



RYAN FIELD

*When Harry
Met Sal*

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romance

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A Ravenous Romance™ M/M Original Publication

Ryan Field

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This book is a work of fiction, and any resemblance to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.

Chapter One

It seemed like the entire university was packing to leave the day Harry and Sal first met. It was a warm, early-June afternoon in 2002. The sprawling Stanford University campus rocked with a sense of excitement and urgency.

Harry was loading his little red Mini Cooper. He'd just graduated and he was driving to New York to start graduate school. He looked up and frowned at his bicycle. It was attached to a roof rack where the bike stood up straight and looked as if it was being held in place by a pair of invisible hands. When he lifted his arms up to make sure the bike was secure, his red T-shirt rode up and exposed the small of his naked back. He had a deep, natural arch that curved in. His jeans were loose and fell low on his hips, and anyone looking could see the waistband of his white briefs. A small, silver convertible slowed down and a good-looking guy with thick blond hair leaned forward to check out his body.

Harry's boyfriend, Mark, moved closer and gave the blond guy a dirty look. Then he lowered his eyebrows, put his hand on Harry's ass, and squeezed it a few times so the guy would get the hint and move on.

The guy in the convertible shrugged his shoulders and hit the gas. Harry jerked forward and asked, "What are you doing?" His arms were still up high, his flat stomach pressed against the window. And Mark's hand was still on his ass.

Mark smiled. "I'm letting that guy know that you're with me," he said. "He was staring at you and his tongue was hanging out." He stood straight and squared his broad shoulders. Mark was a football player and he lifted weights daily.

Harry sighed. “Well, you can let go now. He’s gone.” When they first started dating two years earlier, Mark’s possessive nature made Harry laugh. But now he only forced a smile and tried hard not to roll his eyes at Mark’s childish behavior.

A few minutes later, the bike was secure, the car was packed, and Harry was ready to leave. He leaned forward and kissed Mark goodbye. The tiny car was filled with boxes and suitcases and books. The back end drooped down and it was impossible to see in or out the rear window.

Harry grabbed Mark’s bicep and kissed him on the lips. “I’ll call you later from the road,” he said. “Be good.” He hated long goodbyes and he didn’t want to drag this out longer than necessary.

But Mark grabbed Harry by the shoulders and put his massive arms around his upper body. Mark pulled him into his wide chest, shoved his tongue into his mouth, and kissed him hard. Then he said, “I want more than just a peck on the lips. I’m not going to see you for a while.”

Harry tried to pull back, but Mark wouldn’t release him. So he gently ran his fingers up Mark’s arm, and said, “I just feel weird kissing this way in public, is all. It’s kind of cheesy.” It wasn’t because he was gay. If he’d been straight he would have felt the same way about kissing a woman in public. The campus was mobbed; they were in front of a busy residence hall. People all around them were carrying foot lockers, loading cars, and dragging suitcases. He didn’t want to put on a show.

But that didn’t stop Mark. He was one of those overly affectionate types who loved to hug and grope in public. When they were alone, Mark barely touched him. But

for some reason that Harry couldn't understand, Mark couldn't wait to feel him up in public.

Mark slipped his large hand down the back of Harry's jeans and squeezed his flesh so hard Harry bit his bottom lip and rolled his eyes. "I don't give a damn," Mark said. "I'm going to get one more handful of that hot ass before you leave and I don't care who's watching."

Harry didn't pull away this time. Mark was good with his hands. He knew where to put them and how to use them. So he put his arms around Mark's shoulders and kissed him again. While they kissed, a couple of guys passing on bicycles slowed down; an older man in a seersucker blazer almost tripped over his own feet. But when Mark tried to put his other huge hand down Harry's pants, the button popped open and the zipper went down. Harry stepped back fast and Mark's hand slid out. He pulled up his pants and fastened them, hoping no one was watching anymore.

Then Harry pulled his car keys out of his pocket and crossed to the other side of the car. "I'll call you later from the road," he said. "And I'll see you in New York in a couple of months."

Harry had already rented a studio apartment on East 24th Street in Manhattan. His undergraduate degree was in fine art, and he'd been accepted into a graduate program at a good New York school to study interior design. Mark was moving east in late August to start law school in Connecticut. He could have gone back with Harry, but he was from San Francisco and he had a summer internship lined up with his father's law firm.

When Harry got into the car and switched on the engine, Mark tapped the roof hard and shouted, "Drive safely."

Harry pulled away from the curb and threw his arm out the window. While he waved, he looked into the side mirror and saw Mark standing in the middle of the street. He was grinning and nodding his head up and down. His strong legs were spread wide and his right arm was up. Mark didn't wave; he just lifted his palm and held it there. Harry hit the gas pedal and sighed so loud that it sounded as if a huge boulder had been lifted from his back.

After that, he drove to the Fire Truck House to say goodbye to Marla, his best friend from the fine arts program. He'd met her on the first day of class four years earlier, and they'd been best friends since. She was standing in front of the building waving her arms. Her newest boyfriend was standing next to her. Harry had heard about him, but he hadn't officially met him yet because she'd only been dating him for two weeks and she didn't think it would last.

The Fire Truck House was a cream-colored gem that dated back to 1904. At one time, it had been a real firehouse. But when a new one was built on Serra Street, they'd turned the old firehouse into a building that housed student organizations. Harry had spent a great deal of time there in the LGBT community resource center. He'd already said goodbye to Marla a hundred times, but he wanted to hug her again once more and he wanted to have one last look at one of his favorite buildings on campus.

He parked diagonally at the curb and jumped out of the car. He looked up at the building and smiled. Marla jogged toward him and threw her arms around his shoulders. Her long blond hair fell over her shoulders in thick waves, and her black camisole hung from her thin body. She hugged him hard and said, "I'm going to miss you so much."

Then she stepped back and stood beside a swarthy young guy with short black hair and large dark sunglasses. He was wearing a tight black T-shirt and faded loose-fitting jeans that looked about an inch too long. The backs of his hems were frayed near the heels of his shoes. His shoes were shiny black leather and narrowed to points at the toes. There was a heavy gold wristwatch on his left arm that looked out of place for someone so young. Marla grabbed the guy's arm and said, "This is Sal Sorentino. Sal, this is Harry Beckham."

Harry tilted his head and extended his arm. He shook Sal's hand and said, "It's nice to meet you, Sal." Sal's torso was long and lanky and his forearms were covered with an even layer of black hair. Harry noticed a black leather suitcase beside him.

Sal didn't remove his sunglasses. But he was smiling. He shook Harry's hand and said, "You too, buddy." His voice was deep, with a hoarse, raspy quality.

Marla gave Sal a look and grabbed Harry's arm. She pulled him to the other side of the car and said, "I have a small favor to ask." She lowered her eyes and pouted.

Harry's eyebrows went up. He knew her well enough to know that her tone suggested that she wanted a really big favor, not a small one. He smiled. "What now?"

"Sal needs a ride to New York," she said. "He got a call last night about a job offer. He just graduated with a degree in math, and this is a good offer."

"Why doesn't he fly?"

She shrugged. "He can't afford it. He worked his way through school, and he has a ton of student loans to pay off. He was planning on staying out here and getting a job, and then this offer came up out of the blue. I offered to loan him the money for the air fair, and he flatly refused. He has a lot of pride and he won't take handouts."

Harry looked over at Sal. He stood there quietly with his hands in his pockets and his head down. The thought of driving cross country with a total stranger in the car made Harry's stomach turn a few times. And if Mark found out he was traveling with a strange guy, Mark would lose his mind. "I don't know," Harry said. "It could be awkward. I don't even know the guy. And this car is so small."

"He can pay for half the gas," she said. Then she reached for his hand and smiled. "He's a nice guy, and he's too stubborn to take any money from me. Besides, you'll have company all the way to New York. I hate the idea of you driving cross country alone."

Harry had always admired Sal's kind of pride. Harry wouldn't have taken money from anyone either. So he shrugged his shoulders and said, "I'll do it. But Mark can't find out about this. He'll really freak out."

Marla took a deep breath and frowned. She'd never been a huge fan of Mark's. She didn't like the way he took control of Harry's life, and she didn't like the way Harry let him do it. "What Mark doesn't know won't hurt him," she said. Then she lifted her arm and shouted to Sal, "You're going to New York today."

Sal lifted his head and nodded it fast. Then he reached down for his bag and loped toward the car on the balls of his feet with a light, carefree bounce. His shoulders rocked up and down. He crossed toward them and said, "Thanks, buddy. I really appreciate this. I'll pay for half the gas, too."

Harry waved his arm and said, "Don't worry about it. I was going to pay for the gas anyway."

But Sal lifted his sunglasses and looked him in the eye. “I insist,” he said. “It’s the least I can do. You’re doing me a huge favor, and I really appreciate it, man.” His eyes were deep brown and warm.

Harry nodded and said, “That sounds fair. And you can help with the driving, too.”

While Harry found a place in the back seat for Sal’s suitcase, Marla put her arms around Sal’s shoulders and kissed him goodbye. It was a fast kiss, without much passion, and nothing like the sexy scene Mark had created in front of the residence hall. Then she stepped away from him and hugged Harry again. “I’ll see you in the fall,” she said. She was moving to Los Angeles that week to start a new job as an assistant art director with a film company. And she was planning a visit to New York in late October.

And as they pulled away, she shouted, “Call me.”

When Harry looked into the side mirror, he saw her standing with her elbow in her hand and two fingers pressed to her lips. He sighed and said, “I’m going to miss her most of all. I don’t know what I’m going to do in New York without her.”

Sal shrugged his shoulders and adjusted his seatbelt. Then he spread his legs wider and slapped Harry on the thigh. He smiled and said, “She’s great. I’m gonna miss her, too.”

Harry’s eyes opened wide and he looked to the right without moving his head. Sal had slapped him hard; it stung and Harry wanted to rub his thigh. But he bit the inside of his mouth and said, “If you want to listen to music, feel free to put on anything you want.”

Sal lifted his arms and yawned. “Naw,” he said. “I like the peace and quiet.” Then he slanted his seat back and rested his head against the leather. He was still wearing the dark glasses, and Harry couldn’t see if his eyes were open or closed.

Chapter Two

At four o'clock in the afternoon, they stopped for gas at a chain convenience stores that had rows of gas pumps beneath tall, overhead canopies. Sal sat forward and rubbed his eyes. He'd been sleeping since they'd left San Francisco. He told Harry to pop the gas cap, then jumped out of the car and went into the store. He paid for the gas with cash and bought something else. Harry couldn't see what it was, because Sal shoved it into his front pocket fast. Then he walked back to the car without saying a word. He unhooked the nozzle from the gas pump and put thirty dollars' worth of gas into the tank.

Harry stretched his legs and said, "I'm going to the bathroom. I'll be right back."

"Okay, buddy," Sal said, staring down at the nozzle. Sal was quiet, almost too quiet. It was hard to read his face because his expression didn't change often.

A few minutes later, while Harry was washing his hands, Sal walked into the bathroom. He crossed to the urinal next to the sink, spread his legs apart, and pulled down his zipper. When he pulled his penis out of his pants, he leaned back and whistled. Harry didn't move his head, but his eyes moved to the right and he looked down at the urinal. Sal was holding at least six inches of thick, soft flesh between his thumb and his index finger. Harry's eyebrows went up and he looked down at the sink fast. He turned off the water and gulped. Then he reached for a paper towel and crossed to the exit while he was still drying his hands.

On Harry's way out the door, Sal said, "I don't mind driving the next stretch." Then he shook his penis a few times, put it back into his pants, and pulled up his zipper.

Harry stopped walking. He held the door open and said, "That's fine with me." His voice was light and friendly. He didn't want Sal to know he'd seen his penis. Not that it meant anything; he wasn't cruising Sal. It had been a reflex, and he'd only glanced at it for a second. But Harry didn't want Sal to think he was interested in him sexually.

When Sal returned to the car, Harry was sitting on the passenger side with his seat belt secured. Sal sat down and adjusted his seat, and Harry said, "Are you okay with a stick?" He knew a lot of people who didn't know how to drive a manual transmission.

Sal smiled and said, "I wouldn't have offered to drive if I wasn't." Then he started the car, slipped it into first gear, and pulled away from the gas pumps so smoothly it felt more like an automatic transmission than a manual.

The next four hours passed quickly. Sal drove fast, but he had a steady hand and he never took his eyes off the road. Harry did most of the talking. He told Sal about his new apartment in New York, his new school, and how he was going to miss California and Stanford. He talked about Marla and his boyfriend, Mark. He even talked about his parents out on Long Island and his favorite Aunt Millie up in Riverdale. Sal listened and nodded. He said, "Ah well..." and rubbed his jaw whenever Harry finished a sentence. Evidently, he wasn't much of a talker.

When they finally stopped, Sal pulled into a parking spot in front of an all-night diner and switched off the engine. Harry turned and reached for his jacket in the back seat. Sal removed the keys from the ignition and laughed out loud.

"What's so funny?" Harry asked. He was staring down at his jacket, fishing through the pockets for his wallet.

"You stopped talking," Sal said.

Harry looked at him and said, “Huh?”

Sal smiled. “I’ve never met anyone who could talk for four hours straight without stopping for air. I think you broke a record this afternoon.”

Harry’s head went back and his jaw dropped. “Well, I’m *sorry*. You should have told me shut up and I would have *stopped* talking. I didn’t realize I was annoying you so much.”

Sal lifted his palms in surrender. “I’m not annoyed,” he said. “Calm down and don’t get too sensitive. It’s cool, man. I just never knew anyone who could talk that much without getting tired.” Then he smiled and fake-punched Harry’s arm. “I didn’t mean anything, seriously. C’mon, I’ll buy dinner.”

Harry put his jacket over his arm and straightened his back. Then he lifted his head and said. “I’ll try not to talk too much during dinner.”

They took a booth at the back of the diner. It was one of those greasy spoons with paper napkins and vinyl seats. Sal ordered a large double cheeseburger with French fries and a huge chocolate milkshake. Harry ordered a light salad with grilled chicken and bottled water. Sal ate with his hands, with his head hunched over his plate, and Harry sat with his back pressed to the vinyl bench, cutting small bites of dry grilled chicken and wilted romaine lettuce with his knife and fork. Harry sipped his bottled water and pressed his lips together. The only time he spoke was when the waitress came to the table.

When Sal was finished with his food, he sat back and rubbed his stomach. “Ah, there’s nothing like a good old burger and fries,” he said. “How’s your salad?” Then he reached for his milkshake and sucked down the few remaining drops with a loud gurgle.

Harry scrunched his lips and shrugged, but he didn't speak. He'd only eaten half of his food, and the water bottle was still half full.

When Harry didn't answer, Sal took a deep breath and leaned forward. "You don't have to stop talking altogether," he said. "I don't care if you talk too much. I like the way the end of your nose moves up and down when you talk fast. It's sexy. It gave me a boner back in the car."

Harry dropped his fork on his plate and his eyebrows went up. He swallowed a piece of chicken and cleared his throat. "First you insult me, and now you're flirting with me?"

Sal looked into his eyes and smiled. "I didn't mean to insult you, and I always flirt with people I'm attracted to." Then he shrugged and said, "I'm honest and I don't like to play games."

Harry put down his knife and pushed his plate forward. "Okay," he said, "let me just mention this again in case you've forgotten. You are dating my best friend, a woman. And I'm in a two-year relationship with someone back in California, Mark."

Sal smiled and lifted his palms. "Hey, there's nothing serious between Marla and me," he said. "We just dated a few times and we're not committed. And, you know that acronym, GLBT? Well, I'm the B part of that. I know there aren't many of us around. I'm attracted to men and women, and I think you have the sexiest little ass I've ever seen." Then he reached into his back pocket, placed a five-dollar bill on the table as a tip and said, "I'm going to pay at the cash register. I'll meet you out by the car."

Harry sat there and watched him cross to the cash register. He'd never been so insulted and flattered at the same time.

When Harry was outside, he opened his phone and called Mark's number. It rang for a long time, then went to voice mail. He said, "It's me. I told you I'd call tonight when I stopped. I'm spending the night in a motel and I'll call you tomorrow."

Then he heard a shuffle coming from behind. He turned around and saw Sal heading toward him. "I saw you on the phone," Sal said. "I didn't want to interrupt you." His hands were in his pockets and he was smiling.

"I was just leaving Mark a message," Harry said. "He's worried about me getting to New York alone."

Sal rubbed his jaw and said. "If he was so worried and he knew you were going to call, why didn't he answer his phone?" Then he pulled his hands out of his pockets and spread his arms out wide. "And he's worrying for nothing anyway, because you're not all alone. You have me to protect you."

Harry rolled his eyes and said, "Give me a break. I'm too tired for this right now. Let's go across the street to that motel and see if they have any vacancies."

It was a long, flat-roofed motel with white stucco walls and light blue trim. The red neon sign on the roadside read, "Hide-Away-Motel." Harry would have preferred a larger, well-known chain hotel, but a cheap motel was all he could afford on his college student budget. He didn't come from a poor family. They'd bought him a car, paid for his tuition, and paid for his room and board. But he'd always paid for his own extra expenses with part-time jobs. His credit card was his own, and he didn't live beyond his means.

As it turned out, there was one room left in the Hide-Away Motel. It was the smallest room, with one queen-sized bed. The old man at the counter told Harry he was lucky to get it, too, because the previous reservation had just been canceled.

Harry hesitated for a moment. He wasn't sure he wanted to spend the night with a complete stranger in a small room with one bed.

But Sal stepped forward and said, "We'll take it." Then he smiled at Harry. "We either take this, or drive for miles looking for something else. And we've been on the road all day." Then he slapped Harry on the back and smiled. "Besides, we can save money if we bunk together."

Harry took a deep breath and handed the old man his credit card, then he leaned into Sal's side and whispered, "Just so you know, you're *bunking* on the floor."

Sal didn't say anything else until they were finally inside the room. He dropped his suitcase on the green shag carpet and said, "Home sweet home."

Harry looked around the room and sighed. The walls were burnt orange, the carpet was green, and the chenille bedspread was school bus yellow. There was a wall of built-in Danish modern furniture across from the bed, and two Danish modern nightstands on either side of it. The lamps were round balls, with gold glitter and dented black shades, and the thirty-year-old TV had knobs and dials. It was all so ugly and offensive, it actually hurt his feelings. He placed his suitcase on a Danish modern chair with a black vinyl seat and said, "If I keep my eyes closed, I might not vomit."

Sal kicked off his shoes and yawned. He stretched his arms in the air and said, "I hope we can get something on that TV."

Harry opened his suitcase and pulled out a pair of black basketball shorts and a white T-shirt. He crossed to the bathroom and said, "I'm going to take a long, hot shower."

The bathroom wasn't much better. The showerhead was clogged and the water was lukewarm. But at least it was clean. The old white tiles smelled like strong disinfectant, and the toilet bowl and sink were shining, and there were plenty of clean white towels.

After he showered and brushed his teeth, he put on his shorts and T-shirt and combed his hair back. He heard the television out in the room. He was looking forward to getting into bed and falling asleep to the sound of something unimportant. He had a feeling that Sal's taste in television ran along the lines of cop shows and baseball games.

But when he opened the bathroom door and stepped into the bedroom, he looked at the TV and pressed his palm to his stomach. Sal was watching straight porn. There were two naked women with large breasts blowing a good-looking young guy. The women were on their knees taking turns, and the guy was standing with his hands on his hips giving orders.

Harry turned to his right and looked at the bed. Sal was lying there naked, with his arms folded behind his head and his feet crossed at the ankle. Harry shook his head and said, "What are you doing?" The covers were pulled down and he was on top of the white sheet.

"I'm relaxing," Sal said, then patted the other side of the bed. "You should join me." There was a huge grin on his face and his left foot moved back and forth.

Harry switched off the TV and said, "I wasn't joking. You're sleeping on the floor. And please pull up the covers and stop showing off." He was trying hard not to notice what was happening between Sal's legs. His thick, brown penis was growing. When

Harry had first entered the room, Sal's soft penis had been resting on his right thigh. But it had already grown several inches since then.

Sal lowered his eyebrows and pouted. "Seriously?" Then he grabbed his erection with his right hand and said, "What am I supposed to do with this?"

"How should I know?" Harry shouted. "But you're going to do it on the floor and I'm going to bed."

Sal let go of his penis. It hit his thigh with a loud smack. Then he raised his palms and said, "Okay. I promise I'll be good. Don't make me sleep on the floor. I'll stay on my own side of the bed and you'll stay on yours." Then he pressed his right palm over his heart and said, "I swear."

Harry shook his head. Sal's body was long and lean, and his legs and arms were covered with a thin, sexy layer of dark black hair. He had a tight, rippled stomach and two thick loin muscles on both sides of his pelvis that slanted and pointed down to his crotch. His chest and arm muscles weren't bulging like a weight lifter's. But they were naturally defined and well proportioned with the rest of his body. He was probably one of the best-looking men Harry had ever met, and his dark brown eyes made Harry's heart skip a beat.

But Harry was serious. This guy was a stranger, and he'd never been promiscuous. He'd fooled around casually with a few guys before Mark, which was nothing more than mutual masturbation. Mark had been his first real lover, and even though they weren't officially in a committed relationship with promises and vows, Harry had never cheated on him with another man. So he moved to the bed and said, "You're very attractive, but I don't sleep around. I'm sorry."

Sal lifted his head. “Hey, you don’t have to apologize, man. I kind of like that about you. I promise I’ll be good and I’ll stay on my own side of the bed.”

Harry hesitated for a moment, then got into bed and pulled the covers up to his neck. Sal pulled his side of the covers up to his waist. Then Sal lifted his arms, stretched his legs, and yawned. “This bed isn’t all that bad,” he said.

Harry switched off the light on his night stand and said, “You’re right, it’s not that bad.” Now that the room was darker, it sounded like Sal was breathing heavier.

Sal yawned again, and then he said. “How about a kiss goodnight? Just a peck on the lips. Nothing more than that. You look cute with wet hair.”

Harry smiled. Sal was adorable and he was hard to resist. “Okay, one kiss can’t hurt. But that’s it.” He raised his arm and lifted his finger. “And keep your hands at your sides.”

Sal was on the left side of the bed and Harry was on the right. When Sal closed his eyes and turned his head to the right to kiss him, Harry looked at Sal’s face and hesitated for a moment. Harry’s heartbeat increased and he felt his own penis growing. Sal’s stubble was so dark, it had a greenish tint; his chin was square with a small cleft. He smelled sweet and musky at the same time. Harry took a deep breath and placed his palm on Sal’s cheek. He rubbed it gently; his stubble felt as rough as it looked. Harry felt a rush of pressure; his own face felt warm. Then he leaned in, closed his eyes, and kissed Sal on the lips. Sal made a soft moan and placed his hand on Harry’s shoulder.

A second later, the bedcovers were down around Sal’s feet and Harry was on top of Sal’s naked body. Harry couldn’t control himself. He moved so fast, Sal’s arms went back. Harry spread his legs wide and straddled Sal’s waist, then pulled off his T-shirt and

leaned forward. He placed his palms on Sal's wide shoulders and shoved his tongue into Sal's mouth. Harry had never done anything this bold in his entire life. He couldn't catch his breath; his chest was pounding. His own erection was ready to burst in his shorts, and the only thing he wanted at that moment was Sal's solid erection inside his body.

While they kissed, Sal grabbed the elastic waistband of Harry's shorts and pulled them down to expose Harry's firm, round ass. Harry let him do it; he couldn't wait for Sal to pull his pants all the way down. Sal slapped his ass a few times and groaned. Then he spread Harry's ass cheeks as wide as they would go and said, "I have to get in there, man. I bought condoms this afternoon at the gas station."

"Good," Harry said, with his lips still pressed against Sal's. His chest heaved and his back arched. His heart beat so fast he felt dizzy. "You get the condom and I'll take my pants off," he said in a low, determined voice.

While Harry sat up and removed his shorts, Sal reached down to the floor and pulled a package of condoms out of his jeans. He tore it open with his teeth and pulled out a lubricated condom in a green wrapper. He opened the wrapper and removed the condom. Harry took it from Sal's hand, adjusted the opening, and grabbed Sal's dick. It was fully erect by then, pulsing in the palm of his hand. The shaft was wide and there was a thick vein that ran along the entire shaft. He couldn't get his fingers all the way around it. Harry sucked in his bottom lip and covered the head with a condom, then gently rolled the rest of it to the base of Sal's penis.

Harry moved forward and straddled Sal's waist again. He spread his legs wider and sat up. When he pressed one hand on Sal's chest for support, he grabbed Sal's condom-covered erection with the other. Then he pressed the head of Sal's dick to his

anus, moved it around in a few circles, and inserted the head. When the head was inside his body, he placed both hands on Sal's chest and slowly lowered his hips. It hurt for a second, but it wasn't bad pain. The more his body relaxed, the better it felt. Sal's eyes were closed and his arms were over his head.

When the erection was deep inside his body, Harry leaned forward again and put his tongue back into Sal's mouth. Sal lowered his hands and grabbed Harry by the waist. He squeezed the sides of his ass hard and moaned inside Harry's mouth. His breathing increased and his pelvis began to buck.

Then Harry sat up and lifted his arms in the air. He bucked his hips a few times and started to ride Sal's dick. He went up and down so fast the bed rocked and the old Danish modern headboard banged into the wall with even taps. His ass slapped against Sal's body with loud smacks.

Sal shouted, "Yeah, man. Don't stop." Then he slapped Harry's ass a couple of times. "Ride it, man. This is fucking wild."

They were hard slaps and they stung Harry's flesh. But Harry didn't stop riding. After the slaps, he grabbed his own erection and started to jerk off. His head went back and his eyes rolled; his toes curled and his mouth fell open. He continued to ride Sal, without stopping once, for the next twenty minutes.

Then Sal reached forward and cupped Harry's chest muscles. He squeezed them hard and said, "I'm close, man. Just keep riding and don't stop."

A minute later, Sal's body jerked a few times. He stretched his hairy legs out as far as they would go and shouted, "Ah yeah, here it comes." Then his head went back and

his mouth opened. When he grunted, he tightened his grip around Harry's chest and emptied his load into the condom.

Harry came a second later. His eyes were closed and he still rode Sal's cock. He took a deep breath, tossed his head back, and jerked off all over Sal's chest.

When he opened his eyes a second later, Sal's hands were behind his head and his feet were crossed at the ankle. He smiled and slapped Harry's ass, then looked into his eyes and said, "Give me a kiss."

Harry sighed and kissed him fast. Sal was still deep inside his body and Harry didn't want to move. "When I get up, I'll get a warm towel and clean you off," he said. "I made a mess."

Sal laughed. "That was some goodnight kiss," he said. "I have to be honest, I didn't expect that. I had you pegged as the cautious, self-conscious type who's afraid to let himself go. But you went wild. I've never seen anyone ride dick that way." He laughed again and slapped Harry's ass.

Harry shrugged his shoulders and squeezed his anus so Sal's dick wouldn't slip out too soon. "I am the self-conscious type," he admitted. "I've never done anything like this with a total stranger. It took three months to get to this point with Mark."

Sal ran his hands down Harry's soft legs. Then he looked into his eyes and smiled. "I know we just met, but I don't feel like we're total strangers. I know that sounds weird. But here we are, you know, naked and totally exposed. You're sitting on my dick, and it feels perfectly natural."

Harry relaxed his muscles and Sal's penis slid out of his body. He reached for Sal's hand, lifted it to his face, and kissed his palm. "I'll get some soapy towels now and clean you off."

"I like the sound of that," Sal said. "Maybe you can get a few and rub down my whole body."

Harry climbed off Sal's body and crossed to the bathroom. He knew Sal was watching him but he didn't feel self-conscious. All Harry was thinking about was rubbing Sal down with a wet cloth. He'd begin with the mess he'd made all over Sal's chest, and then he'd work his way down with a clean cloth and rub between Sal's legs. He knew Sal would be sensitive there and he wanted to take advantage of that.

Chapter Three

In the morning, Harry woke up in Sal's arms. They were lying in a spoon position and Sal's hairy leg was wrapped around his waist. They both had powerful erections again, and Sal's was pressing into the middle of Harry's ass. He adjusted his body and backed into Sal's groin. Sal whispered into his ear, "You want to fuck?"

He nodded and said, "Put on a condom first."

When Sal reached for the condoms on the night stand, Harry rolled over on his stomach and spread his legs. He rested his head on the pillow and waited for Sal to mount him. And for the next half hour, Sal nailed him to the mattress with an even rhythm that was so articulate and so outrageous, Harry had a double orgasm.

After that, they took a shower together, packed their bags, and checked out of the motel. Sal drove the first stretch. When he pulled into a fast food restaurant to order a few breakfast sandwiches, Harry's cell phone rang. Harry pulled the phone out of his pocket, looked at the caller ID, and sighed. "It's Mark," he said. "Maybe I shouldn't answer."

Sal gave him a look. "Just answer and tell him everything is fine. It's no big deal, and you're not married to the guy."

Harry shrugged and opened his phone. He didn't talk long, because Mark said he was going to the beach that day with a few friends and he was in a hurry. Mark spoke fast and his voice rose at the end of his sentences. When Harry asked Mark why he hadn't answered the phone the night before, Mark said he'd gone out with a few friends to a bar in San Francisco. He said it wasn't a big deal; just a couple of old buddies hanging out together. Mark didn't bother to ask how the trip was going, or even where Harry was. He

said he'd call later that night when he had more time to talk, and told Harry to drive safely.

When Harry closed the phone, he said, "Interesting."

"What's that?" Sal asked. His mouth was full. He'd just pulled back onto the highway and he was eating his breakfast sandwich. He'd rolled the sandwich wrapper down halfway and he took large, ferocious bites.

"Ah well, nothing important," Harry said. But he wondered why Mark hadn't called sooner. After that long, mushy goodbye, he would have thought he'd been calling him on the hour. But more than that—it occurred to Harry that he wasn't as upset about it as he should have been.

Sal swallowed the rest of his sandwich and reached for another. He'd bought four. "I'm starved this morning," he said. Then he slapped Harry on the thigh and laughed. "You gave me a real workout last night and this morning. I haven't fucked like that in a while."

Harry reached for a breakfast sandwich and smiled. He usually didn't like fast food, but he was starved, too. He opened the sandwich and said, "We probably shouldn't do it again, Sal. I feel kind of trashy now."

Sal slapped his thigh again. "We're just having some fun, is all," he said. "We're not hurting anyone. And once we arrive in New York, what happened on this trip is just between us."

The backs of Harry's legs were hurting, but he wasn't unhappy about that. He shrugged and bit into his sandwich. Then he went into a long conversation about his relationship with Mark. He told Sal everything, from the way Mark liked to grope him in

public to the way Mark felt about them living together. Mark thought it was too soon to live together. Mark still lived with his parents, and Harry had been living on campus with a roommate. And in the fall, Mark would be in Connecticut and Harry would be in New York. It didn't look as if they'd ever live together. Sal listened and nodded his head, but he didn't say much. Every now and then he'd say, "Ah, I see," or, "Isn't that something?" But Harry did most of the talking.

He didn't stop talking until they pulled off the road for gas again. They'd been driving for a long time and the gas tank was practically empty. Harry paid for the gas this time with his credit card and Sal filled the tank. And when it was time to leave, Sal said that he wanted to drive again. Harry smiled and said he didn't mind. So he went back to the passenger seat and started talking. This time he went into a long explanation of his love for design and his future goals as a designer.

An hour after that, Harry said, "Am I talking too much again? I know I have a tendency to ramble, but I can't help it." He sighed and looked down at his lap. "Just tell me to shut the fuck up whenever you want. I won't get insulted."

Sal smiled. "Don't worry about it. I know how to tune you out by now. You can talk as long as you want. It doesn't bother me."

"Tune me out?"

Sal lifted his right hand and placed it on Harry's knee. "Don't get all upset. I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

Harry sat back and folded his arms across his chest. "Well, it sounded like an insult to *me*." He tightened his lips, turned his head, and looked out the window. They were passing through a city now, driving on a ramp. Traffic moved evenly and fast.

Below them were neat little row homes, and beyond that you could see the gray smoke stacks of ancient factories.

“I have an idea,” Sal said. He stretched his legs and pulled down his zipper. Then he reached for Harry’s left hand and shoved it between his legs. “You can kill some time this way.”

Harry’s eyebrows went up and his jaw dropped. “You want me to play with your dick while you’re driving?” But he didn’t pull his hand back right away. Instead, he groped around until Sal’s penis was in the palm of his hand.

Sal’s eyebrows moved up and down a few times. He smiled and said, “You can do anything you want with it, if you know what I mean.” He spread his legs wider and bucked his hips forward.

Sal’s dick was growing. Harry felt it stiffen against his palm. Harry had never done anything like this before. His heart began to race and his own penis was growing stiff. So he looked around first to be sure there were no cars or trucks directly next to them, then pulled Sal’s erection out of his pants. He pulled his balls out, too.

Sal gripped the steering wheel with both hands and said, “Ah yeah. That’s it. Stroke it.”

Harry laughed. “You’re a pervert.”

“Only because you’re so hot.”

Harry stared down between Sal’s legs and took a breath. Sal moaned again. Then Harry let go of Sal’s dick, he pulled his left hand back, and turned in his seat. He reached out with his right hand this time and wrapped it around the shaft. He noticed that when his hand was around the thick base of Sal’s shaft, there were still four more inches

sticking out of the top of his fist. He stroked it gently and stared. He licked his lips and swallowed back. He'd figured that he'd give Sal a quick hand job just for fun. But now he had the urge to lean over and slid it into his mouth. Harry was dying to taste it. He'd never sucked a dark, thick dick like this. Mark's dick was thinner and lighter in complexion. Actually, Harry had never sucked any dick in broad daylight while speeding down a busy highway.

He stroked Sal's dick a few more times and said, "If I suck it, will you promise not to come in my mouth?"

Sal's elbows were locked and his fists clenched the steering wheel. "I promise," he said. "I'll tell you when I'm ready to blow."

"You swear?"

"I swear."

Harry looked around again. There was a gray sedan in front of them and a convertible behind them. But there were no cars on either side. So he lowered his head, opened his mouth, and slid it all the way to the back of his throat. Sal's right leg jerked and he moaned. When his dick was all the way inside Harry's mouth, he lifted one hand from the steering wheel and rested it on top of Harry's head. Harry's eyes were closed, his head was twisted sideways, and his tongue was pressed hard against the bottom of Sal's shaft. Sal tasted salty and smelled like the powdery soap from the motel. He reached down and cupped Sal's large balls in the palm of his hand and started sucking him off.

Harry liked giving head. He liked it almost as much as he liked getting fucked. And he knew he was good at it. He knew how to suck with his tongue, and how to create

pressure with his lips. He maintained a constant beat that intensified the more he continued, always building toward a grand climax.

While cars passed them by, Harry's head bobbed up and down. He squeezed Sal's ball sack with his fingertips; his lips puckered and suction noises came from between Sal's legs. When Sal was finally ready to explode, he clutched the back of Harry's head and said, "I'm close, man. I'm really close now."

Harry's head went up, reluctantly, and he licked his lips. They felt puffy and swollen, and his own saliva was dripping down his chin. If Harry had known Sal better, and if he'd had proof that Sal was safe and disease free, he would have continued sucking him off. He would have taken his entire load and finished him off with a smile on his face. But that didn't mean he had to finish him off with a boring hand job.

So instead of sucking Sal's dick, he said, "Finish yourself off while I suck your balls." Then he lowered his head and sucked both large testicles into his mouth at the same time. He would have jerked him off and sucked his balls at the same time, but he couldn't position himself comfortably in the moving car.

Harry's cheeks bulged. Sal grabbed his own dick with his left hand and let out a long, raspy groan. A minute later, Sal erupted with such force that white cream shot up high in one long, silky stream. It went to the right and hit the large round speedometer in the middle of the Mini Cooper's dash board. The few remaining drops landed on Harry's cheekbone. When Sal took a deep breath and looked down, Harry looked up at him with wide eyes. His mouth was still full and he was still sucking Sal's balls.

Sal laughed and said, "Now I know what to do when you start talking too much. I'll just shove my balls into your mouth."

Harry's eyebrows went down. He pushed Sal's balls out of his mouth and sat up straight. "Very funny," he said, reaching into the glove box for a paper napkin so he could wipe Sal's come off his cheek. "You should be thanking me. That was a damn good blow job." He cleaned his face first, then he folded the napkin in half and cleaned the speedometer.

Sal reached out with his right arm. He put it around Harry's shoulders and pulled him closer. "It wasn't just good, it was freaking fantastic, man. That sucking thing you do with your tongue is really hot. It's like gobbling." He shoved his dick back into his pants and pulled up his zipper. "I think what makes it so good is that you *like* doing it. I can tell."

Harry shrugged his shoulders and repositioned himself in his seat. He wanted to change the subject. "Did I tell you how much I love Frank Lloyd Wright design?" he asked. "Do you think that when we reach Pennsylvania we can take a detour and stop at Fallingwater? I've never seen it and I might not get a chance again any time soon." Harry was a huge fan of all Frank Lloyd Wright architecture. It was his car, and he was technically the one making all the rules. But he figured it would be polite to ask. He didn't want to force Sal into doing something he'd hate.

Sal shrugged. "I don't know what you're talking about. But after a blow job like that, we can stop anywhere you like." He turned and smiled, then slapped Harry's thigh hard.

Harry smiled. "Don't be obtuse," he said. Then he went into a long explanation of Frank Lloyd Wright and Fallingwater that lasted for the next two hours.

When they stopped for the night, they ate dinner in a small Italian restaurant and Sal paid again. Harry tried to stop him, but Sal flatly refused to take his credit card. After dinner, they checked into a shabby place called Cabins in the Woods. The mattress was lumpy, the old window screens had holes, and the bathroom sink had rust stains. Harry didn't remove his socks at all. But it didn't really matter what the place looked like. The minute they were inside and the door was shut, Sal had Harry's pants down around his ankles and his own erection out of his pants.

The next night, they slept in a gay-owned and -operated bed and breakfast not far from Fallingwater. This was their last night together on the road, and Harry wanted to splurge for once. He was tired of stained toilets and murky floors. This was a nice place, with clean sheets, a gas fireplace, and a large, comfortable bed. The owners were an older gay couple and they treated Harry and Sal as if they were newlyweds. They offered relationship advice and mentioned they'd been together for more than thirty years.

The room had a large spa tub. Sal was so excited about getting Harry into a hot tub filled with bubbles that he went out to buy more condoms and they skipped dinner. Before they finally fell asleep, Harry gave Sal a long, slow head-to-toe massage with a slippery oil he'd found on the bathroom shelf. It smelled like musk incense and it felt soft and silky.

In the morning, while they were putting their suitcases in the car, Mark called again. He'd been calling Harry all along in drifts and spurts, with no set pattern. Harry looked at the phone and turned away from Sal. He opened it and spoke for a few minutes about Fallingwater, then hung up and said, "He says he misses me and can't wait to get to New York next month."

After that, it was as if everything had changed in seconds. Sal opened the passenger door and shrugged. His eyebrows furrowed and his lips turned down. He sat on the seat without saying a word, and this set his tone for the remainder of the trip. Harry crossed to the driver's side, staring down at his shoes. When Harry inserted the key into the ignition, he reached for Sal's hand and said, "We've had fun these past few days, and in a few hours it's back to reality and our lives."

Sal looked into his eyes and nodded. "Yes," he said. "We should be in New York in time for dinner."

Harry drove the rest of the way and Sal slept. They passed through the Pocono Mountains in north eastern Pennsylvania and Harry didn't say a word about the beautiful landscape. Normally, he would have gone into an explanation of the summer he'd spent there with relatives, and Sal would have nodded and listened quietly. But for some reason Harry couldn't figure out, he was out of words for the first time in his life. They stopped for gas one more time in a rural section of northwestern New Jersey and talked about how silly it was that in New Jersey it was still illegal to pump your own gas. The conversation was light and casual; just a couple of good buddies on a road trip. No one would ever have guessed they'd been lovers that week.

When they finally reached the Lincoln Tunnel, Sal sat up and stretched his legs out. "Well, we're here," he said. Then he rubbed his jaw a few times and shook his head. "But to be honest, this trip went by so fast I can't believe we're already here."

Harry smiled and reached into his pocket for money to pay the toll collector. "I can't believe it either," he said. He turned to see the expression on Sal's face, but Sal was staring out the window at the women in the next car. So Harry sighed and pulled up to the

toll booth without saying anything else. He'd known all along that they'd be going their separate ways once they reached New York, but now he had a sinking feeling in his stomach that wouldn't go away. He wanted to say something, but he didn't want to make Sal uncomfortable.

The traffic in the tunnel moved fast that day. They were in the city in a matter of minutes. Sal reached into the back seat for his bag and said, "You can drop me off anywhere now."

Harry's eyebrows went up. "Where are you staying?" It had just occurred to him that Sal had never mentioned where he'd be living in New York.

"With an old friend," Sal said. "He's not far from here, so you can pull over any time." His suitcase was on his lap and he was tapping his fingers on the handle.

So Harry pulled over to the curb in a bus zone and said, "Is this okay?"

"It's fine."

When the car stopped, Sal reached for the handle and opened the door. Before he got out, he turned to Harry and said, "Thanks, man. I really appreciate you doing this." Then he reached for Harry's hand and squeezed it hard. "You're the best. I mean that. Don't stop talking, ever."

Harry tipped his head to the side and smiled. "So are you. I mean that. You're the best listener I've ever met."

There was a moment of hesitation. Sal looked into Harry's eyes and Harry's stomach jumped a few times. People hurried by, horns honked, and a police cruiser passed with its siren blaring.

Harry didn't want to let him go this way. He knew Sal would disappear into the crowded city and he'd never see him again. But there was nothing he could do. He was already committed to Mark, and Sal didn't seem like he was interested in committing to anyone.

Then a bus pulled up behind them and the driver shouted, "Get the fuck out of the way, moron!" Sal looked back and said, "Welcome to New York. I'd better get moving so this asshole doesn't go crazy. Good luck with school, man."

"You too," Harry said. He was from Long Island and bus drivers didn't intimidate him. "I hope the new job goes well."

Sal shrugged his shoulders and smiled. "We'll see. If I don't like it, I'll just do something else. There are a lot of opportunities for math majors out there." Then he punched Harry in the arm, jumped out of the car, and gave the bus driver behind them the middle finger while he slammed the door shut.

Harry waited for a moment. He watched Sal walk down Eighth Avenue. He noticed how Sal walked along on the balls of his feet with his head up high and his shoulders rocking. He waited to see if he'd turn back and wave. But the bus driver honked three times and shouted a few more profanities, so Harry slipped the car into first gear and pulled away from the curb. He thought about driving around the corner, but he decided it was best to just head across town to his new apartment on East 24th Street.

Harry didn't know that when he pulled away from the curb, Sal stopped walking. He stood on the sidewalk for a moment, then turned back to see if Harry was still there. He was about to lift his arm in the air, but stopped midway. Harry was gone by then and an old woman was dragging a collapsible shopping cart off the bus.

Chapter Four

Seven years later, Sal stood from the poker table in a Las Vegas casino and shook his opponent's hand. It was mid-December, and like everything else in Vegas, the Christmas trees were larger, the decorations were more elaborate, and the Santa Clauses were dressed like Elvis. An announcer in a booth said, "It's been a good night for Sal Sorentino." Then there was a round of applause from a small audience in front of the poker table.

Sal had just won the last round of Texas Hold 'em in the casino's world championship tournament. And he was about to collect a huge sum of money.

Sal wore dark glasses and a black V-neck sweater. His black hair was still cut short and his jeans were loose and baggy. He smiled for the first time that night. It hadn't been an easy win; his opponent was one of the best poker players in the world. But Sal had managed to beat him with a queen of diamonds and a three of hearts. And now he only wanted to go up to his room in the casino and stretch out on the bed. But he had to smile for the TV cameras first. He was still rising in the business, and he had obligations to his fans and viewers.

He gave a quick interview, shook his opponent's hand one more time, then said good night. He made his way through the casino, shaking more hands and smiling, until he reached the elevator. When he was inside and alone, he leaned back against the elevator wall and clenched his fists. Then he smiled and whispered to himself, "I can't believe I did it." The money was fantastic. But this tournament wasn't just about winning money. It was about securing his name as a contender and beating one of the best poker

players in the business. He'd done it with a poor hand, too. And it wasn't just luck. Sal knew how to calculate and count; he'd watched the cards and evaluated his competition using his mathematical skills and his gut instincts.

When he was in his room, he stripped off his clothes and got into bed naked. His balls bounced and his floppy penis slapped against his right leg. He was always exhausted after an intense tournament. He stretched his arms and legs and yawned a few times. Then he reached for the TV remote and groaned. His back was aching from sitting in the same position all night and his face hurt from keeping a steady, serious expression. The TV in his room had two great porn channels and he figured he'd relax with a good old-fashioned jerk session. He pushed the on button, spread his legs, and reached for his penis with his other hand. He pulled it a few times and gripped the shaft. He was already semi-erect and he was growing larger by the second.

He figured he'd watch the bi-curious video he'd watched the night before. The actress had large, heaving breasts and the male actors were both young and blond, with soft smooth legs and the kind of supple asses he loved to pound. But when he started flipping through the channels, he stopped at the Home Shopping Bazaar. He sat up straight and let go of his dick. His eyes widened and his head tilted sideways. There was an attractive young woman on the TV selling custom bedding, and she was talking to a good-looking young man who looked vaguely familiar.

"You can't go wrong with any of these colors," the woman said. "I have these duvet sets in every color in my own home, and I mix and match them all the time."

The camera took a close-up of the woman running her hand across a pale sage cotton sheet. Sal sat up and raised the volume. He waited for the camera to pull back and

show the people again. When it finally did, the young man said, “We’ve designed these duvet sets for comfort, design and quality.” Then he went into a long explanation about the embroidered boarder along the edge of the duvets, and how hard he’d worked to make sure it was the best quality available.

And while the guy spoke, Sal looked to the left of the screen to read the details about the product. It read in large print: “The Harry Beckham Collection, Exclusive Design for The Home Shopping Bazaar.”

Sal sat back against the pillows and it all came rushing back at once. The guy he was watching on TV was the same Harry Beckham he’d met that warm June day back at Stanford. He’d forgotten the name of the woman he’d dated who had introduced them, but he’d never forget the first time he’d seen Harry smile. His light brown, wavy hair and his soft smooth skin had remained with Sal for the past seven years. The nights they’d spent on the road in dingy motels and cheap cabins still caused him to wet his lips and smile.

And Harry was *still* talking nonstop. Only now he was talking to millions of television viewers about his expensive line of designer sheets and bedding accessories. Sal shook his head and laughed out loud. Then he crawled under the covers and drifted into a deep sleep to the sound of Harry’s voice.

The next morning, he woke to the sound of a man’s deep, hearty voice. Sal had fallen asleep with the TV on, and The Home Shopping Bazaar was selling exercise equipment now. Sal rubbed his eyes and thought about Harry Beckham one more time, then he reached for the TV remote and flipped to one of the porn channels. He had one of those rock-solid morning erections and he knew it wouldn’t go away unless he took care

of himself. Sal was a star at the casino; he could have had any man or woman he wanted. But Sal had never been promiscuous, and he'd always been responsible. Actually, it had been over six months since the last time he'd had sex with anyone.

He couldn't find the bi-curious film this time, but he did find an all-male film that looked interesting. He was in the mood for a guy that morning anyway, and one of the naked actors was wearing a thick white choker with a round silver medallion attached in the center. The actor was blond, with a slim, hairless body and a firm, round ass. Two larger, dark-haired guys with hairy legs and big dicks were taking turns tagging his ass. The blond man was on all fours, with his legs spread wide and his back arched as far as it would go. It looked like one of those amateur porn films, because there wasn't any background music and the set looked like someone's bedroom. The two top guys were laughing and joking around like naughty, drunken frat brothers in a locker room. They both had huge dicks and low-hanging balls. But it wasn't a kinky porn film, and the theme had nothing to do with S&M. The blond actor's choker was just for decoration and he could have done the same scene without it and no one would have noticed.

It was the choker that attracted Sal to the film. He wasn't a kinky guy by any means, but he did have one simple, harmless fetish. And it was only when he was with a man, not a woman. When he saw a necklace of any kind around a good-looking guy's neck, he became instantly aroused. There was just something about it that made his heart race faster. Chokers were hot, but he actually preferred long necklaces. If the blond guy in the film had been wearing a long strand of white pearls, Sal would have stood from the bed and rubbed his penis on the TV screen.

Sal had always kept his fetish hidden from his male lovers. It wasn't that he needed his partner to wear a necklace during sex. And he never would have openly requested it, like some people he knew. He knew straight guys who talked openly about their high-heel fetishes; he knew other guys who loved long, red fingernails on their women. But Sal kept his necklace fetish to himself, mainly because it wasn't something one heard every day. He was self-conscious that way; he didn't want people to think he was peculiar.

After he masturbated, he took a shower, dressed quickly, and packed his bag. He was leaving Vegas on an early flight and he didn't want to miss the plane. He'd been there for almost two weeks and all he wanted to do was go home, lie back on his favorite sofa, and close his eyes. He had another tournament coming up in a month in Atlantic City.

A few hours later, when he was in the air and they announced that it was safe to use electronic devices, Sal opened his laptop and checked his e-mail. He had a comfortable seat in first class this time, and there was no one sitting next to him. He was wearing a black baseball cap and dark glasses. He wasn't recognized often, but because he'd been in a recent tournament that had been televised, he didn't want to take any chances. Flying calmed his nerves and lowered his eyelids. He was planning on sleeping all the way back to Newark airport, but if even one person from the casino recognized him, he knew he'd be forced to spend the entire flight smiling and answering questions about his career as a professional poker player. It had already happened once, on a flight home from Reno.

After he checked his e-mail account, he went to the Internet and found a search engine. He typed in the name “Harry Beckham” and sat back in his seat with his eyes wide open. Harry’s name was everywhere on the Web. There were pages of information about him and his design firm. Harry was based in New York, but he had showrooms in Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles, and London. He sold his original designs on a well-planned Web site and he was a regular guest on some of the most popular daytime talk shows in the country. There were pages of photos: Harry walking down a New York Street in white jeans and a black leather jacket, Harry with a new short haircut on the set of a talk show, and even one of Harry shirtless on a beach—wearing a black braided choker. Sal stared at the beach photo and sucked in his bottom lip. The choker was thick and it hugged his soft, sexy neck. And it looked like Harry had been going to a gym and lifting weights since college.

When a flight attendant leaned over and asked Sal if he wanted anything, he looked up from the laptop and asked, “I’m curious. Have you ever heard of someone named Harry Beckham?” Did Harry’s fame go beyond the Internet? There were so many people these days who seemed to be all over the Internet, yet no one in the real world knew who they were.

She pressed her hand to her chest and said, “Ah well, who *hasn’t* heard of Harry Beckham? He’s my favorite designer. I just saw him last night on The Home Shopping Bazaar and ordered a new set of sheets. I got the taupe and white ones, because he said they’d go with anything.” Then she stood up and smiled. “He’s so sexy, too.”

Sal smiled and closed his laptop, then folded his arms across his chest and frowned. *He* hadn’t heard of Harry Beckham. He’d known him once, but that wasn’t the

same thing. Sal didn't know much about any famous designers. He shopped fast, usually in small boutiques, for black shirts and jeans. He had an interior designer of his own, so he never paid attention to sheets or pillowcases or furniture.

Sal rubbed his jaw and smiled. In the past seven years, Harry had been his best memory. And while he'd been remembering Harry as an adorable guy who talked a little too much, Harry had been busy becoming famous. Sal wished he'd taken the time to look him up sooner.

Sal had never forgotten his trip to Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater with Harry. In one afternoon, Harry had educated him and inspired him. When Harry had explained the details behind the building, it was the first time it actually occurred to Sal that a large, expensive home could actually be a spectacular work of art, too.

When the plane landed in Newark, there was a black Town Car waiting to drive him to his home in Saddle River, New Jersey. He'd done well as a professional poker player in the last four years, and he'd recently purchased a home of his own. It was an opulent, suburban McMansion, with a stone façade, black shutters, and a five-car garage. Each tree on the five-acre property was surrounded with a perfect circle of thick mulch, the dark green lawn was chemically treated every week, and the boxwoods were trimmed into neat little designs that swirled and turned like the scrolls on a Grecian urn. Marble statues of the four seasons flanked the swimming pool; the four-bedroom guest house was larger than most normal houses.

But it wasn't Sal's dream house. He preferred modern architecture like Frank Lloyd Wright's Fallingwater. But he'd purchased this home at a sheriff's sale and it was a good investment. The house had once belonged to an overly zealous C-list celebrity who

hadn't been able to keep up with the mortgage payments. Harry had seized the opportunity to invest his hard-earned money into something solid. When the real-estate market improved, he knew he'd be able to sell at a huge profit and build his real dream house. Besides, this house got him out of the city and into a quieter place where he could relax when he wasn't playing poker.

Tante Clarisse was waiting for him at the front entrance, leaning forward and wringing her hands. She was his full-time housekeeper, a small, crooked woman with bent fingers and two painfully thin legs shaped like the letter X. Her hair was dyed bright red and poorly chopped into a short pixie cut with her own fingernail scissors. One yellow front tooth stuck out and went sideways, and her ears were slanted and pointed like an elf. She was only about five feet tall, and she wore pedal-pushers and flat ballerina slippers. Her accent was French, but she was actually French Canadian. She had made a point of telling Sal this on her first day of work—and that she preferred to be called, pretentiously, Tante Clarisse instead of just Clarisse. It made him grind his teeth. She was one of those self-invented people, one who tried to be over-animated but always came off as painfully transparent.

Sal got out of the car and forced a smile. He had created a polite, invisible wall with Tante Clarisse. He preferred to enter his own home quietly and he didn't like her waiting for him at the door. He'd always had the feeling that she had serious fag hag tendencies, and he wasn't the fag hag type.

He took his suitcase from the driver and nodded, then turned to the front door and said, "Is everything okay, Tante?" He never referred to her the same way. Sometimes it was Tante, sometimes it was Clarisse, and sometimes it was Tante Clarisse.

She had a peculiar look on her face that day; her lips were pinched and one eyebrow was twisted up. She lifted her hands in the air and shook her head. "This time she's gone too far," she said. "She pulled all the bedding off the beds this morning and dragged them all down to the main foyer. And while I was cleaning it all up, she went into the kitchen, opened the refrigerator, and ate all my yogurt." She shook four crooked fingers and screeched, "Four large containers of plain vanilla!"

Sal lowered his head and smiled. Tante Clarisse was talking about his two-year-old pet pig, Dolly. She was extremely intelligent and very possessive. Whenever he left on a trip, Dolly became so bored and anxious, she got into all kinds of trouble. The last time he went away, she ripped the living room drapes off their rods and rooted up all the boxwoods behind the garage. It cost more than two thousand dollars to replace the boxwoods and another five thousand to replace the drapes. "Where is she now?" he asked.

"I put her in the pen," Tante said. "I just didn't know what else to do."

Sal dropped his suitcase on the driveway and said. "But she hates the pen. She must be going crazy in there. You should have put her in the playroom."

Before Tante Clarisse had a chance to reply, he jogged past her, went through the house, and ran out the back door. Unintentionally, Sal had become extremely attached to Dolly. He'd never even wanted a pet pig in the first place. His ex-lover, Braden, had brought her home on a whim one afternoon and Sal hadn't objected. At the time, Braden was nineteen years old, had a body like a porn star, and knew how to give a blow job like an industrial vacuum cleaner. Sal had fallen deeply in love with Braden and he couldn't refuse him anything. Braden had brought the pig home the first week he'd moved into the house and Dolly was just a tiny little thing then. But when Braden moved out a year later

because Sal was always on the road playing poker, Sal got custody of the pig. By that time Sal had become very fond of Dolly; he couldn't just give her away.

Braden lived in New York now and he was working as a model for one of the smaller modeling agencies, hoping for a career in show business. Sal still spoke to him on the phone at least once a week. They got together for dinner and fooled around once or twice a month. Sal was still in love with him and he had a feeling that one day Braden would move in with him again and they'd resume their relationship.

When Dolly saw Sal running toward the pen, she bucked her back legs a few times and squealed out loud. Her head went back and forth and she rammed her snout into the thick, iron fencing. Sal had had someone build a special fenced-in section next to the pool house, with heavy iron bars and a large mound of sand so Dolly could root. She liked going in and out of the pen on her own when the gate was open, but she hated being locked in there for any length of time.

He opened the gate and said, "There's my girl."

She waddled out of the pen and snorted a few times. Then he sat down on the grass and wrapped his arms around her thick neck. Dolly was always very clean, and she never had an odor of any kind. She was smarter than any dog he'd ever had and there were times when he thought she literally understood what he was saying.

"Did that mean old Tante Clarisse lock you up again?" he whispered, then kissed the top of her head.

Dolly stepped back and tilted her head to the side. Then she grunted a few times and poked him in the shoulder with her snout.

“I’ll have a long talk with her about this,” Sal said. “She knows she’s not supposed to lock you up for longer than an hour.” He stood up and shook his head. He knew he couldn’t get too mad Tante Clarisse for this, because he knew that if she quit, he’d never be able to find another housekeeper willing to babysit a pet pig. Dolly was the only reason he’d hired Tante Clarisse in the first place. He would have been happier with a cleaning person once or twice a week. But he couldn’t leave Dolly all alone when he traveled, and he certainly couldn’t take her with him.

He motioned with his arm and said, “C’mon, girl. Let’s go inside and have a snack. I’m starved.”

Dolly followed his steps all the way back to the house. He’d taken the time to train her in obedience; he’d gone to classes so she could learn how to heel and sit like a dog. Now that she was with Sal, Dolly walked slowly and evenly, with her head tilted back and her snout pointed up. Dolly was dark brown with a few white spots. Her snout was black with a pink spot shaped like the state of Hawaii. She wore a black velvet collar with rhinestones, and there was a matching leash for when he took her to the park.

When they went inside the house, she sat on her hind legs and waited patiently for him to give her something to eat. To look at her now, no one would ever have guessed she’d torn the beds apart or that she’d raided the refrigerator earlier that day. Sal was home, and her life was back to normal.

Chapter Five

On New Year's Eve, Harry Beckham couldn't decide whether to wear his black leather sport jacket or his black cashmere sport jacket. He was going to a casual New Year's Eve party in the Village with his best friend, and both jackets went well with his white button-down shirt and new low-rise jeans. The weather had been unusually warm that week, and that night it was rainy and the temperature was in the sixties. He didn't want to lug around a heavy overcoat if it wasn't necessary, but he wasn't sure if the leather would be as warm as the cashmere.

Harry still lived on East 24th Street, between Second and Third Avenues, in The Penny Lane building. But he wasn't in the same studio apartment he'd rented after college. When he'd started to make decent money, he'd purchased a larger one-bedroom, on the top floor of The Penny Lane, with a huge terrace that overlooked a tall building with a huge clock. The terrace was as large as the entire apartment and he used it like another room all year long. In the summer, he filled the entire terrace with containers of potted palms and colorful flowers. He gave informal dinner parties and lit entire terrace with soft, glowing candles. And in the winter he decorated for Christmas with a large Douglas fir, trimmed with thousands of tiny white lights, and sat outside for hours looking up at the sky. He wasn't a fan of Christmas decorations; just white lights and a real tree.

He could have lived anywhere he wanted in Manhattan now, but the Gramercy-Flatiron section of the city felt like home, and Gramercy Park was only a few blocks away. He jogged there in the early mornings, and he took long walks there late at night

when he couldn't sleep. When he passed his butcher and his dry cleaner, he nodded and smiled. He knew everyone in the Korean restaurant by name. The bakery around the corner had the best croissants he'd ever tasted. And he always said good morning to the people who owned the grocery store on the Avenue.

But more than that, The Penny Lane building had that retro, modern style that appealed to his sense of design and personal taste. It wasn't a grand place. The exterior was beige-brick, with a dark green entrance surround. The lobby was lined with red brick and it had been designed to mimic the London street that was in the song *Penny Lane*. He knew all the doormen, and he knew most of his neighbors by their first names. When Marla, his best friend from California, had moved to New York two years after him, she'd purchased an apartment right down the hall from his.

When the doorbell rang, Harry was standing in front of a full-length mirror wearing the black leather sport jacket. He squared his shoulders and adjusted the lapels, then put the black cashmere back into his closet and closed the door. He grabbed his keys and crossed into a short hallway that led to a small entrance hall. When he unlocked the front door and opened it, Marla was standing in the hall. She was wearing a short black dress and dangerous-looking stilettos, and she was carrying a thin jacket over her arm.

She smiled and said, "Are you ready? It's almost ten o'clock."

"I just have to shut off the lights in the kitchen," he said. Then he left her standing there and jogged to the other side of the apartment. On the way back, he stopped and looked out to the terrace where his tall Christmas tree was lit up. He sighed and shook his head. He would have liked to stay home alone tonight in a loose, comfortable sweat suit, sipping chilled vodka on his terrace. If he could have backed out of this New Year's Eve

party, he would have. But he didn't want to disappoint Marla, so he switched off the kitchen lights and jogged back to the front door.

They took a cab to the Village. Traffic was heavy, but it moved fast. Twenty minutes later, the cab dropped them off in front of a large townhouse. It belonged to one of Harry's clients, an older woman who owned a chain of shoe stores all over the country. She'd seen Harry on a talk show one afternoon and she'd liked what he'd done on television so much that she'd hunted him down and begged him to redesign her master suite.

When they climbed the steps and reached the front door, Harry took a deep breath and said, "Here we go." He hated socializing with his clients. He liked to draw the line between friendship and business.

Marla looped her arm through his and said, "Don't be negative. We might have a great time tonight."

He'd been to too many of these things not to know better. He smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe you're right. Who knows?"

It wasn't that he was in a bad mood, and he wasn't depressed. He was thankful for his wonderful life. He'd been very lucky. After graduate school, a famous television personality hired him for a small job. She loved his work so much that she started recommending him to her other famous friends. And they recommended him to their friends. His business and his reputation tripled and it had all happened by accident. But Harry worked long hours and he smiled all the time. When he wasn't working he preferred to be in his own home, in his underwear, doing things that didn't require energy or thought.

The townhouse was filled with people. He knew a few, but most were strangers. His client was so busy playing hostess she hardly said three words to him all evening, which was fine. He liked her but he didn't want to become her best friend. And he had a feeling she wanted more than just a designer: she wanted a trendy new BFF who would entertain her, too. One of the problems he'd learned to handle as a gay interior designer was letting his female clients know, politely, that he wasn't one of the girls and that he wasn't a cliché. Some expected him to be like the gay male characters they read about in chick lit novels, flitting around in a feather boa with limp wrists and a lisp. Others expected him to be like the gay men they were used to seeing on television sitcoms, the swishy, gossipy types that were never taken seriously and posed no threats. Harry loved women and he loved his female clients, but he wasn't one himself.

And he took his work very seriously.

While they were getting drinks at the bar, Marla found a large basket filled with party hats and noise makers. She grabbed a handful of long silver, plastic beads and put them around Harry's neck. But he stepped back and gave her a look when she tried to put a Happy New Year hat with a large pink feather on his head. She shrugged her shoulders, put the hat on her own head, and drank some of her cocktail. They'd been friends for a long time and she knew when it was time to back off. In many ways, their relationship was the exact opposite of what most people expected. She was more like the freaky gay male cliché, and he was more like *her* down-to-earth fag hag.

At midnight, everyone started counting down from ten. When they reached one, the piano player broke into a chorus of *Auld Lang Syne* and Marla threw her arms around Harry's shoulders and shouted, "Happy New Year, by-otch."

He kissed her on the cheek and smiled. “Happy New Year,” he said. Everyone else in the room jumped up and shouted as he stood there with a half smile and watched them.

A few minutes later, Marla saw someone she knew on the other side of the living room and left Harry standing there alone. He was holding an empty champagne glass in one hand and the other was in his pocket.

Then someone grabbed his arm and patted his back. “Happy New Year, Harry,” a man’s voice said.

Harry turned around fast. One of the guys who went to his gym was standing behind him. The guy lived somewhere in Harry’s neighborhood. He saw him when he jogged in Gramercy Park, too. He wasn’t a good friend by any means, but they always seemed to be at the gym at the same time and they always said hello to each other. He couldn’t even remember the guy’s name, but he smiled and said, “Happy New Year to you, too.”

The guy must have noticed the blank expression on Harry’s face, so he smiled and said, “I’m Roger Baines, in case you didn’t remember.” He was wearing a bright red sport jacket, a white turtleneck sweater and black jeans. His light hair was thinning on top and he had a slight paunch. But he was cute, in a cuddly way. If he hadn’t been straight, Harry could have been attracted to him. The older Harry became, the more he was learning to appreciate the fact that guys like Roger Baines were far better partners than the good-looking muscle queens he usually dated.

Harry shook his head. “I’m sorry...*Roger*,” he said. “I’m really bad with names. But I never forget a face or a nice guy.”

Roger smiled. “Don’t worry about it. I’m here with a good friend and we were just leaving. When I saw you standing here, I wanted to say hello before we left.” Then he turned back and reached for a man’s arm. The man was tall, with dark hair, and his back was to them.

When the dark-haired man turned around, Harry’s head jerked back. Then his jaw dropped and he couldn’t find his voice.

Roger put his palm on the guy’s shoulder and said, “Harry Beckham, this is my best friend, Sal Sorentino. We play poker together once in a while.” Then Roger laughed and poked Sal in the arm. “I’m not much of a match, but we have fun anyway.”

Sal extended his right arm to shake Harry’s hand and said, “It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Beckham.” He was smiling and staring at Harry as if he were a total stranger.

Harry shook Sal’s hand and said, “It’s nice to meet you, too, *Mr. Sorentino*.” Then he pressed his lips together and shoved his hand back into his pocket. He wasn’t sure if Sal was joking or not. Maybe he really didn’t remember him.

Sal stepped forward and grabbed the silver necklace resting on Harry’s chest. He looped the plastic beads through his hand and rested them on his palm, then he smiled and said, “You’ve changed a little. Your hair is longer now, and you’ve been working out.”

Harry looked into his dark eyes and shrugged his shoulders. Sal *had* only been joking; he remembered him. His heartbeat increased and his mouth felt dry. “You haven’t changed at all.”

Sal's black hair was still short, his body was still lean and strong, and he was still wearing black V-neck sweaters. There were a few faint lines next to his soft lips, but they only made him look sexier.

"You guys know each other?" Roger asked. "I'll be damned."

"We're old friends. We met in Stanford. We went to college together," Sal said. He let go of the silver necklace and it fell against Harry's white shirt. But he still looked into Harry's eyes, smiling.

"This is so cool, buddy," Roger said. Then he slapped Sal on the back and said, "I just thought you'd recognized him from television."

Sal rubbed his jaw a few times and laughed. "Actually, I only saw him on TV for the first time a couple of weeks ago. And to be honest, I was kind of shocked. I had no idea he'd become so famous."

"Thank you," Harry said. "But I'm not all that famous, and I'm not on TV that much. Most of what I do is far from glamorous." He still wasn't used to his fame, and when someone mentioned it, he wasn't sure how to react.

Sal was looking into Harry's eyes and ignoring Roger completely. He smiled and said, "After I saw you on TV, I thought about trying to contact you, but I figured someone as busy as you wouldn't want to be bothered talking about old times."

Harry's eyes widened and he tilted his head. "I'm not that busy. You could have called. I wouldn't have minded."

"Are you here alone?" Sal asked.

"No. I'm with a friend. You might remember her. Marla?" He was curious. How much did Sal remember about the trip they'd taken cross country? Did he remember

anything? Harry remembered everything, right down to the last time he saw Sal walking away from his car on Eighth Avenue.

“Ah well, Marla,” he said. “I do remember her. She’s the one who introduced us in the first place.”

Harry smiled. He was about to say something, but a good-looking young guy stepped up to Sal and said, “I’m tired and I want to leave.” He was thin and gaunt, and a good deal younger than both Harry and Sal. He looked like one of those circuit boys who could be seen all over town at nightclubs. The ones with trendy haircuts, outrageous shoes, and tattoos. This one had a small, silver ring in his right nostril. He looked as if he were about to stomp his foot, but he didn’t go that far.

Sal smiled at the young guy and said, “In a minute, Braden. I just ran into an old friend from college.”

Braden rolled his eyes and pouted. He looked Harry up and down for a second, then latched on to Sal’s arm and held it tightly.

Harry smiled and said, “It’s nice to meet you, Braden. My name is Harry.” He extended his arm to shake Braden’s hand, but he felt like kicking him in the ass for being so rude.

Braden hesitated for a moment, then he shook Harry’s hand and said, “Yeah, well.” Then he tugged on Sal’s arm and said, “I’m really tired, baby.” His tone was a childish whine. “I want to go home and crash.”

Sal looked into Harry’s eyes and shrugged his shoulders. “It was good seeing you again. I’m glad you’re doing so well.” Then he put his arm around Braden and said, “We really have to get going now.”

Harry smiled. "It was good seeing you again. You look great."

Then Roger slapped Harry on the shoulder and said, "I'll see you at the gym, buddy. And maybe we can all get together one night."

Braden frowned and said, "I have to check my book first."

Harry ignored Braden and said, "That would be nice."

Sal reached to shake his hand again and said, "Do you still talk as much as you used to?" He was smiling and his eyes were glistening.

Harry lowered his eyes and laughed. He knew Sal wasn't trying to insult him. Then he looked up and said, "It depends."

"See you later," Sal said.

Harry pressed his index finger to his bottom lip and watched them leave the room. When they reached the entrance hall, Sal pushed Braden forward and turned back to look at Harry. He smiled and lifted his arm. He waved fast and turned around again.

When they were gone, Marla crossed to where Harry was standing and said, "I saw you talking to those guys. Do I know them? One looked awfully familiar."

Harry smiled. "I'll tell you all about them on the way home. Let's say goodnight and get out of here. I've had enough for one night. I have to fly down to Palm Beach the day after tomorrow for a new client and I just want to go home and be a zombie from now until the time I leave for the airport."

Marla laughed. "Does that mean I can come over tomorrow and spend the day doing your hair and makeup?"

He knew she was joking. He put his hand on the small of her back and said, "And I can give you a home perm."

Chapter Six

On New Year's Day, Sal woke up with a severe headache. His temples were pulsing and his heart was throbbing in his ears. It wasn't because he'd been drinking the night before; he'd only sipped champagne. His head was aching because Braden had taken him to a nightclub after the party to meet a few of his young friends. The music had been loud, too loud to even hold a decent conversation. And while Sal had stood against a wall watching them dance, with his arms folded across his chest and his feet crossed at the ankles, Braden and his skinny young model friends bounced and hopped without stopping for a break. When Sal finally went to him and said he was going home, Braden kissed him on the cheek and patted him on the back. Sal clenched his fists and forced a smile. Braden didn't stop dancing once; he didn't offer to walk Sal to the exit. For all Sal knew, Braden was still in the nightclub dancing to the same awful, pounding music.

He sat up in bed and rubbed his eyes. Then he leaned all the way forward and patted the top of Dolly's head. Her body was motionless and her right front foot twitched a few times. She snorted twice and rolled over on her side. Dolly always slept on a bench at the foot of his bed. She would have been on the bed and up against his back if he'd allowed her there, but he had to draw the line somewhere. Dolly had a tendency to take control of everything, and he wanted her to know he was still the boss.

When he looked at the clock on the nightstand and saw it was only eight in the morning, he sighed. He'd thought that Braden would come home with him and they'd spend New Year's Day together, having great sex and eating Chinese takeout from the containers. And now he was alone, it was raining outside, and he couldn't get back to

sleep. His eyes were wide open and he was ready to get out of bed and do something that would get his mind off Braden. There wasn't much for him to do in New Jersey. So he reached for his phone on the nightstand and called Roger's cell phone. Roger was always there for him and he always made Sal laugh. He'd met Roger at a poker table in Atlantic City three years earlier and they been best friends ever since. Roger had been on the brink of losing a great deal of money the day they'd met, and Sal had helped him out with solid advice.

After five rings, Roger answered and said, "What do you want?" He knew it was Sal calling from the caller ID. Sal knew it had probably taken him so long to answer because he wasn't wearing his reading glasses.

"You want to do something today, man?" Sal asked. He forced his voice to sound upbeat and happy.

"What happened to Braden?" Roger asked.

Sal sighed. Roger always had Braden pigeonholed and oddly enough, for a straight guy, he was usually right. "He decided to stay in the city and I went home alone." Sal bit his bottom lip and squinted. He hated to admit it: Roger had warned him it would happen and he didn't want to go into a long explanation.

But Roger wasn't the type of guy to throw it in his face. "I'm free all day, buddy. I was just going to hang around my apartment. What do you want to do?"

"I don't know," Sal said. "Maybe go to lunch somewhere and catch a movie?"

Roger hesitated for a moment, then said, "Hold on, I just saw the famous guy from my gym, the one we saw at the party last night."

Sal bolted forward on the bed. His eyes opened wide and he said, “Which guy? Where are you anyway?”

“I’m in Gramercy Park,” Roger said. “I went out this morning for a run because I ate too much last night at the party. And the guy from the party is jogging in my direction.”

“Are you talking about Harry, Harry Beckham?” Sal asked.

“Hold on. Here he comes. I’m going to say hello.”

Then Roger lowered his phone and Sal heard their distant voices. He figured Roger was holding the cell phone near his waist. Roger said, “Hey, buddy, good morning.” Harry said, “I see we both had the same idea this morning. I like jogging this time of year, especially on New Year’s Day because it’s so quiet. It’s one of the best times in New York.” Then Roger laughed and said, “Guess who I’m talking to right now?” And Harry said, “Who?” Roger laughed and said, “Your old friend from college, Sal Sorentino.”

There was a moment of silence, and Harry said in a soft, slow voice, “Tell him I said hello.”

Roger said, “Here, tell him yourself. He’s bored and he wants to do something today.”

A second later, Harry said, “Good morning. I just ran into your buddy, Roger. We’re in Gramercy Park.” His voice sounded awkward, as if he didn’t know what else to say. Sal had a feeling Harry was forcing a smile for Roger’s sake.

“Hey, Harry,” Sal said. “When I called Roger this morning, I had no idea I’d be speaking with you, too.” His voice was even and solid; he was telling the truth.

“Ah well,” Harry said. “Here I am.”

There was another weird moment of silence, then Sal asked, “I was just asking Roger if he wanted to do lunch. And maybe a movie later on, if there’s time. You’re more than welcome to join us. I mean, that is, if you’re free today.” Sal sucked in his bottom lip and held his breath for a moment.

“Actually, I’m not doing anything,” Harry said. “It would be nice to get together and talk over old times. When you think about it, it’s kind of perfect for New Year’s Day.”

Sal exhaled. “I’ll drive into the city and pick you up, then we can go down to a deli I love on Houston. I’m sure there’s plenty of parking down there today. Where do you live?”

Harry told Sal where he lived and agreed to meet him in front of his building at noon. Then he said goodbye and handed the phone to Roger. “I was listening,” Roger said. “I’m only around the corner from Harry. I’ll go to his building and wait for you there.”

Sal smiled. “Tell him I’m looking forward to it.”

He heard Roger tell Harry, “Sal’s looking forward to lunch.” And he heard Harry reply, “Me too.”

Then Roger said to Sal, “I’ll see you in a little while, buddy,” and he hung up the phone.

Sal jumped out of bed and jogged to the bathroom. He had plenty of time to get ready, but he still had to take care of Dolly. He had to make her breakfast and devote at least an hour to her; otherwise she’d be miserable all day and torture Tante Clarisse until

he came home. So he showered and shaved, then put on a black mock turtleneck and a pair of faded jeans. Dolly sat up on the bench and watched him move around the room, her head moving back and forth, trying to figure out what he was up to that morning. She knew all his regular patterns, and this wasn't one of them.

When he was dressed, he tugged on Dolly's velvet collar and said, "C'mon, girl, we're going out for a long walk, and I'll give you a nice breakfast before I leave." She sat up and tossed her head to the side. Her snout wiggled a few times and she snorted. Then she jumped off the bench and followed him out of the bedroom.

A few hours later, Sal passed through the Lincoln Tunnel and headed downtown to East 24th Street. Even though he had a five-car garage, he owned only one car: a huge, black Cadillac Escalade. It wasn't the easiest car to navigate in the city, but traffic was light and most people were still sleeping. He pulled up to The Penny Lane in less than ten minutes. It was five minutes before twelve, and Roger and Harry were out front waiting for him. He didn't notice what Roger was wearing, but Harry was wearing a short beige leather jacket, tight jeans, and a long red scarf. When Sal stopped at the curb, Roger headed for the front door and Harry went to the back.

Harry climbed inside and closed the door. "I like your car. It's very nice."

Sal laughed. "It's a hybrid, too. It's environmentally responsible." Whenever someone mentioned his Escalade, he always felt the need to explain the fact that it wasn't a typical gas-guzzling SUV.

"I like that," Harry said. "I still have my Mini Cooper." He put on his seat belt and adjusted the strap across his chest.

"You still have that car?" Sal asked. "I loved that car."

Harry shrugged his shoulders. “When I really like something, I don’t let go of it easily.”

Sal frowned. He had the same problem. But it wasn’t a car; it was Braden.

On the way downtown, Roger did most of the talking and Harry sat in the back seat, listening. He seemed apprehensive and too quiet. Sal could see him in the rearview mirror. His face was blank and his hands were folded on his lap. He nodded and smiled a lot, and a few times he opened his mouth as if he was going to speak, but then thought about it, pressed his lips together, and looked out the window instead.

When they were in the restaurant, Sal and Roger ordered hug deli sandwiches with heaping mounds of potato salad, large pickles, and coleslaw. Harry ordered a small salad. Roger looked at him and said, “That’s all you’re getting? I’m starved. I could eat two sandwiches after that morning run.” And Sal, without thinking, waved his arm and said to Roger, “He’s a light eater. Don’t force him.” Roger lifted his eyebrows and glanced at Sal sideways, then he smiled and said, “I guess you know him better than I thought.”

Harry and Sal looked into each other’s eyes. Harry smiled and said, “We knew each other very well back in college. He’s right, Roger, I’m not a big eater.”

Sal took a long, quiet breath through his nose. He wasn’t sure how much Harry remembered about their trip from California to New York. So he told Roger, “Harry usually talks a lot more, too. But for some reason, he’s being very quiet today.”

Harry lifted one eyebrow and said, “Don’t worry. I’m just getting warmed up. I’ll be talking nonstop soon enough.”

When their meals arrived, Harry looked down at his salad and said, “Where’s your boyfriend, Braden?” He said this casually, as if he didn’t care.

Sal was reaching for the salt, but stopped and said, “He’s still sleeping. We don’t live together anymore. We did for a year, then he moved back to the city. We’re working on things right now. He likes living in the city, and I’m in New Jersey.” Then he was sorry he’d said so much. Harry didn’t have to know everything.

“You live in New Jersey now?” Harry asked, balancing a piece of lettuce topped with a chunk of grilled chicken on the end of his fork. He was picking and shoving his salad, as if actually eating it was a huge effort.

Roger lifted his sandwich and laughed. “He lives in Jersey, with a mean, ugly housekeeper and a pet pig named Dolly.” He opened his mouth and sunk his teeth into a huge pastrami and Swiss sandwich. Near the left corner of his mouth, a drop of orange sauce dripped down the side of his face.

“A pet pig?” Harry asked. He lowered his fork, looked at Roger, and blinked a few times.

Sal smiled. “Her name is Dolly...the pig, not the housekeeper. The mean housekeeper’s name is Tante Clarisse. And she’s very well trained and smarter than most.” He cleared his throat and added, “The pig is smart, not the housekeeper.”

Harry laughed and smoothed out his napkin. “I’m in shock. If I’d had to guess about what happened to you, I’d have said you were married to a woman now, with at least two kids.” Then Harry pressed his hand to his lips and looked at Roger. He acted as if he’d just said something Roger wasn’t supposed to know.

Sal lifted his hands, palm up, and said, “Don’t worry. Roger knows I’m bisexual. No secrets. And I’m not married to a woman because I fell in love with a guy. It wasn’t a choice. It just happened that way.” He always felt the need to explain himself, because most people didn’t understand his bisexuality. For Sal, the odds of falling in love with a man were just as good as they were for falling in love with a woman.

“How is your job going?” Harry asked, then he turned to Roger and said, “We drove across the country together because Sal had landed a good job on Wall Street. He was supposed to stay in California, but the job offer came up at the last minute and he needed a ride. I was going East to start graduate school, and the rest is history.”

Roger swallowed his food and said, “Now that’s something I didn’t know about Sal. When I met him he was just starting out as a professional player.”

Sal shrugged his shoulders. “It didn’t seem important, Roger. I wasn’t in the job for long. I didn’t like it.”

Harry looked back and forth at them both. “You’re a professional *player*?”

Sal gave Roger a look and said, “I’m a professional poker player now. I hated that job on Wall Street. There was no money and no future, and I couldn’t stand being trapped in an office all day. So one day, while I was in Atlantic City for the weekend, I entered an amateur poker tournament on a dare, and I never stopped playing.” He snapped his fingers three times. “And my degree in math has not gone to waste.”

Harry shook his head and smiled. “Ah well,” he said. “You really have changed since college. A house in the suburbs, a pet pig, and you’re a professional poker player. It sounds interesting. I’ve never known a professional poker player before.”

“He was in a huge tournament last month,” Roger said, “and the entire thing was televised. He won the championship, and nice chunk of money, too.”

“I’ve seen those poker games on TV,” Harry said. “They play Texas Hold ’em all the time. I’m very impressed. It must be difficult work.”

Sal shrugged his shoulders and looked in the other direction. “It’s a living,” he said. Then he looked into Harry’s eyes and said. “Do you play?”

Harry laughed and said. “I’ve played a few times, but I’m not very good.” He laughed again and said, “But I play a mean game of Canasta.”

Sal took a bite of his sandwich and swallowed. Then he took a long sip of soda and asked Harry, “Whatever happened to that guy from Stanford you were seeing? I can’t remember his name, but he was going to Yale.” Actually, he did remember the guy’s name. It was Mark. He wasn’t even sure why he remembered, but he didn’t want to admit it out loud.

Harry adjusted his body in his seat and smiled. He shrugged his shoulders and said, “His name was Mark. God, I haven’t thought about him in years. It didn’t work out. I drove up to Yale to surprise him one night and found him in bed with one of his law professors.” He shook his head and smiled. “He was always so firm about being the top guy in bed. I’m not sure what surprised me more. The fact that he was with one of his professors or that *his* legs were in the air.”

Roger’s eyes opened wide and he stared at Harry, trying to process what Harry had just said.

“I’m sorry,” Sal said. He understood. “That must have been awful.”

Harry shrugged again. "It was at the time, but I wasn't really in love with him. The sex wasn't all that great."

Roger almost choked on his sandwich. Sal patted his back and said, "Calm down, buddy. This is as graphic as it gets. I promise."

After that, Harry started talking about his life and his work. And once his lips were moving, they didn't stop. He told them about his apartment and how much he loved The Penny Lane building. He told them how he got started in his business and how lucky he'd been to be in the right place at the right time. He spent a half hour talking about how his embroidered duvets were made, and another half hour talking about his job on The Home Shopping Bazaar.

By the time Harry finally stopped talking, it was almost four in the afternoon. Sal and Roger had just finished eating huge slices of carrot cake. Sal was still looking into Harry's eyes, listening to every word he said. But poor Roger's eyes were drooping and his jaw had gone slack. He kept putting his hand over his mouth to hide the fact that he was yawning. Roger was sitting next to Harry and Harry didn't see, but Sal was across from them, and he couldn't miss it. At one point, Sal slid his foot under the table and kicked Roger in the shin. Roger sat up straight and cleared his throat, then gave Sal a dirty look.

When the waitress put their check on the table, Harry offered to pay for everyone. But Sal scooped it up fast and said, "This is on me, man. It was my idea and I invited you both." Then he reached into his back pocket and handed the waitress a platinum American Express Card.

While she was processing his card, Roger lifted his arms and yawned. “You guys don’t mind if I go home now? I’m exhausted.”

Sal spoke fast. “Don’t worry about it.” Sal had plans, and he’d been figuring out a way to get rid of Roger without looking rude. He smiled and put his napkin on the table. This was working out perfectly.

Chapter Seven

When Sal pulled up to Roger's building, Roger turned and reached into the back seat to shake Harry's hand. "This was fun," he said. "I guess I'll see you at the gym sometime this week."

Harry bent forward and shook Roger's hand. "You probably won't see me until later this week. I'm leaving for Palm Beach tomorrow. I'm starting a new job there and I'm meeting the client for the first time tomorrow afternoon." He let go of Roger's hand and looked at Sal. "Maybe I should get out now, too, Sal. I only live around the corner. I don't mind walking."

Sal lifted his head and looked into the rearview mirror. "I'll drive you back. I don't mind." His voice was loud and strong, and he tilted his head as if he were insulted.

Harry sat back and adjusted his seat belt. He didn't mind walking; it wasn't far. But he didn't want Sal to think he was running out on him. So he smiled and said, "Fine."

When Roger got out and closed the door, Sal pulled away from the curb and made a right turn so he could circle the block and drop Harry in front of his building. Halfway there, he stopped behind a truck trying to pull into a driveway. He tapped the steering wheel and said, "It's good seeing you again. I had a good time today, man."

Harry knew he was talking just to make conversation. The car was silent and neither one of them knew what to say. So he smiled and said, "I feel so important back here, like you're my personal driver."

But Sal didn't react. He hesitated for a moment, then said, "It's still early. Do you want to do something else?"

Harry's eyebrows went up. It was only half past four: too late to work, and too early to watch anything decent on television. He knew that if he went home he'd wind up taking a nap out of boredom, and then he wouldn't sleep later that night. "I guess we could do something else," he said. "What do you have in mind? A movie?"

Sal rubbed his jaw a few times and inched the car forward. The truck had moved a few feet, but it was still blocking the street and he couldn't get around it. "Would you like to see my house?"

"In New Jersey?"

"It's not that far from the city," Sal said. "I'm in Saddle River."

Harry didn't hesitate. One of the things he loved most in the world was poking around other people's homes. When he was a child on Halloween, he'd always been more interested in his neighbors' living rooms than the candy they were giving out. He sat forward and said, "I'm game. But I have to be back in the city before eleven. I have an early flight tomorrow."

The truck finally moved and Sal hit the gas and swerved to the left. He was still a steady, fast driver, but in this large Escalade, it didn't seem as dangerous as it had when he'd been driving Harry's little Mini Cooper. When they were on 31st Street, heading to the tunnel, Sal slapped the front seat and said, "When I stop at the next traffic light, why don't you come up here? It feels weird talking to you in the back seat."

A block later, Sal stopped at a light and Harry unfastened his seat belt. He leaned forward and lifted his left leg through the opening between the two front seats. But the light changed and the driver behind them honked his horn aggressively. Harry's back was arched and his legs were spread wide. His hands were pressed against the top of the

passenger seat for support, and his crotch was resting on the center console. “Just go,” he said. “I’ll climb over. My foot is stuck on something.” He’d noticed a backpack on the floor and he’d been afraid to move it. His foot must have gotten stuck in the strap.

Sal hit the gas and the car jerked. When he noticed Harry’s body swaying back, he instinctively reached out with his right hand to balance Harry’s body. But his hand landed on the middle of Harry’s ass. “Are you okay?” he asked.

Harry noticed that Sal turned his head away from the road for a moment. He stared at his hand, the one pressed against Harry’s ass. “I’m fine,” Harry said, yanking the heel of his foot free from the strap. “Just pay attention to the road.” Then he slid forward, lifted his other leg, and twisted his body into the front passenger seat. Sal gave him a light boost. He pushed on Harry’s ass, and Harry’s eyes opened wide. It felt like Sal had pushed his ass and squeezed it a few times.

When Harry was in the seat, Sal smiled and said, “Are you okay now, man?”

Harry buckled his seat belt and turned his head to the left. He wanted to say something about Sal grabbing his ass, but he wasn’t sure if Sal was helping him or feeling him up. If Sal had only been helping him climb over the seat, it would have been embarrassing and presumptuous. So Harry smiled and said, “I’m fine.” Sal was looking at the road. He hadn’t shaved that day, and his rough, dark beard was beginning to form

It wasn’t a long drive. Harry was slightly familiar with Saddle River because he’d had clients there. But when Sal pulled into the driveway of a massive stone manor house with acres of manicured landscaping that were fenced in with a tall stone wall and iron gates, he pressed his palm to his chest. He’d been expecting a smaller home in a sub-

division with a shorter driveway and less windows. He'd never imagined a professional poker player would live like this.

Sal pulled up to the front door and switched off the engine. He unbuckled his seat belt and said, "When you meet my housekeeper, don't freak, man. She's peculiar, but she's always here and Dolly can't be alone for too long."

Harry got out of the car and followed Sal to the front entrance. The door was tall and wide, made out of solid black walnut and coated with a glossy finish. When Sal turned the key, Harry looked up to the second floor and said, "This place is unbelievable."

Sal opened the door and shrugged. "I bought it as an investment," he said. "It's not really me. It's too large, has too many closed-off rooms, and it's too generic. When I finally get a buyer, and I will eventually, I'm selling it and building something modern and sleek."

When they stepped into the entrance hall, a small woman with pointed ears rounded a corner at the other end of the hall and crossed toward them. She stopped in the middle of the hall and looked Harry up and down, then turned to Sal and said, "It was a quiet day. She's been sleeping a lot. I fed her and took her out, too."

Sal looked at her and said, "This is an old friend of mine, Harry Beckham. I wanted him to meet Dolly and see the house. I'll be driving him back to the city later tonight." Then he gestured with his arm to Harry. "And Harry, this is Tante Clarisse, my housekeeper."

Harry's head jerked to the side. *Tante Clarisse*? What kind of name was that? And those pointed ears. She looked so much like an outdoor garden gnome that he had to

force himself not to smile. She was wearing a tomato-red kimono trimmed in gold, black ballerina slippers with embroidered dragons on the toes, and a small round hat that matched the kimono. Harry smiled and said, "It's nice to meet you, Tante Clarisse." He wasn't sure, but he thought *tante* meant *aunt* in French. It didn't look as if Sal was about to offer an explanation, and Harry wasn't going to ask in front of her.

She nodded at him fast. Her mouth parted and one front tooth stuck out past her upper lip. She sighed and said, "I'm going upstairs now. I'll be in my room for the rest of the night."

They watched her climb up the semi-circular staircase slowly, pulling on the banister with each heavy step she took. When she was out of listening distance, Sal said, "I warned you about her. She's a little creepy."

Harry shrugged. "I live in New York. I see creepy all the time." He was being polite though. Tante Clarisse's appearance, with that red kimono and matching hat, could rival anything he saw on East 23rd Street, including the guy with the white bird on his shoulder who was always talking up to the sky.

"C'mon," Sal said. "Follow me and I'll introduce you to Dolly."

They crossed to the far end of the long entrance hall and turned left at the back of the house. Harry's eyes darted back and forth. The entire house was decorated and furnished and accessorized. Harry could tell it had been professionally done. There were antique Satsuma vases on top of reproduction French, marble-topped tables. Rock crystal sconces hung on the walls and French antiques were everywhere. The floors were beige and brown marble in a diamond pattern, and the ceilings were tall with carved trim. When they passed a bronze sculpture on a long, thin hall table, Harry stopped and looked

down. The sculpture was a large horse, with thin, delicate legs and a perfectly proportioned body. He ran his fingertips across the horse's back and said, "This is magnificent." He stared at the face and said, "The details are amazing."

Sal stopped and turned. "It's nice. My decorator found it in an antique shop up in Hudson, New York." His voice was even and unconcerned.

"This place is a decorator's dream come true," Harry said. Everywhere he looked he saw something spectacular.

Sal shrugged his shoulders and frowned. "I'm sorry," he said. "If I'd known about your design firm, I would have hired you, of course. I found the designer I have through a friend's recommendation." He looked around and shook his head. "I'm sure this is all very good, and she works hard. But to be honest, I hate all this old formal stuff. I'd rather have modern abstract paintings and less furniture. I hate busy, confused rooms. And right now, that's how I'm living."

Harry laughed and said, "I like a more modern look, too. But she did a good job anyway. You have some very nice pieces here."

Then Sal turned and Harry followed him to the end of the hallway. There was a doorway with a half gate of wrought iron, with curls and twists. Sal clapped his hands, but nothing happened. He looked down at the gate and said, "That's strange. Dolly's usually at the gate, kicking and snorting, when I come home. Sometimes she bounces so high, she falls backwards."

"Maybe she's sleeping," Harry said. He leaned forward and looked down at the gate. He'd never seen a pig up close before. He wasn't sure what to expect.

Sal opened the gate and said, “*Dolly*,” then walked into the room and switched on the lights.

The room was practically empty, except for a tall mound of sand on one corner and a small playhouse in another corner. The playhouse was an exact replica of the main house, with black shutters and stone walls. Sal clapped his hands together again and Harry heard a soft squeal. A second later, a brown potbelly pig loped out of the playhouse and shook its head back and forth. Sal went down on his knees and said, “There’s my girl.” The floor was solid concrete and there was a light dusting of sand everywhere. Sal turned back to Harry and said, “This is Dolly’s room. I always refer to it as the *playroom*. I wanted one room in the house where Dolly could do anything she wanted to do. You know, be a pig and not worry about it.”

Harry went down on his knees next to Sal and said, “So this is Dolly.” She was brown with white spots, and her head was larger than he’d imagined it would be. When he saw the velvet and rhinestone collar around her neck, he laughed. “Can I pet her?”

Sal frowned. “Yes,” he said. “She’s very friendly. But she’s acting unusual today. She’s never this quiet and calm. I hope she’s okay.” Then he lifted his arms and put them around Dolly’s neck. He hugged her and said, “What’s wrong, girl? You look depressed.”

Harry didn’t say anything, but he was thinking that if he’d had to spend the day with that freaky old troll Tante Clarisse, he’d be depressed, too.

Dolly shook her head and snorted a few times, then backed away from Sal and stepped closer to Harry. She tilted her head to the side, looked into his eyes, and snorted again. And when Harry reached out to pet the top of her head, she lowered her eyes and made a noise that sound like a huge sigh.

Sal smiled. "I think she likes you," he said. "When Dolly makes that sound, it's like when a cat is purring." He reached out to pet her on the back. "I just hope she's okay. She's not acting like herself."

Harry shrugged. He knew nothing about animals, especially pigs. "Maybe she's just tired today. I'm sure she's fine."

Dolly snorted again and stepped up to Harry's side. She leaned into Harry's body and rubbed her hindquarters against his jacket. Sal scratched the back of his head. "I hope so."

After that, they left Dolly in her playroom and Sal took Harry on a tour of the house. The only place they didn't go was the third floor, where Tante Clarisse slept. Sal began on the first floor, with the custom gourmet kitchen, and wound up on the second floor in the master bedroom a half hour later. He opened a set of tall double doors as wide as they would go and reached forward with both arms. He faced the bed and said, "And this, finally, is where I sleep."

Harry walked into the bedroom and looked back and forth. This was the one room in the house that wasn't over-decorated. The king-sized bed was low and flat with a black leather headboard, covered with a simple brown suede duvet and four pillows with matching suede shams. The hardwood floor was lighter than the rest of the house and all the furniture had sharp, sleek lines. There were no carved pieces, and no bronze statues; not a hint of the rest of the house. The walls were stippled with large modern canvases, and the one over the bed was signed: "Neil Loeb, '71." Harry stared at the canvas and said, "I know that artist's work. I have one of his paintings in my place. He started out in

New York in the 1970s. I think he studied at Pratt and The School of Visual Arts around the corner from me on 23rd Street. But I can't find much out about him on the Web."

Sal stepped behind Harry and put his hands on his shoulders. Harry's heart began to beat faster and he felt a rush in his head. "Can I take your jacket?" Sal asked in a low, raspy voice.

Harry nodded yes and gulped, then felt Sal's strong hands slid up his back and under the front of his jacket. Sal spread the jacket apart slowly and pulled it back over Harry's shoulders. He slid it down Harry's back and let it fall to the floor. Harry took a deep breath and straightened his shoulders. Sal lowered his head and said, "Can I take off your pants now, too?" Then he kissed Harry's neck, just below his right earlobe, so gently it felt like sand blowing over his skin on a windy day at the beach.

Harry hesitated, but he didn't move. When Sal kissed his neck again, Harry closed his eyes and said, "Are you sure we should be doing this? You seem awfully involved with this Braden guy. I don't want to get in the middle of anything. And I hate cheating."

Sal lifted his head and stepped around him so he could look into his eyes. Then he held the side of Harry's face gently and said, "I not going to lie. I am still emotionally involved with Braden, and I'd like to get back with him. But we aren't a couple right now and I'm not cheating on him. He lives in the city and does what he wants, and I live out here alone." He leaned forward and kissed Harry's cheek. "If you don't want to do this, it's fine. But you look so good. I can't stop thinking about the road trip we took back in college."

Harry lifted his arms and placed them on Sal's waist. He was wondering if Sal remembered the blow jobs he'd given him. Harry had worked hard to please him. There

had been times his jaw had ached from sucking Sal's dick. "If we do this once, with no strings attached, can we go back to being friends tomorrow?" He stepped forward and wrapped his arms around Sal's warm body. Sal smelled like rich leather and spicy aftershave. It wasn't a strong, perfumed aroma; just a hint of mellow, masculine spices.

Sal lifted his other arm and wrapped it around Harry's body. He pulled him tighter and said, "I'm fine with that. I'm glad we finally met again after all these years."

Harry arched his back and pressed his lips to Sal's neck. His heart was racing and his cock was ready to explode. He wasn't completely sure how he felt about Sal emotionally. But he knew it was impossible to step back and walk away now. His legs wouldn't move; his feet were stuck to the floor. He'd worry about his emotions later. It had been about six months since he'd last been with a man at all, and years since he'd been with a real man like Sal. So while he continued to kiss Sal's neck, he reached down and opened the top button of his jeans. The zipper went down and he opened them wide. Then he licked Sal's earlobe and whispered, "I'm not wearing underwear. You can take off my pants now."

Sal's breathing increased and large hands slid down Harry's back. He went down to his knees and pressed his palms above Harry's ass and slid them into his pants. Sal grabbed his flesh and sighed. He pulled Harry's pants down to his ankles. Harry kicked off his shoes and stepped out of his pants, then Sal stood up and pulled off Harry's shirt. But when Harry was naked, except for his socks, and Sal's large hands were massaging his ass, he started talking again. He always talked too much when he was nervous. He pressed his palms on Sal's shoulders and talked about his new job in Palm Beach. Harry's

voice was soft and his sentences ran together. He wanted to stop, but he wasn't sure he could.

While he talked about his job in Palm Beach, Sal licked Harry's neck and cupped his chest muscles. He grabbed them and squeezed with pressure. "Your chest is huge," Sal said. "You must work out all the time." He stared at Harry's chest and licked his lips. "I love huge pecs, man," he said. "And I could feed on these for a week." His voice was low and raspy, with a sinister quality that made Harry's heart beat faster.

Harry moaned; his erection bounced. His chest was one of his most sensitive areas. The harder Sal squeezed, the weaker his legs became. "I work out about four or five times a week," he whispered. Then he went into a long talking jag about how his chest muscles always seemed to grow larger than any other muscle in his body. He could never get bulging biceps, but all he had to do was bench press and his chest popped and rounded. He knew he was rambling, but he couldn't stop his lips from moving.

Sal ignored the talking and continued playing with Harry's chest. He grabbed both chest muscles, pushed them together, and lowered his head. He stuck out his tongue and licked them; he sank his teeth into Harry's muscle cleavage and bit gently. When Sal sucked on Harry's hard, brown nipples, Harry's eyes went back and he cradled Sal's head in his hands. Waves of passion shot through Harry's body. Under normal circumstances, he had unusually sensitive nipples. All he had to do was brush them lightly against something and his penis started to grow. With Sal sucking and gently biting them now, he could barely catch his breath.

But Harry didn't stop talking until Sal finally lifted his head and said, "Get up on the bed and lie down on your back." He sounded soft and sensible, but there was no mistaking that it was an order, that he was commanding him to the bed.

So Harry pulled off his socks and climbed onto the bed. He was quiet for a second. He sat back on his elbows and watched Sal strip out of his clothes. Sal's legs were still covered with the same sexy dark hair he remembered from their road trip, his body was still lean and firm, and his penis was still dark and thick. Harry licked his lips; his own erection moved. "Do you have condoms?" he asked. Then he went into another talking jag about safe sex and being responsible.

Sal didn't say anything. His lips were pressed together and his erection was long and solid. He crossed to the nightstand on the balls of his feet, the same sexy stride that Harry remembered well. His right hand went down and he opened the top drawer and pulled out a condom and a tube of lube. He held them up, waved the condom back and forth, and smiled. Then he climbed up on the bed and straddled Harry's shoulders, practically sitting on his face.

Harry rested his head on the mattress and said, "I can turn over if you want. I remember how much you liked doing it that way." He placed his palms on Sal's upper thighs and ran his fingers back and forth. He sighed. "I know I'm talking too much. It's just that I'm a little nervous, is all. I'm trying to stop."

Sal smiled. He bucked his pelvis forward and pressed the tip of his erection into Harry's chin. He lifted the entire erection and slapped the base against Harry's cheek. "I remember something about you, too," he said. Then he moved forward and lifted his penis up. When his balls were directly over Harry's lips he said, "Open your mouth now.

I know how to make you stop talking.” Then he lowered his testicles to Harry’s lips and laughed.

Harry’s head went up, his lips parted, and he sucked both large testicles into his wide open mouth. He closed his eyes and let out a long moan that sounded like a hum. His cheeks bulged and his toes curled. Sal tasted a little salty; but not bad at all. And Harry could still smell a light aroma of spicy cologne, mixed with the natural aromas coming from between Sal’s hairy legs. He took a deep breath, pressed his tongue to the bottom of Sal’s ball sack and ran it back and forth.

While Harry sucked his balls, Sal closed his eyes and jerked his erection slowly. He laughed and said, “See, I know how to get you to stop talking. All I have to do is shove my balls in your mouth.”

Harry’s eyes opened wide and he smacked the side of Sal’s thigh. His cheeks bulged.

“I’m only joking around,” Sal said. “Seriously, man, this is fucking awesome. Don’t stop. It feels like I dropped my balls into a bowl of warm soapy water.”

Harry didn’t stop sucking his balls until Sal finally pulled them out and climbed off his face. Harry watched Sal go to the end of the bed and kneel between his legs. His lips felt swollen and his chin was wet with his own saliva; the inside of his mouth still tasted like Sal. He ran his tongue across his bottom lip and swallowed back.

When Sal spread Harry’s legs apart, Harry arched his back and threw his arms over his head. He rested his ankles on Sal’s shoulders and sucked in his bottom lip. This was the way he’d always preferred getting tagged by Sal: on his back, with his legs up high, so he could see the expression on Sal’s face. He would have been willing to do it

any way Sal wanted, though. After so many years, he would have been willing to do anything to please this man.

Sal covered his erection with the condom, then lathered it with clear lube. He was breathing so fast his chest was heaving. He didn't waste any time. He reached down between Harry's legs with his left hand, found Harry's opening with his middle finger, and guided the tip of his erection to the opening with his other hand. Harry took a deep breath and exhaled. When Sal entered him, there was a moment of sharp pain. His head went to the side and he bit his bottom lip. Harry hadn't been with a man this way for a while, and he knew Sal wasn't small.

But Sal went in slowly, watching Harry's expression the entire time. When Harry squinted and winced, Sal rubbed the back of his leg and waited. When Harry held his breath, Sal stopped moving. And when Harry finally released his bottom lip and looked into Sal's eyes and nodded yes, Sal slipped his entire erection into Harry's body and started moving his hips.

At first, Sal fucked with easy motion. He slid his penis in and out of Harry's body, barely even moving his hips. But when Harry threw his head back and said, "Ah yes, Sal, go deep, man," Sal's breathing became more intense and his hips moved faster. He wrapped his arms around Harry's soft legs and rose to his knees. He lifted Harry's body up higher. The backs of Harry's knees rested on his shoulders and Harry's legs dangled down his back and swayed lifelessly. Then Sal pounded and hammered until Harry's head was buried between the pillows and the top of his head was against the leather headboard. Harry lay there on a downward slant, with blood rushing to his head, puffing

and moaning. He felt Sal's balls slap against his body with each thrust; he sucked in his stomach and whispered, "Ah yes. Don't stop, Sal."

The more Harry begged, the more he received. When Sal was ready to climax, he looked down at Harry and said, "I'm close, man. I'm almost there."

Harry grabbed his own penis and held the shaft. He knew he wouldn't have to jerk hard, because Sal was bringing him close to climax already. A few moments later, they both closed their eyes at the same time and grunted. Sal filled the condom and Harry blasted his load all over his own chest. Then Sal lowered Harry's body to the bed, leaned forward, and kissed Harry on the lips. It was a soft kiss; he didn't insert his tongue this time. He looked into Harry's eyes and said, "This was nice."

Harry reached for the back of Sal's head and ran his fingers through his straight, dark hair. "It was very good, Sal."

But Harry wasn't telling the complete truth. He wanted to tell Sal it was the best sex he'd ever had, with anyone, anywhere. He wanted to tell Sal he'd always wondered what had happened to him and that he'd thought about him a lot over the years. He wanted to tell him that there had been times when, with other men, he'd fantasized about him. Once, with a guy he'd only dated for a month, he actually called Sal's name out loud during sex. But he knew Sal was still emotionally involved with Braden, and he didn't want to set himself up for a letdown. And he didn't want Sal to think he was one of those creepy, *Fatal Attraction* types.

So he looked at the clock on the nightstand and smiled. "It's after nine," he said. "I should start getting ready to go back to the city."

Sal pulled out slowly and sat back on his haunches. “I *am* going to hear from you again, right?” He rubbed his jaw and frowned. “You’re not going to just leave and that’s it? I want to be friends.”

Harry adjusted his legs and smiled. He could still feel Sal inside his body. “Of course, we’re still friends,” he said. “Hell, I can always use another good friend.” Then he forced a smile and said, “I’ll call you when I get back from Palm Beach later this week.”

A half hour later, when they were dressed and heading downstairs, Sal passed a large painting of a landscape on the second-floor hall and shook his head. The painting had been set in a heavy, ornate frame that had been soaked in shiny gilt. When Harry saw him frown, he asked, “What’s wrong?”

Sal clenched his fists and stared at the painting. “I really hate that thing,” he said. “It looks like something you’d see in one of those old Victorian houses on bus tours to homes of former presidents.” Then he ground his teeth and bit the inside of his mouth.

Harry tilted his head and said, “You really don’t like anything about this place, do you?” He felt like stepping back, because it almost looked like Sal was ready to spit on the painting.

Sal shrugged his shoulders and spread his arms out wide. “Not really, but I paid a small fortune to get it all decorated and I’m stuck with it now. I think I might just list this place with a Realtor this week, and I can start building my dream house. I’m very unhappy here.” He lowered his head and pouted. “This might sound silly, but I’ll never forget the time we went to Fallingwater. I learned a lot that day, and I found out I love modern, simple things. I want to live in a place designed by Frank Lloyd Wright.”

The corners of Harry's lips turned down. He liked Sal's house. He wasn't in love with the way the interior had been designed, and Sal's decorator should have taken Sal's personal tastes into consideration. So he looked Sal in the eye and said, "First, not everyone can live in a house designed by Frank Lloyd Wright because there aren't that many. Second, this really is a great house already. Third, I'm a huge fan of opposites, and I think you'd be happier if the house didn't look so formal and stuffy."

Sal gave him a look. "What do you mean?" he asked in a soft, hesitant voice.

"I once designed the interior of a very old stone home in Connecticut with nothing but sleek modern pieces and simple, monochromatic colors," Harry said. "The owners felt just like you: they hated heavy rugs and draperies and wanted to live in a modern, contemporary environment. I even mixed a few shaker pieces in and they worked perfectly."

"Even if you could do that here," Sal said, "I'd still be stuck with all these antiques and relics I paid a fortune for." He tapped the gold frame on the painting. "I'm screwed this time, and it's my own fault for not paying attention to what I was doing. Besides, I know you're probably far too busy to take on this place." This time, when he pouted, he sighed, too.

Harry's first mission as a designer had always been to make the client feel happy and content. He wanted his clients to look forward to going home each night; he didn't want their stomachs churning each time they passed paintings in their hallways. Their homes were their sanctuaries. This was the most important aspect of Harry's design philosophy: harmony. It was how he'd become so successful.

He wasn't sure he wanted to work with a friend, especially Sal. And he didn't want to run into this Braden person all the time either. But he couldn't stand the thought of Sal's pathetic expression whenever he passed that landscape painting. So he shrugged his shoulders and said, "You're not stuck with anything, Sal. I'd be willing to buy most of the things in this house. I have several showrooms, and I can always use them with other clients who love a more formal, traditional look. And every room in this house could be toned down to look like your bedroom." He didn't say it aloud, but he knew he could do a better job than the first designer had done with Sal's bedroom. The bedroom *was* modern, but it lacked texture and warmth. And the lighting was awful. There were spotlights directly over the bed, and he'd always believed no one should ever be lit with direct overhead lights. They cast shadows that made people look like zombies.

Sal smiled and looked up at the landscape. "Actually, I wanted to ask if you'd be interested in doing a job like this, but I was afraid you were too famous and you'd be too busy to take something like this on." He lowered his head. "Do you really think you can make this entire house look just like my bedroom?"

Harry opened his eyes wide and pointed his finger against Sal's chest. "Why do I have the feeling that you knew all along that I wouldn't be able to say no?" He wasn't insulted. He knew he'd been tricked into doing the job, but Sal had been so cute about it, he couldn't get mad. "Now I see why you're such a great poker player. You had me fooled."

Sal shrugged. "It really would be great if you could do this. And I wasn't lying. I really *do* hate this place the way it is right now." Then he put his hands in his pockets and pouted again. "Are you mad?"

Harry laughed. "I'm not mad, and I'll do the job. But you have to trust me and let me do what I want."

Sal lifted his hands in surrender and said, "I trust you completely."

Chapter Eight

When Sal had first started making big money as a professional poker player, he came up with an important life rule: to give back. Playing poker professionally, with TV cameras and an audience drained his energy and kept him awake many nights. He couldn't eat before an important tournament and he was always nauseated before he went in front of the cameras to play poker. But it wasn't as bad as being locked in a cubicle on Wall Street counting other people's money. And when he wasn't working, he had plenty of time to relax.

In the grand scheme, he knew he'd been lucky and he never took it for granted. So along with the monetary donations he gave to charities, he also made sure he gave his time, too. The life rule was simple. For every big tournament Sal won, he'd play another one for charity. He'd inadvertently gained a popular reputation for all the money he'd won for these charities. There were people who followed poker tournaments only because Sal Sorrentino was playing. His fan mail increased daily; the hits on his simple one-page Web site doubled each week.

In March of that year, Sal woke at ten in the morning and rubbed his eyes. It was a Friday and they were predicting more snow for the weekend with nine inches already on the ground from last week's storm. He sat up in his bed, stretched his arms, and groaned. He wasn't looking forward to the long drive to Atlantic City that day. But he'd committed himself to playing in a poker tournament for a children's cancer hospital and he wasn't going to let them down. He could have spent the weekend at the casino, but he was driving back home that same night because he was having dinner with Braden on

Saturday night. The snow was coming sometime late Friday night and he didn't want to take the chance of being snowbound in Atlantic City for the entire weekend.

Braden was still living in New York, and they hadn't reconciled their relationship. But Braden had called him earlier that week and asked if they could have dinner Saturday. He had sounded upbeat and light on the phone; he said he wanted to have a quiet dinner with Sal at their favorite restaurant in the city, a small place in Little Italy. They had spoken on the phone, but hadn't seen each other since New Year's Eve, and Sal didn't hesitate to set the date. The Weather Channel was predicting at least six inches of snow for the New York area, but Sal didn't care. If his SUV couldn't get through, he'd take the train.

He pulled back the covers and yawned, then lifted his legs and sat on the edge of the bed. His bedroom door was closed, but he heard distant voices coming from the first floor of the house.

Harry Beckham was downstairs with moving men. Harry was finishing Sal's new, modern living room and they were delivering his Italian white leather sofas that morning. Harry was redecorating one room at a time, so he wouldn't inconvenience Sal. When the living room was finished, Harry would begin on the dining room and work his way around the entire house.

Harry and Sal worked well as client and designer. Harry told Sal what he thought worked, and Sal agreed and wrote him a check.

After New Year's Day and the one night they'd spent together as lovers, Harry and Sal had slipped into a comfortable friendship that required little thought. When Harry had returned from Palm Beach, he'd called Sal and they'd gone out to dinner. It was

awkward at first, because they'd slept together. But when they met at the restaurant, they started talking as if nothing had ever happened. After that, they called each other at least every other day and got together at least once or twice a week. They didn't have sex again. They were just buddies.

Sal stood up from the bed and yawned again. Dolly was still at the foot of the bed, sleeping. When she heard him moving, her body jerked and she lifted her head up about an inch from the bench. He looked down at her and frowned. She'd lost weight; he could see her ribs. Two months earlier, she would have been up shaking her head and snorting at him first thing in the morning. It was as if she'd lost all her energy overnight. He'd taken her to several different veterinarians to find out what was wrong. She'd been tested for everything that could have possibly gone wrong with a pet pig. But they'd all waved their arms in the air, confused. Physically, there was nothing wrong with Dolly. He eventually found a holistic vet who put her on a special diet; now he was waiting patiently to see if there would be an improvement.

He had to admit that life was easier now that Dolly was so passive and sullen. There were no more rants from Tante Clarisse about Dolly raiding the refrigerator. Dolly didn't seem interested in causing any mischief. She slept most of the day, and only ate when she was beyond hunger. It was like having an older cat in the house instead of a young pet pig.

Dolly lifted her head again and snorted. "Don't get up yet, girl," Sal said. "I'm going to take a shower now."

She lowered her head and closed her eyes as if she'd understood him.

Sal went into the bathroom and looked down between his legs. He put his hands on his hips and sighed. He always slept in the nude, and he still had a full morning erection. And it didn't seem to want to go down any time soon. He was one of those men who remained hard forever, even after sex.

When he turned on the shower, he heard Dolly squeal a few times. He'd left the bathroom door open because he was used to living alone, and Tante Clarisse never entered his bedroom while he was home. When he came out of the bathroom to see why she was squealing, Harry was kneeling at the foot of Sal's bed with his arms around Dolly's neck. She was sitting up on the bench now. Sal stopped short near the bathroom doorway and stood still; Harry looked up at Sal's naked body and his mouth dropped. Sal stopped moving. He reached down and tried to cover his erection with his hands, but the head was still exposed and his balls were still dangling between his legs.

Harry turned his head to the right and said, "I'm sorry. I knocked several times and no one answered, then I heard Dolly squeal. I wanted to see if I could take her out for her morning walk."

Dolly shook her head and snorted. She'd grown very fond of Harry and she knew the words "out" and "walk."

Sal turned sideways, with his hands still between his legs, and said, "I didn't hear you. The shower was running." Then he hesitated for a moment and said. "Hey, it's no big deal. We're buddies. Guys walk around naked all the time in front of each other in locker rooms and never think twice." He didn't remove his hands from between his legs, and he didn't turn to face Harry. But more than that, his erection grew even firmer now that Harry was in the room. He thought about walking over to Harry and slapping his

penis on Harry's soft lips. A good blow job would have been nice that morning. But he knew it was wrong to think these things. They had both agreed they wouldn't have sex again. But his hormones overpowered his common sense when his penis was that hard.

Harry shrugged his shoulders. He wouldn't turn around and face Sal. "I'll just take her down now and we'll go for a long walk."

Dolly jumped off the bench and shook her head so fast, her entire body jiggled.

Sal smiled. "That would be great. Look at her. This is the most life I've seen in her all morning. She really loves you, Harry."

Dolly lowered her head and rubbed it against Harry's back. He reached around with his arm and stroked the side of her body. Then he laughed and said, "Oddly enough, I've becoming very fond of her, too. I never thought a pig could be such a sweetheart."

Sal ran the tip of his thumb across the top of his penis a few times. It was ready to burst. His chest heaved slightly and his heart pounded. There was something extremely sexy about standing there naked in front of Harry, so he removed his hands from his penis and turned back to face him. He wanted Harry to look at him; he wanted Harry to see him standing there ready to explode. "I'll go back to the bathroom," Sal said. "I have to take care of this erection all by myself now in the shower." He looked down between his legs and laughed. "I can't believe how hard I am this morning." He hoped Harry would remove all his clothes and jump into the shower with him.

But Harry shrugged his shoulders and said, "I know how you feel. I was horny like that last night." He still wouldn't face him. "And I know you're pouting, so you may as well stop."

Sal tilted his head. “When you were horny last night, what did you do to solve the problem?” He grabbed his erection and started stroking it slowly, hoping Harry would turn around, crawl over on his knees, and suck him off.

“I found my favorite dildo and took care of myself,” Harry said. Then he stood up and crossed to the bedroom door without looking back. Dolly followed him until he stopped in the doorway.

Sal scratched the back of his head and laughed. He was proud of his erection; it was sticking all the way out. “That sounds really hot, man. Why don’t you take off your clothes, step into the shower with me, and tell me all about what you did to yourself last night with the dildo?”

Harry finally turned and faced him. He looked him up and down and said, “Use your imagination, Sal.” Then he turned fast and walked out of the room.

An hour later, Sal jogged down the steps and found Harry in the kitchen with Dolly. He was making Dolly something to eat, with greens and rice and boiled chicken breasts. Tante Clarisse was at the sink loading dishes into the dishwasher. When Harry saw Sal enter the kitchen, he looked at him and said, “You look nice today. Did you have a good shower this morning?” Harry didn’t seem upset or mad; he’d paid him a nice compliment and he’d joked about the shower. Sal was wearing a black V-neck sweater, dark gray slacks, and his lucky black baseball cap that almost covered his eyes. He thought he looked like he normally looked. The only thing missing were his trademark dark glasses.

Sal smirked. He couldn’t reply to Harry the way he wanted to because Clarisse was there. “The shower was fine, thank you.”

Harry smiled. He changed the subject and said, "I think Dolly is improving since she's started this new diet." Then he crossed to where Dolly was standing and put her bowl of food on the floor.

Dolly stuck her face in the bowl and began nibbling. Sal looked at his watch and said, "I have to run. I have a long drive and I don't want to be late." It was almost noon; he was far from being late. He liked getting to the casino early and having some spare time to relax to prepare himself for a tournament. Getting used to the environment where he would be playing poker calmed his nerves. He was playing for a good cause that day, this hospital helped a lot of sick kids get well. He wanted to win as much money as he could for them. "I'm not sure what time I'll be home, Clarisse. You're going to have to feed Dolly tonight. The list of foods she can eat are all on the counter here."

Clarisse turned from the sink and frowned. She was wearing a white caftan and a large straw hat that morning. "I don't see why we can't feed her the prepared food that all pet pigs eat. She has no idea what she's getting." When she said the word "idea" with her French Canadian accent, it sounded like she said, "I-D."

Harry gave Sal a look. Sal knew Harry wasn't fond of Clarisse, that he thought she was a negative woman with too many opinions about situations that didn't concern her. This was a perfect example: she could have just agreed to feed Dolly the new food and left it at that. Sal said, "Because she's on a special diet, Clarisse, and it's important to keep her meals balanced from now on."

Tante Clarisse huffed and turned back to the sink. Harry lifted an eyebrow and said, "I could take Dolly back to my place today. I'm not doing anything important. She might like being in the city for a while."

“She’s never been to New York,” Sal said. “I don’t know how she’d react to all the noise and the people.”

Harry shrugged and said, “You’re probably right.” Then he looked at Clarisse’s back and said, “I could come back and feed her if you want.”

Clarisse turned fast. Her eyebrows rose and she smiled. “I’ll take good care of her,” she said. “Don’t worry about a thing. I’ll give her the food on the list and she’ll be fine.”

A few minutes later, Harry and Sal left at the same time. Sal walked Harry to his car and said, “Do you really think Dolly’s doing better since she’s been on the new diet?”

“Yes. I do,” Harry said. “I just hope old Clarisse gives her the right foods, is all.”

Sal shook his head and laughed. “You don’t like Tante Clarisse, do you?” He knew most people didn’t.

“It’s not that I don’t like her,” Harry said. “There’s just something about her I don’t trust. She’s the only person I’ve ever met that gives me goose flesh when she smiles. And when you stand next to her and she speaks, her breath is always rancid.”

Sal opened the door for Harry and said, “I’ll call you on Sunday and I’ll let you know how everything went with Braden tomorrow night. I’m kind of nervous. It’s the first time we’ve been out together since New Year’s.” Oddly enough, Harry had become his new friend and romance consultant. It wasn’t that Harry offered great advice. When it came to Braden, Harry didn’t talk much. But he did listen quietly to everything Sal was saying, without offering an opinion one way or the other.

Harry looked down at his car keys and frowned. He said, “I’m sure it will be fine.” Then he inserted the key, turned the motor, and said, “Have fun today and win lots

of money for those kids. I'll be watching you on TV later on." They were broadcasting this one live on a cable channel, from one of the large casinos in Atlantic City, because there were a few famous TV celebrities playing with Sal.

"Thanks," Sal said. Harry was just as superstitious as he was, and instead of wishing him good luck, he always said *have fun*. "Hey," Sal exclaimed. His head jerked to the side and his eyes widened. "Why don't you just come with me today? I'm driving back tonight because of the weather forecast tomorrow." Suddenly, the thought of a long, silent drive made his head feel heavy. "You can talk nonstop the whole way and I won't say a thing. It will take my mind off the tournament and I won't worry all the way down to Atlantic City."

Harry stared down at the steering wheel for a moment and thought. "I guess I could. I might be fun. I've never actually been to a poker tournament before."

Chapter Nine

When they were on the Garden State Parkway, Sal adjusted his body in the driver's seat and rested his left elbow on the door arm rest. He sat way back when he drove, with his legs spread wide. He cleared his throat a few times and said, "Ah, I'm sorry about this morning." His voice was soft, almost a whisper. He didn't look at Harry.

Harry stopped talking and turned his head. His mouth hadn't stopped moving since they left Saddle River. Now he was telling Sal about the last time he'd been to Atlantic City, the time he'd won more than two hundred dollars on the slot machines, and then he'd lost it all in less than a half hour. "You're sorry?" Harry asked. He knew what Sal was talking about, but he wanted to pretend he didn't. "Why are you sorry?"

Sal rubbed his jaw again and sighed. "You know, about what happened in my bedroom this morning. I shouldn't have been so aggressive and made those advances. It was wrong, and I'm sorry."

Harry smiled and waved his arm fast. "It's no big thing, Sal," he said. "I thought you were just joking around anyway...seriously, man. I knew you didn't mean any harm. Don't give it a second thought." When he saw the frown on Sal's face, Harry felt a slight sting of guilt. Harry had known all along that Sal had been getting ready to take a shower. Harry had seen him walking around in the bathroom, naked, with a full erection. Harry had clapped his hands on purpose so Dolly would squeal and Sal would walk out of the bathroom naked. And when Sal had made the blunt sexual advances toward him, it took all of Harry's willpower not to rip off his own clothes and jump into the shower with Sal. He wanted to pull down Sal's zipper right there in the car. But he knew that would have

been a mistake. As long as Sal was emotionally involved with Braden, Harry stood firm on keeping their relationship platonic.

Sal lowered his eyebrows and gave Harry a confused look. “But I was serious,” Sal said. “That’s why I’m apologizing to you now. I *wasn’t* joking around.” His voice rose and he gripped the steering wheel tighter.

Harry turned his head and looked out the window so Sal wouldn’t see him smile. He liked hearing that Sal hadn’t been joking. “Well, either way, it’s no big thing. I didn’t take it seriously, and that’s all that really matters. No harm done.” Then he started talking about the last time he’d been to the beach in New Jersey, changing the subject fast. He knew Sal would think about this conversation for the rest of the trip, and he knew Sal would wonder why he didn’t take the incident seriously.

When they reached Atlantic City and pulled up to the casino’s valet parking, a good-looking young valet ran toward Sal’s car and opened his door. “Good to see you, Mr. Sorentino,” the young guy said. “I have one of the best spaces reserved just for you.”

The guy looked at Sal with wide, innocent eyes. His voice was eager and it seemed as if he would have done anything Sal asked him to do.

Sal smiled. “Thank you,” he said. Then he reached into his pocket and handed the guy a fifty-dollar bill. He turned toward Harry and said, “He’s a great kid. He takes good care of me.”

The guy took the money and said, “Thank you, Mr. Sorentino. I’ll take care of your car.”

Harry opened his door and said, “I guess no one’s going to open my door and help me out.”

Sal laughed and shrugged his shoulders. “What can I say? They love me around here.” Then he bit his bottom lip and punched Harry in the arm to show he was only joking around. “The only reason this kid ran over like he did was because he knew there was a fifty-dollar bill coming his way.”

Harry smiled and got out of the car without replying. He’d seen the way the young guy had looked at Sal, his eyes darting between Sal’s eyes and lips. Sal often underestimated his own good looks, and there was a selfish part of Harry that didn’t want this to change. If Sal had known how good-looking he was, he would have been a dangerous man.

Inside the casino, the floor was mobbed with people. Harry looked around with one eyebrow raised. It was typically a slow time of year everywhere else, especially with an impending snowstorm. But here, there were groups of senior citizens carrying large shopping bags, men and women of all ages standing in front of slot machines, and good-looking young guys in casino uniforms dealing cards. He followed Sal to the back, where the walls were painted black and rows of chairs were already filled with a small audience. There was a poker table in the middle of a roped-off section, TV cameras were positioned in out-of-the-way places, and bright lights that made the green felt on the poker table look dazzling and exciting. When Sal moved into the section where the poker table was, the people in the audience leaned into each other and murmured. Sal pulled his baseball cap down over his eyebrows and kept walking. His face went blank and he bent his head down. Then he walked up to someone holding a clipboard and said, “I brought a good friend with me. Can we get him a seat in the audience?”

The man with the clipboard nodded yes.

Sal reached for Harry's elbow and said, "You go with the director and he'll get you a seat. I'm going in the back room to get ready now."

The director escorted Harry to an empty seat in the middle of the front row. Harry thanked him and sat down between a middle-aged woman with jet black hair and a large round man with a red face. He sat there for about five minutes before the woman behind him leaned forward and tapped his shoulder. When he turned back, she said, "Are you Harry Beckham, the designer? I had to ask." She had soft blond curls and wore thick eyeglasses. Her lip gloss was bold red and she'd smudged some on her front tooth.

Harry nodded and smiled. "Yes, I am Harry Beckham. I'm here with a good friend, Sal Sorentino."

The woman's eyes opened wide and she pressed her palm to her throat. "I can't believe it. I just bought one of your duvet sets on The Home Shopping Bazaar," she said. "And I always watch you when you're on the talk shows."

"Thank you," Harry said. He smiled awkwardly and ducked his head. He was used to being recognized out in public by now, but it never stopped feeling weird.

Then the woman next to him turned and said, "I thought I recognized you, too." She leaned toward him and said, "Do you really know Sal Sorentino? He's so damn hot."

"Ah well," Harry said. "Sal's a good buddy of mine. We've known each other since college." He was smiling, but he was wondering if being seated there in the audience had been a good idea. If people started recognizing him, he wouldn't be able to enjoy watching Sal play, and it might disrupt the game.

However, Harry soon learned nothing stops real poker lovers from enjoying a serious poker game. The two women asked for his autograph and chatted with him about

his new line of bedding for a little while. But the minute the poker players stepped into the staged area and sat down to play, the women sat back and stopped talking. There were still sounds coming from the casino floor, but everyone in the audience went silent and faced the poker table.

Sal was playing with a few other celebrities that day. There was an actor from a well-known sitcom, one of those comedians who had been around for too long, and a famous baseball player. There were a few other sports figures Harry didn't recognize. The announcer introduced them and mentioned the charities for which they were playing. Sal entered with his baseball cap pulled down and a pair of dark sunglasses over his eyes. The only part of his handsome face visible were his lips, and he kept them pressed tightly together. Sal had once told Harry that while he was playing, it was always important to keep a blank, empty expression.

When they started playing, Harry sat back and crossed his feet at the ankle. He knew how to play basic poker, but he wasn't very good and he didn't play often. And Texas Hold 'em always confused him. He'd watched them playing on TV, and he'd listened to the jargon. He'd assumed that "pocket aces," meant a pair of aces, and that the "turn" meant the card the dealer turned over. But he wasn't sure about the "flop," and the "hole" left him shaking his head. The woman next to him probably knew all the rules and words, but he didn't want to look stupid by asking. After all, he was there with Sal Sorrentino, one of the best poker players in the world. So Harry sat there smiling as if he'd been watching these games with a live audience all his life. He watched the reactions of the people around him and followed their moves. If the man with the red face sitting next

to him sighed, so did Harry. When the woman on his other side sat up and clapped, so did he.

In the end, Sal wound up being one of the last players at the table. The cards were coming to him that day, and he was winning huge amounts of money for the children's hospital. From what Harry could see, part of his strategy was knowing when to fold and when to stay in. The other part was knowing when to bluff so he could milk the other players dry. He did this well, with smooth hand signals and gentle nods. His face barely moved and his hands were always steady and calm. One of the other celebrities, the one from the TV sitcom, got so frustrated that he stood up and punched the back of his chair. He'd folded with a straight because he thought Sal had a better hand. All Sal had was a pair of two low cards, and he'd bluffed his way through it all.

Sal wound up winning so much money for the children's hospital, the audience actually gave him a long standing ovation. Sal stood up and shook his opponent's hand, then turned to face the audience and removed his sunglasses. He smiled and nodded a few times, shook someone else's hand, and went into the back room.

A half hour later, Harry sat waiting for him in the audience. Everyone else had left and the only people still around were guys from the camera crew putting away their equipment. When Sal saw him sitting there alone, he jogged over and said, "I'm sorry I took so long. You must be going nuts out here. I was taping an interview. It's going to be on TV later this week."

Harry stood up and smiled. "I'm fine. I had fun today." He wasn't just being polite. There was something exciting about being there, in the casino, that he couldn't quite articulate yet. The people were smooth and calm, and the dim lighting created a

feeling of mystery and excitement. “But I am starved. Let’s get something to eat. It’s on me this time, because you just won all that money for the hospital.”

They ate in one of the casino restaurants. The restaurant staff knew Sal and a waiter guided them to a private table in a dark corner so no one would bother them. But when their young waiter recognized Harry from his TV appearances, he forgot all about the rules and asked for his autograph. He was a good-looking guy in his early twenties, with dark hair and a slim, lanky body. He told Harry he was working his way through design school, and that Harry was his design hero. He bent over and folded his hands together, gushing and smiling so widely there were long lines on both of his cheeks.

Harry smiled and signed his name on a small card, then handed it to the guy and said, “If you’re ever interested in doing a summer internship, go to my Web site and fill out a form. Mention that you met me here in the casino. I usually read those things myself.”

The guy took the card and gave Harry a long stare. He said, “Thank you, Mr. Beckham, I’ll do that.”

When the waiter left, Harry purposely leaned over to check out his ass. He smiled and said, “What a nice guy. With a personality like that, he has promise in the design field.” Not many people called him “Mr. Beckham.” He liked the way it sounded.

Sal cleared his throat and opened his menu. He held it up in front of his face and said, “He wanted to get into your pants. I saw the way he was looking at you. Guys like him are a dime a dozen, and they are usually trouble.”

Harry gave Sal a look. Sal had no right to give him a lecture about men, especially since Sal was still in love with someone who was even more trouble than the waiter.

Braden was no bargain. So Harry said, "I thought he was attractive, too. So what if I hook up with him? I have to have some fun once in a while, too. I'm not a monk." He wanted to see Sal's reaction. So far, since they'd resumed their friendship, Sal had done all the talking about his love life and his feelings for Braden. Harry hadn't said a word about the men who interested him.

Sal lifted the menu higher. "I'm just offering an opinion. I'm not giving you a lecture about men." Then he laughed and said, "Besides, I'll bet anything that guy is a bottom, so it wouldn't work out even if you did hook up with him."

Harry's head went back and his eyes opened wide. "I don't care if he's a top or a bottom. I'm versatile. I can do both."

Sal lowered the menu and glared at him. "Is that a fact?" he said. Then he laughed again and lifted the menu.

Harry's eyebrows went up. Sal sounded jealous. "He was just a nice guy, is all," Harry said. "And I'll bet he actually does go to my Web site and contact me."

Sal took a deep breath and said, "Well if he does, good luck, because you're going to have to flip a coin to see who's going to be the top."

Harry reached for his menu. He opened it up and lifted it in front his face without responding to Sal's comment. Partly because he didn't want to start an argument and partly because he knew Sal was right and he didn't want to admit it.

After dinner, they crossed to the casino entrance and waited for the valet to bring the car around. It was frosty and damp outside; the snow had already begun to fall. Harry couldn't tell how many inches were on the ground because it was still wet on the pavement, but he saw that one of the planters had about four inches around the rim.

While they were waiting for the car, Harry asked, “Are you tired? Do you want me to drive home?” He’d noticed Sal’s eyes were drooping and he’d yawned a few times.

“I’m fine,” Sal said. “Besides, I like driving in the snow. It makes things more interesting.” Then he laughed and punched Harry’s arm, bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet like a boxer in the ring. “And with you talking all the way home, there’s no way I can fall asleep at the wheel.”

For the first half of the drive, the parkway was wet and slushy. There weren’t many cars out that night and Sal breezed through the mess without changing lanes more than three times. The big Cadillac gripped the road; the large tires had good traction. Harry talked and Sal drove with two hands, without moving his head once. But when they reached the South Orange Avenue exit on the parkway, the road was covered with white and Sal had to slow down to thirty-five miles per hour. The temperature had been dropping fast. Harry had been watching the inside thermometer. When they’d left Atlantic City it had been thirty-five degrees, and now it read twenty-five.

The road was freezing over quickly; the car got caught in the frozen tracks of another car and the back end fishtailed. Sal gripped the wheel and gained control. Then he took a quick breath and said, “This is bad. It’s heavy snow now covering a layer of thick ice. I don’t think the roads have been salted yet, either.”

Harry sat up and reached for the handle above his head. He grabbed it and said, “It’s only going to get worse, too. Let’s get off at the Route 3 exit and take the Lincoln Tunnel into the city. We can spend the night at my place. The roads in Manhattan will still be slushy, and if they aren’t, we can always park the car in a garage and walk to my place safely.”

The driver in front of them put on his right turn signal to get off at the Bloomfield Avenue exit. He approached the ramp slowly because another car had already gone into the guardrail. Sal took a deep breath and said, “I really wanted to get home for Dolly tonight. But I think it’s a good idea to head into Manhattan instead of trying to get up to Saddle River tonight.”

Chapter Ten

The streets in Manhattan were partially covered with snow, but nowhere near as dangerous as the roads in New Jersey had been. Sal cut across town to East 24th Street with little effort. He parked in the same garage where Harry usually parked his car and they walked back to Harry's building. The doorman greeted them both with a huge smile. He'd already met Sal a few times, and he was a huge fan of professional poker players. Sal shook his hand and slapped his shoulder; he always appreciated his fans.

When the elevator stopped on the top floor, Marla was standing in the hall waiting to go down to the lobby. The doors opened and she lifted her head fast and said to Harry, "I was wondering about you. I tried calling your cell phone but it only went to voice mail."

Harry made a face and said, "Damn. I left it in my car and didn't even realize it. I went to Atlantic City today with Sal and my car is still in Sal's driveway. It was a last-minute thing. We decided to come into the city tonight because the roads are so bad."

Marla's eyes widened. "I guess that's smart. I hear we're supposed to be getting at least seven inches."

The elevator door started to close and Sal reached out to grab it. "I'm sleeping on the sofa," Sal said. "This isn't what it looks like." He didn't want her to get the wrong impression and think they were lovers. "I have a date with my ex, Braden, tomorrow night. We're thinking of getting back together." They hadn't even discussed the idea of getting back together, but Sal wanted to think positively.

Harry sighed and rolled his eyes. “That’s right. I’m putting a chain on my bedroom door so Sal can’t break it down in the middle of the night and jump my bones.” Then he shook his head and laughed.

Marla lifted her hands and spread her fingers wide. “Hey, guys, it’s none of my business where you sleep.” Then she looked at her watch and said, “I’m late. I’m meeting a guy for coffee in Union Square. We met online this week.”

Harry and Sal stepped out of the elevator. Sal held the door for Marla and Harry said, “Have fun. Call me tomorrow. If I’m not home, call my cell. I should have it back by early afternoon.”

Sal let go of the elevator door and Marla shouted, “Talk tomorrow.”

When they went into Harry’s apartment, Harry went into the bedroom and Sal called Tante Clarisse to tell her he’d be spending the night in New York and that he’d be home in the morning. He asked her to take care of Dolly and to make sure Dolly received the proper foods while he was gone. Her voice was quick and jagged, with a high-pitched tone. She promised him she would, and hung up without saying goodbye. Sal put the phone down and frowned. He knew Clarisse always hung up that way; she hated talking on the phone. But he would never get used to her peculiarities.

Harry came out of the bedroom with a clean pair of sweats, a white T-shirt, and pillows and a blanket. He handed them to Sal and said, “Can I get you anything else?”

It was almost eleven. Sal shook his head and said, “No.” He saw Harry’s eyes drooping and he appeared on the edge of a yawn. “I’m fine. It’s been a long day and I’m exhausted.”

Harry put his hands in his pockets and stared down at his shoes. “I’m going to bed now. If you want anything, just help yourself.” Then he leaned forward, grabbed Sal’s bicep, and kissed him on the cheek. “Good night, Sal. Thanks for today. I had fun.”

When Harry turned and went down the hall to his bedroom, Sal stared at the way his hips moved. His ass looked good in those jeans; he walked slowly. Sal’s lips parted and he took a step forward. The thought of spending a cold, snowy night in bed with Harry, curled up under the covers with his arms wrapped around Harry’s soft shoulders, made him feel warm and calm. When Harry had grabbed his bicep and kissed him innocently on the cheek, he’d felt his penis move. So he took another step and said, “I could keep you warm tonight. It’s cold out there.”

Harry stopped walking and lowered his head toward his shoes. For a moment he stood still, with his back to Sal, in the bedroom doorway. Then he turned around slowly and lifted his head. He spread his arms wide and said, “Ah Sal, I think it’s best if you sleep on the sofa tonight.”

Sal’s shoulders dropped and his head went down. He pouted, and this time he wasn’t faking.

Then Harry smiled. “But I promise I’ll make you Belgian waffles for breakfast in the morning.”

Sal looked up at him and laughed. “Sounds good, buddy. I can live with that.”

In the morning, after a huge breakfast of waffles and bacon, Sal drove Harry back to Saddle River so Harry could get his car. There was another four inches of snow on the ground by then, but the roads had been plowed and salted, and the March sun was already helping it melt. Traffic was light because everyone was staying in, and Harry talked until

they pulled into Sal's driveway and saw his car. The little Mini Cooper was covered in snow, and the plowing company that Sal kept on a retainer had wedged it in with large mounds of hard, icy walls of snow.

"I hope you have shovels," Harry said.

"They're in the garage. Let's go in through the house so I can check on Dolly first."

They used the front door and crossed to the back of the house to Dolly's room. They said hello to Clarisse on the way. She was in the kitchen brewing a pot of tea. She looked up and grunted. Sal noticed Harry looked at her twice, because she was wearing a thick yellow sweater and black wool slacks. She reminded Sal of a bumblebee, stinger and all. He could only imagine what Harry was thinking of his housekeeper.

When they reached Dolly's room, Sal opened the gate and walked to the little playhouse where she was still sleeping. He clapped his hands and shouted her name but she didn't come running. She just lifted her head, slowly stood up on all fours, and prodded toward him with a soft squeal. He pressed his lips together and shook his head. "I don't know," he said. "There's something not right. A few months ago, she would have come running over to me so fast she would have knocked me over."

Harry kneeled down and ran his palm across the top of Dolly's head. She looked up at him and snorted a few times. She'd become very fond of him since he'd been coming to the house. But her eyes were glossy and she seemed to be having trouble keeping her balance. "I agree," Harry said. "Something isn't right."

"Let's get the shovels and dig you out so you can get back to the city," Sal said, "then I'll spend some time with her. Maybe she's just depressed because I was gone all

night. I'm beginning to think maybe all her problems are psychological. Pot belly pigs are extremely smart."

It took more than an hour to dig the car out of the embankment the snow plows had created. Sal worked fast, ramming his shovel into the snow hard and tossing heavy loads to the other side of the driveway. And when Harry wasn't looking, he rolled a ball of snow in his palms and threw it in Harry's direction. It hit him on the side of the face. Harry stopped shoveling. He stood still for a moment, stunned. Then he made his own snowball and threw it at Sal, beginning an all-out snowball fight that lasted until Sal finally pinned him to the ground and made him beg for mercy. Sal pulled him to the ground and climbed on his back. He held him in a gentle headlock and said, "Are you going to stop?"

Harry wiggled and squirmed. "Get off me, you big horse."

Sal laughed and held him tighter. "Not until you promise to stop."

Harry wiggled again. Then he stopped moving, relaxed all his muscles, and said, "I'll stop. Just get off me. Please, I hate being pinned or confined."

When Harry stopped moving and Sal realized he now had total control, he felt his penis growing. It was pressed against Harry's backside. He innocently rubbed his crotch against Harry a few times and said, "I'll let go slowly." Sal knew he had to let go. He was ready to yank down Harry's pants and fuck him right there in the snow.

Sal's arm went down and he released the headlock, then rubbed his groin one more time against Harry's ass and rose to his knees. But as he was about to stand, Harry tried to shimmy out from under him. He made it halfway through Sal's legs, then tried to pull Sal down in the snow and jump on top of him. They rolled in the snow a few times,

but Sal was stronger and he wound up on top again. This time Sal was kneeling and Harry was on his back between Sal's legs. Sal pinned his wrists back over his head and said, "Are you finished now?" He smiled. He didn't want Harry to think he would hurt him.

Harry kicked his legs a few times and tried to break free, but Sal wouldn't release his wrists. Harry finally sighed and said, "I'm finished. Let go of me."

Sal released the pressure and let go of his wrists. He sat n Harry's body and wiped snow from his own face.

Harry remained where he was, with his arms back and his legs still. He looked up at Sal and said, "I promise I'll stop now. You can get off me."

Sal smiled and reached down for Harry's hand. "C'mon, I'll help you up."

When they were standing, Sal looked down at his crotch. There was snow all over his pants. His penis was erect and busting out of his jeans. He pointed to it and said, "You should brush the snow off my pants." He put his hands on his hips and smiled.

Harry looked at Sal's crotch and raised his eyebrow. He shook his head and said, "You can brush your own pants off, because I'm going home now. I want to have lunch with Marla and you've got to get ready for your big date with Braden." He pulled his keys from his pocket and clicked the door locks on his car. "I'll call you tomorrow," he said. Then he jumped into the car, started the engine, and pulled away without waiting for it to warm up.

* * * *

Later that night, Sal drove back into New York and headed downtown to the Village. Braden shared an open loft/condominium on Bleecker Street with two of his

modeling friends. He parked in a garage on Perry Street and walked the rest of the way, carrying a bottle of wine and a bouquet of roses. He was freshly showered and shaved; he'd splashed his favorite cologne on his face and he wasn't wearing underwear. Beneath his black leather coat, he was wearing a black T-shirt and a brand-new pair of tight olive pants. He'd bought them earlier that week, saving them for this private dinner with Braden.

But when he knocked on Braden's door, an attractive young man answered. The young man had blond hair, blue eyes and a thin, smooth body. He was naked except for a short black towel around his thin waist. He held a martini glass. He smiled and said, "You must be Sal. Braden's out back in the hot tub." He opened the door wider so Sal could enter, then turned and walked into the loft in his bare feet.

Sal rubbed his jaw a few times and crossed through the door. When he was inside, he closed the door and followed the young man to the back of the loft, where the lights were low and dancing music was playing in the background. The young man walked to the back door and said, "If you want something to eat first, help yourself. And there are drinks at the bar." Then he walked outside and left Sal standing in the middle of the kitchen area of the loft.

Sal saw a few platters of sushi on the black marble island in the kitchen. There were bottles of alcohol and martini glasses on another marble counter near the sink. It wasn't a large loft: six hundred square feet, if that. It was sparsely furnished, with black leather furniture and glass tables. There was a king-sized bed beyond the sofa with two retro-modern, mirrored nightstands. The walls on both sides of the loft were red brick, and the back wall was all glass. He crossed to the glass wall and stood in front of a glass

door. He looked outside to see what was going on. The lights were dim but he didn't have any trouble spotting Braden in a hot tub with someone. And the young guy who had answered the front door was removing his skimpy towel so he could join them. When the guy removed his towel, he was naked.

The guy stepped into the hot tub and said something to Braden, and Braden turned around and stared at Sal through the glass door. He smiled and shouted, "C'mon outside. Why are you standing there?"

Sal opened the door and walked out to the garden. He placed the bottle of wine and the flowers on a white wrought-iron table and said, "Hey." He forced a smile, but this was nothing like he'd expected the evening would be.

Braden stood up, climbed out of the hot tub, and walked over to Sal. He was completely naked and his penis was bobbing up and down. He reached up with his right hand, placed it on the back of Sal's neck, and kissed him. He stuck his tongue into Sal's mouth, rolled it around, and said, "Take off your clothes and join us. We just got our new hot tub and this is the first night we're trying it out." They'd shoveled all the snow to the edges of the patio, and the sun had melted the places where Braden was walking in his bare feet.

Sal's lifted his brows and dropped his head back. Braden tasted like alcohol and his words were slurred. "I thought we were getting together alone tonight," he said.

"We were," Braden said. "But then the hot tub came early and I figured we'd have a hot tub party instead. C'mon over, I'll introduce you to my roommates. I've told them all about you and they can't wait to meet you."

Sal went to the hot tub and looked down into the water. One of the young guys was holding the side of the tube and floating on his stomach with his legs stretched and his sweet, young ass exposed. The other was floating on his back with his head against the edge of the tub. His soft penis was long and thick; it floated on the surface of the water. Sal rubbed his jaw and raised his eyebrows. It looked like twink soup.

Braden tapped the guy floating on his back on the shoulder and said, "This is my roommate ,Joel." Then he pointed to the guy who had answered the door. "And that one is Reese."

They both turned and nodded at Sal. Joel was just as blond as Reese, but his hair was shorter. Their eyes were glazed and their lips were parted. Sal smiled and said, "Nice to meet you guys." Then he put his palm on Braden's naked back and said, "I'm not sure about this, baby. Maybe I should just leave."

Braden took a shallow breath and said, "Stop being so uptight and have some fun for a change. We're just hanging out." Then he climbed back into the hot tub and took a seat in the right-hand corner. He looked up at Sal with wide eyes and tilted his head. It looked as if he was daring Sal to strip and come into the not tub.

Sal looked down at his shoes and hesitated. When they'd been together as a couple, Braden had always accused him of being too uptight and too conservative. Braden had wanted to have casual three-way sex with other guys, and Sal had always refused to do it. Braden had wanted Sal to go to sex clubs and sex parties, and Sal had wanted to sit home in front of a warm fire and watch poker on TV. And that's because when Sal was with Braden, he didn't need anyone else.

Unfortunately, Braden needed much more.

Sal looked at Braden and sighed. His soft, thin body was wet and shiny and he looked so good. He wanted to put his arms around Braden and hold him forever. And he knew that if he was ever going to win Braden back, he'd have to try to be less conservative. So he kicked off his shoes and removed his clothes. He tossed them into a heap on the brick patio and climbed naked into the hot tub. He didn't take his time; the patio was cold. But the water was hot and swirls of steam rose into the cold March air.

When he was halfway into the water, Braden floated over to him and said, "You look good, Sal." Sal's thick, brown penis was just above the water's surface. Braden lowered his head and kissed the tip in front of the other guys. Then he stuck out his tongue and licked the shaft. He lifted his head and said, "I like the way your dick floats in the water."

Then Sal sank into the tub and sat on a ledge. Braden put his arm around Sal's shoulders and sat on his lap. He reached down and grabbed Sal's penis and said, "See, this is fun. You're already as hard as a rock." Then he looked at Joel and Reese. "Come over here, guys, and feel *this*. It's a monster when it's hard."

Sal's head jerked back, but he didn't say anything. The moment he'd started to remove his clothes his erection had begun to grow. This was awkward for him, but he had strong masculine urges and he liked sex.

Reese went to Sal's right and Joel went to his left. Reese ran his hand down the inside of Sal's right leg and Joel ran his down the inside of his left. Reese grabbed Sal's balls and squeezed them gently, and Joel grabbed Sal's dick and jerked it up and down a few times. And while the two roommates played between Sal's legs, Braden stuck his tongue into Sal's mouth and moaned out loud. Sal opened his legs wider and leaned back

against the hot tub wall while both guys took turns groping his genitals. His eyes rolled back and his toes curled.

When Reese went underwater to suck his balls, Joel went under to suck his dick. Then they came up for air and went back down to switch positions. Sal's body jerked with pleasure. He felt like the meat course on a buffet table. The three young pretty boys weren't interested in having sex with each other. They only wanted to take turns servicing Sal. When Braden finally went down in the water to suck Sal's dick, both Reese and Joel climbed up on his lap and stuck their tongues into his mouth at the same time. Sal closed his eyes and responded without pulling away. He grabbed their asses and shoved his middle fingers into their tight holes. He finger-fucked Joel with his left hand and Reese with his right. Joel spread his legs wide and moaned. Reese licked the inside of Sal's ear and arched his back so Sal could shove his finger all the way into his body.

After an hour of playing in the hot tub, Braden said, "Let's go to bed, guys."

Sal followed them into the loft and crossed to the king-sized bed. He went down on his back and spread his legs wide. Braden pulled a condom out of the drawer in the nightstand and handed it to Reese. Reese opened it and handed it to Joel. Joel put the condom into his mouth and lowered his head between Sal's legs. He covered the tip of Sal's penis with the condom, then rolled it down Sal's erect shaft with his mouth.

Sal closed his eyes and moaned. He closed his eyes as his head fell back and his body responded to this pleasure. These guys touched him with gentle strokes; they brought him to the edge without even trying too hard.

When the condom was on his penis, Braden squirted clear lube all over it, making it slick and shiny. Their eyes were wide as they stared down at Sal's large penis and

licked their lips. Reese climbed up on Sal's body first. He straddled Sal's waist, rode his dick, and jerked off until he came all over Sal's stomach. Reese's hole was tight and he liked it when Sal squeezed his nipples. Joel was next. He rode a little longer, but when he jerked off, his load flew over Sal's head and landed on the pillows.

Braden was the last one to get his ass tagged by Sal. The other two guys watched while Sal got up on his knees. Sal told Braden to lie down on the bed on his stomach. Sal wanted to mount him and do all the work this time; he felt like a stud in a porn film. He shoved his dick into Braden's tight hole without waiting for him to get used to it. He knew Braden liked it this way. He knew Braden wanted to be rammed hard and he wanted it to hurt in the beginning. Braden's mouth fell open and his calves went up. And Sal fucked him for the next twenty minutes in front of his roommates. They both came at the same time, and Braden never even touched his own penis.

When it was over, they all went into the shower together. Reese and Joel got down on their knees and lathered Sal's legs. They looked up at him with soft eyes and worshipped him. Braden rubbed his torso clean with a soft round sponge. Sal leaned back against the tiles and closed his eyes. He thought he'd died and gone to twink heaven. He'd never experience such extreme pleasure in his entire life.

By the time Sal was dressed and was ready to go home, Reese and Joel had already gone out dancing. Sal put his arms around Braden and asked, "Would you like to come home with me tonight?" He was hoping Braden was satisfied now that Sal had agreed to play with his friends.

Braden kissed him on the cheek and smiled. "I can't," he said. "I'm going to meet up with the guys after you leave. You can come with me if you want. We're going dancing."

Sal's eyes widened and he tilted his head. "You're going out now? I thought we could spend some time alone." He shouldn't have been surprised. This was Braden's pattern and he knew it was the way Braden lived his life. He wanted to protest, but he didn't say a word. He knew if he did, they'd wind up in an argument.

"Not tonight, Sal," he said. "I have plans." Then he reached down and grabbed Sal's crotch. "But I really had fun tonight. You're a great stud. My roommates are going to be talking about your dick for a long time."

Sal didn't want to push things. He knew that if there was even a remote chance of getting back with Braden, he had to play it cool. He still wasn't sure how he felt about being with Braden and two other guys. This was new to him. It had been fantastic while he'd been doing it, but it wasn't something he needed or required to be satisfied.

But Sal knew Braden *did* need this sort of lifestyle to be satisfied. And Sal was still in love with him. He wanted him back. But he wasn't sure if he was willing to accept all of Braden's terms. So he kissed Braden on the forehead and said, "I'll call you next week and we'll do something."

Braden hugged him and said, "Be careful going home."

On the way back to his car, Sal put his hands into his pockets and sighed. When he crossed Perry Street and headed toward the garage, he kicked a small pile of snow and clenched his fists. He knew Braden was the ultimate party boy and he'd never be able to settle down into a traditional monogamous relationship with anyone. Braden had always

been honest and open about this with Sal, and Sal could not fault him for that. And if Sal wanted Braden back, he knew he'd have to accept this fact.

Chapter Eleven

While Sal continued to work on his relationship with Braden, Harry continued to transform the interior of Sal's traditional house into a sleek, modern masterpiece. He didn't do anything offensive or outrageous. He knew Sal's taste and he respected Sal's wishes. The colors were even and subtle: beige, taupe, moss green, and plain white. The fabrics he chose were a combination of textures to offset the fact that he'd added a great deal of leather, at Sal's request. When there was a hint of color, it was focused on abstract paintings and accent pillows. Art glass replaced antique Chinese urns. Books filled the shelves in the library and heavy draperies were replaced with light Italian silks. And, also at Sal's request, Harry removed all the heavy Persian carpets in the house and either left the magnificent wooden floors bare or replaced them with sisal.

A great deal of the time, Sal was traveling to poker games in Las Vegas. He gave Harry a key to the house and the alarm code so he could come and go as he pleased. Tante Clarisse frowned and chewed the inside of her lip when she found out Harry was getting a key to the house. She was used to having the whole place to herself when Sal was traveling, and she was a very territorial woman.

Sal had already talked the house with Harry ahead of time. When Harry was working in the house, Sal asked him to keep an eye on Dolly. Sal knew how much Dolly loved being with Harry, and Sal thought she'd miss him less if Harry was around. Harry didn't mind either. He never thought he could become so fond of a pig. But when he went into Sal's house and Dolly lifted her head and greeted him with a loud snort, something tugged at his heart each time.

When Sal wasn't traveling or spending time with Braden, he was usually with Harry. They went to concerts in Central Park and jogged from Harry's neighborhood all the way down to the Village. They ate lunch in outdoor cafes and sat for hours sipping espresso. Sal talked about his relationship with Braden, and Harry listened without commenting. When Sal told him about the night in the hot tub with Braden's friends, Harry pressed his lips together and nodded. And when Sal told him how much Braden loved group sex, Harry just sat back and sighed. He didn't speak for two reasons: one, he wanted to watch Sal's expressions and reactions to his own words, and two, because he didn't want Sal to think he was jealous. Harry had strong feelings for Sal, but he knew that Sal was in love with Braden. So Harry told himself he'd just have to settle for Sal's friendship. Harry knew Sal was sexually attracted to him, but Harry wasn't going to have sex with Sal again if Sal was still in love with Braden.

By the beginning of May, both their best friends, Marla and Roger, were becoming curious about their close friendship. Marla didn't understand why Harry was spending so much time with Sal if they weren't pursuing a romantic relationship. She was going through a very depressing time, truly believing she'd never meet anyone right for her, and she didn't like the fact that Harry wasn't around the same way he'd always been. And Sal told Harry that Roger almost sounded jealous of Sal's friendship with Harry.

So Harry suggested to Sal that they all get together for dinner, so Marla could meet Roger, they could all become friends, and no one would get jealous. In Harry's mind, he pictured this fantasy friendship with all four of them, jaunting around New York just like the characters on *Friends*. They could discuss their relationships and their

careers. Roger would be the funny one, Marla would be the serious one, Sal would be the sexy one, and Harry would be the calm, wise one.

Harry made reservations at a small Korean restaurant on Second Avenue. It was a cool, spring night and the restaurant was within walking distance from The Penny Lane building. While Harry walked down East 24th Street with Marla, he clenched his fists in his pants pockets and chewed the inside of his mouth. He was smiling and talking to Marla, but he was worried about whether or not Marla and Roger would get along. He wanted them to like each other, because if they didn't, it would put a strain on his friendship with Sal. He'd seen this sort of thing happen with other friends of his, where friends drifted apart because old friends don't get along with new friends.

When Harry and Marla stepped into the restaurant, Harry saw that Sal and Roger were already there. They were seated at the table and they'd just ordered drinks. Sal and Roger stood up, and Sal introduced Roger to Marla. She smiled and shook Roger's hand, then looked at Harry and rolled her eyes. Harry smiled and pretended he didn't see. Then Marla sat across from Sal, and Harry sat across from Roger.

For the rest of the night, Marla and Roger sat and ate without speaking much. They smiled and nodded a lot. They gave each other quick stares across the table. But they barely said two words because Harry and Sal did most of the talking. When Sal told Harry that he'd seen Braden the night before and that he'd gone to a dance club with Braden and a few of Braden's friends, Harry pressed his lips together and shook his head. Harry knew how much Sal hated dance clubs and loud music, and he knew Sal had only gone because of Braden. They spent the rest of the night talking about Harry's relationship with Braden as if Marla and Roger weren't even there. Sal never went into

details about his sex with Braden, but Harry had a feeling sex was the only thing he actually enjoyed with Braden.

By the time their check arrived, Roger grabbed it from the waiter's hand and said, "Ah well, this has been fun. But I have to get up early tomorrow."

Marla looked at Roger and said, "Me too." She leaned forward on her elbows, staring into Roger's eyes.

Then Roger pulled a credit card from his jacket fast and said he was paying for dinner. When Sal offered to pay, he lifted his hands and shook his head.

When the waiter returned with Roger's credit card, both Roger and Marla stood up at the same time and looked into each other's eyes. Roger tipped his head to the right and they both headed toward the restaurant's exit. Harry and Sal looked at each other and shrugged, then followed them out the door.

Harry figured they'd all walk back together. Roger only lived around the corner from him and he knew that Sal had probably parked his car nearby. But when they all reached the outside of the restaurant, Roger stood on the curb, lifted his arm, and hailed a taxi. He said he didn't feel like walking that night. The first cab that saw him pulled up to the curb and stopped. Roger opened the back door, looked at Marla, and asked, "You want to share this one?"

"Yes," she called.

Then Marla pushed Harry aside and ran to the back door of the cab so fast Harry didn't have a chance to say anything. He just stood there, with his mouth open, watching Roger and Marla ride off in the taxi. He turned to Sal and said, "Looks like we're walking back alone."

Sal put one hand in his pocket and scratched the back of his head with the other. He smiled and said, "I guess those two hit it off better than we thought they would." Then he punched Harry in the arm. "C'mon, I'll buy you a drink."

Harry lowered his eyebrows and stared down at his shoes. "I have to go home. I can't stay out late. It's a busy week." With Harry's work, it all usually came at the same time. "I'm heading out to my L.A. showroom tomorrow, I'm doing a talk show in the middle of the week, and Friday night I'm booked to do The Home Shopping Bazaar again."

He wasn't complaining. He loved his business and he loved watching it grow. The talk shows made his legs wobble a little, but spending time on The Home Shopping Bazaar made him smile for days. He liked explaining his new line of linens to the public, and actually talking to call-in customers made him high for hours. Listening to their pleased, happy voices inspired him to work harder to design quality, affordable products. Knowing he'd helped someone who couldn't afford an interior designer made him sleep soundly at night.

So Sal walked him to his building, kissed him on the cheek, and watched him walk through the lobby.

Chapter Twelve

Three months later, in early September, Roger and Marla were married in the rose garden behind Sal's house in Saddle River. Sal was Roger's best man, and Harry was Marla's "man of honor." It was an informal ceremony. Roger wore a black suit and Marla wore a beige silk dress. There were only about twenty-five close friends, including Braden and a new guy Harry was dating.

The new guy's name was Rick, an ophthalmologist from the Upper East Side whom Harry had met at a party earlier that summer. He was older than Harry, in his mid-thirties, and he owned a beach house on Fire Island. Sal told Harry he liked Rick, but whenever Rick was around Sal lowered his eyebrows, stared down at his feet, and to whistled.

After the wedding, there was a small reception that lasted a few hours. Dolly sat quietly on the back steps with a pink ribbon around her neck while the guests ate and talked. She didn't poke around for food, she didn't bang into tables, and she didn't bother anyone. She'd lost more weight that summer, four pounds. In August, Sal had taken her to a vet in Maryland who specialized in treating pot belly pigs, and he'd found nothing physically wrong with her. He gave Sal vitamins and told him to keep Dolly on the special diet he'd been feeding her.

When it was time for Roger and Marla to leave, everyone walked them to the front of the house. They grabbed their luggage in the hallway, ran out the door, and jumped into the back seat of a taxi. Everyone waved and threw confetti as their taxi pulled away. They'd booked a two-week honeymoon on an island. And Marla had

already moved into Roger's place because it was larger. She was only a block away, but Harry was going to miss the fact that she wasn't in his building anymore.

Harry tossed his last handful of confetti into the air and looked over at Sal and Braden. Sal had his hand pressed to Braden's back, but Braden was flirting with a young guy whom Roger had invited from his gym. Sal didn't even realize Braden was flirting. He was too busy smiling because he had his hand on Braden's back. Harry sighed and leaned into Rick's side. "I guess we'd better go now, too." They were heading out to Fire Island that afternoon and Harry didn't want to miss the ferry, which ran less often over Labor Day weekend. "Let's say goodbye to Sal first."

No one was looking. Rick reached down and grabbed Harry's ass. "I can't wait to get out there tonight, baby. I'm so horny I could scream."

Harry smiled with his teeth clenched together. He hated it when Rick called him "baby." But he didn't want to say anything that would hurt Rick's feelings. Rick was perfect. He had a great job, he treated Harry very well, and he looked like a male model from a fashion magazine. Harry said, "I can't wait." There was just one problem: he wasn't looking forward to having sex with Rick. Just thinking about it made him yawn.

They crossed to where Sal and Braden were standing. Harry smiled and said, "We're going to take off now. We're going to Fire Island."

Sal put his hands in his pockets and started to whistle *Hard-Hearted Hannah* and Braden reached out and hugged Harry. "I wish we were going with you, sweetie," Braden said. "I haven't been out since July Fourth weekend." He turned to Sal and smiled. "Remember that weekend? That's where we met that hot couple from the Upper West Side and all wound up in the same bed together."

Harry looked down at his shoes and cleared his throat. Braden had underlying effeminate qualities that made the short hairs on the back of his neck stand up straight. And he could never understand why Braden had to brag about his sexual adventures in public. Even if Braden and Sal did have sex with another couple, why did he have to announce it to the world?

Sal took one look at the expression on Harry's face and changed the subject fast. He shook Rick's hand, thanked him for coming, and said to Harry, "I'll call you on Monday."

Harry smiled and nodded. When he put his arms around Sal, he said, "It was a nice afternoon. Talk to you on Monday."

He still couldn't believe how fast things had changed that summer. Marla and Roger, their best friends, were now married, Sal was almost back with Braden, and Harry was dating someone completely new. The only thing that was still the same was his friendship with Sal, and he wasn't sure how long that would last. It was becoming increasingly difficult for Harry to watch Sal and Braden together. When Braden opened his mouth to say anything, Harry wanted to stick his fingers down his throat and vomit.

While Braden was asking Rick questions about his house on Fire Island, Sal leaned over and whispered into Harry's ear, "Rick looks so happy and content. You must be really giving it to him hard in bed. I'll bet you're tagging him real good." Sal lifted his arm, made a fist, and pushed it back and forth a few times. Then he stepped back and laughed. Not just a quiet snicker. He laughed so loudly, he had to cover his mouth with his hand so people wouldn't look at him.

Harry's head jerked back and he raised his eyebrows. "Very funny." He knew why Sal was laughing, and he *didn't* think it was funny. He was laughing because Harry had made the colossal mistake of mentioning to Sal that Rick was strictly a bottom in bed. And Sal, knowing Harry was also typically a bottom in bed, thought it was hilarious. Harry looked into Sal's eyes and smiled. "I'm not getting any complaints from him." Then he turned around fast, pulled Rick's lapel, and said, "Let's go. We're going to miss the ferry."

But Rick didn't move. He smiled and lifted his arms. He looked at Braden and said, "Why don't you and Sal join us for the weekend? It would be fun. Unless you're doing something else."

Harry stood behind Rick, and Rick couldn't see him. He gave Sal a look and barely shook his head no. So Sal smiled and said, "It's really short notice. Maybe we'll take a rain check."

Harry took a deep breath and relaxed his shoulders. But just as he exhaled, Braden started to jump up and down like a four-year-old begging for ice cream. "Please, Sal," he pleaded. "I haven't been to Fire Island since July. Please, can we go? We don't have any other plans this weekend." Then he placed his palm on Sal's chest and started to rub it up and down.

Harry turned away for a moment and rolled his eyes. When he looked back, Sal shrugged his shoulders and said, "I guess we can pack a few things really fast and join you." He ran his fingers through his hair and thought for a moment. "Tante Clarisse can take care of things here, and I've spent a lot of time with Dolly this week so I don't feel guilty about leaving her."

“Excellent,” Rick said. “We’ll wait right here while you pack. You have about fifteen minutes.”

Braden jumped up and kissed Sal on the cheek, and then ran into the house to pack his things. As Sal turned to join him, he looked at Harry and shrugged his shoulders again. “I’d better run. We don’t want to miss the ferry.”

Harry smiled and pretended to be excited. He didn’t want Sal or Rick to think he was upset. “Yeah, that would be awful.”

Chapter Thirteen

They made it to the last ferry with seconds to spare. Sal knew he could have made it there sooner, but he was following Rick and Harry. Rick didn't go over fifty-five miles per hour and he hugged the right lane all the way out to Long Island. Sal got so frustrated driving behind Rick that he switched on cruise control and crossed his feet at the ankle. Braden slept the entire way. When he and Sal took a road trip anywhere, he put his seat back, closed his eyes, and went to sleep. If Braden said three words in the car, it was a lot.

When they arrived at Fire Island and got off the ferry, Braden was so excited he couldn't stand still. On the walk to Rick's house, he kept jogging ahead of them, bouncing up and down in his white short pants. Rick pointed out places of interest as if he was the official tour guide of Fire Island. Harry walked with his head down and stared at his shoes. A couple of times Harry lifted his head and rolled his eyes when Braden's voice rose in pitch. Harry didn't know Sal was watching his expressions. If he had known, he probably wouldn't have let his dislike for Braden be so obvious.

Rick's house turned out to be nicer than Sal had expected. He'd thought they'd be going to one of those gray shingled places surrounded by sand and scrappy, weedy landscaping. But Rick's house was a long and flat and white, with walls of glass and multiple levels of manicured landscaping. The front entrance was flanked with red geraniums in simple concrete pots. The inside of the house was just as modern as the outside. White leather sofas were balanced with Lucite tables, bleached hardwood floors glistened in the late afternoon sunlight, and a huge brass palm tree stood tall beside a white marble fireplace. The back wall of the entire house was glass and it looked out over

a long, narrow swimming pool with more red geraniums. Beyond that, Sal could see a straight line of clear, blue ocean.

The living area was a large open concept, and off a long hallway next to the kitchen area, there were two large bedrooms separated by a flimsy wall of Japanese rice paper. When Rick saw Sal run his hand down the wall that separated the two bedrooms, he smiled and said, “The former owners wanted moveable walls in case they wanted to make one huge bedroom, two large bedrooms, or three smaller bedrooms. They were a couple of serious designers. There are three private baths in this end of the house so the rooms can be split apart easily. It was an ingenious concept on their part. The walls are thin, but they are totally private. You can’t see through them. I usually just keep the three bedrooms like they are right now.”

Sal smiled and said, “Yes, it’s ingenious.” Then he rubbed his jaw and wondered about sound. He couldn’t see through the walls, but they were far from soundproof. Sal was a fan of modern architecture, but he believed in function over form. And rice paper walls, in his opinion, were not very practical.

After they were settled in their rooms, they changed clothes and went out to dinner. Rick took them to a place he knew well and Braden fell in love with their waiter. The waiter was a good-looking lifeguard type, with dark hair and bronze muscles. Braden flirted with the guy all through dinner. He complimented the guy’s dark tan, squeezed his large biceps and giggled. He told him how much he liked the way his tight jeans bulged in the crotch. He did everything he could to show his interest except get down on his knees and lick his groin. Rick laughed at Braden’s boldness, and Harry forced a smile. But Harry wasn’t talking much that night, which was unusual for him. And each time

Braden got excited about something—at one point it was a shrimp dish on the menu that he loved—Harry looked down at his plate and pressed his lips together.

When Harry and Rick got up to use the bathroom, Braden pulled Sal's arm and whispered, "Can we bring this waiter back with us tonight? I think he's interested in both of us. I'll bet he has a huge, thick dick. You can both take turns fucking me." The waiter was at the next table. Braden smiled at him and winked.

Sal looked at the waiter and frowned. "Not tonight, Braden," Sal said. "We're guests here and it's not cool to bring strangers back to someone else's house." The fact that he had to point this out to Braden made him uneasy. Most people would have had enough common sense to know better. This was one of those times he blamed Braden's youth and inexperience.

Braden sat back and folded his arms across his chest. He pouted and said, "I guess you're right." Then he kicked the table leg a few times.

Sal smiled and poked him in the arm with his fist. "Stop looking so depressed. Just because we're not bringing him back tonight doesn't mean we can't have our own fun." Then he bit his bottom lip and poked him lightly again.

Braden looked down at his knees. Then he shrugged his shoulders and said, "I guess...whatever."

Sal tilted his head and watched the expression on Braden's face. He looked like a child who had just lost a toy. Braden never seemed to be satisfied with just the two of them. If there wasn't a third, or some kind of kinky group sex involved, Braden seemed just as happy to go to sleep and forget about sex altogether.

After dinner they went to a bar, where Braden got a drink and went out on the dance floor alone. While Rick was talking to one of the owners of the bar, Harry leaned into Sal's side and said, "Aren't you going to join Braden on the dance floor?" Harry's eyes were wide open and his head moved up and down as he followed Braden's erratic dance moves. It was a slow night in September and there were only a few other couples on the dance floor. Braden was in the center, underneath a mirrored disco ball. He was jumping up and down, with a pink cosmopolitan in one hand and waving his other hand around in circles above his head. His bleached hair looked almost transparent under the dance floor lights, and his underwear line was visible through his tight white pants.

Harry smiled. "He prefers to dance alone. He thinks I'm too stiff on the dance floor and he thinks I inhibit his style."

"*His style?*" Harry squared his shoulders.

"Yes," Sal said. "Braden has taken a lot of dance lessons and he's planning to audition on Broadway when his modeling career starts to wind down."

Harry lowered his eyebrows. "But you're not a bad dancer. I've seen you dance. I never thought you looked too stiff."

Sal shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not really very good. Besides, I don't really like to dance."

Harry turned back to watch Braden jump around, then lifted his martini up high and swallowed it back in one gulp.

A few hours later, Rick looked at his watch and said, "I'm getting kind of tired. It's after midnight." Then he poked Sal in the arm and whispered, "And it's been almost a

week since Harry and I have been together...if you know what I mean.” He tilted his head and giggled a few times. His breath smelled like alcohol and his words were slurred.

Sal’s eyebrows went up. He’d noticed that when Rick had a few drinks, he spoke with a more pronounced lisp than usual. “I’ll tell Harry we’re going and then I’ll drag Braden off the dance floor. I understand.”

Harry was on Sal’s right. He was sipping his second martini, watching Braden dance with his tongue pressed to his cheek. Sal bent over and said, “I think we’re leaving now. Your new boyfriend just told me he’s horny and needs to get fucked.”

Harry turned so fast he almost spilled his drink. “He didn’t say that.”

Sal smiled. “Well, not exactly,” he said. “But I’m sure that’s what he wants. Looks like you’re going to be the top guy tonight.” Then he covered his mouth and laughed so hard, his shoulders jerked up and down.

Harry put his drink down on the bar and whispered, “I’m going to be damn good, too. Rick won’t be able to walk tomorrow after I get done with him tonight.”

Then he stepped away from the bar and said, “You guys can stay longer if you want. I’d hate to see you have to pull your little dancing queen off the floor just when she’s warming up. This is such good practice for her upcoming Broadway auditions.”

Sal put his hands on his hips and smiled. Harry wasn’t usually the vicious, catty type, but when he was, he was damn cute. “No, we’re leaving too. I’m going to bang Braden into the next room while you’re plowing old Rick tonight.” Then he tapped Harry on the shoulder, winked, and stepped onto the dance floor so he could get Braden.

On the walk back to the house, Harry and Rick walked ahead of Sal and Braden. They walked arm in arm and snuggled into each other. When they reached the front

entrance to Rick's property, Braden stopped walking, nodded at Harry and Rick, and whispered to Sal, "Do you think these two would be interested in a four-way?" Harry's arm was still looped through Rick's, and Rick was unlocking the front door.

It hadn't even occurred to Sal that Braden would ask this. Sal was not sexually attracted to Rick. And there was no way he was going to sleep with Harry and Braden at the same time. It would be too creepy. Besides, Sal also knew Harry would have laughed in his face. He shook his head and said, "Don't go there. I'm serious, too. Don't even think about it. These guys aren't your carefree circuit boy roommates in the city and they don't all jump into the hot tub at the same time." His voice went low and he pointed his finger in Braden's face.

Braden sucked in his cheekbones, gave Sal a mean look, and left him standing there alone. He stormed past Rick and Harry and went into the house. Rick and Harry looked back at Sal. Rick spread his arms out and asked, "Is he okay?"

Harry just stood there smiling, staring down at a potted geranium in a concrete urn. He didn't lift his head when he said, "Another temper tantrum, maybe? She's very high-strung."

Sal crossed to the doorway and said, "*He's* fine. Just tired." Then he entered the house and said, "I'll see you guys in the morning. Have a good night." He made sure he walked with a light, even step, and he smiled on purpose so they wouldn't think Braden was mad at him.

But when Sal reached the bedroom where he and Braden were sleeping that night, the room was dark and Braden was already in bed and under the covers. Sal walked to the end of the bed. He nearly tripped on Braden's pants. When Braden took off his clothes,

anywhere, he just threw them on the floor and worried about them later. Sal knocked the mattress with his knee and said, “Are you mad at me?”

Braden turned on his side and ignored him.

So Sal removed his clothes, placed them neatly on a chair, and went to the other side of the bed. He knew that when Braden was in one of these moods, it was pointless to talk to him. He tried to put his hand on Braden’s shoulder to say good night, but Braden jerked away and pulled the covers up over his head.

About twenty minutes later, Sal heard Harry and Rick walk into their bedroom. They weren’t loud, but with the thin rice paper walls, you couldn’t miss them. Sal was flat on his back. Braden was still lying on his side and there was a huge gap between them in the bed. Sal had an erection and he wanted to slap it against Braden’s body. But he knew Braden would turn him down, and not just because he was angry. Since they’d been seeing each other again, and Sal had been actively working on getting back together with Braden, they’d never had sex alone. When they had sex, it was always either a three-way or with a group. Sal had been hoping they could reach a point where Braden would enjoy sex with him, alone. But things didn’t seem to be moving in that direction. The only time Braden seemed to care about sex was if there were more than two people in the room.

Sal heard Harry and Rick remove their clothes. He heard their zippers go down, their belt buckles clink, and their shoes thump on the hardwood floor. There was a moment of silence, and then he heard Rick’s voice. “Are you going to fuck me now, stud?” His voice was soft, but he had to know Sal and Braden could hear them.

Harry's voice wasn't soft at all. And he definitely knew they could hear him. "Get up on the bed, bitch, and spread those legs as wide as they will go."

Then there was a moment of silence, followed to two loud slaps against what sounded like Rick's bare ass.

Sal's eyes opened wide. His stared at the rice paper wall in front of him. The bed moved and Braden turned over and rested on his back. Braden poked Sal in the arm and said, "Did you hear that? They are going to fuck." Then he laughed and whispered, "I'm shocked. I thought they were both bottoms, especially that uptight Harry."

Sal's mouth was open. He nodded and said, "Me too."

Then Rick said, "I need to get fucked, stud. Give it to me now, big boy."

Sal's head went up. *Big boy?* Harry didn't have a small penis, but he certainly wasn't huge.

"I'm going to put on the condom now," Harry said, "and fuck you until you can't walk." Then there were two more slaps against Rick's ass, followed by more silence.

Well.

When Braden heard all this going on in the room next door, he got out of bed, pulled a condom out of his pants, and jumped back into bed so he could cover Sal's erection. He pulled the covers back fast and reached for Sal's dick. Sal spread his legs wide and bucked his hips forward. While Braden covered Sal's erection, Sal heard Rick say, "Yes, Harry. Oh Yes. Fuck me now. Your dick feels so huge." Sal's mouth was still opened wide. It never occurred to him that Harry could actually be an aggressive top in bed, and a good one at that.

Braden didn't waste any time. As soon as Sal's penis was sheathed, Braden straddled Sal's body and slipped Sal's lubricated penis into his hole. While Rick begged Harry to fuck him in the next room, Braden sat back, grabbed his own erection, and started to ride Sal's dick. "This is so hot, listening to them fuck," Braden whispered. "There's something very sexually mysterious about it."

Sal bucked his hips; Braden rode him with a constant, even rhythm. Braden's eyes were closed and his tongue hung from his mouth, but he didn't say a word. He was listening to Rick and Harry in the next room, and the dirtier they talked, the more excited Braden became.

After about fifteen minutes of what sounded like deep, hard pounding, Sal heard Rick say, "I'm getting close, keep fucking me, stud. I want to be your bitch."

Then he heard Harry say, "I'm close, too. I'm going to breed that tight ass now, bitch. Open those legs wider and get ready. I'm going to use your ass as a come dump, bitch."

Sal shook his head. He didn't even know that Harry knew how to talk dirty like that. Harry had never talked dirty with him when they were lovers.

When Braden heard they were getting close, his skinny back arched, his body tightened, and his tongue started wagging. Sal knew Braden was getting close to climax by then; his body always became rigid and his tongue always fell from his mouth. But for some reason Sal wasn't anywhere near climax. He was still hard, but coming was the last thing on his mind. He couldn't stop picturing Rick on the bed in the next room, with his legs spread wide, while Harry fucked him. Sal had no idea Harry could be so loud and verbal, and so dominant in bed. Sal felt a peculiar tug in his stomach and he wasn't sure

why. But he didn't want to disappoint Braden, so he took a few deep breaths and pretended he was close to climax, too.

Harry's voice became louder and more obnoxious. He grunted, "Uh, uh, uh, uh," as loud as he could. He moaned about how soft and tight Rick's ass was, and he bragged about how he wanted to fill Rick's hole with his come. He sounded like one of those aggressive top studs from a porn video; he had Rick begging and pleading for more. And when they were both close to climax, Sal heard Harry sigh and take deep, outrageous breaths. Harry huffed and puffed a few times, then he shouted, "I'm coming. Uh, uh, uh, yes, I'm fucking coming all over the place, bitch. Open those legs for me like a good little bitch."

When it sounded as if Harry had climaxed, Braden jerked his penis faster and exploded all over Sal's chest. Sal closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths. He sucked in his stomach, curled his toes and whispered, "Ah, yeah. I'm coming."

And for the first time in Sal's entire life, he faked an orgasm. What else could he do? His penis was shrinking and his stomach was turning and twisting into knots. He'd heard that women faked orgasms all the time. But until that night, he'd never even thought it was possible for a man to fake one.

After that, the room next door went silent. Sal heard them shuffling around and whispering, but he couldn't make out what they were saying. Braden lifted his smooth leg and climbed off Sal's body. When Braden reached down to remove the condom from Sal's dick, Sal covered his crotch with his hand and whispered, "I'll take it off myself. I have to use the bathroom." Then he jumped out of bed and crossed through the dark room to the bathroom. He didn't want Braden to know the condom was empty and that he'd

faked his orgasm. All he wanted to do was clean Braden off his chest, pull the covers over his head, and go to sleep.

The next morning, both Rick and Braden laughed and joked around in the kitchen. Their voices sounded lofty and their eyes were bright and content. Sal sat at the dining room table sipping black coffee. His eyebrows were furrowed and his lips were turned down. Harry sat across from him and frowned. He lifted his coffee and took a sip. “What’s wrong, Sal?” Harry asked. “Didn’t you sleep well?”

Sal glared at him. “Now that you mention it,” he said, “it was a little noisy last night.” He leaned forward and clenched his fists on the table. Harry knew he’d heard it all.

Harry shrugged and smiled. “I told you I can be a top when I want to be.”

Sal rubbed his eyes and then clenched his fists. “Ah well, you certainly proved it last night.” Then he lowered his head to his lap and shook it back and forth. “And now I’m wondering what went on between us when we were together, because if that’s what you like in bed, you must have been playing me for a damn fool by pretending to be a bottom when we were together.” Then he kicked the table leg, stood up, and left Harry sitting there alone.

Chapter Fourteen

When they headed back to the city, Harry and Sal were quiet. Sal wouldn't look Harry in the eye. Rick and Braden walked ahead of them on the way to the ferry. They chatted about things they had in common; they even exchanged cell phone numbers and made plans to get together during the week. Harry and Sal followed them about ten paces back, with a huge gap between them. Harry pressed his lips together and stared at Rick and Braden's backs. Sal lowered his head and stared at his shoes.

When the ferry dropped them off on the mainland, Sal turned his back to Harry, shook Rick's hand, and thanked him for the weekend. Braden hugged both Harry and Rick and told Rick he'd call him that week. Harry stepped forward and reached out to hug Sal, but Sal stepped back and said, "I'll see you," without looking at his face. Then Sal put his arm around Braden and walked over to his own car.

Harry didn't hear from Sal for the rest of the week. Harry thought about calling him. He still had work to do in Sal's house. He was designing Sal's library, and the furniture wasn't supposed to arrive for at least three weeks. He knew he had to talk to Sal eventually. But he was still mad about the weekend. He didn't eat much that week and he only slept about three hours each night. Sal had had no right to clench his fists and give him attitude about Rick. Harry hadn't done anything wrong. He'd known Sal could hear him that night; maybe that had been a mistake. But Harry and Sal were just good friends and Sal was openly dating and sleeping with Braden.

Then Friday afternoon, Harry's cell phone rang. He was working with a client in his New York showroom, explaining the differences between chenille and leather with

regards to upholstery. He looked down at his phone and his heart beat faster. When he saw Sal's number on the caller ID, he excused himself and went into his office to answer it.

"Hi," he said. His voice was soft, but his heart was still beating hard and he had to control his breathing.

"Hey," Sal said. "What are you doing tomorrow?" His voice sounded normal, as if nothing had happened between them.

Harry shrugged and said, "Nothing special. Why?"

"You want to go for a bike ride?"

"A bike ride?"

Sal laughed. "Yes. I just bought two new bicycles, helmets, and all the gear you need, including cycling shoes. Do you want to go?"

Harry shrugged again. He hadn't been on a bike since Stanford. "I guess." His voice was soft.

There was a moment of silence, then Sal said, "Sorry about last weekend."

Harry took a deep breath and exhaled with a sigh. "What time tomorrow?"

"Is nine good?"

"I'll see you then," Harry said. He hesitated for a moment, then added, "Thanks for calling, Sal." He was thanking him because *he* probably wouldn't have made the phone call. He still wasn't sure about his feelings for Sal, and he had a strong stubborn streak.

But when he hung up the phone and went back to his clients, he couldn't stop smiling. And he was starved, too. Later that afternoon, he had a pizza delivered to his

office and he ate the whole thing all by himself. It was the first thing he'd eaten since he'd left Fire Island that hadn't caused his stomach to turn.

The next morning, Harry pulled into Sal's driveway and parked near the garages at the side of the house. Sal was already outside getting the bikes ready. He was wearing one of those snug black shirts that hugged his chest muscles, a small black helmet, and a tight pair of black bike shorts. He wore black athletic shoes and no socks. His hairy, muscular calves looked sexy; his thigh muscles protruded beneath the Spandex fabric and flexed whenever he moved his legs.

When Harry got out of his car and crossed to where Sal was standing, he looked down between Sal's legs and smiled. He was wearing dark sunglasses and Sal didn't know he was staring at the huge bulge between Sal's legs. In those tight shorts, Sal's large, flaccid penis stuck out in such an obvious way that it was impossible not to notice it.

Sal looked up from the bike and smiled. "Hey, good morning." Then he crossed to where Harry was standing, hugged him, and gave him a kiss on the cheek.

Harry kissed his cheek and said, "Looks like you're ready to roll."

Sal stepped back and smiled. "All your stuff is in the house, upstairs on my bed. Go up and change and I'll wait for you here. And I left a couple of water bottles on the counter in the kitchen...grab them on your way out."

Harry turned back toward the house and said, "I'm going to check in on Dolly first. I'll be back in a few minutes."

When he walked into the house, Clarisse was dusting the living room. He waved and said hello. She grunted something without looking up from her dust rag and

continued what she was doing. On his way back to Dolly's playroom, he heard squeals and snorts. When he rounded the corner and Dolly saw him coming toward her, she lifted her head and shook it back and forth. He opened the gate and went into her room. She rubbed her snout on his leg and pushed him so hard he almost lost his balance.

After a few minutes with Dolly, he went upstairs and changed into the outfit Sal had left on the bed. The cycling shoes and the tight shirt fit well, but the black shorts were so tight, his ass looked huge. He turned sideways in the mirror and sighed. He'd always been self-conscious about the size of his ass. And no matter how hard he tried to pack his dick and balls down, they still stuck out in an obscene way. But he didn't want to complain. He knew Sal had spent a small fortune on all this gear.

When he went back downstairs, Sal was squatting in front of one of the bikes checking the tire. He looked up at Harry and raised his eyebrows. "You look good," he said. "A perfect fit."

Harry frowned and handed him two bottles of water. "My ass looks massive in these shorts."

Sal bit his bottom lip and shook his head back and forth. "You look fine, trust me." Then he stood up and fastened the water bottles to the bikes. "Let's go," he said.

When they left, it was almost ten in the morning. Sal led the way and Harry followed. They rode for the next two hours, then stopped at a small grocery store to get a snack. It was one of those country places, where other cyclists stopped for a break. Sal walked into the store with his head held high, completely oblivious of everyone. He pulled a few energy snack bars from a top shelf. He held them up and Harry nodded yes. Harry didn't care what kind of bars they were. He just wanted to get out of the store

because when Sal walked in, everyone turned to stare at him. Sal had no idea they were staring, but Harry knew they were. They lowered their heads and glanced at the huge bulge between Sal's legs. His dick was pointing to the right; the ring at the head of his dick was so well defined it almost looked like he wasn't wearing any pants at all. One woman pressed her hand to her throat and stopped breathing for a second. An older guy with white hair, dressed in his own cycling outfit, grabbed the side of the counter so hard his knuckles turned white.

When they went outside again, Sal handed Harry a snack bar and said, "I think we should head back now. I have no idea how far we've gone, but I do know that tomorrow we're both going to be so sore we won't be able to move."

Harry opened his snack bar and said, "You're right. But it feels good. I'd forgotten how much I missed being on a bike. I gave my old one away a year after I moved to New York." When he opened his mouth to bite down on the snack bar, he stared at Sal's penis again.

Sal opened his snack bar and took a bite. He chewed and swallowed, then shrugged his shoulders. "I'm just glad you're not mad anymore, is all."

Harry smiled. He knew Sal wasn't the type of guy who showed his emotions openly, and when he did, it usually came out awkward and abrupt. But with Sal he didn't need long emotional explanations; he knew how Sal felt and he didn't need to hear every single word articulated. "I wasn't mad for long," he said.

Sal laughed and slapped him on the back. "I guess I shouldn't have freaked out like I did last weekend. I guess I underestimated you."

Harry tilted his head sideways and said, "How?"

Sal finished his snack bar and looked down at the bike tire. "I've always pictured you a certain way, you know, in bed. When I heard you with Rick last week I was a little shocked at how aggressive you can be. I guess I was wrong about you."

Harry took a deep breath and swallowed. "I have a confession about that," he said. "I faked it. And I've decided not to see Rick anymore. It's not working and it's not fair to either one of us."

Sal's head went up and he looked into Harry's eyes. "You faked what?"

Harry shrugged his shoulders and spread his arms out wide. "I faked it all with Rick. I didn't even climax. He has no idea I faked it, so please don't repeat that out loud." He sighed. "I don't even know why I'm telling you right now. I probably should have kept my mouth shut. Men don't usually fake orgasms."

Sal furrowed his eyebrows and reached for his water bottle. He opened the bottle and took a swallow, then wiped his mouth and said, "It happens. Don't be so hard on yourself." His voice was even and he didn't seem surprised at all.

"Well, I guess it *does* happen," Harry said. "Have you ever done it? Faked an orgasm?" Now that he knew it was so easy to fake an orgasm while wearing a condom, he was wondering if Sal, or anyone else, had ever faked one with him.

Sal fastened the water bottle to the bike and shrugged his shoulders. "Just once," he said. "I don't want to talk about it." Then he smiled and looked back and forth. When he was certain that no one was watching them, he slapped Harry on the ass and said, "But never with you. Every orgasm with you was always the real thing."

Harry smiled all the way back to Sal's house. But when they stopped in front of the garage and got off their bikes, he reached down and rubbed the inside of his thigh. "Damn," he said, "this muscle is starting to get sore already."

Sal rolled his bike into the garage and leaned it against a long, empty wall. The garage was neat and there were soft, cushiony gray mats covering the entire concrete floor. He stretched his legs and said, "Tante Clarisse is out visiting family tonight and she won't be back tonight. Feel free to go upstairs and fill the Jacuzzi in my bathroom. No one's here but us."

Harry walked his bike into the garage and rested it behind Sal's. He watched Sal squat down and stretch his legs apart. When he stood up, his tight black shorts rode up his thighs and his penis moved forward. It stuck out from his crotch and rested on top of his confined ball sack. Harry licked his lips and said, "A hot bath sounds like a great idea." He moved to where Sal was standing. "But there's something I have to do first. I've been dying to do it all day."

Harry had vowed to himself he'd never touch Sal again unless Sal officially broke up with Braden. But he couldn't resist anymore. He thought about Sal before he went to bed at night, and woke up thinking about Sal in the morning. He was only human.

Sal's head jerked. "What's that?"

Harry reached down with his right hand and gently cupped Sal's soft genitals in his palm. He squeezed a few times and said, "Can I do this?"

Sal laughed and ran his hand across the back of his neck. Then he spread his legs wider and said, "You're already doing it."

Harry squeezed him again and said, "You're growing in my hand." Harry could feel it getting stiff. His penis was moving to the right and his balls were getting tighter.

Sal lifted his right arm and cupped his hand. He slid the side of his hand across Harry's face and said, "That's because your hand feels so good." Then he leaned forward and kissed Harry's forehead. "You taste good, too."

"Should I stop?" Harry asked. He bit his bottom lip and squeezed hard. Sal's penis was now fully erect and ready to split through the tight fabric.

"Yes," Sal said. "You should stop doing this and put your hand all the way down my pants and hold it that way."

Harry removed his hand from Sal's shorts. When he looked down between Sal's legs, it looked like there was a banana wedged into Sal's shorts. So he reached forward, slipped his right hand down the front of Sal's shorts and reached for the erection. Sal's head went back and he gasped. His legs vibrated and he had to hold Harry's shoulders for support. Harry wrapped his fingers around the shaft. It was stone solid, but the skin was soft and smooth. He started jerking Sal slowly. "Is that better?"

"Ah, man," Sal said. "You keep doing this and you're going to get me off right here." Then he cupped Harry's face in his hands and kissed him on the lips.

While Harry continued to stroke him, Sal slipped his thick tongue into Harry's mouth and pressed it against Harry's. They kissed this way for a few minutes, then Harry pulled his hand out of Sal's pants and asked, "Do you remember the things I used to do to you in the car back when we were driving cross country after college?" The garage door was wide open and the birds were chirping outside.

Sal nodded and kissed his nose. "How could I forget?" he said. He reached back and placed his hand on the small of Harry's back. A second later, his large hands went down the back of Harry's tight shorts and he cupped Harry's ass in his palms. He grabbed with pressure, spreading the rounds apart and massaging them at the same time.

Harry arched his back and leaned into Sal's chest. When Sal's large hands were pressed against his buttocks, his knees became weak. Sal smelled like spicy cologne and perspiration. Harry inhaled, took a deep breath, and said, "Stand back for a moment."

Sal pulled his hands out of Harry's pants and stepped back. When he was a few feet away, Harry kicked off his cycling shoes and pulled down his pants. Harry's penis was erect; it bounced when he lifted his arms to remove his helmet. And it jerked up and down when he yanked off his tight shirt. He removed his socks last and stood naked in front of Sal. While Sal stood there staring at him with narrow, glazed eyes, he stepped closer and went down on his knees. The gray floor mats on the garage floor were soft against his bare knees. He laid his palms on Sal's thighs and looked up at him with an innocent, submissive expression.

When Harry reached up for the waistband of Sal's shorts, Sal grabbed one of his hands and said, "Maybe I should take a shower first. I might smell a little funky after riding a bike all day."

Harry closed his eyes and leaned forward. He ran the side of his face across the erection that was bursting from Sal's shorts. "No," he said. "You're absolutely perfect just the way you are right now." Then he pulled Sal's shorts down to his knees, opened his mouth, and wrapped his lips around the head of Sal's penis.

“Ah,” Sal moaned. His body trembled and his chest heaved. He grabbed the back of Harry’s head with both hands and pulled it toward his body. His penis slid to the back of Harry’s throat and he moaned again.

The sides of Harry’s face indented and he started to suck. He pressed his tongue against the shaft and his head went back and forth. Sal put his hands on his hips and closed his eyes. When Harry looked up at Sal’s face, his mouth was wide open and his eyelids were cinched shut. Harry took deep breaths through his nostrils; Sal still smelled like spicy cologne combined with his own natural aroma. Harry couldn’t compare it to anything else, because the only time he ever smelled this aroma was when he was with Sal. And, oddly enough, even though Sal had been riding a bike all day, there was nothing offensive about the way he smelled that afternoon. Anyone else would have made him gag.

Harry sucked with a continuous rhythm until he could taste Sal’s pre-come. He knew that Sal was edging toward a grand climax, so he stopped sucking and said, “Finish yourself off.”

Sal looked down and smiled. “Are you going to suck my balls again?”

He knew how much Sal liked having his balls sucked. No matter how many times he did this, Sal couldn’t seem to get enough. So he reached out and cupped Sal’s balls in his palm, then leaned forward and licked them a few times. “Of course I am.”

When Sal grabbed his erection and started to jerk, Harry lowered his head and sucked Sal’s balls into his mouth. Though he’d done this before to Sal, he’d never get over how large and warm they were and how sweet and tender they tasted. Typically, this wasn’t something Harry did well. He’d never sucked Rick’s balls; the thought of it

absolutely turned his stomach. Harry wasn't one of those gay men who enjoyed fantasizing about sweaty jock straps, worn sweat socks, and other locker room things. He'd tried tea-bagging a few other men, but he hadn't enjoyed it. But it was remarkably different with Sal.

A few minutes later, Sal grunted a few times and said, "I'm close, really close, man."

Harry was still sucking his balls. He nodded his head up and down and started jerking himself off. A minute after that, Sal's head went back and his legs began to tremble. He blasted a stream of come up in the air, over Harry's body, and onto the gray cushioned floor behind Harry. Harry came on the floor between Sal's legs. Sal's balls were still in his mouth when he erupted and his left hand was pressed against Sal's hairy leg.

When Sal's balls slid out of his mouth, Sal reached down for his hand and helped him to his feet. Sal kissed him on the lips and wrapped his arms around his body. "You want to go up and soak in a hot tub now?" Sal asked.

Harry nodded and said, "Let me get dressed first."

Sal reached down and ran his hand up and down Harry's naked ass. "You don't have to get dressed. There's no one here except me, and you can go inside the house through the garage door."

"I'll go up and get the tub ready," Harry said. "You can go take care of Dolly. The poor thing must be freaking out now. I'm sure she knows we're home." He reached down and held Sal's shrinking penis in his hand. "I'm glad you didn't fake it today," he said.

Sal lifted Harry's chin with two fingers and looked into his eyes. "I told you I've never faked it with you."

"Who *did* you fake it with?"

Sal slapped his ass hard and said, "C'mon. Let's go into the house."

Chapter Fifteen

After a hot bath in Sal's Jacuzzi, they took a long nap and woke up in each other's arms. Sal pressed his erection into Harry's leg, rubbed it up and down, and reached for a lubricated condom on the nightstand. He was breathing fast and fumbling with his hands. While Sal covered his dick with the condom, Harry turned over on his stomach and spread his legs before Sal even suggested it. Then Sal shoved a pillow under Harry's stomach and mounted him so fast, Harry whimpered a few times. But not for long, because the pain quickly subsided when Sal started to buck his hips slowly. Sal knew how to open him up in the beginning, with gentle thrusts and an easy rhythm. There were no awkward moments and nothing was forced.

Sal rode him this way for more than twenty minutes, bucking slowly, never breaking his rhythm. Harry remained on his stomach with his legs wide open, holding his own erection in his palm, until Sal couldn't hold back any longer. Sal grunted and the rhythm increased. He slammed into him hard, three times, then moaned out loud and filled the condom. And while Sal was still deep inside his body, Harry jerked off into the pillow that was beneath his stomach.

When Sal fell on top of his body and kissed the back of his neck, Harry took a deep breath and let his entire body go limp. This had always been the part of their lovemaking that Harry liked the most. When Sal was still inside him, and he was filled with post-orgasmic sensations that passed through his entire body.

When Sal finally pulled out, they put on sweatpants and went downstairs. They let Dolly out of her playroom, and she was unusually excited that night. Sal said she still

wasn't her old self, but it was the first time he'd seen her legs move that fast in months. She trotted to Harry's side and rubbed her snout against his leg. Her head bobbed up and down and her eyes were clear and alert. She even snorted and headed to her feeding bowls in the kitchen. She pushed them with her snout and knocked them upside down, letting Sal know she was hungry and she wasn't willing to wait long to eat. So while Sal prepared her dinner, Harry ordered Chinese takeout from a restaurant that delivered.

After dinner, Harry hooked Dolly's leash to her collar. When Sal opened the back door so they could take her for a long walk, she practically pulled Harry down the back stairs. If he hadn't reached for the banister, he would have fallen flat on his face. Sal asked him if he was okay, then took the leash, tugged it a few times, and calmed her down. She listened to Sal. The minute he lowered his voice and gave a command, she retreated. He turned to Harry and shook his head. "She almost seems normal. I don't get it. Just the other day she was moping around the house, walking looked like an effort."

Harry put his hands on his hips and looked down at Dolly. She was trotting across the backyard with her hindquarters bouncing and her head held high. "I don't know," Harry said. "Maybe she's glad Clarisse is gone for the night. I know I am." He knew it was none of his business to mention Sal's housekeeper. But Clarisse was one of the few people he'd met in his life that he truly disliked. Just looking at her crooked teeth made his stomach rumble. And when she spoke he wanted to shove something into her mouth. He refused to call her *Tante* Clarisse, and he'd always wondered about her authenticity. She wore *fleur-de-lys* pins and forced a fake French accent. She acted like she was from France, rather than a Canadian who pretended to be from France. Harry loved Canada; he'd traveled there for business and pleasure and he'd always enjoyed each moment. One

of his best employees was from Montreal and he loved and respected her. But he didn't like people who pretended to be something they weren't, and that's what Clarisse was constantly doing.

Sal laughed and shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe you're right," he said. "But I don't have much choice. I need Clarisse around when I'm traveling."

Harry sighed. "Well, if you're ever interested in finding someone new, I have an employee with a daughter who might be interested in Clarisse's job. The daughter has a degree in animal science and she just lost her job at a pet shelter due to cutbacks. And, she lives in New Jersey, not too far from here."

"I'll keep that in mind," Sal said. "But Dolly is used to Clarisse and I don't like disruptions. I like things to move along smoothly because I travel so often."

By the time they returned to the house from their walk, it was getting late. Instead of bringing Dolly upstairs, Sal put her to bed in her playroom. But when Harry and Sal turned off her lights and walked away from the room, Dolly started to grunt and squeal. Harry stopped and reached for Sal's arm. "I think she wants to be upstairs with us. She's freaking out. She thinks she's missing all the fun because I'm here."

Sal frowned. "I *know* that's what she wants," he said. "But I had a few plans for us tonight that don't involve Dolly." He placed his hand on Harry's ass and said, "She'll calm down."

They took a few steps forward, but the squealing continued. Harry kissed Sal on the cheek and said, "I feel kind of bad leaving her like this, all alone in the dark. And she's looking so good and acting so healthy. Maybe we should bring her upstairs tonight. I'd hate to see her have a relapse."

Sal shook his head and kissed Harry on the cheek. “But we won’t be able to do anything with her in the room. If we have sex, she’ll sit on the end of the bed and stare at us. And that’s too creepy.”

Dolly squealed again and bumped her head into the gate. Harry thought for a moment and said, “We’ll just have a quiet night. And when Dolly falls asleep, I’ll put my hand under the covers and give you a good old-fashioned, quiet hand job. You won’t have to do anything. Just lie back and let me do all the work. Dolly won’t even know what we’re doing.”

Sal’s head went back and his eyes opened wide. “All I have to do is lie there and do nothing?”

Harry nodded. He liked pleasing him this way.

“Will you do something a little different for me, with the hand job?” Sal asked. He hesitated and stumbled with his words. And he wouldn’t look Harry in the eye.

But Harry gave him a look. “Sure,” he said. “What?”

Sal stared at his shoes and asked, “When you take off your clothes, will you wear a necklace?”

Harry cocked an eyebrow. He didn’t know Sal had any kinks or fetishes. But wearing a necklace certainly seemed harmless enough. So he shrugged and said, “Sure, but I don’t have a necklace.”

Sal’s eyes lit up. He smiled and said, “I have this cheap strand of pearls upstairs that I got once from a bachelor party.” Then he shrugged his shoulders and said, “If you don’t want to wear them, though, you don’t have to. It’s okay.”

Harry smiled; it didn’t seem like a big request. “I don’t mind. I really don’t.”

Sal kissed him on the forehead. "Then I'll let Dolly out as fast as I can," he said.

When he opened the gate, Dolly jumped from the room, trotted past them, and headed upstairs to the master bedroom. She moved fast, as if worried they'd try to stop her. By the time they went up, she was already on the stool at the end of the bed, staring at the television. Harry laughed and said, "It looks like she really wants to watch TV."

"Don't underestimate her," Sal said. "She actually does look at the TV, and if a chicken, a duck, a monkey, or a dog comes on, she goes wild."

Then Sal put the television on and they undressed. Harry got into bed first. But before Sal got into bed, he crossed to the bedroom closet and returned with an extra-long strand of fake, cream-colored pearls. He got into bed and handed them to Harry. When Harry put them around his neck, Sal's lips puckered and he whistled back. "You look hot in that necklace."

Harry snuggled up to Sal's warm body and rested his head on Sal's chest. He took a deep breath and said, "If you have any other little kinks, tell me about them." Harry wanted to know, because if there *were* any other kinks, he would have been more than willing to please Sal.

Sal ran his palm down Harry's chest and reached for the plastic pearls. He adjusted his body and said, "Not really. I just think it's hot when a guy wears a necklace. Chokers are hot, too."

Harry smiled. He'd once dated a guy from Brooklyn who had a bow tie fetish. He lowered his body so that he could press the pearls to Sal's erection. He rested his head on Sal's lower torso, then he grabbed a handful of pearls and wrapped his hand around Sal's dick. He rubbed the pearls gently along the shaft and said, "How's this feel?"

Sal took a deep breath and said, "Fucking hot...so fucking hot." He closed his eyes and stretched his legs all the way out.

They watched a poker tournament for about a half hour, waiting for Dolly to drift off. When she finally fell asleep, Sal put his hand on Harry's shoulder and he smiled. He spread his legs, adjusted his body, and said, "It's time for my hand job."

Harry was still holding Sal's penis. The plastic pearls were still in his hand, pressed against the shaft. He began jerking Sal off slowly, making sure the pearls were touching his dick. "Close your eyes," he said, "and think about the pearls rubbing up against you." Then he jerked faster. He knew it wouldn't take long.

After Sal came, they fell asleep in each other's arms and didn't open their eyes again until they heard the back door slam shut the next morning. The sun was shining and the bedroom was chilly. Evidently, the weather had changed overnight and Sal hadn't turned on the heat yet. Dolly jumped up off the stool and ran out of the room. Sal sat up and said, "Tante Clarisse is home." Then he got up out of bed and locked the door so they wouldn't be interrupted.

Harry rubbed his eyes. "Should we go down and let Dolly out?"

Sal climbed back into the bed and said, "Tante Clarisse will take care of her. Dolly will be fine." His lips quivered and he rubbed his arms under the covers. Then he snuggled up against Harry's back, wrapped his arms and legs around Harry's body, and said, "Hmmm, you're nice and warm."

They slept for another hour, then took a shower together and got dressed. And while Sal was still putting on his shoes, Harry went downstairs to make a pot of coffee. At the bottom of the stairs, he heard Dolly squealing. The squeals were short and quick,

the way she always sounded when she was hungry. He heard Clarisse moving bowls around on the granite counter. Clarisse slammed something on the counter and said, in her wrecked voice, “Oh, knock it off, you stupid fucking, barnyard pig. You’ll calm down in a minute if I have to shove this down your fucking throat.” She spoke to Dolly with absolute hatred. Though Harry had never heard Clarisse curse before, he’d always had a feeling she had a gutter mouth.

Harry slowed down and tiptoed to the kitchen entrance. He leaned back against the hallway wall that faced a long, thin mirror. He could see everything Clarisse was doing in the mirror, but she couldn’t see him. She was putting green vegetables into Dolly’s bowl and Dolly was jumping around at her side. Clarisse was wearing a white pantsuit that day, with a large white hat that had chartreuse feathers sticking out of a white silk band. Harry shook his head and frowned at her awful taste in clothes. She wanted to be one of those women who wore hats well. But her face was too small, her chin too weak, and her features too pointy. And when she wore a hat, she looked awkward and fake.

Then his mouth dropped open when he saw Clarisse lift her leg and kick Dolly in the ribs. “Don’t rub your filthy head on my white pants, stupid fucking pig,” Clarisse said, as she arranged Dolly’s food in a bowl.

Harry pressed his palm to his throat. He was about to step forward and confront Clarisse, but he stopped short when he saw her pull a bottle of pills from her pocket. She bit her bottom lip and struggled with the lid. When the lid finally came off, she pulled a few pills out of the bottle and dropped them into a small marble bowl. Then she lifted a

pestle from the counter with her crooked, tangled fingers and started crushing the pills into a fine powder.

He waited in silence for a moment, trying not to think the worst, and then he watched Clarisse dump the powder into Dolly's food bowl and mix it all together with a small wooden spoon. Dolly grunted and walked around in circles. Clearly, she was starved. Her eyes were bright and lucid; all she cared about was getting her food and being a normal pet pig.

Harry took a deep breath and stepped into the kitchen. When Clarisse saw him, she shoved the pill bottle back into her pocket. She looked up at him and said, "Good morning." Her face turned red and her hands looked shaky.

Harry tilted his head to the side. "What did you just put into your pocket?"

Her head went back and she glared at him. "I don't know what you're talking about. There is nothing in my pocket. I have no idea what you're talking about."

Harry stepped closer to the counter and said, "I saw you in the hallway. Let me see the pills." He knew for a fact that Dolly was not on any medication and he wanted to know what Clarisse was giving her.

Clarisse slammed a wooden spoon on the counter and shouted, "Who do you think you are? You're not my boss. I'm a very intelligent person and I know what I'm doing."

Then Sal walked into the room and looked at both of them. "What's going on?" Dolly walked up to his side and he reached down to pet the top of her head.

“I came down to make coffee,” Harry said, “And I caught her putting some kind of medication in Dolly’s food. She has the pills in her pocket. I watched her crush them with the pestle and mortar and mix it all into Dolly’s bowl.”

Sal looked at Clarisse and frowned. “Let me see the pills.” He didn’t question her; he believed Harry.

Clarisse stepped back and pulled the pill bottle from her pocket. “I was only doing it for her own good,” she said, giving Harry a dirty look. “She’s much better off this way.”

Sal crossed the room and pulled the pill bottle from her hand. He lifted it up and read the label. He knew the drug: it was strong sedative he’d once been prescribed for a broken wrist. He slammed the bottle on the counter and said, “You’ve been drugging her all along without telling me? What kind of a horrible bitch are you?” He grabbed the counter and took a few deep breaths to stay calm.

Clarisse lowered her eyebrows and squinted. She pointed at Dolly and said, “It’s for her own good.”

Harry shook his head. “I could report you for animal abuse,” he said. He really wanted to kick her in the ass, but he was controlling his temper. “And if I hadn’t caught you doing this, you would have continued and Sal would never have known.”

Clarisse looked at him with a snide expression. “This is *none* of *your* business,” she said. Then she pointed at him with her crooked finger and shook it back and forth.

Sal looked down at the floor and rubbed his jaw. Without looking at Clarisse, he said, “I want you out of my house. Go upstairs, pack your things, and leave before I call the police and see about pressing animal abuse charges against you.”

Clarisse lifted her head and squared her shoulders. “I’ll be gone before the end of the day.”

While Tante Clarisse packed her things, Harry phoned his employee and set up an interview with Sal and his employee’s daughter for Monday morning. With Clarisse gone, he knew Sal needed someone fast. Harry’s employee was thrilled. She told him her daughter had been planning to file for unemployment on Monday morning, but now that she had an interview, she’d wait. When Harry hung up the phone, he smiled at Sal and said, “Stop worrying. You’re going to love her. I promise.”

Chapter Sixteen

Harry wound up spending the entire weekend at Sal's house. On Saturday night they cooked steaks on the grill and ate dinner outside. Sal had a nice, simple patio with gray pavers and a comfortable table with six chairs. But Sal wasn't happy. He told Harry he wanted one of those "outdoor living spaces" he'd seen on TV. He wanted a fireplace, a serious cooking area, a bar, and soft, comfortable furniture. As a designer, Harry wasn't a huge fan of outdoor living spaces unless the client's home was located in a climate where it was warm all year round. He'd designed spectacular spaces for clients in Florida and Southern California. In northern New Jersey, he knew Sal would be spending a great deal of money for something he'd only use two or three months of the year. One of Harry's signature design principles was practicality.

But Sal didn't care. He looked around the patio and said, "This is depressing. I want it to look great. And even if I only use it two months out of the year, it's worth the expense. I work hard for my money." When Harry saw the excited expression on Sal's face, he couldn't say no. It was beginning to occur to him that he couldn't say no to anything Sal wanted. So he smiled and agreed to start the project in the spring.

After that, Sal put Dolly to bed in her playroom, then went upstairs to build a roaring fire in the bedroom fireplace. He and Harry hugged and kissed and cuddled for hours. They were both naked; Harry wore the long strand of pearls again. When Harry finally climbed on top of Sal's body, Sal clutched the necklace and pulled Harry forward so he could kiss him. Then Harry covered Sal's penis with a condom and rode it until

Sal's entire body went into an orgasm. Sal squeezed Harry's thighs until there were dark bruises on his soft skin.

When they were finished, Sal leaned forward and saw the bruises he'd left on Harry's legs. He rubbed them and apologized. He was still deep inside Harry's body and Harry was riding his erection, rocking his hips in slow half-circles. Harry shrugged his shoulders and rested his palms on Sal's strong chest. He smiled and said, "They don't hurt. Besides, a few small bruises were worth watching the expression on your face when you came." Then he leaned forward and kissed Sal on the lips.

On Sunday, Harry woke up with legs so sore that he stood from the bed and squinted. Sal was still sleeping and he wanted to go downstairs and cook him Belgian waffles for breakfast. He put on a clean pair of Sal's white boxer shorts and a sweatshirt and hobbled down the staircase. His calves hurt because of the long bike ride; his thighs ached because Sal had squeezed them so hard. And his butt muscles were throbbing because of both the bike ride *and* the fact that Sal had fucked him twice in the middle of the night. Sal had pulled him from a deep sleep and lifted his legs up at two in the morning without warning. He'd rammed Harry so hard the top of Harry's head hit the headboard. Then, three hours later, Sal pushed him over on his stomach and plowed him again. It happened fast and only lasted a few minutes. Sal had been even rougher and he'd snapped the strand of pearls from Harry's neck. But Harry didn't complain. He came that time without even touching himself. And when it was over, Harry fell asleep with a huge grin on his face and loose plastic pearls under his body.

When he was downstairs, he took care of Dolly first. He walked her behind the house for a few minutes and gave her breakfast. She sat by his side and stared up at him

while he made coffee and prepared the waffles. If even a small crumb dropped to the floor, she scooped it up and swallowed it before Harry had a chance to sweep it.

When Sal came down, he was wearing pale blue boxer shorts and a white V-neck T-shirt. The boxers were wrinkled and his short black hair was sticking up in the back. He sat down at the kitchen table and yawned. Harry lifted the coffeepot and walked over to him. While he poured him a fresh cup of black coffee, Harry smiled and pointed to Sal's crotch. "You should close your legs." Sal's legs were spread so wide that the fly in his boxer shorts was an open hole and you could see the entire shaft of his soft penis.

Sal rubbed his eyes and looked down between his legs. Then he spread his legs wider and pulled his penis out of the opening with one hand. With the other hand, he grabbed Harry's ass hard and said, "Why don't you just pour some maple syrup on this and lick it off?" Then he let go of his penis and left it hanging out of the opening.

Harry stepped back and said, "My waffles are going to burn. Close your legs, put that *thing* back in your pants, and drink your coffee. I'll dip it in ketchup and have it for lunch." Then he crossed back to the center island and smiled at the waffle iron.

But a few minutes later, Harry stopped smiling. He'd just placed a huge stack of waffles in front of Sal and he was going back to get a plate for himself when Sal's cell phone rang. The phone was in the middle of the kitchen table. When Sal reached for the phone, Dolly jumped up from the floor.

At first, Harry wasn't paying attention. He was stacking waffles on his plate and wondering about whether or not he could eat two or three waffles. They were hefty and thick, and he was a small eater. Then he heard Sal say, right in front of him, "No, baby, I'm all alone. The house is empty. There's no one here but Dolly. I've been thinking

about you, too.” There was a moment of silence, and then Sal ended the conversation.

“I’ll call you later tonight and we’ll make plans. I miss you, baby.”

Harry put his plate back on the counter and turned off the waffle iron. He felt a sharp pain in his stomach. He wanted to bend over and vomit. He stared out the kitchen window and frowned. He clenched his fists and pressed his lips together, fighting the urge to cry. Sal was pouring syrup on his waffles as if nothing had happened.

Harry stood there staring out the window until Sal looked up and said, “What’s wrong?” He’d just cut a waffle and a large chunk was on the end of his fork.

“Who was that on the phone?” Harry asked. He knew who it was, but he was hoping—praying—Sal would tell him it was a business call, or a relative.

Sal lowered his fork and gulped. After a moment of silence, he said, “Braden.”

Harry shook his head fast. “Why did you tell him you were alone?” He lifted his arms and spread them apart. “I don’t get it, Sal. What’s with you and Braden? The guy treats you like dirt and you always go running back. We spend a fantastic weekend together, then you turn it all around and you treat *me* like dirt. Do you have any idea how I feel right now?” He lifted his arms in the air and shook his head.

Sal said, “Actually, of all people, I do know how you feel.” He looked up at Harry and shrugged. “And I’m sorry. I guess I wasn’t thinking. But I still have strong feelings for Braden and I’m not ready to give him up.”

The pain shot through Harry’s stomach again and he swallowed back hard. He looked at Sal, sitting there so hopeless and confused, and sniffed back.

And that’s when he knew, for certain, that he was in love with Sal.

He loved him so much he was willing to do anything for him. He'd give up his business, his home, and his money if Sal asked for it. If Sal needed a kidney transplant, he'd give him one of his. There was nothing he wouldn't do for this man. And for a fleeting moment, while he stood there unable to move, he was even ready to give Sal his love without asking for anything in return.

Then Sal said, "C'mon, don't be mad. I have strong feelings for you, too. You know that. But Braden and I lived together. And if there's a chance that I can reconcile with him, I'm going to try." He ran his fingers through his hair and looked down at his lap.

Harry knew it was time to leave. He squared his shoulders and said, "I'm going upstairs to get dressed and I'm going home." He watched as Sal moved the chair back, ready to stand up. "Don't get up and please don't follow me. I can't do this anymore, Sal. I just want to leave quietly." Then he removed a dish towel that had been over his shoulder, placed it on the counter, and left the room.

He found his clothes and dressed quickly. He gritted his teeth and held back his tears. When he was dressed, he double checked the bedroom to make sure he had his cell phone and everything he'd arrived with, because he knew he wasn't returning. Then he took a deep breath and went back downstairs.

Sal was waiting for him in the entrance hall. The first floor of the house smelled like waffles and it turned his stomach. He'd never be able to look at a Belgian waffle again after that morning. Sal went to the front door and asked haltingly, "Can I call you later?"

Harry looked down at the marble floor and said, “No. I don’t think you should call again, Sal, ever.” Then he looked him in the eye and said, “I need to move on and you need to do whatever it is you’re doing with Braden.” He wanted to tell him he loved him, but the words were stuck in his throat. He couldn’t bear the rejection and he was tired of competing with Braden. So he reached for the door handle and said, “My assistant will finish up everything here that has to be done. You can deal with her. She’s very good.”

Sal reached for his hand and said, “I’m sorry. I thought we were good friends having really good sex. I didn’t know you felt this way.” He squeezed his hand. “I’m really sorry, Harry.”

Harry leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. The waffle smell suddenly disappeared and Sal’s spicy, masculine aroma penetrated his nostrils. Sal hadn’t shaved and his dark beard pricked Harry’s smooth cheek. He smiled and said, “For a long time, I thought we were just good friends having really good sex. And that’s what I kept telling myself.” Then he shrugged and said, “I’m sorry, too.”

Harry opened the door and left the house without looking back. His legs felt heavy and rigid and his heart was thumping in his ears. He knew Sal was standing in the doorway watching him. He knew Sal’s elbows were pressed against the door frame and that he was biting the inside of his mouth. Harry sat down in the car and started the engine. His head was straight and both hands gripped the steering wheel. He didn’t even look back when he pulled away from the house and passed the front walk.

Chapter Seventeen

The months that followed were hectic and Harry didn't have time to be depressed. He'd been booked to appear on several daytime talk shows, the third Friday nights of October and November he sold his new bedroom collection on The Home Shopping Bazaar, and he started writing a new book about interior design. A friend of a friend who worked for a large publisher approached him about doing the book. Harry jumped at the opportunity to express his design concepts in print.

When he wasn't working on the book or promoting his designs, he spent most of his time traveling between his showrooms, working with clients.

His assistant finished Sal's house in Saddle River by the end of September. Harry made all the decisions and choices because he knew Sal better than she did, but the assistant was the one in direct contact with Sal. And even though Sal hired the daughter of his employee to be Dolly's caretaker, Harry's employee wound up moving to Florida in early October. She left Harry's firm and he wished her well.

She was his last direct contact with Sal.

After Sal's house was finished, there was no valid professional reason to have contact with Sal Sorentino again. Harry was still very close with Marla and Roger, and Roger was still friendly with Sal, but Harry made it clear to both Marla and Roger that he'd rather not see Sal socially anymore. They respected his wishes without asking too many questions.

Of course Marla wanted to know more. They went to lunch the week after Harry had left Sal's house for the last time and she was curious about what had happened

between them. Harry smiled and said, "It started to get too emotional, is all. Sal wants to get back with Braden. He's obsessed with this guy. I need to move on with my life."

Marla didn't ask any more questions. She reached for his hand, squeezed it, and said, "I understand." Then she changed the subject.

She didn't mention Sal again until the middle of November. Harry was packing for a trip to his West Coast showroom and Marla stopped by his place to say goodbye. While he was deciding on whether or not to bring his black suit, she sat down on the edge of his bed and said, "Roger told me some interesting news last night at diner. Braden and Sal are finished."

Harry looked up at her and tilted his head. "What did you say?"

She shrugged. "Roger told me that Braden and Sal are finished. Supposedly, they took a trip up to Provincetown. It was supposed to be a romantic fall getaway for just the two of them, and then Sal caught Braden having sex with another couple. Sal was taking a nap in the bed-and-breakfast where they were staying. He woke up early and went outside and found Braden in a hot tub with two other guys. So, according to Roger, Sal is finished. He's not going to try to reconcile with him again. And Sal's absolutely devastated."

Harry continued to pack. He lifted a white polo shirt, rolled it into a neat long tube and placed it in his suitcase. He didn't even look up at her. "That's a shame. I'm sure Sal *is* upset."

Marla stared down at her lap for a moment, then she looked at him and said, "You don't seem too interested. I thought maybe there might still be a chance for you and Sal to get together now that Braden is out of the picture."

Harry was holding a red T-shirt. He dropped it on the floor, then shook his head at Marla. “What am I supposed to say? That I’m relieved that Sal and Braden broke up and that I’m now willing to run back to Sal?” He shook his head again and frowned. “Sal and Braden have been going around in this same circle for a long time, and I have a feeling Sal is never going to get over Braden. I don’t understand it, but I’m not going back for more, and I got tired of being second best.”

Then he smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “I can’t trust Sal, Marla. And I want more than just sex with him. I want a life. The day I left Sal’s house for good was the worst day of my life, and it took me months to get over it. I’m not going to repeat my mistakes. I’ve repeated them too many times already.”

Marla stood up and gave him a hug. “I understand,” she said. “I only told you because I love you and I thought you should know.”

“I know,” he said. “In a way, I’m glad you told me. This is the first time I’ve talked about Sal in months. And guess what? I’m okay. I’m not falling apart and my knees don’t feel weak. I think that’s progress.”

She hugged him again. “I think so, too.”

* * * *

On a Saturday afternoon in December, Harry bought the largest Douglas fir tree he could find for his terrace. He’d seen an advertisement in the newspaper about a Christmas tree farm and it looked like fun. So he drove out to this remote farm in northwestern New Jersey, cut the tree all by himself, and tied it to the roof of his Mini Cooper. Then he drove back to the city and dragged it all the way up to the top floor of The Penny Lane building alone. For some reason, the doorman wasn’t around that

afternoon. Harry held the base of the trunk with both hands and pulled it into the elevator. He walked backwards and tugged until his face turned red. His Christmas trees were large, but never this large. He usually had them delivered from a nice florist shop on Second Avenue.

When the tree was finally out on the terrace and secured in its container, Harry looked down at his hands and frowned. They were scraped and brown. They hadn't looked that bad since the time he'd reupholstered an old sofa by himself. A blister was forming between his thumb and his index finger on his left hand; there was a gash on his right palm. But he didn't stop working. He went into the house and pulled all his white Christmas lights from the back of the hall closet. Then he grabbed a small folding ladder and went back outside to hang the lights.

For some reason, it didn't feel like Christmas. He had been hoping that if he continued with his usual holiday routines, he'd get into the spirit of things.

Later that night, he sat outside next to the tree and sipped red wine. It was cold out, but there wasn't any wind and the sky was clear. The sounds of horns honking and traffic moving calmed his nerves. On the sidewalk below, he heard the bells on the front door jingle each time someone entered or exited the building. He sat all the way back in his chair and yawned. When he looked up at the little white lights on the tree, he pressed his lips together and frowned.

When the phone rang a half hour later, he sprang from his chair and went inside to answer it. He'd been expecting a call from Marla. When he looked at the caller ID and saw Sal's telephone number, he dropped the phone on the sofa and let it ring until his voice mail answered. His hands felt shaky and his heart started to beat faster. He stood

there for a few minutes, taking deep breaths and staring down at the phone, relieved that he'd had the foresight to check the caller ID first.

He waited a few minutes, then went into the bedroom and listened to his voice mail. He sat down on his bed and reached for the phone on his nightstand. He took a deep breath and pressed the message button. Sal's deep voice spoke softly: "Hey, it's me, Sal. I was just wondering how you're doing. If you want to give me a call back, you can. And if you don't, that's okay, too. Hope you're good." Then his voice stopped and the phone beeped twice.

Harry sat on the edge of the bed and listened to the message ten more times. After the tenth time, he turned the phone over and dialed the first three digits of Sal's phone number. His hands felt shaky again and his heart was racing. But he didn't finish dialing. He hesitated and dropped the phone on the bed. Then he stood up, grabbed his jacket and gloves, and went out for a walk in Gramercy Park.

When he returned from his walk, there were no new messages on his voice mail. Not even one from Marla. He took a deep breath and sighed. His hands were steady now and his heart wasn't racing anymore, so he deleted Sal's message completely and pretended Sal had never called him at all.

After that, Harry got through the holidays fairly well. He didn't go to many Christmas parties that year because he was afraid of running into Sal. They didn't have any mutual friends other than Marla and Roger, but he didn't want to take any chances. In gay circles, New York could be like a small town in the Midwest. Harry did throw his usual company party in a large restaurant for his employees, and he did spend the rest of the holidays with his family out on Long Island. And thanks to the new book he was

working on at night after work, the time passed quicker than he'd expected. He was working hard on the book. He wanted it to be more than just a book about design: he wanted it to be about an entire lifestyle that was free and simple and uncomplicated. Ironically, a good deal of the book was about how he'd transformed Sal's traditional, stuffy house into a modern, convenient living space, without losing an ounce of elegance.

On New Year's Eve, Marla called and invited him to a party at the last minute. She was worried about him spending New Year's Eve alone. It was a large event in a hotel being thrown by a friend of Roger's. Harry had already turned down all the other invitations he'd received that year, including the one from the client who'd thrown the party the previous year where he'd run into Sal.

He wasn't depressed anymore, but he wasn't in the mood to party. He stammered and hesitated with Marla, mostly because he didn't want to see Sal and he didn't want to say it out loud. He thanked her and told her he'd rather stay home and rent movies that year. Marla seemed to know why he wasn't accepting the invitation. She assured him that even though Sal had been invited to the party, he wouldn't be attending. She said Sal was heading to Las Vegas that year for New Year's Eve to play poker for charity that week. Then Marla insisted she didn't want Harry spending New Year's Eve alone. So he took a deep breath and agreed to meet her at the hotel around eleven that night. But he already knew he'd be there later, closer to midnight, so he wouldn't have to smile for too long.

Unlike New Year's Eve the year before, it was colder outside. Not blustery, but light snow had begun to fall in the middle of the afternoon and by ten o'clock that night Harry's terrace had about six inches. It rose up around the base of his Christmas tree in fluffy white drifts. It covered the branches and sparkled between the little white lights.

Marla had mentioned that it was a formal party, so he wore a black tux and his warmest black leather trenchcoat. Ten minutes before it was time to leave, he called the doorman and asked him to get a taxi. The party was in a midtown hotel and normally he would have walked, but he knew the streets would be slushy and the sidewalks would be slippery.

When the taxi pulled up to the hotel, he paid the driver and stepped out of the cab. It was already after eleven thirty and he knew he was late. He'd been hoping that once he'd arrived, he'd be in more of a party mood. But he stared up at the entrance, took a deep breath, and frowned. He almost turned around and went home, but then he saw Marla waving at him from the front door. He put his hands in his pockets and walked toward her with his lips together, pulled back in a forced smile.

Marla pushed past a few people and ran to meet him. She grabbed his hand and said, "I saw you pull up in the cab. I just got here, too. Roger went ahead of me because I couldn't figure out what to wear. He's going to kill me for being so late. At least if I come in with you, he won't be so mad."

He kissed her on the cheek and twirled an index finger around in the air. "Happy New Year," he said. He was glad he'd run into her. He hated walking into crowded rooms alone.

She put her arm through his and said, "C'mon. Let's go have some fun before they drop the ball in Times Square."

They checked their coats and crossed toward the large banquet room where the party was going in full force. Marla looked great in a silver dress with a long slit up the side and pale gray stilettos. Inside the room, there were hundreds of people talking above

a full orchestra. Some stood; others sat at large, round tables. Streamers fell from the ceiling, small lights twinkled against mirrored walls, and discarded party hats stippled the floor. One good-looking guy brushed by Harry and smiled. The guy held up a long strand of plastic silver pearls and draped them around Harry's neck. He was wearing a white dinner jacket and a pointy red party hat that read, "Here we go again," in silver glitter. He was adorable, with large blue eyes. Harry nodded and smiled at him, then followed Marla to the middle of the room to find Roger.

The orchestra began to play *Just in Time*. Marla spotted Roger at the edge of the dance floor. His back was to them; he was talking to a man with wide shoulders. The man wasn't wearing a formal. He was wearing a short leather coat and a baseball cap. Marla tugged on Roger's shoulder and said, "Look who I found out front."

Roger turned around and smiled. "And look who I found in here?"

The man in the baseball cap next to Roger turned around.

Sal.

He was wearing jeans and a white dress shirt. He hadn't shaved that day and his beard was heavy. He looked into Harry's eyes, smiled, and said, "Hey."

Harry froze. He couldn't move his feet or his hands. His heart started to race and his stomach jumped. He took a deep breath and said, "Marla told me you were going to be in Vegas tonight." He tilted his head and gave Marla a look.

Marla shook her head. "He *was* supposed to be in Vegas, as far as I knew."

Sal smiled shrugged his shoulders. "The flight was canceled because of the weather," he said. "So here I am. I guess I should have worn a formal." His face was calm and he continued to look into Harry's eyes.

Normally, this would have been Harry's cue to say, "Naw, you look fine." But he didn't say anything. Harry grabbed Marla's hand and gave her another look. He smiled at everyone else and said, "I forgot my wallet in my coat. I'll be right back."

And before anyone had a chance to stop him, he turned around and made his way through the crowd. His wallet was in his back pocket; he hadn't left it in his coat. He'd get his coat, leave the hotel, and head to his apartment while he still had a chance to make a fast getaway. He knew that Marla would understand, but he'd explain it to her in the morning.

But when Harry reached the entrance to the banquet room, someone grabbed his arm and pulled him hard. When he turned around, Sal was standing there. Harry jerked his arm free from Sal's grip. Then he looked him in the eye and said, "I'm going home." His hands went up and he shook his head. "If I'd known you were going to be here, I wouldn't have come."

Sal reached for his arm again. "Wait," he said. "Don't go. I came tonight because I was hoping you'd be here. I love you." It came without warning. He reached for the silver pearls around Harry's neck with his other hand and held them in his palm.

The orchestra began to play *Auld Lang Syne* and the people around them began counting back from ten. Sal looked Harry in the eye and put his hand on Harry's waist. Harry tried to step back, but Sal had a firm grip on his jacket. "Don't do this to me, Sal," Harry said. "You know I've never been able to say no to you. I can say no to everyone else, but never to you. Just let me go. I don't want to get hurt again." A single tear formed at the corner of Harry's right eye and trickled down his cheek. He didn't bother to wipe it away.

Sal lifted his arm and pressed his palm to Harry's cheek. He wiped the tear away with the tip of his thumb. Then he smiled and said, "My flight wasn't canceled. It was delayed. I went to the airport tonight and never got on the plane. I raced back to the city, ran through town, and came right here, praying that I'd find you."

Harry's face softened and his lips parted. Though Sal wasn't wearing a tux, he looked better than any other man in the room. "What about Braden?" Harry asked. "Are you here because Braden isn't interested in reconciling with you? I don't want to be second best anymore. I want a future and I want more than just sex with you, Sal."

Sal smiled. "I'm here because I love *you*. I love the way you never stop talking, I love the way you know how to handle Dolly, and most of all I love that you're satisfied to be with just me and no one else."

Everyone in the room shouted, "Happy New Year!" and started hugging and kissing and cheering. The orchestra went into a faster, louder version of *Auld Lang Syne* and millions of multicolored streamers fell from the ceiling. Some landed on Harry's shoulders; a few landed on Sal's black cap. Sal put his arms around Harry and pulled him closer. He whispered, "I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you. I'll do anything. I'll give up my home, my money, and my career. I don't care what it takes to win you back. This time I'm not letting you go."

Harry lifted his head higher and tilted it to the side. Their faces were inches apart. "You don't have to give anything up, Sal. I already love you. I think always have, and I know always will." Then he put his arms around Sal's wide shoulders, closed his eyes as tightly as he could, and kissed him.

When Harry's lips touched Sal's, he felt as if he'd gone deaf. The orchestra stopped playing, the crowd stopped roaring, and Harry was twenty-one years old again. He was standing next to his Mini Cooper on the Stanford campus in California, staring at a tall young man in faded, baggy jeans and a tight black T-shirt. The young man's short hair was dark and his body was long and lanky. It was a warm day in June and the front doors of the Fire Truck House were wide open. The young man was Sal. He was holding a suitcase and he was smiling at Harry.

THE END

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