

Good to Know



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This book would not have been possible
without Elizabeth and Lynn, whose tireless
efforts and dedication to their dreams
made my dream come true.

For Kelley, the best sister
anyone could ever hope to have.
For Gwen, thank you for being my friend.
For Jerry, whose art inspired this story.

Chapter 1

WILLIAM BALDWIN PRUIT III looked out the window over the Avenue Secrétan, wondering why he'd been called to the Headmaster's office; another three months and the school year would be over. It was already nearing the end of March; what could he have done now? His brain worked feverishly to figure out what he could have done. He always did his work, and though he didn't particularly like Ms. Schnabel, his math teacher, he'd never been rude to her. He could hear voices inside; he recognized the clipped, German-accented French exclamations placed strategically amongst the heavily accented English. It made William laugh inside his head every time he heard Monsieur Gamache try to speak English. The Headmaster had obviously never been to America; neither had he spent much time in England, if his accent were any indication. But to whom did the other voice belong? The accent was somewhat unfamiliar—American, maybe? Canadian? Most of William's classmates were not European by birth; the majority came from rich American or Canadian families, like himself. He couldn't really make out what the problem was, and he was trying very hard to hear what could have gotten him in trouble again.

William knew he wasn't a bad student, but he always seemed to be worthy of close scrutiny by the school's Headmaster and psychologist. *Concerned*, they'd say over and over again. William was not in trouble, but they were concerned by his self-imposed isolation. *You don't seem interested in anything other than your books and horses. You don't seem to be making many friends, and*

you've been here how long? It wasn't that he didn't try, but William was small for his age. It was one of the reasons he liked being on the horses; they made him feel big and grown-up. Besides, the other students seemed to be interested only in trying to break curfew or raid the kitchen after hours. *I'm not unhappy*, William would counter, but to no avail. William got the distinct impression that the two old men found him odd and uncooperative.

He'd been at the boarding school most of his life, certainly long enough to remember never having lived anywhere else. The house that his parents called home was in Toronto—Rosedale, to be precise—but he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen it—or them, for that matter. They were faithful parents when it came to sending for him so he could spend a week with them in Prague or Montpellier or Salamanca or wherever they happened to be vacationing, but he'd not seen them now for almost three months. Not unusual given that he had classes to attend, but odd that he'd not heard from them, in any form, for such a long stretch. Perhaps they were tired of his questions, asking if he could go here, see that. *How could they be tired of that?* William wondered. *They usually send me off somewhere with the driver.*

William was checking his jacket and tie for the fourth time when the outer door opened, and he saw Monsieur Gamache standing in the doorway, his face solemn, his eyes downcast before finding William's big blue eyes and forcing a smile.

"Guillaume, viens, viens."

William stifled a laugh at the sound of his name in French, a sound he always found funny.

"Oui, monsieur." William buttoned his jacket and grabbed his little messenger bag, stood straight and walked into the office.

"Hello, William," the other man, the American-sounding man, said as he offered his hand. "My name is Kevin Boyd and I'm a lawyer." William saw Mr. Boyd offer a small smile and add,

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“Perhaps you call them ‘solicitors’ here, like they do in England?”

“No, sir; I’m Canadian,” William pointed out as he shook the offered hand and then sat. “I call them ‘lawyers’ too.”

“Eh bien, Guillaume,” William noticed the look that Mr. Boyd gave to the Headmaster at those words. “Je m’excuse, Monsieur Boyd.” The Headmaster settled in his chair and began again, looking directly at William. “We are as well expecting Monsieur Kleinfelter, but we will commence without him, non?”

William shrugged and sank further in his chair. No use keeping up the charade since the psychologist was also coming. He had done something again, something to deserve another lecture on being social and inclusive in his dealings with his classmates. *But what?* He tried desperately to think of what he’d done now—or not done—but could not think fast enough. He didn’t like this feeling; it made him all fluttery in his stomach, sitting in this office, both of the older men being so nice to him. It made him *nervous*.

“William,” Mr. Boyd started, “I represent your parents.” He shifted uncomfortably and continued. “Yesterday, I’m afraid—”

“Oh, non, comment ça?” Monsieur Kleinfelter rushed through the door, files clutched to his chest as he closed the door behind him. “Vous n’êtes pas capable d’attendre?”

“We just have begun, Hércule,” the Headmaster admonished, “and please to speak the English in front of our guest today, Hércule.”

William noticed Mr. Boyd’s cheeks turn pink as he watched the psychologist settle into the chair between them. And William knew. It wasn’t something he’d done, but something that had been done to him. Again. Like the time some of the upper-class boys had hidden the school’s flag in his room. William had been given toilets to clean as punishment. William had not complained, had *never* complained. It was his life. Just as his life now meant his parents

would never be coming back.

“They’re dead, aren’t they?” William’s voice was resolute but quiet, very quiet, his eyes worrying a crease in his tie. He thought he sounded whiny, as if he were one of his classmates, always complaining about how, without the French Revolution, he would be Prince so-and-so right at that moment.

“Yes, William. I’m so very sorry.” Mr. Boyd’s hand touched his shoulder softly. William didn’t say anything, but it made him uncomfortable to be touched like that. He’d not had a lot of physical affection. “I’m here to tell you and to make sure that you arrive in Canada safely.”

“Why Canada, sir?” William blinked, trying to get his mind around the idea. He thought he should be crying now or something. Wasn’t that what children his age should do when their parents died?

“Your parents’ will is quite specific about what should happen to you—who should take care of you if something happened to them before your eighteenth birthday.”

“But who, sir?” William sputtered a little, clenching his fist at this revelation. Surely there was enough money so that he could finish out his schooling and then make his own way. “I mean, I want to stay here.”

“And nothing would make me happier.” Monsieur Gamache smiled. “But your parents are wishing for you to go back to Canada to live with the relatives who—”

“I have no relatives,” William interrupted. “No grandparents, no parents, no aunts, no uncles—”

“Your mother had a cousin, has a cousin, in Alberta.” Mr. Boyd’s hand had left William’s shoulder. William wanted it back all of a sudden. “Have you ever heard of the artist Jerry McKenzie?”

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William shook his head. He could feel that he wasn't going to win this battle either. He wasn't in trouble this time; it was worse than being in trouble—worse because now, he would have to leave the school, the only place that had ever felt like home.

“He’s becoming very well-known all over the world.” Mr. Boyd shifted in his chair and ran a hand over his thinning hair. William liked that he didn’t try to hide that, his thinning hair. Not like Monsieur Kleinfelter, who wore the most horrendous toupees. *Honestly, who would believe that the fringe around your ears is completely grey, but every other hair on your head is still black?* “He lives on a ranch, with horses—well, two horses. It backs onto the Rocky Mountains near Banff, a touristy-kind of place with lakes and—”

“I want to stay here.” There, William had stated it clearly—no possibility of adding to the confusion.

“Mais, c’est impossible,” Monsieur Kleinfelter sputtered. “Ce n’est pas une question de ce que tu veux, Guillaume—”

William could only think of Frau Zimmerman. The other kids teased him about hanging around with the cafeteria worker, but William adored her, like a grandmother—or at least what he thought having a grandmother would be like, since he’d never known one of his own. Frau Zimmerman would make a special-sized Sachertorte for him on his birthday, wish him fun on his special day, tell him how special he was, how he’d grow up to do great things.

“I’m sure,” Mr. Boyd said as he stared at the psychologist with those deep blue eyes, “that what Monsieur Kleinfelter is trying to say is that this is a legal issue.” William dropped his eyes to his lap, knowing what was coming next. “I’m very sorry, William, but you’re only ten years old.” Mr. Boyd’s hand returned to William’s shoulder. “Your parents were quite specific about who should—”

“Yes, sir.” William did not look up.

“Un peu plus de politesse, Guillaume!” William did not look at Monsieur Gamache, did not wish to see disappointment in his eyes again.

“Please, please, Monsieur Gamache, it’s not a problem.” Mr. Boyd squeezed William’s shoulder a little. “Ça ne fait rien?” William looked up to see Mr. Boyd smiling. He looked intently at William and smiled. “Did I say that right?”

William nodded and flashed a brief, resigned smile back at Mr. Boyd. After Mr. Boyd took his hand back, William retrieved his bag from the floor, straightened his jacket once again, and stood. Looking at Mr. Boyd, he asked, “May I say goodbye to Frau Zimmerman?”

Mr. Boyd looked inquisitively at Monsieur Gamache, who explained about William’s connection to the school’s cook. “Of course,” Mr. Boyd answered, a sad smile on his face. “I think we have plenty of time.” Mr. Boyd stood up and held out his hand to the small boy. *He’s so small for ten*, the lawyer thought, thinking of his two girls and how much bigger they seemed at the same age. “Anyone else you want to say goodbye to, William?” The lawyer felt a twinge of sadness at William shaking his head and felt homesick for his two girls.

Mr. Boyd let William lead him to the kitchen, where he saw a short, stout woman fussing over a counter dusted with flour, hands kneading bread dough. “Frau Zimmerman?”

William tugged on Mr. Boyd’s hand. “She doesn’t speak English, sir.” Letting go of the lawyer’s hand, William walked over and spoke the woman’s name, waiting for her to turn around.

The lawyer, already homesick for Toronto and his family, watched as the woman’s concentration transformed into a broad smile as she patted a stool beside the counter. He saw William just shake his head, eyes downcast; then, the woman got to her knees, lifting William’s chin to study his face. Tears were running down

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William's face when she kissed his forehead, saying things that the lawyer didn't understand. He noticed the woman's brow furrow and turn towards him when William began speaking and pointing in his direction. He saw William nod several times when Frau Zimmerman spoke to him, running her hands over the boy's cheeks and hair. *No wonder he's so small, so frightened*, the lawyer thought. *This has been his home.*

Within the hour, William was sitting beside Mr. Boyd in a first-class seat on a plane bound for Alberta, Canada.

"Frau Zimmerman seemed very nice," Mr. Boyd offered and watched William nod and shrug. "Did you learn German from her?"

"And in school." William's voice was soft, sad.

"Do you like speaking German or French better?"

William shrugged. For William, it wasn't a question of which language he liked better; he liked them both, but for different reasons. He didn't want to tell the man that the reason he liked German so much was that it was always spoken by someone who kissed him, made him feel special, wanted. He thought that if he told Mr. Boyd this, he'd seem like a baby, and Frau Zimmerman had told him that he had to be a big boy and not cause problems for anyone. *Just like you've always been with me*, William remembered her saying before she hugged him. He'd tried not to cry when she said goodbye, but he hadn't been able to stop from himself once he realized he'd be gone for his next birthday, and he didn't know where.

Chapter 2

“FOR Christ’s sake, Kitty, that’s what you’re being paid for, isn’t it?”

“Listen to me, chéri.” Kitty pointed a long red nail in Jerry’s direction. “I know what my job entails, and it does not involve helping you dodge calls from lawyers. You *know* how jumpy lawyers make me.” Kitty threw a piece of folded paper down on Jerry’s work bench. “I told him that you would call within the hour.” She threw him her cell phone; it hit him squarely in the chest with a force that caught him off-guard, his hands fumbling but missing the catch.

“Your husband’s a lawyer.” Rubbing his chest and retrieving the cell phone, he mumbled, “Throw like a lesbian.”

“I know. Call—now!” Kitty sifted through canvas after canvas, decimating the organized pile that sat in the corner of the loft. “And for the record,” she said as she smiled sarcastically, “it only seems that I throw like a lesbian because gay guys can’t catch worth shit.”

Jerry punched in the numbers, eyes darting uneasily between paper and the keys of the cell phone. He waited for the phone to be answered. “That’s a stereotype, and you know it,” Jerry chastised, “and besides, I was only teasing you. You didn’t have to be insulting.”

Kitty continued to rifle through the canvasses without

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acknowledging Jerry's hypocritical observation.

"Yes, hello," Jerry began, "I'm trying to contact a Mr. Boyd."

"Yes, this is he." After a few beats, the voice continued, "Mr. McKenzie?"

Jerry nodded, laughing at the proper grammar, and then realized he was on the phone. "Yes. Call me Jerry, Mr. Boyd."

"Jerry, yes, please call me Kevin. I've been trying to reach you."

"I'm listening." Jerry noticed Kitty's frown. He knew she would probably say something about being more civil when he hung up.

"Are you available to meet with me?" Mr. Boyd, Kevin, sounded like he was busy doing ten things at once. "I'm only about ten kilometers from your ranch, and it is a rather urgent matter."

"Yes, I guess." Jerry tried to hide the contempt from his voice, but from the look on Kitty's face, he was failing miserably. "Isn't this something we can do over the phone? I mean, what is it that you want?"

"I'll explain when I arrive." Kevin's voice, Jerry noticed, was becoming less client-friendly by the minute. "I'll see you in about fifteen minutes?"

"I'll be here." Jerry closed the phone and tossed it onto his work bench. "Happy?" Jerry turned to grin at Kitty.

"How could I be anything but when I'm around you?" Kitty retrieved her phone and stuffed it in her purse. "So, what have you been working on?"

"Now, Kitty, you know the rules." Jerry ushered her out of his workroom in the upper loft of the barn and locked the door. He looked down at himself, noticing the ripped T-shirt and paint-

splattered jeans, and hesitated. “Do you think I should change?”

“In more ways than one, chéri.”

“Do you know any other French words?”

Kitty raked her gaze over Jerry’s tall, tanned body and smiled. “Trou de cul?”

“*Asshole*, nice.” Jerry laughed and swiveled Kitty to the stairs. “So ladylike.”

“You’re the one who thinks I’m a lesbian! Why disappoint?” Kitty smiled and dug in her purse for a cigarette. “What did the shyster want, anyway?”

“Kitty, please.” Jerry huffed when they were outside of the barn. “I know you were listening. He didn’t tell me anything, only that it was an urgent matter.”

“Is it money, do you think?” Kitty puffed her cigarette, never inhaling. Jerry always wondered what the point of smoking was if not to inhale for the buzz.

“What would I need with more money?”

“True.” Kitty puffed some more and finally crushed the almost-unsmoked cigarette under the heel of her very expensive faux-leopard stiletto. “You could always give it to me. Start your own gallery? Find a normal home?”

“You have more money than I do, I don’t want my own gallery, and there’s nothing wrong with my home.”

“Chéri,” Kitty tsked, “you live out in the middle of nowhere, you have no friends, and you never do anything other than work and ride those filthy animals.”

“Chérie,” Jerry oozed, “I don’t need to be surrounded by the city, don’t need friends, and those filthy animals are called

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‘horses’.”

“Quoique.”

“Kitty,” Jerry admonished, “you’re a nice Jewish girl from Winnipeg. What’s with all the French?”

“Mystique, chéri.” Kitty made her way to her car and turned before opening the door. “It sounds better than Yiddish.”

“Gai gesunderhait!”

Kitty laughed and blew Jerry a kiss. “Grois-halter!”

As Kitty backed up, Jerry noticed a compact tan four-door sedan winding its way up his long driveway. *Can’t be money; my parents are already dead*, Jerry thought to himself, already regretting that he hadn’t changed his clothes. Not that he felt the need to impress some stranger, but he didn’t want to look like a slob either. Jerry would never admit to vanity, but he was still quite happy with his looks and his body. He would turn forty-six in June, and he still looked pretty good. He worked in the stables, did the occasional session with weights, and could still bench press almost twice his body weight. On those rare Friday nights when he went to Calgary, he never had any problems picking up the odd young thing to fuck into the mattress three or four times before leaving quietly before the sun came up.

As the tan sedan parked, Jerry puffed out his chest. *Hell, I still look good, no matter what I’m wearing. Who knows*, Jerry smiled to himself, *maybe this lawyer will be good-looking enough and young enough to....* Thinning hair, short build, three-piece suit.... *Or not*, Jerry sighed as he watched the passenger door open. Two lawyers? Who was the woman in the smart Jaclyn Smith-type business suit? Jerry’s eyes drifted up and down the pair; he couldn’t remember the last time he’d worn a suit.

“Jerry,” Kevin said as he stepped forward, hand outthrust. “Kevin Boyd.”

“Kevin,” Jerry nodded and turned to the woman. “Jerry McKenzie.”

“Sara Kaczmerovic,” the woman started. “Sara is fine. I’m with Child and Family.”

“Well,” Jerry laughed. “I don’t have either of those, so... how can I help you?”

“Would it be possible to sit while we discuss this?” Kevin looked around. Jerry thought he looked a little frantic.

“Discuss what?”

Kevin, sensing that the tall man would not make this easy, sighed and began his explanation. “I’m very sorry to inform you that your cousin, Pamela, has been killed in an automobile accident in the south of France.”

Jerry shrugged.

“Well, it seems that she and her husband—”

“Whom I haven’t seen since their wedding almost twenty years ago.” Jerry sighed. “Listen, Kevin, Sara, I’m not some fragile schoolgirl here, and I haven’t seen or talked to either Pamela or Serge in twenty years.” Jerry let the words hang there. “Just say it.”

“They had a son, Mr.—Jerry,” Sara stated, almost in a whisper, “and it was their wish that if anything should happen to them, that you—”

“Sorry, not interested.”

“I beg your pardon?” Sara looked shocked.

“Find some other place for him.” Jerry moved his arms as if to embrace them and herded them toward the tan sedan. “If he’s related to me, there’s plenty of money, am I right?” Jerry saw Kevin nod almost imperceptibly. “And I don’t believe that I’m the only

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remaining relative. I mean, there's gotta be somebody else out there, right? Somebody who would actually want him?"

"Jerry." Sara stopped moving backward toward the car and glowered at him. "There is no one else. There is no other family." She crossed her arms over her chest and waited, but Jerry's expression did not change. "If you do not want him, there's only foster care until he's eighteen."

"Right." Jerry laughed and dug his hands in his pockets. "Let me guess. You pulled him out of some fancy boarding school in Switzerland just so you could put him in foster care." Jerry shook his head and turned to the house. "Try that one on someone else, lady. I ain't buying."

"Mr. McKenzie, please!" Kevin's voice cracked a little as he began walking toward him.

"Look, *Mr. Boyd*." Jerry crossed his arms over his substantial chest but did not move from the veranda. "This kid comes from money, just like I do. Send him back to the boarding school, leave me on the record as primary contact or whatever the hell it's called nowadays, and let him live the life he's used to."

"It's not quite that simple, Mr. McKenzie."

"And why's that?"

"Other than the money in his trust fund, which he can't touch until he's twenty-five, his parents were heavily in debt." Kevin wiped his hand over his eyes.

"In debt?" Jerry hadn't seen that one coming. How could Pamela be in debt? Her parents had been richer than Jerry's ever were.

"It would seem that Pamela invested heavily in her husband's *ideas*." Jerry wanted to laugh at Kevin's use of air quotes. "And...."

“Un huh.” Jerry eyed both Kevin and Sara, only then realizing that they’d left someone sitting in the back seat of the tan sedan. Jerry could only see a little baseball cap, red maple leaf moving up and down or side to side. The boy—they’d brought him. “You pieces of—”

“Mr. McKenzie, please,” Kevin started.

“You couldn’t have told me sooner that he was sitting right in the back seat of the goddamned car?” Jerry’s voice was a whisper as he strode towards the two suits. “What if he heard me?”

“I would think it would make him despise you a little.” Sara smiled. “Who knows, *Jerry*, maybe it’ll make it easier for him to want foster care.”

“I didn’t—” Jerry didn’t know what to say. He finally stopped talking.

“Please.” Kevin motioned to the front door of the house as Jerry watched Sara open the back door of the sedan. He stood rooted to the spot as Sara helped a little blond boy out of the car. Jerry didn’t even know his name, couldn’t even be sure of his last name anymore. What the hell had his cousin been thinking? Jerry followed Kevin to the front door and waited, his hand shaking as he grabbed the doorknob. He watched the little boy move to the back of the car, helping Sara remove two small suitcases. Everything this little boy owned was right there in those two suitcases. Jerry felt his chest tightening a little. *Did he hear me?* Kevin touched Jerry’s bicep and waited. Jerry couldn’t take his eyes off the little boy.

“How old?” Jerry watched as the little boy tugged at his sweatshirt, a big, too-big white fleece job with a big red maple leaf on the front, matching the one on his baseball cap. *No family, no home, I sure as shit don’t want him, and he’s still forced to dress like some tourist.* Jerry felt like turning to one of the suits and asking, *What, you couldn’t find him something with a rude saying or a rock band’s tour schedule?*

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“Ten.”

Awfully small for ten, Jerry thought, but didn’t voice his concern. “What’s his name?”

“William Baldwin Pruitt III.”

“The third? I thought his father’s name was Serge?” Jerry looked back at Kevin for a moment before returning his gaze to William. “How did that happen?”

“Ostentation, perhaps?” Kevin shrugged and offered a small smile, a knowing smile. Leaning closer, Kevin chuckled. “Serge’s *real* name was Malcolm Titford.”

Jerry laughed and turned to look at Kevin. “Poor kid. At least he was spared that much.” Turning, arms over his chest, he studied the scene before him. “I never did like Serge.” Shaking his head, he turned back to Kevin, wishing the lawyer would get that pleading expression off his face, and asked, “How the hell do you die and leave your kid with nothing?”

“He didn’t, Jerry. William could have you. Please,” Kevin repeated softly and motioned to the door.

Jerry let them in the house, moving quickly to the window to continue surveying the boy. Sara was leading him to the porch to deposit the suitcases. William looked up briefly and focused his gaze hesitantly, on Jerry; Jerry smiled, or tried to show a smile, and William looked away. Sara and William headed to the barn. *Don’t go in my studio*, Jerry wanted to say, but didn’t. He continued to watch while Kevin offered explanations and platitudes. They didn’t go into the barn, instead seeming content to lean against the fence of the corral, probably making noises to try to get the horses’ attention.

“I can understand—” Kevin stopped himself and began again. “No, I’m sorry; I don’t know what you’re feeling right now, but believe me, Jerry, we looked for a—”

“Better place?”

“I was going to say ‘more convenient’ place, but there is no other option.” Kevin walked a few feet to stand beside Jerry. “No grandparents, no aunts, no uncles. And with your money—” Jerry heard the meaning, but did not react.

“I wouldn’t have a problem, right?”

“Something like that.” Kevin motioned to the overstuffed sofa. “Could we sit for a minute?”

Jerry sat without saying or offering anything more.

“I’ve sorta gone out on a limb here and convinced Sara to help me bend the rules a little.”

Jerry raised an eyebrow.

“If you could just give it a few weeks?” Kevin rubbed his hands together. Jerry wondered why Kevin seemed more upset by this than he was. “I’ve spent a fair bit of time with that little boy and he’s... wonderful. Creative, funny—and very, very confused.”

“Kevin.” Jerry laughed without any humor. “What I know about kids you could fit on the head of a pin and still have room to paint the Sistine Chapel.”

“Sara will help you both, I promise.” Kevin scooted forward on his chair and smiled. “That boy needs a home, Jerry, and you’re it, I’m afraid.”

“And what if it doesn’t work?” Jerry pinched the bridge of his nose. “Won’t this just make it worse, harder to...?”

“How could it be worse?” Kevin laughed and stopped himself. “The only thing he’s said to me about his parents is that they didn’t want him, were never around, and hadn’t spoken to him in almost three months.” Kevin cleared his throat. “When I told him you had horses here, his eyes lit up. He got so excited, wondering if you’d

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maybe let him ride.” Kevin laughed, a deep, rich laugh that made Jerry smile. “Even told me to tell you he’d muck stalls and clean tack... whatever the hell that means.”

“Means he knows more about horses than you.” Jerry massaged the back of his neck with his hand. “That supposed to make me feel better, you telling me all this?” Jerry’s arms were crossed over his chest, his gaze riveted on the lawyer.

“I guess not,” Kevin began before leaning back in his chair, “but it can’t make you feel any worse, can it? I mean, if all else fails, you can send him back to the boarding school in Switzerland. I know he wanted to stay there.”

“He what?”

Kevin nodded, not bothering to repeat himself.

“Well, that’s just....” Jerry stopped himself from continuing his thought. “I hated that place, hated everything about it. Couldn’t wait to get out of there.” Jerry studied the lawyer’s face for a moment. “I remember what it was like to have to spend vacations there because my parents were too busy jetting around. Wouldn’t be right to just send him back there, no family.” Jerry looked out at the little boy. “Jesus, fuck me,” Jerry sighed. “Kid’s got no one but me.” Jerry shook his head. “Poor bastard.” With a resigned sigh, Jerry gnawed on his bottom lip and turned to face the lawyer. “All right, I guess. I can’t send a ten-year-old out, especially if I’m the only family he’s got.” Jerry smiled at the slight curve on the lawyer’s lips. “But something tells me you knew I wouldn’t be *that* big a bastard, yeah?”

“I didn’t, really, until now.” Kevin stood and offered his hand. “But it’s good to know you’re willing to try.” Kevin let Jerry’s hand drop. “Are you, Jerry? Does, no, could William have you?”

“Yeah,” Jerry sighed, turning to look out the window again. William—or was it Sara?—had somehow gotten Biscuit and King to

come over to the fence. Biscuit seemed quite content to stand there, licking William's outstretched palm. "I'm willing, but I can't make any promises."

"Fair enough, Jerry," Kevin said as he moved to the door, "fair enough."

"I'm gay." Jerry didn't know why he blurted it out like that, but he figured they should know now instead of later. "Just so you know." Jerry followed Kevin to the door. "If that's gonna be a problem, you'd best take him back with you today."

"We've—or I should say Sara has—done a thorough investigation of you, Jerry, and she didn't come across anything that caused her any concern." Kevin offered his hand one more time. "You've got what that boy needs, Jerry; I know it."

"You got kids, Kevin?"

Kevin frowned at the non sequitur but smiled. "Two girls."

"Then maybe you can tell me what it is that boy needs."

"Someone with two ears, a heart, and two arms for hugging." Kevin opened the door.

"Can do that, I guess."

Kevin nodded to the fence. "That little boy is gonna need someone over the next few months, Jerry. Hell, maybe even years." Kevin stepped onto the veranda, waved to Sara and William, and then turned back to Jerry. "But if you need anything, anything at all, you let me know, okay?"

Jerry nodded and stepped off the veranda beside Kevin. "I'll be holding you to that."

"Forgive me for saying so, Jerry." Kevin shielded his eyes from the bright sunlight. "But something tells me you two might just need each other."

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Jerry let the comment go without a response and looked out to the corral, watching Sara and William make their way back to the car. While Kevin knelt on the ground chatting with William about the horses, Sara explained what her role would be in all of this: weekly check-ins—daily if she saw anything of concern; visits with psychologists for William; and assistance for Jerry with things like schools, parenting classes, and anything else he might feel he needed.

“Thank you,” Jerry sighed, overwhelmed by all of the information. “And I’m sorry, Sara... for before.”

“Pfft.” Sara laughed, slapping Jerry backhanded on the chest. “That’s all you got? I’ll bring you with me to downtown Calgary next time, let you see how the pros try to hurt my feelings.”

“Jerry?” Kevin walked up beside them. “I’d like you to meet William Baldwin Pruitt III.”

Jerry got down on his knees and offered his hand, well aware William might not take it. “Nice to meet you, William.”

“Yes, sir. You too, sir.” William placed his small hand in Jerry’s big paw but did not look at him when he said it, and Jerry’s chest tightened a little. “I’m sorry to be a bother, sir. I promise I won’t get underfoot.”

Jerry’s eyes stung as he looked up at Sara and Kevin. *Fuck, he did hear me.* “Hey, listen, William, I’m really sorry about what I said before—”

“It’s okay, sir, you don’t have to—”

“Okay, first of all, you can call me Jerry, and second of all, it’s not okay.” Jerry pushed the baseball cap back on William’s head. “I was rude and that ain’t the cowboy way.” Jerry pulled the cap off completely and ran his hand over William’s blond hair. “And I’m very sorry.” After a moment, Jerry put his hand on William’s shoulder and asked, “Can I make it up to you? Maybe we’ll do some

riding tonight before dinner?”

“Could we? They’re so big!” William’s eyes, Jerry noticed, were a brilliant blue. When Jerry nodded and smiled, squeezing the little shoulder, William sighed. “Thank you, sir, I mean, Jerry.”

“Hey,” Sara interjected, “how ’bout I take William to see if we can’t make something of a space for him in the house.”

Jerry stood and pointed back to the door. “There are two guest bedrooms upstairs and to the left; choose whichever you’d like.” As an afterthought, he called, “We can go shopping for furniture tomorrow, if you don’t like what’s in there now.”

When they were out of earshot, Jerry turned to Kevin and muttered, “Me and my fuckin’ mouth.”

“I know, Jerry, but it won’t do you any good to beat yourself up.” Kevin smiled. “Believe me, you’re gonna make mistakes. And if my wife is right, I make twenty or thirty a day.”

Chapter 3

DAVID stared out at the pastoral scene outside his classroom window; the scenery had always helped him feel peaceful and serene, but not today. No matter where he looked, he could see Sampson's ass as he pounded into that little blond twink, could hear Sampson's laugh as he looked up and saw David standing, shopping bags in hand—mostly filled with more crap for Sampson—in the bedroom doorway. *Come on and try him, baby; you won't believe how tight he is.* And then Sampson had gone back to fucking the little blond twenty-something as if David had never even been there, sweat pouring down his back as he grunted and rutted, the little blond screaming Sampson's name over and over.

In my sheets, on my bed, was all David had been able to think. It wasn't Sampson's bed; sure, Sampson lived there, but everything was David's. *Get out!* he'd finally screamed at the two of them before they had a chance to finish. *Hey, David, this is my house too!* David couldn't explain why, but that had made him laugh so hard that tears streamed down his face. Whether they were tears of laughter or tears of sadness, he couldn't say then. *Since when? Probably the only thing you've paid for in the last year is the sixteen-year-old you're currently in.* Then the little blond thing had spoken, explaining that he was actually twenty-one, but he had refused to prove it when David had dared him to show a driver's license.

Get out! David had yelled again at the top of his voice, spittle

flying out of his mouth before he could stop it. Without waiting, he had taken the pile of clothing on the floor, scooped it all into his arms, and walked casually over to the balcony while the two of them finished, Sampson assuring the little blond that everything was okay. Even when David had gathered the rest of Sampson's clothes—clothes that David had paid for—out of the closet, Sampson and his little blond lay in the bed, gasping for breath.

What the fuck, baby? Sampson, finally coherent, or as coherent as he would get, had run to the balcony. David's condo was on the twenty-fifth floor, and Sampson's clothes had been run over by the cars on the busy street below. David had picked up a meat cleaver in his hand, threatening to call the police and report a break-in; he'd announced his intention to count to five, cell phone in hand, thumb pressing the three digits slowly.

A humorless laugh escaped his lips as he sat back in his chair and pulled himself back to his desk. Sampson and his little blond had had to scurry out of the apartment so quickly, they hadn't had time to cover themselves, Sampson threatening to call a lawyer if any of his belongings were ruined. *You do that, dipshit*, David had yelled back. *Just remember that you don't have a pot to piss in, let alone any money to pay a lawyer. And they won't take a quick fuck as payment, fuckwad!* David hadn't bothered to look over the balcony to see them dressing in the street, although the urge to grab his camera had driven him to distraction for almost five whole minutes.

Now, his condo was on the market, David already having moved into a cute two-bedroom apartment nearer the school.

"Hey, you!" David jumped when he heard the words, still lost in the nightmare that had been Sampson. He looked over and saw Lenore, the school's guidance counsellor.

"Hey, yourself." David tried to sound upbeat but failed miserably. David and Lenore had always had a joking and teasing

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kind of relationship full of one-liners and put-downs, meant only to spur the other to hone and sharpen their repartee.

“You look like shit, sweetums!”

“Thanks, darling!” David doubted that Lenore’s comment was meant to insult or was even part of their regular banter. “What are you doing here?”

“New student—reading over the case file. And you?” When David didn’t answer, Lenore continued, “Shouldn’t you be at home with the new beau?”

“Almost one year. But no, he’s now an *ex-beau*.”

“Oh, sweetie, I’m sorry.”

David dismissed the sentiment with a wave of his hand. “No fool like an old fool, I guess, huh?”

“Well, I certainly hope you mean Sammy.” Lenore insisted on calling him that, even though it drove Sampson crazy, because Lenore had never liked Sampson. *Hot white trash*, she had explained over and over, *is still white trash!*

“I don’t know whom I mean, Lenore.” Lenore had never understood that David had seen this as his one last chance. He was over forty, single, financially secure, and still alone. His parents had disowned him almost fifteen years ago when he’d finally told them that he was gay, his sisters following suit, or, as Lenore had put it, *following the money*. David understood why his sisters had done it, followed their parents’ wishes and cut him out of their lives. If he hadn’t already been over twenty-one and in possession of his trust fund, he probably would have kept his mouth shut. Actually, he was learning to keep his mouth shut. Everybody could be a whore for the right price. Sampson was just another example in what was quickly becoming a line of indefinable length.

“If he didn’t realize what a catch you are, then he’s fucked in

the head.” Out of habit, David looked to the open door, ever-conscious of young ears in the hallways. “Relax, David, still spring break. No kids for miles.”

“I’ll never get used to you speaking that way.” David laughed and got up to hug Lenore. “I mean, how does an ex-nun develop the vocabulary of an interstate trucker?”

“You’re assuming I didn’t have the vocabulary first.” Lenore slapped David’s butt playfully.

“Oh, God, I can just hear it now.” David’s laughter filled the room. “Bless me Father, for I have fucking sinned again, fuck!”

Lenore laughed with him. “You should have heard my Hail Marys!”

“Can’t you go to hell for that?” David was still laughing, tears streaming down his cheeks at the image of this brazen broad in a habit, kneeling and trying not to throw the odd swear word into Sunday Mass.

“Please,” Lenore harrumphed, “if that’s enough to get me a one-way to hell, then I was doomed before I was ten.”

David laughed and hugged Lenore again, his laughter dissolving into sobs.

“What happened, David?” Lenore was stroking his back, trying to soothe him. Lenore was almost six feet tall, making the embrace and the comforting much easier for both of them. “You were so happy.”

“That’s probably it.” David laughed. “I was too happy.” He sat on the edge of the desk, suddenly exhausted. “I don’t know what I’ve done, but I’m definitely on God’s hit list. Lately, anyway.”

“Bullshit, sweetie! This has nothing to do with God, or your family, or anything.”

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“Then why? Why didn’t I see it—again?”

“Because he was good at being a lying, two-faced, hormone-driven, amoral, shit-sucking, spineless fuckwad of a prick.” Lenore moved forward and stroked David’s cheek. “That’s why.” Lenore leaned into David’s embrace and whispered, “You’re too good for guys like that, David, too good.”

“Yeah,” David moaned, pulling away, “but not good enough for any of the others.”

“Well,” Lenore clucked, “if this is going to turn into a *woe-is-me* moment, I’m leaving.”

“Thank you, Lenore.” David smiled and sat back in his chair. “What did you want, by the way?”

“Nothing. Saw your light on from down the hall and wondered what was up.” Lenore pulled the dossier off the desk where she’d put it upon entering. “But while I’m here, I’ll give you a heads-up on a new student.”

“New student? In April?”

“Special case—very sad case.”

“Great, maybe he and I can form a club.”

“William Baldwin Pruitt III, born in Toronto, ten years old, last five years at a boarding school. Both parents recently deceased, no immediate family other than a second cousin living on a ranch outside of town.”

“Boarding school?” David’s eyes narrowed. “Why isn’t he finishing off the year—”

Lenore moved her thumb and fingers over each other, the universal sign for money. “Parents had apparently spent most of the wife’s money on bad investments and such, hadn’t even gotten around to paying for this year’s tuition.” Lenore cocked her head to

one side. “Sad, isn’t it?”

“Point taken.” David reached for the file. “I’ll stop moping now.”

“I meant no such thing.”

David scanned the file. *Jerry McKenzie?* Why did that name sound so familiar? *Ranch outside of town....* “Should I go visit? Or do you think I should leave him alone until Monday?”

“Well, that’s complicated.”

David raised an eyebrow, waiting for her to continue.

“Seems that Jerry doesn’t want him.”

“Doesn’t want him? But he has no other family—what will happen....” David winced at Lenore’s raised shoulders, knowing she wouldn’t have to tell him the answer. “Foster care.” David closed the file and handed it back. “Fucker!”

“Do me a favor—spank me the next time you say that.”

“Not even if you *had* a penis. I’m gonna go see him.” David reached for his keys and his wallet, patting his ass to see where his cell phone was. “Give me the number out of the file again.” David turned, grabbed a whiteboard marker and moved to the whiteboard. “Go.”

Lenore recited the telephone number from the file and stood to leave the room. “Don’t make things worse, David.” Lenore studied him for a minute. “Want me to go with?”

“Please,” David pleaded, still searching for his cell phone. “How could I possibly make this worse?” David found his cell phone and began dialing, watching Lenore’s smug smile as she exited. *Goddamn her, she totally set me up for this!*

“McKenzie.”

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“Mr. McKenzie, hello, sir, my name is David Loewenberger. Please call me David. William has just been registered in my class and will be starting here on Monday.” Many years of practice helped David get all of the words out clearly, succinctly, and in one breath before any interruption could stop him.

“Okay, David, what can I do for you? He’s not in trouble already is he?”

“No, sir, of course, not—”

“Jerry, please.”

“Jerry, I try to make a point of visiting all of my students at their homes before the school year begins, to meet them and their parents or guardians,” David explained, liking the sound of Jerry’s voice. It made his toes tingle; it was so deep and rich. Like a tympani drum. “I understand that William may not be with us for very long, but—”

“He’ll be with *us* long enough to finish the school year.”

“I apologize if I said anything offensive, sir, uh, Jerry, but I was hoping that I could come by for a visit, just to—”

“When would you like to make this *visit*?”

Stow the attitude, you dipshit. “Today, if possible?”

“Sure, David, can you be here before five p.m.?” Jerry sounded annoyed. “I gotta get dinner ready and finish some other stuff around here before—”

David checked his watch; five o’clock was only an hour away. An idea hit him, one that had worked on some of the other parents, parents too harried to want to have to fuss over dinner. “I’d be more than happy to pick something up on the way, perhaps visit with William while you finish your stuff? Unless, of course, your wife—”

“Don’t have one of those.” David heard a muffled

conversation while he waited. “I don’t wanna put you out or nothing, I mean, I know how much teachers make and all, but if you’d like to bring something, we could barbecue, maybe?”

“Sure thing, and don’t worry about the money.” David smiled. “I’ll see you in an hour.”

“You got the address?”

“Yes, it’s in the file. Thank you, again, sir, uh, Jerry. Sorry, Jerry, just one other thing—do you speak French?”

“Not since I was in boarding school myself about thirty years ago. Why?”

“I was just curious, that’s all. William is registered in my French Immersion class.”

“We’ll work it out. See you at five.”

David heard the buzz as the line went dead and flipped his phone shut as he ran toward the door. “Lenore!” David hoped he would catch her. “Lenore, I—” David ran into a hand on his way out the door—Lenore’s hand, holding a Post-it note with the address written on it. “You totally set me up, didn’t you?”

“You wanna see a picture of him?” Lenore fanned herself with the file folder.

“Okay, now I know you’re going to hell for that, Lenore. He’s ten years ol—”

Lenore slapped him with the file folder. David winced, mouth open. “Not him, you dipshit. The man, the cousin, *McKenzie*?”

“Please.” David stuffed the Post-it in his back pocket. “I’ve seen your taste in men! And besides, the last thing I want right now is more man-drama!” David headed for his car. “Besides, he says he was in boarding school over thirty years ago. He’s probably short and bald with a gut out to here!”

Chapter 4

THE ranch was a sprawling sea of grass with a central house and two barns located farther behind. It was not too far out of town, and David wondered what it would be like to live this far away from civilization, if it would be worth leaving the city to find some peace, finally, far away from everyone else. *Or at least guys like Sampson*, he thought to himself as he pulled up beside a big red pick-up truck and put the car into park. Pulling the keys out of the ignition, he noticed a very large, well-built man step onto the porch, wiping his hands on a dishtowel. David pulled the grocery bags from the passenger side of the car and headed towards the man—Jerry, hopefully.

“David?” The man extended a very large hand with beautiful fingers towards David. David could not take his eyes off it. Sampson’s hands had always felt clumsy and awkward on his body, but these would probably not, David was willing to wager.

“Jerry?” David answered. “Thank you for seeing me on such short notice.” David lifted the bags, watching Jerry’s bicep flex under the tight T-shirt when he took them in hand. “Uh, there’s chicken, peppercorn steaks, and fresh vegetables—corn still in the husk, even.” David laughed nervously. *Definitely not short and paunchy, and the thinning salt-and-pepper hair only adds to the sex appeal. But those hands.* David wondered what Jerry did for a living—farmer, carpenter...?

“Man after my own heart.” Jerry stepped aside and let David enter. “How much?” Jerry searched for a receipt but did not find one.

David knew he wouldn’t find it, since it was sitting somewhere deep inside his back pocket. “Please, my treat.”

“I can’t let you—”

“Please, money’s not a concern for me. Besides, the corn is actually from my freezer.” David nodded as he looked around the house: cathedral ceilings, central fireplace, beautiful contemporary furniture—all leather, except for the glass tables, which seemed to be everywhere. Not his style, but it worked anyway.

“What kinda union teachers got nowadays?” Jerry laughed as he guided David toward the kitchen.

“Rich family.” David shrugged.

“And you’re a teacher?”

David had heard the question a million times, and he promised himself for the hundredth time that he would stop letting people know about his rich family. “Change the world one child at a time and all that.” David shrugged, hoping his nervousness didn’t show.

“Hmmm.” Jerry moved towards the kitchen, David’s eyes firmly planted on the shape of the man’s long legs and beautiful ass.

David swallowed audibly. *Think of what Sampson did to you. Think of what each of your four “relationships” did to you.* “This is a beautiful house, Jerry, simply breathtaking.” David continued to look up at the high walls and the beamed ceiling. “Did you have it redone, or did you do it yourself?”

“As much as I could, yeah, did it myself.” Jerry emptied the bags on the counter and turned. “Of course, I had to hire out the electrical and the plumbing, but—”

Good to Know

“It’s—” David couldn’t find the words.

“Drink?”

“Please. Bottled water if you have it. Thank you.” David took the bottle of water from Jerry’s hand and focused on the artwork that was hanging over the buffet beside the fireplace. “Jerry McKenzie....” David’s brain was working furiously to make the connection. “Not *the* Jerry McKenzie, the one who painted a triptych entitled *Becoming Morning*?”

Jerry turned and studied David’s face. David was blushing, color rising to his cheeks. Jerry felt himself stir just a little at the thought of what David’s face would look like when he was coming. “That’s me, but how do you know that piece? I mean, I did that almost—”

“Twenty-three years ago. My father purchased it for his office downtown.” David took a sip of the cool water, willing his ears and cheeks to stop burning. “He hung it in his office. I would get out of university downtown and cross the street to his office and sit and study that painting for hours while I waited to go home with him.” David laughed nervously. “Never got any work done; couldn’t take my eyes off the colors.”

“Shit,” Jerry started, and then he stopped. “Excuse me, David. Gotta start watching my language now, I guess.”

“It’s okay. I’m sure William’s heard worse.”

“I painted that when I was, what, well, must have been only twenty-something then.” Jerry sipped his beer and smiled at David. “What did you say your last name was?”

“Uh, Loewenberger, but—”

“Doesn’t ring any bells for me.” Jerry motioned for David to sit at the long harvest table in the kitchen.

“No, it wouldn’t.” David blushed again; how was he going to get out of this without a thorough explanation of his family life? “My father’s last name is Van den Boesch.”

“Van den Boesch?” Jerry slapped the table, surprising David, making him jump a little. “Well, fuck me, that was the very first piece I ever sold.”

“My father was—is—quite fond of that piece.” David’s nail picked at the surface of the table. “He always told me, *Mark my words, you’ll be hearing that name a lot.*” David flushed at the sound he’d made imitating his father. He had always made his sisters shiver with the uncanny resemblance in their voices.

Jerry finally thought, *fuck it, if he didn’t wanna be asked, he shouldn’t have brought it up.* “So, Loewenberger, then?”

“My grandmother’s maiden name.” David saw Jerry’s eyebrows furrow and sighed. “My family and I aren’t close, and when I told them I’m... I just decided to change my last name, make it easier on everyone concerned.” David shrugged. “Stupid, now that I look back on it.”

Jerry smiled and decided not to push. “So,” he started, rubbing his hands together, “you wanna meet the little *fardeau*.”

David wasn’t sure if he meant that literally or figuratively, but he decided it was in poor taste to call William a *burden*, especially if Jerry was really thinking of abandoning him to the foster care system. He schooled his resentment and smiled. “What I came for.”

“Be right back.” Jerry got up, muscles flexing in his back as he pushed himself away from the table. David’s mouth went dry. *Why am I always attracted to the assholes? At least, he thought, this one’s being an asshole right from word one, unlike the other four.*

“William?” Jerry came back into the room, a little boy at his side. The top of the boy’s head barely reached Jerry’s navel. Jerry’s hand was smoothing over the blond hair of the most beautiful boy

Good to Know

David had ever seen. William had sad blue eyes, downcast to the floor, cheeks red from embarrassment or sleep, and a too-big fleece sweatshirt, complete with maple leaf, hiding a slight build. “This is Mr. Loewenberger, your new teacher.”

“William, I’m so happy to meet you.” David knelt on the floor and extended a hand. When William took it, David added, “I’m very sorry about your parents, William. But I’m very glad you’re going to be in my class. I’m very excited about it.”

“Thank you, sir.” William did not look up, and it made David want to cry.

“You can call me Mr. Loewenberger, if you want; some of the other students call me Mr. L.” David released William’s hand, his heart breaking at the sight of this poor boy. “It means—”

“Mountain lion.”

David looked from William to Jerry. “That’s right. How did you—” David sat back on the chair and leaned forward, gaze still focused on William. “William, sprichst du auch Deutsch?”

“Ja.”

David looked at Jerry again, who shrugged. “Hey, you lost me at ‘mountain lion’.”

“Es ist sehr gut, mein Freund, ja?”

William nodded and looked up for the first time. David could feel the smile threatening to split his face. He loved these moments when he could find something that would be just for him and a student. William would need something like this to feel comfortable. David would ensure that William could make a smooth transition between life in a Swiss boarding school and life in rural Alberta. David couldn’t believe how happy this made him, having someone else with whom to practice his German. Not since his grandmother had passed away more than ten years ago had David had anyone

with whom to speak German. Oma Loewenberger had been his mother's mother, but his mother had always refused to speak German. *It's so guttural and disgusting*, she'd complain. David would always laugh to himself and think, *Not any worse than what you do to the French language.*

"German too?" Jerry's voice snapped David out of his daydream. "Did you go to boarding school in Switzerland as well?"

"No, my mother was born and raised in Saskatchewan, but her family is of Austrian descent." David sipped some water. "My Oma, uh, my grandmother taught me German."

"The one whose last name you use?"

David nodded, his gaze still fixed on William. "William, would you be annoyed if I asked you to show me around while your... while—"

"We've decided that he'll call me 'Uncle Jerry'."

"While Uncle Jerry gets the barbecue ready?"

"Do you like horses?" William's voice was so frail and thin.

"Like them," David clasped his hands together, "I love them. My favorite horse back on my grandparents' farm was named 'King' and I—"

"Uncle Jerry has a horse named King too!" William reached for David's hand and pulled him toward the stable.

David mouthed a *sorry* to Jerry and let himself be dragged. Jerry smiled and followed them to the door, watching William more excited than he'd seen him in days.

Jerry watched for a moment as William pulled David toward the corral, William's little legs going a mile a minute to reach the horses to show his new teacher. *Teacher*, Jerry laughed to himself. *If they'd had teachers like that when I was in boarding school, maybe*

Good to Know

I wouldn't have tried to run away all the time. Jerry headed for the kitchen to finish preparing the meat for the barbecue, his mind playing over the last twenty minutes. Tall, dark hair, beautiful ass, good with kids. *Well, Jerry cautioned himself, if it doesn't work out, at least he can keep the kid company.* Jerry bristled at the thought of David being only a babysitter. *What is wrong with me, anyway?*

Jerry thought about that as he headed toward the back of the house to start the barbecue. *Would it kill you, Jerry, to let the kid stay for a few years and then send him back to that boarding school? And would it kill you to look at someone like David without thinking about whether he can deep-throat or whether his hole is tight enough to make you come in half an hour or less? You're a pig,* Jerry'd decided by the time the barbecue was warmed up enough for the meat, *just like Kitty's always saying. Fuck 'em.* Jerry huffed, deciding that old habits did die hard and that he'd compromised his life enough over the last couple of days.

Jerry came back into the house after igniting the barbecue to find a very excited and flustered William waiting for him. "Do I have enough time to show Mr. Loewenberger my room, Uncle Jerry?" William stood panting in the kitchen, face flushed, waiting for an answer.

"Sure, kid."

David bristled at the epithet. *How hard could it be? William's name isn't exactly a tongue-twister.* "How long do we have?" David smiled at Jerry, but there was no longer any warmth when he did so. *Maybe William would be better in foster care.* But David was appalled at the thought and chastised himself.

"Twenty?"

"Kommen Sie doch mit." William pulled on David's hand with an urgent, worried expression on his face.

"I'm coming with, William." David laughed. "Mach dich

locker, ja!” Shooting a glance at Jerry, David explained, “Calm down, I’m coming’.”

Jerry’s pants stirred; that was not something he thought he’d hear so soon from that mouth, and certainly not in the kitchen. He could still hear Kitty’s voice: *You’re a pig!* Jerry laughed to himself and put on the apron, adjusting himself with the heel of his hand.

He could hear the voices overhead in William’s room, a mix of French, English, and German. Who knew that when the kid was excited, he couldn’t decide on a language. A forlorn thought went through Jerry’s brain, and he wished he’d never let himself forget his French from all those years in boarding school. But then, the only French he’d been interested in was from the local girls. He couldn’t remember now whether he had fucked every girl in sight because he liked it or because he liked to forget that he would rather be fucking the boys.

“Mr. McK—” David’s voice. “Sorry, I mean, Jerry.” David came around the corner without William in tow. “Is there anything I can do to help? Shuck corn, perhaps?”

“Where’s William?”

David’s immediate thought was, *Yeah, like you give a shit.* “He’s in his room, playing. I told him that I should come down and help.”

“Corn’s already in the pot, but if you want to set the table?”

“Certainly.” David turned around, not knowing which cabinet to look in first. “Uh....”

“Cabinet above the sink.”

“Of course, sorry.” David opened the cabinet and removed three plates, three bowls and three side plates. “These are exquisite.” David turned one of the plates over, noticing the initials on the bottom. “Your design?”

Good to Know

“Yup.” Jerry turned from the boiling pot. “You throw?”

“No.” David blushed. “I’m afraid I have no artistic talent whatsoever.” When Jerry didn’t say anything, David felt the need to fill the silence. “I failed art class in elementary school.”

“So did I.” Jerry laughed, his voice sending shivers down David’s body. “But that was probably because I was always skipping classes.”

“In elementary school?”

By way of an answer, Jerry just shrugged and winked. The look that Jerry gave settled in David’s groin, waking desires he’d thought he’d buried with Sampson’s forced impromptu garage sale on the street. *Never again*, he’d promised himself, but now, when he saw Jerry standing there, the muscles of his forearms flexing and releasing, he couldn’t really remember why he’d made that promise to himself.

“I meant to ask you, Jerry,” David started again. “Well, I mean, I meant to ask the artist if I ever met him. Was *Becoming Morning* meant to evoke such strong, sad emotions in the viewer?”

“Why do you ask that?” Jerry had turned and was leaning against the stove, his arms over his chest.

“I don’t know, it’s just... whenever I sat there and stared at it, I always felt so sad and alone, as if I never really felt... it felt like I’d lost something.” David felt himself flushing at the sappy words, but he’d never been able to explain it better to anyone.

“Why’d you keep looking at it, then?”

“I couldn’t take my eyes off it.”

Jerry turned back to the corn, not answering right away. “Painted that just after my parents were killed in a plane crash.”

David heard the sharp intake of breath into his own lungs.

“Oh, my God, please forgive me, Jerry. I’m so sorry; I had no right—”

Jerry turned again and offered a sincere smile. “It’s okay, David. You didn’t know and it was a long time ago.” Jerry moved closer to the sink, mere inches separating their bodies. David could feel the heat radiating off Jerry’s chest. David looked up to see Jerry’s eyes when he spoke again. “No one has ever, I mean, at least, I’ve never heard of anyone feeling the same things when they look at it.”

“I’m so sorry, Jerry, please....”

Jerry moved back to the stove, annoyed by the sudden play of emotions coursing through his body as he looked at that beautiful face, mouth just made for.... “Twenty-three years ago?” Jerry changed the subject. “And you were in university then?” Jerry laughed softly. “What, did they let you in when you were ten?”

“I’ll be forty-two in October.” David’s voice sounded defensive, even to his own ears. “I’ve been teaching now for almost twenty years.”

“Sure don’t look it.” Jerry winked at David, smiling to himself when he noticed David blushing.

Flirting with me and William’s still in the house! “Look, Jerry, that’s awfully sweet, but I don’t think—”

“*Mach dich locker,*” Jerry imitated. “I’m just being an ass. I’m sorry if I offended you.” Jerry placed the corncobs on a plate one by one, his gaze flicking back and forth between tongs and David. “If I’d wanted you naked, I would have told you ya got the ass of a twenty-year-old.” Jerry flashed his best smile and placed the plate of corn on the table and left to check the meat.

David fanned himself for a brief moment, contemplating the harm in having a meaningless fling with Jerry just to get it out of his system. *What could be the harm, right? I mean, everyone else is*

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doing it. Why shouldn't I look on this as a rebound experience? "Ass of a twenty-year-old"—smooth-talking bastard! David was quite sure that given the right set of circumstances, Jerry's language could probably make him come in his pants. *I need serious help,* David thought to himself as he heard the patio doors opening and closing, *if I'm even thinking of getting involved with another guy whose bedpost is probably whittled down to a toothpick.*

David and Jerry both took turns reminding William to slow down. He was shoveling in the food as if he hadn't eaten in over a month. David wondered what his life had been like in Switzerland; had he ever eaten regular, home-cooked meals? Jerry wasn't bad with a barbecue, but David couldn't help but wonder what would happen to this little boy, this poor, fragile, little boy David had become so fond of in just a few short hours. What was it about this blond orphan that tugged so at David's heart? Why was David so close to tears every time the boy smiled? But more importantly, David wondered how much time he would have to help make it all better.

"William?" David began, "if you go and check the blue Tupperware container on the counter, you'll find a surprise for you."

"For me?" William's mouth was full, but not as full as his eyes. He quickly chewed his food and looked to his uncle for permission to leave the table. Once given, William grabbed the Tupperware container but struggled to open it. Jerry showed him how to pop the little tab, breaking the vacuum seal, popping the lid in one easy move and holding it out for William's inspection. William's eyes grew even wider when he recognized the dessert. "Sachertorte?"

"I thought I'd bring you something to remind you of Europe." David smiled. "Do you like Sachertorte?"

"Very much." William moved over to David, placing the Tupperware on the table and his two small arms around David's

neck. "Thank you very much, sir."

"You didn't have to do that." That was Jerry's voice now. David looked up to see the bewildered expression on Jerry's face.

"It was my favorite when I was your age." David smoothed a hand over William's back, feeling embarrassed by the embrace, and smiled coyly at Jerry. "Actually, it still is."

William moved back to his chair, careful not to upset the cake on its plastic tray. Jerry was still looking at David, the bewildered expression softening into a smile. Jerry raised himself out of his chair and rummaged through a drawer, coming back to the table with a cake knife. "Would you do the honors?"

"If William will help me." David moved around the table, placing the knife in William's hand, David's own hand placed gently over top. "Why don't you ask your uncle if he'd like a big piece or a little piece?"

William beamed at his uncle. "Uncle Jerry, would you like a big piece or a little piece?"

"Uh, big, please." Jerry sat back down in his chair—a little too hard, it felt like to him.

"What about you, Mr. Loewenberger?"

David smiled at the perfect pronunciation of his name. "I think I'll have a little piece. That way there'll be more for you and your uncle later."

"You made this?" Jerry's mouth was full of chocolate cake. "This is incredible." Jerry scooped up another bite. "I sure don't remember eating like this when I was in boarding school."

"Me neither." William's comment made both of the grown men laugh; as if William's memories of boarding school were as far removed as Jerry's. "Frau Zimmerman hat mir immer eine

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Sachertorte am Geburtstage getan!”

Jerry looked at David for a translation. “Mrs. Zimmerman always made him one for his birthday.” David shrugged after offering the translation.

“Hey, cowboy,” Jerry turned to William, “that was nice of her, *ja?*”

William giggled when Jerry tugged on his ear. “*Ja*, she was always so nice to me.” William stopped chewing.

“Hey, cowboy, you okay?”

William nodded and resumed eating, although, David noted, with much less enthusiasm.

“You don’t have to finish it now if you don’t want to, William.” David looked over at Jerry, mouthing *sorry*, but Jerry just waved his hand, dismissing the concern.

“I miss her.”

David finally saw the small boy sitting across from him. The cake wasn’t just a dessert to William; it was a connection to a life he’d had to leave behind to come to a different country and a relative who was nothing short of a complete stranger. Small, too small for his age, sensitive, kind, brave, helpless, confused, lost.... David felt like laughing at the irony of his life. Here sat a little boy who had hugged him after getting a cake David had made hundreds of times. And somewhere in the city were four men to whom David had given everything, including his heart, and received nothing from in return but heartache and betrayal.

“Hey.” Jerry’s hand was on his shoulder.

“Sorry, I, uh, just need the bathroom for a minute.”

David walked to the hall and followed Jerry as he pointed to a little room beneath the stairs. “Was it something—?”

“No,” David laughed weakly. “It’s nothing. Just going through a rough patch right now, that’s all.” David turned as he got to the bathroom door. “I’m sorry. I promise not to upset William.” When David closed the bathroom door, he left Jerry in the hall with the same confused expression on his face.

Jesus Christ, Loewenberger, get a grip on yourself. David studied his red eyes in the mirror. Some first impression he was making. “*Hi, I’m gonna be your kid’s teacher, and I’m an emotional wreck.*” *Who wouldn’t want their kid in my classroom?* He sat on the toilet seat for a minute, reminding himself that William and Jerry didn’t need to be affected by his miserable personal life, such as it was. Why couldn’t Sampson have been the one? Why had he had to be just another lowlife who only cared about David’s money? At least, David comforted himself, Sampson had never known his real last name; otherwise, David was sure, Sampson would have shown up at the family building looking for something for nothing. *But if you knew all that, why did you keep him around?* David dabbed at his eyes with some toilet paper. *Because it was better than being alone.* David studied his face one last time: pathetic and needy. The two most sought-after qualities amongst members of the gay community.

David exited the bathroom to find the two men finishing their cake in silence. *Did Jerry ever talk to William? None of my business,* David reminded himself and sat back down. Before David could speak, Jerry opened his mouth. “William and I were just gonna watch some movies tonight, eat popcorn... you’re welcome to stay, if you don’t have other plans.”

“That’s very nice, but—”

“Please, Mr. Loewenberger?”

David looked into William’s eyes, knowing that if William started to cry, David would be leaving Jerry with a rather large mess on his hands. “Okay, why not? It’s only Wednesday, after all.” He

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felt like adding, *And it beats going home to an empty apartment.*

“WHAT movie is this, again?” Jerry’s expression hadn’t changed in the last twenty minutes.

“*The Fantastic Four*,” William answered without taking his eyes off the screen.

David leaned toward Jerry on the sofa and whispered, “It’s not really my thing either.” When Jerry smiled, David added, “Give me a psychological thriller or a horror movie any day.”

“I hear that.” Jerry laughed and passed David the popcorn bowl. After David’s polite refusal of any more to eat, Jerry tapped William on the back with his big foot and handed the bowl to him. “Ten more minutes, cowboy, and then it’s off to bed.”

“But the movie’s not over yet.”

“It’ll still be here in the morning,” David soothed. Then he added, “It’ll give you something to look forward to.” David shrugged when Jerry shot him a look and then whispered, “It always worked on me when I was that age.”

David caught Jerry looking at him intently and blushed. When Jerry finally spoke, the words were almost inaudible. “Can I ask you to stay after....” Jerry nodded toward William on the floor.

David nodded, not wanting to voice any concerns this close to William. When William was safely asleep, David would ensure that Jerry got the message loud and clear.

“Okay, buddy, time to get ready for bed.” Jerry switched off the large flat-screen and moved toward David, cupping one of his elbows. “There’s beer in the fridge. I know you’re driving, but how about we talk out on the patio?” When David nodded, Jerry added,

“How about you get two, and I’ll be there in about fifteen minutes?”

“Do you know any lullabies?” William was standing in front of David, hands tugging on the leg of his jeans. “Uncle Jerry doesn’t know how to sing.”

“Well, I... I’m not sure if that would be appropriate, William.” David turned to Jerry for assistance.

“I’m not gonna tell anyone.” Jerry shrugged with a smirk firmly planted on his face. “I’ll even come with you, just for propriety’s sake.”

“Great,” David sighed quietly, “an audience.”

And so, with William safely tucked into bed, Uncle Jerry lying beside him stroking that little blond head, and David seated at the foot of the bed, David sang *Teddy Bear’s Picnic*. He felt a fool for doing it, William being ten and all, and him not really being sure of the words. The cold, prickly heat of embarrassment made the sweat break out all over his body. How did singers do this every night in front of hundreds of people? Much to his relief, William didn’t ask for an encore, and Jerry, probably sensing his embarrassment, never once looked at him. When William’s breathing became deeper and his body sank into the deep pillow-top mattress, Jerry extricated himself from the bed and motioned David to the door.

“You have a beautiful voice.”

David didn’t answer until they were back downstairs, beers in hands, safely on the patio; even then, he could not bring himself to acknowledge the compliment. “He is so adorable. I can’t imagine how he’s coping with all of this.”

Jerry set himself in one of the willow-branch chairs, letting out a sigh. “I’ve taken him to the psychologist’s once already and will be doing so for the remainder of his time here, but both she and Sara, the social worker, seem very optimistic.”

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“So you won’t be making a permanent home for him, then?”

Jerry’s beer bottle fell away from his lips, and his head swivelled quickly to look at David.

“I’m sorry—none of my business.”

“Nah, why should you be any different than everyone else?”

David winced at the implied insult and stood. “I’m very sorry. I should go.”

“Nah, look, I’m sorry, I guess you just hit a nerve.”

David sat back down in the chair and pressed the beer bottle to his lips, swallowing almost half in one gulp. “At the risk of incurring more insult,” David began tentatively, “you seem to have become very fond of him already.”

“He’s ten,” Jerry harrumphed. “How can you not?”

“I’m a firm believer that the protectiveness for children is hardwired into our brains, as a species.” David hesitated and then added, “But what is it about him, specifically?”

“Huh?”

“I mean is it that you just want to protect him until he leaves, or is it that he’s the only family that you have left, or—”

“You a shrink too?”

“No,” David started, but then he stopped. He began again, “When I went to the bathroom earlier, it was because I could see how happy William is here, how much he’s trying to please you, how his parents clearly never gave a shi—” David stopped again. “I’m sorry, *again*,” David grunted the last word, “so I’m just going to stop talking. I’m sure you’ll do whatever you feel is best for William.”

Jerry finished his beer and stood, and David was sure he was

going to be escorted to the door. “Want another?”

“No, thank you. I’m driving.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not. I’ll be right back.” Jerry moved away, opening the patio door but not closing it. When he returned, David tried changing the subject.

“This is a beautiful spread. Have you always wanted to live on a ranch?”

Jerry shrugged, noncommittal. “No, not particularly. Just seemed the best way to do what I do and avoid the city.”

David nodded his understanding, reaching for the next thread of the conversation. As his mind raced to think of something else to say, he heard Jerry’s chair squeak.

“Listen, I’m sorry that you don’t like me.” Jerry’s voice was almost too faint to hear. “And I’m sorry that—” David opened his mouth, but Jerry raised a hand to silence him. “And I’m sorry that you’re thinking what everyone else is thinking, but I’m almost fifty years old. What have I got that that kid needs right now?”

David shifted in his chair so that he could look Jerry right in the eyes and said, “I’ll tell you what. After another couple of weeks of William calling you ‘Uncle Jerry’, after another week of seeing the look on his face when he rides those horses, after another day of holding that little hand and feeling it pull you with... after another hour of sitting there, like you were, trying to stroke the hurt away...” David felt the tears threatening again and slowed his breathing. “Do me a favor, will you, Jerry? Quit trying to bullshit me and keep your fucking excuses for yourself. You’ve given me some good reasons why you can’t, and I’ve told you some good reasons why you can. But maybe you’re right, so sign custody of him over to me. I’ve got plenty of love to give him.” David stood up, still looking at the horrified expression on Jerry’s face, and added, “It’s been a real pleasure. I’ll see myself out.”

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Before David reached the kitchen table, Jerry's hand was on his elbow. David braced for the punch—*Jesus, this is gonna hurt, a guy that size! Why can't I just keep my mouth shut?*—but it never came. "Wait, please. David, I'm sorry." Jerry motioned David back to the patio. When they were both seated again, Jerry continued, "I'm... not used to... I'm... I guess what I'm trying to say is that—"

"You're scared?" David finished. Not waiting for an answer, he continued, "But scared of what, Jerry? Being responsible for something other than your dick? For another life? For that boy's happiness?" David studied Jerry's expression but went on, "Or are you really scared of the fact that you might just fall in love with that little boy and want to keep him around?"

"What if I am?" Jerry was busy peeling the label off his beer bottle.

"What if you are?" David practically shouted. "We're all scared of something, Jerry. But for fuck's sake, you're middle-aged, you're healthy, you've got a home with horses. And I know you know right from wrong. Cowboy up, man!"

"Where the fuck'd you hear that?" Jerry laughed.

"I like westerns too." David laughed. "My dad used to take me to the matinees on Saturdays."

Jerry finished laughing and placed his beer bottle on the table between them. "You miss 'em?" David knew that Jerry meant his family, if he missed his family, but he wanted to be honest with this man. *Cowboy up, David!*

"Every fuckin' day." David began chewing on the inside of his lip, a nervous habit from his own boyhood. "Every fuckin' day."

"I noticed you do that when you're nervous."

"What? Swear?"

“No.” Jerry moved his hand over his cheek. “Bite the inside of your cheek.” David said nothing. “You nervous around me?”

“Every fuckin’ minute.” David turned, raised an eyebrow at Jerry, and then laughed when he saw the smile on Jerry’s lips.

“Help me?” Jerry nudged David’s foot with his own.

“You mean...?”

“I ain’t makin’ any promises, but if I do decide I want the little rugrat around on a permanent basis, I’m gonna need help, ’cause I sure as shit don’t know what I’m doin’. Not like you.” Jerry moved his foot and rested it against David’s. “Jesus, man, I’ve never seen that kid talk so much, nor eat so much as when you showed up.”

David nudged back with his foot. “Kids only want one thing, Jerry.” Without waiting, David finished his thought. “To know that they’re wanted.”

Jerry finished his second beer and placed the empty on the table between them. He studied David’s face for a moment and then spoke softly. “This rough patch you mentioned before? He got a name?” Jerry smiled, sheepishly, when David’s head swiveled. “Call it a gift.”

“Sampson.”

“No fuck?”

“Yeah.” David laughed. “I thought it was sexy as fuck at first.”

“And now?”

“Better you ask the blond twenty-something twinkies lined up outside his apartment.” David hated the bitter quality to his voice, but didn’t feel like holding anything back, not anymore.

“How old was he?”

“Chronologically, forty-seven. Mentally....” David tipped his

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beer at Jerry with a smile. “Oh, about twelve, on a good day.”

“Fucker!”

“I’ll drink to that!” David laughed. “You gonna tell me you never went after the little blond ones oohing and ahhing over your big *guns*?”

“First of all, thank you; I wasn’t sure you’d noticed.” Jerry’s lips curled into a half-smile and continued, “And second of all, I never fucked ’em if I knew they was attached.”

“What is it with the blond teenagers?” David heard the question and regretted it immediately. “Never mind, forget I asked. I don’t wanna know.”

“Can do that, but....” Jerry leaned forward a little, nudging David’s foot again. “You might like to know that I prefer the more mature yet very attractive variety if I’m thinking of a relationship.”

“Yeah, right, Jerry!” David laughed as he stood. “That would explain your forty-something partner eating dinner with us tonight.”

“Ouch.” Jerry stood and placed a hand over his heart in jest. “Just ’cause he ain’t here don’t mean I ain’t been lookin’ for him.” Jerry moved so swiftly that David was surprised. David would have thought that a man that large would have made more noise when he moved, but suddenly Jerry’s arms were around David’s waist, holding him close to the big body.

“Jerry, this isn’t—” David stammered.

“Sweet Jesus, but you’re a fucking sexy piece of ass when you’re flustered.”

“Jerry, I’m serious about—”

“So am I.” And with that, Jerry’s lips ghosted over David’s, stealing his breath away. David couldn’t feel anything at that moment; he didn’t know if he was standing or sitting, falling or

floating. All he could feel was the hand that swept up his back to cup the back of his head, the other hand pressing against the small of his back. David heard a moan but couldn't swear it wasn't his. Jerry broke the kiss. "I'm not gonna ask you to stay."

"It wouldn't be a good idea."

Jerry continued as if David hadn't spoken. "I know you got scruples and this Sampson fucker hurt you, but—"

"You don't get it, do you?" David pulled away, placing a hand on Jerry's muscled chest, hoping he would stay at that distance. "This isn't about me or you, Jerry." David pulled his hand away. "This is about a heartbroken little boy who thinks he may have finally found a family." David choked out the last words, vowing not to cry in front of Jerry.

"And maybe a little about a heartbroken forty-two-year-old who's still missing his?"

"Maybe." David continued to be truthful. "But if we did this and it didn't work, hurting William would kill me. Knowing that I was responsible for—" David didn't finish, choosing instead to retreat to the safety of the kitchen.

Jerry followed him in, reaching for his elbow once more. "I get that; I do. I really do." Jerry let go of David's elbow and kept a respectable distance between them. "But you can't tell me that you don't feel this too."

David's hand swept between the two of them. "What we feel isn't important right now." David took a deep breath and looked into Jerry's eyes. "All right, yes, I'd love to find someplace right now and let you fuck me into next week, but..." David blushed at the thought. "But it's not what William needs right now."

"I should hope not!" Jerry exhaled forcefully, and David dissolved into laughter, realizing how the words had sounded.

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“Tell me we can work on it?”

David suddenly felt exhausted and weakened. “How, Jerry? How?” David put a hand out when Jerry moved forward. “I’m his teacher, and you’re his guardian. I think there might be something unethical in there somewhere, yeah?”

“So I’ll send him to another school.”

“That’s just cruel.” David shook his head. “This is what I meant about not making decisions with your dick.”

“Fuck you!”

“Jerry, please, just think about what I’m saying.” David reached for Jerry’s hand but retreated when Jerry pulled it out of reach. “William needs a father, or at least a father-figure right now, and I’d be in the way.” David leaned up and planted a gentle kiss on Jerry’s cheek. “You’ve had plenty of years of fucking people senseless, and Lord knows I don’t doubt that you could have me panting like a dog inside of five minutes, but...” David looked down at his feet, suddenly shy. “I can tell you, Jerry, there’s nothing like the love of a child to put everything right in your head. You can’t imagine how powerful and small it makes you feel, both at the same time.”

Jerry sighed and leaned back against the counter, studying his feet, mumbling, “More like two minutes.” When he heard David’s soft laughter and felt the shorter man’s hand, he looked up and winked. “So can’t I have both?”

“Eventually, yes.” David stroked Jerry’s forearm, and Jerry let himself be caressed this time. “Besides, if you think you feel about me the way you do, and Lord knows I’m feeling it too, it should still be there three months from now, right?”

“Three months?” Jerry seemed puzzled.

“My school only goes to grade five.” David raised an eyebrow.

“After that, William goes to the middle school.”

Jerry’s knees sagged a little, from relief or hormones, David couldn’t tell. “So there’s nothing between now and the end of June?”

“I didn’t say that.” David raised the other eyebrow. “Just no displays in front of William and never here.” David held up a stern finger.

“Oh, fuck me.” Jerry’s knees sagged a little. David could see the wheels turning in Jerry’s head, imagining tongues, hands, positions.

“Eventually, that’s the idea.” David turned and walked to the door. “But I’ll tell you this, and repeat it over and over for your benefit, we are not a couple, got it?”

“Fair enough.”

David hooked his fingers into the waistband of Jerry’s tight jeans and pulled the bigger man closer. “My bed, my apartment, my life—you don’t leave anything behind. Understood?”

“So what? Fuck buddies?” Jerry was trying to grab David’s lips with his.

“Let’s just start there and see where it goes, yeah?”

David pulled Jerry out to the veranda and snapped open Jerry’s jeans with one deft move, smiling to himself when he heard Jerry groan. “This,” David began, smoothing his hand over Jerry’s flat abdomen until he encountered a rock-hard dick, the silkiness of it sending a shiver to David’s own groin, “is what you can look forward to.” David pulled Jerry’s head down and smothered his mouth with his own, tongues dueling while Jerry’s hands struggled for purchase, groping David’s ass.

“Hands stay above my waist; this is just a preview.” When

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Jerry started to protest, David increased the pressure around Jerry's dick, swiping his thumb over the sensitive head. Jerry closed his eyes and moaned. David brought their lips together one last time, knowing that Jerry wouldn't, couldn't last much longer. David reached with his tongue and played with Jerry's before raking his teeth gently across it, finally sucking Jerry's bottom lip into his own mouth, nibbling it with his teeth. As Jerry whimpered, David pressed his thumb between the swollen head of Jerry's dick and the foreskin, pulling once, twice, and then relaxed his grip, prolonging the sensations.

"Oh, sweet Jesus." Jerry moaned before his knees sagged again.

"You like that, cowboy?" David pushed against the broad chest, Jerry's breath warm on his lips. David's fingernails traced gentle paths over Jerry's balls and shaft as Jerry's sighs and gasps fuelled his own fire. "You wanna come, cowboy? You thinking about coming on my face? On my dick? About me swallowing it, licking you clean?" David's hand wrapped firmly around Jerry's cock; he pulled from shaft to head in long, insistent strokes, telling Jerry what he was going to let him do to his ass. "Did I tell you I love to talk dirty, cowboy? Love to tell you what I want you to do with that big baseball bat of yours? Did I tell you that I don't have a gag reflex? You ever had that beautiful dick of yours down one of your twink's' throats while he hummed a little song for you?"

"Oh, fuck me, Jesus, gonna come, mountain lion." Jerry's gasps were deep, as if he couldn't get enough air. "Pinch the head, yeah, fuck, kiss me hard, mountain lion!" Jerry's eyes squeezed shut, and David delivered the finishing touch. With Jerry braced against the door, his dick still like granite and his eyes screwed shut, David gently pushed his left thigh up and into Jerry's balls, sending a jolt of pressure through Jerry.

David smiled to himself, loving Jerry's reactions. He leaned up for one final kiss, whispering into Jerry's mouth, "Imagine what it'll

feel like in my tight twenty-something ass, cowboy.”

“Oh, shit,” Jerry gasped.

David felt the hot jets splash up and fall to cover his hand, holding the bigger man close.

Jerry’s head flopped forward onto David’s shoulder, hands coming to rest on David’s slightly flared hips. “Fucking fierce, mountain lion,” Jerry hissed, his breath coming in shallow, short gasps as he looked at David. “This Sampson fucker is a right retard, I’m thinking.”

David kissed Jerry one last time, hand relinquishing its hold on Jerry’s dick. He brought the hand up and pressed it to Jerry’s lips. Jerry licked each of the fingers individually, both men’s mouths agape. “I agree,” David whispered seductively and moved his mouth to Jerry’s left ear. “And about four inches smaller than you.” David smirked and kissed Jerry softly, gently on the lips, the taste of Jerry shared between the two of them now. “You taste better too.” David winked, licking his fingers. “Should be fun.”

Jerry reached out for David when he moved away towards the edge of the veranda. “Wait—surely there’s something I should do for you?” Jerry was still panting, his back leaning against the door. “I can’t leave you like this.”

David smiled as he pulled his keys out of his pocket. “There is.” David adjusted himself with his free hand. “Don’t let William see you like that.” David laughed to himself as he heard Jerry muttering the same words over and over: *Sweet Jesus*.

Jerry went back into the house, his knees still weak. The thought suddenly occurred to him: *How do I get ahold of him?* Followed quickly by, *When did I ever care about satisfying the other guy?* Both thoughts quickly disappeared when, once inside the bathroom, he felt the piece of paper lodged in his boxers. He smiled as he read David’s cell phone number out loud, crumpling the piece

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of paper in his hand and pumping it in the air. *Yes*, he mouthed.

Chapter 5

JERRY awoke to see William standing beside the bed. “What’s up, cowboy? You okay? Sleep okay?” Jerry rubbed his eyes, realizing that he’d gone to bed naked, knowing that he would need to have easy access when he replayed the scene on the veranda. *Sweet Jesus, but that man knows his way around a dick. And that tongue*, Jerry thought, *and that dirty talk, fuck!* Some people liked screamers in bed, but not Jerry; Jerry liked the dirty talking.

“Will you come and watch the end of the movie with me?” William didn’t move, still in his pajamas, hair tousled from sleep.

Jerry suddenly realized what he’d been thinking with William standing in front of him. *You’re a pig!* Jerry would have to give some serious thought to Kitty’s repeated attempts to get Jerry some therapy.

“Of course, buddy.” Jerry reached out and tried to smooth the runaway hair. It was so soft. “Just give me a minute to get dressed, okay?”

“Yes, sir.” William ran to the door but stopped when he reached it. “I mean, Uncle Jerry.”

Lord knows, Jerry thought, *I hate this introspection shit, but David has a point.* There was something to this being responsible for someone else. He knew he would be at a loss to put it into words—so much for the expensive boarding school education—but

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it felt comforting, if not scary as fuck. Knowing that William could grow up happy and healthy because of him sent his mind racing. Realizing that he could give William what he'd never had was a heady experience. *So what*, he reminded himself of David's words, *if I don't have all the answers. I'm smart enough to go out and find them.*

When he got downstairs, he could see that William's hair had been tamed and that he'd put on the usual Dockers and sweatshirt. "How about we go shopping sometime today for new clothes, hey, cowboy?"

William put the movie into the player and looked back at his uncle. "What's wrong with the clothes I have?"

"Nothing, chief." Jerry scratched his head. "Just thought you might like some more. You know, for playing around in the barn, mucking stalls, that kind of stuff."

"Okay." William sat cross-legged on the floor but then turned again. "Can Mr. Loewenberger come too?"

"I don't think so, buddy." Jerry peered around the corner. "I think he might be busy." Jerry didn't hear an answer as he entered the kitchen and began to prepare breakfast. "Whadda ya want for breakfast, cowboy?"

"Doesn't matter." William was behind him now. "Can you make poached eggs?"

"Can I make poached eggs?" Jerry picked him up and tickled his sides, eliciting high-pitched giggles. "Poached eggs it is," Jerry said without putting William down. "But only if you break the eggs. These big paws of mine don't seem to be able to do it properly." Jerry smiled when William nodded.

"Can you reach the eggs?" Jerry tipped William inside the fridge. "Oh, hurry, the door's closing and you don't want to be inside without a coat on." More giggles.

“Got ’em.” William showed his uncle the carton. “Time for shopping, I think.” Jerry nodded when William showed him that the carton only had six eggs left.

“After clothes, groceries.” Jerry maneuvered their bodies back to the counter and pulled out a pan, filled it with water and placed the tray back on top, William still in his arms. “Okay, now try and get them inside the little cup.... There you go.” Both heads swiveled when the door bell rang. “Ten bucks says it’s Sara.”

“No.” William shook his head. “Mr. Loewenberger.”

As he walked to the door, William reaching for the knob from his perch atop his uncle, Jerry couldn’t help but think that David would have to shorten his name. He was counting syllables when the door opened and Sara’s face was smiling at them both.

“Well.” She beamed. “Is William practicing his wrestling holds on you?” William giggled at that.

“Please, come in.” Jerry moved aside to let her pass. “We’re in the kitchen. Have you eaten?”

“Yes, but don’t stop on my account.” Sara placed a file folder on the kitchen table. “I won’t take too much of your time.”

Finally putting William down to the floor, Jerry turned to study Sara’s face. “What’s up?”

“I just came by to let you know about all of the arrangements that I made for William’s school on Monday.”

“I met Mr. Loewenberger yesterday,” William announced proudly.

“You did.” Sara glanced up at Jerry, who explained, giving her the abridged version, minus the hand job on the veranda, of course.

“He speaks German and French and makes cakes and he likes to ride horses too.”

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“Well, I’m happy that you’re happy, William.” Sara looked to Jerry. Jerry was smiling too.

“Hey, cowboy, how about you go watch your movie while I talk to Sara?” Jerry smoothed some wayward hairs on the boy’s head. “I’ll call you when breakfast is ready.”

Once William had disappeared back into the television room, Jerry turned to Sara. “Listen—”

“Yes?”

“Now, don’t go getting all smug on me just yet.” Jerry could feel his cheeks flushing.

“I promise I’ll count to ten first.”

“The thing is that I know I’ve agreed to house him until the end of June.”

Sara’s eyes narrowed, but she said nothing further.

“I’m just wondering if I wanted to try this for a longer period of time, how would that work if things don’t work out, exactly?”

“William is not a television or a video game, Jerry.”

“I know, I know.” Jerry ripped open a package of bacon, laying out several strips into a frying pan coated with too much butter. “I’m just not finding the right words here.” He concentrated on the sizzle for a moment, just long enough for Sara to approach him.

“Jerry, can I ask why you’re reconsidering our deal?” Sara leaned against the counter. “William knows that this is only temporary, as per your request.”

“I know.” Jerry was having a hard time looking at her. “I’m just asking a question here, okay?”

“Well, if what you’re asking is whether or not we’d consider

letting you test-drive him for a year before you make up your mind, the answer is ‘no’.”

“Fair enough.” Jerry was still not looking at her.

“Okay, Jerry, enough with the *Mission Impossible* crap here.” Sara took the pan out of his hands and skilfully flipped the bacon while uncovering the eggs and moving them to the butcher block island. “What the hell is going on?”

“Mr. Loewen—uh, David—had some thoughtful insights into my personality.” Jerry picked nervously at the hem of his T-shirt. “And he got me thinking that maybe....”

“Well, it sounds to me like I want to meet this man.” Sara smiled as she motioned Jerry to the table. “Anyone who can get you thinking is a force I’d like on my side.”

“I’m not that bad, am I?”

Sara laughed and placed her hand on Jerry’s forearm. “Of course you’re not, Jerry, but you gotta admit, you can be a real piece of work.”

“But that’s just it, Sara.” Jerry’s voice suddenly seemed animated, more animated than Sara had ever heard it. “David got me thinking that maybe that’s what William needs right now.” Jerry’s voice died away a little, as he craned his neck to see if William was listening. “Maybe, ah, I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“Sounds pretty good to me so far.” Sara picked up the file folder. “I’m assuming you don’t need this anymore, since you’ve already met his teacher. How did that happen, by the way?”

“Called and came over yesterday, says he pre-meets all his students and parents before school starts.” Jerry looked at her. “I didn’t do anything wrong, did I?”

“Jerry, my God, relax, or you’ll worry yourself to death, and

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then William won't have anyone."

"Don't even joke about that."

"Look," Sara said, sitting herself down, her hand finding Jerry's arm again. "You're over- thinking things. Most parents don't know what they're doing at first. Granted, most parents don't have kids born at age ten." Sara stood again, making her way to her purse at the opposite end of the table. "Any parent, or *teacher*, will tell you the same thing: one decision at a time. This isn't like a gallery showing; not everything needs to be planned months in advance."

Jerry raised an eyebrow.

"What? I know stuff." Sara snorted and pawed at her left breast. "I'm incredibly refined and cultured."

Jerry laughed, stood, and pulled Sara into an embrace. "I think I love you."

"Careful, cowboy," Sara cautioned, "or my partner will come out here and beat your pansy ass. She's shorter than you, but she's got at least fifty pounds on you."

Jerry held up his hands in surrender and backed off, moving to arrange the breakfasts on plates.

As she walked to the door, Sara turned and stuck her head into the television room. "Bye, William. If I don't see you before Monday, you have a good first day at school."

"I will," William called. "Uncle Jerry and I are going clothes shopping today."

Sara turned and smiled at Jerry, her heart breaking just a little at the uncertainty on his face. "Make sure they're happy, healthy, and fuck the rest of it," she whispered when they were out of William's hearing range.

"David said the same thing, more or less." Jerry smiled at the

memory of David.

“He sounds like a keeper.” Sara leaned in closer. “PLU?”

Jerry’s brow furrowed, and Sara rolled her eyes. “People like us?”

“Oh.” Jerry blushed. “Yes, he is.”

“You found out all of that last night, did you?”

“Listen, hang on.” Jerry moved to the entranceway of the television room. “William, your breakfast is ready. Go on in, and I’ll be there in a few, okay?”

William hit the pause button, dropped the remote in front of him, and headed for the kitchen.

Jerry turned back to Sara and guided her towards the veranda, gently closing the door behind them. “Can we—I mean, is there an ethical problem with me pursuing... a....”

“You wanna bang more than the teacher’s erasers?” Sara was smiling so broadly that Jerry thought her face might split.

“Jesus Christ,” Jerry sputtered, “but yeah, something like that.”

“And you would like to know if anything bad could happen because of it?”

Jerry nodded.

“Well, from my end, all I can tell you is that as long as William is safe, happy and healthy, there’s not much the government is willing to do to take him away from you.” Sara turned toward her car, adding, “I can’t speak to the ethics of a teacher dating a student’s parent, but I do know it happens all the time.” Sara stepped back toward Jerry, seeing the confusion and frustration on his face. “My advice? Let him decide if that’s something he wants to risk, if there’s anything at risk at all.” Sara stood on her toes to kiss

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Jerry on the cheek. “I *have* to meet this man! And I like this Jerry a whole lot better.” As she reached her car, Sara turned to Jerry one last time. “And besides, this is Canada, even we queers can get married now!”

Jerry waved, feeling a little better and headed back inside. William was almost finished eating when Jerry returned to the table. *How would you feel about living here forever, William?* God, Jerry wanted some reassurance, but he didn’t want to get the boy’s hopes up just to watch them crash. Within a few moments of finishing breakfast, Jerry made a rash decision that he was sure would come back to bite him in the ass. *But then again*, he reminded himself, *don’t they all?*

Chapter 6

DAVID jumped as his cell phone rang. Thursday morning found him at the school again. *Predictable as the Canadian economy, that's me*, David thought. He didn't bother to look at the display—he never looked at the display—and flipped open the phone.

“Hello?”

“David, it's Jerry.”

“Hey, Jerry, what's up?” David decided to tease Jerry this time. “Don't tell me you're calling him in sick already?”

“Huh? No, oh, I get it. Funny.”

“I thought so.”

“No, I'm calling to see if you'd like to come back out and go riding, or maybe—”

“I'd love to.” God, David hated that anxious, speedy answer. “When?”

“Well, William and I are going clothes shopping, and then grocery shopping, but, say....” David glanced at the clock while he waited. “Say, three o'clock, and then dinner here?”

“I will write this in my agenda in ink.”

“Okay.” David heard the relief in Jerry's chuckle, not really

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sure if he'd gotten to Jerry last night as much as Jerry had gotten to him. "We'll see you then, around three... oh, wait a minute, is there anything you don't eat?"

"Blond twenty-somethings."

"Okay, I'll send him home, then."

"Funny."

"I thought so." Jerry's laugh sent shivers down David's spine.

"You're such an ass."

"I thought you liked my ass." Jerry laughed again. "I mean, from the way you were staring at it last night."

"I was not." David blushed right to the tips of his ears at being caught looking.

"We'll see you at three, then." Jerry's voice was soothing, almost a whisper.

"Wait!" David suddenly realized, too caught in the double entendres. "Is there anything you want me to bring?"

"Hmmm, harness, whips, bit." Jerry laughed, voice going suddenly serious. "For the horses, I mean."

"Ass."

"Just bring yours. Three o'clock."

"Bye, Jerry."

"See you soon."

David hung up, smiling. *Well, he thought, even if there's nothing permanent, at least I'll enjoy the ride for as long as it lasts.* Somewhere deep down, however, David had to admit to himself that he was very attracted to this man—and even more attracted to the

idea that he hadn't run out of chances after all.

"Well, well, and why are we blushing?" Lenore's voice made him jump.

"Jesus, Lenore," David moaned, "don't you ever knock?"

"Not when the door is wide open." Lenore moved closer to David's desk. "Speaking of wide open." Lenore's eyes drifted to David's groin.

"Okay, enough." David shifted and crossed his legs. He could see Lenore wince as he did so. "I went to see William yesterday."

"And got an eyeful of the uncle too, I bet."

David knew he was blushing but looked right at Lenore anyway. "I don't know what you mean. I'm a professional."

"Yeah; so was I until I met Howard." David had always found Lenore and Howard's story to be so romantic. While still a nun, Lenore had met and fallen in love with Howard, a politician representing one of the city's richest neighborhoods. Howard had been married at the time, but the passion he had felt for Lenore had been too much. Howard had divorced his wife and then married Lenore within a year, Lenore having renounced her vows to the church. David wasn't Catholic and wasn't sure of the religious or spiritual ramifications of such a renunciation, but he had never cared, being enthralled as he was with the romantic aspect of it all. *Where's my Howard?* he'd asked Lenore more than once over the past fifteen years.

"Hello? Where do you go when you do that?"

"Huh?" David hadn't realized he'd drifted off.

"You were telling me you weren't the least bit interested in Quick Draw McKenzie."

"Nothing quick about him, I'll tell you." David regretted it the

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minute it was out of his mouth. “I mean, he can be rather thick... I mean, he’s not the brightest bulb.”

Lenore shook her head, laughing. “Doesn’t need to be bright, just has to fit in the socket.”

“Nice, Lenore. You kiss your kids with that mouth?”

Lenore winked on her way to the door. “How do you think I got my kids in the first place?”

David raised his hands in prayer. “Forgive her, oh, Lord, for she knows not... anything.”

“God doesn’t listen to Lutherans,” Lenore yelled from beyond the door. “You’ll burn in hell, heathen, but don’t worry; I’ll save you a seat!”

David laughed and looked at the clock. Almost three hours to go. Maybe he should chase down Lenore so she could amuse him with more playful banter. Or maybe he should go home and shower and shave all over again. Not that shaving again was necessary; David had never been able to grow a beard beyond the two millimeter stage. Despite having a healthy spattering of chest and leg hair, his facial hair was nowhere to be found; he couldn’t even grow sideburns!

Shoving himself back from his desk, David heard the ding of his cell phone again. He flipped it open to see the text message and laughed. *I sent him home. He wasn’t happy!* David’s laughter filled the room as he typed his response: *I found my harness and whip; I’ll make it up to you.* At this rate, with this man, David might just do it.

David finished a couple of hours of arranging, rearranging, marking, preparing and developing more activities for the Smart board that had been installed in September. He loved it, now that he had it. The school division had promised Smart boards for so many years running that everyone had listened with a respectful indifference, but they’d actually come through this year. He’d even

managed to find class-centered games on the Internet for downloading and using with the entire class. It made activities like vocabulary work and board work much more fun, not to mention that he had found a site explaining how to attach a DVD player so that he could project movies as well as Internet sites.

By two thirty, David was ready to go. The drive wouldn't take him that long, but he'd need to stop and pick something up, even though Jerry had not told him to. He could not show up at anyone's house without hearing his mother's voice telling him for the millionth time to bring a gift. He stopped off at the grocery store to get cranberry juice and ginger ale, certain that William would like the combined tastes of the two drinks. It had always been David's favorite summertime drink. As he approached the checkout, he spotted the section for pet lovers. Never having been allowed an animal—his mother had refused to have any “beast” in the house—he usually skipped this aisle. But he had an idea, hoping Jerry would accept the joke in the manner David intended.

Packages on the passenger seat, David headed for Jerry and William's house, smiling and feeling much more like his old self since he'd watched *Fucker* scrambling for his clothes on Wilmot Avenue. As he approached the ranch, David thought he heard whistling echoing inside the car.

David pulled into the driveway and noticed both William and Jerry waiting for him on the veranda. David put the car in park and grabbed the grocery bags off the seat beside him, exiting the vehicle, smiling at the two of them sitting on the top step of the stairs. David's heart thudded at the sight of the two of them sitting close, like father and son. *God, he thought, I hope I can convince Jerry to keep him and give him a real home.*

“What's this?” Jerry asked, accepting the bags and placing them between his feet. “You didn't have to bring anything.”

“I thought William might like it.” David ruffled the young

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boy's hair and smiled down at him. "How was clothes shopping?" David noticed that William and Jerry wore matching Western-style shirts, the pearlized snap buttons shimmering in the sunlight.

"Look!" William raised his left foot and David noticed the new cowboy boots. "Uncle Jerry says I have to break them in, just like horses."

"Good advice." David chuckled and crossed his arms over his chest. "What else?"

"I got new pants, new jeans, socks, underwear, winter boots, a new parka and," William reached into his back pocket, pulling out a black bandana, "this!"

"A bandana." David's eyes widened in mock surprise. "Now you're ready for those hot days of riding the range and taming the wild horses."

"Uncle Jerry says I have to ride with him for now, since the horses are too big for me."

David didn't say anything to William about asking his uncle to buy him a smaller horse, just smiled at Jerry and said, "More good advice." David unfolded his arms and placed them in his back pocket. "Sounds like a smart man to me."

"Yeah," William agreed, "he's pretty cool."

David's heart tugged a little when Jerry reached over and tousled William's hair. "So," David broke the silence, "do you need me to help with anything?"

"Know anything about saddling a horse?"

"Oh, I think I can handle straps and buckles." David realized what he'd said and blushed, noticing a luscious grin spread across the older man's face. "I can even muck a stall if I have to."

Jerry reached behind him and pulled out a saddlebag. "Snacks

for if we get hungry, or should I say,” Jerry teased as he tousled William’s hair again, “*when* we get hungry?” Lifting himself off the step, Jerry turned to William to ask, “You wanna ride with me or Mr. L?”

“Actually,” David interjected quickly, “it might be safer if he rides with you.” David felt his face flush. “It’s been a while for me. I don’t want him falling off the horse because I’ve forgotten how to sit.”

“Good to know. Well, let’s go take a look at your seat, then.” Jerry winked and nudged David’s shoulder.

They walked to the bigger of the two barns in silence, Jerry’s hand still enfolding William’s, David soaking in the sight on a beautiful spring day. No clouds, no rain forecasted—it would be a terrific way to unwind from a very boring day sitting in his classroom.

Jerry insisted on helping David mount King the first time, offering David a quick refresher course on the basics. Although embarrassed, David was glad for the leg up. King was a big horse, definitely larger than the King he’d ridden on his grandparents’ farm when he was a boy. David was relieved that Jerry’s hands had not strayed too much during the lesson, what with William being nearby and all. *The shirts are adorable, by the way*, David had whispered. *Can I ask whose idea?* Jerry didn’t answer, only blushed, which was answer enough. David had never been more overwhelmed with the urge to rip another man’s clothes off than at that moment.

Jerry had fashioned some sort of smaller saddle for William and fastened it to his own saddle; David laughed when he saw William grab immediately for the reins and heard Jerry’s careful reminder about how big the horse was. Jerry reached into the saddle bag before either of them was on the horse and pulled out a helmet for William. David’s heart melted a little more at the sight of Jerry on his knees helping to fasten the strap under the little chin. David’s

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crotch twitched when he saw Jerry lift William onto his strong back and mount the horse effortlessly, his thighs tensing under the denim fabric, his back muscles straining against the thin fabric of his Western-style shirt. Jerry turned, grabbed William's torso, and pulled him up front, placing him on the mini-saddle; Jerry grinned when he looked over to see David palming his crotch. Before spurring the horses into a very slow walk, David felt the heat spread across his face and up to the tips of his ears as Jerry just pushed his hat back on his head and put William's little hands over his on the reins.

They meandered, or so it seemed to David, for about an hour, the sun beating down on their backs, finally coming to stop at a little lake, which Jerry explained was part of the property. *William has his own private lake*, David thought. *What isn't perfect about this arrangement?*

Jerry dug into his saddlebag and pulled out a blanket and some Tupperware containers.

Jerry helped David spread a blanket and lay out the Tupperware containers full of fresh fruit, sandwich meats, thick slices of bread, butter, mustard, and a thermos with cool, clean well water from the pump beside the house. William chatted about the horses and what he was looking forward to about the bonfire to come, and he asked David the occasional question about his new school. Jerry sat, knee raised supporting a forearm, studying the scene before him.

When the food had been replaced in the containers and the containers in the saddlebags, Jerry nodded to a section of field not far from where the horses stood. "Wild berries?"

Jerry handed William a container to hold their pickings, and they headed for the field. "Don't get too far ahead, William." David laughed at the excited *Yes, sir* that William yelled and turned to look at Jerry. "What?" Jerry was studying David just as hard. "Can tell

you got something to say, so spill.”

“It’s nothing,” David stammered. “I just never expected this.”

“That I’m really human after all, or that you’re having fun even though I’m near?”

David landed a playful punch on Jerry’s shoulder and laughed. “Stop that. I never thought those things about you.”

“You backpedaling now, mountain lion?”

“No, I know what I said to you last night—”

“I believe you told me to go fuck myself.”

“Jerry,” David hissed quietly and nodded towards William. “William!”

“He can’t hear.”

“I never told you to... that.” David glanced towards William again, who, like most ten-year-old boys, was getting more of the berries in his mouth than in the container.

“William, save some room for marshmallows,” Jerry yelled and turned his back to William, looking straight at David. “I’m just teasing you... which I believe is how you got all hot and bothered in the first place.” And with that, Jerry was off hoisting William for an impromptu plane ride, neither Jerry nor William afraid of any spilling berries, since none had found their way into the container.

David put the lid on the container and walked beside Jerry, William placed firmly atop his muscled shoulders, his little hands firmly clasped against Jerry’s forehead.

“Will I be tall like you, Uncle Jerry? I like being able to see everything from up here.”

“Well, your mom wasn’t all that tall, and your dad... well, um, he....”

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David heard a different tone in Jerry's voice, struggling with words, like the kind you heard in an adult's voice when they didn't know how to break bad news to a child. David quickly surmised that neither of William's parents had been tall, and Jerry was having a hard time putting into words something that William probably didn't want to hear.

"You know, William," David interrupted, flashing a smile at Jerry, "I'm not tall, not as tall as your uncle, and I really like it." David saw relief wash over Jerry's face. "I don't bang my head in doorways, I don't have to shop in the freak section, *and*," David poked Jerry in the ribs, "I can run faster."

William giggled as Jerry lifted him off of his perch on his uncle's shoulders, set him down and began chasing David. David darted a look behind to see Jerry closing in quickly but veered right and headed for the horses. Safely behind King, David saw Jerry advancing, but with a teasing, grateful look on his face. When Jerry reached the saddle, David smiled and accepted the wink and silent *thank you* that Jerry mouthed, nodding his *you're welcome*.

"Okay, cowboy," Jerry turned to William, "you circle around that way and we'll corner him."

"No fair, two against one!" David trotted toward William while Jerry gave the appearance of a chase.

"I got him!" William cried as he latched onto David's leg, hanging on for dear life. David made an exaggerated tumble in the grass as William threw his arms up in the air, victorious.

"What was that about being faster?" Jerry straddled David's hips, William by his side, still giggling. Jerry pinned David's hands above his head and turned to William. "William, I think this cowboy needs to be taught a lesson."

"No," David huffed as he saw a look flash across Jerry's face.

"What do you think his punishment should be for tickling

me?”

William whispered something in Jerry’s ear that David could not quite hear. Even through David’s whispered promises to be very good from now on, the whispering continued, until finally Jerry looked down at him, grinned, and then looked back to William, saying, “Okay, then, William—start the punishment!”

William giggled and sank into the grass, small hands snaking out to tickle David wherever he could reach. “Say you’re sorry.” Jerry was smiling at him as William made grabbing motions with his hands over David’s ribs and sides. “Say you’re sorry and—”

“Okay, okay, I’m sorry!”

“William, what do you think?” Jerry let go of David’s hands and sat back. David was suddenly aware of his arousal and felt self-conscious, concerned that William would see something he shouldn’t. “Has he suffered enough?” Jerry saw the look in David’s eyes, sensing something other than just discomfort. David’s face was flushed, he noticed, and his eyes were getting more and more panicked.

“No,” William giggled. “Let’s do it again!”

“Please,” David whispered, “let me up now?”

Jerry moved off the smaller man quickly, grabbing William and squeezing him to his chest, ignoring his giggles and struggles to get free. “You’re mean.” Jerry began to tickle the boy. “Really mean! You want to keep tickling Mr. L., huh? How would you like to be tickled, huh?”

“No, don’t! I’m sorry, Mr. L.! Please, no, Uncle Jerry....”

David sat up and tried to focus on breathing calmly and evenly, glancing occasionally back by the horses to see Jerry suspending William a few feet above the ground, tickling him. David slowly got to his feet, feeling embarrassed at how he’d let

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something that should have been so fun and innocent get him so aroused and flustered. *What if William noticed? What if I'd...?*

As Jerry moved to pick up the items that had been scattered during the impromptu chase-and-tackle, he asked, "You okay, David?"

"I'm fine. I, uh." David's breathing was still a little labored, and he wasn't sure how to finish the sentence but didn't want to leave it like this. Jerry moved closer and squeezed David's shaky hand.

"Not in front of William—I forgot," Jerry whispered. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"No, really," David stammered and then felt his face heat. "I just didn't know that I would react—"

Jerry squeezed David's forearm and called to William, "William, let's help Mr. L. get all this grass off his shirt!"

"Jerry, I, uh." David wanted to tell him that this had been a bad idea, that it wasn't going to work. Fuck buddies, friends, whatever they were going to call it—it wouldn't work without one or both of them getting hurt. David could see that now, see that he could fall for.... "I'm sorry; it's nothing."

"I wish we had some tape or a roller or something," Jerry muttered as he furrowed his brows in concentration. "This stuff is hard to get off."

"It's okay; I can take it off when—"

"Nah, may as well do it now."

"Why would we need tape?" William asked, after seeming to ponder the comment for a bit.

"Turn it inside out, wrap it around your hand, and then the sticky side picks everything up."

William pondered this for a moment and then went back to removing the last few blades of grass from the back of David's shirt.

"All done!" Jerry squeezed David's shoulder, letting his hand linger for a moment too long and then pulling it away. Jerry turned to William. "Come on, cowboy, you need some help getting back up?"

"Duh, Uncle Jerry."

David got to his knees, immediately missing the feel of that hand on his shoulder, and brushed off the dirt and grass, looking over to see why William was squealing.

"Say you're sorry." Jerry was laughing just as hard as William, the big man holding William off the ground and tickling his ribs with his big hands. "Say you're sorry for saying 'duh'."

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry."

David mounted his horse alone this time and tried to ignore the little voice in his head telling him that this was all a bad idea.

They rode back to the ranch while the sun dipped toward the horizon, the brilliant yellow light replaced by the reds and oranges of the approaching summer months. David could not believe how the weather had been this April. In his youth, he would still have been wearing a parka at this time of the year, but he'd been amazed that the temperatures for the past few years, even in December, hovered well above those he remembered. *A perfect day*, he thought as he helped settle the horses, watching Jerry lift William so that the little man could help brush down the soft coats.

"Okay, men," Jerry rubbed his hands together. "Hot showers, warm clothes, and then hot chocolate!" Jerry raised his hands and whooped, William following suit. "William, you first! You go get your bath started, careful of the hot water, and Mr. L. and I will be there in a minute." William ran for the house as Jerry removed the saddlebags and hoisted them over his shoulder. As he and David

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walked toward the house, Jerry slipped a hand to David's lower back, fingers barely grazing underneath the waistband. "Have fun, mountain lion?"

"You have to ask?" David wiggled his hips a little, forcing Jerry's hand to dip even further. His fingers, David noticed, were calloused but gentle. "I can't remember the last time I smiled so much! My cheeks are sore."

"You know what's good for that?"

"What?"

"Lip massage."

"I walked right into that one, didn't I?"

Jerry chuckled and placed the saddlebags over the railing of the veranda. Turning to David, he circled his arms around the small waist and let his fingers find the waistband again. "I'm glad you came."

David raised an eyebrow and grinned. "What an opening."

Jerry did not laugh, only dipped his head down, his lips grazing David's for a gentle and chaste kiss. "I promise I'll be good."

"We should check on William." David backed up, suddenly overwhelmed at the tenderness in Jerry's touch, in his voice. "I'm a little antsy with the whole hot water thing."

"He's fine, trust me; he does it every night." Jerry placed a hand on David's shoulder, finally moving it away. "Okay, inside, your turn next."

"I didn't bring a change of clothing."

"Got it covered, mountain lion." Jerry winked and held the door open so David could pass.

THE fire crackled, the marshmallows were almost gone, and William slept, chocolate moustache in place, held firmly against Jerry's chest. Jerry was sprawled out on the ground, shoulders resting against a big log. David sat across from him on a smaller log, his legs stretched out in front of him. He wasn't so close to the fire that he'd shucked the sweatshirt that Jerry had loaned him, but he was close enough that he'd found relief in rolling up the sleeves.

"I wish I had a camera," David said, breaking the silence that had descended since William had fallen asleep. "Poor thing. He must be exhausted."

"And full of berries and marshmallows." Jerry chuckled, causing William to stir a little. "I should put him to bed.... You wanna come in or you want me to come back out?"

David ignored the question for the time being and asked instead, "His parents were both short?"

Jerry stroked the boy's back as he sighed. "Mother was barely five foot and his father, well, probably five and a half, tops." Jerry moved both hands to William's back as the boy shifted and curled into the fetal position, never waking up. "That was nice of you; thank you." Jerry studied David, admiring the way his eyes were shining. *Happy eyes*, he thought, hoped. "Kinda worried about him, to tell you the truth."

"William's height?"

"Not just that," Jerry whispered, placing a kiss on the top of William's head. "I see glimpses of him...." Jerry stopped, brow furrowing, as if he couldn't find the right expression, then started again. "I wonder if he'll ever feel, *be*, happy, all the time, you know. I can't...." Jerry watched as David left his log and sat cross-legged

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beside him. "I'm babblin'." Jerry blushed and looked at David.

"You wonder if he'll ever feel that he's... enough."

"Yeah." Jerry smiled and stroked William's back. "Happy enough, smart enough, brave enough, trusting enough."

"He'll be whatever he wants to become if you support him, encourage him." David looked down. "Love him."

"Even tall?" Jerry smirked, delighting in the slow smile spreading across David's face.

"Well," David sighed, relieved that he hadn't misspoken as he leaned back, hand braced behind him, legs outstretched. "We can't all be tall like you."

"If memory serves," Jerry grinned, "you think I'm a freak."

David blushed and kicked Jerry's boot with his foot. "In a good way."

"I'm still gonna get you for that."

"If you can catch me, cowboy." David brushed his hands against each other and rested his forearms on his knees, saying, as if the question hadn't been asked almost five minutes before, "We can't leave him alone in the house." David rose and stretched his back. "I'll douse the fire and meet you inside."

Jerry rose without comment, one of those beautiful hands cradling William's neck, the other arm wrapped around William's legs. Jerry repositioned his little passenger so that his head rested comfortably on a big shoulder and headed inside. David watched them go, heart melting a little more.

What the hell am I doing? David threw some sand on the fire, questioning himself yet again. *We're supposed to be fuck buddies. I'm not ready for all of this.* Resolving to keep to their agreement, David moved toward the house, resolve fading as soon as he saw

Jerry standing at the kitchen sink. *He's so beautiful, so kind, so gentle with William. What kind of lover must he be? Attentive? Gentle? Savage? Predatory? Probably all of them,* David decided as he sat down at the kitchen table.

"I thought we'd Irish up our hot chocolates and sit by the fireplace." Jerry dried his hands, allowing David the space to wash his. David didn't answer at first.

"What's going on here?" David whispered when Jerry reached out to dry his hands for him.

"You feel it too?"

"I thought we were only going to be—"

"No, if you'll remember correctly, we agreed that we'd start out that way and see where it goes."

"I'm not comfortable with this, Jerry."

"Fair enough." Jerry motioned to the living room, fire already roaring. "No pressure. I'll be good, I promise."

David sat on the opposite end of the sofa from Jerry and turned to study that handsome face, those beautiful eyes—a bit like William's—the crooked nose, those beautiful hands. "I don't want to get hurt again, Jerry. Don't want to hurt you or William." David regretted it the minute it was out of his mouth but couldn't take it back now.

"I understand." Jerry passed a mug to David from the tray in the center of the coffee table. "It should be cool enough now."

David offered his thanks and cradled the mug between his hands, his gaze shifting to the window beyond Jerry's head. "I know I sound like a hypocrite, telling you to take a chance on William, telling you about all the joy that you could find in..." David looked back at Jerry. "And then leading you on by—"

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“First of all,” Jerry whispered, “you’re not leading me anywhere. Second of all, yours and William’s are completely different situations. And most importantly, situations can become so much more emotional and raw when sex is involved. I’m not judging you, David, so stop judging yourself. You don’t want to, we won’t.”

David smiled at Jerry’s words, knowing he was talking about their mutual fuck buddy arrangement. “You know you can be very charming when you want to be.” David blushed at Jerry’s grin and, before he could chicken out, added, “Would you like to get together this Friday? I promise I won’t keep you too long, so you can get back to William; easier to find a sitter that doesn’t need to stay the whole night.” David could feel the heat coursing through his body but forced himself to meet Jerry’s gaze.

“Know anyone who can look after the little cowboy for a couple of hours?”

“I could check with Lenore. She has twins around William’s age.” David’s gaze drifted downward. “She’d have to know about us, though.”

Jerry shrugged. “That’s not a problem for me. You?” David shook his head, expression solemn. “Then it’s a date, a *fuck buddy* date. No pressure.”

“Thank you, Jerry.”

“You’re welcome.” Jerry placed his mug on the coffee table. “Listen, there was actually an entirely different motive for inviting you today.” David raised an eyebrow but let Jerry continue. “Sara came by at breakfast today. I told her I was seriously thinking about keeping William... permanently.”

David flew at him, wrapping his arms around the big, broad shoulders. “That’s wonderful.”

Jerry laughed and held David close to his chest. “Now hold on,

I just said ‘thinking about it’.”

“You’re not fooling me, cowboy.” David released his grip but remained within easy reach of Jerry’s long arms. “I was watching you both today. That little boy idolizes you.” David traced Jerry’s jaw with his thumb. “And I could see how much you’ve already come to care for William.”

Jerry blushed. “Yeah, you were right, much as it pains me to admit it,” Jerry said. “Last night, I set up camp in William’s room, just sitting and staring at him sleep. So innocent, so peaceful. I never thought I could fall in love that fast.” Jerry laughed, no humor in it at all. “Scares the crap out of me. Was hoping that you’d still be willing to help me? Listen to me? Answer questions?”

David nodded and patted Jerry’s forearm. “Cowboy up, yeah?” David whispered the question as he linked his fingers through Jerry’s and raised his hand to his lips, placing one soft kiss against the knuckles. “But tell me it’s not the most exhilarating feeling to know that you’ve touched someone’s heart.” *Like mine*, David thought, but he let the words die in his throat.

Jerry nodded and stared at David’s face. “You’re so beautiful.”

David’s smile faded; he felt like he couldn’t breathe. He pulled his hand away gently, kissed Jerry on the cheek, and stood up. “I should get going.”

“Okay.” Jerry stood and followed David to the door, watching as he gathered his clothes in his arms. “I can pick up the sweats on Friday.”

David nodded. “I’ll be sure they’re washed.”

Jerry wanted to protest, wanting something that would smell of David, but wouldn’t let himself say anymore to scare this man away. “Good night, David.” Jerry leaned forward and kissed David’s forehead.

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“Good night, Jerry.” David stroked his cheek and added, “And thank you, for... everything.” David had been about to say *for the perfect day*, but for some reason, he decided against it.

As he leaned his forehead against the cool steering wheel, David wondered yet again whether he knew what he was doing.

Chapter 7

“I’VE decided.” Jerry still had his coat on, making the announcement immediately upon seeing David come into view on the other side of the opening door. It was Friday night, their first real time together without William, and Jerry was looking to celebrate a tough decision finally rendered.

“About?” David took Jerry’s coat and hung it in the closet.

“I’m going to make it official,” Jerry began, a smile on his face. “I’m going to keep him and start adoption procedures.” Jerry shrugged at David’s self-satisfied smirk. “Who am I kidding? I fell in love with the little guy the first time I watched him sleeping, so alone, so scared, so cautious. If I can have anything to do with changing that, I want to.”

“Jerry.” David moved his arms around Jerry’s waist. “You have already changed him.” David slid his hands under the sports coat and removed it, hanging it up beside the overcoat, wondering why Jerry was dressed up. “I get all gooey inside when I remember how you held him on your chest while he slept by the fire.” David leaned forward and kissed the chest in question. “I can’t tell you how proud I am of you, how happy I am for you and William.”

“Thank you, David, for everything.” Jerry kissed the top of David’s head, noticing that his hair was still damp from a shower. A clean, beautiful, sexy-as-fuck man and a whole three hours to enjoy him.

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As David backed Jerry into the living room, hands loosening clothing, fingers teasing skin, mouths and tongues kissing impatient lips, he felt himself get lost in the look in Jerry's eyes. David felt Jerry's hands, those beautiful hands, unfasten his shirt buttons and then descend to his pants, nimble fingers making quick work of the button and zipper. David heard Jerry's moans when his hands slid into David's pants and slid around to squeeze the firm cheeks. David shivered and moved slowly to his knees, tugging, working, pulling until Jerry's pants were tossed aside, leaving David kneeling in front of Jerry's semi-hard dick. It was much larger than it had felt in his hand. David shivered again as he wondered what it would feel like entering him, slow, languid movements leading to frenzied pistoning over and over until David felt it swell and throb with release.

"Sex me in French, baby." Jerry's eyes were filled with lust as he whispered into David's sensitive ear. "Tell me you want to suck my dick in French."

David moaned and arched his back off the floor; they hadn't made it to the bedroom. "Can't think of..." David's eyes opened as he felt Jerry's small kisses on his neck, Jerry's beautiful hands falling slowly away from his body, and gripped Jerry's chin in both hands. "Can't think when you're doing me like that, cowboy. Can't remember how to say 'baseball bat' in French."

"Charmer!" Jerry rolled onto his back, hand moving to the back of his lover's neck, caressing and pressing gently toward his swollen erection. "How do you say 'sexy as fuck' in French?"

David's lips teased the slit of Jerry's dick as he listened to the words, felt Jerry's hand massaging his neck. He felt as if he'd been given painkillers, his brain all fuzzy and slow to react. He laved Jerry's full length and peered up through his lashes. "Jerry McKenzie."

"How about 'lucky son-of-a-bitch'?"

"Another easy one." David moaned before deep-throating the

full nine inches. Jerry couldn't keep his fingers from sliding into David's silky hair. David came off and then went back down, but this time he hummed something, causing vibrations to send electric shocks up and down Jerry's spine, settling in his balls. He felt David working his perineum again. "David. Marshall. Van. Den. Boesch."

"Sweet Jesus, David." Jerry sputtered. "Do you ever say the wrong thing? You're fucking sex on a pair of long legs, aren't you?"

As if to illustrate his point, Jerry pulled David to a standing position, then knelt, and began caressing David's long legs, smoothing his hands up and down, finally cupping David's ass as he nuzzled David's balls with his nose.

"May I?" Jerry tugged on David's boxers and, when he saw David nod and shiver, tugged them off, lifting each of David's legs to be able to toss them aside. "Which way to the bed?" Jerry asked as he kissed his way back up to David's lips.

David pointed behind him, and Jerry backed David slowly toward the bedroom, his lips never leaving David's. "You have the most incredible mouth, baby."

Without responding, David pushed Jerry back on the bed, kneeling between his legs to continue licking, sucking, nipping, and laving. David massaged Jerry's inner thighs, tickling lightly over the skin with his nails, watching Jerry's impressive endowment twitch and bounce against his abdomen. "You have the most incredible body—so big, so strong, so warm, so—" David smiled to himself as he felt Jerry shudder. "—responsive."

"Never be able to get enough of you, baby."

David reached towards the nightstand, finding the condom and the lube. "Don't know about that, but I'm glad you think so." David's mouth found its way to Jerry's dick again as he opened the condom wrapper and then popped the top of the lube. "Lift your legs for me, cowboy? Knees up to your chest." Jerry felt David's tongue

back under his foreskin as he did as requested, and then he felt the condom being rolled onto his stiff prick, David's fingers slick with lube.

"Holy mother of God, baby," Jerry whimpered as he felt David's tongue flick his hole. "You're gonna kill me with that mouth."

"Don't mean to." David's mouth continued to explore his hole, Jerry still feeling that one hand sliding up and down his latex-encased shaft. Then David's flushed face hovered over Jerry's, David's hand running through Jerry's hair as he lowered his lips to meet Jerry's mouth. The kiss was gentle at first but grew demanding, teeth clicking together, tongues darting back and forth, hot breath pushed from one mouth to the other. "Fuck me?"

"Fuckin' A!" Jerry started to get up from his back but felt David's hand on his chest, a questioning look crossing David's face.

"Later." David gasped as he felt Jerry's dick caressing his hole. "Wanna show you something first."

Jerry lay back down. "Baby, you got me so riled up I don't think I'll last long like this." Jerry felt David reach around and grab his swollen prick. "Guide me in, baby?"

"My pleasure, cowboy." As an afterthought, David added, "Don't have to last long, baby—got plenty of time. I'm not going anywhere; do me as much as you want. Can't get enough of that *grosse bitte*."

Jerry's back arched as the words flowed through his brain. Just the thought of an entire night to do nothing but fuck this tight ass into the mattress was enough of a thought to have his balls tightening up already. "Fuck, yeah, make you scream my name 'til you can't think straight."

"Already there, cowboy." David's hands massaged Jerry's chest as he rode the larger man, his thighs flexing and releasing as

Jerry caressed them, aware of Jerry's gaze on his prick. Suddenly, David stopped riding and peered down at Jerry, lust and passion defining his eyes. "Ready for your surprise, cowboy?" If David hadn't been so intent on making this man moan, he would have laughed at the confusion written on Jerry's face.

Jerry hissed and bucked as he felt David's muscles clench-and-release in a rolling wave all along the length of his dick. "Fuck me; what was that?" David didn't answer; he only closed his eyes and hit Jerry's entire length with another wave. Jerry grabbed David's dick and brushed his big thumb over the sensitive head. "Wish I could show you how it feels, baby." He wrapped his hand around the hot shaft, feeling the heat down to his balls.

"Oh, Jerry," David gasped when Jerry thumbed the slit of his cock. "Make me feel so good." David moved his hands behind him, forcing his chest out, his prick further into Jerry's beautiful hand. Jerry's free hand began to roam over David's chest, abdomen, and thigh. David felt the perfect amount of pressure. "Those beautiful hands." David's fingers found Jerry's heavy balls and began gently gliding over their sac. "Oh, fuck, cowboy... yes, Jerry, close...."

"Oh, shit, baby, yeah, squeeze 'em good and tight. Wanna see your face when you come, David." Jerry's hand moved up and down David's engorged erection, flicking his thumb over the head and slit. "Look at me, baby."

David lowered his eyes, his hands moving over Jerry's chest, pinching nipples, tugging gently at chest hair, and sliding to caress the flexing muscles of his abdomen. "Jerry, so good, so beautiful."

"Yeah, mountain lion, come for me." Jerry bucked his hips once, tugging with his other fist on David's dick at the same time. "Jesus fucking Christ, you're so tight, so fucking tight. Gonna come soon, baby."

David looked down, his hands falling to the mattress as he felt Jerry arch up and peg his gland. David panted as he felt Jerry's hand

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squeeze over the head of his sensitive cock. When David finally gasped, gaze intent on Jerry's hungry eyes, Jerry encouraged his release. Breath stopping, head falling forward, David felt Jerry's free hand at the base of his neck.

"Fuck, David, I can't stop looking at you." Jerry bucked up one last time as he felt David clench hard around him, spraying the hot liquid all over his chest and abs. "Fuck—David—baby—gonna shoot! Yeah, fuck...." Jerry grunted, gasped, then grunted again, and David could feel the pulsing of Jerry's dick in his ass. Jerry's eyes closed tight; he pulled David down on top of him, feeling the slickness of David's own release between them. Jerry bucked himself into David two or three more times, burying his dick to the hilt while he came down from his climax. David felt the breath of Jerry's gasps on his neck as he massaged and caressed Jerry's neck and scalp.

"Jesus, David," Jerry whispered. "Anyone who let you go is a fucking idiot."

"Well, thank you, Jerrod Austin McKenzie," David chuckled between gasps.

"Don't mention it, uh, uh...." Jerry studied David's face and waited.

"You've forgotten already?"

Jerry leaned up and kissed David's nose. "I was teasing, David Marshall *Loewenberger*." Jerry kissed David's neck. "I hate to sound crass, but I knew when I first saw that ass that you would be an incredible fuck." Jerry's face flushed.

"What's crass about that?" David kissed Jerry, tongue licking between lips and teeth. "That's the great thing about fuck buddies. And you know I like to practice my pillow talk?"

"This can't be you practicing."

“Why not?”

“‘Cause when you give me the real thing, you’re gonna kill me.”

“Now who’s the charmer?” David put his hands over the firm mounds of Jerry’s pectorals as he leaned forward and kissed Jerry’s lips, gently and slowly. The kiss that Jerry returned made David shiver. “We’ll just have to keep working on it.” David kissed Jerry’s lips, inhaling Jerry’s scent at the same time. “Build up your stamina.” When Jerry laughed, David felt him relax completely. “Jesus, Jerry, you think I’m sex on long legs, but no one has ever made me feel like this. How do you know exactly what to do to me, exactly what spots to touch?”

“Like I said, I can’t stop looking at you.” Jerry cupped David’s face in his big hands and pulled him down to kiss his nose again. “Your little nose wrinkles when you’re feeling emotional.” Jerry’s hands caressed David’s ribs. “You’re ticklish, but only if I don’t use the right amount of pressure.” Jerry’s lips found David’s ear, kissed it, and then returned to brush lightly over his lips. “You love kissing more than anything, and your ears are so sensitive, left one more than right, that I’d love to try to make you come just by tongue-fucking your ears and mouth.” Jerry laughed when he felt David shiver.

David rested his head on Jerry’s chest, his arms caressing Jerry’s strong shoulders as he wondered what he’d done. *Why does your fuck buddy know more about what makes you shiver than your past boyfriends, all of the losers put together?* David felt Jerry stir, shoulder shrugging, voice soft and mellow. David listened to the deep bass voice through Jerry’s chest before he looked up.

“Where’d you go?” Jerry was smiling up at him. “Thought you’d fallen asleep on me.”

“Not a chance, cowboy.” David kissed his forehead. “If my calculations are correct, I figure we’ve got another three rounds

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before you have to head out, yeah?”

“My dick might have something to say about that!” Jerry moved his hands down to David’s butt cheeks and squeezed, inhaling deeply as David kissed his neck and shoulders. “Mind if I shower?”

“Not at all.” David rolled to the side and leaned down to kiss the foreskin of Jerry’s dick. “I’ll have dinner ready when you’re done.” Grabbing Jerry’s softening dick, David squeezed and leered at Jerry. “I think I can convince your dick to cooperate.”

“Oh, sweet Jesus!” Jerry whimpered. “Wait, you’re not gonna join me for a shower?”

“Something tells me we’ll have plenty of time to conserve water over the next—” David turned to look at the clock, and Jerry seized the opportunity to lean over and kiss David’s ear. “—two hours, twelve minutes, and nine seconds.” *Showers are too intimate*, David decided. *Best not make this more complicated for yourself*.

David washed up first, and then Jerry got up and showered while David worked in the kitchen, putting the final touches on the Swiss steak dinner he’d begun hours earlier. He opened the crock pot and let the aromas fill the apartment, turning the timer off and setting the table. When Jerry finally exited the bathroom, wrapped only in a towel, David presented Swiss steak, baked potato wedges, assorted steamed vegetables, freshly baked bread, and a dry white wine. “Sorry, I forgot to ask if you like wine.” David rubbed his hands over his sweatpants and turned to see Jerry standing there, chest hair still damp, water droplets meeting the towel, his cock already half-hard. David swallowed audibly and added, “This particular restaurant has a dress code, sir.”

Jerry flicked his thumb over his waist, and the towel fell to the floor. “Better?”

David licked his lips at the sight of Jerry’s uncut length

surging upward as he stared at it. "God, you're stunning!" David walked forward, eyes on Jerry's shaft, and stroked his palm over the foreskin-covered head, his other hand fondling the heavy, low-hanging balls. "T'es bandé comme un cheval." David felt Jerry's hands on the back of his neck, his mouth searching for David's ear.

"Something like a horse?"

"Hung like a horse." David went to his knees and darted his tongue between foreskin and head, feeling Jerry's hands tangling in his hair. "Ta bite, si belle, si grosse." David's hands found their way to Jerry's balls, fondling, kneading, cupping them and shaking his hand gently, as if Jerry's balls were a pair of dice.

"Can't think," Jerry moaned and felt his head fall back, knees feeling weak.

"Your dick is so beautiful, so fat." David laved the underside of Jerry cock, inhaling the fresh scent of soap mixed with Jerry's musk. "Chauve à col roué. Putain, si canon."

Jerry hissed as David cupped his balls in his hand and took the full length into his mouth. "I need to sit down."

David reached over to his right and pulled a chair away from the table. "Uncut. Fuck, so sexy, so hot."

Jerry sat heavily, hands smoothing their way through David's silky strands. "Baby, you're gonna make me come."

"Donne-moi ton foutre."

"God, David," Jerry groaned as David suctioned his way up and down Jerry's straining length. "Keep talking."

"I want your cum."

David's teeth scraped carefully over Jerry's sensitive head. Jerry jumped, balls tightening as he fisted David's hair. "Fuck me, I'm gonna...." Jerry tried to pull David's head off of his throbbing

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prick. “Baby, gonna shoot, gotta... oh, warning.”

David sucked one last time and felt Jerry’s fists on his head. David closed his eyes as the hot liquid hit the back of his throat, listening to Jerry’s moans of pleasure and almost coming himself. He felt jet after jet of the ropey liquid coat his tongue, swallowing greedily. He cupped Jerry’s balls and squeezed, feeling Jerry’s inner thighs spread a little further apart. Jerry shuddered as his spasms stopped.

“Fuck me!” Jerry sagged in the chair as David finished licking the last of Jerry’s seed from around the larger man’s cock. Placing one final kiss at the sensitive tip, David straddled Jerry’s hips and leaned down for a kiss. “Baby, you....” Jerry began, stopped, and then started again. “You make me feel so good.” Jerry wrapped his arms around David’s back and pulled him closer.

Jerry kissed David deeply, tasting his own seed, moaning into the kiss, making David shiver once again. “We need to eat.”

“I’m full.” David wrapped his arms around Jerry’s neck, running his hands around the back of Jerry’s head and over the top. David gave Jerry one more searing, tongue-dueling kiss and retreated to the bathroom to wash his hands and brush his teeth.

“Fuck me, but you are one sensitive fucker, aren’t you?” Jerry turned to see David wiggle his eyebrows. “There isn’t anywhere I touch you that doesn’t make your eyes roll back in your head.” Jerry noticed a little tiered étagère in the corner near the bathroom, hidden in the shadow cast by the bathroom lights. He studied it as he approached. “You mind?” Jerry pointed to the photos, securing the towel around his waist again. When David shook his head, Jerry picked up a yellowed, fading black and white wedding portrait. It must be David’s family—the resemblance between the woman and David was striking. They had the same oval face and sad, dark eyes; except for the glasses that the woman wore, she could have been David’s twin. But surely these couldn’t be David’s parents? The

photograph was too old.

“My grandparents,” David offered from beside Jerry, making him jump a little. “Sorry, didn’t mean to scare you. Maternal grandparents.”

“You look so much like her; it’s unreal.” Jerry put the picture back on the shelf and spotted another on a higher shelf. “Wow, brother?”

“That,” David sighed, “is Sampson. I’d forgotten it was there.”

Jerry growled and returned the framed picture to the shelf face down, suddenly unable to explain the jealousy he was feeling course through him, making his skin prickle with sweat.

David laughed and wrapped his hands around Jerry’s bicep, kissing his deltoid. “Thank you.” David pushed Jerry into the bedroom. “Put something on, and we’ll eat.”

Jerry rolled his eyes, complaining about the dress code in this particular restaurant being so inflexible as he shucked the towel and put on his boxers and T-shirt, delighting in David’s laugh. He wondered what it would take to change their “fuck buddies” status to “friends with benefits.”

They ate mostly in silence except for the moans of approval from Jerry as he tasted the foods and questioned the spices, sending a few satisfied looks David’s way when he’d finished his second and third helpings. David pulled out a container of ice cream from the freezer and ducked into the fridge to retrieve a bowl of fresh strawberries and blueberries.

“Where did you learn to cook like this?” Jerry spooned a few pieces of fruit into his bowl and reached for the ice cream.

“My grandmother.” David picked up some fruit with his fingers and popped the berries into his mouth.

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“Is she still alive?”

“No, she passed away when I was thirty.”

“I’m sorry, David.”

David smiled and ducked his head, face flushing at Jerry’s expression. “It’s okay. It was quite a while ago.”

“She didn’t disown—” Jerry stopped himself and held up his hand. “Sorry, none of my business.”

“No, it’s okay, really.” David scooped some ice cream into a bowl and looked back at Jerry. “My parents disowned me when I was twenty-five, well, almost twenty-five, but I’d been visiting with my grandmother regularly every Friday night since I’d been in high school.” David paused, biting his lip. “None of the other grandchildren visited her, and my mother and father hired a maid to clean once a week. They themselves only visited once a month or so. I think my mother was always ashamed of having grown up so poor. And God knows she lectured me constantly when I spoke German, which she considered to be marginally above grunting on the communication scale. Grandma only came to our house at Christmas.” David’s voice hitched a little, and he cursed himself for still being emotional about all of this. “She was lonely. Grandpa had been dead five years before my mother decided that Grandma would move to the city from the farm.” David rubbed at an invisible stain on the table, not wanting to see the look of pity he was sure was on Jerry’s face. “I would phone her on Wednesday night to get her grocery list and then, after buying them on Friday, would take them to her, and we would cook together.” Finally feeling under control, David smiled up at Jerry. “She made me the quilt that’s hanging on the wall in my bedroom.” David fell silent, feeling foolish for telling Jerry all of this, but he didn’t seem able to stop himself.

“She was very lucky.”

“No.” David’s chest heaved. “I was the lucky one.” David felt

a tear fall down his cheek. “Fuck.” He got up and moved to go to the bathroom, but Jerry raised one hand and stopped him in his tracks. David tried to free his arm, but Jerry wouldn’t let go.

“I’m sorry they hurt you so badly, David. Sorry your grandmother was abandoned by her own child.” Jerry pulled the smaller man onto his lap, wrapping his arms around his shoulders, reaching up to kiss his cheek. “But it makes me happy to think of the joy you must have brought her during her final days.”

“She deserved better.” David’s breath caught and he swiped at the tears on his cheeks.

“Better than you?” Jerry kissed David’s chin. “Impossible.”

“Charmer!” David kissed Jerry’s forehead and raised himself up off Jerry’s lap, moving to the sink to rinse dishes.

“Listen, David.” Jerry’s heart was beating so fast that he felt like he might pass out. “I was wondering if you had any current openings—pardon the upcoming pun—for a friend with benefits?”

“Isn’t that just another word for fuck buddy?”

“Maybe, but I don’t like thinking of you, of us... I don’t want to call you that.”

Jerry saw David shrug and continue rinsing the dishes. “Leave that. I’ll do that.” Jerry walked to the sink. “Please, I’ll do it.” Jerry watched David step to the side and look at him, embarrassment on his face.

“I apologize.” David blushed. “I didn’t mean to ruin our evening. I’m afraid I’m not a very good fuck buddy.”

“Don’t call yourself that anymore.” Jerry’s voice seemed harsh, even to his own ears. “Please?”

David stood behind Jerry as he rinsed dishes, the muscles in his back flexing and releasing. David put his arms around Jerry’s

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waist and leaned his head against Jerry's neck. He placed a tender kiss on Jerry's neck and then mumbled, "Thank you."

Jerry lifted his arm over David's head and brought it down over David's shoulders, kissing the shorter man's forehead. "You're welcome."

"I think I'll shower now." David turned his head and kissed Jerry's bicep.

"May I join you?" Jerry didn't look away from his hands as he continued to rinse the dishes.

"Please?" The voice came from behind him, the question not needing to be asked. Jerry closed his eyes and knew that his life would never be the same.

Chapter 8

JERRY was so excited. This would be their second date, but it was also a first, of sorts; it was the first time that Jerry would be spending the night, the first time he'd be waking up next to David. He'd been working on the canvas ever since David had first expressed appreciation for *Becoming Morning*, but he still wasn't sure if it was too much. *Fuck it*, he was going to give David the present anyway. He checked his appearance for the fiftieth time, making sure his beard wasn't too long or too short. He felt like he was a teenager again, with the butterflies in his stomach and the sweat threatening to break out all over his palms. He checked his breath again. Minty, but he popped another mint anyway. Checking his appearance one last time, he called to William, "Hey, cowboy, you ready?"

William was waiting at the foot of the stairs. "For ten minutes."

"Smarta—" Jerry brushed his hand over William's head, loving the feel of the tiny head against his hand. *My boy*, he'd started to think over the past few weeks. He liked that. Scared the crap out of him, but he liked it. "Smart aleck."

"Can I go wait in the car?" Jerry laughed at the impatience in William's voice.

"Sure, buddy. How about you go open the doors and stow your stuff in the backseat?" Jerry tossed William the keys, but William

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missed them completely. *Have to teach the boy to catch*, Jerry added to the list of summer events. "I'll be right there. No starting the car, okay?" Moving to the dining room, Jerry heard the *Yes, sir*, retrieved the plain-wrapped canvas, and headed for the door. He realized at the last minute that he'd given the keys to William. "Hey, buddy," he called to William from the porch, "throw me the keys. I need to lock the door." William gave it his best, but Jerry still had to walk a couple of yards to retrieve the keys. *And throw*.

In the car, Jerry laughed as William practically vibrated with anticipation. "Hey, buddy, *mach dich locker* before you blow a gasket." Lenore had agreed to take William for the night so that David could have a date-night with Jerry. Lenore had a set of ten-year-old twins, one boy and one girl, who she swore would hit it off with William. "Now, what did we talk about?"

William counted off on his fingers. "No staying up past midnight, no eating in the sleeping bag, no throwing things, and...." William closed his eyes. "Always say 'please' and 'thank you'."

"That's my boy." Jerry didn't realize what he'd said right away until he noticed William's head turn to look at him.

"I liked that."

"Me too, cowboy, me too." Jerry wondered seriously for the first time how he ever could have wanted to go back to his former life of being alone, and, if he were honest, lonely. "Here we are, buddy!"

"Thanks, Uncle Jerry."

"Hey, hey...." Jerry reached over and held the back of William's neck as he looked into the blue eyes. "Have fun, right? Just not so much fun you sleep all day tomorrow."

"I know, I know."

"Hey!" Jerry showed William an exaggerated pout and asked,

“Where’s my hug?”

Jerry laughed as William climbed back onto the seat and leaned across, wrapping his arms around Jerry’s neck. “I love you.”

Jerry didn’t stop him again but busied himself with unloading the sleeping bag and William’s duffle bag. When he got one last hug outside the car, he hurried back inside, waved to Lenore and the kids, and drove back down the street to park and get a hold of himself. *“I love you.” Sweet Jesus, what am I doing?* Jerry closed his eyes against the heat burning them from the inside out. Did it mean anything? Was it just a happy ten-year-old’s goodbye? He made a mental note to tell David, maybe get his opinion, and then laughed. *Like I’m ever gonna forget this moment!*

As he parked the car outside of David’s building, Jerry worried that maybe he was reading too much into this one comment. Climbing the stairs, Jerry stood there, and he knew from David’s expression that David saw something in his face. “What’s wrong?” David motioned Jerry into the apartment and took his coat and keys.

“When I dropped William off, I asked for a hug, and when he gave me one, he said he loved me.”

David’s heart melted. He moved to Jerry, cupping the taller man’s face with his hands, and kissed him gently on the lips. “But that’s wonderful, no?”

“I don’t know.” Jerry shifted his weight nervously from one foot to the other. “I mean, does it mean what I think it means, or is it just his way of saying goodbye, or—”

“It means he loves you.” David saw Jerry’s shoulders fall about three inches and stifled a laugh. *William’s got you wrapped around his little finger, doesn’t he?*

“Cool.” Jerry smiled and held up the wrapped present. “For you.”

Good to Know

“For me?” David held the wrapped canvas in his hands. “I hope it’s a book.”

“Ass.”

“No, wait—a new washing machine!”

“Okay, one more, and then I’m taking it back.”

“All right, I’m sorry. But you didn’t need to get me anything.”

“It just felt right.”

David led Jerry into the living room. He took care to cut the brown string and then took his time unwrapping the brown paper. He could tell he was driving Jerry crazy, if his bouncing leg was any indication. The present finally unwrapped, David turned it around to look at the front. The smile fell from his face as he studied the canvas, his mouth dropped open and his eyes grew larger by the second. “Oh, Jerry, it’s... it’s absolutely... I can’t even begin to thank you. I can’t take this, seriously. It’s too much, really.” David studied the replica of the triptych in his father’s office, the one he hadn’t seen for so many years now. But this one was not identical, its colors brighter, happier. It made David want to smile.

“You like it, then?” Jerry stood up and moved towards David. “I called it *Becoming Human*. See right there?” David looked at the bottom of the canvas to see the title. “And I wrote something for you on the back.” Jerry turned the canvas over and pointed near the bottom.

“‘For David. Thank you for the lessons in humanity’.” David closed his eyes, hoping he wouldn’t cry in front of this man yet again.

“You’re getting very flustered.” Jerry moved closer to David, his arms circling the shorter man’s waist until their hips were pushed together.

“And you’re getting very laid!”

“That’s not why I gave it to you.” Jerry’s voice was teasing, but David knew he’d misspoken.

“Of course not. That was insulting. I’m sorry.” David placed the painting on the buffet against the far wall and returned to Jerry’s arms. “I’m sorry for spoiling that moment.”

“Forgiven,” Jerry teased. He pinched David’s ass. “But I’m gonna hold you to it... no pun intended.”

“Trust me; you won’t have to hold me.” David took Jerry’s hands in his. “I’ll be the one pressing up against you all night long.”

Walking backward, David led Jerry to the bedroom, hands reaching for buttons as they went. David’s T-shirt was the first to go, followed quickly by the shirt that Jerry had spent what seemed like an hour ironing this afternoon. David put it on a hanger, much to Jerry’s relief. In his haste, he’d forgotten to bring a fresh one to wear tomorrow.

“Did you want to eat first?”

“Only if you’re on the menu.”

David’s hands found Jerry’s belt and made short work of it and the buttons of his slacks. Moving his hands around to Jerry’s ass, David glided his hands over Jerry’s boxers, removing the slacks as he went. As the belt buckle jingled and hit the floor, Jerry’s lips found David’s, touching them gently, softly. There was no rush, no hurry; they would have all night, and Jerry’s pockets were full of condoms and lube.

David groaned as Jerry’s arms slid around his hips to cup his ass. Kneading and massaging, Jerry managed to elicit a few more moans and a few shivers before removing David’s pants altogether. Jerry’s groan of approval was low and guttural. “You normally go without underwear?”

Good to Know

“Depends on who’s gonna be undressing me.”

“Do I need to worry about other guys undressing you?” David shook his head slightly as Jerry’s tongue slid up David’s neck until it found his ear, the moist tip darting in and out quickly and then circling the shell. Jerry laughed when David pulled so hard against his shoulders that he was practically hanging on the taller man, feet clear off the floor. “What was that?”

David pulled back, lowering himself to the floor, face flushed, ears burning. “My ears are kinda my G-spot.”

Jerry folded David back into his arms, David’s arms pressed underneath his. “Good to know. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

Jerry’s tongue slid up David’s neck again, but this time, when Jerry tongued David’s ear, David wasn’t able to move. Jerry slid his tongue around the shell, blowing hot breath across David’s ear, enjoying the shivers he was causing. “Think I can make you come just by licking your ears like this for the next hour?”

“Five minutes, tops!” David panted as he squirmed but could not free himself.

“Good to know.” And with that, Jerry set to work, his arms still pinning David’s, his tongue licking, sucking, and pistoning until he thought David’s heart would beat through both their chests. Alternating his kisses and hot breath between David’s ears and mouth, Jerry could feel David’s fingers clawing across his ass, struggling to grab something, anything. Jerry’s hands began to move up and down David’s back as much as they were able. He felt a sudden urge to make sure David felt protected, safe. He put his lips against the shell of David’s ear, the more sensitive one, and whispered, bass voice rumbling, “I’ve got you, baby; you’re safe.” Jerry kissed the ear, ensuring a loud, wet, smacking sound. His lips still pressed against David’s ear, David writhing frantically in his

arms, Jerry moved his hands to cup David's ass, pulling the shivering man towards his body. When he felt David's erection press against his body, Jerry brushed his lips across the shell one more time. "Come for me, baby," he whispered gustily in David's ear. Jerry felt David shudder wordlessly. Jerry could feel the moist liquid seeping down his dick and inner thigh. "Fuck, David, what you do to me."

"I think you have that backwards," David gasped as Jerry lowered him to the bed. Jerry moved quickly to David's side and cradled his head while caressing up and down David's chest with his free hand. Placing gentle kisses on and around David's mouth, Jerry waited for David's breathing to return to normal.

Jerry saw the look in David's eyes as he kept up his kisses and caresses. "I wanna fuck you, David." Jerry's kisses grew more intense. "I wanna make you feel, try to make you feel what you make me feel."

David took Jerry's free hand and trailed it down his chest, past his balls, and let it rest near his hole. David saw the look of pure lust on Jerry's face as his fingers encountered the butt plug. "I know I'm a slut."

"No, you're beautiful." Jerry leaned in for one more kiss before putting his hands on either side of David's face while he positioned himself between David's legs. As he descended, he left a wet trail of kisses on David's perfect chest and flat stomach, finally settling on David's cock. He laved the head with his tongue, enjoying the moans of pleasure he was able to create. He took the entire length into his mouth, hollowing his cheeks to create suction, his own cock straining as he watched David arch off the bed. He stayed there, licking and sucking, his mouth working David into an incoherent mess, until he heard David's words.

"Please, Jerry, please." David reached out and placed his hands on Jerry's muscled shoulders. "I'll beg if I have to."

Good to Know

“You already are.” Jerry laughed, his hands finding the plug and pushing it in further, twisting it around until David arched off the bed and called his name again. “Good to know.” Jerry hit David’s gland a few more times before gently removing the plug. Jerry looked up across the flushed body as he placed his tongue at David’s hole, first licking, then pointing his tongue to dart it in and out. His hands reached up to push David’s knees up to his chest for better access. He hissed as he watched the hole stretch and quiver. “You ready for me, mountain lion?”

“Please, Jerry, wanna feel you.”

Jerry quickly grabbed the condom package and the lube, ripping open the former with his teeth while coating his swollen dick with the lube. When he was ready, condom in hand, he crawled up over David’s body. “Put it on me, baby.”

David’s shaking hands managed to get the condom rolled on, pausing briefly to hold it so that he could taste it. “Jesus, you’re huge.”

Crawling back down between David’s spread thighs, Jerry whispered, “You let me know if I hurt you, yeah?” When he saw David nod, Jerry knelt down at the edge of the bed and positioned his cock at David’s entrance. “Gonna make you feel so good, mountain lion.”

“Too late,” David gasped as he felt the pressure. He tried lifting his hips, but Jerry’s strong hands, those beautiful hands, were pushing down on the backs of his thighs, preventing David from moving. *Jesus, is Jerry that strong or am I that weak?*

“Oh, sweet Jesus.” Jerry gasped when he felt his prick slide into the heat, felt David contracting and releasing his muscles rapidly like waves washing over Jerry’s engorged cock, a repeat performance of that first night together. “So fucking tight, baby. This might not last too long.”

“Got all night, cowboy.”

Jerry started slowly, reveling in the look of pure pleasure on David’s face. It would have made a beautiful painting: head thrown back into the pillows, chest heaving up and down, the flush of red across his chest, neck, and cheeks. “Nothing better than this, mountain lion.” David’s face turned toward Jerry’s as he tried to focus on the words, the pleasure too much, threatening to undo him at his very core.

“Harder. Deeper, please, Jerry.”

Jerry pistoned his hips once, twice, three times, as far as he could drive them. His breath came in grunts, almost undistinguishable from the moans of *Oh, God, more, please* coming from the man underneath him. His thrusts sped up, and he released David’s thighs so he could lean down on the mattress, hands moving behind David’s head, his lips and tongue searching for their mates. He bent his knees further, causing the tip of his cock to brush over David’s gland over and over. David’s moans were captured in Jerry’s kisses until Jerry pulled back slightly so that only their tongues were touching, dueling for dominance.

When Jerry felt he was close, he turned David’s head, his tongue sinking deep into David’s ear. He turned David’s head with his hands and claimed the other ear, his tongue pistoning in and out rapidly, in time with his dick. Jerry felt David tense, felt David’s breath catch, felt his hands wrap around Jerry’s back, pulling the two bodies together. When Jerry felt David rubbing himself between them, David’s dick moving across Jerry’s belly, he knew that David was going to come a second time. Jerry turned David’s head in his hands, making quarter turns, pressing lips to lips, lips to ear, tongue to tongue, tongue to ear, over and over until he heard David call his name over and over again.

David felt the orgasm rip through him, his muscles clenching around Jerry so tightly, so much more intense than the waves, that

Good to Know

Jerry cried out his own release. He continued thrusting, pushing in to the limit of his length as the spasms gripped him. His mouth rested on David's neck, his breath coming in short gasps as his dick emptied itself into the condom. Four, five, six times he thrust forward, burying himself to the hilt until he knew his knees would not support him anymore, his quads burning with exertion.

"Sweet Jesus," Jerry gasped as he felt David's arms pulling him on top of him, "what the hell were you doing with those muscles?"

"Like that, huh?" David laughed as he turned on his side to stroke Jerry's chest.

"Fucking hell!" Jerry ran his arm underneath David's shoulders to pull him close, planting a gentle kiss on his forehead. "I thought my head was gonna explode."

David scooted down on the bed, noticing that Jerry had not removed the condom. Tying it off and throwing it in the garbage can, David returned his attention to clean-up. He took the still-hard member in his mouth, sliding all the way down the shaft to bury his nose in Jerry's soft, curly pubic hair.

"Are you trying to kill me?" Jerry's hands combed through David's hair, pulling gently. "That may have to wait, baby. I don't know if I can take anymore."

"I'll be gentle."

"That's what I'm afraid of."

Without answering, David continued to lick and lave his way up and down, tasting sweat and Jerry, smelling Jerry for the first time. "God, you smell incredible."

"I'll write a letter to the people at Dove." Jerry raised his head to meet David's eyes. "How do you think I should word it?"

David returned his mouth to Jerry's dick, moving occasionally to his balls and then back again. "Dear Sirs," David began, mouth still occupied with Jerry's dick, causing vibrations to go straight to Jerry's balls. "I can't tell you how full and happy your product has made me...."

Jerry's laugh echoed deep and vibrant in the room as he pulled David up beside him. With David resting on an elbow, looking down at Jerry, smiles all around, Jerry realized he couldn't remember the last time he'd been so happy and so well-fucked. "A man could fall hard for you if he wasn't careful."

"Flirt!" David kissed Jerry softly on the lips and then trailed his tongue over the beard. "I like the beard. Very bearish."

"Thank you." Jerry leaned up and stole a kiss. "William likes it, too, says it tickles when I kiss him goodnight. Wasn't sure whether to keep it or not. Looks like that's one less decision I have to make." Jerry pulled David down to his chest, placing little kisses on the top of his head.

"Food?" David moved to get off the bed, but Jerry pulled him back down.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Jerry pulled David closer to him, hands cupping David's chin. "Did I say something stupid again?"

"Not at all." David couldn't lift his eyes to meet Jerry's. Snuggling down into Jerry's warm embrace, he added, "Just thought you might be hungry, that's all."

"You'd tell me if I said something stupid, yeah?"

"When would we talk about other things, then?" David smirked and tried to get away.

Jerry flipped David over so that he was pinned. "Think that's funny, huh? Think it's funny to tease the old man." Jerry settled his hips over David's and thrust lightly, his dick pressing into David's

Good to Know

abdomen. “Know what happens when you poke a bear with a stick?”

David smiled and shook his head.

“He pokes you right back—” Jerry ground his hips again. “—with his own stick.”

David looked up into Jerry’s smiling eyes and drawled, “Good to know.”

Jerry leaned on his elbows, placing his forearms underneath David’s head, eyes still locked with David’s. He studied the guarded expression for a moment and then closed his eyes, his lips finding David’s. Jerry brushed his lips lightly over their target several times before allowing his tongue to lick David’s bottom lip, finally pulling it between his own as David had done that first night. “You weren’t wrong.”

“About what?”

“What I had to look forward to.” Jerry smiled and ground his hips again. “Or about what’s-his-name being a fucker.” David laughed and swatted Jerry’s ass. “Would I ruin the moment if I asked you something personal?”

“How much more personal can this evening get?”

“Be serious.”

“I thought we weren’t gonna do that.” David kissed the end of Jerry’s nose. “I thought we were gonna be fuck buddies, sorry, friends with benefits, and see where this goes.”

“Right, sorry.” Jerry rolled over and grabbed for his boxers. “I forgot.”

“Jerry, wait. Isn’t that what we agreed?” David scooted up behind Jerry and wrapped his arms around the big man’s chest so that David’s chest pressed to Jerry’s back. “Ask me whatever you want.”

“I wanted to know if you had any plans for the summer.”

“The summer?” David repeated. “That’s an easy one. No.”

“If I booked a trip to Europe, would you come with us?” When David hesitated too long, Jerry pulled on his boxers. “No answer is an answer too, David.”

“Yes!” David practically shouted. “I’d love to come with you.”

“Don’t worry,” Jerry teased, adjusting his boxers around his hips. “I won’t pressure you, *fuck buddy*.”

Feeling small and insignificant, David pondered those words as Jerry left the room. *I can’t even do fuck buddies right!*

He sat at the kitchen table, waiting for Jerry to come out of the bathroom. “Are we making a mistake?” His voice was barely a whisper, sad and alone.

Jerry kissed the top of his head before heading to the fridge. “I know I’m not; don’t know about you.” David watched as Jerry fixed himself a sandwich, his focus on slicing into the chicken that had been left warming in the oven for the past hour.

“Here,” David stood. “Let me make you a plate of—”

“This’ll do.” Jerry scooped up his sandwich, placed a paper towel underneath, and sat at the table, leaving David standing in the middle of the kitchen, confused and scared. “What is it you want, David? Fuck buddy? You got me. Where’s the problem?”

David sat back down at the table, suddenly wishing he’d put on more than boxers, bristling at the fact that Jerry was back to using those two words, *fuck buddy*. “Promise me that whatever happens, we won’t hurt William, that—”

“I promise.”

David stared; he’d been expecting a bit more fight. “Okay.”

Good to Know

David's unease with Jerry's terse answer was difficult to conceal, but he offered a sincere smile. He thought of offering Jerry the chance to take his artwork back, maybe sell it and make some money, but decided he'd said enough already. *Don't borrow trouble*, he could hear his grandmother's voice in his head.

"You're not eating?" Jerry winked and leaned forward, his hand resting on David's forearm. "You're gonna need your strength for later."

David felt the heat of Jerry's hand, felt his body stirring, but met Jerry's stare, relieved that he'd not blown the evening. "I don't want to use those words anymore, either. You're *not* just a fuck buddy to me."

"Good to know." Jerry smiled, put his plate in the sink, and returned to stand beside David, extending his hand. "Wanna make you shiver." Jerry looked down at the face he was very quickly becoming hopelessly addicted to and brought David's hand to his lips, placing a slow, gentle kiss on his knuckles.

"Are you trying to seduce me, cowboy?" David walked backward again as Jerry refused to release the hold he had on the smaller man's hips.

"Nope." David's heart fell momentarily until he caught the smirk on Jerry's face. "Tryin' to keep you, mountain lion. Wanna make you happy."

David melted a little more as he studied Jerry's face. He was so sincere, so earnest, that David just wanted to tell him what he knew Jerry wanted to hear. Fear kept him from saying anything; David knew that he felt the same as Jerry, but unlike Jerry, David recognized that he was a coward when it came to trusting his heart again. So he said nothing, wishing only that he'd have enough time, that Jerry would *give him* enough time, to get over these irrational fears.

Sometime after midnight, David lay on his back, Jerry on top of him, the larger man's head cradled along David's neck. David could hear Jerry inhaling deeply. "Love the smell of sweat on a beautiful man."

"Can I interest you in a shower?"

"Maybe later?"

"We've got all morning, cowboy."

Jerry raised his head and looked down at David's sleepy eyes. "Wanna wake up with you, David."

"We need to sleep first for that to happen." David laughed, his nerves betraying him.

"Shower first, sleep second, and third..." Jerry wiggled his eyebrows as he licked his lips. "You're gonna wake up with my tongue in your ear and my dick in that beautiful, tight little ass."

"You keep up with that pillow talk, and there won't be any second step."

"Come on, mountain lion. Wanna make you slippery."

As they showered, Jerry barely let his arms leave David's body. He held the smaller man from behind, one hand braced against his chest while the other brought David to a fourth climax in as many hours. He held David afterward with one hand on his ass while the other cradled David's neck, the two men kissing through the sluicing hot water. When they got out, David ran the towel over the larger man's body, planting kisses along his arms, torso, and inner thighs.

As they settled in the bed, David's back resting snugly against Jerry's chest, David let his upper arm rest in front of his own face on the pillow. Jerry's hand snaked across David's shoulder, finally coming to rest on that upper arm in front of David's face. Jerry

stroked the sensitive skin, releasing a few bursts of air against David's neck when he felt David shiver. Jerry moved his hand up, palm open, closing it around David's fist. David closed his eyes, suddenly exhausted, allowing his body to snuggle even closer into Jerry's. David moved his hand toward his lips, bringing the back of Jerry's hand in for a kiss. He kissed the skin, the tiny vellus hairs tickling his nose and lips.

Jerry closed his eyes, finally giving up control to the sandman, content against the warmth of this beautiful man in his arms. *Sexy, smart, kind, generous, practically double-jointed.* Jerry smiled against David's hair, which was moist against his nose. *And I'll do everything to make sure we have a lifetime of this.* Jerry had called Lenore's house to check on William, Jerry's little man giggling in the background. *We're playing Twister,* William had giggled. *Do we have that at home?* The word had brought Jerry's hands to his eyes, fingers pinching the bridge of his nose to keep away the sudden rush of emotion. *Home.* Half of his family was in place. Now, how to convince this man sleeping in his arms to join in? *I'm falling in love with my fuck buddy.* Some part of Jerry should have been worried about that, but he didn't want to listen to that part anymore. He wanted to listen to that part that was telling him that everything would work out the way he hoped. He pushed closer to David's body, feeling the smaller man stir, shift, and settle again, never waking. Eyes closed, Jerry whispered against David's neck, "Wanna make you happy, baby," kissed his neck again, and drifted off to sleep, smile still on his lips.

Chapter 9

DAVID stood at the window of the empty classroom. His students had physical education, and he had forty minutes to plan coursework. He wasn't planning, however, too distracted by his rambling thoughts. *Do you know what you're doing? Will you be able to say goodbye to William and everything if this thing with Jerry doesn't work out? Can you keep your personal life separate from school and avoid the prying eyes of parents? What if they find out what William and Jerry are beginning to mean to you?*

It is the twenty-first century, David reminded himself as he leaned against the window, the pastoral scene outside offering little comfort. But David also reminded himself that there were still plenty of close-minded bigots and homophobes who would never rest until peoples' personal lives became fair game for their sanctimonious misquoting of the Bible.

"David?" Lenore was standing in his doorway. "You okay?"

"Fine. What's up?"

Lenore approached, stood close, and touched his arm. David could feel the sweat forming at his hairline. "You looked kinda spaced, worried." David smiled and waited. "Listen, William is in my office. He's very upset and asking for you."

"What? Is he hurt?" David started to move toward the door, but Lenore pulled on his arm.

Good to Know

“No, I’m afraid it’s probably worse.” Lenore walked with David to the door and shut it before David could exit. “Apparently, there were words exchanged in gym class.” David glanced at the clock. *What could have happened in fifteen minutes?* “From what I was told, some of the boys—”

“Who?”

“It’s not important,” Lenore cautioned. “Some of the boys were making rude remarks about Kyle Clark.” David knew what was coming and knew which little boy, in particular, had started the whole thing. “Calling him a fag and teasing him that he would turn gay because his mother lives with another woman.”

“Jesus, fuck me! Christ!” David reached for the knob, but Lenore placed her hand over his, stilling it. “It’s Bennett Thiry’s kid, isn’t it?”

“That’s not important,” Lenore repeated, taking David’s hand in hers. “When William came to Kyle’s aid, he told them that there’s nothing wrong with being gay, and that his Uncle Jerry is gay, and that the boys should just—” Lenore smiled a little. “uh... ‘cowboy up’.”

“Fuckin’ A, he did.” David laughed. *God, but I love that little boy.* “He loves his uncle; why shouldn’t he stand up for them?” David’s eyes narrowed, the thought suddenly hitting his brain. “Why is he in your office, then?”

“One of the boys pushed William.” Lenore stroked David’s hand when she heard him gasp, “It’s okay—William’s not hurt, not even a mark on him—but Bennett Jr. has quite a shiner coming in.”

David laughed and hugged Lenore. Holding her by the shoulders, David nodded, pride filling him, and beamed. “Benefits of a boarding school education! William’s been studying martial arts since grade two.” David reached for the door handle again, and this time, Lenore did not stop him. “I’m going to take him home; he is

suspended, yeah, for fighting?”

“Debbi’s already called Jerry.” Lenore nodded and followed David to her office, located in the central office, off to one corner, opposite the principal’s office. When they arrived, Jerry was already there, sitting in Debbi’s office. Debbi had only been the principal at the school for two years and had only been in the profession for eight. David had known when he’d met Debbi that she was the typical ambitious administrator-wannabe. She wasn’t the kind who cared about kids, only making a name for herself by exploiting the teachers working with her. *Probably didn’t get enough attention as a child*, David had always thought about Debbi’s type.

DAVID stood outside of Debbi’s office, holding William’s hand. When he’d first entered Lenore’s office, the first words from William’s mouth had been a tearful apology. David had hugged him, pulling William to his feet and assuring him that he’d done nothing wrong, David’s hands rubbing up and down the trembling little back. As he stood there with William, the boy’s little hand squeezing his for dear life, he could see Jerry counting some things off on his fingers, body steady and in control as he sat facing away from the window in the door. David wasn’t proud of himself, but he delighted in the flushed and pained expression on Debbi’s face.

David saw Jerry stand, towering over the overly plump principal, shake her hand, and pull the door open. When he saw David, Jerry’s face brightened considerably, and he rolled his eyes. David wanted to smile. *Imagine trying to work with her.*

“What are you doing here? Don’t you have a class or something?” Jerry lifted William into his arms, shushing his rambling apologies. “I’m not angry, William. I’m proud of you, so proud of you, for defending your friend.” Jerry kissed William’s cheek and stroked the little blond head.

Good to Know

“My students have gym right now.” David squeezed William’s leg, his hand making contact with Jerry’s abdomen. “I have a prep.”

“Great!” Jerry put William down and winked at David. “Walk us to the truck?”

William ran into Lenore’s office to give her a hug, a thank you, and to say goodbye while Jerry and David waited in the office, neither speaking. Jerry took a few steps forward when Lenore exited behind William and held out his hand, introducing herself. “William has told me so much about you. It’s nice to finally put faces with names.” Lenore congratulated Jerry on doing such a good job of parenting William, commenting on how William was making some very good progress in adapting to his new life. Jerry blushed and nodded to David, explaining how, without David, both he and William would still be clueless.

David turned to see the secretaries’ gazes fall back to their desks, mouths agape and faces flushing. Had they been that obvious? David was sure that it would have been impossible for them to have seen his hand touch Jerry’s abdomen, and the words Jerry spoke had surely been no different from those that other parents had used to praise teachers.

Jerry held the door as William and David exited the office, turning and smiling sweetly at the secretaries, offering his thanks and his goodbye. He caught up with them just before David’s classroom, all three of them passing Bennett Thiry, William’s gym teacher, followed closely by Bennett Jr. David had to stifle a laugh when he saw the dark ring forming around the other boy’s swollen eye. Bennett did not lift his eyes, nor did he acknowledge their presence. *Just as well*, David thought. *With Bennett’s mouth and temper and Jerry’s protectiveness for William, it would be a blood bath in short order.*

Jerry stood at the back of the room, hands on hips, sport coat pushed out of the way, watching William gather his things, the little

hands moving furiously to form a neat stack of books and papers. "See you tonight?" He wasn't looking at David, but David knew that Jerry couldn't be talking to William.

"If we can talk." David was dreading the conversation that this little incident had pushed to the forefront of their friendship.

"Can do that too." Jerry looked up and grinned.

David felt the heat slam into his face as Jerry slung William's backpack over his shoulder. David took in the sight of this hulking man, a *Fantastic Four* backpack on his shoulder, his big paw dwarfing the little hand in it. "Staff meeting, though," David finally managed. "Six okay?"

Jerry indicated his approval and headed to the door, David following behind, heart melting at the sight in front of him. "I was thinking roast beef. I feel like roast beef," Jerry shot over his shoulder as David caught up.

"You don't feel like it to me!" William pulled on Jerry's hand, giggling at his own joke.

"That was bad, cowboy!" Jerry moaned and helped William through the large double doors. "How about you go open the car and get yourself settled? I'll be there in a minute." Jerry and David watched William run away, looking for any moving vehicles.

"I'm sorry this happened." David and Jerry watched William open the passenger-side door and crawl up on the seat. "Feel like it's my responsibility."

"The fight or that I'm queer?" Jerry nudged David with his shoulder.

"I know it's silly, but when Lenore told me that William had been in a fight, I was so...." David didn't know the word to use.

"I hear that." Jerry left David standing by the passenger-side

Good to Know

door, waving to William, as he moved to open his own door. “Six,” Jerry called and hopped into the cab.

DAVID pulled into the driveway of the ranch at four-thirty, wrenched the key out of the ignition, and tried to calm himself down before opening the car door. *Debbi Grady, piece of shit, stupid bitch, useless piece of crap, fat cow!*

David looked up to see Jerry standing on the porch, shoulders shrugging, eyes squinting against the sun. *His head is gonna explode when he hears this* was the only thought in David’s head then.

“Are my clocks wrong?” Jerry said by way of a greeting, tongue planted firmly in cheek, leaning down to kiss David’s forehead. David just pressed his body against the bigger man’s and sighed. *Just shut up and fuck me into the mattress so I can forget today ever happened*, David wanted to say.

“Meeting canceled due to an ‘urgent school matter’.” David used air quotes on the last three words. “You’re not gonna wanna hear it.”

“Well, come on in, and let me see if I can loosen you up with my good cooking.”

“Loosen me up or poison me?” David jumped to avoid the slap aimed at his backside. “I’ll help you.”

“You can do the whole thing just for that crack.”

“Sounds only fair.”

“So spill.” Jerry was sitting at the table beside William, checking over his homework with him. David shook his head and darted his eyes at William. “He’s totally absorbed in his schoolwork—got one mean, ornery teacher for math.”

“Do not!” William argued, then, seeing the smile on Jerry’s face, went back to his math sheet. “Mr. Loewenberger’s not mean; he’s nice.”

“Thank you, William.” David patted the little blond head and stuck his tongue out at Jerry. David shivered as he watched Jerry lick his lips. Sensing an imminent inappropriate moment, David patted William’s head again and said, “Hey, William, tell your uncle what ‘genug’ means in English.”

“‘Enough’,” William answered, eyes never leaving the math sheet.

“Good to know.” Jerry leaned back in his chair, hand brushing over William’s hair and asked, “Hey, William, how do you say ‘as promised’ in German?”

“‘Versprochenermassen’.” William flicked at the eraser shavings on his paper and looked up. “Can I go out and play with the horses? I’m all done.”

Jerry stood and swept William out of his chair. “Ja, mein Herr.” William giggled when Jerry tickled him under the ribs. Then Jerry turned to David. “Care to join us? Dinner’s cooking; nothing else to do.”

David and Jerry stood inside the corral fence, backs resting against the wooden logs, watching William pet the horses and feed them apples out of his hand. David winced every time he saw those huge teeth get near the little hand but reminded himself that William was a better horseman than he.

“You gonna let me know what’s happening?”

“Yeah,” David sighed. “Just trying to put it off as long as possible.”

“Time’s up. We can handle it, whatever it is.”

Good to Know

“Yeah, I know.” He heaved another sigh. “Just not sure I want to put you through it.”

“That’s my choice, *friend*.”

David turned a little to face Jerry and began. “Debbi called me into her office at the end of the day to tell me that there is a potential problem.” No reaction from Jerry, David noted. “It would seem that William has been telling some of the other students that I come and visit him, and you, and well, as today demonstrated, it seems that William is not ashamed of his uncle being a...”

“Guilt by association, right.” Jerry smirked, the disgust and bitterness evident in his beautiful eyes. “Hang out with a queer, you must be one.”

“Something like that.” David looked down at his shoes. “She told me that Bennett Thiry has voiced concerns over me *flaunting* my *relationship* with you.”

“And?”

“And he’s apparently considering enlisting the help of other parents to have me removed from my position.”

“*What?*”

“Shhh, William will hear you.”

“Might as well. Sounds like he’s gonna be hearing plenty if this....”

“Bennett.”

“If this Bennett gets his way.”

“I doubt that will happen.” David placed a hand on Jerry’s forearm, the ropes of muscles dancing beneath it. “Bennett is a very unhappy guy. Religious fanatic, divorced *twice*, had affairs with half the women in the school—even got caught banging the librarian in

the nonfiction section one weekend. He's pathetic and harmless."

"Don't know as I like him teaching my boy."

David's head turned at the last two words, smiling at Jerry, hand squeezing over Jerry's forearm. "I like the sound of that." Jerry shrugged and placed his hand over David's. "We're pretty regulated when it comes to what we can and can't teach the kids, so William is safe, but it may bear having some conversations with *your boy* from time to time, just to be sure, you know."

"Can do that." Jerry smiled and let go of David's hand. "But what about you?"

"What about me?"

"Can they really take away your job?"

"No, I'm tenured, been at the same school for fifteen years, excellent evaluations, loads of parental support." David sighed and removed his hand from Jerry's forearm. "The only way they could get rid of me is to drive me out of there."

"Any chance of that happening?"

David could only shrug. "Debbi feels it's in William's *best interest* if you and I stop being so *obvious*. Said she could tell just by the way you were looking at me that there was something *sexual* in our relationship."

"Well, I want you to know I'll do whatever it takes to make sure William's safe—"

"I know you will, Jerry."

"*And* that you're safe and happy and healthy." Jerry brushed the hair away from David's forehead. "And if that means cooling it, we'll cool it."

"Good to know." David blushed as he stared up at those

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beautiful eyes. “It sucks big time, but good to know.”

David couldn’t help the grin that spread across his face as he listened to William, fight obviously forgotten, explain what kind of smaller horse he wanted to get tomorrow. When David had looked at Jerry, at William’s excited reveal that he and Uncle Jerry would be looking for a smaller horse tomorrow, David had stared at Jerry wide-eyed and made a circular motion with the finger of one hand around the pinkie of the other. Jerry blushed and shrugged.

Full, happy, and tired, William yawned halfway through dessert. “Time for bed, cowboy?” Jerry brushed his hand over the blond head and chuckled when William nodded. “You run up and get ready, and I’ll come up and tuck you in, okay?”

William scampered off but stopped at the foot of the stairs. “Can I have a lullaby?”

Jerry turned to David, eyebrows raised. “He ain’t talking about my singing.” David swatted the big bicep and told William that he would be up along with his uncle.

When Jerry heard the footsteps reach the top of the stairs, he turned quickly and wrapped his arms around David’s waist, nose against his hair, inhaling deeply. “Wanted to do that since you got here, mountain lion.”

David melted into the embrace, the bad day fading quickly. “Feels good, cowboy.”

“You should feel what I’m holding.”

David chuckled and squeezed his arms, grip causing Jerry to wince playfully. “So about this smaller horse?”

“When we got home, William was still upset but excited about the field trip tomorrow.” David closed his eyes when he realized where this was going. “So I had to sit him down and explain what a suspension meant.”

“Oh, Jerry, I’m so sorry.” David pulled away and looked into Jerry’s eyes, seeing sadness creeping in at the memory of the conversation he must have had with William.

“I held him in my lap as he cried, telling him that none of this was his fault and that I was so proud of him, that he’d done the right thing by defending himself, and,” Jerry sighed this last word, “that fighting was never right, hitting people was wrong, and he kept crying about missing the zoo.” Jerry’s voice brightened. “I thought, fuck it, and told him I’d take him tomorrow and then we’d go look for a William-sized horse.”

David’s closed fingers traced Jerry’s jaw line and chin. “Lucky boy.”

Jerry circled his arms around the smaller man’s waist again and leaned into the kiss. “Lucky me.”

It was almost midnight when Jerry and David sat on the porch, William snug in his bed, tucked in and kissed goodnight, eyes having closed before David had finished the lullaby. *Tough crowd*, Jerry had teased David as they made their way to the back patio. David looked at the stars while Jerry at David, neither of them speaking for some time, both content to sit in the cool night air thinking their own thoughts. It was Jerry who eventually broke the silence.

“I think I have a problem, David.”

“What’s wrong?” David’s head turned too quickly, his neck cracking. He studied Jerry’s profile and saw Jerry’s hands worrying the arm of his chair in an uneasy way.

“I think I’m falling in love with my friend with benefits.”

David smiled and turned his eyes back to the stars. “Sure you want that?” He turned back, struggling to keep his heart from beating out of his chest. “I hear he’s a real emotional mess.”

Good to Know

“Want him to be *my* emotional mess.” The words were soft and sweet as David felt Jerry’s hand cover his.

David turned his head, facing away from Jerry, tears coming so quickly that his chest heaved a couple of times before he could get his breathing under control. He felt like his tongue was too big for his mouth; he was suddenly aware of the pressure of his tongue against his teeth, the pressure of lungs burning for more oxygen.

“When I called him *my boy*,” Jerry whispered, “I saw something in your face, something that made me think we might be able to... call him *our boy* one day. Did I read that right?”

David closed his eyes, tears welling quickly, throat dry as a desert. He could only nod.

“Wanna call you *boyfriend* now.”

David wiped at his eyes and turned to face Jerry. “You can call me anything you want to, Jerry.”

“Come here.” In one quick movement, Jerry was standing and pulling David to his chest, hands finding David’s chin, thumbing away the tears. “You’re not an emotional mess. Well, maybe a little around the edges, but...” Jerry kissed his lips gently and smiled, cooing, “You’re what I thought I’d never find. What I didn’t even know was missing, what I wanted.”

David pushed his face into Jerry’s chest, tears falling anew.

“Shhh, baby,” Jerry whispered, lips pressed to the top of David’s head. “I know the others hurt you, your family too, but I’ll never do anything to hurt you. Versprochenemassen..”

Chapter 10

DAVID'S eyes were full of anger as he gestured with frustration and rage. "If you ever touch him again, I will make sure that you are sorry!"

"David, please mind your own business and quit making empty threats," Bennett Thiry snarled from behind his desk, greasy face and scalp under his comb-over turning red. "I'll be here long after they've kicked your sodomizing ass out of a classroom."

"Let me put this in terms you'll understand, you sanctimonious hypocrite." David advanced towards the smaller man. At six feet tall and almost a hundred eighty pounds, David had learned to minimize his appearance, especially around his students, but at this moment, he wanted to take full advantage, standing straight, squaring his shoulders. "You want to call me a sodomite and stick your nose in my personal life, fine. You want to refer to your adulterous affairs as 'dating', you go right ahead. You want to raise your children to remain ignorant and incapable of functioning in this world, that's fine too." Bennett opened his mouth, but David increased the volume of his own voice to cut off the words. "But if you don't get your stuff under control, I will put my trust fund to good use to sue you for sexual harassment. What I do with my *ass* outside of this school is none of your business. Got it?"

"Your threats won't work on me, *Van der Boesch!*" Bennett threw a folder at David. "I doubt your trust fund can match what I

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can get from these people. And since you've decided to flaunt your *ass's* activities in front of William, it is my business."

David flipped the folder open to find names arranged in a list, like a petition. David even recognized a few of them—parents of some of his current students, parents of former students, fellow teachers.... His mouth went dry, but he forced himself to meet the weasel's smug eyes. Throwing the folder back at him, he spat, "You don't think I can find people to take my side? This isn't about winning, you Bible-thumping, judgmental piece of crap—"

"Name-calling will only serve to—"

"Sodomizing ass', Bennett? You started the name-calling." David laughed and continued his thought. "This is about you manhandling one scared ten-year-old boy because he had the nerve to put your big, tough Junior in his place—something you should have done—but I guess it's hard to be a parent when you're slipping your Dewey decimal into the librarian's card catalog." David turned towards the door, swearing to himself under his breath.

"I could have your job for those accusations—"

David laughed, humor having long dissipated from his voice. "Go ahead!" David hissed. "Have fun speaking French when you can barely manage a coherent sentence in English, which, by the way, wouldn't leave you much time for your pontificating, so I guess you'd be leaving the moral guidance of your flock to someone else. But hey, with any luck it might be someone who's actually read the Bible and not just used it to spank his hotel guest while his wife is at home thanking *God Almighty* that it's not her!" David was thankful that it was late enough that no students were around. He didn't seem to be able to calm himself. As he yanked open the door, he turned and smiled. "Oh, and by the way, it's Van *den* Boesch, you *Sündenpfuhl*!"

David arrived at the ranch still reeling from the encounter. *Cesspool*, David had called him before leaving. *What an insult to*

cesspools, he thought now. He paced outside the house on the veranda as he watched Jerry and William with the new smaller horse. *Mountain lion*, William had chosen to call it. David remembered fighting tears again when Jerry had explained that William had had the name picked out even before returning to the ranch. He stopped, playing the memory again and again in his head, finally feeling his shoulders loosen, his chest expanding to allow one big breath. “Fuck him,” David finally said under his breath and strolled over to the corral.

“David!” William had long since stopped calling him Mr. Loewenberger, David’s increasing presence at the ranch over the past several weeks seeming to pre-empt his role as teacher in the boy’s life. “Watch!” David leaned on the outside of the fence and watched as William maneuvered the smaller horse, which seemed more a pony to David’s eyes, around some orange pylons, his little body bouncing in the saddle as the animal galloped and whinnied. *Yeah*, David thought, *fuck him and his list*.

“What’s up, mountain lion?” Jerry came to stand beside him, arm draped over the fence, teasing at one of David’s belt loops. “Could see the steam from all the way over here.”

“You got enough on your plate already.” David shook his head, pushing his hip into Jerry’s hand. “How’s the show shaping up?”

“Kitty’s got some interesting prospects lined up.” Jerry explained about the upcoming shows as he watched William, ready to run should anything go awry. “Means I’ll have to be away for a few days.”

“Might help, actually.” David squinted up to see Jerry’s exaggerated pout. “This *cooling it* is killing me. With you gone, I might actually get some sleep, instead of thinking about you—” David’s gaze darted to William, quickly censoring his original words, “—doing what you do to me.”

Good to Know

“You mean fucking you senseless.” Jerry stooped over to pick up the rope that he’d used while William was getting used to the new horse.

“Jerrod McKenzie, your son is right there!”

“He can’t hear; relax.” Jerry coiled the rope in his hand and looked back at William. “Miss you, mountain lion.”

“Miss you too, cowboy.” David sighed, blew Jerry a quick kiss and pushed off the fence. “I’m gonna go start dinner.”

“Or....” Jerry stretched the word out, stopping David in his tracks. “We could forget about cooking, and I could take us out for burgers and ice cream.” Jerry shouted the last few words in William’s direction. David laughed out loud, relief washing over him, forgetting the confrontation as he heard William screaming his approval, words clipped and shaken from the bouncing.

THEY sat in the restaurant watching William, who seemed to have forgotten his run-in with Mr. Thiry. David did not want to bring up any bad memories, but he turned to William and asked, “How’s the arm, William?”

“Good.” William was intent on dunking his fries, making sure he got just the right amount of ketchup so he wouldn’t have to double-dip. Jerry discouraged double-dipping at home, so it was natural that William would try to avoid it in a restaurant.

“What did the doctor say?” David sipped his iced tea, eyes glancing over to Jerry.

Jerry smoothed his hand over the blond head and leaned back in the booth, leg moving to rest beside David’s, calves touching. “Said it would be tender for a while, but there shouldn’t be any

permanent damage.”

David sighed loudly and pressed his calf against Jerry’s, Jerry giving him a quick nudge and a look of relief. David had been frantic when William had come running into his room during his prep, gym clothes still on, face red and hiccupping, his little body shaking. When he got William calmed down enough, he managed to learn that during a particularly spirited game of dodge ball, William had managed to eliminate Bennett Jr. with a well-placed blow to the groin. Bennett, of course, had complained to his father, who had in turn rounded on William about fair play. Not content to leave it at that and still smarting, David surmised, from his son’s well-deserved black eye, Bennett Sr. had decided that a stern lecture was in order. So with William’s elbow gripped firmly, the grown man had gone to town, lecturing and tugging repeatedly until William began to cry, begging to be released.

“Hey, cowboy, you ready for dessert?” David had been so lost in thought that he hadn’t noticed the waitress’s arrival. But it wasn’t the same waitress. It was six o’clock—probably shift change. “Mr. Loewenberger?” David saw the waitress’s eyes settle on him. He glanced at the name tag and then studied her face.

“Tiffany Beler?”

“Oh, my God,” Tiffany yelled, a bit too loud to David’s ears. “I can’t believe you remember me.” Tiffany held out her arms and David slid out of the booth. “That was what, ten years ago, eleven?”

“No idea.” David slid back into the booth. “Been doing this for too long, now. But I remember you and your class.” David laughed as Tiffany giggled. “I remember how little Tommy Zaplinski used to follow you around everywhere.” Turning to Jerry, David whispered, “Major crush on her.”

“Who wouldn’t?” Jerry winked at Tiffany, who giggled some more. David’s eyes widened, lips curling into a smile. *Smooth-talking bastard!*

Good to Know

“Yeah, well, fat lot of good it would do me now.” Tiffany sighed. “He’s finished school like me and works as a computer tech in some office downtown.” She sighed again. “He lives with his boyfriend in a loft just across the river.”

“Can’t win ’em all.” More words of wisdom from Jerry.

“Is this your family?” Tiffany beamed, her eyes lighting up, focusing on William. David couldn’t help but notice the smirk on Jerry’s face, the one that seemed to say, *See? Not everyone has a problem with the idea.*

“Uh,” David stammered, “no, just a friend and his son.” David turned to look at Jerry, not finding any disappointment evident in his eyes. “Jerry,” David waved at hand at the larger man, “and William.” William smiled and offered his hand; Tiffany shook it with her other hand clutched over her heart, and Jerry nodded.

“Whadda ya think, partner?” Jerry tousled William’s hair. “You want some dessert?”

“Do you have any Sachertorte?” William’s narrowed eyes were fixed firmly on Tiffany.

“No, we don’t, cowboy, but we have cheesecake.”

“Ummm.” William considered the offer. “No thanks, I’ll just have ice cream. Can I have one scoop of vanilla and one scoop of chocolate?”

“Sure thing, partner.” Tiffany smiled at William and turned to the adults.

“Nothing for me, thanks.” David looked at Jerry.

“Nor me, thanks, darlin’.” Jerry offered another wink to Tiffany.

David had trouble meeting Jerry’s eyes after Tiffany went back to the kitchen. He’d wanted to say “yes,” but he felt it would have

been presumption on his part. David didn't really care what former students thought of his "lifestyle," and if he were brutally honest with himself, he was sure that most people could figure it out swiftly enough after meeting him. *But now, he'd realized, is not the time. It's still too dangerous. No sense giving the Bennett Brigade any more ammunition.*

The drive back to the ranch was filled mainly with William's voice; David kept conspicuously silent, and Jerry didn't pry, not wanting to push his lover for any information that David didn't volunteer.

Jerry returned from tucking William in, turned off the lights in the kitchen, and found David standing on the patio, hips leaning against the railing. He was sneaking up behind and reaching out his arms, aiming for David's waist when he heard, "I'm sorry, Jerry."

Arms found their target and held fast. "For?"

"Being a coward."

Turning David in his arms, he looked deep into the sad brown eyes, asking, "You think I care if you do or don't admit to something I already know?"

Sighing, David placed his head against his lover's chest. "Bastard, telling me just what I wanna hear."

"It's the truth."

"I know." David leaned back to accept a kiss. "Are you gonna do anything about William's arm?"

"Got a meeting tomorrow with one Mr. Dawydk."

"The superintendent, very impressive."

"He as retarded as he sounds?"

"Professional ethics," David chastised while nodding in an

Good to Know

exaggerated manner, “prevent me from commenting.”

Jerry laughed and pulled David’s head to his shoulder, carding his big, beautiful hands through David’s hair. “If I don’t like what I hear tomorrow, I’m thinking I may pay a visit to a close, personal friend of mine.”

“You got other friends besides me, cowboy?”

“Friend, not boyfriend.” Jerry chuckled.

“Just makin’ sure, cowboy.” David wrapped his arms underneath Jerry’s so that his hands rested on the big shoulders from behind. “Already in a whole heap o’ trouble; don’t need to go to jail for killing someone.”

“Speaking of which.” Jerry kissed David gently. “You gonna take this seriously? The list, I mean?”

“Why?” David shrugged and let go of Jerry, his heart wanting to go further, but his brain reminding him that he couldn’t. “I’m not interested in getting into any pissing contests with people like Bennett Thiry.”

“Fair enough.” Jerry relinquished his hold on the shorter man. “But in my experience, the guy that doesn’t whip it out usually gets pissed on.”

“Been in a lot of pissing contests, have you?” David’s voice was teasing and light.

“A few.”

“Well, if I had a hose like yours, I probably wouldn’t mind so much.”

“You flirtin’ with me, mountain lion?”

“Don’t know. Is it working?”

“The flirting or my hose?”

“Okay, stop, I give.” David signaled his surrender, and Jerry pumped the air with his fist.

“Finally won one.” Jerry embraced his lover again, big hands gliding up and down David’s back. “Let it be known that Jerrod Austin McKenzie finally got the last word.”

“You’re an ass.” David cuddled close to Jerry and kissed along his jaw.

“And if’n I am?” Jerry squeezed David’s neck and inhaled, lips near his lover’s sensitive ear. David shivered and pulled Jerry closer. “Miss making you shiver, mountain lion.”

David pulled away and brought Jerry’s hands up to his lips. “Miss letting you, cowboy.” David smiled and dropped Jerry’s hands, remaining a respectable distance away. He leaned against the railing. “Have you noticed that William is beginning to talk like you?”

“Huh?”

“He’s starting to talk all cowboy, Western-like,” David drawled.

“Can’t say’s I did.” Jerry hitched his thumbs in the waistband of his jeans, one leg bent, foot planted on a railing, and squinted up at the sky, eyes mere slits: a classic cowboy pose. David half-expected someone to yell *cut, print*. “But ya know there, Hoss, if’n you reckon so, then I guess I’d be hog-tied to say that ain’t mighty fine, *mighty* fine.”

David laughed, shaking his head at the comic tableau before him. Jerry released his pose, eyes softening, hand coming to rest beside David’s hip on the railing. Jerry smiled, took a shaky breath and said, “I love you, David.” Before David could answer, he continued, “I just wanted you to know. I don’t expect you to say it.” Jerry brushed his thumb against David’s hip, staring into his eyes without blinking. “Can see you love me too, but I know you’ll need

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some time to let go of some things, sort some things out. Jus’,” Jerry smiled softly, “want you to know that I’ll be waiting for you when you’re done sorting.”

David’s chest lurched at those three words, at the understanding behind them. He’d heard them before, from Sampson and the others, but he’d never wanted to hear them as much, nor *from* anyone, as much as he did from this man. David knew he was in love with this kind, generous, gentle, goofy giant of a man who had the soul of a poet, but he was still convinced that it would all end if the Bennett Brigade had their way. If it came down to choosing between his career and Jerry, David still wasn’t sure he wouldn’t break Jerry’s heart.

“Hey.” Jerry had grabbed the hem of his T-shirt and was wiping away tears from David’s face. “I didn’t mean to upset you; I was trying to make you happy.”

Letting go of all control, David sobbed in Jerry’s arms, sobbed for so many years of feeling alone and abandoned, sobbed for the family he’d never really had, sobbed for the oh-so-many years of wanting but never getting—but mainly, David sobbed because he realized it was his turn now, that he could have everything he’d never had, if he wanted it.

When he felt the sobs die down, Jerry tilted David’s head up and kissed his forehead. Neither spoke, neither having the need to, until Jerry asked, “You want me to make up the spare room? You look tired... *sexy as hell*,” Jerry said as he laughed, “but tired.”

David smiled and hiccupped, his head beginning to pound from the sobs, and said, “Okay.”

Arm around David’s shoulders, Jerry walked them back into the house, locking the patio door and heading for the stairs. Jerry set the alarm so that David would be up in time to return to his apartment and change for another day of school, turned down the bed, and stood beside it, waiting.

David suddenly felt too tired to make it to the bed, but he lifted himself up and walked over to his lover, feeling the arms move around him, the kisses on his head. When Jerry stepped away, David held fast to his arm and looked up into those beautiful eyes, willing himself to say it with everything he had.

Jerry got a glimmer in his eyes and David knew he understood. Jerry smiled, leaned down and brushed his lips over David's. "Good to know."

Chapter 11

“YOU brought this on yourself, David.”

“No, Debbi,” David hissed, “I think you have me mistaken for one greasy, slimy, venom-spewing fundamentalist who seems to have *you* shaking in your stilettos.”

“May I remind you, Mr. Loewenberger,” Debbi prattled, “that you work for me?”

“May I remind you, *Ms. Grady*,” David laughed, “that I do not—that I work *with* you.”

“According to your contract—”

“I report to you, but I work for the school division and the school board.” David glared and finished, “You do not have the power to fire or sanction me.”

“As you said yourself, you report to me.”

“*Much* to my everlasting amusement!”

“Please remain professional, Mr. Loewenberger.”

“I will if you will.” David got up and headed for the door, turning as his hand touched the cold metal of the door handle. “Respect is not something demanded, Debbi; it’s something that’s earned.” David opened the door, eyes clearly focused on the flustered and blushing principal. “When this is over, regardless of

outcome, you will have lost mine and that of countless other colleagues.” David sneered and raised an eyebrow. “But I’ll still accept your apology.” And with that, David closed the door so hard the glass rattled. David smiled sincerely at Maureen and the other secretaries he’d known, worked with, and liked for over a decade, wishing them a good weekend. *TGIfuckingF*, he thought as he made his way to his classroom.

As he piled his papers and daybook into his briefcase, all David could think was, *Fifteen years and it was all for nothing*. Seven parents had pulled their kids from his class for the remainder of the year in protest of David’s personal life, touting the fact that at least their children would have a better moral example next year. An ironic grin spread across his face at the realization that the grade six Immersion teacher at the middle school was, in fact, a lesbian. *Good fucking riddance*, David snarled to the exit sign. He threw his body weight against the doors and considered calling in sick for the remaining month of school. *God knows*, David thought, *I’ve got enough accumulated sick days*. David had never missed a day of school during his entire career, a fact of which he was incredibly proud but at the same time seemed to have slipped everyone else’s mind. Fifteen years building and nurturing his reputation, and Bennett Thiry, small-minded sociopath, had it gripped firmly in his hands.

As he pulled his car out of the lot, he tried to remind himself of the support that he’d gotten from most of his colleagues and almost all but seven of his students’ families. It helped, he realized as he guided his car towards his apartment, noticing that his breathing was slowing and he was not hearing his pulse in his ears anymore.

A smile spread across his face when he remembered what Lenore had said to Bennett in the staff room: *You want to stand there and lecture me about what the Bible says?* The message had been clear but remained unspoken: *I was a nun, you egomaniacal bag of wind!* Bennett had sputtered and spewed for a moment before

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Lenore continued, *Okay, let's go. Bennett.* Lenore's voice had been dripping with sarcasm. *When was the last time you ate shellfish, lobster? Bennett, ever committed adultery?*

Bennett, feeling his power slowly being restored, had countered with, *Like you, you mean?*

Unfazed, Lenore spat, *I didn't sleep with him until after I'd left the order, you fuck!* Properly cowed and out of ammunition, Bennett had beat a hasty retreat and, David remembered, made straight for the principal's office.

Funny, David thought, *I only went in for the water and got a show!*

It was after seven when the knock came at the door, and David was halfway to completely sauced and feeling no pain.

"My favorite fuck buddy!"

Jerry winced at the words and waited to be invited in.

"Where's William?"

"Ranch. Sitter. May I come in?"

David left the door open, said nothing, and went back to the sofa. Jerry followed, closing and locking the door behind him. Jerry could see the beer cans, all three of them, scattered over the coffee table. Smirking to himself, he thought, *My mountain lion is such a lightweight!* Jerry stood in the middle of the living room and took in the sight before him: hair disheveled, shirt untucked, shoes still on, slacks wrinkled. Jerry sighed before asking, "What happened?"

"They're gonna have a mee'in'." David's voice hiccupped on the last word, and Jerry smiled.

"What for?"

David's head lolled on the back of the sofa and took a healthy

swig of beer. “Well, it would seem, that the Bennett Brigade has rallied enough support to determine whether or not I pose a serious *moral* risk to the safety of my students.” He took another swig, holding the can upside down and frowning.

“Oh, baby, I’m so sorry.” Jerry sat on the edge of the sofa, hand going instinctively to David’s knee.

“Pffft,” David spat. “Don’t be sorry, just fuck me into next week.” David grabbed for Jerry’s lapels but misjudged the distance and fell off the sofa. “Ooops! Mountain lion go boom!”

Jerry was finding it difficult not to laugh at the sight before him. He looked down at his knees, hiding his smile as David jumped up with a flamboyant *Tada!* and went to the fridge for another beer. *God, how I love this man!* When this was all over and he had his mountain lion back, Jerry reasoned, he was gonna use this moment to rib the hell out of David. *Tada?* Indeed.

David plunked himself down on the sofa and patted Jerry’s knee. “So, cowboy, what’s up?”

“I thought I’d come and check on you; haven’t heard from you in a while.”

“I’m sorry,” David slurred. Then he whispered, fingers on his lips, “I got in trouble. Shhhh!” David’s eyes darted around the apartment as if he were in a ’50s spy movie, and then he sank back on the sofa, laughing hysterically. Suddenly becoming serious again, and as if in answer to some unspoken question, he yelled, “Fuckin’ A!”

Jerry couldn’t take it anymore; he didn’t want to laugh in David’s face. He shoved off the sofa, collected the beer cans and headed for the kitchen. He’d never seen David drunk; this was definitely an enlightening experience. *Well, Jerry thought, at least he’s a happy drunk!*

“Hey, sailor,” David shouted. “Where ya goin’?”

Good to Know

When Jerry heard David hiccup and begin to bellow *Ten cents a dance*, Jerry lost it completely, big shoulders bouncing, facial muscles spasming, trying to decide whether to remain serious or to give in to the smile. *Cowboys and rough guys tearing my goooooown!* Jerry focused on remembering the original lyrics to the song to keep his laughter from erupting full force. *Fuckwads and dipshits, oh, how they weigh me doooooown—Fuckers!* Nope, definitely not the original lyrics. Jerry ducked his head into the fridge to see how many beer cans remained, his shoulders bouncing, laughter finally escaping. *I wonder if I can get him to do an encore*, Jerry thought as he considered recording it on his cell phone. *Call it a social experiment for posterity*, Jerry reasoned.

“Hey, hot stuff!” David slapped Jerry’s ass. “Wanna dance? You don’t weigh me down.” David leered and caressed Jerry’s chest, whispering, “Except when you’re on top of me. Shhh, we’re not supposed to sleep with the customers; management would fire my ass.”

“Maybe later.” Jerry decided to count the hiccups to keep himself from laughing and motioned to a chair. David fell into it, almost missing. “Can I get you some coffee, baby?”

“Hmmm.” David curled his arms around his own waist, head landing on the table. “I love it when you call me that.”

“Good to know.” Jerry laughed. “Coffee?”

“No, don’t touch the stuff.” David’s head was rolling back and forth, forehead pressed to the table as if to reinforce the idea that he’d declined the coffee.

“Sorry,” Jerry murmured. “I knew that.”

“Bet your ass you did!” David’s head sprang up, his eyes rolling back from the sudden movement. “You know why you knew that, you sexy cowboy, you?”

Jerry’s hand covered his smile. “Why, baby?”

“Hmmm.” David’s forehead found its way back to the table. “I love it when you call me ‘baby’!” His head shot back up. “You knew that ’cause you love me.”

Jerry’s heart melted a little, smile fading. “Never more than at this moment.” And Jerry meant every word. The weight of the world on his man’s shoulders, and he was singing about his gown ripping. *My little trooper*, Jerry sighed.

David released a long sigh of his own. “I think that’s why they all hate me.” David got up and went to the fridge for another beer but stopped in front of Jerry. “You’re mine, all mine, and they can’t *handle the truth!* God, you’re built!” David leaned against Jerry, smacking the big man’s chest. Jerry smiled into those beautiful eyes as David slurred, “Did I tell you I do impressions?” Raising a quick hand to his lips, David closed his eyes and cautioned, “Shhh, it’s a secret.”

“Good to know, there, Mr. Nicholson.” Jerry stifled another laugh and turned David around, hands firmly on his shoulders, guiding him to the bedroom. “Think it’s time for bed, baby.”

“Lullaby and good night, they can all suuuuck my diiiick!”

Jerry closed his eyes and concentrated on getting David to bed, quelling the urge to laugh again. Placing David on the edge of the bed, Jerry knelt down and removed his shoes and socks. Then, pushing David gently back on the bed, Jerry managed to remove David’s pants while David struggled with the buttons of his shirt.

“Who invented buttons anyway?” David gave up and tried to pull the shirt over his head. “Fuckers!”

Jerry wasn’t sure if David was referring to the inventors of buttons or to his colleagues, but he helped David undo the buttons of the shirt. David caressed Jerry’s head as the larger, sober man glided the shirt off David’s shoulders.

“My beautiful man.” David looked into Jerry’s eyes as he

Good to Know

continued to caress his head. “My beautiful, beautiful man.” David stood on his own while Jerry turned down the bed. “Will you stay with me for a while? The management can go *fuck off*! I promise I won’t tell anyone.” David made an exaggerated X somewhere near his heart, the momentum of his arm toppling him over onto a pillow.

“Of course, baby.” Jerry guided David between the sheets, then, removing his jacket and boots, lay on his side on top of the sheets, cradling David’s head to his chest.

“Mmmm,” David purred. “Miss this.”

“Me too, baby.”

“Love it—” big yawn “—when you call me that.”

“Love calling you that.”

Jerry thought David had fallen asleep; his breathing was deepening, his body relaxed and warm. He was still smiling at the sight of his beautiful, sensitive, generous, nurturing man offering himself for ten cents when he felt David stir.

“I love you.”

Jerry stopped smiling.

Chapter 12

JERRY looked at the clock as his eyes opened. *Thank God*—he'd only been asleep for an hour; there was still plenty of time to get back to the ranch. He heard rustling, the clinking of aluminum cans, and realized David wasn't in bed. He jumped out of bed and ran to the living room.

"Hey there, Budweiser. Feeling okay?"

"I'm sorry, cowboy." David walked to him, grabbing two fistfuls of Jerry's shirt. "We could have had a more meaningful couple of hours if I hadn't—"

"Hey, hey." Jerry was laughing, remembering David's *handle the truth!* "I found it very meaningful."

David slapped Jerry's ass and pulled away. "Just so you know," David warned, "I'm the kind of drunk who remembers everything."

"Everything?"

"I'm sorry I told you like that."

Jerry could see the tears threatening in David's tired, red eyes. "Not the way I wanted to hear it, not the first time, anyway—you drunk and singing show tunes. Won't lie to you, but I understand."

David threw his face into Jerry's chest and whispered, "I don't mean to keep fucking things up."

Good to Know

“I know, baby.”

“I *do so* love hearing that.” David’s arms wrapped underneath Jerry’s arms and his hands rested on his shoulders. “Forgive me?”

Jerry tilted David’s head up so that their eyes met. “Every. Time.”

David kissed Jerry’s cheek. “How can you be so understanding?”

Jerry stilled his features and deadpanned, “Because, baby, I can *handle the truth!*”

“Oh shit,” David moaned when Jerry finally released the laughter. “I promise when the trombones in my head go home, I’ll laugh.”

Jerry slumped on the sofa, holding his stomach. “When you fell on the floor, I thought I was gonna piss myself.” Jerry’s laughter erupted anew. “And when you started singing your own version of *Ten cents a dance? ‘Fuckwads and dipshits, oh how they weigh me down’!* It felt like my head would explode if I didn’t let it out.”

“Kinda like my head right now. Irony!” David fell on the sofa beside Jerry. “Great, another memorable fuck-up courtesy of yours truly.”

Jerry’s features stilled as he pulled himself to sit properly on the sofa. “Hey,” he whispered. “Come here.” David moved into his arms. “I’m kinda thinkin’ we have a whole lifetime to make better memories, yeah?”

David gazed up at those beautiful eyes, lips curving into a knowing grin, and whispered, “Fuckin’ A.”

“Promise me something?”

“Anything.”

“Promise me you won’t let them get to you?” Jerry kissed David’s forehead. “Promise you won’t let them, this, change you?” Jerry stood up and pulled David with him, enfolding him in his arms. “I’m kinda fond of you the way you are.”

“Fond, now, huh?” David tweaked Jerry’s nipples. “One drunken binge and I’ve been downgraded!”

“Seriously, baby, promise me?”

“I promise.”

Jerry left, and David went back to bed only to be awakened by the chime of his cell phone. Rolling over in bed, expecting it to be Jerry, David was a little concerned to see Lenore’s number on the display. “Lenore, what’s wrong?”

“I wanted to let you know that the Bennett Brigade has requested a meeting—”

“I know already,” David rubbed his eyes, bone-weary. “I had a little chin wag with Satan’s bride after school today.”

“No, David.” Lenore sounded panicked. “Not that meeting... a general meeting for all parents of the school district *community*.”

“He’s not fucking serious?” David knew that opening a meeting to the school district community meant any parent within the geographical limits could show up and express an opinion, not just parents of the one school where David worked. “Has there been a ruling yet?”

“No,” Lenore sighed, “but there should be one by Monday.” Lenore’s silence seemed to indicate she was waiting for David to say something, but when the silence stretched out too long, she added, “Is there anything I can do?”

“Know any hit men?”

Lenore laughed, sounding as if she’d been holding her breath.

Good to Know

“Just the Big Guy, but I’m sure you meant something a little more immediate, huh?”

“Thanks for letting me know, Lenore.”

“David.” Lenore’s voice sounded pleading, urgent. “Do me a favor? Go spend the weekend with your man and your son.”

“He’s not my son, Len—”

“Yet!”

“God, I love you.” David sighed loudly into the phone. “What would I do without you?”

“If I wasn’t here to talk you out of hiring a hit man, about ten to twenty.” Lenore laughed at her own joke and, as usual, made David’s mood a little brighter. “I love you too. Now go and get some!”

David closed his phone after promising Lenore that he’d spend some time with “his men” and sank back in the pillow. A community meeting. David had seriously underestimated Bennett’s resolve in this matter. But granting such a meeting would be setting a precedent that the school district would not want, allowing parents to dictate how the district, not merely one school, was to be administered. Of course, Debbi would probably like the idea, a community meeting removing her responsibility for keeping control over her *flock*. David rolled his eyes as he got out of bed, hating that word, Debbi’s implied message being that everyone else was a stupid sheep and she was the only one wise enough to keep the wolves at bay. *Not doing a very good job there, are you Deb?*

David looked at the clock. Just after ten in the evening. David sighed and wondered if Jerry would have a fit if he showed up unannounced. Deciding he needed to see “his men” more than he cared about disturbing Jerry, he speed dialed Jerry’s cell phone. Jerry picked up on the first ring.

“Jerry’s Dance Hall, ten cents a dance.” How Jerry said it without cracking, David would never know.

“Any cowboys available?”

“Just one, but he don’t take cash or credit.”

“What’s the going rate for one dance?”

“Three kisses, two snuggles.”

“Deal.”

“See you in fifteen.”

“Can I bring you anything?”

“Just my boyfriend.”

“I think he’s in here under the beer-induced haze somewhere.”

“Oh,” Jerry grunted. “Maybe, you know, just in case of accidental tearing, spare *goooooown*.”

“Bye, you goofy idiot.”

“Bye, baby.”

When David hung up, Jerry was still laughing.

David arrived safe and sound and feeling more relaxed just seeing the driveway and the lights on in the kitchen. *Home* was the only word he could think of now when he saw the ranch, the barns, the horses, and of course, “his men.” *Will it always be like this? Is this the closest I’ll ever get?* David put the car in park and palmed his keys, knowing that if the meeting went Bennett’s way, David could be drummed out of the profession. Of course, he knew that not all school districts would be so intolerant, but what if he had to move to the other side of the country to find one? How would he ever be able to say goodbye to William and Jerry? The ranch? Home?

Good to Know

Maybe if I stay drunk, I can become a comedian.

Jerry had the door open before David had the chance to knock. Taking the duffle bag from David's hand, Jerry led his lover into the kitchen and the warm buns, peanut butter, and mug of tea that were waiting.

"Remembered you telling me how much you like peanut butter." Jerry blushed and shrugged when David stared at him open-mouthed.

"But you hate the stuff." David's eyes darted between Jerry's flushed face and the table set as if a family would sit down for a snack any minute.

"William loves it too, so...." Jerry rubbed David's back and pushed him forward toward the table. "I'm outnumbered!"

"Knew there was *something* about that rotten kid I'd learn to like." David smiled as he sat, reaching for Jerry's forearm. "Please tell me he doesn't know about any of this."

"Hasn't said anything to me if he does." Jerry poured the tea and pushed the basket of buns toward David.

"It would positively kill me if this hurts you or William in any way." David pulled apart one of the buns and set it on his plate.

"Baby, you worry too much about hurting the two of us." Jerry carded his hand through David's hair. "Fighting for what you believe is right will never hurt us."

David raised an eyebrow and glared. "Perhaps you've forgotten what kids can be like? What other parents can be like?"

"Don't patronize me, David." Jerry pulled his hand away. "I know what *people* are like; I haven't—"

David reached for Jerry's hand again and the bigger man relented. "Please, Jerry, I can't fight with you too. If I can't count on

you—”

“Baby, listen to me for a minute. Let me call my contact, the one I was gonna call if the meeting with the superintendent didn’t go well, please?”

“Who?”

Jerry hesitated.

“Who?”

“Now I know you’ll get upset at the idea, but I want you to think about it, okay?”

“Who?”

Jerry sat back in his seat, sighing. “Jerrod O’Ryan.”

“Jerrod O...” David’s jaw hung open, “Ryan? The deputy minister of education for the province of Alberta?”

Jerry nodded, leaning over, placing a hand under David’s chin and closing the stunned man’s mouth. “He and my father were best friends growing up.” Jerry sighed. “I’m named after him.” Jerry laughed as David’s mouth fell open again. “He’s my godfather.”

“Holy shit, now that’s what I call *connected!*” David slapped Jerry’s shoulder and smirked, asking, “Do you think he could get me a better computer?” David’s laughter faded quickly when he saw that Jerry was not even smiling.

“Please tell me you’ll think about it?”

David nodded.

When the dishes were cleaned and the lights extinguished, Jerry found himself on the couch, arms full of his man yet again. “Hey,” Jerry lifted a shoulder, jostling David’s head. “You fall asleep on me, mountain lion?”

Good to Know

“No,” David sighed. “Just thinking.”

“Gonna share?”

“You, William, teaching, whether I’m prepared to lose any one of them.” David pulled himself so that he could lay on top of Jerry, forearms resting on the big chest, chin resting on his own forearms, staring into Jerry’s eyes.

“Not gonna happen, mountain lion.”

“How can you be so sure?”

“Because.” Jerry shifted, scooting down while pulling David up so that David’s head rested in the crook of his shoulder. “I know you pretty well, I think, and you’re not a quitter.”

“God,” David sighed as he inhaled Jerry’s scent. “I hope you’re right.”

“Sleep?”

“Thank you for being so understanding with me.”

“Come on, baby.” Jerry lifted David into a standing position, David gasping at the strength of Jerry being able to lift him to his feet. “I’ll get the guest room ready.”

“I don’t like that idea.”

Jerry turned, released David’s hand, and opened his mouth, closing it just as quickly. When he spoke, he sounded disappointed and confused. “Right,” Jerry pointed a finger in the air, “the sex embargo. Forgot. You want me to drive you home, and I’ll come pick you—”

“What I meant is I don’t like the idea of being that far away from you.” David wrapped his arms around Jerry’s waist, kissing his neck.

“Uh, okay, but I thought, with William—”

“With all you’ve done to me already, cowboy, you ever heard me make enough noise to bring anyone running?”

Jerry ran his hands over David’s hair and kissed his forehead. “You sure?”

“Never more.” David took his lover’s hand and led the way to the bedroom. “Besides, not planning on doing much more than holding you.”

The holding led to kissing, which led to touching, which, in turn, led to the most pleasurable experience either man had enjoyed. The quick, animalistic rutting that had been their usual style gave way to a silent exploration of bodies—no dirty talk, no urgent hands pushing at body parts. Bathed in the glow of a lamp, Jerry traced every inch of David’s body first with his hand and then with his tongue. David shivered over and over, skin becoming so sensitive that Jerry felt rather than saw his lover’s orgasm.

Eyes heavy from his release, David began his exploration. He sat astride Jerry’s hips as he kissed his way up and down and across the muscled chest, stopping to kiss and suck each nipple in turn, his hands pushing Jerry’s big arms over his head, fingers lightly tracing all of the muscles he could reach. When David felt Jerry relax into the mattress, he shifted so that his head was resting on Jerry’s belly, facing Jerry’s straining erection. David took him in his mouth, suckling, no hands needed, as if he were a nursing calf. He took the full length in his mouth, blowing air as he did so. He backed away so that he was only suckling the sensitive head, grabbing the foreskin between his lips and pulling, causing Jerry to hiss and spread his legs farther. When David took the full length again, his hands spread in opposite directions, one going to massage Jerry’s balls, the other to pull and tease his sensitive nipples.

When Jerry’s hand started caressing David’s back, David sensed his man was close. David pulled off, shaking Jerry’s balls gently, pressing them lightly against Jerry’s body, and sank back

down quickly over the whole length, humming a musical scale, the vibrations sending Jerry over the edge. David stopped humming as he swallowed Jerry's seed, the contractions of his throat and the movements of his tongue making Jerry's eyes roll back in his head.

"I missed you." David knew that Jerry didn't mean just the sex, but the intimacy also. From the very beginning, David and Jerry had discovered a great sensuality in one another that had grown and intensified as their relationship grew. Each seemed to know just how to stroke, caress, soothe, excite, and tease the other's body to give the other so much pleasure, to release the passion that sent them tumbling, fumbling toward ecstasy.

David lay on his side beside Jerry, his arm draped across Jerry's waist, his head mere inches from Jerry's. The bigger man's hand still glided up and down David's back as David stared intently at Jerry's profile as if he were storing the image on his brain's memory card. Jerry's eyes were closed, his breathing deepening, his other arm resting over David's.

"Jerry?"

"Hmmm?"

"Look at me."

Jerry's head swiveled at the whispered command, eyes smiling but sleepy.

"I love you, Jerry."

"Now *this* is the perfect moment." Jerry smiled, turned on his side, and nested his head next to David's sensitive ear, whispering, "You make me happy, David."

David closed his eyes, content that he'd been able to do something right by this man at last.

Chapter 13

“WHY not?” David was facing the sink, but he could hear the frustration building in Jerry’s voice.

“Because I don’t want to stoop to his level.”

“How is my contacting my godfather, the deputy minister of education, stooping to his level?”

“I want to beat him because my arguments are sound and right, not because my boyfriend has political clout.”

“Jesus, David,” Jerry hissed, rubbing his hand over his scalp. “What if he wins? What if he beats you?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t play dumb with me, David!”

“Please,” David hissed. “William will hear you.”

“Ah, fuck me all to hell.”

David sank into a chair and rubbed his hand over his face. “I guess,” David sighed, “I’m out of a job and a career.” David reached for Jerry, but Jerry pulled away. “But the chances of him having anything that could make that happen are—”

“David.” Jerry relented and placed his hand over David’s. “I see you with William; I’ve talked to some of the other parents. This

Good to Know

is what you've always wanted to do; this is what you are. It would kill me to see you give it up so easily."

"It's only a small part of who I am." David rolled his eyes when Jerry's eyes widened. "Okay, fine, a big part of who I am, but..." David took Jerry's beautiful hand between his and kissed each of the knuckles. "Not so long ago, I was ready to give up 'us' for the sake of my career, but now... I've had almost twenty years with the kids. I've never had this." David squeezed the hand he was holding. "I'm not losing anything, cowboy."

"Who are you trying to convince, David?"

David relinquished the hand and dropped his face into his own hands, sighing heavily. "Okay," he started, head popping back up to look Jerry in the eyes. "Let's say for a minute that I fight this using any means necessary. Let's say I play dirty like—"

"Me calling my godfath—"

"Let me finish, please."

Jerry leaned back in his chair, arms crossed firmly on his chest.

"Let's say I do whatever it takes to win. What will that prove to anyone? What will calling in the politicians do but divert the attention from the issue at hand, namely, whether my being gay and a schoolteacher means I can't do the job? Why do you think I don't want you involved? If the Bennett Brigade can use you to cloud the issue even further, they will."

Jerry dropped his arms, stood up, and leaned against the French doors to the patio, his fingers tracing the insides of the window panes. "But if he involves me and William, then we can use my resources. It's still a fair fight."

"I know this slimy little dipshit," David whispered, "and I'm telling you that he will dig into your past, William's past, our

lives—”

“I don’t have anything to hide. Neither does William.”

“Maybe not, but do you want to see it splashed across the front page of the paper? Do you want your son to become a poster boy for every gay rights group on the planet?” David rinsed his mug out and placed it in the sink. “This is a professional matter, strictly professional. As long as *I* keep it that way, *he* won’t have a leg to stand on. The minute I involve you... I’m afraid we wouldn’t survive.”

David turned when he heard footsteps on the stairs, preparing himself, planting a smile on his face for William.

“David!” William ran, arms outstretched, throwing himself into David’s waiting arms.

“Hey, William, good morning! Wie geht’s?”

“Danke, gut.”

“Richtig geschlafen?”

“Wie ein Klotz, danke, und du?”

“Nicht so schlecht.” Holding William close to his body so he could whisper into the little ears, David asked loud enough for Jerry to hear, “Should we tell Uncle Jerry what that means?”

William giggled as David looked over to see Jerry smiling. “David asked ‘how are you?’ I said ‘good’; then he asked if I slept well. I said ‘like a log, and you?’ and he said ‘not so bad’.”

David put William down, watching his little legs carry him over to his uncle, who, to David’s delight, bent down and scooped up the little boy, kissing his temple. “Are you gonna ask me how I slept?” Jerry was trying the spit-and-tame method of curing William’s bedhead.

Good to Know

“Did you sleep good, Uncle Jerry?”

With a wink at David, Jerry answered, “Never better, cowboy.”

After breakfast and showers, David and his men found themselves outside tending to the horses. William took his responsibility of brushing his smaller horse and mucking the stall very seriously, earning a suppressed laugh from David. Jerry had built William a long, bench-like stool so that the little guy could reach up to the horse’s shoulders. As he brushed, he imitated Jerry’s habit of muttering little nonsense phrases to the horse. His little head wasn’t big enough for the cowboy hat that he’d picked out, despite the fact that it was the smallest size available, so William was constantly pushing it back on his head, protesting wildly when David suggested he’d see better if he took it off.

David sorted tack, mucked one stall, and had finished half of a second when William called him over for an inspection. It seemed to David that William had taken an inordinate amount of time to do one stall. David had realized too late and stood beside William when he insisted on feeding all of the horses himself. David suppressed more laughter when William kept shifting from foot to foot, giggling that the horses’ tongues tickled his hand. *You try*, William had suggested at one point, and so David fed a few apples to the horses, agreeing with William that the tongues did indeed tickle. Jerry seemed to be content standing aside back against the tack room door, taking it all in.

Jerry had cornered David at some point and asked about all the German. *I know he was in Switzerland and all*, Jerry had said, *but he was in the south, the French part*. Jerry had listened intently as David explained about Frau Zimmerman, about how the only real affection that William had ever had was from this kind, elderly grandmother who didn’t know enough English to comfort a little boy who she could see was lonely and afraid. Jerry had felt like a shit for almost turning the boy away, or wanting to, at least. *At least*

that explains why I hear the little cowboy speaking German to himself sometimes, Jerry mused to himself.

Jerry strode over to the pair where they were feeding the horses and nudged David's shoulder. "Got something I wanna show you."

Struck by the seriousness of Jerry's expression, David nodded and followed, reminding William not to get his fingers caught in the horses' mouths. "Shouldn't we bring him with?" David whispered when they were at the ladder leading to the loft.

"He'll be fine." Jerry climbed first, turning as David stared at his ass. "You worry about him too much."

"Occupational hazard, I guess."

When they reached the loft, Jerry's studio, Jerry turned, eyes narrow, lips pursed. "You like this with all your students?"

David laughed at the impromptu inquisition. "Probably not."

"Thought so."

Waiting for the big reveal, David scanned the studio. Everywhere there were shelves filled with pottery, some of it finished, some not. His eyes fixed on one piece in particular. He walked over to it, leaning over so that he could study it closer. "My God, Jerry, this is beautiful, absolutely beautiful." It was an abstract piece, deep blue, yet warm and soothing, high-gloss finish catching the afternoon light and bouncing it in all directions.

Jerry walked over to stand beside David, a canvas hanging at his side. "Just finished that a little while ago."

"May I?" David reached out with his hands but did not touch the sculpture.

Jerry nodded and David reached out to pick up the sculpture, touching the base only. "It's so heavy," David whispered. Putting it

back quickly, he added, “Don’t want to drop it.”

“Whadda you think?”

David knew that Jerry was asking for his impressions, his feelings, and not whether he thought the sculpture had any aesthetic appeal. “Makes me feel all warm and cozy, like when the sun is streaming through a window and I’m lying on the sofa, dozing in and out.”

“Huh,” Jerry grunted. “Run your hand over it.”

David raised an eyebrow but moved his hand slowly over the entire sculpture. “It’s so smooth and silky.” David shivered a little as he pulled his hand away. David didn’t ask what it was, having been conditioned by his mother, the art aficionado, never to ask such a bourgeois question. *Artists are very highly strung and don’t like to be questioned about their masterpieces*, she’d said. *Right on the money as usual, Mom!* David thought with a healthy dose of sarcasm.

“Started that the day after our trip out to the lake.” Jerry was smiling, not needing to explain any further.

David smiled, remembering the clear blue water of the lake, the horses, William and the berries, and, of course, the evening by the fire. He could feel the breeze, smell the grass, the berries, feel his heart racing as Jerry tackled him and held him while William tickled him. He was smiling when Jerry held something out to him.

“This is part of a set.” Jerry handed David the canvas in his hand, no segue necessary for Jerry’s mind. “Open it.”

Forehead furrowing, David wondered what Jerry was up to, but he reached out and took the canvas. “If this is a nude of some twenty-something, I’m gonna....”

“Smartass. Just open it.”

Both of their heads turned as William made his way up the ladder. As Jerry went over to ensure his son's safe arrival, David unknotted the twine, pulled the wrapper aside and leaned the painting against the shelving.

"Hey, that's almost like my painting." William was kneeling down in front of the portrait.

"Good eye, cowboy."

"But it's more like yours."

David laughed as he saw Jerry's eyes roll back. Obviously he felt that William was ruining some sort of surprise with all these questions. "No, partner, I still got mine." Shrugging as he looked at David's quizzical stare, he added, "Took it down last night so you wouldn't see it."

"Wait." David pointed to the picture. "You said this is part of a set."

"Three, as a matter of fact."

"You can't split them up!"

"Not gonna split 'em up." Jerry sighed and then turned to William. "William, how about you go do me one of your special paintings? Fridge is looking kinda naked."

William headed over to a little miniature easel near Jerry's big one and began dipping his fingers in paint. Then he found the sheet of paper tacked up with push pins and methodically began creating his own masterpiece. David still had the confused expression on his face when Jerry, eyes still fixed on David's, put one arm around his waist and pulled him next to his body, lips finding an ear.

"There's three. One for you, one for me, one for William," Jerry whispered so quietly that David was sure that William wouldn't have heard even if he had he not moved to the other side of

the loft. "They won't be split up when you come and live with us." Jerry kissed his ear and moved over to inspect William's masterpiece.

David wasn't sure whether the shiver was because of the kiss to his ear or from the clarity of Jerry's message, but he followed Jerry and William down the ladder, out of the studio, and back to the house. The portrait was still in Jerry's hand. He placed it in the living room, propped against the fireplace as he told William teasingly to be sure the David didn't go anywhere and not to answer any questions that David might have about the paintings.

No matter what David promised William, the little guy would not spill any secrets. *Of course*, David thought, *no use bribing him with a horse, he's already got three of them in the barn*. And David knew it certainly wouldn't do to bribe him with sweets, since William got those from him for free anyway. He was desperately trying to think of something, *anything*, to offer William when Jerry returned to the living room, eyes darting between his feet and David's eyes.

"Borrowed your painting for a minute, partner," Jerry said to William as the little boy came to stand beside him, helping him arrange the portraits.

David gave a nervous chortle as he stood back and waited for the large and small bodies to disappear. Jerry got the canvases arranged in the way that pleased him and stepped back.

"Hope you like 'em," Jerry said as he stood aside, hand absently stroking William's hair.

"They're...." David was struck dumb by the beauty and the intimacy of the portraits. "Us!"

"Isn't it cool?" William sat on the floor indicating each of the details as he spoke, as if he were conducting a lecture of sorts. "See," William said as he pointed to the first canvas, the one that

Jerry had kept for himself. "This is Uncle Jerry and me." William was pointing to two figures, one large man with a broad back carrying a little boy on his shoulders, both images in silhouette with a bright orange and red sun setting behind them. "And this is you!" William indicated the third figure, a smaller man striding maybe half an arm's length from the other two figures.

When you come and live with us.

William continued his lecture, showing the second painting, the backs of the same three figures on horseback this time, standing by a deep blue body of water, the sun cascading out of the picture in bright hues of yellow and gold.

David reached out and put his fingertips to the canvas, not really knowing when he'd knelt down beside William. His fingertips grazed the first, then the second painting, and then the third, the one Jerry was giving to him. He understood this third portrait; it made sense.

There, in the muted greys, pinks, and fading blues of dusk, were two men, hands resting on the head of the little blond boy in between them. All three figures were walking back to a house, Jerry's house, the house on the ranch. *When you come and live with us.*

David turned, still kneeling back on his heels beside William, incapable of finding the words to describe how he felt. He didn't understand why he wasn't tearing up, why he wasn't crying. It was the most perfect moment, the most perfect gift he'd ever been given. William's voice sounded, snapping him out of his intense gaze in the face of the man who was willing to give him everything he'd ever wanted.

"Don't you like it?"

"Yes, William, I do," David answered William, but his eyes were still fixed on Jerry. "Very much."

Good to Know

“You haven’t said *thank you* yet. You’re gonna hurt his feelings.” William shook his head slowly back and forth. “He worked *so* hard on these.”

“You’re right.” David laughed, tousling William’s hair. “Do you think that since I’ve been rude, I should give him a hug to make it up to him?”

“Yeah,” William nodded and ran to the kitchen. “I think Uncle Jerry likes hugs. I’m gonna get something to eat.”

David stood and studied Jerry, the taller man smoothing his palms over his jeans; David approaching slowly, his eyes never leaving Jerry’s flushing face. *When you come and live with us.*

“You know, of course, he means cookies.” Jerry laughed as David reached his lover. “You’d think with all the berries the kid—” Jerry started to say when David lunged at him, arms wrapping around Jerry’s neck. David’s heart felt as if it would beat out of his chest. David didn’t say a word. “Does this mean you like it?”

David nodded his head, his whiskers rubbing against Jerry’s beard. He was embracing Jerry so tightly he thought the older man would cry out eventually, but he didn’t. Jerry was content to stand there, arms full of happy teacher, and caress David’s back. When David finally pulled away, he looked into Jerry’s eyes again and smiled, repeating, “When I come and live with you.”

Jerry had to wonder just how many cookies William was eating, because he certainly didn’t come running when Jerry was whooping and hollering as if the house was on fire. *Maybe David can get the little cowboy to eat healthier snacks*, Jerry mused as he finished twirling David around the living room and put him back on his feet.

Chapter 14

“ALL right, so we’re all agreed that each party concerned will have the right to speak to the issue at hand, one at a time and with a civil tone.”

David bristled at Debbi’s voice, more from knowing that she’d lose control over this meeting faster than she’d lost control over her weight than from the actual sound. David had had his fair share of struggles with his weight, but he’d never actually gotten to the point where he could only sit in armless chairs.

“Madam Chairperson?”

David sighed when he heard Bennett’s voice. *Fuck you, stupid dipshit*, David thought to himself as he studied his fingernails. *She just finished saying that this would not be parliamentary procedure! You’re worse than your son, and he has the excuse of being only ten years old.* David remembered the relief he’d felt when Bennett had announced that he would be the first—of many, he’d assured David—to remove his son for the remainder of the year. David didn’t have anything against Bennett Jr. per se, but Lord knew David had gone home exhausted after having tried in vain to get anything to stick in that boy’s head. *Worst French I’ve ever heard*, David sighed again as he thought of Junior’s own special version of the French language.

“Mr. Thiry?” Debbi’s voice again.

Good to Know

"I would like to object, yet again, to this meeting being held *in camera*."

Go ahead, David thought, record the whole damn thing. You'll be taking your own notes anyway, you slimy prick! That is, of course, if you can manage without opposable thumbs.

"Mr. Thiry," Debbi sounded weary, "we are not going to revisit everything every time you have an objection. And this is not parliamentary procedure."

At this rate, all I'll need to do is keep my mouth shut and let them skewer Bennett for me. David crossed his legs under the table and thought of Jerry and William. I wonder what they're doing right now. Is Jerry still disappointed that I didn't accept his help? Is William wondering why I'm not there to sing him a lullaby? Are they thinking about me? David had insisted on returning to his apartment after school instead of the ranch. He wanted to keep himself focused and calm. Jerry definitely made him feel calm, but he had never made him feel focused. *Flustered and addle-brained, more like it.*

"Ms. Grady, if I may?" That was the superintendent, taking over. David checked his watch: *Under ten minutes*, David calculated. *I owe Jerry a beer.* David had been sure that Debbi would last at least fifteen minutes before losing control of the meeting. "We are here to assess whether there is sufficient evidence that would force the school district to question the moral integrity of a long-standing, well-respected teacher." Beat. "So, I think we should be moving in that direction." *Thank you!* David chanced a glance at Bennett, who was sitting opposite him. He actually felt sorry for this insect. Bennett's face was flushed, his forehead leaking sweat like the Exxon Valdez, and the hand holding the pen was shaking like a barn in a tornado.

"So let's have it," the superintendent continued. "Mr. Thiry?"

David drifted in and out during Bennett's *sermon on the*

mount. Bennett, in fine form, quoted scripture, expressing his *deep, passionate* concern for the poor, *defenseless* children who were subject to a homosexual who had *openly flaunted* his *predilections* to the point that he had caused fights to break out among the children, resulting in *grievous* injuries. A homosexual who was currently *shacked up* with a man of *no relation* who, also a homosexual, was guardian to *an innocent* who was now *vulnerable* to *two* homosexuals. A homosexual who had flagrantly, according to the *sworn* testimony of one Sampson Dubois, knowingly hired prostitutes of the *male variety*, habitually paid Mr. Dubois to *keep his company* and had *struck Mr. Dubois repeatedly* when he objected to the defendant's *insistence* on watching pre-pubescent boys in order to—

“*Enough.*” David had been content to sit and listen to all sorts of crap but not to be called a pedophile. “First of all, Mr. *Dubois's* real name is Sampson Linklater. He only went back to using Dubois when he resurrected his stripping career after I kicked him out. Second, I’m not surprised that he told you all those things and even less surprised that he signed his name to it, considering I threw him out of *my* condo for engaging in just one sexual act with a man who probably wasn’t even eighteen. I’d be hard pressed to admit to anyone that there hadn’t been others. Speaking of money, Bennett, it wouldn’t be hard to find out if Sampson’s bank account got a little fatter after signing your little piece of paper, so spare the sanctimonious crap about me paying for anything. Third, if you wanna start calling me a pedophile based on testimony of said *Mr. Dubois*, you’d better be prepared to back that up in court. And finally, what I do after school hours, *and* with whom was not to be a focus in this meeting, or was I misinformed?” David turned to Debbi and waited, chest heaving, heat burning his ears.

“While it is true, Mr. Loewenberger, that we had not originally seen any reason to—”

“So I was misinformed?” David rifled through some papers

Good to Know

and pulled out an e-mail. “Because according to this e-mail from you, Ms. Grady—”

“We felt it in the school’s best interest to at least—”

“I’m calling an end to this meeting so that I can contact a lawyer.” David stood to leave but stopped when he heard Bennett’s voice.

“I’m a parent, a taxpayer, and I demand—”

“I’m a taxpayer too, Bennett.” David spat as he stood between his chair and the table, eyes focused intently on Bennett’s reddening, greasy face. “My condo on Wilmot, part of this district I believe, still hasn’t sold, which means that I’m paying the property taxes, which makes me a taxpayer in the district too.” David sat back down, eyes never leaving Bennett’s darting gaze. “Should we check with all the taxpayers in this district? And why stop there? Why don’t we get the media involved, yeah? Drag all of us, especially the kids, through God’s green acre because you can’t admit that you just might be wrong? Are you so self-righteous that you’re going to sit there and tell me that there’s only your way, that no other person could possibly be right in his or her beliefs?”

“Ah yes,” Bennett responded, “the infamous trust fund of the Van der Boesch family; isn’t that the one you threatened to ruin me with?”

“It’s Van *den* Boesch,” David threw up his hands in resignation. “And what did you threaten me with, Bennett, huh? And for the record, I told you I’d use my trust fund to sue you for harassment. If I wanted to ruin you, all I’d have to do is parade *your* personal life in front of everyone’s face.”

“At least I’m a Christian.”

“And what about the people who aren’t, Bennett? What about our Muslim students, our Jewish students, or the ones who don’t believe at all? Are you telling me you’re the only person qualified to

“speak for all of us? You say you’re a Christian, but since when have all of the Christians gotten along? Catholics, Lutherans, Baptists, Mormons... we all believe different things.”

Much to David’s relief, the superintendent turned to Bennett, interested in whatever his answer might be. Bennett sputtered more quotations from the Bible but was halted when the superintendent reminded him that the church had nothing to do with the government and further, the school district was a publicly funded enterprise and therefore free from adherence to any religious beliefs.

Bennett bemoaned the moral state of the government but did not answer David’s questions, David noted with interest. “Are you really willing to put all of these students through that, Bennett? Are you really willing to have *adults*, not just students, fighting, possibly resulting in, as you so eloquently put it, *grievous* injuries?” David waited again, but there was no immediate answer.

Bennett reached into his pile of papers and pulled out “the list.” “I have here a petition signed by over one hundred parents who all feel that Mr. Van der Boesch’s presence is morally reprehensible *and* are willing to remove their children from this district.”

“We don’t respond to threats from teachers or parents, Mr. Thiry,” the superintendent countered, face somber and sedate. “Our parents are free to come and go as they choose. Our facilities stand on their own merit.”

Suddenly, it dawned on David. “Bennett, how many parents from this school signed your petition? How many from my class?”

More sputtering.

“Did you say that one hundred parents from *this* school signed your petition?”

“I *not* see how this is relevant—”

“So you get to *ask* the questions but not answer them.” David

Good to Know

laughed, eyes still focused on Bennett. “That’s two now, Bennett, two questions you’ve avoided. I’ve answered every one of *yours* that pertained to my professional life—”

“And a few personal ones too.” The superintendent again.

“So, Bennett, do you want this for the school, the school district, the *children*?” David ignored the second unanswered question this time. He thought his heart was going to hammer out of his chest, it was beating so hard.

“The coalition, which has elected me its leader, is prepared to proceed with both legal and media action to ensure the safety—”

David couldn’t believe his ears. After everything he’d said tonight, he couldn’t believe that Bennett could still be planning to do this. David’s mind wandered briefly to taking Jerry’s offer of calling the deputy minister of education, but David’s mind kept coming back to one thought: *I can’t do that for the same reason I can’t go to the union*. David knew that if he went to the union, if he took Jerry up on his offer to contact the deputy minister, Bennett would get what he ultimately wanted: attention for himself through a whirlwind media circus. Sitting there, looking over at Bennett, David knew he had no other choice. “Fine.” David stood up. “You win. I quit.” David walked toward the door.

“That’s not a course of action I would recommend, David,” the superintendent said. Then he turned to Bennett. “And if you disrupt this district with the media and this coalition, I will be forced to recommend your dismissal for violating—”

“That won’t be necessary now,” Bennett interrupted, “since he’s already agreed to resign.”

David turned at the sting the words had on him, especially coming from Bennett’s mouth. He’d fought fair, fought hard, but it hadn’t been enough. Bennett stared at him, smug smirk firmly planted on his face. David finally spoke, staring directly at Bennett.

“*He’s* still in the room, Bennett. And you’re right, I agreed to resign. And it will be effective the first day of summer; I will not abandon my students. But I will not type it myself. I want you to type it.” David pointed at Bennett. “And I want every one of those one hundred parents to sign, print their names, and write their address.”

“That’s ridiculous!” More sputtering from Bennett. “I don’t see why—”

“Why? You don’t see why? Well, let me spell it out for you.” David saw Bennett’s mouth open, but no words came out. “Because if one word of this hits any newspaper, I don’t care if it’s in Moscow, if one child is harassed by media, if one hair on William’s head is touched... this will be personal from now on, Bennett. You come near me or my fam—” David took a deep breath. “One word, Bennett,” David hissed as he picked up the list and threw it back at the weasel, “and I’ll already have a complete list of defendants.” David turned to leave.

“Mr. Loewenberger?” The superintendent called to David. When David turned, he continued, “For the record, David, I think you’re making a mistake.”

“And I thank you for that, sir.” David smiled, suddenly weary of this place. Turning to Bennett, he said, “You let me know when you’ve got all those names on a typed resignation, and I’ll sign it after all the names and addresses are verified. You’d better hope your *coalition* doesn’t let you down, because your name will be at the top of that list.”

And with that, David was out the door, career over. He consoled himself, while swiping at his tears, that at least he’d saved Jerry and William from it all. David would never have to stand by and see Jerry’s reaction as David was accused of being a pedophile, of having paid for sex, of having found sexual release while lusting over young boys. *Small price to pay*, David reasoned, *letting Bennett win, so that I will always see that look of pride in Jerry’s eyes.*

Good to Know

I'll kill myself before I disappoint Jerry again.

Chapter 15

DAVID felt completely drained after the meeting. It had been almost three days since he'd seen Jerry or spent any quality time with him or William. He was looking forward to seeing them both now, meeting over, future decided. He still had to have the conversation with Jerry, though, to let him know... well, all of it. Jerry wouldn't be happy with any of this, but David couldn't help that now. *Jerry will understand.*

As he rose to go shower and change, he heard a knock at his door. Spinning in that direction, he hoped it wasn't anyone who would want to talk. Opening the door, he winced inwardly as he smiled at Jerry.

"Bad time?"

"As good as any, I guess." David motioned for Jerry to enter the apartment. "Can I get you anything to drink, eat? Where's William?"

"No, I'm good. With Lenore." Jerry moved to the living room. "You probably wanna change. I can wait, no hurry."

"I won't keep you in suspense." David laughed and motioned for Jerry to follow into the bedroom. Noticing the apprehension on Jerry's face, David grabbed his hand. "I don't have anything you haven't seen before."

"Yeah, I know, but I thought we were on an embargo until

after the meeting?”

“We were until the other night, when I couldn’t control myself.” David shrugged out of his suit jacket and pulled his tie loose, sitting on the bed to remove his shoes.

“Were?” Jerry stood in the doorway, more nervous than David had ever seen him. “You mean it’s over?”

“It’s over.” David stood to remove his shirt and unfasten his pants.

“And?”

“The evil Bennett Brigade got its wish.” David shucked his pants and pulled off his socks, offering a humourless laugh.

“So you’re going to court?” Jerry sounded almost hopeful, or, more precisely, full of hope.

“No, I mean I resigned.”

“You what?”

“I quit, tendered my resignation, threw in the towel, gave up, caved....”

“But what happened to fighting this fuckwad?”

“How, Jerry?” David pulled the T-shirt over his head and stepped into a pair of sweatpants. “He’s managed to get a hundred of the parents behind him, he’s getting God knows how much money from private citizens and enterprises to pay his legal fees.” David placed a hand on Jerry’s chest, reveling in the warmth, conveniently omitting the hate-filled bile signed, sealed, and delivered by his ex; having Jerry hear that crap would kill him. “My trust fund doesn’t even come close to what he’s managed to accumulate.”

“But the kids? William?”

“The kids will be fine; William will be fine.” David moved

past Jerry to the kitchen. "I'm not the only teacher in the city."

"Not the point, baby!"

"No, the point is that I'm saving us from having to live through a media circus." David pointed his finger at Jerry, not sure anymore whether he was convincing himself or Jerry. "I'm saving William from those godawful spray-painted words, from being called those ugly names, from... from..." And David finally ran out of steam. Starting to cry, he fell to the floor. "I don't know what I'm doing anymore." Looking up at Jerry, he said, "I thought you'd understand that I was trying to protect you and William."

Jerry was beside him in a second, arms curled around the shaking body, hands guiding David's head to his shoulder. "It's okay, baby. We'll make it okay."

Resigned, almost shy, David looked up and then stood up. "I'm not going to put any of us through this. I will not drag..." David leaned over and kissed the top of Jerry's head, the scent of his shampoo making David ache. "It's done; it's finished. I fought; I lost."

"Fought?" Jerry stayed motionless on the floor, staring up at the flurry of activity that was his lover. "You attended one meeting and caved."

"Yeah, well fuck you too!" David turned on Jerry. "You weren't there; you didn't see—"

"And whose fucking fault is that?" Jerry raised himself to his full height and walked towards David. "You wouldn't let me be a part of any of this!" Jerry laughed, his voice hoarse and mocking. "Big, bad mountain lion had to be sure he was in control even of his own downfall."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"What the fuck do you think it means, you spineless—?" Jerry

Good to Know

turned towards the door. “You decide when I come, you decide when we fuck, you decide when I can touch you, when I can stay the night, what’s best for me, what’s best for William....”

“You knew from the beginning that—”

“That was before I loved you,” Jerry shouted. “Before I realized I wanted to build a family for you and for William, all of us together.” Jerry opened the door, still shouting. “Before I realized that ‘cowboy up’ was only good for everyone but you.” Jerry’s voice softened, but the disgust was clear on his face. “Before you promised, before, when—” Jerry’s voice hitched and he gnawed at his bottom lip, clearing his throat, “before I knew you could break my heart so easily.”

David narrowed his eyes, tilting his head to the side in disbelief. “Easy?” David laughed. “You think this has been easy for me?”

“I wouldn’t know, David. I wasn’t allowed access to the room while the options were being discussed.” Jerry almost closed the door, but he looked back in at David, scorn and frustration plain on his face. David looked up just as Jerry said, “*He’ll be whatever he wants to become, if you support him, encourage him, love him.*” Jerry breathed out heavily and then said, “I believed you. I trusted you.” And with a final sad, sardonic smile, Jerry whispered, “Goodbye, David.”

David thought of that moment by the fire, William safe in Jerry’s arms, Jerry so worried about the little boy who’d become so happy, who’d come to love his uncle so much, who’d finally found a home. *How am I wrong in wanting to protect that?* It took David several seconds to realize that the keening was coming from him and was not the result of some horrible collision down on the street. He was on the floor, though he couldn’t remember sitting. He held his head in his hands, trying to control the sobs, wondering yet again what anyone really expected out of him. Hadn’t he lost enough in

his life already? Hadn't he paid the price for his "choice" in life? What else would be taken from him because....

The words popped into his head: *as much as you allow them to take*. Wiping his eyes with the sleeves of his shirt, David focused on the painting on the wall opposite him. Jerry, poor Jerry, had been through just as much as David and had never complained once. He'd changed so much over the last few months and had never asked David for anything, had never even asked David if he could leave a toothbrush here, merely waited until David made the offer. More words—*go to him; tell him; explain; he loves you*.

David jumped up and ran to the bedroom, pulling on jeans and his clogs, not bothering with socks. It was raining when he got outside, but he didn't want to waste any time running back for a raincoat. He started the car, put it into gear, and headed for the ranch. Hopefully, he would be there before Jerry could pick up William and get back. David would be there, waiting and hoping that they'd take him back, forgive him for giving up, realize he'd done it for them.

When he arrived, Jerry was just helping William out of the pick-up truck, the poor little guy dwarfed by the big yellow raincoat that Jerry had never gotten around to exchanging. David pulled up beside the pick-up, slammed the car into park, and hopped out, chasing after Jerry.

"William, how about you go and get ready for bed, huh?" William nodded at his uncle and threw a wave at David.

David waved back and inched closer to Jerry. "I know I have no right to ask. I know I've disappointed you—"

"Come in, for Chrissakes. You'll catch your death." Jerry stepped aside to let him pass and closed the door. "Wait here. I'll get you some dry clothes."

David stood, shivering, his practiced speech during the drive

Good to Know

over now seeming inadequate. Jerry still seemed angry, disappointed. David wasn't sure he could do this now, was not so certain of the outcome as he had been when it was just him talking to the heater in the car. Jerry returned and stripped the T-shirt off David without a word, snuggled him in a big towel and handed him a T-shirt. "Thank you, Jerry."

Jerry said nothing, only moving to the stove to heat up some water for hot chocolate and tea. David's eyes watered at the memories of those nights—how long had they all been so happy, healthy, and safe together? David noticed that Jerry was leaning against the counter, waiting.

"I didn't want to leave it like that."

"Why? You got some nicer way of telling me to fuck off?"

David fought against the tears. "I never meant—"

"Don't give a shit what you *meant*, David. I can read between the lines." Jerry moved to the cupboard, picking out the hot chocolate and the tea bags.

"I'm not strong like you are now. I've seen you become—"

"Bullshit."

"Please, Jerry, William—"

"Is my responsibility, and I'll speak my piece in my own house." Jerry slammed the drawer after getting a couple of spoons. David couldn't help but notice that Jerry had only removed two mugs.

"I know. I'm sorry. I only meant the language—"

"You got five seconds to get to the point, mountain lion." David winced at the nickname used in anger and not out of love and friendship. The tears started again.

“Please,” David began, the tears breaking loose, “try to understand.” David closed his eyes and tried to start again. “I’m having trouble finding the right words.”

Jerry glanced at his watch then back at David. “Cowboy up, mountain lion.”

“It’s not that simple, I—”

“William!” Jerry yelled when he got to the foot of the stairs. “Come say goodbye to Mr. L., he’s leaving.”

“Wait, wait!” William came running down the stairs, little legs pumping as fast as they could. “When will I see you again? When can you come riding? When’s our next sleepover?”

David steeled himself against more tears. He knelt down on the floor and ran his hand over William’s little blond head. “That’ll depend on your uncle, William.” David felt William’s arm wrap around his neck and opened his eyes. He hadn’t realized that he’d even closed them. “Why don’t we let him think about it before we ask him, okay?” He said this last loud enough to caution Jerry against any rash outbursts that would only serve to hurt both David and William.

“But I miss you.”

“William, enough!” Jerry’s impatient yelling made David jump. “The man’s got important stuff to do, people to see, papers to sign, promises to bre—”

“Thank you for coming to say goodbye to me, William,” David interrupted, standing to his full height, glaring at Jerry. “I’ll see you the first chance I get, okay? And we’ll see each other at school, right?”

“Bye.” William’s voice, confused and frightened, faded as Jerry patted his bum to get him up the stairs.

Good to Know

Once William had disappeared from his sight, David rounded on Jerry. “We had a deal,” he hissed. “No matter what happened to us, we would not hurt William.”

Jerry only smirked and huffed. “Cowboy up, mountain lion.”

David studied Jerry’s face, that beautiful face that he’d once convinced himself he could love for the rest of his life. Now, it was twisted with hatred and disgust. David’s tears streamed down his face all of the thoughts of what could have been, what *should* have been, flashed through his mind. “I never thought you would be so cruel. I’m sorry if I hurt you, Jerry, but please don’t hurt William.”

“Cowboy—”

“Stop it!” David slapped his hands over his ears. “Please, just stop saying that.” David thought he saw a glimmer of regret in Jerry’s eyes. “Can’t you just try to understand? Please, Jerry? I can’t lose you like this, because of this.”

“I didn’t leave you *because* you won’t fight this fuckwad, David. It’s over because you lied to me, kept me at arm’s length, wouldn’t let me help you even though you knew I’d do anything for you. You promised me you wouldn’t let yourself be changed by all of this.” Jerry shook his head and sighed. “I want *him* back, the man I fell in love with, the man who wanted to rip that fuckwad’s arms off and beat him to death because he hurt William. I want my mountain lion back.” Jerry cleared his throat and covered his face with his hand. “I miss him, miss us.”

Jerry moved past David and opened the door. David paused only long enough to put the dry T-shirt in Jerry’s hands along with the towel and pull the sopping T-shirt back over his head. He turned and looked back briefly. “I’d hoped for so long, wanted for....” The look on Jerry’s face stopped David in his tracks. Shivering from the damp T-shirt and the cold night air, he wiped at his eyes, straightened his back, and nodded. “I won’t bother your family again.” David watched as Jerry closed the door, head bowed, saying

nothing in return.

David walked to his car, convinced that the Jerry he'd thought he knew had never existed at all, had been a fleeting fantasy plucked from the ruins of the pain that had come before it: his family, Sampson, and all the others. Now Jerry was part of that pain, part of his past. By the time he started the car and turned down the drive, he was exhausted. Thinking that the cold air from the air conditioner would help him stay awake during the drive home, he cranked it to high. Maybe the cold would even help him stop the tears. He had to turn on the air conditioner so that he would stop crying long enough not to kill himself.

What David would never see was Jerry sitting out on his porch, soaked to the bone, his head in his hands, shoulders heaving with his agonized sobs. What David would never hear was Jerry pleading, asking David to forgive him. Jerry had been certain that how he'd handled this situation, what he'd said, had been for the best, that David would realize his mistake and put this to rights. What David would never know was that Jerry had managed to tuck William in, sing him *Teddy Bear's Picnic*, and kiss him goodnight. Jerry had done all of this while his heart was breaking, because that was the cowboy way.

Chapter 16

THE shrill alarm woke David; he'd only been asleep for an hour or two, but he was still surprised at how long it took him to recognize the alarm as the phone. He sat up in bed, his head pounding, his heart racing. He hadn't left the apartment except to go to school in over two weeks. He hadn't eaten, hadn't had more than two hours' sleep on any given night, hadn't stopped staring at the painting hung beside his grandmother's quilt. *Becoming Human*.

"Hello?" David's throat felt dry and scratchy.

"David?"

"William, what's wrong?"

"I think Uncle Jerry's sick." David winced at the sadness in William's voice, at how scared he sounded.

"Is he there? Can he take the phone?" David's next question was interrupted by the sound of glass breaking in the background. "William, unlock the front door, go to your room, and close the door. I'll be right there." David put the phone in the cradle and ran around, picking up clothes and throwing them on, not caring whether they were clean or right-side out, jammed his feet into his shoes, and headed out the door, forgetting to lock it.

It was the longest fifteen minutes of his life, that drive back to the ranch. *How did it come to this?* The question was rhetorical, really. David knew he'd let all of this happen because he was a

coward, not a cowboy. He'd let his fears guide his life, as he'd done so many times in the past. His family, Sampson, the Bennett Brigade—they'd all managed to pinpoint his fears and exploit them. The fear of losing his trust fund, of being alone, of standing up and fighting. *William's voice*—David's throat constricted at the thought of that tiny voice over the phone. What would he find when he arrived? How would he ever live with himself if he found that scared little boy hurt or worse? *Come on, dipshits*, he screamed at no one in particular. The other drivers were probably people just like him trying to get somewhere and, like him, cursing this Godforsaken downpour.

He merged onto the highway, William's scared voice echoing in his head over and over. His foot was like lead on the accelerator, his car pushing the top speed. *RCMP—the police*. The thought flashed through his mind before he realized that he could lead them right to the house. The vandals or thieves or whoever was terrorizing William would be caught red-handed. As the lights of the house came into view, he slowed, but not enough. He took the corner way too fast and ended up in the ditch. *Fuck it*, he cursed, struggling out of the vehicle and running the remaining two hundred yards at full speed.

"William?" David barged into the house. "Stay where you are—I'm coming to you."

Before David could move to the stairs, he heard a noise from the kitchen. Pulling a key between each pair of fingers, he moved quietly towards the kitchen, ready to take on anyone who would try to hurt his... what? His family? David had screwed up big time. This wasn't his family, would never be his family now. There was movement near the fridge. "I've called the police. They're on their way."

"Good!" David jumped back as Jerry staggered towards him. "You think they'll bring me some more whiskey?" Jerry laughed at that and slumped in a chair. "What the fuck you want?"

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David stepped back, noticing the broken glasses littering the sink and counters. “Jerry?”

“Yup, that’s me, Uncle fucking Jerry.”

“Everything okay?” David put his keys in his pocket and sat at the table. “William called me, said you might be sick.”

“Was.” Jerry scraped his hands over his face. “Puked up, oh, about fifty bucks worth of whiskey.”

“He’s scared, Jerry.” David rose to move to the stairs. “Do you mind if I go and check on him?”

“Don’t give a shit.” Jerry spread an arm out to each side and inhaled deeply. “About any of it. Not anymore.”

“Can I make you some coffee?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, Jerry. I’ll be right back, okay?” David had met enough drunks in his life to know that aggravating the situation would also mean an escalation.

“What the fuck you want?” Jerry yelled as his head sank to the table top, arms coming around the top of his head.

Without answering, David headed up the stairs to check on William. When David opened the bedroom door, William wasn’t in his bed. It took a few minutes for David to locate William sitting in his closet, knees to chin, arms wrapped around his legs. “William?” David peered into the darkness, waiting for his eyes to adjust. “Do you wanna come out now or do want me to come in there with you?”

Slowly, William moved toward David, reaching out his arms when he was close enough to grab David’s jacket by the lapels. “Is Uncle Jerry okay? He kept yelling that he didn’t want any of this anymore, didn’t want anyone around, that he never should have let

anyone in. I'm scared, David. Is he gonna send me away?"

"Shhh, William, he's not thinking right. He's saying things he doesn't really mean. He's... he's gonna be okay. He will be, William. He will be." David moved to the bed, cradling the trembling body in his arms. "What a night, huh?" David stroked William's hair. "I'm still shaking."

"I think that's me." William's tired blue eyes peeked up at David.

David laughed, bouncing William a few times in his lap. "How about if we split it?"

"Is he mad at me?"

"No, he's not mad, William." David tried to find the right words for a ten-year-old. "He's just tired and confused. You know what that feels like, yeah?" David felt the nod against his chest. "In the morning, he'll be all better." David moved to the other side of the bed, where William slept, and lowered the little body to the pillow, pulling the covers up to William's chin. "How would you like a different lullaby tonight?"

"Which one?"

"It's called *Schlafen, Kindlein*, and it was the one my Oma always used to sing to me when I would visit her on the farm." William yawned and nodded his approval. "Well, thanks for that vote of confidence."

David began to sing, his voice shaky, the words unsure. He was convinced that William's head would pop off the pillow by the chorus, ready to criticize his pronunciation. When he finished, William did not stir; his breathing was deep, his cheeks flushed. David couldn't help placing a little kiss on William's forehead before gently getting off the bed.

When he turned, Jerry was standing in the doorway. David

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braced himself for whatever drunken rage was left in him—*Please, not in front of William*—but there was none. Jerry just turned and walked away.

David took one last look at William and followed Jerry down the stairs, careful to keep a healthy distance.

“I don’t want you here again.” Jerry was facing the kitchen window. “Ever.”

“I’m sorry, but William called, and his voice was so—”

“Ever. Please go. Clean break. William will learn to live with it.”

“I’ll need to call someone. My car ended up in the ditch by the gate.”

“You know where the phone is.”

“Yes, I do, thank you.”

“Will you tell me why?” Jerry’s voice was soft and sad, resigned and pleading.

David was confused for a second. “Why what?”

“Why them and not me?”

“I don’t understand.” David was trying so hard to follow the thread of this line of questioning, but Jerry’s mounting anger was testament to the fact that David was failing. As he saw Jerry’s fists clench, all David could think was, *Please don’t let William see this.*

“Am I that forgettable?”

Suddenly David realized what he was asking. “No.” After a moment, David added, “I’ve never stopped thinking about you.”

“Then why them?” Jerry’s eyes searched the blackness outside the kitchen window as if he would eventually find the answer. As if,

if he just looked hard enough, long enough, he would understand how David could betray him, betray William. “What didn’t I do right? Did I say something that—”

“I didn’t resign, Jerry.”

Jerry turned, his eyes red from vomiting, the anger having faded a little. “What?”

“I didn’t choose them over you.” David’s chin spasmed as it always did when he was fighting back tears. “I chose you.” David laughed harshly. “Funny. I chose you, but you don’t want me anymore.”

Jerry moved forward but stopped when David wouldn’t look at him. “I don’t understand. How? When? I thought—”

“They put the paper in front of me....” The tears fell down David’s cheeks, his voice hitching, his fists clenching on the hem of his jacket. “And all I could see was the disappointment on your face, all I could hear was you telling me to cowboy up. All I could think about was that I didn’t want to see that look every time I closed my eyes. It was killing me, knowing what I’d done to you, to us.” David took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. “I couldn’t do it... couldn’t sign the paper.”

Jerry stood still, not moving forward or back, and David was certain at that moment that it was really over. He would walk out that door and Jerry, William, all of it, would be gone forever. Jerry reached out one of those beautiful hands, but David’s heart fell when he pulled it back just as quickly, his mouth opening and closing, tears welling up in his eyes.

David shrugged. “Cowboy up, yeah?” he whispered as he turned for the door, knowing that Jerry wouldn’t stop him and too tired to call for a cab, cursing himself for never being able to keep track of that goddamned cell phone. *Fuck it, I’ll walk.*

“David?” Jerry’s voice was soft, hesitant. “Do you need a

lift?”

David shook his head and lowered his eyes, gaze still on the door. He wiped at his eyes, his voice hoarse, sad, pleading. “You. Need *you*.”

And Jerry was there before the final word was out of David’s mouth, arms around him, rubbing David’s back, soft whispers of comfort in David’s ear. “You’ve always had me, baby.” Jerry kissed David’s forehead. “Just about killed me treating you that way. I haven’t slept since.”

“I’m so sorry.” David let the tears fall onto Jerry’s T-shirt, not caring anymore that they made him seem weak or frail or out-of-control. “I thought you didn’t want me anymore. I couldn’t eat, I couldn’t sleep, wondering how I was gonna get through the rest of my life without the two of you.”

“Shhh, baby, it’s over. We’re fine, and I’ve never wanted anything more.” Jerry lifted David’s chin up and kissed the tears falling across his cheeks. “You and William are the family I never had.” Jerry’s words hitched as he felt David’s arms encircle his waist. “You’re never leaving this house again.”

“Not until my car is out of the ditch anyway.”

David tried to laugh but shivered instead, the weight of the world lifted off his shoulders. He let Jerry lead him to the bedroom, knowing that there would be nothing but bodies holding each other and lips happy to have found their partners again. Familiarity would be regained, disappointment assuaged, and trust strengthened. The urgency that had always accompanied the meeting of their two bodies would dim tonight while they dealt with the guilt, the frustration, the uncertainty, and the hopes of the future. Their future.

Jerry led his lover to the bed, quieting protests about William being in the next room. *Just let me hold you tonight. I thought I’d lost you for good, stubborn bastard!* David accepted Jerry’s offer of

a T-shirt and sweatpants and changed into them as Jerry stepped out of his jeans, climbing onto the bed first, holding a hand out for David to join him. Jerry's lips never moved further south than David's forehead; his big arms wrapped around David's shoulders as the younger man tried to gain control over his few remaining sobs. Jerry whispered those endearments in his ear, closing his eyes when he felt the familiar shudder zip through David's body. *God, I never thought I could miss something so much.* At some point, they both dozed, still clutching each other like two lost children in a dark forest.

"David!" Jerry was the first to hear it, shaking David awake to listen.

"You hear that?" Jerry was standing by the bed when they heard William scream David's name again. "You go," Jerry whispered, the pain and regret making David's heart break a little. "He's probably still scared of me."

"*We* go, yeah?" David held out his hand and Jerry grasped it, squeezing it along the way, David squeezing back, trying to reassure without words. David closed his eyes as they approached William's bedroom door, the cries getting more insistent, but Jerry squeezed back.

"Hey, William. Bad dream?" William threw himself at David the minute he was by the bed. "It's okay, we're here for you. Nothing's wrong."

William looked from David's face to his uncle's, William's red face curling in on itself as the tears began to fall. "Is he better? Does he still want me to go?"

"Hey, sweetie," David grimaced inwardly at the endearment. He knew Jerry would have probably preferred "cowboy" or "partner," or "chief." "Of course he's better, and of course he wants you to stay." David wiped William's cheeks and turned the little head in Jerry's direction. "See, look. All better." David's heart broke

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at the guarded reserve that had crept back into those eyes. “You know what would make him all better, though, is a hug. Hey? Think you can manage a hug for your uncle?”

“It’s okay—” Jerry started but stopped when David nodded. “William, buddy, I’m sorry if I scared you, can you—”

“Wasn’t scared.” William pulled away from David, fists still firmly knotted in the T-shirt. “Be eleven soon. I was *worried* about you, Uncle Jerry.” William let go of David’s T-shirt long enough to reach for his uncle, David quickly moving out of the way so that Jerry could sit down in his place. William’s arms went around Jerry’s shoulders, eyes closed. “Can I stay with you, Uncle Jerry, please? I like it here.”

David heard Jerry’s breath catch before he assured, “For as long as you want.” David kept blinking rapidly, trying to make the tears stay away when he noticed the tears on Jerry’s cheeks. As if in slow motion, David watched Jerry’s hand caress William’s head and then move over to his lover’s cheek, swiping slowly and tenderly at the tears. Jerry’s eyes met his, and all David could see now was love.

“I love you.” It was Jerry’s voice, not William’s this time. “Very, very much. And this is your home now.”

“I love you too, Uncle Jerry.”

David wiped his eyes, having failed miserably at showing any kind of self-control, and willingly abandoned any hope of ever being able to again. *Fuck it*, he said to himself, *I’m an emotional mess*.

“Our home,” Jerry whispered, reaching for David’s hand.

Chapter 17

IT TOOK David a few minutes to realize where he was, what had happened the night before. He was alone in the bed, but Jerry's side was still warm, the familiar scent intoxicating as David remembered the night before. All of the heartache and the drama had led to this; once again, David had the promise of a family, his family. David glanced at the clock. It was not yet seven in the morning. He kicked off the sheets and the duvet, luxuriating in the full-body stretch, the smells and the sensations and the memories that came back to him. He'd awakened several times in the night, hearing Jerry's snores, and pressed his body against the bigger man's. Jerry had not roused but had instinctively drawn his arms around David's body, nose nuzzling against David's head, breathing slow and calm. He'd kept his ears open for the sound of William's voice, so sure that the little guy would have more nightmares, but there had been none. His two men had slept through the night, the uncertainty of the past few weeks having taken its toll.

There will be no more of that, David assured himself as he stood looking for something to put on his feet. *I won't fuck up again. This is where I belong.* David pulled on some heavy socks he found in Jerry's dresser and went to the bathroom, splashing some cold water on his face, and then headed to William's bedroom. He opened the door slowly, peeking in. William's bed was empty. David pushed the door open all the way and entered, searching all over briefly before he heard the familiar giggles from downstairs.

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As he made his way out of the bedroom, he stopped to study the painting on the wall, the small figure of the boy perched on the shoulders of the big man, the bodies relaxed and at peace, horizon ablaze with color. David refused to cry, refused to keep dwelling on how he'd almost lost all of this, and followed the sound of William's giggles to the kitchen.

"Uncle Jerry," William's voice was full of annoyed patience, "I know what adoption means."

"Good to know, chief." Jerry's laugh couldn't really conceal the delight in his voice. "So, whadda ya think?"

"What about David?"

David cocked his head, ears straining to catch every word, his brain working furiously to pick up the thread of the missed parts of the conversation.

"What about him?" Jerry's voice was cautious.

"Is he still gonna come and live with us?"

"I don't really know, cowboy." Jerry's voice was almost a whisper now. "I kinda messed things up with David. I'm hoping I can make them better, cowboy, but..." David could hear movement as Jerry got up from the table, the familiar sound of pans scraping over the stove's elements. "But what if it is just us?" Jerry's tone was full of apprehension, the kind of apprehension that David remembered from that night on the back deck, the night when Jerry had told David that he was falling in love with him. "Would you still want to live here, with me, you know... be my family?"

David fought back tears as he listened to the uncertain, pleading voice and cursed himself for ever having thought he'd made the right decision to let the Bennett Brigade have their way. As he inhaled slowly through his nose, he smiled and turned the corner. "Just the two of you?" David gave his best attempt at a hurt expression as William looked up at him. "You sick of me already?"

“Hey, mountain lion!” Jerry turned from the stove and took a few steps forward, his hand coming protectively to William’s head. “We thought we were gonna have to douse you with cold water to get you up.” Jerry’s familiar wink sent a shiver of delight through David as he studied the scene before him.

“No,” William protested loudly, “we don’t want to get rid of you!”

“I was just teasing, William.” David advanced slowly toward the table and sat opposite William as Jerry continued to study his face. David’s sense of smell finally registered the smell of eggs and bacon. “Nothing would make me happier than to come and live with you two cowboys.”

“Yeah?” Jerry’s expression seemed happy but guarded. “Even after—”

“Even after.” David’s lips curled into a soft smile as he saw Jerry’s shoulders relax, heard the sharp intake of breath into Jerry’s lungs. “William, tell your Uncle Jerry what *für immer* means in English.”

“Forever.” William had gone back to his duty of buttering toast, oblivious to what was happening between the two men.

David saw Jerry’s chin tremble, noticed the brief shine in Jerry’s eyes before he turned back to the stove. David raised himself slowly off the chair and walked to stand behind the big man, wrapping his arms around Jerry’s waist, his head coming to rest against one broad shoulder. David said nothing, letting this one small gesture say everything he was feeling at that moment. His hands traced a lazy trail up to Jerry’s chest, his fingers jumping slightly as he felt the hitch, heard the catch in Jerry’s breathing.

“Kay, I’m done.” William’s announcement broke the spell.

David placed one kiss on Jerry’s shoulder and returned to his seat, allowing Jerry the time to pull himself together a little more. “I

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am *starving*.” David reached for a piece of toast and took a big bite, chewing thoroughly. David groaned, smiling at William. “This is the best toast I’ve ever had.”

“Thank you.” William beamed and then turned to his uncle. “Can we take the horses out after breakfast, Uncle Jerry?”

“Sure thing, partner.” Jerry turned from the stove, pan in hand, and scooped out the eggs and bacon onto the three plates. “As a matter of fact,” Jerry put the pans in the sink to soak, “I was thinking maybe we could go camping.”

“Really?” William’s mouth was full of food, some of it finding its way across the table as he shouted in disbelief. William wiped the spray of food from his chin and from the table beside his plate.

“That sounds like fun.” David suppressed a laugh as he offered an amused look to Jerry.

“Yeah, sure.” Jerry dug into the food on his plate. “We can take the horses with us, take a tent, ride out to the lake, and camp for a couple of nights.”

“Really?” There was no food in William’s mouth this time. “All three of us?”

David noticed Jerry stop chewing and turn to study his expression. “Just try and keep me away.”

“Looks like, chief.” Jerry smiled at William and looked back at David. “Just the three of us, camping and swimming and marshmallows.”

“Cool!”

The three men ate in relative silence, the only sounds being the excited, seemingly endless questions that kept popping out of William’s overactive imagination. Each question was answered at length, although David knew that Jerry would be giving William

whatever he wanted, and, by the end of breakfast, the entire trip had been planned. Too excited to do his part of the clean-up, William rushed off to his room to pack his bag and then off to the barn to tell his horse all about the trip.

“Thank you.” Jerry’s voice was hushed, his eyes not meeting David’s. They stood side by side at the sink, Jerry washing and David drying.

“For what?”

“For forgiving me.”

David stopped drying and put the towel over his shoulder. He turned to face Jerry and stepped closer. “I love you, Jerry.” David leaned in and reached up to kiss Jerry’s cheek. “But I’m the one that needs your forgiveness for putting you and William through all of—”

“Okay,” Jerry’s voice was a whisper as he reached out and grabbed the towel off David’s shoulder. “We’re both forgiven, then, right?”

“Good to know, cowboy.” David let himself be gathered in Jerry’s arms.

“And I love you too.” Jerry’s chin was resting on the top of David’s head. “Didn’t realize how much until you walked out that night and—”

“Shhh, baby.” David kissed Jerry lightly on the lips. “That’s all over now. We don’t need to think about it anymore.” He leaned back and smiled up at his lover. “From now on, I promise we’ll talk about these things, figure them out together, yeah?”

Jerry nodded and pulled David in closer, one hand tracing a path to the back of David’s head. “I’m so sorry, baby. Couldn’t think about anything other than what I’d done to make you hate me enough to—”

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“We were both wrong in what we were thinking, Jerry.” David pulled back, his hands finding their way to cup Jerry’s jaw. “We fucked up, right? But no more.” He leaned forward as he felt Jerry’s knees relax, their lips almost at the same height then. The kiss was gentle and familiar, each man bathing in the sensations that had been lost for so many long, lonely days, the feel of soft skin, the heated breath as it caressed cheeks and noses, the small, soft whimpers that escaped into the air. There was no urgency in the kiss, no need to take it any further at that moment.

They pulled apart as they heard the front door slam shut. As William entered the kitchen, each man was back at his post, clean-up almost complete.

“Aren’t you done yet?” William’s exasperation made both men smile. “You’re not even changed!”

“Hang on there, cowboy.” Jerry laughed. “We still gotta get everything ready.” Jerry squeezed David’s shoulder, noticing that David could barely contain his laughter. “You got your saddle roll ready, partner?”

“I did that hours ago, Uncle Jerry.”

“Hours?” David chuckled as he tried not to appear so amused by William’s impatience.

“Okay, well, give me and David a little while to get everything else ready, and then we’ll be good to go.”

“Can I help?”

“Why don’t you go out to the barn and see if you can find the tent?”

“Already found it. It’s on the front porch.”

David stifled another laugh as he finished putting the dishes away. “You are so efficient, William.” David pulled open the fridge

door and turned to study both men. “Why don’t you two get everything loaded up? I’ll throw together some stuff for us to eat, and we can be gone in about ten minutes.”

“Don’t forget the marshmallows!” William called as he hurried out the door.

“But you haven’t even showered yet.” Jerry opened the pantry door, retrieved a couple of cloth bags, and then stood by the stairs, arms outstretched, feeling as if he’d lost control of the situation.

“So I’ll take a bath in the lake.” David shrugged, reached for the bags and started filling them. “That kid is going to pop if we don’t get going soon.”

“Have I told you that you’re amazing?”

“Talk is cheap, cowboy.” David winked as Jerry laughed. “You can show me later when William’s asleep. I’ll meet you in the lake around midnight.” He felt the heat slam into his face as Jerry growled low, the guttural sound sending shivers of anticipation through both men.

It took fifteen minutes to get everything ready, William bouncing with excitement as David exited and locked the house. After thanking Jerry for the clothes he’d packed and proving to William that he had not forgotten the marshmallows, David secured the bags to the saddle and hopped on. *Funny*, he thought to himself as he trailed his two men, *it was only a few short hours ago when I thought I’d lost this, when I doubted that I’d made the right decision to resign.*

So much had changed for David over the past several weeks. He hadn’t yet had the chance to tell Jerry about any of it, but perhaps that would come tonight or tomorrow night. Riding slowly toward the lake, David felt warmed by the thought that he had all the time in the world to tell Jerry everything.

David had heard from his father a few days ago. Somehow, in

a way that David still wasn't sure he understood, his father had gotten wind of the battle that had pitted his son against the Bennett Brigade. After the meeting where David couldn't bring himself to sign the resignation, the superintendent had asked him to stay and met with him in his office. At first, David wasn't sure what to expect during the meeting, but the superintendent had always been a man of few words. As David had waited in the plush office, he'd felt a tremendous sense of guilt as he remembered the derogatory way he'd indicated to Jerry that the superintendent was a man to distrust. But as the superintendent first congratulated David on his decision and then explained about the phone call from Mr. Van den Boesch, David began to see the superintendent in a completely different light.

Your father called me to express his concern at how something like this could happen to a teacher who'd devoted his entire adult life to educating and caring for future generations, the superintendent had stated. David had not been able to discern any rancor or dissatisfaction in the superintendent's voice at the interference; rather, David was somewhat relieved to hear that the superintendent had agreed wholeheartedly with the message and with David's decision not to allow himself to be bullied into any rash decision.

David found himself struck dumb during the meeting, not knowing what to say to any of the statements. He'd always felt like an anonymous cog in the school district's machine, quite certain that no one knew who he was or what he had tried to do with the students over the past twenty years. *I've been quite foolish, I'm afraid,* David had finally admitted to the superintendent. *I just assumed that resigning would be my only option, the only way to keep everybody safe.*

As David rode behind his men, he smiled to himself at the memory of the superintendent giving him a light admonishment: *Ours is a difficult life, David,* the superintendent had stated quietly.

You are trying to do what is in the best interest of each of your students, and I am trying to do what's in the best interest of each of my teachers. I told you that you were making a mistake in resigning, in letting that man bully you by threatening your family. I'm sorry that you didn't think I could protect you, that I wouldn't protect you.

Just as he'd done at that moment, David found himself fighting the tears that stung his eyes. He had certainly never thought that the superintendent would be interested in protecting anyone but himself. As he stared after his family, David shook his head at how humbled he felt. When he had become so jaded toward everything and everyone, David didn't know, but he would never make that mistake again; that much, he knew. Jerry had forgiven him, still loved him, still wanted to call William *their* son. And now, William would have a grandfather.

David felt his chest heave as he remembered hearing the sound of his father's voice. After almost twenty years, the voice was still so strong and controlled. David had always thought it was the voice of a man who had spent his entire life making deals, intimidating his business opponents, and striking fear and efficiency into his workers—a voice that could either make people become the best they'd ever been or break them and send them running.

His voice had held none of that when he'd called David that day. In fact, and David couldn't swear he hadn't imagined it, his father's voice had been strong but tender, hitching a few times as David listened to him try to reach out after so many years, a father telling his son that he'd been wrong, that he wanted to try again. It was the only thing that had made the separation from Jerry even remotely bearable; without it, David was sure, he would have felt completely lost, certain he'd wander through the rest of his life oblivious to anything but the pain in his chest.

The phone call had led to a visit later that night at David's apartment. He'd agreed instantly to seeing his father again. David had hurried to clean up the apartment, trying to keep himself busy

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until he heard the knock at the door. As he opened the door, David had been sure that there would be so much awkwardness, neither man knowing how to end the silence that had separated them for so long. All it had taken was for his father to call him *Davey*, a nickname that he hadn't heard in so long, and David's eyes had filled with tears, his arms finding their way around his father's shoulders.

He couldn't remember ever seeing his father display much emotion, but there he stood, his arms caressing his son's back, David feeling the wet of tears against his neck. David had finally laughed to himself at the sight the two of them must have presented and pulled away, wiping his eyes and motioning for his father to enter.

"I don't know about your mother, Davey," his father had begun, "but I hope she'll come around soon."

"Does she know you're here?"

"Yes." Mr. Van den Boesch had handed over his coat so David could hang it up in the closet. "She wasn't happy about what they were trying to do to you, but... well, just give her some time. Can you do that, Davey?"

David had nodded, the tears returning. It wasn't a promise of forgiveness, but it was good enough for now. "How did you find out about all of that?"

"It doesn't matter now, son." He had reached out and put a hand on David's shoulder. "I'm just sorry it took me this long to figure out that none of it really mattered." He'd sat when David motioned to the living room, noticing the painting over the sofa. "I'm happy you've found someone, Davey. Happy that you've turned out to be such a good man." David had fought back more tears as he realized that his father hadn't gotten the entire story—and why would he have? "I heard about what you were willing to do to protect that boy and his father."

"I fucked up, Dad." David had shrugged and sat in the armchair beside the sofa. "I disappointed Jerry by not fighting Bennett." David had offered a sardonic laugh, a small, sad smile. "Seems to be what I'm good at, disappointing people."

"It'll work itself out, if you really love him." His hand had found its way to his son's knee, a small gesture of faith. "And you were never a disappointment, Davey. I'm so sorry if that's how we made you feel."

"Then why?"

"Because I was a fool, an old, stuck-in-his-ways fool." He had shaken his head as if he were trying to arrange his thoughts. "It's hard for people of my generation. We were raised to believe certain things, to think a certain way." He had smiled up at his son. "It takes some time for us old people to learn to think differently."

David hadn't said anything, preferring instead to offer his own smile before letting his eyes settle on the painting over his father's head. "You were right about him, about the artist." David had returned his eyes to his father's. "He is someone very special, someone worth watching."

"Have you told him that?"

"It wouldn't matter now, Dad. He thinks I lied to him, thinks I didn't care about...." David had let his voice trail off. "It doesn't matter now anyway. He's safe. William's safe. That's all I care about."

Neither man had spoken for several minutes. David could see his father resisting the urge to give the old *I didn't raise a quitter* speech, probably realizing as David did that the irony would be far too tempting to resist commenting on. Instead, David and his father had sat in a companionable silence, each glad that they'd taken these first steps.

"Hey, baby?" David felt himself pulled out of his reverie as

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Jerry approached. David suddenly realized that they had arrived at the lake and that Jerry and William had settled their horses. David was still on his, staring off over the glassy surface of the lake. “You okay?”

“Great, I’m great.” David dismounted and grabbed the cloth bags from the saddle. “Got some things to tell you, though. Maybe tonight?”

“Sure thing, baby.” Jerry’s concerned eyes studied David’s face. “All good, I hope.”

“Better than, yeah.”

Jerry leaned in and kissed David’s forehead, reassurance plain of his face. “Okay, then.” Jerry handed David a couple of bottles—shampoo and soap—and a towel and pointed to the lake. “William and I’ll set up the tent while you go relax in the lake.”

“Sounds good.” David headed to the water, laughing to himself as he heard the grunts of frustration coming from the two men trying to figure out how to set up the tent.

The water wasn’t too cold, but it was, David was sure, the shortest bath he’d ever taken. Wrapping the towel around his waist, he made his way back up to the makeshift campsite, pleased and proud that the two men had figured out how to erect the tent. “Looks good, men!” David saluted in mock appreciation. “Jeez, it’s huge.”

“Thanks,” Jerry leered, “but what about the tent?”

“Stop it,” David whispered as Jerry handed him some clothes. “I’ll set up the inside when I’m finished changing.”

“Okay, William.” Jerry clapped his hands together. “Time to gather some firewood.”

“Do I get to use the axe?”

“We’ll see.”

“What?” David stuck his head out of the tent, T-shirt only half over his head. “Are you crazy?”

“No harm in letting him take a couple of swings,” Jerry reassured him with a calm tone, an easy expression on his face. “Gotta learn sooner or later. Besides, I’ll be there to watch him.”

“Small trees—very small trees—only.” David closed the flap of the tent to finish dressing. As he exited, Jerry and William were only about two or three yards away. “I’ll see if I can find some stones to make a pit.”

“Try down by the lake, about three hundred feet that way,” Jerry called, pointing to the far end of the little lake. “We’ll be about a half hour or so.”

As David arranged the stones in a circle, careful to leave sufficient space between the pit, the tent, and the horses, he heard William’s familiar giggles coming from the tree line. He stood, hands on hips, waiting to see the figures emerge from the little forest of maple and poplar trees.

“You did really good there, partner.” Jerry saw David standing by the stone circle, the worry no longer evident on David’s face, and nodded toward William. “He’s a natural. Still got all his fingers and toes too!”

“What?” David teased. “I wasn’t worried.”

“Were too!” William let his bundle of twigs and kindling fall to the ground beside the fire pit. “But I was careful, David.”

“Okay, you caught me.” David squatted down on his haunches and took William’s hands in his own. “What? I’m just checking for blisters.”

“Oh, man.” William’s annoyance was clear, and David couldn’t have been happier about that.

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“Okay, chief, how about you build us a nice pyramid?” Jerry came around to stand beside David, arm finding the smaller man’s waist. “Kindling on the bottom, then smaller twigs, then about four or five logs leaning over all that, okay?”

“No problem.”

As William set to work, Jerry and David stood enjoying the look of utter concentration on his face, his efficient and purposeful movements. David backed towards the tent, pushing the flap aside to reveal the completed interior. “Well?”

“Looks cozy.”

“Cozy?” David harrumphed. “I was going for rustic.”

“That’s what I meant.” Jerry’s hand smoothed over David’s back as the two men returned their gaze to William. “Whadda ya think of our boy there? He’s becoming quite the force of nature.”

“I couldn’t be more proud of him or of you.” David looked up and concentrated on Jerry’s profile. “You’re the best thing that ever happened to him, you know that, right?”

Jerry turned, a look of surprise on his face. He smiled slowly, obviously embarrassed by the compliment. “Wasn’t just me, mountain lion, but thank you.”

“You’re welcome, cowboy.” David turned his attention back to William. The two men watched as William stood, studied his work, and brushed his hands over the seat of his jeans. “Looks good, William. You wanna fire it up?”

“Can I?” William’s eyes grew round with surprise.

“Sure thing.” David felt Jerry’s stare and kicked his hip out against Jerry’s. “May as well show you how to do that too, right?” David reached into Jerry’s front pocket and found the lighter, still not looking directly at Jerry. He knew that Jerry would have that

thought he was too young question in his eyes. David moved toward the fire pit and handed William the lighter. After showing William how to twist the piece of newspaper, he instructed William on lighting it and setting the burning newspaper on the kindling under the leaning logs.

The fire lit, David turned to see Jerry carrying the bags over to the pit. “How about beans and buns for lunch?”

“And then I have to be in the same tent with the two of you all night?” David laughed. “I don’t think so!”

William giggled as he watched David fan the air behind Jerry’s butt. “Yeah, but if we have them for dinner, then it won’t give us time to fart it all out of our systems.”

“Man’s got a point there, David.”

“Are you two gonna gang up on me all the time?” David teased and pulled the small saucepan out of the bag. “Okay, but then we’re goin’ swimmin’ so you two can get it all out.”

“I didn’t bring my trunks.” The disappointment in William’s voice was almost too much to bear.

“Got it covered, partner.” Jerry reached into his bag and pulled out three trunks and two more towels. “Guess you were in too much of a hurry to remember everything, huh, chief?”

“I’m sorry.” The small, hurt voice was back, and David winced.

“Hey, no problem, William,” David reassured. “I forgot mine too, right? Looks like we were both in a hurry.” David looked up at Jerry and smiled, quite certain that Jerry had not meant to sound so chastising.

“Hey, buddy, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you feel bad. I was just teasing you.” The events of the night before were still too

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fresh for William, Jerry figured. He'd have to go back to watching himself for a little while until he was sure William could handle the teasing.

William walked over slowly and, with a burst of sudden speed, grabbed his trunks and ran for the shore. "Last one in has to do dishes." Before Jerry and David could move, William was out of his boots, his jeans and his shirt and pulling up his trunks, waist deep in the water.

Jerry was out of his clothes and into his trunks just as quickly, but David didn't move right away. "What's wrong, baby?"

"Nothing at all, Jerry." He motioned to the lake. "You get down there and watch your son. I'll be right there."

"Our son!" Jerry called as he headed for the shore.

Our son, David thought as he entered the tent to change into the other pair of Jerry's trunks. He listened to the squeals of laughter from both of his men as he slowly made his way to the shore. Jerry was watching as William practiced his front crawl and his backstroke, smile so firmly planted on his face that David thought he would burst from sheer pride. David sat alone on the shore taking in all of the action for what seemed like hours before either of his men noticed that he wasn't in the water yet. David grinned to himself as he watched Jerry and William whispering back and forth, quite sure that he was about to get splashed or pulled in or both.

As he watched the two of them swimming slowly toward the shore, David couldn't help but wonder what William's reaction would be when he found out that he would also be getting a grandfather out of all of this.

Chapter 18

William was fast asleep in the tent, worn out by the day's activities or, more likely, by the twenty or thirty marshmallows he'd inhaled by the fire that evening. David and Jerry sat outside the tent, flap pulled back, making sure that the little guy was safe and secure.

Jerry checked his watch and grinned at David. "You really gonna make me wait until midnight?"

David shook his head and closed the flap to the tent, laughing softly to himself. "And punish myself in the process? No way, cowboy."

Stealing a few backward glances, the two men made their way to the shore and stripped off their clothing. The water wasn't too cold, considering the sun had gone down an hour or two before, but neither of them seemed to notice as they found one another's arms, their bodies supplying more than enough heat to keep them warm.

Jerry held fast, arms around David's waist, the smaller man's arms encircling Jerry's broad neck. Jerry hugged David close, his lips kissing along the slender neck, his teeth biting lightly and gently at the sensitive skin leading to David's ear. Finding his intended target, Jerry's tongue danced around the shell of his lover's ear before darting slowly in then out. Jerry's eyes closed at the sounds of David's gasps, his arms moving more firmly to hold David close.

"I missed you so much, mountain lion." Jerry's eyes darted

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back to David's.

"Not half as much as I missed you, cowboy."

"Good to know, baby." Jerry moved their bodies to the shallower water near the shore and pressed his legs in between David's, his hands reaching down momentarily to pull the smaller man's legs around his waist. "Need to get to know you all over again. Don't wanna go too fast."

"You can do whatever you want to me, baby." David found Jerry's lips and pressed against them, hungry for what he'd missed so badly when they were apart. He pressed his tongue against Jerry's lips, the bigger man's mouth opening almost instantly, allowing David's tongue to trace against his, against his teeth, behind his lips. David's teeth nipped at his lover's kiss-swollen lips, at the sensitive tongue that dueled with his own. "Never gonna disappoint you again, cowboy. That's a promise."

"God, David, I'm so sorry for—"

"You were right, Jerry. Don't need to apologize for making me see what I was too blind to." David's fingers moved to trace along Jerry's jaw, smooth the worried lines of his forehead. His hands found their way to the back of Jerry's neck as he felt those beautiful hands cup his ass beneath the surface of the water. David pulled Jerry's head forward so their lips could meet once again. The gentle caresses of their tongues gave way to a passion that stole David's breath; he sucked in a shallow breath as he felt the bruising pressure of Jerry's lips against his own, heard the raspy, ragged breathing in his sensitive ears.

"Wanna see you when you come, baby." Jerry's hand found its way to David's hard and heated erection. "Wanna make you come, mountain lion."

"Oh, God, Jerry, so good." David panted against Jerry's ear. "Missed those hands... so much." David pulled his body away from

Jerry's just enough so that those beautiful hands could pull and push, trail their fingers over the sensitive flesh of the head and inner thighs. David felt Jerry settle into a rhythm with one hand while the other moved, glided over inner thighs and belly. David forced his eyes open, his breath catching when he noticed the look in Jerry's eyes. That look said it all: *You're mine, all mine, and I'm never let you leave again.* "Oh, Jerry, please, gonna... oh, yes, yes, right there, so good." David felt his balls tightening, his breath accelerating and his skin flushing with warmth as he continued to look into Jerry's eyes, reading every single message that he could find there. "Jesus Christ, Jerry, I love you." And with that, David let go and felt the shudders course through his body, Jerry's strong and sure hands holding him while he exploded, the force of his orgasm slamming his body against Jerry's.

"So pretty, baby." Jerry brought his hand out of the water and licked it clean, feeling the shiver it created throughout David's body. "Taste so good, baby."

"Jerry, God, I love you so much." David settled his head against the broad shoulder as he came down from his orgasm. "So much, baby, can't tell you how miserable I was without you."

"Love you too, David."

"Wanna make you feel this good too." David's hand encircled Jerry's thick shaft and began moving slowly at first. "Ever tell you that I can hold my breath underwater for four minutes?"

"Oh, fuck me!" Jerry hissed, his erection jumping in his lover's hand. "Keep up that kinda talk, and you'll only need two."

Without a word, David sank below the surface of the lake, his hands hooking themselves under Jerry's massive thighs while his mouth engulfed the warm flesh of Jerry's huge cock. On the surface of the lake, Jerry's head lolled from one side to the other as if independent of his body, his breathing coming in short gasps when he felt David take the entire length down his throat. Jerry had seen

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David deep throat him many times, but it was probably the fact that he couldn't see beneath the surface of the lake that had his balls tightening so quickly this time. It was familiar and anonymous all at the same time.

When Jerry felt David's fingers playing at the entrance of his hole, the fingers of his other hand pulling and massaging his balls, Jerry knew that he would be coming soon. He moved his hands to David's head as a warning, as an invitation to come up for air, but David didn't move. Jerry sucked in a deep breath as he felt the explosion course through his thighs, then up his body to his chest. He tried in vain to pull David away again, but when David only continued to take his entire length, Jerry gripped David's head in his hands and pumped furiously, letting David take it all.

David resurfaced, smile planted on his face, and breathed deeply through his nose. His arms circled Jerry's shoulders, and he leaned forward for a lip-bruising kiss, his mouth opening, his tongue finding Jerry's.

Jerry tasted himself on David's tongue and pulled back when his brain started to scream for oxygen.

"Saved you some." David grinned.

"Fuck, baby, nothing better than you." Jerry kissed David gently, his arms finding their way around David's waist again. "Can't believe you're mine."

"All yours, cowboy." David returned the gentle kiss with one of his own. "*Für immer, ja?*"

"And ever, baby."

As they exited the lake, drying each other off and putting on their warm clothing, David turned to Jerry. "Got some news, cowboy."

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

“Couple of days ago, my father called, came to visit.”

“What’d he want? What’d he say? Are you okay?” Jerry’s expression changed, the big man coming to protect his lover so quickly that David wondered if he shouldn’t have kept his mouth shut. “Don’t like the idea of that man hurtin’ you again, David.”

“I’m all right, baby, really. He just wanted to talk.” David reached out and caressed the massive chest. “Looks like William may get a grandfather.”

“Well.” Jerry seemed to calm down a little. “We’ll see about that.”

“Honestly, Jerry,” David assured, “he’s changed. Wants to be a part of my life again.” David hugged the bigger man, planted a few kisses on the massive chest. “Really, baby, it’s a good thing.” David stood, holding onto Jerry’s hands. “You know I’d never do anything to hurt William, right?”

“Guess so.” Jerry pulled David closer. “Sorry, just don’t want anything to spoil this.”

“Never let that happen again, baby.” David led Jerry back up to the fire. “Never again.” As David settled the two of them by the fire, he turned to face Jerry. “He wants to meet you and William.” David saw the guarded expression return. “When you’re ready, Jerry, and I warned him it may never happen.”

“What’d he say to that?”

“What could he say?” David shrugged and settled against Jerry. “Told me that having me back was good enough... that meeting you two would just be icing on the cake.”

“You trust him now?” Jerry stroked David’s back. “You think he’ll suddenly be okay with you having a family?”

“He’s my father, Jerry.” David looked up and met his lover’s

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eyes. “I want to trust him.” David sighed. “And I told him that it wasn’t me he’d have to win over.”

“Yeah?” Jerry laughed softly. “You got me figured out already, huh?”

“What’s to figure out, baby?” David whispered. “You wanted to protect William.” He shifted, his hand coming to rest on Jerry’s chest. “It’s why I fell in love with you.”

“Wanna protect you too, mountain lion.”

“Good to know, cowboy.”

“Okay,” Jerry sighed. “I’ll think about it.”

“I know you will, baby.” David settled his head on the broad shoulder again and closed his eyes.

“David?” Jerry was stroking David’s hair.

“Hmm?”

“William and I were talking this morning about me adopting him.”

“I heard.” David opened his eyes and looked up at Jerry’s face. “Think it’s wonderful, for both of you.”

“Yeah.” Jerry sighed and kissed the top of David’s head. “Never thought I could love someone so much.”

“Isn’t it amazing?” David moved position so that he could kiss Jerry on the lips. “Makes everything in your life seem so much brighter, so much clearer, yeah?” David pulled away slightly, worried by the look on Jerry’s face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothin’s wrong, baby,” Jerry sighed. “It’s just that William wants to know when you’re gonna come and live with us.” Jerry avoided meeting David’s eyes. “Only problem is... well, after the clusterfuck I made of last night, I didn’t have the heart to tell him

that you maybe changed your mind 'bout that.” Jerry held up a hand to stop David from interrupting. “I know what you said this morning, and I appreciate it and all, but, well, I know you were just trying to make William feel better.”

“Well.” David sighed and sat cross-legged beside Jerry. “I meant what I said this morning, but me moving in... well, that will require a little bit of discussion on our part, for sure.”

“Yeah, I figured.” Jerry sighed again, his hand falling to rest of David’s knee. “Can I fix this? I’ll promise anything, give you anything, do anything.”

David took Jerry’s hand in his. “I’m busy tomorrow, but how’s Sunday sound?”

“No way we can talk about it now?” Jerry pushed himself up against the log with one hand, eyes never leaving David’s. “Sorry, yeah, I guess you’re pretty tired, huh? Wanna go to bed, and we’ll talk about it Sunday?”

David laughed and shook his head. “What I meant, cowboy, was how about I move in on Sunday?” David watched the expression of resignation on Jerry’s face give way to understanding. And before he knew what hit him, David was on his back, Jerry’s grin as broad as the side of the barn. Finally, Jerry stopped kissing David’s face. David looked up at the beaming smile and asked, “So that’s a *yes*?”

Epilogue

“IT’S final.” Those were the first words that David heard when he arrived home from last-minute errands the day before school started. He raised an eyebrow.

“The adoption.” Jerry’s eyes glistened with moisture. “Sara just called.”

David exhaled slowly. “Thank Christ!” David ran into his waiting arms, his own arms circling Jerry’s waist, never tiring of the familiar feeling of the warm body. “Give me the paperwork, and I’ll take it into the school district tomorrow and have them make all the changes.”

“Are you kidding?” Jerry laughed. “That’s what I’ve been looking forward to most. Walk in there, stand in front of those pricks, and let them see that I’m good enough—we’re good enough to be fathers. Smug fuckwads!”

“Okay, but do me a favor?”

“I won’t actually call them ‘fuckwads’.” Jerry kissed the top of David’s head. “More than once, anyway.”

David laughed and tilted his head back. “I adore you, Jerry McKenzie, father of William.”

“Good to know, *boyfriend*.” Jerry brought his lips down to David’s, wishing above anything that he could lay David out on the

table and lick his ears until David was screaming his name over and over again.

“Where’s William?”

“Where do you think?”

“Cell phone?”

Jerry nodded. “Still think that was a mistake.”

“Are you kidding me? What if he needs one of us?” David pulled away from Jerry and headed to the sink to fill a glass with water. “What if there’s some sort of emergency? What if he wants to go somewhere after school? If that middle school is anything like his old school, the office is locked tighter than Fort Knox, and how will he get to a phone in an emergency? Not to mention—”

Jerry held up his hands in surrender, wrapping them around David’s waist again. “I give. No beating the mountain lion. I should know that by now.” Jerry stepped back to lean against the counter as David rummaged through the fridge, preparing dinner. He was more than happy to relinquish that particular duty, having grown tired of his own cooking when he realized that David possessed yet another talent. *Fucking perfect man*, he thought as he watched his lover move effortlessly around the kitchen. “How was the movie with your father?”

“Great. Watched *3:10 to Yuma*.” David smiled at Jerry. “The original, not that piece of crap remake.”

Jerry smiled as he remembered meeting the man who had disowned his own son almost twenty years ago. David had come to bed almost in tears late one night after Jerry had handed the phone to him, not waiting around to see who had been calling. *Probably more school stuff*, Jerry had thought. But when he saw the look in David’s eyes, he’d immediately feared the worst. *It was my father*, David had explained. *He’s making good on all of those promises, wants to meet me, maybe go to a movie this Saturday. I told him to*

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come and pick me up so he could meet my family.

Jerry had thought his concerns about David's father reappearing had been validated, but David had said he trusted the man. Jerry was heartbroken when weeks went by and David hadn't heard from his father. Jerry kept his mouth shut, squashing the urge to say *I told you so*. Jerry had always found it strange how this long-lost father had suddenly reappeared out of the woodwork when David was going through his battles with the Bennett Brigade, but he reassured himself that he was there to support David whatever the consequences. David had never explained how or why, precisely, his father had managed to bring an abrupt end to all of the trouble. All Jerry knew was that one day, David had been facing one conflict after another from Bennett, who'd been royally pissed when David had refused to sign the resignation—and then nothing. Whatever Mr. Van den Boesch had done had put a quite final end to all of David's troubles.

Jerry hadn't been thrilled at meeting Mr. Van den Boesch, the man who'd caused so much pain in David's life, but David had been so eager that Jerry hadn't had the heart to say anything. He just opened the door to find a handsome man on the doorstep that Saturday afternoon, his hair mostly grey but still cut stylishly, his eyes the same deep brown as his son's. Jerry couldn't stay mad for long when he saw the look of joy in both sets of eyes, the same shade of chocolate brown, as they embraced for the first time in twenty years. *I'll give you a break, for now*, Jerry wanted to say, *but I'll be watching you*.

Jerry had not been anxious to let William get involved in the whole reunion, not sure how to explain all the details, but had decided it might be good for William to have a larger family. William was excited about *grandpa Niels* and his present, three brand new boxes of LEGOs. William had never had a grandparent; all of his had died long before he'd even been born. Jerry hoped this wasn't too much for the little guy. But watching William on the

floor, LEGO pieces a blur, as he and his new grandpa built skyscrapers, Jerry decided not to worry too much about William that day.

And so here they were, the McKenzie-Loewenberger clan, preparing for school, happy, healthy, and safe.

"I'm thinking barbecue," Jerry said as he came out of his musings.

"I'm halfway through lasagna!"

"God, I love your lasagna." Jerry groaned. "No, tomorrow, I'm thinking we'll have a great big celebration to start the school year off right."

"Sounds good." David continued to grate cheese at the counter. "You need me to go shopping tonight?"

"Nope, I'll pick it all up tomorrow after I drop my men off in the morning."

"You don't have to drop us off; the middle school is just down the street from me."

"I know, but I want to." Jerry stole some cheese and just barely managed to avoid the slap. "Don't wanna spend any more time away from my men than I have to."

David stopped grating cheese and pulled Jerry close. "I love you." With that, he returned to grating the cheese.

"Love you back," Jerry whispered as he strolled past David, placing a loud smack on David's ass. When David turned to complain, Jerry just smiled that smug, satisfied smile and laughed as David closed his mouth and swallowed, hard. "Got plans for that ass tomorrow after the barbecue, so don't go doing too much your first day back."

The barbecue was a great success. William's first day of

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middle school—his first day as a McKenzie—had gone incredibly well, as had David’s, and Jerry’s new exhibit was being rescheduled for later in the fall, the original date having fallen through during Jerry’s tough-love campaign on David.

Jerry couldn’t wait to pick his men up from school, pointing out all of the groceries that he’d bought for the night’s celebration. As he hopped out of the car at home, William turned to Jerry and yelled his thanks just as he always had, but this time, it was: *Thanks, Dad!* David thought he could have knocked Jerry over with a feather. David walked over to Jerry, taking some of the bags.

“You okay, cowboy?”

Jerry leaned in for a kiss, his breath catching, and nodded. “Never better, baby.”

Jerry and David had had many conversations with William about what the adoption would mean, but when William figured that nothing would change, he didn’t seem to have any more questions—until one day, William came into the kitchen with a puzzled look on his face while David was preparing dinner. *Uncle Jerry? If I’m gonna be your son, and you’re gonna be my dad, does that mean my new name is William Baldwin McKenzie?* After some serious discussion between the three men, William had decided that he would like to have the name McKenzie instead of Pruitt. Later that night, with their son tucked in bed, Jerry had cried in front of David for the first time.

What had originally been planned as a single-family event soon blossomed into a much larger celebration and show of thanks. Sara had shown up with her partner—she’d been right, Jerry realized, about her partner being able to fell Jerry before he’d realize what hit him—Lenore showed up with the twins, and there hadn’t been a cloud in the sky. *Jesus, I’m a lucky man*, Jerry’d thought more than once when he caught a glimpse of David and William playing by the corral. *I almost lost it all.* Relief gave way to

happiness, however, as Jerry and his two men cleaned up the yard and got ready for bed.

Jerry stretched out in the bed. "Explain this to me again." Jerry propped his head in his hand, watching David dry his hands on the towel.

David exited the bathroom and began rifling through drawers, frown on his face.

"What are you doing?" Jerry sat up in bed, studying the younger man in his boxers.

"Looking for a pen and paper, so I can draw you a picture this time."

"Ass."

"I thought you liked my ass." David posed, arching his back. "Something about it being like that of a twenty-year old, if'n I do reckon so."

"No more Westerns for you for a while, yeah?" Jerry patted his thighs. "Come here, and I'll show you what I think of that ass."

"I do seem to remember something about plans for it."

"Baby, you have no idea. Now get it on over here."

David moved slowly to straddle Jerry's hips, his arms snaking around the larger man's shoulders as their lips met. The kiss was gentle to begin with, tongues moving lazily between the two mouths, skin warming slowly as Jerry ran his hands up and down David's back, David shivering every now and then.

"I do love to make you shiver."

"You don't have to touch me for that to happen." David winked and pressed his lips against Jerry's mouth again.

"Good to know." Jerry's hands moved farther south, stopping

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and cupping the ass that was so close to his dick, massaging and cradling the fabric-covered flesh. “Any chance of losing these?”

Without a word, David hopped off the bed, pulled down his boxers, flicked them away with his foot, and returned to Jerry’s lap. “Better?”

Jerry could only moan as he felt the moist tip of David’s cock painting lazy circles on his abdomen.

“Good to know.” David arched his back as Jerry’s tongue slid up and down his neck, knowing full well where that tongue would end up in a minute or two. His hands slid through Jerry’s hair. There were only a couple of millimeters of stubble now, Jerry having surprised his men this afternoon with his new buzz cut. “Love your hair, baby.”

“Yeah?”

“Um hmmm,” David was writhing in Jerry’s lap, trying desperately to avoid having that tongue in his ear, knowing full well that once it was there, Jerry would have him coming in seconds. “Feels so soft, so sensual, so sexy, baby.”

Jerry groaned, low and guttural, as David’s hands glided over his shorn skull. “Part of the surprise, mountain lion.” Jerry laughed as another shiver coursed through David’s naked body, his head cradled between David’s arms as they continued their caresses over his skull.

“Love it when you call me that, Jerry.” David placed kisses to the top of Jerry’s skull. “Love you so much.”

“Hmmm,” Jerry growled as he placed one hand behind David’s neck, the other supporting his lover’s lower back, and rolled to the side. “Gonna make you growl for me, mountain lion.” Jerry’s body was resting beside David’s, one hand still behind David’s neck, the other beginning to roam all over the naked body beside his.

“Let me—” David’s hands moved to the waistband of Jerry’s boxers, but Jerry shimmied away, never losing contact with his hands or lips.

“This isn’t about me tonight, baby.” Jerry turned David’s head to start whispering in his ear, his breath hot and moist. “Wanna make you happy, David.” Jerry’s tongue slipped inside David’s ear, the moist tip exploring, Jerry smiling as David practically jackknifed on the bed. “What do you think about that?” Jerry’s whispers made David’s eyes roll back in his head.

“Can’t.” Gasp. “Think.” Gasp. “When you do that... oh, Jesus fucking Christ!” David’s hand scrabbled for purchase against Jerry’s strong back, his other pressing firmly against Jerry’s hairy chest. “Not gonna last, Jerry.”

“Good to know.” Jerry reached behind him, his admiring eyes never leaving the flushed body beside him. “Sweet Jesus, I can’t believe you’re mine.” Jerry’s fingers found the lube; he wouldn’t need condoms tonight.

“Yes, yours, only, always.” David’s hand left Jerry’s back to find his lover’s head, fingers sweeping over the stubble. This time, Jerry shivered.

“You keep doing that, and I’m gonna come all over you right now.”

David arched his back as Jerry whispered the words in his ear, millions of lights exploding behind his eyelids. “Yeah, baby, wanna see you come all over me.”

“Jesus,” Jerry gasped. “Not yet, baby.” Jerry popped the lid off the tube, eyes still focused on the ecstasy of David’s flushed face. “So fucking beautiful, David.” He squeezed some lube on David’s stomach and swept his fingers through it, encircling David’s straining erection several times before moving them to cup and jiggle David’s balls. When David arched his back again, Jerry’s

hand moved further down to press his lover's perineum, soft, caressing presses that sent David's legs akimbo, one resting over Jerry's thigh, the other stretched out to the other side. David bucked his hips as the palm of Jerry's hand continued to massage his perineum, the pressure intensifying, while his index and middle finger breached David's entrance. "Feel good, baby?" David moaned in response, his hand still gliding lazily over Jerry's scalp. "Gonna finger-fuck you, David." Jerry leaned over David's lips, closing his mouth over swollen lips and a searching tongue. "Know how much you love to kiss." Another moan. "Figure you'd like a triple threat tonight...." Jerry pressed his palm against David's perineum. "Massage." Jerry thrust his fingers into David's opening hole. "Fuck you with my fingers." Jerry's mouth closed over David's, and he pulled away to whisper, "While I tongue-fuck that beautiful mouth."

David lost all sense of time and space as Jerry's warm breath cascaded over and into his ear. Those hands were inside him, the palm pressing in between his balls and his ass while that thick tongue pistoned in and out of his mouth. He could do nothing but feel at that point, allowing the sensations to wash over him. He hoped he would come soon, not sure he would be able to take much more. He wanted to taste Jerry in the worst way, had planned on sucking him dry and swallowing it tonight, just to please his lover; maybe he'd still get the chance tonight, provided he had any brain cells left.

"Touch yourself, mountain lion." Jerry's words were hot in his ear, kisses sounding deafening as they landed on his ear. "Wanna see you come. Wanna see what I'm doing to you." Jerry's fingers continued their frenzied thrusts while he pressed against the perineum and tongue-fucked David's mouth, all rhythm lost now as he saw how close David was to climax, letting up to allow for David's gasps and laving his lover's ear.

David's shaky hand found his swollen cock and pulled once

and then twice. “Oh, Jerry,” David whispered as the sensations zipped from his balls to his belly to his exploding dick. “So beautiful, you, so....”

“My man, got my beautiful mountain lion back.” Jerry’s kisses rained down on David’s face and neck, the sensations blurring with the heat radiating from the quivering body, hot pools of liquid quickly cooling on his chest, his stomach, his arms; it seemed to be everywhere. Jerry massaged David’s neck with his hand while his lover’s breathing returned to normal, slowly removing his fingers, hearing David’s whimpers when they were completely gone. “I love you, David.”

“Jerry,” David whispered, his voice hoarse and tired from panting for the last fifteen minutes. “God, love you, nothing better.” David’s hand resumed his caresses over Jerry’s scalp and back. “Let me do you—”

Jerry relinquished his grasp and stood. “No need, baby.” Jerry looked down at his boxers, David’s eyes following. “You made me come in my boxers, mountain lion.” Jerry looked down at his lover and whispered, “So fucking beautiful.” David closed his eyes, and Jerry pointed a finger at David. “Stay put.” David opened his eyes to watch that beautiful ass stroll to the bathroom. *Too bad he doesn’t like to bottom that much*, David thought for the hundredth time. He’d been able to convince Jerry only once since they’d known each other, and David could still remember the feeling of being inside Jerry.

“Nice and warm for my man.” Jerry wiped David’s stomach and hands with the warm washcloth, stopping occasionally to plant kisses on the cleaned spots.

“Your man, I like that.”

“And William’s.” Jerry turned, threw the washcloth at the bathroom, removed his soiled boxers, and lay down beside David again. “Sorry, didn’t mean that to sound creepy like that.”

Good to Know

David laughed. “I knew what you meant.”

“Do you?” Jerry reached behind him while David closed his eyes. “Good.” Jerry kissed David’s lips, those beautifully swollen lips that were almost as sexy now as when David was speaking French or singing, thinking no one was watching. “Ready for your surprise?”

David’s eyes popped open. “That wasn’t it?” David’s voice rose an octave. “Don’t know if I want anything else—might kill me!”

“Shhh,” Jerry laughed, placing a finger over David’s lips. “You want our son to come in and find us like this?”

“Your son,” David corrected.

“Can fix that.” Jerry reached between their bodies to retrieve the little box. When he saw what Jerry had in his hand, David sat up, mouth open, eyes staring. “I know it hasn’t been very long, but—”

“Yes, yes, yes, yes.” David threw his arms around Jerry’s neck, hands traveling up to caress the shorn scalp.

“I haven’t even asked you yet.” Jerry chuckled into David’s chest. “How do you know I was gonna ask that?”

“Because you’re a big, goofy, romantic idiot.” David continued kissing Jerry’s scalp. “Because you’re my big, goofy, romantic idiot, and...” David pulled back to look at his lover. “My beautiful man, my beautiful husband, *our* beautiful little boy, *my* beautiful little family.” He saw Jerry close his eyes and sigh. “And if anybody fucks with my family ever again, I’m gonna rip them apart.”

“*My* beautiful mountain lion!” Jerry sighed into David’s mouth.

“Fierce and willing to kill to protect what’s his.” David nipped

at Jerry's tongue.

“Good to know, baby,” Jerry smiled and kissed David, slipping the ring onto David's finger. “Good to know.”

When D.W. MARCHWELL is not teaching future generations the wonders of science, he can usually be found hiking, writing, riding horses, trying new recipes, or searching for and lovingly restoring discarded antique furniture. A goofy and incurable romantic, D.W. admits that his stories are inspired by actual events and has a soft spot for those where boy not only meets boy but also turns out to be boy's soul mate. After almost fifteen years of working his way across Canada, D.W has finally found the perfect place to live at the foot of the Canadian Rockies. He still can't believe how lucky he is, and, as his grandmother taught him, counts his blessings every day.

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