



TO BLUE

The **ONE** *That*
WAS LOST

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The One that was Lost

TOP SHELF

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Chapter One

"So you're the new sucker, huh?" Elliot said, pitching his voice low enough that Jim wouldn't hear. Of course, he could probably bellow the question without having his current roommate notice, the guy was so unaware of anything besides that fucking Michael who'd broken Jim's heart. For fuck's sake, didn't Jim have any dignity at all? Sure, Michael was back for a visit -- and looking nothing like the reedy, pasty, moping man Elliot remembered -- but he'd brought his boyfriend. That should have at least had Jim trying to seem less like... a moron, Elliot supposed.

Jim was just staring at Michael, even though he was obviously trying not to *look* like it... and fuck if Michael wasn't staring back, though the man was much better at hiding it than Jim was. And meanwhile, Michael's boyfriend was just standing there, acting like he didn't see, didn't know... which Elliot figured meant the big, studly moron was in denial.

Laughter wasn't the response Elliot had been expecting. In fact, he'd been hoping the boyfriend -- Jamie, he reminded himself -- would get offended. Possibly grab Jim's "Mike" and get the hell out of Trish and Chandra's apartment. That would have been perfect, actually. But it didn't happen, wouldn't happen, because Jamie laughed and shook his head.

"I'm guessing that's your way of asking about me and Michael," the man said, his blue eyes sparkling merrily. How could anyone be that fucking casual when their lover -- presumably monogamous lover, which just made Elliot cringe -- was paying so much attention to someone else? "It's really not any of your business," Jamie said, "but Michael and I aren't together. Or not in the way that you seem to think."

Elliot snorted. "Yeah, right." But for whatever reason, he wasn't at all surprised when Jamie took his arm and pulled him away from the others, settling in the far corner of the girls' living room. "Is this the part where you tell me that you're not fucking him? Because I may be younger than you... much younger than you. But I'm not stupid."

Jamie rolled his eyes, which was surprising. "Depends," Jamie said. "Is this the part where you try to convince me that you're fucking Jim? Be warned, though. I already know you're not."

The worst part was, it was the truth. He really *wasn't* fucking Jim. Or being fucked by Jim. Whichever. There was nothing even remotely sexual going on between him and the guy he lived with, which pretty much sucked beyond the telling of it.

Oh, he wasn't in love or anything; Elliot knew that much. But he wouldn't have minded the occasional night or two. Jim was fucking gorgeous. Tall, built, funny, smart... and still saw

Elliot as some sort of annoying little-brother type. "We're not fucking," Elliot said. "We're friends."

Jamie smiled at him then, a real smile, and Elliot thought it was because he'd been honest. Of course, Elliot also thought it made Jamie even better looking than he'd already been, what with the way those azure eyes were shining. "But you want to be," Jamie said smugly, and Elliot let out one short, sharp puff of air.

"Well, duh," he said. "I mean, have you even looked at him? Yeah, I want us to be fucking. Just like you want to be fucking Mike." Because he'd just realized that the way Jamie watched Michael wasn't that "I can't wait to get out of here and naked" kind of look. It was the "God, please let me have this" look that Elliot tried to convince himself he'd never worn. "Shit," he said a moment later, looking into Jamie's eyes and noticing that he and Jamie were almost the exact same height, "Sorry, man. I just... we all figured that Michael coming back and bringing someone with him meant he was... y'know. My bad."

If he hadn't been watching so closely, Elliot thought he would have missed the small, pained smile that twitched Jamie's lips. But he *was* watching, so when he saw it, he pretended he hadn't. He didn't know the guy, but there was no point in making Jamie feel worse. Not when that bastard Mike had obviously hurt this pretty man just as much as he'd hurt Jim. And, huh. He thought Jamie was pretty, now that he knew Jamie wasn't responsible for any of Jim's pain. Go figure.

"Jim still loves him?" Jamie asked. Okay. Maybe Jamie wasn't as smart as Elliot had thought. He couldn't be, if he was even asking that. "By which I mean," Jamie went on, and Elliot started blushing about halfway into the man's next words, "He lives with you and hasn't given in to temptation, so he must still love Michael. Unless he's been dating other guys because he doesn't want to screw up another friendship."

And that was just wrong. Wrong and fucking rude. "Hey!" Elliot started to say, but then Jamie was shaking his head and groaning in a way that Elliot knew was meant as an apology.

"No, no. That came out all wrong. I..." Jamie shrugged, and somehow it looked sheepish. "I know what happened, Elliot. From Michael's side, anyway, and he took all the blame for how things ended. Or didn't end," he added, gazing toward the girls and Jim and Michael. "What I meant was... Christ. I should be better at this. I meant... even if Jim wants you, he sees you as a friend, and the last time he let being friends turn into something more, it went badly. So even if he were ready, willing and able to jump into another... relationship... it wouldn't be with someone he calls a friend. Not after what happened the last time. No matter how attractive he might find you."

It was a perspective Elliot hadn't considered before, mostly because it hadn't occurred to him, and while he wanted to argue, he really couldn't. In fact, there was just something about Jamie that had Elliot speaking the truth, as he understood it.

"Jim wouldn't be fucking me, anyway. Even if he'd never met Mike." Elliot sighed. "He used to be all hot and heavy with my brother. It got them kicked out of town, even. So Jim's known me pretty much all my life, and... just because I turned out being gay, that doesn't mean he sees me as anything other than Trav's kid brother, you know?" He grinned quickly. "And that's one hell of a shame, because I've been told I'm a damned good fuck. It wouldn't be a 'relationship,' though. I don't do those. Too much work; not enough fun."

Just like that, Jamie was laughing, and if Elliot hadn't seen the sympathy and understanding in Jamie's eyes, he would have been incredibly pissed off... and convinced that Michael's friend was an enormous jackass.

As it was, Elliot could only join in the chuckles, odd as it seemed even to him. Still, there came a point at which denying the truth pushed a man beyond being a dreamer and right into the ranks of the pathetic. He would never be pathetic, Elliot promised himself. Not like Jim... and apparently Michael, based upon the few things Jamie told him then.

"Dinner's ready!" Jamie heard, and he actually jumped a bit at hearing it, he'd been so caught up in talking to Elliot.

Elliot. Michael's bane and most hated rival.

Elliot, who was young -- maybe twenty-three, twenty-four.

Elliot, whose body spoke of hours at the gym.

Elliot, who had agreed that their friends needed help, after seeing the way Michael and Jim were dancing around even talking to one another.

Elliot, who kept giving him speaking glances as they sat and started in on the silken-smooth first course, and even then was leaning over, whispering to Jim while Chandra -- the most incredibly beautiful woman Jamie had ever seen in his life, even though she wasn't wearing a drop of makeup -- cleared the soup bowls from the table. Then Jim was looking at Michael again, and Jamie figured that was a good thing.

He darted another glance at Elliot and arched his brows, trying to get the young man to move things along, but then Michael was saying something to him, so Jamie smiled and brushed Michael's arm for maybe the twentieth time, and...

"I... sorry," Jim said, out of nowhere, standing up so quickly his chair nearly toppled over. "I don't... I'm not feeling so good. Thanks for the dinner, darlings, but I think I need to lie down." Then Jim was glaring at nothing, though Jamie was pretty sure it was meant for him. "My stomach," Jim added, and maybe he'd been wrong because the two women just sighed and nodded as the man beat a path toward the door.

"Is he okay?" Jamie asked, trying not to sound as concerned as he suddenly was. Michael was in love with Jim, after all, and even though Jamie knew -- for certain, finally -- that there was no hope for his own desires, he would hate it if there was something really wrong with Michael's... well. Jim.

Chandra sighed but nodded, giving him a speaking gaze. "He will be. He's just been having some... problems. For the last seven months or so."

Well, that was clear enough for Jamie. Elliot, too, judging by the sudden tensing of the younger man's jaw. It was especially clear to Michael, though, because that already pale skin turned a white that was so translucent Jamie almost thought he could see bluish veins pulsing.

Jamie's hand clamped hard over Michael's, holding the man there when he would have stood and followed. "No," he murmured. "No, Michael. Don't go chasing after him just yet."

He saw the surprise on Elliot's face, saw the sudden suspicion that maybe Jamie was trying to keep Michael for himself, but that wasn't what was happening. Wasn't even close to it, damn it, and why in the hell did he care what Elliot thought, anyway? Then Michael moaned, and Jamie forgot about everyone else. His fingers pushed between Michael's, tangling and just holding on as he spoke quietly.

"He's upset, Michael. He's hurting. Maybe even having whatever kind of stomach problems he mentioned. Just give him some time. Enough to calm down and get himself back to feeling... well, as good as he can right now." And thank God Michael was listening. Jamie could tell. "Eat, Michael. Even if you don't want to. Then go to his place and get your heart back. Or get his in exchange for the one you lost to him so long ago, okay?"

And there were soft pink lips on his own for just a bare moment, and the two women were making sounds that implied they thought he was *cute*... and when Jamie looked away from Michael's face, he caught Elliot looking at him.

There was nothing deliberate in that gaze. Nothing hateful or calculating or even curious. Elliot was just... looking. As though the young man didn't know what to make of what had just happened. What to think of Jamie. He was just... *looking*.

It was an oddly pleasant sensation, Jamie realized. He hadn't been an unknown quantity in years.

There was something that felt weirdly intrusive about sneaking in to his own apartment, Elliot thought. Like... even though he had a key, he shouldn't be there. Of course, the fact that Michael's friend-slash-therapist was right behind him didn't help.

Neither did the fact that they were snooping, Elliot admitted, because they were. There was no other word for it, what with Michael having headed up to the very same apartment they were creeping in to, though a good two hours earlier.

"Shhhh..." Jamie hissed from behind him, and Elliot rolled his eyes. Like he would really want to bother Jim and Mike if they were... busy. But they weren't, Elliot was sure, because the entire apartment was silent, aside from the sounds of the air conditioning unit in the window.

"Shush, yourself," Elliot retorted, his own voice barely more than a whisper. "Jim's bed squeaks like a motherfucker, even when he's just jacking off. I'm betting they're asleep."

He pretended to be reluctant, even though he really wanted to know... and he could tell that Jamie shared that feeling because when he reached carefully for the knob of Jim's bedroom door, Jamie didn't stop him. In fact, Jamie only whispered "careful," and Elliot *was* careful. It was always possible that Jim and Michael had just finished, after all, and the last thing Elliot needed was for one or both of them to realize the door was opening.

That would be bad, he figured, and even worse if they saw Jamie there behind him.

The knob turned slowly, silently, and when Elliot had managed to push the door open just enough to peer through, he smiled.

"Oh... oh, look at that," Jamie murmured right against his ear, and it was all Elliot could do to hold himself still. To not rock back against the strong body behind him.

"Yeah," he whispered, frozen for the eternity of moments that passed before Jamie melted away. "Yeah," he said again, feeling stronger this time. "I think it's a fair bet to say that they're... together." And that was true enough, what with the way naked limbs were tangled, wrapped, overlapping without design. Fuck, Elliot couldn't even *imagine* how Jim and Michael were managing to sleep like that.

"God... they're so right together," Jamie said then, and Elliot blinked, even as he backed away and closed the door silently. Fuck, Jamie sounded so happy about it. So thrilled. But Jamie wanted Michael, and Elliot just didn't get it. Wasn't likely to, either, Elliot reminded himself. He didn't do love, after all. Hell, he barely did *two*-night-stands. Even so, Elliot nodded and turned, almost slamming into Jamie's body, the man was so unexpectedly close.

"If you say so," Elliot said with a shrug. "But they're sleeping, anyway, so at least they're out of it. Fuck knows, if Jim's in a better mood tomorrow, I'll actually owe Michael one." He shuddered. "Then again, Mike's gone and got way hot. Maybe Jim owes me if I'm why Michael came back. So, that takes care of them. What are *you* doing tonight, Jamie? Because it's still early, and..." And there were hard hands on his hips, all of a sudden, and Elliot couldn't bring himself to mind. Hell, he couldn't bring himself to do more than grunt encouragingly.

Then Jamie's lips were right against his and there was a strong, flexible tongue driving into his mouth, and Elliot was in heaven. Pure, unadulterated heaven. And he hadn't even needed to go to the club.

"You." The word was groaned, pushed into his mouth, and it actually took Elliot a moment to wonder what the question was. But then Jamie reminded him. "Tonight, Elliot. Tonight, I'm doing *you*."

And, oh. Thank fucking God.

Chapter Two

There was something a little bit disturbing about the way he was attacking young Elliot's mouth, Jamie knew, and he was fairly certain that he'd be analyzing it to death at some point. But not just then. He didn't want to think, didn't want to try to puzzle through his own motivations. It was enough that Elliot was a damned fine looking young man and kissed like a God damned Hoover, all lips and teeth and fast, sucking pulls at Jamie's mouth.

It was easy to do this, Jamie realized. Easy to hold Elliot's body against him, easy to drive his tongue relentlessly between those full, soft lips. Hell, it was the easiest thing in the world to push his hips against Elliot's, to rub his suddenly aching cock against that heated form, even through however many layers they were wearing. It was easier, still, to let Elliot lead him across wood floors without worrying about where they were going.

There would be a bed, Jamie hoped, or maybe just a couch. Whichever. There would be somewhere to push Elliot flat and find out if the young man's muscles looked anything like as good as they felt. And Elliot was right. It was still early. He had plenty of time to get fully acquainted with the rounded, toned ass that fit so well in his hands.

He spared one brief moment to admire the way Elliot was managing to steer them both without even pulling away, without stumbling or getting their feet tangled, but then again, the way Elliot was still kissing him, still bumping and grinding like it was second nature? Well, that pretty much implied that this wasn't an unusual situation for the guy to find himself in, so maybe that explained it.

A small part of Jamie's mind knew he should be worried about that. That maybe he was just going to be another notch or something, but that had to be just habit. He wasn't looking for more, anyway, and God knew he wasn't trying to date Elliot, or anything that insane. Not at all, which was unusual, granted. But Michael was back with his lover, and there wasn't anyone else Jamie was interested in being involved with at the moment, so why should he fight this purely physical attraction, especially when Elliot wasn't objecting even slightly? Was spurring him on, in fact?

He shouldn't, Jamie decided. He wouldn't. Wasn't fighting it at all, if he were being honest, and he'd never been good at lying to himself. Or anyone else, for that matter. "Tell me you have supplies," he grunted against Elliot's lips, only to moan in answer to the nod and nip at his bottom lip. "Thank Christ."

"Always be prepared," Elliot groaned, tugging him through a doorway. Then the door itself was closing, and Jamie heard the lock being engaged, and... oh, yeah. Bedroom. Good call. "First lesson I learned when I came out." And, damn, Elliot's mouth was too far away, followed swiftly

by that strong, muscled body, and Jamie would have objected, would have fought for that heat to return, but... Yes. God, yes.

Hands and fabric and swift motions, and Elliot was definitely not the shy type, although Jamie had already figured that one out. Still, the man was stripping and, Jesus, that body more than lived up to the promises it had made when Elliot was pressed up against him. Flat, chiseled abs, muscles in Elliot's sides that formed a perfect vee, right down to strong, lightly haired thighs... and God help him, but look at Elliot's cock.

It was longer, thinner than his own, Jamie noticed, and curved just a bit as it stood proud. Almost as though it was trying to get to know Elliot's navel intimately. Deep, dusky rose along the shaft, darkening to an almost magenta hue at the slightly bubbling tip, and that was just... "Beautiful," Jamie whispered, his own hands fumbling with buttons and cotton and linen. "God, Elliot. That is one gorgeous dick." Just like the rest of the guy, but Jamie wasn't about to say as much. Elliot's cocky grin was a good indication that he already knew that much, anyway.

Jamie swallowed hard, eyes locked on one strong, tanned hand while Elliot ran it over his own body, first stroking the shaft Jamie had just been admiring, then drawing Jamie's gaze upward to take notice of the man's sculpted chest. Not a single bit of hair there, probably thanks to waxing, which Jamie had never really been a big fan of, but in this case? Oh, in this case, he was totally on board. "Nice..."

"I'm a lot more than nice, Jamie," Elliot said with a smug smile that was tempered by a shaky breath as Jamie finally shrugged his shirt away and stepped out of the pooled linen pants around his ankles, leaving his shoes behind, as well. "Jesus fuck. So are you." And then Jamie had his hands full of hot skin and hard muscle, Elliot's mouth crashing over his again, and that was good. Hell, it was more than good. It was... fun.

He wasn't sure which one of them had maneuvered toward the bed, because it could have been either. The white sheets nearly glowed in the muted light coming through the window. It didn't matter who'd started them moving, though, because they were there, and Elliot was falling back, and Jamie was right there on him, over him.

There were hands on his back, on his ass, his ribs... hell, there were hands everywhere, and it was good that Elliot had so much practice. He wouldn't get clingy or moody when Jamie left in a few days. Even if that had been a possibility, Jamie realized, he wouldn't have stopped. Not when there were orgasms in the offing.

It had been too long -- years, in fact -- since the last time Jamie had indulged in anything casual, and regardless of what Michael had thought about Elliot's relationship with Jim, the young man was clearly a player. And Elliot knew Jamie wasn't local, he reminded himself, which meant... yeah. This was good. And it was about to get even better.

Jamie forced himself to move, to get his palms planted on the mattress beside Elliot's shoulders, and he shifted just a bit, torso rising so he could brace his feet on the floor, and that helped. He

grinned down into Elliot's wide eyes, then chuckled when moving on that pretty body earned him a grunting hiss. "You feel good, Elliot," he murmured, rubbing his cock alongside Elliot's again.

"Fuck. Fuck, Jamie," and Elliot was breathless already, which was never a bad thing, from what Jamie could remember. "Gonna make me come. Like... fuck. Soon, you keep that going."

Oh, that had his ego just swelling and preening. Hell, Elliot was probably a good ten years younger than Jamie. The fact that the younger man was already feeling so out of control was nothing but the universe giving Jamie a big old compliment.

"So come," he grunted, finding a rhythm that was likely to have him beating Elliot to the gate. "We'll rub, we'll come... then I'll have time to taste your skin for a while. I'll get it up again, and you're young. So will you." Jamie gasped, sliding a bit faster, the dribbles and tiny gushes of fluid easing his movements. "Hell, even if you don't, I'll still do you if you want, Elliot. Push right in and treat you right..." And damn, he needed to stop talking or his own words were going to have him exploding before Elliot had a chance to, and that would just be embarrassing.

"God... oh, God," he heard, but he was still staring into Elliot's eyes, so Jamie wasn't sure if the words belonged to himself or the man beneath him. But then Elliot was grunting and straining, that fine, beautiful body bucking beneath him, and when he felt the first rough convulsion, felt Elliot's legs wrap around his hips and hold on, Jamie was right there with Elliot, his sac tightening hard and fast, pushing pulse after pulse of hot, thick seed onto Elliot's skin to join with the growing mess there.

"Jesus... *fuck*," Elliot gasped. "Jesus fuck. Jesus fucking... *fuck*!" And yeah, that just about said it all, so Jamie laughed, not at all surprised that the sound came out in jerks as he regained his breath.

"It'll be better next time," Jamie murmured as he rolled to the side, taking his weight from Elliot's body. "I won't be so quick off the mark. Sorry about that, but it's been... a while." He laughed when Elliot gave him a dubious look. "What? It has. And you may be younger than I am, but I promise you, Elliot. I'll wear you out."

Then Elliot was grinning, and Jamie laughed. "Looking forward to it," Elliot said easily. "After I clean up some."

Yeah... they were kind of messy, weren't they? "A shower might be a good idea," Jamie said, because he really did want to lick Elliot's body, taste those muscles that were so similar to his own. He hadn't taken a lover -- however temporary -- built like himself in... far too long.

For fuck's sake, why couldn't Jim and Mike just mind their own damned business?

Okay, sure. It had to have been a shock for them when he'd stumbled out of his bedroom with Jamie right behind him, grinning hugely. And maybe, Elliot told himself, just maybe, he

shouldn't have left that big, dark hickey on Jamie's neck, right there where anyone could see it. But Jamie hadn't complained during the marking, and he still didn't when Mike made a point of bringing it up, acting all snide and superior, so why the fuck was it anyone's business?

It wasn't, of course, and everybody but Mike knew it, though Jim had jumped in on his lover's side, and just like that a perfectly good morning was going to shit. He'd wanted pancakes, damn it, and with the way things seemed to be headed, he'd be lucky to end up with corn flakes and water.

"Look, you fucking..." Elliot started, snarling again, but then Jamie was right behind him. One big, solid hand was at the small of his back, and he frowned but cut himself off. Then Jamie was speaking, and Elliot tried not to smirk.

"I'm not entirely sure of how this involves you, Michael," Jamie said calmly. "Elliot and I are both single, we're over twenty-one, and I can promise you that whatever happened last night -- and no, the details aren't open for discussion -- was consensual. Yes, Elliot left a few marks. If you must know, so did I. Because it felt good."

Yeah, Mike. Take that! Maybe I'm not good enough for him, but I'm not trying to date him, am I? We're just fucking until he goes back to Boston, so there! Of course, that was only in his own head, and possibly a good bit childish, but Elliot didn't care. He liked Jamie, so far. Liked that the older man hadn't tried to tell him he needed to be more careful or settle down or... well, anything. There had been a few instructions, granted, but "spread wider," "yeah, take it... just like that," and "you tell me if I'm being too rough" didn't really count, he figured.

"I. But. You. Jamie, you're not..." Hah. Just look at Mike stutter. Elliot couldn't help enjoying the sight. Then Jim was reaching out and pulling Mike down on to his lap, and Elliot just knew his fun was going to end.

"Come on, babe," Jim was saying softly, though Elliot was sure he knew the rest of them could hear his voice. "He's a grown man. And a psychologist. Do you really think he doesn't know what he's getting into?"

"Elliot's ass," Jamie said immediately, and Elliot nearly sprained something, trying not to laugh as hard as he wanted to. "And it's a damned fine ass, too. He's right about that." Maybe it was the stunned and horrified look on Mike's face that had Jamie softening his voice, making it sound gentle and soothing as he went on. Elliot thought so, anyway.

"Michael," Jamie said in that tone, "I know you were never fooled about what I wanted. I was always honest with you. And if that ever could have worked out, we wouldn't be here right now. But you're where you want to be, and even if I were blind, deaf and dumb, I would still know you made the right decision. It's that obvious. I just have to look at you -- and Jim -- to know it for sure. That doesn't mean I can't be shallow and driven by my cock, though, and frankly?"

Then Jamie looked at him, and Elliot shrugged, giving the man a grin and a nod, which seemed to be all the permission Jamie needed.

"Frankly, if you push aside months' worth of jealousy and actually *look* at Elliot, you'll see that he's damned gorgeous. Killer body, great... mouth." Jamie winked, and Elliot almost choked -- again -- trying not to laugh. "I'm not up to looking for a boyfriend again, Michael. And even if I were, it wouldn't be Elliot. Um, no offense, El. But I'm only here for a few days, and where I choose to stick my cock until I go home really doesn't have anything to do with anyone but me. And Elliot, of course. I really hope you can see that, Michael. You and Jim, both."

It was the fact that Jamie's words had even *Jim* blinking that really did Elliot in, because just like that, he felt the swallowed, hidden laughter bubbling up, spilling from his lips in loud, sharp barks. Then Jamie's hand was moving from his back, sliding down to pinch his ass, hard, and Elliot somehow managed to stop the sounds from spilling any further, though his body was still shaking helplessly.

Jim was shaking his head, all of a sudden, and when Elliot calmed enough to really look, he thought he maybe saw relief in Jim's eyes. Or else Jim was just glad to be holding Mike so close on his lap, but who cared? He'd wanted Jim, sure, but never the way Mike did, and... maybe that was part of the reason it had never happened, along with all the others he and Jamie had come up with, down at Chandra and Trish's place the night before.

"Okay," Jim announced, glancing from Elliot to Jamie, then finally looking at Mike and smiling. "Elliot and Jamie are both fine with whatever they're doing, they're grown men -- Jamie more than El, but that's not really a shocker, right? -- and it's morning. I don't know about the rest of you, but I need food."

"Pancakes!" Elliot agreed. "Pancakes and bacon and eggs! Syrup, jelly... oh, and some of that cinnamon whipped cream! Let's hit the diner!" Then they were all laughing, and if Mike's voice still sounded strained, well, at least the guy wasn't looking at him like Elliot had just killed his puppy.

"God, El," Jamie muttered, following Elliot back to his bedroom to find his shoes, "If you really eat like that, you must have the best metabolism on the face of the Earth. I'd be six hundred pounds in a month."

Elliot grinned and turned, pressing a long, hard kiss to Jamie's lips and pulling back before it could go too deep. "It's only once a week," he admitted, "and I only have a couple bites of each thing. But most of my clients eat at the diner, too, so it makes them feel good when they see me and realize that they can eat whatever they want -- in moderation -- without getting fat. Or fatter, depending on the guy."

Jamie blinked, then hunted for one missing shoe that had ended up under the bed, somehow. "Clients? What do you do, Elliot?" And yeah. They hadn't actually gotten around to talking much, what with everything else that had been going on.

Elliot shrugged, then sat down to pull on some socks, his bowed head hiding his blush. "I'm a personal trainer at the gym down the street. And yes. I know it's not the best job in the world, but

I like it, and I make way more than people think. More than I could anywhere else. Unless I went to college or stripped or something, but that's not gonna happen." And Jamie was crouching in front of Elliot, both shoes on, hands on Elliot's shoulders, and he couldn't help but look into those blue-blue eyes.

"There's nothing wrong with looking after people's physical well being, Elliot," Jamie said quietly. "A healthy body helps with having a healthy mind. I can tell you that much for sure, because I've noticed that my own clients usually do better in therapy when they're working out. It helps them to see themselves differently, and when you can change how people *see* themselves, it's a much shorter step to helping them change how they *feel*. Especially about things they have no control over. Like their pasts."

Jamie leaned in closer and kissed his cheek, and it was possibly the sappiest, silliest, most ridiculous thing anyone had ever done. Also the sweetest, though Elliot would never admit it. "I think it's a great job," the man added. "And it's incredibly cool that you use something as common as breakfast to set an example. Plus... it kind of explains the whole chest waxing thing."

Then Jamie was up and rushing from the room before Elliot had a chance to do anything more than shout "Hey!"

Yeah, he admitted as he followed more slowly, it was shaping up to be a good morning.

God, Jamie thought, grinning as he pulled his car out onto the highway, he was still sore. Just about every muscle in his body was aching a bit, but it was good. Really good, in point of fact. Hell, it was just a reminder that he'd gone and done something he probably should have done as soon as he'd realized Michael was never going to be interested in the way Jamie had wanted him to be.

That still stung, of course. Would for a while, he was sure, because Michael was pretty much Jamie's ideal. Smart, kind, considerate... and yes, hot as July asphalt. Even so, Jamie knew he'd missed his chance there. By a good two or three years, actually, because even though Michael had never said so out loud, Jamie had a feeling that Jim had always been it for his friend, from the moment they'd met. That Alex guy had just been... a mistake. Some sort of effort on Michael's part to deny what he was feeling for Jim. Jamie was close to a hundred percent certain of that. Michael had been Jim's for far longer than either of the men really knew. And that being the case, there was really no point in moping about it.

It wasn't that easy, of course. Jamie knew that. It would take some time and distraction to recover from the hopes he'd nurtured so helplessly. But Dad and David would help, and so would the rest of his friends, even though they were all going to be surprised that Michael hadn't even come back to Boston. Then again, he hadn't needed to. Michael had his laptop and a few changes of clothes, and he was planning on coming up to pack the rest of his things in a couple weeks, as soon as Jim could arrange some time off.

Jamie would definitely recover, though. Hell, the last three nights with Elliot had already started him down the path. He doubted that he'd be running around like that once he got home, granted, but Jamie had blown off a good bit of steam with the younger man -- "Among other things," he spoke to the voice on the radio smugly -- and that was good. It meant he wasn't in denial, but also that as much as he might want Michael, he wasn't fixated on the man.

He wasn't fixated on Elliot, either, but Jamie couldn't deny that he'd be willing to lose another weekend with the guy, every now and then. Elliot had a stellar ass and knew exactly what to do with it.

God, he could still feel that tight little hole stretched around him, moving up and down, back and forth, as Elliot rode him to yet another screaming orgasm, this time by way of good-bye. Could still see that long, curved prick bouncing, tickling at his stomach, then Elliot's own with the motions.

Yeah, he wouldn't mind going another round or two with Elliot at all.

That wasn't going to happen, granted, but there was nothing wrong with filing the memory away in the spank-bank and keeping it on tap for future... withdrawals. And he'd taken that simile as far as he was willing to go with it, Jamie decided.

He drove carefully, eyes on the road even while he sped along at a good fifteen miles an hour over the speed limit, his muscles relaxing into the more familiar activity of navigating his vehicle. The aches faded as the miles disappeared beneath his tires, the unaccustomed strain giving way. He wasn't even thinking anymore, not really. He was just... driving. Communing with the road in a way he hadn't done in ages and hadn't realized he'd missed until just then. It was... nice. Comfortable. Nearly hypnotic to watch the broken lines flash past.

He barely heard his phone ringing, the tinny sound nearly lost under the oldies station he had on, and since when was Pearl Jam considered an oldie? The question brought a frown to his lips, one that lingered even as he pulled in to the next rest stop. He had voice mail, after all, and he could really use some coffee. He hadn't gotten much sleep the night before, not that he was complaining.

Remembering -- in full color and surround sound -- the reason why he was weary had him grinning again in short order, and he parked quickly, then rabbited in and out of the "welcome center," using the restroom and getting himself the biggest cup of coffee he could. God, it was funny how they'd looked at him when he ordered just plain. No frappe-latte-cappu-macchiato whatever. It was almost like the poor girl behind the counter had never even *heard* of black coffee. Then again, she'd looked to be all of sixteen, so maybe she hadn't.

He ended up sitting on the stone wall outside the front entrance, sipping ambrosia from a paper cup and laughing when he checked his messages.

One from Michael, apologizing yet again for the way he'd reacted to seeing Jamie with Elliot. One from Elliot, warning him that Michael was acting "all weird again, man; you might want to screen your calls." And one -- this one the call he'd actually heard coming in while he'd been driving -- from David.

"Hello, dear boy," David's voice said, "As you aren't answering, one can only assume that you and the lovely Michael are on your way home. Russell and I have arranged a small soiree and invited a few friends, merely to welcome you back. We expect you both at eight this evening." David laughed then. "Of course, if you're likely to be otherwise... engaged... I trust that you'll do us the courtesy of a return call? Yes, of course you will. Neither you nor Michael could ever be so uncouth as to leave us hanging."

Aside from the last word, David sounded so very prim and proper that Jamie knew -- suddenly *knew*, without a shadow of a doubt -- that both his father and David had really expected Jamie and Michael to come back to Boston with things firmly settled between them.

Of course, so had he, more or less, but that had been when he'd believed Michael was right about Jim and Elliot, and since that hadn't turned out to be what either of them had thought, neither had the trip. "Oh, God. This is *not* going to go well." Because that was yet another thing Jamie knew, now that he was thinking about it.

His father, and David -- who was really enough of a father figure to him that Jamie sometimes slipped and called him Dad-vid -- loved him. And they loved Michael. Or they had when they'd believed Michael was going to be Jamie's boyfriend. Eventual husband, possibly, what with the laws changing a little while earlier. But whichever. He had no idea of how they were going to react when they found out that Michael was with his... not-ex, because both Michael and Jim admitted that they'd never actually been a *couple*, or not officially. Well. When they found out Michael was with his... Jim.

Oh, Jamie knew they'd be stunned. Disappointed, too. Hell, Jamie was disappointed, himself. But the Dads were likely to be overly supportive, and that would drive him crazy in about three minutes.

He still needed to call, though. If only to tell them that there was no cause for celebration. Once he finished his coffee. And maybe bought some sunglasses from the vending kiosk he'd passed on the way in, which was currently only twenty or so feet away. Maybe the kid manning the booth could give him details about UV blocking and frame specs and... and okay. He was stalling. He knew he was stalling. And that was just ridiculous.

He was thirty-four years old. He was a licensed psychologist. He had a thriving practice, and people who trusted his abilities. He had a house and a car and friends who loved him. A good life, even, but for the lack of someone to share it with, and he was afraid to call his Dads to tell them that he was still single?

Well, yeah, Jamie admitted with a sigh. He was. Mostly because they would try to hate Michael, and Jamie didn't want that. Michael hadn't done anything wrong. Not even slightly. The man had

just followed his heart -- his true heart -- and ended up right where he was supposed to be. And sure, that left Jamie on his own for the moment, but...

He and Michael would always be friends, and Jim had warmed to Jamie right away. Once he'd known Jamie wasn't the kind to even try to poach, anyway. So Jamie hadn't actually lost anything. Not with Michael being so up front about his feelings for Jim, as far back as the first night Jamie had met the guy his Dads had thought would be so perfect for him.

They would blame themselves for the way things had gone, Jamie realized with a sigh. They would assume that his heart was broken, and that would lead to months and months' worth of careful voices and offers to introduce him to... whatever men either of them ran into at the grocery or the office or... hell, even while parking their cars. And that would just suck, not to mention it would be incredibly uncomfortable.

There was nothing worse than a happily monogamous and committed couple trying to redeem themselves by pimping out their son to whatever single gay guys they met. There couldn't be.

He'd have to lie, Jamie realized. For just a few weeks. Make up something that sounded plausible and not entirely out of character. It would be difficult, but he could do it. After all, he hadn't talked to either of his Dads while he'd been away with Michael. They'd have to take his word for what had happened.

He ended up getting another coffee, and this time the girl behind the counter just smiled. He drank it slowly, back out there on the wall, as he tried to find the words he needed. He didn't like the idea that he was going to lie to his Dads. Even with being a grown man and a professional, it just felt wrong. That didn't mean it wasn't necessary, he reminded himself. He wouldn't be able to stand it if they started hating Michael... or started giving Jamie's number to random guys.

The first words out of his mouth when he finally called were "Hey, David. I got your message. Um, you might want to cancel the caterers," because he just knew David had called them. "No. No, he's not with me." He paused while David made the expected shocked noises, sputters, everything. "No, it's fine. Really. I just..." Jamie heaved a dramatic sigh. "Look, it's just... we got there and I met his friends, and they're good people. I like them. But... you remember how Michael always seemed so alive, so... vibrant?" And David was agreeing, thank God. "Well, he's about a hundred times more alive when he's there."

God, Jamie realized, that was actually the truth. He wasn't lying at all. It wasn't just Jim who had made Michael seem so larger-than-life and happy. It was all of them. Jim, Trish, Chandra... even Elliot, in some bizarre way. And suddenly Jamie was feeling better. Not "oh, I'm over him and ready to move on" better, but... better.

"I like my life in Boston, David," Jamie said in answer to the swift question he'd been asked. "My family is there, my work. And I love Michael, you know I do. But I was never in love with him, okay?" He smiled slightly at the disbelief in David's voice. "I'm not saying that I couldn't have been. Hell, it would have been easy to fall that far. But once I saw him there, I just... I couldn't be selfish enough to drag him away from everything that makes him... shine. And then

there's Jim. They're right for each other in a way Michael and I never were. It's... God, David. It's love. Real, true love. And I'm fine. I swear."

And okay. That should be good enough to have David murmuring "poor child" and offering to pull Jamie down from the cross for being such a martyr. "We need the wood for the fire, dear boy" was likely.

Instead, what he got was a moment of stunned silence followed by a sort of knowing laughter that Jamie had never heard coming from David's lips in the twenty years or so that he'd known the man.

"E-Elliot," he found himself answering David's unexpected question, with no idea of why he wasn't just lying again, except his lies had been true, and... yeah, Jamie just sucked at lying, damn it. "But it's nothing, David. He's just some kid, and I won't be seeing him again, and I do *not* sound well fucked! Jesus! He's nothing like my type, and he works in a *gym*, for Christ's sake!"

He got to listen to still more laughter as David shared the conversation with Jamie's *actual* father.

"Whatever," he finally groaned. "Look, I'm at a rest stop, so I'm going inside. Just... you guys should cancel whatever you have planned, okay? There's nothing to celebrate, aside from Michael being exactly where he's supposed to be, and I'm tired. I just want to get home, take a hot bath, and maybe watch a movie or something. I'll stop by tomorrow after work."

He didn't even wait for the Dads to reply. He just ended the call and turned his phone off before going inside to use the bathroom again, and then got into his car to finish the drive home. He really did want to soak in the tub for a while, let the spa jets soothe away the last of the aches that remained from the past few days.

After that, he'd have to call Michael back, of course, and explain that it was fine. That they were fine. Still friends, even with Jamie's foolish hopes dashed.

He might even call Elliot, just to thank him for the belated warning about Michael's mood.

No, he decided. Calling Elliot would be stupid, even if he *had* given the kid his number. He'd been at the tail end of a sex-drugged stupor then, and while he still wouldn't mind a repeat of the past few days and nights, it really wasn't worth the effort.

Elliot was a player, and that was fine. But Jamie wasn't in the mood to get played.

Chapter Three

Fuck, Elliot thought as he looked around the living room of Michael's Boston apartment, the little man really wasn't much of a packrat at all. Hell, even if Elliot packed up everything that wasn't either nailed down or too big to fit, Mike's shit wouldn't fill more than half of one of the boxes Mike had made him bring. There was still the bedroom, of course, but Elliot had a feeling that the trend he'd already noticed would only continue there, and that meant only one thing to his mind.

This place, as nice as it was, had never been a home to Michael, no matter how many months he'd lived there. It had been a place to sleep and work, a place to keep his clothes. A temporary port in an emotional storm. Elliot knew. He flat out *knew*. Because Jim and Mike's place was exactly the same thing for *him*, the emotional storm part aside.

Oh, he liked it well enough. Liked spending time with Jim again after the years since Jim had left their home town. He even liked Mike, now that Michael wasn't glaring and growling at him. And he was fine with the way his two roommates were all over each other at all hours of the day and night. He really was. Sickened by the lovey-dovey sappiness of it all, granted, but fine.

If men were meant to be so emotional and cuddly and just plain sugary sweet, God would have made them women, Elliot figured. Give him a hot body and a throbbing cock for a few hours, and he was good, and that was the way it should be. And would be again.

Even so, he had to admit that there was something... cool about the way Jim and Michael cared for each other. Like they made each other more... just *more* by being together. It obviously worked for them, anyway. Hell, it'd work for Elliot, too, if they'd just let him watch, or maybe even join in. That wasn't ever going to happen, of course, because Jim and Michael took the whole monogamy thing to extremes.

Their choice, Elliot reminded himself, and it wasn't like he was lacking in offers. He even accepted some of them. Like that Linden guy from the club, whom Elliot had had more than once. Hot, sculpted, a few inches taller than Elliot. Leather pants, mesh shirt, and a cock that just wouldn't quit. Yeah, Linden had been fun the last time. Right up to the point where he hadn't been, which Elliot wasn't going to think about. Couldn't think about.

He forced himself to turn his mind to the apartment again, eyes finding the things he knew had to be Mike's, because the guy had told him plainly, "If it's not furniture or throw pillows, it's mine... leave the dishes and stuff, I don't need them, and the next tenant will probably be happy to have them... sheets and towels are mine, too. Other than that, it's clothes and pictures." And

God help him if he forgot anything, what with Michael's pseudo-landlord already having someone moving in at the end of the next week.

Still, it was good to be out of Wentworth. Good to be in a place where he could try to work his way through the whole Linden thing on his own. At least in Boston, nobody would care if Elliot had long moments of shaking fear.

That was the whole reason he'd volunteered for this trip, after all. The chance to be somewhere different. To be alone. To not watch Jim and Michael doing their whole trust and love and *clean* dance. To feel... free. Or as free as he could, what with the sharp-edged sword hanging over his head.

Luckily, Elliot reminded himself, he had a good few days. He'd shifted his clients to other trainers he trusted, once he'd explained that he had a family emergency, and while Jim and Mike had no idea of why he'd offered to make this trip when Jim had actually managed to get some time off, Elliot didn't think that either of them cared too much. They were probably thinking he just wanted to give them some private one-on-one time, and that was fine. He sort of did, really. They deserved it after everything they'd been through.

Elliot would never say so, but every little bit of resentment he'd felt toward Michael had faded just as soon as he'd seen what Jim looked like when truly happy. Which had been about five seconds after the whole ruckus over Jamie spending time with Elliot had ended.

"Spending time." Hah. Fucking was more like it. Good fucking. Amazing fucking, even. And for fuck's sake, Elliot was in Boston. He could always call Jamie and... but he wouldn't. It would seem too... something. Too "hey, I just happen to be in town less than three weeks after the days we spent in bed and I was wondering if you were free." Too pathetic, and maybe even stalker-ish.

But it wasn't, Elliot knew. He wasn't stalking at all. Hell, he'd barely given Jamie a thought since their encounter. Encounters, he supposed, because there had been far more than one. Still, it might seem weird. So, no. He wouldn't be calling Jamie. He would pack up the rest of Mike's shit instead, and then he would head out to the gay part of town and see what he could see.

He'd be double-bagging if anything came up, though, and while the idea of explaining the why of it to any prospective guy made Elliot cringe a little, that was something he wouldn't lie about. It might ensure that he didn't get laid again for a while, but it was still better than the alternative. Besides, there was sure to be a decent porn shop in the gay district. If nothing else, he could buy himself a dildo.

It wouldn't be the same as having a big, thick, *warm* cock inside him, moving at its owner's direction, but he'd survive. Somehow.

It was a plan, Elliot decided, and while he wasn't exactly grinning as he moved into the bedroom and started boxing up Mike's things, he wasn't frowning, either, and that was probably a step in the right direction.

The packing itself took less than an hour and filled only two cartons, though there was a third waiting for the sheets and towels Elliot would fold and seal away before he left. He had nearly a week before his bosses at the gym would be expecting him to work again. Sheets and showers were going to be necessary, especially if the whole two-condoms thing didn't have everyone he met running away screaming.

"Christ," he groaned, arching his back and sighing at the blank white ceiling, "I need to get laid. Like, now." And that was as close as he was going to get to praying. Ever again. After all, it hadn't worked out so well when he'd begged God to make his parents understand, had it?

His brother, thank fuck, had taken him in for long enough that Elliot had been able to think, but that was Travis. A good man, even according to the government, and the guy had the medals to prove it. Of course, Travis hadn't been *out* while he'd been on active duty, but that was a whole other story.

Laid. Right, Elliot reminded himself. Get laid. That was the plan. And silicone if the laid-with-a-human thing didn't work out. It might be best to buy the toy first, though, considering how late he might be at whatever club he found.

"Okay. Changed plan," Elliot muttered, just to break the silence. "Porn shop. Condoms. Lube. Dildo. Then a club or two. Yeah." He could do that. Would do that. He was young and built, completely in his prime... and he was going to enjoy it, damn it. No matter what.

He would shop, then he would dance and drink and flirt. It would be fun, Elliot told himself as he opened the one suitcase he'd brought with him and dug out his club clothes. Hell, if he was lucky, it would be more than fun. It would be... satisfying.

Jamie hung up his office phone, a small frown creasing his brow. It was always nice to hear from Michael; of course it was. After months' worth of talking to the guy at least every other day and seeing him in between, the last few weeks had been strange, what with once weekly phone calls that never lasted very long.

That was fine, of course, because Michael was incredibly happy with Jim. Jamie could hear it every time they spoke. It was still a little bit discouraging, mostly because Jamie hadn't quite realized how much of his free time had revolved around Michael until the guy was gone.

Even so, that wasn't why he was frowning.

No, Jamie was frowning because of the content of this latest call. The one in which Michael had asked after Jamie and David and Russell... then asked about Elliot, who was apparently in town for a few days. Whom Michael said he and Jim were worried about. Who hadn't bothered to even call Jamie about maybe having lunch.

Then again, Jamie reminded himself, there wasn't really any reason for Elliot to call him. Sure, they'd burned up the sheets together for a bit, but that didn't mean the younger man wanted to spend any more time with him. And if he were being truthful, Jamie would have to admit that he hadn't exactly encouraged Elliot to keep in touch. Hell, he hadn't even called Elliot to thank him for the heads up about Michael's mood that day... God, not so long ago.

So, yeah. Maybe it was his own fault that Elliot was in Boston and Jamie hadn't had any idea. But Michael had sounded so... surprised. Like maybe Elliot had implied that he would be calling Jamie, and if that were the case, then... "Then *what?*" Jamie asked himself out loud, just to hear something other than the muted sounds of the city outside -- and a hundred or so feet below -- the window.

Then what, indeed. "Then nothing," Jamie answered his own question. "If Elliot wanted to call me, he would. Just because Michael thought I knew Elliot was here doesn't mean *Elliot* wants me to know. Obviously. No matter what he might have said to Michael and Jim."

Hell, for all Jamie knew, Elliot might have some new lover or something. Someone he didn't want Michael and Jim knowing about. It was entirely possible, when Jamie considered the fact that Elliot was all about the sex, but also a really good guy. Maybe Elliot had hooked up with someone the guys wouldn't like, which would explain Michael being worried.

If that were so, then it was entirely possible that Elliot and whoever had decided to take the opportunity of a trip to Boston to deal with Michael's place as a chance to spend some time together.

Of course, that didn't really make a whole lot of sense, Jamie realized. Not when Elliot liked to play the field so much. So, no. Elliot was in Boston and just didn't want to see Jamie. "Or he thinks *I* don't want to see *him*. Huh." That was a thought. An uncomfortable thought, actually, which led him straight back to the part where he hadn't bothered to return Elliot's call, and of *course* Elliot thought Jamie wouldn't care either way if Elliot was in town or not. Jamie hadn't given Elliot any reason to think otherwise, had he?

In fact, Jamie told himself sternly, he hadn't given Elliot more than a second's conscious thought until Michael's call, but... he liked the kid. Liked the way Elliot was always so happy go lucky and entirely unapologetic for his very active libido. Elliot was just so real, so uncomplicated. He didn't throw up those walls and masks so many of Jamie's acquaintances were so fond of. Elliot was just... Elliot, and when Jamie thought about it, that was kind of refreshing.

So maybe Jamie had some apologies of his own to make. Because he really was sorry, now that he was thinking and not merely trying to spare himself the embarrassment he'd felt when David and Dad had started teasing him about his "rebound boy." And why did he care about that, anyway? There wasn't any law that said Jamie couldn't have safe, casual sex, and it had been good the last time. There was also no reason that he couldn't stop by Michael's old place and see if Elliot felt like maybe doing it all again.

Okay, Jamie told himself, even as he grabbed his jacket from the stand beside his office door and headed out, waving to his assistant Angela as she packed up her enormous purse with... whatever the hell she hauled around on a daily basis. So maybe he and Elliot really didn't have anything in common, aside from Michael.

Jamie's own upbringing had been entirely different from Elliot's. They moved within completely different circles. Elliot liked spreading himself around, while Jamie still believed in dating and relationships, regardless of what had happened with Elliot. They were in thoroughly different places in their lives, from education to professional aspirations. And yet...

And yet, Elliot was a good guy, and Jamie had enjoyed spending time with him. Even when they hadn't been rolling around getting sweaty and slick. Elliot had a good mind and good ideas. He could hold a decent conversation, even if it was sometimes a little too honest and blunt for Jamie's comfort. Elliot hadn't had any trouble making him laugh, either, and Jamie had to admit that he still admired the hell out of the way the kid tried to help people feel better about themselves. Not everyone in Elliot's position would bother to make the effort; Jamie knew that much for sure.

So, okay. "Okay," Jamie echoed the thought out loud, striding down the street toward home. "Nothing in common except Michael, but good friendships have been built on less. And I've been acting like an asshole, not calling him back just because we had sex and the Dads teased. But it's not all about the sex. It's because Elliot's fun and I want to get to know him better, and not just between the sheets. Besides, it isn't like I'll never see him again. He's sure to be around when I go to visit Michael, so it just makes sense to get any sort of awkwardness out of the way first."

That made sense. After all, it would probably upset Michael if Jamie came to Wentworth and wasn't at least friendly with Elliot, assuming Elliot wasn't interested in having what could only be termed serial one-nighters. Two-nighters. Whatever. Jim wouldn't be likely to care for it much, either, considering how much effort Jim went through to keep Michael happy.

That was even more reason to be friends with Elliot, Jamie's own inclinations toward just that aside. It would make things easier for everybody. Ideally, they could be friendly and still tear it up from time to time, but... just being friendly acquaintances would work, too. It wasn't as though Elliot was going anywhere, after all. The kid was sort of a fixture in Michael's and Jim's lives. And if it left Jamie open to a bit more of the good natured teasing David and Dad enjoyed so much, then so be it. He was a grown man, after all. He could take a bit of ribbing from his Dads. It would be worth it for the kind of sex Jamie had had with Elliot... and might possibly have again.

He would call Elliot, Jamie decided. In fact, he would call the young man right away. After he got some coffee, of course, because he was passing Sparks, and... wait. Why was he passing Sparks? The coffee shop was a good eight blocks out of his way, and...

"Got to love my subconscious," Jamie muttered, opening the door and stepping into the nearly empty business. "Tall vanilla latte," he told the guy behind the counter, trying not to preen at the assessing once-over he got. "Cinnamon sprinkles, please." And yes, it was a froufy coffee, but

Jamie didn't really need the full caffeine effect right then. He was still buzzing from the two pots he'd consumed over the course of the day. Froufy was about all he could handle.

Two minutes and one long sip later, Jamie sat down at one of the tables by the window and pulled out his phone. The number was right there in his missed calls queue, and a second or so later, he was listening to Elliot's phone ring. And ring. And God, ring some more. Didn't the guy have voice mail? Jamie was just about to give up, to end the call and try again later, when he finally heard something other than the seventh ring he'd been expecting.

"What?" And oh, Elliot didn't sound good at all. In fact, he sounded... pissed?

Jamie almost hung up, but somehow he was talking. "Um, hey. It's Jamie."

"Duh. Your number's in my phone, remember?" Okay. He should have called sooner, Jamie admitted silently. Then not so silently.

"Yeah, I should have..." Jamie sighed. "Yeah. Look, I just... God, Elliot. Michael told me you've been in Boston for two days. I guess he thought you were going to call me or something. I..."

Another sigh answered Jamie's, Elliot sounding less pissed suddenly, and more... tired, it seemed like, which was odd since it was only six o'clock or so. "Thought about it," Elliot said, and Jamie could actually hear the shrug in the guy's voice. "Figured you'd be busy, what with your practice and all. Besides, it's not like we're even... Never mind."

Okay, this was not the Elliot Jamie remembered. Not at all. He wondered for a split second whether the Elliot he'd met had been just a façade, but Jamie discarded the notion immediately. Michael would have said something, or Jim would have been looking at El strangely when they'd all been there in Wentworth. That being the case... "What's wrong, Elliot? Seriously."

A snort came through the phone, full of emotions Jamie couldn't even quantify, it came and went so swiftly. "Nothing. Everything. Or *maybe* nothing and maybe *everything*, and why the fuck is it any of your business? What do you care? Look, just... tell Mike you talked to me and he'll get off your back. I'm busy, anyway. Bye, Jamie."

"Wait. Wait! Elliot, what do you mean..." Jamie demanded, but the utter emptiness he heard, unbroken by a breath or even the echoing silence of a still-open connection, announced that Elliot had hung up, and that was just... bad. Bad and wrong and kind of scary, for some reason, because that wasn't like Elliot. Except maybe it was because Jamie hadn't known the guy that long, but still, there was something. And whatever it was only proved that Michael had been right to be concerned.

Yes, Jamie had left the office. He wasn't in work mode at the moment. But that didn't mean he should or could ignore what his instincts were telling him. And his instincts were screaming, deep in his gut, that something was very wrong, and that he could help.

He left his latte on the table, didn't even push his chair in again as he left, this time blessing his subconscious for directing his feet to the general area he needed to be in. It was less than three blocks from Sparks to Michael's old place, and while Jamie wasn't generally one for sprinting unless it involved a treadmill and various bells and whistles that tracked his heart rate, in this case he would make an exception.

Michael would never forgive him if Jim's friend El came back from Boston acting anything like the way Elliot had sounded, after all.

Fuck. Just fuck. Fuck and fuck and *fuck* -- topped with road kill and shit balls galore.

He never should have answered the damned phone, Elliot growled to himself. Hell, he'd been ducking Mike's calls, and Jim's, all day. So why the fuck had he decided to do something as stupid as answer when he'd seen it was Jamie? He should have known better, for fuck's sake!

Should have known Jamie was only calling because Mike and Jim wanted the man to check up on him. And that was the problem, Elliot knew. The reason he was so fucking... Christ. He wasn't even angry. Just... disappointed, maybe, because he'd actually thought -- for almost an entire minute -- that Jamie was calling because he just wanted to talk to him. And Elliot had answered because he was in a new city and didn't know anyone... and his night out really hadn't gone well, so he could have used a friendly voice. Even from someone who wasn't exactly a friend.

He hadn't gotten that, though. No, he'd gotten "Mike said you were here and you didn't call me so I'm just checking up on you." Not in those words, exactly, but Elliot knew how to listen between the lines, so to speak. And no matter what he'd made himself believe before that phone call, he'd... God, Elliot had truly hoped that he and Jamie were at least something more than acquaintances, if not actual friends, because over the last twenty-four hours, Elliot had come to some disturbing realizations. One of them being... he didn't *have* any friends. Not really.

Oh, he had Jim, but Jim was more like a brother, which meant Elliot couldn't just talk to him about things without Jim getting all protective and snarly. Which was nice sometimes, but it wasn't the same thing. There was Mike, of course, but Michael was more like a sister-in-law. Mike tolerated Elliot, maybe even liked him, but anything Elliot told Michael would end up in Jim's ear, so... no.

He had clients, and sure he spent time with them outside of the gym, but they never talked about anything real. Just training and nutrition and which muscle groups needed more work in order to attract more guys, and... yeah, all that shit.

And, Elliot admitted for probably the twentieth time in the last six hours, he had fucks. Guys who liked him, sure, but he doubted that more than a handful of them even knew his name. It wasn't really *him* they liked, it was his body. His cock. His mouth. His ass. They never talked to him, never wanted anything more than the quick, raunchy sessions he offered.

Jamie hadn't wanted anything more, either, but at least the guy had been willing to hang out, to talk, to exchange ideas between mind-numbing orgasms. Fuck, by the time Jamie'd left, the sex had been... not an afterthought, but a bonus. Like... Elliot had actually let himself believe that Jamie wanted to know him, though he hadn't realized it. Then Jamie hadn't called him back, and Elliot had pushed the man from his mind, which had been just fine, right up until the whole thing with Linden, and *now* Jamie called him? Because Mike said Elliot was in Boston?

"Because Jim's all pissed off that I'm not answering my phone," Elliot translated, his own voice shocking in the too-cheery light coming through the windows of Mike's old bedroom and barely heard over the loud rattling of the neighbor's air conditioning unit. "Well, fuck Jim. And Mike. All of them. Especially that damned Jamie."

"No..." And fuck! How the hell, who the... "I don't think Michael would be at all happy if you fucked Jim, Elliot. And Michael's completely off the market, so that's not likely, either. Now, me, on the other hand? Can't say I'd mind another few days." And fuck, just fuck.

"Go away," Elliot ordered, rolling on to his side and staring at the wall, rather than looking at Jamie standing in the bedroom doorway. "I told you I was busy, so just go. The fuck. Away. You're the last person I want to see right now, okay?" He meant it, too, except... he felt the bed dip behind him, and then Jamie's hand was on his back, and Elliot wanted to scream.

Hell, he wanted to scream and yell and throw things because Jamie was there and was acting like a friend would, but they weren't friends. For God's sake, they were just two guys who'd fucked for a few days, and that still made Jamie the closest thing Elliot *had* to friend, considering the way everyone he'd been tight with back home had ditched him as soon as he'd come out of the fucking closet, and it just wasn't *fair*!

"Leave!" Elliot hollered, and he knew he was crying, could feel it in the way his eyes were burning, prickling, and he wasn't the kind of guy who cried, damn it, but he was doing it, and he'd rather die than let anyone see. Let Jamie see. "Get the fuck out, you fucking faggot!"

Yeah, that would work. Jamie would go, and Elliot could... could what? Lie there and feel sorry for himself? But Jamie wasn't going, and that was... weird. In fact, Jamie was suddenly right up against Elliot's back, and there was a strong arm sliding under his waist while another wrapped around him from behind, and Elliot just... lost it.

He flailed and elbowed Jamie. Short, sharp cries flew from Elliot's lips while his legs tried to kick, to flip them, to do something -- anything -- that would let him get away, and Jamie just held on. Held tight. Held Elliot like he actually *cared*, and that was the biggest crock of shit ever because Jamie *couldn't* care. If Jamie gave even the tiniest fuck, he wouldn't have waited for Mike to say, "Call Elliot."

Elliot fought until he didn't have any strength left. Fought until his breath was coming in ragged gasps, his eyes sore and hot from the tears he hadn't been able to stop. He fought until he couldn't

do anything but lie there and shiver in Jamie's arms, shocky with reaction. Then he lay there some more, Jamie's murmured words slowly filtering into his ears and eventually making sense.

"It's okay," Jamie was saying, and Elliot could tell he'd been saying it for a while. "It's okay, El. Whatever it is, we'll work it out. It's okay... Hush. Hush, El. You're fine. You needed this..."

Elliot snorted, finally calm enough to answer the sentiment, even though he was still shaking a bit. "Y-yeah," he replied, and he sounded sarcastic even to himself, so fuck knew what Jamie was hearing. "Yeah, I 'needed' to have you break in and accost me in my own... in Mike's old bed. Sure." Just like he'd needed to break down like a fucking six-year-old girl whose first pony had died unexpectedly. Right.

But Jamie was laughing, just a little, and Elliot thought he heard some relief in the sound. "Well, you didn't answer when I knocked... or when I banged away at the door like it was playing altar boy to my priest. So I let myself in. I still have a key, you know. And you *did* need that, El. Christ."

Those strong arms were loosening then, and Elliot found himself lying on his back while Jamie stared at him, that usually smooth brow furrowing just a bit.

"I don't know what's happened since I was in Wentworth," Jamie said softly, and fuck if Elliot couldn't see concern in the man's eyes, which meant... what? Maybe that they were already friends and Elliot just hadn't known it? The thought cheered him a little, but Jamie was going on.

"Something did, though. I know that much. And I know that Michael doesn't have a clue about it. Jim, either, or Michael would know, too. So... something happened. Something bad. And you're here to protect them, but also to protect yourself. That's just common sense, right?" And God, Elliot thought he might start tearing up again.

"Whatever it is, El," Jamie murmured, one hand sliding up Elliot's chest until Elliot felt that warm palm cupping his cheek, "it can't be that bad. Not so bad that you need to be hiding away here, pissed off and violent and hating the world. And I think you'll realize that if you'll just talk about it."

Elliot had no idea of what his expression was saying, but if it was speaking for the way he was feeling, his face was probably announcing his complete lack of interest in talking about it. Then Jamie said the one thing that shouldn't have made him feel better, but did.

"I'll send Michael a bill for my time, which makes this a session. No matter how unorthodox it might be to provide therapy in the patient's bed while one of us is... um. Mostly naked. So I won't be able to tell anyone about what you say, El. Not Michael, not Jim, not even my Dads. Not even if I wanted to. It's the law, okay?"

Yeah. Maybe yeah. Maybe he could do this, if Jamie really meant it. Elliot needed to talk to *somebody* about Linden, and it might be easier to tell Jamie than anyone else. He already knew

Jamie, after all, and he was pretty sure the man wasn't going to want him again, so Jamie's reaction wasn't going to be an issue, and... Yeah.

"I... okay," Elliot said, the words a little bit muffled as they made their way around his bottom lip, there between his teeth. "I. Okay, Jamie. I just... God, I hate him! I shouldn't, because it's not his fault, but I do!" And the words flowed like lava, hot and burning and turning everything to ash.

Chapter Four

Jesus.

Jamie didn't want to, but he could almost *see* it in the tiny flashes of darkness when he blinked.

Linden, whoever the hell he was, running around the club Jamie had never been to, looking hot and sexy and too damned good to turn down. Good enough that Elliot had gone back more than once, but that was Elliot's business, not Jamie's, so he didn't say a word on that front.

He could still see it, though.

"Hey, guy, want to go again?" Linden had probably said, and Elliot being Elliot, the kid had likely nodded. Then they were in the back and El's pants were down around his ankles and Linden was pushing in... and Elliot had probably been moaning happily, right up to the point when he felt that strange snapping sensation inside him.

God, Jamie could actually see Elliot freezing while the fucker behind him probably moaned louder, moved faster, driving his naked prick into Elliot's body, holding Elliot against the wall with hands and leverage and sheer body weight... could almost hear the bastard's grunts and groans drowning out Elliot's terrified pleas to "stop, stop, God, Linden, stop!"

Hell, Jamie could almost feel the fucker's neck in his own hands, he was that pissed off.

Elliot had wanted to get away; Jamie was sure of that much. He could hear it in Elliot's voice. But Linden wouldn't let him. Just kept slamming in, harder, deeper, burying himself in what Jamie knew was a stellar ass. Kept grunting, moaning things like "hot," "tight," "take it, slut." And then Linden came, forcing long, hard shots of come deep into Elliot's ass, the man's only comment when it was over being "Oh, sorry, guess it broke, but I was clean last time I got tested, so it's fine, we should do it again."

"I felt it," Elliot was whispering against his chest again. "I felt it break, Jamie, and he didn't... didn't stop. I did everything right, and it wasn't enough, and he said... he *said* it was okay, but how can I trust him when he didn't stop, even if he wasn't lying about not noticing? Then he kept calling me, and I just had to get away, and I couldn't tell Jim, okay? He would have... I don't know. Beat Linden up and gone to jail, or started picking out china patterns, and I don't want that, I don't want Linden, I just want... I want everything to be like it was, okay?"

God. God help him, Jamie thought, because Jim beating that bastard up was the least of Jamie's concerns. He still wrapped his arms tighter around Elliot's thankfully less shivering form. He still

murmured "I know... I know, El. Me, too. And it's a pretty good bet that he wasn't lying, okay?" Because that was true. Elliot had tested negative all his life once he'd realized his own bent, and he had never had unprotected sex. Linden would have known that. Would have known that he'd be the prime suspect if Elliot suddenly tested positive.

That was what was happening on the outside. On the inside, though... oh, Jamie was seething.

Going by what Elliot had said over the last hour and some, Linden had been stalking El. Showing up at the gym, horning in on training sessions with paying clients, trying to get Elliot to go to lunch or dinner with him at least twice a week since Jamie'd left Wentworth. Elliot hadn't been up for it, apparently, and Linden had backed off for a few days, so Elliot hadn't really been worried about going into the back of the club with the guy.

But condoms generally didn't break on their own, Jamie knew. Not usually, though it *had* been known to happen. Mostly when there was something a good bit more energetic going on than a regular hard fuck against the wall... and Jamie knew from experience that the one doing the fucking *felt it* the moment that thin barrier was gone. It was a sensation like nothing else.

So Linden had known. He must have. The increased heat and sensation was unmistakable. He'd known he was bare inside Elliot. And he hadn't stopped, even if he hadn't been able to hear Elliot begging him to, which he maybe hadn't, considering how loud the music usually was in those sorts of places. Even so, he'd gone faster. Harder. He'd *held Elliot still* and slammed in and out of Elliot's body. And then that fucker Linden came. Deliberately. In Elliot. Naked. Instead of stopping for another condom, or at least to give Elliot the chance to say 'no'... or even just pulling out, then coming on Elliot's back.

God, Jamie wanted to kill him. Slowly.

Linden had sabotaged the condom on purpose. Jamie was almost entirely sure of it. Whether to scare Elliot into a "relationship" based on fear or simply to feel Elliot around him without latex. That part was irrelevant. What mattered was...

"It's okay, El," Jamie said softly, pulling Elliot closer, his tone entirely at odds with his emotions. "Really. Like I said, there's about a ninety-nine-point-nine percent chance he's clean, like he said. And even if he isn't, that doesn't mean he gave you anything, okay?" And Christ, that was meant to comfort Elliot, but judging by the way the younger man was holding him tighter, it hadn't.

"We'll get you through this," Jamie whispered, letting his hands roam slowly, soothingly up and down Elliot's spine. "We will, El. We're friends, right?" And okay. That was a really intriguing moment of stillness on Elliot's part. "El?"

"Are we?" Jamie barely heard the words muttered against his chest, but after a moment he figured out what they meant.

His hands slowed, coming to rest at the small of Elliot's back, and Jamie smiled just a bit when Elliot looked up at him.

"Of course we are," Jamie said seriously, meaning every word. "You, me... Michael and that Jim of his. We're all friends. And I'll never tell them about what you've told me tonight, but they know something's wrong. They care about you. So I'll tell them that we're working through it, and they'll just have to be supportive, okay?"

Elliot nodded against his chest, and Jamie knew he'd never felt that sort of trust before. Not from anyone. Not his clients, not his friends, not... well, no one ever. It was a heady feeling, to know Elliot believed in him so much. Also sort of scary.

"So," he said, trying to lighten things up a little, "Tomorrow's Saturday. Have any plans, El?"

Elliot shook his head slowly, and Jamie almost groaned at the sensation of that short, soft hair brushing over his nipple, shirt-covered or not.

"Cool. We'll sleep in, then I'll take you to the Cheers bar."

God help him, but the smile he felt against his chest had Jamie making even more silly and touristy plans for the weekend. Anything to make Elliot smile after what the poor kid had been through with that Linden fucker.

He dozed for a while, but when he woke again, he spent a good five minutes shifting and twisting, until he'd managed to worm his way out of Elliot's hold without waking the man, and Jamie only felt a little bit dirty about the phone call he was going to make.

He had the number. Of course he did. He just hadn't used it. He generally called Michael, rather than Jim. But this time... well, Jamie wasn't entirely sure that he wouldn't tell Michael everything, so Jim was his best bet.

Jamie's brow furrowed slightly, even as he placed the call.

"He's fine," he started as soon as the phone was answered, not even waiting for Jim's "hello."
"Pretty scared and a whole lot freaked out, which Michael already knew so I'm betting you did, too. But Elliot's going to be okay. I'm probably going to keep him here for a few extra days, though, so can you and Michael square things with his boss at the gym?"

He listened for a bit, a small smile twitching at his lips when he heard a second voice that sounded curious at first, then concerned when the first voice explained.

"No, I can't tell you anything more than that. I *want* to. God, believe me that I want to. But I can't. I promised Elliot that anything he said would fall under doctor-patient privilege. Oh, you'll be getting a bill for my services, by the way. I'll give you the family discount."

Jamie couldn't help chuckling at the matching growls he heard then.

"Look, I really can't tell you. But I can encourage Elliot to explain it all when he gets back." Jamie frowned. "I can't swear that he will. Ever. I just wanted you to know he's going to be fine. Eventually." Hopefully, anyway, assuming that fucker Linden hadn't been lying about his health status.

There was still something just *fun* about hanging up on Jim. Something that made Jamie chuckle. He would apologize the next time he talked to the guys, of course, but right then? Jamie was exhausted.

He needed sleep. At least a few hours' worth. Just so he'd be alert enough to haul Elliot all over town in the morning. And so what if it was barely ten p.m.? Michael's bed was comfortable, and it would be nice to sleep with a man whom he wasn't going to have sex with that night. He hadn't done that since Michael, and he'd missed it for some reason. The fact that it was Elliot this time just seemed right, in some bizarre way Jamie couldn't explain, even to himself.

He was smiling as he let himself drift off, Elliot held carefully in his arms. The kid needed a friend, after all, and Jamie could be that for him. Would. Happily. More than happily if there was a chance of a bit more touch, but that could wait.

Elliot was laughing as he let Jamie drag him down the street, both of them wearing those stupid, overpriced tri-cornered hats Jamie had insisted on buying. The fact that they were each holding obviously fake, foam-rubber swords only added to the amusement factor. Fuck, they were acting like kids, he realized, and not even kids in their teens.

No, they were acting like ten-year-olds, at best, what with the running and jumping and slashing away at each other with the implements of *non*-destruction, and it was... good. Great, even. In fact, Elliot couldn't remember the last time he'd had so much fun.

It would have been better still, of course, if he hadn't had the great big cloud of worry looming at the back of his mind, but there wasn't anything he could do about that at the moment other than try to distract himself, so... "Not gonna pay taxes on that damned tea!" he cried, swiping his "sword" at Elliot's stomach. "And you can't make me, English dude!"

Jamie blinked for a second, and Elliot knew he'd surprised the man. Then, "Yes, you are, you bloody colonist! The Crown owns you, and you'll do whatever I say or you'll feel my wrath!"

Jesus fuck, Jamie was using the worst English accent Elliot had ever heard, outside of that horrible production of *Romeo and Juliet* senior year. It was too damned funny.

"Not a chance, you ba..." Then he saw the kids on the sidewalk and adjusted the word he'd been about to use. "You bad, bad British guy! I'll dump all the tea in the harbor before I drink it, and that'll teach you!" Then he and Jamie were exchanging badly acted slices and stabs with their "swords" and making up things that had probably never happened in real history -- "You stole my horse, colonist!" "Well, you broke my chamber pot!" "Only because your skull is so bloody

hard!" "You tried to fu... marry my sister, evil British dude, and she doesn't even like you!" "That's because she's used to ill mannered and unwashed miscreants like you!" -- and it was only a matter of minutes before they were laughing too hard to go on.

Elliot was entirely out of breath, hat likely as askew as Jamie's, when they collapsed on a handy bench. He was already red from breathlessness, which was probably a good thing, he decided, because the kids who were suddenly giggling and applauding his and Jamie's silliness wouldn't likely know that he was blushing, too.

Neither would their parents, Elliot hoped, because he'd actually been having too much fun to care while he and Jamie had been moving, but now that they were sitting still and the object of so many amused gazes and tickled smiles, he was for damned sure embarrassed.

Jamie, on the other hand, didn't seem to be feeling self-conscious at all, Elliot noticed with a tiny twinge of jealousy. In fact, the man was grinning from ear to ear, and just like that, Jamie was standing up and bowing, the tacky, touristy hat swept from his head to nearly brush the cement.

"Thank you," Jamie announced, still grinning like a loon. "Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, and -- to steal a phrase from Barnum and Bailey -- children of all ages. The first performance of the JamEl Improvisational Street Theater has concluded. Events have been interpreted for maximum entertainment value, rather than historical accuracy. Which means," and Elliot tried not to laugh when Jamie winked at the closest children, "that if you try to use our version for school, you'll probably get a big red F unless your teacher appreciates fiction. Um... no hats or fake swords were harmed in the making of this entirely inaccurate re-enactment."

Then Jamie turned his head less than an inch and winked again, at Elliot this time, and Elliot did laugh. He was still laughing as Jamie pulled him up from the bench and down the street again, the smattering of applause only making him blush more.

"You know, Jamie," Elliot said, grinning and tucking the foam rubber sword through a belt loop on his jeans, "I think you're the kind of person my momma called 'shameless.'" And Jamie grinned back.

"Is that a bad thing?"

Elliot snorted. "Maybe to her. But I kinda like it. So what's next?" And again he was being pulled along, not that he was complaining. Jamie hadn't led him wrong yet.

"Local microbrewery has a tour that starts in an hour," Jamie answered. "And there's a really good little restaurant close by. That'll give us just enough time for a late lunch before we start swilling all the samples."

Oh, yeah... that sounded good. Food, then a beer tasting? Fuck. "If you keep treating me this well, you're gonna have to marry me," Elliot teased, giving Jamie a patently false look of adoration from the corner of his eyes. "You'll ruin me for all other men."

And Jamie was laughing even harder than Elliot had expected. So hard, in fact, that it was almost insulting. Then it actually *was* insulting... but also sort of funny, even to Elliot.

"Oh, honey... if that's all it takes to ruin you for other men? You've got more issues than National Geographic. And they probably go back just as long. Now, come on. Food. Beer. And far more information than either of us has ever wanted on the selection of fine hops. Maybe another swordfight."

Okay, Elliot admitted, maybe he was a little too sensitive at the moment, because Jamie was obviously joking. Besides... "A guy can never know too much about beer, Jamie. Or steak. They have steak at this place we're going to, right?" And Jamie laughed and moved faster, so Elliot matched his pace, their fingers still twined.

"Almost as good as mine," Jamie answered after a block or so. "The steak, I mean. I'll make you dinner one night, if there's time before you go home." Then Jamie bit his lip and looked thoughtful for just a moment. "Um, and just so we're clear? Being friends now... well, it doesn't mean I don't still want to, um. You know. When you're feeling... better. If that's okay."

Elliot caught himself blinking, but he was just that shocked. Jamie still wanted to fuck him? Even now, when he knew about Linden? Well, apparently, but it was still kind of surprising. Encouraging, too, Elliot realized, because if a guy like Jamie could still want him when Elliot was still feeling so damned dirty, angry, freaked, then things could be worse. Besides, didn't it kind of mean that Jamie had really *meant* it when he'd said Elliot probably didn't need to worry; that Linden was likely clean?

Yeah, Elliot told himself, relaxing a little bit on the inside for the first time since "that night." And he did want Jamie again. Wanted that fucking awesome cock, too. And... maybe Jamie would even stop if they broke a condom. Maybe he wouldn't just... But Elliot needed to think about that for a while. He didn't really know Jamie much, or at all. He had no idea of whether it would be safe to trust Jamie that far.

"So, steak and beer," Elliot finally said, staring at some probably historical building across the street. "Sounds good. I, uh..."

"It's okay, El," Jamie said quietly, letting him off the hook, thank fuck. "You have a lot going on right now. I just thought it would be better if I was honest with you. It doesn't mean you can't say no. We can be friends without the sex, too. It's up to you. Now, come on," and when Elliot dared a glance, Jamie was grinning. "This is a great town. Lots of things to see and do, and so little time to do it in. Let me show you."

Elliot frowned slightly, then, at the determined cheerfulness of Jamie's voice, but he shook it off and nodded. Jamie was right, after all. There was a lot to do in Boston, now that he had a tour guide, and... if they didn't find time on this visit, there was always the next one.

It was only in that moment that Elliot realized he was hoping to come back, and the notion made him happy. Made him feel sort of cosmopolitan, even if Massachusetts was only another state,

rather than a foreign country. Hell, he'd never really planned on getting more than a few towns away from Frederick before he'd come out, but just look at him. Wentworth, and now Boston. So, yeah, Elliot figured he had every right to feel well-traveled. And he would definitely be coming back to Boston. He liked it far too much to stay away.

He wouldn't have Mike's old apartment to stay in next time, but he was pretty sure he could find a motel he could afford without screwing up his investment portfolio, and as long as he could rent or maybe borrow a car again, he wouldn't even need to be right in the city. He'd have to remember to ask Jamie, Elliot decided. Once he knew when he'd be able to get more time off, anyway. Which would probably be a while, now that he was thinking about it.

"We'll make time for steak," Elliot announced, giving Jamie a teasing grin. "It's not like I really need to see the Liberty Bell or anything, right? Or the Declaration of Independence. I already know all about them." And Jamie was laughing again, though this time Elliot had the distinct feeling that it was *at* him, not *with* him. "What?" It would be interesting to see what Jamie said, after all, considering.

But Jamie was shaking his head and giving him a rueful smile. "Nothing, El. I'll just cross those off the list. And look! Here we are! Welcome to McGinty's. It's one of my favorite places, especially for steak."

Jamie sounded relieved, but then again, Elliot was, too. He'd barely eaten anything that morning, and after all the running around -- some of it literal -- he was absolutely relieved to have the certainty of some red meat in his very near future.

He was also a little bit intimidated when Jamie led him inside and Elliot saw just how *nice* the "really good little restaurant" was. Like... jacket-and-tie nice, and neither of them were wearing anything like that. In fact, they were wearing stupid hats and carrying foam swords and how in the fuck was Elliot supposed to feel like anything but a big redneck?

"Um, maybe there's a hot dog stand or something we could go to instead..." he suggested hopefully, because there was no way he wasn't already sticking out like a sore thumb, even though Jamie seemed to be disturbingly comfortable.

"Hush, El. Vincent!" Jamie was smiling at some guy in a suit, and it actually took a minute for Elliot to realize the man was the host... or whatever they called them in places like this.

"Vincent, I know it's not one of my usual days, but it's the weekend. I'm hoping you might be able to find just a small table for me and my friend? He's visiting from out of town, and I'm afraid I've talked about the filet here enough that he'll be despondent if you can't help us. Oh, and would it be possible to check our hats and swords?"

Fuck, the way the man in the suit -- Vincent, apparently -- was looking at him so closely had Elliot wanting to cringe and run and never even *think* about walking through the door of a place like McGinty's again. Then Vincent opened his mouth, and Elliot just knew his eyes were wide. Just like he knew his own mouth was hanging open. He'd never heard such an obviously gay voice in his life. Not even at the club, and that was saying a lot.

"HMMMMMM..." the man nearly purred, and when the man looked Elliot over this time, Elliot thought he could actually feel that gaze stripping him naked. It was... weird. And sort of odd because Elliot knew it should be offensive, but the sheer appreciation in the man's eyes made it more... complimentary than anything else.

"Visiting from where?" Vincent murmured, just loud enough for Elliot and Jamie to hear. "And are there more like him there, Doc? Because you know I love my job, but I'd be more than willing to relocate." Vincent giggled, the girliest sound Elliot had ever heard coming from a man. "God, I'd be willing to move and take work at a *convenience store* if there's a town out there that grows them like him; especially if they grow them like him and *gay*. And of course I have a table for you, Doctor D. Your usual, actually. It'll just be a moment while Thomas clears and resets it. Hats and swords, gentlemen?"

And just like that, Elliot wasn't feeling quite as out of place as he had a few moments earlier. "Um, thanks," he told Vincent as he handed over his tri-cornered hat and foam sword. "Uh, it's a long story."

Then Vincent was taking the same items from Jamie, and Elliot couldn't help laughing at the man's next words.

"Oh, I doubt that, honey. You're here from wherever -- and I'll get it out of Doc eventually -- to get him to lighten up. Good job so far, too. I don't think I've ever seen Doctor D in anything less staid than suit and tie, so..." Once again, that appraising gaze swept over someone, but this time it was Jamie and Elliot was glad. "Well, let's just say that seeing good old Doc D in jeans and a T-shirt, not to mention the hat and sword, gives me some small hope that he *won't* work himself into an early grave."

"Hey!" Jamie objected, sounding amused but also serious to Elliot's ears. "I do relax, you know. Just... not here, usually."

Vincent snorted as he handed their hats and such to a passing waiter. "Coat room for these, and a bottle of the Doc's usual red zinfandel at his table," he said, and Elliot almost laughed at the speed the waiter used as he scurried off.

"Doc, please," Vincent added, collecting two menus and leading them to a table in the far right corner of the room, "You've been coming here since before I even started. More than three years, now. And in all that time, you've never once come in on a weekend, much less wearing a hamantashen-hat and civvies. That's all I'm saying." Then he winked at Elliot, and Elliot had no idea of what to make of it.

The guy -- Vincent -- wasn't hitting on him, or on Jamie; that much was clear. But Elliot truly had no idea of why the almost frighteningly gay man was acting the way he was. Unless it was his natural manner, which was always possible. Even so, Elliot had a question, and he was for damned sure going to ask it. He had a feeling that Jamie wouldn't tell him, but Vincent probably would.

"Um, what's with the whole Doctor D thing?"

And he was right, Elliot congratulated himself, because Vincent smirked and waggled his brows, then blew Jamie a kiss, which was just wrong, Elliot thought, because the host at a restaurant had no business doing that at customers. But Vincent answered, nonetheless.

"Oh, that's easy, stud muffin," the man said, and Elliot frowned at the thought that Vincent might have chosen that as Elliot's nickname. "He's a doctor," Vincent explained quickly, even as he backed away from Jamie's glare, "and he's delicious. So. Doctor Delicious. Doc D." And then Vincent beat a very hasty retreat, moving back to his podium-thing so quickly that Elliot couldn't help laughing.

"Doctor Delicious?" Elliot teased, brows rising. "Really? I mean... I know you're gorgeous. I have eyes and everything." Elliot smirked. "I just didn't know that you had a whole fan club of..." God, he didn't even know how to describe Vincent and the man had been gone for less than a minute. "Um."

Jamie rolled his eyes, and Elliot felt himself relaxing again, which was odd since he hadn't even known he was tense.

"If you're trying to say that there are a bunch of... males who are overly familiar with their feminine sides who find me attractive," Jamie finally allowed, "then yes. I'm sure you've experienced the same, since we're similarly built. But as I think you know, El, I don't really go for the... well. Queens, I suppose you'd say." And Jamie was blushing, which was just... cool. Weird, yes. But cool.

Elliot pushed that thought away, finally settling on the good part of what Jamie had said. "Well, bright side? I'll bet you never have to wait for a table or a haircut or even a drink. So it could be worse."

They were both laughing all of a sudden, and Elliot just let himself enjoy it. He wasn't thinking about what had happened with Linden -- he wasn't -- or about what he was going to tell Jim and Mike when he went back to Wentworth. He was just enjoying the moment, he told himself, because it wasn't going to last forever.

And there was going to be steak, which was always a good thing, he reminded himself. And beer.

Yeah. Nothing bad there, thank fucking God.

The brewery had been an inspired idea, Jamie thought with a grin, because while he was just a little bit bored, having made the tour a good six times over the last three years, Elliot was entirely absorbed in what their guide was telling them.

Blah-blah-blah, hand selected by virgin soccer players dancing naked under the light of the full moon... blah-blah-blah, not harvested until the stars aligned in the proper pattern... And, okay, Jamie was making stuff up, but Elliot really did look like he was fascinated.

Fortunately, as Jamie knew from experience, it wouldn't be long before the tasting portion of the tour, and as both he and Elliot had bellies full of good beef, steamed vegetables, and mashed potatoes, there was no chance of either of them getting loopy. He hoped, anyway, because he'd taken the five minutes Elliot had been in the restroom earlier to call the Dads and borrow their season box at Fenway Park. Baseball wasn't really Jamie's sport, but he thought Elliot might enjoy the luxury of it all.

Maybe he was trying too hard, Jamie realized, but Elliot had to still be feeling out of sorts. Had to be worrying about whether there were cells swarming through his body, replicating and tainting his blood. God knew Jamie had experienced those same concerns, though that had been years earlier -- back in the days when it actually took more than a year to find out for sure and involved more tests than he cared to remember.

So, yes. He was trying to distract Elliot from being anxious. He was also being selfish, though, by doing everything he could to keep the younger man from thinking too much. Elliot was good company, especially now. They'd already had their moment, after all -- their first moments -- and Elliot had been entirely noncommittal about doing it again, but that only meant the guy was thinking about it, Jamie figured. And it was a lot to think about, really.

So Elliot needed time to consider, to decide how he felt about having sex so soon after what had happened at the club. Elliot might even decide to take a break for a while, and Jamie didn't mind that in the slightest. He didn't need to be inside Elliot again right away. Just... eventually would be nice. He still had dreams about that tight ass, those straining, sweat-sheened muscles.

Elliot might even decide that he wasn't interested in anything physical with Jamie again, and if that ended up being the case, Jamie would handle it. Would still be Elliot's friend, even.

It would rankle a bit, sure, but Jamie was a psychologist, and that meant he could analyze even himself.

He *liked* Elliot. He liked pretty much everything about the guy. His looks, his smile, his eyes... his mind. He liked the fact that Elliot wasn't at all pretentious. That Elliot freely admitted it when he didn't know about something. Hell, Jamie even liked the fact that Elliot's grasp of history was so shaky that he thought the Boston Tea Party was really about *tea*, rather than taxation without representation and a whole slew of other things. Liked it that Elliot didn't realize that the Liberty Bell was in Philadelphia and the Declaration of Independence was in Washington, DC.

Of course, Jamie admitted silently, he hadn't bothered to tell Elliot that he was wrong about any of those things, but that was just because... Elliot was so freaked out already. He didn't want the poor guy to start questioning himself, not when Elliot was already wondering about his health.

And maybe, a small part of Jamie's psyche whispered, maybe he just liked being the smart one. Not to say that any portion of him believed Elliot was stupid. Just... uneducated. And yes, there was a tiny desire to be someone's -- Elliot's -- mentor, buried down deep. Miles under the enjoyment of the man and the desire to feel Elliot writhing beneath him again.

Jamie shook the notion away, giving Elliot a huge smile when their guide finally led them to the tasting room. "I think you'll like the amber," he said, nodding at the sixteen short glasses that were already sitting on the bar, eight testers for each of them. "The stout is a little bitter for me, and kind of heavy, but you might like it, too. Um, I don't recommend the blonde. It's a bit sweet."

Elliot snorted, which just made Jamie laugh. "Please, Doctor D. Like you know what I like." And it was only then, with those words echoing in his head, that Jamie realized. He'd really thought he did. Thought he'd known Elliot's tastes. And based upon what? The sex?

Well, yeah. Pretty much. The sex and the things Michael had said about Elliot. The little bit he'd managed to observe when he and Elliot had been between bouts of stellar foreplay and fucking. And that... well, that wasn't really any sort of knowledge at all, Jamie realized.

Yes, he knew he liked Elliot, but the truth was, Jamie barely even knew the man, though their current day together was definitely getting him closer to it. And Jesus, when had he turned into the sort of man who assumed someone's entire personality based upon what they liked in bed?

Right about the time he'd walked in to Michael's old place and forced Elliot to talk to him, Jamie realized. Because he'd been making assumptions ever since.

Jamie slammed back the glass of stout he'd insulted, his eyes burning just a touch from the bitterness that only grew after he'd swallowed, but it was what he'd needed in order to shock himself to speech again. "You're right, El," he agreed, blinking quickly in the hope that it would make his eyes stop watering. "I'm not really qualified to guess about your taste in beers. And don't call me 'Doctor D.' It makes me think of Vincent, and that's just... too disturbing."

Then Elliot was grimacing as he tried the stout, and Jamie was laughing at that expression, and... yeah. It was good. Very good. Friendly, even.

It stayed that way for hours, through the adventure of hailing a cab -- which Jamie managed by jumping in front of one at a stop light while brandishing his sword and announcing "I claim this conveyance for the Crown!" which had Elliot laughing like a loon -- right through getting to the park.

The game wasn't that good, mostly because Boston lost, but it was all still fine. Friendly.

Then dinner, with both him and Elliot deciding on a light meal after their heavy lunch and the copious amounts of beer -- because there had been beer at the ballpark, too, and what man would say no to that, especially when the Dads' private box had its own fridge?

So, salads and grilled chicken and a few glasses of wine... then a movie, because they'd walked past a theater and Elliot mentioned something about wanting to see the film advertised on the marquee "sometime." In the end, that meant "no time like the present" to Jamie. It meant popcorn and sodas, those scary-red licorice things that weren't licorice at all, but Elliot liked them... and the movie wasn't that good, in the end. Hell, Jamie had it all figured out in the first thirty minutes, while Elliot had taken maybe five more before saying, "Oh, I get it, it's the secretary."

They sat through the rest of the film, and Jamie was glad. It had included one of the best car chases he'd ever seen. Just as action-packed as the one in *Ronin*, but nowhere near as long, and that was when he'd made his mistake. He'd said as much to Elliot. Elliot, who had never even *heard* of *Ronin*, much less seen it.

It must have been the wine, Jamie decided. Or maybe the beers. Or... God only knew. But whatever it was, he was sitting on the couch in his own home while *Ronin* played, and Elliot was right there beside him. There were only a few inches between them, and Jamie wasn't feeling friendly anymore. In fact, he was being treated to the full-color, surround-sound memory of each moment he'd spent with Elliot in Wentworth whenever he blinked.

It was wrong, and it was sick, and Jamie couldn't stop beating himself up for even thinking about it. He also couldn't stop himself from being halfway to hard, which he hoped Elliot wouldn't notice.

Yes, Elliot was amazingly attractive. Hell, Elliot was only saved from being pretty by the strength of his jaw and those brows that grew so close together. Nothing like a uni-brow, of course, but... thick, dark, and bushy in just the right way.

Elliot was even fun and funny, smart in ways that Jamie had never been. He had a way of looking at things that made Jamie laugh and nod and wish he'd been able to interpret whatever it was in that manner, himself. And Elliot was amazing in bed, as Jamie remembered very well -- better than he wanted to remember, in fact.

But Elliot was also traumatized. A little bit broken by what had happened between him and that bastard Linden. Not even really ready to think about sex again. Even with Jamie, whom Elliot hopefully knew would never hurt him.

Elliot trusted him; Jamie believed that. And the last thing -- the worst thing -- Jamie could ever do would be to repay that trust by acting on the desires he was feeling more strongly now that they were in his home. Especially when Elliot wasn't ready to think about it, much less act on those thoughts if Elliot even had them.

And, God, Jamie wondered, why the hell was he so impatient, all of a sudden? Elliot hadn't flirted, hadn't done anything that should have gotten Jamie revved up. Nothing but sit there and watch the movie raptly. And even with as much of a player as Jamie knew Elliot to be, the guy hadn't even commented on the men in the film, which was just sad... but proved the young man was still wrecked inside.

That was only a temporary situation, Jamie knew, thankful to be finding something other than his own desire to think about. Eventually -- once Elliot tested negative a time or two -- Elliot would go back to his real life, which included lots of random encounters with hot guys in dark corners.

Yes, eventually Elliot would relax and go on with his life, and that was good. It was what Jamie *wanted* for him. A return to life as usual. Granted, random sex with multiple partners, no matter how safe -- which couldn't be guaranteed, obviously, considering Elliot's current situation -- wasn't what Jamie would call a *good* thing, but...

Elliot had only been out for a few years or so. And that being the case, Jamie had to look at it the same way he'd look at a teenage boy who was finally understanding what his pecker was for and who'd just found out that the town slut not only put out, but thought he was *cute*. And, okay. Broken condom. Never a good thing. But if Elliot had been straight and there had been a broken condom, chances were good that the guy would be just as freaked, wondering whether he'd gotten said slut pregnant.

It would have taken about the same amount of time to find out, too, Jamie told himself with a rueful grin. Mostly because of the whole no health insurance thing he was sure Elliot had going on. The fast tests could be expensive... but maybe he could do that. For Elliot. Maybe he could somehow talk El into letting Jamie foot the bill. For Elliot's peace of mind, of course.

"Christ, this is a long-ass car chase!" Elliot announced, and Jamie could see him grinning. "How the fuck did they manage to film it? It must've taken *weeks*!"

God... God. It was a bad idea. Jamie knew it. In fact, it was possibly the worst idea he'd ever had, but that didn't stop him from raising his arm and settling it on the back of the sofa behind Elliot's shoulders, the tips of his fingers just brushing the soft, worn cotton of Elliot's T-shirt.

"I think I heard they did it in a series of one-shot takes," Jamie murmured, because he wasn't sure about that, but he knew it would excite Elliot even more. And damn it, Jamie realized, he was going straight to Hell. With a capital 'H.'

Then Elliot was turning to look at him full on, and Jamie lost the ability to think coherently.

"Thanks for bringing me here and making me watch this," Elliot was saying, and while Jamie heard the words, he was really more focused on the way Elliot's lips moved. "I... even with everything that's... with me being maybe... dirty. Fuck, Jamie. Just, thanks. You're so..." Elliot sighed, and Jamie was ready, more than ready, to repeat the days and nights he'd spent with the guy. Again. And possibly again.

"You're so damned understanding," Elliot went on, his lips twitching into a small smile. "It's like we're... I don't know." A sheepish gaze. "I'm really glad I'm here, though. I was going crazy back in Wentworth. Jim and Mike... yeah, they're my friends. Friends I'll never sleep with in anything but the actual *sleeping* way. But with you... I don't know. It's like I can tell you anything and you'll just listen. I mean, we're friends now, too, but it's... different."

Jesus, Jamie hoped so. Then Elliot leaned closer, that strong body just pressing against him, and Jamie thought he might explode... or die.

"I still feel so... used," Elliot said then. "Like...having Linden come inside me after the condom broke makes me... soiled, as my momma would say. It doesn't matter that he didn't know, Jamie. I know. I can still... Fuck, I can still feel it. His come. It... dripped down my leg when he pulled out of me."

The worst part about it wasn't that Elliot was thinking about it again, but that his voice was so matter of fact, Jamie realized. Like Elliot was talking about the weather or something.

The movie ceased to exist for Jamie then, and he just knew he was staring at Elliot like the man had suddenly grown three heads. "Jesus, El, that's..." Too much information? Scary because Elliot seemed so stoic, all of a sudden? Christ, Jamie didn't know. Didn't know what to say, either, but he had to say something. Anything.

"That's fucked up," was what came out of his mouth, and he actually saw Elliot's eyes turn just a little bit ashamed. "That you have to remember it so clearly," he added, though he wasn't sure of where the words had come from. "I'd take that from you if I could." He meant it, too, Jamie realized. Elliot was so young. Too young to have memories like that lingering in his head every time he looked at another guy, whether that guy was Jamie or someone in a bar.

At least the shame was gone when Elliot answered. Jamie consoled himself that he'd at least done that much right.

"I'll get over it," Elliot said softly, nodding with a certainty Jamie couldn't understand. "Once I test okay, I'll get over it. If I'm clean, I can't be dirty, right?" And God bless Elliot's logic, because while it might be simple, it was true, in its way. It was also a damned fine opening for what Jamie had been thinking about for the last little while.

"Tell you what, El. I'll call my doctor. He can do a test and tell you -- in a day or two -- what your whole health situation is. Even with starting things on a Sunday." And that was true. It would cost him, of course, but Jamie didn't care about that. His friend, patient, possible regular casual whatever... Elliot, in any case, was hurting. If spending a few hundred bucks, or more, would make that pain go away sooner, then it would be money well spent. "Please, El," Jamie said, "Let me do this for you."

He actually *felt* Elliot's body relax against him. Felt the long, hard sigh push from Elliot as a shrug. Jamie even felt it when Elliot's head barely nodded, his short hair brushing Jamie's cheek a little bit.

"Good," Jamie replied with a relieved smile. "I just need to call him, okay?"

It was easier to get up from the couch than it was to dial the number. Stanley might be his doctor, but Jamie had never asked him for special favors before. Still, in this case, he was willing.

It felt like hours, but it couldn't have been more than twenty minutes before Stanley was agreeing to swing by the next day and draw some blood from Elliot... and from Jamie, as well. Because even if Jamie hadn't broken a condom with Elliot -- or anyone else in ages -- he was still overdue for a test. It had been two years since his last one, which Jamie hadn't realized until Stanley had told him.

Of course, he hadn't had sex in all that time, except with Elliot, and they'd been *very* safe, so... Jamie wasn't worried. He was clean. He was almost completely sure that *Elliot* was clean, too, regardless of the broken latex. And even if Stanley's tests somehow showed Elliot as having contracted... well, anything... they'd figure out what to do about it, fix it, or... Jamie wasn't going to think about that. Not unless he had to.

Fortunately, it wasn't that much of a possibility. Sure, Linden could have been lying to Elliot, but Jamie still doubted it. And even if that bastard had had something without knowing it... well, that was another thing for the "think about it later if he had to" file.

Elliot would test negative. He would. And Jamie would simply smile and say that he'd known it all along. Then Elliot would go back to Wentworth, and Jamie would miss him, sure... but he knew they'd keep in touch this time.

Hell, Jamie was pretty sure he'd end up knowing more about Elliot's love life than he'd ever wanted to. When it didn't involve *him*, anyway.

"Tomorrow, El," Jamie said as he returned to the couch and pulled Elliot against his side once more. "He'll be here tomorrow afternoon, and we'll give some blood... then there's this really cool rock thing at the Museum of Science. Oh, and Vincent said the special at McGinty's tomorrow night is rack of lamb. Interested?"

God help him, Jamie thought, but he was still half hard. Talking about diseases and blood and worrying that Elliot was depressed hadn't changed that.

God.

Chapter Five

Well, Elliot decided as he pulled away from the curb, the boxes of Mike's shit barely filling the back seat, at least he knew a few things now. The most important of which was... Linden either wasn't infected with anything or Elliot had one hell of an immune system. His test -- tests, actually, because Jamie's friend Stan had decided to run a full spectrum analysis of Elliot's blood -- hadn't shown anything bad, aside from a slight case of anemia. Not even enough to require iron supplements, because Stan had merely recommended that Elliot eat more dark, leafy greens and as much red meat as he could stand, the rarer, the better.

That was an incredible weight lifted from his shoulders, of course, and Elliot couldn't be anything other than grateful for it, but at the same time, he was... sad, he supposed.

Sad to be leaving Boston, leaving Jamie, when there'd been no time for just hanging out without fear looming in Elliot's mind. And disappointed that, by the time Stan had the results for him, it had been time to leave. There had been no chance to follow up on Jamie's surprising offer a few days earlier.

"Of course, I didn't even tell him that I was thinking about it, did I? I cried in front of him, acted like a fucking idiot. Jesus. And I leaned on him. Told him I was soiled. Then I talked about come leaking out of my ass, for fuck's sake. Hell, he must be thrilled that I'm actually gone, after all that." And yeah, that was true enough. Elliot hadn't exactly been the best company. Hadn't been able to figure himself out, much less Jamie. It was... confusing, Elliot realized. *Jamie* was confusing. He didn't know what the man wanted. Not really.

First with the sex, back at Jim and Mike's place. Then the no contact. Then Jamie showing up at Mike's *old* place and acting like Elliot's happiness actually mattered.

The tours of the city, the joking around. Then introducing Elliot to Jamie's friends when they ran into them... Jamie taking him to places that were obviously *Jamie's*, just as the club in Wentworth was one of Elliot's places... Jamie paying Stan however much the man charged for emergency weekend blood work. And, of course, the incredibly uncomfortable moments the day before, when Elliot and Jamie had run into Jamie's Dad-and-pseudo-Dad at Sparks, the two older men sitting having a coffee when he and Jamie had walked in.

Yeah, Elliot thought with a snort. That had been fun. Like having a tooth pulled without anesthetic. Hell, he'd nearly been able to *see* the disappointment in Russell's and David's eyes, and he'd had a strong feeling, even then, that they were comparing him to Mike and finding him to be entirely lacking.

It shouldn't bother him, he knew, because he and Jamie were really just friends. And, okay, they were friends who'd had sex more than a few times, but they weren't dating or anything. Sure, Elliot thought there would be more of the fucking the next time he saw Jamie, but he for damned sure hadn't gotten around to telling Jamie yet. So there couldn't have been anything in the way Jamie was acting to clue the Dads to their non-relationship. So, yeah. Elliot was pretty sure that they'd hoped for another Michael.

But Elliot wasn't Michael. He would never be Michael. Hell, he would never be anything like Mike at all. He didn't even want to be. Mike was an entirely different animal, so to speak.

Mike was... well, he was just Mike, and that made him perfect for Jim. Possibly made Michael perfect for Jamie, too, but Mike had made his choice, which apparently still bothered Jamie's Dads. That was no reason for them to be rude to *him*, though, Elliot decided for probably the fiftieth time.

Sadly, while that was undoubtedly true, it hadn't kept Jamie from dropping him off at Mike's old apartment and driving off with a vague promise of calling "sometime soon."

"He'll call," Elliot reminded himself, speaking out loud again. "We're really friends now, not just former... or not so former... fuck-buddies. Hell, he ran around in that stupid hat with me and played with fake swords. We *must* be friends. He didn't even call me on it when I said that ridiculous shit about the Liberty Bell and the Declaration. And he said he wants me again, so he'll call, just like he said." And yeah. It was kind of weird how admitting that to the whirring fan of the car's air conditioning made him feel better.

He forced that thought away and turned on the radio, sighing as he'd done on the drive up when he remembered that Trish's old shit-box of a car was mechanically sound but entirely lacking in extras, by which Elliot meant even a CD player. He would have to make do with FM, though there wouldn't be a decent country station available for another hundred or so miles.

Still, he'd live... and now that he knew he was okay, he'd *really* live.

He laughed softly, making a mental note to tell Jamie when they talked next, and Elliot didn't know it, but he was grinning ear to ear as he sped on down the highway.

It was more than two weeks before Jamie was able to call Elliot, and by the time he did, he was fully convinced that El wouldn't answer, or worse yet, would simply take the call and announce, "Leave me alone, you jackass." He deserved either action.

It wasn't that he hadn't wanted to call, either. It was just... God, Dad and David had been all over him since that unfortunate meeting at the coffee shop.

"He's not your type, Jamie." "He's too young for you." "I know how guys like that enjoy playing around, Jamie, and believe me, he's nowhere near settling down." And Jamie's personal favorite, "He'll never be the kind of man Michael is."

Well, duh, Jamie had told himself at least a hundred times since Elliot left. Elliot and Michael were nothing alike. Never had been and never would be. But that was irrelevant. They were both his friends. And Michael was happy with Jim, which...

On the one hand, Jamie found it incredibly sweet that Dad and David really thought Michael would be better off with *him*. On the other, it sort of made him wonder whether they really thought as highly of Michael as they thought they did. Wouldn't they have respected Michael's decision if they'd really believed Michael was the strong sort of man they'd always suggested?

And didn't it basically imply that they thought Jamie was somehow lacking in common sense when they ignored his explanations about his relationship with Elliot? Because, sure, Jamie had a strong appreciation for Elliot's body and looks. He even admired how straightforward Elliot was. But he for damned sure wasn't trying to claim Elliot as the love of his life. They were just friends who'd had some naked, sweaty fun, once upon a time, and that part of things was over. Elliot had made that more than clear when he hadn't invited Jamie up that last night, or ever even acknowledged what Jamie had said out on the street that Saturday.

But he hadn't really had time to think about it, because the Dads had been keeping Jamie busy, deliberately pressing him into service for their sudden and suspiciously urgent renewing of the vows. They'd decided to do it officially this time, even though they'd always acted as though their "wedding" fifteen years earlier were legal and binding. Jamie was supposed to be David's best man, while his sister Alicia was going to be Dad's "best person."

The whole fiasco had kept Jamie tied up and insane for weeks, especially when added to his work and the constant grilling from the Dads when Jamie wasn't out actively pursuing a cake that could be had within six weeks from their announcement, the right tailor, the best caterer who might be available... and God help him, but if he had to listen to another crappy DJ try to spin Eighties music while still trying to be *cool*, Jamie just might shoot himself. And as a psychologist, that was saying a lot about his mental state.

So he was stressed and short on sleep and just anxious to have it all done with. And he wanted to talk to Elliot, damn it. Hell, he hadn't even left the guy voice mail, he'd been so busy.

He'd also been a little bit afraid, Jamie admitted to himself as he pushed the buttons on his phone. Because it was one thing for a guy like Elliot -- a self-admitted slut, of sorts -- to declare real friendship while scared and at least partially convinced that he was going to get sick and die. It was an entirely different thing for that same young, hot, and hung man to still mean it once the relief of finding out he was wrong about the bad parts had passed.

Hell, Jamie told himself yet again, Elliot had probably forgotten all about him. Was likely to be - he looked at the clock and sighed at the bright red 10:04 displayed there -- Elliot was likely to be at that club of his, spread out for whichever stud had caught his eye. He almost didn't call,

even, he was so sure of it. So... disappointed by the idea, for whatever reason. Unless he'd expected Elliot's close call to open the kid's eyes, which... yeah. Stupid, since Jamie had already told Elliot that he wanted to fuck some more. But that was different, he told himself. He wasn't some stranger, and Elliot had to know that Jamie could be trusted, and...

And he was being an idiot, Jamie realized. Of course Elliot was getting around. It was in his nature, after all. It was one of the things that had appealed to Jamie in the first place. And Elliot did play a lot, but he always played safe. "Except when fucking assholes sabotage condoms," Jamie reminded himself, while making a mental note to have El take him to that club the next time Jamie was in Wentworth. He had an ass to kick, after all. And he was possibly not in the best mood to call Elliot, Jamie thought, but he pushed the green button, and the phone was ringing, and he could leave a message, he decided. Just "Hey, sorry it's been a while, but..."

"Well, where the fuck have *you* been, asswipe? Because the last time I checked, calling 'soon' meant something more like a couple of days, not nearly a fucking *month*!" And oh... Elliot's words were angry, but that voice sounded pleased.

It was enough to have Jamie forgetting all about his hypothesis of moments earlier. There was no loud music in the background. No voices raised to be heard, really. Just the soft murmur of... women? And beyond that, in fact... Jamie's brow furrowed slightly as he made out the voice of an actor he was familiar with, and... "Christ, it's Thursday! Tell me that's not a *new* episode of *Boiling Point*!"

Then Elliot was laughing smugly, and Jamie knew it was. And he was missing it, which sucked... and he hadn't even known Elliot watched the show, for God's sake!

"Hell," he sighed, ignoring Elliot's chuckles. "Guess that proves it's not just you I've been neglecting. Um, I meant to call sooner, but the Dads..." And there was something incredibly heartwarming about the way Elliot listened and made the appropriate noises as Jamie recounted his trials with getting the wedding plans together. Especially since the Dads hadn't even tried to be welcoming to Elliot when they'd met him. David more than Dad, but still.

"Sounds like you've got a full plate," Elliot said after a while. "I guess I can forgive you for slacking off on phone calls. And... I guess I could have called you, but it was your turn, y'know?"

Then Elliot was laughing again, and Jamie almost got worried. "So does this mean you'll be calling Mike again sometime soon? Because Jim's starting to get all comfortable, and I know you don't want that. Or I don't, anyway. It's *way* too much fun to watch him getting all puffed up and he-manly after you talk to Mike." A small silence. "Well, you know. Until he drags Mike off to bed, which is when I usually have to find something else to do. Like the club."

God, Jamie could hear the wink in Elliot's voice, and that was just too bizarre. Too comfortable. Then again, wasn't that what friends did? They knew each other well enough that they could talk and understand each other's meaning. Most of the time, anyway.

"So is there anything I can do to help?" Elliot was going on, and it actually took Jamie a moment or two to realize that he meant about the wedding. "I mean... I know I'm hours away and all, but if you need a place to hide or something, or even some research, just let me know, okay? I'm pretty good with the Internet."

Jamie rolled his eyes, even though he knew Elliot wouldn't be able to see it. In fact, he was glad of that part. "Unless you know a florist who isn't booked solid and can deliver amazing arrangements in less than a month, El, then just having you be my connection to sanity is help enough." He sighed, fully expecting a change of subject.

"What's your budget?" was what Elliot said then, instead of moving on, and that just stunned Jamie for a moment. "And what kind of flowers are you looking for? Oh, and you can stop rolling your eyes at me. I might work in a gym, but I actually do know other people, y'know."

Well, damn. Just damn, Jamie thought with a grin. Apparently Elliot knew him better than he'd thought.

And just as obviously, Jamie thought a good half hour or so later, his phone closed in his hand and his eyes wide as he stared sightlessly at his kitchen wall, he didn't know Elliot nearly as well as he'd assumed. He hadn't expected Elliot's closing words at all. Not even slightly.

"Uh, by the way, Jamie," Elliot had said, "I'm feeling better now. So any time you want to 'um, you know'...? I'm not saying no. Bye."

Jesus.

"Hey, man," Elliot said, hating voice mail, but well aware of just how busy Jamie was. "I was just thinking about you. I mean, Chandra had some cool ideas for the flowers, and... oh, fuck it. I was just sitting here watching football, and Jim and Mike are out on some so-called date. And what the fuck is that all about? I mean, they're together, right? So why in the hell are they dating, and on football night, too? It fucking sucks."

He sighed and shook his head at himself. "Anyway, I was just calling to see what you were up to, but since you're not answering I'm guessing Russell and David are keeping you busy. Or else *you* have a date and didn't tell me." Elliot grunted into the phone. "You'd better not, man. Because that's the kind of thing friends tell each other about before they go out on them. I want all the details of whoever you're seeing."

And that was true, Elliot knew. Jamie was a nice guy, after all. He shouldn't be out there dating just... whoever. No, Jamie deserved someone just as nice and smart and white-collar as *he* was. And as Jamie's friend, Elliot for damned sure deserved to know who Jamie was seeing. Especially if they were going to be getting down and dirty -- in the good way -- when Elliot made it up to Boston again.

He frowned slightly and adjusted his cock in his boxers, shifting the half-wood to a more comfortable position while deliberately *not* giving himself a good, long stroke. Jamie would probably hear the sound he would make, after all, and the last thing Elliot needed was to have the man calling him back and wondering why Elliot wasn't out at the club if he was so horny.

It was because of the strong, athletic men on the TV, anyway, Elliot reminded himself, even though there wasn't a single one of them that was anything like as hot as Jamie. Besides, it was Monday night. The club was never fun on Mondays.

Then the familiar strains of the return music sounded, and Elliot breathed a huge but silent sigh of relief.

"So... call me back when you can. Um, commercial's over, so I'm gonna go. Later, man."

"Hi," Jamie said, grinning when Elliot actually answered the phone. Of course, Jamie had timed the call for when he was fairly sure Elliot would be available, so it was less of a surprise than it might have been otherwise. "How's it going, El?"

He heard Elliot snort, and that just made Jamie laugh.

"Going?" Another snort. "It's not. If by 'it' you mean something other than work, anyway." And yeah, Elliot even sounded kind of frustrated. Bored, maybe. But not with him, Jamie was somehow sure.

"You'd think spring would be the busy time at the gym, what with summer being bathing suit season and all, but no..." Elliot went on, and Jamie settled himself on the couch, prepared for a good long rant. He loved it when Elliot just sort of... let go with him.

"Can somebody please tell me why all the fucking gym-queens get so psycho once the weather starts to actually be bearable? Because I've been booked solid -- more than solid, even, meaning an extra three sessions a day -- for the last week. It sucks. Badly. And the fact that it was the same last year doesn't make it suck any better."

God, there was something just too damned appealing about the irritation in Elliot's voice, but Jamie would never say so. Instead he just chuckled and shook his head to himself. "You ever think it's maybe because they'll have to wear more clothes when it's cooler out? Clothes can be bulky, so it makes sense that they'd want to look all... toned and pumped under the layers, right?" And maybe Jamie was blushing, even if it had been years since he'd held that opinion himself.

Elliot was nearly silent for close to a minute, the only sounds reaching Jamie's ears through the phone being the slow, steady breaths. Then "Okay, that makes a weird kind of sense, I guess. So. Speaking of clothes, what are you wearing?"

He could almost hear Elliot's eyebrows wagging at him, so Jamie laughed and ran his free hand lightly over his cotton-covered chest as he lied. "Oh, you know. Boxers... the usual." Because there was no way he would ever tell Elliot that he was sitting on his couch in a T-shirt and jeans on a work day. He'd also never say that he'd been at half-mast since before Elliot had even answered.

"How are things going at the club?" Jamie added after a moment. "That bastard's not still giving you problems, is he?"

Elliot snorted yet again, and Jamie grinned. His friend had the most expressive snorts ever. This particular one almost shouted annoyance and disdain and resentment.

"No... not what I'd call 'problems,'" Elliot told him a moment later. "I mean, okay. He still takes a shot every once in a while, but he hasn't been pushing his luck or anything. Hell, he hasn't followed me into the back for... weeks, thank fucking Christ."

"Good," Jamie said with a smile, his hand still roaming his chest, fingers rubbing roughly over a covered nipple with every few passes. "If he starts that up again..."

"Tell the bouncers," Elliot interrupted him, and yeah. It actually *was* possible to hear someone's eyes rolling over the phone, and Elliot wasn't the only one who could do it, Jamie thought with a grin. Interesting. "Yes, Mom," Elliot added, even his voice smiling. "So, anything new in the land of cakes and DJs?"

A good fifteen minutes of random conversation later, Jamie was saying good night. "Try not to stress over the job, El," he offered. "Just keep reminding yourself that you like what you do, okay? Because it'll settle down soon, and you know it."

Elliot sighed, and Jamie smiled. "Yeah. Yeah, I know, Jamie," Elliot said, then Elliot's voice went softer, darker somehow, and Jamie nearly shivered. "Hey, Jamie?" Elliot went on, rumbling into the phone, "Could you do me a favor?"

"Um... sure?" Christ, he was sweating, just from that tone.

"Good. Because it'd be really cool if the next time we talked, you actually were wearing boxers, man. You sound different when you're next thing to naked. Night, Jamie."

Oh, damn. Damn. "Um, okay. Sorry, I... I'll call again in a few days. Night, El."

That was about his minimum, Jamie had come to realize. He just didn't feel... right, if he didn't talk to Elliot at least twice a week. But how in the hell had Elliot known he was dressed? And... how could he sound different just because of jeans and a T-shirt, for God's sake?

"Christ."

Chapter Six

Three days before the "wedding," Elliot was getting nervous. Fuck, he was getting nervous enough that Jim and Michael had teased him about acting like it was his own wedding rather than Russell and David's.

That was entirely stupid, of course, and Elliot was pretty sure they knew it, too. He was just... worried.

So was Chandra, for that matter, because the woman had been designing -- on paper -- the floral arrangements she would be doing in two days for *weeks*, now. Of course, when she wasn't vibrating with nerves, she was solid as a rock and completely thrilled to be acting as florist for a wedding. Even a wedding in Boston that wouldn't do anything for her, aside from putting a few thousand dollars in her bank account.

It was Jamie's Dads, after all, so it wouldn't be a society event that might drum up some business. Not even in Massachusetts. Even so, Chandra was thrilled with the opportunity, and even more so when Elliot had managed to arrange a couple days off to deliver the arrangements, then bring back the vases that Chandra had gotten on loan from one of Trish's friends who owned an art gallery.

So Chandra was worried that her floral designs might not be good enough, but Elliot knew they were. Fuck, the woman had skills with flowers and plants that were downright mystical to him. That had nothing to do with Elliot's own worries. In fact, Chandra's concerns were so far away from Elliot's, they were in an entirely different zip code.

He was going back to Boston, six weeks after he'd left.

He was going to see Jamie and hopefully make Jamie's Dads' wedding more beautiful with Chandra's flowers.

He was going to arrive somewhere between noon and two p.m., assuming the universe didn't hate him, which Elliot didn't think it did at the moment, and he'd get everything set up wherever Jamie told him to, and that was fine.

The problem was the vases.

They needed to come back to Wentworth, to Trish's friend Delia's art gallery. And that meant Elliot couldn't just drop them -- and the flowers arranged inside them -- and leave. He had to

stay. In fact, he had to stay and keep a close eye on the vases, make sure none of them got broken or damaged in any way.

That was why he'd had to rent a tuxedo, for fuck's sake.

Not because he'd been invited to the wedding. Not because he was friends with -- or even thought of kindly by -- either of the grooms, but because he had to babysit a bunch of fucking *vases*.

Jamie's Dads were sure to see him, and Elliot knew it. They were also sure to turn up their so well-bred noses at him and sniff or something, just to show how much they objected to him being even a friend of Jamie's. Well, that David one would. Elliot hadn't gotten that much of a disgusted vibe from Jamie's actual Dad.

It was still going to piss Elliot off, though. He could tell. But it was a wedding, not a wrestling match, hopefully, and he was going to be there to make sure shit *didn't* get busted up, and Jim and Mike would be there, too -- because they'd actually been *invited* -- and...

And it was Jamie's Dads, Elliot reminded himself yet again. He would somehow manage to be polite... and as well-mannered as he could. Which, granted, wasn't much.

Fuck, he needed to call Jamie. Again. For probably the twentieth time in the last six days.

"You'll be fine," Jamie announced, answering the call without the unnecessary "hello," which had Elliot smiling. "You'll get the flowers here, you have the tux... you did get the tux today, right? Because you know those rental places can lose things and..."

Elliot snorted into the phone. "I'm picking it up tomorrow. They cuffed the pants too short. Tell me again why I'm doing this?" And yeah, he was begging with the question.

"Because you're saving my ass, El. I didn't even think about flowers until that night when I was talking to you. Alicia hadn't thought of it, either, and by the time she did, everyone in town was booked. I was just lucky that you had Chandra and that she could work it out."

"Yeah," Elliot agreed, grinning. "Jim and Mike's lesbians rock. Besides, they like you, Jamie. They're giving you all the credit for getting 'their boys' back together. Um, I did tell you about the vases, right? Because I'm sort of responsible for them and..."

Jamie was laughing. "Yes," he said, and Elliot could just tell that the guy was rolling his eyes. Jamie seemed to do that a lot. "And you sent me pictures in my e-mail a few days ago. I understand why Trish's friend is so paranoid." Then Jamie paused, and Elliot knew the man was thinking. Probably had his brow furrowed and everything, which was actually a good look on Jamie and pretty damned hot... and Elliot wasn't thinking about that, damn it. Not when he was still in Wentworth and had days to go before seeing the real thing. No matter how close they'd come to phone sex over the last month, he wanted to see Jamie, damn it. In person.

"I know it's kind of last minute and all," Jamie added, "but maybe you should see about getting a price list for the vases. They're, um... stunning." Jamie's cough told Elliot that he was being facetious, but that was fine. "It's entirely possible that some of the guests will become attached to them. They'll sell even faster if the Dads' friends know the person who brought them is my..." And suddenly Jamie sounded uncomfortable. "Um, I guess I should ask you. It's just... we're both going to be there anyway, so would you mind if I told people that you're my, um... 'very good friend'? I mean, I talk to you more than anyone else now, and it would really take the pressure off."

Okay, weird. But not *bad* weird. Just... weird. "Uh, we really are friends, Jamie. I... right?" Because suddenly -- with that wording of Jamie's -- Elliot wasn't so sure. "If we're not friends, then I don't know what we are and that would just suck beyond the telling of it and... Sorry. What?"

The explanation was simple. So simple that Elliot started wondering whether there was an entire code language out there that he didn't know about. Or worse, a code that he didn't know, but that everyone assumed he *did*.

That was something to think about later, though, because Jamie was waiting and "Fuck, yeah. If it'll help you out, I don't care if people think I'm your out-of-town boyfriend. It's not like we won't be fucking while I'm there, anyway. Uh, we are gonna be fucking, right? And I'll get that price list, if you really think your Dad's friends will want to buy those freaky vases. They all look like cocks with big... top-holes." Then he stopped, replayed his own words and blushed. "Okay. Ignore that. I'll get prices. You start exercising your lips. Because if we're gonna make people think we're together, there's gonna have to be a whole lot of kissing. In public, man." And fuck, Elliot was looking forward to it.

He hadn't gotten laid since Linden, after all, which wasn't to say that he hadn't done some laying. He missed the *getting* laid, though. And he knew Jamie was clean. Knew for a fact that if they were in the middle of things and something *broke*, Jamie would stop. And if he didn't, by which Elliot meant if the breaking happened at the exploding, then at least he *knew*.

And that was the moment when Elliot realized that he wasn't nervous about the vases or Jamie's Dads. He was nervous about *Jamie*. He wanted Jamie, sure. He'd known that much since he'd first seen the guy. He'd known that he wanted Jamie to be the one to make him forget about Linden, which he'd just come to realize was the reason he'd restricted himself to pitching for the last six weeks. It hadn't been about trust, exactly, but about trusting *Jamie*.

He hadn't realized how much he was counting on feeling the way he'd felt that first weekend, when Mike had come back to Jim. But he was. So much that he thought he might choke on it. But Jamie was laughing softly into the phone right then, and Elliot forced himself to pay attention.

"I don't really have a problem with that," Jamie murmured. "I always loved kissing you, El. You have a great mouth, from what I can recall. So we'll make it look good for the family and friends

when you remind me. They'll stop throwing single guys at me. We'll fuck like crazed weasels, you'll sell off those hideous vases, and everyone wins."

Not everyone, Elliot told himself a few hours later, pulling the Boston dildo from his body and pretending he didn't hear the soft sounds of Jim and Mike settling after their own bout of sex in the room next door.

Not everyone would win with Jamie's scenario. Fuck, Elliot for damned sure wouldn't. Or not for long, anyway.

Because Jamie wanted something permanent and real, eventually. Elliot knew that much. They'd talked about it, after all. Just as conversation, not as something they would ever do together. Elliot had actually felt a little bit shallow when Jamie asked what he was looking for because his own answer -- "a big, thick cock, good body, nice smile and no demands" -- had seemed so petty when followed by Jamie's list of "a good heart, smart, funny... good looking, of course, and hung like a bull, but someone who wants me, El. Just me, you know? Like what my Dads have, as cheesy as it sounds."

It was a way better list than his own. Of course, Jamie was older, wanted different things. And eventually, Elliot knew, Jamie would find exactly what he was looking for. Until then, though... well, they would play when they were in the same town. And the sex...

God, the sex had been amazing. It was just right when Jamie was plowing into him; Elliot remembered it vividly. It was likely to be just as good, if not better, this time. But not perfect, damn it, because as much as Elliot liked to catch, he liked to pitch, too, and that wasn't Jamie's thing.

He hadn't actually tried during those days that he and Jamie had been doing the casual, no-holds-barred thing, but fuck knew Elliot had never been shy about wanting to get reamed, so if that was something Jamie enjoyed, Elliot figured the man would have just said so. And he hadn't.

So as much as Elliot liked Jamie's cock -- as much as he liked *Jamie* -- there was no way he could even begin to think about something serious with a guy who only topped... and lived in *Boston*.

He would never begin to think about something *serious*, Elliot reminded himself harshly. With *anyone*. No matter whether they liked to pitch or catch or both. No matter where they lived. Too much work, not enough fun. It was his mantra, of sorts, where relationships were concerned. Yeah.

He could still fake it for Jamie's Dads' wedding, though... and while he pretty much knew that just being there as Jamie's fake date would make the two older men hate him even more than they already did, it was worth it.

Jamie wanted him there, after all, and Elliot tried never to let a friend down. And yes, he was happy about the good he might be able to do for his friends in Wentworth, what with the flowers and vases. Elliot was happy to be helping out. Even if it was Jamie's need that really mattered.

That was what friends were for, after all. Helping each other out. Not fantasizing about relationships that would never happen and that Elliot didn't want, anyway. Sex, sure; especially with Jamie. But a relationship?

Yeah, right. Not so much.

Well, this whole thing was turning out to be a huge mess.

Not the wedding itself, granted, but the rest of it, the parts that mattered to Jamie? Oh, those were already what he knew Elliot would call a cluster-fuck.

First Jim had been called in to work because some college kid who'd been working part time was "sick," which Jamie translated as meaning hung over, which meant Michael had ridden to Boston in the van with Elliot. Amazingly, they were both alive when they'd finally gotten there.

Then Michael had dropped one of the vases of flowers, though it hadn't broken, thank God. It had still left Jamie to try to run interference between an anxious Elliot and a defensive Michael for a good three hours while the floral arrangements were placed in the tent behind the Dads' house to Jamie's satisfaction... which in this case really meant his sister Alicia's satisfaction.

The flowers themselves were so far beyond what either Jamie or Alicia had been expecting that... well, that was the one good part of the entire day, as far as Jamie was concerned, because it was only minutes after things were set that Elliot and Michael discovered that one of the vases had sprung a leak during the drive. The water had seeped through the plastic covering their tuxedos, and Jim's, and now all three suits, along with the shirts and cummerbunds, were damp and a little bit stained where they'd brushed the floor of the van.

Michael blamed Elliot, of course, while Elliot thought Michael was being a prissy little bitch. Jamie knew that much because neither man had been shy about saying so. Loudly. And with more swear words than Jamie had thought Michael knew.

Add in the fact that the Dads had come running almost gleefully at the sound of all the commotion and had immediately come down on Michael's side of the argument before insisting that both Michael and Elliot stay in their spare rooms -- and Jim, when he arrived on the train later that night -- and Jamie was willing to state boldly and for the record that the whole event was turning into a huge nightmare. For him, anyway.

Fortunately, Jamie knew everyone involved pretty damned well. Even Alicia, who had -- smart, lucky girl that she was -- bowed out and run off as soon as things had started to get *really* loud.

He knew that the Dads and Michael would get more and more intense, but not louder... and he knew exactly how much of that "stuck up, reserved shit" Elliot could take before exploding in a display of exceedingly violent and vicious four letter words that would only convince the Dads that they'd been right about him from the start.

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Jamie finally snapped, and yeah. He'd been right. Saying "fuck" had actually shut them all up. It was highly unusual for him, after all. "I know we're all acting on nerves and adrenaline! I know you've been cooped up in a van with Michael for hours, Elliot. And Michael, you know I adore you, but Elliot didn't make the damned vases *or* fill them with water for the trip, so it's not his fault!" And yeah, Michael looked a little bit embarrassed all of a sudden, and thank God the man was starting to think.

"It's not the end of the world. The wedding isn't until tomorrow afternoon. That's plenty of time to have the tuxedos dry cleaned. Hell, they'll be back here before noon if I drop them off on my way home and have them delivered. And as for *you*," Jamie added, directing a glare at Dad and David, "Elliot has gone out of his way to help out here. He's never been anything but respectful toward either of you. Um, mostly. So I don't see any need to punish him by making him stay here. By which I mean, *Dads*, that Elliot and I will be just fine at my place while you two play host to Michael and Jim. Because seriously? You're not the only ones who are fucking stressed! Got it?"

Okay, maybe he hadn't actually planned to say all that, but Jamie wasn't sorry. Couldn't be when the Dads were looking just a tiny bit ashamed and Michael was actually apologizing to Elliot.

"Good," Jamie added. "And it's still early, so I'm going to take Elliot... away from here. I promised you a steak last time we talked, didn't I?" he asked, looking at Elliot this time.

There was brief moment of silence, but then Elliot was grinning, eyes sparkling as he nodded. "You did, man," he answered, agreeing with the fiction. "McGinty's again?"

Jamie couldn't help laughing, even as he nodded. "Oh, you know it. Vincent would never forgive me if I didn't bring 'Mr. Hot-body' in while you're in town. And trust me, he'd know." He chuckled softly. "I don't know *how* he'd know, but he would." Actually, Jamie did know. His assistant Angela never could keep her mouth shut.

"Well, we can't have that," Elliot replied, eyes still twinkling, and just like that, it was as though the last however many weeks had never happened. Like Elliot had been there the whole time.

Jamie wasn't entirely sure of how they took their leave. In fact, he was only aware of the fact that they had when he found himself in his car with Elliot in the passenger seat beside him and a hook full of tuxedos in the back. It was all a blur of "see you later" and "be careful" and "thank you, son"... and it was only ten or so blocks later that Jamie realized the "be careful" part had come from Michael... and hadn't had anything to do with driving. Huh.

The surprising thing to Elliot was just how easy it was. He'd sort of thought it would be harder, but it just... wasn't. No, it was easy as pie to pretend he didn't want to go directly to Jamie's house where they could get naked and go at it. It wasn't all about sex, damn it. They were friends, too.

So he just stayed in the car while Jamie dropped off the tuxes, then held his hands folded in his lap while they drove off toward the restaurant. And all the while, he and Jamie carried on a conversation, getting more into the details of things they'd talked about on the phone over the last while.

Elliot found out that the real reason Jamie hadn't gone out with the guy from the caterer's was because the man had terrible breath, though Jamie admitted that anyone who spent their days tasting escargot and liver pate wasn't likely to smell all minty fresh. Still, Elliot agreed that he would have made the same call. If the man's breath had smelled bad, he didn't even want to think about what it would have been like for Jamie to kiss him.

Elliot shared some of the details of the hot little pretty from a few nights before, including the weird thing the guy had done with his hips while they'd been dancing, which had been hot, sure. But strange. No human should be quite that flexible.

They laughed loudly when they drove down the street where they'd "performed" their first street-theater, and Jamie blushed but admitted that he still had their hats and swords in a closet at his place. Elliot insisted that they drag them out later, and Jamie didn't really object.

Jamie told him about the most recent weirdness from work -- without violating anybody's privacy, of course -- which involved a couple who'd brought their teenage son to Jamie in order to have the boy "turned straight." They apparently thought Jamie had done just that for a different boy, and they hadn't wanted to believe that the difference was within the boys themselves.

The first boy hadn't actually been gay. He'd merely been suffering from an extremely severe case of hero worship and had mistaken it for love. It hadn't even taken long for that boy to figure it out for himself, once he'd started sessions with Jamie.

The other boy, however... well, the couple simply didn't want to believe that their pride and joy wasn't interested in girls. They refused to even entertain the notion that their child could be "deviant," as they'd called it.

Fuck, Elliot pitied that kid. He'd been there himself, after all. Except... for him, it had been in Frederick, Alabama, and when he'd told his folks that he thought he might be like his brother Travis, they hadn't rushed him straight to some high-priced shrink. They'd given him three hours to pack his shit, and his dad had already been on the phone with Earl's Lock and Feed. Presumably just in case Elliot had a spare key hidden somewhere. Christ.

"Did he know you're gay? The boy, I mean. The second one," Elliot found himself asking, and he was honestly curious. Jamie would be a damned good role model for any gay kid who was just

figuring out what he was. Hell, Elliot only wished there'd been someone like Jamie in Frederick, except if there had been, whoever it was would probably have been so deep in the closet that he'd have smelled of moth balls.

Jamie chuckled wryly and shook his head, eyes pasted firmly to the road. "Only if he figured it out on his own, El. The last thing any therapist does is share personal information with their clients. It's unprofessional. Not to mention, in this case? If I'd told him I was gay and he'd told his parents? That's got lawsuit written all over it, what with me not turning their bundle of joy into a strapping, skirt-chasing he-man. Poor kid's going to have a rough time of it."

And Elliot had just been thinking the same thing, so he couldn't even argue, as much as he wanted to. "Remind me to pick you up one of those 'Rainbow Recruiter' T-shirts I was telling you about, then. You can wear it while you're out seducing straight boys with your pretty cock."

Elliot winked, and Jamie laughed, and that was good. "Tell me Vincent doesn't really call me 'Mr. Hot-body.' Because that's just... embarrassing. True, but embarrassing." He winked again and got another laugh, and just like that? The tension and bit of sorrow that he'd seen in Jamie's profile melted away.

"Oh, he *so* does, El!" Jamie insisted, nodding emphatically. "And trust me, it's much better than what he started out calling you." But try as Elliot might, Jamie refused to tell, which was just... funny, but annoying, especially with the way Jamie was blushing.

Even worse, Vincent wouldn't tell him, either, once they got to McGinty's. The man did give them a free bottle of wine, though, so Elliot figured he'd try again later. Much later. Next time he and Jamie were there, maybe.

Chapter Seven

Dinner had been good, but then Jamie had known it would be. He always had a good time when he was with Elliot. Not always as good of a time as he'd like to, because that would involve a whole lot more naked skin, not to mention a few hundred condoms and about a gallon of lube... But yeah, Jamie always had fun with Elliot. Even when their conversations turned to serious things, it was good. Like now, when Elliot was just a little bit buzzed and partially collapsed on Jamie's couch while they digested their meals a bit.

"... so there I was, nineteen and so damned sure I would never be anything like my brother, y'know? And everyone supported that, even my folks. It wasn't like the whole damned town didn't know why Travis went off to the Army, right?"

Jamie just nodded and slouched a little, his eyes closing as Elliot's words washed over him. He wasn't saying a word himself, though. Mostly because he got the feeling that Elliot never talked about this, and God help him, but it made Jamie feel special that Elliot was sharing with *him*.

"Problem was," Elliot was saying, "every time I turned around, I couldn't help looking at all the hot bodies. And Frederick may be better known as Fred-neck even twenty miles away, but with as much as everyone has to work hard just to make ends meet? Well, there isn't a gym on earth that can compare. So I looked. Only after a while I noticed that I wasn't looking at Sheila and Tanya and Gretchen. I wasn't jerking off to the idea of one of the varsity cheerleaders going down on me. And okay, I was thinking about getting my dick wet, sure, but... let's just say Tom Avery down at the gas station would have shot me -- literally -- for the kind of workouts he was getting in my head."

Elliot paused then and cleared his throat. "I'm not boring you to death, am I?"

"Not even close," Jamie murmured, cracking his eyes open and rolling his head on the back of the couch to catch Elliot's gaze. "Just trying to picture it in my mind. You at nineteen, just starting to figure it all out. I bet you were adorable." He wagged his brows, offering up a small but sincere grin. "Tell me more."

Elliot snorted, but he still started speaking again.

"A couple years later, Momma and Daddy were starting to make noises. You know. 'You should be dating someone, Elliot. You're old enough to start thinking about settling down and starting a family of your own.' That kind of thing. Then Momma started sending girls around to my work. Uh, I was helping old man Hardesty out on his farm in the afternoons, but I was working at the Jiffy Mart out on route sixteen at night. So one minute it was just the usual, y'know? Guys

stopping by for beer and a dog, chips, maybe a doughnut... and next thing I knew it was like a fucking parade of every unmarried chick for three counties. Guess Momma told them I was a catch. And shy, too, because those were some bold fucking women, Jamie. Hell, Chrissy O'Connor flashed her tits at me one night and promised she'd show me more if I'd take her out to Burger Bonanza and spring for some of that wine in a box."

Elliot shuddered, but Jamie could see the little smile on his lips, so he let himself laugh softly. "Jesus," he agreed, "That's definitely what I'd call bold."

Elliot's nod was slow and serious all of a sudden, and that tiny grin was gone. "Yeah. So after three months of that kind of shit, I finally told Momma to stop. She didn't, though, and a few nights later, I got home from work and told her again. That time she asked me why... and like a dumbass, I told her. Next thing I knew, I was out on my ass. None of my friends would talk to me. I couldn't even get a room at the crappy motel outside town. They didn't serve 'my kind.' Thank fucking God that Travis gave me a place to stay. Who knows where I'd be if he hadn't?"

Nowhere good, was what Jamie was thinking, but he didn't bother to say it. Instead, he just raised his arm, letting the invitation speak for itself. He was glad, too, because a moment later he had a warm, solid body pressed up against his side. Elliot's hand was on Jamie's stomach, and while Jamie still felt the heat and interest in Elliot that they hadn't taken time to revisit yet, it also felt... nice. Good. Simple in a way he couldn't define or explain, even to himself. It just... was.

"Do you mind if I'm happy you *are*, El?" Jamie muttered a moment later. "Happy your brother took you in, happy you're here... happy you're gay?" Because he was, damn it. Even if Elliot's life would have been easier otherwise, Jamie was happy that Elliot liked men. After all, if he didn't, there was zero chance that Jamie would ever have met the guy, and Elliot was important to him, damn it.

Then Elliot was pulling away. Pulling away to look at him. To give him a stare that Jamie could only assume meant, "Are you insane, why would you be happy about my life being ruined?" But then those eyes were rolling and maybe it was okay. Maybe. Then it really was okay.

"Can you seriously picture me living in some double-wide with a wife named Wanda or something?" Elliot demanded. "Jesus, I'm twenty-four, Jamie. I'd have, like... three and a half kids by now, and maybe *one* of them would look like me. This..."

He shrugged, and Jamie swallowed hard at the sincerity of Elliot's expression. "This was probably harder in the short run, y'know? But trying to spend the rest of my life like *that*?" Elliot shook his head slowly. "That would have killed me. Or made me wish I was dead. So, yeah. You can be happy. Fuck knows, I am. Even with losing everyone but Travis and Jim, I'm happy, too, Jamie. Right here, right now, I'm happy."

Then that strong, solid weight was against his side again, and Jamie couldn't do anything but smile and hold Elliot closer. Tighter. He was happy, too, after all. Almost entirely happy.

He honestly thought Elliot had dozed off, the man had been so still, so silent for nearly ten minutes, and that was fine, Jamie thought drowsily. They could nap on the couch for a while, then make some popcorn and watch a movie or something... maybe a game if there was anything good on ESPN later. It was cool. He hummed and let his fingers move just a little bit against Elliot's T-shirt, feeling the heat of the smooth skin beneath the cotton.

"Y'know," Elliot murmured, sounding just as sleepy as Jamie felt, "Even back before I knew how I swing... it wasn't that I thought being gay was bad or anything. I just didn't want to get railroaded into the Army like Travis did. Or chased away, like they did to Jim. I just... wanted to be me. Took a while to learn how, was all. And... not everyone out there is as nice as you, Jamie. So I learned. Fast."

And Elliot was yawning like nothing Jamie had ever seen. Yawning and barely managing to flutter his eyes open, and that was enough. Maybe Elliot would never be in a sharing mood again, but Jamie was prepared to deal with that. The man needed to sleep, especially after the long damned day he'd had, what with driving and Michael and hauling big honking vases all over the place... and dealing with the Dads, too.

Yeah, Elliot needed some rest, and so did he, Jamie knew. After that, though... oh, there was so going to be sex. They'd both been waiting for weeks. Months, maybe. Sex was definitely going to happen. So "Hush, El... hush. Rest now, okay? Still early. We'll just have a nap..."

Somehow, drifting off had never been easier, Elliot's slow, deep, even breaths pulling Jamie down into a gentle sleep, the likes of which he hadn't known in years.

He wasn't sorry that he'd told Jamie about his coming out. He hadn't planned on it, but he didn't mind that it had happened. He also wasn't sorry that he hadn't told Jamie the rest of it, because, even though Jamie was his friend -- possibly... no, definitely his *best* friend -- Jamie was also a psychologist, and Elliot didn't feel any particular need to be mentally dissected at the moment. Besides, it wasn't like he didn't know what Jamie would say if he heard the whole story, anyway.

"It's not your fault."

And yeah, that was true, sort of, because Elliot hadn't really known what he was doing, hadn't known how guys could be. Hell, he hadn't had a single clue that other guys could be even sneakier about getting what they wanted than any woman Elliot had ever known. He hadn't known, but he should have. Travis had tried to warn him before Elliot had hared off on his own.

Fuck, forget tried. Travis *had* warned him, but Elliot... well, he'd been twenty-one, for fuck's sake. He'd been sure he already knew everything. And Travis, at twenty-eight, was old. Too old to understand what Elliot was feeling, too old to remember what it was like to be young and want things that... that Elliot hadn't even been able to understand completely, much less name.

So, off he'd gone, taking his old beat-up truck and the six hundred dollars he had left from when he'd been working, because along with his family and friends, Elliot had lost both of his jobs with one badly timed, anger-driven group of sentences.

"Damn it, Momma, I want you to stop 'helping' me because I don't even like girls, okay? And I for damned sure don't want to marry one! Ever!"

Yeah... that had definitely been his fault. So had leaving the way he'd done, with too little money, too little sense... and no understanding of how the world -- especially the gay world -- worked.

He'd gotten as far as Birmingham, which was where Elliot had discovered his first ever gay bar, and fuck if he hadn't thought he was the shit, just walking in like he owned the place. That was where he'd met Larry... or was it Lucky? Lonnie, maybe. Something with an L that ended in a "y" sound, anyway. Good looking guy, about his own age. But what's his name had been out for years, knew things. And Elliot had been determined to learn.

Well, he'd learned, all right. He'd let... what the hell, call him Lonnie. He let *Lonnie* buy him a few drinks, which was a few too many since Elliot had never had anything stronger than beer, and when Lonnie suggested going out to Elliot's truck, well... Elliot hadn't had a single problem with that. He'd gotten his first blow job that night and it had been... fucking amazing. Given his first, too, which had been less than great for him, though Lonnie had enjoyed it, even if Elliot's throat was sore for a few hours from the way the guy had jammed his dick so deep, so hard. Still, he'd figured if it felt as good to Lonnie as Lonnie's mouth had felt on him, then it was worth a little discomfort. And he'd liked Lonnie.

So he'd returned to the same bar the next night, after a long, hot day of sweating and trying to sleep in the bed of his truck, but the city was too loud and bright, the sun too sharp with only buildings to mute it, rather than the familiar trees. He'd gone back to the bar and Lonnie was there. Greeted him like Elliot was the best thing he'd ever seen.

More drinks, then the truck again, and Elliot learned everything he'd never really wanted to know about getting fucked.

He'd learned that it hurt. That condoms weren't anything like slick enough. He'd learned that tears and begging "Stop! God, please, stop!" were things that spurred some guys to move faster. He'd learned that blood made the long, unbearably thick *thing* in his ass move easier at first... and he'd learned that even with the pain, the blood, the sensation of being *filthy*, there was a spot inside him that made it all worthwhile. That made him hard and desperate for more.

He'd learned what it felt like when someone held his legs wide and slammed harder, then harder still, and finally... finally, Elliot had learned what it was like to have a man pulsing hard in his tender, aching hole, filling the latex sleeve inside him while moaning and calling him "baby." He'd learned that he *hated* being called "baby"... and that even while he was hurting, he could still come *hard*... and that the sheer release of it could wipe away the pain, for a few minutes at least.

He'd also learned that it took three days for his ass to stop hurting, and that driving was no fun at all with a swollen anus. By then he'd been in Memphis, though, and Lonnie or whoever had been left far behind.

The bar he'd ended up at in Memphis hadn't been gay. In fact, it had been the farthest thing from gay that Elliot had been able to find. It was full of people he recognized, though not personally. Still, he walked in and knew in about five seconds just how each person there equated to someone from his home town. He knew the types, after all.

The Miss Mason type -- calm and responsible by day, but stringing at least three guys along in her spare time. The Terry Wilcher type -- out to score as much pussy as he could while never promising anything. The Lucy Marshall type -- dressing and acting like a whore, but really a good girl and probably still a virgin. Yeah, they were all there. The slut, the bastard, the prude, the salesman, the preacher, the saint. It was just like being home again, only none of them knew Elliot's secret.

He'd gone on thinking that until his third beer had him heading off to the bathroom, barely noticing that someone was following him in. He hadn't thought anything of it until he'd finished and given himself a shake... and there was a long, lean body pressed up against his back. A hot, strong hand wrapped around his limp prick. "What...?" Elliot remembered saying, but the man shook his head against Elliot's shoulder.

"Just tell me to stop and I will," the man muttered, his voice low and soft and so serious, Elliot didn't doubt that he meant it. Then that hand was stroking, and Elliot was getting hard. Harder than he'd been since the night he'd gotten sucked off... harder than the night after that, too. And he could feel the man behind him shifting, moving, heard the sound of a zipper and it almost made Elliot scream. But it wasn't *his* zipper because that was already down, so maybe it was okay, and...

And Elliot's T-shirt was pulled up, then there was a hot, hard rod rubbing along his lower spine, sliding up and down, up and down in time with the way that hand was tugging at him, and all Elliot could do was moan. The wet streaks of fluid weren't hurting him any, and that hand, those fingers, just felt so good, and... "Oh... oh, God," he whimpered, eyes closing as he rocked, rolled his hips.

There was another hand all of a sudden, this one dipping into his pants and cupping his balls, and when that sweaty palm rolled them, the stroking hand moving faster while what Elliot knew was the man's cock painted longer, wetter streaks against his spine, he... came. With a sharp shout and bucking hips, Elliot came, short bursts of thick white seed splashing against the porcelain of the urinal.

By the time he'd regained his breath and opened his eyes, the man who'd been touching him was gone, aside from the come covering Elliot's spine. Elliot had never found out just who it had been, but Elliot knew he'd never forget him. That man's kindness, after what had happened in Birmingham, had shown Elliot that... not all men were the same.

It had still been weeks before Elliot had been able to walk into a gay bar, and when he'd been propositioned, he'd insisted on topping, wanting to *feel*, but so damned scared, so terrified of the pain and the blood, even when he knew that bright, sharp burst of pure feeling would make it all worthwhile.

The young man who'd approached him was all for Elliot driving. Had even talked him through it, told Elliot what to do, and how, so nobody would get hurt. He'd made it good for Elliot, was patient when he'd learned it was Elliot's first time. And God, it had been amazing. For him, but also for the guy, which had started Elliot thinking.

He'd done exactly what the man -- Tim, he recalled -- exactly what Tim had said. He'd used lube and fingers to stretch the guy, and while it had seemed a little bit gross to be putting his *fingers* in there, Tim had obviously liked it. Elliot had liked it, too, imagining what that tight grip would feel like around his cock. He'd used one finger, then two... then a third when Tim had said he'd need it, considering the size of Elliot's cock.

Lonnie hadn't done any of that. He'd just spread Elliot's legs, slipped a condom onto himself, and... forced his way in.

Elliot hadn't wanted to think about it, but he couldn't help it. Couldn't help wondering whether he might have liked it more if Lonnie had done the things Tim had asked *Elliot* to do. Couldn't keep himself from asking Tim, either.

That was the night that Elliot had experienced his first threesome, because Tim didn't top, but Tim's fuck-buddy did. And Jonathan had been every bit as considerate as Lonnie hadn't been.

By the time Elliot left Nashville, he knew what it was like to fuck... and to be fucked. In the good way. And he'd eventually learned how to recognize the sort of man who would want to hurt someone.

It had taken a while, granted, but...

No matter what Jamie might say, Elliot knew it *was* his fault. The bad and the good. He could have listened to Travis, could have tried to understand what his brother had been telling him.

He could have been smarter, less ruled by his dick. But he hadn't been, and now...? Well, now Elliot was glad for it.

Yeah, he'd had a crappy first time. So did a lot of people. But everything he'd been through -- everything he'd learned -- had made him stronger, in a way. And the bad things had led to good things, which wasn't anything to complain about. So, all in all, Elliot was fine. He'd be even finer if Jamie would just...

Then Jamie mumbled something, clearly still mostly asleep, and there were strong arms tight around Elliot's chest, a long, hard, thick shaft pressing against his ass through two layers of

denim, and... Oh, yeah, Elliot thought as he pushed back into that pressure. He was more than fine. He was... fucking perfect.

Jamie woke up on the couch, which made sense since that was where he'd fallen asleep. But he also woke up with his hands in Elliot's pants. Or one hand, to be more precise, because the other was spread wide, fingers covering most of Elliot's abs while the first hand -- the one in those jeans -- rubbed up and down Elliot's naked cock, and how the hell had that happened?

But Elliot was moaning, rocking back against Jamie's groin, then rolling his hips forward into Jamie's touch, and Jamie couldn't quite manage to make sense of anything. Not when all his blood was clearly avoiding the big head in favor of the smaller.

"El..." he managed to whisper, and the small sound only pulled a groan from Elliot as answer, but that was okay. It was a good groan, and Jamie knew it. He also knew he wasn't going to stop. Couldn't stop. And Elliot was obviously awake and aware and wanted everything that was happening, and Jamie couldn't do anything but go with it. It had been too damned long, after all.

His hand moved faster, rubbing Elliot's cock harder, even while his other hand pressed, pushed, pulled that muscled body back rhythmically, and it was almost enough. After however many months as it had been since he'd felt Elliot like that, it was... God. Good. He was maybe a minute away from coming in his jeans, for God's sake.

"El... El. Elliot," and damned if he wasn't chanting the man's name like some sort of mantra. But he was. Just like he did when he jerked off, Jamie realized. "God, El..."

"Nnnngh... Y-yeah. Jamie. Oh, fuck. Naked, okay? Skin." And Jesus, Elliot was looking at him, those eyes hot and needy over Elliot's shoulder, and Jamie knew he was going to give Elliot whatever the hell the man wanted.

"Bed," Jamie grunted. "Couch is... Christ. Too small. Bed!" Damn, could he sound any more like a Neanderthal? Doubtful, Jamie accepted silently.

God knew how they'd managed it, but the next thing Jamie knew, he and Elliot were upstairs in Jamie's bedroom and there were hands everywhere, getting in the way and entirely too uncoordinated as Jamie gave up and just wound his fingers in Elliot's hair. He pulled that hot, wet mouth to his own before devouring it with every bit of wanton energy that had built up in his body since the last time Jamie had had the privilege of doing this. Kissing. Kissing Elliot.

"Rubbers?" Elliot moaned against his lips, and it was only then that Jamie realized Elliot had somehow done the impossible. He'd managed to get them both naked in the... however long they'd been kissing. "Jamie. Rubbers!"

Oh. Oh, yeah. Condoms. Lube, too. They'd need those. "Bed," Jamie answered, pushing Elliot back the three steps it took to have the younger man falling onto the mattress, and God. All that

skin and muscle, all that purely masculine beauty and that so-pretty cock, curved and long... and all his, for the moment. Christ, it was almost enough to have Jamie falling to his knees and singing praises.

He chose to crawl up that stunning display of fitness instead, his own muscles brushing Elliot's in ways Jamie had forgotten from their last time. "Stop rushing," he murmured, staring into Elliot's eyes from a few inches away. "We have all night. Tomorrow night, too. If you're staying, I mean."

God, he could almost *see* the thoughts chasing each other behind Elliot's eyes.

"I'm assuming it'll take that long to get the vases emptied and rinsed and all that, anyway," Jamie went on, making it up as he spoke. "You know... the ones that don't sell. Or do you need to get back to work?"

Elliot's hands were moving on Jamie's back suddenly, and Jamie barely managed to bite back a groan at the sensation. "Depends," Elliot answered, his voice all low and growly and entirely too damned hot for Jamie's peace of mind. "If I stay tomorrow, too, am I gonna get fucked even more, Jamie? Because I could really use a good ummmph..."

Jamie held the kiss, pushed it, drove it even deeper than the one before, and when he pulled back, finally, he gave Elliot a long, heated stare. "You're definitely going to get fucked, El. Sucked. Rimmed, and maybe even plugged." Jamie smiled, but he knew it held a little bit of cautious curiosity. "I wonder how you'd feel after spending the entire day tomorrow -- ceremony and all -- with a big, thick plug in your ass, Elliot. It'd probably drive you crazy, but you'd be so open for me later... so ready. Or is that too much for you to handle? It's one thing to hear me talking about toys. Is it different when you know I want to use them on *you*?"

He didn't actually own a plug. He'd never even really considered it. Because in all honesty, Jamie wasn't big on using even dildos and such. It seemed like... cheating, sort of. But for some reason, he liked the idea of seeing something like that -- something he'd put there -- in Elliot. It was... exciting.

"I will if you will," Elliot answered with barely a pause, and damn. Just *damn*. That sounded even better.

"We'll hit the store tomorrow," Jamie murmured, his lips a bare hairsbreadth from Elliot's again. "Right now, though, I want to kiss you again. Then I'm going to suck you dry." He chuckled at the tiny whimper Elliot let out. "After that, I'm going to put you on your knees and fuck you until you pass out. No matter how many times it takes." He closed that tiny gap and drove into Elliot's mouth, tongue spearing, sweeping wantonly before he pulled back again. "I have something like two dozen condoms, Elliot. I think we should try to use them all."

He barely heard Elliot's whispered "God help me", but even though he did, he couldn't quite be bothered to respond to it. Not when Elliot's lips were so hot against his own, that strong, slick

tongue sliding wildly in and out of his mouth. And definitely not when Elliot's body was writhing so perfectly beneath Jamie's own.

Teasing could come later, Jamie decided. After he and Elliot did. A few times, for starters.

Chapter Eight

Fuck, Jamie's mouth was even hotter than Elliot remembered. So were the hands gripping his hips. Strong, hot, maybe just a little bit sweaty, but Elliot didn't mind. Liked it, in fact, because it made him that much less aware of the fine sheen of sweat already covering his own body.

He arched, moans springing from his lips as Jamie took him deeper, and if it hadn't been for the thin layer of latex between his shaft and Jamie's tongue, Elliot was sure he would already be coming. So, thank fucking Christ for condoms. He wasn't ready to come yet. Not even when Jamie did that head-twisting, bobbing thing, though it definitely made Elliot whimper.

His fingers were tight in Jamie's hair, holding on to the sun-streaked locks for dear life... or for delayed orgasm, which Elliot figured was pretty much the same thing just then. But then Jamie was moaning, and Elliot felt the vibrations around his cock, felt the small shivers of sound playing at his already tight, hard sac, and that was more than he could handle. Already. After less than two minutes.

It could have been embarrassing, Elliot realized once he'd stopped bucking and heaving, cock trying to lodge itself deep in Jamie's throat. It wasn't, though, because Jamie was chuckling, grinning as he pulled back, letting Elliot's spent prick and the full condom slip from his mouth. "Guess I've still got it," Jamie murmured, and there was so much satisfaction in the guy's voice that Elliot could only nod, breaths still gusting in and out of his lungs as though they'd been replaced by a bellows.

Even so, Elliot knew it was rude to leave his partner -- his very temporary and strictly sexual partner -- hanging. They were going to fuck later, yes. But right then, Elliot really just wanted to drive Jamie insane. To taste all that heated skin, lick the small droplets of sweat from Jamie's upper lip... to rasp his tongue along Jamie's jaw and feel the short, rough stubble that had grown over the course of the day.

"On your back," Elliot muttered, his voice rumbling just enough that Jamie looked surprised. "On your back, Jamie," he repeated, meeting those bluer-than-blue eyes and smirking wickedly. "And I'll need one of those rubbers, man. I'll even put it on you with my mouth, if you want." And Jamie definitely wanted because Elliot had never seen anyone roll over and find latex quite that quickly before. With the notable exception of Jamie himself, that first night back in Wentworth. Elliot only hoped he hadn't lost the trick of the condom thing. He hadn't tried it in a while, after all.

He started at Jamie's lips, just pressing and plundering the man's hot mouth with a will that surprised even Elliot himself. But damn if it wasn't like coming home, in some weird way he

didn't want to think too much about. Besides, Jamie was his friend, and they'd done this before, so it made sense that it felt right... no matter how much Elliot knew he was lying. To himself, if no one else.

Jamie's mouth was wet and still tasted a little bit of latex and the steak they'd had earlier, along with something that was just Jamie. Something that had been there every time they'd kissed, no matter what time of the day or night. Something... spicy and raw and entirely wild. Indefinable, but so fucking good, Elliot thought he'd remember it forever. Then Jamie's tongue was in play, battling Elliot's in a fast, hard fight that neither of them truly wanted to win but were clearly enjoying.

Jamie's cheek tasted sort of like Jamie's mouth, Elliot noticed a moment later as he slid his tongue over the burgeoning beard. Saltier, but just as... primal and male and... God, Jamie tasted like pure sin. So damned good that Elliot knew it was probably bad for him, but he couldn't help just helping himself. And Jamie was groaning, those blue eyes closed tightly, that strong, beautiful body just shuddering already, and yeah. That was exactly what Elliot had been wanting.

The shaking grew stronger as he slid his mouth lower, tasting Jamie's neck, his shoulder... taking in the sharper flavor that surrounded Jamie's tight little nipples, one after the other. And Jamie's hands were on him, gripping tightly at his shoulders, and Elliot wasn't usually the kind to go for bruises, except he really kind of liked having Jamie's marks on him. Hell, he'd regretted how quickly they'd faded before.

Elliot moved again, lips and teeth finding the lightly haired skin between Jamie's pecs, and when Jamie grunted, Elliot stayed there for a minute or so, mouth and tongue and teeth and lungs drawing up what would probably be a dark fucking mark. It was almost scary how good it felt to leave a sign of himself on Jamie's skin... almost blissful, which only added to the frightening feeling. But he would worry about that later, Elliot told himself sternly. This wasn't the time. This was the time for going with the flow, for giving in to all the things he'd dreamed of... all the memories he'd thought dimmed by time.

Jamie's sternum got a good, long lick, and Elliot couldn't help his own moan when the action had Jamie arching up hard, pressing against Elliot's mouth.

The tight, tense muscles of Jamie's abdomen were nibbled, nipped, scraped at before Elliot left another sucking, darkening kiss just above the man's perfect navel. And all the while, Jamie was just giving it up, no holds barred. He was groaning and grunting and moaning. He even yelped once or twice while his strong fingers moved from Elliot's shoulders to his hair, holding Elliot's head so gently that Elliot was stunned by Jamie's control.

His own control was just about shattered, though. Fuck, he was so damned into it. So deeply and thoroughly involved in what he was doing that he couldn't wait more than another moment. Maybe two moments, because that was how long it took Elliot to open the foil packet on the bed beside him and place the condom in his mouth, between lips and teeth.

Yeah, latex still tasted craptastic, but the way Jamie was looking at him was... Fuck, it was more than enough to make it worthwhile. And Jamie's moan when Elliot positioned his mouth at the tip of that long, seeping shaft and started a slow, careful slide toward the base...? Well, that had Elliot forgetting all about the taste, his mind somehow replacing it with the flavor of Jamie's sweat, Jamie's skin, Jamie's mouth.

"Oh... oh, God," Jamie moaned, the sound so long and drawn out, Elliot could feel it in the hard flesh between his lips. "Oh, my fucking... God, El. I... don't stop."

Because that was gonna happen, Elliot thought with a silent snort. Like he would even consider stopping when they were there in Jamie's bed. In Jamie's room. In Jamie's house, where there was nobody just a room away who might hear them. So, no. He wasn't stopping. In fact, Elliot was determined to find out just how loud Jamie could be.

His mouth moved faster, lower, sucking hard then sliding slickly. His hands gripped Jamie's thighs, holding them spread around Elliot's head, shoulders... and when Jamie started to grunt and groan in earnest, those solid hips rocking hard, driving that thick cock deeper though Jamie was clearly still holding back, Elliot shifted, pulled one hand away from Jamie's leg.

He cupped the tight, hot balls just beneath his chin, moaning around the fiery flesh in his throat when his fingers had Jamie crying out words that made no sense at all... and when Jamie's hands left his hair to dig deep into the sheets, Elliot let his own hand dip further, pressing at the sensitive span between sac and hole. Then Jamie whimpered, and the thrusting of those hips took on a different sort of emphasis, a deeper insistence, and Elliot did it.

He pressed one sweat-dampened finger to Jamie's tight little hole, and Jamie pushed down and back, somehow, and Elliot's digit was suddenly surrounded by the tightest heat Elliot had ever known. And Jamie was coming, his thick cock pulsing and swelling in Elliot's mouth, the bulbous head stretching his throat while that muscled body tensed into a bow, and Jamie screamed.

He screamed and spilled and shook, and Elliot could actually feel the condom filling in his throat. It was a fucking bizarre sensation. Almost as bizarre as knowing that Jamie had come not just from Elliot's mouth, but from Elliot's finger pressed deep inside that perfect body.

He would have examined that thought further, but then Jamie was moaning again, body rocking down onto Elliot's finger, pulling it deeper still, and Elliot felt the spongy but somehow tight nub inside the man's body and...

"Oh... fuck, Jamie. Fuck!" He groaned as he let Jamie's shaft fall from his lips, his own hips shaking, shuddering back and forth as he painted streaks and splatters of hot white against the hairy leg that was suddenly right there between Elliot's thighs. Fuck.

"L-later," Jamie agreed, and Elliot actually felt a little bit insulted that the man could already speak. "Soon, El. God, I am so going to fuck you, baby. Until you're begging me to stop. But I won't."

It was the sincerity in Jamie's voice, Elliot would decide later, that had him rolling away from Jamie's hot, hard body. The sincerity, and maybe Elliot's own recent recollections.

In the moment, however, he froze for a good five or six seconds, then pushed himself away from Jamie, away from the muscle and sinew and bone that he'd been prepared to worship on his back, or his knees, or... just about anywhere, any way.

Elliot stood beside the bed, every part of him shaking, and not in the good way. "Don't ever call me baby again," he heard himself snarl. "And I never beg, L... *Jamie*. It doesn't do any good. Never has. I'm taking the couch." He did, too. Even though he was regretting his hasty words less than ten minutes later.

That under-ten-minutes had been more than enough time for him to snarl at Jamie yet again when the man followed him, looking worried and kind of freaked out. It had been long enough for Elliot to wrap himself in the throw that lived on the back of the sofa, too... and definitely enough time for Jamie to sigh and walk away when Elliot had pretended to a sudden and entirely false case of deaf unconsciousness.

He felt like an idiot once Jamie was gone, of course. Even wanted to get up and go back upstairs. Back to Jamie's bed. Wanted to crawl in and apologize, make Jamie really believe that he was sorry. But he couldn't, Elliot realized by the time he'd actually struggled to a sitting position on the couch.

If he did any of that, Jamie would want to know why Elliot had reacted that way to a simple endearment and what had obviously been meant as a temptation rather than a threat, now that Elliot was actually thinking instead of just reacting. And Elliot didn't want to talk about that. Not ever, and especially not with Jamie.

He'd find some way to smooth things over in the morning, Elliot promised himself. He didn't know how, but he'd wing it. Then Jamie would forgive him, and they'd go to the stupid wedding... and if it really came down to it, Elliot would get Jim to drive the van full of ugly, cock-shaped vases back to Wentworth while Elliot made it up to Jamie and maybe... hopefully... got the fucking he'd been looking forward to right up until the past had reared its ugly, overly-emotional head.

He'd find a way, Elliot told himself again as he lay down on the couch once more, while a part of him was thinking that his pride was costing him a comfortable bed and a warm body to wrap around.

It took hours for Elliot to actually doze off, and even then he found himself sitting up at every sound the house made as it settled. Old houses did that, he reminded himself blearily. It wasn't Jamie coming to check on him... or better yet, to drag him back to bed.

It had been a long, sleepless night for Jamie, one during which he replayed every moment, each action and word, and he still couldn't figure out what had happened.

Sex. Hot, steaming, sweat-inducing blow jobs, mouths and hands in places that brought moans and whimpers and excited cries. Kisses that went on and on, setting Jamie's entire body alight. Elliot's, too, if the groans and small streaks of hot fluids on Jamie's skin had meant anything.

Mind-shattering orgasms for both of them, and then... what? "Don't call me baby" and "I'll use the couch"?

Well, yeah. Apparently so, because that was where Elliot was in the pre-dawn, while Jamie was there in his own bed, still smelling sex and come and Elliot all over his skin and the sheets.

The worst part wasn't even that he didn't know what he'd done, because Jamie knew he'd figure it out eventually. The worst part -- the very worst part of it all -- was the look on Elliot's face as he'd stood shaking beside the bed. The look that had said, just as clearly as though Elliot had spoken aloud, that Jamie had betrayed him.

He was a licensed psychologist, damn it. One of the youngest ever in the entire state, when he'd first gotten his credentials. He should for damned sure be smart enough to know when and how he'd screwed things up, but for the life of him, Jamie couldn't see it. Not even after hours of twisting and turning, throwing the covers off and pulling them up again.

Hell, he felt shaky himself. Baffled and bewildered and entirely... lost. Like he was trapped in some sort of dream that didn't quite qualify as a nightmare, but wasn't all kittens and Christmas, either. Like there was something big, bad and terrible looming above him, but not actually dropping down, and he knew it was there, but he couldn't touch it, couldn't even see it enough to recognize it and rationalize it away.

It was an unsettling sensation, one Jamie had never experienced before. One he hoped never to feel again, assuming it ever stopped, because even the hours he'd been feeling it seemed like forever.

Christ, all he really wanted to do was go downstairs and wake Elliot up. Beg the man to come back to bed, to let Jamie fix whatever it was. Hell, he'd beg like he'd never begged before if it would just get Elliot to...

Beg. Fuck. "Fuck!" Jamie snarled, slamming his head back onto his pillow a few times as his actual words from the night before came back to him. Elliot's exact words, too. "Jesus, I am such a fucking asshole! Of course he freaked out! Christ, I would, too!"

God, he'd told Elliot... and after what had happened with that asshat Linden. What the fuck had he been thinking?

"Until you're begging me to stop, but I won't," Jamie remembered saying, and that was when Elliot had gone from melted to furious in maybe five seconds, and it had to be because of what

had happened with that asshole at the club, and why hadn't Jamie realized? Why hadn't he *gotten* it?

Maybe because he'd been so damned blissed out, but while that was possibly a reason, it for damned sure wasn't an excuse. Especially with Elliot's angry response, "I never beg, L... *Jamie*. It doesn't do any good; never has." God, it all made sense, suddenly. Jamie had reminded Elliot of something the guy had been trying to forget, and those were some dark, painful memories.

Hell, Jamie couldn't even blame El for leaving the bed. He could only blame himself, and yes, he'd already been doing that, but now he knew he was right. Knew it for sure.

He also knew he needed to find some way to apologize to Elliot. A way that wouldn't remind the man of everything Jamie had dredged up with his careless words, and that wouldn't be easy. Breakfast would be a start, though, Jamie decided. A big, luxurious, artery-clogging breakfast with pancakes and insane amounts of fried meats, just like Elliot liked.

Yeah, that would be good for a beginning. Then after the Dads' wedding, Jamie would take Elliot somewhere -- he didn't know where yet, but it would be someplace fun -- and he could start healing the fracture he'd created in his and Elliot's friendship.

Jamie nodded, satisfied with what was at least the seed of a plan. He would implement it, too. Just as soon as he had a shower and got himself cleaned up. Now that he was feeling at least a little bit hopeful, he was noticing just how unpleasant dried come felt on his skin. A shower was definitely required.

Besides, he didn't want Elliot knowing how miserable Jamie had been all night. The poor kid was already freaked out enough.

"And I have to stop calling him a kid," Jamie told himself sternly as he pushed himself from the bed and went to start the shower in the master bath. "Even to myself. Elliot's twenty-four, for God's sake, and he's not a kid at all." He also needed to stop talking to himself out loud, but he'd been doing that for most of his life, so he figured he could try -- again -- to lose the habit, but he wouldn't be at all surprised to find himself still doing it when he was old and gray.

The hot water pouring over him felt incredibly good after the night he'd had, and tense, worn muscles slowly relaxed, leaving Jamie feeling tired. Exhausted, even. And the damned day wasn't even started yet, for God's sake. Hell, there wasn't even time for a nap, what with his plans for breakfast and then the whole tuxedo thing and ceremony, reception and whatever he was going to let Elliot talk him into doing after.

"Christ. I wonder if Sparks has coffee in an IV drip..." he muttered, palms pressing against the tiles beneath the main shower head as he leaned forward, letting the hot water sluice down over his back.

"If they do, then sign me up, too," Jamie heard, and damned if he didn't jump, his exhaustion of a moment earlier washed away by the sudden rush of adrenaline.

"Jesus," he snapped, heart racing wildly as he turned around so quickly he nearly lost his footing, only Elliot's strong hands grabbing Jamie's waist keeping him upright. "Don't... God, El! Don't ever do that again! I... what are you doing here? By which I mean *here*. In my shower!" And naked and... God, Elliot was hard, and what the fuck was going on? Elliot was mad at him. Justifiably so, but still. Elliot was furious, and Jamie was planning on spending a good long while making things right, and...

And Elliot was talking, which sort of demanded that Jamie focus and listen, damn it.

"... might have over-reacted, man. Sorry. I just..." Elliot blushed, and Jamie frowned. "I can't even say I was having a bad night because I wasn't. It was... fucking perfect. But then I... shit. Can I just be sorry and *not* talk about it, Jamie? I mean, I'll probably tell you eventually. Like... way far in the future, but not now, okay?"

Jamie was nodding, even while a part of him -- the professional part -- was trying to tell him that letting Elliot push it all aside was a really bad idea. The rest of him, though... well, the rest of Jamie knew what had happened. Knew it was all part of the whole Linden fiasco. And when Elliot was ready to talk about his feelings and the bitter, angry fear Jamie had seen the night before, well, Jamie would listen.

Maybe whatever advice he ended up giving El would be drawn from the years Jamie had spent in his craft, but so what? They'd work through it together until Elliot was happy and whole and able to let the whole Linden thing go.

He and Elliot were friends, Jamie reminded himself, and he wasn't the type to be scared off by a few rough spots in the road. And neither was Elliot, considering the fact that the man was there in Jamie's shower and those hands -- those strong, personal trainer hands -- were still on Jamie's waist, thumbs rubbing slowly up and down over Jamie's hip bones, and it almost seemed like there might be some sex in the offing.

"Uh, El...?" Jamie murmured, his own hands finally unclenching, rising to rest on Elliot's forearms, "I'm sorry, too, for what I said, but... what are you... uh, doing?"

Elliot laughed then, a little bit sheepishly. "Fuck, Jamie. Thought a smart guy like you would've had it figured when I climbed into your shower all naked and shit. You want me to stop? I'll get it if you do. Swear. Didn't mean to get all psycho on you, but I did, so... "

"No," Jamie grunted, holding on to Elliot's arms when the man started to pull away. "No, Elliot. I don't want you to stop. I just wanted to be sure that this was what I thought it was."

Jamie watched Elliot's eyebrows raise, then lower. Watched Elliot's eyes darken, becoming mostly pupil in mere moments. "You convinced now?" Elliot groaned, moving closer, so close that Jamie felt that long, curved cock brush against his belly.

"I will be, El," he answered. "Just as soon as you kiss me. I love your damn mouth."

Just like that, Jamie could feel every hard muscle pressed up against him. Elliot's mouth closed over his, and Jamie opened easily, happily, to the slick, talented tongue that demanded entry, and God. The tiles weren't nearly as hard against his back as they'd felt under his palms just five minutes earlier.

Those five minutes seemed like lifetimes past, considering how much things had changed. For the better, Jamie knew. Definitely for the better.

Oh, this was *way* better than driving himself crazy on the couch, Elliot decided. So much fucking better that the two things weren't even in the same dimension. And thank God Jamie wasn't pissed off after the way Elliot had acted.

It had been a leap of faith, sort of, to come up the stairs when he'd heard the shower being turned on, but while Elliot had been a lot of things in his life, he'd never been a coward. Sure, Jamie could have told him to get out... could even have hit him, though Jamie wasn't that type; Elliot could tell. But Jamie hadn't told him to go. Hadn't even tried to pull away when Elliot latched on to his body.

Then there was kissing. Long, deep, rough kissing that seemed desperate and inevitable, all at once. The kind of kissing that Elliot had never experienced before, not even with Jamie, and it was good. Damn good. Not as good as Jamie's body rocking against his, though.

Jamie was grunting, the sounds pushing into Elliot's mouth just like Jamie's cock was pushing at his stomach, and Elliot somehow had the feeling that it was only his own body and the wall holding Jamie upright. It was a dizzying sensation, knowing he affected Jamie so much, especially because Elliot was pretty sure he felt the same way. That if their positions were reversed, he'd be just as helplessly gone as Jamie clearly was.

Big hands were roaming up and down Elliot's back, strong fingers digging into muscles at random moments, and Elliot could feel his own moans feeding into Jamie's mouth in return for the grunts and soft snarls he could feel but barely hear. And Jamie was so damned hot, just as hot as the near-scalding water that continued to pour down over them, though it barely made it between their bodies, they were pressed so tightly together.

Elliot's hands were returning the favor in a way, stroking long and hard at Jamie's sides, memorizing each spot that had Jamie arching or shivering or thrusting against Elliot's stomach in short, wild jabs. Then Elliot slid his fingers down farther, short nails scratching lightly at Jamie's hip bones, and when the man arched again, Elliot let his hands slide on that water-slicked skin. Let them drop to cup tight, toned buttocks that flexed and shifted as Jamie's legs spread just a bit. One fingertip pushed inward, resting at the tiny, wrinkled hole Elliot could just feel.

"Oh, God," he heard Jamie groan, the man's tongue leaving Elliot's mouth though Jamie's lips were still brushing his own. "Oh, God. El, I can't..." And Elliot had already known that, after all.

Known Jamie didn't bottom. It was a damned shame, but it was the way it was, and Elliot could live with that. Jamie was just a friend he got naked with sometimes, after all, so where was the harm. Even so...

"It's... fuck, Jamie. It's cool, okay? Just let me... God, trust me, okay?" And Jamie was nodding as Elliot pulled one solidly muscled thigh up, lifting Jamie's knee nearly to his waist. "Not gonna. Just let me..." and Elliot moved, pulled his hips back and down and then his cock was right there between Jamie's legs, Jamie's furry balls resting on top of Elliot's shaft.

He lowered Jamie's leg just a bit and shuddered as hot, wet skin surrounded his sensitive flesh. "Oh, fuck. Yeah, man. That feels..." Elliot shivered, bone deep. "Th-this okay?" he added as he tried one slow, experimental thrust, feeling Jamie's skin, so soft and warm there in the man's crease... feeling that hairy sac sliding along his cock.

Jamie looked stunned when Elliot managed to open his eyes. He didn't know when he'd closed them, but he was glad he'd opened them then because Jamie truly looked stunned. The good kind of stunned. The kind of stunned Elliot had been on Christmas morning when he'd been fifteen and found the dirt bike he'd been wanting for years out in the driveway.

"This okay, Jamie?" Elliot asked again, and he decided to take Jamie's long, loud moan as a yes, especially when it was joined by Jamie's thighs tensing, tightening around Elliot's cock, though not so much that Jamie was trying to stop him. Hell, Jamie was doing a lot of things -- moaning, grunting, sighing... rocking, arching, pulling Elliot closer, pulling at him harder -- but none of them showed anything like reluctance.

Then Jamie's leg hitched a bit higher, and those amazing hips moved faster, and Elliot felt -- for just a bare moment -- the hot, water-slick, wrinkled skin of Jamie's hole against his tip, and it was more than he could stand. He'd already been maybe a minute away from coming, just from sliding back and forth between Jamie's legs. That small touch of what Elliot could only imagine would feel like the seat of Heaven did him in.

"Oh... oh, fuck. I... fuck, Jamie! Fuck!" And it wasn't creative, wasn't anything like what Elliot thought he should be saying in that moment, but those were the only words that were coming from his mouth as he slammed hard against Jamie's body, his cock held in the vise of Jamie's thighs... and Jamie was shaking, too, those blue-blue eyes wide, mostly pupil, and locked tightly on Elliot's.

There were hands, hard and bruising, and tight sacs throbbing... and Elliot could feel himself swelling, pulsing wildly as he cried out, pushing spurt after spurt of wet heat between Jamie's legs while Jamie spilled and shuddered, the long, hard shots of thick fluid splashing Elliot's stomach for just a split second before the water washed them away.

There was a moment of awkwardness as they separated, each taking a turn at rinsing off, and Elliot bit his lip as he grabbed a towel from the heated rack just outside the glass-enclosed shower. God, what had he done?

Well, he'd more or less just fucked Jamie, he answered himself silently. Without penetration, true, but still. He'd had his cock between Jamie's legs. Not by accident, either, but by design. He'd put himself there, and he'd moved, thrust, rocked and heaved until he'd come.

Hell, Elliot realized, he'd pretty much just announced that he wanted inside Jamie's body, and Jamie didn't *do* that. Jamie had probably only allowed it because he was "sorry," though Elliot didn't know what for, and now...?

Well, now, Elliot figured, they would be all uncomfortable with each other. Until Elliot went back to Wentworth, anyway, at which point they would just pretend it had never happened. And that would be good, wouldn't it? Because if it had never happened, then there wouldn't be any weirdness between them and Elliot wouldn't have to worry that he'd scared off his friend. His friend he still wanted to have sex with, but still, his friend. His best friend. Ever.

The realization was actually a relief, and Elliot felt it when his shoulders relaxed. And Jamie saw it, apparently, because that was when the man moved closer, stepping up behind Elliot and wrapping long, perfectly shaped arms around him.

"Thank you," Jamie murmured, which was just... weird. "That was... amazing, El. Uh, I was going to take you out for breakfast, but I think I need... that is, what do you think about a nap? I didn't sleep so well last night, and we have three hours before we really *need* to be up and doing things."

Okay, it was still weird, but Elliot wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth. Not when it was offering sleep in the big, soft bed he hadn't had a chance to enjoy as much as he'd wanted to. "Buy me fast food biscuits with sausage and egg when we wake up, man, and you've got yourself a deal," he answered, and he had no idea of when his hands had risen to cover Jamie's, but he didn't really care.

Weird or not, it felt good. Very, very good. Too good.

Chapter Nine

Jesus, Elliot looked good in a tux. Better than Jamie had imagined. And it was only a rental, for God's sake, which had Jamie thinking of how incredible Elliot would look in a custom-fitted designer tuxedo. Which of course Elliot had no use for, but it was still a damned fine mental image.

Alicia had been working since about the time Jamie and Elliot had crawled out of the shower and into bed for their nap, as she had gone to great pains to point out. Well, not the shower part because she didn't know and it wasn't any of her business, but for a tiny little woman, she'd somehow managed to get everything finished.

The tables were ready, chairs covered and beribboned. The vases were still in place, though each now bore a subtle, beautifully lettered placard near its base indicating the artist's name, what he had called that particular monstrosity, and the asking price for the "sculpture."

The catering company had finished setting the tables with sparkling glasses and gold-trimmed plates, thank God, and... Christ, when and how had they arranged for a champagne fountain? And who had decided it was a good idea, rather than entirely too tacky?

"Do you think they make beer fountains?" Elliot murmured, grinning sideways at him, and Jamie laughed. "Champagne gives me a headache, but a beer fountain would be cool."

"You never know," Jamie answered with a shrug. "But where would you put it?"

Elliot smirked. "You know me. I could put it just about anywhere," and Jamie wasn't sure that they were still talking about the imaginary beer fountain at all. Then Elliot blushed and looked away, and Jamie was certain that they weren't.

"Look, El, are you..." he started, but he didn't know where to go from there. Elliot was clearly embarrassed about what had happened that morning, but Jamie for damned sure didn't know why. And somehow he didn't think his Dads' wedding was the place to get into it. "Are you still up for going somewhere after all of this is done?" he asked instead of whatever he'd started out with, because Jamie honestly didn't know what he'd been planning to say, aside from "Are you sure you don't want to fuck me?" which... yes. Not appropriate for the moment, but also answered that first weekend he and Elliot had met. If Elliot had wanted to, he would have, and it didn't matter what Jamie had hoped their shower might imply.

Then Elliot was nodding, and Alicia was bustling over, and it was time. Time to stand up for David while friends and family witnessed the renewing of David's and Russell's vows to each other. Legally binding vows, this time. Christ.

"Later," he called over his shoulder as Alicia dragged him toward the house. If Jamie hadn't known better, he would have sworn there was some pit bull in her ancestry.

The ceremony itself went by in a blur, and Jamie could only assume that it had done the same for his Dads. He hoped they remembered more of it than he did, though, because his mind had been on other things. He hadn't been paying the slightest attention to the minister's words. Had barely even noticed when the time for the rings came, though he'd found his Dad's old ring in his pocket easily and handed it to David.

Other than that one moment, it was just a buzzing in his ears because he was thinking about the night before, and that morning in the shower. Not in any great detail, granted, because the last thing Jamie needed was to be sporting wood in front of fifty of Dad's and David's friends, but still.

He was still lost in thought when the sudden round of applause dragged him back to the present, and when he saw the Dads kissing hard right in front of him, Jamie couldn't help clapping as well, a huge smile on his face. Then he was hugging them both, muttering congratulations and being thanked, and... yeah. Jamie could think about it later.

More hugs, this time from the guests, all of whom knew Jamie and had even watched him grow up, in a few cases; then cocktails and random chatter, which became easier once Elliot joined him. Startled looks from some of the older men, along with glances back and forth from Jamie to where he guessed Michael was standing, likely with Jim.

And Elliot... God, Elliot was charming. He was talking to people, holding his own in conversations with doctors and lawyers and bankers, oh my. He was even making it sound like he and Jamie had been dating since they'd first met, and all without ever uttering a lie.

"Well, you know how it is. He came to Wentworth with Mike and next thing any of us knew, it was the Mike and Jim show." Elliot shrugged, giving Jamie a wink and a grin. "So Jamie and I just decided to keep each other company for a few days." Another wink, this time for the seemingly spellbound men who were listening. "We really thought that was pretty much the end of it, but..."

"But? But what?" Jeremy, David's assistant, demanded, sounding like he was actually on tenterhooks.

"Well," Elliot went on after a teasing moment or three of silent smirking, "Then I came here to get Michael's things, and I met up with Jamie again... and now, here we are. Very, very good friends." Elliot chuckled, and Jamie seriously thought he could feel it in his balls. "Very... *close*," Elliot finished, his eyes hot and somehow suggestive when they met Jamie's own.

Someone was working their way up to a spanking, Jamie decided, though not in the literal sense, of course. Although, now that he thought about it, he really wouldn't mind seeing Elliot ass-up, that pale, toned bottom red and radiating heat, and... and he really needed to stop watching questionable porn, for God's sake. He didn't want to spank Elliot. Especially not for doing exactly what Jamie had asked, and doing it so damned well.

"Closer later," Jamie muttered, his arm slipping around Elliot's waist, pulling the man against his side. And apparently he'd been louder than he'd meant to be, because Jeremy was laughing and so were the others, and God, Jamie just knew he was blushing.

"So, Elliot, what do you do?" This time the question came from James, who had been one of the strongest supporters of the Dads' hoped-for Jamie and Michael relationship. Jamie was almost sure James was trying to be nasty. He had to already know, after all, what with Dad and David never keeping their mouths shut about Jamie's love life, or lack thereof.

"James," he started, giving the man a warning look, but Elliot shook his head and kissed Jamie's cheek, which was just... strange. Good-strange, but still.

"It's okay, darlin'," Elliot announced, looking determined. "These are your friends. Your Dads' friends. They're just curious. I'm a personal trainer," he directed the last toward James. "It's a good job, and I like it. And before you ask, no. I never went to college. I'm twenty-four, I like dancing and reading and movies with car chases and explosions, but I've been known to watch films with subtitles, too. Mostly French ones, even though I don't speak the language. My family is in Alabama, but we don't talk since they put me out for being 'a sick, perverted freak.' My older brother's a veteran, got back from Iraq a few years back. Oh, he's gay, too. I guess it really is genetic. Anything else... James?"

And, oh, Jamie just wanted to crow at the way James was blinking, but he figured Elliot had already done enough damage.

"Just... just one thing," and damn, James was like a dog with a bone, which had to mean that David had put him up to the whole question and answer session. "Jamie's thirty-four, and he's very successful. But he's in Boston and you're... not. So what exactly is it that he does for you that makes it worthwhile for such a young stud to be satisfied with only seeing his lover once every month or two?"

"James!" Damn it, Jamie had had enough. If David really had put James up to this, Jamie would be having a long, hard talk with the man before the night was through. "This is a wedding, for God's sake, and Elliot is my guest..."

"No." It came from Elliot, and that was enough to stop Jamie's words, mid-sentence. "No, Jamie. I know you know this guy, and I know you're just trying to protect me, but darlin'... sometimes a man's gotta fight his own battles, right? So let me." And damned if the fire in Elliot's eyes hadn't changed, turning from taunting to militant in a heartbeat, or however long it had taken James to get his last words out.

"Fine," Jamie growled, his arm growing tighter around Elliot's waist. "Go for it, sweetheart." Because he wasn't going to call Elliot baby; that much was for damned sure.

Elliot smiled, then turned a less pleasant expression on James. Jamie thought he saw the man pale and it made him proud, for some odd reason.

"If you're trying to say that I'm using Jamie for his money," Elliot sneered, "I haven't asked him for a thing, and he hasn't offered. If he did, I'd be fucking offended, man. Yeah, he makes more than me. He probably has some crazy amount of student loans and shit, too. And I do okay. You ever hired a trainer, *James*?"

Elliot's sneer grew deeper as he looked the man up and down a time or two. "Never mind. I can see that you haven't. Point is, we don't come cheap, not if we're any good. And I'm very, *very* good. I may work out of a gym, but I don't work *for* the gym. They schedule my clients, I use their space, people join and keep coming back because I'm there, and the gym takes a percentage of my fees. Everyone wins. Simple concept, right? So after their cut, I clear about sixty bucks an hour."

Jamie knew he wasn't the only one of the group who was surprised by the figure. He and Elliot had never talked about their incomes, aside from Elliot's assertion that he "did all right" when Jamie asked if Elliot needed gas money for the drive up with the vases.

"And if you really want to know what Jamie 'does for me,'" Elliot added, smirking suddenly, "I'd invite you to come over tonight so you could see for yourself, but I don't like you that much. Or at all. So I guess you'll just have to fucking *wonder* what a guy like Jamie -- hot, smart, and with a fine fucking cock -- could possibly do for me, won't you? I can guarantee you, it makes me scream. Every... damned... time."

And Elliot was finished talking, apparently, because he turned and those fine, soft lips were against Jamie's, just like that, and it was... God, it was about time, Jamie thought as he pushed a moan into Elliot's mouth and followed it with his tongue.

He had no idea of how long they stood there kissing. In fact, all Jamie knew was that when they eventually came up for air, James was gone, probably off somewhere bitching about how rude and uncouth Jamie's new boyfriend was, but that was fine. There had been a good six other people there during the whole thing. At least one of them, if not all, would let people know how Elliot had merely been defending himself. And James wasn't usually such an enormous asshole. Nobody would have been able to stand the man if he were.

Once again, Jamie thought that David was responsible, but the kiss had mellowed him out a little, even while making him tense in other ways. Dad and David's wedding reception wasn't the right time or place for the talk he was imagining. It could wait another day. Maybe two. However long it needed to wait, meaning as long as Elliot was in town. Once El was gone, though, all bets were off.

"You were amazing, sweetheart," Jamie said with a smile, his forehead resting against Elliot's. "Do you really make sixty bucks an hour? Because I'm not at all opposed to expensive gifts, you know." Jamie winked, and Elliot was laughing, and God, it sounded good.

"Hey, Jamie?" Elliot asked a few minutes later while they waited for the man behind the small bar in the corner of the patio to bring them their drinks, "I know this is kind of rude, but I have to ask."

And God, that didn't sound good. Was Elliot going to say something about that morning? About the way he'd acted all... domineering in the shower, which still gave Jamie shivers, just thinking about it? Christ, it had been good. More than good. Nearly perfect, in fact. The only way it could have been any better, Jamie admitted silently, would have been if they'd had condoms and lube in there... and Elliot had actually done it. Pushed in, opened Jamie up, let him feel that long, curved cock deep inside his body. Because lube would have been a necessity. Hell, Jamie couldn't even have taken more than one of Elliot's long, thick fingers without it. Not after the twinges he'd experienced from just the one when Elliot had been sucking Jamie's brains out through his cock, the night before. But Elliot hadn't even really tried in the shower. Not with a finger, and definitely not with anything more... substantial.

Still, Jamie knew he should be happy for as much as he'd had. Elliot between his legs, the man's hard shaft rubbing, sliding, pushing along Jamie's perineum, the pressure just right. He should be happy for the one small moment when Elliot's angle changed, and Jamie had felt that bulbous tip, shower-slick and hotter than sin, actually push at his hole.

They couldn't have done it then, even if Elliot had wanted to. Even if he'd been looser than two-plus years of nobody touching him there meant. They were clean, yes, but bare-naked sex wasn't something Jamie had ever done with someone he wasn't deeply involved with. Which meant it was something he'd never done. Nothing had ever been quite that serious. He'd come close a time or two, but... And Elliot wasn't interested in anything intense. Besides, even with the uncharacteristic degree of control Elliot had taken that morning, Jamie knew how much Elliot liked getting fucked. Hell, their time in the shower was probably as close as Elliot had ever gotten to topping a partner.

That was why Elliot had seemed so uncomfortable afterward, Jamie realized, as though a bulb had just come on in his head. Elliot had done something he hadn't expected to ever do, or close enough to it, and it had freaked the guy out. Was still freaking him out, what with the way Elliot had blushed earlier, and... and Elliot was looking at him, those pretty eyes worried, all of a sudden.

Jamie blinked, then gave Elliot a sheepish grin. "Sorry. I was just... thinking. What is it, sweetheart? And don't worry about being rude. You know you can ask me anything."

He watched as Elliot took a deep breath, watched as the man took a long swallow of beer, straight from the bottle. "Okay," Elliot said, smiling just a bit. "So far we've got Jamie, Jim, and that fucker James. Please tell me that's the end of it? Because seriously? If a Jimmy shows up next, my head's gonna explode just from trying to keep you all straight."

It actually took Jamie a minute to realize that Elliot was serious, but when he did, he set his drink down carefully, without even taking a sip. He took Elliot's beer from between those long fingers and set it down, as well. Then Jamie stepped closer and pressed his lips against Elliot's, hard.

"No Jimmy," he panted a few moments later, grinning as he pressed his forehead against Elliot's again in what was quickly becoming a favorite position. "But if we make the rounds, you can meet all the variations on Robert. We've got one with the full, formal name, plus a Rob, a Robbie, Bob... oh, and there's a Bobby, too, just for variety." Jamie chuckled. "Though I think Bobby's actual name is Roberto, but close enough." Jamie shrugged then laughed again, this time at Elliot's wide-eyed stare.

"Damn," Elliot muttered, shaking his head without moving away, "You Yankees like to laugh at us for nicknames like Bubba and Cooter, but at least we're original."

Jamie was still grinning when Alicia tapped him on the shoulder none too lightly, as even grown sisters had a tendency to do. "You need to stop making out with your boyfriend now, Jamie," she announced. "It's time for the toasts."

Oh, hell. God help him, Jamie thought. Prayed. Begged. He'd forgotten all about the damned toast. He didn't have a single thing prepared. And Alicia knew it. He could tell by the smug amusement in her eyes. "Don't worry, big bro," she said with a taunting grin, "I'll let you go first. That way, my amazing, completely perfect toast will make everyone forget your crappy attempt."

Damned if Jamie didn't hope she was right, too. "Fine. And Alicia? Thanks." He sighed and tried to collect his thoughts, but it was all a blur, suddenly. Everything.

"Just say something about exchanging the same rings again meaning that they were right the first time, and that their love is like the rings. Full circle, no beginning, but more importantly, no ending," Elliot advised in a whisper. "Eternal blah-blah-blah. Married people love that kind of shit. You'll be great, darlin'. Now, go."

Jesus, Elliot had just saved his ass, Jamie realized as he stood there in front of his Dads, his sister, even his mom, though her husband hadn't come. Not with the clichéd suggestions about eternity and such, but with one single word. "Beginning."

He closed his eyes for just a moment, then held up his glass of champagne in the standard toasting position. Then he began to speak.

"Okay, seriously?" Elliot asked as he stared at Jamie from the passenger seat of Jamie's car. "David -- stuck up 'I'm so much better than you that I can't even find the words' David-- was a construction worker when he met your Dad?" Because of all the things Elliot could have

imagined David being, that wasn't even on the list. "Seriously. Like... boots and jeans. Hard hat. Hammer."

Jamie was laughing, and Elliot seriously thought he'd never seen anything so fine as Jamie, happy and in a tux. Fuck, when had he turned into the kind of guy who liked suits at all, much less the suit-of-all-suits?

"More like nail gun and power drill, El. But yeah. Back in the beginning, David was working one of Dad's sites. Everyone called him Dave then. And trust me, you think he's a pain now? Christ, when I first met him, he was so damned defensive... I got lucky with him, though... and not like that! God, I was fourteen! But he was. Well. Let's just say he wasn't as closed off with me as he was with people his own age. And again, Elliot. *Fourteen!* Besides, I've never been into older men." Jamie shrugged and grinned, and Elliot couldn't help the way his eyes dropped to Jamie's hands on the steering wheel, just watching those fingers clench and relax as Jamie maneuvered them through traffic.

"Uh-huh..."

"So David was a little bit... protective of himself. I guess it was because he was gay and in a field like construction. He wasn't exactly out at work, from what I remember. In fact," Jamie went on, "I recall one weekend when I was at Dad's. David was there, too, and that was strange because Dad didn't really hide the fact that he was gay, but he didn't usually have his lovers around when we were there. Not unless it was really serious. Uh, "we" meaning me, Alicia, and Joss. But David was there, and he was all bruised up. Dad was really pissed off, too." Jamie shrugged again. "Then again, I guess he had a right. I mean, someone had beaten David up. Dad and David weren't even together then, but I think Dad always blamed himself."

And damn. The last thing Elliot had really wanted was any reason not to dislike David. The man was a jackass, after all. "But how did that work out?" Elliot wondered aloud. "I mean, Russell's like... I don't know. I was gonna say 'old money,' but I have a feeling that means something different up here than it does back home. And David... he's like that, too. But he wasn't before. Unless he was doing construction for fun, but that doesn't make any sense, right? So how... what happened?"

The rest of the drive was interesting, if only because Elliot suddenly had all sorts of ammunition to use against David. Assuming he ever got unlucky enough to have to spend time with the man. It was also boring as hell, because all Elliot really wanted was to be at Jamie's house, naked and spread out on the big bed while Jamie did him so good that he would still be walking funny in a week.

"We're here," Jamie murmured, a hand on Elliot's knee dragging Elliot from his thoughts, though his cock was slower to follow. Even when Elliot looked through the windshield and saw that they were half a block from McGinty's, his cock didn't seem to realize that there wasn't going to be sex right then.

"Uh... I thought we were going ho... to your place." Fuck, had he almost called Jamie's place "home"? Really? God, he needed to get laid. And he would if Jamie would just turn the damned car around and take them there. Then Jamie's hand was moving on Elliot's thigh, and Elliot moaned.

It was a soft moan. A quiet moan, even. Nearly silent, in fact, but Jamie clearly heard it because that hand stopped, squeezed, and that wasn't really helping with Elliot's not so little problem. "Jamie..."

"We're just stopping in for a glass of wine, sweetheart," Jamie murmured, and Elliot's heart was racing, just like that, at hearing the endearment when they were away from the wedding party. "Vincent would never forgive us if he didn't have a chance to see us in all our finery."

Fuck, he was starting to wonder why Jamie was so concerned about God damned Vincent. In fact... "Okay. Wait. Explain. Um, now would be good. Because you said you don't go for the... fully fruity, but we're here again, because of fucking Vincent!"

Jamie was laughing. Laughing hard and long. It was... annoying. "What?"

"Sorry," Jamie finally said, leaning over and kissing him lightly, and Elliot thought he should maybe ask about Vincent more if it got him sweet little kisses like that. Except he didn't want sweet, he reminded himself. Sweet was for people like Jim and Mike. Even Jamie's Dad and that jackass David. Not him.

"Sorry," Jamie said again. "I thought I told you before, but I guess not. Uh, I've mentioned my assistant, Angela, right? Well, Vincent's her youngest brother, and Angela's been with me since I first started out. Even followed me when I opened my own practice, so she's sort of like family. So is he. Hell, he would have been at the wedding today, but he's already used all his personal days. Which means he's expecting us to stop by and let him drool over us in our tuxedos, since he couldn't do it earlier." Then Jamie blushed, and Elliot decided it was the hottest thing he'd ever seen.

"Fine," Elliot grumbled, though he figured his smile put the lie to his tone, "I never mess with 'family.' But if I get charged extra for spit on my tux, I'm sending you the bill."

And Jamie was laughing again, saying something about saliva being the least of the stains there would be, and Elliot nearly pulled something getting out of the car, he was moving so fast.

A quick glass of wine, let Vincent oooh and aaah over them... and then he and Jamie could go back to the house and do what Elliot had been dreaming about for weeks. Or most of it, anyway.

"Get a move on," he snapped, winking to soften the demand. "I have plans for you, Jamie, and they don't involve wine. Or Vincent." And oh, yeah. Didn't the way Jamie was suddenly rushing have Elliot grinning to beat the band.

"In and out, Jamie," he said softly when they reached the door of the restaurant. "In and out. So we can go back to your place for some, uh... *more* in and out, okay?"

Yeah... yeah, Jamie wanted him, all right. Hell, Jamie almost ripped the door off its hinges, he wanted Elliot so bad.

Good.

Chapter Ten

Well, Vincent had been stunned, all right, Jamie thought with a grin. Stunned and speechless for a good thirty seconds, right before nearly proving Jamie right and actually drooling on Elliot's tuxedo.

That hadn't happened, thank God, because then they would have been stuck at McGinty's for at least another hour while Vincent apologized, rather than the fifteen minutes it had taken Jamie and Elliot to swallow their wine and escape with... well, not with their dignity intact, because Jamie was just about a hundred percent sure that Vincent knew they were running off to fuck, but he just didn't care.

Dignity was overrated, Jamie had decided. And it didn't matter who knew how hot they were for each other right then. It only mattered that they were there. In his house. His bedroom. Still in their tuxedos, but that was fine. Undressing Elliot in a tux would be like unwrapping a gift. Assuming they ever managed to stop kissing, anyway.

Christ, it was a miracle that they'd made it up the stairs, considering the way they'd been attached at the lips from the moment the front door had closed behind them. He had a vague recollection of bumping into the banister as they started up, but that was all. Just... front door. Lips. Bedroom. Lips. Nothing in between. But nothing in between mattered, Jamie reminded himself with the tiny portion of his mind that wasn't consumed with arms and heat and mouths, and cocks rubbing together through too much fabric.

It took enormous effort, but he finally managed to pull himself away from Elliot's hot, wet kisses, breath pushing harshly from his own lungs as he stared into Elliot's eyes. "Don't come in the tux," Jamie managed to say, even while his hands left Elliot's ass to move up a little, to find the fastening of the cummerbund and undo it. "I have plans for your cock, sweetheart. Want to see it bouncing while you ride me."

Then Elliot was groaning even more, those hips just rocking away while Jamie dropped the satin sash to the floor and tried to manipulate button and zipper; then his hands were suddenly free because Elliot was a good three feet away, his chest heaving while those eyes just... burned.

"Say that again... and I really... *will* come in my pants," Elliot hissed, and Jamie could see the truth of it in the tension holding Elliot still as a statue, and damn. He'd have to try that some other time. Sometime when they weren't so desperate, so rushed and desirous of skin and cocks and sweat and seed.

"Hurry," Jamie ordered, his hands suddenly busy with his own suit. Because he'd wanted to undress Elliot, but there was no way he'd manage to hold out if he had that body under his hands, clothed or not. Christ, he wasn't going to last long enough to do more than *touch* El, this time. But he could for damned sure see to it that they were on the bed, hot skin sliding on equally heated flesh when they came. He could make sure that they were covered in each others' fluids, their scents mixed before they started round two. Because there was no way Jamie wouldn't be getting it up again. He might be slowly sneaking up on forty, but Elliot made him feel... fuck. Just made him *feel*.

His dry cleaner was going to be amused, Jamie knew, when he brought in his tux. Jamie had never abandoned a suit of any kind on the floor before, and the wrinkles from however long it lay there were bound to show. But Jamie didn't care right then because Elliot was just a few feet away, wearing nothing but those tuxedo pants. Even Elliot's feet were bare, and that was just too damned hot.

Then Elliot's hands were at the waistband of those pants and there was skin being revealed as the button was twitched, the zipper drawn down... and when Elliot stepped out of the pool of black around his ankles, Jamie could have died from the knowledge that... Elliot had been bare under those slacks. All day long, no boxers or briefs. Jamie could have reached right in at any point and... "Oh, God. El..."

Just like that, there was skin against his own. There were Elliot's arms around his waist, Elliot's mouth on his neck, and Jamie couldn't hold back the cry that felt like it had been building for weeks. Months. Ages, anyway. "El! Fuck, El! Fuck!" And God, he meant it. Fuck. In whatever manner, whatever fashion. Just fuck. Let there be some God damned fucking, for Christ's sake! After the uncontrollable coming, of course, because Jamie was already doing that, and he could feel Elliot's shaft pulsing too, and... damn. They hadn't even made it to the bed. Had barely made it out of their clothes. Christ, they had it bad.

The thought only made Jamie smile as he uttered one last short, sharp cry before his own hold on Elliot's shoulders dragged the man back to collapse over him, on him, but thankfully also on the mattress.

"Jesus," Jamie groaned, his body still shaking from the immediacy of need they'd just expended. "Jesus, sweetheart. Needed that." He would have been embarrassed, except Elliot was nodding against his chest, and Jamie was too busy enjoying the sensation to blush.

"Fuck, yeah," Elliot muttered. "Been needing that for months, darlin'. Still want you to fuck me, though."

God, Elliot really was just that open. That honest. Jamie loved it.

"Going to, El. Just give me a minute, okay? Because... well, you can feel what even the thought of being in your sweet ass again does to me." He knew Elliot could feel it. Hell, Jamie could feel it. His cock was coming back to life, as though it hadn't spent itself just seconds earlier. "I really

do want you to ride me again, sweetheart," he added. "Will you do that, El? Let me watch you taking me in?"

Oh... Elliot was getting hard again, too. It was... fucking perfect. Not quite as perfect as Elliot's next words, though, because "Ride you until you think your head's gonna explode, then ride you some more 'til it really *does*, darlin'..." was pretty damned hard to beat, perfection-wise. Especially if Elliot followed through on those promises, which Jamie just knew he would.

"Good," Jamie groaned, dragging condoms and lube from the drawer beside the bed by touch, since he wasn't about to make Elliot move quite yet. "Missed your ass, sweetheart. Love talking to you all the time, but it's nothing like as good as this, you know?"

Jamie hadn't expected to say that out loud, but he didn't have even a second in which to regret it because Elliot was nodding against his chest, those strong hips rocking on Jamie's body just a little bit. Then "I know," Elliot answered. "Phone's fine. This is better. And you're hard, Jamie. Let's get with the fucking, already."

God. He did love a man with a plan, Jamie thought as he handed over the lube and latex. "I want to watch," he added. "God, I could watch you forever. As long as you'll let me." It was true, too. Surprising, but true.

Elliot nodded, looking entirely happy to be where he was right then, kneeling over Jamie's body, lube in hand. "Yeah... fuck you all night long, darlin'. Long as you want."

Once again, Jamie hadn't planned on speaking out loud, but he was, because he heard himself saying it. Saying the one thing that would end this whole 'casual sex whenever you're in town' thing. "Wish you would, sweetheart." And then he was blushing. Shaking, even, because Elliot didn't. Wouldn't. Had never even suggested that they do it. And Elliot was frozen. Stock still. Staring.

Then Elliot's tongue was creeping out, wetting those soft lips, and Jamie steeled himself for the "thanks for the offer, but that's not my thing" speech. He was already trying to prepare himself to lie -- hopefully convincingly -- when Elliot cleared his throat and sat back, that perfect ass resting on Jamie's thighs.

He watched while Elliot obviously went through some mental gymnastics, and if it took that long for the man to figure out how to reply, then Jamie knew he was doomed. "Look, El," he tried, forcing himself to speak, "I..."

"No," Elliot said carefully, so carefully that Jamie wondered whether he'd offended Elliot more than he'd thought. "No, just... Sorry. I didn't think you. I mean, you never said... but if you mean it. I mean, if that's something you..." And Elliot was frowning all of a sudden, then sitting back harder, his long, curved cock fully hard, which Jamie hoped was a good sign.

"Ah, fuck," Elliot finally growled after nearly five seconds of silence, "Truth is, I'd love to fuck you, Jamie. Didn't think you did that, but if you really want... I'm there. Later. Because I haven't

been fucked since... God, you *know* when. So I'm gonna ride you. Now, okay? And I'll call in to work, because I'm staying another day. Or more importantly, another night."

Oh, Jesus. There was nothing Jamie could say to that. Nothing he could do, either, other than nod and moan when Elliot slicked up two digits and pressed them deep inside his own body. Then that slick opening was right there at Jamie's suddenly sheathed tip, and... oh. Oh, God yes.

It was even better than he remembered. For Elliot, too, because he'd never seen anyone rock and writhe and slide the way El was doing. Never felt anything like it. Not even with Elliot, and though Jamie hadn't admitted it to himself until just that moment, that first lost weekend with Elliot had set the bar so high, he doubted anyone else would have been able to match it, much less surpass it.

Fuck. Fuck, yeah. This was exactly what he'd been needing, Elliot admitted yet again, his body moving faster, harder, taking Jamie's thick cock in over and over again. Something good; right. Something as unlike the night lurking at the back of his brain -- when the man inside him hadn't been Jamie, and hadn't stopped -- as possible. Something... well, not sweet, because this definitely wasn't, but it was... something.

Elliot wasn't going to examine the thought too closely, of course. Mostly because he was too busy not thinking, but just feeling instead. Feeling the long, slow slide of Jamie's hands on his skin. The rise and fall of the lightly haired chest beneath his own palms. Feeling the subtle, constant burn as he rose and fell, hips rocking, twisting on and around Jamie's thick shaft. Yeah, he was feeling, all right.

"Jesus!" Jamie gasped the word like he couldn't hold it in. "Jesus, El! God, you..." Oh, hell yeah. That was it. That was what Elliot had been looking for. The perfect angle to take every last bit of Jamie's cock deep. And it was so fucking deep. Deeper inside him than Elliot thought anyone had ever been, including Jamie himself. So deep, so good.

"Fuck... fuck, J. Yeah, that's... Fuck!" And Jamie was shifting, must be pressing his feet to the mattress because damned if the way Jamie was rocking up didn't suddenly have some force behind it and "Fuck! Yes, yes, right... Jesus fucking Christ, right there, Jamie!"

It was quick. Too quick, but not fast enough, either, but it didn't matter, not to Elliot. Not when he could feel that thick fucking cock swelling, battering away at his prostate, driving harder and even deeper than before now that Jamie had some leverage. And his own cock was leaking, dripping, throbbing, and bouncing above tight, hard balls that pulsed, ached, demanded satisfaction.

Jamie was giving him that, too. Big, hot cock just slamming up now, filling Elliot's hole almost beyond its capacity, and it was too fucking good to last. Too damned right.

"Jamie... Jamie, please..." He was begging, but it was fine, it was the good kind of begging, the "I know you're gonna give me what I need" kind, and Elliot knew that much was true. Jamie was going to give him exactly what he needed. Always had, if Elliot thought about it, which he wasn't doing. "Yes. God, yes..."

He didn't know, couldn't be sure of what Jamie was saying in return, and Elliot had no idea of whether that was because of the ringing in his ears or the fact that Jamie seemed to be grunting more than talking, but it was good either way. Damned near perfect, in fact, which should have scared him but just... didn't. Then Jamie's hands were on his hips, fingers digging hard into Elliot's skin, and that was it. That was what he'd been waiting for, that small pain that proved Jamie was just as helpless as he was in the grip of this... fucking overwhelming moment.

"Now," Elliot groaned, those hands helping him, Jamie moving him as fast as Elliot wanted to go, and when he slammed down again, felt the thick, heated flesh pressing roughly along that little spot inside him, Elliot yelled.

He yelled and arched, hips grinding down so hard he could feel Jamie's sac, and when Jamie only gripped him harder, tighter, and Elliot felt the first shuddering burst of contained heat inside him, he shattered. Broke into what felt like a million pieces, even as Jamie shuddered and gasped, pushing up like he was trying to crawl inside Elliot's body completely. It was... God, it was good.

"Jesus Christ," he heard minutes later as he lay there, sprawled over Jamie, the man's slowly softening cock still buried deep inside Elliot's body. "Jesus Christ," Jamie said again, the whisper just as shaky as Elliot felt. "Unngh. That was, um..."

"Yeah," Elliot agreed, his lips barely moving for that one word while other answers ran through his head. Things like "amazing" and "fucking unbelievable" and "perfect" and "scary." Because it had been all of those things, and more. But especially the last two. Fucking perfect. Fucking petrifying. Christ.

Chapter Eleven

It had been the unexpectedly powerful emotions between them that had sent Elliot running as soon as Jamie was asleep. Jamie knew that. He even understood it, sort of, because it had all felt so... deep, so real. Too real for Elliot to handle, obviously. And too real for Jamie to just brush off.

He hadn't planned on anything like this. Hadn't even considered it as a possibility, but there it was. He'd gone and fallen for Elliot somehow, and it didn't matter that Elliot was too young for him. Didn't matter that the man lived hours away. Hell, it didn't even matter that, from the looks of things, Jamie would never see Elliot again.

Jamie had fallen. Fallen hard and far, and there was nothing to do for it except pretend that he hadn't. And hide it from the world in the hopes that nobody else would ever know what a fool he'd been.

So he went to work. He counseled his patients. He went home. He stopped by to see the Dads every week or so, though that was always uncomfortable now. They were still under the impression that Jamie and Elliot were an item, after all. Then again, so was Jamie's heart, even though his head knew that nothing could be further from the truth.

He ate at McGinty's every other night, just like he'd always done, but Vincent didn't call him "Doctor D" anymore. Didn't ask about Elliot, either, which was a relief. Jamie wouldn't have known what to say.

He thought it would get easier with time. Hoped so, anyway, though the three and a half weeks since the... incident... didn't seem to support that hypothesis. It would have to get better, Jamie told himself on a near hourly basis. It just had to. He'd never felt so damned alone in his life.

He wondered sometimes whether this was how Jim had felt when Michael ran off, and finally decided that if it was, he owed Jim an apology. Not for anything he'd said to Jim, but for the things he'd thought about the man. And for the first time since he'd seen Michael and Jim together, Jamie really and truly wished that Michael had decided to stick with *him*. Michael never could have hurt him like this, even if he'd tried. Not even close. No chance.

It was a selfish wish, and Jamie knew it. He didn't even really mean it, most days. He was just... tired. Yeah, tired. Tired and beating himself up inside, because he should have known better.

He'd thought it more than once, hadn't he? That Elliot was young and still exploring. Wasn't ready for relationships or anything more permanent than what should have been a casual, long-

distance, regular fuck. It would never be that now, though, because no matter what Elliot was ready for, the guy had obviously recognized that last night together as something much more. Elliot wouldn't be willing to admit it, of course, but he knew. Jamie *knew* Elliot knew.

He found himself getting angry, sad, amused at the oddest times, too, and that wasn't something Jamie had expected. Like when he went in to his hall closet for an umbrella and came out holding one of those stupid foam rubber swords. He'd been late for work that morning, simply because he'd stood there for God knew how long, remembering that day on the street.

"Christ, Jamie," he told himself harshly, "get a grip! It's not the end of the world." But it sort of felt like it should be. Like everything in his life had changed so dramatically with that one night, it should have affected the universe. It hadn't, though.

"Because in the grand scheme of things, I'm not even a blip on the damned radar. The ocean doesn't ever notice one grain of sand when it crashes over it. Not even if it's been struck by lighting and melted to glass." Christ. He was depressing even himself. Again.

He'd considered medication about four days after he'd woken up alone and without even a note from El. But that would be cheating, and... he'd earned his heartbreak, God damn it. Possibly even deserved it for being foolish enough to commit himself -- no matter how unknowingly -- to the last person who was right for him. So, no meds. He would ride this painful train to the end of the line... or until it ran itself off the rails.

And he would do everything he could to keep himself busy. Busy enough that he wouldn't have time to dwell on everything he'd done wrong, or even wonder about who Elliot was fucking against the walls of that damned club Jamie hated. It was none of his business. Elliot had made that perfectly clear.

It was a good plan, and it worked for a while, but four weeks later, Jamie had read every back issue of the journals associated with his craft. He'd purchased the updated versions of his school texts and gone through them, noting the differences. He'd worked his way through the entire backlog of DVDs he'd bought but never watched before... and he still wanted to scream every time his fingers paused on the case for *Ronin*.

Three more weeks, and Jamie was in possibly the best shape of his life from the three hours a day he spent at the gym, forcing his body into endless reps as he tried to find the zone and lose himself in it, but it never worked. He wasn't eating right, wasn't sleeping anything like enough, and Jamie had a sneaking suspicion that his work was suffering. Fuck, he'd even snapped at Angela that afternoon, demanding to know what he paid her for when she couldn't find the *fucking file* on one of his new patients.

By the time he'd found it sitting in the middle of his desk, right where he'd left it, she'd been gone, though she'd left him a note on her sticky pad. "*You know I love you, and I get that you're going through something right now, but if you're not acting human by Monday, I quit. Love, Ang.*" It was still more than Elliot had left.

"Jesus fucking Christ, I'm pathetic." Which wasn't actually news, but Jamie hoped that reminding himself of it frequently might help to pull him out of his... whatever the fuck was worse and deeper than a funk.

He heard the phone ringing then, but he didn't care. It would be David or Dad, or maybe even Michael, though Michael hadn't been calling as much lately, what with Jamie never answering.

Then the machine in the hall picked up, and Jamie realized it was his house line, and... okay. The Dads, then. He still didn't feel like talking.

"Nobody can take your call right now," Jamie heard his own voice saying, "but leave a message and I'll get back to you as soon as possible."

The loud beeping noise, then silence, and Jamie was glad, but then...

"All right. Enough," Dad. Great. "I've had enough of this moping around. You're a grown man, Jamie, and I'm proud to call you my son, but right now you're acting like a spoiled brat who's had his favorite toy taken away. Now, you were supposed to be here almost an hour ago, so unless you want me to have David drag himself away from the party to come get you? You'll make yourself presentable and get your ass over here. I mean it, son. You have thirty minutes."

Another beep as Russell hung up, and Jamie sighed. He'd actually forgotten that he'd promised to be at the Dads' little gathering that night, and if he'd remembered earlier, he could have called and bowed out gracefully. He'd done just that for the last seven weeks, so the Dads would have been okay. But he'd forgotten, and now he had to at least make an appearance. Anything else would be rude, since he was already late.

"Shit," Jamie muttered, even as he forced himself to go upstairs to change. Sweat pants and the ratty T-shirt he was in were nowhere close to "presentable."

Twenty-seven minutes later, he was pulling up a block away from the Dads' house, and apparently this party was smaller than usual because he'd actually gotten a spot that close. "Thank God for small favors," he sighed before getting out of the car. Less people meant less time spent trying to seem interested in whatever they might have to say about... whatever.

"It's about time," David announced when Jamie finally walked into the house. "You're looking... horrible, actually. To those of us who know you, I mean. I'm sure you look utterly divine to those who don't. Come along, dear boy. Your expression alone absolutely cries out for a drink. Possibly twelve. Something strong, yes?"

"God, yes. Please."

Two drinks later, Jamie was starting to think that maybe Russell and David had been right. It was good that he was out around people. Reminded him that there was an actual world that didn't revolve around him and his bruised heart. He didn't even object when David's friend Stewart prodded him into dancing. What could it hurt, after all? It was just a dance.

So they spun around the room, and Stewart's arms felt good. Wrong, but good. The wrong arms, Jamie told himself, but still the most human contact he'd had in ages. It was... grounding, in a way. He wasn't actually paying attention to anything Stewart was saying, of course, because he knew Stewart's spiel nearly by heart. It was always the same. His new car, the boat he and Robert were restoring, how glad he still was that he'd gotten out of his dot-com company before it had gone belly up years earlier. Yeah, he knew Stewart. But Jamie was still smiling just a bit when the man returned him to the bar.

"Did you have fun out there, my son?" Okay. Russell was rhyming. At him. Which was only strange because his Dad hadn't bothered for the last however long. It still made Jamie laugh, though. Maybe *because* of how long it had been.

"I suppose I did," he answered after a moment, taking the rum and Coke the kid behind the bar offered. "I mean, it didn't suck."

Russell made a tsk-ing noise, which just made Jamie smile a little more. His Dad's next words wiped that smile away, though. In a heartbeat.

"Look, son. Jamie. You know that David and I both love you. And you know that we've always had your best interests at heart. It's possible that we were both a bit too... resistant... to the idea of you and your young man." Dad actually looked sorry, which was good, but also not helpful. It hadn't been anything that his Dads had said or done that made Elliot leave, though Jamie wondered now if maybe they thought they were to blame.

"Dad..." he started, but Russell shook his head.

"No, son. Just hear me out." Jamie nodded slowly, and Dad went on. "You haven't said so, but we'd have to be complete idiots if we didn't know that ended. You've been... well, you haven't been yourself, Jamie-boy. So -- and I'd really appreciate it if you'd listen instead of flying off the handle and taking the broom with you -- I thought it might be a good idea to introduce you to a very nice young man we've gotten to know rather well over the last few weeks. He's new in town. In fact, he's been staying in your old room while finding work and looking for an apartment."

Oh, "Jesus fucking Christ! Are you completely insane?" And Dad had been right to worry that he was going to be pissed, Jamie realized, because he was for damned fucking sure pissed. Furious. Probably would have hit Russell for even suggesting it if the man hadn't been his father.

"You warned me, yes! But I made the decision, Dad! Me! So it's not your fault that I'm messed up, okay? And you don't have to fix it! Especially not by setting me up with some jackass you met... where? The gas station? Grocery store? Fuck, Dad! I don't care who this asshole is, I'm not going to fucking date some guy just because you think I've been... what was the word? Moping! So I love you, too. You *and* David. But you can just... fuck off, got it? I don't want to meet any new *guy*!" Jesus, he was breathing so hard, he probably couldn't have said anything more, even if he'd wanted to. And, Jamie noticed, his vision was blurry, too, because he could

swear Russell was grinning, which didn't make any sense, considering the things Jamie had just said, but...

"We were hoping you'd say that," David announced as he joined Russell, and damned if David wasn't grinning, too. "In fact, we were rather counting on it, dear boy. Perhaps you might do us the favor of turning around. And never let it be said that your father and I can't change our minds. Old dogs may not *like* new tricks, but they can actually learn, if given enough time."

Okay, that made no sense at all, Jamie thought, but he was suddenly feeling a strange sort of tense anticipation. Not from himself, but from the people around him, all of whom had been witness to his little fit. And somehow he couldn't help doing as David asked.

He turned around, then blinked, breath caught in his chest as his eyes clearly lied to him. There was no way. It just wasn't possible that he was seeing... No.

"Um. Hi, darlin'."

It was Elliot's voice. It looked like Elliot. Hell, Jamie even thought he was seeing Michael and Jim, right behind El, and that was just...

"No." It was more a whisper than a scream, so Jamie took a breath and said it again, forcing the word out on a shout. "No!" And then he was pushing past the apparition, heading for the door, and he was out in the cooler night air, his fists clenched hard against his sides. He'd lost it. He'd finally, completely lost his mind. He'd have to check himself in for observation or something, and wouldn't that just be fantastic?

He could see the headlines already. "Local Psychologist Under Psychological Care -- Imagines Former Non-Lover Everywhere," and fuck! He was rhyming just like Dad, and...

"Jamie! Jamie, wait!" God, it still sounded like Elliot, even though Jamie knew it couldn't be. Elliot was in Wentworth, fucking whoever the lucky guy for the night was. Jesus, Jamie hated that fucking nameless bastard. Envied him too, damn it.

"Come on, Jamie! Just give him a chance!" And that sounded like Michael, which only made Jamie that much more certain that he was hallucinating.

"Fuck off, you're not here, neither of you is here." Except Jamie was pretty sure they were, though he didn't want to admit it. He had no idea of what to say or do if Elliot and Michael were really there, and he thought he'd seen Jim, too, which only made it more likely that they were all real because Michael wouldn't go anywhere without Jim. But if they were really there, then... then the Dads had been trying to set him up with... Elliot?

"But they hate you," Jamie heard himself saying, and God, it did have to be Elliot because nobody else would have known what Jamie meant.

Then Jamie felt warm hands on his shoulders, just resting there, and Elliot's voice was speaking softly, slowly, right into his ear. Jamie even thought he could feel heat radiating from Elliot's body, it seemed so close.

"No," he heard. "No, Jamie. They didn't trust me. We met that first time, and they saw this uneducated kid who'd latched on to their son. They assumed some things. Then I left and they sort of..."

And thank God for that reminder because he'd been about to do something truly stupid, Jamie realized. Like turn around and kiss Elliot, then take the man home and lose his heart yet again. Wake up alone and even more pathetic than he already was.

"Tell them... thanks, but no thanks," Jamie said flatly, pushing himself away from Elliot's warm hands and hot breath. "Maybe they can set you up with some other guy they meet. They seem to collect them, after all. But this? Us...? It's done."

With that, he strode off to his car, ignoring Elliot's voice and the obvious anguish that was there.

He drove carefully, well aware of the two and a half drinks he'd had, and breathed a sigh of relief when he pulled into his spot in front of his house.

"I'm fine," Jamie told himself as he stripped and got into the shower. "I'm fine." And he was. It was just the water pouring hotly down his cheeks, just the trace amounts of chlorine in that same water making his eyes sting. He wasn't crying. Not even a little bit. He wasn't.

"This really isn't how I had expected tonight to pan out," Russell was saying, but Elliot couldn't quite force himself to respond. He was too busy replaying Jamie's words, hearing that dead tone to Jamie's voice. God, he felt like he'd ripped the man's heart out and torn it to bits.

And maybe he had, Elliot admitted. Maybe he really had, though not just a few minutes earlier. It was more likely that he'd done it when he'd crept out of Jamie's bed after that incredible bout of love making... then run back to Wentworth, fear and confusion filling every part of him, body and soul.

Elliot wasn't stupid. Never had been, his lack of interest in a college education aside. And he'd been fucking around for long enough to notice the difference between that and what had happened in Jamie's bed that last night. Hell, he'd noticed the difference before they'd even finished. He just hadn't wanted to admit it. When it had been over, though, and he'd been lying there on Jamie, feeling that latex-covered cock still inside him, twitching slightly as it softened, Elliot hadn't been able to deny what he knew.

God, he'd been scared. Fucking terrified. Enough so that running had seemed the only option. The confusion hadn't set in until he'd actually been back in Wentworth, with no interest in going to the club. Without even the tiniest curiosity about who he could score there.

He'd still gone out a time or two, and he'd even gotten hard from watching some of the guys parading around, but when it came down to it, he hadn't felt anything. Nothing real. And God, that was when he'd realized he hadn't been joking that afternoon so long ago, between mock sword-fighting and the brewery. Jamie really *had* ruined him for all other men. Without even trying.

And apparently, Elliot thought with a purely internal sigh of despair, he'd ruined Jamie, too. Broken him, somehow. Destroyed the sweet, kind nature that Elliot had only recently learned he loved.

That was another thing that had scared him. Love. Elliot had never thought he was the kind to fall in love. Hell, he'd been tolerant of it when other people went and fell. Sure he had. But he'd always thought they were saps. Fools. Idiots who had deliberately put their happiness in the hands of someone else. He'd never expected to learn that it wasn't always a choice, though, because he for damned sure hadn't ever intended to do it himself. And yet, here he was.

Yeah, here he was. In love. Capital 'L' Love. With Jamie. Who couldn't even stand to look at him, judging by the way the man had just walked away without even a glance after that first shocked moment.

"Fuck," Elliot found himself whispering, that one small sound silencing the voices around him. "Fuck," he said again, biting his lower lip, "what do I do now?"

"You woo him, dear boy," David announced over breakfast the next morning. "Much as Russell did me, when I refused to believe that someone like him could possibly be serious about wanting me. I didn't make it easy for my man, of course, but it did work. Obviously, because here we are, married. Again." And David blinked, which Elliot kind of thought meant the man still didn't quite believe it.

"Oh, great," Elliot grumbled. "Because I know so much about wooing, right? I mean, fuck! I've only ever dated once before, and I was sixteen. She was a girl. The closest I came to wooing her was buying her a sundae at DQ so she'd let me get to second base." He frowned. "The whole breast thing is weird. I mean, okay. Useful for babies and shit, but I still don't get the appeal."

Jim and Mike were even less help, once they'd stopped laughing. Then again, they'd never dated until after they'd become an official couple. Hell, Elliot wouldn't be surprised if they came up to Boston again sometime soon to get hitched themselves.

It was Russell who finally managed to make some sense of things for Elliot, and he thought it might be because Russell had dated long before the man had discovered his own bent. Women, of course, but still.

"Elliot," Russell said, after the others were off at work and sightseeing, respectively, "Jamie is my son and I love him. But he's also an incredibly stubborn individual, underneath all those

manners. I blame his mother for that particular trait, of course, though you must promise never to repeat as much."

Elliot swore, of course, and Russell continued. "He's been a wreck ever since the wedding. Or just after, in any case. And I'm fairly certain that he blames himself for everything that happened between you two. In fact -- and I'm no psychologist, but I am his father, so I may have some insight that even a professional would lack -- I wouldn't doubt that he's beating himself up even more, now that he's seen you again."

Russell frowned, then sighed. "I suppose I should have expected as much, but I truly didn't. I assumed that seeing his heart's desire again and knowing that David and I approved would be enough. I honestly had no idea that he would react so... vehemently. But he did, and now you're feeling responsible. But you're not, Elliot. Ultimately, Jamie is responsible for his own actions and reactions. All you can do -- and I hope you will, son -- is prove to him, by whatever means necessary, that you intend to be a constant presence in his life. That if he accepts you, you will love him to the best of your ability for as much time as you two are granted."

Fuck. Just... fuck. Elliot knew that he wanted to be with Jamie. Wanted... God, he wanted so fucking much with the man. But hearing Russell just lay it out there like that made it seem so much more... Elliot didn't know what. Not more serious, because he was already as serious about Jamie as anyone could be. And not more real, either, because real was a given. Elliot wouldn't even be in Boston right then if he hadn't known what he was feeling was *real*.

More... God. Just more.

"So what do I do, Russ?" And fuck, he was begging again. "How do I... woo him, to quote your honey?"

Then Russell was chuckling and shaking his head. "I sent David tools every day for over a month, and believe me, that wasn't easy. Do you have any idea how creative I had to get, just so I wouldn't repeat? I mean, a drill is a drill, right? Fortunately, he was in school again by then, studying architecture, of course, so I was able to flesh that out with drafting tools, as well. But even when he finally agreed that we could date, he didn't believe that I really wanted him in my life, permanently, until I bought him the shed out back."

That made no sense to Elliot at all, because what did a shed have to do with anything? But it also sort of gave him hope, because if David had made Russell try that hard and they'd gotten things straightened out and were still together, as they clearly were, then... yeah. Still...

"I don't think Jamie's the electric screwdriver type, Russ." And Russell laughed.

"No... no, you're right about that, son. But you'll figure it out. You're a smart young man, Elliot. I have faith in you. So does Jamie, you know. He just doesn't trust himself right now." The "or you" was implied but unspoken, and Elliot decided he could live with that.

So he had a plan, sort of. He just needed to figure out how to put it into play.

"Fuck," Elliot groaned. "I am so screwed."

Chapter Twelve

The first package came as a surprise, what with Jamie knowing he hadn't ordered anything. The fact that it contained a vintage, unopened model car kit and no note was even more baffling. That didn't stop him from spending three nights putting the two hundred and some pieces together, then painting the finished product until he had a perfect miniature of a cobalt blue 1977 Ferrari to put on a hastily cleared shelf in his living room. He got a sense of accomplishment every time he looked at it.

The second delivery went to his office, and Jamie found himself blinking at the plastic-encased baseball that was signed by every player in the 1998 Red Sox line-up. That item went on his desk, the stand shining silver at him all day, almost like a promise.

The third item that showed up without warning was a weight belt, top of the line, and just like the first two presents, nothing Jamie would ever have bought for himself. New, though. Not semi-historical like the others.

It was... weird. Puzzling. Intriguing, even.

Angela thought so too when he told her, and, thank God, she hadn't actually quit.

"Okay," she said, her head cocked to one side, "So you've got cars, sports, and working out. Somebody knows you *way* too well, Doc. I can hardly wait to hear what comes next!"

Neither could Jamie, because for whatever reason, the anonymous gifts were helping him take his mind off of Elliot. Helping him feel... better, maybe, or at least not so scattered and lost.

It was when the next package came and Jamie opened it that he started to think about Angela's words, because she was right. Somebody did know him entirely too well. He hadn't even needed to see the certificate of authenticity to know that the jacket in the box in front of him was the one Val Kilmer had worn for maybe fifteen seconds in *Top Gun*.

It was kind of creepy, but Jamie could handle that. Creepy was better than the way he'd been feeling, and even if he had some sort of weird gift-giving stalker, maybe it was someone who would make him feel as semi-decent as he'd felt since the packages had started arriving. Like he wasn't a freak and stupid for regretting walking away from... but no. Elliot hadn't even called since, so that answered every question Jamie might have had.

He ignored the fact that he hadn't called Elliot. He could have. Or even Michael or Jim. But Jamie was the wronged party in this whole thing, damn it, so one of them should have called *him*, for fuck's sake.

Jamie pushed the thoughts away. He'd gotten good at that in the last week or so. Then he looked at the jacket in the box again and grinned a little as he pulled it out and tried it on. It fit like it was made for him, and it wasn't until he put his hands in the pockets while he modeled it for himself and the mirror that he felt the paper against his knuckles.

I'm sorry, the note said, and while he'd never seen Elliot's handwriting before, Jamie was almost a hundred percent certain that he was seeing it right then. *Please. Please let me see you. Let me explain. Please, Jamie. Please.* It wasn't signed, but Jamie knew for sure then. He just didn't know how he felt about it.

Well, that was a lie, Jamie admitted to himself. He knew exactly how he felt. He wanted to beat Elliot to a bloody pulp, wanted to kick his ass and dash his brains out with a rock. Wanted to slap him and punch him and kiss him hard, hold him close until neither of them had any thought of being anywhere but right there, held tightly together, and...

"God, I am so fucked up," Jamie whispered to his reflection. Then he looked at himself again. Really looked at himself in Val Kilmer's Iceman jacket, and he'd never known that Elliot was watching him so closely. Never realized that Elliot was seeing so deeply into him. But Elliot obviously had been, and Jamie couldn't decide whether that made him happy or furious.

Then he read the note again, seeing the "please"-es, finally understanding what they meant. Elliot was begging. And Elliot never begged. It didn't do any good, as Jamie remembered Elliot saying. But those words were still doing exactly that, and...

Our bench, Jamie texted to Elliot's phone, because he wasn't ready to talk to the man yet, and, *Ten tonight. I'll listen.* Just that. Nothing else. And it was only eight, so that should leave Elliot plenty of time to get there. If Elliot even remembered their bench, remembered... anything.

And if Elliot didn't show, Jamie told himself sternly, he would finally let this whole thing go. Move on. No matter how hard it might be.

Elliot found himself sitting on a bench alongside a street at a quarter to ten that night. He would have been there even earlier, but the other guys had all told him to relax. That if Jamie said ten, he meant ten. That didn't mean Elliot wasn't nervous, though.

Hell, Elliot knew he was nervous. Anxious. More worried than he'd ever been in his life, and that was saying something. A lot, in point of fact. And it only got worse as the numbers on his watch clicked slowly toward ten o'clock. He stared at his wrist, watching the countdown... count up... whatever.

Nine forty-nine, and no Jamie.

Nine fifty-two, and still no strong body anywhere near his own.

Nine fifty-eight, and Elliot was sure he'd be sitting there alone for the rest of the night. Then the numbers changed again, and when Elliot looked up from the glowing blue nine fifty-nine, he figured his gasp of relief was audible for a good twenty feet. Jamie seemed to hear it, anyway, and that was all Elliot cared about.

"You're here," Jamie said, and he sounded just as surprised as Elliot was to see Jamie. "I... you're really... Jesus, Elliot. What are you trying to do to me?"

And just like that, Elliot found himself standing in front of Jamie, the ten or so feet between them vanishing in the blink of an eye, it seemed like. "I'm trying to love you, darlin'," he heard himself whispering as his hands found Jamie's waist and held on tight. "Or... trying to get you to love me again, Jamie. Because it took me a while to know it, but... I do, Jamie. I do, darlin'. Even if you don't think you can trust me right now, I... fuck, Jamie. Love you. I was just so..." Elliot swallowed hard. "So freaked. But then I was gone and it was... God." He shivered. "Bad. It was bad, Jamie. Needed you, but I couldn't say. Couldn't do anything but be fucking miserable, and..."

And oh, Jamie's hands were on him, grabbing hold of his arms and pulling him closer, and Elliot couldn't quite manage to do anything but push into that touch. And babble, apparently.

"Wanted to call you so bad, darlin', I did, but I knew you'd be pissed at me; then, when I finally started to get what it all meant, I figured it was too late, and you're so fucking good, Jamie. Could have anyone you want, and I'm just me, y'know? So I was all settled on letting it go, on never feeling like that again, and then..." Oh, and then.

And then there were hot, hard lips on his, and Jamie's tongue reminding him of the man's flavor, and it was... God, Elliot wanted it to be good, but it wasn't. It was... strained. Like Jamie was just reacting while still feeling betrayed or whatever.

"Wait," Elliot groaned, pulling back from that desperate press of lips and tongue. "Wait, Jamie. Just... wait. Not like this. Not when you're so..." Elliot groaned. "I want you, darlin'. I do. Even more than the first time I saw you. And I'd love to just... jump in and go for it, but you're not sure, Jamie. You're not. I can tell. And I want you to be sure, okay? Because if we do this..." He groaned again. "We do this, Jamie, and there's no going back. Always figured if I ever had this kind of talk, it'd be the other way 'round, but... I want it all. I do. With you, Jamie. Got it? So... I think that means we need to talk, right?"

Elliot actually felt the moment when Jamie heard him, understood what he was saying. He felt it in the way those hands on his arms relaxed, though they kept their hold.

"You're too young," Jamie whispered once they were seated on their bench, side by side. "God, I know you're too young, El. You have years of meaningless sex ahead of you, and by the time

you're really ready to settle down, I'll be old and bitter and too fucking grumpy for you to even look at."

Fuck. Jesus *fuck*! Was that really what Jamie was thinking? Christ. "And?" Elliot pried, because there had to be more.

"And I'll hate you by then," Jamie said next, sounding resigned. "There's no way around it. I'll hate you for being out there, for still having sex. For being you, and for not being... mine."

God, Jamie's voice was so miserable. So sad. And that was just stupid because hadn't Elliot just been saying... well, yeah. And that meant Jamie hadn't been listening, and that just pissed him off. He'd been baring his soul, it felt like, and Jamie hadn't even been paying attention?

Jesus fucking Christ. Enough with all this bullshit.

Elliot growled just a little, then moved, throwing one leg over Jamie's lap. The fact that they were in public didn't matter. He truly didn't care if an entire parade wandered by right then and saw him -- them -- like that. Then Elliot's hands met behind Jamie's neck and he forced the man to look at him, those blue eyes seeming somehow muted, which couldn't be anything like good.

"You listen to me, Jamie. I love you, you hear? And you love me. Yeah, it took me a while to figure it out, and even longer to not be all... freaked. But I got there. I *am* there. And by the time you get old, you won't be bitter, you got it? And you won't be angry. Because you're gonna be with *me*. Nobody else. Not ever. For *either* of us. And we're gonna be happy." He meant it, too.

"I tried wooing you, darlin'," Elliot added, "because Russ said that's how he won David. And you told me once that you don't mind expensive gifts. But I'm done with that. I can't wait a month or more to know whether we're gonna be together. So you tell me, Jamie. Tell me now. Are you gonna forgive me for being scared, or do I need to tell my new landlord to keep my deposit because I'm going back to Wentworth? Are you... Fuck. Are you willing to love me again?"

Elliot thought he might die from the suspense, Jamie took so long to answer. Even when Jamie's mouth opened, Elliot couldn't tell what the man was going to say.

"You're sure," were the words that came out of Jamie's mouth, and Elliot might have blushed if those big hands hadn't closed tightly on his hips just then, holding him hard on Jamie's lap. "You really... love me."

It was a statement, more than a question, but Elliot nodded anyway. "More than I ever even knew was possible, darlin'," he answered. "Probably for longer than I think, too." Because that was likely, Elliot realized. Hell, he might even have loved Jamie since that whole post-Linden thing, when Jamie had held him and comforted him, then cheered him up with silliness and stupid hats and toy swords.

"So, we gonna do this?" Elliot asked softly, his eyes meeting that blue-blue gaze as he rested his forehead against Jamie's. "We gonna be everything we should, darlin'?"

Jamie was looking thoughtful, so Elliot let him be for a minute, deliberately not moving his hips, even though he wanted to. He could feel Jamie's cock beneath him, after all, though at the moment it felt like it was at half mast, if that.

Then that flesh was swelling, and Elliot knew. Knew without even hearing the words, though he listened to them when they emerged.

"Yeah," Jamie said softly. "Yeah. But I... fuck, El, I need you to stop with the clubs and the anonymous fucks, okay? I just... I can't do this if you're doing... that. I just can't."

Elliot snorted, his body rocking already. "What part of 'nobody else for either one of us' did you not understand, darlin'? Don't want anyone but you. Especially knowing that you like to catch sometimes, too. Now, can we please go the fuck *home*? Because I have a feeling that the things we're gonna be doing to each other -- with each other -- will probably get us arrested unless we're behind closed doors."

And thank fucking Christ that Jamie was listening, because the last thing Elliot wanted right then -- or ever -- was to go to jail simply for loving his... Jamie.

"You... God, El, just like that," Jamie gasped, watching their reflection in the mirror. "You really mean it..." And Jesus, it was strange to see himself on hands and knees like that, Elliot behind him as that long, curved prick slowly pushed deep again. Jamie had never considered all fours to be a particularly intimate position, after all, but now, with Elliot, seeing himself and his lover in the mirror, watching the expressions chase each other across Elliot's face? Oh, it was intimate, all right.

"Fuck, yes," Elliot groaned, a tiny smirk crossing those full lips as Jamie tried to push back faster, tried to get Elliot to pick up the pace, for God's sake. And Elliot's hands were tight on Jamie's hips, basically letting him know that Elliot was calling the shots for the moment... and that slow and steady and gentle was how Elliot wanted things, right then. "Could never... fuck, Jamie, you feel so damned good... never want anyone else after you. Just... Jesus, darlin', feels right. Does. Fuck..."

It did, Jamie knew. He couldn't disagree, not even in his own mind. It felt good and right and like nothing before. Felt like... this was how it was meant to be. Like he was becoming more and more sure with each long, slow push into his body, with each little moan that sprang from Elliot's lips. "Sweetheart... please. Please, El. Just... harder, okay? I..."

"Hush, darlin'," and the tone was encouraging, but Elliot wasn't moving any faster. He was just keeping to those slow, easy movements, and Jamie wanted to scream. "We're gonna get to harder, Jamie. Promise, okay? But right now..." God, he could see just how hard Elliot was swallowing, the reflection leaving nothing out. "Right now," Elliot moaned, eyes closing, head dropping back, "let me be tender with you, darlin'. Never done this before, y'know."

A part of him wanted to laugh, because one thing he was sure of was that Elliot had fucked more times than anyone else Jamie had ever known. Hell, he was sure of it, now that he knew Elliot liked to drive as well as ride. But there was something in the man's words -- "let me be tender with you" -- that killed any desire to chuckle, even silently. It hit him then that Elliot was telling the literal truth. Elliot had never done that. *This*. And it wasn't fucking. Wasn't even in the same solar system as fucking.

Elliot, Jamie finally understood deep down, was making love to him. Treating Jamie like something precious and perfect and wanted for more than just a tight ass, a hard cock, a muscled body, and a night or three. Elliot was loving him, offering him everything that Jamie had ever wanted or needed, and doing it so simply, so intently, that Jamie was only realizing it right then.

Jamie's hips slowed, stopped trying to move things along faster, harder, deeper, rougher. They weren't fucking, after all, though they would, sooner or later. "Tender..." Jamie sighed, his heart swelling wildly, "Tender is good, El. I... yeah."

It could have been hours or minutes, could have been an eternity or a split second. Jamie didn't know, and he honestly didn't care. All that mattered was that some timeless eon or moment later, Elliot was pulling him up.

He was kneeling, ass pressed tight to Elliot's groin, that long cock buried so deep inside him, Jamie couldn't even express how right it was. Then El slid one hand from Jamie's hip, fingers wrapping lightly around his shaft and stroking so gently, so carefully that Jamie could have cried.

"You gonna come for me, darlin'?" Elliot whispered, the words trickling into Jamie's ear on a soft gust of warm air. "Right here, with me tucked up so deep inside you?"

Then Elliot's body was moving a little bit, just flexing, pushing up enough to press that long, slick flesh against Jamie's prostate, and while the world had already been bright, it was entirely white, all of a sudden. And Elliot was dropping back, only a scant inch, but that pressure went on and there was more of that subtle flex and release, and Jamie knew the answer, suddenly. He would definitely come like this. He just didn't have the ability to put it into words.

He didn't really need words anyway, which was fine, perfect, somehow exactly right. Because Elliot's mouth was on his neck, right there at the crook, and those soft lips were open, pulling hard at his skin, and Jamie could only moan as his body shook, matched Elliot's tiny thrusts, pushed lightly into Elliot's gentle hand...

And then Jamie was coming, something that might have been "yes" or "God" or "please" dropping from his lips as he breathed, seed spilling over Elliot's hand and onto Jamie's stomach, his tensing balls, his thighs, with a lack of urgency he'd never experienced before. It was... God, it was good and unexpected and probably impossible to repeat, but that was fine. It was amazing enough that it was happening this once, that it was imperative and inevitable and entirely what he'd needed without ever knowing it.

Then Elliot's hand was slowing, moving down to cup Jamie's slowly relaxing sac, and Jamie felt teeth on his skin. He felt Elliot's cock pulsing, the small throbs stretching his hole just a little, and it was even better.

"Elliot," Jamie murmured, one hand rising and reaching up, reaching back, fingers resting in short dark hair as he held Elliot's head steady. "Come for me, El. Come." And Elliot did, with a small whimpering moan that Jamie knew he would remember forever, just as he would remember the way they fell then, dropping to the side, Elliot still inside him, still pulsing slowly in Jamie's ass. "Stay," he whispered, almost demanding it. "Stay right there, sweetheart. Please..."

He thought for a minute that Elliot would, but then those lips left his skin, and he felt Elliot's hair against his shoulder as the man shook his head. "Can't, darlin'," Elliot finally answered, pulling out of Jamie's body so slowly it was like a tease... or a gentle disappointment. "Wish I could, but... don't want to lose the rubber in you, Jamie. Even if it might be fun trying to fish it out later."

Okay, gross. But also not, in a bizarre way Jamie wasn't going to examine too closely. "Yeah..." he said after a moment, turning to look at his lover, "about that, El."

Elliot looked up from tying off the thin sleeve of latex, then nodded as he tossed it toward the waste basket beside the nightstand. "I know, darlin'," he said, and Jamie couldn't help smiling when Elliot pulled him close, all that hot, sweat-slicked skin pressing against his own. "Want to go without, too. 'Course I do, y'know? Can't even imagine how it's gonna feel. But we've been apart for a while, and..."

God, that sheepish look was entirely too fucking adorable, not that Jamie would ever say so. "And?" he prodded, hands finding the thick cords of muscle that bracketed Elliot's spine and resting quite happily there. "And?"

And Elliot was kissing him, those lips soft and warm, tongue slick and almost unbearably mobile, and that was something Jamie would never get enough of, so he just sighed and gave as good as he was getting.

"And I don't want you to ever wonder, Jamie," Elliot said quietly, once he'd ended the kiss. "I don't ever want you to think that you took a chance. So we're gonna get tested again. Both of us. Together. And when we come back clean, you're taking a week off because I'm gonna keep you in bed for at least that long. You got it, darlin'?"

Oh. Oh, Jamie got it, all right. Elliot hadn't been fucking around since the last time they'd been together. He knew that. Believed it, because Elliot had said so during the drive back to the house from their bench. But Elliot wanted to be sure Jamie knew, understood that Elliot could be trusted. So the man was going to prove it, which was possibly the stupidest -- and sweetest -- thing anyone had ever wanted to do for him, Jamie thought with a grin.

He did trust Elliot, regardless of what he'd assumed the man to be doing back in Wentworth. He firmly believed that Elliot would have told him if there was any reason to be concerned, which there wasn't since Elliot hadn't been with anyone since that last night with Jamie. That entirely *safe* night.

But maybe Elliot needed to do it for himself, too, Jamie realized. Maybe Elliot needed to prove to *both* of them that they were starting out fresh. New. Clean and committed. And Jamie could live with that. Forever.

"I'll call Stan tomorrow," he murmured, pulling Elliot even closer. "But you get to pay him this time, Mister 'I like giving you expensive gifts.'"

Then Jamie was laughing and so was Elliot, and mouths met, tongues twined, hands roamed languidly, and... "I really do love you, Jamie. You believe that, right?" And Jamie was nodding, just holding Elliot against him with no intention of letting go any time soon. Or ever.

"I do," Jamie whispered, staring into Elliot's eyes from an inch or so away as their foreheads touched. "I do, sweetheart. El. Fuck, I believe that more than anything else. And in case I didn't make it clear before, I love you, too, Elliot. I was... lost. So fucking lost, sweetheart. You were gone and I just..."

Elliot kissed him again. Just a slow, deep, gentle kiss, and Jamie thought he might be able to get used to kisses like that, even though tenderness wasn't something he'd ever really expected from Elliot. But that might have been because Elliot had always been so guarded, so self-contained, which Jamie hadn't realized until the walls he'd never seen had come down, and... and he was *not* analyzing his lover, for God's sake, Jamie told himself sternly. Not.

The kiss slowed, paused as Elliot pulled back and gazed into his eyes, and Jamie would have objected, but Elliot was talking. Murmuring. "You're found now, Jamie," Elliot said, making it sound so simple. "I won't ever let you be lost again. I'll always find you. Promise. And you need to stop saying 'fuck' so much. Your Dads will be fully pissed off if I really *do* end up being bad for you. Or for your vocabulary, anyway."

Okay, Jamie thought, his ability to speak once again halted by Elliot's lips, he could do that. He could also spend the next however many decades just like this. With his lover, who loved him. With so much fucking happiness swimming through his body that he doubted he'd ever frown again for more than a few seconds.

It wasn't every day that a man got exactly what he'd wanted, Jamie admitted, with a silent offer of thanks to whomever -- whatever -- had decided to let Elliot love him. It wasn't every day that a man was found and offered... home.

Jamie was going to cherish every minute.

End.