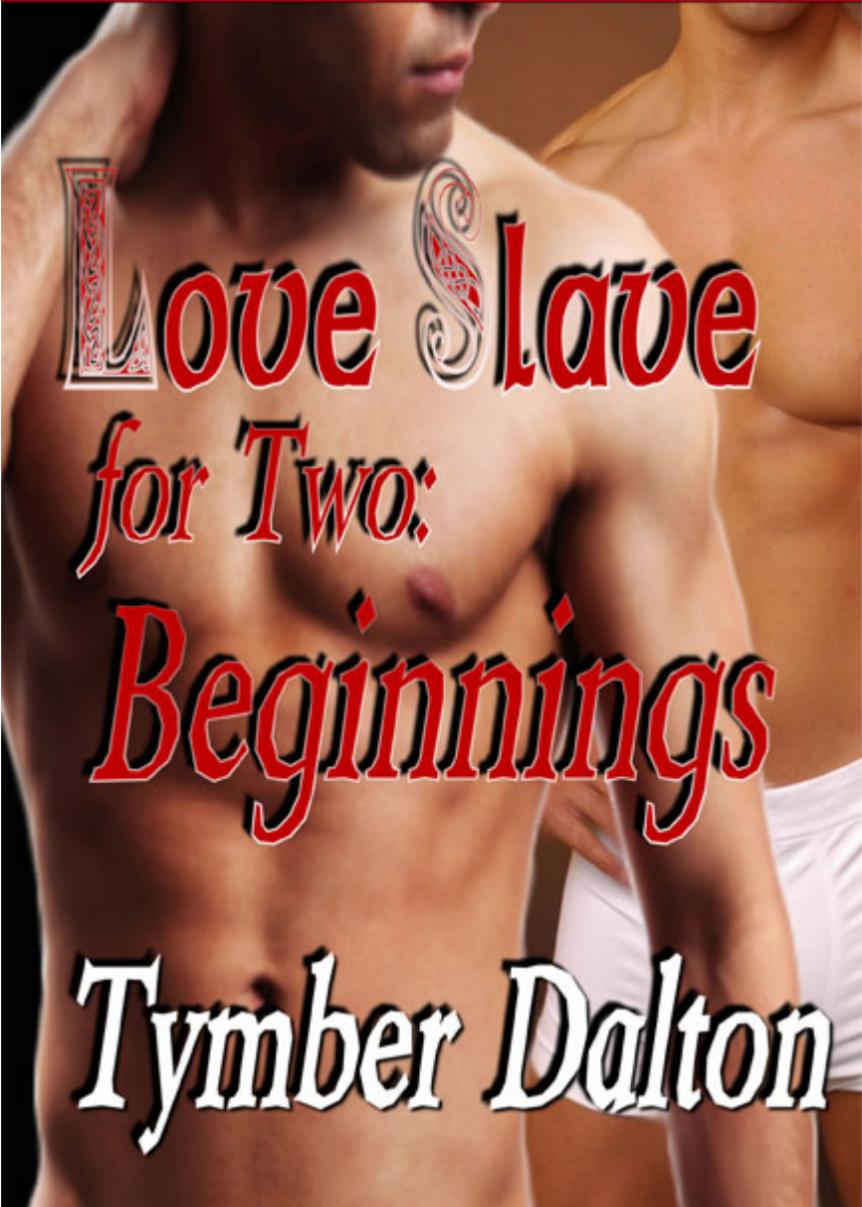


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Love Slave

for Two:

Beginnings

Tymber Dalton

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LOVE SLAVE FOR TWO: BEGINNINGS

Love Slave for Two, Prequel

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MENAGE AMOUR



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DEDICATION

Thank you to all my readers who fell in love with Tyler, Thomas, and Nevvie!

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This story takes place before *Love Slave for Two* and leads into the events of that book. You can get books One and Two in the series (*Love Slave for Two: Family Matters*) from Siren-BookStrand at: <http://www.bookstrand.com/authors/tymberdalton/>

LOVE SLAVE FOR TWO: BEGINNINGS

Love Slave for Two, Prequel

TYMBER DALTON

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Chapter 1

“That’s it, Kinsey! Move it, move it!”

Vaguely aware of Coach Sweeney yelling at him, Tommy’s focus was torn between not screwing up the practice play and the sight of Alicia Smith’s bare legs on the sidelines as her fellow cheerleaders hoisted her up in a pyramid pattern.

At the whistle, Tommy and the others jogged over to the far sidelines where the water cooler was set up. He tried to ignore Alicia’s coy smile, then heard his dad’s voice.

“You’re lookin’ good out there, son.”

He pulled his helmet off and smiled. “Thanks, Dad.”

Coach Sweeney walked up and shook hands with his dad. “Hey, Adam. Didn’t expect to see you here today.”

“Finished up early. I hate missing his practices.”

Tommy’s eyes drifted across the field to Alicia and her short, red, pleated skirt. When she waved, three of her friends giggled.

He turned back to the water cooler, hoping everyone thought his red face was from the August Georgia heat. Thankfully his ample padding and protective gear hid the hard-on struggling for freedom.

“I heard some college scouts are gonna be in this area next

month,” Coach said, eyeing Tommy. “You keep your game up like you have been, you might be able to land a scholarship.”

Adam Kinsey laughed. “He’s already guaranteed one with his grades. I swear, you’d think with my five girls and their momma’s brilliant brain, one of them would be an Einstein. Tommy’s got all his sisters beat there.”

Tommy reddened again, this time with embarrassment over his dad’s praise.

But it felt good.

“We’ll be going about another half hour,” Coach Sweeney said. “Then he’s all yours.”

“No problem.” When Coach walked away, Adam smiled at his son. “Got a surprise for you.”

“Yeah?” He finished his water and handed the empty cup to the equipment manager.

“Yeah. I know you’ve been working your butt off. Your momma and I decided you’ve earned a reward.” He winked. “After practice.” He took a seat in the stands.

Tommy’s heart raced as he donned his helmet and headed onto the field. He doubted they bought him a motorcycle, no way in hell would Momma ever agree to that. Maybe they’d decided to replace his car for him. It sucked being eighteen and a senior and not having wheels.

Stupid Emily anyway. They’d made him loan it to her when hers broke down, said since she was out on her own and married with babies, and him “just a kid,” that it was only right. Then she’d gone and wrecked the damn thing two months ago. His parents hadn’t taken out comp and collision on the old beater car.

The hope building in his heart even overshadowed thoughts of Alicia flirting with him.

After they received their next play, Tommy took his position on the line. When he glanced up, he stood eye to eye with Martin Jayce. Martin had just turned eighteen the week before. They’d all gotten together at his parents’ lake house for a party that past weekend.

Between Martin's green eyes and the memory of what Martin looked like in his swim trunks...

Tommy closed his eyes, immediately willing that thought away. *Girls*. He liked *girls*. Alicia was dying for him to take her out that weekend. She'd been hinting around with comments as subtle as a baseball bat.

As the play commenced, Tommy gave thanks no one could tell when he snuck another look at Martin's ass.

* * * *

Alicia stood waiting for Tommy when he emerged from the locker room after practice. "Tooommy," she called out in a singsong voice. "Are you ever gonna ask me out this weekend?" Her family was all local to Savannah, and her voice had the typical deep, rolling drawl.

He blushed and spotted his father walking toward the locker room, talking with Coach Sweeney. "That's a few days away. I don't know what my parents have planned yet. Can we talk about it tomorrow?"

She latched onto his arm and made a pouty face that pooched her pink lips into a plump bow. "I thought you liked me."

"I do like you. You know how sucky it is without a car."

"Daddy said I could borrow Momma's car on Saturday." She grinned and leaned in close so she could whisper in his ear. "Me and Sarah and a couple others, we went to Macon a couple weeks ago. To one of those clinics. I'm on the Pill now."

He blushed deep red. Yet another thing she'd constantly hinted at. While there'd been a few times he'd used mental images of Alicia while whacking off in the shower, he wasn't sure he was ready for the real thing yet. "That's cool."

What the heck else was he supposed to say?

She stepped back with an evil teenage girl grin on her face as his father and Coach walked up. "I'll talk to you tomorrow, Tommy. Bye."

“Bye, Alicia.”

Adam Kinsey watched her walk away, a knowing fatherly smirk on his face. “She’s sweet on you, isn’t she?”

He didn’t think his face could get any redder if he tried. “Dad!”

His father laughed. “I know, son. I was there myself once, don’t forget. Well, let’s get going.”

He followed his father out to the parking lot, at first puzzled when he didn’t see his dad’s car. He’d forgotten about the promise of a surprise. Then his father pulled out a set of keys and led him toward a blue Ford F-150. Not the newest, but it wasn’t a rust bucket either.

Adam dangled the keys in front of his son. “Emily can’t drive a stick. No chance of her wrecking this one for you.”

Tommy’s eyes widened. “No. Way!” He threw his arms around his father and hugged him. “Oh, man!” He walked around the truck in awe, not even noticing the cosmetic flaws and assorted dings and scratches. “Wow! This is great!”

“Keep your grades up or we take it away. It’s six years old, and the air works. You’ll have to put a new radio in it because it doesn’t have a CD player, and I know you want one. Same rules that applied to your other car. Keep it clean, take care of it, and you still have to pay the insurance. It’s got over a hundred thousand miles on it, but the engine was rebuilt a few months ago, and the transmission is new. You can take it to college when you go.”

Tommy circled the truck again. “Thank you so much, Dad!”

Adam opened the passenger door and climbed in. “You’re welcome. Now let’s get home. Your momma’s making chicken and dumplings tonight.”

* * * *

At home, Karen and April crowded into the front seat with Tommy while he drove them up the road and back a few times. He was the baby, but the two youngest of his five sisters still lived at

home, and he'd always felt closest to them.

Karen teased him about wanting to borrow it, playfully busting his balls. He was youngest, followed by April and then Karen, but he had a special bond with Karen he didn't have with his other sisters.

"You know I won't do that to you, Tommy." She took accounting classes at the community college, already had a job, and was saving up to get her own place after graduation. "Stupid Em anyway. Should knock some sense into her. And then not bothering to buy you another one or at least give you hers to drive? That sucks."

He stared at his new truck. New enough for his tastes anyway. "Yeah, she's just a bitch."

April had already gone inside. Karen giggled. "You know it, baby bro." She hooked her arm through his. "So, Alicia called before you got home."

He groaned. "What did she want? I just saw her after practice."

"You know dang well what she wants." She slowed their pace toward the house, holding her brother back. Her voice dropped, serious. "Now, you listen to me. You know I don't care what you do as long as you're careful. But please, don't be stupid, and don't get her knocked up. She's one of those kinds who'd love to get pregnant so you have to marry her."

His face burned. "She told me she's on the Pill now," he muttered. He could only say stuff like this to Karen. She felt more like a twin than an older sister.

"Bullshit. If you sleep with her, you wear a rubber. Even if she's really on the Pill, you could still catch something from a little tramp like her."

He snorted. Alicia didn't exactly have a stellar reputation, unfortunately. Mostly innuendo around school that hadn't made it to his momma's church...yet.

"I'll be careful, Kar. I promise."

"Good."

* * * *

Alicia squealed and practically tackled him when she saw him climb out of the truck at school the next morning. “This is great!” She grinned and pushed herself closer. “I’ll bring a picnic blanket, and we can spread out in the bed.” She giggled, pleased with her pun.

Tommy blushed and looked around as he peeled Alicia off him. “Um, yeah, okay.”

Irritation flashed across her face. “What’s wrong with you? Don’t you want to sleep with me? What’s the matter, are you gay?”

His face burned. “No!” He looked around and stepped closer. “I just don’t like discussing sex in public, okay? There’s nothing wrong with me not wanting to talk about this stuff in the parking lot before school when I’ve got a chem test in first period that I need to focus on.”

“We gonna discuss it in private, then?” She tried to grab his crotch, but he caught her wrist and pulled her hand away.

Hating feeling pressured to prove anything to her, he resigned himself to his fate. “We can do more than discuss it on Saturday, if that’s what you really want to do.”

She smiled and quickly pecked him on the cheek before flouncing across the parking lot, where she joined a couple of her giggling friends. They raced into the building.

He silently swore and grabbed his books before heading inside.

* * * *

The next day, Tommy made an excuse about needing to study at the library after practice. As soon as practice ended, he drove across the county line into the next town. Fighting a raging case of embarrassment, and with Karen’s words ringing in his ears, he bought several packs of condoms from a drugstore. The clerk, an older woman, didn’t even bat an eye at his purchase.

He pulled his truck around back and removed the condoms from the boxes and tossed the boxes into the store Dumpster. He jammed the condoms into the bottom of his book bag, where his mother wouldn't look. That night, he made sure to lock his bedroom door before he lay back in bed and ripped open a foil pouch.

Better to know how to do this than be fumbling around and give Alicia an opportunity to refuse him using them. He spent a few minutes stroking himself, trying to get hard thinking about Alicia.

That didn't work

Fantastic.

When he thought about Martin, however, his woody stiffened. In the privacy of his own bed, Tommy didn't bother making excuses to himself. The first condom he totally fucked up. The second he finally figured out how to roll on over his shaft. He closed his eyes and lay back, stroking himself, trying to make himself come inside the thing.

It felt...weird. Everything he'd heard about them was right-on there.

Still, he refused to let Alicia get knocked up and force him into a marriage he didn't want. She'd spent every free moment at school hinting and teasing that Saturday would be the first of many times for them, making it perfectly clear where she wanted their relationship to go.

With the extra distraction of the thin layer of material, even Alicia's long legs and tight ass couldn't keep him hard. He thought about Martin again—*fuck it, might as well enjoy myself*—and after a few minutes he turned his head and quietly moaned into his pillow as he came.

Okay, now what? He walked into his private, connected bathroom. The girls had to share theirs, but his father took pity on his lone son and gave him his own bathroom when he'd built the house. He flushed the evidence, then cleaned up and lay in bed.

Where he'd used to think he'd enjoy fucking Alicia, now he dreaded it. If he backed out now, she'd be vicious enough to spread

the rumor he was gay. She was so full of herself she couldn't believe any guy wouldn't want to sleep with her.

Maybe he could talk his dad into needing his help in the office or something. Tommy was helping him design a house for one of his friends. His dad let Tommy work on the blueprints mostly on his own, giving him more control on the project than he'd ever had before. He was pretty sure he'd nailed entry to the University of South Florida down in Tampa. USF had a kick-ass engineering program, but it would be at least another month or so before he heard back.

Alicia had insisted "they" were going to the University of Georgia.

Fuck that.

Tommy smiled as he closed his eyes and imagined how pissed she'd be when she realized he wasn't going to be at her beck and call post graduation.

Chapter 2

Tyler Paulson looked out over the Atlantic Ocean as his plane winged west from London toward New York City. He'd catch a connecting flight there for Tampa.

He couldn't quell the amused smile teasing his lips.

Freedom. Finally, freedom.

Made possible by a full special scholarship to the University of South Florida, giving him the ability to study overseas, well out of reach of his meddling mother. How she'd ranted and raved when he'd first applied, shrilly telling him he wasted his time and energy even bothering to apply for something he'd get turned down for. Then she ranted and raved that he wasn't being fair to her by leaving her alone to provide for his younger brother and sister.

Not his problem.

He was done.

She swore she'd never speak to him again.

Well, that would be a blessing of sorts now, wouldn't it?

After two years at university, his professor of creative writing pulled Tyler aside after class, told him about the opportunity, and gave him the info he'd need and the inside contact information. Said Tyler was too damn talented to waste his time in a small school, he should go on to bigger, better things. Six months later, he learned he'd landed the scholarship. He transferred to USF in Tampa, Florida.

America.

Away from his mother.

Tyler glanced between his feet at his messenger bag, where his battered, used laptop and two printed manuscripts lay safely nestled

with a few other items. In the overhead bin, his assorted carry-on needs and another printed manuscript. In the cargo hold, four large cases with everything he'd been able to pack. He'd left cold-weather clothes behind and opted for cherished books, papers, and photographs he knew he'd probably never see again if his mother had her way.

He would study and complete his degree. After, he was contractually committed to teach for at least three years while he completed his graduate studies. Meanwhile, an agent on the scholarship committee was already shopping the final draft of one of his psychological thrillers around to houses in New York. A paid on-campus student housing unit and a basic meal plan package meant he didn't even need a car to get around, which would save him money.

The committee assured him they would help him apply for citizenship if he wanted.

That's what he wanted. Nothing tied him to England, as far as he was concerned. Setting out alone on a life of promise seemed a damn sight better than the alternative of staying behind, his mother's smug face gloating over him if he failed.

He felt a twinge of guilt over his feelings. His mother had worked hard to provide for them after his father left. Still, that didn't give her the right to treat him like something best left for the dustbin.

The sun set on the horizon ahead of them. When he looked out the window, his visage reflected back to him. What did his mother see in his face that caused her to react the way she did? Was it his father's blue eyes? The fact that he looked so much like him?

He pulled down the shade, sat back, and took a deep breath.

It didn't matter.

Not anymore.

* * * *

Tyler went through customs in New York. When he disembarked

from the airside shuttle into the main terminal at Tampa International, he nervously looked around. A professor from the English department would meet him and take him to the campus.

Then he spotted a tall, distinguished-looking man, with a beard and mustache, holding a sign with his name.

Tyler shouldered his messenger bag, gripped his other carry-on, and walked over. "Dr. Lawrence?"

The man smiled and stuck out a hand. "Just call me Robert. You must be Tyler Paulson, nice to meet you. So you're the whiz kid who stole the show, huh?"

Tyler blushed. "I suppose you could say that."

"Baggage claim's this way. Let's go get your stuff. Are you hungry?"

Two hours later, after Robert Lawrence treated Tyler to his first real meal in America, he helped him unload his things at the student housing complex on the Tampa campus. "Well, you've got everything in the information packet there," Robert said. "Jennie over at admissions said to contact her in the morning. She'll get you started. There's a map in there, but if you get lost, just ask for directions. You'll have a week before classes get underway to learn your way around the place."

"Thank you very much, Dr. Lawrence."

The man looked to be at least twenty years his senior. "We're eventually going to be working together, right? Robert's fine, trust me."

* * * *

Tyler thanked God for his sense of mind to leave his heavy clothes behind. The thick Florida humidity wasn't nearly as oppressive as living under his mother's thumb, but he'd obviously need to alter his wardrobe. He stretched the small cash stipend he received for extra living expenses to the maximum at a thrift store as

he picked out more suitable clothes. He didn't care. It was worth it.

After six months, he felt more at home in the student housing than he'd felt in decades. Since before his father left.

He asked his student advisor for help applying for citizenship.

* * * *

Tyler nervously sat in the office waiting area, his hands around the contract. Several people assured him Bob was excellent and reasonably priced. When the lanky redheaded man called him in, Tyler felt put at ease by the man's friendly smile. He noticed a picture on the shelf behind the attorney's desk, him and another man, in tuxes and holding hands.

His partner, Tyler assumed.

"Well, let's see what you've got here," Bob said, taking the folder and scanning the contract. After a while, he looked up. "It seems fairly standard. Is there anything in particular you're concerned about?"

"It's my first contract. I don't know anything about them."

"What's the book about?"

Two hours later, Tyler realized he'd made a friend in addition to hiring an attorney. When Bob found out Tyler's weekend was empty, he invited him to dinner Saturday night. "Just some friends, that's all. Casual."

"I'd enjoy that, thank you."

While he wasn't a prude by any stretch of the imagination, he realized more than half the people at the dinner party were gay couples and that his exposure to alternative lifestyles had been rather limited. By the end of the evening, he also realized he felt more at ease with the friendly group of people than he had since...ever. Bob and his partner, Terry, were best friends with Pete and Eddie, a funny and oddly matched couple who kept Tyler laughing throughout the evening. When Eddie found out Tyler was single, he took him under

his wing like an overweight mother hen, determined to match him up.

“Oh, geeze, Ty,” Pete grouched. “Watch out. He’s gonna marry you off.”

Eddie glared at him. “What’s wrong with that?”

“Nothing, as long as it’s what Tyler wants.”

“I know lots of single women who would kill to go out with you.”

He couldn’t refuse Eddie’s invitation to their cookout the next afternoon. Pete later caught him alone in the kitchen and grinned. “Sorry about that, buddy. Shoulda warned you.”

Pete was a retired New York City cop who sounded like he’d walked out of the Bronx a few months earlier. He’d been with Eddie for nearly two decades. “Don’t be afraid to tell Eddie to back off if he’s too pushy. He likes to take care of people, and now he’s adopted you.” He laughed as he clapped Tyler on the back with a meaty hand. “Welcome to the family.”

Tyler was left to contemplate that. Here was a group of near-total strangers who’d welcomed him more than his own mother ever seemed to care to.

Friends.

A decent job.

A home.

He thought about the completed citizenship papers sitting on his desk at his new apartment. He hadn’t sent them in yet, even though they were ready. He also realized he truly had nothing to return to in London. Why not adopt the country that had so far taken great pains to adopt him?

* * * *

Between his friendship with Bob, Terry, Pete, and Eddie, and his increasingly wandering thoughts, Tyler realized maybe there was more to him than he’d ever wanted to admit before.

He noticed he could eye the ass of a man strolling past him, then

equally appreciate a curvy woman passing the opposite way.

When he finally forced himself to confront the issue, he admitted he wasn't averse to meeting someone of either gender. Bless his heart, Eddie noticed one day while they were having lunch at the mall.

"I'm gonna set you up, you know, Ty."

Tyler smiled. He'd been watching a handsome, lanky student walk past, a man whose loose clothes most likely concealed a nice body. "You were a matchmaker in a former life, hmm?" A young coed bopped by with some of her friends. Her red hair hung past her shoulders, her snug low-rider jeans exposing a tramp stamp tattoo on her spine.

"I'm a matchmaker in this life, too." Eddie laughed. "At least you make it easy with a broad playing field."

Tyler reddened and focused on his food. "Not sure what you mean, mate."

Eddie snickered. He leaned in and dropped his voice. "You're an equal opportunity kind of guy, that's what I mean, and you know it. Lucky bastard, best of both worlds."

"Well, wasn't Pete married?"

"Oh, sure he was. Why do you think he got divorced? Lots of guys our age who swing the other way ended up married, for a while, at least. He just had the balls to finally come clean and admit it wasn't working for him. Now me, I faked it in high school, but I knew in college I wasn't interested in the fairer sex."

Eddie took a bite of his salad and pointed his fork at Ty. "You, my friend, are bi. Just admit it and accept it. It'll make your life easier. No shame in it. Then I can open the other half of my address book and stop fixing you up only with girls."

No, Tyler knew there was no shame in it, but it still took some getting used to. Eddie ramped up his efforts to pair Ty with "someone nice," in his words, regardless of gender.

Ironically, Tyler found someone without Eddie's help, a girl who truly captured his interest at a campus gathering of English faculty

and grad students. Erin was a little younger than him but not by much. Lithe and in shape, a marathon runner by hobby, a grad student focusing on American Lit professionally, she seemed entranced by the fact that he was an author. She also loved his accent. After a few weeks he found himself chasing her, vying for her affection.

Eddie couldn't wait to plan the wedding.

* * * *

"Tyler! What the *hell* is this crap?"

Tyler winced and withdrew his hands from the keyboard. He heard Erin banging things around in the kitchen, pans hitting the counter with unusual force, cabinet doors slamming. "What is what, dear?"

He started to stand when she appeared in his office doorway. She'd just returned from her training session and was still dressed in her workout clothes, her hair damp with sweat.

"This!" In her hands she held the still-warm baking pan.

"It's a peach cobbler."

Erin's "ick" face told Tyler all he needed to know. "What have I *told* you?" She shoved the pan at him and forced him to take it. "I'm training for the freaking Gasparilla Marathon, okay? What about that don't you understand?"

He looked at the still untouched cobbler. He'd pulled it from the oven about an hour ago. "I'm sorry, love. I thought you might enjoy it. I used fresh fruit and didn't use as much sugar as the recipe called for. I also used whole wheat flour."

She turned, the conversation apparently already over in her mind. "I'm not eating it. Take it to work and share it in the faculty lounge. I swear, sometimes I think you don't have a brain, or you're deliberately trying to sabotage me." She left, slamming their bedroom door shut seconds later.

"Sorry, love," Tyler muttered to himself. He looked at the pan in

his hand. She'd complained about his baking, claiming empty calories would damage her training. He couldn't make any of the richer desserts he enjoyed, obviously. He'd thought this would be perfect, that after four months of marriage he'd finally found a way to make her happy about something.

With a sigh he carried it back into the kitchen, covered it with foil, and tucked it into the microwave where she wouldn't immediately see it. A half hour later, he was in his office when he heard the front door open and close.

"Erin?"

He looked. Gone.

He tried her cell. "Were you planning on saying good-bye?"

"I'm late for class, Tyler. Sheesh. I'll see you tonight."

"About what ti—"

She hung up on him.

Around midnight he started awake at the sound of the front door softly opening and closing. She quietly crept into the bathroom, closed the door, and started the shower. He thought he caught a familiar whiff of men's cologne, but it disappeared before he was certain. He didn't want to let his mind drift in that direction anyway.

It couldn't be.

He rolled over, facing away from her side of the bed, and pretended to be asleep when she slipped under the covers.

The next morning when he awoke at seven, she'd already left, her sneakers missing from the closet. She would be out running until eight, after he'd already left for work.

He tried not to calculate how many hours he'd seen her that week. They could be tallied on both hands with fingers to spare.

Tyler poured himself a cup of coffee—at least she'd had the decency to brew a pot—and climbed into the shower. When he got out, he noticed her clothes from the night before, still crumpled in a pile in the bathroom corner. He picked them up to put them in the hamper and again caught a familiar whiff of cologne.

He fought and lost against the urge to sniff her shirt. There was no doubt in his mind.

That left him with only two options—confrontation or denial.

He stared at the clothes for a long moment before dumping them in the hamper.

Chapter 3

Tommy's hand shook as he ended the call. His friend and roommate, Kenny, stared at him. "What's wrong?"

Tommy shook his head, not wanting to say it, knowing that wouldn't change the truth.

"Dad."

"What?" Kenny took the phone from him and set it on the table. "Fuck, man, you look horrible."

"My dad was killed in a car accident this afternoon. Fucking drunk crossed the center line, in a big box truck, hit him head on." He felt numb.

"Oh, shit. Man. I'm sorry."

"I've got to pack. I need to drive home."

"How's your mom?"

He shook his head. "Karen said they had to sedate her."

"I'll talk to your professors for you, and your boss. You just be careful."

He numbly nodded. He packed, remembering his black suit was—how ironic—still up in Savannah. Within an hour he'd packed and headed north away from Tampa.

He stumbled through the process, his sisters looking to him automatically as the "man" of the family to handle things. Somehow, he took charge.

At the graveside service, he glanced at the people in attendance, some he hadn't seen in a couple of years at least, since high school.

He caught sight of Martin Jayce and felt his heart skip a beat.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Here he was at his father's funeral, and he had a thought like that?

Martin was there with a woman. When he draped his left arm around her shoulders, Tommy caught sight of the wedding band on his old friend's left hand.

His face burned. He tried not to listen to the service, didn't want to think, didn't want to feel.

He somehow made it through the next couple of days. He considered staying in Savannah, moving home, but his mother wouldn't hear of it. Peggy Kinsey felt stronger now that the initial shock had worn off. "You go back to school, Tommy. You've missed enough."

"Daddy would want me to take care of you."

"He'd skin your hide for dropping out of school and you know it." Her smile looked sad and forced. "Promise me, baby, you aren't gonna let us down."

He caught sight of his brother-in-law Clay through the windows, playing with the twins in the backyard. Tommy suspected he might never have kids of his own. His father hated Em's choice in Clay at first but eventually grew to tolerate, if not like the man.

He thought about Martin Jayce.

I think I've already let Daddy down, he thought.

* * * *

Tommy enjoyed his classes. He liked working for the architectural engineering firm part-time even more. He missed his dad, but throwing himself into his studies and work gave him a focus and a goal.

He made friends with a girl in one of his classes. Maggie was pretty and his age. While they quickly developed an almost sibling-like relationship, he didn't feel anything remotely romantic for her. He helped her with her engineering classes, and she helped him pass philosophy. They studied together all the time, when work didn't get

in the way.

Then she met a new guy who suddenly took up a lot more of her time. She could only spend time studying with Tommy when the guy was at work.

“Come on, Maggie. The guy’s name is Primo, for chrissake.”

“He’s Italian. It’s a family name.”

She grew more distant emotionally, her mood somber. Then one day after class she took off her sweater before leaving the classroom, and he saw the dark bruise on her arm.

“What the hell is this?”

She blushed and pulled her arm away from him. “It’s nothing. It’s okay.”

As the class emptied, Tommy made her sit. “Tell me.”

“It was just an accident. It’s fine. He grabbed me a little harder than he meant to.”

“Did he hit you?”

She quickly shook her head. “No! Nothing like that.” She reddened deeper. “I made him mad. It was my fault. He apologized. He felt bad about it.”

“Maggie—”

“Please, Tommy. It’s okay.”

He didn’t think it was okay. He kept an eagle eye on her over the next few weeks. More odd bruises appeared on her arms, but he didn’t question her. He didn’t want to drive her further away, didn’t want to isolate her. Wanted to be a safe haven if she needed him.

She didn’t show for class one Tuesday. He tried to call her later, and her phone went to voicemail. When she didn’t return his calls, he left work early the next day and stopped by her apartment.

Slow to answer the door, she didn’t want to let him in at first. Even with her hair down he still saw the bruises on her cheek and neck.

“Okay, Maggie, this is enough, girl. Come home with me. Let me—”

She shook her head. “No, it’s okay. It was an accident. He apologized. Really, Tommy, I’m okay.” She caught sight of the clock, and her eyes widened. “Oh no! You have to go. I didn’t realize how late it was.” She started pushing him toward the door, but he stood his ground.

“Maggie, don’t do this.”

“Please, you have to go! Now! He’s supposed to come by after work. If he catches you here—”

“If he catches me here, what? He’ll have to try to beat on me like he’s beating on you?”

She started crying. “He loves me. I know he does. Please, you have to go!”

He turned at the door and gently cupped her chin in his hands. “Maggie, you’re my friend. You’re like a sister to me. Just remember, no matter what, you call me. You talk to me. You always have a safe place.”

She nodded, crying, as he kissed her forehead before leaving.

She came to class next day, but her long hair hung in limp strands, and a large, soft, floppy hat shoved tightly down shadowed her face. She didn’t look at anyone, kept her head down, and sat in the back of the classroom.

After class he tried to catch up with her, but she left so fast he couldn’t. He caught sight of her outside, climbing into a car with a surly-looking asshole who glared at Tommy as he approached.

The guy got out of the car. “You got a problem with me?”

“I got a problem with a guy who takes a whack at women, yeah.”

Maggie got out and stepped between them, desperate. “Primo, please, it’s okay. Tommy’s my friend.”

He jabbed his hand at Tommy. “Stay the fuck away from my girl.”

“She’s my friend, dude. I’m no threat to you. I’m just worried about her.”

“You don’t need to worry about her. You just worry about your

own Cracker ass and stay the fuck away.”

Tommy looked at Maggie. “Honey, please—”

“Tommy, it’s okay, really.” She coaxed Primo back to the car. “I’ll see you in class.”

He tried not to worry about her, but two weeks later she looked like shit and wouldn’t talk to him outside of the safety of the classroom. Before class one day, he stopped by Wal-Mart, picked up a cheap prepaid phone and activated it. Before she could scurry from class he blocked her and slipped it into her hand.

“The next time he hits you,” he growled, “either you call me or I *will* call the cops after I kill the fucker. Do you understand me?”

She nodded and left, but not before he saw the tears in her eyes.

Later that evening, his cell phone rang a little after midnight. Maggie’s hysterical voice ripped him from sleep. “Tommy? Oh my God, he’s drunk, and Beth and Sue aren’t home. Please, come get me!”

“Where are you?” She rattled off an address, a convenience store a few blocks from her apartment complex. She raced out the door and jumped into his truck when he pulled into the parking lot. Her left eye had nearly swollen shut, and he spotted blood crusted on her lip.

“We’re calling the cops. I’ll be damned if I’ll let you lie to them about him, babe.”

Crying, she fell into his arms and nodded.

He dialed 911 from his cell. They waited for a deputy to respond. An hour later, three deputies converged on her apartment while she sat with Tommy in the safety of his truck. After they hauled Primo out in handcuffs, Tommy stepped out of his truck and stared at the man.

“I’m gonna get you, you fucking bitch!” Primo screamed before they shoved him into the back of a cruiser.

Three hours later, after a visit to the ER to make sure Maggie’s injuries weren’t too serious, Tommy tucked her into bed with him and protectively held her. He didn’t feel anything romantic for her even

without the crappy circumstances. It would have been like making love to one of his sisters.

He tried to sleep.

* * * *

Three days later, Maggie felt reasonably safe returning to her apartment. But when Primo made bail and started threatening her unless she dropped the charges, Tommy took control and moved her in with him and Kenny.

She didn't fight him.

Tommy left her at his place one evening two weeks after the attack, using the excuse that he and Kenny were helping a friend move. He knew from talking to Maggie's roommates that Primo came by every night looking for her, usually drunk. Tommy and Kenny picked up a pizza and drove to Maggie's apartment, where they waited while the roommates went to see a movie, paid for by Tommy.

Right on time, the asshole showed up, drunk and mean and looking for a fight.

The men gave him one.

Maggie didn't awaken when the men returned home a little after two in the morning. After beating the asshole unconscious, they dumped him, naked, at the Hillsborough River State Park.

He could find his own fucking way home.

* * * *

A month later, after Primo was jailed without bond for grand theft charges, Maggie felt safe enough to return to her apartment. Tommy missed her, but knew despite Kenny's teasing that she would never be anything more in his heart than a dear friend. Slowly she returned mostly to her old self, although she wore an air of sadness she'd never had before.

They grabbed lunch after class one day. She was going through the campus paper while he reviewed his notes for his afternoon class.

“Oh! Have you read his book?” She shoved the paper across the table at him and pointed at an article’s headline.

“Damning Thoughts” Means Dreams of Success for Professor Paulson.

“No. Any good?”

“Oh, man, they have it over at the campus bookstore. It’s a bestseller! He’s great!” She looked at the black-and-white picture accompanying the article and sighed. “I saw him once, between classes. He’s British, you know. You’d love his book. He’s got a short story anthology coming out, too. The article says he’s got contracts for two sequels to *Damning Thoughts*.”

“Cool. Local celebrity.”

That night was their weekly dinner and DVD together. Since dumping Primo, Maggie swore she would never let another man interfere with her relationship with Tommy. She showed up at his apartment with dinner fixings, a Netflix selection, and a small paper bag bearing the campus bookstore’s logo. “Here.”

“What’s this?” He removed the book. *Damning Thoughts* by Tyler Paulson. “Oh, sweetie, you didn’t have to do this.” The hardcover book had to be a strain on her budget.

She kissed his cheek and started making dinner. “It’s the least I can do for the guy who saved my life.”

Later, after she left, he couldn’t sleep. He’d drunk too much iced tea throughout the day and felt wide awake. He spotted the book on his bedside table.

Why not?

Four hours later, he’d read nearly half the book. It was amazing. Maggie hadn’t exaggerated. He forced himself to put the book down, but not before staring at the back jacket cover. Paulson’s intense blue eyes stared back at him from the author photo. Sandy brown hair and a sweet smile.

Nice.

He clipped that line of thought and tried to go to sleep.

Chapter 4

Wednesday morning, Tyler felt a headache threatening. Tension, no doubt. Headache now, fight with Erin later. They came like clockwork, it seemed. Nothing he did was right or good enough, no matter how hard he tried. She would pounce as soon as he arrived home.

If she was even home.

He would sit and take it until she finished verbally scourging him for whatever he'd done this time.

And he *would* sit and take it. He would never lash out at her. He loved her, despite the recent trend in their relationship. Saying nothing was better than saying something he couldn't take back later.

He had to teach an evening class that night. His routine was to stay on campus, lock himself in his office and write or go to the library for research. He never went home before the evening class because it was too much trouble fighting rush hour traffic to get back on time, too stressful. Especially if Erin was in a foul mood and picked yet another fight with him.

After lunch he decided to torture himself a little more and walked down the hall to Erin's office. She'd already left for the day.

Strange.

Across the hall, he found Robert's office also locked, a posted note apologizing for his absence.

A nasty feeling shifted in Tyler's gut. His instincts rarely proved wrong, even though he prayed they were in this instance.

His mind thought back to the past few weeks. Robert had left early the past several Wednesdays, without explanation.

As had Erin.

The hint of a man's familiar cologne on Erin's shirt.

Without word to anyone, Tyler left, hurrying home to their apartment.

Robert's car sat parked next to Erin's.

Tyler took a deep breath and quietly let himself in. Mozart played on the stereo, just loud enough they couldn't hear him enter the apartment. On numb feet he walked to the open bedroom door.

Erin lay beneath Robert as he pounded his cock into her while she begged for more.

Stunned shock set in. After a moment, he cleared his throat. The lovers startled.

Erin had the decency to yank the sheet over herself. She started to stammer something at him, but Tyler didn't want to hear.

He turned to go when Robert spoke. "Tyler, I'm sorry."

"So am I." He didn't slam the front door behind him, still too numb for any kind of thought. He drove back to campus and sat in his locked and darkened office, waiting for his class to start.

He turned off his cell. He didn't know what, if anything, she would say.

He didn't know what to say to her.

Hadn't he expected this anyway? He couldn't make her happy. Nothing he did was right. He loved her far more than she loved him. That much was blatantly obvious to him, even at the beginning. He'd chased her for her affection from the start, grateful for whatever scraps she tossed in his direction.

Somehow, he made it through his class. It comforted him, in a way, to teach and numb his mind to the reality waiting beyond the safety of the campus.

He delayed his return even longer by stopping at an all-night coffee shop. He had thirty pages left to read in a paperback and wanted to finish it in peace.

He tried to give no thought to what might be going on in his

absence.

Erin's car wasn't in the apartment parking lot when he pulled in a little after eleven. Neither was Robert's.

He suspected he knew where she was.

Taking a deep breath, he unlocked the front door and walked in. Not too much out of place. He immediately noticed a swath of CDs missing from the rack near the stereo. A few gaping sections of empty shelves where her books had been.

He stood there for a moment, absorbing that. Was this how a "painless" divorce took place? With a bloodless coup of affections?

He walked into the bedroom. Her clothes, all gone. The bed made—sheets changed, thank God.

Well, a modicum of human decency, at least.

In the bathroom, all her things...gone.

What little she'd kept in the spare bedroom he used as his office...gone.

Her note lay on the small kitchen table, tucked in an envelope. Two sheets, printed on the computer, with her signature.

He barely scanned it. An apology followed by all her well-reasoned arguments listing why she had to leave, most having to do with the fact that Tyler didn't make her happy and smothered her with attention.

Closing with, *It's not your fault. It's not you, it's me.*

He snorted, crumpled the note, and threw it across the room.

Pete and Eddie were still up when Tyler pulled into their driveway. After one look at his face, Eddie pulled him in the front door and engulfed him in a huge hug.

"Oh, man. What the hell happened?"

Tyler shook his head, still unable to speak it, to vocalize the finality.

He collapsed to his knees as he started crying while Eddie and Pete surrounded him.

* * * *

Tyler forced himself to go to work the next morning. He wouldn't let Erin and Robert run him out of the one true pleasure he had left other than his writing. He enjoyed teaching. He enjoyed entertaining and educating his students.

Besides, he'd done nothing wrong. She'd said so herself.

The note was still taped to Robert's door. Erin's office remained locked.

Would they come and go the back way? Taking the long route through the back hallway so they didn't have to pass his office door?

He left his door standing open, just to see.

They didn't appear that day. At some point a student aide from the faculty office taped notes to both doors that they were out due to "family emergencies."

Tyler snorted as he read the notes. *They couldn't come up with better?*

He didn't let himself think about what they might be doing.

She appeared in his office doorway Friday afternoon, just before he left for the weekend.

In her hand she held a thick envelope.

He didn't speak, didn't stand, waited for her to break the uncomfortable silence.

She stepped in, closed his door, and laid the envelope on his desk. "I don't want alimony," she quietly said. "I'll pay off the joint credit card. There's not much on it. You can have the apartment and the stuff. Most of it was yours anyway."

He stared at the envelope, then at her.

Erin swallowed hard. "I'm sorry, Ty. I didn't want it to end like this. I never meant to hurt you."

"How long?" he quietly asked.

"Two months."

Bloody hell. Not even halfway into their first year of marriage and

she was screwing around on him. “Did you use protection, or do I need to go to the doctor and get tested?”

Her face reddened. Her mouth tightened, like she prepared to spit a retort back at him, then she took a deep breath. “I didn’t do anything to put you at risk,” she quietly replied.

He nodded. “Thank you.” He turned away. Conversation over.

She stood there for a moment, hesitating.

“Is there anything else?” he asked.

“Did you want to talk?”

“About what?” He turned and struggled to contain the anger and pain in his voice. “I come home to find my wife fucking my best friend, a man I also happen to work with. What more is there to talk about? I love you, yet apparently I’m not good enough for you. I never have been, according to you. Do you want me to beg and grovel and embarrass myself trying to keep you in a marriage you so obviously don’t want? Do you want me to lie and say this doesn’t fucking hurt? Would that make you feel better? What more do you want from me, Erin? A few liters of blood to accompany the pound of flesh you’ve already ripped from me?”

Finally, the start of her tears. “I’m sorry, Tyler. I never meant to hurt you.” She’d said it before, and in the note she’d repeated it several times. “You smothered me, always hovering, doing everything, like you had to make it perfect! You couldn’t just let things be!”

“Bloody well *excuse* me for spoiling my wife rotten!” He stood, now unleashing his anger. “Did you ever think about sitting down with me and talking with me instead of jumping into bed with a man who was supposedly my friend?”

“I didn’t want to hurt your feelings.”

“Oh, right. Nice, Erin. Brilliant. And I suppose this was just a tender farewell, no? I’m being punished for being too attentive? Instead of being an insensitive asshole who didn’t pay you the time of day or give a bloody damn about you, I’m being left because I paid

too much attention to the woman I just married a few months ago?” He snorted. “Thank you very much for teaching me truths about life. I once heard a man joke that women loved insensitive arseholes. Now I understand what he meant.”

She shook her head. “You just don’t get it. You act like you’re my fucking wife, Ty! I want a man to take care of me.”

He stared, stunned. “What the hell have I been doing then, if not that?”

“I didn’t want to go here with you, but okay, let’s do it.” She leaned closer and dropped her voice. “You’d make some lucky man a good wife, Ty. Yes, you’re great in bed, I won’t deny that. You’re fucking awesome. It doesn’t change the fact that I can’t handle having a guy like you. Maybe other women can. It’s not you—it’s me. I thought it was sweet at first, the way you took care of me. But it’s like you expect me to pick up the slack in some areas, and frankly, that’s supposed to be your job. Just because you decided you wanted to be the wife in our marriage doesn’t mean I automatically decided I wanted to be the husband. Maybe you need a stronger woman than me to take charge for you. I don’t want to be that woman. That’s not who I am. I need a take-charge kind of guy, and you are *not* that kind of guy.”

Erin straightened and took a deep breath. “I think maybe you need to look at yourself and dig deep. I’m not sure it’s a wife you need, Tyler. I think you know what I’m talking about.”

He sat and turned his back to her again and prayed she left. Prayed she didn’t see his tears.

She wasn’t quite finished. “I’ll pay for the divorce. I won’t ask for anything. I’m sorry. I really am.”

“Good-bye, Erin.”

He waited until he heard his office door close behind her to drop his head to the desk and cry.

Robert had the decency not to return to work until Tuesday. Tyler ignored him, didn’t pay him any attention. At the weekly faculty

meeting, Tyler sat away from them and refused to look at either. He noted a few confused looks from others, had heard whispers that stopped at his approach in the halls, and ignored them.

Life went on.

Chapter 5

Tyler moved into a different apartment in the same complex. He was honest with the manager as to why. Tyler chose to bear the pity in the woman's expression as she arranged the swap to a vacancy on the other side of the complex. It was far better than sleeping on his sofa. He couldn't bear the thought of sleeping in the same room, much less the same bed, where the betrayal occurred. His soon-to-be former next-door neighbors were happy to take the nearly new bed off his hands for free.

He bought a new bed, one comfortable, soft, and giving, not the firm rock Erin had insisted upon.

How ironic, he thought as he lay on his new bed. Why didn't he see that correlation before? *A hard bed, an even harder heart.*

Tyler settled into single life as the divorce trundled through the legal system, completed without fanfare or fighting. Bob volunteered to handle the paperwork for him and tried to wave off a retainer fee, but Tyler insisted on paying him.

Erin had enough shame over her actions that she kept her word about the divorce. Simple dissolution, no muss, no fuss. In some ways, that hurt Tyler even more deeply, that all she wanted was out, willing to pay to leave rather than stay and try to work on things.

That he'd been cast aside so easily for another.

For a supposed friend.

Tyler kept his mouth shut to others at work about events, didn't explain, didn't make waves. For the first several months, Erin and Robert were discreet enough not to rub his face in it at work.

He sometimes dated women and the occasional man. No one

really caught his interest enough to make him relax the cautious, hard shell he'd constructed around his emotions. Sometimes he dated a woman more than once. A few times he actually slept with them. He frequently found it difficult to weed out those who genuinely wanted to date him from those who wanted to date *Tyler Paulson, Bestselling Author*.

He even fooled around a little with some of the men, but didn't cross that final line of letting one close enough to give them that part of himself he'd never shared with another man before.

His small two-bedroom apartment was comfortable, clean, quiet—and all his. A reversed floor plan from the old one, just different enough he wasn't reminded of Erin every time he turned around. He could cook what he wanted when he wanted, although he didn't often cook at home. It was too upsetting seeing all those leftovers. The quiet stillness allowed him too much time to think about nights he'd spent cooking with his father.

Tyler frequently went to Pete and Eddie's house and spent evenings there learning to play poker, cooking dinner for them, and enjoying their company. They welcomed and appreciated him. Their Friday night poker game became a comforting routine Tyler looked forward to every week.

Eddie took a swig of his beer and glanced over his cards at Tyler. "Whatcha got?"

Bob usually joined their Friday night games. He grinned. "Stick to quarters, Eddie. You suck at poker."

Pete laughed and slapped his cards on the table. "I'm through. Tyler's wiped me out again."

Bob sighed and folded. "I want to hold on to a little of the retainer you paid me, Ty."

Eddie grinned. "You in or out, Ty?"

Tyler arched an eyebrow at him. "Full house, mate. Queens over jacks." He laid his cards on the table.

Eddie rolled his eyes and threw his cards down. "One of these

days, Bob, I'll listen to you."

Tyler smiled as he scooped the chips toward him, neatly arranging them into piles. "No, you won't, mate. You never do."

Pete gathered the cards to shuffle and deal. "Bob, where the hell is Terry? At least I can beat him. Usually."

Bob glanced at his watch. "Marcus' plane should have landed by now. I'm sure he'll call when they're on the way."

Eddie finished his beer and stood to get a fresh one. "What's this guy's deal anyway?"

"He teaches literature at a university over in Brussels and just broke up with his boyfriend. The last term ended a couple of weeks ago. He was already slated to take the next term off for a sabbatical. Terry knows him from college, told him he could spend a few months with us soaking up the Florida sun."

Tyler tensed, anticipating Eddie's next comment. "So he's single?" he called from the kitchen.

Pete slapped the cards on the table. "Will you please quit bugging poor Ty? Good grief, he's only been single a couple of months."

Eddie returned with a fresh beer. "Hey, it never hurts to keep one's options open. Right, Ty?"

Tyler shrugged. "I suppose."

Pete was about to comment when Bob's cell rang. Bob excused himself, took the call, and returned a moment later. "They're on their way. They'll be here in about thirty minutes."

"Finally," Pete grouched. "Maybe I can win something tonight, goddammit."

They played until Terry and Marcus arrived, then took a break. Tyler didn't tell Eddie he had a date scheduled for the next evening, knowing Eddie would, in typical fashion, pester him for every last detail and try to plan a wedding date. Bless his heart, he went overboard, but he meant well.

Tyler felt Marcus' steely grey eyes examine him, and not uncomfortably. Grey lightly sprinkled his black hair at the temples.

While he looked trim and in shape inside his khaki slacks and pullover shirt, from the lines around Marcus' eyes, Tyler guessed he was at least ten years older than himself. He stood taller than his own five-seven by at least seven inches.

They settled in to play poker. When Tyler got up to freshen his drink, Eddie followed him to the kitchen. "Hey, that's perfect. He's cute and single. You're cute and single—"

"Eddie, I love you, you know I do, but please don't. Not tonight. I'm far too tired for this."

He nodded. "Sure. Just keep your options open."

Tyler rolled his eyes and returned to the dining room.

He was seated across from Marcus and noticed by the end of the evening that the older man spent a lot of time staring at him. His suspicions proved partially correct—Marcus was a surprising nineteen years older than him. Well preserved, to say the least. His skin bore a healthy tan due to his hours spent outdoors hiking around Brussels, which also explained his trim physique.

Marcus startled him. "I must say, I thought your use of the *Macbeth* correlation in *Damning Thoughts* was well-done. Very subtle, not obvious at all. A refreshing change from a lot of commercial fiction. I enjoyed it quite a lot."

Stunned, Tyler nodded. "Thank you. That's quite kind of you to notice." Very few people had noticed. It wasn't something he overtly advertised, figuring critics and readers who paid attention would get it, and if others didn't, oh well.

Marcus continued. "It was a pleasant surprise, I must say." He took a sip of his beer. "I had a rather lively discussion at a faculty reception one evening defending your use of imagery."

A warm flush crept into Tyler's face. "Really?"

"Some academics, as I'm sure you're well aware, don't appreciate commercial fiction."

"Oh jeez," Pete snarked as he threw down his cards. "They're gonna talk shop. There goes the fucking game."

By the end of the evening, Tyler looked forward to next Friday, when they would all get together again at Pete and Eddie's for dinner and the usual poker game.

He also looked forward to spending more time with Marcus, who'd held his hand a moment longer than necessary when saying good-bye and telling Tyler he looked forward to seeing him again.

* * * *

The next evening, Tyler was dressing for his date when his cell rang. Terry's number appeared on the screen, but it wasn't Terry's voice on the other end of the line.

Marcus' rich, rolling voice filled Tyler's phone. "I wanted to call and talk for a few minutes. If you're not busy?" The man's deep voice stirred something within Tyler that the thought of the woman waiting for him could never touch.

"I'm afraid I was just on the way out, actually. I'm sorry."

"Ah. So am I." Tyler sensed the smile behind the other man's voice. "Lucky man."

"Woman, actually."

Marcus' tone changed again. "Oh. I'm sorry." Formal, not quite chilly. "I see I was under a mistaken impression—"

"No!" Tyler felt desperate to not let the conversation end like that. "No, you weren't. I'm..." He felt heat rise in his face. "After my divorce I decided to keep my options open, as it were. Not limit myself."

Curiosity crept in. "Oh? Is that so?"

Tyler felt his cock stiffen. "Yes, that's so." He didn't know what it was about this man, but he wanted to find out.

"So tonight some *lucky* woman gets the pleasure of your company." The way Marcus practically rolled the word "lucky" brought Tyler's erection to full hardness. "Perhaps tomorrow night you'll do me the honor of showing me around town. I don't have a

rental yet. If you'll drive and pick a place, I'll pay."

Tyler's heart raced. "All right. That sounds quite nice."

Marcus rumbled a deep laugh across the line. "Don't stay out too late tonight. I wouldn't want you to wear yourself out and leave me hanging. Pick me up at seven, here at Terry's."

Normally, Tyler would bristle at the way the man took charge, but something about it scratched the surface of a craving Tyler didn't even know he had. "Seven. I'll see you then."

Tyler ended the call and spent the next few minutes in a daze as he finished getting ready. He'd given serious thought to inviting Alice to spend the night with him. She was certainly willing to do it the way she'd hinted, but now...

He considered cancelling his date with her and calling Marcus back to see if he wanted to get together tonight after all.

All through his date with Alice, Tyler's mind flashed back to Marcus. Imagination running wild, Tyler tried to envision him without his clothes, how his voice would sound whispering in his ear.

Was he the one?

He ended up taking Alice home early, claiming a headache.

How trite, he thought.

As he lay in bed and thought about Marcus and his steely grey eyes, Tyler grew hard again. He closed his eyes and fisted his cock, slowly stroked it. He wondered what the man's body looked like, how he would feel, how he'd respond to his touch.

With that thought, it didn't take Tyler long to climax. He caught his breath before cleaning up and returning to bed, where he spent the night dreaming about Marcus.

* * * *

Sunday evening, Tyler arrived at Bob and Terry's house ten minutes early. Terry smiled as he let him in. "Have fun, you two."

Bob appeared in the kitchen doorway behind him. "Don't bust his

balls, Ter.”

Marcus walked out, dressed in slacks and a button-up shirt. His smile hardened Tyler’s cock. “Ready?”

Tyler nodded.

Marcus kept him talking on the way to the Columbia Restaurant in Ybor City, and all throughout their dinner. Unusual, because usually Tyler did the listening as he gently directed the conversation. By the end of their meal, Marcus knew a lot about Tyler, while Tyler knew practically nothing about this man.

As their meal wound down, Marcus leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands clasped. His mouth twisted in a sultry smile as he dropped his voice. “Tell me, Tyler, do you prefer to bottom or top?”

Tyler blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

The way Marcus’ eyes crinkled in amusement hardened Tyler’s cock again. “You haven’t had a lot of experience with men, have you?”

Tyler didn’t know how to answer that, so he just shook his head.

Marcus laughed, sat back, and took a sip of sangria. “Ah.” He winked, making Tyler’s face blush and his cock throb inside his pants. “I thought so.” He leaned in again. “Just so you know, I don’t bottom. Somehow I get the feeling that’s not going to be a problem for you, is it?”

Still not quite sure what Marcus meant even though his implication was pretty clear, Tyler softly replied, “No. It won’t.”

* * * *

They were the last patrons out the door. In the dark and nearly empty parking lot, Tyler unlocked the passenger door for Marcus. When Tyler turned, the other man stepped in and pressed him against the side of the car. Tyler looked into his eyes and felt helpless to do anything.

Not that he wanted to.

A firm bulge poked into Tyler's hip, triggering his own reaction.

Marcus didn't speak at first, his eyes searching Tyler's face. "You're obviously attracted to me." Marcus sounded nonchalant, matter of fact. "So why haven't you slept with a man yet?"

Tyler started to stammer, not used to feeling flustered like this.

Marcus interrupted him. "You've played around a little with men, just never fucked a man or been fucked by one." A statement, not a question.

Tyler nodded, his cock almost painfully hard in response to Marcus' assured confidence.

A long, slow, sexy smile creased the older man's face. "Mmm. A virgin ass." He slanted his mouth over Tyler's and kissed him, hard, possessively, nipping and biting Tyler, drawing a low, hungry moan from him.

Then Marcus stepped away, leaving Tyler shaky and breathless. "You don't have any plans for the next few evenings, do you?" Marcus asked.

Tyler shook his head.

"Good." Marcus stepped past Tyler and slid into the passenger seat.

Tyler realized he was still standing there. He closed the passenger door, hurried around the front of the car, and got behind the wheel. Marcus' pleased smile kept Tyler's cock throbbing.

Dammit, he'd never felt like this about a woman before. Any woman. Or a man. What the hell was going on with him? What was it about this man, someone who should make him bristle at the way he took charge?

With a shaky hand, Tyler started to put the key in the ignition. Marcus reached over and stopped him, his long, graceful fingers curving around his wrist, the heat from the other man's flesh electrifying against Tyler's skin.

Tyler lifted his gaze to Marcus, waiting.

Without turning his head, Marcus glanced around the parking lot,

then pulled Tyler to him. His tongue pressed for entrance, insistent, possessive. Tyler gave in to his lead and let him explore and taste, eagerly leaning across the seat to be closer to him.

Marcus' hand cupped the back of Tyler's head, his fingers tightly twining in his hair. "Do you know what I want right now, Tyler?" Marcus whispered in his ear.

"What?"

"I want to feel those sweet, hot lips of yours wrapped around my cock."

Tyler's heart raced. He didn't care if Marcus heard him moan. God help him, he wanted to taste him. "We can go back to—"

"Not later. Now. *Right* now."

Tyler's pulse went from thundering to stopped in the space of a beat. "Beg pardon?"

Insistent pressure on the back of Tyler's neck pressed him down toward the other man's lap. "It's dark. There's no one around." Marcus leaned in and nipped Tyler's earlobe. "Let me let you in on a secret, Tyler. I like to take charge. I have the feeling you want your men that way. There's not a woman in the world who can give you what I can give you right now."

Tyler closed his eyes as the man's deep, silky voice sank into his soul. He was right.

Damn him.

With shaky fingers, Tyler leaned over and fumbled his trousers open. The man wasn't wearing underwear, making the job a little easier. Marcus kept one hand on the back of Tyler's neck, gentle, steady pressure refusing to let go, while he leaned the seat back with his other hand.

"That's it," Marcus said. "You know what do to. It's instinctive, isn't it?" His fingers molded around the back of Tyler's skull, coaxing, directing.

Torn between lust and self-loathing over his eagerness to comply, Tyler wrapped his lips around the other man's cock and traced the

ridge with his tongue.

Marcus rewarded him with a sharp intake of breath and another gentle squeeze on his head. “That’s it, baby. You’re a natural. I’m keeping an eye out. You just do what you’re doing down there. I’ll take care of everything else. I’ll keep you safe.”

Tyler closed his eyes and let himself go, sliding the man’s stiff shaft deeper into his mouth with Marcus still pressing for more. He wasn’t the first man Tyler had gone down on, or even the largest, but he was the first to totally take charge like this.

His other hand slipped around Tyler’s head. Now Marcus was in total control, Tyler unable to do much more than hang on and lick and suck for all he was worth. His cock painfully throbbed, demanding release as he envisioned how he must look being taken like this. The cock in his mouth throbbed, grew stiffer as the salty tang of pre-come hit his tongue.

“You’re doing good,” Marcus said as his hips jerked harder. “Don’t stop what you’re doing. I’m almost there. Dammit, you’re fantastic!”

Warmth rolled through Tyler. Mixed with his conflicting emotions was pride that he was doing this to this man, and gratitude that his efforts were appreciated.

This man wanted him.

New urgency spurred Tyler, wanting more, wanting approval.

“Get ready,” Marcus warned, just as his fingers tightened on his head.

Tyler swallowed, determined not to fuck this up. He managed to not gag as he deep-throated him without losing a drop. He didn’t move as Marcus went limp in the seat, his grip changing from commanding to gentle as he stroked and smoothed Tyler’s hair.

“That was wonderful.” He patted Tyler’s shoulder. “Fantastic. You can sit up now.”

Tyler wasn’t sure what, if any, the protocol was. He raised his head from the other man’s lap.

Marcus gave him a smile and leaned in for another kiss. “Damn, for a man without much experience, that was really, really good. You absolutely are a natural.” He released Tyler, sat back, and fastened his trousers. “I was talking to a friend who recently moved from the area. He said there’s a great club here in Ybor City, called Blue Coconuts, right on the main drag.” His gaze landed squarely on Tyler again. “Let’s go check it out.”

Tyler’s cock screamed for attention, but he nodded. “All right.”

Marcus smiled and stroked Tyler’s chin. “Very good. You and I are going to get along just fine, aren’t we?”

Tyler nodded.

Chapter 6

Nearly midnight, it took Tyler twenty minutes to find the main strip since he'd never been there before. Even on a Sunday night, Seventh Avenue looked like a cross between something out of Key West and Bourbon Street all rolled into one crazy, tropical Tampa backdrop. They asked a mounted cop for directions, and he pointed them the right way. Tyler stared at the blue neon sign on the building's façade as Marcus paid their cover and they each received a wristband. The loud electronic music thumping through the brick walls didn't bode well, in Tyler's mind, but he was along for the ride wherever it might lead.

And right now, it was his still-stiff cock doing the leading.

Marcus leaned in to the bouncer and asked him something. The other man pointed to a flight of stairs and handed him two more wristbands after Marcus passed him another twenty. Marcus grinned, slipped one band on himself, another on Tyler, and grabbed Tyler's hand.

"Come along, little one. Time to broaden your horizons."

Tyler wanted to bridle at the endearment, but the way Marcus laced his fingers through Tyler's wiped away any thought of protest. Marcus in the lead, they climbed to the third floor, where another bouncer waved them in after glancing at their wrists.

Tyler would have turned around and left if it wasn't for Marcus leading him deeper into the space. A balcony of sorts, the center of the large room looked all the way down onto the dance floor on the main level. Because of the club's light and sound rigging, the patrons below couldn't look up and easily see who watched them. The patrons

on the ground level were mostly gay male couples with a few hetero and lesbian couples mixed in. The music throbbed, the bass rolling through his body, the volume making casual conversation difficult at best.

Half of one wall was taken up by a bar lit with blue neon and worked by a buff, shirtless man younger than Tyler. He wore a buckled leather collar around his neck, leather wrist cuffs on each hand, and tight leather pants that showed every vein of the large cock shifting to the right of his zipper.

Tyler stared, amazed, as Marcus confidently led him across the space, apparently totally at ease in this environment. Various darkened alcoves were tucked around the room, each appearing to contain equipment of various sorts. Some Tyler recognized, and some he wasn't sure he wanted to know what they were used for. Tyler jumped when somewhere behind them it sounded like a whip cracked and a man moaned loudly, even over the music.

Marcus didn't let go of his hand as he laughed. "Ah, sounds like someone's having a fun time." He turned and caught Tyler's eye. "Too bad I couldn't bring any of my toys with me. Customs tends to hassle people with whips and crops." He winked.

Tyler was pretty sure Marcus wasn't kidding.

The older man led him to the bar, where he ordered himself a rum and Coke, then looked at Tyler. "Regular or diet?"

"Regular."

Marcus ordered him a plain Coke, then took a sip of his own drink. "Well, what do you think?" Unmistakable amusement crinkled his eyes.

Tyler glanced around. "I'm not sure."

Marcus laughed. "You haven't run screaming yet. That's a good thing, I suppose."

Tyler didn't know where to look or what to watch. He wasn't sure if he felt under- or overdressed based upon the nearly naked state of many of the people.

Marcus grabbed Tyler's hand and led him around the outskirts of the room, to the far side where a group of people were gathered at a discreet distance around a piece of equipment. The taller man positioned Tyler in front of him, his hips pressed into Tyler's backside.

He dipped his head, his lips near Tyler's ear. "You'll like this. Watch."

As if he had a choice between Marcus' commanding tone of voice and the almost train-wreck-like atmosphere. A man was tethered to an upright X-shaped structure, his back to the spectators. His arms and legs bore leather cuffs. The way they were clipped to the structure left him spread and vulnerable.

"That's called a St. Andrew's Cross," Marcus explained.

The blindfolded man, dressed in nothing more than a G-string and a thick, locked leather collar, wore a red ball gag. Another man, this one in leather pants and shirtless, wore a leather harness buckled across his torso. He checked the bound man's restraints.

He also carried a few decidedly dangerous-looking implements usually seen in horse barns, not Ybor City nightclubs. This man, tall and lithely muscled, grabbed a handful of the bound man's hair and roughly yanked his head back. "Do you belong to me?"

A single loud grunt from the man in reply, all he could manage through the gag.

"I wonder if he's his Master or just his top," Marcus idly wondered, more to himself than to Tyler.

Tyler remained silent, fascinated and scared at the same time.

The man hauled off and slapped the bound man's ass, leaving his hand in place and fiercely squeezing the flesh. "Maybe my puppy needs a tattoo, right here for the world to see. 'Property of Master Kahn.'"

"Answers that question," Marcus murmured.

The man wiggled his ass against his Master's hand, not trying to escape his touch, but in a blatant attempt to get closer.

“My puppy doesn’t get off that easy,” Master Kahn teased, stepping away. He bent over and retrieved something from a black duffel bag on the floor. He then stepped in and said something in puppy’s ear as he placed the item in the man’s left hand and closed his fingers around it.

The man nodded.

Marcus rested his chin on Tyler’s shoulder. “I’d be willing to bet that’s their safety.”

“What?”

“Watch puppy’s hand. If he drops whatever it is he’s holding, I’m sure his Master will stop the scene.”

Tyler wasn’t sure what that meant, but he had a feeling he was about to find out.

Master Kahn stepped away and hefted a flogger. “Is puppy ready for his punishment?”

Tyler assumed the ass wiggle was an affirmative.

Master Kahn glanced around to check his clearance before he started swinging the flogger, working up and down puppy’s back with it, more a brushing kind of stroke than a heavy, thuddy impact. After a few minutes, as the man’s skin gradually grew pink under the leather lashes, Master Kahn picked up the pace. From the sound and look of the strokes, they were more to directly strike than sweep across the flesh.

Marcus ground his hips against Tyler’s backside, one arm dropping to Tyler’s waist. “That could be you,” he said, his lips brushing Tyler’s ear. “Helpless. Bound. Trusting me to take you to the edge and not let you fall over. Have you ever had that kind of trust in anyone before?”

“No.” Tyler didn’t realize he’d answered aloud until Marcus chuckled.

“I thought not.” At some point Marcus had finished his drink and set the cup on a nearby table. He kept one arm around Tyler’s waist as he worked Tyler’s shirt loose from his slacks. That hand he slid under

the fabric, up Tyler's abs, lighting a trail of fire against his flesh. Then his fingers found his left nipple. As the arm around Tyler's waist held him tightly, Marcus started to pinch.

Tyler moaned and nearly dropped his drink. He reached over and set it on a nearby table.

Marcus softly laughed. "I know. Feels good, doesn't it?" He squeezed a little more, the slight bite of pain making Tyler's cock throb even harder. "Lean against me. Relax."

Tyler leaned back, but relaxing was out of the question with his body screaming for more.

On the cross, puppy squirmed, trying to wiggle his ass to fall under the flogger's lashes. Master Kahn stopped and stepped in, running his hand over the man's pink flesh.

"I like this look on you. Let's do some more." Master Kahn dropped the flogger onto the duffel bag and picked up a fierce-looking riding crop. Tyler sympathetically winced as the man flicked it between puppy's legs, but puppy seemed to enjoy it and loudly moaned around the ball gag.

"He's deep in subspace right now," Marcus explained. "I bet you'd love it." He switched to pinching Tyler's right nipple, giving it similar torment. "I've been told it feels like flying, the best natural high you can get without any drugs. The world falls away, and all you're focused on is what you're feeling. I love getting my boy into subspace and keeping him there for a while."

Tyler's head lolled against the other man's shoulder as he struggled to keep his knees locked under him.

Master Kahn changed position and started working the crop over puppy's ass and thighs, alternating hard and soft strokes depending on where they fell, leaving red welts behind in some cases. From where they stood off to the side, Tyler could see puppy's erection straining against his G-string.

After another few minutes, Master Kahn traded the crop for a four-foot whip.

“Ah, a favorite of mine,” Marcus murmured. “I love a short singletail. You can kiss the flesh with it and make a boy come, or you can take off skin and make a boy scream.”

Master Kahn apparently had something close to the latter in mind. He struck puppy on the left ass cheek with it, leaving a red welt and making the man flinch against his bonds. “You don’t like the whip, do you, puppy?” Master Kahn asked.

The man shook his head.

Master Kahn evilly grinned. “You’ll take it though, won’t you?” He nailed him on the right ass cheek, leaving a matching welt.

The man nodded.

Master Kahn walked over and grabbed puppy’s hair again, wrenched his head back and spoke something in his ear. The man moaned and shook his head. Master Kahn gripped his hair tighter and said, loudly enough to be heard by the audience, “My puppy will be a good boy and do what he’s told or he’ll sleep in his crate tonight.”

Softly moaning, frantically shifting his straining groin against nothing but air, puppy nodded as much as he could.

Tyler could barely think straight, between the feel of Marcus’ breath against his neck and the feel of his fingers alternating back and forth, playing with his nipples. But when Master Kahn leaned in and tenderly kissed puppy’s cheek, Tyler recognized there was a much deeper dynamic at work.

The man known as puppy tipped his head and nuzzled his Master’s hand before Master Kahn stepped back. “You know what I want out of you, puppy,” the man ordered, sounding stern. “My puppy better show his appreciation.” He started nailing the man in the ass and thighs with the whip as puppy moaned and squirmed. After a dozen strokes, Master Kahn ordered, “Now!”

The man let out a loud scream around the ball gag as his body went rigid and strained against his bonds. Tyler watched, fascinated, as it looked like the man was gripped by an orgasm.

Marcus laughed. “I wonder how long it took him to train his boy

to do that on command. Excellent.”

As puppy’s body went slack, Master Kahn quickly stepped in and wrapped an arm around him, holding him, whispering to him as he worked to unhook his restraints. As puppy was freed, he dropped to his knees and threw his arms around his Master’s legs.

Master Kahn leaned over and pulled the blindfold and gag off the man, stroked his hair, talked to him. Then he knelt next to him and put one arm around him. He reached for puppy’s left hand and took a small, yellow rubber ball from him and dropped it into the duffel bag. He pulled a throw blanket from the bag and wrapped it around puppy, held him tightly, whispering to him as others walked away from the scene. Master Kahn cuddled him close as puppy rested his head against his shoulder.

Tyler spotted something else he hadn’t noticed before—matching bands on the men’s left hands.

Marcus withdrew his hand from under Tyler’s shirt. “Let’s step away. He’s going to give him aftercare.”

In a foggy haze of desire, Tyler let Marcus lead him into one of the darkened alcoves. Padded benches lined the walls. Some men sat and talked. Others were locked into various intimate positions with each other barely the legal side of indecent.

Marcus sat, pulled Tyler down next to him, and leaned in close. “What did you think?”

With his erection still screaming like a son of a bitch, Tyler could only nod.

Marcus smiled and slipped one hand behind Tyler’s neck, pulling him closer. With his lips next to Tyler’s ear, he said, “I’d love to watch your ass dance under my whip. I bet you’re not a pain pig, but I’d be willing to bet you’d let me take you to the edge and keep you there a while, wouldn’t you?”

Tyler shivered, but he nodded.

Marcus weaved his fingers in Tyler’s hair. “You’d make a nice boy for me, wouldn’t you? I bet you’re a fantastic cook, too. Attention

to details, needing the validation.” He squeezed tighter. “Wanting someone to take control of things for you, someone you can rely on.”

“Yes.”

Marcus chuckled. “Yes, what?”

Tyler closed his eyes, the instinctive answer passing his lips without conscious thought. “Yes, Sir.”

Marcus relaxed his grip and stroked Tyler’s hair. “I’m sure my sweet boy is a praise whore, too. Is your poor cock dying for relief?”

“Yes, Sir.” Every time he said it felt easier, more natural. He had difficulty reconciling this. Maybe Erin was right after all. Maybe her hurled accusations were spot on.

Maybe he just needed to find someone who could appreciate him for who he was. Maybe he really was submissive deep down inside.

Maybe he would make some lucky man a good wife.

Tyler relaxed against Marcus, inhaling the faint scent of cologne mixing with musky desire and excitement and the hint of sweat from around the club. After a few minutes, Marcus nudged Tyler to his feet and led him out of the alcove. On the other side of the space, across the open area looking down at the ground level, a man tied to a low bench was the center of attention in another scene just getting started.

Marcus smiled. “Perfect.” He positioned Tyler at the railing and grabbed his hands, pressing his fingers around the iron top rail. “Don’t let go, boy,” he murmured in Tyler’s ear.

They stood directly across the open space from the scene unfolding before them. Below, oblivious to what happened above, the dance floor teemed with couples doing their own thing to the deep bass beat.

Tyler looked directly into the bound man’s face twenty feet away, clearly visible through the iron railing.

Marcus stepped behind Tyler and nudged his feet wider apart. Now bent over, Tyler’s heart raced as he wondered what was in store.

He gripped the railing tighter.

Marcus folded his long, lithe body around Tyler’s, his legs

pressing against the back of Tyler's thighs. With his mouth at Tyler's ear, he said, "Don't let go of that railing, or I'll stop what I'm doing. Keep your eyes open. Watch them over there." Marcus grabbed Tyler's hips and started a serious bump and grind against his backside.

Across the space, the bound man smiled at Tyler as another man started paddling his ass with a leather strap. Tyler felt unable to look away regardless of the order to keep his eyes open.

"Look at the smile on his face," Marcus said as he reached around Tyler's waist. "Look at how he's enjoying that. He's a true pain pig, I bet. Not like *my* sweet boy." His hand settled over Tyler's crotch as his other tightly gripped Tyler's belt. "Fuck yourself against my hand, boy. Show me how good it feels."

Tyler felt Marcus' palm and fingers press all the way down the hard length of his shaft. As his face reddened, Tyler rocked his hips forward against the palm providing coarse friction for his cock, and backward against the hard bulge pressing into the seam of his ass, back and forth.

"That's it, baby. Be a good boy for me. Show me what that sweet virgin ass of yours can do."

The bound man's eyes had closed, but from the smile of joy on his face as the strap struck him, he certainly seemed to enjoy it. If Marcus didn't stop soon, Tyler knew he would shoot off in his pants.

Marcus continued, relentless. "I wish I could have you drop your pants right now and stroke your cock for me, show me how good it is. I think maybe tomorrow night I should come over to your place for dinner and you can show me what that sweet ass of yours looks like. Would you like that?"

"Yes, Sir!" Tyler gasped.

The other man chuckled. "Very good, boy. Very good. You learn fast. I like that in a boy." He gripped Tyler's cock even harder through the fabric, the friction painfully pleasurable. "I want you to come for me, boy. Show me what a good boy you are."

Tyler's breath came in ragged gasps, part of his conscious brain shutting down and going with the events, logical, rational thought fleeing the scene leaving behind only raw, primal need and the feel of Marcus' hot body through his clothes.

"That's it," Marcus cooed. "You're close, aren't you? Give me what I want, boy. Give it to me...now!"

With a cry lost in the loud music, Tyler felt his climax crash over him. Marcus squeezed his cock, almost painfully, adding an extra bite to the sensation as his other arm held Tyler, supporting him while he recovered.

Tyler gasped for breath, his head hanging, legs shaky, sweat trickling down his back under his shirt. Marcus pulled him up and turned him, his arms encircling him.

"That's my good boy," Marcus crooned, stroking Tyler's hair. "That's my *very* good boy."

He held him like that for a few minutes, giving Tyler a chance to regain strength in his legs. In a daze, Tyler followed Marcus out of the club and back to the car. Marcus kept a firm grip on Tyler's hand, wouldn't let him stop by the bathroom to clean up before leaving.

"I want you to remember me when you get home," Marcus teased. He leaned in and kissed Tyler, nipping his bottom lip and pulling. "I want my boy to remember how it felt having my hand owning his cock, how it felt giving in to me like that."

It was nearly one in the morning when Tyler pulled up in front of Bob and Terry's house. Marcus slanted his mouth over Tyler's, possessively sweeping his tongue across his teeth. "Pick me up tomorrow night at seven," he said. "We'll go back to your place. You can cook me dinner. You don't need to walk me to the door." He winked before stepping out of the car. At the front door, he turned and waved at Tyler before walking inside.

Tyler sat there for a moment, wondering if he'd dreamed the whole thing. But when he got home and stripped in the bathroom, he winced as he peeled his sticky briefs away from his raw and chafed

cock.

Yep. It happened.

He turned the shower on as hot as he could stand it and stood under the spray for nearly half an hour, trying to sort out the events in his mind. He felt like he lost all will around Marcus, had some deep craving to please him, to do what he wanted regardless of the consequences or any doubts he had at the time.

He thought about the man bound to the bench and about “puppy.” Both men obviously enjoyed what they were doing.

Would he ever truly be comfortable enough with himself or anyone else to let go like that? To totally cede control to someone else?

He wanted to. Now, after having a taste of it, he wanted it more than anything.

Chapter 7

Tyler groaned when the alarm went off Monday morning. He'd only had two hours sleep.

When he reached down to scratch his balls he winced as memories of the previous night came pouring back.

He started a pot of coffee. While waiting for it to finish brewing, he took a quick wake-up shower, shaved, and dressed. He poured himself a travel mug full before grabbing his bag.

That's when his cell rang.

Already running late, he glanced at the number. Terry and Bob's phone.

His heart hammered in his chest as he set down his laptop case and answered.

"So, how did you sleep, boy?" Marcus' velvety voice cut through Tyler's morning confusion and focused his brain on one piercingly clear memory from the night before: the feel of Marcus squeezing his cock through his pants as he came.

"Not nearly long enough, but well for what I did."

"Any regrets?"

Tyler closed his eyes. "No, Sir. No regrets."

Marcus chuckled. "Seven tonight. Drop by and pick me up after you go grocery shopping. I don't like spicy, but anything else is fair game. I'll see you tonight. Be a good boy for me today."

"Yes, Sir."

And with that, Marcus hung up.

Despite still feeling chafed, Tyler's cock stood up and made its opinion known as Tyler stared at his phone. Now how the bloody *hell*

was he supposed to get any work done today?

Fortunately, he only had two classes to teach, followed by three student appointments. The classes were easy, freshman-level English classes he could practically sleep through. By four o'clock, when his last student appointment left, he shoved his laptop in its case and bolted from his office for home.

He didn't run into Erin or Robert, thank goodness.

Something easy. Something quick. Something to make an impression. He scoured his memory and cookbooks for something to fit the bill, scribbled out a quick shopping list, took a shower, and made his way to a Publix not too far from Bob and Terry's. He pulled into their driveway five minutes early. Before he could step out of the car, Marcus walked down the drive with a smile on his face and a small paper bag in his hand.

He slipped into the passenger seat, leaned over, and gave Tyler a deep hello kiss. "You're right on time, boy. Excellent."

The wave of satisfaction plunging through Tyler's psyche surprised him. "Thank you, Sir."

Marcus set the bag on the floor next to his feet. Tyler suspected if he was supposed to know the contents, Marcus would tell him.

The older man's hand settled onto Tyler's thigh, firmly squeezed, and remained there. When they reached Tyler's apartment, Marcus helped him trundle the groceries inside. Then he looked around.

"So, this is where the magic happens, hmm?"

Tyler wasn't sure what he meant. His obvious confusion amused Marcus. "Your writing. Genius at work."

Tyler blushed as he unpacked the groceries. "I wouldn't say that."

Marcus laughed and stepped behind Tyler, not quite touching. "I would," he murmured in Tyler's ear, sending a shiver through his body. Marcus stroked a finger down Tyler's jaw. "I most certainly would say that."

"Thank you."

Marcus stepped away, into the living room, to look out the front

windows. Tyler lived on the second floor and admittedly had a nice view of a neighboring wetlands area. Sometimes he caught sight of birds, squirrels, and other wildlife.

“How do you enjoy living in Florida compared to England?” Marcus asked.

How indeed? “There’s no comparison.”

“So you miss London?”

“You couldn’t pay me enough to live in that bloody place ever again,” Tyler growled. He’d never felt happier than the day his U.S. citizenship became official.

Marcus turned, amused. “Really? Why is that?”

And that’s how, nearly an hour later, as Tyler completed his dinner preparations, he managed to spill what few secrets remained left in his life to Marcus.

He surveyed the spread. Salad, vegetables, beef stroganoff. A nice wine. Garlic bread. Strawberry shortcake with fresh-baked shortcake for dessert. Tyler had refused Marcus’ offer to help. The other man sat at the small two-person table in the kitchen and watched Tyler cook, prompting him with more questions, talking with him.

“Well,” Tyler said, looking at the spread, “I suppose we’re ready to eat.”

“Not quite.” Marcus stood, pinned Tyler against the counter and deeply kissed him.

Tyler again felt helpless, turned himself over to the other man. After a moment, Marcus lifted his head. “Strip,” he hoarsely ordered.

“What?”

Marcus smiled. “I have a little something for you.” He caught Tyler’s hand and led him into the living room. He left Tyler standing in front of the couch as he settled on it. “I’m hungry. The sooner you do this, the sooner we can eat that delicious meal you’ve prepared.”

“Strip?”

Marcus arched an eyebrow at him. “Is that a problem?”

Tyler met his grey eyes, studied him, then looked at the floor as he

started unbuttoning his shirt.

Marcus settled back on the couch with a smile on his face. “Very good,” he cooed. “That’s my good boy.”

Tyler’s skin flushed with pleasure at the endearment.

His.

Not even Erin had ever filled him with that kind of feeling before. Now, as he dropped his shirt to the floor and started working on his slacks, he realized how empty his marriage had felt. Like he’d constantly chased her for affection.

In a way, that’s exactly what he’d done. She’d never felt like she wanted to take ownership of their relationship, much less him as her husband. She’d wanted a body in her bed, a person on her arm, a dinner on the table—all under her own conditions.

She’d never truly wanted him the way he’d wanted her.

He kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his slacks.

“Look at me,” Marcus softly commanded.

Tyler lifted his gaze and fell into the other man’s grey eyes. Piercing, intense.

“Come here.”

Tyler stepped forward until he stood in front of him. He spotted the small paper bag on the couch next to Marcus. Marcus patted his thigh. “I want you facedown, right here. Across my lap.” Marcus’ eyes held his, waiting.

Tyler complied, embarrassed that his cock hardened.

But Marcus seemed pleased at that. “That’s my sweet boy.” One palm caressed Tyler’s ass as the other stroked his back. “You have such a nice ass, boy. I can’t believe I’m the lucky one who gets to be the very first to appreciate it.”

Tyler’s eyes dropped shut. He fought the urge to work his hips against Marcus’ lap as the man continued stroking his flesh.

Tyler heard the rattle of the paper bag, and a plastic snick sound, like a flip-top bottle being opened. Marcus slipped one hand between Tyler’s thighs and spread his legs apart just a little. “Hold still, boy.

This will feel weird at first, but you're going to love it.

The hand on Tyler's back grew firm, holding him in place as the other slowly worked between his cheeks, finding his virgin rim and carefully massaging him.

Tyler didn't bother trying to suppress his moan.

He felt cool lube against his skin as Marcus' skilled fingers slowly and gently probed him, not quite entering. "That's it, boy. Relax and enjoy it." One finger slowly penetrated. Tyler's fist clenched as he gave up the fight to keep his hips still. His cock throbbed against Marcus' iron thigh.

"Breathe, baby. Push against me. Let me in."

Tyler felt the finger slide in. His hips bucked as Marcus hit a sweet spot inside him. Anticipating this, Marcus' other hand pressed down more firmly. "That's right, baby. Relax and enjoy it. It'll feel even better here in a minute." He spent time loosening Tyler before he added a second finger to his dark hole.

Tyler groaned.

"Does that feel good?"

"Yes, Sir!" Tyler gasped.

Marcus' rumbling chuckle almost sent Tyler over the edge. "Don't you dare come," Marcus warned. "I haven't given you permission to do that." He replaced two fingers with three, and Tyler clenched his teeth to hold on to his fraying control. Just when he thought he couldn't hold back any longer, Marcus withdrew his hand. The sudden emptiness startled Tyler. He shifted his hips up, trying to regain contact.

"Not yet, boy. I've got something else for you."

Tyler kept his eyes closed as he felt more lube. Something not made of flesh pressed against his entrance.

"Push against me," Marcus commanded.

Tyler did, gasping as the butt plug smoothly slid home.

Marcus wasn't finished. He lightly slapped Tyler's ass a few times, alternating between swats and gentle, sensual strokes Tyler

thought would finish him off.

“Stand up.”

On shaky legs, Tyler did.

Marcus grinned. “How’s that feel?”

Speech momentarily eluded Tyler. “Full.”

Marcus laughed as he stood and headed to the bathroom to wash his hands. “As well it should. I’m not fucking you tonight. I want to make sure when I claim that sweet ass that you’re good and ready for me.” Tyler stood there in a daze, not sure what he was supposed to do, still trying to cope with the alien sensation. A cross between uncomfortable and amazing.

Marcus returned with a towel and tossed it to Tyler. “Let’s eat.” He headed for the table.

Tyler wasn’t sure what he meant. Marcus anticipated this. “Leave the butt plug in. Sit on the towel. And don’t put your clothes on because I want to look at your body while we eat.” His eyes hardened. “Or is that a problem?”

Tyler shook his head and forced his feet forward. “No, Sir. That’s not a problem.”

Tyler thought he might kill for the pleased smile Marcus flashed him. “Very good, boy. I knew you were a quick study. You and I will have a lot of fun together over the next couple of months.”

* * * *

Tyler wasn’t sure how he kept up his end of the conversation. He spent dinner in a daze. Every time he shifted position, the plug in his ass—not even a large one, Marcus assured him—reminded him of things to come. When they finished dinner, Marcus sat back and smiled.

“Excellent meal, boy. Well done. Go ahead and wash the dishes so you don’t have to deal with them later.”

Tyler numbly nodded and followed orders.

Marcus studied him appreciatively. "I love watching a naked boy washing dishes." He laughed. "The only thing better would be a collar around your neck with my name on it."

Tyler spent the entire dinner hard. Marcus' words made his cock throb again. Tyler held on to the sink and took a few deep breaths to remain in control.

How had he reached this point? He'd just met this man, and yet, in only two days, it felt like he was exactly where he should be.

Owned.

Wanted.

When Tyler finished the dishes he turned to Marcus. The older man sat with his arms folded over his chest, one leg casually crossed over the other.

"What should I do with you now, boy?" he idly wondered. He stood and crossed the kitchen as Tyler watched him. He ran a hand through Tyler's hair. "You were really good last night, but I bet you've never had a man show you how to properly worship a cock, have you?"

Heat filled Tyler's face. He shook his head. "No, Sir."

"How many men have you sucked?"

He felt his face grow even redder. "Including you, four."

"How many times have you been sucked off?"

"By men or women?"

Marcus laughed. "That's right, you like girls, too, don't you? Never mind." His grip on Tyler's hair tensed, commanding. "On your knees. Lesson one, right now."

Tyler's knees unhinged as he dropped to the kitchen floor in front of Marcus. He stared at the man's bulge, which strained against his slacks.

"Take it out, but don't put it in your mouth yet."

With trembling fingers, Tyler unhooked Marcus' belt and unfastened his slacks. His cock proudly stood out, darkly engorged.

His mouth watered as he stared at it.

Marcus' hand didn't leave Tyler's hair. "You don't attack a cock like a starving man, even if you are one," he coached, amused. "You respectfully seduce it, no matter how ready it is. Kiss it."

Tyler leaned forward and pressed his lips to the mushroomed head. He closed his eyes and inhaled sharp, musky passion and a hint of soap.

"Eyes open, boy."

Tyler complied.

"Use your tongue. Gently explore the tip. Take your time. Tease it."

It took every ounce of Tyler's self-control not to suck the member deep into his mouth. A clear drop of pre-come formed at the slit. Tyler moaned as he tasted it and rolled it down his tongue.

Marcus didn't release his hair. "Think about what you enjoy feeling on your cock. Run your tongue and lips around the ridge."

Tyler gripped the back of the other man's thighs to keep himself upright. He slowly engulfed the head in his mouth, the warm, silky smooth texture against his lips and tongue forming the entirety of his being. Another hint of salty tang, and he flicked the slit with his tongue.

Marcus let out a low hiss. "Very good, boy. Sit back."

Reluctantly, Tyler did. He looked up at Marcus.

"Let's move to your bedroom." He offered his hand to Tyler, helped him stand, and led the way without bothering to fasten his slacks. On the way, Marcus grabbed the bottle of lube from the couch. In the bedroom he stood beside the bed, kicked off his shoes, and pointed at the floor in front of him. "There."

Tyler dropped to his knees.

"Head bowed."

Tyler complied.

Marcus' slacks hit the floor in a puddle of fabric, followed by his shirt. "I like my boys to ask for what they want. What do you want?"

Without thinking, the answer slipped past Tyler's lips. "I want to

suck your cock, Sir.”

“Excellent answer, boy. Look at me.”

Tyler did. Marcus towered over him, smooth, tanned flesh, heavy sac tense behind his rigid cock.

“You did very good last night, especially for your first time with me. However, I expect more out of you. I know you’re capable of it. I want to feel your lips all the way down to my balls when I come, boy. Open.”

Tyler felt the slight sting of disapproval, coated in a thin layer of shame, and suddenly felt overwhelmed by his desire to prove to this man that he could do it. He opened his mouth.

Marcus stepped forward, cupping the back of Tyler’s head with both hands. “Slowly. Get used to it.” He pressed forward, gradually fucking Tyler’s mouth, plunging a little deeper with each stroke. Tyler thought he was doing a good job until the head hit the back of his tongue and he couldn’t control his gag reflex.

“That’s okay. Relax.” Marcus withdrew a little, not all the way, enough to let Tyler get used to the sensation, then tried again. “Relax. Swallow, boy. Feel it, don’t think it.”

Tyler did a little better. Within a few minutes he could take him almost all the way to the base without gagging.

It was enough to make him temporarily forget about the butt plug in his ass.

When Marcus withdrew his cock, Tyler moaned. “Go get some towels, boy. Now.”

Tyler jumped to his feet to comply. When he returned, Marcus had pulled the covers down and off the bed. He took the towels and laid them out, then sat on the edge and patted his lap. “Right here, boy. I want to play with that sweet ass some more.”

Despite the heat in his face, Tyler scrambled to comply. He closed his eyes and waited while Marcus stroked his back. “I’ve heard British schools like to cane students. Did you ever feel it?”

“No, Sir. I managed to miss that.”

“Never buggered by an upperclassman, hmm?”

“No, Sir.”

The sting and loud crack of a swat, followed by more gentle caresses. Tyler’s cock felt like it wanted to rip off his body and explode.

“The first time I fuck you, boy, I’m going to use your ass well. I’m going to fuck you long and hard and enjoy making you beg for me.”

Tyler moaned.

He spanked Tyler some more, then caressed him again. Every so often a stroke jiggled the butt plug, testing Tyler’s self-control even more. “Remember, don’t come until I give you permission,” Marcus warned. “But you’re my good boy, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Sir.”

SMACK!

“You’re *my* good boy?”

Tyler’s heart twisted. “Yes, Sir!”

SMACK!

More gentle, caressing strokes. “Such a good boy you are.” He reached between Tyler’s legs and stroked his sac. “I wish I had a flogger to use on you. You’d enjoy it. I bet you’d wiggle that sweet ass of yours right into it.”

SMACK!

Tyler moaned. His cock rubbed against Marcus’ thigh.

After what felt like forever of this torment, Marcus ordered him to his feet. In a daze, his own cock in desperate need of relief, Tyler waited.

Marcus smiled. “What’s that?” He pointed at Tyler’s cock.

He tried to think. “My cock?”

Faster than he could follow the movement, Marcus reached out and grabbed Tyler’s cock and balls in his hand and started squeezing. “Whose cock?”

“Your cock, Sir!” he gasped.

The pressure relented. “Very good, boy. I wasn’t really talking about my cock, though. I meant this.” He ran his thumb over the slit, gathering the drops of pre-come there. He held his thumb up to Tyler’s lips. “Suck.”

Without hesitation, Tyler did.

“Very good. How do you taste, boy? Do you like it?”

“I’d rather taste you, Sir.”

Marcus grinned. “I bet you would.” He changed position on the bed, stretched out along the length of it, his head on the pillows. He pointed to the end of the bed, between his legs. “Come here, boy. Get busy.”

Tyler leapt for the bed, eagerly going down on the other man.

Marcus coached him. “Play with my balls, too, boy. Don’t forget to lick the sides of my shaft.”

Tyler closed his eyes. Every time he was rewarded with another taste of pre-come he felt his own cock throb in response.

Marcus twined his fingers in Tyler’s hair and urged him farther down his shaft. “I want you to deep-throat me, boy. You should be able to lick my balls with your tongue while my cock’s in your throat.”

Tyler struggled to comply, not wanting to gag and ruin things. After a while it got easier to manage. He could feel when to swallow, when to relax his throat, how to time his breathing.

He didn’t know how long he lay there, sucking, licking, his head buzzing with the gentle encouragements and coaxing Marcus gave him. After a while, Marcus tensed and his grip tightened.

“Okay, boy,” he grunted. “Now.”

Tyler swallowed, didn’t gag, and felt his lips make contact with the hilt of the man’s cock. He managed to swipe his tongue along his balls.

Marcus groaned as his entire body tensed, his hot seed pumping into Tyler. Tyler kept up with him, desperate to please him. After a moment, Marcus relaxed and patted the top of Tyler’s head. “That’s

my good boy,” he whispered as he relaxed. “Come up here. Lay with me.”

Tyler curled up next to him, the other man’s arm around him. Marcus stroked Tyler’s arm. “That was even better than the first time. You learn very fast.” He rolled to his side, spooning against Tyler’s back, one arm draped around Tyler’s waist. His hand slipped lower, finding Tyler’s stiff shaft. “My boy is still very horny. I think you earned a reward.” He stroked Tyler’s shaft, slowly, alternating the movement with strong, pleasurable squeezing that nearly rolled Tyler’s eyes back in his head.

Marcus breath brushed the back of Tyler’s neck. “You may come, boy.”

Tyler closed his eyes and worked his hips in time with the hand pleasuring his cock. The warm, strong body pressed along his back, the memory of the way Marcus tasted, all this served to ramp up his need to a fever pitch.

“Come for me, boy. Now!”

Tyler cried out as his hips bucked against Marcus, the pent-up explosion ripping his breath from him. After what felt like forever, he collapsed, panting, against the other man.

Marcus chuckled. “How’d that feel?”

“Wonderful, Sir.”

“Still one more thing.” He released Tyler’s cock and pressed his hand to Tyler’s lips. “Lick. Clean me up. You made a mess.”

Without opening his eyes, Tyler did, settling back against Marcus as he licked and sucked his juices from the other man’s hand. This time, it felt natural to comply, to do as Marcus ordered.

He was a good boy.

Marcus feathered his lips along the back of Tyler’s neck. “You are an amazing boy,” he said. “I’m lucky I found you.”

Warmth raced through Tyler’s core. “Thank you, Sir. I’m lucky I found you.”

“Go into the bathroom and take that butt plug out. You don’t want

to sleep with it. Wash it. Leave it on the counter to dry. I'll put it back in tomorrow morning. Then let's go to sleep."

Tyler dragged himself from the comfort of bed to comply. When he returned, Marcus was almost asleep. Tyler snuggled against him, feeling Marcus' limp member nestled along the seam of his ass as he pulled the sheet over them and quickly tumbled into sleep.

Chapter 8

The next morning, Tyler awoke snuggled tightly against Marcus. The other man's grey eyes crinkled, amused, as Tyler studied him.

"What's running through your mind?" Marcus asked.

Tyler shook his head. "I don't know." He did know, but was smart enough not to admit it. He didn't want to jinx whatever this was, for however long it would last, by admitting out loud his feelings for Marcus.

"I like my coffee black, boy. And eggs scrambled, if you have eggs." He pulled Tyler tightly to him and kissed him, crushing his lips and exploring, tasting.

Owning.

Tyler's morning erection hardened even more. Marcus felt it and laughed. "Ah, the advantages of the young. No need to plan things out like us old farts." He kissed Tyler once more, then nudged him to sit up. "After breakfast I'll put your butt plug in. Then you can run me home. I'm getting a rental today, so I'll be here tonight at six, if that's not a problem?"

Tyler couldn't contain his smile. "No, Sir. That's not a problem."

Marcus crooked his finger at Tyler and kissed him once more. "Start our coffee. Then come join me in the shower. You can cook me breakfast after we're done."

Tyler bolted from the bedroom to comply.

He enjoyed washing Marcus, tending to him. His mind no longer wandered to the dynamics at play—he enjoyed the attention, enjoyed serving Marcus.

Enjoyed submitting to him.

He didn't let himself think about what would happen when Marcus returned to Brussels at the end of his sabbatical.

After breakfast, and before he let Tyler dress, Marcus called him into the bedroom and placed the butt plug again. "I want this left in all day, boy," he admonished. "Every time you sit, you'll think of me. If you have to take it out for obvious reasons, fine, but it goes right back in again. Take the bottle of lube with you. Understood?"

Tyler nodded, noting his face didn't even flush with embarrassment this time. "Yes, Sir."

Marcus grinned. "Good boy." He pulled Tyler to him and kissed him. "When I arrive, leave the door unlocked. I want to find you kneeling on the floor, naked, facing the door, your head bowed, and the plug in place."

His heart raced. "Yes, Sir!"

* * * *

It was all Tyler could think about all day long. He raced through Publix on his way home and grabbed something quick and easy for dinner, as well as fixings for breakfast the next morning. Marcus arrived promptly at six and found Tyler waiting exactly as instructed.

Marcus closed the front door behind him. Tyler heard the deadbolt lock before Marcus set an overnight bag on the floor.

Tyler's heart raced.

"Good boy," Marcus cooed. "Sit up."

Tyler did, a little embarrassed that his mouth was watering, but beyond caring at that point.

Marcus' smile twisted Tyler's heart. "You earned a reward." He stepped forward and unfastened his jeans. He let Tyler suck his cock for a few minutes before he tapped him on the head. "Okay, that's enough. I don't want to go off too soon. Is dinner ready?"

"Yes, Sir."

They ate. Tyler stayed naked, his cock standing at rigid attention

throughout the entire meal. He washed the dishes while they talked.

“So how did it feel having that butt plug in your ass all day?” Marcus asked.

“Good, Sir.” It had felt almost pleasantly unbearable at times, the sensation keeping his cock rock hard, making it difficult to find a comfortable position to sit, and damned near impossible to stand to teach without his state being obvious to his students.

“Let’s go to bed, boy. I have another present for you.”

Marcus had again gone shopping. He made Tyler remove and wash the butt plug, then lie across his lap.

Tyler felt cool lube against his rim, then something else press for entrance. Larger than the butt plug, but not quite the same. “This dildo is a little larger than I am,” Marcus explained as one hand pressed Tyler’s lower back, holding him in place as Marcus slowly fucked him with the toy. “I want you good and ready for me when I take you tomorrow night.”

Tyler’s heart raced, the information distracting him enough from the nearly overwhelming urge to come. “Tomorrow?”

Marcus laughed and fucked him a little deeper, making Tyler moan. “Yes, tomorrow. I don’t think I can wait any longer than that to keep myself from this sweet ass.” He sank the toy deep inside Tyler and slid his free hand lower, holding it in place. Then he started spanking Tyler, every impact dragging Tyler closer to release.

“Don’t come yet, boy,” Marcus growled. “Don’t you dare disappoint me.”

Tyler thought of everything he could to hold back, but just when he didn’t think he could take it anymore, Marcus stopped and held still.

“You’re close, aren’t you, boy?”

“Yes, Sir!”

The toy disappeared from Tyler’s ass, leaving him gasping at the sudden departure. “Get up. Go wash this.”

The sudden change was enough to shock Tyler’s system back

from the edge. “Yes, Sir.” When he returned, Marcus sat there with yet another toy in hand. A larger butt plug.

He patted his lap with a seductive grin. “Assume the position, boy.”

Tyler had to arrange his stiff cock as he once again stretched out over Marcus’ thighs. The man caressed his ass. “Such a sweet ass. I’m having so much fun with you, boy. You have no idea. I’m so glad Terry talked me into coming to visit.”

More lube, and Tyler tried to hold his hips still as the larger plug slid home.

“There you go, boy.” Marcus helped him sit up and planted a deep kiss on his lips. “Now you know what to do.” He lay back and folded his arms behind his head.

Tyler knelt between his legs and took his time worshipping the man’s cock, listened to his coaching, losing himself in the sensations of what it did to him and what he knew he was doing to the other man.

Tyler slid the man’s cock down his throat, making him moan and clutch his head. “Jesus—yes!” Tyler closed his eyes and swallowed what felt like a quart of hot come as the man’s hips jerked and bucked beneath him. When Marcus finished, he didn’t release his grip on Tyler’s head.

Tyler held the man’s now-limp cock in his mouth, gently suckling, softly stroking it with his tongue.

“Boy,” Marcus said, his voice hoarse, “you are one of a kind.” He pulled Tyler up to him, as he had the night before, spooning his body against him before taking Tyler’s cock in his hand.

“You earned another reward, boy. Come when you want.” Marcus brought him over. Again Tyler licked his seed from the other man’s hand before getting up to remove the butt plug.

When he returned to bed, Marcus kissed the top of Tyler’s head as they prepared to go to sleep. “Sleep well, boy. You’ll need it tomorrow.”

* * * *

Tyler followed Marcus' instructions to the letter the next day, wondering if there was a chance he might pass out from the excitement at some point during the afternoon. His heart raced, his cock throbbed. It felt like he had to remind himself to breathe.

His ass reminded him of the night's events every time he shifted position, the larger butt plug securely in place.

He didn't look up from his position on the floor when Marcus arrived right on time. He let Tyler spend a few minutes sucking him as a reward before they had dinner. Tyler's hands trembled as he washed dishes, wondering how in hell Marcus could act so calm while he was a nervous wreck.

Tyler removed and washed the butt plug as ordered, then joined Marcus in the bedroom. The older man pointed to the floor, a stern look on his face. For a moment, Tyler wondered if he'd done something wrong.

"I'm going to take that virgin ass tonight, boy. No going back."

Tyler nodded. "Yes, Sir."

"You have no idea how badly I wish I could ride you bareback and be the very first to shoot a load inside you. Unfortunately, we won't have enough time together to let that happen." Marcus, already naked, walked over and ran his fingers through Tyler's hair. "If I was going to be here longer, I'd be able to let that happen."

Tyler shut off that line of thinking. Didn't want to think about the inevitable good-bye in a few months. Wanted to focus on here and now and Marcus taking final, complete possession of him.

"On the bed, boy. Hands and knees."

Tyler raced to comply. The familiar, cool lube, then Marcus slowly, deeply fucked him with the dildo. "I want you ready for me," Marcus hoarsely said. "I want to pound my cock into that sweet ass, and I want it good and ready."

Tyler tried not to squirm, but it felt too good. Marcus reached between Tyler's legs and grabbed his balls. "Did I tell you to fuck the toy, boy?"

Tyler shook his head. "No, Sir," he gasped.

"I'm driving. You sit there and behave." He thrust the toy deep, pulling it nearly all the way out, tormenting Tyler's prostate along the way, before fucking him hard with it. "Don't come, boy. Not until my cock is inside you."

Marcus fucked him with the toy until he was satisfied Tyler was ready. He pulled it out and slapped Tyler's ass. "Go wash it. Hurry up, boy. Don't keep me waiting."

Tyler returned less than a minute later, on his hands and knees in the middle of the bed.

He felt the mattress dip behind him as Marcus knelt between his legs and nudged them wider apart. "Hold your ass open for me, boy."

Tyler reached back and pulled his cheeks apart, loudly moaning into the pillow when he felt a finger lubing his hole.

Marcus drew in a sharp breath. "Is my boy ready?"

"Yes, Sir!"

He heard the rattle of foil, then a moment later felt a hot, hard, condom-clad cock pressed against his rim. Marcus gripped his hips. "This is *my* ass, boy. I own it. Do you hear me?"

"Yes, Sir!" Tyler was nearly beyond conscious thought, much less coherent speech.

Marcus viciously plunged deep, buried to the hilt, and held himself still. Tyler let out a cry and fisted his hands in the sheet.

"My ass, boy," Marcus grunted before he took another hard stroke, then held still again. "Say it."

"Your arse, Sir!"

Tyler couldn't think, couldn't concentrate. A mix of pain and pleasure washed through him. Even the toys hadn't prepared him for the feel of a living cock owning him.

Marcus squeezed Tyler's ass cheeks. "Such a sweet virgin ass," he

gasped. “And it’s all mine.” Marcus spanked Tyler, driving cries from him as he left angry red marks on Tyler’s flesh.

“Beg for it, boy,” he ordered. “Beg for me to fuck you, and you can come for me.”

“Please fuck me, Sir!” he cried out, sobbing. He wanted it, he wanted it over, he wanted it to never end. “Please fuck my arse!”

“That’s what I wanted to hear!” Marcus grabbed his hips and viciously thrust, taking him, pounding his hips against Tyler’s ass, the slapping of flesh against flesh drowned out by Tyler’s plaintive cries. Tyler felt the man’s balls brush against his ass with every stroke, every ridge and vein of the man’s hard shaft sliding along his gland and almost driving him over the edge.

“Stroke your cock, boy. I want to feel you come with my cock in your ass.”

Tyler did, desperately pounding on his flesh as Marcus fucked him hard and fast.

“Come for me now, or I will beat your ass within an inch of your life, boy!”

Explosions went off behind Tyler’s eyes, the pleasure-pain in his ass setting off a cataclysmic release as his balls tightened and his muscles clenched around the cock fucking him.

“Yes!” Marcus dug his fingers into Tyler’s hips and loudly grunted as he shook the bed with his thrusts. “Fuck yes!” With a final slam home, Tyler felt the man’s cock throb, releasing inside him. Almost as an afterthought, Marcus quickly withdrew and collapsed to the bed. “Fuck, yes, boy!”

He’d lost his mind. That was the only explanation Tyler could think of behind the sudden lack of ability to form a coherent thought. Physically he’d climaxed, and his cock thanked him. His ass hadn’t weighed in with a decision yet, but it was quickly heading in the direction of *what the fuck were you thinking?* His heart...

The instinctive, cold chill settling deep inside him didn’t bode well for how he’d look at himself in the mirror the next morning. He

almost preferred the tender cuddling of the past two nights to...this.

Marcus left the bed. Tyler heard water running in the bathroom and the toilet flush as he disposed of the condom. A moment later, the fridge opened and closed. Marcus returned with a soda and leaned against the bedroom doorway, smiling, cocky, proud of himself.

“Well? Are we going to live, boy?”

Tyler nodded, still trying to pull his mind back into some semblance of sanity.

Marcus walked over and slapped him on the ass. “You were fantastic! Best ass I think I’ve ever had.”

Tyler nodded.

Marcus reached for his pants and started getting dressed.

Tyler finally sat up. “What are you doing?”

A dark shadow crossed Marcus’ face, then he shrugged. “I didn’t want to say anything before. Didn’t want to spoil our evening.”

The chill deep inside Tyler became a full-out mental blizzard. “What?”

He pulled his shirt on and looked at Tyler. “I received a call this morning after I left. From Brussels. One of the professors had a heart attack. They want me back to teach his classes this term. I’m catching a flight at three in the morning to New York. I certainly can use the money.”

Tyler blinked. “When, exactly, were you planning on telling me this?”

“I am, aren’t I?”

The chill inside Tyler transformed into white-hot anger. “So you just...you just fuck me and leave, is that it?”

A hard mask slipped over Marcus’ face. Or had it been there all along, Tyler too blind to see it? “Oh, come on, Tyler. You knew this wouldn’t last. It just didn’t last as long as we thought it would, that’s all. Don’t get all girly on me now.” He pulled his shoes on. “This was a lot of fun. You certainly enjoyed yourself.”

Tyler’s face burned as he watched Marcus finish dressing. The

older man stood in front of him. “You were great. I really do wish I could have spent more time with you.” He glanced at his watch. “Jean-Claude is meeting my plane at the airport back home.” Now Marcus had the decency to look embarrassed. Tyler knew that was his ex-boyfriend. “He wants another chance. I told him we could talk.”

Tyler remained silent.

Marcus leaned in and kissed him, tousled his hair. “I’ll let myself out. Take care of yourself, Tyler.”

After the front door shut, Tyler sat there for a long moment, listening to the empty apartment, his ass burning and his heart frozen. When he started to stand he winced, then bolted for the bathroom where he spent an hour sitting next to the toilet, crying and throwing up.

Chapter 9

“Two.” Tyler shed two cards and waited for Pete to deal. He knew he’d been more quiet than normal. His lack of discussion on the topic of Marcus was glaringly and unsettlingly obvious to all at the table.

The other four men nervously looked at each other, then at Tyler. He didn’t want Bob and Terry’s pity. He knew they felt guilty, but he didn’t hold them accountable for the mess he’d gotten himself into. He didn’t even totally blame Marcus.

He blamed himself.

At the end of the hand, Tyler excused himself to the kitchen to refresh his drink. He’d agreed to Eddie’s request to spend the night and had brought an overnight bag.

He could get himself as shitfaced as he wanted, and that’s exactly what he planned to do.

Eddie cautiously approached him. “Are you okay, Ty?”

“I’m fine, mate.” He splashed several fingers of bourbon over ice and added a little Coke to even it out. “Just brilliant. Why do you ask?”

Eddie shook his head. “I’m sor—”

“Don’t say it,” Tyler whispered, his control nearly frayed. He’d taken yesterday off, claiming stomach flu. Close enough, he couldn’t keep anything down until late that evening. He somehow managed to stay sane today, almost looking forward to the poker game as a way to escape.

“I’m here if you want to talk, buddy.”

Tyler nodded. Eddie left the kitchen. Tyler waited a moment before returning to the game.

By the time they broke up around midnight, Tyler was well in the bag. Bob and Terry hugged him before they left.

Terry looked at him. “We okay, Ty?”

Tyler nodded and clapped Bob on the back. “Right as rain, gents. Never fear.”

He awoke the next morning with a hellacious hangover and the smell of bacon fueling both his hunger and his nausea. He washed his face and stumbled out to the kitchen. Pete sat at the table, reading the paper, while Eddie cooked.

“There’s the lush,” Pete teased. “I thought you guys had iron constitutions for drinking?”

“I’m not Irish, mate,” Tyler grouched as he slipped into a chair.

He gratefully accepted coffee and breakfast from them, but before noon he returned home and stared at the empty apartment. Seized by a sudden urge, he grabbed a large garbage bag and emptied the fridge of everything even remotely related to the meals he’d cooked for Marcus. To the bathroom, where he tossed the toys and lube. He stripped the sheets even though he’d already done it the morning after Marcus left, remade the bed, opened all the windows, and aired the place out. By the time he collapsed at midnight from exhaustion he had a spotless apartment, a raging headache, a still-sore ass, and a hole in his heart even larger than the one put there by Erin.

It didn’t change a thing. It didn’t change the truths.

He was submissive. He did want someone to take care of him while he served them, doted upon them. He wanted someone to recognize and value him and let him be who he was.

Anger slowly set in, and he tried to force it back. It wasn’t fucking fair. Women wanted a man to be sensitive and caring and attentive. When he was just that, he got slammed for it. When he found a man who appreciated him for his instinctive nature, he was used and discarded without a second thought.

He couldn’t sleep. He started surfing the Internet, rambling, meaningless searches that led him to a website he’d never heard of.

FetLife.com

Hmm.

There turned out to be quite a lot of local Tampa people in the “scene” or “lifestyle,” as he discovered it was called. Profiles varied from nearly vanilla to far-out extreme.

Including quite a few profiles of men and women looking for “boys.”

Marcus’ voice floated to him. He angrily shoved it down. Maybe he’d looked in the wrong place for what he needed. What he craved.

He created a profile.

* * * *

The next morning, he had three private messages on his account. One was a generic welcome message, one from a woman looking for a whipping boy—literally—and one from the leader of a local Munch group, whatever that was, introducing himself.

Three days later, he’d “met” quite a few local people online and decided to attend the Munch that Saturday afternoon, a vanilla gathering held at a local restaurant where people could meet and mingle in a low-stress environment. One man in particular, a bisexual Dominant, had caught Tyler’s eye. Only four years older than himself, they seemed to have a lot in common.

They agreed to meet at the Munch. Ray stood only two inches taller than him and had gorgeous hazel eyes that picked up the dark colors in his natural blond hair. They spent most of the Munch talking to each other about any and everything except the thing Tyler was most curious about. Before they parted company, Ray offered Tyler his cell number.

“Let’s get together and talk again this week. If you’re interested.”

Tyler nodded and gave him his number in return. “Yes, thank you.”

* * * *

They met again for dinner before Ray ever allowed the conversation to turn to more private matters. “What exactly are you looking for?”

He had Tyler there. Ty shrugged. “I’m not sure.”

“Then why don’t you tell me what experience you have.”

Tyler blushed. “Not much.”

After careful coaxing, Ray learned some of Tyler’s secrets. Not all, but enough. “So you’re not into age play, but you like the Daddy/boy dynamic. Is that right?”

He might as well have been speaking Greek. “I’m not sure. I’m sorry.”

“That’s okay,” Ray reassured him with a smile. “That’s why open communication is very important.” They spent two hours talking. The next day they talked nearly three hours on the phone. Ray invited him to a private party that weekend. “You don’t have to do anything. You can just come and watch or talk or whatever. Or if you feel up to playing, we can work out a scene.”

Tyler wasn’t entirely sure he knew what that meant, but talking and watching, that he could do.

The private house was situated on a heavily wooded plot of land in northeast Hillsborough County. People wanting entrance had to stop at the electric gate and talk to someone over the intercom, where their place on the guest list was verified before they were allowed in.

Tyler found Ray waiting for him outside a large barn. He wore jeans, a black button-up shirt, and a leather vest. He hefted a large duffel bag and shook hands with Tyler. “Ready?”

Tyler, who’d worn jeans and a black button-up shirt as suggested, nervously nodded. “Not sure I’m ready, mate, but I’ll follow you.”

“Just remember, no means no. We take that seriously.”

Tyler followed him inside. In the foyer, a chipper, older woman wore a leather bustier that squeezed her breasts out the top, exposing

her pierced nipples. Over the top of that, she wore a sheer, lacy black top that was more a “why bother” fashion statement in Tyler’s mind. He filled out a confidentiality form, showed them his ID to prove his age, handed over a twenty for a “donation,” and followed Ray through a black curtain into the next room.

The changing room resembled locker rooms he’d seen at the university, except normally you didn’t see women dressing in skintight leather garments, or men dressing up as women, or men undressing and putting on things that looked not only uncomfortable, but downright painful, around their nether regions.

Ray grabbed a locker and stowed his bag. “I won’t need that until later.” He winked. “Let’s give you the tour.”

Ray explained since this was a private party, the rules were a little different than what Tyler saw at Blue Coconuts. “Full nudity, male and female, is totally allowed. At the public clubs, you can’t do that because of the laws. Here it doesn’t matter. No bodily fluid exchanges unless the partners are together, but condoms are allowed.”

Tyler felt dazed as Ray showed him the various pieces of equipment set up throughout the large structure. Several play spaces had been curtained off, separating them from the main area which contained three St. Andrew’s Crosses, several spanking horses, and other assorted pieces of equipment.

“Some people like private play, some like public. If the curtain’s drawn that means private, no entry. If it’s open, it means feel free to wander in and look around or watch. Just make sure you stay clear of tops swinging whips and crops. If you get hit, it’s your own fault for getting too close.”

By the time Ray finished the tour, the hosts were ready to give what was apparently a customary introductory speech, going over the rules and making sure everyone was on the same page logistically. At the end, some gravitated toward the buffet table, some toward equipment, and some broke off into small groups to talk or watch.

Tyler followed Ray through the building until Ray found the man

he sought. "Hey, Oot, this is Tyler."

At first glance, Oot looked to be a handsome teenaged punk rocker. Closer examination revealed the age lines around Oot's light blue eyes, probably putting his age closer to thirty. Approximately Tyler's height even though Oot had a slimmer build, and his short, almost painfully spiked black hair was dyed a uniform shade of coal. His black leather collar bore a small padlock.

He smiled and extended a hand. "Nice to meet you. Master told me about you."

"Oot's my slave, but he's also a switch," Ray said.

"Beg pardon?"

Ray smiled. "He'll play top or bottom, depending on the situation."

"Ah."

A woman dressed in a leather harness leaving nothing to the imagination walked up and deeply kissed Ray. "Hello, Sir."

"Hello, kitten. Where's your owner?"

"He's changing. He told me to see if you were here yet."

Ray smacked her bottom. "I'm here. You ready for me?"

She wiggled her ass, earning her another smack. "I'm always ready."

"That's the truth. Tyler, this is kitten with a lowercase k. She belongs to Daddy Saul."

"Nice to meet you, Tyler."

"Um, nice to meet you too, kitten."

"Are you playing with Ray tonight?" she asked.

Ray smacked her ass. "Don't you worry about who's playing. Worry about your own business."

From somewhere at the other end of the space, a man's voice bellowed, "Kitten!"

"Whoops! Gotta run!" She dashed off in the direction of the voice.

Ray and Oot laughed. "She's gonna get whumped for making him wait," Oot said with a grin.

Tyler didn't ask for clarification. He wasn't sure he wanted to know.

He spent the evening watching, talking to Ray, Oot, and others, and asking questions.

He also spent the evening with a rock-hard erection.

Part of him felt slightly ashamed of the fantasies running through his head. Another part of him felt more than a little envious of the other partygoers who so obviously embraced their activities. He wished he could let go, feel free enough to do what they did.

At one point Ray took a break and led Tyler to a quiet corner. Tyler had watched him play with several couples, straight and gay, usually as the third person and not in a sexual way, simply as a top, Oot had explained.

"So, how are you doing?"

Tyler nodded, feeling mentally hazy from all he'd observed. "Good, I think."

"Anything you feel like trying out?"

He wanted to blurt out *everything*, but stopped himself. "I think so, but I'm nervous."

Ray stroked his arm, left his hand resting on Tyler's. "Nervous is normal. Everyone's nervous the first time they play. You can do as little or as much as you feel like doing. I respect safe words. Nothing happens that you don't want to happen."

Tyler looked around. This would be a lot less nerve wracking if his first time wasn't in front of a bunch of people. He dropped his voice. "Can we use one of the private spaces?"

"Of course. Mind if Oot plays with us, or would you rather it just be me?"

Tyler blushed. The thought of not just one, but two men controlling him was too overwhelming to pass up. "I don't mind."

Ray grabbed his equipment, corralled Oot, and led Tyler to one of the private spaces after it was vacated. A multi-level bench sat in the middle. Ray pulled the curtains shut and turned to Tyler. "Okay, up

front. What's off limits?"

Tyler shook his head. "I don't know."

Ray touched Tyler's shoulder and left his hand resting there. "How about since this is your first time we'll take it easy on you. Some light- to medium-impact play. I won't draw blood, no knife play, no serious pain, no humiliation, no edge play."

Tyler nodded.

"You want anything to stop, you say 'red.' You feel you're too close to the edge, you call 'yellow.' If I ask you if you're okay and everything's okay, you say 'green.' Don't hesitate to say 'red' or 'yellow' if you need to, for whatever reason." He winked. "Is that okay with you?"

Tyler nodded.

Ray's eyes crinkled at the edges when he smiled. He didn't remove his hand from Tyler's shoulder. His voice lowered in tone and volume. "You just want someone to take care of you. You want to be a good boy for me, don't you?"

Tyler's heart raced. He nodded as his cock throbbed in his pants.

Ray stepped closer. At some point in the evening he'd shed his shirt and vest. His bare chest was free of any hair and naturally muscled. Not like he worked out, but as if used to staying active. Tyler suspected it was due in no small part to these kinds of activities. On his back, Tyler noticed earlier, Ray bore a colorful tattoo of a dragon between his shoulder blades.

"Tyler, do you want to be a good boy for me right now?"

Unable to speak, Tyler nodded.

Still in the same low tone, Ray said, "Get those clothes off so we can take care of you." Ray squeezed his shoulder before releasing it. He stepped back, watching him.

With trembling fingers, Tyler started unbuttoning his shirt. This was really happening. It felt oddly the same as his experience with Marcus, yet different. He knew from his talks with Ray that he would check in frequently, would make sure Tyler was okay, would give

him any and every chance to stop the play if it became too intense.

He would be the center of attention, not simply a means of gratification.

When he stood there naked, Tyler waited for further instructions. Ray nodded to Oot, who removed a set of four leather cuffs from the duffel bag and fastened them to Tyler's wrists and ankles. As he knelt at Tyler's feet, he stroked the back of Tyler's left calf.

"You have beautiful legs, Ty," Oot softly said.

Tyler blushed. "Thank you."

Ray chuckled. "Maybe when you get to know us better we can do some private play," he suggested.

Oot stood. "I'd like that, Master."

Ray arched an eyebrow at Tyler. "What about you? Would you like that?"

Tyler didn't trust his voice. He nodded.

Ray pulled him into his arms and kissed him. "Let's get you a little less comfortable," he teased. He led Tyler to the padded bench, where Oot had spread a towel on top. He had Tyler lie facedown and straddle it, his knees resting on the lower level. The men quickly worked to clip his cuffs to eyelets screwed into the supports.

Ray ran his hand through Tyler's hair, his nails dragging along his scalp in a pleasurable way. Then he knelt down in front of Tyler. "How are we doing?"

"Green."

Ray nodded. "Very good. Do you want to be my boy?"

The way he said it reminded him nothing of the way Marcus had said it. He was giving Tyler a choice, an option.

An invitation.

"Yes."

Tyler felt a gentle caress along his spine, down to his ass, but no attempt to penetrate.

Oot.

"I own Oot," Ray said. "If you want to be my boy, I'd let Oot play

with you, too. Is that okay?"

"Yes."

Ray smiled. "I promised Oot he could have a subbie of his own because he's been a good boy." Tyler felt warm lips feather across his ass, gentle fingers stroking the backs of his thighs. "Oot loves sensual play. I'm more of a sadist. We'll see how you like tonight, then we can talk more."

"Okay."

Ray stood and walked around behind Tyler. Tyler couldn't see where he went or what he did.

Oot's hands and lips disappeared. Then he felt another set of hands, Ray's he suspected, massage his back, stroking, rubbing. "I want you relaxed so you enjoy this, Tyler," Ray softly soothed. He worked his way from Tyler's shoulders down to his hips, his ass, to the backs of his legs. The feeling was wonderful, and while not overtly sexual, it made Tyler's cock throb even harder.

Fingers brushed against his balls, making him jump against his restraints. "On another night, I wouldn't mind spending a lot of time playing with this."

Tyler squirmed, trying to get closer to the hand, to not lose the contact.

A slap on his ass. "Quit wiggling," Ray playfully warned. "I didn't give you permission to do that."

Tyler wasn't sure how long that went on, Oot's hands joining Ray's on his body, massaging, kneading, caressing. Tyler felt himself sinking into a pleasant haze of emotions, nothing like he'd ever felt before.

Ray knelt beside him. "Ready for more?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Mmm. I like the sound of that from you. How are we, Ty?"

"Green."

"Excellent." He patted Tyler's shoulder, then all contact disappeared for a moment.

A hand caressed his ass. “I’m going to start right here,” Ray said. His comment was followed by a light slap from a strap. Tyler jumped, but more from being startled than pain. Ray worked the strap across his ass and thighs, mixed in with caresses from his hand and what felt like soft strokes from something soft, perhaps fur.

“Blindfold him,” Ray said. Oot carefully slipped a soft cloth blindfold over his eyes, heightening Tyler’s arousal. His cock screamed for attention as Ray continued the varied strokes, switching between different implements and his hands.

Time folded. Tyler could have been there ten minutes or ten hours, he didn’t know. During a pause in the activity, he sensed Ray kneel next to him again, his voice soft in Tyler’s ear.

“How are we?”

“Green!” Tyler gasped.

“Comfortable?”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Do you want me to make you come?”

“Please!” Tyler knew he’d beg if asked to do so. He felt like he was floating. Maybe this was the subspace Marcus had referred to. He didn’t want it to end, yet his painfully throbbing cock wanted attention in the worst way.

“You have to earn it.”

“Okay!” Tyler knew he would do pretty much anything at that point to feel relief.

“Wrap him,” Ray said.

“Oh, goodie!” Oot said. Tyler heard something, then felt hands pull on his hips, sliding him down the bench just enough that another set of hands could reach his cock. He suspected it was Oot who rolled the condom on him. Ray’s hand stroked his ass again before delivering a stinging slap.

“You’re going to come for me, aren’t you?”

“Yes, Sir!”

“Stroke him.”

A hand firmly gripped his cock and started working in time with every blow delivered to his flesh. Ray switched from using his hand to implements at some point, and then delivered a sharper sting, more directed. A riding crop if Tyler was forced to guess.

The pain increased, spreading through Tyler's body as he felt his mind lifting, free-falling as if released from his tethers and awash in a sea of sensations, pain and pleasure rolled into one large ball he didn't want to escape from.

"I want to hear you scream your head off, boy," Ray chastised, picking up the pace as Oot continued stroking his cock. "Let's hear you yell."

When Oot's other hand cradled his sac and started stroking as Ray delivered several fast and hard strikes with the crop, Tyler fell over the edge. His body went rigid, pulling on the restraints as he let out a yell, his climax exploding in a way he'd never felt before. Soft darkness descended in his mind. He was aware of arms lifting and shifting him, removing him from the bench. Then he felt himself cradled against a firm chest as another set of arms encircled him. The warm softness of a blanket enveloped him.

He cried.

Chapter 10

When Tyler regained his senses, he found himself cradled in Ray's lap while Oot rubbed his feet.

"You okay?" Ray asked.

Tyler nodded as he shivered.

Oot disappeared for a moment and returned with a bottle of water. Ray held it to Tyler's lips for him. "Drink. You don't want to get dehydrated."

Tyler did, eventually reaching up to hold the bottle. A few minutes later he felt strong enough to stand, but the men didn't rush him and let him sit there, supported by Ray.

"Well?" Ray's smile did something to Tyler's heart.

Tyler nodded.

Oot grinned. "You beat him speechless, Master."

Tyler finally laughed. "Um, wow." He shifted position and winced as he felt the sting in his ass. It was, he realized, not a bad sensation. "How long did that last?"

"Nearly an hour. You sure you're okay?"

"Yeah."

Ray helped him stand. "Oot, stay with him, take him into the bathroom, and help him get cleaned up and dressed. Make sure he eats something. You take care of him until I catch up with you later. Come get me if you need me."

"Yes, Master."

Ray pressed his lips to Tyler's forehead. "That was a blast. I love it when a sub enjoys a scene that much." He brushed his hand through Tyler's hair. "I'll talk to you in a little while. Let Oot take care of you

and help you recover.”

“Thank you.”

Ray and Oot smiled. “Hey,” Oot said, “it was our pleasure.”

Oot helped him, carried his clothes for him and kept a supportive arm around him while Tyler held the blanket wrapped around himself. In the bathroom Oot removed the wrist and ankle cuffs, helped Tyler clean up and made sure he was truly steady on his feet. Then Oot led him to the buffet table, where he piled more food on Tyler’s plate after Tyler only picked a little at some selections.

“Hey, eat up. Seriously. You don’t want to crash later.”

Oot led him to a quiet corner where a few chairs were set up. Tyler watched others playing and asked questions, listened to Oot’s explanations. He studied Oot. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“What do you do?”

Oot grinned. “Software programmer. I work for a local bank.” He leaned in. “Security software.”

Tyler laughed. “Seriously?”

“Yep. I don’t have to deal with the public. I work in a secure location, so they don’t care what I look like as long as I do my job. I actually clean up pretty well when I take the collar off and don’t spike my hair.”

Tyler found himself really liking the friendly and talkative man.

“What do you do, Ty?”

“I’m currently teaching college, but I’m also a writer.”

Oot’s eyes widened as he clapped a hand over his mouth. “Oh. My. God!” he gasped. “Tyler Paulson! Now I recognize you! I thought you looked familiar!”

Tyler silently swore.

Correctly recognizing Tyler’s look of fear, Oot grabbed his arm. “No, no, no, don’t worry. Unwritten code of sorts, you don’t out people. You’re safe. But damn! I loved *Damning Thoughts*! Oh, wow!”

When Ray returned a while later, he sat on Tyler's other side. "You okay?"

Tyler nodded. "Still processing it, I think, but good."

Oot grinned, leaned in, and whispered something in Ray's ear before he sat back and looked rather proud of himself.

Ray smirked. "You just now figured that out? Oot, I knew that the other day when I met him at the Munch."

Oot's face fell. "Oh. Why didn't you tell me? This is so cool!"

"Because Tyler's just like the rest of us. He wants to enjoy himself and not have any worries. Right?"

Tyler nodded. "Right."

Ray eyed Oot. "Don't scare him away. I'd love to play with him again."

It struck Tyler that he didn't know what Ray did for a living. "Can I ask what you do since it's out in the open about me?"

He smirked. "Sure. I'm a deputy county administrator."

* * * *

Tyler left the party the same time Ray and Oot did, a little after three in the morning. Tyler went home and collapsed and slept until early afternoon. When he got up to shower, he examined his sore ass in the mirror. Bruises and welts clearly showed on his flesh, but when he ran his hand over them and remembered how getting them felt, his cock stiffened.

Ray called him later that afternoon to check up on him. They chatted for a while, then came the invitation that took Tyler's breath away. "How about you come over this Friday, plan to spend the night with us, maybe spend Saturday night too, if you want."

Tyler's heart raced. "I'd love to."

* * * *

Tyler arrived ten minutes early. He had, at the last minute, remembered to call Pete and tell him he wouldn't be at the poker game. Ray answered the door dressed in shorts and a T-shirt. Oot wore only a G-string and his collar.

"Hey, come on in." Ray led him inside, showed him around, and took him to the guest room where he could drop his overnight bag. Oot was cooking dinner. The delicious smells set Tyler's stomach growling.

Ray offered him something to drink. When they both had glasses of wine, he led him to the living room sofa to talk privately.

"I wanted to talk with you before we really get hot and heavy," he said. "Red still means red, even here. I'm offering you the chance to play our boy this weekend."

Tyler nervously nodded and sipped his wine.

"What limits do you have for this weekend?"

He wasn't good at this. "I don't know."

"Full penetration?" At Tyler's obviously confused stare, Ray smiled. "Can we fuck you?"

Tyler blushed, but nodded.

"Good. I'm not into scat or watersports, don't worry. We won't be leaving the house, although the backyard is private, so I might make use of the pool at some point. I won't leave any permanent marks, won't draw blood. Not intentionally, at least. Neither will Oot. I'm not into humiliation but I am a sadist, so I will be amping up the pain levels somewhat from the other night. Is that a problem?"

Tyler shook his head.

"Sounds like we're going to have fun then. Let's eat."

Dinner felt surreal. Oot sat and ate with them. When they finished, Ray left the table for a moment and returned with something in his hand. "Okay, Ty. For the weekend, unless you decide you want to end the fun earlier, you're going to be our boy. Mine and Oot's, to play with. Is that what you're agreeing to?"

Tyler nodded. "Yes, Sir."

“Stand up.”

Tyler complied. Ray stepped behind him, and Tyler felt him fasten something around his neck. He reached up and touched it, a soft, supple, leather collar with a buckle.

“This is a play collar,” Ray explained. “It’s not locked, so if you had to, you could remove it yourself at any time. But while you’re here playing, you keep that on. Unless we’re in the pool or shower,” he joked. “Then it’s okay to take it off.”

Oot walked over and snagged the front ring of the collar with a finger, pulled Tyler close, and deeply kissed him. “Looks good on you. Master doesn’t usually collar my playmates. This’ll be fun!”

“Ground rules for everyone,” Ray said. “Ty, you call me and Oot ‘Sir’ as you’ve been doing. I’m not your Master, so you don’t call me that. You follow orders from me and from Oot. My orders take priority, of course. You’re not allowed to make yourself come without permission. In fact, you’re not allowed to come at all without permission. Otherwise, you will be punished. We will use you this weekend, but when we fuck you, we’ll use condoms. If you’re a good boy, I might let you do some fucking, too. Strip.”

Oot took Tyler’s clothes from him as he removed them. He left with them and returned with something. “Put this on.” The leather G-string fit snugly over his raging hard-on. Oot squeezed Tyler’s package as he helped him adjust the fit. “God, you’re fucking gorgeous. Please, can I let him fuck me, Master?”

Ray laughed. “I told you, if he’s good.” He circled Tyler, running his hands over his ass, around his front to his cock, where he squeezed. “Help Oot clean up the dishes. When you two finish, meet me in the playroom.”

The playroom was a large den. A padded bench similar to the one at the party sat in the center. On one wall, a shelf held various implements: crops, whips, canes, floggers, and a variety of wicked-looking things Tyler wasn’t sure he wanted to know what they did.

He had a suspicion he might be finding out.

Ray let Oot cuff Tyler's hands and wrists and hook him up to the bench. The difference in Oot's touch with the implements was immediately apparent to Tyler. He took his time, used his hands to caress and squeeze Tyler's flesh, delivered far less sting. Within twenty minutes, Tyler didn't care that he was begging to come.

Ray knelt in front of him while Oot used a soft flogger on Tyler's ass. "You want to come already? You're just begging to be used this weekend, aren't you?"

"Yes, please!" The restrictive leather G-string had only added to his torment. Every movement of his hips added even more torturously pleasant friction.

The doorbell rang. The other two men seemed to anticipate it, but it shocked Tyler back from his heady state.

"Ooh, there's kitten!" Oot said.

"You stay here with him," Ray ordered. "I'll be right back." Oot stepped up his ministrations, quickly settling Tyler back into subspace. He was vaguely aware of people entering the room and a woman's voice.

"Strip, kitten," an unfamiliar voice commanded.

Ray spoke. "Oot, hold up for a moment."

Tyler gasped as the activities stopped, allowing him a moment to gather his thoughts. Ray knelt in front of him again. "Daddy Saul is loaning us kitten for the weekend because he's going out of town and doesn't want her to get into trouble. Do you want to play with her?"

Tyler struggled to form vowels. "Okay."

"You'll get to top her when I say so, but she won't top you. She's a total bottom."

"Okay."

Ray ruffled his hair. "Get that G-string off him."

Tyler felt hands remove the G-string.

The other man's voice spoke. "Well, get your head down there, girl. Use that mouth for what it's made for."

Tyler felt hair brush his thighs, then...

His eyes rolled back into his head at the feel of soft, hot, silky lips engulfing his cock.

Ray laughed. "In this case, Tyler, you don't need permission to come. Not that you could hold back anyway. She's a total cock sucking slut. Have at him, kitten."

Oot started in on Tyler again with a paddle, and it only took seconds for Tyler to explode in kitten's mouth with a loud cry. He was aware of a happy female moan, but she didn't release him, kept sucking, deep-throating him past the point of release until he grew hard again.

Hands caressed his back, his thighs, his ass. He was vaguely aware of Ray showing the other man out, then returning.

Oot groaned. "He's got such a nice ass. Please, Master?"

"We won't get anything else accomplished this weekend if I don't let you fuck him now, will we?"

"Probably not, Master."

"Oh, all right, fine. Go get a condom and lube." He ran his hand through Tyler's hair, caressing, gentle, not pulling it. "Haven't had a good spit roast in a while. Don't stop what you're doing, kitten. Your owner gave me permission to whip your ass if I need to."

She moaned around Tyler's cock, the sensation making him moan in reply.

Ray laughed. "Gotta love that sound."

Tyler was aware of Oot's gentle hands working cool lube into his ass, Ray's hands on his head, and the feel of kitten's hot mouth on his cock. Even if he could have moved, he would have fought anyone tooth and nail had they tried to make him get up.

"Ever been the center, Tyler?" Ray asked. Tyler wasn't sure what he meant, was pretty sure the answer was currently no, but was only seconds away from finding out.

Ray stripped off his shirt, then dropped his shorts and stepped out of them, leaving his stiff cock waving in the air. He wasn't as long as Marcus, but he was thicker around. As he stepped forward, he cupped

Tyler's chin. "You're not going to be able to talk, so three long, loud grunts will mean red, two mean yellow, one means green. Okay?"

Tyler strained to reach the cock in front of him. "Yes!"

Ray chuckled as he slipped his cock between Tyler's lips. Oot rolled a condom on and slid his modest cock inside Tyler, driving another loud, long moan out of him. He was close to coming again.

"Oh, fuck! Master, he's great!"

Tyler wasn't sure where to focus his attention. What was being done to him felt better than great, and he loved what he was doing. After instincts told him Oot and kitten probably didn't need his help, he turned his full attention to Ray.

Ray sucked in a long, deep breath. "Dammit, Oot, he's almost as good as kitten."

"Really? Oh, man, I can't wait to feel that!"

"You'll have to. I'm not letting go of this boy's head until I shoot a load down his throat."

Even though Tyler felt like a fuck toy, he couldn't explain the difference in how this was better than he'd ever felt with Marcus.

Much better. They were focused on his pleasure as much as he was focused on theirs, not the one sided take-and-take he'd felt with Marcus.

He attacked Ray's cock with as much enthusiasm as he could. When kitten made Tyler come a second time, he started bucking his hips against Oot's cock, wanting him in deeper, harder, faster.

It didn't take Ray long to come. He held himself inside Tyler's mouth, ordering him to swallow. Oot soon followed, leaving the room and quickly returning after disposing of the condom.

Tyler trembled, sweaty, all strength gone from his limbs, and still kitten was latched onto his cock.

"Okay, kitten. Stand down, girl. Corner."

With a pouty look, she kissed Tyler's cock, licked his balls, and retreated to a large pillow in a corner of the room.

Oot unhooked Tyler and helped him sit up. "You okay?"

He nodded, unable to speak. Ray brought him a glass of water, which he gratefully accepted and downed.

“Well, how’d you enjoy your first spit roast?”

He laughed, his soul feeling lighter than it had since the night Marcus left. “Wow.”

Oot grinned and hugged him. “Yeah, I was hoping you’d say that.”

* * * *

Ray had a large bed. Late that night and totally exhausted, the four fell asleep, Ray in the center, surrounded by Oot and Tyler, with kitten lying at the foot of the bed. Ray had explained her husband and owner, Daddy Saul, had health problems. He loved her, she loved him, but he couldn’t get it up anymore and had no interest in trying. But he didn’t want to deny her sex, either. Ray and Oot were more than happy to provide her with their services, usually on weekends when Saul had to go out of town on business.

Happy endings for everyone.

The next morning, Tyler was still trying to wrap his head around the dynamic while he helped Oot make breakfast. Then kitten walked into the kitchen.

Ray didn’t even look up from where he read the paper at the table. “Cock, kitten. Tyler.” He picked up his cup of coffee and took a sip.

Tyler nearly fell over as the woman dropped to her knees in front of him and swallowed his cock. He grabbed onto the counter for support as Oot laughed. “Gotta love kitten’s dedication to duty.”

“You can come, Ty,” Ray said, still reading the paper. “She’s better than a fucking vacuum cleaner.”

He wasn’t kidding. Her skilled mouth quickly brought him over as his knees trembled from the force of his release. If it wasn’t for the counter, he would have sunk to the floor in a puddle of flesh. When she finished she sat up, smiled, and licked her lips.

“How is she, Ty?”

He nodded. “Bloody wonderful.”

By the time he left Ray’s house late Sunday afternoon, he’d been fucked and sucked in more positions than he ever dreamed possible. And he’d gotten to fuck both kitten and Oot. Ray had enjoyed the pleasure of his ass, both fucking it and whipping it.

He drew himself a hot bath and soaked, easing his sore muscles. He hadn’t thought it was possible to come that many times in that short a period of time. He also realized how at home he’d felt in both roles, as a top learning how to use some of the implements like floggers and canes on kitten while she was strapped to the bench, as well as bottoming to Ray and Oot.

His brain hurt, as did his ass, but his heart and soul felt better than they had in a long, long time.

* * * *

Tyler felt his slide toward something deeper than friendly fucking. Ray insisted at the beginning, during their first talks, that honesty was a priority. After his third weekend at Ray’s house, when it was just the three men, he talked to Ray privately about it.

“What do you want me to tell you, Tyler?” he asked.

He didn’t want to be hurt again. He didn’t want to let go of his heart just to be hurt.

He didn’t want to torture himself with a dead-end relationship.

“I don’t know.”

Ray shrugged. “We’re poly, you know that. But we’re not looking for another primary relationship. I’m sorry. If you want to stay friends and fuck buddies, I’m all for that, and so is Oot, but that’s all we can give you right now.”

Tyler had known, but he needed to hear it so his mind could drive the memo home to his heart and soul and force him to make the break sooner rather than later. “I know.”

“I hope we didn’t mislead you.”

Tyler shook his head. “No, you both have been wonderful. It’s not you, it’s me.”

“Did you want to leave early this weekend?”

Tyler forced a smile. Might as well enjoy the time while he had it, because he knew he couldn’t allow himself to indulge in it again or it would mean more self-inflicted mental woundings. “No, I want to have fun.”

Ray smiled. “Atta boy.”

* * * *

Pete looked across the table. “Geez, Ty. You in or out?”

Tyler slapped his cards on the table and stood, grabbed his glass, and headed for the kitchen. “Fold.”

A moment later, Eddie followed him. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Tyler angrily tossed ice cubes into his glass and made himself another drink. “Fine and dandy.”

“Then why are you acting so angry? Is this about Marcus?”

Tyler deflated. He leaned against the counter. “I’m just tired, Eddie. Really.” He was angry.

At himself.

At the world.

At fate and everything and nothing. It had been more than a month since he’d last seen or talked to Ray and Oot, and he hated that he missed them like fucking crazy.

Hated that, despite how heartsick it made him feel, he missed Marcus.

He hadn’t said anything to his friends about the Ray-Oot interlude in his life or the three missed poker games. He’d assured Bob and Terry it was just time he needed to work on edits and do research and grade papers.

Eddie wouldn’t understand. In fact, telling Eddie any of his

troubles practically guaranteed Eddie would try to fix them.

“I’m fine, mate. Truly. I just need a vacation, I think.”

“You can always talk to me and Pete if you need an ear.”

Tyler nodded. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Tyler hadn’t anticipated spending the night there, but four rum and Cokes later, Pete confiscated his keys and pointed toward the guest room. “Don’t want to see your limey ass until morning, Ty. Go pass out. Just don’t puke on the comforter. It’s new.”

When Tyler awoke around noon the next day with the worst hangover of his life, he saw with a little shame that one of the men—probably Eddie, if forced to guess—had gone to his apartment and picked him up a few things. A change of clothes, his razor, toothbrush.

He stumbled into the attached bathroom and stood under the shower. When he emerged twenty minutes later, he found someone had set a steaming mug of black coffee on the counter, along with a bottle of Tylenol.

The smile twisted his mouth despite his throbbing head. He’d never noticed anyone came in. Eddie, for sure.

He sighed as he sipped the hot black nectar and washed down two capsules. Why couldn’t he find someone like Eddie, a man or a woman? Why couldn’t he find someone like Pete even, who would appreciate his efforts?

He turned on the exhaust fan and waited for the mirror to clear so he could shave. What was he doing wrong? Was he giving too much of himself? Was he too needy?

Maybe he needed to start focusing on himself instead of everyone else for a while.

Tyler felt a little more human when he walked out to the kitchen after dressing. Eddie sat at the counter, reading the paper. “Hey. You okay?”

Tyler nodded and refilled his mug. “Thanks for the clothes, mate. And the coffee. Pete’s a lucky man.”

Eddie smiled. “One day you’ll find the right person. Don’t rush it. Look at Pete. He went through how many women and wives before we met?”

At least Tyler hadn’t had children with Erin. That was one sad, mixed thought. No children to fight over or miss or mourn.

No children in his life.

No one to read to or take to museums or teach how to cook.

No one.

A memory of himself as a boy, standing in the kitchen with his father while he taught him how to cook, flashed to mind. He angrily pushed it away. Even his own father apparently didn’t think he was good enough to keep in his life.

Eddie shoved a plate of bagels toward him. “Pete and I want you to spend the weekend here. Please? You look like hell. Chill out, relax.”

Tyler started to protest, then resigned. “All right. Why not? A weekend might be what I need to jump-start my brain anyway.”

Pete had gone in to his gallery for the afternoon to work. Eddie wanted to hit the grocery store and drove Tyler home to pick up a few extra things. Tyler started to reach for his laptop, then decided against it. He opted for a couple of notebooks of scribbled ideas, some pens, his swim trunks, and two changes of clothes.

Eddie was happy to see he left the computer behind. “Good! You won’t hole yourself up in your room all weekend.” Tyler spent the afternoon on the lanai next to the pool, Eddie taking time to chat with him every so often, then leaving him alone to work.

Pete and Eddie took him out to dinner with a group of their friends. For the first time in weeks, Tyler almost felt normal. He didn’t think about Marcus or Ray or Oot or anything else except enjoying the company of his good friends. The next evening, they gathered around Pete and Eddie’s TV to watch Eddie’s favorite show, a celebrity ballroom dancing competition.

Tyler had done a little dancing while still in school, as part of

drama classes. He'd enjoyed it.

Eddie seemed tuned into his thoughts. "There you go, Ty. You should go take dance classes. Get you out of your funk. You might even meet someone." Leave it to Eddie to try to turn the most mundane of activities into a speed dating event.

"Leave him alone," Pete growled. "He's had a rough time."

But the idea intrigued Tyler. He looked into it and signed up for classes. Two weeks later he was partnered with a woman in his class, trying not to step on her feet while mastering the foxtrot. She was very nice, very sweet, and very married. While she did hint her marriage wasn't the best in the world, Tyler had his fill of drama to last a lifetime and resisted her not-so-subtle double entendres.

The teacher was also very nice and frequently used Tyler for her demonstrations. One evening, she took great pains to introduce her sister, who'd come to pick her up.

Moira was pretty, and a grad student at USF.

And single.

Holding back his heart wasn't easy. Moira was patient and kind and loved his peach cobbler. She also acted like she loved him. It felt right asking her to marry him. It's what people did, wasn't it? Even if he held back, kept up the wall, refused to let go. That had obviously been his mistake in the past, giving too much.

And that mistake he would not repeat.

* * * *

Tyler stared out the window at the channel. Bob loved the restaurant on Harbor Island because they served fantastic Cuban food.

As they talked, Bob jotted notes on the yellow legal pad on the table in front of him. The waitress took their order and walked away.

"Alimony?" Bob asked.

Tyler shook his head as he stared at the water. "No," he quietly said. "She said she doesn't want any. Or rights to the book earnings. I

want to give her a lump sum payment, though. Something to get her started again.”

“You don’t have to do that.”

“I know I don’t. I want to.” He knew it didn’t make up for the pain he’d caused her. It wasn’t her fault. She was a good woman, a kind woman. It wasn’t her fault.

His anger.

His impenetrable wall.

He didn’t blame her when she came to him, crying, begging for him to go to counseling with her, to try to break through that iron-clad shell he’d carefully cultivated and maintained.

It wasn’t her fault he didn’t know how to dismantle it.

It wasn’t her fault she wasn’t dominant enough for him.

It wasn’t fair to keep her shackled to him when she had her life ahead of her.

Bob reached across the table and touched his hand. “Are you okay?”

“No.” He took another sip of his drink. Eddie had dropped him off and would pick him up when they finished. He’d moved in with them temporarily until he could find another place. “She can have the house. It’s paid for. She should have it. It’s only right.”

His advance on the second book had paid for the small house east of the USF Tampa campus. It wasn’t fancy or new or large or even pretty, but she’d liked it, had picked it out when he insisted she go house shopping. Bob had just gone over the contract his agent sent for the fourth book. It would go out in the mail tomorrow. The third book was in edits now and would be released next year. He was still expecting a third of the advance from that. He could use the advance from his fourth book for a down payment on a condo.

“Did you try counseling?”

“It wouldn’t matter, mate.” He tossed back the rest of his drink and held the glass up to the waitress for a refill. “It’s not her, it’s me. I’d only keep making her miserable.”

Bob studied him. “What did Marcus do to you?” he softly asked.

Tyler’s eyes grew hard and cold. “He taught me a few valuable lessons. Lessons I won’t soon forget.”

Chapter 11

Immersed in his studies, Tommy didn't hear Kenny's teasing comment at first. "Hey, Tommy. Come up for air."

He looked up. "What?"

Kenny smiled. "Break time. Why don't you come over to St. Pete with us this afternoon?"

He sat up and stretched his back, wincing as it popped. "What's going on over there?"

"Professor Paulson's doing an author talk and book signing over at Haslam's. A bunch of us are going over. You like his stuff, don't you?"

Heck yeah, he did. He'd eagerly devoured both of Tyler Paulson's currently released full-length novels, as well as his short story anthology. The man was a great writer. "Yeah."

"You never had him, did you?"

Tommy blushed. "No, I was never in any of his classes." But the author pics that stared at him from the book jackets, those intense blue eyes, he wouldn't mind "having" the man, that's for damn sure. He'd also heard the campus gossip, that the man had just lost his ass in divorce number two, so there was no way in hell *that* fantasy would ever come true.

Kenny glanced at his phone when it rang, then silenced it. "Shelly said you and Karina are quits, huh?"

He stood, grabbed his mug, and walked to the kitchen for more coffee. "Yeah. I broke it off last night."

He noticed Kenny looked a little nervous. "Shelly told me Karina said some pretty mean things about you."

He hesitated, but shrugged. “I can’t control that.”

“Look, dude, it’s none of my business. It doesn’t bother me no matter what because you’re my friend and I respect you. I’m here if you need an ear.”

Tommy leaned over the counter and looked at Kenny. “I don’t know. Okay? I. Don’t. Know. I was attracted to her. She was beautiful. She was great in bed. I just couldn’t see myself spending my life with her. I didn’t want to waste her time and mine when I’ve got work and classes. That’s the story.”

“She’s going to go around saying you’re gay.”

“Let her say whatever the fuck she wants to say. I don’t give a shit.”

“Are you?”

“Jesus, Ken! What the fuck?”

Kenny didn’t answer, simply stared at him as if waiting him out.

Tommy returned to his seat at the table. “I don’t know. Some girls I like, some girls I don’t. Some guys I like, some guys I don’t. Bottom line, I haven’t found anyone—guy or girl—who really floats my boat in a life-altering way. Okay?”

Kenny finally smiled. “So I should broaden my horizons when I’m trying to fix you up? Why the hell didn’t you say so sooner?”

Tommy laughed. “You are so gonna bust my balls, aren’t you?”

“Only a little.” He leaned against the counter and crossed his arms. “I’ve got a cousin who lives over in Clearwater. Shelly thinks he’s hot. I think he’s single.”

Tommy rolled his eyes. “I’ll keep it in mind.”

“So are you in?”

“I just said—”

“For this afternoon. Haslam’s. Paulson’s author talk. Dude, focus.”

“Oh.” He looked at his papers on the table. He was actually caught up, truth be told. It wouldn’t hurt to relax a little. Especially if it meant he could finally see Tyler Paulson in person. “Okay. What

time? I'll meet you guys over there."

* * * *

When they walked into Haslam's, Tommy's gaze immediately settled on Tyler Paulson. The author stood behind the front counter, talking with a store employee. Tommy couldn't take his gaze off the man. His intense blue eyes seemed to find and follow him no matter where he was in the room. He tried to browse the stacks before the talk, but found himself scanning the store, looking for a glimpse of Paulson. During Paulson's talk, Tommy stood in the back of the room, where he had an unobstructed view of the author. He held the books he planned on purchasing and listened, enthralled.

Enthralled was a good description. Paulson's smooth British accent didn't sound the least bit snooty. He displayed an easy sense of humor that kept the audience laughing.

When he finished reading an excerpt from his latest book, Paulson took questions from the audience. Tommy knew it had to be his imagination, but no matter what, Paulson's eyes always seemed to fall on him regardless of who the man was talking to.

He felt his throat go dry.

Then a student sitting near the front of the audience raised her hand and Paulson called on her. "Are you single, Professor Paulson?"

He smiled, his gaze once again falling on Tommy, intense, never blinking. "As of now, but I'm looking for a good woman...or man...to settle down with."

Laughter and more than a few hopeful sighs, male and female, rippled through the audience. As Paulson's gaze lingered on him, Tommy felt his erection suddenly strain for freedom.

He blushed and shifted his books in front of him to hide his growing bulge.

* * * *

Tyler enjoyed the local author appearances more than he did the out-of-town ones. Travel annoyed him, and it was nice being able to go home later and relax.

He was chatting with the store manager before his talk when more people entered the bookstore. One man in particular caught his eye. Tyler focused so as not to lose his concentration. The tall, brown-haired man walked in with a group of most likely students, if forced to guess, but he didn't appear to be there with any of the girls. He seemed at ease, and his friendly, open smile made Tyler's heart thump in a pleasant way.

How can I meet him?

He silently chided himself. Just because he was interested in someone, especially someone as handsome as the brown-eyed stranger, didn't mean the man would be interested in him.

Long and lanky, well tanned but looking like it stemmed from hard work, not from idle beach sitting. Tyler couldn't get alone long enough to approach him.

Then he smiled as a possible plan formed. Even if the question wasn't asked outright, he could work his preferences into his talk to the audience. Put out a hint and pray for a miracle. He would quit waiting for happiness to strike him in the head and seek it out on his own.

The miracle came during the Q and A when a perky little tart not so subtly asked about his single status.

Tyler knew exactly where the handsome man was standing because he hadn't been able to take his eyes from him for more than a moment or two.

He looked at him, paused, and prayed it would work.

"As of now, but I'm looking for a good woman...or man...to settle down with."

The audience laughed. The man suddenly shifted the books in his hands from his side to in front of him. Tyler hoped he stifled his

pleased smile.

Perfect.

* * * *

Tommy hung back at the end of the line, waiting to get his books signed. He didn't know what he'd say, or even if Paulson would be the least bit interested in a broke grad student, but he knew he had to talk to him after hearing that comment. He let people cut in front of him. Still, every time he looked, Paulson's gaze was never a moment or two from focusing directly on him again.

Buying two new copies of Paulson's books would be a hit to his budget, but it'd be worth it for the pristine, autographed copies.

After nearly an hour the crowd thinned. Tommy finally got his chance.

Standing this close, Paulson's blue eyes looked even deeper and more intense, twisting his insides in a good way. "I love your books, Professor Paulson."

Paulson smiled. "Please, call me Tyler."

Tommy licked his lips. "Tyler. Thanks."

Tyler pointed to the books he held. "Would you like me to autograph those for you?"

"Huh? Oh, yeah, thanks." He slid them across the table. "I've already read them. I wanted new copies for the signatures."

"I'm flattered." He opened the first one. "To whom should I make it?"

"Um, Thomas. Tom." He laughed. "Tom Kinsey." He held out his hand without thinking. *Stupid, stupid, you look like a moron.*

But Tyler broadly beamed. "Very nice to meet you, Thomas. Or do you prefer Tom?"

He swallowed hard as Tyler's hand gripped his. Firm, smooth, not at all wishy-washy. "Call me Tommy," he said. "My friends call me Tommy."

Tyler didn't let go. "May I ask you something, Tommy?"

He nodded.

"I don't have any plans for the afternoon. Would you mind terribly if I bought you a cup of coffee?"

He felt his breath catch in his throat. "That'd be great. I'd love it."

* * * *

Tommy quickly bid his friends good-bye without telling them where he was going and drove a few blocks away to the coffee shop. He nervously waited, tapping his fingers on the table, afraid Paulson would change his mind and not show.

Tyler, he corrected himself. *Tyler*.

What a fucking cliché, but he'd never felt like this about anyone. Why was this guy so different? He closed his eyes and conjured Tyler's blue gaze. Dammit, like he ripped his soul open and saw right through him. He wasn't sure how tall Tyler was because, when he'd been close, Tyler had been sitting down. Probably just a little shorter than him.

He blushed and looked out the window. Jesus, *that* was rushing things just a tad. Thinking about how the man's body would feel...

An older but nicely kept Toyota sedan pulled into the parking lot. When Tyler stepped out, Tommy felt his throat go dry. Tyler seemed to find him through the coffee shop window, his eyes on him as he walked through the door and inside.

Tommy stood when Tyler approached. "Hi."

Tyler smiled. Tommy wasn't sure whether to shake hands or hug or drop to his knees and throw his arms around his hips and beg him to fuck him right there.

Jesus!

Tyler shook hands with him, but also touched his arm with his free hand, giving a gentle squeeze to his bicep before releasing him and sitting across the table.

“Thank you for meeting with me, Tommy.”

He sat and nodded. “Thank you.”

Tyler smiled and leaned in close, dropped his voice. “How did you enjoy the presentation this afternoon?”

“You’re great. I love your stuff.”

The waitress interrupted them for their order. When she stepped away, Tyler winked. “Glad to see I had your interest.”

He blushed, but didn’t look away from Tyler’s gaze. “You definitely have that.”

“May I be bold and honest, Tommy?”

He nodded.

Tyler’s smile broadened as he lowered his voice even more. “I noticed you the moment you walked in. Would it be too forward of me to ask if you’re single?”

He swallowed hard. “No. I mean, no, it wouldn’t.” He winced, closed his eyes, and silently swore. “I mean, yes, I’m single, and no, it’s not too forward to ask.” He groaned. “I’m sorry. I’m not normally a moron. I’m usually halfway smart.”

He opened his eyes when Tyler reached across the table and squeezed his hand. The man smiled. “I’m glad to hear that. That you’re single, I mean.” Tyler left his hand covering Tommy’s. “I hope you aren’t in any rush to leave. I’d love to talk with you. Get to know you better.”

He forced himself to take a deep breath, get some oxygen to his brain. Maybe that would help him think straight. “Yeah. I mean, no.” He closed his eyes again. *Fuck!* “No, I’m not in a rush to leave. Yes, I’d love to talk with you, too.”

Tyler forced himself not to laugh. Tommy was so sweet and obviously nervous. Honest.

Real.

A far cry from...

He forced himself not to think the man’s name. He’d given him more than enough rent-free space in his head over the past couple of

years.

More than four hours later, they'd both drank gallons of coffee, exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses, and agreed to talk the next day on the phone. Tommy's soft drawl was a result of his Savannah upbringing, and he was a grad student. Architect. Just four years younger than him, but with a mature air about him. He loved hockey, missed his father terribly, and most importantly, he wasn't trying to brag or boast or impress Tyler.

Tyler reluctantly glanced at his watch. "I really hate to say this, but I've had a rather long day and I'm knackered." He reached across the table again and squeezed Tommy's hand. "I will call you tomorrow. Any plans?"

"No, I'm free all day."

Tyler smiled. "Maybe I can take care of that for you."

* * * *

Tyler did what he always did when he was stuck in a predicament like this.

Who was he kidding? He'd never been in a predicament like this. When Tyler called Pete that Sunday morning, he hoped his friend was awake and had his coffee already.

"Pete? Can I ask you a question, mate?"

"I think you just did," the other man grumbled, "but go ahead."

Tyler resisted the urge to shoot back with a snarky comment. "You watch hockey, don't you?"

Pete's cautious tone made Tyler silently swear. "Yeah? Why?"

"Do you know anything about the game?"

"Um, yeah. Again, why?"

"If I wanted to get tickets to a local game, what would I do?"

"To see the Lightning?"

"Yes."

Pete tried to disguise his laughter behind a coughing attack, but it

didn't work. "Ty, what the fuck?"

"I met someone yesterday I'd like to take to hockey."

Pete laughed. "This new guy of yours a puckhead?"

"A what?"

Pete laughed out loud. "Oh, geez, you've got it bad. Look up the Tampa Bay Lightning's ticket office number. Order tickets. They play downtown in the Forum. You do know where that is, don't you?"

"Yes. Of course I do. I think."

"We were down there last Fourth of July."

"Oh!" Now he did remember. "The big, round, glassed-in building with that funny lightning sculpture in front?"

Another hoarse round of laughter. "Yeah. That."

"Brilliant!" He started to say good-bye when he realized he had another question. "Um, what do I ask for?"

"Tickets."

"Where? I want good seats. What is considered good?"

"Good grief, this guy better be worth it, buddy. See if you can get down low, a few rows up from the glass near center ice. The lower, the better, to impress him, and avoid the end zones if you can. Depending on how many bucks you wanna spend, see if club level seats at center ice are available. Or a box. Whatever you do, don't get the cheap-ass nosebleed seats. If you can't get good seats, you're better off trying to buy from a scalper when you get there."

"A box? What's that? Is it expensive?"

"Depends on your AmEx card balance. Good luck."

Ty hung up, looked up the phone number, and made the call. Luckily, there was a game that very evening. The man on the other end sounded patient, helpful, and obviously amused at Ty's naiveté.

Box seats were available, and they'd cost him.

Ty looked at his credit card and realized he'd better nail down one final thing. "Can you hold just a moment?"

"Yes, sir."

Tyler set the house phone down and grabbed his cell. He hoped it

wasn't too early to call, but Tommy answered almost immediately.

"Hey."

"Hi, Tommy. Listen, I'm sorry I'm in a rush, but you did mention you're available tonight, right?"

"Um, sure. What's up?"

Tyler took a deep, nervous breath. "Would you like to accompany me to a hockey game?"

"Tonight? The Thrashers are in town. You've got tickets?"

Tyler blushed. "Two have come into my possession. I thought I recalled you said you liked hockey."

"Sure! What time did you want to meet?"

Tyler quickly cemented their plans, told him he'd pick him up, hung up, and then returned to the landline. "Yes, two of those tickets, please. You're sure they're very good seats?"

"Yes, sir. Very good seats."

Tyler looked at his credit card again. It was only money. He handed over his number. The clerk gave him a confirmation number and information on how to claim the tickets at Will Call.

"By the way, could you answer one more question for me?" Tyler inquired.

"Yes, sir?"

"What does one wear to a hockey game?"

* * * *

Tyler had two options. One, to spend the day researching hockey so he appeared marginally intelligent on the topic that night. Or two, risk pissing off his editor by not finishing the latest rounds of edits on his manuscript that were due back on Monday.

He prayed Tommy was as kind a man as he appeared to be during their talk and opted to finish the edits.

Tommy was ready when Tyler arrived at his apartment. He met Kenny, Tommy's friend and roommate, and Kenny's girlfriend,

Shelly. Tyler enjoyed the easy way conversation seemed to flow between himself and Tommy as they drove downtown.

Tommy was more familiar with downtown Tampa than Tyler, much to Ty's relief. "I don't mind walking if you want to save some money on parking. And I'll pay for snacks and stuff."

Tyler couldn't hold back his smile. "No, I insist. I asked you out. I'm paying. Next time, you can pay if you wish."

He blushed a little, but smiled. "Thanks, Tyler. I appreciate it."

Tommy guided him to a parking lot a couple of blocks from the Forum. They collected the tickets from Will Call and soon found their seats. Tyler was pleased to note that Tommy seemed very impressed with their seats.

"How many games do you come to each season?" he asked Tyler.

Tyler's turn to blush. "Honestly?"

"Sure."

Better now than later. "This is my very first game."

Tommy's eyebrows arched skyward. "No kidding. Seriously?"

Tyler nodded. "I know nothing about the game." This would tell Tyler if his gamble had paid off.

"Dude...wow. Really? Hold on, I'll be right back." Before Tyler could stop him, Tommy jumped from his seat and raced away.

Fighting his nerves, Tyler sat and watched the Forum fill with spectators. He wasn't sure what was going on, assumed a practice when the teams took the ice, because even though a clock on the center scoreboard started, no announcements were made.

Tommy returned a few minutes later with a program. "Right here." He flipped to a back page, where the basics of the game were laid out.

Tyler swallowed the lump in his throat as Tommy started explaining things to him. After ten minutes, one thing was crystal clear: Tommy was thoroughly enjoying himself even though the game hadn't started yet.

By the time the puck dropped for the first period, Tyler had a very

basic understanding of the game. Tyler found himself leaning close as Tommy draped an arm around his shoulders to point something out and explain.

By the end of the first period, Tyler felt himself dangerously slipping into love despite his brain's screaming warning to back off and hold on to his heart. He watched Tommy's warm brown eyes as he stared at the ice and gave Tyler a running play-by-play of the action and what it meant. When he turned to Tyler, their eyes locked.

Tyler smiled. "Are you enjoying yourself?"

He grinned. "Yeah. You?"

"Very much so."

When the game ended, Tyler knew a lot more about hockey, more than he ever thought he'd know. Tommy had taken great and obvious pleasure in explaining the game to him. Tyler wished he didn't have to drive him home, wished he could bring him back to his place. They sat in the parking lot after leaving the Forum, discussing the game and a multitude of other topics for nearly an hour.

Tommy reached across the seat and brushed the hair away from Tyler's forehead. "Thank you. For tonight. This was fantastic."

"Thank you for saying yes."

Tyler wanted to lean across the seat and throw himself at the other man. Only memories of his past embarrassments kept him in place. *Not too fast*. No matter how much he liked this man.

Tommy leaned in and kissed him, a light brush of his lips against Tyler's. Tyler smiled and caught him before he could get away. He kissed him back.

"May I make you dinner tomorrow night?" Tyler asked.

Tommy grinned. "I'd really like that."

* * * *

On the way back to Tommy's house, Tyler sussed out some of his favorite foods and prayed he could pull it off. A gourmet French

meal? Sure.

Southern Georgia cooking?

He had no clue.

He spent half the night researching and was on the phone with Eddie first thing the next morning. Eddie helped him put together a nice menu he guaranteed Tyler would wow the socks off his Georgia boy. When Tommy arrived on time that night with a bottle of wine, he paused as he walked in the front door.

“Dang, that smells fantastic, Ty!”

Tyler smiled. “Thank you. I hope you like it.”

He loved it, raved about it. Tyler sat there and smiled, gently directed the conversation back to Tommy, and listened to him talk about himself, his sisters, and his mom. Tyler enjoyed hearing him discuss architecture and engineering and design. The fire in Tommy’s eyes when he talked about projects he’d designed with his father, the melancholy as he recalled stories of his past when he worked with his dad.

By midnight, both men were yawning, and Tyler had classes to teach the next morning. He’d also learned a lot more about Tommy. The most important fact was that the more time Tyler spent with him, the deeper in love he fell, whether he wanted to admit it or not.

“I wish I could...” Tommy stopped, his face reddening.

“What?” Tyler coaxed. “What were you about to say?”

“I wish I could spend the night.”

Tyler smiled and stepped in for a kiss. “Me too. However, let’s not jinx things by rushing them.”

Tommy smiled and kissed him. “Agreed.”

Tyler wouldn’t let him help with the dishes, and they agreed to get together the next night for dinner at Tommy’s place.

Even if he could have wiped the broad smile from his face, Tyler wouldn’t. This was the best he’d felt in...ever.

He had hope.

He had faith.

Most importantly, he thought maybe he just might have love.

Chapter 12

Friday, Tyler prepared. Tomorrow would mark two weeks since he'd first met Tommy, and he was going to take the plunge, regardless of where things later led. He invited Tommy over for dinner and a movie and hinted it would be nice if he could spend the whole night.

Tommy didn't say no.

Tyler also made sure to stock up on lube and condoms and breakfast fixings so they wouldn't have to leave.

His mind chanted reminders to him about not falling in love, keeping it casual, just sex.

Tyler ignored it. He wanted to take the chance. At least, for now he did.

Tommy brought the wine and the movie. After dinner, they sat together on the couch, talking more than watching the movie. Tyler didn't miss the way the other man kept edging closer across the couch.

At one lull in the conversation, their eyes met. Tyler gave up trying to wait. Why? It didn't matter anymore. He wanted this man. Badly.

Tommy leaned in and kissed him, long and deeply, the sweet wine on his lips adding to the heat of their embrace. When he lifted his head from Tyler's, he gasped, "Do you have any rubbers?" He winced. "Dammit, sorry, that sounded bad—"

Tyler shushed him with another kiss. "Yes, I do."

He grinned and lowered his mouth to Tyler's again, tasting and teasing and letting himself go. They ended up stretched out on the

couch, Tyler beneath him. Tommy skimmed Tyler's shirt up and off his body.

He kissed his way down Tyler's chest. "Want a back rub, sugar? I give great back rubs."

"I bet you give great front rubs, too, love."

Tommy laughed. "Wanna find out?"

"I most certainly do." He rolled over. Tommy sat up and started rubbing Tyler's back.

For a moment, Tyler almost forgot he was just a few kisses from getting laid. "Jesus, that's bloody fantastic!"

Tommy flushed with pride, or was it a little too much wine? "You can have a back rub whenever you want one."

Tyler finally reached back and patted Tommy on the thigh, prompting him to move. He was afraid if he lay there too much longer that Tommy would put him totally to sleep from the fantastic sensation.

Tyler rolled over and looked up at Tommy. His cock stiffened in his shorts. "Let's go someplace more comfortable."

Tommy grinned. "I'll follow you."

Tyler stood. He turned off the movie and turned on the radio. Then he caught Tommy's hand and led him to his bedroom. Tommy stripped his T-shirt off and pulled Tyler to him, held him tightly, skin to skin.

His hands slid down Tyler's back, to his hips. "You feel so good, sugar."

Tyler draped his arms around the other man's neck. At six feet, Tommy stood five perfect inches taller than him. "So do you." He felt Tommy's stiff erection through his shorts and wickedly rubbed his own against him, making him moan. "You feel very good, love."

Tom shucked his shorts and fumbled with Tyler's. He fell backward onto the bed, pulling Tyler with him. "I've never...I mean...Shit." He nervously licked his lips, making Tyler's cock throb. "I'm not a virgin with girls, but I've only fooled around a little

with guys.”

Tyler’s heart skipped a beat. “A sweet virgin arse?”

Tommy’s cockeyed grin wrapped Tyler’s heart around him. “Yeah, I guess you could say that. Both ways. Never, you know, fucked a guy either.”

Tyler kissed him. “What would you like to do tonight, love?” He licked his right nipple, sucking on it, making him moan. “What are you comfortable doing?”

When Tyler lifted his head, Tommy’s eyes were focused on his. “Anything you want. I trust you.”

“Are you sure that’s wise?” Tyler wondered if he was asking Tommy or himself that question.

“Yeah. I’ve never been more sure about anything in my life.”

Tyler leaned in and kissed him. Then he trailed his hand down Tommy’s body to his hard, rigid cock. Every vein stood out, the head swollen and proud, practically begging Tyler to suck it.

“How about I start with a taste of this sweet dessert right here?” Tyler’s fingers closed around Tommy’s shaft, making him moan.

“Yeah!”

Tyler ignored the ghost of a voice in his head.

“You don’t attack a cock like a starving man, even if you are one.”

He licked at the slit, where a drop of salty pre-come had gathered. His hips bucked beneath him. Tyler slowly traced the ridge around the head, flicking it with his tongue, using his spare hand to play with Tommy’s sac.

He moaned.

With his tongue, Tyler drew long, deep moans out of Tommy as he swirled it around the stiff cock.

“Oh...Jesus! That’s great!” he gasped as Tyler went deeper.

It didn’t take long. When Tyler tasted hot seed in his mouth, he went deep and fast, swallowing, engulfing him, drawing another set of happy moans from the man. When Tyler sensed he’d finished, he sat

up after placing a kiss on his cock.

Tommy stared at him, mouth gaping.

Tyler smiled. "Good?"

He nodded and crooked his finger at Tyler. Tyler bent in for a long, slow, deep kiss. "Sugar, that was the best blow job I've ever had. Ever."

He arched an eyebrow. "Ever?"

"Yeah. Ever. Seriously."

Tyler felt his heart warming. "Well, that's just the first course." He propped himself on his elbow next to Tommy and let his fingers stroke the other man's cock and balls. It didn't take long to get him hard again. "There's plenty more we can do."

"I want to do it all with you."

"Then why don't we do something else?" He reached over to the bedside table and retrieved a condom and bottle of lube. "You've never fucked a man before?"

He shook his head. "No. I mean, right. I mean—"

Tyler silenced him with a kiss. "I know what you meant, love." He nibbled on his neck, under his ear. "Take your time. Use plenty of lube. Go slow. Savor it. Enjoy it." He opened the condom and rolled it onto his lover's now-stiff shaft.

"I don't want to hurt you."

Tyler blinked back his unexpected tears. "If you take your time and go slow, be gentle, you will never hurt me, love." This felt so different than anything he'd experienced before. The pure trust, the open emotions in the other man's face. He knew he could never admit certain truths to him.

Never confess things he'd done.

Never confess his deepest, darkest desires.

Turning around, on his knees, he playfully wiggled his hips at Tommy. "You know you want to."

Tommy froze, then laughed. "Fuck *yeah*, I want to!" He grabbed the bottle of lube and squeezed some onto his hand. "Do I put it on

me too? On the condom?”

Tyler stifled his amused laugh and glanced over his shoulder. “Yes, and on me as well.”

Tommy hesitantly brushed some down the seam of Tyler’s ass. Tyler reached around and gently grabbed his wrist. “It’s okay. Use your finger.”

He felt a tentative digit breach his rim. Tyler gasped. “Yes, like that.”

“Was that okay? I didn’t hurt you?”

“You didn’t hurt me, love, trust me.”

It took a minute to coach him through the process. Then Tyler reached between his legs and grabbed Tommy’s cock. “Hurry up and get that sweet cock inside my arse and quit teasing me!”

Firm, solid thighs pressed against Tyler’s, hot and ready, muscles flexing. He pressed the head against Tyler’s rim. “Okay?”

Tyler flexed his hips backward, impaling himself on Tommy’s shaft. Both men moaned. “Just take your time at first. Get used to it. I’ll tell you to stop if it doesn’t feel good,” Tyler gasped.

Almost torturously slow, Tommy started thrusting, moaning at the feeling. “Jesus, you’re so fucking tight! Is that normal?”

Tyler ground his hips against him, wanting more, wanting it faster. “Oh, yes, love.”

“Holy crap...fantastic!”

When Tyler felt Tommy’s thighs pressed tight against his backside, he sighed, content, filled.

“Now what?” Tommy gasped.

Tyler didn’t hold back his laugh. “Fuck me, love. Just fuck me.”

Tommy’s hands settled on Tyler’s waist. “Oh...my...God, this is great!” He took a slow stroke.

“You can go faster than that,” Tyler playfully teased.

“No, I can’t. I’ll fucking come if I do, and this feels great!”

Tommy could barely think and hoped that the words he said came out in comprehensible English. Feeling his cock tightly fisted inside

Tyler's ass...nothing had ever felt that good.

Well, except for the blow job. He wasn't exaggerating when he said it was the best ever.

He slowly stroked, not wanting to hurt Tyler, fighting the urge to fuck him hard and fast and pound his cock inside him until he exploded. He would never do anything to hurt his guy, didn't want to be like some of the guys he'd heard about.

He wanted to do things right.

"Oh...Jesus. I can't hold back."

"Then don't," Tyler assured him. "I want you to come for me."

He needed no further encouragement. Despite his first climax his second was nearly as powerful, ripping through him and tearing a cry from his lips as he leaned on Tyler for support.

Then he remembered the condom. "Dammit." He pulled out. "I'll be right back." He cleaned up and quickly returned, pulling Tyler into his arms and kissing him. "That was fantastic!"

Tyler looked pleased. "Did you enjoy yourself?"

He nodded and reached down, found Tyler's stiff shaft. "What about you, sugar?"

"What about me?"

"I want to take care of you." He kissed Tyler again and softly said, "Do you wanna fuck me?"

"It's okay if you don't want me to—"

He cut Tyler off with another deep kiss. "I want you to. I want you to be the first." Hell, he wanted Tyler to be his last and only, too, but felt like a moron admitting that this soon. He didn't want to scare the guy off by acting like a clingy girl.

Tyler's blue eyes smoldered in his sweet face. "Roll over, love," he hoarsely said.

Tommy did, closing his eyes.

He felt Tyler's hands, gentle, tender, slowly massaging his ass, relaxing him. "Don't hesitate to tell me to stop if you don't like something, right?"

“Okay,” Tommy mumbled, already feeling his cock starting to stiffen again. His hips, with a mind of their own, rubbed his cock against the mattress and created more pleasurable friction.

Tyler took his time, eventually working his way to Tommy’s virgin rim. Then he applied lube to his finger and, without penetrating, started massaging the tight ring of muscle.

His hips responded, trying to press against Tyler, wanting more contact.

Tyler chuckled. “Not yet, love. Let me do this.” He felt Tyler’s other hand apply pressure to his lower back, holding him in place.

Jesus, he’d never felt this horny. Ever. No girl ever made him this hard this fast this many times. As Tyler slowly worked one finger into him, he moaned. “Yes!”

“Do you like that, love?”

“Oh, fuck yeah!”

Eventually Tyler added more lube and a second finger. When the hand on his back disappeared, Tommy’s hips once again started rocking against the mattress. “That’s so fucking good!”

“It shall feel even better, love.” When Tyler added a third finger, Tommy fisted the sheets in his hands.

“Oh...Jesus!”

After what felt like forever and begging Tyler to do it, the fingers disappeared. Tyler knelt behind him. “Just a moment.”

Tommy heard him rip open the condom pouch and felt him add more lube. Tyler pulled him to his knees. Then the hot, firm head of his cock pressed against his rim. “Push against me, love.”

Tyler pressed in, just a little, and held still. Tommy wanted to buck his hips against Tyler, but the other man hooked an arm around his waist to hold him in place. “Just get used to the feeling. Enjoy it.”

Tommy still managed to fuck himself backward onto Tyler’s cock. Tyler let out a low hiss of pleasure. “My god, you feel so good!” Tyler gasped.

“If I feel half as good as you felt to me, then you’re welcome.”

Tyler chuckled and slowly stroked his cock inside his lover. He had no doubts Tommy was enjoying this experience. He smoothed his hands over Tommy's back, settled them on his waist. "Absolutely amazing."

"Fuck me hard, baby."

"No, as you said, I would totally explode." Tyler leaned forward, reached around, and found the other man's stiff cock. He wrapped his fingers around it and started stroking in time with his thrusts. "How about you give me one more?"

Tommy moaned in response and bucked his hips against Tyler's hand and cock.

"I take it that's a yes?"

"Oh...fuck...yesssss!"

Tyler smiled, enjoyed knowing Tommy's world currently began and ended with the pleasure assaulting him, enjoyed knowing he was bringing him that pleasure, pleasure Tommy had never felt before.

He wanted to be the only person to ever do this to him again.

"Come for me, love," Tyler coaxed, feeling his own release near. "Come with me."

It was all Tommy needed. Tyler heard him groan at the same time he felt hot juices coating his hand. He released Tommy's cock and grabbed his hips, his own climax exploding as he let out a cry.

They tumbled to the bed when Tyler also remembered the condom. *Blast.*

He withdrew and cleaned up. He wanted to confess, to tell Tommy how he felt. Needed to. He didn't want to risk losing this man. Tyler slid back into bed. He started to speak when a soft snore escaped Tommy.

Well, that will go unsaid, obviously.

He carefully cuddled against the taller man's back and slipped his arm around his waist. In his sleep, Tommy's arm moved, rested over Tyler's.

Tyler smiled and closed his eyes.

* * * *

The next morning, Florida sunlight streamed through the window. Tyler hated that the bedroom faced that direction, with a full-on blaze of daylight rudely interrupting sleep. Today, however, he welcomed the sight. Tommy still slept, the orange light slowly creeping across the sheets through the gaps in the blinds, warming the bed and illuminating the other man's skin with a sweet glow.

Tyler closed his eyes and took a deep breath to still the unease within him. Had he made another horrific mistake? Had he just lost his heart, again, to someone unable to return the feelings?

Then Tommy rolled over. His eyes opened as a sleepy smile caressed his face. "Mornin', sugar."

"Good morning." Tommy's sweet brown eyes melted Tyler's core, the open, honest sentiment there. Or was it just his willing and fertile imagination wishing to see those things?

He reached up and stroked Tyler's stubbly cheek. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Then why do you look worried?"

Tyler closed his eyes and fought a nervous bout of tears. It was far too soon to confess his neuroses and worries that, in reality, had nothing to do with Tom. "I'm fine, truly."

When Tyler opened his eyes, Tommy still stared at him.

"Look, can I ask you something?" Tommy started. "And feel free to tell me to go to hell if you want."

Tyler nervously nodded.

"I'm not good at this stuff. Since neither of us are girls and I don't want this to sound wrong or insult you, and since I really haven't been in a situation like this..." He licked his lips, stirring Tyler's cock in the process. "Okay." He took a deep breath. "I don't know where this is going to go. Or where you want it to go. I just know I've never felt

like this before. I'd like a chance to see where it might go." He blew out another nervous breath. "If that's okay with you?"

Tyler thought his heart would stop. He forced the words through tight lips. "What, exactly, are you asking me?"

Tommy's fingers withdrew as his voice softened. "Can we just, you know, not see anyone else? For now, at least?"

Tyler's heart went from nearly stopped to pounding in his chest. "You wish to be exclusive?"

He nodded.

Tyler had to close his eyes to hold back the gush of happy tears as he threw his arms around Tommy. "Oh, yes! I certainly would like that. Most definitely."

Tommy laughed against Tyler's neck. "I mean, I'm not saying we've got to move in together this afternoon or anything. But I know it sounds stupid to say I'm traditional when this is anything but traditional. I don't date around if I'm involved with someone. And I want to be involved with you."

Tyler's grip tightened. "Absolutely!"

"And..." He sounded hesitant. "I know I'm clean. I've always been careful, but I'll go by the student health center tomorrow and get tested and stuff. So we can, you know, get rid of the rubbers."

Tyler laughed. "I shall do the same." He risked looking at his lover.

It felt oddly right saying that. His lover.

His.

Tommy's cautious smile warmed Tyler's heart. The other man obviously felt as nervous about this as he did. "I...um...don't have any classes today," Tommy offered. "And I have the day off from work."

Tyler grinned. "My schedule is clear as well."

"So what do you want to do?"

Tyler rolled onto him. "May I suggest a few things?"

His cautious smile transformed into a beaming grin. "You sure

can, sugar. You sure can.”

Chapter 13

Tyler hummed as he dressed for dinner. He had the perfect evening planned. They would come back to his place for a clichéd nightcap, followed by a hopefully sleepless night in bed, capped off by a long, languid brunch the next morning.

What could be more perfect?

It'd been several weeks since they'd taken their relationship to the next level. Tyler wouldn't deny this was the happiest he'd ever felt. Not even his marriage to Erin, in the beginning, had felt this good, this right.

In his happiness, he found he didn't even crave the things he'd had with Ray and Oot, or Marcus. He was content.

He wasn't alone anymore.

He knew he'd end up arriving at Tommy's apartment early, but he was too eager not to leave. He locked his condo, whistling to himself as he jogged down the stairs to his car. He unlocked it, slid behind the wheel, put the key in the ignition, and cranked it.

Or, tried to.

The engine wouldn't start.

He tried again. It spun over, but wouldn't start.

"Bollocks!" He slammed his hands against the steering wheel and tried again. "No!"

After fumbling for a moment, he found the hood latch and walked around the front of the car. It took him another moment to figure out how to open the hood.

Then he stared at the engine. The wires and components mocked him. Who the hell was he kidding? He didn't know anything about

cars except how to put petrol in them, and sometimes that was an iffy proposition if he wasn't familiar with the car.

"Bloody hell!"

Near tears at the prospect of his evening going up in flames, he tried to start it again. A glance at the time, now he was running into the late range.

With no other option, he called Tommy, his stomach now a mass of jumbled, tight nerves. He feared he might actually throw up.

"Hi, sugar. You on your way?"

Tyler took a deep breath, hoping to keep the emotion out of his voice. "I'm afraid not. There's something wrong with my car. It won't start."

"Oh? What's it doing?"

Tyler fought the urge to kick the damned thing. "I tried to start it, and it makes noises like it wants to start, but it won't."

"Like what?"

"Like what? I don't know. It won't start."

Tommy laughed. "What year and model is it?"

"I...What?"

"What year and model Toyota is it?"

He told him. "What difference does that make?"

"Just sit tight. I'll be there in about half an hour. Order us some Chinese. Have them deliver it."

"What?"

"It's okay, Ty, don't worry. I'll take care of it. I'll see you in a bit." He hung up.

Tommy's easy, confident voice echoed in his mind. "*I'll take care of it.*" He hadn't sounded the slightest bit upset or put out.

Tyler looked at his phone before giving in and kicking one of his tires. He hopped around, rubbing his sore foot for a minute before snatching his keys from the ignition and stomping upstairs to his condo to order the food.

* * * *

Tommy arrived thirty minutes later and backed his truck in next to Tyler's car. Tyler walked down to greet him, surprised to see Tom dressed in old clothes. An overnight bag sat on the passenger seat. He laid a book on the Toyota's fender and pulled a large toolbox out of the back of his truck.

"What's this?"

"Repair manual. I stopped by the auto parts store and got one."

Tyler blushed. "You didn't have to do that."

"Um, yeah, I did. I need it to diagnose the problem. Give me your keys."

Without argument, Tyler handed them over. Tommy tried to start the car, listened for a moment, then smiled. "Might not be serious. Give me a little bit to check it out."

Tyler felt helpless as he stood on the other side of the car and leaned against the fender. "I'm sorry, Tommy. This isn't how I wanted our evening to go. I'm so sorry."

He smiled and shrugged. "Hey, shit happens, sugar." He reached over and patted the back of Tyler's hand as his gaze landed on Tyler. "It's okay. I'll take care of it for you. You let me handle stuff like this. That's my job." He squeezed Tyler's hand before releasing it.

Something inside of Tyler broke free, taking his breath away. "I love you," he softly said.

Tommy stood and looked at him, then leaned in for a long, lingering kiss. "I love you too, Ty. You leave it to me. I'll fix it for you."

"No, I mean it. I love you."

Tommy closed the distance between them, his face growing serious. "I mean it, too."

Tyler threw his arms around him and hugged him hard, his heart pounding. "Dear sweet Jesus, you must think I'm a bleedin' wanker."

Tommy wouldn't let him go. "No," he softly said. "I'm just afraid

one of these days you'll wake up and see the truth about what a jerk I am, and then I'm in trouble."

Tyler wanted to cry tears of joy, as stupid and trite as he knew that was. He vigorously shook his head. "Never! I'm never letting you go."

"Well, you'll have to let me go to fix your car." He looked across the parking lot. "And our food's here, sugar. Why don't you bring us out some plates and drinks and stuff? We'll eat out here, and you can keep me company."

Tyler nodded. "Absolutely."

Three hours and one trip to the auto parts store later, Tyler's Toyota had a new fuel pump and was running again. Tommy locked his toolbox in the back of his truck and grabbed his overnight bag from the front seat. "Now for the fun part."

"What's that?" Tyler asked.

He playfully waggled his eyebrows at Tyler as he held up a filthy hand. "I'm a dirty boy. Time for you to do your job and help me clean up."

* * * *

An hour later, they'd moved from the shower to Tyler's bed. As Tommy kissed him, his long, lanky body stretched over Tyler's, he stared down into Tyler's face. "I really meant it out there, Ty," he said. "I'm in love with you. I don't want to be with anyone but you. I've never felt like this about anyone."

He slanted his lips over Tyler's mouth and gently explored. Tyler wasn't a girl, and he didn't try to insult him by treating him like one. But Tyler was sensitive, maybe more sensitive than some of the girls he'd been with, and he liked that quiet, hidden strength folded into a well-polished, classy wrapper.

He didn't understand what Tyler saw in him, but he prayed he stayed blinded to his flaws.

Tyler reached up and stroked his hair. "Move in with me."

"What?"

"I mean it. Move in with me."

"Oh, man. Seriously?"

"Yes, of course!"

Tommy started to say yes, then mentally swore. "I can't."

He hated the flash of pain that flickered through Tyler's sweet eyes before a mask of calm descended over him. He pulled his hand away. "I understand. It's too soon."

"No! It's not that." He dropped his head to Tyler's chest and swore. "Jesus, I'm a dumb fuck. I'm not good at stuff like this. Yes, I *want* to move in with you. I'd be living here right now if I could. We've got four more months on the lease, and we've got a no-sublet clause. I can't leave Kenny hanging on the rent like that." He lifted his head and stared at Tyler. "Could you move in with me?"

"It's a condo. I own it. I'd rather not sell right now."

"Oh." He curled up next to Tyler, enjoying the feel of his body. Despite their difference in height, he was equally comfortable whether lying in Tyler's arms or Ty was in his. "Will the offer still stand in four months?"

Tyler rolled him onto his back and straddled him. "The offer will stand forever if it means you'll take me up on it."

Tommy grinned and reached between Tyler's legs. The other man's shaft instantly hardened. "Okay. So I'll warn Kenny tomorrow that he can either find a new roomie or move, because as of the end of the lease, I'm out." He brushed his fingers under Tyler's sac, enjoying the soft weight on his fingers. "If you aren't sick of me by then."

"I won't get sick of you. I promise."

"Then you realize I'm gonna start moving stuff in here as soon as possible, right?"

Tyler laughed. "We could start moving you in tonight."

Tommy shook his head. "Nope. Absolutely not."

Tyler frowned. "Why not?"

He gently squeezed Tyler's shaft, making the other man moan with need. "Because I plan on spending the night enjoying my boyfriend fucking my brains out."

Tyler's heart pounded. Tommy's initial answer to his offer had scared the crap out of him before the clarification. He would have to remember not to panic, that part of Tommy's natural charm was his endearingly clumsy ways. Two simple words sealed Tyler's fate.

My boyfriend.

"Well, love, I plan on spending the night attempting to suck *my* boyfriend's brains out through his gorgeous cock."

Tommy grinned. "Gorgeous, huh?"

Tyler slid his body down Tommy, straddling said gorgeous member. "Absolutely gorgeous. And it's all mine." He continued his southern quest until his mouth hovered over Tommy's rigid cock. "Tell me what you want."

His brown eyes darkened, smoldering with lust. "You. I want you."

Tyler wondered if he'd ever managed to wipe the smile from his face. "You have me for as long as you want, love." Aching slow, he drew Tommy's cock into his mouth, laving his tongue over it, enjoying the hot, silky feel of his lover's flesh.

"Ohh...fuck! That's so good!" He threw his head back, eyes squeezed shut. "Jesus, you are gonna suck my brains out, aren't you?"

Tyler lifted his head. "About something like that, love, I never tease." He returned his attention to Tommy's shaft, his own cock stiffening as he listened to his lover's pleased moans. It hadn't taken him long to learn what Tommy liked, what quickly brought him over, what techniques could keep him on edge for long, teasing moments. Tommy had been equally determined to learn the secrets of Tyler's body, enjoyed exploring him, learning, playing.

They really were a perfect match.

His fingers twined in Tyler's hair. "You keep that up, I'm gonna come, sugar," he grunted.

Tyler deep-throated him, triggering his release. He held on and kept sucking until he knew he'd gotten every last drop. Then he released him with a kiss to his balls. "Like that?"

"Oh man!" Tommy rolled Tyler over and went down on him. Tyler closed his eyes and smiled, enjoying the feel of his lover's hot, eager mouth swallowing his shaft.

"My favorite fantasy," Tyler whispered, "is spending all day in bed with you, with your sweet mouth on my cock."

Tommy moaned around Tyler's shaft and took him even deeper into his mouth, doubling his efforts.

Tyler tried to hold back. "My second favorite fantasy is the feel of your arse in my hands while I'm fucking you, sliding into that nice, tight...ah!"

Tommy grabbed Tyler's hips and held on, keeping Tyler's cock deep in his throat as he climaxed. After a long moment he let go, crawled back up the bed and pulled him into his arms.

He kissed Tyler's damp forehead. "How was that, sugar?"

Tyler nodded, still recovering. "A dream come true, love." He snuggled tightly against him. "A desperate dream come true."

Tommy pulled the sheet over them. "I meant it. I'm taking care of you. You're *my* guy. Don't stress about shit like your car and stuff, okay?"

Sleep mingled with the warm flood of love taking over Tyler's soul. "All right. I promise."

* * * *

Three days after the fuel pump replacement, Tommy left Tyler's a little after one in the morning. He knew he wouldn't have time to get himself moving before class the next morning and go by his apartment to get the books he'd forgotten. It would be too damn tempting to lie there in bed all morning, comfortably snuggled next to Tyler.

It just felt right. He'd lie there all day if he could.

He walked in the door and started for his bedroom when his cell rang. He answered without looking, knowing it was probably Tyler checking to make sure he'd arrived safely. "Hey, handsome. I just walked in the door."

"Tommy?" The scared woman's voice chilled him.

"Maggie? What's wrong, honey?"

"Can you please come get me?"

"What's wrong?"

She sobbed. "I messed up bad." She broke down crying.

"Babe, it's okay. Where are you?" He finally coaxed the information out of her and went to wake Kenny. Shelly was working a night shift at the hospital. Tommy sent Ty a quick text message that he'd arrived home safely, but didn't want to tell him he now had to drive to Ybor City to find Maggie. Ty would only worry.

They found her huddled in the doorway of a small pizza parlor with a walk-up window on Seventh Avenue. When she saw Tommy's truck pull up, she stumbled across the sidewalk. Kenny flew out of the passenger door and caught her before she fell. Tommy helped get her into the truck, and on the way back to the men's apartment, she spilled the story.

"I shouldn't have taken the drink. I know it. But he looked so nice." She had a black eye and huddled tightly against Tommy's side while he drove.

"Did he rape you?"

She shook her head. "No. I only had a couple of sips of the drink. I already feel better. But he tried..." She started crying again.

"We need to call the cops, Maggie. We need to file a report."

"I can't tell them anything. I can't identify him. What good would it do?" She started crying again. "I let my roommates go home without me. I wanted to stay and dance. I was so stupid!"

Tommy and Kenny hadn't approved of Maggie's new batch of roommates, party girls who liked to go out dancing and drinking

nearly every night. Maggie had started spending a lot of time with them, her time with Tommy less and less. As her grades slipped, she dropped out of school and had to work to make ends meet.

He looked at Kenny. His friend's expression most likely matched his own. "You're moving into our place, Maggie. That's it. You're done, understand? No more of this party bullshit. I'm moving in with Tyler, so you can have my room. The rent will be about the same you're paying now. You get along fine with Shel. You two are like sisters. In fact, her brother has had the hots for you for years, so maybe that will do you some good, right?"

She managed a harsh laugh. "He's a nice guy. What's he going to want with me?"

"Stop it, Maggie," Kenny ordered. "Tommy's right. You need to be someplace safe. First that asshole, Primo, now this. Shelly would kick my ass if I didn't back Tommy up."

By four in the morning, they were back at the apartment and had gotten Maggie settled into Tommy's bed. Tommy didn't bother going to sleep, knowing he'd have to get up for classes anyway. He used the time to study. When Maggie stumbled out of bed at seven, she hugged him.

"Thank you for putting up with me."

"No problem." He held her at arm's length. "No arguments. When I get back from class, I'll take you over to your apartment and we'll get your stuff. I don't have to work this afternoon."

"Okay." Right now she was dressed in one of his Bulldogs T-shirts and a pair of his boxers.

He kissed her forehead. "I'll get Ty to help me move your stuff. You'll finally get to meet him. You've been a little scarce lately, kiddo. And our boss is looking for an administrative assistant. That'd be right up your alley. Then Kenny and I can keep our friggin' eyes on you and you can ride to work with one of us every day."

She blushed. "He would hire a dropout?"

"You can go back to school. You only had another year. It'd be

good money.” He gave her a final hug. “I’ll talk to him for you.”

“Thanks, Tommy.”

* * * *

Tyler’s last student appointment of the day cancelled on him, leaving him free to leave nearly two hours early. He glanced at the time and smiled. Maybe he could surprise his sweet boy.

He stopped by Publix, grabbed a few things to whip up a nice dinner, and headed off to Tommy’s apartment. He grinned when he saw that neither Tommy nor Kenny’s vehicles were there.

Perfect!

He let himself in with the key Tommy had given him and set the groceries on the counter. Then he heard the toilet flush and water run. *Ah, Shelly must be home.* He busied himself putting things away and then headed for Tommy’s bedroom a half hour later. No doubt his boy wouldn’t have made his bed. He’d tidy up for him.

The door stood ajar. When he pushed it open, it took him a moment to process the sight. The sleeping girl’s black eye looked horrible. To him, what she wore looked even worse.

Tommy’s Georgia Bulldogs T-shirt and boxers.

His heart tightened. There had to be a logical explanation why there was a bruised and battered girl sleeping in Tommy’s bed. Wearing Tommy’s clothes.

His lover’s bed.

A girl.

The memory of walking in on Robert banging away at Erin flitted through Tyler’s mind before he could stop it.

Tyler backed away from the doorway and walked out to the living room. That’s when he spotted a photo collage hanging on the wall. He’d looked at it before, but never really paid attention. One of the pictures showed Tommy with a girl who looked like this girl. In the picture he was kissing her neck while she grinned and had her arm

wrapped around him.

He felt the cold emotional barrier, the one he thought he'd successfully dismantled after meeting Tommy, slide firmly back into place.

Unable to get the old, painful memory of Erin and the picture of Tommy and the girl out of his mind, he pulled Tommy's apartment key off his key ring and left it on the table before quietly letting himself out. On the way home his phone rang. He shut it off without looking at it.

Tommy's warmth and love had brought summer to his heart, but now the chilly, cold blizzard in his soul had returned.

* * * *

Tommy hurried home after class. Exhausted from lack of sleep, he'd drunk coffee all morning to get through the day. When he arrived home he found Maggie still asleep. He'd left two voice messages for Tyler to call him. He was a little concerned Ty hadn't returned his calls yet, or at least sent him a text, but he was probably busy.

He opened the fridge and caught sight of the food. *Weird*. That stuff hadn't been there when he left.

He went to knock on Kenny's door to ask Shelly, but their door stood ajar. She wasn't home.

Returning to the kitchen, he spotted the key on the table. He picked it up, studied it, and tried it in the front door.

What the hell?

Kenny wasn't due home until nearly six. He wouldn't have had time to get a key made for Maggie, would he?

Maybe he stopped by at his break.

He tried Tyler again. He could get her moved alone, but having Ty's help would speed things up. Then he could spend the night at Ty's.

He grinned. This was the perfect solution. Maggie was as good as

family. He wouldn't have trusted moving anyone in but her and knew she wouldn't screw him or Kenny on the rent.

By two o'clock Maggie had awoke. She had no answers about the food in the refrigerator or the key on the table. Shelly returned at three after working a day shift to fill in for someone. The food mystified her.

No Tyler.

Worried about Tyler but wanting to get Maggie moved, Shelly agreed to help Tommy. The three of them managed to get all of Maggie's things moved from the apartment, filling his truck and Shelly's car. By eight o'clock that night, Tommy was really starting to worry about Tyler.

Maggie was helping Tommy pack his clothes and books. "Go on, go check on him. Tell him I'm looking forward to meeting him."

With growing dread, Tommy drove to Tyler's condo. His car was there, but it didn't look like any lights were on inside. All the blinds were drawn. He climbed the stairs and knocked.

"Tyler? Hey, buddy, you there?"

Tyler sat on the couch in the darkened living room, sipping his rum and Coke, his heart seizing at the sound of Tommy's voice. He'd had an extra key made and had planned on giving it to Tommy at dinner. He listened as Tommy knocked and called out to him while he twirled the key in his free hand. The nightlight in the kitchen caught it, silver flashing as he tumbled it through his fingers.

"Ty? Man, if you're in there, answer the door. Please? You're scaring me."

Tyler quietly snorted, then stood and walked to the kitchen to refresh his drink. He dropped the key in the trash as he passed. He knew Tommy hadn't left, could hear him through the door talking to someone on the phone.

"Yeah, Pete? Tommy. Listen, have you talked to Ty today? I'm at his place, and his car is here, but he's not answering...I've been trying to call him all day...Yeah. If you hear from him, have him call

me, please? I really need to talk to him. Well, I can tell you...” He walked away from the door and down the steps before Tyler could hear the news.

I know what it is. Bloody asshole. I made a fool of myself. Again.
Tyler downed his next drink.

* * * *

Tommy spent a restless night on the couch. That he hadn’t heard from Tyler scared him. Tyler never failed to return calls, even if just to send a text message in reply. He never failed to call Tommy at night if they weren’t together to say good night.

To exchange *I love you*s.

At seven that morning, he showered, dressed, and drove to Tyler’s. He arrived a little before eight.

Tyler’s car was gone.

He tried Tyler’s cell again. Straight to voicemail.

Tommy had to be at work in thirty minutes and couldn’t be late today. No time to stop by the university and find Ty.

He called every spare chance he got. Finally, around three, he left one last message. “Look, I don’t know what’s going on, but should I be scared or pissed off or what? Please, call me back! I love you.”

He hung up, regretting the edge in his voice. Dammit, he had it bad for Tyler.

Pete called him back an hour later. “Ty just sent Eddie a text message that he’s fine.”

“What the fuck?”

“I don’t know. That’s all he texted him. ‘I’m fine, no worries.’ Did you guys have a fight or something?”

“No! Dammit, I was going to start moving the rest of my stuff in last night. I told you...” The image of his apartment fridge flashed before him.

The food no one could explain.

The key on the table. Kenny had denied putting it there.

He groaned. “Aww, fuck. Listen, I need to go.”

“What?”

“I’m a dumb fuck, that’s what. I think maybe I know what’s happened. I think Tyler saw Maggie at my apartment. He has a key now and he’s never met her. He doesn’t know who she is. He probably got the wrong idea.”

“Aw, Jesus Christ. Let me tell you a secret, Tommy. If you tell him I said this, I’ll kill you. Did he ever tell you about Erin or Marcus?”

“Erin was his first wife. He said they divorced. I’ve never heard of Marcus.”

“Let’s just say Tyler went through the ultimate mindfuck, okay? Erin cheated on Ty with his best friend. He walked in on them having sex. He has serious trust issues after what she did, and then after what happened with Marcus. He wouldn’t tell us exactly what happened with Marcus, but it was bad. And I did not tell you that.”

Tommy swore. “Okay, thanks.”

After work, Tommy drove straight to Tyler’s. Tyler wasn’t home, but Tommy sat by his front door and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

Around eight o’clock, he watched Tyler’s Toyota pull into his usual spot. He knew Tyler could see him sitting by his door. If he wanted to run, he’d have to do it now or face him.

After a few minutes, when it was obvious Tommy wasn’t moving, Tyler got out of his car, laptop case in hand, and climbed the stairs. Tyler didn’t look at or speak to him when he walked to the door and took out his keys.

Tommy stood. “Can we talk?”

Tyler’s chilly tone scared him. “I don’t think we have anything to talk about, Thomas.”

Tommy grabbed his wrist. “What the fuck is going on?”

Tyler wouldn't look at him. "Let. Me. Go," he quietly ordered.

He did.

Tyler unlocked his door and pushed it open. Tommy wouldn't let him shut the door in his face. He forced his way in and shut it behind him. "You're going to talk to me!"

Tyler glared at him and put his laptop on the table. "I don't have anything to say to you. You can get your things if that's what you want. Then you can get the fuck out."

He grabbed Tyler's arm. "Dammit! What the fuck? Is it because of Maggie?"

Tyler's eyes blazed as he wrenched his arm free. "Is that her name? The girl I saw asleep in your bed, wearing your clothes? Beaten to a bloody pulp?"

"Yes, that's her name. Maggie, my friend. I've told you about her." Tommy grabbed Tyler by the shoulders. "She's moving into my room at the apartment. She called me from Ybor after I left here the other night. She got beat up and nearly raped by an asshole."

"You told me you were home."

"I didn't want to worry you. Kenny went with me. Ask him!"

Tyler glared at him. "How can I trust anything you say?"

Tommy grabbed him and kissed him, waiting until Tyler finally quit resisting to release him. "Because I love you, and I'd never lie to you. Maggie and I have been friends—*just* friends—for a couple of years now. Kenny knows. He helped me beat the fucking hell out of her ex-boyfriend when he attacked her. You've got to believe me!"

"I saw the picture in your living room of you kissing her."

Tommy felt like ripping his hair out. Pete wasn't kidding—Tyler acted like he was in total emotional lockdown mode. "That was years ago, and it was just playing around. We've never been together romantically. She's like a sister to me."

He backed Tyler against the counter. "I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. Have you played your fucking voicemails? I've been worried sick about you! I wanted you to help

me move her into my place last night, then help me move my stuff here!”

Tyler didn’t want to hope. He hadn’t played his voicemails, afraid the sound of Tommy’s voice would rip his heart out of his chest.

He didn’t want to believe.

He didn’t want to be hurt again.

Tommy spied Tyler’s phone on the table and grabbed it. “Show me how to play your damn voicemails. It’ll prove it!”

Tyler snatched the phone away from him. “Fine!”

He dialed into his voicemail box. Minutes later, after the last one played, he felt the tears rolling down his face as he stared at Tommy.

He closed the phone. “Really?”

Tommy nodded and stepped close again. “Yes! Jesus Christ, Ty, I love you!” He engulfed him in a bear hug Tyler finally, reluctantly returned. “I can’t lose you, man! Please!”

Tyler didn’t want to hope, kept his voice cautious. “When do I get to meet her?”

Tommy grabbed his hands. “Right now, and we’re taking my truck so you can’t run away.” He stared into Tyler’s eyes. “I know you had a bad time with your first ex-wife. I know she cheated. I’m not her. And I know Pete’s gonna shoot me for asking this, but who the hell is Marcus, and where the fuck is the asshole so I can beat the crap out of him for destroying your trust in people?”

Tyler gasped, shocked. “What?”

“Yeah, he said something about a major mindfuck.” He stepped closer. “Whoever the hell the asshole is, he’s not me. I’m not him. I swear to God, Ty, I’ll never go behind your back. If there was ever a reason I wasn’t happy or I wanted out, not that I think there ever will be, I’d be man enough to tell you to your face, not play games. Ask Kenny. He’s seen me break up with girls before...”

Tommy winced. “Shit. That did *not* come out right. He’s seen me break off a relationship before. I don’t fuck around. I don’t play games. I want honesty, and I give it.”

Tyler felt torn between amusement at Tommy's verbal stumble and shock that Pete had mentioned Marcus to him.

And a warm, tingly sensation that he wanted to beat the crap out of Marcus.

After a moment of silence, Tommy softened his tone, cupped the back of Tyler's neck and touched his forehead to Tyler's. "I love you, Ty. You're *my* guy. *Mine*. I don't want anyone else but you. Please believe me."

Tyler didn't want to spend his life alone and distrustful. He wanted to love this sweet man, this protective man who was willing to beat up someone who'd hurt him.

"I won't ask you again," Tommy said, "and if you want to tell me to go to hell, okay. Who is Marcus?"

Staring into Tommy's sweet brown eyes, Tyler told him. Not everything, not the complexity of the dynamic or all the sordid details, but enough. When he finished, Tyler was crying.

Tommy used his thumbs to brush Tyler's tears from his face. "I swear to God, Ty, he ever shows up again, I don't give a flying fuck he's Terry's friend. I'm decking him." Then he smiled. "I'm territorial. I won't share you. Not even space in your head. Get rid of him, and Erin, because all that should be there is me loving you. Deal?"

Tyler sobbed and fell against Tommy, the cold, frozen barrier shattered.

For good this time, Tyler suspected.

Tommy slid down the cabinet with him and sat on the floor, holding him as he cried, his long arms securely wrapped around him.

"Jesus, Ty," he whispered, "he's gone. It's okay, buddy, I've got you. You're all mine, and he's gone."

Tyler finally lay still in his arms. "I'm a fucking asshole," he hoarsely cried. "I was so desperate."

"He was, what, nearly twice your age? Jesus, he used you. It's not your fault." He pressed his lips to Tyler's forehead. "If it means

anything, believe me, my first time with you was fan-fucking-tastic. There's only one thing I'd change about our first night together."

"What?"

He smiled. "I wish it'd lasted a few days instead of hours."

Tyler absorbed his words, then laughed, burying his head against Tommy's shoulder. Once he felt steady enough to stand, Tommy helped him to his feet and hugged him. "Come on, let's go introduce you to Maggie. If you promise not to run away, I'll let you take your car so we can bring more of my stuff back here."

Tyler grinned and tightly hugged him. "Absolutely!" He started following him out the door when he remembered something. "Blast. I'll catch up, I promise."

Tommy had already reached the stairs. Tyler dashed back into the condo and rummaged through the kitchen garbage. He found the key, quickly rinsed it under the tap, then dried it and slipped it into his pocket. Smiling, he exited the condo and locked it.

Chapter 14

Tommy slipped on the jacket and nervously adjusted his tie in the truck's side-view mirror. "I look like a monkey in a suit."

Tyler gently pushed his hands away and adjusted the tie for him. "No, you don't. You look quite handsome, love. Stunning, truly."

"You sweet-talkin' thang, you," he teased. "You're just saying that so you can get laid later."

He smiled. "I'm sure I'd get laid later even if I didn't say that."

"Jesus, Ty," he said with a laugh. "You know what buttons to push, don't you?"

Tyler laced his fingers through Tommy's and led him toward the large house. "I wouldn't want it any other way, love."

Tyler hadn't admitted it to his lover, but the only reason they were attending the party was because they were invited. He didn't want to go, had no desire to mingle, and would much prefer to spend the evening curled up on the couch with his head in Tommy's lap, watching TV. But Tyler knew Erin and Robert would be there, as would most of the English department faculty and others, and he didn't want to be thought of as avoiding the party because of Erin and Robert.

Word had eventually gotten around about Erin and Robert's betrayal, as Tyler knew it would. The pitying looks had been far less than he imagined. He also noticed Erin and Robert weren't entirely welcomed at as many after-hours functions as Tyler, even this long after their divorce.

This wasn't the first event he'd brought Tommy to, but it was the first semi-formal one, and certainly the largest.

And it was the first Erin and Robert would also be attending.

No way in hell would Tyler pass up that opportunity.

Tyler refused to release Tommy's hand as they worked their way through the crowd. Tommy acted more subdued than normal, but still pleasant and charming.

Tyler thought he caught the sound of Erin's voice. He maneuvered Tommy toward the sound, past the crowd surrounding the buffet table. Sure enough, there were the lovebirds, chatting with a small circle of friends. He could go weeks without running into them at work if he tried hard. Tyler thought perhaps he'd feel something, a pang, hurt, to see them together like that, as he had in the past. Not this time.

Not with Tommy on his arm.

Tyler squeezed Tommy's hand and led him over. Did Erin blanch? He hoped to bloody hell so. "Erin, Robert. Good to see you."

Robert remained silent. Erin eyed Tommy. "Hi, Tyler. You look good."

"As do you. Erin, Robert, I'd like to introduce my husband, Thomas Kinsey."

Without coaxing, Tommy smiled, shook hands, then possessively draped his arm around Tyler's shoulders and snugged him close. "Nice to meet you."

Erin looked a little queasy. "Nice to meet you, too. Um, how's the writing?"

"Going well," Tyler said. "Just sent another manuscript to my agent. I'm waiting to hear back from him. There have been rumors of the movie rights being taken for one of them."

That caught Robert's interest. "Oh?"

Tyler smiled. "Yes." He couldn't resist. "Bet you regret that quickie divorce now, don't you, Erin?" He forced a laugh. "Oh, Thomas, there's Ronald. I want to introduce you." He quickly caught Tommy's hand and dragged him across the room before Erin could respond.

Behind him, he heard Tommy snicker. “That was pure evil,” he murmured in Tyler’s ear. “Oooh, there you go. Evil Genius. I like that. That’s your nickname. It’s perfect for you.”

Tyler turned to him and winked. “Are you saying I had ulterior motives, pet?”

Tommy snorted. “Um, yeah. You want to sell me some oceanfront property in Montana while you’re at it? Dude, I so know you better than that.”

Tyler pecked him on the lips. “I did want to introduce you to Ronald. And he is over here.”

Tommy playfully rolled his eyes. “Uh huh. Suurrrre.”

* * * *

At one point, while Tyler became engrossed in a heated discussion about Shakespeare, Tommy’s stomach rumbled. Not that he didn’t appreciate the Bard, but buffet won out. He excused himself and threaded his way through the partygoers to the table, where he grabbed a plate. After filling it, he stepped out the back door to the less-crowded lanai to eat. A group of people were seated nearby, but before he could make his way over to an empty chair, he heard Erin’s voice float from the crowd.

“He recently graduated. I don’t understand what Tyler sees in him. He’s just a hick redneck. Did you see that junk truck he drives?”

Robert’s deep voice rumbled with laughter. “He’s found himself a meal ticket, that’s all. Did you hear him talk? He’s an uncouth Cracker. Does construction or something, I heard. Tyler must be desperate.” The people laughed.

Tommy stepped back into the shadows, his face burning. His appetite gone, he dumped his plate and headed inside. He found a bathroom and locked himself in for a minute, splashed water on his face to calm down.

“Uncouth Cracker.”

That about summed it up, didn't it? He stared at himself in the mirror. What the hell did Ty see in him anyway?

After a few minutes he felt steady enough to return to the party. As he looked around, he realized he didn't fit in with these people. They weren't like Eddie and Pete and the rest of their friends, gay or straight. They were academics, their noses pointed so far up in the air they'd drown if they wandered outside in the rain. Clichéd, but true.

He walked out the front door and sat on the stoop. Thirty minutes later, he heard the front door open and Tyler's relieved voice.

"There you are, love! What are you doing out here? I've been looking for you."

"I needed air."

Tyler sat next to him and took his hand, his face serious. "What's wrong?" he quietly asked.

He forced a smile. "Just tired, that's all. I'm sorry I'm a party pooper."

Tyler's deep blue eyes pulled him in, the way they always did. Tyler leaned in and kissed him. "The truth, love," he said. "You promised me the truth. Always."

Tommy felt his face redden. He couldn't look Tyler in the eye as he told him what he overheard. When Tyler didn't respond, he finally looked.

Tyler's face had hardened, angry. Tyler laid a palm along Tommy's jaw. "Listen to me," he said. "You are my life. You are my love. I could not care less what those arseholes in there say about you or me or our love for each other."

"He's right, though. You're better than I am."

Tyler shook him. "Listen to yourself! That comment came from a man who had no compunction about fucking the wife of someone he claimed was a good friend, and less than six months into their marriage! Do you honestly think he is the best person to be making declarations about whether or not someone is trailer trash?"

He stared at Tyler, then finally harshly laughed. "Yeah, I guess

you're right. No one in my family's ever been eligible for *Jerry Springer*, that I know of."

Tyler finally smiled, warming Tommy's heart. "I am extremely proud of you. You won that design contest, did you not? You have already been written up in several trade journals for your designs. Love, he's jealous, that's all. I damn well know Erin must be. Remember, I know what they make. They'll be stuck on teacher's pay for the rest of their careers, while you and I shall be living high on the hog, as it were."

Tyler leaned in and kissed him, gently tracing his lips and tongue with his. "You are my life. I can't say that enough. Would I be introducing you to all of them as my husband if I felt any other way?"

Tommy blushed again, this time in shame. No, Tyler had never denied their relationship, never played it down. He'd always gone out of his way to proudly introduce him in a way to make it perfectly clear who he was—Tyler's.

Tyler laced his fingers through Tommy's and nudged him to his feet. "Now, no more nonsense about this, right, love? Let's go inside and enjoy ourselves."

Tommy noticed that for the rest of the evening, Tyler went out of his way to talk about Tommy's achievements, the prestigious design contest that he won, his professional successes so early in his career. Nearly everyone was impressed.

He stood by and simply listened, nodding when appropriate, content to let Tyler toot his horn for him.

His guy.

His.

Dammit, he loved him so much.

He vowed he would spend the rest of his life showing him.

* * * *

Tommy pointed his truck up a clay dirt driveway. Tyler felt every

nerve in his body tighten, on edge.

Tommy reached across the seat and caught his hand. "Relax, Ty. This'll be fine."

"Right. Easy for you to say. They're your family."

He abruptly braked and shifted the truck out of gear. "No, dammit, they're your family, too."

Tyler looked outside the truck at the woods. "Face it, love. They are your relatives, not mine. I suspect this will be a rather large shock for them."

"I don't care." He grabbed Ty's chin and made him look at him. "I love you. I know Momma won't be happy about it, but she'll accept it. She loves me. She's always said, especially since Dad died, that life's too short to not be happy. *You* make me happy. She'll see that."

"And your sisters? What of them? If they refuse to accept me?"

He shrugged. "I don't care." His face hardened. "I love you. They can shove their opinions up their asses." He shifted into gear again, and Tyler tried to swallow his nervousness as they pulled into a large yard.

Tommy had five older sisters: April the closest to him in age, followed by Karen, Cheryl, Katie, and the oldest, Emily. Peggy Kinsey still worked as a nurse even though the insurance settlement and lawsuit from her husband's death at the hands of a drunk driver meant their home was paid for and she could retire if she wanted.

April and Karen still lived at home. Tyler knew Tommy was closest to Karen. Emily was a bit of a prude. Tommy had already warned Tyler that he wouldn't be surprised if Em gave them grief. The others, he wasn't sure what their reactions would be but hoped for quiet acceptance if not outright congratulations.

An older woman stepped onto the porch as Tommy parked the truck. Tyler assumed it was Peggy. Tom's reaction as he jumped out and bounded up the porch to hug her confirmed it.

Tyler climbed out and approached, trying to quell his nerves. They were only there for the weekend, just a visit, and would be

staying there.

Tommy turned at Tyler's approach but kept his arm around the woman. "Momma, this is Tyler Paulson."

"How do you do, ma'am? It's a pleasure to meet you."

When he extended his hand in greeting, she grabbed his arm and pulled him in for a warm hug.

"Well, hello, sugar!" Tommy's soft accent paled in comparison to Peggy's deep, rich Savannah drawl. "It's about time I got to meet y'all. I've certainly heard enough about you. Well, come on inside. I've got iced tea, and I made brownies." She looked horrified. "Y'all aren't allergic to nuts, are you?"

Tyler shook his head. "No, ma'am. I'm not."

She planted her hands on her hips and looked stern. "Okay, Ty, first rule. I am *not* ma'am. I'm Mom."

He smiled. "Sorry, Mom."

She grinned. "That's better. That's so cute, sounds like 'mum' the way you say it. Tommy, he's adorable."

She hooked her arms through theirs and led them inside the large, airy house to the huge eat-in kitchen and pointed them to the table. The men sat. Tommy looked at Tyler and winked while his mom's back was turned.

Tyler nervously smiled.

Peggy brought them glasses of ice, a pitcher of tea, and the sugar bowl and spoons. Once seated, she smiled at them. "So, how was y'all's trip?"

"It was good, Momma," Tommy answered, fixing his tea. "It's not a bad drive." He cleared his throat. "Are any of the girls home?"

"Nope. April's working late, and Karen's at school until at least six. Why?"

Tommy took a deep breath and stared at Tyler for a moment. Tyler knew he dreaded this conversation. "Momma, I need to tell you something."

Peggy frowned. "Sugar, what's the matter? What's wrong?"

“Nothing’s wrong.” He met her gaze. “Momma, I told you I moved in with Ty.”

“Right. So?”

“Momma, there’s no easy way to break this to you but to say it. Tyler isn’t just my roommate. He’s my boyfriend. We’re...you know...together.”

Peggy stared at him for a moment, then smiled. “Well, Momma’s intuition strikes again.”

“What?”

“Tommy, every time I’ve talked to you for the past couple of months, every other word outta your mouth’s been ‘Tyler this’ and ‘Tyler that’ and ‘me and Tyler did this or that.’ Sugar, I’ve suspected it for a while.”

He stared at her, shocked. “You’re not upset?”

She laid a hand over her son’s hand, then looked at Tyler and laid her hand over his as well. “Do you love him, Ty?”

Shocked into silence, he nodded.

She returned her attention to Tommy. “Do you love him?”

He nodded. “I love him a lot, Momma. I’ve never loved anyone like I love him.”

“Are you happy?”

Both men nodded.

She squeezed their hands, then sat back, took her glasses off and wiped her eyes. “I can’t honestly say I’m in favor of this. But you’re my son. If you love him, and if he loves you, and if y’all are happy, then it’s not my business.” She blew her nose. “Your daddy died way too young, sugar. We shoulda had a lot of good years together. We had a lot of plans we never got to do. Life is too short to nitpick about stuff and lose sight of what’s important.”

The men nodded but didn’t speak.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get to meet Adam, Tyler. I think he would have liked you.”

Tommy snorted. “I doubt Dad would have been happy about this.”

“Why wouldn’t he? He didn’t have a problem with Bob Short. They were best friends for decades.”

Tommy’s eyes widened. “What? He’s gay?”

Peggy laughed. “Sugar, who the heck do you think that ‘cousin’ is he’s lived with for years? If they’re related to each other, then I’m Ronald Regan. They just told people way back when they were close cousins so people wouldn’t talk. Now it doesn’t matter, of course.”

“Bob and Lou are *gay*?”

“Everyone knows it. You never realized it?”

Tommy shook his head, apparently still in shock over the revelation.

Peggy looked at Tyler. “Bob Short was Adam’s second in command at his architecture firm, and his close friend, for years,” she explained. She put her glasses on and studied the men. “I won’t tell your sisters for you. You have to do that yourself.”

Tommy nodded. “Yes, Momma.”

She smiled at Tyler. “You take good care of my boy, you hear me? He’s my baby. He’s my only son.”

Tyler breathed a deep sigh of relief. “I swear I will, Mom. I promise. Forever.”

She nodded and reached for a brownie. “Then that’s all I can ask for, isn’t it?”

With that out of the way, and after they had their brownies and tea, Tommy stood. “What rooms do you want us in?”

She shrugged. “I figured you’d be staying in your old room, sugar.”

He blushed. “Where do you want Tyler?”

She knowingly smiled. “Well, I had thought about putting him in Em’s old room. Now I think it’d be best he bunks with you, don’t you?”

“You don’t mind?”

“Honey, I’ll give y’all the same talk your sisters have gotten. What you do when you close that bedroom door ain’t none of my

business. But you'd best make sure I can't hear what's going on. Discretion, got it?"

Both men smiled. "Thanks, Momma," Tommy said, leaning in to kiss her.

* * * *

Before Karen arrived, Tyler helped Peggy cook dinner while Tommy attended to a few minor chores and repairs around the house. Peggy stood at the stove, preparing a batch of cube steaks to fry up. He chopped vegetables and asked her questions about some of Tommy's favorite dishes. After a few minutes she turned to him.

"You're not real close to your family, are you, son?"

He blushed. "No. I'm afraid I'm not."

"I could tell. You have an air about you. Like you've been abandoned before."

Tyler blushed even deeper, heat rolling across his face. "It's a rather long story."

"I imagine it's not one you're fond of telling."

"Not particularly."

"Ty," she softly said, "if my son loves you, and you love him, that makes you family. My family." She enveloped him in a long, strong hug. "I guess this means we won't see any more babies with the Kinsey name, but that's okay. I don't mind picking up another son." She laughed as she stepped away and wiped at her eyes. "Leastways, one I don't have to put through college."

Tyler wanted to break down and cry. In just a couple of hours, Peggy did feel like a mother to him. Calling her anything but "Mom" would feel horribly wrong. "Thank you."

She shook her finger at him. "Just don't hurt him, you hear me? I'll walk through fire for my kids and their other halves, including you, but you do not want to get on my bad side, boy."

A flicker of darkness washed through his soul at the

admonishment, memories he'd rather leave undisturbed.

He nodded. "Yes, Mom. I promise."

She smiled, then kissed his cheek. "You're a sweetheart. Well, at least this'll knock out my church ladies' group gossip about Billie Mae Englund's married daughter getting knocked up by that shrimp boat captain."

* * * *

Tommy walked into the kitchen about the time the front door opened and slammed shut again. A woman's voice called out. "Momma? Tommy?"

The tall woman who walked into the kitchen could have passed for his lover's twin. Tyler watched as the woman squealed in delight and hugged her brother. "Tommy!"

"Hey, Kar."

She turned and spotted Tyler. Her eyes lit up. "Well, helllooo, Blue Eyes!" She started toward him when her brother stopped her.

"Um, Kar, we need to talk."

She smiled, not taking her eyes off Tyler. "In a minute, baby bro. Introduce me to your friend first. Don't be rude."

Peggy laughed and shook her head as she started frying up the cube steaks, but she didn't say anything.

"Karen, this is my boyfriend, Tyler Paulson."

She smiled. "Nice to meet you..." Her voice trailed off before she turned to Tommy. "What?"

He walked over and draped his arm around Tyler's shoulders. "Surprise."

She looked startled, then recovered and rolled her eyes as she stomped her foot. "Dammit! Why are the cute ones always gay! That is *so* not fair!" She poked Tommy in the chest, hard. "Why the hell can't you bring home a cute straight guy for me, jerk?"

Tyler wasn't sure if this was a good reaction or not, but Tommy

laughed. “Well, hands off, kiddo. He’s mine.”

She stuck her tongue out at Tommy, then leaned in for a serious hug from Tyler. “Nice to meet you. If you ever get sick of him, let me know, ’kay? I’m calling dibs right now.”

Tyler laughed. “I doubt that will happen, Karen, but I’ll keep your offer in mind.”

She sighed melodramatically. “And he’s friggin’ British, too.” She smacked Tommy hard on the shoulder. “Next time, you’re not allowed home unless you bring me one, too.”

April arrived home around nine. While stunned, she took the news well and appeared as enamored of Tyler as Karen. The next evening, the other daughters and their husbands or boyfriends arrived for dinner. That’s when Tommy planned to break the news to the rest of them.

Tyler was battling a serious bout of nerves he thought might lead to hyperventilation when Karen winked at him from across the table. He was helping her set the big formal dining room table for their meal.

“Chill, Blue Eyes,” she joked. “Em’ll have a cow, but that’s okay. She freaks about everything. Don’t let her get to you.”

He tried for deep, slow breaths. A little while later, Tommy caught up with him on the back porch, where Tyler had retreated to try to calm down.

He wrapped his arms around Tyler from behind. “It’s okay. We’ll get through this together, buddy.”

Tyler nodded. “Together.”

Tommy turned him in his arms. “I’m not going anywhere. Even if Momma had flipped out, you’d still be my guy, and I’d still be yours. Got it?”

Tyler always felt himself lost in Tommy’s sweet brown eyes. His rugged face was long and lean and tanned from the time he spent outside on construction sites. But his eyes balanced him out, sweetened and softened his face, expressed the soft heart and

bottomless well of compassion hidden within. “Got it.”

He brushed a kiss across Tyler’s lips. “When we go to bed tonight, I’ll give you one of my back rubs.” He winked. “Then you can give me one of your front rubs.”

Tyler laughed, needing the release of stress. “I love you.”

He grinned. “I love you too, sugar. Don’t forget it.”

* * * *

Tommy had suspected Em would flip out. While the adults were gathered in the kitchen before dinner and all the kids outside playing, Tommy cleared his throat.

“I need to make an announcement.”

Tyler, standing next to him, straightened a little

Tommy didn’t miss Em’s harsh, suspicious, narrow gaze. “What’s going on, Tom?”

“I’ve already told Momma, Karen, and April.” He took a deep breath and draped his arm around Tyler’s shoulders. “Tyler isn’t just my roommate. He’s my boyfriend.”

Cheryl’s eyes widened in surprise, but she didn’t say anything. Katie gasped.

Em went off the deep end. “How dare you! You can’t do that! That’s not right!”

He squeezed Tyler closer to him as much for his own comfort as to keep his lover quiet. “I don’t care what you think, Emily. This is my life, and this is the man I love.”

“You’re gay? You *can’t* be gay! You dated girls!”

Tommy didn’t feel like trying to explain the intricacies of bisexuality to her, so he kept it simple. “I love Tyler,” he insisted. “And if it upsets you, I’m sorry, but I’m not denying who I am or how I feel to make you feel better.”

Her mouth gaped, opening and shutting like a fish, before she yelled, “You can’t do this! It’s not right!”

“You said that,” Karen snarked. “Pick a new line.”

Em’s face reddened. She jabbed a finger at Karen. “You stay the hell out of this!”

Karen stepped forward. “It’s not any of *your* business.”

“Like hell it isn’t! He brings his filthy habits to our parents’ home, and you want me to turn a blind eye?”

Peggy stepped in, her face hard. “That’s enough, Emily Anne. You stop right there. This is *my* house and that’s *my* son and *both* he and Tyler are welcome here. Deal with it.”

“I don’t want my children seeing this!”

“Seeing what?” April chimed in. “What the heck do you think they’re going to do? When you were dating Clay, plenty of times Daddy threatened to hose you two down with the sprinklers. I haven’t seen these two do half the things you used to do on the back porch with Clay, so don’t you give us that crap!”

Karen snorted. “Yeah, remember the time he went and knocked on the windshield when the car was rocking and they didn’t know he was home?”

April giggled. “Oh, that was a good one—”

“Girls,” Peggy broke in. “Focus.”

“Sorry, Momma,” they echoed.

Cheryl weighed in. “I don’t have a problem with it,” she carefully said. “As long as he’s happy.” She looked at her brother. Tommy nodded.

Peggy looked at Katie. “Well, Kathryn Melissa? What say you?”

Katie shook her head. “I don’t agree with it, but like Cheryl said, if he’s happy, then that’s what’s important.”

Em obviously realized she was outnumbered. “What the hell is wrong with you people? Have you not read your Bible lately?”

“I remember something about loving the sinner and not the sin,” Peggy quipped, “if I was hard-pressed to quote something off the top of my head without looking it up. Tyler seems like a very nice man, and considering your father despised Clay at first”—the man blushed

but stayed silent—“then I would think you of all people should have a little compassion and courtesy.”

Em’s face reddened even more. “But he was a man. He wasn’t a queer!” she spat.

Peggy’s voice dropped, deepened. “Let me tell you something right now, missy. Don’t you *ever* let me hear you say that word, or anything else like it in that way, in or around my house or your brother or Tyler ever again. So help me Jesus, I’ll slap that self-righteousness plumb outta your hide if I do!”

Everyone fell silent, apparently not used to hearing Peggy Kinsey’s anger.

“Do you understand me?” Peggy screamed.

Em, for once cowed into silence, nodded.

“Then answer me, girl!”

Em’s soft voice was barely audible. “Yes, Momma.”

Peggy nodded, took a deep breath, and smiled. “Now then. We’re gonna have us a nice, friendly family dinner. Your brother is home, he’s brought Tyler home to meet us, and we’re going to sit down and show him true Southern hospitality.” She glared at Em. “Your choice, little girl. You stay and behave, or leave. Your choice.”

Em set her jaw, but she grabbed a casserole dish and stormed out of the kitchen to take it to the dining room.

Clay looked nervous, but offered up a smile to Tommy and Tyler. “Sorry. She’s been in a bad mood lately.”

“Yeah,” Karen snarked, “her whole friggin’ life. Don’t apologize for her, Clay. She’s a bitch. Don’t think we don’t know it.”

* * * *

Em behaved herself during dinner. The kids didn’t seem to notice her chilly treatment of her brother and his “friend.” Peggy volunteered to her grandkids, who ranged in age from three to seven and adored their Uncle Tommy, that they should call Tyler “Uncle Tyler.” Em’s

face reddened, but she didn't correct her mother.

When the men fell into bed that night a little before midnight, Tommy tightly held Tyler in his arms. "See, sugar?" he whispered. "It worked out fine. You're family. Momma stood up for you. So did my other sisters. Em will come around."

Tyler closed his eyes and inhaled Tommy's scent, enjoyed the warmth of the man's body. Far too tired and stressed to feel even slightly romantic, he was content to lie there, secure, safe.

Loved.

"I love you, Thomas."

Tommy softly chuckled in the darkness and kissed Tyler before wrapping his body around him and settling in to go to sleep. "Love you too, buddy. Forever and ever."

Chapter 15

Tommy went online and checked his credit card balance. It would wipe out a lot of the progress he'd made paying down his balance over the past six months, but it was worth it.

Tyler was worth it. Even if the weekend in Savannah hadn't gone well, he'd still planned on doing this. He wanted visible proof to the world that he was taken, that Tyler was taken. That Tyler was *his* guy.

He spent several days looking at different rings, trying to figure out what he wanted. He even remembered to try on Ty's ring one evening when he'd taken it off to make meatloaf.

Tyler had looked amused. "What are you doing?"

"Just curious." He fitted the ring on several fingers. It comfortably slid onto his pinky, albeit a little snugly. "Just seeing, that's all."

He finally located a band he fell in love with and fought his blush as he told the sales clerk he wanted two of them in different sizes. She seemed to take it in stride, without batting an eyelash. The intricate, entwined vine pattern etched in the gold was perfect, exactly how he felt about Tyler.

Entwined.

Totally part of Tyler, like Ty was totally part of him, impossible to tell where one started and the other ended. That's the way he preferred it.

She returned with a ring sizer, figured out the sizes, and fetched two different bands. He tried the one for him and it fit. The one for Tyler, just a hair snug on his pinky, would most likely fit Tyler perfectly.

He handed over his AmEx card and didn't bother looking as she

rang them up. It would take him five months at his current salary to pay for them, but he wouldn't dare tell Tyler. He didn't want Tyler paying for things like that. He wanted to take care of Tyler.

He didn't care that Ty said he wanted to do this for him, support him until his career and reputation took off. Dammit, he could make it on his own.

And he wanted to take care of Tyler.

His guy.

His.

He sat in his truck and stared at the rings, his gut a nervous, knotted mess. Tyler was expecting him home in an hour for dinner. He couldn't put this off, couldn't wait and plan it to be all romantic like Ty might. He needed it done, now, before he chickened out.

Tyler appeared pleasantly surprised by Tommy's arrival. "My, you're early." He frowned. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head. "Nothing's wrong. We need to talk."

Tyler's eyes widened. "You heard? Dammit! I told Eddie to keep that blasted mouth of his shut!"

Confused, Tommy stared. "What?"

"I told that man not to say anything. He probably couldn't wait to spread the news." Tyler grabbed Tommy's hands. "This changes nothing between us, do you understand?" He cupped Tom's chin in his palms and drew his face down to kiss him. "Absolutely nothing."

"Okay, can we back up a few steps? What the hell are you talking about?"

Tyler's eyes widened. "He didn't tell you?" Tyler turned and smacked himself in the forehead. "Dammit!" He blew out a deep breath and turned back to Tommy, a huge grin spreading across his face. "My agent called this afternoon. There was an auction for the rights to *Alarming Thoughts*."

"Auction?"

Tyler nodded and recaptured Tommy's hands. "Yes. A very active one, from what I understand. One of the publishers bought it! They've

offered a two-million-dollar advance, and they want the next two books for two million each!”

Tommy felt like the wind had been socked out of him. He staggered and grabbed the counter for support. *Holy fuck!* On the heels of that, the realization that now he couldn’t go through with his plan. Ty might think he was being opportunistic, trying to cash in. He’d wanted to ask Tyler if they could combine their finances and have legal papers drawn up for powers of attorney for each other, and other things like that. To finally be as legally “married” as they could be.

Not now.

“What’s wrong?” Tyler asked.

Tommy forced a smile and shook his head. “Nothing’s wrong. That’s great! That’s fantastic news for you.”

“For us!” Tyler’s smile faded. “What’s going on?”

“I’m in shock, that’s all.”

“This changes nothing! This is as much yours as it is mine.” Tyler squeezed his hands. “I love you. You’re my heart and soul. This changes nothing.”

It changed everything.

Tom carefully pulled away from him. “Ty, it’s your money, not mine.” He turned to the window over the sink, trying to collect his thoughts. How would he take care of his guy if his guy was taking care of him? That’s not how he wanted it to be.

Tyler pressed against Tommy’s back and wrapped his arms around him. “Love, this is what we’ve worked so hard—what’s this?”

Tyler’s hand had traveled down the front of Tommy’s slacks and found the bulge the ring box made in his pocket.

Tom stepped away. “Nothing. It’s nothing.”

Persistent, Tyler slipped his hand inside Tommy’s pocket and came out with the box.

He swore and grabbed for it. “It’s nothing. I was going to—”

“What? What were you going to do?” Tyler held the box out of

reach.

Tommy stepped back, his face reddening. "It doesn't matter now," he mumbled.

Tyler grabbed Tommy's hand and marched him into the living room where he sat him on the couch next to him. "Please," he begged, "tell me!"

Tommy took the box back. He couldn't look Tyler in the eyes. "It doesn't really matter now," he softly repeated.

"Now what? That you've found out I'm rich?" Tyler's tone turned bitter. "I've got money now, so you think you're beneath me? Do you really think so little of me or my love for you that you would believe that?"

"No!" He swore and made himself look at Ty. His lover's blue eyes looked full of pain. "I love you! I don't want to lose you. I was going to..." He couldn't finish.

Tyler's face softened. He reached out and stroked Tommy's chin. "Going to what?"

Now feeling self-conscious, but figuring, *What the hell*, he dropped to one knee and opened the box. "I've been wanting to do this for a while. I spent the last few days looking around until I found what I wanted."

He removed one of the rings and took Tyler's left hand. "Look, I don't want your money. I'm willing to sign anything Bob puts in front of me. I just want to take care of you. I want to be with you. As stupid as it sounds, I'm old-fashioned. I want to take care of you, not the other way around. I love you. I want to spend the rest of my life with you. No one's ever made me feel like this before, and honestly? Now I wish you hadn't sold that fucking book because I don't want you to think I want your money. I want to be the one taking care of you."

He took a deep breath as he slipped the ring on Tyler's finger. "We can't get married, but would you marry me anyway? I mean, like this, at least? Make it unofficially official and do all the paperwork and stuff? Do you think you could spend the rest of your life stuck

with me?”

Tyler’s eyes widened, then filled with tears as Tommy seated the ring on his finger. Stunned into silence, he stared at it for a long moment. Then he looked at Tommy and flung himself off the couch onto the other man, tumbling them both to the carpet.

“Yes!” Tyler gasped, kissing him. “Absolutely, oh, love, absolutely! Forever and ever, I promise. I want to spend the rest of my life making you happy.”

He looked up at him from the floor, where Tyler straddled him. “I bought two,” he sheepishly said.

Tyler looked at where the box had fallen on the floor, picked it up, and removed the other band. He took Tommy’s hand and slipped the ring onto his finger. “I swear to you, I will love you with all my heart and soul, forever.” He leaned forward and kissed him, deeply, passionately.

Tommy rolled on top of Tyler. “Do you think a classy guy like you can put up with an uncouth Cracker like me?”

Tyler smiled and brushed the hair out of Tommy’s eyes. “You are anything but uncouth, my love. I love you so much it hurts when you’re not with me.”

“Can we talk about this, though?”

“What?”

Tommy blushed again. “The money?”

Tyler grinned. “I will thoroughly enjoy spoiling you rotten.”

“That’s what I mean.” Deep breath. “I want to take care of you. I know you want to quit teaching. I want you to be able to stay home and write, and I can take care of the other stuff. I’m going to be making decent money in another year or so.”

Tyler studied him. “This means a lot to you, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. It does. My job is to take care of you like that.”

“Well, can I buy us a house?”

“But it would be your house.”

Tyler sighed, exasperated. “And if you bought it, it would be your

house.”

“No! It’d be our house.”

Tyler stared at him until Tommy finally realized his point. “Okay. Fine. We can use your money for stuff like that, big ticket things. We’ll put the rest into savings and retirement. Bob can help us with that. We’ll use my money for running things and all the other stuff.” He kissed Tyler. “Ask Bob to draw up paperwork to protect you.”

“Why is this so important to you?”

Robert’s comment rolled through his memory. “It just is. You’re not a meal ticket. I don’t want people thinking you are.”

“You are my heart and soul. I couldn’t give a rat’s arse what others think. I want us to enjoy this money. It is yours as much as mine, just as what you make is mine just as much as it is yours. Right?” He pulled Tommy closer. “I want you to design our new home. I want you to start your own business. I want us to be partners in this. Everyone says you would be amazing if you became a developer. Let’s do it!”

“What?”

“Partners in love, life, and business. Buy your boss out and take over. Maggie and Kenny can help you. They’ll stay on, you know they will.”

“You don’t know anything about developing.”

“You do. I trust you.”

“I want Bob to talk to you and get your head on straight. I don’t want you losing your shirt.”

Tyler grinned. “You would complain if I lost my shirt?”

Tommy started to reply, then groaned. “You know what I mean.”

Tyler grabbed Tommy’s shirt and pulled him down for another kiss. “Are you sure about that, love?”

Tommy sat up and stripped his shirt off. “All right, we can talk about that later.”

“See? I’m not complaining about a lost shirt.” His fingers brushed across Tommy’s nipples, making him moan.

“Then get your fucking shirt off. And those pants while you’re at it. Jesus, you make me so fucking horny I can’t see straight.”

Tyler looked at him and laughed. Tommy realized what he’d said and joined him laughing. “You sure you want to spend your life with me?”

Tyler sat up. “I wouldn’t want to spend my life any other way. Now let’s go to bed so you can properly fuck me.”

Tommy stood, pulled Tyler to his feet, and led him to their bedroom. The men quickly shed what little was left of their clothes and fell onto the bed, Tommy on the bottom.

“I want a pre-dinner snack, sugar. Turn around.” Tyler complied, straddling Tom’s face as he went down on him. Both men moaned around each other’s cocks as they furiously sucked and licked each other, trying to bring the other over first. Over the past few months it’d become an unofficial game between them when they settled into this position.

Thomas tried to hold back, sensed Tyler making ground, felt his own release closing in. He played dirty and reached between Tyler’s legs, where he pressed a finger against Tyler’s rim and wiggled it.

Tyler groaned around Tommy’s cock as his own exploded. Tyler didn’t stop. He grabbed Tommy’s sac, gently squeezing as he tugged on it.

That finished him. He bucked his hips against Tyler’s face as he came, and in a few minutes the men were lying side by side, breathless, on the bed.

Tyler turned around and propped himself on his elbow. “You cheated, love.” He leaned in for a long, deep kiss.

Tommy grinned. “Yeah? Well, what the hell was that you did?”

“That, my pet, was payback.” He snuggled against Tom’s side and lifted his left hand. Tommy held up his as they stared at the matching bands.

“Forever, Ty. I swear.” He lifted his head and looked into his lover’s eyes. “I know it sucks we can’t really get married, but you’re

my husband. That's what you feel like to me. As far as I'm concerned, that's who you are regardless of what the fucking law says."

Tyler blinked away his tears as he nodded. "I've been married twice, pet. To be quite honest, this feels more real than either of those times." He rolled on top of Tommy. "You are more a spouse to me than either of those women ever were in name or heart."

Tommy started to say something when his stomach growled. Tyler laughed. "How about you help me with dinner? Then we can start our honeymoon after we eat."

Tommy grinned. "I've got the day off tomorrow."

"Then I expect we won't be seeing the light of day."

Chapter 16

Tyler slid onto one of the barstools at Pete and Eddie's counter. "I need your advice, mate."

Eddie arched an eyebrow at him. "You're asking *me* for advice? Holy crap, call the papers."

"Very funny. Seriously, I need a recommendation for a housekeeper." He took a deep breath. "I admit it. I cannot do it all."

Eddie froze before he brayed with laughter. "Okay, I know that had to hurt. Tommy riding your ass about it?"

"Well, I must admit taking care of a two-bedroom condo was much simpler than this house. Don't get me wrong, I love our home. I adore it. You know I do. But it's simply too much for me to keep up with properly and focus on my writing with everything going on now." He looked at his coffee cup. "Thomas insisted I hire someone to help out. He says I'm spending too much time on the house and not enough on my work."

Eddie shrugged. "You need the help. No shame in that."

"How do I find someone discreet?"

"You're not the friggin' president, Ty. Get real."

"I don't want to read about what's in our fridge on TMZ.com, or see pictures of our bedroom there."

Eddie scratched his chin. "Let me ask around for you. A friend of mine was telling me they just hired a new girl a few weeks ago, and she's raving about her. Comes in once a week to do the heavy cleaning, real reasonable. Lost her ass in Katrina and she's starting over. I'll get her number for you."

"You're a lifesaver, mate."

“Yeah, remember that our next poker night and fold early, why doncha?”

* * * *

Tyler glanced at his watch. Ten minutes until their appointment. The girl sounded very nice on the phone, and all her references checked out. Very reasonable prices, too. When he looked out the dining room window and saw the battered Ford Escort pull into their driveway, his heart sank. That couldn't be a good sign.

When the young woman stepped out...

His breath caught in his throat. She was neatly dressed in jeans and a pullover shirt that looked like a man's golf shirt. Not a skinny little twig, but with perfectly sweet rounded curves that looked adorable on her. She'd pulled her auburn hair back into a tidy ponytail, and she carried a folder.

Thomas walked into the kitchen as she rang the doorbell. “That her?”

“Apparently.” He let her in. Her brilliant green eyes immediately caught his attention. Even without makeup she looked beautiful.

She offered a sweet, albeit nervously tentative smile. “Hi, I'm Nevaeh Barton. I'm here about the housekeeper's job. Are you Mr. Paulson?”

Her voice, sweet and soft, pierced right through him. “Yes. Please, call me Tyler, dear. Come in.”

She walked past him into the hallway and waited for him to lead her deeper into the house. “Thank you, Mist—Tyler. People usually call me Nevvie.”

He offered her a friendly smile. “Nevvie. That's beautiful. Come in, have a seat.” He led her to the kitchen and introduced her to Tommy. He glanced out of the corner of his eye and noticed his lover was as smitten by her as he was.

They talked for nearly an hour. She was sweet, she was cute, and

she obviously had very little self-confidence.

She also had the job. Tyler took the lead and offered her more than double what she had quoted him on the phone. When she tried to refuse the additional money, he shook his head. “No, because we need someone dependable and discreet. I hope the extra cash is enough to take care of any incidentals you might need. If it makes you feel better, we’d love you to work here an entire day, not just half.”

She blushed. “All right. Are Thursdays okay? I don’t have anyone scheduled then.”

“Thursdays would be quite splendid, love. Thank you.”

Both men saw her to the door and watched her drive off. When Tyler turned to Thomas and kissed him, he felt his lover’s hard erection pressing against him.

“She’s quite lovely, isn’t she, Thomas?”

He blushed. “Yeah.” He quickly met Tyler’s gaze. “I mean, yeah, she is, but—”

Tyler silenced him with another deep, soulful kiss. “Never worry, love. I know exactly what you mean.” He smiled as he reached up and stroked Tommy’s hair. “I think she will be a welcomed addition around our home, don’t you?”

Tommy nodded.

Tyler smiled, a plan taking shape in his mind. There was something about her, so sweet, so kind.

So submissive.

Could it be possible? The best of both worlds? When he’d decided to spend the rest of his life with Tommy more than a decade earlier, he’d known he was turning his back on part of his life, part of his psyche. The trade-off had been well worth it, though, to meet the needs within him that took precedence. To be taken care of by someone and to have someone who appreciated his efforts to serve them. He’d never admitted that to Tommy, and never would. Their natural relationship dynamic took care of that craving, allowing the truths to lie dormant. Tommy never needed to know the details of that

brief interlude in his life.

But perhaps...

Tyler laced his fingers through Tommy's and led him to their bedroom. "Let's go have a little fun, love. I know I'm certainly in the mood."

"You're not upset?"

Tyler turned, surprised. "Why would I be?"

He blushed again, but didn't respond.

Tyler pressed against him and waited for his lover's brown eyes to settle on his. "We're human. We're men. And while we love each other, women aren't exactly repulsive to either of us. I think we can have quite a few interesting fantasies involving her, can we not?"

Tommy smiled and backed him against the wall. "Damn straight, sugar," he growled as he slanted his lips over Tyler's in a heated, possessive kiss. He lifted his head. "As long as you're okay with that."

"Oh, I'm quite all right with that, love. Quite all right." He brushed his fingers down the front of Tommy's shorts. The man groaned. "Now why don't you let me take care of that for you, and then you can take care of me?"

Tyler's mind briefly flashed back to Marcus.

Perhaps he had learned some valuable lessons from the arsehole after all. Lessons he could lovingly apply in this case.

Tyler planned.

* * * *

Tyler busied himself in the kitchen, laying out breakfast. Nevvie would arrive soon. He wanted to make sure she was well fed before she started working. Tommy walked into the kitchen, fully dressed, and leaned in to kiss Tyler good-bye.

Tommy hated missing Thursdays with Nevvie. "I'll be back after lunch. I couldn't meet with this client any other day." He winked.

“Give Nev a hug for me.”

“Of course, love.”

Nevvie showed up twenty minutes later, the loud sound of the car announcing her arrival before she ever opened the door. “Ty?”

“In here, love.”

He didn’t turn immediately, but when he did, he forced himself not to swear out loud.

Bloody hell!

She looked horrible, deep circles under her eyes, which looked red and puffy from crying. Despite the warm day, she wore an unbuttoned, long-sleeved shirt over her usual short-sleeved shirt.

She wouldn’t meet his gaze as she set her purse on the table.

“Love, what’s wrong?” he softly asked. He had a good idea what was wrong.

Nevvie still wouldn’t look at him. “Nothing. Just a bad morning.” Her voice sounded wrong, subdued. She pasted on a false smile that didn’t fool him in the least. “My boyfriend and I got into it last night, that’s all. No big. Ooh, are those raisin bagels?”

He knew he wouldn’t get the answer out of her right then. That wasn’t the truth, maybe a portion of it, but not the entirety. Later that morning, as she came in from sweeping the patio, he noticed how red-faced she looked from the heat.

“Love, why don’t you take off that shirt?”

She reddened deeper, this time blushing with embarrassment. “No, I’m okay, really.”

He crossed his arms and stared at her. He took a firm tone that he’d never used with her before. “Nevvie, darling. I shall be very cross if you pass out from heatstroke.” He softened his voice. “Please?”

Looking away, she finally slipped the long-sleeved shirt off and hung it on the back of a chair. Then she immediately headed for the utility room but not before he saw what she’d tried to hide—the huge, ugly, purple bruise on her lower left arm, above the wrist, in the shape

of a man's hand, each finger clearly visible.

Tyler didn't pursue her even though he felt his heart hit the floor. He'd suspected she didn't have the best of relationships with her boyfriend, but the fact that the man had put his hands on her...It brought back memories of Maggie's ordeal.

It fully triggered his protective instincts, his inner dominant wanting to go pay the man a visit and beat the bloody hell out of him.

It also cemented what he'd long felt—he was in love with her. Barely three months since meeting her, but he knew without a doubt. He'd caught Tommy staring at her a few times, knew his lover was as fond of her as he was.

The very first day they'd met her, an idea had formed in Tyler's mind. One he slowly chipped away at, setting events into motion that could easily lead to that end. Tyler knew it could work from his own past experiences. Tommy would be just as eager to protect her, although his traditional Southern boy would need some gentle persuasion to be convinced Tyler was all right with it.

When Nevvie walked into the kitchen a little before lunch, Tyler cornered her. It was time to let his long-closeted self out to play. "Love, you didn't give me my morning hug."

A nervous smile caressed her lips. She let him gently envelop her in his arms, eventually relaxing against him. "There's my good girl," he softly cooed. "Now, isn't that better?"

Neither he nor Thomas had done anything to correct her mistaken belief that they were gay. Now it was even more imperative she keep believing it. They were a safe haven for her, friendly security she could count on. Tyler wouldn't have it any other way unless it was to slowly seduce her into their bed on a permanent basis.

Something he hoped he could bring about sooner rather than later after seeing that bruise.

"Yes," she mumbled against his chest, roughly sighing.

He decided to push a little, to see how much she'd tolerate. "You're such a sweet girl, to take care of us so well. One of these

days, I'm likely to not let you leave. Keep my sweet girl here with us forever."

She laughed a little, but she relaxed even more in his arms.

His heart raced, thrilled. He knew with utter certainty, if given enough time, he could totally win her over. Now he only had to win Tommy over to his plan. Tyler gently patted her back as he inhaled the scent of her shampoo. Coconut, he suspected a discount brand, probably all she could afford. Still a sweet scent that was perfectly her.

If he had his way, he'd spoil her rotten, buy her any and everything she could ever want or need.

"Love," he said, "you can always talk to me, or Thomas, if you need an ear. Please. We consider you family, you know. Even after such a short time, we feel you belong here with us, part of us. You *are* our girl. And you're my sweet angel."

He heard her soft snuffle as she stepped back and turned away. "Thanks, Ty. I really have fun working for you guys."

Blast. He wanted more from her, a tangible sign of what he sensed she felt and never thought she could acknowledge. It would take a lot of careful planning on his part.

* * * *

By the time Tommy arrived home for lunch, Nevvie took a break and had donned the shirt again. She was stretched over the kitchen sink, cleaning the window, when Tommy walked into the kitchen. He leaned in and kissed her on the cheek.

"Hey, baby girl. Ty giving you any grief?"

She blushed as she smiled. "No, we've had fun this morning." At least her mood had improved the longer she was there, Tyler noticed.

Tyler sat at the table, paying bills. "Now why would you assume I'd give her grief, pet?" He tipped his head back to receive a kiss from his lover.

Tommy grinned and kissed him. “Because, Evil Genius, you’re a troublemaker, that’s why. I’ll be right back. I need to change.”

Tyler watched while Nevvie glanced at the kitchen doorway as Tommy left the room. He pretended not to notice, barely able to conceal his smile. She was attracted to both of them, that much was obvious.

He made her sit and eat lunch with them. Later, she insisted on doing the dishes. She’d relaxed so much since Tommy’s arrival, apparently she’d forgotten about the bruise on her arm. She pulled off the shirt to get it out of her way. That’s when Tommy’s eyes widened.

He grabbed her hand. “Holy hell, baby girl. What the fuck happened?”

Tyler silently swore. He should have said something to him earlier.

Nevvie reddened and pulled her hand free. “It’s okay,” she mumbled. “It’s nothing. I just whacked it, that’s all.”

Tommy stood, obviously conflicted, as she plunged her hands into the soapy water to hide the bruise. He looked at Tyler, who shook his head.

“Well, be careful, sugar,” Tommy finally said, leaning in to peck her on the cheek. “Who’s gonna take care of us if you hurt yourself?” He playfully tugged her ponytail.

She blushed again, but this time in a good way. From his place at the table, Tyler could see the side of her face, how her lips curled in a faint, pleased smile. “I’ll be careful, Tommy. I promise.”

Tommy left them alone to read his e-mail.

She finished the dishes and dried her hands. Before she could don the shirt again, Tyler walked over and gently caught her left wrist. He brought her arm to his lips and kissed the bruise. Then he focused his eyes on hers, tracing the bruise with his other hand and loosely laying his fingers over the marks. “Angel,” he softly said, “is there anything you wish to tell me?”

Her big green eyes brimmed with tears. She sniffled and shook

her head. "I'm okay. Really."

He didn't respond, staring, letting her fill the silence.

"It's okay. I bruise easy, that's all."

He stared.

She swallowed hard but made no move to yank her arm free. "It was an accident."

He pulled her in for another long hug. With his face buried in her hair, he said, "If there are *ever* any more *accidents*, you don't hesitate to talk to me about them, right? I don't like the thought of any accidents happening to *my* girl."

She relaxed against him for a moment. He'd noticed she nearly melted anytime either of them talked about her possessively.

"Okay." He let her step away and he didn't mention it again.

Later, Tommy cornered Tyler in their bedroom, out of Nevvie's earshot. "That fucking looks like a handprint on her arm."

"What do you want me to say?"

Tommy stared at him for a long moment, then stepped back and shook his head. "I don't know. I guess it's not our business." Tyler sensed Tommy's anger burned, simmering just below the surface, memories of Maggie's ordeal running through his mind.

Tyler knew if pushed too hard and too fast, neither Nevvie nor Tommy would be able to deal with the arrangement he desired. Tyler wrapped his arms around Tommy. "I will talk with her. Will that make you feel better?"

He nodded.

He breathed a mental sigh of relief as he kissed Tommy. He sensed if Tommy tried to step in now that it would scare her off. "Don't worry about it, right? Leave everything to me." He grabbed Tommy's chin and forced him to look at him. "Do you trust me?"

"Of course I do."

Tyler kissed him again, long and slow and sweet. "Trust me to take the lead in this. I will let her know she can trust us and confide in us, right?"

“Thanks, Ty. You’re so much better at this stuff than I am.”

* * * *

Tyler watched and waited. He observed. He gently probed her for information, learning as much about her as he could while gaining her deeper trust. He spent weeks tracking down a necklace nearly identical to one Nevvie had liked on a magazine cover for her upcoming birthday. He also did any- and everything he could to nurture Tommy’s interest in her, including well-timed mentions of her during their lovemaking.

He suspected, by her words and actions, that she was not in love with her boyfriend. Tyler held that fact back from Tommy, not wanting his lover to jump the gun and ruin his carefully constructed plans. He watched how every week she left just a little later, delaying her departure, even going as far as forgetting to do normal tasks so she could stay later.

Tyler stumbled upon the idea of salting little scraps of paper in the backyard flowerbeds when he caught sight of her picking up trash in the yard one day. The men enjoyed watching her bend over.

Tyler certainly enjoyed watching Tommy’s reaction. It was tempting to rush, seeing how much Tommy obviously adored her and her reaction to them. It would be better this way, slowly and carefully, each layer of trust and affection firmly established and built upon. By the time his trap was sprung, there was no possible way she would refuse them.

And there would be no possible way Tommy would refuse to agree to Tyler’s plan.

He knew her birthday was the perfect day to finally set things in motion. After six months, he knew she was the one, the angel to complete them. The irony? He was carrying out two secret plans. One in conjunction with Tommy, to seduce Nevvie into their bed. The other, secret and ongoing for months, to seduce Tommy into falling in

love with her.

The latter plan was nearly complete. The former was just starting in earnest, although he'd surreptitiously been working on her for months without his lover's awareness.

His Georgia boy, a sweetheart with a bottomless well of love, was as thick as a brick when it came to the finer subtleties of relationships. In this case, it worked in Tyler's favor.

The morning of Nevvie's birthday, they stood in the kitchen. As Tyler expected, Tommy was entranced by the sight of Nevvie's sweet backside in the garden. Their conversation naturally led to Nevvie and their wish she could stay. For the first time since the morning of the bruise on her arm, Tyler invoked Nevvie's boyfriend in conversation. He tread carefully. He needed to do this right or Tommy would balk. The trail was laid, but he had to let Tommy follow it. He had to let him feel protective of her as a lover, not as a big brother or mere friend.

"She doesn't want to leave," Tyler said, silently praying.

"Hell, *I* don't want her to leave," he replied.

Tyler successfully fought to suppress his grin. He paused, as if thinking. "Maybe she doesn't have to leave."

"What?" Tommy snorted. "Hold her hostage?"

Tyler managed not to groan. He nudged his lover back on track. "No, dumb fuck, of course not. We seduce her into wanting to stay."

"Isn't that what we've been doing the past six months?"

I have, Tyler thought. What he said was, "Not with purpose. Just in fun and wishful thinking." Tyler leaned forward, his arms resting on the counter, and watched her through the window. *Please, let this work!*

Tommy stepped behind him and started grinding his hips against Tyler's backside.

Tyler smiled. *Hook, line, and sinker. Finally.* "You've given me an idea, Thomas."

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tymber Dalton lives in southwest Florida with her husband (aka “The World’s Best Husband™”) and son. She loves her family, writing, coffee, dark chocolate, music, a good book, hockey, and her dogs (even when they try to drink her coffee and steal her chocolate).

When she’s not dodging hurricanes or writing, she can be found doing line edits or reading or thinking up something else to write. She’s a bestselling writer published in several genres, authoring books such as *Love Slave for Two*, *Trouble Comes in Threes*, *Love at First Bight*, and others. Tymber loves to hear from readers! Please feel free to drop by her Web site and sign up for her newsletter to keep abreast of the latest news, views, snarkage, and releases. (Don’t forget to look up her “alter ego,” Lesli Richardson!)

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