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A black and white photograph of a muscular man, likely a bodybuilder, wearing a white tank top. He is standing in front of a stone wall with a metal railing. His hands are clasped in front of his chest, and he is looking down. The image is slightly blurred, giving it a candid or artistic feel.

*Angel Martinez*  
**Aftermath**

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*by Angel Martinez*

**Forbidden Publications**

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AFTERMATH

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Aftermath  
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This book is dedicated

To Xan and Mic, without whom I would have lost my way.

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Aftermath

by

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## Chapter 1

### Getting Home Late

Three hours late, Victor dragged himself home in a foul mood. Bad enough a five o'clock crisis always arose, but Cody couldn't be bothered to pick up the phone when he called. He left messages to say he'd be late, please don't go anywhere. No call back.

And now, sterile silence greeted him. No stereo playing, no smells of cooking from the kitchen, no one to greet him at the door. Nothing. The little rat had probably gone out tomcatting. A tight knot of anger settled in Vic's chest. After their last argument, Cody had broken down, admitting he'd been selfish and irresponsible. He would start taking care of things at home better and be there when Victor finally dragged his weary ass home at night. So he promised.

Victor dropped his briefcase on the floor, fingers numb from exhaustion and misery. He winced at the echo. He and Cody had loved the house when they bought it, with the two story entrance and the twelve foot high ceilings, but all alone the house was too damn big.

He shuffled around the corner to the kitchen to make himself a long, tall rum and coke, and jerked to a stop. Cody hung in the doorway, his wrists fastened over his head in handcuffs, the connecting chain attached far above his head to a hook screwed into the high doorframe. His auburn head lolled forward and he was completely naked.

"Cody! Oh my God!" Victor rushed to him and threw an arm around his waist to take his weight. "Sweetheart, dammit, you all right?"

Cody lifted his head to rest it on Victor's shoulder. "Hi, sugar daddy. You're finally home. I'm okay, I guess. Must've fallen asleep."

"Who did this to you?" Victor's dark brows drew together, and his anger trembled under the surface of his muscles.

A bitter laugh bubbled up from Cody. "I did this to me. I wanted to surprise you. Easy to set it up but once these cuffs lock, well, guess I put 'em on too tight. Couldn't wriggle back out. Couldn't unhook the chain. Couldn't reach the key." He pointed with his chin to the kitchen counter where the key was in plain sight.

He looked up at Victor with the grin that always melted his heart, half-angel, half-rogue. "Just had to stand here listening to your 'you better be home when I get there, Cody' messages. I'm here, I kept thinking. Not going anywhere."

"You idiot," Victor fumed as he retrieved the key. "What if I'd decided to go out first? What if I hadn't come home until midnight? You could have seriously hurt yourself like this, you damned fool."

Cody groaned when his arms were lowered and sat down hard on the floor. "I'll try to keep that in mind, oh lord of the manor," he muttered, rubbing his wrists and staring at the floor. "There's a pizza in the oven, just gotta heat it up."

"You ordered pizza?" Victor knew he should be trying to be a little sympathetic but he couldn't get past being angry and worried all at once. "That's your idea of cooking dinner?"

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"I made the pizza, dammit, Vic. Crust and all." Cody's voice shook, a bad sign. "I'm not the one stumbling in three fucking hours late."

Victor moved calmly into the kitchen and turned on the oven and the light to see inside. Sure enough, there was a beautiful pizza in there—olives, onions, peppers, broccoli the works—with a handmade crust. A little bumpy in places, not the too-smooth perfection of commercial pizzas. Cody had obviously gone to some effort to set up this evening. But some things Victor couldn't let slide.

"Are you cussing at me, little man," he asked in a smooth, too-calm voice. "Even after our last talk?"

Cody's head shot up. "No, Vic. I mean, yeah, but I'm sorry. I just ... it wasn't real fun stuck like that so long."

"Well, whose fault is that? If you're gonna do dumb-ass things..." Victor came back to him and yanked him up by his wrists. "I should just leave you to them." Though Cody screamed in protest and tried to squirm out of his grip, Victor put him back where he'd found him, hands cuffed high over his head.

"I'm sorry, please." Cody was dangerously close to whining, or even sobbing. "Lemme down. Come on. My arms hurt so bad..."

Victor planted a soft kiss on his lips. "You'll stay there till I say you come down. For being stupid and for cussing at me."

"I just wanted to surprise you," Cody whispered.

"And no tears. You know I hate that."

Biting his lip hard and holding his breath, Cody kept it to a single teardrop trickling down his perfect, smooth cheek. He'd



even shaved before getting himself into his predicament. This wasn't lost on Victor. He smacked Cody on the butt, just once and not too hard. The view was quite nice, he had to admit—Cody's lean muscles all stretched out, the dimples in his glutes standing out. Victor wandered upstairs to the bedroom to change.

He yanked off his tie and kicked his shoes across the room while he fumbled with his pants, wanting to get back to Cody as soon as possible. Then he smiled and slowed down. *Let him wait and think.* That was the whole problem. Cody didn't stop to think. Granted, this impetuous, mad-for-life part of him drove Cody's art and had drawn Victor so helplessly to him. But it also got him in trouble, again and again.

The last time—Victor shook his head, trying to sweep the thought away like ceiling cobwebs. He didn't want to remember. Not now.

When he slipped out of his shirt, he spotted a white hair amid the forest of dark curls on his chest. Most likely Cody's doing as well. Still as massive and hard-muscled as when he'd worked construction but damned if he didn't feel he was getting old prematurely some days. He slid into a pair of boxer briefs, the black lycra ones just to make Cody crazy, and ambled back downstairs.

"Vic, please..." Cody whined as soon as he was back in sight, big, blue eyes pleading.

"I've had a hellish day, little man. Do not get on my very last nerve."

Cody subsided with a sigh, shifting in his cuffs in a pointed way. Victor pretended to ignore him. He moved about the

kitchen getting his drink, poured a glass of wine for Cody and set it where he could see it was for him. Soft fingers of baking pizza scent eased through the kitchen, working their way into every open space. From across the kitchen, a loud stomach growling broke the silence.

Victor looked over the counter at his lover. "Hungry, sweetheart?"

"Yes," Cody breathed, his voice husky.

Victor moved around the counter to see all of him, and his brows shot up. "Well, well, so I see. That for me?" Cody's erection jutted ramrod straight from his body.

He chewed on his bottom lip, his right foot twisting on the tile in agitated half-circles. "I love watching you, baby..."

Victor stepped behind him, letting Cody feel the warmth of his body against his naked skin. Cody's breath caught in a hard gasp as Victor's fingers ran up his ribs to his armpits. He squirmed against the cuffs, head dropping back when Victor's hands closed over his hips to keep him still.

"Sh, sh. You'll hurt yourself." Victor's breath slid over Cody's ear and he moaned, shaft twitching at that simple touch. His hands wandered into the dark red curls at the tops of Cody's thighs as he pressed against him. God, but Cody was so easily turned on. A look, a word sometimes and the boy was ready to go.

One hand cupped Cody's balls gently, while the other slid to his impressive erection. For a small man, Cody carried a lot under the hood. Victor slid his forefinger up the underside, pressing just below the head in circles before he traced

around the rim. With one thing and another, it had been awhile. Too damn long. Cody was already panting.

Victor's hand closed around the shaft, pumping slowly back and forth. A long, sweet moan slid from Cody, the sort that made Victor's balls ache. He felt the hard muscles in Cody's butt tense, saw the lines of definition sharpen on his stomach as he peered over Cody's shoulder.

"Vic, say the words," Cody breathed, his hips beginning to jerk. "Please, please—say the words. I need to hear you say them."

He grinned against Cody's neck and nearly asked what words he meant. Punctuating his speech with hard sucking kisses along Cody's throat and shoulder, he whispered, "Show me how much you love me, my heart. Come for me." Cody shivered and jerked against him and he repeated in Cody's ear, "Come for me. Now."

A strangled cry leaped from Cody as he thrust his hips against the rhythm of Victor's hand. His chest heaved and Victor felt the sac in his hand move and tighten before the first jet of semen rocketed from Cody. His lithe, compact body writhed against Victor, against his cuffs, a hard groan of ecstasy accompanying every pulse of his orgasm. Victor kept up his pumping relentlessly, milking every possible drop.

When Cody quieted and hung in his cuffs, shaking, only then did Victor reach for the key and let him down. He held Cody up against his chest, worried he might fall otherwise.

"Vic..."

"Mmm?" he hummed into Cody's hair.

"Pizza's burning."

"Screw the pizza."

Cody turned in his arms, finding his feet again, and kissed Victor's jaw with a grin. "Don't do that. You'll burn my favorite parts of you." He neatly avoided the swat at his rump as he slid into the kitchen and pulled the pizza out, only slightly singed.

"You do all your cooking naked today," Victor asked with a soft laugh.

"Just this last bit." Cody bent to reach into the bottom drawer for a pizza cutter and Vic nearly choked on his drink at such a lovely view.

"It was a nice idea, sweetheart, your surprise. Just next time, could you maybe think of one that won't risk a separated shoulder or maybe worse?" Victor sighed and slid onto one of the counter stools. "I do like the hook, though. Lots of interesting possibilities."

"Such as?"

"Maybe a nice fern or a spider plant—."

Cody snorted in shock. "You can't be serious! I didn't go through all that trouble for a plant hanger!"

"Just for company." Victor plowed into the slice of pizza Cody handed him straightaway, burned tongue and all. "I mean, what if your mother visits and asks what the hook's for? What am I supposed to tell her?" He lowered his voice another half octave, "Yes, Mrs. Fitzroy, that's where I truss your little boy up when I want to ream him good and proper."

Laughing, trying not to choke on wine and pizza, Cody took the stool opposite. "All right. I'll have Jonathan bring a nice plant from the shop tomorrow."

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The air in the room grew thick as if an indoor storm brewed. "Go to the nursery yourself and pick something up, Cody. I won't have Jonathan in this house."

Cody's eyes narrowed. "Oh, so now I can't even see my friends anymore?"

"Jonathan's hardly a friend, little man. He's just going to talk you into going out clubbing."

"And?" The shaking returned to Cody's voice. "Am I a prisoner? It's a crime I like to go dancing?"

Victor pushed his plate away, no longer hungry. His voice quiet and even, he watched his hands so he wouldn't have to see Cody's expression. "Dancing is fine. I don't care if you go out every night and shake your little ass. But you let strangers buy you drinks. And pop pills into you. And use you like a sex toy. And dump you in an alley."

He glanced up to see Cody's face crumbling and quickly looked back down. "I don't want to have to race to the hospital again, sweetheart, not knowing whether you're alive or dead. Sitting by your bed wondering if you'll make it through the night. And Jonathan thought it was all just too funny and watched it happen and didn't do a damn thing."

Cody's head was buried in his arms now. He made no sound but his shoulders shook spasmodically.

"Cody..." Victor went to him and wrapped him in his arms. "Don't cry. I'm sorry. I won't bring it up again. Just ... no more Jonathan, okay?"

"All right." Cody's voice was muffled against Victor's chest but he sounded calmer. "I think I'm going to bed."

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Tilting his head up, Victor dried those blue eyes. "You want some time?"

Cody managed a smile. "Just enough to clean up. Come to bed soon, Vic. You're so uptight. You need to get laid."

"Oh, you don't even know how bad." Victor growled in mock threat and caught Cody's lips in a searing kiss that promised enough passion for several nights.

## Chapter 2

### Not So Chance Meetings

Victor woke with a groan, the insistent beep of the alarm knifing into his head. A groggy, heavy pressure filled his sinuses. The clock radio was, of course, on Cody's side.

"Could you maybe turn it off," Victor growled and rolled onto one elbow but Cody's side of the bed was empty. He rolled further and reached a long arm out to hit the switch, rubbing at his face wearily. Cody up this early meant one of two things. One of those awful cluster headaches had hit, which Vic doubted since the pain was so awful, Cody would have shaken him awake in panicked agony.

Or he had been inspired.

Vic slid into a pair of sweats and wandered downstairs where, yes, earnest noises of metal on metal drifted out of Cody's studio. Victor chuckled and shook his head. When the muse took Cody, he had to go to it. In the middle of dinner, at three in the morning, right after lovemaking. Vic didn't mind. This was what Cody did. To love Cody was to love his manic ecstasies of creation.

*Understanding* Cody's art was a different matter. He sculpted in metal and "found objects".

"You mean junk?" The first time in one of Cody's studios, Victor had scratched his head at the pile of oddments Cody pointed to as his materials.

Cody's smile held all the enthusiasm of a little boy with his first bike. He nodded vigorously. "Yes, sometimes junk. Junk is a terrific resource. But sometimes things you have around, or see in an antique shop or a dime store, or the grocery store. Sometimes a thing you've had around for years and suddenly you take it apart and it's something completely different."

Only five years ago, but it seemed another universe, shivering in the pervasive cold of Cody's first studio, dimly lit and damp, with the ever-present audience of spiders and cockroaches.

Victor started coffee and bagels, took his shower, shaved and dressed, then gathered mugs and plates to take to the present studio, built to Cody's specifications, clean and bright. He shoved the door open and watched, lost in admiration.

In cutoffs, work boots and a heavy fireproof apron, Cody hammered away at a glowing piece of iron, forcing it to curl and conform to his vision. The light from his furnace painted his pale skin orange and gold, dancing in his hair as if it too were living flame. A miniature Vulcan at his forge, caught in the throes of creative imperative.

When Cody stopped to thrust the iron into a bucket of cold water, Vic cleared his throat. "Can you stop for breakfast, Michelangelo?"

For a moment, those blue eyes stared at him without recognition. Victor waited. Sometimes Cody took a moment to return from his art. "Hey, baby." He finally broke into a huge grin. "Thank you, so thoughtful. Could you set it down for me? You off?"



"Have to be in for nine, yeah." Victor nodded, putting the coffee and cream-cheese and jelly bagel down on the table by the door, out of the line of fire. "Listen, sweetheart, I'll probably be late again—"

"Aw, Vic, it's Friday," Cody interrupted mournfully.

"I know, little man, I'm sorry. That presentation to the board is tomorrow. God only knows why they have a board meeting on the weekend. But I've got to have everything ready and half the departments don't even have their data to me yet."

Cody let out a slow breath. "All right. You'll call me when you're coming home?"

Resting one butt cheek on the table, Victor sipped his coffee to give himself a moment. "Cody ... I don't want you to feel like you're trapped here. What you said last night, it really got to me. If you go out, would you do me two favors?"

"Anything for you, sugar daddy," Cody chuckled. "Don't you wanna come out too? Give me a call on the cell and come meet me?"

"Not tonight, sorry, love." Vic shook his head. "Don't think I'm feeling up to it. Try to come home at a decent hour, all right?"

"Define decent." Cody's grin turned wicked.

"I'm serious here, little man. Before one, one-thirty, if you can manage it. And don't, please, don't go out alone."

Cody rolled his eyes. "Okay, Mom. And I know, I know. No Jonathan."

"Just make me happy. Find someone who'll watch out for you a little. Friends make sure their friends get home safe."

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Vic said it softly, hoping the message would slide in without throwing off Cody's good mood.

It was such a relief to see him in the studio again. After that one awful night, he had been sliding between depression and wild bouts of self-destructive behavior. Vic hoped this was the end of the dark time. No more coming home to Cody passed out in a ruin of beer bottles, or not coming home until dawn, or simply sitting on the sofa staring at the wall, or refusing to eat for days.

For a long anxious moment, Cody chewed on his bottom lip, dark shadows wavering in his eyes. "Maybe I'll call Kurt n' Wyatt." He nodded. "Haven't seen them in, oh, God, ages."

Satisfied, Victor stood and gathered up his jacket. "Good idea. I'll see you tonight, sweetheart."

"Hey!" Cody's angry yell stopped him in the doorway. "You forget something?"

Victor looked down at himself, wondering if he'd forgotten his pants or his shoes. Nope, all there. In confusion, his gaze went to Cody and the hurt in those eyes jarred his memory. "Oh, chrissakes ... I'm sorry..."

He put the jacket down, went to Cody and took his sweet face between his hands. Victor tilted Cody's head up slowly and bent with a soft growl to capture Cody's lips, so soft and firm, in a deep, exploring kiss. "Better?" he breathed against Cody's mouth.

Cody's eyes were closed, his expression one of beatific joy. "Oh, man ... yeah..."

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"Have a good day, little man. Don't forget your breakfast." Victor waved on his way out. Despite the aching feeling of an oncoming cold, he felt better than he had in weeks.

\* \* \* \*

Cody leaned forward, listening to Wyatt's story about an odd encounter on the metro with one of those soapbox prophet types. He heard the story, laughed in the right places, but his attention skittered in a thousand directions, his senses bombarded by the energy and excitement of the room.

It was early, the club just finishing dinner service, the music still at conversation level but Cody felt the buzz of the crowd in every pore. He fairly bounced in his seat, nursing his one drink, waiting for the lights to dim.

He had missed this.

The beef market was in full swing already and more than one patron had 'accidentally' brushed up against Cody's chair, but he was being good tonight. Responsible. He'd even called Victor at the office before he left the house to say they were going to Deva, just in case he changed his mind and wanted to join them.

Kurt asked a question; Cody missed it as his eyes followed a graceful waiter sweep by, his tiny black vinyl shorts practically glued to his ass.

"Hmm? Sorry?"

"Put your eyes back in, Cody," Kurt laughed. "I asked if the big man's joining us tonight."

"Oh," Cody sighed. "No, I don't think so. He didn't sound too good when I called him. All stuffed up and hoarse. I told him to go home to bed."

"And he...?" Wyatt prompted, liquid brown eyes glinting with amusement.

"Growled at me and told me not to mother him, basically." Cody wrinkled his nose.

Both of them found this hilarious. "Oh, the poor old bear," Kurt patted Cody's hand. "He frets like a mother hen and doesn't want you to mother him?"

Cody's smile slipped a little. "He's not that bad."

"Not that bad? Cody-bean, have you ever looked over at him watching while you dance?" Wyatt's eyes danced with laughter.

"Well, no, but—"

Kurt draped an arm dramatically over his eyes, stretching the other hand out towards the dance floor, his voice imitating a strangled growl. "So—jealous—can't—watch..."

Wyatt chimed in, reaching both hands out towards the imaginary dancing. "So—beautiful—can't—look away..."

Though he laughed, Cody felt a tightening in his chest as he protested, "He does not do that! You make him sound like some grasping old coot."

Kurt still laughed but his smile was more sympathetic now. "Oh, hon, we're sorry. No, he's not that bad. And Vic's a huge, gorgeous slab of beef. Who wouldn't sell their grandmother to change places with you? He just loves you so much I think he's bewildered by it sometimes."

Mollified, Cody relaxed and returned to normal conversation. That was until a pair of slender, perfectly manicured hands fell on his shoulders.

"Hey, Codelicious! Where the hell have you been?"

The ambient temperature at the table dropped ten degrees as conversation ceased. Cody knew but he dropped his head back to look up and see who was behind him anyway. Gleaming white teeth in a model perfect face grinned down.

"Hi, J," he said softly, not certain what to do.

"Jonathan," Kurt's tone was frigid, gray eyes hard and flat.

"What? Everybody's still pissed at me?" Jonathan flung himself down in the empty chair uninvited, running fingers back through his black curls. "Cody gets himself into shit when he's out and it's my fault. Christ, what a bunch of drama queens."

"Maybe it wasn't quite your fault, J, but you didn't do much to help, did you?" Wyatt murmured.

"Please. I'm not anyone's keeper. Cody didn't ask for help. And he's not pissed at me, are you, sweet cheeks?"

Cody stared into his drink. "I'm not supposed to see you anymore, J."

"Not supposed to...?" Jonathan's eyes shot wide open. "Shit, Cody, is it time for an intervention? Bad enough you're his little dog slave, now he wants to control who you talk to? He keeping you prisoner in that house? Is that why I haven't seen you anywhere?"

The choice of words made Cody wince. He'd said the same thing to Vic just the night before. "I'm out tonight," he said defensively. "And I'm not Vic's 'slave'."

Jonathan snorted. "Oh, yeah, right. I know the deal. Big man goes off to his corporate high mucky-muck job, and you stay home and be the good little housefrau and cook and clean and meet him at the door with your tail wagging."

"Shut up, Jonathan. It's not like that, dammit." Cody felt his face flush. "There's maid service for the house and pool service and lawn service. All Vic asks is that I try not to trash the place and put some dinner on the table sometimes." He supposed he should be angry with Jonathan but seeing him now, that charming smile lighting up the room, he couldn't be. No matter what stupid things he said.

"Whatever. What're you drinking there? Chocolate milk?" Jonathan leaned over to take a sniff of Cody's drink.

"Toasted almond."

"God, Cody, you and your girlie drinks. C'mon, I'll buy you something real to drink," Jonathan lifted a hand to wave down a waiter.

"No, I'm good. I've got all I need."

Shaking his head, Jonathan rose and circled the table. "You are so whipped, Cody." He leaned over Kurt's drink and then Wyatt's in turn. Kurt's fists clenched as he leaned too far into Wyatt in the process. "Even stodgy old Kurt has whiskey."

"Leave him alone," Kurt growled. "Let him drink what he wants."

Jonathan spread his hands in surrender, resumed his appropriated seat, and ordered a scotch. An uncomfortable silence followed, broken only by the soft clink of glass as

everyone sipped. It might have stretched on indefinitely but Wyatt suddenly lurched forward, a hand on his stomach.

"Excuse me," he whispered and rushed to the facilities. After a moment's shocked hesitation, Kurt followed.

"Should we go check? You think he's okay?" Cody craned his neck to try to see the bathroom door.

"Kurt's got it. You sit tight."

Something in Jonathan's voice didn't sound right but Cody couldn't put his finger on it.

"Cody." Jonathan's eyes, large pools of sea green, regarded him sadly. "You don't blame me for that night do you? I mean, I thought you were just having a good time. I didn't know you'd leave with those guys. Or that they'd, well, you know."

"I know, J." The first few days after, he had wanted to blame Jonathan. And Vic for not being there. And the bouncers for not seeing. And anyone, everyone. Except himself. That was when he'd fallen to pieces, when he realized he'd been drugged, raped and left for dead and it was no one's fault but his own. Now, confronted with those beautiful, sad eyes, what could he say? "I don't blame you for any of it. I know some people don't agree with me—"

"People who treat you like a five year old."

Cody grimaced. "Don't start, J, please. It's good to see you. Don't mess it up."

The smile that melted a hundred customers' hearts at Jonathan's shop every day returned to glimmer between them. "I've missed you so bad, Codelicious."

Kurt raced back to the table to explain that Wyatt was very sick. Probably food poisoning, he reasoned, though Cody could have sworn he cast a suspicious look at Jonathan. Did Cody want a ride home?

"No, I'm all right. You go take care of Wyatt." Cody's forehead crinkled in concern. "Call me tomorrow. Lemme know how he's doing."

Kurt nodded, worried to distraction, and rushed off again. Jonathan made some insincere sounds of concern but turned the conversation immediately to lighter things, funny stories and who was seeing whom and other juicy gossip. Cody let his thoughts be drawn away, happily distracted. He failed to notice the men approaching until they slid into the two vacant chairs.

"So here's where you're holed up, weasel," the larger of the two addressed Jonathan in a rasping voice that held years of cigarette overuse.

Jonathan's eyes flicked back and forth as if looking for a way out. He still smiled but his voice sounded oddly strained. "Martin, Colin ... hey."

"This the one?" The big one waved a hand at Cody.

What the hell does he mean by that? Cody didn't puzzle over it long. The music was starting.

The heavy pulse and rhythmic bass thump worked under Cody's skin like nothing else. His bones itched with it, his spine vibrating as if it were being used as percussion as well. The only thing keeping him in his seat was the desire not to look too eager. He let the first song bump and thud by, waiting for the energy on the floor to grow.



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Those hard, cold eyes staring across at him didn't make sitting still easier. Martin, the big one, leaned with his brutish forearms halfway across the table, shouting directly in Jonathan's ear. Normal conversation became impossible over the music, of course, but Cody had the sudden, horrible thought the man would just as soon bite Jonathan's ear off as speak into it.

He caught the words "sweet little piece", which didn't help his anxious thoughts. Jonathan knew some of the strangest people.

Cody tugged on his sleeve. "J, come dance with me." He motioned to the floor to help get his meaning across in the high decibel atmosphere.

Jonathan leaned close and cupped a hand behind Cody's ear. "You go ahead. I'll join you in a minute. You know how I love to watch you."

The insistent, infectious beat of one of Cody's favorite Depeche Mode songs erupted from the speakers and his feet took him to the floor almost before he could think, winding and weaving through the tables without a single stumble or hesitation. Almost as intense as working in his studio, the dance floor offered the chance to lose himself, though the cocoon of otherworldly bliss of his art was more spiritual while dancing was purely physical.

When he moved, the world melted into the far distance. His body melded with the music, with the air currents, with the other bodies bumping and gyrating on the dance floor. Partnering briefly, moving on, hands and thighs touching him, though he was rarely aware whose; a model of the vast

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sweep of life in microcosm, the complex and unfathomable pattern that joined together each individual sway of hip and stomp of feet.

\* \* \* \*

Jonathan did watch, avidly. Cody's Vertical Kama Sutra was what Kurt called his dancing. Even boring old Kurt came up with a good one now and then. Nothing in the world compared to Cody's lean, heavenly body undulating through its unconsciously sensual movements. Every eye in the club turned his way. Every body on the dance floor gravitated towards him until he became the center of a frenzied mating dance. They all tried to keep his attention. They all failed.

A twinge of conscience hit him then. But no, there was no other way. He'd already argued it all through with himself. He signaled to Martin to wait and sauntered off to join Cody on the floor. For him Cody smiled and came back from his trance. With Jonathan, he would dance as long as his partner stayed.

It had been the summer after high school when they first got together. Jonathan had been Cody's first lover, though that first fling was short, ending when Cody went off to college in the fall. Three and a half years later, Cody returned, full of new ideas and new fire for his art. He and Jonathan moved in together briefly but the love affair soon dissolved in a steamy tangle of jealousies and accusations. Miraculously, they remained friends with the occasional tumble into bed.

All PV, of course. Pre-Victor Szoldos. The goddamned Hungarian grizzly bear had ruined everything. Cody fell hard and fast, sickening to watch. Not that the man was lacking. He'd seen Vic carry Cody perched on one arm and had watched one night when he took on five opponents in an alley, stupid kids looking for an easy fag roll. They got more than they bargained for and Vic walked away with no more than a slight headache. Still, the puppy eyes Cody sent his way, the sudden wish for a house and home and respectability. Disgusting.

Jonathan slid up behind Cody, moving with him, grinding up against his beautiful, leather covered ass. Without missing a beat, Cody's arms snaked up to twine back around Jonathan's neck, his body moving in a way that would make Scheherazade herself crazy. Several men looked near fainting at this exhibition, either by hyperventilation, cardiac arrest or both. When Jonathan slid his hands around front to undo Cody's top shirt button, eager hands joined in to unfasten the rest. Not unusual. Half the patrons would be bare-chested in the next hour. But it was a treat to watch Cody letting half a dozen men undress him.

None of it meant anything to Cody, all part of the dance.

When the music slowed, promising a few minutes of relative quiet, he pulled Cody close and suggested they take a break. That marvelous smile lit up Cody's face as he teased, "Buy me a drink, sailor?"

"Anything you want, sweet cheeks," Jonathan whispered in his ear and if he held Cody a little too tight for a moment, it was only to steady his nerves.

Back at the table, Martin motioned for Cody to sit next to him. "Come on, boy, don't be shy." The ghastly leer Martin offered would have scared off a shark but Cody, always polite, took the offered chair. Martin shoved a full bottle of scotch in front of him. "That's for you, sugar. A little anesthetic. Drink up."

Cody's smile wavered. "Thanks, no. I never drink anything that strong."

"No skin off my nose," Martin shrugged. "But you're gonna need it."

"What's he mean by that, J?" Cody's eyes held a sudden guarded look.

"It's okay, Codelicious. Just do what he asks." Jonathan felt his face might crack from the smile he forced. "It won't take long."

Staring at him in disbelief, Cody pushed back from the table. "I don't know what the game is tonight, J, but count me out." He rose, pulling his shirt back on. "I'm getting a cab home."

"Cody, don't," Jonathan pleaded but it was already too late.

Colin slid in behind Cody and forced an arm behind his back cruelly, a hand over Cody's mouth to stifle any outcry. Fire flashed in Cody's eyes and he kicked back hard, his boot connecting with a solid thud against Colin's kneecap. He twisted and writhed trying to free himself while Colin swore and tightened his grip. All the while his eyes were fixed on Jonathan who stared hard at the floor.

"Not a very good little bitch, is he?" Martin rasped while Colin forced Cody back in his chair. "You trying to pull something here, weasel?"

Jonathan fought not to squirm under that cold stare. "No, man, I told you ... he likes it kinda rough."

Martin laughed, an unpleasant breathy sound. "What a coincidence. So do I." He yanked Cody's head back, his large hand keeping it tilted back while his thumb and forefinger pinched Cody's nose shut. "Now be good, sugar, drink it down." Cody gasped for air and the bottle was upended into his mouth. He had no choice, swallow it down and breathe or asphyxiate. Jonathan winced as they repeated the procedure, Cody held tight between them, until the bottle was empty.

They let go of Cody slowly and he shook them off, furious, wobbling to his feet. "Kemp, you mother fucker," he whispered, taking an unsteady swing across the table at Jonathan. He missed and lost his balance, sitting back down hard. He tried once more to get up, found such simple movements beyond him and collapsed into his chair with his head in his hands.

"All right, sugar, that's better." Martin's scarred hand stroked through Cody's hair and Jonathan had to swallow against his rising gorge. "We'll get along fine. You don't like the hard stuff, I'll get you something else. What'll you have?"

Either unable or unwilling, Cody didn't answer.

"Amaretto," Jonathan supplied hastily. "It's about all he drinks, besides beer and wine." Anesthetic, Martin had said. The more Cody drank tonight, the better.

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"Fancy tastes your little bitch has," Martin growled but he sent Colin to the bar for a bottle. The amaretto, once in Cody's hands, went down more slowly but without a fuss. Already bleary with scotch, Cody seemed hardly aware he drank, though he still raised his head now and then to glare daggers at Jonathan.

*I'll explain later, Cody, I promise.* Jonathan tried to convey with his eyes but probably the best he could hope for would be Cody blacking the whole evening out.

Martin stood and tucked Cody under his arm. "All right, sugar, time to go."

"Where're we goin'?" Cody slurred, failing to get his feet under him.

"Somewhere we can be alone," Martin purred, his hoarse voice lending it the quality of nails on rusted iron. When Jonathan got up to go with them, Martin said, "Go home, weasel."

The urge to say, okay, bye, was strong. But as much as he was concerned with saving his own skin, he simply couldn't walk off and leave Cody. Partly because Victor would find out, somehow, and rip his arms off and stuff the pieces up various parts of his anatomy. But not entirely.

"I'm going with you." He tried to sound very firm. "Gotta make sure he gets home safe."

He could see Martin's gears grinding through every possible way this might be a scam or a trap. Finally he shrugged, apparently deciding no threat existed. "Suit yourself."

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The four of them left Deva with Cody held tight between Martin and Colin. Just another weekend reveler who didn't know his limits.

\* \* \* \*

Jonathan spent the better part of two hours sitting in the shabby living room of the apartment with his hands fisted in his hair, trying not to listen.

Almost too drunk to resist, Cody had mustered a last desperate defense before they closed the bedroom door. The little guy was tough, no denying it. Colin had gone to his knees and Martin's ears most likely rang from Cody's fist before Martin lost all patience. He backhanded Cody hard across the face. The door closed before Cody hit the floor.

Sounds of struggle and protest became muffled, eventually replaced by rhythmic thumping and other sounds Jonathan didn't want to think about. He turned on the television, aimlessly flipping through channels in a vain attempt at distraction.

Finally, the sounds ceased. Martin opened the door, leaning against the frame, cigarette hanging from his mouth, a contented calm radiating from him. "Well, weasel, you delivered after all. I had my doubts."

Jonathan rose slowly, unable to force himself to look into the bedroom yet. "So we're cool?"

"Yeah, we're cool. This time. But next time you have my fucking money, weasel. Or that'll be you..." Martin waved towards the bed. "In there. And I won't be so gentle."

Swallowing hard, Jonathan took a step towards the bedroom. "Are you, um, done with him?"

Martin nodded. "I'll give you five minutes. Collect your sweet little bitch and get out of my sight."

Steeling himself for the worst, Jonathan's legs trembled as he walked to the bed. Cody's naked body lay bent over the foot of the bed, his ankles tied to the metal legs, his arms stretched up on the mattress and tied to the headboard. A cloth had been stuffed in his mouth. Jonathan pulled it free and found to his disgust it was a rolled up sock. A dark bruise already spread over Cody's cheek. Blood and semen seemed to be everywhere, up and down Cody's back, along his arms, trailing down his legs, in his hair. It took awhile for Jonathan to sort it all out.

He turned to Colin, lounging half-dressed in the room's single chair. "You have a towel ... or something?"

Colin only laughed and left the room, shaking his head.

"Fuckersgodwhatfuckers," Jonathan mumbled on a forced exhalation. He stripped a pillowcase off and used it to clean Cody up as best he could. At least Martin seemed to have kept the cigarette burns to a couple on Cody's arm. They'd managed not to do any permanent damage to that lovely face. At least that. Cody jerked and whimpered when he tried to wipe down his poor backside, so he desisted and untied him instead.

A quick search for clothes turned up Cody's blue shirt, torn to ribbons, his boots and his black leather pants, still intact. With time running out, Jonathan didn't bother to look for socks. He worked up a sweat shoving Cody back into his



pants and all the shaking seemed to bring Cody around a little.

"What time izzit?" Cody mumbled, head rolling restlessly from side to side.

"Sh, babes, take it easy. I've gotta get you out of here," Jonathan patted his leg as he shoved one boot on.

"What time izzit?" The question came more insistently, Cody fumbling to sit up.

"I dunno," Jonathan sighed. "Two, maybe?" He helped Cody up and realized no cabby would pick them up like this. In desperation, he stripped off his leather jacket and shoved Cody's arms into the sleeves. It would have to do.

"I promised..." Cody's breath hitched and broke. "I promised Vic..."

The abject misery in Cody's voice brought a lump of regret to Jonathan's chest. He held Cody close for a moment. "If there'd been any other way, Codes. Christ, I'm so sorry..."

Cody's head lolled against his shoulder. "Where's Vic?"

Jonathan rolled his eyes. Even this far gone, all Cody could do was moon over that oversized meathead. "Come on, babes, let's get moving." He pulled an arm over his shoulder, got a firm hold around Cody's waist and heaved him up. Cody weaved and stumbled, but more or less managed to get his feet moving forward.

In the front room, Martin lay on the sofa with his head cradled in Colin's lap. Momentarily disoriented by the bizarre tenderness of this scene, Jonathan stopped short and stared.

"You still here, weasel?" Martin opened one eye, apparently unwilling to move out from under Colin's fingers

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massaging his scalp. "You just remember, that's the last time I cut you any slack. Got it?"

"Got it. Loud and clear," Jonathan answered while he edged them towards the door.

"And anytime you want help with that lovely you have there." Colin's voice, so soft and smooth after Martin's, was somehow more menacing in its civil, conversational tone. "You bring him to me. Train him up for you properly."

"Um, thanks." Jonathan shuddered. "I'll keep that in mind."

Half-carrying Cody, he stumbled down the stairs and out to the street. A short cab ride, a little extra for the suspicious cabby, and they were back at the club and Jonathan's Alfa. Not the easiest car to get someone half-conscious into, but he managed. Now he just had to get Cody home without running into Victor and he just might make it home in one piece after all.

## Chapter 3

### Waiting Up

Victor coughed, a deep, hoarse sound echoing in the hollow cavern of the bedroom. Again, he sat up to stop the hacking, and again, checked the clock.

3 A.M.

At two, he had been annoyed, at two-thirty, annoyance grew to anger. Now the worry crashed in. *Cody, where are you?* Maybe he should start calling the hospitals. The thought made him ill. But that's how he'd found Cody the last time.

"Cody Fitzroy brought in tonight? Or maybe a John Doe, about five foot six, hundred and fifty pounds, dark red hair?" The same questions to every emergency room in the area. Until Cody had turned up at St. Francis, unconscious, no identification.

He slid his legs out of bed. Perhaps it was best to get it over with. A car door slamming brought his head up and Vic dashed to the window. His teeth ground together at the sight of that red convertible.

"Kemp, you little shit." He yanked on a pair of sweats and headed down the stairs, prepared to give Jonathan a good chewing out.

Jonathan leaned in the passenger's side to pat Cody's face gently. "Come on, babes, we're here. You're home." No response. Not a twitch. What the hell was he going to do? Ring the bell and run? He got his arms around Cody and

heaved him out of the car, onto the dew-strewn grass. Maybe the cooler air would bring Cody around.

He closed the door, turned back to Cody and yelped as a large fist closed on his shirt front and lifted him off the ground.

"What the hell have you done to him now?" Victor growled, holding Jonathan at eye level.

"Me? Nothing ... nothing, I swear!" Jonathan sputtered as Victor set him on his feet.

"Bald faced liar. I should rearrange your bones!"

Jonathan went on the offensive. "Now you listen here, Szoldos, you hulking control freak! Cody is not your pet or your possession! He's a man, and you've just about cut his balls off with your rules and your restrictions and your need to know every time he breathes!"

Victor was trying to get around him to Cody. Jonathan kept stepping in his way.

"Dammit, Kemp! What's wrong with him," Vic shouted in frustration.

"He's just a little drunk," Jonathan answered and tried to go on with his tirade. "Don't try to change the subject."

"That's not drunk, that's alcohol poisoning. Jonathan, get out of my fucking way! He's barely breathing!"

"Not until you listen—"

"At least get him off his back!" Becoming frantic, Victor grabbed Jonathan by the upper arm, preparing to move him to one side. Cody coughed, an ominous gurgling coming from him. Jonathan, on edge already, took a swing at Victor. Vic's instincts took over, and his left arm shot up to block the blow.

His right swung around in a hard hook and smashed into Jonathan's jaw.

Jonathan went down hard, unmoving, but Victor had no time for him. He managed to get to Cody in time to roll him on his side before he started throwing up. Even in the moonlight, Cody's face looked gray. Bad enough, but now that he held Cody, he saw signs of a pummeling. An attack, a fight. Vic had knocked out the only person who could have answered any questions at the moment. The how and why didn't matter, though. Cody was in bad shape.

Victor scooped him up, carrying him in the house so he could grab a jacket, shoes and keys. He buckled Cody into the passenger seat of their pickup, so often used for transporting Cody's work, and took him to the hospital, leaving Jonathan lying on the front lawn without a backward glance.

A quiet night for the emergency room at St. Francis, plenty of hands were there to help load Cody on a stretcher and whisk him back behind the curtains. And Victor, once again, as so often where Cody was concerned, Victor could only wait.

\* \* \* \*

Up all night, congested and miserable, Victor fell asleep in the waiting room, head hanging over the back of an uncomfortable chair. He startled awake when someone shook him roughly by the arm.

"Hey, wake up." The voice was far from friendly. "You the one who brought Mr. Fitzroy in?"

Wincing, rubbing at his neck, Victor sat up slowly. He tried to blink the figures into focus, recall where he was and clear his throat enough to speak.

"He's talking to you, mister." The second voice was softer but no less threatening.

Hospital. Cody ... "Yeah," Victor rasped out, coughing. Realized suddenly that the people standing in front of him were state police. "I brought Cody in."

"What's your name? What's your relation to Mr. Fitzroy?"

"Victor Szoldos. Cody's my..." Always the question of what to say. Partner sounded like a business arrangement. Lover sounded frivolous. Boyfriend was ridiculous. And spouse, which would be closer to the truth, wasn't widely accepted. "He lives with me. Look, what's going on here?"

"He was pretty beat up when you brought him in," the larger policeman snarled.

"Yes, he had some bruises. What is this?"

"Look at his hand, Mike." The other cop nodded to Victor's split knuckles. "He sure as hell hit someone tonight. What happened to Fitzroy, Mr. Szoldos? Any idea?"

Victor stood, brows drawing down in a dark line. "I don't like what you're implying, Officer. I would never hurt Cody. He was out, he got home late, in bad shape, I brought him here."

"And where were you tonight, Mr. Szoldos?"

"I was home, in bed. Dammit, what aren't you telling me? What's happened to Cody?" Victor's fists clenched.

"No need to get all riled up. We'd like you to come down to the station, sir. We have some questions."

"Then you can ask them here," Victor growled. "I'm not leaving him. When he wakes up, I need to be here."

"Sir, the sooner you cooperate, the sooner we get this over with."

The bigger trooper laid a hand on Victor's arm. Enraged, Vic shook it off. Both policemen grabbed him and Victor ended up shoved face first against the wall, cuffs clicking shut over his wrists. Rights were read. Vic was yanked around and shoved into walking forward. Next thing he knew, he was in the back of the patrol car.

"Fags like you make me sick," the trooper in the driver's seat snarled. "You get yourself a little guy half your size and beat up on him and think no one's gonna notice cause he's not a girl. Just sick."

In a perfect vision moment of hindsight, Victor realized he should have tossed Jonathan into the back of the truck and brought him along. If anyone should be answering questions, it was that bastard.

A bewildering whirl of rooms and clerks later, where he was asked everything but his shoe size, Victor found himself alone in a bare room, handcuffed to the table. They could have let him have one hand free. He couldn't even blow his nose and ended up turning his head to wipe it on his jacket. Wretched, worried out of his mind, he wondered if he had the strength to rip the bolted table legs from the floor.

Finally a man in a suit with a manila file strode in and took the seat opposite Victor.

"Mr. Szoldos, I'm Detective Matthews." He paused, drawing out the moment. If he wanted to scare Victor it wasn't working. It was simply irritating.

"I'm afraid I can't shake your hand, Detective," Victor managed before another fit of coughing took him.

"Funny guy. Great. Look, you don't wanna be here. I don't either. Let's cut the crap and get to it." Matthews made a show of opening the file. "You say you were home all night. Anybody able to back you up on that?"

"No. Home alone usually means there's no one there to see you," Victor said with a glare.

"Just answer the questions, Szoldos, all right?" While the other cops had seemed on a power trip, this one was older. Cynical. Tired. "Why don't you tell me exactly what you did tonight?"

"I was at work until about seven. That you can verify if you want. Company security logs, guards who saw me leave. I went home and went to bed. At about three this morning, Cody came home..."

"Right. Sure. There's no way that boy just 'came home'." Matthews snorted.

"I was getting to that," Victor shifted in his chair. His head was pounding. "Someone drove Cody home..."

"This someone have a name?"

"Jonathan Kemp."

"Friend of yours?"

Victor snorted and coughed again. "No. He's a friend of Cody's."



"Okay, so this Kemp brought him home and that's when you beat Cody up? You were jealous?"

"What? No! Kemp brought him home beat up! I didn't hit—"

"Your fist says otherwise."

"Fine, I did hit him—"

"So you admit to beating Cody up?"

"Dammit, no! Jonathan swung at me, I hit him. Jonathan, not Cody." Victor sighed. "Look, could I have one hand and a tissue box? I feel like I can't breathe."

"In a minute. Let's start at the top."

"What's happened to Cody?" Vic pulled at his cuffs. "Why won't anyone tell me?"

Matthews stared at him as if he could bore a hole through him. Then he leaned forward, hands clasped in front of him. "The doctors tell us Cody was abused pretty badly tonight. Non-consensual, you understand me? Rope burns on his wrists and ankles. Cigarette burns. Beaten and cut and bitten. And raped."

Victor felt a knife go through him with every word. Jaw clenched, he had to fight down a bellow of rage. That anyone would do that to Cody. That it had happened again. That Jonathan had been involved. Again.

"Goddamit! I can't be here! And why ask me questions when it's Kemp that would know! Or Cody!" His frustration was boiling over.

"We don't think Cody's necessarily going to remember, with his blood alcohol so high." Matthews rose to leave. "You sit tight."

Victor slumped in his chair when the door closed. "Where the hell am I going to go?"

He had dropped off again, his head on the metal table, by the time the detective returned.

"All right, Szoldos, we're done here."

"I can go?" Victor hardly recognized his own congested voice.

"Unless you'd rather stay." Matthews unlocked the cuffs with a dry laugh.

"No, thanks. Nice of you to offer." Victor's hands dove for his pockets so he could finally pull out a tissue and blow his nose. Stupid how such little things could become such a misery. "Why the change of heart?"

Matthews perched on the table edge. "He's awake. And insists it wasn't you. Though I've been trying to tell the chief it wasn't you for hours."

Not quite trusting his legs, Victor levered himself up slowly. "Why's that? My honest face?"

"You don't smell like cigarettes. Not even a little. You couldn't have been there."

That stopped Victor short. Good to know that there was actual detective in this man. "You have a card? Can I call you if Cody tells me anything?"

"You read my mind." Matthews smiled, not a comfortable smile but it seemed a sincere effort, and handed over his number. "He's not saying much now, they tell me, except to ask where you are."

Vic let out a breath. "They didn't tell him, did they? That I got hauled in?" He could just imagine Cody's already distressed mind going into overdrive on that news.

"Couldn't tell you. Better get cleaned up before you go, though. You'd scare the hell out of the nurses right now."

In a daze, Victor took a cab home to shower and change and call the hospital to see where Cody was. In the trauma ward, he was told, and please check in at the desk when he came to visit.

The practical thing to do would have been to call a cab again, since the truck was already at the hospital. He couldn't stand the thought of waiting, though, so he took his Honda, the big Custom 2000. Cody had always teased him that the motorcycle had been the only reason he'd agreed to start seeing Vic in the first place. Riding felt strange without Cody's arms around his waist, warm body pressed close. Empty. Exposed.

Helmet tucked under his arm, he took the elevator to the seventh floor and stopped at the nurses' station.

"Hi, I'm here to see Cody Fitzroy," he said when the woman at the desk lifted her head from her paperwork.

She shot up, gripped his wrist and exclaimed in an intense tone, "Tell me your name is Vic. Please tell me that."

He reared back, eyes wide in surprise. "Yeeess, I'm Victor Szoldos..."

Racing around the desk, she seized his hand and began to drag him down the hall. To every nurse they passed, she exclaimed, "This is Victor, we found Vic!" Which was greeted

variously with "Thank God" and "About time" and "Well, no wonder."

They stopped when they reached an older woman in white, standing just outside one of the rooms.

"Angie! This is Vic!" his guide whispered excitedly.

Angie looked him up and down and extended her hand. "I'm Angela Carson, the supervisor on today. It's about time they let you go." Her voice was sharp and authoritative but with a gentle underlying humor. The tight knot in Victor's stomach eased a fraction.

"Got here as soon as I could. What's going on?" Vic tried to peer into the room but all he saw was the drawn privacy curtain.

The charge nurse shook her head. "The detective who was here told Cody you'd been taken in for questioning. They should have sent someone with more sense." She drew Victor away from the room, lowering her voice. "He's severely dehydrated. Disoriented. Confused. When they told him you were being held at the station, he got really scared. Pulled everything out, IV lines, catheter, sensors, and went under the bed. He won't come out. We've tried and tried and can't get hold of him."

Victor blinked. "Ah ... the beds are on wheels, right? Did anyone try moving the bed?"

"Oh, if it was only that easy." The corners of Angie's eyes crinkled. "He's wedged himself up in the frame. We can't convince him he's in the hospital, he's just not hearing us. All he does is demand to see you."

"Oh. Sorry about all this..."

"Not your fault," Angie said sternly and turned him towards the room. "Just get him out of there and we'll be eternally grateful."

Vic approached the curtain and pulled it aside. The bed was empty, a little too neatly made up for having a patient recently vacate it. He suspected Cody had made quite a mess yanking his lines out, already whisked away and cleaned up.

"Cody? You in here, little man?" he called softly.

There was a bump underneath the bed, a soft sound of distress and a tear-strained voice drifted out, "Vic? You all right?"

"Sweetheart, come out of there. This is ridiculous."

A choked bark of hysterical laughter jerked out. "I can't."

Vic put his helmet down on the floor and got down on his hands and knees, trying to see through the metal framework. "What do you mean, you can't?"

"I'm stuck. We going for a ride?"

"When you're better, love. A nice long one. Anywhere you want." Stuck. Wonderful. Short of asking for tools and a couple of big orderlies to take the bed apart ... Victor rolled onto his back and used his feet to shove himself under the bed as if he were working on a car.

"Hello, there," he said quietly to the tangle of naked limbs wedged under the foot of the bed.

"Hey, baby. They hurt you? Work you over? Get out tasers and stuff?" Cody's voice wavered and cracked, at the end of his endurance. His hair had fallen over his fever bright eyes, giving him a feral look.

"You've been watching too much TV. They asked me questions and said I could go. If you lean back, no, the other way, okay, now slide your left arm in towards you. Attaboy. Your right foot, yep, towards me. Almost there, Cody. It's all right now."

Even in the dim light under the bed, Vic could see now how bad off Cody was. He fought down his rage, wrestled it into a distant mental closet, and kept his voice soft and encouraging. Reaching up, he pulled Cody out the last bit, gathering him close to his chest. "Let it out, sweetheart. Just let it go," he murmured when he felt how badly Cody shook.

It must have been bizarre. The sound of Cody's sobs muffled against Vic's jacket floating out from under the bed, Vic's boots and Cody's bare feet sticking out like strange weeds.

"Be out in a minute," Vic called to the nurses he knew were keeping an eye on things.

Eventually, he wriggled out, Cody cradled in his arms, and managed with a stiff groan to get him back in the bed. He kicked off his boots, sat behind Cody and pulled him back against his chest, holding him and reassuring him while the nurses reattached the IV lines and sensors.

Victor stayed where he was, letting Cody sleep on his chest. No one shooed him away or told him he couldn't sit there or suggested he leave when visiting hours were over. They were just grateful to have Cody calm and cooperative—and not under the bed.

Jerking awake, Vic realized he had fallen asleep as well. Someone had stuffed a pillow behind his head and covered

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them both with a blanket. While he drifted off again, he heard the nurses whispering in the doorway.

"That is so sweet."

"Isn't it? You should have seen him, Nancy. So patient and matter of fact."

"I swear, it's not fair. Why are all the good ones gay?"

A soft laugh. "Must take a special man to put up with other men."

## Chapter 4

### Aftermath

While in the hospital, Cody had been kept calm on sedatives and pain killers, his mood impossible to judge since he was always drifting and drowsy. Back home, without the IV drips and the regular meds, everything changed.

Victor had his first glimpse the night he brought Cody home. He stood in the kitchen stirring a pot of spaghetti sauce when Cody limped up and wrapped his arms around Vic's ribs from behind.

"You're supposed to be in bed, little man," Victor murmured and turned to take Cody in his arms.

Cody lifted a hand to stroke his cheek. "I know. I wanted to see you. Just—" With sudden ferocity, he seized Vic's face in both hands and kissed him, pressing more than suggestively up against him.

"Sweetheart." Victor tried to come up for air and was dragged back down. Gently, firmly, he set Cody back, his voice soft and regretful. "I don't know if we should."

Eyes blazing, Cody shook himself free. "I'm not going to break, Szoldos! Dammit, I wait all this time to come home to you and now you don't even want me?"

"The doctor said—"

"Fuck the doctor! Fuck you! Yes, I'm fucking cussing at you! Deal with it!"



Vic couldn't even muster an ounce of anger. Maybe that's what Cody wanted, to provoke him, but all he felt was heartbreak. He opened his arms, hoping Cody would come back into his embrace. "Sweetheart, please..."

But Cody turned and left, his limping footsteps up the stairs much louder than they had been coming down.

"Damn." Vic turned off the stove and followed Cody upstairs where he had buried himself under the blankets. He sat on the edge of the bed and reached out to rub Cody's shoulder, which was jerked out from under his hand, Cody's cocooned form edging away from him across the bed. When he tried again, Cody made an angry, frustrated sound.

"Cody, I'm sorry..."

"Leave me alone. Just—go away."

That was how relations proceeded for the next few days. Victor tried to hold him, Cody shook him off. He tried to get close in bed, Cody edged away and turned his back. He tried to talk, Cody ignored him or gave sullen, curt answers.

Cody spent his days taking numerous showers, locking himself in the bedroom sobbing, or staring blankly out the window. When he wasn't shouting invectives at his lover. Fears crept into Vic's thoughts about what might happen with Cody home alone all day.

He called Kurt from the office. "How's Wyatt?"

"Better, my dear, much better."

"They find out what it was?"

Kurt's voice grew tight and angry. "They said it seemed like a particular kind of mushroom poisoning."

"Oh. Did you call the restaurant and tell them?"

"Victor, Wyatt doesn't eat mushrooms." A long pause followed. "I can't prove it and every court in the country would call me paranoid, but I know that little shit did it. I know he did."

"Jonathan?"

"Yes, that little shit. Dammit, Vic, I'm so sorry about Cody. I should've insisted he come with us. Kemp poisoned my poor Wyatt to get us out of the way. I'm sure of it."

Victor sighed, leaning his head on his fist. "But no way to prove it. Speaking of Cody, would you do me a favor? Go check on him between classes? Just drop by to say hello?"

"Of course, m'dear. Things going not so good?"

"Things have gone all to hell. Cody's so—angry. And withdrawn."

"Victor, you're not going to want to hear this. But you need to: Get. Him. Some. Help."

Vic snorted. "Right. He flat-out refused last time. No shrinks, he said. No way."

"It's his second time dealing with this." Kurt's smooth, cultured voice was such a balm after being shrieked at for days. "He hurts, Vic. He's had every feeling of safety stripped from him. Of course he's angry. Cody adores you, you know that. If you argue for it hard enough, he'll go."

He took a long lunch to talk to the counseling center, got referrals, and finally found a therapist who sounded friendly without being forced, intelligent without pretension. She understood the seriousness of the situation and cleared a nine o'clock slot for Cody the next day.

"Don't expect instant miracles," she warned him at the end of their call. "This is a process, not a surgical cure."

Cody hardly reacted to the news at all that evening. He shrugged and went to bed, once again unable to stand the sight of dinner. Victor stood alone in the kitchen for a long time, leaning both fists on the counter, wishing the heated lead ball in his stomach would go away.

A splintering crash shocked Vic out of sleep the next morning. Cody's side of the bed glared at him, empty. The sound repeated and Victor dashed downstairs towards the source. The studio. Another horrendous crash, the brittle chatter of shattering glass and the groan of bending metal. Vic tried the door. Locked.

"Cody? Are you all right?" No answer. "Cody, open the damn door!"

In desperation, Vic set his shoulder to the door and in three frantic blows, the lock gave. He staggered as the door suddenly swung inwards and he had to catch himself from falling on shards of blue glass.

Cody stood in his BVD's, a bottle in one hand, a sledgehammer in the other. He took a pull from the bottle, set it down and took the sledge in both hands. Muscles straining, he swung with all the force his lean-muscled body could muster at his latest sculpture. The beautiful, soaring towers Cody had created from discarded wrought iron and pieces of broken bottles and crockery, lay in ruins. Sunlight glinted madly from all the small reflective surfaces, as if a missile had struck this lovely ethereal city and set it on fire.

Aftermath  
*by Angel Martinez*

Blood flecked the soles of Cody's bare feet, a manic grin split his face. He laughed at Vic's expression. "Don't you like it, Victor? Don't you just love it? I call it 'Aftermath'." Another long pull from his bottle of Amaretto, his eyes never left Vic, defiance burning in them, daring him to say something.

"You want the shower first?" Vic said, his voice artificially soft and even.

"For what?" Cody flung the sledge across the room.

"You have an appointment in an hour, little man."

"You keep it. You're the one who made it," Cody snarled "Fucking shrinks. You think I'm crazy now. I know what you want, Szoldos. You wanna have me committed. Lock me away where I'll wither and die and then you can play the tragic, brooding hero for all the boys. Oh, yes, that's Victor. His one true love went nuts and killed himself it's so fucking sad! I'm not having any of it, you hear me? You're not fucking locking me away!"

Cody's yells echoed in the open space, his last word punctuated by him hauling his arm back and flinging the bottle at Vic. It glanced off his shoulder and shattered against the door.

"That's it, Fitzroy. I've had it." Victor's jaw was clenched so tight, his teeth hurt. "You want to act like a spoiled brat? I'll treat you like one."

He strode over the broken glass, ignoring the pain in his feet and seized Cody by the arm. Cody's blue eyes were wide, halfway between outrage and fear, but Vic didn't give him a chance to respond. He sat down hard on the work bench and yanked Cody across his lap, facedown. Yelling and squirming,

Cody tried to wriggle free but Vic caught both his wrists in one huge hand behind his back. His free hand landed flat with a solid smack on Cody's upturned rump.

Hard enough to make a solid sound but never hard enough to truly hurt, Vic kept up the spanking despite Cody's ever more colorful cursing. He felt rather ashamed of himself but there had been so little physical contact between them, he found himself more than a little aroused.

Cody's struggles became less fierce and finally ceased. Vic felt it best to stop then but Cody cleared his throat and said in a small voice. "Vic? Baby? Don't stop now ... please?"

One eyebrow lifted in surprise, Victor realized he wasn't the only one aroused. He continued, since Cody had asked so nicely, each swat now accompanied by a soft caress downwards towards Cody's balls. Soft moans replaced the cussing, Cody's body writhing hard against Vic's thigh instead of trying to get away. A few more thwacks and Cody's body arched and he uttered a long groan as his body bucked in Vic's lap in a forceful climax.

When he quieted, Vic released his hold and pulled Cody up to sit in his lap where he wrapped his arms around Vic's neck and burst into tears. There was nothing to do but hold him tight and wait. Vic rocked him gently, grateful to simply have Cody in his arms again.

"Guess I better get cleaned up so we can go," Cody finally whispered.

Warm colors decorated the waiting room, dark reds and chocolate browns. Table lamps provided islands of soft light and Cody occupied one of these, head down, filling out the

various forms. Vic sat beside him on the high-backed sofa, pretending to read a three month old issue of Life.

Cody reached the line titled "Spouse/Domestic Partner". He bit his bottom lip, hand poised above the paper. Slowly, as if each letter held some ceremonial value, he printed "Victor L. Szoldos".

"What's your title at work now?" He nudged Vic with his knee.

"VP of Business Engineering."

"Oh, we're all just so impressed," Cody muttered.

Victor shrugged, choosing to ignore the sarcasm. When the door opened, he expected a receptionist or a nurse and was surprised when the tiny woman said, "Cody? I'm Dr. Simmons. Paula, if you'd rather."

Cody rose, wiping his palms on his jeans, and offered a shy, little-boy smile with his outstretched hand. He might be reluctant to be here, but still retained his manners. She whisked him away and Vic was left alone in the empty waiting room. He gave up pretending to read and slumped on the sofa, inertia setting in. Probably should call the office. A hundred things were piling up there. None of them seemed important, though. Odd how he felt these days. Whenever he sat down alone, he wanted to go to sleep.

*Just so damn tired. Forever and always tired...*

"See what I mean?" Cody's voice drifted into the fog of his dreams. "Like he's narcoleptic or something."

A weight depressed the sofa next to him and Victor sat up with a start, heart pounding at waking in an unexpected place. The tiny woman and her halo of blonde, frizzy hair

swam into his vision. She smiled. "Hello, Victor. We spoke on the phone."

Vic pulled himself together for introductions, fighting the fuzz in his brain, then looked at his watch. The hour had flown past while he napped.

"Cody and I had a nice chat. I'd like him to set up regular appointments for awhile. Individual ones for Cody and for you and then a once-a-week for the two of you together." She patted his arm. "Would you like some coffee or water? Cody tells me you haven't been feeling well."

A glance at Cody showed him looking almost—smug. Conspiracy seemed to taint the air.

"I'm fine, thanks." Victor scrubbed his hands through his hair. "Look, I can see us coming in together but I don't need my own appointments. I'm not the one with the—" He nearly said "problem" but cut himself off. Cody was giving him a dark look, arms folded over his chest.

"Are you..." Paula pointed a finger back and forth between the two of them. "Part of this relationship?"

"Yes, of course I am."

"Then you're involved," she said. Her tone was one of simple fact, not of judgment. "You're a very large slice of Cody's life and your perspectives are important in this too."

Reluctantly, Victor agreed and found himself railroaded into all sorts of appointments.

In the car, driving Cody over to visit with the still-housebound Wyatt, Victor found himself at a loss. "What, um, what did you talk about?"

Aftermath  
*by Angel Martinez*

"Oh, this and that. My art. My family. You." Cody's voice was light but his head was turned away so Vic couldn't see his expression.

"Not about, the, um...? She didn't ask you any questions?"

"Lots of questions. Like where had I studied and who are my favorite artists and did I go to the Dada exhibit at the Smithsonian."

Victor gave up. Not that he claimed to know anything about therapy but he had expected her to at least touch on the assaults. It sounded like she and Cody had simply had a chat, as if he had taken her out to lunch or something. For this he was paying \$150 an hour?

Cody did seem calmer and even offered him a quick peck on the cheek before he slid out of the car. Vic watched him ambling up the walk to Wyatt and Kurt's house, hands stuffed in his pockets, looking younger than his actual years in high tops, black jeans and a Myazaki t-shirt. He wanted to call Cody back, to tell him ... something, anything to bridge the chasm between them. I love you. I'm sorry...

When had Cody started to dress like that? When had he changed? Vic straightened his tie, a tired, harried stranger staring back at him from the rearview mirror. A terrible, sinking rush hit him in the gut. Cody hadn't changed. He had.



## Chapter 5

### Persistence of Memory

"Can I get you anything? Tea, juice, banana?" Wyatt rose slowly. He smiled but looked as if he grayed out every time he stood up.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that?" Cody looked up from the chess board.

"Don't even start. I'm not playing the 'who's more sick of being an invalid' game with you. This is my house. You're my guest. What can I get you?"

Cody held up his hands in surrender. "Okay, okay. Sorry. Tea's good. Chai?"

"Now, see, that's why I love you. Always reading my mind."

With Wyatt gone, Cody gave up the pretense of concentrating on chess. He curled up in the overstuffed chair by the window and gazed out over the garden, watching the squirrels. A rasping voice seemed to speak directly into his ear, "That's it, sugar, fight all you want. Just makes it sweeter in the end."

He shuddered and pressed the heels of his hands over his eyes. He wasn't going to look around this time. No one would be there. What he wouldn't give to excise that horrible voice from his brain. The police had asked him who did it. But he had only first names, maybe not even real ones, and vague descriptions, blurred by alcohol and fear. What could he tell

them, really? Just like last time, they'd give up after a short investigation. The damage done, nothing would change even if they were caught.

A more pressing question bothered him at the moment: did he still love Victor? He swung wildly these days between desperately wanting Victor's comfort and being appalled by it. Victor.

Here, in this very spot, Cody had first seen him, at one of Kurt's holiday parties. Cody's love interest at the time had dumped him the night before. Victor's date had abandoned him, leaving the party with someone else. Kurt decided to play matchmaker.

"Cody, this is Victor. He works in metal too, as a high steel walker." Kurt introduced him with a flourish and conveniently excused himself.

Faced with a looming, brooding silhouette in the twilight sunroom, Cody had felt intimidated. Especially when Victor looked him up and down and said quietly, "You don't look like you're in construction."

"I'm not, but I do work in steel and iron. I'm an artist."

"Ah, a sculptor. I'm afraid I don't know much about modern art."

The huge silhouette turned from the window and flicked on a table lamp. Cody tried his best to keep his eyes in his head but the lamp illuminated a strong, handsome face and a body so hard-packed he could have been sculpted. But the same old line about "modern art" ... he suppressed a sigh.

"I suppose you like Van Gogh or Monet or something," Cody said, preparing to cut the conversation short soon.

"There's a lot to be said for Van Gogh." Victor nodded and took a long pull from his drink. "But I've always liked the Renaissance best."

Thrown off his stride, Cody tried for a joke. "Oh, sure, all those naked men, like David."

Victor gave him a long look. "It's the conjunction of art and science that interests me. Anatomy, optics, engineering, how the artists studied everything and how their studies showed up in their art. The anatomically correct male nude, though ... don't you feel it's been demonized by a prudish sense of false morals? I mean, the female nude is considered beautiful but as soon as you show a man's privates, it's supposedly obscene."

Cody sat down hard on the window seat. "Whoa. I think I owe you an apology."

"For what?"

Spreading his hands with a smile, Cody answered, "For thinking you were just another gorgeous meathead."

Victor laughed, a low, rumbling sound that made Cody yearn to put his ear against that broad chest. "It's all right. I'm just glad you didn't ask the usual questions, like 'Does your drive shaft match your chassis?' and 'Could you take your shirt off?'"

They both laughed a lot in the next hour of conversation, the most comfortable Cody ever remembered. Maybe not love at first sight, but definitely like and a good deal of lust thrown in. When their fingers met and Victor picked up Cody's, stroking the backs and exclaiming, "You have the most beautiful hands..." Cody didn't even think it sounded corny.

He turned his face up to Victor's and met his heated gaze. All it took was a slight lean forward and Victor took Cody's face between his huge hands, calloused but gentle. His head bent down to Cody's as if magnetically drawn and their lips brushed petal soft.

Victor pulled back, his thumb stroking Cody's cheek. "So lovely, so perfect," he whispered before coming back to claim Cody's mouth in a kiss full of barely leashed fire. Cody melted into him, arms sliding up to twine around Victor's neck. Time and place slipped away under that tender assault, that perfect moment of igniting passion.

Coming back out of pleasant memory, Cody whispered to the garden, "I want to go back. Take it all away, I want to go back."

Mugs and plates clinked on the tray as Wyatt set it down. "I brought milk and sugar. Couldn't remember what you took. And I found Kurt's stash of cookies ... Cody? Oh, hon. It's all right. I'll sit right here with you. You go ahead and cry if you need to."

\* \* \* \*

Victor finished his laundry list for Dr. Simmons of Cody's disturbing behaviors since the first attack and sat back, drained. He hadn't the slightest idea what she might say in response. He certainly wasn't expecting what he heard.

"How have you been sleeping at night lately, Vic?" Paula sat with her feet tucked up beside her on her chair, without pad or chart or pen in hand.

"What in the world does that have to do with anything?"

"Your health is important too. Especially since Cody's expressed some concerns about it."

He scrubbed his hands over his face, irritated. "I don't sleep well. Would you?"

"You have trouble falling asleep? Or you wake frequently? Or the sleep you get is restless?" She handed him the box of chocolates that always sat on her table during sessions.

Victor had been refusing the sweets, now he took one without thinking. Dark outer shell, almond cream. "Good chocolate. Belgian?"

"Yes." She waited, head leaning on her hand, forever patient.

"All right, fine. All of it. I can't fall asleep at night. I'm constantly waking up. I get these horrible feelings that something's happened and I jerk awake. To check if he's still there and still breathing. Silly, I know."

"Do you think it's silly to feel anxious?"

Vic stared at his hands, following the lines of old scars. "No, I guess not. Not since..." He let out a snort. "I guess worry takes a lot out of a man."

Paula swung her feet down and reached into a nearby drawer. "I'm going to prescribe a sleep aid for you, Vic. Something that should help take the edge off the restlessness but not leave you groggy in the morning. Would that be all right?"

For a moment, Vic bristled at the idea. Here they were coming to her to help Cody and she wrote up prescriptions for him? But she had a point. If he let his health fail, he wouldn't be any help to Cody at all. "All right. I guess it couldn't hurt."

Aftermath  
*by Angel Martinez*

He arrived home first that evening since he'd left work early to keep his appointment. Cody had mentioned going to see a new installation at the university, so he wasn't worried. Too much. Vic pulled off his shoes and slipped out of his tie, unbuttoning the first three buttons of his shirt before he stretched out on the couch in the living room. Just a little rest and then he'd start dinner.

The leather creaked under him and he wished it was the old cloth sofa from their first apartment. Worn. Cat-scratched. But comfortable. Most of the old furniture was gone, discarded with the move. Why had they done that? It would have been nice to have the wrought iron bed still. He could have restored it, given a bit of time.

That bed...

He'd come into the bedroom after his evening shower one night a few months into their relationship to find Cody sitting on the bed, fidgeting.

"What's up?" One towel wrapped around his waist, another riffling his hair dry, he sat down on the covers.

"I wanted to talk to you about something." Cody twisted the blanket between his fingers.

"About what? Don't keep me in suspense." Victor slid a finger under Cody's chin and lifted his head, a sick feeling starting in his gut. The last time someone had said 'I want to talk to you' it had ended in Vic's heart breaking.

Cody cleared his throat and squirmed. "Sometimes, um, it's just, see, I like certain things. And if I tell you and you say it's weird or creepy, I'll feel like such an idiot."

Intrigued, Vic sat back against the footboard. "Promise, I won't say anything like that. Come on, little man, you know you can tell me anything."

"Okay, well, I like handcuffs. And being tied down. And—during sex—being told what to do..."

Vic laughed. He couldn't help himself. "You were afraid to tell me you like a little bondage? Chrissakes, Cody! If that's what you want, I'll do the very best I can." He stopped laughing when Cody flushed bright red. "You have to tell me these things, you know. Do you need a scene to go with it?"

Cody shot him a shy grin. "Well, if you wanted to wear a uniform and tell me to get up against the wall, I wouldn't mind. But, no, I don't need it. I don't really need any of it. It's just ... sometimes..."

"Not a problem. At all." Vic pulled him close, burying his face in Cody's hair. It had been a few boyfriends ago, but Vic still remembered what was expected of him. "You have some favorite toys or do we improvise?"

With an excited bounce, Cody was off the bed. All set for sleep in boxers and a t-shirt, he looked for all the world like a bad little boy up past his bedtime as he dug into his bureau drawer. He dug out an enameled box, which he set on Vic's lap.

Lengths of soft cotton rope, two set of faux-fur lined cuffs, little harnesses that were definitely not for elfin-sized horses, and a few chains with snap hooks. Nothing terribly shocking. Nothing to indicate that Cody was into serious pain. Vic kept his sigh of relief to himself.

"Well, little man," he said in a somber tone. "First of all, those clothes need to go."

Cody stood and stripped quickly, no teasing, no coyness. His erection stood out exclamation point straight, with a quiver in his calf muscles.

Vic held out his hands, taking Cody's in a light grip. "Thank you. For trusting me with this. I know it took courage to tell me, sweetheart."

Chewing his bottom lip, Cody looked at the floor. "You called me 'sweetheart'."

"Oh. Shouldn't I?"

"No ... I mean yes." Cody let out a nervous laugh. "I like it."

"Good."

Vic's grin was the only warning Cody had. He lunged and seized Cody around the waist, heaving him up onto his shoulder. With a little gasp, Cody let his torso drape down Vic's back.

"My sweetheart, my compact-model Adonis," Vic murmured as he turned his head to plant a kiss on Cody's perfect, rounded butt cheek. "You just relax and let me do the work."

He set Cody down on his front in the middle of the bed, fished out the smaller pair of lined cuffs and fastened Cody's wrists together at the small of his back. A length of rope was tied around each ankle. Then Vic coaxed those lovely, lean thighs apart as far as they would comfortably go, bent the right leg up at the knee and used the free end of the rope to



tie off at Cody's wrists. Repeated on the left, this left Cody in a modified hogtie that still gave Vic plenty of access.

He bent down to whisper in Cody's ear, "How's that feel?"

A soft, sweet moan and Cody squirming against the comforter was what he received in answer. He gave Cody's backside an experimental swat and was surprised when Cody's moans grew deeper and he lifted his hips towards Vic's hand. Sliding an arm under, Vic stuffed a pillow underneath. Cody ground against the pillow and Vic put a restraining hand on his butt.

"Don't you even think about it. Climax before I tell you and you can stay like that all night."

"Mmm, it's tempting," Cody managed to find his voice, hoarse with need.

In no rush, Vic stroked both hands over Cody's arms and shoulders, caressing, kneading. Cody's over taut muscles began to relax, his eyes closed on a blissful sigh as Vic worked the knots out of his back. When the tension flowed out of Cody, he began a more sensual campaign.

This was the night he discovered how hypersensitive Cody became when bound. He kissed an instep and Cody jerked against his restraints. He sucked on a toe and Cody whimpered as if he were at his limit. But Vic didn't want to torture him and Cody's excitement made him ache to his bones. He retrieved the lube from the nightstand and spread some over his thumb, teasing at Cody's entrance in soft circles.

"Oh, please," Cody whispered, cut off in a sharp gasp when Vic's thumb slid inside.

"Hmm? Please what, love?"

"Please ... please ... I want you inside me." Cody twitched and rocked his hips back with a desperate groan.

"Ah. Since that makes two of us, I'm glad to oblige." Vic leaned forward to place a soft kiss between Cody's shoulder blades while he shifted his body into position. He slicked the lube over his erection, the head nearly purple it was so engorged. With a rolling of his hips, he guided the head within, panting at how tightly Cody gripped him. Short, slow thrusts eased him a little farther in each time, Cody lifting up towards him as if he could hurry the process along.

The little sounds of pleasure from Cody, the way he writhed and ground, soon had Vic setting a faster pace. The wrought iron bed bumped rhythmically against the wall, its feet thumping on the floor. It didn't take long for their downstairs neighbor to bang on the ceiling. "Keep it down up there, you freaks!"

Vic couldn't care less. His balls felt like lead, his fingers gripped Cody's hips hard, and he grated out, "Sweetheart, come for me. Before I pass out."

An ecstatic cry leaped from Cody's lips. He bucked and jerked under Victor as if he were having a seizure, his smooth walls gripping Vic so hard his lungs constricted. A long, guttural groan poured from deep in his chest and he thrust in as far as Cody could take him, his climax forced from him in molten pulses...

A hard slam on the table next to him jerked Vic awake and he blinked in the dim light of the living room. The wrought

iron bed, the apartment, that passionate night all ripped away.

"Dammit, Victor!" Cody shouted. "You can't even stay awake for me to get home! What the hell is wrong with you?"

Cody didn't seem to want an answer, though, since he turned and stomped off up the stairs.

"Crap," Vic muttered, trying to calm his hammering heart. He trudged up to their closed bedroom door and knocked. Tired of Cody running from him, he prepared to force the door but the knob turned easily.

He sat down on the bed next to Cody, ignoring his angry glare. "Dr. Simmons says I need help sleeping at night." He pulled the prescription bottle out of his shirt pocket. "She seems to think I have an anxiety problem."

Cody looked at the label and did an odd thing. He sputtered, then let out a sharp bark of laughter. Before Vic could get too worried, he rummaged in his nightstand drawer and produced an identical bottle, with a nearly identical label. "Me too," he said softly. "Vic ... I'm sorry. This, all this, it's been really hard on you, hasn't it?"

"Just hard for me to see you hurting, sweetheart." Vic pulled his shirttails free with a sigh. "So, you want to sleep together, handsome?"

Cody's laugh was sorrow-tinged. "Sure. I think we're overdue. You get comfy; I'll get us some water."

With an air of ceremony, they both undressed, clinked glasses and downed their pills. Cody didn't jerk away when they lay down and Vic took his hand. They lay quietly, facing each other, waiting for sleep to come.

Aftermath  
*by Angel Martinez*

"How about a quote, Vic? Like you used to do," Cody asked wistfully with his eyes drifting shut.

Vic kissed the backs of his fingers. "Oh, hmm. 'Good night, sweet prince, and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest.'"

"No, no, not that one. That's when Hamlet's dying ... that's no good."

"Right. Sorry. Um ... 'Trust in dreams, for in them is the hidden gate to eternity.'"

"Oh, I like that," Cody murmured. "What play's that from?"

"Khalil Gibran, little man, not Shakespeare." Vic stopped when he realized Cody was asleep and he closed his eyes as well, sleep wrapping him in a soft blanket of oblivion.

## Chapter 6

### Homework

"Hey. Look, I know you're busy but I just wanted to remind you about our appointment at five." Cody's voice sounded small and subdued over the phone.

"I've got it on the calendar, sweetheart." Vic leaned forward trying to ignore his admin approaching his door.

"You used to call me from work just to say hello. You remember?"

"I do. Of course I do—"

Natalie was at his shoulder now. "I need your signature on these three seconds ago, Vic. I mean, it's not really our problem that they bring the specs up an hour before deadline, but still, anything you can do."

He held up a finger to forestall her even as she shoved the papers under his nose.

"There's someone in your office. I can hear it in your voice." Cody's tone sank into sullenness.

"Yes, there is. I don't have—"

"You're not even listening to me."

"I am. I'll pick you up at four thirty."

"I said I'd meet you there." Cody snarled and the receiver slammed down in Vic's ear. He buried his head in his hands.

"Gosh, I'm sorry, Vic. Was that Cody?"

Aftermath  
*by Angel Martinez*

"Yes. Could you do me a favor? If I'm on the phone, please give me a second to finish. I don't care if the building's burning down, okay?"

"Okay. And if you're leaving early, don't forget the expense approvals need to be in today."

"Natalie, when did life become hell?"

She only laughed and left him to his work. A joint session with Paula and he'd already pissed Cody off royally. This was going to be fun.

\* \* \* \*

Vic pulled his Mazda into the parking lot fifteen minutes early. The pickup was already there. Alone in the waiting room, Cody read the paper, a bare glance up the only acknowledgment Vic had come in.

"Cody," Vic slumped on the couch beside him.

"Save it, Szoldos," Cody muttered.

He sank into brooding silence, trying his best not to be angry. Difficult though when it felt like all he did these days was make concessions and apologies. Paula soon appeared though, saying goodnight to her four o'clock and waving them inside.

"Am I feeling a little tension between you this evening?" Paula handed round the chocolates which Cody pounced on and Vic waved away.

"No, not—" Vic tried to explain.

"Yes, dammit," Cody interrupted.

Paula left the chocolates on the table within easy reach. "Well. Some disagreement, at least. Cody, would you like to start since you seem to want to?"

Cody began calmly enough but soon had accelerated to full agitation, voice cracking, hands waving in wild arcs. Vic wasn't the target of his tirade, not directly, but Vic's job.

"...never home until late. He even goes in on weekends sometimes. A lot. And then when he is home, he's too busy, or too damn tired. It's like I'm this warm thing he sleeps next to and that's it!" Cody concluded, glaring.

Paula finally interjected. "All right, Cody, let's give Vic a chance. Vic, what do you think of all this?"

"Cody exaggerates." Vic ran both hands back through his hair. "And he's not being fair. He can't possibly understand the stress—"

"Oh, no. I'm too sheltered and dense to understand stress," Cody shot back.

"Cody, it's Vic's turn now." Paula put a hand on his arm. "He listened. Please give him the same courtesy."

Anyone else Cody would have shaken off and ignored. But for Paula, he subsided into sullen attentiveness.

"I do this for Cody." Vic spread his hands in front of him as if that would help Paula understand. "I got sick seeing him having to scrounge and beg to buy simple things like solder and paint. Diving in the sofa cushions for change. Asking his mother for money. Going without so he could create. My work was seasonal and sporadic then. We barely made the rent some months. So I made Cody a promise one night when we

lost the heat. I told him I would take care of him. No matter what it took."

He stared at his hands. "Yes, I took a corporate job. I have my degrees. It wasn't hard. Yes, I clawed my way up to larger and larger salaries. Yes, it takes time and energy. But Cody never wants for anything now. His own studio, his own truck, space and time and materials enough for whatever he wants. And enough to eat..."

Vic's own voice trembled now; he had come to a terrible nodule of pain. "But even with all that, I failed him."

"How do you think you failed him, Vic?"

He surged up from the sofa, flung his arms out to either side, his lungs laboring as he bellowed, "Look at me! Cody should be safe with me. I should be able to keep entire armies from him! But I wasn't there to protect him. All of this is my fault. Twice now, I wasn't even there!"

Cody rose slowly, a forefinger over his lips. "Vic, oh, God. I didn't—" Two hesitant steps took him to Vic and he pulled the dark head down to his shoulder just before Victor began to sob. He wrapped his arms tight around Vic and backed up to the sofa, springs creaking in protest when they sat down hard together.

"Sh, sh." Cody stroked his hair, not uttering a single complaint when Vic held him in a bone-creaking embrace.

"My poor Achilles. I didn't know..."

"Cody, do you feel that Vic failed you?"

"No! Oh, hell no. I mean, what could he do?" Cody turned his head to kiss Vic's temple.



"I could be there for you. I could go out with you when you ask me to," Vic sniffed miserably.

"What're you gonna do, Szoldos?" Cody rubbed his back hard enough to create a bit of friction warmth. "Follow me around like some giant Rottweiler all day, and all night?"

"Yes."

"That's just silly. And I'm not taking you for walks and cleaning up after you. No way."

Vic hiccupped a weak laugh and sat back down, accepting the tissues Cody handed him.

"Cody." Paula poured a glass of water and handed it to Vic. "Do you think there was a point, during those two evenings when the assaults occurred, when you could have done something to prevent them?"

Cody's gaze drifted into the middle distance. After a long silence, he said, "Yes. Yes there was. Both times. Early on."

She nodded and unfolded her feet from the chair. "We're getting close to the hour mark. I think we've gotten a lot done here today. I'll give you two a moment alone and I'll be back with some homework for you."

"You okay, baby?" Cody stroked a hand along Vic's arm when she left the room.

Vic covered the hand with his. Cody's clever, elegant fingers disappeared in his massive grip. "I'm all right. I feel a little ridiculous."

"Why?"

"These sessions are for you. And I make a fool of myself and fall apart."

Cody leaned in and brushed a soft kiss over his lips.  
"These are for us, not just me. Silly man."

Paula's heels clicked back down the hall and she smiled as she re-entered. "Here we go. Cody, you first." She handed him a printout. "This is a list of self-defense courses for rape survivors. I'd like you to look into taking one."

"But..." Cody's brow crinkled. "Aren't these always for women? I mean, do they even take men?"

Paula waited until he looked back up at her. "I've marked the ones that have taken male patients of mine before. I'm not saying you have to, Cody, but this is more than just a few tips on how to get yourself out of a bad situation. These classes are full of people who've all been through the same thing. A ready made support group."

Cody nodded, chewing on his bottom lip.

Now she turned to Vic. "Sometime this week, Vic, I'd like you to sit down and take a long, hard look at your employment situation. A list of pros and cons. What sorts of financial things would be necessity and what wouldn't if you lost your job tomorrow. What you wanted to be when you grew up."

"Oh. All right." Baffled, Vic wasn't certain what to say.

"Don't just think about it. Please write it down." She handed him a little cloth-bound journal. "Now for the both of you. I'm getting the impression that Vic takes a lot of responsibility in this relationship, does that sound right? Even in intimate circumstances?"

They both nodded, Cody still scanning his list, Vic running his fingers over the journal.

Aftermath  
*by Angel Martinez*

"Victor, do you find this difficult sometimes? To always be in charge?"

Vic opened his mouth, closed it, put the journal down. "Sometimes," he murmured.

Paula nodded. "This week, I'd like for you to switch roles in the bedroom. Make a date if you have to and stick to it, but Cody takes charge and Vic follows. How does that sound?"

A flush rose up Cody's neck but he smiled. "I'm game. Vic?"

"I'll do my best," Vic managed to get out. He hoped he'd be able to carry through with it. The hardest thing in life for him had always been to let someone else lead.

\* \* \* \*

Cody caught himself chewing his nails again. He let out a frustrated huff. Vic was on his way home, as promised, and Cody couldn't calm his hammering heart. Half of him thrummed with excitement and the other half wanted to call it all off. If Victor reacted to anything with even a hint of irritation, he was going to crumble, he could just see it coming.

The Mazda hummed down the street, easy to pick up since cars on the cul-de-sac were few and far between. Cody readjusted cushions on the floor, peeked in the oven, and came back to the door, taking deep, slow breaths. "Stupid, this is stupid," he muttered. "It's Vic, godammit. Vic loves you."

Vic parked in the drive and eased out of the car, his movements slow and deliberate. Headache probably. Yep,

there went the hand to rub his forehead, a sure sign it had been another rough day. Cody raced to the bathroom for aspirin and water and made it back in time for Vic to come through the door.

"Hey, baby. You look tense." Cody disengaged Vic's fingers from his briefcase and replaced it with the water glass.

"Cody, I don't know about tonight," Vic said, hesitant and apologetic. The water looked as if an earthquake was starting in the glass.

"Sh, it's okay." Cody gave him the aspirins and waited till he had them down. Maybe this little assignment made Victor as uncomfortable as it made him. "Go get out of that nasty suit and tie, come down and have dinner with me. If you don't feel so good, we don't have to do anything, you know."

Vic nodded and trudged up the stairs. His discomfort gave Cody a bit of confidence. Everyone needed to be taken care of sometimes; Vic just had a problem admitting it. He hated being fussed over when he was sick. Pushed people away when he was miserable. "Mrs. Szoldos, what the hell did you do to your boy?" Cody muttered as he lit the candles in the living room.

Mariska Szoldos had been a suck-it-up, walk-it-off kind of mother. She'd died before Cody had ever met Vic, but he'd heard it all from his sister. Boys didn't cry. Or get sick. Or do sissy things like draw. So Victor was sent out to football and hockey and out to work with his father on construction sites. Cody's mother, on the other hand, had indulged his every whim and need. Maybe too much, he smiled to himself. If he

and Victor could somehow be combined, they might make one balanced, perfect man.

He pulled dinner out of the oven—a tray of stoneware bowls containing a riot of scents. It was take-out, he made no secret of it, just taken out of the cartons. Good take-out from a Thai restaurant nearby, not the nasty stuff they used to eat, but Cody thought Vic would understand his desire to recreate those dinners in the old apartment.

Vic wandered back down the stairs, looking much more himself in sweats and a t-shirt. "I smell panang. God that smells good—"

He stopped in mid-phrase and stared while Cody fidgeted. He'd pushed the oversized sofas out of the way, put everything on the low coffee table with floor cushions to sit on, lit two dozen candles and put on a Cocteau Twins album. "Well? Is it okay?"

"Cody—" Vic started and then shook his head in a helpless way. Cody was surprised to hear how rough and raw his voice sounded when Vic spoke again. "It's more than okay, sweetheart. It's—like coming home."

An odd way to put it, maybe, but Cody understood. He took Vic by the hand and led him to the table, pushed him down onto a cushion and knelt behind him for a few long moments with his arms wrapped around Vic's neck, his body pressed close to Vic's back, waiting until the big man had caught his balance again.

He slid around and handed the bowl of rice to Vic, letting a comfortable silence settle as they ate. Vic often felt better after dinner. He skipped lunch most days and such a huge

body running on empty would probably be like trying to boil an egg without water.

"So how was your day, little man?" Vic said between bites of pad thai. "Besides getting all this done."

"I got myself into a class," Cody answered nonchalantly.

Vic smiled, his first that evening. "That's good. How did all that go?"

Cody wrinkled his nose. "It wasn't easy. They kept asking if I was calling for my sister or my girlfriend. And some of them didn't know what I was talking about when I mentioned Dr. Simmons. One of them got really huffy with me about it needing to be a 'safe environment' for women. Like I'm some predator or something."

"I'm sure they're just doing what they're told, sweetheart," Vic said, though he frowned in dark disapproval.

"I know, I know," Cody nodded. "But then this woman, kind of hard-voiced, like a drill sergeant, you know? She takes the phone away from the girl and asks me a few questions and signs me up."

"And you're all right with going?"

Cody shrugged. "I think so. We'll see after the first one. I dunno. I've heard those classes can be pretty, um, intense." He shivered and closed his eyes, a cigarette ruined voice whispering in his ear.

"You all right? Cody?" Vic's voice was soft with concern, a large hand wrapping around Cody's forearm.

"I'm ... I'm all right." Cody breathed and resisted the urge to fling himself into Vic's arms. Tonight he was the pillar, the rock. He could do this.

Cody snorted out a laugh. "We're a mess, you know that?"

"Might have occurred to me once or twice." Vic shook his head. "So. What's for dessert?"

Cody felt the heat creep up his throat, wishing for the millionth time he didn't blush so easily. "You are, sugar daddy. Wanna go upstairs?"

A slow grin blossomed on Vic's face. "I'm just following orders tonight, remember? Lead the way."

Beside the bed, Cody slipped his hands under Vic's t-shirt and slid them up along his ribs, taking the material along. Few things excited him as quickly as that hard expanse of dark-furred chest. He shivered, stopping to kiss a nipple before pulling the shirt off over Vic's head. He undid the tie on the sweats, worked the waistband slowly over Vic's burgeoning erection and let them drop.

"Lie down on your back for me, baby," he whispered and Vic bent his head down for a quick kiss before he complied.

Cody hesitated, his heart stuttering. Then with a slow breath, he turned and fished the larger set of padded cuffs out of the drawer. They were meant to be ankle cuffs but Vic's wrists were so big. He took Vic's right arm in his lap and buckled on the cuff.

"Cody—"

"Sh, just relax." He fed the empty cuff around a couple of spindles on the headboard and pressed Vic back with a kiss. With a soft caress, he lifted Vic's free arm and buckled the second cuff securely.

A muscle in Vic's jaw jumped, his eyes squeezed shut. "Cody, I don't think—" His voice had an odd, flat tone.

Aftermath  
*by Angel Martinez*

"Vic? Hon, it's all right." Cody stroked his face.

Vic's biceps strained against the cuffs. The headboard creaked. He choked out, "I can't do this!" A hard groan of metal on wood, and the chain snapped. Vic's arms thumped down hard on the mattress.

"Oh, Vic. Dammit." Cody shook his head and left the room.

\* \* \* \*

Vic stared at the empty doorway, then down at the broken chain in his hands. His heart still pounded but his sanity returned. God. What was that? Pure, white-out panic had struck when Cody fastened him down. He never would have imagined ... He knew he'd never had the urge to be restrained but such an extreme reaction?

He unbuckled the cuffs with shaking hands. Cody had tried so hard. And he hadn't kept his side of the bargain. The cuffs fell from his numb fingers and he raced out of the bedroom, a different kind of fear gripping him. Cody hadn't gone far at least, his profile outlined against the window at the end of the hall.

"Sweetheart? I'm sorry. I ruined everything, didn't I?"

Cody wiped at his eyes but didn't answer. The pain surged in Vic's chest and he took the last three steps at a run, dropping to his knees next to Cody. He was on the verge of making a fool of himself but he didn't care. "Cody? Are you going to leave me?"

An odd, strangled sound came from Cody. "Why the hell would you think that?"



"I can't seem to do anything right for you anymore." Vic buried his head in Cody's lap.

Instead of reacting with anger, though, Cody sighed and massaged gentle fingers over Vic's scalp. "Sh, hush. It was stupid of me to do that to you. Without even asking. I should have realized it might be hard for you." He bent to kiss the top of Vic's head. "Just damn stupid."

"It wasn't," Vic murmured into Cody's thighs, his arms wrapping around that slender waist. "You couldn't know I'd have a panic attack over it."

"Well, now we know. And we both feel like idiots. I'm taking you back to bed, Szoldos. How do you expect me to resist a naked man kneeling at my feet with his head in my lap?"

Vic looked up and though tears still glinted off Cody's cheeks in the moonlight, his teeth flashed in a quick smile. "I can't carry you there, though."

"I know." Inspired by Cody's gentle teasing, Vic got up on all fours and pointed with his chin to his own back. "Here, little man, you want a ride? I'll be your pony."

"How did you know I always wanted a pony?" Cody said as he climbed on and smacked Vic's backside. "Giddy-up."

Happy to oblige, Vic let out a whinny-snort, pawed the carpet with one 'hoof' and set off, clicking his tongue in the appropriate clip-clop sounds. He got the laugh he hoped for and the tension in his chest eased.

"Up on the bed, pony," Cody whispered and then let out a gasp when Vic surged up, his rider still clinging to his back.

Cody had him lie down again, this time on his front. Massage oil replaced the handcuffs and Vic soon felt hopelessly spoiled as Cody's hands kneaded and pressed, glided and stroked along his back. His body had relaxed to the point of half-drowsing, his mind drifting on pleasant woolly nothingness, when he felt Cody stretch out on top of him.

Spreading his thighs with a little moan, Vic rolled his butt up into Cody's groin, pressing up to feel the hard length of his excitement. Oil sliding between them, both bodies more than ready, Cody sank into him in slow, short thrusts. Fingers twined together, Cody's sleek, lithe form molded to Vic's muscles, they moved together flawlessly, hearing each others' rhythms as only long-term lovers could.

Unusual for Vic to take bottom, the novelty of the situation soon had him panting. "Cody—it's awful close."

"S'alright, baby," Cody purred in his ear. "Whenever you're ready."

His body surprised him, reacting immediately. He bucked and jerked beneath Cody in a hard, sudden climax while Cody's groan vibrated against his shoulder, his hips pumping hard and then holding tense at the innermost point as Cody joined him.

Lying content and replete in each others' arms a few minutes later, Cody offered him a lingering, tender kiss. "I know I'm not always happy these days. But I'm not leaving you."

"You don't know how good that is to hear, sweetheart. You want your pills?"

Aftermath  
*by Angel Martinez*

"No," Cody said as he nestled closer. "I don't think I need them tonight."

\* \* \* \*

"I can't do this. It's ridiculous." Victor stared out into the black sea of the moonless garden.

With Cody out at his self-defense class, he had thought it the best time to attempt his part of Paula's homework, the journal. The echoes in the empty house distracted him. His worries for Cody, out alone at night, confounded his ability to form cohesive thoughts.

"We need a cat. A rabbit. Something," he muttered. The blank page stared at him with malicious glee so he drew a skyscraper to confuse it. He turned to a clean page and wrote "Pro" and "Con" at the top. Underlined both words. Took a ruler from the drawer and separated the page into two neat halves. Stared at the columns in growing frustration.

"This isn't going well," he told Cody's photo on the edge of his desk.

\* \* \* \*

The whispering behind Cody seemed full of spite. He felt like he was back in school again. None of the women had spoken to him. Not that he'd made a huge effort, he felt uncomfortable enough, but the stares were getting to him.

Finally the instructor arrived and asked everyone to sit on the floor mats in front of her. Again, Cody ended up alone, on the end, the women clustered in close knots to his left. He

tried to make himself small, pulling his knees up under his chin.

"All right, folks, I'm Shelly." Cody recognized the hard-edged, brassy voice as the one who had signed him up. "There's two rules in this class. We respect each other and we support each other. Beyond that, I just ask you to do your best. Anyone who can't follow these rules, leaves. Got it?"

There was several "yes, ma'ams" and lots of nodding heads.

"Good. Let's have everyone introduce themselves. First names only. How about we start with you, young man?" She pointed her clipboard at Cody as if any extra designation were necessary.

He cleared his throat. Twice. "Hi, my name's—"

"You mean he's part of the class?" a woman across the room shrieked. "I thought he was the demonstrator or something! We can't have a man in class!"

The room erupted into shouts. "Probably here scouting his next one!" "What is he, an ex-con?"

Cody buried his head against his knees, wishing he could vanish. This was turning out to be a colossal mistake.

\* \* \* \*

Vic returned to the desk with a cup of coffee and tried again. "All right. Let's start with the obvious."

Pros: Money. That was easy. Next to money he drew a number of dollar signs. Healthcare. Retirement. Though he supposed those were all sub-sets of money. He drew little arrows to indicate this.

Aftermath  
by Angel Martinez

Cons: Time. In brackets next to this he added: Cody. Home. Family. Cody. *Cody. Cody. Cody. Cody.*

Stuck again, he sat back and realized only twenty minutes had elapsed since Cody left the house.

"Damn."

\* \* \* \*

Shelly's whistle shrilled, guillotining through the shouting. "This bunch doesn't remember rules very long! That's about enough!" She crouched down by Cody, hand on his shoulder. "You all right, sweetie?"

"I think I should go," he whispered miserably.

"Hold tight for me. Give me five minutes here and then decide, okay?"

"Okay."

Shelly put her clipboard down and addressed the group. Even when she spoke softly, her voice carried. "Let's take a minute for some facts, ladies. We all know that rape comes with a lot of myths, don't we? You, green tank top, give me one!"

The young woman in green stammered a moment and squeaked out, "It's the victim's fault."

"Yes! Good! That's our number one enemy in this class, those kinds of myths! How many of you have heard them? It was your fault. You asked for it. You secretly liked it. You brought it on yourself by how you dressed or danced or where you were."

Hands crept up in the air during this recitation. Some of the women looked near tears.

Shelly nodded. "All right. But these are myths. We know they aren't true. Now let's talk about myths about male rape. Some of you just spouted a few here tonight. In ten percent of all reported rapes, the victims are men. Law enforcement believe the numbers are a lot higher but men are much less likely to report a rape. Men are most often raped by someone they know, in everyday situations—parties, at home, in a parking lot."

"But aren't men who rape men all, you know..." A woman in a yellow t-shirt spoke up. "Gay. Is it really, um, rape?"

"I'm going to say this now and we'll repeat it a lot here: rape is not a sexual act." Shelly chopped the air with one hand. "Rape is an act of violence. A power kick. So, no, men are raped by straight men as often as not. And, yes, it really is. Cody, do you mind my asking how long your were in the hospital? After the assault?"

Cody swallowed hard but managed to address the group. "Two weeks."

A middle-aged woman slid over and wrapped an arm around Cody's shoulders, pulling him close. "It's all right, darlin'. They didn't mean it. Everybody here's still scared and mad as hell." She turned to the group. "I'm Alice. My ex broke into my house and raped me after he lost custody of the kids."

The rest of the women introduced themselves after that, some telling a brief story, some not. At the end Shelly looked back over at Cody. "You staying?"

"Yes'm. I think I should."

\* \* \* \*

Victor abandoned the list and turned the page to write:  
When I was growing up I wanted to be...

What? He couldn't recall for the life of him.

Oh, yes. A fireman. A fighter pilot. An astronaut. He laughed at the list, probably the same as many small boys. A stone mason, like my father.

"Don't be like your father, Victor, always dusty, with dirt under his nails," his mother often said. "God gave you brains. Use them!"

So he listened to his mother and went to college and had degrees in Civil Engineering and Business. And after graduation, had promptly gone up on the steel, the most dangerous construction work he could find. It had made his mother crazy and sometimes he wondered if that was why he'd done it.

No. It was more than that.

I wanted to build things, he added in the center of the page.

He looked down at his hands and repeated aloud, "I wanted to build things. How did I get stuck in an office?"

\* \* \* \*

The remainder of the class consisted of basic personal safety issues. Be aware of your surroundings. Try to avoid situations in which you might be vulnerable. Keys in your hand when you go to the car. Take a friend. And so on.

Shelly did spend some time on items used for personal protection: mace, pepper spray, tasers.

"Your key ring." She waved Cody over. "Let's see your keys, hon."

Cody fished his out of the pocket of his track pants and handed them over.

"Good heavens, Cody, do you use all these or are they for decoration?" Shelly asked in mock horror.

"Well, these are for my truck and these are for Vic's car and this one's for my mother's house and—"

"All right!" Shelly laughed. "I was teasing. Didn't really need a recitation. Ladies, Cody's carrying a set of brass knuckles and didn't even know it. Watch." She took the ring in her palm and fanned the keys, inserting one or two between each of her fingers with the point side out. "You may not pack much of a wallop on your own, but think about being hit with a set of keys like Cody's. All right, we're done for the night! See you all next week!"

"Thanks, hon," she said as she dropped the keys back in Cody's palm. "How'd it go for you tonight?"

Cody rolled the keys around in his fingers, seeing them in a new light. "Honestly? A lot better than I thought it would."

\* \* \* \*

Victor had wandered so far into his thoughts, the truck pulling up didn't register. He startled a bit when he heard footsteps in the hall and he turned in time to greet Cody when he reached the study door.

"How did it go?"

Cody leaned against the doorway. "Not so bad. My keys are apparently a lethal weapon. How'd you do?"



Aftermath  
*by Angel Martinez*

The journal on the desk was now festooned with drawings of buildings, large and small, elevations and floor plans.

"I think, sweetheart, I've had an epiphany."

## Chapter 7

### Kemp's Floral Creations

Gina looked up from the cash drawer when the Alfa roared up. She smiled watching the driver emerge, daydreaming. Sure Jonathan was gay but a girl still could dream, right? His smile made her toes curl. His laugh planted an uncomfortably warm feeling in her belly. So gallant and charming, he greeted a woman customer with that beautiful smile and held the door for her. He could be a switch-hitter. You never know.

"Hello, gorgeous!" Jonathan called across the shop to her. "What's everyone up to? Any messages for me?"

"Hi, Jonathan." She felt the blush and cursed her pale skin. "Jonah's in the back with Leslie, taking care of orders. Terry's running delivery. Your insurance agent called—"

"My insurance agent?" Jonathan had stepped behind the counter to leaf through the calendar as he always did first thing. Small orders his staff handled. The big ones, weddings, funerals and so on, he managed himself.

"Yeah, that Martin guy."

"Oh, that insurance agent." A muscle in Jonathan's jaw twitched.

"Something wrong?" Was the shop in some sort of difficulty?

Jonathan turned his perfect smile her way and Gina's anxious thoughts evaporated. "No, no. Just thought I'd resolved everything already. Minor policy details."

"Um, Victor called this morning, too."

"And what did he say?" Jonathan's fingers drummed the counter.

"He just wants a call back." Gina closed the register with a thud. "You should file for harassment, Jonathan. I know you've said you're not scared of him but after the way he hauled off and punched you ... I mean, you could at least get a restraining order."

He gave her an odd look. "I think I can handle my personal problems, Gina-Lola. Don't you?"

She ducked her head, pretending to be very busy with the order forms by the counter. "Of course. Sorry."

Jonathan went back to his office. Gina went back to work, trying to forget how she kept embarrassing herself with him. An hour later, a square jawed man walked in. The way he dressed and moved, his presence screamed "policeman" and she thought Jonathan had taken her advice after all.

"Good morning, sir. How can we help you?" she asked with a bright smile.

He flipped out his badge. "Detective Matthews. I'd like to speak to Mr. Kemp. He in today?"

"Of course, sir. He's in the back. I'll get him." She wasn't supposed to leave the register but what would happen with a cop standing right there? She hurried to the back rooms, past the workroom where a profusion of cuttings covered the table, to Jonathan's office. The door stood open. No Jonathan.

Gina's forehead wrinkled and she looked down the corridor to where the back door was swinging back and forth.

Aftermath  
*by Angel Martinez*

Jonathan was so careful about keeping that door closed. A quick peek outside showed her the alley was empty as well.

"I'm sorry, Detective," she returned to the counter shaking her head. "He must have just stepped out."

"I'll just bet he did," he grumbled. "You give him my card, little lady. Tell him to call me. He knows why."

Gina nodded, unable to construct a reply. The oddest feeling nagged her that Jonathan was in trouble.

## Chapter 8

### Two Steps Forward

Cody woke to the sound of the shower and rubbed the grit from his eyes. Some days he just didn't feel like getting up. What was he going to do all day? His studio still stood in ruins; he hadn't touched the horrible wreck he'd made of his New Jerusalem. Just couldn't face it yet.

Humming drifted over the rush of water and Cody smiled. Victor was obviously in a good mood. Well, why shouldn't he be? He was putting in his resignation today. Of course, being Vic, he wouldn't walk out without a backward glance. He'd give them a month to replace him and then leave with a hefty severance package and bright, scary frontiers before him.

This was a good thing. Cody told him so and encouraged him. He just didn't feel much enthusiasm for anything this morning. He wanted his mother to come in and say breakfast was ready. He wanted someone to spoil him and comfort him. Childish, of course. But there was a large, warm body in the bathroom, hot water and soap on hard muscles...

Cody rolled out of bed, stripping out of his boxers on his way. Steam rolled from the shower stall, tendrils of white as if a volcano occupied the bathroom.

"Vic? You want some company?"

Tchaikovsky's *Firebird* abruptly cut off and the door rolled back, Victor wiping water from his eyes. "Good morning." His smile faded when he saw Cody. "What's wrong, little man?"

Come here, come on." Vic pulled him into the shower and closed the door, putting his back to the spray so he could hold Cody close.

A brief summer storm of tears erupted in the strength of Victor's embrace but Cody soon calmed. It helped that Vic had developed a sudden wealth of patience for crying. He suspected Paula's hand in that. Where Vic might have scolded and reacted with irritation before, now he waited it out, murmuring soothing nothings.

"Anything you want to talk about?" Vic's voice rumbled against his ear.

"No, I don't think so. I just woke up kinda bluish."

Vic's hands stroked slowly over his shoulders and Cody lifted his head to be met by a kiss full of tender fire. The warmth and the water beating down on Vic's back had coaxed an impressive erection, now pressing up against Cody's stomach.

"God, I'm sorry," Vic gasped and pulled back. "You must think I'm a monster. Are you all right? I didn't mean to force—"

The blood sang in Cody's ears, his vision blurring with anger. "Dammit, Szoldos! You weren't forcing me. I'm not going to break. Stop treating me like I'm made of freaking glass!" His hand seemed to rise of its own accord and he slapped Victor hard across the face.

A startled huff exploded from Vic's chest and his face underwent rapid shifts from shock to anger to outright confusion. "But sweetheart. I, that is, you were upset and all I could think about was sex and—Cody, you hit me."

"I'm sorry, baby, I'm sorry," Cody whispered, stroking the reddened spot on Vic's cheek. "Damn, I didn't mean to do that. It's just before, you know, all this, you never hesitated." His voice cracked and thickened. "When you wanted me, you'd bend me over a table or lay me down on the sofa and take what you wanted. And now..."

"What? You don't think I want my beautiful Adonis as much anymore?" Vic's fingers combed through his hair. "I want you so badly it feels like I'm dying sometimes. But I don't want to ... to make you feel obligated."

Cody stabbed a finger at the carpet of black chest hair. "Victor Lazlo Szoldos, did that kiss feel like I was doing anything but enjoying myself?"

"No, but..." Victor leaned back against the tiled wall, shaking his head. "But sometimes you do things just to please me, Cody. I know that."

"Of course I do, you big ox! Christ, Vic, for such a smart man you can be a blockhead sometimes! I like doing things to please you. It makes me happy. It turns me on." His hands caressed over Vic's ribs to his hips. "It makes me hot as hell to please you."

His thumbs slid to the tops of Vic's thighs and he heard the big man swallow hard. Cody smiled and sank slowly to his knees, letting his hands stay where they were, the thumbs working in slow circles towards the erection that was swiftly returning to full attention. Vic moaned, a shiver running up his legs, but he managed to turn so the water wasn't hitting Cody in the face.

Aftermath  
by Angel Martinez

Cody ran his tongue over the tip with a contented hum and without further preamble, slid his mouth down as far as he could. Never able to take all of Vic's length, he still tried, relaxing his throat muscles and letting the head slide into the constrictive ring. Vic hissed and tangled his fingers hard in Cody's hair. *That's it baby, that's my Victor.*

No more protests came from above. Vic responded to Cody's attentions with abandon, his chest soon heaving, his deep moans tumbling over each other like an impassioned aria. Surprising how quickly he came, but there had been such long dry spells recently. Maybe not so surprising.

Vic pumped his hips hard, four times, and uttered a long, ragged moan. Cody slid back towards the head and gripped with his lips, eagerly lapping up all Vic had to offer. When he let go, Vic slid down the wall to sit on the floor of the stall, panting.

"Cody," he murmured. "What am I going to do with you? I have to get to work and I haven't had a chance—"

A finger over his lips, Cody shushed him. "I have all I want for now. I'm not sending you to work with blue balls and I've made sure you'll be thinking about me all day long. I'm sending you out tamed but I'm hoping I get a tiger coming home tonight."

"Ah. I see. Clever, clever little man." Vic grinned and gave him a soft kiss.

When Cody saw him out the door later with coffee and a hug, Victor was still grinning.

\* \* \* \*



"Phone, phone, where is it?" Cody muttered as he searched through the sofa cushions. The jangling electronic blips playing "I Hear You Knocking" grated on his nerves. "I've gotta change the stupid ringtone."

He spotted the display light by the TV and dove for it, hoping the caller had been patient. "'Lo?"

"Morning, Cody." Kurt's voice sounded hesitant and strained. "I'd like to ask you something but I don't want to upset you."

Strange way to start. "Just ask, Kurt. You upset me, you buy me lunch, deal?"

"I'll buy you lunch anyway if you want, hon." Kurt's voice stopped for a deep breath. "This is going to sound odd but have you cleaned up the demolition in your studio?"

"Um, no. Haven't touched it. Haven't even opened the door." Cody's stomach lurched.

"Good. Here's the thing, the head of the Art department here wants to put together a new installation centered around the concept of the influence of violence in art. I didn't give him the details but I did mention, in general terms, your piece and what happened to it. The idea has him very excited and he'd like to see it. Your 'Aftermath', that is."

"He wants to see a bunch of broken glass?"

"Well, yes. I know it sounds odd, but he spouted a lot of things about how rage is a powerful creative force and so on."

"Oh. And all this time I thought the word was 'destructive'." Cody's laugh came out as a strangled whimper.

"Sweetie, if you don't want him to see it, please say so. I'll tell him no and Wyatt and I will come over to help you sweep up."

Cody pressed a palm to his forehead. He knew firsthand that the art world could be a bizarre place but this was beyond weird.

"Cody?"

"I'm thinking, Kurt, hold on." He didn't want to open the studio door, didn't know if he could face the war-zone destruction of his beautiful city. But curiosity won over regret. "All right, lemme know when he wants to come by. Let's see what he has to say."

A little after eleven that morning, Kurt brought his colleague to the house. Tall and stooped, wire-rimmed glasses perched on a prominent nose, he looked like a human version of the Vlasic pickles stork. Introductions complete, Cody led the way to the studio where the door still hung unevenly in its frame from Victor breaking it in.

Dr. Keller ran his hand over a skewed hinge. "Was this your work as well?"

"No, sir." Cody gave him a crooked smile. "That was my partner. I kinda scared the heck out of him with all the noise."

The art professor nodded and Cody could have sworn he muttered "Too bad."

Sunlight streamed through the windows creating patches of fiery, coruscating colored light. Dr. Keller's breath caught and he whispered, "It's astounding. The distribution of color, the twisted remnants of metal. Young man, this is a work of

incredible emotional power. You can feel the fury ... do you have pictures, by any chance, of what it was before?"

Cody nodded, both amused and irritated. "I take photos every step of the process. For comparison if I decide to change things and to help with installation when I move it."

"I'd like this piece for the installation at the CAI. Would you be willing? We can't pay you for your time but it's excellent exposure."

The Contemporary Arts Institute? Cody spent so much time there looking at other people's works. To have something with his name on it, there in the same place Rodney Graham's and Richard Pettibone's works had been displayed. But this piece?

"I don't think I could recreate it." He wrapped his arms around his ribs to stop his shaking. "There's no way I could move this mess and put it back together anything close to the same."

"I could offer you grad students to assist," Dr. Keller began.

Kurt put a hand on Cody's shoulder. "I don't want you to do this if it upsets you, Cody. But it can be done. We could make a grid, like we do on a dig site. Take it apart and reassemble it square by square. An exercise in archeology, eh?"

Cody leaned against Kurt a moment, taking comfort in his warmth. Taking this moment in time apart, this horrible expenditure of impotent rage. Maybe it would be a good thing. His studio would be clear again as well.

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"All right. We'll do it." He shook Dr. Keller's hand. "Thank you. I think I've needed this."

\* \* \* \*

When Vic came home that evening, Cody's news had to wait. His attentions to Vic that morning had worked better than he could ever have imagined. Vic barely got the door closed before his hands started on Cody's shirt buttons. He ripped two off in his frantic haste. Vic's mouth closed on the pulse point at Cody's throat and he moaned, bending back without resistance as Vic took him to the floor. They didn't even make it out of the hallway.

He told Vic about his day later on, during a languid, Roman style, naked dinner in front of the TV. Victor was so proud; he kissed him hard and then couldn't seem to stop. Among the floor cushions and the dinner leavings, Victor laid him down. Cody couldn't remember the last time Vic had come back for seconds.

## Chapter 9

### Unexpected Visit

Bright, cozy, inviting, the storefront smiled at Cody as it always had. Jonathan's shop evoked warm memories, the scents and colors bringing back long summer nights, teasing, laughter ... another life. He blinked back tears and stepped through the door, a cheerful jingle announcing his entrance.

"Good morning, sir. Can I help you?" The girl behind the counter offered a warm smile.

"No, thanks. Just need to see Jonathan," Cody murmured as he walked towards the back.

"Sir? I'm sorry sir, you can't go back there—"

"Oh, yes, I think I can."

He pushed through the swinging door to the back hallway and strode down to the second room on the right. "Jonathan."

The dark-curved head shot up, the fleeting look of shock replaced by Jonathan's smile. "Cody! You haven't called me 'Jonathan' in years. At least not unless you were really pissed off. What's up?"

"Please don't play stupid, J." Cody rubbed his hands over his face. "Why haven't you talked to the police?"

The smile evaporated, Jonathan's eyes sliding sideways. "Codes, I'm sorry. About everything. It's just ... there's no way you could understand." He reached for Cody's hand.

Cody leaped back as if burned. "God, Jonathan! I don't understand? You don't know what the hell you've done to me!"

"Me? I didn't touch you!"

"You set me up, you rotten bastard, and you know it!"

A man roughly the shape and size of a walrus appeared at Cody's elbow. "Everything all right, Mr. Kemp?"

"Yes, yes, thanks, Terry." Jonathan waved the man away.

Cody lowered his voice. "I couldn't sleep, J. Couldn't eat. Couldn't stand the sound of anyone's voice. I'm in therapy and in classes. Do you hear me? I'm in goddamn rape survivor classes. You knew those men, J. You're supposed to be my friend. They nearly killed me and you won't help the cops catch them?"

Jonathan had flushed crimson, his throat working convulsively.

*Oh, cripes, not tears.* Cody rolled his eyes.

"Look, it's complicated, Codes." Jonathan's voice broke and he drew a few gulping breaths. "Those men are for-real badasses. I got myself in deep shit with them. Martin saw you one night at one of the clubs. He didn't give me a lot of choice. Would you rather I was lying dead in the gutter?"

"The way I feel now, J, I think I might."

Cody heaved an exasperated sigh when Jonathan started to sob. He knew the tears were mostly show but Jonathan breaking down had always gotten to him. He closed the door, sat on the edge of Jonathan's desk and pulled him close.

"Don't do this, J. You're not really that scared, are you?"

"I can't go to the cops!" Jonathan wailed, burying his head against Cody's chest. "They'll find out and kill me!"

"Don't you think it's the right thing to do? Get these pricks off the street before they hurt someone else? Before they hurt you?" Cody stroked Jonathan's hair, trying to soothe his shivering. Maybe it wasn't faking this time. "I told the police everything I could but it's not enough. Can't you do this for me, J?"

Jonathan took the detective's name and number and promised to think about it. Short of grabbing a fistful of hair and dragging him down to the station, Cody figured that was the best he could hope for.

"I still love you, Codes. You know that, don't you?" Jonathan wiped his eyes, at his most pitiful.

"You're a manipulative, conniving son of a bitch, J. And you're probably still doing lines. And in debt way over your head. And still screwing everything that moves. But I still love you, too." Cody framed Jonathan's face in his hands and kissed his forehead. "It'd never have worked. You and me. And you've hurt me more than you'll ever know. But I'll always love you."

Cody opened the door and walked out, leaving Jonathan staring at his phone. "Shit, Codes. How do you manage to make me feel like slime and still something special at the same time?"

## Chapter 10

### And Three Steps Back

"Would you like to go out tonight, sweetheart?" Vic asked casually, oatmeal spoon halfway to his mouth.

Cody took a moment to grasp the significance of the question. "You mean ... go out with me? As in us go out?"

Vic put his spoon down, drumming his fingers on the table. "Yes. Isn't that what someone usually means when they invite you out?"

"Well, yeah, I mean, of course!" Cody bounded across the kitchen and flung his arms around Vic's neck. "Oh, thank you, baby. I'd love to."

"Anywhere you want, little man."

"Can we go to Paige's?" Cody knew he should have picked somewhere else when Vic hesitated. "Or not—"

"No, no, I said anywhere. This is for you, my heart, my own." Vic smiled. "I'll even go to Paige's where the dancers like to drag you up onstage."

"And who do I go home with at the end of the night?" Cody ran his fingers through the black thicket of Vic's hair. "And who do I wake up with the next morning?"

Vic's forehead wrinkled in mock concentration, a sudden smile breaking through. "Why, that would be me! The luckiest man alive."

Though Vic's job had become more hectic and stressful rather than less, the light at the end of the tunnel kept his



spirits up. Playful good humor, an increase in energy, Cody thought he simply looked healthier and steadier. He waltzed through the kitchen after Vic left for work, humming bits of tunes. By the time he grabbed the floor vac, his dancing had escalated to frenzied while he sang old REM.

"It's the end of the world as we know it, and I feel fine—"

The phone cut him off and he excused himself from his dance partner to answer it.

"Codes? Are you talking to me?"

"I don't know, J. That all depends. Where the hell are you? Playing in traffic?"

Jonathan shouted over the noise, "Too funny, babes! I'm on the cell, walking to the police station. I called that Detective of yours this morning and I'm going in."

"Well, good."

"Don't I get a thank you even?" Jonathan's sounded hurt.

"You really think I should thank you for doing what you should have in the first place?"

"Okay, no, maybe not. Look, I deserve every minute of you being pissed at me. I do. But I'm trying to be a good guy, right? Should count for something. You gonna be out tonight, Codelicious? Can I see you?"

Cody blew out a long breath. "I'll be out with Vic tonight. At Paige's. I don't think it's such a good idea, having you two in the same room. And I'm not sure I want to see you right now."

"Dammit, Codes, I miss you! And you'll be the hottest thing there. Okay, okay, fine. Another night, then, when you don't have the grizzly with you."

"He's not a—" Cody shouted into the phone and then realized Jonathan was gone. *I am not letting you ruin my good mood, Kemp. No way.*

Kurt would be over soon with the contingent of graduate students anyway and Cody needed to get some clothes on. Artists were allowed some eccentricities but answering the door in his chili pepper boxers probably wouldn't go over well.

\* \* \* \*

Cody leaned out of the car window as they passed the front of Paige's. "Man, what a crowd. Oh, look, there's Kevin and David! Vic, can't you use the valet, just once?"

"It's a ripoff, little man," Vic growled. "How about I let you out? You catch up with Kevin. I'll park and meet you out front."

"Okay." He grabbed a quick kiss and bounced out of the Mazda feeling like a kid on his first field trip. He loved the music here, loved the energy of the crowd. Besides, Xavier danced most weekend nights and he was a treat to watch all his own.

He raised an arm to flag Kevin down, a shout on his lips, when a heavy hand fell on his shoulder.

"Hey, sugar," the cigarette-ruined voice from his nightmares whispered in his ear. "You look awful sweet tonight."

Frozen with fear, everything he had learned in class fled and he could only moan in answer, his lungs too constricted to scream. "No, no ... go away ... please..."

\* \* \* \*

Vic pulled away from the curb, intent on the crazy, darting traffic downtown but still with an eye on Cody in the rearview mirror. Going back out to the clubs had been his idea, but now he worried. Cody could suffer flashbacks. Or just feel let down and depressed.

One moment Cody was clearly visible, the next a larger body blocked his view. A body bent too close to Cody's. A broad-shouldered back that suddenly stopped Vic's breath.

"Holy shit. Oh, hell no." He zipped the Mazda into a spot where a Jeep was trying to parallel park, ignoring the enraged shouts of the driver. His legs wouldn't move fast enough, his heart jack hammering against his breastbone.

He grabbed the first sensible looking girl he saw. "Call 911! Now! That man—" He pointed to Cody down the street, shaking his head and trying to pull out of the grip of his assailant. "Is being kidnapped."

The girl swore and dove into her purse for her cell while Vic raced down the sidewalk, trying to get to Cody before that maniac shoved him into a waiting car.

\* \* \* \*

"Now, sugar, you wanna be careful not to hurt my feelings," Martin purred in Cody's ear. "I might think you're not happy to see me."

He had Cody in a bruising grip at the back of his neck, shoving him towards the Lincoln at the curb. "See, I have a present. Just a little something Colin picked up for you."

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The back door swung open, Colin gazing out with his permafrost eyes. Cody didn't have much thought for him, though. Beside him on the seat, hogtied and gagged, lay Jonathan, his left eye swollen shut, his bare torso riddled with darkening bruises.

"He wasn't real polite when Colin asked where you were, so we had to insist. See, sugar, Kemp was going to the police. Not too smart. His life's not worth a lot right now. But you, my sweet, sweet thing, it would be a shame to have something bad happen to you. So Kemp's gonna be a nice little lesson today. You get to watch Colin slice him open like a pig while I fuck your brains out."

Cody shook so hard his molars knocked together. Colin was easing out of the car to grab hold of him. He had to do something. On his own, he might have crumbled and let them take him, but they were going to kill Jonathan. And Jonathan, beyond all imagining, had tried to keep silent while they beat him into semi-consciousness.

A loose connection in Cody's brain suddenly clicked in place. He had his heavy boots on. He wasn't helpless. Shelly's voice sounded in his head and his body remembered. His boot heel stomped down on Colin's instep. He slammed his elbow back hard into Martin's stomach, then whirled to land a hard kick to Colin's crotch. Colin plummeted to his knees while Martin roared and slammed Cody face first against the trunk of the car.

Cody tensed, waiting for the rain of blows, but another bellow answered Martin's, an enraged bass roar he thought was the sweetest sound he'd ever heard.

"Get your stinking hands off him, you motherfucking bastard!"

Martin's weight was yanked from Cody's back and he turned in time to see Vic land a solid punch to the side of Martin's head. Sirens screamed but they seemed in another universe as the two mammoth bodies collided, locked in a violent embrace as they tumbled to the ground, fists connecting with the sickening thud of flesh on flesh.

A flash of metal on the backseat. Cody dove for the knife, cut Jonathan loose and dragged him from the car.

"Cody? I didn't ... I didn't..." Jonathan's head lolled on his shoulders as if it weighed a hundred pounds.

"I know, J, lie still. Help's coming."

He laid Jonathan on the sidewalk with the thought of helping Vic somehow. The big men were up again, struggling back and forth like bull moose in rut. Onlookers alternately watched in awed fascination and scrambled to get out of the way. Cody barely heard the scrabbling behind him, the metallic click registering as background noise.

"Shit! Cody, get down!"

Something slammed into the backs of Cody's knees. He tumbled face first to the pavement. A loud pop sounded behind him. Ozone and powder. A sharp whine and thud. Cody lifted his head in time to see Vic spin to the left, marionette-like, before he crumpled.

"No! God, no!"

Shouts rang out somewhere far away, Colin shifted and aimed towards the oncoming uniformed police. A volley of

sharp, firecracker pops and he was flung backwards off his feet, still clutching the gun as he went down.

Cody was barely aware. He tried to disentangle himself from Jonathan's arms, though Jonathan wheezed at him to stay down. One thought seared his brain. He had to get to Vic. Crawling, stumbling across the sidewalk, Cody reached him while six officers brought Martin down and cuffed him. Vic's eyes were squeezed shut, his body arched in pain. He didn't want Vic to hurt but pain meant he still lived.

"Baby, ohmigod, I'm here," Cody tore off his shirt and ripped it in half, lifted Vic's torso into his lap and pressed the cloth hard to the bullet wound front and back. Too far left for his heart, but entrance and exit wounds had already left a puddle of blood. Vic's breathing struggled in a rushing gurgle.

"Sweetheart..." he forced out in a tortured whisper. "You all right?"

Cody choked. "Someone shoots you and you want to know if *I'm* all right? I'm fine, I'm fine, now hush—"

"Cody, just listen." Vic gripped his arm. "The house, it's deeded to you. If I die—"

"Will you shut up? You're not dying."

"Life insurance ... you're the only..." Vic gasped and leaned his head against Cody's chest. "Only beneficiary. Same ... investments ... accounts. Call Cheryl ... at the bank. Help you sort things..."

"Sh, sh, my brave Achilles. Don't talk. I love you so. I'm not losing you." The blood had soaked through the shirt.

"Cody ... my love ... don't want to leave you..."

"Then don't! Don't you dare! Fucking drama queen. Somebody help me over here!"

"Such a beautiful mouth ... shouldn't be cussing..."

Vic's eyes slid shut and Cody screamed in frustration, rocking back and forth. How could this powerful, perfect body be felled by something so small? Another set of hands joined his in trying to stem the flow of blood. Jonathan looked barely aware but still he was trying. Then the ambulance crew arrived and both Vic and Jonathan were taken from him.

Cody didn't care who saw, he sat on the sidewalk and cried, bawled his eyes out. Someone put a blanket around his shoulders; he had no idea who spoke to him for some time.

"Hey." Someone shook him by the arm, the voice familiar. "Cody, look at me. This is important." Matthews ... Jim Matthews, yes, that was the man's name. "These the same two who attacked you before?"

"Yes, sir," Cody managed a shaky whisper, wiping at his eyes.

"Can you look at them for me? Do a positive ID? Just that and I'll put you in the ambulance with Vic. They're about ready to take him to emergency. I'll come down and get the rest of your statement later."

With Detective Matthews hand under his elbow, Cody stood. Colin was still on the ground. They had a body bag next to him. "Yes, that's one. That's Colin. He shot Vic. Is he dead?"

"He is, Cody. Now the other one, in the squad car."

Martin was too busy fighting the officers trying to ease him into the back to notice Cody. If he had looked up, Cody

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wasn't sure he would have been able to speak. "Yes, that's Martin. He raped me. He threatened to do it again and to kill Jonathan."

"Kemp? All right, thank you. I know it's been rough, but we needed a positive ID to hold him on the old charges as well as the new. Up you go," Matthews half lifted him into the back of the ambulance. "I'll come see you later."

Victor lay strapped to the stretcher, pale, eyes half closed. An oppressive, disorienting nightmare hum closed around Cody but he willed himself to reach out and take Vic's hand. "Stay with me, Vic. Please."



## Chapter 11

### Threads and Circles

Victor woke to a haze of distant pain and floating queasiness. He hated being drugged, the loss of control over limbs, speech and thought ran nettle-pins along his nerves. *Have to keep me calm and quiet. Protect the precious sutures.*

A face hovered nearby, so like Cody his heart sped, but softer-featured and older.

"Mrs. Fitzroy?" he slurred. "Cody s'all right?"

"Cody's fine, dear. I sent him home to shower and rest. He fussed about leaving you but..." She wrinkled her nose. "He was getting a bit ripe. How are you feeling, Victor?"

"Not so bad," he lied. "How long?"

"You've been asleep for three days, if that's what you meant to ask. And the doctors say you should be going home in a week if you continue to improve." She fished in her purse for a tissue and wiped the grit from the corners of his eyes. Always prim and proper, always prepared, Helen Fitzroy. "Victor, I know we've had some tension between us in the past."

Vic smiled. "Didn't want ... Cody ... living with a manual ... laborer."

"Sh, save your breath." She patted his arm. "I found you a bit intimidating, quite frankly. I worried for Cody living with someone so, forgive me, dear, domineering. But he adores

you so. You're his hero, you know, and mine, the way you rushed to his rescue."

An ache lodged in his chest, nothing to do with his injury, his vision clouding over. The incredible moment when Cody had nearly fought free on his own. Cody racing to him across the pavement, disregarding the ongoing gunfire. Cody ripping the shirt off his back to try to hold death at bay.

"He's ... my hero, Helen," Victor whispered. "Never known ... anyone ... half so brave."

\* \* \* \*

The moment the hospital released Jonathan, he found himself under arrest for conspiracy and accessory to various nasty-sounding crimes. The DA threatened drug charges as well when the police located the pot farm in the basement of the shop.

His lawyer said most of the charges were scare tactics. The DA's office wanted him to play ball and turn state's witness. A deal would be cut.

In the meantime, though, Jonathan was unable to raise bail and his disgusted father refused to help him this time.

"Down the hall, Kemp. Through the door on the left."

He trudged down the long hallway alone in drab gray prison pajamas. Funny the things one didn't consider on the outside. Even his shoes were confiscated, the prison flip-flops echoing a sad, ridiculous tune in the empty corridor. Mattress pad and linens in his arms, he eased through the next set of security doors, met by yet another guard, and shuffled to his assigned cell.

*Could be worse. At least there's only two to a cell. And I'm not in max security with murderers.*

He let out a long breath as the door clanged shut, a small rectangular window the only view of the common room outside the cell. They got to have a few hours a day out there, but no view of the outside world. No trees, no grass, no cars. Just dull, gray walls and doors.

"I musta been good today," a sepulchral bass said behind him.

Jonathan turned to see an enormous shadow rise from the bottom bunk, a glimpse of hard, tattooed biceps was all he had in the dim evening lights.

"Um, hey. I'm Jonathan. Nice place you have here." Jonathan tried to sound as friendly and non-threatening as possible.

A laugh like a steam engine coughing issued from the other man. "You can call me Turk. Or Daddy if you want." Strong fingers tangled in Jonathan's hair, forcing his head back. "They sure sent me a pretty one this time. We're gonna have all sorts of fun, you and me. So long's you keep quiet like a good boy and do as you're told."

Jonathan tried to smile even though his heart wanted to leap up his throat. "Don't suppose it would help if I asked you to be gentle with me?"

"Don't worry, pretty. I got Vaseline and everything. Now you just shut your mouth unless I stick something in it."

He wondered if he could force himself to pass out somehow, appalled by the sound of his whimpers as he was forced to his knees.

\* \* \* \*

"This is incredible, the re-appropriation of space—"

"You're so full of it, Gerald. It's just a bunch of broken glass. This is stupid."

"I don't know why I bring you when you don't know the first thing—"

Cody stood next to the girl in black, unable to help overhearing. "Actually, she's right. It was stupid. Maybe the most senseless thing I've ever done. I think I'll always regret it."

Her hands flew to her mouth. "Oh my God. You're the artist? I'm so sorry..."

"Don't be. You were being honest." Cody smiled at her, ignoring the smug, self-satisfied boyfriend. "Would you like to see what it was before?"

He led her over to the table next to his piece where a silver folio lay open. Dr. Keller had enlarged and cleaned up all his studio photos and arranged them chronologically from the start of creation to the ultimate destruction.

"Oh, it was beautiful," the girl said, running a finger next to the photo of the nearly finished New Jerusalem. "It's so sad."

Cody whispered close to her ear, "I think that's why all the art critics here like it so much. If I hear the words 'powerful' and 'poignant' one more time tonight, I think I'll scream."

She giggled, trying her best to look serious. The opening night of Violent Visions included a vast array of works including a couple of Goyas and a Bosch but Cody wasn't the

only featured artist to attend and though he secretly laughed at some of the pompous patrons, he had to admit it was beyond exciting. Adrianna Mondrian had approached him early on about a gallery show for his work. "The extant, unbroken pieces, yes?" She had joked in her soft, lilting voice. To have a show at Mondrian's—it was every struggling artist's dream.

A parting of the crowd at the doorway heralded the arrival of a wheelchair and Cody stood frozen between joy and irritation. Wyatt pushed Victor's chair and Cody could only imagine how long it had taken them to get him shaved, brushed and manhandled into a suit.

Cody dashed across the room to kiss Vic on the cheek and scold, "You're not supposed to be out of bed yet. And Wyatt knows better."

A dark look crossed Vic's features but he took a breath and caught himself. "I know, little man. But how could I miss this?"

"And don't blame me." Wyatt held up his hands defensively. "The threats he made! Just terrible."

"I can guess," Cody said, eyes rolling. "All right, then, come see what they've done with my mess."

Vic's hand closed around his wrist. "Hold on, sweetheart. I need to do something first."

He flipped the brake on and with Wyatt's hand under his elbow, slid out of the wheelchair to one knee.

"Vic! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

In obvious pain, struggling to keep steady, Vic's hand slid down to grasp Cody's fingers while his free hand fumbled in

the pocket of his dove gray Lauren jacket. He held a red velvet box up to Cody. "My heart, this is something I should have done a long time ago."

Cody opened the box and squeaked. A ring glittered in the velvet lining, a deep blue sapphire and a smoky ruby set in a gold band that twined around both stones as if they were buds on some strange, crystalline flower. "Oh, Vic, it's beautiful. I don't understand."

"I'm asking you to marry me, Fitzroy."

He looked down into coffee-dark eyes, full of anxious hope and the words caught in his throat. Cody wiped his eyes, a little frustrated laugh escaping. "I don't know what to say. Baby, this is so ... God, you're so sweet."

"Say yes," Vic prompted, the color draining from his face. "Yes would be nice."

Cody knelt with him and pulled Vic's head to his shoulder. "Yes. As many times as you need to hear it ... yes."

Only Cody heard Vic's strangled, tear-filled 'thank you' while the room filled with applause.

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

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Angel Martinez is the erotic fiction pen name of a writer of several genres. Currently living part time in the hectic sprawl of northern Delaware, (and full time inside the author's head) Angel has one spouse, one son, two cats, a changing variety of other furred and scaled companions, a love of all things beautiful and a terrible addiction to the consumption of both knowledge and chocolate.

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