



Family  
UNIT

Z.A. MAXFIELD

Loosely

# *Family Unit*

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## **Family Unit**

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## About this Title

**Genre:** LGBT Erotic Contemporary

A retired marine, Logan is methodical and conservative. Richard is a liberal pacifist who is pathologically afraid of guns. Yet the minute Logan sets eyes on Richard, his heart turns over like an old car engine and it isn't long before his motor is revved and Richard is in the driver's seat—even if it seems like each man is driving a different car.

Richard Hunter is parenting his grandson, and the kid—Nick—has had it rough. Richard vows nothing will stop him from creating a loving and stable home. Not even a tempting, red-hot relationship with a very attractive man. However, when Richard looks into Logan's blue eyes it's tough to stay focused.

It's never easy to become a family, what with a temperamental eight-year-old, disapproving outsiders, and outright extortion attempts. But when push comes to shove, both Logan and Richard are committed family men who want to make a loving home for a little boy who needs them. Together, they're planning to form a Family Unit, and they won't let anything stand in their way.

***Publisher's Note:*** *This book contains explicit sexual content, graphic language, and situations that some readers may find objectionable: Anal play/intercourse, male/male sexual practices.*

## Dedication

*To Mark C. for his kindness, and for all my readers who wanted a mature couple. Let's just say I believe no heart is safe from Cupid's arrows as long as it's still beating.*

## Chapter One

Then they came to the house on Highlander Avenue.

“*There's always one,*” Richard whispered ominously to Nick and the boys as they looked up at the house in awe. “One house with overgrown greenery, high hedges, and walled-off courtyards. A house where it seems like nobody lives, where it's *dark and spooky*. Where sometimes you see someone looking out the window, or maybe you catch a glimpse of someone as the draperies twitch closed out of the corner of your eye.”

“Rick,” Nick whispered, “that's Crazy Soldier Guy's house.”

“You know who lives here?” Richard met their eyes. The boys all nodded, although they seemed unwilling to move any closer.

“Crazy Soldier Guy lives here.” Nick's usual partner in fourth-grade crime, Terry Husted, seemed to shrink beneath his black velvet wizard's hat when he talked. “You know. The guy who drives the Jeep? Wears camo and a cowboy hat? He moved in last summer, but I think he's some sort of spy.”

“He never says anything unless he catches you doing something wrong,” Nick supplied.

One of the other boys was nodding. “Yeah. My brother was chasing a cat once? And Crazy Soldier Guy almost killed him!”

“How come?”

The kid—dressed in a black robe with a big scarlet and gold Gryffindor scarf—blushed. “I think he thought my brother was trying to hurt it.”

“I see,” said Richard. “In that case, I don't blame him for being angry.”

“My brother wasn't going to do anything! He just wanted to catch it.”

“Crazy Soldier Guy thinks he's in charge of the whole neighborhood,” volunteered one of the other boys. “He even came to our house and talked to my parents. It's like he's a spy. He knew where we lived and everything. He bosses everybody around.”

“Are you going to do it? Are you going to trick-or-treat his house?” Richard had a hunch that very few of them actually wanted to go to the door, but none of them would admit it.

“I'm going.” Nick straightened his shoulders. “The light's on; that means it's okay? Right?”

“Usually that's true.” Richard nodded. One part of him hoped it went smoothly, while another part wanted the kids to get a good scare. What was Halloween without shivers of delicious terror anyway?

“Coming?” Nick stared at his friends.

They inched forward.

Richard went with them, noticing once they got into the courtyard that it was decorated cheerfully for fall. Autumn leaves were strewn about the place, no mean feat in Southern California, and three hay bales were piled up by the front door. A life-size scarecrow sat forlornly on them, amid a large collection of pumpkins, all carved wonderfully with faces and moons and stars.

It occurred to Richard that maybe Crazy Soldier Guy had a little more Martha Stewart than mad-dog killer going for him.

When they got to the front door, Nick rang the bell, and the boys stood waiting, indecisive now that they'd come all this way and got no answer. Just as they began to mutter about giving up, the scarecrow bounded out at them. Richard had to catch his own breath as he watched the boys tear out of the small, enclosed front yard.

“Shit. Fucking *shit!*” Richard jumped back, slapping his hand over his heart. “That was *awesome.*”

The scarecrow said nothing but held out a small offering of candy.

“You mean the ones who are brave enough to stay get rewarded?” Richard laughed.

The scarecrow nodded slowly.

“Thanks. I have to go catch the kids. They're probably in South County by now.” Richard turned back as he passed the gate, but the scarecrow was sitting, draped benignly over the hay bales again. “You *rock!*”

Richard waved back at the man. He didn't know why, but having the crap scared out of him at Halloween always made him feel young again. Fresh. Breathless with the anticipation of having his whole life before him, if only he was willing to face the scary monster house around the block. He turned and ran down the street, leaving his laughter floating behind him like music.

\* \* \* \*

The laughter of the man dressed as one of the Harry Potter crowd scored Logan's dream like music. An incandescent smile over even white teeth shone bright and eerie in the black light Logan had placed into the fixture over the door. Eyes that danced with pure mischief pulled at him, inviting him to play.

In his dream, Logan chased him down the street and between the houses until all the kids were gone and it was just the two of them. They gazed at one another for a while until someone moved, and then they crashed together for a rush of a different kind altogether. His body was still throbbing with longing when he became conscious of another noise, one he couldn't identify, hidden behind all the other evening sounds.

Logan still slept lightly, but since he'd been stateside he'd gotten soft, sleeping through things that, in Afghanistan, would have had him armed and out of bed before he had a chance to think. His eyes snapped open when he heard the barest scraping of the metal gate that led to his courtyard.

When he went to the window and looked through the curtain, it was just in time to see a group of small figures in black robes run out of his courtyard and down the steps to the sidewalk. He could hear laughter, but not the pleasant kind, drifting on the night air.

*Well, shit.*

Logan went to look around outside. He figured he'd been toilet papered, which, even though it was a mess, he could handle. It came with the territory of being the scary neighborhood guy who kept to himself and told the local kids to put on helmets and be nice to pets. To pick up their trash. Nobody really knew him yet, since he'd only recently moved into Dan's home.



When he saw what the gang of kids had been up to, his heart froze and bile rose in his throat. Dan was a fucking hero. He'd caught a bullet for those kids and spent the remainder of his life in pain for his trouble. He'd been a good man and a faithful lover, and he did not deserve this. *They* didn't deserve it.

He spent the rest of the night cleaning, scrubbing the mess off the doors and using a razor blade to scrape the adhesive from the windows. He'd have to repaint the front door. He planned to find those responsible and see to it that they paid for the damage. Logan thought he knew just where to start, and it hurt his heart.

Before he got sick, Dan had loved playing that scarecrow trick on the neighborhood kids. Every year Logan had enjoyed e-mails from Dan about how, once again, he'd frightened the trick-or-treaters and sent them running. For his first Halloween in Dan's home, he figured it was a good way to honor the man's memory. It was a damned sight better than the memory of holding Dan's hand at the VA hospital when he died.

No one had the right to defile Dan's home. Their home. *His home*. He might not have been able to protect Dan from the cancer that killed him, but he would protect Dan's home from all comers, at all costs, starting with the end of a really, really nice dream.

\* \* \* \*

Light from the windows was only beginning to irritate Richard when someone started pounding on the door. He realized he was lying on the recliner in the middle of the living room, and from the groans and the rustling, the noise was disturbing the boys as well. Time to suck it up. He got up and headed to the door, hands running over the rasp of beard growth on his chin.

"Hold it," Richard said in a low voice as he undid the bolt. "I'm here. You're waking the kids." He turned to check the time on the grandfather clock in the foyer. It wasn't even six a.m. yet. The only thing that kept him from adding a really loud curse was the pile of nine-year-olds in the living room, some of whom were moving and rolling in their sleeping bags as they woke like slow centipedes on the floor.

"What the hell?" he asked when he opened the door and found a tall man he didn't know standing there, holding a large box. "Can I help you?"

"I need to ask your boy some questions." The man tried to shove him out of the way and step into his house.

“Whoa. You wait just a damned minute.” Richard put a hand out to stop him. It landed on his chest, thickly muscled and hard as granite. *Wow!* It was tough not to react to the sensation. “He’s having a sleepover. It’s six a.m. Can’t this wait?”

“I need to talk to all of them.” The man’s facial muscles jumped as though he was grinding his teeth. “It’s important.”

Richard looked up into a tanned, lean face with almost iridescent blue eyes. More blue, he thought, because of the warm, dark amber skin. While he was thinking that, a hand clasped his in a firm grip.

“My name is Logan Wilde.”

“Logan Wilde,” Richard said stupidly. “Like *Oscar*?”

“Yeah. You’re the *first* person who ever said that. Somebody,” he growled, “vandalized my home last night. I got a brief glimpse of a bunch of kids running away, and they all looked like they came straight from Hogwarts.” He dropped a file box on the floor and lifted the lid. It was filled with...sanitary supplies. Toilet paper, feminine supplies...all splattered with an eerie ketchup red substance that smelled horribly like barbecue sauce.

Richard’s brain caught up, and when it did... “*Wait!*” He growled a little himself. “You think my boys—”

That got Richard an exasperated glare. “I only want to ask a question. I’m not going to hurt anyone. I’m going to get to the bottom of this right now, and then I’ll go home.”

Richard looked into the man’s eyes. Something about the way he’d said *home* twice, in just that way—*home*—triggered some kind of awareness in Richard. The man was hurting. Richard lowered his eyebrows and studied Logan’s implacable features for a moment more. “The boys were here with me all night. I slept on the chair there, in the same room, after we watched movies. It couldn’t have been one of them,” he said quietly.

Logan leaned in a little. “You admit you slept.” He’d lowered his voice as well.

“Yes.”

“May I please speak with them?” Logan asked again.

Something bumped into Richard's back, and he turned to find all the boys standing there, Nick in the lead, their eyes trained on him. They looked tired and upset, and Richard felt unreasonably angry on their behalf.

"Mr. Wilde wants to ask you a question. Do you think we could go outside and talk to him for a minute?"

Nick looked back at his friends.

"It's important," Logan added.

They nodded, and with Nick in the lead and Richard taking up the rear, they all trooped out to stand in the front yard.

Richard noticed the man's behavior didn't soften for the children and wondered if he'd ever had any experience in dealing with kids.

Logan shoved the box forward with his foot. "This is how it's going to happen. I'm going to ask you each individually. I'm going to know if you're lying, 'cause I'm a human lie detector." He pointed to the boy at the end, who stood still, groggily wiping what looked like tears from his eyes. "You."

Richard grabbed that pointing finger, pushing it down. "Get a grip and remember to whom you're talking. These are kids, and there's nothing to be gained by scaring them to death. Remember, we agreed to do this. I'll take them back inside if you scare them."

Logan gazed at him for a minute, but Richard didn't have a clue whether he comprehended. "You. Don't panic, little man." He used an even, slightly softer voice but didn't crouch or kneel on the boy's level. "I'm asking a question. Not accusing. You tell me the truth, yeah? I'll know if it's the truth."

The boy sniffled. "No, sir. I didn't do that." He looked into the box briefly and then leaned back as though he didn't want to see it anymore.

"Thank you. What's your name, son?"

"David." The boy rubbed a hand over his nose.

"Thank you, David." Logan turned to the next boy. "You, what's your name?"

"Terry Husted," the kid replied.

"Okay. Did you do this?"

“No. I swear. I don't even know what that”—at this, Terry shuddered—“is.”

“I see,” said Logan. He went down the small line of uncomfortable boys, asking for names and then asking his question. Finally, at the end, he got to Nick. Nick looked to Richard, asking for guidance with his eyes. Richard nodded to him to answer the man.

“No, sir,” Nick said when he was asked. “I didn't have anything to do with those things in that box, sir.”

Logan nodded his head and stepped away, his hands folded behind his back. The boys visibly tensed. Logan looked at Richard. “I'm sorry; I didn't get your name.”

Richard toyed with the idea of smarting off but looked at the box of vile things and felt a little sorry for Logan. “My name is Richard Hunter.” He preempted any nicknames; only his son and Nick ever called him Rick, and anyone who called him Dick wasn't going to get to say it twice. “Call me Richard. And before you ask, I didn't have anything to do with vandalizing your home.”

“Thank you,” he said, going to his box and hefting it back up. He looked back at the boys. “I'm sorry I disturbed you. I know you told me the truth. It takes a lot of guts and maturity to look an angry man in the eye and stand your ground. You guys did real good.”

The little group of boys visibly relaxed, maybe even preened a little. *The bastard.*

“Then we're done here,” Richard said firmly.

“Yeah.” Logan turned to leave but looked back. “I'm sorry I crashed your party. I heard a noise outside, saw some kids running away, and they were all wearing those wizard robes...”

Richard said nothing. Instead he opened the door, and Nick and his friends filed in. They were chatting excitedly now that they'd faced down Logan and won his approval.

“Tell your wife I'm sorry for the disturbance.”

“I don't have a wife.” Richard closed the door in Logan's face with a firm *snap* and called out to the boys. “Who's for blueberry pancakes?”

He got an affirmative answer from a chorus of hungry kids and headed for the kitchen. Nick ambled in as Richard was getting out his biggest mixing bowl.

“Weird, huh? We told you.”

“You did indeed.” Richard got milk, eggs, and blueberries out of the fridge. “How are the guys?”

“They're okay. Terry's gone back to sleep.”

Richard smiled down at his grandson and widened his eyes comically. “Well, no one can say you don't know how to throw a party!”

Nick snorted.

## Chapter Two

Logan cycled past Sharon's Bakery while unobtrusively watching Richard go inside. He'd begun to see a pattern in the man's early-morning runs. He seemed to go every other day and with the kid on Saturday. About three miles in a loop, ending at Sharon's, where he usually bought a bear claw, and then home. He never ran with anyone but the kid. He never seemed to go anywhere without the kid either, when the kid wasn't in school. They looked good together, like Dr. Evil and Mini- Me.

The desire to attempt contact was fierce, especially since Logan had seen the little hybrid the man drove had a rainbow license plate frame and a FIGHT THE H8 bumper sticker. But he also had a WAGE PEACE bumper sticker and a TOWN AND COUNTRY surf insignia, and Logan wasn't about to come on to some liberal with a kid without knowing more.

Everywhere Richard went, he left that enticing laughter and that serene smile behind, and Logan's curiosity overrode even his common sense.

Logan had never seen Richard in the presence of a woman, except for the college-age girl who came to his house and seemed to do some sort of work for him. He said he didn't have a wife. Logan had nothing against kids, but usually only straight guys had them. Ordinarily he would have sheered off at the presence of a kid, but Richard Hunter was special.

*Shit.*

He was going to go crazy if he didn't take the bull by the horns soon.

*What's the worst that could happen?*

Logan watched Richard leave the bakery with his customary little white bag and begin the jog home.

*Next time he jogs... I'll talk to him next time he jogs.*

\* \* \* \*

After Halloween, the *first* time Richard noticed him, Logan was at McDonald's. He was sitting in the corner all by himself, eating one of the parfaits. He seemed to be reading an *AutoTrader* magazine, but every time Richard looked up, he found the man's head snapping back down, and it didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that Logan was looking at *them*.

Why that should be, Richard had no idea. The guy was clearly straight out of the military. His hair was buzzed short, and he was fit. Oh, so very fit. All ripped arms and pecs that looked like pillows. Richard suspected the bronzed skin stopped at the collar and sleeves like a farmer's tan, but when he imagined it, Logan Wilde's body was tan all over and had defined six-pack abs.

Oh yes. Logan was a hot, hot man, and back in the day, Richard might have had cause to hope that his attentions might be more than just the result of suspicion that Nick had vandalized his home at best, and at worst, some sort of interest in Nick himself. Which would be oh, so very not good, because even if Logan was a special-ops ninja motherfucker, he was never, *ever* going to get past Richard to get to Nick.

Richard put his fries down. Didn't that just say everything? The first guy to look at him with interest in years, and he just assumed the man was a pedophile waiting for an opening.

*Jeez. When did I become so cynical?*

After that it seemed Logan was everywhere they went. He was in the grocery store, fascinated by rising-crust pizza as Richard and Nick made their way through frozen foods. He was at the coffeehouse when Richard took Nick for hot chocolate after a rainy day at school. He was cycling around the park when Nick played with his friends, and always, *always*, it seemed to Richard that Logan watched them out of the corner of his eye.

The Friday after Halloween, Richard walked Nick to school and started his run, planning on about three miles in the crisp November air. He left through the rear gate of Mountain View Elementary School, taking it slow and easy, warming up, when he heard another set of feet pounding the pavement alongside his, just behind him. He turned to look, and there was Logan, dressed in a muscle T-shirt already damp with sweat and a pair of track pants.

"I'm starting to think you're following me," Richard called over his shoulder. He looked back and saw twin patches of color stain Logan's cheeks.

"It's a small world," murmured Logan. "I noticed you run in the mornings. I thought you might like some company."

“Didn't come to shake me down?” Richard asked. “Get me lulled into a sense of false security so you could trick me into telling you I vandalized your house with my little denizens of iniquity?”

“I know who vandalized my home. They've helped clean up and paid for repairs.” Richard noticed that Logan was far less outgoing when he wasn't terrorizing nine-year-olds. “I'm sorry about that.”

“It was girls,” Richard said flatly.

“How did you know?”

“No self-respecting boy is ever going to touch a box of tampons, much less dip a bunch of them in barbecue sauce and hang them on your shrubbery. I could have told you *that* then.”

“Why didn't you?” Logan was now jogging alongside him, still keeping his head down, but they were officially jogging together. Richard didn't know why that pleased him, but it did.

“You're lucky I didn't call the cops.”

“Why didn't you?” Logan asked again, chancing a glance into Richard's eyes.

Richard jogged silently beside Logan for a minute or two, thinking that was a good question. Why *hadn't* he called the cops? “You believed the truth when you heard it. I couldn't fault you for wanting answers.”

Logan continued in silence until they came to a four-way stop. “Which way do you go now?” Apparently Logan didn't know *every* move he made.

“This way.” Richard turned on the path that led to the park instead of the one that went by the bakery. A small vanity, he thought, but he didn't want Logan to see him as a guy who only jogged so he could eat a bear claw. Although why he was worried wasn't clear, since he was sure Logan wasn't exactly interested in either his eating habits or the effect they had on his ass. Richard caught Logan's lips twitching and wondered what was so funny.

Richard decided to take the initiative. “Look,” he began, at the same time Logan said, “Say...”

Richard looked up at the man. “What?”

Logan stared ahead as they ran, as if there were something fascinating to look at beyond the hedge of trees that ringed the play equipment.



“It has occurred to me,” Richard said finally, “that I’m seeing you in a lot of places I’ve never seen you before. Is there something I’m missing?”

“What do you mean?” Richard saw that Logan’s cheeks were beginning to bloom with color again. Richard didn’t know whether it was because he was running or because he was embarrassed.

“Well. I kind of feel like you’re stalking us. Me. *Nick*. Which concerns me. Because I worry, you know, and it’s my job to take care of him. And if there’s something that interests you there—my Nick—you need to understand from me that I’m not at all afraid of sneaking up on you in the middle of the night and killing you.” Richard kept running. “And I can be very, very quiet.”

“*What?*” Logan stopped running and stood, tense and panting. “Are you kidding me? You think I’m interested in...”

“Are you interested in Nick? I’m not stupid. I’m probably considered maniacally overprotective. Read: I’m like white on rice. He’s never unsupervised. He’s never going to be.”

“Shit, I can’t believe—”

“I just thought I ought to get that out into the open.” Richard continued on his run. To be fair, he didn’t really believe that Logan was stalking Nick. But it made as much sense as anything else. Truly. Logan’s interest in them made no sense at all.

Richard didn’t expect to hear Logan’s feet coming up from behind, and for a second he worried that Logan might tear into him or something. But Logan continued to jog with him in silence. They were through the park and heading back out onto the main drag again when Logan finally broke the silence. Richard chanced a glance at the man whose cheeks now seemed colored with fury.

“I spent over half my life in the marines, Richard. I’m simply reserved. I’m no pedophile, and I’ve very charitably decided to give you the benefit of the doubt for being a protective father.”

Richard turned. He was about to say something. *Father?* But Logan looked like he wasn’t finished talking, and Richard was getting puffed. It seemed to Richard that Logan ran a lot faster when he was feeling insulted. Richard turned back around to watch where he was going. He was having a hard time keeping up.

“I'm going to say this once. I have been watching you and Nick. I have been—kind of—following you. But not for the reason you think.”

Later, when the paramedics arrived, Richard thought that ten years before—hell, even five—he wouldn't have been so shocked.

“I've been watching *you*.”

Richard kept running, eyes on the road, one foot in front of the other. *Breathe...*

“And I'm dying to know if you taste as sweet as you look.”

Richard snapped his head around to look at Logan's face. To see if Logan was telling the truth. To see if the man was serious or teasing or *crazy*. The last sound Richard heard was the loud *clang* when his head hit the metal light post.

## Chapter Three

Logan jogged from the hospital back to his house. Every time he thought about Richard, his face burned like it was on fire. Okay. *Okay*. That didn't go so well. He thought he'd die when Richard hit the pole and the skin under his hairline above his left eye just blew open. Head wounds, what can you do? They bleed. *A lot*. The man probably had a concussion. Logan was asked to search through Richard's wallet for his medical information. He'd found a driver's license, a donor card, a health-insurance card, an ancient, desiccated condom. He'd nearly killed the man, and he was no closer to learning if he could ask him out.

Way to go.

When he got to his house, he changed his clothes and showered. He figured he'd take his Jeep and go get Richard when the doctor let him go home. Take him where he needed to go. Apologize...

*I'm sorry I said something so shocking, you ran into a pole.*

That was sure to smooth things over.

\* \* \* \*

Richard was busy thinking of all the reasons he couldn't stay at the hospital for even a few more minutes when Logan walked into the room they'd placed him in after they'd stitched him up. The man wasn't given much to talking, but he didn't need to be, really. He had an expressive face and eyes that said a lot, if you looked.

"Hi," Logan finally muttered, laying a hand on the guardrail of the bed from which Richard was thinking of escaping. "I jogged home and got my car. I can give you a ride to go pick up Nick."

Richard focused on that hand. It was clean and square, the nails trimmed neatly and the cuticles nonexistent. The back of the hand gave away age, both by ropy veins and tiny spots where the pigment was missing, patches of white next to brown freckles. Light-colored hair

sprang from the skin. Logan wore a watch, one of those pilot or diver timepieces with lots of dials. Richard wanted to put his hand out and feel all those different surfaces. It *had* been a really, really long time.

“Look,” Logan said. *Another blush.* “I’m really sorry. I probably should have—I don’t know—kept my big mouth shut. Don’t think about it, okay? I know you have a son, but when you said you didn’t have a wife...I thought...maybe. Okay? Just...maybe. No harm, no foul. Sorry. You don’t have to make a big deal out of it. Something I asked. You said no. No big—”

“I didn’t say no.”

“What? Well. You didn’t say anything. You were too busy—”

“I didn’t say no. But you’re wrong.”

Logan looked down at his hands. “Okay. Sorry. Look, it doesn’t have to mean anything, just a question.”

“Nick is my *grandson*.”

“It doesn’t mean I thought you were—” Logan stopped. “*What?*”

“Nick is my grandson.”

“Your grandson.”

“Yes, my son’s son. I fathered a child in high school.”

“Oh.” Logan seemed to digest this. He blew out a breath that ended on a sigh. “You are one sexy-ass grandfather.”

“I... *What?*”

“Jeez, are you kidding?” Logan found the mechanism to lower the guardrail and leaned over. “Look, I don’t know, man. Maybe I’m like those sea turtles that got lost on their way to the ocean and ended up walking into a restaurant. Am I wrong about you? Are you straight? It’s okay if you are. I’m not going to... Well...I guess I did. I’m kind of vibing here. I *want* you.”

“Oh.” Richard wanted something to pull up to his chin. “You’re not wrong.”

“Oh thank *fuck*.” Logan stood up and pulled the privacy panel closed, dragging it around its long circular track in the ceiling. When he was done, Logan kissed Richard. It started out delicate, the hand with that big, chunky watch moving softly across the skin of Richard’s abs and

up, barely grazing a nipple. Richard let out a moan that was half cry, half sigh. His skin sizzled under Logan's touch.

“Logan, I—”

“*Shh...*”

“Logan.” Richard panted once Logan backed off for a breath. “I don't think I exactly want to...”

“Hm?” Logan nuzzled his cheek against Richard's. “You don't shave before exercising?”

“No. Well, yes. I mean, I don't want to...erect a tent. We're in the ER.” Logan looked at him blankly. “I have a *head injury*.”

“Shit. Sorry.” Logan leaned back a little. “Sorry, jeez. How nuts. It's just... I never thought I'd meet anyone who turned me inside out like you do.” Logan pressed another kiss on him, this time so delicate and nearly chaste that Richard almost begged for more. Logan smiled at him, and Richard got caught in a wave of dizziness that he was certain started out as desire and—tragically—turned into the classic symptoms of concussion. Nausea rose, and he tried not to gag. He tried but to no avail. He retched next to Logan's face, although he failed to complete the deal and fully vomit by virtue of an empty stomach. He grabbed the nearest thing he could find—the hem of his shirt—and hauled it up to cover his shame.

*What's green and white and red all over?*

Richard knew they both heard the footsteps approaching by the way that big, hot hand left his chest. “You can come out now.” Logan's voice was gentle.

“I'm so fucking smooth.”

“It's not a problem.” Logan seemed to be taking it in stride. “It's not the usual response I get to a kiss, but—”

“Well...” The doctor announced his presence by pulling on the fabric partition. “It looks like you have a concussion, but it's relatively minor. Headache?”

Richard didn't trust himself to speak. He nodded instead.

“Okay. You can go home if you have someone to wake you every so often. Serious signs would be continued vomiting, confusion, or a headache that worsens and won't go away. Are you going to have help at home?”

Richard started to shake his head, but Logan said, "I'll be there." Richard didn't look over; his cheeks felt like they were on fire.

"Fine," the doctor said. "Queasy?" He leaned over, cupped Richard's chin, and turned his head to look at the stitched laceration that was throbbing but oddly painless under his hair. Behind the doctor, Richard caught a glimpse of Logan as he mimed kissing and vomiting. He bit his lip to keep from laughing and pulled his gaze back to the doctor's.

*Queasy.*

"Yeah. Kind of." His brain worked at about the slowest speed it could go and still keep him conscious.

"I'll have the nurse give you a couple of things to take home. There's an antinausea suppository. I realize it's very unpleasant to use anything that goes up the butt, but it will keep you from vomiting, and if you're queasy, it's the best way to—"

Logan's face was priceless.

"I understand," Richard replied carefully.

"Remove the foil first," the doctor said without looking up. He put his pen back into his pocket and left the room.

Logan snorted. "*Remove the foil?*"

"Oh my G—" A pair of soft lips came down on Richard's for a quick kiss. Then, just as quickly, they were gone. Logan stepped back and stood waiting.

Richard lay staring at the ceiling for a couple of minutes. Closing his eyes tight, he rolled his body over and off the bed and then slipped when his knees buckled, going down in a symphony of stainless-steel trays and crashing barf bins.

In a moment Logan was there, helping him up. "I'm...I'm...sorry. I didn't think. You're unsteady on your feet."

"I'm all right." Richard was so embarrassed, he wanted to jerk his arm out of Logan's hand. "I'm fine."

"Sure you are," Logan murmured near his ear. "I'll help you. If you'll let me."

Richard considered that for a long time. "Thanks," he finally muttered.

At the nursing staff's insistence, he was transferred outside to wait in a wheelchair.

Richard, waiting at the ER entrance, saw Logan pull around in an open Jeep. Richard dreaded getting in. He knew all too well how they bounced and swung from side to side, and he didn't think he could take the pounding he was going to get going over the dips on Alta Vista Avenue on the way home. He stood reluctantly.

“What is it?” asked Logan, who jumped down and came around to open the door for him.

“Nothing,” Richard said, rubbing his forehead with the palm of his hand. “I'm girding my loins.”

“Your *what*?”

“I'm getting ready to go. My head hurts.” He stepped up and sat in the front seat of the Jeep. “Do you think you could...maybe go slow?”

Logan climbed into the driver's seat. Richard tried to figure out what was wrong when it became obvious Logan wasn't going to look his way. The man's cheeks wore that blush again, and Richard was beginning to think of it as...endearing.

“Look. I'm so sorry if I was out of line when I came on to you. Kissing you like that, but—”

“Oh, *no*.” Richard stopped him with a hand on his arm. “I was talking about the Jeep. No.”

“*Oh*. You mean *drive* slowly.” Logan scrubbed his face with his hands. “I am so bad at this.”

Richard looked up at the sky. It was going to be one of those perfect late-autumn days, with dark, fat rain clouds waiting to open up. The crisp smell of ozone. Trees that actually changed color in the Southern California climate would lose their brilliant leaves, the bark would look dark and frightening against the sky, and everything would be chaos while he stayed indoors in front of a fire with Nick. He and Nick had a walk-in-the-rain-followed-by-cocoa compact, only he was having a hard time imagining he'd be up to it.

Now there was someone else in the picture. That was something Richard hadn't even considered a possibility before that very morning.

“I had a Jeep in the eighties. It was like driving a martini shaker.”

Logan smiled, and it caught Richard in the chest like a bullet. The man could smile. “I see. I'll keep it level, Richard.”

Richard's mouth went dry. "Thanks."

"But maybe later"—Logan leaned in—"when you're feeling better, you can tell me whether you like to be shaken? Or stirred."

*Oh my.*

*Does he expect me to choose?*

\* \* \* \*

Logan pulled into a parking space at Nick's school and stopped the car gently. He'd taken great care to drive slowly and without jerky starts and stops. He chanced a glance at Richard, who sat huddled, pale and shaken. He was gripping the door and his shoulder belt.

"Hey, I'm sorry." Logan unbuckled Richard and urged him to let go of the strap. He discovered it was harder than he'd thought to break the man's grip. "I tried to be really—"

"I know." Richard held his head ultrastill. "I appreciate that you were driving slowly. It's just that I'm feeling a little sick."

"Ah." Logan kept hold of Richard's hand when he would have pulled it away. "Open Jeep. Bad time for inserting a suppository."

Richard barked a laugh. "As if."

Logan snickered. "No, really. I'll be happy to help you with that when you get home."

Richard said nothing.

"Don't move. I'll get Nick and bring him here."

"I should hope he wouldn't go with you..." Richard opened the door and lurched out of the Jeep. Logan leaped down from his side and went around. "He's supposed to wait for a code word."

"What is it?"

"I can't tell you the code word." Richard ran a hand through his hair, which still had dots of blood caked on it, and winced. "You don't give up the code word! What kind of a soldier were you? Just hang on. I'm coming."

Logan was stung by Richard's words. "Hey."

"No offense, man, but I hardly know you."



Logan sighed. "None taken."

"I hope not. Seriously, it's nothing personal." Richard peered at Logan.

"I was only trying to help."

"I know, I... Thank you."

"You and me," Logan murmured, gesturing between them. "This could change things."

"It already has." Richard looked up at him. "But—"

"I know." Logan's whole body relaxed as he fell into step with Richard. "Go slow."

Logan put his hand on the small of Richard's back when he looked like he needed the support. He liked it there. A lot. They walked together in silence with Richard in the lead until they were standing across from a long line of classroom doors. They waited for a couple of minutes, avoiding each other's eyes, while parents gathered in knots and people who knew one another connected to say hello.

The buzzer sounded, loud and long in the quiet afternoon, and Richard ducked in agony, covering his ears. "Oh, man!" He leaned his shoulder against a wall. Logan kept his hand where it was, wishing he could do something to protect Richard from the noise.

"Which classroom is he in?" Logan asked after the awful ringing, buzzing noise finished.

"Room four-oh-one." Richard took off walking toward the end of the building. "He'll be out in a minute. His teacher likes to shake everyone's hand as they leave, and since he likes to dawdle and chat with his friends, he's usually the last coming out."

"What's it like?" Logan asked. "Having a kid?"

"I don't know. Like a job, only with the best boss ever." Richard didn't move away from the protective hand Logan placed on his lower back, even though some of the other parents were starting to stare. Logan pulled it back anyway, twenty-five years of necessity and caution overtaking him at the last second. Richard looked back up at him.

"You know, as far as I know, Mountain View Elementary School doesn't have a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy."

"I don't know. I think life has a 'don't ask, don't tell' policy."

Richard's eyes met his, and there was something there Logan couldn't quite define. It was defiant and strong, and he admired it. "Not my life."

“I see.”

“I've never made any secret of the fact that I was gay, not since high school.”

“Nick knows? He knows what that means?” Logan couldn't quite believe it. Nick was only around nine.

“Well, so far we've kept the graphic visual aids down to a minimum, but yes. I prefer men. Nick knows that I haven't had girlfriends except his grandma. I've had boyfriends, and when I find someone to date, it's going to be a man.”

“How does he take it? It doesn't freak him out when a guy comes over?”

Richard rolled his eyes. “Well, there's been such a constant parade since he was born that I'm sure he hardly notices anymore.”

Logan blinked away his confusion.

“I'm kidding. The subject hasn't exactly come up.” He glanced up at Logan shyly. “Yet.”

Logan smiled down at Richard, knowing he had some dumb-ass, love-struck look on his face but unable to wipe it off. Richard's eyes were on him, and there it was, that same expression Richard wore on Halloween. The one that told Logan *here we go* and *oh my gosh* and *oh fuck* all at once. The one he'd seen just before Richard had run off with his Halloween candy, leaving that musical laugh behind.

Logan caught his breath and stared. “It came up today.”

*Did it ever.*

Richard pulled away from the wall as Nick came barreling out of the classroom. He caught the boy up and gave him a hug, reeling a little. Logan kept his hand firm to steady them both.

“Rick, today we learned all about the California missions.” Nick chattered excitedly. “The priests had all these European diseases that they gave the *Indios*, and then they made the ones that survived build their churches!” Nick stopped in his tracks when he saw Logan. Honestly, Logan couldn't blame him. He knew he'd developed the reputation of neighborhood busybody and enforcer. Nick had a kind of trapped look when his eyes went from his grandfather to Logan and back again. “What's going on?”

“I... Well, it's stupid really... I had an accident, and Logan very kindly offered to bring me home from the hospital.”

“What?” Nick looked scared. That was the only way to describe it. Logan saw his face drain of blood. No way that was over a simple accident.

“What happened?” Nick asked his grandfather in a whisper. He still hadn't moved.

“I just ran into a pole when I was jogging. I wasn't paying attention to where I was going, and I knocked myself out.” Nick looked at Logan, who shrugged.

“Are you going to be okay?”

“I'm fine, Nick.”

Nick didn't answer but continued to peer at Richard. His hand clutched Richard's arm, and he held on as they began to walk to the car.

“I was jogging with your grandfather, so I called the paramedics.” Logan flipped his car keys back and forth between his hands while Nick looked from one man to the other. “He has a mild concussion, and we should get him home, but he's going to be good as new if he gets a day's rest or so. The EMTs came in one of the big red trucks with the lights flashing.” Logan thought a diversion might work, but no luck. The kid still looked wary.

“Are you really okay, Rick?” Nick was looking at Logan. Trying to put the pieces together.

“I'm going to be just fine. I gave myself a little tune-up, is all. Now I can hear radio broadcasts from all over the former Soviet Union inside my head. How about it? Ready to go?”

“Yeah.” Nick frowned. “I... Yeah.” He let Logan take his backpack. Tentatively Nick put his hand up and touched Richard's T-shirt where drops of blood had splattered against the white fabric. “You're sure you're okay?”

“I'm fine. I'm queasy. Doc said not to sleep for too long, so we'll have to set the alarms to go off every couple of hours.”

“I can stay on the couch and wake you up every so often,” Logan volunteered. “I can get stuff for dinner too, if you guys want. Pizza and salads?”

Nick leaned into his grandfather. He had a questioning look on his face, and his body language screamed *stranger*.

“Nick,” Richard said, folding an arm around the boy's stiff little body. “I met Logan this morning when I was out jogging, and it was a lucky thing, because he helped me.”

Logan didn't add that if he hadn't been there, the accident probably wouldn't have happened.

"But—"

"He discovered who vandalized his house, by the way, and apologized for waking us up at that ungodly hour." Richard shot Logan a look.

Logan dropped back to watch them as they got to the parking lot. As soon as Nick saw the Jeep, his worry for his grandfather went on the back burner.

"Cool! You came in the Jeep?"

"Yeah." Logan looked at Richard. "I feel bad because it's shaking up your granddad and making him a little sore. I'll drop you and get us some pizza. Maybe I'll get my truck, because it looks like rain."

Nick got into the backseat of the Jeep and buckled up. Logan thought he looked as happy as any boy could look back there. "You like an open car?"

"Yeah. I think it's cool."

"Well, where I come from it's too cold and wet most of the year."

"Didn't you drive a Jeep in the army?"

"I'm a marine, son. Yeah, some. We drove in a Humvee, though, mostly, the last few years."

"Did you ever—"

"Nick, don't you dare," Richard warned.

Nick slumped. "I was just going to ask if he'd ever been in a war."

"I was in Afghanistan after 9/11. And Iraq." Logan met his eyes. "But that's not what you were going to ask me. I told you I'm a human lie detector. Don't forget that."

"Okay. I was going to ask—"

"*Nick*," Richard warned again.

"If you'd ever saved anyone's life." Nick aimed an unrepentant grin at his grandfather, who shook his head, then obviously regretted it.

"Nice save," Logan muttered.

“Well? Did you?”

“I hope so, Nick,” Logan answered. “I really hope so.”

“He saved me today.” Richard looked relieved when Logan sedately crawled around a tight corner and onto the street where Richard and Nick lived.

They pulled up in front of the house, and Logan took the opportunity to admire it as Richard and Nick gathered their things. The house was one of his favorites in the neighborhood. It was older, built in the 1950s, and stood at the mouth of a cul-de-sac. When Logan had first seen it, he imagined that if he knocked on the door, June Cleaver would answer. It was tall and narrow. Picturesque. It had three dormer windows on the second floor and two big picture windows downstairs. They all sported flower boxes that were stuffed with multicolored blooms.

Richard got out at the curb and pushed the seat forward to let Nick jump down before he closed the door behind him. “Thank you.” He leaned over the door frame and met Logan's eyes.

Logan's breath caught in his throat, and his heart did a funny slamming thing against his chest. “I'll be back in about an hour with food and my truck.” He fumbled a pen from his pocket and searched around for a piece of paper, finally locating a parking-garage ticket on which he scribbled his number. “Here's my cell number. If you can think of anything you need—anything at all—call me and I'll bring it. All right?”

“This is really very kind of you. You know—”

“Anything at all. Really.” Logan took a last look at Richard and waited until he was back far enough away from the Jeep to take off. “Back soon,” he called. It wasn't until he was at the pizza place that he realized he'd forgotten to ask what kind of pizza they liked, and he didn't have *their* phone number to call and ask.

## Chapter Four

As soon as Richard was inside, he lowered himself into his leather recliner and opened it out so he was almost horizontal. Nick ran and got him a quilt, and soon they were rehashing the day. Richard noticed after a while that his grandson was unusually quiet.

“Logan seems nice.” Richard watched Nick's face as he took this in.

“Yeah.”

“I don't know what I'd have done if he hadn't been there. I completely knocked myself out.” Currently Nick was stretched out in the oversize chair next to him, and Richard was making small circles on the boy's back through his school-uniform polo.

“I hope he brings a good pizza.”

“I'm sure he likes the stuff we like.” Richard felt sleepy; he could have easily drifted off like this, except for the tension he still felt in Nick's small body. “Something bothering you?”

“What if something happens to you? Dad's dead, and Mom—”

“Nothing's going to happen to me.”

“It did today.” *Trust Nick to point that out.*

Richard didn't know what to say, so he stalled. “I could really use a water. Do you think you could bring me a bottle?”

“Sure.” Nick got to his feet. It was a measure of how worried he was that he didn't complain.

Richard took a deep breath. “You have me, Nick. And there are people like my friends and the teachers at your school. People like the Kepplers across the street. My attorney will make arrangements for you if anything happens to me. You'll be okay. I promise.”

Nick looked at his toes and kept walking.

When Logan rang the doorbell an hour later and Nick ran off to get it, Richard was feeling worse than he had since he'd hit the pole. Sick and dizzy, with a headache that felt like someone was using a power drill behind his eye.

"Hey." Logan came into the room behind Nick, who looked uncomfortable at best ushering the large man in.

"Hi there." Richard shifted to a sitting position.

"Can we eat on the coffee table?" Nick asked. He liked to eat in the living room, considering it a treat to kneel at the low table where he could watch television.

"Sure," Richard told him. "You and Logan can keep me company, but I don't think I want to eat anything." He tried to decide if his stomach would let him keep down more water and took a cautious sip.

Logan held up a two-liter soda bottle. "I brought ginger ale," he offered. "I find that whenever I get nauseated it helps to quiet things down. I used to box a little."

"Really?" Richard filed that information away. Boxing wasn't exactly something he went out of his way to watch.

Logan lowered his head. "When I first joined the marines, I had a little bit of a chip on my shoulder."

"I see." Richard could imagine. "It can't have been easy being a career marine." Richard could see that the implied *gay* wasn't lost on Logan.

"Easier than some things." Logan turned to Nick. "Do you think you could show me where we could get a glass and some ice? Maybe some napkins and plates for the salad?"

"Sure." Nick led Logan out of the room, and Richard let out the breath he was holding.

It only took Logan's eyes on him for the memory of that ER kiss to make itself felt, and he ruthlessly tamped down the thought, the end result of which was that when Logan came back into the room, he felt his cheeks heat. For a second he swore he saw an answering sparkle in Logan's eyes.

"What do you think you can manage?" Logan asked. He opened a pizza box. "I got a combo and a Hawaiian. I hope you like those."

"Score." Nick brought in napkins and forks. "Pineapple."

“Nick doesn't eat much in the way of vegetables willingly, but he likes fruit,” Richard explained.

“Fruit's good,” Logan agreed. “I didn't like veggies too much when I was young. I like them now, though.”

“There's hope, Nick. That's good to hear.”

“I like broccoli. The rest taste like dirt.”

“You'll develop a taste for dirt,” Logan told him. “Happens to the best of us.”

“If you say so.” Nick looked doubtful.

“That's if you say so, *sir*,” Richard teased.

Nick's gaze darted toward Logan. “Really?”

“Your grandfather's teasing you.” Logan flashed Richard a grin that did something more for his insides than the ginger ale. “You can call me Logan.”

“Mr. Logan,” Richard added.

Logan's eyes met his, something distinctly uncomfortable there. “That makes me sound like my grandmother's hairdresser.”

“Logan. You can call him Logan. But only him. Other adults you use the proper address, all right?”

Logan blinked up. “How come you don't call your grandfather *Grandpa* or something?”

Nick grinned around a slice of pizza. “My dad called him Rick, so I always have. Wait till I tell the other guys I can call Crazy—”

Richard hissed and raised his eyebrows.

“What?” Logan looked at Richard. “What am I missing?”

Richard swirled the ice around in his glass to buy himself time to think.

“Everyone at school calls you Crazy Soldier Guy,” Nick blurted out.

“They do?” Logan peered at Richard. “Really?”

Richard felt bad that Nick shared *that* bit of information. “Apparently you've earned the reputation of—”



“Everyone thinks you're going to *kill* them if you catch them doing something bad. It's all over the school that you almost sent the sixth-grade girls to *jail!*”

“*Nick.*”

“Yeah?” Logan glanced at Richard, and then an evil grin appeared on his luscious lips. “Heheheheh. Cool.”

Richard frowned.

“Evildoers beware. Crazy Soldier Guy is on the prowl. I like it!” Logan raised his fist, and Nick bumped it in midair.

“Seriously? You all are having way too much fun for me. I feel like someone hit me with a light post.”

Logan looked at his watch. “When was the last time you took a Tylenol?”

“At the hospital.”

Logan sighed impatiently. “That was this morning. No wonder you feel bad. Nick, where does your grandfather keep the Tylenol?”

“Kitchen,” Richard answered for Nick. “I'll show you.”

When Richard started to rise, Logan forestalled him. “Drink your ginger ale, and I'll bring it.” Logan wiped his hands carefully on a napkin before standing to follow Nick into the kitchen.

Richard watched them go, wondering what he was getting himself into. Logan didn't fit in his house, which was scaled for ordinary mortals. Logan filled doorways and sat like a giant with his knees bent and spread at awkward angles between the couch and the coffee table. He also had that tightly sprung muscle thing, the tension in his body that cops had and servicemen, a kind of wary readiness that made Richard watch him closely, a little guardedly.

On the whole, Logan wasn't the kind of man Richard saw himself with, and yet...

“Here.” Logan handed him two Tylenol gel caplets. “What kind of pizza do you like?”

Richard took the tablets and swallowed them with the ginger ale. “I'd really rather not eat just now.” He pushed the recliner back so he was comfortably horizontal.

“Still queasy?”

Richard nodded and then looked away, embarrassed when Logan laid a hand on his abs. “I’m just going to lie here. When you’re done eating, Nick, you can do your homework here at the coffee table, all right?”

“Yeah,” Nick muttered.

Logan went back to his food. “Nick, we need to wake up your grandfather every so often if he falls asleep, okay?”

“Okay.” Nick bit his lip. “What happens if we forget?”

“Probably nothing,” Logan told him. “When it’s difficult to wake people up, that can mean their brain is bruised or something. I guess making sure you can wake them up is one way to tell things are okay.”

Richard was drifting, watching Nick as he and Logan ate a metric ton of pizza together. Logan ate some sort of chopped-looking salad, after carefully removing half and closing up the container.

“I’ll put this in the fridge for you, so when you get hungry later, it will still be crisp,” Logan told him.

They cleared the coffee table, and Nick practiced reading aloud from a *Boxcar Children* book that he’d brought home from school. The two men listened quietly, and at some point Richard heard the first sounds of rain on the roof, spattering down into the patio area behind the slider where they were sitting, dripping from the glass table onto the concrete floor. Nick’s voice slowly decoding the words and the sound of the rain conspired to lull him to sleep. He let himself go, even as he tried to stay awake, knowing it was futile to fight.

Logan knew the moment Richard drifted off to sleep. His breathing became deep and even, emanating from his lips with a slight throaty sound on each breath that couldn’t technically be called a snore. As Nick continued to read and the rain pattered down, Logan wanted to commit the entire scene to memory. Besides being quiet and peaceful, it was the first time he’d heard the breathing of a sleeping man—such a soothing sound—beside him in a long, long time.

Nick read well. He was a likable, polite kid with a good sense of humor. He enjoyed games and did what he was told for the most part. Richard handled him with compassion and humor, and Logan liked them together. For just a minute, Logan pretended that his life could be like this

night all the time. So simple, with dinner and family, rain on the roof. People to connect to and care for and build a life with.

Logan had believed the chance to be part of a family was beyond his reach. He'd thought it too bad, because growing up with siblings and parents who loved him was a memory he cherished. At almost fifty and gay, he'd believed having a family of his own was the stuff of fantasy.

*Maybe not, though.*

\* \* \* \*

"Hey." Richard heard a voice call his name. "*Richard?*"

"Hm." He started after a minute, his first thought, as always, Nick. "Hm, Nick?"

"I'm here," Nick said from the stairs. "I'm going to go upstairs and take my shower."

Richard levered the recliner up groggily. "What about your homework?"

"It's done." Nick grinned. "Me and Logan played chess for a while after."

"Logan and I," Richard corrected automatically.

"No, you didn't," Nick teased. "You were asleep." He turned and headed up the stairs.

"He has you there." He heard Logan's voice coming from the kitchen. He tried rubbing his face and discovered parts of it were sore.

"Jeez. How long was I out?"

"A couple of hours. I asked when Nick's normal bedtime was. He seems to know the routine."

"Yeah."

Logan returned with a cup of tea, wordlessly offering it to Richard, who declined it. "My house was always chaos around bedtime when I was growing up."

"Was it?" Richard couldn't imagine Logan and *chaos* in the same sentence. He seemed so entirely unflappable.

"I had three brothers and two sisters. Chaos."

"I was an only child." Richard smiled. "Spoiled, I guess."

"I doubt that. Spoiled people don't put anyone else first."

Richard's eyes strayed to the stairs, where Nick had been standing moments before. "It's surprising what people do for kids."

"Not everyone."

"No." Richard looked down. "Not everyone."

"Where are his parents?" Logan asked quietly.

In the deepening shadows, it seemed like a good time for confidences. Darkness pushed aside awkward defensiveness and the raw pain of losing his son, James.

"Nick's father, my son, James, died in a motorcycle accident when Nick was three. His mother..." Richard pursed his lips, still unable to speak of his daughter-in-law without getting angry. "His mother had a substance-abuse problem, and they'd divorced when Nick was a baby. James had custody of Nick. The decision was made to leave him with me temporarily at first, but then I fought to keep him."

"When he was three?" Logan asked.

"Yes." Richard was silent for a very long time.

"That's quite a commitment."

"Yes." Richard wondered if he should say more. There were reasons he didn't like having this conversation. Not the least of which was, who would date a man with a nine-year-old kid?

Logan still peered at him as if he were waiting for something. "Did I say something wrong?"

Richard frowned. "No, why?"

"You went all monosyllabic on me—yes, yes, no. Weren't you scared to take on the responsibility for someone else's child? What did it mean to you? What was your life like before? How has it changed?" He blew out a breath. "I guess I'm curious."

"I guess." Richard laughed a little.

"I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry." Logan sat back and pressed his lips together.

"It's all right. It's just that no one's asked me all that before."

"Really?"

"Really. I was trying to think of a good answer. My life before was...different. I shared a loft in LA with my partner, John, and—"

“Your partner?”

The faint touch of pain Richard felt when he thought of John crept under his skin. It dwelled inside him like a living thing, sometimes as anger, sometimes sadness, but always restless and ready to show itself. “Yes. John and I were together for nearly ten years. It was nice for a long time. He and I bought a loft in one of the downtown renovations. Very pricey. Elegant. I had a studio. It was all very *Queer As Folk*.”

“Is he...? Did he—”

“He didn't want a child. When James died and it fell to me to raise Nick, John told me I had to choose.”

“*What?*” Logan's brows drew together, and Richard couldn't tell what it meant.

“He told me that the best part of being gay was not having to have children around. That if I took Nick, I'd have to find somewhere else to live.”

Logan's eyes widened. “What a *fucktard*.”

“That's not fair. He had a point. It wasn't as if we'd ever dreamed...”

“He sounds like a dickhead. Things change. If a child needed you... So you moved?” he asked. “You're probably a lot better off.”

Richard had to bite his tongue to keep from laughing. “You're angrier on my behalf than I was at the time.”

“You weren't angry?”

“No.” Rick swallowed. “At the time I was just sad. Guilty. I felt I'd done the unpardonable. Changed the rules in the middle of the game. I got *angry* when he replaced me a week later with my best friend. Ex-best friend.”

Logan still sputtered. “People don't understand the first thing about *partnership*. Shit happens; you're supposed to suck it up.”

“Did you have someone?”

“I—” Logan looked down. “Yeah. I did. He got cancer.”

“I see.”

“He was a few years older and retired. I was still in the corps back then, so we didn't live together, but I spent all the time I could with him. We were *partners*.” Logan looked at his hands as though he hoped to find a beer in them.

“There's beer in the fridge, if you want.”

Logan laughed. “I used to smoke. I promised Dan I'd quit, and I've kept that promise for eleven years, but I still wish I had one when—” He stopped suddenly.

“When something makes you sad,” Richard guessed.

“Yeah.”

“I jerk off,” Richard lied.

Logan's head whipped around. “Every time you're sad?”

“Since I started doing that, everything makes me sad, but I feel *so* much better.”

The look on Logan's face was priceless. “You're shitting me, right?”

“Yes.” Richard winked at him.

Logan shook his head a little and returned a smile so completely *pleasant* that Richard froze on the spot. That was a smile he could get used to. He looked into Logan's eyes then—they stared at each other—and he didn't hear Nick enter the room.

“Rick?” Richard looked up to see Nick standing uncertainly in the doorway.

“Yeah?”

“Can I play my game for twenty minutes before bedtime?”

“Yes, sure. Let's see what you got, shall we?”

Nick tore open the orange game-rental envelope and drew out the cardboard squares that sandwiched the disc. He told Logan all about it excitedly; it seemed that Logan was knowledgeable about gaming. They turned on the television and put the disc into the Xbox.

For the briefest minute, Richard allowed himself to imagine that it was John playing with Nick. That it was John he'd eaten dinner with that night and every night. For the briefest moment, he wished he and John and Nick could have been a family.

Then Logan shot him a shy look over Nick's head, and an entirely new picture came into his imagination, unexpectedly, and it made him wonder what he'd ever seen in someone as selfish as John at all.

## Chapter Five

Richard returned from putting Nick to bed and found Logan concentrating hard on Nick's game. He watched as different emotions played over Logan's expressive face. That he was a pretty fierce competitor had been obvious when he'd played with Nick earlier, but he wasn't a sore loser when he was behind, and he won with an easy grace that made Nick feel like he'd won too.

"I can see what kind of leader you must have been."

"Who says I was a leader?" Logan put down the game he was playing and then walked to the television to switch it off. When he returned, he sat on the coffee table facing the recliner where Richard sat, still upright on the edge. "How are you feeling?"

"Still goofy, but better. Now I'm experiencing more embarrassment than anything."

Logan shrugged that off. "It happens."

"Have you ever knocked yourself out on a light post? Have you even ever known anyone who did?"

Logan grinned. "I do now." Richard heard the teasing in his voice. "You looked pretty stupid lying there on the ground bleeding."

"Nobody bleeds intelligently. I was so shocked—"

"Why? Because Crazy Army Guy was hitting on you?" Logan caught one of his hands and held it. "You didn't think someone like me swung that way?"

"That's not it. I—"

"That must happen to you all the time." Logan bit his lip. "Don't you get hit on pretty often?"

"No." Richard frowned. "Not at all."

"You're kidding?"

“No. What do you mean? Like do guys hit on me all the time? Am I that—”

“Men *or* women?”

“What?”

Surprise etched itself on Logan's face. “You have no clue, do you?”

“What?”

Logan rolled his eyes. “I don't know why you're so surprised by my attention, but maybe that's what I like best. I like being the guy who gets how completely *adorable* you are. Not that adorable is my thing exactly. Actually it's not.”

“Excuse me?”

Logan pulled him in for a kiss, a long one that promised a lot more than it was attempting to deliver just then. “I know I'm not making a lot of sense. Nothing makes sense since I met you. I don't want to take advantage when you're down, but damn...”

Richard blinked.

“Since your partner, do you date? Do you have someone?”

“No.” Richard stayed where he was. “No. It hasn't been... I've been taking care of Nick, and that's been a full-time job.”

Logan smiled at him. “Would you go out with me? Maybe for a beer? Shoot some pool, see a movie?”

“I—”

“Moms date. Single ones do. They sometimes go out. We could get a sitter or even take him with us—not for a beer, but a movie?”

Richard shook his head. “This is—” He slumped back into the recliner. “You're making my head ache.”

Logan stiffened. “I'm sorry.” He rose to his feet. “I didn't mean to—”

“Logan—”

“No, forget I said anything. Later maybe, okay?” Logan picked up his mug and walked it into the kitchen. Richard could hear water running for a minute, and then Logan came back and sat down, not in front of him on the coffee table but on the couch. He looked down at his hands. “I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”



"I'm not uncomfortable, except my head hurts. I just never saw myself dating again."

"Never?"

"Not really."

"Why not?" Logan asked. "You're not old. I thought you were Nick's father. There are probably plenty of kids at the school with dads just your age. Single moms. They must date."

"I know. I just never thought about it."

"Will you think about it now?" Logan asked. "Can I come courting, Grandpa?"

"Well, when you put it like that...it makes me feel like a *total* idiot."

Logan laughed. "It's meant to. It's not rocket science. I just want to buy you a drink. I find myself in the odd position of being able to pursue a romantic relationship without hiding it. I have no idea how it's done."

"Yeah. About that. Why on earth did you join the Marine Corps?"

Logan sat forward. "What do you mean?"

"I mean"—Richard continued, getting it out on the table even if it might not be what Logan wanted to hear—"I have a hard time understanding why gay men and women would serve in a military that asks them to hide and lie."

"What if you had to lie to keep your job?"

Richard heard the edge in Logan's voice, and he was going to say he meant no disrespect, but some important and stubborn part of him didn't let him lie about that either. "I didn't choose a job where I'd have to. No one can make me lie about who I am."

"You must have been economical with the truth to Nick's grandmother. I don't know much about women, but I'm pretty sure none of them—"

"I did prevaricate with her; back then I was still telling myself I wasn't gay, that it was a passing thing, that I could get over it. I've taken responsibility for my actions. I've told my truth since then. I didn't join the military."

Logan stood. "Well, I guess you think that makes you the better man. I did. I had to lie to get my job. I've lied to keep my country safe. I've lied to protect people I thought needed protecting, and I did that because I was the best man, the most qualified man, the kind of man who *could* do all those things and more. There weren't a lot of guys like me stepping up to the

plate back in the day, and there are even fewer now. And for the record, they only ask you to lie by *omission* now.”

“Logan, I don't think you have to lie to protect people or step up. I don't think you have to deny who you are to make a contribution, and by doing that, you just perpetuate—”

“Isn't it fabulous that we all have the choice to give up our dreams and goals and let our families down so we can be here and queer and everyone—but us—can get used to it?”

“Logan, I didn't mean—”

“You don't know me, so I'm going to cut you some slack here and tell you that all of my family, men and women, serve in the military in one capacity or another.”

“You're right. I'm sorry. I didn't know.”

“My dad retired a two-star general in the USMC, and my mother was a Marine Corps nurse, which means she was a commissioned naval officer. My entire family has supported every move I've ever made. They know all about me. They love me.” Logan stared down at him. “You didn't have to lie to get the job you felt you were destined to do, by fate and heredity and genetics and *desire*.”

“*Logan*.”

“I was really good at my job. I know that. Maybe I took on a guiding role, but my dad was the true leader. I just tried like hell to be half as good as he was. Was I supposed to walk away from that because I'm gay? Do you really believe that?”

“I said I was sorry.” Richard sat up. “I admit I didn't understand.”

“You wouldn't. Probably.” Logan looked at his watch. “It's really late. Maybe we both need some sleep.”

“I *said* I was sorry.”

“It's not that.” Logan removed his shoes and lay back on the couch, tucking his hands under his head. “Well, yes it is. I can smell liberal snobbery from a mile away, Richard.”

“What?” Richard was aghast.

“You've never been *asked* to make my choices, and therefore you don't know *what* you'd have done.”

“Logan.”

“So to expect you to understand is unfair of me. Go to sleep. I’ve set my watch to go off in an hour and a half.”

“I hope you know that you’re completely overreacting.”

“There is every possibility that you’re right, but I’m tired, and talking about it further isn’t going to help matters.”

“I see.”

“Try to get some shut-eye. Do you have enough water?”

“Logan.” Richard got up from the recliner clumsily and went toward Logan, not knowing what he’d do. Logan shot off the couch to catch him up in a soul-searching kiss. Their tongues slipped and slid and danced, and Logan’s raspy face brushed against the sensitive skin of Richard’s upper lip. Richard savored the feel of it for as long as it lasted. Logan backed him, still joined in their kiss, down into the recliner and pulled the wooden lever so that he was flat again.

“Night, Richard.” Logan pressed his lips to Richard’s forehead.

“Night,” Richard whispered, completely dazed. “Sweet dreams.”

Logan gave a light laugh, lay back down on the couch, and turned away, saying nothing.

\* \* \* \*

The following morning, Logan left at first light. They’d shared a quiet kiss, but Logan had remained enigmatic. Richard drove Nick to school in a fresh downpour, the kind of drenching California rain that saturates the hills and shrinks the coastline. The school staff, always unprepared for anything outside of the usual, needed help with sandbagging some of the rooms that threatened to flood. He begged off further volunteering in the library or at noon, citing his head and the fact that he’d slept little the night before.

Logan, as good as his word, had woken him every ninety minutes or so to engage him in some sort of brief conversation until dawn. *As if he knew who the thirty-fifth president of the United States was.* Listening to Logan’s rich, masculine voice purr sleepily at him in the darkness shot a thrill down his spine every single time, but they had never gone back to the easy camaraderie of the earlier evening.

Richard examined the situation carefully. He did, in fact, have a personal prejudice against war. Not against soldiers, not the troops themselves—but the willingness to engage in killing?

Yes, he probably did have a problem with that. He had a real and lasting and completely rational fear of guns, based on the deaths of a high school friend named Peter in an accident and another man named Jason later on in college. He knew as surely as he knew anything that he was never, ever going to be comfortable with guns and that he was likely to be irrationally afraid of people who were.

Given that, he should just give Logan a pass. And yet his heart kept getting stuck on Logan's dazzling smile. The one that made him seem about fifteen years old. The one that flirted and promised and showed up in his eyes, that said he could deliver on that promise. Lively and intelligent and basically good.

All-American.

Richard walked to his car and got in, completely soaked. He drove home and took a hot shower, then changed into sweatpants and an old T-shirt. It didn't take long reading the newspaper in front of the fire before he was completely asleep. Next thing he knew, someone was pounding on the door.

"*All right!*" He opened it to find his assistant, Trina, standing there. She held a pink bakery box and a drink carrier with two jumbo coffees in it.

She peered at his face and gasped. "Omygosh, are you all right?"

"Yeah, I'm just... I hit my head yesterday. I'm a little black-and-blue, but no big."

She pushed past him and into the kitchen. "You *hit your head*? How on earth—"

"I was jogging, and I turned to look at something. Before I turned around, somebody put a light post in my way."

Trina was busily putting baked goods onto a plate and uncapping coffees, which Richard was delighted to see were lattes, when her hands stopped and she turned around.

"Seriously."

"I'm afraid it's true. I knocked myself out right on the street."

Trina frowned. "Is there something—"

"It's not a big deal."

"Did you pass out? Is there something you're not telling me? Are you sick? Do you have Alzheimer's?"

“How did you get from 'I ran into a light post' to Alzheimer's?”

“My grandmother started getting forgetful when she got older.” Trina still wore a look that said she had no idea how she sounded, and Richard decided to cut her some slack.

“I don't have Alzheimer's,” he told her, wondering again just how old she thought he was. “I'm only forty-five.”

“But—”

“And regardless of what they tell you at that artsy-fartsy school you go to, forty-five isn't old. It's...tempered.”

“I know that. Of course I know that. But dude, you seriously knocked yourself out on the street, and I wonder if it isn't time to bite the big one and get some hired help around here.”

“*You're* the hired help,” he reminded her.

“No, I mean, like...to watch your blood pressure and stuff.” He watched her as she handed him a bear claw wrapped daintily in the little square of waxed paper with which she pulled it out of the box. “Make sure you stay safe.”

“I do not need a nurse, Trina.” He took his coffee and pastry and headed for his office. “There were...extenuating circumstances.”

“Like what?” She picked up her own coffee and followed him in.

“Like I was—” He couldn't help it. His face lit up as though he were on fire. Not for anything in the world did he want to tell Trina that he'd been hit on by a man and it so shocked him that he'd knocked himself out. Or that the man was attractive as hell. He cleared his throat and gave her a number of thirty-five-millimeter rolls of film. “These need developing.”

She studied him carefully. “If I didn't know better...”

“I think you may need to run to Foto Hall to get some supplies. I'm not sure how much paper—”

“What are they for?”

“Those are the same-sex couples I photographed on Saturday. The wedding-ring shots. The jewelry store said they wanted poster-sized black-and-whites with a retro look. Traditional. Very upscale. I tried a kind of *Breakfast at Tiffany's* thing. You'll see.”

“Where'd you get the models?”

"I called friends. They signed waivers. I can kill two birds with one stone by uploading to iStock and Getty and earn a little cash that way. Maybe."

"Cool. You need to go digital. This would be so easy if—"

"How many times do I have to say it? I like film photography. My dad taught me. I like manually drawing pictures as well and getting my hands into paint. I know it's old-fashioned, you young whippersnapper, but it's not obsolete yet, and neither am I." He hoped.

"All right." She took the rolls of film and put them onto her desk. She took off her jacket and put it over the back of her chair. "Next semester I might have a problem."

"Yeah?" He stopped what he was doing and tensed. He liked Trina. Apart from being the daughter of a very close friend, she was one of the best assistants he'd ever had. She had an ear for ad taglines that had saved his sorry ass more than once. "What?"

"I may only be able to work on Fridays." She swallowed. "Is that going to be a hanging offense?"

He relaxed his shoulders. "No. Oh crap, I thought you were going to say you couldn't come at all. One day a week is probably enough if I do less film photography or find someone else who can develop the pictures."

"You can develop the pictures."

"I know I can, Trina, but it always seems like I'm doing something else that other people can't do for me. Right now I'm supposed to be designing a logo for that new sports bar on Harbor Boulevard."

"Caught Looking?"

"Yep. That's the one. Is it me, or is that name suggestive?"

"It's you." She rolled her eyes.

"Why is it that sometimes everything about baseball seems so...?" He was rummaging around in his imagination for baseball-related images and pulling up what he could on his computer's desktop when Trina cleared her throat.

"Door," she said.

"What?" He looked around.

“That's your door? The one at the front of your house? Where people are likely to knock if they want to visit?”

“Really?” he asked. “Do you mind getting that?”

She heaved a sigh, reminding him of Nick. “Not at all.” Nothing like having an assistant who forgot, every so often, that they weren't helping you out of the goodness of their heart. After a few minutes, he was lost in a line drawing of an idea he was considering, showing a catcher patently checking out the ass of a batter on the opposing team. He supposed if Caught Looking wasn't a gay bar, he'd have to make the softball team coed.

He heard a throat clear behind him and turned to see Logan standing there, obviously fresh from his run.

“Oh, Richard?” Trina's look told him that she'd want full details later. “There is someone here to find out how you are. You know, from your accident. When you were jogging with him and you hit your head.”

“Hi.” Richard felt his cheeks heat up. Richard wished Logan would do that thing that made his dimples show up against his tanned face, but instead he seemed guarded.

“Hi, Richard. I came by to see how you're doing today; I didn't mean to interrupt your work.”

“It's not a problem. We'd only just barely gotten started. Would you like a cup of coffee?” he offered.

“I've had mine.”

“I see.” They stood staring at one another, and Richard could almost feel electricity crackle through his hair. Something about those blue eyes on him...

“Well.” Trina interrupted the silence. “No time like the present for darkroom work.”

Logan turned to look at her. “Darkroom?”

“Yes, I'm going to just go and develop these.” She gathered up the film canisters. “It might take me quite a while. Maybe”—she looked at her watch—“an hour.”

Richard looked at her. “More, if you need to go to Foto Hall.”

“Yeah?” Her eyes widened. “Oh, how could I have forgotten that we need...?”

“Supplies,” Richard offered with a grin.

"I am right on that." She picked up her keys and her purse. "Due to the wet weather, I might even be stranded and have to get lunch out. You know what would be good? If you need anything, why don't you just call my cell phone? Otherwise I'll be back after lunch."

"That *would* be good, Trina," Richard told her.

By the time she left, Logan had a pretty interesting expression on his face. "Did you just get rid of your assistant so we could...?"

"Oh yeah." Richard took a step toward Logan and put a tentative hand on his shoulder. "But I haven't forgotten that you think I reek of liberal snobbery."

"About that," Logan muttered. "I think I was a little tired." Logan slipped his arms around Richard's waist.

"Maybe I was a little judgmental," Richard admitted.

Logan leaned forward, and Richard found himself looking up at him, a breath away from a kiss. Logan was wet from running, and he smelled like man and rain. His eyes were a brilliant shade of cornflower blue, and Richard noticed the irises had black rings around them and that he had long lashes, but they were the same light color as his hair and didn't look quite as spectacular from a distance. His hair and eyebrows were both threaded with silver that, like Richard's own, had a slightly different texture.

Logan tightened his grip. "Is the military thing going to be a problem?"

"Yeah, probably."

Logan frowned. "Then why are you looking at me like that?"

"I can't help it."

A knowing smile bloomed on Logan's face. "Yeah?"

Richard closed his eyes. "Oh hell yeah."



## Chapter Six

Logan pressed his lips to Richard's, and the man just melted all around him like hot wax. He realized he was going to have to support his weight only seconds before both arms slid around his neck. Logan got a pretty firm grip on Richard's ass as his knees buckled.

"Wow," Richard murmured against his lips. "Still a little dizzy."

Logan deepened the kiss, and Richard opened for him, tilting his head back to give him access and running a shy tongue across his lower lip.

When they broke apart, Richard looked up at him through unfocused eyes. "Talk about knocking a guy off his feet."

Logan shook his head, and he was very much afraid his cheeks were heating up. "I can't think of anybody who's ever had this same—"

"Do you want...? That is..."

Logan looked into Richard's eyes. "If you're asking me do I want you, the answer is an unqualified yes." He pulled Richard close so he could feel the result of his desire.

"Yep," Richard said breathlessly. "Me too."

Logan laughed. "I can tell."

Richard closed his eyes and turned his head away.

"No." Logan cupped his chin, forced him to look up. "Look at me."

"I'm such a clod. I'm afraid after all these years I'll implode and just go off when you touch my zipper, or that I've forgotten how to—"

"If you forget anything important, just ask." Logan took Richard's hand in his. "Which way to the bedroom?"

“Oh *dang*.” Richard let himself be pulled along as Logan exited the office and headed for a bed. Logan took the stairs two at a time while Richard muttered in halfhearted protest. At the end of the hall, he found a bedroom with a king-size bed in it.

“This one? I can't believe people don't drag you off to bed every time you set foot out the door.”

Richard pushed Logan back and took hold of the hem of his T-shirt, yanking it off over his head. “Yeah, well, fortunately for you, my personal charm is as obvious to most people as applied calculus.”

“I'm good at math.” Logan pulled Richard's shirt off as well, unveiling a fairly firm, freckly body, with a light dusting of hair.

“Yeah?” Richard slipped his hands into the back of Logan's running shorts and gave his ass a squeeze that made all the breath leave Logan's lungs in a hiss.

“Yeah, I'm kind of a geek.” He wrapped both arms around Richard and hauled him against his body.

Richard rocked his hips against Logan's in an unsubtle invitation to grind. “This feels too good to be true.”

Logan backed Richard up until his knees hit the bed, then forced him down onto it. He hefted Richard's upper body, pushing and pulling it across the unmade surface even as he humped into Richard's hips, which undulated beneath him as he maneuvered them both. “Do you have supplies? Lube and condoms?”

“Condoms?” Richard's voice sounded dazed.

Logan pushed his shorts and briefs to his knees, and Richard used his feet to help him get them off the rest of the way. They both worked on getting Richard's sweatpants out of the way as efficiently as they could. He couldn't wait to feel Richard's body against his, skin to skin. “Condoms. Do you have any?”

Richard went still beneath him. “Night table, but they've probably disintegrated. Check the expiration dates.”

Logan leaned over and looked in the neat drawer. Flashlight, aspirin, batteries, books, ChapStick, glasses. “There are two boxes.”

“The one in the back is probably newer. I buy one every three years or so, whether I need it or not.” Richard was running his fingers through Logan's short hair, and he was having a hard time concentrating on the task at hand.

Logan squinted at the writing. “I can't read this.” He tried holding it out farther, but by the time he got to the end of his reach, he gave it up as hopeless. “Can you make that out?”

Richard reached into the nightstand drawer and got a pair of half-moon reading glasses, which he set on the bridge of his nose. “It's within six months; want to chance it? I don't think I'll get pregnant.”

“I get tested every six months; I'm clean, but you don't have to trust that.” Logan realized that two middle-aged guys peering at the expiration date on a box of condoms didn't exactly have that “ooh, do me now” factor, and he laughed, leaning his forehead against Richard's. “I'm really fogging up your reading glasses here, aren't I?”

Richard slumped against him as he drew them off and tossed them onto the nightstand. “I must look—”

“So hot,” Logan whispered and touched his lips to Richard's. Richard didn't just kiss him back; Richard *surrendered*. Like *yes, I'm yours* and *yes, you win* and *yes, I give up*. It was one of the reasons he couldn't keep his hands off the man. “You know I want you. What do you say?”

“Yes,” Richard whispered back. “Yes yes yes.”

Logan grabbed a condom and a half-empty bottle of lube. He tossed them onto the side of the bed and relaxed back into the body of the man he hadn't been able to get out of his mind since he'd seen him on Halloween.

“Want you,” he whispered as he slid a hand up to brush a rose-colored nipple. It puckered under his touch, making him want to taste it. He brushed it with his tongue, and it rippled. Richard jumped and hissed.

“Oh, *Logan*.” Hands cupped Logan's face and pulled him up for a kiss. “It's been a long, long time.”

“I know; I'll go slow,” Logan reassured him. He felt Richard rumble with laughter beneath him and met his eyes. “What?”

“Sorry.” Richard bit his lip. “This time I was going to say, 'Cut to the chase.'”

Logan rolled his eyes. “Huh?” He grabbed Richard and tickled him, eliciting a squeak before he picked up the lube. “Did you just tell me to *cut the cheese*? Ew.” He flipped the cap on the lube and squeezed a generous amount onto his fingers.

Richard squeezed Logan's ass and ran a slick finger around his pucker to let him know he was going in. “You're f—uhn—” Richard moaned when Logan breached his hole.

“What was that?”

“I was going to say—” Richard arched as Logan began pumping a finger in and out of his ass. Richard shivered and licked his lips. “You're f—uhn. *Stop that...* Funny.”

“Stop this?” Logan added another finger. He watched a flush stain Richard's chest. While he was still able to think, he wanted to commit to memory how hot Richard looked while he was being fingered.

“Stop using me as a mmnh—” He gasped. “Meat puppet.”

Logan got a condom with his free hand and opened it with his teeth. “You want me to stop?” he teased, deliberately taking away his fingers. Richard's ass followed his hand, and he chuckled.

“Oh, not... *No*,” Richard murmured, trying to draw Logan back down.

Logan lined his cock up and used his slick hand to guide himself. “Tell me. Talk to me. Too much?”

“No.” Richard let out a breath and caught his lower lip between his teeth. “No, I—”

“Oh *sweet*.” Logan couldn't help sighing as he sank into Richard's tight heat. “*Sweet as you looked.*”

“Shh.” Richard put both his hands on Logan's hips and clung, trying to adjust.

Logan felt Richard's tight flesh give way beneath him, and he wanted to snap his hips. He was dying to simply let go, but he held back and eased into the tight channel, watching as the aspects of pleasure and pain fluttered across his lover's face. He could watch Richard for hours, had done, actually, as he'd slept on the armchair the night before. From the first, Logan had felt a spark strike somewhere deep inside him—the minute he heard Richard laugh—and the more he saw of him, the brighter it grew.

Richard locked his ankles around Logan's waist. Logan liked having the limber man wrapped around him, squeezing with his knees to hold on, his grip like a python's. Logan sank into Richard's body, slipping a hand around his neck to bring him in for a deep, openmouthed kiss. Richard was heat and sweat and pleasure. He quivered and clung, making the most erotic little noises deep in his throat as Logan pushed into his yielding body again and again.

"So fucking hot." Logan licked a line up Richard's neck and changed the angle of his thrusts slightly, trying to find what Richard needed.

"*There, baby,*" Richard whispered against Logan's skin. "*Shit. There. Right. There.*"

With each thrust, Logan felt Richard's body shudder. He couldn't help using the muscles of his ass to pop his hips—hard enough to lift Richard off the mattress—any more than he could help the low and guttural grunt that escaped him as he did it.

Richard's answering moan was all he needed to tell him to do it again and again. He let something loose inside of him, something new and strangely shocking, and soon they were moving against each other frantically, their rhythm perfect, as if they'd been made for each other. He balanced on one hand and found Richard's cock with the other, wet and gliding against his stomach, giving Richard some friction to hump against. He was enormously gratified to hear Richard's little cries of satisfaction as he did it, as though everything he did was just exactly what Richard needed right when he needed it.

"Oh, *Logan.*" Richard licked his dry lips, and Logan went in for more hungry kisses. "*So good.*"

Logan broke contact to breathe but hovered, sharing puffs of air as they panted, savoring the feel of Richard's lips as they barely brushed his own. Those featherlight touches sent currents of electricity traveling over every inch of his body. When Richard would have dragged him down for a deeper kiss, Logan drew back, not to tease him but to prolong the sensation of hovering over a steep drop. Every part of him was engaged, from his toes, where he dug into the mattress for traction, to the skin of his dick, encased in the condom as it slid and slipped and caught against the clenching heat of Richard's ass, to his fingers and his lips and his eyes, which never left Richard's brown gaze.

Logan felt so in tune with Richard that he wasn't surprised when the first faint tremors of orgasm pulsed through the body beneath his. He felt Richard's ass tighten on his cock, felt each

little shock wave of pleasure. Some so light, he wondered if he felt them at all. Some hard enough to nearly impede his progress as he continued to push his way deeply into Richard's tight heat. His hips snapped once, then once again, as he surrendered to his own climax. They were still straining against one another minutes later, Logan completely unable to speak, and Richard for once without the need to fill the silence.

Richard moved the palms of both his hands over the skin of Logan's back, using them to soothe, gentling him as they returned to reality. Eventually Logan rolled to the side, carefully removing his dick, holding on to the condom as he felt their flesh disconnect. He tossed the condom to the trash can next to the bed. Despite Richard's sticky chest, he pulled the man tight up against him and kissed him contentedly.

Richard did all the *n*'s right. He nuzzled, he nestled, he nipped, and right then they were necking. Logan smiled against Richard's lips.

"Mmn," Richard finally muttered. "What's so funny?"

"Not funny." Logan sighed. "It's *nice*." Another *n*.

"Yeah." Richard pressed closer. "*Yeah*."

\* \* \* \*

By the time Trina came back, cautiously poking her head through the front door and listening as if she were going to pop right back out if she could hear them having wild monkey sex upstairs, the bedding gurgled in the washer, and Logan watched as Richard puttered around the kitchen making omelets and toast. He could get very, very used to the sight. He knew that everywhere Richard went this fine day, he'd have a delicate blush, just a hint of color high on his cheeks. Knowing that he'd put it there did something funny to Logan's chest that he sincerely hoped wasn't an impending heart attack.

Every time their eyes met, he felt a little bubble of awareness pop and he had to remind himself to breathe again.

"Hi," Trina said shyly.

"Hi, Trina." He hoped his glance was casual. "Did you get what you needed?"

"Yeah." She snorted. "Did you?"

"*Young lady*," Richard called primly from the kitchen. "Are you hungry? I made enough."

"No," she replied. "I ate. I'll go develop these, and you can take a look before I leave today. I'll be in the darkroom if you need me."

"Kay, thanks." Richard came into the dining room and put two plates on the table. He went back to the kitchen and came back with juice.

"You have a darkroom?"

"The third bedroom upstairs has a huge walk-in closet. All I needed to do was put in a good ventilation system, and it's worked perfectly." Richard sat down in a chair next to his and scooted it closer so their knees touched.

"So many photographers are going digital these days." Logan felt Richard's breath stir the hair at his temple. He had to like a man who had an impulse to get that close over breakfast after sex. From what he could tell, Richard wasn't even aware he was doing it, leaning in. Zoning out a little. At one point he rested his head in his hand and just smiled a goofy smile and gazed.

Logan raised his brows.

"What?" Richard asked.

"I asked you about digital photography. Any desire to get into it, or do you like to do film photography exclusively?"

"I'll probably go to digital photography for the still photos I use, like the ones she's developing now. I have a very fine digital camera and use it to take pictures of the kids at school and things like that."

"Their yearly school pictures?" Logan ate his way through a delicious, cheesy omelet. He'd been completely unaware of how hungry he was until Richard put it down in front of him.

"No, they have a service for annual portraits. I just take pictures of events for the yearbook they put out for the sixth graders and for annual PowerPoint presentations. The principal likes to have those for assemblies."

"You're not eating?" Logan asked.

"Oh." Richard picked up his fork. "Yeah."

"So you're pretty involved in school?"

"Yes. I work at home, so I find I can squeeze in some hours every week to do volunteer work, jog-a-thon, noon duty. I do a comic-art workshop."

“Wow.”

“Yeah, well.” Richard's gaze left his for a moment, and Logan could see something flicker briefly across his face that looked like pain. “I didn't have the opportunity to do that for my own son. James was raised by his mother. I wasn't even allowed—”

“What?”

“They had sole custody; I wasn't really part of James's life. In retrospect, I should have lawyered up and pushed a lot harder, but they were so hateful. It was hardest on James. I could see that he was better off if I was out of the picture.”

“That can't be true.”

“At the time I thought it was, and there's no way to go back. I tried their so-called supervised visits, but his mother was ugly to me, and his grandparents acted as though I were some kind of sex offender. It always left James in tears.”

“I think that's the saddest thing I've ever heard.”

“He”—Richard had to steady himself, and Logan heard a catch in his voice—“he wrote me a letter years later, and we became close. He realized when Nick was born there was more to the story than what his mother and grandparents shared with him.”

Logan smiled at him. “Probably because he had a better understanding of fatherhood.”

“That's what he said.” Richard looked down at his food. “When he died, it was... You'd think because we didn't have much of a relationship that it would be easier, but I spent months in counseling trying to find a safe way to vent.”

“What did you finally do?” Logan was curious. He couldn't imagine the easygoing man currently gazing at him had ever been enraged.

Richard raised the corner of his mouth in a half smile, and his eyes went hot. Logan was almost chilled by it. He'd seen that expression before on confident soldiers and predatory animals. “I went after custody of Nick.”

Richard picked up his fork and took a bite of his omelet.

“Feels good to win,” Logan observed.

Richard shook his head. “This is one thing no one can win. It seems every couple of months the battle lines are redrawn.”



“Really?”

“Nick's mother called him just last week and promised him she'd come see his Halloween costume. She never showed. I don't give a fuck about winning; I just want him to be happy.”

Logan put an arm around Richard and gave him a squeeze. “You make Nick happy. He's a lucky boy.”

“You think?”

“I *know*. You make me happy too.”

“That's nice.” Richard's lashes swept down, hiding his thoughts. “Me too. You make me happy.”

They finished breakfast at about lunchtime and gazed at each other until Trina came down from the office and poked fun at them. In the end, Logan helped put the bedding back on Richard's bed, and they said good-bye at the front door, lingering for an extra-long and unnecessarily passionate kiss.

“Holy cow.” Richard clung to the door as Logan went down the porch steps.

Logan spun around and shot him a quick grin. “Always leave 'em wanting more.”

Richard slumped against the door frame. Logan thought he heard him mutter, “Hell yes,” as he started jogging back to his house.

## Chapter Seven

Richard's foot tapped restlessly as he worked. He had spent the previous three days drifting around on the fumes of the finest sex he'd had in...well...ever, and every so often Logan sent him e-mail to let him know he was thinking about it too. How...*high school*. He was trying not to acknowledge—even to himself—that he was photoshopping his head onto the body of the tooth fairy for another quick reply when Trina came up behind him and saw it. He couldn't close the window fast enough.

"I'm going to pretend I didn't just see that." She handed him his mail. As he searched through it, she added, "Aren't you going to cover your note with little sparkly hearts?"

"I thought you said—"

"I'm over pretending; I can't live a lie. You two have to be the cutest couple I have *ever* seen."

"I don't know if we're a couple."

"Then why did you let him have his wicked way with you. If you thought I was washing the sheets with someone I wasn't involved with—"

"Washing the sheets? You have a very vulgar way of putting things, Miss Trina."

"When I came home, you and he had the sheets in the laundry machine. *Washing the sheets*. Get your mind out of the gutter."

"Oh." He had to admit that the gutter was precisely where it had gone; he'd imagined thick ribbons of cum shooting out of Logan's cock like a funky-smelling Jackson Pollock all over his Wedgwood blue, four-hundred-thread-count—

"Hey, where are you? Or do I want to know?"

"Um." He blushed.

“Nuff said. You're at least one half of a bona fide couple. Maybe you should go over there and find out if he's the other half. No time like the present. I'll finish up that picture for you if you want.” Her dark eyes sparkled.

“Nothing doing. I don't want to even imagine what you'd send him. It's off already anyway.” He shut down the computer. “Still...no reason a guy can't jog around the neighborhood and maybe knock on a door.”

“Well, *he* certainly did that,” she agreed.

“And he mentioned that he might be doing some yard work, so he could conceivably be outside in front of his house. Working.”

“Shirtless.”

“Sweaty.”

“His muscles straining and rippling under that tanned exterior as he bends over to pull weeds.”

“You missed your calling,” he said drily.

“Romance writer? I've thought about it.”

“Pimp.” He got up quickly and left her behind in the office. “I'll be back in a bit.” He picked his keys off the hook by the door.

“Do you want me to pick up Nick from school?”

Richard froze for a minute, thinking about all the things he could get done in an entire afternoon with Logan. Well, *get done* wasn't exactly what he was... *Yes, it was.*

“No, I've got it. I've never missed a day yet,” he called back. “But maybe after I've had a chance to feel him out.”

Her head appeared at the top of the stairs. “You're going to want to tell Nick in advance if you won't pick him up.”

Richard frowned. “That's what I just said.”

“Oh.” Her eyes widened with feigned innocence. “I thought we were still doing innuendo.”

“Bye, Trina.”

“Bye.”

Richard strode out into the sunny fall day. They were enjoying the first hint of the season, celebrating with crisp, clean air. He could see the mountains from where his house sat on the highest spot of a relatively flat landscape. The wind was likely to whip up at times during the day, but the recent rains made fire unlikely. It was shaping up to be a beautiful California day.

By the time he reached Logan's single-story rambler with its walled courtyard, he had lost the thread of what he planned to say. There were large tarps on the driveway loaded with piles of trimmings, and the garage door was open.

Richard practically skidded to a stop. That had to be the cleanest, most organized garage he'd ever seen. There was nothing out of place in it. It was outfitted with shelves and Peg-Boards neatly arrayed with tools. Closed cabinets indicated there might be other things stored there, but Logan kept it immaculate. Sterile. The floor was covered with some sort of hosable slick surface in a black-and-white check. If he put a hand down, he wasn't likely to find even a speck of dust.

One bicycle hung from the wall, helmet and protective gear in a wire rack next to it. One set of skis, one snowboard. It looked lonely. For the first time, Richard realized that Logan had gone the better part of his life with the companionship of his fellow soldiers. He'd probably had a family of sorts with them, even if he'd had to be less than authentic about who he was. He'd had a lover who'd died. He'd come from a close-knit family. Now he was no longer in the service, and he'd moved here. To a new town maybe, all alone. *Why had Logan moved here?*

Richard was heading for the courtyard when he heard music drifting over the fence where a white gate stood open into the backyard. He hesitated a second and then turned and strode past it, down a long, narrow walkway that opened out into the backyard with a sudden rush of color. Bruce Springsteen wailed from Logan's boom box at maximum volume, wanting to die with his Wendy on the streets in an everlasting kiss. Logan worked with his back to the yard, raking the trimmings of a vivid carnelian bougainvillea plant. Richard's mouth went dry, and he suddenly remembered why he'd wanted to be an artist.

As Logan moved, the sweat glistened off his shoulders where it caught the sunlight. He wore nothing more than a thin pair of khaki-colored cargo shorts. They hung off his hips in a precarious, improbable way that made Richard want to watch to see if they'd fall off altogether. From his vantage point, he could see that Logan had a tattoo he hadn't noticed on the afternoon they'd made love. It seemed to be a stylized and colorful design, like a tramp stamp at the base of

his spine, with words written in bold black letters underneath it. Logan was thoroughly fuzzed, and like his short, cropped hair, some of it was going silvery gray.

“Oh holy mother,” Richard whispered under his breath when Logan started playing air guitar with the rake, singing along about highways and broken heroes. Richard thought his knees would buckle when Logan's hips pumped as he humped his guitar rake and leaned back, his shorts still defying gravity. When he got to *tramps* and *baby*, Richard was standing close enough to reach out and manhandle him into a flying tackle that would have ended in the very same kind of never-ending kiss that Bruce was singing about—with the exact same level of passion—except he'd miscalculated and jumped a *career marine*.

“*Oh fuck.*” Logan took his elbow off Richard's windpipe and slowly helped him up, dusting him down. “That's gonna bruise.”

Richard's eyes were still watering, but he'd gotten a whiff of green grass and earth on Logan's skin, and his near-death experience had only caused the blood in his veins to sing in a higher key with more enthusiasm. He hooked a hand behind Logan's head and brought him in for a scorching kiss, breaking it off only when it was *breathe* or *pass out*.

“What a rush!” He laughed against Logan's lips. “Something about you and adrenaline, I can't—”

“Come with me.” Logan took his hand and started for the patio and the sliding door that led into the kitchen. “You need ice on that.”

When Logan stopped in front of the freezer to take out the ice tray, Richard deliberately walked straight into him and slid his arms around his waist, holding him from behind. He swept his hands up and ran them over pecs, grazing nipples with an occasional nail until Logan hissed with pleasure.

“I didn't realize you had a tattoo,” Richard told him, using his voice to buzz the skin between Logan's shoulder blades to feel him quiver underneath his hands. “It's hot. What is it?”

“Marine symbol. It's more elegant than the devil dog, don't you think?”

“I love it,” Richard told him. “Can I lick it? Do you have others? Can I lick them?”

“Richard—” Logan laughed, turning in his arms.

Richard leaned into Logan, trying for more, trying to get his scent and his warmth and friction, while his mind was racing through all the sensory input. “Hot,” he said finally, sighing.

“Cold,” Logan replied.

Richard shook his head. “Don't tease; this isn't word association. I can't keep my hands off you. You make me want to just—” He emphasized his point by grinding his cock into Logan's through the thin fabric of Logan's shorts.

Logan broke the kiss. “No, really. You've pushed me into the freezer, and it's cold.”

Richard stepped back. *Smooth*. “I'm sorry.” He backed up and pulled Logan toward him.

Logan closed the freezer door. He gestured toward Richard's neck. “Are you sore?”

“I'm fine.” Richard waited breathlessly. If he'd failed to indicate what he wanted, then Logan was too dumb to... On the other hand, maybe Logan didn't want to... He squirmed under Logan's intense scrutiny.

“I don't usually go for *cute*,” Logan said finally, wrinkling his nose with distaste as he said the word.

Richard was moving toward Logan again, but he froze. “Wait, what?”

“It's never really been my thing. Every time I look at you, I think, 'That is the cutest fucking man I have ever seen.’”

“What's your point?” Richard snapped. *Could this day get any worse?* The first guy he'd—literally—thrown himself at in years had put him on the ground like a bad dog, and then he had to go and... It sounded suspiciously like he was getting kicked to the curb.

“I guess I just wanted to tell you that you're cute. What do you mean, 'what's your point'? Cute isn't a bankable commodity in the Marine Corps. We weren't real cute with each other. And you're just un-fucking-believably *adorable*. Your laughter stops my heart.” Logan frowned. “I don't do adorable either. The very word—”

“*Jeez*.” Richard slumped back against the counter.

“What?”

“That was...”

“Yeah, well...” Logan turned back to the freezer, a deep flush on his cheeks. “There you have it. I've gone cuckoo for Cocoa Puffs.”

“Logan, you... I have no blood left in my brain to think with.” Richard shook his head and tried not to laugh. “You're the first guy I've wanted in five years. Ten, really.”

Logan moved toward Richard, holding an ice pack in his hand. “Yeah?”

“*Hell yeah.*”

“That’s a good thing, right?” Logan applied the cold pack to a sensitive spot on Richard’s neck. Richard felt Logan’s breath fan his cheek. Logan was gazing down at him. *Gazing.*

“Oh...yeah.” Richard licked his lips to moisten them. “I feel like some hormonal kid.”

Logan grinned. “You act like one.”

“Logan—”

“In all the best ways.” Logan’s lips came down on Richard’s, and they clung to one another until they were both panting. “C’mom.” He led Richard farther into the house. “I need a shower.”

“Hm? I think you’re fine.” He smelled his own shirt. “You don’t mean—”

Logan pulled him into the bathroom and closed the door behind them. He pressed Richard up against it and squeezed his ass cheeks with both hands. Richard responded by wrapping his legs around Logan’s waist. “You smell delicious.” Logan rocked him suggestively back and forth. “I want you naked and wet.”

“Okay.”

“With your hands up against the tiles.”

“Yeah?”

“Mmm hmm.” Logan pulled away and set Richard down on his feet. “Get undressed.”

Richard didn’t hesitate. It wasn’t long before he turned to find Logan watching him, having shucked off his own shorts. Richard saw no sign of underwear and smiled.

“Unlike you, I didn’t go commando.” He drew off his jeans and stepped out of them. Something silly on Logan’s face made him do a little bump and grind, and when that got an immediate hard swallow, he did it again. He grinned. “Like what you see?”

“You know I do.”

Richard’s eyes took in Logan’s darkly engorged cock. “I do now.”

Logan opened the glass door, and they stepped into the large space. The size of the stall indicated that it had been designed to house either a shower or a bathtub, and Richard was delighted to see the space had been refurbished and, unlike his own almost fifty-year-old showers, had multiple spray jets and a handheld hose nozzle. It was perfectly pristine—elegant,

even—with marble walls and stone floors and built-in shelves to hold potions. *The perfect place for good, clean fun.*

Logan held the nozzle away and adjusted the water temperature.

“This okay?” he asked, using jets of water to massage Richard's shoulders as fine spray misted them from all sides.

“This is probably the nicest shower I've ever been in.”

“It's nicer with you here. Hands on the tile.” Logan's voice rumbled next to the skin just below Richard's ear, and Richard wanted to lean back, maybe get more contact as he complied, but Logan's face was gone, and Richard could hear him fumbling with something behind him on one of the shelves.

Logan's hand wrapped around his hip and pulled him back, so that holding himself upright was a little harder, a little more precarious. He felt Logan's feet nudge his apart, and while Logan mouthed the top of his shoulder blade, a hand cupped and squeezed his buttocks. Fingers coated with cool gel found his opening, and Richard gave himself up to the sensation of hot water and hotter man and tried to relax. Logan's loose hand stroked his chest and slipped down to cup his balls. Richard laid his head back on Logan's shoulder and felt every nuance of Logan's breathing against his skin.

A sound escaped Logan's lips when Richard pressed back against his hand, asking for more. Richard heard the crackle of a condom package, felt the tension in Logan's jaw as he tore it open with his teeth.

“You feel so good,” Logan murmured as his hand disappeared to put the condom on.  
“So—”

“You keep your shower pretty fully prepared,” Richard remarked.

Logan's hand stilled. “Is that a problem?”

“No, I—” Richard turned to look Logan in the eye. “No.”

It seemed that no one moved for a long time; water poured down. Richard's erection was throbbing and cold, no longer in Logan's hand.

“I have sensitive skin,” Logan told him. “I keep waterproof lube in the shower because anything else...”



“You don't have to explain,” Richard said quickly. “It's not my business.”

“Yes, it is.”

Richard changed the subject. “So our tough soldier has sensitive skin?”

“It turns out that only my neck is leather.”

“It's all right, you know.” Richard turned back around and spread himself again. He placed his palms flat against the wall. “I only said something because suddenly I felt nervous.”

“Nervous?” Logan pressed his lips to the side of Richard's neck. “Are you sure this is what you want?”

Richard nodded. He didn't trust himself to speak. He felt Logan's erection slip and slide along the delicate skin of his perineum and shivered, arching his spine, begging for more contact, some penetration. Just more of anything from the man who made his flesh throb and his body feel hot and cold all over.

Logan fingered him a minute and lined up. “Here, okay?”

Richard dragged a breath of moist air into his lungs through his mouth, then licked his lips. “Mm. Go.”

Logan leaned in, barely breaching Richard's channel. He'd been thinking about taking Richard like this since he'd first laid eyes on him. He'd clammed up when Richard remarked on his level of preparation, but truth be told, since he'd met the man on Halloween, he hadn't had a shower when he didn't jerk off to the image of Richard doing *exactly* what he was doing right then. Who could explain attraction? Richard was different from every man he'd ever been with, but still—he made Logan's heart skip a beat. There. He'd allowed himself to think it. And even if he wasn't about to go all goofy and say it again, he could take advantage of the fact that his fantasy man had, for some inexplicable reason, become his real-life shower buddy.

*And what a fantasy.*

Richard burned like fire, consuming Logan everywhere he touched. Just then Richard was leaning over, clinging to the wall, and arching to take Logan's cock, every bit he could get, inside his hot, tight body. The way that water danced off their skin felt like sparks flying, like Logan welded himself to Richard with every thrust. Logan's hands slipped sublimely over the skin of

Richard's back. He closed his eyes and curled his arms around Richard's chest, holding him tight and steady while he pumped in and out.

Richard pushed back, and Logan surged forward, sinking balls deep into that perfect ass. That it was attached to Richard, well...that was *important*, even when he would normally only be thinking about the ass in question itself. He had thought he could put it down to his late, great, unfortunate dry spell, but holding Richard now, finding their rhythm together, he admitted it. Whatever it was they had, it was not only about sex.

Richard was all slick skin and sweet cries and surrender. His body was tight yet comfortable. Logan bit his lip and concentrated on what he was experiencing. He let himself drown in the sensations of shower and skin and the push/pull of Richard's tight ass around his cock. He jerked his hips back and shot them home again, driving into Richard so hard, he felt his balls slap Richard's with a wet *thud*. Richard made some kind of a noise, a kind of *ahahah*, that was high-pitched—almost warbling—as Logan held his hips in a crushing grip and let loose.

Then there was nothing between them but water and lube and the thinnest barrier of latex, and suddenly Logan was thinking ahead, wondering what might happen if Richard were his—if they trusted each other enough to know they were safe together and nothing had to come between them at all. He slid a hand down and fisted Richard's cock, pressing his thumb enthusiastically into the slit.

Richard's cries changed from *ahahah* to *yes yes yes*, and his whole damned body jerked when he came. Richard's muscles jumped, his head dropped forward to rest against the tile as Logan filled the latex. He brought a hand up to pull Logan's mouth down for a kiss. Logan pressed them both into the cold marble wall and held Richard there, panting, not at all certain that Richard could stand without his aid. He wasn't entirely sure he could either.

Logan pushed his hands through Richard's wet hair from behind to drag it off his forehead. Both hands cupped Richard's face as they shared the sweetest, longest kisses of Logan's life.

“Okay?” Richard's laughter rumbled under his fingertips and all through his body before it rang off the walls of the shower and made Logan's chest feel like it was expanding exponentially and contracting at the same time.

“Maybe.” Richard nestled into Logan's body, pressing back, rubbing their cheeks together until Richard's light stubble burned the skin of Logan's face. He let Richard up off the wall and

helped him get rinsed. While he was soaping himself up, Richard turned Logan's face toward his and frowned. "You're all red there."

Logan kissed him gently. "You're going to need to shave more often if you don't want me to look like I have road rash all the time."

"I'm sorry."

"No big. Like I said, I have sensitive skin. My family used to send huge boxes of stuff for me. Big jars of Vaseline. I took some ribbing for that."

"I'll bet."

"My younger sister was the best. We have similar issues. It's gotten worse as I've aged. It wasn't that bad in Iraq, but in Afghanistan during Enduring Freedom, the heat and dry air really took its toll." He stepped out and handed Richard a towel.

"Are you always this talkative after sex?" Richard asked.

"Am I talkative? Not really, no. I don't think so. I've never really thought about it. Does it seem like I am?" When Richard rolled his eyes, Logan frowned. "What?"

Richard shook his head and laughed, drying himself off briskly. Being pressed up against a marble wall didn't do much for his self-esteem. His now cold and wrinkly dick was disappearing. "I have to pick Nick up at two seventeen."

Logan blinked. "Who picked that particular minute?"

"I don't know. It has something to do with the amount of time teachers are supposed to spend teaching in a year. The reason I mentioned it is because I wondered if we had time for a nap."

"A nap?"

"Yep." Richard flung the edge of his towel around one side of Logan and caught it on the other side, pulling him in for a kiss. "A nap. Skin to skin. Drowsy. Warm. See what comes up. A *nap*."

"Ah." He picked up his watch from where he'd left it on the counter. "It's eleven."

"Perfect. I'll shave if you have a new disposable."

“I do.” Logan opened a drawer. “Here, take your pick. I also have”—he looked down at the assortment of travel-sized things he bought and kept around for the occasional one-night stand—“other stuff.”

“Wow.” Richard picked out a razor and a tiny can of shaving cream. “Trick or treat.”

Logan felt his face heat up. “I—”

“I didn't mean anything by that,” Richard said gently. “It doesn't matter when it's us. We're the only ones here, okay?”

Logan nodded. He wasn't about to tell Richard that he'd toss the whole drawer and let him put his stuff in there for good. “Sure.”

Richard held up the razor. “I'll get to it, then.”

“I'm going to go lock up the back gate and put away my tools. I'll be back.”

Once alone in the bathroom, Richard spread the shave cream over his skin. It only took a few minutes to shave, so he tidied up after himself and exited into what he assumed was the master bedroom. *Another tidy, Spartan room.* It was elegantly furnished with solid, well-constructed pieces that showed clean lines and quality joinery. The linens had a nautical theme that struck Richard as kind of broody. Not a good sail on a clear, sunny day, but a glide out on water, dark before a storm. There were photographs on the dresser of several men and women of varying ages in uniform. He picked up an older picture of an attractive woman just as he heard footsteps coming up behind him.

“My mother,” Logan said, taking it from him and putting it back on the dresser. He caught Richard by the hand and led him to the bed. “Wait until I tell her about you.”

Richard wanted to reach over and turn the photo so it wasn't staring at them. “Good or bad?”

“I don't know.” Logan slid under the sheets and moved toward the center of the king-size bed, and Richard got in after him. They settled comfortably together—automatically almost—and Richard reflected on how well he and Logan fit together. He was just the right size to rub their feet together and still stick his face into Logan's neck and fall asleep, which he was very much about to do if he weren't mistaken. Apparently Logan had gotten over talking and was content to cup Richard's face in one of his large hands and smooth a thumb over the newly

shaven skin of his cheek. Richard felt his eyelids dragging down, heavier and heavier, until his sated body curled into Logan's and he fell asleep. The last thing he saw was those astonishing blue eyes, open and watching him thoughtfully.

## Chapter Eight

Richard woke up on a cloud of dull languor and contentment. He rested on his side with Logan's arm around him. He was raking his fingers gently through Logan's pubes.

“What are you doing?”

“Dunno.” Richard pressed his face into Logan's armpit. “Petting you?”

“Keep it up.”

“And what?”

Logan nudged up with his hips so his thickening cock brushed Richard's hand.

“Ah.” Richard moved his hand lower and brushed Logan's balls lightly with the tips of his fingers.

“Wanna go for a ride?” Logan leered at him. “Saddle up.”

“Yours, sir, appears to be a western-style saddle.” He demonstrated by gripping the horn. “And it appears to be leaking.”

“Mount up, smart-ass.”

Richard grinned, but instead of hoisting a leg over, which he knew he'd end up doing eventually, he slid down the bed and buried his face in the junction of Logan's thighs. He nuzzled around for a minute, getting appreciative noises, and then nosed into Logan's ball sac. He raised his head. “Is saliva a problem? Does it burn your skin?”

Logan's jaw was slack, and for a minute Richard thought he didn't hear. “Probably a little, but do *not* let that stop you.”

“All right,” Richard murmured as his licked the sensitive, wrinkled skin. He took the globes into his mouth and let them pop back out, stretching Logan's scrotum a little. He pushed behind them to nip at the strip of skin leading to Logan's puckered hole and teased his way there, all the while listening for clues. Some guys...well. Some he wouldn't be doing this with—at

all—and some didn't like it, but from what he could tell, Logan didn't mind too much. He dared to put the tip of his tongue on the rose-colored flesh, just to see if—

“*Fuck.*” Logan barked so loudly that Richard jumped. “*Jeez.*”

“No good?”

For an answer, Logan grabbed his head in a grip that could only have come from years of holding on to a football and held him there. *Not like that was a bad thing.* Richard grinned against the hot, damp skin.

Logan was going to get rimmed like no one had ever been rimmed before. While, at forty-five, Richard knew he was getting a little gray and his downtime was probably longer and his uptime was...well...not long enough, Richard also knew without a doubt that he could keep this up for hours. And his secret weapon? *He wanted to.*

Richard began by using his lips to tease and excite the delicate tissue surrounding Logan's tightly puckered hole, light, fluttery brushes that had Logan pushing toward him even as he drew his lips away. Then Richard tongued him, lapping over the wrinkled skin. Logan's hands left Richard's head, and he fisted the sheets as his hips undulated beneath Richard's mouth in an effort to get more sensation. When Richard's tongue finally breached his ass, the payoff was instant and gratifying; Logan choked out a sound that was somewhere between *guh* and a sob, and then he grabbed his cock, pumping in cadence with Richard's tongue thrusts.

Richard caught one of Logan's hands and entwined their fingers. “I can make you come just like this.” He looked up. “Permission to try, *sir?*”

Logan gazed at Richard's face in confusion and then he grinned. He let go of his dick and sank a little lower as he gripped the headboard with his free hand. “Permission is so...*granted.*”

Logan went wild when Richard thrust with his tongue. Nature had definitely helped him out with that; he had a fairly long and mobile tongue, and more than once it had come in handy. Here, with Logan, he discovered a new thrill: he could lift his head every so often and gaze up past Logan's body—which even given his age and his body's few flaws was still perfectly fucking perfect—and see the man's eyes watching him. It was like sinking into a warm tub with a glass of wine.

“If you still wanna ride, you may need to—”

“Nah ah,” Richard murmured against Logan's ass, ratcheting the tension up just that much further. Logan clutched at Richard's hand now, and Richard thought all he had to do was hum a little and Logan would shoot.

“Mmn,” he sang into the skin beneath his lips. He continued, first making simple noises for the sake of vibrations, and then he began to hum something, a song that was stuck in his head.

“Holy—” Logan's hips shot straight up, and the first jets of cum ribboned from his dick. “*Richard.*”

Richard lifted his face from Logan's ass and slipped a finger in to stroke him as he rode out the waves of his climax. “Logan,” Richard replied. “You're so...” He lapped and nipped Logan's cock—which was probably getting sensitive even as he scooted up Logan's body and tasted the fluid collecting on his stomach.

“I can get a washcloth and wipe you down,” he murmured. “Do you have anything you want me to rub into your skin?”

“There's a jar in the nightstand.” Richard moved in for a kiss that was all the more intimate because Logan would taste his own spunk.

“I'll be right back.” Richard got up and went to the bathroom. He got a washcloth damp and brought both it and a dry hand towel back to where Logan still lay dazed and sleepy looking on the bed.

“Thanks.” Logan watched Richard take gentle swipes over his skin.

“Nick's skin is delicate, has been since he was a baby. He's allergic to nickel. I know that if he gets a rash, it has to be cleaned constantly of irritants and dried thoroughly. A moisture barrier helps. His mother never—” Richard pursed his lips and said nothing more.

Logan frowned. “His mother never what?”

“She didn't get that.” He patted the area dry. Leaning over the side of the bed, he opened the nightstand drawer and felt for moisturizer and a condom. “I was thinking that since technically only one of our cannons is loaded, so to speak, it's up to you to figure out how to—Holy fuck!” Richard jumped off the bed when his hand encountered something that could only—by its metallic feel, shape, size, and weight—be a gun.



“What?” Logan shot off the bed and looked in the drawer. Richard could see the tension in Logan's muscles; he marveled at the instantaneous transition from love-drunk and languid to battle ready. “Did you get cut?”

“No.” Richard backed away. Any possibility of an erection was gone as completely as if it had never existed. He strode to the bathroom on autopilot and began to dress.

Logan followed him. “What is it? Talk to me.”

Richard was incapable of speech; he looked at Logan's watch where it still lay on the counter next to the bathroom sink. *Shit!* Two ten.

“I have to go,” he told Logan. “I have to pick up Nick.”

“I'm so sorry. I meant to set the alarm. Wait.” Logan caught Richard's hand. “If you wait two minutes, I can give you a ride to the school.”

“No.” Richard pulled his hand away. “I can't. I can't do this.” He ran out the door, leaving Logan there staring after him.

Logan stood in his bedroom watching the afternoon sunlight sift through the miniblinds over his bed. *What the fuck happened?* One minute Richard had his tongue shoved so far up Logan's ass that he felt it in his heart, and the next—

He walked to the nightstand. The still-open drawer looked neat; there was nothing sharp that could have cut Richard. No hot porn or anything. He took out the jar of moisturizer he kept handy for when his skin acted up and...

The gun.

“Oh for fuck's sake,” Logan muttered. He raked a hand through his short hair and slammed the drawer closed.

\* \* \* \*

Fifteen minutes later, Richard was a sweaty mess. By the time he made it to school, the major crowds of parents had come and gone. He noticed Trina's car driving up to the valet area in front of the office and cursed under his breath. He waved at her to wait and entered the office, where he found Nick huddled in a chair alternately wiping away tears and glaring mutinously around him.

"I'm so sorry I'm late, little man." He squatted on his haunches before the boy. "Trina's outside with the car. Did you call her?"

"Yes," Nick said crossly.

"I'm not that late, you know."

"You didn't answer your phone."

"No." Richard looked up at the office secretary, who was trying not to watch their little drama play out. "I'm sorry. I didn't think I'd be gone so long; I went for a run, and then I saw Logan doing yard work...and—"

"You've never, *ever* been late before." Nick's eyes filled with tears.

Richard sighed. "No. I haven't."

"You *promised*."

"I'm here," Richard told him. He didn't think that Nick wanted to be grabbed up for a hug, so he kept his distance, but he wasn't really happy about it. He sure as shit would squeeze the kid and fawn all over him the minute they got home, though. He'd let something distract him from what was most important. He'd dropped the ball.

Nick sniffed at him. He stood and grabbed up his backpack, saying nothing as he stalked out the door.

He heard a throat clear behind him. "Richard, can I talk to you for a sec?"

Richard turned to find Principal Charlotte Tachler behind him. "Sure, Charlotte. Let me just tell Trina I'll be out in a minute, okay?"

"That's fine. Come back to the office."

Richard nodded. He walked out of the office and past the benches where children sometimes waited when their parents were late. He knew that after a certain time, they'd be rounded up and required to wait for their parents inside, a precaution against the ugly world of predators. There were three boys there, two of whom looked like brothers, but they didn't seem to be worried that their parents hadn't shown up yet. They were poring over some kind of book of video-game codes.

No, probably only Nick could be so severely traumatized by his absence. Nick, who was already pouting in the backseat of Trina's Honda Civic. Trina got out and peered at him over the roof.

"He called," she said helplessly.

"I screwed up," he informed her. "It won't happen again."

"What?"

"Never mind; the principal wants a quick word. Can you two wait here for a minute?"

She nodded. "Sure."

"I'll be back." He turned and reentered the building, then walked straight into the principal's private office without knocking, because the door was open. There were some advantages of being an active parent volunteer.

"Close the door," she told him, and he did. He studied her face. It really didn't matter how long he'd been out of elementary school; the principal's office still gave him the willies. It didn't help that he was sitting in a smaller, lower chair than hers. One he was dead certain she'd picked for the very reason that it made her seem a towering figure, as if he were at the bottom of a microscope on a slide.

He tried breaking the tension. "Have I been bad?"

"Of course not, Richard. We had a visitor at school today who said she wanted to see Nick and take him for lunch." Charlotte scratched her thumb over her desk blotter while he processed that.

"What?" He leaned forward. "*What?* Who?"

"She said she was his mother. She had a young man with her. Her identification checked out."

"I have a copy of the custody papers on file here, Charlotte, if you're telling me you let her take him out of this school—"

"Calm down, Richard. Of course we didn't let her take him." Richard watched her closely as she picked up a pencil and tapped it on the desk. She seemed to be choosing her words carefully. "But I was afraid she'd cause a scene. I had the police on the way just in case. She was very agitated but remained respectful. I wanted to tell you because...I thought the young man she

was with seemed to be under the influence, and I was concerned. I'm afraid they weren't here long enough for the police to arrive. Nick doesn't know. Was I right to be concerned?"

"Hell yes," Richard told her. "Lila might be using again. I don't know how many times this makes that she's relapsed, if she is."

"I'm sorry." Charlotte remained still.

"She knows she's not supposed to come to the school. All visits are carefully coordinated and supervised. I'll have to let my attorney know. Can you give me a number where he can reach you?"

"Yes." Charlotte took out her card and wrote something on it, then handed it over the desk to him. "That's my cell. I try to think the best of everyone, Richard, and I work with a lot of different types of parents: low income, rehab, people who have been hard up against it or made lousy decisions. Your daughter's boyfriend was trouble, and if they'd come when all the other parents come after school instead of trying to sign Nick out for lunch..." She didn't have to tell Richard that the teachers didn't worry about who left with whom after school.

"She's my son's ex-wife. They divorced when Nick was just a baby," Richard corrected. He didn't hold it against Charlotte that she didn't remember every single thing she'd ever read or heard about each kid's family.

"I see. I'm glad to hear it, really."

"Why?"

She grinned. "Because I like you, and I wanted to like them but couldn't."

"Thanks." Impulsively he put a hand over the desk for her to shake. He wanted to feel like they were in the business of protecting Nick together. "I need you on my side if it's going to get ugly. She's showing some interest in him again, which happens in cycles, usually when she's drinking or tweaking again, and I—" His throat closed over the thought of having to fight Nick's mother all over again.

"I am on your side. Have your lawyer call me. I want him on speed dial."

"Thank you." He felt absurdly grateful as he walked to the door of her office, especially when she came around her desk and gave him a firm hug.

“Be careful.” She kept a firm grip on his shoulders as they broke apart. “Do you have a security system on your house?”

He nodded.

“It might be a good idea to use it.”

He left the office feeling worse than ever. As he folded himself into the front seat of Trina's car, he tried to put on a bright smile. Nick and Trina were singing along to an Avril Lavigne song, so he took the opportunity to look out the window and let his mind drift for a minute.

He'd fled from Logan's house in terror. There wasn't a hope in hell he'd ever be able to go back there, knowing that Logan was armed and kept his weapons in places like his damned nightstand. Never mind taking Nick over there. That was patently out of the question. He was already the neighborhood oddball for grilling Nick's friends and their parents about whether they kept guns in their homes.

His reaction to feeling that gun under his fingers had been so shocking and visceral that he'd immediately lost his erection. *So sexy, that.* All he could think of at that moment was finding Nick and getting him home to their house where they'd be safe. Then he got to school only to find out that Nick's mother, Lila, was trying to do an end run around their custody agreement. *Again.* Richard's palms itched with sweat.

When they arrived at the house, Richard couldn't stop himself from looking around nervously. He didn't want a confrontation, but if Lila was going to violate their custody agreement, things would get ugly fast. He was glad to see that no one was waiting for them, yet he had a fierce stab of regret when he thought of Logan. He'd have liked to see Logan's face just then. Odd how the man made him want to reach out, grab on, and never let go.

At Richard's age, he had one thing in his favor. Real regret wasn't new.

\* \* \* \*

“Nick?”

Richard looked over the bubbling pot at his grandson, who was doing his homework and studiously ignoring him.

“Shall I pour the sauce over the spaghetti, or do you want half sauced and half butter and cheese?”

Nick remained silent.

Richard turned off the stove and walked around the island to sit at the table across from Nick.

“Eventually, you will tell me what's bugging you. Why not cut to the chase?”

Nick raised sullen eyes to his. He gave a long, slow blink and then went back to his homework.

“You know, you're about four years too early for that crap.” Richard got back up and put spaghetti on two plates. He deliberately sauced Nick's completely and left his own like a perfect *taiji* symbol of artfully arranged creamy white and red pasta. He put their plates down and prepared himself to eat. Nick raised his eyebrows when he saw Richard's pasta, but still said nothing.

Richard was carefully excavating as much of the red slurpy stuff as he could without mixing it with the white when Nick blurted out, “Trina said you were with Logan and lost track of the time. And I hate it sauced.”

Wordlessly Richard exchanged their plates, and Nick looked marginally appeased, even a little ashamed.

“I could be held up in traffic, and you can't blow your cool.”

“This never happened before *he* came along.”

Richard took a sip of his iced tea. “Who?”

Nick rolled his eyes. “Crazy Soldier Guy. That's who.”

“He loves that you call him that.”

“Logan,” Nick amended.

“That's right.” Richard watched Nick absorb this.

“Were you with Logan?”

“Yes. We were at his house.”

“You lost track of time?”

“I fell asleep.”

Nick snorted. "He must be pretty boring."

"No comment." Richard forked up another spiral of spaghetti.

"Rick?"

"Mmmhmm?"

"Did he kiss you like guys kiss girls on television?"

How Richard kept his food in his mouth was destined to be one of the great mysteries of his life. He pulled his napkin up from his lap just in case.

"Does it seem odd to you? That a man would kiss another man that way?"

Nick's lip curled. "It seems odd to me that a guy would want to kiss *anyone* like that."

Richard shook his head. "Someday you might change your mind."

"Will I want to kiss a guy or a girl, do you think?" Nick attacked the cheese pasta with a new vigor.

"I don't know. That's kind of a personal thing. Everybody has to decide for themselves."

"I know for sure there's no one at school I'd kiss, even for a candy bar."

Rick had difficulty keeping a straight face. "I've been to your school, and I'd have to say I agree." He was so grateful Nick was talking again that he didn't even ding him for using his jeans as a napkin. "While I'm doing the dishes, you need to get the rest of your homework done."

"Okay." Nick frowned. "I did get scared, you know? When you weren't there."

"I'm so sorry, Nick." Richard cuffed his arm lightly.

Nick still had a little grudge going; Richard could see it in the set of his shoulder as he returned to his books. But his glacially cold shoulder was thawing out a little.

Richard was just drying the dishes when the doorbell rang. He opened it with Nick jumping around and peering out from behind him to discover Logan there.

"Oh." Nick turned around and headed back for the kitchen. "It's *you*."

"*Nick*," Richard warned.

"Sorry." Nick didn't turn back.

Richard turned to the man standing on his doorstep. Everything that had transpired between them that afternoon came vividly to his mind. He felt his entire body heat up.

Logan cleared his throat. "I brought ice cream." He held up a bag.

"That is just shameless." Richard couldn't help his smile.

"Let me in, Richard, okay?"

Richard stood in the doorway with the knob in his hand. He'd had a lot of time to think that afternoon. He didn't know how he'd live with the gun thing. He wasn't ready to give up his principles, and he did *not* want to go back to Logan's house. He would never take Nick there. He was more conflicted than he'd ever been, but he was also very much afraid the decision had been taken out of his hands sometime earlier that day when his heart had slammed against his rib cage and informed him that Logan was *the one*. And it was a cinch that Logan wasn't armed tonight, because his clothes fit him like a glove and there was no place he could be hiding a gun. Richard's eyes swept down. *But the man was sure packing*. Against his better judgment, Richard stepped back, and Logan strode in.



## Chapter Nine

Maybe, Richard thought as he watched Logan try to interact with Nick, the man wasn't perfect. Maybe. Nick was being a pill, and Logan was obviously concerned and hurt that he wasn't being accepted, even hero-worshipped the way he had been the last time he'd visited. To his credit, Logan remained patient and cheerful, keeping the atmosphere light everywhere except the space immediately surrounding Nick.

Richard returned from putting the ice cream into the freezer when he overheard Logan ask Nick if he wanted to play the video game they'd played before.

Nick turned away. "I beat that game."

"Did you?" Logan sounded genuinely pleased. "That looked like it was going to be tough."

"It was no big deal," Nick told him. "I already sent the mailer back for another one."

"Cool."

Silence filled the room as Richard stepped in. "Logan brought us some ice cream. Extreme Moose Tracks. We can have that as a snack before your shower if you want. Did you finish your homework?"

Nick gave him a look that implied *I know what you're up to*. "Yes."

"How about some chess?" Logan frowned slightly and looked over Nick's head at Richard. Richard shrugged.

"Nah." Nick sat there with his arms folded.

Logan tried again. "Well—"

Nick got up. "I'm going to go take my shower now," he said to the room, without looking at anyone.

Logan's eyes widened, and he again looked at Richard.

"Okay, no ice cream?"

"I don't think so." Nick headed for the stairs. "Night."

"Night," Logan said carefully.

"Night, Nick. Be sure and check your nose; I think you just cut it off to spite your face." Richard tried not to laugh.

Nick walked faster and then thundered up the stairs.

Logan turned to Rick. "What. The. Hell?"

Richard put his hands through his hair, blew out a big breath, and relaxed. "That, my friend, was the power of the pissed-off nine-year-old boy."

"Did I—"

"No. And yes. I was late to pick him up at school today, and he found out it was because I was with you and I lost track of time."

"So he's jealous?" Logan frowned. "That's not normal, is it? If I acted like that, my dad would have put my head through a wall. Did you tell him shit happens and he needs to suck it up?"

Richard decided Logan was not perfect after all. He stood up and went to the kitchen for the ice cream, giving himself time to think. He heard Logan's measured footsteps behind him.

"Does this mean you're not going to see me anymore? Are you going to give him that kind of power?" Logan's blue eyes were troubled.

Richard put both hands on the counter and leaned, a sign Nick and Trina would have recognized as his "I'm gathering my patience" posture. Logan wasn't in the know, so Richard cut him some slack.

"I think I need to fill you in on some stuff," Richard told him stiffly.

Logan looked down. "Sorry, none of my business, I know."

"Well, as to that," Richard said, "that's not entirely true. I don't normally let Nick act like a snot to my friends."

"That's good to know."

"There are extenuating circumstances." Richard listened for the sound of running water and then prayed that Nick wasn't sophisticated or determined enough to turn it on and then come back down to eavesdrop. "When Nick was born, his mother went into a tailspin of depression

and anxiety and started using drugs. She often left him in his crib, untended, until my son got home from work. Once or twice he cried so long and hard that the neighbors called the police. She was in and out of trouble with Child Protective Services almost from the day he was born. They were divorced when Nick was only a year old. My son held it together, doing whatever they told him to do to keep Nick from being put into foster care, and it wasn't easy."

"I didn't know."

"How could you know?" Richard asked. "When Nick was three, Lila was pretty much out of the picture. There was a good Montessori school, and I paid for Nick to go there. James was doing well in his job, supervising construction in a kitchen-remodel company. He was just starting to take out a nice girl. He was in a fatal motorcycle accident, and he never made it to pick up Nick at the school one day. It was hours before they could locate me, and I was the only one on the contact list."

"Oh fuck." Logan put a hand on Richard's arm. "I'm so sorry."

"That was just the beginning. All hell broke loose. It took nearly a year to get custody of Nick from his mother, who was using. I had to go through her parents and Nick's grandmother. They tried every low thing they could think of. It took Lila, Nick's mom, passing out with a cigarette in her hand and the resulting fire to get people to listen to me. Her parents don't want her back or her child. They like him, they want a monthly visit, but they're not going to raise him. My—James's mother has other children and grandkids. She's good to him but doesn't want to raise him. Everyone else..." Richard put his hands up helplessly.

"So you stepped up."

"I *love* him. Every molecule. Every hair. Every shitty little comment that comes out of his mouth." Richard turned around and allowed Logan to see the emotion he felt.

"I'm—"

"There is nothing I wouldn't do for that boy. Nothing I wouldn't sacrifice. Nothing I wouldn't bear. I got to the school today, and he was crying. Not jealous but *scared*. He's afraid I'm going to disappear too, and he thinks I'm the last person on this earth who loves him and his only chance at happiness. I haven't been very successful at helping him over that. It's probably true."

"I'm sorry. I didn't have a clue."

“Of course not. I'm only just telling you now.” Richard shook off his emotions a little and got down bowls for ice cream. He automatically took three bowls from the cupboard and three spoons from a drawer. “I never imagined I'd have this...situation, for lack of a better word. I'm in my midforties. Not exactly the cream of the crop. I don't go out. I don't date. I don't even go in for the Internet. I live for Nick, I work at home, and I volunteer.”

Richard leaned in as Logan slipped his hands around his waist and gave him a bit of a hug. “It's all right.”

“I cannot let him down. He has to come first. I have to give him that power. He needs it to feel safe.” Richard found the ice-cream scoop in another drawer and held it in both hands for a moment, warming it.

“Feeling safe is important.”

“It's taken years to earn his trust, and he still has nightmares.”

Logan nodded. “I can understand that.”

“Can you?” Richard sighed. “It won't be fair to anyone I date. I won't be caught in the middle. I'm very clear about my mission here.”

“Are you saying you won't see me?”

“Nick comes first—always.”

“I can live with that,” Logan said softly, taking the ice-cream scoop from Richard's hands.

“You have no idea what you're saying. It's not something you can just declare. You need to take a lot of time to think about it; you have to mean it.” Richard watched Logan dish up the ice cream, pushing blobs of it into the blue-and-white bowls until they were generous and even.

“I will think about it. I know what you mean. Of course I mean it *now*, but that's not a commitment, is it? And that's what you're going to need. What he needs.”

“What he deserves,” Richard whispered. “Despite the fact that he's acting like a shit. I scared him today. And there are other things. Things that scare me as well.”

“What?” Logan stopped what he was doing.

“When I got back to the school, the principal told me Nick's mom and her new boyfriend showed up wanting to take Nick out of school for lunch.”

Logan put down the ice-cream scoop and turned. “Take him *out* of the school?”

“Yes. And unsupervised visits are specifically not allowed in our agreement, legally. The school sent them away, but the principal, Charlotte...” Richard didn't necessarily want to tell Logan how worried he was, but at the same time, he did. It would feel so good to have an ally, but it was a lot to expect.

“Charlotte what?”

“Charlotte thought the boyfriend looked like trouble.” He lowered his voice so Logan had to lean in to hear it. “She thought they might have been high, so she called the police in case they made trouble. They left before the cops could get there. She advised me to use the security system.”

Logan gripped Richard's arm. “Do you think you or Nick are in danger?”

“I don't think so, no. But I have to take precautions.”

“Damned right you do. This house would be a piece of cake to break into.”

“What?”

“Sash windows on the ground floor, all with flimsy locks. Sliders I could lift off the tracks and remove if I wanted to. At least you have a system.” Richard followed along as Logan started toward the front door to examine the lock there. Nick, still wet and surly looking, came down in his nightclothes.

“Hey, little man.” Richard noticed Nick hesitating on the stairs. “We dished you up a bowl. You can't go to bed without having a little.”

“I guess,” Nick growled.

“You can put it in the freezer if you aren't going to eat it until tomorrow.”

Nick started for the kitchen. “I'll eat it.”

Richard glanced up and saw Logan's lips twitch the beginning of a smile.

“It puts a different spin on things,” Logan remarked casually.

“It does.”

Logan sighed. “It seems to me that keeping you safe is mission critical.” He bent over and examined the lock on the door. “This looks good, but I can come over tomorrow and change the window locks. And you need those things you use on sliders—if you don't have them—to prevent them from being lifted off the track. Do you keep a weapon?”

“No.” Richard shuddered.

Logan stilled. “That’s what it was this afternoon, wasn’t it? The gun?”

Richard nodded reluctantly.

“I store the clip separately. There was nothing chambered. The safety was on.”

“One bogeyman at a time, please.”

Logan put a hand on Richard’s arm and patted it gently. “Sure.”

Nick’s voice came from behind them. “I brought your ice cream, Rick. I couldn’t carry them all.” Logan hid his smile again and took off for the kitchen.

“Thank you.” Richard ruffled Nick’s hair before taking the bowl. “Logan can get his own.”

Once inside the kitchen, Logan stared at the bowl. Richard was right. He had no business saying he could live with Richard’s commitment to Nick. If he were honest with himself, he had no concept what it meant. He’d never had a child. He didn’t pretend to know what parents felt for their children. He didn’t know if he was capable of that, or even if he wanted to be.

*And that kid. Wow. What a handful.*

Nick had rotten luck, for sure, on the parent front. Logan couldn’t imagine; his own parents were firm, but genuine and loving. They still made time for him, for his siblings, and all the offspring. Growing up, he’d never known what it meant to be afraid, except when his father was actively deployed in a combat zone. Even then he’d had his mother’s strength and love. He’d never even once imagined living in a world without family.

Logan spooned a bit of ice cream into his mouth, allowing the cold to wash over his tongue as it melted. He’d been in some pretty crappy places, seen what war could do, how orphans barely survived the ravages of violence and disease. He’d been in service to his country for over twenty years, and he was between gigs now. It couldn’t hurt him to help a man protect his family.

“Logan?” He heard Richard’s voice behind him.

“Yeah, here.” Logan picked up his bowl and went toward the sound. He found Nick and Richard eating their ice cream in the living room and sat down next to Richard.

“You okay?” Richard brushed his hand over Logan’s back.

“Just thinking.”

"I'm sorry." Richard lowered his eyes. "I dumped a whole lot on you at once."

"You were right. It's a lot to take in." He glanced over at Nick, who was busy putting a DVD into the player.

Richard nodded toward the television. "We're going to watch an episode of *Doctor Who*. You want to join us?"

"Who is Dr. Who?" Logan asked. He had a vague idea, but based on the scandalized look on Nick's face, he was going to pay for that.

"You don't know who Dr. Who is?" Nick turned and raised a supercilious brow. "Where have you been?"

"I don't watch a lot of television," Logan told him. When Nick returned, he sat on Richard's other side. Richard put an arm around Nick and a hand on Logan's knee.

Nick looked at his grandfather in dismay. "It's going to take hours to catch him up."

"I'll Google it later. Do I need to know everything about the show to watch an episode? Will it make sense otherwise?" Logan tried to imagine a show he'd have to study for. *Shoot*.

"It'll be fine," Richard told him. "But you need to make sure to catch up. Maybe we can have a marathon sometime. We could have fish and chips..."

"And bangers and mash," Nick supplied.

"Now I do know what those are; I've spent some time in England."

"They don't still have police boxes." Nick sounded very disappointed. "I read that on the Internet."

"Don't they?" Logan asked, wondering why that was a problem. Or if it was.

"No." Richard shrugged.

Logan enjoyed the show once it started, and after an hour of sonic screwdrivers and alien monsters, Nick hugged his grandfather and said good night. Richard made Nick put their bowls and spoons into the dishwasher, then left for a while to settle the boy in. When he came back, he was tired in a way that Logan hadn't seen on him before, even when he'd had his head injury.

"You've had a rough day," Logan murmured as Richard settled in beside him.

Richard lit up a little when their fingers touched. "It had its moments."

Logan snorted. "It did at that."

"I don't know what to say except I'm sorry. I come with baggage. If I can ask... Please don't get involved because you feel sorry for us, and don't try to make Nick like you if you're not—"

"There doesn't seem to be much chance of that."

"You don't know him. He will idolize you." Richard sighed.

"You're worried I'd just bag it if it got tough?"

"It's nothing personal. I don't even know what I'd do. I just don't want Nick hurt."

"The prime directive."

"Yes, indeed. The awful truth. The snot-nosed brat is job one."

Logan contemplated this. "I'm not saying I'm ready, but I had a pretty good family. My parents were tough and tender, but solid with each other. We all knew Mom came first with Dad, but it was more than that. We knew the *unit*—that's what my dad called us when we all went on vacation or something—came before any individual in it. He'd say, 'The unit is moving out at 0700 for Disney World, so if you need anything, it has to be ready to go.' I think I'm used to thinking like a team member, so I don't think being in a family makes me squirm."

"I see."

"On the other hand you're absolutely right when you say I need to take my time. I do," Logan told him. "I need to take a lot of time so I don't make any promises I can't keep, especially to Nick."

"Theoretically that's very good thinking."

"But?"

"I want to lick your tattoo again," Richard confessed. It brought a stain to his cheeks that turned Logan's heart over like the engine of an old car.

Logan grabbed Richard's head and applied a knuckle gently to a place where he had no bruises. "Heaven help me. *The cute. It burns.*"

\* \* \* \*

Richard saw Logan to the door after the news. They'd sat together and held hands and talked quietly for a bit, and then Logan went home, after admonishing him to set the security system.



Richard showered and brushed his teeth, a little on edge, a little worried. He read for a while, thinking that would help. It didn't. It kept coming back to Lila's new interest in Nick. He knew she felt the stirrings of maternal longing often enough when she wasn't using. He believed she was sincere when she wasn't fucked-up, and found it extra tragic that she couldn't keep herself from revisiting the addiction again and again. Yet he couldn't be sorry because he was never giving Nick up. *Ever*.

When he looked at the clock and discovered it was two in the morning, he finally turned off the light.

But an hour later, when he heard the first noises from Nick's bedroom, he was still awake.

He was on his feet instantly, tearing down the hall to where he knew Nick was either having a bad dream or the occasional night terrors that held him in their grip and scared the unholy hell out of him. When he entered Nick's small room, the boy shot off the bed at him. Richard caught him in his arms and led him down the hallway back to his bed. He turned on the television and flipped through the channels until he found cartoons playing on an East Coast station. He and Nick said very little—just climbed into the bed together and curled up around the mounds of pillows, between the crisp, cool sheets.

Once he had Nick's small body in his arms and he felt the boy relax and drift off into a peaceful sleep again, he turned off the television with the remote and fell into a deep and dreamless sleep of his own.

## Chapter Ten

The security alarm sounded in the first blush of early dawn. Richard, startled awake, leaped out of the bed even before he registered that Nick, who had fallen asleep beside him, wasn't in it. His heart thundering in his chest, he ran for the door of his bedroom, intent on finding his grandson and eradicating the awful noise. It was then that the thumb ring he wore on his left hand caught on the door mechanism so fiercely that his arm stayed in place even as his body tried to run for the stairs. He was flat on his back, still hanging by his thumb from the door, when Nick flew at him from the stairwell.

"I'm sorry, Richard," Nick told him tearfully. "I didn't know the alarm was on, and I went to get the paper."

Richard scooted up and studied the mangled bit of gold that had at one time been a claddagh, peeling it first off the metal part of the door where it was caught and then off his thumb. "Oh *fuck*, that hurts," he hissed, staring as his entire hand started to swell and bleed. The obnoxious sirens were still going, and now the phone was ringing.

"You get the phone, Nick." He rose and turned to the panel just outside his bedroom door. He paused briefly to get his composure and keyed in his code. "Fuck, fuck, *fuck*."

"That's not the code word, Richard." Nick giggled. He handed the phone to Richard, who repeated the proper word and hung up.

"Sorry. Not a role model." He held up his hand, and Nick's eyes went wide.

"I'll get some ice." Nick took off for it, and Richard followed him, groaning in pain and continuing to swear.

Once they had everything they needed for first aid assembled, they sat down at the kitchen table. Richard patted his thumb gingerly with a wet paper towel. It was already twice its normal size, and the entire area around the base of his thumb and across his hand started to form purple bruises. It hurt like a motherfucker. "This *really* stings."

"I'm sorry," Nick said again, staring at Richard's hand. "I didn't mean to set off the alarm."

"It's not your fault. I should have told you I set it. By that time you were asleep. And this?" He indicated his thumb. "This is a freak accident. Who knew you could catch your ring on that little tongue that sticks out of a door. Someday this will seem funny." *After it stops being so painful it brings tears to my eyes.*

"Why'd you set it? You don't usually turn it on unless we go away." Nick frowned, and Richard wondered how much he should say.

"I heard about some break-ins in the neighborhood lately, and I realized how dumb it is to protect our stuff when we're not here and not protect ourselves when we are."

"That does seem kind of dumb." Nick put his elbow on the table and rested his chin on his hand.

"The only thing I would mind losing is you, little man. Logan mentioned our window locks downstairs seemed flimsy..."

"*Logan.*" Nick pursed his lips.

"Look, do you really have a problem with me seeing someone?"

Nick avoided his eyes.

"Seemed like you liked Logan well enough before he asked me out."

"You never didn't pick me up before."

"*Drop it, Nick,*" Richard growled. "I need a pain reliever." He went to the cabinet in the kitchen where he kept them, but couldn't open the childproof container. "Aw shit." He leaned over onto the counter.

Nick came up quietly behind him and took the bottle from him. "I can get that. I was doing that for Mama when I was three."

"I'm not the same."

"As what?" Nick shook two tablets out for him.

"Three, I need six hundred milligrams for this. It's not the same as your mom. I'm not going to let you down. As long as I'm breathing, Nick."

Nick flushed as he looked at the bottle carefully. "Kay. Three? It says one to two."

“Don't worry. I broke my arm skiing in high school, and that's what the doctor told me to take when the pain was really bad.”

“Is it?” Nick asked. “Really bad?”

“Yeah.”

Nick lowered his eyes. “Sorry.”

“Not your fault. It's the curse of the mysterious doorjamb. I should have been suspicious all along. The word is like *lamb*; it has a spurious *b* in it that you don't pronounce.”

Nick hissed a little laugh.

“And a gracious good morning to you, my young friend.” Richard grinned. “Want pancakes?”

“Sure!”

“Great, me too. You can get right on that while I sit here and try to decide if I need to go to the emergency room.”

\* \* \* \*

Later, while they were eating, Richard decided to bring up the subject of Lila. “You know, if your mom was interested in having Thanksgiving here, we could do that.”

Nick looked up from his food. “Really?”

“Sure. It's family time. It might be nice to make a feast and invite her. Your grandparents too, if they want to come.”

“They won't. She told me they don't talk to her anymore.”

Richard felt bad for bringing them up. “Well. We can still invite Lila and put a turkey in the oven.”

“Yeah.”

Richard decided to bring up the subject of visitation. “You know that if you were to see her without her asking me first, that wouldn't be right, right?”

“I know.” Nick looked down.

“She needs to let me know, and then I can help you plan it. No surprises. If you haven't heard it from me, you can't just go off—”

“Look, I know all this, okay? She's supposed to make an appointment, and then I can see her.”

“That's only so we can plan around—”

“No, it's not. It's because you don't trust her. It's because she's not a good mom.”

Richard carefully put down his fork and leaned back in his chair. “She's made some bad decisions, Nick.”

“I know that. And they always started when she'd meet *some guy*. So yeah. I get it. She was fine unless *some guy* came along, and then she'd...” Nick seemed to recognize that he'd said too much.

“I'm done.” He pushed his pancakes away, then got up from the table. “I'll get ready for school.”

“I'll put these in the sink. I have a bad feeling about who's going to be doing the dishes for a couple of days.” Richard held up his hand, and Nick rolled his eyes.

“Pretty convenient, I'd say,” he mumbled as he took the stairs to his room.

\* \* \* \*

Richard walked Nick to school and regretted it after the first few steps when the jarring on his swollen hand became painful. He managed to see him into the class and fend off the questions of the morning moms. They were all curious why he was holding his hand up like some demented runway model and then sympathetic when they got close enough to see his hand was swollen to almost twice its normal size. He was getting a lot of mileage out of how stupid the accident was too, and was about to see if one of them would give him a lift home when he saw Logan stretching his long, lean body out on the street in front of the school in preparation for a run. The image hit him like a fist in the chest, and he missed what Missy's mother was saying completely.

“I'm sorry, what?”

“You need to have that hand looked at. You might have torn something, and it will impact your dexterity.”

“Well, it's my left hand, so it's going to affect my sinisterity,” he murmured, still watching Logan. It was like fucking gay porn—right there on the street—when he bent over to stretch his hamstrings.

“Huh?” she asked.

“Nothing; I'm sorry, I blanked. I see a friend, and I need to ask him something.”

“Oh.” Missy's mother turned to see where Richard was looking. “Oh my.”

Richard turned back in time to see the woman adjust her glasses.

“I'll see you later...um...”

“Janet.”

“Yeah. Hi, Janet, thank you. I'm Richard. Later, okay?” His heart sped up when Logan glanced their way.

“You take care of that,” she admonished, nodding her head toward his hand. “Later, Richard.”

He didn't even really hear her, because by then he was heading toward Logan, whose eyes made a leisurely sweep over him until they got to his hand. “What the *hell*?”

\* \* \* \*

“Mr. Hunter?” the receptionist called and gave him a clipboard with a pile of forms to fill out. “We didn't think we'd see you back so soon.”

“I hurt my hand,” Richard muttered. He'd had just about enough of Logan's teasing.

Logan hadn't, apparently. “On a doorjamb. It was a ferocious attack, and the doorjamb won.”

“Technically I caught it on the little tongue that sticks out of the door and holds it closed, Logan.” Richard clenched his teeth.

Logan pulled him away from the reception desk and found them a quiet place to sit in the waiting room. “Some people will do anything to get a little tongue.”

Richard looked away. “It's embarrassing enough, Logan.”

“I had a friend who caught some shrapnel in his hand from an IED in Iraq. They had to do microsurgery, and they used leeches to keep the swelling down. Cool, huh?”

Richard thought he was going to faint.

“Of course, they might not have to use leeches on you, but your hand looks awfully swollen.”

“Are you *trying* to make me cry?”

“No.” Logan leaned over him with a worried frown. “I’m trying to make you laugh.”

“News flash, it’s not working.” Richard turned away.

“Hey—”

“This may seem funny to you, but I’ve had three hours of sleep and the alarm went off at the ass crack of dawn and I yanked my arm out of my socket running to see what was up, so I haven’t had the best of days.”

“You said Nick set it off accidentally?”

Richard put an elbow on his knee and rested his head in his right hand. “Yes. Sometimes if he wakes up early, he gets the paper.”

“Oh, man.”

“He was asleep when I set it; then he had a nightmare. I brought him into my room. Thank heaven it wasn’t his night terrors. I hate when that shit happens.”

“Night terrors? Like bad dreams.”

“No, these are bad dreams’ bigger, older, scarier, loan-shark enforcers. *Pavor nocturnes*. You can’t wake him up. He sits there with the whites of his eyes showing and screams and shakes and... You just have to wait it out. It’s awful.”

“I guess so. Then what?”

“Then he falls back to sleep. He doesn’t remember them. This morning when the alarm went off, he wasn’t there. I panicked. I’m not proud of it.”

“You seem pretty tense...”

“Hell yes, I’m tense. It’s my job to keep him safe. What if I can’t—”

Logan put his hand on Richard’s shoulder to reassure him. “I’ll help in any way I can.”

Richard cleared his throat and looked down at the patient information forms. He dropped them on his lap to search through his wallet for his insurance card. “I’m sure this is a waste of time,” he told Logan as he discovered there were three more pages. “At least I had a chance to

catch Trina before she came to the house. She has a key, but she can stay home till later if I'm not there."

"If there's nothing wrong, that's great, but if there is, you need to catch it right away. Hands are delicate. Lots can go wrong if they heal improperly, and you don't want to lose mobility."

"I'm here. I'm taking care of it; you can stop—"

"Mr. Hunter?" the receptionist said. "Do you have an insurance card with you?"

"I do." Richard got up and handed it to her through the window. He returned to his seat and his paperwork. "I hate hospitals."

"At least last time you didn't have to do all this paperwork."

"I was bleeding and barely conscious. I'm sure they knew I was insured."

"They had your wallet. I found your insurance card behind the condom." Logan grinned at him. "I don't suggest you use that one, by the way. It's from the turn of the century."

Richard picked up his wallet and fumbled through it. He took out the condom and didn't bother trying to read the expiration date. The words on the forms were bad enough. He flicked it into the trash and went back to his forms.

"You're not supposed to keep them in your wallet anyway."

"I know."

"Then why—"

"Not that it's any of your business, but it was insurance."

"Insurance?" Logan asked. "And it is my business, I think, even if you don't. I'm sorry you don't."

"I'm sorry. I'm just tired." Richard rubbed his eyes with the heel of his uninjured hand. "Insurance. When was the last time you had a condom in your wallet when you needed one? That never happened to me. I always needed one and didn't have one."

Logan shook his head. "That's..."

"Reverse psychology. Having that condom in my wallet has guaranteed I haven't had to use one for four years." Richard blushed when Logan barked a laugh. "Well. Until I met you..."

Logan was laughing far harder than Richard thought was necessary. "Four years? Shit." Logan appeared to think that through. "I was the first in—"



“Mr. Hunter?” The receptionist came to the door, and Richard got up to follow her through it to the same ER he'd been in when he'd hit his head. As if he had every right, Logan trailed behind.

## Chapter Eleven

If there were ever anything better than being on Vicodin and drinking a chocolate shake from In-N-Out, Richard didn't know what it could be until Logan put on his tool belt and started changing the locks on the windows. Richard lay on the couch—where he'd been deposited with the order to rest—watching Logan as he climbed a step stool to remove the flimsy metal locks on the old wooden sash windows.

“Your problem here is that when these windows were painted, someone replaced the older, probably very solid hardware with new. It's shiny but not worth shit. I'm putting stops on the window frames here so that you can leave them open a bit at night, but the opening won't be large enough for anyone to crawl in.”

“Mmhmm.” Richard sucked on the straw, but the shake was still too thick. As Logan worked, his ass did some pretty fantastic things, and Richard found himself giving the straw a little more tongue than strictly necessary.

“Nick gets out at two seventeen?” Logan called over his shoulder.

“Yes.”

“I can drive you to get him if you like.”

Richard thought about Logan's ass some more. “Hm?”

“I can take you over to pick Nick up. If you want, I'll just drop you off. He might worry more if he sees you in that brace with the sling and I'm there again.”

“Mmhmm.” Richard tongued his straw again.

Logan turned around on the small step and folded his arms. “Are you paying attention?”

“Define paying attention.” Richard shook his cup. “My shake is too thick, and it doesn't come through the straw. I keep licking and sucking, and nothing is happening.”

Logan's jaw dropped open. “You're *high*.”

“Hell yeah.” Richard grinned. “And I’m thinking all the licking and sucking I’m doing is going to waste on this shake. Why don’t you come over here and—”

Logan let out an expletive.

“It’s been a really sucky day. I tell you what. I’m going to go upstairs and plant my face into a pillow. If my naked ass happens to be sticking up in the air, and you feel like you want a piece of it, don’t hesitate to let me know.” Richard lurched up and started for the stairs. “Fucking In-N-Out. Takes an hour to drink a shake.”

As he walked up the stairs, he moved more side to side than he normally did, and eventually momentum carried him into the wall. “Ow.”

“I’ve got you.” Logan’s voice sounded very near his ear.

“Yes, you do. I hope you appreciate that.” Richard turned and leaned into Logan as they went up the stairs. “Who’s got you?”

“You do,” Logan told him. “You have me.”

“Does that include your ass?”

“Not when you’re a sloppy drunk.”

“I see.” Richard bit his lip. “Mine’s still up for grabs.”

Logan grabbed it.

No doubt about it. Richard was the most beautiful man Logan had ever been with. He was currently stretched like a *Penthouse* centerfold on his back, his hips elevated by a number of pillows. His hand was still in the sling, but that was the only thing he wore. His body wasn’t young. It had irregularities in skin texture, red spots, and freckles. The light dusting of hair was going gray. Despite his lean physique, he had the beginnings of love handles, and his skin was looser, his body not as hard as a twenty-year-old’s. For all that, Logan found him irresistible, and especially loved his face, which was chiseled and lined in all the right places around brown eyes that sparkled. He was vibrant and fresh, and Logan wanted to put his face into Richard’s neck and just breathe him in.

“Do you want me to shave?” Richard asked him.

“Oh hell no. You’d cut your throat, and we’d end up right back at the ER.”

“But—”

“I’ll take my chances.” Logan slowly removed his tool belt. “If anyone asks, I can tell them I was mauled by a bear.”

“Who are you calling a bear?”

“Yeah.” Logan grinned. “You’re not much of a bear. Kind of youngish looking.” He ran a hand down Richard’s light treasure trail, slipping it palm down over Richard’s erection and fingering the soft hair there. “Come to Daddy.”

“What?” Richard gasped and recoiled from Logan’s touch. “Do you have a time machine? Because we need to go someplace where *you did not just say that*.”

Logan shook his head. “You love it.”

“I do—”

“Put your hand on the headboard.” Logan made it an order, and Richard’s good hand flew to the top of the carved wood and clung there. Logan grinned. “You love it.”

Richard shrugged, but Logan saw a blush steal over his cheeks and down to his chest.

“I want to hear you scream my name.”

Richard drew in a great lungful of air to comply, but Logan bit his nipple and put a hand on each knee to push Richard’s legs apart.

“Not yet.”

“When?” A teasing light lit Richard’s eyes.

“When you can’t stop yourself. Until then? Not a word.”

“Not a word.”

“That’s three words, Richard.”

“Okay.”

“Four.”

Richard pursed his lips and rolled his eyes, but Logan laid the flat of his tongue along the vein of Richard’s cock and teased it until it felt like stone beneath his lips. He lavished each of Richard’s balls with attention in a leisurely, languid way, watching from where he rested between the man’s legs to see what seemed to make the most impact. No doubt about it, when he circled

the dark, puckered flesh of Richard's hole with his tongue, he came off the bed with a gasp and shivered in a way that made Logan feel like a god.

Richard bit his lip as Logan probed deeper. He melted under Logan's hands and undulated his hips. Logan watched him writhe. Watched as he licked his lips when panting made them dry. Richard was a walking wet dream, so responsive, so charismatic. Logan didn't know how he'd scored a chance with a guy like him, but he was going to take advantage of every minute.

"You are so damn beautiful." Logan's voice hardly sounded like his own. Richard looked at him strangely, as if he didn't understand. He took his hand off the headboard to cup the back of Logan's neck and pulled him up into a kiss that was crude and intimate and, at the same time, reassuring in a loving and familiar way. He didn't take his eyes off Logan's.

"I think you're beautiful too, Logan," Richard whispered back.

Logan reached into the nightstand drawer, loath to lose contact for even that brief time-out. He found a box of condoms and a kind of lube he'd never used—both brand-new—and tore the boxes open. "Three dozen?" he teased, his voice low, still reflecting the intimacy of the moment before. "That's optimistic."

"I'll give you a day or two," Richard teased.

Richard gripped Logan's shoulder and held on while their kisses grew longer and more passionate. Neither man wanted to break the spell that silence wove around them. Richard watched as Logan ripped open the foil and rolled the thin sheath onto his cock. He flipped the lube open and generously coated himself, then fingered Richard's hole with the slick stuff, which felt like nothing so much as egg white on his fingers.

Richard's eyes rolled back a little in his head as Logan brushed his prostate with a knuckle. "Blush for me," Logan told him, doing it again. "I want to make you light up and shine."

Richard closed his eyes slowly and opened them again, and it had a peculiar effect. Logan could see his arousal in every plane of his face, in the color of his skin, the way he moistened his lips. Logan wanted to study him, to find new ways to turn him on and make him beg for everything Logan knew he could give him. He lined up his cock with Richard's hole and watched his expression as he pressed forward. Richard seemed to dissolve, to inhale him and accommodate him. As he took Logan deeper, Logan groaned in satisfaction and sank into his heat.

Logan started out by moving slowly, conscious of the way his ass pumped, trying to make every motion fluid. Their joining was a dance, and Logan wanted it to be as beautiful as he found the man in his arms. He wanted full-body contact, but Richard's hand—in its sling—couldn't take much pressure. Looking for leverage, Logan pulled back to sit on his haunches and pushed Richard partially onto his side. He held Richard's leg up against his chest and pressed back into Richard's tight heat, pumping his cock in and out until Richard's head dropped back and his eyes fluttered shut.

“Harder,” Richard demanded.

Logan snapped forward and buried himself, over and over, as deep as he could.

“*Logan.*” Richard gripped the sheet with his good hand. His mouth hung open as he panted between thrusts, making intimate noises deep in his throat that sounded a little like purring. Logan tried to hide a smile as he took Richard's cock into his hand. Richard gasped. “I feel so—”

“*Shh.*” Logan thumbed the slit at the top of Richard's dick. Even that was beautiful. Ivory, but it turned a dark, rich plum shade when Richard needed him. It was all smooth, perfect skin on the top, yet was ropy and ridged by the vein on the underside. Positioned like this, he could watch his hand fly over that velvet length. He loved Richard's *trust*. He loved the control Richard gave him. He wanted to map every pleasure point, every tickle spot, every line and mole and freckle on Richard's body, but whenever they were naked, Logan's own body screamed *go* and he couldn't seem to take his time.

Richard's balls drew up in their delicate skin sac as Logan stroked, holding firm and letting Richard move against him as he surged into Richard's ass. Richard brought his good hand over his face as he jerked awkwardly between Logan's cock and his hand.

“*No,*” Logan told him roughly. “Headboard. I need to see your face. Watching your face is what will make it happen for me.”

Richard's hand slapped onto the headboard again, and his knuckles turned white.

“Open your eyes.”

Richard's eyes opened and met Logan's even as the first splash of hot cum hit his belly and chest, running over Logan's fingers and looping in the air.

“*Logan.*” Richard tried to shout, but sound barely came from his dry throat. “Logan, *Logan.*”

“*Mine.*” Logan pushed his face against Richard's leg as he shot his load into the condom.

“Yes,” Richard agreed, grinding his cock against Logan's hand as they rode out the last of their spasms together. “*Yes.*”

Richard's hand fluttered up and down Logan's abs as he continued to rock his hips. Blood thrummed low and deep, pulsing, until they came to their senses.

Logan let Richard's leg slide down gently and nestled in along his side. Their eyes met again, until Logan broke off contact by looking down, a little embarrassed. “I don't know—”

“I don't either.” Richard shook his head. “But something's happening between us and—”

“I know.” Something shocking and primitive made the announcement inside Logan's heart, and he knew it to be true, written there in blood and flesh and need. *This man is mine.* “*I know.*”

\* \* \* \*

Richard stood outside of Nick's classroom fifteen minutes early, chewing his bottom lip thoughtfully. Logan had left him sleeping while he finished up on the windows, waking him in time to give him a lift to the school. He'd dropped Richard off with a squeeze of his good hand and eyes that promised more. Richard felt like a heel asking him to leave, but he had to have time; he had to give Nick time. He leaned against the scratchy brick wall while he waited for all the classroom doors to fly open. As soon as the obnoxious bell/buzzer rang, the kids would boil out of their classes, reeling with the giddy euphoria of release from school, and he'd walk home with Nick, who was hopefully in a better mood.

Nick emerged looking relieved to be out. Richard grinned at Nick and sped up to greet him with his usual high five.

“Today we had an assembly, and if they have fifth-grade music next year, which they may not because of the budget, I want to play the bass. Can I?”

“That great big huge thing?” Richard asked.

“Yes. It's the bottom that makes an orchestra sound good,” Nick told him solemnly. “Can I?”

“Sure,” Richard agreed. “If they don't have the music program next year, maybe you can do private lessons. Play an electric bass like Paul McCartney.”

“Who?” Nick pointed at Richard's sling. “What's with your arm; did you go see a doctor?”

“Yeah. Nothing serious; it's in a brace, and they want it in a sling for a few days. It doesn't hurt as much when it's up. The swelling is already going down.”

“I'm sorry,” Nick said. Richard figured it would probably be impossible to get him to stop apologizing. Like all kids his age, Nick thought he was in charge, and when things went wrong, it was his fault—Nick more than most, because his mom put so much on him at an early age.

“You are not the center of the universe.” Richard used the oft-repeated phrase without much hope that it would make a difference. Nick rolled his eyes, and Richard could see that it didn't.

Richard ushered the boy toward the front of the school. Nick buzzed around with swarms of his friends, practically dancing along by Richard's side, a sure sign that it was Friday, and the weekend promised to be fairly cool and crisp by California standards, which both Richard and Nick preferred. Richard looked at the sky and wondered if they'd even get more rain. They left the school grounds, and Nick, who had been loquacious and hyper, suddenly stopped being either, and Richard glanced up to see Lila standing directly in their path. Nick stepped closer to him. Richard wondered if he was even aware that he did it.

“Hi, Lila. I didn't expect to see you.” Richard used his pleasant voice, the one he saved for unfamiliar animals and tax auditors.

“I wanted to see my baby.” Lila held her arms out, and after a moment's hesitation, Nick went to her and let himself be enfolded in her embrace. Richard's heart clenched. He worked hard to set his personal feelings aside as he put a smile on his face and joined them, but as many times as Lila had let Nick down, it was like swallowing poison watching her gear up to do it again.

Richard shook off his anger and tried to be optimistic until a voice barked, “*Lila*,” and he turned to see a tall and beefy man come up behind him.

“I had to park all the way down the fucking street.” The newcomer crossed his arms and gave Lila a surly stare. Nick returned to his place by Richard's side, so close Richard could feel the side seam of Nick's cargo pants brush his leg. He dropped a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder and kept smiling pleasantly.

“This is my friend Kevin, honey,” Lila told Nick. “He's a motocross racer.”



“Wow.” Richard gave Nick's shoulder a squeeze. “We watch that sometimes on television.” Kevin shrugged and waved indifferently at Nick, then jerked his hair out of his eyes. He was over six feet tall and handsome in a “rough trade” sort of way. He had the tats and the piercings that Lila usually favored, including the ear-stretching plugs that never failed to make Richard a little queasy. What worried Richard were the slightly overbright eyes and palpable agitation. He could see what had alarmed Charlotte.

“No big, just a lotta guys getting dirty.” Kevin peered down at Nick. “You like to ride motorcycles?”

Nick looked to Richard. “I'm not old enough.”

“Shit, just 'cause they say that don't make it true.” Kevin grinned. To his credit he had nice, even white teeth and a charming smile. Not a hopeless drug habit, then. No meth mouth. “I was riding dirt bikes at your age.”

Richard watched with growing horror as that seed was planted. *Like I'm ever going to let Nick do that.*

“I thought maybe we could take Nick to the park.” Lila gave Nick a hopeful look. “I was thinking maybe we could visit.”

Nick stepped from side to side, and Richard saw his dilemma. It always hurt Richard's heart to see the boy—who at nine should have had a mother he could idolize and wrap around his little finger—weigh his experience against what he wanted more than anything. The indecision in his eyes made Richard feel sick inside.

“We're on foot today; we could meet you at Sunflower Park in about ten minutes. We've always got time to play, huh, little man?”

“Yeah.” Nick looked relieved to have the decision taken from him.

Lila stepped forward with Kevin at her back. “Nicky? I was thinking maybe we could just go the three of us. You and me and Kevin.”

Nick stiffened, and Richard's heart sank. “I'm sorry, Lila. That won't be possible today.” There was a distinct thud as the conversational ball hit the ground. Rick moved in to smooth it over. “Nick and I were just talking this morning, though, and we want to invite you for Thanksgiving dinner. You can bring Kevin, and we'll make a feast. What do you say, around maybe three, so we can watch some football?”

“But—” Lila's eyes went blank. “That's nice. That would be fine, I think. Kevin?”

“I'm usually expected at my mom's, but I think I can blow it off this year.”

Richard didn't let a flicker of what he was thinking show and promised to reward himself with a good stiff drink after the Vicodin wore off completely. “That sounds fine. What's your favorite pie?”

“Chocolate cream,” Lila told him. “Do you want me to bring anything?”

“Whatever you like; let me know. We can take off walking and be at the park in—”

“It's all right. It looks like rain anyway.” Kevin gave Lila's arm a tug. “How about we make an appointment for another day, and you can see your son then?” The way Kevin said it, Richard knew there'd be trouble—if not then, soon, and probably a lot.

“We'd be happy to go anytime, wouldn't we, Nick?” Richard kept the pleasant expression but knew his smile had dimmed.

Kevin pursed his lips and looked around like he had important places to be that weren't anywhere near Mountain View Elementary School.

“Okay, we'll see you on Thanksgiving, Nick.” Lila held her arms out for another hug, and Nick went again—not as slowly—probably because he knew he wouldn't be abandoned into his mother's care. While they embraced, Kevin shot Richard a narrow-eyed look, and his gaze swept over Richard's body. It was a look that told Richard everything he needed to know about how things were going to stand between him and Kevin. Part dismissive, part condescending. A little predatory. Definitely threatening. If he got a look like that in prison, he'd be writing a letter home to his mother to say good-bye.

*Fuck. Why do things with Lila always have to go from bad to worse?*

“I'll be seeing you, sweetheart,” Lila told Nick as she and Kevin walked away.

Richard brushed a hand across Nick's back as they watched them go. Lila seemed to be talking and gesturing with her hands. And at one point Kevin turned back to look at them. Richard waved automatically, nudging Nick to do the same, but the message from Kevin was loud and clear. *This is only the beginning.*

*Well. Fuckity, fuck, fuck, fuck.*

They started the short walk home, and Richard's hand started throbbing again. He was tired, and now he knew he had reason to be afraid. Suddenly he was very, very glad there were new locks on all the downstairs windows.

## Chapter Twelve

“Yes.” Richard secured his Bluetooth more firmly to his ear as he watched Nick play with a couple of girls from the cul-de-sac. They'd arranged some sort of makeshift ramp and were riding their bikes over it, trying to fly off the edge like BMX racers. Richard sat in the yard on a camp chair with a glass of iced tea. “Just let Frank know. I know that he takes the afternoons off on Friday, but if my grandson's mother is beginning to violate our custody agreement, it's probably something he'll want to hear about sooner rather than later.”

“Okay, I'll ping him and tell him to give you a call.”

“Thanks, Sylvia.” Richard hung up the phone.

From where he sat under the jacaranda tree in his front yard at the mouth of the cul-de-sac where they lived, Richard could see all the incoming traffic. It was one of the reasons he'd purchased this particular house. It wasn't a well-traveled street; most people who wound up on it either lived there or had made a wrong turn. Kids routinely buzzed up and down its length on every form of transportation from plastic roller skates to electric Barbie cars. Mothers watched from kitchen windows. Richard's living room had an enormous bay window that overlooked the entire street. Today, though, and until he figured out what was in Lila's head or heart or whatever, he'd be sitting within shouting distance, and he didn't care who knew it.

Richard took a picture of the three kids with his phone as they played, and sent it to Logan along with a note that he was holding the X Games in front of his house. He thought maybe Logan had plans for the weekend, but didn't ask. They were still at the tenuous sending-text-messages-and-pictures stage. E-mails. Not really calling each other to talk, although they'd made contact by phone when necessary. Richard thought that messaging was the best thing that ever happened to dating since, well...forever. No commitment, there was nothing personal, just a quick quip or a checking-in message that most of the time required no reply. In fact, he usually

shut his phone off directly after sending one, because he didn't want to sit around waiting for a response.

“Richard, we're having a contest to see who gets the most air,” Nick shouted from under a protective helmet. “Will you be the judge?”

“All right.” Richard moved his chair so he had a clear view of the end of the ramp. “Should I get the camcorder?”

The kids all called out that yes, they wanted to be videotaped during their jumps, and Richard went back into the house to get the camcorder. He rummaged around first in the entertainment center, where he thought he'd left it after Halloween, and then ran up to his office to see if he'd plugged it in up there without thinking about it. He found it on the charger and was just picking it up when he saw an unfamiliar vehicle crawl down the street toward the kids. He watched for a second, frowning, as it kept coming closer. He moved toward the window as the car rolled in front of the house. Just as he got to the glass, the vehicle, a late-model compact sedan with darkened windows, pulled up next to the kids, and the window rolled down. One or two of the kids walked to the car to hear what the driver had to say.

Richard's heart froze. He slapped the window with his good hand so hard, it was a minor miracle that it didn't break. He screamed Nick's name at the top of his lungs. He hit the stairs running, camera forgotten, and burst out the door in time to see the car move on, all the children going back to their game—all of them, including Nick—completely safe and unharmed.

His hands shook as he sank into his camp chair. The car that had scared him so much parked badly in front of one of the houses at the top of the loop, and Richard could see now what he'd been unable to view from his window upstairs. It had a restaurant-delivery decal on the door, and a young woman got out, carrying a large hot-food transportation bag.

“Oh *shit*,” Richard cursed, allowing the adrenaline to dissipate as he waited for them to notice that he never brought the camera. They'd forgotten all about it apparently and carried on with their game while he “judged” and critiqued each jump. When the girls' mother, Sherry, came along to collect them for dinner, Richard took her aside and told her that they'd approached a strange car.

“Good thing you were here,” she remarked.

Richard shook his head and told her quietly, “I was upstairs; I went to get my camera. If anything had happened—”

“Are you nervous about something specific?” she asked. “Did you hear something at school?”

“No, it's nothing like that. Richard's mother is taking an interest in him again, and she has a new boyfriend...” Richard pursed his lips.

“This is the girl you told me about? The one who has the problem with drugs?” She said this in a voice so low, none of the children could hear.

“Yes.”

“Richard, who won?” Nick asked eagerly.

“Lucy got the most air,” Richard told him. “Sarah was the most creative with the way she used the handlebars to turn the wheel while she was airborne, and you were the fastest rider by far!” Nick swooped by him again, almost knocking both him and Mrs. Keppler off their feet. “Watch it!”

“I'll tell the girls to keep an eye out for strangers,” Mrs. Keppler told him. “And I'll tell the moms too. We'll keep an eye on Nick if you aren't outside.”

“Thank you. I'm sure I'm just being paranoid.”

“There's no substitute for parental supervision.”

Richard ran a hand through his hair. “They say it takes a village.” He grinned. “Wanna be in my village?”

“You bet.” She ushered the girls and their bikes toward their house across the street, and Richard thought it wouldn't be a bad thing if the other parents in the neighborhood were looking out for Nick too. Of course, they all watched each other's kids, but it was nice to hear it again.

\* \* \* \*

Richard watched Nick as he struggled with the longest spaghetti pasta in any restaurant in Southern California. He was trying to wind it around his fork, but then inevitably it would get bigger than the boy's small mouth could comfortably chew, and even though Richard was giving him carte blanche to slurp, drip, and bite, dropping what pasta never made it to his mouth back onto the plate, Nick still had trouble. But he looked happy, and Richard toyed with a glass of

cabernet and watched because, having ordered baked ziti, he'd neatly handled most of his meal while Nick was still trying to figure out the use of the large spoon he'd been given to facilitate his noodle winding.

"I saw you and the girls go up and talk to the car from the restaurant service. What did she want?"

"You know how you turn on Livingston to get to our street, but our street is called Frost?" Nick asked.

"Yeah."

"She wanted to know if she was on Frost."

"I see." Richard sipped his wine. "Did you guys forget that you're supposed to stay well away from cars if they stop and the driver wants to talk to you?"

Nick hit his own head with the flat of his hand. "Sheesh. I didn't think."

"I gotta tell you, buddy, that scared the hell out of me. I was in my office, and I saw all three of you walk over and talk to the lady. Right within grabbing distance."

"I'm sorry." Nick looked down at the fork and spoon in his hands.

"No harm, no foul this time. If a car slows along and stops when you're walking, especially if someone tries to get your attention, you're to *always* move away in the opposite direction and find an adult you know. Someone like me or Lucy and Sarah's mom. Got it?" He gave Nick a smile that said, *Just going over the basics*—he hoped—and not one that said, *The world is an evil place full of hungry zombies, and your brain looks like a birthday-party cupcake*.

"Got it." From the way Nick went after the pasta, Richard knew his warning didn't exactly traumatize him. "How's your hand?"

"It hurts a little every now and again." Richard dropped some money into the leather bill presenter and put it on the side of the table for their server. "Do you think you're going to need a box for that?"

"Yeah," Nick said, putting down his fork. "You get a lot of stuff here."

"I'm for home and a movie, and maybe, if I can ever eat again, a little ice cream."

"Me too!" Nick agreed.

Richard's phone chimed that he had a text message. When he retrieved it, he realized he must have missed a couple of others while he'd been in the shower. Besides the one from Frank, his lawyer, that just came in, there were two earlier messages from Logan.

Frank's read, *Got your message. Write up the situation and e-mail me. Do you think she's using?*

Richard considered how to reply. Nick buttered the last slice of sourdough bread, oblivious.

*I have no evidence that she is. Boyfriend appeared to be high, he thumbed. Just precaution at this point. Why do they want Nick alone? Scary.*

Richard and Nick left the restaurant, heading for the parking lot with the next day's lunch in cardboard cartons. They were almost to the car when Richard's phone chimed again.

*That's what I'm asking myself. Be cautious. Probably fine, err on the side of safety.* Frank was nothing if not conscientious.

*On it,* Richard typed. He decided, when they finally got to his car, not to retrieve Logan's messages then, preferring instead to get them later when he had a chance to respond. He used the remote to unlock the doors and waited until Nick jumped into the back before going around and getting into the driver's seat. "Seriously, little man, I'm going to be glad when you're big enough to sit in the passenger seat, because it sucks driving you around like a chauffeur everywhere."

"Home, James." Nick grinned. Richard pulled out into traffic and tried not to think about the two messages from Logan in his pocket. He *tried* not to. At the first signal, he took out his phone and read the earliest one.

*That looks like fun,* Logan wrote in response to the picture Richard had sent of the kids playing in the street. Richard glanced up at the signals briefly and decided to open the second message.

He couldn't believe his eyes.

The text read, *This looks fun too,* and right there, in all his middle-aged glory, was a picture of Richard asleep on the bed that very afternoon, lying facedown, completely and totally bare-assed naked except for his sling, with no sheet to cover him at all. And it looked...*hot*. Sort of. He could see why Logan had taken it, and that he'd played with it a little, maybe airbrushed it



with Photoshop or changed the lighting some. He looked like he'd gotten laid, for damn sure, but it was artsy, and his butt was sticking up at just the...

*Dayaaaaamn.* Richard stared at the picture until he realized cars were honking and going around him.

"I said home, James," Nick reiterated, giving his seat a kick as he made a raspberry noise. "Green light, Richard."

"Very good, sir." He stepped on the gas again, just in time to be in the middle of the intersection when the red-light camera flashed. *Shit.*

That picture! It unbalanced and embarrassed him, and yet...it made him feel hot as hell. Logan had taken it without his permission, but that he thought Richard a worthy subject and then messed with the picture, maybe even keeping it in his own phone to look at. Maybe even... He tried to snap back into chauffeur mode, but it took an effort. He bit his lip.

"Very good, *indeed*, sir."

\* \* \* \*

Thanks to a strong cup of Earl Grey tea, Richard was lying on the couch awake after three episodes of *Star Trek: The Next Generation* while Nick snored softly in the recliner. They had decided to camp out in the living room, watching a marathon of television shows. Nick had played hard that day and succumbed to sleep early, and Richard was glad for the quiet. The gas log glowed cheerily, but it didn't give off much light. He got up and switched on a reading lamp, but after sorting through his books, his gaze fell on a sketch pad he'd tossed into a corner with the thought that he'd get back to sketching one day. Since Nick had come along, there had always been more to do every day than he had time for, and things like drawing for fun had become a distant memory.

He got himself another cup of tea and sat comfortably upright. It didn't take him long to realize he'd have to remove the sling to hold the pad with his injured hand while he drew with his right. The pain was minimal due to over-the-counter pain relievers, but the swelling was still bad. He started by sketching a picture of his own hand, grim though it was, recording for posterity how it looked cut up and black-and-blue.

Then he took as his subject a sleeping Nick, his heart melting as he captured the essence of what always made him feel so protective: little hands curled into fists under his chin, his soft,

childish mouth slightly open and relaxed, the way his hair hung on his forehead, a little sweaty at the temples. He looked so vulnerable, almost exactly as he'd looked when he was a baby. When Richard looked closely, he saw bits and pieces of all the ages and stages in between.

After that, Richard turned his attention to Logan, allowing his imagination free rein, using files from his memory and his imagination to create a realistic picture of the man he couldn't get off his mind. He drew him with clothes and without, remembering things like how he'd looked as a scarecrow, how he'd played air guitar with his rake, how he'd smoldered when he'd barked at Richard to put his hand on the headboard. Finally, inspired by his memory and turned on as hell, he sketched a large picture of Logan as Richard had seen him earlier that day, looking out his bedroom window, completely nude. Richard captured the sweep of his spine from the broad shoulders to the curve of his back, where that tattoo draped like bunting over his beautiful ass. As he drew, he could recapture the texture of hair beneath his fingers on those taut thighs and the ridges of some scarring he hadn't had the inclination—or the breath at the time—to ask about.

In the end he had a respectable number of really first-rate sketches, finally putting the book down when the clock on the VCR read 3:00 a.m. It occurred to him that if he sketched more, his fine artwork wouldn't be lagging so far behind his graphic-art skills. He fell asleep and didn't wake up until he heard the teenage boy down the street tearing up the neighborhood with his motorized scooter, which sounded like nothing so much as a giant mosquito with 'roid rage.

Nick was already up watching some cartoons and eating a bowl of Froot Loops. Richard wiped his eyes and stumbled into the bathroom first and then into the kitchen to set up the coffeemaker. He ground beans and got out the filter by rote, then added water to the carafe from the pure water tap in the sink. He grabbed a banana off the counter and took it back into the living room just in time to see Nick furiously shoving his sketchbook under the couch.

"Yeesh." Nick got up and headed out of the room, leaving his cereal on the ground and the television on. Richard took a few steps toward him.

"Nick—"

Nick turned. "You drew Logan naked?"

*Okay, not the best place to leave that.* "Artists draw people naked all the time, Nick; don't you remember when we went to the Getty and we saw—"

"You drew him *all over the place*."

“Yes. I did.”

“Why?” Nick folded his arms.

“I guess he was on my mind. I drew my hand. I drew you. Did you see?” Nick tried on a grin. “You were asleep, but I didn't draw you drooling. You can thank me anytime.”

“It's like you're in love with him or something. It's like he's your boyfriend.”

Richard stood, stunned for a minute by the vehemence in Nick's voice. “We are...well...maybe not in love or anything, but we're dating. You could call him my boyfriend. I'm sorry if that isn't the way things were supposed to go, but when I met him, I liked him. He's a good man, and he likes me.”

“You still don't have to go all smushy.” Nick turned his back and stalked up the stairs. “You don't have to draw naked pictures.”

Richard followed him to the landing. “You're right, Nick. I'm sorry.” The slam of a door followed a frosty silence. “I *said* I'm sorry,” he called to the empty hallway.

Richard returned to the living room and pulled the offending book from under the couch. He took it upstairs and locked it in his file cabinet. He was very much afraid that he wasn't going to stop wanting to draw Logan, even if he didn't see him anymore. He wasn't going to be able to stop thinking about him. Richard sat at his desk and put his head in his hands as he heard the *ping, ping* of Nick's handheld video game start up, a sure sign that he'd be in his room for a while, possibly as long as he could hold out without food.

Richard turned on his computer to find a number of e-mails, the most recent of which was from Logan. It read, *Good morning, starshine*. He opened it to find that Logan had morphed his naked picture into a weird shape that made him look like a spectacular alien creature with four arms and four legs and a long, narrow body like a stick bug.

Richard laughed as he scrolled down the message. *The earth says hello*.

Richard let out a sigh. *Oh hell no*. These two people he cared about were simply going to have to learn to get along.

## Chapter Thirteen

Sunday afternoons were always lazy at the Hunter home, the day more often than not spent out in the front yard with the other kids on the street. There were so many this day that Richard brought out the kettle barbecue and started grilling hot dogs. Then the Kepplers from across the street brought a big plastic bowl with salad, and they had to find a table to put that on. More people came out of their homes with food and kids, turning the afternoon into a spontaneous block party. Sherry Keppler had gone so far as to place orange traffic cones with KIDS AT PLAY written on them at the mouth of the cul-de-sac to either dissuade or slow car traffic.

Six or seven of the hard-core bicycle lovers were reevaluating the makeshift ramp in the center of the street. There was an insulated plastic ice chest filled with pop and beer, and someone had a boom box playing alternative rock. In November, few if any people heated their pools, but two or three people had spas, and he noticed some bathing suit-clad teenagers headed toward one of the houses at the end of his side of the loop.

Nick grinned at him from atop his bike. “Guess we started something.”

“I'd say we did.” Richard offered him a hot dog. Nick shook his head and took off again, looking back briefly to shout that he wanted Richard to watch. He practically flew his bike down the street and circled, heading toward the ramp at full speed, and when he hit it and was airborne, he adopted Sarah Keppler's maneuver with the handlebars, turning his wheel—which didn't do an awful lot to keep him up but probably made him feel wicked cool.

“Go Nick, go Nick, go Nick,” Richard chanted from where he was standing, earning a red face and a pleased smile from the boy.

When he heard an engine, Nick looked up to see Logan's truck creeping down the inlet street. He pulled into the driveway of one of the houses before he got to the cones and turned around. Disappointment stabbed at Richard until he saw the truck pull to the curb a small distance away and park.

A thousand emotions built within Richard as Logan got out of his truck. He was wearing black jeans and an olive drab T-shirt. He had on running shoes. Logan was an ordinary if very fit middle-aged man, but each and every movement he made caused Richard's heart to careen against his rib cage. Logan wore a faint look of surprise as he scanned the activity on the street, bouncing his keys back and forth between his hands a couple of times before he shut the driver's-side door.

Richard saw him straighten his shoulders as though he were on parade, and his heart stopped slamming, stopped dancing, nearly stopped beating, as he caught the determined look on Logan's face as he came over. Their eyes met, and Richard wanted to memorize the look in them so he could sketch it in his sketchbook and keep it in his heart.

There was no doubt in Richard's mind that Logan planned to stake some sort of claim, to establish the privilege in front of everyone present, so they would know that he and Logan were seeing each other. Logan's gaze told him that if he broke eye contact, it wouldn't happen. If Richard broke eye contact, Logan would shake his hand, make nice with the neighbors, and grab a beer.

*Ten-four, good buddy.*

A million thoughts raced through Richard's mind, and the one that stuck, the one he focused on, was that Logan had probably spent almost three decades during which he could never, ever look at a man in the way he was looking at Richard just then. Richard didn't move, didn't speak, and didn't take his eyes off Logan's, the invitation in his own eyes written there for everyone on the whole block to see.

*Come and get it.*

What seemed like an hour passed as Logan crossed the last few feet between them. Every cell in Richard's body grew alert to his lover's nearness, reacting—in total contradictory fashion, as always—by sighing into a completely calm and relaxed hyperawareness. He could capture and catalog every detail about Logan while remaining oblivious to everything else going on around him. It reminded him of being fifteen all over again, and he cursed to himself.

“Fucking puppy love,” he murmured as Logan reached him.

Logan said hi, nothing more, and placed a hand on Richard's shoulder, giving it a brief squeeze and then sliding it up to his nape. He pulled Richard in for a short kiss on the lips,

landing it with perfect accuracy, keeping his eyes open and on Richard's as he softened it for the barest hint of a second, and then let him go. Richard smiled and caught Logan's hand as they waited to see what would happen next.

When they finally glanced around, a few pairs of eyes were on them, a few were averted. Sherry's were a little brighter than usual as she offered Logan a beer. He took it from her uncertainly, but she smiled warmly at him and moved off. Richard gave his hand a squeeze.

"That was a long time coming," Logan said.

"I gathered that might be the case."

"Thank you."

Richard frowned. "For what? I didn't do anything."

"Exactly." Logan picked at the label on his bottle. "I worried that you'd blow me off."

"Me?" Richard looked around. "I'm a known quantity in these parts. Have you ever seen my car?"

Logan's lips twitched. "Your little green queen machine?"

Richard straightened. "I beg your pardon."

"You drive that hybrid with the rainbow license-plate frame and the Courage Campaign bumper stickers, don't you?"

"It's not exactly a Miata."

"Confess. You've owned the Miata."

"I never!"

"Volkswagen Cabriolet?" Logan raised an eyebrow.

Richard pursed his lips.

"I knew it." Logan leaned over and whispered, "I think it's hot, how not cool you are."

"I was at USC at the time."

"You are totally turning me on with that." Logan bumped him with his shoulder.

"All right." Richard bumped him back. He turned to the street and looked for Nick, who wasn't immediately apparent as he scanned the crowd. He caught sight of him with the Keppler girls and a couple of other kids who, having abandoned their bikes on the lawn, were talking and

goofing around a ways away. “Thanks for not—you know—doing the whole *An Officer and a Gentleman* thing.”

“What, you didn't want me to put my hat on your head and carry you down the street in my arms?”

Richard flushed. “Um, yes. Well. Actually I *really* want you to do that, just not while everyone in the neighborhood is looking.”

“Gotcha.” Logan scanned the crowd. “So I guess all my fantasies of bending you over your Weber Kettle will have to wait?”

“Oh. My.” Richard swallowed. “Okay... Yeah.”

“You're so easy. You blush like a kid.” Logan smiled. “Speaking of which, I brought something for Nick and the kids there, but I'm going to need a couple of hands getting it out of the truck.”

“What?”

Logan was already walking toward the place where Nick was sitting with his friends. “Nick, I have something for you. You think you can give me a hand?”

Nick glanced Richard's way. Richard shrugged and followed along as Logan changed course. Logan saw another group of kids and asked them to give him a hand as well. Richard had no idea what Logan planned as they all headed for his truck.

Logan lowered the tailgate and turned to find Nick in the crowd. “Richard sent me a picture of you guys biking the other day, and it reminded me of when I was a kid. My dad built me a ramp for the street, and I thought it would be fun to make one for you.”

Richard turned to Logan in surprise. “Logan, how cool! You made this?”

Inside the truck bed, a structure made of plywood, solidly built, with what looked like galvanized aluminum hardware, waited to be pulled out by eager hands.

“I tested it with my weight and my bike, so I'm sure it will support whatever they've got,” Logan told him as he went to the other side of the truck to help slide it out. “Watch your hands for splinters.”

“This looks great. When did you do this? I thought you were busy this weekend.”

“Some friends came by; they gave me a hand making this.”

“Not literally, I hope. Why is it I'm picturing drunk men and power tools?”

Logan barked a laugh and said, sotto voce, “Cause you're a pervert.”

They wrestled the ramp to the ground, and a group of older boys took it from there, hoisting it and carrying it over to the middle of the street where the other ramp was quickly dismantled.

Nick stood behind his grandfather, looking on.

“What do you say, Nick?”

Nick looked less than enthusiastic. “Thank you, Logan.”

“You're welcome. I thought maybe we could trick it out a little. Paint it whatever color you like. Maybe make up a symbol or something with your name like taggers do and put it on there...”

“That sounds like a great idea; I can do something on the computer, make a stencil maybe...”

“Thanks.” Nick turned and walked away.

Logan nodded toward him. “Do you think he doesn't like it? Wait—did he build the one they're using now?”

“It's not that. I was doing some sketches this morning, and he was embarrassed.”

“How come?” Logan shut the gate on his pickup and dusted off his hands. Richard saw him watch the kids with a pleased expression on his face when they took a few test rides over his ramp.

“One of them...well. Some of them were of you, and one was frankly erotic, just a nude of you from behind, but—”

“He seriously saw a nekkid picture you drew of me?” Logan appeared horrified.

“No—well, yes—but it's not like that. It was art. I'm an *artist*. You know that. He's been to every museum in the LA and Orange County metro areas with me at one time or another and—”

“You have completely forgotten what it's like to be a nine-year-old boy, Richard.”

“No, I haven't.”



“*National Geographic*.” Logan waited while Richard tried to catch up. “Do you remember your first sight of naked people in *National Geographic* or wherever, and you didn't want to look but you had to?”

Richard slumped a little under Logan's direct stare.

“You weren't artsy Mr. Cosmo then. You were a kid, and all that skin made you feel—what?”

“You're right, of course.” Richard leaned against the fender of Logan's truck and looked over at where Nick and his friends were playing.

“What you think logically and what happens to your body are two different things, you know that.”

“But he's... He isn't going to look at a picture of you and be titillated. It's just another man for him.”

“Not if you drew it,” Logan reminded him. “If you used your skill to convey your attraction. He might not even know why it disturbs him, but it would.”

“Like your picture of me.”

“Yep.” Logan started back toward the gathering, glancing back to see if Richard was coming. “It's just something to think about.”

“I'll figure all this out.” Richard fell into step beside him. “It's new.”

Logan stopped. “Are you going to kick me to the curb if Nick doesn't warm up to me?”

Richard looked at his feet. They were almost within hearing distance of Sherry and a couple of the other moms, and he could feel their scrutiny, as if they were curious but too polite to stare outright. “The truth is, I don't know the answer to that, Logan.”

“Fair enough.” Logan turned to him. “But you need to know that more than my body is engaged here, and I—”

“Rick!” Lucy called as she started her run up to the new ramp. “Watch and see if I go higher than before, okay?”

“Sure, Lucy!” Richard cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted back, “I'm on it!”

“Not the right time; I'm sorry.”

"I'm the one who's sorry, Logan." Richard turned back. "Cross my heart, we'll talk later, okay?"

Logan watched as Richard loped off to join the kids, positioning his chair in the perfect place to capture the jumps with a pocket-size digital camera or cheer a kid on.

"Can I get you something to eat? My name is Sherry Keppler. I live over there." She handed him the beer he'd been drinking with the partially peeled-off label and pointed to a pretty, tan-colored house across the street.

Logan held out his hand, and she shook it. "Logan Wilde. No, thank you. I ate before I came. I just wanted to bring the ramp over."

"The kids are going to love that thing. I've seen your truck here a couple of times; have you been seeing Richard long?"

If Sherry was more than idly curious, she kept it off her face. Logan replied, "No, not long. We met on Halloween. The boys trick-or-treated my house."

"Nick's going to give you fits. He's used to having his grandfather all to himself."

"Yeah, I get that." Logan toed the ground with his shoe. "That's typical, though, right?"

"Sure." Sherry brightened. "All kids go through that when a parent starts to date. See that woman over there?" Sherry pointed to a woman who was handing out cookies to a couple of kids with obvious helmet hair. "That's Anne. She just married David, the man at the barbecue." When Logan looked, he glimpsed a nondescript man behind a cloud of smoke. "Her kids were such brats when they decided to get married, they almost canceled the wedding twice. Not to mention his kids. They came around, and Nick will too."

Logan studied them and saw that the boys resembled their dad. "The Brady Bunch?"

"Kind of." Sherry laughed. "His are boys, and she has two girls and a boy. My point is, I guess, that these things take time."

Logan was silent for a minute. "Thank you."

She grinned and made her way back to the table where other women were watching their conversation with interest.

*Great. I'm on an episode of Desperate Housewives, the out edition.*

"Hi," said a man's voice behind him.

Logan turned and presented his hand. "Logan Wilde."

"Mike Lefebre," said the newcomer, who raised his brows. He took Logan's hand, but only after a brief hesitation, and Logan shook it warmly even though wanted to yank it back. "You and Richard?"

"Yeah."

"You military?"

"Marine Corps, retired." To make conversation, he asked, "Are any of those kids out there yours?"

"Yeah," Mike said, dancing from foot to foot as if he had something on his mind. "I don't mind telling you I'd rather they didn't see you and Richard going at it."

"Going at it?" Logan turned what he thought was a remarkably calm face to the man.

"You know, in public. I like Richard, don't get me wrong, and I have nothing against gays, but I don't want my kids seeing that."

"Tell you what, Mike. We won't do anything you wouldn't do, all right?"

Lefebre's face frosted over. "There's no call to get nasty."

"I'm not being nasty, Mike. On the contrary." Logan folded his arms. "I've spent over half my life under the strictest military discipline in this country. I didn't ask and I didn't tell, and you can forget about any public displays of affection. So it's all new to me, and I'll be looking to fine heterosexual couples such as yourself and your lovely wife as examples of how free men and women of high moral values and decent upbringings are supposed to act in the very country I nearly laid my life down to protect. I want to thank you in advance for your guidance."

Logan stepped away from the man before either of them said any more. Sherry was watching him with a frown on her pretty face, but he gave her a smile and started back to his truck.

*Tell Richard I'll call him*, he mouthed at her, making that dumb-ass hand motion to illustrate. He unlocked his truck and got in. When he turned over the engine, he let the loud music from his radio wash over him.

Richard Hunter wasn't going to be a battle; he was a whole fucking war. Worth it—oh hell yes—and *then some*. But there wasn't going to be a decisive victory. They'd skirmish here and there. He'd have to advance; he'd be forced to retreat. This was retreat. He could accept that Nick didn't want to share and the neighborhood wasn't going to let them play happy family without a fight.

On the other hand, he'd staked his claim to Richard and announced his attentions as clearly as if he'd pissed on the man. *As it were*. He drove back to his house content that he'd made a sortie against all of Richard's misgivings and suburban limitations. And he'd lived to tell the tale.

When Logan factored in the rush of expressing his affection for Richard in public, in front of all the man's neighbors, it had been a very good day indeed.

\* \* \* \*

Richard lit the fireplace while he waited for Nick to finish up his shower so they could catch a little television before bed. Nick was still taciturn, but more unhappy than angry, which had Richard worried. He could handle Nick when he was just being a little shit. All kids seemed to try it on every now and again. He had a very distinct memory of his own grandmother telling him not to “*get too big for your britches*” once when he'd pulled some stunt or other.

The problem with Nick was that he was damaged goods. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that his mother had neglected him. She'd been far worse whenever there was a man in her life, and Nick wasn't stupid. He probably foresaw a lot of nights ahead with—at the very best—babysitters.

Richard wanted to build his trust, had been building it, little by little. Logan seemed content to let Richard set the pace, and it didn't hurt that they had time together when Nick was in school. Maybe there were advantages to being old guys in this case that hadn't been apparent in the first place.

“I brushed my teeth.” Nick came down the stairs warily.

“Good; do I need my sunglasses?”

Nick rolled his eyes.

“Come on down. We can watch something for a little bit before bed, or do you want to read?”

"I'm fine; whatever."

"Okay, I think I'll just put in this Wiggles CD because—"

"Ew, no! Not the Wiggles. That's for babies."

"Hm, then what would you suggest? I have classic *Star Trek*. What about the giant brain cell episode?"

"Sure; those things creep me out."

"What else creeps you out?"

"What do you mean?" Nick looked away.

"I noticed you blew off Logan even when he tried to do something nice for you. Does he give you the creeps?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yes, it matters very much to me." Richard sat on the edge of the coffee table, facing Nick on the couch. "If you're honest, it matters to you too. You're not the kind of guy who blows people off when they bring you something nice, so you can't be feeling good about it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Look. I'm pretty sure Logan can take whatever you dish out. But I don't think it's okay for you to be angry all the time, and I for damn sure know if you're rude, you'll answer to me. Got that?"

"Yes, *sir*."

*Oh for fuck's sake.* Richard ran his bruised hand through his hair and made up his mind to suck it up. "You're a pill," Richard said cheerfully, leaping onto the couch and squishing the boy into his embrace whether he liked it or not. "I can't decide whether to take you with water or mash you up into applesauce."

"What the heck does that mean?"

"I don't know." Richard rubbed his knuckles over Nick's head. "Right now I want to see Spock with a giant brain cell attached to his head. Give me the television control."

After a while of watching in silence, Nick spoke again. "Do you think we could paint that ramp and put my name on it?"

“Yes.”

“It's really nice.” Nick looked at his hands. “Lucy said I was lucky you had a friend who could make stuff like that.”

“You are. I wouldn't have had the first idea how to build it.”

“Sure you would. It's probably on the Internet.”

“I guess in that case I could have done it. But I didn't, and Logan did.”

“Because he wants you to like him.”

“Logan knows I like him even if he doesn't build you a ramp. I'm his friend. You don't do stuff to get friends to like you; they just do.”

“He's your *boyfriend*.”

“Tell me what you think is the difference between a friend and a boyfriend.”

Nick shot him a grossed-out face. “Kissing. Lucy says it's weird to see two boys kissing.”

“It is weird, isn't it? You hardly ever see two guys kissing. Is that what makes it weird? 'Cause it doesn't feel much different than kissing anyone else. Scratchier if I haven't shaved, I guess.” Richard ran a hand over his chin.

“I guess. How come you don't kiss Trina? She's pretty, and she likes you a lot.”

Richard put the television control on the arm of the couch and took off his sling, stretching out his arm. “I dunno. The way I'm made, I guess. Maybe it's like broccoli.”

“Broccoli?”

“You like it, and every time I have to make it for you I need to wear a gas mask. How can you eat something that smells like that when it's cooking?”

“It tastes good if you put mayonnaise on it. Grandma showed me.”

Richard shuddered. “It tastes like feet.”

“Maybe kissing a guy *is* like broccoli,” Nick conceded, and Richard pinched him lightly.

“We're good, right?”

Nick sighed. “We're good.”

“And Nick? You need to send Logan a thank-you note.”

“I do?” Nick whined.

“You do.”

“Oh all right,” he muttered. “But I’ll bet they don’t make mayonnaise for that.”

## Chapter Fourteen

By Wednesday morning when Richard dropped Nick off at school, he was beginning to think he'd imagined the hunger he'd seen in Logan's eyes on Sunday. They'd kept up with each other through texts and e-mails, but he hadn't seen the man in the flesh since then. Which was a damned shame, because Richard was missing that flesh more and more. He was walking back toward his house, looking at the sky and wondering whether the cover of clouds meant rain, when he heard a horn honk.

"Hey," Logan called from his Jeep. "Got an hour and a half to spare?"

Richard's face burned. "Sure." He climbed up into the passenger seat. "Got more if you want it. Trina has instructions and a key."

"Really?" Logan had a way of looking at him that made Richard want to say yes to anything.

"Really."

"How's the hand?"

"Still swollen," Richard told him.

"How's Nick?"

"He's a little puffed up too, I'm afraid."

"I got a thank-you note from him, though, in an e-mail to which he'd appended a picture of the kids using the bicycle ramp I made."

"I'm glad you got it."

"Did you make him send that?"

Richard looked at his hands. "I may have suggested—"

"It's not going to work if you force him on me."

"I know that."



"He's going to like me even less if you try to force things. It's like...go kiss Aunt Bertha's hairy wart; there's a good boy."

"Did you just compare yourself to a hairy wart?"

"What I'm saying is that it's natural for him to be reticent. I think you... I think we should just let him have his space."

Richard was silent for a while as he tried to figure out what to say. "I think you're right, you know. It's only natural for him to be cautious. For the record, I don't plan on forcing anything on him. On the other hand, when someone gives you a gift, especially something they've worked hard on, a thank-you note is in order."

"I see." Logan drove for a while in silence.

Richard wondered if Logan knew how inadequate he felt trying to be a father. He'd never had the opportunity, and now, even though he was raising Nick, the boy still wasn't his son. He wondered if Logan realized how carefully he'd had to go with Nick, both to earn his trust in the first place and to keep it. "I may not be too good at this whole parenting thing, but—"

"I think you're awesome." Logan stopped him. "You remind me of my dad, and my only complaint with him was that I wished he'd been around more. He's my best friend."

Richard forgot to breathe. "That was a pretty good compliment."

"It's not a compliment; it's the truth." Logan pulled into the parking lot of the Original Pancake House. "From what I've seen, you enjoy every minute you have with him, you've totally got his back, and he still knows who's in charge." He parked the Jeep and pulled the keys from the ignition.

"Yeah, well, I've been accused of not sweating the small stuff to a rather large degree. Nick can be so... He's a little explosive sometimes."

Logan came around the Jeep and closed the passenger door after Richard jumped down. "Does he get out of control physically?"

"No," Richard assured Logan. "Quite the contrary, he shuts himself off. I just worry that he expects the worst all the time, and sometimes I think people who expect the worst, get it."

"It's not easy."

“No. Look.” Richard stopped Logan before they entered the restaurant. “I’m okay with giving you a pass on this, no hurt feelings. Nick is damaged goods, and I—”

Logan’s face was grim. “I heard you the first time you said it. Unless you *want* me to take a pass, let me see what I’m getting into first.”

“But—”

“I know this is some kind of preemptive strike to save Nick’s feelings, or yours.” Logan’s look was unreadable. “I hope it’s yours. I hope that you have some.” He looked away. “Feelings.”

Richard finally deciphered the look he was getting and sighed. It was a *hopeful* look, and he wanted to shock the shit out of the pancake house patrons by flinging himself at Logan in the parking lot like a deranged tart.

“*Oh yes*. I do. Yes.” All he could do was smile. “Have feelings.”

Logan smiled back, and it probably didn’t cause the sun to emerge from the clouds, but Richard didn’t think anyone would blame him for seeing it that way. “Then can we eat now?”

“Sure.” Richard followed Logan into the restaurant, and they seated themselves at a booth. After they both had coffee and had placed their orders, Logan broke the silence.

“I guess the kids like the ramp.”

“They’ve spent every minute they can out there using it since Sunday. That was really a terrific thing you did.”

“You mean attempting to buy his affections.”

“I meant nothing of the *sort*.” Richard looked up when the waitress put a bowl of fruit between them. “Thanks,” he told her.

“Even at the time I thought it was kind of a bonehead move, but the guys were in for a visit, and we kind of got into building it. At least I didn’t show up with a puppy. How cliché would that have been?”

“Logan, would you just stop? I’m sure you didn’t mean anything by it but that it would be a nice gesture.”

“No, Richard. I did mean something by it. I want him to like me, because I want you for my lover, and don't think that doesn't make me feel like a heel. Because it does. But I want you, so I did it anyway.”

Richard leaned in and spoke in low tones. “I can be your lover whether Nick likes it or not. In case you hadn't noticed, he's in school half the day, and in the summer he spends time with—”

“I guess I misspoke.” Logan smiled up at the waitress when she put their plates in front of them. Logan had ordered crepes rolled around creamy filling, and Richard's were large, flat pancakes from a sourdough batter. Logan leaned back in when she left. “I want Nick to like me because I like him. And I like you.”

“Then it will happen, because it's hard to resist someone who likes you.”

Logan grinned up at him while he cut his first bite out of the crepe. “You're so cheap.”

“I'm not cheap, Logan. I'm easy. Big difference.” Richard grinned at him.

Logan popped the gooey blend of eggy pancake and filling into his mouth, and it went straight to Richard's dick.

“I have to admit, when you asked me if I had time, I wasn't expecting to spend it eating pancakes.”

“Really?” Logan frowned and picked up his coffee.

“I thought it was a booty call.” Richard watched as Logan blushed behind the mug. “I'm glad you weren't drinking when I said that; you'd have spit.”

“I would not. Like you could shock me.”

*Okay.* Maybe he was a grandfather, and maybe he had an advanced university degree in fine arts, and maybe he was the treasurer of the Parent-Teacher Association, but *yeah*. He knew a challenge when he heard one. He allowed only the barest hint of a feral smile to show on his lips and took satisfaction from the knowledge that Logan didn't have a clue what was about to come. Or who. He picked up a strawberry from their communal bowl of fresh fruit and dunked it into the creamy filling of Logan's crepe.

“Mmmnh.” He licked the luscious filling off and took a bite. He imagined he was licking the cream off the velvety head of Logan's cock and let it show on his face. “*Creamy*. I can't get enough of this. Maybe I should have had what you're having.”

Logan eyed him warily. "It is good."

Richard licked the juice off the strawberry he'd bitten and let it rest on his tongue a second before his lips wrapped around it and he pulled it into his mouth. Even before he swallowed it, he swiped his tongue over his lips to collect the juices he was letting gather there. When he could finally speak, he said, "Juicy. So ripe. The fruit is delicious today."

"Richard..." Logan frowned at him. "Are you...?"

Richard speared a piece of green melon onto his fork and held the whole thing up, giving it a lick and a slurp before he bit a piece of it off. He never took his eyes off Logan's either, and by the time he sent his foot out to play, the man was catching on. Too bad he was wearing lace-ups. "I wish I'd ordered the sausage. It's so meaty and slick."

"You are doing that on purpose."

"What?" Richard asked as he dabbled his finger into his butter and syrup. He licked it off with a number of unnecessary strokes of his tongue, keeping his eyes half closed in a parody of ecstasy. "Uhhnn. This is just so—"

"Did you really think I'd stop you on your way home for sex?"

Richard raised his eyebrows. "I don't see why not."

Logan stopped the waitress as she passed. "We need two boxes and a check, please."

\* \* \* \*

Logan closed the garage door behind his Jeep with the push of a button. Ever since Richard's little show in the restaurant, he didn't know whether he wanted to laugh or tear his hair out. Richard challenged him, mystified him, turned him on, and made him want things he didn't believe were possible.

He went around to the side of the Jeep, where Richard was just stepping down with a knowing smile. Of all the things that made Logan want to get next to Richard, the way he looked up at him—as if he were waiting for the next big adventure—was the one that dinged him the most. It was the most enticing thing Logan had ever experienced. It had been there in the laughter Richard left behind on the first night they'd met, and it was there in his eyes now, boyish and full of mischief, ready for anything. Richard seemed like he could be the best chum, the finest cohort in crime, and yet he was still the sexiest man Logan had ever encountered. He had a

way of gazing up at Logan that made him feel heroic and a way of teasing him that put him firmly in his place.

Logan reached out for his hand, recalling at the last minute that Richard had injured it. “Come on, I want to show you something.” He took Richard's forearm and gently pulled him to the door into the house.

“All right.” Richard once again gave Logan his trust. Logan didn't plan to take his confidence lightly and wished there was a way he could express how Richard's faith made him feel. Instead he opened the door to his home and led him to the study.

“Here.” Logan drew him in and showed him what he'd been up to. He'd purchased a full-size Cannon gun case with a massive double steel composite door and internal hinges. It looked like a bank vault from an old Western film.

“I bought this. You said you didn't like guns, and...well...I got this thing. See? No outside hinges? It weighs six hundred and fifty pounds, so it can't just be carried off. Well, it's pretty secure anyway. Everything I own, guns and ammo, is inside this case as of now. All of it.”

Richard blinked up at Logan. “You got this just because I said—”

“Not just because...no. Well, *yes*. It isn't good to have weapons unsecured if Nick is around. Or...you know...other kids.” Logan hated how desperate he sounded. He wanted Richard to know he'd do what it took to keep him safe. To keep Nick safe. That they were both important enough to him that he'd make big changes, even if, on principle...well. He looked into Richard's eyes and thought maybe...

Logan wouldn't have been as surprised when his back hit the gun case if Richard hadn't been trying to climb him like a tree. As it was, it knocked the wind out of him, and he couldn't get a word out. When Logan thought he had his balance, Richard ground their dicks together, and Logan's knees buckled under their combined weight, causing him to slam against it once again. He was glad the damned thing was bolted to the floor. He caught that very fine ass in the palms of his hands and staggered around so Richard's back was to the case, after which he prepared himself to lay siege.

“Oh jeez.” Richard panted into the skin next to Logan's ear. “Could you be any more perfect?”

“You're crazy,” Logan whispered as he bit the muscle at the top of Richard's shoulder. “C'mon.” He lurched away from the cabinet and started toward the bedroom with Richard attached to him like a limpet. “You could make this easier by walking down the hall by yourself.”

“What's wrong with right here?” Richard wasn't giving him much time to think. Logan gazed around his office for a horizontal surface, then put Richard down on the desk next to his computer and gave him a gentle kiss.

“What do you want?” Logan asked breathlessly.

“Whatcha got?” Richard delivered a hungry gaze of such potency that Logan felt it grip his balls. “I'm open to suggestions.”

“Then my first suggestion is that you strip,” Logan said. He was gratified to see a mysterious smile appear on Richard's face as he slipped off the desk.

“You got any music?”

“What?”

“You asked me to strip.” Richard leered at him.

“Seriously?” Logan didn't know if Richard was joking or what, but if the man wanted music, he could do that.

Richard grinned at him. “You like Aerosmith. Do you have 'Walk This Way'?”

“You're serious?”

“Do I look like I'm kidding?”

“This I gotta...” Logan walked to his computer chair and fired up his desktop. “I think I have it...iTunes...” He cursed when he realized he'd need his reading glasses. He put them on and peered over his playlists. “There. Cued up.” He swiveled his office chair to ask Richard...

*Oh. My fucking...*

Richard assumed some sort of ass-out pose and licked his lips.

Logan cleared his throat. “Do you want to say when?”

One perfect eyebrow arched. “*When*, baby.”

Logan hit the music.

Richard oozed enthusiasm. Even knowing it was just the light from the high windows playing on the planes of Richard's face, Logan thought he looked lit from within. He began slowly, lifting the hem of his T-shirt and using it to wipe his brow. Acting surprised to find his belly naked. Then he did a nasty grind that showed his abs to their best advantage. It didn't seem fair for an old dude to have abs like that from drawing pictures on a computer, but there it was. He continued to use the shirt to play hide-and-seek.

Logan wondered if Richard had ever stripped professionally. He tried to think back on whether he'd mentioned anything about that. He was favoring his left hand, the one he'd caught on the door, and Logan figured *no*. The man was a total klutz. But absurdly, there he was, whipping off his shirt, executing a move with his hips that could get him arrested in about half the continental United States and smoothing a hand alongside the wavy hair on his head like he'd been stripping all his life. Logan met his eyes and fought the urge to cross his legs.

Richard turned and looked over his shoulder as his ass made a perfect circle in the air. He was so sinewy and supple as he dipped and twisted, Logan knew this wasn't a spur-of-the-moment thing. Richard turned to the side and hooked a finger in the elastic waistband of his workout shorts, and as he grooved and popped his hips, they slipped an inch to reveal firmly toned flesh and the elastic webbing of a designer jock. He turned and displayed the other side less enthusiastically, exercising care with his painful hand. Logan's mouth went dry when those shorts came down farther to reveal a garment so tiny that, even when Logan was looking, it was hard to see. Richard whirled again, his perfect ass cheeks showcased by a picture frame of creamy elastic with a thin black stripe on it.

His ass kept making wide, invisible O's and perfect figure eights, and suddenly he was on all fours, supporting his weight on his forearms while he humped the air. As if that weren't enough, he had an ecstatic look on his face, as though he were really...

"Richard—" Logan ground out hoarsely.

When Richard leaped to his feet and began a pretty conscientious lap dance, Logan started to sweat. He reached a hand out, and Richard slapped it away, international stripper sign language for *keep your hands to yourself*. Richard's eyes twinkled, though, as he literally turned the other cheek when the song suggested it, bending all the way over to peer at Logan through

his legs. Richard bit his lip suggestively and stood back up, rubbing his butt all along Logan's thighs and knees as the song ended.

The two men eyed each other quietly for a minute.

“Oh *hell no*.” Logan snatched Richard right around the middle and pulled him back to sit on his now-thoroughly erect and leaking cock. “You did not just get even *cuter*.”



## Chapter Fifteen

Richard was supremely content after his dance, if a little out of breath. It suited him perfectly well when Logan pushed him facedown on the desk and yanked his jock down, and even better when Logan licked a path from behind his balls to his butt crack. Logan blew on the damp skin, chilling it, then redoubled his efforts, parting his cheeks with his thumbs and pushing his tongue up into Richard's ass.

“Oh shit, *mmn gah*.” Richard grabbed at the cool wooden edge of the desk and lifted his knee up onto the top to bare more of himself for Logan. “Jeez, *yes...baby*.” He gasped.

He looked behind him when he heard Logan fumbling with his belt one-handed.

He started to take his leg down, thinking he could help Logan with his clothes. “You need—”

“Stay right where you are,” Richard said behind clenched teeth. He punctuated that with a stinging bite on Richard's ass cheek and then followed it up with a soothing lick of his tongue.

From where his cheek lay pressed to the surface of the desk, Richard heard Logan's jeans hit the floor, and then he watched, fascinated, as a foil condom wrapper fluttered to the desktop from where it had been in Logan's mouth.

“Dude, did you just spit that? That's so—”

“Shut up, Richard,” Logan told him, and even though it was said with the grim determination of a man on a suicide mission, it made Richard smile. A hand came down on his ass cheek, hard, *thwack*, but then it gently soothed the sting away.

“Uh, Logan...”

“I said shut up, Richard.”

Richard's eyebrows rose, but other than that he didn't react.

“What the fuck am I going to do with you?” Logan said as he positioned himself. “Can I go?”

Richard's heart warmed considerably. Even when he was doing brute force, Logan still couldn't be insensitive. “Go, baby. You'd better figure out what you're going to do with me because—”

Logan smacked the other cheek harder. “Did I *ask* you?”

Richard snorted. “Yeah, baby. You did.”

Logan managed to slip the head of his dick into Richard's ass, gripping his shoulders as he growled, “Gimme.” Richard complied, rocking his hips and allowing himself to be filled. A deep sigh escaped Logan as he eased himself in the rest of the way. Richard could feel Logan's breath and his smile on his neck.

Logan was going to be a machine; he was going to drive himself into Richard's body over and over until he came. Richard shivered as Logan's rough hands gripped him hard, holding him steady. Logan wasn't smiling anymore. He was fierce, making animal grunting noises, and Richard responded in kind. This Logan was like nothing Richard had ever known. His tenderness gone but not entirely forgotten, this Logan held Richard down and abraded his skin with a fuzz-covered chest, striking sparks along his spine. When Richard gave himself over to Logan, those sparks turned to flames deep inside of him.

Logan and Richard had spent time making love, but this was fucking.

Richard's last coherent thought, that being fucked by Logan was everything he imagined it would be, was fleeting, and after that it didn't matter. There was nothing except Logan's cock filling him, the rub of a freshly shaved face on his neck, crisp chest hair on his back, and the thump and throb of his own cock as it connected with Logan's file drawers. Logan was fucking him to get off, hard and fast, and it was working, especially when Logan's hand came around and caught his cock in a grip like a fucking lipstick tube.

“Shit, Logan,” he moaned into a stack of yellow Post-it notes. “Damn, baby...”

“What do you need, lover?” Logan asked him tightly.

“Make me come on your cock like the dirty slut *I am*,” Richard shouted. He licked his dry lips.

“Shh...shhhh...*shit!*” Logan's hips bumped his cock past Richard's prostate and nailed it.

Richard's whole body tensed as he shot creamy jets of cum all over the drawers of Logan's desk. He heard the catch of breath that signaled Logan's release, felt Logan's heat piercing him deep and his weight pressing him down as he panted through waves of mind-boggling pleasure.

Logan leaned over and met his eyes, and Richard saw something loving and warm there as Logan reached out to remove the papers that were sticking to Richard's slick skin. Logan's lips twitched into a satisfied smile.

"Like the *dirty slut* you are?"

Richard closed his eyes and hid his face with his arm. "At the time I was trying out bad, bad boy. You did spank me. I thought that's where we were going with all that."

"Are you a bad, bad boy?"

Richard shuddered as Logan gripped the lip of the condom and removed his dick. "You say that now and it's just creepy. It doesn't have the same—"

"Would you shut up while I catch my breath? I didn't get my breakfast." Logan tossed the used condom into the trash and then knotted the bag and picked it up.

Richard pushed from bent over to standing but held on to the desk while his legs were still shaky. "I think your breakfast may be part of the reason you can't catch your breath. Do you eat like that all the time?"

"I'm not even going to dignify that. I am a finely tuned military machine, and you are a self-employed artist who jogs a little." Logan shot him a look before walking stiffly out the office door and down the hall to the garage in only his T-shirt.

Richard followed him. "I am a self-employed artist who jogs a *lot* and goes to strip aerobics three times a week with my friends."

"You what?"

"I am a—"

"I heard that part. What about the strip aerobics?"

"When Nick was in first grade, a group of us suburban stay-at-homes decided to take strip aerobics at the local gym. This was the first time I got to use it in a possibly romantic social environment. Did it work?" Richard grinned and followed Logan into the garage.

Logan cleared his throat and threw the trash bag into the big bin. "Uh-huh."

“Ooh. Pancakes.” Richard got their sack from the pancake house out of the Jeep and ran inside the house toward the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

A deep sense of contentment wrapped around Richard even as he dragged the blanket over Logan's shoulders. Logan lay facedown on the bed, breathing deeply and evenly. He snored. Richard couldn't stop himself from pressing his face into the curve of Logan's neck where it swept down to his thickly muscled back. He pressed his lips to the skin there, earning an irritated ripple of Logan's body as if he were ticklish.

Richard wasn't one to kid himself. The chances of him finding someone like Logan, since he never dated, never clubbed, and positively couldn't even consider tricking anymore, was statistically more improbable than being struck twice by lightning. Maybe at his age he simply *knew* how lucky he was, and he wasn't about to take it for granted.

Logan made his entire body happy, from his lopsided grin to his neat-freak garage to the way he always hovered protectively with his hand out, as if he were waiting for Richard to go headfirst into another light post. And probably he was. Richard frowned when he realized he hadn't appeared too competent of late. Between running into the light post and the mishap with his hand, he'd been in the ER twice. The number of times he'd needed emergency care in his entire adult life? Exactly two...

Richard pressed his face back into Logan's neck, and the man turned his head.

“What?” Logan asked sleepily. “Time to go?”

“No.”

Logan rolled over, his large body seeming to erupt in the bed as covers shifted and exposed Richard's naked ass to the cool air.

“What, then?” He grunted as Richard pulled the blankets back.

“You don't think I'm accident-prone, do you?”

Logan appeared to consider this carefully. “I think maybe in your enthusiasm you don't look before you—”

“You *do*.” Richard pushed him onto his back. “You think I'm clumsy.”

"I wouldn't say clumsy exactly. It's more that you don't look where you're going sometimes."

"That's just a careful way of saying that you think I'm clumsy. I'll have you know that up until I hit that lamppost, I'd never needed emergency medical care as an adult."

"Really?" Logan looked like he was enjoying this.

"Really," Richard told him. "I'm considered rather well coordinated at the gym."

"Where you strip?"

"Where I work out. I can assure you that kind of dance gets my heart rate to an aerobic level in no time, and the sweat pours off my body."

"Mine too," Logan teased.

"I'll bet."

Richard's phone rang and vibrated, almost leaping off the nightstand into his hand. He dropped his feet over the side of the bed and sat, looking at the dial. To Logan, he said, "Nick's school. I have to take this. "

Logan nodded.

"Hello?"

The cool and professional voice on the other end belonged to Nick's principal, and Richard's heart gave a sudden lurch.

"Hi, Richard. This is Charlotte. I need to talk to you for a minute."

"Sure, what's up?"

Charlotte paused for a long moment, during which Richard felt his blood pressure rise exponentially.

"Is Nick okay?" he asked finally.

"He's fine. He'll be *fine*. He's in my office now. I'm calling from the secretary's phone. He's been in a fight, Richard, and I have to tell you I need to suspend him for a couple of days."

"*What?*"

"I think you had better come here to the office. We can talk about it in person."

"Jeez, Charlotte, you're scaring the crap out of me."

"It's not the end of the world, Richard, but it's going to have consequences."

"Shit." Richard put his head in his hands. He felt Logan's firm grip on his neck and shoulder, kneading the muscle there, soothing him.

"Look. We're friends, right? We go back a few years?" Charlotte paused again, and Richard worried there was a shitload the normally loquacious administrator wasn't telling him.

"Yeah, sure."

"It's none of my business, but if you're starting a new relationship and it's becoming serious, you should bring him too."

"*What?*"

"Word gets around, and I don't want you to be blindsided. If you have something that's becoming a partnership, then this discussion includes that person too."

"*Shit.*"

"You know I have your back, right?"

"I do, Charlotte."

"Good."

"Is this going to get ugly?"

"I hope not," Charlotte answered.

"Me too."

Richard put the phone down and didn't move for a minute.

"What?"

"Nick got into a fight. I need to go." He said it, but he couldn't quite make himself do it just yet.

"I'm sorry." Logan frowned. "What was he fighting about?"

"I don't know. Charlotte didn't say."

Logan gave him a look that said *you can do better than that*. "Best guess."

"She said if I had someone new and it was getting serious, he'd better come too."

"*Fuck.*"

“She said it could get ugly.” Richard stood up and looked around, realizing that his clothes were still where he left them in Logan's office.

“Shit, I left my clothes downstairs. I'm out of here. You rest, okay?” Richard kissed Logan's temple and patted him on the back for a minute. “I'll call later or text.”

“Aren't you forgetting something?”

Richard frowned at him. “I don't think—”

“Me, you *jerk*.” Logan got up and went to the bathroom. “I meant me.”

“Logan, you don't have to—”

Logan's head popped back out of the bathroom. “The only thing that's going to get ugly,” he growled, “is you trying to push me away.”

“Logan—”

“I'm going to make myself understood here, whether you like it or not. I am involved in your life. I am your lover; I want to be your partner. I like Nick. I want to help. I foresee the possibility”—he swallowed hard—“I imagine that we could have something very like a family, Richard.”

Richard's jaw fell open only a tiny bit before he snapped it closed. “Yeah?”

“Yes,” Logan hissed. “I come from a very fine family. A fun family. I miss that.”

“I didn't,” Richard said softly. “But I want to know what it's like.”

“Wait while I get dressed, and we'll both go.”

Richard stood uncertainly, half in and half out of the bedroom, while Logan gazed into his closet. “What does one wear to fire a shot across the bow of the bourgeois suburban middle class?”

Richard grinned. “Before or after Labor Day?”

## Chapter Sixteen

The first thing that Logan noticed when he entered the elementary school office behind Richard was that the secretary was willing to smile warmly at him, but none of the kids would meet his eye. There were four boys lined up on the chairs across from the secretary's desk, and two of them positively looked the worse for wear. One was Nick, who held an ice pack across both his eyes and a wad of tissues to his nose. Some effort had been made to clean up his skin, but his shirt was a bloody mess, and Richard stopped in his tracks, reaching back for a steadying grip on Logan's arm.

"Steady," Logan told him. "Noses bleed like gangbusters."

"I know that." Richard walked to where Nick sat and pulled the ice pack away. Both eyes were swollen nearly shut. Logan's heart sank. *Probably broken, then.*

"Nick?" Richard reached out a hand, but Nick pulled away.

An attractive blonde woman in her late forties came down a long hallway and reached Richard first, pulling him into a solid hug.

"Hey," she said. "I have the boys' families in the conference room in back." She indicated a room at the end of the corridor. "You ready?"

Richard hesitated. "Not really."

She leaned her head toward Richard. They were of a height, and her highlighted blonde hair obscured Logan's view of Richard's face. "Okay, first thing you need to know is that Nick didn't start it. He was down trying to protect himself when we broke it up. He's probably going to need a visit with a doctor to make sure his nose isn't broken."

Logan leaned in. "It looks like it might be."

She glanced from Richard to Logan and smiled. "Hi, my name is Charlotte Tachler."



"Hello," Logan told her. Richard seemed incapable of speech, so he held out his hand. "I'm Logan Wilde."

"Pleasure to meet you." Charlotte took his hand in a firm grip and shook it. Her attention returned to Richard. "I'm sorry, but the other parents are here, waiting."

Richard cleared his throat. "Lead the way."

When Logan stepped into the conference room behind Charlotte and Richard, he couldn't help but assess the situation. He was experienced in conflict management, probably had more training than Charlotte with regard to discipline, and he already knew that in the small room only one person was going to prove difficult. The man sat spread out in a single chair as though it were a Barcalounger and took up what seemed to be a great deal of the available space. When Richard walked through the door, the man threw a look toward the woman next to him, and she looked away. He peered at Logan as though at first he didn't understand why he might be there, but when it dawned on him, probably because Logan had his hand on the small of Richard's back to reassure him, he rolled his eyes and puffed out a wholly disingenuous sigh.

It wasn't for nothing that Logan had worn his USMC T-shirt and camo pants. He'd shaved again, even though Richard had been hurrying him to leave. He knew he looked like a marine, well, except for the hair, which was longer than regulation on the top, but still higher and tighter than civilian standards. He'd been told more than once that his presence could fill a room, and he let it happen. He kept his body language relaxed but commanding. He took a strategic place at the table next to Richard and slightly behind him, closest to the door, which Charlotte closed behind her.

There were three women seated at the table. Logan guessed they were each one of the boys' mothers. The man Logan had singled out as trouble glared at him, and the woman next to him stared straight ahead as if they weren't together. Maybe they weren't. Charlotte seated herself at the head of the table and fidgeted for a second with a stack of papers.

"All right. Now, first, I want to thank you all for being here. I know this can't be an easy thing on a workday. It's always hard when our kids make bad choices, and we are going to have to face this with calm and—"

"What happened?" one of the women asked. She had dark hair and eyes that said she would rather be anywhere else. "I mean... I know they were fighting."

“Let me start by introducing you, if you don't know each other. I'm pretty sure you've seen each other around, Richard and Logan.” She indicated them. Logan inclined his head, and Richard lifted his hand. “Pam and Lonnie Jenkins.” She indicated the couple, who did little to respond to her and even less to acknowledge each other. “Luisa Franco and Kelly Martinez.”

They all nodded stiffly to one another. Logan looked at his watch. If it was all going to go this slowly, they were going to be there awhile.

“You got somewhere to be?” Lonnie asked, already belligerent.

“No, I was thinking about trying to get Nick in to see an ENT rather than the emergency room,” he said, although he'd been thinking of no such thing. Richard turned and looked at him like he always did. *Like a hero*. Logan almost blushed.

“All right, then, the basics from witnesses and the noon supervisors.” Charlotte got out a stack of papers and looked them over before she spoke. “It seems Guillermo and Nick were arguing at the lunch tables today.” Luisa Franco went a little pale. “They were joined by Lonnie Jr., who taunted Nick about having two fathers. Nick refused to argue. He tried to walk away, however, and while he was throwing his lunch in the trash, Guillermo and Lonnie picked him up and threw him into the bin headfirst.” Lonnie laughed out loud. A muscle jumped in the jaw of the woman Logan assumed was Lonnie Jr.'s mother.

“Excuse me,” Charlotte told him, “this is a grave matter, and I need you to regard it seriously.”

“Fuck that.” Lonnie smirked at Richard. “Kids do shit like that. It's harmless. Horseplay.”

“In this school district, it's bullying and subject to expulsion,” Charlotte reminded him.

This got a reaction from Pam Jenkins. “Ms. Tachler, please don't expel Lonnie.” She jerked a thumb toward Lonnie Sr. “He doesn't even live with us anymore. I have to have Junior go to this school because that's where the bus goes and I don't drive.”

“I know, Pam,” Charlotte said gently. “I understand your situation. I just wanted to remind Lonnie that what Junior has done is very serious.”

“Yeah, right, he threw a kid into a trash can,” Lonnie growled. “What do we gotta do to make this go away?”

“I wasn't done yet,” Charlotte said, and Logan noticed Richard kept his hands folded on his lap, but they were white where he was squeezing his fingers together. “After that, Kevin”—

Charlotte inclined her head toward Kelly Martinez—"helped to get Nick out of the trash bin." Kelly briefly closed her eyes. "And then Guillermo and Lonnie Jr. shoved both boys down. When Nick was on the ground, Lonnie kicked him in the face and called him a name I'm not going to use here." The room went silent. Even Lonnie was subdued by this evidence of his son's brutality.

Logan sat forward in his chair. "Did Nick lose consciousness?"

"No," Charlotte said. "One of the boys said he thought Nick had his hands to his face and dodged most of the blow."

Logan wanted to kill something. "He needs to be seen for a possible head injury, though. If we could make the rest of this brief..."

"I think that's wise."

"Is that all or is there more?" Logan asked. Richard looked ill, and Logan didn't know how much more he could take.

"That's when the noon supervisors arrived and took charge. The whole situation erupted in what they said seemed like seconds." Luisa, who Logan assumed was Guillermo's mother, sat without speaking. Lonnie's mother, Pam, on the other hand, burst into tears.

"Richard, I'm so sorry."

Richard said nothing. Logan wasn't certain what to do.

"I'm sorry too," Kelly Martinez murmured. Her eyes were damp as well, and Logan gave her a nod.

"Is Kevin unharmed?" Logan asked, his deep voice cutting into the silence in a way he hadn't intended it to.

Charlotte cleared her throat. "Yes, the only one injured was Nick."

Richard still sat frozen, and Logan took that to mean he could speak on their behalf. He hoped that's what it meant. "Mrs. Martinez, if I understand correctly, Kevin came to Nick's aid, and I want to say thank you."

She smiled at this. "Kev's a decent kid. At least I think he is."

“They're all decent kids.” Richard spoke at last. “Sometimes they're taught indecent things. Sometimes they make stupid mistakes.” He still didn't look up from where he clenched his hands in his lap.

Lonnie rose. “We're done here,” he said, trying to grab at Pam's hand. She jerked it away.

“You're done here,” she spat. “Anyone can see where he gets that shit.”

“Like you're so perfect. You don't like these people any more than—”

“That's enough for now,” Charlotte interrupted in a voice that didn't allow for argument. “All the boys will be suspended for the rest of the week for fighting. There may be repercussions, Pam and Luisa, for Lonnie and Guillermo's bullying. I have to consider your needs carefully against the safety of all my students, and I won't be allowed to adjudicate this at my discretion because this is going to require a psychiatric evaluation by a school-district counselor.”

“Shit. In my day we handled it on the street,” Lonnie said. “Get in a fight in the school yard, you handled it. None of this pussy psychological shit. What's that going to teach your boy? Next guy comes along to knock him down, he's going to take a dive again.”

Logan kept the flat of his hand on Richard's back.

Charlotte rose. “Nick did exactly what he was instructed to do, from what I understand. He tried to avoid conflict.”

“He should have tried to avoid my kid's foot.”

Pam made an outraged noise, and Richard tensed.

“I'm taking Nick and Richard to the doctor now.” Logan got up. “Thank you for telling us what happened. When is Nick to return to school?”

“Monday,” Charlotte told him.

Kelly frowned. “If Kev and Nick were victims, why are you punishing them too?”

“I just want to give all the kids involved some time to reflect. Nick needs time to heal. We'll talk more privately after I've scheduled the evaluation. It may not go on their records as a suspension.”

“Thanks again.” Logan held his hand out, and Charlotte shook it. He went around the room, and the only one not willing to shake his hand was Lonnie. *No surprises there, and no loss.*

“I’ll be in touch tonight, Richard. I want to know how the doctor’s appointment went,” Charlotte told him, patting his back gently. Richard stayed behind to speak with her and Kelly briefly while Pam and Luisa left through the front office door with their boys. Lonnie hung around for a minute, watching them go, even though neither of them said a word to him. Logan stepped out the door and walked slowly past the kindergarten classrooms on his way to the parking lot. He figured that Richard would come out with Nick when they were done and head for his truck. He wasn’t surprised to find Lonnie following him.

“Hey,” Lonnie called. “Look, man, I’m sorry my kid beat up your kid.”

Logan wasn’t going to be fooled by his phony show of sincerity. “No, you’re not.”

“Yeah, well.” Lonnie gave him the kind of unpleasant once-over Logan expected from people like him. “I didn’t know they let *you guys* in the corps.”

“Haven’t you heard? They don’t ask, and we don’t tell. Anyway, I’m retired.”

“Life’s tough. Kid has two dads? Life’s even tougher.”

“Just to clarify,” Logan told him, “Richard is Nick’s *grandfather*, and I’m nobody’s dad.”

“Yeah, I got that. Home at last with the little woman.” Lonnie continued to posture, and Logan let him. “Your kid is going to get a lot more shit like that; he might as well get used to it. My kid? He’d better not get expelled. Stuff can happen to people who make trouble.”

“If you come near my family, I’ll kill you.” Logan let him see the truth of that in his eyes.

Lonnie didn’t flinch. “I’m not so easy to kill, *maricón*.”

“You know what happened to the last guy who said that to me?”

“I don’t give a shit what happened to him.”

“Neither did he when I was finished with him.” Lonnie gave him the finger and walked away, but Logan took it as a win just to shut the fucker’s mouth. He’d bear watching, and so would his kid. What a mess. Richard was probably thinking about homeschooling or moving to Canada or something. Logan looked up at the sky and wondered why it still seemed so blue when he was feeling so angry. *How could such a great morning turn into a day like this?*

Nick walked out the office door, and Richard came out after him. Nick was looking straight ahead, and Richard looked the picture of dejection. Logan met them, and they walked to the car in silence. Logan unlocked the truck, and Richard put Nick in the back of the crew cab and got into the front.

Logan turned to Richard. "Do you have an ENT?"

"Nope."

Once everyone was buckled in, Logan fired up the truck. "Emergency room?"

"Yeah." Richard sighed.

Logan shook his head. "We should keep a suite there."

## Chapter Seventeen

Logan stood behind Richard in Nick's room, watching his lover smooth blankets over his grandson's sleeping form. The tender scene caught him in the chest a little, where his heart ached for Richard. Logan was impressed by the boy's room even though it had the usual jumble of clothes and sports equipment strewn over the wood floor and the large oriental rug that dominated it. The walls were painted with trompe l'oeil murals, and one had only to look at the bookshelves to figure out that they'd been done to look like a scene from the Harry Potter novels. The large window, set in a dormer jutting out over the roof, had a simple gathered row of attractive fabric on top but did nothing to obscure the view. The room had been decorated meticulously for a well-loved boy. *Richard's work, no doubt.*

Richard watched Nick sleep while Logan watched Richard.

They'd taken Nick to the ER, and it was clear from the swelling, they'd have to wait to see what could be done about his nose, which was probably broken. There were no septal hematomas to worry about, thank heavens, and whatever damage had been done to his nose, it could probably be corrected. Logan had broken his own nose more than once as a kid, the first time as the result of catching a line drive with his face in Little League that pushed it over to the side and made his mother cry for days.

Of more concern to Logan was the possible damage a kick to the head could do to a child's still-forming brain. Trauma caused by a brain slamming against the skull that housed it could do major long-term damage, and it didn't always manifest itself at the time of injury. Logan was grateful he didn't have to try to talk a doctor into a head CT. Once they'd explained the nature of the injury, a sharp kick to the face when Nick was down, the doctor had been outraged on his behalf and insisted on checking for possible head and neck injuries. No damage showed up in the tests, and they'd allowed Nick to return home. As he had the night Richard hit the light pole, Logan was staying over to check every other hour or so, this time on Nick.

Logan pressed his lips together against things he knew he shouldn't say just yet. What he felt for Richard had become a confused cocktail of love and hope and wishful thinking, blended with the urge to nurture and protect and shaken over the ice of twenty-five years of living alone.

Not alone, no. *But lonely*. Longing for the family that was his backbone growing up, regret for the family he'd thought he could never have as an adult. He'd been content to be the world's best uncle, the most fearsome collector of Toys for Tots, and a determined protector of innocents wherever he was on the globe.

That afternoon, it clicked for him while watching Lonnie—that piss-poor excuse for a human being—threaten his family that he'd do anything and everything, including lay down his life, to protect Richard and Nick.

Doing whatever was humanly possible to save lives wasn't new. He'd been expected to exchange his life for comrades' and even strangers' from the moment he'd joined the marines. But now his family had faces. They had names, and he loved them. That was all he needed to know for the emotions that constricted his chest to turn to steel and squeeze all the air from his lungs, wrapping around his heart in an attempt to seal it for good. And maybe he wasn't ready for that.

"You okay?" Richard was frowning at him.

"Sure," Logan lied. "Shocking day. You expect crap like that from adults, but—"

"Children can be vicious." Richard stepped away from Nick after brushing a hand over his cheek. He led the way from the small, highly decorated room and headed for the stairs.

"That they can." Logan followed him down the stairs. "Do you have experience of this?"

Richard went to the living room and looked out the window. "Doesn't everyone?"

"Probably, but I'm asking you specifically."

Richard turned back toward him. "Sure, why do you ask?"

Logan moved toward the fireplace and peered at it. "Do you ever light this?"

"Yes, it's a gas log. Just turn the key; there's a stick lighter on the mantel.

"Gas log." Logan admitted to a certain disappointment.

"Yes. It's much cleaner burning than—"

"I can see where it would be, but sometimes a man just needs to build a fire. Do you ever take Nick camping?"



Richard rolled his eyes. “What on earth can you see in me that would begin to make you think such a thing was possible?”

Logan ignored the sarcasm. “You don’t?”

“We’d both be killed by things I don’t even know exist. I usually make it a point only to lead Nick where I can go safely. Like the Getty Museum or SeaWorld.”

Logan knelt and checked that the flue was open. He turned the gas key, and lit the fireplace with the first click of the lighter. “This is nice,” he remarked grudgingly. It did look rather realistic and crackled like an actual fire. It put out some warmth, both emotionally and thermally, into the room.

“It’s easier than wood, and you never have to remember to buy it.”

“I’m currently resisting the temptation to make jokes.” Logan walked to where Richard stood and wrapped his arms around him. “I like a wood fire. When my mom used to send me out to the woodpile, if it was warm enough, there was always a chance I’d bring in a big spider or two.”

“That’s not much of a recommendation.”

“No, I don’t suppose so. You were awfully quiet in Ms. Tachler’s office,” Logan observed. “It made me think you were somewhere else.”

“I was.” Richard leaned back against Logan’s chest. Logan pressed his lips to the skin just under his ear and rocked him back and forth. “It didn’t matter what we said in there anyway. The haters don’t change, and the others are just mortified their kids are in trouble. I could hardly meet Pam’s or Luisa’s eyes. Our kids have been in school together since kindergarten.”

“Tough stuff.”

Richard was silent for a long time, chewing thoughtfully on his lower lip. When he finally spoke, he seemed reluctant. “I was bashed in high school.”

Logan blinked. “I thought you weren’t... When you say *bashed*—”

“Jeez. This just sucks.” Richard broke out of Logan’s embrace and headed to the kitchen. “Stay where you are; I’ll explain in a minute, okay? I need a drink. Want one?”

“Beer if you’ve got it.” Logan moved to a comfortable spot on the couch.

Richard returned to the room with two Coronas and an expression on his face that Logan was hard-pressed to decipher. He looked determined. He handed Logan a beer and then a bottle opener, after taking the cap off his own. After Richard sat down on the couch beside him, Logan noticed Richard looked anywhere except into his eyes.

“My mother used to have a saying about chickens coming home to roost.” Richard ran his free hand through his hair and took a generous drink of beer. “Back in high school, I knew what I was, whatever the evidence to the contrary.”

“If this is a tough subject—”

“It's not. Not really,” Richard continued, waving away Logan's objection. “In my sophomore year, there was a boy who turned me inside out. Not that he tried or anything. It wasn't in his nature. He was just someone who I had a major thing for, seriously, my first passionate, pillow-hugging, masturbating, *wanting-to-hit-that-like-the-fist-of-an-angry-god* crush. Youth is wasted on the young, man.”

Logan chuckled because he'd certainly experienced the same thing. “That's true enough.”

“There were a couple of guys. You know the type. They noticed something right away when I was talking to this boy and guessed what it meant.” Richard looked at his shoes. “They made life pretty hard for me and almost impossible for this other kid.”

“I'm sorry.”

“Yeah, well. It was what it was. Anyway, one day there was more trash talk than ever, and this guy I liked just snapped and beat the crap out of me. I was down on all fours with my arms wrapped around my face, and the kid I thought was *it*, man...this kid I liked so much was kicking my ribs so hard, I could feel them *crack*.”

“Oh *fuck*.” Logan pulled Richard into his arms. He cupped the back of Richard's head and held him while Richard clung to his chest.

Richard shook his head. “Okay, that's a major downer, but it's over. It's not something I even really think about, but today's events brought back the whole damned thing. After that, the next year in school, I met Nick's grandmother. Back in the day, it seemed safer somehow, and I didn't exactly have to pursue her. It was cooler to be bi than gay, and I got her pregnant in junior year. By the time we graduated, it was obvious to everyone that the whole fucking thing was a big mistake—except for our son, James, who was being raised by his grandparents—and I was

persona non grata. I rarely saw James, even if I wanted to. At first they kept me away by asking me to stay away. Later on, when I realized the unfairness of that, they cited my nonparticipation in his early years to prevent me from participating when he was older.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Well. When he graduated from high school, he came looking for me. We... I think we mended some fences. He knew I loved him.”

“That’s good, anyway.” Richard was looking into the fire, and Logan knew exactly where his mind was.

“When James died, I swore I’d take care of Nick. I swore I would see to it that his life was perfect.”

“Nobody’s life is perfect, Richard. How could you even think you could make such a promise?”

Richard slumped. “I don’t know. You look into a baby’s eyes, and it’s not rational. I swore I would make his life perfect because I was certain I could do that, and today I feel like I failed him utterly.”

“Because some kid kicked him?” Logan gripped Richard’s arm. “You think that negates the positive effects you’ve had on him? The advantages he has living with someone who loves him unconditionally? Having a gay grandfather isn’t the worst thing that could happen to a kid.”

“I know. *I know that.* But when we were in that conference room, I just blanked. I froze. I thought...*I did this.*”

“Oh hell no, you did not. If anyone’s chickens came home to roost, it was that Lonnie’s, and there are plenty of words for what he is. His own wife detests him. This is one day out of how many? How many years have you had Nick?”

“Five.”

“Then do the math.” Logan finished off his beer and took Richard gently into his arms. “I suggest we get some rest while we can; I set my phone alarm so we can check on Nick in about an hour and a half.”

Richard melted against him for a brief minute. “You’re a good man.”

“Thanks.” Logan gave him a tender kiss. “Right back *atcha.*”

Richard pushed away. "I need to set the security system."

Logan watched as Richard checked the doors and windows, satisfying himself that they were locked. While he was glad to see that Richard was conscientious about doing this, he was sorry he felt he had to. The day's incident on top of the feeling that his former daughter-in-law and her boyfriend were planning something had to be scaring him badly. Richard returned to the room and went to the wall where the control for the system was mounted. Logan frowned.

"Have you heard anything else from Nick's mother?"

Richard punched in the alarm code, then stopped where he was, his hand hovering over the keypad. "No. But I'm going to have to let her know about this, and it might just turn out to be fuel for their fire. They might want to try to take—"

"I'm sorry I brought it up." Logan went to Richard where he stood and put his arms around him. "I'm sorry about all of this. It seems that maybe things were working better for you before I came along and—"

"*Hey.*" Richard's eyebrows came together in a fierce V above his nose. "*You* aren't the problem. If there's a problem, it's not because you came along. This thing with Lila goes in cycles. It's not the first time she's gotten cleaned up and come back after Nick, and it won't be the last. Every kid worth keeping gets bullied in school. This was worse than most, I guess."

"I'll say."

"It's just another day in paradise, Logan. It will all look better in the morning." Richard pulled away from Logan's embrace and sighed. "Get some rest; I need to check my e-mail and figure out what to tell Nick's mother and grandparents."

"How bad is it going to be?"

"I'm going to talk to my lawyer first, and then I'll let you know."

Logan tossed a throw pillow down at the head of the couch and pulled a quilt off one of the recliners. He felt like he needed to say something more. "For what it's worth, I think the principal would back you to the hilt."

"I know."

"And if they want to depose a retired marine colonel, I will too."

Richard looked up at him, and *there it was*, that hero thing that made Logan feel ten feet tall. “Thank you.”

“It's no big deal.” Logan's voice faltered.

Richard grinned. “Let me be the judge of what's a big deal in my life, will you?”

Richard watched Logan settle himself, then finished his beer and took his and Logan's empties to the trash. He stood at the spotless kitchen sink for a long time, avoiding what he knew would be a tough e-mail to his attorney. Despite what he'd said in the heat of that moment of guilt, he knew he was the best person to raise Nick. Anyway, it didn't matter, because he had no plans to give Nick back to his mother and her boyfriend or to his other grandparents, no matter what he had to do to keep him.

Once again, this time through no fault of their own, Richard was torn between the boy he loved and the man who was gaining a firm, firm grip on his heart. If he sat on the stairs between them equidistantly, isolating himself in the process and pleasing no one but the outside world, if he waited for the world's approval, he'd never have the right to either of them.

Well. *Fuck that*. Richard washed his hands and dampened his face with a splash of cool water. He wasn't about to wait to see what the world would *let* him do. He was going to do what was right, and the world be damned.

## Chapter Eighteen

Logan woke before his phone's alarm had the chance to go off. He didn't move for a minute, perceiving that there was someone else close by. His instinct for self-preservation kicked in, thankfully, after he realized where he was, or he'd have shot up from the couch into a defensive position before he thought about it. But it made him frown. He was definitely getting soft. A slight shifting of his eyes told him he was being watched, drawn actually, by Richard, who sat cross-legged on the coffee table like a kid, with a sketch pad in his lap. He was concentrating, looking up and back down at his work, and his tongue was visible at the corner of his mouth.

Logan closed his eyes again. *Cute*. Richard was so damn cute, it made his heart ache. It was a wonder he didn't go into some sort of sugar coma every time he set eyes on the man.

"Don't bother pretending to be asleep. I could tell exactly when you woke up," Richard said conversationally. "All your muscles tightened up like someone yelled *freeze*. I admire your restraint."

"Count yourself lucky." Logan turned his head toward Richard. "I was just thinking I've lost my edge."

"Hopefully you won't need it much here in the burbs."

"Hopefully." Logan started to roll but then stopped again. "Okay if I move?"

"Mhmm," Richard murmured without looking up. "I'm done; I was just blending a little here and there."

Logan rolled onto his side with his head propped on one hand, arm bent at the elbow. "Did you ever think about getting Nick some martial-arts training?"

Richard's hands stopped moving. "What?"

"Did you ever think maybe he needs some way to defend himself?"

“He's a kid.” Richard frowned and put his work down next to him. “He shouldn't *have* to defend himself.”

“Of course not.” Logan rose to a sitting position. “And kids shouldn't have to worry about what other kids put in their drinks, and old people shouldn't have to worry about walking home from the bank after cashing a check. I only meant that it's wise to have a plan in place if something should happen.”

“So then what? We teach him to fear everything? Or turn him into a little ninja boy who will strike first and then ask questions?”

“I don't think you're giving the idea the consideration it deserves.”

“I've thought about this. Of course I have. I don't want him to be scared, but I don't want to turn him into some weapon.”

“I think if he learned some simple close-combat drills, not just drills but realistic techniques like *Krav Maga* for threat neutralization and quick escape—”

“Great. So he can be the biggest monster on the block.”

Logan bit back the first retort that came to him—that *he* was the biggest monster on the block—because it wouldn't have been productive to say it. But it hurt to hear Richard say it. Even in the darkness he could see quite clearly the distaste with which Richard used the words *weapon* and *monster*.

“You think knowing how to defend yourself is a bad thing?”

“No, of course not, but you know how people like that are. They always take it to the next level, escalating conflict because they can, throwing their weight around, and eventually they just become bigger bullies than the ones they were trying to protect themselves from in the first place. Power corrupts, and absolute—”

“I know the saying,” Logan muttered, getting to his feet. He'd heard enough. He took off for the kitchen. “I need a drink of water.”

Richard leaped up to follow him. “Oh shit. I didn't mean... Logan, you're different. It was your job to learn things like that.”

“I know that.” Logan opened the refrigerator, blinded temporarily by the light it offered in the otherwise dark room. Richard came in and turned on the overhead fixture.

Logan got out a bottle of water and twisted off the cap. He offered it to Richard, but Richard shook his head.

“It's different for soldiers. You don't have any choice in what you're asked to do.”

“Is that what you think?” Logan asked. “You think that soldiers don't have a choice?”

“Well, yeah. I mean. It's your job. They train you. They arm you, give you the technology or whatever. They tell you where to go and you go, right?”

Logan closed his eyes and shook his head in disbelief. “Here's a news flash, Richard. Everyone always has a choice about what they do, every minute of every day.”

“I didn't mean—”

“Let me finish. Sometimes my choices suck. Sometimes the only choices are I do something *or* I die. Sometimes the choice is I do something *and* I lose everything, including my freedom and my life, but I always, *always* have a choice. Even if that choice is just to accept my fate. Or reject it. I've made some good ones and some piss-poor ones.”

Richard sighed. “Of course you're right. I didn't mean to imply you were some sort of drone.”

“Well, yes, I think you did mean to imply that. It's true we develop reflexes, but I think you meant to imply that you couldn't teach Nick self-defense *and* instill in him when to use it properly, or how to behave with the kind of nobility you believe people should exhibit in a perfect world. But I don't think there's anything particularly noble about getting your ass kicked. And I don't think we live in a perfect world.”

Richard sighed. “It can't be a perfect world if we arm our children against one another. Maybe you just don't know how I feel about things like this, but here it is: Someone has to step up and say violence is not okay. It's a cycle, and someone has to have the guts to break it.”

“I know. I'm not suggesting we arm him. I'm suggesting basic self-defense. And if he were my kid—”

“Well, he's not your kid, all right?” Richard snapped. “Don't you think I want to get a gun and put that kid down for what he did to my boy? But what the fuck kind of a world would we have—”



“Hey.” Nick wobbled into the room sleepily. Thanks to the ice pack, his eyes weren't swollen shut, but his nose was about twice its normal size. It seemed to be in the correct place, though, and looked straight still. “My face hurts.”

Richard looked at his watch. “It's been a while since you last had a Tylenol. How about we get you something? Then maybe a little ice cream will take your mind off it?”

It was telling that Nick didn't seem excited by the prospect of a treat. He sank into a chair at the table morosely and waited in silence while Richard got him some chewable pain-relief tablets and a glass of water.

“I have vanilla and chocolate chip. What are you up for, Nick?”

“Vanilla, please.” Nick sat hunched over the table, resting his chin on his arms. To Logan, he said, “I heard you arguing.”

“Sorry, did we wake you?”

“No. Maybe.”

“Logan and I just had a difference of opinion,” Richard told him, setting a bowl and a spoon down in front of him. “What kind of ice cream do you want?” he asked Logan.

Logan looked at his watch. He was tired and, more importantly, feeling a little unhappy with Richard. It was one thing to deplore violence. It wasn't hard to see violence wasn't okay. Nick's broken nose was living proof. But he hadn't realized that Richard saw him as either an intrinsic part of the problem of the current violent society or a mindless thug. It stung to think Richard considered him a bully or a man who had no choice, who acted on someone else's say-so without thinking it through on his own. That Richard didn't see there might be something in between bully and drone.

“I'm afraid I'm tired. I'm going to have to go.”

Richard shot him a worried look. “Is everything okay?”

“I need some sleep. It looks to me like you guys have everything under control.” He got up and headed for the door. “I'll call you.” Richard caught up with Logan at the door.

“Hey, wait—”

Logan turned when he heard Richard's voice and leaned in for a quick kiss. He turned back before Richard could see anything in his eyes he'd rather not share. Richard punched the code on the security system and opened the front door for him.

Logan's heart felt heavy. "Take care of your guy. He's looking a little deflated."

"I will. Sleep well." Richard held up his hand in a half wave, one of those dumb-ass, wiggly fingered things that didn't belong on a guy his age at all. A *cute* wave, damn it.

"I will." Logan strode out into the night.

Richard watched Logan step down the brick stairs and onto the pathway that led to the sidewalk, then closed the door when Logan's truck pulled away from the curb. He pushed the buttons to reset the alarm. He knew he'd fucked up. No doubt about it. He'd taken one look in Logan's eyes as he left and felt kicked in the stomach. He'd hurt Logan. Maybe badly. The last thing in the world he'd wanted to do was hurt Logan.

He scrubbed his hands through his hair as he returned to the kitchen and Nick, who looked a little happier. "Good?"

"Mm hmm," Nick replied around the spoon. "Are you going to shoot somebody?"

"No. What makes you think that?"

"I heard you tell Logan you would take a gun and put down the boy who hurt me."

"No, I said I wanted to do that, not that I would."

"How come?"

"How come I want to? Or how come I won't?" Richard helped himself to a bowl of ice cream, embarrassed at its size after he scooped it. He shrugged. "Guess I'll be jogging tomorrow."

"Do you think Logan would shoot Lonnie if I asked him to?"

"Of course not." Nick gazed at him unhappily while he took a spoonful.

"I'll bet he'd shoot someone who threw *him* in a trash can."

"He most certainly would not." Richard put his spoon down. "Want to talk about it?"

Nick reddened and kept his eyes on his bowl. Richard watched him as he stirred his ice cream around for a while, turning it to mush.

“Want some chocolate sauce?”

“No, thanks.” Nick sighed. “You really like Logan, don't you?”

“Yeah.” Richard picked up his spoon again. “Yeah, I do.”

Nick's perfect, full lips pulled up on one side, a face he made when he was not exactly mollified but coming to terms with something. Richard held his breath. “People shouldn't have to be ashamed of who they like, should they?”

“Not really. Unless they like... I dunno. A really bad guy or something. Someone who tells them to jump off a cliff.”

Nick nodded. “I don't think it's right that Lonnie trash-talks you because you're friends with Logan. I told him to shut up.”

“Thank you.”

“Lonnie said lots of things. Gross stuff. I told Logan.”

“You did?”

“Logan said you don't have to listen to the kind of guy who kicks a man when he's down.”

“He did?” Richard didn't think Logan and Nick had spoken two words to one another since they'd left the school. “When?”

Nick spooned another ice-cream blob into his mouth. “While you were talking with the doctor.”

“I see.” Richard gazed at his grandson. “Lonnie doesn't seem like the kind of guy I'd listen to either.”

“Lonnie picks his nose and *eats* it.”

“All the more reason.” Richard tried not to laugh but failed. When Nick joined him, it was obvious his face hurt more. Richard sobered instantly. “Nick, I'm so sorry that you got hurt because of me.”

“Logan told me that Lonnie was a pinhead, and even if Katie Couric was my mom and Superman was my dad, he'd be a jerk about it.” Nick frowned. “He said some people are just jerks.”

*And thanks to my thoughtless comments earlier, I'm one of them.* Suddenly Richard didn't feel much like eating his ice cream.

“I think maybe I hurt Logan's feelings earlier.”

Nick watched him silently. He ate his ice cream, his darkly bruised face impassive.

“I really like him, but there are some things we just can't agree on.”

“Like broccoli?” Nick asked.

Richard huffed a tired laugh. “Yeah.”

“Maybe you should say you're sorry.” Nick spooned up another bite.

“What about you? Are you still going to give him the cold shoulder? He really had our backs today. I was pretty shocked in that conference room. You weren't there, but Logan... He has a way of making people listen to him.”

“I'll bet he does that crazy-soldier thing, and—”

“Don't knock it until you've seen him use it on Lonnie Sr.”

“Lonnie's dad?”

“The man is a total jerk, Nick. Lonnie Jr. probably doesn't have a very easy life.”

Nick frowned. “I guess Logan's not so bad, but I still hate Lonnie.”

“Aw, Nick.” Richard sighed. “I dunno. I think that hating someone is harder on you than it is on them. I'm tired. I'm going to put this back in the freezer and sack out.”

Nick handed Richard his empty bowl. “If I can't sleep, can I watch TV in your room?”

“Sure, why don't we just go up? You can turn it on, and then if you fall asleep, great, and if not, you don't have to move.” Richard put his bowl into the freezer and rinsed Nick's bowl out in the sink. Richard draped an arm around his shoulder on the way up the stairs. That little head came down and rested against his side, warm and trusting.

“Sometimes I still feel scared,” Nick said in a small voice.

Richard pulled him closer. “Me too.”

## Chapter Nineteen

The next morning, Logan checked his e-mail and found one from Richard—a hand-drawn cartoon of a man being squashed flat by a cartload of words like *I'm sorry, I'm a jerk, I was thoughtless*, and *Please forgive me*. The words that riveted his attention were *You can spank me later*.

*Yeah, jeez*. He sipped at his coffee. He'd just have to get used to the fact that Richard tensed up around any discussion of violence. Richard's reaction was probably a better reaction, a more wholesome reaction, than the one *he* had to the subject in general. It was natural for them to have a difference of opinion about things every once in a while. But Logan worried that this one would have far-reaching consequences unless they could find a way to meet somewhere in the middle. In the meantime, he wasn't giving up on the idea of teaching Nick how to defend himself.

The thought of Richard on his hands and knees while a boy he liked kicked the crap out of him made Logan sick inside. He wondered where that boy was now, what kind of man he'd turned out to be, or if he had any idea what he'd done. Logan was still sitting at his desk, thinking about what he wanted to say to Richard in response, when the doorbell rang.

Logan looked out the peephole, but he didn't see anyone. He opened the door and found a large basket on his doormat with a number of helium balloons attached. No one was around, but it didn't take a genius to figure out who left it there. A large plush snowy owl perched on top of a number of treats: a couple of boxes of tea and a plate of scones, shortbread, different kinds of jam, and even a small bottle of the thick cream he'd seen at teatime in fancier hotels in England. There was a rolled-up note tucked into a red collar around the owl's neck.

*Owl Special Delivery. You are cordially invited to Thanksgiving at Hogwarts, R.S.V.P. by owl post as soon as possible.*

Logan realized with a thump to his gut that this must be what it was like to be courted. A completely alien warmth filled him. *Jeez*. He picked up the basket and took it inside, wondering if his cheeks looked as hot as they felt.

Flushed and excited, Richard and Nick sneaked back down the street. “Do you think he’ll come?” Nick asked, racing ahead.

“I don’t know. His family lives back East. Maybe he has plans to celebrate with them. It’s nice we invited him, though.” They unlocked the front door and went inside, where the air still carried the welcoming orange and vanilla scent of the treats they’d baked earlier. “I wonder how he’ll get along with your mom and Kevin.”

“I wonder if Mom and Kevin will come. Sometimes she forgets.”

Richard didn’t offer his opinion on how hard it would be to forget your only child on Thanksgiving. If Nick still wanted to use the word *forget* when a much-more-truthful term would be *blow off*, then who was he to tell him no?

“How’s your face? Still okay?” Richard changed the subject.

“Yeah, it doesn’t hurt unless I move it. Or laugh. Or touch it.”

“I’m sorry.” Richard smiled sadly.

“It’s okay.” Nick sat at the kitchen table. “You really think they’ll get along?”

Richard sat across from him. “Logan’s a good guy. I’m sure they’ll get along fine. I think a better question is what are we going to cook?”

“Well...turkey, right?” Nick frowned. “Have you ever cooked a turkey?”

“No.”

“That’s not good.”

“I’ll bet there’s something about it on the Web,” Richard offered. “We’re smart guys, right? I’m sure we can figure it out.”

The phone rang, and Nick ran for it. After a minute, he returned with one of his little brows arched high on his forehead. He held his hand over the receiver and drawled, “It’s your *boyfriend*.”

Richard took the phone with a sharp tug. "You're lucky you only have one nose to break. Now go put it into a book where it belongs while I talk."

Nick laughed but sat down in front of Richard with his arms folded as if Richard's conversation were going to be the most fascinating thing he would ever hear.

"Hello?" Richard said into the cordless handset. He wasn't sure what to expect, and the fact that Nick was teasing him wasn't helping. He really had hurt Logan the night before; he was certain of it.

"Yeah. Hi," Logan said. "I got the basket, thanks. Great scones. What are the red bits?"

"Dried cranberry." Richard's heart beat a little faster. The man had a damned fine voice. Low and rich, it crawled through the airwaves and sank into Richard's spine like a drug.

"Oh. It tasted like orange, and I—"

"That's the mystical nature of the cranberry-orange scone."

"I see."

After a pause, Richard said, "Did you try the clotted cream?"

"Yeah, I like that stuff a lot. Had it in England. It's not sweet like whipped cream. But still..."

"Creamy," Richard finished for him, trying not to blush.

Richard heard Logan clear his throat. "Yes. Creamy."

"We like it too."

"Look, about Thanksgiving. I'm sorry, but I'm going home to be with my folks. If I'd known..."

"No, it's all right. We usually go someplace else. It's just that this year we invited Nick's mother and her boyfriend."

Logan was silent for a bit. "Is that wise?"

"Choices are funny," Richard said brightly with his eyes on Nick. "Sometimes there aren't any good ones. We figured on turkey, but I'm a complete nonstarter when it comes to roasting the big birds. You wouldn't have any idea how to do that, would you?"

"As a matter of fact," Logan told him, "I can make a great turkey."

"That's good news."

"I can help you make a game plan for the big day, but I'm leaving on Tuesday night. Why don't the three of us do the shopping on Sunday? That will give you enough time to thaw the turkey, and then we'll go over what you'll need to do with it and figure out what you want to serve with it."

"Sounds like a good idea," Richard agreed.

"You know I wish I didn't have plans. Or that you... I'm actually not looking forward to leaving, except I want to see my family. You and Nick would love my dad's place. He's got lots of land, and he keeps a couple of horses."

"No way, seriously?" Richard could practically hear Logan smiling through the phone.

"Really." Logan paused uncertainly. "Richard, can I see you?"

Richard bit his lip. "Have you looked at your e-mail?"

"I got your apology. It wasn't necessary. People are bound to get uptight after something like what happened to Nick."

"I'm still sorry if I made you feel—"

"We can have a difference of opinion, can't we?"

"I should hope so."

"We're bound to, right?"

"Probably. So we're good?" Richard asked. "Because I hated to think—"

"We're good. Better than good." Logan seemed to hesitate. "Do you guys want to come over? I was just going to get some stuff done in the yard."

"Trina will be here in about a half hour, and then we have some mock-ups to do for a client's newspaper ads. But in the afternoon, I could be free. Maybe we can watch a movie?"

"Sounds like fun. I'll get the work done, and you call me when you can."

"Okay, and hey"—Richard gazed at Nick, who was picking at something on the table that definitely needed to be wiped up, whatever it was—"Nick and I were grateful to have you there yesterday, you know? Both of us."

"Thanks." Logan paused. "See you later."

"See you."



\* \* \* \*

Trina took one look at Nick's face and practically shrieked. "What *happened*?"

"I got gay bashed," Nick told her proudly.

Richard frowned at him. "Nick, technically—"

Nick warmed up to his story and was recounting it enthusiastically. "These guys threw me in a trash bin because Richard's gay, and then when I got pulled out, they pushed me on the ground and kicked my face. My nose is broken, and I had to go to the hospital and have a cat thing."

Trina dropped what she was carrying and put her arms around Nick. "Oh my G—"

"He's fine," Richard reassured her. "Head's okay. He just might need a little something done with his nose, but they can't tell yet because it's still too swollen."

Nick was milking it, though, making the most of Trina's hug. "Then I got called into the principal's office, and she suspended me for the rest of the week."

"That's *heinous*," Trina gasped with outrage. "How can they suspend you? That's a fricking *hate crime*. Do you want me to call my friends from school who intern at the *Orange County Register*?"

"It's fine," Richard told her. "Calm down. Charlotte called last night to reassure me that it isn't going to go down as a suspension on his record. She just wants a cooling-off period. He has a broken nose anyway, and he needs some rest."

"Well..." Trina appeared marginally less militant. "Say the word, man. I've got your back. I could blow this thing up like Nipplegate on the Web. You need an anthemic music video to fight injustice? I'm your—"

"I don't think that will be necessary," Richard picked up her bags and nudged her toward the office. "But I appreciate the offer."

"Okay, just asking."

"Nick?" Richard called out. "You can watch television while we're working, but I want to see you read for about an hour today too and finish up your homework."

"Okay." Nick gave him a nod and headed for the living room. When they made it to the office, Trina turned to Richard.

"I can't believe some kid broke Nick's nose."

"The kid is vicious, but so is his dad. It's been something of a stressful week."

"Oh, man."

"Nick said that some of the kids are talking about me and Logan."

"Really? How on earth...?"

"He built a ramp for the kids when they bike, and a couple of times he's been with me when I picked Nick up from school."

"But still, how would they know? I mean, you guys could just be friends, right?"

"I don't know." Richard felt heat creep to his face. "I did kiss him last Sunday. I mean, he seemed to want me to, and it was just a greeting kiss, no tongue or anything. Hell, the Kepplers are more demonstrative, and they probably haven't slept together since Sarah was conceived."

"I'm so sorry, Richard."

"It's all right." Richard grimaced. "It is what it is."

"No, it's not," Trina murmured, putting her hand on his shoulder. "It *cannot* be all right."

"Thanks." He gave her hand a squeeze and then took a deep breath. "Time to work. I want to get this done, because Nick and I are going to Logan's house later to watch a movie."

Trina smiled. "I can watch Nick if you want to spend some time with Logan."

"Thanks, but it's fine. We were both invited." Richard turned on his printer and fired up his desktop computer. "We're all going to spend some time together."

"For Nick to get to know Logan?"

"Yeah, something like that."

"How do they get along?"

"I don't know just yet. It was tense for a while." Richard pulled up windows with indexes of photographs in them. "I don't imagine it's ever going to be easy, but they seem to be thawing out toward one another."

"Well, I'm keeping my fingers crossed."

"Thanks." Richard clicked on the picture he was going to use for a restaurant ad. "I'm going to photoshop this to tart it up, and then we can pick a font."

“Do you ever worry that, compared to the things you used to do at work, this is like Pavarotti doing weddings and bar mitzvahs?”

“What?”

“Well. I've seen your work from Oldmanston and Pfeiff. That was some terrific, amazing stuff. The illustrations. The magazine layouts. And I've seen your fine art too. This is like...putting the training wheels back on.”

“Yes and no. It's less stressful, I get to work at home, and I make enough money to support my lifestyle.”

“You don't ever regret...?”

“No. Never.” He smiled at her. “And for some strange reason—even though I probably shouldn't feel that way right now—I'm even hopeful about a lot of things.”

“Oh hey. Me too, Richard.” She put her arms around him. “I'm very hopeful.”

## Chapter Twenty

Richard and Nick arrived at Logan's house in time to help him plant a border of flowers in the courtyard in front of his house. *Just* in time to see Logan on his knees, wearing only a pair of loose cargo shorts and glistening with sweat in the almost eighty-degree heat. Richard groaned. The top of his tattoo and the elastic from his underwear peeked obscenely from under the waistband, and all those luscious muscles strained as he reached forward and dug into the earth with a trowel.

“Holy moley,” Richard said stupidly. Nick hung by his side, uncertain, until Logan turned with a grin.

“I'm almost done. You got here sooner than I expected.”

Nick spoke up. “I know those. Those are impatient flowers.”

Logan laughed. “Yeah, they're called *impatiens*. They like it where it's a little shady and people won't step on them. I can't even believe it's November and it's warm enough to plant flowers. That takes getting used to.”

“I've lived here all my life.” Richard shrugged. “But lately it seems warmer in winter.”

“I miss the snow, but it's kind of cool having flowers all year round. You want to help me plant some?”

Nick looked back at Richard. “Okay.”

Richard nodded. He was glad he'd worn shorts when his knees hit the grass. He tapped and tickled plants out of their little plastic pots and used Logan's trowel to cut apart the large flats of colorful perennials. All the while he listened as Logan talked to Nick, watching as the boy thawed out a little. Nick loved to put his hands into the dirt; gardening was one of the few things that could bring him back from a solid blue funk. By the time the entire border was created, Nick was smiling and relaxed.

“Richard, I left a pitcher and some powdered lemonade on the sink in the kitchen, and there's ice in the freezer,” Logan told him. “Mind making some?”

“I'm on it.” Richard got up and dusted himself off. He headed through the front door into Logan's house and back toward the kitchen. He found everything exactly where Logan said it would be and prepared three large, cold glasses of lemonade, then picked up two of them to take to Logan and Nick out front. He wasn't surprised to find them deep in conversation when he reached the front door. He hung back a little to hear what they were saying. Logan had proven himself more than capable of getting Nick to open up about what happened at school.

“Logan?” Nick used a sprinkler nozzle to drizzle water lightly on the newly planted flowers. “You and Richard argued about teaching me karate or something, didn't you?”

“Something like that,” Logan agreed. “Richard doesn't think it's a good idea to teach kids to fight.”

“What do you think?”

“I think that what Richard hopes is that you won't have to fight. That there will always be people around to protect you.”

“Great, so I only get beat up when nobody's looking.”

Richard's heart sank. Logan said nothing.

“I'll bet nobody beats you up,” Nick said.

“That's not exactly true.” Logan smiled. “My brothers and I used to fight a lot. And just because I know how to take care of myself doesn't mean that people don't occasionally pick on me. Especially when I was in uniform.”

“What do you do when that happens?”

“Mostly I try to do whatever it takes to get out of the situation without fighting.”

“I tried to walk away; that's when they put me in the trash. I should have just stayed there.”

Richard saw Logan's jaw clench. “You did the right thing, Nick. You did everything you could.”

Richard moved through the front door with the lemonade, his gut churning with feelings he didn't understand.

"I brought..." Richard handed the lemonade over, and his mouth went dry. Logan stood with the sun at his back. The light picked up the gold in his hair, sparkled off the silver threads. His skin was bronzed. His cool blue eyes assessed Richard, gazing at him with something warm and possessive in them.

"Thank you." Logan took a deep swallow, his throat working. A drop escaped his lips and ran down his chin. Before he could even think about it, Richard caught it with his thumb.

Nick took his and drank nearly all of it one gulp. "Rick, I want Logan to teach me how to fight," Nick said mutinously. Richard pulled his hand back as if it burned. "It sucks getting beat up."

"Now wait—" Logan sputtered.

"I'm sorry, Nick." Richard looked at Logan. "Logan knows how I feel about teaching you to fight."

"But—"

"Richard's right, Nick," Logan told him. "It's up to your grandfather, and we need to respect his decision."

"*However,*" Richard continued, "last night I was pretty upset, and I wasn't listening to anything Logan had to say. It seems like maybe I got a little ahead of myself. I don't want you to learn to fight, Nick. I'm very clear about that. But he's right that you should be able to defend yourself."

"You mean it?" Nick gazed up at him.

"Yes," Richard told him. He met Logan's eyes over Nick's head, which bobbed with excitement. Logan shot him a questioning look.

"If you don't mind my saying so, I'd like to teach both of you."

"How do you know I'm not already a black belt or something?"

Logan snorted. "Are you?"

"No," Richard admitted.

"Then you could probably use a few pointers." When Richard grimaced, he added, "It never hurts to be prepared. Weren't you ever a Boy Scout?"

Richard's eyes widened. "Me?"

“Look, I’ll teach you something now. Okay?”

Richard and Nick looked at each other. Richard nodded, taking their glasses and finding a place to set them down. Logan took the hose from Nick and turned the water off. After he wound it up neatly, he faced them where they stood on the grass.

The look Logan gave them conveyed his doubts about their trainability, and Richard vowed to earn his respect.

“Okay. The most important thing is the first rule. Any fight you can avoid, you avoid. Got that?”

Richard looked at Nick, who nodded.

“Say it,” Logan told him.

“Any fight I can avoid, I’ll avoid,” Nick repeated.

“What does that mean to you?” Logan asked.

“I won’t fight unless I have to.”

“Good. And no goofing around play fighting with your friends. This is only for when your life is in danger. Like medicine, right? Only when you absolutely need it.” Logan turned to Richard. “Okay?”

Richard nodded. “Thank you.”

“Good.” Logan held both hands up, arms bent at the elbows, palms out, next to his face. He bent his knees slightly and leaned forward on the balls of his feet. “This is the first thing I want to teach you both. Richard, swing at me.”

“*What?*”

“I said, take a swing at me. Go on. It’ll be fine.”

Richard took a halfhearted swing at him. Logan blocked it easily with one hand and followed through with the other, taking hold of Richard’s shoulder and pulling him in and down at an angle.

“See, Nick?” Logan asked. “He’s throwing a punch with his right hand, and I’m using the hand on the same side—my left—to help it slide past me. I only want it to miss me. That’s all that counts. My elbows are in toward the body; hands are at face height. I’m going to put my palm up to his fist, then slide it to his elbows, then to his shoulder. I’m going to tilt my head just

enough to let his fist go past, and I'm going to follow through by using my other arm to get hold of his shoulder, skin or shirt. Got that?"

"I don't know," Nick told him.

"Again, Richard. Slow this time." They practiced like that for a while. Logan taught Richard and Nick what to do, how to hold their bodies slightly forward, how to protect their faces. He threw different types of punches at them as they practiced, changing arms and trajectory. He was patient and let them practice on each other.

Richard was amazed that something as simple as an open hand could become a shield that protected him so adequately. "No one is just going to throw one punch, though, right?"

"No." Logan looked down. "No, you can expect that anyone who really wants to hurt you isn't going to stop there."

"Then what?" Nick asked.

Logan considered this carefully. "Ordinarily I would put an attacker down without prejudice. I'd make sure he was so completely incapacitated that he couldn't get up, and then I'd escape. For you, I'm going to work with the idea of buying you time. If you get into a scuffle on the playground like you did, the supervisors will be there to break it up. You're not fighting for your life, and we have to respect Richard's wishes. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Are we cool?" Logan asked Richard.

"We're cool." Richard felt a blush steal up his neck. "More than cool."

"Okay." The three of them entered the house, which seemed dark by comparison to the front yard. Nick ran off to the bathroom to wash up, and Richard and Logan walked to the kitchen.

Richard went to the sink to wash his hands. He was painfully aware that Logan was only a few feet away, and while they'd been practicing blocking punches, he'd been close enough to smell the scent of the sweat on his sun-warmed skin. He heard Logan behind him just before the man's lips came down on the back of his neck.

"Mm." Richard bit his lip and shivered. "That feels so..."

"Have I mentioned how hot you look today?" Logan asked.



“No.”

“You look edible.” Logan's hands came around and clamped onto the edge of the sink, effectively trapping Richard against it. With Logan's body pressed up against his back, Richard's reacted predictably.

“Logan.” Richard closed his eyes. “Nick will be here any minute.”

“I know.” Logan stepped back. “I just wanted to—”

Nick's voice called out, “What movie are we going to watch, Logan?”

Richard went back to washing his hands. Logan turned and asked, “What sounds good?” He gave Richard a pat on the ass and followed the sound of Nick's voice to the living room.

After Logan left, Richard let out the breath he was holding and adjusted his dick. He leaned over the sink and splashed cold water onto his face.

Any chance he had of being alone with Logan was gone until Monday when Nick went back to school. He'd kept that firmly in his head, but his body didn't seem to want to cooperate. His thing with Logan was new. He understood they shared a powerful attraction. They'd acted on it, and now every time he looked at Logan, he could clearly recall the man's mouth on his cock. How it felt to be beneath him, how it felt when Logan was buried deep inside his body. He gripped the counter tightly and fought off image after image of making love with Logan.

Logan's return to the kitchen brought him out of it. “You okay?”

Richard turned to see Logan's face etched with concern. If he confessed what he'd been thinking, Richard was certain Logan would bust a gut laughing.

“I'm fine.”

“You don't look fine.” Logan's eyebrows went up.

“I just had an impure thought,” Richard said dismissively. “I'm good.”

Logan moved forward. “An impure thought?” His eyes brightened. “About me?”

“Actually I was admiring your faucet.”

“My *what*?”

“I'm just kidding.”

Logan raised a hand to the side of Richard's face. “You know, I really wish we—”

“Me too,” Richard answered. Logan placed a gentle and mostly chaste kiss on his lips. Richard stepped into his body, and Logan enfolded him in a hug.

“We’re going to watch the first *Transformers* movie.”

“Tell me you didn’t just have that movie on hand because you like it.”

“I went to the video store before you came.” Logan released Richard and took his hand. “And I got microwave popcorn. Do you think Nick will want some?”

“If he doesn’t, we should probably take him back to the emergency room.”

“Okay, I’ll get it and bring it in.” In the distance, they could hear Nick calling them to come and watch.

“You’re such a good man,” Richard gushed suddenly.

Logan stopped as he reached into the cupboard. He turned back, his eyes full of warmth. “Just because I bought popcorn?”

Richard shook his head and smiled. He turned toward the living room, where he’d find Nick.

Logan sighed. The next time he could be alone with Richard wasn’t going to come soon enough *at all*.

## Chapter Twenty-one

By the time Logan discovered, quite by accident, that Richard was a proficient juggler, he'd added aspirin to the list of things they needed from the grocery store.

"Sure." Logan tried to understand. "I like pomegranates. But they're not on the list."

"The list?" Richard bobbed as he rolled a pomegranate over his neck and then caught it gingerly with his still-bruised left hand, the trick not breaking his concentration at all as he swept it back up into the act with the other fruits he was juggling. "But they're on sale, and they're really good for you."

"And they make your fingers all red," Nick chimed in.

Logan held up the paper he was holding. "But...the list."

Richard bagged up the pomegranates and placed them into the cart. "The point is, Logan, that the list is really not etched in stone. It's more like a framework from which we can digress if something seasonal presents itself. Or something happens to be on sale."

"And that's why you always have to look at everything very carefully. Right, Rick?" Nick grinned up at Logan. "So you don't miss anything."

"Then why do you make a list?"

"Well, how else would I know what to buy?"

"But if you ignore the list?" Logan persisted. "How is that—"

"Logan, you seem awfully hung up on that list." Richard frowned.

Logan pressed his lips together.

"C'mon, Richard. Can we get a pumpkin?"

"I don't see why not. That could be part of our centerpiece." Richard turned his shopping cart to the pumpkin display. "Hey, look. They have sheaves of wheat. When I was a kid and I

had to sing that 'Bringing in the Sheaves' song in church, I thought it was bringing in the sheets. Like laundry, you know?"

They were off again, and Logan had to physically lower his shoulders to keep them loose. "I will get through this," he murmured.

Richard must have seen his expression, because he stopped in the act of putting a bundle of wheat into the cart. "What? What is it?"

Logan sighed. "I don't understand what's happening here. We made a list based on a simple assessment of your needs. We came to the store to procure what was on the list. We've been here almost an hour, and the cart is full, but still we have yet to gather half of the things I see as mission critical."

"Logan—"

Logan could hear the pitch of his voice rising but was unable to stop it. "We have a list, Richard. Does that mean *nothing* to you?"

"Dude, *whoa*." Richard caught Logan's arm and moved with him to the potato bin. He pulled a plastic sack off the roll and handed it over. "Potatoes are on the list, right? How about you get potatoes?"

"Potatoes." Logan began to lift the spuds and check them over, rejecting some, putting others into the bag.

"What ledge am I talking you down from here, Logan?"

"I admit I don't care for shopping much."

"So the list, that's what you do. You make a list, get in, get out. Tactical, surgical strike?"

"Yes." Logan grinned. "It must seem kind of..."

Richard teased him by grabbing at his collar and letting his eyes go wide. "This is like *Apocalypse Now*. Never, *ever* go off the list, man. Impulse buying. That's just Satan working through your credit cards."

"You took my perfect list and turned it into utter chaos."

"Just the list?"

Logan's heart caught in his throat. He gazed down at Richard's boyish face, which was—as usual—alight with mischief and laughter and a thousand impulses that made Logan's blood race. “No. Not just the list.”

“Sorry.” Richard gave him a smile of such complete insincerity, it ground out any laughter.

“I'm not,” Logan told him anyway. If he could have, if he'd had the courage, the sheer nerve, he'd have kissed Richard right there, as he'd seen men kiss women in public his whole life. He turned away to find Nick holding two small, plump pumpkins, one white and one orange.

“Which do you think?” he asked. “Orange?”

“I don't know,” Richard said seriously. “It's not on the list.”

Nick's eyebrows shot up. “We have a list?”

Logan almost chucked a potato at him but caught himself at the last minute. He had to admit it wasn't unpleasant shopping Richard's way. He made a game out of everything, involved Nick in all the choices, and probably had the kid eating things most kids didn't touch at his age. In fact, Logan thought as he trailed Richard and Nick around the store, tamping down his frustration at having no control over the expedition, Richard made everything fun. His enthusiasm—which drew Logan to him in the first place—was so contagious, even other shoppers stopped to watch as he discussed the merits of one brand of rice over another.

“All things considered,” he was telling Nick, “I've gotta say I'm going to go with the one that smells like popcorn when you cook it, okay?”

Nick's eyes fairly glowed. It wasn't hard to see how much he loved his grandfather. “Basmati it is. I just like to say that word. Baaaaahsmaaaaaahti.”

“*Basmati NO! We will not let him go.*” Richard spoofed the Queen song.

“*Let him go.*” Nick followed, and they were off. Down the aisle, shopping and a floor show, Logan thought. If he could only survive it.

“*Never, never let him go.*”

“*Oh, mama mia, mama mia...*” Richard sang, giving him a last look as he rounded an endcap full of potato chips. Logan dutifully pushed the cart, heat creeping up and suffusing his face. The world Richard inhabited was completely different from his own. His military background aside, he was from back East. Richard might float around in the aisles of the grocery

store wearing flip-flops and cargo shorts in November, but it was going to take some getting used to.

Logan had already given up his Sunday afternoon to shop with them, thinking it would be something relatively harmless that they'd get done quickly. But whether he was in the vegetable aisle juggling or posing in frozen foods or seriously contemplating the different kinds of bread for stuffing, this adventure was turning out to be a glimpse into the very nature of Richard himself. A simple trip to the market was anything but a simple trip to the market.

Richard was mercurial. Playful one minute, serious the next. Artistic, witty, practical if it was forced on him, lavishly attentive to Nick. At one point Logan caught him gazing at his grandson while Nick chose a cereal brand out of hundreds and with very few guidelines. Nick waffled over the choices for several minutes while his grandfather looked on patiently, and Logan got the impression that Nick was free to take all the time in the world. Where Richard's love for his grandson was concerned, there were no limits. And if Logan wanted to bask in the glow of that kind of love, he had to step up.

Logan leaned close to Richard and kissed him, quickly brushing lips across his forehead. He elicited a smile and could have stopped himself but chose not to as he pressed his lips to Richard's for the briefest contact. Richard blossomed under that kiss, and warmth spread outward from him like a golden light.

"What was that for?" Richard looked at him with eyes that said they already knew the answer.

"It feels really, really good to be with you." Logan hesitated to say more.

"I'm glad." Richard's lashes lowered slowly, and Logan thought that it was possible he'd embarrassed the man. "I'm saving my response for later."

Logan grinned back. "I'm saving *a lot* for later. I hope you make time for me."

Richard shot him a knowing look, but then Nick pulled them into the cereal decision and the shopping continued. Logan felt like he was being dragged up and down every aisle like a ball on a chain. Still, when they finally reached the checkout and Richard swiped his card and paid for everything they'd purchased, Logan found he hadn't needed the aspirin at all. He pushed the cart as Richard and Nick moved along beside him, caught up in their plans, and it came to him what he'd probably known all along.

He was a family man, and this could be his family. And now he just had to be strong enough, smart enough, and brave enough to reach out and catch hold of it, or he'd have no one but himself to blame when the chance passed him by.

\* \* \* \*

Richard felt better about everything when he dropped Nick off with his teacher on Monday morning. He'd stopped by Charlotte's office on the way in, and she'd reassured him that things were being taken care of. No one would get a shot at bullying Nick for a while. He watched as the kids raced around the lunch-table area, finally lining up when the warning bell rang. Nick was dining out on the fact that he had the remnants of two black eyes, and the other kids hung on his every word. After the teachers led their students away and into classrooms, Richard stood thoughtfully for a minute on the playground, then started home.

His mind was on a million different things. How to protect Nick from prejudice. How to keep him safe in an unsafe world. How he could make up for the loss of Nick's father.

Even more pressing was the worry Richard sensed Nick felt for his mother. Every time she reassured him she'd be there for him and didn't show, stacked up until Nick didn't have solid ground beneath his feet. No matter how Richard tried to shore it up, Nick was always one phone call—or more probably, one call that would never come—away from having it all washed away again.

Nick had a short school week, owing to the Thanksgiving holiday, and Lila and her boyfriend were coming for dinner. He had no illusions about Lila's boyfriend. At best it would be a tense and uncomfortable night. At worst it could end in disaster if, as he suspected, Lila's boyfriend was going to be high. On the one hand he was glad Logan would be well away from that, but on the other he had to admit he would have liked Logan and the strength of his physical presence to back him as he had when Nick had been injured at school. He could become very used to leaning on a man like Logan.

For the thousandth time, Richard worried that it was unfair. Logan was finally free of the strict military discipline that forced him to hide who he was inside. He could be enjoying his newfound freedom by clubbing and dating. Maybe he could have found a man who could help him come out slowly, not a ready-made family with a guy the whole neighborhood knew was out and proud.

As if on cue, Logan's Jeep came around the corner and stopped by the curb. Logan looked relaxed at the wheel, wearing the camo cargo shorts and olive shirt that were probably the reason the neighborhood kids called him Crazy Soldier Guy. Richard couldn't see his eyes because his floppy brimmed hat hid them, but he had no doubt that the smile on Logan's lips was reflected there. The engine idled, and Logan waited until Richard was standing next to the passenger door at the curb.

“Hi,” Logan called out.

“Hi,” Richard said, trying to appear casual. “Nick's back in school.”

“I gathered.”

“I have time.” It was more of an offer than a statement.

Logan held up a white bag and grinned. “I have bear claws.”



## Chapter Twenty-two

Logan had barely pushed the garage-door button to close it behind them when Richard unbuckled his seat belt and scrambled over the console in an attempt to straddle his lap.

“Oh hey.” Logan pressed the bar to move his seat back as Richard started pulling his T-shirt off over his head. “What the f—”

“Shut up; I’ve missed this.” Richard licked the side of his neck. “Missed your skin.” He pulled the shirt so Logan’s head popped through the neck hole and tossed it aside, then used both hands to massage Logan’s pecs. Richard’s elbow sounded the horn briefly, deafening them, causing Logan’s heart to race, as if it hadn’t already been trying to tear out of his chest.

“Whoa!” Logan opened the door on his side of the Jeep and nearly fell out with Richard in his arms. “I missed you too, but—”

“I had no idea it would be like this. I haven’t had a lover in...well, a long time, and then to have you so close and be unable to...” Richard kissed him as they made for the door. When they got there, Logan’s back slapped up against it, and they stayed there, lip-locked for a while.

“Missed you too,” Logan agreed when they broke for air.

“And then it got to the point where you were actively trying to get me hot—don’t tell me you weren’t—and I thought I’d—”

“Wait, *what?*”

Richard pulled Logan down for another kiss and rubbed their noses together. “I shaved, see?” He pressed his cheek to Logan’s. “No razor burn.”

“That’s nice.” Logan closed his eyes and breathed in Richard’s cologne. “Smooth. Pretty sure of yourself.”

Logan leaned back against the door as Richard pressed his body close. “Wishful thinking. And see? My wish came true.”

Logan ran his hands over Richard's shoulders and back up his neck to cradle his head, bringing him in for a long *slow down* kiss. Richard's hands fluttered up and down his sides, all along his rib cage, and Logan wondered if he'd ever get enough of that. Richard slid his arms around Logan's waist and burrowed his fingers into the back pockets of his shorts. They hung low at the best of times, and Logan could feel Richard gathering handfuls of his ass. Richard pressed into his body shamelessly, and Logan slid down a little to line up their cocks.

Logan was almost giddy with arousal. At last he could afford to go as slowly as he wanted, no hiding, no interruptions, virtually no consequences if they got caught. He could let the passion build between them as he had with no other man. He had time, would make time, to fill himself up with everything Richard had to offer.

*And bear claws.*

Richard was already working the fastening on his shorts, fumbling with shaking fingers that said he was every bit as aroused as Logan was.

"Come on," Logan told him, opening the door carefully so he didn't fall to the floor with Richard in his arms. By tacit agreement, they headed for the bedroom.

About halfway there, Logan felt Richard's hand slip into his, and it did something to his heart. That simple gesture, made without a word, *You lead, I'll follow*, caused Logan's heart to stutter in his chest. He turned to look at Richard just then and found a serene smile on his face. He stopped moving while he looked his fill.

"What?" Richard asked.

"Just...you know my heart is engaged here, don't you?"

A slow smile bloomed on Richard's face. "Yeah?"

"Yes." Logan frowned and dropped Richard's hand. "I know we were just about to... I need to say something, all right?"

Richard's face remained serene, and Logan thought he was being pretty magnanimous considering he'd just put a brief halt to the action. Logan rubbed his hands together nervously. "Look, I've been practicing this, so just let me say what I've got to say and then bring it, because it's hard for me to regroup if I have a plan. Okay?"

Richard smirked. "Okay. I get that. Carry on."

Logan moved on toward the bedroom, where he went to the window to look out. Richard followed and sat on the bed.

Logan turned. "There hasn't really been anyone since—" He fumbled for words. "My—Dan, my partner, left me this house."

Richard's face turned serious. "I wondered why you moved here since your family is back East."

"Dan liked it here. He didn't like the snow."

"I'm so sorry for your loss, Logan." Richard's voice said it all. They both understood loss.

Logan could tell he was waiting for more. "What we had was long-distance, comfortable, and caring. We were alike in a lot of ways. We were both military. When we were able to be together, we probably could have bored the average person to tears."

"Comfortable is good, though. Right?"

"Right," Logan agreed. "But when he got sick, it was so awful. Little by little, the things we had together eroded away. Until it was just him looking up at me from a hospital bed; he had these sad eyes, and there I was, holding his hand, trying to give him my strength through our skin."

Richard said nothing. Logan tried to shake off his mood.

"I know I loved him."

"Of course you did. You were there for the long haul. That takes love."

Logan returned to sit on the bed with Richard. "It was a quiet thing, though. No fanfare. No fireworks. It was warmth over coffee and knowing someone cared about me. I could care about him. E-mails and care packages while I was deployed. When I could be here with him, we laughed at the same things in the paper. A couple of beers and a game on television. Lights out and making love."

Logan lay back on the bed he'd shared with Dan. Richard curled up next to him on his side, relaxed. Listening, even though he'd been fully aroused and impatient before. Logan shook his head.

"I'm sorry, you and I had something hot going and I—"

"We've got time." Richard stroked the side of Logan's face with the backs of his knuckles.

“The thing is, I thought when I met you, I might be getting a second chance.” Logan rubbed a hand impatiently through his hair. “But when I’m with you, it’s such chaos. I’m filled with emotions I’ve never felt before. It feels like the first time, and I”—Logan swallowed hard—“I feel disloyal.”

Richard cupped his face. “You are such a good, good man.”

“But—”

“I have to think it’s okay to feel different things with different people. I have to think that how I feel about you doesn’t take away from Nick, right?”

“Yes, but—”

“I believe there’s enough love to go around. It’s not something you only get a portion of, so you have to hoard it, only give it out in pieces in case you run out. I don’t think you’re disloyal. I think he’s in your heart, just as he should be. And I think he’d want you to be happy.”

“Do you think...?” Logan looked into Richard’s eyes. “Is love what we have here?”

Richard’s eyes widened. “And you think *I’m* a dork?”

Logan noticed Richard neatly sidestepped it, but he didn’t mind. Too much. He’d had his say.

“C’mere.” Richard pulled at him roughly.

Logan went willingly into Richard’s arms and helped him off with his shirt. Richard’s hands fumbled over the fastenings on his jeans, and Logan swept them away. “Let me. You just relax.”

“All right,” Richard said hoarsely. He lifted his hips as Logan pulled his jeans and boxers down, tugging when they caught on his stiff cock. He removed and tossed Richard’s shoes and socks, then got rid of his own shorts and briefs. They stared at each other, now fully undressed, silent, until Richard broke the spell by laughing.

“We’re like high school kids. Once we’re naked, it’s like time stands still.” Richard’s hands slipped over Logan’s shoulders to squeeze his upper arms. “It’s really a fine thing that you have all these muscles.”

“Yeah?”

Richard rolled up and pushed Logan flat on his back. “Yeah.”

Logan let himself be held down, content to see what Richard would do next. Richard moved around, straddling Logan's hips until he could grind Logan's cock beneath his ass.

"Oh *fuck*." Logan's mouth went dry as Richard rocked and squeezed his dick between their bodies. Logan lifted off the bed a little in order to reach out for a condom and some lube, but firm hands pushed him back down.

"I got this," Richard said, leaning far enough to open the nightstand drawer. He pulled out a condom and dropped it on Logan's chest, and then leaned back over for the lube, squirming way more than was necessary.

"Richard—"

"Shh," Richard told him, hitting the Play button on the clock radio by Logan's head and fiddling around until he found a hip-hop radio station. "Prepare yourself for the lap dance to end all lap dances."

*And how fucking perfect is Logan Wilde?*

The gag formed by their names was not lost on him. Hunter and Wilde. *Shit*. But yes. *Yeah*. There was love involved. He wasn't able to say anything when Logan asked, damn it. He'd frozen inside, his mind numb with a kind of panic when Logan mentioned the *L* word. *The four-letter L word*. Richard had shot his mouth off about there being enough love to go around for everyone without realizing that Logan wanted to call what they had—whatever it was—love.

But it *was* love. And Richard knew it. Yet when it came time to say the words, like it or not, he'd blanked. Now Richard looked down at the man who'd practically said, *I love you*, the man who'd gone so far out on that limb he was clinging to leaves, and knew he'd sawed it off neatly at the trunk.

Richard ground on Logan's dick, undulating his hips, turning the thing into a lap dance where he rose to his knees and shimmied. Logan's cock sprang up between them, brushing his perineum, and he danced as he skimmed along the damp tip, making the barest, briefest contact as he move to the beat.

Logan squeezed his eyes shut. "Fuck." He gasped. "That's so damned..."

Richard picked up a condom, then dragged it slowly down Logan's treasure trail. After teasing Logan's navel with the crisp corner of the foil packet, he brought it to his mouth and opened it with his teeth. "Eyes on me, Logan. No hiding."

Logan opened his eyes. "All right."

Richard leaned over and kissed him, then scooted his ass down Logan's thighs so he could roll the latex onto Logan's dick.

Richard gave Logan a perfectly lecherous smile as he flipped open the cap of the lube. "Wanna?"

Logan grinned and held out his hand. "Sure."

Richard dropped a generous dollop of the slimy stuff onto Logan's fingers and lifted himself to his knees again. Logan slid a hand between Richard's thighs and circled the tightly puckered hole behind his balls.

"*Mmmh.*" Richard bit his lip.

"Dance for me," Logan whispered, stroking him gently.

Richard let out a deep sigh and started to move. That had to be one of the most erotic things he'd ever done. It was as if he was putting on a show, as if he could see himself from both the inside and the outside at the same time. He was as aware of how he looked to Logan as he was of how Logan was reacting to him. He let his movements get deeper and more serious, gave up his inhibitions, and just let his body go free, imagining that each dip and undulation and brush of his skin against Logan's was a drag of flint across tinder. He waited for the spark that would fully ignite them both.

"Jeez." Logan sighed as Richard dipped onto his fingers. Richard used his own hand to single out the index and middle fingers of Logan's hand and inserted them, shallow at first, the barest hint of penetration, and then gradually let Logan in farther and deeper until he was fucking himself with them. He rocked and rode Logan's fingers until—clever man—Logan brushed them against his prostate, interrupting his rhythm and making him grunt with pleasure.

"Yes," Richard hissed. His mouth went dry, and all he could think of was more and harder and deeper.

"More?" Logan read his mind, his eyes soft and unfocused.

“Yes,” Richard said again, pressing down, getting as much sensation as he could before he absolutely had to move to Logan's dick.

“Tight,” Logan murmured as he drove a third finger in.

Richard skimmed his hands over Logan's pecs and down to his abs. They felt hard and strained as Logan tensed with arousal. His skin was damp with sweat and flushed red on his chest and neck where the capillaries were closest to the surface of his skin.

Richard stroked Logan's cock a little, pumping it once or twice as he fucked himself back onto Logan's hand. He rose to his knees again, his eyes on Logan's, and made his intention clear by pushing Logan's hand away and lining up his cock.

“Want you,” he whispered as he sank down on the fat head, tensing until it popped through the resistant ring and into his ass. He hissed with pleasure and prolonged the long, slow glide of Logan's dick as he melted around it until Logan was balls deep inside his body. “Want you so much... *Oh, Logan.*”

“Shit.” Logan puffed out air. “You are so—” Logan broke off on a strangled sound and gripped Richard's thighs.

Oh. Yeah. For the first time in a long time, Richard was totally incapable of speech. It would have made him smile if it hadn't been for the slack-jawed, glassy stare that he couldn't seem to get off his face. He gazed into Logan's eyes and cupped his face tenderly between his hands. For the first time in...ever...he could only kiss and stare and hope that Logan could understand what his inability to speak meant.

Logan looked right back at Richard and slid his hands up to his hips. Richard was in complete control. He set the pace, fast and then slow, a deep grind and then a skim, a drag and then a drop, that left Logan breathless and needy and, at the same time, anxious to let Richard take charge and excited as a kid on an amusement-park ride. It didn't hurt that Richard was beautiful. The way he stretched and rocked and undulated was more like a complex and erotic dance than a simple desire to get off.

It was seductive in the extreme, like Logan had his own private stripper willing to go to any lengths—to do anything—to please him. It was exhibitionist behavior on an intimate level designed solely for his pleasure, and it *rocked his world*. His Richard. *His*. Dancing just for him.

Logan's fingers tightened on Richard's hips as his movements became more chaotic. He could see that Richard was having a hard time controlling the reaction of his body. When Logan tried to wrap his hand around Richard's cock, Richard took hold of it and replaced it on his hip.

"No. Just for you now," Richard whispered. He dipped down and touched their lips together, brushing and licking only for a second. "I want—" He broke off, then gripped Logan's shoulders with his hands, using his strong thighs to hold himself up as he moved faster. Sweat droplets matted the hair close to his face and dripped onto Logan's chest. He never broke eye contact, and Logan felt the first faint thrill of anticipation as his balls tightened.

Logan's breathing quickened. "Close."

The corners of Richard's lips lifted in a half smile, but Logan wasn't sure if Richard understood. Even though they gazed at one another, he sensed that Richard was in the zone, his body in complete control, his mind soaring. Logan closed his eyes briefly and felt Richard squeeze his shoulders hard.

"Stay with me," Richard said, surprising him. "Fly with me." Brown eyes shone, and Logan did as he was told, his entire body tightening as he sailed off the edge of the world toward release.

*"Richard—"*

"Sh, I've got you." Richard slipped his hands under Logan's head and cradled it. "I know. I feel it. *I've got you.*"

Logan strained as his orgasm overtook him. His cock thickened and warmed as he took Richard's moans into his mouth. Richard's body tightened and flexed, and his spunk sprayed Logan's stomach, filling the air with the scent of their lovemaking. Richard broke their kiss and looked into Logan's eyes.

"Love. Love. *Love you*, Logan Wilde," he said in time with the shuddering of his breath. "I love you."

\* \* \* \*

Logan drifted in a light sleep of pure sticky, sweaty, sated love when he felt something move in the tangle of arms and legs in his bed. Richard nuzzled at him, down his neck, leaving a light trail of kisses across his shoulder as he moved.



"Gotta get up," Richard said softly. "Almost time to get Nick."

Logan pulled him back down into a tight embrace. "What time is it?"

"One thirty." Richard spent a moment or two kissing him. Making his toes curl a little. "I have to shower. Can't pick up Nick all funky-spunky smelling." He tried to get away, but Logan held him a little closer.

"I'll come to the shower with you." He started to get up, but Richard put his hand out and pushed him back down.

"You just rest. I'm going to get in and get out and take off on foot, and you look so..." Richard trailed off.

"What?"

"I was going to say beautiful."

Logan blinked. "You're the beauty," he told Richard. "I will never get tired of looking at you."

"Aw, jeez." Richard grinned down at him. "I feel like an idiot. Fucking puppy love."

"*Puppy love?*" Logan grabbed Richard by the upper arms and took a healthy bite from the hump of flesh where Richard's neck joined his shoulders.

"Ow." Richard squeaked, laughing.

"Hell no. This isn't puppy love. This is Big Dog love. This is Devil Dog love. Come here, you." Logan actually barked and got on all fours, teasing Richard by trying to snap at him with his even, sharp teeth.

"Whoa! No. *Shit.*" Richard jumped back, snorting with laughter just as his phone rang. Logan watched Richard as he sobered quickly and dived for his discarded jeans. He realized Richard still worried that Nick would get into trouble at school.

"Hello?" He held his hand up, and Logan stayed silent, watching as Richard left to go into the bathroom. It didn't bother Logan that he left to speak in private, except when Richard came back into the room with an unhappy look on his face, Logan had to bite his lip to keep from prying.

Richard tossed the phone on the bed next to his jeans. "That was Nick's grandmother, Lila's mom."

“Yeah?”

“She wants me to drop Nick off on Friday so they can spend the day together. I told her it's fine with me, but I don't know what Nick will have to say. Sometimes it's uncomfortable between them. She's strict and doesn't let him play on his PSP while he's there.”

“He'll survive. Won't you be there? I can't see him being bored around you.”

“No, I don't have to be there. We've always had a deal that they get to spend time with him alone. I'd say I'm not their favorite person.”

Logan's brow furrowed. “Them, but not Nick's mother?”

“Nick's mother has a history of dropping the ball, but her mom and dad are nice. Nick said his grandmother doesn't talk to Lila anymore.”

“That's sad.”

“Yeah, well. We've all given Lila a lot of chances. Now we know to keep an eye out. OkuOkay if I take a quick shower?”

“Sure.”

Richard started to go and then came back to place a gentle kiss on Logan's lips. “I'm going to miss you when you're out of town. When do you leave?”

“Tomorrow afternoon. I have things I have to do and family to shop for before I leave. I probably won't see you until I get back.”

“You'll keep in touch, though?”

Logan smiled and gave him a shove. “What do you think? Go take your shower. Don't want you to be late picking up Nick.”

Richard turned and headed for the bathroom, where he set the land speed record for soaping up and rinsing off. He emerged to find Logan putting some cream on his skin where it was scraped and red. He toweled off as he watched.

“Sorry if I got a little enthusiastic.” Richard kissed the back of Logan's neck and then danced out of his way when Logan made a grab for him. “I'm going to be late if you touch me.”

“I won't touch you a lot. Just a little?”

Richard came back for a kiss that erupted into a grope. He still had no clothes on, and the evidence was plain to see that he could easily be sidetracked if he weren't careful.

Logan grinned down at Richard's cock. "Like shooting fish in a barrel. You are so easy."

"Shooting—" He slapped at Logan's erection. "Like you're not?"

"Oh, I *am*."

"I've got to run." Richard pulled on his shirt and then sat to drag on his boxers and jeans, followed by his shoes and socks. When he rose, Logan was sliding back into the bed, apparently taking his advice to nap.

Logan let his feelings show in his eyes. "Bye. See you."

Richard couldn't stop himself from taking one more kiss. "Safe trip, yeah?" He stroked the short hair framing Logan's face. "I love you."

"I love you too," Logan said, his voice just a little husky. "I never thought—"

"Me neither." Richard let his hand linger on Logan's cheek. He checked the time on his cell phone. He had plenty of time to walk briskly to school to get Nick if he left right then. "See you." He turned and left, heading for the front door and into the courtyard.

"Hey," Logan called from the window.

Nick turned in the middle of crossing the street when he heard Logan's voice.

"Yeah?"

"Happy Thanksgiving."

Richard waved. "You too!" He felt lighter than air when he turned and broke into a jog.

## Chapter Twenty-three

Thanksgiving dawned way too early for Richard, whose job it was to extract a disgusting plastic packet of things that had been removed from the turkey and then—inexplicably—replaced, wrapped in a plastic bag. He'd thawed the bird in the refrigerator since Sunday because Logan told him this was the approved method. In fact, Logan had written him a precise and detailed plan of action—SOP for preparing the Thanksgiving meal—that began with the admonition to *rise at 0600 and brew a voluminous pot of coffee*.

The inside of the bird—*dear heavens, was he really trying to shove his hand into the inside of a dead bird?*—was still icy cold, and it felt like his hand was turning blue as he tried to press his way in.

Nick stared at him sleepily. His eyes were a little crusty and still bore the traces of bruising from his fight the week before. His hair stuck out all over at adorably odd angles.

“Rick?” he asked.

“Mm hmm?” Richard was wedging his hand around, but there seemed to be a bulbous hunk of something in his way.

“There's a bigger hole on this side.”

“Hm, what?” Richard turned the large tray they'd gotten out for the purpose of keeping the sink clean and looked at the other side of the bird. His face burned. “Figures,” he muttered.

“What?”

“Never mind.” Richard stuck his hand through the opening and felt around, trying not to unman himself by puking, but—“I got it.” He pulled out the bag.

“Jeez, what is that?” Nick's lip curled. “Is it *dripping?*”

“Ohshitohshitohshit.” Richard ran to the sink and threw it in, still wrapped in its plastic, and washed his hands. When he got control of himself, he blew out a deep breath and looked at

Logan's painstaking, handwritten notes. He wrote like an engineer or an architect, with perfect, small printing and numbers that were crisp—crossed sevens, slashed zeros, and eights made up of two circles like little headless snowmen.

“Do you suppose turkeys smell worse when they're alive or when they're dead?” Nick asked conversationally while Richard opened the window and dragged air back into his lungs.

“It says here to add the contents of the packet, except for the liver, to a pot of water and bring to a boil.” Richard opened the cabinet under the sink and got out a pair of pink rubber gloves, a ridiculously whimsical set with an attached pearl bracelet and a giant fake diamond ring that someone had once given him for Christmas as a gag gift. He wished he had the kind that surgeons used.

*Needs must when the devil drives.*

“You're not seriously going to wear those.”

Richard looked at them and winced. “I am. I can't stand the thought of touching that bag again. It's either the gloves or we take Lila and Kevin to Denny's. Say the word. I'm good either way.”

“Okay,” Nick agreed. “It looks goofy, though.”

“What, you don't think these work?” Richard modeled the gloves as if he were going to be photographed wearing them, before taking them off again and laying them on the counter. “Well, pearls before five is a big fashion disaster anyway.”

“Seriously.” Nick was almost nodding back off.

“Hey, we need to cut onions and carrots, and you can string the celery for me.”

“Okay.” Nick took the bag of celery to the sink and washed each rib, cracking it and tearing the strings off. Richard neatly chopped carrots and onions into large chunks.

Richard donned the gloves like a surgeon and eyed the bag of turkey organs. “Okay, here goes nothing.” He opened up the plastic, spilling a number of small, distinct meaty bits onto the tray that held the turkey. “I feel like I'm trying to read the damned entrails of this thing. *Double, double, toil and trouble*. Okay here we go...*Blah, blah, blah* except the liver into a stockpot full of cold water, plus the neck, the veggies, and the peppercorns.”

“Dude.” Nick eyed the scattered bits warily. “Which is the liver?”

Richard still held his hands up as though he were about to perform surgery. “I have no clue. But it clearly says *except the liver*. He's underlined it twice. Do you suppose he used a ruler? Look how straight those lines are.”

Richard had no clue which organ was which. Nick looked to him for answers. He looked at the clock. Seven fifteen. Logan was two hours ahead, but it galled Richard that he might need to call. It wasn't as if he couldn't figure it out.

“Go get my laptop and bring it back here to the kitchen table; we can Google *turkey liver*.” Richard kept the gloves on but washed them clean with soap and water, and when Nick returned with his MacBook, Richard leaned over his shoulder to look.

“Got the Google page.”

“Search images,” Richard told him, watching him type.

“Oh.” Nick grimaced up at him. “That's kind of gross.”

“Yeah.” They walked together back to the tray. “Which of these things looks like that.”

Nick pointed to a large, amorphous blob that seemed darker than the others and had no discernible shape. “I think it's that one.”

“I'd have to say I agree.” Richard picked it up, reading through the rest of his notes to see if it would be needed elsewhere. When he discovered that it wasn't, he tossed it into the garbage disposal and turned on the water. When he pushed the button, his instinct was to put a hat over his heart and say a few words or something. “Too bad we don't have cats, but we don't. Good riddance.”

“No kidding,” Nick agreed.

“Okay, we put all the rest of this stuff here into the cold water and bring it to a boil, then turn it down to a simmer and... It says here to *skim scum*.”

Nick looked appalled. “There's going to be *scum*?”

\* \* \* \*

Richard waited until Nick was engrossed in the game and made his way to the kitchen again to look at the clock on his phone before he dialed. Five o'clock. Lila and Kevin said they'd be there at three, and they hadn't shown up or called. Since this was the third time he'd called, Richard wasn't surprised to hear it go straight through to voice mail.

“Hello, Lila? Richard. I'm trying to figure out whether we had a misunderstanding or something. Nick and I are starting to get worried that something happened to you. We were expecting you at three, and we're holding dinner, but it's not doing the turkey any good. We're watching football now, but I figure we should probably get started by about six if we want dinner to taste good. Can you please call me? Even if you can't make it?” Richard ran out of things to say that didn't sound like *what the fuck are you thinking, you heartless bitch?* “Well, thanks; you know Nick's counting on this, right? Bye.”

He walked to the sink and leaned on the counter, hanging his head. His back felt stiff, as if he'd been holding it tight for hours, and maybe he had. He tried to think of a way to salvage the fact that Lila and Kevin hadn't bothered showing up for Thanksgiving. Tried to find a way to make it right for Nick, who sat in the living room in a carefully pressed pair of chinos and a white button-down shirt. He'd even put on a tie and worn a navy blue blazer. Something told Richard he'd seen the boys in the eastern clothing catalogs they often received around holiday time and gone for a traditional, more classic look. A festive, fancy dinner outfit to go with a special family occasion. He'd spent an hour that afternoon perfecting the art of tying a tie. A perfect full Windsor. Just like Richard's.

*Fuck.*

Richard felt sick to his stomach, a combination of the nerves he'd been feeling all day, the disappointment he'd sensed building in Nick, and the fact that he'd eaten nothing since ten that morning, anticipating the huge meal they'd cooked. Then there was Logan. He missed Logan. He never realized how much he could miss someone he'd only known for a brief time until Logan had flown back to where his family lived in Iowa. He had never, ever missed John like this. Never ached for the sight of his face the way he did Logan's. He'd had an entirely different relationship with John, based on personal and professional goals and mutual friends. John traveled for business, and Richard had looked forward to the opportunity to be alone.

Logan was...family. He was going to be an essential part of Richard's life. He and Logan were building something entirely different together, and Richard knew how important it was going to be now that he got his first taste of what it was like to be without it.

Richard heard footsteps behind him, and Nick padded into the kitchen in bare feet. He'd shucked his nice clothes in favor of his softest jeans and a T-shirt that read, *Here comes trouble.*

“She's not coming, is she?” He opened the refrigerator and took out a cold bottle of root beer.

Richard pressed his lips together, trying to find the words he should say.

“You don't have to say anything. I know she's not coming.”

“She may come later. We could eat, and then maybe she'll come later and we can still have dessert. Make coffee and cocoa and eat some pie. What do you say?”

“Can we eat in front of the TV?”

Richard sighed. “Yeah, sure. Just let me get changed into something comfortable.” He started to leave the kitchen and changed his mind, turning back. He went to Nick and pulled him into a hard hug. “We don't get to choose our parents, and they don't get to choose us. But I'd choose you in a heartbeat, Nick. Of anyone I've ever known, you're the one person I'd choose to be with no matter what.”

Nick hugged him back, saying nothing.

Richard left the kitchen before the sadness that washed over him brought him to tears. Fucking, *fucking* bitch. He wanted to see to it that she never had the opportunity to do this again, never had the right to mess with Nick's mind or his heart. But he knew he didn't stand a chance. The courts would always allow her at least a supervised visit, and in his heart Richard knew that he would never turn her away, just in case—just on the off chance—she was going to get it right at last, because he'd wanted someone to give *him* that chance and they never had.

His cell phone buzzed, and he glanced at it, his heart pounding, hoping against hope that it was Lila to say their car had broken down or they'd been stuck in terrible traffic but that she was on her way. He'd gladly eat turkey that tasted like sawdust, wait all night, if she'd make even the tiniest of efforts.

At first he didn't recognize the number, but he answered it anyway.

“Hello?”

“Hello, my lover.” *Logan*. “Did you happen to notice whose alma mater is getting its ass kicked even as we speak?”

Richard sighed, his throat suddenly too tight to speak.



“That's right, yours.” Logan laughed. Richard could hear others laughing and football in the background. Logan sounded like he'd had a nice meal and a few beers.

Richard cleared his throat. “Yeah, well. The game's not over yet.”

“At forty-two to seven? I'd say it is,” Logan teased. “Looks like the only good Trojan is the one I'll be putting on my dick the second I see you again.”

“Ohmyfucking—” Richard slumped against the closed door of his room and took a deep breath. No way was he going to spoil Logan's lovely mood. “It is great to hear your voice. How do you know I don't plan to just snap one on myself and bend you over the hood of my car the second I see *you*?”

Logan was silent for so long that Richard started to worry that he'd made a mistake. “*What?*”

“I didn't mean anything by it, Logan; I was just—”

“No.” Logan stopped him, and Richard could hear something in the background, movement, a door closing. “What did you say?”

“I said, I didn't mean anything. I was just kidding around.”

“Jeez, what a peckerhead. I hope you're not kidding, Richard, 'cause just the *thought* of you inside me... I had to leave the room or embarrass myself in front of the kids.”

## Chapter Twenty-four

At the red light, Richard looked into his rearview mirror and watched as Nick looked dully out the window. He was dressed in what Richard called *grandma casual*, a pair of nicely creased chinos and a sky blue polo shirt. Richard was forced to remind him to put on his belt, but Nick was wearing his newest Vans and held his small backpack in his hands. In it, Nick had packed his PSP and a number of games, his headphones, because Grandma Rachel didn't care for the noise, and several Magic Tree House books.

Richard couldn't help thinking he looked like he ought to be in a sheriff's prisoner-transfer bus wearing leg shackles. Nick sighed again.

"Okay, so I'll drop you off at Grandma Rachel's and then pick you up at five."

"Okay."

"Stop acting like I'm taking you to the animal shelter. She's your grandmother. She wants to see you. It could be worse."

"I know. I just don't know what I'm going to say about Mama. I think it will make Grandma Rachel sad if I tell her Mama never came for dinner yesterday."

"Just tell her the truth, Nick. It is sad. But there isn't any point in pretending that everything's fine when it's not, and it's not okay to lie."

"I know."

"It's okay to be sad."

"I know."

Nick was silent for the rest of the drive, right up until Richard pulled his Prius into the driveway of the Flannigans' attractive two-story home. No one could say that Lila had grown up without advantages. Her parents were cool and distant but polite people. They made him feel neither welcome nor unwanted. Richard had never really figured them out, and when James had

divorced Lila, taking Nick and leaving Lila to her friends and partying, Richard figured he didn't have to work too hard at it.

Richard walked around the car and took the small pack from Nick as he emerged. He looked like he was walking the green mile, and Richard had to bite his tongue to keep from offering some sort of outlandish treat that he could look forward to later. Not that they wouldn't have one. If it was hard on Nick to go, it was also hard on Richard to leave him there, knowing how unhappy he was. He promised himself he wouldn't succumb to the big-eyed gaze.

"You want to ring the bell?" Richard asked.

Nick straightened. "I'm not *two*."

"Then knock, and let's get this show on the road," Richard told him.

Nick dutifully tapped the door.

When Rachel answered, she said, "Hello, boys." Richard grinned. She was the kind of woman who referred to unmarried men as boys on principle, whatever their age. She had once referred to Nick and him as "living the bachelor life." They were of an age, but to Richard she seemed a throwback, more like his mother than his peer.

Rachel was a pretty, middle-aged woman with a voice that spoke of cigarettes and of gin and tonics. She came to the door resplendent in a vibrant-print shirt that made Richard think of Miami and a pair of white capris. She wore a white belt around her slim hips, and her toes were painted Day-Glo orange. Strappy sandals clicked on the tiles as she led them to the living room.

"You just put your things down there, and then we'll head for the kitchen," she told Nick. She glanced up at Richard and asked, "Did you want to stay for lunch?"

"No," Richard said a little too quickly. He smiled at Nick's other grandfather, Jim, who stood in the kitchen, a cup of coffee in his hand. They shook hands politely. "No, thank you very much, but even though it's a holiday, I should probably go home and work."

"Even on Thanksgiving weekend?" Jim asked.

"When it's your own business, there are no days off." Richard shrugged.

"I hear you. That's why I don't work for myself. Got ten years, so I get three weeks' vacation time now."

"Lucky you," Richard responded with a grin. "What was I thinking?"

"I have your favorite in the oven," Rachel told Nick. "Dinosaur chicken nuggets."

Nick looked like he was about to make a crack, but Richard gave him a glare that squashed it. "Thank you very much."

"You're welcome. We'll have some fun today," she told him. "I got chocolate chip cookie dough in a tub."

Richard sighed as Jim walked him to the door. "Nice to see you, Jim."

"Good to see you too." Jim held out his hand again, and Richard shook it. "Don't be a stranger."

"No, I won't. Thanks. See you at five." He waved.

Jim waved back and closed the door, and even Richard had to admit it was easier breathing freely when the Flannigans weren't around. He pulled out of their driveway and back out onto the street, glancing once more at the house and wondering what it was that made people so different from one another. Theoretically people should basically all be fairly similar. They needed to eat, to be sheltered, and to be loved. He and the Flannigans had far more in common than they had separating them, but the things that were different were so vastly different, they couldn't even form a bridge between them. Not even their mutual love for Nick made that possible. And it should have. It really should.

Nick got his phone out at a stoplight and called Trina, slipping on his Bluetooth so they could talk while he drove.

"Hello?" Trina answered uncertainly.

"Hi, it's me. I just dropped Nick off at his grandmother's house; are you busy today?"

"Not really." She sounded groggy. Richard smiled. It was nearly eleven, but she was a college kid, and he realized he'd probably woken her up.

"Is your mom there? I thought I'd ask you both to lunch."

"No, she and my dad went up to the wine country." Nick heard the rustling of bedding and something crashed. "*Shit.*"

"I'm sorry I woke you. If you want to go back to sleep—"

"No, lunch sounds great, as long as it's not turkey. We did it big-time at Grandmother's house, and to be honest, I'm over it."

“Okay,” he told her. “I’ll pick you up.”

“Fine, give me twenty.”

“That’s what I like about you. Most girls would need an hour.”

“Most girls care what they look like.” Her voice held her sunny smile.

“See you.”

“Later.” She hung up.

By the time he got to her house twenty minutes later, true to her word, she was standing outside waiting. She got into his car and fastened her seat belt.

“I thought maybe we could have lunch and do some early Christmas shopping.”

Her mouth hung open in shock. “Do you know what day it is?”

“Friday?”

“Black Friday,” she reminded him. “The biggest shopping day of the whole year. You won’t be able to get anywhere near the mall.”

“I guess it’s not an original idea.”

“Not really.”

“I thought I’d start getting presents.”

“We can do that on the Internet.”

“But I want to do something.” Richard sighed. “I suddenly have time when no one is around—”

“Well, if you really want to, let’s do it.”

“All right, yes.” He grinned. “How bad can it be?”

\* \* \* \*

Trina waved helplessly from the opposite side of the congested walkway. Richard was flattened against the window of an upscale jeweler’s, trying to gauge when it might be a safe time to wade across. He had the distinct impression that if he made a wrong move, he’d be swept away in the human flash flood and never see her again. When next he glanced her way, she was bravely shoving her way across, her face a study in concentration. He’d seen pro wrestlers with less intense game faces.

“Ha!” She punched his shoulder lightly. “I made it.”

Someone knocked her hard from behind with a large box from the Apple store. “S’cuse me.” They headed past without looking at her.

She rubbed her shoulder a little. “Did you figure anything out? Who are we shopping for again?”

“I thought Nick, of course,” he said over the wailing of a baby. “And Logan.”

“And *Logan*,” she teased. “It’s Christmas-present serious? You have to dump him before the holidays if it’s not; otherwise you’ll have to exchange the I’m-dumping-you-after-New-Year’s present.”

“What’s that?”

“Nothing. I mean, it’s not something specific.” She leaned over confidentially. “Generally it’s something from Cost Plus he can later regift as a housewarming present.”

“Jeez. How do you know all this stuff?”

“My mom. She’s really good at this. She told me nobody wants to be alone at Christmas, so there’s a tacit agreement that people make to grind their way through the holidays, chug the nog, smooch the New Year in, and then bail with no hard feelings.”

“I’m torn between admiration and fear.”

“Hey, I never said I’d do that, but people do.”

“*Yup. People do.*”

“What about you?”

Richard turned away from her, putting his back to the crowd. A woman with a backpack neatly pressed his face into the glass. At least it didn’t leave a print. He looked at the jewelry, some exquisite colored gemstone earrings and a bunch of wedding sets.

“What do you mean?”

“Are we heading to Cost Plus for Logan’s gift?”

“Oh hell no.” Richard gazed at the display. “I’m fucking crazy about the man. The *L* word was mentioned.”

“You’ve only been going out, what? A month, and you’re already talking about *lesbians*?”

Richard nudged her away from the jewelry store and out into traffic. “That's right. I understand one month is the lesbian anniversary, and one should give one's partner either Melissa Etheridge CDs or a DVD copy of *Tipping the Velvet*.”

“You're serious!”

“I am. I'm in love.” Richard stopped there, right in the middle of the mall after saying that out loud to someone who was not Logan, and grinned. “And I told him so.”

“No way!”

“Way!” Richard felt sixteen again. “He said his heart was engaged, and that sort of led up to it. I can't even describe this. I was in a relationship for almost ten years, and I have never felt like this in my life.”

Trina bit her lip. “That's so cute. You've found your prince! What are you getting him? It has to be good.”

“I don't know.” Richard shook his head. “It has to be something...fabulous. But unique. Something that hints at commitment but doesn't fall out of the blue and smother him.”

“You've been thinking about this.” Trina eyed him.

“I have thought of little else since we came to this godforsaken mall, except I now know I'm getting Nick a netbook for Christmas.”

“Cool. Could you adopt me, please? Because I need someone to spoil my ass rotten too.”

“Like your mom doesn't. I want her to meet Logan. I want to have a big Christmas party.”

“Jeez, any minute now you're going to burst into song.”

Richard took a deep breath, figuring no one could hear him in a shopping mall this crowded and noisy. “*Oh, what a beautiful morning...*”

Trina slapped a hand over his mouth. “Save it for Simon Cowell.”

Richard pushed her hand away. “Okay, shall we blow this place? I've about had it.”

“Is there anything you want to do before we leave?”

“Yes. But it's stupid.” Richard flushed. “I want to find a way to make some kind of a statement—as corny as it sounds—about...belonging. Like I belong to him. That's pretty fucked-up, isn't it?”

Trina gave him a look he'd seen on her mother's face. An exasperated, womanly look. "It is not fucked-up to want someone to know you love them. One of my friend's brothers got a PA for his girlfriend."

"A personal assistant?" Richard frowned. "I doubt Logan would want a—"

"A Prince Albert piercing. Through the urethra and then—"

Richard gasped and fought the urge to put a protective hand over his genitals. "We need to think of something that doesn't involve putting a hole in my dick."

"She said it barely hurt."

"Yeah, well. It probably didn't hurt *her* at all." Just the thought of someone putting a needle in his dick was giving him all the attitude he needed to power his way through the throng. Richard navigated around the island created by a white picket fence, inside which Santa was making himself available for photographs. There was a mile-long line, and none of the kids looked like they gave a shit.

"I mean, he told her—"

"No."

"Tattoo?" Trina had to quicken her pace to catch up to him.

"What can we do without disfiguring me, hon? That's where I'm drawing the line."

"Not even a simple piercing?" She caught him by the elbow. "Nipple?"

Richard slowed. He hadn't thought of a nipple piercing. He could do that. He thought he could do that. *Could he do that?*

He bit his lip and turned to Trina so suddenly, she smacked into him. "Nipple piercing."

Trina's eyebrows shot up. "I was *kidding*."

"I'm not. Where do I get one?"

"Oh shit, seriously?"

"Seriously," Richard told her. He punched her arm playfully. "But if you ever tell your mother, I will fire you on the spot, never speak to you again, and make you eat next year's turkey liver."

"Yeesh. Okay." She rubbed the spot on her arm dramatically and threw in a wince for good measure. "You know I'll tell, though, right?"



“Yeah.” He resigned himself to the ribbing he was going to take for this. “*Fucking puppy love.*”

“What?” Trina asked.

“Nothing. Never mind.” He took her hand and squeezed it. “Lead the way, Trina. My nipple's not going to pierce itself.”

\* \* \* \*

Richard had cause to second-guess himself while he sat in the piercing chair. He had to hand it to Trina. She'd taken him to a class establishment, a nice, new place just south of the mall. It was clean and hygienic and offered everything for a man or woman's body-art needs, carefully and methodically performed by what seemed like diligent and courteous people. He sat frozen to his chair, but now that he'd set out on his course, he could hardly back down. Trina was looking at him as though she expected him to yell, *PSYCH*, any minute. Or explode. She did have a wary sort of apprehension in her eyes.

“You're sure you want to do this?” she asked again for the fifth time.

He sighed. “Trina, I'm forty-five years old, and I'm in love for the first time. I want to mark the occasion. That's not *so* crazy, is it?”

Trina's eyes softened, and for a minute she looked exactly like her mother. “No. It's not.” She got out her cell phone. “But I'm getting pictures, because you're going to scream like a little girl.”

“It may surprise you to know I want you to get this on video,” he said as Devon, the entirely-too-attractive-for-his-own-good piercing professional, came over and smiled down at him.

“Okay.” Trina was excited for him. He could hear it in her voice. “Rolling.”

Richard was caught between conflicting impulses when Devon ran a gloved hand over his chest. “Left, correct?”

“Right,” said Richard; then he gave a nervous laugh. “No. I mean, yes. Left. Correct.”

Devon looked up at him from under his lashes, and even with Logan firmly in mind, or maybe because he had Logan in mind, his body reacted to the man's touch, and his nipples got

hard. Devon marked him with a felt pen and had Richard look to see if he thought it looked right. Richard glanced at Trina, who shrugged.

“Heh.” Devon grinned when he saw Richard's uncertainty. “It's fine, Richard. I'm going to give you a tremendous pinch with the clamp, dude. Here's where it's good if you can prepare yourself by breathing deeply and evenly, okay?”

“Yeah.” Richard's mouth went dry. Real fear choked him, and arousal confused him.

“Scared?” Devon murmured. He had a low, sweet voice and a gentle touch, and it went a long way toward making Richard relax. As much as he was going to, anyway.

Richard gasped in a deep breath when he felt the pinch of steel on his skin.

“We marked where we're going to go, and it's going to hurt like hell. I'm not going to lie to you. But once it's through, I want you to breathe for me, okay? Keep breathing slow, deep breaths.”

“Okay.” Richard's heart was slamming against his rib cage, and his palms were damp where they hung on to the sides of the chair. “Are you getting this, Trina? It's not happening more than once.”

“Not going to get them both pierced?” Devon asked conversationally as he shoved the metal piercing bar into Richard's skin on one side of his nipple, through Richard's flesh, and into the tube on the other side.

Richard sucked in a breath and tried to hold it together while his head spun and his body reacted to the bright, sudden conflagration of searing pain. “Nope.”

“You'll change your mind,” Devon told him confidently.

“I just need the one, over my heart.”

“Yeah?” Devon asked. He looked at Trina and got the wrong idea entirely. “Sweet, man.”

“Yeah, *no*,” Trina said, still filming. “It's for his boyfriend, Logan. To commemorate first love. So fucking romantic, I want to puke.”

“Really?” Devon asked. “First love?”

Richard was still biting his lip, but he managed to nod.

"That's epic," Devon murmured. "Good for you. I just have to slip this through"—he pushed the ring through Richard's flesh on the end of a little metal rod—"and then we'll put the ball on. Once I take off the clamp, you'll feel one hundred percent better."

Devon worked for a brief time getting that ball set into the small ring and then cleaned the skin and coated it with antibacterial ointment.

"You're done."

"That's it?" Richard was still breathing deeply. He'd broken out into a panicked sweat. He wanted to change his soaked-through clothes as soon as he got home.

"Is that enough?" Devon grinned at him.

"Can I have something to drink?" Richard asked. He felt light-headed. Not sick, really, but a little faint. Like he'd had too much coffee, which he had.

"Have a Tootsie Pop," Devon said, offering him a bowl of different flavors. Richard picked out a red one and unwrapped it, then popped it into his mouth. He savored the crisp, sour-sweet cherry flavor, and it made his mouth water. Once he'd given it more than a few sucks, he felt much better.

"You look good like that," Devon said under his breath. "Too bad you're off the market."

Richard smiled at him around the sucker, not unaware of the picture he presented, and liking it entirely too much. If anyone had asked him a month before, he'd have for certain said pain was not hot and he'd never get his nipple pierced. But the way Devon was looking at him, and knowing he was being taped for Logan to see what he'd done... Well. He'd been doing a lot of unexpected things lately.

\* \* \* \*

After going home to change and wash up a little, Richard headed back to the Flannigans' place to pick up Nick. He was entirely satisfied with the day's work, even though he knew Nick would give him a hard time about his new jewelry. It wasn't like he was going to be able to keep it secret. He wasn't ashamed anyway. Just a little sore.

The Flannigans' house was quiet when he drove up, the porch light on because the sun was going down. Richard checked the time on his phone and headed to the front door. Five on the dot. Nick certainly could not complain that he was late tonight, at any rate. He had a hundred

things on his mind when Rachel opened the door, and later he realized he should have seen the whitish tightness about her mouth and the rigid set of her shoulders right away.

“Hi, Rachel.” Richard entered when Rachel stepped back. If he thought it unusual that the lights were mostly off, he didn't think much of it. The Flannigans weren't exactly a chipper lot at the best of times, and maybe an entire day spent with an exuberant nine-year-old boy exhausted them.

“Hello, Richard.” Rachel looked behind her at Jim, who was standing under the arch that led to the living room, his face unreadable.

“How did it go?” he asked, sensing that something was the matter but unable to understand. “Nick give you a hard time? Maybe he's tired. I'll just be—”

“Nick isn't here,” Jim said.

“What?” Richard blinked. “What did you say?”

“Nick isn't here, Richard. And we're so sorry. Lila came, and she wanted to take him go-kart racing. She had her boyfriend with her, and we didn't—”

“What?” Richard's head was starting to swim.

“Maybe you'd better sit down,” Jim said, putting a hand on Richard's shoulder. “You don't look so good.”

Richard shook off Jim's touch. “Tell me.”

“He's with Lila. She said she'd bring him back by four-thirty, but she hasn't come or called. We tried calling her, but she's not picking up.”

Richard stared at them. “*What?*” he said stupidly, and it wasn't like he figured the third time would be the charm or anything; he just couldn't think of anything else to say.

“Nick is gone, Richard. Lila took him.” Jim said the words slowly and louder, as though Richard were deaf.

Rachel gripped his shoulder, hard. “He's gone. We don't know when Lila is planning on bringing Nick back.”

## Chapter Twenty-five

Richard passed Jim and entered the living room because he needed to sit down. Like, right *then*, before his knees buckled, because he was swamped with both the pain of their betrayal and the nagging aftereffects of doing something as stupid and frivolous as getting his nipple pierced. He yanked his phone out of his jacket pocket, wincing when the motion caused the fabric of his shirt to scrape uncomfortably across his chest.

Jim took a breath and began to talk, but Richard held his hand up, preempting him, and dialed Lila's number. Wherever she was, if she didn't answer, Richard was going to see to it that she was sorry she'd ever—

“Hello, Richard.” Lila's voice was surprisingly calm.

Richard tried to keep the panic from his voice. “Give me one good reason I shouldn't call the police and have your ass arrested for kidnapping.”

“Just chill, Richard. We're only camping. That's all. I knew you'd never let me and Kevin take him camping, so I asked Mom for help.”

Richard covered the mouthpiece with his hand. To Rachel, he said, “You knew she was going to do this? Prepare yourself for an epic battle in court.”

“She just wanted to be with her son,” Rachel protested.

Richard pointed at her, the phone cupped in his hand. “I'll talk to you when I'm done with Lila.”

Jim frowned. “You have no call—”

Richard ignored him. “Lila.” He tried breathing through his nose. “Maybe I have been insensitive. Why don't you just bring Nick home, and we'll talk about it? Maybe we can have that Thanksgiving dinner and just spend some time as a family and renegotiate.”

Richard heard a squawk and some shuffling, and then Kevin's voice came on the line. "We'll do that soon, Richard. But for now me and Lila and Nick are going to stay here together, and I think you should know that we'll probably be a while. Nick doesn't have to be back to school until Monday, so we're going to take the opportunity to go riding and maybe do a little fishing."

"Listen to me, Kevin. *Very carefully*. If Nick is not returned to his grandmother's home by nine o'clock tonight, I'm going to call the police and report a—"

Richard could hear a struggle for the phone and some furious hissing before Lila's voice returned. "Richard, stop. *Chill*. I promise, Nick's having a good time, and I won't let anything happen to him. We're just camping. Don't get bent out of shape."

"Lila—"

"Do you want to talk to him? I'll get him if you want. Here. Talk to Kevin."

"Yes." Richard gritted his teeth. *How could life take a right-angle turn like that?* "Kevin?"

"Yeah." Kevin sounded like he was smirking. "It's only for the weekend, Richard. But then we're going to have to talk."

The fine hairs on the back of Richard's neck stood up. "Talk?"

"Here's Nick now."

"Hi, Rick." Nick sounded breathless.

"Are you all right?"

"Yeah. There's some kids here and a pool."

"Where are you, Nick?"

There was a long silence. "They told me I'm not supposed to tell. They said that Mama would get in trouble and maybe go to jail. I'm sorry. Grandma Rachel said it wouldn't be anything bad if I went, and I..." Nick trailed off.

Richard cursed. Nick sounded close to tears. "It's all right, Nick. If you're having a good time, then we can count it as a lovely surprise, right? I wish I could go on a lovely surprise camping trip sometimes."

Nick snorted. "You hate camping."

“That's right. So isn't it nice that you have Lila and Kevin to take you? As long as everything's cool with you, can I talk to Lila again?”

“It's cool. See you.” It sounded like was the phone changed hands, the sensitive microphone picking up sounds of splashing and children laughing and yelling.

“Hello?” Lila's voice again. Richard had to tamp down the rage he was feeling. “As you can hear, he's fine. We're not beating him or anything.”

Richard closed his eyes. “I know, Lila. When will you be bringing him home, just so I don't worry?”

“We'll have him back on Sunday night in plenty of time to take a shower and get a good night's sleep. All right with you?”

“You know it isn't.”

“I know. I just... I'm his mom, and sometimes it hurts that I can't see him.”

Richard sighed. “I'll see you on Sunday night, Lila. Call me if you need anything at all.”

“All right. Thank you.”

Richard wanted to add, *Don't screw up*, but he didn't want to make things worse. “Bye.”

“Bye,” Lila said. Richard closed his phone.

To the Flannigans, he said, “I'm going to call my lawyer and see if I can have you arrested for abetting a kidnapping.”

“Richard.” Rachel rounded on him. “You wouldn't let her near him. She said you wouldn't let her even take him to the park! She's his *mother*.”

“I'm only going to ask this once.” Richard faced her. “Did you know what she had planned when you called me and asked to visit with Nick?”

“Yes,” Rachel said. Her gaze stayed on the floor. “But we thought she'd bring him back before you got here. You'd never have found out.”

“You didn't think Nick would tell me?”

Rachel shook her head. “Not if his mother told him not to.”

“How can you think making a nine-year-old boy keep a secret like that is okay?” Richard's hands were shaking as he got to his feet. “I can't do this.”

“Richard. Lila's clean. She loves her son. It isn't fair to keep punishing her—”

“Is that what you think? That I'm *punishing* her?”

“She's sober now, Richard.” Rachel's voice was scraping his last nerve raw. “It may be time to let her have Nick back.”

“Why? Because she's making terrific decisions like kidnapping Nick behind my back? And you still feel sorry for her after she lies and manipulates and... *Shit*. What is wrong with you people?” Richard walked to the door. “If I had my way, you'd all be locked up.”

He didn't stop but continued down the walkway, even when they followed and tried to explain, making excuses for their inexcusable lapse in judgment. He headed for his car and got in, before closing the door and pulling out of the driveway even while they were still imploring him to try to understand.

Two blocks away, he pulled over and rang his lawyer's office. He knew he'd get the machine, and he also knew he had Frank's private cell number at home. But he was shaking all over, weak from the physical shock of the piercing and still throbbing with rage from the Flannigans' duplicity. He left a message for Frank to call him and then drove sedately home.

\* \* \* \*

The minute Richard put his car into the garage and closed the door behind him, the mask of self-control fell away and he gave in to the fury that he felt, slamming the car door and the door to the house, then kicking the bags and backpacks around the foyer like BBs, finally entering the living room, where he repeatedly kicked and punched the pillows on the couch. In the end, none of it made him feel better. He ate a frozen meal that might as well have been sawdust, and lay on the couch for hours and hours, unable to sleep and yet unwilling to drink or self-medicate in case Nick should need him.

In his darkest hours, while he paced, or after, while he lay on the couch drawing sketch after sketch of Nick and Logan from memory, he realized that it was probably true: *if* Lila was clean and *if* she was stable and *if* she chose to fight him, she could get Nick back, and there was nothing he could do about it. They would almost always give a child to a mother who had worked toward a second chance, no matter what she'd done in the past.

It was that thought—that he'd lose Nick—that cut him deepest, hollowed him out so that he was little more than a husk as he held his cell phone, passing it between his cold hands, back and forth, until he finally made his decision.



“Hello?” Logan's voice sounded sleepy. *Shit*. Richard forgot Logan was hours ahead. “Richard, is that you?”

Richard was silent. Now that he'd finally committed himself to calling Logan, he didn't exactly know what to say.

“Richard? Did you sit on your phone? Are you ass dialing me?”

“No.” Richard huffed out a laugh, but at the same time, he knew his voice was cracked and broken and hopeless. “Fuck. No. Sorry. I'm sorry.”

Richard could hear Logan's sharp intake of breath and another noise, the scraping of metal on wood, like he sat up quickly and grabbed his watch. He could picture Logan doing just that. Military readiness. The quintessential minuteman. “What is it?” His voice had changed too. It sounded wary but confident.

Richard wanted to cry with relief. He spoke beyond the pain clogging his throat. “They took Nick.”

“Who took Nick?” Logan's voice was impersonal and precise. It made it easier for Richard to say what he had to say.

“Lila and her boyfriend. His grandparents were in on it. They lied to me, and when I went to pick him up, he wasn't—”

Logan cut him off. “What did the police say?”

“I—” Nick's heart contracted painfully. “I didn't call the police. They said they'd bring him back, and I'm afraid if I make trouble—”

“Call the police, Richard; get them there right away. Then call me back.”

Richard could hear drawers opening and fabric rustling, as if Logan had gotten out of bed and was putting on clothes. “But—”

Logan's voice was gentle but held absolute conviction. “Call the police, Richard, and then call me back.”

Logan's voice was so compelling. Something powerful that had nothing to do with his words held Richard in its grip after they were spoken. Richard hesitated for only the briefest fraction of a second, then ended the call without saying anything and did exactly as Logan commanded.

\* \* \* \*

When the doorbell rang at eight in the morning, he hadn't slept a wink.

Trina stood at the door with two coffees. The look on her face as she peered at him could best be described as shocked. "What happened to you?"

"It's a long story." He stepped back so she could come in. She didn't take her eyes off his face.

"Did your piercing get infected? I was worried about how you'd feel in the morning, so I thought I'd bring—"

"It's not the piercing. Lila took Nick. He's..." Richard pressed his lips together to keep from crying. "I don't know where he is."

"No! Did you call the police?"

"Yes, I called the police." Richard still felt the bitterness of that encounter. "They came last night and I told them Nick's mother took him without permission and I showed them the paperwork and they said they'd look into it. They advised me to have my attorney contact the county district attorney."

"*What?*" She held the coffees out toward him, as though she couldn't decide whether to offer them or simply fling them. "Didn't you tell them what kind of a person she is? That she gets high and—"

"Of course I did!" He took the coffees to the couch where he'd slept, picking up and stacking the drawings he'd worked on and cast aside.

"Then why aren't they issuing an AMBER alert?"

"They said there's no reason to suspect that Nick is in imminent danger—he's with his biological mother—but they'd interview the Flannigans and will investigate the matter. Yada *fucking* yada."

"Shit."

"I had a really bad night; I wanted to take something stronger than aspirin, because I couldn't sleep. I wanted a drink, but I had the feeling that as soon as I did, Nick would need me, and I wouldn't be able—"

"Whoa. Stop." Trina caught his hand between hers.

"I hate myself. I almost didn't call the police at all. I thought I had to give Lila the benefit of the doubt, for Nick's sake, and it was killing me."

"Oh hell no." Trina squeezed his hands. "Lila kidnapped Nick. You don't have to try to see the best in her. That's a criminal act."

"I know. I called Logan, and he told me what to do."

"Good man."

"Yeah." Rick sighed. He'd been so confused, and Logan...Logan always knew exactly what to do. "My man."

"Let me see your nipple."

"*What?*" He jumped away.

"I just want to make sure it isn't infected. Have you been doing the aftercare like they said?"

"Trina—"

"Okay, I'll shut up about that for now." She sat silently for a minute, as though there could be nothing more to say. "Do you think she'll hurt him? Do you think she isn't staying sober? What has you so tense?"

Richard put his head in his hands. "I'm afraid she won't bring him back. That they'll disappear, and I'll have to put his face on a milk carton or up at the Costco or on the bulletin boards at Wal-Mart. *Have you seen this child?*"

"Aw, jeez, Richard. You have to have a little faith. Lila doesn't want to have the police after her, and she's not the sharpest knife in the drawer. People like her always get caught."

"Yeah?" He gave an unhappy, cheerless sort of laugh. "With Lila, you can pretty much count on the fact that whatever can go wrong, will go wrong."

"Then you should keep after the police and hope for the best. What do you want to do today?"

"But—"

"You'll have your cell phone. Just don't turn it off, and wherever you are, you're in reach. Let's do something that makes you happy."

“You know what would make me happy?” he asked, having gotten a sudden inspiration. “It would make me happy to be able to record the conversations I have with Lila while she's kidnapping Nick. It would make me happy to have a record of the shit she's putting me through.”

“I was thinking of something more on the line of a pony ride or a facial.”

“We should go to the electronics store. I need a recording device.” He put his coffee down. “When we get Nick home safe, we can go for a pony ride if you want.”

“All right.”

Richard left Trina to clean himself up a little and dress. When he was done, he headed downstairs. He checked his phone for messages. There was nothing new from Logan. He didn't exactly expect anything. They'd been in touch constantly the night before, until he'd had to report the disappointing news that the police wouldn't be following up in any meaningful way. Richard called Logan at last, after the police were gone, and Logan instructed him to sleep. He'd told Richard he would be in touch in the morning. Logan probably imagined that he would sleep late after such a tough night.

Richard opened a picture message Logan had sent Thanksgiving morning. Someone had used his phone to capture him happily brushing one of the horses he'd been talking about. He wore a knit watch cap and a barn jacket. You could see his breath in the air. Richard stood where he was and let his fingers play over the image. He definitely felt cut off, almost bereft without Logan's solid presence. He was still looking at it when Trina found him standing in the hallway.

“Hey, Mr. Romance, what's that?” Trina came to a halt beside him and looked at the screen on his phone. “Nice picture.”

“Yeah.” Richard sighed. She wrenched him to her in an impulsive hug that made him see stars when she accidentally crushed his nipple.

“Oh! I'm *so* sorry.” Her hands covered her mouth so all he could see were eyes wide with shock.

“It's nothing. I'm the one who did it, after all.”

“Do you regret it?”

“It seems so stupid now. I'm afraid of what Logan will say.” He led Trina to the garage and they got into his car. “He's going to think it was a really dumb-ass thing to do, isn't he?”

“How would I know? You said he has a tattoo?”

“Yes.”

“He'll probably think it's sweet. If not, you can sell it like it's sweet, right? Or take it out and let it heal. I say he'll think it's hot.”

“I forgot I'm an old man.”

“A hot old man who needs to just shut up. He'll love it. If he loves you, he'll love it.”

“He loves me.” Richard didn't know how Logan felt about body piercing, but he knew Logan loved him. He broke into a small smile as he pulled out of the driveway. “That much I know.”

Richard could feel Trina's eyes on him from the passenger seat, and he looked at her briefly. She had that unnerving, womanly gaze her mother, and for that matter, *his* mother, always got when they watched a boy-child make what they perceived to be some sort of progress.

She gave a slight laugh and then looked straight ahead. “Then there's nothing else to worry about now besides getting Nick back and what we're going to do to make Lila's life a living hell.”

Richard felt a chill. Kipling was right. *The female of the species is more deadly than the male.*

Even the young ones.

## Chapter Twenty-six

Snow flurries drifted lazily over the interstate. Banks of snow pushed aside by plows oozed a creeping mist onto the road.

"I really appreciate this," Logan told his dad as the pickup neared the airport. He didn't suppose there was much else to say. He had his duffel in the back of the cab and an electronically purchased ticket on Northwest, heading first to Phoenix and then home. Because of the storm, he wasn't certain if the plane would take off on time—or if at all—but it was imperative that he try.

"This man..." Logan's father began.

"Richard Hunter," Logan supplied.

"Is it serious?"

Logan pressed his lips together. It might seem sudden to his parents, but who knew what they were thinking. He'd hoped to have time to talk to them more about it, but now he had to return. "Yeah."

"Bring them home for Christmas, son."

Logan smiled. He should have known. "Sure. I'll ask. They'll probably love the idea right up until they realize how cold it's going to be."

"Yeah." His father chuckled. "Like Dan. But they won't realize it till we've got them here."

Logan cracked a smile, then looked out the window. "Yeah."

\* \* \* \*

Logan thought of nothing but Richard on the flight home. It didn't help that someone two seats ahead of him was wearing Richard's cologne, and every so often he'd get up and move around the cabin, leaving that scent Logan associated with Richard in his wake to tease and arouse him. It had an interesting if faint sweetness to it, fresh, though, like almonds and lemon, but Logan thought it might just be that he had begun to associate anything sweet with Richard.

On the last hour of the flight, Logan fidgeted, fully aware that it was probably the first time in his life that he'd ever done so. Logan wanted to say things he thought might be important about partnership and family and friendship and team. Things he thought, looking back, that Richard might not know. Things that Logan had learned from his family and from brothers and sisters in arms. About sharing burdens and asking for help and love and comfort. Things that Richard might once have known, but that had been knocked out of him hard by experience. He wanted to take Richard into his arms and hold him. To fill him up with love until he could understand he'd never be alone again.

When his plane touched down, he shot out of his seat and raided the overhead bin for his case. He was out the door and headed to the shuttle for the main parking lot as fast as he'd ever done it. In his mind he was light-years ahead, working out what he could do, what they could do together, to get Nick back.

Logan drove the loop that took him around the parking lot and away from the airport, following the signs that led him to the 55 freeway north toward home. Swept up in the never-ending Orange County traffic, even on a Saturday morning, he realized that this landscape—low, suburban, and filled with cars, faded by too much sun and sprawling before him in endless rows of look-alike houses—had somehow become home. He pulled off the freeway almost on autopilot, as though his truck was heading for the garage where he kept it and his heart was on a mission to find Richard.

Richard was his home now. Richard and Nick.

Logan left his case in the truck and practically sprinted up the walkway to knock on Richard's door. Even if he'd only been gone four days, and even if it didn't make sense, he started forward with his heart pounding, when the door opened, and he stopped halfway across the threshold, off balance and on one foot in front of Trina.

"Hi," he said, trying not to look as though he was tremendously disappointed.

"Oh. Hi." Trina looked behind her, and Logan peered around her too, expecting to see Richard. When he looked back at her, he caught the tired look in her eyes. Logan followed her into the entry hall.

"Richard finally fell asleep, Logan. He just crashed. I've never seen him like this, and I've known him since I was a baby."

“We'll get Nick back.”

“I don't think that's all that has him worried.” Trina frowned and looked toward the stairs.

“Tell me.”

“The police obviously aren't taking this very seriously, and Nick's grandparents told him that since Lila is sober, she should have Nick back. Richard's afraid he'll lose Nick for good.”

“One thing at a time,” Logan said confidently, heading for the stairs. He turned back to find Trina gathering her things. “Are you leaving?”

Trina stopped at the door. “You're what Richard needs now, not me. Keep me in the loop, though, all right?”

“All right. Thank you, Trina. You're a good friend. Richard's lucky to have you.”

“Yes, he is.” She dimpled at him. “Take care of him.”

“I will.”

Once Trina shut the door behind her, Logan took the stairs two at a time.

Logan found Richard curled into a ball of misery on his bed. He looked so small and utterly defeated that it broke Logan's heart. Richard opened his eyes when Logan took a step forward, and drew in a sharp breath.

“I didn't expect you.”

Logan held back for a second but finally decided to sink to his knees on the floor next to the bed and lift his arms. He was utterly unprepared when Richard launched himself at him. They hit the hardwood floor behind him with a *thud*. Logan couldn't contain the groan that escaped him. Richard pressed his face into the surface of Logan's chest.

“You smell like soap and airplane.”

“I got a flight just before the weather got bad. I think we were one of the last ones out.” Logan's big palm caressed the back of Richard's head, and he sighed.

“You shouldn't have cut your visit short.”

“Yeah, I should.”

“How do you always know exactly the right thing...?”

Logan shook his head and held Richard, pressing their bodies firmly together. He kept his voice low and stroked Richard's hair.



Logan kissed him tenderly on the top of the head and savored the scent he'd been thinking about all weekend. Sweet almonds and lemon and something indefinably fresh and subtly earthy that was entirely Richard. Something that just smelled good and wholesome. *Like home.*

When Logan's muscles, already stiff from the plane ride, started to ache, he finally broke away and stood, offering his hand to help Richard stand as well. "Let's move up to the bed, where it's soft. Trina told me you haven't slept?"

Richard shook his head and crawled onto the bed, knee-walking to the center, where he sat waiting for Logan to join him. Logan shucked his T-shirt and jeans before Richard had a chance to object, and met him wearing only his briefs. Richard tossed his own shirt to the floor and lay back, lifting his hips up to remove his cargo shorts, under which he wore nothing at all. Something gold glinted on Richard's chest over what was very definitely a barely closed piercing.

"What the *fuck*?" Logan's jaw dropped.

"Oh shit. Don't even ask me about that. I... Trina and I went shopping while Nick was at his grandmother's. I felt so happy. I was feeling goofy and in love, and I—" To Logan's horror, tears glittered in Richard's eyes.

"Hey, *shh*..." Logan crooned. "It's all right, Richard. I was just surprised, is all." He let Richard lie down beside him and then ran a curious finger ever so gently over the slightly reddened flesh. He smiled when Richard's nipple puckered a little, until Richard grimaced. "Sorry. Looks like it's healing nicely. It's hot. What a bad, bad boy you are."

"Trina has been after me to take scrupulous care of it." Richard lay back and closed his eyes. "She's been a brick. I'm just useless. I feel like gravity stopped working."

"Do we have a plan?" Logan pulled Richard back into his arms, and Richard melted against him.

Richard was silent for a long time. "The police say there's not a damned thing they can do."

"That's... *Shit*. That's not very... But okay. That doesn't mean *we're* helpless." Logan stroked Richard's back in little circles.

"I keep telling myself Lila must love Nick. She's not going to let him get hurt."

"Of course not. It's frustrating, but so far it doesn't sound dangerous."

“That's what the police are saying,” Richard replied grimly. “But she hasn't proven herself to be very reliable in the past.”

“They understood why her visits should be supervised? You told them about the fire? You told them about her boyfriend?”

“Yes, but they pointed out she's been in rehab and she's testing clean weekly. They got an earful of how responsible she's been the last three months from her mother.”

Logan felt disgusted. *Three months.*

“What can I do?” Logan linked his hand with Richard's. He enjoyed the softness of the slightly smaller hand in his. He'd always thought Richard's hands attractive. Strong and capable, but still delicate and dexterous. An artist's hands. “What do you need from me?”

Richard pressed his free hand to Logan's chest and put his face into the junction of his neck and shoulder. Logan put a hand out to cradle the back of his head.

“This very minute? *This*. Human flesh.” Richard bumped his face along Logan's neck, dropping kisses. “Do you think it's okay for me to...?”

“Yes. Take what you need, baby.” Logan pulled Richard as close as he possibly could and held him tight. He filled his senses with Richard: the way he felt when they were skin to skin, the softness of his slightly wavy hair, the scent of lemons and almond and toothpaste. Richard clung to him, and it didn't take long before Logan sensed Richard's thickening cock and the desperation with which he ground it against Logan's thigh.

Logan smiled slightly into Richard's hair and shifted until they were lined up. Even through his briefs, the drag of Richard's cock over his made him gasp and shift again and again until they had a rhythm that echoed in the way they kissed. Richard kissed him like a man determined to lose himself in the act, and Logan surrendered himself to it entirely, ready to gorge himself on the sensation of having Richard close again.

Logan reached for his briefs and pulled the front down to maximize the friction and get contact skin to skin. He caught the globes of Richard's tight ass in his hands and pulled his hips down, surging up to meet him.

“*Logan,*” Richard whispered, hips pumping, skin sliding across Logan's lower body, so that even the little hairs on Logan's legs seemed charged with lightning.

Their cocks met and slid in a slick trail of precum on their abs. Richard made quick, almost punishing jabs at him with his cock. Logan's legs tingled as he began the inexorable slide into orgasm. He closed his eyes and held on tight, his heart full of a savage pride because Richard needed him. Both men growled low in their throats as they lost themselves to the heady pleasure of it. Longing and love and distance fueled their desire to reconnect, but animal passion took over, and Logan was frantic to get off.

"Yes," Logan hissed when Richard stretched out fully and kissed him passionately.

Richard broke the kiss off with a cry and strained against Logan, his hips jerking as he shuddered in Logan's arms. "*Love you, Logan.*"

The first splash of Logan's cum hit their bellies, but Richard gave a low growl and a breathy moan, and suddenly they were both coming, their mingled seed and sweat slicking the surface of their skin until they were gliding, flying with each other.

Richard rocked against him as they softened together, humming a little. He crooned in Logan's ear, some song that Logan didn't recognize, but he could tell that Richard was relaxed and content, maybe even drifting off to sleep.

"Thank you, Logan," Richard whispered after a while, tenderizing Logan with his hands and elbows like a cat and finding the perfect place to sleep half curled up on Logan's stomach.

Long after Richard stopped rocking himself and his breathing grew even, Logan held him, stroking the soft hair on his head. Their jizz dried between their bellies, and it wasn't comfortable, but Richard needed him, and Logan would see that he got whatever he needed, whenever he needed it.

"Anything you ever need, Richard," he whispered into Richard's ear. "Anything I have. I love you."

Richard turned and spoke, his voice barely above a breath of air against Logan's neck. "I need Nick."

Logan moved to his side, his head on his hand, propped up by his elbow. "Have you considered finding him yourself?"

Richard tensed. "Why didn't I think of that? Since I had that locator chip embedded under the skin of his ass when he was a baby, it should be easy."

"*Richard.*" Logan's brows drew down.

Richard put his head in his hands. “I'm sorry. I'm tired, and I can't think straight. I planned on hiring a private detective Monday morning if they don't bring him back. Until then, I figured I'd just have to wait.”

“This is one of those choices, baby.” Logan took Richard's hands. “Remember when I said we always have a choice?”

“What can I do? No one has the first idea where Lila might have taken Nick.” Rick wanted to shove Logan away, but at the same time, his very presence felt like something to cling to, like Rick was drowning and Logan could keep his head above water if he just held on tight enough.

“I do.” Logan fairly hummed with energy, like something lit him up inside.

“You do what?”

“I think we can find Nick.” Logan's gaze was serious. “I think we should. If your instinct about Lila's boyfriend is right, Nick could be in some kind of danger.”

“But everyone thinks Lila ought to have a chance to prove herself,” Rick argued—stupidly, because he didn't believe it for a minute, and both he and Logan knew it.

“You don't prove yourself by lying or breaking the law. I'm wondering if Lila's mom knows more than she's telling.”

“Rachel? I don't think she'd lie to me.” Rick saw the disbelief on Logan's face. “Well, she would. She did. But she told the police the same thing. She let Lila take Nick, thinking they'd be back before I came to pick him up, but Lila changed her plans and took him camping. They have no idea where.”

“I'd like to talk to them anyway.”

“The human lie detector.” Rick smiled fondly at Logan, remembering how angry he'd been when Logan frightened his boys. He picked his phone up from the nightstand. “I can set it up. They're not exactly in a position to deny me that.”

Logan placed his hand on Richard's, over the phone, and held it there. “I don't want to seem like I'm barging in on something that's none of my business. Are you sure you're okay with this? With my being involved?”

Logan's face creased with warmth as his lips turned up into a smile. The moment stretched out between them, solid and comforting. Richard read something so steady in Logan's eyes, the kind of caring he'd only dreamed of inspiring in a man, the kind of love he'd longed for.

Logan was alloyed from dependability and kindness. Loyalty so deep and forged so strong that it was unbreakable, and in that moment Richard knew he'd love Logan for the rest of his life. Richard let out a breath.

"You are involved. Maybe I haven't been clear enough. I love you. I need you involved."

Richard began by dialing the Flannigans, but before he could finish, his phone signaled that he had another call coming in. He didn't recognize the number and put it on speaker.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Richard." *Kevin*. Logan frowned.

"Kevin?" Richard gripped the phone tightly. "Is something the matter?"

Something creaked in the background on Kevin's side. "I think we might have a problem, Richard."

"What is it? Did something happen to Nick?"

Logan whipped out a pen and snapped his fingers. Richard gave him a pad of paper from the nightstand drawer.

"No. Nick's fine."

"I know he didn't have much with him. Does he need clothes? Is it cold where you are? Maybe I could just bring him his clothes."

Logan nodded and wrote, *Good. Ask questions.*

"It's nothing like that. It's just that Lila's pretty determined to keep Nick with her, and we both know that the courts will hand him over eventually. She's his mom. What I'm thinking is, what if we just keep him? If you want to see him, you might start thinking about—"

"*Kevin*?" Lila's voice. "What the hell do you think you're doing?"

"Shut up, Lila," Kevin hissed, and a series of muffled noises erupted. "I *know* what I'm doing."

“Kevin, shut up and hang up the phone. Are you crazy?” More scuffling. “Richard, it's not like he says. I'm bringing Nick back—”

A *crack* noise and then a *thud* nearly stopped Logan's heart. He took the phone from Richard's shaking hand and held a finger to his lips. “*Kevin*. This is Logan Wilde, Richard's”—Logan realized he didn't have a good word—“lover.”

“Put Richard back on. I need to talk to him.”

“No,” Logan told Kevin implacably.

“Dude, if Richard wants Nick to come home tomorrow night, we need to work something out, so put him back on the phone.”

“Kevin, what do you need? Money? It sounds like you're going to ask for money, and unless you're a chump, the kind of money you want isn't going to be something we can lay our hands on now, okay? It's Saturday afternoon on Thanksgiving weekend, so how about we—all of us—stand down?”

Kevin was silent, but Logan could hear the sound of someone crying in the background.

“Is Lila okay?” Logan asked. “*Lila*. Talk to me.”

Lila sniffed. “I'm okay.”

There was more scuffling, and Logan thought Kevin was trying to muffle the phone, probably against his body. Logan could hear Kevin saying, “I'm sorry, baby. I was trying to talk; it was a reflex...”

There were more faint wrestling sounds, and Kevin came back on the line. He laughed nervously. “I guess this weekend has got us all tense, huh?”

Logan stroked Richard's hair, trying to soothe him. “Yeah, I guess.”

“So yeah. Maybe Monday morning I could call you back when the banks open—”

“*Wait—*” Logan stopped Richard from grabbing the phone. “I have some cash, not a lot, but enough to tide you over. A couple thousand. We could come get Nick, and if Lila wants to come home with us, we can talk to the lawyers Monday morning about a more favorable setup. Maybe shared custody and living expenses, just so we don't have to go through anything else like this again. What do you say? We can be reasonable.”

There was no sound at all from Kevin's end, and Logan worried for a minute he'd hung up. After a bit, Kevin returned to the phone, and Logan heard a door slam.

"I don't think that's such a good idea right now."

Logan cursed. Kevin's bravado seemed to have fled, leaving paranoia in its place. Logan met Richard's eyes, silently willing him to have faith even as Richard's face paled and he pressed his forehead into Logan's shoulder. "Where's Nick, Kevin?"

After a moment of silence, Kevin answered, "He's fine."

Richard slumped against Logan's side. "Can I talk to him?"

"No."

"Can I talk to Lila again?"

"I don't think so, Logan."

"Kevin—"

"I'm going to have to call you back. I'll call when the banks open. Things just got more complicated."

"Kevin, you need to understand that if anything happens to—" Logan cursed when the call ended from Kevin's side.

"Logan—" Richard's voice was rising. "What the hell?"

Logan stood. "Call the police again, Richard. This just went from bad to worse."

"Kevin said he'd call Monday. What if he just takes off?"

Logan pulled Richard to him. "I don't want to scare you, but this just went from a noncustodial parent abduction to a kidnapping and extortion case. There's no more trying to look on the bright side."

"Lila won't let him—"

Logan gripped Richard's shoulders and looked him squarely in the eye. "*Richard*. Lila is not the one in control. We don't even know if they still have Nick. That Kevin... What the fuck is his name?"

"I think it's Kevin Cannon. Fucking macho, gun-named prick."

"Let's go to the Flannigans' and see if we can find out more."

“How could they not have Nick? Where would they put him? Who—”

Logan wrapped his arms around Richard. “Shh...I know you're scared. I'm not going to lie. Kevin's a shit. He probably doesn't even think of what he's doing as extortion. Addicts don't think like that. He sees that he has something you want, and he's going to try to get what he can for it.” Logan kissed Richard's forehead. They broke apart so Richard could dress. When he was done, he jammed his feet into shoes and took his wallet, phone, and keys from the nightstand.

Richard swallowed hard. “I can't lose Nick.”

“We have to believe it won't come to that.”

Richard turned and slammed the nightstand drawer closed with a loud *bang*. “I don't know what to believe about this whole crappy situation.”

“That's fair.” Logan waited until Richard was ready and then led him from the bedroom. “Maybe I should have been less...strident with Kevin. I could have been—”

Richard caught Logan's arm and stopped him on the stairs. Their eyes met, and it felt to Logan as if time stood still. Logan closed his eyes and gave in to the delicate kiss Richard pressed on his forehead.

“Logan, maybe I don't know what to think about Kevin and Lila. But I *know* I believe in you.”

“Thank you,” Logan whispered, catching Richard's hand in his and hurrying the rest of the way to the garage. “Thank you.”



## Chapter Twenty-seven

Logan sat at the Flannigans' kitchen table. Mrs. Flannigan was attempting to feed them chocolate chip cookies and milk. She wouldn't meet his eyes. Mr. Flannigan—Jim—was pleasant enough but vague. Rachel's lip held the barest hint of a sneer. He and Richard weren't exactly going to find fertile soil here for growing trust.

“So what you're saying,” Logan asked pleasantly, “is that you don't know anything at all about this Kevin Cannon? You've never met his family or any of his and Lila's mutual friends?”

“Heavens no.” Rachel gave a light, entirely forced laugh. “Lila's twenty-seven years old. It isn't as though she and her friends come here to hang out.”

“So you can't think of anything? Nothing we could take to the police?”

Rachel turned to Richard. “Frankly I wish you hadn't involved the police, Richard. It's been hard enough on Lila—”

Richard narrowed his eyes. “Lila isn't the one I'm concerned about.”

“As we told you,” Jim intervened, “Lila came to take Nick go-karting. She said she'd bring him back around four thirty, and Richard was scheduled to pick him up at five o'clock. We had no reason to doubt her word.”

Richard shook his head in disbelief. “You have got to be kidding me.”

Rachel's hand hit the table. “We told you Lila has changed. Everyone can see that but you.”

Logan turned to Rachel. “I've seen enough. Jim thinks he's telling the truth, but you've been lying to everyone all along. You helped to plan the abduction of your grandson and pulled the wool over your husband's eyes as well as Richard's.”

Jim glared at her. “*Is this true?*”

“Jim, you can't believe a word he says. He's with that...Richard. He's completely on his side. Meanwhile Lila has to beg to see her baby a couple of times a month. And heaven only knows what they're teaching him.”

“Ma'am.” Logan stood abruptly. “We'll be on our way.”

“Logan?” Richard looked up at him.

“We're not going to find anything else out here. We are, however, going to give this information to your attorney for use later in civil court if this doesn't make it to criminal court. I doubt they'll enjoy being on the receiving end of a subpoena or a restraining order.”

Jim shot Rachel a frosty look and followed after Logan. Richard came up from behind as they reached the door. Jim was the first to speak.

“Richard. I can't tell you how sorry I am. I didn't know.”

Richard acknowledged him. “I understand.”

Logan kept his hand on the door frame after Richard stepped out onto the porch, but turned back to Jim. “You have to know that this is wrong. You have to see what it's cost Richard, to say nothing of what Nick must be going through. Step up, Jim. Tell the police. And if you even think of fighting us, be prepared for a shit storm, because I won't let your daughter or your wife manipulate Richard ever again.”

Jim lowered his eyes but said nothing as Logan closed the door behind him.

On the way back home, they bought some burgers, but neither man was willing to say much. Richard seemed drained as much as anything. Hopeless and empty. For some reason that made Logan afraid as nothing else could. Logan wanted to tell him exactly what he needed to hear, but for once he had no clue what it might be. He didn't have much hope to offer. Yet.

He ground his teeth and remained silent.

*Kevin Cannon.*

*Little motocross-racing pisher thinks he can cruise in and score some money by bartering a decent man's family? Not fucking likely.*

\* \* \* \*

Logan pulled his truck into his garage and closed the door behind him. He needed his computer. He didn't expect a Google search to produce an iGoogle satellite map to the little

prick's whereabouts. Life just wasn't that convenient. Still, was early yet, and the fact that it was a holiday weekend was promising. He had acquaintances who raced dune buggies—sand motorheads—who often met for big rallies on holiday weekends. He had a hunch the same could be said for the dirt-bike racers.

“I'll tell you what.” He leaned over to Richard, who looked nearly half asleep. “I need to look some things over on the Web, yeah? See if I can find anything out about Cannon. Maybe I can find out if Cannon belongs to a racing club, or if he's got sponsorship from a local company.”

Richard gathered up their trash. “What can I do? I need to do something.”

“You can call the police again and tell them about Cannon's phone call and our visit with the Flannigans, and then I think you should rest for a bit.”

“I don't need to rest,” Richard growled.

Logan stood in the doorway of his office, looking down into Richard's eyes. “Yes, you do. You need to take care of yourself so you can take care of Nick.”

“Do you really think we can find him?”

“I don't know.” Logan pressed his lips together. He didn't want to fill Richard with dread *or* candy coat the truth. “If we're very lucky, and if it's true that he's had any success as a rider, we'll probably be able to come up with something that will give us a starting point. Sometimes looking for information is like lifting the corner of a Band-Aid. You have to start peeling it away somewhere, and if you can get a piece of it...”

“But you're not very optimistic?”

Logan couldn't look at the hopeful expression on Richard's face. “The way I see it is this: We need to be doing something. Even if it leads nowhere, we need to be able to say we did what we could.” He watched the light dim in Richard's eyes. “I'm sorry.”

“No.” Richard straightened. “No. You're absolutely right. You go hit cyberspace, and I'll make coffee.”

Logan watched him walk toward the kitchen and called him back when he was struck by another thought. “Do you think you could make sketches of Lila, Kevin, and Nick? If we do find a place to look, it might be helpful to have pictures, right?”

Rick's smile blossomed for the first time in hours. "Yeah, you bet I can. I'm on it."

\* \* \* \*

"Hey." Logan motioned Richard over when he brought in coffee. "Want to see something fun?"

Richard drew up a chair and sat down, his own mug steaming in his hand. "What?"

"I found an Expert Village video of Cannon discussing how to choose BMX safety equipment." Logan switched to the next video he found, one of Kevin eating it on a mountain of dirt. "Then I found this one. Check it out. Looks like he got tatered here and they're carrying him back to his truck. That him?"

"What the fuck? Yeah, that's him. You found him?"

"Yep, here he is crashing." Logan winced. "Ouch, that's gotta hurt. I'll bet he broke something. There. See? His arm's hanging funny."

Rick sighed. "That's a beautiful sight, isn't it?"

"Remind me never to piss you off." Logan chuckled. "But yeah, pain looks good on him. I found some other stuff. Look at the side of his truck, can you see? There's a logo, isn't there?"

Rick peered closely at the image after Logan froze it. "I wish I had my Photoshop software here. I could... It looks like it says Triple Nine? Nine Nine Nine Racing?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought, and I looked it up. It's a play on words—something to do with sterling silver—actually .999 Racing, out of Sterling Dirtsports. They supply bikes and equipment out of Palmdale. The thing is, I thought while you were talking to the police I'd try to find someone either online or by phone who knows Cannon. Maybe someone knows where he's likely to go camping. It's worth a shot."

"It's better than anything I was doing." Richard's smile tugged at Logan's heart. "How did you think to do this? Use a YouTube video to find information."

"Honestly? I just Googled the name *Kevin Cannon* and *motocross*. It seems he really has done some professional racing. Maybe Sterling sponsored him. If nothing else, we have an idea of what his truck looks like, and I'm looking through the videos connected to these to see if there's anything else. Maybe he has a toy hauler or something, or I can find him interacting with a different group. This could take a while."

“It's not like we have anything better to do.”

Logan looked at his desk. He couldn't forget that the last time they'd been in his office, he'd pushed Richard's face right down onto the Post-it notes stuck to the left of the keyboard and fucked his ass. Even though Logan would never mention it in the face of the far-more-important job of getting Nick home, he couldn't help but remember.

“No, not really.” Richard got to his feet and started out of the room. Then he turned with an embarrassed smile on his face and said, “The sooner you find Nick, though, the sooner we can put that desk back to more satisfying use.”

Logan shook his head. “Every truly important job has unexpected perks.”

\* \* \* \*

Richard looked down at his paper and up at the street name again. He'd found yet another place. The third RV campground on his list of ten. When he'd embarked on his quest, he'd never imagined how many campgrounds there were. He'd never even noticed them before. Logan had picked twenty that seemed to have the highest probability based on information he'd gotten on the Web, a couple of phone calls, and proximity to practice tracks. He and Logan split that list into two, half near the Palmdale/Lancaster area and half near Lake Elsinore. Richard suspected Logan took Lake Elsinore because it was a more likely target, and he had the sense that Logan felt more comfortable confronting Cannon and Lila, if it came to that.

Or maybe it was busywork, something to do because Logan didn't want to sit on his hands and wait. But it didn't matter. Richard was more confident that he'd get Nick back than ever since he'd been taken.

Richard felt like he'd discovered a world he never knew existed. He took his photocopied sketches of Cannon, Lila, and Nick and asked in the RV-park offices—if they were still open—if anyone matching their descriptions had rented a space. Now he drove through the campgrounds themselves, looking for anyone else to ask. It was nearly ten. So far he'd had no luck. Most people still up were partying, and no one had seen them.

Logan had given him the list, his GPS navigator, and a pair of binoculars. If Richard found anything, or if he saw Nick, Lila, or Cannon, he was under strict orders to do nothing but observe.

As Logan put it, *“Once you have visual confirmation of the target or the hostages, phone the police. Under no circumstances are you to confront.”*

Richard's gut clenched when he thought of all the times they'd argued about Logan's life in the military, the violence inherent in his job, or the ease with which he took command. Because when it came down to it, Richard had never been so grateful for anything in his life.

As soon as Nick was home and things were quiet, he'd have to man up and tell Logan exactly that.

Maybe use the desk again, just to drive the point home.

Richard stopped his car on the side of the road when his cell rang. It was so dark and quiet where he was that he began to see the attraction. Stars glittered over the desert, and crisp air blew the day's detritus across the pavement, bits of chip bags and paper napkins. An occasional coffee cup tumbled along.

“Hello?”

“Hey, it's me,” Logan answered.

“Hi. Anything?”

“I don't want to get your hopes up.” Logan sounded excited. “But I think I've found them.”

“What?” Richard's heart sped up. “Seriously?”

“Yeah, the thing is, there could be lots of trucks like his, but this one pulled in with a Jayco toy hauler like Cannon's. I haven't seen anyone moving around inside it, though, and no one has come out. I'm going to stick around and watch a little, ask around. I'd swear that's his truck. There's a ding in the door that I noticed from the video.”

“What should I do?”

“Once I'm sure it's him, I'll text you; then you head home. For all we know, Nick might be on his way there. I'm still not sure they're even—”

“Don't start second-guessing yourself now.” Richard sighed. “What we're doing is better than sitting at home worrying, and I for one don't intend to do any more of that until I have to.”

“Fine, I hope it's him, but—

“I understand, Logan.”

“I want you to be happy.”

“You make me happy. And Nick does. And we're going to get through this and be happy together.”

“I'll text the word *found* if I see him, and you head home.”

“All right.”

“See you at home, lover.” Logan hung up.

Richard closed his phone and edged back out onto the road.

“At home,” Richard said to no one in particular.

\* \* \* \*

Nick huddled in Lila and Kevin's bedroom in the fancy RV and tried not to cry. The lights were out, but his PSP glowed with a movie that Lila had given him to watch while she went to talk to Kevin again about letting them leave. Nick had heard them argue—they were angry and shouting—and then he heard them leave to go outside, probably to smoke, since the motor home belonged to Kevin's mom and she wouldn't let them smoke inside. She wasn't there, but Kevin seemed afraid to break the rules, and it made Nick think Kevin's mom must be pretty scary.

Nick had been trying not to cry since he'd first realized that Lila and Kevin had no intention of taking him back to Grandma Rachel's in time for Rick to pick him up. When they'd headed to this place, he'd cried and begged his mom to take him to Rick's, but Kevin had delivered a wicked pinch to his arm and told him that only pussies cried. Lila was frosty with Kevin about that, but they still didn't take him home, and Nick had been angry and scared ever since.

It didn't take a genius to know Rick would be frightened too. Nick tried to talk to Lila about that, tried to tell her how hard it would be for Rick without him, that Rick needed him, but she was angry with Rick for not letting her take him to the park and wanted to teach him a lesson.

Nick finally gave in to tears when it seemed like it wasn't going to matter, since no one was coming to see how he was doing anyway. He was sunburned and hungry and miserable. His lips were chapped, and he had a bruise on his arm where Kevin had pinched him. He had a bathroom, though, and when he had to pee, he could use it. There was a cup there so he could get himself a drink of water if he wanted one, even though it tasted like old plastic.

Nick knew that this was exactly what Rick had been talking about when he'd said that Nick shouldn't go with Lila alone. He'd tried to tell his Grandma Rachel that it wasn't okay. He'd tried to let her know he didn't want to go with Lila and Kevin, because no matter how much fun go-karting sounded, it wouldn't be worth how sad it would make Rick.

It was even worse knowing that he'd lied to Rick. That was something he couldn't take back, and it made him sick inside. Kevin told him that when Lila gave him the phone to talk to Rick, he had to say he was having fun or they'd take away his books and his PSP and they'd leave him locked in the motor home. He didn't want Rick to worry, anyway, so they didn't need to tell him how to act. But after he'd lied, it felt like all the bad things in his dreams could swallow him up, and he wondered if he'd ever feel like smiling again.

Now that the tears flowed freely, Nick admitted that he wanted his grandfather bad. He wanted to see Rick, to be in his own house, in his own bed. He wouldn't even have minded having Logan around, because he doubted anyone got pinched with Logan watching. At least not twice.

Nick entertained the fantasy of Logan and Rick bashing Kevin's head in and wrapping a giant rubber band around him to shoot him into space. He would have started to drift off to sleep except he could hear Lila and Kevin arguing again, and this time they weren't just shouting at each other. This time he could hear his mom crying and begging Kevin to stop hurting her. Nick ran to the window in time to see Kevin grab his mom by the hair and drag her back toward the stairs that led to the RV's cockpit.

"Hey!" Nick called, pounding on the window, rattling the miniblinds. "Mama!"

Kevin pointed a menacing finger at him. "Shut the fuck up," he growled, "or you're next." He hauled Lila up the stairs until Nick couldn't see her anymore. He could still hear them arguing, though, and Nick dived for the farthest corner of the bed and closed his eyes in terror when he heard two more big crashes that rattled the motor home down to its wheels.

\* \* \* \*

Logan felt pretty good about himself, all things considered. He'd found Kevin's toy hauler parked exactly where he'd guessed it would be, although that was something he wasn't entirely willing to tell Richard. It certainly *could* have been in Palmdale.



Logan hadn't gotten very far before being spotted by a security guard in a golf cart, and it seemed prudent to include him in his plans once Logan realized he would be easily impressed by a marine colonel looking for a kidnapped boy.

"My name is Wilde," Logan told the guard. The kid wore a friendly, just-need-to-talk-to-you-for-a-second smile that probably went a long way toward getting people to turn down their music or pick up their empties. He held out his hand, and the guard took it and gave it a shake. "Colonel Logan Wilde, USMC retired. I have a problem, and I wonder if I can run it past you."

The kid seemed impressed by the title. "Chuck. I'm Chuck. Sure. Got any ID?"

Logan produced his identification and said, "Here, at least I am who I say I am."

Chuck held Logan's wallet up in the dim light. "Okay, I got that."

"It's not a serious criminal matter. *Yet*. I'm looking for a boy whose mother took him from his grandfather without permission and then refused to take him back. The grandfather has custody, and the mother is limited to supervised visits. The boyfriend has started making threats—like he's going to try to extort money from the family, or he won't give the boy back."

"Are you sure of this?"

"The kid's grandfather filed a police report."

"Then this would be a matter for the police—"

"Yes, I know. I'm not here to confront them," Logan reassured him. "I wanted to make sure they were here, and then I thought I'd ask you to call the police."

"Why don't you call them?"

Logan shrugged. "Maybe I don't want to get too involved. I'm just a friend."

"What are you here for, then?"

"My friend Richard's beside himself with worry for the kid. I came to see if the boy and his mother were here with my own eyes and if they were all right. Then I want to make sure that once the authorities are called, the boyfriend doesn't have a chance to flee the scene or do anyone bodily harm."

"I see." To his credit, the kid thought it over carefully. "You're just going to watch after I call the cops and make sure he stays put?"

"Yep."

“Have you seen the boy? Are you sure he's there?”

“Not yet.” Logan took out the sketch Richard had made and handed it over.

“Yeah.” The guard squinted in the dim light and poked a finger at the drawings of Lila and Cannon. “I seen these two.”

“In that toy hauler over there?”

“Yeah, they pulled in with that, but they moved to the rig next to it. The class A. I saw a kid when they were at the pool, but I couldn't be sure it was this one.”

Logan felt the thrill of finding his quarry hit him, and he smiled. “If the woman's here, then that's the kid.”

“I don't know if they're still here, though. I came on at five when it was getting dark.”

Logan pulled a small pair of binoculars from a bag on his belt. “So if you saw a guy in the dark watching one of your sites, you'd want to know why, right?”

Chuck rolled his eyes. “I should think so.”

“Now you know.”

Chuck's lips twitched. “You'd better not be shitting me. Let's see if the kid's there, then.” Chuck abandoned his golf cart on the side of one of the empty streets and indicated that they should head toward the lakeshore. “If we head for the shore, there are places to take cover and watch so they won't see us.”

“You ever military?” Logan asked as he followed Chuck on foot.

“Nah. Video gamer.” Chuck laughed.

Logan and Chuck crunched across the sand to a covered picnic area with tables and trash cans, where it wouldn't be obvious from a casual glance that two of the shapes on the ground were men watching the motor home. No light came from the space with the toy hauler, but the RV next door was lit from inside, and its awning sported festively draped globe lights.

Logan handed the binoculars to Chuck after he'd seen what he needed to see. “If Cannon decides to leave quickly, he'll head out in the toy hauler. That motor home would have to be broken down and put away before it could get back on the road—the lights, the awnings, the patio furniture, the rugs.”

“No sign of a woman or kid.” Chuck handed him the binoculars back.

“Shoot.” Logan hoped they hadn't left. “Is there any way to find out who owns that RV? No way a guy like Kevin owns that. He might make good money, but he's spending it getting high.”

“I could—”

The door of the RV burst open, and both men froze. Logan wondered if Chuck even realized that he'd clutched his forearm.

A man and a woman came out onto the patio. They appeared to be arguing about something, but he lit her cigarette amiably enough. Logan lifted the binoculars to his eyes and looked long and hard at the woman, trying to discern any features she might have in common with Nick.

Chuck hissed. “Is that them?”

Logan cursed under his breath. “I can't tell.”

“What do we do?”

“I don't know. Wait. Watch.” That was Cannon; he could tell that from the sketch and the YouTube videos. He was pretty sure that was Lila. But until he saw Nick... “I wanted to get a visual confirmation on the boy.” He pulled out his phone and texted the word *Found* to Richard, hoping to hell he hadn't made a mistake.

The argument got more heated, and Chuck grew tense. “Fuck, Wilde. This is going to turn ugly.”

“I know. Looks like they've been drinking.” Logan watched as Cannon's body language turned threatening. All of a sudden, Kevin threw his cigarette down and grabbed the woman by the hair.

Logan pushed up to a crouch. “Shit, shit, *shit*.”

Chuck took out his cell phone. “Even if the kid's not in there, I can't see this and not call for the police.”

“I hear you.” Logan got up, watching as the man dragged the woman to the steps of the motor home. The woman's attention was momentarily caught by something beyond Cannon, and Logan trained his binoculars in that direction, only to see Nick in the rear of the RV banging on

the window. "Fuck it. Call nine-one-one. The boy's there. That's a kidnap and extortion. Two hostages. Tell them it's getting violent."

Cannon disappeared inside the RV with Lila. Logan took off, low to the ground, running from shadow to shadow until he was in the darkness behind the motor home. He climbed the ladder and flattened himself on the roof, listening. There was more yelling coming from inside. So far it was just a man's voice, with a woman's occasionally answering back. Logan looked over the side of the roof with the awning just in time to see the window of Cannon's truck explode and hear his car alarm go off. Logan barely had time to get himself flattened on the roof of the RV again before Cannon rushed out of the door, with Lila in tow.

Logan used his binoculars to look around and discovered Chuck hiding a short distance away with a pile of rocks and an aluminum baseball bat. Logan stifled a laugh. He could have used a guy like Chuck in Afghanistan.

Logan watched as Lila and Kevin enacted their drama, screaming drunkenly at each other and searching around for whatever broke the window on Kevin's truck. They were still there when the police rolled up. That was quicker than Logan had dared to hope. He had to give the local law enforcement high marks for making good time. He flattened himself against the roof again and watched as Kevin and Lila tried to talk their way out of the trouble they were in.

The noise and confusion brought the few campers who still remained in the park out of their rigs to mill around watching the show. Logan had no difficulty slipping down the side of the RV to melt into the small crowd. He didn't know what he wanted to do yet, whether he'd make his presence known there or not. Kevin and Lila weren't going anywhere, and Richard would be headed home. Nick might need him.

Through the now-brightly lit RV's kitchen window, he saw someone heading for the rear of the motor home, and soon Nick was coming down the steps in the tight grip of a female police officer with a deep frown on her face. A word from her and Kevin got cuffed immediately and thrown into the back of a black-and-white, with Lila alongside him. Logan's heart thudded painfully. Nick looked ready to cry. He was wearing dirty clothes and carrying a tiny backpack. Even with the crowd around him, he was all alone.

Unexpectedly, Nick's resemblance to Richard sucker punched him. Protectiveness filled him so fiercely, he felt it squeeze him into a role he wasn't sure he wanted—or was ready—to play. It was like hide-and-seek. Like singsong voices calling him from someplace entirely new.

*Ready or not...here I come.*

While he tried to process this, he watched the drama unfold from the sidelines. Nick's eyes were huge in his face as the adults discussed what was to be done with him. They searched the crowd, and before Logan could move away on feet that suddenly felt like anchors, Nick saw him. Logan didn't know why, but when Nick's jaw dropped open and he took a deep breath to call to him, Logan put a finger to his lips and shook his head.

Nick stared at him uncertainly for a minute, trying to do what Logan was telling him to do, but Logan could spot the exact moment when the kid's control snapped. Nick's small face crumpled, and he dropped his backpack and took off running. One of the cops caught his hand, but Nick tore away from her and headed straight for him, dissolving into tears and slamming into him like a rocket.

Logan's heart blew a huge shock wave through his entire body. *Safe. Nick was safe now. Thank God.*

“*Logan.*” Nick wrapped his arms around Logan's neck as Logan lifted him. “I didn't want to come here but they made me and when Kevin started hurting my mom I wanted to use *claw mygod* but you only taught me what to do if someone was hitting me and... *I want to go home.*”

Logan hardly trusted himself to speak. “It's Krav Maga.”

“Whatever.” Nick clung to him, and Logan's balance felt off, as if his whole world could be pulled off its axis by a nine-year-old boy.

“Richard's going to be so mad at me,” Nick sobbed.

“No, he won't.” Logan's voice was hoarse. He set Nick down on the ground and squatted in front of him. “He won't be mad; he's going to be so glad you're all right, Nick. I promise.”

Nick scanned the crowd desperately. “Is he here?”

“No. I came here by myself. We split up so we could look more places.” Logan got out his phone and gave it to Nick. “I'll bet he'd appreciate a phone call.”

Nick gave him a watery smile and started to dial, then hesitated. “He's going to be pissed that I lied to him on the phone, but they made me tell him everything was okay or they said I'd never get to go home again.”

“Just call him, Nick,” Logan reassured him. “He's so crazy with worry, you could probably blow up France and get away with it today.”

Chuck came up from behind him, looking relieved. “This wasn't my usual Saturday night.” He shook Logan's hand again and squatted down to talk to Nick. “You know this guy?”

“Yeah, he's my grandfather's—” Nick stopped abruptly and looked to Logan.

“Go ahead. I haven't got anything to hide, Nick.”

“He's my grandfather's boyfriend. He taught me krav mygod but only enough so I can stop someone from hitting me but Kevin *pinched* me and I don't ever want to go anywhere with him again.”

Chuck gave Logan a new look, like he was surprised or maybe a little confused, as he introduced Logan to the police. It wasn't Logan's best-case scenario. He'd planned to get in and get out without attracting attention once Nick was secure. But the upside was that, after a great deal of fucking around and telling the same story over and over to everyone who wanted to hear it, he was allowed to take Nick with him and drive him back to his grandfather.

Nick slept most of the way home. Logan exited the freeway and checked on him in the rearview mirror. He pulled into the driveway at Richard's around two a.m., and even at that late hour, it was a riot of color and lights. Several unfamiliar cars were parked along the street, indicating that Richard wasn't the only one waiting for Nick's safe return. Logan sighed deeply when he pulled the key from the ignition.

Nick was home and safe. Nothing Logan had ever done in his life made him feel as good as that.

Logan hung back once he'd opened the door to the truck. Nick spilled out, already scrambling for the house like a cartoon character before he even hit the ground. Logan reached in for Nick's pack and watched as the front door opened.

Richard stood there, thrumming with excitement and worry and love. Nick ran to his grandfather, who caught him up in a hug so tight Logan thought he heard both their spines crack.

“*Nick.*” Richard half sobbed, half laughed.

It didn't matter if Richard didn't see Logan leaning against the truck. It didn't matter if the only words, the only emotion, Richard had then were for the boy in his arms. Logan watched the reunion with satisfaction, and when Richard's eyes met his, a vault on his heart slammed shut with the two of them, Richard and Nick, safely and permanently inside it.

Richard treated him to a long, slow smile and beckoned him with a finger. Grinning back, Logan locked his truck and started up the pathway home.

## Epilogue

It was still dark outside the window when Logan's eyes fluttered open.

"I felt you watching me," he said, rising onto one elbow and resting his head in his hand. Logan's hair, still short but longer now than it had been—probably ever—stood out in tufts, and Richard reached to rake his fingers through it. Logan sighed. "Are you happy?"

Richard's heart constricted in his chest, and he slid farther down into the warmth of the luxurious sheets and down blankets on their bed. "The happiest I've ever been in my life, Logan."

"You like camping?" Logan teased.

Richard gave the side of Logan's head a playful flick when he thought of how much he'd dreaded the idea of going camping with Logan and Nick. "I was all worried you'd give me a roll of toilet paper and a trowel. I never expected—"

Logan stopped what Richard was going to say with a kiss.

Richard had been almost frozen with apprehension about their upcoming camping trip until Logan rolled onto their cul-de-sac driving his truck and pulling a fully restored vintage Airstream trailer. With four-hundred-fifty-thread-count sheets and down bedding.

"I love you," Richard whispered.

Logan snorted. "Me or the trailer."

"Both." Richard slipped between Logan's legs and let him know how much. His cock was hard, and it bumped and rode along the delicate skin behind Logan's balls.

"Did you check on Nick?"

"He's still sound asleep. It's only four a.m. He's usually out till at least six," Richard whispered. "What did you have in mind?"



“Fuck me.” Logan reached into a drawer on the side of their bed and pulled out a condom and lube. When Richard grinned at him, Logan pulled him down for quick kiss. “And none of your acrobatical gyrations or the whole place will start rocking.”

“Okay, fuck you without moving. Got it.” Richard laughed quietly as he rolled a condom down on his dick, giving it a pump or two for good measure. Logan grabbed Richard's ass cheek in one of his large hands, and that caused Richard to jerk his hips a little, bumping the head of his cock against Logan's hole before he had a chance to play with it.

Logan's eyes widened. “Take your time, baby.”

Richard bumped it again while he lubed up his fingers. He positioned his hand against Logan's sensitive opening and pressed a finger in. “Gimme.”

Logan shifted his hips to give Richard better access and then thumbed Richard's nipple ring. “I still can't believe you did this to yourself.”

“Technically I let a guy do it to me.” Logan frowned up at him, and Richard nipped at the end of his nose. “I missed you that weekend. I wanted to make a statement.”

“I guess I should be glad you didn't send me your ear or something.”

“What?” Richard stopped his finger midpush.

“I thought it must be an artist thing. Some guys would have just called me.” Logan slid the palm of his hand over Richard's pec, pinching the ring between his thumb and forefinger.

Richard ground his dick against Logan's thigh, while he circled and tapped his lube-slicked hole. Logan tugged the ring, and Richard sucked in a shuddering breath. “*Oh fuck.* You get that it meant more than that, I hope.”

“I get that.”

“It means I belong to you.” Richard looked into Logan's blue eyes. “No matter what.” Richard pushed two fingers into Logan, who tilted his head back.

“*Uhn.*” Logan's groan was half sigh, half plea. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Richard fingered Logan until he could easily slip two in and out and then brushed his gland with a knuckle. “Ready?”

Logan gave Richard's piercing a twist and then brought his head down for another kiss, this one possessive and challenging and passionate. Richard opened for him, sliding his tongue into Logan's mouth even as he pushed his cock into the tight heat of Logan's ass.

Richard broke off the kiss when Logan moaned. He pressed his forehead against Logan's, fully aware that he needed to give him time to get used to being filled.

"Okay?" He cupped the side of Logan's face with the palm of his hand.

"Yes," Logan hissed. "I don't usually give up my ass, is all."

"Damn, so tight, baby." Richard kissed him tenderly. "You sure this is what you want?"

Logan shifted beneath him a little, but Richard still didn't move. "I admit it's never been my thing. But then I think it's you, and that makes it..." Logan's voice sounded like he'd been swallowing glass, and he closed his eyes, which seemed suspiciously shiny to Richard. "I love that."

"*Logan.*" Richard pushed his cock deeper, lifting Logan's knees, until he was in as deep as he could go. "You've got it. Whenever, all right?"

Logan gave Richard's nipple ring another tug. "It's like this. It makes me yours."

Richard caught his breath and leaned in to kiss Logan, languidly this time, as though he had all the time in the world. He filled Logan, then drew out, slowly and carefully, letting his hips glide back and forth like the center weight and crank of an oil well pump jack.

While they were camping like this, they made love cautiously, using more force than friction, grinding more and moving less. They had a child sleeping twenty feet away, and although they occupied an enclosed bedroom in the Airstream, and it had a door that locked, it was in everyone's best interest if Nick slept through their lovemaking. Their muscles tensed against one another's bodies until the sheer power they used to repress the velocity and sound of their coupling lent it a secret, thrilling vitality.

Logan's teeth were clenched against any noise that might be building behind them, and Richard barely grunted when he felt Logan's ass squeeze him like a fist. Hot cum spattered both their stomachs as Richard deliberately crushed Logan's cock between them and rode out his own orgasm seconds later.

No sound broke the silence, save for their panting.

“Love you.” Logan's voice came out as a quiet croak. “Always.”

“Love you, Logan.” Richard held Logan's sweat-soaked body tenderly for a while, then pulled a towel up off the floor and cleaned them up, carefully removing the condom and the evidence of their passion.

He lay back down and stroked his hands over Logan's lightly furred chest. “I'm the happiest I've ever been, Logan. I hope you know.”

A smile teased at the corners of Logan's lips as his hand came up to draw Richard closer. “Me too, lover. Me too.”

\* \* \* \*

Logan watched as the dark sky showed the first cracks of sunrise over Bryce Canyon. The air smelled of dawn and wood smoke and sage. His camp chair was a big, sturdy thing he'd brought along and set up on the patio under the awning. Richard currently lay curled up on a hammock they'd stretched between two trees. He'd crawled beneath a colorful quilt to keep him warm in the crisp air.

A coffeepot percolated on their camp stove, scenting the air around them as they eschewed the use of the Airstream's lovely kitchen in favor of more traditional camp cooking. As soon as Nick woke up, Logan planned to start a real breakfast of sausage and eggs and crispy fried potatoes.

Richard wasn't exactly an outdoor enthusiast, but looking at him now, Logan figured they were bound to win him over. The Airstream had been a small price to pay to be able to spend time like this.

Well. Not really. The damned thing had cost a fortune. But it was worth it.

Logan looked over a map to discover if there were local places he could take Richard and Nick fishing. Maybe somewhere they'd be allowed to cook with an open fire.

Logan wondered how Richard would handle gutting a fish if they ever caught any, and laughed out loud.

“What's so funny?” Only Richard's eyes were visible outside of the blanket. So far he'd been pretty adamant that he didn't care for the cold.

“I was thinking we should go fishing,” Logan told him. “Maybe catch a few and cook them over an open fire.”

“You know what I think would be great?” Richard's eyes danced.

“What?”

“I think it'd be great if you had all your body hair waxed off.”

Behind them, the door to the Airstream creaked, and Nick stepped out, coming down the stairs looking like a burrito. He'd bundled up in two sweat suits and a watch cap, had fleece boots on his feet, and wore mittens.

“It's cold,” Nick grumbled.

“Hi, Mini-Me.” Richard laughed. “Logan wants to go fishing.”

“Sounds okay.” Nick plopped into his own camp chair. Logan got up and used the hot water from a carafe he'd filled earlier to make Nick hot chocolate.

“Here you go, Nick.” He handed Nick a mug and then poured fresh coffee for himself and Richard. “Richard just doesn't want to gut a fish.”

Nick frowned. “I wouldn't either.”

“Does this mean I'm going to have to do all the fish gutting by myself?”

Richard laughed. “Does a bear sh—”

Logan leaned down and kissed the end of that sentence away.

“Ew.” Nick groaned. “It's too early in the morning for the mushy stuff.”

Logan blushed. “Sorry, Nick.”

Richard eyed them both. “I've been meaning to ask. What time will you be ready for mush? I find I like mush an awful lot if it involves Logan.”

Nick made gagging noises and covered his eyes, but Logan thought it was all good-natured ribbing. He hoped so.

“Nick's my homeboy. He'll get used to it eventually. We're okay, right, Nick?” Logan held his fist in the air, and Nick bumped it with his own.

“Doesn't mean I want to watch grown-ups kissing.”

"Yeah, well. We'll give that as much thought as it deserves." Richard winked at Logan. "Anyway he's got something far worse in store for us, and it involves fish guts."

"Turkey guts were bad enough." Nick's lip curled. "We had to look those up on the Internet."

"What?"

"Turkey guts," Richard reminded him. "I couldn't tell which was the one that wasn't supposed to go in the stock on Thanksgiving."

"Ah. The liver. It sort of disintegrates and makes the stock all brown and bitter tasting."

"That sounds nasty. Good thing you noted that." Richard gave Nick a meaningful look. A "never again" kind of look, if Logan knew him at all.

"You're not much of a cook, are you?"

"If you mean can I identify the entrails of dead things? No, not really." Richard shrugged.

Logan put a cast-iron frying pan over a flame on the camp stove. "No, I mean, you don't get into it that much."

"I cook. It just doesn't usually involve eviscerating anything."

"Richard cooks pasta a lot," Nick informed Logan. "And vegetables and bread."

"I see."

"Things with cheese."

Richard frowned. "I cook. You've never gone hungry."

Nick laughed at him and sipped at his cocoa. "I think Logan's going to have to do the cooking for our family. I think he's better at it and likes it more."

Logan's heart caught in his throat, and he met Richard's eyes to see if what Nick said had the same effect on him. In the dawn stillness, no one spoke for what seemed like an eternity. The answer was there in Richard's eyes. *Yes, I heard* and *Yes, I want that* and *Yes, we're a family*.

"What?" Nick asked, looking back and forth between them.

Logan didn't trust himself to speak.

"You said *our family*." Richard's voice sounded hoarse. "Like you and me and Logan are going to be a family together."

“Are we?” Nick looked up at Logan and then back to Richard.

“I think so,” Richard answered at the same time Logan said, “I hope so.”

Nick sat back in his camp chair and sipped his cocoa.

“Cool.” He grinned. “That's going to be cool.”

Logan cleared his throat and got up, getting ready to start breakfast. “Okay, that's settled, then. We're going fishing, and this unit is moving out at 0900 hours. I expect all this gear to be loaded and ready to roll by then.”

“Yes, sir!” Nick sipped his cocoa.

Richard simply rolled his eyes and sank lower under his blanket. “*Oh-nine-hundred?* What is that anyway? I thought this was a vacation.”

Logan shot Richard a stern look but ruined it by following it up with a wink. “Who wants breakfast?”

 THE END 

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Z. A. Maxfield is a fifth generation native of Los Angeles, although she now lives in the O.C. She started writing in 2006 on a dare from her children and never looked back. Pathologically disorganized, and perennially optimistic, she writes as much as she can, reads as much as she dares, and enjoys her time with family and friends. If anyone asks her how a wife and mother of four manages to find time for a writing career, she'll answer, "It's amazing what you can do if you completely give up housework."