

**Hearts Afire: April**

Emery Sanborne and Jamie Craig

Published 2009

ISBN 978-1-59578-527-5

Published by Liquid Silver Books, imprint of Atlantic Bridge Publishing, 10509 Sedgegrass Dr, Indianapolis, Indiana 46235. Copyright © 2009, Emery Sanborne and Jamie Craig. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author.

Manufactured in the United States of America

Liquid Silver Books

<http://lsbooks.com>

Email:

raven@lsbooks.com

Editor

Terri Schaefer

Cover Artist

April Martinez

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents and dialogues in this book are of the author's imagination

and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is completely coincidental.

Once Burned

Emery Sanborne

Chapter One

“Sullivan, got a minute?”

Three steps from the door, so close to being home free for the evening. So far.

Forcing a smile, Andreas turned around. “Yeah, Chief, what’s up?”

“Come to the Sanctum.” Chief Ed Borowiak disappeared down the hall far quicker than any six foot, two hundred fifty pound man should. But he’d always been frighteningly agile for his size.

After shift in the chief’s office, this didn’t bode well.

The man had two tumblers and a bottle of scotch out when Andreas joined him.

“The single malt? Christ, this really isn’t going to be good, is it?” He dropped down across from the chief.

“You worry too much, son.” Ed finished pouring and nudged one of the glasses across the desk. “It’s not always bad news when I call you in here.”

“Well, seeing as I just got promoted, I doubt it can be that good.” Lifting the glass, Andreas swirled the amber liquid around and took a sip, the smooth burn of the scotch warming him as it traveled down. Ed started to speak, but Andreas held up his hand. “One more, I think I’m going to need it.” It took two sips to finish off the glass. “Okay, I’m ready.”

“You know, your father’s rolling in his grave, seeing you treat scotch like that.”

“The exercise will do him good.”

Ed snorted. “Sacrilege. Your mother raised you better than that.”

“Ma’s the one who started it.”

“I suppose. My baby sister always was an odd one.”

Andreas reached for the bottle. “I’ll tell her you said that. Now out with it.”

“We’ve been short staffed lately, I’m sure you’ve realized.”

“And here I thought those extra hours were part and parcel of the promotion.”

“Anyway, the city finally deigned to send us another warm body.”

“How green is he?”

“He has two years under his belt.”

Two years was good. Young and eager, but still a bit seasoned.

His relief must have shown because Ed shook his head. “Don’t get too excited just yet. This one has a bit of a reputation.”

“Hot head?”

“Adrenaline junkie. First one in, always volunteering for the most dangerous tasks. He’s been driving the Conshohocken crew around the bend. Good worker, but a bit of a liability.”

“How’d they get stuck with him?”

“Local boy. Well, not much of a boy after sixteen years in the Marines, but you get what I mean.”

“Sixteen? Any reason he didn’t stick it out for twenty?”

“Would you stick it out for twenty with the way things are in Iraq and Afghanistan?”

He couldn’t argue with that.

Suddenly, the reason for this meeting finally hit him. “Hell.” He leaned back, studying his uncle. “You’re assigning him to me, aren’t you?”

“I’d give him to Osborne, but you know how Osborne gets. Makes your old outbursts look like nothing.”

Gordon Osborne was the station hothead ever since Andreas had finally managed to get his own temper under control a few years back.

“So I was right to worry,” he grumbled. “When’s he start?”

“Tomorrow.”

Fuck. He barely managed to keep from saying it out loud. Uncle Ed didn’t care much for swearing when a building wasn’t burning down. “I was off tomorrow.”

“Welcome to the big leagues.”

“The extra ten a year really isn’t worth it.”

“You’re going to earn every penny of it, kid.”

Andreas considered another drink, but decided against it. Work or no, he was still going out tonight. He’d bailed on Benny’s last birthday. And it’d make Oliver’s day getting a break on the designated driver rota.

He sighed. “What time do you need me here?”

“Bobby’s due in around,” Ed consulted his calendar, “noon. So just get here before then.”

Which meant he could still have *some* fun tonight. “Thanks, Chief.”

“I do what I can.”

* * * *

Much to Andreas' regret the following morning, Oliver had insisted on staying DD, meaning that Andreas had consequently drunk more than he'd intended. Though it wasn't as close to what he would have consumed if he'd still been off the next day. But rolling into the station twenty minutes before noon, he wasn't feeling tip top, especially when the sun was so damned bright. Any other day would have been cloudy.

Uncle Ed *owed* him.

"Weren't you off today?" Gordon asked when Andreas strolled into the locker room.

"I should have been." Andreas gave Gordon a dangerous look. "And I probably still would have been if someone knew how to control their temper."

"Hey now, you hypocrite, I've gotten better! I was only in one brawl in the last six months." Then Gordon started to laugh. "Oh man, that means you got stuck with the newbie, didn't you?"

Pulling a quarter out of his pocket, Andreas pitched it into the nearby coffee canister, which was nearly half full after being emptied two weeks ago. Uncle Ed knew he couldn't break the boys completely, so he made them pay for each and every f-bomb they dropped. "Fuck you."

Gordon only laughed harder, then tossed a quarter in himself. "Have one on me."

"Fuck you," Andreas replied, smiling.

"You wish." Gordon looped an arm around his shoulder. "C'mon, let's go meet the new kid."

Said new kid didn't show up until nearly quarter after, clad in tight blue jeans and worn leather jacket, his sandy hair on the long side and wind tousled. Of course the adrenaline junkie rode a motorcycle. Shaking his head, Andreas took another sip of his coffee while waiting for the new guy to enter the station proper.

"Sorry about that. Traffic's a bitch today. But it's not a habit, I'm usually obscenely early." He smiled with straight, brilliantly white teeth and held out his hand to Andreas. "Bobby Ford reporting for duty."

"Andreas," he shook Bobby's callused hand, enjoying the look of confusion before adding, "Sullivan."

Andreas wasn't a name that tended to go with ruddy curls, blue eyes, and a smattering of freckles, but that was what you got when your dad named you after his buddy with the last name of Sabatino.

"And this here's Gordon Osborne," Andreas introduced. "Make certain you stay on his good side."

"What about yours?" He was only slightly surprised by the appraising look in Bobby's dark eyes.

"Sullivan's got the patience of a saint these days." Gordon clapped his shoulder. "The man only has good sides."

Having co-workers accepting of your sexual orientation generally wasn't a bad thing until they started flirting for you.

Andreas focused on the task at hand. "How about we give you the grand tour, then meet the rest of the guys? Don't judge them by Gordon. Or me. We're the extremes."

"I can live with extremes."

"So we've heard." Andreas led the way.

“Yeah, I have a bit of a reputation. But I’m working on it.”

The first call would tell that. “Good. Because this job has no room for heroes.”

“Says the man who wanted to be a fireman since before he could walk,” Gordon chimed in.

Andreas didn’t look back. “It’s in my blood, what can I say?”

“Family business?” Bobby asked.

“Third generation.”

“Sounds like my family and the service. Except Dad, Granddad, and Pop were regular army.”

“I’m in it for the women.”

“Shut up, Gordon.” Then Andreas slipped into his schpeal about the ins and outs of their particular operation, and did his damndest to ignore how intently Bobby watched him, something almost hungry in his steady dark eyes. Bobby was going to be trouble in more ways than one.

Chapter Two

The first call didn’t provide much of a test. No one broke much of a sweat over the small rubbish fire in an abandoned lot. What sweating there was to do, was more due to the fact that it was mid-July in Philadelphia than the fire itself.

It wasn’t until nearly two weeks into Bobby’s tenure at the station they finally got called to a fire that gave Andreas a chance to watch him in action. Any other time Andreas would have been grateful for business being slow. Just because he made his living putting out fires didn’t mean he loved them.

He had once again partnered himself with Bobby for this run, keeping with the “two in, two out” rule. No better chance to keep an eye on the man than to stick by his side. But Bobby followed every procedure to the letter, like he had every time prior. Andreas was beginning to wonder if Uncle Ed had been misinformed.

After his shift ended, he stopped by Ed’s office. “You got a moment, Chief?”

“Depends. Does this require scotch?”

“No.”

“Good, then come on in.” Ed set his pen down. “You have my undivided, son. What’s up?”

“Bobby Ford.”

“I’ve only heard favorable things from the boys.”

“That’s the problem.”

“Jealous?”

“Hardly.” Andreas sprawled out in the chair opposite his uncle. “I’ve just yet to see any signs of the guy you were warned about.”

“It’s been pretty quiet. The city’s been easy on you this summer.”

"Today's run was pretty rough. There were a couple of decent opportunities for someone to play hero. But nothing. He's the best behaved man we've had here in awhile."

"Excluding yourself."

"Didn't Ma tell you to stop picking on me?"

"Reg is my baby sister. What gave you the idea I ever listened to her?"

"Maybe the fact she's had you wrapped around her finger since day one. But you'll have to take it up with her at dinner Sunday." Andreas had always enjoyed his uncle's teasing. Since his dad died shortly after Andreas' thirteenth birthday, Uncle Ed had been a good stand in father. Appropriate that he was Andreas' godfather as well. "Getting back to Bobby, so far he's seeming like a good addition."

"Well, he is the new boy. The new ones are always well behaved until they settle in some. He'll show his true colors sooner or later." Ed leaned back with a sigh. "I sure as hell aim to enjoy it while it lasts. And so should you."

"I'm trying." Andreas got to his feet. "I'll catch you tomorrow, Chief."

"Sounds good. And stop worrying so much."

"I thought you paid me to worry."

"Damn, you have me there."

Laughing, he left and headed for the locker room to pick up his things, only to run into Bobby as he pushed through the door. Literally. Bobby was wiry in build but solid. He didn't budge an inch, and Andreas wasn't exactly small in stature.

"Sorry about that. I thought everyone from day shift had gone," Andreas apologized.

"They did. So was I. But I forgot something."

"Find it?" He walked to his locker.

"I did." There was an unmistakable note in Bobby's voice that made Andreas turn. His posture combined with a speculative gleam in his eyes only further confirmed Andreas' suspicions.

"Bad idea, Bobby."

"I know I didn't read you wrong."

"You didn't." He shoved his wallet in his back pocket and grabbed his keys. "It's still a bad idea."

"Fraternization's not forbidden."

"It's not exactly encouraged, either."

Bobby pushed off the wall and came further into the room. "So that's a flat out no, then? You're not even going to think about it?"

"You haven't given me anything to think about." Okay, that sounded a lot harsher than Andreas had intended. "I didn't mean--"

“You did,” Bobby cut him off with a grin. “But I never got around to asking, so you’d be right.”

“I ... oh.” He was good, no denying that. And were circumstances different, he was exactly the kind of guy Andreas would go after. He liked a touch of cocky and self-assured. Add in the sandy hair, dark eyes, and near similar height and Andreas was pretty much hooked from the word go. “Very bad idea, Bobby,” he said again. “I don’t fraternize.”

“You mean you haven’t fraternized. Yet.”

“No, I just don’t.” Once. He’d done it once and nearly gotten himself killed for it. There had been a lot to learn in the early days. But he’d made damn certain to keep his personal life very separate from his professional. Well, as separate as could be with Uncle Ed the chief of the station. Family was its own animal.

“One drink.”

“Bobby...”

“One drink between colleagues, if that’s how you want it.” When Andreas still didn’t respond, Bobby added, “One drink and I’ll never bring it up again.”

A sucker for persistence, Andreas finally conceded, “One drink, as colleagues.”

* * * *

They wound up at Edison and Sons, a small, family run pub a few blocks from the station on South Street. The place looked like a dive, but the beer was good and cheap. And the burgers were out of this world.

“I thought it was one drink only,” Andreas pointed out. That didn’t mean he wasn’t grabbing a burger.

“The burger’s on your tab, Sullivan. I only promised a beer.” Bobby eyed him over the menu. “I’m starving and figured you might be, too, after the day we had.”

“You’re the considerate type, are you?”

Bobby snorted. “Christ, I’m one of the most selfish bastards that ever lived. I do, however, have my moments.”

“When you’re after someone in particular.”

“Exactly.”

“What can I get you boys?” the server asked. She broke into a sudden smile. “Hey, Bobby Ford, long time. Where you been keeping yourself these days?”

“You’re the one who left me for the big city, darlin’.”

“And look where it got me. Actually, this is a side job. The band’s still together with a good string of gigs. Need something stable for the bills, though.” She turned to Andreas. “I’m Gina, used to be Bobby’s beard in high school.”

That was direct. “Um, Andreas,” he said.

“Didn’t want you getting the wrong idea about us. Bobby and me go way back. Heck, I figured out before he did that our interests lay in the same direction.” She eyed Andreas, a wicked smirk curling her lips. “And it

seems they still do. Where'd he find you?"

"Work. We work together. And we're not--"

"Sure you're not." Leaning close, Gina whispered sotto voce, "Just so you know, he loves it when guys play hard to get. Bobby's a sucker for a challenge."

"I'll keep that in mind."

Bobby just grinned at him. Very bad idea.

"So what can I get you boys?"

"Two Yeunglings and two burgers with everything. The burgers go on his tab," Bobby added.

Andreas opened his mouth to protest, but thought better of it. What was the point? "Yeah, that's fine. And an extra order of fries."

"You got it. Be right back." Gina disappeared.

"Nice beard," Andreas said. "You could've done a lot worse."

Bobby slouched back in the booth, looking perfectly at home. "Best friend I had growing up. It's a shame we don't get to see each other much these days, even if we do live in the same area."

"She's in a band?"

"Lead singer. Her group's been together since our senior year. They enjoyed moderate success about five years ago, but otherwise, well..."

"They've stuck with it for love, not fame."

"Pretty much. You gotta admire that."

"Yeah, you do." And what was strange was that he now knew more about Gina than he did about Bobby. "So what's your story?"

Bobby shrugged. "You know it already."

"Sixteen years in the Marines, two years as a firefighter. That's not much of a story."

"Those are the exciting bits."

"If you want details, I'm the one to give them," Gina said as she returned with their beers. "Bobby likes to pretend he's Mr. Enigma. It's like pulling teeth to get anything out of him. Guess that's why he made such a good Marine."

"You know it." Bobby saluted them both with his drink and took a sip. "Fresh. Excellent."

"Just tapped the keg this evening."

"So what should I know about him?" Andreas asked.

"Well, let's see..." She screwed up her face looking thoughtful. "You know about hard to get already. If he

likes you he'll do anything for you. Lives in his jeans whenever he can. Oh! And never, ever, under any circumstances, let him near peanut butter."

"Why not?"

"You'll never get any if you do. It's obscene how fast he can go through a jar."

"Especially if it's crunchy," Bobby chimed in.

Peanut butter addict, that was new. And not remotely endearing. Christ. "Anything else?"

"The sooner you sleep with him, the better."

"Why's that?"

"Because you don't have a prayer of shaking him otherwise. And that's enough trouble from me. I've got other tables." And Gina was gone again.

"Is it true?"

"What?"

"That the sooner I sleep with you, the sooner you'll leave me alone."

Bobby took another drink of his beer, expression unreadable. "Maybe it is, maybe it isn't."

"Uh huh."

Unreadable became devilish. "But you'll never know unless you try, will you?"

Smug bastard. Andreas distracted himself with his beer. It was fresh, but he wasn't sure it was worth it. One drink as colleagues. Even he didn't believe that. The only question remaining was whose place they would end up at.

Chapter Three

One drink became two. It was nearly three, but Bobby started bragging about his billiard skills, so they said farewell to Gina and headed for Buffalo Billiards.

"I was base champ a half dozen times, you sure you want to wager?" Bobby asked, readying his cue while Andreas racked the balls.

"I never play without wagering. We never played for fun in my house. Most times it was for chores, but pocket money figured in whenever my brothers and I could swing it."

"Your parents allowed that?"

"Hell, they encouraged it." He lifted the rack away. "With four boys, they were willing to do just about anything to keep us in line and out of trouble."

"By encouraging gambling."

"To an extent. If we were ever caught doing it outside the family, all proceeds got confiscated for the church. Though Father James was pretty good about setting that aside for the year-end party, so we didn't mind so

much.”

Bobby lined up his shot and broke, sending a solid in the far right pocket. Walking around to his next shot, he said, “I always knew I was missing out.”

“What? Siblings or being Catholic?”

“Both.” The cue ball just barely missed the six resting next to the left side pocket. “Though, being an only child, I did get spoiled rotten. Not a bad trade off, I guess.”

“There were plenty of times I wished I were an only child.” Circling the table, Andreas calculated various possible angles. “I was the youngest for the first eleven years of my life before Bruno happened along. Seamus and Teddy have three and a half years on me. Needless to say, it was interesting growing up.” Finding a favorable shot with the thirteen, he aimed and pocketed it. Fifteen followed. “What are we wagering?”

“Winner fucks loser?”

He knocked the twelve in, but missed the eleven. “Not very creative.”

“Saves time later on.”

Eyeing the strong line of Bobby’s back and taut curve of his ass as he leaned to take out the two, Andreas nodded. “Yeah, all right. Best out of five?”

“Works.” Down went the two, five, three, and seven in quick succession, once again missing the six.

“Nicely done, soldier.”

Bobby glared at him. “I don’t think I need to remind you I was a Marine.”

“Nope.”

“Bastard.”

“You have no idea,” Andreas chuckled, and proceeded to clear off the rest of the striped balls.

* * * *

Predictably, they were tied two-two and needed to play all five rounds, making the fifth the most brutal. Three and four hadn’t been child’s play, either, as they each stepped up their game. Conversation gave way to flirting gave way to obscene suggestions and arousing contact. The longer they played, the dirtier things got until by the time Andreas stepped up to break the last round, he had Bobby flush against his back, right hand not so discretely slipping into his pocket.

“You’re starting to make the breeders blush,” he said, nonplussed as wandering fingers found his cock and started teasing at the tip. Hard as a rock and wanting nothing more than to toss Bobby on the table and fuck him, Andreas broke like a pro.

Bobby backed off with a laugh. “They’re just jealous. Those college girls in the corner are practically creaming themselves.”

Grinning in their direction, Andreas leaned on the table while Bobby took aim. “If they had any idea that their wildest imaginings paled in comparison to reality...”

“I knew you weren’t as uptight as you appeared.”

Andreas leaned in close, nipping at Bobby’s ear. “You’ll be lucky if you can think straight, let alone walk straight when I’m through with you.”

The ten slid into the corner like it belonged there. “Good thing I’ve never cared for straight in relation to anything. Well, unless you count poker.”

“Goddamn fags, no one wants to see their shit,” Andreas caught the comment from a young, preppy looking man slinking by with arm wrapped possessively around his girlfriend.

Andreas stuck his cue out, catching the man in his gut and halting his escape. “Sorry, I didn’t quite catch that. What did you say?”

The man eyed him up and down with a sneer.

“Jimmy, let’s go.” At least the girlfriend had enough sense to see that the four inches and several pounds Andreas had on her man probably weren’t in his favor.

Jimmy took a step closer. “No one wants to see your shit in public. I still think it’s a shame they don’t lock your kind up.”

“And I think it’s a shame you don’t have the common sense you girlfriend does. Now fuck off before you get yourself into some real trouble.” He turned back to the table to find Bobby watching him with a guarded look. “What?”

“Nothing. Your shot.”

Andreas shrugged the encounter off and moved to take his turn.

“Fucking fairy, knows I’d kick his ass.”

His shot went wild, popping the cue ball up to crash down with a hollow thud. He saw Jimmy the prick and his woman disappearing out the exit.

“Just let it go, Andreas.”

“Can’t.” He was already hot on Jimmy’s trail, out the door and into the muggy night, before he realized he was in motion. Jimmy and friend were just turning south when he drew up behind them. “Hey, Jimmy.”

Jimmy did an about face and met Andreas’ fist. “Jesus Christ! You fucking lunatic!” He clutched his nose.

“Leave him alone!” the girlfriend shrieked.

In response, Andreas hauled Jimmy up onto his toes by his shirtfront. “If I have to watch you humping your piece of ass for the evening, you can sure as hell put up with a bit of flirting between me and my friend.”

“Ain’t natural. No way am I watching what ain’t natural.”

“But your girl pawing all over that big titty blonde was? Not how it works, friend.” Jimmy doubled over with Andreas’ sucker punch. “And, more importantly, never insult a *fairy* who *can* kick your ass.” He shoved Jimmy away, finally done with the man. Long ago he’d learned to ignore such comments and take assholes like Jimmy in stride. But he’d been having a damn good evening, and the bastard had ruined it.

Bobby stood at the corner, waiting for him and looking, well, it was too dark to tell, but Andreas figured it wasn't happy. Whatever.

Then the pavement was rushing up to meet him with Jimmy holding onto his back for the ride, Bobby's "Look out!" echoing around them. He had just enough time to roll to the side, sparing his face and absorbing most of the impact on his left side. That was going to fucking hurt in the morning.

Andreas dislodged Jimmy with little effort. "Should've walked away while you could, Jimmy."

"Fuck you!" Jimmy pounced.

Jimmy did get in a few good hits, but it was a losing battle and Andreas soon had him pinned to the concrete, bloody but not giving in. Every punch earned another, "Fuck you, fag."

And then came the unmistakable sound of a police cruiser driving up. Andreas landed one more hit for good measure. It was already too late, he was fucked either way. Bobby hauled him off and away from Jimmy.

"Christ, now you come around."

"You should have run," he grumbled, getting to his feet. Once again the girlfriend had shown some sense and gotten out of there. He wished Bobby had done the same. "Now you're fucked."

"I nearly got court-martialed twice. You don't know fucked until you've faced that." At least he seemed to be in a good mood about it all.

The officer walked up to them. "What's going on here?"

"Misunderstanding, officer."

Jimmy had managed to get to his feet. "This freak attacked me. You need to arrest him."

"Technically, it was self-defense," Bobby said. "Our bloody friend here wouldn't leave well enough alone and jumped Andreas."

"What was your part in all of this?"

"I was trying to stop things from escalating."

"Hm, I see. Well, you boys best come to the station with me so we can sort this out. I've got you all on drunk and disorderly at the moment."

"Fuck this shit," Jimmy spat.

"You want resisting arrest added in, son?"

"Are we being arrested?" Andreas inquired. The chief would have his head.

"*Not* if you come along quietly."

"I knew that one drink was a bad idea," he mumbled.

"Oh, I'll make it up to you," Bobby promised, keeping his voice low as they followed the officer back to the car.

Chapter Four

At least they didn't get put into lockup, nor were any charges pressed. Unfortunately, both Andreas and Jimmy got hit with hefty fines, which Andreas wasn't even close to being able to cover. Jimmy seemed to have no problem.

"I can lend you the difference," Bobby offered. "It's not like you'd be in this mess if I hadn't asked you out."

"Probably not, but I can't accept it." It was no way to start ... anything. "Which means it's down to Ma or the chief." Neither of which were all that appealing. Ma would give him hell and Uncle Ed was going to find out one way or another. Better go with Uncle Ed. "Damn."

"I wouldn't have figured you for the type to get in a bar fight," Bobby said while Andreas scrolled to his uncle's number on his phone.

"There's a lot you don't know about me." Uncle Ed picked up on the fourth ring. "Hey, Chief, I need a favor."

"This time of night, I ain't your chief, son. What the hell's going on?" He sounded half awake and surly as hell. It would only get worse.

"Do you have a couple hundred I could borrow?"

"What? Now? What the hell have--you got arrested?"

"No, not exactly. Got pulled in for a drunk and disorderly."

"Goddammit, Andreas, what were you fucking thinking?" It was a mark of how upset Uncle Ed was that he swore at all.

"I wasn't?"

"No shit. Christ, I thought you got this out of your system in your twenties."

"So did I. Sorry, Uncle Ed."

"F--Your mother's going to have a fit. And you're damn lucky you didn't get arrested. You know how that would look?" He made a noise akin to a growl. "I've got enough trouble dealing with Gordon. You're supposed to be levelheaded and reliable now."

"I am, I just--"

"Save it. I'll be down in twenty." No goodbye.

Bobby just looked at him. "You should've let me cover it."

"The chief would have found out one way or another, be it from the commander here or me. And better me, in the long run."

"Makes sense." Sighing, Bobby leaned back against the wall. "So this thing's not going to happen, is it?"

"Between you and me? Not tonight."

"I figured not at all."

Andreas took up residence on the wall beside him. “Why’s that?”

“You weren’t exactly jumping at the offer earlier. I doubt the way tonight ended up helped matters.”

“Not really.” He tilted his head to the side, giving Bobby a sidelong glance. “Though, technically, the night didn’t end, it got interrupted. We’ve still got a game to finish.”

“Well, I was winning.”

“No, we were tied.”

“I would have won.”

“Maybe, maybe not.”

Bobby grinned. “So, a rematch, then?”

“One of these days,” Andreas agreed.

“Sounds good.”

* * * *

Andreas got an earful from Uncle Ed the moment they set foot outside the police station, and he kept going after dropping Bobby at the firehouse for his bike, right up until they pulled up in front of Andreas’ row house in South Philly.

“Thirty-four is no age to be picking fights.”

He was smart enough not to point out that Gordon was nearly forty and still doing it. But Gordon also wasn’t family. “I didn’t pick a fight. The asshole needed to be taught a lesson.”

Uncle Ed switched off the truck. He wasn’t leaving anytime soon. “Those words did not just come out of your mouth.”

Andreas felt like he was fourteen again, being called in front of Uncle Ed for stepping out of line, because Ma was too busy looking after Bruno and keeping a roof over their heads. “Well, ignoring them sure doesn’t do any good. How many times are you going to put up with being called a dumb Polock before you snap?”

“That’s different.”

“Yeah, it is. Because most times you can go out, have a good time, flirt with your companion, and no one’s the wiser. You don’t get people saying ‘Those fucking Polocks, they make me sick. They should know nobody wants to see them.’”

“It’s still up to you to be the better man.”

“I’ve tried being a better man most of my life. It doesn’t *do* any good.”

“Beating the guy up’s generally only going to bring more trouble on your head in the end.”

“I know that.” He put his hand on the door handle. “Are we done?” And now he was acting like he was fourteen. The sooner he got out of here and into his bed, the sooner he could start to forget this whole mess.

“Not just yet. I need to know that we’re not going to have another Tom Browder incident on our hands.”

Damn. “Bobby and I just went out for a drink. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Yet.”

“Don’t yet me. It’s too soon to make those kinds of assumptions. And there’s no way I’d ever want a repeat how things went down with Tom. I learned my lesson, all right?”

“You know how you get, Andreas,” his uncle said kindly.

“I haven’t gotten like that in years, Uncle Ed. Plenty of relationships since then, and a hell of a lot more lovers. I’ve been fine after every single one. So stop worrying.” Not waiting for a dismissal, he shoved the door open and climbed out.

“No chance of that.” The man smiled. “Get a good night’s rest. I’ll see you at the station tomorrow. And don’t worry, I won’t tell your ma.”

“Good.”

“Don’t want her mad at me too.”

“You never do.” Andreas laughed in spite of everything. “I’ll have the money back to you next week.”

His uncle waved him off. “Whenever you can, kid. Just keep your head on straight.”

“Night.”

Watching Uncle Ed drive away, Andreas knew he’d screwed up tonight. He did know better, just like he knew going out with Bobby would only lead to trouble. Neither thought stopped him, nor were they likely to.

* * * *

The next morning, predictably, was hell. He’d barely slept and when he finally did get up, he was sore and sporting brilliant bruises on his left forearm and thigh. Then there was Gordon to deal with. A veteran of many bar fights, he immediately spotted the signs, confronted Andreas and pestered him until he gave up the full story, leaving out all mention of Bobby. Gordon proceeded to laugh so hard that he fell off the locker room bench.

“The paragon of restraint and level-headed cool...” He set himself off again, gasping for breath.

“Happy as always to cheer you up, Gordon,” Andreas said dryly, buttoning up his shirt.

Gordon hauled himself up. “At least you only had to pay a fine. Could have been a lot worse.”

“Yeah, I could look as bad as the other guy.”

“Bet he won’t be insulting anyone anytime soon.”

“That type? He’ll be back at it the moment the bruises fade, trying to get some of his own back, being an even bigger prick.”

“I still think you did right.”

“Of course you do.” He sighed. “Come on, let’s get to work.”

“What work? I know I should be glad there aren’t fires, but shit, what are we supposed to do?”

“The trucks can always be washed.”

“Again? For the third time this week?” Gordon shook his head. “I’d be happy to rescue a cat up a tree at this point.”

“Well, until then, we’re washing the trucks.” Andreas smiled at Gordon’s crestfallen look.

“You were serious? Damn. Days like this make me wish I’d been an accountant like my old man.”

“Except for the fact you’re lousy at math.”

“Yeah, except for that.”

Chapter Five

Bobby kept his distance without noticeably keeping his distance. Avoiding tended to be Andreas’ gig, so it was odd being on the other side for a change. He *should* have been glad for it. Less temptation that way. Naturally it had the opposite effect.

When Bobby volunteered to pick up the sandwiches at lunchtime, Andreas jumped at the chance and went with him.

“I really could’ve managed on my own.” Bobby’s smile was a little more than friendly.

“Then I would have had to wait until the end of shift to find out why you’ve been avoiding me.”

“Seeing as you weren’t all that eager to go out in the first place, and then considering the less-than-spectacular ending, I figured the less you had to deal with me, the better.”

“Usually you’d be right.”

That got his full attention. “Oh?”

“I tend to do the avoiding. That’s how it’s supposed to work.”

“I see, I’ve gone and messed up your system.”

It sounded ever more ridiculous than Andreas had thought. He felt a reluctant grin tugging at his lips. “Just make sure you don’t do it again.”

“Ooh-rah.”

“At ease, soldier.”

“*Marine.*”

“Christ, you’re a touchy bunch about that, aren’t you?”

“With good reason.”

Drawing up to the sandwich shop, they lapsed into comfortable silence until they retrieved the station's order and were on their way again with two large bags each.

"All right, I might be grateful for the help now," Bobby said.

Andreas shrugged. "They're not that heavy. And there's handles. You'd have been fine."

"Thanks just the same."

Then he went and did something he knew he was going to regret later. "Seamus has an extra set of tickets for the Phillies game Saturday. You interested?"

No hesitation. "Very. Haven't been to a game in years."

"Okay, then."

"Under one condition."

"What's that?"

"That we avoid the cops this time around."

Andreas chuckled. "You're out of luck there. My sister-in-law Dotty is a cop."

"Already introducing me to the family? Damn, you move fast."

Bobby was teasing, but the comment settled like lead in Andreas' stomach. Fuck, he hadn't even considered that factor. Forget later, he really regretted saying anything now.

"That *was* a joke, you know," Bobby reassured him. "If you want, we can forget the whole thing."

"No, it's fine. I just..."

"Panicked?"

Why lie? "Yeah."

Bobby elbowed him. "Don't. We haven't even kissed yet, let alone fucked. Until we know if that's any good, what's the point of worrying?"

He had a point.

"Besides, even if we're fucking amazing together, you'll still have nothing to get worked up over. Although," there was a impish curl to his lips, "if I start calling you nauseating pet names, then you need to head for the hills."

Andreas loathed pet names and was nauseated at the thought. "You are joking, right? Please telling me you're joking."

"I don't know, pumpkin, am I?" Bobby batted his lashes.

Andreas snorted. "Be damn glad my hands are full."

"You're right, you're more of a 'cupcake'."

“Bobby.”

“Lambikins?”

“Stop.”

“Cuddly bear?”

“Anytime now.”

“Pookie?”

“One more and I’m taking you out behind the station house and beating your ass.”

“Promises, promises.”

Shaking his head, Andreas led the way back into the station.

* * * *

Saturday was sunny and almost cool. Amazing, but that’s the way eighty felt after a stretch of ninety-plus days. Either way, it was the perfect day to hit the stadium.

He met Bobby at Lombard-South station to catch the Broad Street Line down to the sports arena and Citizens Bank Park. The crowds weren’t too bad yet, but the train was still standing-room only, just lacking the sardine effect.

“So where are we meeting the in-laws?”

“Anyone ever tell you you’re an asshole?”

Bobby grinned. “Every day of my life.”

“Fine, *soldier*,” the grin became a frown, “they’re meeting us in front of McFadden’s. Seamus looks like me, with several extra pounds and a couple inches. Dotty resembles a young, shorter Katharine Hepburn.”

“And a cop to boot. Yeah, I’m going to be nice to her.”

The car took a sharp turn and they knocked against each other. It wasn’t unpleasant.

“Also, don’t try to match her drink for drink,” Andreas added.

“Why’s that?”

“I couldn’t eat for two days after I tried.”

“Aren’t you genetically pre-disposed to being able to consume large quantities of alcohol to little ill effect?”

“Yes, and I can.”

Bobby let out a low whistle. “Right, I’m going to be really, really nice to Dotty.”

“Not too nice, Seamus has a jealous streak.”

“You don’t have to worry about that. Next time you see her, ask Gina how disastrous our one time together

was.” He ran his hand through his shaggy hair, swiftly reaching for the bar as the train swayed again. “And before you ask, I hadn’t been a virgin for nearly two years by that point.”

“Never tried it,” Andreas admitted, keeping his voice low as he could in the din. “Had a few decent kisses and not horrible grope sessions, but...” He shrugged. “I did enjoy breasts, though.”

That earned an agreeing nod from Bobby. “Yeah, there is something about them. I always had fun with Gina’s.”

“She does have a nice pair.”

The train ground to a halt and further conversation was impossible in the mass exodus to the ball field. Seamus and Dotty were waiting, waving enthusiastically when they spotted Andreas.

“Thought we’d be waiting all day.” Seamus slugged him lightly.

“He lies.” Dotty wrapped him in a warm hug. “We just got here ourselves.” Then she turned to Bobby. “So you’re the new problem child at the firehouse.”

“That’s what everyone says.” He smiled and held out his hand. “Bobby Ford. Andreas told me that I am not to drink with you under any circumstances.”

Snorting, she shook his hand. “He exaggerates.”

“Not much,” Andreas chimed in.

“No, not much,” she agreed.

Seamus elbowed in and shook Bobby’s hand. “Ignore them. They can go on for hours. I’m the one you really need to look out for.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

They headed for the gates, and found the way to their seats with little trouble. Andreas hung back a bit, surprised--and he refused to admit, slightly pleased--at how well Bobby got on with Seamus and Dotty. It would be a good sign, if they were anything. But they weren’t.

Christ, what the hell had he been thinking? Too late now.

Andreas shoved the thoughts aside and focused on the present and the *very* nice seats Seamus had landed along the first base line.

“Still reaping the benefits of physical therapy, aren’t you, Seamus?” Andreas said as he took his seat between his brother and Bobby.

“You missed out on the Mets game a few weeks ago. Scored seats in the mayor’s box.”

“I officially hate you. Unless you only had two tickets, then I suppose I can forgive you for favoring your wife.”

“Actually, I was working.” Dotty grinned at him. “And so were you, if I recall.”

“Well, yeah, only because the weekend supervisor was sick and Uncle Ed couldn’t--Oh, that bastard,” Andreas growled. “At least I’ve finally got something to throw back in his face for a change.”

Seamus held up his hands. "You didn't hear it from me. I *like* being in his good graces."

"So do I."

"What'd you do now?"

Bobby chuckled, but attempted to cover it up with a cough. Andreas glared at him. Then Dotty's gasp drew his attention back.

"That was you? I just assumed it was Bruno."

Seamus looked at her. "Bruno flew down to Costa Rica Monday to visit Teddy."

"Well, he's the only Sullivan boy that gets into trouble these days." She eyed Andreas. "Or so I thought."

He was not blushing. "It was just a misunderstanding."

"It's more than a misunderstanding if one of our boys hauled you in."

"To be fair, the guy didn't know when to leave well enough alone," Bobby chimed in.

"Not helping." Andreas really wanted to hide. The bad idea was getting worse by the second. "I got fined for a drunk and disorderly. Can we move on, please? I've gotten enough shit from Uncle Ed."

Seamus laughed. "I can't wait to tell Ma and our brothers. Still, beats when you were fighting every few weeks or so back after--"

"It was a rough year," Andreas cut him off. "And the other night was an exception."

"Hey, Bobby," Dotty said, "want to help me with some dogs and brews?"

"I'd be happy to." Not too eager to get away or anything.

After they'd left, Seamus turned back to him. "You're a bit testy today, aren't you?"

"Yeah, I am. Sorry." Andreas slumped in his seat. "The other night was a disaster that I'd really like to forget."

"You're practically the Zen master these days, you're so calm. What set you off?"

"What used to always set me off?"

"Andreas..."

"Yeah, I know. But I was having a really good time and then that asshole came along and ruined it." He sighed. "I should have just let it go. But do you know how many times I have let it go?"

"I'm sure it's a hell of a lot more than I want to guess," Seamus said sympathetically. "It was Bobby you were out with, I take it?"

Andreas nodded. No point in denying it.

"So you and he?"

“Got interrupted long before we could find that out.”

“Yet you’re already introducing him to the family,” Seamus teased.

“I figured a ballgame would be low pressure. I didn’t remember the part about you and Dotty until it was too late.”

“Poor bastard.” He grinned. “Been awhile since we met one of your boyfriends.”

“Because I tend to avoid having ‘boyfriends’.” Andreas glared at him. “And Bobby’s not even remotely close to being a hook-up, let alone ‘boyfriend’.”

“Delayed denial, I don’t know...”

“Shut up.” He glanced up the stairs. “They’re on their way back. Can you just give it a rest for now so I can enjoy today?”

“For now.”

“You so owe me box seats next time.”

“Owe you?”

“I’m not sure if this makes me wish I weren’t an only child or really grateful that I am,” Bobby observed from the end of their aisle.

Andreas looked at Seamus and they both said, “Grateful.”

Chapter Six

Bottom of the ninth, the Phillies managed to pull off a last minute homer and beat the Braves five to four. A good end to an enjoyable day.

Dotty gave Bobby a hug as they were parting. “Remember, cookout, next Sunday. If for some unfathomable reason Andreas,” she gave him a pointed look, “doesn’t give you directions, we’re the only Seamus Sullivans in North Wales.”

“I’ll see if I can make it.”

“Don’t let Andreas stop you. We like you, even if he doesn’t.” Seamus shook his hand one last time, then slugged Andreas for good measure.

“And they’re on their best behavior right now,” Andreas said dryly.

Going their separate ways, Dotty and Seamus headed for their car and Andreas and Bobby made for the terminal.

“You’re lucky having family like that, even if they do give you a hard time,” Bobby told him.”

“Don’t I know it.” His family had always been pretty supportive, especially Uncle Ed. The only one who’d given him any trouble when he came out was Teddy, but he’d come around eventually, after getting his own shit straightened out.

“My folks are still so-so on the whole thing, though my being gay became less of an issue once I joined the

Corps. Dad hates Marines, always said they're a mass of arrogant jerkoffs. Which was one of my main motivators for joining up right out of high school. The greater hate will always win out."

That was one way of looking at it.

They lapsed into an easy silence as they boarded the train and didn't say much until they reached their stop. Emerging on the street, the first real awkwardness of the day descended between them, until Bobby broke it.

He stepped close enough to make his intention clear, but kept enough distance that most casual passersby wouldn't think anything of it. "I'd really like to kiss you right now."

"But."

"But," his smile had a slightly bitter curl to it, "I don't want some passing asshole to ruin it."

"The fight the other night really was an exception," Andreas stated.

Bobby nodded. "I'm sure it is. And you're not the problem."

"The passing asshole is." Bobby's place was out since he still lived in Conshohocken. That left Andreas' house. He'd had guys home he just barely knew the first names of, so why he hesitated now really didn't make sense.

"Or maybe we should just leave things as they are." Bobby started to step back.

"My place is this way." Andreas nodded over his shoulder, turning before he could second guess himself. He felt no small amount of relief when Bobby fell into step beside him.

It was an all too short, too quiet walk, leaving Andreas too alone with his thoughts. He was nervous. He hadn't even been nervous his first time. Of course, he hadn't known enough to be nervous then, thank God. If things went horribly, he still had to work with Bobby every day. If things went really well, he still had to work with Bobby every day. He'd learned a lot from Tom Browder, and a hell of a lot more since. Well, he'd deal with what he had to when he had to.

Andreas led the way into his house. "Beer?" he asked.

"Yeah." It was the distracted response of someone checking out their surroundings, which was fine by him. Better that Bobby was checking out the secondhand furniture and semi-new paint job than, well, him.

Grabbing two bottles from the fridge, he turned, surprised to find Bobby standing right there.

"Um, hi?"

"Hello." Bobby had the slow, seductive smile of a predator biding his time. Grabbing the bottles from Andreas, he set them aside and took one step closer, so that Andreas could feel his body heat but not feel him. Yet. "Anyone ever tell you that you think too much?"

"Used to be I didn't think enough." Andreas held his ground, not that he had much choice with the countertop already digging into his lower back.

Bobby looked at him, unblinking and dead even. It had been awhile since Andreas had been with anyone his height. Usually his partners were shorter, very occasionally taller. Something about looking a man in the eye without having to make a conscious effort to do such was always disconcerting. But he'd always liked it. A lot.

“Want me to tell you how this is going to work?” Bobby’s voice had a huskiness to it that promised any number wonderful things.

“How is this going to work?”

“First, I’m going to kiss you.” He leaned in just enough to seem as if he was going to do just that, but he stopped short of making contact. Tilting his head a fraction to the right, he continued speaking, breath whispering against Andreas’ lips. “Then, you’re going to show me to your bedroom, because I don’t go home with a guy to have a stand up encounter, do you?”

Andreas gave a subtle shake of his head.

“As for what happens next...” Bobby shrugged. “That’s up for negotiation.”

“Okay.” Andreas waited, but Bobby seemed to have finished. Fine by him. “Are we going to stand here all night, or are you going to kiss me?”

Bobby’s dark eyes crinkled at the edges. “Yes.” His lips brushed lightly against Andreas’ at first, teasing. The barest hint of tongue, enough to spike Andreas’ curiosity so he parted his lips slightly. It was all the invitation Bobby seemed to need. Teasing quickly gave way to insistence and a surge of hunger that took Andreas by surprise with its sudden intensity.

He reached for Bobby, wanting him closer. Now. But Bobby caught his wrists and guided his hands back to the counter. “Not yet.”

Mouth and hands aside, there was still no contact between them. Bobby somehow maintained that miniscule distance between them. Kissing had never been enough for Andreas. He liked full body contact whenever he could manage--raspy stubble and solid chests, desperate cocks and the promise of hot skin beneath however many layers.

“Please.” He surprised himself by begging.

“Not yet,” Bobby chuckled and deepened the kiss.

“Bastard,” he would have said, were his mouth not otherwise occupied.

Finally, breathless, Bobby pulled away, taking a step back and leaving a fairly dazed Andreas leaning on the counter for support. “Well, that’s promising.” Wild eyes and slightly swollen lips, tan skin flushed ... the devil would be hard pressed to look more debauched or sinful. “Bedroom?”

Andreas snapped to attention. God damn. “This way.” He led Bobby through the living room and up the stairs to the second story. His bedroom was a mess but the sheets were clean, and that was all that mattered. He’d apologize later, if he felt like it.

Bobby was right behind him. Again, close enough that Andreas could almost feel him, but not close enough. It was time that changed.

Spinning, he pinned Bobby against the bedroom door, bringing their bodies flush together. Finally. Solid chest, hard cock, powerful thighs ... God... It wasn’t until Bobby said, “Happy now?” that he realized he’d groaned the last part out loud.

“Getting there.” Andreas took possession of Bobby’s mouth, hungry and demanding, throwing his entire body into the act. Bobby eagerly reciprocated. He was the first one to go for clothing, tugging Andreas’ polo up and

off with an efficiency that barely forced them apart. Blunt nails ran down his now bare back, causing his hips to thrust forward and eliciting a groan from them both.

“Fuck me,” Bobby said hoarsely while Andreas nipped along his jaw and enjoyed the faint abrasion of stubble against his lips and tongue.

“Does this mean I won our match the other night?”

Bobby snorted. “Hell no. We still have a rematch. But I do want you to fuck me.”

“I guess I can’t argue with that.” Andreas worked Bobby’s t-shirt up and off, pressing him back against the door. Then he set to work on Bobby’s jeans. Popping the button, he drew down the zipper and revealed gray boxer briefs. “Passable,” he murmured.

“Sorry?”

“I can’t stand just plain briefs. These are passable. Especially since they aren’t white.”

“Are you a brand snob as well?”

“No.”

“Good to know.”

Smirking, Andreas shoved jeans and underwear down to allow Bobby’s cock to rise unencumbered, dropping to his knees as he did so. Average in length, Bobby had a thickness that made Andreas seriously reconsider who got to fuck whom first.

Bobby seemed to read his mind. “Next round.”

Andreas ran his palm along the side of it, curling his fingers slightly to get a sense of how sensitive and responsive Bobby might be. Tightening his grip, he drew Bobby’s cock to his mouth and ran the flat of his tongue over the head, noting with pleasure the way Bobby’s abdomen contracted, showing off the barest hint of definition. “I can live with that.”

He kept mainly to the head at first, tonguing over each ridge and contour to discern which spots elicited that sharp catch of breath. Mouthing down to the base briefly and back up, he brought his hands into play while he returned to his torment of the tip. Bobby’s hands didn’t go to Andreas’ head until Andreas brought his balls into play. But his grip wasn’t forceful or demanding, it was just there, another point of contact, soothing in the flex and release of fingers against his scalp.

When Andreas finally took Bobby fully into his mouth, Bobby’s relieved groan was quite possibly the best sound Andreas had heard in ages. He kept the contact mostly shallow, focusing on the sensitive places he’d discovered earlier, adding pressure here and the barest hint of teeth there. At last Bobby tensed, giving Andreas enough warning to pull back and accommodate his release. Swallowing, he slowly brought Bobby down, then sat back, feeling entirely too smug.

Dazedly, Bobby blinked down at him. “Jesus fucking Christ.”

“I prefer Andreas these days.”

“Cute. Real cute. Jesus...”

Nothing beat a good blow job. On either end. “I suppose it’s good that I’m fucking you, isn’t it?” Andreas got

to his feet.

Bobby's lazy smile was disarming as he stripped his pants the rest of the way off and kicked them aside with his sandals. Which was why Andreas completely surprised when Bobby hooked his waistband and dragged him close. "A mouth like that, you can do anything to me you goddamn want." The words and the fierce kiss that followed went straight to Andreas' cock, along with whatever blood hadn't already headed there.

"Careful what you promise," Andreas teased between kisses, "I just might take you up on it."

"I never promise what I can't deliver."

Bobby Ford was going to be his downfall.

Swallowing hard, Andreas said, "Right now, I just want your ass."

"Happy to oblige." Bobby maneuvered them away from the door, never relinquishing his hold on Andreas' jeans and dragging Andreas to the bed. Unfastening the fly, he asked, "How do you want me?"

Andreas preferred face to face, but there was no way in hell he could handle that tonight. "From behind."

He could have sworn he saw regret flicker across Bobby's face, but it was gone too quickly to be certain. "Works for me. But first..." Bobby shoved Andreas' remaining clothing down and let out a low whistle. "I'll say again, you can do anything you want to me. Damn."

Andreas wasn't huge by anyone's standards, but he wasn't small, either, and knew genetics had been very, very kind to him. Jeans and shoes off and out of the way, he hauled Bobby closer and reveled in near head-to-toe skin-on-skin contact. That Bobby was already half hard again only made it that much better.

He scented along Bobby's neck. "I'm very glad you're so persistent."

"So am I." Bobby nipped at his ear, hands wandering everywhere. "Fuck me now."

Andreas didn't need to be told twice and nudged Bobby toward the bed while he rifled through his nightstand. Plenty of lube but only two condoms. Damn. Still beat none, and he'd have to make sure those two were put to really good use.

Tearing one open, he slipped it on, grabbed the lube, and joined Bobby on the bed.

"I've got a couple in my wallet, if you're worried about running out."

Admiring the smooth, pale curve of Bobby's ass as he moved behind him, Andreas said, "There's a Walgreen's two blocks away. But let's not get too far ahead of ourselves."

Bobby glanced back at him. "I'm optimistic, what can I say?"

Optimism was good. "Or you're just greedy." Andreas ran slick fingers between Bobby's cheeks and two of them pushed past the tight iris of muscle with relative ease. "Definitely greedy."

"Very. And in case you couldn't figure it out, I'm no blushing virgin here."

In other words, "Hurry up and fuck me." Andreas twisted his fingers just so in retaliation, loving the low moan that came from Bobby at the movement.

"Neither am I." Andreas smirked as he removed his fingers and slicked up his cock. Moving into position, he

pressed inside Bobby, taking his time to savor every inch of Bobby's tight, glorious heat. "God, that's good," he breathed as his balls came to rest against Bobby's.

Bobby rose up slightly, changing the angle and tightening his hold. They both groaned. "You going to sit back there enjoying the scenery or are you going to fuck me?"

"I don't know, the scenery's really good." Andreas caught Bobby's hair as Bobby started to move forward. "Oh, no, this is me fucking you, remember?"

"Something tells me you're not going to let me forget that."

"No, I'm not." Andreas began to withdraw as gradually as he'd entered, but returned hard and fast, ensuring he had Bobby's complete attention. He experimented with a few different rhythms and depths of penetration until he found the right combination that had them both fairly incoherent.

Andreas could lose himself in sex. *That* had always been the easy part. What came on either end of it was the real challenge. But it didn't matter now. Skin slapping against skin, friction and sweat and moans... All too soon it came to an end as he shuddered his release, dimly aware of Bobby bringing himself off. Andreas had just enough forethought to remove and bin the condom before he collapsed, Bobby dropping beside him.

"God damn." Bobby sounded utterly blissed out. Andreas felt pretty damn close himself.

"You can say that again."

"God damn."

Andreas swatted Bobby's shoulder. "Watch it."

Bobby chuckled. Finally he asked, "Bathroom?"

"This way." Reluctantly, Andreas rolled out of bed. Bobby just lay there, sprawled out, smirking. "Oh, no, you don't." Andreas grabbed his ankle and started dragging him off until Bobby moved of his own volition.

"Spoil sport."

"No co-opting my bed." He headed down the hall.

"I would have made room when you got back. Maybe."

"You steal the covers, don't you?"

"Good thing we don't need them this time of year, huh?"

Andreas just shook his head and tried not to be too pleased with the thought of Bobby staying.

Chapter Seven

They didn't return to bed anytime soon. One thing led to another in the bathroom and by the time they emerged, they were both famished. Andreas slipped on a pair of sweats and Bobby his jeans before they went downstairs to order a pizza.

While waiting, they finally got around to the beers from earlier. Well, same beer different bottles, ice cold from the fridge instead of lukewarm on the counter.

Bobby straddled one of the kitchen chairs and downed about a third. Andreas watched from where he leaned against the counter, mesmerized by the contractions of Bobby's throat as he swallowed.

"Enjoying the show?" Bobby grinned over the lip of the bottle.

Andreas took a swig of his own. "Very much."

"I aim to please."

They lapsed into silence just bordering on uncomfortable. Andreas sucked at the in-between times. Flirtation and build up was fine, physicality even better, but after... Yeah, he was horrible with after.

He distracted himself by polishing off most of his beer.

"I really hate this part," Bobby stated, gaze riveted on Andreas. "When you don't stick to 'wham, bam, thank you, sir,' you've got to deal with awkward silences and wondering if there's a next time, and when that'll be. Do you make the move or wait? Stay the night or slip out the first chance you get?"

Andreas chuckled. "I think that's why a lot of us stick to quickies at clubs and one-night stands."

There was a wry twist to Bobby's lips. "What makes you think this isn't a one-night stand?"

"There's the way you were going on about my mouth earlier." He smiled and ticked off the items on his finger. "Which was followed by very high praise of my cock. We work together, therefore have to see each other after the fact. Not a guarantee against one-night, but more certain than when work parties aren't involved. And then there's the fact that we're even having this conversation."

"Impressive."

Andreas gave a mock bow. "I have my moments."

"But you forgot something."

"Did I?"

Bobby nodded and finished off his beer. Dismounting the chair, he stalked over toward Andreas and pinned him against the counter. This part of the kitchen hadn't seen so much action since the first and only Thanksgiving he'd hosted here nearly three years back.

When Bobby didn't make a move, Andreas prompted him, "You said I'd forgotten something."

"Yes."

"And?"

Pressing close, cock to cock, chest to chest, Bobby ghosted his lips across Andreas'. "I don't wait this long for one night."

Andreas tried to focus on Bobby, but their close proximity made his eyes cross instead. Not necessarily a bad thing. "Three weeks is a long time?"

"In our world, very."

He had a point.

Sick of talking, Andreas caught Bobby's lips in a fierce kiss and Bobby returned it with a pleased "mmph". Just as things were starting to get really interesting, his fucking doorbell rang.

"Whose bright idea was it to order pizza?"

Bobby snickered. "Yours."

"But you suggested food."

"Only because your stomach growled."

Before things could devolve any more, the doorbell rang again.

Rocking his hips meaningfully, just once, Bobby backed up. "Pizza's on me."

Andreas considered protesting, but decided against it. What was fifteen bucks?

A short while later, Bobby returned, pizza in hand. "I thought of a sixth reason."

"What's that?" Andreas was busy debating the merits of plates, but Bobby settled it by flipping open the box, retrieving a slice, and digging in. Good, Andreas hated doing dishes. Taking the seat opposite, he started in as well. "You going to make me wait until half the pizza is gone?"

"Mm mn." Bobby swallowed. "Just needed to take the edge off."

"So?" God, the pizza was a brilliant idea. Maybe they should have gotten two. Half might not be enough.

"Andreas, you listening, or have I lost you to that divine Italian craftsmanship?"

"Mexican. The pizzeria is run by a man from Tijuana."

"Whatever." Bobby rolled his eyes.

Finishing his slice, Andreas gave Bobby his full attention. "You were saying..."

"I've met your family."

"Unintentionally."

"The very same family who invited me to a barbeque next weekend."

"Only because they can't be rude when I ever want them to be."

"Can I finish?"

Andreas waved him on.

"Intentional or not, you don't introduce a one-night stand to any family members."

"But we hadn't had sex yet. Or even kissed."

"Doesn't matter."

"You better not be picking out curtains."

“Can’t stand them.” Bobby grimaced. “My mother always seemed to be shopping for curtains when I was growing up. I still haven’t recovered.”

“So long as we’re clear.” Grabbing another slice, Andreas nudged the box. “Eat up.”

“Why, am I going to need my strength?”

“The night is young and you still haven’t fucked me. What do you think?”

“I’m going to need my strength.”

Chapter Eight

Bobby didn’t leave until Sunday afternoon. Late. And Monday morning came way too soon for Andreas’ liking. Rolling out of bed, he stumbled into the shower, then into his clothes and out the door. He was well into his coffee from Wawa’s and entering the station before he was even remotely awake. He hadn’t been this sexed out in ages. It felt fucking amazing.

“Station brew not good enough for you anymore?” Gordon greeted him.

“I barely remember the walk here. I had to stop.”

Gordon had a knowing smirk. “Rough weekend?”

“The best possible kind.” Andreas collapsed in the nearest chair and savored the hell out of his coffee. “By the way, I’m going to need your cousin Lou’s number. One of my kitchen cabinets suffered some trauma.”

“I really don’t want to know, do I?”

Andreas shook his head and grinned. “No, you really don’t.” Looking around the station, he realized they were alone. “Where’s everyone else?”

“Where do you think? Out washing the damned engines.”

“Why aren’t you?”

“Because despite it being my most favorite duty, I thought you might want to see a friendly face.”

That made him laugh. “If you’d left off the sarcasm, I might have almost believed you.” He clapped Gordon on the shoulder. “Come on, let’s go give the boys a hand.”

Both trucks were out and well on their way to being soapy by the time Andreas and Gordon joined the others outside.

“Well, look who finally decided to show themselves,” Frankie Block taunted from the top of the nearest engine. “Knew it was a mistake sending Osborne in.”

“I won that toss fair and square!” Gordon protested.

Frankie lobbed as sponge down at him, nailing Gordon square in the chest. “I still say you rigged it. Now get your ass to work.”

Andreas nudged him on. “You heard the man.”

“What about you?”

He held up his mug. “Gotta finish my coffee first.”

“Slacker.” Gordon left him.

Walking around, Andreas was pleased to note everyone was hard at work. He waved to Al Sutter and John Newton who were between the two trucks. He continued around and ran smack dab into Bobby. A shirtless, very soaked Bobby.

“Easy there. I don’t feel like adding coffee to the rest of this mess.” Bobby grinned.

Andreas barely saw it as he was trying very unsuccessfully not to stare at the droplets of water clinging just-so to Bobby’s skin, much like they had in the shower.

“There’s a time and a place.”

Andreas snapped to attention. Shit. He took a step back. “So, um, what happened?”

The grin had only grown wider. “Met the wrong end of a hose. No thanks to Olsen!”

Tim’s head poke around from the back. “I said I was sorry. Christ!” The poor guy wasn’t entirely dry either.

“The water’s supposed to go on the trucks,” Andreas said.

“You don’t say,” Tim grumbled before he disappeared.

Bobby’s eyes had an evil glint to them. “While I don’t mind, do you plan on standing there all day or are you going to lend a hand?”

He wanted to lend a hand all right. Andreas gave himself a mental slap. He did not just think that. No. Just no. Finishing his coffee, he set the mug off to the side on the pavement. “Okay, where do you want me?”

Bobby snorted.

Work at work, Andreas reminded himself. “Save it.”

Bobby shrugged as if to say “your loss”. “I think Tim could use a hand. Just make sure you’re behind him when he turns the water on.”

“If you don’t lay off, your ass is mine, Ford!”

Andreas leaned close to Bobby as he walked past. “It sure as hell better not be.”

“My ass is my own. Unless you’re in the mood for a rematch,” Bobby hinted. “Tonight?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Works.”

Andreas did his damndest to keep his mind on work the rest of the day. He didn’t even come close to succeeding.

* * * *

While Monday ended up low key, Tuesday turned out to be hell. From about ten minutes after he arrived until nearly an hour after his shift ended, Andreas barely had a chance to sit down. Philadelphia had decided they'd slacked off enough, it seemed.

Neither he nor Bobby were in the mood for their rematch that evening. Instead they picked up a couple six packs and some Chinese, then headed back to Andreas' to watch the Phillies play the Cardinals.

It wasn't until the third inning and most of his second beer that Andreas finally felt the last tension from the day leave him. The General Tso's, his never-fail comfort food, hadn't hurt either. He was in a very good place at the moment.

Bobby seemed to be in an even better place where he lay sprawled out on Andreas' couch, having taken it over when they settled in the living room. Fortunately for him, Andreas preferred his easy chair. The temptation was there to join Bobby and, well, whatever. But this thing between them wasn't at *that* point yet. And frankly, Andreas had never been all that comfortable with the more domestic side of relationships. He sucked at after and was hopelessly lost at just hanging out.

"Can't get you to shut up tonight for trying, can I?" Bobby nursed his beer. "What's going on?"

"Nothing at all."

"Right. You know, you could have begged off tonight, I wouldn't have been irrevocably crushed."

"I didn't want to beg off."

"So?"

"So what?" Andreas was no longer in such a good place.

Bobby looked at him for a moment, then shook his head. "Never mind." Finishing off his beer, he got up off the couch. "We're both beat and that makes this a really bad idea. I'll catch you at work tomorrow." He sounded more resigned than anything else. And that's what got through to Andreas.

"I'd like it if you stayed," he said just as Bobby reached the door. "Please."

Bobby faced him, expression guarded. "Why?"

"What are you, a woman?"

He smirked. "We both know that isn't true. And our friend Jimmy from last week is a bigger drama queen than I'll ever be. I just want to know in simple guy-speak why--the house is too quiet, you don't trust yourself not to drink all the beer, you really don't want to rely on your own hand tonight..."

Andreas had to laugh. "You got two out of three, that's not bad."

"So long as that last one is part of it." Bobby returned and flopped back onto the couch. And that seemed to be that.

Andreas tried to go back to watching the game. He couldn't. "You're just going to drop it?"

"Why not?" Suddenly Bobby growled at the TV. "Come on, you blind bastard, he was safe by a mile! Even the catcher thinks you're a dumbass! Goddamn umpires."

Waiting until it seemed safe, Andreas attempted to keep a straight face when he asked, "You all right?"

“I’m--Ball! Unless his knees are down by his ankles now!”

“You weren’t quite this vocal Saturday.”

Was he--yes, he was blushing. “I, um, hate the Cardinals. A lot.”

“Oh?” This was interesting. “Do tell.”

“It’s stupid.”

“Stupider than getting hauled in for a drunk and disorderly when you know better?”

“Nothing’s that stupid.”

Andreas grinned. “So?”

Bobby got up. “Want another beer?”

“Yes. But that beer better come with an answer.”

A moment later he returned, handing Andreas a bottle, then returning to the couch. “My first ... relationship, the guy hailed from St. Louis. Loved the Cardinals. Which, fine.” He looked up sheepishly. “And, no, I don’t hate the Cardinals because one of my exes loved them.”

“Why do you hate them?”

“Because my ex became just that after I caught him in bed with the second-string short stop.”

“No shit?” It wasn’t funny, but then again, it really was.

“I told you it was stupid.” But Bobby laughed right along with him.

“Do I want to know how recent this was?”

“Seeing as it was before I could legally drink, I think it qualifies as not very.”

“And I thought Ma could hold a grudge.”

“My dad’s side hails from Iowa. You can’t beat Midwestern farm stock for stubbornness and grudge holding.” He took a seat on the arm of the chair, more casual than close. “Now you’re supposed to share something equally embarrassing so I don’t feel like a complete loser.”

Shifting to the side, Andreas peered up at him. “I’ve already shared it, remember? You were there to experience it first hand.”

“Doesn’t count.”

“That’s the best I’ve got.”

“It has to be from before I met you.”

“Says who?”

“Says me. My game, my rules.”

“I wasn’t aware we were playing a game.” Andreas was rapidly returning to that very good place.

“That’s because I’m that good.” Pointing with his beer, Bobby said, “Spill.”

What the hell. “Ballroom dancing,” Andreas mumbled.

“Sorry, I didn’t catch that. It sounded like ballroom dancing.”

“Because it was.”

Bobby looked at him expectantly.

“What?”

“Why? Most people don’t take up ballroom dancing on a whim.”

“Sure they do.”

“Okay, fine, you don’t strike me as the whim type. Why?”

Damn, was it suddenly warm in here? He focused on his beer and finally conceded. “For the obvious reason. To impress someone.”

Bobby propped his arm up on the back of the chair. “And did you? Impress him?”

“I might have. Eventually. If I hadn’t broken his foot.”

That threw Bobby into a coughing fit. “Sorry, you broke his foot?”

Andreas sighed, closing his eyes. “Not by stepping on it. I’m not that unskilled. It was just a poorly executed dip.”

“Note to self, avoid dipping at all costs.”

Andreas opened his eyes just enough to glare at Bobby. “Satisfied?”

“For the moment.” Bobby took a swig of his beer, grabbed Andreas’, and carefully set both aside. With impressive agility, he straddled Andreas.

Andreas settled his hands on Bobby’s thighs. “You don’t shift gears, you skip them, don’t you?”

“Only when the situation calls for it.” Bobby leaned in, bringing their mouths perilously close but also managing to keep a deliberate distance between them.

“You do this on purpose, don’t you?”

“It drives you crazy, doesn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Then, yes, I do it on purpose.” He moved his lips just a fraction closer, tongue darting out, teasing a response from Andreas and pulling back when he received one. “And I decided it was in both of our best interests if I took steps to prevent the next awkward silence.”

“The idea has merit.” Andreas sought out contact, but Bobby effectively denied him again.

“My game, my rules,” Bobby repeated.

“What about my game and my rules?”

“You don’t have a game, Andreas. And your rules went out the window the moment you agreed to drinks.”

“Maybe that’s what I want you to think.”

“You’re too honest to pull that off. But that’s a good thing.”

Andreas frowned. “Yeah, about as good as having a ‘nice personality’.”

Bobby kissed him then, hard and with plenty of tongue, but again pulling back before Andreas could try to take control. “I’m thinking we should stop talking altogether tonight. It only seems to lead to trouble.”

Andreas couldn’t argue with that. “So what does that leave us with?”

“The obvious.” Bobby climbed to his feet, then hauled Andreas out of the chair. Turning, Bobby headed for the stairs. “The Cardinals are trouncing the Phillies and we’re both in desperate need of distraction. It’s time I take you upstairs and fuck you properly.”

Following, Andreas said, “And what makes you think--”

“My game...”

“Your rules,” he sighed.

“And before you ask, your countertop is still broken and the couch is too narrow. Plus rug burn’s a bitch.” Bobby glanced back at him with a feral smile. “I also like having plenty of room to work.”

Bobby’s shirt was off and he was just slipping out of his shoes when Andreas joined him.

“You’re not wasting any time, are you?”

“You prefer me with my shirt on?” he teased.

“Hell no.” Andreas lifted his own shirt off and pitched it into his closet. “I also prefer the wet look.”

“I could tell yesterday.” Bobby hooked Andrea’s belt loops, dragging him close, then set to work on his belt. Bobby somehow managed to pull him closer with each movement. “I’d have sworn you wanted to haul me into the nearest dark corner to ravage me senseless.”

Andreas snorted.

“Okay, that didn’t come out quite as hot as I hoped.”

“You think?” He ran his hands down Bobby’s back, delving beneath his waistband to the smooth skin and firm ass beneath. “But you’d have been right.”

Belt undone, Bobby now unfastened Andreas’ pants, right hand slipping inside to wrap firmly around his cock. Andreas groaned.

“Already hard. I like that. A lot.” Bobby ran his thumb over the head, catching just enough moisture to buffer the friction. “Now the question is, do I get you off first, or do I make you wait?”

Now. Andreas wanted to say “now”, but he really didn’t want to come off as desperate. So he kept his mouth shut.

“I won’t think any less of you if you say ‘now’. I’d say ‘now’.” There was a slight teasing note that made Andreas wary. “Just say the word.”

Fat chance. “Fortunately I know restraint.”

“I’ll bet you do.” Increased pressure with an added twist had Andreas arching up into Bobby’s touch. “I’m of half a mind to tie you to the bed and see just how restrained you can be.”

“God.” It appealed more than it should. “Not tonight.”

“But not an outright no. Definitely worth saving for later.” He shoved Andreas’ jeans and boxers to the floor. “On the bed. Face down.”

Now it was his turn to be disappointed. Facing away was easier for a number of reasons. And yet... He toed off his shoes and stepped out of them along with his pants, then headed for the bed. Flipping back the comforter, he dropped down, rolled over, and curled one of the pillows under his head.

“Don’t you dare go falling asleep on me.” A moment later, the bed dipped under Bobby’s weight. “God, you’re gorgeous, you know that?”

“Yeah, freckles and pasty skin are always a huge turn on,” Andreas said wryly.

“They are for me.” Lips brushed over his left shoulder. “And you’re not that pasty.”

“The farmer’s tan helps.”

Tongue followed by teeth and lips again as Bobby worked his way across Andreas’ back. “Fireman’s tan.”

Andreas chuckled. “Whatever.”

Reaching his spine, Bobby started traveling south.

Andreas had to ask, “What are you doing?”

“Testing your restraint.” Bobby lingered at Andreas’ lower back. He ran the flat of his tongue over a particular patch of skin, making Andreas shiver. “That’s my spot.”

“Any specific reason?”

“You have a smattering of freckles resembling an X.”

Andreas twisted, trying to see. “I do not.”

“You’re not that flexible. Trust me on this.”

“Shut up, Bobby.”

“And fuck you?” Bobby grazed his teeth along Andreas’ left cheek, nipping playfully.

“I thought that was what you were supposed to be doing.”

“Eventually.” Teeth again. Then Bobby’s hands were coasting down his thighs, urging them further apart.
“Gorgeous.”

“You already said that. Need a thesaurus?”

The slap reverberated across his skin and went directly to his cock. Andreas bit back a moan. That should not feel as good as it did. The second one did get a verbal response.

Bobby laughed. “Who knew you’d be so kinky?”

“I’m not.” Andreas cursed himself for arching up into Bobby’s touch.

“Keep telling yourself that.” Another slap, but this time Bobby left his hand there, running his fingers gently over the stinging skin. He settled his other hand on the opposite side, mirroring the movements, working inward and teasing his thumbs down the crease. And anticipation couldn’t prepare Andreas for the hot tongue that soon followed. Slickly roving it came to rest against the tight circle of muscle hidden there.

“Bobby you don’t--”

Bobby pressed forward just enough to shut Andreas up. Press, wiggle, retreat. A little farther, a little firmer each time.

Rimming was one of those things that Andreas had never felt comfortable asking for, though he really didn’t *ask* for anything in particular when it came to sex. Whatever happened happened. But given his druthers...

Then Bobby brought a finger into play, alternating at random until one finger became two. “Do you have any idea how good it makes me feel to have you so open and eager for me?”

Andreas replied, he was certain he did. He just doubted it was all that coherent, especially judging by Bobby’s chuckle.

“Gorgeous.”

“Thesaurus,” he managed.

Teeth sunk into the soft flesh just below his left cheek. “Gorgeous is perfect. Hot is too short. Sexy too limited. I’m sure beautiful would earn me a slap, as it should, along with pretty much every other related adjective.”

“I’m still getting you a thesaurus.”

“Good, it’ll make me seem smart.” Bobby drew away, earning a groan of protest from Andreas. He moved into Andreas’ line of sight and began rifling through the nightstand. “Now I’m glad you crawled out of bed so obscenely early on Sunday to hit the drugstore.”

“Ten is hardly obscenely early.”

“When you’re up past four it sure is.”

“Be glad I’m a decent host and didn’t make you run out.”

“At least I made it worth your while.” He rolled the condom on and slicked himself up with deft movements,

returning to his spot between Andreas' outstretched legs. "Up and at 'em."

"If you add 'solider', you're in for a world of hurt." But Andreas obeyed, bracing himself on his forearms.

"But it's okay to call me that?"

"You were actually in the military."

"I was in the Marines."

"Don't tell me you guys take offense to that too."

"Not as often." The head of Bobby's cock teased at Andreas' opening, still slightly cool from the lube. "In any event, it's always best to call a Marine a Marine. Less chance of trouble that way." And then he was sliding inside and Andreas couldn't have cared less about Marines or anything else at that moment.

Bobby took his time. He always seemed to take his time finding just the right angle, just the right speed... All well and fine, but Andreas only had so much patience for self-discipline. He was going to have to ask Bobby about it when--

"Goddamn," he breathed. Or not. There was something to that right combination, especially now that Bobby had wrapped his hand around Andreas' shaft, moving in time with his thrusts.

Andreas gave himself over. When it felt this fucking good, why complain?

Chapter Nine

Bobby did not stay the night. Though by the time he took off, he would have been better off if he had. Even with the extra hour of sleep Andreas managed thanks to no commute, he dragged into work half-awake for the second time that week. Late nights had been so much easier to handle in his twenties.

"You'd better go easy," Gordon ribbed. "You're not as young as you once were."

"Ha ha." Andreas cradled his mug. The station really needed to invest in stronger coffee. It had taken nearly three cups to get his eyes open. He was going to need at least another two to be remotely functional, which meant he'd be peeing like a racehorse all day. Fun.

"Hope you get some decent sleep the rest of the week, we need you top form Friday."

"Friday? What's going on... Oh hell, it's the make-up game against the Center City crew, isn't it?"

Gordon nodded. "And it'd be nice for our pitcher to be on his game."

They'd won last year. Not just won, slaughtered their opponents. Center City would be looking for revenge. "Didn't that minor league player join their crew this winter?"

"Yes. And rumor has it he could have made the majors but didn't like how much it took him away from his family."

"Maybe it'll rain again."

"Fat chance. Hey, Bobby!" Gordon waved him over.

"What's up?" His smile lingered on Andreas.

“How’s your game?”

The smile became a smirk and Andreas found his coffee utterly fascinating. “All depends on the game, Osborne.”

“Cute. But we’re talking baseball here.”

“Never played much, just the odd pick-up game growing up and on the base. In high school it was football and lacrosse for me.”

“Damn. I was hoping you might have some hidden talent.”

“Oh, I have plenty of hidden talent.” Bobby’s straight face only made things worse. Choking on hot coffee wasn’t the most pleasant experience.

Gordon slapped Andreas on the back. “Easy now.” He told Bobby, “Andreas has been hitting the coffee pretty hard today. Best you watch what you say around him.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Did he have to sound so smug? “When’s the game and what are our chances?”

“Friday and generally pretty good, but now they’ve picked up a former minor leaguer.”

“Ouch.”

“Fortunately, Andreas is our ace in the hole. When he can keep his eyes open, that is.”

Andreas glared at him. “Don’t let Gordon fool you. About the only thing going for me is that I throw a decent fast ball.”

“You strike them out more often than not. That’s also in your favor,” Gordon pointed out.

“Anything at stake?” Bobby asked. “Other than pride.”

“The losing team’s chief marches in the Mummers’ Parade,” Andreas replied.

“Okay, I can see why you guys want to keep winning.”

“Grumpy as the chief was Monday, he’s ten times worse after marching. If we lose, there’s going to be a mad rush for taking off the days on either side of New Year’s Day. More so than usual.” But Andreas knew he wouldn’t be so lucky, if they lost the game, Uncle Ed would be marching, and if Uncle Ed was marching, he’d be off and Andreas on. And Andreas hated working New Year’s. It was just as crazy as full moons and championship game nights.

Gordon slung his arm around Andreas’ shoulders. “So you understand why we need our boy here rested and as little caffeine reliant as possible.”

“Perfectly.”

The alarm went off, much to Andreas’ relief, and put an end to further discussion. He was going to be glad to see the end of this week.

* * * *

The South Street boys had two outs against them in the bottom of the ninth, and all signs pointed to Center

City coming out the victors. But Bobby stole home when Andreas bunted to land on first, and Gordon took everyone by surprise by knocking the ball deep into right field, bringing Andreas and him across home plate for a double and the game. A fair end to a crappy week.

Tradition also dictated that losers bought drinks at the location chosen by the victors, so they ended up at Edison and Sons.

“Christ, you boys are scaring off the regulars,” Gina said as she came up to the booth where Andreas and Bobby had squeezed in with Gordon, Al, and Tim. Emmett Jonas from Center City had parked himself on the end.

“That’s what you get when nearly two dozen rescue personnel cram into a small space,” Gordon informed her. He was all charm. “I apologize in advance for any brutish behavior you witness this evening.”

“Down, Gordo,” Andreas warned.

“Hey, I was just--”

“Break her heart,” Bobby chimed in, smiling, “and I’ll kick your ass.”

Gina rolled her eyes. “Just ignore them, sweetie. I love the attention. So,” she drawled, “is anyone going to tell me what all the celebration is for?”

“We trounced the Center City crew in our annual baseball match,” Tim announced.

Emmett glared at him. “One run isn’t a trouncing.”

“It is when you boys have an ex-pro on your side.”

“Yeah, well,” Emmett sighed. Then with a pleading look to Gina, he said, “Please convince them to go easy on us. Two years in a row cuts a bit deep.”

She patted his shoulder. “I’ll see what I can do. What’ll it be, boys?”

With their drinks ordered and the bulk of teasing out of the way, they settled in for a relaxing evening. Andreas found himself enjoying Bobby’s close proximity far more than he should, but he did his best to keep things casual. His crew might be okay, but it was always difficult to gauge how outsiders would respond. Bobby, on the other hand, seemed determined to get a rise out of him one way or another, though to his credit he did keep most of his efforts below the table. Fortunately they were on the inside of the booth closest to the wall.

“Knock it off,” Andreas said out of the corner of his mouth, but did nothing to dislodge the hand working up his inseam. He’d only draw more attention by doing that. And, okay, he didn’t *really* mind.

“Not on your life.” Bobby crept higher, stilling briefly when he encountered Andreas’ cock, which responded with embarrassing eagerness to the touch. “So easy.”

“Am not.”

A bit of pressure and the edge of a nail had Andreas nearly jumping out of his seat. “Are so.”

“I figured you would have learned,” Emmett addressed him over the din, sneering. “Especially after what happened to you last week.”

“Sorry, what?” Andreas was glad his voice sounded normal. He tried to shake Bobby’s hand off. It only made things worse.

“No one wants to see your latest mating dance, Andreas.”

“*Mating* dance. So that’s what they’re calling it these days,” Tim said. “I thought it was still called flirting.”

“You always were a bit slow,” Gordon told him, smirking at Emmett.

Emmett just glared back. “I figured he would have learned his lesson after last week, getting arrested...”

Andreas felt Bobby tense beside him. But he needn’t have worried. Unfortunately, Andreas was quite used to this line from Emmett.

“You know me, Em, I’m just a glutton for punishment.” He leaned closer to Emmett. “I forgot how much I enjoyed semi-drunken brawls. I wouldn’t mind another go.”

“Fuck you, Sullivan.”

“About time you were man enough to admit that’s what you’re after.”

Before Emmett could respond, or react, one of his crew called out, “’Ey, Jonas, it’s your round!”

“Next time you won’t be so lucky.” Emmett glared at him and stalked off.

“What was his deal, anyway?” Bobby asked. “Beside being a prick, obviously. Seemed to me he was gunning for a fight.”

“Emmett’s always gunning for a fight,” Al said. “But that was nothing. You should have seen him when he was one of us.”

“I’m so glad you were the one to get that promotion.” Tim saluted Andreas with his beer. “Best thing that happened to our station in years.”

“Yeah, our trucks wouldn’t be half so clean if Emmett were in charge.” Gordon winked.

“I sure as hell hope you prefer me over him,” Andreas said.

Tim frowned. “I never did get why you two never got along. Emmett was a dick all around, but especially with you.”

“Because he was jealous, obviously,” Gordon gave the simple answer.

Not exactly jealous, Andreas smirked, remembering the night just after Emmett had announced he was leaving. He’d always had his suspicions about Emmett, but it was another thing entirely to have them confirmed in the back corner of the locker room.

“What are you grinning about?” Bobby asked.

“Not a damn thing.” Andreas polished off his beer. God, that had been a fantastic night. Rough, angry, and as hate-filled as any of their encounters. It always made for some of the best sex. And ever since Emmett had been scared as hell Andreas would tell.

He nudged his empty toward Gordon. “Go tell Center City we’re ready for our next round.”

Chapter Ten

It was just nearing midnight when Andreas and Bobby left the bar. By that time the group had thinned enough for the two parties to fit more comfortably together and with less animosity. Gordon had begged them to stay on, but Gina had distracted him, allowing them to slip out unnoticed.

"He better treat her right," Bobby said for the umpteenth time.

"Gordon might not stick with any woman for long, but he does treat them well while he's with them."

"If I hear otherwise..."

Impulsively, Andreas wrapped an arm around Bobby's neck to pull him close, kissing his temple. The side street was empty and Andreas had had just enough alcohol to let his guard down.

Bobby chuckled. "I've been trying to get some kind of reaction out of you all night. If I'd known all it took was me getting protective of Gina, I could have saved us both a lot of trouble."

"Ha ha." Andreas released him, but Bobby seemed to have other ideas and not too subtly guided them into the nearby alley. "Bad idea, Bobby," Andreas said as Bobby pinned him against the brickwork.

"You keep saying that, yet I have trouble believing you." Bobby scented along his neck, nose teasing against the skin until he reached Andreas' ear. "Come home with me."

Settling his hands on Bobby's hips, Andreas pulled him closer. "My house is only a few blocks south of here."

"Doesn't matter." A hint of teeth. "I want you at my place."

"We still have to go to mine to get my car."

"My bike's at the station. That's a shorter walk."

Which meant riding on the back. On the interstate. Hell no. "Uh..."

"Chicken."

"Am not." *Am so.*

"I'll make it worth your while." Then Bobby's lips were on his, hard, searing, and filled with so much promise. "And you've already got a spare set of clothes and whatnot at the station. So there's that argument."

Damn.

"Not to mention the fact it puts us halfway to your brother's place for the barbeque Sunday."

Double damn. "You get us killed, I'm going to kill you."

"I'm not even going to touch that," Bobby laughed, stepping back.

"Fine." Andreas led the way out of the alley and toward the station.

"So enthusiastic."

"I'll be plenty enthusiastic if we survive the ride to Conshohocken."

* * * *

Andreas survived the ride to Bobby's. Barely. Okay, it just felt like barely. He had no problems with going fast. Hell, he had a few speeding tickets to his name. But he liked going fast in an enclosed vehicle, not exposed to the elements and clinging for dear life while zipping along on two wheels.

"It's a shame," Bobby said as he let them into his single-story stand-alone, "because you'd look damn fine on a bike."

"Yeah, scared shitless has always been a great look for me," he replied dryly. He whistled a long, low note when Bobby flipped on the kitchen lights. Cathedral ceiling, fairly new appliances, and a granite-topped island complete with sink. Solid and sturdy, it seemed like it could put up with a fair amount of abuse. "You do this?"

"No way. Lived through my parents' kitchen remodeling and swore I'd never do that to myself." Bobby leaned back against the fridge. "I lucked out and the family who owned this place before me suffered through it a few years back."

"Very lucky. But I would have figured you more for the condo type."

"After fifteen years in the service? Nope. I needed something permanent and stable feeling. Having no neighbors right on top of me was also a bonus."

"Can't have come cheap."

"New kitchen, spacious patio, and finished basement? Not remotely. But worth every penny."

"How many bedrooms?"

Bobby grinned. "Guess I know where your priorities lie."

"Cute." Talking was going well enough, but Andreas had had enough of talking for one night.

"This way." Bobby sidestepped him and turned the corner out of the kitchen, leading the way through a dining room/living room. "Of the four, two are being used as bedrooms. And only one of those concerns you."

Andreas drew up behind him and tugged him back, bringing them to a halt at the crossroads. "And the other two?"

"Den and ... record room."

"Sorry, record room?"

"As in LPs, yes."

Andreas snorted. "People hardly buy CDs these days. What are you doing with vinyl?"

"It's digital too," Bobby said defensively, starting to pull away, but Andreas held him there. "But vinyl does sound better, you have to admit."

"I'd say distinctive, not necessarily better." Burying his face in the juncture between Bobby's neck and left shoulder, Andreas murmured, "Christ, another music snob. How do I find you guys?"

"Hang on." Bobby faced him. "You got a thing for music snobs?"

“They tend to have a thing for me.” Xavier and Joe the prick ... David ... George Goddamn, Lenny, Eliah ... and, unfortunately, Tom Browder. Though he was more into Tom than the other way around. “How big is this collection of yours?”

“Oh no, I’m not having you judging me by the *size* of my *collection*.”

“What about the contents?”

“No Streisand, no Cher, no show tunes.”

“I wasn’t going there.”

“Figured I’d save you the trouble.” Bobby worked open the top Andreas’ shorts, using his hold on the material to walk Andreas toward the west side of the house. “But right now I would really like to show you the bedroom.”

Andreas followed along, but wasn’t dissuaded yet. “How many?”

“You’ll see tomorrow.”

“A couple hundred.” Bobby blushed faintly. “More?”

“Tomorrow. And then you can mock me all that you want.”

“Well over a thousand?”

“I knew I should have said storage.”

Andreas opened his mouth, but Bobby clapped a firm hand over it.

“How about putting that mouth of yours to better use?” Bobby suggested. “Maybe if you put it to really, really good use, I won’t only give you the total, but I’ll also tell you the most embarrassing album in my collection.”

How could he refuse an offer like that? When Bobby released his mouth, Andreas asked, “Do I still get to mock you?”

“Unfortunately.”

“I love a challenge.” He pushed Bobby toward the bed. “Strip.”

“Yes, sir.”

Andreas laughed. Bobby had no idea what he was in for.

Chapter Eleven

The next morning, Andreas woke confused. It wasn’t because he was naked in a strange bed ... well, actually it was a very familiar bed after the previous night. Nor was it the still warm but empty space next to him. The smell of fresh brewing coffee was just plain delicious. No, the confusion stemmed from...

“John Denver?” he called out, voice rough and sleep thick. Why on earth would anyone be playing John Denver at this hour? Correction, at all.

“That, Andreas, is the most embarrassing record in my collection.” The bed dipped under Bobby’s weight, and soon that weight settled against Andreas’ back in the form of hot, smooth skin and a very hard cock.

Andreas peered back at him. “Please tell me that’s because of me and not him.”

“Give me some credit.”

“After waking up to ‘Country Roads’, you’re lucky I’m even speaking to you.”

Bobby kissed his shoulder. “You asked for it.”

“No, I didn’t. You offered.”

“And you earned it.”

“Feels more like a punishment,” Andreas complained and tried to roll over. “Get up a sec, would you?”

“I’m quite happy where I am, thanks.”

“I’m sure you are. But I’d really like to avoid getting a crick in my neck.”

“Oh, fine,” Bobby sighed, rising up just enough for Andreas to change positions before settling back down on his chest. “I suppose I do prefer this side of you. Well, most of the time.”

He ran his hand through Bobby’s sandy shag of hair. The look suited him and Andreas wondered if he kept it longer now because of sixteen years of regulation buzz cuts. “You just want me for my ass, I know how it is.”

“Who wouldn’t want you for your ass?” Bobby grinned wickedly. “Though your cock does come a close second.”

“And my mouth?”

“Mm, that,” leaning forward, Bobby kissed him with a languid thoroughness born of a lazy morning, “is beyond compare.”

Andreas pulled him in for another kiss, savoring the rich, smoky flavor of freshly brewed coffee. Damn, he really could go for some right now. “If I’m so good with it, I shouldn’t have to suffer through John Denver.”

“He’s not that bad.”

“True. It’s not like you’re subjecting me to Barry Manilow or Rod Stewart.”

“Exactly.”

Narrowing his eyes, Andreas asked warily, “You don’t own anything by either of them, do you?”

“Give me some credit,” Bobby huffed, dropping his lips to Andreas’ chest, then again a bit lower.

“I might be persuaded.” Andreas sprawled out comfortably as Bobby descended, inching his mouth and body down by agonizingly small increments. Pausing mid-abdomen, Bobby peered up. “So what’s yours?”

“My what?”

“Most embarrassing album.” Andreas could almost hear the silent *duh*.

“*Not* going there.”

“Then I’m not going *here*.” Bobby rubbed his torso along the length of Andreas’ shaft, sparse hairs adding just the right amount of friction.

“I doubt you’ll be going anywhere near me if I tell you.” Fucking Teddy and his oh-so hilarious Christmas gifts. The bastard. Of course that didn’t explain why it was still in his collection, buried way at the back but still there, nearly a decade later.

“Hey, I’m playing you John Denver!”

“And I’m ever so grateful for that,” Andreas replied dryly.

“So long as it’s not Manilow or Stewart or Cher or Streisand or a Broadway show, you’ll be safe from mockery.”

“Are those the only exceptions? Sure you don’t want to toss out a few more?”

Frowning in thought, Bobby shook his head. “Nah, I think I can abide anything else.”

God, he was going to regret this. “*Millennium* by the Backstreet Boys,” he said as inaudibly as he could manage.

Bobby snorted. “You’re joking. Please tell me you’re joking.”

Andreas stared at the absolutely fascinating crack on the wall across from the bed.

“You’re not.” Andreas shoved Bobby away when he started to laugh, nearly rolling them both off the bed in the process when Bobby grabbed a hold of him. Settling back on top and not laughing as hard, Bobby asked, “Was it at least a gift?”

“Yes.”

Bobby nodded. “Okay, that earns you some slack. Though why you haven’t tossed it out... Unless you like it?”

“Ha! Right.” There was no way in hell he liked it. But he hadn’t hated it as much as he’d expected to, the *one* time he’d listened to it. And if one of the songs happened on the radio, he didn’t always turn the channel. Fucking Teddy. The son of a bitch was getting re-gifted this year.

“It’s also not ‘Nsync, so you get a few points back for that.”

“Gee, thanks.”

“Anytime. Now, where was I?”

“You were about to suck my cock.”

“And judging by that tone, I take it, the sooner the better?”

“Unless you want me walking out that door.”

“Long walk back to Philly.”

“I know for a fact the R6 runs through here. So not that far of a walk. All hail SEPTA.” Which made a nice change from “goddamned SEPTA”, the more frequent chant.

“No way.” Bobby slithered his way down to settle between Andreas’ legs. “What kind of public servant would I be if I left you to fend for yourself against the unpredictability of mass transit?”

“One who supports the system?”

“Hm,” Bobby tilted his head to the side, “good point.”

When he started to roll away, Andreas hooked his right leg over Bobby’s shoulder. “Oh, no, you’re not going anywhere.”

“Neither are you, it would seem.” Bobby’s breath puffed lightly over Andreas’ erection as he spoke.

Bobby’s hair was too short for gripping, so Andreas settled for an encouraging flex of his fingers. “How about we call each other’s bluffs and you wake me up properly?”

“John Denver’s a perfectly proper way to wake up.” But before Andreas could protest, Bobby effectively shut him up by running the flat of his tongue from the base to the tip of Andreas’ cock. “Better?”

When Bobby didn’t follow up with anything, Andreas glared at him. “You might have just taken things from bad to worse.”

“Can’t have that.” Tongue again, followed by a brief hesitation, then Bobby moved up just enough to take Andreas into his mouth and descended. Hot, tight, and--

“God,” Andreas groaned when Bobby took him all the way in. “God damn.”

Bobby retreated, hollowing his cheeks until the pressure was exquisite enough to make Andreas’ toes curl. Down to a slightly more reasonable spot, then back up, Bobby added his right hand beneath to pick up the slack of his mouth, his left hand bringing Andreas’ balls into play. Bobby had been extremely good with his mouth before this. Now ... fuck.

Andreas cried out incoherently as Bobby pulled him right up to the edge, right up, closer, and left him there, teetering. Just one touch, a little more friction and--Bobby dragged him back from the brink, down enough that it was back to square one. Well, not quite.

“Bobby, what in the hell are you doing?”

Bobby’s only response was a wicked grin and a return to the licks, twist, and sucks that soon had Andreas practically begging for release. He didn’t actually beg until the third time. And it wasn’t until the fourth that Bobby finally took pity on Andreas and let him come.

Andreas lay there bonelessly, grinning like an idiot as Bobby crawled up and dropped down beside him.

“I think John Denver’s growing on me,” Andreas said.

Bobby patted his stomach. “It’s an acquired taste.”

“More like the proper incentive.”

That earned a warm, rich laugh from Bobby, who heaved himself up and out of bed. “Come on, coffee’s getting cold.”

Andreas eyed Bobby's cock, jutting out proud and hard from his body. "You planning on walking around with that?"

"Seeing as you're about ready to drift off again, yeah, I'd say so." He didn't seem at all put out by it. "But there's very pricey coffee and possibly the best damned omelet you've ever had if you don't."

Reluctantly, Andreas stood, stretching to his full height. "What's in it for you?"

"You, of course. Wide awake and with plenty of energy to greet the day."

Andreas grinned. It sure as hell wouldn't be the day he was greeting when all was said and done. Which was fine by him. And then some. That death-defying ride on the back of Bobby's bike was turning out to be more than worth it.

Chapter Twelve

Come Sunday afternoon, the last thing Andreas wanted to do was leave Bobby's bed and go to Seamus and Dotty's barbeque.

"Family forgives," he protested as Bobby all but carried him into the shower.

"I don't have that luxury. Especially since I'm still the new guy and trying to impress them." His tone had the right amount of lightness, but Andreas sensed that Bobby was serious as well.

That was ... not new, exactly, but it had been a long time since Andreas had hooked up with anyone who wanted to impress either him or his family.

They arrived at the house in North Wales early enough to get roped into helping with set up. He'd told Bobby an extra fifteen or twenty minutes in the shower wouldn't have hurt.

"You, on the back of a motorcycle, I never thought I'd see the day," Dotty teased.

"Stranger things have happened." He grunted, lifting the tray of meat from the counter to haul it out by the grill for Dotty to set to work. Poor Seamus couldn't grill to save his life. Cooking was fine, but grilling was somehow beyond him. But his wife more than made up for it, having taken first prize in two barbeque contests, the first of which was when she had just barely turned sixteen.

"I think it does you good. Bobby does you good," she said pointedly.

"Don't go there, *Dorothy*," he warned.

"Oh, this is serious."

He stopped walking. "Do you want to carry this out to the patio yourself?"

"I *could* manage." She patted his arm. "But it's not every day a girl gets a handsome firefighter at her beck and call."

"So that's why you married a humble physical therapist."

"Andreas, honey, there's nothing humble about any one of you Sullivan boys."

"Good point." Andreas set the tray down. "Your grill awaits, ma'am."

“Thank you kindly.” She curtsied and started the grill up, a high-tech, stainless steel number with more dials and doodads than it had any right to. Fire, something to hold it, and meat ... what more did you need?

“If you were a man, I’d say you were overcompensating for something.”

Dotty’s grin was deadly. “Good thing I’m not, then, huh? And grab the cook a beer, will you?”

Obliging, Andreas went to the ice filled tub containing at least a half dozen different microbrews. He chose two at random, popped the tops, and returned. “You let Seamus go to the distributor alone again, didn’t you?”

“Christ, and don’t I regret it.” Dotty took a hearty swig from the bottle, grimaced, then glared at the bottle. “Some days you just want a plain old beer. The cheap, domestic, always on tap kind. But oh, no, not for Seamus. No, it’s got to be fancy labels and confusing as hell names.” She took another sip and shrugged. “Beer’s beer. Still, if I didn’t know better, I’d swear Seamus was the queer one.”

“Thanks. I think.” He chuckled as Seamus and Bobby began moving the tables around again. Bobby did not look pleased. Though who would after the third time? “Could Seamus be any more anal?”

“I don’t know, could he? You’re the expert.”

Andreas rolled his eyes. “You’ve been hanging back with the boys in blue too much again. Ma’s going to wash your mouth out with soap if she hears that.”

“Your ma’s got a mouth that would make a sailor blush.”

“Or a Marine.” Then it dawned on him. “Ma’s coming.”

“Of course she is. And Uncle Ed. Like they always do.”

And he knew that. He’d just forgotten. As he had with the ballgame.

Dotty tapped his bottle with hers, getting her attention. “I think things are more serious than you think they are.”

“Shut up.” He’d known Bobby for all of a month now, maybe a little more. And they had only been fucking a week. No, it was a bit more than fucking. Not exactly dating. God, he hated that word, along with “relationship”. Almost as much as “boyfriend”. Fucking it was, then. But he’d fucked guys for a lot longer and not once had he introduced them to his family. It wasn’t intentional with Bobby. It just kept happening. Right. “I really hate you right now, Dotty.”

“What’s to hate?” she asked nonplussed. “Bobby hasn’t yet knocked Seamus flat on his ass like he deserves. In my book, that makes him a keeper.”

“You can stop planning the housewarming right now.”

“Uh huh.”

“Dotty, please.”

She looked at him, really looked at him. “All right, I’ll cut through the bullshit and lay it on the line for you.” Pausing to finish off her beer, she continued. “Bobby’s not one of your fly-by-night boys. Doesn’t matter how short of time you’ve known him, he’s got you good. And no one’s gotten you since Tom.”

“What about Xavier and David?” Three years and just under two respectively. That counted as gotten in his

book.

Apparently not in Dotty's. "You could have been with them twice as long and I'd still say no."

"Come on." She was so far off base. So very far.

"Who pursued whom?"

"Me them. What's that have to do anything?"

"And Joe and Eliah? George?"

"George was mutual and casual."

"Fine, I'll give you Mr. Goddamn. But every other guy in the long string since Tom you've gone after."

"I've been picked up plenty of times."

"Bet it's not even close the number of times you've done the picking."

Dammit, did Seamus have to have the tables just so? Andreas would kill for an interruption right about now. Or guests. Other people showed early, usually. "Is there a point to any of this?"

"Your reaction is proof enough," she said smugly. "You never get upset unless something hits close to home."

"I don't love him, Dotty."

"Of course you don't. Not yet. Last I checked we didn't live in a Harlequin world." She started lining meat up on the grill.

"So?"

"So," she drawled. "You don't now, but it's very likely you could. And you, Andreas Sullivan, haven't allowed for that possibility in a very long time."

"Because that's not how I work," he said defensively.

"Why is that do you think? Couldn't be because you got burnt and burnt badly, no, not at all."

God, give him the strength not to throttle her. It wasn't the first time she'd talked to him like this, and it probably wouldn't be the last. But it had been awhile. "Why now, Dotty?"

"I really like Bobby and I wouldn't mind him sticking around. And he's had a good effect on you, bar brawling aside," she teased.

"As always, I appreciate the concern but I'd prefer if you'd butt out."

"You can't be too put out if you're still being polite about it. 'Butt out' versus 'fuck off', I guess your ma taught you some manners after all."

"My sons are all perfect gentlemen," a smoke-roughened voice spoke from behind them. "When they're not being perfect little shits, that is."

"Your timing is impeccable as always, Ma." Andreas turned and gave his mother a quick hug. Well, he went

for quick, but she held on just a bit longer as she always did and kissed his cheek before releasing him.

“Is your sister-in-law being her usual busybody self again?”

“Me? Never,” Dotty said with over exaggerated innocence, flipping the burgers. “I was just getting him primed for you, Reg.”

“Much appreciated.” His mother hooked her arm through his. “How about we leave Dotty here to the cooking and you introduce me to the nice young man your Uncle Ed has been telling me about.”

It just kept going from bad to worse. Though it probably was time to rescue Bobby from Seamus.

Ma beat him to it. “When the food’s good, people aren’t going to give a damn how the tables are set up, Seamus.”

The look Bobby gave them could only be interpreted as complete and utter relief.

“But, Ma--” Seamus started to protest.

“I said leave it. And go give that charming wife of yours a hand before this boy here decided to drop a table on you.”

Seamus wasn’t happy, but he gave her a fleeting peck and headed back toward the grill.

“Now that he’s out of the way,” all of her attention riveted on Bobby, “mind telling me why I should bother giving you the time of day after you got my boy arrested?”

Oh, hell.

Bobby just grinned. “Well, for one thing, he wasn’t arrested, just fined. And for another, I tried to stop him, but as I’m sure you know very well, there’s really no stopping him when he sets his mind on something.”

Which had Ma laughing long and hard. “Oh,” she wiped at her eyes, “you’re going to fit in wonderfully, Bobby.”

“You won’t hear any complaints from me on that, Mrs. Sullivan.”

“Reg. Please.” She dropped on the picnic bench, pulled out her Winston Lights, and patted the seat next to her. “Tell me about yourself.”

It wasn’t a request. Ma didn’t make requests.

But Bobby didn’t seem to have a problem and settled down beside her.

Andreas just wanted to crawl under the nearest rock. Or at least have another beer. Another several beers. He didn’t get far, because Bobby grabbed hold of his belt loop and pulled him down on the seat next to him.

“If your mother’s going to interrogate me, the least you can do is lend me some moral support.”

That set Ma off again.

“I hate every single one of you right now,” Andreas grumbled, but settled back.

“I’ll make it up to you, don’t worry,” Bobby assured him.

If he didn't die of embarrassment today it would be a miracle.

Chapter Thirteen

The air hung heavy with smoke and soot, making it nearly impossible to navigate through the abandoned factory. No sign of fire yet. Though Andreas had his suspicions that he could be standing on top of the blaze and wouldn't notice. After nearly fifteen minutes in, the only thing he was certain of was that Bobby was still behind him, and that was because he'd just checked. But even that was debatable at this point.

Bobby tugged at his arm and, after Andreas turned, nodded back the way they had come. Time to get out.

Andreas shook his head. Not yet. They were close to the source, he knew it.

Bobby tugged again.

No. Andreas started forward. The factory structure was still fairly stable despite its age and being long unoccupied.

As he rounded the corner, or what appeared to be a corner in the murk, a loud, metallic groaning reached his ears. Shit.

Time crawled after that. The smoke gave way to flame. Flash fire.

"So this is hell," he thought with detachment, awestruck. Then the roof appeared considerably closer.

He fell to the ground. Hard. And time resumed its normal, too-quick pace.

Andreas realized that he hadn't fallen, he'd been pushed, by Bobby if the fireman-shaped deadweight lying half on top of him were any indication. Deadweight. Why the fuck wasn't Bobby moving? They needed to get out of here.

The bulky equipment didn't allow for the best maneuverability in the world, but eventually Andreas worked himself free. And still Bobby didn't move.

Fuck. He then noticed that the hose to Bobby's SCBA had become detached. Unconscious and no oxygen. Double fuck.

They had to get out, yesterday by the look of things. Trying to jar Bobby as little as possible, Andreas hoisted him into a piss-poor fireman's carry and started searching for an escape route. The route they'd taken had been replaced by a mass of twisted metal and licking flames. Onward then.

He did a quick calculation and took a sharp left, praying that they were as close to the east of the building as he thought they were.

Andreas stumbled on, one foot after another. He was so focused on getting them out that the blue sky above him didn't register at first. Blue sky and only the faintest traces of smoke.

Everything after that became a blur--finding the trucks and the rest of the crew surrounding them, EMTs taking Bobby from him...

"Easy." Gordon restrained him with a firm hand.

Where the hell was his helmet?

“Andreas!”

He snapped to attention, blinking at Gordon. “What happened?”

“We were given the call to pull out ten minutes ago. What the fuck were you doing?”

“There was no call.”

Gordon spat, scrubbing his soot-streaked face. “Goddamn radios. I keep telling the chief we need to upgrade.”

So that’s what Bobby--“Where’s Bobby?”

“On the way to the ER.” And Gordon was restraining him again. “Easy, Andreas. He’s conscious and breathing--hacking a lot, but fine.”

“Fine?”

“Minor smoke inhalation and a dislocated shoulder, but comparatively fine.”

“Fine,” he repeated and felt ill.

“Oh, no, you don’t.” Gordon caught him as he swayed. “Best get you out of that gear before you add heatstroke in with everything else.”

“Fine.”

“You’re sounding like a broken record, Sullivan.”

Jesus, it was shades of Tom all over again. Except that time, Andreas had been the one on his way to the ER, severely concussed with a twisted right knee. Bobby had gotten off lucky.

“We’ve still got work to do here. But the quicker we do it,” Gordon smiled, “the quicker you can go check on your boyfriend.”

Work, work was good. Andreas nodded. “What the hell are we standing around for?”

Work meant he could deal with other issues later.

* * * *

Work and then some. It was well past dusk when they got back to the station.

Uncle Ed caught him by the shoulders and pulled him aside.

“Just thought you might want to know, Ford got released a few hours ago. Banged up and coughing more than your ma in January, but otherwise all right.”

Andreas was relieved. Really. But he was still numb enough for it not to register. “Good, I hate the fucking hospital,” he managed.

Up went Uncle Ed’s very bushy right eyebrow.

That made Andreas smile. “No free pass, huh?”

“You know the rules, son.”

“You’re a hardnosed bastard, Chief. But I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“You want hardnosed, you should come to City Hall with me tomorrow. I’m not risking my boys to faulty radios again.”

He squeezed his uncle’s shoulder and said, “Thanks.”

“Tell you what,” the chief began with a sly smile, “I’ll give you a free pass if you don’t tell Osborne I said he was right.”

“I think I can manage that.”

* * * *

Andreas was halfway up his walk when he caught sight of the shadowed figure sitting on his stoop.

“You were supposed to go home,” Andreas told Bobby.

Bobby raised his sling. “Even I’m not going to ride a bike one-handed.”

“I figured that would be right up your alley.”

“Maybe tomorrow. I’ve had enough thrills for today. You?”

“And then some.” Andreas grimaced and shifted uncomfortably. “About the factory--”

“Don’t. It’s part of the job.” Bobby levered himself up. “But if you really want to make it up to me, how about a beer?”

Heading up the steps, Andreas unlocked his door. “Beer sounds good.” Whiskey sounded better.

“I don’t think I mentioned it, but I really enjoyed getting to know your family Sunday.”

“I think I did, too, once they laid off some.”

“It’s what families do best. And you shouldn’t be embarrassed by them.” Bobby headed into the living room while Andreas went to the kitchen. “Hell, you should count yourself damn lucky.”

Andreas shrugged and opened the fridge, glad to have something other than the fire to talk about. “I do, most of the time. But sometimes you just want a break, you know?” Though now that he really thought about it, he hadn’t gotten that much ribbing from them in quite awhile. Especially concerning one of his guys. Maybe they did realize something he didn’t. “Ever get the feeling you’re the last to know?”

“Know what?” Bobby sounded distracted.

Beers in hand, Andreas walked into the living room and found out why. Bobby was searching through his CDs.

“Please tell me you’re not looking for *Millennium*.”

“Okay, I’m not.” He could hear the grin.

“Haven’t I suffered enough?” Christ, it had been a hell of a couple weeks.

“Nope. Aha!” Bobby held the case up triumphantly, then paused. “Hold on--Indigo Girls?”

“What? What’s wrong with them?” Andreas peered over his shoulder.

“You’re not a lesbian.”

“Not the last time I checked. And you don’t have to be a lesbian to like their music.”

“Maybe you’re the exception that proves the rule.” Bobby flipped through more cases. “Eminem. Cat Stevens. Aimee Mann. The Clash. Johnny Cash. Drowning Pool. Christ, you’re nothing if not eclectic.”

“That’s bad?” Andreas knew his taste in music wasn’t exactly discerning, but it wasn’t horrible. Was it?”

“You just don’t strike me as the eclectic type.” Bobby stopped looking and faced Andreas. “I like that you can surprise me.”

“Thanks?” Where was he going with this?

“It’s just been awhile since anyone’s surprised me. And I was pretty sure I’d had you figured out from day one.” Running his hand thoughtfully down Andreas’ chest, Bobby continued. “It would be for the best if you told me to back off.”

What? “Why?” Now?

“Because I had way too much time to think this afternoon, waiting on the wonders of the American medical system,” he said lightly, then sobered. “I’ve done casual a lot. And this isn’t feeling all that casual to me anymore.”

“Okay. And that’s bad?” Andreas was really confused now.

“It might be. Depends on you.”

“On me?”

Bobby nodded and took a step closer. “You’ve been hurt, bad, I gather. And it makes sense that you want to avoid that.”

Andreas got it. Finally. And he wasn’t pleased. “This is the cut our losses now speech, isn’t it?” What a fucking time for it. Shades of Tom all over again. Things went along just fine until the job gave them a brutal wake-up call. Too close, too much, couldn’t hack it.

“If you want it to be, then, yeah, it is.” Bobby released him. “I’m going to go. I should be able to make the last train.”

He really was leaving. Andreas stood there stunned for far longer than he should have. Bobby was out the door and down the walk by the time Andreas headed after him.

“Bobby, wait.”

“What?”

“Why is it suddenly all or nothing with you?” Andreas had a sneaking suspicion why. Close calls tended to do

that. But, well, this still wasn't supposed to happen. Not yet. "What's wrong with seeing where things go?"

Bobby came back a few paces but remained on the sidewalk. "If things are going nowhere, what's the point?"

"How do you know? I sure as hell don't."

"I practically forced you into this ... whatever it is. And when I thought that fucking roof was going to collapse on you..." Bobby stopped and squared his shoulders. "That's not fair to either of us."

"No. What's not fair is you freaking out before there's anything to freak out about."

"Freak out?" Bobby tasted the phrase with a half smile. "It's hardly freaking out. Just being practical. Today was a hell of a reality check."

"Screw practical. And who the hell needs a reality check? Can't we just see where this is going to go and worry about where it's going when it gets there?"

Bobby didn't say anything for the longest time, but finally he broke into a wide grin. "So you are interested after all?"

"Interested? Bobby, when you weren't responding today, I--" Yeah, so not going there. A different tack, maybe. Andreas added some levity to his tone. "I've spent more time *in* bed with you this past week than I have out of it. If that's not interested..."

Bobby's grin became a full out smile. "You don't have to be interested for the sex to be great."

Andreas could deal with this much better than the other. Still serious, but lighter. There'd been enough of doom and gloom for one day. "I've always found it helps. Besides, if there wasn't any interest on my part, I wouldn't have tried to make up for the crappy way the night went at Buffalo Billiards. *That* would have been the time to cut my losses."

"Good point."

"Thank you," he said, relieved. "Now, are you coming back inside, or am I going to have to drag you in? Because I sure as hell am not letting you ride the train in your condition."

"You have no idea the things I can do one-armed," Bobby said cheekily. "But I kind of like the idea of you dragging me in. Could be fun."

Andreas held open the door. "In."

"Ooh-rah." Bobby saluted and brushed past him.

"At ease ... Marine." He followed Bobby inside, locking the door behind them.

The End

About the Author:

Emery Sanborne considers herself a work in progress. She loves Philadelphia, Lake Michigan, taking long walks through old cemeteries, accents from the British Isles and writing. While she has yet to fall in love, she holds onto the hope of one day being completely swept off her feet by something other than a really good book or the strong city wind.

For more information on Emery, please visit www.emerysanborne.com. Or you can catch the latest in her journal at emery-sanborne.livejournal.com or MySpace at www.myspace.com/emerysanborne

A Voice in the Dark

Jamie Craig

Prologue

The 101 wasn't clogged yet with rush hour traffic, but it was going to get worse before too much longer. Much worse. The morning reports from KGO and the various Bay Area television stations would likely not deter commuters convinced they could avoid the crunch, and scorching summer heat would ensure tempers frayed even more when they were proven wrong.

The vehicles' sirens wailed as they pulled out from Station 36, the fire truck leading the way. In the passenger seat, Dan Middleton sat staring out the side window, watching the streets of Burlingame whip past. The call had been clear. Two-car collision. Ambulances from Mills-Peninsula already mobilized. Everyone and their brother were descending on this particular accident, but nobody sounded optimistic.

Dan prayed to God everybody was wrong.

His stomach flipped when he saw the wreckage strewn across the entrance ramp. Pieces of metal littered the concrete, leading the way like bread crumbs to the guts of the scene. One car had flipped into the center lanes, the passenger side crushed inward, while the other rested on its side on the shoulder. That one, a Mustang that couldn't be more than a year old, had the most damage. The windshield and driver's side window were smashed, and the entire left front flank mangled. The driver's door bowed so deeply, Dan knew there was no way the driver had survived the impact.

The road was coned off to redirect oncoming traffic, but it didn't take a brain surgeon to figure out what had gone wrong. The Mustang had hit the other car trying to merge from the entrance ramp. He had to have been going far too fast, then tried merging far too soon. Neither one of them ever really had a chance.

He was the first one off the truck when it came to a stop. He took two steps toward the Mustang before the closest cop cut him off.

"Work on the other one." The man's badge read Wentz. Beads of sweat already dotted his high brow, even though the marine layer hadn't yet burned off to reveal the sun. "The Mustang was DOA."

Dan hadn't expected to hear any different and veered course. His heavy boots crunched against the shards of thick glass peppering the highway. The EMTs hovered nearby, waiting for a body to help, but his focus was on the man he could see trapped inside the overturned car. His first instinct whispered the man was unconscious, but a slight shift of his shoulder, secured by the seatbelt that had held him in place, said otherwise.

Dan crouched at the side of the car, bending his head to peer in through the broken glass. Dark hair hung down in long strands over the man's face, though the hair at the sides and back was short enough to reveal oozing cuts where flying glass had cut him. The man had a tattoo half-hidden by his shirt sleeve, but that, too, was covered in blood.

"Sir?" He had to speak up in order to be heard over all the traffic. "Don't move, sir. We're going to get you out of there as soon as we can."

"What happened?" The words were wet, like even they were coated in blood. "What's ... happening?"

"You've had an accident. We're here to get you out. I need you to stay perfectly still, though, okay? This is going to take a couple minutes."

"I can't see you. Everything's dark." His voice rose an octave. "I can't see."

"Calm down, sir. I'm sure everything is going to be fine." No, he wasn't. Loss of vision meant head trauma. The man's survival odds plummeted. "Take a deep breath. Focus on my voice." He waited until he saw the hitch in the man's chest, but a trembling had already started in the man's limp hand. Dan had to distract him. "My name's Dan, by the way. What's yours?"

The question was met with a long pause. And then faintly, "Anthony." Another long pause. "Dan ... my mom ... she's waiting for me. At the airport. My mom ... will you go get her?"

"Yeah," he agreed automatically. "Just as soon as we get you out of here." Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Boyer and Alequin hauling out the Jaws of Life. "Where's she flying in from?"

"Paris ... no ... no ... that's not right. Rome. Her vacation." Blood rolled down Anthony's hand, and his fingers twitched. "Can't leave her. Promise me ... you won't."

"Rome. Got it. I'll make sure she doesn't get forgotten. You have my word on it." He stood at the sound of the others approaching. Though he didn't think Anthony could hear him, he lowered his voice and stepped closer, just to be sure. "He's conscious, but bleeding bad. We can use the spreader to get the door off, but there's a dash bow up across one of his legs. We'll have to roll it back in order to get him out."

Boyer nodded and moved around him to get to the edge of the smashed door. Dan knelt back down again to speak to Anthony.

"My team's here. We're going to start cutting you out of there, okay? Don't be startled by the noise. The spreader works on hydraulics, so it sounds a lot worse than it is."

"Okay."

Alequin started the engine to power the hydraulics. Despite Dan's warning, Anthony cried out. He cried out again when Boyer began prying the door from the frame. The vibration made more blood drop from Anthony's fingers, and he groped uselessly, as though seeking something to hold on to.

"Dan?"

"I'm here." His instincts told him to comfort the man, reach out to him in some way, but the broken glass and Anthony's unknown injuries made that a very bad idea. "So tell me about your mom's trip. She send you pictures?"

"She's got ... rolls of film. She ... she wants me to take care of them." Anthony's voice faded. "And wine. She shipped boxes of wine ... and olive oil. But she doesn't drink." He suddenly gained more volume. "Don't leave her."

"I won't. I gave you my word, didn't I? I don't go back on it."

Metal groaned as the spreader did its job, the door peeling away like tissue paper. The vibrations jarred glass free from the window frame, and the tinkling as it hit the ground sent another visible jolt through Anthony.

"Stick with me here, Anthony." Dan edged back, out of Boyer's way, but the new angle and fresh opening gave him his first real look at the man's face. A wide mouth, strong jaw, good looking in a boyish kind of way.

“We’ve almost got the door off.”

“What then? I can’t see, Dan. I can’t see you. I can’t feel anything. Oh my God ... I can’t...”

“You can. You *will*. That’s just the shock speaking. Everything is going to be fine.”

Dan put every ounce of passion he could in the words because he wasn’t entirely convinced they were true. He wanted them to be. Oh, man, did he want them to be. All this guy had done was get up early in order to go pick up his mother at the airport, and some asshole who had been driving too fast had plowed into his side. It wasn’t good that the other driver was dead, but they certainly didn’t need to make this a double tragedy.

He had to move again once the door was out of the way. EMTs drew closer, a gurney ready to get Anthony into the ambulance and over to Mills. Dan knelt next to the back door and leaned in as close as he could without obstructing their work.

“They’re going to set the ram up to move the dashboard off your leg,” he said, keeping his voice calm. “As soon as that’s gone, the EMTs are going to get you out of there. Understand?”

“Yeah ... I understand.”

Anthony groaned as they pried the dashboard off his smashed legs, though Dan couldn’t tell if that was from relief or a fresh wave of pain. The mangled plastic was dark with blood, like everything else in the smashed vehicle. The EMTs jumped into action as soon as Boyer stepped back, using thick cutters to free him from his safety belt.

Dan stood out of the way as they carefully extricated Anthony from the car. The man was taller than he’d expected, though hanging upside down wasn’t exactly the best way to judge a man’s height. As they started to wheel him away, it dawned on Dan that he didn’t even know Anthony’s last name, and he raced up to walk along the side of the gurney.

“What’s your mom’s name?” he asked. “So I don’t have to walk around the terminal shouting for ‘Anthony’s mom.’”

“Beatrice ... Saunders. She’s on ... flight 2383... Lands at eight-thirty. Thank ... thank you.”

“You just concentrate on you for now. I’ll have her over at the hospital before you know it.”

Boyer appeared at his elbow as they loaded the gurney onto the back of the ambulance. He’d been close enough to overhear everything. “Alequin can deal with the clean-up while I run you back to the station to pick up your car.”

Dan nodded. “That’s good. Thanks.”

He was barely aware of the traffic whistling by as they headed over to the truck. He hoped Beatrice Saunders had a strong spirit. He had a feeling both mother and son were going to need every bit of strength they had to get through this.

Chapter One

“Are you sure you don’t want me to go in with you?”

Beatrice used the same tone she always used when she was trying to be pushy without being pushy. It was a strange combination of support, eagerness, and disapproval, as though she’d be happy to do whatever

Anthony suggested, but would be disappointed if he suggested the wrong thing.

“I’m sure. I can handle it.”

“But you’ve never been inside a fire station before.”

“There’s lots of things I’ve never done before. You can’t hold my hand every time I have a new experience.”

“I just want to help you.” Now she was reproachful, and he could imagine the tiny, hurt frown on her thin lips. Telling her no again would make him seem completely ungrateful, but he knew he was right on this one.

“And remember what Rhys said? I’ve got to practice being self-sufficient. Besides, I have Lucy to help me.”

“That dog is no substitute for your mother.”

“Mom, please. I would feel better if I could do this on my own. I won’t be in there for long, anyway. He probably doesn’t even remember me.”

Which Anthony believed, but he absolutely remembered Dan Middleton. He remembered the rich, calm voice. He remembered the soothing words, the promises that everything was going to be fine. He remembered the way Dan reminded him every step of the way that he was right there, and even though Anthony couldn’t see him, he had a friend in the chaos. He never forgot a single second, even though the rest of his memory of that morning was either hazy or nonexistent. Beatrice had sent a nice card that she signed for both of them, but Anthony had never felt like that was enough.

Now, a year later, he was strong enough to walk into Station 36 on his own and thank the man who had, in many ways, saved his life.

“Fine. I’ll stay out here.”

Anthony almost smiled. Beatrice sounded petulant, but rather than guilt him into agreeing, it only amused him. A lot of things that would have upset or annoyed him the year before amused him now.

“I love you, Ma.”

“Do you at least want me to help you out of the car?”

“Is there a car parked beside me?”

“No.”

“How do I get to the door?”

“I parked right in front of it. Once you get out of the car, walk forward ten feet. There’s a button to open the door on your right side. It’s one foot from the door.”

“So ten feet to the button, and then another foot to the door?”

“Yes.”

“Got it.”

He didn’t wait for more argument from his mother. He pushed the door open, used his stick to feel the ground beneath him, and then turned to push himself out of the car. He closed the door, then felt his way to the back

door's handle and pulled it open. Holding out his hand, he sought for Lucy's thick fur, his fingers curling into the soft texture for a moment before he found her harness. Gripping the handle, he clicked his tongue--Lucy's sign to ease out of the car and stand at attention, waiting for his direction.

That was the easy part. He had gone through that process a thousand times.

"Good luck, honey!" Beatrice called before he shut the back door.

He trusted his mother's estimation of the distance. He had no choice. The past year had been difficult, but they both adjusted in ways he would have never dreamed possible. He still felt like he was a little too reliant on her, but adjusting to a world of blackness took time. Each small step forward was a victory he cherished.

Anthony felt along the wall until he found the big, cold button. He pressed it and immediately felt a breeze of cold air wash over him. Taking a deep breath, he urged Lucy forward. She guided him into the cooler building, and he automatically picked up every sound he could to catalogue. Pen scratching against paper drew him to the left.

"Can I help you, sir?"

The voice was still to his left, and he continued following it until he felt the edge of something hard and solid.

"Hello. My name is Anthony Saunders. I'm looking for Dan Middleton. Is he working today?"

"He is. Hang on. I'll page him."

Anthony kept his hand lightly on the desk, listening to the man pick up a phone and announce Dan had a visitor. It didn't take long for fresh sounds to join the pen scratching that had resumed as soon as the man had hung up, and Anthony turned his head slightly in the direction of even footsteps walking across the hard floor.

"Hi, can I help you?"

The worst thing about meeting new people was sticking his hand out for the customary greeting. He was better at turning towards the source of the voice, but he could just imagine himself, hand hanging out to the side, looking foolish and expectant.

"Dan Middleton? Hi, my name is Anthony Saunders."

His worries vanished when a rough, warm hand engulfed his. The fingers were long and firm, evoking the question of what the man attached to them might look like.

"What can I do for you, Mr. Saunders?"

"I ... um..." Despite the hours he spent rehearsing this moment, Anthony faltered. *Just say what you came to say, and leave it at that.* He took a deep breath and found the words that had momentarily eluded him. "I was in an accident a year ago. You were one of the responders. You helped save my life, and then you picked up my mother at the airport. I wanted to thank you in person."

Silence. He hated silence. It made it too hard to read people and situations.

But this silence only lasted for a matter of seconds.

"Anthony. On 101." The rich voice was less formal, closer to the friendly tone he'd used at the accident. "Your mom sent me the hugest card while you were in the hospital."

“Oh, God, did she? She told me she got something ... classy.”

Dan laughed. “Oh, it was nice, don’t get me wrong. But it was two feet long and came in a purple envelope. We’ve still got it hanging on the wall upstairs.”

Anthony matched his laugh. “I guess I shouldn’t be surprised by my mother’s taste in cards. Anyway, I was wondering if I could buy you a coffee or something. Sometime.”

“Oh.” The offer seemed to take Dan by surprise. “You know, you don’t have to do that. It’s enough for me to see that you’re up and walking. That’s what’s important.”

“I know I don’t have to, but I want to. I mean, if you’re busy right now since it’s in the middle of the day and you have actual responsibilities, I understand.”

“Well, I’m on shift, so I really can’t...” When Dan paused, Anthony inwardly cringed. Now came the pity speech. He hated these as much as he hated the silences. “But if you don’t have to be anywhere, you can stick around and have a cup of coffee with me here.”

“I don’t have to be anywhere,” Anthony said quickly. He wanted to spend more time with Dan--he liked the timbre of his voice. “Except my mom is waiting for me outside. And that sounds lamer every time I say it.”

“So invite her in. She’s more than welcome.”

Dan sounded sincere, and there was no reason not to get Beatrice. She would be very happy to join them. “Okay. I’ll go get her and meet you back here.”

“Nah, you don’t have to do that.” The angle of Dan’s voice shifted. “Dallas, will you run and bring Mrs. Saunders into the kitchen? What kind of car is she driving?” The last question was clearly directed at Anthony again.

“She’s in the Subaru, probably parked in the handicap spot.” Anthony nudged Lucy. “If you lead the way, Lucy will follow you.”

Lucy’s immediate tug on the harness meant Dan was already moving. Anthony’s pulse quickened slightly as he matched her gentle pace, but it always did that when he was in strange environments. The last thing he wanted was to accidentally bump into something and look like a fool. Somehow, though, he didn’t think Dan was the kind of person who would say something.

His arm brushed against something solid, followed by the sudden smell of coffee and bacon. A chair scraped across the floor, and Lucy pulled to his right to guide him closer.

“We’ve got kibble here for when some of the guys bring their dogs in,” Dan said. He sounded far away, and Anthony tried to imagine what the layout of the kitchen must be as he sat down in the chair he now felt at his side. “Can Lucy have some?”

“Oh, thanks, but no. A dog like Lucy has to stay on her routine. That means dinner at the same time every night.” The glass coffee pot clinked against a mug, and then another. “I’ll just take mine black, thank you. Mom has one cream and four sugars.”

“Somehow, that doesn’t surprise me.”

While Dan prepared the drinks, Anthony let his hand drop to the top of Lucy’s head and toy with her soft ears. It was warmer in the kitchen, and the back of his shirt stuck to his neck. He yearned to reach up and pull

it away, but he feared his mother showing up at any moment and fussing at him like he was a child.

“So before your mom walks in and I have to turn on my best behavior...” Dan set the coffees on the table. Anthony jumped slightly when he felt a warm hand grip his wrist and carefully lead it to the hot cup. “I’m guessing the blindness is a result of the accident?”

“Yes. I won’t ... get into the details, but it was because of the glass shards from the windshield. They did their best to at least restore partial vision, but the nerves were too damaged. Considering what I’ve heard, though, it seems like I got off easy. It could have been worse.”

“Considering what *I* saw?” Dan sounded like he was smiling. “Yeah, you look damn good.”

“I wish I had come here sooner, instead of waiting a year. But I was dealing with a lot of stuff, and I wanted to be mostly back to normal before you saw me. What you did for me ... you saved my life in more ways than one.”

“I just did my job.”

Anthony wanted to argue with him. He wanted to point out that getting Anthony out of the car was his job. Talking him through the worst of it, assuring him that everything would be fine, keeping him calm, lending him strength that he would draw on for days, and even weeks, later, wasn’t just part of his job.

“Well, that morning, that time, it didn’t seem like just a job to me.”

“Oh, I didn’t mean--” His deliberate interruption came with a slight bump of the table, jarring against Anthony’s knee. “Mrs. Saunders. It’s good to see you again.”

“It’s good to see you, too. Come here. You’re practically family.” The last word out of Beatrice’s mouth was muffled. Anthony guessed that had something to do with the hug she insisted on giving Dan. He supposed he should have warned Dan about that, but there were worse things than getting a hug from Beatrice. “How are you doing? You look well.”

“Not as good as Anthony here. Hey, Dallas, did you show Mrs. Saunders her card yet?”

Anthony hadn’t even known the other man was in the room. From the entrance behind him, he heard a gruff, “You just asked me to bring her in.”

“So now I’m asking you to go show her she’s famous around here.”

“I am?”

“Sure. Your card is the best one we’ve ever gotten. You think I’d let the other guys forget you sent it to me?”

Beatrice laughed. “Oh, this I have to see.”

More footsteps, and then the table nudged against Anthony’s leg again. How close was Dan sitting anyway?

“I’m sorry.” Dan’s voice was lower, almost conspiratorial. “I wanted a minute to explain about what I said earlier.”

“I’m just glad to hear she thinks you look well. Otherwise, she might try to adopt you and start force feeding you. I think it’s an Italian thing.” He paused, waiting for a reaction to his joke, but Dan remained silent. He wished he could see the other man’s face. “You don’t have to explain anything.”

"I do. I don't want you to think I dismissed what you said. If I helped, I'm glad. Very glad. You were ... that was a rough accident. The fact that I can put you in the plus column now? Seriously, I meant what I said. That's all I need."

Anthony wished Dan would keep talking. He didn't care what Dan wanted to talk about. He'd listen to the weather report, if he had to. Anthony had spent the past year becoming acquainted with the sound and depth of voices, the way a certain pitch could resonate in his chest. It was amazing what he could learn about a person when all visual cues were absent.

"You can definitely put me in the plus column. Well, except I have to rely on my mother to drive me around. Which puts a crimp in my social life." As soon as the words left Anthony's mouth, he didn't know why he said them.

"Girlfriend gets cranky, huh?"

"Yeah, dates get cranky when my mom chaperones. Well, they would, if I ever met any new people."

"What about your friends? Can't they help by driving once in a while?"

"I have ... well, issues with cars." Anthony considered lying, but Dan sounded like he was genuine and not just making conversation. "I trust Mom. With others, I have the occasional anxiety attacks."

"Huh. That makes sense. Sucks, but makes sense."

"Yeah, it does suck." Anthony snorted. "And now that I've made it clear what a loser I am, I should try to find a deft way to change the subject."

"You're not a loser." Surprisingly, Dan still seemed sincere. "Take it from somebody who's seen just about every kind of person out there. And hey, you have to listen to me because I'm practically family, remember?"

"Oh, right. I'll have to keep that in mind."

"That actually wasn't the biggest card I could find!" Beatrice's voice heralded her arrival long before the click of her heels. "Can you believe it?"

"No, actually, I can't."

"I found one that was at least four feet tall and shaped like a bunny. I laughed and laughed, but I thought it would be better for something more subdued."

"Yes," Anthony murmured, "that's her definition of subdued."

"Everybody loved it," Dan said. "We get some bad days around here. It helps on those days to come back to the station and see your card up on the wall. Reminds us that not every call has an unhappy ending."

"Oh, aren't you sweet!" Beatrice tapped Anthony's arm. She did that a lot to get his attention. "Let's invite him over to dinner."

"What did I tell you about her trying to force feed you?" Anthony asked.

"I'm not. We're thanking him properly. I would've invited him a year ago if I thought you would agree to it."

"What do you say, Dan? Since she wants to thank you properly, that pretty much guarantees she'll cook more food than you could possibly eat."

“Clearly, you’ve never been around a bunch of hungry firemen after a hard job.” There was a smile in his voice. “I wouldn’t want to impose.”

“You wouldn’t be imposing. I owe you more than a meal for saving Anthony’s life.”

Anthony was braced for Dan’s, “I was just doing my job,” speech again, but it never came. Instead, he heard, “Let me bring some wine, and we’ll make it a date.”

“Wine would be lovely, wouldn’t it, Anthony?”

“Yes, that sounds like a fair deal.” He kept his voice even, almost nonchalant. He didn’t want Dan to know just how excited the thought made him. But he couldn’t remember the last time he had been so pleased to have a dinner guest.

Chapter Two

Dan wasn’t entirely sure what had possessed him to accept the dinner invitation, but driving through the streets of San Jose, trying to follow the map he’d printed off Google, was a little late to be having second thoughts. He didn’t really know the Saunders’. Just because their thank you card had found a well-worn home at the station didn’t mean he should encourage any kind of relationship with them. It wasn’t always healthy for victims of accidents to try and forge friendships with their rescuers. They needed to move on, without reminders of painful parts of their history.

If he was being honest with himself, however, it looked like Anthony *had* moved on. The awful crash had been almost a year ago, and he was clearly mobile and adjusted mentally. It was a shame the blindness was permanent, but he’d moved around the fire station with a deliberate grace, never once stumbling or looking unsure. Dan hadn’t even made the connection on who he was until after Anthony mentioned the detail about picking his mother up at the airport.

Really, there was no logical reason for him to turn down the invitation when it came. Beatrice Saunders was still as quirky and bright as he remembered, and after getting to spend a little bit of time with Anthony, Dan realized he was a man he would most likely have hung out with if they’d met under other circumstances. There was a gentle pride about him Dan responded to. Anthony obviously hated feeling so helpless in some regards, yet he took what aid he knew he had to and found a way to do it himself the rest of the time. There was a lot to admire there.

Dinner. It was just dinner. These were nice people, wanting to thank him for making a difference in their lives. They weren’t asking to be his best friends--though he sincerely believed Beatrice would give his own mother a run for her money--and he was under no obligation to do anything but sit and enjoy some good food and pleasant company. It wasn’t like he had any other plans anyway. And the last time he’d had home-cooked food had been months earlier when he’d flown back to Wisconsin for Christmas.

He pulled up to a cute ranch-style house and peered through his window at the number. Bingo. It was a nice neighborhood, older, with thick trees lining the sidewalk and a range of car makes sitting in the driveways. From what Anthony had said, this was his mother’s home. What had happened to Anthony’s after the accident? For that matter, Dan was suddenly curious about what Anthony did for a living.

After grabbing the wine he’d promised from the passenger seat, he walked up to the front door and rang the bell. On reflex, his gaze swept over the yard and the house’s exterior. The trees needed to be trimmed back. They grew too close to the power lines, and one in particular appeared ominously close to a long side window. One bad storm, and broken branches could wreak havoc.

Dan had expected Beatrice to answer the bell, but Anthony opened the door, his cane in his hand. The

delicious aroma of garlic, olive oil, and tomato sauce wafted from the house, making Dan's mouth water. Anthony wore a pair of black slacks and a light blue shirt, and his hair was combed away from his face and the dark glasses he wore.

"Dan?"

His earlier nerves melted away at the hopeful expectation in Anthony's face, and he ventured a step inside. "I'm sorry I'm late. I suck at reading maps. It's why they never let me drive the truck."

"It's not a problem. Mom doesn't have dinner on the table yet, so you're technically not late." He held out his hand. "Did you bring the wine?"

"I actually brought two. One red, one white." He passed the red over and held onto the other. "I wasn't sure what we were going to have for dinner, so I thought I'd play it safe."

"Either would have been fine. I'm not exactly a wine snob, and Mom doesn't drink."

Anthony grinned and started to add more, but he was interrupted by Beatrice, who emerged from the kitchen with her arms already held out in an invitation. Bracelets clicked and tapped against each other on both arms, and her hoop earrings made her small face seem narrower. A tiny drop of marinara sauce clung stubbornly to the corner of her mouth.

"Oh, there you are!" Her arms went around Dan in an enthusiastic hug. "Did you have trouble finding us?"

"Not any more trouble than I have finding my own house." He sniffed appreciatively at the air. "The food smells fantastic. Thank you so much for inviting me."

"Oh, we're happy to have you. It's not every day I get to cook dinner for a handsome fireman." Beatrice took the bottle Anthony was holding, and then plucked the white wine from Dan's hand. "Everything still has a few more minutes. Anthony, why don't the two of you go sit in the living room, and I'll call you when dinner's ready."

"You know how to open that wine, Mom?"

"Dan can help me later if I can't figure it out. Now go on."

Dan followed Anthony into the comfortable front room. A fan circulated in the corner, helping to move the warm air, while Lucy lounged on the floor by a large recliner. As they entered, she lifted her head, giving Dan such a look of *don't mess with Anthony* that he almost laughed out loud.

"How long have you had Lucy?" he asked as he sat in the corner of the couch closest to the chair.

"Lucy and I met about four months ago. At first, I wasn't sure I even wanted a dog. It's a lot of work, but we went through the month-long training together, and now I can't even imagine what my life would be like without her."

"She's beautiful." And she was. He'd always loved yellow Labrador retrievers. "She makes me miss home."

"Where's home? And did you have a guide dog there?"

"Wisconsin. Just outside of Madison. And no, no guide dogs specifically, but we've always had dogs as pets. My folks have a chocolate lab now named Boomer." Dan laughed. "Except he'd probably give the breed a bad name. He's not the brightest dog around."

“Wisconsin? Are you a Cheesehead?”

Dan snorted. “Are you kidding? You can’t be from Wisconsin and not root for the Packers. It’s against state law. I save all my vacation time and use it all up around the holidays, just so I’m guaranteed to get to see at least one game a year live.”

“Your family has season tickets?”

“My dad does. He saves what he can for when I go visit.” He grinned. “My brothers hate that.”

“Lucky. I know people who would kill or die for seats in Lambeau. Kill or die. I was able to go to a few games myself. It was amazing to see Favre live.” Anthony chuckled. “Of course, at the rate he’s going, your grandchildren will probably get to see him play.”

Dan joined in his merriment, though he refrained from commenting grandchildren were never going to happen. His sexual preferences were half the reason he lived in the Bay Area and his family lived on the other side of the country.

“So you’re a football fan?” he asked, shifting the conversation back to more neutral territory.

“Yeah. All sports, really. I used to call games for KNBR, but now I do the score round-up and injury reports in the afternoon.”

Dan’s brows shot up. “Really? You’re on the radio and everything?”

“Yeah, I know, I can’t believe it, either. I majored in broadcasting and played football and baseball in school. I didn’t really think about combining those two things until I got an internship at KNBR.”

Letting his gaze sweep over Anthony’s body was reflex. Strong shoulders tapered to a trim waist, which led straight to long legs, good for running, good for a lot of things. Dan lingered on the man’s crotch, then flushed when he realized he was checking Anthony out. He was very glad Anthony was blind and couldn’t witness it. Dan was usually a lot more discreet than that, and he especially didn’t fixate on a guy’s package while in said guy’s home.

“I’m going to have to tell everyone at the station we helped a celebrity. Maybe tune the radio to catch you in the afternoon.”

“I’m hardly a celebrity, but if you need to know about some obscure point of sports trivia, I’m your man. And I do mean trivia, as in, trivial. But I can also get the occasional ticket, if you want. Nothing as great as a Packers home game, but I do have some connections.”

“I hope you mean tickets plural. The only way I’d ever consider taking advantage of that kind of offer would be if you got to go, too.”

“I don’t go to live games anymore. I always end up asking the guy next to me what’s happening.” It was said lightly, though Dan thought it wasn’t quite a joke. “But I guess if you don’t mind keeping up a running commentary...”

Mentally, Dan kicked himself. It was a stupid mistake. But he hadn’t even been thinking about Anthony’s blindness. He’d been too focused on the man himself. “I don’t mind if you don’t. It’d be fun to hang out with someone who knows all the inside scoop.”

“The A’s are playing Seattle next Friday. If that’s workable for you, I could get passes for the press box, no

problem.”

Dan did the quick math in his head. “Yeah, that’ll work. I’ve got Friday and Saturday off. You’re sure you want to go? I didn’t mean to put you on the spot like that.”

“No, you didn’t put me on the spot. If you had, I would have said as much. Besides, I can think of worse ways to spend a Friday night than at the ballpark with a guy I like.”

It sounded like anything Dan would hear at any one of the bars he frequented when he was looking for a little company. *A guy I like*. For a moment, he entertained the notion that Anthony had meant it in that context. He glanced at the wide mouth, skimming his tongue over his lower lip as he contemplated what it would be like to kiss it. But just as quickly as he thought of it, Dan shoved the notion away. It was a perfectly innocuous statement. Dan was reading *way* too much into it.

“Then it’s a deal. Just promise me you’ll let me drive instead of your mother.”

Anthony chuckled. “Mom doesn’t like baseball, anyway. Why don’t you pick me up at the radio station around six thirty, then we’ll go over to the stadium from there?”

“Sounds like a plan.”

Beatrice’s call from the other room that dinner was ready pulled them to their feet, and he followed Anthony to the dining room. He’d been foolish to be so anxious. There was nothing wrong with making new friends, especially with someone he had as much in common with as he did Anthony.

* * * *

Dan could not remember the last time he had eaten so much. Not even Christmas dinner counted. Back home, there were enough people present to make sure everything disappeared, sometimes before you were ready for it to be gone. In the Saunders house, no plate was ever truly empty. Anthony’s warning about how much his mother cooked had not been an idle one. Beatrice kept the food coming, long after Dan had his fill. No amount of protesting did any good.

He did insist, however, on helping clean up. Sitting down after such a meal would guarantee a nap, especially with both bottles of wine gone and a third opened and waiting. Beatrice argued with him, but he refused to listen, standing in front of the sink with his arms folded across his chest to loom even larger over her petite frame. She slapped at his shoulder, but caved quickly, chattering nonstop as they did the work.

He was more than a little relieved when she announced she was going to call it an early night. With a peck on his cheek, she waggled her fingers at him good night as she headed down the hall.

“Your mom is something else,” Dan announced, entering the living room. Anthony sat on the couch now, his attire not quite as crisp as when Dan had arrived. In fact, he looked deliciously rumpled, right down to the dark hair waving across his forehead. “But she’s done for the night, she said. Which leaves just you, me, and at least one more bottle of wine.”

“Ah, so you’re going to stick around and help me drink it? I thought Mom might have scared you away by now.”

“Nah, I like her.” Sitting next to Anthony, Dan set down the glasses he’d carried in and filled them half-full. He didn’t want Anthony to worry about spilling. “But I’m kind of glad it’s just us now. It’s hard to get a word in edgewise around her.”

“She likes to entertain. She hasn’t had much of a chance in the past year, though.” Anthony sighed, his smiling mask slipping for a moment. “There’s a lot of things she hasn’t had a chance to do in the past year.”

“It must’ve been tough, having to move back in here after the accident.”

“Yeah, it wasn’t easy. I’d been living on my own since I was eighteen, and all of a sudden, I was completely dependent on her. But I needed time to adjust ... after I realized there was no way around that, it was easier to deal with.”

Stretching his arm across the back of the couch, Dan bent his leg in order to sit sideways and face Anthony directly. “I have to tell you, you have no idea what a relief it was to get that card from your mom when you were in the hospital. I was really worried about you.”

“I wouldn’t have protested if you had come by to see for yourself that I was okay.”

“I’m starting to wish I had.”

Anthony tilted his head. “Why’s that?”

Dan shrugged. “Well, we’ve hit it off pretty good, I think. We could’ve been friends this whole time.” He grinned. “You could have had somebody else driving you around instead of your mom.”

“Sure, you say that now. But the first time I called while you were in the middle of a hot date, that would be the end of the Dan Middleton Taxi Service.”

“I would have to be *on* a hot date in order for you to interrupt one, and considering the closest I’ve gotten to that in the last year is running into someone twice at the same bar, I think I would’ve been a safe bet.”

“Really? Did my mother exaggerate how handsome you are? I was under the impression you’d be beating the women back with a stick.”

Dan drained the rest of his glass. “Oh, the women, sure. Toss in the fact that I’m not interested, and all of a sudden, it becomes their personal mission to prove they’re the one.”

Anthony sipped from his wine. “You’re not interested in women at all, or you’re not interested in dating anybody right now?”

He’d had too much to drink. That was the only reason he could fathom to explain why he blurted it out the way he did.

“No women. Much to the chagrin of my mother. She wants more grandbabies, but I keep telling her, just because gay marriage is legal out here now, doesn’t mean I’m going to pick up the first guy I find just so I can adopt.”

The corner of Anthony’s mouth lifted. “You sound like you didn’t really want to tell me that. Like you’re a bit nervous.”

His eyes narrowed, Dan regarded Anthony closely, trying to gauge his reaction. “That’s because I don’t announce it everywhere I go. I’ve lost more than one friend who couldn’t deal with the fact I’m gay. Which is kind of ironic considering where I live.”

“Now you sound a little bit annoyed. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean anything by what I said. You don’t have to worry about me, though. I can deal with the fact you’re gay. I can even empathize about the jerks who can’t

deal with it.”

“I’m not annoyed,” he said automatically. “Not at you, anyway. I just...” Then the last part of Anthony’s words sank in, and his immediate need to explain dissolved into curiosity. “Are you? Gay, I mean.”

“I am. And given the number of homophobes in sports, sometimes I feel like I’m living in Texas instead of San Francisco. Of course, it hasn’t really been an issue since my social life went into the crapper.”

“You know, what is it with that? Just because you like sports means you automatically have to be into girls? It’s ridiculous. That’s exactly what I have to go through. People have this weird idea that firefighters are exempt from the gay gene or something. And let’s not forget I’m from the Midwest on top of it. I’m supposed to be straight as an arrow, wearing my ‘I love Dubya’ pin, and spitting out babies as fast as I can get my wife pregnant.” He reached for more wine. “Sorry. Soapbox there. I promise I’m getting off.”

“Getting off? Speaking of something else I haven’t done in a long time.” Anthony’s mouth twisted. “Sorry, that joke wasn’t very funny.”

“Neither is thinking guys would ignore someone as hot and smart as you, just because of your accident.”

“No. People don’t want to date a blind guy, mostly. It makes them uncomfortable. They think things are too different and they’re not quite sure how to behave. I mean, earlier tonight you apologized for suggesting we go to a game together, like it was some sort of horrible offense. Imagine that, except it’s almost constant.”

“But I apologized because I hadn’t even thought about you being blind. I got so wrapped up in talking about the game, it completely slipped my mind.”

“Fair enough. Most people apologize because they can’t stop thinking about me being blind. Even if I assure them that they’re much more worried about it than I am.” Anthony shrugged. “Sometimes, it’s all more trouble than it’s worth.”

With his arm stretched across the back of the couch, Dan’s hand was right next to Anthony’s shoulder. He squeezed it once and let his fingertips linger on the muscle that felt much harder than he’d anticipated.

“Then it’s their loss,” he said and grinned. “Though I will admit, the fact that you couldn’t see me checking you out before dinner made it easier to face you and your mom at the table.”

“You were checking me out? Now I feel embarrassed. I’m not exactly in the best shape of my life. Now, if you were checking out my college-aged body, that would be something else entirely.”

Dan dared to continue caressing the tight line of Anthony’s shoulder. He liked the heat pouring off the man, like he was going to burst into flames right there on the couch. He especially liked the slight stain that had spread over his cheeks when Dan had made his confession.

“Trust me. You’ve got nothing to be embarrassed about. Did you not hear the part I said earlier about you being hot?”

“Oh, I heard it. There’s nothing wrong with my ears. I guess I’ll have to take your word for it, since nobody else has volunteered the information. Well, Mom assures me that I still look presentable, but she has a biased opinion.” Anthony snorted. “I’m going to shut up now, because it sounds like I’m fishing for more compliments.”

The wine was definitely getting to him. Dan ignored the little voice in the back of his head, warning he would never be this bold if he was sober, and slid his hand to cup Anthony’s nape.

“You don’t need to fish.” Leaning forward, Dan pulled an unsuspecting Anthony closer at the same time. “I’ll prove it to you.”

Anthony’s mouth was partly open when their lips met, probably in anticipation of saying something else to put himself down. Dan was more than happy to stifle that impulse with his careful kiss, clinging tenderly to the wide mouth he hadn’t been able to stop staring at.

Anthony didn’t respond immediately, but just before Dan thought he should break the contact and apologize, he felt the tip of Anthony’s tongue slide against his lips. Neither of them changed the careful pace or the gentle contact, but the caress was enough to make Dan’s head spin more than the wine had. The kiss gradually evolved, Anthony opening into the embrace, inviting Dan to deepen the contact. They both moaned as Dan sought out the curves of Anthony’s cheeks and the taste of wine coating his tongue.

“Wow,” Anthony murmured, when Dan finally broke away to catch his breath.

“Believe me now?” His voice was husky, his hand shaking where it still held Anthony’s neck. He rested his other one on Anthony’s thigh, hoping it would divert the man from how shaken he’d been by the kiss.

“I believe you.” Anthony licked his bottom lip--a movement Dan only caught because he was still staring at the other man’s mouth. “So ... when was the last time you necked on the couch like a teenager?”

“When I was a teenager. But you kiss a hell of a lot better than Liz Speer. For that matter, you kiss a hell of a lot better than any guy I’ve known.” His heart demanded to be loose from his ribcage, and he took another deep breath. “But necking usually means more than one kiss. We’ve got a ways to go if that’s what we’re doing here.”

“I actually meant that to be an invitation. I suppose I could have been more smooth about it. On the other hand, I’m not sure there is a smooth way to invite somebody to neck like a teenager.”

“No, probably not,” Dan agreed. But then he didn’t want to talk anymore. He just wanted to feel Anthony’s lips on his again.

Anthony’s response this time was immediate. He was the one to seek out the contact of tongue to tongue, and he was the one to shift sideways on the couch so their bodies were more flush. Dan moved his leg out of the way in order to align their hips, but the first brush of his fingertips against Anthony’s arousal made him sigh in delight.

“Good to know I’m not the only one hard here,” he whispered.

Anthony moaned. “You better keep your hands above the waist, or I might forget we’re on my mother’s sofa.”

“Does she know you’re gay?”

“She knows. I told her years ago because I wanted her to hear it from me instead of from rumors. Which does happen when you’re sort of in the public eye.”

Though he was loath to lose the contact, Dan moved his hand to cup Anthony’s face instead. “So showing how hot I am for her son won’t bother her?” He captured his mouth in another long, sensuous kiss.

Anthony seemed to melt into the caress, his arm sneaking around Dan’s shoulders to hold him closer. When Dan tried to pull away, Anthony groaned a protest and chased his mouth until their lips were fused together again. Tiny shivers wracked Anthony’s frame each time their tongues touched, like the tension built beneath

his skin. Dan wanted to seek out Anthony's cock again, but he resisted the urge. It almost felt exactly like losing a decade or two and making out like teenagers--there was an electric fervor of possibility and discovery.

"She'd probably be thrilled," Anthony finally murmured against his mouth. "She thinks I need ... company."

"So do I." He traced the entire arc of Anthony's lower lip with the tip of his tongue, then repeated the motion along the top. "Does that make the A's game our first date then?"

"I think it does. I can't believe how far away Friday seems now."

"You mean you weren't looking forward to it before?" Dan nipped at his chin. "And here I thought we were hitting it off so well."

"I was looking forward to it. I'm just..." Anthony paused long enough to skim his mouth across Dan's lips, and then further, to his jaw. "I'm just excited about going on an actual date."

Dan didn't want to consider the implications that he was very likely a set of training wheels for Anthony. If Anthony wanted to practice getting back into the social swing of things with him, Dan wasn't going to tell him no, not after finding out what a great kisser the man was. There was nothing wrong with a few casual dates to build Anthony's self-confidence again.

It didn't even occur to him until later--much, much later, when his mouth felt bruised and his blood hummed--that he'd automatically assumed they would have more than one.

Chapter Three

Anthony always knew the moment he walked into a baseball stadium, a soccer field, or a basketball court. First, there was the smell of popcorn, pretzels, beer, and brand new, fresh-out-of-the-box team merchandise. That was followed by the sea of voices. Children chattering excitedly, a man selling programs, an usher pointing people to their chairs, and good-natured, if slightly rough, smack talk. But the real tip off was the jump of excitement that always electrified his pulse. What happened when you got thirty thousand people together in the same place, waiting to watch the same thing, pumped up for the same victory? Something tangible. Something Anthony felt like he could touch.

"These are really good seats," Dan commented.

They were. They were some of the best seats in the whole Coliseum. They were also in high demand at the station, and Anthony had stopped putting in his request for the seats after he realized he couldn't really enjoy live games. But he had gotten tickets for that night without a fight--probably because Art had been so shocked when Anthony asked for them. He could have easily gotten tickets that were a little higher, a little further away from the field, but Anthony had to admit to himself that he wanted the good seats because he wanted to impress Dan.

He *really* wanted to impress Dan. Even before this was a date, he wanted Dan to think he was a great guy--clever, interesting, intelligent. And now that they were on what they both agreed was an actual date, he still wanted Dan to be impressed, but he also wanted Dan to kiss him again. He tried to keep his nerves under control, though, because if he was anxious, Lucy would pick up on that. So he focused on remaining calm instead of on how close Dan's hand was to his. They weren't quite touching, but even in the balmy, summer night, he felt the heat coming from the other man's skin.

Anthony had even told Beatrice not to wait up for him. He had expected her to laugh, but she took his hand and intoned with great solemnity, "Don't mess this up, Anthony. Dan is a good boy. He'd be good for you."

He didn't intend to mess it up. He just hoped he didn't do anything to unintentionally ruin everything.

"I don't think I've ever been this close for a live game before," Dan said. "Usually a group of us from the station will get bleacher seats or plaza seats in the outfield."

"Wait until you watch a football game from here. I mean ... you know, if you do see a game from the seats, it's pretty amazing."

Dan's arm brushed against his as his muscles shifted. "I'm starving. I'm starting on these fries." His voice was muffled; he must have leaned over. "You want anything right now?"

"No, I'm good." By all rights, he should have been starving, too. He hadn't been able to eat a thing that day, but his stomach was in too many knots to be hungry. He didn't even know why he was so anxious. He had already spent time with Dan, he knew they got along well, he knew Dan liked him--or was at least interested in him--but he couldn't shake his nerves. Interestingly enough, not one of his jangly nerves could be ascribed to the ride in Dan's SUV. "So, do you go to a lot of baseball games?"

"Maybe three or four a season. I don't like going by myself, so I usually wait until some of the guys say they want to go." He was silent for a moment--probably eating, Anthony realized. "If you don't hate my commentary, maybe we could do this more often."

Anthony smiled. "I think that sounds like a good idea. If you can find time between saving lives and being a hero."

Dan's soft snort came with a shift on his seat. His thigh now rubbed slightly against Anthony's, solid and warm. "Not every call is life-threatening, you know. You have no idea how many times we get sent out because someone caught a dish towel on fire and set off the alarm."

"I'm sure people are grateful you show up, even if it is just a dish towel." Anthony wanted to reach out and touch him, but curled his fingers against his palm instead. "Have you always wanted to be a fireman?"

"I always knew I'd go into public service somehow. Cop, fireman, I even considered the military for a little while in high school. When I moved out here to go to college, I bounced around, trying to figure out where I was going to land, where I was going to fit. I got EMT certified on a whim, and that introduced me to a couple guys who were volunteer firefighters. So I decided to try it out."

"Why did you always know you'd go into public service? Family tradition?"

"I just always wanted to help people. When I was a kid, I was always one of the biggest in my class. I used to play bodyguard a lot to help out the smaller ones with the bullies." He laughed. "I was always going home with something ripped or bleeding. I got to be an expert on cleaning myself up."

Anthony chuckled. "So while you were out making the world better, one picked-on kid at a time, I was busy being a jock."

"Nothing wrong with that. Especially considering how you turned out."

The crowd roared to life, startling Anthony. For a moment, he had forgotten where they were. The voice over the PA system announced there was a runner on first and on second. He decided against asking about the game in favor of another question. "How did I turn out?"

He almost jumped again when Dan's strong hand rested on his knee, squeezing it all too briefly. "Focused. Intelligent. Hard-working." A broad chest leaned against his arm, followed by Dan's warm breath in his ear as

he murmured, "With an ass I've been dying to get my hands on for a week now."

Christ. Anthony suspected part of the reason Dan got under his skin so thoroughly was that he hadn't received this sort of attention from anybody in a long time. There was nothing wrong with a little basking after a long dry spell. But on the other hand, he wouldn't be so thrilled with the attention if he didn't like Dan so much.

"I sincerely hope this game doesn't go into extra innings. As much as I love baseball."

Dan settled back in his seat, and Anthony instantly missed the heat of his body. "You never told me what position you played."

"I was a tight end in football. I always wanted to be a running back, but I had the height and the speed to be a receiver, so the coach put me there. In baseball, I played second base. I wanted to be shortstop, but the coach told me to suck it up. Unfortunately, I wasn't quite good enough to impress any scouts."

"It got you into broadcasting earlier, though. And you're good. I listened to you this week. You sound great on the radio."

"Yeah. Though I don't know how long I'll stick with it. At first, I was just thrilled that they found a place for me at the station. Now, I'm starting to get a bit frustrated. They think boring stats is all I can do."

"What do you want to do?"

"I *want* to call games again, but I'm pretty sure that's out of the question. If nothing else, I'd be happy if somebody asked me my opinion occasionally. Just because my optic nerves were damaged, that doesn't mean I suddenly forgot everything I've ever known about sports." Anthony shook his head. "Sorry. I think my bitterness was showing there for a minute."

"Well, have you asked? Maybe they don't want to overload you yet. Or what about interviews? Get athletes or coaches in and put them on the air."

Anthony hadn't asked. A part of him had just been hoping that if he did his job well, they'd remember he was a talented and capable guy, and they would put things right. Of course, a part of him knew he couldn't be passive about the situation. Even without Dan pointing it out to him.

"The monthly programming meeting is next week. I was thinking about pitching some ideas for the beginning of the football season."

"You should do it. And hey, if you need moral support, I'll volunteer to cheerlead when I can. Though I have to warn you, I look ridiculous in those little skirts."

"If you know from experience, I definitely want to hear that story sometime." He reached for Dan's hand and gave it a light squeeze, unmindful of who was around him, or what a camera might catch. "Thanks for the offer to cheerlead."

Dan shifted again, and this time, Anthony was convinced the firm contact between their thighs was designed to drive him crazy. His foot nudged Anthony's, too, infinitesimal movements nobody would be able to see but he felt all the way to his marrow.

"I'll save the story for after the game," Dan said lightly. "You're coming back to my place for a beer, right?"

"I planned on it. Though I don't know if I want to wait until the end of the game to get a beer."

“Just think of how good that beer’s going to taste if you wait. Trust me.”

“You’re a big fan of delayed gratification?”

“No, I’m a big fan of taking my time with something I know is worth it.”

“Ahh. So slow and steady wins the race?”

“Did I say anything about slow? Now steady, I’ll give you.”

“You said you were a fan of taking your time. I thought that meant slow. But I think we can agree on steady.” Anthony grinned. “I mean, ask any coach. They’d rather have a player who’s steady instead of flashy.”

“Speaking of coaches...” The muscles in Dan’s thigh tensed. “Shit. I haven’t been telling you anything that’s been going on with the game.”

“That’s fine. Other things have been distracting my attention, for once.”

“Well, that’s good to hear.” The tension in Dan’s leg disappeared. In its place came the brush of an arm against Anthony’s. Dan wore a short-sleeved shirt; the distinct tickle of hair along Anthony’s skin was enough to distract him even more from the game. “At least I know I’m not boring you now.”

“No. I think that’s the very last word I’d ever apply to you. You’ve never done anything to make me think you have a boring bone in your body.”

“You say that now. Let’s see what you say after I want to go to the millionth ball game.”

“You think going to a million baseball games will bore me?” Anthony held out his hand and smiled. “Hi, I guess we haven’t met before. My name is Anthony Saunders, and my job is sports.”

Dan laughed, knocking aside Anthony’s fingers. The familiar calluses scraped across his skin, reminding him of the time they had spent making out on the couch. “So do you do anything else for fun? Tell me how you relax.”

“I guess I better dig deep so you think I have some sort of life. I’ve developed a love for audio books, even though I wasn’t a big reader before the accident. I like to go to a few smaller clubs that always have good, obscure bands. Lucy and I like to go on walks. I mean, I spend a lot of time listening to the ten thousand ESPN channels, I won’t lie to you.”

“You and half the rest of the men on the Peninsula.” The weight returned to his shoulder, and he felt Dan’s breath before he heard his lowered voice. “And so we’re clear, that was me fishing to try and figure out where our second date is going to be.”

A chill went down Anthony’s spine at the promise. The first one wasn’t even over yet, but he would happily make plans for the second, a third, and more beyond that.

“What about you? What else do you do for fun?”

“Oh, I’ll hit the clubs in the city every once in a while. If the weather’s good, sometimes I’ll go camping. Or in the winter, I’ll go up north and ski. That’s one thing I miss about Wisconsin. Winters don’t seem right without snow.”

“Winters seem just fine to me without snow. Sometimes, I’d be assigned to cover a game in New York or Minnesota, or even Wisconsin, right in the middle of winter and...” Anthony shuddered. “Cold climates aren’t

for me. I've never been camping before, though. Always wanted to try it."

"We usually went a few times a summer when I was growing up. Dad was always looking for new spots to try." His elbow nudged at Anthony's side. "And you're totally missing the point of snow, you know. The thing about getting cold is you get to warm up again afterward. I'll bet your problem is you always got cold on your own."

"No, my problem was that I got cold with a bunch of guys who didn't care if I got warm again." He felt warm now, though. Too warm. His hair was itchy where it stuck to the nape of his neck, and he just wanted to get Dan alone. "How would you suggest warming somebody up?"

"Well, when I go skiing, if there's a lodge, I make sure I'm curled up in front of the fireplace. If I've got a date with me, I make sure we're both curled up." Another nudge. "Of course, if I've got a date, I usually try to book a private cabin instead. Then all bets are off."

Anthony knew he shouldn't push for more information since Dan had to stay vague--and it wasn't very healthy to let himself get all worked up in the middle of thirty thousand people anyway--but he couldn't help himself.

"If you have a private cabin, do you even bother with skiing?"

"Depends on how the date is going. Though I'll be honest. I've only ever taken a couple dates up there. I don't meet very many people I'd like to be stuck in a tiny cabin with for three days straight." A roar swept through the crowd, silencing any more conversation for far too long. When it finally quieted enough for individual voices to be distinguished, he heard Dan say, "If you're ever interested in seeing what I'm talking about, just say the word. I'll show you getting cold isn't as bad as you think it is."

Anthony laughed, but it didn't seem like a joke. If Dan did everything else as well as he kissed, Anthony suspected he would find a way to take Dan up on that offer--with or without the snow.

* * * *

Going back to Dan's place was the only real solution, but it was far from ideal. Anthony tried to avoid strange places if he could--even with Lucy in hand, it was difficult to navigate through an environment he didn't know. But the other option was going back to his mother's house, and while Beatrice was amazingly open minded about both his orientation and his previous relationships, he didn't need to deal with her on a first date. She would insist they all sit down at the kitchen table, have a nice piece of cake, and discuss how the date went, what their future plans were, and Dan's intentions towards her little boy.

Anthony didn't mention that he was nervous, either. For the rest of his life, he would have to deal with unexplored territory. He would never feel confident walking into another person's home again, or even a public building. But actually entering Dan's apartment went a long way towards assuaging his fears. For one thing, it smelled welcoming. Not fresh-cookies-on-the-table welcoming, but welcoming all the same. Anthony didn't like visiting a person's home and immediately getting assaulted with the smell of week-old trash, or dirty socks, or cat litter, or that musty, unidentifiable smell that meant the windows hadn't been opened in at least a year, if not more. He also approved of the temperature--Dan clearly had an air conditioner, and he wasn't afraid to use it. Cool, clean air slipped over his skin, and some of his nerves quieted.

"You're not going to get in trouble for having a dog here, are you?"

"Nah, they're pet friendly here. If I didn't have such an awful schedule, I'd get a dog of my own." He gripped Anthony's elbow, stopping him from entering the room further. "I know Lucy's going to help you, but since I'm hoping this won't be the only time you come here, let me give you the lay of the land. Front door opens

into the living room, and it's a straight shot forward into the hall that'll take you to the bathroom and my bedroom. Couch is against the wall to your left, but there's an end table before you get to it. Oh, and there's a coffee table in front of it."

"Information about the coffee table is good to have. Those bastards hurt when you run into them." He wanted to pull away and let Lucy take him to the couch, but he knew that would seem unbelievably rude. "So, where are we headed?"

Dan didn't let him go. "Do you want a cup of coffee or anything? Or I've got some beer if you'd prefer."

"Ah, here's the real test. What sort of beer do you have?"

"I've got some Black Toad, some Sam Adams, and I think there's a bottle or two of Anchor Steam left from the Fourth."

"Sam Adams would be great." He expected Dan to release him then, but Dan seemed happy to keep a hold on his arm as he guided Anthony forward. He finally let go as they reached the couch, and Anthony lowered himself to the cushion, gesturing for Lucy to sit at his feet.

"Be right back."

Anthony stroked the top of Lucy's head as he listened to the sounds of Dan moving around. Fridge opened, shut. Drawer opened, shut. The slight hiss of two bottles having their caps popped.

"You want anything to eat?" Dan called out. "You didn't really eat anything at the game."

Anthony did want something to eat, but he didn't know how well it would go over if he shouted, *yeah, you*. "No, I'm not really hungry right now. Unless you want something."

"Nope, I'm good." His voice was closer. The couch dipped slightly next to Anthony as Dan sat down. He pressed an ice-cold bottle into Anthony's hand. "I think we should drink to something. Like new friends."

"Okay, new friends." The bottles clinked together, a small vibration moving through his fingers. "And maybe we should drink to being more than just friends."

"I figured that probably went unsaid." The weight of Dan's arm settled over the back of the couch, his free hand caressing Anthony's shoulder. His fingers were cold from carrying in the beer, and new shivers rolled down Anthony's spine. "Can I make a request? And if it's not okay, it's perfectly fine to say no. I don't want you to do anything that might make you uncomfortable."

It took everything he had not to settle into the side of Dan's body. "Name it."

The soft strokes never stopped. "Can I see you without the sunglasses?"

"Yes, but I should warn you ... my face is scarred. I'm not a monster ... well, that's what they tell me, anyway."

"Hey, I've seen you hanging upside down in your car with blood all over you. I don't care about a little scarring. The important thing is you're alive for me to ask."

"Good point." Anthony took a deep breath and reached up to remove the shades. Beatrice had helped him choose an over-sized pair because of what the glass had done to his eyes, cheeks, and brow. He had touched the scars obsessively in the first few months, mapping them with his fingers until he intimately knew their

sizes and shapes. He folded the glasses and set them in his lap. "What do you think?"

"I think that's much better. I've been wondering for over a year what color your eyes were." The hand on his shoulder slid up to his neck, holding him still as Dan leaned closer. Anthony jumped when he felt Dan's beer-cold lips graze along his cheekbone, drifting upward to his temple before finding a path back down to his ear. "They're right, you know. You're not a monster. If anything, I think you're one of the sexiest guys I've ever met."

"I wish I could have seen you. Not that it really matters what you look like, but I want to know if my imagination is right." He slid closer to Dan, seeking out his warmth. "Feeling you will at least give me an idea."

"I thought your mother told you I was good looking." There was humor in Dan's voice, but there was nothing funny about the way he continued to brush kisses along the side of Anthony's face. "Listen to your mom. I like her assessment best."

"In my experience, there's lots of different modes of good looking. You could have a troll face and a great body, for all I know."

All of a sudden, Dan shifted, peeling away for awful seconds as he seemed to lean forward. Glass clinked against glass. Before Anthony could register what Dan might be doing, a strong hand wrapped around his wrist and took away his bottle of beer.

"So let's get that settled, once and for all." Another clink. Oh. The coffee table must have been glass as well. "We've got privacy, we won't get interrupted by your mother inadvertently walking in on us. Just you and me. Ask me what I look like, touch my face, do whatever you want. I'm all yours."

Anthony wished it could be like in the movies. He would just skim his fingers over Dan's face, map his features, and have a perfect idea of what the man in front of him looked like. Anthony was sure there were people who could do that, but he wasn't one of them. At most, he would learn whether or not Dan had a bulbous nose, or acne, or some sort of growth on his cheek. Of course, that was all good information to have.

Anthony reached up and his fingers met the smooth skin of Dan's cheek. He moved carefully, so he wouldn't poke an eye out or shove a finger up his nose, and began to mark details. Stubble covered his jaw, short enough to be rough, so he probably needed to shave more than once a day. He had a square chin without a cleft, and his bottom lip was fuller than the top lip. Anthony skimmed his fingers upward, noting that his eyebrows were bushy without being alarmingly so. He already knew that Dan's hair was amazingly soft.

"What color are your eyes?" Anthony murmured.

"Brown." The answer came on a breath. "So's my hair. I need to get it cut."

"I like the way it feels." He cupped the back of Dan's head and leaned forward, seeking out Dan's lips. He kissed him only for a moment before using the shape of his mouth to guide him along Dan's jaw, and down his neck. He smelled amazing--like sweat and sun and the grass clippings at the ball park, and maybe a hint of smoke. Anthony's mouth and throat felt dry. "Do you want to stay out here?"

"No. But I ... we don't have to rush anything." His arm slid between Anthony and the couch, around his waist in order to pull their bodies closer. A shudder rippled through Dan when Anthony nipped at the hollow of his throat. "And what about Lucy? If we move, does she have to come with us?"

"Lucy can stay out here. She'll stay where I tell her to until I get her." He smoothed his palm up Dan's chest until he reached the collar. A tiny bit of hair stuck out from behind the material. "I know we don't have to

rush anything. But I think the bed would be more comfortable.”

“It would,” Dan agreed. “As long as you’re sure.”

The hold he had around Anthony’s back tensed in anticipation of standing, and together, they rose to their feet. Anthony’s heart pounded loud enough, he was sure Dan could hear it. He’d been looking forward to this all night, every brush between their bodies at the game a torment. He wanted freedom to touch, to be touched, to feel alive like he hadn’t felt alive in a year.

But Dan didn’t move right away. His free hand cupped the side of Anthony’s face, and he held him still, his thumb stroking the corner of his mouth. “Before we go anywhere...” His breath was hot from how close he was. “I’m going to kiss you the way I’ve wanted to since I saw you waiting for me at the radio station.”

Anthony couldn’t do more than offer a sound of agreement before Dan claimed his mouth. He wrapped his arms around Dan and immediately parted his lips, responding to the demanding pressure and the hungry sounds coming from the back of his throat. He leaned against Dan, clinging to him so he didn’t fall, because Dan made him feel seriously weak. Especially when he slid his tongue against Anthony’s and his teeth scraped across Anthony’s lips.

Though they had spent hours making out on the couch, Anthony wasn’t quite prepared for how thoroughly Dan kissed him now. He didn’t hesitate. Didn’t hold back. His broad hand splayed over the small of Anthony’s back and molded their lower halves together, while the hand still holding Anthony’s face continued to caress along his jaw. Dan seemed intent on devouring Anthony whole, a sentiment he more than heartily supported, but it was the tenderness when he would curl their tongues together or swallow another of Anthony’s breaths that made the room spin.

Anthony clung to him when Dan finally lifted his head. “You better tell Lucy to stay put.” Dan’s voice was as ragged as his breathing. “I need to get my mouth on the rest of you before I decide to hell with the bed.”

Anthony didn’t know how he was supposed to be able to form words, but he somehow found his voice. “Lucy. Stay here.” He hoped his tone was strong enough to catch the dog’s attention, because he felt winded.

Dan kept his arm around Anthony’s waist and led him forward. Anthony was a little afraid their feet would tangle together and send them both toppling to the ground, but they managed to keep their footing.

“Tell me about your room,” Anthony said.

“Not that different from any other bedroom.” Dan paused and shifted their angle in order to guide Anthony through a doorway. The jamb brushed against his shoulder. “Queen-sized bed, heavy oak headboard with slats.” When they came to a halt, Dan grasped Anthony’s wrist and pulled until Anthony felt the cool cotton of a down comforter. “No footboard. I’m too tall for those to be comfortable.”

“There’s nothing on the floor to trip me up, is there? You’re a tidy guy?”

Dan chuckled. “I didn’t think we’d be spending any time on the floor. But no, there’s nothing. If you come off the end of the bed, it’s a straight shot forward to the door.”

“Good. Now that we’ve got the formalities out of the way...” Anthony smoothed his palm over Dan’s solid chest until he found the line of buttons. He popped the top one free, and his body tightened with anticipation. He wanted to feel all of Dan, and he wished he could just rip the shirt open. Instead, he made himself move systematically down the line, focusing on buttons instead of the skin he was exposing.

Dan dropped his arms in order to make it easier, but Anthony missed the heat of contact between them. When

the shirt finally fell open, he rewarded himself for his patience by smoothing his palms across Dan's stomach. Muscles, clear and outlined, twitched beneath his skin. He knew Dan was fit, but there wasn't an ounce of fat anywhere to be felt, even where he dipped his fingers inside the waistband of the jeans.

"Remember how I said about taking my time with things that matter?" Dan's husky voice came with a steel grip at Anthony's shirtfront. He fisted the fabric and yanked Anthony against him, the thick line of his erection jabbing into Anthony's hip. "How 'bout next time?"

He didn't wait for a response before crushing their mouths together. If the kiss in the living room had been passionate and thorough, this was an assault, a devouring as his teeth clashed with Anthony's, his hungry tongue demanding any and all contact.

Next time sounded perfect to Anthony. This time couldn't be about a slow exploration. Not when they were both starving for contact. He could tell with each new attack on his mouth that Dan had the same craving, the same desires. A part of him thought it was more than a little insane to put himself in such a vulnerable position--naked in somebody's strange house--but the logical part of him knew he was safe. Knew that, with Dan at least, he wasn't vulnerable at all.

At the first gasp of breath, Dan grabbed the hem of Anthony's shirt and yanked it over his head. The blast of air from the air conditioning cooled the beads of sweat that had collected along his shoulder blades, and then Dan wrapped his arms around him again and returned to kissing him. The slightly coarse hair along Dan's chest scraped over Anthony's, catching on nipples that already felt too sensitive to touch. It would be even better when each of them was writhing on the bed. He didn't know who was going to be on top, but Anthony was sure somebody was about to get fucked.

Anthony was grateful he opted for a comfortable pair of sandals that morning. He was barefoot before Dan made short work of Anthony's fly and pushed his shorts down his legs. His skin warmed when Dan took a half-step back and it dawned on him what the other man was doing. Dragging his gaze up and down Anthony's body, taking stock, maybe even cataloguing details. Anthony opened his mouth to make a joke about checking out the goods, but Dan's lips on his silenced him. And then made him forget he was ever self-conscious in the first place.

The hard edge of Dan's zipper rubbed along Anthony's naked arousal, while his hands found a new home squeezing Anthony's ass. Dan groaned when Anthony tightened the muscles. His hot mouth slid away, along Anthony's neck, to blaze a trail of small bites and scorching kisses down his chest.

An ex had given him what amounted to a pity fuck about four months after the accident, but beyond that, Anthony had practically been a monk. As Dan moved lower, there was the faintest thrill of fear. Living in darkness was always unnerving, but being naked and discovering the body and quirks of a new lover heightened that hint of anxiety. But it was difficult to concentrate on that, especially when Dan nipped at his inner thigh and then blew a cool whisper of air over the wet tip of his cock.

"Do you want to sit down?" Dan didn't do much more than whisper, but in the quiet of the room, that was all that was needed. When his lips skimmed down the length of the shaft, Anthony jumped, only to calm again as Dan cradled the opposite side of his cock and licked back to the head again. "Tell me what you want."

It wasn't a matter of want. It was a matter of need.

"Yeah, sitting down is good." He felt the edge of the bed against his leg, and turned to lower himself to the mattress. "As far as what else I want ... I think you're already on the right path."

Dan chuckled. His hands massaged the tops of Anthony's thighs for a brief moment before they disappeared altogether. "Hang on."

He struggled to hear what was going on, but it took the rasp of a zipper being pulled down for Anthony to realize Dan was stripping out of the rest of his clothes. Something hard hit the floor, followed almost immediately by an identical thud. Then Dan was back, spreading Anthony's legs wider as he knelt between them.

"You've got a great cock." The compliment warmed Anthony as much as the long hand gripping the base. Dan tilted it away from his body and licked over the slit again, moaning in satisfaction. "Damn, but you taste even better than you look."

Anthony sighed and leaned back on his hands, his head tilted up. He felt Dan's tongue and breath everywhere. He couldn't discern a particular pattern; Dan seemed most interested in the crown and the pre-come leaking from Anthony's slit. He thrust his hips, though the motion was shallow. He didn't want to take over the rhythm; he just wanted to meet each gesture of Dan's tongue.

When Dan started caressing his balls, Anthony sighed. That single moment of relaxation opened the door on Dan's attentions, and firm lips wrapped around the head. His tongue never stopped, as adventurous now as it had been during all those long, delicious kisses, and he pumped his hand slowly up and down the length as he suckled at the tip.

"God ... Dan..." Supporting himself on one hand, he ran the other through Dan's hair. The curls were like silk--almost as soft and warm as the mouth swallowing more of his length. He held his breath, waiting for the firm lips to move lower, waiting for the clever tongue to roll over his taut skin.

The hand on his sac moved first. Callused fingertips stroked the skin behind his balls, teasing him with their proximity to his ass but never venturing further. A broader finger--a thumb, maybe--curled over the top, effectively scooping his sac against Dan's palm. As the contact strengthened, Dan pushed his other hand all the way to the root of Anthony's cock. His mouth followed. With his mouth came suction--hot, sweet, almost painfully numbing. The dance of his tongue would have been too much if it had been any firmer.

"Fuck, yes," Anthony hissed. He caressed the side of Dan's head, tracing the curve of his ear before moving to his face. He wiped his thumb over Dan's cheekbone, then scraped his nails over the hollow of Dan's cheek. Anthony wanted to know the shape of Dan's mouth as it stretched around his cock. But many of his conscious thoughts fled as Dan began to pump his shaft.

Each slide was long and sure, from the grip of his hand to the tightness of his lips. Dan grew braver with each one, fingers slipping lower and lower, until Anthony couldn't bear the teasing any longer and brought his heels up to the edge of the bed. It worked to expose his ass more to Dan's assault, spreading his cheeks a fraction wider. On the next stroke down, Dan finally grazed over Anthony's opening, scratching his nail around the tense muscle.

Anthony fell backwards, his hips lifting from the bed as his shoulders touched the mattress. Each light touch sent an almost painful shock up his spine. He felt like he hadn't been touched before in his life, like every brush of skin against skin was a new, heretofore unknown experience. And Dan just kept teasing him with his finger, even as he let the tip of Anthony's cock push at the back of his throat.

"God ... Dan ... I can't wait to feel your cock."

Dan groaned around his length. His hot breath fanned over Anthony's stomach, blanketing him in warmth, and his tongue flattened along the underside of his shaft. Another breath. In. Out. In again. The muscles in Dan's throat worked, and as he carefully pushed the tip of a finger inside Anthony's ass, Dan swallowed down the rest of his length.

Anthony thought he would come as soon as Dan's throat constricted around him. He couldn't remember the

last time he had felt anything so amazing. Once Dan began to move, Anthony couldn't keep his pleasure to himself. He moaned with each breath, each one coming faster and harder every time Dan pumped his wrist or swallowed around his cock. There wasn't an inch of his body not affected by Dan, even parts of him Dan hadn't touched yet.

When Dan pulled off his length, Anthony almost grabbed his head to pull him back. The other man's harsh breathing rattled his own, rattled everything inside him, and only the return of Dan's hands on the inside of his thighs was enough to soothe it away.

"I hope wanting to feel my cock means what I think it means." Hair tickled across his balls as Dan bent his head, and Anthony nearly shot off the mattress at the lick across his opening. "Because I can't remember the last time I wanted to fuck someone so bad."

"Yes..." Anthony caught his breath. Dan's tongue was impossibly hot against his skin, teasing his hole with a promise of more. "It means I want you to fuck me." He cupped the back of Dan's head, holding him in place as he began to thrust his tongue. "Christ, I need you to fuck me."

The fingers came back, two this time, joining the slick probes as they slid in and out of his passage. Dan didn't hold back his satisfied sounds any longer, and occasionally, his teeth caught on Anthony's skin in his eagerness to get deeper.

"I can't take this anymore," he heard Dan mutter.

He abandoned Anthony's body. A moment later, a drawer slid open. Foil ripped. Something squelched. Anthony held his breath, waiting for Dan to settle between his legs again, but the weight came unexpectedly at his side instead. Dan curled an arm over his chest and hauled him up the length of the bed, settling them both on their sides.

"You get on top," he said. "Ride me."

That hadn't occurred to Anthony, but he was glad Dan suggested it. If he was on top, his hands would be free to map over Dan's body, to become better acquainted with his muscles and the texture of his skin. He swung his leg over Dan's hips, bracing himself against Dan's chest while he settled on top of him. His erection was thick and long, sliding between Anthony's cheeks. He felt the slick condom covered with cool lube, but the warmth of Dan's flesh seeped through it.

Anthony reached behind him to grasp the base of Dan's cock. Instead of guiding the tip to his passage, he slid the crown up and down his flesh, creating a bit of friction between their bodies as he sought out Dan's mouth.

Hunger returned to their kisses. Dan clutched at Anthony's arms, not stopping him from teasing both of them with the long swipes of cock to flesh, shuddering every time Anthony's fingertips brushed over his balls.

"You better like to switch it around," he growled. "Because I want as much of that cock as you're willing to give."

"I'm the definition of flexible," Anthony promised against his mouth. "And I don't think I'm going to get enough of you."

A groan. A slide of a rough hand down to his ass. Tongue tangling with tongue. Dan sucked away his breath and then demanded more, tremors vibrating so roughly through his body Anthony felt them everywhere they touched.

Anthony knew he could prolong everything for hours with long kisses, but he still didn't want to take things

slow. Without breaking from Dan's mouth, Anthony positioned Dan's cock at his entrance. For a moment, the blunt tip seemed too large for entry, but he pushed back until his flesh gave and his breath caught. There was just an inch inside of him, but it was already enough to tighten his muscles and ignite his nerve endings.

Dan's hands shot down to grip Anthony's hips. His fingertips dug into the muscle, bruising in their ferocity, and Anthony felt the fight in him as he held back from slamming Anthony further down.

"Fuck," Dan panted. "You're so tight." His hips nudged upward, pushing another inch inside. "I don't know how long I can keep it easy."

Anthony didn't think Dan would need to keep it easy. A slow burn traveled up his spine and into his chest. For a moment, Anthony thought it would suffocate him, but that wasn't enough to stop him from pushing down another inch, and then another. When he reached the base of Dan's cock, he dropped his head onto Dan's shoulder, gasping for breath as his body echoed every tremor moving through his lover's flesh.

Dan pressed his mouth to Anthony's slick skin, the tip of his tongue tickling along it. He waited for several seconds, simply gripping the firm line of Anthony's hips, before slowly starting to withdraw. His hips angled back into the bed, his thick cock scorching as it slid out of Anthony's ass. Halfway out, he took a deep breath and jerked forward again, burying himself so hard his balls slapped against Anthony's flesh.

Anthony grunted, shocked by the force that mingled pain with pleasure. Not so much pain that Anthony didn't want Dan to do it again. He eased up Dan's body, giving him room to slam forward again, sending a fresh jolt up Anthony's back. With a moan, he sought out Dan's mouth again, their tongues winding together.

That was the rhythm they set--the sinuous glide out followed by Dan's forceful push back in. Each stroke was longer than the last, their needs stoked higher, their resistance dissolving away. With Dan's sure grip keeping him steady, Anthony took the initiative to touch everywhere he could. He threaded his fingers through the coarse hair on Dan's chest, tugging hard enough to pull a grunt of approval from Dan's throat. He outlined the hard muscles of his arms, feeling every twitch, every sinew, as both of them moved. Silently, Anthony resolved to repeat his investigations with his lips after they were both sated. His mouth watered to learn Dan's body as well as the rest of him.

His senses were overwhelmed. By the sounds they made together. By the salty smell of Dan's skin, and the parts of him that were coarse, and the parts that were soft. Even their kisses tasted a little salty, as sweat clung to his upper lip.

Anthony shifted his body, finding a way to increase the friction against his cock between their slick bodies. Dan's ridged stomach felt wonderful against the sensitive underside, and he knew he wouldn't be able to hold himself back from the edge for long. Dan felt too amazing, from the stubble brushing against Anthony's chin to each hard, almost punishing, stroke.

He didn't need his sight to know how close Dan was. He held onto Anthony's ass even tighter, his fingers occasionally straying to trace along the crack and stretched outline of his hole. Whimpers turned to constant moans, vibrating into Anthony and going straight to his cock. His strokes quickened, shuttling in and out of his channel with an almost desperate urgency.

When he felt Dan let go and reach between their bodies, the first pull at his cock made his head spin.

"Going to come any second here," Dan breathed. "You as close as I am, or do you want to jerk off on me after I finish?"

He *was* close, and the image Dan put in his head pushed him even closer. But he wanted to come while Dan was still in his ass, while Dan's body still flexed and trembled beneath him.

“No, I’m ready...” As soon as Anthony started speaking, Dan tightened his hold. It felt like another hand had closed around his chest, squeezing and squeezing until he had no choice but to burst. Anthony pressed his lips to Dan’s, shouting into his mouth as his cock jerked and erupted.

Dan continued to strip his shaft, coating it with come on every swipe. His hand shoved at the small of Anthony’s back at the same time he slammed one final time upward, and his entire body went rigid as he shot deep inside the passage. He devoured Anthony’s mouth, refusing Anthony the space to breathe, the space to move, the ability to do anything but sink into his kisses. He didn’t even release Anthony’s cock when he finally stopped stroking it. He just held it and squeezed, letting his thumb run over the increasingly sensitive head.

Anthony was silent for several long beats, without the means or the desire to speak. He just wanted to stay stretched on top of Dan, shuddering every time his thumb grazed over his tender skin. He had been thinking about Dan a lot since the night they spent on the couch--to the exception of just about everything else--and nothing in his daydreams matched the reality.

“You don’t have to work tomorrow, right?” Anthony asked.

“ I’m off until Sunday.” He caressed up and down the length of Anthony’s spine, massaging away the last of the tension. “Did you want to spend the night? We could go out tomorrow then. Maybe go into the city for dinner?”

“I’m glad you asked, because I didn’t want to seem pushy.”

“What about Lucy? Is this going to mess up her schedule too much?”

“I’m going to need to take her for her nightly walk soon. Is there a store nearby? Maybe we can walk down there and buy some food for her. And some ice cream for us.”

“Found your appetite, huh?”

“Yeah. I think it’s because the nerves are gone. I mean, that went well, right?”

Dan chuckled. “I think well might be an understatement.” His lips brushed against Anthony’s temple.

“There’s a Lucky’s a couple blocks away. We can pick up stuff for breakfast, too. I’ll do you my fireman omelet.”

“Sounds good.”

Despite their plan, Anthony didn’t move. He wanted to stay right where he was for as long as possible, matching the rhythm of Dan’s breath and feeling the regular beat of his pulse. He could get used to that. Anthony suspected he could even learn to love it.

Chapter Four

Dan stared at the reflection in his rearview mirror. He definitely needed a haircut. Sunlight glinted off his rich brown hair, making it look even longer than it was. Any time it passed an inch or two, it started to curl. Right now, the top was a riot of waves, like someone had come along and deliberately messed it up with both hands. It curled at his nape, too. It wasn’t long enough to hit his collar or annoy him yet, but that wouldn’t be too much longer. Every time he considered scheduling an appointment, however, the reminder of how much Anthony liked it this way made him choose not to.

Anthony touched it constantly, or at least, whenever they were in a position to be touching each other like

that. He had done it all that night after the A's game, and all the next day. Between their conflicting work schedules, they hadn't managed more than a couple phone calls since Sunday. Neither one of them were too thrilled about that. It was easy being together. Fun. The time they'd had together had flown by, between fucking, and laughing, and talking, and then fucking again. He loved how physical Anthony was. It might have been a side effect of losing his sight, but Dan ate it up. He couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this flush of desire for someone, the kind that consumed every waking thought and drove him crazy until the next time they could be together.

He fussed with some of the more awkward curls and sighed. He should just face it. He wasn't going to cut it any time soon. Not until he couldn't stand it or the chief complained. It was worth tolerating a little longer to get Anthony's caresses, like when he fisted the top for a better hold when Dan was blowing him.

Glancing at his watch, he climbed out of the car and headed into the radio station. He whistled under his breath. The sun was shining, the temperature wasn't too hellworthy, and in just a few minutes, he was going to see Anthony's broad smile when he surprised him. He was addicted to those smiles.

He was addicted to a lot of things about Anthony.

When he asked for Anthony, the receptionist directed him to sit down, but he didn't have to wait for long. The elevator dinged, and Dan heard the familiar click of Lucy's nails across the tile.

"Are there any messages for me, Layla?" Anthony asked.

"No, but there is somebody here to see you."

Anthony's smile was immediate. "It's not my mother, is it?"

She laughed softly. "No, it's somebody better looking than that."

"Remind me to come pick you up more often," Dan said as he stood and came up to Anthony's side. Delight brightened Anthony's smile; it was enough to make Dan's stomach flutter. "The people here are good for my ego."

"You can pick me up any time." He nodded at Layla. "Layla, this is Dan. You might see him around here more often."

"It's nice to meet you, Dan." The phone started to ring, and she offered a quick smile. "Have a good night."

"To what do I owe this surprise?" Anthony asked, slipping his free hand into Dan's.

Dan caressed the side of his palm as he led the way to the front door. "I hated that I was on shift yesterday for your big production meeting, so I called your mom this afternoon after I woke up to ask if she minded if I steal you for the night." He held the door open, letting Lucy guide Dan into the early evening sunshine. "I want to know how everything went."

"Good, because I've got a lot to tell you. Do you want to hear it all now or do you want me to wait until we get ... where are we going? Out? Because I should change my clothes if I need to look presentable."

"Nope, no need to change." They stopped at the side of his car, and he opened the rear door for Lucy to get into the back seat. "I've got everything ready for burritos back at my place. I figured we could just kick back better there."

"Oh, good. I have the feeling I'm not going to be in the mood to share you tonight." Dan opened the

passenger door, but Anthony paused before ducking into the car. He tilted his head, as if he intended to move in for a kiss, but shifted direction at the last second, his mouth skimming across Dan's jaw. "I've missed you."

"It's been a long week," he murmured in agreement. Glancing over the top of the car at the radio station, he confirmed nobody was watching before sliding his free hand around Anthony's waist. It put them in closer proximity, and he pressed a soft kiss to the side of Anthony's neck. "Too bad you have to work tomorrow. I'd ask you to spend the night."

"I could still spend the night. Nobody will care if I come in late. As long as I'm here before the show starts." A car backfired and Anthony jumped. "Though maybe we should have this conversation when we're not in the middle of the road."

Smiling, Dan let him go long enough to slide into the front seat, and waited until Anthony's feet and hands were out of the way before shutting the door. He jogged around the front of the car, his heart light.

"I went and picked up some more stuff for Lucy," he said as he pulled away from the curb. "Your mom kept trying to get me to go down to San Jose and get some of yours, but I didn't want to run the risk of being late."

"Oh, thanks. You know, before too long, I think Lucy's going to have you wrapped around her paw."

"It might be too late for that." They coasted to a stop at a red light. "For her and her owner, both."

"Might be? I guess that means I've got to try harder." Anthony's hand unerringly found Dan's thigh, solid and warm through his jeans. "Not that I'm not up for the effort."

Dan covered Anthony's hand and squeezed before the light turned and he had to drive again. "So what happened yesterday at the meeting? Or are you going to make me wait until we get home to find out?"

"I might make you wait for the long version with all the details. But the short version?" Anthony's fingers flexed and he smiled broadly. "The short version is that Bruce, the head of programming, loved my pitch. He doesn't want to commit to a full schedule yet, but he does want to send me down to Anaheim to talk to the Angels' General Manager."

"That's great!" And it was. Anthony had worried out loud about the potential reactions to his pitch more than once on Saturday. "I knew you could do it."

"Well, I haven't quite done it, yet. This is more like a ... trial run." Anthony sighed and his hand slipped away. "I'm a little bit nervous, to tell you the truth. I haven't been to Angel Stadium in years. Hell, I haven't even traveled anywhere since the accident."

"But you get around fine. And you've got Lucy. She's a big help." He glanced over, but Anthony still looked far too somber about something that should be exciting news. "You're flying, right? You know the airline is going to be helpful."

"Mom has a bunch of frequent flyer miles, so I'm going to use those to fly down. There will be a car waiting for me, and Layla has already booked a room for me near the stadium. So ... I should be able to handle everything. I'm just nervous and excited and scared. Especially since I'm going down there on Thursday morning."

"Thursday?" Dan hadn't expected it to be so soon. "That's only a week away. Is that enough time?"

"It's going to have to be. Bruce wants this interview and one with the A's ready to roll before the big game next Saturday. If I can get it done for the pre-game show, I'll have a new assignment."

They drove in silence for several minutes. For all his confidence in Anthony, Dan had assumed his employer would make the transition a reasonable one. This felt too fast. Nine days wasn't enough for a guy who wouldn't even get into a car with most people he called friends, to adjust to the idea of flying and landing in a strange airport, all by himself.

"What kind of stuff do you have to do in preparation?" He posed the question as he pulled off 101.
"Anything I can help with?"

"I did interviews in college, but that seems like a lifetime ago. The major thing will be thinking of questions, and then memorizing the questions because I can't rely on notes. I'll need help with that."

Dan nodded. That made sense. Though it brought up something else he'd been wondering about...

"How do you handle reading the scores and everything? I haven't seen you handle anything with Braille on it."

"I do get a few of my reports in Braille, though I'm not completely proficient in that, yet. I use a screen reader to compile all the information I get through email, and then sort out what's most important. I also spend a lot of time just calling various teams and talking to their media reps."

Dan whistled under his breath. "You must have an amazing memory."

"Yeah. I've done a lot of memory work and learned a lot of tricks, though. I also have audio to text software, so I can keep track of notes. But I can't refer to my laptop while I'm on the air, so it's easier to just keep it all in my head."

"And here I thought I was getting involved with another jock." Though Anthony couldn't see him, Dan smiled anyway. "Were you ever going to tell me you're a closeted brainiac, or were you going to save that tidbit until I was well and truly hooked?"

Anthony laughed. "I'm not a closeted brainiac. You don't know any guys who have all sorts of meaningless and obscure sports stats stored away? The only difference is, somebody pays me."

"Money is an excellent motivator. Okay, I'll let that one go. But if you've got any other deep and dark secrets you're planning on springing on me later, now would be an excellent time to 'fess up."

"Well, in that case, there is one other thing. You know that stereotype about gay guys and musical theater? In this case, it's true. I love musicals. I'll understand if that's a deal breaker."

"I'll let that one slide if you don't hold it against me that I own all eight seasons of *Will and Grace* on DVD."

"I think I'll just let that fact slip my stellar memory," Anthony said lightly.

"You say that now. Just wait until I'm on one of my marathons." He pulled into the parking lot for the apartment complex, slowing down to avoid upsetting Lucy with the speed bumps. "We'll have to do a trade. I'll go with you to see a show, and you curl up with me on the couch for a DVD."

"I'll think about it," Anthony promised as Dan pulled into his assigned parking spot. "And that's really saying something, because I won't watch that show for just anybody."

"Think of it as an opportunity to drape yourself all over my hot body." Pocketing his keys, he leaned across and pulled the handle to open Anthony's door for him. "Because I'll bet if anything can distract me from my show, it's you."

"I'd be a fool to pass up an opportunity to drape myself over your hot body." Anthony stepped out of the car, slamming the door behind him. A moment later, he had the back door open and was holding Lucy's harness. "Did you park in the usual spot?"

"Yeah." Dan quickened his step to catch up with Anthony. "I hope you're hungry. I have a ton of food. I even got ice cream for you."

"I'm starving. Are you going to let me help in the kitchen, or are you from the Beatrice Saunders School of kitchen management?"

"Everything's mostly done already. I got it all put together before I left to pick you up. We'll have to heat up the meat again, but you won't have to wait too long." He grabbed Anthony's elbow and stopped him from stepping into a broken patch on the sidewalk. "Careful. There's a bad crack there."

"Um ... thanks."

With Dan's hand still on his elbow, he stepped over the damaged section and onto the smooth concrete. Since they were only a few feet away from the stairs that led to the second floor, Dan opted to keep a hold of Anthony's arm. He didn't release him until he needed to unlock and open his door. Lucy moved forward confidently, leading Anthony into the apartment like it was her own house.

"Go ahead and have a seat," Dan said. "I'll get the meat warm."

"Are you sure you don't want me to help? You don't need to wait on me."

"You're my guest. Of course I'm going to wait on you." Disappearing into the kitchen, he took the lid off the pan he'd left on the stove and turned on the flame beneath it. "What do you want to drink?"

"A Sam Adams is fine."

Dan heard his old couch creak as Anthony sat down, the familiar snap of fingers that was Lucy's signal to lie down. While the meat and onions began to warm again, he put another pan on the stove to warm the tortillas. Once that was done, he carried the beer out to Anthony. Before he could turn back to the kitchen, Anthony caught his hand and pulled him closer.

"I think I'd like a proper kiss before you disappear again."

Dan let Anthony tug him down to the couch, their hips knocking as he half-rested against the other man's chest. Their mouths fused unerringly, lips already parted in anticipation of tasting the other. This was one of the things that had proven effortless between them. Their bodies synched without hesitation, instincts following instincts, need matching need. The first time that knowledge had dawned on Dan, he had been more than a little rattled. He had clung to Anthony, refusing to let him roll away. Sex was supposed to be messy. Often awkward. It took more than one night of kisses and one round of fucking to find that kind of rhythm. At least, it always did for Dan.

Anthony had shattered that preconception.

They were both panting when he finally peeled away. Anthony's glasses were askew. Reaching up, Dan straightened them, then let his fingers graze over Anthony's cheekbone.

"Can we make it a house rule you don't wear these here? I know you prefer to wear them in public, but I miss seeing all of you."

Anthony removed the glasses and tucked them into his shirt pocket. "You know, it's almost ironic hearing that line come from you."

Dan frowned. "Why?"

"Because I don't get to see any of you."

Ouch. "I didn't mean it that way. If you'd rather wear them..."

Anthony squeezed Dan's hand. "No, it's okay. I didn't mean anything by it. I just thought it was a little funny, that's all."

"Reminding you you're blind isn't funny." In spite of Anthony's assurances, he felt uncomfortable, and stood to go back to the kitchen. "I should go check on the food."

He thought that walking away would be a clear enough indication that he was done talking about it, but Anthony followed him. "Actually, it kind of is funny, in a black humor sort of way. But ... reminding me? Dan, it's not really something I can forget."

"No, but it's something you're learning to live with." He dropped a tortilla into the ready pan. "I should be more careful about what I say."

"I've already had to learn to live with it. For three months after they released me from the hospital, it was all Mom could do to get me to leave the house. I almost lost my job. I felt like I had lost my entire identity. That's when I was sensitive enough that everybody needed to watch what they said." Anthony leaned against the jamb, his eyes opened and unfocused. "But that's over now. I'm still adjusting but it's not a topic that's going to upset me."

Dan slid the warmed tortilla onto a waiting plate. "Do you want the works on your burrito?"

"Does it make you uncomfortable when you're reminded that I'm blind?"

The protest rose automatically to his lips. "It makes me uncomfortable when I feel like I've said something stupid," he added. "It doesn't make a difference to me that you're blind."

"But you feel like you've said something stupid because you think being blind makes a difference to me. I don't want you to feel like you have to watch every word that comes out of your mouth. I also don't want you to feel like you have to go out of your way to ... help me."

"I don't."

"You do. Like a bit earlier, when you leaned over and opened the car door." Anthony ventured further into the kitchen, though he stopped well short of the stove. "I think maybe it's an issue of ... expectations. And boundaries."

The food forgotten, Dan stared at Anthony like he didn't know him. "Are you saying I've been coddling you?"

"I'm saying that I think you've been doing things you wouldn't normally do if I wasn't blind."

Dan thought back, trying to summon details that would support Anthony's declaration. He *had* opened the door for him. He didn't do that for anybody else. But he thought he'd been...

His throat tightened ... Helping. That was the word Anthony had used.

"I didn't want you to get embarrassed if you couldn't find the handle right away," he explained. "I know you hate looking dumb, or clumsy."

"Do you think I'm stupid or clumsy?"

"No!" The denial was sharp and swift, driven by the force of his belief. "God, Anthony, is that really how I'm treating you?"

"No, that's not how you're treating me. My point is, you don't make me feel stupid or clumsy. You never have. And if I trip over a piece of sidewalk or miss the door handle, that just means I'll learn to watch my step and where the handle is."

It took a moment for him to make the connection between the reference to the sidewalk and what had just happened outside. Dan flushed, embarrassed now, and turned back to the stove.

"I didn't even realize I was doing those things." He tossed a second tortilla in the pan, more for something to do than anything else. "I'm sorry."

"I know. I didn't think you were doing anything to be a jerk. But I thought we should talk about it before things got ... annoying."

"No, I'm glad you brought it up. The last thing I want is to annoy you."

"Are you annoyed now?"

"No, just ... feeling dumb, I guess." With a sigh, he slid the second tortilla out, and set the pan on a back burner. "It's been so long since I've had a serious relationship, I guess I overcompensated. I mean, I know what I'm like. I know I like to take care of people. It's just hard sometimes to find that line."

"I know." Anthony approached, curling his fingers around Dan's belt. "But if you want to have a serious relationship, you can find other ways to take care of me, if it makes you happy. And I don't think you're dumb. I think you're sweet."

Dan snorted, but let himself be pulled into Anthony's arms. "Isn't sweet usually the kiss of death?"

"Nah. I like sweet guys. Especially when said sweet guys like me back."

"This one is also trying to feed you, you know. You still haven't told me what you want on your burrito." He looped his arms over Anthony's shoulders, leaning in to nibble along his jaw. "Or am I supposed to let you feed yourself, too? Because my mom would throw the fit of the century if she found out I wasn't treating my date right."

Anthony chuckled. "You can feed me. I like everything on my burrito." His hand drifted around Dan's body to find his ass. "Would you like me to go back to the living room and stop distracting you?"

Dan took one last, long, tongue-tingling lick up the side of Anthony's neck. "Only if you promise we can pick up at this point after we've eaten."

"I can guarantee it." With a final squeeze, Anthony stepped back. "I'll need the food to keep up my strength anyway."

"Then one burrito with the works coming up."

His heart was lighter as he turned back to the stove. Anthony had been right. It was better to bring this up

now, because the last thing Dan wanted was for something to fester and fuck things up later down the line. He already cared for Anthony more than he'd cared about anyone in a very long time. If the prospect of losing him now filled Dan with dread, what would it be like when he loved the man?

Because that was what he suspected would happen. There would be no *if* they fell in love.

It was going to be *when*.

And *when* felt like it would be sooner with every minute they spent together.

Chapter Five

Dan spent most of dinner listening to Anthony talk about his interviews. For all his nerves, he could tell Anthony was excited about the opportunity. His entire face lit up. He spoke more with his hands. He even startled Lucy once when he knocked over his empty beer bottle. Dan had reached automatically to pick it up for him when he caught himself halfway. Anthony could do it. More importantly, Anthony wanted to do it. Dan wouldn't take that liberty away from him.

It bugged him that he'd been so oblivious to what he was doing. He liked to think he was a little more self-aware than that, especially since he already knew what Anthony's feelings were on the subject. He'd watched Beatrice fuss over her son at dinner that first night, and he'd been a sounding board for Anthony at the game when he'd needed to vent about his mother. He should've known better.

To make it worse, some of the things he'd been doing he did out of habit with everybody. Chivalry, his mother had always called it. Brownnosing, according to his brothers. Dan knew Anthony didn't mean anything by it, but it was going to be tough curbing his natural instincts to step in. He would do it, of course. For Anthony. For a potential future. He'd done a lot more for people he didn't like half as much as he liked this man.

Anthony demanded to help clean up, and they stood together in the kitchen, Dan loading the dishwasher as Anthony rinsed everything off. "Do we need to take Lucy for a walk now or later?" Dan asked.

"That depends. Do you plan to keep me occupied for the rest of the night?"

"That was the hope." Taking the last bowl, he finished the load and closed the door. The machine hummed as he started it, but already, his focus was back on Anthony. Dan stepped into his personal space and pressed him to the edge of the counter. "I figured I was going to be trying to cheer you up or helping you celebrate, but either way, my plans always ended up in my bed at the end."

Anthony tilted his head back and kissed Dan's jaw. "Then I better take her out for a short walk now. Because once I get into your bed, I'm not going to want to leave."

With a sigh, Dan stepped back and gave Anthony room to walk away. He wanted to go out with them, but he didn't want to impose. Anthony might have sensed Dan's hesitation, because he added, "Do you want to come with me?"

His heart leapt, but he kept his voice even. "That's not going to screw up her routine?"

"No, I don't think she'll mind the company. You can even help." Anthony grinned. "Grab a baggie."

Dan pretended to groan in dismay, but did as he was told. When he emerged from the kitchen, Anthony crouched at Lucy's side, readying her for her walk.

The tightness in his throat returned. They looked so natural in his space. Like they belonged there. His apartment was going to seem very empty tomorrow when they left.

“Are you going to be okay borrowing one of my shirts for work tomorrow?”

Anthony chuckled. “Am I? I don’t know your size.”

“I just didn’t know if you wanted me to throw your stuff in the wash or if it was worth it finding something of mine that’s smaller. I usually have to get a large, but you’re not as broad as I am through the shoulders.” He paused at the door. “You can leave the shirt here as back-up for next time then.”

“It won’t be a big deal wearing something that might be a bit big. That’s one of the perks of working in radio. Besides, nobody there thought I could dress myself, even before the accident.”

Dan snorted in amusement. “Sometimes, I’m very glad I don’t have to worry about all that. One of the few perks of everyone wearing a uniform for work. Ready?”

“Yep.”

Anthony passed through the door Dan held open, Lucy walking close to his legs. Her eyes darted around, taking in her surroundings with obvious intelligence. You didn’t need to know much about dogs to know that Lucy was very smart, and very well cared for. Dan couldn’t imagine what it would be like to turn his wellbeing over to an animal like that, and to do so with the obvious trust Anthony had in Lucy.

The cool evening air welcomed them when they emerged, and as soon as Lucy led the way toward the dog path around the complex, Dan took Anthony’s free hand. They didn’t speak. There wasn’t any need to. Sharing their company was more than enough, and he ran his thumb along Anthony’s in rhythm with their steps.

When Anthony pulled up to let Lucy sniff around, Dan stepped closer, pressing into Anthony’s side. “Is it jumping the gun to offer you a drawer?” he said quietly. “I thought since we can only really get privacy here at my place...”

“No, I don’t think it’s jumping the gun. Well, maybe it is. But I don’t have any problems with jumping the gun. That’d be the most convenient way to deal with the fact we can’t just go back to my place.”

A weight lifted from his shoulders. “Well, we could, but something tells me your mom wouldn’t be as willing to get locked out of the bedroom as Lucy is.”

“She’d eventually let us go. Unfortunately, she’s a night owl and can talk deep into the early morning.” Anthony squeezed Dan’s fingers. “You don’t think you’ll get tired of always having me around?”

“I don’t see that happening any time soon, no.”

“Well, you haven’t had a chance to be annoyed by my bad habits, yet.”

Dan didn’t see that happening any time soon, either. Lucy did her business, and Dan cleaned up after her with the baggy. Anthony led her around a bit more for exercise, but he walked quickly, and it was clear he was as eager as Dan to get back to the apartment.

“There,” Anthony announced, once they trotted back up the stairs. “She’ll be good for the night.”

Silently, Dan prayed he was right. He rushed to get them inside, his hands fumbling uncharacteristically with

the keys, only to stand at the side as he waited for Anthony to unhook her harness. He fixated on the long fingers, how they had felt curled with his, how deceptive they were in their strength. They stroked over Lucy's yellow fur, soothing as much as Anthony's low voice. When Anthony finally straightened, Dan itched to grab him and demand he do the same to him.

He settled for coming up behind and molding over his back. Kissing along Anthony's shoulder, Dan ran his hands down the front of the man's thighs, then back up again to find his cock already hardening.

"Someone made a promise before dinner," he murmured.

"Yes, I seem to recall something like that." Anthony reached back to hold Dan's hip. "Oh, who am I kidding? I haven't stopped thinking about it."

Dan closed his eyes to focus for a moment on the salty tang of Anthony's skin. The muscles jumped beneath his lips, followed by a soft sigh.

"Do you want to lead the way?" He meant it in more ways than one. He hoped Anthony understood that.

Anthony nodded, and Dan didn't separate himself from his back. He stepped towards the hallway with confidence. Each step was measured, and he reached out with his free hand to meet the wall as soon as they left the living room. Trailing his fingers, he led Dan to the bedroom and right up to the edge of the bed.

As soon as he stopped, he spun around to face Dan and their mouths connected in a hungry kiss. Anthony devoured his mouth, kissing him like he had been starved of the contact. Dan responded in kind, happy to let Anthony control the tempo as their tongues wound around each other.

Four days with only the sound of his voice to hold him over. It amazed Dan that he'd lasted so long. Every sweep of Anthony's hands down his back sent another shiver through his veins, threatening Dan's equilibrium. Hell, Anthony did that, just by being in the same room. The more he got to know the man, the harder Dan fell.

There was only one solution to his weakening muscles.

Grasping Anthony's hips, Dan twisted to pull both of them onto the bed. They landed on their sides, and immediately, Anthony bent his leg to hook it behind Dan's. He yanked forward until their erections crushed against each other. Both of them promptly moaned.

"You better be fucking me tonight," Dan muttered against his mouth. "I'm tired of fantasizing about what it's going to feel like."

"You can stop fantasizing after tonight." Anthony clawed at Dan's shirt, pulling it free of his pants so he could touch bare skin. "Or at least, stop wondering what it'll feel like." His hands moved lower to cup Dan's ass. "God, I love your body."

Dan arched against him, digging his nails into Anthony's hips. "It's all yours. Anything you want." He'd never meant anything more. He'd crawl on his hands and knees in Lucy's harness right then if Anthony asked.

"You know what I said earlier about you helping me?" His fingers kneaded Dan's flesh through the denim. "This'll go faster if you help me get your pants off."

He didn't have to be told twice. He released Anthony's arms, working fervently at his fly. Yanking down the zipper, he slid his hands inside in order to slide the jeans down, to be stopped by Anthony beating him to the punch. Hard palms smoothed over his ass, and the metal teeth of the zipper cut into the base of Dan's aching

cock.

The cold bite calmed his racing nerves enough to work his pants down his legs. Without letting him go, Anthony pushed him back to the mattress, bending over him to fuse their mouths together once again. Dan kicked the jeans off the rest of the way. His hands had better things to do at the moment.

Dan fussed with Anthony's zipper while Anthony explored Dan's freshly exposed skin. His fingertips trailed up and down Dan's shaft. The gentle pressure was almost enough to tickle him, but he didn't try to squirm away or push for more. Anthony kept each caress light as his hand drifted over Dan's thighs and to his sac and then higher to the hard muscles of his stomach. He continued to kiss Dan, and his mouth provided a marked contrast to his fingers--hard instead of tickling, demanding instead of teasing. The combination was enough to make Dan heady and he fumbled more than usual with Anthony's fly.

The first touch of his fingertips along Anthony's cock made his entire body throb. Anthony groaned into his kisses, but none of them lessened. If anything, they grew even stronger, as if Dan's attention fortified his desires. It was no wonder he'd nailed his presentation. The man had a drive that matched Dan's own. People might be lulled into thinking Anthony was less because of his blindness, but Dan knew the truth. It only took a little bit of confidence for Anthony to take charge of a situation with everything he had. Sex was no different than his career, or his years playing sports.

Curling his hand around the long shaft, Dan squeezed in rhythm with his pounding pulse. "I don't know how you do it," he panted between kisses. "Being around you makes me lose control."

"I have the feeling you don't lose control often," Anthony murmured, his hand still moving, seeking out little sensitive spots that made Dan's muscles clench and tremble. There was one place on his inner thigh that stole Dan's breath every time Anthony caressed it, and his fingers returned to that area again and again. His other hand pushed at Dan's shirt until it was high around his chest and he dragged his mouth down to Dan's chest, nipping and licking at the skin.

Dan shook his head. "Not like this. Never like this, actually."

He cried out when Anthony caught the tip of one hard nipple between his teeth, fisting the blanket at his side at the same time he tightened his grip on Anthony's cock. His lungs started working again with the swipe of Anthony's warm tongue over the sensitive spot. Planting his heels on the edge of the bed, he spread his thighs, lifting his ass slightly to make it easier for Anthony to explore.

"You do the same thing to me." Anthony didn't lift his head, and it felt like he was engraving each word into Dan's chest. "Before the accident, when I used to fantasize about some hot guy, I'd always focus on his great ass or cock or something. But now I..." His tongue darted out, swiping across Dan's nipple again. "I spend all day thinking about how you taste." He bit into the sensitive skin, hard enough to pull another shout from Dan's throat. "And how you sound." He closed his fingers around Dan's erection. "How hot your cock feels when it's buried in my ass."

Though the air conditioner was going full blast, a light sheen of sweat already glistened on Dan's forehead. His skin felt thin and fragile, ready to combust at the slightest bit of friction. Muscles he didn't normally use trembled, and the hair at the back of his neck prickled to attention.

"I suppose this should be the point where I tell you I haven't been fucked in a while," Dan confessed. At the startled lift of Anthony's head, he let go of the blanket in favor touching the man's parted lips. "Nobody's got to me the way you do in ages."

"Then I'll make sure you're good and ready for me." Anthony kissed a line down Dan's body, regularly and freely taking detours to taste every bit of Dan's skin. Dan moaned with the contact, but he wasn't the only

one. Anthony made small sounds of satisfaction each time his mouth connected, and the sounds only got louder as he moved closer to Dan's groin. "How do you want it? On your back? On my back?"

"Honestly?" He flushed a little at what he was about to admit. He could honestly say he had never said it to another guy before. "I was kind of hoping you'd bend me over the edge of the bed and fuck me that way."

Anthony lifted his head long enough to smile. "I like that." He moved lower, dipping his head to nuzzle against Dan's cock. He licked patterns around the crown and up and down the shaft, until he reached the sac. "Let's see if you like this." He sucked Dan's balls into his mouth, his tongue winding around them.

Dan groaned in approval. "Not like. Love it." He spread his legs even wider, reaching down to stroke the side of Anthony's face. His hole was already clenching in anticipation. He didn't doubt Anthony's word; Anthony wouldn't do anything to make this unpleasant. But he strongly suspected that once Anthony was draped over his back, firmly seated inside Dan's ass, all bets would be off.

Anthony gently gnawed and sucked on Dan's balls, always knowing just how much Dan could take and when to ease off the pressure, his hand seeking out Dan's ass. At the first brush of contact, his body tightened, but Anthony didn't relent. Slowly, steadily, he pushed one finger, and then two, into Dan's channel, using his teeth and tongue as a distraction from the unfamiliar pressure.

He should've gotten the lube out. Dan knew it with the first intrusion. But they hadn't exactly been thinking with the right heads, and they couldn't stop now, not yet, not with the slow burn already starting to radiate through his groin. Later. When they got the condom. Right now, he wanted to savor each minute of excruciating stretching, fingers that felt bigger somehow, nails scraping across his inner walls.

"More," he said through gritted teeth. "Please."

Anthony responded by pumping his wrist, long, smooth strokes that prolonged the burn and made the base of his spine tingle. It didn't take long before Dan began to rock against Anthony's hand, trying to make him move faster, harder. Anthony moaned, the sound moving through Dan's balls until they ached.

He groaned in protest when Anthony finally tore his mouth away, but that protest was forgotten as soon as Anthony asked for the condoms.

"Top drawer of the nightstand. The lube's in there, too."

Before he could give further direction, Anthony was moving, around the edge of the bed and unerringly toward the furniture in question. Dan scrambled up, peeling away his shirt, and tried to ignore the pulsing inside his skin. He was half afraid he was going to shoot like a teenager as soon as Anthony got inside him. Hell, it might not even take that long. He grasped his balls and pulled as hard as he could tolerate, bracing against the sharp pain stabbing through his thighs.

Relief washed through him. There. That was better. Maybe he'd actually last two strokes now.

Anthony found a condom and tore the foil open with nimble fingers. "Give me a hand with this?"

Dan snickered and closed the distance between them. "I know you're only asking so I'll touch you. Because there isn't a man alive who can't find his cock in the dark."

"I guess it wouldn't do any good to deny it..." Anthony shivered as Dan's fingers brushed across his shaft. "I love any excuse that leads to you touching me." Dan unrolled the condom down his length, and Anthony shivered again. "Do you feel ready?"

“Hang on.” Grabbing the lube, Dan coated his fingers and reached around to slick his hole. He slipped in easily, but Anthony’s cock would be thicker--deliciously so. It nudged at his hip, and he abandoned touching himself in favor of coating the rubber instead.

Anthony wrapped his arm around Dan’s waist, pulling him closer. They stood, locked in a half-embrace, while Dan spread the lube with long strokes. He knew they wouldn’t stay that way for long--Anthony’s cock twitched and his breath came in quick pants.

“God ... it feels like it’s been forever since I’ve done this,” Anthony said, his voice muffled against Dan’s neck.

“So I guess that makes us even.” Though it wasn’t necessary, he reached lower and cupped Anthony’s balls. The whimper that came from Anthony made it more than worth it. “Let’s just promise each other we won’t take as long to do this again.”

He felt Anthony’s smile. “It’s a deal.” With another kiss on Dan’s neck, Anthony gently turned him to face the bed. Dan closed his eyes as Anthony ran the tip of his cock between his cheeks, brushing over his clenched hole, but never quite pressing against that muscle.

Dan buried his head in his bent arms, waiting for the first push, eager for the initial burn. The tender rest of Anthony’s hand in the small of his back, as well as the careful introduction of his cock, were relaxing, but Dan needed more, needed those moments to be over when the pain shot down the back of his thighs as the head penetrated the outer muscle. He bit his tongue when Anthony stopped. He unclenched, clenched, unclenched again, in tandem with his breathing.

Anthony chose the second exhalation to press his weight forward.

His first thought was, *I should’ve used more lube*. He gritted his teeth, grunting against the ache, but the moment the tip pushed past the tight ring, everything eased. The fire smoothed out into warmth engulfing his lower half, and muscles in his shoulders loosened. He nearly jumped when Anthony reached under his hip to grasp his cock, and the long moan that escaped him matched the rest of Anthony’s slide into his ass.

Anthony moved his hips shallowly, as if testing their position and Dan’s reaction. The small movements didn’t bother Dan--he was grateful for the chance to adjust to Anthony’s size. He felt thicker than Dan had expected, and each short thrust just afforded Dan more time to learn every inch of Anthony’s body. After what might have been several minutes, Anthony began a new rhythm. Longer. Slower. He almost left Dan’s ass completely before pushing forward again. As he found the tempo he liked, he leaned forward, his chest pressing against Dan’s back, his fingers curling into the bed beside Dan’s hand, his other palm skimming over Dan’s cock.

“Oh, God, yeah...” That was what he’d wanted. That weight. The pressure. The heat sinking into his bare skin. Dan turned his head, seeking out Anthony’s mouth. He caught the corner, then the lower lip, sighing when they finally sealed together and shared what little breath they had left.

Dan was relieved he had the bed in front of him and Anthony behind him, because his knees grew weaker by the second, and his muscles trembled from the tension. When Anthony broke away, his breath was hot and loud in Dan’s ear, his mouth hungry as he pressed hard kisses to Dan’s jaw and throat. Dan responded in kind, tasting every bit of Anthony’s skin that he could reach until their mouths met once again.

His hand skidded along the blanket to find Anthony’s, and he knotted their fingers together, squeezing at the same time he clenched around the cock in his ass. The tandem sensations made Anthony jerk. It disrupted their kisses, but Dan needed to ease the pressure on his neck for a moment anyway.

"I might not be fantasizing anymore," he panted, "but I'm sure as hell going to be daydreaming about this again."

"Keep talking," Anthony gasped. "I can't see you. I at least want to hear you."

"You can feel me, too, though." To prove his point, Dan reached back and gripped Anthony's hip, glorying in the flex of the tight muscle. "Otherwise, one of us is doing something seriously wrong."

"I can feel you." He moved enough to press his lips to Dan's nape, the kiss ending with a slight nip of teeth. "I've never felt anything like you."

Dan echoed the sentiment in between groans. For all of Anthony's weight, for all of the heat wrapped around him, he felt like he was going to fly apart. Each drive into his ass elicited more encouragement, the words tumbling from his lips as readily as the fire racing through his veins, and he reached beneath him, folding his fingers over Anthony's to pull harder at his cock.

Anthony obliged him by tightening his grip, his fingers becoming hard bands around Dan's shaft. His hips snapped into a faster tempo, quickening even as the strokes became shallower. It seemed like Anthony didn't want to lose an inch between them, and Dan didn't blame him. He followed Anthony, pushing back each time he pulled away from Dan's tense body. Despite that, they moved together perfectly. Dan couldn't remember the last time he had been so in synch with another person.

The throb began in his thighs. A burn suffused his flesh, searing his skin, while sweat dripped down his balls. Anthony mouthed the back of his neck, and all Dan could do was beg for more. More of his kisses, more of his cock, more of everything. Even then, he doubted it would be enough. It might not ever be enough. He might have to tie Anthony to his bed and refuse to let him go, just to slake even a fraction of his desire.

Anthony moaned, the sound vibrating against Dan's skin. It seemed to vibrate through him, prompting a matching sound from his throat. Anthony began moving a bit more erratically, as though he couldn't hold himself steady. He alternated with long strokes, and short, hard thrusts, and everything else in between, but it didn't matter. Everything he did just stoked the fire already burning hot and bright, and the words he muttered further fanned the flames. "Fuck ... I'm not going to last, Dan."

"Then don't." He teetered on the brink himself. Digging his nails into Anthony's sweaty skin, he squeezed around the length inside him, crying out when Anthony did the same with his cock. "Just like that. God, fuck me just like that."

A fingernail scraped over his slit as Anthony jerked him off. He didn't know if Anthony was aware of it. He didn't really care. He just knew between that, and the pounding, and the sweat and taste and sound of the man above him, it was suddenly too much.

He exploded with a shout, Anthony's name spilling from his lips. The room blazed white hot as his head slammed back onto Anthony's shoulder, and his body screamed for mercy as his lungs refused to cooperate.

Anthony panted Dan's name, the sounds climbing higher and higher above them as he continued to pound into Dan's body. He clenched around Anthony's cock, his muscles flexing to hold Anthony's length, but that didn't slow the other man. Dan's throat and chest burned for oxygen, and he thought he could easily beg Anthony to never stop, and then beg him to please give him a chance to catch his breath. Anthony claimed Dan's lips, shouting one final time into his mouth before slamming his hips forward.

They remained locked like that for long seconds, seconds that erased any that came before, any that came after. When Anthony finally relaxed, melting over Dan's back, Dan twisted his arm in order to cup the back of the other man's head, slowing the kiss without letting him go.

“Now *that* was definitely worth losing control for,” he murmured.

“It was.” Anthony kissed him again before easing back and slipping out of Dan’s body. Dan fell on the bed, rolling on his side to watch Anthony remove the condom and knot it. His face creased with a frown, and Dan almost asked if he could help, but then the frown cleared and Anthony found the garbage bin on the other side of the nightstand. Dan reached out and took Anthony’s hand, guiding him to the bed. “Now I’m really worn out.”

“It’s a good thing we’re already in bed then.”

He slid back, allowing Anthony room to get comfortable. They ended up on their sides, Anthony in front of him, his arm firmly around Anthony’s waist. Pressing a kiss to Anthony’s damp neck, he burrowed as close as he could get and closed his eyes.

Sleep had never been so peaceful.

Chapter Six

“You in?”

Boyer’s question didn’t register until he prodded Dan’s elbow. Dan glanced up from where he was trying to fix the strap on his helmet, trying to recall what it was Boyer had been talking about.

“Am I in for what?”

“Maggie let me off the hook this weekend because the girls got invited to a sleepover Friday night. She’s going shopping on Saturday, so I’m taking the boat out to Woodward. Did you want to come along?”

Saturday. That was when Anthony returned from LA. Dan had wanted to drive him to the airport that morning, but it would’ve meant Anthony getting there obscenely early. So Anthony had spent the night in his own bed, and Beatrice had taken him instead, and Dan was left aching and lonely, going about his normal routine as if Anthony had never entered his life.

“I can’t,” he said. “Sorry.”

Boyer lounged in the seat opposite him, his gaze contemplative. “Got plans with that new guy?”

Turning back to his work, Dan nodded. His sexuality wasn’t a secret with his team, but it never really got talked about. Oh, sure, whenever there was a social gathering with partners, whoever he was dating at the time was always invited. That was as far as it usually went.

“He had to fly down to LA for work. I’m going to pick him up.”

“His dog’s a beaut.”

“Yeah, Lucy’s a sweetheart.”

“Does she get to fly with him, too? How does that work exactly?”

“Anthony had to take her in to the vet to get her certified okay. She just gets to sit at his feet, I think.”

“Hm. Interesting.”

Boyer seemed genuinely interested in the topic, but it was so out of character for him to pursue conversations

regarding the men Dan dated, Dan knew it wasn't as casual as it sounded. Confirmation came when Boyer didn't move from his chair, even though he'd finished speaking.

With a muttered curse, Dan tossed the helmet onto the table and glared at him. "Spit it out."

"What?"

"You know what. Something's bugging you. Something about Anthony, maybe?"

Boyer lifted a shoulder in a half shrug. "I don't have a problem with the guy."

"Then why the third degree?"

"It's not..." Boyer sighed and shook his head. "I told Maggie this was stupid."

"What's stupid?"

"Oh, Maggie's on a new kick. She thinks you're just dating this guy because you feel obligated to. She made me promise to talk to you about it." He stood and backed away. "So now we've talked, and I'm going to forget this whole conversation ever happened. I'll tell Maggie she's full of shit."

"Wait." Dan replayed Boyer's words in his head. "Why on earth would I feel obligated to date Anthony?"

"Because of the accident. And because he's blind."

"That makes no sense."

"You want to call Maggie and tell her that? I've spent all week trying to get her off my back about this."

"Why is she on your back in the first place?"

"Hell if I know. I told her about the guy, and she asked about how you two met, and next thing I know, she's playing Dr. Phil."

Dan couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I don't feel obligated to date Anthony. I like him. A lot."

Boyer motioned for a timeout. "Didn't ask for the details, you know. You're happy, that's all that matters."

With a shake of his head, Dan picked up his helmet again. "I don't get why Maggie's so worried. She's never poked her nose in before about the guys I date."

"Well, to be fair, you've never dated a guy like Anthony before."

"A guy like Anthony? You mean, a guy who's smart, and funny, and I have a blast with, even when we're just hanging out? You're right. I haven't dated too many guys like that yet."

"You know that's not what I meant."

Dan dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "We talked about the blind thing, and it's not an issue. Make sure you tell Maggie."

Boyer returned to his chair and straddled it. "What about the fact that we're the ones who pulled him out of the wreck? You know you've got a thing for kicked puppies, Dan. You want to save the world, and you've got some grandiose idea you can do it one person at a time."

“Anthony doesn’t need saving.”

“I know that, and I’ll bet he knows that. The question is, do you?”

It was on the tip of his tongue to tell Boyer where he could shove his third degree when the alarm pealed throughout the station. Immediately, the retort vanished, replaced by instinct and years of training. He and Boyer moved smoothly as they jogged over to the lockers, and Dan focused on getting his gear on rather than Anthony and what dating him meant. It was easy enough until he struggled with his helmet, and the reminder of the conversation crashed back.

He would’ve been lying if he didn’t admit the thought had crossed his mind that night Anthony had gently asked him to back off a little bit. Everything had worked itself out in the end, but more than once, he’d caught himself doing something the split second before Anthony would have known about it. It wasn’t until the following day that he’d sat down and evaluated just what dating Anthony meant.

First and foremost, he had a friend. They had a lot in common without being identical twins. They could joke about their differences and the other didn’t take offense. They could just hang out like he’d told Boyer, and while it eventually devolved into something physical, Dan was just as content to curl up on the couch together.

Then there was the sex. The attraction between them was undeniable. Dan had wondered a little how Anthony could be attracted to him without knowing what he looked like, but those questions were dispelled the first time he buried his nose in Anthony’s neck and breathed him in. He’d gotten hard in seconds.

He wasn’t trying to save Anthony. If he’d learned anything in the short time they’d known each other, it was how self-sufficient Anthony was. He was too greedy to make this thing between them work to mess it up now.

The truck raced through traffic, the sirens ringing to clear the way. In an effort to refocus, Dan concentrated on the details they’d been given. Office building. Three floors. Faulty electric had started a fire in an unused storage room on the ground level. Eight different companies conducted business in the building, which could mean a shitload of people inside. Hopefully, they were all one-or two-man operations and out to lunch when the call had come in.

His hopes fell when the smoke hit his nose while they were still blocks away from the site.

“How many other units got called in?”

Boyer shook his head. “They didn’t say. I’ll bet at least a half dozen, if not more.”

Ambulances screeched alongside them, racing them to their goal. More adrenaline flowed through Dan’s veins with every block. It had been several weeks since their last major blaze. Most of their calls were minor or accident related. This had all the earmarks of a day-long job.

He pulled the guard down over his face when he saw the fire a block away. The helmet rocked slightly on his head, and he yanked at the strap again, trying to secure it to keep it in place.

There wasn’t time to think as Boyer pulled to a stop. Everything happened automatically, each man spilling from his position to work in synchronous attention to getting the job done. As fast as they’d been, though, they were the second unit to arrive. The first had split up--half taping back the scene to keep onlookers from getting too close, the others working at the hydrants. One had already started wrapping rescue blankets around the people still straggling out of the burning building.

Dan scanned the scene. Flames licked along the outer walls, engulfing the front entrance. They were

concentrated on the side closest to them, and though the fire hadn't spread to the third floor yet, that was only a matter of time. A slight breeze from the bay kept fanning it further away. Smoke already curled into the branches of the eucalyptus trees lining the road.

"Sometimes, I really hate those trees," he muttered.

A burly firefighter from Millbrae approached. "There's more people inside. We don't have numbers, but I've got two men in there already, working to get them out."

Boyer appeared at Dan's side. "We'll go in," he volunteered.

"There's a side door that's safe," the other firefighter said, gesturing toward the far end of the building. "The front stairs are blocked, but there's another set in the rear which are still navigable. By the time you find the others, we'll have the ladders in place."

With matching nods, Dan and Boyer headed off, circumventing the crowds to get to their destination. The heat grew stifling the closer they got, but it was nothing new, nothing he couldn't manage, nothing he hadn't managed a hundred times before. His focus stayed on the door that would lead him inside, and he held back as Boyer tested it before pushing it open.

The power was out, and smoke clogged the far end of the hallway. It rushed toward them with the fresh influx of air, but they were too far away for it to be anything more than billow. Emergency lighting illuminated the stairwell several yards ahead of them, sickly red against the gray and darkness. Dan kept his head down. Work fast, work hard, be thorough. That was the best way to get the job done.

They ran into one of the other team helping an older woman down the stairs, while a man in an ill-fitting suit aided a second one.

"My partner's on three," he said. "But I heard shouts on two when we went by the door."

"Got it."

Dan and Boyer stood out of the way to let them pass, then rushed to the second floor landing. The door was hot to the touch, and smoke curled from beneath it, showing the movement of air on the other side. Both men stepped back as Dan grasped the handle. They had worked so long together, it was a familiar dance.

More darkness. The shouts the other firefighter had reported drifted from their left. Dan led the way, stumbling only when his helmet slipped down over his eyes.

"Damn it!" He stopped and fixed it straight again. When he lifted his head, Boyer was frowning at him.

"Maybe you should go man the hose. I'll take care of this."

"This needs two of us."

"So send Alequin in."

"We could have these people out of here by then." Dan started moving toward the shouts. "Stop arguing and let's do it."

Boyer stopped protesting, but Dan knew it was only temporary. Besides, Boyer was right. If Dan's helmet was faulty, he shouldn't be in the thick of things. Better to be outside where the air was clearer and let someone else who didn't have defective gear deal with the life and death stuff.

But Dan wouldn't turn back now. This was what he did. This was what he would always do.

A resounding crash made the floor vibrate, momentarily stunning both men into stopping. Another scream pierced the air, but it was quickly drowned out by the roar of flames, and a fresh wave of heat surged through the hall.

Part of the building had already collapsed. Most likely on people.

Dan and Boyer raced forward.

He knew as soon as he saw the dented door where the problem was. He had no idea how it had happened, but between the unequal pressure and the door jammed against its hinges, the occupants inside couldn't get out. No wonder they were panicked.

Boyer had his radio off the clip before Dan had even tested the door's heat.

"We've got an office with at least two or three people inside, unable to get out. Suite 208. Front of the building, near the entrance. There windows on your side?" The radio squawked a response Dan only half-caught. "We'll work on the door from our side, too. Out."

Dan was the one with the fire axe, but Boyer was the one who held his hand out expectantly for it. For a moment, Dan wanted to argue again. He was stronger, damn it. He'd get through faster. But the grim set of Boyer's jaw said he wasn't going to take any shit. Dan should've paid better attention to his helmet, or grabbed another one instead. They needed the surest sight as well as strong hands to get this door open.

He passed it over, moving grudgingly to the side. Boyer shouted to the occupants within to stand back, then gripped the long handle and swung.

The door creaked. Boyer swung again.

Three blows later, the lock snapped. On the fourth, the uppermost hinge broke and Boyer turned the axe around to use it to batter at the door instead.

Dan waited, his heart pounding in his ears. The shouts were louder. The encroaching heat made it feel like the hair was singeing on the back of his neck, even beneath his heavy jacket. Doing his best to ignore the urge to rub at the crawling sensations, he reached up to adjust his helmet one more time.

He saw the ceiling collapsing over the door too late to do anything to stop it.

Chapter Seven

By the time Anthony returned to his hotel room, he just wanted to collapse on the bed and sleep until he needed to be at the airport again. His flight to Los Angeles had been at seven that morning, and he barely slept at all the night before. He had been too busy rehearsing the entire trip in his mind over and over. The route Beatrice would take to get him to SFO. The best way to find his way out of LAX and to a cab. Making his way from the hotel to the stadium. The whole process had cycled through his brain again and again.

He had been too tense to sleep on the plane. He knew he had time for a brief nap before he needed to get to the stadium, but he passed that up in favor of giving himself extra time to get lost and found again. Each successful step of the journey alleviated some of the tension, but he never really relaxed. His voice shook during the interview. He almost forgot a whole series of questions. Time slowed until it crawled across his nerves, but he made it through. He asked every question. He laughed and joked like he was perfectly at ease. He didn't let his nerves overtake him until he was in the privacy of his own room.

Anthony fumbled around until he found the remote, then flipped through the channels until he found a station with the local news. He just liked the company of the voices. Lucy settled on the floor at his feet--he heard her familiar sigh as she closed her eyes for a nap--and he searched for the phone. He had forgotten to request a menu in Braille when he checked in, but now he didn't really care for a menu. He just wanted food--he was too hungry and tired to be picky.

"Hi, can you transfer me to room service?"

"Certainly, Mr. Saunders. Can I help you with anything else?"

"No, that'll be it for now. Thanks."

And in other news today, a major fire in the Bay Area has claimed the lives of five people, including one area firefighter.

"Room service."

"Um ... wait ... please..."

The fire started on the first floor of an office building in Burlingame around lunch this morning and quickly spread.

"Sir?"

"I ... I'm not..." Anthony dropped the phone, though he didn't know if it hit the cradle.

Authorities are not releasing the names at this time. The fire was brought under control around three, before it could spread to any other building.

Anthony's first instinct was to call Dan, but he could be at the hospital. Or he could be busy. Or he could be...

Anthony didn't want to risk Dan not answering the phone. He always knew that chance existed. He knew as long as Dan ran into burning buildings, or pulled people out of mangled cars on the freeway, that he would be at risk. It was something Anthony thought he had come to terms with. But now he knew it wasn't something one could ever come to terms with. Nobody could ever be sanguine about the possibility of losing a lover. Especially when he had the potential to be more--the potential to be everything.

He paused, cradling the cell phone in his fingers, losing precious seconds. If he called and learned the worst possible news, there would be no way around his devastation. He would give up his eyes all over again, and throw in his ears and hands, for Dan to be safe. He would make that deal without a second thought.

"Don't be overdramatic. Chances are, he's fine. He's good at what he does. So just calm down and make the call."

He had already programmed his phone with Dan's number--it was three on the speed dial. But he opted to call Beatrice, instead. The thought of the endlessly ringing telephone was still too much to face, even after his pep talk.

The phone only rang once before Beatrice answered. "Oh, Anthony. I was just about to call you."

"Is it ... I just heard on the news about the fire."

"I know. It was awful. I called the dispatcher as soon as I heard about it."

“Did Dan ... who was hurt?”

“Dan was sent to the hospital for minor burns. But when I called the hospital to speak to him, he had already checked himself out. He didn’t answer his phone, though.”

“Who did they lose?”

“Nobody would tell me. I don’t think they’re releasing the name to anybody until the family is contacted.”

Anthony sighed. Ultimately, it didn’t matter the name. The result would be the same--Dan would be devastated to lose any of his men. They were his family.

“I’m coming home.”

“What? Right now?”

“Yes. I’m going to LAX right now. I’m sure I’ll be able to get a plane tonight.”

“Do you want me to call the airline?”

“No, I’ve got it.”

“Call me and let me know when you land. I’ll come get you.”

“Thanks, Mom, but I think I’m just going to take a cab to Dan’s. I think he’s going to need my support.”

Anthony hoped he would be able to give Dan what he needed. Of course, if he got to the apartment only to learn that Dan needed some time to be alone, Anthony would give him that, too.

“You’re sure, Anthony?”

“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“I’ll call you if I find out anything else.”

“Thanks.”

“Be careful.”

“I will be. Love you.”

Anthony was glad he hadn’t had a chance to unpack anything. Fifteen minutes after calling his mother, he was on the way up the freeway to LAX.

The flight was a blur. Lucy fidgeted on the plane, too aware of his agitation to truly settle. More than once, the flight attendant stopped to make sure he was all right. Anthony had to struggle not to snap at her.

His stomach only started to unknot after the taxi dropped him off at Dan’s apartment complex. Adjusting his bag on his shoulder, he let Lucy lead the way, wincing when he bumped his hip on the railing. He counted the steps he knew it would take to get to Dan’s door. The fact that Lucy stopped at the same time he did told him he’d found it.

His knock reverberated up his arm. It was late. Too late? He’d made a ten o’clock flight, which meant it was now getting close to midnight. Dan might be asleep after his day’s ordeal. In fact, he probably was. High stress. Painkillers. He needed rest. This visit might be more of a nuisance than help.

The bolt slipped quietly from the inside. Fresh air and the scent of Dan's living room wafted out as the door opened.

"You're supposed to be in Los Angeles." Dan's voice was soft, but lacked the *go away* vibe Anthony had feared. That was a good sign.

"Yeah. I am. But I heard about the fire and ... I wanted to be with you. Mom told me that you were at the hospital earlier."

"I was." But that was all he volunteered. Instead, the door creaked, and he said, "Come on in."

He prompted Lucy to follow Dan and stepped into his much cooler apartment. He put his bags down near the door, happy to be relieved of that burden, and realized he didn't quite know what to do. Had he overstepped by rushing from Los Angeles to be at Dan's side?

"How are you? I mean ... you aren't seriously hurt, are you?"

"Just minor stuff. My gear protected me mostly. What did the reports say?"

Dan's voice was neutral--guarded even. For the first time since they started dating, Anthony had a hard time reading him. "The news said that there was a fire in an office building, and that five people died, including a fireman from the Burlingame department. Mom confirmed that it wasn't ... that you were being treated in the hospital, but that's all I could find out."

"Oh." The sofa cushions whispered from Dan's weight. "Can you ... sit with me? I'm a little tired."

Anthony followed the sound of Dan's voice, though he wasn't sure just how many steps separated him from the couch. His knee bumped against the arm, and he used that point of reference to guide him to Dan's side, letting Lucy sit at his feet. He automatically sought out Dan's hand, gently rubbing the tip of his thumb over Dan's fingers and knuckles, assuring himself that he didn't have any bandages or burns there.

"Do you ... want to tell me what happened?"

"We were the second unit on the scene, so focus was still on evac. Boyer and I went in to help get the people on the third floor out, but we got diverted to the second floor since it was closer to the source. More important to get them out first, right?" With a heavy sigh, he shifted, his legs stretched out in front of him as the nearest pressed more firmly against Anthony's. "Boyer took the lead because of my damn helmet. If I'd swapped it out like I should've, that would have been me in front when the ceiling came down. Boyer would be home with his wife and kids right now."

Anthony kept his voice even and low, even though the thought of Dan being the one under a falling ceiling made his gorge rise. The realization that the man who had lost his life was somebody Anthony knew--somebody he partly owed his own life to--increased the weight in his heart.

"I'm sorry." He itched to put his arm around Dan's shoulders and pull him close, but he had no idea where the burns were or how severe they were. "God, Dan, I'm so sorry."

"He was talking about going out on the boat on Saturday. He wanted me to go along." His body hitched. "I hate this part of the job."

Hoping that he wasn't making the situation worse, Anthony gently pulled Dan into a half-embrace. He wished he had something to say. Something that would make all of this easier for Dan, but he didn't think any words would be the right ones.

"I know. But you shouldn't ... you shouldn't blame yourself for what happened. It wasn't your fault."

Dan didn't speak. The hand Anthony held slipped out of his grasp to rest lightly on his thigh, but he leaned more heavily into his side. Anthony turned to brush a kiss across his head. Instead of the soft curls or warm skin he expected, though, his lips grazed over the edge of a gauzy bandage.

"My hair got singed," Dan said without prompting. "The nurses had to buzz it all off to get the tape to stick."

"Oh." For a brief second, he was disappointed at the loss of Dan's thick, soft hair. But that was quickly replaced by horror at the implications. How close had Dan actually been to being buried alive in burning rubble? "I'm so happy you're safe." Anthony tenderly skimmed his fingers over Dan's head, seeking the edges of the bandage. "I was so scared ... right up until you opened the door, I was scared."

"If it freaks you out, I'll understand if you want to go. I know what I do ... I don't want you to be scared."

"I don't want to go. I didn't race out of LA so I could come here and tell you we're finished."

"Good." His head bent. The hard plane of his forehead rested on Anthony's shoulder. "I'm not sure what I'd do if you left."

"I'm not going to leave." Anthony kissed the top of Dan's head, his hair short and fuzzy against Anthony's lips. "When I heard the news ... all I could think about was how much I didn't want to lose you. It's not that I didn't realize the dangers of your job, it's just ... I didn't realize how much I need you."

"I wanted to call you, but I didn't want to screw up your interview." Dan took a deep shuddering breath. "Did it go well?"

"It went well." Anthony didn't want to talk about his interview, but if that's what Dan wanted, then he'd do it. "I was really nervous at first, but I held it together. I think the GM was pleasantly surprised that I had real questions to ask, and wasn't just interested in talking about stupid shit. And I didn't have any trouble traveling, either."

"Good." Dan relaxed slightly, shifting to sit more upright again. "Good. I'm glad. I knew you could do it."

"I know. And that's why I was able to get through it." Anthony couldn't keep his hands to himself, though he was still very careful about how he touched Dan. "Can you show me where you're hurt?"

Strong fingers curled around his wrist, guiding his hand upward. "The worst of it's here on my neck." Anthony traced the tightly taped edges of the bandages along his bare shoulder and behind his ear. "There's splotches on my head but those were pretty superficial. And one bad graze on my left arm near my elbow. One of the beams scraped down my arm when it fell."

Anthony rarely bemoaned his lack of sight--he had made his peace with it and it wouldn't do any good to wish for something that could never be. But he wished he could see Dan's face. He wished he could see just what Dan had experienced, and was still going through.

"Did you check yourself out of the hospital because they said you could go home, or because you didn't want to be there anymore?"

Dan paused. "Does it matter? I'm where I want to be, and I'm fine, and better yet, I've got you here now." The sudden tug forward, pulling Anthony against Dan's body, came immediately with a tight wrap of his arms around Anthony's back. His face buried in Anthony's neck, but he didn't kiss Anthony, or do anything but breathe. "God, I'm so glad you came. I don't ... I've never been so close to it before. How am I ever going to

face Maggie? She's going to hate me."

"Maggie's not going to hate you." He had never met the woman, but Anthony still felt confident that he was right. "Her husband is a hero, but she knew the risks." Anthony smoothed his palms up and down Dan's back, hoping the simple contact would soothe the tense muscles. "If I were her, I'd be proud of his bravery, and yours, too."

Little by little, some of the knots came undone, Dan's body weighing heavier against Anthony's. Dan pressed a soft kiss to his shoulder here, touched the small of his back there, but otherwise, he didn't move, didn't change from that pose both of them seemed to need.

"That was another reason why I left the hospital," Dan said quietly. "Someone told me she'd shown up. I couldn't ... I wasn't ready to see her."

"You don't have to see her until you're ready. There's nothing wrong with needing a bit of time." He didn't know just how much time Dan could reasonably expect to get, but he knew that it was more than just a few hours.

"I'm off for the next week." As if that was the time Anthony was talking about. "Boyer's funeral is probably going to be Monday or Tuesday. Would you ... go with me?"

"Of course, I'll go with you." Anthony hooked his finger beneath Dan's chin and held him as he tilted his head. He skimmed over Dan's cheek and mouth, their breath mingling. "I'll do anything I can for you."

A sound he'd never heard from Dan before choked its way out of his throat. His fingers dug into Anthony's back, painful but sure. Every muscle pressed to Anthony quivered.

"I don't want to think about it anymore," he confessed in a hot whisper. "I just want to be able to enjoy what I have, how lucky I am right now."

Anthony understood that. He understood survivor's guilt. And he understood that sometimes it was important to remember that you were still alive, and that was nothing to be sorry for. He pressed his mouth to Dan's, sighing softly when Dan parted his lips and allowed Anthony to slip his tongue inside.

The kiss was sweet, almost chaste, mouth clinging to mouth as Dan clung to him. They moved as if they had all the time in the world, neither rushing to do more than softly explore the other's tongue. Anthony slid his hand over the heated skin to cup the back of Dan's head. He'd show Dan that he wasn't alone, that he didn't have to berate himself for not getting killed, that all that mattered in that moment was the two of them, there on the couch.

The hard tips of Dan's fingers eased, but they trembled slightly as they slipped beneath Anthony's shirt. He touched each knob of Anthony's spine, charting the landscape of his body as if he'd never done so before. The tenderness was new. Dan had been careful more than once before during sex, but this felt like something else. It was delicate and almost tentative, a plea for mercy rather than a cry for more. It begged to be cherished. Anthony had little problem complying.

Anthony shifted on the couch, moving to lean back against the arm. Once situated, he pulled Dan on top of him, so they were both stretched across its length. Anthony never broke from Dan's mouth, but he didn't try to deepen the kiss, either. He was happy to keep it light, to let Dan merely taste his mouth and trace his lips with the tip of his tongue. But their new position freed his hands more, and he used that freedom to map Dan's smooth back.

"Tell me you're staying."

“I’m staying. How long do you want me to?”

“As long as you’ll let me keep you.”

“That sounds good to me.”

Each touch was light, almost questioning, and Anthony slipped his fingertips beneath the waistband of Dan’s pants, seeking even more of his heated skin. He didn’t explore too far, though. There would be more time for that later. At that moment, Anthony just wanted to reacquaint himself with every inch of Dan’s body, remind himself that Dan was still there, remind Dan that he wasn’t alone.

Dan hadn’t been hard when he’d stretched atop Anthony, but with each passing second, each lingering caress, his cock stiffened against Anthony’s hip. They rocked gently against each other, stoking the fragile fire building inside them. For as needy as Dan was, Anthony matched it. The separation had been necessary if only to show him how much he treasured their time together.

Coiling an arm around the top of Anthony’s head, Dan lifted away from his mouth. His breath fanned over Anthony’s face, but it was the light trail of his fingers along Anthony’s chest that brought goose bumps to his skin. When Anthony shivered, Dan ran the broad of his thumb over the nipple, as if trying to evoke another tremor.

“Thank you.” Dan dropped a kiss to Anthony’s chin. “I don’t know how I would’ve been tonight on my own.”

“You’re very welcome.” Anthony arched as Dan’s thumb swiped over his nipple again. “I’m glad I didn’t wait until tomorrow to come back. I was a little worried you’d want to be alone and I’d be intruding.”

“Never.” His lips returned, grazing over Anthony’s. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Anthony thought that should have been his line. Without Dan, he wouldn’t have survived the accident. Without Dan, he wouldn’t have had the courage to try for bigger and better things at the radio station. He didn’t think he had done even a tenth as much for Dan, but he wanted to have the chance.

He reached between their bodies and sought out Dan’s zipper, fumbling with it until he could push his fingers into Dan’s pants and caress his hard shaft. Dan shuddered at the contact, his hips driving forward, pushing hard against Anthony.

He barely caught his breath before Dan sealed their mouths together again. This time, the kisses went deeper, edged with hunger that hadn’t been there before. Dan abandoned his nipple, scratching a path lower to find Anthony’s cock. He didn’t bother undoing the fly. He simply molded his hand over the length and squeezed with the same strength he met Anthony’s touches.

By the time they broke apart, Anthony’s breath was gone and his heart was hammering. He tried to imagine Dan’s face--piecing together what he knew from touching him and from the descriptions Dan gave him. His lips would be swollen, and maybe his eyes would be bloodshot and heavy-lidded. Their mouths met again with even more force, and he pushed his hand past Dan’s boxers, all five fingers curling around his smooth length.

“Tell me...” Anthony gasped against Dan’s lips. “What do you want?”

“You,” came the unequivocal answer. “Inside me. In bed.”

Anthony smiled. “You’re going to have to move, then.”

Dan scrambled quickly off, their knees knocking, breaking the contact they had on each other's cocks. He grabbed Anthony's hand and helped him up, but his lack of grace vanished as he slid his arm around Anthony's back and tugged him close to his side.

"How are you at finding your way around here on your own?"

"Oh, I'm fine at finding my way. But I'd rather keep a hold on you."

He could always tell when they stepped into the bedroom. It smelled different, muskier like Dan's deodorant and body wash. The air wrapped around him as close as Dan's arms, welcoming him in even if it wasn't his own. Sometimes, he felt like it was. Like it would be simple to ensconce himself into Dan's life and never leave. But he kept those thoughts private. As much Dan might want him around now, there was no telling what the future might bring.

Dan stopped with the edge of the bed nudging their legs. His hands went to Anthony's shirt buttons, but his mouth was busy along Anthony's neck, nibbling at new patches of skin as he slowly exposed the rest of him.

Anthony dropped his head back, his fingers curling with the desire to be buried in Dan's hair. Just how bad were the burns on his head? He suspected Dan would downplay it all, so he focused his attention on Dan's pants, pushing them over his hips and down his legs. Despite the heat of Dan's mouth, each caress sent chills down Anthony's back, and his thighs and groin tightened.

Though Dan stepped obediently out of his pants, he didn't stop working at Anthony's clothes. The shirt fell away, and his lips and tongue drifted lower, swirling around a nipple over and over again until it was tight and sensitive. Then came his pants, and with it, Dan fell to his knees. Hot breath spilled over Anthony's cock, but Dan focused elsewhere, tracing the line of his pelvis with the tip of his tongue.

Anthony jerked when he felt something like stubble running alongside his shaft.

"I guess getting my hair cut isn't all bad," Dan teased, his tone lighter than it had been since Anthony first walked through the door.

"No, definitely not all bad," Anthony agreed, his voice climbing as Dan did it again. He soothed the shaft with the flat of his tongue, and Anthony's knees felt weak. He loved Dan's mouth, and everything Dan did with it. "But what are you doing down there?"

"Just showing you how much I missed you." His mouth disappeared, only to reappear at Anthony's balls, sucking them past his lips. He rolled them against his tongue for a moment, grasping Anthony's thighs when they started to quiver. He chuckled when he let Anthony go. "I love how sensitive you are to that."

Anthony gripped Dan's upper arms and pulled him to his feet. It wasn't that he didn't want to feel Dan's mouth--he very much did--but Dan's earlier words still echoed in his head. *You. Inside me. In bed.* He needed to be that close to his lover, needed to feel Dan tight and hot around him, holding him, until there was simply nothing else in Anthony's world except his body.

Dan's separation left Anthony cold, but their fingers remained tangled, Dan's tugging at his until they were both on the bed. Anthony rested on his knuckles, all too aware of the long, solid body beneath his, and he shifted until their chests touched, their mouths teasing the other with soft, nipping kisses. Their cocks aligned, the tips catching on the beads of pre-come seeping from the slits. Dan parted his thighs, but rather than brace his heels against the bed like he had before, he wrapped his legs around Anthony's hips.

Anthony touched his brow to Dan's as he reached between their bodies to wrap his hand around both cocks. Dan responded by holding Anthony even closer with his strong legs. "You keep holding me like this, and I'm

not going to be able to get the condom.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t have grabbed my cock like that then.” But he relaxed his legs, allowing Anthony just enough room to stretch to the side, feeling around for the nightstand drawer. “Not that this is me saying we shouldn’t use one tonight, but ... we’re both clean, and if you wanted to make us exclusive, maybe some time down the road...”

Anthony paused, still empty-handed. “I’m ready to make us exclusive right now. Hell, I’ve been exclusive since our first date.”

“So have I. I just thought ... we haven’t said anything about it. I mean, we’ve talked about you having a drawer and all, but...” Dan molded against him as he followed Anthony’s arm to grab the box of condoms. “If I figured anything out today, it’s that I need to grab onto happiness where I can. And you make me happy.”

Anthony still didn’t move. He couldn’t--the richness and emotion in Dan’s voice had him frozen. “You make me happy, too. You always have.”

“Happy enough to move in?”

This didn’t seem like the right time to have such a major conversation. His cock was straining for Dan’s warmth, and they had both had one hell of a scare. Neither one of them could be expected to think clearly. Anthony understood all of that, but a different, calmer situation wouldn’t have changed his answer.

“Yes. That happy.”

Dan sighed as if he’d been terrified of the response and pulled Anthony back into a more comfortable position. The box he held rustled, followed by a soft thud off to his left.

“Then I guess this makes this our bed now.” The foil tore, and Anthony groaned as Dan grasped his cock. “I almost said that earlier. I’ve been thinking of it as ours for a while.”

“I haven’t ... but only because I didn’t want to be presumptuous...” Anthony pushed his hips forward as Dan slid the condom down his length. “Do you need me to ... get you ready?”

“Please.”

The soft entreaty drove him sideways, this time rooting for the lube. Dan maintained the constant strokes up and down his back, sometimes tickling across his ass, always warming the flesh he touched. He continued even when Anthony drew back, his fingers slick and probing for Dan’s entrance.

“Oh, yeah...” The exhalation brought Dan’s heels to rest on Anthony’s ass. Anthony conjured the image of what Dan must look like--spread and open and hungry for Anthony’s touch--and almost forgot what he was doing.

He started with two fingers, pushing them into Dan’s passage until they were buried to the third knuckle. He kissed everywhere he could reach, his mouth hungry for the taste of Dan’s skin. There was still the faint smell of smoke, and Anthony suspected there always would be. He didn’t mind that reminder, as long as Dan flexed and moaned beneath him, rising off the bed to meet each thrust of Anthony’s hand.

Several moments passed before Anthony added a third finger, twisting his wrist to help ease the entrance. Dan began to writhe beneath him, sharp moans echoing around them each time Anthony nudged his prostate.

“Please,” Dan repeated, though it wasn’t a quiet approval anymore. This was desire, pure and simple. Tight,

hot, hungry desire threatening to suck him in with each stroke into Dan's channel. His hands clutched at Anthony's arms, and for the first time, Anthony felt the brush of the bandage near his elbow. Another reminder of how close they'd come to losing each other today.

Anthony had no need to hear Dan plead with him a second time. Especially since he had the same desire coursing through him. He pulled his hand free to grip the base of his cock and Dan's fingers covered his, guiding him until the head pushed into Dan's stretched hole. Anthony dropped forward on one hand, grateful Dan was still holding him, pulling him until he was fully sheathed, and they were locked together.

Dan cupped his face, holding him still as he brushed kisses across his cheeks, his chin, his mouth, his eyes. "That's more like it."

And it was. Heat pulsed through him, blanketing every inch of his skin. Where Dan touched him burned even hotter, and Anthony chased after his lips every time they strayed too far away.

Anthony didn't want to move. He didn't want to do anything except kiss Dan and sigh each time tight muscles clenched around his shaft. Dan seemed to feel the same way--or at least sympathize with Anthony's wishes--because he didn't try to push for more. He would have taken a last minute flight across the country if it meant being with Dan in his bed--in *their* bed.

He rotated his hips, and Dan gasped in his ear. Another rotation had them both moving. They'd both crave more friction soon, Anthony knew, but at that moment, each slow circle was enough.

He didn't know when Dan started speaking, but soon, it wasn't just his breath filling Anthony's ear.

"Know what I'm looking forward to? Getting you whenever I want. Knowing I can roll over when I wake up from dreaming about you, and you're going to be right there." His tongue snaked along Anthony's jaw, his ass squeezing around Anthony's cock. "Better get used to waking up with my mouth on you. I plan on putting it everywhere I can."

Anthony warmed at the picture Dan painted with his soft promises, then added his own details. Curling around Dan's back when he fell asleep. Getting to know every inch of his body and his life. Being there when Dan came home from his long shift and falling into bed together.

The more Dan talked, the more Anthony felt right about his decisions. Finding him. Dating him. And now moving in with him. He didn't believe in fate, but he couldn't believe that something so good had come from an accident that had cost him so much. In his whole life, he had never expected being gifted with the sort of existence Dan was describing.

Gradually, his strokes lengthened. The increased contact usually made him feel tighter, more powerful, but not tonight. These liberated him, leaving him light and dizzy with only Dan's arms and legs to keep him grounded. The added friction of Dan's cock rubbing against his belly heightened the sensations, and he rained kisses along the uninjured side of Dan's neck.

"The best part about it will be just having you here," he heard Dan murmur. "I've never had someone in my life who filled as many corners of it as you do."

"Me, neither." Anthony wanted to say more, but he wasn't sure what. Emotions and unnamed needs flooded his chest and stopped at his throat. He couldn't talk, so he decided to show Dan with longer, more desperate kisses, and harder thrusts of his hips. His whole body slid along Dan's, absorbing his warmth, his familiar scent, and he even swallowed each moan and caught each sigh. His spine and arms and fingers tingled, and he was glad he didn't have to release Dan any time soon.

Small cries now punctuated Dan's words, breaking them up into smaller and smaller fragments until they became merely images resting between them, tangible only in their imaginations. Some of the cries provoked fiercer drives into Dan's body, while others calmed nerves he'd thought seared beyond repair. All of them managed to leave him trembling.

In spite of his traitorous body, though, Dan was the first one to start the frantic writhing. His hands clawed at Anthony's hips, their kisses including teeth as well as tongues. He whimpered, and he squeezed, and when his voice decided to work again, he begged Anthony for what he wanted.

"Don't stop ... fuck, don't ... oh, just like that ... God, please..."

"I won't ... I won't stop..." His stomach was slick where it slid against Dan's cock, the pre-come spreading across his skin and mingling with his sweat. He moved faster, keeping up a driving rhythm that didn't give Dan's ass or cock a second of relief. Dan's words devolved into moans and shouts and harsh cries every time Anthony shifted his angle. The base of his spine tingled, and he wanted to let go of what was left of his self-control, but before he did, he wanted to feel Dan's come coating his skin, and have Dan's shout of pleasure echoing in his ears.

Anthony didn't have to wait for long. Dan dug his nails into his back, gripping him so tightly that Anthony knew he'd have marks and bruises on his flesh. His cock jerked between their bodies, and he buried his face in Anthony's neck, and he felt more than heard Dan's moan of release. The vibrations were still moving through him when his own orgasm overtook him, burning through his flesh.

Dan's harsh pants coursed over him, his hands soothing over the skin he'd marked. "I want you to be presumptuous," he said. Anthony's uncooperative brain struggled a moment to remember how this connected with their earlier conversation. "You and me ... I think we're more alike than we realized. I don't think it's such a stretch we've both been having a lot of the same thoughts." He nuzzled Anthony's cheek, lips finding new spots to explore. "Like living together."

"Oh?" Despite his unbelievably long day, he didn't feel tired. Just sated and warm. "Would it be presumptuous if I said that I'm pretty sure I'm falling in love with you?"

"No." He felt the curve of Dan's smile. "You think I ask guys if I can keep them if I'm not falling in love with them myself?"

"I had hoped that you weren't in the habit of inviting any random guy to live with you."

"I've never invited *any* guy to live with me before."

Anthony smiled. "I've been the invitee a few times. Believe it or not, I always thought I valued my independence too much to live with another person. It feels different this time."

"Maybe Beatrice broke you of that," Dan teased.

Anthony laughed. "Maybe. You know she's going to be absolutely thrilled by this development. She'll probably just cut out all the formalities and move right to referring to you as her son."

"As long as she keeps cooking for me, she can call me whatever she wants." Dan groaned softly as he finally straightened his legs, but he continued to hold Anthony close atop him. "My dad's going to love you. As soon as he finds out you're in sports, you'll never be able to shake him."

"As long as he doesn't try to convince me of the greatness of Brett Favre, I'm sure we'll get along wonderfully."

They both chuckled, and Anthony relaxed even more, his limbs turning into something that felt like Jell-o. He didn't want to move. He wasn't just falling in love with Dan--he was already there. And had probably started falling when Dan had been only a distant voice in the dark, keeping him calm, keeping him sane even as fear clawed at him.

Dan made him feel at peace. Anthony knew that as long as he had that, he wouldn't need anything else.

The End

About the Author:

Jamie Craig is the sum of two wholes: erotica writers Pepper Espinoza and Vivien Dean. Pepper has been writing since she was a child, but began her professional writing career in 2005 and now writes full time as well as teaching writing composition at the local community college. A former resident of Los Angeles, she now lives in Utah. Vivien, the daughter of an author and sportswriter, also began writing at an early age, but eventually explored storytelling through acting and film production before coming back to prose. Vivien, her British husband and two children live in Northern California.

To learn more about Jamie Craig, please visit www.jamie-craig.com. Send an email to Jamie at jamie@jamie-craig.com

Meet Lsb Authors At The House Of Sin Lsbooks.Net

We invite you to visit Liquid Silver Books

LSbooks.com

for other exciting erotic romances.

2007: Terran Realm

Urban fantasy world: TerranRealm.com

Featured Series:

The Zodiac Series: 12 books, 24 stories and authors

Two hot stories for each sign, 12 signs

The Coven of the Wolf by Rae Morgan

Benevolent lusty witches keep evil forces at bay

Fallen: by Tiffany Aaron

Fallen angels in hot flight to redeem their wings

The Max Series by JB Skully

Meet Max, her not-absent dead husband, sexy detective Witt, his mother...

And many, many more!