hand, Jean following easily.

"My sexy Cajun."

"Yours, Chou. Take me upstairs."

"I am." He was doing his best not to grunt and throw Jean over his shoulder.

Especially as Jean started bumping and rubbing, pushing against him.

"You're playing with danger today, babe." He growled the words, and when they were up the stairs, he tugged Jean to him to steal a kiss, right there in the hall.

"Like to play, Chou. Fuck me." Oh. Oh, fuck.

"Bedroom. Now." He did pick Jean up this time. He threw his lover over his shoulder and high-tailed it to privacy.

"Damn. Damn, Chou." Hot hands landed on his ass.

"This is what happens when you say stuff like that." He got them into the bedroom, the door firmly closed, and then he tossed his lover onto the bed and began stripping.

Jean sat there and watched him with hungry, needy eyes.

Watching him and not getting undressed. "Naked, babe. I can't fuck you with clothes on." At least, not without ruining said clothes.

"Huh?" Jean's eyes were on his cock, his belly.

He laughed and tossed his jeans at a chair before climbing up onto the bed. He grabbed a handful of Jean's shirt. "I said take this off."

"Oh." Jean slipped out of the shirt, then reached for him.

"The pants, too, babe." He leaned in and licked at Jean's right nipple.

"Uh-huh..." Jean nodded, but didn't move.

He growled and went for the other nipple, sucking that one into his mouth.

"Oh, fuck. Chou. Need." Jean arched, hands shoving at his pants.

"Me, too, babe." He helped tug them down, baring his lover.

During his shower, Jean had shaved, cleaning up the area around that long prick.

It made him whimper, and he felt Jean up carefully, loving the smooth texture, loving even more the way touching it made the most amazing noises come from his man.

"Present for you, eh?"

"And it's not even my birthday." He gave Jean a kiss and then went down on his lover, nuzzling all that smooth flesh.

"Fuck. Fuck, cher. Want you and your cock."

"Gonna have me, babe. Hard and fast." He pushed Jean's legs apart and pushed his face against his lover's ass.

Jean groaned, and as soon as his tongue touched that tight hole, the groan became a cry.

Yeah, that was what he wanted to hear. He began to lick and lap at that sweet hole. It wasn't long before Jean was humping, fucking the air, begging for him. He pointed his tongue and pushed it in, fucking Jean with it.

Jean grabbed his knees and pulled them back, muttering at him in incomprehensible patois, begging him.

He loved being able to make his lover crazy like this. Lived for it.

Once Jean was good and wet he dragged the lube from under the pillow and slicked himself up, got his cock right where he wanted to be.

"Fuck me. Now, Chou. Hard and deep."

"Just like we both need." He pushed into Jean's body; that tight heat felt so good.

So right.

The heat and pressure made him gasp, made his eyes roll back in his head.

"Jean. Jean. Oh, babe." He pushed all the way in. All the way.

Jean's body held him like a fist, rippling and moving around his cock. He found Jean's mouth with his own. He swallowed each and every one of Jean's moans, loving how his Cajun clung to him.

He began to hump into Jean's body, to drive into that heat over and over.

"Love. Harder. More. Come on."

"Yeah, babe." He moved harder, pushing eagerly into Jean's body.

Jean took him in and in, grunting and grabbing at his arms.

He loved this man. Loved everything about Jean. Ralph lost himself in Jean, in the tight heat and delicious mouth. The bed springs were singing, squeaking and ringing.

"Love you," he managed to gasp out, his ass driving him into his lover.

"Mmhmm. Love. Don' stop."

He laughed breathlessly. "No stopping." Like the thought had even occurred to him.

"Good. Good man. Lord."

"The best." He got one of his hands wrapped around Jean's cock and pulled on it as he fucked his lover.

"Mine. Fuck, yes." Jean went up on both elbows, hips slamming against him, driving faster and harder.

"Yes. Yours." He managed a nod and a whimper. God, Jean was one sexy Cajun.

He watched one drop of sweat slide down Jean's chest, slip into the indented navel. Groaning, he pushed harder and shifted. He wanted that special spot -- he wanted to make Jean scream from it. Jean moaned, started moving, too, helping him.

"Yeah, babe. Yeah. Love you." He found Jean's gland, and they found the perfect rhythm, rocking together.

Jean's cries grew in speed and volume, Jean squeezing around him.

"That's it, babe. Come for me."

"Yeah. Yeah. Yeah." Jean's gaze fastened on him, his lover red-cheeked and grinning. "Chou!"

Then heat poured over his fingers.

Fuck, he loved that smell. Jean's pleasure.

Of course, that sweet, tight ass working his cock didn't hurt, either.

"Soon, babe." He was really close; he could feel his orgasm gathering in his balls.

"Uh-huh." Jean grabbed his hips, pulled him deeper.

"Babe!" He cried out, hips grinding against Jean's pelvis. With a shudder, he came, pouring himself into Jean.

"So good." Jean groaned, sounding happy and lazy and sated.

He rested against Jean, letting his lover feel his weight. "Yeah." He grinned. "Just what the doctor ordered."

"Mmm. Maybe you need another dose?"

Laughing, he kissed Jean hard. "Definitely."

Jean rubbed their noses together. "Better, Chou?"

"I'm just right now. You?"

"Perfect."

"Good. Gonna cuddle you 'til we have to go play nice with our guests, okay?"

"Sounds like a plan, Chou."

"Cool." He stayed buried inside his lover and let his eyes close. Relaxing into Jean's welcoming body, he drowsed off.

## *Chapter Fifteen*

Fuck, Benj's hands felt good.

He'd woken up to a slow, deep massage, Benj working his lower back but good.

"What did I do to deserve this, baby?"

"Mmm... you were lying there all sexy and beautiful. I couldn't keep my hands off you."

He chuckled. "Whatever you say, so long as you keep going."

"I'm going to keep going." A soft kiss landed on the top of his neck. "I love your skin so much."

He grunted, eyes closing again. "Ralph said they're going to bring in art supplies so I can paint."

"Oh, won't that be cool?" Benj laughed softly. "You haven't painted in so long."

"Yeah. I'm looking forward to it." That wasn't a lie at all. He could spend the winter painting again.

"Good."

That sweet massage kept going; there was no way he could have tight muscles with Benj working his magic.

"God, baby. You rock my world. You... did we miss supper?"

"No." Benj giggled, fingers stuttering a little. "Jean and Ralph were... busy."

"Ew." He wrinkled his nose. "You know, I just don't see Ralph's appeal."

"No? You're not into big studs like Jean and I are, though."



"I have this serious thing for brown-eyed massage therapists."

"Yeah?" He could hear the pleasure in Benj's voice. "Still?"

"Yeah, Benj. Even when I'm old and hurt and grumpy." He reached back with his good arm, patted Benj's leg.

"You're not old, love."

"I feel old, baby."

"You're not old, you're hurting. And I would do anything to make that go away."

He nodded. He knew that. He did. "You're here, baby. You're the best thing I got going for me, ball or no."

"Long as you don't forget that I'm in it for the long haul."

That made him chuckle. Right.

Forget.

Not fucking likely.

There was a light knock on the door, and Ralph's voice called out. "Hey, guys, are you about ready for supper?"

"Can't it wait for another fifteen? I'm getting a rubdown." See him, see him be reasonable and explain.

"Fifteen it is."

"Good deal." He grinned. "So, I get to enjoy you for ten more."

Benj leaned in against his back, warm and cuddly. "I'm all yours."

He knew. He grabbed one of Benj's hands, kissed the knuckles. He so knew.

## *Chapter Sixteen*

Brett had to have a couple of tests at the hospital, so Jean drove Brett and Benj went along. He and Jean were going to go shopping and then come back and pick Brett up.

He had a list of stuff: pumpkins, carving tools, decorations, and he was going to try to find something fun for him and Brett to dress up as. It didn't matter they were out in the middle of nowhere, they wanted to have fun.

"So, where to first, cher?" The air was crisp and cool, and it felt good to be out.

"Well, my list includes the grocery store, the craft store, and a party shop with costumes. So as long as we get to those, I'm easy." Once the last words were out of his mouth, he blushed slightly and then giggled. "But clearly not cheap," he added.

Jean's laugh filled the air. "We'll stop at the farmer's market first, eh? Get some fresh fruits and veggies."

"Oh, yum. I don't think we've ever had so much fruit as we've had since coming here, but it's all been really good."

It was great, having home-cooked meals that were actually good.

"You should learn to make smoothies. He likes those, and you can add a ton of vegetables."

"Oh, that would be wonderful -- he does seem to really like those. It's funny because I always thought smoothies had to have yogurt in them."

Jean had already taught him a lot in the kitchen, just by letting him watch and help out.

"I find that those slow him down, but one a day with the dairy would probably be okay."

"I never thought of food as an important aspect of how you felt before. I mean, I know he needs lots of carbs when he's playing and stuff, but it's way more than that, isn't it?"

"It's fuel, cher. Just like you put good gas in your car, it runs better." Jean started lecturing about minerals and vitamins and proteins.

Benj tried to pay attention and remember, but he hoped he could get Jean to write it down for him.

When they pulled into the farmer's market, it all went away, because pumpkins! Pumpkins and flowers and beautiful apples and squashes...

Laughing and chattering, he went from stall to stall, grabbing this and that. They had to get a wheelbarrow to hold everything. Jean bought all sorts of vegetables -- cabbages and corn, greens and apples -- all the while talking to everyone.

Benj had an amazing time, choosing his own things and following Jean, taking it all in.

"Do you like green or red apples, cher?"

"Oh, how about both? They look so pretty next to each other."

"Absolutely. I like the green ones for eating and the red ones for cooking."

"Cool. It smells so good here."

"It does. Did you want to stop at the market restaurant for lunch?" Jean's eyes twinkled. "They use things from the market."

He laughed and nodded. "Yes. I do."

The restaurant was sort of amazing -- yam and black bean burritos, spaghetti squash with marinara, a curried pumpkin soup that made him want to moan.

"This is an amazing place. I have the best food adventures thanks to you."

Jean looked at him, beamed. "Why honey... thank you."

He smiled back happily. "You're welcome. Now, what do you suggest for dessert?"

"Apple tart. It's to die for."

"I definitely want to taste something *you* say is to die for."

Jean's hand patted his. "The pastry is something special."

He turned his hand over and squeezed Jean's. "I can't wait."

"So, after this, craft store?"

"Oh, yes, that would be great. Do you and Ralph usually do things up for Halloween?"

Jean shrugged. "We eat and watch movies, but there aren't usually people around at this time of year. We haven't ever had holiday patients."

"Really? Are Brett and I going to put a crimp in your style?" He didn't want to upset Jean and Ralph's holiday, but this was their last hope.

"I don't think so. I'm actually looking forward to Thanksgiving, Christmas."

"Oh, good." He beamed at Jean. "Me, too."

His phone rang. Brett.

He gave Jean a smile of apology and answered. "Hey, love."

"Hey, baby. I'm going to be a bit longer than we thought. If you want, you can go back to the house and I'll call when I'm done."

His heart missed a beat. "Is everything okay?"

"I'll call you when I'm done, baby."

Benj bit his lower lip, wanting to press. "You promise?"

"You have my word, Benjamin."

"I love you," he whispered, Brett's use of his full name suddenly scaring him.

"Love you. Buy me a present. Something cool." The phone line went dead.

Benj swallowed and looked at the phone. He wasn't sure what to make of that, except it wasn't like Brett. He chewed on his lower lip.

"What's wrong? What did they say about his headaches?"

Benj shook his head. "He needs more tests. He's going to call when he's ready to be picked up." He folded his hands together over and over, letting out the nervous energy. "He wouldn't tell me anything."

"I'm sure he's fine, huh? They just need to make sure." Jean didn't sound so certain.

"I don't know, Jean. He wouldn't tell me what the other tests were, and he didn't say it was nothing. He promised to tell me when we go to get him, though."

That didn't exactly relax his fretting, though.

"It'll be fine, huh? Let's go shop."

He nodded. They hadn't had the wicked dessert, but he didn't think he could eat now anyway.

Jean kissed his temple. "We'll get a tart to go."

"Oh, what a good idea -- then Benj and Ralph can have some, too." He reached out and squeezed Jean's hand again. "Thank you."

"It will be all right, cher. You ain't alone in nothing."

"You've been such a godsend, Jean. It's so much less stressful to have someone there for you."

They ordered the whole tart, then paid. "It's good for us, too, to make friends."

"I know you've got lots of people the rest of the year, but don't you ever get lonely in the winter?"

"Sometimes. Mostly I just get grumpy. Ralph is a gator when he's bored."

Benj giggled. He loved the way Jean spoke. "You mean he gets snappish?"

"You know it, cher." Jean rolled his eyes and made alligator snapping motions.

Benj laughed, and he slipped his hand into the crook of Jean's arm, following along and letting Jean distract him.

His Brett would be okay.

He had to be.

Had to.

\*\*\*

He waited out in front of the hospital, very, very carefully not thinking.

The doctors would contact the league, the team, Ralph. He would just not worry about it right now. Damn it.

He needed a bottle of whiskey and a punching bag.

Jean's car stopped just down from where he was standing, and before he could even move, Benj was out of the car and flying toward him. He held his arms open, not thinking. Not thinking at all.

Benj didn't stop until he'd attached himself like a leech, arms holding on tight to Brett. "Oh, it's so good to see you."

"I got you." He squeezed Benj tight. "You have a good day?"

"My day was fine." Benj pulled back enough to look into his face. "How are *you*?"

"It's been a long day." He wouldn't lie, but he didn't want to go into it.

Worry flared in Benj's eyes, but his lover took a deep breath. "Let's get home, then. Jean has the most wonderful supper planned."

Benj took his hand, clung to it hard.

"Sounds good, baby."

He got into the car, and Jean was on the phone, talking hard. "...yeah, yeah. I got him. We're heading home. Yeah. I t'ink so, too, Chou."

Benj climbed into the back with him, sitting close. He could feel the questions right there in the stiffness of Benj's breaths, but Benj was good to him, didn't ask.

Brett just threw one arm over Benj's shoulders, pulled them close. "Tell me about your shopping."

"We got so much stuff. The trunk is full to bursting. We went to the market first and got pumpkins and fresh fruit and vegetables. And Jean knew everyone. And then he took me out to lunch at this fabulous little place that uses stuff from the market, and we got the apple tart to bring home so you and Ralph could have some, too."

He nodded, leaned in, let Benj's voice pour over him.

Benj told him about the craft store and the costume store, about what it was like shopping in the grocery store and how Jean was going to teach Benj how to cook all sorts of food and which foods would give him the most energy and what to stay away from.

It seemed to relax his lover, too; Benj settled more firmly against him and stopped fidgeting.

Brett thought about breathing, in and out, in and out. Over and over. It didn't seem any time at all before they pulled back up at Jean and Ralph's place, Benj beginning to tighten up again.

"Come to the room." He didn't wait to help unload. None of it. They needed this done.

Benj opened and closed his mouth, and then nodded and took his hand, following him along. They didn't stop; Brett just took Benj into the room and locked the door behind him before sitting them down.

Benj only waited long enough for him to be settled before straddling his legs and taking his hands. "Tell me." Worried, scared eyes stared into his own.

"It's a brain tumor. My headaches. That's why I'm having them."

There. He said it out loud. A tumor. In his brain.

Benj went pale as a ghost. "But you've had your headaches forever."

"They say it's been there for a long time. They're going to go in, take it out."

"Brett..." Benj began to breathe rapidly, like he couldn't get enough air.

"Stop it. I mean it, baby. You have to keep your shit together." He couldn't be strong for both of them, not right now. Not without some booze.

Benj took another gasping breath and then wrapped both arms around him and pressed close, held on tight. "Is it... is it... you know?"

"No. No, baby. The doctor says there's nothing about it that looks like cancer. Not anything. They'll know for sure after the surgery, but the specialist said no." Said the tumor was slow-growing, smooth or something. That it wasn't something life-ending.

Career-ending, maybe. Life-ending, no.

"Oh. Okay. Okay. So, what. What are they going to do? I mean, they can't leave it inside your head, right?"

"Surgery. Monday. I'll be in the hospital for about five days."

Benj went entirely stiff and then slowly relaxed. "I'm trying, Brett. I really am. But they're going to cut your head open and I'm scared."

"Yeah, baby. Me, too. We need to talk some, about what happens if... well, if the worst happens, but we don't need to do it today."

Benj suddenly pressed their lips together, kissing him for all he was worth.



Brett opened up, let Benj in, even though his mind was a million miles away, worrying about the team, about the mass in his head, about someone cutting into him.

When Benj was done he pressed their foreheads together and stared into Brett's eyes. "You're going to be okay, love. You have to be."

"Then I have to be." He looked back. "I'm sorry, baby."

Benj's hands cupped his face. "This isn't your fault, love. You didn't ask to have a tumor. I'm just glad they found it when it's still okay to operate. I don't know what I'd do without you, love. I don't." Benj stopped talking, biting his lip hard.

"Shh. You know... I have things set up. In case. You'd be taken care of, baby. Set up." He wouldn't leave Benj without a safety net.

"I don't!" Benj's hands slid to his shoulders and dug in. "I don't want things that you've set up. I want *you*."

"Then you'll have to be strong, Benj. You'll have to make sure they do this shit right while I can't."

Benj nodded, and that seemed to be what Benj had needed to buck up. "We have the paperwork, giving me power of... saying I can make decisions for you. Is the doctor at this hospital good or should we go somewhere else?"

"He seemed okay. I've got Doc Richards coming out Monday for the team. He'll make sure the technical shit's done. You know this might be it, huh? They might not let me out on the field again."

"You get through this operation in one piece and then we'll worry about fighting for your spot on the team, love."

"Do you want to go home or stay here?" He wasn't sure he cared, one way or the other.

Benj chewed on his lower lip for a moment. "If we stayed here, there'd be someone to distract me while you're having the operation and in the hospital. It might make it easier to stay strong."

"Okay, baby. Ralph can do my rehab, with the head and the shoulder." If the guys still wanted them there.

"Good." Benj laid his head down on Brett's good shoulder. "It's going to be okay, love. You'll see. Everything is going to work out just fine."

"I know, baby." He said the words, but he didn't believe it.

Not at all.

## *Chapter Seventeen*

Ralph sat at his desk with about a million forms in front of him, Brett sitting across from him.

Brett and Benj had come home yesterday and hidden out in their room for the rest of the day. He hadn't blamed them a bit.

"So. I'm going to go over all the forms and shit with you. And I hope you'll come back here after for your rehab. Jean and I, we're signed up for the long haul with you and Benj."

"That's what Benj wants." Brett looked like a block of stone, sitting there.

"Is it what you want, too?" He knew staying here would be best -- there was nowhere else that Brett would get personal care like he could here.

"I don't know what I want, man."

"You want the best people working to make you better, man. That's the doctors you have at the hospital, and that's us here. I'm serious, man. We'll be dedicating to getting you back on your feet, continuing the rehab on your arm. And we'll be here to support you and Benj through the whole thing."

"Okay." Brett stood, started pacing from door to window.

"Do you have any questions about the surgery?"

"What's going to happen, after?"

"You mean right after, or once you get back here?"

"Yes. They said I would probably have trouble reading at first, maybe balance problems, some emotional shit."

He thought the question was, 'can you handle that?'

"That's right. They're going to be poking in your brain, man. Sometimes it takes awhile for things to settle back down. Like I said, Jean and I are here to support you and Benj. We've got access to a body doc and a head doc. And we understand what's going on."

"Okay." Brett stood at the window. "What else?"

"Do you want me to go over the worst case scenarios with you?"

"Yeah. Shoot."

He didn't sugar coat it; he knew Brett wouldn't appreciate that. "Absolute worst case is you die on the table. Second worst is permanent brain damage or a stroke. Your odds are very good, though, that you're going to pull through this without either of those happening."

"If I have a stroke, I don't want them to save me. Is there a paper for that?"

Ralph sighed. "It's called a DNR -- do not resuscitate. But Brett, are you sure? A lot of people come back from strokes."

"I'm sure. I don't want Benj to know. Just let me sign it."

"You don't want to discuss it with him? How do you think he's going to feel if you wind up needing heroic measures and have already refused them?" He could understand why a man like Brett would want to sign a DNR, but to not discuss it with his partner felt all kinds of wrong.

"He's going to be devastated. He's going to be devastated no matter what."

"I think you should trust him with this. Explain it to him. Explain how this is a worst case scenario. There's every chance things are going to work well."

"Fine." Those eyes flashed with a sort of deadly cold fury, and the phone flipped open. Brett dialed, waited. "Benj. I'm signing a DNR in case I blow a vein during surgery, so you don't have to take care of a fucking vegetable. That cool with you?"

"You son of a bitch. You know fucking well I didn't mean you should do it like that."

Brett looked over at him. "It's Thursday. I have surgery Monday. I don't have a shitload of time to pussyfoot around. Not only that, my relationship is none of your fucking business. Benj knows me."

"You could have broken it a little more gently." Ralph growled, feeling protective of Brett's sweet, gentle lover.

He pulled out his own phone and called Jean. "Babe? I think you should go check on Benj."

"He's on his way to y'all, bebe."

"Okay, thanks."

Ralph hung up and raised an eyebrow at Brett. "He's on his way."

"I know. He told me." Brett stared him down.

He stared back. "You want to talk to him in private?"

"No. I've done that. He's not a child. My Benjamin is a strong son of a bitch. He'll have my back."

Benj came in as Brett spoke. "Of course I have your back, love." Benj went and stood next to Brett, hand on his arm. "You're not going to be a vegetable."

"I don't want you having to take care of me if I am."

Brett was looking at Benj like... like the man was his equal, like Brett believed Benj could handle this and be strong for both of them.

"Don't I get a choice?"

"I don't want to live like that."

Benj closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "No, it's not cool with me. None of this is. I guess I don't get a choice, though."

"Well, I could not have the surgery. That's an option."

"No." Benj shook his head, hand going to Brett's chest. "You need that thing out of you. You know I'll do anything I must to help you through it."

Ralph was just sick, watching this, watching them go through this. "Do you want to sit with us? As we go through the papers?"

"If that's what Brett wants."

"I just want it over." Brett looked exhausted. "And I want a drink."

Ralph shook his head. "The drinking won't help. At all. And I'd like us all to go into this with a positive attitude. You've been living with the headaches for years. They take this tumor out, and once the swelling goes down, you'll be pain-free. It's a good thing."

Benj held onto Brett's hand. "As soon as you've had the surgery, you can concentrate on getting better."

Brett looked like he was going to argue, but didn't. "Benj has my medical power of attorney. He's on all the insurance policies, and the apartment in the city and the summer house down in the Keys have been transferred into his name."

"What? When did you do all that?"

Ralph was nodding, though. Brett was preparing for the worst case and making sure things would be as easy as possible for Benj if things went wrong.

"This morning. I told you, baby. I won't leave you hurting for anything. I'll take care of you."

"Then you remember that when you're having the surgery and you *live* for me, Brett. You come through it, because all the stuff in the world, all the money, none of that means anything if you aren't there with me to share it."

"I intend to." Brett winked at Benj. "I'll have a big-assed bald spot and be a grumpy asshole. You may decide to off me yourself."

Benj tilted his head. "Well... aside from the bald spot, how is this going to be different than usual?"

Brett chuckled, then popped Benj's hip. "Butthead."

Ralph couldn't help but smile. Every time he decided that Brett was absolutely fucking unbearable, the man would do something to prove that he was human.

"Do you need me for anything else? I can live without hearing all the gory details." Benj looked up at Brett with adoration. The sweet man would do anything for Brett, Ralph was sure of it -- absolutely anything.

"Nope. I've still got to figure out if the club's firing me and work out all the details. I want a BLT. You think you can sweet-talk tall, dark, and Cajun into it for me?"

Benj grinned. "I bet I can. And even if I can't -- that's one I know how to make." Brett was given a solid kiss, and then Benj trotted off, looking almost happy.

Brett looked over at him, one eyebrow raised. "Better?"

Ralph nodded, refusing to feel bad. "Yes. Sit down. Let's go over any other questions you have, and then we'll make sure absolutely everything you want in order is in order."

"I still want a bottle of something eighty proof." Brett sat. "Are they going to get rid of me?"

"No booze. And I don't know." Ralph sighed and rubbed his face. "They're going to wait until after the surgery. They've already paid for your stay here, so they're willing to keep playing the waiting game as long as I tell them you're working toward being a hundred percent again."

"Okay." Brett chuckled, the sound bitter and harsh. "Fucking body."

"It's a strong body, Brett. You've been putting up with pain from that tumor for

years, and you've been playing professional ball while you were doing it. Think how nice it'll be not to have the constant headaches."

"Yeah, if they don't scramble my brains while I'm in there."

"I know that's a danger, but you've got to know they know what they're doing. Yours isn't the first head they've cut into. Everyone wants you coming out of this better than you went in."

Brett nodded. "I wish I'd waited to go in. I'd've had one more good season."

"And in the meantime the tumor could have killed you. Besides, you could come back from this and have that season, Brett. If you rule that out right now, it'll definitely never happen. Just don't shut that door yet." People might think it was hoodoo, but Jean's belief in feeding the soul, in the power of positive thinking -- it made a difference.

Brett sighed, rubbed the back of his neck. "Okay, man. What next?"

"I'll stack the forms we need to fill out here, and you can do that after we've gone through everything. DNR at the bottom. Next up -- you say Benj already has medical power of attorney? Is it filed somewhere?"

"My lawyer has it. Doug Ferris."

Ralph wrote down the name and had Brett add the phone number next to it. "Jean and I will be for him, no matter what. We're here for you and Benj, not the team, not anyone else. I assume Ferris also has all the paperwork for your assets?"

"He does. He has my funeral arrangements, everything."

Ralph nodded. "There a bunch of pre-op forms to sign. Most of them say you and your heirs won't sue if anything goes wrong."

"He can sue for malpractice anyway."

Ralph nodded. "I know, but they won't do the operation if you won't sign."

"Yeah." Brett started signing, the tension in the man's shoulders getting worse and worse.



"You've got the best people, Brett. Everyone is working to make sure you get the best outcome possible from this."

"Yeah." That pen shook this time.

"You know if you want to talk, I'm here, right?"

"What is there to talk about?"

"I know you're not one to talk about your feelings and stuff, but talking can help, maybe you've got questions, fears, things you don't get..."

"You mean, how can I go from on the top of my game to having a surgeon in my brain and a bum shoulder? Do you have that answer?"

He shook his head. "No, I don't. It's not fair, Brett. I'll be the first to tell you that. But life's not fair -- it just is."

"No shit. So, we've talked. Go us. Can we go work out yet?"

"It'll make you feel better to sweat, won't it?" Ralph shook his head. "A very light workout, okay?"

"I'll be on the track."

"Brett. I mean it. No pushing today. No pushing until that thing is out of your head."

"I have to do something. I have to run."

"How about some swimming instead?"

"How about we have a big fucking fight and beat the shit out of each other?"

"It sounds like the perfect stress reliever to me, but I have a feeling if we go back to the house after that, two very pissed-off men will finish what we started."

"I can live with that." The tension was pouring off Brett. Ralph could feel the waves.

"Get out to the pool, man, before I change my mind and go with the shit beating plan."

"Fuck you." Brett slammed out of the room without another word, heading for the pool at a run.

Ralph shook his head. Maybe he should have gone a few rounds with Brett. The man was so full of fear and anger. But if anything happened to Brett because of it, he'd never forgive himself.

This whole thing sucked rocks.

Still, he couldn't help but think that at least they'd uncovered the root of Brett's headaches, and there would never be a better time for the man to undergo surgery and the aftermath than when he had him and Jean to help.

He didn't think Brett was convinced, though.

## *Chapter Eighteen*

Jean waited for Benj to come back in from meeting with Brett and Ralph. Lord have mercy, there wasn't a single thing right about this mess. Not one.

He heard the sweet one's footsteps, running up the walk even before the door opened. He poured two cups of calming tea and waited. Someone was going to need a friend.

Benj came in, looking lost. "Oh. Oh, Jean."

He just stood, opened his arms.

Benj ran into them, a great sob breaking from him.

"Hey, hey, cher. I got you, eh? I got you." He rocked Benj, humming softly, just letting the wee thing cry it out.

Benj sobbed for a few minutes and then sniffed hard. "He signed a DNR."

"Why on earth for?" Brett was young, healthy. That was ridiculous.

"In case he has a stroke or something while they're doing the operation. He said he doesn't want to be a vegetable." Benj looked absolutely miserable.

"So, you tell him, Benj. You tell him that's giving up, yeah? You tell him to fight."

Stubborn men.

"He said I'd support him. To Ralph. How was I supposed to argue with him?"

"So don't argue in front of Ralph. Talk to him now. Tell him what you feel, cher."

Benj nodded and wiped at his eyes. "You don't think I'm crazy for being upset, do you?"

"Shit, no." Hell, Jean was devastated, and he didn't like Brett. "You deserve a say, cher."

"I don't want him to think I don't support him. Because I do, Jean. I *do*. I just..." The tears started again, silent ones this time, flowing down Benj's cheeks.

"I want you to listen to me." He sat them down, stared at Benj. "You have to remember this battle is mental, cher. He has to believe he'll get better, and so do you. Y'all have to fight and fight, so fierce. This is serious hoodoo here."

Benj nodded. "He has to get better, Jean. I love him so much."

"Then you make him." Jean thought this was Benj's trial here, to learn to be strong for Brett, to push back and force his lover to live and thrive.

Benj nodded slowly. "I'm so scared," he said softly.

That didn't surprise Jean at all. "I'd be a little worried 'bout you, if you weren't."

Benj gave him a weak smile. "He's always been the strong one. I don't know if I can do this."

"I know you can. He'd do it for you, wouldn't he?" Jean didn't believe for a second that Benj couldn't do this.

"Of course he would!"

"Well, then. You can, too."

Benj nodded and began chewing on his lower lip. "Do you think I should go talk to him now or wait until he comes back?"

"What does your gut say?"

"I don't know, it's too busy churning. I feel like I'm going to throw up. I have since I found out."

"No tossing cookies. Come on. Have a cup of tea. It'll fortify you."

"I'm not sure I can eat..."

"So drink. Please. It's good medicine."

Benj took the tea and sniffed it cautiously. "Oh, it smells nice."

"It tastes good, too." Drink it, little one. Drink it.

Benj blew across the top of the tea cup and then took a sip. "It is nice, thank you."

"We won't make y'all leave, you know that, yeah?"

"Thank you so much, Jean. You don't know how much that means."

"Oh, cher. Sure I do. Me and Ralph, we need folks, too." Hell, him and Ralph, they'd had rough times.

"This tea is really nice, and it's settling my stomach."

"It's my grandmere's recipe. Guaranteed to work."

"Go Grandmere."

Benj's fingers reached out to touch his hand, and he drank the rest of the tea.

"I was thinking something wicked for supper. Steak?" He was planning on easier foods after the surgery, things that Brett could handle.

"Oh, Brett loves a good steak." Benj nodded, smiled. "Apple pie? With ice cream?"

"Yes. Green beans or artichokes?"

"Oh, I love artichokes. But green beans for Brett."

"You got it, cher. Anything you want."

"I don't think you can give me what I want, Jean."

"No, but I can help you get it for yourself, eh?"

"Yeah, everyone can help. He's going to get well. He has to, because I won't live without him."

"He'll get well and he'll *feel* better." Positive thinking.

"Yes. No more headaches." Benj laughed a little, and if there was a touch of hysteria in it, it was still a laugh.

"That's right. And they don't think it's cancer, right?"

Benj shook his head. "No, just a tumor in his brain. Just."

"Yeah. A slow-growing thing that they'll, God willing, take in one piece."

Benj nodded. "I know I should be grateful that it isn't cancer and that the prognosis is good, but I'm kind of fixed on: brain tumor, surgery, possible side effects..."

"Ralph read some. He'd probably be a little unbalanced the first few days, especially if there's swelling. He'll have emotional outbursts, trouble reading. The pain will be rough the first day, but is controllable, and then that should start to feel better."

"He's not going to like the emotional outbursts thing at all." Benj began fiddling with his tea cup. "He's old school about things like that."

"I'll give him space. Ralph... well, he'll know when to back off and when to push." At least Jean hoped so.

"I think it'll probably be best to just ignore the emotional stuff as much as possible, you know?"

He nodded. He thought so, too. Those wouldn't be real thoughts, more like Brett's brain rewiring itself.

"So we're going to have a special meal tonight? What else can we do to make the next few days special?"

"I think you ought to do things he'd like, but not overdo it. Don't make this a last meal situation, eh?"

"Oh, I never even thought about it like that." Benj started chewing on his lower lip again, worrying the flesh.

"Stop." Jean shook his head, smiled. "You have to believe that he will be fine, that it will be hard work, and he'll be fine."

Suddenly he stopped. The art supplies. They'd come, and Ralph had allotted an entire room to Brett's 'painting therapy.'

"Cher, you should take your man and set up the studio."

Benj's face lit up. "The stuff came?"

"There's a ton of it. Ralph did good."

"Oh, he's going to be so pleased." Benj clapped his hands. "I'm going to go get him, if you think Ralph won't mind my interrupting their schedule."

"I think Ralph is going to be understanding, cher."

Hell, he knew Ralph.

Ralph was scared.

"Okay. I'm going to go now, then." Benj bounced up and came over to give him a hug and a kiss. "Thank you!"

He patted Benj's back. "See you at supper, cher."

Benj headed out, looking so much happier than he'd been when he'd come in.

Jean sat, took a sip of Gram's tea. Hopefully, all this mess would work itself out.

## *Chapter Nineteen*

Benj headed toward the converted barn, but he heard someone in the pool as he passed it, so he hung a right and checked it out first -- Brett liked the pool and spent a lot of time in it; they were lucky it was heated or he'd never be able to keep using it.

Brett was there, doing one lap after the other, pushing himself hard.

Benj bit his lip, a little worried Brett was pushing too much.

He went to the edge and waited for Brett to come near and then waved his arms. "Love! Brett!"

Brett's head popped up from the water. "Hey, baby. What's up?"

"I want to talk to you. And then I want to take you somewhere wonderful."

"Okay. Hand me a towel? My jailer's gone up to the house."

Benj grabbed the towel and handed it over as Brett got out of the pool, skin dripping. "He's not... your jailer." Oh, look at that. Look at his Brett. "You've still got it," he added.

"Yeah? You still want?" Brett flexed for him.

He made an appreciative noise that he didn't have to fake at all. He wasn't faking the way his cock twitched and began to slowly fill, either.

"I do. Very much."

"Good." Brett leaned in, kissed the corner of his mouth. "So, what did you have to talk about?"

He bit his lip, but went ahead and plunged in. "This DNR thing. I don't want you to sign it, Brett."



"Why not?"

"Because I want you to fight. For your life, for me, for us. I want you to trust me to tell them to pull the plug if the worst happens, but I want you to fight with everything you have before that happens."

There. He'd said it.

"You'll do it, though? You'll tell them to pull the plug, if I'm fucked up bad?"

He nodded, blinking back tears that threatened. "I know you don't want to live like that. You wouldn't be you anymore, and I wouldn't hold on to a shell of you. But that's the last resort, love. The very last, after all heroic measures have been tried."

Brett started moving them toward the house, one arm around his shoulders. "It's important to you, then?"

He slid his own arm around Brett's waist and held on tight to his lover. "Of course it is. You are... well, my life."

"I want what's best for you, baby."

"Then you'll fight and fight and get better." He squeezed Brett's waist as they went inside. "Promise me you'll tear up the DNR."

"If that's what you need, but I want your promise that you'll do right by me."

"I will, Brett. I swear it. If I have to pull the plug, I will. I know I don't seem so strong, but I can do that for you. But I need you to fight your hardest for me first."

They came to the house, and Brett pushed him back against a wall, eyes staring down at him. "I always fight for you, baby. I always give it my all."

"Then you tear that DNR up and let the doctors help you if they have to -- give you the tools to win that fight." He slid his hands up around Brett's shoulders and held on.

Brett sighed. "I don't think it's the right decision, but if you're that sure."

"I'm sure, love. I need this."

The softest kiss was pressed to his temple. "For you, baby."

"Good. And I'll be strong for you, Brett. I swear it."

He tugged himself up so their mouths pressed together. "Now, come with me -- I want to show you something."

"Okay, baby. Lead the way."

He grabbed Brett's hand and took him toward the room Jean'd said they were going to turn into Brett's studio.

There were huge windows, the light pouring in, and there was a beautiful fireplace.

"Oh, this is nice."

Stacked in one corner were a bunch of boxes, which he knew were filled with art supplies. He headed for them. "Uh-huh. Nice light."

Brett followed him, hands on his shoulders.

"Do you think this would be a good space for painting?" He opened the first box for Brett.

"It's great, but I don't think I'll be painting now, do you?"

"Why on earth not? Look at all these supplies." Benj thought maybe Brett needed to paint now more than ever.

"I just... Damn. He went all out." Brett knelt by the boxes, helping him unpack all sorts of odds and ends.

There were paints of all sorts, canvases in various sizes. An easel, pallets, and even painting books.

"Wow, there's anything you could ever want here."

"Uh-huh. Sketch books, pencils, brushes..." Brett started moving things around, setting things up.

Benj helped by unpacking all the boxes, but he left the setting up to Brett. Oh, it was good to see his lover engaged and happy. This room would be a boon after the surgery, Benj was sure.

The room was warm and inviting, the sparse furniture welcoming, cushy. He could sit in here, read. Watch.

"It's good, huh?"

"Yeah. Yeah, baby. It's a nice setup. I'll get spoiled."

He leaned against Brett's back, hands sliding around his lover's waist. "I think you deserve a little spoiling."

"I'm scared, baby. I wish I'd never gone in."

"I'm scared, too, but I'm glad you did. That thing would have kept growing and it would have killed you. And you have those horrible headaches that never get any better." He rubbed his cheek along Brett's shoulder. "I just want you to be healthy and happy."

"I just want for all this shit to be over. I want our lives back."

He just wanted Brett to be happy; the rest of it really didn't matter. "It'll happen, love. Maybe not tomorrow or in a week, but we'll get there."

"No, baby. I don't think so. I think... I think the best I can hope for is one more season and then another life."

"But that's not a death sentence at all, love. We've talked about this before -- think of all the things we can do together once you're retired from baseball."

Brett nodded. "I know."

"Do you want to do some painting or sketching now, or just get everything unpacked and set up?"

"Let's put the room together." Brett's eyes met his. "This whole room's ours?"

Benj nodded happily. "That's what Jean said. I never expected it to be so big or so beautiful."

Brett's grunt proved the man was pleased.

They worked together, him unpacking, Brett settling things where he wanted them. When it got to the point where his lover was arranging and fiddling just for the sheer pleasure of doing it, Benj curled up on the comfiest couch and happily watched.

He felt more at peace than he had since Brett had told him about the tumor.

They were going to survive this. They had to. And they were going to be happy surviving it, at that.

Damn it.

## *Chapter Twenty*

Three days left.

Brett sat outside on the porch, staring into the darkness. Everyone was asleep but him. He didn't think he'd ever sleep again.

He just wanted to see everything as a healthy person, again and again.

The screen door squeaked, just the littlest bit, warning him someone had come out. Then his Benj was there, blinking and shivering in the dark. "Brett? Are you okay?"

"Yeah. I'm cool."

No, he wasn't okay, but he'd... live.

"Couldn't you sleep?"

"No, baby. You need yours, though, huh?" He held one arm out, offering his side for warmth.

Benj climbed onto the chair with him, cuddling up against him. "If you're awake, I want to be with you."

"I'm awake." He leaned close, sighed.

Benj kissed his cheek and rubbed those clever fingers over his scalp.

"Feels good." He kept his eyes open, forced himself to pay attention and watch everything.

Benj smiled at him. "I love touching you."

"Yeah? Good. I'm going to have to stay in the hospital for a couple of days, yeah? Four or five, maybe. I'll miss you then."

Benj chuckled. "I'll be staying with you, love."

"It would be more comfortable here." Thank God.

"So we'll be comfortable when we get back here."

"I don't want to do this, Benj." It was easier, to talk in the fucking dark.

"If you don't, the tumor could kill you."

"I know. I'm going to; I just don't want to."

"Yeah, me, too." Benj's arm snaked around his waist, his lover pressing close. He sighed again, eyes on the stars. He was tired -- bone-tired, but he couldn't sleep. Soft, little kisses began to pepper his cheeks.

"Mmm." He tried to fight the yawn with all he was.

"You're tired, love."

"I don't want to waste any time." He was, though, so fucking tired.

Benj kissed him suddenly, tongue pushing into his mouth. He moaned, half surprised, half pleased, and let Benj in, let Benj kiss him. Benj cupped his face, tilting his head slightly to deepen the kiss. The connection was warm, solid, something to enjoy and hold onto.

"Love you," murmured Benj, before diving back in and keeping the kisses going.

Brett closed his eyes, not hard or horny or anything, but it didn't matter. This was good -- him, Benj, the dark, the quiet.

Benj touched him, hands sliding over his body like his lover was learning him again, memorizing him.

"Love you, huh?" He needed Benj to know.

Benj nodded. "Yeah, I know. I've always known."

"Good. You want to go in, or is it good here?"

"I'm easy, love. I just want to be with you. It's pretty nice out here, isn't it? Not too cold."

"It is. Quiet."

Private.

Peaceful.

Benj's hand worked its way beneath his T-shirt, stroked his belly. Brett could feel his abs jerk and jump, respond to Benj's touch. He felt Benj's smile against his lips.

"You laughing at me?" he teased.

"No, I'm enjoying the way your body moves under my fingers." Benj rubbed his belly again.

He had a serious jones for Benj's touch. It was on his top ten list. It was on his cock's top three list.

Those sweet fingers slid up to tease across his nipples. He groaned, his nipples going taut, just from the tiny touch.

Benj made a soft, happy sound and shifted, moving even closer.

"You coming on to me?" He pulled Benj into his lap.

Benj giggled and nuzzled into his neck, licked his skin. "Yes. I am."

"Yeah? It's working."

Benj rolled their hips together. "Mmm, I can tell."

"Are we supposed to be horny, baby?" He settled Benj closer.

"Why not? You want to soak up all the good stuff, right?"

"Every fucking bit."

"Then we should do this. Right now. Under the stars." Benj's mouth settled on his again, the kiss harder, more purposeful.

He found himself moaning, surprised by Benj's hunger. Benj rolled those hips again, hands sliding up under his T-shirt. His fingers went for Benj's waistband, pushing into the elastic to cup his lover's ass. Benj wriggled right back against his hand, a little moan sounding.

"Fuck, you're fine." He barely murmured the words.

"Not fine like you."

"No. Like you."

Benj laughed softly. "You're biased."

"No, baby. I just know what I like." He smiled at Benj, then held Benj's gaze. "You gotta know, Benjamin. More than the fucking game, more than winning, you're it for me, huh? Balls to bones."

"I'm yours, Brett. No matter what."

"Okay, then."

That was going to be enough.

Damn it.



## *Chapter Twenty-One*

Ralph finished his breakfast and raised his eyebrows at Jean. "I guess he's decided not to follow the routine today." He wasn't going to push it, though. Not under the circumstances.

Jean chuckled. "Can you go, uh, look out the dining room door, Chou?"

"Are the raccoons back, babe? You need me to scare them off? It's not a skunk, is it?" He headed for the door and stopped, chuckled at the sight of Brett and Benj curled up on one of the porch swings together.

Jean had draped a blanket over them, and Brett was holding Benj like the man was precious.

"Oh, man. That's something to see."

He held out an arm for Jean.

"Mmmhmm. I thought that you might forgive him if he rested in." Jean cuddled right against him.

He slid his arm around Jean, hand landing on his lover's hip. "Life's a bitch, you know? This isn't fair."

"What? His headaches will be gone, he's here with care and therapy, he has a lover who is dedicated to him. It's the best situation."

"If everything goes okay." Ralph chuckled suddenly. "Look at me, all doom and gloom. It must be catching." He kissed Jean. "You're right, of course."

"I am." Jean smiled at him, the look almost gentle. "He'll be home right before Halloween. I'm going to decorate."

"You are?" They usually didn't do much for Halloween. It wasn't like they had trick or treaters out here.

"The little one'd like it."

"Ah. Then you should do it." He kissed the top of Jean's head. "I'll help if you want."

"I'd like that." Jean looked up at him, those dark eyes tired, worn. "This has been a different job."

"It has. It's more personal than usual, isn't it? You like Benj a lot."

"Well, Chou, how often do we get family in for the winter?"

"Never. It's usually nice and quiet." He gave Jean a wink. He didn't mind having this company. It had become personal for him, too.

"God knows Mr. Gator ain't quiet. Or nice."

"Give him a chance, babe. Let's see what the surgery produces."

"What? They pluck a tumor from his head and he becomes a sweet?" Jean's eyes twinkled. "There's a thought."

"Hey, if his head isn't hurting twenty-four seven, then yeah, maybe it'll improve his disposition." Ralph liked Brett. For all the man's growls and gruffness, he wasn't a quitter, he worked hard, and it was obvious to anyone with eyes that he loved his man wholeheartedly.

"Maybe. Come inside, let's have coffee. He'll be sore when he wakes up."

"Yeah. We should set the massage table up in his painting room, so Ben can work on him in a nice environment whenever he needs it. He equates the barn with arguing with me."

He and Jean made their way back to the kitchen.

"Makes you wonder some, what the little one sees in him, eh?"

"Did you see the way he was holding Benj? Like there wasn't anything more

precious in all the world. That's what Benj sees in him. And he no doubt thinks Brett is a stud." Ralph winked at his lover.

"No doubt." Jean patted his ass, then turned to face him. "Not as good as mine, though."

Jean's words had him puffing up. "You still think I'm a stud, babe?"

"Every day." Jean's fingers traced his pecs, down his abs.

"Mmm." His cock liked the touches, perking in his jeans and beginning to push at the fly. "You've still got it, too."

"This old Cajun?"

He made a point of looking around. "What old Cajun? Now, if you mean this *sexy* Cajun, then yeah, you."

"I don' know 'bout that, Chou..." Jean's fingers found his nipples, tweaking them hard.

That left him gasping, his hands sliding around to Jean's ass. He grabbed himself a double handful and squeezed. "Careful now, or it won't be coffee we'll be having."

"Coffee is food of the gods." Jean's ass pressed back into his hands.

"No, that would be your come."

"Chou..." He loved that -- the way he could still surprise Jean, shock his lover.

"It's the truth, babe." Bending, he took Jean's mouth, tongue sliding past Jean's open lips.

A soft moan pushed into their kiss, and he couldn't help but smile. Each kiss reminded him why he'd wanted Jean, why he'd pursued the man.

"Love you, my Cajun." He pulled Jean up against his body, rubbing their middles together. Jean felt so good, so right.

"Tell me you feel good, eh? Tell me you're well."

"Babe, I'm good, you know that. You feed me right; I exercise. You're stuck with me for a very, very long time."

He saw Jean's lips moving in a fervent prayer. Ralph let Jean make the prayer -- they could all use all the help they could get -- and bent to suck up a mark on the long throat.

"Chou..." Jean's body arched, tense as a bowstring. "Feel that, deep in."

"That's where I want to be, babe. Deep inside you."

"Now?" Jean was moving toward the hallway, toward their quarters.

"Now is good." He followed eagerly, his hands still on his lover.

"Uh-huh. I want you." Jean was worried, scared, he could feel it in his lover's tension.

"You got me, babe. I'll take your mind off things."

"Swear it." Jean stripped his shirt off as they got into the bedroom.

He took his T-shirt off, too. Why had he gotten dressed? "Oh, I swear it. In a second I'll show you."

Jean was naked, hands working both their cocks. "Good. Now."

"Hungry man." He pushed his own jeans right off and pushed hard into Jean's hand.

"Haven't had my coffee..." Jean's laughter made him smile.

He cupped Jean's face and took his lover's mouth, tasting the sweetness there. Jean knew how to touch him, and he imagined he could feel every single scar -- each smooth burn, each callus -- on the skin of his cock.

"You want me inside you, you'll need to slow down, babe." He was fast on his way to coming.

He could see Jean consider it, then smile. "I want." That touch slowed down, becoming almost torturous.

Groaning, he tried to push in faster, harder along Jean's palm. "Why did I have to say anything?"

Laughter filled the room, Jean gentling his touch even more.

Ralph pushed Jean onto the bed, tumbling into it with his lover. "Want you so much."

"You have me all the time. You're just randy." Jean winked and goosed him.

He jerked and managed not to shout out at Jean's hand pinching. "I am. You must be putting something in my food."

"Mmhmm. Cajun voodoo."

He chuckled. "Well, you just keep doing that voodoo you do." Then he found Jean's mouth with his own, his hand searching for the lube on the bed.

"Forever." Jean groaned against his lips, biting at him, just a bit.

He humped down against his lover, the little sting making him leak.

"Remember our first time?" Jean lifted one leg, spread for him.

"I do." He'd been so nervous, Jean so fine, so sexy. He finally found the lube and popped it open, splurting slick over his fingers.

"I needed you more than air." Jean's lips were soft below his ear.

"And I couldn't breathe."

He nuzzled against Jean's lips and searched for that hot little hole.

"I wanted..."

Jean's balls were so soft, like velvet.

"...that. I wanted you inside me."

"I couldn't believe how tight you were. How hot." He slipped his fingers into Jean's hole, groaning as that tight heat wrapped around him.

"You spent so long, making sure I was ready. I was out of my mind."

"I wouldn't hurt you for the world." He slid his fingers in and out, stretched them.

"No. I know." The neat thing was, Jean was telling the truth.

He found Jean's gland and pushed against it over and over, just to watch his lover's reaction.

Jean's eyes went heavy-lidded, the full mouth opening.

"Want you so bad, babe." He let his fingers slide away and slicked up his cock.

"Like this or hands and knees?"

"Hands and knees, baby. I want to take you hard. Make you scream, yeah?"

That earned him a deep, red blush, Jean nodding and turning for him.

"Love this ass, babe." He bent to give one cheek a kiss.

"Love how you fuck me."

"Good." With that, he slid right into his lover, that tight ass squeezing hard around him.

Jean moaned, body jerking, muscles rippling around him.

"Babe. Yes." Groaning again, he began moving, fucking, loving on Jean.

"Yes..." Jean pushed back onto his cock, head down as they rocked.

He wrapped his fingers nice and tightly around Jean's hips and helped his lover rock back into his thrusts.

"That's it. Just like that. Chou. Chou..." The patois started flowing again.

He loved that, loved making his Cajun crazy. Ralph moved faster.

Their skin slapped together, both of them groaning as they made the bed scream. He shifted, kept moving until he found that pleasure point inside of Jean's body. When he hit it, Jean jerked and cried out, head tossing.

"Yes!" He moved faster and banged hard against that spot over and over.

"Ralph. Chou. Please. Don' stop..."

No, there was no stopping.

He pushed harder. He could hear Jean, getting close, needing more and more.

Needing him.

He slid one hand around Jean's hip and grabbed hold of the needy cock. Jean bucked up, almost knocking him over, the low cry desperate.

"Babe. Babe." God, it was good. There was nothing like it.

Heat splashed over his hand, Jean's ass milking his cock.

He opened his mouth in a soundless cry as Jean's orgasm pulled his own out of him.

Jean held him in, held him close, and he curled around his lover's back. "Love you, babe."

"It's going to be okay, right?"

"It's going to be okay." He'd keep saying it until it could be true.

## *Chapter Twenty-Two*

He packed his bare essentials into an overnight bag, brushed his teeth, and stared at himself in the mirror for a long, long time before he headed to the bedroom and sat.

"Are you sure you want to come with me tomorrow? The surgery's scheduled so early..."

Brett had already been to the hospital more than he'd expected. Tests, more tests, papers -- all that horseshit.

"Of course I'm coming with you tomorrow." Benj cupped his cheek, gazed up at him with all the love in the world. "I wouldn't be anywhere else."

"You could just sleep in." He wrapped one arm around Benj, tugged him close. "Everything's set up, in case. You know."

Benj curled up against him. "I won't be able to sleep, love. You don't have to worry about me -- it's my turn to worry about you."

He nodded, trying not to think about... all this mess.

Cutting into his fucking head. They were going to cut into his motherfucking head.

Benj nuzzled against him. "You need to sleep tonight, love. Can I help with that?"

"I don't think I can sleep, baby." He was scared.

"You want me to rub your back, love?"

"Sure." If it didn't relax him, it would ease Benj.

"Why don't you lie on the bed -- more comfortable that way."



Brett moved, stretched out, trying not to think about... all the things a guy thought about before surgeons took out an extra bit of brain.

Benj oiled up his hands and began working on his back, the touches light and good, slowly becoming stronger. "You need to talk about it, love?"

"I don't know what to say. There's nothing to say."

"You're tight."

"I'm scared."

"Good." Benj kissed the back of his ear. "I'd be more worried about you if you weren't. It's a scary thing. You're going to come through it, though. You're going to come through it and be better than ever."

"Well, then. I'm going to be fine." He winked, chuckled, then closed his eyes tight. "I love you, huh?"

"I know. I do like to hear it, though. As many times as you'll tell me." Another kiss landed, this time on his neck. "And I love you. More than I could ever say."

"I know, baby." Brett sighed, changed the subject. "Did I tell you that Mickey and Raul and Jack called me? They're going to come see us at the hospital."

"Really?" Benj sounded truly happy to hear it. "I'm so glad they're coming to support you."

"They just want to poke fun." He grinned, though. The four of them were tight -- even with all the weirdness. They hadn't been in touch much. Everybody knew it was bad luck to hang with the injured guy.

"They only do that because they care." Benj's hands were working magic and relaxing his muscles.

"I know." Hell, he'd been Mick's best man and had testified at Raul's immigration hearing.

"It's nice knowing they'll come by to see you. I know you've missed everyone, everything." Benj's fingers began pushing along his spine.

"It's been nice, though, having you." His toes actually curled.

Benj giggled softly. "You can have me any time you like."

"Oh ho! Can I now?" He actually smiled and meant it. "I want to go travel, baby. You and me and the world, huh?"

"Yeah. There's a lot of places to see. We could just go and go and go."

Brett nodded. "It's a plan. We do this thing, we heal up, if I have to, I play my last season. Then we just go."

"Yeah, it sounds great. Especially the 'we' part."

"Where should we go first?"

"Oh, somewhere warm with a beach and room service."

"You liked Cancun. We could go there. See the ruins."

Sunbathe.

Drink.

Sleep in.

"Sounds good to me. We should go see the monkeys this time."

"You and your monkeys."

Those sweet giggles came again, Benj's fingers tickling now. He started making monkey noises, oo-oo-oo and ee-ee-ee, both of them laughing hard. Benj collapsed half on him, half off, nose pressing against his.

He met Benj's eyes, laughter fading. "I'm gonna make it through this, baby. I swear to you. I'm gonna do it."

"You'd better. Because if you don't, I'm going to find you on the other side and beat your ass."

"That's fair."

"Okay." Benj rubbed their noses together and then kissed him.

He dragged Benj close and held on. Okay.

It was going to be okay.

## *Chapter Twenty-Three*

Benj had tried sleeping.

He'd tried meditating.

Pacing.

Reading.

Talking.

He'd tried everything.

None of it could mitigate the fact that Brett was in that operating room with his head being cut open, the tumor taken out. Would they get it all? Would something go wrong during the surgery? Every possible scenario ran through his head like a gory movie.

And no matter what he did, he couldn't stop it.

"Cher, you want a juice? They have orange, apple." Ralph and Jean had been with him, every second.

"I don't think I could." His mouth was dry, so dry, but he didn't think he could keep anything down.

"They said he's doing well, huh? We should get another update soon."

Benj nodded and got up again, walking around the little waiting room. He wanted to run. He wanted to scream.

Mostly he wanted Brett to be done with surgery, to be well and holding him again.

A nurse came in, headed right for him. "Mr. Simon?" At his nod, she continued.

"We've had some trouble regulating his blood pressure. The surgeons are with him, but things are taking longer than expected."

His heart felt like it had stopped. "Trouble?"

"Just a bit. They're taking every precaution. I just wanted to update you."

"I. Thank you. How much longer?" He didn't think he could do this for much longer. Not without losing his mind.

"You should be able to see him in recovery in a couple of hours, I imagine."

"A couple of hours." He blinked back stupid tears. "Okay. Okay, thank you."

She patted his arm, nodded, then she was gone.

Damn it.

Ralph was right there. "His blood pressure?"

"That's what she said. They had trouble regulating it. Is that bad? She made it sound like it wasn't too bad, but she said trouble."

"I'm sure they're being careful so that he doesn't have a stroke. Remember, that was the big risk."

"He's too young to have a stroke." Benj twisted his hands together. "He's not going to have a stroke. He can't."

"Well, then, we'll be glad they're takin' their time, Chou."

"I just don't know how much longer I can stay here." He sat down and then stood again.

"Do you want to go somewhere?" Jean took his hand. "We could walk."

He held on like it was a lifeline. "I need to be here when they've finished."

"You have your cell. We'll walk the stairs."

"You sure that will be all right?"

Jean gave him a sweet, gentle smile. "I swear it will be."

"Okay. Okay, that sounds good. I don't think I can take much more of this room."

He let Jean lead him out of the waiting room and only looked back twice.

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Benj followed the nurse to recovery. He was vibrating. Literally.

They were finally -- finally -- letting him go see Brett. Not awake yet, yadda yadda -- he didn't care. He just needed to see his lover for himself. The surgeon -- Dr. Somebody Important -- was standing there, smiling. Smiling.

Oh, thank God.

"Hi. Hello. What can you tell me about Brett?" There, go him. He hadn't stammered once.

"He's doing well. Very well. We removed the tumor -- all of it, in one piece. It's at the lab, but it looked good."

"Oh!" Benj's knees nearly collapsed out from under him at the sudden release those words brought.

"He's going to be groggy, hurting, and his balance is going to be affected for a few days at best, a few months at worst."

Months. Oh, Brett would hate that. Just hate it. But still. "But it is going to get better?"

"There's no reason to believe it won't. He's relatively young, healthy, strong. His nerves will reroute."

"Oh, that's good news. Thank you." He needed to go see Brett now. He didn't care if his lover was groggy or grumpy or anything but alive.

"You'll only be allowed in for a few minutes. The nurses will show you the hand washing station."

"Okay." He nodded and turned his attention to the nurse, who was waiting patiently by a sink, a smile on her face.

She showed him the foot pedal sink, the soap, the face masks.

If he hadn't been so thrilled to finally be seeing Brett he might have been worried or scared about all the preparations he had to make, but he just wanted to see Brett. Nothing else really seemed real.

Really, Brett looked okay -- a little pale and with tubes and bandages on his head, but not... deathly ill.

He reached for Brett's hand, taking a big sigh of relief when it was warm. It felt normal. Benj wasn't sure what exactly he'd been expecting, but he was relieved by what he got.

"He's really doped up, but you can talk to him. He's already had his eyes open twice, and he's talked, which is great. He didn't make much sense, but they were words. I'm Lisa, by the way. I'm a big fan. He signed a ball for me, about five years ago."

"Oh, you'll have to tell him -- he'll love that." Benj gave her a big smile and then turned his attention back to Brett.

"Brett? Love? Lisa says you're kind of awake. Can you hear me?"

Brett took one slow, deep breath, chest rising and falling.

"The doctor said everything went well. And you look good." *Open your eyes for me, love.*

"Thir..." Brett frowned, swallowed.

"Oh, are you thirsty?" Benj turned to Lisa, who'd retreated, but was still within earshot. "Can he have some water?"

"Not yet. We need to make sure he doesn't vomit. How about a few ice chips?"

Benj nodded and took the cup of ice chips she handed over.

"I've got some ice chips for you, love." He took out one of the chips and rubbed it along Brett's lips. "Can you feel that?"

Brett's lips opened, straightaway. He was worried about the ice chip sliding into Brett's throat and choking him, so he kept hold of one end and slipped it into Brett's mouth. It melted almost immediately, and Brett opened for another one.

"Oh, you are thirsty."

He got another ice chip and did the same thing. "You're doing great, love. Just great."

"Ben..."

Those bloodshot eyes opened, stared at him.

"Brett!" He beamed at his lover, moving closer so he was sure Brett could see him. "Hey, love. Don't you look wonderful?"

"Hurts."

"I'll talk to the nurse -- I'm sure you're not supposed to be hurting."

He turned away long enough to get Lisa's attention again. "He's hurting."

She came over, looked at his chart. "Okay, do you see that green button? That's his morphine drip. You can't overdose him, but either one of you can hit it when he needs relief."

"Oh, thank you."

He smiled at Brett. "They've got you on the good drugs, love." Leaning over, he hit the button. "I'll show you how to use it when you're less groggy, okay?"

Brett tried to nod, but groaned.



"It's okay, love, you don't have to say anything or move or stuff like that. It's going to get better. They had you in the operating room forever because they were being very careful. They got the whole thing out, though, love. The entire tumor."

He babbled away, hoping Brett was holding onto his voice.

Lisa kept coming over, checking things, nodding, offering him a smile. "We're going to move him to ICU overnight in a few hours, then to his own bed tomorrow morning."

"I can stay with him in the ICU, right?" He was sticking by Brett like glue.

"You can, but I'll warn you, he'll be out of it, and you'll be uncomfortable."

"That's okay. I promised him I'd stay with him." It wasn't like he'd be able to sleep if he went back to the house with Jean and Ralph.

Brett groaned softly, legs moving restlessly. "I need up."

One of Lisa's hands landed on his shoulder. "Hey, big guy. Stay. No getting up for a day or so, hmm?"

"You'll have lots of time to show everyone what a big stud you are."

Lisa grinned at him, winked. "I'd prefer not to restrain him, honestly, so let's keep him nice and calm. The pain meds might give him nightmares."

"Restrain him!" Benj's eyes went wide. "No, we don't want that."

"Nope. So let's keep him quiet."

"Did you hear that, love? You need to stay calm and quiet." He patted Brett's hand.

Brett's fingers jerked, then curled around his, holding on.

"Love you, Brett." He bent and kissed Brett softly, and then simply leaned against the edge of the bed and held onto Brett's hand. It was going to be okay.

## *Chapter Twenty-Four*

Hurt.

His head hurt.

"Ben." Didn't Benj say he'd be here?

"Hey, love." Benj's hand slid over his, warm and soft. "How are you doing?"

"Where am I? I need a drink." His mouth felt weird.

"Hospital, love. You had surgery, remember? To take out the tumor." Something cold and wet slid against his lips.

He opened for the ice, sucking the little chips. So good. So good.

Wait.

Tumor.

"Did they get it?"

"They did, love. The whole thing. It's at pathology, but the doctor said it looked good -- not cancer." Benj's fingers slid on his cheek, petting him.

"Not cancer?" He sighed. "Good. When... when do we go?"

"When you're feeling better. A few days. I'll stay right here with you, so you don't have to worry about a thing."

He grunted, dozing off a little bit maybe, holding Benj's hand.

When he came to again, Benj's head was on his belly, fingers still twisted around his. He reached over, careful of all the tubes, and stroked Benj's hair, real careful. Those sweet eyes popped open, and Benj smiled up at him.

"Baby." He smiled back. "It all went okay?"

"It went great. They got it all out."

"When's it supposed to feel better?"

"Are you hurting?" Benj lifted his head and reached for something. "This is your morphine. You click it when you're hurting."

"Kay." Warmth flooded him, and he sighed. "Love you, huh? You okay?"

"I am." Benj kissed his hand. "And I love you, too."

"When can we go home?"

"When the doctor says so. They said it would be four or five days before the surgery, remember?"

"I think so?" He felt a little confused. "I think I'm ready now."

Benj shook his head. "That's the morphine talking, love. It hasn't even been a day."

"It hasn't?" He frowned, tried to sit up. "I have to pee."

"You've got that thing in your penis doing it for you, love." Benj patted his stomach.

"I have to pee."

Benj frowned at him and pulled back the blankets. "Oh, the line is all twisted." Benj fiddled.

The pressure eased, and he groaned in relief.

"Better."

"Sorry, love."

Benj shifted, moving so his head was resting on the bed next to Brett's.

"When do I get to come home?" Wait? Had he asked that?

"In a few days. You only just had the surgery, love." Benj's lips touched his softly.

He smiled, nodded, and winced as that pulled at the back of his head. "No nodding."

Benj's hand slid on his cheek. "Yeah. No nodding. Not for a few days, hmm?"

"Love you, baby." He sighed, stretched. "What time is it?"

"Um..." Benj checked his watch. "It's just after five a.m."

"Wow. Aren't you tired? Shouldn't you go home to the apartment? Sleep?"

Benj's face went funny for a moment, and then he shook his head. "I'm staying here with you, love."

"I know it's fucking selfish, but I'm glad. I hate these places." His eyelids were so fucking heavy.

So heavy.

"It's okay, love. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else." Benj gave him another soft kiss. "Why don't you go back to sleep before the nurses come and wake you up?"

"I think I should. I want juice. You think the Cajun would bring me one of the red smoothies?"

He liked those.

He liked those a lot.

Benj gave him a slow, beautiful smile. "I bet he would. I'll ask him when he comes by tomorrow, later today. Whatever."

"Cool."

He patted Benj's hand again, sighed softly, then sank into sleep.

## *Chapter Twenty-Five*

Jean had a care package made up -- juices and bread and magazines and decent coffee in a Thermos and soft, comfortable clothes. "Come on, Chou. The lady said they got him in a private room already. That's good, huh?"

"Yeah, it is. Means they've moved him out of ICU. I'm not sure why we needed to bring all this stuff..."

"Because Benj needs real food. Brett needs real food." Hospitals were awful places.

"He might not be on solid food yet, babe." The elevator stopped and they stepped out. "They said four twelve."

"Brett needs nutrition and it's chilly in here." So what if he was stubborn about it?

Ralph chuckled. "Let's face it -- you're a nurturer."

Like that was news.

"Shut up, Chou." There. Four twelve. He knocked quietly.

Ralph chuckled softly, opening the door when they heard Benj's call to "Come in."

Brett was in bed, eyes closed, looking pale as hell, but not as bad as he'd feared. Benj, though, the man looked too pooped to pop.

Benj gave them a tired smile. "Hey."

"Hey. I brought goodies." He headed over, handing Benj a nice, soft, warm sweatshirt and the Thermos of coffee. "How's he doing?"

"Oh, God. Jean. Thank you." Benj looked like he was going to start crying, but he bit his lip and didn't. "Good, actually. The nurses kept waking him up. I'm not sure

how anyone gets better without getting any decent sleep. But he knew who I was, what was going on. They've even taken the drain out. He wants to go home."

"I imagine so. No one wants to stay, hmm? Can he eat yet?"

"I don't think so -- they're still only letting him have ice chips. Maybe after the doctor sees him." Benj hugged the sweatshirt to him, like it was a pillow, or a security blanket. "Is this coffee? The stuff in the cafeteria is brutal."

"It is coffee. I brought sandwiches, too, and some sweet stuff. Music, books. A decent pillow."

Brett's eyes opened for a second. "Benjamin?"

Benj turned immediately and took Brett's hand. "Hey, love. I'm right here."

"Benj. Hey. Thirsty."

"We're still on ice chips, love. I'll talk to the nurse when she gets here." Benj fed a couple of ice chips into Brett's mouth, his attention fully on the ball man.

Ralph nodded. "I'll go talk to them, Benj. He needs to wet his whistle, huh?"

He nodded to his lover, smiled at Brett. "How're you feeling?"

"Sore, stupid. You bring me a smoothie?"

"Huh?"

Benj gave him a grin. "He's been asking for one of your smoothies."

"I'll bring you one tonight."

Brett grunted. "A red one. I want a red one."

Strawberry. He knew that. "You got it, man."

Benj beamed at both of them.

"He brought me a nice, soft sweatshirt, too, and some good coffee. Which I don't

think you can have yet. But Ralph will find out. Are you hurting? Do you need anything else?" Benj was flittering from one thing to another. The poor sweet thing was obviously exhausted.

"No. No, I'm good." Brett smiled a bit, then the heavy eyelids fell again.

Benj patted Brett's cheek and then sighed. "He's been doing that, going in and out. He knew who you guys were, though, and remembered that he wanted a smoothie. Those are good signs."

"He sounds good. Very good. Can he... how's his balance?"

"I don't know. They haven't had him up yet." Benj gave a frustrated sigh. "The doctor hasn't come by yet so we don't know anything and he can only have the ice chips and I just wish he'd show up and let us move forward."

Ralph came in the door, two big male nurses in tow. The familiar faces made Jean smile. "Benj, this is Marcus and Ken. We're good friends, and they're going to be on Brett's team while he's here."

"Hi, there. It's good to meet you." Benj shook their hands. So serious.

"Hey. The doctor's going to be here in a few minutes, and then we'll get him on his feet. If you want, there's juice down in the nurse's station. You can get some, and we'll check bandages and tubes."

"Oh, I should stay."

"What kind would he like? I'll go." Jean didn't mind.

"Something with strawberry if they have it, apple if they don't. Thank you so much, Jean." Benj held his hand tight for a moment.

He nodded and headed out. He found apple that didn't look like it had extra shit in it.

"You being picky, babe?" He hadn't realized Ralph had followed him out.

"Thought Brett would appreciate being given the privacy."

"Yeah. He looks better than I thought."

"It went well. He's with it, too. That's a really good sign."

"Yeah? You're happy?"

"With what I've seen so far. I'd like to hear what the doctor has to say."

He nodded, bouncing a little. "Yeah. Yeah, me, too. I just. I'm worried about Benj, hmm?"

"He's stronger than you think -- he'll do anything for Brett."

Jean headed back toward the room, walking slowly. "But would Brett do anything for him?"

"I believe he would, Jean. He tore up that DNR."

"Yeah?" That made him feel hopeful, honestly hopeful that the gruff man would make Benj happy.

"I know he's not your type, babe, but he's a good man."

"You're my type, Chou. Open the door." It wasn't that he thought Brett was a bad man; he thought Brett wasn't good enough for Benj.

Ralph goosed him first and then quickly opened the door.

Brett was sitting up, pillows propping him up, looking like he'd just run a marathon. Benj was fussing over Brett's pillows, looking happy to have something to do.

"Hey. Hey guys." Brett blinked at them. "When did you get here?"

"About ten minutes ago, love." Benj stroked Brett's hand. "Remember asking Jean for a red smoothie?"

"Right. Right, I... Fuck."



"Shh. It's okay, love. They were drilling in your head; it's perfectly all right to need reminding now and then."

"Still." Brett frowned. "I want to go home, Benj."

"I know, love. It'll be a few days here at the hospital, though. The doctor hasn't even seen you yet."

Jean could see Benj's fingers fluttering, fiddling with the edge of Brett's sheets.

Ralph stepped up, got face to face with Brett. "Your short-term memory's a little whacked, man. That's frustrating as fuck, I bet."

Brett nodded, then winced. "I gotta fucking stop doing that."

"He's going to be okay, though. Remember, this was one of the possible temporary side effects."

Benj took the apple juice from him and popped the top, finding a straw. "Are you still thirsty?"

"Fuck, yes."

Benj sat on the bed next to Brett and held the straw up to his mouth.

"I can do it, Benj." Brett's hands were shaking violently, opening and closing randomly.

Benj bit his lip, but nodded, closing Brett's hand around the juice and then letting go.

"Wait." He headed over, caught the bottom of the glass in one hand before it fell. "Those things are damn slick. I know, I carried it in."

"Thanks," Benj said, patting his hand and taking the glass from him. "Let me help you this time, Brett? We'll find you a better cup for next time."

"Okay. Okay, Benj." Brett drank deep, then settled back, gasping a little.

"You're doing well, love. You're doing well." The sweet thing looked absolutely frazzled.

"Are you sure you won't come to the house, cher? Let me or Ralph take a shift?"

"Oh, no. I can sleep here. Brett needs me."

"I'll be happy to stay, cher. Honestly."

"I promised him I'd be here." Benj patted his hand. "I do appreciate the offer, but I'm fine."

Ralph nodded. "Let's let them sleep, Jean. It's time for rest. They'll have him up and walking this afternoon."

"Yeah?" At Ralph's nod, he shrugged. "I'll be back this evening with your supper, cher."

"Thank you so much, Jean, Ralph. It was good of you to come. Oh, and the red smoothie, right?"

"Absolutely, cher. I'd be happy to."  
In fact, he'd be more than happy to.

"Thank you!" Benj wrapped him in a quick, hard hug before going back to Brett's side.

He nodded, headed out with Ralph, trying his very best not to worry.

Not to worry about the little cher at all.

Ralph's arm came around his shoulders. "You're fretting, babe."

"Am I?" He shook his head. "I don't know why. We've had head injury patients. We've had grumpy patients. I just really like Benj."

Ralph began to chuckle. "Babe -- you're a nurturer. Benj calls to the momma in you."

"Oh, you stop it." He reached out, swatted Ralph's ass hard. "Ass."

Ralph squeaked, but it didn't stop the laughter. "It's the truth, babe."

"Is not. Butthead." They were both laughing now, heading out into the fall morning. "You want to go spend the day goofing off?"

"I do. Yesterday was long and awful, and once Brett is back he's going to need a lot of attention. Let's go have lunch somewhere fun and then decide what to do with our afternoon."

Their fingers twined together for just the briefest second. "Sounds good, Chou. Perfect."

"Perfect like me." Ralph danced out of the way before he could do anything about that comment.

He gave chase, the sun making the day seem brighter, warmer. Happy, all of a sudden.

Ralph looked back over his shoulder, laughing, smiling.

It really was a perfect moment.

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Benj watched and fretted and tried to stay out of the way as Marcus and Ken helped Brett sit up and move to the edge of the bed.

He held his breath as Brett carefully got his feet under him and stood up. When Brett didn't immediately collapse back down, Benj clapped his hands happily.

"Well done!"

"You ready to take a step, man?" Ken asked.

Brett nodded, then groaned and swayed. "Fuck."

"Easy. Easy. Breathe. Don't jostle your brains."

Benj giggled nervously. "No brain jostling."

He wished there was something he could do.

"The first few steps are going to be really weird, man, but your brain needs you to try, so you can rewire the motions." Ken had Brett take one shaking step.

"Good job, love!" Benj beamed at Brett. "Your first tumor-free step."

Brett looked at him, eyes wide and scared and beginning to be furious. "How long is it going to be like this?"

"Love, this time yesterday you were in surgery. They cut your *head* open. Of course you're going to be shaky to start with!"

"It wasn't just yesterday..."

"Yes, love. It was." He blinked back his tears and put a smile on his face. He knew how much Brett hated feeling weak. "Just yesterday."

"Jesus."

Marcus patted his arm. "Dude, big-assed tumor equals big hole for your nerves to figure out. It'll happen."

And now they knew -- now Benj knew from the surgeon's mouth. Not cancer. Not malignant.

He patted Brett's hand. "It's all going to be just fine. You need to be a little bit patient is all. Do you think you can take another step?"

Marcus had one arm, Ken the other, and Brett managed another step, then a third.

"We're going to get you to that chair, man, and remake your bed, okay?"

"That sounds great, doesn't it, love?" He went to the chair and patted it, like he was Vanna White or something.

"I want to go home." Brett looked about as white as a ghost.

"When the doctor says it's okay."

Marcus and Ken got Brett to the chair and sitting in it and then went to deal with the bed.

Benj cupped Brett's cheek. "Can I get you anything, love? Some more juice?"

"This is fucked up, baby. I want out of here." He could feel Brett's heart racing.

"It's just going to take a couple of days, love." He pressed kisses on Brett's face. "You need to calm down, okay? You need to relax."

Brett sipped at the juice, swallowing easily, color seeming to come back a little.

"Jean's bringing you a smoothie later. Won't he and Ralph be pleased to hear you walked!"

"Ralph. He'll say I haven't done enough." Brett winked.

Benj giggled softly. "Probably. But you'll do better tomorrow."

"You think?" Brett patted his hip, chuckled.

He leaned into the touch. "I know you will. Nothing's going to stand in your way for long."

"I just feel so goddamn fucked up."

"You just need to be patient, love. You'll get better every day."

"Okay, man. Back in bed. You're made up." Marcus came over. "I want to get you up and walking with a cane before you're released."

"See? They expect you'll be walking that well in a couple of days." Then they'd get Brett to the house and Ralph could help them. He just needed to make it 'til then.

He encouraged and cajoled, helping Marcus and Ken get Brett back into bed.

"There -- that wasn't so bad!"

Brett grunted, the sound raw and pissed and weird. Benj kept touching and petting and trying very hard not to lose it.

"Jean will be here soon with your smoothie."

"I just want you, baby. Okay?"

"Yeah, that's okay by me. Do you think I could climb up there with you? I'll try not to jostle anything."

"You can jostle, baby."

He climbed as carefully as possible until he was lying stretched out next to Brett. "Oh..." He sighed, his eyes fluttering closed.

"There you go. Sleep, baby." He could hear Brett's heart beating, sure and steady.

"Okay." He thought, just maybe, now he could.

## *Chapter Twenty-Six*

Ralph held the door open to let Jean go in, his lover's arms full of food and smoothie and God knew what else.

He stopped after taking a step in. "Aw, look at that."

Benj had crawled up into the bed with his man, the two of them sleeping peacefully.

Brett's arm was around Benj, cradling the man, protecting him.

Jean eased him out, the door shutting quietly. "Give them a minute longer, eh?"

"A minute, a half hour. We'll want to go in before they shut down the visiting hours. You promised Benj you'd bring that smoothie."

He hoped they didn't need to keep Brett in here too long -- he hated hospitals. Not as much as Jean did, but still.

"I did. It's just... the wee thing's getting rest." Jean looked so damn sincere.

"He'll have all the sleep he wants when they come home to us, yeah?"

"Yeah. Yeah, Chou..."

He was going to suggest they go to the waiting room when a nurse went in with a tray of what had to be supper.

"I guess we should get in there before they start that so-called dinner."

Jean smiled, nodded. That seemed to be what his lover needed. "Evenin', y'all! I brought smoothies!"

Benj sat up next to Brett and yawned, stretched. "Oh, is it supper time already?"

"It is." Jean grabbed two big Thermoses from his bag. "One red smoothie. One good coffee."

"How're you both feeling?" He stood out of the way as Jean helped organize Brett and the drinks.

Brett looked over at him, eyes confused for a second, then seeming to focus. "Better. I feel better. The pain is almost gone."

Benj had Brett's smoothie and carefully wrapped Brett's hand around the Thermos. Brett seemed stronger already, holding the big Thermos in both hands, sucking from the straw. Benj was drinking Jean's coffee, sighing happily, though Ralph wasn't sure if that was from the coffee or how well Brett was doing.

Brett drank most of the smoothie, looked at Jean. "Thanks, Cajun. Like those."

Jean beamed. "I know. There'll be another tomorrow. I put protein powder and..."

Brett grunted, held up one hand. "I don't want to know."

Benj giggled and started in on the homemade sandwich Jean'd brought. Brett relaxed back on the bed again, eyes closed.

Benj kissed Brett's cheek. "Sleep, love. I'm going to visit with Ralph and Jean for a few minutes."

Benj climbed off the bed, smiling at him and Jean. "I really appreciate you guys coming back and bringing the food and stuff."

"It's what we're here for, Chou." Jean led Benj to a chair. "Did you get some rest?"

Benj smiled. "Yes. Brett let me curl up with him."

Ralph bit back his chuckle. It didn't matter if Jean liked Brett or thought he was "good enough" for Benj -- Brett was clearly who Benj wanted.

"He already seems more with it. Did the walking go well?"

"I think that depends on who you ask."



Ralph did chuckle this time. "He doesn't think he's doing well enough, hmm?"

Benj nodded slowly. "He is, though. He made it all the way to the chair and back. And he only grumped a little."

"It takes a little time, that's all." Jean sighed, and then asked the question they were all dreading hearing the answer to. "Did the pathology report show, cher?"

"Yes!" Benj beamed at them. "It's not cancer."

They both relaxed, slumped a little. Oh, thank God.

Jean grabbed Benj, hugged him tight. Ralph laughed happily and hugged them both at the same time, picking them up off the floor and making Benj squeal.

"Oh, Benj. Thank God. Thank God for that." Jean whispered the words, grinned ear to ear.

"Yeah. Amen." Benj grinned as he let Jean and the little one go. "And he's eager to get out of the hospital, so I figure he's not feeling too bad."

Ralph nodded. "What I read said the pain isn't too bad, in these things."

It was the emotional issues he was worried about. Benj looked happy, though, so for now, things seemed to be going well.

Jean sat with Benj for awhile, the two of them chatting away.

Ralph wandered around the room, trying to be unobtrusive.

Brett's eyes opened, watching him move.

He wandered over to the bed, gave the man a grin. "Hey. Benj told us the good news -- about it not being cancer. Congratulations, man."

"You're welcome. I mean, thank you."

He grinned and leaned against the bed. "I bet you're about ready to break out of this joint, though, huh?"

"Yeah. Let's go. You drive."

Ralph chuckled. "It won't be long, man. Just hang in there. At least you got Jean bringing you decent food."

"I just want out. I need to start moving again, working out."

"I'll give you this, Brett -- you are one tough son of a bitch. I suggest, though, that you let those stitches in your head heal before you go at it a hundred percent." He leaned in and murmured, "Your Benjamin would kill me if I let you do anything that made your head pop off."

Brett almost laughed. "Hey, you're supposed to be focused on my shoulder."

"I'll try and remember that, man." He gave Brett a wink.

Brett looked over at Benj, really quickly, then grabbed his arm. "Tell me the truth, the walking thing, it's gonna get better soon, right?"

"It is, man. Your brain is re-wiring, you know? Plus, the whole surgery thing. It tires a body out."

"You're not shitting me?"

"I don't do that, man."

"Okay." Brett sighed, nodded. "Man, that pulls the stitches."

"Yeah, give them a few days, too, huh? It's all going to come together for you. You just have to try not to go crazy until that happens."

"I just want out of here. I need things to stop being fucked."

"Three days, man. Then you'll come back to our place and you and I will be back to duking it out."

"Okay. Three days. Take Benj home, huh? He's got to be fucking exhausted."

"I'm sure he is. But he keeps saying he made you a promise, and I'm not sure if we should try and make him break it."

"He's a stud."

"Surprisingly, yes."

Brett snorted. "There's no surprise."

"There is to those of us who don't know him. It's a good surprise, though."

"He's one hell of a man."

"He is. You both are." He patted Brett's shoulder. "You'll both get through this."

"Maybe." That didn't sound hopeful.

"No maybes about it, man. Hey, you survived meditating with me and Jean, didn't you?"

"Meditating. Oh, right. You mean your nap."

Ralph chuckled, gave Brett another wink. "If Jean calls it meditating, then that's what it is."

"You are so whipped."

"I am." He patted Brett's shoulder again. "I doubt I'm the only one here."

Brett tried to growl, but the man was almost asleep again, blinking slowly at him.

"Sleep, man. Jean and I'll be back tomorrow to bug you some more."

"Uh-huh."

Boom.

Asleep.

Ralph chuckled and turned to where Benj and Jean were still talking together, the little one looking like he was half asleep himself.

"Hey, babe, we should probably go. Come back tomorrow."

"Sounds good. Are you sure you won't come back with us, cher?"

Benj shook his head. "No, my place is here. I can catch up on my sleep when Brett's better."

"If you're sure." Jean hugged Benj again, patted his back.

"I'm sure. I'm just going to curl back up with him, listen to his heartbeat."

"That sounds good, cher."

"Yeah, it is good." Benj kissed them both on the cheek and said goodnight.

Ralph put his arm around Jean's shoulder. "Come on, babe. Home."

"Yeah. Yeah, Chou." He thought Jean looked almost as tired as Brett did.

He was going to have to make sure he took better care of his man.

## *Chapter Twenty-Seven*

He was going to take this cane and shove it up someone's ass. Sideways. He crept down the hall, the walls seeming to tilt and move as he walked.

"Dude! Bat man! What's up!" He looked over, seeing Mickey and Raul heading down the hall toward him.

Fuck.

"Hey, guys."

Look at me. I'm a gimp with a cane.

"Hi, guys." Benj squeezed his arm, just the once.

"Look at you." Mickey walked around him. "Brain surgery. Man, some people will do anything for a little attention."

"Fuck you, asshole."

Raul hooted, clapped. "Still the sweetest motherfucker in the game."

Benj giggled softly, but had mostly faded into the background.

"I couldn't quite believe it when we heard the news, but I'm seeing it with my own eyes. They leave any brain behind when they took it out?" Mickey didn't say it, but the question hung there anyway -- was it cancer, are you okay?

"Nope. They just sucked all of the fucking thing out. Good thing, because now I can talk at you fuckers' level. Where the fuck is Jack?"

Raul shrugged, black eyes rolling. "You know Jack, man. He's scared of fucking hospitals."

"Liar!" The little red-headed pitcher came running, squealing to a halt in front of

him, making him stumble back. "Dude! A cane! Can you run? Does the brass know? Fuck a doodle!"

Mickey grabbed Jack by the collar and hauled him back. "The man just had brain surgery, give him a fucking break. Asshole."

"Brain tumors... You know, that's high-dollar fucked up, Brat."

He rolled his eyes. "You are just a doll baby, you mouthy asshole." Still, it felt sort of good, to get shit out in the open.

"Jack's got a point, though. What's gonna happen come spring? Team won't be the same if we don't have your ancient ass warming the bench."

He looked at Mickey. "I intend to be back, man."

Maybe.

For one more season.

"For real, man?" Mickey's face broke into a huge grin. "All right! That's the best news we've had in months."

"Yeah. For real." He answered Mickey's grin, but he wouldn't look at Benj. "Hell, it might be my best season yet."

"Woohoo!"

The guys shared a round of high fives, ending with Mickey holding a hand up to him.

He went to high five, and his hand slipped on the cane, sending him careening forward. His head knocked into Mick's shoulder, and right before the world blinked out, he saw the wall.

Fucking hell.

## *Chapter Twenty-Eight*

Benj did not freak out. Okay, he didn't freak out on the outside. Inside was a totally different story, but he was the only one who knew about that so it counted as not freaking out.

Marcus and Ken, who'd clearly been hovering out of sight while he and Brett walked, had swooped in and gotten Brett back to his hospital bed with a minimum of fuss, leaving Benj to reassure Brett's buddies that everything was fine.

"I'm sure he's fine," he reassured Mickey.

"Dude, Ben. Dude. He... he ain't coming back, is he?"

Benj wanted to say that no, Brett wasn't coming back. He wanted to say that a lot, but he didn't. "Oh, don't count him out yet. You know how stubborn he is -- and the doctors say it'll take a few days for his brain to remake connections. This is all perfectly normal." Perfectly normal. Right. He nearly laughed, but he didn't think he'd be able to stop.

Raul shook his head, then grabbed Jack's arm. "Come on. Ben needs a fucking coffee."

"Huh?"

"Cof. Fee. For Ben. You and me. Buying. Walk."

He opened his mouth to tell them he didn't need one, but then he clued in that Raul was trying to make this easier for him, so he nodded and found a smile from somewhere for them. "That would be great, thanks."

"Yeah, man." Raul nodded and went, leaving him to face Brett's best friend.

"Tell me the truth, Ben. I ain't gonna rat him out -- not to anyone."

"I don't know, Mickey. The doctors said, best case, he's well enough to play in the

spring. Worst case was he died on the table, so we're already ahead of the game here." He was not going to let Brett forget that, no matter what else happened. Brett was alive and wasn't a vegetable. That right there was a victory, God damn it.

"How's the shoulder?" Mickey's green eyes were sad, serious, but unflinching. Mickey had been in the minors with Brett. Brett had talked management into moving Mickey up. The man was rock solid.

"Not great. But Ralph was only just starting to work on it with him when we found out about the tumor. He's had it for years. *Years*, Mickey."

Mickey nodded. "He's had headaches since he was in the minors, man. We all just thought... I guess that it was just Brett."

Benj nodded. "I know. Me, too." He sighed and tried not to feel guilty about that, about it taking someone they'd only known a short time to insist he get checked out.

"You know him, Mickey. He's stubborn. If there's any way for him to get back out there by spring, he will."

"Yeah, but... Ben, is that the good thing? He's not hurting for money; Brett's wicked smart with it. Maybe... maybe it's time. I'm going to announce my retirement in the spring. We got another baby coming; I don't want to miss her."

"Oh, congratulations, Mickey! I'm so happy for you -- Brett will be, too. As for the other." Benj shrugged. "He doesn't want to go out like this. He has it in his head that if he can do one more season, then he'll be going out like a man." Benj didn't believe that, but Brett was Brett and he'd support his lover.

"Well, if you need someone to talk to him..." Mickey sighed, rubbed the back of his neck. "I'd rather have him go out a season early and not hurt the rest of his life."

"From your lips to God's ears, Mickey. Or at least Brett's."

"Yeah, well. You know how to reach me. I'll come, if you need, just..." He lowered his voice. "Don't mention it to Jack, huh? Raul I trust, but Jack... he ain't mean, but..."

Benj nodded. "He doesn't have Brett's back like you do."



"Yeah." Mickey's eyes went to the door. "You think he's okay?"

"I sure hope so."

Brett had to be okay, there was no other choice.

"Shall we go see?"

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Everything was swimming.

A lot.

"I'm gonna hurl."

"No. No, man. That's too much pressure. We'll give you a patch, huh? It'll settle you."

Another voice sounded. "Do you remember what happened, Mr. McCallister?"

"I fell."

"Do you know where you are?"

"Hospital. I was talking to Mick. I fell because you assholes sucked out a chunk of my brain."

There was a chuckle, and he was able to see enough to recognize Marcus. "That about sums it up. You have to be careful until you're steady on your feet, man."

"I want to go home."

Now. Now would be good.

"Soon, man. Trust me, we want to see the back of you." The man gave him a wink.

"Fuck off. Where's Benj?" He winked back, though.

As if he was drawn by his name, Benj appeared at the door with Mickey right behind him.

"Baby." He held out one shaking hand. "Sorry, Mick."

Benj came rushing over, taking his hand. "Oh, love. You gave us a scare."

Mickey followed more slowly "Hey, I'm just glad I'm not responsible for any permanent damage, man."

"No. I'm just off balance." And a klutz. And a bit of a loser.

"Oh, so nothing's changed."

"Fuck you." God, he was... Shit.

Mickey laughed and clapped him on the shoulder -- the good one, thank God.

"Fuck you, too."

"How's the wife? I didn't get to ask." He couldn't remember her name for the life of him.

"Nina's great. She's got another bun in the oven, man."

"Really? Congratulations!" Mickey was a damned good father.

Mickey's grin was suddenly full on and totally real. "Thanks, man. We're excited."

"When's it coming?"

Brett kept holding onto Benj's hand; it was like a lifeline -- warm and solid.

"May, man."

"Oh, cool." Wait, did that make her just a little pregnant?

"Yeah, I'm..." Mickey looked over at Benj, who nodded. "I'm announcing my

retirement in the spring, man. I want to actually spend some time with the family, you know?"

"No shit? How's..." Nancy? Nelly? Nita? Nina. Nina. "Nina feel about that?"

"She said something along the lines of 'it's about time, asshole.' I might be paraphrasing some."

"Yeah? You're not... regretting it?" Because God knew, he was starting to think about... "Does it feel like giving up?"

"No way, man. I put in my time, worked hard. I deserve to retire and spend some time with my family."

He saw Benj nodding out of the corner of his eye.

"We should get a place on the Cape, man. Next summer. All of us, and the kids."

"You're on, Brett. I'm gonna hold you to it."

He nodded, then groaned again, his head throbbing.

"Soon that won't hurt," Benj told him, petting his hand gently.

"That's what they say. Fuck."

"I should go. I'll grab the guys up from the cafeteria. We'll get together when you're back in town, 'kay?"

"Hey, Mickey. Thanks, man. Huh?"

Mickey grabbed his hand, shook hard. "Anytime. You get better."

"I will." He didn't know how much better, but he would. "Tell Nancy I said congratulations."

"Nina. Sure. She'll be happy to know you made it through okay. She's always had a soft spot for you and Ben."

"Yeah. She's a doll baby." Nina. Jesus, man. Cope.

"Okay. We'll see you guys."

Mickey shook his hand again and then headed out.

"That was nice of them to visit," murmured Benj.

"Yeah." He closed his eyes for a second, trying to sort shit out.

"Are you all right, love?"

"No, baby. I'm pissed off." Maybe more than pissed off.

"Don't be mad at Mickey -- he didn't mean to hurt you."

"I'm mad at me, Benj. I made a fucking fool out of myself."

"No, you didn't!" Benj hugged him tight. "Mickey understood."

"Benj, I fell down and passed out from a motherfucking high five!"

"And had you done a high five before since the operation? No. The doctors explained how your brain needs to rewire itself."

"I know. It doesn't mean it's okay."

"Getting mad at yourself isn't going to help."

"What am I supposed to do?" He didn't want to growl.

"Let your body heal! You don't have to go out there and play baseball today. Or even tomorrow."

"I just don't want to fall down."

"So tomorrow you won't. One day at a time, love."

He looked at Benj, shook his head. "Are you going to keep on being calm and shit?"

"I think I can manage it for another day or two. I'm counting on you being sprung by then." Benj gave him a wry smile.

He met Benj's eyes, serious, sure. "This is fucking weird. I hate this shit."

"I know. Me, too." Benj leaned in and kissed him softly. "It's going to get better, though."

"And if it doesn't?"

"It will. I won't accept anything else."

"Hardass." That made him laugh, hard.

Benj giggled right along with him. "That's me. Ass of steel."

He rolled his eyes, kept grinning, so fucking in love it hurt a bit.

Benj curled up against him, fingers sliding over his chest, warm through his pajama top. "I love you, Brett McCallister. No matter what."

"Tell me we can leave tomorrow. Even if it's a lie."

"We can leave tomorrow, love. Ralph and Jean will take us home and feed you smoothies."

"And after that?"

"After that I'm taking you to bed and making love to you. It'll last for *hours*. Like that tantric sex you read about but never quite believe."

"No shit?" He grinned, drew Benj closer. "What else?"

"Well, I don't know, I think we'll be pretty exhausted after the hours and hours of sex."

"Baby, Benj. Imagination. Use your imagination." He closed his eyes, listened to the sound of his lover's voice, felt Benj's cheek on his shoulder.

"We could eat. We could take a walk around the park and then you can teach me and Jean and Ralph how to be big, bad baseball players. And then we'll plan the trips we're going to take when you retire."

"Mmmhmm. Paris. Rome. Rio, maybe. Then home for Christmas." It didn't sound like a bad life. In fact... what had Mickey said? He'd put in his time?

"And then a cruise or two during the winter months."

"And springs somewhere not on the ball field."

"Someplace where we can see all the flowers and trees blooming. Can you imagine it, love? You and me kissing under a cherry tree in bloom? It would be very romantic."

"At least until I had to kick someone's ass, hmm?" Of course, that could be romantic, too.

Benj giggled. "My stud."

"That's right. Your stud." He patted Benj's butt again. Nodded. This time, it only ached a little bit.

Benj continued talking; his lover's voice flowed over him, made him feel better.

"I want to retire, baby." The words surprised him, but they sounded... good.

Benj's head lifted from his chest. "What did you say?"

"I said, I want to retire. I'm going to get better, do my best, but... I'm ready. Is that bad?"

Benj shook his head. "No, no, it's not bad at all. Oh, Brett." A beautiful, slow smile grew across Benj's face. "I love that you're a baseball player, that you've been able to do what you love so much, but I miss you so much while you're gone." Benj's voice went soft. "I've been looking forward to your retirement for awhile now."

Then Benj grabbed his hands and looked into his eyes. "But I don't think you

should make a final decision right now. You need to recover from the surgery and then make it official."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know."

Still, he knew.

He just knew.

## *Epilogue*

Ralph went through his files one last time, making sure he had all the information in place for tomorrow's incoming client.

They had this one for a month, and then a week's break before they were inundated. The summer months were always busy, their house full of people needing their special brand of help.

Another waft of something wonderful hit his nose, and Ralph gave in to the inevitable and set the files on the top of his desk. Supper had been wonderful, but Jean had promised dessert would be even better.

He made his way to the kitchen, but it was empty. As he looked around, he heard the TV and he chuckled, heading into the den.

Jean had a plate of beignets and two cups of coffee sitting on the end table. "Chou! Chou, the wee cher jus' called! The big growly gator's fixin' to be on the TV!"

"No shit? Cool." He grabbed a beignet, his own private piece of food heaven, and sat next to Jean. "I'm getting spoiled tonight."

"It's our last solo night for a while, eh?"

The new man, a basketball player with a broken pelvis, had six kids.

Six.

"Uh-huh. Nearly a month." He took advantage of the fact they were alone to kiss Jean full on. They'd been spoiled by having Brett and Benj -- while Brett would grumble and tease them, they could sure kiss without raising any eyebrows.

Not to mention they'd had a couple of weeks on their own since Brett had been declared healthy and hale by Doc Trelaine.

The shoulder was never going to be back to its original condition, and it had taken



weeks for Brett's balance to return, but the headaches had gone and something had happened to Brett in that hospital. Something that had turned his focus to the canvases in the studio, to planning half a dozen trips with Benj.

Hell, by the time the holidays had been over, Brett had hired someone to sell his artwork in three different galleries.

Benj had been glowing, the sweet man blossoming as Brett found happiness.

It had been a good winter, full of healing and happiness. He and Jean couldn't have asked for better, really.

Except for the fact that the stubborn son of a bitch never would learn to meditate.

Jean bounced. "Chou! Look!"

Brett stood in front of the camera, looking lean and healthy. "I would like to announce my retirement from baseball. It's been a great ride, and I have no complaints, but after a series of illnesses and a long discussion with my family and management, we believe it's my time to go. I will be doing commentary from the booth for the new website, livebaseball.com, along with my colleague, Mickey Bonost."

"Oh-ho, will you look at that? Retirement." The camera panned back a little and Ralph nudged Jean. "Look at that, he's got Benj right there next to him."

Benj looked like a million bucks -- standing there beaming, along with Brett's friend and his wife and kids. Ralph thought, maybe, staying for the therapy had helped Benj most of all.

He put his arm around Jean. "We did good there, babe."

"We did. I miss him."

Ralph wasn't sure how. Brett's thank you present to Jean was a laptop so that the man could chat and email Benj regularly, look up recipes in the kitchen, order strange and unusual spices without Ralph knowing...

"I thought you didn't even like the growly gator," he teased.

"Bastard. I... I'm glad he found his mind, eh?" But Jean would never really like Brett.

"Yeah, me, too." He nodded at the figures on the TV again. "They look good. Happy."

"They do." Jean leaned against his shoulder, hand on his thigh. "What about you, love? Happy?"

He turned and tilted Jean's head so he could look into those eyes. "So very happy, babe. I wouldn't change my life with you for anything."

"No?" Jean leaned forward, and Brett's voice seemed to fade away. "You don't mind your Cajun?"

"No, I don't mind my Cajun at all." He pressed their lips together, tongue slipping into Jean's mouth. He tasted sweet there -- his lover had already sampled the beignets.

Jean pushed close, arms wrapping around his neck. He was going to miss this -- making love in the family room, making love wherever.

But that was tomorrow. Tonight, he had this.

Jean chuckled, hand reaching out to grab the remote, clicking the power button and leaving them together in the darkness.

End.