



# POKER NIGHT



## *Full House*

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Full House

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**Warning:** This book contains sexually explicit content which is only suitable for mature readers. This story has been rated *Total-e-sizzling*.

**Poker Night**

# **FULL HOUSE**

**Carol Lynne**

## *Dedication*

For Claire, Marek and Sophie.  
You've all sacrificed a lot to give authors a chance to do what they love.  
Thank you.

## *Trademarks Acknowledgement*

The author acknowledges the trademarked status and trademark owners of the following wordmarks mentioned in this work of fiction:

Coke: The Coca-Cola Company CORPORATION

## Chapter One

Tired and dirty, Marco parked his pickup in the driveway of the small two bedroom house. He grabbed the cooler on the seat beside him and headed inside after a long day of work.

What he'd hoped would be a relaxing night shattered as soon as he heard the arguing. "Shit."

It seemed his brothers were always fighting lately. He unlocked the door and stepped into the living room. Nicky was pinned to the floor by Bruno, his much bigger brother. The two of them were cussing and screaming at each other.

Marco glanced around the room. "Where's Maria?"

His brothers were too busy yelling to even hear him. The feuding siblings took a back seat momentarily in Marco's mind as he strode through to Maria's bedroom and opened the door. He didn't immediately see his baby sister until he opened the small closet.

Maria sat on the floor, her arms wrapped around her legs.

"Come here, baby girl." He reached down and pulled Maria up and into his arms. "It's okay. It's just what brothers do. I'll take care of it."

"Dad called," Maria informed him. She buried her face against Marco's neck.

Marco hugged his sister. "Is that what Bruno and Nicky are arguing about?"

Maria nodded.

Marco carried the frightened girl over to her small twin-size bed. "I'll go find out what's going on, and then I'll start dinner. Hamburgers on the grill sound okay?"

Maria nodded, again. She reached out and grabbed a pink stuffed bear that was starting to fall apart.

With a kiss to Maria's forehead, Marco went back out to the living room just in time to see Nicky throw a punch. Although Nicky's fist didn't land squarely, it did manage to clip Bruno's jaw.

"Break it up!" Marco screamed, lurching for his brothers.

He wrapped his arm around Bruno's neck and pulled him off his younger brother. "Stop it." He pointed a finger at Nicky. "Throw another punch, and you'll be sorry."

Although Marco wasn't big, years of laying brick had given him enough upper-body strength to intimidate both his brothers. They broke apart, but continued yelling at each other.

"He's going to see Dad," Bruno spat.

"He's our Dad and he misses us," Nicky countered.

Marco held up his hands. "Shut up!"

His brothers quieted, but continued to give each other dirty looks.

"Now, when and why did Dad call?" Marco asked. They hadn't seen Eddy De La Santo since he'd stolen the money Marco had set aside to put a new roof on the house.

"About an hour ago. He said he was in town and wanted to come over," Nicky explained.

"In town? Where the hell's he been?" Marco knew no good would come from letting his father visit.

"In Santa Clarita with some woman." Bruno stood and crossed his arms over his chest. At seventeen, Bruno was the biggest of the De La Santo's and often used his size to intimidate his fifteen-year-old brother.

Marco took off his T-shirt and wiped the sweat from his face and under arms. He didn't want to refuse Nicky a visit with their father, but he wasn't comfortable having Eddy in the house. "Why don't you call him back and tell him you'll meet him at a restaurant, my treat."

Marco turned to Bruno. "If you don't want to see Dad, you don't have to. I'll go tell Maria the same thing."

Bruno nodded and Marco left the room. He knocked on Maria's door before entering. "Feeling better?"

Maria nodded. "Why do they have to fight all the time?"

Marco began picking up dirty clothes and stuffing them into the hamper. "They're teenage boys. It's to be expected. Please don't let them upset you."

"But what if one of them gets so mad they leave?"

He walked over to sit on the side of the bed and put his arm around his baby sister. "I know things haven't been easy, but just because Mom and Dad left, doesn't mean your brothers will too. I mean, they'll leave at some point, but that's what adults are supposed to do. Bruno will be eighteen next April. I can't make him stay here after that. Men of that age want their freedom."

"You didn't."

*I didn't have a choice.* Marco bit his bottom lip. "How could I possibly leave you three? I love you."

Maria hugged Marco around the waist. "I love you, too."

He kissed the top of his sister's hair. "Nicky's going to dinner with Eddy. Do you want to go?"

Maria shook her head.

Marco didn't blame her. All she knew of their father was drunken days and nights. "Okay. I'll go fire up the grill."

Walking back through the living room, Marco addressed Nicky. "Did you feed Rufus?"

Nicky shook his head but didn't take his eyes off the television.

"Well, get up and do it." Marco sighed. He was so tired. He knew the time had come for some rule changes. There was no reason the kids couldn't help him out. Dinner should already be on the table by the time he got home. He'd tried to talk to his brothers about it before, but they'd played off his requests and nothing had changed.

He opened the fridge and took out a package of hamburger. It was starting to look a little brown so he made sure to smell it after opening the plastic. It was close, but Marco thought they'd be okay if they ate it. He'd have to make sure the burgers were cooked well instead of medium the way his family preferred them.

After making up seven patties, Marco grabbed the plate along with the salt and pepper shakers and headed out back. As soon as he pushed open the screen door, Rufus barrelled into him, trying to get at the platter of meat.

"Rufus!"

While trying to save their dinner, Marco was thrown off balance and fell over the top of the large German Shepherd.

"Fuck!" he screamed as his knee hyper-extended. He collapsed on the ground as Rufus dove for the meat. His hands balled into a fist as he tried his best not to pass out. From the way Rufus was eating, Marco wondered if the dog had been fed at all that day.

The back door opened and Nicky came to stand over Marco, bowl of dog food in his hands. "Shit. What happened?"

Marco narrowed his eyes at the fifteen-year-old. "Your dog knocked me over to get to something to eat. Now I've not only lost dinner, but I've fucked up my knee."

He started to let it go, but exploded again. "Dammit, Nicky! You're the one who begged me for a dog. If you can't be bothered to feed Rufus, I'll find him another home."

Nicky set down the bowl and helped Marco up. "I got up late. It was either take care of the dog or miss the school bus."

Marco tried to balance on one leg as Nicky helped him back into the house.

"You gonna be okay?" Nicky led Marco to the couch.

Marco swung his left leg onto the cushions beside him and began to massage the sore knee. "Get me a bag of vegetables out of the freezer," he ground out between clenched teeth.

"What happened?" Maria asked, coming into the room.

"I hurt my knee, sweetheart, but I'll be okay." Although he'd said it, Marco knew better. He'd done the same thing a few years earlier at work and it had taken a couple of weeks to heal. Normally it wouldn't be that bad, but in his line of work, he was either kneeling or climbing on scaffolding.

"Maria, can you look under the bathroom sink and see if that old elastic knee brace of mine is still in there?"

Maria's big eyes rounded. "Umm, it's not there anymore. I thought you were done with it, so I cut it up to make my bear a black mini-skirt."

Marco took the bag of frozen mixed-vegetables and placed it under his knee. Leaning to the side, he pulled out his wallet and handed Bruno a twenty dollar bill. "Take my truck to the drug store and get me another one."

Bruno, who'd been slouched in the old recliner, grabbed the money. "Cool. I'll be back."

Marco rolled his eyes as his brother started to leave. "No speeding."

Bruno turned around and rolled his eyes. "I'm not Nicky."

"Wait!" Marco suddenly remembered their dinner was gone. He handed Bruno some of his emergency money he stashed in another compartment. "Pick up some burgers for us."

"I'm going to eat with Dad," Nicky informed him.

Marco looked through his wallet again. "You'll have to eat cheap. I've only got another twenty left."

After his brothers left the house and Maria went back into her bedroom, Marco laid down on the couch. He'd just given away all his cash. What the hell was he supposed to do for gas until Friday? Hopefully Kent wouldn't assign him jobs too far away. If he was conservative with his driving, he just might make it.



\* \* \* \*

By the time Marco arrived at the construction site, the inside of his cheek was raw from chewing it. The pain was horrendous and he knew he had no business working. Unfortunately, he didn't have disability insurance and when he didn't work, he didn't get paid, which wasn't an option when you had four mouths to feed and a mortgage to pay.

He found the closest parking spot he could and got out, retrieving his tool bag from behind the seat. As hard as he tried to walk like nothing was wrong, he caught his boss' eye.

"I need a word with you in the office." Kent pointed towards the mobile single-wide trailer.

All Marco could see was the six steps it took to get inside the damn thing. He dropped the heavy canvas bag at his feet. "Can't we just talk here?"

Kent narrowed his eyes. "Why're your eyes all bloodshot? Do not tell me you've come to work with a hangover, or did you just stay up all night?"

Marco felt like laughing in Kent's face. What would his boss think if he knew the real reason Marco hadn't gotten much sleep the previous night. Besides his sore knee, Nicky had been nearly inconsolable when he'd come home from supper with Eddy. Just like Marco and Bruno knew he would, Eddy had tried to hit Nicky up for money. It had taken Marco hours to calm his brother down enough to go to bed.

Marco's normal bedroom was the living room. Usually the couch wasn't so bad, but with his hurt knee it had been almost unbearable. "I promise I was home all night, and I haven't had a drop of alcohol since the last poker game."

Kent put his fists on his hips and glared at him. Marco could tell his boss didn't believe a damn word he'd said. "Just tell me what you wanted to talk to me about."

"That customer you did some work for down south has asked for you again. He wants to put a brick wall around the patio and outdoor fireplace you built for him."

Marco cursed silently. His biggest fear had come to be. "I can't."

"What do you mean you can't? I pay you to lay brick and keep the customers happy. The guy's paying you a compliment by asking specifically for you. Just do it!"

Although it did make him proud the customer had been so pleased with his work that he asked for him again, Marco wasn't sure how he could swing it. One thing he did know

was he couldn't afford to piss Kent off to the point of getting fired. He tried one last ditch effort. "I still have another three days before I finish up here."

"Forget about it. I can have Clarkson do it."

Santa Cruz was over an hour away and that was with no traffic. He'd have to not only figure out where to come up with the gas money, but he'd have to make some modifications at home.

Without another word, he nodded his acceptance of the situation. Putting his weight on his good leg, he bent and picked up his tool bag. "Do you want me to check in every day?"

"Of course."

Marco turned and headed back to his truck. He could feel Kent's eyes on him and tried not to limp. By the time he swung his bag in the truck bed and got behind the wheel, he felt close to tears. There were times when his life sucked, and this was sure as hell one of them.

As he pulled out, he tried to think of what to do. He'd never in his life borrowed money from his friends, but he honestly didn't see any other choice. Reluctantly, he pulled the phone out of the holder attached to his belt and called the one man who knew about his situation.

"Pilato Promotions," Angelo answered.

"Wow, that's a pretty impressive name you've come up with."

"It was Moody's idea."

Marco grinned. There was something about Angelo and his lover that always made Marco feel good. He thought it had something to do with the fact the men seemed so different yet managed to make a relationship work. Secretly, it gave Marco hope that one day Kent would notice him.

He tried to figure out the best way to ask Angelo for what he needed. Everything in his head came out lame, so he finally blurted it out. "I need to borrow some money. Kent's just assigned me to work on a job in Santa Cruz, but I don't have enough for gas. I get paid on Friday, so I can get the money back to you then."

"How much you need?"

"Seventy-five should do it. I'm really sorry, man."

"Don't be stupid. Why do you have to pay for your own gas anyway?"

"It's just an upfront cost. Kent usually reimburses us if we have to go out of the city on a job."

"And I take it you didn't want to tell Kent you didn't have the gas money?"

"No lectures. Please." He knew most guys wouldn't have a problem telling Kent they were strapped for cash, but Marco wasn't most guys.

"Come on over. I'll even give you a cup of coffee."

"Thanks."

"What're friends for?"

\* \* \* \*

After watching Marco drive off, Kent scowled and headed back to the trailer. By the way the younger man was walking, Kent guessed he'd had a good-sized cock up his ass more than once the previous night. The thought made him want to growl in frustration. When would Marco grow up?

He'd waited for more than a couple of years for Marco to get the partying lifestyle out of his system, but the object of his dreams still wasn't ready for what he had in mind.

Kent slammed the door on the trailer and took a seat behind his desk. He looked at the bids that needed to be completed and sighed. He hated sending Marco to Santa Cruz, but lately, the less he saw of the gorgeous man the easier it was to cope.

He knew their mutual friends thought he was too hard on Marco, but in his opinion, they were too soft. Besides, did they have any idea the toll years of wanting someone could do to a guy? Yeah, maybe he was crabby around Marco, but he saw so much potential in the younger man, always had.

The first day the skinny teenager had stepped foot on one of Kent's construction sites and practically begged for a job, he'd snapped him up. He could see the desire to work and work hard in Marco's black eyes.

Although he'd always thought Marco was extremely handsome, he hadn't actually started having romantic feelings for a couple of years. It wasn't until the twice-monthly poker games had begun that Kent had started truly falling for the gorgeous man. A fat lot of good it had done.

Marco rarely dated anyone more than a couple of times. It seemed on the rare occasions Kent saw Marco around town, it was with a different guy. The men were always heavily

muscled and extremely possessive of Marco's attention. Kent couldn't blame them. If he had Marco, no way would he let anyone close enough to try and steal him away.

With a shake of his head, he tried to concentrate on the job bids in front of him. Whether or not things ever worked out with Marco, Kent had spent enough time and energy wanting something that wasn't there.

\* \* \* \*

Marco set down his trowel and reached for a rag to wipe his hands, before plucking the phone from his belt. "Hello."

"How's the knee?" Angelo asked.

"About the size of a grapefruit, but I'm struggling through."

Angelo sighed into the phone. "Why don't you go by and see either Eric or Jules on the way home later?"

"It won't do me any good. They'll just tell me to rest it for a couple of weeks, and we both know I can't afford that."

"What if you've torn your ACL or something?"

"I haven't. I think I'd know if something was seriously wrong with it. It's just sore and swollen. I've been putting ice packs on it at night. I'll be fine eventually."

"How much longer will you be working down south?"

"Well, if I worked tomorrow I could probably get it done, but I think I'd be better off waiting until Monday. At least that'll give me two days of rest."

"You're still coming to poker, right?"

"I doubt it. How am I gonna explain to Kent why I'm limping, because believe me, he'll notice."

"How're you going to explain why you're not there, because I guarantee he'll ask. You and I both know what he'll think."

"It won't be anything different than what he's thought about me for years. If I see him, he's likely to make me stay home from work. I just can't take that chance."

"So why not just come clean with him? Why are you still hiding who you really are?"

Marco knew the answer to that question. "I'm afraid I'll still come up lacking in his eyes. This way, I can at least pretend it's the secrets that are keeping him at bay."

## Chapter Two

Kent set his twelve-pack on the counter and started unloading bottles into his refrigerator. He had another twelve-pack in the truck to take to the poker game, but his mood called for a pre-party libation.

With the dark brown bottles lined up like soldiers, he shook his head. He needed to start buying actual food. Other than some condiments and a week-old carton of leftover Chinese, Old Father Hubbard's cupboard was bare.

He grabbed a beer and unscrewed the cap, flipping it into the empty beer carton. With the counter against his hips, he up-ended the bottle and didn't stop drinking until it was empty.

Kent lowered the bottle and reached into the fridge for another. The second bottle in hand, he moved through the kitchen, up the stairs and to his bedroom. Setting the beer on his nightstand, he began undressing.

People speculated as to why he worked all the time, but what else did he have? His house was empty. Hell, he didn't even have a cat. Where had his dreams of settling down with a special someone gone?

A vision of a five-foot-ten man with black hair and shining brown eyes came to mind. *Yeah, if only.*

Disgusted with himself, he strode through to the en suite and turned on the shower. As he stepped under the cool spray, he wondered if his life would've been different had he stayed married to Jessica.

High school sweethearts, Jessica thought it was important to save her virginity until marriage. Kent still wasn't sure if that was the trait that had attracted him to the petite brunette, or if he'd been in serious denial of his own sexuality.

They'd married shortly after graduation. He'd known the relationship was doomed by the time they'd returned from their honeymoon. Unfortunately, Jessica had known it, too. Kent knew he'd been luckier than most men. Jessica had been his best friend for years and evidently, she'd had her concerns even before the wedding.

Their divorce was quiet, easy and quick. Several years later, Jess had moved to Seattle with a man she eventually married. They still talked from time to time, but as the years went by their conversations were fewer and farther between.

After rinsing off, Kent turned off the water and grabbed a towel. As he rubbed his skin dry, he wondered what his friends would say if they knew he'd once been an All-American married man. He snorted. Well, at least for the six months it had taken to get the divorce.

\* \* \* \*

By the time he made it to Bobby's, Kent was already feeling the effects of the three beers he'd had earlier. He slid into an open seat at the table and crossed his hands in front of him. "So, where's Marco?"

Angelo cleared his throat and glanced at Moody before answering. "He called and said he had something else he needed to do."

"Typical," Kent murmured. "So what's this something's name?"

"Huh?" Angelo questioned.

"Is it someone he's just met, or has he dated him before?" Kent refused to show how much it bothered him. So what if Marco would rather be with the flavour of the week instead of with his friends, with him.

"He's not on a date."

Kent was surprised by the apparent annoyance in Angelo's voice.

"So if a date isn't more important than poker night, exactly what is?" Kent asked, equally annoyed at the run-around he seemed to be getting.

Angelo picked up his beer bottle and drank the last of the amber liquid. "Just drop it, Kent."

Before Kent could reply, Angelo stood and stomped his way into the kitchen. Confused by what he felt was Angelo's misplaced anger, he rose and followed his friend.

"What the hell's going on?" He asked, trapping Angelo in the kitchen.

Angelo shut the refrigerator door and set his unopened bottle on the counter. "He'll kill me if I tell you," he mumbled without turning to face Kent.

Kent stepped forward and put his hand on Angelo's shoulder. "You're starting to worry me."

Angelo glanced over his shoulder. "He hurt his knee a couple days ago, and he doesn't want you to know."

Kent backed up a step. He felt as if he'd been slapped. "Am I such a monster that he can't tell me when he's hurt? Why didn't he file a workman's compensation claim?"

Angelo turned to face Kent. "He didn't do it at work. He was afraid if you found out you'd pull him off the job. He can't afford that."

"Shit!" Kent headed for the door.

"Wait! Where are you going?" Angelo asked, running to catch up.

Kent spun around and shook his head. "I don't know. Out."

"Don't go by his house. He'll know I told you."

Kent narrowed his eyes at his friend. "You know what? I don't really give a fuck if he finds out. You guys are so busy talking behind my back that you refuse to see what's right in front of your face."

He left Angelo sputtering in the foyer. He was almost to his truck when Moody came barrelling out of the house.

"Wait up there," the big detective called, jogging towards Kent.

"What? You come out to put me in my place?"

Moody held up his hands. "I came out to talk some goddamned sense into you before you go flying out of here half-cocked."

Kent crossed his arms and leant against the driver's door. "How would you feel in the same situation?"

Moody shook his head. "I'm not saying you don't have a right to feel like you do. All I'm trying to do is to get you to stop and think about it for a second." Moody gestured with his thumb towards the house. "This whole thing between you and Marco has Angelo half-sick with worry."

"Why?"

"Because he cares about both of you, jackass."

Kent's blood began to boil again. "I don't have to take this shit from you." He turned and opened the door of his truck.

"No you don't, but I can tell you from an observer's point-of-view, you've been too damned hard on Marco. I haven't known you long, but the way you talk to him? Hell, I'm surprised he'd even be in the same room with you."

"You don't know shit about me and Marco," Kent fired back. He really didn't want to take on the beast in front of him, but he wouldn't just stand by while Moody took chunks out of his hide.

"You need to make up your mind as to whether you love him or you hate him. Because the way you've been acting, the choice is going to be taken out of your hands sooner than you think."

Kent climbed up into his pickup and slammed the door. He roared off down the road leaving Moody standing in the middle of the street. How dare that asshole confront him.

After driving around for close to an hour, Kent pulled into the construction lot. He climbed out of the truck and walked towards the small building that held the primary offices. Although he usually used his trailer on large job sites, the rest of his office staff worked in the glass and brick building Marco had helped build.

Before unlocking the door, Kent took a moment to appreciate the brickwork Marco had worked so hard on. Even at such a young age, Marco was the best brick layer Kent had ever worked with. The mosaic-style designs could attest to Marco's skills.

He fit his key into the lock and opened the door. After punching in the security code, he travelled through the showroom and to his office, flipping on lights as he went. In his favourite chair, Kent opened the bottom drawer of his desk and pulled out a bottle of whisky.

Two shots later, Kent stood and went to his secretary, Jill's, office. He sorted through his keys until he came up with the one that opened the personnel cabinet. Although Marco was now part of a union, Kent still kept basic information on all his employees. He found Marco's file and carried it back to his desk.

He wasn't sure how long he stared at the closed file, warring with himself, but he eventually opened it. The first thing that smacked him in the face was the red marker indicating a change to Marco's birth date.

Kent couldn't help but chuckle. He remembered very clearly making the change. It had been on Marco's seventeenth birthday, seven years earlier. He'd known it was Marco's birthday, but according to what he'd been told, it was his employee's nineteenth.

For weeks he'd been working his way up to asking Marco out. He'd finally decided taking the gorgeous guy for a celebration dinner was the perfect excuse. After tracking Marco



down, Kent had arrived on the job-site at lunchtime. He'd approached Marco as the young man sat alone in the shade of a piece of machinery and received the surprise of his life.

Marco had been chuckling to himself as he read a homemade card. The front of the birthday card said, "Happy 17<sup>th</sup> Birthday". Marco had quickly stuffed the card into his lunchbox when he spotted Kent, but it was too late.

Kent had never let on that he'd seen the number on the front of the construction paper, but he sure as hell didn't ask Marco out either. Going to jail for fucking a minor wasn't something that appealed to him. Although he should've fired Marco for lying on his job application, he just couldn't bring himself to do it. He'd gone back to his office, changed the date on the application and tried his best to forget his attraction to the under-aged man.

Marco was no longer underage, but Kent still doubted he was ready for anything but a passing affair. Still, Moody's words continued to haunt him. What if Marco fell in love with someone else while Kent was waiting for him to grow up?

*Fuck.* Kent scribbled down Marco's address and closed the file. He told himself he'd just swing by to make sure Marco wasn't in need of anything before going home. The thought of returning to Bobby's wasn't appealing at all. His friends had made it pretty clear whose side they were on, and it sure as hell wasn't his.

\* \* \* \*

With the scribbled address clenched in his fist, Kent pulled up in front of the small yellow and white house. He glanced around, wondering how safe his truck was before climbing out.

The houses on either side of Marco's seemed to be in decent condition, but Marco's house was definitely the pride of the neighbourhood. Despite needing a new roof, it appeared well kept for a home of its apparent age.

With a deep breath, he climbed the four cement steps and knocked on the door. He waited for several moments before knocking again. It was possible Marco was just slow getting up to answer.

The door opened and a large Mexican man answered. The man appeared young, but not too young. A date? "Is Marco here?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Kent Baker, his boss. I heard he was hurt so I thought I'd stop by to check on him."

The handsome man scratched the light covering of hair on his bare chest. "He's in bed. You want me to get him up?"

It was easy for Kent to connect the puzzle pieces. "No. Just tell him to see me in my office Monday morning."

He turned without another word and retreated to the safety of his pickup. *How fucking stupid can I be?* Of course Marco would have the flavour-of-the-week taking care of him. He drove home intent on forgetting he'd ever embarrassed himself by going by Marco's house.

\* \* \* \*

"Bruno! Who was at the door?" Marco asked his brother.

Bruno shuffled into the bedroom he shared with Nicky. "Kent something. Said he was your boss. Said for you to meet him in his office first thing Monday."

"Shit! Did you tell him who you were?"

"No. Why?"

Marco shook his head. "Nothing. You ready to go to bed?"

Bruno scratched the short curls above his ear. "Might as well. Ain't shit on TV."

Marco carefully sat up and swung his legs to the floor. "Help me up, will ya?"

Bruno grabbed Marco's hand and pulled him to his feet. "I already made your bed for you."

Half-way towards the door, Marco paused and looked over his shoulder. "Really?"

"Yeah. I'm not that much of an asshole. I know you're hurtin'."

It was such a small gesture, but it meant the world to Marco. Rarely did anyone do something for him that didn't have to be asked for. "Thanks."

Bruno waved him away and shut the door once Marco was in the hall.

Marco stopped at Maria's door and gazed in at his sleeping sister. He often worried what it was like for her growing up without a woman's influence. He'd made sure she had her own space, but unfortunately, that was all he could do for her beside show her all the love he felt.

He quietly shut the door again and made his way to the living room. After turning off the lights and making sure the door was locked, he laid down on the sofa. Other than brief

naps in one of his brothers' beds, Marco hadn't slept on a real mattress his entire life. The couch had been his bed even as a boy, although back then, he'd had to share it with Bruno.

As he lay in the dark, he tried to imagine why Kent would come to his house. *Poker night. Shit.* He fumbled around on the coffee table until he came up with his cell phone.

The phone rang three times before Angelo picked it up. Even then, his friend didn't say anything right away. "Please don't tell me Kent came over there?"

"So you did tell him." It wasn't a question because Marco already knew the truth.

"I'm so sorry. He started in on the same ole shit about a date being more important to you than your friends. I just couldn't take it anymore. I kinda blew up on him. Then he yelled at me, then Moody got involved. Hell, I don't know. The whole thing just snowballed before my eyes."

"Well, it's even worse now. Bruno answered the door and told him I was in bed."

"So?"

"You've never met Bruno. He doesn't look like your typical seventeen-year old. No doubt Kent thought he was my boyfriend or something."

"Oh. Ouch. You're going to have to straighten it out, Marco. You know that, right?"

"Maybe. At least I've got another whole day to think about it. I'm supposed to be in his office Monday morning."

"Good luck. Call me if you need anything."

"Thanks." Marco hung up and tossed the phone back to the table. He'd briefly considered calling Kent, but had quickly decided against it. "Monday'll come soon enough. No sense borrowing trouble."

\* \* \* \*

Trouble came soon enough when there was a knock on the door the following day. With his brothers out and Maria playing in her room, it was left to Marco to gingerly make his way to the door, praying it wasn't Kent.

Opening the door, he came face to face with an even bigger problem. "What do you want?"

Marco's dad pushed past him to enter the small living room.

"I didn't invite you in," Marco protested, regaining his balance with a hand on the wall.

"It's my house. I don't need an invitation," Eddy proclaimed.

"The hell it is. If it had been left up to you, we'd have been out on the streets years ago. I'm the one who pays the mortgage and the taxes, not you, you sonofabitch."

Eddy sighed and flopped down on the sofa, putting his big booted feet on the coffee table. "I need money. Things with Lucinda didn't work out, and I need to get out of town."

"Tough shit. Get a fucking job," Marco spat, holding his ground.

Eddy jumped up and lurched towards Marco, slamming his fist into his son's jaw. "Don't you get smart with me."

The force of the blow knocked Marco off his feet. Memories of a childhood spent hiding behind the couch assailed him. He'd promised himself he'd never again allow his dad to lay a finger on him. *Damn.*

"Get out," he screamed over the sound of Rufus' barking as the loyal German Shepherd tried to scratch his way through the back door.

At almost twice Marco's size, Eddy leant over Marco and pulled him up by the front of his shirt. "Don't you dare fuck with me, boy. I can take back everything you have."

Marco bit the inside of his cheek as he tried desperately to maintain his balance on his reinjured knee. "No judge in the State of California would give you custody of Bruno, Nicky and Maria."

"I either need money or a place to stay. You decide."

"I don't have anything to give you. I had to borrow money from a friend for gas a couple days ago."

Eddy backhanded Marco, once again sending him to the floor. Marco heard a noise and glanced towards Maria's room. His baby sister was staring wide-eyed through her partially-opened door.

In no condition to fight his father, Marco knew he had to get Eddy out of the house before he did anymore damage to Maria's fragile disposition. "Give me a few days. I'll see what I can come up with."

Eddy righted himself with a satisfied smirk on his face. He glanced over his shoulder and grinned. "Boo!"

Maria let out a squeak and slammed her bedroom door.

"Get out, Eddy." At that point, Marco didn't care if Eddy beat him to a bloody pulp, he would not allow his dad to mess with Maria like that.

"I'm going. But I'll be back on Wednesday for my money. If I don't get it, the next time you see me will be in court."

Marco wiped the blood off his chin as Eddy stormed out of the house. Moments later, Maria came running into the living room.

"Are you okay?"

Marco nodded. "I'm fine. Will you get me a wet washcloth?"

Maria ran back out of the room to do as asked. Marco shook his head, trying to get his thoughts in order before Maria came back. He groaned as he scooted across the floor towards the couch.

He'd managed to pull himself up and lie down before the cloth was thrust into his hand. Marco dabbed at his split lip for several moments before addressing his baby sister. "Please don't let Eddy worry you. He's full of hot air."

"What're you gonna do?" Maria asked.

"I don't know yet, but at least I've bought myself some time." He wondered if Moody would be able to give him some advice as to how to deal with his old man.

"Hand me the phone, sweetheart, and then go back and play."

Maria continued to look down at him, a worried expression on her face. Marco reached out and ran his hand down his sister's arm. "I'm okay, really."

With a nod, Maria handed him the phone before retreating to her bedroom. Marco waited until her door was shut before punching in Angelo's number.

"Hello?"

"Hey, it's Marco. Is Moody around?"

"Why? What's happened?"

Marco tried to smile around his sore lip. Angelo was an uptight guy on his best days. He knew his friend would really worry if he knew what was going on. "Nothing life-altering, I just have a couple of questions for Moody."

Marco heard Angelo whispering in the background moments before Moody's deep rumble came over the phone.

"What's going on?"

Marco took a deep breath, surprised he was actually going outside the trust of his family with the truth of his home life. "I need your advice on a domestic issue I'm having. Do you think you could stop by? I mean, if you're busy, that's okay..."

"Give me the address."

Marco rattled it off. "It's not that I don't want Angelo to know, but we both know he'll stew over it."

"I'll see what I can do. Give me an hour."

"Thanks. Uhh, the door's unlocked, so just come in. I don't know that I'll be getting off the couch."

"Is it wise to have your door unlocked?"

Marco moved his sore jaw open and shut a few times before answering. "Probably not, but I don't think my problem will be back any time soon."

\* \* \* \*

Marco was asleep when the door being opened woke him. "Hey," he mumbled.

"Holy shit! What the hell happened to you?" Angelo bellowed as he made his way over to the sofa.

Marco looked around Angelo to Moody and raised his eyebrows. Moody grinned and shrugged. Marco wasn't angry. He knew the two rarely kept anything from each other, but now he'd have to suffer at the hands of Angelo's mothering.

"My dad came by looking for money. This is what happens when he doesn't get it." Marco met Moody's gaze. "He said if I don't come up with some by Wednesday, he'll take me to court to try and get the house and the kids back."

Moody shook his head. "He could try, but no judge in the world would grant it." Moody took out his cell phone and snapped a couple of pictures of Marco's injuries. "Was anyone else here when it happened?"

Marco nodded. "Maria."

"Can I talk to her?" Moody asked.

"Why? I mean, she's..." Damn, Marco didn't know how to describe his sister in a way that Moody would understand. "...timid. She spends most of her time in her room. I don't know if it's because she was exposed to so much violence at such a young age or what, but she feels safe in there."

"Would it be easier for her if I talked to her in there?" Moody asked.

Marco nodded. "Probably. If you can help me up, I'll introduce you to her. She won't speak to you without me in there."

One moment Marco was lying on the couch and the next he was scooped up into Moody's arms. "Hey!"

Angelo chuckled. "It's best to just let him have his way. It's easier."

Marco looked up at Moody. "I feel like a fucking toddler."

"You're as light as one too. Haven't you been eating?"

Marco refused to answer the question. Money had been tight the last couple of weeks. He made sure the kids had some kind of protein to eat, but he'd made do with whatever was left over after they got their fill. With two teenage boys in the house, that was often very little.

Moody made a deep rumbling noise in his throat and carried Marco towards the hall. "Which room?"

"This one." Marco reached out and knocked on Maria's door. "Maria? Sweetheart? Can I bring a friend of mine in to talk to you?"

After several long moments, the door opened. Maria seemed shocked to see her brother in the arms of such a big man.

"It's okay. This is Moody. He's a police detective. He's going to try and help us with our problem."

Maria's gaze went from Marco to Moody and back again. She opened the door further and stepped back.

Moody walked into the bedroom and deposited Marco gently on the bed. Marco was surprised when Moody sat cross-legged on the floor beside the bed, obviously trying to make himself smaller.

Moody pulled out a small pad of paper. "Can you tell me what you saw, honey?"

Maria climbed up on the bed to hide behind her brother. Marco pulled her around to sit beside him and wrapped an arm around her. "It's okay. He's trying to help."

"I heard yelling," she began. "I went to the door and saw Eddy punch Marco. He yelled some more about money and then he slapped Marco."

Moody made several notes on his pad of paper. "That's all I need." He smiled at Maria. "You did good, honey."

Marco kissed the top of Maria's head. "Thanks. I'll call you in for lunch as soon as I get it fixed."

Maria nodded, and Marco started to slide off the bed. Once again Moody picked him up.

"Seriously, dude, I can walk."

Moody scowled. "Seriously, *dude*, it's easier this way."

Maria giggled, which surprised them both. Marco studied his little sister. "You find this funny?"

Maria nodded, giggling again. "You look so tiny."

Now it was Marco's turn to scowl. "I'm not tiny. Moody's just a giant."

Moody carried Marco in and set him on the couch. Angelo was standing beside the front door.

"I think I'll run out and get stuff for lunch."

Marco studied his nervous friend. "You don't have to do that. I'm well enough to stand at the stove and make a box of mac and cheese and boil a hotdog."

Angelo shook his head. "You are not and you know it. Besides, you called us over here at lunchtime, and I'm starving. It'll just be easier to eat if I run out and get some stuff."

Marco narrowed his eyes at Angelo. He knew what his friend was up to. Evidently Angelo had taken a look around his bare kitchen while he'd been in the bedroom. Still, his sister needed to eat and despite his protests, he was in no condition to cook it for her.

"I'd appreciate that." It took more strength than he thought he had to accept the charity he knew was being offered. Despite everything, he'd never taken a penny from the state to help raise his siblings. He'd always prided himself on being able to handle his home life on his own, but it seemed the older the boys got, the more money seemed to be needed.

At least Bruno had finally gotten a job a few days earlier. In the past, Marco had told both brothers that their schoolwork came first and as long as they put in the time and energy required to get good grades, he'd leave them alone about jobs. But when Bruno had come to him about buying a class ring, Marco had put his foot down. He'd informed his brother a part-time job might be in order if he wanted such extravagances.

Bruno hadn't argued. He'd gone out two days later and found a job as a stock boy a couple of afternoons a week.



"Is there anything special you're hungry for?" Angelo asked, interrupting Marco's thoughts.

"Whatever you get will be fine. We're not picky eaters in this house." Whining at the back door got his attention. "Can I ask you for another favour before you go?"

"Sure," Angelo answered.

"Would you set out a bowl of food for Rufus? I think Nicky forgot again. He's usually inside, but I've had trouble keeping him off my leg."

Moody turned to Angelo and gave him a kiss. "I'll do it while you get lunch."

Angelo kissed his partner back before heading out the front door.

"Where's the food?" Moody asked.

"There should still be some in the metal can next to the backdoor. His bowl should be on top. He might need some fresh water in his bowl outside, too."

Moody disappeared into the kitchen. Marco settled back on the sofa. He touched his fingertips to his lip, feeling the drying blood. How many split lips had he suffered over the years?

"Jesus Christ!" Moody shouted.

Marco grinned. "I see you've met Rufus."

Moody came back into the room. "He nearly knocked me over trying to get at his food."

Marco gestured to his knee. "How do you think this happened?"

"You need to get that dog into some kind of training class," Moody remarked, taking a seat next to the couch.

"I would if I could afford it. He's really not so bad. I think he makes the kids feel safer knowing he's here at night."

Moody nodded. "From the sounds of it, they need as much of that as they can get."

"Amen."

## Chapter Three

It was another three days before Marco was well enough to meet Kent in his office. He'd hated to call in sick. It was something he'd rarely done in his years of employment, but it couldn't be helped.

After several days spent on the couch, he was finally able to put enough weight on his knee to walk. He glanced at himself in the rear view mirror. Unfortunately his face looked worse than right after the mini-beating he'd received from Eddy.

He climbed out of his pickup and made his way into the Baker Construction offices. How many times had he gone over the planned meeting in his mind? Despite going through a hundred scenarios, Marco couldn't see any way around it. He was going to have to come clean with Kent. It was definitely something he wasn't looking forward to.

Thankfully, at seven in the morning, the offices were still fairly empty. He knocked on the wall outside Kent's open office door.

Kent glanced up from a pile of papers. "Come...Fuck! What the hell happened? Your little boy toy get rough with you after I left Saturday night?"

*And so it begins.* Marco made his way into Kent's office and sat in the chair in front of his desk. "No. I had a run-in with my dad on Sunday," he admitted, refusing to look at Kent.

Complete silence met his explanation. He finally glanced up. Kent's face had gone red, his meaty hand fisted on top of his papers.

"I hope you filed charges," Kent ground out between clenched jaws.

"Kind of. I told Moody about it. He took a couple of pictures."

"Moody? So he's your go-to guy now?" Kent scoffed.

"He's a friend. I wasn't sure what else to do." Marco shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "There were extenuating circumstances. I needed some answers from someone in law enforcement."

"What kind of circumstances? A man beats the shit out of you, you press charges. It should've been as simple as that."

Marco touched the healing cut on his lip with the tip of his tongue. "There are things about me you don't know."

Kent's body seemed to relax enough to lean back in the wide leather desk chair. "You talking about your age, because I already knew about that."

Shocked, Marco leant forward, bracing his hands on the arms of the chair. "You knew about that? How?"

"I saw you reading a birthday card on your seventeenth birthday," Kent stated. His tone was matter-of-fact, but Marco could sense some underlying hurt.

"I needed the job."

"I guess I figured that out. Otherwise I would've fired your ass on the spot."

Marco knew it was time. "I needed the job because I was trying to raise my two kid brothers and my little sister. That was Bruno who answered the door Saturday night."

"What?" Kent burst out of his chair and stalked around the desk. "What the hell are you talking about? I've never even heard you mention your family, now, suddenly, I learn you've got an asshole for a father and three kids you've been taking care of? When did this happen?"

"Mom left nine years ago, shortly after Maria was born. Guess she got tired of being a punching bag for the old man." Marco shrugged. He knew if he didn't get it all out within the next few minutes he'd chicken out.

"Eddy, my dad, was too busy getting drunk to actually hold down a job. I knew if I went to the authorities, they'd split us up. So I dropped out of school and did what I had to do. Once I turned eighteen, I kicked Eddy's worthless ass out. I've been doing it on my own ever since."

Kent's face was back to the reddish purple colour it had been several minutes earlier. He started to say something, but stopped. He held up his hands. "Give me a moment. I'll be right back."

\* \* \* \*

Once inside the small restroom, Kent locked the door. With his back to the cool tiles, he slid down the wall to land on his ass.

His anger was threatening to overwhelm him and he knew it. If he hadn't left his office, he knew he would've started to yell. Marco wasn't the person he was mad at though, so there was no reason to take his anger out on the younger man.

As he sat on the floor with his head resting in his hands, he tried to figure out just who he should be angry with. Marco's dad was an easy option. Never would he have believed Marco would let anyone, let alone his own father, hit him.

Which brought Kent right back to himself. He should've known. He should've seen it before now. Had he been so blinded where Marco was concerned? For so long, he'd searched for reasons why Marco wasn't ready for a relationship, always choosing to think the worst of the good-looking younger man.

"Hey," Marco called through the restroom door. "Am I fired?"

"Hang on," Kent answered back. He rubbed at his eyes and stood. After several deep breaths, he unlocked the door, and opened it to gaze down into the bruised face of the man who'd held his heart for years.

He swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Of course I'm not going to fire you." Kent swallowed again, trying to keep his tears at bay. What kind of man did Marco think he was?

"Thanks."

Kent checked his watch. "Why don't we go get breakfast? We've got some talking to do, and I'm not sure this is the place."

Marco's fingers brushed over the bruise on his jaw. "I'm not sure I'm ready to go out in public yet. I thought I could finish up the job down south while I healed."

It took every ounce of Kent's strength not to reach out and replace Marco's fingers with his own. "I know a place where no one will stare."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

\* \* \* \*

Marco followed Kent in his truck. He still didn't know where they were going, but he was so shocked his boss was being nice to him he no longer cared. His head was still

spinning over the events in Kent's office. He'd actually spilled his guts and the sky hadn't fallen down around him.

Instead, Kent seemed...nicer. Was it pity that fuelled his newfound concern?

Marco sighed. If it was pity Kent wanted to give, he was wasting his time. The main reason Marco had never opened up to his boss about his home life was because pity wasn't what he yearned for from the man.

He continued to follow the bright red pickup down one side street after another until it pulled into a bricked, circular driveway. Marco peered through the windshield at the large brick and clapboard modern house in the Colonial style.

The first thing that struck him was how un-Kent-like the structure was. He would have never pictured his boss in such a traditional house.

Marco pulled his rusted white truck behind Kent's new one and shut off the engine. He was still a little stunned. Why would Kent bring him here?

Before he could open his door, Kent was there to do it for him. "Hope you don't mind. I thought I'd throw a couple omelettes together."

"No. That's fine." It sure as hell beat the small bowl of store brand corn flakes he'd had earlier.

Kent reached in and practically lifted Marco from the cab. "Do you need help getting inside? The front steps might be hard for you."

Marco had been so focused on the size of the house, and the big white columns, he hadn't even noticed the semi-circular brick staircase that let up to the front door. "Jesus, Kent. I had no idea you lived in a place like this."

His gaze went to the brickwork. He studied the workmanship with a critical eye, pleased in the knowledge he could've done a better job. As he continued to study the house, he spotted two separate chimneys. "How many fireplaces you got in this thing?"

Kent wrapped a supporting hand around Marco's waist and led him to the stairs. "Four. Two downstairs and two up."

Marco's jaw dropped. "Seriously?"

Kent shrugged as he helped Marco up the steps. "I always wanted one growing up. With the weather the way it is in San Francisco, I thought it was the perfect opportunity to have what I wanted."

Marco shook his head. He still couldn't put the man beside him and the house looming over him together. It seemed completely out of character. He began to wonder how well he really knew Kent.

Kent unlocked one of the big double doors and punched a code into the keypad just inside. "Hang on. I've got something that might help."

Kent disappeared and Marco was left standing in the formal entry. Everywhere he looked, he saw opulence. From the wide, sweeping staircase, to the overhead chandelier, Kent's house screamed money. This was the man who whined if he lost fifty bucks in a poker game?

Moments later, Kent reappeared with a set of crutches. "Try these."

Marco took the first crutch from Kent and chuckled. The darn thing was almost taller than he was. "Uhh, I'm not sure they'll work."

Rolling his eyes, Kent adjusted the one he still had in his hands and handed it over before doing the same with the crutch he'd given Marco.

"Why do you have these? I don't remember you getting hurt?"

"I broke my foot about ten years ago. I ran across them a couple of weeks ago while cleaning out the storage room." Kent started to walk to the back of the house. "Come on, kitchen's this way."

Marco had never used crutches and it took him a few seconds to get the hang of it. Kent had been right, it did help. Although he knew he couldn't work while using them, they would go a long way in getting around. He'd really slacked off on taking care of the house since his fall over Rufus.

"Have a seat."

Marco slid onto a stool at the large island and leaned the crutches against the wooden counter top. He ran his hand over the beautifully grained and glossy wood.

"Gorgeous, isn't it?"

"Yeah. I guess I never thought of using wood like this." The warm colour of the countertops complimented the white cabinetry and brick alcove that housed a huge industrial-style stove. "You like brick, I see."

Kent chuckled. "Does it show?"

"Just a little."

Kent opened the large stainless steel refrigerator and removed a carton of eggs, small jug of milk and block of cheese. "I don't have much, but I made a run to the store Sunday. The beer bottles were starting to get lonely."

As Marco watched Kent whip up the eggs and milk, he tried to figure out what rabbit hole he'd fallen into. "So'd you build this place?"

Kent lit the stove and set a skillet over the gas flame. "Yep. It was the first official project for Baker Construction. We built most of the homes in the neighbourhood but mine was first."

"Who did the brickwork?" He knew he sounded jealous, but as much of it as was in the house, Kent had to have worked closely with the guy.

Kent poured the bowl of frothy eggs into the skillet. "Who didn't? I tried at least six different guys before I gave up and finished it myself. That's why, if you look close, the work doesn't match."

Once again, Marco was shocked. "I didn't know you knew how to do that?"

With his back to Marco, Kent shrugged. "I'm nowhere near as good as you are, but I learned the trade from my old man."

*Was that a compliment?*

Kent flipped the omelette and turned back to the island to grab the block of sharp cheddar and a cheese grater he'd dug out of one of the cabinets. He met Marco's gaze before returning his attention to the stove. "You truly are the most gifted bricklayer I've ever come across. I'm damn lucky to have you."

Marco smiled. At the age of sixteen he'd worked hauling bricks for the craftsmen. Over time, he'd convinced the men to teach him. How many hours had he worked to get his technique to the point where he was satisfied? How many times had Kent ordered him to tear something apart and redo it? At the time, Marco thought Kent was being a hard ass. He doubted he'd ever be able to please the picky son-of-a-bitch.

"I never thought I'd be good enough at it to please you," Marco mumbled.

Kent shook his head as he cut the super-sized omelette in half and divided it onto two plates. "It wasn't that. I saw the potential in you to be the best. I just wanted you to see it in yourself."

Kent sat on the stool beside Marco and they dug into their breakfast. As he ate, Marco let his boss' words sink in.

"What's wrong?" Kent asked.

Marco set down his fork. "I don't know. I guess I never realised how much you cared. I'm just trying to wrap my mind around it."

Kent finished off his breakfast and pushed his plate away. He leaned his arm on the island and rested his head in his palm, facing Marco. "My problem is that I've always cared too much."

"Huh?"

Kent sighed. "Remember how I found out your true age?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I was coming to ask you out on a date. I thought you were nineteen. When I found out you were only seventeen, I freaked."

"So why didn't you ask me out once I was old enough?"

Kent's fingers began scratching at the short brown hair on top of his head. "Because my first mistake made me realise how young you really were. I couldn't get past it. I continued to watch you come in tired all the time. I've never been much of a partier. I told myself we had nothing in common, that we wanted two different things out of a relationship." Kent laughed. "Well, I told myself I wanted a relationship, but you'd only be interested in a fuck buddy."

Any appetite Marco had, left him. He pushed his plate away and looked down at his hands. "Usually half-asleep means I've been up all night with one of the kids. As far as fuck buddies, well, I admit, I've had a few, but it wasn't what I truly wanted. I'd have loved to have a steady partner, but my life doesn't lend itself to that. When the kids were younger, I was lucky if I got out for a few hours every couple of weeks. It's better now, but most guys won't hang around long enough for me to really get to know them."

With no warning, Kent reached out, grabbed the back of Marco's neck and pulled him into a deep kiss. Marco opened immediately, as Kent's tongue swept through the interior of his mouth and towards the back of his throat.

"Mmmm," he groaned. His cock filled as he closed his lips around Kent's tongue. He'd waited so long for this moment, he wasn't about to release Kent until he was forced.

Kent turned Marco to fully face him and scooted his stool closer. "I've wanted you..."



"Yes," Marco answered the unspoken plea. He reached out and ran his hands over the bulging muscles of Kent's chest, stopping to pinch the man's nipples through his tight, logoed T-shirt.

Kent groaned as Marco squeezed the tight nubs.

Tasting copper, Marco suddenly realised his lip had re-split. He backed off the kiss, worried what Kent might think. "I'm sorry." He reached for a napkin, but Kent retrieved one first and dabbed at Marco's bleeding lip. "I'm clean. I promise."

Kent nodded, placing kisses to Marco's bruised jaw. "Does this freak you out?"

"What? You kissing me?" Marco asked.

"No. Me wanting you as much as I do. I'm thirteen years older than you."

Marco gazed into Kent's eyes. He'd never noticed what a kaleidoscope of colour the man's eyes were, browns, mixed with greens and a hint of blue. As he stared, he tried to tell himself he was good enough for a successful man like Kent.

"Why would you want me? You could have anyone. I come with more baggage than a 747."

Kent reached across to the small prep-sink and wet another napkin before returning to dab at Marco's cut. It was obvious Kent was in deep thought as he attempted to concentrate on the split lip.

"We have a lot of talking to do," Kent finally said. His voice had gone soft, almost a whisper.

Marco nodded.

"It's not an easy thing for me to admit, but I wanted you the day you walked onto the construction site looking for a job. Later, when I found out you'd only been sixteen at the time, I was ashamed. It made me feel perverted, and I guess I took it out on you. I'm sorry."

"No. I knew you were attracted to the way I looked. My life was so fucked up at the time. I intentionally sought you out back then. I loved teasing you with my body. I know it was wrong, but it made me feel like someone wanted me and only me."

Kent started to say something, but jumped when his cell phone began ringing. He handed the wet napkin to Marco and unclipped the phone from his belt. "Kent Baker."

Marco pressed the paper against his lip and pulled it back to see he was no longer bleeding. He set the napkin on the counter and continued to stare at Kent as he talked business.

Still on the phone, Kent stood and walked across the kitchen, gazing out the back set of French doors. Marco had a strange feeling the call wasn't going well. He caught snippets of Kent's voice as it rose in volume several times.

"I'm sorry. It can't be helped. We'll get it done as soon as possible."

Kent's spine stiffened. Marco carefully slid off his stool and made his way over to the much bigger man. Kent seemed to sense Marco's presence and reached out his arm, drawing Marco against his chest.

"I'll call you back in a bit. Dammit! Just give me a few minutes." Kent ended the call and replaced the phone in its holster.

"Something wrong?" Marco asked, pressing his cheek against Kent's chest.

"That was Kevin Banes. He's upset you haven't finished his wall. He's having a big party on Saturday." Kent kissed the top of Marco's head. "I tried to tell him you were hurt, but the jackass won't listen."

Marco tilted his head up to stare into Kent's eyes. "I can finish."

"The hell you can. You can barely walk. I'll go down and finish it."

In all the years he'd worked for Kent, Marco had never known his boss to finish a job for one of his employees. He wasn't sure if it was the need to get the job done or his apparent feelings for the man responsible for not getting it done in the first place. "Let me help you. It's not bad as long as I'm in one place. It's the lifting and walking that hurt the most."

"Have you been to the doctor?"

"I've been to two, Eric and Jules. They both said what I already knew. I just hyper-extended the knee. It was healing nicely until..." Marco gestured at his face.

"I'd like to talk to Moody about that, by the way. I'd feel a lot better if I knew something was being done."

Marco thought of the money he was supposed to hand over to his father later that evening. He'd already made plans to take the kids to Angelo's house. "You'll find Moody at my house this evening. Eddy's coming by to get some money. Moody's planning on greeting him at the door."

Kent nodded. "He won't be alone. I want to look the man in the eyes when I threaten him."

Marco shook his head. "You don't know my dad. He's not easily intimidated. He'll probably take your threat as a personal challenge."

“Bring it on.”

“Moody’s assured me that Eddy won’t be able to take the kids back, but I don’t know if I’m even willing to take the chance.”

Kent bent down and kissed the uninjured corner of Marco’s mouth. “Let me call Banes back and you can tell me about your brothers and sister on the way to the jobsite.”

Marco started to move away as Kent dialled the phone, but the bigger man pulled him in even closer. He was so caught up in the smell and feel of the bigger man, he hadn’t even realised Kent had ended the call.

“You okay?” Kent asked, running a hand down Marco’s spine.

“I don’t know. Guess I feel like I’m in the middle of a dream I don’t want to wake up from.”

“You and me both, babe.”

## Chapter Four

Kent set down another skid of bricks next to Marco. He watched as the expert buttered another brick with mortar and set it carefully in place. Like most of Marco's requested work, the low wall surrounding Kevin Banes' patio was an intricate mosaic.

From his sitting position on the overturned five gallon bucket, Marco glanced up. "Something wrong?"

Kent shook his head. "Just enjoying a master at work."

Marco snorted and picked up another brick in a darker shade. "Tell that to Bruno and Nicky. They think of me as a labourer and nothing more."

Although he said it in a flip manner, Kent could tell it was a source of pain and embarrassment. He studied his surroundings and once he was certain they were alone, he leant in and brushed a kiss over Marco's lips. "Kids today don't know shit."

Marco chuckled. "Tell that to Bruno. He thinks he knows everything."

That reminded him. "Will you let me meet them?"

Marco's big brown eyes opened wide. "You want to?"

"Sure." Kent sat on the ground, facing Marco. He picked up a small piece of dried cement and rolled it between two fingers. "We haven't exactly had time to talk about everything, but I'd like to get to know your family." He shrugged, tossing the mortar several feet away. "We can take things slow. I don't want to push myself on anyone."

"They know I'm gay, but I've never introduced them to a date." Marco's face flushed. "My brothers might tease us."

"Let 'em. As long as they don't have a real problem with us dating, I don't mind a bit of teasing." He glanced at his watch. "You about ready to pack it up for the day?"

Marco studied the wall for several moments. "I still have at least another day, maybe day and a half."

Kent nodded. "We'll come back first thing in the morning."

Marco rolled his eyes. "You've got an entire company to run. We both know you don't have time to work as my pack mule."

Kent leant forward and kissed Marco. "Are you kidding? I finally get to openly do things like this." He kissed his soon-to-be lover again. "It's worth being your pack mule for a couple of days."

"Let me do these last few, and I'll be ready."

Kent stood and dusted off the seat of his jeans. He knew Marco wouldn't be ready to leave until the last of the mortar he had mixed was used. If nothing else, Marco was definitely thrifty.

\* \* \* \*

On the ride back to the city, Marco leaned as far as he could against the door and rested his left leg in the seat between him and Kent. He still couldn't believe the turn his life had taken in one day.

Kent reached over and began to rub Marco's knee. "Are you sure you didn't overdo it?"

"I'm okay. The brace helps a lot." He scooted down a bit as Kent's hand began to wander further up his leg.

Almost to the juncture of Marco's thighs, Kent pulled his hand back and placed it on the steering wheel.

"Why'd you stop?" Marco asked. It had been months since he'd felt the touch of a man, but Kent wasn't just any man. He was *the* man as far as Marco was concerned.

Kent grinned. "Because once I start I won't stop until I have you naked, straddling my lap with my cock shoved up your ass." He glanced at Marco. "And the highway isn't exactly the right place for that. Besides, there's something else I need to take care of this evening."

Marco poked Kent's hip with his foot. "More important than taking care of me?"

"Ensuring your asshole father never touches you again is taking care of you."

Marco rested his head back against the warmth of the window. He'd seen his dad react to being backed in a corner.

"I don't want anything to happen to you," he whispered, remembering the night he'd witnessed Eddy and another man arguing over a bag of weed. Marco had only been around six at the time, but he still remembered the glassy-eyed look in his dad's face when he'd hit his best friend over the head with a beer bottle. Even that hadn't been enough to assuage Eddy's thirst for vengeance. Still gripping the broken bottle, his dad had sliced into the man's

face. Eddy had been convicted of assault and sent off to jail. It was the reason there was seven years between Marco and Bruno.

"Hey." Kent roused Marco out of his memory. "I'll be okay."

"I know him, Kent. He'll come after you."

"I'll be with Moody."

"Doesn't matter. He'll probably go after Moody as well. Not while the two of you are together, of course, but he'll find a way."

For the remainder of the drive, they talked about Marco's brothers and sister. "You'll never meet a sweeter girl than my Maria."

"Where're you taking them while Moody and I talk to Eddy?"

"Well, Bruno has to work, so he won't be home anyway. Angelo invited Nicky, Maria and me out to dinner."

"Good. Make sure you have your cell phone on. I'll call you when it's safe to come home."

Instead of driving to Marco's, Kent continued past the exit towards his house in the suburbs. "What're you doing?"

"I thought I'd run by the house to change. I don't want to meet your family smelling like I've been working in the hot sun all day."

"I like the way you smell."

One of Kent's eyebrows rose. "Kinky."

Marco shrugged. "I just think a man should smell like a man. Guess I've spent too many years on construction sites."

Kent pulled into the circular driveway and parked his truck facing Marco's. "I think I should take your pickup back to your place when I go to talk to Moody and Eddy. No sense in Eddy getting suspicious."

Before getting out of the truck, Kent reached over and ran his hand up Marco's thigh. With a lusty grin, Kent's hand brushed over Marco's groin before cupping his balls. "Care for a quick shower?"

Marco's cock filled at the thought of seeing Kent naked. It truly would be a dream come true, but he knew it couldn't happen, at least not in the shower. "We both know if you get me in the shower, I'll end up with your cock up my ass."

"That's the plan."

Marco motioned towards his knee. "Do you really think I'll be able to steady myself with you ramming in and out of me?"

"Shit. I didn't even think of that."

Kent started to remove his hand, but Marco quickly reached down and held it in place. "Of course, if you don't mind getting your bed dirty?"

There was that sexy grin again. Marco licked his lips, his tongue passing over the healing cut. "We've got thirty minutes. I'd say that's enough time for a quickie and a shower."

"Well then what the hell are we waiting for?" Kent got out of the truck and walked around to hand Marco the crutches out of the back. "You know it'd be a lot easier if I just carried you inside and up the stairs."

"Yeah and then I'd be ready to put on an apron and call you Dear." Marco made his way up the front steps to the front door. "I may be smaller, but I'm no bitch."

Kent stopped in the process of unlocking the door. "I'd never think of you that way. I was talking about getting you upstairs and into my bed faster. That's all."

Marco closed his eyes and rested his forehead against Kent's chest. "Sorry."

Kent reached around Marco's crutch and rubbed his hand up and down Marco's spine. "No need to apologise. I guess we just need time to get used to each other in a relationship setting."

Marco looked up into Kent's hazel eyes. "Relationship? Is that what this is?"

Kent flushed. "Well, I was hoping we were finally working up to that. Why? Don't you want the same thing?"

*More than anything.* "What about the kids? You have to know it won't be easy. They take up most of my time."

Kent leant down and kissed him. "We'll make it work."

\* \* \* \*

By the time Kent got Marco up the stairs and undressed, he was harder than he could ever remembered being. He stood nude, gazing down at the most perfect male body he'd ever laid eyes on. "Damn."

His eyes were riveted to the Jacob's Ladder piercings in Marco's cock. He couldn't decide which was sexier, the row of six small barbells pierced through the darker skin of Marco's shaft or the hidden full hip and groin tattoo.

Kent reached down and ran the tip of his finger up the shiny silver ladder that ended just below the crown of Marco's cock. "Why didn't I know about these?"

Marco turned his head to the side. "It's not something I tell anyone. I get a new one every year on my birthday, have since I turned eighteen."

Kent's other hand began tracing the elaborate tattoos. "And these?"

Marco shivered, his skin breaking out in goose flesh. "I think I'm addicted. Whenever I get a bit of extra money, I have a little more done on it." Marco shrugged. "I guess it helps to remind me that I'm a man with wants and needs and not just a provider."

Kent noticed the more he played with the piercings, the more pre-cum oozed from the slit of Marco's crown. "You're the sexiest thing I've ever seen."

Marco's black eyebrows shot up towards his hairline. "Really? They don't turn you off?"

Kent braced his hands on either side of Marco's hips and lowered his head. "Completely the opposite. I've never been more turned on in my life."

Marco moaned as Kent's tongue licked up the underside of his cock.

After swiping at the large dollop of pre-cum, Kent kissed the head of Marco's erection. "I haven't been fucked in a very long time, but someday soon, I'd like to feel you inside me."

"Oh, shit." Marco's hips bucked up, pushing his cockhead into Kent's mouth again. "Suck me."

Knowing they were running out of time, Kent stood and climbed over the top of Marco in the traditional sixty-nine position. He groaned at the first touch of Marco's tongue. It had been far too long since he'd felt lips wrapped around his length. "Do you swallow?"

Marco released Kent's cock. "This is the first time I've done it without a condom. But I want to taste you."

Kent knew there was a slight risk involved, but with Marco, it was one he was more than willing to take. "Good," he grunted.

He opened his mouth to Marco's cock once again, taking as much as he could. He loved the way the cold silver barbells felt against his lips and tongue. Body piercings had never



appealed to him. Evidently it wasn't the hardware, but the men who didn't turn him on, because, holy fuck, he didn't think he could get enough of playing with Marco's.

One of his bottom teeth snagged on one of the metal balls causing Marco to thrust his hips and cry out in pleasure. The slurping sounds coming from his lover intensified as Kent began to purposely bite and pull at the barbells. Kent didn't know that his cock had ever been sucked in such a fervent manner.

He pumped his head up and down on Marco's shaft, scraping his teeth along the ladder as he plunged down to the root over and over. The lips around his cock tightened as the first rope of cum erupted from Marco.

The tight suction Marco had on his dick combined with the taste of his lover's seed on his tongue, tipped Kent over the edge. He shot his load down Marco's throat in wave after wave of ecstasy.

Kent licked Marco's cock clean and turned around to lie beside him. Without a word, he attacked Marco's mouth, combining their mutual flavours in an erotic dance of tongues. "Come back here with me tonight."

Marco lifted his hand to cup Kent's cheek. "I can't, especially not tonight. If for some reason Eddy came back, and I wasn't there..."

*Damn.* Kent hadn't even considered Eddy returning after he and Moody left. "Just in case, maybe you should all come back here?"

"It's too early for the kids to know we're sleeping together."

Kent brushed his lips lightly across Marco's and gestured towards a closed door. "They don't need to know. I think we can be sneaky enough, don't you?"

"You haven't even met them. Why would you invite us...?"

Kent silenced Marco with a kiss. "Until I know Eddy isn't going to bother you, I don't want you or the kids out of my sight. I'd suggest crashing at your place, but I thought it would be easier to sneak into your bed if we were all here."

Marco laughed. "Well, since I sleep on the couch, you're probably right."

Kent sat up. "What do you mean you sleep on the sofa?"

Marco shrugged and pushed himself into a sitting position, gently fondling Kent's cock with his hand. "The house only has two bedrooms. I gave one to the boys and the other to Maria. It's really not an issue. I've always slept on the couch. Hell, I wouldn't know what to do with myself if I had my own room."

Kent felt his cock twitch. He gave Marco one more kiss and slid off the bed. "I'm gonna grab a quick shower."

He left a beautifully nude Marco in bed as he headed for the bathroom. Without bothering to warm the water, he turned it on full blast, hoping the cold spray would cool his renewed ardour.

Once the water had warmed, he picked up the liquid soap and squirted some into his palm. Marco was one of his highest paid employees. He was also probably the hardest worker of the bunch. What must it be like for the man to go home after a long day and take care of three kids, and then to sleep on the couch?

Kent thought of all the negative names he'd called Marco over the years. He was more than ashamed of himself, he was mortified. How many times had he sat across the poker table from Marco and put him down for what Kent believed to be the man's wild lifestyle?

Now he knew the real story, Kent wondered why Marco had never corrected him. He was deep in thought when the shower door slid open and Marco stepped in.

"Mind if I rinse off?"

Kent put a steadying hand around the man he'd cared about for years. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"About what?" Marco asked absently, rubbing soap over his well-toned body.

"About your family. Was it the age thing?" Kent dribbled soap down the front of Marco's body and began helping his lover wash. He paid particular attention to the man's cock and balls.

"We come from two different worlds. It was easier for me to *think* you wouldn't approve of the way I lived than to *know* you wouldn't approve."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean? I'm not a fucking snob. Every cent I have, I earned."

"Hell, Kent, you looked down on me just because you thought I dated too much. What would you have thought of me if you knew my mom had abandoned four kids and my dad was a mean drunk who liked to take his anger out on anyone handy?"

Kent released Marco's cock and gripped him by the shoulders. "The reason I said that stuff about you dating around was because it hurt! I wanted you! *Me!* But I knew you'd never settle for an old man when I thought you had a different stud in your bed every night."

Marco took a step and plastered himself against Kent's chest. "You're not too old for me, just too good."

"No." Kent wrapped his arms around Marco. "You've sacrificed more of yourself than I would have."

"That's not true and we both know it. You've just never been in the same position. I did what anyone would have done."

Kent still wasn't sure of that, but he knew there would be time later to discuss it further. He made sure the soap was rinsed from Marco's body and turned off the water. "We'd better hurry or we're going to be late."

\* \* \* \*

Kent loaded a large laundry basket of clean clothes into the trunk of Angelo's car before going around to the front passenger door. He wanted to lean in and devour his lover's mouth, but with a cute pair of ten-year-old eyes staring at him, he knew it wasn't possible.

"You remember the security code, right?"

Marco grinned. "It's my birth date. How could I forget?"

Kent nodded. "Just make yourselves comfortable. There's a media room in the left wing along with some candy and stuff."

Marco covered Kent's hand where it rested on the door. "Thanks."

Kent leant down, stuck his head through the open window and whispered in Marco's ear. "Thank me later. Please."

Marco chuckled. "Don't forget to pick up Bruno at nine."

"I won't. You told him I'd be coming after him, didn't you?" Although he'd met Bruno the night he'd shown up at Marco's house, they'd yet to be formally introduced.

"Yeah. Don't sweat it. Bruno's a good kid."

Angelo started the car, and Kent started to step back. Marco reached out and grabbed Kent's hand. "Be careful."

"I will. You four have a nice dinner." He felt suddenly alone when Marco released his hand and Angelo drove off. Kent continued to watch the luxury sedan until it was out of sight.

"You sure you're up for this?"

Kent walked towards Moody. "No, but I'm glad you're here. Left up to me, I'd probably do something...unlawful."

Moody chuckled and stepped back into the house. "I don't think what I'm planning is exactly on the up-and-up." Moody reached into his back pocket and pulled out several folded sheets of paper. "Here. I thought it might be a good idea to know what we're up against."

Kent took the pages. "Eduardo De La Santo." He glanced at Moody. "Eddy's rap sheet?"

Moody nodded. "If there was a school for thugs, Eddy'd be their valedictorian."

Kent scanned the list of offences. It went back years. It appeared that a gang had played a huge part in Eddy's life. "The Dominions. How do I know that name?"

"You've probably seen their tags spray painted around town. They've been around for years selling drugs, robbing, killing rival gang members. Although I don't think Eddy's an active member, he was once their leader."

Kent continued reading Eddy's list of crimes. Most of the items listed were things Eddy had been arrested for but not convicted of. The man had done time twice though, once for assault and once for... "Contributing to the delinquency of a minor? Call me naïve, but I wasn't aware you could get seventeen months in jail for buying some kid beer."

Moody shook his head. "He didn't. That was the result of him pleading guilty to a lesser charge. He was running prostitutes. The cops knew it, but they couldn't get any of his whores to testify."

Kent handed the pages back to Moody. "If he's got a stable of prostitutes, why does he need money from Marco?"

"The whores belong to The Dominion. When Eddy lost his position, he also lost his income. He's been shackled up with a stripper in Santa Clarita until recently. I talked to the cops down there. Let's just say they were glad to be rid of him. The guy's a grade A asshole with a temper."

"Okay. So what's the plan?" Kent sat on the worn, lumpy couch. He couldn't believe Marco slept on the damn thing.

"We wait. If Eddy shows up, I arrest him on a few outstanding warrants and the beating of his son. With any luck, he'll resist, and I'll have something else to charge him with. We also make it clear Marco and the kids are not to be contacted in any way."

Kent wasn't sure if he was happy Moody planned to arrest Eddy. He'd already prepared himself for a good old fashioned ass whipping. He heard Rufus barking at the back door which reminded him. "You sure you don't mind taking Rufus for a couple days?"

Moody shook his head. "I certainly don't mind. I just hope he leaves Angelo's flowerbeds alone."

Kent felt bad his home wasn't equipped to accommodate a dog the size of Rufus. "Maybe I'll look into fencing my yard."

Moody chuckled. "Damn. From what I've heard, the two of you've been at each other's throats for years. Amazing what one day of opening up can do."

Kent knew the detective was making fun of him, but he didn't care. "I'm only following your advice. You told me to make up my mind before it was too late."

Moody laughed louder. "None of us expected you to move Marco and the kids into your house within twenty-four hours, though."

"It's just until I know Eddy won't be a problem," he tried to excuse himself.

"Yeah, right."

\* \* \* \*

"So what's up with you and this new guy?" Nicky asked.

Marco swallowed the bite of hamburger in his mouth and took a drink of his milkshake. "His name's Kent Baker and you've all heard me talk about him for years."

"Yeah, but...like...you seem to be more than friends." Nicky ducked his head after saying it.

Marco was sure his sexuality was a cause of embarrassment for his brothers, but he'd never really shoved it in their faces. "I like him, always have."

"Is he your boyfriend?" Maria asked.

Marco's gaze flicked to Angelo. His friend grinned. "Would that be okay with you, sweetheart?"

Maria seemed to think about it for several seconds. "I guess."

"You guys aren't gonna mess around in front of us, right?" Nicky asked.

Marco set down his burger and leant across the table towards his brother. He understood the question, but how much of his personal life did Nicky expect him to give up.

Hell, he was a twenty-four-year old man and had never even spent an entire night with a man. He opened his mouth to lay into Nicky when Angelo kicked him under the table.

"What?" he asked.

Angelo nodded towards Maria. "I think I'm going to take Maria into the arcade."

Marco nodded, thankful his friend had been thinking of his sister, even if he hadn't.

As soon as Angelo led Maria into the brightly lit arcade adjoining the burger joint, Marco addressed Nicky. "I will try my best not to make out with Kent in front of you guys, but there will be times when you'll see me kiss him. I also plan to sleep in Kent's room while we're over there."

Nicky made a face. "Just make sure it's as far away from where I'll be sleeping as possible. The sound of you getting boned during the night makes me want to puke."

Marco was shocked. He wasn't sure whether to laugh or get pissed.

Evidently, Nicky knew it and tried to soften the statement. He reached across the table and jabbed Marco in the arm. "I know what you've given up to take care of us, and I want to see you smile for a change, but I'm just a little uncomfortable with it."

"Fair enough."

"He's the reason you went back to school, isn't he?"

"Yeah. Partially."

Nicky narrowed his dark brown eyes. "Why?"

Marco sighed and shifted uncomfortably in his chair. "Kent is everything I've ever wanted in a partner, but he's also incredibly successful. I guess I just didn't..."

"Feel like you was good enough," Nicky finished for Marco.

"Yeah. To be honest, I still don't, but he wants me anyway."

"I only met the guy for about ten minutes or so, but he seems cool. Not as cool as you are, but he's all right." Nicky stood and tossed his napkin on the table. "You don't see half the things we see."

"What're you talking about? What things?"

Nicky grinned. "The good things about you. The shit money and education can't get a person."

Marco watched as his fifteen-year-old brother sauntered into the game room. He scowled when he noticed the top of Nicky's boxer shorts prominently on display. "Kids."

## Chapter Five

The ballgame on TV was in the third inning when Rufus started barking. Kent and Moody jumped to their feet at the same time. "You think he's trying to come in the back?"

"I don't know, but someone's out there." Moody readjusted the shoulder holster under his light-weight jacket. "Stay here, I'll go look out back."

Kent moved to the doorway leading into the kitchen. The sound of something slamming against the back of the house was heard over the dog. "See anything?"

He'd no sooner got the words out of his mouth as gun fire erupted, peppering the front of the house with a spray of bullets.

Kent heard Moody shout something as he dropped to the floor. The television set exploded in a flash of blue light. *Shit*. He heard the sound of tires squealing on the pavement and Rufus' continued barking. "Please tell me you're not dead?"

Several moments later, Moody walked into the room with his cell phone to his ear, and blood running down the side of his face. "You okay?"

"Yeah. Might've pissed myself though."

Moody chuckled and disappeared back into the kitchen, still on the phone.

Kent stood and dusted the broken glass from his clothes and hair. He felt something on his face and reached up to discover a trail of blood running down his forehead. "I'll be in the bathroom."

Passing Maria's bedroom, Kent entered the small bathroom and turned on the light. He found a washcloth and began cleaning the small cuts. They all looked superficial, so he didn't think a doctor was in order, but he knew the few cuts he had would be enough to scare Marco.

After rummaging around under the sink, he came up with a box of cartoon character bandages. "Great," he grumbled.

Moody stuck his head into the bathroom. "Sure you're okay?"

Kent nodded. "I'm fine."

"Police are on their way. Eddy blind-sided me." He wiped at the small cut under his eye. "Bastard got away when the gunfire started."

"What the hell *was* that?" Kent asked, bandaging the last of the nicks on his face.

Moody turned and walked back into the living room with Kent close behind him. "I think Eddy brought company."

Kent's chest tightened. "You think he was trying to have his family killed?"

Moody rubbed the back of his neck. "No. I think Eddy was coming around back because he knew he was being followed. The gun spray was probably from whoever he was trying to get away from."

Kent studied the room. In a matter of seconds, Marco's living room had been trashed. Kent's gut clenched when he noticed the sofa. How many bullets had found their way into that piece of crap?

An image of Marco sleeping peacefully on the couch assaulted him. Kent shook his head. This time of night, the whole family probably would have been sitting around on the furniture watching television.

Sweat began to pour from Kent's neck and forehead. "Do I need to be here?"

Moody glanced around the room. "No. I'll take care of it."

Kent nodded and went through to the kitchen. He grabbed the long leather leash from the kitchen table and opened the back door. "Rufus!"

\* \* \* \*

By the time Angelo pulled into Kent's driveway, they still hadn't heard anything from Kent or Moody. Marco really wanted to call, but he'd promised he wouldn't.

"Is this the place?" Nicky asked from the backseat.

"Yeah," Marco answered, checking his phone to make sure it was on.

Nicky whistled. "Please marry this guy."

Angelo and Marco both began to chuckle at Nicky's change in attitude. "Just don't get too comfortable. We'll probably only be here for a couple of days."

Nicky got out of the car and grabbed the laundry basket out of the trunk.

Marco opened his door. "You coming in?"

Angelo shook his head. "I'll leave you guys to get settled."



Marco reached across and squeezed Angelo's arm. "The dog food's in the trunk. If you run out before we can get back home, just call and I'll get you some more."

"Rufus will be fine, don't worry."

Marco gave Angelo's arm one last squeeze before getting out of the car. "Maria, sweetheart, can you hand me my crutches?"

He heard a bang coming from the trunk and winced. Hopefully, the ten-year-old didn't scratch Angelo's pride and joy. After steadying himself on the crutches, he turned to shut the car door. "Thanks."

Angelo waved at Nicky and Maria. "I'll talk to you in the morning."

Marco nodded and made his way to the front door. He fished the borrowed key out of his pocket and unlocked the door. "I need to turn off the alarm."

"Alarm?" Nicky whistled. "Fancy."

Marco tapped his birth date into the keypad. "There. That should do it."

He heard the laundry basket drop to the pristine dark-wood floor and Nicky was off. "Hey!"

The expression on Maria's face was one of wonder. "That nice man really lives here?"

"Yep," Marco answered, leading Maria into the large living room. He realised it wasn't the kind of room you kicked off your shoes and got comfortable in. "Let's get something to drink and find the media room."

"What's a media room?" Maria asked.

Although Marco had worked for years on houses that held media rooms, he'd never actually been in one. "It's a room that is specifically designed to watch television and movies." He grinned. "At least that's what I hear. Let's go see if we can find it."

\* \* \* \*

At a few minutes after nine, Marco tucked Maria into one of the guest beds. He realised he'd forgotten to bring his baby sister's nightlight. "Do you want me to leave the door open and the hall light on?"

Maria nodded. "Where will you sleep?"

Marco had been trying to figure that out all evening. "Would you be upset if I slept in the room with Kent?"

Maria bit her lip, her sweet face wrinkled in thought. "What if I need you during the night?"

He brushed Maria's curls away from her face and bent down to kiss her on the nose. "I'll be at the end of the hall. All you have to do is knock on the door."

After several moments, Maria nodded. "I guess that'll be okay."

Marco smiled at his baby sister. "I love you."

"I love you, too," she whispered around a yawn.

Marco reached over and turned off the bedside lamp. "Get some sleep, sweetheart."

As he made his way back down the stairs, the front door opened. He almost tumbled down the steps when Kent entered with Bruno and a leashed Rufus in tow. He was about to ask about the dog when he noticed the bandages on Kent's face. "What happened?"

Kent handed Rufus off to Bruno. "Why don't you find the kitchen and get Rufus a bowl of water?"

"Kent?" Marco continued down the stairs, his gut twisting in knots the closer he got to his lover.

Once Bruno was out of the room, Kent walked towards Marco and wrapped his arms around him. "We need to talk."

Marco nodded. "What happened?"

Kent gestured to the kitchen. "Can I buy you a cup of coffee?"

"No, but you can buy me a beer. By your expression, I'm gonna guess I'll need one."

Once in the kitchen, Kent scratched Rufus behind the ears and took his leash off. "I bet Nicky's already found the media room."

Marco could tell Kent wanted to talk to him alone. "Yeah. It's down the hall to your right, Bruno."

Kent opened the fridge and handed Bruno a couple of cans of Coke. "Nicky's probably ready for one."

Bruno glanced down at Rufus before addressing Marco. "I couldn't find his food, did you bring it?"

"It's in Angelo's car," Marco groaned.

"That's okay. I can pick up some more in the morning. I'm sure I've got something he can eat," Kent assured them.

Bruno nodded and left the room.

"Have a seat." Kent pulled a package of steaks out of the freezer and slid them into the microwave to defrost.

"You're not seriously going to feed a dog steak." Hell, Marco couldn't remember the last time he'd eaten steak. The thought of giving the high-priced meat to a dog went against everything he believed in.

Kent just shrugged and passed Marco a bottle of beer. "He saved my life tonight. He deserves to dine like a king."

Marco's breath hitched. "You'd better start talking before I freak the fuck out."

Kent pulled a stool in front of Marco's and told him the events as they happened. "...so you see, if I'd been on that couch I'd be dead. But more importantly, if you hadn't told Moody about Eddy coming by and the four of you were home..."

Kent closed his eyes and pulled Marco in for a kiss. "I keep going over and over it in my mind."

After the initial shock of hearing how close Kent was to getting shot, Marco's lust began to get the better of him. He wasn't sure if it was the need to reaffirm Kent was okay, or the thought that he'd come close to losing either the man he loved or his family. "I need you to fuck me."

Kent's eyes went wide. "Wh...what?"

Marco stood and grabbed his crutches. "Where are the boys sleeping?"

Kent still appeared shocked. "Well, I thought they might enjoy sleeping in the maid's quarters over the garage. It's set up like a small apartment."

"You have a maid?" Marco was shocked.

"No, well, yes, but Lisa only comes twice a week. The house was built with a family in mind."

"Okay, I'll tell the boys to find it and head to bed in an hour." Marco pressed his body against Kent. "Feed the dog, take him out to pee and meet me in your bedroom."

Kent appeared completely rattled by the exchange as Marco made his way towards the media room.

\* \* \* \*

By the time Rufus finally found a spot suitable to do his business, Kent was starting to get impatient. "Come on, boy."

He locked up the house, turned off the lights and set the alarm before taking the steps two at a time. Taking the time to peek in Maria's room, Kent was surprised to find the little girl's eyes wide open. "Hey, aren't you supposed to be asleep?"

"Did you talk to Eddy?"

Kent walked into the room and sat on the edge of the bed. It didn't surprise him Maria would refer to Eddy by name. Even in the short time he'd known the little girl, it was obvious Marco had been the only father-figure in her life. "No."

This was entirely new territory for him. He wasn't sure if he was supposed to lie or tell the truth. One thing he was sure of was that he'd never put the sweet little girl in harm's way. "Would you like to stay here for a while?"

"What about Marco?"

Kent smiled. "You can all stay."

Maria rolled to her side and clasped her hands under her cheek. "Why do you live in this big house all by yourself? Don't you get lonely?"

Kent swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Yes, it's very lonely sometimes. Which is why you guys would be doing me a big favour if you stayed."

"Sometimes I spill stuff," Maria admitted.

"That's okay."

"But your house looks brand new. Won't you get mad?"

Kent shook his head. "My house is older than you are. It only looks new because it's never really been a home." He playfully tugged on one of Maria's curls. "I'd much rather have stains on the floor if it meant I wasn't alone anymore."

"Marco likes you. He told us."

"Can I tell you a secret?"

Maria nodded.

Kent bent down to whisper in her ear. "I'm in love with your brother." He rose back up and put his finger over his lips. "Shhh, don't tell him. It'll be our secret."

Maria giggled and pretended to lock her lips and throw away the key.

With a smile on his face, Kent stood and tucked the covers around Maria. "Would you feel better if Rufus slept with you?"

Maria's eyes widened. "Really?"

"I'll be right back." Kent left the room and went to the top of the stairs and called for his furry saviour. "Rufus! Come here, boy."

The big German Shepherd bounded up the stairs. Kent led the dog to Maria's room where Rufus promptly jumped on the bed, licked the little girl and settled beside her.

Feeling better, Kent went to the master bedroom. He opened the door and stopped dead in his tracks. "Holy fuck," he whispered.

Marco was naked and spread-eagled in the centre of the bed. He stepped into the room and locked the door. As he undressed, he couldn't help but stare at the perfect specimen of manhood draped seductively over Marco's thigh.

Licking his lips, he checked the bedside drawer to make sure he still had condoms and came up with two. He held one up to the light to make sure they weren't expired and grinned. He tossed the condoms and lube onto the bed and studied Marco's bronzed body as his soon-to-be lover stared back at him.

"Fuck, even your feet are sexy."

Marco chuckled as Kent took Marco's big toe into his mouth and gave it a gentle suck. He knew if he wasn't careful, he'd become a foot man like Angelo. Never before had he seen the appeal, but he definitely did now.

Kent released the perfectly shaped toe and continued up Marco's leg. When he reached the back of his lover's knee, he playfully nipped at the skin, eliciting a moan from Marco.

Marco's cock began to fill as he bent his leg and revealed himself fully to Kent's questing tongue.

He groaned when Kent began sucking on his sac, taking first one nut and then the next into his mouth.

As Kent continued to pay homage to Marco's balls, he stared up the length of his lover's body. Marco's cock had gone rock hard and the light from the bedside lamp made the piercings sparkle. Like he had earlier in the day, Kent wondered what it would feel like to be fucked by the hardware covered cock. It would have to wait until morning, because his dick needed to bury itself deep into Marco first.

"Play with your cock," Kent told Marco as he moved lower on the bed. He pushed Marco's good leg further out as he started to rim his lover's pucker. Marco's hole opened

immediately for Kent's tongue, which surprised him until he tasted the subtle flavour of soap. He grinned. Seemed his baby had prepared himself well.

The silky inner walls of Marco's ass seemed to welcome Kent's attention as they tightened around his tongue. He reached blindly for the bottle of lube, knowing he couldn't hold off sinking his cock into the hot Latin body another minute.

He sat back on his heels and ripped open the condom package before sheathing himself. "Roll to your side, babe."

Kent knew it would be tricky working around Marco's sore knee and the last thing he wanted was to bring his lover discomfort. He spooned his body behind Marco's and began lubing the smaller man's hole.

Marco reached down and hooked his good knee over his arm, giving Kent an open invitation. *Perfect.*

He nestled the head of his cock between the spread cheeks of Marco's ass and slowly entered his lover's channel. "Oh, Christ!"

Immediately, Marco's body seemed to suck Kent's dick in to the root. Had he ever fit so perfectly inside another man's body? He reached around Marco's hip and ran his lube-slicked hand over the man's decorated cock as he began a steady rhythm.

Kent used his thumb to press against the piercings one by one. "That feel good, baby?"

Marco grunted in reply, hoisting his leg even higher. The added room to manoeuvre allowed Kent to increase the speed and intensity of his thrusts.

Kent's thumb settled on the silver barbell directly under the crown of Marco's cock. He continued to apply pressure to the sensitive area, longing for the day when he could twist his lover like a pretzel and bury himself as deep as his cock would allow.

After all the years of waiting and hoping for Marco in his bed, Kent knew the realisation was even better than the fantasy. Marco was his and always would be. He knew he wanted to see his name tattooed somewhere on Marco's perfect body. Just the thought of branding his lover in such a way threatened to tip him over the edge. He applied more pressure to the piercing, yearning for his lover's cum to cover his hand.

"Do it," he growled in Marco's ear.

Two deep thrusts later, Marco shot, covering not only Kent's hand but his own stomach. Kent doubted he'd ever made anyone come so much. He was still flying high on the thought when he felt his own balls tighten and explode, filling the condom.

Kent gave himself a few moments to enjoy the continued aftershocks before gripping the base of the condom and pulling out. As he tied off the rubber and tossed it into the trashcan beside the bed, Marco carefully set his leg down.

Too satisfied to get up, Kent reached for his T-shirt on the floor and cleaned them both. He snuggled against Marco's back and whispered the words he'd waited years to say. "I love you."

Marco pulled away enough to roll to his back. He reached out and pulled Kent by the back of the head into a deep kiss.

Even Marco's kisses felt like the best he'd ever had. Kent wondered if love truly did make the difference. He wanted to believe Marco felt the same. The thought of Marco enjoying sex with another man as much as what they'd just shared, left him shaken.

"Was it good?" Kent knew it was an insecure thing to ask, but he needed to know.

"The best," Marco whispered, kissing Kent again.

In that moment, Kent wanted to ask Marco to move in permanently, but he knew it was too soon. He'd continue to think of excuses why Marco and the kids needed to stay until they could no longer imagine leaving.

Marco pressed his lips against Kent's shoulder. "Did Moody say who he thought was after Eddy?"

Kent should have expected the question. Now that Marco had been given time to process the information Kent had given him, he was sure his lover would have a lot of questions.

"Probably someone he owes money to. Do you think he would've crossed The Dominions?"

"I don't think he'd openly cross them. He knows too much about the way they deal with that kind of situation. But I can see him trying to skirt them. Maybe he's got a whore or two he's pimping out without giving his old friends their cut."

"So you think he's running prostitutes on The Dominions' turf?"

"No. He's too smart for that. It doesn't matter where in the city he's trying to run them. Once you're in The Dominions, they own your loyalty until death. If they found out, they would consider it an act against them."

"But I know he's run prostitutes before. I saw it on his rap sheet." This was an entirely new world for him and he knew he was in way over his head.

"Yes and no. He ran them for The Dominions, but never for himself. Believe me, if he had, we'd be living in a much bigger house."

The mention of his house brought up something else they really needed to discuss. "You'll need to call your insurance company. I'll make sure the house is repaired, but it should be turned in anyway."

"How bad is it?"

Kent wanted to down-play the damage, but he knew Marco would see it soon enough. "Bad. I called one of the night watchmen over at the office to get someone to help him board up the front windows. It should be okay until we can get over there in the morning."

Kent felt Marco's body begin to shake. He wrapped his arms tighter around the man he loved. "It'll be okay. I won't let anything happen to any of you."

"Do you think whoever shot at the house was trying to get Eddy or us?"

"I'd say Eddy, but I don't think they cared if they took anyone else out in the process. Which is why I think it's doubly important all of you stay here until this can all be sorted out."

Marco let out a disgusted snort. "I bet if you had this day to do over again, you'd have just patted me on the back and told me to get my ass to work."

"No." Kent leant up on one elbow. "The only thing I regret about this morning was not straightening things out years ago. I was an ass."

"We both were. I was so sure you'd look down on me..."

"Are you kidding? After hearing what you've been through, I look up to you. You've handled yourself like a man since the age of sixteen. No one could find fault with that."

Marco's body began to relax as Kent settled him against his chest. Kent was pleasantly pleased Marco didn't protest staying longer. In the coming days, he hoped to show Marco how well he could fit into their lives.



## Chapter Six

It was another two days before Marco could finish the brick wall project and start repairing the damage to his house. The day he'd gotten his first look, he'd excused himself and threw up beside the damaged home he'd grown up in.

As he sat staring out the front windshield of Kent's truck, he began to wonder if he'd ever again feel safe in the house he'd worked so hard to hang onto. He felt a comforting hand at the back of his neck.

"You okay?"

*Was he?* Marco knew he still couldn't answer that question. Years earlier when he'd finally gathered the courage to kick Eddy out, Marco thought that was the last of the violence his brothers and sister would have to witness.

"I'm glad you were able to find a sitter for Maria. I'm not sure she'd be able to handle this." Marco heard his old pickup pull in behind them and knew his brothers were looking at the damage for the first time. He wondered if they were thinking the same thing he was.

Kent kissed Marco's cheek. "I'm going to start unloading the windows. Take as much time as you need."

Marco shook his head. "I don't need time. I just need to see it back to the way it was."

He opened his door and carefully jumped down. Although his knee was still swollen, he'd been able to get around with one crutch which would help a lot in the coming days. He wondered how long the project would take. Not only did the windows need replacing, but the woodwork and walls, inside and out, needed patched, sanded and painted.

As he neared the front door, Marco caught several of his neighbours peering out their windows. He bet they'd be more than happy to see the entire family gone from their street. He flashed his best smile and waved, unsurprised when the curtains immediately closed.

He heard a horn honk and glanced over his shoulder to see his friends pull in front of the house. Zac, Eric, Trey and Cole piled out of Cole's truck and headed his way.

"We heard you could use a hand," Zac called.

Marco felt warmed by the gesture. He knew how much weekends meant to his friends, but he also knew they were always there for each other. "I could use more than one. Luckily you brought eight."

"And you've got more on the way. Jules was called into the hospital, but Bobby, Angelo and Moody will also be here."

The group of men immediately began helping unload the supplies out of Kent's truck. Marco noticed the puzzled expression on his brothers' faces and called them over. "What's up?"

Bruno crossed his muscled arms over his broad chest. "Who're all these people?"

"My poker buddies. You've heard me talk about them."

"Yeah, but you've never introduced us," Nicky grumbled. "Is there a reason for that?"

Marco didn't know what to say. He didn't want his brothers to think he'd been ashamed of them, but he realised that's exactly the way it appeared. He dug deep to try and come up with an honest explanation.

"I was embarrassed," he finally admitted. "Not by you guys, so don't ever think that. I was ashamed that we had shitty parents. These guys didn't grow up like we did. I guess I thought they wouldn't understand."

Bruno reached out and punched Marco in the arm, nearly knocking him on his ass. "If we said something like that, you'd tell us they weren't really friends if they didn't like us because of our parents."

Marco chuckled. "You're right. Maybe I didn't give them enough credit."

"Doesn't sound like you gave them any credit at all," Nicky chimed in.

"How'd the two of you get so smart?"

Bruno grinned. "We had the best role model and teacher anyone could ask for."

Marco pretended to stick his finger down his throat. "Stop or you're going to make me puke."

Laughing, Bruno and Nicky walked away. Marco watched his brothers introduce themselves one by one to his friends. He felt true pride for the first time in a long time. Despite recent events, he knew he was witnessing his greatest achievement in life.

"Something wrong?" Kent asked, slipping an arm around Marco's waist.

Marco cleared his throat. "No. My brothers are good kids."

"That they are. You should feel proud."

Marco nodded. "I do."

\* \* \* \*

After they finished for the day, Kent invited everyone over to his house for a cookout. On the way, he and Marco stopped at the grocery store. When Kent noticed Marco getting a large bag of store brand dog food, he scowled.

"That's not good for Rufus. Get one of the yellow and white bags."

Marco set the bag in the cart. "Since when are you an expert on dogs?"

"I'm not, but I do watch TV. That other brand is supposed to be better for them."

Marco rolled his eyes. "It also costs three times more. The only real difference is the amount they shit and for three times the price, I'd rather have Nicky picking up piles of crap than to have him going without something else he needs."

Kent started to argue, but snapped his mouth shut. He knew the money issue would be their biggest adjustment. He couldn't fault Marco. He'd learned the hard way how to budget and stretch a dollar. Growing up in a middle-class family and going on to become quite wealthy, Kent had never worried about where his next meal was coming from. He decided to pick his battles when it came to money.

They passed the produce section and Marco playfully picked up a cucumber. "Give you an ideas?"

Kent chuckled. "Not nearly as many as that big, twisted zucchini is giving me."

Marco spotted the odd shaped vegetable and started to laugh. "You are not buying that. Walk away, Kent. Just walk away."

The meat section proved another obstacle. Kent automatically started to reach for the big T-bone steaks.

"These are cheaper," Marco said, holding up a package of patio steaks.

"Yeah and they taste cheaper. This is my dinner party. Please let me serve what I want."

Marco dropped the patio steaks and walked off. Kent sighed. The last thing he wanted was to get into a fight over fucking steaks. He loaded the cart and caught up with Marco.

"I'm sorry if that came out wrong."

Marco shrugged. "No. I'm sorry. The kids have never had T-bones. It's selfish, but I hate for them to get used to things like that. It'll just make it that much harder when we have to go home and live on hamburger and mac and cheese."

If Kent had his way, they'd never be going back to their old life. "So we feed them hotdogs tomorrow, but tonight we all dine like royalty. Please let me to do this for them."

"Only if you'll let me help pay."

"Deal."

After paying for the groceries and loading the truck, Kent headed back to his house.

Marco reached over and put a hand on Kent's thigh. "Sorry if I made you mad."

"You didn't. We just have different ways of looking at things. Doesn't mean one of us is right and the other is wrong. It'll take time and compromise, but I'm up for it. What about you?"

With his head turned towards Kent, Marco smiled. "I can't help feeling that you're compromising too much. I mean...hell. Do you know what you're getting into? The De La Santo's come with baggage. Lots of it. It's not just about buying store brand things over name brands. It's about not being able to drop everything and go to the movies, or not being able to lay naked on the couch and make love all day."

Kent understood what Marco was trying to tell him. He'd be lying to himself if he said he hadn't thought about all the things the two of them couldn't do, but it was the things they could do that pushed their relationship over the top for him.

Although he knew it wasn't the time or place, Kent unbuckled and slid across the seat. He wrapped his arms around Marco and kissed him, keeping it short, but heartfelt. "I love you. Have for years. Do you honestly think not being able to fuck you anytime I want is gonna change that?"

Marco's eyes sparkled. "Besides my brothers and sister, no one's ever said those words to me."

It was an incredibly telling statement. Kent wondered what it would've been like to never hear that his parents loved him. He made a mental note to call his dad. Since his mom's death a few years earlier, Tom Baker had retired and moved to Phoenix. Although Kent got down a couple of times a year to play golf, they definitely weren't as close as they used to be.

Kent kissed Marco again, letting his tongue slip inside to brush against Marco's. "Please tell me we can make this work?"

Marco smiled, his white teeth a stark contrast to his dark skin tone. "I hope so, because I love you, too."

\* \* \* \*

When they pulled into the circular drive, Marco was pleased to see Kent's backyard fence was well underway. He'd tried to fight his lover over it, but Kent had insisted he'd meant to add one a long time ago, but never got around to it.

Looking at the expensive black iron fencing, Marco began to wonder if it would hold a dog like Rufus in. "You don't think the bars are too far apart, do you?"

Kent turned off the engine and studied the work his crew had done earlier in the day. "Not at all. It should hold Rufus just fine. But if you're worried, we can figure something else out."

"No. Just wondering." Marco couldn't ask Kent to do any more than what he already had. He'd brought several chain link panels over from the construction site and had set up a temporary twelve by twelve enclosure to hold Rufus while they were at work.

Between the two of them, they managed to get all the groceries in one trip. When Kent opened the door for him, Marco was hit by the noise level of the house. He knew from the driveway that only Bruno, Nicky and Maria were there, so why all the noise?

"We're home," he called.

Maria came running into the kitchen, skidding to a stop in front of Marco. He set the bag of groceries down and hugged her. "What's all the noise about?"

Maria giggled. "They're playing a video game and keep accusing each other of cheating."

"How do you cheat on a video game?" Marco asked.

Maria shrugged. "Ask them."

Marco noticed Kent hadn't said anything since they entered the house. His lover was methodically putting away the groceries like he was in the house alone. He kissed Maria's forehead. "Go on and play. We'll call you when everyone gets here."

Maria started to leave, but came back and gave Kent a hug from the side. His hands full of meat packages, Kent seemed startled by the display of affection. Kent's gaze went from the top of Maria's head to Marco.

The expression on Kent's face nearly knocked the wind out of Marco. It wasn't a look of annoyance but rather one of longing. He nodded to Kent with a smile.

Kent set down the steaks and picked Maria up into his arms. He gave the black-haired beauty a kiss on the nose. "What was that for?"

Maria shrugged. "I missed you guys today."

Kent's Adam's apple bobbed up and down several times before he answered. "I missed you, too, sweetheart."

Marco liked that Kent had started using the same endearment he used. "Okay, break it up, you two. We've got a lot of work to do if we're having guests for dinner."

Kent set Maria back on her feet and the little girl wandered out of the room. The boys started in on each other again, getting Marco's attention.

"Sorry about that. I'll go tell them to cool it."

"No," Kent stopped him. "I kind of like. It completely changes the whole feel of the house."

Marco snorted. "Yeah, gone are the days when you enjoyed peace and quiet."

"No. Gone are the days when I felt so lonely I had to make myself get out of bed in the morning."

Groceries forgotten, Marco made his way over to Kent. His lover's arms opened immediately, pulling Marco in close. "If this is a dream, please don't wake me."

"Oh, ooh," Nicky cried from the doorway.

Marco glanced over his shoulder. "What do you want?"

"Something to drink. Didn't know I was going to walk in on the two of you doing...whatever it is you're doing."

"We're hugging. Get used to it." Marco pulled Kent's head down for a quick, but deep kiss. "We'll be doing a lot of that, too, so there's something else you'll need to get used to."

Nicky made a face and grabbed two cans of Coke out of the refrigerator.

When he left the room, Kent chuckled. "That was mean."

Marco grinned up at his lover. "Maybe so, but I have a feeling he'd have the same reaction if you were a woman. They're just not used to seeing me in love."

\* \* \* \*

"So, Thanksgiving? Are we all getting together, or what?" Eric asked.

Marco pulled the lap blanket Kent had given him up a little higher on his chest. Although it was chilly, the adults had decided to relax outside around the large fire pit. With a full stomach, Marco looked towards the house. He could see Kent instructing the boys on loading the dishwasher. It was sad, really, that the boys had no idea how to operate something so many people took for granted.

He returned his attention back to his friends who continued to discuss the upcoming holiday. "The kids and I are up for anything you guys plan."

He heard the backdoor open and close. Kent tossed several fresh logs onto the fire and squeezed in behind Marco on the chaise longue. Marco snuggled back against the bigger man's chest and sighed. "Get them straightened out?"

Kent kissed the top of Marco's head. "Yeah, I told them to treat it like putting a puzzle together. The more they can get in the dishwasher, the less they have to wash by hand."

"What about you, Kent?" Eric asked.

"What about me?" Kent chuckled.

"Do you already have plans to go to Phoenix for Thanksgiving?"

"No. I usually go down between Christmas and New Year. Why? You planning something?"

Marco felt Kent's hands idly rubbing his stomach. He subtly pulled the bottom of his shirt up so he could feel Kent's hands on his bare skin.

"I'd like to," Eric answered. "This'll be the first time I have the day off in years."

"So, let's get together over here. We can eat turkey until we're stuffed before retiring to the media room to catch the football game." As he talked, Kent began to unfasten Marco's jeans.

Never in his life had Marco been in a similar situation. He was suddenly thankful it was dark outside. Although he began to wonder how much light the glow of the fire was shining on them. He lifted his good leg, creating a makeshift tent out of the small blanket.

Kent obviously knew what he was thinking because he felt his lover's chuckle rather than hearing it.

As everyone started making plans for what they'd bring for their holiday dinner, Marco concentrated on the fingers brushing the cropped patch of pubic hair above his quickly filling cock. He knew Kent was teasing him and it was driving Marco crazy.

"Hey," Zac piped up for the first time. "I forgot to tell you guys. I'm taking Eric on one of those gay cruises in February. We were talking and thought it would be fun if all of us went."

"I can't," Marco said immediately. Not only couldn't he afford something like that, but he knew he couldn't leave the kids. "Maybe someday though."

Kent's hand shoved deeper into Marco's jeans, wrapping around his length. Marco felt Kent's lips brush against his ear. "Are you sure you wouldn't like to go?"

Marco knew if he said yes, Kent wouldn't think twice about paying for his ticket, but he didn't want a sugar daddy. Marco pushed back against the bigger man as he slid further down in the chair, giving Kent more room to play.

"I'm sure. Maybe we can all go camping once the weather is warmer. I'll make sure to borrow a separate tent for the kids."

"Did someone say camping?" Moody asked. "Now that's my idea of a relaxing way to spend a weekend."

Somehow that fit. Marco could easily picture Moody chopping trees and wrestling bears out in the wild.

"Camping?" Angelo squeaked from Moody's lap.

Moody playfully swatted Angelo's hip. "You'll love it. I'll buy you a pair of hiking boots."

"No thanks. Not really my style," Angelo quipped.

"Yeah, that's what you said about the biker boots I got you, but you know you love 'em."

Angelo elbowed Moody. "I can't believe you told them that."

"Angelo in boots? Spill," Bobby said around a laugh.

Angelo narrowed his eyes at Moody, practically daring him to open his mouth again. Never one to back down from a challenge, Moody kissed Angelo before addressing the group.



"We made a deal. On Angelo's date night, I have to wear sneakers and go to that tacky Italian restaurant he loves so much, and on my night, he has to wear leather pants, black boots and accompany me to The Edge, my favourite hole in the wall."

The entire group began to laugh. Marco wasn't sure if it was the thought of Angelo in leather hanging out at a biker bar or the expression of humiliation on his trendy friend's face.

"I bet you're sexy in that outfit, Angelo." Trey received an admonishing poke to the side from Cole for the remark.

"He's hotter than hell and he knows it." Moody licked the side of Angelo's face.

There was something about the way Moody did it that made Marco's cock jerk in Kent's hand. Kent noticed and applied more pressure, pressing his thumb against one of his piercings.

Somehow the conversation turned to sexual secrets, and Eric was the next to pipe up. "Zac loves it when I wear nothing but my white coat and stethoscope. The man goes crazy for a good role play of doctor and patient."

Again everyone chuckled.

Cole rubbed his hand across Trey's hip and spoke. "Role playing's something Trey and I enjoy as well. Nothing like being sent to the principal's office to make a bad boy even badder."

Bobby glanced at Jules. "We like to do it in risky places. There's nothing like the fear of getting caught to really get the blood pumping."

All eyes turned to Marco and Kent. "Don't look at us. We're new to this."

Kent cleared his throat. "Although there is the piercings and tattoos thing you've never brought up to your friends."

"Uh, not for public knowledge." Marco tried to pull Kent's hand off his cock. He couldn't believe his lover had just exposed his secret.

Kent's hand tightened its grip on Marco's shaft. "Everyone else just spilled secrets. It's part of knowing you have friends who accept you as you are."

"What kind of piercings are we talking about?" Zac asked.

When Kent said nothing, all eyes shifted to Marco. Although he hated the thought that his friends would think he was a freak, he knew Kent was right. They were his friends no matter what. "Jacob's Ladder."

Moody choked on a swallow of beer and began coughing. After he recovered his breath, he shook his head. "You're more man than I am. I've heard those things hurt like hell."

Marco shook his head. "It's a different kind of pain, and for me, they're worth every second of discomfort."

"I'm never going to be able to look at you the same way again," Eric muttered.

"See? That's what I was afraid of. That's why I never said anything." Marco was going to kill Kent.

"Uh, it's not a bad thing. You just seem, I don't know...hotter to me."

The statement earned a low growl from Zac. Eric leant over and kissed his partner. "I love your dick, too, honey."

"Are you saying you now love Marco's cock?" Zac asked.

Eric grinned. "No. I haven't even seen it. The idea is sexy though."

Marco felt the grumble of Kent's chest against his back. He knew his lover was sorry he'd brought it up. *Good. Serves him right.*

He finished his beer and set it beside him on the ground.

"You want another?" Kent asked.

"Would you mind?"

"Not at all." He leant close to whisper in Marco's ear. "As long as you don't put that cock away while I'm gone."

"Deal."

Kent untangled himself and stood. "Anyone else need a beer?"

"I'll take one," Angelo said.

"Bring him two. He turns into a wildcat when he's been drinking." Moody did that face licking thing again, perking Marco's cock right up.

After Kent went into the house, Zac's gaze zeroed in on Marco. "You seem happy."

"Why wouldn't I be? I have the one thing I've always dreamt of."

"And a shot up house. And a father who's threatening you."

Marco thought about it. "You know, those other things suck, but they can't dampen my happiness anymore. I've lived with that shit all my life. As long as the kids are safe and taken care of, I'm going to grab every ounce of love I can while it lasts."

Out of nowhere, two strong arms hoisted him off the chair. The blanket fell away and not only was Marco being held in Kent's arms, but he was exposed to his group of friends.

"Holy fuck," Eric groaned.

"What the hell, Kent? Are you trying to show everyone my dick or what?" Marco asked.

Balancing Marco on his knee, Kent reached down and grabbed the blanket. He tossed it over Marco's lap and headed into the house. "We'll be back in a few," he threw over his shoulder to the others.

Marco was starting to freak out. Had he said something wrong? Was Kent going to break up with him? "What's wrong?"

Kent didn't say a word or stop walking until he had them locked inside one of the downstairs' bathrooms. He set Marco on the sink vanity and took a step back. "There's something you and I need to get straight."

"I'm sorry. Zac asked and I..."

Kent held up his hand. "Stop."

Marco's mouth snapped shut as he waited for the fallout.

Kent placed his hands on either side of Marco and leant forward. "As far as I'm concerned, this isn't a 'while it lasts' arrangement. If I'm some passing diversion for you, I need to know."

"Passing diversion? What the hell gave you that idea? I'm the one who's afraid you'll wake up one day and decide it's not worth the hassle. I just meant I'm gonna try and cram a lot of love into the time I have with you."

"I thought we were building a family. You don't just decide to throw that away one day."

"Why? My mom and dad did. Why should you be any different?"

Kent stepped as far away as the small room would allow and turned his back on Marco.

Marco could hear Kent grumbling to himself under his breath, so he took the opportunity to tuck his flaccid cock back into his jeans and zip up.

Kent slowly turned around and Marco realised his lover wasn't angry. The moisture threatening to spill down Kent's cheeks were proof. Kent walked back over and fit himself between Marco's thighs.

"When someone loves you, truly, deeply, loves you, they don't stop and they don't leave. I'm sorry you drew the short straw when it came to parents, but I'm not them. If I had my way, I'd tear down that damn house of yours so you and the kids couldn't go back. I want you here, with me, until the day I die."

Marco's breath hitched as his eyes began to sting. Shit. No way was he going to cry in front of Kent. He swallowed around the lump in his throat and tried to get himself under control. No one had ever chosen him. He knew his brothers and sister loved him, but they were different.

The things Bruno and Nicky had both said to him started playing through his mind. Maybe he was good enough for Kent. Surely a man like Kent, who could have anyone he desired, knew what he wanted.

*Four days.* Marco still couldn't believe he and Kent had worked out their differences only four days earlier. He knew if Maria ever came to him after dating a man for four days and said she wanted to move in, he'd go absolutely ballistic.

"What're you thinking?" Kent asked, interrupting Marco's train of thought.

"That it's only been four days."

"Bullshit. This has been building for eight years. Eight years I've waited to get close to you. I've watched you, wanted you, loved you. I'm tired of waiting. I want it all, and I want it now."

Marco nodded.

"What?"

Marco gazed into Kent's hazel eyes. "Yes. I want it, too."

## Chapter Seven

Marco taped up yet another box and wrote Maria's name on the outside in big black letters. He'd caught his baby sister several times wiping tears from her eyes. He knew he'd put off the conversation long enough.

"Come here, sweetheart."

Maria finished stuffing her bedspread into a trash bag and walked over to sit in Marco's lap. "I want to make sure you're okay with this. I know you've only known Kent for a month, and I'm worried I'm moving too fast for you."

"I like him."

"But?"

"No buts," she giggled and covered her mouth.

"And you're okay with selling the house?" Marco asked.

"Yeah."

"Then what's bothering you?" He'd looked into Maria's big brown eyes every day since she was born, and he knew when something was troubling his sister.

"I was talking to Kati the other day," she began.

Marco knew Kati was Maria's best friend in school. "Yeah?"

"When I told her we were moving in with Kent for good, she asked me which one of you was the husband and which was the wife. What did she mean by that?"

Marco took a deep breath. He knew the issue was bound to come up sooner or later, he'd just hoped he'd have a few more years.

"Well, some people think only a man and a woman should fall in love and have a family. They don't understand how two men could fall in love with each other, so they try to fit them into categories that they understand. Does that make sense?"

"Kinda. So which one are you?"

"Neither. Kent is my partner. That means we share things equally like putting you to bed, cleaning the house, doing the million other things that need to be done. It's my opinion, that in a lot of ways, two men can live together more easily because we don't assign duties

according to gender. Like some people believe women should do all the cooking and cleaning. I think if people treated marriage more like a partnership both sides would be happier."

Marco could tell he was starting to lose his sister with his ongoing monologue. "Basically, Kent and I love each other. We work together because we want to and it makes both of us happy. Does that answer your question?"

"I know you can't have babies, I learned that in health class, but do you have sex?"

Marco almost swallowed his tongue. "What do you know about sex?"

Maria rolled her eyes. "I'm almost eleven, Marco. I've heard plenty of kids talk about sex."

Despite what she said, Marco had a feeling his baby sister wasn't as educated as she proclaimed. He grinned. Which is just the way he wanted it to stay, at least for now. "Ask me again in about five years and maybe we'll discuss it."

"Fine. I'll take that as a yes. Can I finish packing now?"

"Sure."

Once Maria started on her sheets, Marco stood and wandered into the living room. He pulled out his phone and called Kent.

"Hey, babe," Kent answered.

"I just had an interesting conversation with Maria."

"Yeah? Is she upset about changing schools?"

"No. She was at first, but I told her she'd still be able to see her friends occasionally." The sound of someone banging on the door made Marco jump. "There's someone here."

"Don't answer it. I'm in the office. I'll use one of the other lines to call Moody."

"What if it's a neighbour or the realtor?" The pounding came again. "Shit. Hold on and let me peek out the window." Marco walked over and peered through the brand new mini-blind. His hand shook as he met his father's angry black eyes. "Fuck!"

"I'm calling Moody. Stay on the line and don't open the door."

Maria came out of her room. "Who's banging?"

"Go into the bathroom and lock the door, sweetheart."

"I know you're in there! Open the goddamn door!" Eddy yelled.

"Come in here with me," Maria begged.

"I can't. The important thing is for you to be safe. I've already emptied out the stuff from under the sink. Try and hide in there."

"Not without you!"

Marco suddenly realised he only had the flimsy doorknob lock in place. It wouldn't take Eddy more than a well-placed kick to get inside.

"On second thought, run out the back door and go to the neighbours."

"No."

"Maria Corrine De La Santo, do what I tell you to do!" he screamed.

With tears in her eyes, Maria ran to the kitchen. Marco heard the back door open and stepped towards the sound of his yelling father. He quickly reached out and turned the deadbolt into place, pulling his hand back like it had bit him.

"You there?" Kent asked in his ear.

"Yeah. I made Maria go out the back to one of the neighbours."

"Where're you?"

"In the living room, but I'm seriously thinking about going into the bathroom and locking the door." Out of nowhere, the front window seemed to explode.

Marco jumped back as a large yard ornament went sailing inches from his head. "Shit. He broke the window."

"Run!"

Marco did just that, locking himself in the bathroom as he heard Eddy enter the house. He sat on the floor and braced his back against the vanity and his feet against the door. "How long did Moody say it would take?"

"He said he was calling the black and whites, but he'd be over as fast as he could get there."

Eddy began to scream obscenities through the bathroom door. "Come out of there, you fucking faggot!"

As predicted, Eddy kicked the door, splintering the wood around the lock. Only Marco's feet braced against the hollow-core door kept his father out, but the continued battering against the wood was having a painful effect on Marco's, not quite healed, knee.

"I can't hold him off any longer," he told Kent.

"You have to, baby. Just a little longer."

"Go away!" he shouted. "I don't have any money!"

Eddy's next kick went right through the flimsy door. Marco looked around for something, anything, he could use as a weapon.

"I gotta put the phone down." Marco dropped the phone to the floor beside him and reached up to the towel bar beside the sink. He wrapped his hands around the square bit of chrome and pulled down with as much of his weight as he could as Eddy steadily chipped away at the door.

A knife appeared through the door and swung down towards Marco's feet just as the bar broke free. Marco swung at the hand holding the knife with all his might, hearing a satisfying scream from his dad as the metal connected with its target.

"You little sonofabitch! You're gonna pay for that."

Marco continued swinging the rod back and forth in front of the hole. He heard the police sirens pulling up in front of the house. "Here that, Eddy? They're coming to take your ass to jail."

"Fuck that!" With one more body slam, the door gave way and splinters, wood and his father came crashing down on Marco.

"If I'm going to jail, it'll be for murder," Eddy growled.

"Hold it right there," a deep voice shouted from the hallway.

Although Marco knew it was Moody, he couldn't take his eyes off the knife clutched in his father's hand. On instinct, he blocked the downward plunge with his forearm, taking the knife deep into his flesh.

The sound of a gunshot filled the small bathroom as Eddy was thrown forward, the knife imbedding even further with the weight of his father's body.

The knife forgotten, Eddy sat up and spun around to face Moody. It was obvious to Marco by the crazed look in his father's eyes he was on something.

"Next one will be between the eyes," Moody growled.

With an animalistic scream, Eddy launched himself towards Moody. Another shot went off and his dad fell to the floor in a heap. Marco stared at the pool of blood blossoming onto the floor from under Eddy's body. Although he knew he'd never admit it to anyone, he came close to enjoying the sight of his dad's life draining away on the scarred wood of the old house.

In Marco's mind it seemed fitting. How much blood had already been spilled in the small home at Eddy's hands?



"Are you okay?" Moody asked, stepping over Eddy's body.

Marco gazed into the face of his saviour. "I will be now."

The paramedics rushed into the house. They started to check Eddy, but Moody growled at them. "He's dead. Take care of the victim."

Now that the excitement was over, Marco realised he still had a large knife running all the way through his forearm. He swallowed around the bile that began to rise. "I think I'm going to throw up."

A small pan was thrust in front of him as he emptied his stomach contents. He barely heard Moody as he picked Marco's phone off the floor and began talking to Kent.

Spitting one last time into the pan, Marco slumped onto his side, his head hitting the floor. He tried to keep his eyes open as he addressed Moody. "Tell him I'm okay. And someone needs to find Maria."

\* \* \* \*

By the time Kent arrived, the paramedics were loading Marco into the back of an ambulance. He rushed over, sick at the sight of the blood-soaked towel wrapped around Marco's arm.

"Wait!" he yelled before they could close the doors.

Relief flooded him when Marco opened his big brown eyes. "Hey," his lover said, his voice sounding odd.

"Hey, babe." Kent turned to the ambulance driver. "Where're you taking him?"

The guy gave Kent the name of the hospital.

Kent nodded and gazed back at Marco. "I'll follow in my truck."

"Maria," Marco reminded him.

"I won't forget her. You just concentrate on yourself for a change."

"We need to go, sir," one of the paramedics informed him.

"I love you," Kent told Marco as the ambulance doors were shut.

As soon as the emergency vehicle took off, Kent turned to search for Maria. He found her sitting in the backseat of Moody's police issued sedan. He opened the door and knelt. "Hey, sweetheart."

Maria blinked several times before turning to look at him. "Eddy hurt Marco."

"I know. I'm going to find Moody and tell him I'm taking you with me to the hospital, okay?"

"Okay," she said in a soft voice.

Kent walked towards the front door and was stopped by a uniformed officer. "Sorry, sir, but you can't go in there."

"The hell I can't." He cupped his hands over his mouth. "Moody! You'd better tell this guy to let me through before I start showing my ass."

Moody came to stand in the doorway, an amused smirk on his face. "Let him in. I've got a strong feeling he'd do it."

The officer moved aside and Kent pushed by him and into the house. "Where's he at?"

Moody gestured to the body in the hallway. "We're just waiting on the coroner."

With more hatred in his heart than he'd ever felt for another soul, Kent walked over and kicked Eddy's corpse.

"Hey, hey," Moody admonished. "As much as I'd like to join you in kicking the shit out of that asshole, it might be a little hard to explain the post-mortem bruising to the coroner."

Before turning away, Kent spat on the body at his feet. "What kind of father tries to kill his son?"

"One who didn't earn the title of father."

Kent nodded his head. With his anger beginning to dissipate, he turned his focus back to Marco. "I'm going to take Maria to the hospital."

"I'll have Angelo run by and pick up the boys."

"Thanks." Kent wasn't big on handing out affection to his friends, but he couldn't let the moment slip by without showing Moody his appreciation. He wrapped his arms around the big man and squeezed. "Thank you for saving my entire world. I owe you everything."

He was surprised when Moody hugged him back. "You're welcome. And if you'll help me fix Angelo's back porch, we'll call it even."

Kent chuckled as he stepped back. "You've got yourself a deal."

\* \* \* \*

Trey handed Kent another cup of coffee. "How is he?"

Kent took a tentative sip of the strong, bitter brew. Marco had been in surgery by the time Kent and Maria had arrived at the hospital so he hadn't seen him before he'd been taken in. "The doctor just came by. He said they repaired the tendon damage. It'll be a long healing process and he'll have to go through intensive therapy, but they think he'll regain the full use of his hand."

"Have you seen him?" Trey sat down across from him.

"Not yet." Kent's eyes went to Maria, Nicky and Bruno who were huddled together in the corner of the waiting room. He'd tried to comfort them, but had retreated when Bruno informed him they were fine.

Although he knew the De La Santo children were a tight group, the dismissal stung. So like it had been most of his adult life, Kent sat across the room feeling alone and left out. Most of his friends were there with the exception of Eric and Jules who were on duty, but even they had been by several times in the previous couple of hours.

Trey, who had always been the most sensitive of the group, put his hand on Kent's knee. "You can't take it personally."

"What?"

Trey gestured to the De La Santo children. "They aren't used to depending on anyone but themselves. It'll take them a while to open up to you."

"I thought we were making great strides towards building a family." Kent shook his head. "It hurts."

Trey bumped his thin shoulder against Kent. "I'm going to play devil's advocate here for a minute, so don't beat me up, K?"

"I'll try to control my rage," Kent answered dryly.

"Trust will probably never come easy to those kids. I'm not trying to downplay your relationship with Marco, but you've only been in his brothers' and sister's lives for a short time. It's natural for them not to trust you enough to let you in."

"I've opened my home to them," Kent tried to argue.

"Yes you have. And even though you and I know it shows you trust them, they're kids. They wouldn't see it that way. Their father just tried to kill the only truly stable person in their lives."

"So where does that leave me?" Kent looked at the cooling coffee in his hand. He felt like throwing the damn paper cup across the room.

"In the perfect position to gain some of that trust you long for. You can't force it on them though. Marco will probably be in here for a few days. Take them home later, make sure they eat, let them know you're there if they need to talk. The important thing is that they'll begin to see you care about them and not just their brother."

Kent glanced at Trey. He knew his friend was right. Everything he said made sense. Although things had fallen into place with Marco so quickly, he really didn't know the kids as much as he'd like. "Thanks."

"Kent?" Jules called, walking into the waiting room. "They have him in room 312, but they only want two people at a time in there."

Kent nodded. "Thanks." He stood and walked over to Bruno, Nicky and Maria. "Marco's in room 312. Only two at a time though, so you'll have to decide which two of you go first and which of you will wait and go up with me next."

Bruno appeared shocked at first. He turned to Nicky. "Why don't you take Maria up? I think she needs to see for herself that Marco will be fine."

As Nicky led Maria by the hand towards the elevators, Kent put a hand on Bruno's shoulder. "That was nice of you."

Bruno shrugged. "They're kids. I figured if you could wait, so could I."

Kent gestured towards a chair. "Mind if I sit with you?"

Bruno shook his head and resumed his seat.

Kent had known since their first meeting Bruno was as big as a man, but he was slowly beginning to realise Bruno was a man and not a kid. Hell, Marco was taking care of his brothers and sister when he was younger than Bruno.

"So, you graduate in June?"

"End of May," Bruno corrected.

"You have plans for college?"

Bruno wrinkled his nose. "I barely made it through high school, but Marco wouldn't let me drop out. He said I'd regret it forever if I didn't graduate. Guess that's one of the reasons he worked so hard this year to get his GED."

Kent was shocked. "He what? When did he have time?"

"He made time. Took him a while, but he finally did it. I don't know that I've ever seen him more proud of himself as the day he walked across that little makeshift stage."

Kent wished he'd have known. One more thing he missed out on because of his preconceived ideas and Marco's inferiority complex. "I bet he was handsome with that look on his face."

Bruno's black eyebrows drew together. "I don't know about that. He's my brother, dude."

Kent chuckled. "Trust me, he was handsome."

Bruno shrugged and crossed his arms comfortably over his chest. "Do you think Marco would teach me how to do what he does?"

Immediately an image of Marco thrusting in and out of Kent's ass came to mind. "Excuse me?"

"You know, the stuff he can do with bricks. It's cool. He used to take us with him once in a while when he did side jobs. I thought maybe I could learn how to do that."

Kent let out an internal sigh of relief. "I'm sure he'd love to take you on as an apprentice. And in my opinion, you couldn't learn from a more skilled craftsman."

"He's that good?"

"Yeah. He's that good." Kent reached down and patted Bruno's knee. "He'll be off work until he heals, but once he's ready to go back I'll give you a job. I can't pay you much while you're apprenticing, but at least you'll be making some money while you're learning."

"Cool. Thanks."

They sat in companionable silence for several minutes until the elevator doors opened. Nicky and a smiling Maria came towards them.

"How is he?" Bruno asked, getting to his feet.

"Sleepy. But he woke up for a few seconds." Nicky chuckled. "Long enough to remind us to get our homework done before going to bed."

"That sounds about right." Bruno glanced at Kent. "You ready?"

"Yeah." Kent stood. He leant down and gave Maria a kiss on the forehead. "We'll run by and get something to eat on the way home."

Nicky and Maria both nodded and sat down.

Kent actually felt nervous on the elevator ride up. As pleased as he was that Bruno chose to wait and accompany him to Marco's bedside, he worried he wouldn't be able to keep it together in front of the seventeen-year old.

They stepped into Marco's room. Kent wasn't initially pleased that his lover was sharing a room with someone else, but he realised it was probably all Marco's insurance would pay for.

He gave the patient in the first bed a nod as he walked towards, what had to be, Marco's bed. At least the privacy curtains had been drawn between the two beds, so maybe he could sneak a kiss in before he left.

With an IV stand and another monitor on one side of the bed, Kent and Bruno were forced to stand side by side. He gazed down at the sleeping man. His hand automatically began to brush soothing strokes against Marco's thigh through the blanket.

"He looks pale," Bruno commented.

"He's been through a lot. He's a fighter though."

"Yeah. He is," Bruno agreed.

Their voices must have alerted Marco to their presence because his lover's eyes blinked several times before remaining open.

"Hey," Marco's scratchy voice greeted.

Kent had to struggle with his inner adult not to push Bruno out of the way and profess his love to Marco.

Marco obviously knew him too well. He smiled at Kent. "I need to talk to Bruno for a few moments."

Hurt, but trying his best to understand, Kent nodded. "I'll wait in the hall."

Before Kent could step away from the bed, Marco touched his hand. "I love you."

Kent squeezed the hand that had brushed his. "I love you, too."

He walked out to the hall. It was amazing how those three little words could soothe him. He hoped it would always be like that. Kent knew they'd have disagreements over everything from money to raising Nicky and Maria, but at the end of the day, he knew Marco was the only one he wanted to lay beside.

He felt a hand on his shoulder and turned to find Bruno. "You can go in."

Kent didn't waste time getting back to Marco's side. Now that they were semi-alone, he bent and gave his lover a short but deep, tongue-brushing kiss. "I was so scared."

"You and me both. But it's over." Marco puckered his lips. "Kiss me."

Kent complied, thrusting his tongue into Marco's mouth. He tried to put all the love and fear he'd experienced over the previous several hours into the kiss. He finally pulled back when Marco yawned.

Kent couldn't help but laugh. He felt so much better. "You need sleep."

Marco nodded his head in agreement. "I told Bruno how sorry I was that things worked out the way they did with Eddy. I don't think he blames me."

"Of course he doesn't."

"I was worried," Marco admitted.

"Of course you were." Kent bent and kissed Marco's forehead. "You wouldn't be Marco if you didn't worry about the people you love."

"Don't let them con you into letting them stay up past their bedtime."

"I won't."

Marco's eyes started to drift shut. "Love you."

"Love you, too. I'll see you in the morning."

Kent waited a few extra moments until he was sure Marco was asleep. He turned to exit the room and found Bruno staring straight at him. "Something wrong?"

Bruno shook his head. "You really do love him, huh?"

"More than I love myself," Kent replied honestly.

Bruno nodded and walked out of the room. Kent joined him in the hall as they waited for an elevator. Bruno's eyes remained on the closed steel doors. "I'm glad he found you."

Kent didn't know what to say, so he kept his mouth shut. He knew what it had taken Bruno to admit what he just had. Maybe Trey was right and it would take time. Regardless, Kent knew something had changed in his relationship with Bruno, and that was enough for the time being.

## Epilogue

Marco ran his finger between the bricks, keeping a watchful eye for inconsistencies. He grinned as he sat down on the soft green grass. He stared up at the brick and white columned gazebo completely satisfied.

"Hey, babe," Kent greeted, dropping down beside him. "What're you doing?"

"A final inspection of Bruno's work." He leant against his partner's side. "He's good."

"Of course he is. He learned from the master."

Marco pushed Kent back until they were lying side by side. "Thanks for letting us build this."

Kent wrapped his arms around Marco. "No thanks needed. This is your home as much as it is mine. It's been nice watching the two of you work on it together."

"Better be careful what you say. Bruno was talking about putting in a brick path from the patio out to the gazebo."

"Go for it." Kent rolled over on top of Marco and ground his hardening cock against his lover. "You look awfully tired. You sure you wouldn't like a nap?"

Marco spread his thighs, putting their cocks into better contact. "Where're the kids?"

"My dad took them to the Warf for the afternoon."

Marco grinned. Kent's dad had become a familiar addition to the family in recent months. After Kent had surprised them all with trips to Phoenix for the Christmas holiday, his dad had made a point to fly up to San Francisco every other month. It was Tom's third trip in six months, and Marco had a strong feeling the older man might decide to relocate back to the city of his birth.

Marco felt his pre-cum begin to soak through his jeans. "You'd better take me inside or the neighbours will be calling the cops."

Kent stood and tossed Marco over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Marco reached down and slapped his lover on the ass. He'd become used to the caveman-side of Kent and had learned to just accept it.



As Kent carried him into the house and up the stairs, Marco pushed his hand under the waist of Kent's jeans to the slightly furred skin of his partner's ass. "You feel good."

Kent's large hand rubbed Marco's ass in return, pressing his fingers along the seam that ran between Marco's ass cheeks. "Not half as good as you're gonna feel wrapped around my cock."

"Oh, so you think you're going to play top man this round?" Although they didn't get afternoon trysts often, they were still in the honeymoon stage of their relationship. Sex was usually a regular morning and night occurrence, but there was something about sneaking away for an unplanned romp in the sack that always proved to excite them the most.

Kent tossed Marco to the centre of the bed and began undressing. "I'll make you a deal. If you can keep your dick hard until after I fill your ass with cum, you can have a go at my hole."

Marco knew it was an unfair request. Kent fucked like a jackhammer and Marco was always reduced to a pile of coming goo by the time his lover reached climax. He smiled. What Kent didn't know was Marco had picked up a new toy the previous day.

"Deal." Marco stripped out of his clothes and rolled off the bed.

"Where the fuck are you going?" Kent asked, pulling down the covers.

"To the bathroom. I'll be right back."

With his back turned, Kent didn't see Marco grab the small bag out of his top dresser drawer and retreat to the bathroom.

Marco used the opportunity to take a piss before doing a quick clean-up. After tossing the washcloth into the dirty clothes hamper, he reached for the new cock ring he'd purchased. He gripped his dick and pumped it several times, trying to get as hard as possible.

A thought suddenly occurred to him. With a chuckle, he opened the door and returned to bed. Kent was already spread out, cock in hand.

With the cock ring concealed in his hand, Marco knelt beside his lover. "I was wondering if you would help me with something?"

"Sure, babe."

Marco held out his arm and opened his hand. "Put this on me?"

"Fuck," Kent groaned, taking the knobby, black silicone ring from Marco. His lover seemed to study the ring for several moments. "I can't believe I've never used one of these before."

Marco hadn't either, but he knew it was supposed to help him stave off his orgasm. "Get me good and hard before you put it on."

With a lick of his lips, Kent sat up and engulfed Marco's length. Marco moaned as Kent's teeth playfully scraped against his piercings. Within moments, Mario was on the verge of shooting a load down Kent's throat. He pushed his lover's head away.

"You're supposed to get it harder, not make me come."

Kent shrugged. "Couldn't help myself. You taste so good."

Marco leaned back on his hands. He bowed his back and thrust his rigid shaft into the air. "Do it. Be careful of the ladder though."

Before he slipped the ring on, Marco felt Kent's finger run down the length of his piercings. "Are you going to get another next month?"

Marco tilted his head to gaze into Kent's eyes. "I don't know. You want me to?"

Kent seemed to consider the question for a few moments. "Well, I think you should do what you want, but I think your dick's sexy just the way it is."

Kent leant down and ran his tongue along the twirling mass of vines and symbols tattooed on Marco's hip and groin. Marco had taken the time to explain each symbol and design to Kent and what they meant to him. He knew the tattoos were proof of his depressed nature in the past, most of them having to do with survival and loneliness, but Kent seemed almost obsessed with them.

"What're you going to add to this?" Kent asked, his gaze going from the tattoos to Marco's eyes.

"Something happy. I think it needs to reflect my new life." Marco grinned. He'd already decided to have the artist incorporate Kent's name into the design.

Kent cupped Marco's balls and groaned. He stretched the silicone ring over the aligned silver barbells to the base of Marco's cock. "I think I've changed my mind."

"Huh?" Marco's cock was damn near throbbing. No way could he stop.

Kent manoeuvred himself to his hands and knees, his beautifully tight ass facing Marco. "Fuck me, babe."

Marco chuckled as he grabbed the lube and popped the top. He drizzled a good amount down Kent's crack, catching it with his other hand before it could pass the winking pucker. Marco entered his lover with his index finger, pushing as much lube as he could inside. "You're so hot."

"That damn cock ring is what's hot." Kent pushed back against Marco's hand. "More."

Happy to oblige, Marco slid his middle finger inside as well. He was rewarded with a deep, rumbling moan from Kent. Despite Kent's claims that he preferred the top position in bed, Marco knew his lover enjoyed getting fucked as much as he did.

He marvelled at the way Kent's skin stretched to accommodate a third finger. *Damn that's sexy.* Marco remembered what it felt like the first time he'd fucked Kent without a condom. He'd never realised how much feeling was lost through the thin layer of latex.

Kent also seemed to enjoy the added sensation of the Jacob's Ladder rubbing across the inner walls of his chute. That first time, Kent had barely lasted two minutes before he was spraying his chest with his cum. Marco hoped he'd always have that effect on his lover.

"Now," Kent groaned, bringing Marco out of his thoughts.

Marco removed his fingers and squirted additional lube onto his cock. He ran his palm up and down his shaft several times, ensuring a smooth entry.

On his knees, he positioned his cockhead at Kent's entrance and surged forward in one smooth stroke. Just like a pro, Kent's body accepted the invasion with minimal discomfort. "You okay?"

"I will be once you move your ass," Kent cried, an impatient tone to his voice.

Marco shook his head. For someone who always needed to be talked into their current position, Kent always warmed quickly. Marco pulled out, making sure to give his lover the full effects of the barbells, before thrusting back in.

His rhythm was steady and controlled as his speed increased. He held onto Kent's hips and revelled in the sounds of skin slapping against skin. The squeeze of Kent's inner walls was almost too much to bear. He was grateful for the cock ring as Kent began slamming himself back, impaling himself over and over.

Marco bent over and nipped Kent's shoulder blade before latching on with his teeth. He wanted to mark his partner for a change. Marco's chest and groin were covered by bruises lovingly applied by Kent in the heat of sex.

He released the tanned flesh and leant back, his eyes focusing on his ringed cock as it pumped in and out of Kent's hole. *Fuck*. With the simple addition of the black ring, his dick took on a whole new persona. Gone was the boy who'd been abused by his father, gone was the scared sixteen-year-old kid who'd had to take over as head of a family, gone was the man who'd never known what it was like to be truly loved.

Marco sucked in a breath at the sudden but intense emotions that threatened to overwhelm him. He quickly pulled out of Kent's ass.

Kent's head swung around towards Marco. "What's wrong?"

Marco swallowed around the lump in his throat. "Turn over."

He didn't mean it to sound like an order, but he knew it had. "Please."

Kent complied, rolling to lie on his back. He spread his legs and stared up at Marco. "Babe? What's wrong?"

Marco reached down and removed the cock ring before sliding his cock back into his lover's body. He pressed himself against Kent and took his partner's mouth in a sensual, love filled kiss. This is how he wanted to remember the moment.

The kiss heated and soon Marco felt a splash of warmth shoot between his body and Kent's. He reached between them and wrapped his hand around Kent's cock, milking the shaft dry.

Once Kent was taken care of, Marco began to truly make love to the man under him. He continued to kiss Kent as he thrust and ground his way to fulfilment. His balls tightened and his thrusts became erratic as he tipped over the edge into bliss.

As he emptied himself deep within his lover, he buried his face against Kent's neck. Tears threatened in the intensely touching moment and crying in front of Kent wasn't an option. He'd gone his entire life without showing the weakness he knew tears presented to the world.

Marco felt Kent's soothing hands rub his back as he struggled to hold himself together.

"Are you going to talk to me?" Kent whispered.

Marco shook his head. "I'm just happy."

"That's good, right?"

It was obvious Kent was beginning to question Marco's sanity. He finally lifted his head and stared into Kent's beautiful eyes. "I realised something."

"What, babe?"

"Everything I've ever been through helped lead me to you. If it hadn't been for my shitty life, I never would've met you. Even more, had I not quit school and gone to work for you, I'd probably have ended up following in Eddy's footsteps. I guess everything, good and bad happens for a reason."

"You know the same could be said about Nicky and Bruno. You've done such a fine job of raising them. It's because they were also given a different role model to follow that they're growing up to be men we can be proud of."

Once again Marco's eyes began to sting. He tried to pull away from Kent to run to the bathroom, but strong arms held him in place.

"Why are you trying to run away from me?" Kent asked.

"Because I don't want you to see me cry," Marco admitted.

Kent rolled them until Marco was lying underneath the larger man. Kent gazed down. "Do you think I'll think less of you? Because nothing could be further than the truth. We've talked about the kids slowly building trust in me, but I need to know you're starting to trust me more as well. You open yourself to me, but there always seems to be a wall we hit. What can I do to break through it?"

Marco knew Kent was right. He'd opened his heart but not his pain. "I don't think I know. Crying wasn't an option I had growing up in a house like mine. Mostly because I knew at a very young age Eddy fed on people's weaknesses. I guess I learned to keep that part of myself locked away."

"I hope you know I'm nothing like Eddy."

Even the thought of comparing the two men was more than he could stand. The first tear dripped out of the corner of his eye to run down the side of his face. That single drop of moisture seemed to give birth to even more as the tears continued to run out of his eyes.

Kent alternated between wiping away Marco's tears and kissing him.

"I never want to lose you," Marco cried.

"You won't." Kent kissed him again, wiping the snot from under Marco's nose. "For better or worse, right?"

Marco nodded, sniffing. He used the back of his hand to dry his face. "I promise not to do that again."

"Don't you dare promise any such thing. One thing you need to get through that thick head of yours is this. I love you. No matter what. And if you're upset I expect to be the one you discuss it with. If you're happy, I want to be the one you celebrate with. Got it?"

"And if I'm horny?" Marco gave Kent his best grin.

"You have my permission to take me anytime, anywhere. As long as that's all reciprocal, of course."

"Oh, of course." Marco pulled Kent down into an erotic kiss. He hoped to do a lot of reciprocating in the years to come.

\* \* \* \*

"Pay attention," Bobby snapped at Kent.

Marco chuckled and slapped Kent's hand that had wandered into his lap. The sound was louder than he'd imagined it would be and the entire table started laughing.

Red-faced, Kent tossed a couple of chips into the pot. "I'm in."

"You'd like to be," Moody mumbled behind his beer bottle.

Marco couldn't stop laughing and threw his cards down. He decided to tease Kent a little more for his own amusement. "I can't concentrate with a hard-on. I'm going to the bathroom to take care of the situation."

Kent choked on the mouthful of beer he'd just begun to swallow.

With a wicked grin, Marco headed in the direction of the restroom, but circled back and slipped into the kitchen to talk to Eric and Jules.

"What's going on?" Eric asked.

Marco put his finger over his lips. "Shhh, I'm paying Kent back for embarrassing me earlier."

Eric shook his head. "The two of you are as disruptive to the peace around here as you ever were except for a different reason."

"You're just bitter because for once you're not winning," Marco shot back.

A loud chorus of groans came from the dining room, signalling the end of the current game. Marco grabbed two beers out of the fridge. "Ten bucks says Moody won again."

"God, I hope not. Bobby will pout the rest of the evening," Jules complained.

Marco led the way back into the dining room, handing Kent his beer.

Kent looked surprised. "I thought you went to the restroom?"

"Well, you didn't join me so I decided to go for a beer instead." Marco sat down and stole a quick kiss from his lover. The longer he and Kent lived together, the better their relationship became. They'd learnt to compromise when it came to budgets.

Marco caved and started allowing Kent to do the grocery shopping without him as long as his partner used the coupons Marco cut out for him.

"How're the kids?" Angelo asked, sorting Moody's chips into neat, colour-coded stacks.

"Good. Since graduation, Bruno's taken over the garage apartment. He's even paying rent, much to Kent's grumbles."

"I don't need his rent money," Kent tried to argue.

"Maybe not, but he needs to learn how to budget his paycheque and rent is part of it. You're just lucky I don't charge him for the food he eats."

"I agree with you," Zac said. "When I moved out of my parents' house and went to college, I was absolutely clueless."

"You still are," Eric chimed in.

"Am not."

Eric looked at Marco and gave him a subtle nod.

Marco grinned. It was nice to see his friends happy in their various relationships. What was even nicer was how all eleven of them had come together to overcome some pretty heavy duty obstacles.

Kent leant over and brushed his lips across Marco's cheek. "What's wrong?"

Marco glanced around the table at the people who meant the world to him. "Nothing. Not a damn thing."

## **About the Author**

An avid reader for years, one day Carol Lynne decided to write her own brand of erotic romance. Carol juggles between being a full-time mother and a full-time writer. These days, you can usually find Carol either cleaning jelly out of the carpet or nestled in her favourite chair writing steamy love scenes.

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