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...Mark couldn't remember the last time he'd actually come while dreaming. In his dream Nolan was lying naked beneath him on his back, his legs up over Mark's shoulders as Mark eased his way into the hot clench of Nolan's passageway. The dream had been so vivid he could actually smell Nolan's warm, musky scent—a hint of vanilla mixed with the heady scent of their mingled sweat. He could feel the grip of Nolan's muscles massaging his cock as he moved, slowly at first and then with more intensity, even ferocity. Nolan moaned and writhed beneath him, his clear brown eyes focused on Mark's face, his lips parted, Mark's name on his tongue. When Mark came in the dream, he came in real life as well, waking himself in the process.

As they stood quietly at the railing, Mark realized something had shifted between them in these final weeks. The antagonism between them had eased. He'd forgiven Nolan for his stunt that first day, regretting most of all the distance it had put between them as a result.

Mark's cock twitched at the memory of the dream and Nolan's proximity, but instead of moving away, he held his ground, leaning slightly toward the other man. Mark's hands were resting lightly on the railing. Both men were looking out at the trees. Mark wondered if Nolan felt the static of electric desire crackling in the air between them.

Mark's pager buzzed. He put his hand in his pocket to deactivate it but didn't pull it out to read the message. He knew he should go back inside, but he stayed rooted to the spot, silently

willing Nolan to turn toward him, to part his lips for a long, lingering kiss.

As if he sensed Mark's unspoken wish, Nolan did turn his head, his deep brown eyes fixed suddenly on Mark's face. Mark caught his breath, surprised at the raw desire that flashed over Nolan's features.

He wants me, too...

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BY

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ALTERNATIVE TREATMENT
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*To Jean, Tracey and Emily,
my gracious and persistent muses.*

CHAPTER 1

Nolan snapped his fingers and pointed to the floor in front of his chair. Eagerly the young doctor hurried from behind the desk and dropped to his knees. Nolan stood and unzipped his jeans, thrusting his hips forward in unspoken command. Greedy fingers pulled aside underwear and warm wet lips glided over the crown of his erect shaft. Nolan closed his eyes, sighing with pleasure.

The nameplate on the desk read, *Mark Harrison, MD*. The doctor folded his hands over Nolan's file. "Any questions, Mr. Daniels?"

Nolan hadn't heard a word he'd said, too caught up in his brief fantasy to pay attention. The doctor's voice was deep, his tone measured and calm. Though Nolan was pretty sure Harrison was younger than himself, he had a certain natural superiority that

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Nolan figured came from a lifetime of entitlement. He was handsome, almost too handsome, with those startlingly blue eyes, the impeccably cut blond hair and the square, chiseled jaw. There was an innocence to his face that Nolan found himself wondering how he could exploit. Anything to make his forced duty in this dump less painful. He realized he was staring and what's more, he realized the doctor stared back. In that moment something passed between them, a current arcing between them in the silence that tugged at Nolan's cock, pulling it erect even before his mind processed what he was seeing.

He decided to test his theory. "I'm sorry," Nolan offered with a slow, easy smile. He leaned forward, turning his head slightly and arching one eyebrow while he scrutinized the young doctor's handsome face. "I've never seen such a vivid color of blue. I can't decide if they're sapphire or royal blue."

Dr. Harrison looked startled. A faint blush crept up his cheeks. "I beg your pardon?"

"Your eyes. They're so blue. Tell me it's not contacts." Nolan leaned forward, letting just the tip of his tongue appear on his lower lip. He hooded his eyes, aware of the effect this had on men who understood his secret language of seduction. The doctor swallowed visibly, the flush deepening. No straight guy bluster or outrage. Instead the doctor's eyes slid away from Nolan's and he shifted in his seat, shuffling the papers on his desk. When he spoke, his voice was hoarse and he cleared his throat. Nolan leaned back, smiling. No question about it, the guy was gay.

Still, he didn't rise to the bait. He seemed to recover himself and, ignoring the unspoken invitation, acting as if no spark of recognition or desire had passed between them. Not that Nolan would be interested in Dr. Harrison for anything more than a quick

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fuck in the supply closet. He liked men in leather and denim with some life under their belt—not soft, spoiled boys in designer suits who took their wealth and position as their natural due.

The doctor continued. “It’s a shame we can’t use your skills as a licensed paramedic, but insurance restrictions and state regulations won’t allow it. Still, we can always use volunteers. We’re chronically short-staffed around here.” He stared at the file in front of him, scanning the details of Nolan’s arrest for DUI and the sentence of one hundred hours of community service at the nursing home. “I know you’re not exactly here of your own volition.”

“Better this than jail.” Nolan shrugged, forcing back the scowl that threatened to erupt and adopting an indifference he didn’t feel. The whole thing was so unfair. He’d never even had a speeding ticket before. He’d known before he got behind the wheel he was making a mistake, but he’d fallen for Wayne’s bullshit—again.

“Nevertheless,” Dr. Harrison droned on. “I hope we can develop a good working relationship during your tenure here.” He picked up a clipboard and scanned it. “We can use your help in the mornings. Could you be here from, say, ten to twelve each day? Does that fit into your schedule?”

“My schedule is pretty fluid. Shift work. Ten to twelve hours on, four days a week on a rotating basis. I can’t really commit to a firm schedule.”

The doctor nodded. “I’m sure we can figure something out.”

His eyes really were an amazingly vivid blue.

The doctor stood and walked around the desk, extending his hand. “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Daniels.”

“Call me Nolan.” Nolan fixed his gaze on the guy while keeping his hand in his grip several beats too long.

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The doctor cocked his head very slightly and offered the ghost of a smile in return. “All right, then. Nolan.”

Nolan suppressed a snort when the reciprocal offer wasn’t forthcoming. Naturally the director of this crappy little nursing home was too good to be called by *his* first name. He’d have some fun with him, nonetheless. When Dr. Harrison pulled his hand away, Nolan let his gaze slide down his body. To his amused delight he saw evidence of an erection beneath the dark brown tailored pants. He looked back at the doctor’s face and again let just the tip of his tongue appear between his lips.

The doctor flushed and turned away. Gotcha, Nolan thought with an inward smile, just where I want you.

* * *

Mark looked at the small clock on his desk. Damn, how had it gotten so late? He’d told himself that morning he was going to leave on time for once but then, he told himself that every morning and it pretty much never happened.

He realized he’d been staring at the same chart for the last twenty minutes, his mind very much elsewhere. Long legs encased in jeans just tight enough to hint at the strong, well-shaped calf and thigh muscles. Black square-toed boots of soft, scuffed leather—bad boy boots that matched the bad boy black leather jacket and the *I-dare-you* look in those deep brown, restless eyes.

The man obviously knew he was seriously hot. Even aside from the come-on remark about Mark’s eyes, Nolan Daniels gave off a definite gay vibe—the kind of rough, push-you-up-against-an-alley-wall vibe that turned Mark on. Not life partner material. Not that Mark had time for a life partner.

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Mark forced his thoughts away from the hard body and his own longing. The guy was a temporary employee, nothing more. He knew from the file that Nolan Daniels was thirty-eight. It was his first DUI arrest and hopefully his last. Mark would need to watch out for signs of impairment while on the job. He wondered if Nolan had a serious problem with addiction or had just made a one-time mistake.

The fact he'd had his sentence mitigated to community service and was gainfully employed boded well. When the judge, a friend of Mark's dad, had called to see if he could use a volunteer, Mark had checked with some colleagues at the medical center Nolan worked for and found he had a good reputation there.

He hadn't counted on the guy's compelling attraction. Yeah, he knew he was being played with the comments about his eyes and the slow drag of Nolan's tongue over his lips but still Mark's body had responded. He'd seen the knowing smirk on Nolan's face as he'd raked Mark's body, his eyes lingering insolently at Mark's crotch, but it had only served to make his cock harder.

Why was it he always fell for the bad boys?

Not that it mattered. Nolan Daniels was off-limits. He'd do his community service and hopefully be an asset, not a hindrance, in the running of the home. Mark wasn't so foolish as to get involved with staff, even temporary part-time staff.

He leaned back in his chair and put his hands behind his head. Nolan's image refused to politely disappear, off-limits or not. He was good-looking by anyone's estimation. His dark, thick hair was longish, curling down the back of his neck to his collar and falling in a wave over his forehead. His eyes were a deep, clear brown, the brows thick and straight above them. His nose was large and slightly crooked. His lips were thin and mobile, easily curved into

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a smile, the flash of white teeth behind them.

His shoulders were broad, as was his torso, which tapered to a narrow waist. Mark's cock hardened at the thought of unbuttoning Nolan's shirt to see if his chest was hairy or smooth. From the dark shadow of a beard on his face, Mark suspected he'd have a hairy chest, dark curling hair Mark would like to nuzzle with his cheek before moving down to take the man's erect cock into his mouth...

The night nurse stuck her head inside the office door, jerking Mark quickly back to reality. "Mr. Clifford is having trouble breathing. I know you're not even supposed to still be here but Dr. Atkinson is busy and—"

Mark was already around the desk, glad for something real to distract him from sexual fantasies that were destined to go nowhere.

* * *

Mark still wasn't quite sure how he'd ended up at a bar instead of home to a hot shower and bed. He hadn't made it out of the nursing home until after ten. He was expected back by eight the next morning yet for some reason, instead of driving home he'd found himself heading toward South Broad Street where several gay bars were located.

While waiting for his drink, his heart nearly stopped. Several stools down along the bar to his left sat a tall man in a black leather jacket, dark brown hair curling down the back of his neck. How had they ended up at the same place? Was it fate? Were he and Nolan already destined to be lovers, despite his earlier promises to himself to the contrary?

The man turned slowly on his stool as if drawn by the magnet

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of Mark's desire. His heart had resumed its beat and was now tapping far too fast against his ribs. Would they acknowledge each other? Move closer?

They made eye contact.

It wasn't Nolan.

Mark kept staring while his mind tried to process this fact. In response to his stare, the man offered a ready, wide grin in Mark's direction. Mark, feeling foolish, looked quickly down.

"Hello. Where have *you* been all my life?"

Mark didn't look up from his empty glass as he tried to recover. Finally he set it down and turned toward the tired pickup line. A man probably twenty years his senior with a thick black mustache over a crooked smile sat to his right.

"Can I get you another?"

Mark shrugged, still struggling over his confused disappointment. What the hell? One more and then he'd hit the road. "Sure. Vodka and tonic."

The man gestured toward the bartender and placed the order. "So, I haven't seen you here before. Handsome young guy like yourself, I'd remember, yes sir. I'm George. George Stanley. I own four car dealerships in the area. I can get you a great deal, if you're interested. Come on back to my car. I've got my laptop in there. I can show you some *amazing* cars and there's a substantial discount for my, uh, friends." The man squeezed Mark's thigh to emphasize his point. Mark swiveled away from him.

The drinks arrived and Mark picked up his glass. He already regretted letting the stranger buy him a drink. The man put his hand on Mark's arm. "Hey. I'm serious, I can get you a brand new car for pennies on the dollar." The man spoke with all the honesty of a hungry crocodile. "You take care of me, I take care of you, if

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you get me.” Again the crooked smile.

Mark put his glass on the bar and stood. “Thanks but no thanks, George. My car works fine. Thanks for the drink. Here’s tip money.” He dropped a ten dollar bill on the bar, not wanting to be beholden in any way to the used car salesman. At least the guy had got him moving. He headed out of the bar, hoping he was sober enough to drive home.

* * *

Nolan pushed the mop over the smear of clumped vomit on the hallway floor, trying to keep his irritation at bay. It rubbed him raw to be forced to do the work of an orderly or candy-stripe volunteer. He was a certified paramedic, but that didn’t matter at Golden Apple. Here he was just serving his time, and the nurse had a whole list of tedious chores for him to handle once he’d mopped the floor to her satisfaction.

When his allotted two hours were done, he walked up to a dumpy nurse’s aide with frizzy hair pulled back into a ponytail. She was standing at a high counter in the nurses’ station, scribbling something on a chart. “Excuse me, I need to find Dr. Harrison.”

The woman glanced at him with a scowl, which softened as she looked him over. She glanced at his nametag. “Nolan Daniels. New orderly?” She smiled hopefully, thrusting large, pendulous breasts toward him.

Though not interested in the slightest, he returned the smile, thinking to catch more flies with honey than vinegar. “I’m a paramedic. Doing, uh, volunteer work. I need Dr. Harrison to sign something.” He held up the sign-in sheet he would need to prove to the court he’d done his allotted hours.

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“He’s doing rounds right now. Give me that paper and I’ll get it signed for you.” She held out a pudgy hand, the nails bitten ragged.

Nolan put his hand behind his back. It was humiliating enough being forced to have a doctor sign the fucking sheet. No way was he going to share it with this nurse. “No, that’s okay. I’ll catch him later. I’ll wait in his office.”

“No one waits in the doctor’s office when he isn’t there,” the woman said primly. She looked at her watch. “He’ll probably be done in about twenty minutes. You want to wait here? We’ve got coffee. I could get you a donut.” Again a hopeful, though this time more tentative, smile.

Nolan glanced at his own watch, doing some mental calculations about the time he would need to get his errands done before his shift started. Having to catch a damn bus for transportation put a serious crimp in his lifestyle. The October weather had cooperated so far, but what happened when it started to get really cold? Was he expected to stand in sleet and snow waiting for the freaking bus? How did people deal with this crap?

He slumped into a chair and picked up a magazine. “No thanks on the donut. But yeah. I guess I’ll wait. Thanks.”

“Any time, sugar. *Any time.*”

In your dreams, babe. Nolan flipped open the magazine, studiously ignoring the fat nurse until she turned away with a small defeated sigh.

* * *

Mark walked quickly to his office, his head down. He nearly ran over Nolan Daniels, who stood and moved directly in front of him as he passed the nurses’ station. “Excuse me,” he said

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reflexively, trying to sidestep the man. His heart had begun to beat too quickly, memories of a steamy dream featuring the sexy Mr. Daniels slipping unbidden into his mind.

“I was waiting for you. I need this signed for the hours worked today.” Mark fumbled in his jacket for a pen. “Could we go in your office, doctor? I had a few questions.” Nolan moved nearer and Mark’s cock snapped to attention. Jesus, was he going to get a hard-on every time the man stepped too close?

To avoid anyone seeing his erection as much as anything, Mark nodded and headed quickly toward his office, Nolan right behind him. Once inside, Mark sought the refuge of his desk, feeling himself more in command after he sat behind the protective bulwark.

Nolan sat on one of the chairs in front of him, placing the sign-in sheet on the desk. Mark picked up a pen, leaning forward to sign it. Their fingers brushed and Mark pulled his hand back, his breath catching.

Nolan leaned back, putting one booted foot on the opposite knee. “I was wondering, Doc. Is there any way we could work something out?”

Something in his tone made Mark glance sharply at him. “Excuse me?”

Those restless eyes were fixed on him. “A hundred hours is a lot of time. Time I don’t have. I was wondering. I don’t know...maybe we could work something out. You and me. Private like...” Nolan trailed off, lowering his head to gaze up at Mark through thick, dark lashes, biting his lower lip in such an obvious attempt at seduction Mark nearly laughed.

But he didn’t laugh. His stomach twisted, his cock bending

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painfully as the blood rushed into it. He could feel the color rising into his cheeks. For one crazy second Mark considered the unspoken proposal. Was the guy actually offering sex in exchange for hours worked? Did he really have that kind of unmitigated gall? How did he know Mark was gay, much less amenable to such an outrageous suggestion? Not that he'd actually suggested anything out loud, but the body language could be read by anyone with a brain in his head and a cock in his pants.

Mark pushed the sign-in sheet back across the desk. "I didn't assign you those hours, Mr. Daniels. The court did. I guess next time you'll think before getting behind the wheel after a few too many." He knew he sounded pompous and condescending and hated himself for it. The look of disdain and anger that washed across Nolan's face struck Mark like a blow, but there was nothing for it. The guy had brought it on himself.

Mark tried to muster his own sense of outrage that Nolan would attempt to bribe him with sex, but his throbbing cock belied his efforts. Beneath the proper doctor persona, Mark ached for what Nolan seemed to be offering, even if the offer was entirely devoid of feeling. His lips were actually burning to feel the press of Nolan's mouth on his. He could almost feel the hot tug of Nolan's lips wrapped around his cock. He could almost see Nolan kneeling at his feet, gazing up at him with those big brown eyes while he came down Nolan's throat.

Shaken by the vividness of his fantasies and aware of the intense scrutiny of the man on the other side of the desk, Mark stood abruptly, turning his body to hide his erection. "I'm afraid I need to get to my morning rounds," he lied. "If you'll excuse me..." He waved toward the door, dismissing Nolan.

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Nolan stood abruptly, nearly knocking his chair over. “Yeah. Whatever.” He strode from the room. Mark slumped back into his chair, aching with loss for something he’d never had.

CHAPTER 2

Nolan was tired after his all-night shift but still too wound up to go to bed. His team had received a call for an accidental gunshot wound but when they got there, they found themselves in the middle of a full-blown domestic dispute. The husband was the one who had been shot in the foot, and he was in the process of strangling his wife when they'd arrived.

Nolan had pulled the guy off her and held him down while the EMT staunched the bleeding. They'd had to strap him in the gurney to keep him from attacking his wife again. Fortunately the police had arrived by then and the sight of their guns calmed the guy somewhat.

Nolan loved the adrenaline rush his job invariably afforded him. He thrived on stepping into life-or-death situations, forced to

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make split-second decisions to save a life that otherwise might be lost. He'd been doing it for nearly twenty years, starting as an EMT-basic and working his way up the ranks through experience and certification training when he could find the time and money.

But sometimes, especially lately, he found it hard to come down after a shift, feeling too edgy and hyped-up to unwind. He went into the kitchen and poured himself a glass of orange juice. He would have liked to add a hefty shot of vodka but it was eight in the morning and probably not the best idea.

His not so subtle attempt to offer some kind of sexual arrangement had backfired. For a second he'd thought the doctor might actually go for it. The guy was very easy on the eyes. It would hardly be a sacrifice to blow young Dr. Harrison in his private bathroom in exchange for his signature on the sign-in sheet. Nolan realized he had actually been looking quite forward to it, even if Mark wasn't really his type.

He'd been hopeful for that second, watching the doctor's professional persona mask slip as he took in the meaning of Nolan's implied offer. Nolan had seen the raw lust spark in the man's eyes before his face had closed and he'd delivered his mini-lecture about getting behind the wheel.

Now he'd have to face the guy, both of them knowing what he'd offered and what Mark had rejected. The thought was humiliating, but Nolan would deal with it. He'd handled worse. At least he'd signed up for a later stint for today and hopefully could avoid seeing Mark Harrison altogether. He would check in at the nursing station, get the two hours over with and get the hell out of there.

Nolan walked up the narrow stairs to his bedroom, setting his orange juice on the nightstand beside the bed. He stripped off blue

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cargo pants and work shirt that served his uniform while on shift and tossed them into a corner. His floor was strewn with dirty scrubs, blue jeans, T-shirts, socks and underwear. He definitely needed to make a laundry run. What a hassle it was to haul the stuff to the Laundromat two blocks away without a car.

He ran his hands through his hair and closed his eyes, which felt gritty and dry. A hot shower would have felt good, but now that he'd sat down he was too tired to get up again. Man, was this all there was? Thirty-eight and wiped out after a single shift. Back in the day he could work two shifts back-to-back and still go cruising afterward.

He remembered how proud he'd been when he finally received his EMT-paramedic certificate. No one paid *his* way through college and medical school, that was for sure. He'd been working full-time since high school, going to school for his certificates when he could fit it in, without a dime of help from anyone.

Not like Dr. Harrison, who probably had his fancy university and medical degrees handed to him on a silver platter, along with the cush job as director of that nursing home. The guy probably worked for six hours a day and then played a few rounds of golf at his club.

Nolan lay back against the pillow, offering a derisive snort to the empty room. When he closed his eyes the doctor's image floated unbidden into his head. True, he wasn't Nolan's usual type, which was rugged, mustached and tough. Someone who understood Nolan didn't have the time or inclination for love. Raw, dirty sex, fast and hard—that was all he needed to get by.

Mark Harrison was probably a romantic—a touchy-feely sort of guy who needed constant assertions of love. Nolan was lucky he'd rejected his hinted overtures. The guy would have ended up

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falling for him. Who needed that kind of complication? Better to put him out of his mind altogether.

But Mark refused to leave. His image lingered, beckoning in Nolan's mind. He had straight, dark blond hair that fell in a fringe over his forehead, giving a hint of wildness to an otherwise conservative cut. Add in those impossibly blue eyes and what looked like a very decent bod beneath the tailored suit and it was definitely enough to get Nolan's juices flowing.

What was the guy like off the job, when he wasn't doing the stern doctor-running-the-show routine? Mark Harrison. It was a good name. A strong name. He said it aloud to the empty room, just testing the sound of it in his mouth.

"Mark."

Was Mark the kind of guy who got a thrill from cruising the leather bars, pretending to be cool while quaking on the inside? Nolan smiled at the thought of meeting him at The Danger Zone, his favorite backroom sex bar.

Mark would be standing at the bar. Nolan would sidle up beside him and order a drink. He'd move closer, letting the guy feel his heat, smell his scent, sense his power.

They'd make eye contact. Nolan would smile, a slow burn of possibility on his lips. Mark would respond in kind, though his smile would be nervous, his fingers clenching around his glass as he half-turned away to hide his erection.

Nolan would put down his glass, the liquor warming his stomach and working in his veins. He would gesture for Mark to follow, taking him back past the red curtains to the dimly lit dark room that smelled of sweat and spunk mingled with burning incense and the faint reek of desperation.

Nolan's cock was hard. He stroked it, imagining Mark kneeling

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before him on the dirty floor, glancing nervously at the strangers around them engaged in their own private dances of anonymous gratification. He would take that self-important doctor down a peg or two, shoving his cock down his throat, holding Mark fast until he'd jerked every drop of come from his balls. Then he'd zip up his pants, pat Mark's blond head and walk away.

Oddly the fantasy shifted without Nolan's permission or intention. He found himself kneeling on the floor, Mark's cock poised at his lips. He looked up into Mark's blue eyes. Something in them made his heart start to pound. There was lust, yes, but something else—power.

Mark tilted his hips so the head of his long, thick cock nudged Nolan's lips. Nolan's cock was straining, his balls tight. No! No way was he going to submit to the unspoken but insistent command of the man now towering over him. He wanted to jump up, to push the man away and run, but his legs were leaden, held to the ground as if he were chained there.

He managed to turn his face away, pressing his lips tight and shutting his eyes. Strong fingers gripped his head on either side, forcing him back into position. Again the cock pressed hard against his mouth, its touch burning his lips.

Nolan sat up suddenly, his heart slamming in his chest. It took a moment to figure out where he was, and to realize Mark wasn't there—had never been there. He'd fallen asleep, that was all. He'd been dreaming. But what a dream!

He fell back against the bed, his cock still hard despite the strange twist the dream had taken. The compelling force of Mark's sensual will still lingered in his mind. He shook his head as if that would shake it away. It had been a dream, nothing more. If by some odd quirk of fate the two of them ever did end up together, if

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anyone took control, it would be Nolan.

Not that that was even a possibility, if he'd wanted it—which he didn't. A sudden, unwelcome loneliness fell over him like a shroud. Too weary to finish jerking off, Nolan closed his eyes again and slept.

* * *

The sound of a horn honking outside his window jerked Nolan awake. He looked at the clock. Four forty-two. *Shit*. He had to be at the damn nursing home by five. Even if he left the house that second and caught a bus right away, it would take twenty minutes to make it across town.

He sat up, calculating the risk of driving with a suspended license. In his car, he could make it in ten. He shook his head. He was in enough trouble as it was. Damn it. Why had he forgotten to set the alarm?

He stood and moved toward his bureau, retrieving his wallet and searching in it for the number of the nursing home.

"Golden Apple. This is Alexis. May I help you?"

"Yeah. This is Nolan Daniels. I was scheduled for a shift today from five to seven. I'm so sorry." He oozed sincerity. "I had to work a double shift today at my job. This was the first moment I got to call. Could you let Dr. Harrison know I can't make it today? I'll do four hours tomorrow to make up for it. I have the day off."

"Nolan Daniels," the woman said slowly. "Five to seven... Can't make it..." Nolan realized she was writing down what he was saying. For a moment it almost bothered him how easily he could make up lies and sound convincing. But only for a moment.

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* * *

“You still here?” Debbie, the night nurse, frowned at Mark and then shook her head indulgently. “I bet your sweetheart doesn’t like dinner getting cold every single night. We’ve got things under control here. Why don’t you skedaddle?”

Debbie was in her sixties but still ran rings around most of the staff. She was efficient, hard working and smart and Mark liked her. She was always telling him to go home to his nonexistent sweetheart. He never corrected her that there was no sweetheart, either female or male, nor had there ever been.

Other than the occasional casual affair, he hadn’t been seriously involved with a guy since his third year in medical school. He’d been in love with Jeremy, or thought he was, but he hadn’t taken the time to keep the fire burning. That relationship had basically ended due to lack of tending—he’d simply been too busy to put in the time necessary to sustain anything meaningful.

After medical school it was even worse, working eighty and ninety hour weeks in the hospital, sometimes falling asleep right in the middle of a sentence. Then there was Golden Apple, the family’s legacy and pride and joy, and the bane of Mark’s existence.

During his residency, while doing a rotation in the emergency department of a teaching hospital, he was struck by the staggering number of uninsured patients who had put off basic care because of no resources to pay for it. Often they ended up in the emergency room for illnesses and diseases that would have been infinitely more manageable if treated on an ongoing basis.

Sonya Olsen, one of the attending physicians at his hospital, had talked animatedly to him about her plans to start a free clinic

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in Clearfield County, Pennsylvania, where her family was from. She planned to hire a nurse practitioner to offer the day to day care, and she would be the overseeing doctor on staff, commuting a few days a week from New Jersey. She'd told him about the grants and funding it was possible to get, and the volunteers who would help run the clinic.

"My dream is to have a full-time MD on staff. It's a great way to get invaluable experience right off the bat," she had told him. "Once you're done with your residency, I hope you'll consider it. You can sign up for three months to a year. It comes with a stipend—not a lot, but enough to live on. And you really get to practice the art of medicine."

He'd been excited at the idea—jumping right in on the front lines of medical care. He agreed it seemed like an excellent way to get a variety of experience while offering a valuable service. Yet when he'd completed his residency, very strong pressure from his parents, not to mention significant student loans that needed to be paid off, instead convinced him to accept the position of interim chief physician and director at one of his family's string of privately owned nursing homes in the Trenton, New Jersey area.

There he'd come to understand all too well what Sonya meant. At the nursing home he wasn't practicing medicine, he was practicing insurance company compliance.

His father had promised it would only be for a few months while they looked for a replacement for the previous director, who had been fired when it was discovered he was embezzling funds and tricking some of the patients into signing over their life's savings to him. His father and uncle had begged him to stay on just to the end of the year, but the year came and went, still without a replacement. And here he remained, three years later, drowning in

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a sea of paperwork. He was overworked and bored to death, a deadly combination.

It had slowly begun to dawn on him that his father and uncle, who were co-presidents of the family business, were purposefully dragging their feet in finding his replacement, anxious to keep a member of the family who could be trusted in the position, after having been burned. The longer he stayed, the less options he felt he had. He was committed to the place now and cared about its residents and the staff. But at what cost, he wondered. At what cost?

Mark looked at the large clock hung on the wall over the nurses' station counter. It was just after seven. "There was supposed to be a guy here by the name of Nolan Daniels?" He glanced down at the clipboard he was holding. "His shift was five to seven today. I need to sign something for him. Is he still here?"

Mark tried to ignore the twist in his gut that saying Nolan's name caused. He'd gone over their strange conversation a thousand times in his head. Had he misinterpreted Nolan's words? Had he just assumed the guy was offering sex in exchange for hours worked because he himself was so attracted to him? Had he only imagined the come-on in Nolan's eyes, the promise in his tone?

But what else could he have meant? Mark could hear his sexy, gravelly voice in his head. *Maybe we could work something out. You and me. Private like...* The guy sure had balls to make such a brazen offer, veiled or not. Still, he'd done the right thing in nipping it in the bud. Nolan Daniels was trouble, no question about it.

Debbie was scanning a chart of her own. "Nolan Daniels. Nope. He didn't come in today. There's a note here that he called

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in, something about a double shift at his job.”

Mark felt foolish, unable to hide from himself the fact he’d been sticking around for the sole purpose of seeing Nolan again. What was his problem? He forced himself to smile at the hovering Debbie. “Guess he’ll just have to make up the time. I’ll get going then. Have a good night, Debbie.”

“Night, Dr. Harrison. Say hi to your sweetheart for me.”

* * *

“Hello?”

“Nolan? It’s me.”

Shit. Wayne. Wayne Baxter, the reason Nolan had gotten pulled over and arrested for DUI. They hadn’t spoken in the month since it had all gone down. Wayne had called several times but Nolan had refused the calls. He wouldn’t have taken this one if he’d been paying attention.

“What is it? I’m just heading out.”

“I—I miss you, Nolan. Come home to me, baby. I know you love me. I just know it.” Wayne’s voice was thick, his words slurred.

“You’re drunk, Wayne. Sleep it off. And for the record, I don’t love you. I never loved you. And you don’t love me either. You love the idea of a good drama. You need to grow up.”

“Nolan, baby. Please...” Wayne’s voice cracked and Nolan knew tears weren’t far behind. “I got a hold of some pills. I don’t want to live without you. This time you gotta believe me. I—”

“Run that shit by someone else, Wayne. I’m done with your theatrics. Gotta go. Bye.” Nolan hung up the phone. It was hard to believe he’d once felt something for that guy. Wayne Baxter had

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cost him his driver's license for the next three months and gotten him fined and consigned to community service. He had a record now, thanks to his ex-lover.

He'd been at a party having a good time when Wayne had called. At first Nolan had assumed he was bluffing, but he'd seen enough attempted suicides on the job not to let him dismiss the possibility out of hand. Wayne's speech was slurred and his entreaties had sounded real.

He'd used the same tired line he'd tried just now, but that time Nolan had fallen for it. "I don't want to live anymore," he'd said to Nolan, who could barely hear him over the pulsating music and sounds of laughter around him. "If I can't have you, I don't want to live. I've got fifty Oxycontin tablets and I'm going to crush them and put them in wine and make a final toast to Nolan Daniels, the man who broke my heart."

"Wayne, stop it. Don't be ridiculous. You're drunk. Just go to bed. You'll feel better tomorrow—"

"No. I'll be dead tomorrow. Good-bye, Nolan. Forever."

"Wayne. Don't do anything stupid. I'll be over in a minute."

Like a jerk, Nolan had left the party, leaping into his car to rush across town to save a man he was no longer involved with and didn't even like. He made the fifteen-minute trip in ten, bursting through Wayne's unlocked front door without even knocking.

Instead of a dying man, he'd found Wayne sitting naked in his living room, a half-empty bottle of vodka on his lap, watching TV. Wayne stood, swaying, and held out his arms, the bottle still in his hand.

"Baby. You came. You do love me."

"Cut the shit, Wayne. Where's the stuff? Show me what you took."

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“Huh?” Wayne looked genuinely confused. Nolan could see he was very drunk.

“The pills. The pain pills.”

“Oh. That.” Wayne giggled, lurching toward Nolan on unsteady feet. “I kind of made that up.”

“Jesus.” Nolan realized he’d been sweating, his heart pounding, afraid he’d find his ex-lover dead. Now he nearly sagged with relief to find it wasn’t so. He’d been stupid to drive over there. He should have stayed put, called 9-1-1 and let them handle the suicide threat.

Anger pushed the relief aside. He wanted to punch Wayne in the jaw for tricking him like that. During the few months they’d dated—if the periodic sweaty sex and the nearly constant bickering could be called dating—Wayne’s penchant for drama and theatrics had worn Nolan out.

He didn’t need someone calling him at 3:00 A.M. on his day off to tell him he’d had Nolan’s initials tattooed on his chest because his heart belonged to Nolan. But that was better than the time Wayne had shown up at the emergency room where Nolan’s ambulance was delivering a patient. It was the night after a particularly big fight and there Wayne stood, six dozen red roses in his arms.

While Nolan didn’t hide his sexuality, he didn’t need some histrionic asshole coming to his place of work and making a fool of them both. He’d learned with Wayne, if you gave him an inch, he’d take a mile. The only way to deal with Wayne was to cut him off at the pass or he’d never give up.

“Give me that.” Nolan had grabbed the liquor bottle from Wayne’s hand and taken a long pull. Then he took another. He knew he was drunk, too. Not as drunk as Wayne, maybe, but

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getting there.

He shouldn't have gotten back behind the wheel, but he was damned if he would stay at Wayne's place. "Get a life, asshole," were his unkind parting words. As he drove back to the party, Nolan found himself becoming angrier and angrier.

When Wayne called, Nolan had been in the process of seducing a very hot guy named Enrique who'd been playing hard to get all night. With his luck, someone else had moved in and the sexy Latino had already forgotten Nolan existed. He began to drive faster, hoping Enrique was waiting for him.

Flashing red lights and the whoop of a warning siren were the last straw to a truly horrible evening. He'd been in a nasty frame of mind when the state trooper strutted up to his car window, demanding license and registration.

If he'd been only a little more sober, he probably could have talked his way out of the speeding ticket or at least avoided being forced out of his car for a sobriety test. He wouldn't have punched the officer and spent the night in jail either. That fucking Wayne had ruined his life. What gall to call him now, acting like there was the slightest chance he would ever get back together with such a manipulative little prick.

Nolan glanced at his watch. Shit, he was going to miss the bus again if he didn't get a move on. Grabbing his wallet and his jacket, he headed out the door.

* * *

As the days turned into weeks, Mark observed that Nolan had seemed to settle into a kind of routine at the nursing home. He signed up for as many hours as he could, obviously eager to get the

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job over and done with. Mark let him, figuring the sooner he was out of there, the better. Within two months Nolan had nearly completed his hundred hours of community service.

Though they crossed paths rarely, except for the daily signing of Nolan's work sheet, Mark was always keenly aware when Nolan was in the building. Mark had to admit, once the guy faced the reality that he had to do the time, he'd buckled down and shown a good work ethic. The nurses liked him and so did the residents. On more than one occasion, Mark had witnessed Nolan sitting in one resident's room after his shift was done, chatting amiably or looking with what appeared to be genuine interest at their photo albums and other memorabilia.

Though he knew it would lead to nothing, Mark was forced to admit he remained deeply attracted to Nolan Daniels. If only they'd met a different way under different circumstances...

As if he'd been summoned by Mark's thoughts, there was a tap at Mark's open office door. He looked up to see Nolan. "Got a second, Doc?"

"Sure. Come in."

Nolan sauntered into the room. Just the way he walked made Mark hard and he silently cursed himself for this ridiculous attraction. Nolan lowered himself into a chair, stretching his long, sexy legs out in front of him. In spite of himself, Mark's gaze was drawn to the bulge at Nolan's crotch. He looked away, hoping the heat he felt in his cheeks wasn't translating into a blush.

"I've only got fifteen more hours left." Nolan waved the wrinkled, much-handled sign-in sheet toward Mark. "I have the next four days off from my *real* job." The emphasis on the word wasn't lost on Mark. "I'm hoping to pack in the hours here so I can wrap this up and hit the road."

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Mark tried to tell himself, as he'd been telling himself all along, that the sooner Nolan "hit the road" the better, but Nolan's request brought into sharp relief the blurred edges of Mark's desire. Once Nolan was done with his community service, Mark would never see him again. There would be no chance of anything between them...

Who was Mark kidding? There was never any chance. Nolan would never fall for a guy like Mark. He saw him as the establishment—someone to report to, someone to resent. Nolan had hit on him purely with the intention of getting out of his community service. Once he'd realized that wasn't an option, he'd barely given Mark the time of day.

Fine. Let him go. Out of sight, out of mind. "We can always use the help," Mark said calmly, his voice professional, maybe even cold. He was distracted by Jack, an orderly who stuck his head into the office and said breathlessly, "It's Mr. Jenkins. He's clutching his chest and moaning. His eyes are popping out of his head and he's sweating like a pig. Hurry, doctor!"

Both Mark and Nolan jumped up and began to run, overtaking the elderly orderly as they hurried along the hallway toward room six. They found Mr. Jenkins lying inert, his face slack and gray.

"9-1-1," Mark barked to the orderly. He moved quickly to Mr. Jenkins's side, touching his throat with two fingers. "No pulse." He pointed toward the cabinet above the sink that held emergency medical supplies in each bedroom at the nursing home.

"Grab two mouth shields. We'll do CPR till the emergency team gets here." Nolan hurried to obey. He tossed a shield to Mark and put the other over his own mouth. Mark was glad to have a trained paramedic with him, even if technically he was there strictly as a volunteer.

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Quickly Mark positioned Mr. Jenkins's head and leaned down, beginning CPR. He gave two rescue breaths and then began the chest compressions, mindful of the frail, brittle bones of the old man. When he began to tire, Nolan stepped in and they worked together, breathing for the old man and pumping his heart, entirely focused on their task.

They continued the cycle for another few minutes before the emergency team arrived from the nearby hospital. Mark and Nolan stepped back to let the men do their work. Within seconds they had an IV started and had transferred Mr. Jenkins to a stretcher. In another few seconds he was whisked away.

Both men moved toward the bed, slumping down on it. CPR was hard work, but more than that, the thought Mr. Jenkins might not breathe again on his own weighed heavily on Mark.

"They said his pulse was back. I think he'll make it," Nolan offered, as if privy to Mark's thoughts.

"You were great on your feet. Thanks for your help."

"No problem." Nolan shrugged. "It's what I do."

For some reason they both looked up at the same time, their eyes locking. Mark could feel something passing between them, something primal and powerful. There was an almost magnetic pull drawing him toward the other man.

Cautiously, barely believing his own nerve, Mark inched his hand closer to Nolan's, which was resting limply on the rumpled sheets. When their fingers touched, he felt a jolt of electricity pass directly from his fingertips to his cock.

Nolan shifted on the mattress, pulling his hand away. He met Mark's gaze, the hint of a smile curling his lips. "Guess we better get back to work. So many bedpans, so little time."

Slowly Mark nodded, Nolan's implied rebuff striking him like

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a blow. Nolan rose from the bed. Mark stood, too, pulling the sheets and blankets up, wondering if Mr. Jenkins would return soon, wondering if he'd live.

Echoing his thoughts, Nolan again offered solace. "Without any equipment or drugs, we did what we could. He's in the best possible hands now."

Mark nodded, pushing his hands into his pants pockets to keep himself from reaching out to pull Nolan into his arms.

CHAPTER 3

“I heard Mrs. Johnston is especially fond of the new young doctor.” Nolan, who had been stuffing envelopes for one of the secretaries, whipped around at the sound of Mark’s deep, sexy voice.

Nolan laughed. “Yeah, I told her I’m just volunteering here, but she’d got it into her head I’m an MD. I like her. She reminds me of my grandmother.”

“Well, play your cards right and who knows? Her maiden name is Murdock.”

“Murdock?” Nolan offered Mark a blank look.

“You never heard the name? That family bought up half of New Jersey back in the thirties and forties and established a huge real estate empire. For all we know, she’s a millionaire and just

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stays here because she likes the food.”

Nolan grinned at the unlikely scenario. He had to admit, he loved hearing Mark’s voice, even if the only things Mark ever said to him had to do with the residents at the damn nursing home. Mark strode toward the counter where Nolan was working. He stood beside Nolan, so close Nolan could smell his cologne—bay rum with a hint of lime. Normally he thought of this as an old man’s scent but on Mark it smelled good. Nolan suppressed an urge to lean and down to smell it better.

Mark’s hand rested casually on the counter. Equally as casually, Nolan let his hand drop beside Mark’s. He could feel the erection jutting against his jeans and glanced down, trying to see if Mark was similarly afflicted. Mark, however, was pressed up against the counter.

Nolan had given up trying to convince himself he felt nothing for Mark Harrison, though the realization frightened him a little. The sensual tension between them was so thick Nolan could have cut it with a knife. Mark shifted subtly, inching closer. Nolan moved as well, until their shoulders were touching.

Mark was maybe three inches shorter than Nolan’s own six-foot-two. He imagined dipping his head and nuzzling his face against Mark’s neck, inhaling his scent, licking along the pulse at his throat, lightly biting the flesh until Mark shivered and turned toward him, lips parted...

“There you are, Dr. Harrison. The board meeting is in five minutes. I know you don’t want to be late.” Janet, Mark’s skinny, annoying secretary appeared behind them. Mark pulled away abruptly, as if coming out of a trance. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes over-bright. Whatever had been going on between them just then was definitely not one-sided.

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But the moment was lost, the mood dispelled. All business, Mark said brusquely, "I'll check back with you later." He followed his secretary down the hall without a backward glance.

Nolan stared after him, shaking his head. *What the hell is wrong with me? The sooner I get this gig over with and that sexy, aloof son of a bitch out of my sight the better.*

* * *

"That's gonna kill you, you know." Mark stepped out into the brisk November sunshine, trying to ignore the tug of desire the man's broad, leather-clad back pulled from him. Nolan was taking his fifteen-minute break out on the long side veranda of the building, which was used most of the year for the senior citizens to enjoy the afternoon sun.

Nolan turned toward Mark and blew out a long stream of smoke, clasping his cigarette between thumb and forefinger like it was a joint. "Yeah, well. We all gotta go somehow. Anyway, I don't smoke much. Maybe one or two a day. It's just a way to relax."

Mark bit back the lecture that rose to his lips about nicotine and addiction. He moved to stand beside Nolan, staring out at the leafless trees that surrounded the property. Their branches were outlined in gold from the sun against a vividly blue autumn sky.

Nolan took a last drag of his cigarette and flicked it over the railing. He shifted, moving closer to Mark until their shoulders were nearly touching. Mark recalled the wet dream he'd had the night before, which featured Nolan in the starring role.

Mark couldn't remember the last time he'd actually come while dreaming. In his dream Nolan was lying naked beneath him on his

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back, his legs up over Mark's shoulders as Mark eased his way into the hot clench of Nolan's passageway. The dream had been so vivid he could actually smell Nolan's warm, musky scent—a hint of vanilla mixed with the heady scent of their mingled sweat. He could feel the grip of Nolan's muscles massaging his cock as he moved, slowly at first and then with more intensity, even ferocity. Nolan moaned and writhed beneath him, his clear brown eyes focused on Mark's face, his lips parted, Mark's name on his tongue. When Mark came in the dream, he came in real life as well, waking himself in the process.

As they stood quietly at the railing, Mark realized something had shifted between them in these final weeks. The antagonism between them had eased. He'd forgiven Nolan for his stunt that first day, regretting most of all the distance it had put between them as a result.

Mark's cock twitched at the memory of the dream and Nolan's proximity, but instead of moving away, he held his ground, leaning slightly toward the other man. Mark's hands were resting lightly on the railing. Both men were looking out at the trees. Mark wondered if Nolan felt the static of electric desire crackling in the air between them.

Mark's pager buzzed. He put his hand in his pocket to deactivate it but didn't pull it out to read the message. He knew he should go back inside, but he stayed rooted to the spot, silently willing Nolan to turn toward him, to part his lips for a long, lingering kiss.

As if he sensed Mark's unspoken wish, Nolan did turn his head, his deep brown eyes fixed suddenly on Mark's face. Mark caught his breath, surprised at the raw desire that flashed over Nolan's features.

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He wants me, too.

In that moment he knew it. There was no reason for Nolan to pretend. He was nearly done with his community service so it was no longer about trying to get out of his hours. Not that Mark fooled himself Nolan wanted anything more than a quick toss between the sheets. Would that be enough?

Maybe it was exactly enough. A quick, impersonal fuck. A way to get Nolan out of his mind and out of his dreams. That had a way of happening—once he finally got the object of his desire, the object lost the allure it once had. Yes, this was the perfect way to get over Nolan once and for all. He'd say something. Suggest they meet after work. See where it led.

What was he thinking? Nolan still worked there. He was still, technically speaking, Mark's employee. On the other hand, once Nolan was done with his hours, he'd never see him again. He had to seize the moment. It was now or never.

Adrenaline coursed through his gut and his mouth was suddenly dry. Though it was cold outside, he felt a prickle of perspiration in his armpits and his cock was hard with anticipation. The words slid through his head in a silent rehearsal.

If you're not busy tonight, maybe we could go out for a drink...

He opened his mouth to speak but someone beat him to it. "There you are, Dr. H. Mr. Stratton from the insurance company is waiting in your office." Janet stood at the sliding glass door. "I paged you." Her voice carried more than a hint of reproach and she tapped her foot impatiently.

Mark bit his tongue to keep from screaming. He was sick of being dogged by that woman, always thrusting papers at him to sign or reminding him of the many appointments and thousands of things he had to get done that day. Why was he still in this job that

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left him exhausted and miserable at the end of each day?

“Guess break’s over for us both.” Nolan shrugged, a small smile sliding over his face, and then he turned away.

* * *

“What the fuck are you doing, Harrison?” Mark drummed his fingers on the steering wheel of his car, which was parked across the street from the address listed for Nolan Daniels in his file.

It was nearly eleven at night on a Friday. Mark had been sitting in his car for the last twenty minutes, arguing with himself about whether or not he should call first or just step up to the door and ring the bell or, the most sensible alternative—drive away.

What had possessed him to follow Nolan’s bus? Nolan had signed up for an eight- to-ten shift that evening at the home. Normally Mark wouldn’t have even been there, but he’d stayed late, catching up on paperwork and, though he barely admitted it to himself, waiting for Nolan’s shift to be over so he could sign his sheet and thus have an excuse to see him.

To his chagrin, Nolan hadn’t stopped by his office to get his sheet signed. He probably didn’t even know Mark was in there. He’d heard Nolan saying good night to the night nurse and almost jumped out of his chair to say, “Wait!” But he’d hesitated and the moment was lost.

He had walked out to his car with a vague plan of driving by the bus stop as if he’d just been passing by. He would casually offer Nolan a ride home. But his timing had been off and by the time he’d executed the U-turn to pull up in front of the bus stop, Nolan was already onboard.

On a crazy whim he followed the bus, which meandered

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through the city streets for about twenty minutes. The bus pulled up at the end of narrow residential street and stopped, the hydraulic doors opening with a whoosh. Nolan climbed down and walked along a block of row houses, one identical to other except for the color of the doors and shutters and the array of children's toys and bicycles cluttering the tiny front lawns.

Mark remained idling at the corner, watching as Nolan walked to the fifth house down, climbed the small stoop, unlocked the door and slipped inside.

Now as he sat frozen with indecision, a taxi pulled up to the curb and honked. After a moment Nolan stepped out. He climbed into the back seat and it drove away.

Feeling like a detective tailing his charge or worse, like some kind of stalker, Mark followed. The cab drove through the residential neighborhoods and along the service road of the freeway for a while, exiting in a seedy area of industrial-type buildings and warehouses.

At the end of a cul de sac stood a large concrete one-story building. The taxi pulled up in front and after a moment Nolan climbed out. Mark eased past him and pulled into the small parking lot beside the building, his heart beating fast.

It was obviously a bar—a gay bar from the looks of the men standing in small groups leaning against the walls, cigarettes in hand. There were no women in sight. He had come this far, he told himself. Might as well go in. After all, it's a free country. He could pretend it was a coincidence. "Hey, fancy meeting you here..."

He wasn't dressed for the place, not in his regulation suit and tie. Shrugging out of his camelhair coat, he took off his suit jacket. Loosening his tie, he pulled it from around his neck, tossing it onto the seat beside him. Pulling his tucked-in shirt from his trousers, he

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unbuttoned it, revealing the white T-shirt beneath. He looked in the mirror in the sun visor and ran his fingers through his hair.

Before he could talk himself out of it, he climbed out of the car, clicked the doors locked and headed toward the bar. Several of the men nodded and smiled as he passed. He nodded back, barely noticing them.

The room was high ceilinged, pipes and beams exposed. Clearly it was a converted warehouse. Long scuffed wooden bars lined both the right and left walls, the barstools bolted into the ground along them nearly all occupied. Loud music pumped through speakers mounted in the corners of the room. In the center of the room men were dancing. Some were gyrating to the beat, others locked in each other's arms, pressed against one another from shoulder to groin.

The space was dimly lit and overheated. Mark was glad he'd left his coat in the car. The place smelled of spilled whiskey and beer, stale sweat, urine and a riot of men's colognes. Mark stayed close to the door, leaning back against the wall as he scanned the crowd. It was a young crowd—twenties and thirties. As with Nolan, black leather, jeans and boots seemed to be the uniform of the evening.

Mark saw a sign over one of the bars—The Danger Zone—painted in glossy red letters against a black background. He'd heard of the place but had never been. It was a holdover from the rash of sleazy sex bars that had permeated the area in the pre-AIDs days, back when anything went.

As his eyes adjusted to the low light, he saw red velvet curtains hung at the back of the room. Was Nolan already back there, fucking some stranger? The thought rankled him. Why the hell was he so attracted to a man who hung out at a place like this?

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Someone bumped against him. Reflexively Mark moved away, mumbling, “Excuse me.”

The man, a short, wiry guy in a black tank top and black leather chaps, smiled broadly at Mark, revealing crooked yellow teeth. He had red hair and small, vividly green eyes, which he focused on Mark. “No excuse needed, babe. You looking for some action?” To punctuate his words, the man grabbed his own crotch, cupping it as he narrowed his eyes, his tongue sliding over his lips in an exaggerated gesture.

“No. I’m—I’m meeting someone here.”

The man shrugged, his face closing. “Your loss, babe.”

Mark seriously doubted that but he only shrugged in reply, forgetting the man as he drifted away to try his luck elsewhere. Mark scanned the room again in search of Nolan.

There he was, tall and handsome, standing at the bar beside another man, who put his hand on Nolan’s arm. Even from a distance Mark could see the guy was very good-looking, with long blond hair and broad shoulders, bare beneath a black leather vest. Nolan was holding a shot glass, which he tipped to his lips and emptied before setting on the bar.

They walked together toward the dance floor. Mark watched with dismay as the two men moved into each other’s arms. The blond began to swivel his hips against Nolan’s crotch while they swayed together. Unwarranted jealousy curdled through Mark’s gut.

This was ridiculous. What had he expected, following Nolan, spying on him? For all he knew, that blond guy was his lover, not just some stranger he’d met a moment before. What did he know of Nolan’s life? Next to nothing.

Feeling like a fool, and a very lonely fool at that, he slipped out

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the door of the bar and into the dark, cold night.

* * *

Yeah, there was something going on between them, at least beneath the surface, Nolan told himself. Lately it was as if they sought each other out, accidentally touching each time, moving closer and closer... If that secretary hadn't come out onto the veranda, would Nolan have made a move? Would Mark?

No. Who was he kidding? Except for the lust factor, a guy like Mark would never look at him twice. He wouldn't be caught dead going out with a mere lowly paramedic with no college degree. And anyway, Mark wasn't his type. He didn't go for uptight little rich boys who spent more on their cufflinks and ties than most guys spent on rent.

A guy like that was probably in a relationship anyway. Good-looking, rich, successful, used to taking the gifts the world handed him. Did he go home to a life partner, someone waiting with a ready smile and a hard dick?

He'd learned over his time on the job that Mark was thirty-two and that his family owned this nursing home, along with four others in New Jersey, which explained his position as director at such a young age.

He'd had a chance to watch Mark some in action. He was good with the patients—attentive and thorough without being condescending. He spent a lot of time in his office, pouring over paperwork, when he wasn't stuck in endless meetings with gray men in gray suits. Big bucks notwithstanding, Nolan wouldn't have traded places with the guy for anything.

Despite the lousy pay compared to what he could earn if he

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became a nurse, Nolan loved his job. He felt like a soldier on the front lines, literally fighting to save someone's life, forced to think and react at the exact same moment. If someone presented with shortness of breath, he had to make rapid decisions based only on the word of the patient and a cursory physical. Was the shortness of breath due to asthma, congestive heart failure, pneumonia, airway obstruction? Not only were the treatments for each different, but if his assessment was wrong, he could harm or even kill his patient. Yet instead of being overwhelmed by the challenge, Nolan thrived on it.

How demeaning it had been, forced to work as an orderly and janitor when in some respects he knew even more than Mark Harrison, MD about how to handle certain emergency situations. He'd been surprised, though, by how much he'd enjoyed interacting with some of the old folks at the home.

He especially liked Mabel Johnston, who reminded him of his grandmother. When he had a little down time he liked to visit her in her room, smiling when she called him Dr. Daniels. He'd given up trying to correct her.

He liked to hear her stories about what it was like on the Upper East Side of New York during the Depression, or traveling abroad with the Women's Army Corps during World War II to perform for the soldiers, and life with her various husbands. She always promised to make him her famous ginger cake once she got back into her own kitchen, which, sadly, would probably never happen.

He was at the end of his shift and heading over to Mark's office for his signature when his cell phone buzzed. Retrieving it from his pocket, he flipped it open. Shit—Wayne again. When was the guy going to get over himself? This was really getting old.

Nolan considered letting it go to voice mail but decided the

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only way to end Wayne's continuing obsession was deal with it head-on. He'd tell him once and for all, in no uncertain terms, that it was over.

He pushed the button to connect the call and launched right in. "Look Wayne. This has got to stop. You can't keep calling me. There is no 'us,' got it? It's over. Finito. End of the line."

There was a pause, during which Nolan nearly hung up. Then a voice he didn't recognize said, "This isn't Wayne. It's Jeff. Jeff Dempsey."

Jeff Dempsey? What the hell was he doing on Wayne's cell phone? Nolan knew who he was, though they'd never met. Jeff and Wayne had been going at it hot and heavy when Nolan had entered the picture. He was vaguely aware this guy Jeff had blamed him for the breakup, though that was a crock. Wayne had been looking for a way out and Nolan was just the excuse.

Confused, Nolan said, "What? Who?"

"You know who I am, so cut the crap." Something in Jeff's tone made Nolan stop walking.

He leaned against the wall by an unoccupied bedroom. "Yeah?"

"I hope you're happy now, you bastard." Nolan said nothing, wondering where the hell this was going. Finally Jeff whined loudly into the phone, "You killed him, man. You fucking killed him."

Dazed, Nolan walked into the empty room and fell into the single chair beside the stripped mattress. "I what? What are you talking about? Why are you on Wayne's cell?"

"His mom found him. Booze and empty pill bottles next to his bed. Dead a couple of days by the look of him." There was a long pause, during which Nolan could hear Jeff gasping and sniffing.

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He realized the guy was crying.

Jeff's words hadn't yet fully penetrated Nolan's mind—they were sliding over it like oil on water. They didn't seem real. They couldn't be real. Not again.

Not again.

Jeff continued. "He left a note, you rat fuck. Addressed to you. I could have made him so happy, but he left the note to *you*." Jeff's voice rose, edging on hysteria. "You fucking asshole, he killed himself because you're a self-absorbed prick who broke the heart of the man I loved."

Nolan's mind seemed to be short-circuiting. The old all-too-familiar dread seeped through his veins like a corrosive acid. Not again. Not again. He was caught in a loop and the thoughts didn't make sense.

Jeff was crying again on the other end of the phone. Nolan took a breath, forcing himself into some sort of composure. "Jeff. Jeff, listen to me. I didn't kill anybody. I haven't even talked to him in over a month."

After more snuffling, Jeff said in a choked voice, "Like I'd believe anything *you* say. You stole him away from me, you bastard. I wouldn't even be talking to you but Wayne's mom insisted. She gave me his cell phone and asked me to call his..." Jeff's voice cracked. "His *lover*. You."

"Christ," Nolan whispered. "Me and Wayne—we weren't lovers. It was over between us months ago."

"That's why he did it! Don't you get it, you dumb fuck? He killed himself because you're a selfish dick who threw away the best thing you ever had. I would have given anything for what you destroyed. And now he's...he's..." Jeff dissolved in a paroxysm of noisy sobs.

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Nolan was gripping the phone so tight it hurt his hand, but he couldn't seem to loosen his hold. "Listen, Jeff, this isn't about me. Wayne had some fantasy in his head but no way was it really about me. We were *never* that close."

"That's not what the note said. He wrote that without you his life was no longer worth living. I blame you. You did this to him." Jeff's voice rose. "You'll have to live with what you've done for the rest of your life." Before Nolan could respond, Jeff disconnected.

Nolan sat rigid in the chair, staring blindly at the cell phone in his hand. He was no longer a grown man sitting in a darkening bedroom in a nursing home in Trenton. He was seventeen, still living in his parents' Paterson home. It was two in the morning and he was trying to swim out of a deep sleep to answer the ringing telephone before his mother did, knowing who it must be.

"Hey, baby brother." It was his sister, her voice clotted with alcohol. "I know where I can get a gun. I'll do it right this time. You put the end of the gun in your mouth, point it toward the back of your throat and squeeze. Gotta be careful not to aim too low. Otherwise you'll just be a quadriplegic. That would seriously suck."

Wide awake, his heart pounding, Nolan, then as now, used anger as a way to keep the terror at bay. "Shut up, Janine. You're drunk. Don't be an idiot. I hate when you talk like this. Cut it out."

Her responding laugh was laced with gin. "Just messin' with ya, Nolan. Where would I even get a gun anyway, right? 'Night." She'd disconnected and he'd fallen back into troubled sleep.

She was twenty-two then and had left home four years before. Well, more accurately she'd been kicked out by their irate stepfather who was tired of her "shenanigans." When she'd left,

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she'd promised Nolan she'd get him out of there as soon as she was on her feet, though she never did.

He didn't understand back then she was bipolar. No one had diagnosed her. She was just crazy—wildly high on life one week, bone-chillingly depressed the next. Their mother called it mood swings, and claimed Janine was just acting out to get attention.

Her first two suicide attempts, tried while she was still living at home, had been unsuccessful. A handful of pills in the girls' bathroom at the high school the first time, cutting her wrists in the bathtub the second. Both were botched affairs. She was punished the first time and thrown out of the house for good the second.

The third time had been the charm.

Nolan remained frozen in the chair, the cell phone still clutched in his hand. Something was happening deep inside his body. He couldn't have moved if he'd wanted to. It was as if there were a dam inside him and if he moved, it would break and drown not only him but everything in its path.

CHAPTER 4

Mark stared at his inbox, which was piled high. It was ten after five. Whatever was waiting to be read and signed and handled could wait until tomorrow. Damn it, he was going to get out on time for once.

He sat a moment longer, wondering where Nolan was. He usually appeared promptly for Mark's signature when his shift was over, never working a second longer than he had to. Since Mark had spied on him at that bar the week before, he'd been unable to stop the images that crowded his head of Nolan and the blond hottie, locked together, pelvises grinding. Had they moved back behind those curtains, groping, tongues colliding, cocks hard as they pulled at each other's jeans, oblivious of the men around them?

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Mark shook his head, willing away the unwelcome picture of Nolan, the blond on his knees before him, Nolan's cock in his mouth. Standing, Mark reached for his coat from the freestanding coat rack near his desk. Leaving his office, he said good night to the nurse and orderly who were at the nurses' station.

As if it were an afterthought, he asked, "Have you seen Nolan Daniels? Did he sign out?"

"No. He hasn't been around yet. His shift's over though. Maybe he forgot to sign out."

"Okay, thanks. Maybe I'll just have a quick look around."

Without stopping to examine his motives too thoroughly, Mark walked down a hallway of bedrooms, heading toward the lab where he'd last seen Nolan. As he passed open doors he glanced in reflexively, making sure whoever was inside was comfortable.

He nearly passed by the empty room, the one recently vacated by Edith Jackson, who had died peacefully in her sleep at the age of ninety-four. The lights weren't on, the room instead backlit by the streetlights already flicking on in the winter gloom. Someone was slumped on the chair beside the bed.

Mark moved closer and took a step inside the door. It was Nolan Daniels. What was he doing there? Why was he sitting there as if he were carved in stone?

Mark flipped on the light and walked all the way into the room so he was facing the sitting man. Nolan turned slowly toward him, his eyes unfocused. *Shit. He's drunk. I should have known.*

Switching into employer mode, Mark demanded, "What's going on here? Have you been drinking?"

* * *

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Nolan's mind clicked back to the present at Mark's question. Figured the bastard assumed he was drunk. "No, I haven't been drinking," he snapped. "I just got some bad news." He stood, glaring at the doctor, glad to have something new to focus on. "My shift is over. I'm getting out of here. You can sign my sheet tomorrow."

"Nolan, wait. I'm sorry. That was out of line."

Ignoring the doctor, Nolan strode out of the room, aware if he stopped he would start crying. His friend Johnny Walker was waiting at home. He could almost taste the whiskey on his tongue. How he longed for its sweet oblivion.

* * *

"So this is it." Mark signed the last line on the page Nolan had thrust in front of him. He tried to tell himself he was glad it was over. At least now he could focus on his work and stop obsessing about Nolan Daniels.

Beyond the physical attraction, Mark wondered what made the guy tick. He suspected there was a lot more to Nolan Daniels than swagger and good looks. He was clearly far more complicated than Mark had first supposed.

He'd speculated endlessly about what kind of bad news Nolan had received that night when he'd had found him alone in the empty room. Raw anguish had been in his eyes for the few beats it took him to come back to himself. Before he'd raised the arrogant, angry mask once more, there had been a flash of pain so vivid, so heartbreaking, Mark had nearly reached to take Nolan in his arms.

Mark regretted his hasty accusation that Nolan was drinking, realizing as soon as he said it that Nolan wasn't drunk, but in

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shock. Watching the anger twist over Nolan's handsome face, Mark knew then he'd lost whatever chance he might have had to find out what had hurt Nolan so much.

In the week that followed Nolan had avoided him. When they did talk, it was only about matters pertaining to the nursing home or Nolan's hours of community service. Mark told himself again and again to let this one go. Whatever attraction he felt for Nolan Daniels, it could only end badly.

Mark pushed the paper back across the desk, looking into the dark eyes of the man across from him. *Will I see you again?* To Mark's horror, he found himself very nearly uttering those words aloud. Instead he said the first thing that popped into his head.

"So, you're getting your license back soon, right? That must be a relief."

"Yeah. First of the year. Two weeks. Thank God. I can't stand being without a car, especially in winter. I have a whole new respect for people who take public transit all the time."

The day was over and even though it was only a little after five it was pitch black outside. It had been snowing for about an hour and a bitter wind rattled the window. "I'm heading out. Could I give you a lift somewhere?" Mark offered. "I'd be glad to."

"No, that's okay," Nolan answered, making Mark's heart sink though he forced a smile and shrugged as if it made no difference to him. Nolan took a knit cap from his jacket pocket and pulled it over his dark, curling hair. "I can stand under the shelter at the bus stop. I'll be fine."

Nolan stood, shoving the neatly folded and now complete sign-in sheet into his back pocket. Mark stood as well, walking out from behind his desk. Nolan extended his hand and they shook. His grip was strong and firm. This time it was Mark who held on too long.

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Nolan pulled his hand away, his mouth twisting into an enigmatic smile.

“Well, good luck and all that,” Mark said lamely.

“Yeah. You, too. Maybe I’ll see you around.” With that, Nolan was gone.

Mark walked out of the building and into the side parking lot reserved for staff. The snow had changed over to sleet, which hit Mark’s face like icy needles. He hurried toward his car, releasing the locks and popping the trunk. He removed a small snow brush and wiped off the snow and scraped the ice from his windows, getting thoroughly wet and chilled in the process. Finally he climbed in, wishing winter were over, wishing he didn’t live in ugly, gray, freezing Trenton, New Jersey.

When he eased out of the parking lot onto the street, he saw Nolan standing huddled beneath the small enclosure at the bus stop, backlit by the streetlight. There were four other people there as well, bodies hunched, faces grim. Making a U-turn, he pulled up in front of the stop, opened the passenger window and leaned over.

“Hey, Nolan. It’s horrible out here. Are you sure I can’t give you a ride?”

Nolan stepped forward and flashed a wide smile toward Mark, who smiled back in spite of himself. “You sure I wouldn’t be messing up your fancy leather interior, Doc?”

Mark laughed. “It’s okay. I’ve already soaked the driver’s seat.”

Nolan climbed in and pulled off his cap, which was covered with snow and bits of ice. He shook his hair from his face and turned to Mark. “Man, It’s brutal out there. I hadn’t realized it was sleeting till I had to stand out here. The bus is late. If you hadn’t come along I was seriously thinking about calling a cab.”

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“Harrison’s Taxi, at your service. Where to, Mack?”

Nolan laughed. “To tell you the truth, I was thinking of celebrating the completion of my community service. There’s a pub not far from here. They serve free pizza and chicken wings at happy hour. If you don’t mind slumming, Doc, I’ll buy you a beer.”

Mark let the gibe pass, focusing instead of the second half of the sentence. He glanced at Nolan and then back at the road. Nolan was watching him, the expression on his face hard to read.

Careful Mark, who always weighed and reweighed every option before making a decision, felt a sort of reckless giddiness rising in his blood. He’d wanted this for weeks and now, just when he’d thought he’d never see the sexy bad boy again, here he was inviting him out for a beer. Even if nothing came of it, why not seize the moment?

“Yeah, that sounds great. Oh, and do me a favor, will you? Call me Mark.”

* * *

Nolan watched Mark’s Adam’s apple bob as he drank from his bottle of beer and had a sudden compelling desire to draw his finger along Mark’s throat. He couldn’t tear his eyes away when Mark set down the bottle and loosened the knot of his tie.

Mark saw him looking and a faint smile etched his mouth. He took off the tie and unbuttoned the top two buttons of his starched white shirt. If Nolan had his way, Mark would have kept right on going until that shirt was open.

So here they were, no longer boss and employee, no longer enforcer and community service drone. It felt good to be on more

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even footing with the guy, even if nothing came of it.

The sexual tension that had been lurking beneath the surface those couple of times when they were alone at the nursing home had returned, full force. Though they were just making small talk, each kept accidentally on purpose touching the other—a brush of the knee, the touch of the fingertips when passing the salt, a dark, sensual glance exchanged over the rims of their beer mugs.

Nolan didn't fool himself that Mark would actually want to get involved with a guy from the wrong side of the tracks. But maybe he wasn't above a quickie in the dark, now that Nolan was no longer under his authority. Nolan savored the image of the young doctor, naked and on his hands and knees, begging Nolan to fuck him.

After exhausting the topics of the nursing home, the life of a paramedic, the terrible weather and the upcoming Christmas holidays, Mark asked, "So are you from around here, Nolan? You have family to celebrate with?"

"Nah. I don't do holidays. It's a bunch of hyped-up advertising bullshit, if you ask me. As to family, I never knew my dad. Apparently he took off while my mom was pregnant with me. I think she always sort of blamed me." Nolan shook his head with a snort. "I haven't seen her in about ten years. She's up in Paterson, still married for some strange reason to an active, abusive alcoholic."

"That sucks. No brothers or sisters?"

It was on the tip of Nolan's tongue to say "yes," but aloud he said, "No. Just me."

Mark laughed. "I used to dream of being an only child. I have three older brothers and I don't think I ever got a new piece of clothing or pair of shoes until I started buying my own stuff."

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Nolan said nothing, the hovering ghost of Janine distracting him.

“You look so sad.” Mark’s words startled Nolan out of his reverie.

“What? No, I’m okay. Just remembering something...”

“What really happened that night when you got that call, Nolan? I was out of line accusing you of drinking. It was obvious to me afterward you’d had some kind of shock.”

Nolan looked up from his mug, experiencing a sudden overwhelming urge to tell someone. But no. He didn’t dare. Not about Janine. He’d never told anyone about her, once he’d left home. But what the hell, why not tell him about Wayne? Then at least he’d see the DUI hadn’t been Nolan’s fault. Well, not entirely, anyway.

“It was a call from a guy who wanted me to know my ex-lover had killed himself and had left a suicide note blaming me.”

Mark looked startled at Nolan’s bluntness. “That’s horrible. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah. I hadn’t even seen the guy since this whole DUI thing went down. This wasn’t the first time he pulled something like this. Or rather, he’d pretended before. Cried wolf. I was at a party when he called the first time. I raced over there like a maniac, thinking to save him. I wasn’t thinking clearly. I should have just called 9-1-1.”

Nolan’s last memory of Wayne, naked and drunk, weaving toward him with the whiskey bottle in his hand, slid through Nolan’s mind like a ghost. “It was actually after, on the way back, that I got stopped. I was so angry at his tricking me into coming over that I wasn’t paying attention to the speed limit. And I, uh,” he paused, took a breath and plunged on with his admission, “I

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kind of gave the officer a hard time. That was what got me busted. I let my temper get the better of me.”

Mark nodded sympathetically. “How’d he do it?”

“Wayne? Overdose of pills and booze. I guess I’m lucky he didn’t put a gun in his mouth and blow his brains out.” Nolan watched the dismay and distaste wash over Mark’s features. For some reason this goaded him on. It felt better to be obnoxious than to face his own pain.

“What was his name?”

Nolan found himself disarmed by Mark’s question. Unbidden, tears sprang to his eyes. Jesus, what was his problem? Angrily he wiped his eyes with the back of his hand. “What’s the difference? He’s dead now.”

“You know it wasn’t your fault, right?” Mark’s tone was gentle, maybe even condescending. Like he knew anything about it.

“Yeah, sure. I know that. The guy was mentally unhinged. I was just handy to paste the blame on for his own misery.”

Mark nodded. He put his hands flat on the table, staring down at them, lost in thought. Finally he looked up, gazing past Nolan into the middle distance. “It’s so hard for us to understand the depth of pain someone must be in to take their own life. We can’t help but wonder if there was something we could have done. ‘If only I’d come over that last time when he’d called. If only I’d made the time to listen when he was hurting.’”

“Yeah,” Nolan agreed, surprised at Mark’s insight. “That’s exactly it. If only I could have done *something*, maybe she wouldn’t have...”

“She?”

Nolan felt his face heat. “Uh, he. Did I say she?”

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Mark nodded, his expression quizzical. Nolan focused on his food, taking a bite of greasy pepperoni pizza. Mark picked up the thread of his conversation, jerking Nolan to attention with his words. "In the end, though, when someone's bound and determined to do it, nothing you can say or do will stop them."

"You don't know that," he said vehemently. "There might have been something. We can't just sit by and let them die." Nolan realized he'd raised his voice. Embarrassed, he clamped his mouth shut, aware of Mark's sudden scrutiny.

"No, of course not." Again that gentle, condescending tone. Nolan felt his hackles rise. He was contemplating a sarcastic retort while Mark continued. "Bottom line, when a person is in that kind of mental or physical pain, what other people want or demand just doesn't play into it any longer. I've heard it said suicide is an aggressive act, something to get back at those the person thinks hurt them. But I don't believe that. I think, even with guys like Wayne, beneath the drama they just can't go on anymore. They're tired, if you will. Beat. The prospect of having to draw another breath or take another step is just too much."

Nolan felt an odd sort of relief pervade him. *Maybe he's right. Maybe there's nothing I could have done. Nothing anyone could have done.* Did that lessen the pain? He wasn't sure. To distract himself from this line of thought, he offered, "Looks like you've done your homework on the classic suicidal personality. Do they teach Suicide 101 in med school?"

Mark smiled, though his eyes were soft with sadness. "No. They should, but they don't. But I've seen that kind of pain at the nursing home. Old people devastated by loneliness and ravaged by disease. They just can't face one more minute on this earth. They want to go. I've seen people pretty much give up and let go. They

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will themselves to die, basically, where someone else might hang on for longer. They just can't do it anymore."

Nolan nodded and Mark continued. "I have some personal experience, too. My Uncle Frank killed himself. It was a while ago. I was still a teenager. He was married and had two kids. Apparently he had this whole secret life on the side for years. He had a lover from Nigeria named William. William got tired of being a secret, I guess. He gave Frank an ultimatum—divorce his wife and live openly with him, or William was going back to Africa.

"Frank couldn't do it. He loved William, I know he did, but he just didn't have the courage to face the wrath of my homophobic family. He let William go. William left the country and Frank never heard from him again. He went kind of nuts at that point. Too late, he left his wife and declared to the world he was gay. He became promiscuous and a huge embarrassment to the family. He tried to find William and failed. And then..." Mark paused, tears in his eyes. "He just sort of wasted away. He gave up. In the end he got a hold of a lethal dose of morphine, but really he died of a broken heart."

Mark continued to stare into his mug. "I used to lie awake, wondering what I could have done to keep him alive. I hadn't told anyone I was gay. I was barely sure of it myself. I would listen to my parents ranting at the dinner table about what a sick ticket Uncle Frank was, and how he was destroying the family with his homosexual perversions. They didn't see his pain—they just saw his wife Sandy as the victim, and their own reputation in the community suffering as a result of his behavior. I think they were relieved when he did it. At least they could put him behind them."

"Man, that's really cold," Nolan said. His parents hadn't been

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relieved when Janine had killed herself. Instead they'd made it all about them. He still remembered his mother's words. "Janine's death is my single greatest failing." The ego in that statement had floored Nolan even back then, as young as he was. *It's not about you, you bitch*, he'd wanted to shout. Instead he'd turned inward, shutting out his mother's grief and his stepfather's false platitudes.

"Yeah," Mark went on. "I used to think if only he'd known he wasn't alone, known that I was gay, too, he might have hung on." He gave a small mirthless laugh. "Such is the self-centeredness of a teenager. I've since learned, there's really very little you can do. You can't save people from themselves."

Nolan looked at Mark. This line of conversation was depressing the crap out of him. It was time to lighten the mood. And turn up the heat. See what Mark was really made of, once the tie came off and his guard was lowered.

"Hey," Nolan said, "let's change the topic, how 'bout? We came out to celebrate, not commiserate."

Mark nodded. "You're right. I didn't mean to lecture. What do you want to talk about?"

Nolan looked Mark over, sizing him up while he offered what he thought of as his seduction smile. He was pleased to note the faint flush rising in Mark's cheeks. It deepened as he allowed the tip of his tongue to appear between his lips. Yeah, the guy was into him and that was a good thing.

Feeling reckless, Nolan said, "Let's get out of here. There's a club called The Danger Zone. Ever hear of it?"

Mark frowned, his faint flush deepening. "Yeah. I've heard of it."

"We could head over there if you want. Don't worry, I'll protect you." Nolan laughed though even in his own ears it rang

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hollow. “You’ll get a kick out of it. Though it might be a little rough for a guy like you, a guy used to taking tea in china cups and playing golf at the country club.” He smiled to soften the sudden bitter sarcasm that had crept into his tone, aware by Mark’s expression what had meant to be a joke had fallen flat.

“You know, that tired theme’s getting old, Nolan. Not for nothing, but over the time you were at the nursing home you made it abundantly clear you think I had the world handed to me on a silver platter, that being a doctor is a piece of cake and my life as director of Golden Apple is a walk in the park. You like to think you’ve got it tough because you got busted for making a stupid decision and had to pay the price. That I deserve your scorn and derision because I got here on an easy path while you had to work your way to where you are.

“I’ll let you in on a little secret. I’m thirty-two. I went to school for twelve years after college, counting residency. Since then I’ve done nothing but work in my family’s nursing homes. I barely need a medical degree for what I do now. And the irony is, I’m not doing what I’m supposed to be doing.”

Mark leaned forward, a sudden spark of fire lighting his eyes. “There’s a woman I know. One of my attendings during residency. She lives here in Trenton but she commutes once a week to a place called Havenfield in Pennsylvania, where she started a free clinic a few years back. They’re doing amazing work there—providing basic healthcare and preventative services to poor families who’d otherwise go without any care at all or show up at the emergency room of the nearest hospital, which is over twenty miles away.” His hand balled into a fist and for a moment Nolan thought he was going to strike the table with it.

Instead, he looked down at his hand and slowly uncurled the

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fingers. Nolan could see the effort Mark was exerting to keep himself calm. “She’s asked me to come work there. It’s something I’ve always wanted to do. Instead I’ve spent my entire life attempting to please my family, a family who doesn’t even know I’m gay and is still waiting for me to bring Mrs. Right home for dinner like the rest of the boys. I’m trapped in a job that, while reasonably fulfilling and well paid, is someone else’s idea of success, not mine. In a word, my life sucks.”

Whoa. Dr. Perfect isn’t so perfect, or so happy. In fact he’s as miserable as most people. The thought nearly made Nolan laugh out loud, not because he was glad for Mark’s misery but because suddenly Mark had become approachable. Not someone he had to impress or keep at arm’s length so as not to be judged and found wanting. Instead here was someone he could relate to, someone he could even like.

As he thought over Mark’s words, he said, “Why don’t you change it?”

“Change what?”

“Your life. Your job. If you hate it so much, why don’t you quit? Go work at this clinic. What’s the problem?”

Mark sat still for so long Nolan thought maybe he hadn’t heard him. He started to repeat himself when Mark said, “Quit? Just like that?”

“Yeah. Why not? You’re unattached. Your family sounds like a bunch of royal assholes, no offense. Walk. Tell them to pound salt. Call this doc and tell her you’re on the next train to Pennsylvania.”

“Oh. I couldn’t. I mean, they rely on me at the home. I have responsibilities.”

“So what? Sounds to me like you’ve paid your dues. Surely you’re not the only guy in New Jersey who can run a fucking

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nursing home. Give them notice. Say a month. Gives you time to figure stuff out. Like the sneaker commercial says, just do it.”

Mark stared at him as if Nolan had suggested he strip and dance naked on the table. Slowly his incredulous look changed to a wide grin and then Mark laughed out loud. “You know, maybe you’re onto something.”

He pulled out his wallet and dropped some money onto the table. “Is the offer to The Danger Zone still good? Come on, Nolan. Show me the dark side.” Mark eyes were lit with a strange fire that piqued Nolan’s interest.

There was more to this guy than met the eye, that was for sure.

CHAPTER 5

The snow and sleet had stopped and the roads were shiny in the reflected light of the streetlamps. Mark followed Nolan's directions to the club, wondering how he'd react if he knew Mark had been there not long before, spying on him.

Nolan's perception of him amused Mark on one level, even while it annoyed him on another. Just because Mark didn't choose to hang out at skanky sex clubs didn't mean he was naïve or inexperienced by any stretch of the imagination.

Nolan seemed to be under the mistaken impression Mark was sexually timid and needed to be protected from predators at that club. Mark smiled to himself, thinking how much fun it would be to prove Nolan wrong, if the chance presented itself.

They pulled into the parking lot and headed toward the club

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entrance. The place was considerably less crowded than the night he'd followed Nolan, probably because it was several hours earlier. There were still plenty of guys at the two bars that lined the walls and a few couples swaying on the dance floor.

They moved toward some empty barstools and several of the men greeted Nolan by name. "You come here a lot?" Mark asked, still not exactly sure how he felt about this.

"From time to time." Nolan shrugged. He ordered scotch, neat. Mark ordered a beer. Just as Mark took his first sip, the short redhead who had accosted him when he'd followed Nolan appeared beside him.

"Hey, babe. You came back. I saw you slip away the other night. Friend never showed, huh? You shoulda stuck with me. I'd have given you an experience to remember." He moved closer, nudging Mark's shoulder, leaning forward with a leer. "It's not too late. Offer's still open. Wide open."

Mark felt his cheeks heat. "I'm with him," he mumbled, nodding toward Nolan, feeling like an idiot, though not for the reason Nolan might suppose. The redhead faded away upon hearing the news.

Nolan lifted his brows, a faint smile twisting his lips. "So I thought you said you've never been here."

It was Mark's turn to shrug. "He's got me confused with someone else," he said with as much nonchalance as he could muster.

"Yeah, okay. Whatever you say, Doc." Nolan lifted his glass. "Cheers."

They finished their drinks in silence, watching the couples on the dance floor. Nolan nudged Mark and pointed toward the back of the bar. "See that curtain? Back there is where the real action

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is.”

“I thought that kind of thing went out of style with the eighties.”

“Anonymous sex with strangers never goes out of style, who’re you kiddin’?” Nolan laughed. “Come on. I’ll take you back there. Don’t worry, I won’t let anyone rape you.”

Mark stood abruptly from his barstool, translating his annoyance into deadpan sarcasm. “Yeah? Well, in that case, lead the way.”

He followed Nolan, aware of the admiring glances on all sides for both of them. He felt out of place in his white shirt and woolen slacks amidst the denim and leather, but none of the men staring with such open admiration seemed to mind.

Nolan pushed back the edge of the curtain and stepped into the darkened room. The air was hot and close, the smell cloying. After a moment Mark could make out the shapes of men in various positions along the walls. Mostly it was one man leaning back, another on his knees in front of him, head bobbing furiously. There were several men standing alone, pants open, their hands on their own cocks. In one corner a couple was actually fucking, both on hands and knees, moving in tandem.

The thick curtains dampened the pulsing music in the main bar. No one spoke in this smaller room, the only sound being the groans and sighs of the men in various stages of climax.

Intellectually Mark was repelled by the sordid scene, but his body reacted nonetheless, his cock lengthening and hardening, his heart quickening its pace. Nolan had moved into the room, finding a spot against the wall from which to survey the scene. In the gloom it was hard to read his expression.

Mark approached Nolan and saw an unmistakable glint of wry

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amusement in his eyes. *He's laughing at me.* No doubt he was amused at what he assumed was the naïve and sheltered young doctor, completely out of his ken.

Mark's earlier annoyance shifted one notch toward anger, while at the same time his dominant nature rose to the fore, spurred on by the naked and nearly naked men around him, the raw, stark smell of sex and sweat in the air and Nolan's taunting grin.

With a sudden gesture he pinned Nolan against the wall by one shoulder, while reaching up to pull his head down with the other. Goaded by Nolan's unspoken challenge, he pressed his thigh between Nolan's legs, forcing them apart. He acted so quickly Nolan barely reacted, allowing himself to be manhandled without protest or resistance.

All the aching, pent-up lust of the past few months welled up and spilled over as Mark put his mouth over Nolan's and kissed him. He moved closer, pressing his body hard against Nolan's, aware of his own hard cock and the responding erection in Nolan's jeans.

After a few stunned seconds, Nolan began to kiss him back, though his arms remained limp at his sides, as if he were too shocked to do anything else. Mark kissed him hard, holding his head still as he explored his mouth, not letting him go for at least a minute.

When he stepped back, his heart was pounding, his balls aching. "Jesus," Nolan said softly, bringing a hand to his mouth. "What the fuck?"

"Come on." Power pumped through Mark's veins like a drug. "Let's get out of here. I'm taking you home." He flipped back an edge of the heavy curtains and stepped into the main bar, not looking back to see if Nolan followed, certain that he was.

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* * *

Nolan directed Mark along the Trenton streets to his working class neighborhood. Cars lined the curb, people home for the night. “It’s that one there.” Nolan pointed. “I can’t believe it, there’s actually a spot right in front.”

They hadn’t spoken much on the drive home. Mark seemed intent on the road and Nolan, for one of the few times in his life, was tongue-tied.

Mark had thrown him for a complete loop with that kiss. In an instant the tables had turned so dramatically Nolan hadn’t known what hit him. One minute he was on top, looking forward to the shocked expression on Mark’s face when he took him to the back room. The next he found himself falling under Mark’s spell.

Mark seemed barely fazed by the action around him, instead focusing his attention on Nolan. He’d moved so quickly and with such strength Nolan had been taken completely by surprise. And what a surprise! Mark’s kiss had disarmed him. The passion of it—the intensity. Nolan’s shaft was still hard with the memory. He touched his lips, which felt tender, almost bruised.

Mark parked the car and turned toward Nolan. They sat in the silence a moment and then Mark put his hand on Nolan’s thigh. His fingertips sent currents of desire pulsating to Nolan’s cock. “So,” Mark said softly. “What’s next?”

Nolan looked down at Mark’s hand. He wanted to invite Mark in. Then he thought about his place, which was a wreck as always. Normally he didn’t give a damn. It was just a place to eat and sleep. He rarely brought guys home, preferring to stay at their place, if he stayed at all.

He was suddenly very conscious of the plush leather interior

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and polished wood paneling of this car and Mark beside him in his designer suit. Mark was from a different world. Did he really feel like having this guy judge him? “I don’t know. The place is kind of a mess.”

Mark shrugged and smiled, his eyes kind. “I don’t care if you don’t.”

Mark’s hand was still on Nolan’s thigh, the fingers perilously close to the rising bulge in his jeans. Lust overrode self-consciousness. “Okay then. Come on.”

Mark followed him into the house, bumping into him in the tiny foyer when he stopped to hang his key on the key rack. Nolan turned back, his mouth readied for a kiss, lifting his arms to take Mark into them. But Mark had stepped back, apparently with no intention of resuming the scorching kiss they’d shared at the bar. He wasn’t even looking at Nolan, but was looking past him into the living room.

“I love these old places,” Mark said. “My grandparents lived in a row house just like this one.” The house was narrow, the foyer opening onto the living room, which opened onto the dining room and beyond that the kitchen. Stairs along one side of the living room led to two small bedrooms and the only bathroom in the place. White lace curtains hung from the windows, courtesy of the last tenant to live there. The furniture was drab but clean, also left by the last tenant, who sold the lot to Nolan for next to nothing.

Embarrassed by his misread of Mark’s intentions, Nolan said brusquely, “I just rent. You can hang your coat there.” He pointed to the hooks embedded in one wall of the foyer. He hung his jacket, too, and walked into the living room, hastily grabbing newspapers and used drinking glasses to take into the kitchen. “Just sit down wherever. How ’bout I’ll fix us a drink? I have a

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new bottle of Johnny Walker Red.”

“That sounds perfect.” Mark smiled at him. “I’ll have it over ice, if you’ve got it.”

Nolan bit back the retort that rose to his lips about even poor folk having ice these days. He realized it was such an ingrained habit to resent anyone who had more than he did that he naturally assumed they were out to insult him.

He left Mark, who was no doubt silently recoiling at Nolan’s shabby, small place. The doctor probably had a fancy home in some nice neighborhood with a heated garage to store his Lexus in and a maid who kept everything spotless.

Reaching for the whiskey, Nolan twisted off its red top. He took a long pull straight from the bottle, savoring its burn, welcoming its heat. He grabbed two glasses and took the ice tray from the freezer, dropping a few cubes into one of the glasses.

Returning to the living room, he handed the glass with ice in it to Mark, who was sitting on the sofa that leaned against one wall. There were two chairs across from it against the opposite wall, a small end table between them.

Mark took the glass and held it steady while Nolan poured several fingers of whiskey over the ice. Nolan poured a few inches into his own glass and sat beside Mark. Mark was watching him as he sipped his whiskey. Nolan let his eyes drift lower, across the broad chest and down to the bulge beneath his belt buckle.

Mark set his glass down on the floor by the couch. Under Nolan’s gaze, he began to unbutton his shirt, not stopping until it was completely open. He wore a white T-shirt beneath it, the sleeves barely covering the tops of bulging biceps. The guy was seriously built, Nolan realized, a fact he hadn’t fully appreciated since until now he’d only seen Mark in dress shirts and suit

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jackets.

Nolan put his glass down, too, his heart thumping in his throat, his lips again tingling at the prospect of Mark's kiss. He waited for Mark to make the first move, not wanting to embarrass himself again.

Mark searched Nolan's face, his expression at once tender and fierce. Nolan felt somehow naked, exposed and vulnerable, but at the same time deeply aroused. What was it about this guy? He'd had him pegged all wrong.

"So who are you really, Nolan Daniels? Who are you really behind that tough guy persona you show the world?"

Disconcerted by the question, still off-balance from the kiss at the bar, Nolan retreated to familiar ground. "Who am I? I'm the guy you dream about, babe."

Mark gave a small laugh. "Okay. Have it your way. Safer that way."

Nolan shrugged, confused. What the hell was the guy trying to do—psychoanalyze him or something? Better they just get down to the business of sex, a business Nolan was used to transacting without too much talk or, for that matter, too much thought.

Mark was watching him, and Nolan again had the unsettling feeling he could see past his face into his thoughts. He wanted to turn away but instead found himself leaning forward, drawn by Mark's compelling gaze. Mark angled his head slightly as he moved toward Nolan, lightly touching Nolan's lips with his. They remained still for a time, closed lips lightly brushing. Nolan could hear his own heart beating in his ears and imagined he could hear Mark's as well.

Nolan parted his lips and closed his eyes, aching for another of those kisses. But instead of responding in kind, Mark pulled away,

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narrowing his eyes, his smile nearly cruel. “You want me, don’t you, Nolan?”

Nolan stared. That was *his* line. He liked to get guys nearly desperate for him before he gave in and let them worship his cock or offer their ass for his use. How had Mark turned things so on their head?

He realized Mark was actually waiting for a response. Well, two could play that game. With a sly look, Nolan dropped his hand to his crotch, cupping his erection. “What do you think? Want to get down on your knees and find out just how much?”

Ignoring the taunt, Mark stood, his cock clearly outlined against his tailored trousers. “Let’s go upstairs. Show me where you sleep.”

It wasn’t a request and, for some reason, Nolan didn’t think of refusing. Not that he wanted to refuse Mark, far from it. That bulge in Mark’s pants looked pretty damn good and his own balls were aching with need.

But did he really want Mark to see his bedroom? It was even messier than downstairs, with clothing scattered over the floor and empty glasses and bottles on the bureau and nightstand.

Mark was watching him, his chin lifted slightly, as if daring Nolan to refuse him. What the hell, at least the sheets were clean.

He walked up the narrow stairs, Mark following behind. They entered the small bedroom and Nolan sat on the bed, patting the mattress beside him. Mark sat down and turned toward him. Without speaking, he pressed against Nolan’s chest, pushing him back against the bed.

Nolan allowed himself to fall. He closed his eyes, at once marveling at his own passivity and thrilling to it in some strange way. Mark’s hands were still on his chest, the touch firm and

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calming. Mark lifted Nolan's shirt and ran his cool fingers over Nolan's bare skin.

Nolan's heart thumped beneath Mark's touch but he still didn't move, barely even lifting his head to help when Mark pulled the shirt from his body. Mark's hands warmed against his skin, the palms pressing flat, moving in comforting, swirling motions over his chest and shoulders.

Nolan's normal MO at this point would have been to reach for the man above him—to pull him down into a rough embrace and grind his erection against him, leaving no doubt whatsoever as to his intentions or desires.

But he lay still, as unable to move as if a spell had been cast over him, pinning him to the mattress and robbing his muscles of their will. It was as if he were cocooned in soft down but then encased in stone, like a statue. True, he'd had a fair amount to drink so far that night, but it wasn't a liquor-induced stupor. It was more of a hypnotic trance. And while he was deeply aroused, he also felt a deep stillness, a kind of peace he wasn't used to experiencing.

He felt—safe.

The realization was an odd one. It wasn't a feeling he was used to, especially not in the context of sex. He understood desire, lust, rage, power, control, loss of control—but safety?

Mark's hands moved lower, stroking Nolan's stomach and sliding along his sides. The effort of thinking became too much and Nolan let go. He began to drift in and out of consciousness as strong, sure hands moved over his body, soothing his muscles and easing his bones.

He felt Mark rising from the bed and wanted to say, "No, don't stop. Don't go," but he found he didn't even have the strength to

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form the words. He felt the tug of his right boot and the give of leather as Mark pulled it from his foot. He did the same with the other and then peeled Nolan's socks from his feet.

Nolan felt the pull of the metal button at his fly and the drag of the zipper over the rise of his erection. He tried to lift his hips to help but wasn't sure if he'd succeeded. Nevertheless, Mark pulled his jeans down, along with his underwear, exposing Nolan's cock and balls. He tugged the jeans past Nolan's feet, not stopping until Nolan was completely naked.

Nolan couldn't recall ever being naked in front of a fully clothed man. Even so, again this would have been his cue to rise up, to push Mark to his knees beside the bed and shove his erect shaft down Mark's throat. Even when Mark lifted his legs up onto the bed, Nolan remained inert. Only his pounding heart throbbed against his ribcage.

Opening his eyes, he saw Mark was taking off his shoes and socks. Mark climbed onto the bed, crouching between Nolan's legs. Nolan closed his eyes again, moaning softly as warm, soft lips closed over his shaft.

His cock hardened even more at Mark's touch, throbbing with pleasure as Mark skillfully teased his way up the shaft and then lowered his head to take it as far as he could. Strong fingers gripped his balls, which tightened with aching need. Mark's tongue glided along the underside of Nolan's shaft, a sure hand gripping the base of Nolan's cock and pulling upward to meet his mouth.

Somehow he mustered the strength to reach toward Mark, planning to grab him by the hair and force himself deeper into Mark's throat. Letting go of Nolan's cock and balls, Mark stopped Nolan by catching his wrists and pinning them to his sides.

Startled by the aggressive gesture, reflexively Nolan pulled

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against the restraint of those strong fingers but couldn't get himself free. For some odd reason the feeling of helplessness heightened his passion. A shudder shook his frame and he moaned.

Mark resumed his attention to Nolan's cock and balls, now using only his lips and tongue. He licked up and down the shaft, sometimes actually using his teeth to lightly scrape the sensitive flesh. He focused for a while on the sensitive gland at the head of Nolan's cock, lapping at it like a cat licking its cream. The sensation was extraordinary.

Just when Nolan thought he would come from that alone, Mark lowered his head, taking Nolan's shaft into his throat, not stopping until he'd taken its entire length. This sent Nolan to the very brink. He wanted to hold on longer, savoring Mark's exquisite talent.

But when Mark began to do something amazing with his throat muscles, Nolan gave up the fight, surrendering to the spasming pleasure hurtling through his body. Still Mark had Nolan's wrists pinned firmly to his sides. Nolan's heart was pounding, the blood roaring in his ears, his breath jerking raggedly in his throat. "Oh God, oh shit, oh God, oh shit..." Nolan was vaguely aware it must be himself speaking, but he didn't recognize the sounds.

He was tumbling out of control, his trembling body suddenly jerked into a rigid posture, every muscle contorted with the effort. He felt the hot, spurting release of his climax as his body bucked of its own accord. Mark continued to suck until he drained Nolan's balls of their seed.

Only then did Mark release the tight grip on his wrists. Nolan sagged against the bed, drifting in and out of consciousness. Eventually his heart slowed its frantic pace and a great sense of peace drifted over him, along with something new, something he couldn't yet define.

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He opened his eyes to see Mark, who was now sitting cross-legged beside him. His blond hair was tussled and fell across his forehead, his dark blue eyes moving over Nolan's face as if memorizing every angle and plane.

Neither spoke. They locked eyes. There was a fire in Mark's gaze that sent sparks of life directly to Nolan's cock, even though he'd just experienced perhaps the most intense orgasm of his life.

Though the fire remained in his eyes, Mark's mouth curved into a slow, easy smile. "My turn," he whispered.

* * *

Mark climbed off the bed and stood over Nolan, who lay flat on his back, his eyes following Mark's every move. For a moment Mark just admired Nolan's naked form—the broad, straight line of his shoulders, and the firm pecs beneath soft, curling chest hair that tapered down, drawing the eye toward his flat belly to the thick cock now lying at half mast, nestled against a dark pubic thatch.

Mark unbuckled his belt and drew it from the loops of his pants. Opening the fly, he slipped his hand into his underwear, stroking his rigid, throbbing shaft. He stepped out of his pants and pulled his T-shirt over his head. Nolan made no move to rise, but kept his eyes locked on Mark's. Mark stared back as he gripped his own cock, moving his hand up and down along the shaft.

"You've got an incredible body," Nolan offered. "I want to return the favor but I can't seem to move. Whatever the hell you did to me, I'm wasted."

Nolan's position on his back gave Mark an idea. He wondered if Nolan would go for it. Only one way to find out. "That's okay. You don't even have to get up. Just scoot over here to the end of

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the bed. Put your head right here.” He pointed to the edge of the mattress.

With a small knowing smile, Nolan complied, maneuvering himself until his head was just beneath Mark’s balls. He opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue. Then he laughed. “Bring it on, baby.”

Mark spread his legs and leaned forward until the tip of his cock touched Nolan’s lips. Nolan parted them to receive him. Mark edged the crown of his cock into Nolan’s mouth. Nolan lifted his head slightly, sucking the cock deeper into his mouth. His hands came up, grabbing Mark’s balls.

For a few moments Mark gave in to his need, savoring the heat and friction of Nolan’s rough but sensual touch. It felt fantastic. He pulled back and stood straight, his cock bobbing over Nolan’s face, shiny with his saliva.

“Hey,” Nolan said. “Come back here. Fuck my face with your cock. Come on. You know you want it, Doc.”

“Mark,” Mark said softly. “It keeps a distance between us when you do that, Nolan. Call me Mark.”

“Okay. *Mark*. Quit playing hard to get. You want to fuck my face or what?”

Mark appraised the supine man, looking past the twisted hint of a sneer on his mouth to the dark, hooded eyes. He noted the hint of a flush washing over Nolan’s stubbled cheeks and the rise and fall of his chest as his breathing quickened.

“Yeah. That’s what I want,” Mark answered. “But I want to do it my way. All I want you to do is lie there. Don’t use your hands. Don’t try to jerk me off. Just open yourself to me. I don’t want you to do anything except just lie still and take what I give you. Think you can do it?”

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By way of answer, Nolan closed his eyes and parted his lips, sending a jolt of lust coursing through Mark's body. Mark spread his legs again to lower himself and leaned forward, guiding his cock back into Nolan's open mouth. Nolan closed his lips around the shaft.

"No." Mark pulled his cock away. "Don't do anything. Just lie there and keep your mouth open."

With a slight shrug, Nolan opened his mouth wide and winked up at Mark. Ignoring this, Mark again inserted just the tip of his cock between Nolan's lips. He pressed it against Nolan's warm, soft tongue. Slowly he moved down until about half of the shaft was in Nolan's mouth.

Nolan's arms were at his sides, as Mark had directed, his mouth slack around Mark's shaft. On an impulse, Mark leaned over Nolan and gripped his wrists, using his weight to pin Nolan down. At the same time he slid his cock deeper, not stopping until the head of his cock was lodged firmly in Nolan's throat. Nolan's cock was now fully erect, his chest heaving.

Mark pressed down harder, covering Nolan's nose with his balls. It took every ounce of self-control to keep himself still in the warm, velvet clasp of Nolan's throat. He counted to ten, watching as Nolan's hands curled into fists. Yet Nolan didn't resist. Easily as strong as Mark, if not stronger, Nolan didn't try to wrench his arms free. He didn't try to twist his head away to catch his breath. He just lay there, effectively letting Mark choke him with his cock.

Finally Mark pulled back, slowly withdrawing his cock from Nolan's mouth. Nolan gasped for breath, his eyes fluttered open. "Jesus," he whispered. "Who the hell are you?"

Mark smiled down at him. "I'm the guy you dream about, babe."

CHAPTER 6

“Nolan, get up. You’ll be late for school. Hurry. Get up.” Nolan forced one eye open. Janine as standing beside the bed, tugging at him, her expression anxious.

“Go away. I’m not going.” He tried to put the pillow over his head, but Janine grabbed it.

“Nolan, come on. Chris has been drinking. You don’t want to cross him.”

Nolan came fully awake and stared with confusion at his sister. “Janine, I’m a grown man. Chris wouldn’t dare beat me anymore. And you...” He stared at her, confused. “You’re dead. What’re you doing here?”

Janine laughed, tossing her long dark hair. “I’m not dead, silly. How could I be here talking to you if I was dead?”

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"But the gun? I found you. I saw..." Nolan couldn't say the words. Maybe it had all been a dream? A nightmare. After all—here she was, smiling down at him, as alive as he was. He reached for her hand. It was frozen. Frozen and hard. Alarmed, he jerked his own hand back.

Her eyes narrowed. "What? So I'm cold. So what? It's cold out here. Let me get in the covers with you and I'll warm right up." She grabbed at the blankets and Nolan saw her fingers were blue.

He rolled from her. "No, you can't get in. Go away. I want to sleep."

"Come on. Don't be a brat. You were always such a brat." Despite his effort to keep her out, Janine climbed into the bed beside him. She was stiff—rigid as a corpse and her body was like a block of ice beside him. She reached with cold, white arms to embrace him.

Nolan recoiled. "No, get away." He pushed at her but she was stronger than he was. He was no longer a man, but a four-year-old boy, helpless against his big sister who was twice his age and twice his size.

She turned her head and he saw the huge, gaping hole at the back of it. Pinkish gray brain tissue smeared with blood and bone dripped down her neck. A rising horror swept through him.

"Your head." He gasped. "Your head. Janine, you're hurt."

Janine faced him again, her smile still in place. "I'm not hurt, silly. I can't feel pain any longer. But you can, can't you?" She lifted her hand and he saw she held a gun. The gun she'd used on herself.

Nolan recoiled in terror as his sister waved the barrel of the gun in his face. He heard the click as she cocked back the hammer. "Open your mouth. I'll show you."

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“No! Janine, stop! No!”

* * *

Nolan woke with a jolt. He was on the floor beside his bed, the sheets twisted round him. Though it was cold in the room, he was sweating and his heart was hammering in his chest. He sat where he was for a while until his heart slowed and his head cleared.

Man, what brought that on, he wondered. He hadn't dreamt about his sister in years. It must have been because of their conversation the night before about suicide, where Mark spilled his guts about his gay uncle.

Mark. Mark Harrison MD was in his house, in his bed! The long, sexy night unfolded itself in his mind, pushing away the lingering evil of the dream. He couldn't remember the last time he'd let someone stay the night. Sometime near dawn Mark had murmured, “Should I go?”

“Stay,” Nolan had whispered, surprising himself at how much he wanted that.

He untangled himself from the sheets and stood. The bed was empty. Where was Mark? Had he woken on Nolan's crappy, lumpy mattress in his crummy little house and, once the whiskey and the lust had worn off, realized with horror what he'd done?

Telling himself to cut out the dramatics, Nolan walked down the hall to the bathroom, half expecting to find Mark in there. He wasn't. After using the toilet and brushing his teeth, Nolan walked downstairs. “Mark? You here?” No answer.

To stave off the pain he felt rising at Mark's abandonment, he let the familiar comfort of anger wash through him. *Fuck him, anyway. Who needs the complication?*

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Who was he kidding? This was one complication Nolan was willing to take on. For maybe the first time in his life, he wanted the man he'd been with the night before as much the next morning, if not more.

Why was the attraction so strong? Was it the long, slow burn of lust that had been building unrequited during Nolan's tenure at the nursing home? Usually he met a guy and, if he were interested, had him in bed by the end of the night.

What was it that was different about Mark? Nolan couldn't quite articulate it, or maybe he wasn't yet willing to. They hadn't even fucked yet but Mark had taken ownership somehow. Yes, that was the word—ownership of Nolan's lust. Used to being the one in control, the one who called the shots, Nolan still wasn't entirely sure how he felt about this.

He knew one thing. Last night, falling asleep in Mark's arms had felt so good. After Mark had come down his throat and nearly made Nolan come again in the process, they had lain together in the dark, drifting in and out of sleep, rubbing against each other, touching, stroking, squeezing. Nolan had come twice more, once in the sure grip of Mark's hand and once with his cock nestled against Mark's ass.

"Mark?" he called again, walking naked back toward the kitchen. No Mark. Nolan didn't even have his phone number. He didn't know where he lived. He thought about Mabel Johnston. She could be his excuse for showing up at the nursing home, but should he bother? Shit, if Mark had decided this was a one-night stand and hadn't even had the grace to let Nolan know he was leaving, who needed him?

Maybe it's for the best. As hot as he is, the guy's fucked up. He's still in the closet. Who needs the hassle?

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Nolan climbed the stairs and went into the bathroom. He turned on the shower, closing his eyes as he lifted his face to the welcoming hot spray. Remnants of the fading nightmare still clung to him like bits of sticky spiderweb and he shuddered, willing them away.

He dressed in a long-sleeved black knit shirt and the usual faded jeans. He looked at himself in the mirror as he put on his watch. There were deep lines etched around his eyes and along each side of his mouth. Though he still had a full head of dark hair and a strong body, he wasn't that far from forty. What had he done with his life?

Yeah, his career was satisfying, as far as it went, but what did he really have to show for it? He had friends, he supposed, if the sex buddies he hung out with at some of the local gay bars could be called friends. He had a mother he hadn't seen in years.

Maybe he should reach out to her again. The last time he'd tried had been nearly ten years ago. Visiting for the weekend, Nolan had confronted his mother over breakfast about the latest bruises on her arms, bruises shaped like the brutish, thick fingers of his bastard stepfather.

"Oh, he didn't mean it, dear. You know he's got a temper. It was really my fault. He was so sorry after."

Nolan shook his head in exasperation and worry for his mother. "How long are you going to put up with this, Mom? He's never going to stop drinking and when he drinks this is what happens. One day it's gonna go too far. He's gonna end up killing you. Oh, but he'll be *so* sorry after."

Chris had burst into the room, obviously listening at the door. "Quit poisoning my wife with your crap. This is my Goddamn house, you faggot, so mind your manners!" Chris's eyes were

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bloodshot, his face mottled with rage. His skin was tinged with gray, the nose bulbous and lined with red veins.

“Mary’s happy with me, you little prick. Aren’t you, Mary? Aren’t you?” His voice shifted suddenly, moving from rage to a wheedling whine that made Nolan’s blood run cold.

Nolan’s mother smiled toward her husband with vacant eyes. “Yes, dear. Of course I am.” Turning to Nolan, she added in an undertone, “You just don’t understand. He’s all I have, Nolan. I love him.”

Nolan had wanted to scream. He’d wanted to shake her. He’d offered a dozen times over the years, even begged, that she move in with him and leave Chris once and for all, but she always refused.

And so he’d stopped coming by to visit—he couldn’t stand seeing some new evidence of his stepfather’s abuse on his mother’s arms or throat or face. He spoke to her on the phone every couple of months, mainly to satisfy himself she was still alive.

He put coffee on to brew and sat at the small kitchen table, thinking about his mother. It was nearly Christmas. Maybe it was time to try again. Maybe Chris had mellowed over the years. Maybe Nolan was better equipped to deal with the whole thing with ten more years of life under his belt.

There was a knock at the door and the creak of hinges. Nolan looked up at the sound of Mark’s voice. “Nolan? Can I come in? I hope it’s okay. I left the door unlocked while I went to get us some breakfast.”

Happiness rose inside Nolan like a gust of fresh wind, scattering his lingering melancholy and doubt like autumn leaves. “Hey,” he cried, standing from the table. “I thought you’d flown

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the coop.”

“What?” Mark entered the kitchen looking surprised and then contrite. “I’m sorry. You were sleeping so soundly I hated to wake you. I should have left a note or something. I didn’t think I’d be so long. I couldn’t find anywhere decent around here to stop so I drove all the way to my favorite deli near my neighborhood.”

Mark was carrying two white bags over his arms, with two cups of fancy looking coffee balanced in his hands. “I had them add cream to the coffee. I figured you could add sugar. I hope that’s okay.”

Nolan took the coffee cups from him. He glanced around his small kitchen, seeing it through Mark’s eyes. Shame mingled with anger as he took in the old oven that was probably the original one that came with the house, the outdated refrigerator with the tiny freezer on top and the warped Formica counters. Whatever pattern there had once been on the peeling linoleum had long since faded. No doubt Mark had come down for coffee and seen the crappy old coffeemaker and no food in the fridge.

Once out, he hadn’t found any of the diners or delis in Nolan’s working class neighborhood fancy enough for his snobbish tastes. Nolan looked up at Mark with a scowl, ready to say something sarcastic and hurtful.

But Mark was grinning at him, clearly proud of himself for his purchases, unaware of Nolan’s inner turmoil. Nolan ordered himself to knock it off. Mark probably didn’t give a damn about Nolan’s kitchen. He probably drove to his deli because that’s where he knew to go.

Nolan took a sip of the coffee, surprised in spite of himself by how good it was. “This is delicious. It’s a lot better than the crap that my hundred-year-old coffeemaker produces.”

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Mark set the bags down on the table. “I wasn’t sure what you like so I got an assortment.” He opened one of the bags and began pulling items from it—pastries, bagels and several clear plastic containers that held cream cheese, butter and different jams. From the other bag he removed a jar of olives, a packet of deli meat wrapped in white butcher paper, two large sour pickles, a small jar of mustard and a loaf of rye bread.

He shrugged. “I guess I kind of went overboard. That’s pastrami, by the way. Best in Jersey.”

“Wow, did you leave anything in the store?” Nolan joked, though he found himself vastly pleased Mark had gone to such trouble for him. Not only that, he was relieved Mark hadn’t thought of him as only a one-night stand.

Mark laughed and Nolan noticed for the first time the dimple on the side of his chin. It wasn’t quite on his cheek, but lower, just below his mouth. “This way you can pick.” Mark waved his hand over the table. “Breakfast or lunch.”

“You stopped by your place, too, I see.” Mark had changed from his Dr. Boring suit into a red T-shirt beneath a soft brown leather bomber jacket. His jeans were black and clung to thickly muscled thighs. The package bulging between Mark’s legs made Nolan’s mouth water.

“Yeah. I hate wearing suits all the time, but it goes with the territory.”

Nolan retrieved some plates and cutlery and they both dug into the food, Mark making himself a pastrami sandwich, Nolan choosing a flakey pastry filled with baked apple and raisins.

He sipped at the coffee, which had a hint of cinnamon. With the sweet cream added it didn’t even need any sugar. He took a big bite of the pastry and washed it down with another slurp of hot

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coffee.

"I don't think anyone ever brought me home breakfast before."

"Really? Well, I guess there's a first time for everything." The words were innocent enough, but something in Mark's tone gave Nolan pause. He cast a sidelong glance at him and saw Mark was watching him with searching eyes. Something in his face made Nolan's breath catch and his heart skip a beat.

They finished their brunch and Mark helped Nolan put away the leftovers. Nolan was embarrassed by the contents of his refrigerator, or rather the lack of contents. There was plenty of beer, a carton of milk, a wilted head of lettuce and some jars of ancient condiments.

"You don't eat here much," Mark observed with a wry smile.

"Nah. This is just a place to come home and crash, I guess. You probably have a fancy maid and cook and all that. Welcome to how the rest of the world lives."

Mark cuffed Nolan's head lightly and laughed. "Hey, come on. You can drop that shit now, can't you? We've spent the night together. There's something happening between us. Don't put up walls to keep me away. It's not necessary. Okay?"

Nolan, who had regretted his remark as soon as it slid past his lips, nodded.

Without discussing it beforehand, they both moved through the living room and up the stairs. They straightened the bed together and then lay down, both still fully clothed. Though sexual thoughts had been rising in Nolan's head and his cock had been rising in his jeans, once they lay down he realized how tired he was. They'd stayed up nearly all night touching and kissing.

"Want to take a nap?" he suggested.

"That sounds perfect," Mark said. "I want you well rested for

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what I plan to do to you later.”

“Oh yeah? We’ll just see who has what planned.” Nolan laughed.

Nolan stood again, pulling off his shirt and jeans. Mark followed suit, going a step farther by removing his underwear. “We’re not gonna get much rest if you do that,” Nolan warned with a grin.

“Sure we will. You just need to exert a little self-control. Get naked. I want to feel you next me while I’m sleeping.”

They lay together on the bed, drawing the covers up over their bodies. Mark turned over so his back was to Nolan. Nolan rolled toward him, draping one arm over Mark and nestling against him.

Nolan didn’t consider himself a touchy-feely kind of guy. He was more a “wham, bam, now go away” kind of guy. But not with Mark. With Mark he thought he might actually be content to just hold him, without even trying to fuck him. He had no idea what this meant. *What is this strange feeling?* Just as he was drifting into sleep he figured it out.

He was happy.

CHAPTER 7

Mark opened his eyes in the fading light, aware of a deep sense of contentment that overlay something else—arousal. As he came fully awake he realized the source of this arousal. Nolan was spooning him, his erect cock nudging persistently between Mark's ass cheeks.

Mark lay still, giving no indication he was awake, curious how far Nolan would go. It felt good as Nolan rubbed his hard cock between Mark's cheeks. Nolan reached around Mark and grasped his already rising shaft, jerking it gently in an effort, Mark supposed, to bring him to erection without yet waking him.

He realized as Nolan continued to move that Nolan's cock was lubricated, sliding slickly against him. Nolan pulled back and repositioned himself so the head of his cock pressed directly

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against Mark's entrance.

"Hey," Mark said involuntarily, trying to twist back to see what Nolan was doing.

"Hey, yourself," Nolan replied. As he spoke he brought a strong arm around Mark's chest, holding him firmly in place. At the same time he draped a muscular leg over Mark's legs, effectively pinning him to the bed.

Mark could have wrested his way free, but he found himself aroused by Nolan's display. Yet when Nolan began to penetrate, Mark jerked beside him. "Condom," he said automatically.

"Already on," Nolan purred in a low voice next to his ear.

"This isn't what I had planned," Mark murmured back.

Nolan tightened his grip around Mark and answered. "That's okay. It's what *I* have planned. I'm going to fuck you, Dr. Harrison. I've wanted to do this since day one. You've got the hottest little ass, you know that?"

He pressed forward, his cock entering Mark's passage. Nolan's cock was long and thick and for a moment Mark wondered if he'd be able to accommodate it without pain. He was more than willing to find out.

Holding Mark tight, Nolan continued to push forward. At the same time he reached again for Mark's cock, catching it in a rough grip and pulling up hard. Mark was distracted by this, as was no doubt Nolan's intention as he pressed his way home. Mark grunted from the invasion and then sighed with pleasure as Nolan's shaft filled him.

Nolan moved slowly at first, giving Mark a chance to adjust to his girth. He accentuated each sensual thrust of his hips with a stroke to Mark's cock. They began to pant in tandem. Mark knew he could come from what Nolan was doing, but he didn't want to

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come. Not yet—not like this.

He lifted his arm, pushing Nolan's hand from his shaft. Nolan didn't protest, instead gripping Mark's hip with strong fingers and pulling him back hard against his cock.

"Yeah," Nolan said, his voice thick with lust. He moaned. "So hot, so hot..." It wasn't long before he was moving faster, rutting hard into Mark and grunting with each thrust. His strong leg was still draped over Mark's, his fingers digging into Mark's hip.

Nolan began to tremble, his entire body undulating in one long shudder. He came hard, slamming against Mark with such force Mark would have flown forward on the bed if Nolan wasn't wrapped so tight around him. Nolan's body was hot against his, covered in a thin sheen of sweat. Mark could feel Nolan's heart tapping against his back.

Mark's cock was throbbing and he reached for it, catching it in a light grip and stroking it, capturing a drop of pre-cum from its tip for a bit of lubrication. Nolan fell away from him with a contented sigh.

Mark rolled over onto his back, turning toward Nolan. He had one arm thrown over his face, hiding his eyes. The used condom still clung to his shaft. Mark reached for a tissue from the nightstand and using it, eased the condom from Nolan's cock and tossed it into the trash can beside the bed.

Next he reached for the tube of lubricant and a new condom. He tore open the wrapper and rolled it onto his cock. Squirting a dollop of lubricant onto his fingers, he smeared it over the head of the condom.

Throughout all this Nolan hadn't moved, lying limp as a rag doll on the bed, sprawled out, his long limbs akimbo. Mark positioned himself between Nolan's legs, pushing them farther

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apart as he did so. He knelt forward, leaning over Nolan, who opened his eyes and offered a lazy, satisfied smile.

Mark smiled back but said nothing. He grabbed a pillow from the head of the bed and pushed it beneath Nolan's ass to give himself better access to that tiny puckered entrance. Pushing Nolan's legs up so his feet were flat on the bed and drawn up to his body, he angled himself downward until his mouth was level with Nolan's ass.

Nolan lay still and compliant. Mark gripped his balls in one hand, lifting them out of the way. He noted with satisfaction that Nolan's cock seemed to be stirring, though it was just minutes since his last orgasm.

Kneeling down, he flicked his tongue on Nolan's asshole, circling it lightly. Nolan shuddered and whispered, "That feels good." Placing a hand on either inner thigh, Mark spread Nolan's legs farther and licked again, this time with more pressure. It was tight—the muscles too tight for his tongue to penetrate.

Leaning back, he began to stroke Nolan's rising cock with one hand, while sliding a lubricated finger into Nolan's ass. He moved it slowly, pushing outward in small circles until he felt the muscles begin to ease. After a while, he added a second finger. Nolan pushed back against them, taking them deeper. Satisfied Nolan was ready to receive him, he withdrew his finger and let go of Nolan's cock. Lifting himself up over his new lover, he murmured, "I want you."

They stared into one another's eyes and Mark was startled by what he saw, or thought he saw. Beneath the lust rekindled by Mark's attentions lay something else. Was it tenderness? Or was he only seeing what he himself felt reflected in Nolan's eyes? Mark tended to be a romantic, assigning higher feelings to those he

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was with than they necessarily felt.

He knew he was falling a little bit in love with this man he'd quietly lusted after for three months running. But was there any way that could be reciprocated? More likely this was a passing infatuation, one that would burn brightly for a few days or weeks and then sputter away, leaving him a little lonelier and a little more shut down than before.

Shaking away these sudden and unwelcome thoughts, Mark turned his attention back to the handsome, naked man beneath him. He put his hands under Nolan's legs, pushing against his thighs. Nolan understood what he wanted and obliged, lifting his legs up and back toward his chest and placing his hands lightly on either of his hips to hold his position.

Mark leaned up over Nolan, touching the head of his cock to Nolan's nether entrance. The lubricated tip slipped in easily. He guided his shaft with one hand until it was lodged far enough inside for him to let go. Balancing himself with a hand on either side of Nolan, as if he were preparing to do pushups, Mark moved forward, savoring the tight massage of Nolan's muscles hugging his cock.

He recalled suddenly his dream, the wet dream he'd had early on featuring Nolan in just this position beneath him. For once, reality was even better than the dream. Nolan watched him with those large, dark eyes. His lips were lightly parted and his cock was again fully erect.

Mark moved slowly at first, pushing deep inside Nolan and then pulling almost all the way out. Each time he did this Nolan arched his body upward, as if to say, "Come back." Mark continued to tease him, easing in slowly and pulling back nearly to withdrawal.

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He kept his eyes on Nolan's face as he fucked him. Nolan still watched him. The intimacy of this single gesture between them nearly took Mark's breath away. He would have expected Nolan's eyes to be shut, his face turned away, focused exclusively on his own pleasure. Instead he saw again that look of...of what? Tenderness. Yes, tenderness beneath the lust.

Nolan clenched his muscles tight around Mark's cock, distracting Mark from his musings and drawing an involuntary moan of pleasure from him.

He began to move faster—in long smooth strokes, increasing the force of his thrust. Nolan, his eyes still on Mark's face, reached for his own cock. Mark watched, mesmerized, as Nolan drew his thumb over its tip as his fingers curled around its shaft. His stroke was slow and deliberate, and deeply sensual. Mark glanced from his cock back to his face—Nolan's eyes were still on Mark, his tongue now appearing between his lips as he jerked himself in time to Mark's movements.

As Mark moved faster, so did Nolan's hand on his cock. Mark could feel the impending rush of his orgasm, starting from his toes and moving through him like an unstoppable force. Though he'd planned to make it last as long as possible, at that moment he could no more have controlled himself than stop a wave from crashing on the shore.

Finally he shut his eyes, unable to focus any longer on either Nolan's handsome face or his gorgeous cock. He surrendered himself completely to the hot, perfect grip of his lover's ass, coming so hard he nearly blacked out from the force of it.

When he opened his eyes again, he was lying sprawled on top of Nolan. Nolan had lowered his legs on either side of Mark and his arms were loosely around him. Gently Mark pulled his cock

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from Nolan, careful to keep the condom in place as he did so.

“You alive?” Nolan murmured against his hair.

“Barely.” Mark rolled from on top of Nolan, falling beside him. He pulled off the condom with trembling fingers and tossed it toward the trashcan, not even certain he made it, too wiped out to care.

They lay quietly for quite a while, the silence easy and companionable. Mark was nearly asleep when he heard Nolan say, “Have you ever been in love?”

Taken by surprise by the question, Mark answered honestly without trying to figure out what lay behind the question, if anything. “Me? I’m not sure. I thought I was once. How about you?”

“Nope. To tell you the truth, I’m not even sure the concept is real. I mean the idea of romantic love. Who do you know that’s really happy with who they’re with? I mean over the long haul. I’m thirty-eight, I’m not unattractive, I’m not stupid. I’ve been with a lot of guys, both short-term and long-term, and for some reason, no matter how great it starts out, after a while something changes. It just, I don’t know, loses its thrill. Things you used to think were sexy or funny begin to annoy you. Little habits you thought were cute become these huge issues.”

Nolan lifted himself on his elbow, facing Mark, his expression earnest. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s me. Maybe I just don’t know how to connect.”

Mark put his hands behind his head and stared up at the ceiling. Was this Nolan’s way of warning him not to fall for him? Or was he honestly reaching out? Mark decided to take him at face value.

“With me,” he offered, “I think it’s a matter of time. I don’t seem to find the time to make a relationship work. I’m so busy at

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the nursing home I barely have time to breathe much less meet someone and cultivate a relationship.”

He reached over to stroke Nolan’s bare thigh. “I do believe in the concept of romantic love, even though I’ve never personally experienced it. Maybe I just haven’t been ready.” He turned to face Nolan, losing himself for a moment in those deep, brown eyes. “Maybe I never met the right guy.” He fell silent, wondering if Nolan could hear the unspoken question that rose in his mind.

Until now?

CHAPTER 8

“You’ll be there tomorrow...right, Mark? Uncle Jim and Aunt Betty will be here and all your brothers and their wives and families.” She paused, the silence an unspoken rebuke toward Mark because he had no wife and family to bring to Christmas Eve dinner.

“If there’s someone you want to bring...” Mark’s mother paused expectantly on the phone. Every time she invited Mark over, she asked if he had someone to bring and she didn’t mean a pal. She meant the future Mrs. Right, wife material. As she never tired of reminding him, he wasn’t getting any younger and it was high time he found a nice girl to share his life and take care of him and produce more Harrison offspring, like there weren’t enough of the little rug rats running around already.

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Surely on some level his parents had to know he was gay. He'd never pretended to be straight, except by omission. He hadn't dated girls in high school or college, but neither had he admitted outright his sexual orientation. It was more of a "don't ask, don't tell policy," he supposed. The stigma of Uncle Frank still lingered in the family lore. Though his brothers, none of whom he was close to, might accept him if they knew, he doubted his parents had changed much in that regard.

What would she say if he replied, "Sure, Mom, I'd like to bring my new lover, Nolan Daniels. He's really hot. I think I might even be falling in love."

No. It was too soon to call it anything like love. But whatever it was, it sure felt great. In the week since they'd had sex the first time, they'd only managed to connect twice more, both times at Nolan's house. Their schedules had collided, with Nolan called in to do a double shift on Sunday and Mark stuck late two nights in a row at the nursing home.

They'd met for lunch one afternoon. In a way Mark cherished that meeting more than the sexual rendezvous, as sizzling hot as they had been. Because to him it signaled there was more between them than just becoming sex buddies. They were becoming friends.

Over lunch they'd talked about their careers. It took Nolan a while to wrap his head around the concept of Mark being miserable at his work. He recalled the conversation.

"So, you really hate that job?" Nolan had sounded incredulous. "I mean, shit, look at the car you drive, the respect you command. You're six years younger than me and from where I'm sitting, you've got it made."

"Yeah. I know. My family agrees with you. They keep telling

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me what an ungrateful son I am to even think of walking out on the family business. You'd think we were doing some kind of rare, essential work designed to save the planet, instead of running a string of nursing homes in New Jersey."

"Well, I said it before, Mark. I'll say it again. Why don't you quit?"

Mark didn't answer, thinking to himself that Nolan just didn't understand the complexities of the situation.

After a while, Nolan offered, "When I'm trying to make a decision, I like to weigh the pros and cons. I imagine it like a set of scales and each pro or con is a little weight on one side or the other. If you can list everything good about something and then everything bad, and see how it weighs out, you usually realize you've already made the decision somewhere in your head."

"It's not so easy," Mark protested. "I can't just walk out on the place. They rely on me there. The family relies on me, too."

"Sure. But they don't own you. Do they? I mean, from the sound of things, you've more than paid your dues. Or is it like the Mafia? Once you sign on, you can never leave?"

Mark laughed. "No. It's not like that. I mean, not exactly. But there's this unwritten expectation in my family. You join the business. Period."

"Okay. So you did it. You served your time. I guess what you have to decide is, 'Is this what *I* want? Or is this what they want and I'm going to spend the rest of my life or at least the foreseeable future being the good boy? And for what?'"

For what, indeed. Mark fell silent, pondering this question. It wasn't like he was doing something only he could do. As Nolan had said, there had to be plenty of people who could run a nursing home, and probably a lot better than he did. His only real

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contribution was that he was “family” and thus intrinsically trustworthy. Was that enough reason to continue to put his dreams on hold? And for how long?

As if Nolan had been listening in on his thoughts, he said, “The way I see it, the toughest part of something like this is actually making the decision. The rest is details. Take it from an old guy”—Nolan grinned—“who’s made plenty of mistakes. In the end, you gotta do what’s right for you. For *you*, not anyone else. Once you make that decision, the rest will work itself out.”

Mark chewed thoughtfully on his sandwich. “Maybe you’re right. Maybe I’ve been making this a huge deal in my head when really it’s pretty simple. I just have to make a decision and the rest...”

He paused and Nolan, flashing a broad smile, finished for him, “...is just details.”

After they’d gone their separate ways, Mark had continued to think about their conversation. He even went so far as to make a mental list of the pros and cons, balancing them on the scale in his head. Job security, good money, prestige, familiarity—these were good things, he supposed.

An endless sea of annoying paperwork associated with running the place, tedious meetings with vendors, sales reps, attorneys and staff, a basically predictable and often boring job caring for the elderly, and the fact he’d been promised that the job was temporary weighed pretty heavily against the good things.

But what really tipped the scales was what he lacked and what he yearned for. The chance to do essential work with people in the direst need. The adventure of striking out on his own, of breaking the dull, predictable Harrison mold and making a name for himself that had nothing to do with a string of nursing homes in and around

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Trenton, New Jersey. Just the thought of signing up with the rural free clinic sent a shiver of anticipation through his body. He could put his things in storage, lease his house and hit the road. He could, for once, really make a difference.

“Mark? Hello? Are you still there?”

“Oh, sorry, Mom. I was distracted for a minute.”

“You work too hard. You have no time to meet anyone. I still don’t see why you won’t let me set you up with Lynn McCarthy. She’s perfectly lovely and she’s very eager to meet you. She’s got a darling little girl. It would be ideal—a ready-made family for the busy doctor.”

“Mom. Stop it. I’ll handle my own social life, thanks. As to Christmas Eve, I’ll be there. I’ve—I’ve got something I need to talk to Dad and Uncle Jim about—some things to do with the business.”

At that moment he knew he’d made his decision. He was going quit. He was going to stand up to his father and his uncle and his brothers and there wasn’t a damn thing they could do about it.

His mother sighed histrionically. “Business, business, business. That’s all you men ever want to discuss. I work my fingers to the bone to provide a nice house and raise you boys and what thanks do I get? What happened to romance and flowers? What did I do wrong?”

“Nothing, Mom,” Mark answered, not even trying to follow his mother’s convoluted ramblings, reasonably sure they had very little to do with him. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

* * *

“Hey, whatever. I hate those family gigs, anyway.” Nolan

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knew he sounded defensive. Truth to tell, he *felt* defensive. Yeah, it wasn't rational to expect Mark to back out of his family obligations to spend Christmas Eve with Nolan, and he certainly hadn't expected him to. But some secret part of him had hoped maybe, just maybe, Mark might suggest either that Nolan come with him to meet his family or that they'd spend the evening together.

After all, Mark had admitted how much he loathed the endless family affairs, filled with screaming children and endless bickering between the various generations of Harrisons brought together at each holiday to remind each other how little they really cared for one another.

Yet Mark had acted scandalized when Nolan casually suggested, if he hated these things so much, why not give the whole thing a miss. "You're a grown man. How much longer are you gonna kowtow to these people? They probably wouldn't even notice if you didn't show up. What's one brother more or less?"

"Oh, they'd notice, all right. I'm one of the favorite topics of discussion. 'When do you think you'll settle down, Mark? You're not getting any younger, you know. All the good ones will be snapped up before you know it.' Like I'm in the market for melons or something. Then there's the endless discussion of the family business. I end up drinking myself into a coma every holiday just to blot them all out."

"But this time's different, right? You're gonna stand up to them, right? Tell them you're ready to move on in your career." It had been quite a revelation for Nolan to realize just how stuck Mark felt in his job as director of the nursing home. At first he'd been almost angry to think how ungrateful Mark was for rejecting such good fortune. But as they'd talked more, he'd come to

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understand how trapped Mark felt, following someone else's dream instead of his own.

At least Nolan had always been his own man. He'd made his own way from the time he was eighteen, never relying on another soul. Not only that, he felt validated by his work, which he knew he did well. This thought made him feel superior to Mark, or at least on more equal footing, despite Mark's fancy degrees. This, in turn, allowed him to experience a new emotion for his new lover—compassion.

Maybe over time, if they managed to stick together somehow, which was probably a long shot, but if they did, maybe he could help Mark find the courage not only to tell his family he wanted out of the family business, but to admit who he really was.

It had to drive Mark nuts listening to them go on, year after year, about his inability to find a good woman and all that crap. If it had been Nolan, he'd have told them years ago to go fuck themselves. But then, he'd never been one to hold his tongue. This was both a strength and failing, and had gotten him into more trouble than good, no doubt.

"We can spend Christmas Day together," Mark said. "After I go over for the gift exchange thing. We meet really early so the kids can open their presents. I should be able to get out of there by ten at the latest. Maybe I'll get really lucky this year and get another necktie. I only have about six hundred of them."

"Okay. I'll see you then. Remember, don't let the bastards get you down."

They hung up and Nolan stared at the phone, wondering if Mark expected a present. No, surely it was too soon in the relationship.

The relationship.

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Who was he kidding? There was no relationship. In fact, ironically he'd sealed their doom in that regard, encouraging the good doctor to quit his job, pull up stakes and move away. Nolan shook his head. Maybe it was just as well. The bright flame of their infatuation might burn all the brighter because Mark would be leaving. Then they could both fool themselves once he was gone that it might have lasted.

* * *

The huge Christmas meal was done at last and the men were lazing on the sofas and recliners in the large living room of the big old house where Mark had been raised with his three older brothers. The women were moving between the dining room and kitchen while the children were scattered through the house, their play punctuated by shouting, laughter and the sound of things breaking.

Mark had given up trying to help the "womenfolk" during these affairs, tired of being treated like an idiot male who wouldn't be able to boil an egg or set a place at the table without detailed and explicit instructions from a woman. The Harrison family was stuck in the fifties, so it seemed to him, even down to the division of domestic labor and certainly when it came to tolerance for differences between people.

Mark sat near his father, who was glued to some old Western on TV. Mark sipped a beer while trying to work up the nerve to say what he had to say. He decided the direct approach was best. After all, he'd always told them he wasn't going to remain as Interim Director of Golden Apple forever.

"Dad? I need to talk to you. You and Uncle Jim."

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“So talk.” His father didn’t turn his head from the TV. “I’m listening.”

“Uh,” Mark glanced around at his brothers and his uncle. “In your den, if that’s okay. It’s about the business.”

Now his father swiveled his head toward his youngest son. “Trouble at the Golden Apple? Can’t it wait until after Christmas, for heaven’s sake?”

“No.” Now that he’d decided to do this, Mark knew he had to go for it before he lost his nerve again. “Sorry, but no. This can’t wait.” He stood and turned to Uncle Jim, who was bouncing a toddler dressed in a black velvet dress with a red ribbon around her round belly on his knee. “You, too...please, Uncle Jim.”

Jim handed the child to her father and lumbered to his feet. Mark had never much cared for Uncle Jim, who turned to him with narrowed eyes and said in an exasperated tone, “Jesus, Mark. You’re always so melodramatic. What now?”

He didn’t answer, instead heading toward his father’s den, the only room in the house his mother hadn’t been permitted to cover in chintz and fill with china knickknacks and vases of silk flowers. It was an overtly masculine room, if the stuffed and mounted fifty-pound fish on the wall and the dark wood and leather furniture filling the room was one’s definition of masculinity.

His father sat in the big recliner no one else was permitted to sit in, ever. His uncle sprawled out on the much-worn brown leather sofa beneath an oil painting of an English foxhunt that Mark’s father thought lent a certain gentility to the space.

Mark leaned against the large mahogany desk, too nervous to sit down himself. They were both looking at him expectantly. He began to talk, haltingly at first, and then with greater conviction, about his dream of working at the free clinic, and his desire to

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actually make a difference in the world.

"You make a difference right now," his father insisted. "Our homes provide a much needed service in the Trenton area. You've got a lot of responsibility and you do a good job. Why go gallivanting off to treat a bunch of ignorant hillbillies in some rural backwater, for Christ's sake? You're needed here, son. We need you. It's the *family* business. It's what gave you this nice house to grow up in and provides you with a safe, secure job."

"And you're paid damn well for it, too," Uncle Jim interjected. "How many other thirty-two-year-old whelps pull down the kind of salary you do? If this is your roundabout way of angling for more money—"

"It's not about the money, Uncle Jim." Mark interjected. He'd planned to stay calm in the face of whatever their arguments would be to keep him tethered to a job he hated. He realized he was clenching his jaw. He could feel his blood pressure rising and it took all his effort to continue in a calm voice. "It's about self-actualization. It's about being true to myself for once. It's about doing what's right for me."

"Oh, brilliant," his uncle spat back. "We give you damn kids the moon and you want the stars. You know we've been trying to find your replacement. It's tough to find the right fit. Look what happened last time we brought someone in from the outside."

"Jim's right, Mark. This isn't just about you and your self-whatever it is. You're just being a selfish child. You want to sow more wild oats and shirk your responsibilities. All your brothers were married with children by the time they were your age. You've never even brought a girl home to Sunday supper, for crying out loud. What the hell's the matter with you? When're you gonna grow up and accept the responsibilities of a real man?"

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"You owe us, boy," his uncle added. "We made those two letters at the end of your name possible. This business made that nice house of yours and that fancy car possible. You have no *right* to quit. Not until we find someone who can replace you."

The anger Mark had been struggling to keep in check erupted like hot lava, making his blood boil. "Damn it, I don't owe you shit. I've spent the last three years working my ass for you. And yeah, you pay me well, but nothing I haven't earned. Yes, you helped me with med school, but I still came out with over fifty thousand in student loans, loans I'm still paying off."

"Martin," his father roared. "Get in here. Mark's trying to kill me."

Martin, Mark's oldest and least favorite brother, came loping down the hall and into the den. Of all the brothers, Martin most resembled Mark, with dark blond hair and very blue eyes. Though he was only six years older than Mark, he was at least fifty pounds heavier.

Martin hadn't had the grades to get into medical school, instead taking a degree in hospital management from a local college. Of Mark's other two brothers, one had also gone to medical school and the other was a lawyer, who dutifully represented the nursing homes for the family. No one had ever dared to break ranks. What Mark was doing was unprecedented.

"What's going on? What're you doing to Dad, Mark?"

"I'm not *doing* anything to him."

"He's quitting the family business. He wants to join some hippie commune clinic in the backwoods of Pennsylvania so he can treat toothless old bums who will pay him with rotgut whiskey and kindling wood." The derision was ripe in Uncle Jim's voice.

Mark ignored both Martin and his uncle, turning instead to his

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father. “Look, Dad. We had a deal, remember? You’ve always known I didn’t want to join the family business. At first I was just going to cover for a few months. Then you said to give you one year. Here it is, over three years and I’m still stuck behind that desk, buried in paper, treating geriatric patients and putting my life on hold.”

“Who said to put your life on hold? Damn it, boy. You’re the one who breaks your mother’s heart every day of the week, refusing to even meet the nice girls she lines up for you, never bringing anyone home for us to meet. Is it too much to ask, to make your mother happy? It’s bad enough you want to abandon the family business. Why can’t you at least find a good girl and get married, for Christ’s sake?”

Mark stared at his father. He looked at Uncle Jim, who was pushing his fat lips and in and out in that annoying way he had when he was angry. Martin was smirking, always pleased when another brother was being upbraided.

Though intellectually he knew this was ridiculous, he felt himself reacting to his father’s glare and his brother’s smirk as if he were eleven instead of thirty-two. He opened his mouth to defend himself with his usual excuses about being too busy and he’d find his own partner, thank you very much and then he stopped.

He thought of Nolan. How would Nolan handle this situation? No way would he let his father browbeat him while his brother and uncle stood on, tacitly judging him and finding him wanting. Nolan would speak his mind.

He recalled Nolan’s look of stunned surprise when Mark had admitted he’d never told his family he was gay. What was even more stunning, when he thought about it, was that they had to be

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told. They knew so little of Mark, and cared so little, that they didn't know this very basic fact about who he was.

Something shifted inside Mark at that moment. It was as if he were literally shrugging off the mantle of a false self he'd worn for so long he'd forgotten it wasn't truly a part of him. The eleven-year-old inside him had made its last appearance.

He was a grown man. He was done pretending to be something he was not, even if only by omission. He drew himself up and faced his father. "Dad. I'm never going to bring home a nice girl. You've got three procreating sons and six grandchildren to carry on the family name. I might have children one day, but they'll be adopted."

His father looked at him blankly. "I'm gay, Dad. A homosexual. I've been gay since I've been sexually aware. There will be no Mrs. Right in my future."

There was a dead silence for at least five seconds. Then Martin burst out laughing. "Good one, Mark. You really had me going for a second there."

His father knit his eyebrows and glowered. "If that's your idea of a joke, it's not a very funny one."

Mark's heart was beating fast and he felt jittery, almost sick with excitement and nerves. But he held his ground. "It's no joke, Dad. The joke, if there is one, is how long it took me to tell you."

His father's face reddened and he slammed his fist against the arm of his recliner. "No son of mine is a God damn queer!"

Mark's mother appeared in the doorway, her expression anxious. "Peter," she demanded of her husband. "What's going on here? I could hear the raised voices from the living room."

"Linda, it's Frank all over again, Lord help us."

"What?" Mark's mother cast a confused, worried glance in

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Mark's direction.

"He's as queer as a two dollar bill," Uncle Jim interjected. "I always thought there was something off about that boy."

"Not only that," Martin smirked. "He's quitting the family business. Going to devote his life to the great unwashed and work for free. After all you've done for him."

Mark's mother's face went slack, her mouth falling open, her eyes filling with tears. "No," she whispered in the shocked voice reserved for learning someone has died. Mark knew she hadn't even heard Martin, too horrified by Uncle Jim's pronouncement to take in anything else. "Not Mark. No. They're lying, aren't they, Mark? You aren't..." He could see she couldn't even bring herself to say the word.

Oddly, he found he wasn't even angry anymore. Why waste the emotion on these people? He was related to them by blood but realized with a dawning sadness that beyond that connection, he felt very little.

Not only that—he'd said it at last!

His deep, dark secret was secret no longer. He looked from person to person in the room and realized he was free. Free at last. They knew the truth and his world hadn't dissolved. He hadn't crumbled away like a pillar of salt. Nothing was different. If they chose to shun him, he realized he didn't really care. In a way he almost wanted it. A clean break. Put them and his years of trying to fit into the family mold behind him.

He was ready at last to start a new life. An honest life, free to work as he wished and love who he wished. He thought of Nolan, who he'd known such a short time, yet felt closer to than these people he'd spent his life trying to please, and always, it seemed, failing.

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“Mark,” his mother said beseechingly. “Tell me they’re wrong. You just haven’t met the right woman, is all. I know a girl, I met her at my yoga class. She’s—”

“No, Mom. Sorry. They’re right. I’m gay. I should have told you years ago. Maybe I would have if I hadn’t watched all of you lynch Uncle Frank and drive him to his death.”

“That’s enough!” Mark’s dad shouted.

“No,” Mark said calmly, “it’s not enough. Maybe if I’d felt safe enough to admit what and who I really am, I wouldn’t have allowed things to go so far in other areas of my life. Yes, I wanted to be a doctor, but no, I don’t want to spend my life filling out insurance documents and palpating the prostates of old men. I’m tired of weighing everything I do in terms of the family and the family business. I’m a grown man and it’s time I began to live the life I want to live, not the one you’ve designed for me.”

He looked from his mother to his uncle to his father, barely aware Martin was in the room. “I’m giving my official notice. I’ll send it in writing next week if you want. One month. You have one month to find my replacement.”

His mother was now weeping openly. He felt no sympathy for her. “I’m sorry to disappoint you, Mom. I’m sorry this is such a horrible shock to you, and that all of you,” he waved his hand toward the men in the room, “are such narrow-minded homophobic bigots that I was too afraid to come out and interact with you honestly. Well, that’s over now. I’m gay. Deal with it. Don’t deal with it. That’s on you.”

He walked toward the door, easing himself past his crying mother. “Thanks for dinner, Mom. I think I’ll pass on midnight mass this year.” Spurred into recklessness by the adrenaline ripping through his blood, he added, “I’ll be spending Christmas

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Day with my new lover.”

He swept from the room, a grin erupting over his face even while his heart was beating a thousand miles an hour. *Jesus H. Christ*. He’d done it! Not only had he finally given notice, but he’d come out at last! And it felt good. It felt great.

Without stopping to say good-bye to the rest of the family, already gathered again in the dining room for pie and coffee, he grabbed his coat and headed for the door. He climbed into his car, eager to see Nolan.

His new lover.

It had felt amazing to say that out loud. He wouldn’t call him before he went over. He’d surprise him. “Nolan,” he said aloud, rehearsing what he’d say when Nolan opened his door, “You won’t believe what happened...”

CHAPTER 9

Nolan tried to focus on the DVD he'd rented, annoyed with himself for letting the fact he was spending Christmas Eve alone get to him. He kept the TV in the spare bedroom, which contained a bureau and a double bed for guests, though he never had any guests.

It had been a fantastic week, all things considered. Mark had turned out not to be the stuck-up standoffish guy he'd been while at the nursing home. He was funny and kind. Even weirder, he actually seemed interested in what Nolan had to say, not dismissing him because he didn't have the letters after his name that Mark had.

It had made Nolan feel special, the way Mark had sought his advice about quitting his job. Not that Nolan thought Mark was

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going to quit because of him. It was obvious when they talked he just needed a little encouragement to follow his own instincts. The little push a friend can offer.

A friend...

A friend with benefits, Nolan thought with a grin. So far each time the sex had been better than the last. Nolan couldn't get enough of Mark's hard body and even harder cock. With other guys, no matter how hot the sex, there was always a part of him hovering off to the side, watching and critiquing the action with clinical interest, or worse, detached indifference. When Mark and he had sex Nolan found himself completely in the moment. He was there, one hundred percent, something he'd never experienced before.

He knew it wasn't fair to be mad at Mark for choosing his family over Nolan for Christmas Eve. Besides, this was Mark's big night. He had screwed up his courage at last to tell them he was done paying his dues and wanted out.

Nolan wished he could be a fly on the wall during that scene. Hell, he wished he could actually be there. He'd even go so far as to go to midnight mass with the family, if Mark had invited him. But he hadn't.

"I'd be way too nervous with you there," Mark had said. "Don't worry. I'll give you the whole horrible blow-by-blow when I see you on Christmas Day."

"You don't know it's going to be horrible. Maybe they'll surprise you."

"Yeah. And maybe there really is a Santa Claus."

Nolan consoled himself with the somewhat astonishing thought he'd be spending Christmas Day with his new lover, instead of alone and recovering from a hangover.

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Normally Nolan went out on Christmas Eve. There were plenty of other lonely, horny guys to pick up at one of his hangouts, but tonight he found he didn't want to. It wasn't just because he had no car. It was because he had Mark.

But did he? Did meeting a few times over one week for food and sex equal anything at all? They certainly hadn't talked about being exclusive, not this early in the game. Was Nolan even ready to be involved like that?

He thought a long while about this question, for once putting aside his usual knee-jerk reaction of, "No way!" He was thirty-eight. Did he want to spend the rest of his life alone?

He knew that in itself wasn't a good enough reason to get seriously involved with someone. In fact, that kind of reasoning could be the kiss of death, if the underlying attraction and compatibility weren't there.

But it was there. In spades. He really liked Mark. In fact, he couldn't remember being with someone he liked as much.

Yeah, Mark still kind of intimidated him sometimes, with his fancy degrees and obvious wealth, at least relatively speaking. Mark had yet to invite him to his house. Of course, they'd had very little time, with their busy and sometimes conflicting schedules. And since Nolan didn't have use of his car yet, it made sense for Mark to stop by Nolan's place.

Still, the old insecurities playing in Nolan's head made him wonder if Mark was ashamed to bring him home for some reason—like maybe he wasn't good enough to be seen in Mark's hoity-toity neighborhood.

Nolan paused the movie, though he hadn't been paying attention to it anyway. He went downstairs and retrieved the bottle of whiskey and a glass. *Might as well get smashed and go to*

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sleep early.

He poured himself a quick one and drank it down. Then he poured another, deciding he'd take the bottle up with him. He heard the squeak of the front screen door and then a rapping knock.

Mark? He glanced at his watch. It was only nine o'clock. Was something wrong? Why hadn't he called first?

Nolan set down the bottle and glass on the small table in the living room. He moved toward the front door and flicked on the porch light. Looking through the peephole, instead of seeing Mark he saw a tall, dark-skinned god of a man. It took him a second to place him.

Enrique! The sexy Puerto Rican he'd come that close to seducing before Wayne had pulled him from the party with his threats of suicide.

What was Enrique doing at his place? He'd figured he'd never see the guy again. Curious, Nolan pulled the door open. "Enrique. *Feliz Navidad.*"

Enrique smiled, a perfect flash of white against tan skin. "Nolan. Forgive me for just showing up. I was in the area and remembered your address. I took the chance you might be home. I'm leaving for Puerto Rico at the end of the week and I feel we have some unfinished business, you and I."

Nolan raised his eyebrows. "I wasn't aware of any," he answered, though he immediately understood the subtext of Enrique's remark. He stepped back and gestured for Enrique to enter. Since Mark had been coming around, he'd taken to keeping the place fairly neat, so at least he wasn't embarrassed to have an unexpected guest drop by.

Enrique moved very close to him. "No? Well, perhaps I have made assumptions I shouldn't have made. Do you remember that

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night at Jack's party?" Enrique's accent was rich, his voice smooth. He put his hand on Nolan's forearm and lightly squeezed.

Nolan flashed back to the events of that evening, before Wayne's call. He and Enrique had been outside on the deck and though it was September, summer hadn't quite let go. The air was warm and Enrique had been wearing a white tank top that looked good against his sculpted muscles and caramel-colored skin. They'd been flirting for about an hour, sizing each other up and deciding without words if they were going to go home together or not.

"You disappeared like Cinderella at the ball. At first I was just angry," Enrique said. "I figured you'd been leading me on and used your so-called emergency as a way to disappear. What is the expression in English? I wrote you off. But then the other night at Cosimo's, Jack mentioned that guy who killed himself. Walter?"

"Wayne," Nolan corrected. Cosimo's was a gay-friendly bar Nolan went to occasionally.

"Yes. When I heard that, I realized I had misjudged you. You had gone to try to save your friend. I heard, too, about the DUI thing." Enrique gave a sympathetic click of his teeth. "Is that why I don't see you around anymore? No driver's license?"

"Yeah, I guess. Puts a crimp in your style to take a bus everywhere. I get my license back the first of January, thank God." They had moved into the living room. Nolan picked up the whiskey bottle. "I was just about to have a drink. Care for one?"

"Yes, thanks. I'll take it neat."

Nolan retrieved another glass from the kitchen and poured an inch or so into it. He handed the glass to Enrique and topped off his own. He raised the glass in a toast. "*A un Año Nuevo feliz y sano.*"

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“You speak Spanish? I’m impressed.”

Nolan shrugged. “That’s about the sum total of it. Oh, and I can ask where the bathroom is.” Enrique smiled, a wolf’s hunger flashing in his dark eyes. Nolan sat on the sofa, waving Enrique toward the chair. Ignoring the gesture, he sat down beside Nolan.

Nolan knew he should tell Enrique about Mark. He should explain he was involved with someone. Yet something stopped him from speaking. After all, *was* he involved? It had only been a week. Plus, it wasn’t like he was planning to seduce Enrique. They were just sharing a friendly drink. *Liar*.

“I’ve thought a lot about you, Nolan,” Enrique said in his slow, sexy voice. “I don’t know if you remember where we left off when you had to leave that party...”

“No. Not exactly.” *Hands brushing thighs, groins touching as they danced, lips parting for a kiss...*

“Well, I do.” Enrique put down his glass and moved closer until his thigh was touching Nolan’s. “Let me remind you.” He pulled Nolan closer and kissed him, at the same time reaching for Nolan’s crotch.

For a moment Nolan didn’t react, stunned by the sudden move, and then captivated by it. Enrique’s kiss was long and lingering, a sensual exploration of Nolan’s mouth. While he kissed him, he slipped his hands into Nolan’s jeans and past his underwear, finding and gripping Nolan’s rapidly growing cock.

Nolan knew he needed to put a stop to this. It wasn’t right. True, Mark and he hadn’t made any promises to each other, but this just didn’t feel right.

But it sure felt good.

He closed his eyes, letting Enrique stroke his cock. After a few moments, Enrique let go. Nolan watched as he took off his jacket

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and peeled his shirt over his head, revealing a dark tan, perfectly smooth chest, the chiseled muscles clearly the result of many hours spent at the gym.

“You like what you see,” he told Nolan, who couldn’t deny it.

“Listen, Enrique, there’s someone—”

“Shh, I don’t want to hear.” Enrique cut him off. “There’s always someone. I’m leaving the country in three days, Nolan. You won’t see me again. Whoever is waiting somewhere for you, they won’t know a thing. I just need to take care of this unfinished business, you see. You were in my dreams. I always follow my dreams. Then I’ll disappear forever.”

He pushed Nolan back against the sofa and knelt on the floor in front of him. With deft fingers, he opened Nolan’s pants and pulled his underwear down below his balls, exposing Nolan’s erect cock.

“Hey,” Nolan protested, though without much conviction. He forgot all misgivings as Enrique’s mouth closed over his cock, sending spirals of pleasure surging through him. Enrique massaged the base of his cock and balls with sure fingers while he licked and sucked the head and shaft.

What was the harm of one little blowjob from a guy he’d never have to see again? He’d make sure it didn’t go any further than this. As soon as Enrique finished his “unfinished business” he’d send him away.

Oh, yes, just as soon as...oh...so good...

Nolan closed his eyes and gave himself over to the heavenly ministrations going on between his legs. He was vaguely aware of a car door slamming, but it barely registered above the rustle of his own increasingly labored breathing and the sweet, wet sound of Enrique’s mouth on his cock.

“Jesus, Enrique. That’s so...fucking...good.”

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He heard the knocking but at that precise moment Enrique did something amazing to his cock and balls and Nolan lost it, spurting in uncontrollable arcs of pleasure. It was only maybe ten seconds, but ten seconds was enough for the front door, which he'd failed to lock, to creak open.

The world tilted on its axis at that moment—shifting from real life to a kind of living nightmare. Nolan, still caught in the throes of his orgasm, turned his head toward the sound of the opening door.

There stood Mark, a bottle of champagne in his hand, a look of stunned horror on his face. The bottle of champagne slipped from his fingers and crashed to the floor, shattering in a fizz of bubbles and green glass. Still Mark didn't move.

Nolan, endorphins of pleasure colliding with a surge of blood-curdling adrenaline, sat frozen.

"I knocked," Mark finally mouthed, as if he'd lost the capacity to speak.

Nolan felt he might shatter like the champagne bottle if he moved, but he knew if he didn't he might lose Mark forever. He stood abruptly, barely aware as he knocked the shirtless Latino back onto his haunches. Hurriedly he tucked himself back into his jeans and moved toward the foyer.

"Mark. Please. It's not what you think," he began, but by the time he reached the door, Mark was gone.

* * *

Mark barely remembered making the drive home, but somehow there he was, in his driveway, the engine idling, his mind numb. He knew he needed to turn off the ignition and go into the house,

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but he couldn't seem to muster the energy necessary to make that happen.

His cell phone had buzzed in his pocket nearly the entire ride home. He knew it was Nolan calling but he didn't answer. He couldn't bear to hear his excuses and lies. It took all his effort, but eventually he managed to turn off the ignition. Still he sat, making no move to climb out into the cold winter night.

He was bone weary. The hot flare of joy that had soared to life over the past week was now only a vague memory of warmth. Who had he been kidding? What made him think a tiger would change his stripes, or even that he could?

Nolan Daniels was a player. He knew it when Nolan had made his thinly veiled offer to trade sex for hours worked. He knew it when he'd watched him dancing with that blond man at the bar. He knew it when Nolan had taken him behind the red curtain, and he knew it for certain tonight, watching that dark stranger kneeling shirtless at his feet, Nolan's cock thrust down his throat.

Whatever he'd thought they were sharing, to Nolan it was clearly just another lay. Something he might brag about to his sex buddies over chips and beer. "Yeah, I fucked that doctor. He thinks he's better than us, but in the end, he's just another piece of ass."

Mark shuddered, actually hearing Nolan's voice say the words in this dark fantasy. To think, he'd been so elated after finally telling his family he was quitting at last. And not only that—proclaiming he was gay.

He still hadn't even processed what all had gone down at his parents' house. Nolan had been the man he wanted to share it with. Nolan—the man he'd thought he was falling in love with, the man he'd thought he could call a friend.

"What a naïve fucking idiot I am," Mark said aloud. His breath

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hung on the air, the car having quickly lost its heat once he turned off the engine.

It was only the cold that finally prodded him to get out of the car and go into the house. Reaching in the backseat, he grabbed the second bottle of champagne, a vague idea of drinking himself into oblivion forming in his head.

The phone was ringing when he came onto the landing. He hurried up to the kitchen and peered at the phone mounted on the wall. When he saw it was his parents' number, he let it ring, unwilling to listen to their diatribes.

He put the champagne in the refrigerator as the answering machine clicked on. "Mark. You need to call your mother and apologize. She's been crying her eyes out over what you did." His father's voice was tight with barely controlled anger. "And on Christmas Eve, for Christ's sake. Isn't it still Christmas Eve? What were you thinking?"

Mark walked out of the kitchen and headed for the living room. He dropped his coat over the back of the sofa and slumped down onto it. The phone rang again. Again he let it go to voice mail, not even bothering to look. His brother Patrick's voice came on the line. "Mark, what the hell went down? Where are you? I can't believe you had the nerve to walk out. The grups are fit to be tied. Whatever you did, I say, all right! Call me on my cell when you get a chance."

Mark nearly smiled. "Grups" had been their term for their parents when they were kids. They'd adopted the word from an original *Star Trek* episode in which the grownups on some distant planet were afflicted with a horrible disease that reduced them to slaving lunatics their children called "grups," a contraction of the word grownups.

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Patrick was the brother closest in age to Mark, born eighteen months his senior. They'd been competitive as boys and until they'd become adults there had been little love lost between them. Even now, they weren't especially close, but Patrick was the easiest of his brothers to talk to. He thought about calling Patrick back to find out how the family was handling his defection, but decided against it.

Mark dug in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. All the missed calls were from Nolan. For a moment he toyed with the idea of calling him, but knew he couldn't face it. He didn't want to hear excuses and lies. He dropped the phone to the sofa beside him, the fatigue of a lifetime of loneliness weighing down his limbs.

He'd been lonely before he'd met Nolan, but somehow he'd kept it at bay. It wasn't something he thought about much, at least not on a conscious level. It wasn't *personal*. This was a new kind of loneliness—the loneliness of something lost, something ripped from him.

With Nolan, he'd let down his guard. These past months of secret attraction and yearning had culminated into an intense and thrilling week of passion and budding friendship. He'd finally removed his armor and left himself bare and vulnerable.

What a fool.

Too late, he remembered why he was usually so slow to get involved. That brief happiness had been replaced with a pain as sharp as crushed glass being dragged over his heart.

To be fair, they'd never said they would see only each other. Mark had just assumed Nolan was as into him as he was into Nolan. He'd set himself up by assuming Nolan shared the same moral code. He'd brought this on himself.

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The house phone rang again. “Jesus,” Mark said aloud. “Leave me the fuck alone.”

This time it was his mother. “Mark? Mark, dear? Are you home? Mark? Hello?” She never quite seemed to get the idea of voice mail. There was a long pause and then she continued. “Listen, honey. I know you’re dealing with a lot right now. We honestly had no idea how miserable you were at Golden Apple. And this—this other thing. We could get you help. Or maybe you want to talk to Father McGuire? There are things you can do to, uh, adjust and deal with your, uh, perversions.” She cleared her throat and continued in a falsely bright tone. “You’re a doctor. Maybe there are medical treatments to, uh, kill this kind of, uh, urge?”

Mark slipped off his shoe and hurled it at the telephone. “Two points,” he said, as the phone went crashing to the ground.

CHAPTER 10

It was nearly midnight on Christmas Eve and Nolan had managed to put away half the bottle of whiskey, but so far it wasn't doing its job. He flipped open his cell phone and stared at it. Instead of calling Mark for the sixth time, he punched in another number.

"You've reached Golden Apple Nursing Home. No one is available to take your call. Please leave your name and number and someone will get back to you shortly. Thank you."

Nolan didn't leave a message. Obviously someone was on duty but they weren't picking up at this hour. Even if he reached someone, what would he say? "This is Nolan Daniels, the guy who changed bedpans and mopped the floor for the last few months. I'm actually the director's lover. Except I don't know where he

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lives. Can you give me his home address? I need to go over there and apologize for his finding me with my cock down some other guy's throat..."

How was it Mark had never invited him to his place—had never even told him where he lived? Maybe Mark had planned it this way all along. After all, he'd admitted he didn't have time for relationships. By always going to the other guy's place, he kept things simple. Maybe he never let whoever he was fucking know where he lived. It was easier to get rid of them that way.

Until Mark had come along, Nolan himself rarely let whomever he hooked up with come to his place. He had been the one in control, the one who showed up when it suited him and disappeared when he was done. For the first time, he had an inkling of the pain he might have caused the various guys in his past he'd used and then forgotten.

Nolan closed his eyes, seeing for the hundredth time the look of frozen anguish on Mark's face as the bottle of champagne slipped from his hand and crashed to the floor. Shame flooded him at the memory, and remorse. And then anger.

God damn Enrique to hell for his bad timing. He hadn't even been in the picture for months and then, the one time he wasn't welcome he appeared, bronze-skinned, dark-eyed and glossy-haired, looking good enough to eat and refusing to take no for an answer.

Not that Nolan put up much of a protest. Three words. "Listen, there's someone..." Enrique had behaved exactly as he himself would have, before Mark had entered his world. If anything, the knowledge of some other guy lurking in the wings would have made the conquest all the sweeter.

He couldn't really blame Enrique. It was Mark's fault. Mark

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shouldn't have just shown up without calling. They'd only been serious for a week. You don't just show up at someone's house. And then he'd hightailed it so fast out of there that he was already gone before Nolan could even get to the door.

Nolan shook his head, uncomfortably aware his usual habit of blaming everyone but himself for whatever woes befell him wasn't working so well anymore. Of course it wasn't Mark's fault. Mark had no reason to expect to find Nolan with another guy.

True, they hadn't explicitly said they would be exclusive, but after the intense week they'd just spent, any reasonable guy would assume it, especially someone like Mark, who wasn't used to playing the field the way Nolan was. Still, Mark shouldn't have just walked into Nolan's house unannounced.

Damn it. If only he'd take Nolan's call and let him explain. If he could just reach Mark, he'd be able to talk his way out of this. But not on a voice mail. He needed to speak directly to Mark. Better yet, he needed to see him. But he didn't know where he lived. He didn't even know the neighborhood or the name of his street.

After Mark had run away, Enrique, still on the floor, had lifted his eyebrows and quirked a smile. "Oops," he'd said. "I guess that's the someone you were referring to."

"Yeah." Nolan stood staring at the shards of green glass and the puddle of champagne soaking into the area rug in the foyer, numb with disbelief and rising misery. He wished Enrique would disappear. He wished he'd never met the guy. He wished he hadn't let his dick lead him into this nightmare.

To his credit, Enrique had gone into the kitchen and returned with the trashcan, broom and dustpan and a roll of paper towels. Together they'd cleaned up the mess as best they could for the time

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being. He'd mop in the morning. The throw rug was probably history.

Enrique had offered philosophically, "No use crying over spilled milk, isn't that the expression? Or in this case, spilled champagne. So how about we forget that guy and you return the favor, hmm?" He cupped his own crotch suggestively, giving Nolan a long, hungry look.

Nolan shook his head. "Look, you need to go. This shouldn't have happened. Even if Mark hadn't walked in, this was a mistake. I'm sorry. I know we were hot and heavy at that party but things are different now. I—I think I..."

He'd almost said it. "I think I'm in love with the guy." But he hadn't. When he said it out loud for the first time, he would say it to Mark. If he ever got the chance...

Enrique had been gracious enough, leaving without too much protest. Sitting alone now, the whiskey working its way through his blood, Nolan almost wished he hadn't sent him away. There was solace in sex—for that little while he could shut down his brain, he could forget...

He was tempted to get into his car, the car he wasn't legally permitted to drive until next week, and just start driving until he somehow stumbled across Mark's house. Nolan pulled himself upright, weaving a little under the weight of the alcohol sloshing in his veins. No. Driving drunk late on a winter night was not something he would do.

Not even for Mark.

Tomorrow, when he could think clearly, he'd come up with a plan. He staggered up the stairs and fell onto his bed fully clothed, his heavy heart pinning him down.

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* * *

Mark realized he hadn't moved for many minutes. It was after midnight. He was staring at the TV, though it wasn't on. He was just watching the black screen, the real drama going on in his head. In his mind's eye all he could see was Nolan, the guy he'd been falling for all these months, with another man at his feet, head bobbing at his groin.

His cell phone rang again. He stared at it and let it go to voice mail. A moment later it beeped, indicating he had a message. He lifted the phone, which seemed very heavy somehow—either that or his muscles had lost their willingness to cooperate. He felt almost drunk, except without the high.

He punched in the code to access his voice mail. "Mark. It's me. Please call me back. We have to talk. *Please.*"

It's me.

The familiarity those words implied—not even having to identify yourself. The assumption the person listening already knew from the first word who it was on the other end of the line. And until tonight Mark had loved to hear the sound of Nolan's voice.

Who was he kidding? He still loved it. Though he was forced to face the fact Nolan had been leading him on, he still wanted him every bit as much as he had before.

But something was gone now, or at least damaged. That fledgling trust they'd been building had been torn. Would he ever be able to get past that image of Nolan and the other guy? What if he hadn't walked in on them? Would Nolan have confessed to what had happened? Or would he have continued to see whoever that was on the sly?

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He hit the button to listen to the message again. “Nolan,” he whispered to the empty room. “I want you back. I want *us* back. Like before.” Could they ever go back? Would the hot, tender sweetness of new love ever be recaptured?

Do I call him back and pretend to believe whatever excuses he comes up with? Or do I read him the riot act, demanding to know what the hell is going on? Mark shook his head. Neither idea appealed.

He wished he had someone to talk to about this. *I have no real friends.* What a depressing realization. He did have colleagues—guys he played tennis with, people he met at the various functions and events his work took him to, friends from medical school he occasionally met for a beer or dinner. But when it came down to it, there was no one he could really confide in. He’d kept himself at such arm’s length from everyone he knew, even his own family—especially his own family. And now he had no one to turn to.

Ironically, he wished he could talk to Nolan about what to do. “Hey, Nolan. I have this problem with my new lover. Oh, wait...it’s you...” Mark shook his head and sighed. They had been becoming more than just lovers—they were friends. Though they were still new, Nolan had been so supportive about Mark’s decision to leave the nursing home. Supportive—shit, he’d been the one to encourage him to follow his dreams.

“Are you part of my dreams, Nolan? Is that all you’ll ever be now?”

Mark thought about the champagne bottle he’d dropped by accident, so shocked at what he was witnessing. He should have offered to clean up the mess, but he just couldn’t stay there another second. It was a waste of good champagne, he thought with a bitter smile, aware this would have been his father’s reaction. His mother

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would have worried about the broken glass. Neither of them could have dealt head-on with what they'd witnessed.

Was he any different from them? He'd run, driving blindly away, somehow making it home. Had he ever really faced anything difficult head-on? Until tonight, that is. He'd finally found the courage to face his father and uncle and give his notice—something he should have done two years before.

When he'd finally told them he was gay, his first thought was how proud Nolan would have been of him at that moment. Nolan had been behind him, solidly in his corner, tucked away like a good luck talisman in his heart.

Hauling himself to his feet, Mark went up to the kitchen and retrieved the bottle of champagne. He took a crystal tumbler from the cabinet and, popping the cork, filled the glass. He drained it quickly and refilled it, carrying both the glass and the bottle to his bedroom, determined to drink the whole fucking thing.

* * *

"Nolan. What're you doing here? And on Christmas Day. I thought you were done?"

Alexis, the receptionist at Golden Apple, smiled at Nolan. She was a pretty young woman with short red hair and a ready smile. She had always been pleasant to Nolan while he'd done his time.

"You have to work on Christmas?" he offered sympathetically. "That's a raw deal."

"No, it's fine. I'm getting double-time for it, and I'll be out of here by one. Are those for me? You shouldn't have."

Nolan was holding a small bouquet of flowers and a box of chocolates. He laughed. "Sorry. They're for Mrs. Johnston. She

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told me before I left that her family wasn't going to be able to visit her this Christmas. I wanted to stop by and see how she's doing."

"Aw. That's so sweet. Is she expecting you?"

"No. I thought I'd surprise her."

"Well, I'll just let her know she has a visitor." She lifted her phone and dialed a number while Nolan waited.

She hung up and looked up at him. "She's thrilled. She says just give her a few minutes to powder her nose." Alexis grinned. "You came just in time. In about thirty minutes the Christmas luncheon is going to be served."

When Nolan walked back to Mabel's room, she was waiting, dressed elegantly in a dark green silk dress that looked two sizes too large on her tiny, bent frame. She had pulled what was left of her wispy, white hair back into a bun, hair combs studded with pearls and what looked like real diamonds glittering over her ears, though obviously it had to be costume jewelry. She'd reached up, pulling Nolan's head down for a kiss with those papery, soft lips. She had a smell he'd found peculiar to old people, that of dust and decay, masked by a heavy floral perfume.

"What a pleasure to see you, Dr. Daniels." She beamed, her bright button eyes shining out of a myriad of wrinkles. "Why, thank you, gallant sir!" she exclaimed, when Nolan held out the flowers and candy.

"My goodness me," she proclaimed in her papery-thin voice. "You remind me of my great grandson, Timothy. He's overseas now, in the army. He used to come visit here every Thursday and always with a fresh bouquet of flowers. Flowers do brighten a room."

While Nolan put the flowers in a vase, Mabel opened the chocolates and offered one to Nolan, who shook his head. "You

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seem sad, Nolan. Is your family far away, too? So hard on holidays.”

“I don’t really do Christmas.”

“And yet here you are, bearing gifts for an old lady.”

“I love talking to you, Mabel. Our daily visits were the highlight of my time here. You’re the only thing I’ll miss from this place.”

She laughed, clearly pleased. “Well, thank you. I do hope you’ll continue to visit and once the weather is nicer, we can stroll on the grounds together like a proper lady and gentleman.” She dipped her head toward him with a sudden grace, giving him a glimpse of the beauty she must have once been beneath the wrinkled, sagging skin.

“But back to you. What’s making you sad?”

Nolan sighed, admitting, “I had a fight last night. Well, not exactly a fight. A misunderstanding with someone. We’re still new, you see, and he—uh, that is...” Nolan felt himself coloring.

Mabel reached over and patted his knee. “It’s all right, Nolan. I don’t mind if it’s a *he*. We all have a place in this world. Though if I were sixty years younger, I’d give whoever the lucky fellow is a run for his money, I can tell you.”

Nolan laughed, feeling nearly happy for the first time since the night before.

“So, what happened?” she persisted. “You had a lovers’ quarrel?”

“Kind of, yeah. And he won’t return my calls. He didn’t give me a chance to explain. We’ve only been, uh, going out in a serious way for a week. Part of me says, just forget it. Let the guy go. Who needs this kind of hassle? But another part...”

“Nolan, listen to me. I may just be an old woman, but some

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things, like matters of the heart, never change. I've had three husbands and more than my share of lovers." She winked and Nolan tried to imagine this wizened, faded old woman in the arms of a lover.

She went on, "When you get to be my age, you look back and realize how little most of the things you thought at one time were important even matter at all. When you boil it down, it's *who* was in your life, not what. It's the joy of seizing true love, and the terrible regret of turning away from it, for whatever reason."

She peered at him with those dark button eyes. "Let me ask you a question. And just answer it without pondering or explaining or measuring your answer. Just say what comes off the top of your head. Ready?"

Nolan nodded, wondering uneasily where the old woman was headed with this.

"Do you love this man?"

"Oh, it's too soon—"

"No, stop, stop right there." She held up a hand. "I said the first answer that comes to your lips. No thinking. Answer from the gut. Do you love this man?"

"Yes," Nolan whispered.

Mabel nodded. "I thought so. Go to him, Nolan. Make amends. Even if it wasn't your fault, reach out to him. Don't let pride or fear get in the way of what matters. Reach out. Don't find yourself a year or five years or fifty years from now looking back with regret and wondering what might have been."

As if on cue, Christmas dinner was announced over the loudspeakers. Nolan escorted Mabel to the dining room and said his good-byes. As he bent down to her, she kissed his cheek. "Merry Christmas, Nolan. Remember, follow your heart."

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* * *

Mark cocked one eye open, trying to figure out what that incessant ringing sound was. He reached for the phone and grabbed the receiver, mumbling a hello. Strangely, the ringing continued. Coming more fully awake, he put the receiver back in its cradle and sat up.

Groaning, he squinted at the clock. It was nearly one o'clock in the afternoon. He couldn't remember sleeping this late in years. The empty champagne bottle was overturned on the bed beside him.

The doorbell. That's what it was. Someone was at the door. Someone who really wanted to get in and didn't have a key. At least that ruled out his family, thank God. They all knew where the hidden key was, under a false stone on the side of the house. If it were that urgent, they wouldn't hesitate to use it. Plus, they'd call first. His was not a family known for spontaneously dropping by.

The ringing continued and Mark forced himself upright and out of the bed. He stood still a moment, waiting for the room to stop spinning. He pressed his fingers against his eyes and drew a deep breath.

The ringing had changed to knocking—a pounding, insistent knock. Mark grabbed a pair of jeans and slid them on, not bothering with underwear. He grabbed a T-shirt, pulling it over his head as he loped down the stairs. Maybe a neighbor was hurt or sick. He always kept a spare doctor's bag in the trunk of his car, just in case.

"Coming," he called as he hurried toward the door. The knocking stopped. Mark glanced hurriedly through the peephole, expecting Mr. Muller from across the street, whose infirm mother

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lived with him. But it wasn't Mr. Muller.

Nolan Daniels stood there, his hands shoved into the pockets of his black leather jacket. It was snowing lightly and his dark hair was blowing in the wind, his large brown eyes staring fixedly at the door. Mark pulled back abruptly and leaned with his back against the door, wondering what he should do.

He looked again through the peephole, his heart beating fast. It had begun to snow harder but Nolan just stood there, still as a statue, staring back at him as if he could see him.

Despite the lingering anger and hurt at Nolan's betrayal, Mark couldn't deny the rush of joy at seeing the handsome man. Maybe things didn't have to end. Maybe there was a way back, somehow. Taking a breath, Mark turned the knob and opened the door, with no idea what he was going to say.

* * *

They stared at one another for a long moment. "How did you get here?" Mark finally said.

Nolan jerked his head back toward his car, parked in Mark's driveway. "I drove."

"But your license—"

"Yeah, I know. A week too soon. I figured if I got stopped, hey, it's Christmas, right?"

"It's snowing," Mark remarked somewhat inanely.

"So I noticed." Nolan tried to smile but didn't quite manage. Mark looked so sexy, his hair disheveled, face unshaven, only a T-shirt covering his well-muscled torso, his feet bare beneath a pair of soft, faded jeans. Nolan wanted to grab him and pull him into his arms. Instead he stood back, letting the snow fall on his face

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and head, sticking to his eyelashes and wetting his cheeks.

“You found my address.”

“You’re good at stating the obvious today.” This time Nolan managed a grin and Mark’s small returning smile was like a bright flare of hope in the darkness. “You’re in the phone book. Well, you and two other Mark Harrisons and three M. Harrisons. I got lucky and found you on the third try.”

“You should come in. You must be freezing,” Mark said, stepping back.

Nolan entered the landing of a split-level house that had one set of stairs heading up and one down. Mark took Nolan’s jacket for him and hung it on a hook by the door next to his own.

“You want some coffee or something?”

“No, I’m okay. I want to talk, Mark. You need to hear me.”

Mark narrowed his eyes and for a moment Nolan thought he was going to tell him to leave. Instead he said, “Okay. I’ll listen.”

He gestured downward and Nolan followed him down the stairs into a large room. In one corner, facing an entertainment center with a large flat screen TV, was a stationary bike and some free weights. Beneath a picture window there was a big desk on which sat a computer monitor and a stack of books and papers. There were bookshelves along one wall filled with books and knickknacks.

The room had a warm, lived-in feel to it. In the corner there was a rose-colored couch with a matching stuffed chair. Mark took the chair and waved Nolan toward the sofa.

“I called you last night,” Nolan began. “After you ran.”

Mark said nothing. They were both quiet for a time. Did Mabel really expect him to beg forgiveness? This was a mistake. Nolan Daniels begged no one.

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Mark was watching him, his expression closed, his arms wrapped protectively across his chest. This wasn't going to work. Nolan had been a jerk to think it would. He stood up, embarrassed to have put himself out there when Mark clearly didn't plan to meet him halfway on this. "Maybe I shouldn't have come. If you didn't even have the decency to answer the phone—"

"The *decency*? I walked in on you with some guy going down on you and you dare talk to me about decency? Okay, so we've never expressly said we're just seeing each other, but after the week we've had together, shouldn't I have the right to expect you to keep your dick in your pants for five minutes when my back is turned? Or is this just how you always act—get whatever you can wherever you get it and to hell with whoever you might be involved with. "

"Damn it, Mark, you won't even take the time to listen. Haven't you ever screwed up? I'm trying to explain but you won't even let me talk."

"How can you clean this up, Nolan? Even a smooth talker like you. I saw what I saw. Obviously whatever we had—whatever I *thought* we had—doesn't mean jack shit to you."

"Forget it. Just forget it." Nolan pushed past Mark, who had also risen from his chair. Nolan's heart actually hurt as he strode toward the stairs, his fingers curling into fists of helpless anger.

Mabel's wavering old voice came into his head as if she were beside him. *Don't let pride or fear get in the way of what matters. Reach out.* He stopped and turned slowly around. Mark was watching him. Instead of the righteous anger Nolan had expected, sorrow was etched on Mark's face.

The fight flew out of Nolan, leaving him deflated, his heart cracking. "Mark," he said softly. "I'm nearly forty. I don't do

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relationships. I don't know how. I always fuck things up, if not sooner, then later. This thing with you. Whatever we have—I don't want to fuck it up."

"A little late for that," Mark snapped.

Nolan started to react and forced himself to stop. He owed Mark some kind of explanation, even if Mark didn't want to hear it. He took a deep breath, determined, for once in his life, to just lay it out there.

"What you walked in on. It wasn't planned. He caught me in a vulnerable moment. I'm never even home on Christmas Eve. I was there because I was thinking about you. For the first time in maybe fifteen years, I wasn't out there cruising for some comfort sex. I was sitting at home, feeling kind of blue because I wasn't with you."

Mark was watching him, his arms still crossed over his chest, but his expression softened just a little. Taking heart from this, Nolan continued. "Enrique knocked at my door and I thought it was you. I was so happy I just pulled open the door without even looking and there he was. This is the guy I was really into the night of that party, the night Wayne made the first fake suicide call and I ended up with the DUI. Enrique just showed up at my door after all these months, talking about unfinished business."

Nolan stepped closer to Mark, though they remained several feet apart. He held out his hands in entreaty. "I was lonely and a little drunk and I let him in. He wasted no time making his agenda very clear." Mark scowled and turned away. "Shit, Mark. It happened so fast. There he was, kneeling at my feet, pulling at my jeans. It wasn't my fault. I did start to tell him about you, but then he was on me and it felt so good."

"I don't want to hear it." Mark started to push past Nolan

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toward the stairs.

Nolan grabbed Mark, gripping him tight by the shoulders. “Well, damn it, you’re going to hear it.” Mark wrenched himself away. Nolan dropped his arms and looked at the floor, aware he was blowing it.

Go to him, Nolan. Make amends. Even if it wasn’t your fault, reach out to him.

But it *was* his fault, wasn’t it? Even if Mark hadn’t walked in on him, it was a sleazy thing to do. Maybe it was time to take responsibility. To own his mistake and simply apologize. What else could he do? What was left?

Nolan looked up. Mark was watching him and the pain in Mark’s eyes nearly took his breath away. Suddenly Nolan forgot his own defense. His own loneliness and self-pity seemed irrelevant in the face of Mark’s pain—pain he had caused. For the first time in his life, Nolan found himself putting the feelings of someone else first. He took a step toward Mark, aching to take him into his arms and kiss away the hurt.

Instead he spoke softly, from the heart without regard for what it would get him. “Mark, I—I’m so sorry I hurt you. I should have stopped him. I could have stopped him but I let my dick do the thinking. Whether or not you came by, I should have behaved in a way that would have made you proud of me. All I can say now is I guess thirty-eight years of acting like a prick takes some time to undo. I don’t want to be that guy anymore, Mark. When I’m with you I feel different. I feel proud of myself. I feel good about who I am.

“I know you may not be able to get past this, and if that’s the case, I’ll just have to live with it. To live with myself and what I’ve done. But know this. I’ve never felt this way about someone

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before. I've never let another person get under my skin the way you have. Please forgive me. Don't shut me out. Not now. Now when we're just getting started. Give me another chance."

Mark let out a long breath. Nolan waited while his world hung the balance. Nothing, he realized with something approaching awe, mattered more than this moment.

"Nolan," Mark finally whispered. He said nothing more—just Nolan's name, but it was enough. Mark held out his arms and wordlessly, gratefully, Nolan stepped into them.

CHAPTER 11

They held each other a long time. The ache of the past night, while not erased, eased and shifted inside Mark. He was no longer angry. He understood Nolan's vulnerability and forgave him for it—even loved him for it.

He felt as if he could just stand there forever, his arms around Nolan, Nolan's arms around him—neither going forward in time nor rehashing the successes and mistakes of the past. It was a moment of grace.

Still without speaking, he took Nolan's hand and led him up the stairs, turning at the landing to take the second set of stairs that led to the kitchen and bedrooms. They walked along the hallway to the master bedroom and once there, Mark kissed Nolan lightly on the lips. He pressed his hands against Nolan's chest, intending to push

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him back against the bed.

But Nolan gripped his wrists and gently but firmly brought Mark's hands to his sides. "I want to make love to you," Nolan whispered. "I don't want to fuck you. I don't want to jerk you off. I think that's all I've ever done before. This time, I want to make love."

Mark nodded, touched by the admission and the sentiment behind it. He started to take off his shirt but again Nolan stopped him. "Let me." Nolan gripped the hem of Mark's T-shirt and lifted it over his head. Mark raised his arms, allowing Nolan to remove his shirt. Nolan's hands were cold against his chest, but Mark didn't mind. He closed his eyes, enjoying the sensation of skin against skin.

Nolan's hands moved lower, unbuttoning and unzipping Mark's fly. He knelt in front of Mark as he pulled the denim down his legs. Mark stepped out of his jeans and looked down at Nolan, who smiled up at him as he brushed his cheek over Mark's rising cock.

Nolan stood and quickly pulled off his own clothing, dragging his dark green wool sweater off along with the white T-shirt beneath it, revealing his sexy chest and firm abs. He kicked off his black boots and socks and slipped out of his jeans and underwear.

"Lie down," he said and Mark obeyed him, though his impulse was to kneel and take that gorgeous cock into his mouth. Nolan knelt at the bottom of the bed between Mark's feet. Mark assumed he was going to lean forward and suck Mark's cock, but instead he bent down and kissed the top of Mark's foot.

Mark lifted his head in surprise, watching as Nolan kissed the other foot. With strong hands, Nolan took one of Mark's feet and began to massage it, kneading along the arch and gently pressing

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each toe. While Mark's cock was perking eagerly for attention, he couldn't deny the massage felt very good.

"Lie back and close your eyes," Nolan said softly. "I'm going to take my time with you."

Mark lay back against the pillow with a contented sigh as Nolan continued to massage his foot. After a while he focused on the other foot. Mark eased into the mattress, hot for Nolan but willing to wait, curious what would come next.

Nolan moved up along Mark's legs, massaging the muscles with sure, strong fingers. As he inched up Mark's thighs, again Mark's cock hardened in anticipation of the warm, wet tongue he very much wanted.

Instead Nolan pushed at his hip. "Roll over. I want you completely relaxed." Mark did as he was told, his erect cock mashed between his body and the bed. Nolan moved over his back lightly at first, and then with a stronger hand, pressing hard into muscles Mark hadn't realized were tensed.

Nolan focused on his lower back, moving up slowly as the muscles succumbed to his steady, persistent touch. Mark felt himself melting into the bed. The unsatisfying, alcohol-soaked sleep of the night before had left him washed out and aching. Nolan's hands felt incredibly good and he began to drift into a semi-sleep.

He came awake when Nolan gently pushed him over onto his back. Again crouched between Mark's legs, Nolan leaned forward, his lips brushing over Mark's chest. His tongue circled Mark's right nipple, which rose in response. Nolan lightly bit the nubbin and Mark murmured his approval.

He licked and bit the other one, sending a jolt of desire directly to Mark's cock. Nolan left a trail of feather light kisses along

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Mark's stomach, heading straight down. Mark arched his hips a little, his cock bobbing toward Nolan's mouth.

But again Nolan bypassed his cock. He pushed against Mark's thighs, pressing them apart. His tongue drew a pattern of pleasure over Mark's balls, which tightened in response. Nolan dipped lower, finding the asterisk between Mark's ass cheeks.

He licked in a sensual circle, lightly touching the entrance. Mark couldn't help himself—he thrust forward, forcing the tip of Nolan's tongue past the ring of muscle. Nolan gripped Mark's hips and pressed even farther inside.

"Jesus, Nolan. Fuck me. Please." The words were out before Mark even realized he had spoken.

Nolan pulled back and laughed softly. He sucked one of Mark's balls into his mouth, holding it lightly while he caressed the other with his hand. He opened his mouth wider, taking both balls between his lips. When he gripped Mark's shaft, Mark nearly climaxed on the spot.

Letting Mark's balls fall from his mouth, Nolan leaned up, Mark's cock still caught in his hand. He began to lick the head, gliding back forth over the sensitive gland while he continued to pull and stroke the shaft.

Mark let out a low, guttural sound he barely recognized as his own voice. He gripped Nolan's head to keep from sliding off the edge of the world as an incredibly intense orgasm rocked through his body, leaving him deaf, dumb and blind.

Nolan continued to stroke and suckle him until every drop was spent and every ounce of energy expended. Mark lay limp. He couldn't even muster the strength to lift his eyelids. He tried to find the breath to form words, but failed. He gave in, content to drift along the endorphin-induced high produced by his orgasm. Just

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before he passed into dreams, he heard Nolan's voice murmuring somewhere near his ear.

"Merry Christmas."

* * *

Mark was jerked out of a deep sleep by the sound of someone moaning and thrashing beside him. Dawn was just spreading the dark velvet sky with streaks of gold. It took Mark a second to remember there was someone else in his bed. He twisted toward Nolan in alarm. "Nolan, wake up! You're dreaming."

"No, no, Janine. Please. No..."

Mark shook Nolan by the shoulder. "Wake up. Nolan. You're having a nightmare."

Nolan's eyes flew open, his face a mask of terror. He jerked upright, his hands clenched into fists. He stared at Mark with unfocused eyes, no sign of recognition on his face. Mark stroked his cheek, concerned. "Nolan, hey. It's me, Mark. It's okay. You were just having a bad dream."

To Mark's relief, Nolan's eyes cleared and he fell back against the pillow, his body easing. "Man. Jesus. I'm sorry. You must think I'm a crazy person."

"No. No way. Believe, me, I know. Nightmares can seem incredibly real. Do you remember it?"

"No," Nolan answered too quickly. "I can't remember." He rolled away, turning his back to Mark, but not before Mark saw the lie in his eyes.

"Hey," he said softly, touching Nolan's shoulder. "Sometimes it helps to say it out loud. It robs the dreams of their power, like opening the door and letting light into a darkened room."

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Nolan didn't respond.

"Who's Janine?" Mark asked gently. "You called out that name. Is she someone close to you?"

He felt Nolan's shoulder stiffen beneath his hand. He squeezed it reassuringly, certain he'd touched a nerve. He stayed quiet, wondering if Nolan wanted to talk about it, certain if he did it would help ease the pain.

Taking a guess, he offered, "You miss her, don't you?" Nolan's shoulder began to shake beneath his hand. It took Mark a moment to realize he was crying.

"Nolan. Hey. It's okay. You're safe here with me."

"Shit. I'm sorry." Nolan's voice was choked and Mark could see he was fighting for control. Mark moved closer, wrapping his arms around Nolan. A sob escaped Nolan's lips. Mark stroked his hair and held his shaking body, letting him cry.

Eventually Nolan stilled. Mark cradled him, waiting. Finally Nolan turned toward him, his face streaked with tears. "God, I'm sorry," Nolan whispered in a strangled gasp. "I don't do this. I don't cry." He wiped his face and tried to smile, but didn't quite make it.

"It's just...it's just..." His face crumpled again into uncontrolled misery. He twisted away from Mark's embrace and smashed the bed with his fist. "Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck. This isn't supposed to be happening."

"Hey, it's okay. Everyone cries, Nolan. Don't fight it so hard. It's okay. No one's judging you." Mark reached for some tissues and handed them to Nolan, who wiped his face and blew his nose.

Tentatively Mark reached out again, half-expecting to be rebuffed. Gently he pulled Nolan to his back and Nolan permitted it, though he didn't meet Mark's gaze. Mark wrapped himself over

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Nolan like a shield, his head resting against Nolan's bare chest, his leg draped protectively over Nolan's body.

His heart ached for the suffering man. It seemed like a new grief, one Nolan hadn't yet dealt with. Mark wondered how long it had been since she'd died, for he was sure now whoever Janine was, she was dead.

After a while, Mark raised his head and looked at Nolan's face. It was swollen and wet with tears but his eyes were closed and his expression was peaceful. Carefully Mark lifted himself from the bed. He went into the bathroom and returned with a cool, wet washcloth, which he placed lightly over Nolan's eyes.

"Thanks," Nolan said softly. "That feels good." He sighed. "Man, I don't know what came over me. I haven't cried like that in twenty years. Shit, I don't think I've cried at *all* in twenty years. You must think I'm such a jerk."

"Please, Nolan. Don't say that again. I don't think you're a jerk. I think you're a human being who's dealing with something very painful. Can you tell me what's going on?"

Nolan was quiet a while. Finally he said, "It's been a long time. In fact, it'll be exactly twenty years ago next week. It's hard to believe it's been so long. I haven't thought about her for years, but lately for some reason I've been having these horrible nightmares."

Nolan lifted the towel from his face and offered Mark a wan smile. "Man. I feel like I've run a marathon. I'm totally wiped out. I don't even think I can stand up if I tried."

"You don't have to. We can lie here as long as you like." Mark looked away from Nolan and stared up at the ceiling, putting his hands behind his head. He sensed Nolan needed this bit of distance.

The fact he'd been able to cry in front of Mark was something

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in itself. Mark wondered if *he* could cry in front of another man. Would Nolan be able to trust him enough to talk about whatever was going on in his head?

Mark decided not to press the issue. If Nolan wanted to talk about it, he would. He reached over and put his hand on Nolan's thigh and for several minutes they lay quietly together.

After a while, he felt Nolan's hand slip over his and Nolan began to talk. "I had a sister..." he began.

* * *

Once Nolan began to tell the tale, he found he couldn't stop. Words spilled over themselves as he told Mark all the things he'd never said aloud to another soul. He told him about Janine, about the suicide attempts and then her final, horrible success. He told him about his mother and abusive stepfather. About the drunken rages and his own futile efforts as a young boy to protect his mother. He told him about giving up, about getting away and making it on his own. He told him about what it was like, barely eighteen, sometimes living with guys just for a place to stay in exchange for sex while he scrabbled his way into the adult world.

Mark listened and asked questions, the kind of questions that showed he was really paying attention and really cared. He didn't judge or condemn. Sometimes just his gentle touch on Nolan's arm said more than a thousand words could have.

They got out of bed finally, hunger driving them to the kitchen in search of food. Mark made them breakfast, cheese omelets and toast, with coffee and orange juice to drink. While he cooked, Mark told Nolan about the fiasco with his family on Christmas Eve. He laughed some while he was telling it, but it was clear the

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pain was still raw just beneath the laughter.

"They'll come around," Nolan offered, hoping it was true. "You gave them a lot to handle in one night. I bet you're the topic of conversation for the next few days, huh?"

"Few days? Are you kidding me? The next few years." Mark's laugh was bitter.

"Yeah, well. I'm really proud of you, Mark. It took a lot of courage to stand up to them. To stand up for what matters to you. You did good."

Mark smiled, pleased with the praise. "So what happens now?" Even as Nolan asked this, he almost wished he hadn't. For, though he was the one who had encouraged Mark to make the changes in his life he needed to in order to be happy, what did it mean for them as a couple? This free clinic was located somewhere in rural Pennsylvania. Mark would be moving away. Where would that leave the two of them?

Mark looked suddenly thoughtful, as if the same realization was passing through his mind. "I've given them a month at the nursing home. I haven't made any firm decisions yet. I need to contact Sonya Olsen—that's the one who put this whole thing together—and see what the need is, and what the timeframe would be."

Something must have shown in Nolan's face because Mark added, "It's something I've always wanted to do, Nolan. I want to give back. I want to make a difference. It's not like Pennsylvania is another country. The town is only four or five hours from here."

It's not like they were life partners, for God's sake. They didn't even live together. Nolan forced a smile. "Sure. You should definitely check it out. Like you said, it's something you've always wanted to do. I'll still be here when you get back—if you're

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lucky,” he added in a teasing voice.

“We have time, Nolan,” Mark said softly. “Let’s enjoy today.”

“Yeah,” Nolan echoed. “In the end, that’s all we’ve got.”

* * *

Both of them had the next day off. They talked about going out to eat or going to a movie, but neither seemed inclined to leave Mark’s cozy home. In fact, neither seemed much inclined to leave his bed, except to eat or use the bathroom. They couldn’t get enough of each other.

Since Nolan had broken down and cried, it was as if they’d skipped past several layers of getting to know one another, and moved straight to close and trusted friends. It felt wonderful. Because Nolan had shared such closely held secrets, it had freed Mark up to do the same.

He admitted for the first time to another person that, until now, he’d secretly believed something inside him was broken—that he lacked the capacity for love. He’d never felt close to his family. He’d never been in love with another man, though he’d been very fond of a few.

Now that he’d found Nolan, that had changed. The frightening thing was, along with the love came a new sense of vulnerability. To love someone was to leave oneself open to pain. He’d experienced it with a vengeance, seeing Nolan with another man just hours after they’d kissed each other good-bye.

And yet he couldn’t just shut off the feelings. Nolan had penetrated the walls of his reserve so surely there was no going back. He couldn’t pretend to Nolan or himself that what was happening between them didn’t matter. It mattered more than

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anything, even more, he realized with a shock, than his long-held dream of working at the free clinic.

He'd talked to Sonya, who was very eager for him to join the clinic as soon as he could make arrangements. She was willing to accept a three-month commitment. But what about Nolan? Three months wasn't that long, was it? Still, it was hard to imagine a guy as hot and as highly-sexed as Nolan would stick around waiting for Mark to return. Was it really worth it to take that risk? Even to fulfill his dream?

He looked over at Nolan, who was dozing beside him. It was early evening and though they'd made love several times already, just the sight of the handsome man stirred Mark's blood. He touched Nolan's thigh, the tips of his fingers brushing the tip of Nolan's cock. He noted with amusement that even in sleep, it was erect. Nolan stirred.

"You awake?" Mark asked.

Nolan opened his eyes and turned toward Mark. "Yeah. I was having a seriously excellent dream though. You were in it." His eyes slid down Mark's body, toward his groin. Mark was wearing his favorite soft cotton gray lounging pants with nothing beneath them. His cock hardened in response to Nolan's gaze.

Nolan got up to use the bathroom. When he returned, he stood by the side of the bed, his eyes hooded, his cock beckoning. Mark climbed out of the bed and stood facing his lover. "You look so hot," he murmured. "Stay just like that. Don't move. I want to touch you."

Nolan smiled but did as Mark asked. Moving behind Nolan, Mark stroked the small of Nolan's back and traced the sexy dimples, one above each perfect globe of his firm ass. Nolan shuddered at his touch. He was so responsive. He was so hot.

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Mark stepped around in front of Nolan. Standing back, he cupped Nolan's balls, sliding his hand up over the shaft, which pointed hard toward Nolan's hip. Kneeling in front of him, Mark bent toward the drop of pre-cum glistening on the tip of Nolan's cock. Mark closed his mouth over the crown just long enough to lick the delicious nectar from it.

Nolan moaned and thrust his hips forward. "Yeah," he whispered. Wanting to prolong the moment, Mark let Nolan's cock fall from his lips. Rising, he licked his way along Nolan's torso until he came to his lips. But instead of kissing him, on an impulse he lifted two fingers and pressed them against Nolan's mouth.

Nolan parted his lips and moved his head to take Mark's fingers into his mouth. Mark let him, his cock tingling and balls tightening in response to Nolan's tongue. He was sucking the fingers like a cock and Mark pressed them deeper into his mouth. The action caused something primal and powerful to click on inside Mark. He had planned to suck Nolan's cock, but now he found himself saying, even commanding, "Get on your knees."

His fingers still in Nolan's mouth, he pushed down on Nolan's warm tongue to reinforce his words. Nolan dropped to the floor, looking up at Mark, his eyes sparkling with intensity and lust. He parted his lips, releasing Mark's fingers. His mouth remained open in an inviting O.

* * *

Nolan lifted his head, his open mouth an offering for Mark to claim with his cock. His eyes flickered over Mark's chest, smooth save for a small V of dark blond hair tapering down his sternum. He was muscular though not with the bunched, bulging muscles of

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a weightlifter. He had a swimmer's body, lean and sinewy.

Nolan watched hungrily as Mark pulled the drawstring at the waist of his pants and let them puddle at his feet. Nolan eyed his bare form appreciatively. Mark's was a gorgeous cock by any accounting, thick and straight, with large, round balls hanging beneath it. He moved very close to Nolan, who had remained in his submissive pose, his mouth open, his cock twitching with lust.

With any other man, Nolan would have grabbed those slender hips and jerked him forward. He would have inhaled that cock, sucking it in deep until Mark moaned and begged for mercy. Then he would have pushed him back against the bed and sucked Mark nearly to orgasm. Only nearly though—he'd want him on fire when he flipped him over, lubed him up and eased his way into heaven.

But Mark wasn't any other man.

Mark put his hands on either side of Nolan's head. "Keep your mouth open. Don't try to help. No lips or tongue." Instinctively Nolan closed his eyes as the head of Mark's cock entered his mouth.

Mark curled his fingers in Nolan's hair. Nolan licked along the underside of the shaft as it slid deeper. Mark tightened his grip in Nolan's hair as he pressed the head of his cock into Nolan's throat. Nolan consciously relaxed his throat muscles, eager to receive his lover's heavy, hard cock. As Mark moved in and out, Nolan savored the silky, sensual glide of Mark's cock along his tongue.

Mark's leg brushed Nolan's bobbing shaft. Nolan couldn't help the soft moan that escaped as he wriggled to increase the contact. Mark pressed harder, catching Nolan's shaft between his leg and Nolan's stomach. Nolan shuddered, rubbing against the leg like a rutting dog. He reached for Mark's hips, pulling him closer as he

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sucked Mark's cock with frenzied abandon.

It wasn't long before Mark was bucking and jerking against him, nearly choking Nolan with his long, thick shaft. Nolan didn't care. Wrapping his hands around the base of Mark's cock, he pressed both thumbs against Mark's perineum. With a cry, Mark shuddered and began to ejaculate in long, thick ribbons of cum that Nolan eagerly swallowed. He didn't let Mark go until Mark sagged against him, holding onto Nolan's shoulders to remain upright.

Nolan stood, supporting Mark as he pushed him toward the bed. Mark fell back on it, spread eagle, eyes closed, a small, satisfied smile on his lips. Nolan massaged his cock a moment as he admired his spent lover. He was just trying to decide whether to straddle Mark's chest and fuck his face, or flip him over and fuck his ass when the doorbell rang.

CHAPTER 12

Mark didn't move.

Nolan waited a beat and then touched Mark's shoulder. "Hey. You going to get that?"

"Hmm?" Mark didn't open his eyes.

"The doorbell. Someone's at the door."

Slowly Mark's blue eyes opened, though they remained unfocused. "Nah. Let them go away. I don't want any visitors. Nobody but you."

Nolan smiled. He again pondered the sexy choice of how to best enjoy Mark's perfect body when the doorbell rang again, this time several times in succession.

"Maybe it's important," Nolan suggested. "You want me to go see for you?"

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“Probably paperboy,” Mark mumbled. “Wants his money. Wallet on bureau.”

Nolan grinned. Mark was so far gone he couldn’t even speak in complete sentences. “Okay. I’ll be right back. Don’t go anywhere.” Mark’s eyes were again closed, his head lolling to the side.

Nolan found his jeans and pulled them on. Shirtless, he grabbed Mark’s wallet and headed down to the front door. Just as he came to the last stair, he heard the snick of the lock turning and the door opened.

“Mark? Are you there? Why aren’t you answering the phone? We’re all worried sick.” A woman of about fifty-five with carefully sprayed and set blonde hair and Mark’s eyes stepped into the house. When they lit on Nolan she gasped, bringing a hand to her mouth. “Oh, my God.” She pressed against the door as if she could disappear through it.

Nolan could see from her startled, fearful reaction that she took him for some kind of intruder. “Mrs. Harrison?” he ventured. Some of the fear drained from her features at the use of her name, but she remained backed up against the door, holding her purse against her torso like a shield.

“It’s okay, Mrs. Harrison. I’m a friend of Mark’s. He’s just upstairs. He’s...he’s resting.”

At this remark she colored, blushing a deep red. “*You’re* the one.” She pointed an accusatory finger toward him.

“What?” Nolan took a step back, surprised by the sudden venom in the woman’s tone.

“The one who turned my boy.”

For a second he had no idea what she was talking about. “Turned him? Excuse me?” Then understanding dawned. She blamed Nolan for turning her son into a queer. Even though he’d

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faced prejudice and homophobia his whole life, it never failed to stun him anew. How could people be so fucking clueless?

“Mom. What’re you doing here? Is everything okay?”

Nolan turned toward the sound of Mark’s voice, biting off the nasty retort he’d nearly made to Mark’s mother. He would let Mark fight his own battles. Mark, again in his gray lounge pants, was pulling a T-shirt over his head. His hair was ruffled, a faint orgasmic flush still on his unshaven cheeks and throat.

“Is everything okay?” Mark’s mother parroted, turning her attention to her son. “Is everything *okay*?” she repeated, her voice rising in trembling rage. “You’re standing there with this—this half naked *man* in your house and you ask me if everything is *okay*?”

She glared at Nolan for a second, pressing her lips together in deep disapproval before continuing. “Don’t think I don’t know what you’re up to, Mark Randall Harrison. You walk out on us on Christmas Eve and don’t have the courtesy to return our phone calls. We don’t see hide nor hair of you on Christmas. All the grandchildren asking, ‘Where is Uncle Mark?’” You can’t even answer your door, hiding out in here like some—some I don’t know what! No, everything is *not* okay.”

Mark came down the stairs toward his mother, brushing Nolan’s shoulder as he passed him. In a remarkably calm tone, he said, “Nolan. Let me talk to my mom alone for a few minutes, okay? We’ll just go down to the living room.”

Nolan nodded, relieved to get away from the unpleasant scene that was unfolding. He went into the kitchen and put on some coffee while Mark led his mother, still babbling her outrage, down the stairs.

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Mark settled his mother on the sofa and sat in the chair across from her. She had quieted and was watching him, her head tilted. She squinted her eyes as if she were trying to get him into better focus.

“What? What’re you staring at?” Mark touched his face, with the sudden horrible thought there might be dried semen on his cheek.

“I’m trying to see what I missed all these years. How come I, your very own mother, didn’t know you were a...” She paused, distaste washing over her features. “A homosexual.” She pursed her lips and scowled, as if the very word created a bad taste in her mouth. He half expected her to spit on the ground, though of course his mother would never do such a coarse thing.

Annoyed, he snapped, “What’re you looking for, horns? A scarlet H painted on my forehead?”

“All those years.” She shook her head slowly for several seconds. Mark resisted a strong urge to strike her. Pulling a tissue from her bag, she began to twist it in her hands. “Your shameful secret, hidden from the world. It’s a sin, Mark. The Bible says so.”

“Stop it.” Mark realized he was clenching the arms of his chair. He made a conscious effort to uncurl his fingers and relax. His mother had always taken blind refuge in religion when she was frightened by things she didn’t understand.

“The Bible also says a man can stone his wife to death or sell his daughter into slavery. I don’t acknowledge or accept your idea of sin when it comes to one person loving another. It has no meaning for me. If you’ve come here with some misguided notion of making me see the error of my ways and repenting before it’s

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too late, you might as well leave.”

To his surprise, she looked contrite. “I’m sorry, Mark. You’re right. That was uncalled for. This is the twenty-first century. I know we need to be accepting of people’s...differences. It’s just, well, I’m your mother. I should have known. Maybe I could have done something to help.”

“I don’t need any *help*, Mom.” Mark cut her off. “I’m not Uncle Frank. I’m happy with who and what I am. My only regret is waiting so long to tell you. And...and the way I told you, or told Dad. It isn’t how I would have chosen. It was an emotional time. I wasn’t thinking straight.” He grinned suddenly, though the pun about a gay guy thinking “straight” sailed right over his mother’s head.

“Christmas Eve,” she said with reproach. “Did you have to do it then? And then you just fell off the planet. Not taking our calls, not coming over Christmas Day. I was worried, Mark. I thought maybe you’d...”

Mark stared at her. “Oh, Mom. No. I would never...” So she’d thought he might have committed suicide like Uncle Frank? If she’d really thought that, why had she waited for two days to come find him? Mark shook his head, trying hard not to read more into this than there might be, unwilling to broach the topic.

He looked hard at his mother, trying to see her as he would one of his patients, objectively, clinically. She looked tired, frightened and unhappy. For the first time since he’d walked out of his parents’ house, he felt real remorse for how he’d handled things.

Not that he was sorry he’d finally found the courage to quit the nursing home and, more importantly, to come out to his family at last. But she was right. It was Christmas Eve, a time of year that meant a lot to his mother. She set so much store in having all her

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sons and their families gathered together, sharing a meal and attending the church service together. He'd ruined that for her, and he'd ruined Christmas Day as well by not showing up.

"Mom, I'm sorry for not taking your calls and for walking out the way I did. I was reacting. I wasn't thinking clearly. I guess I just needed some time to work things through."

His mother looked up hopefully. "So does that mean you're going to come to your senses? Stay with Golden Apple? Get rid of that...of that...man upstairs? Go into therapy for a cure?"

Mark shook his head and closed his eyes, trying desperately to call up all his patience and empathy for a woman trying to deal with things she didn't accept or understand. He realized it had been years since he'd even tried to talk to his mother in any meaningful way. Maybe if he'd tried to share more, and sooner, they wouldn't be at such an impasse now.

"Look, Mom. For the first time in my life, I'm going to do what *I* want to do. I'm thirty-two. Not twenty-two. Not twelve. For years I've been living a lie. I've been trying to fit myself into a mold you and Dad and society have built for me. I just can't do it anymore. Or more accurately, I *won't* do it anymore. There's no going back. I can't unsay the things I've said. I don't want to. I've given the business three years. It's time I start my own life. *My* life, not the one you had planned out for me. And I'm going to start living that life as openly and honestly as I can.

"That means I'm done pretending to be something I'm not. I'm not straight, Mom. I'm gay. I'm a homosexual." His mother winced. "You might as well get used to it, because it's not something I can change at will. You didn't choose to be heterosexual, did you? It's not a lifestyle *choice*. We are what we are. Why not accept that and move on? There is no cure for being

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gay because it's not an illness. It's simply the way I'm built. Can you accept that, Mom? It's not something I'm doing to the family. It just is."

She pursed her lips but didn't refute him. How could she? Instead she said, "Your father didn't want me coming over here today. He said as far as he's concerned, you're no longer welcome in our home."

Mark was shaken and saddened by this pronouncement, but not really surprised.

His mother continued, "He'll never approve of this...this lifestyle." She waved her hand vaguely around the room, as if it were somehow decorated in "quintessential gay."

"No, I don't expect he will. I don't require his approval, but it does make me sad to think he can't look past his own bigotry to remember I'm his son. If I'm not welcome there, I won't go there."

"Oh, Mark," his mother said softly. There were tears in her eyes.

Mark seized on her emotion to find the empathy he needed to comfort her. "Listen, Mom. You're welcome in *my* home. You don't need Dad's permission to come here. I hope in time you'll come to understand me better, and to understand this lifestyle, as you call it. People are people, They love who they love—it's really that simple. It doesn't have to define who we are. Certainly it's not the only defining thing about us."

His mother was weeping openly now, which distressed Mark, but he made no move to stop her. What could he do? Instead he moved to sit beside her and draped his arm lightly over her shoulder. He half expected her to shrug him away, not wanting to be touched by a homosexual, even if he was her son.

To his relief, she leaned into him, though she began to cry

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harder. “Mom, it’s okay. Everything’s okay.” He rocked her gently, thinking how small she felt in his arms. He waited until the tears subsided, recalling how many times she’d held him in her arms when he was a small child, crying from a scraped knee or the taunting of his older brothers.

“You’re a good boy, Mark,” she finally said through her sniffles. “You were always my favorite boy, my baby. This is just so hard.”

“I know, Mom. I appreciate you coming over to see me. I really do. You took the first step by coming here. Who knows, maybe someday Dad will come to accept things as they are too.”

“Maybe.” His mother looked doubtful.

“Listen, would you like some coffee or something? A snack?”

“No. No. I didn’t even tell your father where I was going.” She pulled away, dabbing at her eyes with a tissue, her expression suddenly purposeful. “He thinks I’m at the supermarket. I better be getting back.”

“Okay. Well, would you like to meet Nolan properly now?”

“Your...your...”

“Friend,” Mark supplied with a small smile.

His mother patted her hair and wiped her mascara-stained cheeks. “No. No, I’m a mess now. I don’t have time. I really couldn’t...” She looked positively panicked. “He was half dressed—clearly you weren’t expecting company.”

“Come on, Mom. He was wearing jeans, not a G-string. Yes, we’re lovers but we’re more than that. He’s my friend. He’s a terrific guy. I’m in love with him.”

Even as his mother winced again, Mark felt a winging joy soar through him at the thought. He really *was* in love with Nolan. He resisted the sudden urge to run up and tell him right away.

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His mother was frowning and he knew he'd said too much, but he didn't care. He was done censoring himself. He pointed toward the bathroom just off the living room. "Why don't you go wash your face and I'll bring him down, okay? It's the polite thing to do."

At those magic words, his mother nodded and retreated to the bathroom. Mark took the steps two at a time. He could smell the coffee brewing but the kitchen was empty. Heading down the hall, he found Nolan lying on the bed, his hands behind his head, staring at the ceiling. He had put his shirt on and his dark hair was combed back from his face.

Nolan sat up as Mark entered the room. "How's it going?"

"I think she's coming around. She stopped pushing the therapy angle, at least."

"Therapy?"

"For the cure. The queer cure."

Nolan shook his head. "Jesus."

"Yeah. Look, I told her I'd introduce you. I figured maybe if she actually gets to know you a little, she'll see what a terrific guy you are and before you know it, they'll be having us both over to Sunday dinner."

Nolan laughed. "Yeah, I'll count on that."

Mark laughed, too, though he was suddenly sad. Ironically, he'd often found it an imposition and annoyance that he was expected to be at his parents' house every Sunday for a meal, but now that he'd been officially denied access, he felt the loss.

As if aware what he was feeling, Nolan said gently, "We'll make our own Sunday dinners, Mark."

Mark looked at him gratefully. "Yeah. Thanks."

They walked together down the stairs, but when they got to the

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living room it was empty. The bathroom door was ajar. Mark looked in, but his mother wasn't there.

"Mom?" he called, stepping back into the living room.

Nolan was at the window. "She drive a blue Mercedes?"

"Yeah."

"She just drove away. Guess she didn't really want to meet me all that bad."

Embarrassment at his mother's rudeness fought with relief that she was gone. "I'm sorry, Nolan."

"Hey, no skin off my nose. I don't do the family thing well, anyway. Haven't seen my own mom in years."

Mark looked closely at Nolan, wondering if it always had to be so hard.

Nolan opened his arms. "Come here." Mark moved toward him and they leaned into each other, dipping their heads together so they were touching at the forehead and nose. Mark found the gesture aching, sweetly intimate. Unbidden, his eyes filled with tears that he rapidly blinked away.

"You okay?" Nolan asked softly.

By way of answer, Mark tilted his head slightly and brushed Nolan's lips with his. Nolan caught Mark's head in his hands and held him still, slipping his tongue into Mark's mouth. They stood for a long time, exploring each other's mouths, their bodies pressed close, their hearts beating faster. Nolan dropped his hands and brought them around Mark and Mark responded in kind, pulling Nolan close and holding him tight, thinking how he never wanted to let him go.

CHAPTER 13

“So, this is it, huh?” Nolan tried to keep his tone light. “I can finally get rid of you and go back to my real life.” He forced his lips into what he hoped passed for a grin.

Somehow a month had hurtled and skittered toward this moment like a stone rolling down a hill, gathering speed as it went. For the first time in his life, the innate restlessness Nolan had always experienced had been eased. He felt more comfortable in his own skin and somehow more settled.

They’d both been tested for STDs and come up clean as whistles. This was something of a relief to Nolan, who had done a few foolish things in his day when it came to unprotected sex. Thus, with the understanding they were seeing only each other, they had stopped using condoms.

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Nolan loved the hot clench of Mark's passage when he penetrated its tightness. It felt so good to slide in bare, his cock wet with lube and rock hard with lust. He loved entering his lover in such an intimate way, with nothing, not even a thin layer of latex, to come between them. By the same token, he loved when Mark spurted deep inside him, his sweet, hot seed deposited like a gift, like an offering.

Now the day had come. Mark was leaving for his clinic, committed to a minimum stint of three months, though Nolan knew he might well stay longer. He might never come back. This might be it—the beginning of the end of their relationship.

Nolan no longer fought any internal battles about how to define what the two of them shared. He was in love with Mark and he'd even told him so, a time or two in the dark, lying in the warmth of Mark's strong arms as they drifted toward sleep.

Mark was the first man he'd been with who was actually enough for him. He didn't lie beside Mark thinking about someone else. He didn't cruise the sex bars any longer, prowling for something quick and dirty to ease his lust while keeping his heart protected. For the first time, the prize meant more than the chase.

Somehow Mark had stripped his heart bare, leaving him raw and vulnerable. He'd penetrated every last reserve and now he was leaving, possibly forever. "Hey," Mark said, his voice gentle. It was uncanny how he was always able to read Nolan's thoughts and feelings. "It's not like I'm going to Africa. I'll just be one state over. I'll come back at least once every two weeks for the weekend and you can come out to see me, too. Just give me a week or so to settle in and we'll figure things out."

"Sure. Yeah. I know." Nolan was resting his forearms lightly on Mark's shoulders, their frozen breath hanging in the air between

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them. They stood in Mark's driveway beside Nolan's car. It was a frigid day at the end of January and Nolan had already started the car to warm the engine. He had to get to work and if he didn't leave in a minute or so, he'd be late. He was sorely tempted to call in sick but knew he'd only be prolonging the moment.

He'd told himself in the past he just didn't "do" relationships. He preferred to play the field, keeping his options open and his life uncomplicated. He hadn't realized until Mark came along, how incredibly guarded he'd been, and how lonely.

Enter Mark Harrison, MD. How different he'd turned out to be from the formal, almost prissy man Nolan had marked him as on their first meeting. Even when they'd first begun to flirt while Nolan was still working off his community service, he'd mistakenly had Mark pegged as someone he could manipulate, just as he'd always manipulated the guys he was with to keep himself safe from his own emotions.

That was the real power Mark wielded over him. It was the power of love. And now Mark was leaving him. Sure, he said he'd come back on weekends, but how long would that last? Long distance relationships didn't work. Anyway, if Mark really loved him, as he claimed, he wouldn't be leaving.

How had *that* stupid thought entered his brain? Nolan banished it, angry at himself for even having it. He was acting like a spoiled brat. Didn't he wish Mark the best? Hadn't he been the one to encourage Mark in the first place to follow his dreams?

Mark brought his arms around Nolan, pulling him into a bear hug. Nolan hid his face against Mark's neck, lightly grazing Mark's skin with his lips. He had expected Mark to say he loved him, and he was going to say it back, here in the broad daylight without alcohol or sex to ease the way. But Mark didn't say it and

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so he didn't either.

Mark dropped his arms and stepped back, his eyes searching Nolan's face. "You'll be late for work. You better go."

"Yeah. You take good care, Mark." Why was he acting like Mark was going off to war? This was something good for Mark—something he'd wanted for years. Why couldn't Nolan find the good grace to be happy for him?

"You did it, Doc. You made it happen. I'm really proud of you." That wasn't what he wanted to say. He wanted to say, "I love you, Mark. I don't want you to go, but I do want you to succeed and do what's right for you," but the words didn't make it to his lips.

"Thanks, Nolan. That means a lot to me. I'll call you when I get there, okay?"

"Yeah." Nolan gave Mark a playful cuff, ruffling Mark's blond hair, blinking away the sudden tears in his eyes. He didn't want Mark to go, that was the bottom line. But who was he to stop him?

He got into his car and eased out of the driveway, twisting toward the street as he backed out. Mark was watching him again with that searching look, his hands deep in his coat pockets, his eyes on Nolan.

Abruptly Nolan pulled the car to the curb and put it in park. Jumping from the driver's seat, he ran up the driveway toward Mark. "What?" Mark asked in surprise.

Nolan grabbed him, pulling him close as he bent down to kiss him, not caring what the neighbors might see or what they might think about it. Mark kissed him back, stroking the back of Nolan's neck. Nolan felt like he could stand there forever, just kissing and holding his sexy lover. A car drove by and Mark pulled back.

Nolan let him go, but not before whispering, "I love you. I'll be

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here waiting when you get back.”

* * *

Mark sat on the lumpy twin bed in the room where he would be staying on the second floor of the old house, rent free for the next three months. He was exhausted but exhilarated by the hectic, crazy day. Three months at this kind of pace would wear him out, no question about it.

Three months.

Three months away from Nolan Daniels. Nolan had said he would be waiting when Mark came back and Mark believed he meant it. At least at the moment he said it. But Mark was a realist. They were still in the flush of new romance and both of them were in uncharted waters when it came to love. Could the relationship handle his leaving so early on? Should he have put it off another six months or a year?

But no. If he had done that, he knew he would have begun to resent Nolan for putting his dreams on hold, and that wouldn't be fair to either of them. This was when Sonya needed him. Plus, the timing with leaving the nursing home had been right. He needed to have more faith in Nolan, in the relationship and in himself.

He flipped open his cell phone and pressed the speed dial for Nolan's number. It was a little after seven in the evening and Nolan should just be finishing his shift. Mark realized he was holding his breath, ridiculously eager to hear Nolan's voice. Nolan's cell rang five times and switched to voice mail. Mark waited for it to finish, refusing to let himself entertain the idea Nolan might be purposely refusing his call.

He left a message. “Hey, Nolan. It's me. Just finished my first

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day. I'm totally beat. Give me a call when you can. Bye."

Mark kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the bed. He'd brought his own sheets and blankets, having noted the cheap polyester bedspread when he'd visited the premises during the interview, but he didn't have the energy at that moment to change the bedding. For now it just felt good to kick back and relax, enjoying the silence of the countryside outside his window and a chance to lie still.

As promised, he'd called Nolan when he'd first pulled into the unpaved parking lot beside the old Victorian house that now served as the Clearfield Free Clinic, but he'd gotten Nolan's voice mail then, too.

Apparently word had spread that a doctor would finally be on site, because when he'd arrived, the waiting room was packed and several people milled about on the wraparound porch, their faces turned toward the winter sun.

The place was run primarily by a nurse practitioner named Margaret and a phlebotomist named Joe, with Sonya donating what time she could one day per week for the cases requiring a doctor's expertise. The need was so great, however, that one day a week just wasn't enough. His coming would finally allow the backlog of patients needing basic care to be seen, instead of only the direst of emergencies.

Mark had been impressed with the quality of the facility when he'd come out to visit it two weeks before during the informal interview process. Sonya had managed to tape together the funding needed to run the place, via government grants and donations.

The clinic provided a range of primary and preventive services, including medical exams, laboratory testing, non-narcotic pharmaceuticals, anonymous HIV testing and X-rays.

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As a full-time doctor, Mark would receive a stipend that equaled about a fourth of what he earned at the nursing home, but he didn't care. In a stroke of luck, Dr. Olsen had actually found a month-to-month tenant to lease Mark's place in his absence—a visiting doctor from India who was working at her hospital for the next six months. The rent would cover the mortgage and Mark didn't mind living frugally. He could stay with Nolan when he came back to Trenton for visits.

Arriving a little before noon, Mark had hit the ground running, seeing patients nonstop for seven hours, with a just a quick break to eat a chicken salad sandwich the nurse brought in for him. He'd treated a child with the flu, diagnosed two cases of untreated diabetes, prescribed various antibiotics and dermatological creams for a variety of ailments and even set a broken arm.

In just one day he'd practiced more medicine than in a month at the nursing home, and he was providing a real service to people who would otherwise probably go without. He was doing something important and it felt good.

He wanted to tell Nolan about it. He picked up his phone, which he'd dropped on the bed beside him, and looked at it, in case he'd missed a call or a text. He was probably still working his shift. Yes, that must be it. Or maybe the clinic didn't get good reception out here in the middle of nowhere. He looked at the phone again. It showed a good, strong signal.

He sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed. This was silly. Nolan would call when he called. Mark needed to trust him and let it go. Like that corny saying about setting something free and it will come back to you if it's meant to be, he would need to have faith Nolan would still be waiting when he came home.

His cell phone rang, sending an electric thrill of hope shooting

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through him. He grabbed it, fumbling to get it open, not even taking the time to look at the Caller ID. “Nolan,” he said excitedly into the phone.

There was a brief pause and then, “Mark? This is Sonya. Sonya Olsen.”

Mark felt his face heat. “Oh, sorry. I was expecting someone else.”

Sonya gave a small laugh. “Evidently. Listen. I just got into Havenfield. I’m sorry it’s so late. I meant to arrive this afternoon to get you situated but things were insane at the hospital today. I trust you made it through your first day okay? Margaret showed you the ropes?”

“Yes. Everything went fine. Hectic, but fine.”

“Excellent. I hope the accommodations are okay. I’ll take you around the village tomorrow and show you where everything is. We can get your kitchen properly stocked. Meanwhile, I was hoping to take you to dinner. You can give me a complete report over lasagna at Victor’s Italian Restaurant. It’s a bit of a drive from here, but it’s either that or the local diner.”

Mark realized as she spoke that he was starving. He hadn’t eaten since that chicken sandwich on the fly five hours before. “Italian sounds great. Just let me jump in the shower. I can be ready in fifteen minutes.”

“Perfect. I’ll pick you up in front of the clinic. See you then.”

Mark stood, the phone still in his hand. He’d take it into the bathroom, just in case Nolan called back.

* * *

Somehow Nolan had made it through the first week apart.

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They'd talked every night. That first night Nolan's shift had run overtime, the emergency calls coming in nonstop. Though he was exhausted from a thirteen-hour day, he'd had the energy to talk for two hours to his lover.

It made Nolan happy that he was the guy Mark chose to share his excitement over his new work with, but at the same time he couldn't deny the slither of fear that snaked over the back of his neck. What if Mark decided to make the change a permanent one?

Today was Friday and Mark was coming home for the weekend. Nolan had done some shift trading to make sure he was off both Saturday and Sunday. Mark had said he would be leaving at about four o'clock that afternoon, so Nolan could expect him by about nine that evening. This worked out well, since Nolan would be done with his shift at seven and this would give him time to make dinner.

Nolan had never made dinner for another person. He barely knew how do much more than boil eggs. But in anticipation of tonight he had bought two steaks, two potatoes and all the ingredients to make a tossed salad. He had a bottle of red wine on the counter, waiting to be uncorked.

Just as he was leaving the hospital, he got a call from Mark. "Hey, Mark. You on your way?"

"Uh, that's why I'm calling. Nolan, I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to come tonight. I'll be there first thing tomorrow, though, I promise. I'll get up at four so I can be there by nine. Okay?"

Nolan thought about the steaks in the refrigerator and the candles he'd bought for the kitchen table. Well, they'd keep another day. Swallowing his disappointment, he asked, "So what happened? I thought the clinic closed at four on Fridays?"

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“Yeah, it does. But there was a big accident out on a county road involving a tractor-trailer and a school bus this afternoon and a bunch of kids were injured. They’ve taken most of the injured over to Chester General. That’s a small hospital about twenty miles from here. They’re short-staffed. Sonya asked me if I could come help out, just for a few hours until the worst of them are stabilized. She got me clearance and I said I’d do what I could.”

“Sure. Sure, I understand. No problem. I’m pretty beat anyway. I’ll just see you in the morning. And don’t worry about getting up so early. Get some rest and get here when you can.”

“Thanks, Nolan. You’re the best.”

“Yeah. Okay, bye.”

Nolan sat for a while, feeling terribly let down and sorry for himself. Intellectually he knew Mark had made the responsible decision. He was a doctor, after all, with an oath to uphold.

But damn it, he’d been looking forward to this all week—to opening the door when Mark arrived, ushering him inside, the smell of garlic and melting butter from the bread in the oven filling the house, the wine already poured and waiting, the candles lit. He’d take Mark in his arms and kiss him until Mark forgot all about that damn clinic and his good works.

Well, he’d see him tomorrow. Yes, this was a setback, but no big deal. They’d still have a nice solid block of time together to reconnect. Forcing himself to be content with this, Nolan toyed with the idea of going out to The Danger Zone to distract himself. He decided against it, instead looking through his DVD collection for something to pass the evening.

His phone rang again and he grabbed it. He didn’t recognize the number but it was local. “Nolan Daniels.”

“Nolan. It’s Gene Mueller. Remember me?”

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Gene Mueller. The redhead who could suck the chrome off a bumper. “Yeah, sure I remember you. What’s it been, three years?”

“Something like that. I moved to New York City but I got laid off recently and I’m back on the old stomping grounds, looking for work and a little fun. I was wondering, if you weren’t busy, maybe we could check out the Zone together, if it’s still up and running, that is.”

“Oh, it’s still there, all right. But I—” He paused, the words he had to say so new. “I’m actually seeing someone.”

“Hey, that’s cool. Bring him, too. We’ll have a party.”

“He’s out of town right now.”

“Even better.” Gene laughed. When Nolan didn’t respond, he added, “Just kidding,” though the sincerity was lacking in his tone. “Listen, just friends, right? That’s cool. I need something to do with my Friday night and since your guy is out of town, it sounds like you do, too. Maybe we could go to dinner? Get reacquainted. Check out The Danger Zone after, if you want. Sound good?”

Yeah, it sounded good. Why not? Gene was a nice guy and it would pass the time. It would be fun to check out the Zone after all this time. Mark didn’t expect Nolan to turn into a pumpkin while he was gone. Just because they were in a relationship didn’t mean Nolan had to sit home alone every night.

“Sounds like a plan,” he told Gene. They made their arrangements on where and when to meet and hung up. Nolan went up to the bathroom to wash his face. As he toweled himself dry, he looked in the mirror.

Gene’s phone call and the memory of Gene’s considerable oral skills had got his blood flowing. He wanted Mark, but Mark wasn’t there. What harm would come from a little oral sex in the dark in the back room at the Zone?

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Nolan shook his head, annoyed with himself for the thought, but unable to shake it completely away. After all, Mark and he weren't married. It wasn't like Mark would ever find out. What he didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

Would it?

* * *

"So, tell me about this guy. I want to meet the man who could tame Nolan Daniels." Gene dipped a French fry in ketchup and looked at Nolan expectantly. They were sitting at a small table in a crowded burger joint, eating burgers and drinking beer.

Gene looked good in his black cashmere sweater and jeans. He had let his auburn hair grow long so that it touched his shoulders. He was slender but strong, with hazel eyes and an engaging smile. Nolan had forgotten how good-looking he was.

They had dated for a few months, or what used to pass in Nolan's book as dating, which meant they met for regular sex. Nolan had liked Gene but had kept him at an emotional distance, just as he had every other guy until Mark had come along. When Gene had moved to the city, they'd lost contact.

"I'm not sure *tame* is the right word," Nolan said with a laugh. "His name is Mark. Mark Harrison. He's a doctor." Gene, who worked in construction, raised his eyebrows to show he was impressed. "I met him when I was doing, uh, volunteer work at a nursing home."

Gene's eyebrows went higher. "You? Doing volunteer work at a nursing home? My God, are you really Nolan Daniels or just an exact replica planted here by aliens?" Gene shook his head, laughing.

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“Okay, okay. It was community service. I got busted for a DUI.” Nolan was tempted to launch into the story and convince Gene it really wasn’t his fault, but he held his tongue. Whatever the reasons, he had been driving while drunk, he had hit a police officer and he had been given a hundred hours of community service. In a way it felt good to own up to it without trying to clean it up in any way.

Gene nodded knowingly. “Now *that* makes more sense. So you and the hot young doctor have a torrid love affair in the supply closet, doing it behind stacks of bedpans and wheelchairs?”

Nolan shrugged and grinned. “Not exactly like that. We didn’t really get together until after I’d finished my time there.”

Gene peered at him and stroked his chin. “Well, I guess even the notorious Nolan Michael Daniels has to settle down sometime. So where is this Dr. Wonderful? Medical convention? Family business?”

“He’s doing some work at a free clinic in Pennsylvania. It’s just for a few months.”

“A few *months*. Whoa, that must suck for you. As I recall, you’re a man used to a steady diet of serious sex.” Gene reached beneath the small table and squeezed Nolan’s thigh. Despite himself, a zing of desire traveled from Gene’s fingers right to Nolan’s cock.

Nolan shifted in his chair and Gene’s hand fell away. “So, what about you? Anyone serious in your life these days? A trail of broken hearts left behind in New York?”

Gene shook his head. “Nah. You know me. I’m not interested in the *heart*.” Again he squeezed Nolan’s leg. “I think that’s why we always got along so well, you and me. We appreciate the pleasure without having to muck it all up with emotional shit.”

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Gene's hand moved higher, coming dangerously close to the bulge between Nolan's legs. With his other hand, Gene dipped his finger into the ketchup and opened his mouth, sliding his tongue out so the tip touched his lower lip. He sucked at the ketchup and then closed his lips over his finger, pushing it far back into his mouth in a seductive way clearly designed to evoke the sucking of a cock, which is exactly what it did.

Nolan's balls tightened with the memory of their marathon sex sessions. Gene had loved nothing better than licking and sucking Nolan's cock and balls, making it last sometimes for hours. He would bring Nolan to the edge of climax and keep him there until he was nothing but a sweat-soaked, lust-crazed animal, grunting and writhing while Gene sucked every last drop of semen from his balls.

Gene rarely permitted Nolan to service him in kind, preferring instead to jerk himself off while Nolan, once he recovered sufficiently to do so, fucked him in the ass.

Nolan's rising cock was caught uncomfortably in his jeans. Hidden by the table, he reached into his pants to adjust himself. Gene gave a knowing smile.

They finished their burgers and beer. Pushing back in his chair, Gene said, "The night is young. Let's go over to the Zone. What do you say? For old time's sake."

Nolan instantly thought of Mark. He would have rather been with Mark, that went without saying. But Gene was right. What was the harm of just checking out the scene with an old friend?

As they walked together to the parking lot, Gene offered, "Let's take my car and leave yours here. I'll be the designated driver. That way I can ply you with drinks and then have my way with you." He laughed to show he was kidding, though Nolan

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knew he was not.

“I think I’ll take my car, thanks. That way if you meet someone hot at the club, you aren’t stuck with me.”

“You’re really serious about this doctor guy then?”

“I am.” Nolan nodded.

Gene winked. “Well, we’ll just have to see what we can do about that.”

CHAPTER 14

Though Nolan hadn't been back to The Danger Zone since the time with Mark nearly two months before, nothing had changed. The same loud, rhythmic music still pulsed through the huge room, the same bodies still gyrated in a frenzy on the dance floor, the same guys still crowded each of the two bars, lust and loneliness emanating from them like radio signals.

What am I doing here? As the question slipped into Nolan's head, he found he had no good answer. Though he wasn't betraying Mark just by going to a club, he knew Gene had other ideas. He also knew Gene could be very persuasive.

They stopped first at the bar. "Johnny Walker?" Gene asked, remembering Nolan's drink of choice. Nolan nodded. Gene ordered for them both. "Two doubles of Johnny Walker Red,

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neat.” When they were served, Gene lifted his glass. “Cheers.” They clinked their glasses and Gene drank his down in one gulp. Nolan followed suit, glad for the warming glow the liquor cast over his uneasiness.

Gene pulled Nolan toward the dance floor. Nolan went willingly enough, the whiskey working its magic on his inhibitions. Gene danced around him with sensual, undulating movements until the music shifted to a slow dance. Nolan started to leave the floor but Gene grabbed his arm and pulled him close.

Again Nolan could have extracted himself from Gene’s tight embrace. He was taller and stronger than Gene. But he didn’t. What harm was there in one slow dance?

They moved slowly, neither leading as they drifted over the dance floor. Gene rested his head on Nolan’s shoulder. Nolan could feel Gene’s erection pressed against his thigh. He could feel his own responding arousal stirring in his jeans. Gene pulled him closer, running his hands over Nolan’s back. Though it wasn’t Mark, it felt good to be touched, to be held in someone’s arms. He closed his eyes as they moved, letting his mind go blank.

Moving in a kind of trance, he wasn’t prepared when Gene dropped his arms and moved back a little, suddenly slipping his hand into the waistband of Nolan’s jeans, past the elastic of his underwear. As Gene groped for Nolan’s cock, Nolan pulled back abruptly, bumping into a couple behind him.

“Hey. What the fuck?” he demanded.

“Come on, baby,” Gene purred. “You know you want it. Let’s go behind the curtain. I’ll remind you of what you’ve been missing all these years.” He narrowed his eyes and slid his tongue over his lower lip. When Nolan didn’t respond, Gene added, “Don’t worry about the doctor. This is just between us. What he won’t know

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won't hurt him, right?"

Nolan took another step back. "Maybe not. But it would hurt me."

He headed back toward the bar, threading his way through the crowd. Gene followed. "Man. You are *not* the man I used to know. You've become, I don't know." Gene shrugged, seeking the word. "A fuddy-duddy. A drag. Turning down a free blow job from *me*?" Gene had raised his voice and several men in the vicinity turned to stare at them, leaning closer to hear better.

Nolan felt himself coloring. "Back off, Gene. I told you from the start this is serious."

"I guess I figured I could persuade you otherwise." Gene frowned. He turned toward a handsome black man with long, braided hair who was obviously listening in on the conversation. "My friend here just turned down the best blow job in Trenton and Manhattan combined. Can you believe that?"

The man moved closer, sidling up beside Gene. "I absolutely cannot believe that. Tell me more." He flashed a white smile.

Nolan stood for a moment, watching the two men size each other up. Knowing Gene and watching the lust curling over the other man's features, he knew the two of them would be in the back room within minutes, Nolan already forgotten.

Nolan's annoyance at Gene's behavior evaporated as he realized Gene was only behaving the way he'd always behaved—the way he himself would have behaved before he met Mark. Back then it was just about the conquest. Sex was the ultimate goal, and who it ended up being with didn't really matter. What a hollow, lonely way to live, he now thought.

Glad he'd taken his own car, Nolan clapped his hand on Gene's shoulder. "Hey. Thanks for dinner. I'm going to call it a night."

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Gene, distracted by his new target, turned a moment to Nolan, raking his body with a bold, lingering gaze. “Last chance, Nolan. You, me and...”

He looked toward the stranger, who supplied, “Grant.”

“...Grant here could have some serious fun. Am I right, Grant?”

“You bet your ass, uh...”

“Gene.”

Nolan shook his head with a laugh. “Have fun, boys. See ya’.”

Gene shrugged and turned toward Grant, Nolan rendered invisible. Nolan pushed his way through the throng with a grim smile. Easy come, easy go. He used to be just like that, treating people like objects, focused only on what they could give him, forgetting them as soon as they had nothing to offer.

He was different now. Though he wasn’t sure just how or when the change had taken place, he knew it was because of Mark, and the love he felt for Mark. He no longer defined his life by how often he scored. He liked who he was becoming. The grimness left his smile with the realization he would be in Mark’s arms in less than twenty-four hours.

* * *

The next morning Nolan awoke to his ringing telephone. “Hello,” he said sleepily.

“Nolan. It’s Mark. Did I wake you?”

“No, that’s okay. What time is it?”

“It’s eight o’clock. I meant to get up and out of here sooner but—”

Nolan sat up, a big grin splitting his face. “No worries. If you

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leave now you'll be here by, what, one?"

There was a pause and then Mark exhaled a deep breath. Nolan tensed and his smile fell away while he waited. "That's the thing. You know the accident yesterday? Well, we lost one of the kids last night. An eight-year-old girl. She was Dr. Quentin's daughter. He's one of the doctors on staff at the hospital here. Obviously he's not coming in to work this weekend. They're still operating at capacity for this sleepy area and they've begged me to stay and help out for the rest of the weekend. I just couldn't say no."

Now the silence was on Nolan's end. He knew he was expected to give Mark permission and say everything was fine and dandy and they'd see each other the next weekend, but somehow he just couldn't bring himself to form the words. He felt as if he'd been sucker punched.

"Nolan? You there?"

"Yeah."

"I promise I'll get there next weekend. I promise, no matter what."

"Hey, it's no big deal," Nolan lied, silently smacking his closed fist against the bed. "Do what you gotta do. I'm fine."

"Okay, thanks, man. I owe you one."

"No, you don't," Nolan said sharply before he could stop himself. This wasn't Mark's fault. It was just bad luck. Warming his tone, he added, "I understand, really. You do what you have to and call me when you get a chance, okay?"

"I miss you."

"I miss you, too. Bye." Nolan lay back against the pillow. For several minutes he stared at the ceiling, cursing Mark for leaving him in the first place, cursing himself for being such a selfish prick, and missing Mark with every fiber of his being.

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“Wait a minute.” He sat up, speaking aloud. “Mark can’t come home, but I can go to him!”

Why hadn’t he thought of it before? Instead of engaging in a sneaky, stupid flirtation with a guy who meant less than nothing to him, he could have been on the road last night.

Eagerly he went to his laptop and opened a map search program. “Havenfield, Pennsylvania,” he said, as he typed in the name of the town. If he left now, he could be there by one-thirty or so. He knew Mark would be working at the hospital, but hopefully he wouldn’t be so busy he couldn’t take a break for lunch.

Nolan wouldn’t think past that. If Mark wanted him to stay the night, he would, but if it was imposing, Nolan wouldn’t try to make Mark feel guilty about it. He’d just kiss him and tell him he’d see him next weekend, and he’d drive back to Jersey, happy just to have seen his lover for an hour.

He grinned to himself, recalling Gene’s assertion that Nolan was not the man he used to know. That was, he realized, a good thing.

Nolan racked his brains, trying to remember the name of the hospital where Mark was working for the weekend. He closed his eyes, recalling their conversation of the night before. He’d been so focused on his own disappointment, he hadn’t paid proper attention to the details. He turned back to his laptop and did a search of hospitals near Havenfield, hoping his memory would be jogged.

Bingo. Chester General Hospital. He did another map search for directions and hit the print button. Hurriedly he showered and dressed, excited about what he had planned. Was he crazy, driving five hours to have lunch?

Probably, yeah.

But so what?

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* * *

Mark was standing just outside a patient's room, trying to comfort frightened parents of a child in a coma. Out of the corner of his eye he saw a man standing at the end of the hall with his back to Mark and his heart did a little flip. The man wore a black leather jacket like Nolan's and his dark hair curled down to the collar just like Nolan's did.

Mark smiled to himself. He missed Nolan so much that now he was seeing him in other people. He focused on the parents, forgetting the stranger as he discussed the prognosis in as positive of terms as he could manage.

Then he heard the stranger's voice and caught his breath.

"Excuse me, I'm looking for Dr. Harrison. Mark Harrison? No. I'm not a patient, he's a friend of mine." Mark looked up just as Nolan turned in his direction, his handsome face lighting up as he saw Mark.

What the hell was Nolan doing there? Mark forced himself to finish his conversation with the distraught parents, answering all their questions with as much kindness and patience as he could manage while Nolan hovered nearby, his hands shoved in his jeans' pockets, rocking on his heels, a broad smile on his face.

Finally the parents were satisfied. They returned to their daughter's room to take up their vigil and Mark turned to Nolan. "Hey. I thought I was seeing things at first. What're you doing here?"

Nolan shrugged and said airily, "I was in the neighborhood. Thought I'd see if you'd like to grab a bite to eat."

"You were, huh? Just passing by..."

"Yeah," Nolan said softly, that one word rich with tenderness.

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Lightly he touched Mark's arm. It took every ounce of control for Mark not to wrap himself around his lover and kiss him, then and there.

Instead he looked into Nolan's deep brown eyes, all the fatigue of the last twenty-four hours falling away. They stood still for several seconds, just looking into each other's eyes.

"Dr. Harrison, you're needed in room twelve," a voice crackled over the intercom.

Mark wanted to trace a finger down the side of Nolan's stubbled cheek. He wanted to bury his face in Nolan's neck and whisper how happy he was to see him.

"Uh, Mark. I think they're paging you."

"What?" Mark forced himself to focus. "Oh. Right. Listen, I'll just take care of this. Can you wait for me in the visitors' lounge? I shouldn't be too long."

"How about I'll wait in my car? I thought we could go grab a bite to eat, if you had the time."

Mark realized he hadn't eaten since two glazed donuts and a cup of bad coffee at five that morning. "Great. There's a diner not far from here." The page was repeated over the intercom. "See you in a few," he promised, hurrying away.

Twenty minutes later Mark hurried out to the hospital parking lot, scanning it until he spied Nolan's old red Ford. Nolan was leaning back in the driver's seat, his head on his chest, apparently asleep.

Mark tapped lightly on the window and Nolan stirred, lifted his head and opened his eyes. He gestured for Mark to go around to the passenger side. Mark climbed in and Nolan started the engine. "Hey, guess I fell asleep. Where to?"

"The diner's about a half mile down the road. It's on the left.

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You can't miss it."

"Okay. The diner it is." Nolan eased out of the parking lot and headed in the direction Mark had indicated, but instead of going straight, he turned down a small side road that headed toward some farms.

"Where are you going? This isn't the way."

"I know," Nolan replied. He pulled over onto the dirt shoulder and put the car in park. "I just can't wait another second to do this." He unbuckled his seat belt and then unbuckled Mark's as well.

They reached for each other, lips meeting in a kiss. Mark inhaled Nolan's familiar sensual scent, placing a hand beneath Nolan's heavy, dark hair to stroke the back of his powerful neck. Nolan's hand dropped to Mark's crotch, cupping the bulge there. Mark's cock leapt to attention, his entire body tingling with aching need.

Nolan moved his fingers seductively over the light wool of Mark's trousers. Mark could feel the tip of his cock moisten with pre-cum. He pulled back from Nolan's kiss and said breathlessly, "Nolan. You've got to stop or I'm going to come in my pants."

Nolan gave a low, seductive laugh. "We couldn't have that, could we? I'd better open your pants so we don't make a mess." He reached for Mark's belt buckle, quickly opening it. His fingers were on the button of Mark's fly when a large pickup truck drove slowly by them, the man and his passenger scrutinizing Nolan's Ford as they passed.

Mark came to his senses and pushed Nolan's hand away. "This is a small town, Nolan. We need to be cool, okay?"

"What?" Nolan, who had been facing away from the road, hadn't seen the curious stares.

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As Mark pointed to the truck now ahead of them, understanding flashed into Nolan's eyes. "Oh, sorry. You're right. You do have to live here, after all, at least for a few months. Can't have them knowing you're a queer, right?" A trace of bitterness had crept into Nolan's tone, though he tried to smile.

Mark shook his head. "It's not that. I'm not going to hide who or what I am ever again. That's over. But letting someone give you a blow job on the side of the road in plain sight probably isn't the best idea, no matter what your sexual orientation, am I right?"

Nolan laughed. "Yeah. When you put it that way." He straightened himself and turned back toward the road, buckling himself in, while Mark did the same. "Let's go eat."

Once they were seated across from each other in a back booth at the local diner, Nolan asked, "So, how long can they spare you from the hospital?"

Mark frowned as he looked at his watch, pretending to do mental calculations. "I have about...let me see...sixteen hours." He laughed with pleasure at Nolan's startled, happy look.

"What? Really?"

"Yeah. All the fires are out, at least for the moment." He touched the pager on his belt. "They can reach me in an emergency, but everything's pretty well under control now. The more serious cases were airlifted to larger facilities. I don't have to go back in until tomorrow morning for rounds on Dr. Quentin's patients. What about you? Can you stay the night?"

"I thought you'd never ask." Nolan smiled, reaching beneath the table to squeeze Mark's thigh. Mark's cock rose instantly at his touch. The waiter chose that moment to arrive with their tray, setting down the platters of food with a clatter before fading away.

While they ate, Mark talked about the work he'd been doing

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over the past week, and his time at the hospital during the emergency. "I've never felt so alive," he admitted. "After all those years of schooling and then the endless time at the nursing home, I'm finally making a difference. The work is interesting. When some of these patients walk into the clinic with mysterious rashes and strange pains, it's all up to me to figure out what's going on and get them the best treatment possible. The week has literally flown by. I'm working really hard, but at the end of the day I've actually done something meaningful. It's like I finally matter."

"You matter to me," Nolan said softly, a hint of hurt in his voice.

Remorse assailed Mark. "Nolan. Come on." He put his hand on Nolan's arm. "That's not what I meant. I meant my work. You know what I mean."

Nolan nodded. "I'm sorry. I'm being a jerk. I do know. And I'm glad for you. I really am. I just can't help wondering..." Nolan paused and Mark's heart wrenched at the pain that washed briefly over Nolan's face before he managed to rearrange it into a smile.

"...about us?" Mark supplied. Nolan nodded. Mark leaned forward, speaking earnestly. "This week apart has been good in a way. I've had time to really think about what I want. I can tell you this. What we've shared over these past few months has been incredible. I honestly didn't know if I had what it takes to let someone into my life. Into my..." He paused, hoping what he was about to say didn't sound too corny, and then deciding just to go for it. "...my heart."

Nolan smiled and dipped his head, and Mark was glad he'd said it. "Listen, Nolan. I want you in my life. If you want me in yours, we'll find a way to make it work. Let me finish out my commitment here and we'll figure things out from there."

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Nolan nodded. Mark waited, realizing he wanted Nolan to agree, to say he wanted Mark in his life, but Nolan said nothing. Mark sensed he had something to say, but he didn't want to push him. There was time to hash all the details out later. After all, Mark had only been away a week. He had time to make any major life decisions.

While he loved the work so far, and felt more vital than he could ever remember feeling about his career, the pace was intense and he did miss Nolan tremendously. He might feel very differently at the end of his commitment.

Time would tell, he supposed. It always did. Mark decided just to enjoy the fact Nolan was there. He'd driven all this way to see Mark, and that felt pretty terrific. It was enough, for now.

They finished their meal in relative silence. When they were both done eating, Nolan pushed away his plate and leaned back against the red faux leather back of his seat. "So you going to show me your fancy crib? I want to see how the other half lives."

"Yeah, right. It's a real mansion." Mark laughed. "Actually it's not bad, especially given that it's rent free. I have my own bedroom, a small kitchen and bath and even a sitting room complete with a thirty-year-old TV that's gets three whole channels."

Nolan laughed. "Accommodations fit for a king. How about the bed? Room for two?"

"It's only a twin bed, but I think we can both manage to sleep in it."

"Sleep?" Nolan raised his eyebrows and flashed a devilish grin. "Who the hell's talking about sleep?"

CHAPTER 15

Mark beamed with obvious pride as he showed Nolan around the small clinic. It was better appointed than Nolan had expected, with a large waiting room, modern medical equipment, a lab and a fully equipped exam room.

“This is nicer than most for-profit clinics,” he noted, impressed.

“Yeah. Dr. Olsen has connections. She got some major donations from some people with very deep pockets. And she knows how to write grants. There’s a lot of government funding out there, if you can figure out how to tap it.

“In fact, there’s a significant elderly population out here and not a lot of specialized care in that regard. They live on farms and in small towns without a lot of support or day-to-day care. I might approach her about setting something up, some kind of adult

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daycare facility for the elderly.”

Nolan couldn't help but laugh. “Wait a minute, I thought you couldn't wait to get away from the old folks.”

“No,” Mark said seriously. “It was never the residents. It was the job itself. It was the fact I felt forced into the job by my family, instead of choosing it for myself. And the work I did was mainly paperwork. Bureaucratic crap I couldn't stand. There's none of that here. I just run the clinic. Sonya worries about all that other stuff.”

Nolan nodded, suddenly thinking about Mabel Johnston. He'd continued to visit her once a week or so since he'd finished his hours at the nursing home. She was always ridiculously delighted to see him. He had taken to bringing little cakes and cookies he would buy at a nearby bakery, along with fresh flowers. She had a microwave in her room, and she would make them cups of hot tea.

There had been a few mild days on which they had walked together outside, moving slowly over the grounds of the nursing home, Mabel's gnarled, bony fingers curled around his crooked arm, her face gazing animatedly into his as they talked. It was odd to realize, but he'd come to think of her as a true friend. For the first time in his life, between Mark and Mabel, he had real friends.

Mark led him through a door at the back of the clinic and up some stairs to the second floor. As Mark had said, it was nothing to write home about, but you couldn't beat the price. They walked along the narrow hallway to the bedroom. Mark entered first and turned to face Nolan.

“I've missed you,” he murmured, holding out his arms.

Nolan stepped into them, wrapping Mark in a strong embrace. They kissed for several long moments. They moved back to pull at each other's clothing, dropping articles with disregard as they moved toward the bed.

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They fell naked onto it, grappling hungrily for each other. When Mark's mouth closed over the head of Nolan's shaft, he lay back in surrender, letting the intense pleasure wash through him. Mark sucked and licked at the head and shaft, at the same time wrapping his hands around Nolan's scrotum and pushing down, his thumbs stroking between Nolan's ass cheeks.

"I want your ass," Mark murmured, coming up for air. "I don't have anything. Any lube."

"I do," Nolan managed to gasp. "In my wallet." He lay limp on the bed, watching Mark retrieve his jacket and pull the wallet from its inner pocket. Inside were four packets of lubricant. Mark dropped three of them on the nightstand beside the bed and tore open the fourth.

"On your hands and knees," Mark ordered, his voice low and sensual. Nolan eagerly complied, twisting back to watch Mark smear the lube on his hard cock and then position himself behind Nolan.

Nolan turned back and lowered his head when he felt the tip of Mark's gooey cock press against his sphincter. He pushed his ass back toward Mark, aching to feel him inside. As Mark entered him, he pressed against Nolan's shoulders, forcing them to the bed. He gripped Nolan's hips and guided himself deep into Nolan's tight but yielding passage.

"Yeah," Mark said softly. "Oh, yeah." He began to move in small, tight circles, sending a rush of heat through Nolan's blood. Mark leaned over Nolan's back, skin on skin as he reached beneath Nolan's body in search of his cock, still wet from Mark's kisses. With his other hand, Mark gripped Nolan's balls, just hard enough to make him moan.

After a week apart, neither one could hold out for very long.

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Soon Mark was thrusting faster, his hand flying over Nolan's rigid shaft. Nolan's balls tightened beneath Mark's fingers, a deep tremor working its way through his body.

"Ah, Jesus," he cried, bucking beneath his lover, his climax causing a chain reaction in Mark, who shuddered and jerked behind him, his hands falling away from Nolan's cock. He grabbed Nolan's hips as he slammed hard inside him.

They fell together onto the bed, rolling to their sides as they landed. Mark's cock was still buried deep inside Nolan. They were both sweating lightly, though the room was chilly. Nolan could feel Mark's heart beating against his back. They lay still for several moments, recovering in silence.

Eventually Mark pulled away from him, reaching for some tissues to clean himself. Nolan turned toward him, feeling the sticky spot beneath him. "Oops," he offered with a shrug. "I guess I made a bit of mess here. Sorry."

"Who cares? Come here." Mark lay back down and Nolan scooted closer, rolling over onto his back. There wasn't much room on the narrow mattress but it didn't matter. Mark reached for the covers, which had been pushed to the foot of the bed during their lovemaking. He pulled them up over their naked bodies and draped himself over Nolan, his head resting on Nolan's chest.

They were both quiet, content to drift in the afterglow of sex. After a while, Nolan felt Mark's body ease and his breathing deepen and slow. He smiled. He loved it when Mark fell asleep in his arms. No one had ever done that—he hadn't permitted it, he supposed. Nolan stroked Mark's hair, feeling for maybe the first time in his life, utterly at peace with himself and the world.

* * *

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Halfway there, that's what Nolan told himself that morning. Mark was six weeks into his commitment with the free clinic. They had managed to spend most of the weekends together, though Mark had more flexibility than Nolan, with his rotating ambulance schedule.

Nolan had just come off a twelve-hour shift followed by eight solid hours of sleep. He was facing three days off in a row. It was the first really spring-like day of March and Nolan heard birds twittering their approval in the trees outside his window.

It had been a while since he'd called his mother and though he dreaded it, he decided this was as good a time as any. He dialed the number, offering a silent prayer as he always did that she was still alive. He was relieved when she answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mom. It's Nolan. Just called to check in. How are things?"

There was a silence that extended for so long Nolan thought perhaps he'd lost the connection. "Mom? Are you there?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm here. I was going to call you, Nolan. Just as soon as I got situated."

"Situated? Is everything okay?" Nolan's gut began to twist, certain from the tone of her voice that it was not. "Did he hurt you again? Mom, tell me."

"No. No, no. Well, that is. Yes. But that's not what's wrong. I, um. He's...your stepfather is in the hospital."

"What?" Scenarios of drunken rages, of Chris slamming Nolan's mother against a wall and backhanding her, evaporated with this unexpected news. "What happened?"

"Well, I, you see, I put him there."

"Mom. Please stop talking in riddles and tell me what the hell is going on."

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“Well. He was drunk.”

Nolan bit his tongue to keep from asking when he wasn’t.

“And—and he got angry because the steak was overcooked and he came at me with the steak knife.”

“Jesus, Mom,” Nolan said softly, his heart aching.

“And, I don’t know.” Her voice became more forceful. “I just snapped. I said, ‘Chris, if you come any closer with that knife, I swear to God, I’ll break this frying pan over your head.’ It’s my heavy iron pan, you know the one, right?”

“Yeah,” Nolan answered, barely able to believe what he was hearing. “Go on.”

“So, he kept coming at me. I picked up the pan and I, oh Nolan, I slammed him upside the head. He fell down and started clutching his heart and gasping. I don’t think I managed to hit him all that hard, so I couldn’t see what he was going on about. I was terrified because I’ve never dared lay a hand to him. I don’t know what came over me.”

“He was having a heart attack?” Nolan guessed.

“Yes! He was sweating and gasping. I quick called 9-1-1 and they hauled him off in the ambulance. That was three days ago.”

“Is he stable?”

“Yes. They want to do open-heart surgery. He’s gonna be in there for a while. Oh, Nolan. If he dies...it’ll be my fault.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, Mom. If they’re doing open-heart surgery, he obviously has serious heart problems. They weren’t caused by you beaming him with a frying pan, that’s for sure. You know what I think?”

“What?”

“I think it’s great you finally stood up for yourself. Coming at you with a knife! Jesus, Mom, how much more of this are you

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going to take?”

“No more, son.” She spoke softly but with a conviction Nolan had never heard before. “I’ve told your Aunt Betty everything and she’s convinced me to move in with her and Stan. They have that big old house down in North Carolina and plenty of spare room. Now that I’m retired there’s really no reason to stay in Paterson.”

“Have you told Chris?”

“No. I haven’t been to see him. I’ve been too afraid. While he was lying there on the floor, he told me he was going to kill me for what I did. I believe him.”

Nolan believed him, too. “Thank God you’re finally getting out, Mom. I’m so proud of you. Do you need help with packing and stuff?”

“No, thanks. Your cousin Roger’s going to drive me down with his van. We already have most of my stuff loaded. We’re going to leave as soon as I’m ready. Chris can cook his own fucking steak from now on.”

Nolan, who had never heard his mother curse, laughed out loud. A weight he hadn’t realized he’d been carrying in his heart for his mother melted away, leaving him lighter than he’d been in thirty years.

When he hung up, he thought, *I think I’ll go see Mabel today.* He would pick up a nice spring bouquet at the flower shop where the girl behind the counter now knew him as a regular. Mabel and he would take a stroll, as she called it, through the grounds. Last time he’d been to see her, a week and a half before, the daffodils had just been peeking up through the ground, pale green shoots with tiny tightly bound dark yellow buds at their tips. Maybe today they would be in bloom.

He smiled at the thought of Mabel exclaiming over the flowers

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in her papery, wispy voice. She was going to be ninety-two on the last day of March, she had told him proudly. He had made a mental note, determined to make the day special for her if he could. As far as he could tell, her two daughters, both well into their seventies, rarely came to see her. Her grandchildren lived in other states and, since her great grandson had been stationed overseas, she had almost no visitors.

When he arrived at the nursing home, Alexis, the receptionist, looked up with a smile that faded when she saw him. "Oh. Nolan. I'm so sorry."

"What? What're you sorry about?" He moved toward her, concerned at the tears suddenly filling her eyes.

"Mrs. Johnston," Alexis whispered, looking at the bright red and purple flowers he held clutched in one hand. "You don't know, do you?"

"What? What don't I know?" Even as he asked, he did know. His heart sank like a stone. How could it be? She was fine not ten days ago. He leaned heavily against the receptionist's counter, closing his eyes.

Alexis stood and reached up, placing her hand on his shoulder and giving it a gentle squeeze. "She went peacefully, Dr. Atkinson said. Her heart just stopped."

Nolan nodded. As a paramedic, he'd seen more than his share of death, but no one he'd been close to had died, not since Janine all those years ago. "When?" he managed to ask.

"Last night. In her sleep. I was going to find your number and let you know but I didn't get a chance yet. You beat me to it. I'm sorry."

"Hey, no." Nolan waved a dismissive hand. "Not your fault. Not your job. But thanks." He lifted the bouquet and set it on the

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counter. "Here. Have some flowers." He turned away to hide the tears that had sprung to his eyes. Forcing one foot in front of the other, he somehow made it out of the nursing home and to his car.

Settling into the driver's seat, he fished his cell phone from his pocket and punched in the speed dial for Mark. It was morning, Mark's busiest time at the clinic, but Nolan just needed to hear his voice.

After five rings, he got the recorded message. "Hi, you've reached Mark Harrison's cell phone. Leave a message. Thanks."

"Hi Mark. It's me. I, uh..." Nolan drew in a deep breath, realizing how much he wished he could see Mark now. This five hour distance thing was for the birds. "...I got some bad news this morning. Mabel Johnston passed away last night. Peacefully, in her sleep, or so they said. Well. Um. Okay. Call me when you can, bye."

Nolan clicked his phone closed and sat for several minutes without moving, staring blindly into space. He hadn't even had a chance to say good-bye. And her birthday—she's missed it by only a few weeks. Couldn't her heart have held out a little longer?

"Mabel," he said softly. "I'm going to miss you."

And then he put his head into his hands and cried.

* * *

Mark stood outside the clinic watching the sunrise. He hadn't been able to sleep, wrestling with the ideas that wouldn't stop running through his head. He and Nolan had talked extensively about what Mark would do when he returned to New Jersey at the end of the month, but Mark still hadn't committed to anything concrete.

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For Nolan it was apparently a foregone conclusion that Mark would be coming back and so far, Mark hadn't had the nerve or the heart to disabuse him.

The clinic was operating smoothly now, once he'd been able to handle the backlog of untended patients that had built up prior to their securing him as a full-time physician. Margaret, the nurse practitioner, had the daily routine well under control and both Sonya and Mark agreed that, now that Mark had handled the backlog of patients, he would only need to work fifteen to twenty hours per week at the clinic.

To fill his time and earn more money, Mark had accepted a part-time position at Chester General. He loved working there, especially in the emergency room. He understood now on a firsthand basis the rush of adrenaline Nolan had talked about, making split-second decisions that could save a life, or cost it.

Yet at the same time, the hospital had maintained its small town feel. He knew everyone who worked there on a first-name basis. While the salaries were nowhere near the level he could command in New Jersey, neither was the cost of living. He'd already calculated, if he sold his house, even in the depressed market, he'd be able to clear plenty to cover a sizable down payment on a very nice house in the area. To top it off, Dr. Heinz, one of the doctors on staff, was retiring that summer and they were looking to hire a full-time replacement. Even if he took the job, Mark felt confident he could continue to oversee the running of the clinic.

But what about Nolan?

How ironic. For the first time, Mark was happy in both his work and his love life, except for the small detail that they were three hundred miles apart!

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The few times he'd hinted Nolan might enjoy a change of pace from hectic city life and his intense ambulance schedule, Nolan had claimed he'd go stir crazy out in the boonies, as he called Havenfield.

"Besides, even if I did come down there," Nolan had asserted, "what would I do?"

"They have emergencies here, too, you know. In fact, paramedics here have more extensive protocols because the emergency calls can be miles away from any hospitals. You'd have more authority to act."

Mark had drawn a spark of hope from Nolan's reaction. At least he hadn't dismissed him out of hand, instead seeming to ponder the thought. "Well, find me a job," he had laughed. "And then we'll talk."

"That's it," Mark said aloud to the hawk that flew overhead. *If I can find him something, maybe he'd consider it. He's got nothing in Trenton keeping him there but habit. No family, no property, and now that Mabel's gone...*

Mark had been surprised by how hard Nolan had taken Mrs. Johnston's death. He hadn't realized what good friends they had become. He'd seen his share of residents passing away at the home—it went with the territory. While he'd become very fond of some of them over the years, Mabel Johnston included, he'd never connected in the way Nolan seemed to with Mabel. As their doctor, he couldn't afford that kind of connection. Detachment was essential or you'd break down every day.

Later that afternoon at the hospital, Mark began to put out feelers about positions with local fire departments, counties and hospitals for an experienced paramedic. To his astonishment, he found out the chief paramedic for Clearfield County wanted to

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retire, but had been holding on until a suitable replacement could be found. Though Mark didn't believe in fate, he couldn't help but think it was playing hand now.

The only drawback, and it was a considerable one, was that the position was part-time. It would still be enough to give Nolan his requisite adrenaline rush and keep his skills sharp, but it wouldn't be enough to live on, even out in the country. Though Mark would happily have Nolan live with him and work only part-time, he doubted Nolan's pride would permit it.

That evening his phone rang and he saw it was Sonya Olsen. Time was closing in and she needed an answer as to his willingness to commit for another period of time. She was pressing hard for a year this time. To steer her away from the conversation a little longer, Mark launched in with his idea about a senior center.

"It would be a place for older folks to come and hang out together. We'd have activities. Things like movie night and bingo. And planned excursions during the day for shopping trips and the like. We could tie it in with the clinic, devoting some time for routine checkups at the senior center. You're the whiz at funding. If you could get the grants and donations, I might know of an excellent candidate for director of the project."

While he was saying this, he wondered if he could sell the idea to Nolan. He wouldn't have suggested it to Sonya if he didn't honestly believe Nolan would do a great job. He'd watched him with the residents at the nursing home, not just Mabel. Nolan had an ease around old folks that not many people, especially people under fifty, possessed. And it would supplement his paramedic income, thus keeping his pride intact.

"I love the idea," Sonya enthused. "Especially in an area like this, where it's so easy for people, especially older people who can

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no longer drive, to isolate themselves. There are grants out there for this very kind of thing. I'd love to tackle this." She chuckled, adding, "You've got the bug now. I can tell. You're going to stay, aren't you?"

"I honestly don't know, Sonya. I want to stay, yes. I love the work. And, as we've discussed, I feel confident I can split my time between the clinic and the hospital." He paused.

"But," Sonya interjected. "I can hear the 'but' in your voice. What's holding you back? What have you got in New Jersey that's keeping you from making the leap?"

"Well." Mark hesitated, wondering how much to confide in the doctor. She was progressive and open, but he'd never shared anything of his personal life or sexual preferences with her. How would she react if he told her the stark truth?

While he was pondering this, to his great surprise she offered, "I bet I know. His name is Nolan. Am I right?"

Mark's mouth fell open. "How did you know?"

Sonya laughed. "That first night. When you answered the phone, so eager and happy when you said his name. I've been in love, Mark. I'm no fool."

Mark laughed. "Guilty as charged. He's the main reason I could only commit to the three months in the first place. Our relationship is still pretty new, you see. This separation has been a real test for us. We've survived so far but..."

"What does he do for a living?"

"He's a paramedic. Rides an ambulance in Trenton. He also did, uh, some volunteer work at the nursing home I used to run. He's very good with older people. I was thinking of him, actually, for the directorship. With his medical knowledge and comfort level, he'd be ideal."

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“Sounds like it. I grew up in Clearfield County. I know the people. Tom Ryan oversees the emergency management for the county. I could definitely put in a word for Nolan for the chief paramedic position. And with the directorship of our as-yet-to-be-funded senior facility, he’d have plenty to keep him occupied, don’t you think?”

“I do. Now if we can just convince him.”

* * *

It was the last weekend before Mark came home again for good, at last. He had arrived close to midnight the night before and they’d been too hungry for each other to talk about the future, or much of anything. But now, in the light of day, it had to be faced.

Mark and Nolan were sitting in Mark’s kitchen, drinking coffee and eating the sweet rolls Mark’s mother had dropped by that morning. While she wasn’t precisely warm toward Nolan, she had been making an effort to hold out the olive branch. Nolan could see it meant a lot to Mark, and he’d done his best to be friendly in return.

Mark was staring out the kitchen window, lost in thought. Nolan, who had managed to completely kick his small but persistent smoking habit, suddenly felt an acute longing for a cigarette.

He eyed Mark critically, trying to read his thoughts in his face. He was never as good at this as Mark was with him, but this time he knew what was going through Mark’s head and the realization made him sick with dread.

“You’re going to stay there, aren’t you? I can see it in your face. You want to make this move a permanent one.”

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He waited for Mark to deny it, to say he just needed a little more time to find something back in Trenton, or a little more time to wrap things up in Havenfield, but Mark didn't say any of that.

Instead he placed his hand over Nolan's and admitted, "I love it there, Nolan. I love the countryside and the fresh air. I love the slower pace of life. I love helping people and really making a difference in a way that's meaningful to me."

"And I fit in—how?" Nolan scowled. His old MO of taking offense first and figuring things later rose sharply to the fore. Wasn't this just typical—he'd found the man of his dreams, the man he hadn't even known he was looking for and now that man was leaving, not for three months, but forever.

Instead of defending himself or trying to placate Nolan with bullshit about how they'd still visit each other, blah, blah, Mark said, "You could come, too—if you want."

"What?"

"I've found you a job, or at least the opportunity to interview if you're interested. The only drawback is it's part-time. It's chief paramedic for Clearfield County. The man in the position now has been wanting to retire but has stayed on because there was no one qualified enough in the area to take over for him. To supplement that income, there's another position waiting for you. It's a directorship of a senior facility, though it'll take some time for the funding for that to come through. It's still just in the planning stages."

Nolan stared at Mark, trying to process what he was saying. He was confused, not sure if he was elated that Mark would go to such lengths to keep him in his life, or angry at Mark's presumption that he'd just chuck everything he had in Trenton to make the move.

Still caught for the moment in his old way of handling things

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out of his ken, Nolan demanded, “Okay. Let me get this straight. You found me a paramedic job and a second job without even asking me if I wanted to move? You just assumed I would throw away my life here in Trenton and move to another state, out to the boonies to take some job I know nothing about, just to be with you?”

Mark’s crestfallen look penetrated the fear that had created Nolan’s anger, burning it away like a fog. “I had hoped,” Mark said quietly, “you would consider it. I know it’s a lot to throw at you. I probably should have told you sooner, but I wanted to line things up before I made any decisions.

“And to answer your question more directly, I want to accept the position at Chester General, to continue to supervise the free clinic and move to Havenfield permanently, but only if you go, too. I’ve thought about this long and hard, Nolan. Since you’ve come into my life, I’ve never been happier. I honestly don’t think I would have found the courage on my own to take charge of my life if you hadn’t been there in my corner, rooting for me and helping me to see I was the one who had the power to make the changes I needed to in order to be happy.

“But more than that.” Mark paused, capturing Nolan with a look so penetrating everything fell away but his loving gaze. “I love you. I want you in my life.” Beyond the words, Nolan felt Mark’s love radiate from his eyes, melting his defenses like fire on ice.

“Listen to me, Nolan. If you decide you’d be happier here in Trenton, then that’s where I want to be. I love the life I’ve found in Havenfield, but without you in it, it would never be enough.” He squeezed Nolan’s hand and bit his lip, suddenly looking very much younger than his thirty-two years.

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Mark's words had left him speechless. He sat stunned, taking in everything Mark had said. When he took the time to think about it, Nolan had to admit he'd enjoyed the weekends he'd spent in the country with Mark, beyond just their time together. An image of Mark and himself sitting on the porch of their country home flashed into his eye as real as if it were a memory rather than a fantasy.

What did he really have in Trenton? He had the gay bars he no longer had an interest in frequenting. He had his crummy row house, the basement of which flooded every time it rained and a landlord who was darkly hinting the rent was going to rise at the end of the lease term, which was at the end of May. He had his paramedic job here, granted, but in the end it was just a job. His skills could be taken anywhere and he had to admit he rather liked the sound of chief paramedic.

But all of that was details.

Mark wanted *him*—Nolan Daniels—in his life, so much so that he was willing to cast away everything to be with him. He thought over the last three months—how hard it was to go to sleep each night without Mark in his arms, how great it was each time they reconnected, everything but their love for each other falling away into irrelevance when they kissed.

He brought his second hand over Mark's and lost himself again for a moment in those sapphire blue eyes. Softly he said, "Tell me about the second job? It's director of what?"

EPILOGUE

“Mail’s here,” Mark called from the back door. “The last of the grant money came in. It’s a done deal. We should be fully up and running within the month.”

Nolan was staring out at the stream that ran tumbling and sparkling at the back of their property, dappled with golden coins of sunlight. He turned toward Mark expectantly. “That’s great.”

It was hard to believe it had already been nearly a year since they’d made the move together to Havenfield. They’d found the perfect house on half an acre of land that sloped down to a stream and beyond that a wooded grove Mark liked to call their private forest.

It had taken some adjustment to his ego to allow Mark to partially support him, but because Mark brought in more money

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and worked longer hours, Nolan kept the house and cooked the meals, finding to his surprise and pleasure that he was turning out to be a pretty good cook.

He'd taken the job as chief paramedic for the county and had to admit he, too, liked the slower pace of things. "Probably because I'm getting old," he'd said to Mark, not entirely kidding, but Mark had only laughed, assuring Nolan he could still run rings around most guys ten years his junior.

As he'd made his way around the county handling the emergency calls, he'd realized how valuable a senior center could be to the far-flung community, bringing old folks together and helping to keep them from becoming marginalized and isolated.

Rarely a day passed that he didn't think of Mabel. She would have liked this idea—she would have been the first to sign on. He smiled, the pain of her passing now dulled by time and the recognition that she'd lived a good, long life.

Mark came to stand beside him, holding something out to him. "A letter for you. Looks official." He handed Nolan an envelope made from thick, pale gray paper, the law firm of Hanson & Prescott printed in shiny, embossed letters in its left-hand corner.

"Uh oh," Nolan said. "Looks like someone's suing me. I wonder what the hell this is?"

He tore open the envelope and extracted a letter printed on the same thick, fine stationery as the envelope. It read:

Dear Mr. Daniels:

Concerning the matter of the Last Will and Testament of Mrs. Mabel Murdock Johnston, you have been bequeathed the sum of one-hundred-thousand dollars

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for, “a friendship brief in duration but lasting in affection.”

Please contact our firm at the number referenced above to let us know how you wish to collect the funds.

Sincerely, Harold Prescott, Attorney at Law

“Nolan. What is it? Are you okay? Is it bad news? Your mom?”

Nolan turned slowly toward Mark, still not quite taking in what he’d read. Wordlessly he handed over the letter.

Mark scanned it. “Holy crap! I knew she had money, but man, she must have been a millionaire! That’s great, Nolan. Congratulations.”

Mabel rose up in his mind’s eye, her sparkling dark eyes twinkling from the myriad wrinkles surrounding them, dancing with pleasure as she greeted “Dr. Daniels.” The image so vivid she could have been standing beside him.

Nolan’s eyes filled with tears. He still didn’t really have a handle on the idea of so much money being dumped in his lap, but the realization she’d added him to her will, including those moving words about friendship, touched his heart in a way nothing ever had.

If it hadn’t been for Mabel, he might not have had the courage to try to win Mark back after he’d fucked up with Enrique. This very morning he might have been waking up alone in his Trenton row house after a night of meaningless sex, hung over and miserable, with nothing to look forward to but more of the same.

He turned to look at Mark, who was grinning from ear to ear.

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Love rose like a helium balloon in his heart, nearly lifting him from the ground as he looked at his handsome, happy lover. Silently he vowed to cherish every day they had together, and to always, as Mabel had admonished him, follow his heart.

“Kiss me,” he commanded with a laugh. Mark was happy to comply.

CLAIRE THOMPSON

Claire Thompson has published erotic fiction since 1996. Claire's work includes the sensual exploration of BDSM as well as sizzling M/M erotica, both vanilla and D/s. And don't miss her ménages, both M/M/F and M/M/M, where she explores the complexities and passions when two become three. Claire has published more than forty novels and short stories, both in print and e-book format.

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