

A male pole dancer is performing a handstand on a vertical pole. He is wearing a white thong and is positioned upside down. His legs are spread wide, and his arms are extended downwards, gripping the pole. The background is dark with blue lighting. The dancer's body is muscular and well-defined.

*A Dreamspinner  
Press Anthology*

# *Sindustry //*

*Making a Buck the Hard Way*

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Making a Buck the Hard Way

*A Dreamspinner Press  
Anthology*



*Dreamspinner Press*

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# *Package Boy*

Connie Bailey

THE overcast sky began to drizzle, darkening the granite of the gravestone. The man at the graveside rose and brushed off the knees of his uniform. Donning his hat, he gazed out from under the brim, taking a last look at the dates carved in the stone. Six years ago today, his love had died in this city, leaving him to trudge down the long gray tunnel of the future alone. He tried to keep busy, to fill his time so there was no room for the crushing loneliness; he had his work and he devoted himself to it. His job required a professional demeanor, which suited him fine. Having severed connections with his traitor emotions, it was a relief to let his expression mirror his lack of involvement with this unjust world.

His watch beeped and he said goodbye one more time before walking to the car. The sleek, elongated lines of the diamond-black limousine gleamed wetly in the diffuse sunlight and he was careful not to scratch the wax as he opened the door. The car looked perfect. He could see his reflection in the mirror-bright finish. He looked perfect. It was time to go to work.

“YOU’VE got Lino on the line,” Celino Sansone answered his phone cheerfully.

“Hello, gorgeous. How’s my best boy?”

“Zia Marda!” Celino greeted his manager. “What’s shakin’?”

“I know it’s a day off for you, but I just got a call from a man who used to be a preferred client. He’s back in town for a visit, and I’d really like to impress him.”

“Anything for you.”

“I hoped you’d say that, but it’s a real favor. I’ll make sure you’re taken care of... *large*.”

Celino grinned. *Large* meant a bonus of several thousand deposited

into his bank account, over and above the normal hefty fee. “You’ve been nothin’ but good to me. Where do I meet him?”

Marda gave Celino the details. “Thank you,” she said. “I really appreciate it.” After a brief pause, she spoke again. “I know you’re used to handling big shots, honey, but this guy is really big. I don’t have to remind you of the rules, right?”

“No, ma’am.” When dealing with Marda Accardo’s clients there were many rules, but chief among them was *keep your mouth shut*. You never talked later about what a client said or did. Gossiping was a good way to lose your job or much more. “Don’t sweat it. I’ll do you proud.”

“Thanks again, gorgeous. Call me later.”

Celino took his time getting ready and evaluated his appearance before leaving for his appointment. His fair hair, vivid blue eyes, and classic profile were the legacy of a great-grandmother from northern Italy and he thanked her every time he passed a mirror. Looking good was a huge asset in his profession and he never left the house looking anything but his best. He earned enough that he could afford the most expensive salons and he didn’t stint when it came to a haircut or a day at the spa. People always assumed he was a model, and he rarely corrected them; it was none of their business what he did to pay the rent.

As he walked the hall to the elevator and crossed the lobby, he appreciated his surroundings. He wasn’t exactly uptown yet, but he was upwardly mobile and this apartment building reflected his success. Since being plucked from grueling solo work by Zia Marda and joining her stable of hand-picked escorts, he’d earned more in one year than the three previous added together. He had a nice place, money in a savings account, and enough left over to indulge his love of fine clothes and good food. Mrs. Accardo never took more than the agreed-upon commission and took a very maternal position when it came to “her boys”. While it was understood that her particular clients were partial to a little rough stuff, anything more than black-and-blue marks on one of her employees resulted in blacklisting. A patron who got carried away found himself shut out the next time he called for some compliant company.

Celino crossed himself as he left the building and took a half-step to avoid a crack on his way to the waiting car. He’d never had any real bad luck, but it didn’t hurt to hedge your bets. If things continued on the same track, he’d have a decent retirement fund in two years. If he resisted buying that pair of Ferragamo ostrich boots. If he didn’t take a

cruise this summer. If he stopped falling in love with Jacky.

Celino sighed as he sat back and watched the city flow by the limo window. Giacomo “Jacky Nic” Niccolo, with the body of a Greco-Roman wrestler under a sleek business suit, sly green eyes glinting like tropical waters, white teeth gleaming in a scimitar-shaped grin, thick black hair that sprang back when stroked, long thick cock that sprang back when stroked.... Celino glanced up and met the driver’s eyes in the rearview mirror. He nodded cordially, wondering if he’d said or done something foolish while daydreaming about Jacky. The driver nodded back, a courteous professional, and turned his attention back to the road. Celino made an effort to do the same, but Jacky was never far from his thoughts these days.

It had been all fun and games in the beginning, when Celino was Zia Marda’s fresh new star and the don’s favorite grandson had made a discreet call. Jacky Nic was the only child of the only child of Il Papa’s beloved first wife, an only child herself who died giving birth. The don doted on Jacky, and from infancy, it was taken for granted that the boy would hold a place of power one day. At twenty-six, Jacky was sharp, handsome, the youngest underboss of the powerful deCavalcante family and engaged to the niece of the don’s *consigliere*, the old man’s right hand. There was only one fly in the pasta fagioli, but it was a big one. Jacky Nic wasn’t just dabbling on the down-low, indulging a preference for the back entrance, or getting off on dominating another man. Jacky Nic was gay and while the other bosses might wink at a kink, they’d never take orders from a bona fide *fagola*, as he put it.

Celino didn’t mind at first. For once, the client was his age and attractive and it was fun meeting clandestinely, feeling the rush of forbidden passion. But that was before he fell for Jacky. Now he worried every time Jacky left his arms that it would be for the last time. He was afraid that someone would get wise to their budding relationship and inform the don. Celino knew he should be concentrating on earning enough money to get out of the life, but life without Jacky wouldn’t be much of a life at all. Celino sighed again. It had been stupid to let himself care for a customer, knowing that nothing could ever come of it. Jacky would marry the Sicilian princess and run the family empire in Jersey while Celino would grow old and lonely somewhere down in Florida with a little dog to keep him company if he was lucky.

“We’re here, sir,” the driver said, halting the downward spiral of Celino’s thoughts.

“Thanks,” Celino said, as an attendant came forward to open the car door. As he stepped from the limousine, he gave the driver a wave and gave himself a quick pep talk. *No one was going to find out about him and Jacky. Somehow, they’d find a way to be together, even if it was only for a few days or a few hours at a time. Other men had mistresses; no one had to know that Jacky’s side-slice was a guy. Maybe it wouldn’t be such a bad life.*

CELINO’S client was on the top floor of the luxury hotel in one of four penthouse suites. The foyer was guarded by two muscular men in tailored suits that disguised the lines of their shoulder holsters. Celino gave up his phone and stood docilely through the pat-down. When the soldiers were sure he wasn’t concealing any weapons, he was passed into the suite.

“Who the hell is that, Joey?” someone bellowed as soon as the doors closed.

The dapper man walking toward Celino put his cell phone away and called over his shoulder. “Mrs. Accardo sent someone over to entertain you while you’re waiting.”

“Oh yeah, the package boy. Well, tell him to come in. I’ve got a delivery for him.”

Celino kept his expression pleasant as he was introduced to the client, but Alberto “Big Bones” Bonaventura repelled him on sight. This was going to be one of those rare times when he didn’t enjoy his job, but the thought of Marda’s bonus should get him through it. Whatever Bonaventura’s age, shape, or degree of piggishness, he was just another man who wanted to get his pipes cleaned and was willing to pay well for the service. It was just a couple of hours out of Celino’s life and then he could go home, take a shower, and call Jacky, not necessarily in that order. He’d just cruise on autopilot until it was done. “It’s an honor to meet you,” he said.

“Mind if I call you Lino?” Bonaventura set his empty shot glass down in a spray of crumbs next to a half-finished plate of calamari. “I like blonds, Lino.”

“That’s probably why Mrs. Accardo sent me.” Celino smiled. “She wants you to be impressed.”

The out-of-town capo smiled back, the slabs of his cheeks grudgingly giving way. “You’re a little cocky; I like that too. So, you



want a drink, Lino? You hungry or do you want to get right to it?"

"I'm ready when you are, Mr. Bonaventura."

"Joey! Make sure nobody comes in."

"You got it, Mr. B," Joey said, giving Celino a hard look. "And before package boy leaves, I'll make sure he knows what'll happen if he ever mentions your name."

"You don't have to worry about me. I know the rules."

"You hear that, Joey?" Bonaventura rose and put a hand on the back of Celino's neck. "He knows the rules."

Joey shrugged. "If you say so, Mr. B. I might have a little talk with him anyway."

"Do what you gotta do," Bonaventura said. "Come on, Lino. The bedroom's this way."

"JESUS H!" Bonaventura panted. He looked down at the top of Celino's head, broad shoulders, and muscular back and a hot rush of pleasure fizzed along his nerve endings. The sight of his hard cock stretching the virile young man's mouth made him feel like a king. "You got a tongue like an electric eel."

Celino sucked Bonaventura's foreskin into his mouth, nibbling delicately as he darted his tongue around the sensitive tip. His fingers were busy stroking and rubbing, using every trick he knew to speed things along. He was relieved when Bonaventura took hold of his head and began thrusting eagerly. Celino drew air through his nose and sucked hard, working the underside of the thick cock. The visiting don might not have the longest dick in the world, but he made up for it in circumference, and he was the sort that got off on causing discomfort. Having someone choke on his meat was probably a fantasy of Bonaventura's, something he'd brag about. On the next stroke, Celino put his palms against Bonaventura's thighs and pushed. Feeling the resistance, Bonaventura tightened his grip and thrust harder. Celino put up a token struggle, gazing up at the other man in a plea for mercy.

"What's a matter, *ragazzo*? Too much for you?"

Celino nodded emphatically and Bonaventura groaned his pleasure, fingertips digging into Celino's scalp as he pushed deeper. Ignoring the tickle of wiry hair against his nose, Celino swallowed hard as he strained against the other man's hold. Bonaventura came abruptly, squirting a briny load down the young man's throat. Slowly, the don's grip relaxed

and his labored breathing slowed. Stepping back, he pulled out of Celino's mouth and patted him on the cheek.

"You did good, *bel ragazzo*. I gotta go to a meeting, but when I come back, we'll go another round and take our time."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it, Mr. Bonaventura. Should I wait for you here?"

"Here? Hell, no. I'll be takin' all my boys with me and I ain't leavin' you here alone. After you freshen up and get dressed, the limo will take you wherever you want to go and someone will call when I want you again."

Celino nodded as he picked up his clothes. "It's okay if I use your bathroom?"

Bonaventura pointed without looking, already on the phone. Celino nodded his thanks and closed the bathroom door behind him. Flipping on the light, he dropped his clothes and went to the sink. Not until he'd rinsed his mouth did he put on his briefs and trousers. As he buttoned his shirt, he shook his head at his reflection. Celino liked sex a lot and he was usually able to separate the emotional from the physical while he was working. He'd convinced himself he could keep doing this until he had enough money to start his own business, but the past five minutes had changed his mind. Everything was different now that he loved Jacky. Now, he wasn't just earning a living, he was betraying his lover for mere money. It sure wasn't because he found Bonaventura irresistible.

Celino spit in the sink again. There was no getting around the fact that he'd let someone he didn't know and didn't even like use him like an appliance, something he swore he'd never do again after he got off the streets. It took all the joy out of the job and when the fun was gone, it was time to move on.

Pushing away from the marble counter, he tried not to imagine what Zia Marda was going to say when he told her he couldn't play the second half of the gig. He could say goodbye to his bonus for sure, and probably his job, but he couldn't do this for another minute. Anyway, Celino's anxiety over her reaction was nothing compared to his fear of how Jacky would take the news. Celino didn't think the young underboss would be too happy about the insult to a guest of the deCavalcante family. No matter how sweet Jacky was when they were alone, there was no way he'd take the side of a callboy on a matter of family honor. Celino wasn't looking forward to the next couple of hours, but he couldn't stay in Bonaventura's bathroom forever. He opened the door,

heard voices, and closed it again, but it was too late. He'd already heard Jacky's name. Dropping to the floor, he put his ear to the crack and strained to hear what the two men were saying.

"Niccolo's a punk," Bonaventura growled. "I got no problem with offing him."

"Me neither, Mr. B," Joey answered. "But why do *we* gotta do it? Why can't one a their own guys take care a the prick?"

"*You* don't gotta do it, Joey. Just make sure it gets done."

"Consider it done." Joey paused. "This ain't a sanctioned hit, is it?"

"Not at the moment. This meeting's important because I wanna look him in the eye and hear him say he wants Jacky Nic dead. If he ever crosses me, I'll have somethin' on him."

"Excuse me, boss, but big fuckin' deal."

Bonaventura laughed. "You're a practical guy and you know I like that about you, but it *will* be a big fuckin' deal when Il Papa croaks and Chuckles is head of the deCavalcante family."

Celino blinked, fighting the shock that wanted to paralyze him. Someone wanted Jacky out of the way and Celino had to warn him. Fading back from the door, he flushed the toilet, washed his hands, and walked out as if the room was empty. His racing heart went into overdrive when Joey spoke from his right.

"Mr. B already went downstairs. I hung around to remind you not to say anything about what happened here."

"What happened where?" Celino repeated in a perplexed tone.

"I don't care if you're a smartass. What I care about is Mr. B's reputation. He wouldn't appreciate anybody knowin' he was playin' hide the salami with a guy."

"I understand. Really."

"You better. If I ever find out you blabbed anything to anybody, I'll kill you. I'll kill Mrs. Accardo. I'll kill your family, your neighbors, and any stray cat that wanders by. You understand that, pretty boy?"

"Yes, I understand." Celino forced himself to meet Joey's eyes, black as ripe olives. "Can I have my cell phone back now?"

"Sure, kid." Joey handed Celino his phone. "Let's go; your car's waiting."

Celino controlled the impulse to jerk his arm away when Joey took hold of his biceps and steered him toward the door. The soldier didn't

speak again as the elevator descended, spending the time combing his hair and straightening his tie. As Joey opened the limo door and gestured to Celino to get in, he flashed a blade in front of the young man's eyes. Putting a finger to his lips, he banged a fist on the roof of the car and the driver pulled away. Celino looked back as he turned his cell phone on and Joey held up the knife in a final warning.

"Where to, sir?" the driver asked.

"Uh," Celino faced front. "I'm not sure yet. Can you just drive for a few minutes?"

"Sure thing."

Celino started to dial Jacky's number, but thought better of it. The aloof driver would no doubt report everything Celino said or did. "I should've taken a leak before we left."

"Are you picky about where?" the driver asked.

"The nearest gas station will do."

"Sure thing. I could use the john myself."

Celino was afraid he wouldn't be able to pee when the driver went into the men's room with him. To his relief, he produced a stream and went to wash up. "I'm going to grab a coffee in the convenience store," he said over his shoulder, as the driver zipped up. "Can I get you anything?"

"Thanks. I could use a coffee. Black is fine."

"See you at the car." Celino hurried out the door, pulling his phone from his pocket as he rounded the corner of the old-style gas station. He punched Jacky's number and put the phone to his ear as he entered the small store. Holding the cell awkwardly between his head and his shoulder, he poured two large coffees and found the lids for them. The voice mail message came on as Celino was adding cream to his cup.

Jacky's warm baritone swaggered from the speaker and made Celino's groin throb. Shaking off the sultry spell, Celino spoke quickly after the beep. "I can't explain everything right now, but you're in trouble. Meet me at Zia's spa. Be really careful and don't let anyone see you." Celino bit his lip, trying to think of what else he could say to get his message across. "I love you," he ended impulsively, as the driver came into the store. Dropping the phone into his pocket, he handed a Styrofoam cup to the other man. "Black, right?"

The driver's expression finally lightened. "As a matter of fact, I am Black. Rob Black."

“Celino Sansone. Everyone calls me Lino.”

“Yeah, I already knew that,” Rob Black said as he paid for the gas and coffees. “I keep a log of my passengers.”

“Well, at least there’ll be some record if I’m never seen again after tonight,” Celino said as they walked to the car.

“Sir?”

“Just a bad joke, Rob. Would you mind taking me by Spa Roma so I can pick up a couple of things Mr. Bonaventura asked for?”

“Sure thing.”

“I’LL probably be a few minutes,” Celino said as they pulled into the parking structure. “Do you want to come inside and wait?”

“Thanks, but I’ll be fine here.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yeah.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be keeping an eye on me?”

“I’m just driving you around.”

“Then why did you come into the bathroom with me?”

“I wanted a look at your package.” Rob grinned. “Just kidding. I had to take a piss.”

“I must sound completely paranoid.”

“It’s probably a good idea to be paranoid if you’re going to hang around with men like Big Bones Bonaventura.”

“Point taken.” Celino got out of the car. “I’ll be back as quick as I can.”

“I’ll be here.” Rob gave Celino a mock salute before he rolled up the window.

As Celino neared the garage elevator, a man stepped from the shadows and grabbed him from behind. He recognized Jacky’s cologne and relaxed into the embrace before he remembered the driver. By that time, Jacky was nuzzling aggressively at his neck and squeezing his crotch. Throwing out a hand, Celino hit the elevator call button and tried to discourage Jacky. It might have worked better if he’d really wanted Jacky to stop what he was doing. “Ahhh, damn it, you can get me so hot so fast,” Celino moaned. “But somebody might be watching us, so cool it until we get out of sight, okay?”

“I’ll try, but it’s torture being this close to you without touching you.”

The lift doors slid open and Celino slipped inside with Jacky on his ass. As soon as the doors closed again, Jacky pressed Celino into the corner and took his mouth in a ravenous kiss. Celino responded eagerly, pulling Jacky close and squeezing him tight.

“God damn, I can never get enough of you, Chel,” Jacky breathed as their lips parted. He slid his hands from Celino’s shoulders, down his arms to twine their fingers together. “Thanks for meeting me.”

“I have to talk to you,” Celino said, “but not here.”

“That doesn’t sound good. You droppin’ me, baby?”

“Of course not. I’ll explain as soon as we have more privacy.”

When they reached the second floor, Jacky waited by the elevators while Celino went into the boutique spa that fronted for Marda’s real business. Celino got the key to a massage room and let Jacky in at the employee entrance. He barely got the door locked when Jacky lifted him off his feet and laid him out on the table. “You look a little tense,” Celino’s lover said. “Let me work on you a little.”

“We need to talk.”

“Talk while we’re doin’ it,” Jacky suggested as he squeezed Celino’s reliable hard-on.

“I overheard Alberto Bonaventura talking about a hit on you.”

Jacky froze. “What?”

Celino pushed Jacky’s hand off his crotch and sat up. “Zia Marda sent me over to his hotel. While I was in the bathroom, I heard him talking about it to a guy named Joey.”

“That’s what your message was about? Swear to God, I thought you were leading up to giving me the brush-off. Then you said....”

“I was nervous,” Celino interrupted. “I don’t hear hits ordered every day and then I didn’t know how much I should say when it was being recorded, you know?”

Jacky nodded. “But why would Big Bones want me dead?”

“It’s not him; it’s someone he called Chuckles.”

“Bullshit! The only Chuckles I know is my Uncle Carlo and only the family calls him that.”

“I’m just telling you what I heard.”

“You must’ve heard wrong.”

"I know what they said, Jacky. I'm not deaf or stupid."

"Sorry, baby. It's a shock."

"What should we do?"

"This is my problem. I don't want you anywhere near it."

"I'm already near it. If Bonaventura finds out I told you...."

"What? What did that pig say to you? No, wait. Don't tell me. If you tell me he threatened you, I'll have to kill him."

Celino rested his hand over Jacky's heart. "That means a lot to me, but be real for a second. You can't whack a visiting boss. Your family would disown you."

"Yeah, they would at that; they'd have to." Jacky chewed his lower lip. "I need to think about this for a minute."

"What if you told your grandfather?"

"He'd probably take my word, but to get permission to hit Bonaventura, he'd have to show proof that Bonaventura was planning an illegal hit on me."

"Otherwise, the reprisals will start and the next thing you know, you got a war on your hands."

"That's right, baby." Jacky looked into Celino's eyes. "You're worth it though, like that Greek chick, Helena Troy."

"Come on, Jacky. You can drop the Romeo routine now."

"Romeo routine?"

"You know: the extravagant compliments and presents, all the cuddling and rose petals between the sheets, the texts at odd times just to let me know you're thinking about me. It's really sweet of you, but you don't have to keep the act up twenty-four seven." Celino sighed. "I don't have any illusions about the reality of our relationship; I know you pay for my time."

"Well... a little more than your time." Jacky grinned as he regained his equilibrium. "So you think you're just a piece of expensive ass to me? Is that right?"

"It's okay. I'm used to being wanted for my body."

"It's quite a body," Jacky agreed. "Perfect proportions and not an inch on you that isn't toned and tanned. You're what I think of when I hear the words 'golden boy'."

"I can't believe you're teasing me at a time like this."

"I like teasing you. I thought you liked being teased." Jacky

paused. “I also thought you liked my gifts and the flowers and the cuddling; I sure enjoyed providing them.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t like the way you treat me. I just said that you didn’t have to keep up the pretense, especially while we have more important things to think about. Like your life.”

“Baby, stop.” Jacky took Celino’s hands. “There’s no pretense. I treat you like I do because that’s what you deserve.”

“I love you, Jacky Nic, but you’re you and I’m me and it just isn’t going to happen.”

Jacky ducked his head and kissed Celino. “I coulda swore you said you loved me just before you hung up, and I couldn’t wait to get here and show you how much I love you and convince you to stay with me.”

“Your full-frontal assault always works.”

“Is that what’s buggin’ you? Do I come at you too hard?”

Celino chuckled despite his resolve to remain serious. “Too hard? What’s that?”

“That’s my baby,” Jacky said, playfully slapping the other man’s cheek. “This is the Celino I love, spunky and funny and ready for anything. Let me make a quick call to my Aunt Sylvia to clear something up and we’ll continue this conversation.”

“Did I mention our time is limited?”

Jacky put a finger to Celino’s full lips as his call was answered. “*Ciao, Zia Syllie! Si, va bene.* Can I talk to Uncle Carlo for a minute? He is? No, nothing urgent, but would you give him a message when he gets home? *Grazie.* Please tell him I met Mr. Bonaventura’s guy and I know exactly what he wants. *Si, grazie.* Of course, I’ll see you Sunday.” Jacky broke the connection and met Celino’s eyes. “I’ll be damned; my uncle is at a meeting with a VIP from out of town. Chuckles wants me dead.”

“I told you.”

“Yeah, you did. Thanks. Now, I gotta figure out the best way to break this to Il Papa. You want to go with me to see him?”

“There’s a driver waiting to take me back to Bonaventura’s hotel.”

“Fuck that!”

“I wasn’t intending to go,” Celino said.

“You nearly gave me an aneurysm.”

“Well, relax. I said I’m not going. In fact, I’m quitting the business.”



“Are you serious?”

“I know it’s an inconvenience, but—”

“Inconvenience? Baby, I’ve been waiting for you to say something like this forever.”

“You’re happy about this?” Consternation took up a small tuck between Celino’s eyebrows. “But... if you wanted me to quit, why didn’t you say something?”

“Because you always talked about how happy you were and how much money you were making. I thought you’d be insulted if I insisted you quit your job and let me support you.”

“I don’t want you to support me and it’s too big a risk for you anyway.”

“Because I’m me?” Jacky guessed.

“That’s right. You’re Jacky Nic, the Prince of Newark, heir apparent to the deCavalcante crown. You’ll be the most powerful man in the city some day and you know the rule: don’t get caught with a dead girl or a live boy. We may not be breaking up today, but it has to end sometime.”

“So you’re saying that if I become don, I can’t have you?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

“Then all our problems are solved.”

“How do you figure that?”

“If I’m out of the running for head of the family, there’s no need to kill me. It’s that simple.”

“I must be missing something here. You’re Il Papa’s favorite. What could take you out of the running, other than a bullet?”

“Me.”

“You’d walk away?”

“Only if you’re comin’ with me.”

“I’m a little surprised.”

“You don’t believe me?”

“Well, look at it from my point of view. It’s a little hard to believe that you’d give up so much wealth and power for a, you know, male escort.”

“How do I make you believe I love you?” Jacky clenched his hands into fists. “I’m offering to give up my family, my livelihood, and my

honor for you. I'm telling you that instead of going after Bonaventura like I'm achin' to do, I'll swallow my pride and leave town. I'm promising that I'll start an entirely new life with you anywhere you choose. If there's something else I can do, just tell me."

"Give me a second to absorb, okay?"

"Absorb what? You're shocked that I care so much? What did you think I was trying to say with all the expensive presents and romantic weekends?"

"I thought you were saying the same thing that all the other guys say: that you think I'm hot and you want to nail me."

"Well, I can't deny that, but I was also letting you know how much you mean to me, or so I thought."

Celino laughed abruptly. "All this time I was falling in love with you and afraid to say anything. I was sure you'd evaporate if I started talking heavy about feelings and stuff."

Jacky smiled. "Do you feel as *pazzo* as I do?"

Celino thought about it for a minute. "It *is* crazy, but actually, I'm thrilled, or would be if I wasn't so worried."

"I thought I just took care of all that."

"We still have to get out of town."

"Oh yeah." Jacky made a circuit of the massage table and stopped in front of Celino. "Bonaventura is at the meeting right now, right? Nobody but you and me and the people at that meeting know about the hit, right? So, we're gonna get in my car and head in whatever direction feels right. I'm gonna get on the phone and transfer another chunk of cash to a savings account that isn't connected to the family."

"You keep surprising me. I thought you left all the details to the accountants."

Jacky shrugged. "I always had this wild idea about runnin' away with you, and I knew we'd need money."

"It's one thing to have a fantasy, but—"

"A guy can dream, can't he?" Jacky interrupted.

"Where's your car?" Celino answered without missing a beat.

"Yeah, that might be a problem. I'm not sure we can get to it without your driver seeing us."

"He's not *my* driver. Well... he is my *driver*, but he's not *my*.... You know what I mean."

“Glad to hear it. You ever seen him before?”

“No. I’m familiar with the guys that work for the car service Marda uses, so I assume Rob works for Bonaventura.”

“Rob?”

“Rob Black.”

“On a first-name basis already, huh?”

“Cut it out, Jacky. What if we just walk out of here, get a cab to the airport, and buy a car later?”

“I like it, baby. Now, we have a plan. Just one question.” Jacky grinned. “Do we have time for a quickie?”

“Why don’t we wait until we can join the Mile High Club?”

“You’re killin’ me, Chel, but I’ll try to keep it in my pants ‘til we’re off the ground.”

“Just try keeping in mind that someone wants to kill you and I’ll be happy.” Celino paused. “That didn’t come out right, but you know what I mean.”

“I’ll try to worry more. Can I have one kiss to hold me over?”

Celino grabbed Jacky by the ears and yanked him forward, bringing their mouths together with bruising force. Into the brief, fierce caress, he poured all of the passion he felt for this man.

“Whoa,” Jacky breathed when Celino broke off the kiss. Greedily, he pulled his lover back, but Celino wasn’t having it.

“There’s plenty more where that came from,” Celino said, as he shoved Jacky away for the first time since they’d met. “And you can have it as soon as I know we’re safe.”

“Now, that’s what I call incentive. Let’s roll.”

Celino opened the door of the private room in time to see Rob Black straighten up from the water fountain. The chauffeur turned and looked directly at Celino.

“Thought you got lost. I got thirsty and decided to see what I could find to drink.”

Celino’s stretched nerves had had enough. “Nothing in the limo’s mini-bar appealed to you?”

Rob blinked at his passenger’s tone. “Sorry to intrude.” His gaze flicked to Jacky. “Should I go back to the car and wait?”

“Yeah, do that,” Jacky spoke up. “Your services are no longer needed.”

“That’s not your call,” Rob answered. “Sir.”

Celino spoke before Jacky could reply. “Rob, what would you say if I asked you to drive me and my friend to the airport?”

“Sure thing. Which airport?”

“I’d rather take my car,” Jacky said as they exited the elevator in the parking structure.

The driver shrugged. “Suit yourself, Mr. Niccolo, but your Ferrari ain’t exactly low profile.”

“So you know who I am.” Jacky squared his shoulders. “So what?”

“Getting pissed off wouldn’t be the wisest move right now,” Rob said. “If you don’t trust me, and God knows you got no reason to, then you drive the limo to the airport.”

“He’s right,” Celino said. “I love your car, Jacky, but it’s eye-catching.”

“That’s why I bought it.”

Rob held out the keys. “You’re a man who appreciates the finer things, Mr. Niccolo,” he said, glancing at Celino. “I hope you have a long life to enjoy them.”

“Hey, Rob,” Celino said, as he opened the passenger door. “Are you going to be in a lot of trouble for letting us take the car?”

“Oh yeah,” Rob said with feeling.

“It’s okay,” Jacky said. “He offered, baby.”

“I don’t like to think about what Bonaventura’s boys might do to him. They’re going to want to talk to him when I don’t show up and you go missing.”

“*Madonna!*” Jacky cursed mildly. “What do you suggest we do with him?”

“At the least, he deserves to know what kind of shit is going to descend on him.” Celino raised his voice again as he leaned on the door. “Do you know why we’re going to the airport?”

“Because Mr. Niccolo has made the unprecedented decision to start a new life?”

“Yeah!” Celino was startled. “Do you know why?”

“Because his uncle secretly ordered a hit on him?”

“You must listen at a lot of keyholes,” Jacky said.

“No, I’m the talent.”

Jacky reached into his jacket, but Rob was already holding a gun pointed at him. “Easy,” Jacky said holding his hands where the hit man could see them.

“You’re kidding,” Celino said. “You’re the hitter? I should have seen this coming. I finally decide to quit the life. I find out my boyfriend really loves me. We’re on our way into the sunset, so of course you’re a hit man.”

“Calm down,” Rob said, lowering his weapon. “I only pulled mine out because he was about to. I’m not going to shoot anybody. For one thing, I don’t have a contract yet.”

Jacky lowered his arms. “So, you gonna babysit us until you hear from your boss, or what?”

“If you want me to, but I was serious when I gave you the keys. Get the hell out of here.”

“Why?” Celino asked. “Why bring all this trouble on yourself? You must have a reason.”

“Mr. Bonaventura will be very angry with me, but since neither he nor his co-conspirator can talk about this situation, it won’t be hard to blackmail either of them into dropping the matter. So there won’t be any damage to my reputation. I don’t need money, so I don’t mind losing the fee. I’m out of pocket for the airline ticket, the hotel, and the limo rental, but I’ve always wanted to wear a chauffeur’s uniform at least once. I’m not really losing anything by letting you go, so why not?”

Jacky made a rude noise that clearly expressed his opinion of Rob’s speech.

“I could just go ahead and kill you,” Rob said.

“Come on,” Celino said. “Just tell me the truth.”

“If I do, will you leave?”

Celino crossed his heart.

“I watched you while I was driving you around,” Rob said. “In hindsight, that was a mistake. See, Joey the Patch told me I’d be pulling a double today; Bonaventura’s so paranoid about his visit that he planned on offing you too, just to be on the safe side.”

“That’s it!” Jacky exclaimed, slamming the limo door. “I’m gonna kill him.”

“No, you’re not.” Celino grabbed Jacky’s arm. “We’ve got a golden opportunity and we’re going to take it.” He turned to Rob. “Or

am I wrong?"

"You're not wrong. Say the word and I'll tell Big Bones that I killed you both and compacted you in your car."

"You're not really gonna crush my Ferrari, are you?" Jacky said.

Rob shook his head. "I'm taking your wheels in lieu of my fee."

"Treat her good, okay?" Jacky glanced at Celino. "I know it's just a car, but...."

"I wouldn't disrespect a fine piece of craftsmanship," Rob said. "And to finish answering your question, Lino: I simply don't want to kill you. You're a decent guy who was going to die just because an evil, horny old man got nervous and gave an order. Normally, I would've put two in the back of your head without thinking twice, but today, I need a better reason."

"Why?" Celino persisted.

"Because you're in love and you have a chance at a life with the person you love. I can't take that away just on somebody's say-so. I'm still human, after all."

"Thank you," Celino said.

"You're welcome. Seeing the two of you turn over new leaves has got me thinking."

"Do me one more favor?"

"What?"

"Call Zia Marda for me? Tell her whatever you think you should tell her and that I'll call her when I feel safe."

"Sure thing. I'll make sure Mrs. Accardo knows what she needs to."

Celino smiled, imagining Marda's reaction to the news that a client had planned to do away with one of her boys. "Thanks again."

"I said you're welcome. Now get out of here before a group hug breaks out."

Jacky started the engine and Celino slid into the passenger seat. With a wave to Rob, they pulled out of the oversized parking space and headed for the exit. The lights were with them and they made good time to the airport. Several impulsive decisions later, they were airborne without incident.

JACKY opened the door of the airplane toilet when Celino knocked.

“Are they makin’ these things smaller now?” he complained.

Celino managed to wedge himself into the small space without anyone noticing and shut the door. He wrapped his arms around Jacky, nuzzling at his ear. Jacky was uncharacteristically unresponsive.

“Honest to God, Chel. I’m not sure we can do it in here.”

“We can,” Celino assured him.

“How?” Jacky looked around. “Seriously, how? If I get my dick out, one of us is going to have to leave.”

Celino hopped up onto the miniature stainless steel sink and put a foot on the metal toilet ring. Deftly, he unbuttoned his trousers and worked them down over his round butt. Jacky stopped griping as his tongue came out to wet his lips. He reached for Celino’s cock, pulling it out of the fly of his briefs. Squeezing firmly, Jacky shuttled his hand up and down a few times.

“Ah, yeah,” Celino breathed as he peeled Jacky’s suit jacket down his shoulders. “I love the way you touch me like you just can’t wait.”

“I’ll touch you all you want.” Jacky let the expensive garment fall to the floor and took hold of Celino’s dick again. He managed to bend far enough to get his mouth on the head and Celino gasped with pleasure.

“Thanks for doing this.”

“No need to thank me.” Jacky left off licking his way around the tip of Celino’s hard-on. “I love doing this.”

“I meant.... Oh, man, that feels good. I meant thanks for doing it *here*. For giving up everything and being here with me.”

“I’m trying not to think too hard about it and just do it. Once the shit hits the fan there’ll be no going back. You know what?” Jacky straightened to kiss Celino and it was a while before he finished his thought. “I’m glad Uncle Carlo tried to get me out of the way.”

“You’re kidding me. Ooh, do that again. Yeah, that. Oh God, you’re going to turn me into quivering guy goo.”

“Guy goo?” Jacky made a face as he circled a fingertip around Celino’s lower opening.

Celino grinned. “Would you rather I said man gravy?”

Jacky grinned back. “I love you,” he said, as naturally as sneezing when something tickles your nose.

Celino leaned forward and kissed Jacky, a soft kiss that he didn’t need his tongue for. “I love you too,” he murmured against Jacky’s lips.

“This is almost too good to be true.”

“I’m not gonna back out or let you down, baby.”

“Your family....”

“Will be fine without me. What do I wanna be a gangster for? I’d rather lie around on a beach somewhere with you.”

The sound of Celino swallowing was audible in the small space. “I’m sorry I never took you seriously.”

“That’s okay, baby. We’re startin’ fresh, remember?”

“I knew I loved you, but now I realize just how much. I’ll never sell you short again.”

“I’ll do my best to make you proud of me.”

“Shit! I’m going to cry.”

Jacky leaned in and took Celino’s mouth in a deep, lingering kiss. “Let me give you something to cry about,” he murmured.

Celino laughed softly as his lover pulled out a single-serve packet of lubricant. Reaching down, he found Jacky’s zipper and freed his hard cock. Awkwardly, he stroked the suede-skinned rod of flesh while Jacky eased a finger into him. “Oh, God, yes! You know just how to push my buttons. I don’t think I can wait to feel you inside me.”

“Not to mention the fact that somebody else might need the bathroom.”

Celino laughed again. “I’m waitin’ on you.”

Jacky flattened the foil of lubricant, extruding all the contents. He stroked his cock, slathering the slippery gel from tip to root, as Celino watched avidly.

“Good,” Celino said. “This is going to be awkward as hell, but I know we can do it.”

“My mouth’s dry,” Jacky said, as he seated his cock.

“I’m excited too, but don’t go too fast. Slower. Slower. Ahhhhh, shit. Shit!”

Jacky stopped and looked into Celino’s eyes. “What? Should I take it back out?”

Celino flexed, squeezing Jacky’s cock just behind the tip. “Only if you want to.”

Jacky sucked in a breath through his teeth. “I think I’m hurtin’ you.”



"It does hurt some, but not so much that I want you to stop. Go ahead; we'll have the rest of our lives to take it slow."

Tiny pearls of sweat formed at Jacky's hairline as he eased into Celino a millimeter at a time. Celino assured him he could go faster, but Jacky had his own ideas about pacing. Not even Celino's warning that someone could knock at any second could goad Jacky into speeding things up. "Damn, this feels so good," he groaned.

Celino clutched at Jacky's shoulders. "Pull back a little and push in again."

"Like this?"

"Oh, hell yeah. Oh God!" Celino's words deteriorated in a drawn-out moan.

Jacky continued to thrust in shallow strokes, triggering that wonderful sound from his lover. "Is this good?" he asked.

"Couldn't be better. You doin' all right?"

"Baby, you got no idea. If I could only do one thing for the rest of my life, this would be it."

"Yeah, me too. Just somewhere more comfortable."

Jacky chuckled as he took hold of Celino's cock again. Leaning forward, he thrust in abbreviated strokes as he licked at Celino's taut nipples. Celino made a whining noise deep in his throat just before he came, dappling his belly with glistening cum. Grabbing Jacky's head between his hands, Celino welded their mouths together and pressed a heel into Jacky's back, urging him deeper. Jacky leaned in, forging up the narrow channel until he was on tiptoe. Celino groaned into Jacky's mouth as the long cock filled him completely, drawing out his orgasm.

"Good. So good," Celino breathed, as their mouths parted. "Now take me like you want to."

Jacky bit his bottom lip in momentary indecision before leaning back and withdrawing slightly. Without room to thrust, he pulsed the muscles of his buttocks, churning his rod in the tight heat that clenched and relaxed unpredictably. His excitement mounting to dizzying heights, Jacky claimed Celino's mouth again as he shot off, his cock firing like a hand cannon. Leaning hard against Celino as his seed unfurled, Jacky burrowed his face into the curve of his lover's shoulder. "*Madonna!*" he panted. "I feel like I'm going to pass out."

Celino kissed the top of Jacky's head, hugging him fiercely. "I love you so much."

“Not as much as I love you.”

“I loved you first.”

“I love you best,” Jacky retorted.

A rap at the door broke up the giddy game of one-upmanship.  
“Excuse me.”

“Answer,” Celino hissed.

No, Jacky mouthed, shaking his head.

“Is someone in there?”

“If you don’t answer, they’re comin’ in.”

“What is it?” Jacky called out.

“Sorry to disturb you, sir, but the return to seats sign has been on for some time.”

“I... I... I’ve got a touch of the stomach flu,” Jacky stammered.

“I’m sorry, sir, do...” The attendant paused as Celino embellished Jacky’s story with a loud barfing noise. “Do you need help?”

Celino’s silent laughter pushed Jacky’s rapidly wilting cock from his sheath and then it was Jacky’s turn to fight the giggles. “No, thanks,” he gasped. “I’m feeling better now.”

Celino wrangled his leg from over Jacky’s shoulder and flushed the toilet with his foot.

“All right,” the attendant said. “Please return to your seat as soon as you can. We’ll be starting final descent soon.”

Jacky captured the foot Celino was tickling him with and tucked it under his arm. “Thank you, ma’am. I’ll be right out.”

The attendant walked away and Jacky and Celino exited the bathroom, but not before sharing a kiss in pledge of all the good things they had in store for each other. And they kept that vow.

THE driver put down the phone and eased the car through the ironwork gates of the cemetery. He was not surprised, or particularly worried, by the fact that two powerful Cosa Nostra bosses were pissed off at him. As soon as Mrs. Accardo spoke with Il Papa, he would bet that neither man would be a worry to anyone anymore. Matters here were nearly wrapped up; just one last visit and he could be on his way.

As he approached the grave, a jet passed over, leaving its mark across a sky as blue as Celino Sansone’s eyes. A slight smile curved his

lips as he knelt and placed a small bunch of flowers in the marble vase. In small and broken words, he explained what he'd done and why and that he would not be coming around as much as he used to, that he had a sudden yearning to travel somewhere he'd never been, to see places and people he'd never seen. He knew his love approved and when he rose to go, he felt the familiar sadness, but this time a settled serenity bloomed in its wake. He'd done the right thing.

Sliding into the driver's seat of the flashy Ferrari, he wished Jacky and Celino the best of luck. *I should be so lucky*, he thought as he pulled onto the road. Rapidly, he shifted up through the gears for the sheer joy of acceleration as he headed out of the city with no destination in mind. Who knew? Maybe he would get lucky.

Born on an Air Force base, CONNIE BAILEY has been in flight ever since. Her father took the family wherever he was stationed: Spain, Morocco, Turkey, Alaska, and more; then while studying commercial arts, Connie married a musician who turned out to be a pilot in disguise. His job as an aircraft designer and competition pilot has taken them all over the world.

Reading has been Connie's favorite diversion since age four, and books are among her best friends. With her husband's support, she set out to become an author, writing every day and posting at various Internet groups and blogs; she cannot recommend that school of writing highly enough. The candid feedback she received was invaluable to her development.

A few fun facts: she lives at a small grass airfield with a hang gliding school, has what's commonly referred to as a "photographic memory," and collects words as a hobby.

<http://www.conniebailey.com>

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# *Dance For Me*

Maria/Albert

ALMOST every pair of eyes in The Tiger Club was riveted to the stage, watching Demetrius's gyrating torso in lustful fascination. Michael Carrick was one of the few whose eyes weren't on the lithesome Greek. Not that he'd seen that slender yet muscular body gyrate on stage and in his bed enough times that he'd ever tire of it. Who could tire of perfection? But Michael was on shift; he was working as a bouncer. The club's patrons were the ones receiving his unwavering attention tonight.

There was a roar of approval, of raw lust, and Michael surmised Demetrius's pants had finally joined his shirt and most of the rest of his clothes on the floor, but Michael couldn't spare the time to even glance at the stage. His eyes narrowed and a muscle in his jaw twitched as he focused on the couple in the back corner. Those two were trouble just waiting to happen. He'd pegged them for that when they'd first come into the erotic dance club, but he'd been handling another potential trouble spot and unable to head for this one immediately. Now that the other crisis had been averted, he wove expertly between the tightly packed tables surrounding the stage, heading for the unlikely couple. David never should have let these two through the front door, but he was new, trained but still a rookie. Michael or Dugan would have to sit David down and explain how he should have handled it. But for now, the damage was done. It was up to Michael to provide damage control.

The leather-clad bald behemoth was half a head taller than Michael, and that was saying something. Three of the little brunet with him could have been poured into the man's clothes with room to spare. That could be fine; more than fine, of course. After all, the same could be said of most of Michael's partners, but he'd never taken anyone who wasn't just willing, but eager. The little brunet looked anything but eager. He looked terrified, under his crumbling mask of aloof coolness, like he realized he'd made a dangerous, maybe even fatal mistake and

had no idea how to fix it. Fortunately for the little guy, Michael was there; it was Michael's job to fix problems before they happened. It was time to interfere. Shit, maybe past time; things looked like they were about to come to a boil faster than he'd expected.

Michael increased his pace, making his way across the crowded club toward the back table with calm purpose, even as he caught Danny's eye and tilted his head toward the pair, indicating he might need backup for this one or a different type of intervention. If they were lucky, they could get these guys out of the club with minimum fuss while the patrons were still focused on Demetrius. After Demetrius's dance, there would be open dancing for twenty minutes, giving the patrons time to strut their own stuff or hook up with one another to use one of the upstairs rooms, or to pair off for the rest of the night. They needed to get these guys out of here before that.

CARLO Milan tried to keep his voice from trembling. It was bad enough his body was, which was only serving to excite Rex more, like a dog slathering for a meaty bone. Christ, he even had a dog's name. Stupid, stupid! What had he been thinking? That was just it. He had let his stomach do his thinking for him, and now his ass was going to suffer for it, not to mention the rest of him. He had to get away from this guy. "I told you, I don't do that. I said I'd blow you for getting me in, if you bought me dinner," Carlo said, trying to sound reasonable, to keep the desperation from his voice. God, he could have stood on a corner on Madison and gotten paid to blow some nice, safe accountant if he'd been ready to stoop to whoring for a meal. He snorted in self-disgust. Who was he kidding? He'd been whoring for his meals for the past seven years, since he turned fourteen, only he hadn't realized it until just recently. The memory brought pain, like a knife in his back, in his heart. But that had been different. Why the hell had he let the smell of food and the sound of the club draw him to the door, right when this guy was there to pay the cover charge?

"And I say the ten dollars I already paid buys me your tight little ass for the night," the man said, thrusting his hands down into the back of Carlo's jeans, an impossibly thick, rough finger raking across the crease between Carlo's cheeks in threat more than promise. "You're not going to need to eat after I'm done with you. I'm going to fill you so full you won't have room for food. Although maybe after we're done I'll buy

you breakfast. If you're still conscious," he said, with a rough, grating laugh, as he literally lifted Carlo to his feet, using the hand under his ass like a crane, clamping his other hand tightly against his chest to secure him.

"Then let's go to my apartment, where we can be comfortable, if you're spending the night," Carlo lied desperately. "I didn't bring anything, I wasn't looking to score. We need lube. And condoms," he added, in sudden realization. He couldn't let anyone touch him without one. He fought back panic at the knowledge that he didn't have condoms or lube or an apartment.

Rex laughed again, the sound of chain on brick. "We don't need any of that pansy crap. They got rooms upstairs here. I'm gonna fuck that tight little hole of yours raw and bare. Gonna make you beg, make you scream," he said, pinching Carlo's ass cheek hard for emphasis, as he dragged Carlo toward the stairs.

Oh God, this monster wanted to bareback him. Carlo's heart was thudding so wildly he thought he might have a heart attack; he knew the guy could feel it from the way his cock hardened against him. He frantically began planning his escape as they approached the stairs.

Rex glared at the well-muscled man in the tiger-striped T-shirt who was blocking the base of the stairs, in front of an orange velvet rope between two stanchions. "I'm sorry, but all the rooms are full. There's a motel down the street," the man said helpfully, with an apologetic smile.

"Bullshit. How about I give you an extra twenty to open one up for me?" Rex growled.

"Sorry, sir, we're full up. But the Continental is a good place. Brass headboards, great for looping belts into, or cuffs if you're carrying. Good soundproofing. No one will call the cops no matter how loud you get. We'll of course refund the cover charge for you and your guest for the inconvenience," the bouncer said reasonably. "Just tell David at the front that Danny said it was all right."

Rex cursed. His cock was so hard he could pound nails and the horny little rich kid in his arms was shaking wildly in anticipation. Fuck it, why not? Best ten dollars he'd ever spent and here he was about to get it refunded too. He could put the twenty toward the room. Shit, maybe he'd pay for two nights. Rex could tell the kid was aching for it, but too scared to ask for the reaming he needed. He'd bet anything that tight little ass was cherry. He'd teach the kid all he needed to know. He could

feel the struggle building, knew that the kid was going to fight him. He knew the kid would be a screamer too, just the way he liked them. Just the thought of the battle he was going to be in for had him half-crazy. Fuck, he'd do the kid in the alley outside, up against the brick, and then maybe carry him down the block to that hotel, once he'd pounded him into submission a little. Rex swung around and headed for the entrance, carrying the kid along with him.

CARLO had almost begged for the bouncer to help him, but he could tell it would be useless. He didn't care. No one cared. They were just in it to make a buck, like everyone else. Carlo fought back unaccustomed tears. He hadn't cried in days; he'd thought being discarded like trash and living on the streets for nearly two weeks had dried all the tears out of him. He'd make his move outside, where he had a better chance of getting away.

David at the door was reluctant to refund their money, until another man came up behind them and interceded. This one was huge, also in a tiger-striped T-shirt. He was only half a head shorter than Rex, but he was bigger everywhere else. His thighs were as thick around as Carlo's waist and his biceps were the size of Carlo's thighs, the right one proudly sporting a USMC tattoo, although his golden-blond hair fell in waves to his shoulders. For a pathetic moment of hope Carlo thought he might intercede, but the man just watched them go with eyes as pale blue and hard as glacial ice.

Carlo was biding his time, looking for an opening as they walked out into the pitiless night. But when Rex began forcing him into the alley beside the club, Carlo's heart rate spiked further, as he realized he was out of time. It was still well lit here in the mouth of the alley from the streetlights, but further in it was dark as pitch. This was it: his best chance.

Carlo erupted into a flurry of motion, twisting his torso around, intending to slam the palm of his hand into Rex's nose. He'd witnessed more than one fight in his time on the streets, and he'd learned a little at least. But Rex's head jerked up and back and Carlo hit his chin instead. He might as well have been pounding concrete. He kicked and hit and squirmed wildly, trying for shins, knees, balls, anything that might take the guy down, but Rex didn't seem to feel any of it. It was like a kitten trying to attack a grizzly. A meaty hand grabbed him by the throat and



slammed him back into rough brick. Carlo's head swam, his vision sparkled, and the world was reduced to a pair of rabidly bright swamp-green eyes riveted on his own.

Suddenly the face disappeared and the hand was yanked away from his throat. Carlo collapsed into a dazed heap at the base of the wall, desperately trying to process what had happened. His eyes widened as he recognized the bouncer from the bar, the huge blond who had watched them leave. His mask of disinterest had been replaced by rage, pure hatred. Carlo didn't see exactly what the man did—the flurry of blows was too fast—but in the next instant Rex was limp. He came crashing down to the alley pavement on top of Carlo. It felt like a wheelbarrow full of bricks landed on him. Carlo started struggling helplessly, but then a booted foot rolled Rex off of him. As he lay gasping for breath, the same face hovered over him, but now it was miraculously warm with concern.

“Jesus, kid, are you okay? Some rescue, huh? I really screwed this up six ways to Sunday, didn't I? Sarge would have kicked my ass for this. Dugan still might. But I had to wait until this guy was outside with you. I couldn't let him see it was one of us; I wouldn't want him to take it out on the club when he wakes up. But I thought I had a little more time.” He held out a hand. “You're a real little hellcat, aren't you? A hissing little spitfire,” the man said with what sounded like genuine admiration in his voice. “For a second there I thought you'd actually get away on your own. I won't hurt you, I swear, Marine's honor. That's kind of like Scout's honor, only more kickass. You're not going from the frying pan to the fire. My name's Michael. Did he hurt you? I mean, can you walk? We need to get you back inside,” he said.

Carlo blinked up at the man, his head spinning, partly from the pain in his skull and throat, partly from hunger, and the rest from the adrenaline that had only just finished slamming through him, making him want to vomit. Carlo heard the sound of running feet and tried to scrabble upright, but his limbs weren't cooperating.

“Damn it, Michael, ye could have been hurt again! Ye should have waited for Danny,” a thick Irish brogue accused.

“I know. I'm sorry, sir, but the kid needed me. I think he needs an ambulance. He's not talking,” Michael said, snapping to attention like he was facing his drill sergeant, but sounding genuinely upset, as he faced a diminutive red-haired man flanked by two muscular men, a brunet and

an African American, also in tiger-striped tees.

The little red-haired man with the weathered face knelt beside Carlo. “Ach, ye poor wee laddie. Hurt, are ye? We canna be having that, someone getting hurt in my club. Do ye need an ambulance? Or will a hot meal and a safe place to stay fix ye up? Maybe a couple of dozen hot meals; ye look like ye could stand them. This isn’t how it usually goes, lad. You’re usually safe once ye reach my doorstep, or my name’s not Dugan Glenrowan. Just ask any of the lads. If you’ll come with us, laddie, we’ll see you safe from the likes of him,” Dugan said. He glared at the unconscious man beside him and spat on him, then turned back to Carlo. “Did he hurt ye too badly, laddie? We’ll let you get a few free blows on him while he’s down, ones he can feel when he wakes up, but we canna let ye kill him. Do ye want us to call the police...?”

“No! No police. I just....” Carlo trailed off, feeling the sting of tears threatening again. They were being so nice to him, helping him; he’d thought he was going to be raped, maybe even killed, but they’d saved him. Why? What did they want? Once he was back inside, what would they do to him? He tried not to look afraid, but he couldn’t help shaking violently as he looked from one to the other wildly.

“Ach, we’re scaring the poor laddie. Danny, Theo, you go back inside. Michael and I can walk the lad in,” Dugan said to the two large men, the one from the stairs and the hulking African American.

“Yes, sir,” the two men said, leaving as quickly as they’d come.

“There, is that a wee bit better? First things first, laddie. Can you walk, or do you need an ambulance?” Dugan asked, his voice gentle.

“I’m all right,” Carlo said, standing shakily, relieved to find everything really did seem to be working. His eyes slid to the mouth of the alley.

The older man gave him a sad smile. “We won’t stop ye from running, if you’ve a mind to, laddie, but the shape you’re in now, I’m afeared you’d not do too well on the streets tonight, and I’m thinking ye might not have any other place to be. Ye might not be able to tell from looking at her, but The Tiger Club is more than a dance club. It’s a sanctuary of sorts. We’re not Johnny’s House, but we do our part. Ye look like you’re a might too old for O’Seanessy to be helping you and my lads would have proofed ye at the door before letting you in. Yer ID at least says yer twenty-one or older. Cards on the table, laddie: I’m offering ye a meal and a safe, private room for the night with a deadbolt

on the door that locks from the inside and no strings of any kind. Or ye can go. But if ye do, at least take the contents of this bastard's wallet, so ye can buy yerself a room for the night. He'll likely be robbed before he wakes up anyway, so ye might as well be the one to profit from his misfortune, seeing as he was so keen on profiting from yours," Dugan suggested. "Then perhaps in the morning ye could be coming back to us, to see what we have to say," he offered. "Or I can lend ye a trifle," he added cautiously.

Carlo shuddered. "I don't want his money or yours," Carlo snapped. Then his face flushed darkly. "I mean... I'm not a thief, and I won't take charity."

Dugan sighed. "Aye, I thought as much. All right, lad. No money. Ye have your pride and pride is a precious thing, even more so when you've naught else left to lose. But surely you'll take the meal and the bed I'm offering ye? 'Tis not charity at all. Ye'd be doing me a great boon, lad. Ye were a guest in my club. My honor, my own pride demands I make recompense for the ill that befell ye whilst in my care," he encouraged.

Carlo looked intently at Dugan's face, looking for deceit, for treachery, relieved the streetlights illuminated him so well. He saw only honesty and heartfelt compassion. Dugan had remarkably kind eyes; they reminded him painfully of his mother's. And he saw the glint of a gold cross at his throat too. His gaze shifted to Michael. Michael was glaring warily at the man he'd downed, but then he looked immediately at Carlo, as if aware he was being watched, and his expression instantly softened.

"If I go with you, I can leave whenever I want? You won't ask anything from me in return? Marine's honor?" he asked Michael. "And do you swear to God?" he asked Dugan, hoping the cross meant something to the man.

"Marine's honor," Michael said.

"Aye, I swear to God on my baptismal cross that I'll not harm ye, laddie, nor allow anyone else to," Dugan said, pulling the cross out, lifting it to his lips and kissing it, then tucking it back under the open-necked shirt. "You'll come, then?" Dugan asked, his voice hopeful.

Carlo bit his lip nervously and nodded slowly. The grin that lit Michael's face was amazing, as they began to walk back toward the club. Carlo felt his heart trip into a faster rhythm again, but this time not from fear. He shook his head in self-disgust, regretting it instantly as his head

reeled. He felt an impossibly huge and strong hand steady him and then pull away, an instant before the panic set in again. Michael smiled at him, then slowed his pace, still walking between Carlo and Dugan but slightly behind, as if he was guarding both of them, which Carlo realized maybe he was.

There was a different man at the door now, the one from the stairs before, the one from the alley.

"I told David to cover the stairs, as we really are full up now upstairs and all he has to do is keep people from getting past him, not make any judgment calls or anything. David needs a talking to before he covers the front door again," Danny explained.

"Good, good. I'll be in the kitchen, seeing this lad gets fed, and then upstairs, seeing he's settled, in case ye need me," Dugan said. Dugan turned to his newest charge. "Have ye a name ye'd care to share with us? It can just be yer first name; we don't stand on formality here. It need not even be yer real one, at least not for now."

"Carlo," Carlo said tersely, still ready to fight or run.

"I'm Dugan, as I said. What do ye like ta be eatin', laddie? I can give ye a menu ta look at, or ye can ask for what ye've a fancy for, and we might have it," he said, as he led him into the kitchen. The kitchen was large, well lit, incredibly busy and remarkably clean. And most telling of all, the seven men working inside were joking and laughing, even though they were moving with swift efficiency, and they didn't stop their teasing when Dugan entered. Instead, they turned some of it on him.

"Oh no, not another stray, Dugan! Look at him. We'll be cooking noon to night to fatten this one up," a short blond, who looked remarkably like the Pillsbury Doughboy, said in a distinctive southern twang.

Another laughed. "Not everyone wants to be as plump as you, Jasper," a surprisingly tall Asian said.

"Don't let Demetrius see him! He'll be having hissy fits for days!" an African-American man a decade older than them said with a teasing grin, working with dizzying speed, despite the prosthetic left arm ending in a hook that stood out boldly against his white chef's apron.

"Naw, don't let Demetrius see Michael seeing him!" a bony redhead teased, eyes sparkling in mischief as he looked past them at Michael, who'd trailed them inside.

“Now, now, lads, go easy on him. This is Carlo. He may be staying here for only the night, or more, if we’re lucky and you hooligans don’t scare him away.” Dugan turned to Michael. “Michael, ye need to get back on the floor, keep a weather eye out for shenanigans.”

“Yes, sir,” Michael said, surprising himself by how reluctant he sounded. He turned and walked resolutely back onto the floor of the club.

Dugan watched him go, intrigued. It looked like Michael was more than a little smitten with their newest charge. Michael was a good lad, but still, that could pose all kinds of problems or create all kinds of solutions, depending on which way the wind was blowing. Well, he’d just have to keep a careful watch. The new lad was extremely skittish and there was a rare air of naiveté and fragility about him, despite the ferocity of a tiger cub that apparently lurked just beneath the surface. He turned to the lads. “What can ye give Carlo that’ll be ready quick?” Dugan asked.

“Pick your poison, Dugan. It’s all good, hot and ready. They’ve been a little slow on ordering tonight. It’s Yoshi’s and Demetrius’s fault. They’ve got them wanting to eat something that’s not on the menu,” the African American said with a hearty laugh.

“What do ye fancy, lad?” Dugan asked.

Carlo looked completely overwhelmed.

“Never mind. You sit here, lad. I’ll fix you up a plate,” Dugan said, patting his hand in a fatherly way.

MICHAEL’S gaze was drawn inexorably back to the kitchen door, worry for the kid mixed with self-blame for the kid getting hurt churning his gut. What had brought the kid to this part of Hilldale? The clothes he was wearing—those designer jeans, Italian leather boots, and silk shirt—all screamed money. But there was no flashy watch or jewelry to go with it; it looked like it had been at least a week and more likely two since the kid had seen a shower; and he obviously hadn’t eaten in days.

Michael hadn’t realized how much it was affecting him until Danny told him to go on his dinner break. He’d tried to argue the point, knowing Dugan hadn’t wanted him in the kitchen, until Danny had shown him there was a ten-foot radius of clear floor all around him, including an area of normally prime real estate along the bar. He was

making their patrons nervous with his angry pacing and grim glower.

Hell, dinner meant he could go in the kitchen, right? See if the kid was okay? Michael tried to force the scowl off his face. He didn't want to scare the little guy any more than he already had been. But when he entered the kitchen, he saw he needn't have worried. The kid was deep in discussion with Dugan. But not so deep that he wasn't immediately aware Michael had entered. The kid's body tensed, a look of fear and readiness on his face, like he was prepared to bolt. But then, amazingly, recognition lit his eyes, replaced in the next instant with what looked suspiciously like awe, even hero worship. The look intensified an instant later to one of hunger. Michael groaned as a pink tongue licked part nervously, part sensuously over a soft upper lip. Then the kid was blushing darkly, his gaze instantly turning to his plate, and he began eating with ravenous intent, as if the hunger he'd just betrayed had anything to do with filling his belly.

Michael's cock stood up and took notice, like a pointer scenting his prey. God, had he ever been so transparent, so naïve, so blatantly sexy yet so innocent? So damn young? Thank God it looked like Dugan had apparently talked the kid into staying. Spitfire or not, the little guy probably wouldn't last the night on the streets, although he looked like he might have already lasted a few. Michael wondered why he was here, what had driven him to a gay strip joint in one of the shadier parts of Westside. Serious trouble lay only two blocks away to the west and south, but trouble like that knew no real boundaries. There were plenty of other predators out there like the one they'd downed who would think nothing of chewing the kid up and spitting him out. He could have died. If they'd just ignored the obvious, let the two men leave, he probably would have, all too easily.

Michael yanked his gaze away with effort. He went deeper into the kitchen and joked around with Jasper, as he scored a plate of his own. He sauntered casually over to Dugan and Carlo. "Mind if I join you?" he asked.

Dugan looked from the lad to Michael and back again. "Carlo?"

Carlo looked up and shook his head, eyes riveted to Michael's face. Dugan bit back a sigh. It was lust at first sight for the both of them, apparently. He'd have to have a word with Michael alone later, make sure he understood how fragile the lad's ego was. He'd learned a bit about the lad in the short time they'd been speaking. Also, he'd have to

make sure Demetrius didn't target him. Jealousy could be a particularly vicious green-eyed drag queen, and Demetrius could be deadly. He still had a ruthless, feral streak in him from his own time on the streets. It was that element of danger that drove the patrons wild for him. Dugan could see that Carlo had fire as well, though hidden far deeper.

"I'm Michael Carrick, by the way. I didn't give you my full name before," Michael said, holding out his hand, eager for the excuse to touch the kid.

Carlo reached out tentatively and shook, his own slender hand disappearing completely into the other man's grasp, which was huge and warm and strong and so incredibly gentle, when he could have easily ground Carlo's knuckles to powder. Michael's hand began massaging him, his thumb rubbing against the back of his hand. It felt remarkably intimate and erotic. With a final caress, Michael released his hand. Carlo kept it outstretched, feeling astonishingly bereft. Then he jerked his hand back down self-consciously, his face flushing, and he began shoveling food into his mouth again.

"Hey, easy, Wildcat. You don't want to make yourself sick. Eating too much after going without can really do a number on you. I know. I've been there. We pretty much all have, at one time or another," he said, nodding his head to indicate everyone in the kitchen.

Carlo flushed darkly again and stopped eating. Then he yawned widely and immediately looked chagrined, belatedly covering his mouth with his hand.

God, what a mouth the kid had. Jesus. Michael's heartbeat kicked into double-time. But a second yawn followed almost immediately after the first. Now that the kid was warm and full, now that he felt safe, the exhaustion was kicking in. He was going to be crashing any time now. "How about I take you up to your room?" Michael offered. Then he looked sheepishly at Dugan. "If that's all right?"

Dugan looked intently at him, conveying a host of messages in the single gaze. "Of course, Michael. Get the lad settled. Good night, Carlo. May your dreams be sweet."

"Good night. And thank you. I... thank you," he said again, getting up and following after Michael, like a tiger cub trailing after a full-grown Bengal.

THE second they were on the floor again, Carlo tensed back up, unconsciously moving closer to Michael. Michael made sure it was clear that Carlo was with him. Everyone kept a wide berth and they crossed the club unmolested.

David bit his lip and looked guiltily at Michael and Carlo, as he unclipped the velvet rope from the stanchion and let the two pass. "I'm sorry, Michael," he said, his face downcast but his eyes looking upward, like a contrite puppy.

"Don't sweat it, kid. Everyone makes mistakes; that's how you learn the ropes. Just as long as you learn from it. I know you'll do better next time. At least it worked out all right; no permanent damage done," Michael reassured him.

David looked immeasurably relieved.

Halfway up the stairs, Carlo tripped on a step. He nearly fell, but Michael's arm snaked around him instantly. "Hey, easy there," he said. God, it felt right, holding the little guy. He was all whipcord muscle and bone. Too much bone, not enough meat, but he felt strong, not fragile, hard and compact and wiry. Soft warmth suddenly became hard against his lower thigh, and Carlo's breath hitched as his erection swelled and all signs of sleepiness vanished.

"Are you done for the night?" Carlo blurted, before he had a chance to think better of it.

"Looking for some company?" Michael challenged, his eyes flicking up and then down his torso, with just enough interest, leashed hunger, controlled, contained.

"Perhaps," Carlo challenged with a touch of arrogance, his own eyes raking over Michael's body in appreciation.

That hadn't been the answer Michael had been expecting, nor the delivery. "You've done this before?" he asked in surprise.

"What, hooked up with a man I just met? Of course," Carlo lied boldly.

Michael had meant had he fucked someone before. The little guy looked like he'd never gotten beyond the hand job stage, if that. The kid had cherry written all over him. Which was a problem. Michael had never taken a cherry before. Too much drama, too high expectations. He liked his hook-ups without strings. On the other hand, if the kid was cherry, he'd be a tabula rosa, a blank slate, just waiting for him. He could



teach him just what he liked, how he liked it. Demetrius was amazing most ways, but there were certain things he wouldn't do. "Be careful what you wish for, kid," Michael warned.

Carlo's eyes flashed. "I am not a child," he snapped, spinning away from Michael and stalking up the stairs.

Huh. Michael hadn't expected that, either. He grinned. A little hellcat, all right. His cock hardened painfully at the thought of making the little brunet purr.

Carlo hesitated at the top of the stairs, realizing to his frustration that he couldn't continue storming off. He had no idea where to go. He suddenly felt very much the child Michael had accused him of being.

"Fourth door on the left, once you get past that sealed door," Michael supplied helpfully. "You need a key to get in, but it's a one-way lock. You can open it without one from inside," he assured Carlo, demonstrating with his own key. Carlo nodded. "The staff rooms are all to the left of the staircase and on the other side of this door. Each room's got its own private bathroom, complete with shower stall," he added helpfully.

"Which one is yours?" Carlo asked.

"Three doors down from yours, on the right. Feel free to knock if you need anything later. I work until two a.m., so I won't be there until then, but I'll be up for a bit after that. Most nights I don't go to sleep until four or five," he said, trying to make the invitation casual.

Michael led Carlo to the appropriate door and opened it with a second key. "There's stuff inside you can use and keep, a toothbrush and toothpaste, soap and shampoo and stuff, all of it new. No strings. There should be at least one or two extra sets of clothes in the bureau, too, that should fit you, as well as some new socks and underwear in different sizes. Some guys when they come, what they have on isn't really wearable anymore. Dugan keeps the rooms ready. We've got a couple of washers and dryers in the basement, detergent too; everyone uses them."

Carlo entered warily. The room was small, sparsely furnished, everything in it obviously at least secondhand. He tried to hide his disdain. It wasn't the mansion full of expensive antiques he was used to, but it wasn't as if he'd seen better the past two weeks. It might be well worn, but at least it was clean. Compared to the shelter he'd tried that first night, before he learned better, it was heaven. The bed was neatly made and incredibly tempting. An image of him and Michael twined

around each other on it flooded his mind.

“Oh, and the door’s got a deadbolt. You’ll be safe here tonight,” Michael assured Carlo.

Carlo looked back over his shoulder. “What if I don’t want to be safe?” he challenged.

“You’re playing with fire, kid. Don’t offer something like that unless you mean it,” Michael scolded.

When Carlo didn’t respond he sighed. “Breakfast is pretty much whenever, mostly between ten a.m. and two p.m. As you can guess, we’re pretty late sleepers around here. Good night, Carlo.” He closed the door and headed back down the hall.

Carlo felt a bizarre mixture of relief and disappointment flooding him. He drew the bolt and looked around him carefully. No other doors, other than to the tiny bathroom. He was alone. Safe. Thirteen days of tension and terror leached from him in a tumultuous rush. It was fortunate he’d been standing beside the bed. He fell onto it, his strength evaporating. He was asleep before his eyes closed, his booted feet still on the floor, the single overhead bulb still glaring brightly.

MICHAEL paced the club floor restlessly the rest of the night. The venomous looks Demetrius was flinging his way didn’t bode well for extracurricular activities once he was off shift, either. Not that he was actually even interested in Demetrius at the moment. Images of Carlo kept flashing across his mind’s eye. He was so screwed. It didn’t usually happen this way. Shit, it had never happened this way. It was like the kid was an instant obsession. He didn’t know whether he hoped the kid stayed beyond the night, or whether he hoped he’d leave in the morning. They’d know when the kid did; there was no way he could sneak out. The halls were all monitored by hidden cameras, like the rest of the club, and someone was always in the security booth. Between the strays Dugan picked up and some of their clientele, Dugan had learned over the years to be cautious. There weren’t any cameras in the rooms, though. He wished there were. He wanted to see Carlo again. Hell, he didn’t just want to, he needed to. It was like an itch he couldn’t scratch. Another kind of itch; he had the other kind too, but his right hand would be able to take care of that problem later tonight.

By the time Michael finally got off shift, he was still completely wired. He bounded up the stairs and into the private wing, stopping just

outside of Carlo's door, debating what he should do. What if the kid was up and waiting for him? What if he was playing head games, hoping Michael would knock, like it was a test or something? Crap, he hated not knowing someone well enough to tell stuff like that. He knocked gently, not wanting to wake Carlo if he was sleeping, but loud enough he'd hear if he wasn't. Nothing. He knocked again, just to be sure, but there was no answer. With a sigh, he headed to his room. Even if Demetrius wasn't pissed at him it wouldn't have mattered. It wasn't visions of the Greek in his bed that had kept him hard and horny all night.

CARLO stiffened, instantly awake. Who, what, where? He scanned the well-lit room tensely, ready to spring. Something had wakened him. There was a gentle knock at his door. Someone was outside his door, wanting to get in. The cheap travel clock on the old, battered nightstand read 2:15 a.m. Carlo heard a sigh, and soft footsteps receding down the hall. To his left. Michael? Had that been Michael?

He was out of the bed in the next instant, silent as a cat. He pulled the door open soundlessly. The blond giant was halfway to his room, trudging wearily, his head slightly bowed and shoulders slumped. Tired or disappointed? The thought that he might be the latter thrilled Carlo. He gaped as in the next instant, Michael spun, dropping into a crouch with astonishing speed, a combat knife miraculously appearing in his right hand, which was drawn back to throw.

Carlo's hands flew instinctively in front of his face in a futile effort to protect himself, but it wasn't necessary. Recognition lit in Michael's eyes, and the knife disappeared back into whatever unseen sheath had held it as he rose, an apologetic look on his face, his hands out in a calming gesture. "Sorry, Carlo. Old habits die hard. So do old soldiers," he said softly, as he approached cautiously, obviously afraid of spooking him. "I knocked, in case you were still up and wanted some company. Um... to talk or... whatever," he said.

Carlo's eyes flicked up and down his torso. "So I see. Or does pulling a knife always make you hard?" he challenged.

"I've been hard the whole frigging night. My dick's going to fall off if I don't do something about it soon," Michael said.

"Now that would be a terrible tragedy," Carlo purred, stepping closer and closing his hand around Michael's cock boldly.

Holy shit! The kid didn't act like a novice, like he was new,

desperate, skittish. "I'm giving you one chance to change your mind about this. I don't screw around. When I fuck, I fuck. You don't want to be pounded into my mattress, take your hand away, go back inside, no harm, no foul," Michael offered.

But instead Carlo pulled the door to his room closed with his free hand and then tugged on Michael's cock. That was all the invitation Michael needed. They were in his room, the door bolted, in under a minute. He reached for Carlo, but the kid had dropped to his knees. Michael's zipper was open and his cock was in the little guy's mouth before he could blink. His eyes widened in eager surprise. Demetrius was amazing, but he didn't suck cock. It had been too long since he'd felt this. Michael grabbed the kid by the hair, but was careful not to force the guy to take more than he could. He was huge; most guys gagged before they got him halfway.... Holy fuck! He felt Carlo's throat open for him, like a Madison Street whore. Christ, the kid was taking him, all of him! Holy shit, the kid was loving it. He'd never had anyone so eager to suck him before. And he thought this kid was a virgin? He felt like a pro. Shit! Holy crap. And he was letting him suck him bare? Was he out of his fucking mind? This kid obviously wasn't the cherry he'd assumed him to be. They hadn't tested the guy yet. They all got tested, Dugan insisted on it. Not that they'd get thrown out for being sick, but so they'd know, so they'd fix what could be fixed and treat the rest as best they could. The kid could have anything. He pulled out of the eager mouth, having to tug on Carlo's hair to keep him off him. "No, wait, stop!" Michael said.

To his astonishment, Carlo looked devastated, completely crushed. "You don't want me?" he asked, his beautiful dark eyes wet with tears.

"No! I mean, yes, Jesus, of course I want you! I just... I want to do this on the bed. I don't want to waste it in your mouth, when I could have that tight little ass of yours wrapped around me instead," Michael said.

Carlo didn't look convinced.

"Take your clothes off," Michael commanded. "I want you on that bed, open and eager for me."

For a moment, Carlo looked like he was going to balk at the command. There was a flash of rebellion in his eyes, way better than the despair from before, but then Carlo complied with complete alacrity. Michael shed his pants and opened the nightstand drawer and pulled out a condom and the lube.

“You ever done this part before? Be honest, kid. I don’t want to go too fast if you haven’t,” Michael said.

“I’m not a kid,” Carlo snapped. “I’m twenty-one.” But he sounded more bitter than angry.

“Poor fucking guy. You’re a real Methuselah, aren’t you?” Michael said, rolling the condom onto his cock and lubricating it. “Then slick yourself up for me,” he commanded, tossing him the lube.

The little guy took it and began prepping himself. Holy shit. He wasn’t just getting himself slick, he was putting on a show.

“Jesus. Now it’s my turn,” Michael said, taking the lube and slicking up his whole hand. Not that he’d fist the kid or anything, but he wasn’t sure how many fingers the kid could take. His were a lot thicker than the kid’s, and he wanted to get all his fingers ready at once. Damn, the kid had a sweet cock. Long and narrow, beautiful. He wrapped his right hand around it as he stuck the index finger from his left into the kid’s hole. Christ, the kid was tight! But then he relaxed and opened around him, the same way his mouth had around his cock. He slipped a second finger in, scissoring them, and then a third, tearing his gaze from his fingers to Carlo’s face. Carlo’s head was flung back, and he was biting his lip. Michael was worried at first, until he realized it was ecstasy he saw, not pain. Shit, the kid was ready; more than ready. He withdrew his fingers and pressed the head of his cock against the kid’s hole. He looked up, wanting to see Carlo’s face again. He was shocked to see tears in his eyes, beginning to spill down his cheeks.

He started to pull away guiltily, when with a desperate cry Carlo thrust forward, ramming his ass against him. He felt his cock sink into Carlo’s incredible wet heat. “Please, please take me, love me. I’ll be good for you, I swear I will. Please, please, don’t stop, don’t leave me,” Carlo begged.

“Hey, hush. It’s okay. I want you, Carlo. God I want you,” Michael soothed. He pushed in deeper, afraid he’d hurt him, but Carlo had obviously done this before. He pushed toward Michael, meeting every thrust, the muscles in his ass tightening and loosening around Michael’s cock, driving him wild. He was losing it, losing all control. He began pounding into the kid, all thought of being gentle vanishing in the face of the kid’s insatiable need.

He pumped the kid’s cock wildly with his right hand, realizing he’d been ignoring it. Seconds later, with a roar, he came. Carlo did too, a

moment later, spurt after spurt of hot cum painting Michael's tiger-striped shirt. Shit, he'd never even taken it off! He tore it off now and fell forward onto the bed, careful not to crush Carlo. He pulled the kid tenderly toward him without thinking, just wanting to hold him. Demetrius hated touching him afterward, said he was too hot and sweaty and.... Carlo was a snuggler. With a contented sigh he settled into Michael's embrace, his delicate fingers running across Michael's back, his chest. He was shaking, trembling.

"Shit, are you cold?" Michael said in surprise, pulling up the blanket he seldom used around him.

Carlo shook his head mutely, burying his face in Michael's armpit.

"Hey, oh yuck, you don't want to go there, kid. I get all sweaty. I stink after sex," Michael protested. Not that the kid smelled like a bed of roses, of course. It hadn't hit home quite so hard before, but he was definitely stinky.

Carlo shook his head mutely. Michael tugged gently on his hair, making him look up. The kid was biting his lip again, the tears streaming down his face now. Michael felt a fist of guilt clutch his heart. Crap, he'd hurt the kid, maybe even forced him without realizing it. He'd obviously totally traumatized him. Christ, he hadn't so much as kissed him first. The kid had blown him, then he'd commanded him to strip and had fucked him. He was a complete and total asshole. He was....

"Thank you! Thank you, thank you, thank you! I'm sorry I wasn't good enough, but I don't know what you like yet. I swear I can be what you want. I...." Carlo bit his lip harder, choking back a sob.

Holy Christ! Who the hell had done what to this poor kid that he could think that, after what they'd just done? "Hey. Stop, Carlo. I don't want to hear you say that. I don't want you to think that. You were fucking amazing, kid. Jesus, you were probably the best fuck of my entire life. I've never had anyone as eager for it as you, as good at it. Whatever guy told you different, he's one fucked-up asshole. Don't you believe a word he said to you. There's all kinds of people like that, kid, talking shit like that, trying to make you feel small so they can feel big. I don't care if he was a boyfriend or a one-night stand, or a series of either of those. No matter who or how many people ever said anything like that, they need to start fucking girls, 'cause they sure as hell aren't ever gonna find what they need with another man, if you weren't exactly what they should have been looking for," Michael said. "You're perfect,

Carlo, abso-fucking-lutely perfect. Don't ever let anyone tell you different," he insisted.

To prove he meant it, Michael kissed him. He expected the usual awkward fucking-a-stranger kind of kiss; it was always that way for him, with first kisses. But this... this was amazing. Carlo's tongue danced against his, warm and wet. Carlo was kissing him like his life depended on it. He threw himself into the kiss the way he'd thrown himself into the blowjob and the sex.

Michael wouldn't have thought he could get it up again the rest of the night, the way Carlo had drained him. He was twice the kid's age, pushing forty-three when Carlo couldn't be more than a few weeks past twenty-one, if his ID hadn't been fake. They were usually good at spotting the fakes, but David was new to the door; he might have fucked that part up too. A moment later Michael ceased to care. He barely had the presence of mind to get out another condom before the thinking part of his brain switched completely off and he buried himself in Carlo's warmth again.

CARLO woke up to the incredible, wonderful feeling of a heavy arm across his chest, a warm body wrapped possessively around him. For a single, fleeting, wonderful moment of ecstasy Carlo thought it was Eduardo, that the past two weeks had been some sort of nightmare, that Eduardo still loved him, wanted him. But there were no familiar dark chest-hair curls tickling his nose; this chest was smooth and sleek and hard. Carlo looked up into Michael's face and was surprised to see Michael looking back at him, a look of tenderness on his face, his eyes the warm blue of the sky.

Michael reached out a hand and caressed his face. "Good morning, beautiful," Michael said, the words a contented rumble from his chest into Carlo's ear.

"Good morning," Carlo replied, unsure what else he should say. Or do. Eduardo had always told him what he wanted, until he'd learned to anticipate his every desire. This was uncharted territory.

"You should probably head back to your room, shower and change. You could shower here, but then we'd never make it to breakfast, or maybe lunch either, and I'm starved," Michael said. "Besides, Dugan might swing by your room, and I wouldn't want him to worry." Not that he would, Michael realized with a grimace. Whoever had been pulling

security duty last night could tell him. The cameras would have shown where Carlo went, and that he was still there. Crap. He hoped Dugan wasn't going to be pissed at him for this. He hated disappointing Dugan, the way he'd hated disappointing his dad and then the sarge or the lieutenant. Not his captain. He hadn't given a rat's ass what that prick had thought.

Carlo obediently began putting his clothes back on. Wordlessly. Shit. Was the little guy mad at him?

"Um... I'm not kicking you out or anything. I mean....," Michael said.

Carlo looked up, confused. "You don't want me to go?" he asked. "But I thought... I'm sorry; I misunderstood. I thought you meant...." He was starting to look agitated again.

"Hey," Michael said, going to him. "Cut that out, okay? Stop apologizing every two seconds when you're not doing anything wrong. How old are you, Carlo? Really?" The kid didn't act like he was twenty-one; he acted a lot younger.

"Twenty-one. Why?" Carlo asked, sounding puzzled.

"Can I see your ID?"

Carlo looked a little wary, but he nodded. He pulled a narrow leather wallet out of his pocket, took out a California non-driver's ID card, and handed it to Michael. Carlo Milan, July 1, 1988. Yup, it looked legit. Guy had his twenty-first birthday just a little over two weeks ago. 1403 Manchester? Holy shit. That was in Hillside. Only the wealthiest people in the city could afford to live up there. "You're a long way from home," he said, as he handed back his license. "Parents kick you out for being gay?" he guessed.

"My parents are dead," Carlo said coldly. "They were killed when I was fourteen." Then he was heading for the door.

"Hey, I'm sorry. I shouldn't have pried. I just... I'm worried about you, Carlo." Carlo stopped at the door; he didn't turn back around, but he didn't open it, either. "I can see someone hurt you and I don't want to hurt you worse. If you want to keep it close to the chest for now, that's fine. No one makes you tell your story here. You can tell it when you're ready, or never, to Dugan or to any of us or all of us. Can I walk you down to breakfast? We both shower and change first, meet in, say, half an hour at your room?"

Carlo hesitated, then nodded and left.



Oh man. He probably shouldn't have slept with Carlo. No, make that definitely shouldn't have. But he had, so now he was honor bound to do as right by him as he could.

MICHAEL was relieved Demetrius wasn't at breakfast. He was likely still in bed. Demetrius was definitely not a morning person. He slept late even for them. Carlo looked and smelled terrific. He was wearing a bright blue button-down shirt that had seen better days and a pair of somewhat baggy chinos, both of which he'd apparently scavenged from the bureau. His hair was amazing, fluffy black and glossy; he'd obviously blow-dried it after his shower. Michael fought back the urge to run his fingers through it. Dugan had already glowered at him when Carlo wasn't looking. He was in for a talking to as it was; it was best not to exacerbate the situation.

Dugan and the others were friendly, solicitous of Carlo, as Michael had known they'd be, whereas Michael received a few smirks and more than one crude hand gesture. It was pretty obvious they all knew whose room Carlo had spent the night in. He was really not looking forward to seeing Demetrius this morning.

The others did most of the talking; Carlo mostly listened. Then Dugan carefully brought up the subject of Carlo staying, telling him he could work in the back, in the kitchen, or at bussing tables, unless he had any experience at waiting on them.

"I want to stay. But I want to be a dancer," Carlo said.

There was a friendly roar of laughter, and Dugan cut in before Carlo took it the wrong way. "Lad, most everyone who comes here wants to be a dancer. But it takes practice. Like any other kind of dancing, there's an art to it. It's not as easy as people think. You'll start in the kitchen or on the serving floor and work your way up to it," he said gently.

"But I can do it! I've danced before, like that. Let me show you," Carlo protested.

Dugan smiled indulgently at him. "All right. I'll let you audition for me. On the condition you abide by my decision. If I say you need to work with the lads, learn the art, and either work the kitchen or bus tables to earn your keep meanwhile, you'll do it? Either that, or you're free to go, of course," he said.

Carlo's eyes widened in panic. "No! No, I'll do whatever you say. Don't throw me out, please?" he begged.

"Ach, lad, easy! No one's throwing you anywhere. People aren't trash, to be thrown away," Dugan argued. "At least not in my place they aren't," he qualified, seeing the look of devastation on Carlo's face. "Come, lad. Now's as good a time as any. You too, Theo. I'll want your opinion as well. And Danny and Michael. The rest of you, stay put," Dugan said.

They exited the kitchen, heading into the main part of the club. "Onto the stage, lad. Michael, show him the way, and then come down to watch," he added. "Danny, you cue the music. No need to bother with the lights. Any piece in particular, lad?"

"'Livin' La Vida Loca.' I heard you play it last night," Carlo called out from backstage.

"That's a tough piece, lad. A might fast and short for a dance. Ye need time to work your crowd into a frenzy. Are ye sure?" Dugan asked.

To their surprise, Carlo looked confident, almost haughty as he appeared and pulled off his boots. He was wearing only the button-down electric blue shirt and pair of loose chinos; he hadn't put on a costume. "I'm sure. I've stripped to it before," he said, ducking back off the stage.

This would be a true test, seeing what the lad could do in street clothes without rehearsing, to a song like that. Dugan was sure he couldn't possibly be as good as he thought he was, but he'd be sure to let him down gently.

The distinctive, vibrant music began, and Carlo appeared on stage. But this wasn't the skittish young man they knew. This was the man who'd dropped to his knees and sucked Michael like a well-trained whore, who'd spread himself and impaled himself eagerly on Michael's cock. Every movement, every gesture was pure, raw, confident, unleashed sex.

Each fling of his hands, each snap of his hips, each undone button had the small knot of men watching him mesmerized. By the time his shirt was peeled halfway down his torso, the other men, who'd been peeking through the kitchen door, had joined the rest on the floor, drawn to Carlo like sailors to a Siren. There were muffled grunts and the sounds of loud panting as men adjusted spontaneous erections to more comfortable positions, as barely restrained hands yanked back from zippers. By the time Carlo's pants joined his shirt on the floor, revealing

the borrowed glaringly white BVDs he was wearing, fists were clenched and lips were being bitten from the strain of restraining their hands. When Carlo flung himself onto the ground in a grand finale, legs spread, pelvis thrust into the air, head flung back, Michael leaped in front of them, his back to the stage, actually growling in challenge, like a wildcat protecting his mate.

There was dead silence as the music ended, and then a wild roar of catcalls and wolf whistles and men pounding on the table.

Carlo stood, face flushed, torso sweating, eyes wild and glazed looking.

“Ye dance tonight, lad, God help us all. I’m going to double the shift of bouncers when you’re on stage, though, and pray ye don’t spark a riot,” Dugan qualified, using all his willpower to keep from adjusting his own erection. These boys were like sons to him, and here he was lusting after Carlo like a schoolboy! He needed to call Rodrigo to see if he was free. It had been too damn long since he’d gotten laid. He had a club to run; he couldn’t let the other lads see him affected like this by one of their own. But the lad was an incubus with the face and heart and soul of an angel. Lord, he’d best not let Rodrigo see him! There was no telling how the poor man might react. Rodrigo was more than a little touched in the head. He had been for decades, ever since the war. “We’ll discuss salary and the like later. Michael, why don’t you take him upstairs for a while? All right, lads, show’s over. Nothing more to see here,” Dugan said to the others, ushering them back into the kitchen as Carlo quickly dressed.

MICHAEL could barely keep his hands off Carlo all the way up the stairs. Carlo wasn’t making it easy for him either. He was panting wildly and rubbing against Michael at every opportunity, like a cat in heat. They dove into Carlo’s room, slamming the door and sliding the lock home. Carlo ripped his clothes off in desperation, in frantic need, with none of the finesse he’d shown before. Michael tore his own clothes off, literally, but he was oblivious to the ripping fabric, all his attention focused on Carlo. Michael hurled him to the bed and dove down on top of him. His hand flew to the nightstand. Thank God Dugan carefully stocked every newbie’s room with condoms and lube. This lover was completely different from the one he’d held last night. He was a clawing, hissing, demanding spitfire. He whipped Michael into a frenzy with every

scratch, every bite. By the time both men fell back onto the bed, panting and spent, they were both soaked in sweat, and Michael's scratched back was stinging like a bitch from the salty sweat.

When Michael could finally speak again, he asked the question that had been burning through his brain since Carlo had begun to dance. "Where in the hell did you learn to dance like that?"

To his dismay Carlo stiffened and began shaking. Shit, shit, shit! "Never mind. It doesn't matter; you're here with me now. I'm going to protect you, take care of you, see that no one ever hurts you again," he soothed, realizing to his amazement that he meant it. He'd never felt like this before, so incredibly protective and possessive of a lover.

But Carlo stiffened worse. He began trying to push him away, but he was pinned under Michael's heavy arm, by his thigh. "I'm not a child! I'm a man! I take care of myself now! I don't need you; I don't need anyone! You don't own me, no one does! Get out! Get out of my room! It's mine! Dugan gave it to me! I dance for him, not for you!" he spat.

Michael pulled back in surprise, in hurt.

"Out! Get out!" Carlo screamed shrilly again.

Michael leaped out of the bed and snatched up his tattered clothes. "No wonder your last lover threw you out, you fucked-up little shit," he snarled, and then he fled the room, naked, torn clothes clutched to his chest, a knife of pain burning in his heart. He slammed the door so hard the wall shook and the frame cracked.

Carlo stared at the door and then collapsed onto the floor. He began crying his broken heart out onto the worn wood.

Michael double-timed it to his room, slamming that door too with a thunderous boom. He all but ripped the bathroom door off the hinges going inside. He got into the shower and turned it on, full blast, cranked all the way over to hot. He let the water slam against his stinging back as he leaned into the tile wall and began pounding his fist against it, oblivious to the cracks that began spider webbing out from beneath his hand, as he began sobbing great, choking, tough-guy sobs, steam rising all around him as his back reddened under the brutally scalding spray.

A FEW seconds after the doors slammed, half a dozen people stood in the hall looking wildly back and forth, some still half-asleep, Danny wrapped dripping in a towel, Peter with a knife clenched in his right

hand, and Gustaf with a gun in his left. “What the fuck just happened?” Danny demanded, as Dugan ran into the hall. He’d heard what had sounded like explosions.

“It sounded like Michael’s voice, and the new guy,” Jasper volunteered.

Dugan began issuing commands. “Danny, check on Michael. Better take Will with you, the state he’s in. Gustaf, Peter, put the gun and the knife away. Back to your rooms with the rest of you. We’ll call you if we need you,” he said.

Dugan could hear the sounds of wild sobbing coming from Carlo’s room when he reached the door. The lad didn’t answer, but Dugan discovered the door wasn’t locked, and he went in.

It took a long while to get Carlo to talk, but Dugan was a patient man, and he’d dealt with more than one hurt lad over the years. The poor boy’s life story came out in jerky sobs, how he’d been orphaned at fourteen, how his godfather had taken him in. Only the man, Eduardo—Carlo wouldn’t tell him his last name—had not treated Carlo as a son. Far from it. He’d kept the boy out of school, told the state he was homeschooling him, but there’d never actually been a tutor. Money must have changed hands somewhere; the state tested homeschooled lads. The only thing the boy had been taught was sex: what to do, how to do it. The one goal in Carlo’s life had been to pleasure Eduardo, to see that his every need was met. The boy had been naught more than a sex slave, for seven years.

Then, two weeks ago, two days after his twenty-first birthday, he’d been kicked out, without warning, without notice. Eduardo was tired of him. He said Carlo was too spoiled, too demanding, but Dugan realized the poor lad was more likely merely too old for the sick bastard who’d been using him. Eduardo had told Carlo he was moving back to Italy, that he had a new boy there, one eager to please him. Carlo had begged and pleaded and finally enraged the heartless bastard enough that he’d had two of his men drag the boy off into a car with nothing but the clothes on his back and dump him in Dockside. It was a miracle that, dressed as he was, the lad had lived to make it into Westside from there. But he had no clue how to take care of himself, no skills, no trade, not even a high school diploma. The cruelty of a man who could do such a thing, who could twist a child so, was beyond Dugan. Aye, he’d seen worse. At least the man hadn’t been a blood relation, at least Carlo

hadn't been beaten as well, but that was a small mercy. Thank God the lad had found his way to them!

Dugan talked to Carlo some more, calming him, telling him a little about Michael, enough so he could see how much he'd hurt him. When Dugan felt it was safe to leave the lad alone, he did. He needed to hear how Michael was doing.

Danny was standing in the hallway, looking incredibly relieved to see Dugan. "I got him out of the shower. He scalded his back pretty badly before I got to him, and he was all scratched up too. He hurt his hand, trying to put it through the bathroom wall. Jasper's put some burn ointment on him, wrapped his back, but he thinks he needs to have his hand X-rayed and that a doctor should maybe look at his back. He's afraid it might get infected. But that's just the physical part. Mentally he's a wreck. I haven't seen him like this in years, Dugan, not since he first came here. You need to talk to him. I'm hoping he'll listen to you," Danny said.

"Aye, he will. I've a lot to tell him. Once he hears, I think they'll be able to work it out between them. Meanwhile, do what you can to get the club ready for tonight. Rework the staffing so Michael's not on the floor and we certainly won't have Carlo dance tonight. Thanks, Danny. Don't worry; it will be fine," Dugan assured him.

Three hours later, when Dugan and Michael returned from the hospital, Carlo was one of the first to greet them. "I'm so sorry, Michael! I didn't mean it. I just... I'm...."

Michael looked intently at him. "I'm sorry too, Carlo. I never should have said what I did. You've gotta watch that with me. It's reflex. When somebody hurts me, I hurt back. Luckily it takes a lot to get through this thick skin of mine, but I let you get in real deep, Carlo. Talk to me, okay? Dugan told me a lot. Christ, that fucker's lucky he's in Italy already. I had a friend who's a cop, his name's Jordy Williams, check on his house. It's all closed up already. He and his partner Gary want to bring that fucker up on charges for what he did to you. Try to build a case, arrest him, get him extradited back here to stand trial. Shit, I wasn't supposed to tell you about that yet. You're probably not ready to hear stuff like that, but I'm still a little loopy with what they gave me for my hand. I kind of fucked up, cracked a few bones," he said sheepishly, holding up his hand, which had a cast from his fingers halfway to his elbow.

“Come upstairs? Talk to me? I want to learn all about you,” Carlo said.

“I’d like that. Dugan told me I’m not working tonight. Guess I’m going to be on light duty for a while anyway, ’til the cast comes off,” Michael said.

“I’m working tonight. I’m going to dance,” Carlo said proudly.

“Are ye sure you’re up to it, lad? Ye could start tomorrow,” Dugan offered. Apparently no one had told Carlo he wouldn’t be dancing tonight.

“No, please! I... I mean, please, Dugan, I want to. Demetrius has been showing me the costumes. He’s helped me pick one out for tonight that will be perfect,” Carlo said.

Dugan and Michael exchanged looks. “Demetrius? I think we’d better go have a talk with Theo, Carlo,” Michael suggested. But when they did, they were pleasantly surprised to discover Demetrius had apparently truly befriended Carlo. Theo approved the costume and had already checked it for sabotage and found nothing.

When Michael thanked Demetrius later, in private, Demetrius shrugged. “I was getting tired of you anyway, Michael,” he said, but then he sighed when he saw the flash of hurt across Michael’s face. “No, I am sorry. That is not true. But I see the way you look at him. In all these months, you never looked at me that way. And you never broke your hand over me and we fought more than once, eh? What we had, it was fantastic, but it was only sex. With him, I think you have more. I hope you are both happy together. Now go, before he thinks you feel differently,” Demetrius urged.

Michael thanked him, grinning, and headed up the stairs.

HOURS later, Michael stood behind the stage with Carlo. Michael had a table reserved right in front, but he’d wanted to give Carlo a good-luck kiss. His three rehearsals that afternoon with full stage lighting had gone without a hitch, but he figured Carlo would still be nervous.

He discovered that Carlo was completely frantic, excited and terrified all at once. “I... I never danced for anyone else, other than this morning. I... I’m not sure.... What if...?”

“If you dance half as well as you did this morning, we’re going to have half the club going upstairs or down the street after you’re done.

But they'll come back tomorrow night, and the next. They're going to love you." Michael's throat constricted a little at the word "love", his heart hammering wildly.

Then Carlo was kissing him, a desperate needy kiss, and suddenly it didn't matter. Nothing mattered but this man. "Dance for me, my love. Dance for me," Michael whispered in his ear. Then he turned and ran down the stage stairs, as the intro music cued.

"We have a new face at The Tiger Club tonight, a new body," Dugan said into the mic. "His name is Carlo, gentlemen, and once you see him dance, as the song says, you'll never be the same." With that, "Livin' La Vida Loca" cued, the house lights went down, the spot came on, and Carlo appeared on stage.

"Dance for me," Michael mouthed, his eyes riveted to his lover, his love. And Carlo began to dance.

Carlo stood in front of a room full of men, each gazing hungrily at him, completely enraptured. But Carlo danced for only one.



MARIA ALBERT lives in the California Bay Area with her two daughters and several dozen friends, most of the latter of whom are still trapped in binders on her bookshelves. She looks forward to releasing many more of them in the coming months. Maria's Dreamspinner publications include:

~ "Score Two for the Good Guys," *Make Me a Match, Volume Two*  
Jeremy Masterson's & Rick McFarlan's story

~ "Christmas Angel," December 2008 *Advent Calendar*, Day 26  
Dillon Gosling's & Gabriel (Angel) D'Angelo's story

~ "The Second Time Is the Charm," *Reflections of Love*  
Sean Wycliff's & Jefferson Jeffries's story  
plus further adventures of Jeremy & Rick and Dillon & Angel

~ "Man of Honor," June 2009 *To Have and to Hold*, Day 6  
Further adventures of Dillon & Angel

# *Unorthodox Utopia*

G.S. Wiley

THE first time I saw Jeff, he was kneeling on an uneven laminate floor with another man's cock in his mouth.

The floor was in the back bedroom of a condo on North Dearborn. In addition to Jeff and his partner, the room held a cameraman with a massive lens, a guy with a boom mike, and a bored-looking topless woman with blood-red lipstick and brittle bleached-blond hair. She'd clearly had one too many bad dye jobs; my hands practically itched to give the poor woman a good long session with a high quality leave-in conditioner.

The man who'd brought me here laughed—a loud, sharp bark—and said, “Like what you see, huh?” He was George Standish, the director-*cum*-impresario in charge of this little operation.

“Do you mind?” the cameraman asked, but he didn't turn around, and Jeff didn't stop sucking. Good thing, too, because his muscular friend on the narrow, unmade bed looked like he was getting close to the finish line. George jerked his head. “Come on, Steve. Let's leave the ‘artistes’ to their work.”

He led me out of the room and into the kitchen. It was small, but there was a fridge and a microwave in one corner. I looked at someone's souvenir mug from New York City while George said, “If you take the job, it'll be real easy work. We shoot four days a week, and we'd probably only need you for an hour a day. Two, tops.”

George was a big man, broad-shouldered and heavy, and he constantly chewed Nicorette gum. I'd met him through a longtime client of mine, Miranda Cooper, when I mentioned I was looking for a way to make some extra money on the side.

“You're looking for someone to do hairstyles and makeup for your movie shoots?” I clarified. That was what Miranda had told me.

“Yeah,” George confirmed. “Nothing too fancy, though. We’re on a budget here. You done this kind of thing before?”

I nodded. Before I opened my own salon in Chicago, I’d done hair and makeup for a few commercials and the occasional low-budget indie movie out in LA. “And you’re not, you know, squeamish or nothing, right?” George went on.

I looked up at him, alarm bells suddenly ringing in my head. “What?”

George’s gum cracked. “Well, we ain’t exactly shooting the fucking *Gilmore Girls* here.”

I felt suddenly uncomfortable. “It’s all legal, though, right?”

“No kids, if that’s what you mean. I don’t deal in that shit.” George looked disgusted at the idea. “We mostly do threesomes and lesbian stuff.” His disgust turned into a smirk. “That’s our biggest market, but I don’t suppose you’d be interested in that.”

“Not really.”

“And then there’s the gay angle. We don’t sell a hell of a lot, but our little Jeffrey sure is a hit with those guys. Just started a few months ago too.” George sounded proud, almost paternal.

“I can see why,” I admitted.

George laughed, his big belly shaking like a perverted Santa Claus in jeans and a sweaty black T-shirt. “Yeah, well, if you’re thinking of getting any perks off him, think again. He’s got a boyfriend who makes sure all his affairs are strictly on-camera, if you know what I mean.”

I was sure I could guess. I changed the subject. “What about money?”

George got a pained look on his face, but he was a businessman. He named a figure; I named a higher one. We met in the middle. It wasn’t a fortune, but keeping a new salon afloat in Chicago is like keeping a badly house-trained Great Dane from ruining your carpets: you need all the help you can get.

I shook George’s meaty hand and he said, “Let me introduce you to the team.”

The team consisted of three cameramen, a sound guy, and an assortment of actors who, according to George, usually came in a couple of days a week, filmed a few pornographic scenes for Internet release, and were paid immediately in cash. “It’s a sweet gig for them,” George

told me, but from the deadness in the eyes of the brittle blonde who introduced herself as “Brandi with an ‘i’,” I wasn’t convinced.

The guy who’d been on the receiving end of Jeff’s blowjob called himself Nick. He gave me a hearty, manly handshake when George introduced us. He’d pulled on a pair of boxer shorts, but his barrel chest and rock-hard abs were still on public display. Normally, I’d have had a hard time looking away, but at that moment Jeff came up beside him.

He was fully clothed, in black jeans and a burgundy T-shirt with a collar and an embroidered crest. Jeff looked more like a prep school senior than a porn star, and when he said, “Nice to meet you, Stephen,” his voice was light and gentle.

“Steve’s got his own hair salon,” George said. No one looked particularly impressed, although Jeff gave me an encouraging smile. “There’s Sam too,” George went on, when no one made a comment. “He’s our tech guy. Runs our server and uploads our files or whatever the hell it is. He works out of an apartment on West Wacker.” This was Miranda Cooper’s sister’s brother-in-law, the reason I’d found out about the job.

Jeff glanced at his watch, an old-fashioned gold circle on a leather band, and said, “I’d better run, George.” He pulled a messenger bag over his shoulder, which made him look even younger than he had before. I knew he wasn’t a teenager—George had sworn he didn’t deal in kids—but he couldn’t have been more than twenty-five. Young enough to make me feel like a pervert.

“You’ll need to bring your own supplies,” George told me, as the others filtered back to their jobs. “We’ll see what we can figure out for reimbursement. But none of that fancy expensive shit, huh? We’re not filming a fucking Academy Award-winner.”

“Okay.”

George smiled like we were kindred spirits, and slapped me on the back nearly hard enough to dislodge teeth. “Great. See you tomorrow, Steve.”

MY salon, Utopia, was on the north side of the Loop. When I got back, my business partner Antonia DiFranco was still there, sweeping up hair from the linoleum floor.

“You taking that porn job, then?” Toni swept the hair into the

dustpan.

“It’ll only be a few evenings a week.”

“Think you’ll bring in enough to hire a shampoo boy?”

“If he’s willing to work for minimum wage and the occasional free highlight job.”

Toni snorted. “There are worse ways to earn a living.” She looked at me pointedly for a long moment. I thought of Jeff, and Nick and “Brandi with an ‘i’.” I wondered what their stories were. Toni pushed open the pedal-can with one high-heeled foot, dropped in the hair, and took off her smock.

“As long as you don’t forget where your real interests lie,” she said. There was no chance of that. I’d worked too hard to get the salon off the ground to pack it in for a part-time porn job.

IT had been a long time since I’d done stage or film work, but after George’s repeated insistence that he didn’t “want anything fancy or expensive” I was certain I would be able to do the job he wanted. I brought my usual stuff, the powders and blushes and creams I used to make up brides, bridesmaids, and prom-going high school seniors, and showed up at the North Dearborn condo complex the next evening.

It was only once I arrived that I realized I didn’t have a key or any way to get in. Under the watchful eye of an elderly security guard, I rang the bell beside number 788, and a moment later, I heard Jeff’s voice. “Hello?”

“Hi. It’s Steve,” I said. Then, in case he’d forgotten me already, I added, “Stephen Hardy. The stylist.”

“Right.” I heard vague recognition in his voice. “Come on up.” There was a buzz, and the door opened. The security guard nodded politely as I passed, and I pushed the button for the elevator.

Jeff opened the apartment door when I got there, giving me a big, dazzling smile. “Hi.”

The apartment was empty. “Shooting starts at six,” Jeff explained, walking back inside. His messenger bag was on the floor beside the worn-looking cream couch, and there was a thick paperback and a notebook on the cigarette-scarred coffee table in front of him. “Nobody usually shows up until then.”

“Oh.” I stood awkwardly for a moment. Jeff folded his long, lean

body onto the couch and looked up at me.

“You can sit down, if you want. I’m just studying.”

I put down my bag and sat on the arm of the couch. “What are you studying?” seemed the logical conversation-starter, so I went with that.

“Thomas More, at the moment.” He held up the paperback. “*Utopia*.”

“That’s the name of my salon.”

“Cool.”

There was a silence, which we both tried to break at the same time. I gestured for Jeff to continue. “I’m doing a bachelor of arts at Loyola.”

“Wow.” I wasn’t sure what else to say. When I’d been speculating about their stories, I hadn’t pegged Jeff as a student at a private Catholic university. “I bet that’s expensive,” I said, and then I winced inwardly.

Jeff shrugged. “That’s why I’m here.”

“I’m sorry,” I said. That sounded wrong too.

“It’s okay.” Jeff marked his place with a scrap of paper and put the book into his bag. “Since I’m here, do you want to do me first?” Lewd and inappropriate images flashed through my mind in the brief instant it took me to realize he was asking me to style his hair.

“Sure.”

I looked around the space, and Jeff helpfully advised, “Why don’t we do it in the bathroom?”

Like the rest of the condo, the bathroom had seen better days. The walls were a particular 1970s shade of avocado, and the white fake-marble countertops were flecked with gold leaf. I assumed they shot scenes in here, at least occasionally, since there was no shower curtain and the room was surrounded by small fans to keep the camera from fogging up with steam.

We brought a stool in from the kitchen and Jeff sat facing the bathroom mirror. I placed my supplies on the counter and looked at them, running a professional hand through Jeff’s soft blond hair. He didn’t need a lot of product, so I squirted a little light mousse onto my hands and rubbed them briskly together.

My ability to make small talk always improved when I was working. As I massaged the mousse into Jeff’s hair, I asked him what else he was studying at Loyola. “Art history, anthropology, ceramics. Basically the perfect all-around education for a low-budget Internet porn

actor.” I looked up into the mirror, but he was grinning, and I smiled back at him.

“George told me you have a boyfriend,” I said, casually. It was a popular topic of conversation with people in the stylist’s chair. In the past ten years, I’d given more relationship advice than Ann Landers and heard about more sexual escapades than *Penthouse* magazine.

“Yeah. Evan.” Jeff’s already gentle voice softened when he said it. I ran Jeff’s hair through my fingers, styling it into gentle spikes. I liked the look on him.

“And he’s supportive of your job?”

“It was his idea.” I glanced up again, but Jeff didn’t seem to think there was anything odd about that. “It’s not my only job,” Jeff went on. “I work at the campus library too.”

“Which do you like better?”

Jeff didn’t hesitate. “This one pays more. But I can’t exactly tell my friends about my hard day at the office.”

I finished Jeff’s hair and did his makeup. I didn’t go overboard, just a bit of powder to reduce the glare of the lights. When I’d almost finished, we heard the door open. George appeared outside the bathroom, chomping on his Nicorette gum. “Getting an early start, I see.” He sounded pleased. There were two other people with him, a tall, bald black man and a redheaded woman with beads and a caftan.

“The camera guys should be here any minute,” George went on.

Taking the protective tissue out of his collar, Jeff stood up and said, “Thanks, Stephen.” He went back out into the living room, and the redhead took his place on the stool.

I didn’t stay to watch the filming. About an hour and a half after I’d arrived, I was finished with my work and George gave me a small handful of bills. It was about as much as I’d make in tips on a good day at the salon. I pocketed the money as I headed down in the elevator and out onto the street.

I WENT back to the condo the next evening and the next, but Jeff wasn’t there. When I got there on Monday and he still wasn’t anywhere to be seen, I asked George, as casually as I could, “Is Jeff coming in this week?”

“I think he’s on for tomorrow. We’re doing a threesome shoot with

Nick, Brandi, and Tanya today.” Tanya was the redhead. The last time I’d done her hair, she’d told me more than I’d ever wanted to know about chakras and healing crystals.

George smirked around his gum. “I told you, there’s no way you’ve got a chance there, buddy. By all means, be my guest if you want to try; just don’t do it while the boyfriend’s around. You’re doing a good job so far and I don’t want to have to find someone new.” I hesitated for a moment, torn between enjoying the compliment buried somewhere in there and asking what he meant. By the time I decided, George had disappeared into the bedroom and Tanya was telling me about “healing the chi.”

After I’d been working for him for a week, George finally remembered to give me a key to the condo. Tuesday evening, I was able to let myself in, balancing my bag of brushes and makeup on one shoulder and carrying my straightening iron in the other.

As promised, Jeff was on the couch with his books, his schoolbag on the floor beside him. He glanced over his shoulder as I came in and put my things in the bathroom. “Hi, Stephen,” he said, when I came out again. He smiled, but it didn’t seem as dazzling as before.

“Hi.” I looked at his books. “Still reading *Utopia*?” He nodded, then glanced around as if someone else might have come in with me.

“Can I show you something?” He stood up. “Before everyone else gets here?”

I followed him into the bathroom.

The door was warped, and it didn’t quite shut all the way. Jeff jammed it closed as far as it would go and then, before I could say anything, he pulled off his T-shirt.

Jeff’s body was slim, as I’d expected, but it was also marked. There was a big, yellowing bruise on his chest and halfway down one side of his body. The other side was riddled with smaller, black bruises in a line. I wasn’t a doctor, of course, or even much of a first-aider, but none of the marks looked new to me. They were, however, a little suspicious.

“George wants me to do a naked scene today,” Jeff said, worry in his voice. “Can you cover this up?”

“I can try.” I had pancake makeup in my bag, but I wasn’t sure if it would be enough. Jeff sat on the stool as I rifled through my bottles and containers. “Can I ask.... I mean, how did you...?”



“It was nothing,” Jeff said, quickly. Too quickly. That alone gave me the answer, and a deeply uneasy feeling in the pit of my stomach. “Really, nothing.”

I didn’t press him. Instead, I took out my brushes and sponges and ran them over Jeff’s bruised body.

I was nearly done when we heard George outside. “Hello?”

“We’re in here,” I said, adding a finishing touch to Jeff’s abdomen. It wasn’t a bad job. The darkest of the bruises still showed through, but I was pretty certain no one would notice. If anyone was even looking at Jeff’s chest or back.

“Thanks, Stephen.” Jeff’s face was so full of gratitude, I had to smile. He left the bathroom, and a moment later, George appeared in the doorway, alone.

I had to say something. “His boyfriend is abusive.” It wasn’t a question. I had done my share of volunteer haircuts and fund-raisers for women’s shelters in LA. I knew what I saw.

George shrugged, which confirmed it. “That’s none of our business.”

“How often does it happen?”

“What the fuck do I care? Jeff’s a big boy. As long as he does what I pay him for, the rest is up to him.”

Instead of leaving as soon as I was finished, like I normally did, I hung around while they filmed, pretending to reorganize my makeup kits. When Jeff finished his scene and came out of the bedroom stark naked, I had to consciously keep my jaw from dropping.

He was gorgeous; there was no other way to describe him. I’d heard him and Nick grunting and moaning theatrically for the cameras, but whatever they’d been up to, the makeup on Jeff’s body had held up well. His clothes were piled on the couch next to his bag and his schoolbooks, and he got dressed in front of me, pulling on his boxers, his jeans, and his T-shirt without so much as a blush. I fixed my eyes on my makeup bags.

“Thanks again,” he said, when he’d finished dressing. I figured it was safe to look, and I glanced up.

“You’re welcome.” It didn’t seem like enough. “If you need any more help, you know, with anything, just tell me. Anything at all.” It sounded stupid, even to me. I was just a hairdresser with a business so

successful I had to take extra work on porn movies. I had no idea how I could help him.

Still, he smiled and said, "I'm fine. But thanks!" He slung his bag over his shoulder and left.

MIRANDA Cooper came into the salon on Wednesday morning. As I was setting the foils in her hair, she said, "Sam told me George's actors have looked a lot better since you started working for him."

"Thanks." I hadn't met the computer-whiz Sam yet. I had no reason to.

Miranda looked up from her *Vogue* magazine and met my eyes in the mirror. "Is the work all right?"

"Yeah, it's fine," I said, reaching for another foil on the table. It was easy enough, and it didn't take a lot of time away from the salon. "Thanks for the recommendation."

"My pleasure." Miranda smiled, but she didn't sound convinced.

I styled a few other clients that morning, including a woman who insisted on a tight poodle perm despite all my attempts to convince her it was no longer 1977. As she sat beneath the dryer, the foul-smelling perm solution filling the salon, I escaped to the back room, where I found Toni eating a sandwich.

"Perm lady got her way, then?" She wrinkled her nose at me.

"The customer is always right." I helped myself to a paper cup of strong, bitter coffee.

"You know she'll blame you when she ends up looking like the bride of Frankenstein." I shrugged. The woman wasn't a regular client. From the moment she came tromping in and announced, "If you're thinking about overcharging me, think again. My husband's a shampoo wholesaler and I know what this stuff costs," I had a feeling we could live without her repeat business.

"Have you seen this?" Toni pushed a pamphlet across the Formica tabletop. The front advertised the "Fifty-Thousand-Dollar Style Finals in Las Vegas," but she helpfully summarized it anyway. "It's a styling contest. Only ten bucks to enter a photo, and the winner gets fifty grand."

"I don't think we'd win." I'd been at hairdressing competitions before. There was always somebody with a sponsorship from Vidal Sassoon and a personal acquaintance with Paul Mitchell who waltzed

away with the top prizes.

“We wouldn’t have to win. The top ten finalists get ten grand each.” She smiled. “That’d be enough to let you quit your night job, unless you’re enjoying it too much.”

“I enjoy the money,” I said. I opened Toni’s brochure and glanced through the glossy examples. I could do better than most of them. I usually did.

“We could split our chances,” she suggested. “I’ve got a wicked women’s updo I could enter. You could do something for men. Do you know someone you could ask to model for you? Because Bernardo’s supposed to be coming into town for a couple of days if you don’t.”

Much as I relished the thought of styling Toni’s thick-necked brother, another possible model sprung immediately to mind. “That’s okay,” I said, steeling myself to go back to the perm lady. “I think I know someone.”

When I saw him the next day, Jeff said, “George is letting me keep my shirt on today,” and headed straight for the makeup chair.

I wanted to ask him about what had happened with his boyfriend, if it happened a lot, why he put up with it. Instead, as I ran my hands through Jeff’s hair, I said, “I have a favor to ask you.”

“Oh, yeah?” Jeff smiled at me in the mirror. “What’s that?”

I told him about the competition in Las Vegas. “It’d be really easy,” I added. “You’d just have to let me do your hair and send in a photo.” Compared to how Jeff spent most of his evenings, I thought, this one would be a breeze. “I couldn’t pay you, but I’d be happy to treat you to dinner afterward.” I tried to sound casual, especially about that last part, but I clearly wasn’t casual enough. Jeff’s smile faltered, and I felt my heart stop.

“I don’t know if it’s a good idea. Sorry.” He looked genuinely regretful. “I’d really love to help you out, but I’m just really busy. It’s nothing to do with Evan or anything like that.” By saying that, of course, Jeff told me loudly and clearly that it was. “I’m sorry,” he repeated.

I shrugged, and tried to sound like I didn’t care. It was like George had said, I thought. Jeff was a grown man, and I barely knew him. He had no reason to listen to me, and I had no real reason, beyond basic human decency, to care about him.

“It’s okay,” I told him. “I’ll ask someone else.”

“Nick might be up for it,” Jeff suggested helpfully.

“Maybe,” I agreed, and I pulled the tissues out of his collar.

SATURDAY was always one of the salon’s busiest days. This one was made even worse by the fact our receptionist, Gina, called in sick about ten minutes before we were due to open. In addition to washing, cutting, and styling our clients, Toni and I had to keep running up to the reception desk to greet them as they arrived for their appointments and ask them to take a seat in the waiting area.

At five o’clock, when I was finishing up a quick trim on my last client of the day, Toni told me she had to take off. “Bernardo and Giulietta want to take me to dinner before they head back to New Jersey,” she said, as the man in my chair flipped idly through a *New Yorker* he must have brought with him. Our magazines were more of the “fashion trends and celebrity-spotting” type. “Sorry.”

Since I’d been leaving her to lock up the salon every night for the past two weeks, I couldn’t complain. Once Toni had gone and I’d seen the *New Yorker*-reader to the door, I ran a broom around my chair, sweeping up the hair. I was contemplating another fun Saturday night at home, with my microwave pasta meal and maybe a Corona or two in front of the TV, when there was a knock on the front door.

I’d flipped the “closed” sign over before I started my cleanup, but I didn’t have anything else planned for the night. If it was someone in dire need of emergency highlights or an urgent shampoo-and-set, I thought I might as well let them in and earn a little extra cash.

It wasn’t a desperate client. It was, in fact, Jeff standing on the other side of the glass door, in jeans and a denim jacket with his messenger bag over his shoulder. I unlocked the deadbolts and opened the door. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Jeff smiled and, again, it just about took my breath away. “Are you busy?” I shook my head. “I wondered,” he went on, “if you still needed my help with your competition thing?”

I didn’t ask him why he’d changed his mind. Instead, trying desperately to remember all those great plans I’d had for the competition, I led him into the back and sat him at a sink.

In George’s condo, I rarely shampooed anyone. There was no time or space, and since George was always conscious of time, I usually just

spritzed the actors with water before trimming or styling.

Now, I put a black cape around Jeff and he leaned back eagerly. Looking at him, I felt my stomach flip, and I forced myself instead to concentrate on the temperature of the water, on the nearly empty bottle of shampoo, on anything but the way Jeff looked leaning back in the chair and smiling up at me. “So what’s the plan?” he asked, eagerly.

“Nothing too fancy.” The water was warm enough. I gently splashed it onto Jeff’s hair. “They’re looking for something reasonable, not some crazy artistic design.” Maybe, I thought, I could do a kind of modified faux-hawk. Jeff’s hair had the body for it. I focused on the mechanics of it, on how I would best be able to turn the idea into something worthy of at least ten thousand dollars, as I massaged the shampoo into his hair.

In my ten years as a stylist, I’d washed thousands of heads of hair. Usually, it was about as sexy as replacing the bottle on the water cooler or counting out the cash drawer or any other part of my job, but there were times when it felt like more than that.

With Jeff, it was definitely more. Rather than washing with the brisk professionalism I used with Miranda Cooper and the guy with the *New Yorker* and the rest of my clients, I found myself stroking Jeff’s hair, enjoying the feel as I threaded it through my fingers. When he closed his eyes, I came to my senses, and I stood up quickly enough to bang my head against the shampoo shelf above the sink.

“Are you okay?” Jeff’s eyes flew open, wide with concern.

“I’m fine.” I forced a smile, even as pain hammered through my head. “Why don’t you come over to my chair?”

He sat patiently while I fiddled, pushing his hair up and then down, trying it spiked and then straight. There was no way I was going near the relationship question, but after a long period of silence, I went to one of my other stylist standbys.

“So, Jeff, are you from Chicago originally?”

“I’m from Oregon,” he said. He’d moved his feet off the ledge beneath the chair, I noticed, and he was swinging them in front of him like a kid. “My parents are still out there.”

“I lived in LA for years,” I answered. “Do you miss the west coast?”

The big smile came back. “I miss the weather,” he said. “And the

surfing.” I imagined Jeff in a bathing suit, catching the waves like the dozens of guys I used to see from salon windows in California. Just like that, inspiration came to me, and I reached for my scissors.

It didn’t take long once I knew what I was doing. Less than an hour later, I whirled Jeff around to face the mirror.

“I think I’ll call it ‘Sexy Surfer’. What do you think?” I asked, putting the finishing hairspray touches on. Jeff laughed, a giggle that would have won me over if I hadn’t already been completely smitten.

“It’s great.”

“Let me get the camera.” We kept a cheap digital camera under the front desk, something Toni had grown used to when she worked at a high-end salon on Mulholland Drive. There, you never knew which celebrities would come in and be willing to sign a photo for your “wall of fame”. Here, the only famous person we’d ever had in our swivel chairs was our local congressman’s daughter, and we hadn’t bothered taking a picture of her. He was a Republican.

Jeff stood in front of the blankest of our blank walls, and I took a few pictures of him from every angle. To make it seem less like I was taking his mugshot, I told him to pose.

“Come on,” I joked, “you should be used to this. You’re an actor, after all.”

He laughed again. “Most of the time,” he said, “no one’s interested in seeing my face.”

“That’s their loss,” I said recklessly, clicking another picture. “You’re gorgeous.”

He actually blushed, which threw a lead bar of guilt onto the butterflies in my stomach. I took one last picture and switched off the camera. “Do you want me to put your hair back to normal?”

Jeff hesitated, and then shook his head. “I like it.” He touched his hair. “It’s cool.” Cool enough for ten thousand dollars, I hoped.

“Thanks again,” I said. He went back to the chair and picked up the bag he’d left on the floor. I expected him to say goodbye and head off, but instead he said, “Didn’t you mention something about a payback dinner?”

I smiled. I couldn’t help it. “What do you like?”

We ended up at Chopsticks, a sushi place a block or so away from the salon. Toni and I had been for lunch once, and while it was nothing

like the sushi bars we'd had in LA, it was passable. We ordered our avocado rolls and our unagi, and Jeff surprised me by conducting a conversation in what was apparently Japanese with the smiling waitress. When she'd gone, I said, "Wow," and he fixed his eyes on the fish tank beside us, like he was embarrassed.

"I taught English for a couple of years in Kyoto."

"That's really cool." It was the truth. I'd spent years in LA, and the only second language I'd picked up was "No hablo español."

Jeff shrugged. "It explains why I'm twenty-seven and still in college." He was older than I'd thought. That made me feel a little better about leching after him like a dirty thirty-two-year-old. "And why I'm still working for George to pay the bills."

"What's it like?" I asked, because he seemed to want to change the subject. "Working for George, I mean."

"He's an okay boss," Jeff said. "I did movies for another guy before him, and he was always trying to get into my pants. The only thing George is interested in is money."

I glanced away. The restaurant was busy, and most of the tables held small groups of friends or couples eating rainbow rolls and dynamite cones. I wondered, briefly, what people would think of Jeff and me, if they would assume we were a couple or if they'd think we were friends.

"Do you like performing like that?"

Jeff didn't hesitate. "No."

"So why do you do it?" It seemed the next logical question. Once I'd said it, though, it sounded harsh, like I was prying, so I added, "I mean, if you really don't like it, there must be other ways to make a buck."

"It's not all bad," Jeff answered. "Evan likes me doing it. It's good money, and it turns him on." I really didn't need to hear about Evan's turn-ons. "I just always think sex should mean something more than money, you know?"

I knew.

The waitress, who was also apparently Jeff's new best friend, brought us our food, and we ate in silence for a while. His arm brushed against my sleeve as he reached across for the soy sauce, and my foot touched his as I shifted in my chair. I felt like a teenager on a first date,

at least until Jeff looked up from his sweet potato tempura and said, “I know what you’re thinking.”

“Really?” I hoped not. I’d been trying not to picture Jeff and I having meaningful sex back at my apartment.

“Evan’s not a bad guy. He has a temper, but it doesn’t usually get out of hand. And he really loves me.” It sounded like the dialogue from a Lifetime movie, but Jeff’s eyes told me he really believed it.

“He let you come here,” I admitted, grudgingly.

Jeff’s eyes shifted away from me. “He’s away, actually. He had to visit a friend in Indianapolis for a few days.”

I didn’t say anything.

We sat for a while when we were done eating, talking about everything, it seemed, except Evan. Jeff told me about his courses, and about how he’d chosen Loyola. “My parents are Catholic.”

“How did they take your coming out?”

Jeff looked away again. This was beginning to be a habit. “I’ll tell them,” he said, a little defensively. “When I think they can handle it.” I remembered thinking that about my parents too. When I finally took the plunge, one Fourth of July weekend when I was about twenty-four years old, my dad said, “You’re a hairdresser in Los Angeles, Steve. If you wanted to shock us, you should have said you were straight.”

I paid the bill and we left the restaurant. For a moment, I wondered if I should ask Jeff back to my place but he said, “I guess I’ll see you on the set next week.”

“I guess so.”

“Thanks for dinner.”

“Thanks for your help with the competition.”

He didn’t move, and the voice in the back of my mind, the one that would have been personified as a devil on my shoulder if I’d been a cartoon character, said, “Kiss him.”

Jeff, looking like the angel that should have been on my other shoulder, took a step toward me. I stood, frozen in place outside the restaurant, while Jeff put up his hands, pulled my head down the few inches he needed to, and kissed me softly on the lips.

It was sweet, chaste, and over in a second, but it left my head reeling. When Jeff pulled away, there was a look of barely controlled panic in his eyes. “It’s okay,” I said, although I wasn’t sure who I was



reassuring.

“I’d better go.”

“You don’t have to.” I hoped my voice didn’t sound as desperate as I felt. “I mean, if you want to come back to my place....”

He shook his head. “I’m sorry, Stephen.” He turned away, hitched up his messenger bag, and headed for the bus stop. I didn’t follow him. Instead, I hailed a taxi and went home to the coldest shower of my life.

I didn’t hear anything from Jeff the next day, but I didn’t really expect to. On Monday morning, Toni came into the salon as I uploaded the pictures of Jeff for the competition. “He’s cute,” she said, looking over my shoulder at Jeff’s smiling face. “You fucked him yet?”

I rolled my eyes at the screen. “Does Bernardo know his baby sister talks like that?”

Toni shrugged. “He’d just tell me it’s one more reason why I can’t find a husband.”

I WAS worried things might be awkward between Jeff and me at the condo that night, but he wasn’t there. George was sitting at the kitchen table looking through papers and chewing his Nicorette gum with more vigor than usual.

“What’s up?”

He barely glanced at me. “I’ve closed down production.”

“What?”

He waved a careless hand. “It’s just a temporary measure. The accountants suggested it. Seems we’ve got a bit of a cash-flow problem. Nothing serious.” He ran a hand over his bald head.

“When do you think you’ll start up again?”

“Just as soon as we solve a few problems. Our Web site was hacked or some shit like that. I’ve got Sam on the case.”

“Oh. Okay.” I sighed. “Do you have Jeff’s phone number?”

I expected another joke, or maybe another warning about Evan, but George just took out his cell phone and scrolled through his contacts list. He scribbled a number on a scrap of paper and handed it to me without a word.

I dialed the number as soon as the elevator dropped me off at the ground floor. It rang twice before Jeff picked up.

“Hi.” I realized immediately I hadn’t thought about what I was going to say. “It’s Steve. George told me he’s stopped production.”

“Temporarily,” Jeff said. “He’s not getting rid of anyone permanently. Not yet, anyway.”

“Yeah. Right.” I sighed. “Listen, I was wondering if—”

“Stephen.” Jeff cut me off. “I’ll see you when we start production again, all right?”

“Right.” Of course. “Okay. Bye.”

“Bye, Stephen.” It might have been my imagination, but I was sure he sounded a little wistful as he hung up the phone.

It was nearly a week later when I saw Jeff again. Toni had stepped out for lunch, and I was finishing up with my last client of the morning. She was a desperate housewife named Victoria Harris who came in from her multimillion dollar suburban bi-level in Evanston because she liked “thinking that I’m still part of Chicago, even out there in the sticks.”

I was blow-drying her and listening to her talk about her husband, a high school principal whom she suspected of cheating on her with the president of the PTA. I made suitably sympathetic noises, as always, and I stopped dead when I glanced at the mirror and saw Jeff coming into the salon.

He was dressed like he had been the first time I’d seen him, in the burgundy T-shirt and jeans. Unlike that time, however, he also had a black eye. Well, it was more purplish yellow, really, but it looked bad enough for me to switch off the blow dryer and leave Victoria mid-rant to go over to him.

“What happened?”

He shook his head. “I’m fine.” That was clearly a lie. “I’m sorry to bother you, Stephen, but I need your help.” He looked at Victoria. She stared at us in the mirror, half her hair styled and dried and the other half hanging wetly over her shoulder. “If you’re in the middle of something, I can come back later.”

“No.” Now that Jeff was here, the last thing I wanted was for him to disappear again. “I’ll just be a minute. Here,” I pointed him toward the break room. “Just wait there. I’ll be right with you.” He went, and I returned to Victoria.

I could tell she was dying to ask, and I could also tell she wouldn’t

leave until she had her story. As I switched on the dryer, I raised my voice to be heard over the blowing and said, "He's a friend of Toni's. She wants me to hire him on as our new shampoo boy."

"I'd certainly come in for more shampoos if that was the case." Victoria practically leered. I gave her a half-hearted smile and the quickest blow-dry of my career.

By the time Victoria had paid her bill and set up her next appointment, Toni was back. I found her and Jeff in the break room, sharing a box of takeout sukiyaki. "Your friend Jeff was just telling me about Japan," Toni said, looking at me meaningfully. "He taught English in Kyoto. It sounds very interesting."

"Would you mind, Toni?"

I hoped she would take a hint. I was wrong. She looked at me innocently. "Mind what?"

"Could you give Stephen and me a moment alone?" Jeff filled in for me. "I'm so sorry to interrupt your lunch. It won't take very long."

"Of course." Toni simpered at him and, barely sparing a glance for me, disappeared back into the salon with her sukiyaki. When she'd gone, I took a good look at Jeff.

He didn't seem hurt, apart from the black eye, but that stood out on his beautiful face like Magic Marker on a Renaissance painting. I wanted to touch him, to take him in my arms and kiss him better, and then I wanted to go and punch Evan in the face. Or the balls. Or both.

"He wanted me to have sex with a guy for money," Jeff said. I didn't need to ask who he was talking about.

"Another porn job?"

Jeff shook his head. "A prostitution job. It was a guy he knew, someone who'd seen my movies." I went from wanting to punch Evan to wanting to kill him. Preferably painfully and with a lot of blood. I could do it. I'd seen *Sweeney Todd*. "I said no, so Evan hit me. Then I walked out on him."

There was a catch in Jeff's voice. I wondered if he would accept a hug from me, then thought it might be overstepping my boundaries. Instead I stood awkwardly beside him, my arms half-raised, until Jeff said, "I thought he loved me. I can't believe he'd ask me to do something like that." He shook his head. I, personally, would have dumped the guy when he asked for the porn. "The stuff for George, that was all for the

camera. It wasn't real. How could Evan want me to whore myself out to some stranger?"

It was because Evan was a grade-A asshole. "I've been staying with a friend on campus for the last few days, but he needs me out today. I couldn't think of anywhere else to go."

"That's fine." I felt a flush of pride knowing that Jeff trusted me. "You can stay with me. There are two bedrooms at my place."

"I'm really sorry to impose like this," he repeated. "It won't be for long, I swear. I've got an application in to the dorms at Loyola already."

"It's no problem," I said. This time, I meant it.

I spent the rest of my lunch break taking Jeff over to my apartment. "I've got class at one-thirty," he said, glancing at his watch. "What time are you going to be home?"

"The salon closes at five."

"I'll meet you then." Jeff smiled at me. Then he reached out and brushed his hand against my arm. It was barely a touch, but it left me with a buzzing, tingling feeling, as if I'd swallowed a hive of bees and washed it down with a bottle of champagne.

I WORKED all afternoon, ignoring Toni's blatant attempts to fish for dirt about Jeff. Just before the end of the day, my cell phone rang. It was George. I could hear his Nicorette gum popping before he said anything.

"We're doing a quick shoot tonight. Last-minute thing, but I'll pay you if you show up."

"Did you get your money problems solved?"

"Let's put it this way. The loan sharks are only after my legs, not my balls at the moment." It didn't sound like anything was solved to me. "Hey," George went on, "you don't know where Jeff is, do you? I called his home number, but that asshole of a boyfriend told me he walked out days ago. About damn time if you ask me."

"Try his cell phone," I said, trying to sound like it was a suggestion rather than a certainty. "He's probably around somewhere."

"See you later." George hung up, and I did the same.

He must have gotten hold of Jeff, because when I arrived at the condo on North Dearborn about an hour later, they were both there. Jeff smiled at me, but he didn't give anything away, and I decided I'd better not, either.

“It’s a quick suck-and-fuck,” George told him elegantly, as I brushed pancake makeup over Jeff’s yellowing black eye. “That stuff sells the best, anyway, and we need the cash quick. I told Nick to get his ass down here pronto. We’ll do it on the couch this time,” he added. “Give the one-handed mouse-clickers a little variety.”

“Okay,” Jeff said, amiably.

Immediately, I realized that I didn’t feel quite so amiable about it. The thought of him sucking—or fucking—someone else made my stomach turn.

The intercom buzzed, and George went over to it. “Dammit, Nick, bring your fucking key once in a while.” He buzzed the door open. I put the finishing touches on Jeff’s hair and, when I was nearly done, he reached up and touched my hand. Looking at me in the mirror, he gave me one of those smiles.

My knees were still weak when the front door burst open and someone who was definitely not Nick said, “You fucking bastard, Jeff. I told you I’d find you.”

Evan was a lot less personable than I’d imagined. He was a short man, stocky, with a ragged line of stubble on his cheeks and red-rimmed, puffy eyes. He had definitely been drinking; that was obvious even before he breezed past me on a cloud of liquor fumes and reached for Jeff.

“Fuck off, Evan.” I stepped forward and put a hand on Evan’s shoulder. He shook me off and headed toward Jeff, who stood up and looked him in the eye.

“Evan,” Jeff said, in that same calm, gentle voice he always used. “You’re drunk and you’re making a fool of yourself.”

“Like hell. You’re coming home with me, Jeff.”

I had never been what you might call the world’s best fighter. Still, this was Jeff we were talking about. I hit Evan as hard as I could. It hurt like hell but was barely enough to knock him off course. As he stumbled to regain his balance another, meatier, hand descended on his collar and, like a cat with a kitten, George picked Evan up by the scruff of his neck. “Do you mind? We’re trying to shoot a movie here.” Evan kicked his legs. They swung pathetically a foot off the ground, until George opened the door and tossed him out. As he was struggling to his feet, the elevator doors hissed open. Nick looked down, as he stepped out of the elevator and over Evan’s prone body.

“You’re late.” George wiped the sweat from his forehead. “And we have a movie to shoot.”

I didn’t stay to watch the filming. Instead, I headed back to the apartment to put some ice on my hand, which was throbbing like I’d punched a steam engine or a brick wall.

About an hour later, as I sat on the couch with my bag of ice feeling seriously sorry for myself, I heard a knock on the door.

“Hi.” Jeff smiled when I let him in.

“How was the shoot?”

An unreadable expression crossed Jeff’s face. “Do you mind if I sit down?”

He headed straight for the couch. I joined him, sitting on the other end. “I didn’t do it,” he said, at last.

“What?”

Jeff shook his head. “George was pissed off, but I told him I couldn’t do it anymore. I quit.”

“Why?”

“Because this whole thing was Evan’s idea in the first place, and Evan, as I think he just proved, is a total asshole. I don’t want anything to do with him anymore.” Jeff looked at me. His bruised eye was looking a little better, at least in this light. When he inched forward and said, “I don’t want any more meaningless sex,” I could smell the gel I’d put in his hair.

In one smooth, pornography-worthy move, Jeff slid onto my lap, threaded his fingers into my hair, and pressed our mouths together. He worked his mouth down my throat, kissing beneath my shirt collar and pulling the hem up with his hands. I put my arms around him. He pulled back a little.

“Jeff,” I said. There was a lot I wanted to say, so much I wanted to promise him, but Jeff shook his head.

“It’s okay.” It was more than okay; it was Utopia. Unorthodox utopia, but Utopia nevertheless, and I’d never been happier.

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# *Leather Dancer*

Andrew Grey

I

“IS that the guy you’ve got the hots for?” Kye leaned out my living room window, craning his neck for a look.

“Yes.” I peeked out around him. “God, you don’t need to be so obvious.”

Kye pulled his head back inside as the object of my fantasies disappeared around the hedge. “Why not? Being a little obvious might actually get you noticed.” He was being snarky, but truthful. “Speaking of getting noticed,” he plopped himself on the sofa, bouncing a few times as he picked up his beer, “I’ve got a couple tickets to the Gay Erotic Expo this afternoon. You want to go with me? Maybe we’ll get noticed by some hot guys.”

I rolled my eyes on reflex. “You’ll get noticed by the hot guys; I’ll get ignored.”

Kye downed the last of his beer and got up. “Good, then it’s settled,” he called as he marched into my bedroom.

“What’s settled?” Jesus, does he think I just agreed to go? I followed him, hoping to stop Hurricane Kye from destroying my neat and orderly closet.

“You just said you’d go with me, so we need to find you something to wear.” He started hauling out shirts. “Yuck,” throwing the shirt on the floor; “Terrible,” another one joined the first; “Ewww, plaid is so out.” This shirt got tossed over his shoulder.

I grabbed his hands. “Stop.” I started picking up the unworthy shirts, hanging them back up, unable to hide my exasperation.

“I couldn’t agree more....” He marched back into the living room, grabbed his coat, and threw mine at me as I came out of the bedroom.



“Where are we going?”

He rolled his eyes. “To my place. You have absolutely nothing that doesn’t scream, ‘I wear a lab coat!’” Kye’s patented “You know I’m right, so don’t argue” stance accompanied the declaration, and while I tried to form a snappy comeback ... oh, hell... I had nothing.

Huffing to myself, I put on the coat Kye’d thrown at me, grabbed my keys, and followed him out, locking the door behind me. It was easier to go along than to fight him, and besides, he was my oldest friend, and while his methods left a lot to be desired, he always showed me a good time. He was one person who’d never let me down.

Once we’d exited my building and reached the sidewalk, Kye threw an arm around my shoulder. “You’ll have a good time, I promise.” He was all smiles as we walked together the few blocks to his place. Once inside his cramped apartment, he sprinted to his closet and started laying out potential outfits. “This’ll look good on you.” He held up a pair of trendy jeans from some designer I’d never heard of along with a shirt from some other name I couldn’t pronounce.

“How about you dress me like your very own live Ken doll and then we’ll go?” Now it was my turn to be snarky.

Kye ignored the tone and handed me the clothes before looking at my feet. “God, I should have found you some better shoes before we left,” he groaned, shaking his head, “but I can only do so much.” Then he started stripping off his clothes, quickly getting naked before pulling on his own wardrobe selection for the expo. “Well, what are you waiting for?” I wasn’t sure, but we’d seen each other naked many times, so with a shrug, I stripped to my briefs and pulled on the jeans and shirt. “See, they look good.” He pushed me in front of his full-length mirror, and I had to admit, he was right. I turned around, smiling at what I saw. “Come on; let’s go.” We finished getting ready and left the apartment, catching a cab to the expo.

The ride was quick and we pulled up to the convention center, getting out of the cab and approaching the tall building. I immediately walked to the main entrance where a woman in an immaculately tailored suit approached me.

“Can I help you?”

Before I could answer, Kye pulled me away and back onto the sidewalk. “We enter over here.” Kye pointed to the sign above the door I’d tried to enter and I stifled a laugh. The Gay Erotic Expo was in the

same building as a Baptist ministers' convention.

Entering through the appropriate door, we presented our tickets and received wrist bands and a goodie bag. The elevator arrived and we squeezed in between a drag queen and a man encased in leather. I tried to keep my eyes to myself, but failed miserably. *This was going to be interesting.*

The doors opened and everyone surged out of the cramped space. We followed the crowd down a short hallway and into a large hall. I felt an elbow in my ribs and I looked at Kye as he gestured overhead. A large poster hung from the ceiling with the name of a Web site beneath it. I shook my head in a combination of wonder and disbelief. On the poster was a man lying on his back, legs in the air, spread wide. Yup... we were at a porn convention. I turned to Kye and continued laughing. His eyes had glazed over and he had a delighted smile on his face, like a child on Christmas morning.

"Come on; let's go this way." Kye led me toward one end of the room and we headed down one of the aisles. Now, I have to admit, I didn't know where to focus my eyes. There were great-looking men everywhere, wearing next to nothing, and the butts... of every type and description, poking out of thongs, jockstraps, leather chaps. Hell, there was even a pair wrapped in cellophane. My eyes didn't know where to settle.

I heard Kye squeal "Oh... yes!" and I was pulled toward a booth filled with leather of every style and description. Kye rummaged and browsed as I waited.

"Can I help you?" A huge, godlike man wearing only a leather jock stroled up to Kye like a large cat on the hunt.

Without missing a beat, Kye ran his eyes up and down the man's body before pointing at his basket. "I'd like one of those!" The big man laughed and I watched as Kye flirted shamelessly. My eyes bugged out when Kye leaned close and whispered something and received a pat on the butt in return followed by some hot, intense looks. They continued talking, and, after a few minutes, Kye bounded over to me, all smiles. "I'm meeting him after the expo."

I checked my watch. "Five minutes. That's a record, even for you." Kye had never had trouble attracting handsome men—he was great-looking with an incredible body and expressive eyes, and guys just went for him big time.

His retort was cut off by an introduction being made from the stage at the far end of the hall. "Gentlemen, it's my pleasure to welcome the boys of Hotmen.com live and in person." The crowd around the stage cheered as three gorgeous, shirtless men hopped on stage and started gyrating. Jeans opened and slipped down, exposing butts and bulges encased in fashion underwear that soon joined the jeans.

"Good god," I managed to mumble as one of the studs on stage started to stroke himself as onlookers waved bills. The boys continued gyrating and shaking their butts as they alternately covered and exposed themselves to the adoring crowd for the next five minutes, making sure everyone got a good look. Then the music ended and the boys pulled up their pants and leapt from the stage and led the crowd to their booth where they sold DVDs and autographed pictures.

"I'm going to get a picture." I nodded and continued walking as Kye bounded off with the crowd. Looking at the various displays, I stopped at a booth filled with books. This at least was within my comfort level. My eye was drawn to a cover with a forest scene and a hunky satyr with mischievous eyes staring back at me. I picked up the book and read the back.

"The books are all buy one, get one free." I looked up at a pretty woman with shining black hair, a big smile, and incredible eyes. She handed me a CD. "This has excerpts of all our books."

"Thank you." Taking the disk, I picked up a copy of *Children of Bacchus* and a baseball story titled *Caught Running*. "I'll take these two."

"Those are great; I know you'll enjoy them." She took my payment and smiled again, placing the books in a bag and handing it to me. After thanking her again, I continued on my way.

Turning the corner back near the stage, I stopped short, unable to believe my eyes. In front of a booth facing the stage was a platform about two feet high, and dancing on that platform to the beat of the music in the room was the man who lived in my building. I couldn't believe it. I'd been watching him for months as he came and went from my building and here he was in the flesh... quite literally. He wasn't tall by any means, but perfectly proportioned, with tanned skin, jet-black hair, and a strong, toned body. Defined abs, great legs, a tight butt, and clipped chest hair completed the damn near perfect, leather-jock-clad package.

I stood and stared, mesmerized as his body moved and flowed with sensual grace and overt sexuality. His hips flexed and with each movement, I couldn't help wondering what it would feel like to have him grind those hips into mine. I had to discreetly adjust myself as I watched him. To be this close and yet so far from the object of my desire was both frustrating and exciting all at the same time. I mean, if nothing else, I at least had a full erotic image to add to my fantasies.

I continued watching him, unable to tear my eyes away as another show was introduced on the stage. People crowded around and he kept dancing, oblivious to everything except the music. I saw one of the men in the crowd trip and fall against the platform, sending it scooting along the carpet. The dancer seemed to teeter for a second before starting to fall. Without thinking, I rushed forward, trying to catch the falling dancer before he hit the ground.

I felt a weight hit my arms and then stop. Looking down, I saw that my arms were filled with a hot, desirable, nearly naked man. Damn, he felt good. His skin was hot and I quickly realized that my right hand was holding his butt. I couldn't move, didn't want to move. I watched as his head turned and his eyes met mine.... Fuck, this man was sexy.

"You can put me down anytime." He was smiling and I stammered something unintelligible as I shifted him back on his feet. "Thanks for saving me."

"You're welcome." I know I blushed beet red as I remembered feeling his butt as I held him. "You're not hurt, are you?"

"No. Thanks to you, I'm fine." I stepped back to give him space and he joined the other men in the booth while I turned around and started looking for Kye.

I found him at a booth that sold toys. "Did you get the picture you wanted?"

Kye nodded and pulled the autographed picture of three naked men out of his bag, showing it to me as he continued his shopping. Once he'd made his selections, he paid for his purchases and we continued to explore the rest of the booths.

At just before six, we left the expo. "Do you mind taking this stuff back to your place for me? I'm supposed to meet Hank at the coffee shop around the corner in half an hour."

"Sure...." I didn't have anything better to do anyway. So I hailed a cab, loaded our purchases inside, and gave the driver my address.

Arriving at my building, I paid the cabbie and carried the bags inside and up the stairs to my apartment. Unlocking the door, I set the bags on a chair and went into the kitchen to find something to eat.

A few hours later I heard a knock on the door followed by Kye bounding inside. “How was your date?”

He rolled his eyes. “It was a hookup, not a date. You’re so old-fashioned.”

“Okay, smartass. How was your hookup?”

Kye shrugged. “He was good-looking and all, but a real dud in the sack.” He flung himself down on the sofa, bouncing a few times on the cushions. “So, I hear you had some excitement at the expo.” I told him what happened. “You mean you were holding your porn-star neighbor in your arms—the guy you have the hots for—and you didn’t do anything?” I shook my head. “Not even a kiss?” I shook my head again. “You’re telling me you didn’t even cop a feel?”

I know I turned bright red. “Not on purpose, no.” He gave me one of those ‘what am I going to do with you?’ looks and huffed in exaggerated exasperation. “Even if he is some sort of porn star, he doesn’t deserve to have me pawing at him. I just caught him when he fell, that’s all.” Besides, while my neighbor was really hot—and now I knew it firsthand—I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to go out with someone who had sex for a living. Truthfully, I didn’t know if I could handle it or how I’d feel about the obvious comparisons.

Kye must have heard something because he got up and went to the window. “There he is.” I peered over his shoulder to see my hunky neighbor heading up the walk. Kye turned to look at me. “You should go talk to him.” I shook my head and turned away from the window. I wasn’t sure I wanted to talk to him. I’d been fantasizing about him for months and now that I’d gotten a look at him, it was painfully obvious that he was way the hell out of my league, so I should just forget it.

Before I could say anything to Kye, he bounded across the room and was in the hall, the door closing with a bang. *Kye... what are you doing?* A few minutes later the door opened again with Kye ushering my neighbor inside. The man was hot in jeans and a T-shirt and after a few seconds of confusion he smiled. “You’re the guy who caught me when I fell off the platform.” He stepped forward, holding out his hand. “I’m Robbie. Robbie Frinzi.”

I took the offered hand. “Denny White.” Over Robbie’s shoulder I

saw Kye wave as he left the apartment, a very self-satisfied look on his face. I didn't know what else to say and found myself tongue-tied. Robbie started to look around, obviously a little uncomfortable. After a few seconds he turned toward the door.

Jesus, I had the guy I'd been watching for months here in my apartment, and like a doofus I wasn't saying anything and he was going to leave. I had to say something, but didn't know what. Finally I decided to try the most obvious thing I knew. "Would you like to get a cup of coffee or something?"

"I can't. I really have to be going."

"Oh." Well, I tried. Feebly, but I tried.

He turned, his hand on the doorknob. "We could have dinner sometime, though." He turned around, a brilliant smile on his face.

I couldn't help smiling in return. "Yeah... that'd be great."

"Good. Can I meet you here tomorrow at six?" I nodded and watched as he slipped out the door and left the apartment.

A few minutes later, Kye burst back into the apartment, all questions. "What happened? Did you talk to him?" He pulled me onto the sofa. "Tell me everything." I thought for a second we were back in high school.

"I asked him out for coffee, but he said he had to go." I kept my expression dour.

"Is that all?" Kye looked disappointed.

"Then he asked me to dinner." I broke into a smile as Kye hit me on the shoulder.

"Don't tease me like that." He got quiet for a second. "He asked you to dinner?"

"Uh-huh."

Kye broke into a huge grin. "That's so cool. He actually asked you to dinner." Kye slapped my hand. "Way to go." I wasn't sure I shared his unbridled enthusiasm, but I did have an actual dinner date for the first time in months.

"Kye.... Do you really think he's some sort of porn star? I know he was dancing at the expo, but... geez, if he is, how will I ever measure up? What if I'm not as good as the other guys he's been with?" I could feel my insecurities taking over.

Kye huffed. "First thing, he didn't ask you to sleep with him; he

just invited you to dinner. Just take it one step at a time and you'll be fine." He broke into another grin. "You do have condoms and lube, don't you?" I smacked him on the arm as he howled with laughter. "Seriously, just be yourself and have a good time." He lifted himself off the sofa. "I'll see you later." Then he was gone again, looking like a boy scout who'd just done his good deed for the day.

## II

GOD, I was nervous, pacing the living room from one side to the other, looking at myself in the mirror every five minutes. "Would you sit down? You're making *me* nervous." Kye pulled me onto the sofa. "You have nothing to be worried about. You look fine and you'll have a good time." He shook his head and pulled me into a quick hug and then left the apartment.

I'd known Kye since high school and how we got to be friends has always been a mystery to me. He was always super outgoing, whereas I'm shy and always a little reserved. But, for some reason, he latched on to me in freshman English and we've been friends ever since. For a while after college we had an apartment together, but eventually he moved out to live with his boyfriend. That lasted six months and he moved out again, but by then I'd gotten a smaller apartment. My mother asked a few times why the two of us didn't get together. She loved Kye, but it never happened for us. We were the best of friends, but we'd never be lovers.

A soft knock stopped my nervous pacing, and after a deep breath, I opened the door. Robbie stood in the hall, looking incredible... and carrying flowers. No one had ever brought me flowers before. "Are these for me?" Robbie smiled and handed me the flowers. I took them and ushered him inside. "Thank you."

"Are you up for Italian food? I know a place with great lasagna."

I smiled into his handsome, strong face. "Sounds good. Let me put these in water and we can go." I quickly went into the kitchen and put the colorful bouquet of mixed flowers in a vase, placed them on the coffee table, and grabbed my keys, locking the door behind us. "Can we walk, or do we need to drive?"

Robbie smiled and touched my arm softly. "It's just a few blocks,

and it's a beautiful evening. We can walk if that's okay."

I nodded and we talked as we walked. "Can I ask you a question?"

Robbie smiled and continued walking. "I can probably guess what it is, but go ahead."

"Where did you learn to dance like that?" Robbie stopped walking and stared. That obviously wasn't the question he was expecting. "I mean, you looked so incredibly sexy dancing on that platform. Your eyes were closed and you seemed so happy, like you were in another world."

That earned me another smile and Robbie continued walking. "I trained as a dancer in college and was hoping to turn professional, but a leg injury ended my chances."

The thought of seeing him dance again was making me kind of excited. But our conversation was cut off as we arrived at the restaurant. Robbie opened the door and held it for me. I walked inside and he followed me.

"Robbie!" An older man raced from the back of the restaurant, pulling him into a fierce hug. "It's been too long." He released him and looked at me.

"Pop, this is Denny. Denny, this is my father, Pauli." We shook hands and he led us to a table.

"So have you known my son long?" From the look on his face, he seemed to be making conversation.

"I met him yesterday. We live in the same building." I couldn't help looking at the smile on Robbie's face.

"So you're not one of those dancers he works with." The look on his face made it plain that he wasn't happy about what Robbie did for a living. He turned to his son. "I wish you'd quit that place and come back to work for me." Robbie rolled his eyes and didn't answer. This was obviously a conversation they'd had many times before. But one thing was very plain: Pauli definitely loved his son; you could see it in his eyes.

He led us to a table in the middle of the restaurant and Robbie rolled his eyes again. "Pop, this is a date. Can we have a table that's a little more private?" Pauli looked at Robbie and then back at me, finally smiling. I guess he decided I was at least marginally good enough to date his son because he led us to the table Robbie wanted.

"Enjoy yourselves." The door to the kitchen opened and some sort



of commotion could be heard. "Excuse me." Pauli rushed back into the kitchen, and as soon as he entered I heard him holler, "What the hell are you doing? I've got customers out front." Then the door closed and Robbie started to laugh, and I joined him. You just gotta love family.

When we were alone, I continued, "From what your father said I take it you work as a dancer?"

He let out a soft sigh. "I work at the Leather Stallion." I didn't know what that meant. "Most nights, I dance on the bar or in one of the cages wearing various leather outfits."

"If what I saw at the expo is any indication, you must do very well."

Our server interrupted, squealing Robbie's name.

"Hey, Janine."

The big-haired, buxom woman leaned close, a little too close. "You should call me; we should go out."

"Janine, I'm gay and this is my date, Denny." She was obviously a little obtuse.

"Oh." That definitely let the wind out of her sails. "What can I get you to drink?" She reverted to server mode and we ordered beverages, and she left us alone again.

"She's been trying to get her claws into me since high school. Anyway, to get back to what I was telling you, I'm a dancer, but that's all. I don't hustle and I don't deal or use. I just dance." Robbie looked down into his lap, then lifted his head and looked around. Everyone appeared busy. "Look." That sigh was back. "I did a movie two years ago. Pop doesn't know and it's not something I want him to know." He checked to make sure no one could hear. "A friend of Sal's, the guy that owns the club, offered me a lot of money to do it. Hell, I thought it would be fun. It wasn't. I've been asked to do others, but I won't." His eyes became hard. "It's not something I'm proud of, but I learned from my mistake and moved on."

Janine brought our drinks and took our orders, keeping her flirting to a minimum.

I watched Robbie as he placed his order. I wasn't sure how I felt about Robbie's past, but I believed him when he told me he didn't hustle or do drugs—he didn't have the drawn, haggard look. My reservations were more selfish, applying to my own insecurities and self-perceived

inadequacies. Robbie was looking at me, waiting for some sort of reaction, and I watched as the anxiety played on his face. *Fuck, Denny. Have some guts for once.* “Everyone has a past; some are just more colorful than others.” Robbie relaxed a little. I wasn’t sure how I felt about what Robbie did for a living, but I had to admit, it was his dancing that had captivated me at the expo.

Our dinners arrived. “What do you do?” Robbie started eating.

“I’m a pharmacist at the drugstore near our building.” I’d always liked my job, but it seemed so boring compared to his.

Robbie’s eyes brightened. “Cool. You help sick people get well.”

“Yeah.” I smiled conspiratorially. “And watch as teenagers shyly buy their first package of condoms.”

He smiled an incredible smile. “You must have some great stories.” I was about to launch into one, when Pauli appeared at our table, saving both of us from one of my long-winded stories guaranteed to send a date running for the hills.

“Are you enjoying your dinner?” The question was directed at me.

I swallowed and wiped my mouth. “Yes, it’s wonderful.”

“I’m glad you liked it.” He looked down at my almost empty plate, and smiled a huge smile. He turned to Robbie. “I like a man who eats.” Robbie’s plate was still half-full but he was finished eating.

He was probably about to claim a need to watch his waist, but he stopped himself. “It was great, Pop.”

Pauli tsked softly as he took the plates away. “I don’t suppose you have room for dessert?”

“I’m stuffed. Denny, do you want anything?”

“Just coffee, thank you.” Pauli walked back to the kitchen, shaking his head the entire time, returning a few minutes later with our coffee.

We lingered over coffee, talking while Robbie’s father hovered close by, not wanting to miss anything important. Finally, Robbie got up and tried to pay, but Pauli shoved the money back and shooed him out of the restaurant with a huge smile.

The evening was cool but very pleasant. Robbie took my hand as we walked back to our building. His hand felt nice in mine.

At Robbie’s front door, we stopped. “Would you like to come in?”

I leaned forward, tilted my head slowly, and brought my lips to his. I’d been wondering what his lips would feel like all night and they didn’t

disappoint. Firm and warm, sweet, with a hint of coffee. I felt his hand on my head as he deepened the kiss, his tongue tracing the outline of my lips, asking for entrance. I parted my lips a little and his tongue continued its gentle probing while his lips did things I never dreamed. This was incredible. He tasted incredible, his body pressed to mine felt incredible. I wanted this to go on forever. I felt his arms wrap around my back, his hands pulling me closer, his hips undulating softly against me. His excitement was evident as his length pressed against my hip. God, I was tempted to take Robbie up on his offer.

I could feel the kiss reverberate through my entire body. I was stoked and raring to go, his kisses curling my toes. Slowly, I backed away, ending the best kiss I'd ever gotten in my life. My chest was heaving and I wanted to take him in my arms and do it again. Hell, I wanted to take him up on his offer and go into his apartment and take this further. But I stopped myself. It took all my energy, but I stopped myself, my body screaming in protest.

Swallowing down the lump in my throat, I kissed him gently on the lips and quickly pulled away. "Good night, Robbie." His eyebrows raised in surprise. "This was a date. A wonderful date, not a hookup." The surprised smile on his face told me I'd made the right decision. "I'll call you tomorrow." I smiled, kissed him just below the ear, turned, and went upstairs to my apartment.

My answering machine was blinking when I entered and I pushed the play button as I went through to the kitchen. Kye's voice came through the machine, loud and clear. "How was your date? Hope you don't get this until tomorrow. Call me."

I smiled to myself and dialed Kye's number. "You're home early. Didn't it go well?"

"It went great, Kye."

"Then what'd you do, hop right into bed?"

"No, Kye...." I made sure he knew I was humoring him. "We had a nice dinner at his father's restaurant, we talked for hours, and then walked home together."

"Did you at least kiss him for god's sake?"

"Oh yes." We kissed all right. My toes were still tingling.

"Thank god." I could almost see Kye's eyes rolling. Then his voice changed, excitement plain. "You met his father?"

“Yes, he owns the restaurant Robbie took me to.”

“That’s big... really big. But he didn’t want to sleep with you?”

“He invited me back to his place when we got home. We kissed and then I said good night and came home.”

“Why in hell did you do that?” I knew Kye wouldn’t understand.

“I like him, really like him, and I didn’t want him to think it was just about sex. He deserves more. I deserve more.”

“Only you would turn down sex with a porn star. Did he ask you out again?”

“He’s not a porn star, he’s a dancer, and I told him I’d call him tomorrow.”

“Well....” I was waiting for Kye’s pronouncement. “It sounds like you had a great evening. Call me tomorrow and let me know how it goes.”

“I’ll talk to you later.” I hung up the phone, shaking my head as I headed to the bathroom, cleaned up, and climbed into bed. But I couldn’t sleep, the memory of Robbie’s kiss playing in my head.

### III

“I CAN’T believe you’ve been dating him for three weeks and you still haven’t slept with him yet.” From Kye’s tone, you’d think *he* wasn’t getting any... or something.

“We’ve had a great time, and just because we haven’t actually had sex yet doesn’t mean we haven’t done other things.” Wonderful, special things, and besides, I was hoping that tonight that would change.

Kye continued as though I hadn’t spoken. “And tonight he’s taking you to the club where he dances.”

I couldn’t help smiling. “Yup.” I shivered a little. “But there’s a dress code and I need your help.”

“What dress code do you need my help with?”

“Leather.” The phone went silent. “You there?”

“I’m speechless. He dances at a leather club?”

“The Leather Stallion.”

“He dances there? Jesus....” Kye’s voice trailed off and I wondered why.

“So can you help me? I don’t want to go overboard, but I don’t want to stick out either.” I was starting to get nervous about this, but I’d promised Robbie and I was really looking forward to watching him dance.

“Sure, I’ll help you. Come on over. Say, do you think he could get me in too?”

I chuckled. “Probably. But not tonight... okay?”

“Sure... okay.... Come on over and we’ll get you set up for your big date.”

I spent an hour at Kye’s picking out a leather vest, pants, and a cap. I thought the cap looked weird, but Kye insisted. “You look good.”

Looking at myself in the mirror, I wasn’t sure. “It’s not too much? I just want to blend in.”

Kye slapped me on the butt. “It’s not too much.” He checked his watch. “You better get going or you’ll be late.” I gave him a big hug and rushed home to make the final preparations. Once in the apartment, I straightened up, changed the sheets, and got dressed, before walking down the stairs to Robbie’s.

He was expecting me and opened the door right away, wearing only a pair of jeans. His eyes traveled up and down my body. “Do I look okay?” His attention was making me self-conscious.

“You look really good.” He stepped back. “Come in. I need to finish getting ready myself.” My eyes followed his jeans-encased butt as he walked back to his bedroom and I felt an urge to follow, but sat on the sofa instead. Robbie joined me a few minutes later, sitting next to me on the sofa and leaning close for a kiss, which I gave gladly.

I could tell there was something on his mind just by the way he was looking at me. “What is it?” He looked away. It must be bad. “Tell me.”

His eyes raised, he asked, “Do you like me?”

The question blew me away. “Yes. Why would you ask that?” In fact, I was starting to have deep feelings for him.

“You’ve never... I don’t know how to say it. In the last three weeks, you’ve never tried anything other than kissing and touching and I’m starting to think you don’t like me that way.” His eyes returned to his lap, like he was afraid of the answer.

“Robbie, I haven’t been out with a lot of guys and I’d always end up having sex really early and it never worked out. So this time I wanted

to wait and get to know you first. Besides, I figured you had guys come on to you all the time and I wanted you to know that I liked you for you, not just for the sex.” I leaned close and kissed him, my tongue playing over his lips. “I figured you were worth waiting for.” I ran my thumb gently over his lower lip.

“You’re something else.” I saw that his eyes were wet as he blinked. Then he kissed me again, this time hard, his hand holding my head, his body pushing me back against the sofa, pressing to mine. Damn, he felt good. My hand slid down his body, tugging at the waist of his jeans. I wanted him so bad I could taste it. Hell, I wanted to taste him, feel him in my mouth, feel him filling me in so many ways. I heard a dinging through the passion, lust, hunger haze that clouded my mind. “Shit.” He collapsed on top of me, his head resting on my shoulder. “We have to go or I’ll be late.”

I pulled him into another kiss, this one gentle. “It’s okay. We’ll pick this up when we get home.” I nipped his bottom lip, tugging on it gently before letting him get up. “Let’s get you to work.” We got up from the sofa, grabbed jackets, and left the apartment. “Don’t you have to wear leather when you’re at work?” We hailed a cab, since the club was too far to walk.

“I’ll change there. They provide my outfits.” I got in the cab and he slid close. Robbie gave the driver the address and we rode in silence through the city lights.

Arriving at the club, there were men hanging out all over. Most were dressed in leather to the hilt: chaps, jackets, jocks, harnesses, the works. Robbie had the cab stop out front and we got out. I paid the driver, after a small argument with Robbie, and he led the way to the side entrance. “You can go in with me and I’ll get you a seat in the club before I have to start.” We were standing in a side alley.

“How late do you work?” I leaned close, kissing his neck. “I can’t wait to get you alone.”

Robbie checked his watch. “I work until one, then I’m yours until Monday morning.” I liked the sound of that. He led us into the club, through a series of seating areas and then out into the bar. Taking me to a small table near one corner of the room, he said, “I’ll be dancing in there.” He pointed to a metal cage on top of a platform, three feet off the ground.

“Then I’ll have a good view.” I gave him a quick kiss. “Go get

ready for work. I'll be fine." Robbie smiled and then I watched his tight butt head back the way we came. Damn, he was fine. Turning my attention away from Robbie, I sat down and looked around the room. Almost everything was painted black and I watched as some really rough-looking characters stocked the bar for the evening. A few patrons had wandered in, but it was still a little early by club standards.

The club filled up over the next hour. The music started, bartenders began getting their patrons toasted, and I've never seen so much leather in one place in my life. One of the bartenders, who'd been over earlier, returned with a fresh beer before scooting back behind the bar. Then I saw the dancers enter the room. One jumped behind the bar and started gyrating his toned abs and tight butt, while another was lifted onto a platform. I waited and a few minutes later Robbie came out wearing only a leather jockstrap and boots. Two men lifted him onto the platform and secured him in the cage. He immediately started to move to the music. Damn, he looked incredible, moving and gyrating to the music, looking at me like he was dancing just for me, like everyone else wasn't there.

"He's hot!" A man encased in leather motioned toward Robbie as he talked to the guy he was with. "I wonder how much for him."

His companion shook his head. "He doesn't do that. I've been coming here for months and he never leaves with anyone."

"Everyone has their price." *What a jackass.* I watched as he sauntered up to Robbie, talking him up, and then smiled to myself as he was turned down flat. He crawled back to the bar with his tail between his legs and Robbie continued dancing.

Guys approached Robbie all evening, putting money in his boots. A few tried for his jock, but he'd take the money before they got too close, and then he'd go back to grinding those hips, that tight butt shaking from side to side.

"What are you into, baby?" a deep voice drawled near my ear. I turned, looking into the eyes of a huge leather daddy.

"Him." I indicated Robbie, who'd momentarily stopped dancing.

The man humphed, "Dream on; you'll never get him." He whispered into my ear, "But I'll make you feel real good." His hand trailed down my back, but I shook him off, got to my feet, and walked up to Robbie, looking up at him while he danced.

"If I give you a dollar, can I get a kiss?"

Robbie bent down, still shaking that perfect butt. "No, but I'll give

you one for free.” I put my face to the bars and waited. I felt Robbie’s lips on mine, the kiss a promise of what I hoped was to come.

Slowly, we pulled apart. Half the men in the room were watching, most with envy on their faces. With a caress of my cheek, Robbie started dancing again and I returned to my chair. The evening wore on and I watched Robbie move and dance for hours; he never seemed to tire.

Toward one o’clock, I saw a man approach, speaking to Robbie briefly before heading toward the back room. A few minutes later, Robbie got out of the cage, walking directly to me. “Sal wants to see me. I should be just a few minutes. I’ll change and then we can go.” I nodded and he disappeared into the back room.

Half an hour later, I was still waiting and wondering what was going on. Suddenly, he burst through the door, slamming it back on its hinges. “What’s wrong?” Robbie looked at me, fit to kill, and I backed away, wondering what I’d done. He rushed toward the exit and I followed him out of the club. “What happened, Robbie?” I was becoming concerned.

Robbie took a deep breath and wiped his eyes. He suddenly looked like he was going to cry. “Sal called me into his office. There was another man with him. It seems this guy saw me dance and inquired about me. It seemed he wanted to know how much I charge for the night. When I explained that I didn’t hustle, he got angry.”

Now I was getting angry. “What did he say?”

Robbie was getting a good head of steam. “He grabbed me and told me that I’d spread my legs for that film and that I’d spread my legs for him! Then Sal told me that if I didn’t do it, I was fired. I grabbed my stuff and left to find you.” Robbie looked around and then slipped behind me. “That’s him, the guy that just came out of the club.” He was looking around and spied Robbie. “Let’s get out of here.”

He walked to where we were standing, a hard look on his face. I met him without blinking. “I understand you owe him an apology.”

“For what? Negotiating the price of a whore for the night? I don’t think so.” I nearly gagged at the arrogance, the selfishness... the smell. He stepped forward, liquor pervading his breath. “And what are you going to do about it?” His lip turned up, hand on my shoulder.

I could feel the adrenaline coursing through me. I put my hands on his shoulder and thrust my knee into his groin with everything I had. He doubled over in pain, crying like a baby before collapsing onto the



pavement.

I turned to Robbie, ignoring the lump rolling around on the pavement, whimpering in pain. "Now let's get out of here."

We walked a block and hailed a cab home. "You don't fight very fair."

I looked to see if he was mad at me, but Robbie was smiling. "He was a drunk jackass who tried to buy you for the evening. Fair has nothing to do with it."

Robbie settled next to me on the seat of the taxi as it sped through the streets. "Thank you," he said and leaned close, and I stroked the skin of his lower lip with my thumb. We pulled up to our building and I paid the driver before going inside.

Robbie stood in the hallway, looking at me, indecision in his eyes. "Come with me, Robbie." I took his hand and led him upstairs to my apartment. After unlocking the door, I pulled Robbie inside, pressing him against the back of the door. "I've wanted you for a long time."

Robbie lowered his head before I could kiss him. "You sure you want me?"

I raised his head with my finger. "Where did that come from?"

"He tried to buy me." His eyes lowered. "Maybe I am a whore. I mean, I did have sex for money when I made that porno."

"No." I brought my lips to his, kissing him gently, soothing away the hurt, letting him know for certain that it was him I cared for... him I loved. I pulled away as the realization startled me, looking into his eyes, seeing my own feelings reflected back at me. Leaning forward, I captured those quivering lips with mine. Robbie's arms encircled my neck, our kiss deepening. "This way." Holding him close, I walked us through the apartment and back to the bedroom. I opened the door, letting Robbie decide.

"You want to have sex with me." Robbie looked through the open doorway to the bed. "Even after what happened at the club?"

"No, I want to make love with you." I stepped close, so close I could feel his body heat through my clothes, my fingers brushing against his cheek. "I love you, Robbie." I stood, looking into his eyes, waiting. I didn't expect him to say it back; that wasn't necessary. I just needed him to know. I saw a tear run down his cheek and he made no effort to brush it away. He just stood there, silent, looking at me.

I leaned forward, taking his mouth against mine, thrusting my tongue, staking a claim. This kiss was not soft, not careful, but hard, almost brutal, my hand pushing against his head, his short hair rough against my palm. Using my superior height, I pushed Robbie against the wall; he humphed into my mouth as his back hit the door, but his lips didn't waver and our tongues continued their thrilling duel. God, Robbie was driving me crazy. It was talking all my willpower to keep from ripping off his clothes right there where we stood, but he deserved more than sex against a wall.

Robbie's head bumped the plaster as we pulled back, both of us coming up for air, our chests heaving. "I've wanted to do that since we met, but you played it so cool, I didn't know if it would be welcome." Robbie heaved a breath. "But, I'm glad we waited because I love you too."

Jesus, those words ripped through me, warming my heart and making me so hard it hurt. Tasking Robbie's mouth again, I maneuvered him away from the wall, kissing him toward the bed. I felt when his legs hit the mattress and I leaned forward, easing him back down onto the bed, that tight body rubbing against me. God, he was driving me wild. I needed to step away, needed to cool down, or I was going to blow in my pants. Standing up, I kicked off my shoes and opened the buttons on my shirt, stripped it off, and dropped it on a chair. Opening my pants, I slipped them off my legs and let them pool on the floor. Robbie started to squirm on the bed and started pulling up his T-shirt. "Please...." I touched his arm, placing it back on the bed. "Let me." Robbie settled, his eyes wide as I slipped off my briefs, standing before him, naked.

"Wow." His lips formed the word, but made no sound, his eyes traveling from head to toe. "You're as hot as I thought you'd be." I'd never thought of myself as hot, but this was no time to argue.

"And you are wearing way too many clothes." Climbing onto the bed, straddling his hips, I kissed him hard as my fingers lifted his T-shirt high on his chest, hands rubbing his hard nipples. Releasing his lips temporarily, I pulled his shirt over his head, throwing it behind me. Sitting up again, I ran my hands over his sculpted chest and stomach, clipped chest hair rough on my skin. "Beautiful... so beautiful." The olive skin and dark nipples on top of hard muscles twitched as I stroked him. "Now this is hot!" I leaned forward, tonguing a hard nipple as Robbie wiggled and moaned beneath me and I could feel his hardness

through his clothes as his hips thrust forward.

“What do you want, Robbie?” He cried out as he thrust his hips again and I scooted further up on his body, fingers opening his belt, pulling it off. “Is this what you want?” I reached behind me, opening his pants, pulling down his zipper, encountering something smooth, and my eyes widened. “You’re still wearing the leather jock, aren’t you?”

“You like it?” His eyes were swimming as I jumped off the bed, yanking down his jeans and throwing them on the floor.

“Yeah!” The black leather jock looked so erotic, so decadent here in my bedroom. Even though I’d been watching Robbie dance in it for hours, it looked sexier here in my bedroom where I could appreciate it up close. “I like it,” I admitted, stroking the leather, feeling the hardness beneath it. “Really like it.”

“Jesus... don’t tease me.” His eyes were rolling as I continued stroking him through the leather. “Denny... that’s cruel...,” Robbie whimpered softly.

I reached to the bedside table and pulled out some condoms and lube, dropping them on the bed. Then I opened the snaps at his hip and the jock fell away, dropping to the floor, and what I’d imagined for weeks was right there. I swallowed the lump in my throat as I feasted my eyes. “You’re such a stud!” Straddling Robbie again, I grabbed a condom, handing it to Robbie. While he opened the package, I grabbed the lube, slicking my fingers, preparing myself for what I really wanted.

Taking the condom from Robbie’s fingers, I rolled it down his thick length, situated myself, and lowered my body onto him, taking him inside me. Robbie started making all these sounds, incredible moans and whimpers.

“Take me, Robbie...” I lifted my body and Robbie thrust his hips against me, going deep, filling me completely. “Yeah... like that!” He relaxed and pushed up against me again. “Yeah... give me everything, Robbie... everything you’ve got.”

Robbie went wild, thrusting deeply, making these noises that were sending me over the moon. “You want more?” I crashed myself onto him, whimpering with passion. We started moving together, our bodies in rhythm, the bed bouncing in response.

“Fuck, Robbie.” I leaned forward, kissing him hard, and he used the opportunity to shift up on the bed. Suddenly, I found myself on my back and Robbie driving into me. I wasn’t going to last much longer.

“God, Robbie... so close....”

“Yeah... me too.” He picked up the pace, giving me everything I could want. My head was swimming, the passion racing through me. My body tensed and I came without ever touching myself. “Love you, Robbie!”

I collapsed back onto the bed, my mind whirling, clouded with spent passion as I felt Robbie thrust hard. “Denny... love!” he groaned, pulsing deep within my body. He collapsed on top of me and I whimpered as he slipped from me. My mind was still throbbing as we came down from our orgasmic high. Slowly, I realized the throbbing wasn’t in my head, but a soft pounding noise coming from the next apartment. Robbie started laughing softly. “I guess we were inspirational.”

“I know you sure as hell were.” I pulled back the covers and guided us beneath the blankets. “Love you.”

“I love you too.” We settled together, sleep starting to overtake me. “Denny, what am I going to do for a job?”

I pulled him closer. “Why don’t you work for your dad until you find something else?”

He nodded against my skin. “But I really loved dancing.” I could hear the loss in his voice.

“You could always dance for me; I can guarantee a very appreciative audience.”

ANDREW GREY grew up in western Michigan with a father who loved to tell stories and a mother who loved to read them. Since then he has lived throughout the country and traveled throughout the world. He has a master's degree from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee and works in information systems for a large corporation. Andrew's hobbies include collecting antiques, gardening, and leaving his dirty dishes anywhere but in the sink (particularly when writing). He considers himself blessed with an accepting family, fantastic friends, and the world's most supportive and loving partner. Andrew currently lives in beautiful historic Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

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The Sin of Omission

A Cruise for Christmas

# Corona & Lime

Sonia Devereaux

“YEAH, we’re going to GYM now. We’re right outside the station.” Kyle Taggart wrinkled his nose like a day-old puppy. “Because I don’t have any reception underground, Papi.” There was a pause in the conversation on the dishwater-blond’s end but his traveling companions, Jacob Benson and Paul Donovan, could hear their friend Armando Cruz complaining through Kyle’s flip phone.

*Watch him back out on us again,* Paul thought, hazel eyes rolling skyward.

“Papi, what do you want me to say? I told you this yesterday: take the E to 14th Street. It’s four blocks. Well, I know you’re not near the One, that’s why. So fine: take the One to 18th. Yeah, it’s on 8th between 18th and 19th. Papi, what do you want from me? Because that’s where we’re going. Therapy doesn’t have pool tables, that’s why.” Kyle pinched the bridge of his nose. “Either meet us or don’t. Bye. No, I’m hanging up. Bye.”

Kyle closed his phone. “I don’t have time for his shit tonight. Let’s go.” He didn’t wait for Jacob or Paul and headed down the steps. Jacob and Paul exchanged a look before following behind.

“Maybe we should just forget about going downtown tonight,” Jacob said, dodging people as he turned the corner. Even after spending four years at NYU and another four after that living in the city, he still felt like a transplant and was not a fan of the smelly, damp, and dark subway system. “Let’s just forget it and meet Armando at his place,” Jacob added, nearly tripping over a sleeping homeless man.

“Don’t you start too. I’m not going out to Queens tonight, first of all. Second, this is about you, remember?” Kyle shot him a backward glance. “You haven’t been with anyone since Brian left you ten months ago. You need to get out and meet someone.”

“You guys keep saying that. Then you introduce me to a never-ending stream of jerks. I’ve met enough ‘someones’ to last me a lifetime.” Jacob skirted past a group of teenagers in his efforts to keep pace. “What’s so bad about being single? I like being single. I don’t need a boyfriend.”

Kyle smirked as he walked. “Who said anything about a boyfriend?” He pulled out his MetroCard and inserted it into the automated machine to refill it. “You need to get fucked so you’ll stop being so uptight.”

“That’s your answer to everything, isn’t it, baby?” Paul asked, walking up behind the dark blond and snaking his hands around his waist. “Nothing like some dick to cure the blues.”

“I don’t see how sex is going to help me,” Jacob protested, watching Kyle kiss Paul on the neck. Paul ejected Kyle’s card and the blond and brunet walked back to where Jacob was standing in front of the metal turnstiles. “Dick, as you so eloquently put it, is not the answer.”

“I know you’ll meet someone. I just have a good feeling about tonight,” Kyle insisted, heading through the turnstiles first. “For one, it’s a full moon. And more importantly, my fortune cookie from Hunan Delight today said that I would change someone’s destiny.”

“Hunan on 52nd Street?” Paul asked.

“No, Hunan on 48th.”

“Oh, I like the one on 52nd better; they have cuter delivery boys,” Paul explained.

“You would, babe. You always were a sucker for a man in uniform.”

“Fortune cookie philosophy aside,” Jacob interrupted, “I still say this is a bad idea.” He had objected to going to the gay sports bar from the moment Kyle brought it up. And with every step he walked behind Paul and Kyle as they headed to the downtown side of the terminal, he regretted giving in. “My mother always used to say to my sister, you’re not going to meet the man you’re gonna marry in a bar. The only types of guys you meet at a bar are the wrong type.”

“Did she say that as she milked the cows? Or when she fed the chickens, Farmer Blue Jean?” Kyle teased, not bothering to turn around.

“Shut the shit up, Kyle,” Jacob groaned, making a face at Kyle’s

back.

"I always thought it was cute you grew up on a farm," Paul decided, smiling at Jacob. Jacob quirked an eyebrow. "I've always fantasized about meeting some big, strong, strapping farmhand and us doing it against one of those big commercial tractors."

"Bottom or top?" Kyle wondered.

"He'd be the top. All sweaty from lifting hay bales and rebuilding the barn after that tornado."

"Maybe be the big beefy type, all muscle, no brains. And a cock all fat and thick that makes you wonder if his father was a horse or something," Kyle added, smirking his classic mischievous smirk.

At 5'5", Kyle was the shortest of the trio. He was also the most devious, and that's why the other two both referred to Paul's boyfriend of two years as a gremlin. Jacob liked "leprechaun" better, but an Irish twenty-something with the nickname "leprechaun" just seemed like a bad cliché. Green eyes, dark blond hair, shoulders that freckled in the summer sun; Kyle would be cuter if he weren't always scheming something.

Paul, on the other hand, was handsome in a more classic Roman fashion. Olive-toned skin, darker features, with the exception of hazel eyes. Jacob had met the brunet at a party when they were both in college. Paul was half-drunk and had made a pass at the recently outed sophomore. He told him in his alcohol-induced state quite cockily that his father was from England and his mother was Greek and that's why he was so hot. And before Jacob could comment, Paul threw up on him.

They'd been best friends ever since.

"Talk some sense into your boyfriend, Paul," Jacob begged as they watched an A train whiz by on the center track. "I really don't want to go to GYM. It's all the way on the other side of Manhattan. And there's nothing but athlete types there. I don't know a quarterback from a relief pitcher. I have no business being in a sports bar."

"You don't have to know anything about sports," Kyle answered before Paul had a chance to. "There are plenty of built, gay sports fans who want a cute bottom who's not too femme, not too straight acting. You know, like you."

"Maybe I want to top next time around. I don't bottom exclusively. I never did with Brian, you know."



“Fine,” Kyle decided. “We’ll find a hot little bottom for you then.”

Jacob sighed. “I’m not going to meet anyone. And if Armando blows us off I’ll be the third wheel the rest of the night. We can go get drinks at Mars 2112. Armando loves that place.”

Paul glanced at Jacob before looking back at Kyle. “Armando *is* a flake, baby. Maybe we should go somewhere else. Besides, we can go almost anywhere if you’re that anxious to play pool.” Jacob nodded in agreement. He could always count on Paul.

Kyle shook his head. “No, this is for his own good. He can’t sit home every Saturday night.”

“But, baby, look at him. He looks miserable.” Paul motioned to where Jacob was standing on the platform. Jacob slumped his shoulders and stuck out his lower lip on cue. “See?”

Kyle narrowed his eyes, and then nudged Paul. “I need to speak to you privately.” He spun around and found a vertical support beam littered with track construction notices he could duck behind. Then he motioned with his index finger for Paul to join him.

“The E or the C should be here any minute,” Jacob protested. The subway cars only took about seven minutes to arrive at the stations. Not that missing the train would be a bad thing. If it delayed them from having to go to GYM tonight he didn’t mind in the least bit.

“Only take a minute,” Kyle answered. When Paul got close he yanked him around the side of the beam.

Paul made a face. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Kyle hissed. “You’re gonna ruin all my hard work.”

“What hard work? What are you talking about?” Paul crossed his arms. He should have known Kyle was up to something.

“Jacob needs to meet someone. But he would never agree to another blind date. So I set him up without him knowing it.”

“You what?”

“Lower your voice!” Kyle shot him a look. Paul rolled his eyes. “Anyway, a very attractive guy is gonna come up to him in the bar and strike up a conversation. And no matter how Jacob acts, the guy is gonna be interested.”

“You arranged for a guy to hit on him at the bar?” A nod. “What would possess you, Kyle? Have you lost the rest of your mind?” Kyle’s

eyes narrowed as Paul struggled to keep his voice level. “He made us promise him no more fix-ups. His eyes did that beady thing they do when he gets really mad and all serious and stuff. Hell, I’m surprised he didn’t ask us to swear a blood oath.”

“Stop exaggerating, would ya?” Kyle pinched the bridge of his nose and took a breath before looking at his lover again. “Jacob lost his confidence when Brian dumped him. He’s afraid to meet anyone new. It doesn’t help that Brian was his first real boyfriend. He doesn’t have to marry the guy. He just has to get his mojo back.”

“And how is this guy going to know it’s Jacob?”

“I met him in person. He’ll recognize me. And I told him that Jacob was about 5’10” and 160 pounds, medium brown hair, blue eyes, shy. Oh, and shorter than you.”

“Just where did you meet this guy anyway? Personals ad or something?”

“Or something.”

Paul frowned. “MySpace?”

“Of course not, though I checked out this guy’s page and he has a lot of hot male friends.”

“Really?” Kyle nodded. “He’s cute then, huh?” Kyle nodded again, this time a smile forming on his lips. “I don’t know about this. It seems wrong. You’re lying to him.” Paul glanced at Jacob, who was playing with his cell phone and sighing heavily. “If he finds out this was a setup....”

“Look, what’s the worst that can happen? The guy knows the deal. And when I explained the situation he was more than happy to agree. So what if they don’t see each other again after tonight? Isn’t it worth seeing Jacob happy and boosting his self-esteem?” Kyle looked around the beam. “Just look at that face. Isn’t he just begging to get laid tonight?”

Paul glanced at where their friend was standing. His toes were right against the yellow line and he was fiddling with his cell phone, sliding it up and down restlessly. “Paul, the guy needs our help. How can you deny a friend in need? Especially one so sexually frustrated?”

Paul gave his boyfriend a skeptical look. “I guess it’s not a horrible idea. I suppose it can’t cause any harm. As long as he doesn’t find out it was a setup.” Paul frowned again. “Armando doesn’t know about this, does he?”

“Hell no.”

“All right, good. Then Jacob will never know.” Paul smiled. Maybe this would be a good night after all. If Jacob finally started dating again it would be worth a little deception.

THEY got to the bar at 10:27 despite Jacob’s protests. Kyle couldn’t have been happier Jacob hadn’t held them up. It gave him a good half-hour to get some liquor into Jacob so he wouldn’t be such an ass when his “date” showed up at eleven. Kyle didn’t see why Jacob didn’t like GYM in the first place. Hardwood floors, brick walls, flat-screen TVs airing all those deliciously sexy contact sports like football and bull riding. And who could forget about all those muscular men sipping their Bud Lights sitting in front of the TVs? What wasn’t to love about the gay sports bar?

They lucked out getting seats at the bar. It wasn’t too crowded yet. Then again, not a lot of sporting events came on Saturday nights. “What’ll you have?” the bartender questioned, placing napkins in front of the three friends.

“Guinness, if it’s on tap,” Kyle answered first. The bartender inclined his head and then looked at Paul and Jacob.

“I’ll have a Red Headed Slut,” Paul answered. “The shot, not the drink.”

“For you?” The bartender glanced at Jacob.

“He’ll have a Red Headed Slut too,” Kyle told the beefy hunk behind the bar before Jacob could get a word in. “And then bring him a Long Island Iced Tea.”

“No problem. You guys want to pay as you go or start a tab?”

“Tab’s fine,” Kyle decided, handing over a credit card. The bartender turned to go over to the computer to set up a tab while Kyle admired his rear end.

“Red Headed Slut and an LIT? Are you trying to give me alcohol poisoning?” Jacob groaned, preventing Kyle from fully getting to appreciate their bartender’s ass with his complaining. “I was just gonna get a Corona.”

“You need to get out of your comfort zone. You can’t go to a bar, dressed the same old way, ordering a damn Corona with lime on the side. Live a little. How do you expect to get laid if you don’t shake things up

and stop going back to your old standbys?”

Jacob made a face. “Just because I like Corona I’m doomed to be single forever?”

“There’s not enough alcohol in beer. Plus, you nurse your drinks like a newborn on your mother’s tit. I’d like you to at least get buzzed tonight,” Kyle explained matter-of-factly.

Jacob was seconds from commenting when Kyle’s loud, obnoxious ringtone interrupted the conversation. Paul’s eyes rolled up. “Armando?” he questioned, as Kyle flipped his phone up. Kyle nodded.

“Papi? Where are you?” Kyle’s nose wrinkled. “Papi... Papi, you’re breaking up. Yeah. I’ll go outside. You can’t miss it, it’s between 18th and 19th. That’s exactly what I said earlier. Exactly what I said, Papi. You Dominicans don’t listen....” Kyle trailed off as he headed out the glass door.

“The two of them are ridiculous.” Jacob looked at Paul and nodded in agreement. “Don’t worry about Kyle. He only busts your chops so much because it’s his way of being worried about you. I know you’re totally against us helping you meet someone. I just think Kyle’s right about you sitting home every Saturday night.”

Jacob shrugged. “I never know what to say. And I know I’ll just get turned down. Why bother trying?”

“Maybe Kyle’s premonition is right and you *will* meet someone tonight.”

Jacob snorted. “Yeah, I’m so sure.” He took his drinks from the bartender without another comment, using the silence between the two of them as an opportunity to scan his surroundings. He wasn’t looking for any real purpose, save for looking’s sake.

The bar itself wasn’t half bad, if you didn’t mind multiple sporting events playing all over the place. He didn’t give two shits about sports, though he had to admire the fine male specimens who did. He wasn’t sure he was into the guys who hit the bench press on a regular basis but you had to admire the dedication. And not all of the guys in here were suffering from steroid abuse. Some had just enough muscle tone to show off their hard work without making them look like slaves to the gym.

Then there were the more casual types who looked like regular stiffies with office jobs who, like their straight counterparts, happened to just really like sports. This place made a lot of sense, especially seeing how straight people, male and female, obviously hooked up at regular

sports bars. The more Jacob stopped stereotyping the guys he assumed came to GYM the more he noticed guys like him. Guys who probably weren't all that into sports either but knew they could cruise in here and pick up a partner or two.

Okay, so the bar and the people weren't that bad. He was still a little out of his comfort zone, because even if he ingested enough liquid confidence tonight to actually speak to one of the patrons, if the guy wanted to talk sports he was toast. Hypothetically speaking, of course, if he were inclined to strike up a conversation with any male in the bar who wasn't one of his friends or a bartender, he'd probably try for a guy who appeared to be working the room. A cruiser was less likely to care if Jacob knew anything about the tight end on his favorite football team, and more about Jacob's own tight end.

Of course, Armando always reminded them anytime Jacob wound up allowing his friends to drag him to a gay bar that you couldn't rule out the bartenders as potential partners. He once had asked for Sex with the Bartender and the bartender in question, not being familiar with the cocktail, had taken it as a come-on. Armando never did get that drink, but he did have a very sexy story to tell the next morning.

By the time Kyle returned inside with Armando in tow, Jacob and Paul had already downed their shots and Jacob was making noticeable headway with his rather strong LIT. Armando was as fiery as ever, giving Jacob an openmouthed kiss and immediately launching into an account about some slut who was practically begging for it at a pizza shop on the Upper East Side.

Jacob only half-listened to what his darkly tan and handsome friend was saying. He enjoyed the slight hint of an accent as Armando said certain words. He loved the cadence of his voice as his whole face lit up and he spoke animatedly. It wasn't what he said, but how he said it that always brought a smile to Jacob's face whenever he met up with them.

Sure, Armando embellished a bit. But the other three never doubted Armando's wild tales about pretty Chelsea boys who were hot for his tan, Spanish ass. As Jacob's mom always explained to his sister after she'd come home from an interesting date, half the time you only date the guy for the stories anyway. And Armando's misadventures in queer dating were enough to base a movie of the week on.

As much as Jacob genuinely enjoyed Armando's company, he still envied him. For one, Armando had somehow mastered the art of being

single and looking. He looked without having to look and he never had an issue finding and being found by gorgeous, interesting guys. To add further insult to the entire situation, Kyle always used Armando's experiences as "teaching tools" for Jacob to learn from. That is, when he wasn't trying to find someone new that Jacob just had to meet.

"Jacob baby, don't turn around now and look all obvious or whatever, but there's a guy checking you out to your right." For the first time since Armando arrived at GYM and started entertaining them with his latest life experience, the brunet actually heard what the black-haired man was saying.

"Me?" Jacob asked, sure he had either totally misheard or Armando was totally mistaken. "You sure you're not just seeing things?"

"I'm serious. I couldn't figure out who it was he was looking at, but it's definitely you." Armando glanced off to Jacob's immediate right before looking at Paul. "Paul, you see him?"

"Dark brown hair? Like 6'2", standing over by the two black guys?" Paul confirmed.

"Um-hum." Armando shook his head to emphasize his point. "Ooh, Jacob baby, he's cute."

"I wonder if he's here alone," Kyle played along, also glancing toward the man he had arranged to meet their friend here.

"Being here alone isn't really the issue," Paul answered, picking up on his boyfriend's effort to draw more interest to the situation. He knew his best friend better than anyone. Jacob would just as soon blow off the whole thing if he weren't made 100 percent confident there wasn't any chance it was a mistake. "As long as he's single he could be here with ten guys."

"Not even," Armando answered. "It's just like football. Just because there's a goalie doesn't mean you can't score."

"Well, once Jacob talks to him he'll find out whether he's involved with someone or not," Kyle pointed out.

By this point Jacob was really sure this whole thing was a misunderstanding. There wasn't any guy. And even if there was he wasn't looking at him. He knew his friends and it was even more likely they were just trying to raise his spirits. If he turned the guy would conveniently not be looking anymore and they could just as easily tell him he had looked away and Jacob had simply missed it.

“Jacob, really, I’m starting to get a little uncomfortable,” Paul piped in. “I don’t like the idea of some stranger undressing my best friend with his eyes on the other side of the bar.”

“Just knock it off, guys. I know what you’re doing. If this is how you three are gonna act all night, I’ll just head back to my apartment.”

“If you don’t believe us, just look for yourself,” Kyle remarked. “I doubt he’ll look away even if you don’t do the whole stretch-and-look-over-the-shoulder thing. All three of us caught him eyeing you up like a holiday ham and he hasn’t let up yet.”

“Kyle’s right,” Armando agreed. Then he shook himself. “Did I just say that?”

“Suck cock, Papi,” Kyle answered, giving their friend the finger.

“Not even if I were diabetic and that was the insulin.”

“Long Island Iced Tea.” The four friends glanced back at the bartender who placed a fresh drink in front of Jacob.

Jacob frowned. “I didn’t order another one.”

“He did.” The man motioned over to Jacob’s right and the four looked to where a younger man was sitting, seemingly alone, but in their direct line of sight. He smiled at Jacob and raised his own glass before taking a sip.

“He bought me a drink?” Jacob questioned, trying to get a good look at his apparent suitor. His friends had been serious?

“Sending you a drink? Who does that anymore?” Paul wondered.

“Is it so bad?” Armando said. “Don’t people do that stuff?”

“Yeah, maybe back in 1989,” Paul answered. Kyle shot him a look. Right. They were supposed to be encouraging Jacob, not making him have second thoughts. Paul quickly amended his statement. “I mean, I suppose it was nice. Drinks are pricey in here.”

“I’m sure he’s just intimidated. We’re all standing around. It’s hard to just walk over to a group of guys and single one out to start talking to,” Kyle explained.

“True, true,” Armando agreed, shaking his head as he said it. “Let’s go play pool and let Jacob talk to the *papi chulo*.”

“Talk to him?” Jacob was flabbergasted. “I can’t. I couldn’t....”

“Oy, Jacob baby, you’re kidding me, right?” Jacob shook his head no vigorously. “Why?”

*Why?* Armando couldn't be asking him why. For one thing the "papi chulo" they were discussing was more than just your average run-of-the-mill pretty boy. After all, there were more than a healthy number of cute gay men in the bar tonight. As for the mystery man who had sent him the drink... hell, gorgeous only started to cover it.

He was sex personified.

Piercing blue eyes, icy but ironically warm at the very same time. Dark brown hair in a short cut with longer pieces sweeping down right to his thick, dark brown eyebrows. A firm jawline. A tight-fitting navy crew top, which hinted at a lot of possibilities underneath his shirt. And that smile, one part cocky, two parts confident. The type of smile that says, "Yeah, I'm hot. We both know it. What you wanna do about it?"

No way in hell could he talk to that guy. His smile had its own tagline, for shit's sake. Jacob just kept shaking his head no, not really hearing what the others were saying until it occurred to him that they'd left him at the bar by himself, one half-finished LIT and a brand-new one his only company.

"That guy was cute," Armando continued as Jacob's three friends headed over to the pool tables. "Jacob better not mess this up."

"Damn right about that," Kyle agreed. He of course had more riding on this encounter than Armando or even Paul did. He couldn't have been happier with the way things had gone so far, though. It lent realism to the situation that it was Armando who had first noticed Race glancing over at Jacob. Their friend wouldn't suspect a setup with the way Armando was unknowingly playing along.

If anything, it had been Paul who threatened to fuck things up. Kyle admitted he wouldn't have picked the drink idea either if given the choice, but he hadn't discussed any details with Race, wanting the interaction to be completely natural. He wasn't totally surprised he had sent the cocktail over, though. Especially since he had agreed to let Race put all his drinks on Kyle's bar tab. Jacob had been too busy people-watching to notice Kyle slip back inside before Armando arrived and tell another bartender that he was paying for Race's drinks.

The beauty of the entire thing was, after Jacob had probably the best sex in his life tonight, his ego would be inflated and he could cruise and pick up guys without a care in the world. Kyle admitted to himself he was interfering in Jacob's love life when he had promised not to. But what Jacob didn't know wouldn't hurt anyone.



As for Jacob, he hadn't moved from his spot on the stool. He managed a few nervous gulps of the new beverage, but only because the bartender had gotten rid of the old one since he was too stunned to touch either of them. He wasn't totally naïve as to how this was supposed to work. He was supposed to go over to the guy, drink in hand, and thank him. But that wasn't happening.

He wasn't sure what to think of a guy sending him a drink. Didn't men send women drinks? That made him feel a little uneasy. Then of course was the fact that the guy looked younger than him. Not to mention, most importantly, if he stood up and attempted to actually walk over to where the other man was seated, he risked the very real possibility of the drink spilling all over him or the floor.

He was sure he'd fuck this up. Besides, maybe the bartender had goofed and given it to him by mistake. Or the guy was here with a bunch of his college friends and this was a dare or something. Send the loser a drink. That's it. Besides, even if the guy were interested, and that was still debatable, Jacob would have no clue what to say. Or do. His friends weren't even nearby to watch him. They'd never know he chickened out and—

"Hey." Jacob was startled, but managed not to show it physically as he regarded the gorgeous object of his thoughts who now stood mere inches away from him. All that mental back-and-forth and he hadn't even noticed the hot guy had come over to him. Why hadn't he thought of this scenario?

"Hey." It was loud in the bar. Not that it wouldn't be. Unlike with his friends when they spoke with automatic raised voices to communicate, Jacob felt weird having to speak so loudly to the handsome stranger.

And as if the stranger had thought the exact same thing, the slightly taller guy leaned over so his lips were almost brushing Jacob's ear. "So what's your story anyway?" the kid asked in a deep, low voice. "You didn't want to look at me, even when all your friends were. You didn't want my drink. Just give me a line in. Am I completely wasting my time?" He pulled back a little and gave Jacob a heart-stopping smile. "I sure hope not," he finished in a higher voice.

"No." Realizing his voice wasn't loud enough, he copied the other guy and leaned over so he was talking directly into his ear. "No," he repeated. "I thought my friends were teasing me. I didn't think you were

actually interested.”

“Why not?” The hottie was speaking in his ear again.

“Guys like you don’t hit on guys like me.”

“Bullshit.”

Jacob made a face. “That’s not bullshit.”

“Sure it is,” the guy insisted. “I’m hitting on you, aren’t I?”

Cocky, wasn’t he? Jacob smiled. He could play this game. “What if I told you I had a boyfriend?”

“He’d be a pretty bad boyfriend to leave you here all by yourself.”

“How old are you, anyway?” Jacob looked at the kid with a pair of quirked eyebrows. “Are you even legal?”

“Twenty-two.” Jacob found himself smirking with a shake of his head. That would explain some of the bravado, wouldn’t it? He must be going through his James Dean stage, all talk and no fear. Though Jacob didn’t recall being that sure of himself at that age.

The gorgeous twenty-two-year-old leaned in again. “Why’s it matter anyway?”

“Why’s what matter? How old you are?” The kid inclined his head. “You’re a little young for me.”

“It won’t really matter when we fuck later.”

Jacob pulled away then. Talk about forward. Actually, forward would be putting it politely. This little brat, whose name he didn’t even know, was propositioning him? Or was this just how pickup lines worked these days? Kyle and company expected him to date guys like this?

It was actually a blessing in disguise that the kid was so smug, though. Jacob didn’t have a ton of confidence to begin with, but he couldn’t take someone like *papi chulo* here seriously. “You kiss your mother with that mouth?” Jacob asked, still taken aback.

“You ask like you want to find out what I do with my mouth,” Jacob’s companion commented, that heart-stopping smile on his pretty-boy face.

“You actually get guys to go home with you talking like this?”

“I do.”

“Not possible.”

“I don’t think you’ll be so confident when you’re looking for your

pants on my floor at the ass crack of dawn tomorrow.”

“I don’t make it a habit of going home with guys I don’t know.”

“First time for everything.” The kid extended his hand. “And the name’s Race.”

“Jacob.” They shook hands. “Are you telling me your name so I know what to scream later on?”

Race smiled. “Maybe.”

“Are you really this overconfident or is this a put-on?”

“Is your ass as nice in person as it looks in those jeans?”

“You must think I enjoy being spoken to like this.”

“You’re blushing, and you haven’t taken your eyes off of me since I came over.”

Jacob swallowed. “It’s the alcohol. I’m buzzed. I’m not blushing.” Jacob leaned even closer. “I’m certainly not blushing over you. And I’m sure as hell not gonna bottom to some first-grader for starters.”

“Who said anything about *you* bottoming?”

“You’re not even my type.”

“Dick is everyone’s type.” Jacob flushed brighter. Race took the opportunity to lean closer yet. “It’s not cocky if it’s the truth, you know,” Race continued. “I saw you and decided I want to see more. It’s not a come-on or arrogance. I don’t believe in pointless small talk about where you work and how you came out and if you want two-point-three kids and a white Labradoodle. You’re cute and I want you. End of story.”

It took exactly seventeen minutes to get back to Race’s cramped, one-bedroom East Village apartment. Jacob had barely managed a goodbye to Paul before Race and he left GYM and ended up on a half-empty subway car. Some heavy petting and inappropriate groping soon led to some intense kissing on the rather quick ride back to the younger man’s place.

From the moment the heavy metal door shut behind them in the third-floor walkup, Jacob no longer cared that he was almost five years older, and the responsible one. And it certainly didn’t matter as Race pressed him against said door that he didn’t go home with strangers or that he didn’t come to Alphabet City and didn’t really know exactly how he was getting home when this was over.

Getting Race's tight crew v-neck off of him and cluttering the floor. That's what mattered. Raw need. Basic instincts that had been denied for far longer than was sane. That's what mattered. Dick. That mattered too.

"I'm gonna fuck you," Jacob hissed, pushing Race back so he could step away from the front door. The older man racked his fingers against a tight chest, and pinched twin nipples that had risen in greeting. "Fuck, I'm gonna fuck you."

"Couch or bed?" Race teased, running his hands against pants that were suddenly two sizes too small. Jacob groaned in the back of his throat and pushed Race back until his legs hit the sofa. "Couch it is," he smirked.

"It's all the same, isn't it? Couch, bed, chair, floor?" Jacob leaned down and offered the other brunet his moist lips again.

"You should consider yourself lucky." Race sat and pulled Jacob into him. "I don't usually kiss the guys I bring home."

This time the kiss lasted until Jacob's lungs demanded more air. A little winded, he was powerless to stop Race from forcing him to sit on the sofa. "I'm gonna fuck you," Race promised. Race smothered his neck with a flurry of new kisses and Jacob's eyes slid shut. Hands were roaming up a black T-shirt. "Fuck, I'm gonna fuck you," Race continued, repeating Jacob's words from minutes before.

Jacob kept his eyes closed as Race's hands roamed and sojourned up and down clothed flesh. He could hear his belt buckle being undone and feel an urgent tug at his jean pockets. "Maybe I'll suck on it first, and take it from there."

A blowjob sounded heavenly. With the way Race's callused hands were moving, it was obvious he was moments from taking Jacob into his mouth. It had been incredibly too long since he'd had such intimate contact. The last time had been perhaps two weeks before Brian and he called it quits for good. Which was almost a year ago now. Brian had come home from work and they ended up in the kitchen. They had been having problems for a while but that night they'd seen a break in the arguing and....

Jacob jerked, eyes shooting open. "What?" Race made a face as Jacob scrambled to maintain some of his modesty by quickly tucking himself back into his boxer briefs. "What?"

"I can't. I'm sorry. I just can't." Jacob sat up as Race pulled away

completely. "I'm sorry. Really."

Race narrowed pretty eyes. "What's the problem? That time of the month or something?"

"I know what you said at the bar was true. Who cares about small talk about stupid things when it's all gonna lead to sex in the end? I buy that. I believe that." Jacob ran a shaky hand through his hair, though it was cut too short to actually be out of place. "Maybe not everything matters right away. But how can I justify sleeping with someone whose last name I don't even know?"

Race's eyes only got smaller. "What is this, you trying to earn your merit badge or something?"

"I'm not saying one-night stands are wrong. I'm just saying they're wrong for me."

"So you're blowing me off, is that it?" Race's arms were across his chest and he looked livid. "I'm not good enough for you?"

"No. No. You're gorgeous." Jacob shook his head furiously. "It's not you, it's me. Really. Even if that sounds like a bad breakup line, it's true." Jacob swallowed, looking away. "I guess this is the part where you throw me out. I just thought before that happened I could..."

"You could what?" Race interrupted. "Sing 'Kumbaya'?"

"Talk. Er... explain myself."

"Who are you, Holden Caulfield? This isn't *The Catcher in the Rye*, you know. I didn't bring you back here so we can talk."

"I just wanted to say thank you."

To this Race lifted both eyebrows, his defenses dropping just a bit, mostly from shock at the statement more than anything. "Thank me for what? This some kind of joke? Or a setup?"

"No. Not at all. I just haven't met anyone even the slightest bit interested in me that wasn't a complete asshole since I got my heart broken almost a year ago. You, being interested in me, made me feel a little like the me I used to be." Jacob shrugged. "I guess I'm just a romantic at heart."

"All the guys in the bar tonight and I bring home a sentimentalist. I really have the worst luck." Race took a long breath.

"I am sorry I made you feel rejected," Jacob continued, giving Race a careful look.

"I don't feel rejected. Nothing like this has ever happened to me

before. It's one of those one-in-a-million types of things. Statistically speaking."

"You really are the cockiest guy I ever met."

"And you're the most ridiculous guy I've ever met, turning down ass."

"Excuse me for not wanting to take advantage of you."

Race laughed. Actually laughed. Jacob watched as Race continued to laugh for several more moments. "Is there a hidden camera or something? You can't be for real."

"Why, because I believe in the value of a real relationship? Because I think sex and love belong together?"

"Love is for people that are foolish enough to believe in it. Love is just lust in sheep's clothing."

"I don't buy that."

Race sneered. "What's the point in love if it just kicks your teeth out?" Jacob met Cancun-blue eyes. "You believed in love and now you're alone."

"But that feeling of being in love is worth the pain." Race narrowed his eyes. "You've never felt love? Real love?"

"No."

No? How was it a no? Then again, Race was only twenty-two. And given how cocky he was, Jacob couldn't very well think Race would make real sacrifices for another person. He had too much bravado to be in love and give to someone else.

"I guess that doesn't surprise me."

Race made another face, this time of disgust. "So now you're gonna psychoanalyze me to figure out what caused this cynicism. Since anyone who doesn't believe in love must have deep underlying issues."

"I never thought that... or said that..."

"So what you wanna know? You want to hear how my mom died when I was nine? How my old man worked nights, so I basically raised myself? How I left home before my seventeenth birthday so he wouldn't find out he had a faggot son and ended up couch hopping for the next few years? At nineteen I met a thirty-one-year-old and shacked up with him for a year and a half until I got sick of him and had enough for this shithole."

"Race, I didn't mean to upset you, really. I—"

“I’ve been bartending since I was eighteen. At this gay dive, SEX. Which is as tongue-in-cheek as it sounds. Those guys who come in don’t know nothing about love and like to keep it that way. They don’t have time to daydream about their knight in shining armor or their lost prince. Fucking fairy-tale bullshit ideology. Who needs it when there’s ass and dick and sex? Huh? What makes love better than getting fucked?”

“I’m sorry. I should just go.” Jacob stood up.

“Don’t let the door hit you on your queer ass on the way out.”

Up until that moment he felt bad for Race, he felt bad for him having a rough start at such a young age. But now he was just whining like a little brat. And Jacob wasn’t apologizing anymore.

“You know what, asshole? Maybe if you met a real man before tonight you wouldn’t see what I did as an insult and actually realize I’m doing the right thing. Then again, you’re just an arrogant kid who knows everything so I’m wasting my breath on...”

Jacob didn’t see Race move from the couch. No matter how you looked at it, it was a low blow. The punch connected with Jacob’s right shoulder blade. It didn’t take more than a millisecond to respond as Jacob pushed the younger man back into the couch. Neither of them were sober enough to actually put up a real fight, and despite the fact that Race was a few inches taller, Jacob had about twenty pounds on him.

Jacob settled for pinning Race to the sofa once it was clear the younger man wasn’t swinging anymore. Race didn’t struggle, but he did give Jacob a defiant face.

“You hit me first; you need to sleep it off.”

“Hmn.” Race frowned. “So much for your good behavior patch, Boy Scout.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

Race motioned to where Jacob was sitting on the edge of the couch, down to his crotch. “You’re just denying yourself.”

“I never said I didn’t want you.” Jacob let go. “You have no idea how I want you.” Race sat up. “Then again,” Jacob continued, giving the blue-eyed male a look, “I’m not the only one pitching a tent either.”

Race narrowed his eyes and then adjusted himself so he wouldn’t look as aroused. “It was a natural reaction from fighting with you. Don’t flatter yourself.”

“In any case, now what? Do you still want me to go?”

"I never told you to leave in the first place."

The men's eyes met.

Jacob swallowed. "So?"

"You hungry?"

AFTER Jacob's fourth twenty-cent taco, he finally asked, "And you say this place is called San Loco?"

"Yeah, there's one really close to here on Avenue A. Nothing on the menu's more than eight dollars. And they deliver until four." Race finished his bean burrito. "How can you live in the city for eight years and go to bars on the Lower East Side and never have eaten at a San Loco?"

"Eight years sounds like a lot, but the first two and a half I never left campus. Where our farm is, it's six hours to a real city, so I wasn't used to such a fast-paced lifestyle. Even when I started venturing out I was always in the more tourist areas, or up in Chelsea. Until I met Armando I'd never even been out of the borough."

"You really are from the sticks, huh?" Race inquired. Jacob nodded, tossing back his Corona. "Keep drinking like that and your hillbilly ass will be too blitzed to get home, you know."

"Fuck that," Jacob decided, finishing off the beer. "I'm too blitzed now."

"Well, if you stay here I might rape you."

Jacob shook his head. "Can't rape the willing."

"Touché."

"What did you mean by calling me Holden Caulfield earlier?" Jacob wondered, peering into the neck of his beer, a drunken habit that had no real explanation. "Granted, I haven't read that book since I was in high school, but I thought he was a foul-mouthed delinquent who got thrown out of school and avoided going home by staying in some hotel in NYC."

"Forget I said anything," Race answered, taking a long sip. "I was just mad and it came out wrong."

"Is *The Catcher in the Rye* one of your favorite books or something?"

Race made a face. "Do I look like the type of guy to *have* a favorite



book?” Race watched as Jacob grabbed more greasy Mexican food with a scowl on his face. “What?”

“How do you have Corona and no limes?”

Race sighed. “Do you know how Corona with lime got popular in the US? American tourists saw Mexican locals drinking their beer with lime in it so they brought it back here. But Mexicans did it to keep flies from trying to get to their drinks. It’s fucking bug repellent.”

“How do you know that?”

“I bartend. I told you that like an hour ago.”

“That you did. Sorry, I wasn’t putting two and two together. I’m a little fucked up right now.”

“And we still aren’t having sex. That does great for my enormous ego, ya know.”

“Just cuz I won’t take advantage of you doesn’t mean we can’t do other things.”

“For the last time, Jacob, you’re not taking advantage of me. I want to be fucked. I want to—” Race never did finish what he was going to say as Jacob cut off the rest of his statement with a firm, albeit a bit sloppy, kiss.

Race moaned. This was why he didn’t kiss guys he brought home. He certainly knew better than to become emotionally attached. Not to anyone. Certainly not to Jacob.

THE next morning Race woke up in an empty bed. Reality set in. Even though last night was not a typical night for him by any means it still all added up to the same thing. It didn’t matter what the circumstances, he was always alone in the morning. It had been one of the weirdest nights he had ever spent and got paid for. Hell, he even kind of liked Jacob a little bit. He was sort of like that goofy older brother type who didn’t realize if he styled his hair a little different and wore a pair of 501s and the right shirt he’d be an actual fox.

But now that it was morning and he was alone, that was that. It wasn’t like he could call up Jacob’s friend Kyle and ask for Jacob’s number. After all, bad enough Kyle hadn’t wanted Jacob to know he was being set up, he had actually set him up with someone who had given certain favors of a sexual nature for money in the past. And wasn’t completely against doing it in the future if the pay was right and rent was

due.

What would Saint Jacob want with a piece of meat like him anyway? It was better for everyone involved that the idiot had at least had enough common sense to leave while Race slept. The last thing he needed was that stupid Boy Scout to...

"Omelets are just about ready," Jacob announced, popping his head in the room. Race frowned.

"What?"

"Breakfast will be ready in about two minutes. And I'm not serving it to you in bed. So get up, take the four steps from your bedroom into the kitchen so you can eat. It'll get cold."

Race shook his head. "What?"

Jacob frowned and left the room.

Why in God's creation was Jacob still here? They hadn't even fucked last night, for crying out loud. Jesus H. Christ, did this screwball make it a habit of getting up at half past too early to make breakfast for some guy his friend paid to pick him up in a bar?

"Race, hurry up!"

Race sighed and then swung around, feeling with his feet for slippers. He supposed Jacob was obviously a dating virgin since last night had gone completely wrong. And to the older man's credit, he didn't know he was being set up. With that being said, who turns down seemingly free sex? It wasn't bragging to think Race did have one of the finest asses this side of the East Village. Was that loser in his tiny galley kitchen serious? Did he really not sleep with him because he didn't want to take advantage of him?

Guys like Jacob actually existed outside of romance fiction?

"Most people don't make breakfast when they didn't get dessert the night before, you know," Race explained matter-of-factly.

"I'm used to a hearty Sunday morning breakfast. You didn't have a lot so I had to make do. And I'm a morning person, so it's hard for me to sleep late. Especially in a strange bed."

"Sleep late? It's eight. And if I'm not completely hung over and suffering memory loss, four and a half hours ago we were singing show tunes and debating which *Star Wars* sequel we liked the best."

"You're up, aren't you? You can thank me for breakfast and shut up, Race." They got into a staring contest. Jacob narrowed his eyes and

Race rolled his. Then he shoveled a forkful of food into his mouth, still making a face.

“You’re a mess, Jacob. You know that?” Race announced, mouth full of food. “A mess.”

“You’ll have to tell me how you like your coffee.” Jacob’s attention was elsewhere. He started pouring it into a chipped, black mug. “Or are you one of those types that like his coffee like you like your men?”

“Oh, you mean dark and murky?” Jacob snorted.

“LEAVE the dishes; the maid will do them later,” Race cracked, slumping onto the couch.

“And by maid you mean you’ll let them pile up until you have no choice but to wash them.”

“What’s your secret, Jacob? Got a magic eight ball in your pocket or something?”

The older male smiled. “All wisecracking aside, I should be going. I feel pretty grimy and need to shower.”

“I’m not making you leave, ya know.”

“Mom always said the mark of a good house guest is they know when to leave.” Jacob grinned. “Besides, I’m hoping despite our rather odd night you’d consider letting me call you or something.”

“Call me?” Race looked stunned. “You want to call me?”

“No, please, don’t hold back. Tell me how you really feel.” The brunet shrugged slightly. “Can’t blame a guy for trying though. It only took me ten months. Maybe in another ten months I can try again to ask a guy out and—”

“All right, all right, stop with the side show.” Race rolled his eyes. “I already put my number in your cell phone when you went to the bathroom before.”

“You did?” Race made a face. “Why?”

“I’m used to waking up by myself. I figured you’d be gone this morning. I just thought maybe you’d want to... who knows. Forget it. Or erase it, even better.”

“You like me. Raymond A. Valentino likes me.”

“I knew telling you my government name was going to bite me in

the ass. It's Race. Not Raymond, you asshole. Get out of my place." Jacob laughed. "Forget this whole thing happened. Do me that favor."

"But I want to see you again."

"No. Out of the question."

"I'm gonna call and we're going to go out."

Race narrowed his eyes. "You got the wrong idea about me. I told you to just forget the whole thing. Okay? Forget it."

Jacob let out a breath. "Is this about Kyle setting me up with you? Or is this about that *Catcher in the Rye* comment?"

It had probably been a good four years since anything had surprised the twenty-two-year old cynic. But he must have looked more than shocked given the look he got from Jacob in return.

"It took me about two hours to figure out what you meant by calling me Holden Caulfield. But then I remembered the part in the story where he picks up a working girl, but once she gets to his room he asks her if they could just talk. Then it wasn't hard to figure out Kyle was behind this. He's tried setting me up for months." Jacob shrugged. "As for your comment, though, that really was an obscure reference. You must really like that book."

Race sat on the couch, not looking at Jacob as he answered, "That thirty-one-year-old I shacked up with gave me a first edition of *The Catcher in the Rye* as a birthday present. I've read that novel probably a hundred times since sophomore year in high school. Holden was me, in so many ways. Still is, I guess. I'm still just a kid running away from everything and everyone."

"I'm gonna call you." Jacob paused and waited until Race paid him attention. "And we're gonna go on a date. And then another date, and another. And we're gonna fuck like rabbits and start the whole thing again."

Race stood up, eyes narrowed. "I'm not some charity case you can save to feel good about your bullshit existence, Jacob."

"Who said anything about saving you? Maybe I'm just some straight-laced guy who likes Corona with a lime in it, even if the lime is only used to keep bugs away and Red Headed Sluts have more alcohol per volume. Maybe I'm just some country-boy transplant who mentions his mother and her philosophies in normal conversation too much and is a horribly hopeless romantic. And who cares. I'm not asking for a happy

ever after, complete with kids and a dog. Maybe I like you. Maybe all I'm asking for is a date and all the other baggage and bullshit and whatnot doesn't matter right now."

Race's heart was pounding. He shook himself. Who was he fooling? Jacob wasn't gonna call. He was a nice guy. Genuine. Trusting. And what was he? A bartender at a sleazy gay bar who whored on the side on occasion to pay the bills. He shook his head frantically. "You can't mean that."

"Why not?" Jacob leaned closer. "I'm hitting on you, aren't I?"

Race furrowed his brow. "I'm not your type."

"Someone once told me 'dick' is everyone's type."

"You're serious about this, aren't you?"

Jacob held up his hand, extending his three middle fingers, and letting his thumb rest against his pinkie. "Scout's honor."

"You're a mess, Jacob." Race could feel himself smile, a real smile, not the one he plastered on at SEX to get a bigger tip. "A disaster area." Jacob leaned in, giving him a warm, modest kiss.

SONIA DEVEREAUX started writing when she was eight years old. She would spend all day writing stories about the misadventures of a cat, dog, and cow. Then illustrate them to create her own stapled books. Eventually she progressed to the more sophisticated tales of a kangaroo named Penelope and an alligator named Gus. Today, thankfully, she's given up on the furries and their escapades and graduated to stories filled with unconventionally sexy men and their dramatic experiences.

Sonia and her husband spend their free time together watching anime, laughing with their friends, and gossiping. It's probably a good thing that Sonia knows, works with, and meets an assortment of entertaining people. Because being the good, and sometimes eager, listener that she is, she is often reminded that fact is stranger than fiction. Which is almost certainly why she likes to read and write stories that have a lot of excitement and make her smirk out loud.

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# Sunshine

JL Merrow

DANIEL always looks at the shoes first. You can tell a lot from a bloke's shoes: what sort of work he does, how well off he is, how much it'll hurt if he gives you a kicking. Then he slowly raises his gaze, taking in all the details on the way, until he gets to the man's face. A punter once told him it's dead sexy, like he's drinking in the sight of them, savouring every inch. Talk about making a virtue out of necessity.

'Course, sometimes he doesn't need to go that slow. He'd know those boots anywhere—he knew them the minute they turned the corner from Market Street, just from the sound they made on the pavement. So as soon as he sees those boots, Daniel flicks his eyes straight up to the face and gives the bloke a smile, although really it's a shame to be so hasty, as the bits in between are well worth lingering over.

"Evenin'," the boots' owner says, as usual. His voice is so deep Daniel was surprised when he first heard it. The bloke's six foot six if he's an inch, and his chest measurement must be something similar; you'd almost expect him to have a squeaky little voice to compensate.

"Evening," Daniel returns. "Any trouble tonight?" He doesn't know the bloke's name, but he knows he's a bouncer down at the King's Head. He helped Daniel out one time when a punter got nasty and went for him with a knife, and he always passes this way on his way back home after work.

"Nah, dead quiet. Well, the usual, you know. Couple of young ladies pissed off their heads we had to persuade into a taxi, but no rough stuff."

Anyone else would have called them slags, or slappers, or something equally derogatory, but Bob the bouncer (well, he's got to call him something, hasn't he?) is always polite about the people he deals with. Daniel likes that about him.

“Ow’s tricks, then?” Bob asks Daniel in his turn.

Daniel shrugs. “You know. So-so. Bloody credit crunch. Last bastard asked if I was going to cut me prices.”

Bob grins. “Tell him you’re a luxury item. They’re s’posed to sell better in a recession, ain’t they?”

Daniel grins back. “I wish,” he says, although he’s not sure which part of Bob’s statement he’s referring to.

“Night, then,” Bob says, and the boots clomp off home.

“Night,” Daniel calls to their echoes, the night already feeling a little colder as the sounds die away.

“EVENIN’.”

“Evening.”

“You look like your bloody dog’s died. What’s up? Not had any more trouble with that gentleman I saw off for you?”

Daniel snorts. “He wasn’t a gentleman; he was a fucking cunt.” He sighs. “Sorry. Had a bit of bad news today.” He had his three-month checkup at the doctor’s this morning. And right, he already knew things were going downhill fast, but he’s been doing a fair job of ignoring it up until now.

“Should take the night off, then.” Bob’s voice is sympathetic.

“Bit late now, innit? I’m here, aren’t I? Anyway, I need the money.”

Bob’s quiet a minute. “I got paid tonight.”

Now Daniel’s silent. He likes Bob. He’s not sure he wants that to change.

“Look, we don’t have to do nothing. I’ll pay you for your time, all right?” He sounds sincere as hell, but Daniel’s not daft. He knows where it’ll end. Still, he does need the money. It’s not like he’s going to be able to count on earning any for much longer.

“All right. Where to?”

“I live on Carter Street. Got a flat above the Indian. Hope you like curry.” He sounds like he’s smiling, and Daniel looks at his face to make sure. Somehow it’s easier than he thought it would be to smile back.

For the first time Daniel follows the boots as they clatter off down the street, the faint sounds made by his trainers drowned out as they walk



in step. Sheltered by Bob's comforting bulk, Daniel can almost pretend he doesn't notice the way the night is closing in on him, and he keeps his gaze fixed on the faint glow cast by the streetlamp at the end of the road. Embarrassingly, he forgets about the bin on the corner and trips, but is caught by firm, muscular arms. "Watch out, mate. People'll think you've been drinkin'." Daniel can feel the blush spreading over his face, but the smile's back in Bob's voice so he doesn't feel too bad.

"So, you got a name, then?" Daniel asks as they round the corner. The street lighting's a bit better here but it's less sheltered too and the wind has sharp little teeth that gnaw hungrily at Daniel's skin. There's a whiff of coriander and cumin in the air, making it seem warmer as the aroma grows stronger.

"Rob."

Daniel manages not to laugh. "Daniel," he tells Rob. "Are we nearly there, then? Smells like it."

"Yeah, here we go. I was serious about that curry, by the way. I'm always bloody starving after I get off work. You hungry?"

Daniel shrugs. "Not really, but I could help you out a bit."

"Right. Mind the step, mate. Want a look at the menu?"

Daniel shrugs. "It's your dinner, mate. I could go for a few poppadoms, though."

It's warm—almost too warm—in the small restaurant and the dim red glow of the lamps with their red shades makes it seem warmer still. Rob orders a chicken korma and some aloo sag, which is him all over; he's not the sort of bloke to get into pissing contests over how hot he can stand a curry. And it's sort of sweet that he's trying to get his vitamins, although in a place like this, he's fighting a losing battle.

"Right this way, mate," Rob tells him, key rattling in the lock of the street door. "Mind the stairs; they're bloody steep."

They creak too. Daniel counts thirteen of them before they get to a narrow front door, which Rob unlocks. "Welcome to my humble abode," Rob says with a laugh. "Right, just let me bung this down over here and I'll see if I can find the beers. Or I've got some wine if you'd rather."

"Whatever you're having," Daniel tells him a bit awkwardly.

"Look, to be honest I don't give a monkey's, so what do you fancy?"

Daniel looks at him sharply, but he doesn't sound pissed off, just

too knackered to choose, so Daniel says “Wine, then. Red if you’ve got it. If not I’m easy.” He thinks he might have flushed a bit at the unintentional double entendre but Rob’s expression doesn’t change so maybe he got away with it.

“Yeah, I’ve got some.” He fishes around noisily in a cupboard in the small kitchen area at one end of the living room and comes up with a bottle that Daniel identifies after a moment as Tesco’s merlot. “Would sir like to taste the wine?”

“Fuck off!” Daniel tells him, laughing. He had a good look around while Rob was busying himself in the kitchen so he finds the sofa easily and sits down. It’s sort of nice, even though Daniel’s still a bit on edge. Rob’s flat is small and tidier than you’d expect of a bloke living on his own, although not as tidy as Daniel’s place. Daniel eats most of the poppadoms and then digs into the korma with the extra fork Rob provided. It’s not bad, if you don’t mind a fair bit of grease. Plenty of flavour, and not too much heat. Comfort food, that’s what it is. And the wine’s going down a treat, and the sofa’s comfy, and Daniel thinks he could get used to this, if only it was real.

“So what do you do when you’re not working?” Rob asks him around a mouthful of chicken.

Daniel waits a moment before replying. “All right. You’re going to piss yourself laughing, but I like to go to art galleries. Went to the National last weekend. They’ve got a load of good stuff there.”

Rob does, in fact, laugh, but somehow it’s just surprise, not mockery. “You what? I thought a kid your age wouldn’t be seen dead in one of those places!”

“Well, I have to put on a disguise first,” Daniel tells him, grinning. “Case anyone I know turns up. Nah, I just like that sort of stuff. I mean, loads of people don’t get into art and all that until they’re older, but that’s just a waste, innit? What if you never get the chance later?”

“Fair comment. I wouldn’t know where to bloody start, in an art gallery.”

Daniel raises an eyebrow. “Well, there’s always the male nudes.”

Rob grins. “Prefer mine flesh and blood. Though I do see your point. Come to think of it, I’ve got me own collection of male nudes, although I always thought that was porn, not art.”

Daniel laughs. “Sorry, mate, but I reckon you were right the first time.” He mops a bit of sauce up with a spare piece of naan. “Anyway,

how about you, then? I mean, you've got to spend a fair bit of time down the gym, way you look, but what else are you into?"

Rob clears his throat and puts down his fork. "Right. Your turn to laugh. I like getting out in the country. There's a group of us, and we go for walks places and end up down the pub. You can get some bloody good grub, country pubs. And there's the darts, of course." He smiles. "Go on, laugh at the old fogey. You know you want to."

"Nah, it sounds nice." It's the sort of thing Daniel wouldn't mind doing now and then, but of course he doesn't say that. It'd sound like he's asking Rob to take him along like a bloody pet dog. "So, you grow up in the country?"

"Nah, but that's where me gran lived. We used to go and visit in school holidays when I was a kid. She used to take us on walks and point out all the plants and wild flowers. She knew all their names—the proper names, I mean, not that Latin rubbish. When I was little I used to think she was a witch, 'cause nobody could know that much about herbs and stuff. Then after she died we found these notebooks where she'd drawn all the plants and flowers, and painted them in watercolours. Fucking amazing, those books were. You'd like 'em."

"Yeah? I never knew my grandparents. Or my parents, for that matter." He'd been abandoned as a baby. Chucked away like a fucking bit of rubbish. No, that wasn't fair. Whoever his mum was, she made sure she left him somewhere he'd be found. She cared that much, at least. Sometimes Daniel wonders about her. Whether she ended up like him.

Daniel's looking out the window as he says that, not that there's anything there he can see, so it's a shock when a large, rough hand closes over his.

"S'all right," he tells Rob. "I'm a big boy now."

"No you're not. There's nothing of you. Every time I look at you I think someone ought to feed you up."

Daniel grins crookedly. "That's all right, then. You just did."

"Yeah, right. Couple of bloody poppadoms and a forkful of korma. Keep you going for weeks, that will."

"Sod off."

"I mean it," Rob continues, and Daniel realizes the wine bottle's empty and he's only had a glass and a half. He doesn't drink much, never

has more than a couple. Last thing he needs is to make himself even more vulnerable. “You need someone to look after you. Make you realize how special you are. ’Cause you are, you know? You’re fucking special. Beautiful, that’s what you are.” Rob’s other hand comes up to stroke Daniel’s face. It feels rough, and hard, and unbearably gentle, and something inside Daniel dies as he leans forward and lets Rob capture his lips in a kiss. Because this is what the bloke’s paying for.

“So beautiful,” Rob repeats, and he’s kissing Daniel harder now. He abandons Daniel’s hand to start to grope his chest, running his hand up and down. Daniel’s nipples harden in response, because Rob’s got it all wrong. He’s the beautiful one, not Daniel, and he can feel his jeans getting tighter even though his heart is breaking. He lets Rob pull him in close, and runs a hand over his head, marveling at the scratchy stubble. If Daniel shaved his head he’d look like a fucking freak, but on Rob it looks good, it fits. Daniel looks at him, wanting to memorize every pore, every blemish that just makes Rob that much more human and wonderful. He’s never felt so turned on and so miserable in his life. And then Rob kisses him again, and everything else is swept away by a tsunami of need and want.

Daniel’s not sure who started trying to get the other’s clothes off, but pretty soon they’re shirtless and fumbling at trouser buttons.

“Stand up,” he tells Rob hoarsely as he gets on his knees on the floor. Shakily, he manages to undo Rob’s trousers and they fall to the ground, leaving only a thin layer of cotton between him and what he’s after. The bulge in those underpants looks fucking gorgeous and Daniel mouths it through them while Rob gasps in pleasure. Carefully, he pulls the waistband down and over the head of that lovely cock. Even next to the rest of Rob’s bulk, it looks big. Daniel spares a moment to wonder what the fuck Rob’s doing here with him when he could have anyone he wanted. Then he gets to work, nuzzling him, licking him, teasing him before finally plunging him into his mouth.

“Condoms...,” Rob rasps, and for a moment Daniel’s appalled at himself for forgetting the cardinal rule. He fishes in his back pocket and pulls out a foil packet.

“I’ll put it on for you, shall I?”

“Fuck, yeah.”

Daniel rolls the thin latex over Rob’s cock, which twitches in seeming approval. Then it’s back to business, his lips closing over the

head, pushing down the shaft, only to pull back and allow teasing little licks to the crown.

“Stop,” Rob gasps finally. “Want to....”

Daniel knows what Rob wants. He undoes his jeans and pushes them down, letting his hips wiggle enticingly. He’s got it down to a fine art. “How do you want me?” he asks.

At first he’s not sure Rob’s understood the question, but finally the bloke rouses himself and says, “On your back.”

Daniel gets into position, even though he’d rather Rob take him from behind so he doesn’t have to look into those eyes. But the customer is always right, so he lies down on the sofa and grasps his legs, hands behind the thighs.

“Ready,” he lies. Although it’s only half a lie really, as he’s been ready for this for weeks, ever since Rob stepped in and saved him from that bastard with the knife. But he never reckoned it’d be like this. Never thought he’d be taking Rob’s money.

Rob takes a deep breath. “Bloody hell, you’re gorgeous.” He kneels down by the sofa and runs a calloused hand over Daniel’s arse. “Beautiful.” Leaning down, he plants soft kisses on the backs of Daniel’s legs, on his buttocks, as his fingers run into Daniel’s cleft and ghost over his hole. He spits on a finger and pushes it in gently. “Bloody hell, that’s hot.” Rob’s voice is hoarse. “So bleedin’ tight.”

Daniel’s hard despite himself, his breathing speeding up even before that thick finger nudges against his prostate. He gasps, but suddenly the finger is gone.

“Gotta do this proper,” Rob mutters, stumbling out of the room. Daniel wishes he hadn’t gone. He’s got a fair idea what the bloke’s gone in search of but he doesn’t want to lie here on his own with nothing to distract him from thinking except the cracks in the small patch of ceiling above his head.

Rob’s back soon enough, though, the floorboards creaking beneath his heavy tread, and Daniel hears him fiddling about with something. Then the fingers are back again, this time slick against his skin. This time, as Rob’s finger slips back inside him easily it feels even better. Rob adds another finger. “All right?” he asks gruffly.

“Yeah. I’m okay. You can....”

Rob doesn’t wait to be told twice. “If you knew how long I’ve

wanted to do this,” he tells Daniel, the words falling like acid rain on Daniel's exposed skin, and he slicks up his cock and gently, slowly, pushes inside. “Seein’ you every night, wantin’ to touch you....” He’s a big bloke and it’s too much; usually Daniel just zones out while he’s doing this, lets his body go through the motions, but this is Rob and it’s too fucking much. Daniel fights to keep his useless fucking emotions under control but it’s too hard.

It’s a good job Rob’s a bit drunk. Daniel doesn’t reckon he notices a thing.

“Bloody hell!” Rob gasps as he pistons in and out of Daniel’s hole. “Not going to... you touch yourself, right? Wank that fucking gorgeous cock off for me.”

Doesn’t ask much, does he? Daniel keeps his eyes on Rob’s chest as it rises and falls above him. There’s a trickle of sweat running down it and he concentrates on that, watching its progress, while he works his cock the way he knows will get him off quickly.

“So fucking lovely....”

In the end Daniel’s orgasm takes him by surprise, as Rob plunges in deep and stills, the head of his cock against Daniel’s gland. Daniel feels it pulsing inside him even as he shoots out his own climax, and then Rob’s heavy body collapses on him, sweaty and hot and heartbreaking.

Rob presses a kiss onto his lips and then draws back. “Sorry. Better stop squashing you.” He pulls out and takes off the condom, wrapping it in a tissue before chucking it in the bin with a muffled clunk. Then he just sort of hovers for a moment as Daniel pulls on his jeans and shirt, finally grabbing his own trousers but not actually putting them on.

“That all right, then?” Daniel asks emptily, pushing his feet into his trainers and standing up.

Rob doesn’t seem to want to look at him but that’s fine. Most of his punters don’t, afterward. “Right.” Rob pauses and then pulls out his wallet and gives Daniel a handful of notes. It’s not his usual rate but Daniel can’t be arsed to say so. He just wants to get out of there now.

“Cheers, mate. I’ll see you around, yeah?”

Rob doesn’t answer as Daniel finds the door and lets himself out, closing it gently behind him.

It’s dark as pitch now, the streets and alleyways a labyrinth of gloomy tunnels. As Daniel passes underneath it, the streetlamp on the

corner of Commercial Road flickers and goes out.

THE next night, Daniel doesn't hear Rob's boots walking up Market Street. Or the following night, or the one after that. Seems Rob's found another way to walk home after work. Daniel hates that it hurts. He knew this was coming, didn't he? You don't let someone fuck you for money and then expect to still be friends. He wishes he'd gone home early that night, like he'd planned to before Rob turned up. But he's wished for a lot of things in his life and got sod all to show for it. He doesn't expect anything to change now.

So he smiles at the punters and gives them what they want and takes their money, and afterward he goes home to his bare little place—minimalist, a mate called it once, which Daniel thinks must be a euphemism for bloody depressing, not that it'll bother him for much longer. Sleep never seems to come easily these days so he grabs something to eat (not a curry; he doesn't seem to fancy those at the moment) and peers at the television wondering where they find all the crap they put on. He's still going to miss it, though.

ON the fourth day, it finally happens, and after that Daniel doesn't go out to his pitch on Market Street ever again.

IT'S a few weeks later when he hears the boots again. Maybe longer. Maybe one month and seventeen days, but who's counting?

"Daniel," Rob's voice says. It's still as deep as ever, but now it sounds hoarse as well. Daniel looks up to where he knows Rob's face is. The freshening breeze whips Daniel's hair over his eyes and he brushes it aside automatically. He hasn't bothered to get it cut for a while.

"Lo, Rob," he says, trying to smile. It's hard, because Rob's voice isn't smiling and well, there's fuck all for Daniel to smile about at the end of the day.

"Daniel, I'm sorry, mate. I—look, can I buy you a coffee?"

"Don't need charity," Daniel says shortly.

"Right. You buy me one, then. But just—just let me talk to you, all right?"

Daniel's about to tell him to bugger off, because he really doesn't need this. Can't cope with it. He's barely coping with living, he's hardly

been out on his own since it happened, and if he lets himself feel too much he won't even make it back to his flat. So it's a bit of a surprise to hear himself agreeing.

Rob's footsteps come closer, so close that Daniel can feel the bloke's body sheltering him from the wind as a big hand gently takes his arm. It's—nice. Like a mate. Like someone who cares, not someone who's shitting themselves they're going to get it wrong and would really rather Daniel take his embarrassing, inconvenient disability elsewhere.

"How long since you went completely blind?" Rob asks in a tone that's shocking, it's so matter-of-fact.

"Few—few days after I last saw you," Daniel tells him past the lump in his throat, his mind whirling.

"Thought so. I went back to find you, a week after that, and one of the other lads said he'd heard you wouldn't be around no more." He laughs. "Fucking awful timing, that, wasn't it? Right, here we are. Little step, couple of inches, then you're fine. Table on the left's free. You sit down, I'll get the coffee. How d'you like it? No fancy stuff here, just plain black or white."

Daniel finds a chair and sits. "White, no sugar. Extra milk, though."

The place sounds pretty busy, but then it usually is. Daniel's been here before. He wonders if it's the same girl at the counter as last time he was in, and if she's staring at him as he folds up the white stick carefully and puts it in his jacket pocket. He sits there listening to other people's conversations until he feels a large body brush past him and a couple of mugs hit the table with a thunk.

"There you go, mate. Extra milk, just like you asked for."

The coffee's bloody marvelous, strong and milky, uplifting and comforting all at once. From the smells around him it must be around lunchtime, and Daniel's surprised to find his stomach growling. He could just go an all-day breakfast, but he doesn't fancy eating in public. Especially not in front of Rob.

"You've lost weight, mate." Rob's voice sounds concerned.

Daniel shrugs it off. "Yeah, well, always wanted to be a size zero."

Rob hesitates. "You're all right for money, though? You're on benefits, right?"

"Yeah, don't worry. I'm not starving to death or nothing. Just not



been feeling like eating much.” And he hasn’t got the hang of cooking without burning himself or making a mess yet, and there’s only so many cornflakes you can stomach. Daniel takes another sip of his coffee to try to keep his belly quiet. “You guessed, then.”

“Yeah. My gran went blind a couple of years before she died. I recognized the signs. How come it happened to you so young?”

Daniel doesn’t answer for a moment, and he jumps slightly as a hand comes to rest on his arm.

“Sorry,” Rob mutters, moving his hand away. Daniel wants to tell him it’s all right, that he wants to be touched, nobody’s touched him for so long now, but the words stick in his throat because at the end of the day Rob’s just another punter, isn’t he, and he’s only here now because he feels sorry for Daniel.

“Retinal disease. Genetic. Want the Latin name?” It comes out a bit more aggressive than he meant it to.

“Nah, never was much cop at languages.” There’s a pause, and then Rob speaks again. “There’s stuff you can do when you’re blind. Jobs, I mean. Don’t blame you for giving up the streets. That line of work, you need to be able to see trouble coming. Need to be able to run away from it an’ all. But you don’t have to be on benefits all your life.”

Daniel shrugs. “Yeah, well, I’m still learning Braille and that.” He laughs without humour. “Should of done all that earlier, shouldn’t I?”

“Nah, that kind of thing you don’t want to think about it until you have to.”

Stupid, how much better that makes Daniel feel. “Not wrong there, mate.” Daniel’s coffee’s down to the dregs now, so he stands up, the chair dragging on the floor tiles with a noise that puts his teeth on edge. “Right. It was nice seeing you, Rob. Even though I can’t. Thanks for the coffee.”

He’s about to leave but Rob’s large, warm hand is on his arm again. “Sit down. You haven’t let me—oh, bloody hell, mate, just let me say my piece, all right?”

Daniel doesn’t sit down, but he doesn’t walk away either. “About what?”

“About that night. Look, I’m sorry. Things shouldn’t have gone so far. I shouldn’t of got carried away like that. I never meant to. I never wanted to be just another one of those bastards who....”

Daniel's jaw tightens. Rob never calls people bastards. Rob's polite about *everyone*. There's that god-awful noise again and Daniel realizes he's pulled the chair out again and is sitting down. Rob's hand is on his, the skin rough against his own. The rasp of that calloused thumb rubbing gently over Daniel's knuckles seems to drive everything else out of his mind.

"That's why I didn't go round your way for a couple of nights afterwards. Didn't want to see you giving me that smile you keep for the punters, that one that never gets to your eyes."

Daniel doesn't answer for a moment. Then he thinks *Fuck it, it's only money*, and pulls out his wallet. He takes out two of the notes with the corners folded down, and one of the ones that's folded in half, and shoves them across the table. And then he holds his breath, because there's no knowing if Rob's going to take this the way Daniel hopes he will.

There's a long silence. Then he hears the notes crackle as Rob's hand closes on them. "Cheers, mate. I knew you were good for the loan," Rob tells him, and suddenly it's all right again. Like the sun coming out from the clouds, which he'll never see again. But he can feel the warmth on his face, and sometimes that's enough. Daniel gives a smile, a proper one, the one that's just for people he cares about, and he feels Rob's hand on his.

"Right," Rob says. "Well, suddenly I'm feelin' flush, so how about we get a fry-up? Don't worry. I'll tell you if you get egg down your shirt, although tell the truth that's more likely to be me. Manners of a pig, I have."

"Yeah, I remember," Daniel tells him with a grin. "Got that mango chutney all over the shop, you did."

Rob laughs. "Fancy doing that again sometime?"

"Yeah, all right."

Sometimes when the sun's really bright, even on a crisp spring day, you can feel the warmth right through your clothes and into your bones.

At least, Daniel can. And he's pretty sure Rob can too.

JL MERROW is a very English mother of two who finds writing the only way to stay sane, except of course when a plot is driving her crazy. Having grown up on an island, she can't remember a time before she could swim and prefers to remain close to water at all times. Luckily, the weather in her native land being as it generally is, this is not difficult.

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# Night Moves

Patric Michael

HE lounged indolently against the rough wall, bathed in the bright glow of the city lights, and scanned the traffic as it slid inexorably past, like a river of stinking, molten metal. He adjusted his pose, arching his back a little and turning his head just so as he watched the cars go by. He couldn't stop that rhythmic, surging progression; wouldn't have wanted to try. He could only create a disturbance, cause it to eddy and roil around its own reluctance whenever someone slowed to look at him more closely. It was the only power he had, and all he really needed.

Set the hips. Lean back. Cock forward. Crunch the abs. Thumbs crooked in the pockets. Hands framing the goods.

Jesse's mental litany ran through his mind as he put himself on display. Meat in a buyer's market.

Too many boys on this street tonight. Gotta be the best. Gotta look just right for the money.

The wall behind him, his unwritten billboard, was cold. The heat from the late-afternoon sun had long since fled, and the thin leather jacket he wore held no warmth. It was designed purely for form, not function. That he wore jeans which were more holes than substance and a cropped, sleeveless muscle shirt didn't help either.

Doesn't matter. I look good, damn it. I look just right.

I hope.

He did look good, in that vaguely sleazy way that seemed to attract so many *dates*. A street word, which meant nothing more than potential money to guys like him.

He kept his dark auburn curls cut short. Longer, it would be too hard to keep clean and besides, his dates didn't want to be reminded of wives and girlfriends. There were other streets, other places where one horny guy could fuck another and still pretend he was straight.

His face bore distinct traces of his father's European heritage. A round face with high cheekbones and a generous mouth, punctuated by an aquiline nose that came straight from his mother. It took him well out of the realm of "boy next door" and cast him as something much more handsome, more exotic. More *knowing*.

Only his eyes, gray-white around the pupils and deepening to the color of smoke at the edges, gave away the innocence hidden in his soul. Eyes which held the shadows of laughter, long forgotten.

The entire package, the whole *product*, practically screamed, "Take me. Fuck me. Let me love you."

Of course.

He was good at his *job*. Damn good. It was all he knew how to do anymore.

Jesse scanned the street, scanned the traffic. His bright eyes were constantly on the move for *potential*. A slowly moving car. Perhaps a look from a hungry driver. Maybe a cop.

A green van drifted slowly down the strip. The cars behind it honked, almost absently, and swerved around it. Everyone knew what this street was for, and why anyone would drive slowly along its razor-straight course. If you weren't cruising, you stayed out of the right lane. *Duh*.

Jesse watched it approach. Sparkling neon reflections made it impossible to see through the windshield, and smoked glass turned the passenger window into a wall. He looked to his left, scanning the boys the driver had passed. Each had their charms, prominently displayed, but too many had that broken, agitated look as well. The look that tells anyone with eyes that there's more than just a shirt riding on their shoulders.

That look meant they were cheaper, more numerous, more desperate. Most of the tricks didn't seem to care, up to a point. The driver of this van, however, was picky.

Good. Pass them all, like you bastards used to pass me up two years ago.

Now he could afford to be picky too.

Barely.

Nothing on his shoulders, for which he was eternally grateful. Nothing but a too-thin leather jacket. He would *never* ride that particular

horse again.

Jesse laid his head against the brick, feigning indifference. He squinted slightly to keep the van in sight, and crunched his abs a little bit harder.

The van stopped. The passenger window rolled down, opening a black maw into which Jesse could not see. He waited for the voice in the darkness.

“You wanna take a ride?”

Jesse pushed himself away from the wall, careful to make sure his jacket didn’t block the view of the treasure trail running down into his low-slung jeans as he approached the van.

There had been a gun once. Remember that.

“Where to?” He drawled the words, still indifferent. His heart pounded as it always did. You never knew what that darkness was hiding.

“Just around the block a couple times. Whadda ya say?”

Ah, fuck. Picky and cheap.

Jesse leaned into the open window, finally getting his first look at the driver: Glasses, a receding hairline, soft fingers gripping the steering wheel loosely. No rings. A bulge in his pants. Litter in the foot well. An overflowing ashtray.

He noted these things immediately. Rough experience taught him wisdom. Almost as fast, he made his assessment.

“No thanks, mister. I’m just waiting for someone.” Someone who doesn’t look like he has a family waiting at home.

The driver gaped, startled, then recovered. “Your loss, kid.”

“May I live to regret the day,” Jesse answered breezily, grinning as he turned away.

The driver roared off. Jesse’s grin widened as he settled back against the wall, the litany running through his mind once again.

Could have used the money, though.

Maybe he was wrong. Wouldn’t have been the first time his snap decisions led him astray.

But maybe he was right too.

THREE hours and two blowjobs later, one giving, and one getting,

Jesse's legs were already sore and his back was frozen solid. He stomped his feet, trying to feel his toes, and zipped his jacket a few inches against the chilled breeze that had kicked up, stirring dust and trash in little whorls.

God, I hate this shit. I miss being warm. What I wouldn't give to never have to be cold again.

A stray thought that had no meaning because it had been expressed so often as to lose all vitality.

He was about to bail when he spotted the black pickup truck.

He had seen it before. Several times in fact, over the past month, but it never stopped. Just another one of the chickenshit pussies that looked but never bought.

This time, however, it slowed to a crawl as it approached. The difference was so unusual that Jesse paused, more than a little curious.

This should be fun.

He leaned, arched his back, and hooked his thumbs in his pockets. He pushed them down, making the waistband of his jeans sink into dangerous territory. Especially dangerous if the guy turned out to be a cop. He stood that way, his face wearing an expression of invitation and, hopefully, interest, only to give way to pure disbelief as the truck crept past and turned right.

Shit. You're losing it, boy.

Disgusted with himself, he hitched his jeans back up, zipped his jacket higher, and headed for home.

Four blocks later, absently watching his sprung shoes hit the pavement and wondering how to stretch too little cash over too great a need, Jesse heard a soft voice just ahead of him. He looked up, startled, and stared into the face of an angel. Or maybe it was a demon. Too many shadows to be sure.

The guy was tall. Maybe four inches over his own five-ten. He wore jet-black 501s, a cream-colored button-down shirt, and a plain denim jacket substantially thicker than Jesse's own.

His face was longer than strictly necessary to be handsome, but his jaw was square, his chin strong, and the rest of his rugged features more than compensated. Still startled, Jesse suddenly wished he could see the eyes better, but it was darker on this street. Less traffic.

"Do you want a ride?"

He spoke in a voice that somehow reminded Jesse of molten chocolate: rich, thickly textured, and soft. The sound of that voice made him wish he hadn't pawned his iPod. He missed music too.

"I'm parked just up the street."

No hints, no suggestions of anything but a genuine offer of a lift, and yet that voice shot straight down his spine and pooled, shifting, at the base of his dick. Barry White's voice.

Jesse's gaze fell to where the man pointed and saw a black pickup truck parked a few slots up.

"You!" Jesse gaped.

"Yeah, me." The taller man seemed to hang his head. His long hair swirled to obscure his features. "I drove around the block again, swearing to myself I would stop this time, but you were already gone."

Ah. A newbie.

Jesse grinned. "Chickened out?"

The incredible voice dropped a shade, husky. "A lot, yeah. More times than I can count. I just... well...." He rubbed the back of his neck absently and then looked earnestly at Jesse. "It's just that you are so... so *gorgeous*."

Jesse laughed, delighted by the man's shyness. It made him feel warm inside, and somehow special.

"You don't exactly strike me as the type to pick up a hustler." The man's obvious discomfort wasn't anything like the cagey nervousness of the usual tricks, but he couldn't say what made it so different.

"Um, no. Not exactly." The guy flipped his hair out of his face and grinned. "Until now, at least."

"What's your name, baby?"

The man scowled a little at that, but Jesse wasn't sure if it was because he had been laughing or something else.

"Rafe. Feel free to skip the angel jokes."

As in Raphael? How fucking ironic.

"Rafe. Nice to meet you. My name is Jesse, and I'd love to ride with you." Jesse took Rafe's arm, lightly drawing him toward the truck.

Rafe planted his feet. "Wait. You don't understand. I was offering you a lift. I wasn't trying to *buy* you."

It was Jesse's turn to be flustered. "Oh. Oh! I'm sorry. I thought



you meant....” It was obvious what he had thought.

I really am slipping. Can’t even fucking read a date right.

He dropped Rafe’s arm as if it were on fire.

Rafe reached out and took his hand. “No, you still don’t understand. I want to spend time with you, Jesse. I’ll happily pay for it, but I don’t want to buy you. See?”

Jesse didn’t see, but something about the guy made him feel *something*. It seemed like ages since he had felt anything but the need for money.

“No, not really. But I wouldn’t mind getting out of this cold, if nothing else. Did you have anything in particular in mind?”

Rafe looked stricken. “No, I... I hadn’t thought beyond getting up the nerve to ask you out.” He chafed Jesse’s cold hand between his larger, warmer ones. “I figured we could just sort of play it by ear after that.”

“Sounds like fun, Raphael.”

Rafe rolled his eyes. “Somehow, it doesn’t sound so... biblical... when you say it.”

“That’s good, because I have plans for you that I don’t think your pastor would appreciate.” He lifted Rafe’s hand to his mouth and kissed the palm, digging the tip of his tongue into the creases he found there.

“Oh, my God,” Rafe gasped.

Jesse could almost hear the man blush.

RAFE bought takeout, which they ate sitting companionably in his truck, idling at the top of a parking structure so they could look out over the lights of the city.

“How do you feel about music?” Jesse asked around a mouthful of noodles.

Rafe grinned. “Music is good. Why?”

“Well. There’s this club I know. Great music, and an even better atmosphere. Haven’t been there in a while, though.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Good. We’ll walk from here. Parking is usually a bitch.”

They finished their meal and Rafe locked his truck, but not before insisting that Jesse wear his jacket.

“Why?”

“Well, leather is nice, but I’ll take ‘feel warm’ over ‘look hot’ any day.”

“Oh. What about you?”

Rafe pulled out an oversized black denim shirt from behind the seat and put it on. It should have made him look like some kind of wannabe farmer, especially when he rolled up the sleeves, but somehow it didn’t. If anything he looked even more handsome. Rugged. Like a walking car commercial.

Rafe’s jacket was a size too big, but since it was blue and not bulky, it went well enough with the torn jeans and elevated Jesse beyond the level of mere hooker.

“I was wrong. You still look hot,” Rafe said in that deep soft voice, and touched his face briefly. He cupped his hand behind Jesse’s head and bent to kiss him. His tongue played across Jesse’s lower lip for a moment, testing, then retreated when Jesse offered no encouragement. Instead, Rafe tilted his head and kissed the hollow beneath Jesse’s ear, his tongue nuzzling the crease along the earlobe. The sensation made Jesse’s knees unlock and he grabbed at the door handle to keep himself upright.

“Oh jeez. What did you just do?”

Rafe smiled, holding Jesse’s face between his palms for a moment as he searched his face.

“You have the most amazing eyes.”

Jesse covered Rafe’s hands with his own, squeezed, and then drew them away. He let go, his expressive gray eyes twinkling.

“Race ya!” he shouted, bolting across the nearly empty parking lot. He was already halfway down the first flight of stairs before he heard Rafe’s footsteps pounding after him.

They arrived breathless and still laughing, both their faces flushed with the exertion.

The bouncer, checking IDs, looked them over and grinned. “Looks like you two got an early start.”

“Not early enough,” Jesse replied promptly, grabbing Rafe’s hand and dragging him in.

THE club was hip, trendy, and almost exclusively gay. Everything from

the pulsing lights and the pounding music to the names of the overpriced drinks and pictures on the walls was designed to encourage one thing only. Sex.

Rafe had to lean in close to be heard over the throbbing music. “What’ll you have?”

Jesse lost himself in the sheer sensory overload of Rafe’s lips brushing his ear, the music screaming into his head, and the press of hot, sweaty bodies all around them.

“Surprise me.”

Rafe grinned and disappeared into the crowd. Jesse leaned against the small table and jived to the music while he waited.

He was wholly lost to the thump and rhythm when a rough, gravelly voice spoke in his ear. Hands grabbed his shoulders.

“Hey, cutie. What are you doing here?”

Jesse’s eyes sprang open as he turned sharply to his left. All the color drained from his face.

The voice belonged to a man about thirty-five years old, muscular and trim. Gold sparkled in his ear and at his throat.

“Oh. Hey, Alan. How are you doing?” Jesse twisted out of the man’s grasp.

“I’m good, kid. Though I would have thought you’d be happier to see me. You must be coming up in the world if you can afford this place.”

“Yeah, well. I—”

Alan smirked. “Never mind. I see how it is.” His eyes shifted to a point over Jesse’s left shoulder.

Rafe had returned with Coronas and limes on a small tray. He saw the stricken look on Jesse’s face and set the tray down. He stepped around and wrapped his long arms loosely around the smaller man’s body.

“Who’s your friend?” Rafe asked, absently rubbing his chin against Jesse’s ear. He looked pointedly at Alan.

“Um. This is Alan. We knew each other a long time ago.”

Alan laughed, the sound roughened by too many cigarettes and too much straight whiskey. “Oh, yeah. We knew each other.” He gazed at Jesse’s rigid body with something like satisfaction. “We knew each other real well.”

Rafe frowned down at Jesse, his eyes puzzled. Jesse couldn't meet his eyes.

Alan laughed.

"Nice to meet you, *Alan*." The tone in Rafe's voice clearly said otherwise.

"Yeah, you too." Alan looked at Jesse again. "When your hour's up, come find me and we'll have some real fun. I guarantee it."

Okay, so I liked the ropes, liked the toys. Thought I did, anyway, but that was a long time ago when I didn't know what else was even possible.

"Sorry, pal. This one is mine." Rafe pulled Jesse close against his chest. "Forever, if he'll have me." He spoke directly into Jesse's ear.

Jesse melted against Rafe's chest and nuzzled the side of his face. Deep inside, something began to *shift*. He glared at Alan.

Alan stared for a moment and then laughed again. If anything, the sound was even harsher. "It'll never last, kid. He'll find out what you're really like and drop your ass like a rock. I'll find you back out on the street in a month, shaking a cup at the tourists for change." Alan turned to leave, and then stopped. "Just like I did before."

Rafe felt Jesse stiffen in his arms. He squeezed tighter.

"Hey, Alan?"

"What?"

"Jesse's done with the street. *I* fucking guarantee it." Rafe's eyes blazed. "Now piss off, asshole, before I take your overpriced, overblown, uptight, skanky ass outside, and teach you a few things about respect."

Alan visibly paled. He recovered quickly, glared, and then left without a word.

Rafe could feel Jesse shaking in his arms. "Hey, are you okay?" He turned the smaller man around to face him, rolling his eyes when someone bumped them from behind.

Jesse's eyes danced. Laughter, not fear, made him shake.

"Skanky? Skanky! I don't think I've actually heard that word since the fifth grade!"

Rafe blushed.

"Oh, now you blush? What happened to that shy guy I met a few hours ago?"

“That was different,” Rafe replied. “I was afraid of what you’d say.”

“You certainly didn’t seem to be afraid just now.”

“I don’t care what *he* had to say. Besides, I think you need someone to look out for you.” Rafe spoke earnestly. “If you’ll let me, I mean.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“I can see that. But it’d be nice to let down your guard once in a while, wouldn’t it?”

Jesse nodded slowly. Emotions rose and fell on his face in rapid succession, too fleeting to identify.

“I won’t hurt you, Jesse.”

“Is that a promise?” Hope, weak and crippled, but hope nonetheless shimmered behind Jesse’s eyes.

“Yes,” Rafe said, speaking directly into his ear.

Oh, God. Let it be true. No more scrambling to pay rent on that fucking room. No more getting groped by ugly old men who think I am just meat. No more groundage when I can’t buy food. Even if it’s only for a week, let it be true.

“Hey, sorry if I’m interrupting anything, but these are on me. It’s about time someone took that guy down a few pegs.” One of the wait-boys, clad only in white satin boxer briefs, set two drinks down on the little tray. He eyed Rafe appreciatively and then winked at Jesse. “Don’t lose him, man. He’s a keeper.” Smiling, he turned back into the crowd.

Yeah, but am I?

Jesse eyed the drinks. “What are these things?”

“I don’t know. Purple?” Rafe grinned. “Nice of him, though.” He picked one up, handed it to Jesse, and then took his. They clinked the glasses together.

“Cheers.”

Jesse sipped experimentally. “Hey, that’s good.”

Rafe winced, tasting his. “Wow. That’s too sweet. You can have mine.”

“Aw, you’re just trying to get me drunk,” Jesse said, taking a sip from both glasses.

“Furthest thing from my mind,” Rafe replied, one hand over his heart and the other palm up like a Boy Scout. He took a long pull from

the Corona, skipping the lime. He leaned in and kissed Jesse's mouth. Their lips pressed together, Rafe's slightly parted so his tongue could trace the contour between Jesse's lips. Jesse's tongue darted out briefly, and then withdrew.

Jesse broke the kiss, laughing. "You taste like beer!" he said, loud enough for Rafe to hear. "I like it."

"It tastes better on you," Rafe replied.

"Dance with me!" Jesse tugged Rafe by the hand. There wasn't much of a struggle.

BY the time the club closed, both men were exhausted. Rafe had bought Jesse something pink, and another of the purple drinks, appreciating the waiter's generosity when he discovered what a "Black Opal" cost. For himself, he only drank the two Coronas, though he was sorely tempted to break his self-imposed limit when he discovered how much fun Jesse had squirting lime juice directly into his mouth.

They walked back to the truck, taking the elevator up to the top of the parking structure rather than the stairs they had used coming down. Rafe had taken one look at them, shook his head, and led Jesse by the hand toward the metal doors. "No way I could make it up those stairs now."

"Me, either," Jesse agreed. "My legs are still shaking."

They held each other as the elevator rose, Jesse's face nestled into the hollow of Rafe's neck.

"We fit," he mumbled against the pulse beneath his lips.

Rafe drew back and bent his head to kiss. Jesse brushed their lips together for a moment and then laid his head on Rafe's shoulder.

"This is nice."

"I agree." Rafe's tone was puzzled.

Jesse heard the jag in that mellow voice, and hated himself for it.

The elevator doors opened, allowing a swirl of cold night air to wrap around their legs. Jesse didn't move. Rafe waited patiently until the doors closed again.

"Jesse? Honey? Are you okay?" Rafe tilted Jesse's face up to his.

The raw, throbbing concern in Rafe's rich voice threatened to buckle his legs. *Yes. No. Shit, I don't know. Fucking Alan!*

“Sure. I’m fine. I was just liking the moment.”

“Not half as much as I’m liking having you in my arms, I bet.” Rafe gave him a gentle squeeze.

“Um, Rafe?” Jesse looked up, his pale eyes glittering. “That was almost sappy, you know?”

“Yeah, I know.” Rafe sighed. “Still true, though.” He brushed his fingertips along Jesse’s jawline, and then cupped his chin. “Now, are we gonna ride this elevator all night or what?” He pushed the door button and the elevator opened.

Jesse shuddered. “No way. Too cold.”

“Thought that might convince you.” Rafe bent his head to nuzzle his ear. “Wanna race?”

Jesse groaned. “Ugh, no. I can barely walk.”

Rafe nodded. “Okay.” Then without warning he stooped, caught Jesse behind his knees, and lifted him easily into the air like a bride over the threshold.

“Whoa, hey!” Jesse sputtered. “I said ‘barely’. I’m not crippled.”

“Do you want me to put you down?”

Jesse clasped his hands behind Rafe’s neck. “No. Not really.”

Rafe smiled, his strong face relaxed and his voice steady. “Then I shall carry thee to yonder chariot.”

The smile on Jesse’s face widened. “Really sappy. Who are you and where did you come from, cuz you sure as hell ain’t from around here.”

Rafe grinned at the familiar line. “I’m just me. Nobody special.” He set Jesse down and dug in his pocket for the keys.

“Oh, is that what that was. I thought you were just happy to see me.”

Rafe rolled his eyes. “Dude, that was really lame. Besides, *that’s* on the other side.”

“Wait a minute. You use words like skanky and dude, and *thee*, and you have the nerve to criticize my quotes? Really?”

Rafe laughed. “You got me there. I guess I’m just old-fashioned.”

He opened the door for Jesse and then got in on his own side. “Thank you,” he said, starting the engine.

“Thank you for what?” Jesse said, puzzled.

"I had a great time tonight, so thank you for letting me take you out," Rafe replied. He let the engine idle for a few minutes, and then rubbed the back of his neck. "I can take you home now, if you want."

Panic welled up to the base of Jesse's throat, threatening to choke him.

No! You promised!

When he could speak, his voice was husky. "Did you mean what you said?" Jesse hesitated. "To Alan. About me being on the street?"

"Absolutely." No hesitation. The strength of Rafe's flat statement sent fire down Jesse's spine.

"What can you do?"

"I don't know." Now Rafe faltered. "I thought I would start by taking you home, to my place."

Ah shit. You are such a fucking moron!

What had begun to *shift* in the company of this strange, comfortable man broke loose entirely.

"Oh, jeez." Tears filled his eyes, threatened to spill over. "I am so stupid! I thought you meant *my* place." A teardrop rolled down Jesse's cheek, glittering in the city lights below them. "I thought you were cutting me loose."

Rafe gasped, startled by the display. He reached across the seat to draw shaking shoulders into an awkward embrace. Jesse scooted closer. When his head was tucked beneath Rafe's chin, he began to cry in earnest.

"Hey, shhh. Baby, it'll be okay. I promised, didn't I?" Rafe murmured in Jesse's hair, trying to soothe the pain-wracked sobs.

After a few minutes, Jesse began to subside. He sniffled, wiped his nose on his sleeve, and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes.

"Fuck."

"Yeah, I know. That's my jacket."

"Oh, shit! I forgot. I'm sorry. I—"

"Don't sweat it, Jesse. I'm only teasing," Rafe interrupted.

"God, I must look like shit. I don't know what happened. I used to be stronger than this."

"You do look a bit ragged around the edges," Rafe agreed, wiping the tears from Jesse's face with his thumbs. "You still have beautiful



eyes, though.”

Jesse snuffled again, dragging his arm beneath his nose again. Both men laughed. Both sounded a little watery.

“Let’s get you home before you drown us both.”

Jesse snuggled down, curled up on the bench seat, and laid his head on Rafe’s leg. He fell asleep almost immediately.

As Rafe drove, Jesse would sometimes start, burrow his face into Rafe’s leg, and then sigh.

Worse than any cliché, the sounds sent an arrow straight through Rafe’s heart, every time.

THE first thing Jesse felt was someone stroking his hair.

“Jesse, honey? Can you wake up for me, just a little?”

Molten chocolate. Rivers of it curled through the sleepy fog in his head. “Mmm,” he mumbled. “Nice.” Laughter bubbled around him. Soft, gentle laughter that coaxed, rather than demanded.

“C’m on baby. Wake up. I think my leg is asleep.”

*Leg. That voice. Oh, it’s not a dream!* “Rafe.” Jesse opened his eyes as the realization hit home. He’d been drooling. “Oh, shit!”

“Well, I’ve always wanted to have some hot guy drool over me,” Rafe said, laughter coloring his voice like dappled sunshine. “I just never expected a hot guy to drool *on* me.”

Jesse sat up, flushed. “I think my face went to sleep. Where are we?”

“My house, about an hour out from the city. Are you okay?”

Jesse rocked his jaw from side to side. “Definitely asleep.” He yawned. “But yeah, I’m okay.”

“Good. I don’t know about you, but I am beat. I need to crash.”

“Ah, crap. And I slept the whole way. I’m really sorry. I should have—”

Rafe shushed him with a finger to his lips. “I don’t mind. You’re beautiful when you sleep. Did you know that?”

Jesse’s eyebrows lifted.

“I turned the cabin light on a couple of times to look at you.” Rafe’s voice was unrepentant. “I couldn’t help myself.”

Jesse touched Rafe’s face in the dark, feeling the smile there.

“You know, that’s kind of sweet, in a weird sort of way. I keep waiting to wake up, or for you to disappear like smoke.”

Rafe snorted. “I ain’t going anywhere, except to sleep. Are you coming with me?”

“Yes.”

They entered the house through a side door, Rafe flipping on lights as they moved through the single-story building.

“It’s not much, but it’s mine at least.”

“It’s nice. Not too fancy, not too plain.”

“Well, it works for me. Bedroom is this way.” Rafe flipped a switch on the wall, illuminating a small room dominated by a queen-sized bed. “Bathroom’s over there. Closet, dresser, towels are on the shelves.” He pointed to the various features. “Grab whatever you need, okay?”

“Where are you going?”

“I’m going to let the cats in. They probably think I deserted them.”

“Cats? How many do you have?”

“Just three. Why? Are you allergic?”

“Nope. I just wondered. Why so many?”

Rafe shrugged. “Dunno. We just sort of found each other. One I bought from a kid out of a box, and the other two were rescues.”

“Do you always pick up strays?”

“Only cats.”

“What about me?”

“Do you have a tail?” Rafe grinned.

Jesse switched his hips suggestively. “Something like a tail, maybe.”

Rafe rolled his eyes and pulled him into a rough hug. Jesse turned his head, leaving Rafe to kiss his cheek. Rafe let go almost immediately, his voice thick. “I’ll be right back. Make yourself at home.”

Jesse explored the closets, opened a few drawers, and assured himself of the bathroom light in case he needed to find it in the dark. He touched the strings of a guitar leaning in the corner, smiling at the faint, mellow tone. He stripped and climbed into bed, reveling in the feel of the smooth cotton on his bare legs.

He could hear Rafe’s voice through the open door but he couldn’t make out the words. He closed his eyes and let the sound carry him.

Something about Rafe's voice made him feel....

Safe. He makes you feel safe. Makes you feel real. Not a toy.

Too bad he....

Jesse fell asleep before he could finish the thought.

When he awoke the first time, dawn light shone through the thin curtains, casting faint patterns across the room. He stretched, rolled over, and found himself alone in the wide bed.

He doesn't want me.

He sat up, stretched again, yawned, and got up. He went into the living room and found Rafe asleep on the couch. He was on his side, and the couch was too short for his long frame. Where his bent knees would have hung over the edge, they were supported by a low coffee table. The sight would have been comical were it not for the reason why he was there at all. Jesse felt a pang of regret wash over him. Then he saw the tattoos.

Bold black designs, intricate and interlocking, patterned his chest and marched a line down as much of his stomach as he could see. From the ink on his wide shoulders, Jesse figured the tattoos continued across his back. These were no needle-and-string jobs, either. A lot of work went into those tattoos, and a lot of pain too, he supposed. Jesse wanted to trace the pattern sprawled across the man's chest. Wanted his finger to follow the path, down and down. He bent to look closer when something touched the back of his leg.

Jesse bit back a shout as he turned to see a plain gray tabby staring up at him, golden eyes unwavering. He reached to pet the creature but it darted under the coffee table as his hand came near. He stepped back, grinning. "Hey, cat. Do you know how special your guy is?" he whispered.

The cat jumped up onto the coffee table, stepped daintily across the gap to the couch, and settled beneath Rafe's chin. Still asleep, Rafe curled his arm around the cat and it began to purr.

Jesse's eyes watered at the sight. "He said he liked to hold me too," he whispered to the cat. Its ears twitched at the sound but its eyes remained closed.

He never said anything about loving you, though.

Jesse rubbed his eyes and went back to bed.

WHEN he awoke again, Jesse smelled heaven. Bacon, or maybe it was sausage. The aroma drew him out of sleep easily, waking all of his senses and making his stomach rumble. He got up, pulled on his shorts, and followed his nose.

Rafe was bare to the waist, and barefoot. He still wore the 501s but the first two buttons were undone, revealing a scatter of dark curls. He shook the frying pan, looked up, and grinned.

“Morning, handsome. Did you sleep well?”

No. You weren’t with me.

“Like a log. Nice tattoos. I notice you slept on the couch.”

“Yeah. Thought it was a good idea at the time.” He arched his back, stretching. His abs rippled. “Need a bigger couch, though.”

“Oh.” Jesse bent down, reaching toward the gray tabby. “Who’s this?”

“Jo. Short for Joy if I remember right, it’s been so long.”

The cat skipped back a few steps away from Jesse’s hand.

“She’s kind of skittish and she sheds like crazy so watch out. Cat hair everywhere. Especially the bed.”

“I don’t mind. I’ve slept with worse.”

Rafe’s face clouded. “I’m sorry.”

Way to go, asshole.

“It’s cool. Stuff like that comes with the territory.”

Rafe nodded, clearly unhappy. He shook himself with an effort.

“You hungry?”

“I could eat.”

“Good. How’s your head?”

“It hurts. I hate hangovers.”

“Don’t we all. There’s aspirin in the cupboard. Orange juice in the fridge, if you like that. If not, there’s water. I’m afraid I’m not very domestic.” He nodded toward another cupboard. “Grab some plates, will you? This is just about ready.”

Jesse downed two aspirin with OJ and then poured a glass for Rafe.

Rafe plated sausage and eggs for two, snagged the silverware from a drawer, and set it all down on the bar which separated the kitchen from the living room. Toast followed a moment later. “Eat up.” He took a seat beside Jesse. “Afterwards, we need to talk.”

“About what?”

“Nothing bad, I’m sure. Now, eat. I can hear your stomach all the way over here.”

Jesse grinned, forking an entire sausage into his mouth. “Rummhmum.”

Rafe mock scowled. “Where’s your broughtin’s up, boy? Ain’t you got no couth, talkin’ wit yer mouth full?”

Jesse pasted an apologetic, hangdog look on his face, which made Rafe laugh, nearly spraying his orange juice.

It could have been so good.

“This is good,” Jesse said, when his mouth was clear. “Thank you.”

“My pleasure, my honor.”

Jesse shook his head. “You’re too much this early in the morning.”

“Early?” Rafe laughed. “Check the time.” He nodded to a digital clock on the wall. It was almost noon.

“Wow. I haven’t slept this late in... I don’t remember how long.”

Rafe nodded, his eyes shadowed. “I kinda figured.”

Jesse pushed the last of his eggs onto his fork with a bite of toast. “Did you watch me sleep?” He didn’t look up.

“I checked on you from time to time, yeah.”

Jesse drew trails in the bright yellow liquid on his plate with the last of his toast. He put it into his mouth and chewed, even though it suddenly tasted like shit. He looked up, caught Rafe watching him carefully.

You’re damaged goods, baby. Alan all but said so, right out loud.

“I saw you sleeping on the couch earlier this morning.”

“That’s kinda what I wanted to talk about,” Rafe replied, pushing his plate away. “C’mon. Let’s find something for you to wear. I don’t think I can do this with you looking so good to me.” His voice was rough, almost strangled. Rafe took Jesse by the hand and led him into the bedroom. He opened a few drawers, rummaged in the closet, and came up with a T-shirt, socks, boxer briefs, and jeans. “These should fit you well enough if you don’t mind the extra length, but I’ve got a belt somewhere if you need it.” He practically shoved the clothes into Jesse’s arms. “You get the first shower. I’ll deal with the dishes.”

Jesse eyed the briefs suspiciously. “You aren’t a boxers guy, are

you?”

Rafe shook his head. Something like a grin smoothed his face, but it didn't quite reach his eyes. “Commando, mostly. Those are new. I haven't worn them yet.”

Jesse nodded. “I wouldn't have minded if you had.”

Rafe's face twisted. “Save me some hot water,” he all but growled and left the room.

Confused, Jesse went into the bathroom and shut the door.

JESSE played with the cat while he waited for Rafe to finish his shower. By the time he appeared, long damp hair pulled back into a ponytail, the cat was in his lap and purring loudly.

“Where are the other two?”

Rafe shrugged. “Outside chasing mice, I imagine. Sometimes they bring me presents.”

Jesse grimaced. “Lovely.”

“Not when you find them in the dark, barefoot.” Rafe sat down in an overstuffed chair, seemed to think better of it, then moved to sit on the couch. The cat climbed out of Jesse's lap, tail high, and walked across to Rafe. He ruffed her fur, smoothed it, and then set her down on the floor. She wandered off toward the kitchen, leaving the two men to stare awkwardly past each other.

Rafe cleared his throat. “Jesse, I like you a lot.”

Here it comes.

“I really do. I'll keep my promise too. I have a few options that might help you get a place of your own...”

Jesse listened, dread growing monstrous teeth and gnawing at his guts as Rafe outlined his tentative plans. His voice seemed to fade away to a dull background drone, punctuating the pounding in his ears.

“... work if you want it. But you'll probably have to start low on the ladder at first...”

Jesse's vision swam. The tears in his eyes made Rafe's shadowed, sad face twist and shatter. The roaring in his ears grew louder, drowning out the world.

When did I start crying all the time?

“I thought maybe I could stay here, with you.”

Rafe sighed, trying not to feel torn in two as he watched Jesse's tears spill free, salty raindrops dotting the shirt he wore. His shirt. He slid over to wrap Jesse in his arms and rest his chin on his head. He couldn't bear to see the man's face. Didn't want Jesse to see his. He rubbed his hands along Jesse's arms, soothing. "I know you want to, Jesse. God knows I want you to stay, but I don't think I could handle that. I'm sorry if it sounds selfish, but it's the truth."

"What's to handle? I like you. You said you liked me. I don't even snore, usually."

"It's not that simple. I..."

Resignation crawled into Jesse's belly, cold as a glacier in winter, numbing.

"It's because of what Alan said, isn't it? You don't like what I am. Was. Whatever."

Rafe's hands stopped moving. "Jesse, what are you talking about? What did Alan say?"

"You heard him. He knows what I liked. Nasty stuff. I didn't know there was anything else, then. When I found out that things didn't *have* to hurt, that I didn't have to let him hurt me, that I didn't want to be with him anymore, he said dog shit on the sidewalk mattered more than I did." Jesse hung his head. "Do you know why?"

"No."

"Because sooner or later someone will come along and scrape the shit off the sidewalk. After a while, I started to believe him."

Rafe hugged him tighter. "Why would you believe such a thing?"

"How could I not? He said it often enough. Every time he did that... that... he told me how bad it was. How nasty I was for liking it." Jesse laughed ruefully. "You know what they say about pain. How good it feels when it stops."

"I never did quite get the whole bondage thing," Rafe admitted, rocking Jesse gently.

"This wasn't bondage. No safe words. Just plain torture. Figured it out years ago, which is why I left him." Jesse squeezed Rafe's hands in his. "He took me in. I thought I didn't have anywhere else to go." Jesse slid down, laying his head on Rafe's leg.

Rafe cradled his head, stroking the dark curls. "You're wrong, you know."

Jesse stiffened. "About what?"

"About how you think I feel about your past." Rafe laid his hand on Jesse's chest, felt his heart thudding. "None of that bothers me, Jesse. It bothers me that it happened to you, and I would change it if I could, but it doesn't change how I feel about you."

Jesse sat up. Rafe's eyes were shining, filled to the brim.

"Why did you sleep on the couch last night?"

Rafe closed his eyes, forcing a tear to spill over and slide down his face. "I told you. I wasn't trying to buy you. I didn't want you to think that sleeping with me was the price of club cover and dinner."

Arrogant bastard.

Jesse stood, staring at Rafe, who looked panic stricken. The tabby wandered in from the kitchen. Jesse spoke succinctly and clearly. "Fuck that, and fuck you."

"Jesse, I—"

"Shut up and listen." Jesse's pale eyes flashed with anger, and something else. "Did it ever occur to you, mister knight-in-shining-armor-rescuing-the-stupid-shit-stained-hustler-from-a-horrible-life-on-the-streets, that I might have *wanted* to sleep with you? That the furthest thing from my mind since we danced was that you were just another trick?" Jesse's voice fell, softened. "Is it so hard to believe that I wanted you and not your money?"

Rafe's face was hard. Flat. Expressionless. "Yes."

"*Why?*" Jesse all but shouted his frustration.

The cat bolted for the bedroom.

"Because you won't kiss me."

*Oh, shit. Didn't see that coming.* Jesse sat down in the middle of the floor. Hard. The cat peered out, sauntered across the room, sat down in his lap as though nothing had happened. "Rafe, listen. I—"

"No. You listen. It's my turn to rant." He didn't stand up. "I wanted you from the first moment I laid eyes on you leaning against that stupid building like nothing could touch you. I *fell* for you when you finally let your guard down last night and I saw how vulnerable you really were. I promised you right then, and I swear I will keep it, but it killed me inside to think that you wouldn't have the same feelings for me." Rafe rubbed the back of his neck. His ponytail swung back and forth.

"Every time I tried to kiss you, you turned away! Didn't you just



say that if you hear something often enough you start to believe it? Every time I tried to kiss you I heard *no*, and I believed it. But even then I didn't want you to think I was just using you, Jesse."

Rafe's face twisted. "I'm the last person in the world who'll ever take advantage of you, regardless of how you feel for me, and no one else will, either." Color rose in his face. "I just don't think I can handle having you so close to me, and not *have* you because... I love you."

Jesse got up, displacing the cat, who flicked her tail and stalked off. He held his hand out to Rafe, who rose finally and took it. Jesse searched his face.

"Hazel," he murmured.

"What?"

"Never mind. Hold still."

Jesse tugged at the tie holding Rafe's hair back. "Looks better this way." He buried his fingers into the dark strands at the base of his neck and drew him down. He fastened his lips on Rafe's mouth, taking advantage of his surprise. His tongue pushed past the firm lips, exploring, demanding. Rough at first, but with increasing gentleness, he tasted the ridges at the roof of Rafe's mouth, dipped into the pocket beneath Rafe's tongue, sucked on it when it lifted, and drew it in. He bit playfully, feeling the pliant muscle flatten between his teeth. Rafe's tongue slipped free, explored Jesse's mouth in return, and he moaned. The sound vibrated through both of them.

Jesse felt Rafe's long fingers press against his hips, then push them apart.

"Are you sure you want to do this?"

Jesse groaned and pushed Rafe back onto the couch. His weight flattened the larger man into the soft cushions as he laid full length atop Rafe's body. He flexed his ass, grinding his hardening cock against Rafe's crotch, grinning at what he felt there.

"Does that answer your question?"

Rafe laughed, sliding his hands beneath Jesse's shirt to caress the smooth skin of his back. The calluses on his hands made Jesse's skin tingle.

"We've got to lose this shirt."

Jesse arched his back, letting Rafe draw his T-shirt up and over his head. It trapped his arms as it slid off his shoulders, pinning his hands to

either side of Rafe's chest.

Rafe took advantage by pulling Jesse's head down to kiss him again, their legs intertwined.

The added pressure of their shifting bodies as Jesse moved pressed their swollen cocks together, sending lightning jags of hunger and need coursing through his body. His mouth responded, biting down on Rafe's lower lip, pulling, stretching, letting go. His elbows unlocked and he fell heavily against Rafe's broad chest. He tried to extract himself from the tangle of shirt around his wrists, but Rafe kept pulling him back down, trying to recapture his mouth.

Jesse succeeded in getting one arm free and retaliated by biting one thoroughly erect nipple through Rafe's thin shirt. Rafe yelped and grabbed a double handful of Jesse's ass. Jesse felt his cock surge and knew why Rafe laughed.

"Baby, I've wanted this for so long. You have no idea." Rafe's liquid voice throbbled with raw desire, naked in its intensity.

"Prove it."

Rafe shoved the coffee table away. He snaked his body sideways, dragging Jesse with him to the floor and taking the full weight of their impact across his wide back and shoulders.

Rafe rolled, pinning Jesse's smaller body beneath him. He drew his knee up to Jesse's balls.

Jesse tilted his hips up and forward to press the bundle of nerves beneath his sac against the stout oak of Rafe's leg. He locked his ankles around Rafe's thigh and pulled, grinding.

Rafe spread his hands wide on Jesse's chest. He pinched the nipples between finger and thumb, twisting experimentally. He flattened his palms against the dusky brown buds, rubbing small circles until they hardened. He bent, took first one and then the other into his mouth, trapping them between his teeth and flicking them with his tongue.

Jesse buried his fingers in Rafe's hair, alternately tickled and enthralled by the sheer sensation of the thick mass shifting and sliding across his skin.

Rafe's hands roamed. His touch was gruff, playful, almost innocent in its eagerness to explore every hill and valley of Jesse's chest and stomach. He stopped only when his hand reached the line of hair that widened as it disappeared beneath the waistband of Jesse's jeans.

Rafe abandoned Jesse's nipples with a cry, leaving them throbbing, aching for that wet, flickering heat to return. He traced the path of hair with his tongue, leading with his chin until he met the unyielding resistance of fabric and zipper.

Jesse burst out laughing when Rafe suddenly buried his nose into his navel, blowing in exasperation.

"What are you doing down there? I can't see with all this hair!"

Rafe raised his head, flipped his hair to one side with a practiced twitch, and grinned, tugging at the button of Jesse's jeans. He pulled the zipper, freed Jesse's cock, and dragged his hanging hair along its swollen length. The sensation was exquisitely gentle, and Jesse's hips bucked involuntarily.

"Commando. I like that." Rafe blew cool sweet air, chilling the sweat-dampened skin.

"Rafe...." Jesse's voice was husky, pleading, strident in its intensity.

Rafe looked up, met Jesse's smoke-pale eyes, and smiled mischievously. He dragged his hair again, heavier this time because his head was closer, and touched the long thick shaft with the tip of his tongue. A sharp pulse of energy raced along Jesse's cock, centered at the base, then burst outward through his body. Rafe drew lazy designs with his tongue along the shaft, tasted his balls, and then changed direction, zigzagging precise strokes until he reached the juncture beneath the head. He teased the foreskin back with his hand and set bold wet marks up to the slit. He blew air again, cooling the fire lines he drew. He leaned back, fumbled beneath the couch, and then drew out a condom.

Jesse's eyebrows rose. "Planning this, were you?"

"Baby, I tried for a month to work up the nerve to bring you home. There hasn't been anyone else to use these on."

"No one?"

"I don't want anyone else but you."

Rafe drew the edge of the foil packet along the length of Jesse's dick. It jumped and twitched. He laughed and planted a healthy kiss at the base of the shaft as he tore open the package. He placed the rolled latex in his mouth, grabbed Jesse's cock by the root, and used his lips to roll the rubber down the shaft, humming. He rolled the condom the last few inches with his fingers.

Jesse watched, fascinated. He had done that often enough, but it was the first time anyone had ever dressed *him* that way, and it felt damn good.

Rafe ran the edges of his fingernails lightly along the latex. The sensation set up a rhythm in Jesse's body and he felt his balls tighten. Without warning, Rafe plunged his mouth over the head and down the shaft.

Jesse *screamed*, more than a little shaken by the sudden heat that enveloped his skin. A low throaty rumble, Rafe humming again, vibrated through his dick, magnifying the sensation. His hands clutched involuntarily, pulling Rafe's hair and head farther down onto his cock. Rafe resisted for a moment, tilted his head, and then took the entire length. Jesse could feel his throat working, constricting around his cock head as Rafe swallowed to keep from gagging.

Rafe pulled back, covering the exposed portions with his hand, keeping perfect time with his mouth as teeth and tongue raked more fire up and down the engorged shaft. He yanked at Jesse's jeans, pulling them down past his knees, and Jesse kicked them free. Rafe cupped his balls, fingertips exploring the round globes, the flat plane beneath them, and the faint ridge that marked the beginning of his crack.

Jesse twitched and squirmed, trying to maneuver those questing fingers to where he wanted them to be. "Rafe, please. I want that...." The vibration around his dick modulated, intensified, as Rafe laughed with his mouth full.

Jesse moaned and thrashed. He tried to capture Rafe's hand, tried to guide it home.

Rafe raised his head, still stroking a steady, agonizing rhythm with his hand. "Not yet." He brought his other hand to Jesse's face, traced the contours of his lips with a questing finger, and demanded entrance.

Jesse took the proffered hand in both of his, dug his tongue into the palm, and then sucked the first two fingers greedily into his mouth. His tongue lashed, wetting the surfaces, making them slick. The rhythm of Rafe's hand on his cock faltered, shifted, strengthened. It squeezed on the upstroke, relaxed on the down. The tugging sensation felt incredible.

"Get ready, baby." Rafe's voice was low, intense. His mouth reclaimed Jesse's cock possessively, humming with pleasure at the reunion. A faint hint of teeth intensified the fire racing along his shaft, shaped it until his balls hardened like iron.

Rafe's slick fingers found his hole, circled it, testing. They found their mark, centered, and pushed. Not hard enough to demand entrance, just to announce their presence. They circled the ring of resistance, pressed and relaxed in perfect counterpoint to the tug and squeeze their distant cousins sang to Jesse's aching dick. Rafe's mouth and tongue hummed harmonies around the leaking, throbbing head.

The overlapping sensations were too strong, too complex, and Jesse's brain short-circuited. His hands slammed to the floor, his fingers digging furrows into the carpet as his body thrashed, his back arched, and his hips thrust blindly forward. Brilliant white fire exploded from deep within his groin, raced along his nerves, illuminated his entire body from the inside out. Pinpricks of color danced behind his eyelids as wave after wave of pure pleasure bolted through him. Pleasure that chased the white fire, shaping it into a new thing entirely, which teetered on an edge, hovered, and then plunged. He came with a shout, riding the hurricane of his body's release as he filled the latex still cradled in Rafe's mouth and talented tongue.

Oh. OH...GOD!

Tears sprang in his eyes, coursed down the sides of his face, and pooled in his ears as a sudden, startling realization hit him with all the impact of a cannon blast.

In the four years he spent hustling the streets, any number of guys, some gorgeous, most not, had sucked him, fucked him, done all manner of things to him and with him, but no one had ever, *ever*, made love to him.

Until now.

RAFE deftly slipped off the condom, tied it, and tossed it aside. His palms spread the glistening sheen that remained across Jesse's slackened abs and chest. Only when he reached to touch his face did he notice that Jesse was weeping.

"What is it, baby? What's wrong?" Confusion and concern colored his voice. He lifted Jesse to cradle his head against his chest.

"Raphael, I.... No one.... I never knew it could be that good."

"I'm glad you liked it." Rafe nuzzled his ear. "Only, I hope we aren't done yet."

Jesse felt the throbbing insistence pressing against his lower back.

He rubbed his eyes and smiled.

“Absolutely not,” he said, as his own dick began to twitch in response. He stood, taking Rafe’s hand with him as he rose. “Come with me.” He tugged Rafe impatiently toward the bedroom, and then paused. “Anything else under the couch we’ll need?” His grin was impish.

Rafe blushed furiously and shook his head.

THE cat wandered into the room, sniffed at the sweat-scented place where Jesse had lain. She lay down where the warmth was greatest and went to sleep, purring.

“I WANT to ride you.” Jesse’s pale eyes smoldered, his hole already tingling in anticipation. He pushed Rafe onto the bed. “I *really* want to ride you.”

Any hesitation Rafe might have had fled in the wake of pure hunger that throbbed in Jesse’s voice. “I really *want* you to,” he said as he began to unbutton his jeans.

“Uh-uh. I get to do that.” Jesse pushed his hands away, pulled him to sit up. “This first though,” he said as he lifted Rafe’s shirt over his head and tossing it aside. “I want to follow the path.”

“What?”

Jesse did not reply; he merely pushed his lover back down on the bed and climbed over him. His balls swung and his dick already felt heavy with need.

Ready again and so fast. Incredible.

“This.” Jesse traced the black tribal patterns on Rafe’s chest with his finger. “The path of discovery. I’ve wanted to do this from the first moment I saw them.”

“Oh? You don’t mind them?” Rafe’s voice held the faintest hint of defiance.

“Are you kidding? If I’d have touched them then I would have come in my pants, except I wasn’t wearing any.”

Rafe laughed, a low rumble deep in his belly that made Jesse’s body shiver. The laughter crumbled into a soft moan as Jesse’s slim fingers followed the interlocking patterns down to Rafe’s jeans.

“Don’t take too long,” Rafe warned.

Jesse knee-walked his way up Rafe's body, stopping just short of Rafe's mouth straining to reach his dick. He reached back and popped the buttons of Rafe's jeans with practiced ease, then bent down to brush a kiss against his lips. He left a trail of light, feathery kisses on his chin, his neck, and his chest as he slid his entire body down, dragging his balls along the moguls of Rafe's abs. The sharp jolt of Rafe's cock catching the back of his balls made him gasp.

"I don't think I can."

Jesse followed the road map etched into the caramel-colored skin, a treasure trail made of dark patterns. At the point where the pattern spread and widened, he found himself confronted by the spectacle of Rafe's dick.

Thick and meaty, it was slightly longer than average, well tapered, and sported a wide, flaring head uncomplicated by foreskin.

"Oh, jeez. It's beautiful."

"Well, you kinda have me beat by comparison," Rafe admitted.

"No, you don't understand," Jesse said almost absently, his eyes riveted, his hands working the shaft. "This is perfect. Trust me." He looked up, met Rafe's gaze, locked on. Something cemented between them.

"I admit I was kinda worried." Rafe's laughter was rich, inviting, shot through with anticipation. "I'm glad it works for you, but I gotta tell you that if you keep doing that it's gonna get messy in about two seconds."

Jesse's eyes lit up and he held out a hand. "Give!"

Rafe scabbled in the nightstand's single drawer, produced a small bottle of lube, and a few condoms. He tore open one of the packets and handed it over.

Jesse placed the stretchy ring of latex on Rafe's dick, perched it like a crown. He wet his fingertips and closed them together to make a kind of tunnel. He pushed the ring down slowly, delighted with the faint pop as it stretched over the flaring head and snapped into place. He rolled the rest of the condom down just as slowly, chasing ahead of its advance with searing swipes of his tongue. He gave a slight tug when he reached the base, unrolling a bit more, and then smoothed the entire production with a loose fist.

"Jeez. I didn't think it was possible to come just from watching

someone put on a rubber.”

“Ah, not so fast.” Jesse gave Rafe’s dick a healthy squeeze. “I’m just getting started.”

“You damn near just finished me.”

Jesse laughed and held out a hand as he sat upright. “Lube.”

Rafe gave him the bottle and lay back, groaning.

“You’re killing me here. You know that, right?”

“Yes, I do,” Jesse said as he squirted a small pool onto the tips of his fingers. He reached back, slicked his hole, pale eyes locked to hazel green. His back arched, his fingers worked. He pressed his balls against Rafe’s straining cock and relaxed. He sat back, broke his gaze, then corralled Rafe’s dick to hold it upright.

Jesse dribbled a thin stream of the clear slippery fluid onto the head of that beautiful cock, watched it run down the length with a satisfied smile. He leaned forward, fastened his mouth to Rafe’s, and kissed him deeply as he slid forward, his cock and balls spreading the lube along the entire length. With a sigh, he bent his back, tilted his hips, and pushed.

Rafe’s cock twitched, sprang up, almost but not quite hitting Jesse’s hole.

Jesse reached back, made an adjustment, and then slowly, exquisitely impaled himself upon his lover’s body with a breathy sigh of pleasure.

“Raphael....”

This is what I was made for. I’ve known that ever since I was eighteen. Suspected it even sooner. But, oh, God... I had no idea it could feel this good.

Jesse’s eyes glinted in the late-morning sunlight. The patterns cast by the thin curtains painted his face and body with tattoos of his own. He looked down at himself, saw his own straining cock dappled with light and dribbling with pre-cum. He wanted nothing more than to please the man beneath him, inside him, for no other reason than because it made them both feel good. Certainly not because he’d been paid.

He leaned forward, feeling the steel rod of Rafe’s dick slide easily, almost to the point of escape. He leaned back, watched Rafe’s eyes widen when he seated himself, watched those hazel eyes close in ecstasy when he grabbed Rafe’s thighs hard enough to leave bruises and pulled that slick rod even deeper into the pulsing heat of his ass.



Watched Rafe's eyes fly open when he *clenched*.

"Jesse!"

Rafe's howl delighted and excited him beyond belief and he began to move. Slowly at first, then with increasing urgency, rising up and slamming down, all the while clenching and relaxing the ring of muscle as he rode Rafe's entire body.

Jesse leaned forward, drawing Rafe's knees up with him to keep him from slipping free. He kissed Rafe's mouth, hard, and used his teeth to tug at his lip. He planted kisses, wet and dry, on his cheeks, his forehead, his eyes. He felt Rafe's arms wrap around his body and the feeling of safety those arms provided made something snap and fall away. He laughed, delighted with himself, reveling in the sheer feeling of this wonderful, soft-spoken man wrapped around and buried in him.

Anything but soft-spoken now, as he howled his passion and Jesse's name in that beautiful, molten-chocolate voice.

"Fuck me, Raphael. Fuck me hard!" He pulled at Rafe's arms, drawing him forward as he leaned back, rising up and down in a punishing rhythm as he moved.

Rafe surged forward, his knees spread wide and bent, caging the lively, animated body that willfully, almost maliciously surrounded the center of himself, clenching on the upstroke, milking his cock.

Jesse bucked. Jesse rocked. Jesse bore down and squeezed, feeling the thump of Rafe's heart against his own chest as they held each other, feeling the jerk and spasm of Rafe's dick as it slammed against that sweet spongy ball inside him, over and over. Red sparks this time, a whole new sensation, coursed through his body in waves. He clung to Rafe, breathing nonsense into his ear, chewed the tender flesh of Rafe's neck, and still he rode. Long, deep strokes that varied only in their frequency, not their intensity.

He felt Rafe's arms lock, felt his back stiffen, felt his cock spasm in his ass as Rafe came. Felt his own dick sliding against Rafe's stomach jerk in response.

"Jesse!" Rafe shouted his name as a barely inarticulate mixture of need and desire, which collapsed into a bone-rumbling growl that Jesse felt go straight through his ass to his cock.

Jesse's cum geysered between their bodies, lubricated the spasming friction of skin on skin, cooled the fire that burned between them.

Rafe lay back, spent in every way that mattered, still buried deep in Jesse's ass. Jesse grabbed his thighs again, clutching, trying to hold his lover with his body as he felt the steel soften. He didn't want the feeling to end but he was too exhausted to fight the inevitable. He rose slowly, smiling as Rafe gasped and twitched at the sensory overload. Jesse caught the condom, tied it off, and tossed it. He stretched out along Rafe's long frame and tangled their legs together.

Rafe pulled Jesse close, nestled his head on his shoulder, and rubbed his back languidly. "Oh, God, Jesse. You were exquisite."

Me, not the deed. I'm not even sure what "exquisite" really means, but it sounds wonderful.

A happy flush heated his body, spreading outward from where Rafe's hand rested on his butt.

"Mmmmmhhh.... You felt so good in me, Raphael. I could do that for hours." He drew lazy circles in the cum on Rafe's chest.

"Um. Give me just a minute, will you? You're a wildcat."

Jesse chuckled. "Yeah. I kinda surprised myself."

Rafe's large hand splayed across Jesse's ass and squeezed gently.

"What do these mean for you?" Jesse tapped a spiky black streak curling around one nipple.

"Hmm? Oh, I don't know. I guess you could say they are a road map." Rafe cleaned them both with a handful of Kleenex as he spoke. "Just reminders of certain events in my life that I don't ever want to forget."

"Is that why there are empty places in the pattern?"

"Yes."

Jesse sighed. "That is so cool," he said, as he drifted off to sleep.

Rafe thumbed a faint sheen of sweat from the beautiful brow, drew a blanket over them both, and followed him.

A WEEK had passed since Rafe had brought Jesse home and taught him the difference between living and surviving, and why the distinction mattered.

True to his word, Rafe had made some calls earlier in the week and had gotten Jesse a part-time job cleaning cages at the local veterinary clinic when he realized Jesse's deep and abiding love of animals. Jesse

had sat for hours, patiently coaxing the other two cats to accept him, his stillness so much at odds with the inquisitive exuberance he constantly felt once he finally understood that Rafe truly loved him, despite how he had learned to survive.

The pure irony of Jesse cleaning up stray animal shit had them both laughing until tears ran down their faces.

It also said much about how far unconditional love had gone toward healing him.

THEY had been shopping earlier that day, filling out Jesse's scant wardrobe in preparation for his new job. Jesse now wore a deep maroon shirt and black 501s, sheepishly admitting when he picked them out that he liked the way Rafe's had looked on him.

"So where are we going now? And how come you didn't get anything for yourself? Those sweats are kinda ratty."

"I have an appointment, and we were shopping for you, and I like these ratty old sweats. They serve a purpose."

"Oh."

"Can I ask you something, Jesse?"

"Sure. Anything."

"Why wouldn't you kiss me that first night?"

They turned a corner and Jesse spotted a guy leaning against the wall, head tilted just so. He looked at Rafe, saw the tenseness in his eyes, maybe afraid of the answer. But Jesse couldn't see how, given that they'd been fucking like bunnies the entire week.

He turned to look out the window, watching the hustler as they passed. Another version of himself, and not half so lucky.

"Most of us don't kiss a date, Rafe. It's just about the only thing we can save that's truly ours. The fucking tricks take everything else." He turned to look at his lover, who stared straight ahead. "And, to tell you the truth, until you came along, I had forgotten why I was saving it in the first place, even when you had me right there in your arms at the club and you stood up for me. Now I can't imagine myself kissing anyone but you."

Rafe's face brightened. "You have no idea how happy that makes me."

"You weren't worried, were you?"

“No, not exactly.” Rafe rubbed the back of his neck. “I guess I just wanted to reassure myself.”

They drove a few more blocks before Rafe pulled over and parked.

“Where are we?” Jesse scanned the street. Two doors up, a garish red-and-blue neon sign proclaimed tattoos and body piercings.

“I have an appointment with Jas. He’s my tattoo guy.”

“You’re getting another one? Sweet! What’ll it be?” Jesse fairly bounced out of the truck.

Rafe laughed. “You’ll see.”

They entered the small building, crushed between larger, newer structures, and a dark-haired bear of a man looked over the counter. “Hey, Rafe. I’m just finishing up. Won’t be a second.”

Jesse looked around, fascinated, as the large man finished wiping down the table.

Jas flipped open the counter divider and motioned for Rafe to sit down.

“You too, Jesse.” Jas grinned at his surprise.

“I called ahead and told Jas what I wanted to do.” Rafe was smiling that particular soft smile that Jesse knew belonged only to him.

“What are you having done?”

Still smiling, Rafe stood and dropped his pants. He was wearing some ridiculous string thing. Not much more than a pouch and dental floss.

“Gave up going commando, did we?”

“Absolutely not,” Rafe and Jesse spoke in near perfect unison.

“I just didn’t want to offend your delicate sensibilities,” Rafe added.

Jas rolled his eyes. “As if I haven’t seen it before. Tasted it, even.” He winked at Jesse.

Rafe blushed furiously. “That was a long time ago.” As he sat back down he added, “He gave me my first tattoo at a party.”

“Oh....”

Jas watched the exchange. “I take it you still want to do this?”

“Absolutely.” He motioned for Jesse to stand beside him. Rafe took his left hand and placed it high on his own right thigh. Jas outlined it with a purple marker.

Realization flooded through him when Rafe placed Jesse's right hand on his left thigh.

"Rafe... Are you sure?"

"I told you. They mark the events in my life I never want to forget." His voice was husky, thick with emotion.

Jesse's voice was equally charged. "See? I told you we fit."

He watched as Jas laid the buzzing needles against caramel skin and began inking in the outline. It just exactly covered the faint marks of an almost-healed bruise.

"Are you two gonna share?"

It was Jesse's turn to blush furiously.

Born during one of the worst fires in L.A. history, PATRIC MICHAEL escaped to the foothills of the Cascade Range where the world is a lot more green, even in summer.

His wide-ranging and varied career, from ship building to making special effects movie props, has given him enough material for a lifetime of stories.

He constantly reinvents himself with each new thing he creates. Now, it is as a writer of what he loves to read, but only when he can convince the cat that his keyboard isn't the only place in the house to sleep.

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# Wanting More

Cari Z.

HE said his name was Mike. He had the nervous, giddy energy of a man who was lying, a man who knew he was doing something wrong but didn't care. He was in his mid-thirties, round-faced and handsome. He watched me on the pole and requested a private dance. I led him to a curtained room and sat him down in a chair, and then I moved for him. I guess calling it a dance might be a little incorrect. There was writhing, there was grinding, there was the discreet placement of hands to encourage him. After all, that was what I was supposed to do. I knew he'd take me home from the moment his eyes locked onto me in the front room. The lap dance just sealed the deal.

"Mike" did take me home. He had a nice car, a two-seater that indicated to me he wasn't a traditional family man. He lived in a gorgeous house in one of the suburbs of Denver, not too far from Capitol Hill and the club I worked at. Three stories high with tall glass windows and ivy covering the front, it looked like something out of an old British novel. I let him escort me inside, damp hands clutching mine as the door closed behind us. We began to kiss, him eagerly and me mirroring his reactions. Hands pawed me, climbed inside my tight leather pants—that took some real effort on his part—and before I knew it we were naked together. We hadn't even made it past the living room.

Mike sprawled back into a spacious white leather recliner and I straddled his lap, rubbing our groins together as he continued to squeeze me to him, taut with need and panting desire. He wanted me *now*; I felt it in his body and his short, inarticulate murmurs. He tried to press up into me at one point, but I stopped him.

"Condom," I murmured against his lips. "I have one here. Wait a moment...." Leaning back out of his embrace, I reached over toward my discarded jacket and the little foil packet in its pocket. As my fingers closed around it, I felt Mike's body stiffen into rigidity. The recliner

snapped back into an upright position, tossing me off him onto the floor and cracking my head against the edge of the coffee table at the same time. I lay there for a moment, dazed, as the voices started to fly.

“James....” Mike’s voice was quavering and high. “I thought you were still in Vancouver, the conference, it... why not?”

“Shut down early. I tried to call, but clearly you were otherwise occupied.” The new man’s voice was chilling. “Get your slut up and dressed.”

“My... right, yes....” Suddenly clothes were shoved into my hands and I was pulled to my feet and then pushed toward the door in a rush. “Honest to God, James, it isn’t what you think. He—”

“Stop.” New hands touched my shoulders and I found myself looking up at the hard, handsome face of James, I presumed. “He’s bleeding.” Was that the warmth I felt behind my ear? “And you can’t push him out into the weather like this, Liam, not looking like he does. For fuck’s sake.” He met my eyes again. “Down the hall to the left, second door, is a bathroom. Use it to clean yourself up and get dressed. Stay there until I come and get you.”

I nodded numbly. My head was painful and my heart had barely slowed its anxious, adrenalized pounding. I moved away from them and down the hall to the indicated bathroom, shutting myself in. Voices rose, not quite shouts, but I knew whatever was happening out there wasn’t pretty. And here I was locked in the bathroom. Shit.

I used a washcloth to wipe myself clean and dressed quickly, debating whether or not I should use my phone and call someone to come get me. Miles, my manager, was a cautious guy, and he didn’t like to get directly involved if at all possible. I could try calling Johnny, but he was undoubtedly doing business himself and wouldn’t appreciate an interruption. I didn’t have the cash for a cab. And there was no way I could call the cops, even if things did get bad.

I shelved the idea of using my phone and tended to the cut on my head instead. It wasn’t too bad, but the lump that was rising up with it made me glad I kept my hair jaw-length and not short. I washed the bloody strands in the sink and then pressed a gauze pad to the cut. I sat down on the toilet seat, held my head, and listened to the argument raging in the hall.

Mike—no, Liam—was shrill, crying and explaining and begging all in the same breath. James’s voice was lower, deep and hard, and as



cold as the ice hanging down from the windows outside. The fight went on for maybe ten minutes, and then there were stomping feet, the sound of a door upstairs slamming, and silence. I waited in tense anticipation. How was I going to get out of this? At least my head had stopped bleeding.

A few moments later, the doorknob on the bathroom wiggled. A knock sounded right after it. “Open the door.”

It was James. I didn’t want to antagonize him any further, so I unlocked the door and slowly pulled it open. He was right outside it, arms crossed. He looked me up and down slowly, lingering for a moment on the bloody cotton in my hand. “Is it serious?”

“No,” I replied, keeping my voice soft. I had been with difficult clients before and knew how to handle their rage. I had never been stared down by a client’s lover, however. This was one of the most uncomfortable moments of my entire life.

“Throw it away, then. I’m driving you back.”

What? “What?” I asked as my mouth caught up with my brain.

“I’m driving you back to your—” his mouth curled slightly, “establishment. Liam said he drove you out, and I doubt you’ve got a way to get back.”

“I could take a cab.” Actually I couldn’t, but I didn’t relish the idea of stepping into a car with a man who was obviously furious with me.

“My car is faster, and I need to go out anyway.” His face softened, just barely. “I’m not going to hurt you.”

I had heard that before, but I actually believed it coming from this guy. He looked respectable, your nicer-than-average businessman in a dark gray suit with a crisp white shirt undone at the collar. Dark, curling hairs emerged from the edge of the clean white cotton, and I would have stared longer if I thought I could get away with it. He was taller than me by almost a head, and his face, while handsome, could have been carved out of a granite block for all the emotion I saw in it. Not exactly the reaction I’d expected after he’d come home to find his lover with another man.

I didn’t say anything else, just grabbed my jacket and slipped it on. He handed me my small overnight bag—I had totally forgotten it in the heat of the moment—then led the way to the front door. I glanced around cautiously. Nothing broken, no evidence of a blow-up except for the crooked coffee table. Liam was nowhere to be seen.

James held the door for me and I walked out into the cold. The air stung my cut and I wasn't really dressed for winter, so I was happy to get into his car. It was another sports car, comfortable and expensive. I gave him directions to the club and sank back into the heated seat, keeping my eyes straight forward. He didn't say anything, just drove. Fast. We got there in fifteen minutes. He parked in front of the club and gestured toward it.

I unbuckled my seat belt and then paused. Guilt gnawed at me, which was strange because I wasn't the one who had cheated. I'd just been the instrument of the betrayal. "I'm sorry."

"I don't blame you." He gestured again. I took the hint and got out of the car. He drove away and left me standing there, completely bemused.

I went home after that. I lived within walking distance of the club and my shift was up anyway. Once I got home, I had a shower and set my alarm clock, then fell into bed. I wanted to fall right asleep, but my mind couldn't stop replaying the night's events. Not for Liam's sake, although I felt bad for him. I couldn't stop thinking about James.

What kind of person lived his life so logically? I knew what had happened wasn't my fault, but jilted lovers aren't renowned as the sort of people who let logic guide them through a crisis. I wouldn't have been so calm if it had been me. That was one of the reasons I didn't have a boyfriend. I felt guilty even thinking about cheating on someone I loved. Three more months, and then I'd graduate from culinary school and go to work as a chef. The money wouldn't be as good but I loved cooking. What I did now was just work.

Johnny had introduced me to the business. I was naïve and broke and lonely, and he was a friend in a dark hour. For a while he was more than a friend, but Johnny was the sort of guy who like to sample. We looked similar, both slender and fit and attractive, but he was dusky-skinned and exotically beautiful, whereas I was pale and sharp-featured. Enough people liked my look that I got by, but Johnny was the queen at the club, and he knew it.

He laughed when I told him about my evening the next day. "Oh my God, awkward moment!"

"Try paralyzing," I groaned. "The client was ready to shove me out into the snow, he was so scared."

"And then they had an argument?" Johnny raised one eyebrow and

grinned lasciviously. "A heart-wrenching, ear-piercing argument, full of accusations of broken promises? Do tell."

I threw a napkin at him. "You're such a drama queen."

"I know, but you love me anyway." He smirked at me. "Alex, you need to find yourself a daddy. Forget being a chef. Get a daddy and everything will be better. Little boys like us need daddies to enjoy the finer things in life."

"You'd know; you have three of them." Our club was visited by a lot of wealthier men, and Johnny was nothing if not charming.

"And I appreciate each and every one."

"Then why do you still work at the club?"

"Because I like it there," he shrugged. "Because I'm good at what I do. Because I like to be the center of attention."

"Someday," I said seriously, "you'll fall in love with someone and want to be only with them. Then things will change."

"Alex, you're not exactly the voice of experience here," Johnny replied dryly. "That's your dream, not mine. Besides, I'm already in love with myself. By the time I get overshadowed at the club I'll have a wealthy daddy who can give me all the pretty things I want and go somewhere else. Somewhere warm, like Maui." He fanned himself mockingly.

I laughed at him. "You probably will."

"I know I will. I just don't get why you won't." He leaned over and stroked my shining dark hair. "You're so lovely, Alex. You could have a life of ease if you just find the right guy to give it to you, instead of ruining yourself with hot stoves and sharp knives."

"I enjoy cooking," I reminded him pointedly. "As you well know. How was the veal parmesan?"

"Delicious. Now I have to go to the gym so I don't get fat. I don't understand why you aren't fat, the way you cook."

I shrugged. "The best part of cooking is having someone else appreciate it."

"Well, look no further than me. Maybe you can get a daddy through a restaurant. Someone who likes good food and cute asses."

"Oh, go to the gym."

I took classes in the afternoon and worked the club at night. Miles ran a pretty tight operation, and despite the fact that a lot of suspicions

floated around about his place, the cops never closed it down. All the sexual acts took place behind closed doors or curtains, and clients were encouraged to develop “relationships” with us and take us home. That led to tense situations occasionally, but the best money was in overnights. Miles was concerned for our welfare, and if we reported trouble from anyone he’d bar them from the club. I thought about mentioning Liam and James to him, but decided against it. It was very unlikely they’d be back.

It was a good thing I didn’t live in Vegas; I was a lousy gambler. About two weeks after the uncomfortable incident I had to eat my words. I was on stage dancing when I saw him enter the club. He sat down at the bar and ordered something, his eyes never leaving me. Him. James.

I didn’t know his last name, but I did know I’d been thinking about him for the past two weeks. I liked more dominant men, and he had pushed a few of my kinkier buttons when he’d ordered me around. I’d been too flustered at the time to appreciate it, but my subsequent daydreams more than made up for that. And now he was here, and he was looking at me.

It was late, and this was my last performance of the night. I decided to make it a little more enthusiastic than I’d been planning. I had on loose trousers, a black silk shirt and tie, and a fedora. The tie was already loosened, the shirt already undone. I strutted to the end of the stage and struck a pose while I got the tie off the rest of the way. I twined it around my body, sliding it back and forth between my thighs and up around my neck before tossing it to a regular, who caught it with a grin. I slid out of the shirt, running my hands across my chest and down my slender waist, and then started on the pants.

Some guys wear cowboy boots, some wear sneakers, some go barefoot. When you’re taking off all your clothes it doesn’t really matter, but having the wrong shoes on can break the spell. I looked fairly androgynous under the reddish lights, and when I turned my back to the crowd and bent over, slowly exposing my toned ass and legs as I slipped the pants off, my choice of footwear was revealed. High heels. Very high heels. I’m flexible enough to touch the floor with my fingertips in five-inch stilettos, and they made my legs look amazing. I straightened, my hands caressing my hairless body as I did, and the catcalls started coming.

Calling was good; it meant the guys were getting into it. I slung my

pants over my shoulder and cocked a hip suggestively, then tossed them into the back and swanned over to the pole. In nothing but a black fedora, stilettos, and a g-string, my skin glowed under the garish lights. I held onto the pole with my hands and bent my waist to a ninety-degree angle, thrust my hips back, then sinuously slid into an upright position. I rubbed myself against the pole, let my feet slip out from under me, and swung around in an easy turn.

The music was coming to a close. I wanted to let James know I'd seen him, single him out somehow, but he was sitting too far back for me to reach. But then, I did still have my hat. I crawled down the stage, feeling eager fingertips brush my thighs and shoulders as I passed, but I had eyes only for James. I stopped at the end of the stage, sat back on my heels, twirled my hat around on a finger, and then threw it to him. Song over, lights out, and more applause than I normally got for an act. I was always good, but this last dance I had really felt it.

I stood up and walked off the stage, waiting for offers to role in. One dance could be good for a few hours of work behind the curtains if the club was busy. It was busy, and the offers rolled in, but I waited. Maybe he would... fuck, why had he come here? It might have nothing to do with me. It probably didn't, and I needed a few more clients tonight to keep Miles happy. I was about to accept an offer from a regular when I got a message saying that the man at the bar wanted to buy me a drink.

A drink. It was a start. It was a bizarre, weird, crazy start. Miles wouldn't be satisfied with just a drink, but I could probably work it into something more. I hoped I could work it into something more. I put my shirt and pants back on and walked the long way back to the bar, to avoid getting waylaid by other customers. Jennifer let me through with a smile and pointed toward James, but I had memorized exactly where he was before. I went to him, wearing a pair of flip-flops now—the stilettos cramped my calves after a while.

He was running his fingers around the edge of my fedora, and he held it out toward me as I approached. "Lose something?"

"Thanks." I smiled and took the hat from him, setting it on the bar.

"What will you drink?"

"Just a Coke, please. I shouldn't drink while I'm working."

"Fair enough." Jennifer knew what I liked and set it down before James could order it. He looked at me speculatively, one elbow on the bar. I sipped my drink, trying not to seem nervous. I was nervous,

worried that he was here to chew me out and feeling attracted to him all in the same breath. He didn't say anything, so after a moment I spoke.

"I would have remembered if you'd ever been in here before," I said, not quite able to pull off coy. "Why stop by now?"

"I wanted to thank you."

Well, that threw me. I coughed a little on my sip of Coke. "Why?"

"Because Liam can be an incredibly thoughtless asshole, and I'm fairly sure this isn't the first time he's stepped out on me." He shrugged his broad shoulders, mostly nonchalant, but I could tell that he was bothered by it. "We've been together for years, and things just got too comfortable." He looked me up and down, smiling slightly. "And I certainly can't fault his taste. What's your name?"

"Cristof."

"That's not your name."

"It's my stage name. My real name's Alex." Holy shit, had I just let that slip? We used pseudonyms to preserve the professional distance. I'd barely spoken ten words to this guy and I'd already spilled my real name.

"Alex." He held out his hand. "James Fitzgerald."

"Nice to meet you." I shook his hand firmly. "Even if... well...."

"I know."

Jennifer coughed slightly. I knew that was my cue. "Shoot. I've got to get back to work." I let go of him reluctantly.

"Back up on stage?"

"No, that was my last dance for tonight, but I've got a few hours left on my shift, and...." I shrugged my shoulders.

"How are you going to spend them?"

"Lap dances, probably." He'd asked. "Despite how we met, I actually don't go home with many guys."

He smiled, like he could see right through me. I didn't know what he was seeing, but I hoped it was something he liked. "What do you charge?"

Oh, God yes. "It depends," I replied, trying to be casual. "Dances can be as short as a song or as long as a client wants. Then there are the extras...."

"What sort of extras?"

Time to turn on some charm. I reached my hand out and traced a

line across his thumb, then down into the valley between it and his index finger. “What I wear, how much I touch you, whether you get to touch me... the little things.”

He was getting aroused, I could tell that much. His face was still pretty inscrutable, but his groin registered something completely different. “How much for you, in what you’re wearing now plus the hat, hands included, and a quarter-hour of your time?”

What a businessman. Usually a long, grabby lap dance with me was eighty dollars, but I really wanted him to stay. “Fifty dollars. Do you want a private room?”

James smiled again, just barely. “The other option is what?”

“A curtain. People can’t see but they can hear. The private room is just the two of us.”

“Private,” he told me, and handed over a fifty-dollar bill.

“Okay, then.” I reached out and took his hand in a gentle hold. “Come back with me.”

He stood up and then put the fedora on my head, tilting it slightly to the side. He looked at me and nodded slightly. “Better.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I probably wouldn’t be able to get it out of my mind. I led him back to my room. All of the established dancers at the club had their own rooms, and where Johnny’s looked like a harem, full of velvet and pillows and incense, mine was a little more Spartan. There was a chair in the center of the room, comfortable but not so large I couldn’t straddle it. A loop of rope hung down from the ceiling just over the chair, high enough to be out of the client’s way. The walls were alternating wide black and white stripes, and music was pumped into the room via two tall, slender speakers in the corners. Large square mirrors decked out the side walls, so the client could get a different look at us if he wanted one. Cleaning supplies and a small clock were tucked discreetly behind a low table.

A new song was about to begin, so I gestured toward the chair. “Please sit.” James sat and watched me minutely as I made a few last-minute adjustments. I slid out of the flip-flops and pushed back the sleeves of the shirt, then moved toward him. I could have just jumped down and started grinding like I had with his boyfriend—his ex now, I guess—but I wanted to see more of him. I wanted to feel more. I stepped around him slowly, fingers trailing across his forearm, up his bicep, and swirling in a circle around his shoulder. He let me touch him, not looking

at me but straight forward. I stepped behind him, running both my hands up his shoulders and neck and into the edge of his short, dark hair. Some guys were fussy about their hair and I didn't want to break the mood, so I just skirted my fingers over the nape of his neck and the outsides of his ears. Every part of his body intrigued me, and I was pleased he was letting me explore.

I made my way around to the front again, my fingers itching to keep touching him, but he hadn't paid for that. He wanted me to dance for him. I smiled slyly at him, grabbed the rope above us, and lowered myself, very slowly, onto his thighs. I liked the rope. It helped me balance and display my body to its full effect all at once.

I brushed myself over against him, lightly, undulating like a wave. Finally James's hands reached out and began to undo my buttons. The feel of his fingers against my skin made me shiver, and by the time I was bared to the waist I was completely hard. I let go of the rope and the shirt slipped off my shoulders as I put more of my weight against him, moving my hands to his chest.

How long was it since I'd been with someone I actually wanted to touch? I was good at my work and I did enjoy men, but I'd never wanted any of my clients the way I wanted James right now. I wanted more than a dance; I wanted him to strip me down, force me onto my back, and take me hard, muffling my screams with a kiss. I wanted... fuck, I needed to focus if I was going to get through this without passing out.

I fingered his nipples through the fabric of his shirt. He touched mine as well, a slow smile coming to his face when he saw the piercings. He tugged on them, gently at first and then harder, and I bit my lower lip to keep from moaning. His eyes drank in everything about me, and I prayed that he liked what he was seeing. Eventually I had his shirt undone and I couldn't resist running my fingers through the dark, curling hairs of his chest. He closed his eyes for a moment when I scratched my fingers lightly through his pelt, and I felt the warmth of satisfaction flow inside of me. I was pleasing him. That was important.

How long had we been here? I'd lost track of the time, but it was probably at least fifteen minutes. Unfortunately I had to move things along. I stood up, letting the shirt fall away from me, and then turned around. I sat back and pressed the cleft of my ass against his groin, hard and then light, varying the pressure with the beat. Large hands reached out to cup my cheeks, and when he squeezed me there the heat shot



straight to my cock, straining it against the g-string. I did moan this time; I couldn't help it. James reached around me to the pants' simple clasp, undid it, and pushed them away. I let them fall to my feet, anxious to feel his hands on my bare flesh. Fingers traced the outline of the g-string, flaring across my hips and down into my crevice as his other hand ran up and down my spine.

"Turn around," he told me. His voice was husky and low. I spun around and leaned into him again, barely keeping from falling into his lap, my wrists wrapped tightly in the rope. He circled my waist with his arms and pulled me down further. Our cocks rubbed against each other, and the fabric might as well not have been there. "Ride me," he commanded. I couldn't have said no. We had progressed beyond a lap dance at this point. I let go and ground our cocks together, my hands going behind his head to clasp his neck. The sensations were incredible and the feel of his hands around my waist, pulling me closer into his warmth and his sharp, clean scent, intoxicated me. Then he reached up and gave a sudden, sharp twist to one of my nipple rings.

I lost it. I came, gasping and shuddering as I rocked against his body, my fingernails digging into the base of his skull. My seed escaped the g-string, flowing across both our thighs and his abdomen. I had never come like this before. I had never come with a client like this, just from rubbing, no mouth, no penetration.... It consumed me, and for a long moment I just leaned against him, getting my breath back and recovering from the consuming pleasure. When I finally opened my eyes I was looking directly into his face. James looked satisfied, eyes heavy-lidded like a cat's. "You made a mess," he pointed out with a purr.

I glanced down and blushed. "I'm sorry. I didn't.... I'll clean it up." I reached for a washcloth.

"Not with that." His words stopped me in my tracks. "With your mouth."

He wanted me to lick my cum off of him? He wasn't paying enough for that. Then again, I wasn't supposed to have come, either. And I really, really wanted to do this for him....

The hell with it. If I didn't make my quota tonight I didn't make it. I wanted this. I slid back out of his lap, coming to my knees before him. He spread his legs and I slid between them, then leaned in and began to lick my semen away. I liked the taste of myself, and being in such close proximity to his groin hammered home the fact that James hadn't come.

Not yet. I laved my tongue across his bare stomach, tracing the treasure trail of hairs until I got to his fly. "Please...."

"Please what?"

What was I doing? "Please let me taste you."

"You can ask more politely than that," he told me. His eyes had gone from satisfied to smoldering.

"Please, sir." I was blushing but didn't care. "Please, may I taste you, sir?"

"Very well. Take it out." An order had never been so speedily obeyed. I wrenched open his fly and freed his cock. It was beautiful. Large and long, probably eight inches and as thick around as my wrist. The head was glistening with precum and I nuzzled it with my face for a moment, inhaling his scent, and then licked slowly up the shaft before taking him into my mouth.

He was big. It took a while, but I was desperate to please him and eventually worked the whole of his length into my mouth and a little ways down my throat. I held him there and hummed, and James gasped. "Alex...." He grabbed the fedora and tossed it to the floor. His hands wove into my hair and moved me, up and down, slowly and steadily until I felt him tighten beneath me, and then he was pressing me down hard enough to gag me as he shot down my throat. He came in thick, heavy bursts and I swallowed it all, only regretting that I didn't get to taste more of it. Eventually he let me go and I sat back, inhaling deeply. I felt sated, physically and emotionally, and leaned my head against his knee. We sat together in silence for a while before he stirred, a now-gentle hand mussing my hair. "Sleeping?"

"No, sir."

"Call me James now."

"James." I rubbed my face against his thigh for a moment and then reluctantly pulled away. "Here." I passed him a washcloth. "Just in case I missed a spot."

He raised an eyebrow but took it anyway. I used the time to clean myself up and slip back into my clothes. My crotch was still wet but I liked the warm, slightly damp feeling. When I turned back to him he was standing, and I suddenly felt a little shy. I could only guess at what he thought of me now. He looked pleased, though.

"Here." He passed me a hundred-dollar bill and I took it uneasily. I

hadn't brought him back with the intention of charging him any more than I already had.

"You don't have to give me this. I wanted to do...." Everything? More? "What we did."

"And it was all well done," he said agreeably. "You're very good at your job."

The praise should have made me happy, but instead it just made me feel like a whore. I wanted to be more than a whore to James, but I couldn't articulate it. After all, first impressions last forever. Instead I just said, "Thank you."

James looked at me for a long moment, eyes fixed on my face, before turning toward the door. Oh God, this was it? I moved a little closer to him and he paused. "Yes?"

I couldn't think of anything to say. I finally settled on, "Drive safely."

"I will."

"And come back." That slipped out before I could stop it. He didn't say anything, just smiled slightly and walked away.

Well, fuck. It was a good thing I'd made my quota. There was no way I'd be able to concentrate for the rest of my shift. I paid Miles and walked home, shivering all the way. I fell into bed and didn't wake up until I was already late for my first class.

I wanted James to come back. I wanted him to watch me dance, to ask for me, to command me. I wanted his cock down my throat and inside my ass. I wanted to please him. I couldn't tell Johnny how I felt; he could play a submissive but was really a dominant, and didn't understand the deep sense of pleasure I got out of obedience. He did get that I had the hots for James, and heartily approved.

"Very twisted, Alex. I like it."

"I don't want him because of his ex," I sighed. "I don't want to live in some sort of sordid soap opera like you do, man."

"But the intrigue! The passion! The grandeur!" Johnny flung his arms wide. "What's not to like?"

"How about the crying, the bitching, the foul tempers and all the fighting?"

"Spice of life, Alex. Spice of life."

I could handle a little spice if it meant James coming back, but he

didn't. One night passed, then two, then a whole week. Business was brisk but I didn't get the one man I wanted. I dreamed about him; hell, I had wet dreams about him. But he didn't come back.

I could have slapped myself for getting upset about it. He'd wanted to check me out, see what his ex had almost had, get an experience out of it. There was nothing binding us together but a steamy backroom session and a hurtful betrayal, and I could guess which one weighed more heavily on his mind. Hell, for all I knew he and Mike—no, Liam, dammit—were back together and happy as clams. Good for them.

I almost believed in my own indifference until I saw him again. Actually, I heard from him first. I'd finished my last dance of the evening an hour earlier, and my shift was coming to a close. Mark, one of the bouncers, was waiting for me outside my private room. "Some guy at the bar wants to buy you a drink, Cristof."

My heart instantly started beating faster. "Thanks. I'll be right there." Mark walked away and left me suddenly sweating, half filled with anxiety and half with hope. It had to be James. Other guys occasionally bought me drinks, but it had to be James tonight. I hurriedly checked myself from all angles in the mirror in my room. My shirt was midnight blue tonight, but the rest of the outfit was the same. My lips were a little darker than usual but that couldn't be helped; I had worn lipstick for my last lap dance (his wife's, he'd told me) and it had stained them a little. I put the fedora on, adjusted it slightly to the side, and then took the long way through to the bar. Jennifer saw me and smiled, and pointed me toward—yes, James!

I was grinning as I sat down. I couldn't help it. He looked like he had the first time we met, in a gray suit and bright white shirt. He was smiling this time, though. My heart skipped a little as I considered that I had put that smile there. He was smiling for me, and we hadn't even done anything yet. Jennifer handed me a Coke and I sipped to give myself a little time to recover my voice. "You were gone for a while."

"Business trip." He shrugged. "Did you expect to see me every night?"

Well, if that wasn't a loaded question. "Just hoped," I confessed.

A strange look crossed over his face, a combination of pleasure and reluctance that I couldn't pin down. It was gone in an instant, leaving just the pleasure. "Really. What were you hoping we'd do?"

My mouth had gone dry again, but I didn't stop to drink. I looked

at him under lowered lashes and whispered, “Whatever you want.”

“You like to be told what to do.” It wasn’t a question, but I nodded anyway. “How much to bring you home for the night?”

Oh, boy. This could get complicated. I wanted it, though. I wanted to go with him so badly. How much to charge...? “Five hundred dollars.” I said it and hoped he wouldn’t flinch. He didn’t even blink.

“You charged Liam more.”

It figured he’d know that. “Yes.”

“Why less to go home with me?”

Why all the bloody questions? I had to answer, though. “I want to go with you.”

“Good.” He stood up. “Finish your drink and tell whomever you need to know.”

I downed the rest of the Coke, then went back through the bar and around to the locker room. I grabbed my jacket and overnight bag and stopped by Miles’s office to fill him in, then returned to James.

He escorted me out to his car, one hand resting possessively on the small of my back. I liked the feeling of it there. We walked out to his BMW and he opened the door for me, then got in and started the engine. We drove off toward his place, and I tried to conceal my nervousness. I was going home with the man of my dreams. What could go wrong? What couldn’t? What did he want? What should I do?

“Tell me up front what you’ll allow,” James said.

“I’m not really into pain,” I confessed. “A little is fine, but nothing that leaves a permanent mark. I like to be told what to do.” I felt my cock rise slightly as I said, “I like being restrained.”

That got a response. His breath hitched slightly and he glanced over at me, and then grinned. “Good. Anything apart from pain that you don’t like?”

“Messes.” That word covered a whole lot of things, but he nodded.

“Neither do I.”

That was it until we got back to his house. It looked the same as it had before, except this time the very top windows were glowing with light. Probably the bedroom I had never seen. James opened my door and led me into the house. We took our shoes off at the door, and I took the opportunity to glance around. It looked the same as it had before, but there was a slightly more sterile quality to the place now. Before it had

been a home. Now the first floor looked barely used.

“Upstairs.” James placed his hand on my back again and guided me up to his room. The carpet was smooth and thick under my bare feet. His bedroom was at the end of the hall, the door cracked just enough to let a sliver of light show. I entered and stopped just inside.

The room was beautiful. Rich, chocolate-brown walls were set off by the light trim and champagne-colored carpet. The bed was king-sized, and the comforter on top of it was the red of a fine, dark wine. The bed had four huge posts, and attached to each one was a cuff, softly lined and waiting. Another pair of cuffs dangled from a chain screwed in to the ceiling, and hung just over the center of the bed. There was also a length of soft black rope. A few closed doors probably led into a closet and the bathroom, but I only had eyes for the bed.

“Still comfortable?” James asked quietly. I could only nod my head. “Good.” He took the bag out of my hand and dropped it on the floor beside the bed. “Go into the bathroom.” He pointed at the closer door. “Shower and make sure you’re totally clean. Dry yourself off and come back in ten minutes, completely naked. Go.” I went.

Several of my clients preferred me to shower before we had sex. They liked to be the only ones on my skin, and personally I liked getting the chance to be completely clean for James. His bathroom was immense, a full Jacuzzi tub with a smaller shower off to the side. The vanity for two could have been a vanity for six, and stretched along the entire wall. Soft light suffused the room, calming and relaxing.

I turned the shower on and got inside. The soap smelled like James, and I lathered up and scrubbed myself from head to toe, working fast but thoroughly. I washed my hair, rinsed, and got out, drying myself with thick, dark towels.

Had it been ten minutes? Would I be too early if I went out now? Or was I already too late? Unease spurred me to open the door and reenter the bedroom. James was standing in the middle of the room, waiting for me. “Nine minutes,” he said. “Good.”

His feet were bare and his jacket was off, but other than that he was still completely dressed. I felt totally exposed under his steady gaze, all of the allure that came with my outfits and the stage and the dark, private rooms gone. I was laid bare, and I was trembling.

“Come here.” I walked over to him, my eyes on his chest. “Turn around.” I turned, showing him my back. “Put your hands behind you

and cross your wrists.” I did, and soon smooth, slick rope was twining around my arms, binding me at the wrists and pulling my elbows back and close together. “Not too tight?”

“It’s fine,” I murmured.

“Good. Turn around and kneel.”

I faced him and got down on my knees. His hands brushed through my hair and I melted into his touch. “James....”

“Sir now, Alex.”

“Yes, sir.” I loved calling him sir.

“What do you want, Alex?”

“To please you, sir. However you want.” He smiled at me and then sat down on the edge of his bed, unfastening his belt as he went. He freed his erection and stroked it gently, eyes on me. My eyes were on his cock. Just looking at it made my mouth begin to water. I was desperate to go down on him.

“Come here,” he told me after a moment. I shuffled over on my knees, feeling awkward, but he seemed to enjoy the view. I knelt in front of him, brushing his legs with my chest. I watched his hand work up and down his length, stroking slowly, then faster, then slow again. I wanted to be his hand. I wanted his hands on me and my mouth on him, sucking him deep. I moaned without realizing it.

“You want this.” It wasn’t phrased as a question, but I answered it like one.

“Yes,” I whispered, my eyes not moving from his cock.

“Take it, then.”

Oh, thank God. He parted his knees and I moved between them and then leaned into his groin. His smell and the hot, smooth feel of his flesh against my face were intoxicating, and I knew he would taste even better. I lowered my mouth over his cock and licked the head, drinking up the clear, sweet essence that had gathered there. James’s hands found my hair again, and he worked his fingers into the damp, clean strands slowly, scratching his nails across my scalp in time with the movements of my head.

Not having my hands free was making things more difficult than I’d thought. It wasn’t just that I couldn’t hold him in place, or work more than one piece of him at once. My shoulders were drawn back so tightly that my elbows were almost touching, and a subtle burn was beginning

to tell between my scapulae. None of which deterred me, but it did make my efforts a bit more frantic. I wanted to taste all of him, touch all of him, and I couldn't do it fast enough. I sank deep down onto his cock and then pulled up again, slowly stroking him with my tongue and encircling the dripping head, grazing him gently with my teeth, and then pulling away. I nibbled down the shaft until I got to his balls, kissed them, licked them, and then sucked the left one into my mouth.

James groaned quietly, and I took it as a sign of encouragement. I moved my mouth between the two, probing them with my tongue, then released them and moved quickly back up his cock, swallowing more of his precum as I went. James let me continue for another few minutes before pulling me away, gripping my hair tightly, and jerking me backward off of him. We both were breathing heavily, and my lips felt slightly swollen, my tongue slightly sore, and my shoulders and back more than slightly sore. I looked up at him and watched him rein in an impending orgasm.

“Turn around.”

I didn't want to turn around, I wanted to take him back into my mouth and suck him off, getting another taste of that essence that I craved, but I could only obey. “Yes, sir.” I shifted around on my knees, which I knew were probably red now, and turned away from him. I felt his fingers trail over my shoulders, dip between my arms, and trace a little ways down my spine. In places the skin was almost numb, but his touch still seared me. Then he suddenly released the knots, and the tension in my back melted away in a wave of heat as my shoulders were freed. I sighed with relief, and then with pleasure as James's hands massaged my tight muscles.

After a moment he let go. “Stand up and get onto the bed. Kneel and face the headboard.”

“Yes, sir.” I stood, slowly, a little achy but not bad. I turned around and watched him stand, one hand beginning to unbutton his shirt. I wanted to undress him, but that wasn't in his orders. Instead I brushed by him, gaze lowered, and crawled to the center of the crimson comforter, kneeling more comfortably now. James stripped quickly and moved onto the bed. He pulled the cuffs to my feet and slipped them around my slender ankles, locking my legs into place. I had to spread my knees a bit, but I could still sit easily. James closed in tight behind me, running his hands down my arms. The feeling of him pressed nude against my



body shot straight to my groin, and my already hard erection nearly touched my stomach. I leaned back against him, hands seeking him out, but he grabbed my wrists and raised them over my head. I moaned with disappointment but let him fasten my hands in the cuffs.

“I’m going to explore you,” James murmured into my ear, his hands caressing my chest. “Don’t come while I do. If you have to ask me to stop, ask, but don’t come. I’m saving that for later.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good.” He kissed the back of my neck, then downward, hands following in the wake of his mouth. I focused on what he was doing to me, how incredible it made me feel. Every touch made me shiver, every swipe of his tongue and hint of his teeth sent me higher.

I did have to stop him, several times. When his hand first gripped my cock, I asked him to stop. He didn’t let go but he didn’t move either, holding me firmly. I worked on my breathing, trying to slow things down. After a minute or so I felt capable of letting him continue without coming, but the urge lurked just beneath the skin.

I stopped him when he took me into his mouth. He was good, too good, and there was no way I’d be able to hold back for long. He understood and smiled at me, then moved behind me again. I didn’t stop him when his finger touched my hole, but I did when his tongue replaced it. “Stop,” I whimpered. “Please.” The urge was growing and growing, filling me and replacing all conscious thought with the need to come.

James pulled back, leaving me shuddering and jerking hard on my arms to give me something else to focus on, a way to stem the flow. It wasn’t going to work, and James knew it. He smacked my ass, hard. It jolted me out of my desperation and gave my overworked nerves something else to focus on. I didn’t get off on spanking usually, but I was definitely appreciative of it right now.

“Better?” James asked. I could hear the grin in his voice.

“Yes,” I moaned. “No. Sir....”

“Soon, baby.” He kissed the point of my shoulder and pulled away again. He left the bed for a moment but returned quickly. He was close to me but not touching, not until one of his fingers snaked between my cheeks and against my hole, slick with lube. I relaxed and he pressed inside of me.

“Yesss...,” I hissed. It felt so good, but I wanted more. After a moment another finger joined it, stretching me in preparation for him,

and I begged him to stop. He did, smacking my butt again to calm me down. His words were heated, though.

“I wanted you from the moment I saw you,” he whispered into my ear. “Straddling Liam in that chair. I was furious, and I still wanted you. I couldn’t get you out of my head.”

“I want you too.” As if he didn’t know. “I want you now.”

“Good.” He pulled his fingers out of me. I heard him open the package and put the condom on, and then he was against me again, his tip thrusting up into me. I let him in, I welcomed him in, and he filled me with his cock, stretching me further than I was used to. I loved it. I sat back onto his lap, taking him to the root, and his harsh groan was the best praise I could imagine.

We sat still for a moment. His arms were around my waist, his face buried in the crook of my neck. When his hands lowered to my hips I began to move, lifting myself up slightly and then falling again. He pressed up against me, thrusting me higher and pulling me down harder. His hands were everywhere except my cock, but I didn’t need them there. I was going to come soon, without him even touching me.

“Stop!” I gasped. “I’m going to... I need to...”

“Come for me,” James whispered, beating himself even harder into me. I rose, I fell, rose and fell, and when I rose high enough his crown scraped my prostate. A sharp, tingling burst spread out from inside the channel, sweeping the rest of me up into the longest, hardest orgasm of my life. I cried out, shooting my seed across the crimson bed and pulsing even after there was nothing left to come out, shaking with the intensely pleasurable sensations that still coursed through me.

I gripped James like a vise. As soon as I relaxed some he came as well, spilling into the condom while he hauled me down against him, as tight as we could get. I was still dripping a little, and our thighs glistened with the last spurts of my release as he cradled me back into him, his fierce hold relaxing slowly. I rested against him, trying to bring my breathing back under control, but I had nearly blacked out. I felt totally limp.

He undid the cuffs, saving my arms for last, then laid me down on the bed and disappeared for a moment. When he came back he cleaned me up, soothing my heated skin with a cool washcloth and wiping off my legs and his comforter. And his wall. Damn, that had been an intense orgasm. And fuck it all, he was paying for this; why was he taking care

of me? I moved to get up, but he pressed me back down. “Relax, Alex.”

“Yes, sir.”

He chuckled. “Just James now, babe.” He put the washcloth into a nearby hamper, pulled back the comforter and top sheet, and climbed into bed with me. He wrapped me in his arms and kissed my temple. I turned my face and captured his mouth with mine, sighing with pleasure.

“That was perfect,” I told him with a smile.

“Get some sleep now.” He pulled back a little ways and turned off the light, then settled against his pillow and shut his eyes. I sighed internally. Lots of guys pulled away after the act. Some men who took me home put me into their spare bedroom to sleep, and a few shunted me to the couch or went there themselves. I hadn’t thought this would be an issue with James, but... I closed my eyes and quickly fell asleep, exhausted and satisfied.

I woke up before James the next morning. He was sleeping soundly, one arm beneath his head. I lay there and looked at him for a while, forcing myself not to trace the lines of his face, so much more relaxed while he was sleeping. After a few minutes I got up and walked to the bathroom, taking my overnight bag with me. I cleaned up quietly, got dressed in a soft blue T-shirt and jeans, and made my way downstairs to his spacious kitchen.

My stomach growled. I hadn’t eaten much yesterday, and it was almost eight now. James would surely be hungry when he woke up. I browsed the contents of his fridge, pulled a few things out, and settled down to making us breakfast.

James came down just as the French toast was finishing up. He was wearing a dark silk robe, undone so that I could see the boxers beneath it. He looked a little puzzled at first.

“Good morning,” I said with a grin. “I hope you’re hungry.”

“You cook too?” he remarked as he sat down on a barstool.

“I love cooking.” I dished out the vanilla French toast, added bacon and a small carafe of raspberry maple syrup to his plate and brought it over to him. I set down his knife and fork and added a glass of orange juice. “And when I saw the raspberries I couldn’t resist. I hope you don’t mind.”

“It smells amazing.” He cut a small bite and put it into his mouth, then closed his eyes for a moment before swallowing. “And it tastes even

better.”

“Try the syrup,” I advised, getting my own plate and joining him. We ate in companionable silence for a while. Damn, he was right. It tasted incredible. It was funny, but I didn’t actually eat my own food very often. I cooked for Johnny, I cooked in school, yet I lived off of canned soup and toast. I needed to indulge more.

James finished before I did and watched me finish, a faint smile on his face. Once I was done he asked, “How much to keep you here another day?”

Immediately my face flushed. I was surprised and pleased that he wanted me to stay, but I needed to come off as professional. “For the day, or for another night as well?”

“Both.”

I opened my mouth, but then the phone rang. James looked at it, annoyed. “Hang on.” He stood up and grabbed the phone off the receiver. “Yes?” He was silent for a moment. “Morning, Liam.” He glanced at me and then walked out of the kitchen and back up the stairs.

“Fuck,” I muttered under my breath. Worst possible time for the ex to call. I washed the dishes by hand, glancing behind me to see if James was coming back down, but there was no sign of him. When I finished cleaning I went out into the living room, sat down by the tremendous glass windows, and watched the snow come down. The flakes were tiny but there were lots of them, and suddenly I felt cold. I was turning back to grab a sweater out of my bag when James came back downstairs. He was fully dressed now.

“Sorry about that. We’ll have to reschedule for another time.”

Why? “I understand,” was all I said.

“Here.” He handed me six hundred-dollar bills.

“That’s too much.”

His eyes were smiling. “The extra is to keep you from being too annoyed with me.”

I smiled despite myself. “I’m not that annoyed.”

“Best to make sure.” He leaned in and kissed me, cupping the back of my head. “Come on; I’ll take you back.”

I wouldn’t let him leave me at the club before telling me when I’d see him again. “Since we have to reschedule and all.”

“Next weekend.”

My face fell. “That long?”

“Business trip. It just came up.” That was all he said and I knew better than to push.

“Next Friday.”

“Saturday. I get in Friday night.”

“Then come here. I’ll help you unwind,” I persuaded.

“Fine, Friday. Imp.” We kissed again, and then I left the warmth of his presence and stepped out into the snow. He waited for me to get inside before driving away.

James and I developed a pattern, an unspoken commitment. I stopped going home with other men. It annoyed Miles, but he couldn’t complain because I was easily paying my share. I still danced, I still took people to the back, I still gave them blowjobs, but no one else got to fuck me now. James consumed my weekends. He’d come and get me Friday night, we’d stay together Saturday and I wouldn’t leave until late on Sunday. I cooked or he ordered takeout, and we hardly set foot outdoors. Good thing I liked being a homebody.

I learned more about him. James was a lawyer—no surprise there—but he specialized in environmental law. He’d spent five years in New Zealand after graduating from Stanford, had a sister who was also a lawyer and lived in New York, and owned a very successful consulting business with Liam that he poured his energy into.

He asked few questions about me. I wanted to open up to him, but he didn’t seem to want it to be a two-way street. We weren’t to a point where I felt like I could ask him about our relationship; hell, we might never get there. But I had some hopes in that direction as well.

I was graduating from culinary school. I already had a job lined up at a high-end restaurant downtown. The money wasn’t as good as what I was making now, not even close, but most of what I made now went to paying for my education. Once I was out of school, my expenses would go way down. Naturally, Johnny thought I was nuts.

“It’s stupid,” he insisted over coffee one morning. “You could live way more comfortably for less work if you’d just keep it up at the club. And what about hanging out with your daddy? Your weekends will be consumed with work now.”

I rolled my eyes. “No they won’t, man. I’m working weeknights, not weekends. And I’m tired of the club. I want something more stable.”

“You want James.” Johnny’s dark eyes glinted slyly. “Can’t blame you, Alex. He is a sexy devil for an older guy. Still very yummy. I give him full marks for tastiness.”

“I’m so glad he meets with your approval, but I don’t want him for a daddy.”

“Alex.” Johnny cast his eyes heavenward as if asking God ‘Why?’ “That’s fucking ridiculous. You’re beautiful and desirable and hot. You deserve a daddy. If you were a woman, men would be falling all over themselves to get you whatever you wanted. What you’ve got is even better, though! Yummy James, the handsome and wealthy lawyer, who treats you well and just wants you to fuck him and cook for him. What’s not to love about that scenario?”

“I don’t want to be paid for sex. I don’t want to be bribed to keep him company. I just want to be with him, on equal terms.”

“Uh-huh.” There was pity in Johnny’s eyes. “You’re too idealistic for your own good, you know that?”

“Whatever.” I poured him another cup of coffee. “Ready to help me move?”

“I’m ready to hold the door for the big burly moving men and ooh and ahh over their muscles.”

“What I own won’t fill a U-Haul, Johnny. Off your ass. Let’s go.”

I was leaving the apartment we shared. It was a really nice place, and there was no way I’d be able to afford it for a while after switching jobs. Johnny wasn’t thrilled but he understood, and understood why I refused to let him make up the difference. I needed to do things on my own. I wanted to be successful in my new career. I wanted a different life, and I wanted... well, James, but I was a little out of luck there. He’d been gone on a trip to Indonesia for the past three weeks, looking into something for a corporate client. He’d already had to extend his trip twice, and his phone calls at this point were basically, “I’ve no idea when I’ll be back.”

I missed him terribly. In the few months we’d been seeing each other, this was the longest we’d ever been apart. I’m sure it hit me harder than it hit him, but my need to see him was so strong it hurt. I wanted him back. I wanted to be in his arms and under his body and filled with him. I wanted to cook him breakfast and read the paper with him and go to ball games together. He didn’t know I was graduating soon. I’d mentioned that I took cooking classes, but not that I was planning on

being a professional chef. He knew I roomed with Johnny, but not that I was moving to a new place. He probably didn't know I loved him, not because I wasn't willing to say it, but because he didn't seem comfortable with the idea. I understood. He'd been with Liam for nearly ten years. Maybe he saw me as a rebound. Better that than just a whore.

I did most of the moving, burning off my excess energy hauling my stuff out to the truck. Really, there wasn't much. The nicest thing I owned was a laptop, and there was no furniture but my futon. My new studio apartment wasn't very big, but it still loomed pretty empty once we'd brought everything in.

"Pathetic," Johnny sighed. "I'm buying you a dining room set. This is just too pathetic."

"Don't buy me anything," I told him sternly. "I'll get some more things soon."

"If James saw this, he would kick your ass. Why don't you just move in with him?"

"Because we're not there yet."

"Well, get there. Fast."

James came back that Friday. It was a surprise, seeing him in the club; he hadn't called me. I wasn't busy and I ran over to him, grabbing his shoulders and pulling myself up for a kiss. "Finally," I murmured against his lips.

"Someone missed me, then," he said with a grin as he held me.

"Someone definitely did. Three weeks is too damn long."

"I agree," he said. We sat down together at the bar. "Next time you should come with me."

"To Indonesia?" I laughed. "I don't know; I'm antsy about needles. I hear you need lots of vaccinations to travel there." James had told me about it before he left.

"You couldn't be as bad as Liam."

Oh, yeah. This had been a joint James/Liam company trip. I was still sorting out how I felt about that. "I hope he took it okay."

"He's staying there for the rest of the month." James took a sip of his water. "There's still a lot of work to do." He looked at me. "I am serious about bringing you with me next time, though."

"Oh." Oh. Well. That was great, but... James was looking at me carefully.

“You wouldn’t lose any revenue. I’d cover all your expenses and pay for your time.”

Damn it, that wasn’t how I wanted him to look at things. “It isn’t that.... Well, it is, a little, but....”

“The idea of spending that much time with just one man doesn’t appeal?”

Why did he jump to that conclusion? “No, that’s not it at all! I love spending time with you. It’s just that I’m not going to be working here much longer anyway, and my new job won’t give me the time off.”

James narrowed his eyes a little. “You never mentioned a new job to me.”

“You never asked!” I replied in exasperation.

“So, you were just going to disappear and never mind letting me know what was going on?”

“No! I wanted to tell you, and I’m telling you now!” I glanced around. This was hardly the venue I would have chosen to bare my soul in, but it would have to do. James looked upset and I hated seeing it, I hated being the cause. “I don’t want to keep seeing you the way we have been. For money, I mean.”

“Really.” His voice was cold. “What else can I give you?”

“I don’t want you to give me anything. That’s one of the reasons I’m changing jobs. I don’t want to be another expense to you.” His expression was like stone now, like I’d seen it when he’d walked in on me and Liam, and it chilled me. Why couldn’t I be more eloquent? Why couldn’t I get to the point? “What I mean is—”

“We’re done.”

“No!” God, no! “No, it isn’t that. I don’t want that! I love being with you.”

“Fine words. You’ve always been sweet with those.”

“Damn it, James, I don’t want to be just a whore to you.”

“What else did you think you could be?”

His words, clipped and sarcastic, cut through me like a knife. I drew back a little, mouth open, just staring at him. He looked tired. He looked stern. He looked absolutely serious. Fuck me, I’d just lost him.

I didn’t want him to be my daddy; I wanted him to be my partner. I wanted to tell him I loved him, but I couldn’t now. I couldn’t say anything. And I couldn’t stay here, because if I did I was going to break



down into tears and make an idiot of myself. I stood up silently and turned to go. James didn't stop me. I walked away to the back, ignored Johnny's raised eyebrow as I passed him, changed and left. Miles would be upset, but I'd pay him his share from my savings.

I didn't live within easy walking distance of the club anymore, but it was almost summer now and the evening was warm. My shoes were comfortable. There were no busses and I didn't really want to wait for a taxi. So I walked. Once I got home I collapsed onto my futon, unable to sleep but unable to stay standing, and cried against my pillow. I'd let dreams get the better of me, and I was paying for it now.

Hours passed. It was getting close to noon by the time I heard the knock at the door, and I still hadn't slept. I pushed tiredly off the thin mattress and made my way to the door. Probably Johnny wanting to know what the hell was going on. I opened it up, rubbing one red eye....

It was James. He was wearing the same dark suit he'd been in at the club, and looked as though he hadn't slept a wink either. I froze under his gaze, unsure what to say or do. Finally I croaked, "Hi."

"May I come in?"

"Sure, yes." I moved out of the way and let him inside. He glanced around the small, barren apartment, then back at me. I flushed under his scrutiny. "New place," I said a little defensively. "Um, sit down." I gestured to the futon. "I'm sorry it's a mess—"

"You need to stop apologizing to me," James said firmly. "I'm the one who's sorry, Alex. I didn't understand what you were trying to say to me last night."

How did he figure it out, then? James read the question in my face. "Johnny pulled me aside after you left. He told me you were going to be a chef, that you'd been planning all this for months and that if I'd bothered to talk to you I'd know it as well. Then he called me a fucking idiot."

"I'm sorry about that."

"Don't be. He's right." James moved over to my side, never taking his eyes from mine. "I can be very obtuse. It's one of the things Liam hated about me, my inability to understand what other people need. I didn't learn from him. You told me I meant something to you in a thousand ways, and I ignored them because that felt safer."

"I never told you I loved you."

“You gave me everything I wanted in bed without question and you made it better without trying. You cooked me breakfast. You gave me homemade chocolates for Valentine’s Day, for god’s sake.” James touched my face gently. “I didn’t think I was ready for a relationship. I wanted to be safe. So I paid you, and kept you at arm’s length, and hoped I wouldn’t fall for you. But I already have.” He took a deep breath. “I want you to be with me. Not as a paid companion, but as my lover. As my friend. As my partner. I love you, Alex. Please tell me I can fix this.”

I didn’t feel like I could speak. If I tried I’d just break down, and neither of us needed that right now. Instead I drew James into my arms, winding my fingers through his soft, short hair as I pulled him into a kiss. He wrapped his arms around my waist and held me close, pressing our bodies together as the kiss deepened. I opened my lips and let his tongue inside, mimicking its thrust involuntarily with my hips. I wanted him to consume me, to hold me and burn all my frustration and pain away with his need for me. James needed me. He loved me. I could feel it in the tremble of his arms, hear it in the faint, breathless groan emerging from his throat as we embraced. I was loved, and I was happy. Deliriously happy to be with him.

We had to pull apart eventually; it was getting difficult to breathe and even harder to keep from fucking right there in the middle of my tiny living room. James held me tightly, as though he could draw me inside of him. “Will you stay with me?” he asked finally. “I want my house to be a home again. It doesn’t feel right without you there.”

“Well...” I pretended to consider it for a moment. “You do have a much nicer kitchen.”

James laughed. “And a much nicer bed. Which, by the way, I can’t wait to get you into.”

My tiredness had melted away with our kiss, and the prospect of being in bed with him gave me a surge of energy. I glanced around the apartment. “I’m going to kiss my deposit goodbye for breaking the lease.”

“Let them have it. I want you with me.”

“I do too.” I stood up, pulling James with me, and kissed him again, hard enough to leave him grinning and breathless. “Let’s go home.”

CARI Z is a Colorado girl who loves snow and sunshine. She and her husband are living abroad currently, and trying to feel good about taking showers with nothing more than a bucket of water, soap and a handy ladle. She's trying hard not to envy you right now.

# *The Cowboy and the Movie Star*

Kate Roman

“WE’RE doing what?” Jake Ryder stared at his employer in disbelief. “Kelly, tell me you didn’t just say ‘making a gay porno’.”

“Jake, understand me, we’re not ‘making a gay porno’.” Kelly Williams, tall and heavyset, ran a hand over his square jaw. “I’ve rented the place to Mantastic Films for a week.” Jake opened his mouth again and Kelly raised his hand. “No, listen to me,” he said, pursing his lips. “I’ve got to make the place pay. Otherwise—well, otherwise I’ll have to sell up, go back to the city.” He looked at the cowboy. “Neither of us wants that. I need you to give me a break here, Jake.” His expression was almost pleading.

Jake sighed and nodded.

When old man Williams died, Jake had thought for sure his city-slicker kid would sell the Lazy R and he’d be out of a job. Instead, Kelly had moved to Montana lock, stock, and barrel, and was doing his best to turn the failing horse ranch around. Kelly was wet behind the ears, but so far, his outlandish ideas had made money: money that paid Jake and made it possible for him to stay on the land and with the horses he loved. Jake had viewed Kelly’s idea of turning the place into a dude ranch with suspicion at first, but Montana as a place practically sold itself, and Kelly had brought in a slow but steady stream of other city slickers, wanting to try their hand at being cowboys. Even so, renting out the whole place for a movie—let alone a porno—was a new development.

“What is it you want me to do?” he asked resignedly.

“Do? What I want you to do, Jake, is stay out of their way unless they come to you for help, okay? They’re gonna have full run of the place. Just try and keep an open mind about the whole thing, and for God’s sake don’t mouth off to anyone.”

“Kelly—”

“I’m not saying anything, Jake. I’m just saying....”

“Okay, okay, I get it.” Jake held his hands up in surrender. His temper had landed him in hot water a couple of times before, and Jake gave his word that he’d be on his best behavior with the film people.

He left Kelly in his office in the house and jogged down the porch steps, out into the sweet spring morning.

The Lazy R was a thousand acres of prime Montana range nestled at the feet of the Rockies, and Jake loved every inch of the place. From the plain, familiar old ranchhouse and the huge clapboard barn at its heart, to the sturdy log corrals and the sprawling pastures, it was the closest thing to a home Jake had ever known.

Jake crossed the yard, heading for the barn. Hell, if lending the place out to make a gay porno let him stay on as foreman, he wouldn’t say another word against it. As long as it didn’t interfere with the normal running of the ranch and his work breaking in the new stallion, he was fine with it.

That his own feelings leaned toward other men was a closely guarded secret. He wasn’t about to let a bunch of pretty-boy sex stars—calling them actors, he thought, was a stretch, since from the few examples he’d seen of the genre, there was no way you could fake what was going on—bother him one way or another.

Jake hefted a couple bales of hay into the back of his old pickup and slipped behind the wheel. There were two mares turned out in the high paddock, nursing a strained tendon and a stone bruise, respectively, and he wanted to get out and check on them before he attended to the mares in foal. Even working all the hours in the day there was still too much to do, and not enough hands to do it.

And breaking in the new stallion, Kilgawain, was proving challenging. Jake shook his head, turning his key in the ignition. The horse had objected to Elroy’s attempts to bridle him by planting a hoof square in the middle of the cowhand’s chest. It was a wonder he wasn’t dead, the blow he took. Jake put the truck in reverse and edged slowly away from his spot outside the barn.

But before he got more than a few feet, a boxy, flashy Hummer sped around the corner of the building, nearly taking off Jake’s tailgate. The driver laid on the horn as Jake swore creatively.

As the Hummer pulled in next to his truck, Jake killed the engine and rolled down his window, aiming to give the driver a piece of his

mind. Dust from the Hummer's rapid passage up the drive clogged his nose and mouth. Something told Jake the movie people had arrived.

The driver's side door swung open and a solid, fleshy man with luxurious hair and too-perfect teeth jumped out of the vehicle, swaggering around the front grill to stand next to Jake's door. Jake looked down at him without enthusiasm.

The guy couldn't have been more than five foot five or six, even wearing a ridiculously expensive pair of brand-new high-heeled Ropers. Sprayed-on jeans and an embroidered sheepskin coat, open over a crisp new denim shirt, completed the picture.

"Wow! You really gotta watch that corner, cowboy. I didn't even see you 'til you were nearly under me!" He stuck his hands in his pockets and gave Jake a lecherous grin. "Course, that happens a lot in our line of work, huh? You get me?"

Jake stared. "Our line of work?"

"Sure. Aren't you on this pic too? *Montana Stud*? I assume everyone else is here already, on account of me having to pick up Miss Thing here at the airport."

"Did I hear you right? 'Montana... Stud'?"

The newcomer stuck out a smooth and manicured hand. "The name's Tarfield. Byron Tarfield. But you probably know me better as Cock Masters." He winked.

Jake stared, openmouthed. "Look, Mr. Masters, or Tarfield, or whatever the hell your name is, I don't know you as anything but a nuisance so far. I don't know how they drive in Pornland or wherever the hell you people come from, but out here we know better than to go tear-assing around blind corners."

Byron's expression darkened. But before he could respond, the Hummer's passenger door opened, and Jake suddenly forgot all about driving and porn stars and everything that wasn't the lanky blond climbing warily out of the big SUV.

He stood for a second next to the car, looking around and inhaling the wild, sweet air with obvious appreciation. The hint of a smile played around his thin, fine lips, and as if on cue, a gentle breeze sprang up, tousling his mop of sand-blond curls. He squinted into the bright sunlight and then fixed Jake with a look from the bluest, gentlest eyes Jake had ever seen. They reminded him of the sky just after dawn, and something just south of his stomach chose that moment to remind him that dawn

was his favorite time of the day.

“Byron, be fair. You were going way too fast and you know it. Driving’s not your strong suit.” The tall blond shut the car door behind him, approaching Jake’s truck shyly. Jake’s heart beat in his throat.

Byron scoffed. “Like you’d know. Meet my co-star, Miss Matthew Dove.”

Jake scrubbed a hand over his unshaven jaw self-consciously. “So what do I know you better as?”

Matthew smiled and Jake’s jeans tightened accordingly. “It’s just plain Matthew Dove. Um, Mister Matthew Dove.”

“So I gathered,” Jake said, smiling back. “Sorry, where are my manners? I’m Jake. Jake Ryder.”

Matthew tilted his head to one side, but before he could speak, Byron fixed Jake with a puzzled frown. “Jake Ryder? Are you sure you’re not in porn? Hell, sweetheart, even without the name you should think about it.”

Jake’s smile disappeared and he turned his attention back to Byron. “Listen, jackass, that happens to be my real name, and a damn good one at that. I don’t need to hide behind any pseudonym.”

Byron glared. “That’s a big word for a lowly cowhand to be using, isn’t it?” Suddenly, his face cleared and he brayed with laughter. “Jake Ryder? A cowboy? Now you’ve gotta be putting us on.”

Jake glared back, then restarted his truck, letting the engine roar. Grinding it into gear, he reversed angrily past the pair and made a rough U-turn before heading out of the yard, raising a cloud of dust that completely obscured the Hummer and its passengers in the rearview mirror.

Still, Jake cursed himself for looking.

“FILMING hasn’t even started and you’ve already managed to piss off the star? Jake, you’ve gotta give me a break here!”

Kelly raked a hand through his hair in exasperation. He and Jake were standing in the big ranchhouse kitchen, having an after-dinner cup of coffee. Jake had thrown himself into his chores the whole day long, fighting all the while to keep Matthew’s smile, his sweet blue eyes out of his mind. When Kelly had summoned him from his small cottage back up to the house, he’d had a sinking feeling he’d put a foot wrong already.

Jake set his cup down on the counter and leaned back against the sink, arms folded. “Kelly, the man cast aspersions on my good character. What was I supposed to do?”

“Cast aspersions on your—what, by assuming you’re in the same line of work that he is? The line of work that’s gonna keep the bank off our backs for a good six months? Come on, Jake, think this through!”

Jake raised one hand to toy with his bottom lip, pinching it between two fingers. He knew Kelly was right, but it didn’t dispose him to regard Byron Tarfield any more favorably. They might need the money this movie would bring, but there was something about him Jake didn’t like. And thinking about him anywhere near Matthew Dove.... Jake closed his eyes-

“Earth to Jake? Jake, are you even listening to a word I’m saying?”

Jake held his hands up in surrender. “Yeah, yeah, Kelly. Message received, loud and clear. I’ll play ball, okay? Even with Byron.”

Kelly took a deep breath, letting it out in a sigh. “I don’t know what it is with you, Jake. It’s a damn good thing you’re as good with horses as you’re bad with people, that’s all I can say.”

“I’m gonna try and take that as a compliment.”

Kelly snorted. “You do that.” He crossed to the sink and poured out the rest of his coffee, rinsing his cup under the faucet and putting it on the dish rack.

“Look,” Jake said, “I screwed up. I get that. If you think it’d help, I’ll go over to Mr. Tarfield-Masters’ room and apologize right now, okay?”

Kelly looked over at him with the trace of a smirk. “You’d really do that, Jake?”

“I’d do anything for this ranch, Kelly. You know that.”

“Glad to hear it, Jake, real glad.” Kelly slapped him on the back. “He’s upstairs, in the yellow bedroom at the top of the stairs.”

“I thought they were all sleeping in town? At the Golden Hoof?”

Kelly shrugged. “As far as I can tell, crew’s in the bunkhouse—”

“Carl and Boots are gonna love that,” Jake said darkly.

Kelly ignored him and continued. “And all the rest of the actors are in town, but apparently Mr. Tarfield wanted to be closer to the action, to, as he put it, ‘soak up the ambiance’.”

“Ah.”



“Exactly. Now go get ’im, tiger, before it gets too late and you interrupt his beauty sleep.”

Jake set his teeth and headed for the stairs.

Outside Byron’s bedroom door, though, he had second thoughts about his promise to Kelly. Surely this could wait ’til tomorrow, no matter how pissed the guy was. Besides, Jake sure as hell didn’t want Byron Tarfield thinking he was coming on to him.

Before he could knock, the door opened, and Jake found himself staring not at Byron but at Matthew, looking rumpled and sleepy in gray sweatpants and a worn pink T-shirt. Standing in the doorway, lit by the soft yellow bedroom lamp, Matthew looked even more gorgeous than he had that morning, if a little worried. Then his brow cleared and he smiled. “Jake! Were you looking for me?”

“All afternoon,” Jake blurted out, and then wished he could sink through the floor. “I mean, do I have the right room? I’m looking for Byron T—well, I’m not ‘looking for him’ looking for him, exactly. In fact, am I interrupting? I should go. You know what? I’m gonna go.”

Jake couldn’t have stopped babbling in front of those beautiful blue eyes, even if he’d been offered the deed to the ranch.

Matthew smiled shyly. “You’re not interrupting anything, Jake. If you’re looking for Byron, he’s staying at some hotel in town. The name’ll come to me. Hang on....”

“The Golden Hoof?”

“Yeah, that’s it. Said he couldn’t stand all the noise and the smells from the horses.”

“Too much ambiance, huh?” Jake snorted. “Figures. That guy doesn’t seem the real ranch type.”

Matthew nodded, smiling. “Not even close. Byron considers anything less than a four-star hotel to be backpacking.”

Jake suddenly remembered he was talking to one of Byron’s co-stars. “Look, I’m sorry if the guy’s a friend of yours, but—”

Matthew’s smile widened. “Jake, the man’s a toad.”

Picturing Byron’s sloped forehead and squat figure, Jake cracked up. “That’s a good word for him, Matthew. But what about you? You don’t mind the ambiance?”

“I love it out here. Reminds me of where I grew up.” Matthew leaned against the doorframe. The action gave Jake a glimpse of bronzed,

taut skin where Matthew's T-shirt didn't quite meet the waistband of his sweats. Jake chewed his lip and struggled to return his gaze to Matthew's face. He chewed his lip harder. Matthew was beautiful. His sand-colored curls stood out at angles, as if he'd just been sleeping, and a firm jaw and Roman nose only served to accentuate the soft, vulnerable quality of his amazing eyes. Jake only realized he'd been staring when Matthew fell silent, regarding him curiously.

"I'm sorry," Jake said. "I should let you get some rest, not keep you out in the hallway all night listening to me bad-mouth your co-stars."

Matthew stood back from the doorway, gesturing to the room inside. "Why not come in and bad-mouth them where we can both be comfortable?"

"Ah. Uh, yeah.... You know, Matthew, that might not be such a good idea, what with me working here and all, and you being a—a...."

"An adult film actor," Matthew supplied helpfully.

"Yeah, that." Jake took a deep breath. It was taking everything he had not to take Matthew up on the invitation. Jake had had his heart broken just once, but once was more than enough. And if he entered Matthew's room, Jake knew he'd lose his heart for sure. Maybe even more than that. "I don't think it's a good idea."

Matthew looked disappointed. "Would you come in for a little while if I promise to behave?" he said softly. "It's kinda lonely, Jake."

Jake saw the plea in Matthew's eyes and heard everything he wasn't saying. Taking a deep breath, he stepped across the threshold.

It turned out that not only had Matthew grown up just over the Montana border in Idaho, but that the longer they sat talking on the worn yellow gingham couch in Matthew's bedroom, the further Jake felt himself fall. The longer he looked into Matthew's eyes, the more ridiculous it seemed that Matthew could be a porn star, or anything other than absolutely perfect. Blame it on the moon or pheromones or the fact that Jake hadn't gotten laid in more time than he cared to admit, but as they sat at opposite ends of the sofa, nursing the beers Jake had snuck down to the kitchen for, all Jake could think about was how much he enjoyed Matthew's company. Under other circumstances, Jake thought, they might have had a shot together. But with—

"Penny for your thoughts?"

Jake looked up to find Matthew eyeing him mischievously, lips toying gently with the mouth of the beer bottle. He forced himself to look away from Matthew's mouth and thoughts of what he really wanted it to toy with. Suddenly uncomfortable, Jake shrugged in answer to the question, taking another mouthful of beer.

Matthew looked down. "You're wondering," he said slowly, "how a guy like me gets to be in the porn business."

Jake choked on his beer, and Matthew shot him a small smile. "Everyone wants to ask, Jake." He paused, and when Jake remained silent, spoke slowly. "The answer is that it's just a job."

"Just a job? Matthew, you have sex with men for money. In front of other people! People watch you having sex! Doesn't that bother you?" Jake flushed. He hadn't meant to say any of that out loud. "I'm sorry, man. It's none of my business, really—"

"No, it's a fair statement," Matthew said softly. "And I don't really have an answer, or an excuse—"

"Matthew, you don't have to defend yourself to me." Jake scrubbed a hand over his face, feeling suddenly awkward. "Look, I'm out of line. I have no idea why I said what I did and—it's late. I should go." He rose from the couch, cheeks flaming.

"Jake, it's hard to be in my line of work and meet someone you want to be with, because it's a struggle for guys to figure out how it would be different from what I do in front of the cameras." Matthew's voice was so soft Jake had to strain to hear him.

He sat back down. "Look, Matthew. You're... you're beautiful, and—and everything about you feels so right to me, you know? But I'm just—I can't...."

"Jake, work is—well, it's work. It's different from...."

Jake's eyes lingered on Matthew's features. The delicate cheekbones, the firm, prominent jaw. "It's different from what, Matthew?"

"You know what one of the basic rules of porn is, Jake?"

Jake shrugged.

"Keep the kissing out of it. No one ever watches a porno for the kissing." Jake hesitated, and Matthew continued in a rush. "Jake, do you know how long it's been since someone's touched me because I asked them to? Or because they wanted to? Because they wanted me?"

Jake caught his breath. The loneliness, the longing in Matthew's bright blue eyes were echoed in his own heart. Throwing caution to the wind, he leaned in close and pressed his lips against Matthew's, answering the request with fervor.

"I want you, Matthew," he whispered.

The connection between them was electric and simultaneously sweet. Matthew's kisses were tentative, almost shy, but Jake claimed his mouth firmly, pulling Matthew into his arms. And once Matthew was there, it was almost as if a dam had burst inside him. He bore Jake down against the nubbed cotton of the couch, clambering on top, all long limbs and eagerness. Jake held on tight, letting Matthew take what he needed.

As they kissed, Matthew became bolder and needier, exploring Jake's mouth, tongue darting as if he couldn't decide what he needed to taste first or next. Eventually Jake rose, arms still tight around Matthew, and pulled him toward the high four-poster bed, releasing Matthew's mouth just long enough to pull the pink T-shirt up over his head. Matthew pushed Jake onto the soft, thick eiderdown, fingers trembling as he undid the buttons on Jake's shirt.

Jake rolled Matthew over and mouthed his neck wetly, eliciting a moan of pleasure. "Yes, Jake, oh yes."

Matthew called Jake's name, and the thrill of the word on his lips sent an electric shock up Jake's spine. He could hardly believe that this beautiful, coltish blond was in his arms, holding him tightly, burning with a need that equaled Jake's own. Jake reclaimed Matthew's mouth, the kisses harder now, hungrier. His hands slid down and under the waistband of Matthew's sweats, seeking the firm, hot skin there, and Matthew bucked into his touch. "Jake, please. Don't stop...."

Jake grinned. "Every time you say my name," he whispered in Matthew's ear, "I'm gonna kiss you." He followed up the statement with a demonstration, and Matthew wriggled happily beneath him.

Jake took his time.

He ran his palms slowly over every inch of Matthew's skin, touching everywhere, watching his eyes carefully. Loving the way Matthew arched up into his touch, knowing he was getting it right, that what they were doing was perfect. Jake smoothed and stroked every inch of Matthew's body, listening to his breathing and savoring each response, until Matthew was writhing with need, out of his mind with desire.

"Jake," he whispered. "Please...."

Jake grinned, tangling his fingers in Matthew's soft blond hair, and kissed him in answer. Matthew moaned into the kiss, aligning his hips with Jake's, bucking a little. Jake slid a hand down between them, letting his fingertips play along Matthew's shaft, exploring the smooth, taut skin before drifting down to cup Matthew's heavy balls, thumb rubbing lazily. Matthew captured Jake's lower lip between his teeth, tugging gently, and Jake moved his fingers lower, exploring the lightly fuzzed cleft between Matthew's cheeks.

"Jake," Matthew whispered, breaking away. "Want you, so much. Please." He pushed against Jake's body, a light sheen of sweat covering his golden skin.

Jake kissed him again, worrying his lips gently. "You got it, Matthew." He paused for a second, but before he could speak, Matthew rolled out from under him and walked confidently across the room to his suitcase, returning with lube and a condom. He bounced back up onto the bed as Jake opened the foil packet, and as Jake unrolled the rubber, fitting it to his cock, Matthew explored Jake's torso with mouth and hands, urgently licking and kissing, pinching and stroking.

"Distracting, baby," Jake whispered, leaning over to nip at Matthew's neck.

Matthew beamed and contented himself with running his hands over Jake's darkly furred stomach as Jake slid the condom home. Slicking two fingers with lube, Jake nuzzled Matthew over onto his back, pushing his thighs apart with one knee. "Need you, Matthew. Right now."

"Please," Matthew whispered. "Oh please, Jake."

Jake looked up sharply and kissed Matthew's smiling lips. He slid his hand down between Matthew's legs, one finger finding Matthew's hot, tight hole. They both groaned as he pushed inside, working the ring of muscle gently. Matthew clung to Jake's shoulders, spreading his legs wider. A wordless cry of pleasure escaped his lips and he stared into Jake's eyes wonderingly. Jake kissed him again, parting his lips as he added a second finger to the first, working Matthew's entrance more firmly. Matthew bucked against him needily, fucking himself on Jake's fingers, eyes never leaving Jake's. "Please," he whispered. "Now, Jake."

Jake grinned down at him, stealing another kiss. "You got it."

Pushing himself up, Jake knelt between Matthew's spread thighs, leaning forward to rest one hand against the coverlet. With the other, he

gripped the base of his cock, the tip nudging Matthew's willing hole. He pushed against the ring as Matthew groaned, hands fisting the quilt beneath them. "Jake, yes! Yes!"

Jake felt Matthew open to him and with one long, smooth stroke, he drove his cock home, fetching up against Matthew's hips with a soft growl.

Matthew arched against him with a cry, hands scrabbling for purchase on Jake's sweat-slicked skin. Jake watched Matthew hungrily, desperate for what he was feeling to be acknowledged, reciprocated.

He wasn't disappointed.

Matthew's arms slid around him, holding him tight. Desire lit Matthew's eyes as he thrust urgently, his heat and need fulfilling Jake, setting him alight.

Every time Matthew called Jake's name, Jake kissed him, mouth darting from neck to collarbone, ear to cheek. Wrapping Matthew tightly in his arms, Jake kept his strokes long and slow. The slick, tight heat of Matthew's ass around his cock was incredible, but more than that, Jake felt whole. Matthew wanted him, needed him; he felt it in every nuance of their connection, and it was overwhelming. Pleasure built deep inside him and spread faster than a wildfire, until it was all Jake could do to hang on tight, murmuring Matthew's name again and again as each stroke pushed him closer to the edge.

Matthew stared at him, wide-eyed with desire as their rhythm grew fiercer, until finally Matthew closed his eyes and arched with a shout, his ass milking Jake's cock as he came, wet and hot against Jake's belly. Then the fire inside Jake burned out of control, and he let his head drop forward onto Matthew's chest as flickering tongues of pleasure rocked them both. He rubbed his temple against Matthew's jaw, growling softly.

Neither of them made a move to disentangle, or even loosen their grip. Instead, they lay and stared at each other happily, Jake's softening cock still buried deep inside Matthew. Jake shifted, feeling it slip a little.

"Don't move," Matthew whispered. "Please, Jake, stay in me."

Jake tightened his grip, kissing Matthew's chin softly. "Relax, baby. I'm not going anywhere. Relax."

Matthew sighed contentedly, eyes drifting closed. "Say it again."

"Relax?"

Matthew smiled against Jake's forehead. "No. Call me that again."

“What, ‘baby’?” Jake giggled against Matthew’s jaw. “I’ll call you whatever you want,” he murmured. “That was amazing.”

“I know I promised to behave, but—”

“Baby, you did behave.” Jake kissed him again, lightly. “That was perfect. Perfect.”

Matthew nuzzled Jake’s jaw, rasping their stubble-pricked cheeks together playfully. Jake grinned, enjoying the game.

After a few seconds, Matthew stopped, and Jake looked back into his eyes. “Jake....”

Jake kissed him again, light and sweet, drowsing softly. “Hmm?”

“Jake, it’s never been like that before.”

Jake’s eyes flew open and he found himself staring into Matthew’s open eyes, eyes full of wonder and appreciation. “Matthew,” he said quietly, “it’s supposed to be like that every time.”

Matthew closed his eyes, and Jake kissed each eyelid, feeling Matthew smile as he did so.

Jake held Matthew close, stroking his back, until Matthew’s breathing became deep and easy. He didn’t stir as Jake pulled away, slipping out of the bed and into the night.

Jake walked the lonely dark road back to his tiny foreman’s cottage with a conflicted heart.

THE next morning, Jake rose with the sun, just like it was any other day. As if his whole world hadn’t changed the night before. As if he could follow Kelly’s instructions and stay the hell away from the film crew, as if he could stay away from Matthew.

He had to stay away from Matthew. Jake gripped the edges of the bathroom sink firmly, shaking his head. What the hell had he been thinking? The guy was a porn star! He had a string of different men every day, lived a glamorous Hollywood life, and didn’t need a scruffy, lovelorn cowboy trailing after him.

Jake smeared a clear space in the steam coating the mirror. He had no illusions. Life in the outdoors, working hard every day, rain or shine, had left its mark. The tan and the lines were both permanent, he suspected, despite not even being thirty-five. Still, with thick dark hair and blue eyes he considered himself presentable at least and—

Jake grimaced and strode out of the bathroom, headed for the tiny

cottage kitchen. Despite how right Matthew had felt in his arms, how perfect their connection, Matthew was a movie star. One who had sex with other men—lots of other men—for money. End of story.

Filling a thermos with thick black coffee, Jake grabbed his hat off the counter and pulled on his boots, determined to forget about Matthew Dove if it was the last thing he did. There was plenty to do around the Lazy R if a man needed to lose himself in work.

It was already light when Jake headed for the stable, the pale blue sky stained pink at the rocky line of the horizon, as if the mountains had torn it wide open. Jake tried not to take it as an omen. He approached Kilgawain's stall confidently, despite knowing the stallion's temper.

Broken in at two, the horse had gone unworked and unriden for several years, until Kelly had bought him at auction and, with the help of three other people, managed to bring him back to the Lazy R. When one after another of the other hands refused to work him, Jake stepped in. Their temperaments suited each other. Kilgawain was a top breeding prospect, with excellent bloodlines and great conformation. Once the horse was ready to prove his manners and performance in the show ring, his stud fee would be a great asset to the Lazy R's income.

If the damn horse didn't manage to kill someone first.

Jake called softly to Kilgawain, the lead rope coiled loosely in his hand. The stallion snorted with a sound like a gunshot, and kicked the door of his stall. *Fine*, Jake thought. *Have it your way*.

Thirty minutes later, Jake latched the gate of the paddock behind him, Kilgawain stamping and huffing at his retreating back. Half an hour with that horse was more work than most men got done in a morning. Jake figured he'd leave the big guy to stew for a couple hours while he checked in on the hands and knocked off some of his other chores. Kilgawain needed to get accustomed to the sounds and smells of the ranch, the hum of activity around him, before Jake returned to begin their real work.

Carl Tanner, one of the Lazy R's two remaining hands, sauntered up just as Jake got the gate latched. "Helluva beast, Jake. After what he did to Elroy, I'm surprised he ain't headed for the dog food factory."

Jake frowned. "Take it easy, Carl. Elroy wasn't being smart. I never bridle this horse 'less he's cross-tied. You can't expect a horse like this to turn into a well-mannered filly just because it would make your life easier."



Carl shook his head and spat. "Still. It ain't right. Just like them movie queers. Ain't right, I say."

Jake looked at his ranch hand narrowly. "Don't you have someplace to be, Carl? How're those yearlings doing?"

They talked stock and the day-to-day business of the ranch, and Jake gave Carl a list of jobs that would keep him and Boots busy until day's end and, more importantly, far from the main area of the ranch. Jake was sure that Carl's feelings on the film production were echoed by his fellow hand. It only made sense to keep the two groups as far from each other as possible.

The sun was high over the mountaintops by the time Jake headed back toward the stables, aiming to retrieve the wire cutters from the tack room. There was a fence needing some attention in the back pasture, well away from the barnyard. Far away from the movie, and Matthew.

What he found when he arrived at the barn drove all thoughts of fence-mending from his head.

The ground floor was swarming with people, and the horses whickered anxiously in their stalls, unused to the commotion. Huge freestanding spotlights were trained on a pile of hay bales with a blanket on top, and several cameras pointed at the area. Electrical cables lay on the ground like snakes sunning on a rock, and crew members moved purposefully, calling to one another as they went, checking the cameras, moving the lights, holding up giant pieces of silver cardboard in various configurations.

In all the commotion, no one registered Jake's presence as anything more than another piece of the set. Jake ducked between the huge lights and went stall to stall, calming and soothing each animal as he went.

The tack room was at the head of the second set of stalls, and Jake spent a few minutes searching the crowded shelves for the tool he wanted. Finally, he emerged from the small room and stopped dead in his tracks.

A group of people now stood around two very naked men on top of the hay bales. Jake couldn't help staring. Byron stood in all his diminutive glory with one foot up on a hay bale, thrusting hard into the ass of a slender young man, who was crying aloud with every stroke. As Jake watched, Byron threw his head back, groaning hard and long as his partner resettled on the blanket. Byron grasped his partner's hips and began thrusting fast and strong, setting a furious pace. The young man

beneath him clutched the rough wool and moaned.

The onlookers looked bored, as if this sort of thing happened every day. Which, Jake supposed, it did. Jake tried to edge quietly around the knot of people, eyes on the ground.

“Cut! Cut! Who the fuck is that guy? Hey you!”

A balding man in thick black-rimmed glasses was staring at him angrily, arms spread wide. “Hello! We’re filming here? In case you didn’t notice? Ugh!” The director threw up his hands. “Save me from local talent trying to catch a fucking break.”

Jake cleared his throat. “I work for the ranch. I just came by to check on the horses and pick up some equipment from the tack room.”

“The what?”

“Tack room. Where we keep all the leather things.”

“Whatever. Get off. The set.”

Jake had no argument with that. He had zero desire to stay.

Atop the hay bales, Byron and his co-star were following the interaction closely while lazily continuing to fuck. The director turned back to them and flapped his hands encouragingly. “Keep going, guys! Keep going! Byron, baby, you’re looking wonderful. Ride it out.”

Jake headed for the open door, the heat from the lights and the smells of sweat and sex disorienting and bizarre. He was three steps from freedom when he heard the director call out, “Okay, Byron, pull it out and finish up nice and strong for the close-up. Dove! Get ready. You’re up next.”

Jake stopped in his tracks. Looking back over his shoulder, he saw Matthew, dressed in a short orange robe and Byron’s ridiculous boots, gazing unemotionally toward the scene on the hay bales. Matthew stirred, as if feeling Jake’s gaze on him, and met Jake’s eyes across the barn. Jake’s throat suddenly felt dry and tight. Last night, Jake had thought the two of them together were special, but in the harsh, cold light of day, it was obvious he’d been just another job to Matthew. Just another body.

Matthew looked at him sorrowfully, eyes filled with apology.

Jake turned and fled. As he emerged from the chaos of the stables, gritting his teeth against the dust, more bad news awaited him: Byron’s shining, oversized Hummer was parked behind Jake’s battered old truck, blocking him in. Fixing the fence in the back pasture would have to wait.

Jake looked around him wildly. Matthew was on the other side of the wall, bare yards away, even now approaching the hay bales, and the thought of working nearby, hearing the sounds.... Jake spun and strode angrily across the yard. A gleam of gold in the harsh sunlight caught his eye, and the answer came to him. Kilgawain.

As Jake approached his paddock the stallion stomped and snorted, shaking his dark mane in irritation. Jake shook his head. He and the damn horse deserved each other. Just a couple of easily spooked, easily riled fools.

Jake felt a twinge of guilt for letting his emotions get the better of him. It wasn't the stallion's fault the morning had gone so badly. What had he told Carl that morning? *"You can't expect a horse like this to turn into a well-mannered filly just because it would make your life easier."*

Matthew slept with other men. He'd made a career of it, and no matter how much Jake wished things were different, he couldn't expect Matthew to change for him. He couldn't make a one-night stand into something it wasn't. Life wasn't easy.

The wide, merciless sky bore down on him, and Jake swore, loudly and at nothing in particular. Kilgawain shied away with a snort. *Fuck this*, Jake thought. *There's work to be done. Honest work, done fully clothed.*

That thought brought back the scene in the stables, the haunted look in Matthew's eyes, and Jake saw red. Grabbing his saddle off the fence, he slung it onto the big stallion's back, taking none of his usual care not to spook the fiery horse. In moments, he had swung himself to Kilgawain's back and turned him for the trail.

Kilgawain bucked and snorted, surprised and unsettled that the steady hand he was used to, so far from easing his rage, now encouraged it. Bending low over his neck, Jake spurred him on, and the big horse leapt away at a gallop.

With every stride, Jake could feel the stallion's speed and strength, the ripple of muscles under the golden hide as Kilgawain flew up the trail, carrying them both away from the barnyard and into the sweet, wild country.

The fence repair went smoothly. The barbed wire stung his palms even through the thick leather gloves and Jake welcomed the pain, embracing it, hoping it would eventually distract him from the pain he felt inside. Matthew's eyes, wide with fear and apology, stung him to the

core. He'd thought last night that their connection had been real. That it had been true.

With a final twang, the fence snapped back into place, the rows of metal wire harsh and unyielding against the pasture. Jake glared angrily at the tree line, hard-bitten firs and pines digging into the rocky soil, taking a stand against Montana's notoriously harsh weather. The view, usually soothing and conciliatory, today did nothing to improve his mood.

His temper communicated itself to the stallion and Kilgawain shied and sidled as they headed down the trail toward home. Jake started to regret the impulse that had led him to ride the half-broken horse to the back of the ranch. They were still a mile out when his misgivings were proved right. Kilgawain, startled by a pheasant rocketing out from the nearby brush, dropped his head between his knees and started to buck in earnest.

Taken by surprise, Jake struggled unsuccessfully to regain his seat. The packed dirt of the trail caught his hip bone hard as he fell, and he scrambled, cursing, to his feet. Kilgawain's flying heels were all he could see as the horse fled at a gallop toward home.

With a jaundiced sigh, berating himself for a fool, Jake started off in his wake, rubbing his bruised hip.

By the time he made it back to the stallion's corral, Jake was in a fine and mighty temper. So seeing Matthew Dove standing in his city clothes by Kilgawain's side, petting his muzzle, was like a bucket of cold water in the face. Jake slowed his steps, needing to buy some time.

Matthew turned at his approach. "Thought this guy might be yours. He was raising some kind of havoc by the bunkhouse. You should've seen him!" Matthew gave the big horse a friendly rub, reins held loosely in the other hand. "He really doesn't like that cowboy with the red hair—what's his name?"

"Carl." Jake tried to keep his voice neutral, his heart thudding in his chest. He closed his eyes. "Matthew, that horse has put one man in the hospital and nearly broke another's arm. You wanna come away from him?"

"Who, this guy? I find that hard to believe. Jake, this guy's just a big buttercup."

The two of them met each other's eyes briefly. A hollow feeling started in the pit of Jake's stomach as Matthew's alluring blue eyes

reminded him of his vow the previous night. But kissing Matthew now was out of the question. Jake turned sharply and busied himself removing Kilgawain's saddle, unbuckling it as Matthew continued to soothe and adore the stallion. Incredibly, the big horse was basking in the blond's attentions.

Jake carried the saddle over and set it on the fence rail. He could return it to the barn when he was sure there were no more naked people fucking in the center of it.

"Get some good film this morning?" Jake pulled the saddle blanket off Kilgawain's back, hardly able to look at Matthew. The guy was beautiful, perfect. And the thought of him on the movie set, on the hay bales with Byron like the scene he'd witnessed.... Jake bit his lip savagely. "I'd've said hi, but I felt overdressed. Hopefully though, whoever you were with at least showed you a good time."

Matthew watched in silence as Jake began to rub the big horse down.

"Jake," he said finally in a small voice. "I didn't do a scene this morning. I walked off the set a couple minutes after you left."

Jake focused on the feel of the stiff bristles under his palm, cleaning the sweat and dirt from Kilgawain's coat. "Yeah, sure you did, Matthew."

"I meant what I said last night, Jake. It's never been like that with anyone else. Never. This morning.... Jake, the thought of anyone else touching me, let alone—"

"Uh-huh. Sure thing, Matthew." Jake bit his lip. He wanted to believe Matthew. Badly. But a fierce knot in his chest wouldn't let him. He brushed Kilgawain vigorously and the horse twitched his tail in irritation.

"I know how it must sound, but you've gotta believe me. Jake, I can't think of anything but you. Just the thought of someone else near me... I couldn't stand it. I don't know what I'm gonna do."

"Don't you mean who?"

Matthew looked at the packed dirt at his feet, and Jake's resolve faltered. Matthew was just as beautiful as he'd been the night before, coltish and shy. Jake resolutely turned back to the big horse, taking the reins from Matthew's hands and pushing past him to lead Kilgawain into his paddock. He fumbled with the gate and Matthew stepped in, holding the gate wide as Jake and Kilgawain passed.

“Look, Matthew, I don’t know what last night meant to you, and I’m not sure I want to. It was probably...” Jake took a deep breath and focused on a spot over Kilgawain’s shoulder, resolutely turned away from Matthew. “It was a mistake, okay? Let’s chalk it up to experience or maybe just the ambiance and both move on, okay?”

“A mistake? Jake, no!” Matthew moved around Kilgawain’s side, stepping back into Jake’s line of vision. “Don’t say that!”

“I don’t know what you want from me, okay? We fucked and it was fantastic, then the next morning you had a bunch of other guys lined up for their share. Hell, in groups of two or three, even. I don’t know. Then you turn around and try to tell me it was special? Matthew, I look like an idiot to you, or what?”

Matthew stood silent, eyes glittering with unshed tears.

“Just....” Jake shook his head, resting one hand on Kilgawain’s powerful shoulder. He looked at the ground. “Just go back to your life, Matthew. Don’t confuse this for something it’s not.”

“Jake, don’t. Please.”

Jake willed himself to say silent, biting back everything he longed to say. He didn’t dare believe what Matthew was saying could be true, and that he’d felt last night just as keenly as Jake had. Jake set his hat further back on his head, and looked determinedly at the packed dirt.

Eventually he heard Matthew leave, shutting the gate quietly, and Jake raised his head. Kilgawain stomped and snorted, dancing in place as Jake ignored him, watching Matthew’s retreating back, aching inside.

Jake spent a restless night in his wide and empty bed under the cottage’s sloping eaves. He tossed and turned, thoughts constantly returning to Matthew. He was well aware he’d behaved like a Grade-A asshole that afternoon, but the previous night, with Matthew in his arms.... Jake punched his pillow, kicking the thin quilt away despite the chilly air.

JAKE rose early, aiming to get his morning chores done and then head into town. There was feed to buy and a new water pump to order, and he figured if he could just get off the ranch, away from the movie people and most of all, away from Matthew, he might be able to think straight again.

He was heading past the barn on his way to his pickup when he

heard shouting.

Jake hesitated for a moment, but something about the voice raised the hair on the back of his neck. Uneasily, he hurried around the corner to the rear of the barn, where the tractor and the horse trailer were parked.

The movie director who'd shouted at Jake yesterday was yelling again today. Jake surveyed the scene, brow furrowed. The horse trailer's loading ramp had been lowered, and the director was standing halfway up, waving his arms and berating someone crouching inside, half-hidden by a crumpled horse blanket.

He gestured to someone behind him in the shadowy interior of the barn, and after a few seconds, Byron emerged carrying a coil of rope. A sick feeling started in the pit of Jake's stomach, and he started walking faster. He was close enough now to make out the words.

"I warned you, didn't I? But you wouldn't listen! Now we're gonna do it my way!" The director bent and began tugging on the blankets. Jake heard a muffled cry, and then a mop of blond curls emerged from the horse trailer as the director yanked the hapless victim out. Jake's heart stopped as he recognized Matthew.

Matthew's cry of fear and pain as his assailant flung him to the ground burned through Jake like a firebrand. He saw Matthew clutching uselessly at his inadequate robe and hurried forward, a cold, sick feeling rising in his gut.

"Dove." The director's voice was rough, harsh, filled with anger and contempt. "We signed you up because the paying customers like watching Byron here fuck your tight little ass. Now one way or another, that's exactly what's gonna happen here today. Either you bend over that saddle like I told you and smile for the camera, or I'll rope you to it and have Byron make you beg. Which is it gonna be?"

He grabbed the coil of rope from Byron and knelt, pinning Matthew down. Matthew sobbed. "I quit! Leave me alone!"

The director panted with effort as he tied Matthew's wrists. "Conversation over. You're under contract, and now your pretty ass is getting done the hard way!" He cinched the rope down tight and Matthew whimpered and thrashed.

Jake broke into a run.

He barreled into Matthew's attacker and they both went rolling in a heap. Jake wasn't a violent man but he'd never shirked a fight either, and

right now, fighting for Matthew's safety, nothing could have stopped him. He wrestled the director onto the ground. "He said he quit! Your ears painted on, man?"

"Get off me, cowboy, right now! What the fuck is wrong with you?"

Jake gritted his teeth. "What the fuck is wrong with *you*? Leave him alone."

"He quits when I say he quits, and that's after Byron gets through with him, not before! Now get off me!"

Jake did as the man asked, getting slowly to his feet. The struggle had attracted the rest of the crew, and a small knot of onlookers stood in the barn doorway, watching in silence. Byron had retreated to join them, leaving Matthew where he'd fallen, sprawled in the dirt.

"Matthew!" Jake forgot the director. Eyes wide and tear-stained, wrists half-caught in the heavy rope, Matthew was struggling to cover himself with the skimpy robe.

The director had recovered his feet, and took advantage of Jake's momentary distraction to aim a wild swing at his midsection. Taken off guard, Jake weathered the blow and drew back his arm. With one punch, his opponent was out cold.

Breathing heavily, Jake hurried to Matthew's side. Matthew stared up at him, shivering, fists knotted in his thin terrycloth garment. "Jake," he whispered. "He was gonna.... I couldn't stop him...."

"Easy, Matthew. No one's gonna do anything to you. I've got you. I've got you now."

Jake pulled Matthew into his arms. At that moment, he didn't care if the whole world was watching. The only thing that mattered was the fear in Matthew's eyes, the way he clutched at Jake's shoulders. "It's okay, baby. You're okay now. You're safe."

Several crew members were bending over the director, gently slapping his cheeks, trying to bring him around. Byron detached from the knot with an angry squawk. "You! You have got to be kidding me."

Jake glared at him. "He quits. And we're leaving."

"Oh, the fuck he does. That bitch is under contract."

"Byron, we're leaving." Jake's tone brooked no argument, and Byron's cocky air left him. He looked nervously over his shoulder as Jake continued, "And if I catch you within a mile of Matthew, I'm gonna



knock you into next week. Are we clear?"

Byron took a look at Jake's eyes and stepped back carefully.

Jake held Matthew against him, feeling him shake still. "Come on. Let's get out of here." Jake grabbed a blanket from the bottom of the trailer as they rose, and he wrapped it gently around Matthew's narrow shoulders. Matthew wavered where he stood, a shudder passing through him, and Jake caught him as he collapsed, gathering him into his arms and lifting him up off the ground, knees slung over one arm. Matthew whimpered softly, eyes squeezed tightly shut. Jake shifted his weight and started walking.

MATTHEW was tense and motionless in Jake's arms all the way back to the ranchhouse. He only opened his eyes once they made it onto the porch, and Jake set Matthew down gently on one of the sanded pine benches.

He leaned against the porch railing, unsure how to break the silence.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, Jake." Matthew looked down at the painted white boards. He arranged the folds of the blanket around him, slowly, eyes still unfocused. A slick of mud stuck in his hair, and Jake could see a bruise already forming over his collarbone. "Nothing like that's ever happened before and I panicked. I just—"

"No, baby," Jake said softly. "I heard what he said and, Matthew, I would've been just as scared."

"You would've?" Matthew seemed to focus on Jake for the first time. His voice faltered. "Jake, I just can't.... It was so...."

Jake dropped onto the bench next to Matthew, putting one arm loosely around his back. Matthew curled in toward him, pulling his knees up, burrowing against Jake's body. His wrists were red where the rope had been, and Jake had to look away. He bit his lip. "Matthew," he whispered. "You can't go back. I won't let you."

Jake looked out at the pine-shaded yard, setting his jaw before turning back to Matthew. He took a deep breath. "Look, I'm sorry about yesterday. I was a jackass, man. I should've—"

Matthew looked up at him and shook his head. "No, Jake, you were right. I don't think I'd've believed it either. Me showing up out of the blue, telling you one night changed my whole life? I don't blame you for

being suspicious.”

Jake looked at him closely. “Matthew, it’s just that... I saw you standing there on the set, watching those two guys who were fucking just like they were getting the mail or something, and I thought....”

“I couldn’t, Jake. I didn’t lie to you. All I could think about was the way you touched me.”

Jake sighed. “Come on. Let’s get you inside and cleaned up, okay? Then we’ll figure out what comes after that.”

It was obvious how shaken Matthew was by the whole ordeal, and Jake shelved his plans for going to town. He’d catch hell from Kelly later, but none of that mattered compared to the relief in Matthew’s eyes when Jake told him he’d stand guard at the bathroom door while Matthew showered.

Matthew emerged in his sweats and T-shirt, scrubbed and pink from the heat. He stretched his shoulders languorously and crawled under the eiderdown comforter, eyes heavy with fatigue. “Jake,” he whispered. “Come to bed.”

Jake shook his head vigorously. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Matthew.”

“Jake, please. I need you to touch me just like you did that first night.”

“*I know* that’s not a good idea right now. You’ve been through a lot and....”

“And what?” Matthew asked in a small voice.

Jake chewed his lip. “And I’m scared I’ll hurt you, Matthew. After what they were doing to you this morning—”

“You could never hurt me, Jake. Never.” Matthew’s eyes were thoughtful. “Just come to bed and hold me for a little bit, okay?”

After a few seconds, Jake nodded. He rose and removed his work shirt, then crawled in next to Matthew, still wearing his jeans and T-shirt. Matthew turned to him, twining their bodies together against the cool sheets with a soft, satisfied noise. Jake rested a hand on Matthew’s back, rubbing gently, listening as Matthew fell asleep with small, hitched breaths against his neck.

“No one will ever hurt you again, baby.”

JAKE leaned in the doorway of the farmhouse office, watching Matthew

work his magic. It had been nearly three months since the day Jake had punched the director, and since that day—Jake smiled—since that day, he'd never slept alone. He let his eyes roam over his lover's slight, beautiful frame.

Matthew's back was turned, the phone tucked between ear and shoulder. "You wanna come back here, that's the going rate. No ifs, ands, or buts. Take it or leave it."

Jake tossed his hat onto the soft brown leather couch and idly flipped through the bookings register, listening to Matthew rope in another group for a visit. Film crews, school groups, vacationing tourists—all of them loved Matthew's easy charm and open, sunny manner. And Kelly loved what it was doing to the Lazy R's bank account.

"If you think you can get a better deal somewhere else, go for it, but remember, that price includes accommodations and catering, so...." Matthew trailed off, hands on hips, his back still turned to Jake. "Yeah it is, isn't it? Anyway, I've got another call coming in so let me—"

Jake smirked. The Lazy R didn't have a second line. Matthew was just good at putting the spurs to reluctant clients.

"Look, Byron, I don't care. Take it or leave it, but let me know by close of business. Thanks."

Jake's smirk disappeared and he looked up sharply as Matthew replaced the phone in its cradle. "Byron? Not the same Byron who—"

"The very same!" Matthew grinned. "Apparently *Montana Stud* was such a hit that they want to do a sequel. Of course, after my agent was done suing them into next year, I doubt they'll be able to afford our rates. Which I doubled, just for them."

Jake closed the ledger firmly and came around the desk to stand in front of Matthew, arms folded. "I don't like it, baby."

"Why not? The best revenge is taking all their money."

"The best revenge is living well."

"Well, I'm doing that too. But they might as well give us all their money while they're at it." Matthew's grin widened. "Besides, Jake, I have you to protect me."

Jake relented, pulling Matthew close and claiming his mouth firmly. Ever since Matthew had quit the film business, Jake had kept his vow, kissing Matthew every time he said Jake's name, even when on one

particular occasion it caused Kelly to choke on a piece of perfectly good prime rib.

Matthew leaned close, his expression softening. He slid his fingers along the side of Jake's jaw, eyes staring into his with wonder and happiness. "Nothing scares me anymore, Jake. I have everything I've ever dreamed of out here."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. Now how 'bout you lock that door and protect me a little more, huh?"

Jake drew back, his expression at once incredulous and desiring. He'd become well acquainted with that tone of voice.

And was powerless to resist it.

Matthew stepped in close, his kisses hard and needy, and Jake let him take what he wanted, Matthew walking him backward until his ass hit the doorframe. He managed to lock the door with one hand as Matthew grabbed his hips, pushing their groins together, rubbing hard. Jake bit back a moan as Matthew nibbled at his neck, grinding his denim-clad erection against Jake's own.

Matthew broke away suddenly. "Jake, I don't have anything on me. For protection." His voice was breathless.

It was Jake's turn to grin, as he pulled a condom from the back pocket of his jeans. "I was hoping I'd find you in a good mood."

Matthew laughed. "Well, Jake, my mood's about to get a lot better, I can tell." He reached for Jake's belt buckle with a sly grin.

The two of them kissed and nipped at each other, mouths hot and wet against each other's skin. Jake loved when Matthew got like this, when he was overwhelmed by desire and just took Jake whenever he wanted.

The two of them fetched up against one arm of the leather couch, Matthew tugging Jake's jeans and briefs down over his hips, freeing his hard cock. Matthew captured its length in one hand and groaned, stroking gently. "Jake, need this," he managed. "Right now."

"You got it, baby." Jake fumbled with the button of Matthew's jeans while Matthew grabbed the condom out of his hand, tearing it open and sliding the pre-slicked latex home. His hand strayed lower, fondling Jake's heavy sac.

Jake gasped. He unzipped Matthew's jeans and pushed them down

until the heavy denim gathered around his ankles. His proud, erect cock stood out from under the starched white button-down shirt he wore. Jake pulled him close, one hand cupping his tight, round buttock as Matthew stepped out of his jeans. The two of them kissed fiercely, and Jake felt the tip of Matthew's prick leave a smear of pre-come across his thigh. He groaned, tightening his grip on Matthew's ass.

Matthew panted with desire. "Desk?"

Jake ran his tongue up the side of Matthew's neck in one long, wet swipe. "Couch," he answered. Matthew groaned in response, then broke away from Jake's embrace to kneel on the smooth brown leather, knees wide, head ducked coyly. Jake stepped closer, spitting on his fingers and running them the length of Matthew's crease, finding his hot, tight hole with ease.

He knelt, straddling one of Matthew's thighs, his lover's overheated skin between his legs a contrast to the cool leather beneath them. Jake pushed his slick finger inside, working Matthew firmly, his other hand flat against Matthew's sweat-slicked stomach. "Please," Matthew whined, writhing against Jake's finger. "Come on, Jake. Need you. Now."

Jake leaned forward and kissed Matthew's eager mouth. "What do you need, Matthew?" he whispered. Matthew moaned in response. "You gonna tell me?" Jake continued. He removed his finger and stood with a creak of worn springs. He lined his cock up with Matthew's entrance, the tip nudging gently against the tender opening.

Matthew pushed back against him. "Don't tease. Need you to fuck me now. Hard."

Jake held Matthew's hips firmly. "Anything for you, baby," he murmured. Jake pushed in slowly, savoring the long, smooth slide. Matthew cried out softly, hands clutching the back of the couch. Jake rested, flush against Matthew's hips, and looked down at the connection between them, where he was joined to his sweet blond. He moaned. The sight of his cock buried to the hilt in Matthew's ass always drove him wild.

Feeling Matthew's body adjust around him, Jake took a few short, tentative strokes. Matthew whined his approval and Jake sped up the pace, fucking Matthew harder, staying deep, panting with effort. "So good, baby," he managed. "So good."

Matthew's whimpers turned to soft cries and Jake could tell every

stroke was hitting him just right. He slowed his pace, feeling his cock drag over that sweet spot with every movement.

He took a hand from Matthew's hip and reached beneath him, stroking his cock in time with each thrust. Matthew's cries grew in volume and Jake nipped his shoulder in warning, thrilled that he could do this to Matthew, drive him to the edge every time. The two of them were so good together, so right. Jake let his head fall back, feeling his cock swell in Matthew's passage, tightening the connection. He slowed his strokes further, trying to cling to some measure of control.

"Harder, Jake, harder. Please!" Matthew sobbed, pushing back against Jake, bucking between Jake's hand and hips. Jake obeyed the command, moving his hand back to Matthew's hips, driving into him with quick, short strokes. Matthew moved his own hand to his cock, and then stiffened with a breathy moan. His passage clenched around Jake and Jake was gone, launched over the edge with a sharp cry, pushing deep as the two of them rocked together, both of them alight with the pleasure they found in each other's bodies.

Still held tight inside Matthew, Jake slid a hand down one of Matthew's thighs, rubbing softly. He nipped Matthew's neck, eliciting a shiver, and then nuzzled the bitten place as Matthew chuckled contentedly.

The pounding on the office door made them both jump. "Oh, come on, you two!" Kelly bellowed from the other side. "Can't you at least keep it out of the office?"

"No idea what you're talking about," Jake called back. He slid free and pulled Matthew to a standing position. The two of them hurriedly redressed and set the couch and each other back to rights, before Jake unlocked the door and held it wide for the Lazy R's young owner.

Kelly sidled in with exaggerated care, holding a sheaf of papers in front of his face. "Can the two of you at least *try* to keep the grab-ass at home? I have no idea how we'd explain it to the tour groups. Let alone the potential for lawsuits from the school district."

Jake and Matthew grinned at each other and Kelly handed Matthew the papers. "Here. Auction registries. Seeing how you show no signs of leaving, I'd be mighty glad if we could go over them and you could start picking up on what we've gotta do to keep these folks off our backs."

Matthew beamed, looking at Jake.

Kelly sighed. "Try to remember it's a working ranch, Jake.

Seriously. I swear I pay you for more than just keeping him happy. Now git.”

“Money well spent, you have to admit.”

“Out!”

Jake strode happily down the hall and out into the sunshine, the taste of Matthew’s sweet mouth still on his lips.

AFTER dinner, the two of them had ridden out along the creek that ran through a large section of the Lazy R’s back pasture, taking advantage of the lingering daylight and warm summer evening. With Jake by his side, Matthew was quickly remembering the riding skills of his youth, and Chicory, an old blue roan, was a patient and easy-tempered mount.

Now though, the gelding and the stallion were contentedly grazing in the evening sun, as nearby, Jake and Matthew lay on an old blanket. Jake was on his back, feet planted firmly on the rough wool as Matthew sat astride him, rocking his hips with soft, pleased cries.

Jake let his hands play over Matthew’s bare skin—the toned stomach, the sharp ridges of his hip bones, until Jake was cupping Matthew’s taut, round buttocks, holding him close as he thrust into him from below. Jake threw his head back, groaning long and loud as Matthew moved, bracing himself on Jake’s shoulders.

Matthew’s fingers tightened on Jake’s skin. “Jake....”

Jake managed to open his eyes and moved his hands to Matthew’s back so he could sit up, preserving their connection. He kissed Matthew as the two of them moved together, gentler now but no less sure, and Matthew whispered against his mouth happily. “Love you, Jake. God, I love you.”

Matthew leaned forward, wrapping his arms around Jake, his head against Jake’s neck. Jake hung on, holding his beautiful man tight, smelling the wet heat of sex between them, Matthew’s sweat and musk mingling with his own, the breeze playing across their overheated skin.

Matthew’s cries became higher, and Jake felt Matthew tremble against him, teetering at the precipice. Jake held him, bending his head to whisper, “Love you too, baby. So much.”

Matthew stiffened with a ragged cry, fingers kneading Jake’s flesh, and his seed hit hot and wet against Jake’s belly, his ass milking Jake’s cock. Jake came with a low growl, clutching Matthew hard against him,

needing Matthew to feel how good it was for him, this connection they had. Jake felt his lover's smile against his cheek, and the aftershocks intensified, just for a moment.

Jake dropped back on the blanket, letting Matthew push him down, letting him guide their bodies to his satisfaction. A sudden breeze sprang up, carrying a reminder of the coming night, and Jake wondered if he should move yet. His fingers played lazily over the pool of sweat at the base of Matthew's spine and he waited.

Out of the corner of his eye, Jake saw the looming bulk of the jagged mountains standing firm under the wide sky. He turned his head at a flicker of movement, and saw their two horses grazing a respectable distance away, heads down in the thick sage and wheatgrass, the sun's dying rays casting them in a magical light. Jake had always loved this place, the vast, rolling badlands soothing his heart. And yet, he reflected, he'd never known true peace until now.

"D'you think this is what they mean in the movies when they say happily ever after?" he asked softly.

Matthew raised his head, his gentle blue eyes smiling down into Jake's, and Jake's heart swelled. Without waiting for a response, he pulled Matthew down for another kiss.



KATE ROMAN has never been involved with the adult entertainment industry, but it's gotta be better than her day job as an IT consultant. Until stardom (or the lottery) comes calling, she reads, writes and gardens in Northern California, ably assisted by a motley assortment of foster dogs, one cat, and four rabbits who are absolutely no help whatsoever.

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# *The Meaning of Perfection*

Taylor Lochland

It didn't feel like I'd been asleep for long when Jack pounced on me, startling me fully awake. "Hey, Felix!"

"Damn it, asshole! Get off me." Jack was my best friend, roommate, and colleague. I loved him like a brother, but sometimes I wanted to throttle him. I shoved him off to the other side of the bed and pulled the blankets back up to my chin. "You just getting home?"

"Heh. Sorry about that." He sat up and grinned sheepishly, running his fingers through his spiky blond hair. "Yeah. Ol' Max paid for an all-nighter. Anyway, you know that old Greek-looking hotel on Forest Street? The Portara?"

"Yeah, I've seen it. What about it?"

"Well, Max wanted to go there to spend the night. Good thing too. Turns out the owner's cool with guys like us, and he understands how it can be tough sometimes to find a decent and private place to do our business."

It wasn't *always* difficult to find a place, but ever since Jack had an incident with a stalker and we switched to doing outcalls only, the problem did crop up at times. Most of our clients were fine with springing for a hotel room if they didn't want us to come to their homes, but not all of them could regularly afford that.

"So," Jack continued. "He says we're welcome to use his hotel whenever we want. He can do either nightly or hourly rates, and we can get the rooms at a discount, since we'll be bringing him business and all. There's just one more thing, though." He paused to yawn. "I have to service him once a week."

"Do you have to do him for free?"

"Nah. But he gets a discount. Fair trade for the room deal, I think."

"Hotel owner, huh? He's not some creepy old dude, is he?" Not

that we never dealt with creepy old dudes, but we were never stuck in a weekly contract with one.

“No, he seems cool. He’s not really old, maybe in his mid-thirties, and he looks fine. A little nerdy, but kinda cute. The hotel’s pretty awesome too—lots of Greek columns and statues everywhere. Anyway, I told him about you, so you should come with me to meet him later if you’re not busy. That way, he’ll know who you are.”

“Yeah, later. And go back to your own damn room.” I closed my eyes and quickly fell back asleep, wishing Jack could have waited until we were both awake to share his news.

JACK’S cell phone rang as we approached the building, and he took it out of his pocket and glanced at the display. “I gotta take this call. Go on ahead; I’ll catch up in a minute.”

I opened the door and went inside. There didn’t appear to be anybody behind the front desk, so I decided to have a look around. Jack wasn’t kidding about the Greek statues—there were gods and goddesses in every corner. In the lobby, there was a fountain with a pair of naked male statues in the center, one holding the other in his arms. I wandered closer to get a better look.

“That’s Apollo and Hyacinth,” a voice said from behind me. “A sad story from Greek mythology. Are you familiar with it?”

I turned around and looked into the dark green eyes of an attractive man with neatly trimmed auburn hair and a pleasant smile. “No, I’m afraid I’m not.”

“Well, to sum it up, Apollo and Hyacinth were lovers. One day, they were out practicing their discus throwing, and Apollo’s throw ended up hitting Hyacinth in the face, accidentally killing him. One version of the story says it bounced, but the most commonly known one says that Zephyr, the god of the west wind, was in love with Hyacinth. He was jealous and blew the discus off course. Apollo grieved and created the hyacinth flower out of Hyacinth’s blood.”

“Damn.” I looked at the statue again, and thought I could see the sadness carved into the god’s features.

“Hey, what are you doing depressing my friend?” Jack said as he caught up.

“Ah, then you must be Felix.” The green-eyed man extended a

hand to me. “Nice to meet you.”

I accepted the handshake. “Nice to meet you too, um....” I glanced around to see if he had a name tag of any sort, since Jack hadn’t told me the man’s name, and I hadn’t thought to ask.

“It’s Julian, but everybody calls me ‘The Professor’.” He touched the rim of his glasses in response to my questioning look. “It’s because of these, and the fact that I like to read a lot. Mostly the classics.”

“That’s cool.” I couldn’t help but smile at him. I had a thing for the intellectual types.

Jack patted me on the back and turned to Julian. “I already told him the deal. I just wanted to bring him by so you guys could meet.”

Julian nodded. “Thank you. If you or your clients have any concerns or questions, feel free to come find me.”

“Okay.” I put a hand on his arm and lowered my voice. “By the way, I’d be willing to provide the same service as Jack, if you’re interested. It would only be fair, since I’m getting the same deal.”

Julian averted his eyes a little from my intense stare. “Thank you. I’ll keep that in mind. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’m a little short-handed tonight, so I have to cover the front desk.” He gave me a polite nod before taking his leave of me. I watched him work for a few minutes, until Jack tapped me on the shoulder and reminded me that we both had clients to meet.

OVER the next few months, Julian and I became friends. Whenever a client wanted to meet me at the hotel, I’d intentionally show up early. Julian would sit with me near the fountain and we’d talk—I usually let him choose the subject. I honestly didn’t care what we talked about as long as I got to spend some time with him.

As one might guess from the way he decorated the hotel, he had a passion for Greek mythology. He loved to tell me the stories, and I loved to listen to him tell them. “You really should be a professor,” I said one day after he’d finished telling me the tale of Zeus and Ganymede.

His cheeks flushed. “I thought about it, but I’m not really comfortable talking to groups.” I didn’t press the matter, since I really didn’t have the right to question anybody’s choice of occupation.

It turned out that running the hotel wasn’t originally his choice. Ownership was dumped in his lap when his uncle, the original owner,

died unexpectedly. Julian worked there through high school and college, so the family decided he should be the one to run it. Though he suspected his aunt and cousins just wanted to get rid of the place. In any case, he moved in and remodeled it into his own little Greek paradise.

Before I knew what had happened, I'd fallen hard for him. I really tried not to, since falling in love could get very messy for somebody in my line of work. However, his intelligence, kindness, and good looks all worked together to win me over. I tried not to be jealous when Jack had his weekly appointments with Julian, but that was asking a bit much of myself.

ONe night, in the middle of a winter snowstorm, Jack and I had a joint appointment with Neil, one of our regulars. He liked getting both of us at once, and he liked the rooms and the discounts at The Portara. We thought about canceling because of the weather, but he offered to pay us double so we decided to brave it. Of course, I wanted to go because I'd get to see Julian.

Julian gave us a disapproving look when we came in the door. It was the first time I ever saw such a look on his face. "It's horrible out there. I can't believe that guy made you two come out in this shit. I even told most of my staff to stay home." He shook his head and handed us a key. "Anyway, he's in room 6. I made him pay for an entire night, so at least you can camp out here until the storm's over. Though, to be honest, I'd have let you guys stay whether he paid for it or not."

I grinned as I accepted the key. *He cares.* "Thanks, Julian."

"Yeah, thanks, man." Jack winked at him. "See you tomorrow night if I don't see you in the morning."

My jaw tensed a little as I clung to the warm feeling and tried to resist the jealousy.

"Just make sure he pays you plenty well. Good night." Julian waved at us, and then returned his attention to his book.

I went into business mode as we took care of our client. Neil was awfully appreciative that we came out in the storm, and he paid us even more than promised. However, he worked the midnight shift, so he had to leave shortly after we finished. It was fine with me. He was a decent and handsome enough guy as far as our johns went, but I really didn't feel like spending the night with him.

Once he was gone, Jack and I put on our boxers and stretched out in the bed. “Do you know why he’s never taken me up on my offer?” I asked.

“Offering to do Neil alone?”

I sighed. “Not Neil. Julian.”

“The Professor?” Jack’s eyebrow rose. “Your offer to provide similar services as mine, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

He turned to me and studied my face for a long moment. “You got a thing for him, don’t you?”

“What makes you say that?”

“Let’s see... you’re the only one who calls him ‘Julian’, your eyes get this weird look when you talk about him, and you mysteriously show up early whenever you’re supposed to meet somebody here.”

I looked away, unable to meet his gaze. Even though I was usually pretty good about hiding my emotions behind a mask when I needed to, Jack had known me long enough to easily see through it.

When I didn’t answer, he went on. “Anyway, to answer your question, I don’t know. Maybe he’s just comfortable with me. Or....” He reached over and ruffled my hair. “Maybe he’s in love with you but doesn’t want to ruin your friendship.”

“I seriously doubt that.”

“Don’t doubt it.” Jack got under the blankets and rolled onto his side, facing me. “I was serious. We stay up talking some nights, and from what he tells me, he’s had some shitty luck with relationships. So of course he’s afraid of getting involved with anybody. That’s why he pays me.”

Even though I was feeling jealous again—I wished Julian would talk to *me* about personal things like that—Jack’s words made me feel a little more hopeful. “What makes you think he might be interested in *me*?”

“Just something in his eyes when he talks about you. It’s a lot like the look in your eyes when you talk about him.”

“He talks about me?”

“Once in a while, yeah. He really likes having somebody to share those old Greek stories with.”

I smiled. “I see.” There was another question I wanted to ask, but I

wasn't sure if I should. After mulling it over for a moment, I came out with it. "When you're with him, how does he like it?"

"Planning something?"

"No. I just wondered."

"Riiight. Anyway, if you must know, he likes it both ways, but his favorite is getting it up the ass. He likes oral a lot too."

"Ah." I pushed aside the thought of Jack performing those acts with Julian, and instead imagined myself with the honor.

After a few moments of silence, Jack's voice snapped me out of it. "That all?"

"Yeah."

"Good night then." He closed his eyes, and within moments, I heard soft snoring.

I eventually fell asleep as well, but not before spending what seemed like hours staring at the ceiling, trying to figure out a way to get Julian to give me a chance.

As it turned out, I needn't have worried about it. When morning arrived, Jack wasn't feeling very well. Or so he said. "I'm probably coming down with a cold or the flu. Think you can go down to the desk and talk to the Professor for me? I'm gonna be a little slow getting out of bed. And let him know that I'm going to have to cancel our appointment tonight."

Wondering why he didn't just pick up the phone and call Julian, I reached over and touched his forehead. It was cool.

"Just go," he said as he pushed my hand away and pulled the comforter over his head to block me.

It didn't take a genius to figure out what he was doing. Heart pounding, I went downstairs and approached the front desk. However, it was Julian's assistant, Marcus, who greeted me.

"Hey, Marcus. So you made it in through the storm?"

He looked up at me with bleary eyes. "Yeah. I got in around midnight. I couldn't leave the boss to take care of this place by himself all night and all day today, could I? Anyway, need to check out?"

"Soon. My friend isn't feeling well, so he's moving a little slow. Is Julian around?"

"He's probably still asleep. Is there something you need?"

“Actually, I have a personal message for him, but I can talk to him later. Do you know what time he’s planning on getting up?”

Before Marcus could answer, the office door opened behind him. Julian came out, wiping his glasses on the hem of his T-shirt. “Morning, Felix. What’s the message?”

“Hi, Julian.” I stared for a moment, as it was the first time I’d ever seen him without his glasses. It wasn’t that he looked better or worse—I liked him just fine when he was wearing them—but he looked younger somehow. I regained myself as soon as he put them back on and his familiar face gave me a questioning look. Not knowing how much Marcus knew about his boss’s extracurricular activities, I gestured for Julian to follow me to the lobby. “It’s of a personal nature.”

“Sure.” He joined me at the fountain. “Did something happen last night? I don’t know if I trust that Neil guy.”

I shook my head. “No, it’s nothing like that. Jack’s not feeling well, so he wanted me to tell you he’s going to have to cancel your appointment tonight. He would have come down and told you himself, but he’s a little sluggish right now.”

“I see.” His face showed a flicker of disappointment, but he simply nodded. “Thanks for letting me know. Tell him I hope he feels better soon.”

“I will.” I hesitated for just a second and then tentatively touched his arm. “You know, somebody else can take care of you,” I said softly. “The offer I made when we first met still stands.”

After a moment of silent consideration, he opened his mouth. “I’m not sure.”

“Why not? I promise to take good care of you.”

“I don’t know, Felix.” He averted his eyes from mine. “Don’t get me wrong, I like you, but I’m comfortable with Jack. Maybe I’ll just skip this week.”

My fingers ran down his arm to brush his hand. “It’s good to get out of your comfort zone and try something new every so often, isn’t it? We get along well enough outside the bedroom, so we’ll probably do just fine in it.” I hoped I didn’t sound like I was pleading, but there was no way I was going to let this opportunity pass by. If I did, I’d beat myself up over it, and Jack would help.

He looked at me again, and I felt my heart beat several times before



he smiled and nodded. "All right. Come by around ten."

"DAMN, man. Just pick something already," Jack said between exaggerated snuffles as he watched me from the edge of my bed. "Don't know why you wanted my help anyway. Whatever you wear, it's not like you're gonna be wearing it for long."

I turned to him with a smirk. He was right, of course. "Yeah, but I still want to look good."

"You always look good, asshole. Just hurry up so you can fucking leave me in peace."

After I'd wasted a few more minutes rifling through my clothes, Jack got up, reached into the closet, and pulled out my tight black jeans and dark gray silk dress shirt. "There." He thrust them at me and went back to the bed. "And wear your leather jacket."

"Thanks." I got dressed, looked at myself in the mirror, and then turned to Jack. "Well?"

He let out a jaw-cracking yawn. "You look hot. If I wasn't sick, I'd fuck you right now." He got under the blankets and pulled them up so high that all I could see of him was a small tuft of bleach-blond hair. "Now, turn off the light and let me sleep. I'm using your bed, by the way. It's more comfortable, and it's not like you'll be needing it tonight."

"That's the hope. Feel better, Jack. I owe you one." I turned off the light and left the room, closing the door behind me.

I made good time getting to the hotel. The storm from the previous night had passed and the roads were clear. Not that it mattered much; six feet of snow wouldn't have kept me away. At nine-thirty, I parked my car in the lot out front. I ran my fingers through my hair trying to get my unruly waves to behave, took a deep breath, hopped out of the car, and went inside.

Julian looked up from his book and chuckled softly. "You're even early for your appointments with me, I see."

"Sorry." I grinned sheepishly. "I can go wait in the lobby if you want."

"No, it's okay." He closed the book and set it aside. "Marcus is here already. He came in early to flirt with the new cook before she leaves, but I don't think he'll object to a half-hour of overtime." He

picked up a key and tossed it to me. “That’s to room 14. Go on ahead. I’ll be there as soon as Marcus gets set up.”

It was my first time in room 14. I could see why Julian wanted to use it—it looked more like ancient Greece than any of the other rooms I’d been in. Vases painted with scenes from the stories Julian had told me decorated the tables, the bedposts looked like Greek pillars, and there was a mural of what I think was The Parthenon on the wall. When I was done checking out the room, I turned off the light.

Excitement gradually replaced my nervousness as I lay in wait near the door, crouching like a cat. When Julian entered, I pounced on his back, wrapping my arms around him from behind. “Good evening, Professor,” I whispered in his ear, making a purr-like sound in my throat.

Clearly startled, he caught his breath. “You scared the shit out of me.”

“I’m sorry.” I worried for a moment that I’d made a mistake, but when he chuckled softly and patted my arm, I figured all was forgiven. I nuzzled his neck as I slid both of my hands down his arms to lightly grip his wrists.

He turned his head and smiled shyly at me for a moment, then gently freed one hand from my grip and took his wallet out of his pocket. “I usually pay Jack up front. I assume your rates are the same as his?”

Money. I usually did collect it up front when it was my first time with a particular client, but in this case, I hadn’t even thought about it. I would gladly service him for free, but I was worried about scaring him off if I told him so. “You can pay me later, you know. You’re a friend.”

“I’d rather get it out of the way so I don’t need to worry about it.”

“I understand. Anyway, sure. Same as Jack. You can just put it on the table by my jacket.”

The streetlights outside gave just enough light for me to watch him as he counted out the bills and carefully laid them where I’d indicated.

When he turned around to face me again, I approached him, my lips curved into a sly smile. “Now, I’m officially yours for the night.” I walked around him in a slow circle, rubbing my body against his. “So, what would you like me to do for you?”

He put a hand on my arm. “For one thing, stop walking in circles. You’re making me dizzy.”

“As you wish.” I stopped in front of him and leaned in to kiss him

gently. The passion I felt for him threatened to overwhelm me, but I somehow managed to keep it in check. “Is that more to your liking?” I asked as I pulled away.

“It’s better. But I think we need to do something about those clothes of yours.”

My heart was racing, but I kept up my calm exterior. “My clothes... don’t you like them?” I raised my arm and brushed the silken sleeve against his cheek. “I wore them especially for you.”

Julian ran both of his hands over the front of my shirt. “It’s not that I dislike them. They look good on you.” He unbuttoned two buttons, then leaned in and pressed his lips to my chest. “I just like skin a lot better.”

I stood still while he undressed me, though it was difficult. Whenever he exposed a new bit of skin, he kissed it, sometimes sucking gently as well. It drove me crazy. By the time he pulled down my jeans and underwear, I was completely hard, and it took every ounce of willpower I had not to attack him right then. I stepped out of my discarded clothing and kicked it aside. “I’m supposed to be the one pleasing you.”

“It pleases me to please my partner.” To emphasize his words, he kissed the moist crown of my erection and lightly licked the underside, making me shiver. He then got back to his feet. “Do you mind if I turn on a little bit of light? I’d like to see you.”

“Whatever you want.”

He switched on the desk lamp, and a low light bathed the room. He gazed at me, his eyes running up and down the length of my body. “Adonis. You look just like Adonis.”

“You probably say that to all the guys.” I tried to brush it off and not let his words affect me so much. I wasn’t having much luck.

“Nope. You’re the first one I’ve ever said it to.”

“Seriously?”

He nodded. “Seriously.”

I grinned and approached him again. “Thank you. Hearing you say that means more to me than you know.” I grasped the hem of his sweater and started to pull it up, but he stopped me.

“This is going to sound silly, but I enjoy it when my partner’s naked and I’m not. At least for a little while.”

“Hey, no big deal. You’re not the only guy who likes that.” I

wanted to see his body, but I could wait. I let go of his sweater and slid my arms around him. “So, what would you like your naked Adonis to do?”

He thought for a moment. “Just sit down at the edge of the bed for now.”

I did so. “Should I sit like a Greek statue?” I leaned forward and rested my chin on my fist.

“That’s *The Thinker* by Rodin. He was French.” He laughed. “Not exactly Greek.”

“Sorry. I grinned sheepishly and sat up straight. Even though I felt a little foolish from my error, it didn’t bother me much. Hearing his laughter made it worthwhile. “How about this?” I put on my most seductive smile and lounged sideways, letting one elbow support my weight.

“Better. You’re making me wish I had some grapes to feed you.” He sat on the chair by the desk and picked up the pencil and pad of hotel stationery. “You don’t mind if I draw you, do you?”

I raised an eyebrow at the request. “I don’t mind, as long as the drawing doesn’t end up on some naughty Web site.”

He laughed again. “I promise.”

I held the pose while he sketched. By the time he put down the pencil, my arm was starting to ache, but I didn’t care. “Can I see?” I got up and walked over to him.

“Of course.” He turned the paper to show me.

“Wow, you never told me you were an artist.” He’d managed to include a huge amount of detail in such a short amount of time. Everything was in proportion, with highlights and shadows in just the right places. I leaned in as if taking a closer look, but I really just wanted to feel his body heat mingling with mine. “Do you draw all of the guys you’re with?”

“Just the ones who look perfect.”

“I’m hardly perfect.” I couldn’t help but smile at the compliment.

He set the paper down on the desk and pulled me into his lap. After a moment of looking me over, he said “I can’t find a single flaw.”

I knew I had a good body. Otherwise, I wouldn’t make such a good living by renting it out. Still, nobody’s perfect. I shifted and pointed to a dark mole on my left hip. “There. I have a blemish.”

“This little thing?” He caressed it with his index finger. “It doesn’t take away from your beauty at all. That means it’s not a flaw.”

“Well, thank you. I’m glad you think so.” I shifted and straddled him, wrapping my arms around his neck. “You’re not so bad yourself.” I kissed him hard, pushing my tongue past his lips to explore the inside of his mouth. I was thrilled by how quickly he responded to me. He kissed me back, and I felt one of his hands tangling in my hair and the other pressing against the small of my back. My heart raced and I reminded myself over and over that for once, I wasn’t dreaming. Breathless, I finally broke the kiss. “How do you want it, Julian?”

He thought for a moment. “Just stay in my lap.” The hand that had been in my hair slid down the front of my body. “I want to make you come, and I want to watch your face while I do it.” He wrapped his fingers around my erection, making my breath come in sharply.

“But what about you?”

“It’s for me just as much as it’s for you.” He smiled and gently started to pump. “We’ll worry about the rest later.”

I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and sat there while his hand worked my organ, pumping slowly with a light grip at first, but gradually getting more vigorous. His eyes remained fixed on my face, which might have made me feel uncomfortable or self-conscious before I’d started working in the sex business, but now, it was nothing. Anyway, I enjoyed looking into his eyes. I leaned in once to nip at his neck and felt his hand slow down again. I guess he really didn’t want me to finish when he couldn’t see my face very well.

His free hand slid up to my chest and stroked my nipples until they were hard. I pressed against the touch and moaned, and could see the hint of a smile playing on his lips as soon as the sound was out of my mouth. I grinned at him and then looked down to watch what he was doing. He wasn’t the first person who wanted to pleasure me before being pleased himself, but for once, I didn’t have to pretend or imagine I was with somebody else. His thumb started to massage the head of my cock as he pumped, and soon after that, my muscles tightened and I gasped out his name. He put a hand under my chin and raised it, watching me intently as my seed spilled out. “Beautiful,” he whispered, leaning in to kiss my cheek. “There’s nothing like the sight of a gorgeous man in that moment of ecstasy. It’s absolute perfection.”

I felt my face get warm. I couldn’t remember the last time I

blushed. “Thank you.” I pressed my lips to his neck. “You’re all about seeing and watching, aren’t you?”

“Yes. Is there something wrong with that?”

I put my hand on the bulge in his khakis and gave it a gentle squeeze. “No, not at all. I just think it’s time we moved on to your sense of touch.” I slid off his lap and pulled him to his feet. “Anything in particular you want me to do? Do you want to do it between my thighs like the ancient Greeks?”

He laughed. “So you know about that, do you?”

“Of course. You told me.”

“I guess I did. Anyway, whatever you’d like to do would be fine.”

I considered for a moment. Using my thighs just didn’t seem intimate enough. I knew I wasn’t quite physically able to take him up the ass so soon after having an orgasm, but I could take care of him his second favorite way. I retrieved a small bottle of lube from my jacket pocket and dropped it on the floor within easy reach, then returned to him and took hold of the waistband of his pants. “Can I take these off you now?”

“Just the pants. And the underwear, of course.”

I touched his chest and fingered a nipple through the knit of his sweater. “Do you mind if I ask why?”

“It’s just a fetish I have.”

“All right,” I said with a shrug. I’d seen all sorts of fetishes in my work, so it didn’t strike me as odd. I wanted to see him, but even more, I wanted him to be happy. I sank to my knees, unbuttoned his pants, and slowly pulled down the zipper. When I freed his swollen organ from the fabric, my disappointment over not getting to see him completely naked was forgotten.

I touched the tip of my tongue to the precum, letting its salty taste fill my mouth. That little taste made me want to drink every drop of him, so I quickly took his swollen cock into my mouth and sucked greedily. As soon as I started to move my head forward and backward, I heard the sweet sound of his moans and felt his hand in my hair. I reached for the lube, opened it, and squirted some out onto my fingers—all without losing my rhythm. He sucked in his breath when I teased the skin just outside his entrance, and let it out in a gasp when I pushed the slick finger inside. I shifted it around until I felt his sweet spot. If I didn’t

already know what I was looking for, the moan he let out would have told me I struck gold.

I threw myself into the act, using every ounce of the skill I'd honed in my years as a sex worker. It almost felt like every blowjob I'd ever given was just practice for this one.

Putting a little more pressure into the prostate massage, I swirled my tongue around the head of his cock as I sucked even harder and moved my head even faster. It was no surprise when I glanced up and saw him watching me.

His legs tensed and shook, and I kept up both the pace and the pressure until his orgasm was complete. I swallowed all of the fluid he gave me, then removed my finger and released the softening organ from my mouth.

"Was that good?" I asked as he sank to the floor beside me.

"Of course it was." He put his arms around me and hugged me to his chest, wearing a smile of satisfaction on his face. "Thank you."

We sat in silence for a few minutes, both of us recovering our strength. Eventually, he got back to his feet. "I'm just going to clean up. I'll be right back." While he was in the bathroom, I climbed into the bed and got under the covers. I buried my face in a handful of blankets and inhaled deeply. Now that I was familiar with Julian's scent, I didn't want to let it go.

"Do you like the smell of the fabric softener or something?" he asked when he returned.

I felt my face get warm. "No, but I found another smell I like." I held up one side of the blankets, inviting him to join me.

He turned off the lamp, took off his glasses and set them down on the nightstand, then lay down next to me. "Good night, Felix."

"Night, Julian." We snuggled up against each other. I was completely naked, and he was still naked only from the waist down.

We both fell asleep easily, but I woke up in the middle of the night. I was in no rush to get back to sleep. Wanting to remember as much of this night as possible, I lay awake, listening to the rhythm of his breathing and taking in his body heat. A couple of times, I brushed my hand over the smooth skin of his legs and ran my fingers up to his hips, keeping my touch light so as not to wake him.

Finally, when the sunlight filled the room, he opened his eyes and

blinked. “What time is it?”

“Morning to you too.” I leaned in and stole a kiss. “It’s almost eight.”

“Ah.” He got up and picked the clothes up off the floor. “Well, thanks for filling in for Jack last night. I need to take a shower, but you’re free to head out whenever you’re dressed. I guess I’ll talk to you the next time you’re around.” He tossed me my shirt and pants and turned away to head to the bathroom.

My heart sank as I watched him go. *That’s it?* Ignoring the clothes, I got out of bed and followed after him. “Julian?”

He sighed and looked down at the floor, his hand halfway to the shower knob. “I’m sorry, but could you give me a bit of privacy so I can take a shower? I have some business to attend to this morning.”

“Let me shower with you. I need to clean up too.” I forced a smile. “And I can help you with those hard-to-reach areas.”

“No. If you really want to take a shower now, you can use one of the empty rooms. I’ll call Marcus and tell him to give you a key.”

My smile faded. “If I can’t shower with you, I’ll just wait until I get home.” I remained in the doorway, not yet willing to leave his presence.

When the silence was getting too uncomfortable, he approached me and put a hand on my shoulder. “Felix, I’m really sorry if I ever gave you the wrong impression, but last night was simply a business transaction.”

“Business transaction?” I had no reason to feel insulted, since he was technically right. He paid me and I performed a service. Still, to me, it was something much more.

“Yes. You did a fantastic job, and you’re free to go now.” He gently nudged me out the door. “Bye, Felix. I’ll talk to you soon, okay?”

I thought I caught a glimpse of sadness in his eyes as he closed the door without giving me a chance to answer.

Feeling numb, I got dressed and sat on the bed for a moment, staring at the mural on the wall. I could hear the shower running, and I thought about barging in and confessing my feelings. Instead, I took the money he’d paid me and put it on the nightstand—near his glasses so he’d be sure to find it. Sometimes, feelings were better expressed without words.



AS I drove home, my disappointment gradually turned to anger. By the time I reached my building, I was steaming. I stomped up the stairs and slammed the apartment door behind me, heedless of the neighbors and of Jack. Even though it was early for drinking, I got a beer out of the fridge and sat down with it at the kitchen table.

“Hey.” Jack came into the kitchen wearing nothing but his boxers. “I wasn’t expecting you back for at least another hour or two.”

“I wasn’t expecting to be back yet either.” I opened the bottle and took a long drink. “Asshole.”

“Huh? What’d I do?”

“Not you.” I rolled my eyes. “By the way, you look much healthier today than you did yesterday.”

“Yeah. Quick recovery.” He ran a hand through his hair and smiled. Joining me at the table, but with orange juice instead of beer, he gave me a long look. “Are you gonna tell me what happened?”

“No.” I chugged the rest of the beer, then returned to the fridge for another.

“Fine. No skin off my nose.” He shrugged, but he wasn’t doing a very good job of hiding his annoyance.

“Listen, Jack. Sorry for being an ass.” I quickly swallowed half of the second beer. “I appreciate what you did for me. Unfortunately, let’s just say things didn’t work out.” I finished my drink and set the empty bottle on the table.

“I’m sorry to hear that. Especially after I lost a night’s work for you.” He got up and stood behind me. “To be honest, I’m not sure love’s meant for guys like us,” he said, leaning down and hugging me from behind. “Too complicated, you know?”

“Yeah.” I patted his hands and pressed my cheek against his arm. “Too bad you and I are so incompatible.”

“And we know that from experience, don’t we? I still have the scars.” Jack ruffled my hair and pulled away. “Let’s never try that again. It’s a wonder we came out of it still friends.”

“Seriously.” I stared at my empty beer bottle until my vision wavered. “You know, I think I need to rest.” I stood up, a little wobbly from the combination of emotions, lack of sleep, and alcohol.

“I think you do too.” Jack helped me to my bed. I passed out, still

wearing my clothes, and didn't wake up again until my phone rang late in the afternoon. I quickly answered it hoping it might be Julian, but it was just one of my regular clients wanting to set up a meeting for that night.

I GOT through the next week without going anywhere near The Portara. I *wanted* to go there; even if I couldn't be Julian's lover, I valued his friendship. However, being so close to him would probably be painful, and I was worried I'd say something I might later regret. There was also a little evil part of me that wanted to make him miss me. A few clients wanted to go there, but I simply told them I was checking out new places to increase the options. If they protested, I offered to throw in an extra service or two. That always worked.

Trying to come up with something that might help my chances with Julian, I started checking out the course offerings at the local community college. Maybe he'd like me better if I used my brain instead of just my body. I also spent a fair amount of my free time at the library. I'd go with the intention of reading some myths and stories on my own, but I always found myself rereading the ones Julian had already told me, hearing his voice saying the words in my head.

When the time came for his weekly appointment with Julian, Jack offered to come up with an excuse to cancel. I told him to go on and not worry about me. He'd already lost one night for my sake. There was no reason to lose another one.

As it turned out, I would be occupied with a client anyway, so it wasn't as if I'd be moping around in need of comfort. It helped that my client was Gregory—one of my regulars who liked it fast and rough.

Gregory was perfect for me that night, and not only because of how he liked his sex. There was also the fact that he only called me when a friend of his was out of town and let him use his loft, so he didn't need to worry about a hotel room. As soon as we got started, I let myself go and got lost in the act. The sex was wild, sweaty, and animalistic. It was therapeutic for me, and I almost felt bad for charging him. He was quite pleased with my performance, however, so he paid me gladly.

I got home a little after midnight, and was surprised to see Jack's car in the lot. He usually stayed with Julian until morning. When I entered the apartment, I heard his voice over the sounds of the television. "I think you broke him, man."

“What are you talking about?” I could guess at the answer, but I wanted to hear it. I took off my jacket and hung it up, then joined him on the sofa.

“What do you think I’m talking about? He couldn’t get it up.”

“Julian?”

Jack raised an eyebrow. “Of course. Who else?”

My heart started to beat a little faster, and I turned my head a little to try to hide my grin. I got a little bit of joy out of the knowledge that he couldn’t perform with Jack, as cruel as that may sound.

“Anyway, yeah,” Jack continued. “Needless to say, nothing happened. He asked about you, though.”

“Oh?” My breath caught in my throat.

“He just wanted to know how you were doing. I think he misses you. You should stop by the hotel tomorrow and talk to him.”

I thought about it for a moment. I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to see him. Still, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to set myself up for disappointment again. “Maybe.”

“Maybe? Come on. You’ve been moping around this place long enough and you’re getting annoying. Now you’re making him act all mopey too. And I know you want to see each other.”

“Sorry. I’ll go see him.” I paused. “Jack, I’m curious... does he ever take his shirt off when he’s with you?” I’d been meaning to ask him about that all week.

“He didn’t for awhile, but he does now. I take it you didn’t see it then?”

“See what?”

“He has a birthmark. It’s really no big deal, but he thinks it’s ugly.”

“Nothing could make him ugly.” It made sense, though. After he’d gone on about how perfect he mistakenly thought I was, he probably felt self-conscious about it. I stared at my feet until Jack’s voice broke the silence.

“I don’t know the details of what happened between you guys and it’s probably not my place to say this, but, I’m pretty sure he does feel something for you. He didn’t seem like the same ol’ Professor tonight. He just seemed kind of... distracted. You know? And when he asked about you, there was that something in his eyes again.”

I thought about that, and the more I thought about it, the more

anxious I got to see Julian. There was no way I was going to be able to wait until morning. Still, I had to get Gregory's smell off me first, so I stood up and headed for the bathroom for a quick shower.

"Got another john calling you or something?" Jack asked when I returned about fifteen minutes later, wearing clean clothes and running my fingers through my damp hair to work out the tangles.

"No. I'm going to the hotel."

"Felix, I don't know, man. He seemed out of it, so he's probably sleeping by now."

"If he is, I'll wake him up. I have to find out what the fuck's going on in his head. See you tomorrow."

"Good luck then," I heard him say as I headed out and closed the door behind me.

I USUALLY drove near the speed limit—didn't want to have to talk to a cop for any reason—but I drove ten miles over on my way to The Portara. Maybe Julian really did feel something for me. On the other hand, it frustrated the hell out of me that he pushed me away. By the time I arrived at the hotel, I was so antsy that I leapt out of my car, not bothering to lock it before hurrying into the building.

"Late for an appointment?" Marcus asked with a smirk as I ran up to the front desk.

"No. Do you know where Julian is?"

"Your friend left a while ago, so I'm guessing Julian's asleep by now."

"I need to talk to him."

"I don't think he wants to be disturbed. Can it wait until morning?"

The look on my face must have been enough to give him my answer, because a second later, he sighed and shrugged. "Guess not. Room 14. Just don't tell him you got the information from me."

"Sure. Thanks."

Room 14—the room we used for our night together. As I knocked on the door—softly, so as not to disturb the other guests—I wondered how often he used that room for his encounters. When there was no response, I knocked a little louder. A few seconds later, I heard what sounded like a soft sigh followed by footsteps.

"What is it, Mar—" His voice cut off when he opened the door and

saw it was me. “Felix? What are you doing here at this hour?” He quickly pulled his robe closed in the front, but not before I caught a glimpse of the discoloration on his skin.

Instead of answering his question, I grabbed his shoulders, looked him in the eye, and hungrily pressed my mouth to his. I forced my way into the room as I kissed him, kicking the door closed behind me. His lips were rigid under mine at first, but I persisted until they softened. I walked him to the bed and nudged him to lie down without breaking the kiss. I finally released his lips and sat up, untying the belt of his robe and pushing the soft terrycloth aside, revealing the pink birthmark covering his chest from just above his left nipple all the way to his armpit.

“Felix, I don’t wa—”

I brushed his lips with my fingertips. “You don’t want me to see this?” I touched the mark with my other hand. “Do you really think so little of me that you worried I’d care about it? Please don’t tell me this is why you pushed me away.”

“It’s a reason, but not the only one. I’ve been wanting to try removal surgery—”

“Shhh. You’re just fine as you are.” The birthmark wasn’t very dark, but it was large enough that I understood why he felt self-conscious about it. I leaned over and kissed it in its entirety, then worked my way down the front of his body and continued until I reached his boxers. I pulled them off and dropped them on the floor.

“Fe-Felix.” He gasped when my tongue ran up and down his cock until it was hard.

“So you *can* still get it up. At least for me.” I got to my feet, smiling at the redness that now colored his face. “Turn over onto your stomach.” When he did, I put my hands on the white cheeks of his ass and gently spread them apart, exposing the pinkness between.

His breathing hitched as soon as my tongue touched the sensitive skin. Encouraged, I quickly dampened both of my index fingers with my mouth and pushed them just inside his entrance. I closed my eyes and sighed, savoring the inner heat and the flavor of the man I desired.

I was so lost in the sensation that it took me a moment to notice he was moving his hips and softly saying my name over and over. I stood up, plunging my fingers deeper until I felt his prostate. I massaged it and watched as he writhed under my touch. Seeing him like that was almost enough to make me climax right there. “What’s wrong, Julian?” His

name rolled off my tongue. “Don’t you like it?”

“I do.” He turned his head to look at me, his face still flushed. “But I need more of you.”

I nodded and gave that sensitive spot one last rub before removing my fingers. I quickly stripped out of my clothes and retrieved a couple of items from my jacket pocket. Julian watched as I put on the condom and squeezed some lubricant out onto my hand. I breathed on the gel, warming it, then returned to the bed and rubbed the substance around and inside his opening, making sure it was slick. “I want to be able to watch you this time.”

“I have no complaints about that.” He turned over onto his back and adjusted his glasses.

“Good.” I pulled him so that his rear was at the edge of the bed, got into position between his legs, and then slowly entered him. I groaned softly as his body squeezed me, and I gazed at him, reminding myself just whose body it was. I reached out a hand and caressed his upper body, my fingers tracing the outline of his birthmark. I remembered what he’d said about the mole on my hip—how it wasn’t a flaw, since it didn’t take away from my beauty. I felt the same way about his mark. “You’re amazing, Julian. No lie.”

He smiled at me and caught one of my hands, bringing it to his lips. “You’re the first person to tell me that.”

I returned his smile and slowly started to thrust as my hand continued its course down the front of his body. I gently took hold of his erection and pumped. His moans—and the knowledge that I was the one causing them—sent chills down my spine. I was no stranger to that sound, but it was much sweeter hearing it in his voice. I leaned forward many times during the act, wanting to kiss him. Apparently, the feeling was mutual, because he raised his head and shoulders off the bed, meeting my lips with his own whenever he saw me coming. I gradually sped up the pace, and when our moans got louder and his back arched off the bed, I straightened so I could watch the expression on his face as he climaxed. Seeing him was enough to bring me over the edge as well, and I know he watched me too.

“Julian...” I collapsed on top of him and took his face in my hands, kissing him deeply once more. When we broke the kiss, I rested my head on his chest and listened to the sounds of his heartbeat. “Julian, please don’t push me away again,” I said when my breathing regulated

enough for me to speak.

He sighed softly and buried a hand in my hair. "I never wanted to push you away."

"So why did you? You said your birthmark wasn't the only reason. For which I'm glad, I might add. I'd hate for you to think I'm that superficial."

"A lot of guys are."

"Sure, but a lot aren't. Anyway, I've seen bodies of all types in my line of work. Your mark's really nothing."

"I'm glad you think so." I could hear the smile in his voice. After a few seconds, he sighed. "I just promised I wouldn't do this to myself anymore."

"Do what?"

"Get involved with a... with somebody like you. I mean, beyond just doing business with you guys to take care of my physical needs. It's hard for me to get out and meet people." The hand in my hair massaged my scalp. "Anyway, there've been two others, and both relationships ended badly. The first wasn't a... an escort, but he did erotic massage. You know, a massage with a happy ending. He eventually fell for one of his clients and left me. The other did the same work as you. I thought I could handle it, but I started getting jealous when I thought of him with other men. He quit the job for me, but then I ended up leaving him. I kept wondering how I measured up to all the guys he'd been with."

"I guess he didn't reassure you enough."

"He tried, but it never sank in."

I could imagine how he felt, though I hadn't been in very many relationships myself. I propped myself on my elbows so I could look him in the eye. "Well, you learned from your previous experiences, right? And as they say, third time's a charm. If you're at all interested in me, give me a chance."

Julian reached up and brushed back a loose strand of my hair. "I've been interested in you since the moment I saw you."

"But you were scared to get too close to me. I get it. So, what do you say?"

He looked slightly to the side, and I could tell by the look on his face that he was considering the question.

"Now that I know the feeling's mutual, I'm not going to leave you

alone.” I tilted my head and nibbled at his neck. “So you may as well say yes.”

He giggled softly and squirmed a little. “Quit that; it tickles.” When I stopped and met his eyes again, he smiled and nodded. “Okay. Let’s give it a shot.”

My heart leapt, and I smiled the biggest smile I had in a long time. “Excellent. I promise to treat you right.”

“Felix, I have to tell you... I’m probably going to be jealous again. To be honest, I already am.”

“Don’t worry about that. I’m only two years away from thirty, so it’s probably almost time for me to retire anyway. I’m actually thinking of going to college. You know, try doing something with my brain instead of my body for once.”

“Oh?” His eyes widened a bit in interest. “And what are you planning on studying?”

I flopped down on my side next to him. “I haven’t decided for sure yet, but I was thinking about classical literature.”

“Classical literature, huh?” He laughed. It was such a beautiful sound. “Just don’t get your hopes up that you’ll actually be able to do anything with it. I have a degree in classical lit, and I run a hotel. You just might end up working for me here.”

I settled my head down against his chest again. “I think that would be perfect.”



TAYLOR LOCHLAND has been reading and writing for as long as she can remember. As a child and a teenager, she spent many weekends holed up in her room with her books. If she didn't like something about a story, she'd often take it upon herself to write her own version. As an adult, she became involved in the anime fandom, which led to an interest in fanfiction and text-based online role-playing. She later abandoned fanfiction when she discovered creating her own characters was more fun.

She's lived in the Detroit metropolitan area her entire life. When she's not reading or writing, she can often be found playing with her cats, sewing, looking at the night sky, watching baseball or hockey, or going to anime conventions.

Taylor is most creative after midnight, but unfortunately has a job that usually requires her to be awake by 7:30am. She just knows that the sleep deprivation will catch up to her one of these days.

Taylor's blog: <http://taylor-lochland.livejournal.com>

# See Me, Feel Me

Zahra Owens

“CAN you do me a favor?”

“That depends,” Demme answered suspiciously. It wasn’t that he didn’t trust his friend, but Lee had a tendency to play practical jokes on him and Demme had to admit he fell for them every time.

“I have a good client to see tonight and I can’t make it. I have an audition to go to—one that might mean I can quit this lousy job and finally move on to something I do for fun instead of just money, man.”

Demme sighed. “So this is one of your regulars?”

“Oh yeah. Been to his house three or four times now. He knows the drill. No touching. Who knows? If I move to the big time, he could be your regular date.”

Lee giggled and Demme didn’t trust that. He desperately needed the money, though, and a nice, polite client sounded good, especially if he had the potential to become a regular. “Okay, I’ll do it. But if I don’t like him, I’m not going back!”

“He’s an understanding guy. If you don’t like him, don’t give him your number.”

Demme jotted down the client’s details and flicked his cell phone shut. He’d have to run to make it across town in time. Sometimes he wished he could just take a cab, like Lee usually did, but cabs were expensive, so he jogged in the direction of the subway, his backpack with everything he’d need flung over his shoulder.

IN high school, Demme was the toast of the school. Despite the fact he wasn’t a jock, he knew he could get any girl he wanted, including the cheerleaders. He was the pretty boy, with doe-like brown eyes, nonchalant dark curls, and a nice, tight frame. Rumors that he was well hung soon spread from the locker room, and that made even more girls

turn his way. His only problem was that he didn't want any of the girls, and when his classmates found out he spent his after-school hours at a dance studio, he got labeled as the queer, the fruit, the queen. It wasn't far from the truth, but at the time he couldn't admit it. Now, ten years later, after dropping out of high school to pursue a dance career and then injuring his back, he was finally getting his life on track again. He'd passed his GED and was taking college classes, but since he had to cough up all the money for that by himself, he'd found it hard to find a job that left him with time to study as well.

When Lee told him what he did for a living, Demme had resolutely said no. He wasn't about to sell his body for a couple of bucks. But Lee was adamant that with Demme's looks and his smooth dance moves, he could cater to a special brand of client, the ones who wanted to look and not touch. Lee introduced Demme to his agent, a woman who claimed she only found jobs for artists, but whose clientele was decidedly shadier than the average producer's. She didn't want to know exactly what Demme or Lee did with their clients, as long as she got ten percent of their earnings. Most of the jobs she got them were bachelorette parties and strip-o-grams, but when word got out, the occasional gay man would pay them on the side to perform solo. She didn't breathe down their necks too much, so they pretty much set their own standards. Demme ended up with a nice line of regular clients for which he stripped off his clothes while some of them drooled and others masturbated. He didn't mind if they touched themselves or got off from watching, as long as they kept their hands to themselves.

AFTER a swift run up the subway stairs, Demme was panting when he arrived in front of the opulent house. He paced in front of the door, trying to calm his breathing. The last thing he wanted was to come across as rushed and nervous; he had to at least pretend to be a professional. Demme lifted his hand to ring the doorbell, but retracted it quickly when he heard a voice asking him to come in, shortly followed by the door buzzer. He pushed the door open and felt just paranoid enough to look around the entrance for a camera. There wasn't one he could make out, but he still felt watched.

"Walk straight through to the back, please," the same slightly rough voice said, and Demme couldn't tell where the voice came from. It was dark in the hallway and although he could just make out the walls

and the doors, there was no light visible underneath them. Demme chuckled when he realized he was wondering whether he'd walked into a vampire's lair. No, Lee wouldn't do that to him. Would he?

The door at the end of the hallway was ajar and Demme knocked before entering. There was a little more light in the room, but it was all indirect and he couldn't make out if there was anyone inside until he heard that voice again.

"Why don't you set up in the usual place and wait for me?"

Demme had no idea where the usual place was, so he looked around the room and saw that near the large French windows, there was an alcove with a loveseat and a few steps leading up to it.

"Up here okay for you?" he asked no one in particular, hoping the voice would answer.

"You're not Lee."

Demme sighed, but he recovered almost immediately. "No, I'm not, but Lee sent me. He thought you'd like me."

"And why did he think that?"

Demme tried to look in the direction of the voice. "I don't know. You tell me," he answered rather cockily.

"Why don't you come a little closer and sit down here?"

"No touching," Demme answered. "Didn't Lee tell you?"

A lean, inconspicuous man moved out of the shadows and into view. "I know." He gestured in the general direction of the couch opposite the one he was sitting in. "You can sit there where I can't reach you. And I'll gladly pay you extra for your time."

Although he wasn't totally comfortable yet, the promise of extra money sounded good to Demme, so he walked toward the sofa and sat down at a safe distance.

"Forgive me. You must think it's awfully dark in here. You can turn on any lights you like. There's a lamp on the table next to you," the man instructed.

Demme patted the table to find the small switch and flicked on the light. His eyes had adjusted to the dark already, so even though it wasn't a very bright light, it still made him squint. He hoped the man didn't think it made him look silly.

"What's your name?"

"Ehm, Demme," Demme said hesitantly.

“Well, ehm, Demme, that’s an unusual name.”

Demme wasn’t quite sure whether the man was mocking him by mimicking the way he’d introduced himself, but he knew from experience that if he wanted to make a few bucks, he better not take things personally. In his line of work, he encountered all sorts of men and most of them weren’t equipped with all the social graces. If they were, they’d be picking up men in a bar for free, not dialing a cell phone and paying for a little company.

“I have a weird mother,” Demme eventually confessed. “I also have a sister named Styx.”

“Oh dear.” The man chuckled. “Poor girl. I bet she gets teased a lot!”

What little Demme could see of the man pleased him. His smile was warm and seemed genuine, although there was something strange about his eyes. Maybe it had to do with the fact this man seemed quite comfortable living in the dark. “Not too much,” Demme answered. “She’s a Goth, so it suits her to a tee.”

“Ah, I see.” The man nodded.

“So what do I call you?” Demme asked.

“I’m Scott, but you can call me Kip,” the man answered seemingly without thinking, giving Demme the idea that he either used that name all the time, or it was in fact his own name.

“And you think I have a weird name? How did ‘Scott’ become ‘Kip’?” Demme asked, but then he realized it was really none of his business. “I’m sorry; I’m prying. You don’t need to answer that.”

“That’s okay.” Kip flashed an irresistible smile at Demme. “I’m Scott Emerson Huntington the Fourth.” He sighed demonstratively. “In my family the firstborn son doesn’t just get that name, but also gets the nickname Kip, which he passes on to his firstborn son. Of course in my case, that isn’t going to happen.”

“So there will be no Scott Emerson Huntington the Fifth? That’s a bit sad,” Demme stated, realizing he was having quite a personal conversation with a client and that he actually felt fairly comfortable, even though he didn’t know the man. He had to get down to business, though. He wasn’t here to talk, after all. “Anyway, where did you want me to set up?”

Kip waved in the general direction of the little alcove. “That’s sort

of a natural stage, don't you think? Is that enough space for you?"

Demme nodded. "Sure. It'll do nicely." He got up from his seat and took off his jacket. Then the phone rang. Not wanting to eavesdrop, Demme took his CD player out of his bag and put it on the table while Kip answered. He heard Kip speak in subdued tones until he ended the call.

"Listen, Demme. I'm sorry, but there's someone coming over and.... Can I call you again another time? I'll pay you for your time now, of course."

"Yeah, sure." Demme packed up his CD player and put on his jacket. "Listen, I didn't do anything yet, so it's okay. No need to pay me."

"Are you kidding?" Kip answered while he took out his wallet. "You came all the way across town for this, and we talked. It's not your fault that something came up. I canceled our agreement, so I'll pay you anyway. Don't think you'd be doing this type of work if you had a trust fund, kid."

It wasn't a question. Demme really needed the money. It just didn't feel right to take it when he hadn't worked for it.

"I like your work ethic, but just take the money," Kip insisted. As he got up to hand him the neatly folded bills, Demme finally got a better look at his client. Kip looked to be in his late thirties, with longish, dark hair, but streaked with gray. He was slightly taller than Demme, and quite a bit leaner, more sinewy than Demme's dancer physique. As the light from the lamp he had flicked on earlier caught Kip's eyes, Demme saw they were sparkling blue, but Kip seemed to avoid Demme's gaze.

"Thanks," Demme said as he took hold of the money.

"Can I have your phone number?" Kip asked before letting go of the bills. "So I can call you some other time. You know, when Lee's busy again?"

Demme took out a piece of paper from his backpack to jot down his number. "Here you go." He handed Kip the paper and exchanged it for the money.

"HEY. You're home early," Lee remarked when Demme walked into their apartment. "Date not go well?"

"I can't believe you call them dates, Lee. They're jobs, as in I do

the work and they pay me for it.”

Lee snorted. “Yeah, right. So how’d it go?”

“Okay, I suppose. A little strange.”

“Strange?”

Demme shrugged. “If you want to know, we just talked and then he got a phone call and asked me to leave.”

Lee sniggered. “So you didn’t even need to take your clothes off? He paid you, right?”

Demme nodded. “Full price.”

“Told you he’s nice. Never lifts a finger to you. Always pays. That’s my kind of client.”

“So how did your audition go?” Demme suddenly remembered why his friend hadn’t been able to go to Kip’s.

“Aaah, they’ll call me.” Lee shrugged. “I tanked.”

“I’m sorry. You can have Kip back if you want.”

Lee looked at Demme with some amazement. “He told you to call him that? He didn’t ask me to call him Kip until our third date.”

Demme rolled his eyes. “It’s not a date!”

DEMME had almost forgotten about Kip when he got a phone call the following week. As soon as the slightly rough voice spoke, he immediately remembered him.

“Demme? Hi, this is Kip.”

“Yeah, I know. How have you been?” Demme knew it came over nicely when he treated his clients with respect, but with some kind of familiarity, so he always addressed them as if they were friends. Also, it wouldn’t seem suspicious to anyone overhearing his side of the conversation.

“Great,” Kip answered. “I was wondering if you were free tonight.”

Demme didn’t need to check his calendar. Weeknights were usually slow, so he knew he could make it. “What time?”

“Around seven?”

“Okay.”

“Good. I’ll see you then.”

DEMME arrived slightly early and without having to run this time. He wasn't surprised when the door buzzer went off as soon as he rang the bell. He let himself into the darkened house. This time, one of the hallway doors was slightly ajar and there was light streaming out into the corridor. As soon as he walked near it, he heard Kip's voice.

"Have you eaten yet? I have leftover Chinese takeout from yesterday. There's plenty for two."

Demme walked into the kitchen just as Kip was taking the square cardboard containers out of the refrigerator. He opened each one, smelled them, and put them on the table.

"Chicken chow mein, hot and spicy prawns, fried rice," Kip announced. "Any preference or would you like a bit of everything?"

Demme realized he hadn't even answered Kip's last question about whether he wanted any food. In fact, he hadn't said a word since he walked in. He was too intrigued by the way Kip navigated around his kitchen, how his hands touched all the surfaces, and then it hit Demme that the reason Kip's hands were so busy was that he needed them to see. Demme suddenly realized that Kip was blind.

Why would a blind man hire a stripper he couldn't touch? Unless he expected that a little persuasion would make Demme drop his guard and allow him to overstep his boundaries anyway. He knew Lee allowed some of his clients to do more than watch, but he also trusted Lee not to put him in that sort of situation, at least not knowingly.

Demme continued to watch how Kip skillfully used chopsticks to put noodles on a plate.

"So? A bit of everything? Demme?"

Demme startled. "No prawns for me, please. They make me break out in hives and that's not a pretty sight." As soon as the words left his mouth, he wished he could take them back. How could he refer to something Kip couldn't see? Certainly that wasn't the right way to deal with a blind man? He also just realized that last time he'd written his cell phone number on a piece of paper and Kip hadn't even blinked. That meant someone else knew his number. Demme wasn't sure how comfortable that made him feel.

Kip hadn't sensed his unease and chuckled. "I wouldn't want to do that to you. I'll give you the chicken, if that's okay. I prefer the prawns anyway." He stopped dishing out and looked in the general direction of



where Demme was standing. "I'm glad you decided to say something. I can usually tell where people are from their steps or where their voice comes from, but you were dead silent. For a moment I thought you'd snuck out."

Demme shook his head, and then realized Kip wouldn't be able to see that. "Wouldn't be very polite to just up and leave without saying something."

After putting Demme's chicken in the microwave, Kip took out some glasses. "What would you like to drink with the food? Wine? Beer?"

"Beer sounds good," Demme answered a little hesitantly. He felt silly for still feeling out of his depth and he thought he should be doing something to help Kip, but Kip didn't seem to need it. Demme kept thinking that if he couldn't see he'd be utterly lost, but Kip moved around his kitchen as if it didn't bother him.

Kip took two beers out of the fridge and replaced the glasses he'd just taken out with bigger ones. As Demme watched him pour the beers, he noticed the new glasses were just the right size to hold the contents of the entire bottle. It started dawning on Demme that Kip had all sorts of helpful items around and was probably more than self-sufficient.

"Now sit. Hearing you shuffle your feet is making me nervous."

Demme smiled at Kip's blatant honesty and complied, sitting down at the place setting where Kip had just deposited a beer.

"Lee didn't tell you I was blind, did he?" Kip asked a little hesitantly.

"No, he didn't."

"I'm sorry if that makes you uncomfortable."

"It doesn't," Demme was quick to answer. Too quick.

"Yes, it does, and that's okay," Kip admitted, sitting down at the table himself. "You're probably asking yourself why I'd pay for a stripper when I can't enjoy the show?"

Demme felt caught, but Kip's straightforwardness made him feel like he owed the man the truth as well. "It did cross my mind, yes."

"I'm not going to jump you. Don't worry. Lee always came by to talk. I liked his company and the fact he always had great stories to tell. We had a good rapport."

"Yet you called me and not him?"

Kip smiled wryly. “I like your voice. I wanted to get to know you better. Besides, I like meeting new people, especially people who have a very different life from mine.”

The microwave pinged, saving Demme from replying. He felt slightly more at ease, but still didn’t quite understand what his job was going to be tonight. Was he just here to keep Kip company? Prevent him from having to eat alone? He didn’t know whether to feel creeped out or just to feel sorry for the guy. How lonely do you need to be to pay for people to have dinner with you?

Kip put his own plate in the microwave after carefully putting Demme’s dinner in front of him.

Three minutes later they were both eating and Demme discovered this food was much better than the cheap kind he and Lee usually got from the corner Chinese restaurant. He decided to enjoy the treat and not worry too much about what was going to happen later. Demme couldn’t keep his eyes off Kip, though. His client for tonight was truly a good-looking man, and the fact that Kip couldn’t see him feasting his eyes made Demme slightly bolder than he would usually be. He even caught himself thinking that if Kip wanted to touch him, he might just let him.

“So are you in college, or is this job your ultimate dream?”

If there had been any sort of mocking expression on Kip’s face, Demme would have taken it as an insult, but Kip seemed genuinely interested. “I wanted to be a dancer, but I hurt my back and that sort of killed my professional career. Every time I do too much now, it gets really sore, so I knew I had to try another avenue. I’m in community college trying for a liberal arts degree. Don’t know what I want to do with it yet, though.”

Kip smiled. “There’s time. Can’t be easy to pick up your life again after you’ve had to give up on your dreams.” He bit into a large prawn, took his time chewing and swallowing, and then continued. “I can help you with your back, though.”

Demme didn’t say anything, his suspicions returning full force.

“I’m a massage therapist,” Kip elaborated. “Actually, that sounds shady. I’m a manual therapist, meaning I give therapeutic massages to people with muscle pains and sports injuries and such.”

“And this is where you tell me to strip and lie down on the bed so you can touch me?”

“No,” Kip answered calmly. “I told you the first time that I

wouldn't overstep my boundaries and I won't. I'm just offering my expertise. It's an unconditional offer. You can take it or leave it and it won't make me think any less of you if you say no. Besides, I can give you a pretty decent backrub while you keep your clothes on. A colleague of mine and I do lunchtime sessions in big corporations. We set up a chair and give five-minute massages. Don't see those people stripping."

The fact that Kip seemed very casual about it and didn't take Demme's suspicions personally made Demme relax again. Maybe he should take Kip up on the offer. He hadn't had any sort of therapy since right after the injury, mostly because he couldn't afford it, but he remembered how good it felt.

"How much do you charge?" Demme eventually asked after finishing his food.

Kip chuckled as he pushed his plate back. "Always that work ethic. I like that about you. Consider it a tip for your work here tonight. And if it feels good and you want more, we can work something out."

"Okay," Demme agreed.

"Let's go, then."

Kip led him to a room right off the front door. It was a fairly spartan room, with none of the anatomical drawings Demme thought belonged on the walls of a massage therapist's practice. It was quite spacious, though, with one long massage table in the middle and one of those fancy grasshopper massage chairs to the side.

Kip pointed at the chair. "Just straddle that. Put your face in the O-ring and relax."

Kip moved closer to Demme and adjusted the armrests until Demme felt comfortable. The long mirror against the wall that Demme could look in from his position also helped him feel more secure. Demme was aware that Kip was touching him quite a bit, probably more than a sighted therapist would, but his touches were professional and soothing and Demme was soon able to relax, just like Kip had asked.

"I'm just going to feel around a bit to see where your knots are," Kip said softly. "Where was your injury approximately?"

"Ehm, somewhere near the bottom of my ribcage."

Kip's nimble hands moved down Demme's spine and Demme had to admit it already felt good. In the mirror, he could see Kip spacing out a bit, concentrating on the sensations under his hands.

“Yeah, I can feel it. You had surgery, didn’t you?”

Demme nodded and then remembered to answer audibly. “Yes. They had to fix a herniated disc because I always felt pins and needles in my legs, but it never recovered completely.”

Kip continued slowly massaging the area around the old injury. “Are you in pain right now?”

“Some, not all the time. Right now it feels pretty good.” Demme chuckled.

Kip smiled as his hands started probing deeper, pushing the muscles harder as they relaxed. “This should last you a couple of days, unless you’re planning some strenuous exercise.”

Kip’s rhythmical touches were pushing Demme’s groin against the front of the seat and to his surprise, he realized he was growing hard. It felt good to be touched like that and for some reason, he trusted Kip to do the touching.

“Fuck, that feels good.”

Kip chuckled. “Told you it would.” Kip snaked one hand between the chair and Demme’s chest and put his palm flat between Demme’s nipples, while his other hand rested on the small of Demme’s back. For a moment, Demme was afraid Kip would feel that his nipples were erect, betraying his arousal, but if he noticed, he didn’t show it. Kip pushed his hands toward each other, stretching Demme’s spine back and pulling his face free of the O-ring. Demme could feel the muscles stretch.

“Oh, God, yeah!”

Kip’s face was so close to Demme’s he would only have to turn his face to the side to kiss Kip, but he didn’t dare. Kip had been nothing but professional with him and maybe that was truly what Kip wanted, so Demme didn’t want to break his side of the bargain.

“I think we’re done. How does that feel?” Kip asked, his hand still lightly resting just above Demme’s ass.

“Really great, thanks,” Demme answered.

“We can do this every time you drop by if you like.” Kip took his wallet out and handed Demme his money.

“I can’t take that, Kip,” Demme said softly. “You just gave me a massage that costs at least that much and you fed me too. I didn’t do anything.”

“You kept me company; humored me. And I didn’t need to eat

alone. I can afford it, Demme, or I wouldn't have called you. Consider it a donation to your college fund. I admire someone who can turn his life around and if this helps to pay your rent and keeps you from having to do other jobs you don't like doing, then I'm happy."

"What are you? Manhattan's rent-boy benefactor?" Demme wanted to take the words back almost as soon as they left his mouth. Kip had been nothing but good to him and he was being rude in return.

"I'm sorry." Kip sighed. "But you're not a rent boy and I hope I didn't treat you like one."

"You didn't," Demme admitted. "I'm sorry too. It's just that in my line of work, people always try to take advantage of you, and I guess I'm still waiting for you to."

Kip moved back and Demme could see the disappointment on Kip's face. He didn't know what else to say to make it better, though.

"Listen, just take the money. It's getting late and you probably have classes in the morning. In any case, I have appointments first thing tomorrow as well, so we should both get some sleep."

For a moment, Demme wondered if Kip had somehow sensed that he was turned on. He quickly dismissed the idea. There was definitely a bulge in his pants, but Kip was nowhere near enough to feel it. He just had to conclude that he'd insulted Kip by what he'd said and, although it was unintentional, he really couldn't blame the man.

"It felt really good. The massage," Demme elaborated as he put on his jacket and flung his backpack over his shoulder. "Thanks."

Kip nodded as he showed him out.

DEMME didn't think Kip was going to call him again and it wasn't until later that night, as he was touching himself, alone in his bed, that he really regretted that. It didn't take Demme much to conjure up the image of Kip, of Kip's hands on him, and not just working on his spine. It sent him over with a loud groan.

LIKE Demme predicted, Kip didn't call again. He was therefore quite surprised when he came home from class to see Lee smirking like the cat that got the cream.

"Your boyfriend called."

"Boyfriend? I don't have a boyfriend. You know that," Demme

answered, pouring himself some orange juice.

“Well, apparently he’s been leaving you voice-mail messages, but you’re not answering them. Did you have a lover’s quarrel?”

Demme really didn’t have a clue what Lee was talking about, but he took out his cell phone anyway. “Damn. Battery’s dead again!” he cursed. He made his way to his bedroom to plug it into the charger and then returned to the kitchen, where Lee was still sitting, seemingly quite content about taunting him. “Put me out of my misery. Who the hell are you talking about?”

“Why, Kip, of course. Didn’t realize you two were so serious. He sounded all apologetic too. Hang on.” Lee raised his finger as if he’d just discovered something earth-shattering. “He touched you, didn’t he? Did he put his hand down your pants? Did he try to kiss you? Come on, Dem, I’m your friend; you can tell me.”

Demme didn’t want to let Lee get away with that. “No, Lee. He’s been the perfect gentleman all the way.”

“Okay, so he came on to you and you liked it?”

Demme rolled his eyes and took his glass of juice elsewhere. Lee followed him.

“You wanted him to come on to you and he didn’t?”

“Lee, buzz off! It’s none of your business!” Demme turned his back on Lee, but his friend didn’t leave. He tried to sort out the mess of clothes on the floor, but Lee still didn’t get that he just wanted to be left alone.

“Come on, Dem. I’m your friend. He’s a nice guy and he sounded really worried that you didn’t return his calls.”

“He is nice,” Demme had to admit. “And nothing happened. We had dinner together, nothing fancy, just really good Chinese takeout, and then he gave me a massage.”

“Oh wow!” Lee sounded impressed. “He never gave me a massage!”

“Well, you don’t have a back injury.” Lee was still giving Demme that smug look. “What? Are you telling me I’m naive? That this is Kip’s way of getting into my pants?”

Lee snorted. “Hell if I know. He’s never even touched me, let alone wine and dined me!”

Once Lee finally tired of teasing him, Demme made up his mind

and didn't even bother to take his backpack. He couldn't do this over the phone, with Lee trying to listen in. He had to go to Kip's house to clear this up. On the way over, he thought about what he was going to say. He couldn't just come out and admit that he couldn't get the guy out of his mind. How do you tell a man you barely know that you get hard every time you think about him? Demme shrugged and decided to play it by ear. Maybe Kip was just lonely and he was good company. Maybe there was more between them. Only time would tell.

Since Demme hadn't called to say he was coming, the door didn't let him in automatically. Instead he had to give his name and it took a while before the buzzer sounded. There was more light in the hallway this time and the door to the left, opposite the room where Demme had received his massage last time, was open. Demme peered inside and saw a young guy in some sort of sports attire reading a magazine.

"Demme?"

"Yes." Demme turned around and saw Kip sticking his head out of the door. Over his shoulder, Demme could just make out another sporty-looking fellow lying on the massage table. He had his hands folded behind his head and his groin area was covered by a towel, but he was otherwise naked.

"Why don't you get yourself something to drink in the kitchen? I have two more clients to see, so it will take me about forty minutes. Make yourself comfortable in the lounge, okay?"

"Okay," Demme acknowledged. He did what Kip suggested, but after walking around the rest of Kip's house for a while, he got bored and headed back toward the front door. The waiting room was still open but now unoccupied. Demme was happy; this meant that Kip was taking care of his last client and they would soon be able to talk in private. It also made Demme a little nervous and he decided to pick up another beer. As he walked past the closed door of the massage room, the noises inside made him stop. He heard a man moaning. Rhythmically. The noises were playing with his imagination, because to Demme, they sounded like sex noises, the kinds of moans you produced when you were being expertly fucked or sucked off.

Demme shook his head. It couldn't be. Kip was a manual therapist, a consummate professional. Judging by the massage he'd given Kip, he was very good at what he did. His regular clients most likely felt comfortable enough to vocalize their appreciation. The grunts were

turning him on to no end, though, so Demme peeled himself away from the door with great difficulty. He was already back in the kitchen when he heard a door open. A little later, the front door opened and closed as well.

“All done,” Kip announced as he walked into the kitchen, drying his hands on a small towel. “I’m glad you decided to come.”

“The battery on my cell phone died, so I didn’t get your messages today. That’s why I didn’t return your calls.”

“Good,” Kip replied with obvious relief. “For a moment there, I thought you didn’t want to see me again.”

Demme bit his lip, trying to formulate an answer that didn’t immediately signal his eagerness but still gave Kip some hope. For the first time, he was glad Kip couldn’t see his facial expression. “You’ve always been considerate with me. Why wouldn’t I come? If I was free, of course.”

“And you are? Tonight?”

“Of course.”

The broad smile on Kip’s face betrayed all of his relief without censorship. “So what would you like for dinner?”

Demme exhaled loudly. “I don’t know.”

“You’re hungry, right? Or have you already eaten?”

“No. I just.... You don’t need to feed me every time I come here.”

Kip ignored Demme’s statement. “I’m starving. How about Italian? I know a great place that delivers their lasagna in these authentic stone pots. No seafood, I promise.”

“Okay,” Demme conceded. “Sounds great.”

About forty minutes later they were both sitting over steaming plates of pasta and Demme knew Kip wasn’t just boasting. “This is the best darn lasagna I’ve ever had in my life, I think.”

Kip smiled proudly, as if he’d made it himself. “As good as it is, it’s great to be able to finish it in one go, though. You know, no leftovers. Takeout food rarely comes in single portions, does it?”

“True,” Demme had to admit. “Unless you have a double-portion appetite.”

“Not me.” Kip laughed.

Demme spotted Kip’s hand resting on the table and he had the



sudden urge to touch it. A silence had fallen between them and although it wasn't entirely uncomfortable, Demme still hesitated. What if Kip pulled away? What if he felt like he was being seduced, when all Kip wanted was a little company, some conversation and someone to make sure he had no leftover food? Was Demme reading the signals wrong?

"I'll do the dishes," Demme offered.

"Naah, we'll put it all in the dishwasher. Much easier."

They cleared the table together and then made their way to the living room. This time, Demme sat down on the same sofa Kip always seemed to sit on.

"I'm amazed by how well you cope," Demme told Kip. "I'd be lost if I couldn't see."

Kip shrugged. "I've been blind for so long it's become second nature."

"You weren't born blind?"

"Nope. I have a genetic condition called retinitis pigmentosa. In some people it progresses slowly and they have tunnel vision for years, but I was completely blind by the time I was fourteen. Although it gave me time to get used to it, it was still a shock when they turned off the lights completely."

Demme didn't know how to reply to that. He didn't want to feel sorry for Kip, but couldn't help himself. Without thinking, he grabbed Kip's hand. "I'm sorry. Do you ever wish you could see again?"

Kip smiled and squeezed Demme's hand. "Not really. I have a pretty good life. I like the work I do and I probably wouldn't be so good at it if I could see."

"You could be right," Demme agreed. "My back felt great for days after you gave me that massage."

"I'll gladly help you again," Kip suggested.

"On one condition," Demme said. "I want to pay for it."

"Okay," Kip conceded. "But you get a friendly discount."

THE next two weeks, Demme returned almost every day and their dates pretty much went the same way every time. Kip would order some sort of delicious meal and they'd share that and then retreat to the lounge for more trivial conversation over a glass of wine or a beer. Demme could tell Kip truly enjoyed his company. Time flew by when they were

together, although neither seemed to find a way to make the first move toward something Demme felt was inevitable.

It had taken some persuasion on Demme's part, but they'd finally agreed that dinner and Kip's massage were sufficient payment for Demme's time, so at least money was no longer exchanged.

The more time Demme spent with Kip, the more the attraction grew but the clearer it became that Demme was going to have to be the one to move it forward. Every time Kip massaged his back, the touches became more intimate, but Kip stuck to the agreement they'd made on the day of their first meeting. It was starting to frustrate Demme.

"Will you give me one of your full-body massages one day?" Demme asked as he rubbed his stomach. He'd had too much to eat, but then the roast beef had been succulent and the scalloped potatoes simply to die for. They'd washed it all down with a lovely bottle of red wine and Kip had just opened a second one, making both of them slightly buzzed.

"Not satisfied with the usual fare anymore?"

"Remember when I walked in a while ago and you still had clients?"

"As I see it, you like to come around when they're still here. Pretty soon they're going to think I have a private life. Or do you like the pretty boys that are on my client list?"

Demme chuckled and took another big swig of wine for courage. "They make such delicious noises when you're working on them," Demme murmured, his nose still stuck in his wineglass.

"And you want to know what I do to make them moan like that?"

Demme couldn't miss the smugness in Kip's expression. He scooted closer and nudged him with his shoulder. "Don't tell me it's deep-tissue massage."

"So what if it is?" Kip asked, still sounding rather proud of himself.

"You're teasing. I've had one of those. They're not exactly painless, but those weren't sounds of pain I heard."

"Oh, then they did it wrong," Kip teased.

"So show me then?"

"Are you sure you can take it? It's pretty intense."

Demme decided to jump in headfirst. He was just tipsy enough to be daring. "I don't think there's anything you can do to me that I wouldn't be able to take."

Kip hesitated and drank from his wineglass before answering. "They're jocks, Demme. Professional athletes and college athletes who have a shot at the big time."

Although Kip was very good at looking at him when he talked to him, it wasn't lost on Demme that Kip avoided this now.

"I make sure they leave here relaxed. Totally relaxed. And if that means coaxing certain swollen body parts to give up their bounty, then so be it."

Demme slowly moved closer to Kip and when Kip didn't retreat, he let his lips ghost over Kip's ear. "Are you telling me you give them blowjobs?"

"No," Kip answered calmly.

"Hand jobs?"

Kip didn't immediately answer. Eventually he leaned a little closer to Demme and Demme softly kissed his ear.

"They're closet guys. Even to themselves sometimes. They can't give in to their urges because their sponsors expect them to hang out with fashion models. Female fashion models. And without sponsors, they're nobodies. I give them their massage and when they turn over, they're rock hard. When I flex their hips the towel moves and.... It's a natural progression."

There was no shame in Kip's voice. Demme didn't know how he felt about it, though. He stripped off his clothes for money—something he could never put on a résumé—but the man he was in love with saw giving hand jobs to finely built men part of his rather well-respected job. In a lot of ways, what Kip did went further than what he did.

"And you're never tempted to kiss them or even blow them?"

Kip smiled. "That would be too intimate. It wouldn't be a massage anymore."

Demme could see that. "I can understand them getting hard under your hands," he whispered in Kip's ear. "You do it to me every single time and I'm always fully clothed."

Kip turned his head and chastely kissed Demme. "You're not bothered by it?"

Demme shook his head, still close enough to Kip so he could feel the gesture. "You said yourself it wasn't intimate."

"It's not. I provide them with something they need, that's all."

“And it doesn’t do anything for you?” Demme tried to gauge Kip’s reaction, but didn’t want to leave the intimate space they were in right now.

“They never touch me. That would be breaking down boundaries I don’t want them to cross.”

“But surely it does something to you too?” Demme rephrased his question.

“Sometimes afterward, when they’re gone. Yes.”

Demme smiled slightly and kissed Kip’s temple again. He didn’t say anything.

“What they do to me is nothing compared to what you do to me, though.”

Demme was already rather aroused, but Kip’s words made him rock hard. He desperately wanted to truly kiss Kip and maybe, just maybe, be allowed to touch him and make love to him. Demme gently placed his hand on Kip’s thigh and stroked upward, toward his hip, where Kip stopped him.

“I’m sorry, Demme. It’s moving a bit too fast for me.”

“Okay.” Demme moved back some, but didn’t take away his hand. “Tell me what you want then, because I’m about ready to burst.”

Kip smiled and gently kissed Demme. Their kisses were becoming more intimate, but Demme had yet to really taste Kip. “I can help you with that if you like. Apparently I’m rather good at it.”

Demme chuckled. He’d accepted from the moment it had become clear that he was going to have to be patient with Kip that he would let Kip set the pace. If a hand job was within Kip’s comfort zone, then who was he to argue with that?

“Come with me?” Kip asked, getting up from the sofa and holding out his hand toward Demme.

Demme hoped Kip would take him to his bedroom, but instead, Kip led him to his treatment room.

“Take your clothes off and get on the table,” Kip instructed. “I won’t watch,” he joked.

Demme hoped Kip would do the same, but he didn’t.

“On your front,” Kip added.

A little uncomfortably, Demme complied. It wasn’t easy to find a position he could relax in, since he had to accommodate for his erection.

He hoped Kip wouldn't give him the full treatment before starting on his front, though. Kip's hands on him, kneading his lower back and buttocks and spending time on his inner thighs as well, brought Demme even closer to his climax and he had to try to think of other things to prevent himself from coming. Just in time, Kip asked him to turn over.

"So how do you know they're hard?" Demme queried.

"I move their hips, like so," Kip demonstrated. "The towel moves a bit and then I casually brush over their cock with my hand."

The back of Kip's hand barely touched the heavy erection lying on Demme's belly.

"You're shaven," Kip stated amusedly.

"You can feel all that from such a fleeting touch?"

Kip leaned closer and kissed Demme. Again it was an amicable kiss rather than an inciting one, but in this case, Demme didn't mind. He was still trying to keep in control of his own body and didn't want to come like a teenager the moment he was kissed.

"There are certain advantages to being blind," Kip replied quite happily. "Can I touch you?" he said, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"Do you ask that of your clients too?" Demme answered, equally quietly, as if raising his voice would break the intimate moment.

"No," Kip replied. "I simply suggest that I take care of their swelling." He chuckled at his own choice of words.

"Well, by all means take care of mine. Please," Demme added.

Demme's stomach muscles contracted involuntarily when Kip's nimble hand enveloped his straining shaft. He knew he wouldn't last long. The buildup to this moment had been too extensive. He couldn't even look at what Kip was doing to him; the feeling in itself was amazing enough.

"Talk to me?" Kip asked hesitantly. "They never say anything and the silence is hard to take."

Demme took a breath in. He needed more air, but the tension in his stomach didn't make that an easy task. And now Kip wanted him to speak.

"Fuck, feels so good," Demme managed to squeeze out. He could hardly keep his eyes open, but he noticed Kip's smile.

"Slow," Demme instructed. "So close." He grunted, trying to stave off his climax as long as possible, but Kip was genuinely good at this.

That he did as Demme asked and didn't speed up his movements was both a source of frustration and great pleasure for Demme as he held onto the sides of the table, his knuckles white from the force of his grasp.

"Oh God. Coming!" Demme cried out as his hips bucked up of their own accord. Kip leaned down and kissed him, passionately this time, while Demme's seed pumped out between Kip's fingers.

"Lemme touch you?" Demme asked as soon as he'd recovered enough breath.

"No need," Kip answered, panting.

"But I want to! I want to give to you what you gave to me!" Demme pleaded.

Kip pushed himself up from the table he was partially lying on and reached for the tissues, wiping his hand and then handing some to Demme, so he too could clean himself up.

Despite feeling a bit wobbly, Demme sat up and pulled Kip closer to him again. Kip let him, but didn't look at him. Standing between Demme's spread thighs, he looked like a shy boy all of a sudden, and Demme started wondering about a few things. He tried to kiss Kip, but Kip didn't let him.

"Let me take care of you?" Demme asked again. "Please?"

Kip leaned his head against Demme's and they stood there for a few moments. "I already came," Kip eventually admitted. "It was so much better than what I'd imagined and—"

"You came in your pants, like a schoolboy during his first kiss?" Demme finished Kip's sentence.

Kip nodded. "It's not exactly something to be proud of."

"You shouldn't be ashamed of it either." Demme soothed Kip by stroking his hair. "Kip, are you a virgin?"

Kip shook his head.

"It's okay. I don't mind," Demme continued, determined to get to the bottom of this.

"Come with me," Kip said abruptly, his posture straight again as if he'd been given a sudden injection of courage. He took Demme's hand and dragged him along, stopping against the hallway wall to kiss him, then a little farther on, they halted again just before they reached the living room.

Demme was already aroused again and he hoped Kip would lead

him to his bedroom this time, but to Demme's considerable disappointment, they ended up back on the living room couch.

"Talk to me," Demme pleaded with Kip. "I promise that nothing you can say will make me run away, except maybe if you're married or that you want to have me as a side dish whenever your lover is out of town, because there's a reason tonight was the first time I came by someone else's hand than my own in... months!" Demme knew he was rambling, but he wanted to lay it out for Kip and his thoughts were coming out in one long stream. "I'm not a sleeping-around sort of guy. I've tried the one-night stands and the kinky sex and frankly, I'd rather jack off over a porn mag. I want someone to share things with, have a connection with, and I hope that the sex will be great because of that and not in spite of it. I thought we really had something here and I'm hoping you won't tell me I'm delusional or something, but..." Demme had to catch his breath and when he did, he found he had nothing more to add. He needed feedback from Kip, but Kip was just sitting next to him, holding Demme's hand.

"You don't have a boyfriend?" Kip eventually asked, his voice still calm and quiet.

"Do you think a boyfriend would think it was okay for me to spend every evening of the week away from him?"

Kip shrugged. "I'm a client and, I don't know, maybe he works nights?"

"You stopped being a client by the second date, Kip," Demme confessed, smiling at himself for calling them dates, like Lee always did. "And no, there's nobody. I go home every night with a hard-on that's been there since I walked in the door and I go to bed and bring myself off fantasizing about what you'd look like making love to me."

"Not even Lee?"

"Lee's a friend. Don't think I'm his type and he certainly isn't mine. I help pay his rent. That's about it."

"Have you ever?"

Demme looked at Kip, wondering what he meant. "Have I ever...?" he parroted. "Dressed up in women's clothes? Had a threesome? Kissed a fish?" he joked.

Kip chuckled. "Well, have you?"

"Yes, yes, and sadly, yes."

Kip seemed to relax. “Have you ever been in a long-term relationship?”

“Longest one was a year, when I was still dancing,” Demme said truthfully. “It didn’t survive my injury, though. He didn’t see himself with someone who wasn’t a dancer. Since then, I’ve been looking, but most guys my age only seem interested in the sex.”

“My longest one was eight years. He died four years ago and there’s been nobody since.”

Demme looked at Kip’s face and saw tears glistening in his eyes.

“He left for work in the morning and an hour later there were cops at the door telling me he’d died in a pileup on the interstate.”

“Oh, Kip,” Demme replied, for lack of better words. Some things were starting to fall into place. Demme had wondered why Kip exhibited such restraint. Until this evening, they hadn’t even kissed and had barely touched. Kip wasn’t a virgin; he was a widower.

Demme squeezed Kip’s hand and Kip returned the gesture.

“So you see, I wasn’t looking for someone else. I was looking for some companionship and someone to talk to about what’s happening in the outside world. Preferably a guy who wasn’t interested in the latest sports scores, because I get enough of that from my clients. Lee was great to talk to, but with you....” Kip stopped midsentence as if he was looking for the perfect words. “I felt so comfortable around you and before I knew it, I’d developed feelings for you that I didn’t know what to do with. You’d made it clear that you didn’t want to be touched and I respected that, but it became harder and harder. Giving you the backrubs was nice, but I found that I wanted—needed—more.”

“Me too,” Demme admitted quietly.

“Can you stay tonight?”

Demme nodded, then reminded himself he actually had to say the words. “Yes. I have to work tomorrow night, but it’s Friday, so no classes tomorrow.”

“You have to call Lee?”

“Nope. I sort of told him that you and I... well, that we were hitting it off, so if I don’t show, he’ll think I got lucky.”

“I can’t promise anything, Demme. Part of me still feels like I’m betraying John, although I know he would want me to find someone else.”



“As long as you don’t expect me to be John, I’m fine with that.”

Kip chuckled. “You’re not a lot like him, actually. He was taller, a big extrovert, which is a nice way of saying he got in your face. He wasn’t as soft-spoken as you, or as gentle, and he had *no* patience, which isn’t exactly something I can accuse you of.”

“Well, you don’t know me very well yet,” Demme was quick to reply. “I was holding back.”

“The thing is, I don’t want you to be like him. There will never be anyone like him, ever again. I want you to be you, because I like you. I think I’m finally ready to let someone else into my life.”

“I’m glad,” Demme answered, snuggling closer to Kip. He yawned.

“You’re tired? I’m sorry. I didn’t realize how late it was.” Kip flipped the top of his watch open to touch the dial and check the time. “I think I wore you out!”

Demme sat up straight and stretched his back. “Sorry I’m such bad company, but it’s been a rather busy week and I didn’t get a lot of sleep.”

Kip got up and pulled Demme to his feet. “Let me take you to bed, then.”

THEY didn’t make love that night, but instead fell asleep amid languid kisses and chaste caresses, Kip dressed in PJs and Demme in borrowed boxers and T-shirt.

The next morning they each woke up on their own side of the bed, since they both were unaccustomed to sharing with anyone else.

Demme was a little disorientated when he opened his eyes in a bedroom he’d barely seen the night before, but hearing Kip’s slow, even breathing reminded him where he was. Once his eyes had adjusted to the light, he saw that Kip was facing him, his head resting on his curled-up arm as if he’d fallen asleep looking at Demme, which of course wasn’t possible. His hair was a little messed up, falling half over his face, and Demme thought he could lay there forever looking at the beautiful man who’d answered his prayers the night before. Demme’s eyes were drawn to Kip’s hand, which was resting on the mattress between them, and his nimble and oh-so-talented fingers. The memory of what those fingers could do instantly made Demme hard. Damn, he wanted to make love to Kip so badly it ached. How long would it be before Kip would be ready?

Demme couldn’t resist touching Kip’s hand and when Kip didn’t

budge, Demme wiped the hair away from Kip's face.

"Mmmh," Kip moaned.

Demme moved until he was lying close enough to kiss Kip.

"You smell good," Kip murmured.

"I could probably use a shower," Demme teased.

"I think I like you better au naturel instead of all soapy smelling. Besides, I'd like to get you a bit more sweaty first."

Demme bit his lip in anticipation. "Are you going to jog me around the block?"

Kip laughed and Demme saw the morning light reflected in Kip's crystal-blue eyes. "I had something much more pleasurable in mind."

"I hope we have all day for that," Demme teased.

"I have three clients to see around noon, but until then and after that, I'm free."

"Hand job sort of clients?"

"One of them is, yes."

Deep lines on Kip's forehead betrayed just how worried Kip was about that, but Demme found he was okay with it.

"It's business, right? You give them something they need and they pay you handsomely for it?"

Kip nodded. "Yes, but if you don't want me to do it anymore, I'll tell them."

"I don't think you should deprive those poor closet cases of what little sexual satisfaction you can give them. Besides, I'm still stripping tonight. Lee and I have to dress up as cops to arrest a few bachelorettes for being prudes."

"I wish I could see that."

"Silly girls who scream because two guys take their clothes off isn't what turns me on, you know that. But they pay well and the tips are usually worth it all by themselves, not to mention the word of mouth."

"Come here with that mouth," Kip instructed. He kissed Demme passionately, turning him on even more than before.

Demme let his hand wander underneath the top of Kip's pajamas and was pleasantly surprised to encounter soft chest hair. When Kip didn't stop him, he went in search of a nipple, smiling into the kiss when he gently rubbed his finger over it and Kip moaned.

“Sensitive, are we?” Demme teased.

Kip looked at him with his unfocused gaze and nodded. “It’s been a long time since anyone touched me like that.”

Still very close together, Demme nuzzled Kip. “Then it’s about time we do something about that.”

When Kip smiled shyly, Demme hitched up his pajama top. “Let me look at you?”

“It makes me self-conscious,” Kip admitted. “I can’t tell what you’re looking at.”

“I’ll do what you do then and look with my hands. Does that help? Or do you want a running commentary?”

Kip flipped Demme over on his back and pretended to ravage him, making Demme giggle uncontrollably. Their laughter died down as they started slowly grinding into each other.

“Thank you,” Kip whispered.

“For what?”

“For being so patient and giving me time to adjust.”

“It’s nothing,” Demme said quietly.

“It’s not nothing, Demme,” Kip was quick to reply. “I was always afraid to meet new guys because I didn’t want them to push for sex right away and that’s what guys do. Plus it’s hard to see the subtle hints when you can’t actually see.”

Demme kissed Kip gently. “It’s hard to meet guys who like tenderness and kissing and cuddling when you take your clothes off for a living.”

Kip cocked his head in understanding. “So thank you.”

“Can I touch you now?” Demme asked hesitantly before he dipped his hand underneath the elastic band of Kip’s pajamas.

Kip nodded and kissed Demme once more while he slowly let his hand drift toward Kip’s groin. Although he’d felt Kip’s hardness against his hip, he had no idea what he was going to encounter or how Kip would react to being touched so intimately. Just like with his nipple, Kip moaned as Demme wrapped his hand around Kip’s erection. He didn’t pull back, so Demme squeezed gently and twisted his wrist, making Kip moan again.

The slowness of the lovemaking was making Demme giddy. Kip’s hands all over him, exploring his torso and stomach and hips, were

driving him crazy, but he knew he had to let Kip take the lead for now. He hoped the way he was grinding against Kip's hip would make it clear that he wanted more, but on the other hand, Demme enjoyed the sensuality and the amazing tenderness Kip displayed.

Kip was straddling him by now, their cocks gliding together with two layers of fabric still separating them.

"Take off your shirt?" Demme asked, trying hard to make it sound more like a request than a demand and, to his surprise, Kip stretched up and pulled it over his head, letting it fall next to the bed.

"Wow!" Demme exclaimed at seeing the dark hairs fanning out over Kip's chest. Kip immediately went shy, so Demme tried to form a more eloquent response. "I like hairy men," he admitted with a chuckle. He sat up and enveloped Kip's chest with his arms, hugging him tightly. "You're beautiful."

"No, I'm not," Kip answered, letting his hair fall in his face. "I'm too skinny. You have really nice muscles. I like the feel of them."

Demme ignored the compliment. "You're beautiful to me, Kip."

They continued to kiss, and Kip let Demme take off his pajama bottoms, then helped Demme out of his boxer shorts until they were lying next to each other naked.

"You must have seen a lot of men without their clothes on?"

Demme laughed. "Not really. Lee when we're stripping. A few of the other guys too when they want a larger group. I have regular customers, a couple who like to fuck with an audience. They're usually naked when I strip. Other than that, I'm the only naked one in the room." Demme looked at Kip and didn't like the shyness that seemed to fall over him from time to time. Or was it a lack of self-esteem? "Kip? Nobody's perfect and I certainly wouldn't fall for a guy just because he had the perfect body. I fell for you. Lock, stock, and barrel. And that certainly hasn't changed now I've seen what's underneath your clothes."

This seemed to relax Kip somewhat. "Can I ask you a personal question?"

Demme tried not to laugh. "Seeing as we're in a bed, naked, and about to make love, I hope, everything is personal, so yeah."

Kip didn't even look at him now. "Are you a bottom or a top?"

"I'd like to think I'm neither. Or both. It doesn't really matter to me. I guess it depends on my mood, or my lover." He kissed Kip. "So

just tell me what you want and I'm sure I can accommodate."

"I'm glad you're versatile," Kip replied, still painfully shy. "So am I."

Demme was happy with Kip's honesty. Now all he had to do was lure him out of his shell. "So tell me what you're in the mood for?"

"Can we just...?"

"Make out?" Demme suggested.

"God, I feel like a fumbling teenager," Kip answered.

Demme kissed Kip's neck and then whispered in his ear, "You're doing fine. I love you." He didn't wait for Kip's answer, but started kissing his way down his body, all the while expecting Kip to stop him, but he didn't. After his collarbone, Demme licked Kip's nipples and then moved to the edge of his rib cage and down the treasure trail to the tiny belly button, which he circled with his tongue. Kip's stomach muscles flexed and he grunted, but Demme wasn't put off. Demme liked the taste of Kip's salty skin and started placing butterfly kisses on his belly, carefully avoiding the perfectly formed cock lying on a bed of pubic hair.

When Demme finally stuck out his tongue to lick the rigid column, Kip pulled him away, so Demme moved up his body again. "Everything okay?"

Kip sighed and nodded. "Want to taste you too."

Demme moaned to show his appreciation and after a quick kiss, moved again so they could taste each other. Demme was not a big fan of 69ing because he always had a hard time keeping his mind on the task at hand when he was being given a blowjob, but he was horny enough to give it a go. Kip was a bit more hesitant with his mouth than with his hands, but Demme didn't care. He moaned when it felt good and soon enough, Kip was blowing him like a pro. They were both lying on their sides, which gave Demme a chance not just to do this comfortably, but also watch what Kip was doing. To his surprise, Kip really seemed to enjoy it. The added visual stimulus made Demme's orgasm become dangerously imminent.

"Close, Kip," Demme warned while he continued licking the shaft and sucking the head of Kip's cock.

"So come then," Kip urged him on.

Demme didn't want to, but he had no choice. Kip didn't relent and

although Demme had stopped watching what Kip was doing, he couldn't stop feeling it. The tension in the depth of his belly was growing as he tried not to thrust into Kip's mouth, but Kip seemed to be able to take the subtle movements Demme couldn't prevent. Demme stopped what he was doing to Kip, fearing he might cause some irreparable damage if he had a cock in his mouth while he came, and gave into the glorious sensation of coming into a lover's mouth. From the edge of his consciousness, Demme could feel Kip lick him clean and he tried to gather his wits to return the gesture when he felt Kip move away from him. Just moments later, Kip pulled him into his arms and kissed him passionately.

"Fuck, that felt good," Kip said after they came up for air. "You tasted good too."

"You didn't even give me the chance to make you come," Demme protested.

Kip led Demme's hand to his still-rigid cock. "So finish it now then."

With Kip in his embrace and one hand on Kip's cock, it didn't take Demme long to make his lover come. With long spurts, Kip's release flowed over Demme's hand and he licked it off before kissing Kip.

"I love to mix our tastes like that," Kip admitted as he lay panting. Demme pulled the blankets around them to keep warm.

They were slowly drifting off to sleep again when a quiet beeping sound alerted them.

"Have to jump in the shower. Clients coming soon."

By the time Kip had washed up, Demme had fixed them some sandwiches and let in Kip's first client.

Ninety minutes later, he closed the door behind the last one and before he could turn around again, Kip accosted him from behind.

"You unleashed something inside me, Demme," Kip admitted, tightly hugging Demme and kissing his neck. "That last guy usually doesn't do anything for me, but when I was touching his cock all I could think of was you and I got so turned on, I hope it didn't show."

Demme wiggled his ass. "I think it might have, but you can take me to bed to take care of that wood you're sporting."

Kip seemed to think about it, but then declined. "Let's go outside. To the park or something. I want some fresh air."

Demme didn't know how to react to being turned down. One of the things he liked about Kip was his honesty, but now he felt he was being misled somehow. He knew Kip was still dealing with losing his lover, but he had to know for sure. He watched Kip move to the hallway closet to get his coat.

"Damn," Kip cursed.

"What's wrong?"

"My coat isn't where it usually is," Kip said, looking frustrated.

"I'm sorry," Demme apologized. "I put my coat in there and yours fell off the hanger. I put it back."

"You have to leave things in their place, Demme. Otherwise I can't find them!"

Kip looked more than a little annoyed and Demme didn't know what to say. There were a million little things that reminded him every moment of Kip's disability, but most of them were trivial and Kip seemed to take them all in stride. Now Demme realized that his very presence was causing frustration for Kip.

As Demme looked at the contents of the hall closet, he picked out what he thought was Kip's coat. "Is this it?" he asked, handing it to Kip.

Kip took it and swallowed hard as soon as he felt the fabric. He brought it to his face and inhaled the scent, then fumbled to put it back. Instead he picked out another one and put that one on. He took his folded-up cane from the little hook inside the door and flicked his wrist so it straightened out. "Let's go."

Demme grabbed his own coat and struggled to follow Kip, whose long legs were carrying him quickly and confidently down the street. Demme wanted to say something, but Kip's stern face and his total disregard for whether Demme was following him or not made Demme stay silent. Kip led them to the park and easily navigated his way to a secluded bench, where he hesitated before eventually sitting down. He still wasn't talking.

"If you want me to leave, just say so," Demme said, trying to sound unemotional, but only partially succeeding. This seemed to mellow Kip a little, since his face relaxed. He remained silent though, staring out over the wide expanse of grass where people were sitting and a family was sharing a picnic in the first sunlight of the spring.

"I know it's hard for you. You explained it to me; that you found it

difficult to let go of John's memory, and I've been patient. I can be patient a little longer if you need it, but I want.... I need to know that you at least want me here."

Demme looked at Kip's face, which remained impassive. Afraid he might make Kip nervous by hovering around him, he sat down on the bench next to him, making sure they didn't touch. After what seemed like an eternity, Kip, somewhat hesitantly, placed his hand over Demme's.

"It was wrong of me to take it out on you," Kip said softly. "It wasn't your fault."

"What did I do wrong?" Demme asked hesitantly.

"Nothing." Kip sighed deeply. "All of John's clothes went to charity. I kept only a few things and one of them was his coat. He had thrown it in the back of the car and they gave it back to me after.... There's a big tear in the sleeve, so I couldn't give it away. Also, it smelled of him and when I missed him really badly, I could take out that coat and smell him on it. I hadn't done that for a while, because the smell is almost completely gone." Those last words betrayed how sad this made him feel. "His memory is fading, Demme, and I'm scared that pretty soon, I'll forget what he felt like and smelled like and sounded like. Other people have pictures of their loved ones, but I don't."

Demme turned his hand around so he could squeeze Kip's. What he really wanted to do was put his arms around him and hold him tight, but he didn't think that was welcome now. So they sat together in silence for a while.

Then Kip inhaled deeply. "Thanks for being so patient. I'm sure other guys would have given up on me a long time ago."

Demme shrugged. "I'm not other guys."

"Thank God for that."

When Demme looked to his side, he saw that Kip's gaze was still directed over the meadow, but he was smiling softly.

"I want to move on, Demme," Kip stated. "I need to. And I want to do it with you, if you'll have me."

Demme felt his heart jump into his throat. "Why?" Demme asked without thinking.

Kip laughed. "Where do I start?" Kip turned his head toward Demme for the first time since they arrived at the park. "You don't treat



me like an invalid. You don't feel threatened by John's memory. I hope?" he added, leaning conspiratorially closer to Demme.

"The jury's out on that one," Demme answered, trying to sound light.

"You don't mind if I touch other men, for strictly professional reasons of course."

Demme laughed. "At least *you* get to keep your clothes on."

"Yeah." Kip giggled. "I only do the nude massages for close friends."

For a moment Demme wondered how serious Kip was, but then Kip nudged him with his elbow and Demme grabbed his arm, hugging it close as if he were cold. He just wanted to feel Kip and Kip obliged him by putting his arm around his shoulders and squeezing him.

"I have a second appointment tonight as well, Kip."

"More bachelorettes?"

"No."

"A man?" Kip asked a little more hesitantly.

"Two men." Demme hoped it wouldn't make Kip pull away.

"The couple you told me about? The guys who get turned on by you watching them fuck?"

Demme nodded. He knew he had to vocalize it to make it clear to Kip but the word stuck in his throat.

To Demme's horror, Kip pulled his arm back and put his hand in his pocket, taking out his keys. He fumbled around with them a bit. "Hand?" he asked Demme.

Demme held out his hand where Kip could feel it and Kip moved his over Demme's. Something made of cold metal slid between their clasped hands.

"What is this?" Demme asked without unclenching their hands.

"You'll be late getting back tonight and I might already be in bed. I figured it would be easier to give you a key, because I'd really like to sleep next to you again tonight."

Demme stifled a giggle, then took Kip's face in his hands and kissed him passionately.

It was almost two a.m. when Demme snuck into Kip's house, using

what he now proudly understood to be his own key. He was carrying two bags, one with his music and the fake cop's uniform he'd taken off at the bachelorette party, and one with his toothbrush and a change of clothes for the next day.

He hung up his coat in the hallway closet, making sure he didn't move any of Kip's stuff and noticing that John's coat, with the torn sleeve, was all the way at the back now. Leaving his working stuff well out of the way in the hallway, he tiptoed upstairs with his overnight bag, hoping he wouldn't wake up Kip. Then again, as he was traipsing around the upstairs hallway, he contemplated making some sort of noise, because after his last clients he was horny as hell and Kip's request he return there tonight held a certain promise. Still, he didn't want to frighten Kip, so he changed out of his clothes into a fresh pair of boxers in the bathroom and then silently entered Kip's bedroom, where he slowly slipped under the covers.

As soon as Kip stirred, Demme wrapped his arms around him and kissed his neck.

"Mmmh, someone had a good time tonight," Kip murmured, still half-asleep.

"A very frustrating time," Demme answered, nuzzling his lover's long hair. "Imagine taking your clothes off in front of two horny guys who start to fondle each other and who are fucking each other silly by the time your song is done playing."

"And they're not allowed to touch you," Kip added teasingly.

"And the person I want to touch is somewhere else entirely, you mean," Demme corrected.

Kip turned around in Demme's embrace and kissed him passionately. "I like that," he whispered against Demme's mouth. "Make love to me?"

"Are you sure?" Demme asked, trying to convey he wasn't the one in doubt.

Kip nodded determinedly. "Yes, I think I'm ready."

Kip's actions didn't betray his words. Demme felt no hesitation whatsoever and the sensation of Kip's hands all over him was still a bigger turn-on than anything else he'd ever experienced.

"Can I turn on the light?" Demme asked, hoping it wouldn't break the mood.

Kip chuckled. "Doesn't really matter to me."

Rubbing his groin against Kip's chest hair as he reached up to find the light switch, Demme bit his lip. "I wish I didn't need the visuals, but I like the watching almost as much as the doing." He hoped it wouldn't put Kip off, but Kip reassured him easily.

"Once we get to know each other better, it'll be different. When you know every inch of my body, I'll show you how amazing it is to just go by touch alone."

"And sound and smell and taste, of course," Demme added.

"Of course," Kip concurred, capturing Demme's mouth with a searing kiss.

DEMME liked being in charge when he made love. Even when he bottomed, he liked to be the one calling the shots, but with Kip, it was a curious mix of tenderness and passion that made Demme relinquish control.

Now that Kip had finally decided they would go all the way, he devoured Demme, touching him with a certain urgency and, like a child, needing to put everything in his mouth to get the true feeling. Demme tried to reciprocate, but it was totally unnecessary. Kip was on fire and Demme more than enjoyed sensing the total devotion. He'd been hard since he left his clients' house, so getting to spend that horniness on his lover was just what he needed. After a very intense blowjob, Kip flipped him over and Demme came hard while Kip was rimming him.

"Fuck! That was major..." Demme blurted out, not quite finding the right words to express what he was feeling. Kip had stopped his ministrations after Demme collapsed and had enveloped him in a tight hug, gently letting him come down off his high.

Demme couldn't ignore Kip's erection nudging his ass though. "Fuck me?"

"Are you sure?" Kip asked, still holding him tightly.

"I've been sure since before we ever kissed," Demme admitted freely. "I've been wanting to feel you inside me since the first time you touched me. Of course I've always wanted to fuck you too. Make love to you," Demme corrected himself, as if he felt the latter words were more accurate but he wasn't used to using them yet.

"Damn," Kip cursed as he turned away from Demme to sit on the

side of the bed.

A little unsure about what was going on, Demme followed his lover and turned toward him. “What’s wrong?”

Kip was rummaging through the bedside table. “I bought condoms last week, but I’m not sure—”

“Here they are,” Demme said, easily recognizing the package and handing the small box to Kip. He didn’t want to make a big deal out of it, so decided to distract Kip a bit. “Can I put it on? On you, I mean? I’ve always wanted to do that.”

Kip chuckled shyly. “Sure.”

Demme got on his knees behind Kip and somewhat awkwardly reached around Kip’s sinewy frame. As he took Kip’s erection in his hand, Kip hissed, and he moaned when Demme rolled on the condom and then fisted his cock a few times.

“I think you’re ready for me now,” Demme whispered seductively in Kip’s ear.

Kip turned around and took Demme’s hands in his, entwining their fingers as they lay down together. As passionate as Kip’s moves had been earlier, now he seemed unsure of himself, so Demme urged him on. “It’s okay. You opened me up very nicely.” He spread his legs so Kip could sit between them and align his cock with Demme’s entrance. Kip pushed in slowly and Demme reveled at being filled up with such restraint. It wasn’t until Kip started moving that the passion returned and Demme felt himself harden again.

“It’s been so long,” Kip moaned as he looked straight at Demme.

Kip’s eyes had turned dark blue and looked almost liquid as Demme gazed into them. He knew Kip couldn’t see him, but it didn’t feel like that. The intensity of Kip’s eyes made Demme look away. “It’s like riding a bike,” he said to defuse the situation. “Once you get on again, it’s like you never stopped.”

Kip smiled and his gaze softened. Their movements became more synchronized and Kip moved their hands over Demme’s head, pinning them to the mattress as he intensified his thrusts.

Being totally at Kip’s mercy was an unusual situation for Demme, but he realized he trusted the man so completely, it actually turned him on.

“Not going to last much longer, Kip,” Demme warned.

“Can you come again?” Kip asked, not without surprise in his voice.

“Fuck, yeah,” Demme answered, sounding a bit strained. “Hell, yeah!”

As Demme tilted his hips slightly, the angle of Kip’s thrust became just right and Demme’s orgasm hit even harder than the one before. Kip kept pushing until he too came. They were both panting hard, arms wrapped tightly around each other, and as their breathing slowly calmed, Demme realized Kip was crying.

“Shhh, it’s okay. Did I push you too much?” Demme asked softly.

Kip shook his head but didn’t answer. Eventually he held onto the condom and pulled out, then carefully discarded it.

Demme didn’t know how to react so he just put his hand between Kip’s shoulder blades in a show of support.

“I’m sorry. I usually don’t get this... miserable... after sex. It’s not your fault.”

Demme moved closer to Kip again. “Want to talk about it?”

Kip shrugged. “You asked me once if I ever felt like I missed being able to see?”

Demme nodded, his head against Kip’s neck so Kip could feel it.

“I meant it when I said no, but now I’m not so sure.”

“Oh?”

Kip took a deep breath, as if he needed to gather his courage. “Both times when you came, it felt so intense. I wish I could see you come too.”

Demme wrapped his arms around Kip and squeezed him from behind. At first he didn’t know what to say, but then it dawned on him. “You’re the only one who’ll get to feel it, though. Everyone else gets to watch, but you get the full show. You get all of me.”

“And that’s priceless, isn’t it?”

“You bet,” Demme answered determinedly, squeezing Kip in his embrace.

“I love you,” Kip mumbled.

“And that’s priceless too,” Demme added.

ZAHRA OWENS was born in Europe just before Woodstock and the moon landing and was given a much less pronounceable name by her non-English-speaking parents. Being an Aquarian meant she would never quite conform, and people learned to expect the unexpected.

She started writing fairy tales in first grade; the same year she came into contact with her first group of English-speaking friends, a group which would eventually grow to include people from all over the world. On the outside she was a typical only child, accustomed to being with adults most of the time. On the inside, she sought ways to channel her wild imagination.

During the daytime she earns a living as a computer specialist, but it's her former career as an intensive care nurse that tends to seep into her fiction. Maybe this has to do with her weak spot for flawed characters and imperfect bodies, or maybe it's just her sadistic streak coming through. You be the judge.

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# Exposure

Marguerite Labbe &  
Fae Sutherland

IF Sebastian had to photograph one more straight man faking gay for the paycheck, he thought he'd shove his zoom lens somewhere it didn't belong. "It's not like there's much artistic credibility in the gay porn industry anyway, but is it too much to ask to get a real fag in front of my camera?" He glanced over at his assistant as she handed him a cup of steaming chai latte.

"Don't look at me; I just get the coffee." Allison smirked and nodded toward the set. "Does it matter when they look like that?"

Sebastian glanced over his shoulder, eyes raking the waxed-smooth, ripped-muscle pretty boy he'd just finished shooting. He shrugged one shoulder and went back to readying the camera for the third, and last, shoot of the afternoon. "Yes, it matters. But only to me, apparently."

He sighed and turned, watching as they switched out the set, this time to one of a huge wrought iron four-poster, swathed in white silk and satin, with a pure white background. "All right. Where's my next victim?"

"That would be me." Angel stepped onto the set and shrugged out of his robe. Without a trace of self-consciousness, he handed it to the assistant. The photographer's eyes looked him over, judging as Angel crossed to the bed and smiled.

The photographer had pretty eyes, a dark blue that studied him coolly. His face was just rough enough to save him from being effeminate and Angel decided that his afternoon had just become very interesting.

Angel stretched out long limbs on the pristine bed and shot the photographer a laughing smile. "How do you want me?"

Being photographed by Sebastian Case, the most requested artist in

town, had taken on a whole new dimension now that Angel realized he was hot too. His gaze slid to Sebastian's hands as he adjusted the lens. They were competent hands, handling the equipment with confidence and skill. Angel smiled again. Definitely a more interesting afternoon.

*How did he want him?* Sebastian had to shake the obscene thoughts off. Which was in and of itself a bizarre occurrence. He'd had enough beautiful men pass in front of his camera that he wasn't affected by a pretty face, a tight ass, and big, seductively innocent brown eyes.

At least, that was what he told himself as he handed the camera to Allison and approached the bed.

Angel peered up at him, his brows lifted expectantly, a smile curving his lips. Sebastian ignored the punch of lust that hit him and focused on doing his job and getting this one out of his studio before the trouble Sebastian could see lurking in his eyes was set loose.

Sebastian grabbed a sheer white sash from the props table and gestured to the young man's hands. "We're going to start with your hands bound. Don't worry; we're not going to actually secure the ties, just give the illusion of it."

Angel's smile faltered a bit before he nodded and held out his wrists. "All right."

Sebastian took his hand, his fingertips brushing the fine skin of the young man's inner wrist as he wound the sash around it twice before reaching for the other hand. Their eyes met and Sebastian's heart thudded in his chest at the wide-eyed expression on Angel's face, his head tipped back to look up at Sebastian.

It was ridiculous, to be so affected by a simple piece of cloth. At least that's what Angel told himself and chalked it up to Sebastian's presence instead, the sure way he wound the scarf around the other wrist before having him kneel, bound hands in front of him.

Angel shouldn't feel that odd twinge of vulnerability; after all, he could get his hands free simply by pulling them apart. He cocked his head, tamping down another instinctual shiver at the way Sebastian was looking at him, and retaliated by wiggling his fingers and kissing the air. The flash of irreverence chased away his momentary misgivings. They were on a shoot and there were a ton of people around working. Much better to concentrate on the sparks between them and translating it into a photograph than these odd twinges.

"Does this work for you?" Angel teased.



Sebastian frowned, studying him with his hands on his hips, then went back to look at him through the camera. "Tilt your head a little to the side; look up through your lashes."

Angel obeyed, the frivolity vanishing again as his heart picked up a beat. He couldn't see Sebastian's eyes behind the lens and it shouldn't matter. He'd been photographed so many times and he loved being in front of the camera. This afternoon was different. Maybe it was because, though he couldn't see Sebastian's face, it was like he could still feel his hands wrapped around his wrists.

Sebastian unscrewed the camera from the tripod, preferring to have a full range of motion for this shoot. He found himself wanting to take multiple shots of the same pose, all from different angles, each one more beautiful than the last.

Angel's eyes followed him, and Sebastian crouched down beside the bed, zooming in first on his face, until just those big dark eyes, thick with sooty lashes, filled the frame. He hit a button to switch it to black and white before clicking the shutter.

"Beautiful," he murmured without realizing he'd spoken, and shifted, coming around the foot of the bed. "Now lay back and put your arms above your head. Loosely for now, relaxed."

Angel nodded, his chest rising and falling rapidly; the illusion of breathlessness gave him a quality Sebastian craved to capture on camera. The contrast, as Angel laid back with his arms draped above his head, one long leg bent at the knee slightly, of tanned golden skin, dark chestnut waves, and the white sheets, the white sash, was stunning.

"Perfect." He snapped the shutter repeatedly as he circled the bed, and again Angel's eyes followed him.

Lust, Angel could understand, and there was a healthy amount of that between them. Normally his sense of everyone else in the room faded as Angel concentrated on the camera; this time all of his focus was on Sebastian and the low, gruff murmur of his voice, the way it whispered over his senses.

Then Sebastian paused, lowering the camera as he studied him. Angel's stomach tightened as a flutter went through it. If Sebastian didn't stop looking at him like that his reaction would be very evident soon. Angel could already feel his cock start to stir. "Roll over onto your side."

Angel did and Sebastian set down the camera, adjusting his leg,

half-cocking it up. Angel noticed his hands were callused and wondered what the man did on his time off to make them that way. Much better than soft hands.

Then to his disappointment and relief Sebastian unwound the strip of cloth from his wrists. “What now?” he asked, curious in spite of himself. Sebastian hadn’t tossed the scarf aside, but instead was running it through his fingers in a way that sent a shiver down Angel’s spine.

“Bring your hands closer to the headboard.”

Angel’s cock twitched as another, stronger shiver struck. He locked his eyes on Sebastian’s face and lifted his hands until he felt cold wrought iron. “Like this?”

Sebastian nodded. “Just like that.” He hadn’t missed the quick expression of disappointment that had flashed across Angel’s face when he’d taken away the sash. That reaction niggled at him as he curled his hands over the young man’s, encouraging him to grasp the wrought iron of the bed frame.

Winding the sash loosely in and out and around Angel’s wrists, he then brought the end to the frame Angel held onto and tied it off in a soft, loose bow. The effect wasn’t meant to be obvious bondage, but sort of a romantic, light session between lovers. A taste of kink, with a romantic vibe. The desire and soft vulnerability in Angel’s eyes added to the mood.

“Good. Now don’t hold the frame too tight, just loose and sensual, kind of caress it... oh, that’s perfect.” Sebastian knelt on the foot of the bed and snapped shot after shot, zooming in at various angles on various parts of his subject, trying to capture perfectly the scene he was setting.

He wouldn’t know for sure until he developed the pictures whether he’d gotten it, but he was willing to lay down money that he had.

Angel’s heart wouldn’t stop fluttering, and as much as he tried to tell himself it was only because his photographer was drop-dead gorgeous, he didn’t believe it. To calm the inexplicable rush of nerves, he pretended that this was just foreplay between him and Sebastian, which helped even as it sent desire shooting through him.

Sebastian spotted his hard cock immediately and half-lowered the camera, giving him a crooked smile. It was the first smile Angel had seen on his lips and it packed a potent punch. Angel smiled back, arching his hips shamelessly, and wiggled his fingers again at Sebastian.

“You have me at a disadvantage.”

“Not yet I don’t.” With that promise, Sebastian once again set down the camera and untied Angel’s wrists.

At the other man’s instruction, Angel went onto his hands and knees, one hand fisted in the now rumpled covers, half rocking back. “It’s going to be a little hard to tie me up this way,” he said, glancing at Sebastian over his shoulder.

“I’m not tying you up this time.” The glint in Sebastian’s cool blue eyes was all the warning Angel had before he bound the cloth over his eyes.

The gasp was faint, and probably only Sebastian heard it, being so close to Angel at the time. It sent a ripple of awareness shooting through him and he took a step back from the bed, hands trembling faintly for a split second before lifting the camera again.

“Turn your head toward me, and part your lips a bit.”

Angel did, tilting his face toward the sound of Sebastian’s voice, and his full, pink lips parted sensually, as if he was having trouble catching a full breath.

“Lick them,” Sebastian commanded, snapping a flurry of pictures as Angel obeyed, wanting to capture as clearly as possible the damp pass of his tongue. “Perfect.” He crouched down beside the bed, zooming out so he could get all of Angel in the shot. “Now, I want you to pretend you’re dying to be touched, but being denied. Pretend you’re trying to entice me to give you what you want.”

His finger hovered on the shutter button, watching, waiting.

Angel clung to Sebastian’s voice. Even when he’d first started modeling naked he never felt this exposed. The camera whirled and snapped as Angel touched the tip of his tongue to his upper lip and rocked back, spreading his legs a little wider and arching his back so his ass lifted higher in offering.

He had trouble drawing in a full breath as he turned his head, following the sound of Sebastian’s voice, the heat of the photographer’s eyes on his skin. He smiled, a teasing come-hither one as he lifted a hand and traced a finger down his chest.

“Very good.” For half a second Angel preened, then Sebastian spoke again. “More. You’re frustrated, horny. You want your lover’s hands on you. Show me.”

Sebastian didn’t know how right he was. Angel would give his left

nut to have the other man's hands on him. If only he could see him then he wouldn't feel so vulnerable. Angel half-cocked his head to the side, his lips parted, and imagined Sebastian's hand trailing down his spine. "Please," he whispered, very softly, knowing the sentiment would translate itself to the camera.

Sebastian's knees threatened to buckle and for a split second he forgot he was just the photographer, Angel just a model, and that "Please" was not directed at him, but at the camera.

Swallowing hard, he snapped several more shots. "Good. Now turn over, lean back on one hand, and spread your legs." Angel did and, without being told, the young man's hand began a slow, traversing trail down his chest and stomach, stopping just shy of his groin.

"Like this?"

Sebastian's brain misheard that and he almost answered, "I more than like it, I love it." Instead he just nodded, even though Angel couldn't see him. "Just like that." He clicked the shutter over and over as Angel flowed smoothly between poses. First arching his back, then splaying his fingers across his chest to brush his nipple, the young man's breath came faster and his cock glistened now, heavy between his thighs.

It occurred to Sebastian that he'd completely forgotten the rest of the crew was even there. He'd been so enthralled by his subject that it was as if it were just them, alone, and no one else existed.

Of course, now that he realized it, their surroundings came rushing back into focus and Sebastian straightened, heart pounding as he cleared his throat. "Okay, I think we have the shot. You can take the blindfold off. Good work."

He tried for a professional, unruffled tone but wasn't entirely sure he'd managed it. He turned away and handed the camera off to Allison, ignoring the knowing look she gave him. "Have those pictures sent to my loft. I'll develop them myself."

Angel tugged off the blindfold and left it crumpled in the middle of the bed. The vulnerability vanished in an instant, which left him with the lust raging in his veins. That, he was comfortable with. Sebastian's back was to him as he talked with his assistant. When she glanced at him over Sebastian's shoulder, Angel gave her a wink.

He rose from the bed, at ease with his own nakedness, even with the state he was in. Sebastian half-turned as Angel slipped into the robe, giving him a short nod before starting to break down the camera

equipment.

Angel tied the robe and quirked a smile. A nonchalant Sebastian. That was very sexy. The photographer might try to ignore the sparks that had been flaring between them, but Angel didn't sense that kind of heat without it being reciprocated.

"Yes?" Sebastian said, his gaze as cool and collected as his eyes as Angel stopped in front of him. They were the same height, just about, though Angel was more slender. And damn, Sebastian was even sexier up close.

"Just to clear the air." Angel slid his hand around the nape of Sebastian's neck and kissed him, letting the pure heat flash through him before he pulled away with a nip to Sebastian's lower lip. Just a taste was all he needed. For now. "See you around." Then he turned and sashayed off, grinning from the sensation of Sebastian's eyes on him.

SEBASTIAN clipped the last of the photos to the drying line and took a step back, perusing them. Not to brag but Lord, that was good work. Of course, his subject had a hell of a lot to do with it.

There was a keen vulnerability and sensual pleasure that came across, something almost virginal about the young man bound and blindfolded and burning up Sebastian's camera. Not virginal as in untouched, but virginal because it was clear that Angel hadn't been exposed to bondage before, but took to it like a fish to a stream.

Sebastian's hand lifted and he lightly traced his fingertips across one photo in particular, the one where Angel had said "Please." The single plea reflected in his body language, a desperation in it that made Sebastian's heart thud heavily in his chest.

Dropping his hand, he slipped out of the darkroom, through the protective anteroom, and out into his loft. He grabbed his cell phone and crossed to his desk, rifling through papers to find the information sheet for today's shoot. Ah, there. He sat down and scanned the papers, eyes landing on the contact information for the day's three models.

The first two didn't even register, but his fingers were dialing Angel's number almost of their own volition, and he turned, leaning back in his chair as it rang. It was late; he'd probably be leaving a message.

Angel glanced up from his book and almost didn't answer the

phone. He had just gotten relaxed, stretched out naked on his bed, and was ready to read until he fell asleep. Then he made the mistake of looking at the number and when he didn't recognize it, the little thrill of possibility raced up his spine.

"Hello?"

"I have an idea for another project for you." As soon as Sebastian spoke, Angel knew who it was. He didn't have to give his name. His voice still touched Angel in the same way it had when he'd been blindfolded.

Angel rolled onto his back and grinned up at the ceiling. "I've been thinking of you too." Sure, this wasn't the booty call he'd been expecting, but somehow Sebastian's statement was even more intriguing and Angel hadn't been able to get that almost chaste kiss out of his mind. Even more frustrating, he hadn't been able to get the memory of being on the other side of Sebastian's camera and somewhat helpless out of his mind either.

On most occasions he was very picky about whom he took to bed. He might flirt outrageously, but it rarely went beyond that. Sebastian was different. He wanted to get his hands into Sebastian's pants, or have Sebastian get his hands into Angel's pants. He wouldn't bitch about either one; he just wanted hands in pants.

Sebastian somehow wasn't surprised that Angel had been thinking of him. If the young man had been able to get that afternoon out of his mind, he'd have to be made of sturdier stuff than Sebastian.

"Good. I have a project I signed up for recently, but haven't found the right model. I think you'd be perfect."

There was a brief pause and then a chuckle. "What's this perfect project?"

Sebastian fiddled with a pen on his desk as he thought of the right way to couch the answer. Best to be blunt. He'd found tiptoeing around subjects never served him well. "It's for a fetish catalog. I liked the way you worked with the bondage today and I think you'd demonstrate the various products well." He paused, and then continued. "It's fairly hard-core stuff: fetish wear, CBT toys, bondage furniture, etc."

He was curious whether Angel would be interested just based on the type of shoot it was, but decided an added incentive was never amiss. "It pays extremely well for what will probably be about a three-day shoot."

Angel's mouth went dry. Hard-core bondage. He'd never even done light bondage and today didn't really count. He could've removed the silk scarf any time he wanted to. He ignored the little voice that said he wouldn't have touched it until Sebastian said he could. He didn't even know what CBT toys were or what exactly bondage furniture entailed other than being tied down to a bed or a chair.

"CBT toys?" he asked, hoping he sounded more confident than he wasn't feeling at the moment.

"Yeah, you know: cock, balls, and tits. For you I'd probably go with a cage or chastity device." The wicked, rough edge to Sebastian's voice shivered over his nerves. Angel was on the verge of saying no. This wasn't his kind of scene at all, but something held him.

"Where's the shoot?" he found himself asking. He was mad; he really should just say no thanks and hang up.

"Since it's not a local company, I'll be shooting it in my own studio. It's the second half of the floor of my loft. I'll e-mail you the address. The company has already shipped everything they want me to shoot and I have it set up. Do you think you'll be available in the next week or two? If not I'll have to find someone else, as I have a dead—"

"I'm available."

Sebastian grinned. "Good. How does Saturday sound to start?"

There was a slight pause and Sebastian held his breath. The young man could change his mind, but he didn't think Angel would. Living his life looking through a lens at people, Sebastian had come to understand people in ways they didn't even realize they revealed. Angel wanted to do this shoot for more reasons than the fat paycheck.

"Sounds good. Do I need to... dress any certain way?"

Sebastian chuckled. "Clothes are the least of your worries. I'll see you at noon Saturday, Angel." He let his voice linger over the man's name before snapping the cell phone shut.

This was going to be fun.

ANGEL knew he looked good. He'd put a lot of time into his appearance this morning. It didn't matter that his clothes would be discarded once the shoot began. Putting himself together calmed his nerves, but it didn't stop the flutter when he knocked on Sebastian's door.

He squashed the sensation ruthlessly and gave Sebastian a bright

smile as he opened the door. “Mornin’.” This was just another job. There was no reason at all to get worked up. Even if—when—he slept with Sebastian, that wasn’t anything to be nervous about either.

Sex was fun and laid-back and Angel enjoyed it to the limit. Nope, there was nothing to be nervous about at all. Then Sebastian smiled.

“You’re on time. I like that in a model,” Sebastian said and stepped back to let Angel inside.

Angel stomped down the last remaining quaver, kissed his fingertip, then pressed it to Sebastian’s lips as he slipped inside. The loft was spacious, with lots of natural lighting. It suited Sebastian. “Just out of curiosity, which picture did you decide on for the calendar?”

Sebastian shut the door behind Angel, lips tingling where he’d touched them. “I can show you, if you like?”

Angel nodded, his hands shoved in his pockets. He was nervous. Which was sexy and, he hoped, would come across on camera as well. Sebastian placed a hand on the small of his back, a subtle commanding gesture and, as he’d suspected, Angel instinctively followed his lead without hesitation.

In the darkroom, Sebastian flipped on the red bare bulb in the ceiling and unclipped one picture from the drying line.

“This one.”

It was Angel bound, laying on his back, arched a bit and looking directly at the camera. He looked vulnerable, sensual, his hips turned slightly to the side in a way that almost hid his erection, but not quite, and the move gave the picture a coy quality that, combined with the hint of bondage, was intensely arousing.

Angel studied it the way he studied all the pictures he was in that ended up being published. It was good. He didn’t believe in false modesty. Angel knew he took good pictures. The camera loved him. He also knew it took a good photographer to bring out his best, and Sebastian had captured the spirit of the moment. It was a picture Angel could be proud of.

“We make a good team,” Angel said as Sebastian clipped the picture back on the line.

“Yes we do, which is why I thought of you for the catalog.”

The catalog. Angel glanced around the darkroom at the various images of himself and the other models. His pictures jumped out at him,



not because they were of him, but because in every single one his eyes were drawn to the scarf wrapped around his wrists or around his eyes. A little thrill danced through him and Angel tried to dismiss it, though this time it wasn't so easy.

Earlier, they had just touched the surface. Today would be much more... potent. The thrill was stronger this time with a touch of apprehension. It was just a job, Angel reminded himself, as he turned toward Sebastian with another smile. "Shall we get started?"

Sebastian wasn't one to lie to himself. What sizzled between them was more than just model/photographer chemistry. If he was honest, and he always was, brutally so, then he had to admit that this was as much about testing the waters of their attraction as it was about work. Maybe more.

"Come with me." He put his hand on Angel's back again and this time there was a shiver he couldn't miss as Angel let himself be guided through the loft and out into the hall. Opening the sliding door to the second half of the floor, Sebastian waved the young man inside. "After you."

Angel seemed to hesitate a moment, then squared his jaw and strode through determinedly. Sebastian's lips twitched in amusement. His subject wasn't one to back down from a challenge. Good.

Following him, Sebastian slid the door shut and turned. "It's just going to be you and me today. Is that a problem for you? I could call my assistant if you'd be more comfortable."

It was a courtesy offer, one he knew Angel wouldn't take even if he might want to. To admit he was uncomfortable seemed to be more than the prideful young man would allow. Sebastian counted on it, in fact.

"No. Thanks for offering, though." And just the suggestion eased some of Angel's qualms. "I would actually be more comfortable if it was just the two of us." That would be as close as he got to admitting that he might be a trifle nervous.

He trusted Sebastian's professionalism. The man had a good reputation and, even more, he trusted his instincts. Sebastian wasn't a creepy stalker looking for a victim. And if by any chance he ever needed to gather himself during this shoot, he wanted only Sebastian to see his vulnerability.

"So what do you want to start with?" Sebastian gestured around the

room.

There was so much to see. Angel's eyes skimmed over a cage hanging from the ceiling, a funny-looking swing, and an ominous cross. There was a table set up with all manner of things, some of which Angel recognized and quite a few that he didn't.

"Extensive catalog," he murmured and walked over to the table, which was less intimidating. He was half-tempted to let Sebastian choose because he didn't know where to start at all. Then he firmed his lips and raised his chin a notch. He was acting like a virgin on prom night, and that had been a long time ago.

He picked up one of the dildos and a collar that caught his eye. It was pretty, leather and steel. He liked the look of the collar and he'd done photo shoots with anal toys before, so at least that would be familiar. "How about these?"

Sebastian nodded, a flare of protectiveness he hadn't been prepared for surging through him at the uncertain but eager expression on Angel's face. He'd chosen right. Angel would be perfect. *For the shoot or for you?* his inner voice asked and Sebastian turned away with a small smile. Maybe both.

"Here, I have a small selection of makeup over here. For this I'd like it if you darkened up the eyes a good bit, very smoky, and no color on your lips, just shine." He glanced back over his shoulder and his grin was wicked. "Makes people think of blowjobs and come."

Angel nodded, handing off the dildo and the collar to Sebastian before sitting down at the table. Sebastian left him to it and crossed the room to grab a pair of matching leather and steel wrist cuffs as well. They'd go perfectly with the collar and would look sexy on but not attached to anything, contrasting with the pale golden skin of Angel's thighs when he used the dildo on himself.

When Angel stood up and turned around, Sebastian's cock stirred heavily inside his jeans. He looked exotic and sexy and the darkened eyes with bare, glossy lips had just the effect Sebastian had hoped for. He himself was certainly thinking about blowjobs and come and those perfect lips.

"Good." He crooked his finger. "Come here; let's get these on you."

Angel chuckled and popped the top button of his jeans. "It might be better first if I'm naked." The little bit of flirtation along with the few

moments he'd spent fixing the makeup had settled his equilibrium. The appreciation darkening Sebastian's blue eyes didn't hurt either, and Angel's smile was easy and natural as he slipped out of his shoes and slid his jeans down his long legs. "Do you want me to leave the shirt on? Half-unbuttoned?" he asked as he folded his jeans and set them on the chair.

"Naked." The edge to Sebastian's voice was just a little rougher this time and Angel blew him a kiss as he added the shirt to the pile.

Sebastian crooked his finger again, this time not saying a word. It was like a little hook behind Angel's navel, drawing him toward the other man. Angel held out his arms and Sebastian's answering smile made his throat tighten in anticipation. The crooked cant of his lips was commanding and possessive.

The weight of the cuffs made their impression far more than the scarf did. It was like having Sebastian's hands circling and capturing his wrists. Angel was a little breathless as he leaned forward and arched his neck so Sebastian could place the collar around his throat.

Who wouldn't be a little breathless with a man as hot as Sebastian staring at them that way?

Sebastian snapped the collar in place and there was a brief flash of disappointment at the lack of a keyed lock that he could secure. He'd throw away the key if he could and admitting it turned this shoot into a far different thing. Their eyes met and as Sebastian adjusted the collar, Angel cast his gaze down, a subtle, unconsciously respectful gesture.

Sebastian let his fingers brush the young man's jaw briefly before stepping back. "Let's start over here."

Angel took several breaths and then followed Sebastian over to the pile of black and red satin draped pillows on the floor. "How do you want me?"

*Such a loaded question*, Sebastian thought. He grabbed his camera off the tripod and handed Angel the dildo. "On your knees," he murmured, one brow lifting. Angel was clever enough and aware enough to know that Sebastian was no longer talking about the shoot.

Sebastian didn't have to speak loudly to be heard, he didn't need to scream or demand; that softly spoken command had Angel sinking to his knees as the mood between them shifted. It was dizzying and Angel found himself grateful for the pile of pillows and the reminder that this was a set and a shoot, no matter the heat between them. That could be

addressed later.

Angel eyed the bulge in Sebastian's jeans, but for once a clever quip didn't come to him. The tip of his tongue peeked between his lips and he shifted the dildo from one hand to the other as he cocked his head.

He wished Sebastian would kiss him. A real kiss, one he could taste, a hard one that would leave his lips tingling and reassure him. Angel pushed that thought away for later and gestured with the dildo. "Lube?"

Sebastian gestured with his camera. "Behind you, under the edge of the fabric. But not yet." He crouched down, bringing the camera up and zooming in on Angel's beautiful face. "Use your mouth on it first. Slow and easy. I don't need you to deep-throat it, just let me see your tongue, your lips, hell, even use some teeth if you want."

Angel's lashes fluttered and he nodded. Sebastian began to snap shot after shot as Angel cradled the dildo in both hands, bringing it to his lips and staring right at the camera as he licked across the tip, kissed it, gave it a teasing nip with his teeth, eyes wicked and aroused.

God damn, he was good.

"Good boy." The far too personal endearment came out without thought. "Now suck on it for me, gorgeous. Get it nice and wet; show me what you've got."

The whimper was barely audible, but you could hear a pin drop in the studio and the soft sound went straight to Sebastian's cock. They'd just begun and already he wanted to drop his three thousand dollar camera and push the young man back on the pillows and have his way with him.

It was hard to concentrate on the shoot. First off, Sebastian's face was too close, too intent, and Angel kept thinking that he'd much rather wrap his lips around Sebastian's cock than the dildo. At least he didn't have to fake desire. He was horny and it screwed with his concentration.

He should've gotten the fucking out of the way; then he'd be less tense. He wanted Sebastian. Sebastian wanted him. It was simple. But the way Sebastian issued commands and the shiver it gave him wasn't simple in the least.

Angel half-closed his eyes and moaned, dragging his tongue up the underside of the dildo as the camera clicked away. Would Sebastian keep some of these pictures for himself and imagine doing this to Angel for

real?

Uncertainty flashed, but Angel pushed it away again with a quick spurt of anger. It was a job. So what if he had the hots for his photographer? He'd have him when this was all over with; there was absolutely nothing to get all worked up about.

After another few minutes, Sebastian reached out and took the toy from Angel. He got a bit of a pout for that and his lips quirked. Dirty, dirty boy. He sat back on his heels and looked at Angel. Finally, he rose and held out his hand.

"New plan. Come here."

Angel blinked, then took his hand, rising. He followed Sebastian obediently over to the large St. Andrew's cross, though as soon as he seemed to realize what they were aiming for, Angel's breath quickened audibly. Sebastian set the dildo down and his own cock stirred as he picked up another item off the table, a rather nasty-looking cock cage. Its bark was worse than its bite, with all the spikes along it and ominous leather, but inside it was actually lined with soft leather; while it'd be uncomfortable if Angel got hard, it wouldn't actually hurt.

"Have you ever used one of these before, Angel?"

Angel shook his head, trying to make sense of the contraption. He was suddenly very conscious of the weight of the collar and cuffs and even more conscious of the large cross next to him. Sebastian was going to tie him up for real, not the illusion it had been at the other shoot. "What is it?" he asked, moving a bit closer to Sebastian.

The photographer smiled and opened it up. "It's a chastity device. It goes around your cock and keeps you from getting hard."

"Sounds cruel. Who would want to be chaste when it's so much fun to be unchaste?"

Sebastian chuckled and the sound stirred the hairs on the nape of Angel's neck and desire in his stomach. All too easily, he could picture himself tied to the cross, still wearing his adornments at throat and wrists, with that evil-looking thing around his cock. Only in his imagination, Sebastian wasn't taking his picture. Angel's cock twitched.

Screw that. When he got down and dirty with Sebastian, he was getting his hands all over the other man. Being helpless didn't seem like it would be much fun at all. *Then why the excitement?* his thoughts taunted.

Sebastian set the cage down and his camera as well and then turned to Angel. "If you'll just...." He gestured to the cross. "Facing me."

Angel took a deep breath and nodded. Sebastian could almost touch the tension and nerves as well as the excitement rolling off of him in waves. He wanted to touch, as a matter of fact, every inch he could. Instead he struggled to maintain as much of a semblance of professionalism as he could. He wasn't sure how long it would last, honestly.

Angel nodded again, stepping up to the cross and shifting to spread his legs and his arms out. Sebastian's heart thudded in his chest as he reached up and attached the wrist cuffs to the heavy iron rings on the cross, then crouched down to do the same to his long legs at the ankles.

Sebastian glanced up at Angel from where he crouched, one hand resting on his calf. "All right?"

Angel swallowed hard, concentrating on the feel of Sebastian's hand on his skin. It was way more comforting than it should be considering they'd known each other for all of one and a half sessions of photographs. "Yeah, I'm cool."

He flushed, realizing what a bald-faced lie that was and how Sebastian could see right through it. He felt compelled to be honest with him. "I mean, it's weird. Not too weird though. I'll be okay." Just as long as it was Sebastian on the other side of the camera and nobody else.

Sebastian patted his calf in a possessive way. "You're doing good, Angel."

Angel smiled and took a deep breath to relax. "You gonna use that thing on me then?" He nodded toward the chastity device. "It's not going to hurt, is it?" He didn't think Sebastian would do that to him, but he picked a fine time to ask after he'd already been bound.

"No, it won't hurt. It'll feel a bit uncomfortable if you start to get hard, but it won't hurt."

Angel could live with uncomfortable. He knew for a fact that he'd be springing a boner before long. He'd been halfway there during the whole dildo scene. Sebastian just got into his blood that way.

Sebastian reached for the cage and finally let his gaze fall on Angel's cock. His fingers tingled with the urge to touch, to wrap around him and stroke until he was aching and whimpering with pleasure. Even stronger was the urge to lean forward and taste, to suck him deep and feel Angel harden in his mouth.

Christ, when had he become such a lecher? He'd done more nude photo shoots in the past six years than he could count, and this was the first time he'd found himself turning into some cliché photographer predator type.

So it was with business-like touches that he slipped the cage over Angel's cock, wrapped the base around his balls, and locked it into place. It took every ounce of his willpower to not sneak in a single unnecessary touch.

When he rose, he wondered if Angel could sense his tension the same way Sebastian had sensed Angel's. He didn't linger on the thought and grabbed his camera, taking a step back.

"All right. What I want you to do is look right at me and writhe, like you're trying to get out of the shackles, but not very hard. Just sort of restless movements, slow and fluid."

Angel forgot his disappointment the moment Sebastian began giving orders. This he understood—following the camera's demands—and his anxiety eased. He thought about how much he'd been dying to have Sebastian plant a kiss on his hip or to touch him more than he had and Angel half-closed his eyes, the soft moan rising without any effort. He circled his hips and met Sebastian's intent gaze.

"Like this?"

His nipples peaked and ached, and for a second he thought Sebastian was going to toss down the camera and touch him. It would shatter the professional illusion, but Angel couldn't have cared less anymore. He bit his lip and arched against the bonds as if trying to entice.

It was a strange mix between business and pleasure, and as Sebastian began snapping pictures, the uneasiness returned. Sebastian prowled with the camera, like a wolf drawing out the hunt until Angel wasn't sure if he'd pounce or not. He just kept murmuring encouragements and bits of praise that would ease him for a moment before the feeling of being too exposed, too vulnerable returned.

This time the camera was seeing too much and Angel wasn't sure if he wanted to give it.

Sebastian could see the tension rising, the slightly wild look that came and went in Angel's eyes, only seeming to calm when Sebastian spoke quietly to him. Angel would focus on him then, their eyes meeting, and the young man would relax. As soon as the camera came

back into play though, he seemed disoriented and anxious.

A part of him said to stop the shoot, to let Angel free and send him on his way. That would be the respectable thing to do, he supposed.

But the rest of Sebastian argued against it. The rest of Sebastian recognized that this had nothing to do with the camera, but to do with the connection between them. Angel didn't like the camera coming back into play because it separated them, like a wall coming up. Sebastian had a feeling that if he put the camera down and continued this scene, Angel would fall into it like a comfortable, warm bath.

It only confirmed Sebastian's belief, the conviction that had hit him just minutes before. He wanted Angel for his own, not as a model. If he was honest he'd admit he'd known that from the time he'd called to arrange this shoot.

He got the impression, however, that Angel didn't know he belonged to Sebastian yet. And maybe pushing him just a little more would be the trick.

For once Angel couldn't separate work from someone he wanted, and it fucked with him. If it was just the two of them having illicit dirty sex without the camera it would be one thing. Hell, even with the camera, as long as it was just for them and not for some damned catalog. Or if there was no heat between them and this was just another job then that wouldn't be a problem, either.

But it wasn't just a job. Angel couldn't pretend any longer. And as Sebastian moved in closer with the camera focusing on his face, the vulnerability and desire surged. Angel made a soft sound, half-turning his face away as the pressure around his cock increased. His hips moved, not because Sebastian ordered it, but because he couldn't keep them still anymore.

If he could just ask for a break, give himself ten minutes to pull himself together, but in all the years he'd been modeling Angel had never asked for a break. It was a matter of professional pride and he wasn't about to start now.

Angel's eyes stung as Sebastian moved close enough that he could hear the other man's breath between harsh snaps of the camera. And still, he didn't touch him.

Sebastian crouched abruptly, snapping shots of the cage, mouth going dry at the beautiful contrast of Angel's smooth skin, golden tan against the black leather and silver steel. His tongue literally tingled



wanting to taste that sleek dip where thigh met groin. He could almost hear the soft cry he'd get if he did.

Every snap of the camera sent a shock through them both. To Sebastian it said, "Mine, mine, mine," a ragged whisper that clawed at him to claim what was so obviously his. Angel.

"Good boy," he whispered, circling around to the side and focusing on one shackled wrist, the way his slender fingers clenched and unclenched, wrists moving against the bonds more aggressively now.

And then Angel jerked hard against them, hard enough to startle Sebastian, and he lifted his head, lowering the camera to meet frantic dark eyes.

"Undo them! Let me out!"

Angel yanked again and then Sebastian was there undoing his ankles and wrists. The trembling wouldn't stop when he was free, though it became a mix of both relief and panic instead of just panic. He drew in a deep shuddering breath and went for his clothes, trying to get the cuffs and the collar and the cage off all at once.

"I'm sorry. I made a mistake. I'm wasting your time. I can't do this." He realized he was babbling, but couldn't seem to make himself stop.

"Wait a minute, Angel. You're going to hurt yourself." The hint of command in Sebastian's voice had him stopping and turning toward the other man. His face burned and his eyes stung and he couldn't meet Sebastian's gaze. He'd never acted like this on a shoot before.

"I'm sorry. You must think I'm a complete idiot." Sebastian's hands undid the cage and Angel groaned as blood rushed back into his cock. He couldn't believe how hot he still was despite everything. He still wanted Sebastian to kiss him, wanted the other man to push him down on those cushions and fuck him until he screamed.

Only now he knew it was one-sided. He was a model and Sebastian was a photographer. Now that he looked back on it, Sebastian had never returned his flirtatious behavior. He was an idiot and it was all on camera. Everything had to have shown on his face and in the way he moved his body.

"If I may just get my things and go?"

Sebastian almost let him. In fact, Angel began to snatch up his clothes without waiting for an answer. The young man was halfway to

the door only partly dressed by the time Sebastian caught him, turned him, and slammed him up against the door, mouth slanting across Angel's.

The young man's cry was muffled by his lips, but it wasn't a distressed cry; it was one of relief. Angel's arms flew around his neck, the remaining clothes dropping to the floor. Sebastian tore what Angel had managed to get on off as he began to walk him backward back into the room, growling as he kissed him possessively.

"Mine," he snarled against the young man's lips and Angel whimpered, clinging tighter. Sebastian slid his mouth down Angel's neck, finally reaching the pile of cushions and fabric, tumbling him down onto them. He snarled it again. "Mine."

"Yes." Angel arched against Sebastian, yanking at his shirt until he managed to get it off Sebastian. "Yes." He couldn't catch his breath, didn't want to pause to do so. When Sebastian growled "mine" again, Angel's heart lurched and his cock ached.

"Yes, please." Sebastian's mouth devoured his throat, the scruff growing in on his jaw scraping his skin, and Angel closed his eyes on another whimper. "Oh dear god, please."

It was too good. It wasn't enough.

"Take my jeans off," Sebastian commanded.

Angel nodded with another breathless groan, kneeling up to undo the button and slide the denim down Sebastian's legs. He knelt back on his heels, taking in the sight of the other man naked. His shoulders were broad and a delicious sprinkling of hair dusted his chest. Another time he'd wax eloquent about how gorgeous Sebastian was; right then he planned to get his mouth and hands on every inch he could.

Sebastian didn't let him linger, reaching out to slide one arm around his lean waist, hauling the young man down against him. His dark hair tumbled around his face, the loose curls ending just around his chin, and Sebastian wanted to bury his fingers in that silky hair and guide Angel's mouth on his cock. Although he had a feeling Angel didn't need the guidance.

"Kiss me," he murmured, the command quiet, but Angel responded to it as if he'd barked it, immediately leaning down and pressing his lips against Sebastian's. Angel had enough sass for a hundred people, teasing and taunting and sure of his own power, but under it all Sebastian could smell the submission wanting out. Just waiting for someone strong

enough to take him in hand and demand rather than ask.

Lucky Angel, he'd met that someone.

Sebastian rolled with him, taking control of the kiss and pinning him back against the pillows. Angel succumbed so sweetly, his mouth softening, his body arching, long legs spreading to allow Sebastian to nestle between them naturally.

Angel sighed, luxuriating in the feel of bare skin against bare skin, far more hedonistic than the satin underneath his body. Sebastian's hands touched him as if he owned him and Angel found himself responding in ways he never had before, his whole body going liquid with want.

Sebastian's tongue dove into his mouth, branding him, and Angel's heart fluttered as madly now as his stomach had earlier. He skated his hands down Sebastian's back and squeezed two generous handfuls of the man's ass. He had an amazing ass, one he had to explore further.

When Sebastian finally broke the kiss and let him breathe again, Angel groaned. "More, please."

Angel arched up, his shaft rubbing against Sebastian's stomach, the other man's cock sliding along the cleft of his ass. Sebastian's hand fisted in his hair and dizzying desire swept through Angel as those lips continued to command with kisses and hard little nips along his cheek and jaw. Each bite seemed to say what Sebastian had claimed earlier: "Mine."

He shivered. It called for some response, one other than yes: a direct acknowledgment. Angel turned his head and met Sebastian's gaze, surrender pooling heat in his stomach, and sizzling along his nerves. "Yes, yours...." The moment he said it, he knew he was right.

Sebastian groaned harshly in response, nodding and reaching one hand down between them. "Yes, Angel. You're mine." He rubbed a fingertip against Angel's entrance, the skin heated and smooth. "If that's going to be a problem, say so now. Do you want to be mine, pretty baby?"

Angel whimpered and rocked his hips up, nodding emphatically. "Yes, god yes. Ever since you laid eyes on me that's all I've wanted." He shifted, all impatience and want. "Please, Sebastian...."

Sebastian gave him a wicked grin. "That was the perfect answer." He shifted suddenly, sliding down Angel's arching body, pushing his long legs up and out. His hands splayed on the backs of Angel's thighs then leaned in, tongue making a long, wet sweep of the cleft of his ass,

stopping just at his entrance and lingering there.

Angel tried to think past the tormenting brushes of Sebastian's tongue. He'd answered instinctually, but what was he getting himself into? Did he still want to be Sebastian's even if the other man wanted to tie him up? Even if he wanted to use those bondage devices that made him feel so exposed? He wasn't a true sub, was he?

It all came to him in a flash, how he responded to the camera and the barked commands when he was modeling, being told how to touch himself, how to act, and he'd loved every minute of it, but something had been missing. It had taken the right set of circumstances, the right man to make him realize this was exactly what he wanted.

Angel groaned, sliding his hands down to his thighs to hold himself open for Sebastian's tongue. It flicked and teased and probed, driving him wild. Angel tossed his head, trying to catch his breath on a whimper. His fingers dug into his own skin as he lost himself willingly to the other man.

Sebastian lifted his head, sliding sensually up Angel's arching, twisting body until they were face to face, breath mingling and eyes locked. "I'm going to want to play with you, Angel." His hands snatched Angel's wrists and dragged them above his head, the other man's breath catching sharply. "Tie you down, up, and take you. Over and over, until you can't remember what it's like to not feel me inside you, over you, against you. Surrounding you."

His tongue traced Angel's gasping lips, and his smile was dark and wicked. "I'm going to consume you, pretty baby."

Angel's eyes were wide. "Until there's nothing left?"

Sebastian's smile gentled and he shook his head, this time nuzzling Angel's lips. "No, baby, I'm not going to make you go away. I'm going to help you become who you were born to be. Mine."

Oh, now that just sounded delicious altogether. Angel wanted every promise that fell from Sebastian's lips. He craved it. All his. A thrill of delight danced along his skin. "You think you're up to it?" he asked. He had no doubt Sebastian was capable, but he couldn't stop the way he pushed and prodded and teased.

Sebastian chuckled, nipping Angel's lower lip before soothing the sting with his tongue. That sound was far more promising than any words. "Sassy boy, how come your mouth hasn't gotten you into trouble?"

“Haven’t found the right one to tame me.” Angel laid a hot, hungry kiss on Sebastian’s lips. He itched to touch Sebastian, but didn’t try to pull his hands free. It felt too damn good to be held down. All his fears and worries about being vulnerable and exposed seemed silly now. Sebastian would take care of him and he’d instinctively known it, trying to move closer to the photographer when he was uncertain.

He wanted Sebastian to play with him. He wanted it all. “Yes. Tie me down, take me, use me. Whatever. I want it.”

“I wasn’t asking permission.”

The dark, rough edge to Sebastian’s voice made Angel moan. “I know... just sayin’ is all.”

Sebastian laughed. He could be assured that Angel would never be broken, and that sass promised many, many pleasurable punishments. Already his hand itched to spank the brat.

Instead, he released Angel’s hands and rose up on his knees, grabbing the leftover lube from the dildo shots. He licked his lips, teeth catching the lower one as he smiled slowly.

“Roll over, pretty baby. Just like you were earlier this week. Show me your gorgeous ass.”

Angel grinned and moaned as he obediently rolled over onto all fours, one hand coming back to spread his ass, rocking backward enticingly. “Like this?”

“Exactly like that.”

Pouring some of the lube onto his fingers, Sebastian shifted forward, free hand coming around Angel’s waist to pull him back as his slick fingers sought his entrance and two sank deep inside.

“About damned time,” Angel groaned. The sensation of being penetrated after wanting it so badly was exquisite.

He gasped at the sharp little chastising slap Sebastian gave one cheek followed by a twist of his fingers deep inside of him. “Yeah. Oh god yeah.” He couldn’t say which felt better. Both caused wild electric sparks.

He wanted Sebastian to hurry, to be inside of him now, pounding him into the satin cushions. What a set for their first time, all sin and pleasure, foretelling so much more for their future. He tried to move back against Sebastian’s fingers harder, but the man had put his hand on Angel’s hip again, guiding how he moved without force.

“Please... just fuck me now. There’s....” Angel paused to catch his breath, hand fisting in one red pillow as those fingers scissored. The sting and ache made him tremble. Fuck. What had he been about to say? “There’s condoms in my jeans.”

Sebastian chuckled. “Are there? Why, Angel, what did you expect to happen here today?”

Angel glanced back at him, breath coming quicker. “This.”

Sebastian smirked and twisted his fingers again. “Exactly this?”

Angel shook his head, eyes closing as Sebastian rubbed against his prostate. “Not... not exactly. I... I hoped, all right?”

“That I’d fuck you?”

“Yes!” Angel snapped, clearly impatient, and Sebastian smiled, withdrawing his fingers and leaning forward over Angel to nip his ear.

“I’m doing far more than fucking you, Angel. I’m claiming you.” He gave Angel’s earlobe a sharp nip and pushed to his feet. “Stay,” he commanded as he turned and scanned the room for Angel’s jeans.

Angel whimpered and dug his other fist into a black pillow. He could hear Sebastian moving about and was tempted to look over his shoulder at him, but the thought of testing himself, remaining like this just as Sebastian had ordered, was even more exciting.

“Good boy,” Sebastian said, coming back and running his hand down the arched curve of Angel’s back. He moaned under the possessive touch.

“I can be.” Angel peered up at Sebastian through his lashes and touched the tip of his tongue to his upper lip. “Let me show you how good I can be.”

Those blue eyes of Sebastian’s were so dark, like a storm brewing, and Angel craved to feel it break open all over him. Sebastian leaned down and nipped the nape of Angel’s neck. “Trust me. You will show me everything I want.”

“Now?”

Sebastian’s lips quirked at the hopeful tone. “What is it you want to show me now?” He had an idea, and the way Angel licked his lips, Sebastian knew he was right. “You wanna suck me, baby?”

Angel nodded, breathing harder and chewing on his lower lip. “Yes, god yes. Let me, please. I’ll blow your fucking mind, I swear.”

Sebastian had no doubt that was true and though his cock was

aching to get inside Angel he wasn't about to turn down such sweet begging. Not this time anyway. He dropped the condoms beside Angel next to the lube and came around to stand in front of him, one hand coming down into Angel's hair, just like he'd imagined earlier.

"Open your mouth, gorgeous. Show me how good you really are."

Angel slid his hands up Sebastian's thighs, leaning into the weight of Sebastian's hand in his hair. He was becoming addicted to the man's commands, the sure way he had about him. Angel smiled and ran his tongue up the underside of Sebastian's cock to the flushed head. As much as his mouth ached to really taste him, to deep-throat him until he never lost the flavor on his tongue, Angel forced himself to wait.

Locking eyes with Sebastian, he nibbled his lips over Sebastian's shaft, savoring silken hot skin against his mouth. He traced his tongue around the glans, flicking it over the smooth head and into the slit. Then he drew the head into his mouth and gave it a hard suck, his stomach tightening with desire as Sebastian's eyes flashed.

When he tried to move back so he could take Sebastian's balls into his mouth and tease those, Sebastian's hand tightened in his hair, not letting him move. Angel moaned, opening his mouth wider and relaxing his throat to take Sebastian deep inside him.

Sebastian rocked his hips forward, letting his cock slide slowly deeper. Angel didn't hesitate nor flinch as his cock hit the back of Angel's throat and kept going. God damn, he was good. And all the while looking up at him with desirous dark eyes and flushed cheeks.

When Sebastian began a slow, steady thrusting, Angel accommodated him readily without a twitch of resistance and Sebastian groaned. "Good boy," he murmured, his free hand coming down to trace a finger along Angel's hollowed cheek.

His heart tightened, a feeling he'd only experienced once before, and he knew that while he wasn't the type to believe in love at first meeting, or even second meeting, he could recognize that it was already growing, starting. He was going to love Angel; there was no doubt about it. Sex was only part of the equation.

Angel lashed his tongue, warming under Sebastian's hot gaze and the approving words he spoke. As he sucked and stroked he was rewarded with the rich, musky flavor of Sebastian and he moaned. To him sucking cock was an art form, and he loved every second of it.

When Sebastian eased the pressure in his hair, Angel slipped off

him, rubbing slick lips along Sebastian's equally slick shaft to his balls. "Yummy," he whispered, laving and licking before drawing each sac into his mouth.

Sebastian's thighs tensed under his hands and Angel moaned again. The knowledge that he could affect someone like Sebastian was heady. It made him want to crawl under Sebastian's skin until the other man couldn't get him out.

His lips trailed another teasing path up Sebastian's cock, tracing his tongue along the veins, nibbling them before lifting his gaze to Sebastian again and laughing softly. "Is that fag enough for you?"

Sebastian's brows snapped together, his brain not exactly working to full capacity with half his blood flow directed south at the moment. "What?"

Angel grinned up at him, made all the more wicked by the slickness of his lips and the way he was licking absently at the head of Sebastian's cock. "The day we met, you asked if it was too much to get a real fag in front of your camera. Just wondering if I passed."

Sebastian had to pause for a minute to remember saying that at all, but suddenly it came back to him and he laughed out loud. He sank to his knees, pulled Angel close, and then lowered him onto his back, nodding.

"I think you, my beautiful Angel, are enough fag for any man. But only this man gets to have you."

"That sounds just about perfect to me." Maybe it should worry Angel how easily he agreed. Only the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea of being exclusive to Sebastian. As flirty and outrageous as he could be, he was picky about who he actually fucked and even more about who he entered into a relationship with. Sebastian struck all the chords with him.

"That goes both ways." Angel poked Sebastian in the chest. "Only I get to have you. I'm the only one you play with."

Angel wanted to believe that this heat between them would deepen into something more. He was already half head over heels for Sebastian. Even if it didn't deepen, and god he wanted it to, Angel would respect his partner and be exclusive, and he demanded that same respect in return.

"Deal."

Angel smiled, his last niggling worry falling away, and arched



against him. "Well, now that that's out of the way. Fuck me, please. You've got me so damn worked up. I've been thinking of you fucking me since I left the first photo shoot."

Sebastian grinned and rocked his hips against his lover. "Liar."

Angel laughed. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me. You're a liar, Angel. Beautiful, beautiful liar." He reached for the lube and the condoms, lips nibbling along the young man's jaw. "You've wanted me to fuck you since the minute I turned my camera on you, pretty baby," he whispered.

Angel moaned and arched against him impatiently as Sebastian rolled a condom on. "Then why aren't you inside me already?"

Sebastian grinned. Oh he was going to love every bit of the back-talking this man was going to give him. Angel would never be broken and there was a huge relief in that. Sebastian wouldn't have to worry he'd push too hard, go too far, cross a line Angel didn't want crossed. Submit he might, but Sebastian didn't doubt that if he ever got complacent and stepped over the line, Angel would knock him right back into place.

He took one of Angel's hands, squeezing a bit of lube into it. "Get me there if you want it so bad, Angel. Give yourself to me."

"With pleasure." Angel's hand went to Sebastian's cock and as much as he wanted Sebastian, he took a minute to fondle him, to revel in the moment just before the fucking. He wrapped his fingers around him, stroked, slicking his cock and feeling the heat, knowing it would soon be branding him on the inside.

Then Angel hooked one long leg over Sebastian's shoulder, spreading himself wide open, and guided Sebastian's cock to him. Sebastian's eyes were hot on his face and Angel didn't hide the pleasure he felt at being penetrated. He was every bit as expressive under his lover's gaze as he was under the camera's.

"Ooohh, that feels damn good," he said, digging his fingers into Sebastian's shoulder and bicep as the man sank into him, drawing out the initial penetration until he was buried balls deep. Angel shivered. "God yeah...." Just the way he liked it at first. Then he flashed Sebastian an impish grin and bit his lower lip, clenching around his cock.

"Now fuck me, gorgeous."

Sebastian would teach Angel about demands, and about patience,

but for now all he wanted was to sate the desire that had been boiling under his skin since he'd turned and laid eyes on this beautiful young man.

His hips snapped and Angel moaned. They snapped again and Angel arched hard. Bracing one hand on the pillows under them, the other wrapped around Angel's calf where it rested against his shoulder, Sebastian turned his head and pressed an openmouthed kiss to the silky skin, lightly dusted with golden-brown hair that matched the neatly trimmed patch around Angel's cock.

Angel never looked away from his face and Sebastian didn't either, their gazes locked as Sebastian drove into him, hard and deep, every thrust reaffirming the fact that was now as true as the sky being blue. Angel was his.

Angel wrapped his other leg around Sebastian's hip, catching his breath when Sebastian surged into him deeper. He forced his hands to stop their clinging and move. He wanted to touch Sebastian, needed to touch every spot he'd dreamed about.

Long fingers stroked down Sebastian's throat, caressed his chest, running his fingers through the sprinkling of hair. He teased Sebastian's nipples until the man groaned. "I love the sound of your voice, rough and commanding."

"Good. You're going to be hearing a lot of it." Sebastian's eyes glinted and Angel felt a little thrill as he leaned over him. "And I expect to be obeyed."

Before Angel could agree, his lover was kissing him breathless, driving all sense from his head. Angel made a soft sound and arched into him, kissing Sebastian back, melting as he plundered and demanded more.

Sebastian urged Angel's leg down, because he wanted to be closer, chest to chest, skin to skin. It wasn't hot in the studio, but between them they were generating enough friction to have sweat slicking their skin, causing a delicious slide as they fucked. Hot and hard, deep and faster now, it was as if they'd been born knowing how to do this dance.

When the kiss broke, Angel was gasping and Sebastian was panting and the desire kicked up another notch. Their hips rolled together, meeting and grinding, each seeking more contact, more penetration, just more.

"Sebastian," Angel gasped.

“Mine,” Sebastian panted in return.

“Yes.”

Sebastian reached between them, fingers closing around Angel’s cock and stroking fast to match his thrusts, then laughed wickedly when he tightened his grip just as the panting began to reach a crescendo.

“Not yet,” he growled.

Angel whimpered. Why not yet? Then they could recover and go at it again. Oh, but that edge to Sebastian’s voice, that sweet, sexy edge and that sinful laugh had him nodding. Not that he had much choice; the grip Sebastian had on his cock kept his orgasm from coming.

Then he moaned again, his arms locking around Sebastian’s neck. Each thrust pushed him closer but he couldn’t come. Each surge rubbed Sebastian’s cock against his spot, making him even wilder.

“Yes, now.”

Sebastian laughed again, giving his cock a squeeze. “No, not now, not yet.”

Angel bit his lip, casting Sebastian a pleading look through his lashes. “Why not now?” He couldn’t come up with any good argument; Sebastian’s fucking stole his senses.

“Patience, my Angel. I’m the one who makes the demands here.”

Angel shivered from the top of his spine down to the tips of his toes. And then he knew what Sebastian wanted and words came to his lips as if they’d been waiting his entire life to come out. “Yes, sir.”

Sebastian’s eyes darkened and Angel moaned, arching against him. “Please, Sebastian, I’ll be a very good boy. Let me come.”

Sebastian’s cock rebelled against the control he was trying to maintain over it. Angel begged so sweetly, with wickedness in his eyes, and Sebastian cursed, releasing Angel’s cock in order to grab both wrists and drag his hands up above his head.

“Beg,” he growled, eyes narrowed and intense. His hips snapped hard, fast, every motion dragging a sharp cry from Angel.

“Yes, please, please... oh fuck. Let me come, please, Sebastian... sir!”

Sebastian snarled as his orgasm refused to be denied any longer. He let one wrist free and reached between them to stroke Angel. “Yes, come for me, baby. Come for me.”

He followed his own command, the whole world going more than a

little fuzzy around the edges as he came, and then Angel's orgasm began and the near-painful clenching and the ragged shout he let out just made Sebastian's seem to last forever.

"Oh damn, oh damn." Angel clung to Sebastian, legs wrapped around his waist as if he'd never let go. He was a little miffed that he'd never played like this before. It had been such an erotic thrill to beg for Sebastian and to know that he'd meant every damn word of it. And then he changed his mind. Now he'd only be begging for his lover and nobody before him.

His hands were still pinned over his head and Angel was in no hurry to pull them down. He knew just how he looked with them stretched above him, sweaty and breathless from the intense fucking, come all over his stomach.

Angel chuckled, recovering his breath, and ran his toe down the back of Sebastian's thigh. "More please, sir," he said in a throaty whisper and delighted to feel the quick answering throb of Sebastian's cock still inside him. He arched lazily and planted a hot, open kiss on Sebastian's mouth. "Why don't you take some wicked pictures of me looking like your favorite wet dream, maybe do some of those things you were promising earlier?"

He wanted it, wanted it all in this brand-new start to the rest of his life.

Sebastian grinned, dropping a kiss on those sassy lips. "Why don't you let me worry about when and where and what we do next? And who said you're looking like my favorite wet dream?"

Angel's eyes didn't lose a bit of their confidence. "Some things a boy just knows."

"Then you know that my favorite wet dream involves pretty welts on your bottom and leaving you lingering on the edge of orgasm for hours."

Angel's lips parted and his eyes heated even more. "R-Really?"

Sebastian laughed and took a long, slow kiss from his mouth before pulling back just enough that their lips barely brushed and their eyes met. "Maybe. What do you think?" he whispered.

"I think I'm in so much trouble."

The glee in his voice was audible and Sebastian grinned in response. "You have no idea. But you will."

Watch for more Angel and Sebastian  
in the *Games in the Dark* anthology  
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MARGUERITE LABBE has been accused of being eccentric and a shade neurotic, both of which she freely admits to, but her muse has OCD tendencies, so who can blame her? Her husband and son do an excellent job keeping her toeing the line, though. Together with her co-author Fae Sutherland, Marguerite has found a shared passion for beautiful men with smart mouths.

When she's not working hard on writing new material and editing completed work, she spends her time reading novels of all genres, enjoying role-playing games with her equally nutty friends, and trying to plot practical jokes against her son and husband. Her son is learning the tricks too quickly and likes to retaliate. You'd think she'd learn.

FAE SUTHERLAND has always dreamed of being a published author, starting her writing career off at age eleven with a horrific "The Monkees" fan fiction that will, luckily for all, never see the light of day. At age thirty-three, she has since progressed to more serious writing, though always keeping that dash of irreverence and fun.

Fae tells the stories that the muses give her, and though she is multi-published both solo and joint, she truly does prefer writing with her co-author Marguerite Labbe best. When she's not working hard on writing new stories to make her readers sweat or slaving over edits for completed work, she spends her time on web site and graphic design, being with her closest friends, and playing "The Sims 2" until the wee hours of the morning.

She currently resides in Washington, DC, where there is never a shortage of interesting characters to draw inspiration from.

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