



Back Cut

by Alexa Snow

Nate Tavaras leaned against a bookshelf behind a crowd of people sitting in metal folding chairs and watched as Carter read from his book, *Sustainable Limits*, which had come out six weeks earlier.

He wasn't listening; Carter had practiced at home for weeks until Nate had picked up the nearest book -- not Carter's, just some paperback that was sitting around with dozens of others because Carter never stopped reading -- and thrown it at him.

"Hey!" Carter had said.

"Hay is for horses," Nate told him. "You sound fine. You've sounded fine for the past three days. Hell, you sounded fine the second time you read it."

Carter tucked his hair back behind one ear and glared at him. "Don't be an asshole."

"I don't know why you'd expect me to stop now." And Nate had grinned, because this was the kind of

exchange that had gotten him all fired up about Carter when they'd first met, and then there'd been kissing and groping and, eventually, naked skin.

Nate might not have been listening, now, but he was watching Carter. He hardly ever stopped watching, truth be told. Not that he did it when Carter knew he was doing it, because that would have been taking it a little too far, but there were plenty of times he could get away with it. This was definitely one of them.

There were thirty people or so in the chairs provided by the bookstore, most of them watching Carter with rapt attention as he read. Typical, from what Nate had seen at the previous readings on the tour. Even the three women knitting in the back row, heads cocked slightly to one side as their needles clicked furiously, seemed to be par for the course. Carter's eyes were on the paper he was reading from - he read from loose pages, not the actual book itself. There was some reason for it that Nate had nodded over but not really paid attention to.

Carter looked relaxed, comfortable, his hair pulled back into a loose ponytail at the nape of his neck and the top two buttons of his shirt undone. From where he was standing, Nate couldn't really see Carter's eyes, but he knew what they looked like -- a combination of green and hazel with little brown flecks, and thick eyelashes that seemed more like a woman's.

There wasn't much else about Carter that was like a woman, though. His nose was straight and masculine, his lips thin, Adam's apple prominent. His hands weren't as big as Nate's, but the ends of his fingers were squared off and surprisingly calloused considering the extent of his physical exertion tended to be wrestling with the temperamental plumbing in their kitchen.

The sound of applause jolted Nate out of his reverie and back to the present, where Carter had rolled up his loose pages into a tube and was tapping it against his thigh, looking sheepish. He had his other hand behind him, thumb tucked into the back pocket of his jeans -- he stood like that a lot -- and when the clapping died down he sat on the table he was supposed to have been sitting behind and started to take questions from the audience.

Nate watched, and this time he listened, too. One of his favorite things about Carter was that he almost never stammered when he talked, like he'd rehearsed everything he was saying in advance even when there was no way that could be the case, so hearing him answer questions wasn't all that different from hearing him read aloud.

Might have been one of the reasons that driving Carter out of his mind with lust, to the point where he was gasping and stuttering and then completely without words, was something Nate liked so much.

He was smirking when Carter thanked everyone for coming and stood up again, and he stayed where he was as folks started dispersing. Some of them went up to shake Carter's hand; one was a thin young man with glasses and flushed cheeks. Oh yeah. No question in Nate's mind that that kid had a crush on Carter. Wasn't the first and wouldn't be the last. *That* thought was enough to get him to push himself away from the bookshelf he'd been leaning against and start him walking toward the front.

Not that he was worried.

Off to the side, a woman in her mid-twenties or so was waiting, arms crossed over her chest and a frown on her face. She radiated... something. Carter probably would have said discontent and would have talked about karma or some other similar nonsense.

Nate just knew he didn't like it.

"Sell out," she muttered under her breath as Nate passed her, and he stopped.

"What?"

"I wasn't talking to you," the woman said.

Nate glowered. "To who, then? Your guardian angel? Casper the friendly ghost?"

"Fuck off." She pushed past him to stand in front of Carter, and Crush Guy gave her an uncertain look and backed off fast. "Good to know what you're really made of."

"Excuse me?" Carter said. One of the bookstore employees, who'd been hanging around, inched closer.

"You used to stand for something. But as soon as someone offered you a nice fat paycheck, you sold out." Her hair was long and loose and probably hadn't been combed in a couple of days if how it looked meant anything. She was wearing the same kind of ratty flannel shirt that Carter used to wear all the time but now reserved for lazy weekend days when they never made it out of the house, along with a pair of boots that were half untied and had a hole in one toe.

"I don't know what you're -- "

Carter started, but was interrupted when the bookstore guy said loudly, "Thanks so much for coming, Mr. Carter." The guy insinuated himself between Carter and the woman. "I was hoping I could get you to sign a few copies, if you wouldn't mind?" He led Carter back toward the door with the sign that said 'Employees Only.' Nate shot the annoying woman another glare and followed.

"Sorry about that," the bookstore employee was saying to Carter as the door swung shut behind Nate. "Sometimes people can be kind of funny, and not in the amusing way."

"No kidding," Carter said, bewildered, and Nate stepped closer and reached out, closing a hand around Carter's arm just above the elbow.

"You can go out the back if you want," the bookstore guy said. "Or just hang tight here for a few minutes until I get rid of her, okay?"

Nate managed not to make any pointed comments about environmentalists and their causes, what with how it got Carter all in a snit. "You sounded good," he said instead.

"Did I?" Carter was almost pathetically grateful, which told Nate how rattled he was by what might have

happened.

"You know you did. You're good at this." It wasn't like Nate to be so generous with the compliments, but under the circumstances he thought Carter needed the distraction.

"Yeah, well. I'm starting to think I won't mind when this is over," Carter said. There were another four readings scheduled over the next week, and then it was over and they got to go home. Not that Nate was in a hurry; they'd been enjoying themselves pretty thoroughly in a variety of hotels. If it weren't for the readings, it would have been a vacation, and even with them it was damned close.

"Not like you didn't know that kind of thing can happen." Nate glanced through the glass in the door and saw the woman being taken toward the front of the store by the employee. "Looks like he's taking care of it."

"Maybe we should just go out the back." Carter was subdued, his shoulders slumped, and Nate decided the easiest -- and probably best -- thing to do was go along with him.

"Come on, then," he said, and led the way.

By the time they got back to the hotel, Carter was pretty much himself again, which was a relief as far as Nate was concerned. He didn't get the worrying thing -- he didn't do it, and when other people did, it left him confused about why they couldn't just let stuff go. Plus when the other person doing the worrying was Carter that threw another kink into the works, because Nate found himself wanting -- maybe even needing -- to help Carter shake it off, and he had no idea how to do that.

"Want to take a swim?" Carter asked as they went into the lobby.

The hotel had a heated pool, something Nate hadn't had many opportunities to indulge in, and he liked it a lot more than he'd admit to. Carter, being Carter, had figured it out, though, and Nate was pretty sure he was feigning eagerness to give Nate an excuse to get into the water. Nate wasn't sure how he felt about that. Kind of grateful, sure, but then feeling grateful pissed him off, so he dealt with it the way he dealt with most feelings, by pretending they didn't exist. "Sure," he said, focusing on the fact that he did want to swim instead of all the other stuff.

He ended up distracted by the sight of Carter changing into his swimsuit, which looked more like running shorts than anything else and was probably half a size too small. Not that Nate was complaining. The opposite, in fact, even if it did mean that his own roomy swim trunks -- bought the second day of their trip at the nearest giant warehouse store -- felt a little bit tighter than usual. The way Carter's skin glowed at the small of his back, right where it disappeared behind the elastic waistband of the yellow and orange shorts, was enough to tempt Nate to suggest that they skip the pool and go to bed instead. It was probably a symptom of the fact that they'd been together for a little under two years that he was able to resist that temptation. He still felt a stab of disappointment when Carter pulled on a ragged T-shirt for the walk down to the pool, though.

There was a couple with two kids in the water when they went in, the older boy splashing his younger brother until the smaller kid whined. Great, Nate thought. Just the kind of thing that really got on his nerves.

"Oh geez," Carter moaned softly, sinking down into the water, which was probably ten degrees warmer than it really needed to be. It was practically like getting into a bathtub, not that Nate did that very often. He sighed as the heated water rose to his chin.

"Kids!" The woman, her dark hair mussed and her eyeliner spread out around her eyes making her look like a raccoon, was drying herself off with one of the hotel towels. "Come on, time to go."

"Aw, mom." The bigger boy flicked water at the littler one again. "Five more minutes?"

"Five more minutes?" the other kid begged.

"You heard your mother," the man said sternly, and both boys immediately shut up and obeyed, paddling past Carter and Nate and climbing up the stairs at the shallow end of the pool. Nate ignored their chattering after that, even if he found himself relaxing when they finally left, and he and Carter were alone.

"Nice, huh?" Carter asked, rolling over onto his back and looking at the ceiling, chin lifted.

"Yeah," Nate said. "Can't say I'll be sorry to go home, though."

"You're agoraphobic," Carter said fondly. His toes peeked up over the surface of the water.

"Fuck you," Nate said, not even a little irritated. "I like our house. What the hell's wrong with that?"

"I didn't say there was anything wrong with it," Carter told him. He dunked under the water and came up with his hair sopping wet and curling a little bit where the long strands fell in front of his ears. "We both like it. I just like this, too."

"Yeah, well, you're a freak," Nate said. He dove down under Carter, grabbed onto his thigh, and dunked him. Carter struggled, hands shoving ineffectually at Nate's; they broke the surface together, Carter's laughter ringing out.

"Jerk!" Carter said, swiping a handful of chlorine-scented water into Nate's face.

Nate coughed and splashed water back at Carter. "Asshole." He turned to swim back toward the side of the pool and Carter snaked an arm around his waist from behind, hanging onto him like a leech. Even with the water buoying them up, Carter's added weight made it hard for Nate to keep his head up -- he had to spin around and dunk Carter a second time to get free of him. Carter came up still laughing, pushing hair out of his face. "What are you, five?" Nate asked, side-stroking to the edge of the pool and hanging on.

"Yes," Carter said, splashing him again. "I am. Which I guess makes you a cradle robber."

"Oh, that's nice, Carter," Nate said.

"I didn't say it was," Carter pointed out, swimming toward him cautiously. "Anyway, you're the one who's always accusing me of being *too* nice."

"You usually are," Nate said.

"I notice you don't complain when it's you I'm being nice to." Carter swam closer and put a hand on the edge of the pool next to Nate's. His voice was low, and water droplets clung to his lips. "You like it when I'm nice to you, right?"

Nate watched him with some suspicion, waiting to see if he was going to get splashed again, or maybe dunked this time. Carter's eyes were kind of mesmerizing this close up, though. "Depends on what kind of nice you're talking about," he said gruffly.

"I think you know what kind of nice I'm talking about." Carter's hand stroked along Nate's side.

Nate's breath caught. "Not here," he said.

"Why not?" When Carter said it, it sounded almost reasonable. "We're all alone. There's no one to see." His hand moved down along the outside of Nate's thigh.

"Not here," Nate repeated, but he didn't reach to stop Carter's hand, and when Carter leaned in and kissed him, he didn't pull away.

Carter tasted like bleach, his lips lush and full against Nate's, and Nate's dick twitched and swelled inside his trunks. "It's just us," Carter whispered.

"Maybe," Nate said, nodding. "But not for long." The pool was still open for another couple of hours; people could come walking in any time, and once Nate started something he liked to finish it. "Let's get out of here." He gave Carter's shoulder a quick squeeze and pulled away, then got out of the pool. His skin prickled as the air hit it.

"Agg. Cold," Carter said, dancing from one foot to the other as he wrapped one towel around his shoulders and scrubbed his face with another. "Why did I think this was a good idea?"

"Because you're an asshole," Nate reminded him, just as a man and his young daughter, toddling in a pale pink swimsuit with a darker pink skirt, came in. The man gave him an annoyed look and Nate dropped his gaze. "Sorry," he muttered.

He was still feeling annoyed -- with himself, mostly, for caring -- when they went back up to the room.

"Let's get room service," Carter said, shutting the door.

"We had dinner two hours ago," Nate protested.

"Three," Carter said. "And I'm hungry."

"Yeah, well, if you'd eat something other than that rabbit food maybe you wouldn't need to eat all day long," Nate grumbled, stepping into the bathroom and peeling down his wet trunks. He left them on the floor.

Carter was still talking. "Maybe I'll get pizza. I wonder if they could make up some toppings that aren't on the menu? I mean, if they have mushrooms for salad, they should be able to throw it on top of pizza, too." Naked now, he bent to rub his thighs with one of his towels.

Drawn to him like he'd been magnetized, Nate walked over and took the towel from Carter's hands. Dropped it onto the floor. Kissed him. Carter grabbed onto him eagerly, parting his lips to let Nate's tongue in.

"Yes," Carter said, shivering against him, pressing closer.

"I said not at the pool," Nate told him. "Here's fine."

"Good." Carter's hand fumbled, closed around Nate's erection. "Good. Here is good. Just... Nate, please."

Nate walked him backward until they hit the wall. His mouth traced Carter's jaw, and Carter turned his head so Nate could bite down on his ear, something that always made him gasp and, sometimes, beg. "Tell me what you want me to do," Nate said. "Fuck you?"

"Yes." Carter's dick was hard against Nate's pelvic bone.

"You want me to fuck you?" Nate murmured, slipping his hand between Carter's ass and the wall, fingertips brushing into the cleft.

Carter whimpered and pulled back, trapping Nate's hand. "Yeah. Please. Nate."

He loved it when Carter begged -- *loved* it. It made him crazy. "Bed," Nate said tightly, shoving his cock into Carter's grip one more time. "Now."

They'd had sex that morning; the lube was still next to the bed. Nate wondered if the housekeeper had seen it, if she'd cleaned around it, and what she'd thought, if anything. Hell, people who worked at hotels were probably used to seeing a lot worse. Carter yanked the covers down and sprawled out on the bed, one hand on his cock, stroking slowly, while he waited for Nate.

"Say it." Nate leaned over him, two slick fingers teasing at his opening, but not delving inside, not yet.

"You know I want you to," Carter said. His hips shifted restlessly, trying to get Nate's fingers to enter him.

"Yeah, I do." Nate bit Carter's lower lip and Carter gasped. "Still want to hear you say it."

Carter made a small, choked sound. "Fuck me."

Nate pushed his fingers inside Carter, watching his eyes widen and his mouth fall open. "Yeah," Nate said, barely aware that he was speaking as he probed deeper, feeling Carter's body relax and tighten around him. "Gonna."

"Nate." Carter lifted his hips. His cock, hard where it lay along his stomach, twitched, his ass clenching around Nate's fingers at the same time. "Jesus. Please, just..."

He couldn't wait any more, and even if he could have, he didn't want to. Nate knelt up and replaced his fingers with his cock, slowly sliding into Carter, whose hands clutched at Nate's hips.

"Do it," Carter begged. "Fuck, Nate, don't tease me, I can't -- I need -- "

"Know what you need," Nate said, going the rest of the way in, as deep as he could get. Carter was tight as hell around him, perfect. His skin was flushed, nipples small and dusky pink. Nate took a deep breath and lifted Carter's ankles up to his shoulders, supporting Carter's weight with both hands on his ass, and started to move, fucking Carter slowly but steadily.

Carter's eyes were locked on his. "Yeah. Oh God, Nate."

"It's okay," Nate told him. "I've got you. Gonna give you... fuck, yeah. Feels good."

"I'm going to... come, Nate..."

"Not yet," Nate said. He shifted, grabbed onto the base of Carter's dick and squeezed just between the point of pain and pleasure -- he knew Carter's body so well now that he knew exactly how far to take it. He thrust in again, and Carter's ass tightened around him. Carter sobbed.

"Not yet," Nate said again, but it was close, too close, and anyway wasn't coming the whole point of fucking? He started to move faster, shoving himself slickly into Carter, and slid his hand up to the head of Carter's cock, working it with quick jerks of his wrist. "Come on."

Carter's heels dug into Nate's shoulders as he started to come, shooting onto his stomach with a series of sharp cries. His body pulsed around Nate's dick, and Nate had to grit his teeth to hold back -- he didn't want to miss the expression on Carter's face, the moment when almost-pain melted into sheer bliss. It always gave Nate a thrill -- well, a warm ache, anyway -- in his chest to see it, and he waited until Carter's mouth curved into a sleepy smile before he gasped and thrust five or six more times then came, pleasure swelling up in him.

Nick stayed where he was, shuddering, until he managed to catch his breath. Carter's hand was rubbing Nate's hip gently, two fingertips of his other hand tracing through the puddle of come on his stomach. "Here," Nate said shakily, reaching for Carter's wrist. He brought Carter's hand to his mouth and licked the come from Carter's fingers, astonished as always at the hint of sweetness. Then he pulled back, lowering Carter's ass down onto the mattress, and lay down beside Carter.

Rolling onto his side, Carter draped an arm over Nate's waist. "Mmm," he said.

"Uh-huh." Nate closed his eyes and yawned. His cock was softening, sticky, against his thigh, and sleep seemed like a pretty good idea right then.

"I need a shower," Carter said.

"Nah." Nate shook his head, then pulled Carter closer and rubbed the tip of his nose against Carter's ear. Carter's hair was still wet and it smelled funny, like a combination of swimming pool and shampoo.

"Stay here." It was the closest he'd come to admitting how much he loved to feel Carter pressed up against him, warm and familiar.

"Okay." At least Carter was easy to convince.

"You good?" Nate asked. He slid a hand up the inside of Carter's thigh to his dick, which was soft, small. "Comfortable?"

"Yeah," Carter said, sounding almost amused. "I'm good." He was quiet for a minute. "Hungry, though."

Nate sighed. "Okay, okay. Order room service." Carter started to move, and Nate grabbed onto him, grinning. "From here."

"That's going to be kind of tricky when they deliver it," Carter said.

"Oh, you can get up then," Nate said, thinking that'd be half an hour at least. "Just not now."

Carter stretched to reach the phone, dragging it onto the bed. "You want anything?"

"Well..." If it wasn't his idea in the first place, Nate figured he didn't have to share the blame. "Sure. A burger and fries. You think they'll send up beer?"

"Probably." Carter dialed, and Nate curled up around him and breathed in the scent of his skin while he listened to Carter ordering the food. "You're being weird," Carter said, when he'd hung up.

"I am?" It was probably easier to deny it.

"Yeah." Carter squirmed until they were face to face, studying him, which should have made Nate pretty uncomfortable but somehow didn't. "You're... playful."

"You wanted to play in the pool," Nate said. "I'm the one who said no."

"Well, yeah, but now you're being... I don't know." Carter kissed him. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah." As far as Nate could tell, he was. A meal on the way, a comfortable bed, nothing in particular to do, and a warm, naked Carter beside him. What else could he possibly need? "I'm gonna want to fuck

you again later."

Carter groaned softly and slid a hand into Nate's hair, clinging to him like that. "You're going to kill me," he said.

"At least you'll die happy," Nate whispered against Carter's sweet, wide mouth.

"There is that," Carter said. For a few minutes they lay there, breathing in each other's breath. Then Carter asked, "It's not because of this whole thing? The tour?"

"Me wanting to fuck you?" Nate asked.

"No, you being weird," Carter said, punching Nate's shoulder. It hurt, but Nate didn't complain. "You didn't have to come."

"I thought coming was the whole point," Nate said innocently, and Carter hit him again. "Ow! I know, I know. You told me that. At least a hundred times."

"Yeah, but I wasn't sure you ever believed me." Carter looked frustrated, but also kind of worried.

"If I didn't want to come, I wouldn't have come," Nate said; Carter should have known this about him by now.

"Okay, okay." Carter backpedaled, obviously thinking Nate was on the verge of getting pissed off. "Fine. You're totally normal."

"And you're a pain in the ass," Nate said, but he pulled Carter closer and kissed him anyway, just because he wanted to.

In the morning when they went to leave the hotel, bags in hand, they discovered that Carter's car had a flat tire.

"Well, fuck," Nate said, looking at it.

"Actually, double fuck," Carter said, which was one of Nate's favorite expressions. He'd moved around and was standing looking at the other side of the car.

"One on that side, too? Piece of shit tires." Nate kicked the one nearest him.

"We must have run over some nails or something." Carter frowned and unlocked the door, tossing his bag into the back seat. "I really hope the spare is okay."

"The spare's only good if you have *one* flat," Nate said. "Unless you have two spares."

"No, just the one." Carter opened the trunk, pulled the carpet out of the way, and looked down at the spare tire.

Nate crouched beside the car and poked at the tire thoughtfully. It didn't take long to find the large, ragged tear in the rubber. "Looks like someone put a hole in it."

"What?" Carter stepped away from the car and glanced around at the cars near theirs. "The rest of them seem okay. If it was vandals or something -- you know, kids getting into trouble -- don't you think they'd have damaged more than just ours?"

"Yours," Nate said. He frowned.

"Whatever. My point is, if people were going around flattening tires, they wouldn't just do one car." Carter pulled the tire from the trunk and set it down on the pavement, then rolled it toward Nate. "Can you get started with this? I'm going to call the auto club and see if they can bring a whole new wheel, or at least another spare, and then I'll check in with Edward and let him know what's going on." Edward was Carter's editor, the guy who'd set up this whole book tour thing in the first place.

Nate let the tire roll into his leg and crossed his arms over his chest. "So, what, I'm hired help now?"

"*Please*," Carter said, sounding more stressed out than he had before, and Nate sighed and went to the trunk to get the jack.

It was a good two and a half hours before they were on the road, and by then Carter was jittery and annoying as all hell. Nate had to keep reminding himself that there was good reason for it, but even that didn't make it any easier to deal with. And *that* just made it clear to him that he had a shitty, unforgiving attitude, which made him feel extra surly. He could barely manage a decent word to Carter until they finally arrived at the bookstore where he'd been scheduled to do a reading almost an hour before.

"There," he said. "We're not even all that late."

Carter gave him a look of disbelief and shoved the car door open.

Luckily, the bookstore employees had been told what was going on, and they had everything set up and ready. One of them met Carter at the door and ushered him quickly back to the little staged area they'd created, and Carter, flustered, listened to his introduction and then took the microphone that was offered to him.

Nate couldn't bear to watch -- he left the store entirely, wandering down to one of the first non-chain coffee shops he'd seen in a while and getting himself a cup without anyone looking at him funny when he didn't want a latte or a cappu-whatever. He leaned against the building and sipped the drink, aware that he was scowling but unable to stop.

He gave it a good half hour, knowing the reading would take twenty minutes tops and be followed by a bunch of stupid questions that would just irritate him. He finally threw his empty coffee cup in the nearest trash bin and strolled back inside, just in time to hear a loud commotion at the back of the store,

including shouting and the sharp, out of place squeal of microphone feedback.

Moving more quickly, Nate headed for the stage area and got there in time to see a woman standing near Carter give a short, sharp flick of her wrist and toss a coffee cup full of something too bright red to be blood at him. Carter jerked back in time to avoid getting the stuff directly in his face, but it hit his throat and hair and high on his chest, clinging thickly to his shirt and skin.

Nate leapt forward without thinking and grabbed the woman, his hand closing around her upper arm at the same time a nearby security guard seized her from the other side. "You son of a bitch!" she yelled, obviously at Carter, who was pale against the dripping red. "How can you let this happen?"

"What, you acting like a psycho?" Nate growled, shaking her a little bit. She turned her head and glared at him. It was the same woman from the day before -- that didn't come as a surprise -- although now her hair was bundled back at the nape of her neck. She had a drop of the bright red liquid on her cheek.

It smelled like paint, not blood.

She turned back to Carter. "Once you understand, you can't go back!" she shouted, jerking her arm away from the security guard and pointing at Carter. "You're fooling yourself! You can't just become one of them! You're bathing in the blood of the animals who are being killed so that corporations can make the almighty dollar!"

Another security guard joined them, and Nate reluctantly relinquished his hold on the woman.

"Call the police," someone female standing behind him murmured. Nate looked; she was the one who'd met them at the door and was wearing a name tag that said "Asst. Manager" on it.

"No!" Carter said quickly, and pretty much everyone nearby looked at him. "No, don't... just let her go." He was more than a little bit wild-eyed, and not in a good way. It made Nate want to hit the bitch who'd thrown the fake blood on him.

"Don't do me any favors," she snapped.

Nate moved over to Carter, not touching him. "Let them throw her in jail for a night or two, cool her down," he reasoned.

Carter shook his head resolutely; his lower lip was shaking and his pupils were too wide. "No. No, let her go."

Exasperated, Nate huffed and turned toward the security guards. "At least find out who she is," he told them.

"Where's your ID?" the taller of the two guards asked her. In the time it took them to figure out she was completely unidentifiable -- no ID on her, no wallet, nothing -- Carter disappeared. "Keep her here until I get back," Nate growled, and went looking for him.

He was in the men's room, gripping onto one of the sinks. He'd made a half-hearted effort to clean off some of the paint, but he looked worse for it, the drying liquid ground into the fabric of his shirt and smeared on his skin. He didn't flinch when Nate rested a hand at the small of his back, but he didn't lift his eyes and meet Nate's in the mirror, either.

"You sure you want them to let her go?" Nate asked.

"Yeah." Carter's voice was shaky, his gaze on the wadded up, wet paper towels clogging the sink. "I don't want her to... I can't do that to someone else." He'd been in jail briefly, himself, after an attempt to free a bunch of lab animals had resulted in him taking the fall for a whole group of animal rights freaks, and being Carter, he couldn't let it go.

"Okay," Nate said. "You need to sit down?"

"No. But I think I'll stay in here until she's gone." Finally, Carter glanced up and their eyes caught and held.

Part of Nate still hated that Carter had so much power over him, but he managed to suppress the feeling and focus on what needed to get done. "Right," he said gruffly. "I'll be back in a minute."

He accompanied the assistant manager, the security guards and the woman to one of the employees' entrances, where she was let go a lot more gently than Nate would have liked. "Don't come back," the assistant manager, Becky, told the woman as she pulled her shirt down at the waist and glared at them. "We've got you on the security cameras."

"Like I'd want to come back here," the bitch spat out, and turned and stalked off.

"Is Mr. Carter okay?" Becky asked Nate in a low voice as they went back inside.

"A little shaky," Nate admitted. "But he'll be fine."

"I don't understand why he wouldn't want to press charges," Becky said.

"Long story," Nate told her.

She gave him a look that clearly meant she had time, but he shook his head and she said, "Okay. But here, take my number..." Becky paused and drew a notebook and pen from her pocket and scribbled it down. "If you need anything, or he wants reassurance that this isn't going to happen again, or whatever... call me."

Nate took the piece of paper. "Sure." He'd throw it away as soon as she turned around, but he knew she meant well; she seemed nice enough. "Thanks."

"No problem. It's my job." She reconsidered. "Well, technically, not really, but you know what I mean."

"Yeah." Nate headed back to the bathroom.

Carter had apparently given up on trying to get the rest of the paint off him -- he didn't look any cleaner than he had when Nate left, and he'd moved away from the sinks and was leaning against the wall next to the completely useless hand dryer. "Is she gone?"

"Uh-huh." Nate crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"No cops?"

"No. No cops."

"So, can we go?"

"Yeah," Nate said. "Let's get the hell out of here."

Carter waited in the car while Nate checked into the hotel, then tugged a hooded sweatshirt on and slunk through the lobby. All he needed was a pair of sunglasses and he'd look like a serial killer, Nate thought, but had better sense than to say.

"M'gonna take a shower," Carter muttered, and went into the bathroom, shutting the door firmly behind him. Nate listened for the click of the lock. Didn't hear it.

The water started up a minute later; he waited until he figured Carter was well-wet before knocking and letting himself in. Carter was jumpy enough as it was -- the last thing he needed was to be surprised by Nate's sudden appearance.

"You want a hand?" Nate asked, already stripping off his clothes without waiting for an answer.

Carter didn't answer, which meant he didn't say no. Nate stepped in and reached for the soap. He worked up a thick lather and kissed Carter, then tilted his face up and started washing the underside of Carter's jaw and his throat, fingernails scratching lightly at the skin to loosen the stubbornly clinging flakes of dried paint.

"Too rough?"

Murmuring a negative, Carter closed his eyes. "Just get it off me."

"Yeah. I will." Nate concentrated, made sure he got all the paint off before moving his hands lower, rubbing Carter's shoulders. Carter groaned softly and let his head fall forward, resting it against Nate's collar bone. "It'd be better from behind."

"You always say that," Carter told him, with a hint of humor, but he cooperatively turned until his back was to Nate. "Oh, God. Yeah. Feels good."

Nate dug his thumbs into the tense muscles at the base of Carter's neck, then slid his hands lower, massaging either side of Carter's spine and his lower back. "Not good to carry all this tension."

"You think?" Carter asked. He braced a hand against the tile wall and sighed. "I wonder if that place next door has chamomile tea."

"You never know," Nate said. "All that herbal mumbo jumbo's getting more popular by the day, seems like."

"It's not mumbo jumbo," Carter said, but he didn't sound annoyed the way he usually did when Nate teased him, just tired. "Forget it. I'm going to take a nap."

"It's the middle of the afternoon," Nate pointed out, but he shut off the shower and pulled back the curtain.

Carter shrugged. "Hence my use of the word 'nap'. Anyway, I need some rest if I'm going to make it through dinner with my brother tonight."

"Oh. Right." Nate had actually been hoping Carter had forgotten about that, but knew saying so would just make him look like a jerk. "Maybe we could see an early movie first or something?"

"I don't even know what's playing," Carter said and, naked but holding a towel, walked out of the bathroom without another word.

It was hard to know whether to push the issue or not; Carter wasn't like this often enough for Nate to have figured out how to deal with him when he was. Actually, Carter was never like this.

Thank God.

By the time Nate left the bathroom, Carter was in bed, under the covers. The towel was on the floor next to the bed in a heap. Nate kicked it over closer to the wall and scratched his hip, looking at Carter uncertainly. Carter was lying on his back with an arm flung up over his eyes, his hair loose and wet enough that it was leaving damp patches on the pillowcase.

"Are you sleeping?" Nate asked finally.

Carter sighed. "Does it look like I'm sleeping?"

"It looks like you're being an asshole," Nate said. "Not that that's anything new. Come on, let's go do something. Take your mind off it."

"I don't want to 'do something,'" Carter said. "I just want to lie here. All afternoon. And do nothing."

"Seriously?"

Carter nodded, his arm moving with the motion of his head. "Seriously. I might, if I'm feeling really ambitious, watch some TV."

"Porn?" Nate asked hopefully, and Carter laughed.

"Maybe I could be persuaded," he said. He shifted his arm up onto the pillow above his head and looked at Nate with a raised eyebrow that made it clear there was going to be some getting lucky involved.

"Thank God," Nate said, and crawled into bed.

Carter waited until he'd already shut off the car to voice his doubts about the evening. "We could go have dinner somewhere else instead, just you and me."

"Okay," Nate said. It wasn't like *he* had much interest in hanging out with Carter's brother Scott and his wife. He'd only agreed to it because he was pretty sure Carter wanted to go -- or thought he did, at least -- and wasn't likely to go on his own. "What do you think, that big Chinese place on the hill near the hotel?"

Sighing, Carter took the keys out of the ignition. "We can't."

Damn. "Okay, fine."

They got out and went up to the front door. Carter knocked. The house was a good size -- two floors, had to be at least a couple of bathrooms -- and the porch they were standing on couldn't have been more than a year old.

The door opened. "Hi," Scott said. "I wasn't sure you guys were still coming."

It was a stupid thing to say, Nate thought, considering Carter was the master of doing what he said he was going to do. Of course, Scott was kind of a jerk, so it shouldn't have come as a surprise that he'd stay something stupid. "Yeah, well, here we are," Nate said.

"Right," Scott said. "Come on in."

Scott's wife Helen, slender and blonde, came in from the back, where Nate could see the kitchen. She held out her well-manicured hand and shook Nate's, then hesitated for about four seconds before stepping closer and hugging Carter. "Gabriel," she said. "I'm so glad to see you. Can I get you two a drink?"

Carter looked startled about the hug, but nodded. "Sure, that'd be great. Anything's fine."

"Why don't you all go on into the living room for a little while? Dinner will be ready in about ten minutes." Helen went back into the kitchen, and Nate and Carter followed Scott into a living room with a pale, cream-colored carpeting and two couches that looked like no one had ever sat on them before.

"Any trouble finding the place?" Scott asked as he lowered himself onto one couch and gestured at the other.

"No," Carter said. He looked nervous; he kept rubbing the edge of his thumbnail against the side of his finger. "We have maps."

"You should get a GPS," Scott said, frowning as if anyone who didn't have one was living in the dark ages.

Nate shifted on the uncomfortable couch and frowned back at Scott. "Maps work fine. It's not like we need some computer holding our hand, telling us which way to turn."

"I guess not," Scott said after a brief pause. "I guess you prefer to stray off the beaten path." It was said stiffly, as if what Scott really wanted to say would have been a lot more rude and this was his compromise.

There was an awkward silence. Nate filled it with a mental list of all the things he'd say to Scott if they guy hadn't been Carter's brother.

Helen came into the living room with three glasses of what looked like beer. Trust people like this to waste glasses on something that could better be drunk out of the bottle it came in. Still, Nate mustered up a smile as she handed him one. "Thanks."

"You're welcome." She perched herself on the edge of the same couch Scott was sitting on as if she didn't intend to sit there long. "So, how is the book tour going?"

"Good," Carter said. "I mean, different. From life as usual."

"I'm sure." Helen smoothed the blue skirt of her dress, and Nate noticed that her open-toed shoes revealed pale pink toenails. It was like they'd stepped through some freaky time warp into the 60s or something. "And Nate, you're enjoying it?"

"It's okay." He wished he could lie and say it was the most amazing experience of his life just to make Scott squirm.

"What about you guys?" Carter asked. "How's life? Anything new and exciting?"

Helen blushed and gave her husband a sidelong glance. "Well..."

Reaching for Helen's hand, Scott said, "You tell them, honey."

"I'm pregnant," Helen said. "Only ten weeks, so it's still early days yet, but so far, so good."

"That's great," Carter said, sounding like he meant it. "Congratulations!"

"Mom and Dad don't know yet," Scott told Carter. "We wanted to wait until the second trimester, just to be on the safe side. You know how Mom is; she'd be really upset if anything happened."

Carter nodded. "I won't say anything. If you want, I'll even act surprised when she calls to tell me."

"Which she definitely will," Scott agreed, and the two brothers shared the first grin Nate could remember seeing between them.

"So you should expect to hear from her in about a month." Helen stroked a hand across her still-flat stomach. There was a faint sound from the kitchen, like a timer going off, and she stood up. "Excuse me -- I think that was the oven."

There was a couple of minutes of slightly awkward small talk. Nate made them less unbearable by draining his beer, which was actually pretty good. Good enough that he was tempted to ask what kind it was, but that would mean participating in this farce of family life, and he couldn't bring himself to do that.

"Dinner's ready," Helen said from the doorway. With the light from the kitchen glowing behind her, she looked like an angel.

Nate hated everything about this.

The dining room was like something out of a magazine. There were even candles on the table, a touch Carter probably would have been able to appreciate if it hadn't been for the huge, juicy roast that was sitting there, too. Nate could see how Carter's eyes went right to it.

Vegetarianism was pretty stupid as far as Nate was concerned, but he'd learned to work around Carter's. He could eat meat when they went out to dinner -- Carter didn't mind it being on the table if it was just one serving and he didn't have to smell it cooking. Nate didn't cook it in the house unless Carter was out and there'd be enough time to open a window, air the place out.

He waited, now, for Carter to say something. But Carter didn't, just stood there with his lips pressed together, then moved to the chair Scott indicated.

"Scott, could you carve, please?" Helen asked. "Do either of you need another drink?" She looked at Carter, took in his expression, and frowned. "What's wrong?"

Carter shook his head. "Nothing."

Nate waited a few seconds, watching the way Scott's knife sliced through the meat, juices pooling on the plate, and trying to imagine how it looked to Carter. He wished Carter would speak up for himself, but since he wasn't going to, Nate did. "Carter's a vegetarian."

"What?" Helen, confused, looked from Nate to Carter. "Since when?"

"For years," Carter admitted, and Helen flushed and turned wide eyes toward her husband.

"You knew? And you didn't tell me," she said. Her jaw tightened. "Take it into the kitchen."

"I just *forgot*," Scott protested, but his wife was having none of it.

"Take the meat into the *kitchen*." She looked at Carter. "Gabriel, I'm so sorry. I had no idea."

Carter swallowed as Scott left the room, balancing the platter. "It's okay."

"Of course it's not. Now, let me think. The roasted vegetables are fine -- they were cooked in a separate pan. And there's the salad and the bread." Helen glanced into the kitchen. "We can just save the meat for another night."

"I don't mind you all eating it," Carter said. "Um, as long as the rest of it isn't on the table."

"Are you sure?" Helen seemed to consider it for a few seconds, then shook her head. "No. No, you shouldn't have to do that."

"I wouldn't say it if I didn't mean it," Carter told her, which was a lie. A lie told in an attempt to be nice, sure, but still a lie.

Nate made an impatient noise. "He doesn't like being called Gabriel, either. Goes by his last name."

"Oh," Helen said. "No one told me." She seemed upset, or maybe angry. Nate liked the thought of her angry; it made her seem more like a real person. "Look, why don't you two sit down and start, and Scott and I will be right back."

There wasn't a door between the dining room and the kitchen, so as Nate and Carter sat down, they could both overhear as Helen reamed Scott a new one under her breath.

"How could you do that?" she was hissing. "I know you and your brother don't exactly see eye to eye, but this is just... it's so *childish*! So immature!"

Scott muttered something; it didn't sound like an apology. Helen lit into him again, and Nate grinned and looked at Carter. "Think he'll learn his lesson?"

"I don't care," Carter said miserably. "Let's just go."

"What, just walk out?" It sounded okay to Nate, as long as Carter wouldn't be all upset about it later.

"But they're gay! Do you seriously expect me to treat them like -- like everyone else?" Scott said loudly in the kitchen, in protest of something Helen had said, and Carter's expression went even darker.

Nate stood up and went to the doorway between the kitchen and dining room. "We're going."

"What?" Helen said. "No, wait, please. God, I'm so sorry about this. Please stay. I really want you to stay." She sounded so sincere that Nate almost felt sorry for her.

Scott, though, didn't say anything. His arms were crossed over his chest and he looked sullen, like a kid

who hadn't gotten his way.

"No -- I think it's better we go. But thanks." Nate glanced back; Carter was already hovering at the far side of the room.

In the car, behind the wheel because it was obvious Carter was in no condition to drive, Nate looked at the front door of the house. Helen stood there looking sad. She waved a little bit, tentatively, and he lifted a hand before putting the car into drive. He felt bad for her -- none of it was her fault, except for the part where she'd married an asshole.

"So," he said finally, when it seemed like Carter wasn't going to say anything. "That big Chinese place?"

"I'm not hungry," Carter said.

"Well, I am." And the Chinese place was probably a safe bet.

They usually went to chain restaurants, which were predictable. Nate liked predictable. Not that it mattered to him all that much, because most places you could get a burger or a steak, which were the two things he was most likely to order, but with Carter it was more complicated because of the whole vegetarian thing. But the chain places usually had a couple of options for Carter to choose between, whereas a diner or independent place was less likely to know what to do with someone who didn't want any meat.

Thank God Carter hadn't decided to become a vegan. Yet. When it was his turn to cook, Nate made a real effort to make things with eggs and milk that Carter liked, in the hopes that the idea of stopping eating those foods would seem unappealing.

Besides, he liked mac and cheese, too.

Nate turned the car into the long driveway that led up the hill to the restaurant. At least it was driving okay now that it had the new tires.

The food turned out to be slightly worse than average, but Carter didn't seem to notice. Of course, the four drinks that he had with dinner might have had something to do with that. He started out with a pina colada, umbrella and all, and moved on to a Blue Hawaii, Mai Tai, and then a Sex on the Beach. He snickered when ordering it, and the waitress looked at him doubtfully and glanced at Nate.

"I'm driving," he said. "Don't worry, he won't be dancing on any tables."

That seemed to make her worry even more, but she nodded and went away and came back with the drink. Carter drank it. His eyes were glazing over, and he was slouching so much that his chin was closer to the table than Nate had ever seen it, but strangely he was still able to carry on a conversation just like usual.

After a lengthy diatribe about global warming and Al Gore's documentary, which Nate had been forced to watch not once but twice, Carter paused and frowned. "I think I'm drunk."

"You think?" Nate snorted. He'd only seen Carter drunk once before, and that was at a New Year's Eve party that had been followed by one of the hottest nights of sex they'd ever had, so it wasn't like he was *complaining*. "That's it, I'm cutting you off."

"You don't get to decide what I do," Carter told him.

Nate shook his head and popped the last piece of chicken into his mouth. "Sure I do, if you're drunk. What if you wanted to get behind the wheel like this?"

"I wouldn't try to drive when I'd been drinking," Carter said. "How stupid do you think I am?"

"You're the one who seems to have had four drinks without realizing it," Nate pointed out. "You do the math."

"Four drinks doesn't equal stupidity," Carter said. "Besides, they tasted good."

"I find it hard to believe these drinks were that much better than other ones you've had in the past. So, what're you trying not to think about?"

"Oh," Carter said. "You mean I drank to try to get stupid."

"Whatever works for you," Nate said. That wasn't what he'd been getting at, of course, but it probably wasn't reasonable to expect Carter to get it, what with the way it was looking like just focusing his eyes was a challenge. "You done?"

Carter surveyed the remains of his meal, which had been reduced to a few pea pods and a square of what Nate was pretty sure was bean curd. "Yeah, I guess."

"Good." It didn't take long to pay the bill and walk out the car, and by the time Nate pulled into the hotel parking lot, Carter was half asleep, his head leaning against the window. Nate shook him a little. "Hey, sleeping beauty."

"Hm?" Carter blinked and yawned.

"Come on -- we're back. Get your ass out of the car." Nate opened his own door and got out, then went around and made sure Carter wasn't going to fall on said ass. He got a hand under Carter's arm and helped him inside, ignoring the looks the people they passed gave them. It wasn't like he cared what anyone thought. He got them to their room without incident and unlocked the door.

"M'going to bed," Carter said as they went inside, and promptly collapsed onto it, not even bothering to take off his shoes.

Nate sighed and undid them for him, letting them fall to the floor and stay where they landed because they weren't his responsibility. It was bad enough he had to take care of Carter.

Carter mumbled something.

"What?" Nate said.

"Thirsty," Carter said, turning his head to the side.

"Well, get yourself a drink," Nate told him. "Since when is it my job?"

But Carter didn't move, and before Nate turned on the TV he went into the bathroom and filled a glass with water, then brought it back and set it on the table next to the bed.

"There, drink that."

Eventually, bleary-eyed and groggy, Carter did. He turned over and draped an arm over Nate, pressing his face against Nate's side.

A minute later, he started to snore.

Nate sighed and turned up the volume on the TV.

At six a.m., Carter got up, took a piss with the bathroom door open, and drank what sounded like three glasses of water before coming back to bed. At nine forty, he was still sleeping, flat on his back with his hair everywhere. Nate decided to go down and have breakfast without him. He didn't leave a note, and wondered if Carter would be awake and confused by the time he got back.

Nate had three cups of coffee with his breakfast and went back to the room, where Carter had rolled over but otherwise failed to get up. Great. What the hell was Nate supposed to do now?

He went over, sat on the bed, and shoved Carter's hip. "Get up."

Carter groaned and rolled over. His shirt had hitched up in the back, baring a strip of skin, and Nate couldn't resist -- he bent over and pressed his lips to it. It was cool and smooth, and the feel of it made Nate hard instantly.

"Hm?" Carter murmured. "Did I hear you telling me to get it up?"

"That part's not necessary," Nate said, grinning. He squeezed Carter's ass with both hands and then went to work undressing him. Carter didn't protest, and by the time he was naked, sprawled out on the white hotel sheets, they were both hard.

"M'hung over," Carter said.

"So?" Nate closed a hand around Carter's dick and gave it a slow, lazy stroke, watching as Carter arched toward his touch.

"Jesus, Nate." Carter spread his thighs. "C'mon. Just fuck me."

Nate liked it when Carter was hot for it, but right then 'willing' was good enough. He found the lube, spilling some in his haste, and slicked Carter up before pushing into him. It felt as incredible as it always did, hot and tight. Carter was relaxed underneath him, limbs splayed, eyes unfocused and a hand on his own cock.

"Feels good," Nate panted, thrusting forward again. He lowered his weight onto an elbow and caught Carter's mouth in a kiss, wide and open mouthed, tongues moving together wetly.

"Oh God." Carter tilted his hips and the angle changed. "*God*, Nate."

It Nate could have spared some breath, he would have agreed. It shocked him how good sex was, always had, but with Carter it was even better. He slid out a few inches and then back in again.

"I'm gonna come," Carter gasped, writhing under him. "Just a little -- more, oh God, I can't, I'm --" He came, shuddering, the waves of his release tightening his body around Nate's dick.

"Fuck," Nate said, clenching his teeth, trying to wait it out. His hips had other ideas, gave a last two awkward jerks before he came, too, spurting into Carter's willing ass, heat and slick wetness surrounding him, the head of his cock so sensitive he hissed and bit his lip when he finally eased out.

They were silent for a while, which suited Nate just fine. Eventually, though, Carter sighed and said, "Thanks."

"Yeah, you're welcome. It was a real hardship." Nate snorted, and Carter snickered, and eventually they got up and started their day.

At that afternoon's reading, freaky flannel lady didn't make an appearance, which was a relief even to Nate, whether he wanted to admit it or not. Well, except for the part of him that would have liked an excuse to punch her in the face. He wasn't above hitting a woman, not if she was acting like a psycho. It still galled him that Carter had insisted on letting her go instead of putting her in jail for a couple of nights like she deserved.

The following evening was the second to last reading, and Nate was relieved about that, too. It'd been okay at first, kind of interesting, but now it was just more of the same and he'd be happy when it was over and they could go home. He'd managed to snag himself a chair this time around, at least, and now that the reading was drawing to a close he was slid down in it, half dozing and letting the sound of Carter's voice drift over him.

This was the biggest crowd Carter had read to by far, but then again the store was bigger, too. Carter's publisher had provided a security guard to keep an eye on things, just in case, but there'd been no sign of the woman who'd been causing trouble.

Carter finished up. There was a round of applause, a few token questions -- all polite and none of them

new -- and then everyone got up and started milling around. It was always like this; like none of them knew where to go next. Like they were all hoping, maybe, that Carter would stop them and say something just to them.

It made Nate feel warm, knowing he was the one Carter would go home with.

"Wasn't that wonderful?" The little old lady with stooped shoulders might have been old enough to be a great-grandma, but her smile was as bright as a woman's half her age.

"Yeah," Nate agreed, getting up and stepping out of her way. With his luck, she'd trip over his feet and break a hip or something.

"I'm going to ask if he can sign my book." Great-grandma was clutching a copy of Carter's book to her as she toddled toward the front, where a bunch of other people had formed something more like a mess than a line. Most of them were neatly dressed and seemed to fit with each other, except for what looked like a skinny boy wearing a baseball cap who was working his way determinedly through the crowd.

Nate realized that something about the boy looked familiar, but by then it was too late.

"Carter!" He started forward, side-stepping around the old lady and then shoving his way toward Carter, who looked up. Confusion crossed his face -- then the boy, who'd come around the edge of the table, swung his arm and hit Carter low on the side, and the look on Carter's face changed to shock.

Someone said something, and the security guard, who'd been standing close enough to stop it, jumped forward and grabbed the boy, whose hat fell off, revealing to everyone that he was actually the same she who had been stalking Carter before.

Nate shoved one more person aside and reached Carter. The security guard was pulling the struggling woman away, and Nate saw something small that glinted as the light hit it fall to the thin carpet at the same time Carter raised a red, wet hand and started to go down.

That better be more paint, Nate thought, even though he knew it wasn't. He caught Carter and tried to keep him upright, but he wasn't close enough and the best he could do was to slow Carter's descent. Carter's foot tangled with the chair that was pushed in under the table and it tipped over. There were a lot of raised voices, someone saying something about 911, and Nate jerked Carter's shirt up and saw the blood running, bright and fast, from a narrow but deep-looking wound in his side.

"Fuck," Nate said. "Okay. Okay, don't try to move."

"Don't worry." Carter's voice was thin with pain. "Was... is it bad?"

Nate shook his head and lied. "No, not bad. You'll be fine." He looked up and caught the eye of one of the store employees, who was standing there not knowing what to do. "Call an ambulance."

"I already did." It was a woman's voice nearby, and Nate swallowed as she pressed a wad of fabric into his hand. "Here, put pressure on it. Keep talking to him." She was gone, but Nate could hear her saying

something further away.

He tried to focus on Carter's face and let everything else fade away into the background. "Just take it easy. The ambulance guys'll be here soon."

"Ambulance guys?" Carter laughed a little bit, then winced and closed his eyes. "Shit. Fuck, Nate. I never filled out that thing."

"Shut up," Nate told him. "Look at me." When Carter opened his eyes again, they were glassy. "You're going to be fine. Don't be such a baby."

"I never filled out that form. That will." Carter drew a shaky breath. He was pale and Nate could feel the heat of his blood soaking into the cloth.

"You don't need a will," Nate snapped. "Jesus, somebody gives you a scratch and you start talking about dying."

"I meant to," Carter went on, like Nate hadn't said anything at all. "I meant to fill it out."

"Would you shut up about the stupid will?" Nate wondered if he was putting enough pressure on the wound, and pushed a little more firmly. Carter gasped and clawed at him, fingers digging into Nate's arm. "Sorry. Sorry. Fuck."

Carter was white as hell, and he was breathing too fast. "Hurts."

"I know. I know it does." Nate could feel Carter's blood running over his hand; it was warm and slick and the cloth was soaked through. There were people crowding around them, talking, making it hard to think. "Just hang in there." Fuck, he sounded like a moron, and if the damned ambulance didn't get there soon he was going to carry Carter out to the car and drive him to the hospital himself.

Fortunately, about a minute later, he heard the sound of sirens outside. Why did they have to do readings at the backs of stores? It felt like forever waiting for the EMTs to find them. Things got even more confusing after that, what with the paramedics and the police arriving at the same time, and one of the officers trying to talk to Nate, who tried ignoring him but eventually had to snap, "Later, all right?" because he was busy holding Carter's hand as they lifted the gurney up and started through the store toward the front door.

Once they were in the ambulance, Nate had to sit back against the wall and let the EMTs do their thing. Carter's eyes had slipped closed, but Nate could see his chest moving up and down as he breathed and tried to reassure himself with that. They put an oxygen mask over Carter's face and radioed information about his vital statistics to the hospital. None of it meant much to Nate.

When they got to the hospital, he stayed where he was, keeping out of their way as they got Carter out of the ambulance, then followed as the EMTs made the hand-off to the ER doctors. He expected to be stopped there, to be told he couldn't be in the room, but it seemed like no one even saw him, and he sure as hell wasn't leaving until someone told him he had to. He kept back against the wall, not really

watching anything that was going on, his eyes glued to Carter's face.

Finally, one of the doctors seemed to see him. "Are you his friend?"

Nate could have said yes and left it at that, but for some reason he opened his mouth and what came out was, "Partner."

"Business partner?"

"No." Nate swallowed. God, his mouth was dry.

"Okay. Well, he's stable, but he's bleeding internally and we're going to need to get in there and close things up. It doesn't look like his liver was damaged, which is what we'd be concerned about given the location of the wound, but they'll find out for sure."

Nate nodded. "Okay."

On the bed, Carter opened his eyes and turned his head toward Nate. "Nate." There was no volume behind the word, but Nate heard it anyway and moved immediately over to stand beside him.

"Yeah. You want me to call your family?"

"No. Not yet. I just..." Carter's eyes closed again, then opened with what looked like a lot of effort, but he didn't say anything else.

"You're gonna be okay," Nate said, and leaned down and pressed his mouth to Carter's.

They took Carter upstairs to surgery, and after a while someone remembered Nate was there and told him where he could go wait. He stopped by a bathroom on the way to the right floor and scrubbed his hands clean -- he had to reapply soap four times before he got most of the blood off, and it wasn't until he reached for the paper towels that he realized his hands were shaking.

It had all happened so fast. One minute everything had been fine, and the next Carter was bleeding all over the place. Nate never, ever would have thought that crazy bitch would try to actually hurt Carter, although now that he thought about it some more, maybe the flat tires had been her, too...

He threw the damp paper towels away, kicked the trash bin for being there, and went out to sit in the hallway near recovery, where Carter would end up after surgery. Carter was going to be fine, Nate told himself. Sure, it sucked to get stabbed by a psycho, but it hadn't sounded like the doctors were too freaked out, and that had to be a good sign.

"Hi," someone said, and he looked up to see the woman who'd been at the bookstore, the one who'd told him to put pressure on the wound. "How's your friend?"

"Partner," Nate said. It seemed important. "He's my partner. I don't know. In surgery."

"Yeah." She sat down in the chair next to his, her knees turned toward him. She had short, dark hair shot through with white. "Don't worry -- this is a great hospital. I should know; I used to work here. I'm Kate."

"Nate."

"We rhyme." Kate slid back in the chair and crossed her ankles. She was wearing sensible short boots with rubber soles and jeans that were almost the same shade as Nate's.

"You used to work here?" Nate didn't really care, but supposed conversation was a good distraction.

Kate nodded. "For about ten years. In the ER, actually, but I quit when I got pregnant. I've been thinking about going back to work now that my son's in school. What do you do?"

Nate looked down at his hands. "I'm a logger."

"Seriously?" Kate sounded surprised. "And you're with Gabriel Carter? That's... interesting."

"Yeah, I guess it is." There was no guessing about it -- it was weird as hell the way he and Carter had ended up together, and they both knew it. Oil and water weren't supposed to mix.

"Have you been together a long time?"

"Um. Yeah. Well, two years. Give or take." Something was announced over the loudspeaker system, but it didn't mean anything to Nate. "Wait, how do you know Carter?"

"I don't; I mean, not personally. I was at the reading, remember?" Kate smiled a little bit.

"Oh. Right."

"Hey." Kate touched his arm hesitantly. "I'm sure he's going to be okay. Do you need anything? A cup of coffee, some water?"

Shaking his head, Nate said, "No. Thanks. I'm good."

"Well, I'm going to go find someone I know and see if I can get an update. Hang tight and I'll be back." Kate patted his knee and left.

Nate had spent more time than he would have liked in hospitals, what with logging being a fairly dangerous profession. He'd waited while guys got stitched up after accidents with chain saws, while bones were set after falls, while crushing injuries were dealt with after trees or limbs had landed on them. It all sucked, and he'd have thought none of it could be capable of bothering him anymore, but apparently he was wrong. Or maybe it was just that this was different -- Carter being hurt wasn't an accident, it was something someone had done on purpose.

Or maybe it was that it was Carter.

Kate came back with coffee. "Don't feel like you have to drink it if you don't want it," she said as he took the cup. "Word is he's doing fine, and they're closing him up now. His liver wasn't damaged."

Letting out a huge sigh, Nate slouched in his chair. "God. Thanks. For finding out."

"You're welcome. Is there anyone I can call? Someone to be with you?"

"Not really." There were people Nate could call -- Carter's family, for one, and his editor for another, although the bookstore would probably let Edward know what had happened -- but Nate didn't feel like dealing with questions right then, not when he couldn't see Carter with his own eyes and know that he was going to be okay. If that stupid bitch had killed Carter, he'd have torn her limb from limb with his bare hands.

Forty minutes later, Carter was moved to recovery, and a couple of hours after that, they moved him to something called a "step-down" unit, where Nate was finally able to sit with him. The nurse told Nate that Carter was doing well but would be in and out of sleep as the effects of the anesthesia wore off. Nate hitched his chair close to the bed, and even though he knew he probably shouldn't touch Carter, shouldn't disturb him, he couldn't help resting his hand on Carter's.

There was a visit from a police officer. Nate answered his questions as best he could, which wasn't all that well. He didn't even know the woman's name until the cop told him; turned out she had a history of breaking the law, though she'd never actually hurt anyone before. Now that she was in custody, they were making arrangements to have her evaluated for psychiatric disorders; she was so wound up she wasn't even making any sense.

"Is there a number we can reach you at?" the cop asked finally.

"Yeah." Nate was reciting his cell phone number when Carter's hand twitched under his, and he barely noticed the cop leaving, all his attention on Carter.

Carter stirred and made a soft sound like a complaint. His eyes opened slowly.

"Hey," Nate said, linking their fingers together. "Don't try to move, okay?"

There was a long silence -- Nate could see Carter trying to make sense of where he was and what had happened. "peration?"

Nate nodded and hitched the chair even closer. "Yeah, but everything's fine. They sewed you up and in a few days you'll be as good as new."

"Humpty Dumpty," Carter mumbled.

"Uh-huh."

The nurse came back in and checked the machines. "We'll move Mr. Carter to a regular room in the

morning," she said. "Assuming everything continues to look good."

Carter was quiet again, asleep, the regular rise and fall of his chest enough to lull Nate into a state of calm. He was practically dozing when another doctor came in around ten to check the machines, and smothered a yawn against his sleeve.

"Sorry," the doctor said softly. "If you want, I can get someone to bring in a chair that unfolds into a bed. Be more comfortable than sleeping like that."

Nate shook his head. "I'm okay. That nurse said you were gonna move him to a different room in the morning?"

"Yes, I think so." The doctor glanced at the chart he was holding. "Everything looks fine. We could probably even move him now if we needed the bed; it's just easier to leave people where they are sometimes, and he's resting comfortably. No point in messing with that." The doctor was keeping his voice low. "You sure you don't want that fold-out chair?"

"Well..."

The doctor grinned. "I'll have them bring one in for you."

"Thanks."

Shit, it was late. Probably too late to call Carter's folks, which he ought to do if it wouldn't give them a heart attack to have the phone ringing so late. On the other hand, every minute he debated would just make it later.

Nate went downstairs and found an exit door. It was getting cold out, and he tucked one hand into the opposite armpit as he messed with Carter's phone, trying to find the right number in the phone book.

It was Carter's mom that answered the phone, thankfully. Nate wasn't too fond of Russell. "Hello?" She sounded wary.

"Stephanie? It's Nate Tavaras." There was a pause, so he added, "Carter's -- um, Gabriel's..." And then he didn't know what to say, because 'partner' was all well and good to strangers but he felt like an idiot saying it to Carter's mother.

"Yes, Nate. Is everything all right?"

"Um, not exactly. It will be, but... he's sort of in the hospital."

"Oh, no! Is he sick?" Something in her voice made Nate wonder if she was thinking HIV, because God knew that was the only bad thing that could happen to gay people, right?

Nate cleared his throat and tried not to let his irritation slip through. "No, he's not sick. He got stabbed."

"He *what*?" Stephanie sounded horrified, and Nate could hear Russell saying something to her in the background, and her answering. "How badly is he hurt, Nate?"

"Well, you know, it wasn't good, but he's going to be okay. I just figured you'd want to know." Which was different from thinking Carter would want them to know, but Nate was pretty sure no matter how much Carter might have protested, deep down, he would have felt like they deserved a phone call. And probably a phone call from someone better at this than Nate.

"Where are you? I thought he was in the middle of some kind of book tour or something."

"Yeah, he is. We are. We're in Eugene. Scott didn't tell you?" Not that it should have been a surprise he wouldn't.

"No. Is -- is there anything you need? Should we come? We could probably get there within..." Stephanie was thinking, calculating. "I don't know, by the middle of the day tomorrow."

The thought of them turning up at the hospital made Nate's skin crawl. "No, that's okay. We're fine. I just wanted to let you know what was happening. I'll have Carter -- Gabriel -- give you a call tomorrow, all right?"

"All right. Thank you for calling, Nate."

"Yeah. Bye." It was a relief to hang up, and by the time Nate got back upstairs, Carter was awake again. Or sort of awake, at least, his eyes at half-mast and his thumb restlessly brushing against his index finger in a slow by steady rhythm. His glasses were still over on the little table on the far side of the bed; without them, he looked different, vulnerable. "Hey," Nate said.

"Woke up 'n you weren't here," Carter said.

"Yeah, sorry." Nate sat down and picked up Carter's hand, then settled it into the cradle of his own; for whatever reason, he couldn't bring himself to rest his own hand on top of Carter's. "I was calling your folks."

"My parents?" Carter's eyes closed for a long ten seconds or so, then opened again. "Time is it?"

"A little after ten," Nate said, then added, "At night."

"Mmm." Carter inhaled through his teeth, like it took a lot of effort and he had to concentrate. "If I died - _"

"Don't," Nate said.

"Said 'if,'" Carter told him. His hand turned in Nate's, littlest finger pressing against Nate's thin, sensitive life line. Or heart line, or whatever it was. Carter would know, even if Nate didn't. "You make all the decisions. Don't... let them. Want you to do it."

"I will," Nate said. "Would. Don't worry about it."

"Can't help it," Carter said pitifully. He tried to lift his other hand, the one with the IV line in it, up toward his face, winced and let it fall back down beside him.

"You need something?" Nate asked. He stood up, leaning over the bed, looking for whatever it was that was bothering Carter, but couldn't see anything.

"You," Carter said. "Need you."

"You got me," Nate told him, and bent to press his lips lightly to Carter's. "I'm right here. You got me."

Nate didn't get much sleep, not even after they brought the chair that unfolded into a bed. He was too tall, for one, so his feet hung over the edge. And for another, nurses were coming in and out of the room all night, checking the machines Carter was hooked up to. An hour before the sun rose, he'd already given up and was sitting on the windowsill with his back against the cool glass. He was thinking about going to get some coffee, but he didn't want Carter to wake up alone again so he kept putting it off. Finally, Carter woke up when one of the nurses was poking at him, stirring and then grumbling.

"Good morning, Mr. Carter," the nurse said cheerful. "I'm Vanessa, I'll be your nurse this shift. You're going to get some clear liquids for breakfast, and then we'll get you up and walking a little bit."

"Walking?" Nate said. "So soon?"

"It's a good idea to get back on your feet as soon as possible after surgery," Vanessa said. "And he'll feel a lot more comfortable without this catheter."

"Yes, please," Carter said. "Can I have tea?"

"One cup," Vanessa agreed. "They'll bring your tray soon. You might want to go down to the cafeteria and grab something before the good stuff's gone." This last was directed at Nate.

"There's good stuff?" he asked.

"Comparatively," she said.

Nate snorted. "Compared to what?"

"I'm not sure you really want to know." Vanessa checked one of the machines and wrote something down. "The muffins come from a place up the street. They're pretty good."

"Pretty good, or just edible?"

"You," Vanessa said, giving him a stern look, "are a troublemaker. He is, isn't he?" she asked Carter.

"Mhmm. All the way."

"Well, fine," Nate said. "If you two are ganging up on me, I'm leaving." He patted Carter's knee under the blanket. "Be back in a few. You want me to leave your phone?" It was still in his pocket.

Carter shook his head. "No one I want to talk to."

Nate went down to the cafeteria and got himself the biggest cup of coffee they had, and a blueberry muffin that was already gone by the time he got back up to where Carter had been. 'Had been' being the operative words, since in the fifteen minutes he'd been gone, Carter had been moved. It took another ten minutes to find him -- on a completely different floor.

"There you are," Nate said, walking into the new room.

"I told them you'd be back and wonder where I'd gone," Carter said, sighing. Someone had given him his glasses, and he looked more like himself even though he was still pretty pale. "Sorry."

"Not your fault. I miss anything else?"

"The glamorous removal of my catheter?" Carter shifted uncomfortably on the bed and stifled a pained sound.

The new room didn't have any chairs, so Nate had to set his coffee down and go grab one from the hallway. He half expected someone to tell him he couldn't take it, but no one seemed to paying any attention, which was just fine with him.

"What'd my parents say?" Carter asked him as he sat down.

Nate blinked and took a sip of his coffee. It was already darned close to cold. "Didn't know if you'd remember that."

"A lot's pretty hazy, but it'd take more than painkillers to make me forget something like that."

"It was just your mom I talked to. She wanted to know if they should come up, but I said no."

"Thanks for that much, at least," Carter said.

"Told her you'd call today."

Carter grimaced. "I take it back."

"You love your mom," Nate said.

"Yeah. I just don't like her very much." Carter reached down and adjusted himself through the covers. "Feels like someone shoved a bunch of sand up inside my dick," he said, just as Vanessa came in.

"It will, for a day or so," she told him, not seeming disturbed in the slightest, although the other nurse who was following her looked a little taken aback. "Now, let's get you up and to the bathroom."

"I don't have to go," Carter said.

Vanessa drew back the covers. "Doesn't matter; you have to try anyway."

Setting his cup down, Nate stayed where he was. There wasn't enough room around the bed where Vanessa was urging Carter to swing his legs down onto the floor; he'd just be in the way, and he should trust Vanessa to be able to do her job.

"Now, just take it slow, and if you start to feel light-headed, let us know right away, okay?" Vanessa said.

With one nurse on either side of him, Carter shuffled his way to the bathroom, giving Nate more than a few glimpses of his bare ass as he went. Much as Nate wanted to stay where he was and act casual about it, he couldn't; he got up and followed, loitering just outside the bathroom as Carter took the shortest piss in history, breathing painfully through his teeth as he did.

"Perfectly normal," Vanessa said. "The catheter'll do it every time."

"Well, at least everything still works," Carter said.

"It'll resolve itself very quickly," Vanessa assured him as they got him back to bed, Nate standing awkwardly at the foot of it, waiting. "There, now. They'll be in with your breakfast any time, and otherwise all you need to do is take it easy."

"Sounds good," Carter said, groaning as he lay down. "I'll just stay right here. Maybe forever."

In Nate's pocket, Carter's phone started its annoying fall of notes. "You want it?" Nate said, pulling it out, but Carter shook his head, lips pressed tightly together as he tried to relax, so Nate answered it himself. "Hello?"

"Gabe? It's Scott."

"It's Nate."

"Oh," Scott said. "Okay. My mom called this morning and told me Gabe got hurt, then I checked the news and it's all over the place. What the hell happened?"

"The news didn't say?" Nate asked.

"It said some crazy lady stabbed him."

"Well, yeah, pretty much," Nate said. "But don't worry -- he's gonna be fine." He added that last in the

hopes it'd get under Scott's skin.

Scott didn't say anything for a few seconds, then cleared his throat. "Is he going to be there for a while?"

"He got *stabbed*," Nate said. "He had surgery. What do you think?"

"I mean, they're not transferring him somewhere else or anything?"

Nate sighed. "No. He'll be here. We both will." No one had said anything definitive about how long they'd keep Carter in the hospital, but he was pretty sure it was going to be another day or two at least. Scott was probably planning on sending flowers or something.

"Okay. Tell him I'll be there later this afternoon." Scott hung up.

"That was different," Nate said, shutting the phone.

"My dad?" Carter asked.

"No, your brother."

Carter looked as surprised as Nate felt. "Seriously?"

"Yeah. Says he's coming up this afternoon."

"I hope you love me," Carter said, and Nate frowned. "Because there's no way I'm going to survive a visit with my brother unless you're willing to steal some of the really good painkillers for me."

"I'll call him back and tell him not to come if you want me to," Nate said. Truth be told, the thought of it filled with a dark kind of satisfaction, and it wasn't like he wanted to see Scott again. The other night had been more than enough.

Carter shut his eyes and let his head tip back on the pillow. "I don't know."

"Well, you'd better figure it out in the next couple of hours, or it'll be too late to stop him." Nate sat down in his chair again and drank the rest of his cold coffee.

"Breakfast!" An older woman wearing a mint green apron came in with a tray and put it on Carter's table-on-wheels.

"Let me guess," Carter said wearily. "Tea and jello?"

"And chicken broth," she said.

"I'm a vegetarian," Carter told her.

"Well, dear, it's just broth. There's not actually any chicken in it."

"Right, because chicken broth is made with faux chicken," Carter said. "The jello is made with gelatin."

"And no meat," the woman said.

"Gelatin comes from animal bones," Carter said, shoving the wheeled table away from the bed.

Nate was torn between letting the two of them fight it out and dealing with it himself. Carter's pale face and glittering eyes made the decision for him. "Look, that's fine," Nate said to the woman. "Just leave it and we'll deal with it, okay?"

She seemed relieved and beat a hasty retreat, and Nate pulled the table out of the way.

"Just tell me what you want and I'll go get it," he said.

Carter sighed and shook his head. "It doesn't matter. I'm not even hungry."

"Fine."

The look Carter gave him was a suspicious one. "What do you mean, fine?"

"I mean fine. Eat, don't eat, whatever." The temptation to add 'it's your funeral' was there, but a little too close for comfort considering the night before. Nate sat down and propped a heel on the frame of Carter's bed, closed his eyes, and waited.

"I guess I could drink the tea," Carter said after a minute.

"Yeah?" Nate got up slowly, moved the broth and jello cups onto the window sill where Carter wouldn't have to look at them, then wheeled the table back over so Carter could reach the tea.

Carter held the cup but didn't sip from it, just wrapped his hands around it like he wanted to warm them. "I just," he said. "I want." He sounded lost and tired and sad. Nate wished there was something he could do to make it better for him. "When do you think I can get out of here?"

"I have no idea," Nate said honestly. "Not soon enough. I could go get you some magazines or something. A book?"

Wincing, Carter shook his head. "No books. God, I hope this hasn't ruined me forever."

"Don't be stupid," Nate told him.

The next time a nurse came in to do whatever nurses did to people who'd just had surgery, Nate said, "I'm going out for a while -- I'll be back. Call me if you need anything."

The car was still back at the bookstore parking lot, and he had no idea where that was, so he had no choice but to walk. A quick check with a passer-by pointed him in the right direction for a local mega-

mart store, where he shopped randomly, distracted, walking up and down the aisles tossing things into the cart. He got an assortment of magazines, some pudding cups and vegetarian vegetable soup -- it wasn't pureed, but he figured the kitchen could handle that part -- and, in the electronics department, a portable DVD player and a handful of DVDs. At least that would give them something to do while they waited for Carter to get out of the hospital, he figured.

Nate paid for his purchases, not thinking until he'd stepped outside onto the sidewalk about how he'd have to walk back toting all this shit. Any other time, he might have changed his mind and returned the stuff, but the thought of Carter lying back there on a hospital bed, face pale, made him grit his teeth and start walking.

A doctor was in the room when he got back, the curtain half pulled around Carter's bed. Nate went quietly over to the corner and set the bags down next to a chair.

"You're back," Carter said. His voice was weak and shaky.

"Yeah. How you doing?"

"Okay."

The doctor had peeled back the bandage on Carter's side and was examining the wound. "Looks good," he announced. "Want to see?"

Nate didn't, not particularly, but figured he'd sound like a wuss if he said so. He moved closer to the bed and looked -- dark stitches across flesh that should have been smooth and unmarred, deep bruising. He had a sudden, visceral memory of what Carter's blood had felt like on his skin, hot and sticky, and the smell... Nate's stomach did a quick roll, and he bolted for the bathroom.

He threw up twice, hands shaking as they gripped the bowl, sweat beading along his hairline despite the coolness of the room. Wiping the back of a hand across his mouth, Nate grimaced and stood up, wishing the sink looked strong enough to support his weight as he rinsed and spat a couple of times.

"You okay?" It was the doctor, standing in the doorway.

"Fine," Nate said shortly. "I do this every day around this time. It's part of my routine."

The doctor smiled. "It's not an uncommon reaction."

Yeah, well, Nate didn't like to think of himself as a common guy.

"Let the nurses know if you need anything," the doctor continued, and nodded at Carter as he started for the hallway. "I'll be in later to check on you again."

"Thanks," Carter said, but he was looking at Nate worriedly. He was going to say something, Nate just *knew* he was, and then Nate was going to snap at him, which wouldn't be fair, and... "What'd you get?" Carter asked, gesturing at the bags.

Relief and affection rushed over Nate. "DVD player," he said. "Thought maybe some movies would help pass the time." He went over, legs still shaky, and rustled through the bags until he found the DVDs, which had slipped down underneath the food. "Oh, and this." He held up a four-pack of chocolate pudding and Carter grinned.

"Man, I love you. Hand it over."

"Should check with the nurses first," Nate said, but gave Carter the pudding anyway and set the DVDs on the tray next to the bed before taking out the DVD player box and starting to open it up. By the time he got the thing out of the box and set up, Carter had eaten a pudding and opened the "Blue Planet" DVD set.

They got the first DVD playing, Nate's chair pulled up next to the bed. As the opening music started, Carter reached out and stroked a hand along the back of Nate's neck. "You okay?" Carter asked gently, and Nate said, "Yeah," and laid his head down on Carter's shoulder, closing his eyes.

Mid-afternoon, when Carter was sleeping and Nate was pretending to read one of the magazines he'd bought, there was a soft knock at the door. Even though he didn't know who it was, Nate stood up, because the nurses and doctors pretty much never knocked -- so far, at least. He didn't say anything, though, because he didn't want to wake up Carter, who probably needed the sleep.

The door, which technically wasn't shut, swung open. Scott was standing there, looking -- well, Nate wasn't sure how he looked. He didn't know the guy well enough, and didn't want to. Confused, irritated, worried? Maybe.

Scott looked at Carter, eyes closed but wearing his glasses, on the bed. "How is he?" he whispered.

Standing up, Nate started toward the door. They could talk in the hallway, if talking was necessary. Hopefully, punching the guy in the face wouldn't be necessary, although at least they were in a hospital if he did. "He's okay. They think they'll be able to release him in a couple of days, but I don't know if he'll be able to drive all the way home once he gets out of here. Maybe we'll get a hotel room or something." Weary, he rubbed a hand over his face, not caring how he looked in front of this asshole. "Anyway, did you want something?"

"I wanted to see him," Scott said.

"Well, if it's just for more of the same you gave him the other night, you can forget it." Nate kept his voice low, but forceful, wanting to get his point across.

Scott flushed and glanced away. "No. Not more of the same. That was -- I had a bad week at work, which I realize is no excuse. I shouldn't have said the things I did."

"If they're what you're thinking, it's probably better you said them." Nate glanced back at Carter, who

was still sleeping peacefully. "No point in pretending you approve, right? Who would that benefit?"

"He's my brother," Scott said softly, looking ashamed. "I have to... I don't know, learn to approve, I guess."

"Yeah, well, learn quick," Nate told him. "Because I'm not going to watch you hurt him again. He's a good person. He deserves better."

"I know. You're right."

Nate glanced back again, saw Carter stirring. "Come on, if you're going to," he said grudgingly to Scott, who followed him into the room. "Hey," Nate said when Carter opened his eyes. "Look who's here."

Blinking, Carter nodded, wary. "Hi."

"Hi," Scott said, and reached to touch Carter's shoulder, then shied away. Nate glared at him, and he managed to pat Carter's arm, instead, where it was covered by the sheet. "I wanted to see if you were okay."

"You could have called," Carter said, still looking like he thought he was going to get kicked when he was down.

Scott shook his head. "Not the same. And I needed to -- I wanted to apologize. For the other night. I know I was out of line, and I... that's not really how I feel." He smiled uncertainly. "You're the only brother I've got, right?"

"That doesn't mean we have to like each other," Carter said, his voice soft. "It doesn't mean we have to have a relationship. We don't."

"I want us to," Scott said. "I mean, if you do. I promise I'll do my best to set aside my asshole tendencies."

Carter smiled, a genuine smile. "Okay. I mean, yes. I know it'd make Mom happy."

"Yeah," Scott agreed. "But what -- what about you?"

"You mean, will it make me happy?"

Scott nodded.

"Yeah," Carter said. "Yeah, I think it would." He lifted his hand free of the sheet and grasped Scott's, hung on.

Not knowing how he felt about any of this, Nate kept quiet. The two brothers talked for a while, cautiously, still feeling each other out, until Scott checked his watch and winced.

"I've got to get going," he said. "I promised work I'd try to get a few hours tonight -- we've got a project due Monday and we're behind schedule."

"Well... thanks for coming," Carter said. He looked more relaxed, more peaceful, than he had before. It made Nate want to be nice to Scott, so he walked him to the door and shook his hand.

"I'll call tomorrow," Scott said, and was gone.

Carter seemed exhausted after that, and slept until almost dinnertime. While he was sleeping, Nate went down to the nurse's station and had a serious discussion with the nurse in charge of the shift, explaining about Carter being a vegetarian and making it clear that him getting another crap meal was unacceptable. He wasn't sure if it'd worked until someone delivered Carter's tray.

"Oh, man, they finally got a clue," Carter said, yawning and picking up his spoon. His tray held what looked like vanilla pudding, some thick, blended soup that might have been split pea and had a 'vegetarian' sticker attached to the plastic lid, and a dish of applesauce that hopefully had raspberry puree in it and not some weird kind of red food coloring.

Nate sat down, hitching his chair a little closer to the bed, not that there was much closer to get. "Maybe the people in the kitchen this morning were temps or something," he suggested.

"I hope they don't come back," Carter said fervently, and fell upon his meal. It was gone in ten minutes and he leaned back on the pillows, one hand resting on his stomach on the good side.

"You okay?" Nate asked, wondering if he was hurting.

Carter closed his eyes and nodded slightly. "Yeah." But when he opened his eyes again, Nate could see he was starting to get that glassy look. Without saying anything else, he went back out to the nurse's station and asked if Carter was due for pain meds any time soon.

A blonde nurse checked a chart. "Five minutes ago," she said. "You are on top of things, aren't you?"

"I just know him," Nate said, and went back to the room and held Carter's hand until he'd had his drugs and slipped off to sleep.

Eight weeks later, things were finally pretty much back to normal. It felt like forever to Nate, who was sexually frustrated and still having a hard time relaxing when he went anywhere with Carter. The police had investigated thoroughly, and they had no reason to think the woman who'd attacked Carter had been working with anyone else -- she was just an isolated nut. Even knowing that, Nate found himself eying strangers suspiciously at the supermarket and watching people who walked near the truck when Carter was in the passenger seat at the gas station.

Jesus. He needed to get a grip.

"What do you want for dinner?" Carter asked as he got back behind the wheel and pulled away from the pump.

"I don't know," Nate said. "What about that roasted casserole thing?"

Carter frowned and pushed his glasses back up his nose. "With the potatoes and carrots?"

"Yeah, that one. It's not bad."

"Not bad?" Carter said, laughing. "That's high praise."

"Highest you're gonna get until you start making real food," Nate grumbled, but it wasn't actually a complaint.

He helped slice potatoes when they got home, leaving the onions to Carter, who was particular about how they were cut up. The casserole baked for about an hour, the rich roasted smell of it filling the house. "Want a beer?" Carter asked just before they sat down to eat.

"Sure." Nate watched as Carter moved easily from the table to the fridge. He'd commented a couple of days before that he felt fully healed, but Nate could see how red his scar still was. As much as he missed sex, there was no way he was going to chance hurting Carter. Just the thought of it made his stomach tighten unpleasantly.

He had a second beer as he was loading the dishwasher, then went to watch TV with Carter, who was into some sitcom starring the kid who'd played Doogie Howser years ago. Nate didn't pay that much attention -- he was distracted by the press of Carter's thigh to his, and grateful they were both wearing long pants because if they'd been in shorts he didn't think he'd have been able to keep his self-control.

"What's with you?" Carter asked, turning to look at him, and Nate frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"You're all... tense."

Nate glanced down at himself and realized his hand was curled into a fist and, to his surprise, that he was hard. "Nothing," he said shortly.

"Nothing? You've got to be kidding me. What about this?" Carter stroked his hand over Nate's denim-clad erection and Nate groaned.

"Cut it out," he snapped, and got up, heading for the kitchen and thinking about another beer. If he got drunk enough, he'd stop thinking about sex, about sliding his cock into Carter's sweet ass and fucking him--

"You're being a jerk," Carter said, following him into the kitchen. "And an idiot."

"You know, I just like you more and more all the time," Nate said sarcastically, leaning back against the counter and crossing his arms over his chest.

He found out almost immediately that this had been a mistake as far as positions went -- Carter stepped in close and put a hand on the counter to either side of Nate's hips, effectively trapping him. Unless Nate was willing to push him away, which he wasn't; that was why it was so effective. "We can have sex, you know," Carter said to the underside of Nate's jaw. "I asked the doctor. He said it was fine."

"He'd probably love it if you ripped open your side and had to have more surgery," Nate said tightly.

Carter rolled his eyes. "Give me a break. Why are you being so stubborn about this? I know you want to." He pressed forward, rubbing his own erect cock against Nate's. Nate held back a groan. "We can be careful, if it'll make you feel better. Just let me suck you off."

"No," Nate said.

"Please?" Carter shifted so his leg trapped Nate's right one and used his left hand to unfasten Nate's pants.

"Don't," Nate said, but he sounded less than convincing even to himself.

Carter slid his hand inside Nate's underwear and grabbed hold of his cock. "Please? I want you. I want you so much."

Nate groaned, his cock twitching in Carter's grip. He knew when he was beat. "Okay, fine," he muttered. "But not here. You should be lying down, if we're going to--"

"Fuck?" Carter said, and just the sound of it made Nate groan again. They shouldn't, he shouldn't, but he wanted to, so badly.

"We're not going to fuck," Nate said. He let Carter lead him to the bedroom, where the covers were still tangled from that morning -- they rarely made the bed unless they were changing the sheets. "Take off your clothes."

"You're such a romantic." Carter pulled his T-shirt off over his head easily, not wincing or moving like he was afraid it would hurt. By the time he'd taken off his pants, Nate was naked and sitting on the bed, aching to touch all that bare skin. Carter lay down and reached for him, hand skimming Nate's chest and hip. "Kiss me."

They'd barely kissed since Carter'd been hurt -- Nate never would have imagined he'd miss it so much, but he had. Now, hitched up onto one elbow, he kissed Carter slowly, parting Carter's lips with his tongue and slicking inside his mouth. Carter made an eager sound and wrapped an arm around Nate's waist. "No," Nate said, pulling his mouth away. "You'll hurt yourself."

"I won't," Carter said. "I'm fine. I need this, Nate."

"Then stay still," Nate said severely, realizing how this could work, "and let me give it to you."

Carter's eyes were wide behind his glasses; Nate took them off his face and set them on the bedside table. "Please," Carter said, though he obeyed and stayed still. "Please, Nate."

"Shhh," Nate said, and kissed him again. "Let me." He kissed his way down Carter's body, lingering at his nipples until they were small and peaked and Carter was gasping. "Want me to suck you?"

"Yes. Yes." Carter inhaled shakily as Nate took him into his mouth. "God, Nate. It's been too long, I can't--"

"Don't hold back," Nate murmured against the head of Carter's dick, hand stroking the shaft. "Come whenever you want."

He went to work, taking Carter in deep, then focusing on the tip, which always made Carter whimper and tremble and come. This time, though, there was whimpering and trembling, but no coming. Not that Nate wasn't enjoying himself, but it was making him think that maybe Carter wasn't as ready for this as he'd insisted.

Pulling back, he asked, "You okay?"

Carter shivered and swallowed. "Yeah, I just -- can't you fuck me? Please, Nate? I need -- I think I need you inside me."

Giving himself time to think, Nate licked Carter's dick and let his eyes travel to the scar on Carter's side. It was still red, still angry-looking, but maybe Carter could take it, if they were careful. "You can't move, if we do."

"Okay," Carter agreed eagerly. "No moving, I swear."

Nate was already reaching for the lube, fumbling with the bottle in his sudden, desperate need to get inside Carter. This was a recipe for disaster, them trying this for the first time when he wanted like this, but he'd be careful. Careful.

He slid a slick finger inside Carter's ass, watching Carter's face for signs of pain. "God, just do it," Carter muttered. "Come on."

"I don't want to put too much weight on you," Nate said. He grabbed a pillow and got Carter to lift up so he could push it beneath him.

"I'm not going to *break*," Carter said irritably. "Just fuck me already."

Trying to ignore Carter's words, Nate lined himself up and pushed inside, slow, cautious. Carter threw his head back and made a long, low sound, spreading his thighs wider and grabbing at Nate's ass. "You're not... supposed to move," Nate gasped.

"Can't help it," Carter said, just as breathless. "If I can't move, you move."

There was no way in a million years Nate could have kept from moving. He already was, even though he'd told himself he'd wait, because it felt so good to have Carter tight and hot around him, Carter's face suffused with pleasure instead of pain. God, this wasn't going to last long. He thrust in again, not going as deep as he might have liked, angling for Carter's prostate.

Carter cried out and came, pulsing hard and shaking like a leaf. That was all it took to make Nate come, too, the orgasm squeezed out of him by the force of Carter's. His arms trembled with the effort of not letting himself drop down onto Carter. "Jesus," he said finally, when it had passed. "You okay?"

Smiling, Carter stretched beneath him. "Are you kidding? I'm great."

Nate was relieved; he pulled out carefully, wincing as his sensitive cock slipped free. Then he did what he'd wanted to do minutes before and collapsed down onto the bed beside Carter, letting all his muscles relax. "You sure?" He reached out to touch Carter's scar, brushing his fingertips over it.

"Yes, I'm *fine*," Carter said, rolling onto his side and giving Nate a look. "Seriously, I've been fine for two weeks. I don't get why you were so weird about having sex again."

Irritated, Nate sat up. "You don't?"

"Not really."

"You know, for a smart guy, you can be really fucking stupid," Nate snapped. He wanted to get up and storm out of the room, but he knew Carter would just follow him, so what was the point?

Carter sighed. "Just tell me, then, if I'm so stupid."

"You almost died," Nate said savagely. Thinking about it made him want to break things; he couldn't see how talking about it wouldn't be worse. "And now you want me to fuck you like nothing happened?"

"Well, I want you to fuck me like I didn't actually die," Carter said. He held his hands out at his sides. "See? Right here. Not dead!"

"Yeah, but you could have been," Nate snarled. "And then what the fuck would I have done? How would I have--" He realized with horror what he was about to say and stopped himself at the last second. Couldn't look at Carter, though, in case Carter realized, too. In case Carter was looking at him with pity or something worse, not that Nate could think what that might be.

"I knew I should have filled out that will," Carter said ruefully, and his tone of voice, tinged with amusement, was what made Nate's head swivel around to look at him. "Oh, and in case there was any question, you're the idiot."

Nate swallowed around the huge lump in his throat. "Fuck you." It didn't have the right kind of bite to it.

"As often as possible. Come here." Carter patted the mattress, and Nate went, hating himself and loving Carter at the same time. "I know," Carter said, when Nate was pressed against him, mouth on Carter's shoulder. "You don't have to say it. It's okay that you don't."

"Sometimes I do," Nate pointed out. He knew he had at least once.

"It's okay," Carter said, petting his hair in a way Nate shouldn't have allowed, but he was just... he was tired. "It's not important. I know; that's what matters."

Nate sighed and closed his eyes. "Why do you have to be so understanding all the time?"

"One of us has to be, or we'd have killed each other by now," Carter said, and Nate draped his arm across Carter's chest.

"Yeah, well, it's annoying."

"I'm sure you think so."

"I do," Nate said.

"Closest I'm ever going to hear."

"Damn straight."

And Carter laughed. "Aw, why would you want to damn the straight? They're just trying to get by like the rest of us."

"It's easier for them," Nate said, then hesitated. "I wish..."

"I know," Carter said. He sighed and kissed Nate's forehead where his hairline was receding. "I know. But we're good, right?"

"Yeah," Nate said, and relaxed, because Carter was there with him, breathing, heart beating, whole. Sure, a little scarred up, a little less perfect, but Nate didn't care about any of that. "We're good."

End.

Back Cut

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