

Man of Honor

Maria
Albert



HOME. Safe. Dillon. The words repeated over and over in Detective Gabriel D'Angelo's brain, a mantra of comfort, as he rested his forehead on the steering wheel of his silver pickup in the parking lot behind his apartment building. Angel almost hadn't made it. He'd miraculously survived the three-month deep-cover assignment from hell—three months that had somehow stretched to six—in the Mexican drug cartel that had been working its way up California and made the mistake of thinking they could set up shop here in Hilldale like they had in San Diego and LA. Survived almost unscratched, until everything went wrong.

The bust had gone sour at the last moment. The shit had hit the fan, the bullets flew, half their suspects had ended up dead or wounded, and Angel himself had barely made it out of there alive. Not unscathed, but near enough. Still, his arm burned like a son of a bitch, now that the shot of painkiller they'd given him had worn off, while he was being debriefed. Eight freaking hours, on top of the four he'd spent at the hospital. He wasn't done with the debriefing either, not by a long shot, but the captain had seen he was completely burnt out, used up, running on fumes, when Angel had slipped into Spanish without realizing it. He'd spoken far more Spanish than English these past six months. He might look like an Anglo, with his bristle-blond hair and piercing blue eyes, but he spoke like a native. He'd

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grown up on a ranch in Tolerance, Texas, right on the border of Mexico.

With a curse, Angel yanked his thoughts away from those memories, for sanity's sake. He'd never have gotten that close to dredging up the past if he weren't half out of his mind with exhaustion. Maybe more than half. Angel had had less than four hours' sleep in the past ninety-six hours, and during that time had been flying an adrenaline high and falling in the crash at least a dozen times, he'd been caught on the wrong side of the bust. Smack dab in that free-for-all, the shootout, he'd been shot, for Christ's sake! Just the muscle of his bicep, nothing too severe, no nerve or bone damage, thank God, but still. Then, like an idiot, he hadn't accepted the ride he'd been offered, and nearly died a second time.

He'd wanted to come home in his own truck, on his own terms. He'd needed to. It was part of the ritual, putting the deep-cover assignment behind him, changing back from the twisted, treacherous, coldhearted, vicious bastard he'd been posing as to the man he really was. It was more than that. He was coming out of cop mode, too, morphing from someone who could betray everyone around him in the name of the job to someone who was trusted but also worthy of that trust. One of the good guys. A man of honor. The man Dillon loved. Hopefully.

Six months. God! They'd been together less than three when he got the assignment. Six months without a word, a touch between them. Dillon could be dead for all.... Angel fought down the panic that thought brought. Dillon wasn't

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dead. Angel knew he wasn't. He'd had some very limited contact while he was on the inside of the operation, his partner on this assignment, his backup, Juanita Esperanza. She'd posed as his on-again, off-again girlfriend so the cartel wouldn't get suspicious that he never got laid. She'd been his link to the good things, his real life, giving him word that Dillon was okay. Hell, the kid was thriving, in his job in the Surveillance Unit, in his classes at school. The kid didn't need him anymore. He could....

Angel shook his head at his stupidity. Dillon loved him. Christ, the kid all but worshipped him. It was scary sometimes, knowing how much Dillon needed him. And he'd left Dillon alone to fend for himself, abandoned him, just like his father had when he threw him out onto the streets last year, fresh out of high school, just like his ex-boyfriend Connor had when he saw Dillon was broke, that the gravy train had dried up. No. No, it wasn't like that. Angel hadn't left him. It was his job. Dillon knew that, accepted it. It wasn't his fault he was Dillon's whole world. Dillon had lost all his so-called friends when he came out, when he was thrown out of his father's house, his neighborhood, his social circle. Angel kept encouraging Dillon to make new friends, at work, but especially at school, kids his own age, ones he had something in common with. Dillon couldn't spend all his time hanging out with some beaten-up bruiser of a cop twice his age.

God, he was tired. His mind was whirling in circles—no, spirals, bad ones, like drilling into an oil well, inky black viscous gunk. No, not oil. No, he wasn't going to think of the

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oil rig he'd worked on that summer when he was eighteen, or how the pain in his damn arm felt too much like that rabid coyote bite he'd gotten when he was sixteen, not fucking thinking of anything that reminded him of Texas, of the ranch, of home. Of family, his other family, the one Dillon didn't even know about. What was left of it. He swallowed hard, forcing a sudden flood of tears from his eyes. Christ, he hadn't cried since... no! No, he wouldn't go there.

Exhaustion had weakened all his emotional walls to a scary degree and everything was roiling right at the surface. Dillon was his family now, the only family he needed, no matter what long-lost faces had flashed in front of his mind's eye when the bullets were flying, when he was hit, when he thought he might die.

Angel forced himself away from the one near-death experience to the slightly more recent one. He'd fallen asleep at the wheel on the way home. Out cold. He'd jerked back awake to the blare of the horn from the oncoming taxi and swerved his truck back over the double yellow line into his own lane just in time. Although the other driver had corrected too, he probably wouldn't have hit him. Angel had stopped, shaking wildly. He'd nearly thrown up in the cab of his truck afterward; he'd barely pulled over in time to vomit on the asphalt instead. Now he was crashing again, the adrenaline surge long since spent, leaving him weak and shaky and way too far past exhausted. He just wanted to crawl into his own bed, wrap his arms around Dillon, and sleep for a week. He hadn't seen the kid in six months and all he wanted to do was sleep. Damn, he was getting old. He

hadn't had company other than his own hand in months, and all he could think about was sleeping? And why the hell was he still in his truck, when he was home?

Angel opened the door and dragged himself out of the truck, trudging to the building entrance. He forced himself not to lean back against the elevator wall and close his eyes like he ached to. He'd fall asleep on his feet. They'd find him curled up on the floor of the elevator. He walked down the hall to an achingly familiar door. He caressed it like it was Dillon's face. Home. Safe. Dillon. Thank God. He let himself in, creeping through the living room silently, not bothering to turn on the light, letting the ambient light from the street light his way. It was just after five in the morning, not yet dawn. He didn't want to wake Dillon up, not when he didn't have the strength to wake him up properly. Besides, Dillon might have the early shift, although Angel was hoping he could talk him into calling in sick. But he might have classes too. Was it Thursday? No, it would be Friday, now. Thursday was last night; it was morning. Shit, was it even still the summer semester, or had the fall semester started? Angel couldn't remember what Juanita had told him; he couldn't even think anymore.

Angel ghosted to the bedroom doorway and entered, crossing the bedroom soundlessly too. He stood by the bed for just a moment, inhaling deeply, soaking in the all but forgotten scents of home, staring at the blanket-shrouded form. No more sleeping alone with one eye open, his gun under his pillow. No more lies; no more drugs and filth and violence. *Home, safe, home, safe*, the voice in his head

repeated, even as a second voice struck up the cadence *Dillon, Dillon, Dillon*. Work was all about danger and deceit, lies and treachery. Dillon was safe and sweet, honest and innocent, pure. This had been his toughest assignment ever. Dillon was his anchor now. He was what had kept him connected, sane, grounded.

Angel put his holstered Glock down gently on the nightstand next to his side of the bed, along with his cell phone, wallet and ID case, keys and the prescription bottle of Percocet they'd given him at the hospital, as if he'd ever go near a potentially addictive drug after where he'd been the past six months. He toed off his shoes, not even having the strength to undress. He'd showered at the station, changed into clean clothes. He hadn't shaved off the perpetual three-day stubble that had been part of his cover, and his hair had grown way out of the familiar buzz cut, so that he barely recognized himself when he'd looked in the mirror, especially when he'd seen the cold, hard eyes, the harsh lines of six months of stress on his face, and four days of exhaustion. Dillon would be in for a shock in the morning, waking up with a strange man in his bed.

Angel climbed in to bed next to Dillon almost shyly. The familiar scent of Dillon's baby shampoo, his body wash was stronger on the bed, much stronger. Relaxing for the first time in months, Angel dug his face into the soft, sweet hair, wrapping his arms around Dillon's slender body. Wrong. The body felt wrong. Angel's seeking hand cupped a soft, full breast, recoiling in shock even as the figure snapped awake and jerked violently, yelped and elbowed him viciously in the

stomach. The strange woman lying in their bed scrambled away from him and started screaming loudly enough to wake the dead. A slender foot lashed out, catching him in the jaw, snapping his head back, and a second heel slammed into his bandaged arm.

Angel roared in pain and confusion and betrayal. Flickering synapses sparked violently to life as he scrambled for the lamp, falling headlong off the bed. The overhead bedroom light flared on seemingly of its own accord. “Mary!” a frantic voice called. Dillon, Dillon’s voice. But who the fuck was Mary, and what the hell was she doing in their bed?!

Angel stumbled to his feet, wild eyes scanning the room frantically, and then he froze, gaping. Dillon was across the bed from him, hugging a beautiful woman protectively. They were both half-naked. Angel saw a tumble of blond hair contrasting sharply against Dillon’s chocolate curls, eyes much lighter than Dillon’s, more gray than green. She had remarkably long legs for someone who was slightly more petite than Dillon. Angel could see every inch of those creamy legs, peeking out from under the shirt of Dillon’s green silk pajamas. The ones Angel had bought Dillon as one of his presents for Valentine’s Day, the ones that matched Dillon’s eyes, the ones Dillon, bare-chested, was currently wearing only the bottoms of.

A rage so deep it horrified him grabbed Angel in a stranglehold. A tiny, rational voice tried to tell him that he wasn’t really seeing what he thought he was, that there was a reasonable explanation why Dillon would be half-naked, holding someone else in their bedroom. It tried to convince

him Dillon would never betray him like this, that if he did, it sure as hell wouldn't be with a woman, but his eyes were telling him different. He'd been encouraging the kid to make some friends his own age, had been worried that Dillon was all work and no play. Well, it looked like the kid had been playing plenty while Angel was gone.

"Angel?" Dillon asked in shock and sudden recognition. "Oh my God, you're here!" Angel saw the bright flashes of emotion cross Dillon's face too fast to catalog, to name, and then Dillon flushed darkly. Shame, at being caught fucking a stranger in their bed.

Angel didn't trust himself to speak. Worse, he didn't trust himself not to hurt them. Something wild and primal, a terrifyingly real manifestation of the dark side he faked on his cover assignments, exploded over him. Out, he had to get out, get away from them before he hurt them. Angel ran, through the bedroom, the living room, to the front door. He flung open the door and ran into the hall, shaking with fury, almost plummeting headfirst down the emergency stairs as he took them two and three at a time. Get out, drive to a motel. Sleep, he had to sleep. He couldn't think, not now, not like this, not with his gut churning and his hands balling into fists and the crushing weight in his chest threatening to bring him to his knees.

He was at his truck, his hand plunging into his pockets for the keys before the realization hit him. He didn't have his keys. Or his wallet. Or even his shoes. "God damn it!" he roared into the empty, pitiless night, not even realizing he'd sworn in Spanish until a voice scolded him in the same

language.

“Don’t blame God for your troubles, my friend. Give the devil his due, okay? God is on your side. He looks out for his angels. He sent me here to help you,” a soft, reassuring voice said.

Angel froze, his heart hammering wildly. Shit. Was this someone from the cartel, someone they’d missed, out for revenge? He’d been Angel there, too. His cover ID was Angelo Santiago, a dishonorably discharged gun for hire, although most of them had called him Anglo, scornfully at first, and then with respect, once he’d earned it. No, if it was them, he’d already be dead.

“Show yourself,” Angel said in Spanish, still ready to fight, to run.

A figure appeared out of the shadows, at least a foot shorter and 100 pounds lighter and a decade or maybe two older than him, but tough, hard, wiry. And kind, gentle. There was something about his face, his bearing that relieved some of the tension in Angel’s shoulders, though he didn’t drop his guard. Familiar. There was something familiar about.... “Rodrigo Martinez,” Angel said in relief, switching to English, his sleep-clouded brain miraculously placing the man. “We met at the Department picnic in February, just before Valentine’s Day.” Just before his assignment began. “You’re the new kid’s uncle, the transfer, Roberto Martinez, the rookie. Shit, although not so new anymore I guess, huh? What are you doing here?” he asked, baffled.

“That cab you almost hit? That was me,” Rodrigo said, switching to mildly accented English. “I recognized your truck, got a great view of the front plate as it was coming for me,” he said.

Right. His personalized license plate was pretty distinctive, memorable: ARCHNGL.

“Since it was you I didn’t call it in. I didn’t want to get you in trouble, you know? But I was afraid you might be injured or something, instead of drunk like I first thought, even after I saw you throw up. I’d seen the way you went after some of those other guys at the picnic, after they’d had too many beers to drive. You looked like you were ready to break their arms instead of just take their keys. Either way, I figured I’d better follow you, make sure you made it home. When you were sitting in your truck without going in, I almost left my cab then to check on you. I thought maybe you passed out or something. But then you got out, you made it inside the building all right. So I went to leave, but God, he smacked me upside the head and told me not to go yet, that you still needed me, so I waited. Good thing I listened.”

Some of the tension returned. That’s right. Rodrigo was the crazy cabbie, the one who heard voices, who talked to God. And sometimes to the devil, if the rumors were true. Terrific. And he’d followed him that whole time and he’d been clueless? Jesus.

The man laughed. “Yeah, you remember me. Loco Rodrigo, that’s me. Even Berto, much as he loves me, he

thinks I'm crazy too. But that's okay. I don't mind. Anyway, you shouldn't be driving. I see you're injured, and about dead on your feet. You probably think you're standing still, but you're swaying like crazy. Come into the cab; let me give you a ride. You need to crash. Lie down before you fall down. You're safe with me, Gabriel," Rodrigo said seriously.

"I don't want to sleep. I want to get drunk and I want to get laid and I want to forget I ever left Texas," Angel said tiredly.

"I've got a bottle of tequila at my place. And a big bed. You come home with me, okay?" Rodrigo said, eyeing Angel appreciatively, like he was offering some company to go along with the bed.

Angel blinked, returning the perusal. Roberto was gay. It looked like his uncle was too. Rodrigo wasn't as striking as his nephew, but he was still a handsome man. He was short enough for Angel's tastes, his thick black hair only lightly peppered with gray, but he was older and his body was hard, trim, wiry, not slender, almost delicate. An image of Dillon, pinned to the wall by his body, arms over his head, writhing in ecstasy flooded him. He buried the image. Dillon had cheated on him, betrayed him. Fine. So now all bets were off, now he could fuck whoever he wanted to. Rodrigo wasn't quite his usual type. He was too confident, too strong, but that didn't matter now. Nothing mattered. It had been so damned long. He just wanted to bury himself deep, pound somebody mercilessly. Rodrigo was strong enough to take whatever he dished out. He wouldn't break. This was the safest relief he could think of; a way to get his anger out,

hopefully make it feel good for both of them. God, he needed to feel good again. Angel nodded, ignoring the voice in his head screaming at him to turn around, to go back inside, back to Dillon. No way was he listening to voices. He wasn't that crazy; not yet, anyway.

"My wallet's upstairs," Angel hedged.

Rodrigo grinned. "This ride's for free. My shift's done anyway. Hop in," he said.

Why the fuck not? With a tired nod, Angel entered the lion's den and the shrill voice of his conscience, of reason, silenced.

DILLON Gosling stood frozen in shock, clinging to Merissa, heart hammering. By the time he could move, Angel was gone. "Are you all right?" he asked. "You screamed... he didn't hurt you? You're okay? The baby's okay?" he asked. The questions felt wrong; all of this was wrong. Angel would never hurt anyone, especially not a woman. Texas chivalry ran through him deep, to the bone. Except... that hadn't been Angel, not his Angel.

Meri shook her head, her heart pounding in syncopation to Dillon's. "No. He didn't. I'm fine, the baby's fine," she said, her arms leaving Dillon and clutching her stomach protectively. "He scared me, that's all. I woke up and there was this huge man in bed with me, groping me. I mean, I

thought he was... his hand was... that was Angel?" she asked in disbelief. That savage-eyed hulking animal had looked nothing like the smiling, gentle giant in the pictures Dillon had lovingly shown her.

Dillon nodded, eyeing the bedroom door fearfully and then in dismay. "He's gone," he whispered, eyes filling with tears and then widening as he processed everything he'd seen. "Oh my God. He was injured. His arm was wrapped in gauze. There was blood," he said, making a beeline for the phone. Had something gone wrong on the undercover assignment Angel had been working? Was he on the run from whomever he'd been out to get?

"I have to call Juanita," Dillon said, snatching up the phone. Juanita was Angel's partner. She had been his only contact with Angel these past six months. She needed to know something was wrong, very wrong. Dillon looked at the clock guiltily. It was just after 5:15 in the morning. But she'd told him to call her anytime, if he needed her, and he definitely needed her. He was surprised when she answered her cell on the first ring.

"Dillon? Why are you calling? Is something wrong? Isn't Angel there with you?" Juanita asked, her voice full of concern.

"With me? You mean you know he was here?" Dillon asked.

"Was? What do you mean, was? He should have only just about gotten there. The debriefing wrapped up less than an hour ago," she said.

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“You mean it’s over? His assignment’s finally over?” Dillon asked, shaking, the dread that had clamped around his heart for months now trying to lift away. But it wasn’t over. Something was very wrong. That wasn’t his Angel who’d come home. He was a stranger; an angry, dangerous stranger.

“You mean he didn’t tell... Dillon, start from the beginning. What happened?” Juanita said, slipping instantly from friend to detective.

Dillon told her, haltingly, about Meri’s scream waking him, running into the bedroom, seeing her, Angel, the bloody gauze, the wild-eyed rage, Angel leaving.

“Shit,” Juanita said, snapping her fingers insistently and catching Rick and Jeff’s attention before they headed out of the briefing room. “Sit tight, Dillon. Angel’s just still stressed out from the bust. It didn’t go quite the way we were hoping,” she said, an understatement of massive proportion. “He just hasn’t decompressed enough yet, hasn’t grounded back fully. We talked about this before, right? He’ll be fine. He just needs a little time. I’m going to find him for you and bring him home,” she assured him. Crap. Her psychology degree had been invaluable in her hostage negotiations and in her undercover work, in assessing and manipulating perps. But it had also helped more than once in talking a friend back down, out of an assignment. She’d thought Angel was okay. The department psychiatrist had cleared him to go home too; it was part of the debriefing. Of course, what Angel had found when he got there must have traumatized the hell out of him. He’d been depending on finding safety, security,

love, and instead he'd found what looked like the most base betrayal. Exhausted as he was, his coping skills already overloaded, he wasn't up to processing what he'd seen rationally. Hell, most men in his position wouldn't have been in any circumstances, but Angel should have known better. He and Dillon were solid, unshakeable, or should have been.

Rick McFarlan and Jefferson Jeffries looked at Juanita questioningly, but she waved them silent. "Dillon, listen. You and Meri need to call in sick today. Just stay there, work on the wedding plans, get the place ready for the bridal shower tomorrow, whatever you can do to keep busy without leaving. That way, when I bring Angel home, you'll be there. Everything's going to be fine. You'll see."

"I can't just sit here! I need to look for him. What if...?" What if he hurt someone? What if he hurt himself? Juanita could hear the unasked questions as clearly as if Dillon had spoken them aloud.

"He'll be fine. He's one of the good guys, remember? We're going to bring him home. I know of a few places we can look, and if that doesn't work, I'm going to put out an APB on him and his truck. We know what he's wearing and we'll make sure everyone understands who we're looking for and why. No one's going to hurt him; he's going to be safe," she assured him. She should have driven Angel home, walked him to his door. Not that it would have helped, if he'd snuck in like that anyway, but still, he was her partner. His safety was her responsibility. Damn it! "Try and get some more sleep, Dillon, okay? Meri too. She needs to take care of the baby," she said. A moment later she was turning to Rick and

Jeff.

“What happened to Angel?” Rick asked, frowning in concern.

Juanita explained quickly. She was hoping if they split up and hit Angel’s favorite haunts they could find him without calling in the APB on him and his truck. She didn’t want this going on his record, if it didn’t have to. But if there was no other choice, she’d make the call, make sure everyone understood the situation, that they not approach him, just locate him, and keep him in sight. She needed to be the one to go to him—her or Rick or Jeff, someone he trusted. Hopefully. After feeling safe, feeling home and then having the rug yanked out from under him, the way he’d reacted, Angel was obviously in a dangerous state, mentally. Angel hadn’t trusted Dillon, but she prayed he’d still trust his friends.

“He hasn’t called either of us, to crash at our place,” Jeff said, checking his cell for missed calls, just to be sure. “I’ll take the motels nearest their home.”

“I’ll take the bars nearest there,” Rick said.

“I’ll hit the places he talked about missing while he was inside,” Juanita said. Of the three of them, she knew him the best, although they’d known him longer. She had the best chance of figuring out where he’d go, if the bars and motels turned up a wash. Not that many of those places would be open, as it was just before dawn. They headed out to their cars.

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Her phone rang again, and she told them to hold on when she saw it was Dillon again. This time he was frantic. She listened, doing her best to calm him down again, and then turned to the guys. “Shit. This just escalated. It’s bad. Dillon said Angel forgot his keys, his wallet, his cell, his gun, even his shoes when he left. Dillon figured he couldn’t get far. He ran down to his truck to look for him, but he said he’s gone. He was calling for him and he didn’t answer. Angel shouldn’t have gone far like that. Either he’s hiding or he’s missing. Maybe taken. Either way we have to run that APB now,” she said.

“I’ll tell the captain. Christ. This isn’t happening. Not after getting him out of there alive,” Rick said, his voice grim.

It was a battle keeping Gabriel awake in the cab, but Rodrigo could tell he’d never be able to wake him up to get him into his apartment and there was no way he could carry him. The second they were inside, Rodrigo steered Gabriel into the bedroom, to the bed. He even got him to drink a couple of glasses of water, stalling him by telling him the tequila wouldn’t give him as bad of a hangover. As he’d hoped, Gabriel fell asleep before finishing the second glass of water.

Rodrigo tucked him in tenderly, eying him appreciatively. Gabriel had a beautiful body, almost as beautiful as his soul. The aura around him was so pure, so

white, it was almost blinding, except for the layer of muck shrouding it, like sticky black tar, oily darkness, dimming the brightness. But still so bright underneath, just like Mitch, like Berto, all the other angels he knew. Berto, he should call Berto. Someone might be worried about Gabriel. He called from the living room, speaking softly, although he doubted anything could wake Gabriel for a while. He got Berto's voicemail and left a message.

"Hey, Berto, I have one of your angels. He's safe at my place, if anyone there is looking for him. He's sleeping. The one from the picnic, that really bright one, you know, Gabriel. Call me when you can. Love you, Berto. Stay safe," he said. Rodrigo ducked back into the bedroom, checking on his guest. Gabriel was snoring softly, the scowl gone now, the tension easing, the exhaustion still there, but his face looking younger, better, as the chaotic blackness shrouding him started to dissipate. Rodrigo pulled out his medical kit and unwrapped Gabriel's arm, scowling at the torn stitches at the bottom of the wound. Bullet wound. He cleaned the cut with antiseptic. Gabriel was out so deep he didn't even twitch. Rodrigo used a few butterfly bandages to close the tear, and then expertly re-bandaged it, relieved he didn't need to dig out the bullet, stitch the wound. He'd done enough of that years ago to last a hundred lifetimes. Then Rodrigo sat on the edge of the bed and pulled out his bible, opening it to a well-worn passage, and began to read aloud softly. One hour rolled into the next, as God's words embraced them both.

The phone woke Rodrigo, vibrating and buzzing in his

pocket like a handful of angry bees. He looked over at his angel, lifting his arm off the man's chest. He hadn't meant to sleep with him. But Gabriel looked better now, either from the scripture, or the sleep, or maybe even the company. The darkness shrouding Gabriel had faded away to almost nothing, just a stubborn wisp remaining, although it was dark outside now. Rodrigo looked at the clock. Shit, he'd read and slept the whole day away. It was 8 p.m. Well, Gabriel had needed it. Rodrigo answered the phone belatedly, smiling as he recognized the number. "Hello, Berto," he said in Spanish.

"Uncle, Jesus, is he still there? Is he all right?" Berto asked almost frantically in rapid-fire Spanish.

"Language, Berto. Jesus' name is not a curse," Rodrigo gently scolded. "Yes, I told you, he's fine. He's still sleeping, and the darkness is gone now. He's so bright, he almost hurts my eyes. The devil, he kept whispering for me to fuck him or make him go, but I drowned out his voice with God's words. God, he asked me to watch over Gabriel, so I am. Unless you're coming to get him. It's all right if you are. God will let me give him to you," Rodrigo said.

"Yes, we're coming. We're already on our way," Roberto said, his voice betraying his relief. "Stay with him, Uncle. Keep him safe for us. I'll be there with Juanita in just a little while, and some of his other friends. Rick and Jeff. You remember them, right?" Roberto asked, speaking slowly and carefully, like one would to a child.

Rodrigo rolled his eyes and shook his head. "I'm not

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crazy, Berto, just because I can see souls and because God and the devil talk to me. It just means I can see and hear things others have forgotten. I won't hurt your friends. I know the angels from the demons."

"I know you do, Uncle. I know you'll tell me, if you ever get confused again, if the devil speaks too loud. We'll be there soon. I love you," Roberto said.

"I love you too. See you soon," Rodrigo said, disconnecting the call.

Rodrigo looked up, realizing he wasn't alone anymore, seeing Gabriel eyeing him warily. "Ah. You're awake. I'm sorry if that frightened you. Berto, he loves me, but he worries that I'm crazy. He doesn't understand. Mitch does, a little now. Maybe you might a little too. You're so bright again, it makes my heart sing. There was a blackness all around you, like oil, like tar. The devil, he was trying to get to you. He's gone now; you're too bright for him to touch again. But whatever you were doing, whatever dark place you were in, you have to be careful. The darkness, when you're in it for too long, it can consume you. I know. Not many men come back, once they've gone to the other side. And it changes you. I don't think you'd be too happy, hearing voices like I do. But I kept you safe from that, this time. No tequila, no meaningless fornication, just water, good healing sleep and some scripture," Rodrigo said, patting his bible lovingly. Then he laughed and began humming the theme from *The Twilight Zone*, as he saw the look Angel was giving him.

ANGEL jerked back, startled. How the hell had Rodrigo known that music was going through his head? Had it been that obvious from his expression? Rodrigo laughed again, open and joyously, and Angel found himself smiling back, the smile turning into a grin, and suddenly he was laughing too. It was as if he'd climbed out of a well, or out of the grave. It was like he'd been buried alive, but suddenly he could think again, breathe again. He still didn't know what that woman, Mary, had been doing at their apartment, but now he knew it couldn't possibly be what he'd been thinking. Now he remembered that Dillon had appeared from near the door, not from on the bed. Dillon must have been asleep on the sofa in the living room. He'd passed right by him without realizing it, in the near dark. Shit, he'd scared them both to death. He stopped laughing. Thank God he hadn't slept with Rodrigo. He'd never have been able to forgive himself if he'd cheated on Dillon, and he was already carrying enough guilt to last a lifetime. "I have to call someone. He'll be worried about me. How long have I been here?" Angel asked, looking around.

"Almost fourteen hours," Rodrigo said.

Shit! Dillon would be frantic.

"That was my nephew, Roberto, that I was talking to. He said he's coming over with some people. I hope it's all right. They're good people. Juanita and Rick and Jeff. He said

they've all been worried about you, but I told him you were safe here with me. I'd called him and left him a message, when you first came, but he must not have had access to his cell until now, if he was so worried and only just calling." Rodrigo frowned.

"It's all right. Thank you. I owe you so much. I don't know how I can repay—" he began, but Rodrigo shook his head, cutting him off.

"You don't owe me anything. When those bigoted bastards in Westside, they hurt my Berto, almost killed him, you took him to your precinct, to Northside, you made him safe. And Mitch, he kept me from killing them, he kept my soul from being harmed again, he helped give me a chance to keep making up for what I did, in the army. You just keep fighting on the side of the angels, Gabriel. There's too much darkness all around us. You help keep us all in the light. But first, you need to work things out with Dillon, fix what you tore. What God has joined, let no man tear asunder. You've never said the vows, not in so many words, but they've been in your heart and in his." Then Rodrigo shook his head sharply, like there was a bee in his ear. "Party's over, honey. It's time to put away your toys and tell your friends good night; their parents are here," Rodrigo said with a sigh. He was halfway to the door when the bell rang.

Rodrigo looked through the peephole and carefully removed the wires wrapped around each lock, secreting them along the molding of the doorframe. Then he opened the triple locks that had secured the door. Angel saw Roberto standing in the doorway, Juanita beside him and Rick and

Jeff behind them. “Hi, guys. Sorry if I worried you,” Angel said sheepishly. “I’m all right now. I just needed some sleep.” Or maybe scripture, to chase the demons away. The darkness. Like oil. He remembered thinking that, too, on the drive to Dillon. Oil. Tar. Darkness. Jesus.

“Angel! Thank God!” Juanita said, hesitating to enter the apartment as Roberto blocked her with his arm.

“May we enter, Uncle?” Roberto asked formally, eyeing the man with an odd mixture of love and caution on his face, his eyes flicking back and forth to the doorframe, to the floor. Looking for booby traps? Christ, is that what the wires were for?

“Of course, Berto. It’s safe for you to enter,” Rodrigo said reassuringly. “I know it’s time for Gabriel to leave. I hope you remembered his shoes.”

The four of them entered. Juanita scrutinized Angel’s face critically and exhaled in relief. “You look a lot better,” she said. She hadn’t realized how much the assignment had taken its toll on him, how much he’d changed. It had been so gradual, but seeing him now, after twenty-six hours away from it, fourteen of those hours sleeping, he looked like himself again, like he had when she first met him, just before the assignment started. Except for the beard, and the hair, but those were superficial. Everything else looked right. His eyes were no longer hard, wary, shuttered; there was warmth in them again. “Hey, tough guy. Ready to go home? Or do you want to crash at my place tonight? I could call Dillon and—”

Man of Honor ♥ María Albert

“No. No, I need to see him. Talk to him. Fix things. I kind of...” He stopped explaining. “You already know. He told you,” Angel said with conviction, seeing her expression.

“Dillon’s been worried sick. We all have been. We were afraid someone took you, when you didn’t come back, leaving without your wallet, or badge or gun, without even your shoes. What were you thinking?” she chastised.

Angel sighed. “I wasn’t. Not clearly, anyway. My brain was completely fried. Temporary insanity. Well, sleep deprivation, at any rate. I’d rather not have the word ‘insanity’ on my departmental file if I can help it.”

There was a hiss of tension from Roberto but Rodrigo laughed. “Don’t worry, Berto. I know what you think, what everyone does. But that’s okay. Crazy or sane, God helps me keep you safe. Whether or not you can hear him, I can. I don’t care what people think.” But a look of pain and loss flashed across his face.

Angel turned to him. “Except, sometimes, you wish your friends would come over more, that their parents would let them play with you, right?” he asked gently. “Anytime you need a friend, Rodrigo, you call me. Not because I owe you, but because you’re one of the good guys, a man of honor. You could have taken all kinds of advantage of me before, but you didn’t. I was safe here. I knew that. Even screwed up like I was, I knew. I trusted you and I don’t trust easily. I never could have let go like I did, slept like that, if I’d doubted you for an instant. Thank you,” he said sincerely.

A smile lit Rodrigo’s face, and just for an instant, the

room seemed to brighten with it. “I knew you’d see. Just like Mitch, and the other angels, even Berto, when he lets himself. Good night, Gabriel. I’ll see you again when you need me, or when I need you, or maybe just to play, if our parents let us,” he said with a conspiratorial grin and a wink.

Angel smiled back, and impulsively hugged him.

Rodrigo embrace him like a brother and then released him. “Now go. I need to drive. Someone else, they might need me.”

Angel nodded and smiled. The five of them left, heading down the hall, to the stairs. “You need to report in, Angel, before you go back home,” Juanita said seriously. “Not to finish your debriefing; that can wait until morning. I told you we were worried, but you might not realize... we put an APB out. More in case you were snatched than anything else, but... the department psychiatrist is going to need to talk to you again, before you’re released to go home,” she said apologetically.

Angel stopped walking for a moment and grimaced. “An APB. Shit. Well, I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. But then I definitely need to borrow your cell right away. I need to call Dillon, to tell him I’m safe, to apologize, to tell him I love him, I trust him, that it wasn’t really me he was seeing.”

She nodded. “The woman who was in your apartment—” she began.

“No. I don’t need to know, not yet. Dillon can tell me,

when I see him,” Angel said.

She shook her head. “It’s complicated. The more you know before you talk to him, see him, the better. I would have said something, if I’d realized. I should have thought it through. Her name is Merissa Turner. Pretty much everyone calls her Meri. She’s just a kid too. She turned twenty last month. She works with Dillon in the Surveillance Unit. They’ve got a lot in common, they’re about the same age, have the same taste in movies, books, music. Meri lost her parents too. They were killed in a car accident when she was eight. Her grandmother raised her; it was just the two of them. Then two years ago Meri’s grandmother had a stroke. She’s in a nursing home, half-paralyzed. She can’t talk or feed herself anymore, although she’s still fully aware and she can still write to communicate. But she needs full-time care.”

“Meri started work the week after you left. She and Dillon hit it off right away. They’ve gotten to be really close, best buddies, inseparable. Meri’s been lonely too. She understands that and the fear. Not just because of losing her parents, her grandmother being incapacitated. Her fiancé, Daniel Cortez, he’s in the army. She only gets to see him when he’s home on weekend passes, a few days every few months. They’d been planning a big wedding for next June, once his tour is up. But a week ago she learned she was pregnant, about three months along. She knows right when it happened. It was an accident; the condom tore. The day she told Daniel her big news, he told her his. He’s shipping out to Afghanistan; he leaves next weekend. He wants to make sure the baby has a father, legally, no matter what

happens, but he wants her to have her dream wedding too. It's this Sunday. Meri's been going nuts, trying to pull it together so Daniel can go into battle with a clear head."

"Everyone's been helping, especially Dillon. He's been coordinating everything like mad, her own personal wedding consultant. He reached out to Rick's sister-in-law, Dana, to do the catering, to Jeff's partner, Sean, for the flowers, to Jordy's foster dad, Johnny O'Seannessey, for use of the ballroom at Johnny's House. They've already named Dillon the baby's godfather. He's also going to be her man of honor at the wedding. You know, her bridal attendant, instead of a maid of honor, since he's her best friend. But when it rains, it pours, right? And things happen in threes, good and bad. Three nights ago, there was a fire in her apartment building. She was at work, thank God. But she lost everything. All her clothes, her grandmother's wedding dress, everything. She was a wreck. It was a no-brainer. Dillon took her home."

They'd reached the car. Angel leaned against it, closing his eyes. "No clothes. No pajamas. No bed. Shit. Is she all right? I know I scared the crap out of her too. The baby...?"

Juanita took his good arm and squeezed it reassuringly. "She's fine. Freaked, hurting for Dillon, more than anything, but fine. Dillon's been doing amazing, holding down his job, pulling a 4.0 at school, being a good friend. But none of it means anything to him without you, Angel. Meri's the one holding him together right now, keeping him home for you to find, instead of going out looking for you. We couldn't risk where he might go, him getting hurt. We knew you'd never forgive yourself if something happened to him while he was

looking for you. We've been looking out for him for you, like we promised you we would. We've kind of adopted him. He's sort of the kid brother we all wish we had. We wanted to make sure you could stay focused on your job, and that you wouldn't worry about him. I know you did anyway, but I know you worried less than you would have. Then this morning, it all blew apart, it all hit the fan, just like the bust."

Angel exhaled slowly. He was so proud of Dillon, so thankful for his friends. "Thank you, all of you. For watching out for Dillon, for looking for me. We'll go to the station, I'll see the shrink, get a clean bill of health," he said confidently.

Rick smiled and slipped off his shoes. "Here. You'd better take these. They should fit. I'm already clocked out and I'm heading home. The last thing you need is to show up at the precinct barefoot, if you're trying to avoid a one-way trip to the rubber room," he said, grinning.

Angel laughed and then hugged him and Jeff and shook Roberto's hand. "Get going, guys." He put on the shoes. "Juanita, can I borrow your phone now? I hope your battery's charged. This might take a while."

"DILLON, you have to eat something," Meri coaxed. "You haven't eaten all day."

"I can't. Not until I know," Dillon said, fighting to keep

the tears at bay. He couldn't start crying again; he'd set off Meri again too. Her hormones were all messed up, and she cried all the time now. Or maybe it was knowing Daniel was heading into a war zone, that their baby might never see his or her father. But he couldn't eat. Angel was out there, somewhere, with no money, no way to get food. If he was even still alive. What if he was dead? What if someone had realized who he was, followed him from the police station, or found out where he lived, somehow? What if they took him and...?

"Stop it. He's going to be okay," Meri assured Dillon. "And it's not your fault, or mine, or even his. Things just happen sometimes. And there's a reason for everything, even if you can't see it at the time. Something good will come of it, somehow, if not to you now, then later, or to someone else who needs something good more. You're the one who told me that, remember? You told me you never would have met Angel if your father and Connor hadn't been so awful, but that it was worth it, anything was worth it for him. Jeff says the same, that there has to be balance, good and bad, yin and yang."

"Angel's alive, Dillon. He made it through the assignment. If his coming home and leaving again right away was the price for that, it was worth it. You'll fix things, I know you will. You'll come out stronger because of it. That's what love's about, right? About trust and caring, sacrifice and growth, learning how to lean on someone and learning to stand alone, to hold them up or sometimes even carry them, when they can't make it on their own, knowing they'll

be there to carry you the next time. Angel needs you Dillon, now more than ever. He never would have been so upset seeing me here if he didn't love you so much. Love that deep can be scary sometimes. We're afraid it leaves us too vulnerable. But it doesn't. It gives us strength. You're both stronger together. He knows that, in his heart, even if his head was telling him something else. He'll come back; I know he will. I'd walk through fire for you, and I only love you like a brother. He'd do more. He'll figure it out. He loves you, Dillon. That's what husbands do. You don't need a ring or a big wedding for that. I don't either. The fancy wedding is for Daniel, because he wants me to have it. All I want is to have him, home, safe. For me and for the baby," she said, her eyes brimming with tears. "Oh, damn. I was really trying to make it for a whole hour without crying again," she said, fighting the sobs. "I'm afraid I'll set you off again. I guess... we won't... have to worry anymore... about the drought, huh? The two of us... are going to fill... every reservoir in Hilldale," she finished bravely, laughing and crying at the same time.

Dillon hugged her tight. "That was beautiful, what you said about love. You should write that into your vows. I'm so glad you're here. I couldn't do this without you," he said.

"I was just going to say the same thing. About you, I mean. Not the vows. I'm not rewriting the vows again, mister, not two days before the wedding. They're already way too long, with that Eskimo and Apache stuff Jordy found on the Internet for us. Who would ever have guessed he was such a closet romantic?" she said, pulling back and smiling, wiping away the tears.

Dillon laughed, wiping at his own face. “Don’t let him hear you say that. Saying ‘closet’ in the same sentence as Jordy’s name is liable to get you buried in a tirade. No one throws a good, old-fashioned snit fit like Jordy. But don’t you dare tell him I said that,” he said, fighting to smile, to make it sound lighthearted. Poor Meri had been through enough. The last thing she needed was to worry about him.

When the phone rang Dillon jumped. He stared at it wild-eyed. It was Juanita; the caller ID was flashing her number. “Juanita? Did you find him? Is he all right?” Dillon asked, frantically. There was a pause at the other end. Dillon wanted to scream, until he heard the voice, not Juanita’s. Angel’s. Oh God, it was Angel.

“Dillon, it’s me. I’m all right,” Angel assured him. “I’m so sorry, babe. That wasn’t really me before. I mean it was, but I hadn’t slept for four days and then I got shot and—”

“Shot! Oh my God! Your arm, that’s what happened. You were shot?!” Dillon screamed into the phone. “Can you move it? Where are you? Is Juanita with you? Are you on the way to the hospital? I need to—”

“Easy, love. Breathe. I’m fine. I already went to the hospital right after it happened. They stitched it up; it wasn’t serious at all. I’m with Juanita now. But I was safe before. I’ve been at a friend’s house, asleep this whole time. I had no idea everyone was so worried. Rodrigo called Roberto to let him know where I was, but Roberto apparently didn’t get the message until a little while ago. I’m on my way to the station. They want to make sure I’m really okay. I scared the brass

too, it looks like. But my head's on straight again, I swear. I love you, Dillon, and I trust you, and I know you'd never cheat on me. You'd never do anything to hurt me like that. I keep telling you I shouldn't be your whole world, when really, you're the one who's mine. I just couldn't stand thinking I'd lost you. Everything I was doing, trying to make the world a safer place, was wasted, if I didn't have you to come home to. I've been alone too long. It's my fault, mostly. I keep pushing people away, trying to protect myself, protect them, and hurting them instead. I'm sorry. I know this must not all be making sense to you right now. All you need to hear right now is I love you and I trust you and the next time I come home, you'll know it's really me."

"Oh, Angel. I love you. I've missed you so much. So much has been happening. I've been going crazy wanting to share it all with you. I... when you come home, about Meri, she..." he began, hesitantly.

"It's okay, Dillon. It was okay before Juanita explained it to me. I told her I trusted you without hearing it, that I'd let you tell me, but she said it was better she did, and I'm glad. Your friend Meri can stay with us as long as she needs to. I always wanted a kid sister growing up. Looks like God decided to answer my prayer a little late, that's all. He works on a cosmic timescale, you know; it's all just a blink of an eye for him. Shit, I hope that isn't freaking you out. You do know I believe in God, right? I mean, I've kind of hinted at it, in the past, what with my mother naming us all after archangels." There was a moment of silence on the line and, for a second, Dillon thought they'd lost the connection. "Hell.

That too. I've never told you about my brothers," Angel said, his voice suddenly rough. "I don't know if I can, yet. But I will, someday soon, I promise. The more we know about each other, the more we can understand each other, the more we can trust. Love is all about trust, right? Even half out of my mind I should have remembered that much, at least."

"It's okay, Angel," Dillon told him. "I forgive you, if you need me to, but I don't need to forgive you. I mean, I understand, I realize what it must have looked like, and here you were thinking you were safe, that it was me in bed and realizing it wasn't. Juanita told me about undercover work, and the department psychiatrist did too. I talked to him a little too, while you were gone. Even though we're civilian techs, it's part of our benefits package. I want to understand, to be what you need, who you need."

"You are who I need, Dillon. You've always been that. Crap, I have to go. Another call's coming in. Juanita needs her phone back. Love you. See you soon," Angel said.

"Love you. Come home soon," Dillon said, disconnecting first so Angel wouldn't have to.

"Thank God. He's okay? You're both okay?" Meri asked hopefully.

"We're both okay," Dillon confirmed.

"Good. Great. So... you need to eat and then you need a long, hot bath, or shower, or whatever, and we need to change the sheets on the bed and make up the couch for me, because I'm moving onto the sofa, where I should have been

all along, and you're moving back into your bedroom. There's no way I'm going to get any sleep tonight with the two of you squeaking away on this sofa bed. It's bad enough listening to you toss and turn all night," Meri said with a smirk.

"Beast," Dillon said affectionately. "Now I remember why I never wanted a baby sister." He grew silent and bit his lip. "I always wanted a brother. I thought Angel was an only child too. He never told me he had brothers. I've never seen pictures of them or heard their names or anything. Why would he keep something like that from me?" he asked, the hurt evident in his voice.

"Maybe because it hurt too much. Either it hurt him or it might hurt you. Maybe his family kicked him out too. Or maybe they're wonderful, loving and amazing, and he thought that would hurt you, seeing it. Are you really going to start working yourself up about that now, after finally knowing he's safe? You trust him too, right? So you need to trust that he'll tell you about it, when he's ready," she said gently.

Dillon hugged her, pressing his forehead against hers. "I was a complete idiot for not wanting a sister. I wish you were my sister," he said sincerely.

She smiled, blinking back tears. "I already am. So you'd better not make me cry again, or I'm telling Grandma," she teased, sniffing.

"Uncle, uncle! No more tears. If you promise not to cry, I'll let you cook me dinner," he coaxed.

She burst into laughter. “It’s your funeral. You’d just better keep teaching me, though, because I plan to dazzle Daniel with my fine culinary skills when he comes home,” she said, blinking rapidly. “Oh, damn. Sorry, I can’t help...,” she sobbed.

Dillon took her in his arms, holding her close, patting her back. “It’s okay, Meri. Really. I understand. Planning a wedding, having a baby, losing your home in a fire, having someone you love going away, knowing they’re going into danger, any one of those things is stressful enough. Having all of them happen all at once is more than anyone should have to take, especially not someone as sweet as you.”

“I guess I must have screwed up big time in a past life, huh? It’s all on the wheel, right? But this karmic balance stuff can be a real bitch,” she said with a grimace.

“Don’t think of it that way. Think of it as, with all that’s happened, the rest of your life should be perfect,” Dillon argued.

“From your mouth to God’s ears,” she said. “If he has ears. That’s the kind of question kids ask, right? I remember, when I was a little girl, before my mother died, we were talking about God, and she told me how warm and wonderful and loving God was. And I asked her, ‘How many fingers does she have?’ She thought that was priceless, that I thought God was some giant cosmic mom. Dad was just as tickled as she was. I... oh, Dillon, I miss them so much. I wish they could be here, with me, not for the wedding, but for the baby. I have such cute pictures of when I was....”

Suddenly her face crumpled. “Oh no. They’re all gone. All my pictures of them, of me when I was a baby. Our baby’s going to want to see them, and I don’t have anything. I—”

“Hey, hey, hey. I know how precious they were, but they’re only things. The important thing is you weren’t hurt, or the baby. Besides, you must have distant relatives, or friends of the family who have some kind of photos, right? After the wedding, that will be our new project: contacting them all. We can even start at the reception, or better still, call and ask people to bring copies of their photos if they have any to the wedding. Whatever they have—your parents’ wedding photos, your birth announcement, Christmas card photos, your class pictures. Then afterwards, we’ll build a new set of albums for you, okay?” he soothed.

“Oh, Dillon! What a wonderful idea!” she said. “And it’s a good way of letting them know about the fire, that I really do need everything to restart a home, for bridal shower or wedding gifts. I still feel so greedy, having a shower the day before the wedding,” she said.

“Don’t you dare! Your friends are the ones insisting on it, remember? Just be glad we couldn’t pull it together before the fire, so you didn’t lose those things too. Between the shower and the clothes and household-goods drive for you at the station, we’ll have you back on your feet in no time. Oh! I meant to tell you! I talked to the super yesterday and there are three two-bedroom apartments here in this building that are going to be vacant starting in September. I’ve already put a referral in for you. We can be neighbors. That way you’ll have built-in babysitters, whenever you need them,” he said.

She smiled mischievously. “Babysitters? Plural? Are you sure big, buff, and studly can handle that?”

Dillon laughed. “I have no idea. Brothers. Wow. For all I know, they’re a lot younger than Angel. Maybe he took care of them growing up. Or they could be older, with kids of their own. Maybe he’s already an uncle.” He shrugged, trying not to let it bother him.

The doorbell rang and Dillon jumped, heading for the door at a run. It couldn’t be Angel already, but still.... He carefully checked the peephole and opened the door. “Dana! Cat! What are you two doing here?” he asked in surprise.

Cat McFarlan grinned like her namesake. “My big brother called us. He said Angel’s on his way home tonight and we got to talking and well... Meri, how would you like to come home with us tonight? Our place is a lot bigger than this one. We’ve got two spare bedrooms just taking up space. And Cheryl dropped off a bunch of the donations for you from the folks at the precinct. It’ll be like Christmas. We can sort through stuff, see what you still need, so people know what to buy you. You’re mostly getting gift cards, but a bunch of us are going on a shopping spree tomorrow morning. You have to have presents to open too. That’s part of the fun, right? And this will give Dillon and Angel some time alone, to get reacquainted,” she said.

“Cat, you don’t have to do that. Angel’s okay with Meri staying. Really. He called and told me,” Dillon said.

Cat shook her head. “Men! Look, trust me. You haven’t seen each other in six months. It’s going to be hard enough

on the neighbors, let alone someone in the next room,” she said knowingly with a grin.

Dillon blushed darkly. He’d been worried about that. He and Angel were definitely enthusiastic and Angel loved it when he was vocal—the louder the better. Although he really didn’t want to even be thinking about that in a room with two lesbians and a pregnant woman, even if they were all good friends of his.

“She’s right, Dillon. You’ve been so wonderful, but you and Angel really do need some privacy. Thanks so much, Cat, Dana. I can’t tell you how much I appreciate everything you and everyone have been doing for me. And I can’t wait to see what you have!” Meri said eagerly.

Seeing how excited she was, how happy, Dillon couldn’t argue. This would be good for both of them. It only took her a couple of minutes to pack; everything Meri owned now fit into a single duffel bag. After a brief hug, they were gone.

DILLON was climbing the walls by the time he heard the front door open three hours later. He ran to it and blinked in surprise. “Angel! Wow. You shaved. And cut your hair,” he said, blushing at what a stupid thing that was to say after six months apart. But Angel looked just like he had before the assignment. His eyes, those beautiful, blue eyes were bright and clear and warm again. All the awkwardness he’d been feeling, the worry vanished. He flung himself onto

Angel, his mouth fastening onto Angel's in a frantic kiss, thundering with unleashed passion, like a dam bursting.

Rick had told Angel they'd be alone, that his sister was taking Meri in so they could have the time they needed. Angel had been so afraid Dillon would be skittish of him, afraid to touch him, shy, he'd been prepared to take things as slow and gentle as Dillon needed. Knowing he didn't have to be was the best gift Dillon could have given him. He slammed his lover up against the door, just the way he'd remember holding him the last night they'd been together, his left hand wrapped around Dillon's wrists, pinning them over his head, against the door, his right hand yanking at the button of his pants, the zipper. He winced at the pain in his right bicep and forced himself to stop. He was too wild, too close to losing control. He didn't care about his own injured arm, but he wouldn't hurt Dillon. He'd die before he hurt him.

Dillon yelled as Angel tossed him over his good shoulder, heading for the bedroom. Lube, they needed lube. The bed. He was going to pound Dillon into the mattress, then pull out the faux fur duvet and take him on the floor, caveman style, the way they both loved. He tossed Dillon onto the bed, and tore open his own pants, literally, and then ripped open the nightstand drawer, yanking it right off the track. He grabbed the lube and tossed the drawer aside and drenched his fingers. Dillon had shed his clothes. He was naked, writhing on the bed, whimpering in need. Angel dove onto the bed, onto Dillon. His hand was shaking from the effort of control as he put his finger against Dillon's

puckered hole.

“I need you in me, now!” Dillon commanded.

Angel’s eyes flashed and his restraint crumbled. He thrust his finger in deep, hard. Dillon thrust against his hand. “More, harder. Hurry,” he begged.

Relieved he hadn’t hurt Dillon, Angel pulled out the single finger and then thrust in two, and he began scissoring them. “God, baby, you’re so tight! Didn’t you use any of the toys I gave you?”

Dillon shook his head frantically. “They weren’t you. I wanted you, need you. Oh God! Angel, please don’t make me wait, I’ve waited so long.” Angel’s eyes widened. Tears were streaming down Dillon’s face.

He pulled out the fingers and hugged him. “Shh. Don’t cry, baby. It’s okay now. Everything’s okay,” he said, slicking up his cock. Angel was so hard it hurt. He felt like he was going to explode the second his cock touched Dillon. He shuddered, thinking about the tight heat he’d feel. Then Dillon grabbed hold of his cock, guiding it toward him, and he forgot to think, forgot to breathe, forgot everything but how to feel. With a bestial roar he thrust in deep, all the way to his balls. Dillon screamed, not in pain but in need, and he kept whimpering, begging, screaming as Angel pulled back and pushed in again and again as Dillon slammed up to meet every thrust.

Their eyes locked and they stared riveted to each other, as sweat soaked through Angel’s shirt, ran down Dillon’s

naked chest, leaving him shiny and slick, so tight and hot and wet and... with another roar, Angel came, spurt after spurt, buried balls-deep inside Dillon. Dillon screamed again, raggedly, his voice already hoarse, and Angel felt the wild clenching of Dillon's passage milking the last drops out of his cock. Christ! He was still hard. He felt like he'd be hard forever, like he could stay inside Dillon forever.

He slumped forward, careful not to crush Dillon, rolling onto his side and pulling him tight against him, not wanting to leave him. But he slipped out; it was inevitable, Dillon's passage was so slick, so tight that he pushed Angel right out, a flood of cum pouring out with him. Angel held Dillon against him, breathing deeply, soaking in the scent of his hair, his skin. Home. He was finally home. He didn't want to ever leave again.

Angel reached over to the nightstand, biting down on the hiss of pain that almost escaped. He'd forgotten all about his arm in the heat of passion. His hand met an empty hole instead of the drawer he expected to find. What the...? Oh, right. He peered over the bed and picked up the hand towel and T-shirt that had spilled out of the drawer, a casualty of his mad scramble for lube. He toweled them both off and then laid the soft, worn T-shirt on the wet spot, rolling onto it and wrapping his arm possessively around Dillon. His hands caressed Dillon's smooth, hairless chest, reveling in the familiar feel, learning the differences.

Dillon had changed some, while he was gone. His chest was more defined, his abdomen too, like maybe he worked out some now. But his shoulders felt a little broader too. Had

his hands forgotten, or was Dillon still growing, still filling out? He massaged one narrow, muscular bicep. "You been working out, baby?"

"Mmhmm," Dillon said, a sound more like a moan of ecstasy or purr than an affirmation, pushing into the massage. But then he continued, his voice lazy and sated. "I got a membership at Danny's Gym, that gay gym on Bryant where Rick's sister Cat works. I wasn't getting any exercise, between work and school and everything. I go there sometimes. Not a lot, though. Usually only when Tim and Kevin or Gary and Jamie or Jeremy and Rick are there."

"It's safer working out with a buddy, a spotter," Angel agreed.

"Uh, yeah. Safer," Dillon said, but Angel couldn't help noticing the flush of color that darkened his face, down his neck to his chest. God, he'd missed that blush. But why...? "Dillon? Is there another reason you need someone with you?" His hands stilled, and he tensed. "Has someone been harassing you? Threatening you?"

"No... well, yes, but not like...." He turned and faced Angel, biting his lip nervously. "I don't want to get you all upset again," he said, his eyes filled with concern.

Screw that. Angel was already upset. Then realization dawned. "They've been hitting on you," Angel said, a statement, not a question. Crap. Of course they'd hit on him. Dillon was gorgeous, with those expressive green eyes and that tangle of chocolate curls and delicate face, that pale, flawless, nearly hairless body. He was an eighteen-year-old

walking wet dream.

Dillon looked embarrassed. “Yeah. Pretty much. Flirting, but also, just staring. I mean, sometimes, I’d walk in there, and it felt like it was feeding time at the zoo and I was this juicy T-bone. But when I’m with Kevin, or Jamie, or Rick they back off and leave me alone. Heck, when I’m with Gary too. He’s nowhere near as big, but he just emanates intimidation. And when I’m with Tim or Jeremy... well, the two of us together, they just sort of stand and drool a lot, like they can’t decide who to pounce on, and by the time they work it out, Kevin or Rick shows up, or even Cat, and they back right off. Christ, especially Cat. You should see how protective of Jeremy Cat is. There’s all kinds of wild speculation in the men’s locker room about whether she and Rick and Jeremy secretly have a three-way going,” he said, with a laugh.

Angel looked suitably shocked and Dillon grinned. Man, Dillon had definitely grown some while Angel was away. He sounded more confident, like he knew at least a little now how amazing he was. It made Angel crazy, thinking of anyone even watching him, let alone maybe copping a feel here and there. But it was important for Dillon’s ego. Dillon’s father and ex had really done a number on Dillon’s self-esteem.

Angel gasped as a hand brushed unexpectedly against his cock, and then gripped it. “You’re still hard.” Dillon sounded aroused but also a little concerned, like maybe he hadn’t done a good enough job.

“Of course I’m still hard. Six months with nothing but my hand and suddenly I’m touching and smelling and tasting you again,” Angel said.

“I thought I was the one who got to do the tasting,” Dillon said with a sexy pout, and then he was sliding down Angel’s leg, his mouth closing around his cock.

“Jesus!” Angel said, grabbing a fistful of dark curls, pushing into Dillon’s eager mouth. He’d wanted to be slow and sweet the second time, but all thought of that flew right out of his brain as he thrust hard into that wet, willing suction. His eyes widened as he felt Dillon’s throat open for his shaft, as he took it all in, until his nose was rubbing against curling blond hairs, breathing deep.

“How, where... holy fuck!” Angel screamed as a second orgasm ripped through him, as he fought against forcing Dillon onto him and trying not to suffocate him. He felt Dillon swallow and suck, and then his eager tongue was licking him clean, as Angel’s entire body convulsed in aftershocks.

“Hothouse English cucumbers,” Dillon said, licking the cream off his lips like a satisfied cat.

“What?” Angel asked in a daze. Christ, the room was spinning and he must be having auditory hallucinations too.

“Hothouse English cucumbers. You know... those really long plastic-wrapped ones at the supermarket? I’ve been practicing. For when you came home. They were the only ones big enough, long enough. I wanted to surprise you,”

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Dillon said, his tongue licking up Angel's abdomen, to his pecks, swirling gently around his left nipple and then his right, nipping here and there playfully. "I wanted to please you."

"Christ, Dillon, if you pleased me any more I'd be dead," Angel said feelingly.

"I don't want you dead. But I'll admit: having you this relaxed has definite potential. There's something else I've been wanting... hoping... I mean, maybe if... never mind," Dillon said, blushing darkly and squirming. Dillon's breath hissed and Angel realized that Dillon's cock was rock hard. He hadn't come a second time.

"What do you want, baby? Anything, I'd do anything for you. You know that, right?" Angel encouraged.

"I want to be inside you," Dillon whispered, burying his face against Angel's chest, speaking so softly Angel almost didn't hear.

Angel stiffened in surprise. And arousal. Because he'd been thinking about that too, these past six months, wondering what it would feel like to be on the receiving end, trying not to think of how it would be like a French poodle fucking a Great Dane. It's not that Dillon wasn't hung. He was definitely more narrow, but only an inch or so shorter than Angel, still damned impressive by any measure. It's just, Angel almost never did that. Only he couldn't think why he shouldn't, why it wouldn't be amazing. "Go for it, babe," he said.

Dillon jerked up, startled, eyeing Angel in disbelief and sparking hope and then his face darkened in shame. “No, I know you don’t want to. I don’t want it to be like some charity fuck, that you just feel sorry for—” The rest of his argument was drowned in a moan, as Angel kissed him, their tongues dueling, until Angel withdrew his and suddenly Dillon was in his mouth, touching, tasting, the one in control of the kiss. Dillon drew back in surprise.

“There is no way you could ever be anything like that. You’re amazing, Dillon. Everything about you. You’re the sweetest, sexiest, smartest, hottest man I’ve ever known. That kiss was perfect. And this will be too,” he said, gently circling his hand around Dillon’s cock and guiding it toward his ass. “Christ, you’re so wet for me, you’re leaking all over my hand. We don’t even need the lube,” he said.

“No way. I mean, yes we do,” Dillon said, a look of determination and growing excitement replacing the look of inadequacy. He covered his cock and Angel’s crack liberally and then carefully, gently slid his index finger inside Angel. “Wow. Oh God. And you said I was tight? I’m not sure this is going to work,” he said doubtfully.

Dillon felt the muscles surrounding his finger relax. “Hell yes, it will. Don’t you dare think about stopping,” Angel chastised. “Come on, babe, give me two,” he said.

A second finger slid in and then a third.

“God, your fingers are so long, so narrow. I need more. I’m ready, Dillon. I want you to fill me,” Angel said.

Dillon drew his fingers out, and pressed his cock against the tempting hole instead. Angel pushed right back into him, opening for him so easily Dillon was amazed. He'd only had one other boyfriend and Connor had always insisted on being on top. Angel was the penultimate top, he was so dominant, Dillon had never thought Angel would be willing to do something like this. He thought it would just remain a fantasy. He pushed in deeper, taking control, then pulled out, the slow, sensuous probing gradually ramping up to something different, something more, deep, hard, powerful, wonderful. With a cry Dillon came, his eyes widening in amazement and joy. "Mine, you're mine," he said, surprised at how possessive he felt.

"Yours," Angel purred in agreement.

Dillon slid out and tried to find a dry spot on the towel. The T-shirt was a hopeless sticky mess. He tossed it aside and tucked a fold of blanket underneath instead, then wrapped himself securely around Angel. He was exhausted and more content than he'd felt in months, maybe ever. He was asleep in moments.

Angel had been afraid he wouldn't be able to fall asleep, after sleeping so long earlier, but Dillon's hypnotic breathing and his warmth wrapped around him were enough to tip the scale. He fell into a dreamless, sated sleep, safe in his lover's arms.

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ANGEL moaned in protest when the alarm sounded the next morning. He was surprised and somewhat appeased when Dillon got up too. "I have to go down to the station to finish my debriefing," Angel said apologetically. "But I forgot to set the alarm. Why did it go off?"

"Meri's shower is today. Here, in our apartment. I need to get everything ready. And the wedding is tomorrow and there's still so much to do. I wish I could just spend the whole day here in bed with you. Maybe tomorrow, after the reception? We could pull an all-nighter? I don't have classes or work on Monday."

"I don't have work either. In fact, after the debriefing I'm officially on leave for three weeks, to decompress from the assignment and catch up on all those days off I missed," Angel said.

"Three weeks?!" Dillon jumped up and wrapped his legs around Angel, kissing him wildly.

"Whoa! We'd better take this into the shower. And we're going to have to hurry. I should have been up half an hour ago. I'll grab something to eat on the way in, save some time," he said, walking with Dillon clinging to him, as if he didn't weigh a thing.

"God, you're strong. I'd almost forgotten," Dillon said.

"Can't have that, babe. No forgetting anything about me. I'll have to give you a refresher in the shower," Angel said.

TEN hours later, Angel's mind kept going back to the previous night and that amazing shower as he drove home. Dillon had given him a "coast is clear" call. The bridal shower was over; it was safe to come home. Safe. Home. God, he was lucky. Lucky to have Dillon. Lucky to be alive. They still didn't know what the hell had gone wrong with the bust. As near as they could tell, someone had tipped off the cartel at the last minute. It was blind luck Angel had lived through the bust. Or maybe divine intervention. He pulled into the parking lot, feeling like a different man from the one who had done so only yesterday. Three weeks of uninterrupted Dillon. Well, except for his job and classes, but still, there would be a few days in there that he'd get to see him twenty-four/seven.

Angel was relieved to see that any girly decorations that might have been inside the apartment had disappeared. Dillon looked exhausted but happy, proud. "Do you want to order out?"

"No way. We have enough leftovers in the refrigerator to feed an army," Dillon said, grinning.

Angel followed him to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "Holy cow. Didn't you guys eat anything?"

Dillon laughed. "You have no idea. This is maybe a quarter of what there was. It must be a cop thing, you know, the same gene that enables you guys to eat nonstop donuts?" he teased. "We had twenty-nine people, including

me and Meri. She was so touched; she was crying and laughing the whole time. I thought Cat and Dana were going to need a U-Haul to bring everything home, but Dana came in her SUV and Cat borrowed Kevin's and they managed to get it all to their place."

"Oh, damn. I wanted to sign my name to the card, put in half for whatever you got her," Angel said.

"That's so sweet of you. But you don't have to. I bought her a set of Calphalon pots and pans. I've been giving her cooking lessons. The right pots can make all the difference. Cheap ones can ruin everything no matter how careful you are," Dillon said.

"That's what my mom always said," Angel said. "That's why I got a good set too. Although I haven't really been doing much cooking since you came and started keeping house for us. You've been spoiling me, babe. I hope you don't think I've been taking advantage. It's just, you wanted to cook for me, do whatever you could, before you got your feet under you. But we should really share the kitchen work from now on. I mean, if that's okay."

Dillon exhaled in relief. "I'm really glad you told me. I've been obsessing over wondering how I'd get dinner on the table for you every night, when I'll be in class or on shift half the time. I mean, I loved it, but it was a real challenge, those first few months last semester, before you left, and this past semester I was taking eighteen credits, including two lab courses. The fall semester starts a week from Monday and I've signed up for twenty-one credits with two labs. And I've

been full time at the station since April.”

“Damn it, Dillon, that sounds like too much. I don’t want you working yourself too hard. You need time for you too. Not to mention for us,” Angel said.

“There will be. I promise. The second you tell me you’re feeling neglected, I’ll drop something,” Dillon swore anxiously, looking suddenly unsure, more like the kid he’d first met last December than the man he’d come home to.

Angel cupped Dillon’s cheek tenderly, reassuringly. “This isn’t about me, lover. It’s about you, your needs, about balance. You need time for fun too. Not just the gym. Friends. Movies. A social life,” Angel said.

“I’ve got that now,” Dillon said, a shade defensively. Having friends his own age had been a sore spot with Angel before he’d left. Angel still felt guilty for being thirty-six, when Dillon was only eighteen. Well, nineteen now; he’d had a birthday while Angel was gone, but he wasn’t about to bring it up any time soon, until Angel asked. Birthdays were a touchy subject with Angel; he still didn’t know when Angel’s was. He kept meaning to ask Rick or Jeff. “I’ve got friends now, between Meri and the guys at work and the gym. And I’m trying to reach out more at school. But they’re all so young! You know what I mean. They’re just kids. Most of them are there because Daddy’s paying their way,” he said with more than a touch of scorn and jealousy. His father had planned to pay his way too, before he’d disowned him when he found out Dillon was gay.

“I’m sorry, babe. I didn’t mean to upset you. You’re

doing great. I'm so proud of you. I'll try and let up a little about it. It's just, I kept worrying while I was inside about how lonely you'd be. I'm glad you weren't, that you were okay," Angel said, kissing him.

Dillon returned the kiss but kept it from intensifying. He pulled back and looked Angel in the eye. "I had the guys, and Meri, but I was still lonely as hell. Not a day went by without me wishing a dozen times or more that you were there with me. I hope you don't ever have to do that again. I mean, not for as long. I know that's part of your job, that they used you because you're so good at it. But I was so scared something would go wrong, that you wouldn't come home." He swallowed. "How's your arm?"

"Better. I actually broke down and took a Percocet this morning, and then one this evening. And I went in to have the bandage changed, like I was supposed to." He didn't mention the stitches Meri had torn by mistake, or his surprise at the butterfly bandages. Rodrigo must have done it while he was sleeping. He didn't like realizing how vulnerable he'd been, that he'd trusted his life to an almost total stranger. "Eat with me? I want to hear all about the wedding you planned. Oh, shit. Am I invited? I mean, I want to go. I guess I can wear my gray suit, but you're going to be in a tux, right? Or are you?"

Dillon nodded. "I am. With a green cummerbund and bow tie, though, to add some color and distinguish me from the groom and the best man. Daniel didn't want to wear his dress uniform; he was afraid looking at the wedding pictures would upset Meri more if he was in uniform. His friend

Marcos, his best man, is in his unit, shipping out with him, but he agreed to wear a tux too. And you, sir, are going in one as well. I put one on hold for you as soon as I started planning the wedding. I kept hoping you'd come home in time to wear it," Dillon said, swallowing hard, his eyes tearing. "Damn. Meri's a bad influence. She's been crying at the drop of a hat all week."

"Meri is wonderful. And so are you," Angel said, brushing the tear from his cheek and kissing him slowly and sweetly. "And delicious. But I am as hungry as a bear. Food first, then responsible wedding-type stuff, and then touching time. Although I'll probably sneak a few hundred touches in along the way," he warned.

"Good. Come on; let's get a plate made up for you. I'm still stuffed," Dillon said.

Angel ate, while Dillon went over his plans. Angel shook his head in amazement at the wedding flowchart Dillon had made.

Dillon grinned sheepishly. "It's an engineering thing. Don't laugh; I was a whiz at the seating charts. You're at the bridal party table with me, by the way. And Meri's grandmother and her nurse. She's going to be able to come, in her wheelchair. Meri's so excited."

"How about the groom's family? Actually, I was wondering why they weren't helping her," Angel said.

"Daniel doesn't have any. Both sets of grandparents died before he was born and his mother left them when he

was just a baby. His father was an only child and never remarried and he died two years ago. Daniel has an older brother, David. A lot older; he was almost more like an uncle than a brother. But Daniel hasn't spoken to him in two years. David didn't come to their father's funeral and Daniel never forgave him for it. When Daniel heard he was shipping out, he realized he might not get a second chance at a reconciliation. He didn't want to leave anything unfinished, or bring any bad karma onto the battlefield. So he did his best to contact David, but he hasn't heard back so far. Meri gave me David's last known phone number and address, and it seems to still be current. I've been leaving messages all week too, explaining, encouraging him to come. I haven't heard back either, but I'm still hoping he'll surprise everyone and come. I kept a seat for him and a guest at the head table."

"Meri and Daniel met in senior year of high school, and they've been dating ever since. It's part of why they got along so well, the empathy factor. But he sort of lost touch with his civilian friends, and the only one he's really close to in the army that has leave at the same time is his friend Marcos," Dillon said. "I really hope his brother David comes."

Angel nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak. What if he'd died, when he was shot? When he'd huddled on the ground, clutching his arm, praying he wouldn't be hit with another round, he'd pictured his brothers' faces. His heart had almost burst with his regrets. Damn. He needed to rebuild some bridges of his own, sometime soon.

Angel cleared his place and washed his dishes, then got

his checkbook out of the drawer. This was something he could do while Dillon finished up his own paperwork. He figured the newlyweds needed cash more than anything, so he'd write them a check. He was curious to see what his balance was too. He had direct deposit, but he'd added Dillon's name to the account so he could pay his part of the bills while he was undercover.

He smiled as he saw Dillon's meticulous record-keeping. He was surprised and pleased to see that Dillon had socked a substantial portion of his paychecks away into CDs every month. Then his heartbeat spiked at one of the final entries in the checkbook. There was a check for \$4,000, and the note underneath said, "Security deposit, Apt. 340." Their apartment was 462 and he'd paid the security a year ago.

"Angel? What's wrong?" Dillon asked, seeing him staring at the checkbook in disbelief. "Oh, I meant to tell you, I opened some CDs for you. I hope that's okay," he said, biting his lip.

"Where...? Why...? You're leaving?" Angel asked in disbelief.

"What? No! Why do you... oh! Oh, shit, Angel, no! Of course not. I'm sorry I freaked you out with that. And I know it's a lot, that I can't cover the whole thing yet. I felt guilty writing that without asking. It's for Meri. She doesn't know about it yet, but it's my wedding present to her. I haven't given it to the super yet, in case she changed her mind about moving into our building. But I know what it's like, to be homeless, alone. When you took me in, I was half-starved

and living in a hellhole. I needed to make sure that didn't happen to Meri," he explained.

Angel released a long shuddering breath and embraced Dillon. "Don't you ever, ever leave me. I mean, at least, not without telling me first. If it happens, I don't want to find out like this. I..." He pressed his mouth against Dillon's in a searing, desperate kiss.

When they finally came up for air, Dillon looked him in the eye intently. "I'll never leave you. I love you. I'll love you when you're forty and when you're fifty and when you're sixty and every decade after and every year in between. You're my partner. My husband. I don't need to say vows to know that we're together forever. Although don't be surprised if you see me mouthing them along with Meri when she says them tomorrow. Because I planned to before and I still plan to. And this wedding is going to be flawless. I'm done for the night. Now, I'm going to take you to bed and show you that you're mine." Then he kissed Angel again.

An hour later, they finally made it to the bedroom.

"WOW. You look... oh, this is going to be hard," Angel said, staring at Dillon in his tux. He looked amazing, way too perfect, like he belonged in some bridal magazine posing with a supermodel in a designer wedding dress. Angel pulled at the confining collar of his shirt.

“It’s already hard,” Dillon said devilishly. “But if you don’t stop fidgeting, you’ll mess up your tie,” Dillon said in exasperation, fixing it for him for the sixth time that morning. “And have you actually seen yourself in the mirror? I look okay, but you look amazing. I don’t know if I should let you out of the house. Most of the women there aren’t married, more than a few of the guys are gay, and I don’t want anyone else dancing with you at the reception but me,” Dillon said, a possessive fire in his eyes.

“Um, how is that going to work? I mean, us dancing. Her fiancé, he’s army, right? And the best man. I don’t want to get in their faces with something like that,” Angel said.

“Relax. Daniel is perfectly okay with that. In fact, he couldn’t be happier. He’s thrilled I’m gay. Think about it. I’m Meri’s best friend and he’s away from her all the time. I’ll never be interested in her that way, and keep anyone who is at bay. Not to mention his best man, Marcos, is gay too,” Dillon said.

“Oh. Well, in that case, other than maybe a single dance with the bride, you damn well better save all your dances for me,” Angel said. He reached for Dillon and then stopped. “I know we can’t wrinkle these now, but after the reception, I want to fuck you in that tux. I want to carry you over the threshold and—”

“Stop!” Dillon said. “Jesus, you’re going to make me soak right through if you don’t behave,” he said, adjusting his painfully hard cock to a better position. “We’d better get going. We need to be there ahead of everyone, to make sure

everything's okay."

"I know, I know," Angel said, forcing himself to be good. Dillon had worked so hard to make this perfect. He didn't want to spoil it.

Angel drove them in his pickup. He couldn't get over how beautiful Johnny's House was, as he was waved through the wrought-iron gate after his and Dillon's IDs were scrupulously checked and compared against the guest list the guard at the gate held, and he drove up the curving drive. The foster boy's home was a converted luxury hotel in Hillside, the most exclusive district in Hilldale. Angel had heard that Johnny rented out the chapel and ballroom for weddings, and that it was highly sought after. Even without seeing the room itself, he could see why. This part of Meri's wedding, at least, would be fairy-tale. The owner and patron of Johnny's House, Johnny O'Seanessey, had spent decades as a foster father to hundreds of boys he'd rescued off the city's streets. Most of the boys were runaways, reformed drug addicts, and thieves and prostitutes, and a surprisingly large proportion of them were gay. Johnny gave his boys love, safety, a father, a home. Jordy Williams, a fellow Northside detective and one of Angel's friends, was one of "Johnny's Kids."

A tuxedo-clad usher who couldn't have been older than seventeen escorted them inside. Angel's eyes narrowed at the wide smile and appreciative perusal he gave Dillon, his arm automatically going possessively around Dillon's waist. The teen's eyes widened and he looked sheepish and a little bit intimidated. After introducing them to Johnny O'Seanessey,

the youth slipped away quickly. Johnny was appropriately short for someone who often bulldogged his way through the city's red tape, with graying red hair and shrewd but compassionate green eyes.

"Mr. O'Seanessey," Dillon said. "I wanted to thank you again for your generosity in postponing your renovation so that Meri could use the ballroom for her wedding. I know you're doing it as a favor for Jordy, but the department took up a collection. It doesn't come anywhere near to covering the usual rental charge, but we wanted to show our appreciation as best as we could," Dillon said, holding out a check.

"Please, thank everyone for their generosity," Johnny said, accepting the check. "You're right; I am doing this for Jordy, although I try to help young people whenever I can. But your donation is appreciated and the money will be put to very good use. I'm glad you're here so early, Mr. Gosling. I wanted to get your approval on some changes I had to make to the seating arrangements. We needed to add a third table to extend the bridal party table and shift the other tables accordingly. That RSVP we hadn't heard from, Mr. Cortez, has arrived, but he brought three guests instead of just one, and I hadn't known he was also a special-needs guest. In order to fit his wheelchair and the children, we're going to have to switch things around a bit," he said, pulling a folded paper from his pocket and brandishing the revised seating chart.

"He's here? Daniel's brother, David? Oh my God, that's wonderful! But Meri didn't mention a wheelchair or children.

I'm sorry." Dillon looked down at the revised seating chart. "David Cortez, Tanya Summers, Stacy Summers, and Gordon Summers. Are those their ages? Eight and five?" he asked. Johnny nodded. "That's perfect. Thank you so much. I would have gone nuts having to change that at the last minute. Can you have someone escort me to them?"

"I'll take you; it's on my way," Johnny said. "I thought the brothers might like some privacy for their reunion, so they're waiting in a private room I offered them the use of. I know the groom was planning on arriving early too, to make sure everything was all right, so there should be time," Johnny said. He looked over Dillon's shoulder. "In fact, there he is now. Miss Turner showed me his picture," he said, gesturing with his chin.

Dillon turned. Two men in tuxedos were being escorted their way. Dillon recognized Daniel from the photo Meri kept in her wallet too, the only photo she had left of him after the fire. Dillon headed for them, hand outstretched. "Daniel Cortez? I'm Dillon Gosling. It's a pleasure to finally meet you. Meri's told me so much about you."

"Likewise. She's been talking my ear off about you for months," Daniel said with a grin. "This is my best man, Marcos Valdez."

"And this is my partner, Gabriel D'Angelo. Pretty much everyone calls him Angel," Dillon said.

They exchanged handshakes as Daniel said to Angel, "I'm so glad your assignment finished in time for you to make it. I was hoping I'd get the chance to meet you,

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especially now that Dillon's agreed to be the baby's godfather. There's plenty of time before the ceremony starts. I'd love to get a chance to talk to both of you before then," he said.

"We'd love to. But first, there's someone I think you'd like to speak to even more," Dillon said.

"No, it's bad luck to talk to the bride before the wedding," Daniel objected.

"No, not Meri. Your brother. Meri and I contacted him. We were hoping we could convince him to come and, well, he's here, along with three guests," Dillon said.

Daniel's eyes widened. "He's here? David is here? With... who came with him?" he asked, obviously floored.

"A woman, Tanya Summers, and her two children, Stacy and Gordon. Mr. O'Seanessey's put them in a room so you can catch up with each other in private, mend some bridges before the ceremony," he said.

"Gentlemen, I'm Johnny O'Seanessey. Welcome to Johnny's House. Why don't you come with me? Mr. Gosling, why don't you come too? I have one or two other quick questions for you," Johnny said. The five men started walking through the foyer, past a grand staircase, toward the rear of the house.

"He came. Oh my God, he's here. I can't believe he came," Daniel said in hushed tones to Marcos, in Spanish. "What do I say to him?"

“You give him a chance to introduce the woman and children, let him tell you in his own time, in his own words why he didn’t come to your father’s funeral. But most important, remember, today is your wedding day. It needs to be as perfect as you can make it for Meri’s sake, as well as your own. So even if you want to strangle David, you find it in your heart to forgive him, for this one day at least. The two of you have the rest of your lives to hate each other if you want. You need to make peace with him for now at least. After our tour of duty is done, if you want to burn your bridges then, that’s when you do it,” Marcos said.

Daniel nodded.

Angel swallowed hard. He hadn’t meant to eavesdrop, but he couldn’t help hearing. The rest of their lives to hate each other. God. Did Rafe and Uri still blame him, still hate him? Weddings and funerals: the two things that brought family together when nothing else could. Would it take another funeral for him to face his brothers? No. He’d call them as soon as the reception was over, do all he could to mend his own fences.

The door was open when they approached. “David,” Daniel whispered in shock, grabbing hold of Marcos like he might fall without him.

The dark-haired, dark-eyed man in the wheelchair who looked so much like his brother paled. He reached up and clutched the hand of the tall blonde beside him tightly, even as the little boy ducked behind his mother’s skirt and the eight-year-old girl looked curiously at them.

“Oh, my god, David! What happened?” Daniel asked, running across the room to his brother, falling to his knees and wrapping his arms around him.

“I’m sorry, Danny. I’m so sorry for everything. I’ll never forgive myself for not being there when you needed me. I would have given anything to come to Dad’s funeral, to be there for you, but I couldn’t,” he said, his voice choked with emotion.

Johnny, Dillon, Angel, and Marcos left the room, closing the door behind them, to give the brothers some privacy.

“Christ. Why didn’t you say something, warn him? A wheelchair!” Marcos said.

Dillon’s eyes widened. “Oh my God. You mean, he didn’t know?”

Marcos shook his head.

“I’m sorry. Johnny mentioned it, but I just assumed...,” Dillon said.

“It’s obvious David’s had a pretty tough row to hoe too. I think Daniel will be able to forgive him now. I’m glad. You need to stay focused. When you fight, you can’t let stuff like family back at home distract you. It’s going to be tough enough, with Meri pregnant. I don’t know what he’d do if it wasn’t for you, Dillon. But he knows, no matter what, you’ll look out for Meri and the baby. Wow, and now maybe his brother can help too. And his lady friend. The way David was holding her, that looked pretty solid. Especially bringing her

kids here too. There may be another family wedding in the near future. Only I hope they wait. I know Daniel wouldn't want to miss it."

"Look, I know you've probably got a million things to do. I'll keep an eye on the door, make sure he's okay once they're done. Why don't you go be man of honor, help Meri get dressed? How many best men can say that to another man the day of the wedding, right?" he said, shaking his head and laughing. He looked from Angel to Dillon and grinned. "Man, it's in the air. The two of you, the way you look together, it's incredible. Makes me jealous, man. Some day, I want to have a man look at me the way you two look at each other. Maybe soon, God willing, the two of you will be able to tie the knot too, make it official in the eyes of the state. God, he already knows; he doesn't need to hear a priest say the words. Oh man, I'm getting sappy now. Well, I'd better get it all out now. Don't ask, don't tell, right? But as soon as my tour is up, I'm done. I just hope I can find a job when I muster out."

"We'd be happy to put a word in for you at the precinct," Angel said. "Lots of ex-military go into law enforcement, or civilian support services, like Dillon. Look us up, okay? Daniel too. Us good guys have to look out for each other, right?" he said, with a smile.

"It's a deal. Now go and help make the magic happen for Meri. This is her special day," Marcos said.

A LITTLE less than two hours later, Angel and Dillon watched Daniel sweep Meri around the ballroom in their first dance together as husband and wife. “You did it, babe,” Angel said. “You gave them the fairy-tale wedding they wanted. I still can’t believe how perfect it was. People plan stuff like this for a year or more, and it gets all screwed up. But this... a week, and it was perfect.”

“It wasn’t me. It was everyone. They all pulled together, came through for them,” Dillon said modestly.

“I know. But it’s like an orchestra. Without the maestro, it’s just a bunch of instruments playing in cacophony,” Angel said.

Dillon looked at him oddly, speculatively. “Thanks. That’s really sweet of you to think that but... that’s not really an analogy I’d expect you to use.”

Angel sighed and gave him a lopsided smile. “Yeah, it doesn’t exactly fit in with the redneck hick cop aura I project, does it? Well, prepare to be amazed. The band’s cuing the bridal party to the floor. Remember I told you not to worry about this dance, to just let me lead, that I know what I’m doing? Come dance with me, my love,” Angel said.

To Dillon’s amazement, he was swept onto the floor. It was as if Fred Astaire had reincarnated in Angel’s body. They spun about the room in a flawless, graceful waltz. Dillon gazed up at Angel, completely enraptured, oblivious to the flashes of the camera, the videographer, their friends watching in open-mouthed amazement. Angel was his whole

world. By the time the dance ended, Dillon was giddy, his face flushed. “You are the most amazing man I’ve ever known,” Dillon said breathlessly, a look of utter devotion on his face. “How did you learn to dance like that?” Dillon asked in awe.

“You know how, Dillon. You said it, in those vows you helped Meri write.” He took Dillon’s hand, looked deeply into Dillon’s eyes and recited the end of Meri’s vows to Dillon: “You are my husband. My feet dance because of you. My heart beats because of you. My eyes see because of you. My mind thinks because of you. And I love because of you.”

“Oh, Angel,” Dillon said, eyes bright with adoration. He repeated the same Eskimo vows back to Angel and then the two of them sealed their vows with a kiss that lasted through the entire next dance, with a love that would last them through their lifetimes.

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



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