

ELLORA'S CAVE *Spectrum*



Hide Out

Katie Allen

When Officer Peter Giordano is assigned to keep Trevor Haas safe until he can testify against his murderous father, he expects the hardest part of his job will be keeping his hands off the gorgeous witness. The two men hide out in the small, sleepy town of Honeysuckle, fixing up their dilapidated safe house by day...exploring each other's bodies by night.

Their small-town neighbors have some secrets of their own, however, including one that someone is willing to kill to protect. Soon, a neighbor is dead and Pete and Trevor are thrown into the middle of a murder investigation. The two men struggle to keep Trevor's true identity a secret, knowing his father will stop at nothing to silence the star witness against him—even if that means killing his own son.

Note: Pete and Trevor won't have to go it alone. Wash and Rhodes, the crush-worthy heroes from Private Dicks, are along for the ride once again.

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Hide Out

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Chapter One

Officer Peter Giordano stared at his lieutenant's office door. The blinds had been rolled tight, hiding the view within, and that made Pete's stomach clamp in on itself. He deserved this reprimand, deserved it for being stupid. He should have known better than to let down his guard but the new guy had been so open and friendly, and it had been such a relief to tease and laugh as if he was just one of the guys.

Someone must have filled the newbie in right quick. When Pete had come on shift today, the new guy hadn't even looked up. Instead, he'd flinched away from Pete's friendly bump on the shoulder and hurried out, almost running.

And now Lee wanted to see him. This was going to be humiliating at best and, at worst... Blowing out a short, hard breath, he forced his fist to knock.

"Come in!" Lieutenant Lee barked. Closing his eyes for a second, Pete took another bracing breath before twisting the knob and stepping into his superior's office. He stopped just inside the door, startled to see three other people already standing in the room with Lee.

"You wanted to see me, ma'am?" Pete's quick glance took in the two detectives and stalled on the man slouching between them, his hands jammed into the front pockets of his jeans and his mouth twisted sulkily. His gaze caught on that full bottom lip for a fragment of a second before Pete forced his eyes back on his lieutenant.

"Officer Giordano," Lee greeted. "Come in and shut the door behind you."

Pete obeyed as his brain tried to switch gears. This didn't look like a sexual harassment reprimand. This looked like... Actually, he had no idea what this looked like.

"Have a seat," the lieutenant offered.

"I'll stand." Pete glanced at the other three again before looking back at Lee. "Thanks," he tagged on belatedly.

Lee shrugged. "You know detectives McDonald and Salas, don't you?"

With a slow nod, Pete said, "Homicide, right?"

"Right," McDonald confirmed. "You found that witness in the Curtis Park stabbing — nice work."

"Thanks." Pete accepted the compliment warily. He still wasn't sure what was going on. Salas gave him a nod. She was small and serious, and had a habit of speaking as if each word were of utmost importance. From what he'd seen of Salas' police work, Pete thought she was a good detective, although he did wonder if it was hard to be so *earnest* all the time.

McDonald was burly and balding. The hair that remained was wild and his clothes always looked unkempt, but he was straightforward and smart. Pete hadn't had much contact with McDonald but the little he knew, he respected.

"The detectives have asked for our help," Lee began. "Before they explain the situation, I need your assurance everything said in this room will remain confidential."

Pete almost laughed. Whom would he tell? "Of course."

"Good." Lee held his gaze. "The detectives requested my most discreet officer and you immediately came to mind. Due to the...unorthodox situation, you may opt out if you don't feel comfortable accepting the assignment."

Despite trying to keep his face expressionless, Pete felt his eyebrows shoot up. Lee's orders were always just that—orders. "Opting out" had never been an option before. What kind of dangerous shit was this?

"However," the lieutenant continued, "your cooperation will definitely be a consideration when you come up for advancement."

Pete's eyebrows came back down and he swallowed back a smirk. *There* was the Lee he knew—big words, carrot, stick and all. Hiding his amusement, Pete just nodded.

"Have you heard of Harold Haas?" McDonald asked.

A little surprised at the sudden change of subject, Pete asked, "Big Hal Haas? Has a bunch of those organic food stores he does the dumbass commercials for?"

The stranger between the two detectives shifted, drawing Pete's attention. The man was staring at the wall over Lee's shoulder, his sulky mouth curled up in a sardonic smile.

Christ, he's hot, Pete thought, before catching himself and looking back at McDonald, who was nodding.

"That's him," the detective confirmed. "He also dabbles in some land development, as well as drugs, money laundering and knocking off any poor asshole who gets in his way."

Pete blinked, absorbing the information.

"This," Salas tipped her head, indicating the surly stranger next to her, "is Trevor Haas, Harold's son."

"Courtland," Trevor snapped.

McDonald grimaced. "Yeah, Trevor Courtland now. Changed his name. Took us almost ten months to find him again."

Jamming his hands into his jeans pockets, Trevor hunched and scowled. "Seemed better to hide than, you know, *die*," he muttered at the floor.

"Die?" Pete asked. "Who was after you?"

Trevor looked up, his eyes narrow and so, so blue. Pete swallowed. "Dear ol' Dad," Trevor said with a humorless curve of his lips.

"He has threatened Mr. Haas'—I mean, Mr. Courtland's life," Salas explained.

Ouch. That was rough. Pete stole a quick glance at Trevor. If his own father was trying to kill him, it was no wonder Trevor was a little surly.

"Sonny here's our witness," McDonald said, jerking a thumb at Trevor. "We've been after Haas for years. Just got an indictment from a Grand Jury yesterday, thanks to his testimony."

Salas nodded. "The trial will be in seven months, unless there are any delays."

"Doubt I'll be alive to see it," Trevor muttered.

Salas' lips tightened and McDonald, his face reddening, looked at Trevor sideways. The detective's fists opened and closed, as if he were resisting the urge to smack the younger man.

"Unfortunately," McDonald said, sounding as if he were talking with gritted teeth, "Haas made bail. I tried to explain it'd put our witness in danger but the judge offered it anyway."

Meeting Pete's eyes, Trevor elaborated, "Same as last time when these assholes almost got me killed."

One of Pete's eyebrows shot up.

"We put Mr. Courtland into protective custody," Salas explained tightly. "However, we were unaware one of the officers assigned to protect Mr. Courtland..."

"Had his hand in Dad's pocket?" Trevor suggested when Salas paused.

McDonald grunted an assent. "The asshole gave Courtland's location to Haas. Let him in the fucking motel room door."

Looking back and forth between Trevor and McDonald, Pete asked, "So what happened? Since you're obviously not...you know."

"Dead?" Trevor offered with a smirk. "I climbed out the bathroom window."

"Yeah," McDonald growled. "Then you disappeared."

Trevor shrugged. "What d'you expect? Couldn't trust anyone else to keep me safe so I took care of it myself."

The lieutenant cleared her throat. "These recriminations aren't helping the problem at hand. Why don't you explain to Officer Giordano what his part in this would be?"

"Of course, Lieutenant." Salas turned to Pete. "What we need, Officer, is a trustworthy cop, someone who can provide security for Mr. Courtland and not reveal his location to anyone."

Shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot, Pete summarized, "So you need a babysitter."

McDonald gave a crack of laughter. "Pretty much."

"Fuck off." Trevor was scowling at Pete. "I told you, I can take care of myself a hell of a lot better than the shit job these morons managed."

"Watch yourself," McDonald ordered, his smile dropping away. He gave Trevor a stern glare. "What good'll it do if you disappear again?"

Trevor shrugged. "Staying alive is good."

"And not testify?" McDonald scowled when the other man shrugged again, this time with less certainty. "You gonna run away from your dad all your life then? Why not just give up a few months of your life and get this done? Then you'll be free."

Although he didn't answer, Trevor's scowl had lightened a little.

McDonald looked at Pete. "What d'you say, Giordano? He can sleep on my couch for a couple days while you get your shit in order, then you can take him and go wherever. It'd be a cream job—seven months of nanny duty and the possibility of getting your shield at the end of it."

"Maybe *you* should be the one watching it, Detective McDonald," Lee warned. "That is not a promise you can keep." Turning to Pete, she added, "It will, however, be a consideration—a *strong* consideration in your future advancement."

Trying to keep his face expressionless, Pete thought fast. This sounded perfect. Boring, sure, but this assignment would give him a break from the sideways glances and the jokes edged with anger and hate. It'd be seven months during which he could still be a cop without all the bullshit.

He kept his eyes on his lieutenant, refusing to look at Trevor. Pete was a professional. The fact that the witness he'd be protecting was an angel-faced, muscle-bound, all-too-fuckable wet dream of a man should not have any bearing on his decision.

"I'd like to accept the assignment," he told Lee.

She nodded, a small smile peeking out. "I thought you'd come through."

McDonald was grinning and Salas gave him an approving nod. When Pete allowed his eyes to focus on Trevor, he saw the man was glaring at him, the only one in the room who wasn't pleased—at all.

* * * * *

"Where the fuck are we going?" Trevor couldn't stand it any longer. He and his guard dog had been driving in silence for hours. He'd sworn not to break, to make the square-jawed Boy Scout next to him talk first, but if Trevor saw one more cornfield or cow or piece-of-shit barn, he was going to go nuts.

"We're almost there." The cop didn't even glance at him.

The rage that had been simmering for the past two weeks, ever since the detectives had shown up at his work, heated up a few degrees. "I didn't ask *when*, asshole," he said slowly and clearly. "I asked *where*."

Now the cop did glance at him. "Our new home for the next seven months," he non-answered, the corner of his mouth quirking up as he refocused on the road ahead. If the guy hadn't been driving, Trevor would've punched him. Instead, he slouched lower in his seat and stared out the window.

Clearing his throat, the cop broke the silence. "We should probably get our cover stories straight."

Trevor snorted. "Good luck trying to be anything other than a cop with a stick up his ass." When the man's face reddened a little beneath his tan, guilt tugged at Trevor and he frowned, staring out the window. It wasn't this guy's fault Trevor had a homicidal asshole for a father or McDonald and Salas were a couple pit bulls when it came to tracking down their missing star witness. "Sorry," Trevor muttered. "What's the fucking plan then?"

"I th-thought..." The cop paused and Trevor looked at him. His jaw muscles jumped as he stared straight ahead. When he spoke again, the words were distinct, with no hint of a stutter. "We can say we're from Cleveland. No one really knows or cares a lot about Cleveland. I lived there for six months though, so I know enough about it in case someone pushes for details."

"Sure, Cleveland's fine. It rocks, in fact." Trevor sent a sideways glance toward the other man. Although he didn't smile, the cop did seem to relax a little. "Why'd we leave the wonderful city that is Cleveland?"

Now he did smile. "I was a financial advisor until I burned out. We're moving to get a fresh start, so I can figure out what I want to do."

"Huh." Trevor digested that. "So what do I do?"

The cop shrugged. "You get to pick. Something from home would be easiest. Writer, artist, photographer...take your pick. You might want to choose something you know a little bit about though. Those kinds of careers, people like to ask questions."

Trevor thought for a second. "Graffiti artist," he announced.

"Perfect." The cop smiled. "Very trendy."

"So," Trevor said. "We the fucking odd couple or what?"

The cop sent him a puzzled glance. "What?"

With an impatient sigh, Trevor clarified, "Why are we, two manly men, living together?"

The red crept back into the cop's cheeks. "W-we're, um..."

Trevor wanted to laugh. "We're pretending to be gay? A couple?"

"Yeah." The cop shot him an uncertain glance. "You okay with that? We could pretend to be brothers or roommates, I guess."

"Everyone'll just assume we're gay anyway," Trevor said. "Might as well be out."

"Right."

Silence fell over the pickup. Trevor was fighting to hold back laughter. He hadn't been looking forward to this. In fact, out of the whole shitty past four years, he'd figured the next seven months until the trial would be the worst. Now, however, he was starting to think this might not be so bad.

He snuck another peek of the cop's severe profile and hid a grin. Not bad at all.

After a few minutes, his amusement faded and boredom crept back in.

"Doesn't anyone believe in paint around here?" he muttered. They'd just passed yet another barn that had been battered by years and bad weather, leaving the gray boards exposed except for the odd patch of peeling red paint.

The cop snorted but otherwise didn't respond.

Trevor stole a glance at him, hating the way his pulse accelerated at the hard lines of the cop's face. Everything was hard about the guy – mouth, body, even the abrupt angles of his short haircut. The only softness was the silky gray of his eyes, bordered by thick, dark sweeps of lashes. Ripping his gaze away, he focused on yet another fucking cornfield.

"We're not going to be living on a fucking farm, are we?" He knew he sounded sulky but Trevor didn't care.

Shaking his head, the cop slowed down, pointing out the windshield. "We're living here."

Leaning forward, Trevor followed the path of his finger to the painted sign welcoming them to...

"Honeysuckle?" There was no way. "I'm going to be living in a town called Honey-fucking-suckle?"

The cop grinned. "We're going to be living in Honey-fucking-suckle."

Falling back against the seat, Trevor closed his eyes. "Fuck me," he sighed.

I wish. Pete clamped down on the thought. He had to stay focused, stay professional, or there was no way he was getting through the next seven months.

"C'mon, man," Trevor groaned. "Think of all the great cities out there – Portland, Denver, Austin, Chicago – fuck, I'd even pick fucking Montreal over this small-town bullshit."

"That's the point," Pete told him mildly, glancing at the map displayed above his radio. He'd turned the navigation system's voice commands off hours ago. He couldn't stand the automated chick bitching at him when he had to detour off the directed route to find food or a rest stop.

"What's the point? You want me to be miserable?"

Pete saw Second Street up ahead and slowed to make a left turn. "You prefer cities. Think your father doesn't know that?" He waited for what appeared to be the only other moving vehicle in town to slowly pass them, heading in the opposite direction. "Making you miserable is just a bonus."

Trevor grunted. "What's my name?" he asked out of the blue.

"You forget?" Pete turned again onto Mason Street.

"No dumbass, my *undercover* name." Trevor sighed with exaggerated patience. "My graffiti-painting, one-half-of-a-token-gay-couple-in-Honey-fucking-suckle name."

"Right. How about your middle name?" Pete suggested.

Shaking his head, Trevor told him, "Wouldn't work—it's Harold."

"Oh."

"Exactly."

"What name would you like?" Pete asked. "I don't care, as long as it's not too unusual."

"Patrick?" Trevor suggested with an innocent look.

"No, we're not going to be Pete and Pat."

"Fine," Trevor said and then frowned. "Why do you get to keep your name?"

"I'm not the one testifying," Pete said. "The official story is I'm taking an unpaid leave of absence. The lieutenant and your detectives are the only ones who know I'm with you. They're trying to minimize the number of people who know where you are or who you're with."

"They're not *my* detectives," Trevor growled. "Things were going just fine until they walked in."

"Except for always having to look over your shoulder, afraid someone's trying to kill you," Pete said mildly. "So, name?"

"Randy Lance?" Trevor suggested with a wicked curl of his lips. "Dick Long?"

"If you want to get sued by a porn star for trademark infringement, go right ahead." The minute the words escaped, Pete wanted them back. Now Trevor would be wondering how he knew two relatively obscure gay porn stars.

Pete frowned. Now that he thought about it, how did *Trevor* know these two relatively obscure gay porn stars?

"Fine," Trevor conceded, apparently oblivious to Pete's internal panic. "How's Joe sound? Non-porny enough for your conservative, financial-advising ass?"

"Perfect," Pete agreed with more enthusiasm than the name warranted. "How about a last name now? How'd you pick Courtland?"

"After bolting out of that supposed 'safe' house, I hid in the back of a truck carrying a load of Courtland coffee." Trevor looked as if his mind was far away for a moment. Refocusing on Pete, he shrugged. "How about Richard Joseph Long—please call me Joey?"

Pete sighed. Obviously, Trevor was determined to be Dick Long. "Nice to meet you, Joey the graffiti artist. I'm your loving partner, ex-financial advisor Pete Giordano." He swung into a cracked and crumbling driveway and parked. "Welcome home."

Craning his neck to see the house in front of them, Trevor closed his eyes as if he were in pain. "You've got to be shitting me."

"W-what?" Clamping his lips together, Pete gave his head a short shake. What was up with the stuttering? He'd had a rough time with it when he was a kid, occasionally

getting so bad he'd been completely stuck, frozen, unable to get a word out. It'd taken years and numerous fights before he'd lost the original nickname of "retard".

Since junior high, he'd been pretty much stutter-free, although it snuck out on rare occasions under stress. Three times in an hour, though—that was unacceptable. He glanced at Trevor's incredulous face as the other man examined the house. Pete knew why he couldn't talk right. The reason was sitting right next to him. He also knew he needed to get over this insane crush right away.

"This place is about to fall down, that's what," Trevor told him, opening his door and climbing out.

Pete turned the car off and got out. "It's structurally sound," he corrected. He could hear the tightness in his own voice.

Trevor looked at him, disbelief covering his face. "Is this heap yours?"

Bending to pull two suitcases out of the back of the truck, Pete welcomed the chance to hide his expression. "Yeah. That's the other reason I need to keep my name. The real estate agent knows it already."

"Why the hell do you own a shithole in Honey-fucking-suckle?"

"It's not a shithole," Pete snapped before attempting to rein in his defensiveness. "We need to live somewhere. Might as well use this time to fix it up and then resell it when we leave."

Trevor started to laugh. His offense dropping away, Pete could only stare at the way laughter transformed Trevor's face, from sulky model to someone...irresistible.

"You're flipping the house," Trevor choked out, wiping tears of mirth from his eyes. "We're a gay couple from Cleveland and we're flipping a house."

Tearing his eyes away from the beautiful man in front of him, Pete hauled the suitcases up the front walk to the uneven front porch steps.

"If we're going to be this kind of cliché," Trevor said from behind him, "does this mean we have to get a Shih-Tzu?" He laughed even harder.

Pete ignored him, dropping the suitcases on the porch so he could dig the key from his pocket. One of the suitcases didn't stop at the porch but broke through and fell to the earth below, leaving a jagged hole in the wooden porch floor. After a second of startled silence, Trevor burst out laughing again.

With a sigh, Pete pulled the screen door open with a squeal of hinges. Yanking the key from his pocket, he inserted it into the lock. It was reluctant to turn, scraping against itself as it finally gave way. Pete turned back toward Trevor. "Watch your step," he cautioned, gesturing at the porch. "Think some of the wood's rotten." Pushing open the door, he stepped into his new house, letting the screen bang shut behind him.

"Thanks," Trevor yelled, breathless from laughter. "I'd kind of figured that out."

Pete ignored him yet again, looking around. It *was* a shithole. He knew that. Despite that, something about the place beckoned to him. He'd found it on a real estate internet site one night when he was longing for a place without shared walls. As the couple in

the apartment next to his screamed insults at each other, Pete had stumbled onto a listing for this house.

He'd kept going back to it for weeks. It didn't make sense—it was too far for him to commute to work and it was, as Trevor had again informed him, a shithole—but he'd bookmarked the listing and looked at it again and again.

The house drew Pete. Even as he told himself it was a crazy idea, he'd been calling the real estate agent. He'd signed the papers to make the house his just a week before he was called into the lieutenant's office. Now, turning a circle inside his new home, Pete looked at the stairs stretching up in front of him. It didn't feel crazy. It felt right.

A crash made him whip around and lunge for the screen door. Trevor sprawled amongst broken boards on the ground where another section of porch floor had once been.

"You okay?" Pete asked him urgently, stepping carefully onto part of the remaining porch, testing his footing before allowing all his weight to rest on it.

Trevor got to his feet, brushing off dirt and bits of wood. "Yeah," he said, sounding a little sheepish. "Thought I'd get the suitcase that fell." He grabbed the bag by his feet and offered it up to Pete. "Here."

Although his heart was still racing, Pete had to grin. "Thanks." He accepted the suitcase and set it by the door where he knew the floor was sound. "Want a hand?"

"Sure." Trevor took his outstretched hand and stepped out of the hole onto the remaining porch floor. Pete grabbed Trevor's other arm to steady him as he found his balance.

"Good?" Pete asked. When Trevor nodded, Pete meant to step back—he really did. Instead, he froze when he realized how close they were standing. Trevor's arm flexed beneath Pete's grip.

Biting his bottom lip, Trevor tipped his head closer to Pete's. "Think we should let the neighbors know we're a couple?" he murmured.

"What?" Pete looked around. They were being watched. An elderly couple walked slowly on the sidewalk in front of Pete's house and a middle-aged man mowed the lawn across the street with his eyes fixed on Pete and Trevor. There was also a young woman pretending to trim her hedges next door, although her clippers just closed on air as she stared at the drama on the porch.

"Want to give them a show?" Trevor asked, leaning even closer.

Pete froze.

"It'll save having to make explanations over and over..." By the time his words trailed off, Trevor's mouth was almost touching Pete's, his breath brushing his lips.

He knew. Somehow, Trevor knew. *And he's mocking me.*

Pete saw red. He stiffened and spun Trevor around, slamming him up against the house. Trevor's eyes went huge as he stared at Pete, who leaned in as close as Trevor had been to him just a second before.

"Listen to me," Pete clipped out, his voice quiet and as hard as ice. "I am here to do a job. I will keep you safe but you will *not* fuck with me. You got it?" When Trevor just stared at him and swallowed, Pete gave him a small shake. "Got it?"

"Yeah," Trevor muttered, dropping his gaze.

"Good." Pete released him and stepped back, watching as Trevor grabbed his suitcase and yanked open the screen door. He disappeared into the house, easing the door closed behind him so it didn't slam. It just closed with a small click.

Pete stared at the door for a long time, both guilt and anger burning in his gut.

Chapter Two

Shit! Trevor blew out a breath, leaning against the wall of one of the upstairs bedrooms. His heart was beating fast and hard, and it wasn't because he was scared. He was pissed off but not at Pete. He was mad at himself for being so turned-on.

With a quiet groan, he covered his eyes with his hand. The Boy Scout was mouth-watering when he was all quiet and mild-mannered, but that show of force had weakened Trevor's knees and turned his brain to mush. He knew he was in trouble the minute his bodyguard-to-be stepped into the lieutenant's office, six-plus feet of square-jawed, tight-assed, uniformed cop.

Trevor dropped his hand and walked to the window, staring out into the backyard where a sprawling tree reached its branches toward him. He'd always been a sucker for cops, especially big, muscle-bound cops who could shove him up against a wall and make him behave.

Gotta stop thinking about this, he told himself, adjusting his fly. Just the image of Pete manhandling him was enough to make his cock begin to swell.

"Trevor."

He whipped around, jerking his hand away from his crotch. Pete was standing in the doorway holding a rolled sleeping bag. Shoving his hands in his pockets, Trevor plastered a disinterested look on his face.

Pete's jaw muscles worked for a few seconds of silence. "Listen," he finally said. "I shouldn't have..." He paused and started again. "I know you're in a shitty situation and the condition of this place doesn't help. I probably should've rented somewhere furnished. I just," he ran a hand down the trim around the doorframe, "really like this house."

Fuck. Trevor had to close his eyes for a moment, the tender slide of the other man's hand across the wood and that caressing note in his voice slipping beneath Trevor's skin and making him shiver. *Fuck*, he thought again. *After just a few hours, this guy has me in pieces*.

Forcing his eyes open, Trevor managed a shrug as he cleared his throat. "It's okay," he muttered, glancing around the room. Looking at Pete was too dangerous for his peace of mind. "It's a shithole but it's kind of a cool shithole. Better than the cardboard look-alike crap they build now." He couldn't help it—his eyes flashed to Pete's. Trevor instantly regretted it. The way Pete's face lit up made his lungs contract.

"It really is," Pete enthused, taking a few steps into the room. "And it *is* solid—well, except for the deathtrap of a porch. A bunch of those boards'll have to be replaced. Hopefully the floor joists aren't rotting."

"You could keep the porch like it is," Trevor suggested, feeling a smile tug on the corners of his mouth. Pete's excitement was contagious. "Get rid of a few unwanted visitors."

Pete laughed. "Put a few crocodiles under there and we could finish them off for good."

With a snort, Trevor told him, "If you're going to do that, might as well just dig a fucking moat."

"Hmm..." Pete tipped his head to the side as if considering the idea. "We could stock it with trout. Have our own fishing moat."

Trevor shook his head, smiling. "Is that for me?" he asked, nodding at the sleeping bag.

Pete looked down as if he'd forgotten he was holding it. "Right," he said, offering it to Trevor. "We'll go shopping for furniture eventually but this'll have to do for now."

"That's fine." Trevor accepted the sleeping bag. "Thanks," he added belatedly. "Shopping? Why not just load up all your furniture and drag it down here?"

"No one except McDonald and Salas knows you're with me," Pete explained, "but I still didn't want to make anyone curious—or give them a big-ass moving truck to follow. Besides, most of my furniture is crap."

"Oh." Tossing the sleeping bag to the floor, Trevor shifted his weight, still not comfortable meeting the other man's eyes.

"Hungry?"

That brought Trevor's head up. "Fuck yeah."

With a grin, Pete shifted back and gestured at the doorway. "Let's go then."

Pete wasn't trying to watch Trevor's ass as they descended the stairs but his gaze just kept returning to the tight, jean-clad cheeks in front of him.

"Shit," Trevor muttered as they reached the bottom and Pete jerked his head up guiltily. "I should've helped unload the pickup."

"Nah," Pete said after clearing his throat. "It was just a few boxes." He slanted a teasing look toward Trevor. "You want to help? You can unpack them."

Trevor gave him a sideways smile. "You bring food?"

Shaking his head, Pete said, "Thought we could go out, check out the town."

"Check out the town?" Trevor mocked. "Woo. That'll take five minutes."

"Smartass." Raising a hand, Pete gently smacked the back of the other man's head.

"Watch it," Trevor growled, although a smile touched his lips.

* * * * *

They quickly discovered they had two choices—a local diner or a fast-food chain.

"Should we take a risk and eat at Mallory's?" Pete suggested.

"Sure, wherever." Trevor shrugged. "Let's just eat some food before I start eating my own fist."

Although a comeback hung on his tongue about exactly what body part of Trevor's he would like to eat, Pete swallowed it back. If he didn't allow Trevor to mess around, Pete shouldn't get to either. Swinging the truck into a space, he shoved the gearshift into park with more emphasis than it really needed.

He was reaching for his door handle when Trevor stopped him.

"Wait," Trevor said, his teeth worrying his bottom lip again.

"Yeah?" Pete's voice was gruffer than he'd intended. It was just the sight of Trevor's full mouth, the way the tip of his tongue touched the temporary indentations left in his lip by his teeth... Restraining a groan, Pete forced his gaze to Trevor's eyes.

"What are we...?" Breaking off, Trevor dipped his head.

"Go ahead," Pete told him.

"How...um, how should I *act*?"

"Act?"

"With you," Trevor elaborated. "When I tried, you know, getting into character before, you weren't too happy. I guess I'm wondering *how* you want me to pretend I'm your boyfriend."

"Oh." Pete blinked. He seriously had no idea. He'd never had an actual live-in boyfriend before. "Figured you were fucking with me before."

Dropping his eyes to the side, Trevor admitted, "Yeah, guess I kinda was. Not to be mean or anything though. Just...teasing."

Another wash of guilt flowed over Pete. He'd been so quick to assume Trevor knew, that he was all but calling Pete queer right to his face, when all Trevor had intended was to joke around.

"So...?" Trevor prompted, bringing Pete back to the conversation.

"How should I know?" Pete asked testily. He hated feeling guilty.

Trevor rolled his eyes. "You went to cop school—weren't there some kind of undercover acting lessons or something?"

"Undercover acting lessons?" Pete stared at him.

"I don't know!" Now Trevor was the one who sounded annoyed. "Just tell me what to do and I'll do it."

I bet you would. Pete felt his skin flush with desire. "Fine," he snapped, trying to cover. "Just take your cues from me." Yanking the door open, he climbed out onto shaking legs and strode to the front of the pickup.

Pete stopped and waited for Trevor, who approached warily.

"Don't worry," Pete told him. "We're not going to make out or anything. This is a small town. Just...act like we're friends."

Trevor looked at him, his expression serious. "I can do that."

"Good." Pete headed toward the door.

A bell jangled as they entered. Pete stopped just inside the door to look around. The diner was worn around the edges but clean and cheery. The day's special—beef brisket—was handwritten on a whiteboard propped on an easel. Three older men were clustered around a table with coffee and plates of half-eaten pieces of pie in front of them. A young couple sat a few tables down and a dark-haired waitress was clearing their dishes.

Everyone was staring at them. Even the young cook peered out from the kitchen, her eyes wide and curious. Pete moved toward an empty table at the back, glancing behind him to make sure Trevor was following. He needn't have worried—if Trevor had been any closer, he would've been plastered against Pete's back.

Trevor was scowling as fiercely as the first time Pete had seen him in the lieutenant's office. The silence from the customers made the piped-in music seem uncomfortably loud as they made their way through the diner. Pete sat with his back to the far wall, where he had a view of the entire place.

Glancing at Trevor, Pete said, "Sit down."

Trevor still hesitated, glancing at the chair next to Pete before dropping into the one opposite him. Low-voiced conversations started up at the other two tables.

"I hate small towns," Trevor muttered, barely loud enough for Pete to hear him.

With a grimace of sympathy, Pete reached over and squeezed Trevor's forearm. "They'll get used to us," he said as he sat back in his chair, not allowing his fingers to linger.

Trevor gave a disbelieving grunt and slouched down in his chair. The move shoved his feet farther under the table until one bumped into Pete's.

"Good morning!" the waitress greeted them cheerily. "Did you gentlemen need a menu or will you be having the brisket today?"

"Brisket, please," Pete requested.

"Brisket," Trevor ordered as well and Pete nudged the other man's foot with his own. "Please," Trevor added, giving Pete a mocking look.

"Good choice." The waitress nodded. "Good thing you got in here early. Once the Saturday lunch crowd hits, the special sells out like *that*." She snapped her fingers.

"Good thing then," Pete responded politely as Trevor's expression grew even more morose.

As the waitress headed back toward the other couple's table, Trevor sighed heavily. "We could be in San Diego right now. Or New York. Or Atlanta. Anywhere except Honey-fucking-suckle."

"But then we wouldn't be getting brisket," Pete told him, his mouth quirking up at the corners.

Trevor groaned. "Brisket. Yay. The girl in the kitchen looked about twelve. Think she knows how to cook?"

With a shrug, Pete said, "Dunno. We'll find out, I guess."

"Yeah." Trevor played with his napkin-wrapped silverware, a sulky twist to his mouth. Pete tried not to fixate on that full bottom lip.

"So what'd you do?" Pete finally asked out of desperation, needing some distraction from Trevor's mouth.

"What?"

"Before McDonald and Salas ran you down. What'd you do?"

Trevor glanced around. "Should we be talking about this?"

"No one can hear," Pete told him with a shrug. "Why not?"

Although he didn't look convinced, Trevor eventually answered, "I was working for a couple of P.I.s. Before that, I was a bouncer."

Pete nodded. "How did they find you?"

Grimacing, Trevor said, "It was so stupid. My prints were on a crime scene—one I helped solve—and the cops took mine to rule me out. When they ran the prints, McDonald and Salas came running."

"Yeah?" Pete leaned forward, interested. "What crime?"

"The owner of the club where I worked as a bouncer was selling kids out of the basement. The two guys investigating asked me to help." Although he tried for nonchalance, Trevor's eyes lit with excitement.

"Those two guys are the ones you work for now?" Pete asked.

"Yeah." His excitement dimmed a little. "*Worked* for, probably. We'll see if I can get the job back after the trial." Trevor stared down at his hands, flat on the table. "If I live that long."

"Hey! Don't be an idiot." Pete covered one of Trevor's hands with his. "You'll live. I promise."

His head down, Trevor turned his hand over so they were palm to palm. "Sure you're up to it?" he asked quietly. "Daddy dearest is a real asshole."

"I'm a bigger asshole," Pete growled, making Trevor laugh.

"Here's a couple glasses of— Oh!" The waitress paused, a water glass held in midair and her gaze fixed on the men's hands. Trevor yanked his away, scowling. With a shake of her head, the waitress put the water in front of Pete and reached for the second glass on her tray.

"Of course," she exclaimed, sounding just as cheerful as before. "You two must be the ones who bought the old Cooper place on Mason Street!"

Nodding, Pete extended his hand. "Pete Giordano. This," he waved toward Trevor, "is Joey. Joey Long."

The waitress shook Pete's hand, beaming. "Cindy Cord. That's my daughter, Tina." She pointed at the cook, who was still stealing glances at them from the kitchen. When Tina saw all three looking at her, she turned crimson and gave an awkward wave before focusing intently on the food.

"Oh she's going to be disappointed when I tell her you two are...um..." Cindy trailed off, looking more puzzled than embarrassed. "Partners? Or did you go to Iowa or somewhere to get married?"

As Trevor made a choking sound that he tried to turn into a cough, Pete told her, "Partners is fine. I'm still trying to convince Joey to tie the knot but he's a little gun shy." Leaning closer to her, he said with a conspiratorial smile, "His parents fought a lot."

"Ah," Cindy breathed, nodding. "Understandable. Well, welcome to Honeysuckle. It's always nice to see some new faces, especially such good-looking ones."

"Um...thank you." Pete made a conscious effort not to look at Trevor, knowing he'd crack up at the man's expression. The bell on the door jangled as two women entered the diner.

"Better get back to it," she said, winking. "This place is going to fill up fast when word gets around that you're here. Everyone'll want to get a look at the new arrivals." On cue, another four women surged in.

Trevor watched in horror as they battled for the table closest to his and Pete's. "How do they know already?"

"Somehow they just do in this place." Cindy shook her head and laughed. "Although I think part of this is due to Tina texting everyone she knows when the pair of you walked in here. She had her eye on blondie here. I'll have to go break the news you're both unavailable." Still chuckling, she bustled off.

"Hi!" A pair of matched redheads leaned over their table, flashing identical cleavage.

"I'm Kari," one breathed, flashing a toothpaste-ad white smile. "This is my sister, Kylie."

Pete gave a stilted nod and opened his mouth to speak when Cindy's voice from across the room interrupted him.

"They're gay, girls," she hollered from the other side of the diner. "So stop harassing them and let them enjoy their lunch."

The twins' faces fell as a disappointed murmur rippled through the now-full diner.

"Oh," Kylie said. "Well, it's nice to meet you anyway."

"Maybe we can go shopping together sometime?" Kari suggested as the two drifted away.

"Sure," Pete grunted. When they were out of earshot, he added under his breath, "In hell, maybe."

"I think we *are* in hell," Trevor muttered, eyeing the crowd packed into the diner. "A hell with brisket."

Pete laughed. "Could've been worse. They could've dragged us out on the street and beaten our heads in."

With a long-suffering sigh, Trevor wondered, "*Would* that've been worse?"

Pete laughed and then caught a glimpse of another group of women making a beeline toward their table. "Heads up—more Honeysuckle hags at two o'clock."

Before the giggling women could descend upon them, Cindy came to the rescue. "Girls, go sit down!" she ordered, a tray loaded with plates balanced on her shoulder. "Let the poor boys get settled in before you pester them to death. Shoo!" The women obeyed, switching direction and moving back toward their table, although they shot sour looks over their shoulders at Cindy's oblivious back.

"So sorry, boys," Cindy said, setting overflowing plates in front of them. "Not a manner to be found among the lot of them. I had a word with Tina about her part in bringing them all here. The regulars are going to make a stink if these girls eat all the brisket." She sighed, glancing down at their plates. "Anything else I can bring you?"

"No thank you," Pete said politely.

"Well, it's on the house today." When Pete began to protest, she shook her head, her mouth an uncompromising line. "You should be able to eat your meal in peace. I'll try to keep these girls in line but you've already been bothered too much. Enjoy!" She hurried off again, fixing a stern eye on a table of gigglers who looked about sixteen years old.

"That was nice of her," Pete said and Trevor nodded, taking a bite. His eyes widened as he chewed.

Jamming another bite in his mouth, he said around it, "This is good!"

Pete tried the brisket and almost groaned. It *was* good. Really good. Amazingly good. He took another mouthful.

"That little girl can cook," Trevor said between bites. Pete nodded, his mouth full. If he would be living in the same town as this place for seven months, he was going to get fat.

* * * * *

Thanks to Cindy, they ate their meal in relative peace. The noise in the diner had ramped up to a level where they could talk without worrying about being overheard, although they limited their conversation to satisfied grunts as they shoveled food in their mouths.

"How was it?" Cindy asked as she cleared their plates.

"Wonderful," Pete told her.

"Tina's a great cook," Trevor chimed in.

"Isn't she?" Cindy beamed. "And she's only a senior in high school. She's going to culinary school in California next fall. I'll miss her like crazy though. It's been just the two of us at home for so long."

"Thanks for handling crowd control." Pete tipped his head toward the other tables.

"No problem," she told him, waving off his gratitude. "Don't worry. You're new and interesting now but everyone'll calm down soon. Won't be long before you're chasing after these girls instead of them running after you."

Pete cleared his throat and Cindy shook her head. "Of course you won't be chasing them. Sorry about that—I just forgot for a second."

"Don't worry about it," Pete told her with a grin.

She blinked at him, silent long enough that his smile fell away. "Something wrong?" he asked.

"Oh no," she reassured him with a breathless laugh. "You are just the prettiest thing I've seen in a while. Don't mind me."

Speechless, Pete felt his cheeks burn.

"It's almost sickening, isn't it?" Trevor drawled, adding a flash of desire to top off Pete's embarrassment.

"As if you're not just a doll yourself," Cindy scoffed teasingly. "The two of you are quite the pair. Wouldn't be surprised if the sight of you caused a few of the local men to switch sides."

Trevor choked on his drink of water and Pete laughed out loud. The sound brought the diner patrons' heads around and he sobered quickly.

"I like you, Cindy," Trevor announced, giving her a sweet smile.

"Feeling's mutual, boys," she said, giving him a pat on the arm. "Come back anytime."

They managed to escape the diner mostly unaccosted, although Pete was pretty sure he felt a hand patting his ass as they squeezed through a group of people waiting to eat who were milling around by the door. Once they were clear and headed toward their pickup, Trevor shook his head.

"That was nuts," he said. "That must be how a boy-band singer feels."

"Please." Pete slanted a laughing glance toward him. "You loved that. All those teen girls panting for you?"

Making a face, Trevor muttered, "No thanks."

His expression was so disgusted Pete raised a quizzical eyebrow.

"Um, jailbait, you know," Trevor explained.

Now Pete was really curious—Trevor looked almost panicked. A crazy thought tickled at Pete's brain as he eyed the other man but he quickly shook his head and dismissed it. That was just wishful thinking. "Want to do some grocery shopping?" Pete asked.

"Sure," Trevor agreed with so much enthusiasm Pete's curiosity rose again.

"Well, it won't be *that* much fun," Pete told him, grinning when Trevor blushed.

"Whatever," Trevor grumbled, avoiding the other man's eyes.

They climbed into Pete's pickup and buckled their seatbelts. Before he turned the key, Pete turned to face Trevor.

"You were good in there," he said seriously. "Very believable."

Ducking his head a little, Trevor told him, "Thanks."

They drove the three blocks to the grocery store in silence.

Trevor stared. He blinked and stared again. It was true.

Pete was singing. It was under his breath, but he was definitely singing. The guy was examining the label on a box of pasta and he was singing along to the lite-rock shit that passed for music at the grocery store. He wasn't half-bad either.

"What the fuck, man?" Trevor asked, his voice full of laughter.

Pete's head came up and he looked at Trevor, oblivious. "What?"

"Don't act all innocent," Trevor told him, his lips quivering with the effort of holding back laughter. "Boyz2Men? Really?" He watched with pleasure as Pete's cheeks darkened and he dropped his eyes.

"Sorry." Pete snuck a quick peek at Trevor. "Was I singing?"

The cop is too fucking cute for my own good. "You were." Trevor nodded solemnly.

"Shit. Sorry." A small smile crept out as Pete's eyes flashed toward Trevor again. "Was I dancing too?"

His eyes widening, Trevor could only shake his head. *Dancing?*

"Sometimes it just happens," Pete sighed. "I hear the music and bam!"

Before Trevor knew what was happening, Pete had grabbed him by the hand and waist, pulling Trevor against him so they were plastered together from thigh to chest. Panicking, Trevor tried to pull back, knowing what the proximity to Pete would do to his body, how it would expose the feelings he was trying very hard to hide.

Instead of releasing him, Pete spun Trevor through some quick dance steps. Resisting the urge to melt against him, Trevor pushed hard against Pete's shoulder, stumbling back a few steps when he was suddenly free.

Breathing hard, he stared at Pete. "You told me not to fuck with you." Trevor was humiliated to hear a tremor in his voice. "So don't fuck with *me*!" He turned away and closed his eyes, trying to force his body to stop shaking.

"Trev," Pete said softly, touching his shoulder.

Trevor shrugged off his hand. "Fuck off." He knew he was being an idiot. It was his own damn fault. He was always crushing on the unavailable ones. He just couldn't seem to help himself.

"Listen," Pete persisted, standing too close behind him. "How about some new rules?"

"What new rules?" Trevor asked, interested but still wary.

"Actually, we'd just need *some* rules," Pete corrected himself, a touch of amusement in his voice, "since we haven't actually come up with any yet."

His embarrassment over his hissy fit fading, Trevor turned around to face him. "What rules then?"

"Well, I know one of yours is no tangoing in the grocery store."

Flushing, Trevor scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. "No dancing in the grocery store should kind of be a given."

"Sorry." Pete shrugged, dropping his gaze for a moment. "Won't happen again. Don't know what got into me."

Squashing down an extra-stupid rush of disappointment at the promise, Trevor grunted skeptically. "No more singing either."

"Now wait a minute!" Pete's laughing gaze snapped up to Trevor's. "That probably *will* happen again. Pick another rule."

"Your turn," Trevor said, tossing the rule ball to Pete so he could think.

"Okay." There was a small hesitation before Pete continued, "Physical contact."

"What about it?" His stomach flipped.

"I don't know," Pete said, shooting him an exasperated glance. "If we should have it—in public, I guess. If so, what's okay and what isn't. That sort of thing."

Trevor knew he was scowling but couldn't help himself. This was insanely awkward. "We can't *not* touch," he growled. "That'd look suspicious. I mean, we're supposed to be a couple here."

"True," Pete agreed, looking just as uncomfortable as Trevor felt. "So what's the limit?"

"In the diner," Trevor managed to say despite the flush creeping up his cheeks, "we were holding hands and neither of us freaked, so that's okay."

"Okay, good." Pete nodded. "So holding hands is acceptable. What about, uh..." His voice trailed off in a mumble.

"What was that?" Trevor mocked him, cupping a hand behind his ear. "Did you say blowjobs?"

Pete jerked as if he'd been punched. When their eyes met, his blazed with such heat Trevor started. He'd expected laughter or even outrage, but this looked like...desire. A suspicion flared to life in his mind.

Recovering quickly, Pete shook his head. "Kissing," he clarified. "I said kissing."

Emboldened by what he'd just seen in Pete's eyes, Trevor stepped closer. "I'm good with kissing," he murmured, staring at Pete's mouth.

Pete cleared his throat. "Kissing but no dancing," he mocked hoarsely. "You're not very consistent."

"Mmm." Trevor made the sound in his throat as he leaned closer, locked in on the hard line of Pete's mouth.

Pete's eyes flicked up and then back to Trevor's face, a comprehending smile starting. "Putting on a show for the deli guy?" he asked in a low voice.

What? What does the deli guy have to do with any of this? Then Trevor stopped thinking, since Pete had caught him by the arms and turned him a half-circle, shoving him back against the shelves. For a second, he wondered if this was a repeat of what had happened on the porch earlier and Pete was about to lecture him for teasing.

Instead, with the shelves etching horizontal lines into Trevor's back, Pete leaned in and pressed his mouth to Trevor's. It was a hard kiss, Pete's lips unyielding and merciless. Something shifted in Trevor and he melted, turning pliable in the other man's hold.

Too soon, Pete pulled back. The two men stared at each other, startled. Pete inhaled, as if he was about to say something. A stranger's voice interrupted.

"Excuse me," she snapped, her voice chilly. They both jumped and Pete released his hold, stepping over to the cart and shifting it over to allow the woman through.

"Disgusting," she muttered when she was barely within earshot. Stiffening, Trevor moved to go after her but Pete caught his arm. His grip was light but just the touch held Trevor still. A little annoyed he was so easy to control, so *willing* to be controlled, Trevor shook off the hand holding his arm.

"Guess we can't expect everyone in Honeysuckle to be like Cindy," Pete said under his breath, smiling wryly at Trevor. "*Hoped* they'd be but I guess not."

Trevor couldn't smile back. It appeared Pete was completely unmoved by the kiss. As he'd said, it'd just been a show for the deli guy. The heat that had lit Pete's eyes a short while ago, the heat that had given him hope, had been an illusion, an invention of Trevor's love-hungry mind.

"You okay?" Pete asked.

Shrugging, Trevor grabbed the grocery cart and began pushing it down the aisle. "Why wouldn't I be? C'mon, we'd better finish and get out of here before that woman brings friends with pitchforks and torches."

* * * * *

"So what's first?"

Looking up from the grocery bag he was emptying, Pete eyed him quizzically. "What?"

"For the house," Trevor elaborated. "What'll you fix first?"

"The basics on the bedrooms, I think," Pete answered slowly, looking around as he spoke. He hadn't really had the time to plan it out yet. The kitchen needed a makeover but everything was more or less functional, so that could wait. "Get the floors refinished and paint the walls, so we can get some beds in there."

Trevor nodded without making eye contact as he stacked cans in one of the cupboards. "You know what you're doing?"

"Sure." Pete put the milk into the refrigerator. "My dad is a contractor. I worked for him every summer since I was old enough not to nail my hand to a floor joist until..."

"Until?" Trevor prompted when Pete trailed off.

"Um, until I got a d-different summer job in college," he finished, staring at the carton of eggs he held.

Trevor looked at him. "Trying to cook those with your eye laser beams?" he finally asked when the silence had stretched out for several seconds.

"Hmm?" Pete blinked, shook his head and stuck the eggs into the fridge. He frowned. It'd been years since he'd thought about that miserable summer between his sophomore and junior years in college.

"Never mind," Trevor said, fiddling with an apple. "Could I... I mean, I could help, if you want."

"Good thing you volunteered," Pete told him, grinning. "I would've drafted you otherwise."

"Either way, I'm your slave, huh?" As if he'd just realized what had escaped his mouth, Trevor flushed and turned his head to the side.

With the image of Trevor as his obedient sex slave, it took several deep breaths before Pete could speak again. Even then, his voice sounded rusty. "Looks like it."

They put away the rest of the groceries in silence.

* * * * *

"I think we need to make a list." Pete turned a circle in the bedroom where he'd tossed his sleeping bag.

"Of?" Trevor slouched in the doorway, his hands jammed in his pockets.

Grinning, Pete raised an eyebrow. "Practicing to be a Gap model?"

Trevor flipped him off.

Ripping his eyes away from the sulky, golden temptation, Pete tried to focus. "A list of what we need to get. I have my basic tools but we'll need to rent a drum sander and a buffer. Oh and I'll need to buy some wood putty."

"Plates," Trevor added. "Pans, glasses, silverware, shower curtain, beer..."

As he patted his empty pockets, Pete made a face. "Paper for lists."

With a snort of laughter, Trevor pushed away from the wall. "Let's just go. We'll grab things as we see them. Does this shit town have a home-supply store?" At Pete's incredulous look, he sighed. "Right. Stupid question."

"Actually, there's one about fifteen miles north in Benson, right next to a Target," Pete told him, looking around one last time. "We'll need some sort of window coverings."

Examining the tip of his shoe, Trevor muttered, "Can't have the neighbors watching our wild orgies."

"Or our lack of them," Pete said, staring out the uncovered window. "These windows need replacing too." He shook himself and headed toward where Trevor blocked the door. "Okay, let's go," he ordered, giving Trevor a small push. "We won't get anything done staring at the walls."

Chapter Three

As he stepped out the front door, Pete stopped and swore.

"What?" Trevor asked from behind him.

"Forgot about the porch," he grumbled.

"That's 'cause you weren't the one who fell through it."

Pete shot an annoyed look over his shoulder. "Did you think it was a good idea to put all your weight on the spot right next to where a *suitcase* fell through the floor?"

"Are you calling me fat?" Trevor asked with mock-offense.

Running an eye up and down the muscled body in question, Pete smirked. "Well, you *are* a little —"

"Don't say it," Trevor interrupted, his eyes narrowed.

"What?" Widening his eyes in pretend innocence, Pete casually moved away from the other man. "Chubby? Curvy? Rubenesque?"

Trevor lunged for him and Pete ran, hurdling the porch and any suspicious board that might give under his weight. Trevor was close behind and caught him within half a dozen strides, snaking an arm around Pete's waist and jerking him back against him.

Although Pete had a couple of inches on the other man and was just as well muscled, he let himself be pulled against Trevor's chest. After all, he wasn't about to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"I don't know," Trevor was saying as his hand ran over Pete's stomach, making the muscles ripple beneath his touch. "It's feeling a little squishy here. Maybe a little bread-doughy. Should I poke it and make you giggle?"

"Only if you want to die." Pete had tried for a threatening tone but the words emerged more breathy than anything. He rolled his eyes at his own lack of coolness.

"What's with the death threats?" Trevor murmured next to his ear. "Aren't you supposed to be my protector?" His hand was still moving, stroking lower. Pete caught it with his.

"Where're you going with that?" Although his voice was a warning growl, his hips had a life of their own, pressing back against Trevor's groin. He heard a catch of breath behind him.

"Oh! I'm sorry to interrupt..."

Pete jumped, jerked out of the oddly sensual moment by a woman's voice. He pulled away and Trevor let him go. The woman was small with light brown hair and pale blue eyes that darted around when she talked, never settling directly on them. Pete recognized her as the hedge-trimming neighbor from earlier.

"I don't mean to intrude but I brought some things, just a few things, I made them myself but if you're on one of those low-carb or gluten-free or whatever diets then you don't need to eat one just to make me feel better," she said, stumbling over her words as if they were coming out of her mouth too fast to organize. The woman shoved a plate of cookies at them.

"Thank you..." Pete cocked an eyebrow at her and she flushed.

"Oh...right, sorry," she babbled. "I'm Marsha Hayes. Yes, that would be like 'Marsha, Marsha, Marsha!' from *The Brady Bunch*. I've heard that quite a bit."

Pete smiled. She made *him* feel composed, and this was only seconds after Trevor's hands were just inches from his crotch. "Thank you, Marsha," he told her, accepting the plate. "I'm Pete and this is Joey." He waved a hand toward Trevor, who was already foraging beneath the plastic wrap for one of the cookies.

"You made these?" Trevor mumbled around the edges of a bite.

She nodded, her eyes huge as she stared at him. "I got the recipe from the Honeysuckle Lutheran Church's cookbook. Normally I get all my recipes from the internet but I thought welcome cookies should come from the town's cookbook, don't you think?" She flushed, dropping her eyes. "Oh, and you two don't care about stupid recipes, do you? I'll just shut up now."

Somehow, Pete doubted that.

"They're really good," Trevor told her, snagging another couple cookies from the plate. "Thank you."

She colored again but from pleasure this time. "No, thank *you*! I'm so glad to have a neighbor again. This house has sat empty for so long, just falling down around its own ears. Marty next door and I take turns mowing the lawn so it doesn't look like it's empty because I've heard that attracts thieves and delinquents, so it will be nice to not have to do that anymore."

Catching a laugh before it could escape, Pete changed it into a cough. "Thank you. We have our work cut out for us." He waved at the porch.

"Yes, I almost came over this morning when Joey crashed through," she admitted. "He seemed fine though and you helped him out and then you seemed to be having a private moment, so I didn't want to interrupt but then here I am interrupting anyway."

Pete and Trevor just blinked at her.

"I hope you don't think I'm being...inappropriate or anything," Marsha continued, "but we're really happy you're here. I mean, not everyone, of course, but most of us just couldn't be happier. Not just that you're fixing up this old place but that the two of you felt you could live here comfortably. I think you'll find Honeysuckle to be a very accepting town. Would you like to come over to a barbeque tomorrow night?" She switched topics with barely a breath between them.

Stealing a glance at Trevor, Pete saw he was looking a little panicky. There'd be no conversational help there. "Sure," Pete agreed, although he winced inwardly. "We'd love that." He had to restrain a yelp as Trevor pinched his ass—hard.

Marsha beamed. "It'll start at six. You won't need to bring a thing—there's always loads of food. I should let you go so you can go wherever you were heading. I'm so glad you're my new neighbors. Bye now!" With a final wave, she headed back over to her yard.

"Fuck," Trevor breathed.

Pete slapped the other man on the ass sharply with his free hand.

"Fuck!" This time it was a lot louder. "What was that for?"

"You *pinched* me!" Pete accused.

"You said we'd go to a fucking picnic!"

"Barbeque," he corrected. "And keep your voice down."

"I don't give a shit if it's a fucking Satan-worshipping, fire-dancing, naked hoe-down," Trevor hissed. "When I agreed to this protection deal, nothing was said about getting friendly with the Honeysucklers!"

"We need to blend in," Pete told him.

Trevor gave a short laugh. "Right. The only openly gay couple in this pissant town. We blend right in."

"You," Pete said, holding the cookies away from his body to keep them from being crushed as he wrapped an arm around Trevor's waist and jerked him in close, "need to suck it up." His eyes dropped to Trevor's mouth, so temptingly close. Trevor's tongue darted out to dampen his lower lip and Pete felt the wet tickle against his own mouth all the way down to his swelling cock.

"I don't think anyone's watching," Trevor murmured, his eyes fixed on Pete's parted lips.

"Good," Pete murmured before jerking back as he realized what Trevor was saying. "I mean, right. What's the point then?" Taking a deep, shaky breath, he released Trevor and stepped back. "Better get going."

He turned and walked toward his truck, mentally swearing at himself. This wasn't a carefree vacation where he could get to know his boyfriend better. As he climbed into the driver's seat of the pickup and balanced the plate of cookies on the center console, Pete watched Trevor circle the front of the truck. The scowl was back.

Frowning, Pete drummed his fingers against the steering wheel. He might not have the most experience but it seemed to him Trevor was either a natural for undercover work or he was attracted to Pete.

Trevor climbed into the passenger seat and slammed the door. "Well?" he demanded when Pete just sat there, eyeing the other man. "We going to go or what?"

Pete opened his mouth to ask, "Are you gay?" but the words froze in his throat. What if Trevor said no? How uncomfortable would that be? Even worse would be if he

said yes. All those possibilities that would open up if Trevor was gay were better off kept stuffed in the back of the closet.

"You okay?" Trevor asked, looking closely at him.

Pete started the truck. "Sure." He would be. He just had to get these too-tempting daydreams out of his head.

* * * * *

By the time they were driving home from their shopping trip, Pete had his lust under control. He also had a clearer plan of action worked out for the house. He'd fix the porch first. The upstairs floors could wait—they weren't trying to kill anyone.

He glanced over at Trevor and snapped, "What are you doing?"

"Checking my e-mail." Trevor looked up from his phone, his eyebrows drawn together.

"Turn that off!" Pete reached for the phone, only to have Trevor hold it out to the side. "Don't you know how easy it is to track someone by their cell phone?"

"Sorry," Trevor huffed, holding down a button and powering the phone down.

"When we get home, you need to mail that to Detective McDonald at the station," Pete told him. "He'll hang on to it until you get back."

"But—"

Cutting him off with a glare, Pete repeated, "You're sending it back. There's a fucking GPS chip in that thing!"

Trevor shot him a glare. "Fine."

There was silence for a few minutes before Pete spoke again. "I brought my laptop. You can check your e-mail on that when we get back to the house if you like."

"Whatever," Trevor grumbled.

Pete's knuckles whitened as his hands tightened on the steering wheel. "I'm not yelling at you for fun. I can't keep you safe if you do stupid shit like that."

"I know," Trevor bit off. "I told you I'd send it, okay?"

The silence was icy as the truck ate up several miles of county highway.

Trevor sighed. "Sorry. I *would* like to check my e-mail on your laptop—thanks."

With an uncomfortable shrug, Pete shifted in the seat. "I'll just leave the computer set up. You can use it anytime."

"Thanks," Trevor said again.

Pete snorted a laugh.

"What?" The belligerence was back in Trevor's voice.

"It's just you sound so pissed off about being polite," Pete told him.

"I am! It sucks." Although he was still scowling, Pete could tell Trevor was having a hard time holding his cranky expression.

Changing another laugh into a cough, Pete faced straight ahead, staring at the nonexistent oncoming traffic.

"Better get that cough looked at," Trevor told him. "Sounds like you might be coming down with a case of asshole syndrome."

Pete laughed out loud at that. "It's chronic," he said, with a quick glance at Trevor. He was happy to see the other man was smiling. "Nothing they can do."

"Too bad," Trevor grunted as they pulled into the driveway and parked.

"Let's go in the kitchen door," Pete suggested. "We won't lose a leg to the porch crocodiles that way."

Giving an affirmative shrug, Trevor grabbed two handfuls of loaded bags. "Looks like it might rain. Why aren't you parking inside?" He jerked his head toward the detached garage that sat at the end of the driveway at the back edge of the property.

Pete made a face. "Because I'd rather risk hail than having that heap collapse on top of my truck."

"Thought you said this place was structurally sound," Trevor mocked, after leaving the bags on the back porch and coming back for more.

"The house is," Pete corrected. "The garage is not. We'll check it out to see if there's anything to salvage in there. It'll work to store supplies until we take it down."

Trevor studied it, his head to the side. "Wouldn't take much. Looks like it'd go down if someone even leaned on it."

"Pretty much." Pete pulled a stack of lumber from the back of the pickup and carried it to what was left of the front porch. Thunder rumbled in the distance and they both picked up the pace, emptying the truck in record time.

Everything was put away and they were setting up a folding table in the kitchen when the rain started to pour.

"How's the roof?" Trevor glanced upward.

"We'll find out, won't we?"

With a snort, Trevor yanked open the table legs and locked them. "Ready?"

"Ready." They flipped it right-side-up.

"Easiest furniture assembly I've ever done," Pete said with satisfaction. "Want to take a break?"

"Sure."

They grabbed their newly purchased camp chairs and two of the beers they'd just stored in the fridge and headed for the front porch. Treading carefully, Pete tested the boards on the far side of the hole and pronounced them sound. Despite that reassurance, Trevor lowered himself very gingerly into his chair.

Popping open the beers with the bottle opener on his pocketknife, Pete offered one to Trevor.

"Thanks." Taking a drink, Trevor winced. "Warm."

"Well, if you don't want it..." Pete reached toward him.

Twisting so Pete couldn't reach his beer, Trevor shook his head. "Hands off. Warm or not, this beer's mine. I've earned it."

"Doing what?" Pete asked, taking a drink from his own bottle. "Shit, that *is* warm, isn't it?"

"Doing a disgusting amount of shopping," Trevor told him.

With a groan, Pete settled deeper into his chair and took another drink. The second sip tasted better than the first. "It *was* a shit-load of shopping, wasn't it?"

"Yeah." Trevor shifted his chair closer so he could prop his feet up on the railing. "Know what we need out here?"

"What?"

"Porch swing."

Pete smiled. "Definitely."

They sat in comfortable silence and drank their beers, watching the rain spatter the muddy spots in the lawn. As lightning split the sky, Pete glanced at Trevor's profile. Something warmed his chest but it wasn't the anxiety-tinged heat of desire. It was just...comfortable. Taking another drink of lukewarm beer on the rotting porch of his new home, Pete realized what he was feeling. It was contentment.

* * * * *

"Pete."

The whisper brought him out of sleep instantly. His hand closed around the grip of his gun. Flipping the unzipped sleeping bag off his body, he rose to a crouch.

"Pete!" The whisper now had a tinge of fear as Trevor's almost-naked form materialized from the shadows. "Don't shoot me, dumbass!"

"Fuck," Pete muttered, lowering his gun and standing up straight. His heart was still beating at warp speed. "Not too smart to call the guy pointing a gun at you a dumbass."

"So sorry I insulted you when you were holding a *gun* on me," Trevor threw back sarcastically, still in a whisper.

Pete glanced at his watch. It was just past midnight. "What's wrong?"

"I think I saw someone in the tree outside my window."

The words had hardly left Trevor's mouth and Pete had slipped by him into the hall. The almost-full moon and the streetlights outside glowed through the uncovered windows. Before they'd gone to bed, they'd thought about putting up the blinds they'd bought, but both of them had been so tired Pete was pretty sure they would've ended up with crooked blinds and Trevor screwed to the wall.

Easing into Trevor's room, Pete stayed low as he headed toward the window. He flattened his body against the wall by the window frame and snatched a fast look

around it. When he identified which tree it was, he ducked back into the hall again, moving fast.

Pete headed down the stairs, through the kitchen and out the back door, easing the door shut behind him. The air brushed against his chest and he realized he was just in his underwear. He immediately dismissed the thought, focusing on the tree next to Trevor's window. There was enough light from the moon and peripheral streetlights to make a flashlight unnecessary, which was good. A bobbing light would've given Pete away as he crept across the yard toward the tree.

At the base, he peered up but didn't see anyone. He circled around, looking from all angles, but the tree was unoccupied. Shifting his attention to the ground, Pete saw his own bare footprints, plus a shoe print in the rain-fresh mud.

Crouching to examine the print, Pete saw it was smaller than a full-sized man's print, so it was either a juvenile or a really small adult. He expanded his search, circling outward beneath the tree until he found two more prints, these pointing away from the tree. They were parallel to each other, deeper than the first print.

Looking up, Pete saw a thick branch only about eight feet above the ground. If this kid had known Trevor had spotted him, he could've swung down to this branch and hit the ground running. He peered higher into the tree. There were a couple branches extending toward Trevor's window, close enough for someone sitting up there to see inside his bedroom.

After he took a final glance around, Pete headed back inside. He paused in the kitchen long enough to wipe his feet down with a wet paper towel and then went upstairs.

"Trevor," he said as he reached the hallway.

"In here," Trevor's voice came from Pete's room, so he pushed open the door. Trevor was standing in the middle of the room, still in just his black boxer-briefs, arms crossed tightly over his chest.

"Think it was a kid," Pete told him, "judging by the size of the shoe print."

Trevor nodded.

"I'll trim some of those branches closest to your window tomorrow. For tonight, though, you'd better stay in the other bedroom."

"Could...um," Trevor started, dropping his gaze. "Would you mind if I stayed in here? With you?"

Pete's heart stuttered even as he told himself not to be stupid about this. "'Course," he said, as casually as he could manage. "Might be a good idea anyway, in case the peeping neighbor finds another way to see in. We're supposed to be playing a couple, after all."

"I'll grab my stuff." Trevor returned just seconds later with his sleeping bag and the air mattress they'd picked up at the store. The more Pete had looked at the wooden

floors as he was making refinishing plans, the harder they'd looked. He'd noticed the mattresses in a camping display and had dropped two into their overflowing cart.

Trevor placed the inflated mattress next to Pete's and covered it with the sleeping bag, tossing his pillow down toward the top. Although he raised an eyebrow at Trevor's positioning of the makeshift bed, so close to his own, Pete just settled into his own sleeping bag without saying a word. He placed his gun to the side of his pillow away from Trevor.

"Did you get a good look at him?" Pete asked.

"No," Trevor's voice sounded very close. "I'd cracked my window before I went to bed, so some noise woke me up. When I looked out the window, I saw a shape moving in the tree. I think he was still climbing, since he was moving around pretty close to the trunk. He was just a dark form though. Didn't look too big." He hesitated. "I...ah, freaked a little. I slammed the window and locked it and then came in here."

"No, it was good to get the window closed and locked," Pete assured him. "It was most likely just a kid who wanted to get a glimpse of the new queer neighbors. That'll give us something to do at the barbeque. We can check out shoe treads on all the kids."

Travis gave a short laugh. "That won't make our new neighbors think we're strange at *all*."

With a yawn, Pete said, "We'll just have to be stealthy about it."

Silence covered the dim room until there was only their breathing. As tired as he was, Pete had figured he'd drop right to sleep but he was wide awake. He told himself it was adrenaline from the search of the yard that was making his heart race. It definitely wasn't because Trevor's body was within reach.

"I thought," Trevor's voice made him jerk in surprise, "it could be one of my father's guys."

"It wasn't." Pete turned his head toward Trevor. "Not unless your dad started hiring kids as junior thugs."

"That was my first thought, I mean," Trevor clarified. "I know it wasn't now but I can't seem to calm down."

"Yeah, me neither," Pete admitted. "Too much excitement for this time of night. I'm fuck-all tired too."

"No shit." It was Trevor's turn to yawn.

"All right, so talk," Pete ordered.

"What?"

Shifting onto his side, Pete told him, "If you can't sleep, then talk. Tell me something. Put me to sleep."

"Like what?"

"Like anything." Pete tucked his arm beneath his head. "Tell me why your dad wants to kill you."

Trevor gave a choke of laughter. "Nice fucking bedtime story that'll be."

"It'll be like a ghost story told around the campfire," Pete said. "Here, I'll start. Once upon a time..." He trailed off expectantly.

Trevor was quiet long enough that Pete figured he wasn't going to say anything but then a heavy sigh drifted across the small gap between their beds.

"Fine," Trevor conceded, sounding deeply martyred. "Might as well. Can't sleep anyway."

Although he smiled, Pete didn't say anything. He just waited for Trevor to talk.

"Growing up, I always got along with my dad okay," he started, talking slowly. "My mom died when I was eight, so it was just the two of us for a while. Then he married Stacy, and then Mia, and then Denise, and then Belle."

"Not all at once, hopefully."

"Course not," Trevor scoffed. "There were divorces in between. I think bigamy is the only crime he *hasn't* committed."

Pete grunted a laugh.

"In high school, I played football and dated girls, was crowned Jack of Hearts—the Homecoming Queen of guys—all of that shit. I basically tried to be the all-American kid," Trevor went on.

"Tried to be?" Pete repeated. "Sounds like you pretty much *were* the all-American kid."

"Yeah, well, that all went to shit in college."

When he paused, Pete prompted, "So what happened?"

Trevor was quiet.

"Trev? What happened in college?"

"I got a boyfriend."

After a stunned second, Pete sat bolt upright. "You *are* gay!" he crowed. "I knew it!"

Staring up at him, Trevor didn't say a word. The dim shadows of the room cut shapes in his face, hiding his eyes and sharpening the angles of his jaw and cheek. His silence made Pete ashamed of his excited outburst and he lowered himself down to his side.

"Sorry," Pete apologized. "It was just that I was going to ask you when we were in the truck but then I convinced myself you were just a good actor and were just really getting into your role."

"So what's *your* plan now?" Trevor asked, his voice tight.

Pete shook his head, confused. "What d'you mean?"

"Now that you know. Will I get a different babysitter?"

Pete laughed, he couldn't help it. "Hardly."

Even with the low illumination, Pete could see Trevor narrowing his eyes. "What's that mean?"

"I'm..." Pete trailed off as he realized actually saying it was harder than he expected, even after Trevor had just come out to him. "It means I'm, um, I'm g-gay too." The word "gay" almost stuck in his throat, almost reduced him to his ten-year-old, tongue-tied past self.

Trevor's face hadn't changed. If anything, his expression was cooler than before Pete's admission. "Are you fucking with me?" Trevor bit out.

"No," Pete said baldly, holding Trevor's gaze. "Not that I wouldn't like to." Pete swallowed. That last part had just sort of slipped out.

His words hung between them. Pete didn't dare move, as if a single blink would convince Trevor he was lying, that he was messing with his head just to be an asshole. Pete knew this fear, had felt it many times, that knowledge that exposing your secret self to someone often led to cruel laughter and a fist to the gut.

"Shit," Trevor breathed, breaking the silence with a laugh. "What are the fucking odds?"

Pete's muscles, which had been drawn tight, relaxed. "What, that we'd both be gay?"

"Yeah." Shaking his head, Trevor smiled. "That I'd get the only gay cop as my personal bodyguard."

"I don't know if I'm the *only*—" Pete started, only to be interrupted.

"I should've guessed when you started dancing me around the grocery store," Trevor teased.

Pete gave a short laugh. "Yeah, that probably should've been a tipoff."

Leaning a fraction closer, Trevor asked, "So, when we were messing around in the yard, were you," he flicked his eyes down to Pete's crotch, "getting hard?"

Swallowing hard, Pete tried to answer casually. "If I say yes, are you going to get a big head?" At Trevor's soft laugh, he flushed, picking up too late on the double meaning of his words. *So much for playing it cool*, he thought ruefully.

"That's why I pulled away at the grocery store," Trevor explained. "Thought you were going to freak when you felt something poking you."

"It was probably for the best. You stepping back, I mean."

At Pete's words, Trevor pulled back and his face blanked. "Think so?" he asked coolly.

"Well," Pete said awkwardly. What had started out as teasing seemed to have gone sideways. "If we'd been going at it in the aisle, that woman would've probably called the cops on us. We could've blown your cover the first day."

"Yeah, suppose that's true." Flopping down onto his back, Trevor stared at the ceiling.

"You okay?" Pete asked tentatively. He knew he'd screwed up the fun, flirty exchange they'd started but he wasn't sure *how* he'd done that exactly. What he really wanted to do was roll on top of Trevor and kiss him until they'd both forgotten there'd been any awkwardness.

"Fine," he answered flatly. "Just tired."

Pete bit the inside of his cheek. "You going to finish telling me about your dad?"

"Said I'm tired," Trevor snapped, flipping over onto his side so he faced away from Pete.

"Fine." He knew he should be annoyed at Trevor's attitude but all Pete felt was lonely. "Goodnight."

A grunt was the only answer. Pete stared at the back of Trevor's head until he fell asleep.

Chapter Four

A shout woke Pete. He was on his feet, gun in hand, before he realized the sound had come from the man next to him, who still appeared to be asleep—restless sleep, but still sleep.

Crouching next to his makeshift bed, Pete replaced his gun in its spot next to his pillow.

“Trev,” he said softly but Trevor still tossed, muttering nonsense words. Reaching over, Pete shook his shoulder gently. His skin was sleek and cool beneath his touch, and Pete couldn’t resist. His fingers lingered, brushing the place where Trevor’s arm met his side.

Trevor sat up with a gasp and Pete jerked his hand away.

“Okay?” Pete asked gruffly, the feel of Trevor lingering on his fingertips.

“What?” Trevor blinked. “What’s going on?”

“You were having a dream,” Pete told him. “Bad one, by the sound of it.”

“Fuck,” he sighed, allowing his body to sink back onto his sleeping bag.

Pete watched him. “So, you okay then?”

“No,” he admitted. “I’m not.”

This was out of Pete’s experience—not the bad dreams, but the aftermath. The comforting part. “Want to talk about it?”

“No.”

Well that was clear enough. “Think you can sleep?”

“No.”

Having expended his whole repertoire of post-nightmare conversation, Pete settled on his side, facing Trevor, on top of his sleeping bag. Even though he knew it was stupid, he really wanted to touch him again. Fully expecting a rebuff, he reached out and laid his hand on Trevor’s bare stomach.

Pete felt the other man’s rough inhale, the high-tensile vibration of the muscles beneath his palm.

“What are you doing?” Trevor asked, although he sounded more curious than offended.

“Dunno.” He really didn’t. “Just wanted to touch you.”

“Oh.” The silence seemed bigger in the darkness.

“That okay?”

The stomach beneath his palm lowered in a sigh. "Yeah." Trevor's hand found his, resting on top, warm and heavy and...nice. "After all, we did agree we could hold hands."

"True." Pete smiled. He was still smiling when he fell asleep.

* * * * *

The next time he woke, the lemony morning light was streaming through the uncovered windows and he was plastered against Trevor's back. They'd both shifted during the night into the space between the two air mattresses and Pete's side was numb from lying on the hard floor.

Despite this discomfort, he really didn't want to move. His right arm had wedged itself beneath Trevor's head and his left was wrapped over his waist. Pete's erection pressed against the curve of Trevor's ass.

Pete wondered if Trevor was hard as well and he was very tempted to slide his left hand down a few inches to find out. He hesitated though, not wanting to wake Trevor and ruin this opportunity just to hold the man against him.

His hips had their own plan, however, flexing slightly to push his erect cock against the ass in front of it. Pete could feel the moment when Trevor woke, the alert tension of the other man, but Trevor didn't move away—or even move at all.

Emboldened by Trevor's stillness, Pete flattened his hand against Trevor's stomach and slid it downward, moving slowly, giving Trevor time to push him off if he chose. When Trevor didn't move, didn't shove him away, Pete stroked a single finger beneath the waistband of Trevor's boxer briefs.

He heard Trevor's breath catch. Pete's heart accelerated, thumping in his ears, and his hips flexed again. This time, Trevor pushed back against the pressure, catching Pete's cock in a pleasurable trap.

Unable to be patient any longer, Pete thrust his hand beneath the fabric of Trevor's underwear and closed his fingers around a thick cock that was just as hard as his was. Hissing out a breath, Pete explored the length of it, from the base to the wet tip and back down again to cup Trevor's drawn-up balls.

"Shit!" Trevor groaned, breaking the morning's silence.

"Shh," Pete whispered into his ear before closing his teeth on the hard meat of Trevor's shoulder. He yelped, jumping under the pinch of Pete's teeth, and the cock wrapped in his fist swelled even more.

Pete's phone rang. The sound startled him, making him tighten his fingers around Trevor's erection, drawing another hungry groan. Muttering curses under his breath, Pete released him reluctantly and scrambled to grab the phone.

"Yeah?" he snarled.

"Giordano." McDonald sounded uncharacteristically tentative. "Is this too early to call?"

"No," Pete said, more calmly this time. "Sorry, Detective. Rough night."

"Everything okay?" the detective asked, his voice sharpened.

"Yeah." Pushing to his feet, Pete stretched, popping the night on the hard floor from his joints. Glancing at Trevor, he saw the other man was watching with hot, narrowed eyes.

"Giordano, you there?"

Swallowing hard, Pete ripped his eyes away from the six-plus feet of hot man lounging on the floor, watching him as if he'd like to eat Pete alive. "Uh, yeah. Sorry. Didn't get too much sleep. We had a visitor in the yard last night."

"Haas?" McDonald guessed, sounding more stressed than Pete had ever heard him sound.

"Not unless he wears really small shoes," Pete reassured him. "It was a kid. I'm thinking it was just curiosity about the new neighbors. I'm going to trim the trees away from the house today though, limit the possibility of anyone using them for access into the house."

With an approving grunt, McDonald said, "Good idea. Everything else okay?"

"Seems to be, except for the man-eating front porch. Have to replace a few rotten boards before one of us becomes its dinner." Trevor stood up and did a stretch of his own before disappearing into the hall. Pete could hardly restrain himself from running after that tight, boxer-briefed ass.

The detective laughed. "Welcome to the joys of homeownership. You'll be dying to get back to your apartment after all this is over."

"Probably," Pete said, although he didn't really mean it. This house was growing on him even more, now that he and Trevor were living in it together. He made a face at the sappy thought. Twenty-four hours and he was already dreaming of rainbows and puppies and lifelong relationships. He had to knock that shit off immediately.

"Well, hang in there," McDonald told him. "It'll be over before you know it. Call if you need anything. Otherwise, I'll check in with you in a couple days."

"Sounds good." After Pete hung up the phone, he glanced at Trevor's empty sleeping bag. Disappointment trickled through him before he quickly clamped down that emotion.

Get moving, the logical side of his brain ordered. *There's no time for crawling back in bed for some morning delight anyway*. He couldn't help giving the mussed sleeping bags a final glance before heading for the bathroom.

It was occupied, of course. Pete hesitated, listening to the hiss and patter of the shower through the closed door. Unable to resist, he turned the doorknob and slipped into the steam-filled room.

Trevor had picked out a basic, clear shower curtain the day before to circle the ancient claw-foot tub that had been converted to a shower. Pete swallowed hard,

staring at Trevor's body, which was barely blurred by the steam and rivulets of water coursing down the curtain.

A clear shower curtain is nice, Pete thought. He finally forced himself to rip his eyes away and turn toward the toilet. As he peed, he concentrated on slowing his breathing. If he was going to hyperventilate every time he even glanced at Trevor, he wouldn't get anything done.

Without thinking, Pete reached over and flushed the toilet.

"Fuck!" Trevor bellowed from the shower, almost taking the brand new curtain down as he hurdled out of the tub.

"Shit, sorry," Pete told him. "That's ancient plumbing for you. Let's add a flow-control valve to our list of things we need to install."

A soaking wet Trevor just glared at him, dripping. His hair darkened to bronze when it was wet, Pete noticed, fascinated. He reached out to touch a strand draped over his shoulder, plastered against his skin.

"I love your hair," Pete said and then pulled his hand away, a little startled he'd actually said his thought out loud.

"Don't try to distract me with that flattery bullshit," Trevor grumbled. Although he clung to his scowl, Pete noticed certain parts below the waist were very much affected by that "flattery bullshit". "You tried to scald me like a lobster."

Pete bit back a laugh. "That's because you'd be delicious." Leaning in, he nipped at Trevor's neck. "Especially with butter. Better get back in there before all the hot water runs out and I try to freeze you like," Pete thought but couldn't come up with anything, "a frozen lobster."

"Fine." Trevor watched him warily as he stepped back into the shower. "But I'll know to look out when you come in here with a stick of butter and your lobster bib on."

Pete laughed as he left the bathroom. At least he knew how to get Trevor out of the shower if he happened to be taking too long. If they were going to be roommates, it was good to know these things.

"Holy fuck," Trevor muttered, turning his face up to the now-comfortable spray and closing his eyes. The teasing, rumped Pete with bed-head and morning stubble was even more irresistible than his clean-cut, Boy Scout alter-ego. How was he going to manage not to completely lose his shit over this guy?

* * * * *

"Okay, that's just not fucking fair."

Trevor stopped dead. Never mind bed-head Pete or Boy Scout Pete or cop Pete or any other Pete so far — this, *this* Pete was going to bring him down. He was rummaging in the oversized tool compartment built into the back of his truck, his jeans hitting low on his hips and his bare back exposed to the mid-morning sun.

He forced his feet to walk, to skirt the hole in the porch and the stacked boards and bring him within six feet of Pete. That was the best he could do. Any closer and Trevor was going to hurl himself on the other man, rip off those raggedy-ass jeans and fuck him silly.

Jamming his hands in his pockets, Trevor tried to look casual. "Thought today's first project was going to be the porch hole."

Pete looked around and grinned. "When you say 'porch hole', it sounds dirty." He focused on the toolbox again and pulled out a small chain saw. "Nope, tree first, porch later."

Trevor grunted. "Showing off for the neighbors?"

"What?"

Nodding toward Pete's bare chest, Trevor elaborated, "Thought maybe you were hoping to get on the 'Honeysuckle Studs' calendar this year."

"There's a Honeysuckle Studs...?" Pete flushed as he trailed off. "Ha ha. Very funny. It's hot out, okay?" He stalked off toward the rickety garage.

Falling in next to Pete, Trevor noticed they were being watched. "You managed to draw a crowd. I think your nomination for Mr. July is pretty much in the bag."

"Fuck off," Pete said under his breath. "Shit, everyone is watching, aren't they?"

They were. The lawn-mowing man from the previous day was washing his car and shooting regular glances toward them. Marsha was back at her hedges, still trimming nothing but air. Next door on the other side, an older couple fussed with the potted geraniums lining their porch.

"Maybe I'm paranoid because someone wants to kill me," Trevor muttered, "but I'm kind of creeped out by this. You?"

"Definitely," Pete agreed, ducking into the rickety garage through the side door. It was a fairly large structure but mostly full of junk left by the previous owners, stacks of pallets and a stack of scrap wood. Even if Pete *had* wanted to park his truck in the garage, it wouldn't have fit without some major cleanup.

Instead, they'd stored the new ladder and some of the other supplies they'd picked up the day before in the garage. It would at least keep the rain off. Handing the chain saw to Trevor, Pete maneuvered the ladder out the door and carried it over to the tree their spying visitor had used the previous night.

Trevor followed, muttering, "At least we can hide from the neighbors back here. Fucking small town."

Snorting a laugh, Pete set the ladder beneath the branch stretching toward the window.

"You know," Trevor said, examining the tree, "no one could actually reach the window from either of those branches. See?" He pointed. "They get too narrow. You'd have to be Fluffy the Two-Pound Fairy to not break the branch if you're sitting on it."

Pete just grunted and climbed up a few rungs. "No one needs to be looking in at you, even if it was just a kid or Fluffy the Fairy. I'm not taking a chance."

"Fine." Trevor handed him the chain saw. "Need me to help or should I go far away before you drop a branch on my head?"

Before Pete could answer, a shout went up next door. Trevor whipped around and saw the neighbor couple hurrying across the lawn toward them. His shoulders lowered as he relaxed, feeling like an idiot for jumping at the least commotion.

"Wait!" the man puffed as he approached, his wife close behind. "Wait!"

"Wait? We're not going anywhere," Trevor said under his breath. Pete must have heard because he laughed as he descended the ladder with the chain saw gripped in one hand.

"Get away from that tree!" the woman ordered when she got close.

Catching Pete's equally confused glance, Trevor asked, "Why?"

"You can't cut it down," the man insisted. "That would be a crime."

"A crime?" Pete repeated.

"That tree is over eighty years old," she told them, crossing her arms over her narrow chest and glaring at him, as if she were going to tackle him and rip the chain saw from his hands. Trevor hid a laugh in a fake cough.

"We're not going to cut it down," Pete assured them, using his calm, diffuse-the-situation voice. Obviously he wasn't enthusiastic about being brought down and de-sawed by a septuagenarian. Trevor smirked at the idea. "We're just trimming these branches back a little. We had a young visitor last night who was using this tree to see into the house."

Their eyes rounded. The couple looked oddly similar, as if years of living together had homogenized their features. Both had short, gray hair and pug noses. The only difference was the man was balding and an inch or two taller than his wife.

"There was someone looking in?" he asked. "Like a peeping Tom?"

Trevor nodded, remembering the shot of terror he'd felt when he'd glimpsed a person outside his window.

"Young? So a teenager, you think?" The couple exchanged a look.

Trevor could almost see Pete's ears prick up. "Do you have any idea who it might have been?"

Another glance passed between the man and woman. She gave a slight nod and he said, "Well, we don't want to make trouble for anyone, but Danny, Len Swanson's boy, would be our bet."

"Why's that?" Pete casually rested his elbow on one of the ladder rungs. "Has he done this sort of thing before?"

"Noo..." She drew out the word, infusing it with doubt. "But he's always there. You know, lurking."

"Plus he's gotten a little strange over the past few years," the man added. "Dresses like a...what's the term? Roth?"

"No, that's an I.R.A., dear," his wife corrected. "Goth, I think."

The man nodded enthusiastically. "That's it—Goth. All those black clothes."

"And in the summer too." She shook her head. "He must get so warm."

Clearing his throat, Pete asked, "Where does Danny live?"

"Right across the street," the woman told him. "That's another reason we thought it might be him. The blue house. Len was washing his car in the driveway."

"Ah," Pete said noncommittally. "We'll talk to him then."

At this, the couple looked a little panicky. "You won't mention we said anything, will you?" the man asked. "I'd hate for him to think we thought he might do something like this."

"Of course not," Pete reassured them. "I'll just talk to him—I won't accuse him of anything."

"Thank you," she said.

Pete smiled. "No problem. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'd better take care of these branches. I'm hoping to have enough time to get the porch fixed too."

"You're just cutting off two branches?" the man asked suspiciously.

Pete nodded.

The couple looked at each other and then nodded slowly. "Okay then," the woman agreed. "We'll just watch from our patio then, if you don't mind."

"Of course not," Pete assured them solemnly. Trevor couldn't even look at him. One sideways glance and he'd start howling with laughter.

"Oh," the woman said, "I'm Iris Hammitt, by the way. This is Morty."

"Pete," he said, reaching his free hand to shake. "This is Joey."

The Hammitts shook the men's hands and headed back toward their yard. They settled into patio chairs facing the threatened tree.

"Roth?" Trevor murmured.

Pete shot him a look. "Don't even fucking start or I'll lose it."

"How'd you keep a straight face?" Trevor asked, talking low. "I had to stare at the ground so I didn't bust a gut."

"I bit my cheek," Pete admitted. "It fucking hurt."

Trevor choked back a laugh.

"Don't." Pete pointed at him and glared.

Holding up his hands, Trevor gave him his most innocent look. With a skeptical grunt, Pete climbed up the ladder.

"What do you think they're going to do from over there?" Trevor muttered, sneaking a quick glance at the pair. They waved. He raised his hand in response.

"Supervise?" Pete suggested.

"Just don't take off too much," Trevor warned, holding back a snicker.

Glaring at him from above, Pete said softly between gritted teeth, "Quit fucking with the guy holding a chain saw."

Trevor just laughed at the threat.

* * * * *

As Pete stood and twisted, stretching the kinks out of his back, he kept his eyes on Trevor.

The man knows how to wield a crowbar. Coughing to cover a laugh, Pete wiped the smirk off his face when Trevor turned to glare at him.

"You supervising?" Trevor growled. "Should've known you'd pull an Iris-and-Morty."

"Iris-and...oh!" He laughed. "They moved to the front porch when we switched jobs, did you notice?"

"Maybe they're afraid we're going to cut off too much of the porch floor," Trevor suggested, making Pete laugh again. "After all, this shit-hole house has to be over eighty years old."

"At least." After a final stretch, Pete bent to pry the last rotten board off the floor.

"So what's the next step?" Trevor asked.

Squinting up at him, Pete couldn't speak for a few moments, his words stolen by the beauty that was Trevor. He was silhouetted against the late afternoon sun, which caught the gold of his hair, lighting a halo around his head. That thought broke the spell and Pete snorted. Trevor was definitely no angel.

"Hello? Pete?" Trevor waved a hand in front of Pete's face. "You with me?"

Pete shook his head. "What?"

"Guess not." Trevor sighed with exaggerated patience. "I was asking what's next, since you're Mr. Bob Vila."

With a snort, Pete told him, "I'm more like Red Green."

"Who?"

"Never mind," Pete said, refocusing on the newly expanded hole in the porch floor. "We have to measure and cut the new boards now."

Trevor grinned. "It's time for power tools. Nice."

"I have a better idea," Pete told him, pressing back a smile. He walked over to the truck and grabbed a small handsaw from the toolbox. Holding it up, he called over to Trevor, "I'm thinking you should start with this. You know, work your way up."

"But..." The look on Trevor's face was so outraged Pete couldn't hold back a laugh. He moved to put the saw away and when he turned back toward the porch, he started. Trevor was right in front of him.

"Think you're funny, do you?" Trevor growled, his eyes lit with devilry.

"Yeah," Pete said, his voice sounding husky to his own ears.

"Bet I can get you to stop laughing." Taking another step closer so they were toe-to-toe, Trevor leaned into Pete, pressing into him from thigh to chest.

It worked. Pete stopped laughing. They stared at each other for several seconds, their faces just inches apart.

Trevor's lips curved in a challenging half-smile. "You're not so —"

He broke off, his eyes rounding in surprise as Pete whirled them both around and shoved Trevor up against the truck cab. Before he could hide it with a façade of nonchalance, Trevor's eyes flashed with hunger.

Interesting, Pete thought. His growing erection thought it was interesting too.

"Getting a little cocky, aren't you?" Pete asked silkily, sliding his hands down Trevor's arms and wrapping his fingers around his wrists.

Trevor didn't answer except for a shrug that would've seemed nonchalant, except for the bulge of his cock growing against Pete's crotch.

"Think you're in charge here?" Pete growled into Trevor's ear and felt a shiver ripple through the other man. Restraining a triumphant grin, Pete ground his hips against Trevor's, rubbing their erections together. Denim scratched against denim, and the fabric barrier between their cocks just made his anticipation grow. "Do you?" Pete pressed.

"No," Trevor all but whispered, his mouth sulky as his gaze dropped to the side.

Pete nipped that tempting bottom lip. "Who is in charge?" He felt Trevor's intake of breath against his own mouth.

"You." Trevor's eyes, shy and blue and eager, flashed to his own for a second before dropping again.

Pete caught his breath. "Damn right." Closing the gap between them, he kissed Trevor, taking over his mouth as if it were his property. Trevor allowed him entrance, eagerly meeting Pete's tongue with his own.

As they kissed, Trevor twisted and squirmed, forcing Pete to tighten his hold and flatten the other man against the truck. A movement in his peripheral vision caught his eye and Pete jerked his head up, drawing a protesting noise from Trevor.

"Look," Pete rasped, nodding at a skinny kid, probably thirteen or so, who stood half-hidden by the trunk of a maple tree in the yard across the street. It took Trevor a few seconds to respond to his command but then he turned his head to look.

"That the Roth?" he asked, low-voiced.

Pete huffed a laugh. "Well, he *is* lurking."

"That's a definite lurk."

"Dark clothes."

"That's a Roth for you." Trevor nodded seriously.

"And last but definitely not least, he's in the Swansons' yard."

Rounding his eyes comically, Trevor asked with put-on amazement, "Wow. Are you a cop or something?"

"Smartass." Releasing Trevor's wrists, Pete took a reluctant step back. "I should go talk to him."

"Now?" Trevor protested. Glancing down at Pete's crotch, the corner of his mouth kicked up. "You going all tented out like that?"

Pete followed the path of Trevor's gaze. "Guess not," he said wryly. "That'd get me on all sorts of neighborhood watch lists."

Trevor snorted. "Yeah." He traced a line down Pete's bare chest with his fingertip. "Want to go inside instead?"

"And do what?"

Staring at him, Trevor said, "And play Uno. What d'you think, shit-for-brains?" He slid out from between Pete and the truck and stalked toward the house.

"Trevor?" Pete caught up to him in three strides and grabbed his arm. "What the fuck just happened?"

The fierce glower was back. "Forget it," Trevor snarled, trying to twist free of his grip.

"Hey," Pete chided gently, catching his other arm. "Tell me."

Trevor jerked his chin up and glared at him. "Fine. You need to decide whether I'm a job or a toy and quit jerking me around."

Pete's jaw dropped. "I'm not..." He trailed off as he glanced around at the watching neighbors. "Let's go inside and talk about this, okay?"

"We might as well give Iris and Morty a show," Trevor told him, pulling his arms out of Pete's grip and crossing them over his chest. Pete tried not to notice how that position made his biceps bulge.

"No," Pete told him flatly. "If we're really going to talk, we're going inside. There are things the neighbors shouldn't hear."

Trevor glowered for a few moments, then spun around and stalked into the house, Pete following close behind.

Once inside, they were both silent.

"We need a fucking couch," Trevor finally muttered.

Pete ignored that. "It is my job to watch over you."

"Fine," Trevor snapped. "So how does that translate to having a hand down my shorts?"

The words hit Pete hard, snapping his head back. "W-what the fuck does that mean?" he demanded. "Are you saying I used my p-position to coerce you? That you don't want me t-t-touching you?"

"No!" Trevor burst out. "I didn't mean that. I just..." He broke off, shaking his head. "I just want to know what you *want* from me."

Everything. Pete clamped his molars so he didn't shout the thought out loud.

"Just tell me what you want," Trevor said, quieter now. "I can't set myself up for something just to have it ripped away."

"I-I-I..." *Fuck.* Pete closed his eyes. He'd forgotten how much he hated the helpless feeling when the words just wouldn't come. Taking a deep breath, he tried again. "I want to keep you safe." There it was, every word stutter-free. Enormously grateful, Pete took another breath for the next sentence but Trevor spoke first.

"Okay, got it," he said tightly. "You're the cop and I'm the fucking victim. Let's just leave it at that then." Trevor ran up the stairs, taking them three at a time.

Choking on the words he hadn't said, Pete watched him go.

Chapter Five

Pete raised his hand to knock on the bedroom door and then lowered it. He raised it again, hesitated, and then pulled his hand back. As he raised it a third time, the door jerked open in front of him.

"What?" Trevor demanded. "You've been standing there for ten minutes. I could hear you breathing."

"Sorry," Pete said. "Um, we should probably head over to the barbeque soon."

"Shit. Do we have to go?" Trevor groaned.

Shrugging, Pete told him, "We probably should. We need to —"

"Yeah, I know," Trevor interrupted. "We need to blend. I got it." He walked over to the laptop set up on the floor and crouched down to close the e-mail program he was using. "Just let me change my shirt."

Pete lounged against the doorframe and watched him yank his t-shirt over his head, knowing it was just masochistic to torture himself with the sight of so much of Trevor's bare skin but not able to look away. Trevor grabbed a button-down from the closet and pulled it on, looking up just in time to catch Pete watching.

Pete quickly looked away. "Do you think we should bring something?" he asked, gazing out the window at the newly trimmed tree.

"Like what?" Trevor smirked. "Jell-O salad?"

"With marshmallows on top," Pete added and laughed. He recalled himself quickly and his smile fell away. "Should we pick something up? Chips, at least?" he asked the floor as he struggled to regain his equilibrium.

"Might as well bring some beer," Trevor suggested. "We already have that."

"Good idea." Shooting him a quick glance that didn't quite land on Trevor, Pete asked, "Ready?"

"You can look at me, you know."

He didn't even have to say anything to know he wouldn't get any words out. Clenching his jaw, Pete just shook his head.

"I didn't mean it," Trevor told him. In his peripheral vision, Pete saw him take a step closer. "That whole thing about —"

Pete couldn't do it. He couldn't have this conversation a second time. Pushing away from the doorframe, Pete turned toward the stairs. "We're going to be late."

Without looking to see if Trevor was behind him, he almost ran down the stairs.

* * * * *

He'd fucked up. Trevor took a drink of his beer without taking his eyes off Pete. He'd gotten scared and defensive and mouthy, and ruined any chance of them ever being...whatever it was they could've been. Fuck-buddies, at least. Now, Pete couldn't even be bothered to look at him anymore.

"Joey!" Marsha was headed his way. "Why are you hiding over here?"

So I can sulk and watch Pete. He just gave her a shrug and a half-smile.

"Well, come on over here and meet everyone." She tugged his arm until he relented, following her to the first cluster of people. Trevor recognized one of the men as the lawn-mowing, car-washing, father-of-the-lurking-teen neighbor.

"Joey, this is Abby, Terrance, Michelle, Greg and Len." Marsha pointed at each person around the circle, ending on the neighbor Trevor had already recognized. He shook hands all around, the names flying out of his brain almost as quickly as Marsha rattled them off.

"So, Joe," the balding and sweaty one – Terrance? – said. "Where're you from?"

Shit. Where was it again? "Cleveland," he said, trying to keep the relief out of his voice when he finally remembered his cover story after his moment of panic.

"Huh." Terrance's eyes instantly glazed over. Trevor pushed back a grin. Pete had picked the perfect city. From the blank looks all around the circle, no one knew much about Cleveland and no one really cared.

"What brought you here to Honeysuckle?" the woman to Terrance's left asked. Her blonde-highlighted hair was pulled into a high ponytail and her hand looped through the arm of the man on her other side.

"Pete had enough of the corporate world." He shrugged. "Thought fixing up the house'd be a nice change."

There was an awkward moment of silence and dropped eyes that confused Trevor for a second before he realized what had just happened. He'd reminded everyone he was gay.

"So, um," the other woman started. She was a redhead with a round, freckled face. Trevor guessed her to be bald-and-sweaty's wife. "What do you do, Joey?"

This one was easy to remember. "I'm a graffiti artist," he told her. Everyone's faces blanked as if he'd started talking about Cleveland again.

"That's a job?" Bald-and-sweaty asked.

"Terrance!" his wife chided.

"It's okay," Trevor told them. "I'm not a tagger or anything. I do murals, neighborhood projects, that sort of sh—" He stopped in mid-swear. "Um, *stuff*," he amended.

"I'm an artist, as well." The man whose arm the blonde woman was clutching spoke for the first time. Trevor got a good look at him and had to admit the guy was fairly handsome—he had nothing on Pete, of course, but he wouldn't make a person sleeping with him throw up in the morning. He was slim and tall, with dark hair and

even features. The man looked like someone who played a lot of golf. He was also giving Trevor a look. *The* look.

Trevor cocked an eyebrow when he realized the man was waiting for a reaction. Before he could speak, someone else beat him to it.

"Greg's a photographer," the blonde explained.

Shooting an annoyed look at her, Greg clarified in a smooth voice, "Photography is my medium, yes. The way you say that, Michelle, makes it sound like I take yearbook pictures or something."

She flushed and smiled hard at Trevor. "We're redecorating one of the guest bedrooms as a nursery. We were thinking of a mural for one of the walls. Maybe you could...?" She trailed off, looking at the man next to her. Greg looked as if she'd suggested they all kill some kittens.

"For God's sake, he doesn't do Care Bear paintings," Greg snapped.

"Actually," Trevor told Michelle, "I do a lot of work for kids. Let me put some sketches together for you." *Sketches?* his brain mocked. *Why the hell are you promising her that, you idiot?* He'd been pretty good at art, especially graffiti, when he'd been in high school but he hadn't touched a can of spray paint for almost ten years. The only reason he'd pushed the issue with Michelle was because her husband was being an asshole.

"Congratulations," he said, before Greg said something else dick-like and Trevor started talking about his imaginary degree from some fancy art school. When Michelle stared at him blankly, he waved awkwardly at her mid-section. "On the baby."

The group went quiet and no one would look at each other.

"Oh," Michelle said, too fast and high. "We're not pregnant *yet*. Soon, though."

"Oh. Okay." Trevor wondered if he should apologize.

"Hey," Pete said, lightly bumping his shoulder against Trevor's. "Want to introduce me?"

"Hey!" Trevor's relief at the interruption completely wiped away any leftover awkwardness with Pete. "Um, sure. You know Marsha, and that's Greg and Michelle and Terrance and," he racked his brain frantically for her name, "Abby?" She nodded and smiled. "And this is..." His words faded away as he turned toward the empty space where their neighbor had been standing. "Where'd he go? Well, that *was* Len, our across-the-street neighbor."

"Hello." Pete nodded at the faces around the circle.

"So when is the moving truck arriving?" Abby asked, her eyes darting back and forth between Trevor and Pete. Trevor assumed she was imaging them having sex. He wished he hadn't thought about that, because now *he* was imaging them having sex. That was a good way to get in an embarrassing position. To slow the hot flow of blood heading to his cock, Trevor thought about balding and sweaty Terrance getting it on with Greg the asshole. That did it.

"Actually," Pete answered, "we're planning on gradually buying new things." With a fond sideways glance, Pete slid an arm around Trevor's shoulders. "We both had pretty pathetic bachelor pads."

Two can play this game, Trevor thought, leaning into Pete and slipping an arm around his waist. He felt Pete start and smiled. "Garage-sale chic," Trevor added, massaging Pete's hip with his fingers.

"Exactly." Pete's voice sounded a little rough. He cleared his throat. "There's so much work to do on the house, we figured it'd be easier not to have to work around furniture, so we're roughing it for a while."

There was another of the uneasy pauses. Greg the asshole's gaze was locked on Trevor's hand where it rested on Pete's hip.

"So." Marsha's voice rang out a little too brightly. "Have you met the Nunns?"

"No. Just the priests," Pete joked.

"The...? Oh!" Marsha laughed. "No, silly, Mark and Chrissy Nunn. Come on—I'll introduce you."

She dragged them off toward another couple standing by the grill. Glancing at his watch, Trevor saw barely a half-hour had passed since they'd arrived. He swallowed his groan.

Letting his hand drop a few inches, Trevor pinched Pete's ass—hard. Pete jumped and glared at him but Trevor was unrepentant. Pete deserved that and more for accepting Marsha's barbeque invitation. With a silent sigh and a forced smile, he went to meet some more fucking Honeysuckle neighbors.

* * * * *

There was not enough beer in the world, Pete discovered, to make a neighborhood barbeque fun. The best part was taking advantage of the opportunity to touch Trevor. Even if it was just a brush of hands or an arm around his shoulders, every contact thrilled Pete. He knew he'd pay for it later when the Trevor-withdrawal set in but for now Pete was stealing every chance he could get to touch him.

They'd eaten overcooked hamburgers and talked and he'd had several beers, but the night was still dragging on, with none of the guests looking in any hurry to be leaving. Trevor had disappeared into the house to use the bathroom about fifteen minutes earlier. Pete glanced at his watch. He'd give Trevor two more minutes and then he was going in after him. It wouldn't surprise him to find Trevor had escaped through the front of the house and snuck home.

With a sigh, Pete settled into a lawn chair next to across-the-way-neighbor Len.

"So," Pete said amiably. "I haven't seen your son tonight. What's he up to?"

"Nothing." Len shot him a quick, almost panicked look. "Why?"

"No reason." *This is interesting*. "Guess we'll just have to meet him another time."

Setting his lips into a grim line, Len spoke without looking at him. "He's busy. School keeps him busy. Excuse me." He stood up so abruptly his chair wobbled and Len darted away.

"Weird," Pete muttered.

"What?" Trevor asked, dropping down into Len's vacated chair.

Nodding at a retreating Len, Pete said, "All I did was ask him a simple question about his kid and he bolted."

"Huh." With a shrug, Trevor slouched down a little in his chair. "He ran off when you came over earlier too. Think he's afraid of catching gay?"

"Could be," he mused and then gave Trevor a look. "Did you take a nap in there or something?"

"What?"

"You spent about two hours in the bathroom."

Trevor looked away. "Wasn't that long," he muttered.

Pete just waited until Trevor blew out a loud sigh.

"Fine," Trevor said, shooting him an annoyed look. "I had to fend off asshole Greg on my way out. He tried to corner me in the kitchen so he could hump my leg. Where are you going?"

Pete hadn't even realized he'd gotten to his feet. The bottom of his stomach was cold. "Where is he?"

"Sit down, dumbass," Trevor hissed at him. "It was no big deal. Don't start a fucking fight at our first neighborhood barbeque."

Pete laughed at that. He couldn't help it. "Our first neighborhood barbeque is a special time," he mocked, sitting back down. The lingering echo of anger still burned his gut but he knew Trevor had a point.

Reaching over, Trevor slapped Pete's knee lightly. "You know what I meant," he protested. "You're the one who keeps going on and on about blending and all that shit."

Pete caught his hand before Trevor could pull it back and held it against his leg.

"You two are so sweet with each other," Michelle cooed as she pulled a chair closer to theirs and plopped down. "I can tell you're still in that honeymoon period. I remember when Greg and I were like that. We couldn't keep our hands off each other."

"Hmm," Pete told his almost-empty bottle. *Seriously. Not enough beer in the world.* Trevor was silent.

"How did you two meet?" she asked, not seeming to notice the lack of reaction. "I love hearing about how people get together."

"Um..." Pete's mind blanked. He'd thought of the cover story basics but not this detail. Of course he should've thought of this—it was what everyone wanted to know. Nobody cared about Cleveland.

"At a coffee shop," Trevor said easily and Pete relaxed, squeezing his hand in thanks for the save. "He was walking in, talking on his cell phone and acting like an ass." This time, Pete squeezed his hand a little harder. Trevor ignored him and continued. "I was leaving with my coffee—the super-sized one, of course—and he plows right into me."

"Oh no!" Michelle gasped. Pete had to stop himself from asking what happened next.

"So I'm wearing a scalding-hot coffee suit, hyperventilating because it hurts like fu—ah, hell, and here's the cute guy who caused all of this without a drop on him. So I'm pissed and he's asking if I'm all right—still with some guy on his cell—and I storm out of there after telling him what he can do to himself."

"You were pretty rude," Pete said primly. It was Trevor's turn to squeeze his hand in warning.

"What happened then?" Michelle breathed, leaning forward.

"I was really pissed. I didn't even go in for coffee all week," he complained, shooting an aggrieved look at Pete.

"Sorry," Pete apologized before catching himself. Why was he feeling guilty? This was a made-up story!

"I finally break down and go in," Trevor continued. "The place was only a half-block from my apartment and I make really shitty coffee."

"He does," Pete chipped in.

"Don't push me," Trevor warned, giving him a sideways glare. "Just telling this makes me annoyed with you."

Lifting their linked hands, Pete pressed a kiss to the back of Trevor's wrist. "Want me to make it up to you again tonight?" he murmured, holding back a laugh at the flush that climbed the back of Trevor's neck.

"Anyway..." Trevor stretched out the word with exaggerated patience. "I finally go in again early on a Sunday morning. The place is empty except for the barista and the asshole who tried to scald me to death the last time I was in. So he sees me and gets up."

"He was just glaring at me like he wanted to rip my face off," Pete added, getting into the spirit of things.

"I *did* want to rip your face off," Trevor told him, "and then feed it to the sharks. That *hurt*."

Okay, now he's getting a little carried away. Restraining an eye roll, Pete just put on his most sympathetic face. "Poor baby."

"Exactly," Trevor said, nodding. "So he walks over and says he feels so bad about what happened he'd like to buy me a coffee. I was still pissed but how could I turn down free coffee?" Tugging his hand free, he ran a finger down Pete's face. "Especially after he smiled at me."

"Ahh," Michelle sighed. She actually looked a little misty-eyed. "But how did you know when Joey would be coming in?"

"I went every day," Pete improvised. "I sat there for hours, waiting for him. I've never drunk so much coffee. You should've heard how fast I was talking." He looked at Trevor, who was watching him a little warily. "I knew I had to see him again though. Just one look and I knew..."

The wariness in Trevor's eyes was shifting to heat. Pete stared at him, caught. He couldn't help leaning in, moving closer, until —

"That is the sweetest story I've ever heard!" Michelle announced, breaking the spell. Pete started and then sat back, his heart beating as fast as if he really *had* drunk all that coffee from the made-up tale. He gave Michelle a tight smile, not daring to look at Trevor.

"Greg!" Michelle called across the yardful of neighbors to where her husband seemed deep in an intense discussion with Terrance. "Come over here! You need to hear this story." Greg looked over as Terrance scowled at them and stormed off.

"Actually," Pete said, pushing to his feet, "we should get going." It probably wouldn't be wise to have the closeted asshole who'd just hit on his pretend boyfriend come over to hear their fictional "how we met" tale.

"Really?" Trevor's voice was full of hope as he surged to his feet.

He nodded, hiding a smile. "Lots of work to do on the house tomorrow."

"Oh that's too bad," Michelle said. "Well, it was nice meeting you both. Joey, don't forget my sketches."

"Of course not." Trevor's smile had a sickly edge to it. Pete cocked a curious eyebrow at him.

They found Marsha and thanked her before calling a general goodbye as they escaped into their own backyard. As the kitchen door swung shut behind them, the two men stared at each other.

"Holy fuck," Trevor finally breathed. "What the hell was that...hell?"

"Seriously." Turning toward the living room, Pete switched on one of the cheap floor lamps they'd picked up. He was immensely grateful they'd taken the time to install the window coverings earlier that afternoon. Now they could relax without worrying what pantomime their neighbors could see.

Dropping into one of the camp chairs, he tilted his head back and wished for a couch. "I'm going to be so grateful for the furniture once we get some," he sighed.

"Definitely." Trevor dropped down in the chair next to him. They sat in silence for several minutes.

"Nice story," Pete said without opening his eyes, breaking the quiet peace of the room.

"Thanks," Trevor grunted.

They didn't speak for another few minutes. There was a rustle of nylon and Pete opened one eye. Trevor had shifted in his chair so he could look at him.

"I didn't mean it," Trevor said.

"Mean what?" he asked, although Pete had a pretty good idea what he was talking about.

Trevor scowled. "What I said earlier, about you touching me when I didn't want you to. I just said that because I knew it would piss you off."

It was Pete's turn to frown. "Why'd you want to piss me off?"

"Dunno. Guess I was just..." He waved a dismissive hand.

"What?"

"It's stupid."

"I don't care," Pete told him. "Tell me anyway."

Trevor sighed. "It's your job to protect me. I *know* that. I guess I was hoping this was more than you just doing your duty. I don't..." He trailed off, staring at the toe of his shoe.

Pete was silent, waiting.

"I've been in that spot before and I don't want to be there with you." Trevor slouched lower in his chair, repeating softly, "Not you."

His eyebrows twisting together in confusion, Pete asked, "What spot?"

"Fuck," Trevor muttered. "You just won't let it go, will you?"

"No. What spot?"

His head whipped around and Trevor glared at him fiercely. "The one where I like you a whole lot more than you like me. The one where you have fun and then walk away, leaving me empty. That fucking spot, okay?" Ripping his gaze away, Trevor stared at the wall, his jaw set.

Pete pushed out of his chair, sinking onto his knees next to Trevor. Trevor wouldn't look at him. "Hey," Pete said. "I'd never leave you empty."

"Don't say that," Trevor snapped. His fists were balled, his knuckles whitening.

"Why not?" Pete's voice was gentle as his hands closed over those tense fists.

"Because," his voice broke on the word and Trevor flushed, "you can't just say shit like that."

"But it's t-true." *Shit. Not again.* He took a breath. "You're not just a job to me."

Trevor's eyes caught his for a second and then darted away. He didn't say anything, as if he were waiting for something, for Pete to say something else or do something or... Pete's mind went blank with panic.

"Oh hell," he sighed. "I suck at this kind of thing."

"What kind of thing?"

"Talking." Pete grimaced. "You know, about emotions and shit."

Trevor laughed. "I'm not much good at it either."

"How about," Pete's stomach was filled with dancing butterflies but he tried to ignore them and fake some confidence, "I show you instead?" When Trevor's eyes, so blue and so hungry, connected with his, Pete's skin went hot. As desperate as he was for Trevor, though, he still waited for an answer.

"Well?" Trevor growled. "What's the problem?"

"Is this what you want?" Pete asked him.

"What do you think?" he grumbled, rolling his eyes.

"Then say it." Pushing to his feet, Pete felt desire and confidence flooding back as Trevor stared up at him, cockiness stripped away and only raw, vulnerable need remaining. Pete stepped closer, pushing Trevor's knees apart so he could stand between them and loom over the other man.

"Say what?" Although Trevor's voice was raspy, a trace of resistance remained. Despite that, Pete could almost taste Trevor's capitulation. Just one more nudge... He flipped open the button on his jeans and watched Trevor's eyes flare with lust. Pete smiled.

"Five," Pete said, "four...three...two —"

"Yes!" Trevor burst out.

Widening his stance to push Trevor's knees farther apart, Pete slowly lowered his zipper, easing it down over the bulge of his growing erection. "Yes, what?"

"Yes, I want this," Trevor practically snarled, his gaze fixed on Pete's crotch.

"You want what?" Pete purred, hooking his thumbs in his loosened waistline and easing his jeans over his hips. As he waited for Trevor's answer, he rubbed the soft cotton of his boxer briefs over his swiftly hardening cock. When Trevor reached toward the fabric-guarded bulge in front of him, Pete grabbed his wrist and held him off.

"Bastard!" Trevor hissed, his eyes narrowing. "Quit teasing."

"Say it," Pete ordered, unmoved by the minor temper tantrum. He was loving this, the power and control over this strong, gorgeous man. They locked eyes in a battle of wills. Pete didn't blink, keeping his face implacable and hiding his worry that Trevor wouldn't say it, that he'd decide it wasn't worth it and walk away.

"Fuck me," Trevor finally ground out, dropping his gaze. "Please."

The surge of desire hit Pete hard, so intensely and suddenly, his knees went soft and he had to brace his legs to stay upright. He yanked his boxer briefs down around his thighs, freeing his rigid erection. Trevor stared, his tongue peeking out to touch his bottom lip and leave it glistening.

Biting back a groan, Pete had to take several deep breaths before he could even speak. "Suck it," he rasped, and Trevor was on his knees, knocking back the camp chair on his way.

There was no hesitation. Trevor swallowed Pete's cock to the back of his throat as if he were starving for it. Unable to control himself, Pete groaned, overwhelmed by the

heat and the wetness and the pulling suction. He slid his fingers over Trevor's hair, tugging loose the ponytail holder at the base of his skull. The long blond strands fell free, slipping forward to brush against Pete's skin with each raising and lowering of Trevor's head on his cock.

Burrowing his fingers through those teasing strands, Pete cupped the other man's skull with his hands. Trevor went still beneath him as if waiting for direction. That obedient pause sent blood thundering in his ears and his hips nudged forward, burying his cock deeper into Trevor's throat. He took it eagerly, swallowing so his throat massaged the tip.

Pete gritted his teeth to hold back a whimper. He'd never felt anything so amazing. Tightening his fingers, he held Trevor's head still as he retreated and advanced, his hips thrusting forward to bury his cock into the hot, welcoming mouth and pulling back so Trevor's lips tightened around just the head as his tongue lapped at the slit.

"Enough!" Pete pulled free, wanting nothing more than to fuck Trevor's mouth until he came, but knowing he wanted this to be more than a mostly dressed, two-minute blowjob. He wanted to feel Trevor's skin against his, to taste his cock and his balls and his ass, to experience the squeeze of Trevor's body around his erection. He wanted *more*. That should have scared Pete, but he was too desperate and hungry and hard to feel anything but need.

Trevor had pulled back when ordered and, still kneeling, waited for Pete's next command.

"Get up," Pete barked, unable to do anything about the rough edge in his voice. He was just happy he was able to talk. When Trevor scrambled to his feet, Pete told him, "Strip."

"Yes sir," Trevor snapped back with a smirk. He seemed to be finding his balance once again after losing it during the stare-down earlier. Flicking the buttons free one by one, Trevor paused to run his finger down the line where his chest met the edge of his opened shirt.

He's definitely getting more comfortable, Pete thought, his gaze following the path of Trevor's finger as it tucked beneath the button on his jeans. *Maybe too comfortable.*

"Stop," Pete ordered, and Trevor went still, wariness sharpening his expression. Shoving his jeans and underwear down his legs, Pete hurried to undress, stripping with none of the teasing technique Trevor had shown. Despite that, Trevor watched with hungry eyes, still not moving except for the expansion of his chest as he sucked in air.

When he was naked, Pete moved behind Trevor. He stood there for a moment, feeling the tension radiating off the man, loving the way it made his own excitement build. Lifting Trevor's hair out of the way, Pete kissed the nape of his neck. A shudder ran through Trevor's body and he tipped his head forward, silently asking for more.

Pete was happy to oblige, kissing and nibbling his way down the back of Trevor's neck until his shirt collar stopped his progress. Reaching around with both hands, Pete caught the open edges of Trevor's shirt and slid it over his shoulders and down his

arms, trailing his knuckles against the skin he exposed. When the shirt fell free, Pete didn't drop it but twisted the material until it turned into a thick rope.

With his mouth close to Trevor's ear, he growled, "Hands behind your back."

Trevor caught his breath and let it out in a soft groan. His heart beating furiously, Pete waited to see if the other man was game. When Trevor's hands slowly moved to the small of his back, Pete couldn't restrain a triumphant grin.

He wrapped the shirt around Trevor's wrists and tied the ends in a bulky knot. Pete eyed his work critically. It wouldn't have held a true prisoner but it worked just fine for his compliant captive.

Circling his arms around Trevor's waist, Pete unbuttoned his jeans and then eased the zipper down. He worked the other man's jeans and underwear over his hips and down his legs, crouching to free his feet from his shoes and socks. Trevor stepped free of the fabric crumpled around his ankles and stood naked and gorgeous, looking ten feet tall from Pete's crouched position.

As he stood up, Pete trailed his hands up Trevor's calves, behind his knees and along the backs of his thighs, feeling the solid columns of his legs beneath lightly furred skin. When he cupped the firm ass cheeks, Pete felt Trevor shudder under his touch. He squeezed his two handfuls of hard muscle, drawing a groan from Trevor.

Reluctantly releasing Trevor's tempting ass, Pete swept aside the silky fall of hair so he could lick the other man's bent neck. He scraped his teeth over the muscle sloping down to Trevor's shoulder, loving the size and the strength of him, especially as he stood bound in front of him. Pete could do whatever he wanted with this muscled, beautiful ideal of a man.

Wrapping his arms around Trevor's chest, he played with his nipples. Trevor pushed his ass back, grinding against the stiff cock behind him. Pete stilled his hips with a gentle hand.

"Stay right here," he ordered, unable to resist a final pinch of Trevor's erect nipples. Trevor grunted, jerking under the sharp squeeze.

"Again," Trevor demanded.

"Giving orders?" Pete asked silkily. "I should leave you here just like this all night for that." He had no intention of carrying out his threat—it would punish him as much as Trevor.

"No sir," Trevor backtracked. "Sorry. Please do that again, sir."

"This?" The pinch was even harder this time but Trevor surged beneath the rough touch.

"Yes," Trevor hissed.

"Now stay," he repeated. "Don't move." It was harder than Pete had expected to walk away, even though he knew it was just for a minute. He glanced back when he reached the bottom of the stairs and had to stop and admire the image of Trevor, hugely

erect, hands behind his back, his loose hair wild, his eyes narrow and hot, standing obediently where he'd been left.

Pete took the stairs three at a time. When he'd packed the condoms and lube in his suitcase, he'd called himself all kinds of fool for thinking he'd get any action in Honeysuckle. Now, though, he was hugely grateful for his flash of optimism.

Grabbing the supplies, he descended the stairs, almost unable to believe his luck when Trevor came into view, still in the same position, still with the same hungry, defiant glare. Pete stalked up to him, stopping just inches away, and dropped the condoms and lube at their feet. Trevor's gaze wavered and fell.

"Good boy," Pete murmured, cupping his jaw and turning Trevor's face to his. "So obedient." He leaned in and kissed him. It was sweet and gentle for only a second before Pete took over the other man's mouth, demanding entrance. Pete held Trevor's head in both hands, controlling the angle and force of the kiss. He nibbled at Trevor's lips, holding him back when Trevor tried to push forward, to deepen the kiss again. Pete pulled his head away.

"Behave," he said sternly. Even as Trevor nodded, his hips were pressed against Pete's, rubbing their stiff cocks together. The heat of Trevor's erection against his made him go hot and cold with pleasure, but Pete fought for control.

"Turn around," he commanded, his voice ragged. Trevor paused, his expression torn. His hips jerked, whether voluntarily or not, Pete didn't know, but the result was the same. Seizing his upper arms, he whirled Trevor around and propelled him forward until Pete had flattened him against the wall.

Yanking at the shirt twisted around Trevor's wrists, Pete pulled it free and let it drop to the floor. He wanted to press against Trevor without his hands in the way.

"Fuck, you feel good," Pete groaned, the words slipping from him before he could catch them. Softening his grip, he ran his hands over the contours of Trevor's back and down to his ass. His thumbs delved into the crevice between the cheeks, searching for and finding the clenching opening.

Pete heard a catch of breath as he pushed his thumb into the tight grip of Trevor's ass, burying the intruder into the hot squeeze of his body. Closing his eyes, Pete had to pause, panting, overcome by the sensation of being inside Trevor. When Trevor clenched around his thumb, Pete knew he couldn't wait another minute.

"I have to fuck you now," he rasped, pulling his thumb free.

"Finally!" Trevor half-laughed and half-sobbed.

Grabbing a condom packet off the floor, Pete tore open the foil and rolled it on with hands that shook with need. In fact, his whole body was vibrating. He'd never wanted any guy so badly. Snatching up the container of lube, he squeezed some into his hand and returned to Trevor, still standing against the wall.

Pete found that tempting hole again and shoved two slick fingers inside. His other hand found Trevor's cock trapped between his body and the wall. He caressed the

slippery head, his gentle fingers contrasting with the ruthless invasion of his other hand.

Trevor was panting, pushing back against the plunge of Pete's fingers, his own hands flattened against the wall. Lowering his head, Pete kissed the other man's shoulder and licked at the sweat he found there. He tugged Trevor's hips away from the wall, giving himself room to wrap his hand around Trevor's erection in a firm grip. He slid his hand up and down the rigid cock, just rough enough to draw a needy groan from Trevor's throat.

Pulling his fingers out of that beautiful ass, Pete lined the tip of his cock up to the lubed entrance. He reluctantly released Trevor's erection so he could seize the man's hips in both hands, holding him still while he worked the head of his cock into the hot, tight grip of Trevor's ass.

He paused, sucking in air, almost blind with the pleasure of it.

"More," Trevor demanded, attempting to shove his hips back and drive Pete's cock deeper. Pete's grip prevented Trevor from impaling himself on the thick spike. He held on, digging his fingers into the other man's lean hips as Trevor wiggled against the restraint. Eventually, Trevor stilled.

As a reward, Pete pushed in another inch, withdrew and slid forward again. He stretched it out, wanting to savor every second he was inside Trevor, every plunge and retreat, every thrust that stretched the man's tight, tight hold around him.

Trevor wasn't so patient. "Just do it, you motherfucker!" he gasped, twisting his hips as he tried to break Pete's hold. "Why are you fucking torturing me like this?" The last words were almost a wail.

"Because," Pete panted, "you feel so fucking good." When Trevor quieted again, Pete leaned forward a little to plaster his front against the other man's sweat-slick back. "I don't want to rush. I want to remember how every second feels as I ram my cock into your ass."

With an incoherent sound, Trevor tightened around the cock burrowing inside him and, at the squeeze, lines of electricity burned new pathways through Pete's body, frying all his nerve endings at once. With a snarl, he tightened his hands on the other man's hips, driving his cock in to the hilt while yanking Trevor's hips against him.

Something had snapped, leaving Pete powerless to control himself. With wild thrusts, he drove deep into Trevor's ass. One hand snaked around to fist Trevor's erection, pumping up and down in rhythm with his hips as they slammed against the man in front of him.

Pete could feel Trevor's excitement building, could hear it in the small noises he made. He thrust faster, harder, not caring that his strokes were growing wild, even rough.

"Harder!" Trevor begged. "Please, harder!"

Fuck! Widening his stance for more leverage, Pete rammed deep and fast into his ass, feeling his control slipping with each thrust. A roaring filled his ears and he closed his teeth on Trevor's shoulder.

With a yell, Trevor exploded, his body clamping around the erection buried in his ass. It was too much. Pete groaned as he came, his hips working in small, unconscious jerks as his orgasm took over and all he knew was blind, limitless ecstasy that melted everything inside him.

Chapter Six

The first sound Pete heard as he came back to reality was Trevor's breathing. His sweat was cooling on his body except where they were connected, skin to skin. Releasing the cock he still held, Pete wrapped both arms around Trevor's chest—not to control but just as a hug. He kissed the spot he'd bitten.

"Did I hurt you?" he asked, wincing at the raw sound of his voice.

Trevor's body moved against his in what Pete was pretty sure was a laugh. "Only in the best way," he said, turning his head. "And only when I begged you to."

"Jesus!" An aftershock rippled through Pete at his words. "What you do to me..." He smiled as he kissed the corner of Trevor's mouth.

"What *I* do?" Trevor protested indignantly, although his lips quivered from restraining a smile. "Aren't you the one still parked in my ass?"

Pete laughed. "Suppose I am." He eased out of Trevor, oddly regretful to leave, and stepped back.

"Oh." Trevor turned his face away.

"What?" *Shit*. Here was the awkwardness. Pete hated this part.

"I didn't mean you had to go," Trevor muttered.

Pete stared at him for a surprised second and then laughed. When Trevor shot him an offended glare, Pete grabbed him by the arm, turning him around and tugging him into his arms. Trevor remained stiff and unresponsive for a whole three seconds before melting against him and wrapping his arms around Pete's waist.

"Don't worry," Pete reassured him, giving him a squeeze. "I'll be back in there soon."

"Good." Trevor's voice was muffled against Pete's neck. "Think an air mattress would pop if we got wild on it? 'Cause these floors look kind of hard and something tells me I'll be the one on my hands and knees."

Pete winced. "We need a bed."

"And a couch."

"Definitely." Pete's hands were wandering from Trevor's back down to his ass. He just couldn't stay away. "And a nice, solid dining room table. I'll bend you over and—"

Trevor raised his head and wrapped a hand around the back of Pete's skull to yank him in for a kiss, cutting off his words, as well as any remaining connection between his mouth and brain. Despite the fact that they'd just had sex, Trevor's kiss was tentative, even shy. Pete was oddly charmed by the hesitant flick of Trevor's tongue against his—charmed and definitely turned-on. His cock was already swelling again.

He reluctantly pulled his head back. "Tell you what," Pete suggested. "How does a shower and then testing out the quality of that air mattress sound?"

Trevor gave a long-suffering groan. "I'm going to be on my hands and knees, aren't I?"

Nipping the other man's lower lip, Pete growled, "You'll be where I put you."

"Yeah?" If the word was meant to have come out challenging, Trevor failed miserably. It was more of an eager sigh.

"Yeah." Unable to resist, Pete kissed him again, short and hard. "And now I want you in the shower, so move." Turning Trevor around, he gave him a little push toward the stairs. Laughing, Trevor headed for the steps. Grabbing the condoms and lube from the floor, Pete caught up with him and gave him a sharp smack on the ass with his free hand.

Trevor jumped a foot, turning his head to glare at Pete. "What the hell was that?"

Crowding behind him, Pete pushed his erection against the other man's ass. "Please," Pete scoffed. "You liked it."

"Did not," Trevor protested, but the color creeping up the back of his neck told otherwise.

"Liar," Pete murmured into his ear, snaking a hand around so he could grip the rigid spike of Trevor's cock. "You're hard as a rock."

"I didn't... It wasn't..." Trevor sputtered.

Giving the erection in his hand a final squeeze, Pete released it, backing down a step with a laugh. "It's okay," he soothed. "We won't do anything you don't want to do. If you want me to spank your ass until it burns, just let me know. Until then, there're lots of other things I can think of."

Although he was still flushed, Trevor relaxed a little as a suggestive smile touched his mouth. "Like what?"

"Like molesting you in the shower if you'd ever get your sweet ass up there," Pete growled.

Trevor hurried up the final stairs and dodged into the bathroom, only to pop his head back out. "Hurry up, slowpoke!" he teased before disappearing again.

"You're a mouthy little bastard," Pete called after him, climbing the stairs and following him into the bathroom. Trevor was already in the tub adjusting the water temperature, the clear curtain blurring his outline just enough to make it interesting. Pushing the curtain aside, Pete joined him in the shower.

Tilting his head back into the stream, Trevor closed his eyes. The water changed his hair to liquid gold. Pete touched a streaming lock, unable to keep his hands off the man.

"Turn around," he ordered, reaching for the shampoo. He soaped Trevor's hair, massaging his scalp with his fingertips in order to hear Trevor's groan of pleasure. Pete nudged him around again to rinse, working his fingers through the dark-blond strands until all the bubbles had been washed away.

When he grabbed the conditioner bottle, Trevor tried to take it away. "I can do that."

Holding the bottle out of reach, Pete shook his head. "I want to. Now turn around and be still."

After a mutinous pause, Trevor obeyed and Pete worked a liberal amount through Trevor's hair.

"I like this stuff," Pete told him, running his fingers through to separate the strands. "It's slippery."

Although Trevor just grunted, it was a breathless sound. The hair washing was getting to him. Pete grinned and reached for the soap.

Lathering his hands, he moved Trevor's heavy, conditioned hair over his shoulder so his back was completely exposed. He swept his soapy palms over Trevor's skin, across shoulder to shoulder and then down the length of his spine. Trevor's ass cheeks clenched as Pete's fingers delved between them.

"Spread 'em," Pete growled, knocking his foot between Trevor's feet and feeling like the cheesiest T.V.-show cop for saying it. Trevor seemed to like it though—he obeyed quickly, bracing his feet against either side of the tub as a shudder ran beneath his skin.

Crouching down, Pete soaped Trevor's left leg and then his right, working his way up until he reached where the back of Trevor's thigh met the hard curve of his ass cheek. At that point, he couldn't resist taking full advantage of the spread thighs, reaching between to cup Trevor's tight balls in his soapy hand.

Trevor's chest expanded with a sharp inhale and a tremor ran through his locked leg muscles. With a final gentle squeeze, Pete slid his fingers back between Trevor's cheeks, finding and circling the puckered entrance. Trevor moved his hips, nudging back against the touch, as if his body was asking for the penetration.

When Pete finally pushed his finger into his ass, Trevor hissed out a breath.

"Sore?" Pete asked, starting to withdraw the digit.

"No!" Trevor's body clamped around his finger as if to hold it inside. "A little, I mean, but don't stop. Please."

Pete wasn't sure why he was so charmed by the grudging way Trevor said "please". Just for that, he plunged his finger deep into Trevor's ass several times before withdrawing it.

Trevor made a disgruntled sound. "I'm okay. Really."

"Yeah, well, maybe so," Pete told him, soaping his hands again, "but your ass will have to wait a while to get fucked again."

"But —"

"Enough." Pete cut him off. "Turn around." When he saw Trevor's expression, he had to bite back a grin. That sulky bottom lip was going to drive him crazy. Pete nipped it and then kissed him. It was impossible to be so close and *not* kiss Trevor.

He ran his hands up Trevor's arms and down his chest, pausing to pinch the other man's nipples before sliding across his belly and down to his groin. Pete had saved the best for last. Both hands stroked Trevor's engorged cock, one sliding over the head as the other gripped the base before sliding up and taking the place of his first hand. They moved faster and faster, squeezing and sliding with soapy ease over the length of his cock. Trevor's breaths came fast, forcing his chest to heave with the effort. His eyes were locked on Pete's fingers wrapped around his erection.

Moving his hips closer, Pete bumped his cock against Trevor's. His hands still moved in a regular rhythm as he expanded his grip to encompass both stiff shafts. Trevor reached out and grasped Pete's hips, fiercely digging his fingers into the unyielding muscle, as if his hold was the only thing keeping him on his feet.

"I'm going to come!" Trevor groaned, his hips thrusting uncontrollably, small movements that rubbed his cock against Pete's with an almost unbearable friction.

"Then come," Pete ordered, increasing the speed and pressure of his fingers until it was bordering on painful. "Now."

With a guttural shout, Trevor exploded, shooting jets of hot cum onto Pete's belly. The sight drove Pete over the edge and he let himself go, tumbling into the tearing ecstasy of his orgasm. Pulse after pulse of pleasure ripped through him, melting his insides until everything inside him had burst from the tip of his cock.

Trevor's fingers were gentle on his hips now, massaging the newly bruised flesh as Pete came back to earth. His blue eyes were soft, just inches away, all sarcastic shields stripped from them. Feeling raw and vulnerable, Pete brushed his knuckles down Trevor's cheek and then leaned in to kiss him, just a touch of his lips that clung for a fragile second.

Pulling back, he forced a smile. "Better rinse that c-conditioner out," he said hoarsely and then cleared his throat. "Before we run out of hot water."

Trevor blinked and his eyes were guarded again. "Right." He tipped his head back into the stream of water. "At least with you in *here*, I know you won't be flushing the fucking toilet."

Pete's laugh sounded rusty to his own ears. "That's true." Grabbing the soap, he did a quick lather and rinse before washing his hair. Pete didn't know what was wrong with him. There wasn't any reason for him to get shy all of a sudden, to be tongue-tied and avoiding Trevor's eyes. No reason at all.

"Done?" Trevor asked, reaching for the faucet. At Pete's nod, he turned off the water. After sluicing the drops from his hair, Trevor stepped out of the tub, grabbing a towel and tossing one to Pete. They dried off in silence for an awkward amount of time before Trevor spoke again.

"Did I fuck things up somehow?"

Pete looked at him, surprised. "What d-do you mean?"

"I don't know." Trevor shrugged, looking uncomfortable. "You've gone all quiet. Figured I'd said something."

"No," Pete told him as he messed around with his towel. It seemed stupid to wrap it around his waist but hanging it up and standing naked in front of Trevor seemed...presumptuous, like he was assuming that was okay now, that they were a couple or something. "You didn't do anything. I just..." How was he supposed to explain to Trevor when he didn't even understand what was going on in his own head?

"Hang on." Trevor hung up his towel and turned toward the sink, grabbing his toothbrush. "I'm about to fall over here. Let's finish this in bed—or in bags, I guess. Okay?"

"Okay." That gave him a short reprieve. Pete reached for his own toothbrush, holding it out so Trevor could squeeze some toothpaste onto the bristles. They brushed in silence but it was a companionable silence this time. Glancing sideways at Trevor, Pete smiled around his toothbrush. It was surprisingly nice to do stupid little things like this with someone.

No, he corrected himself, it's nice to do stupid little things like this with Trevor.

* * * * *

"Are we going to just end up in the crack if we push them together?" Trevor asked, eyeing the air mattresses doubtfully.

Pete sighed. "Probably."

Shooting Pete a quick glance, Trevor suggested, "We could both sleep on one."

His heart picking up tempo, Pete tried to keep his voice even. "It'd involve some close sleeping."

"Spooning, even." The corner of Trevor's mouth quivered.

"Hmm." Pete resisted the urge to yell "yes!" and pretended to consider the idea. "Maybe zip our sleeping bags together..."

The humor disappeared from Trevor's expression as his eyes grew hot. "Okay."

They connected the two bags, creating a double-sized sleeping bag, and crawled in without saying anything further. Trevor lay on his side, his back several inches away from Pete's front.

Without eye contact, some of Pete's bravado returned. "Why are you clutching the edge of the bed?" He snaked an arm around Trevor's waist and tugged him closer. "Get over here."

Trevor didn't hesitate. He shifted over until they were truly spooning, his back against Pete's chest and his ass pressing into Pete's growing erection.

"So we're okay?" Trevor asked tentatively.

"Yeah," Pete told him, kissing his shoulder. "I was just being a fuck-tard. Don't mind me."

Trevor snorted a laugh. "Is it the screwing-the-witness thing again?"

"No."

"No?"

"No." Pete sighed. The guy wasn't about to give this up.

"Was it because you think you won't be able to do your job if you're distracted by fucking me?"

"You aren't going to let this go, are you?" Pete asked.

With a short laugh, Trevor said, "No."

"Fine," he groaned. "It's nothing logical or anything. It's..."

"It's what?" Trevor's chest expanded beneath Pete's hand in a huge sigh. "Jeez Louise, just come out with it. This is like pulling fucking teeth."

"Watch it," Pete growled, catching one of Trevor's nipples between his fingers and giving it a warning pinch.

Trevor squirmed, rubbing his ass over the hardening cock behind him. "Sorry," he said, although he didn't sound apologetic.

"Sure you are," Pete scoffed. Now that he'd started, he couldn't stop playing with Trevor's nipple. "What I was *saying* is this is just...new."

"What do you mean 'new'?" Trevor asked breathlessly, still wriggling against him. Pete tightened his arm to hold him still and switched to the other nipple, teasing it to a hard point.

"'New' as in 'new'. As in, I've never done this before so I don't know how to act." Pete's voice was gruff with embarrassment.

Trevor tensed against him. "You've never done this before," he repeated carefully.

Blowing out an impatient breath, Pete shook his head, even though Trevor couldn't see him. "I've done this before. I just haven't done *this*."

Trevor was quiet for several seconds. "What?"

"I've fucked before," Pete explained, struggling to find the right words — *any* words, actually. "But that's all it was — getting off and then leaving. It wasn't this, with you, and living together and shit." *It wasn't a relationship*, Pete thought but refused to say it.

"But we're not really living together," Trevor told him. "I mean, we are but it's just so you can protect me until the trial, right? So if it helps, just think of it as long-term fucking. You know, like a really, really long one-night stand. That way, it won't mess with your head."

Pete couldn't breathe. It felt as if Trevor had kneed him in the balls. How had he so dramatically misread the signals? *Stupid!* his brain mocked. It was just like he'd told Trevor — he'd never experienced anything beyond a random fuck. This was Pete getting mushy and playing house and imagining a stupid fucking fairytale ending with mice sewing him a goddamn ball gown and motherfucking squirrels singing at their motherfucking wedding. Idiot.

His hand dropped away from Trevor's chest and he withdrew his arm, shifting back a few inches — as far as he could go without falling off the air mattress.

Trevor turned his head, rolling over far enough to look at him. "You okay?"

"F-f-fine." He closed his eyes, not able to look the other man in the face. "J-just t-t-t..." Pete gritted his teeth. He was too exhausted for this shit. "Tired."

"Okay," Trevor said tentatively. "Goodnight then."

"N-night."

Pete lay awake for a long time, thinking about how stupid he'd been. What kind of idiot fell in love with someone in two days?

Trevor stared at the multiple panes of moonlight that made up the window.

Why the fuck did I say that? He had no clue why he'd done it, why he'd shut down Pete's tentative suggestion they were more than casual fuck-buddies trapped in the same house for seven months.

Trevor had felt it too, the difference from all other boyfriends and hook-ups and casual lays. There was something about Pete, something that drew him even as it pricked his skin with uneasiness, warning him that this relationship could be dangerous to his peace of mind, to his heart.

Absently rubbing his chest, Trevor shifted slightly, resisting sliding back against the heat and comfort of Pete's body. It'd only been a few days, but Trevor knew he was already addicted—not only to that muscular body but to the way Pete's amused eyes searched for his when the neighbors were saying something nuts and to the gentle slide of his hand over wood as he worked to fix the porch. Even the way he stuttered a little when he was anxious or uncomfortable warmed Trevor's belly. Except for tonight, when Trevor had caused that stammer. Just the thought hurt his heart.

He'd panicked. That was the only explanation. Why else would he sabotage what was shaping up to be the best relationship he'd ever had? Whatever the reason, it was said and Pete was hurt and would probably never bring up how he felt about Trevor again. Hell, he'd probably never bring up how he felt about breakfast cereal, much less about Trevor.

He shifted again, trying to move slowly so he wouldn't wake Pete. He knew he'd fucked things up. The question was, how could he fix it?

* * * * *

Trevor woke up with his back pressed against a warm, male, snoring body, a rigid cock branding his right butt cheek. Pete's arms were both wrapped around him, clutching him tightly. Trevor smiled. Their unconscious bodies knew what was right, even if their brains were determined to fuck it up.

He wiggled, nestling his ass more tightly against Pete's groin. The snoring stopped, turning into a sort of waking growly grumble as Pete's arms tightened and he buried his face in Trevor's neck.

Trevor knew the exact moment when Pete remembered the conversation of the night before, because he stiffened and began to pull away.

"Wait," Trevor told him, rolling over and pushing Pete onto his back in the same motion, both of them falling off the edge of the air mattress and landing on the floor in a tangle of sleeping bags. Before Pete could recover from his surprise, Trevor straddled his stomach.

"I need to talk to you," Trevor said, trying to focus. The ripple of Pete's abs against his balls was very distracting.

Pete cocked an eyebrow. "You have to sit on me to talk to me?"

"No." Shifting back a little so the damp tip of Pete's cock bumped his tailbone, Trevor grinned. "This is just for fun."

"Fun," Pete repeated, his mouth twisting into the facsimile of a smile. "Right."

"See, that's what I need to talk to you about."

"Fun?"

Trevor shook his head. "It isn't all fun. I was just being a panicky asshole last night."

His smile fell away as his eyes went wary. "Explain."

"I'm trying to," Trevor told him. "You just keep distracting me."

Pete looked offended. "Do not!"

"Do too!" Trevor laughed.

"How am I distracting you?"

"With this..." Reaching behind him, Trevor stroked a hand over Pete's eager cock, which jumped against his lower spine. "And this..." He pushed up on his knees to brush his sac over the stomach muscles beneath him. "And this." He stroked his thumb over Pete's lower lip.

"Yeah?" Pete rasped. "Want me to tell you how you're distracting me?"

"Me first," Trevor insisted. "It's been bugging me all night."

"Do it then." Impatience ran through his voice as Pete gripped Trevor's thighs and pushed him back a little harder against his erection.

Trevor shook his head. "Even on the bottom, you're bossy."

"Damn straight." Pete's hands were massaging his quads now, working higher and higher up his thighs. Trevor swallowed. "Now tell me what you need to say so I can fuck you."

"Yes sir." Trevor knew he'd lost the control but he also knew he liked it that way. "You do things to me no one has ever done—and I don't mean that in a sex-trick way. I feel things with you and that freaks the shit out of me, so I told you it's just sex between us so I could keep pretending it was true."

Pete was watching him with those unsettling gray eyes. "Done?" he finally asked.

His voice escaping him, Trevor could only nod.

"Then kiss me."

Trevor blinked. "But what about what I just said?"

With a smile, Pete reached up to run gentle fingers down Trevor's arm. "We'll figure out how we feel later. Right now, I want to fuck you blind."

After a startled moment, Trevor grinned back. "Sounds like a plan." Leaning forward, he touched Pete's mouth with his, brushing his lips in a barely-there kiss he knew would drive Pete nuts with frustration. Sure enough, Pete grabbed his head with both hands as he snarled, yanking Trevor down into a hard kiss.

Pete demanded entrance into his mouth, taking over with his tongue, nipping with his teeth when Trevor didn't respond quickly enough. Trevor let him in, melting beneath the dominating kiss, as turned-on by the punishment of it as he was by the caressing reward. He wriggled with pleasure and Pete growled a warning, holding his head still with both hands.

Being a large guy, Trevor had a hard time finding someone who was bigger than he was, especially someone who wanted to hold him down and fuck him. When Pete had tied him up the night before, he'd almost lost it right then. The memory made him squirm again and Pete flipped them both so Trevor landed on his back on the air mattress with Pete on top of him.

"Do I need to tie you up again?" Pete asked, sounding amused, and Trevor's heart beat in double-time.

"Yes please," Trevor gasped, and Pete's grin fell away as his eyes lit with desire.

"When we finally get a bed," Pete promised, his voice thick, "I'll tie you up so you can't even move an inch. Then I'll shove my cock up your ass and fuck you until you beg."

"Jesus Christ!" Trevor's hips jerked, thrusting up toward Pete's.

"For now though," Pete continued, seizing both of Trevor's wrists and tugging his arms over his head, "I'm going to have to settle for just holding you down while I fuck you until you beg."

"Please," Trevor moaned, even as he realized Pete hadn't even gotten to the fucking part and he was already begging. When Pete sat back on his knees, Trevor groaned again, this time in disappointment, but Pete was just reaching for the condoms. He rolled one on as Trevor watched, mesmerized, and then he slicked his latex-sheathed cock with lube.

Trevor's fingers itched to help, to slide his fingers down the length of Pete's erection, but he resisted, keeping his hands locked together above his head where Pete had put them. Pete watched him with a knowing curve of his lips, as if he could see the struggle going on in his head.

"What a good boy," Pete purred, and Trevor jerked, just the caress of the other man's voice enough to bring him off the bed. "Let's see how long you can last."

No! Trevor didn't want to know how long he could last. He didn't *care* how long he could last. He wanted the instant gratification of Pete's cock in his ass. That didn't appear to be Pete's plan though, so Trevor braced himself.

Supporting his weight on his hands on either side of Trevor's chest, Pete dipped his head down and caught Trevor's earlobe in his teeth. Trevor closed his eyes as the damp tip of his tongue ran over the shell of his ear, raising a trail of goose bumps down his neck. Pete's lips brushed along his jaw and under, teasing his throat with delicate touches before closing his teeth just hard enough to send a thrill down his spine.

His mouth was a little rougher on Trevor's nipples, sucking and nipping with enough pressure to sharpen the nubs into swollen, needy points. Trevor was panting for breath already and Pete hadn't even reached his waist yet. His back arched off the mattress, thrusting his straining cock upward, trying to press it against something, anything—Pete's hand or cock or stomach. Trevor needed the slide of flesh against flesh, the friction, but Pete was out of reach and his erection met only empty air.

Grasping Trevor's hip with one hand, Pete shoved his body down, flat against the mattress, and held him there. The restraint only made Trevor more frantic and he twisted in Pete's grip. With a husky laugh, Pete pinned his other hip and well and licked a path from Trevor's breastbone to his bellybutton.

There he paused to dip his tongue into the shallow depression. Trevor groaned at the delay. Pete's mouth was close, so close, and he was spending what felt like hours exploring his bellybutton. He was dying to grab Pete's head and force the other man to swallow the full length of his cock, but he didn't move his hands except to grip his own wrist. He knew if he forced the issue, Pete would find a way to punish him—a sweet punishment, sure, but one that would last and last, delaying his orgasm for an infinite amount of time.

So he held his arms above his head, one arm pulling against the strength of the other, while Pete kissed a line down his stomach until he reached the desperate head of Trevor's cock.

"Please," Trevor moaned, not able to resist begging any longer. "Suck me, please!"

Pete chuckled, his breath hot against the wet head of Trevor's cock. "Since you asked so nicely..." He circled his lips around the tip and drove the cock to the back of his throat.

Trevor let out a shout of pleasure, the need to grab Pete's head almost unbearable now. He shoved his hips up instead, fighting the grip of Pete's hands, trying to bury another half inch of his cock into the wonderful, suctioning heat of his mouth.

Pete allowed it, sliding his hands down Trevor's thighs. Tightening his lips around him, Pete raised his head, pressing his tongue against the sensitive underside of Trevor's cock before easing down to the base again. Trevor's hips matched the rhythm, driving deep into Pete's throat before sliding back out, only to bury his cock inside the hot depths of his mouth once again.

"I'm close," Trevor gritted out and Pete pulled away. "No!" Trevor's voice was almost a wail but he was too far gone to be embarrassed. Pete showed no mercy. Instead of returning his addictive mouth to Trevor's desperate cock where it belonged, he ran light hands over Trevor's thighs, catching him under the knees.

He pushed Trevor's legs toward his chest, confusing him for a moment before he realized what Pete intended. Irrational panic flowered in his chest and Trevor twisted, trying to turn over.

"Wait," Trevor panted. "Not this way."

"Yes." The head of Pete's cock pressed against the clenched entrance of Trevor's ass. "This way. I want to watch you when you come."

The feel of the blunt intruder penetrating his tight opening distracted Trevor, although the panic was still sharp. "Please," he begged, reaching to grab Pete's wrists. "I'm not..." He stopped, not even knowing how to finish his sentence.

To his relief, Pete paused. He leaned down and gently kissed Trevor's mouth. "Don't worry," he soothed. "I'll take care of you. I'll always take care of you."

Trevor stared at him, searched his face for reassurance. Pete looked steadily back, his gray eyes soft. The panic eased and Trevor nodded slowly, releasing his grip on Pete's arms and placing his hands over his head in surrender.

Pete kissed him again, more deeply this time. Relaxing a little more, Trevor arched into the kiss, the final shreds of his fear disintegrating until only hunger was left.

"Okay," he said hoarsely when Pete lifted his head. "Look at me if you really have to look at me."

Pete grunted a laugh. "I do have to look at you," he told him, bracing his hands on the air mattress on either side of Trevor. "I really do." Holding his gaze, Pete pressed the tip of his cock against Trevor's rear opening, pushing through the resistance until the head was lodged inside his ass.

His eyes wanted to close, to block everything out but the wonderful, stinging stretch of his ass, but Trevor kept them open and locked onto Pete's eyes. As he entered him, Pete's gaze softened and his face flushed. Looking at him, Trevor could almost imagine how the grip of his ass felt around the sensitive head of that cock, how hot and tight and amazing it must feel for Pete.

"Fuck," Trevor hissed, overwhelmed by the dual onslaught of sensations, of glimpsing Pete's ecstasy while experiencing his own intense pleasure.

"Okay?" Pete asked, sweat beading across his forehead and temples.

"Not if you don't hurry up and fuck me," Trevor gritted out.

A half-smile flashed before Pete's intent expression returned. Slowly, so slowly, he pushed into Trevor, inch after inch until the entire thick shaft throbbed inside him. He felt huge and incredible and Trevor tightened his body around the invading cock, just to watch Pete's face contort with pleasure.

"Tease," Pete accused in a gasp. Trevor huffed out a laugh. It was Pete's fault for insisting on the face-to-face thing. If he hadn't, Trevor wouldn't have known it was so fun to torture him.

All thoughts of teasing disappeared as Pete began to move. His cock slid out and back in, starting slow and then getting a little faster, a little harder. With each thrust, Pete's belly rubbed against Trevor's rigid shaft, finally giving him the friction he'd been begging for all morning.

Pete's face was tight, his eyes molten silver as he drove into Trevor. As the tension built, the pleasure ratcheting up with each plunge of Pete's cock, each stroke of his hard belly across Trevor's erection, so did Trevor's renewed panic.

He'll see me, he'll see me, repeated over and over in his mind. He had no idea why that scared him so much but it did, and he twisted his head away.

"Look at me," Pete rasped, and he did, unable to deny that commanding voice. The panic kept growing though, accelerating his heart until it felt as if it would beat right through his chest. Pete was hammering into him, not letting him look away.

"Hang on to me," he ordered, and Trevor grabbed his arms. That helped a little, although he was still terrified as Pete drove into him, never breaking eye contact. Trevor hung on, fighting back his climax, too scared to go over the edge with Pete watching. *He'll see me!*

Pete kissed him, a short, hard press of his lips. "I've got you," he told him. "Come. Now."

He let go. Trevor gave himself up to the pleasure, disintegrating into a million pieces while Pete watched. The panic had intensified everything and he came hard, convulsing over and over until it felt as if everything inside him had erupted, spilling out into the open where Pete could see. He held on the whole time, anchoring himself by digging his fingers into the strength of Pete's arms.

The muscles shook under his hold and he vaguely realized Pete had come too, had jumped over the edge with him. This yanked him back into a series of aftershocks. When that passed, he drifted on the final strands of pleasure, gradually coming back to reality to find Pete still deep inside him, his arms wrapped around Trevor in a bear hug and his face buried in his neck.

Trevor slid his hands over Pete's back, returning the embrace. Tipping his head forward, he kissed him on the head, his hair soft against Trevor's lips. Pete's arms tightened around him in response as he pulled his cock free, sending a final ripple of pleasure through Trevor.

"Okay?" he asked, stroking a hand over his shoulder blade.

"Yeah," Pete finally answered without looking up. "Mind if we stay like this for a little while?"

"I don't mind." *Not at all.*

They fell asleep with their arms locked around each other.

Chapter Seven

"Want some?" Pete held out his water bottle. It was mid-afternoon and hot, and they were still working on the fucking porch floor. They would've been done if they'd gotten up a little earlier – as it was, they'd rolled out of bed around lunchtime.

"Sure." Trevor's fingers brushed his as he took the bottle and Pete felt the shock all the way down to his balls.

Isn't fucking supposed to get him out of my system? he wondered, watching as Trevor tipped his head back and drank, his throat moving as he swallowed. It had actually accomplished the opposite – now Trevor was firmly embedded inside him. Pete snorted a laugh and Trevor raised an eyebrow.

"You're like a splinter," Pete non-explained.

"Thanks?" After a final drink, he set the water on the porch floor in a spot of shade out of their way.

Pete laughed again, stepping close enough to slide his fingers down Trevor's arm and take his hand. "You're there, under my skin," he said, running his fingertips across Trevor's. "Sometimes painful, sometimes annoying –"

"Hey!" Trevor interjected.

Closing his fingers around Trevor's hand, Pete yanked his arm so he stumbled forward a step, bumping against Pete's chest. "The only problem with that comparison is, I'll never want to pull you out."

"I'd say there are other problems with calling me a splinter," Trevor protested. Although he was attempting to look surly, he wasn't doing a very good job of it. His tongue dampened his bottom lip while his eyes sparked with hunger.

Leaning close, so his mouth brushed Trevor's ear, Pete said very low, "I wish all the neighbors would disappear for a while so I could tie you to this post and suck you off. Or maybe I'd bend you over the railing and –"

"Joey!" a woman's voice called, interrupting Pete's little fantasy. "Pete!" Trevor moaned under his breath.

Taking a deep breath, Pete turned and forced a smile, keeping the porch railing in front of him in the hope it would hide a certain unruly portion of his anatomy until it could settle down. "Hi...um, Abby, is it?"

She beamed at them. "Aren't you good with names. I would never have remembered after meeting so many people last night."

He shrugged. "It's useful for the job."

"Right," Abby nodded. "I suppose you needed to remember all your clients."

Clients? Right – financial advisor. “Um, sure.” Pete stumbled a little over the word, kicking himself for almost forgetting their cover story. He decided to change the subject before he said something to totally fuck everything up. “So what are you up to?”

Holding out the cardboard box she’d been clutching to her chest, Abby said, “Tomatoes. I have a few vegetables growing out back. Since it’s too late for you to start your own garden, I thought you’d like some fresh produce.”

“That’d be great, thanks.” He reached down to take the box from her, still not ready to move away from the railing. “That’s really nice of you.”

“Oh, there’s plenty,” she assured him, although her face was flushed with pleasure.

Trevor peered over his shoulder into the box. “Those are huge,” he told her. “What d’you feed those suckers?”

Her cheeks brightened even more as she giggled. “I have a composting bin,” she explained. “Plus the soil here is...” She trailed off, ducking her head. “Sorry. You don’t want to hear boring gardening stories.”

“Actually, I love gardening stories,” Trevor said with a sweet smile that squeezed Pete’s heart. “Would you mind if we asked your advice next spring when we start ours? We’re pretty hopeless gardeners.”

“Oh, I...of course!” She was completely flustered and Pete couldn’t blame her. Trevor at his most charming could turn anyone’s brain to mush. “But I’m sure you’re not hopeless.”

Holding up his thumbs, Trevor showed them to her. “Completely brown,” he said sadly.

She laughed and then stopped herself, covering her mouth with her hand. “Silly.” Abby shook her head. “I should get back. Enjoy the tomatoes.” She hurried off with a wave.

“Thank you,” Pete called after her. He watched her hurry back across the street to her house, a beige ranch-style with dark green trim that sat next door to Roth-fathering Len’s place. Trevor rested his chin on Pete’s shoulder, leaning into him.

Pete tipped his head to rest against Trevor’s temple. “You were nice.”

“So was she,” Trevor shot back defensively. “Besides, I feel kind of bad for her. Her husband’s kind of an asshole.”

His eyebrows twisting together in confusion, Pete asked, “Wait—is she married to the closet case?”

“Greg?” Trevor said. “No—that’s what’s-her-name...Melissa?”

“Michelle,” Pete corrected. “Right. Abby’s married to Terrance then?”

“Terrance is sweaty and balding, right?”

“Yeah.”

"Then yeah, Abby's married to Terrance," Trevor confirmed with a small nod, digging his chin into Pete's shoulder. His arms snuck around Pete's waist, tugging his ass against Trevor's groin.

Pete caught his breath. "So Terrance is an asshole too?"

"Not as big a one as closet-case Greg but yeah." Trevor circled his hips, grinding his burgeoning cock against Pete's ass. "I could tell by how she acts. Bet he tells her she's boring when she talks about gardening and shit."

"Huh." His voice was rusty and he cleared his throat. It wasn't that Pete didn't care about the neighbor. It was just right now, with Trevor's erection pressing against his ass, he really, *really* didn't care about Abby or any of their neighbors. "Time for a break?"

Trevor gave an amused snort. "Aren't we taking a break right now?"

Balancing the box of tomatoes on the railing so he could hold it with one hand, Pete slipped the other arm behind him to grab Trevor's hip and pull him hard against him. "I meant a *special* break," he said, his voice quiet and rough. "Inside?"

"Why, Pete," Trevor gasped with a fake Southern drawl. "Are you suggesting what I think you're suggesting?"

"I don't know," Pete growled, pulling the other man even more tightly against his ass. "If you think I'm suggesting we go inside and I pin you against the counter, rip off your clothes, hold you down and fuck you until your head explodes, then yeah, I am suggesting that."

"That's funny. I was thinking exactly the same thing." Trevor's hand dipped from Pete's waist toward the bulge in the front of his jeans.

"C'mon," Pete ordered. Before he could turn around though, a car pulled up in front of the house. Catching the movement in the corner of his eye, Pete whipped back around.

Two men, one driving and one in the passenger seat, occupied the car. Neither was familiar to Pete.

"Get in the house," he ordered quietly.

"What?" Trevor dropped his arms and stepped back. "Why?"

"Get in the house." Pete enunciated each word. "Now." Shit. His gun was inside. He hadn't thought he'd need it just fixing the fucking porch.

The men got out of the car and he used his body to crowd Trevor toward the front door, which also served to keep Pete between the men and Trevor.

"What the hell?" Trevor protested, poking his head around Pete's shoulder. "Oh," he laughed. "It's okay. I know these guys."

"That doesn't mean it's safe," Pete insisted, still trying to push Trevor back. "Get inside the fucking house!" The cop who'd betrayed Trevor a year ago had probably known him.

"No, seriously, Pete." Trevor darted around him and down the stairs, giving his arm a quick, reassuring squeeze as he passed. "You can trust these guys."

"Fuck—Trevor!" he snapped, grabbing for him, but Trevor was already out of reach, grabbing the closer of the two men in a hard hug. Pete trailed after him, swearing under his breath.

"You must be Pete," the shorter man said with a cheery grin, extending his hand. "Nate Washington, but you can call me Wash 'cause everyone does. The big guy over there making out with Tr—ah, *Joey*, is Rhodie."

Pete shook hands with a short nod of greeting, still uneasy and intensely pissed at this turn of events. It didn't help that Wash was drop-dead gorgeous and had just had his arms wrapped around Trevor.

"Making out?" The other man repeated. He was big—a rough-around-the-edges bear of a man whose demeanor just screamed cop. "I just hugged him. And it's Isaac Rhodes, by the way."

Pete eyed them both coldly. "He e-mailed his location to you." Fuck, he was mad.

"Hey now, it's not like that—" Wash started but Rhodes cut him off with a sharp wave of his hand.

"No, he didn't," Rhodes told him, taking a step closer. "And we shouldn't talk out here. Inside."

Although it irritated him, Pete knew he was right. Stepping aside, he waved the other three toward the house. Wash and Trevor went willingly enough but Rhodes gestured for him to go first.

Definitely a cop, Pete decided. He eyed Rhodes, debating whether it was worth pushing the issue, but the other man's even, implacable gaze convinced him to let Rhodes take up the rear. As he climbed the porch steps, his back stiff, Pete couldn't help but wonder whether Rhodes and Trevor had hooked up. If the big cop could get Pete to do what he wanted without even saying a word, he'd most likely be a master of domination in bed.

Pete tried to block out thoughts of Rhodes and Trevor together but the image wouldn't leave his brain.

"Did you get hit by burglars?" Wash asked, peering into the various, mostly empty rooms. "Or is this some decorating scheme—American Barren or something?"

The amusement in his voice pricked Pete's already-wounded pride. "We're refinishing the floors and painting first," he said, hating the defensiveness in his voice. "Then we'll shop for furniture."

"If we'd known you two were showing up, we'd have picked up a few bean bag chairs at least," Trevor added, grinning. Pete wasn't sure if it was Trevor's pleasure in seeing the two men or what, but his grin sent another surge of fury through Pete.

"How did you find him?" Pete demanded.

"Seriously?" Wash asked, examining a hall closet as if he could pull a couch from its depths. "There's *nothing* to sit on?"

"There're camping chairs," Trevor suggested. "Or the floor. So how are you guys? How're Carlos and Miguel?"

Wash pulled his head out of the closet. "They're great. Carlito can pick a lock almost as fast as Rhodie. We're working on electronic locks but I don't want to overwhelm him with too much all at once. Wee Miguel's going to science camp. He likes the creepy-crawlies."

Pete could feel his blood heating, the steam rising into his head like a cartoon. "How did you find Trevor?" he asked again, this time through his teeth.

"He e-mailed us," Rhodes explained, and Pete jumped. He hadn't realized Rhodes was so close behind him.

"You told them," Pete said flatly, looking at Trevor, whose grin slowly dropped away, replaced by a scowl.

"No, he didn't," Wash interjected. "The IP address of your laptop gave us the general area. Since this *particular* general area doesn't have too many newcomers—especially hot, gay, blond ones—it just took a few phone calls to find out where you were living."

It'd been easy, Pete thought, his stomach contracting in on itself. If Rhodes and Wash had been a couple of Hal Haas' minions, he and Trevor could be dead right now. He closed his eyes. He'd thought he was being so clever with his cover stories and new house and small town instead of a big city, but the whole time he was leaving a trail deep and wide enough for a five-year-old to follow. Nice protector he was turning out to be.

"Who else?" he demanded, looking at Trevor, who scowled back at him silently. "Who else did you e-mail?"

"No one," Trevor told him, his jaw set tightly. "I'm not an idiot."

Pete bit off his first reply. "Go pack," he said instead.

"What? Why?"

"We have to leave."

"Hang on." Wash stepped forward. "No need to rush out of here. No one else could've gotten that information. Not without getting an e-mail from Trev here."

"You're his friends," Pete clipped out. "They're watching you, tracking calls, tailing you. If you found Trevor, then *they'll* find him."

Wash snorted. "No one followed us."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Pete just looked at him.

"Rhodie zigzagged around the city for about two hours," Wash told him, rolling his eyes. "Seriously, he went around in so many circles I got dizzy and almost puked in his lap. We're pretty good at knowing how to lose a tail."

"If you're wrong and we stay here," Pete said evenly, every muscle in his body tight with fury and nerves, "then Trevor gets a bullet in the h-head." *Not now*, he pleaded silently. *Don't let me lose it now.*

All of the earlier amusement was gone from Wash's face and his eyes were a livid green. "What are you saying, asshole? That we would risk Trev's life to come here and hang out and have a good time watching your fucking empty-ass house fall down around our ears?"

"Wash," Rhodes warned, but both Wash and Pete ignored him, their gazes locked in a furious stare-down.

"Yeah," Pete bit off, taking a step closer to Wash. "That's exactly what you did. You might as well have drawn a fucking m-map for th-th-th—" He snapped his teeth together with an audible click. His body had failed him again, shutting down when he most needed to get the words out, when he needed to convince Trevor that his friends were wrong, he wasn't safe, Pete had failed and Haas' people were probably lying in wait right now.

There was no way he could talk now. Turning on his heel, Pete slammed out the front door. He didn't go any farther than the porch—he needed to stay close to Trevor, especially now. Bracing his hands against the railing, he stared blindly across the street.

"Giordano." Rhodes walked over to stand next to him.

After shooting the man a glare, Pete faced front again without saying anything, not ready to trust his voice.

"No one followed us," Rhodes said evenly. Although they were the same words Wash had uttered just a few minutes before, there was something in Rhodes' tone that almost convinced Pete it was true. No one was waiting down the street for a clear shot of Trevor's head...at least not yet.

"Doesn't matter," Pete muttered, a large chunk of his anger dissolving. "You found him in less than a day. They'll find him too, eventually." With a sigh, he leaned against the support post. "This house was a fucking stupid idea."

The man next to him grunted—in agreement or dissent, Pete wasn't sure. "Not necessarily. Without that e-mail, we'd still be searching for him."

"Yeah?" Pete felt a touch of hope, which he quickly squashed. He was too fucking attached to this stupid house. "Any way Haas can access that IP address?"

"No." Rhodes paused. "At least not that I know of. Better check with Wash, though—he's the computer nerd."

Pete gave a humorless bark of laughter. "Doubt he'll talk to me. Punch me in the throat maybe..."

"Nah." Rhodes shook his head, the corner of his mouth twitching. "Wash doesn't hold grudges. Well, he does but that doesn't shut him up."

Chewing on the inside of his cheek, Pete was quiet for a few moments. "So you're the P.I.s Trevor worked for?"

"Works for, yeah," Rhodes corrected.

Pete cocked an eyebrow. "Took you for a cop."

"Was," he told him shortly, his tone and closed expression strongly discouraging any further discussion of the topic. Although Pete was really curious now, he didn't push. He had a feeling Rhodes was not a good one to push.

"You honestly think Trevor's safe here?" Pete asked.

Rhodes glanced around at the quiet neighborhood. Their usual audience was missing. Iris and Morty had slowly driven off in their Buick an hour before, heading to an eye doctor appointment. Pete assumed the rest of the adults were at work.

"Seems as safe as anywhere," Rhodes finally answered. "Did some research on Haas. Not too high-tech. More of a bribe-or-kill kind of guy."

"Huh," Pete grunted. "Reassuring."

"Wash and I'll stay for a few days," Rhodes offered, although it was more of a statement than a suggestion. "Few more eyes and guns for you." He jerked his head at the still-unfinished porch floor. "Can help around here too."

Pete hesitated. It would be a huge relief to share some of the protection burden, especially since he was currently floating around in a fog of lust and fascination, but he'd just met the two men—how could he trust them?

"There aren't any beds—or any furniture, actually," he said, stalling to gain a little thinking time.

Rhodes shrugged. "Trev mentioned that in his e-mail. We came prepared."

If Trevor had known these guys for a while, worked with them, they would've had plenty of opportunity to do him harm if they'd intended to do so. Pete turned to study Rhodes. There was something about the man Pete instinctually trusted—both of the men, actually, although Wash bugged the ever-loving shit out of him.

"Okay," he agreed, pushing away from the railing. "Come on in. I'll show you the hard floor you can sleep on tonight."

* * * * *

"You glad we came yet?" Wash grinned at him.

Pete looked around. He and Rhodes had finished replacing the boards in the porch floor and then all four men had tackled the hardwood floors in the bedrooms. Every protruding nail had been sunk, every gaping hole filled, all of the squeaking boards had been mercilessly nailed to the joists below. The wood floor stretched in front of him, ready to be sanded and buffed and stained.

He grinned back at Wash. "Fine," he admitted. "I'm glad you came. You might be an asshole but at least you're a hard-working asshole."

With a laugh, Wash held up his hammer, pretending as if he were about to bash in Pete's head.

"Wait!" Trevor dove between them. "Don't brain him 'til after dinner—he actually knows how to cook!"

"Really?" Wash asked, lowering his hammer. "Praise the food gods—I'm starving."

Shaking his head, Pete demurred. "I'm not that good. Trevor just thinks I'm great because he can't cook a Pop-Tart."

Trevor jabbed his elbow into Pete's ribs. "Last time I save you from Wash's hammering arm."

If they'd been alone, Pete would've hooked an arm around Trevor's neck and pulled the other man against him for a hard kiss, but they weren't alone. That was the bad part of having Rhodes and Wash around.

"This town have any restaurants?" Rhodes asked, appearing in the bedroom doorway.

"Yeah but we don't need one," Trevor told him. "Pete's cooking."

"Chicken?" Pete suggested. "I could do stir-fry."

"Perfect." Trevor leaned toward him and, for a second, Pete thought he was going to kiss him. Pete shot a wary glance at the other men and Trevor turned away. "Let's get going then," he said, heading toward the hallway.

Pete followed but not before catching a look between Wash and Rhodes.

Do they know Trevor's gay? he wondered. *Do they know I am?* Telling himself it didn't matter either way, he squashed down the nervous butterflies that had fluttered to life at the thought. If they didn't know, they would soon enough. Pete couldn't keep his hands off Trevor for many more *minutes*, much less days.

Chapter Eight

"Now that we have more porch floor that won't collapse, we should get a couple more camp chairs," Trevor suggested. "For guests." He shifted on the porch step he was sitting on next to Pete. Rhodes and Wash reclined in the two existing camp chairs, drinking beer as they watched the neighborhood settle in for the night.

Wash snorted. "Or I have an idea. You could get actual furniture."

"We'll paint out here," Pete said, "then we'll get a porch swing and real chairs. I want to get those bedrooms done first though. I'm dying for a real bed." Feeling his cheeks flush, he looked down at his beer bottle. It was probably obvious to everyone what he was really dying for—Trevor beneath him in a real bed.

"Can't believe we're actually in sleeping bags tonight," Wash said, laughter in his voice. "Here's that sleepover we've always dreamed of, Rhodie."

Rhodes grunted. "Yay."

Climbing to his feet, Pete told them, "I'm grabbing another beer. Anyone want anything?"

"I want to use the bathroom," Trevor told him, standing up as well. "But you don't have to get that for me. Think I can handle that on my own."

"Good thing," Pete said. "Or you'd have been out of luck." He held the door open for Trevor to catch and made his way to the kitchen.

Placing his empty bottle by the sink, Pete turned around to find Trevor leaning against the wall, just inside the kitchen. "Thought you had to take a piss," Pete said, stalking toward him.

"Lied," Trevor told him, a catch in his voice that heated Pete's blood.

Bracing both hands against the wall on either side of Trevor's shoulders, Pete leaned in close enough to feel the quick pants of Trevor's breath against his lips. "You shouldn't tell lies."

"Guess you'll have to punish me for that then," Trevor suggested breathlessly.

Pete sucked in air as all his blood flowed to his cock. Putting his mouth next to Trevor's ear, he rasped, "You're just dying to feel my hand smacking your ass, aren't you?"

Tilting his head to the side and exposing his neck to Pete, Trevor groaned, the sound thick with want. Eagerly taking what was offered, Pete kissed and licked down Trevor's neck, lightly biting the hard muscle where his shoulder joined. With another low moan, Trevor squirmed, pushing into his touch.

Using his body to flatten Trevor against the wall, Pete held him still. He hissed a breath between his teeth as he pressed against the stiff bulge at Trevor's crotch. Pete barely had to touch the man and he was as hard as a rock. This knowledge almost blew off the top of Pete's skull.

Lifting his head, Pete stared into Trevor's lust-drunk eyes before his gaze dropped to the luscious mouth below. Trevor's teeth worried his bottom lip and Pete couldn't look away. Something about seeing the edge of the other man's teeth pressing against the red flesh of his lip drove him wild.

With a growl, Pete took that mouth with his own, hard and deep and showing no mercy. Although Trevor whimpered beneath the assault, both of his hands were twisted in Pete's shirt, as if to prevent him from backing away.

He needn't have bothered. Pete had no intention of leaving. He kissed Trevor again and again, wishing he could kiss him so deeply it would show the world these lips were his, this body was his... *Trevor* was his.

Dropping one hand, he worked it between their bodies so he could grasp Trevor's erection. The denim barrier of the other man's jeans just added to the anticipation and Pete squeezed him through the fabric, loving the way Trevor moaned and grew beneath his hand.

A movement in his peripheral vision made Pete jerk away. Rhodes was in the doorway, watching them with narrow, smoldering eyes.

"What?" Trevor asked in a rough voice, before following Pete's gaze to the kitchen doorway. "Rhodie, you mind?"

Rhodes blinked and a smile twitched at his mouth. "Right. Just came in to tell you we're going for a run."

"Good," Trevor said, tugging at Pete's shirt to bring him back into a kiss, but Pete frowned.

"A run?" he repeated. "Now?"

"Seems like a good time," Rhodes answered, his eyes sliding down to where Pete's hand still rested over Trevor's crotch. "Carry on." Turning around, he walked away.

Pete and Trevor stood quietly, listening to the indistinguishable rumble of words from Rhodes on the porch.

"A run?" Wash's voice was clear and appalled. "With you? You know I don't run with you, Rhodie. You go too fast and yell at me if I have to stop and tie my shoe..." His voice trailed off as Rhodes said something else. "Fine, so maybe it *was* just an excuse to take a break but did I mention you run fucking *fast*? Do I look like the motherfucking Roadrunner? Besides, you go for miles and I want another beer and we're both wearing *jeans*, for Christ's sake and..."

Rhodes' low voice interrupted again.

"Oh." Whatever he'd said had calmed Wash right down. "Why didn't you just tell me that in the first place? Fine, I'll go with you but I'm walking. You can run fucking

circles around me if you have to but I'm not going to run." There was a pause and then Wash's voice sounded much louder, as if he were yelling through the screen. "Have fun, you two. Use protection. We'll be gone for a while. Why do I feel like I'm in a fucking college dorm? Fine, I'm coming." His voice grew muffled, as if he were walking away. "I'm glad Trev's finally getting some, after the way..." He'd moved far enough away that his words faded completely.

"Shit," Trevor groaned, closing his eyes and letting his head rest against the wall behind him. "How long are they staying? It's like having a set of gay, permissive grandparents in the house."

Pete laughed. "Out of the house now," he reminded Trevor. "We should take advantage of that." His hips pressed against Trevor's again.

"Right," Trevor agreed, his fingers grabbing the hem of Pete's shirt and tugging it up his torso. Pete lifted his arms so Trevor could slide the shirt off and toss it away. Pete yanked Trevor's t-shirt off over his head and let it drop to the floor.

Seizing Trevor's head in both hands, he kissed him, sucking at his tongue and tugging at his lower lip with his teeth, thinking of the way Trevor nibbled on it when he was uncertain. He definitely wasn't uncertain now. Pete felt the other man's hands unbuttoning his jeans and he dropped his hands to lock them around Trevor's wrists.

Jerking back, Pete demanded, "Did I say you could do that?"

Trevor's hands stilled in his grip and his eyes were wide, the pupils dilated. "No sir."

Fuck, he loved this game. "No I did not." Pulling Trevor away from the wall a step, Pete pushed his lover's hands behind his back. "Keep these here until I say you can use them."

"Yes sir." Judging by the way his chest heaved in and out, Trevor enjoyed this as much as he did. Popping open the button on Trevor's jeans, Pete slowly lowered the zipper, watching the other man melt as each tooth of the fastener released its mate.

"What should your punishment be for not asking permission?" Pete growled, tucking both his thumbs beneath the waistbands of Trevor's jeans and underwear.

"I don't know, sir." Trevor was vibrating with need. "Whatever you want."

"What I want," Pete said slowly, yanking Trevor's jeans and underwear to mid-thigh, "is for you to bend over that counter." He jerked his head toward the kitchen counter between the fridge and the sink. Trevor obeyed, walking awkwardly in his lowered jeans and lowering his chest against the smooth surface.

The position left his ass exposed, displayed for Pete's pleasure. Moving behind Trevor, he just looked for a moment at the hard globes that made his mouth water. It was too beautiful a sight to keep his hands off for long though. He used his foot to bump Trevor's feet apart, until he was standing as widely as the jeans around his thighs would allow.

Kneeling behind Trevor, he pushed apart the ass cheeks in front of him and found the puckered hole with his tongue. Trevor jumped and swore at the touch, clearly not expecting the damp caress. Once the initial surprise wore off, however, he pressed back, silently asking for more.

Pete was happy to give him more. Trevor tasted amazing, just like he'd expected. Massaging the clenching muscles of his ass, Pete forced his tongue inside, working his way into the dark, hot hold of Trevor's body. He withdrew and thrust again, deciding he'd be happy to stay on his knees forever, his tongue playing with the entrance to Trevor's ass.

"Fuck, that's good," Trevor moaned and Pete redoubled his efforts, outlining the sweet spot with the tip of his tongue before darting in again. Reaching between Trevor's spread thighs, Pete wrapped his fingers around his lover's balls, squeezing with just enough force to draw another groan.

Releasing the sac, Pete slid his hand up to explore and discovered Trevor's cock was caught between the counter's edge and his body. There was a danger to that, a possibility of pain that excited him. With a final wet kiss against the opening to Trevor's ass, Pete pulled away and stood up.

This time, Trevor's moan was filled with disappointment and he squirmed in protest. Lifting his hand, Pete brought his palm down on Trevor's ass and the sound of the smack reverberated through the kitchen. Trevor's hips jerked in a way that made Pete suspect he'd pressed his erection against the counter. His own cock bobbed in reaction as he imagined the shot of pain that intensified the pleasure.

He waited, stroking the reddening ass cheek, watching the man in front of him for a reaction. He was vibrating with such strong arousal Pete was afraid he'd take the whole house down like an earthquake — structurally sound or not.

"Please," Trevor panted.

Pete's fingers tightened on his flesh in a squeeze. "Please what?" His voice sounded like a stranger's, rough and dirty and full of grit.

With a groan, Trevor pushed back into his grip. "More," he begged. "Please."

Gritting his teeth to keep from exploding, Pete raised his hand and brought it down sharply on the other cheek. Trevor's cry trailed off into a whimper. His hips were still pushing back, asking for the fall of his hand, and Pete eagerly answered his unspoken plea, spanking his ass, hard and soft and hard again, until the skin burned hot beneath his hands.

Dropping back down to his knees, Pete rested his cheek against that heated ass, clutching Trevor's hard thighs above his rumpled jeans. His heart was thundering, his breath panting against Trevor's skin, and his erection pressed painfully against the front of his jeans. He had to take a moment to regain control, to fight back the wild beast that screamed at him to ram his cock deep into Trevor's ass and fuck him mercilessly.

With a groan, Pete turned his face so he could bite at the firm flesh, carefully keeping his teeth from pressing too deeply, barely scoring the surface of Trevor's skin.

A shudder ran through Trevor. "Fuck me now," he gritted out. "Please, Pete."

Pete's fingers dug into Trevor's trembling thighs. He wanted to give Trevor what he needed, wanted more than anything to feel his bare cock squeezed by the tight grip of Trevor's body, to fill his ass with cum until it ran down his thighs and marked him as Pete's. With a snarl, he released his grip and pulled away.

He knew he couldn't do that to Trevor. "Condoms," he managed to get out as he climbed to his feet. "Don't move."

Trevor choked out a laugh. "Not going anywhere. Hurry the fuck up."

Although he desperately wanted to stroke a hand down that gorgeous, sore ass, Pete knew he would never be able to stop. Gritting his teeth so tightly a pain shot up to his temple, he ran for the bedroom.

He got back to the kitchen to find Trevor exactly as he'd left him, looking so irresistible and gorgeous and unbelievably fuckable, Pete skidded to a stunned halt and just stared.

"What are you waiting for, the grandparents to get back?" Trevor demanded. "Fuck me, for Christ's sake!"

That snapped Pete out of motionlessness. "Giving orders again?" he asked, his voice silky with warning. Striding over to Trevor, he drew a line down Trevor's spine with his finger, barely brushing his skin.

Trevor quivered. "Wouldn't have to if you weren't so slow," he snapped back, but Pete heard a shake in his voice, a crack in the bravado, and he smiled.

"So mouthy." Pete tsked. "What will I do about that?" He tossed the condoms and lube on the counter next to Trevor. His gaze still fixed on the tempting sight in front of him, Pete unbuttoned his jeans and yanked the zipper down, shoving everything down far enough to free his desperate cock.

"Nothing," Trevor snarled, clinging to the tattered remains of his defiance. "Just shut up and fuck me!"

Pete shoved against his body, flattening his chest against Trevor's back so he could whisper in his ear, "Don't push me." He nudged his hips forward, burying his erection in the crease of Trevor's ass. It felt so good, Pete's eyes almost rolled back in his head. He forced himself to focus.

Working his hand between the counter and Trevor's hips, Pete discovered the rigid cock trapped there. Leaving it pressed against the hard edge of the counter, he rubbed a teasing thumb over the tip, sliding across the slippery head.

"Please..." Trevor groaned, pushing his ass back against Pete's erection.

Laughing breathlessly, Pete nipped his earlobe. "Sure, now you're all obedient, when my cock's on your ass."

Trevor's only answer was a moan and another wriggle of his hips. Pete had to clench his teeth to keep from spilling all over the other man's ass cheeks. With a final

stroke of his thumb over Trevor's slick cock head, Pete moved his hand and eased his body back.

"Wait!" Trevor begged, sounding panicky. "Don't go. I'll be good!"

Grabbing the lube off the counter, Pete purred, "I know you will." He uncapped it and nudged the nozzle into Trevor's clenching hole. "Unless you need another reminder." Stroking a recently abused ass cheek with his free hand, he squeezed a generous amount of lube inside Trevor.

Trevor sucked in a breath and let it out in a moan. Pete tossed the lube on the counter and shoved in two fingers.

"Yes!" Trevor grunted, not seeming to mind the rough entry. On the contrary, he drove his hips back, impaling himself even farther on Pete's fingers.

"Door's open," Pete warned. "Better be quiet or all the neighbors'll hear how much you like my cock in your ass."

Trevor groaned, obviously trying to muffle the sound. Pete drew out his fingers and thrust back in, twisting them as he pulled out completely. Trevor gave a choked-off sound of protest.

"Shh," Pete warned. He didn't really care if everyone in Honeysuckle heard—Pete loved how noisy Trevor was. Those moans and sighs drove him crazy. Watching Trevor try to hold back, especially since he was failing so miserably to be quiet, drove Pete to the edge of what he could stand.

He rolled on a condom and grabbed the other man's hips with both hands. Pete worked the tip of his cock into Trevor's opening and tunneled ruthlessly inside, too far gone to take his time. Once he was fully lodged in Trevor's ass, Pete paused, clinging desperately to his control, knowing he was barely a thrust away from coming.

Trevor fought his hold, trying to force him to move, and Pete growled and held him still. He withdrew and plunged back in with a shudder, the squeeze and stroke of Trevor's body so incredibly good, better than anything he'd ever felt. He drove inside even as he felt the last threads of his control snapping.

His thrusts grew rough and wild, yanking Trevor back against him as Pete hammered his cock deep into the tight depths of his ass, his entire world narrowing to the pistoning strokes that sent shockwaves of pleasure radiating out from his groin. One hand slid around to fist Trevor's erection. He'd barely closed his fingers before Trevor came, his body tightening around the invading cock and driving Pete over the edge.

His final thrusts were jerky, short shoves of his hips as he buried his cock as far as he could inside Trevor's trembling body. His orgasm ripped through him, gutting him with ecstasy until he was raw and bare and shaking inside.

Wrapping an arm around Trevor's hips, Pete yanked him even more tightly against his body, folding his chest over Trevor's back. He pressed his face into the side of his neck, sucking in breaths of dark, warm air that tasted like Trevor. Pete touched the damp skin with his tongue and felt Trevor shiver in response.

With a final, lingering kiss beneath his ear, Pete shifted back, slipping free of the hold of Trevor's body. As he tossed the used condom in the trash, Trevor straightened and turned to face him.

Trevor's eyes were shuttered and murky blue as he leaned back against the counter, crossing his arms across his chest, watching as Pete ran warm water over a paper towel and squeezed out the excess. His expression turned even more wary as Pete moved to stand in front of him.

Eyeing that full bottom lip, now held so cautiously tight, Pete had to kiss him. He felt Trevor's inhale and then his mouth softened. Trevor pressed into the kiss with a small sound that vibrated against Pete's lips. Breaking the contact, Pete stared down at him but didn't even try to speak. Even if he'd known what to say, he knew he wouldn't get anything coherent out anyway.

Dropping his gaze to Trevor's cock, he ran the damp paper towel over it, wiping away any trace of semen. He cleaned the other man's stomach and thighs and then stopped thinking about doing anything useful as he played with Trevor's balls.

"Okay," Trevor half-laughed, sliding to the side to wet his own paper towel at the sink. "Don't think we have time for round two." He wiped Pete's cock, starting off with brisk efficiency before beginning to linger.

Pete laughed, the sound still a little rusty. "Now who's teasing?" he asked, happy his words were working again. Trevor flashed him a look that sent an electric pulse straight to his cock. With a final hard squeeze that made Pete gasp, Trevor released him and tossed the paper towel in the trash.

"Wait," Pete said, preparing yet another paper towel. "Turn around."

Trevor snorted but obeyed. "Last time I did that when you told me to, I got majorly fucked."

"Like you didn't enjoy that," Pete scoffed, squeezing the paper towel into a ball as he held it against Trevor's tailbone so a trickle of water ran between the cheeks of his ass.

"Jesus Christ!" Trevor hissed, his back arching. "Watch it or you're going to get me going again."

Pressing back a satisfied smile, Pete shook out the wadded towel and stroked it over Trevor's ass, delving into the crevice and lingering around the well-used opening. He pressed his fingertip inside and Trevor reached back and grabbed his wrist.

"Seriously," he said. "Rhodes and Wash could walk in any minute."

"Yeah?" Pete tossed the paper towel into the garbage and pulled Trevor back a step so their bodies touched, wrapping his arms around Trevor's waist. "Think they'd get off on seeing me fucking you?" Dropping one hand, Pete caught Trevor's cock in his grip. The man was almost completely erect again.

"Fuck!" Trevor's body shook against his. "Didn't think you were such a perv."

Pete grinned. "I'm not saying we should do it. I just like getting you all hard and bothered by talking about it."

"Asshole," Trevor grumbled, although he didn't try to escape Pete's grip. In fact, he nestled back against him.

"Speaking of that..." Pete paused, trying to think of a way to ask his question casually.

Trevor twisted his head around to get a glimpse of Pete's face. "Speaking of what? You being an asshole?"

With a teasing growl, Pete tightened his hand around Trevor's cock just hard enough to make his point. Trevor grunted.

"No," Pete told him, giving up on being casual and deciding to just ask straight out. "Have you and Rhodes or Wash ever...?"

"Ever...?" Trevor asked innocently and Pete jerked his fist up and down the teasing man's cock just once. Trevor jolted against him. "Oh that," he gasped. "Not really."

"What does that mean?" Pete pressed.

Trevor shrugged. "Kissed Rhodes a couple times but he's so nuts for Wash, there wasn't much point in it."

"Yeah?" Pete slid his thumb over the head of the cock in his hand. "They're...together then?"

With a snort, Trevor nodded. "They act like an old married couple. Wash had a few issues but even before they worked that out, I knew I never had a shot."

"Did you want one?" Pete didn't know why he asked. He didn't really want to know the answer to that question.

Tossing off a casual shrug, Trevor told him, "Sure. Wouldn't anyone?"

"Right." Sucking in a breath was suddenly painful. His lungs felt too tight.

"Course," Trevor ducked his head as the back of his neck darkened to red, "that was before I met you."

"You're just saying that because I have your dick in my hand," Pete teased, lightheaded with relief and excitement.

"Well duh," Trevor shot back. "Speaking of my dick in your hand, would you mind...?"

Pete smiled. "Would I mind...what? Letting go?" He slid his fist to the tip and off.

"No!" The word popped out quickly, as if Trevor had no control over his response.

"No?" Pete closed his fingers around the straining cock again. "Then maybe you meant would I mind doing this?" He tightened his grip and then softened again, loving how Trevor's body melted back against him, even as his cock hardened in his hand. "Or this?" Running his hand to the very tip, he teased the head with his fingertips. "Or maybe you want me to get on my knees in front of you and —"

A scream from outside cut him off.

Chapter Nine

Trevor jerked away. "What the fuck?"

Pete yanked up his jeans and carefully fastened them, mindful of his swollen erection. His gun was upstairs, damn it. Condoms, lube, gun... He was going to have to start keeping important things on the main level.

"Trevor," he snapped. "Don't go out there." Deciding not to take the time to run upstairs for his gun, he headed toward the front door.

Trevor pulled up his own jeans and followed. "But—"

"No." Pete didn't let him finish. "If you even step foot out that door before I say it's safe, I will..." He couldn't think of an appropriate threat, so he trailed off. He figured it was implied.

"You'll what?" Trevor had his sulky, James Dean impression going again.

Guess it's not implied. Closing the six feet between them, Pete used his extra two inches to full advantage. "I will beat that sweet ass of yours so hard you'll be glad we don't have furniture, since you won't be able to sit down anyway. Got it?" His voice changed as he spoke, his threat degenerating into a sexy promise by the end.

"Yeah?" Trevor's smirk confirmed the uselessness of the threat.

Glaring at him, Pete snapped, "Stay behind me and do exactly, *exactly*, what I say."

"Don't I always?" he purred. Pete tried to shut him down with his best icy glare. Trevor just grinned.

Giving up on his attempt at intimidation, he shoved open the front screen door. A quick glance showed all was quiet outside, so he crossed the porch and hurried down the steps. A pebble on the walkway reminded Pete he should've taken the time to put on shoes.

"Pete!"

He whirled around. Marsha was standing on her front porch in a t-shirt and sweatpants, half-hidden by one of the posts. She peeked around it.

"Marsha," Pete said. "Were you the one who screamed?"

She shook her head, her eyes huge, and ducked back behind the post.

Pete eyed the other houses. It had definitely sounded like a woman and it had sounded fairly close. Since there was no woman screaming on the street, it had most likely come from one of the houses closest to theirs.

"What's going on?" Iris and Morty were out on their porch, peering over the railing at him. "Did you hear a scream?"

It hadn't been Iris or Marsha, then. That left Michelle or Abby. Pete jogged toward Terrance and Abby's house with Trevor close behind. Pete shot a glare over his shoulder but didn't say anything. He was on the porch when the front door opened and Terrance stepped out in a t-shirt and boxers, his remaining hair sticking up willy-nilly in wild bunches.

"What the hell's going on?" he demanded. "Who's screaming out here?"

"Is Abby okay?" Pete asked.

"Abby?" he repeated. "Abby's fine. She's sleeping."

Pivoting around, Pete passed Trevor and headed across Len's front yard to Greg and Michelle's place. No one greeted him at the door, so he pounded on it with his fist.

"Michelle?" he yelled. "Greg? Everyone okay in there?"

Silence.

"Hello?" Pete pounded again. "You guys all right?" He tried the doorknob and it turned in his grip. The door swung open, revealing a darkened entryway. "Wait here," he told Trevor and then stepped into the darkness.

"Michelle?" he yelled again. "It's Pete, your neighbor. Greg? You home?" He gave his eyes a few moments to adjust to the darkness and then moved farther into the room. It was a vaulted living room with stairs on one side. The kitchen opened up to the left and two closed doors were on his right.

A sound behind him brought Pete around as he reached for the nonexistent gun at his hip. Trevor stood behind him, hands raised in front of him as he took a step back.

"Wait outside," Pete hissed at him.

"Fuck off." Crossing his arms over his chest, Trevor didn't move. "I'm not leaving you alone in here."

"Then stay back." Moving quietly to the first of the closed doors, Pete turned the knob and pushed the door open, staying flat against the wall next to the opening. He took a quick look and then pulled back. It was a half-bath, empty.

Moving toward the next door, Pete repeated the process, opening the door as he stayed to the side. This small room was a coat closet, stuffed with winter coats and lighter jackets. Reaching in, Pete shoved the hangers, heavy with clothes, to the side and then jumped back.

"Holy *fuck*!"

Michelle huddled on the closet floor.

"Pete!"

He saw Trevor moving toward him out of his peripheral and Pete whipped his head around. "Get back!" he snapped. Trevor actually obeyed this time, retreating to the front door. Trevor leaned out to yell at someone outside to call 9-1-1 and then hovered by the door to watch Pete.

Crouching in front of Michelle, Pete took inventory, trying to see if she was injured. "Michelle?" he said softly.

She looked up at him, her face and t-shirt pale in the dim light except for blotches and streaks that looked black. Pete knew they weren't actually black. They were red.

Michelle was covered in blood.

"Where are you hurt?" Pete asked. "Michelle? Are you bleeding?"

She shook her head back and forth, over and over.

"Michelle," Pete said more firmly. "You need to tell me where you're hurt."

The headshaking continued. "Not me," she finally said, her voice sounding loud in the dark closet. "G-Greg." His name disintegrated into a sob as she started to cry.

"Trevor," Pete barked as he stood up. "Watch her." He ran up the stairs four at a time. At the second floor, he began checking rooms. The door to the third room stood open.

When Pete looked in, he saw Greg—bloody and naked, gagged and tied spread-eagle to the bed.

He forced himself to flick the switch by the door and light flooded the room. Blinking at the glare, Pete stepped inside, his gaze sweeping the area. Except for him and Greg, it appeared to be empty.

At the side of the bed, he stared into Greg's clouded, sightless eyes and knew the man was dead even before he pressed two fingers to his neck to feel for a pulse.

"Fuck," he muttered, not allowing himself to glance at the bloody mess that had been Greg's body. "So much for quiet small towns."

* * * * *

Trevor was waiting for him a few steps away from the closet. Naked relief washed over his face when Pete descended the steps.

"Is he...?" Trevor asked, jerking his head toward the upstairs.

Pete quickly glanced at Michelle. Her head was bowed, her forehead resting on her knees. He gave Trevor a short shake of his head.

"We called for help, Michelle," Pete told her, crouching down next to her huddled form. "They'll be here soon."

"I shook him but he wouldn't wake up," she said, sounding bewildered as she met his eyes. "He's dead, isn't he?"

He hesitated and then nodded.

Michelle gave a choked groan, her head flopping forward as if someone had cut a string.

"I'm sorry," he said, the words sounding empty and inadequate.

She just shook her head against her knees.

"Did you see who did it?" Pete asked, getting another headshake in response. "So what happened?"

Michelle was quiet. When she raised her head, Pete was surprised. He'd thought he'd gotten the most he was going to get out of her – nothing.

"I was shopping," she said in a quiet and toneless voice, "in Benson. My friend, Jill, lives close by, so I went out to dinner with her. I was just going to stay over at her house but I called home and I could...I could tell..." There was a silent pause.

"You could tell what?" Pete urged softly. Trevor had crept closer until he was just a few feet from Pete.

Michelle's eyes met Pete's, sharp and direct. "I could tell he was cheating on me again." The focus faded and she tipped her head forward once more.

"Michelle, stay with me," Pete commanded. "What happened then? Tell me."

"I couldn't sleep," she went on. "I slipped out and left Jill a note, drove back and let myself in. I was dreading going upstairs, not knowing who I'd find in bed with him. I kept going over and over how I should react, what I should say, if I should kick the slut out or leave myself. I still hadn't decided when I walked in to...that." A tear trickled onto her cheek and ran past the corner of her mouth to drip off her chin.

"Is that when you screamed?" Pete could hear the faint wail of emergency vehicle sirens.

She blinked at him. "I don't remember." Her face crumpled as she began to sob. Reaching out, Pete patted her shoulder and she launched herself at him, wrapping her arms around his neck and burying her face against him. He almost toppled back but caught his balance in time.

She cried against him until what appeared to be the entire sheriff's department arrived, followed closely by two paramedics, who gently pried Michelle away from him and settled her on the couch to check her over.

Pete moved over to where Trevor was waiting next to two deputies. As he nodded to them, he wondered when the county had last seen a murder. Judging by the deputies' wide-eyed expressions, it'd been a while.

"You're all bloody," Trevor told him. Glancing down, Pete saw that, sure enough, some of Greg's blood had transferred from Michelle to his bare chest.

"Shit," he muttered. "Excuse me," he said to what appeared to be the older of the two deputies, although even she looked fresh out of training. "I'll be happy to talk with you guys once you get things sorted out here, but would it be okay if I ran across the street to my house to take a quick shower?"

"Just sit tight, sir," she told him. "We'll need to talk with you and get some pictures and samples first."

"Right." He'd expected that answer. "Mind if we sit?"

"Just don't get blood on anything, sir," she warned him. "You'll contaminate the crime scene."

Pete resisted the urge to roll his eyes. She'd probably have him pinned on the floor if he did. "I'll be careful," he said calmly enough. "We'll go sit in the kitchen."

She looked over at the open kitchen, which was in easy view of the deputy's position, and gave a short nod. Pete jerked his head at Trevor, who led the way into the kitchen. After making sure his hands were clear of blood, Pete pulled out a chair and plopped down.

"Well," Trevor said quietly enough so no one except Pete could hear. "We get to sit in real chairs. Guess that's something."

Huffing a laugh, Pete nodded. "I guess."

After a quiet second, Trevor asked, "The husband?"

"Dead."

"Figured." He paused again. "Murdered?"

"Definitely," Pete told him. "Naked, gagged, tied to the bed, dick cut off, stabbed."

"Holy shit." Trevor blew out a breath. "Cut off?"

Pete nodded and they sat in silence for a few minutes.

"Think she did it?" Trevor asked, nodding toward Michelle's huddled form.

"Doubt it," Pete said. "If she did, she's a hell of an actress."

The front door opened and a man walked in. Even if the uniform hadn't given it away, Pete would've known it was the sheriff by the collective silent sigh of relief from all the deputies. The guy in charge was here now.

Bumping Trevor's foot with his own, Pete nodded toward the sheriff, who was getting the rundown from the woman who'd been watching them. "Check it out," he said under his breath.

Trevor looked over. "Sheriff?" he guessed and Pete nodded.

"We'll need to talk to him," Pete said. When Trevor cocked his head and looked at him blankly, he elaborated, "He might be curious after running your name, *Joey*."

"Right." Trevor made a face. "Great."

"If I were an annoying asshole, I'd remind you now that I told you to stay home," Pete muttered.

"Yeah," Trevor scoffed. "I'm going to let you run out alone in the middle of the night after we hear someone scream. Dumbass."

The sheriff was talking now. Although he was speaking quietly, he had one of those voices that carried easily, whether the owner of the voice wanted it to or not. "You two go outside and start talking to the neighbors." He glanced up, catching Pete's eye. Leaning closer to the female deputy, he asked, "What's with the Chippendale show in the kitchen?"

Although the sheriff had lowered his voice even more, Pete could hear every word. "Think we should be insulted or take that as a compliment?" he asked Trevor under his breath.

Trevor shrugged. "It's a toss-up. Those strippers are built but they're also pretty slutty."

"Nothing wrong with slutty."

"True."

The sheriff was headed their way.

"Sheriff," Pete greeted him, taking quick inventory of what he could see. Although the sheriff looked to still be in his thirties, he had an air of confidence about him. Pete hoped his competence matched that assurance.

The sheriff nodded in response. "Zack Osgood," he said, holding out a hand to Pete.

"Peter Giordano." He shook the sheriff's hand. "This is Richard Joseph Long," he said, introducing Trevor.

Osgood's mouth twitched as he extended a hand. "Dick Long?"

Trevor just gave him a cool smile and shook his hand. "Call me Joey."

"Sheriff Osgood," Pete said. "Mind if we find a private place to talk?"

The sheriff glanced around. "Not in this place," he said ruefully. "Goddamn open floor plan. Unless we want to jam ourselves into that little bathroom, this is probably the most privacy you're going to get."

"No offense, Sheriff," Pete told him, "but your inside-voice needs a little work. How about the backyard?"

"I'm afraid there are people everywhere."

Pete thought for a second and then asked, "Can I borrow your notepad and a pen?"

"Sure." The sheriff handed them over.

"I'll give you the number of the person who can explain everything," Pete said, low-voiced. "Not *this*, of course," he gestured toward Michelle and the entire crime scene, "but the two of us, at least." He scribbled Detective McDonald's name and number on the pad. Below it, Pete wrote "protected witness" and drew an arrow pointing toward Trevor.

Osgood took the notepad back and glanced at it. His eyebrow shot up. Reaching over, Pete adjusted the notepad in the sheriff's hand, turning it so the arrow actually pointed at Trevor.

"Yeah, Giordano, thanks. I got it." The sheriff's free hand moved, his fingers forming shapes in quick succession. Pete stared at his hand, knowing Osgood was doing sign language but not knowing *what* he was saying in sign language.

"No?" the sheriff asked. "Yeah, not too many do. Thought I'd try though." Taking the pen from Pete, he wrote "Fed?"

Pete shook his head.

"Good," Osgood said. "They can be a pain in the ass. Wait here until the forensics guys show up and let them get some pictures and samples of that." He gestured at the

bloody smears across Pete's chest. "Then I'll give you both a ride to the station and we can talk in my office."

"You'll keep this to yourself?" Pete asked, nodding at the notepad the sheriff was sliding into his shirt pocket.

"Thought that was why we went through the whole dog-and-pony show in the first place," the sheriff told him. When Pete just looked at him, waiting, he added, "Just between us."

"Thank you, Sheriff. By the way, you'll find my prints on the light switch upstairs."

Osgood gave a brief nod and walked away.

"Fuck," Trevor breathed. "We're never going to get to bed tonight."

Shooting him an amused glance, Pete asked quietly, "Since when are you so interested in sleep?"

Trevor snorted. "Didn't say sleep, did I?"

Pete had to laugh at that. "Don't think we'll be getting much of either tonight."

"Then fuck twice."

"Actually, it's fuck none-ce," Pete corrected.

Trevor gave him a look and Pete laughed again, settling back in his chair. Not much more he could do tonight.

"You two okay?" Rhodes and Wash strode into the kitchen.

Pete stared. "How the fuck did you two get in here? Thought they'd be keeping you out with everyone else."

"They were." Wash grinned. "Amazing what can slip through that back door."

With a snort of laughter, Trevor told him, "You should know."

"Enough," Rhodes said sharply. "You hurt?"

Glancing down at his gory chest, Pete shook his head. "Third-hand. It's the guy upstairs who bought it."

"Yeah?" Wash's gaze sharpened with interest. "Foul play?"

Pete nodded. "Yeah, unless he decided to tie *himself* to the bed and cut off his own dick."

Rhodes and Wash both winced. "The wife?" Rhodes guessed, glancing at Michelle on the couch.

"Widow now," Pete told him.

Rhodes shook his head. "No, I meant do you like her for it?"

With a shrug, Pete said flatly, "No." The more he thought about it, the less he thought she was guilty. "Hard to fake being in shock."

"Maybe killing him was shocking enough," Wash suggested, but Pete shook his head.

"It took some time and forethought," he said. "Tying him to the bed, gagging him, stabbing him multiple times... That kind of planning and execution doesn't lead to shock. I think she's telling the truth that she just found him."

"Hey!" The sheriff's voice boomed down from the top of the stairs. "Did the Chippendales just double? What the hell are the two of you doing in the middle of my crime scene?"

"Just checking on our friends, Sheriff," Wash called up with a cheeky grin.

"They're fine." Osgood was not amused by Wash. "Now get the hell out before I arrest you both."

"We're leaving," Rhodes said. Turning back to Pete and Trevor, he lowered his voice. "You two headed in for interviews soon?"

"Yeah. Make yourselves as comfortable as possible. We probably won't show up until tomorrow morning."

Rhodes nodded. "Call if you need anything."

"We leave on a walk and you end up in the middle of a murder," Wash told them, shaking his head. "Hope you at least had time to make out a little."

Flustered, Pete didn't answer.

"Wash," Rhodes snapped. "Quit messing around or I'm leaving you to get arrested."

Wash winked at them and then turned to follow Rhodes out the front. "You'd leave me alone with the cute sheriff? And his handcuffs?" he was asking Rhodes, whose growled response was lost as the front door swung shut behind them.

* * * * *

"The detective backed up your story," the sheriff said.

Pete just nodded, shifting in his chair. Osgood was interviewing both of them in his office instead of an actual interrogation room, which was a good sign. Trevor was lying on the sheriff's couch, apparently asleep despite the uncomfortable-looking way he'd contorted his body. Before they'd headed to the sheriff's office, Pete had been allowed to take a quick shower. Trevor had just grabbed a shirt and shoes.

"Why don't you take me through what happened tonight, Officer," the sheriff requested, glancing at his watch. "*Last* night, I guess it is now."

Pete pushed a stack of paper toward the sheriff. "Here it is in writing. I had some free time over the past four hours."

Although Osgood pulled the stack toward him, he smiled genially. "Why don't you tell me too?"

"Okay," Pete agreed. He ran over the details, stopping for the sheriff's many questions.

"So," Osgood said after Pete finished. "You've lived here how long?"

"Since Saturday." Pete had to swallow a laugh. A lot had happened in three days.

"Get to know any of the neighbors?"

"We've met most of them—Marsha had a barbeque for us on Sunday," Pete explained. "Don't know them well enough to say who's a killer though."

The sheriff's eyebrow cocked again. "You don't think it's his wife?"

Pete shook his head. "She was in shock. What happened to Greg would've taken some planning. Seems too premeditated to put the killer into shock."

"Could've gone into shock when she saw what she'd done," Osgood suggested mildly, tapping his pen against his leg.

"In that case, wouldn't she have gone into shock when she cut off his dick?" Pete asked. "It would've shocked me."

The sheriff coughed as if he were covering a laugh. "Do you like one of the other neighbors for it then?"

Chewing on the inside of his cheek, Pete considered the question. "They're a fucking weird bunch, that's for sure."

Osgood laughed outright this time.

"Michelle said she thought he was cheating on her—that's why she drove home from her friend's last night."

"Who was the other woman?" the sheriff prodded. "Any idea?"

"None." Pete shook his head. "All I know is it could've been either a woman or a guy. Greg was bi or gay and pretty heavily closeted either way."

"Yeah?" Osgood tilted his head, looking interested. "How'd you discover this?"

"Total flamer. Plus he hit on Joey."

"Ah." Sheriff Osgood paused, glancing over at Trevor's sleeping form. "And you two are...?"

"Together?" When the sheriff nodded, Pete said, "Yeah."

"As a cover or are you really together?" Osgood asked.

Good question. "Not quite as long-term as we've been pretending," Pete told him, figuring the sheriff didn't want to hear about their relationship issues. "But yeah, we're really together." He watched the other man cautiously. This was the first time Pete had outright admitted he was gay to someone else in law enforcement. To his surprise, the sheriff seemed to be fine with it.

"So when Greg hit on Joey," Osgood asked casually, "did that piss you off?"

"Yeah."

"Ah."

"Didn't kill him though."

Osgood studied him for several seconds. "Yeah. Didn't really think you did. So give me the weird neighbor rundown. Who had the barbeque?"

"Marsha. She's next to us to the left as you face our house. I can't remember any last names, sorry."

The sheriff waved that off. "I've got witness statements. Everyone who wasn't woken up by the scream was woken up by you, so I think I have everybody's names somewhere. Just tell me what you know."

"Not too much on Marsha. She's just a little...twitchy. A nervous babbler. When I came out after I heard Michelle scream, Marsha was on her porch," Pete told him, watching as the sheriff scribbled notes.

"Okay," Osgood said without looking up. "Next?"

"Iris and Morty – they're our other neighbors. Older couple, on the smaller side." Pete half-smiled. "Can't imagine they'd have the strength to wrestle Greg down and tie him up. They'd be good ones to talk to as far as possible witnesses though. They're always watching the neighborhood."

Osgood nodded, still scribbling.

"Len is next door to Greg and Michelle," Pete said slowly, trying to sort out his impression of the man in his head. "He's...odd. Something's bugging the guy but I have no idea what. Could be he's just homophobic. His kid is fourteen, I think. His name's Danny. I suspect he was peeping from a tree in our backyard the first night after we moved in but I don't have any proof it was him, just that Iris and Morty said he's a lurker."

"Lurker," Osgood repeated as he wrote. "Got it."

"Abby and Terrance are next." Pete glanced over at Trevor, tempted to wake him up for this one. He decided to leave him be. If Trevor had anything to add when he woke, he could just call Osgood. "Abby seems sweet, kind of sad. All I know about Terrance is he sweats a lot. Trevor thought he might be an asshole to Abby though."

The sheriff looked up. "Why's that?"

Pete shrugged. "She was kind of apologetic about herself. He figured her husband told her she was boring."

"Hmm." He made a note.

"Greg and Michelle...you should definitely talk to Joey about them. I came into the conversation late," Pete told him. "They didn't seem all that happy to me though."

Osgood glanced at Trevor and then back at Pete. "Okay if we wake him up?"

"Can we leave after he talks to you?" Pete shot back.

"Sure," Osgood agreed, glancing over his notes. "I'll call if there's anything else."

Pete got up and walked over to Trevor. Bending over and gripping the sleeping man's shoulder, Pete gave him a gentle shake. Trevor woke right away, jerking to a sitting position so fast Pete had to pull back quickly to keep from being accidentally headbutted.

Blinking, Trevor focused on Pete's face. "Hey," he greeted him in a sleep-roughened voice. "What's up?"

Instead of releasing his shoulder, Pete kept his hand there, his thumb rubbing a gentle circle against Trevor's t-shirt. "The sheriff wants to get your opinion of Greg and Michelle – and any other neighbor you've talked to."

"Oh," Trevor said, losing the word in a huge yawn. "Sure. Greg was an asshole."

"Specifics?" Osgood requested.

"He got pissed when Michelle said he was a photographer instead of an artist." Trevor rolled his eyes. "Michelle was trying to get pregnant but I got the impression Greg wasn't all that interested in knocking her up. He followed me into the house when I went in to use the bathroom. Cornered me in the kitchen and tried to feel me up – or down, as it were."

Even though Greg was dead, Pete still felt a flash of anger.

"I liked Michelle okay," Trevor went on. "She has kind of a desperation to her though. Like she's trying so hard to be happy but pretending isn't cutting it anymore, you know?"

Osgood nodded, setting his pen down. "Thank you, gentlemen. This'll help. If there's anything else –"

"You'll call," Pete interrupted. "Got it."

* * * * *

The sun was coming up when a deputy dropped them off at their house. Rhodes and Wash were waiting for them in the camp chairs on the porch.

Trevor laughed as they walked toward the pair. "Grandma and Grandpa on the porch. They just need a shotgun and a hound dog to complete the picture."

"I'm sure Rhodes has a pistol," Pete said, feeling a little punchy. "Think that counts?"

Ignoring the banter, Rhodes started to speak. "So what –"

He was cut off by Trevor's upraised hand. "Sleep first. We'll tell all but we have to get a few hours first."

Pete and Trevor headed inside and up the stairs, leaving the other two grumbling on the porch. Without saying anything to each other, they both stripped down and climbed into their double sleeping bag. Pete wrapped his arm over Trevor and pulled him in close. Not even the sweet ass tucked against his groin could keep him from sleep.

Chapter Ten

Pete was in love with Rhodes and Wash.

While he and Trevor had slept tangled together, the other two men had driven to the home-supply store and rented a sander, a buffer and even a shop vacuum. Once they'd woken up, the four of them had made short work of the entire upper floor. By mid-afternoon, the floors were smooth, buffed and vacuumed clean.

Overcome with gratitude, Pete cooked an enormous late lunch. Rhodes and Wash had also picked up another pair of camp chairs, so they were all able to sit around the table to eat. Wash couldn't decide whether to call their mid-afternoon meal "linner" or "dunch". He decided he liked the sound of "dunch" better.

Rhodes was more interested in the murder. "Spill," he ordered.

Pete spilled, telling all he knew about the case and the neighbors. Trevor interrupted frequently, adding parts Pete had forgotten.

"Have you done background searches on these people yet?" Wash asked.

Pete blinked at him. "Since it's not my case and I don't have access to any kind of database...no."

"Can I use your laptop?" Wash was already out of the kitchen and halfway up the stairs.

"Sure," Pete called after him, "but we don't have any last names and you don't have my password and you're gone and not listening to me anymore."

Trevor laughed. "He'll figure it all out. If not, we'll all hear about it soon enough."

"Thought about doing some interviews?" Rhodes asked, standing up and starting to clear the dishes.

"Interviews?" Pete repeated, pushing back his own chair and grabbing a couple of dirty plates. "The neighbors, you mean?"

Trevor smirked as he filled the sink with soapy water. "Rhodes is dying to work on this case."

"Didn't say *I* should do interviews," Rhodes grumbled.

"You want to though," Trevor told him, grinning. "C'mon, just admit it."

The big man shrugged. "Nothing to admit. Just think it's interesting."

"Why don't you want to do the interviews?" Pete asked.

"I do," Rhodes admitted, shooting him a small, sideways grin. "You know these people though. You'll get more information out of them."

Pete thought for a few moments as he accepted a dripping glass from Trevor and dried it with a dishtowel. "It could be interesting to hear if Iris and Morty saw or heard anything."

Handing over another glass, Trevor smirked at him. "Sheriff Hotness is so going to kick your ass for interfering."

With a shrug, Pete concentrated on drying the glass. "Could be fun." He snuck a glance at Trevor and swallowed a laugh when he saw his sulky expression. Hooking a finger into the waistband of Trevor's jeans, he gave the other man a tug. Although Trevor held on to his scowl, he allowed Pete to pull him closer.

"I'm teasing," Pete told him. "I don't even bother to look at him when you're in the room."

"Yeah?" Trevor shot him a look under his lashes. The flash of blue above that still-sulky mouth started a buzz beneath Pete's skin.

"Yeah," Pete said, his voice rough and low.

Trevor allowed his hip to bump against Pete's. "What about when I'm not in the room?"

"Then I'm staring at the door," Pete answered, "waiting for you to come back."

That did it. The last trace of Trevor's pout fell away and he looked Pete full in the face, his expression naked and vulnerable, a rare openness that compressed Pete's heart.

Rhodes cleared his throat. "I'll go help Wash."

Both of the other men looked at him in surprise. Pete had forgotten he was there. "Don't go on our account..." he started but Rhodes had already escaped the kitchen. "Tell Wash my password is 9P48D3," Pete yelled after him.

Trevor handed him a plate to dry. As Pete rubbed it with the towel, he considered grabbing Trevor and pressing him up against the sink. He took the next plate and decided against it. Instead, he just enjoyed the moment—Trevor's hip lightly bumping against his, their upper arms brushing, the easy silence broken by the clank of the silverware against the sink and the soft slosh of the dishwasher.

Pete marveled as he took a few spoons, his fingers brushing against Trevor's. He'd actually been honest about how he felt—out loud. Instead of trying to play it casual or keep it business-like, he'd laid it all out there in all its scary messiness and Trevor hadn't laughed or sneered or thrown it back in his face.

Caught in a sweeping rush of happiness, he turned his head and kissed Trevor, a quick smack that landed somewhere around his ear.

"What's that for?" Trevor asked, looking at him with the beginning of a smile.

Pete shrugged and concentrated on the handful of silverware he was drying. "Dunno. Just felt like it."

"Okay," he said doubtfully, shooting Pete an amused sideways look. "Dork."

"You're the dork," Pete shot back, smiling as he bumped against Trevor's side.

Trevor shoved back. "You're the king of the dorks."

Tossing his dishtowel on the counter, Pete wrapped his arms around Trevor's shoulders, holding him in place so he could pepper his face with kisses. "Well, then you're my dork *queen*." He laughed as he kissed him until his lips landed on the corner of Trevor's mouth and he lingered.

"Okay," Trevor agreed breathlessly.

"Okay what?" Pete pulled back to look at him curiously.

Trevor's cheeks were touched with red, whether from arousal or embarrassment, Pete couldn't tell. Trevor cleared his throat. "I'll be your queen."

Cupping his face in both hands, Pete really kissed him this time, a long, sweet, deep kiss that didn't stop until he ran out of air.

"Oh Christ." Wash's exasperated voice from the doorway brought their heads around. "Do we have to go on another fucking walk so you two can mess around some more? You two are like rabbits—a pair of gay fucking rabbits."

Rhodes appeared behind him, his lips twitching. "Don't you mean gay rabbits fucking?"

"Please," Trevor scoffed, stepping back from Pete. "As if you two aren't going at it at every opportunity." He turned to Pete. "I learned to knock before walking into either of their offices *or* the bathroom. They even did it in my own bedroom while I was in the shower."

"Your bedroom?" Pete raised an eyebrow at the two men, who didn't look at all embarrassed.

"At your invitation, wee Trev," Wash reminded him.

Pete shook his head. "I'm not going to ask."

"If you're done with the dishes and making out, why not do some neighbor interviews?" Rhodes suggested.

"One-track mind," Trevor muttered, letting the water out of the sink. "Or two-track, I guess," he amended, smirking at Rhodes and Wash.

"What'd you find out about the neighbors?" Pete asked Wash, who shook his head.

"Nada. Rhodes gave me the password and then...distracted me before I could use it." He shot a steamy look at his partner from under his lashes. Rhodes just smiled.

"Here's an idea," Pete said. "Why don't we stain the floor upstairs and then hang out on the front porch tonight. The neighbors will come to us."

"Sure?" Rhodes asked doubtfully.

"Positive," Pete told him. "They'll be wanting to talk. All we'll have to do is listen."

"You just want your floors finished," Trevor grumbled.

Pete grinned at him. "Pretty much."

"So where will we sleep tonight while that shit dries?" Wash asked.

"Living room, I guess," Pete told him.

Wash snorted. "All comes back to the slumber party, doesn't it?"

"Don't pretend you don't love a slumber party," a deadpan Rhodes told him before turning to Pete, ignoring Wash's sputter of laughing protest. "You have stain?"

He nodded. "And applicators."

"Let's do this then."

* * * * *

"Isn't it beautiful?" Pete asked. He was standing on the top step, admiring the gleaming wood floor of the upstairs hall stretching into the three bedrooms.

"Yeah," Trevor grunted from the living room below, where he was sprawled in his camp chair. "Fucking gorgeous."

Ignoring Trevor's sarcasm, Pete said, "I can't wait for the whole house to be done."

Wash groaned. "I think you're high on fumes, Petey-Pie."

"You're the one doling out the cutesy nicknames," Rhodes told him. "How much of that shit did you inhale?"

"Me? I never inhale," Wash protested, eyes wide with put-on innocence.

With an amused snort, Rhodes stood and stretched. "Wish we could get to the shower."

"Yeah." Pete winced, joining them downstairs. "Forgot about that."

"We could all strip and hose off outside," Wash suggested.

Trevor laughed. "That'd bring the neighbors running."

"You guys go ahead," Pete told them. "I'm gonna see what I can do in the sink."

* * * * *

They all managed to get the worst of the stain off at the sink in the half-bath. After changing clothes, they were presentable enough. In fact, Pete looked so good Trevor couldn't stop looking at him.

"Who wants to sit on the front porch and drink a beer?" Pete asked.

"Me," the other three men chorused. They all trooped inside, grabbed beers and chairs and headed for the front porch. They sat in comfortable silence for several minutes. The sun was setting, lighting the sky peach and orange around the edges.

"We'll need a lawnmower," Trevor said, almost regretting breaking the silence. "Lawn's getting shaggy."

Pete grunted an assent. "And a weed-whacker."

"Who're your friends?" a voice piped from the porch next door. Trevor looked over to see Iris and Morty watching them.

"Come on over and meet them," Pete called. Lowering his voice, he added, "And the first neighbors have arrived. What'd that take, three minutes?"

All four men stood up as the elderly couple climbed the porch steps, offering their chairs. Iris and Morty didn't hesitate to take Trevor's and Pete's.

"Beer?" Trevor offered.

"Love one," Iris told him and Morty nodded. Trevor headed to the kitchen, grabbed two from the fridge, hesitated and then grabbed two more. It would save him the trip inside if more neighbors stopped by.

On his way out to the porch, he passed Wash, who headed toward the bathroom. Trevor stepped outside, letting the screen swing shut behind him. He put two of the beers down and popped off the caps on the others before offering them to Iris and Morty. Pete was sitting on the top step, his back resting against the railing post. Trevor settled opposite him.

"Did that sheriff treat you decently?" Iris asked Pete. "We saw he took you with him last night."

"Of course," Pete assured them. "It was just routine, since I was first on the scene."

"Second," Morty corrected.

Pete nodded. "Right. Michelle was first."

"Poor thing," Iris sighed and Morty nodded. "Can you imagine finding your husband like that?"

"You don't think she did it?" Trevor asked, curious.

"Oh no," Iris told him. "No, no, no. She'd never do anything like that. Is that what the sheriff is thinking? Do I need to call him and put him straight?"

Pete looked surprised. "Didn't Osgood call you already?"

"Sure," Iris said. "Didn't say anything about thinking Michelle did it though."

"Why don't you think she did it?" Rhodes chimed in. He had been quiet until this point and both husband and wife looked at him, startled.

"You haven't met Michelle," Iris told him. "She's the sweetest thing. Adores that ass of a husband too." She paused, looking sad. "Adored, I mean." Morty patted her knee.

"Ass?" Pete pressed gently as Wash rejoined them on the porch.

Iris shook her head. "Don't mean to speak ill of the dead but I can't lie—he was *not* a nice man. Here she was, wanting to start a family, and there *he* was, cheating all over the place."

"Who was he having an affair with—do you know?" Trevor asked, feeling as if he were waist-deep in a soap opera.

Morty snorted. "The better question is, who *wasn't* he fucking?"

"Morty!" Iris reprimanded sharply. "Watch your mouth."

"I'm sorry but it's true." Morty leaned forward and lowered his voice. "And it wasn't just women, if you know what I mean."

Trevor was careful not to catch Pete's eye as he tried to keep a straight face. "Men?" he couldn't resist asking.

Both Iris and Morty nodded.

"Anyone you know?" Pete asked.

The couple exchanged a glance. "Well," Iris told them in a conspiratorial whisper, "it was a while back but we think something was going on between Greg and Marsha."

"Really?" Pete lowered his beer bottle without taking a drink. "Do you think she could've...?"

"No, of course not." Iris bit her lip and glanced at Morty. "At least...I don't *think* she would. She is a nervous one though, isn't she? Always laughing when nothing's funny."

"I don't know," Trevor said, thinking about the cookies she'd made for them. "Sure, she's twitchy but I thought she was nice. Besides, do you think she could have done something so...cold-blooded?"

"Chopping off his what's-it, you mean?" Iris asked. "You'd be surprised what a woman scorned is capable of doing. There've been times when I've been so mad at Morty here I've eyed our kitchen knives."

Morty's head snapped around and he stared at her.

She flipped her hand dismissively. "Of course I wouldn't actually *cut* you, silly thing. It's just something every wife has thought about at some point or another."

Wash went into a coughing fit.

"Beer go down the wrong way?" Rhodes asked, giving him a slap on the back.

"Yeah," Wash wheezed, holding up a hand when Rhodes looked ready to give him another whack. "Thanks, I'm okay now."

Clearing his throat, Pete asked, "But why would Marsha lose it now? Hadn't their affair been over a long time ago?"

"Maybe something happened," Iris said vaguely, apparently determined to hold on to her theory. "And it all came rushing back."

"What about a jealous husband?" Pete suggested. "All that anger could've been because Greg slept with his wife."

Morty coughed.

"Is that cold of yours coming back?" Iris asked him. He shook his head and jerked his chin in the direction of the next house. Trevor turned to look and saw Marsha crossing the yard with another plate in her hands.

"Is it okay if I join you?" she asked, hovering a few feet away from the porch steps.

"Of course," Pete told her. "Come on up."

"Beer?" Trevor held up one of the extras.

"No thank you," she said, climbing the steps. "Beer upsets my stomach. I brought over some cheese and sausage biscuits I made for Michelle but she's not home yet, poor thing, and they should be eaten while they're hot." She offered the plate to Trevor, who snagged a couple of biscuits and passed the plate to Pete.

"They're great, thanks," Trevor said around a mouthful of biscuit.

"Oh, it was no problem," Marsha told him, flushing a little. "It's an easy recipe—just a pound of cheddar and a pound of sausage heated and combined with biscuit mix..." She trailed off, turning her head away. "Here I'm going on about food when Greg was m-murdered only last night." She snuffled and rubbed her eye with the heel of her hand.

"Now don't worry about that," Iris told her, balancing a biscuit on her leg to free up one of her hands so she could reach over and give Marsha's arm a reassuring pat. Trevor thought it was funny Iris kept a tight grip on her beer at all times. "That's how people cope with death. We feed the survivors."

Marsha gave her a shaky smile. Rhodes and Wash stood up, offering up their chairs, but she waved them back down. "I shouldn't stay long. I just wanted to bring over the biscuits and see if anyone had heard anything." She leaned against the railing.

Pete frowned. "Rhodes, would you mind checking that railing?"

Before he'd even finished asking, Rhodes was nudging Marsha over and giving the railing a hard shove. "Solid."

"Thanks," Pete told him. He turned to Marsha. "Lean away. Just didn't want you ending up in the bushes."

"Oh. Thank you." Despite the reassurance, she rested her hip against it a little tentatively this time. "Has anyone heard anything? How's Michelle doing?"

"I know she spent last night at the hospital," Pete said. "Did she go back to her friend's house?"

"Her sister picked her up and brought her home with them," Iris informed them. "She and her husband have a farm about an hour south of here."

"How do you manage to know all this?" Pete asked in amazement.

She shrugged. "I just pay attention."

Morty smiled. "Iris is a sharp woman," he said proudly. "Nothing gets by her."

"Well, this sharp woman needs her bed," Iris announced, pushing to her feet. Both Trevor and Pete stood up.

"Have a good night," Pete said. "Thanks for coming over." There was a chorus of goodbyes.

"Thanks for the beer," Morty said, following her down the porch steps. The conversation dwindled as everyone watched the couple cross the yard to their own house.

"Poor Michelle," Marsha sighed, breaking the silence. "I can't imagine who could've done such a thing."

"What's your theory?" Wash asked.

She stared at him with huge eyes. "Mine?"

"Sure," he said casually, watching her closely. "You've known them for years. Who do you think hated Greg enough to do that to him?"

"Well, I...I..." She bit her lip. "I really don't know. No one we know, that's for sure."

"Why's that?" Pete asked.

She looked over at him, surprised. "No one we know could've done such a thing, of course. I mean, to cut him up like that... You'd have to be a monster. There's no way we could've lived in the same town as a killer and not known."

"You'd be surprised," Trevor said under his breath.

Everyone turned to look at him and he winced. He hadn't really meant to say that out loud. "Um...think of all the people who lived next door to serial killers," he improvised. "None of them ever suspect."

"I suppose," Marsha said doubtfully.

"You're all talking about what happened to Greg, I suppose," Terrance said as he came up the front walk. "Terrible thing."

There was a murmur of assent. Trevor wordlessly handed Terrance a beer.

"Thanks," Terrance told him. "Think Michelle finally offed the cheating bastard?"

Marsha sucked in a breath. "Terrance! What a horrible thing to say."

He shrugged and took a drink of beer. "It's the truth. Just 'cause someone chopped him up doesn't mean we have to pretend like he's a saint. The guy screwed everyone who stood still long enough."

"I can't listen to this." Marsha stormed off the porch and past Terrance, almost running back to her house.

There was an uncomfortable silence.

"Shit," Terrance said. "Didn't mean to upset her. Just pissed me off how the article talked about him. You know, what a great guy he was and all that."

"Article?" Pete repeated.

"Yeah," Terrance confirmed. "The one in the *Storm County Sun*? Actually, the A.P. picked it up. Guess the murder was gory enough to go national."

"I'll have to check it out," Pete said. "Where's Abby tonight?"

Terrance shook his head. "This thing really freaked her out. She's all jumpy today. Startled her when I walked in on her in the kitchen tonight and she nearly took my head off. I told her the psycho who did it was most likely someone he picked up out of town so she shouldn't worry."

"Why do you think that?" Rhodes asked. "That an out-of-towner did this?"

Although he looked surprised by the question, Terrance answered easily enough. "He was always picking up strangers in bars and bringing them home. Like I said, the guy wasn't what you'd call discriminating and he was always looking for new meat."

Across the street, Len's garage door opened and his minivan backed out of the driveway.

"What's the story on Len?" Pete asked Terrance as the van accelerated down the street.

"What do you mean?" Terrance finished off his beer and reached for the last unopened one sitting by Trevor.

Trevor raised an eyebrow, watching as the man uncapped the fresh bottle.

"He doesn't seem to care for us," Pete elaborated. Trevor noticed he also watched Terrance's switch from empty bottle to full with sharp interest.

Terrance shrugged. "He's a little, what do you call it? Homo-scared."

"Homophobic?" Pete offered.

"That's it." Terrance nodded. "Me, I don't care what you guys do in your own bedrooms, as long as you don't ask me to watch."

Watch? Terrance? Trevor's stomach curdled at the idea. He shot a quick glance at Pete in time to see his tiny wince. Trevor bit his lip to hold back a grin. Pete didn't like the idea any more than he did.

"Open-minded of you," Wash said.

Completely missing the sarcasm, Terrance shrugged. "I try to be open-minded about people. Now Len, on the other hand... I hate to say it but the guy's kind of a redneck. You'd think with that weird kid of his, he'd be a little more tolerant."

Pete made a noncommittal sound.

"In fact," Terrance went on, "the sheriff should talk to that little freak. He's always creeping around, spying on people. He probably saw something."

"Has he spied on you?" Pete asked him.

Terrance dropped his gaze. "No, not on me. Abby said something about him looking in the window or some shit though. She's so nice, she didn't want me to beat his little spying head in." Finishing the last quarter of his beer in one go, he set the empty bottle next to Trevor's hip. "Better get back. She's probably getting all spooked with me gone." He hurried down the walk and across the street.

"Yeah," Wash muttered. "He's one tolerant motherfucker."

Rhodes snorted. "Tolerant and truthful."

"He was lying his ass off there at the end, wasn't he?" Pete mused. "Wonder what Danny saw Terrance doing."

"We should ask him," Trevor suggested, gesturing with his beer at the house across the street, where Danny's silhouette was outlined in the large front window. When they all looked over, the blinds dropped down, hiding him from view.

"Don't think he wants to talk to us, Trev," Wash told him as he stood and stretched. "Since Terrance the Terror drank the rest of our beer, anyone want to start the sleepover?"

* * * * *

Even though everyone mocked Trevor for making popcorn, they all ate it as they lounged in the living room. Although the late-summer evening wasn't too cool, Pete started a fire in the fireplace, using the wood from the branches he'd trimmed. The ambiance of the flickering flames was worth the extra heat.

"I was thinking," Trevor told them, "about what Pete said. Why *would* Marsha go off on Greg after all this time?"

"Yeah?" Pete prompted.

"When Greg was coming on to me in the kitchen at the barbeque, Marsha walked in on that."

"Ooh." Wash winced. "That'd do it."

"Possibly," Rhodes said. "How'd she react when she saw you?"

"Stopped like she'd just run into a wall," Trevor answered. "Then she turned around without saying a word and left. I could tell she was flustered, since she almost ran into Terrance on her way out."

"What'd Greg do?" Pete asked.

"He didn't seem too bothered by it, although it did distract him enough for me to get out of there without having to knee him in the nuts."

"I don't know." Pete didn't sound convinced. "Marsha as a dick-slicing murderer? Gay ex or not, she just doesn't seem capable of that."

Rhodes gave a grunt of assent. "Doesn't seem enough motivation either. Who cares if their ex is fooling around with a guy?"

"Especially Trev," Wash said. "He's beautiful. Who wouldn't want to make out with him?"

"Watch it," Pete growled, his eyes narrow. Trevor squirmed in his chair. Pete jealous was a pretty sight.

"Chill, Petey." Wash laughed. "No one's trying to steal your man."

"Better not," Pete grumbled and Wash laughed again.

Chapter Eleven

"I can't believe you had an extra blow-up mattress and you didn't tell us," Wash bitched from the living room as Pete and Trevor brushed their teeth, crammed into the half-bath.

"You slept right on the floor last night?" Trevor called back around a mouthful of toothpaste. "Ouch."

"Yeah, ouch is right, you hoarding fucker," Wash yelled.

"Floor my ass," Rhodes' voice rumbled from the other room. "You slept on top of me."

"But I felt your pain," Wash cooed. "I'm indignant for *you*, Rhodie."

"Whatever, princess," Rhodes scoffed. The men's voices grew softer, interrupted by an occasional growl of laughter. Trevor concentrated on rinsing his mouth. He carefully didn't meet Pete's eyes, oddly shy at the knowledge the other two men were messing around in the next room.

"Think we should pull our bed in here?" Pete asked in a low voice, bumping against him.

Risking a glance at his teasing eyes, Trevor smiled. "Don't think we'd fit," he said resignedly, and Pete laughed.

"We'll have to go on a long walk tomorrow," Pete said, following Trevor out of the bathroom. "Give these two some alone time."

As they walked into the living room, Trevor cleared his throat loudly. "We're coming in. Hands where I can see them, dicks where I can't."

The guys laughed. They'd imitated Pete and Trevor's arrangement of two zipped-together sleeping bags on top of the air mattress and were laying front to back, covered to the waist and naked above. Rhodes' arm was draped over Wash's side in a way that was both comfortable and possessive.

Ever since Trevor had known Wash and Rhodes, there'd been no question the two men were together. Even when they were arguing, they were connected. For the first time, Trevor didn't have the usual pang of envy for their easy relationship. Stealing a quick look at Pete, busy poking at the remains of the fire, Trevor felt a warmth seep through him instead. He was part of his own twosome now. He had his own connection, his own guy who sent a trill of excitement up his spine whenever he looked at him.

With a satisfied smile, Trevor yanked off his t-shirt. His hands hesitated at the button on his jeans, feeling a little awkward about stripping down in front of Wash and

Rhodes, but then took those off as well, figuring he couldn't really sleep in his jeans. In just his underwear, he climbed into the sleeping bag.

Glancing over at Wash and Rhodes, he noticed their attention was caught by the same thing. Following their gazes, Trevor turned his head to see Pete pulling off his shirt over his head. The glow from the fire lit his chest, coloring the curves of his muscles red and darkening the grooves as black as the crumbling carbon remains of the logs.

Pete dropped his jeans, bending over to pull them clear of his feet. Trevor checked to see if Rhodes and Wash were still paying attention and they definitely were. Pete stood up straight, naked except for the form-fitting boxer briefs, and Trevor caught his breath. The guy was perfect...and he was Trevor's.

A rush of possessive pride hit him by surprise. He was out of bed and standing before he realized what he was doing. Unmoving, Pete watched him approach, the flickering light tossing strange shadows across his face. When Trevor reached him, uncertainty made him hesitate. This stranger made of hammered bronze was a different Pete than the one he knew. The eerie light, the pair watching with lustful eyes, the desire that hung in the room like a low-lying fog, thick and sticky...all of these things tightened Trevor's stomach and stiffened his cock.

When Pete raised his hand, Trevor jumped. He felt silly for being startled but Pete had been still for so long, Trevor almost expected him to act like a statue. Reaching for Trevor's nape, Pete caught the band that held his hair back and pulled it free.

"I like your hair," Pete said softly, catching a handful and letting it slip through his fingers like water. Trevor shivered and half-closed his eyes.

I like that you like my hair, he thought but didn't say it out loud. Even in his head it sounded silly and Trevor already acted like an idiot around this man. Instead, he just stood quietly, allowing Pete to play with his hair.

Catching a strand, Pete slid his fingers down to almost the bottom and brushed the ends against Trevor's lips. They parted on a small gasp and Pete released his hair, using his finger to trace Trevor's bottom lip.

Trevor met the fingertip with his tongue, inviting it into his mouth. Closing his lips, he sucked at it, nipping at it in frustration when Pete refused to give him more than the very tip of his finger.

"If we were alone," Pete whispered next to his ear, "I'd spank your ass for that."

A sound escaped Trevor's throat that was embarrassingly close to a whimper. Pulling his finger free, Pete held Trevor's face in both hands and brushed his lips over his temple. Trevor closed his eyes, giving himself up to the strong hands cradling his jaw and the lips leaving trails of heat everywhere they touched.

Pete kissed his closed eyelids, the bridge of his nose, the edge of his cheekbone. With a sigh, Trevor tried to tilt his chin up but Pete's hands kept him in place. Those teasing lips touched his face again and again, everywhere except his mouth, where Trevor was dying for them to be.

"Kiss me?" he begged in a cracked whisper. "Please?"

In answer, Pete's lips finally settled on his, touching down lightly for a long, sweet moment before his tongue broke the chaste seal of Trevor's lips and eased into his mouth. With a hungry groan, Trevor met the invading tongue with his own, petting and stroking before he sucked it deep into his mouth.

He felt more than heard Pete's sharp inhale. Digging his fingers into the hard muscle of his ass cheek, Pete yanked Trevor against him, hard. His mouth was ruthless as the kiss went wild, sucking and biting until Trevor was shaking and pliant, desperately wanting to be fucked.

There was a small noise and Pete broke the kiss, staring over Trevor's shoulder. "Sorry," he rasped and Trevor looked at him in surprise, wondering why he was apologizing, until he realized it was directed toward Wash and Rhodes.

"Oh!" he said, twisting his head around to look at them. "Sorry."

"You kidding?" Wash asked, sounding a little breathless. "Don't mind us. It's like our own live porno." Trevor noticed Rhodes' hand wasn't on top of the sleeping bag anymore but had disappeared beneath it. His hand seemed to be moving in the general region of Wash's groin. That could explain Wash's lack of oxygen.

When Pete dropped his hands to Trevor's waist and tucked one finger into the waistband of his underwear, Trevor's heart immediately took off. The beats thundered in his ears, his stomach clenching with a mix of excitement and apprehension and flat-out lust.

Pete's hand lowered a few inches, dragging Trevor's boxer briefs down his hip and exposing the top of his left ass cheek to the view of the two men behind him. Trevor caught his breath, tipping his head forward to press his sweating brow against Pete's shoulder. There was something so incredibly naughty about this fire-lit striptease, from Pete's slow-moving fingers to the quiet rustling and breathing sounds from the audience on the floor.

Snagging the opposite side of his underwear with his other hand, Pete slid the fabric down another few inches until it bunched beneath his cheeks, showing off his entire ass. Pete palmed the globes and squeezed hard enough to make Trevor gasp.

One hand stayed on his ass cheek as the other one circled his hip to find his cock, swollen and leaking with need. His fingers closed around the hard shaft, sliding up its length until Pete's thumb could slide over the head, spreading the moisture around the tip.

With a low groan, Trevor pressed his forehead harder against Pete's shoulder, fighting to hold his hips still and not thrust into the other man's grip. The hand on his ass wasn't helping Trevor's control. Pete's fingers delved into the crevice between his cheeks, finding his tight hole and shoving a finger inside.

Trevor sucked in a breath as pleasure radiated from front and back, buzzing along his spine until his entire body vibrated. Pete's hands moved up and down on his cock, in and out of his ass, and all the time the other two men watched. Trevor imagined

what it looked like from their angle, what it would be like to see that thick finger piercing his clenching ass. Pete's fist tightened around Trevor's cock and he came, biting Pete's shoulder as he exploded.

"Fuck!" Pete hissed out, his hand still moving, milking the last of Trevor's semen from him in a final burst of juddering pleasure. They stood for a moment, panting, and then Pete tugged Trevor's underwear back into place. Trevor gave an apologetic kiss to the spot where he'd gripped Pete's shoulder with his teeth.

Wash's groan brought Trevor's head around. Both Rhodes' and Wash's faces were tight with desire.

"Excuse us," Rhodes gritted out, standing up and hauling Wash up with him. Both of their erections bulged against the front of their underwear. They almost ran to the tiny half-bath, slamming the door behind them.

"Guess we're in the kitchen," Pete said, and Trevor gave a short, breathless laugh.

Pete washed his hands at the sink while Trevor admired the shifting muscles in his back. He traced a line across the other man's shoulder blade and Pete went still. Trevor smiled and drew a twisting loop, enjoying the way Pete's muscles twitched beneath the skin at his touch.

"I've never done anything like that before," Pete admitted, shutting off the water but not turning around. Trevor traced a spiral on his back as he listened. "Didn't mean to do that in front of them."

Trevor smiled. "I didn't mind." His fingers pressed harder, massaging rather than drifting over his skin.

"Yeah?" Smiling, Pete glanced at him over his shoulder then faced away again. "After we kissed, I looked up at them and I w-wanted to..."

"You wanted to what?" Trevor found a knot and used the heel of his hand to work it out.

Pete groaned. "Shit, that feels good." He was silent for a beat. "Guess I wanted to sh-show them I could do anything I w-wanted to you. 'Cause you're mine." When Trevor's hands stilled, Pete shot him another quick look over his shoulder. "That's fucked up, isn't it?"

"Maybe," Trevor said, suddenly not able to breathe but in the very best way. "Probably."

"Yeah." Bracing his hands on the counter, Pete sighed. Leaning in, Trevor kissed the point on his spine where his neck met his back and felt Pete shiver beneath his lips.

"I already knew," Trevor told him, kissing a line down his backbone.

"Knew I'm a jealous, f-fucked-up freak?" Pete asked with a laugh.

Lowering himself to his knees, Trevor tugged Pete's underwear down to his thighs and licked his tailbone. "No." He pushed Pete's ass cheeks apart so he could kiss his puckered hole. "I already knew I'm yours." He jabbed his tongue into Pete's ass.

"Jesus Christ!" Pete pressed back against his mouth. Drawing out, Trevor traced a wet circle around his rear entrance before plunging back in, stabbing in and out like a small, slick cock. When he pulled his head away, Pete groaned in disappointment.

"Turn around," Trevor told him and Pete obeyed without question. Trevor had to press back a smug grin. Pete didn't have a problem with getting ordered around as long as a blowjob was forthcoming.

Lowering his head, Trevor dodged the demanding erection and licked at his balls instead. Obviously not in the mood for being teased, Pete seized his head and lined up Trevor's mouth to the end of his cock. Puckering his lips, he gave the tip a tiny kiss, looking up at Pete.

"If I suck you," Trevor began, making sure the breath from his words blew right across the wet, sensitive head of his cock, "can I fuck you next time we have privacy?"

Pete's hands gentled, stroking instead of holding. "You can fuck me anytime you want," he promised. "In front of a choir of nuns, for all I care."

Trevor laughed. "When we're alone will be fine." Wrapping his lips tightly around the head of Pete's erection, he licked at the head. The fingers in Trevor's hair tightened, pulling on the strands, but he liked the slight pain, the addictive feeling of being powerless. Pete moved Trevor's head up and down, fucking his face with a ruthless rhythm, while Trevor licked and sucked and swallowed, trying to make Pete lose control.

It didn't take long for Pete's thrusts to speed up, become uneven. Trevor doubled his efforts, pressing his tongue along the underside and tightening his lips around the head as Pete pulled almost all the way out of his mouth. When he thrust back in, Trevor swallowed, working the tip with his throat muscles.

A rough noise tore from Pete's throat. "I'm going to come," he warned. Trevor clung to Pete's solid thighs and forced the cock another fraction of an inch farther down his throat. With a bit-off shout, Pete spilled into his mouth. Trevor swallowed eagerly, wanting every drop, everything Pete could give him. He continued to suck gently as Pete trembled and panted, holding him in his mouth until Pete slowly pulled free.

Tugging Trevor to his feet, Pete wrapped his arms around him, burying his face in Trevor's neck as he recovered. With a shuddering sigh, Pete finally loosened his arms and lifted his head, dropping a lingering kiss on Trevor's mouth.

"Want to go to bed?" Pete asked when he finally pulled away and adjusted his underwear. Dropping his hand, he twined his fingers through Trevor's.

"Sure. Think those two've finished fucking in the bathroom?" Trevor asked, following Pete out of the kitchen.

Pete shrugged. "If not, they can find their own way to bed."

Rhodes and Wash were tucked into their sleeping bags, curled together and already asleep.

"The sleep of the well-fucked," Trevor whispered, and Pete muffled his laugh. Rhodes opened his eyes and gave them a small smile before shutting them again. Wash didn't even stir.

Pete climbed into their improvised bed and held the sleeping bag open for Trevor. As he settled onto his side, feeling Pete's arm wrap over him and pull him tightly against him, Trevor smiled. For a witness hiding out from his murderous father in a house with no furniture in a town with a knife-wielding killer on the loose, he was pretty fucking happy.

* * * * *

"What's on for today?" Rhodes asked, pouring water into the top of the coffeemaker.

Pete thought about it for a moment. He'd just woken up fifteen minutes earlier, so his brain wasn't functioning at full capacity yet. "Painting?"

Wash turned from where he was flipping pancakes at the stove. "Outside or inside?"

"Inside." Pete yawned and stretched. "Just upstairs. I want to get those rooms done so we can get some fucking beds."

"Getting tired of the sleeping bags?" Trevor asked as he came into the kitchen, sneaking in an ass-squeeze as he slipped by Pete and headed for the coffeemaker. "I'm kind of enjoying it."

"Coffee's not ready yet," Rhodes told him. With a melodramatic sigh, Trevor slumped against the counter.

Wash shot him a wicked grin. "It has been kind of fun, hasn't it?"

His coffee-deprived sulk falling away, Trevor laughed and nodded.

"You need a bigger bathroom," Rhodes grunted, a smile twitching at the corners of his mouth.

Pete snorted. "How about we get you guys a guest bed? That'll save our bathroom and your," he waved a hand in their general direction, "whatever body parts you had to contort last night."

"How long are you staying?" Trevor asked, boosting himself up to sit on the counter right next to the coffeemaker.

With a shrug, Rhodes asked, "How long are *you* staying?"

"The official word is seven months 'til the trial. If he gets off though, guess I'm hiding forever," Trevor said.

"He' being your father?" Wash clarified, piling a few pancakes onto a plate before pouring more batter into the pan.

"Yeah," Trevor muttered, kicking his heels against the cupboard door below. "Dear ol' Dad."

"What exactly did you see him do?" Rhodes asked.

There was a pause as Trevor stared off into the space over Pete's head. He finally answered, "I watched as he killed my boyfriend."

"Ah, Trev," Wash said into the stunned silence.

Pete made a move toward Trevor, a jerky motion that stopped in mid-step as Trevor pushed off the counter and headed toward the side door. The screen banged closed behind him and Pete stared at it for a second.

"I should go after him," Wash said.

Shaking his head, Pete moved to the door. "No. I'll go."

Trevor hadn't gotten very far, just to the newly trimmed tree in the backyard. He'd propped his shoulder against the trunk, his back to Pete.

"Careful," Trevor told him without turning around. "Bad things happen to people who get involved with me."

Pete snorted. "Little late for that. Don't think we could get any more involved."

Trevor gave a small huff of laughter and some of the stiffness eased from his stance. "True."

"I'm sorry, Trev," Pete told him quietly.

He gave an awkward twitch of his shoulder that was not quite a shrug.

Pete took a step closer. "Want to tell me about it?"

"No."

"Okay." He took another step, bringing him right up against Trevor's back. Running his fingers down the other man's arm, Pete took his hand. "But we're going to have to pretend to talk out here for a while so Wash thinks you told me. Otherwise, he's going to drag it out of you once you get inside."

Trevor gave a surprised bark of laughter. "Oh fuck. You're right." He turned his hand and linked his fingers in Pete's. "He'll probably do that anyway, even if we stay out here all morning."

"Yeah, that's probably true." Pete was too close to resist. He caught Trevor's earlobe in his teeth and gave it a tug before releasing it. "And we'll miss breakfast if we wait too long."

Trevor shivered. "And if you keep messing around like that, I'm going to start begging you to slam me up against this tree and fuck me, and then we'll both get arrested."

"Jesus," Pete hissed. He snaked an arm around Trevor's waist and pulled him back against him. "Thanks for putting the idea in my head. Now I'll never be able to look at this tree the same way."

"We could slip out here tonight," Trevor suggested wickedly and Pete's arm tightened.

"That sounds..." His words trailed away as a movement at the corner of the house caught his eye. "Stay here," he commanded, and took off toward where he'd seen the motion.

As he rounded the corner of the house, he saw a small, black-clad figure fly through the yard across the street and disappear into Len's house.

"Danny?" Trevor asked from right behind him.

Pete turned around. "Did you chase after me?" he asked in a calm voice.

Obviously, Trevor didn't trust his tone. He started backing up. "Yeah."

"After I told you to stay put?" His voice was positively *silky* now.

Trevor's look of sulky defiance was back, mixed with a touch of excitement. "Yeah."

Pete struggled to hold onto his anger but a different kind of heat was rising inside him—and that wasn't the only thing that was rising. He stalked toward Trevor, the surge of adrenaline caused by that second of danger—right before he knew the person watching them was just a kid—changing to arousal.

"Everything okay?" Rhodes rounded the corner with Wash.

Pete took a deep breath. "Sure," he told them. "The neighbor kid was lurking again, that's all."

"You two were out here forever," Wash said, grinning. "Figured we should check to see if you'd finally killed Trev."

Rhodes gaze flicked down to the bulge at Pete's crotch. "Don't think killing was what he planned."

"Really, Petey?" Wash laughed, his eyes following the path of Rhodes' gaze. "In the yard?"

Pete felt his face heat. "I wasn't going to actually *do* anything," he muttered.

"I was," Trevor said, smirking.

"Watch it," Pete warned, pointing at him. "I'm still pissed at you."

Wash shook his head. "Never stays where you put him, does he?"

"No." Pete glared at Trevor. "How am I supposed to protect you when you keep running into dangerous situations?"

"Dangerous?" Trevor repeated incredulously. "It was the neighbor kid!"

"We didn't know that."

Crossing his arms over his chest, Trevor met him glare for glare. "Who's going to protect you if I'm not there when *you* go running into dangerous situations?"

Pete blinked at him, completely baffled. "Protect me? *I'll* protect me. You're the one in danger!"

"And you're the one who's going to get killed trying to keep me safe," Trevor argued. "How would I live with that, huh? How do you expect me to just stay where you put me when you could be hurt?"

Throwing up his hands, Pete turned a frustrated circle. "Because that's the whole point!" he whisper-shouted, incredibly annoyed but still cognizant of the strong possibility any number of neighbors could be listening. "Why d'you think McDonald asked me to protect you?"

"Because he doesn't care about anything except his case," Trevor snapped back, stepping closer so he was chest-to-chest with Pete. "He doesn't give a flying fuck if you're shot in the face, as long as I'm alive to testify."

"Yeah, well, I get his point," Pete told him. "I'm going to keep you alive. If that means I get shot in the face – nice, by the way – then I get shot in the fucking face."

The burn in Trevor's eyes flared. "You fucking asshole," he hissed, shoving Pete's shoulders with both hands. Pete grabbed his arms, holding them as the other man struggled in his grip. "You motherfucking asshole."

"Call me what you want," Pete said between clenched teeth. "I'm going to protect you."

"I like your fucking face, okay?" Trevor yelled. "I don't want you to be shot in the face!"

"What's all this about getting shot in the face?" Wash muttered to Rhodes. "Does it have to be the face?" Although he heard, Pete ignored the aside, all his attention focused on the man in front of him.

"I'll be careful, okay?" Pete released his wrists and cupped Trevor's face, feeling the fine tremors running through him. "We'll both be safe. We'll be okay, Trev. I promise."

Trevor glared at him, his eyes too bright, almost glassy.

Pulling the other man toward him, Pete held Trevor's head against his shoulder. Trevor resisted at first but then softened. "Nothing'll happen to either of us," Pete soothed. "It's okay."

Gripping handfuls of Pete's shirt, Trevor muttered, "Fuck."

Pete gave an amused snort. "Asshole," he said fondly, rubbing his hands over Trevor's back.

"Cocksucker."

Laughing out loud at that, Pete gave Trevor a tight squeeze. "Yes please."

They held each other for a while until Trevor raised his head. "Where did Rhodes and Wash go?"

"Away from our crazy asses," Pete guessed.

"Yeah?" Trevor caught his gaze and raised an eyebrow, his eyes sparking with a wicked light. "So we're alone."

Pete huffed out a laugh. "Sure, except for every neighbor within a three-block radius who are looking out their windows at us."

"Right," Trevor sighed. "Paint shop then?"

"Paint shop," Pete confirmed, tossing an arm over Trevor's shoulders as they headed into the house. "Think those two ate all the pancakes?"

* * * * *

Rhodes and Pete ended up making the trek to the home-supply store for paint and supplies while Wash and Trevor stayed home to prep the walls.

"He'll be fine," Rhodes told him.

Pete glanced at him in surprise and then focused on the road again, smiling wryly. "I'm that obvious?"

Rhodes shrugged. "If anything does happen, Trev has a good brain. He'll figure it out. Plus Wash is there. He may be a smartass but he knows what he's doing."

"Yeah." Pete chewed the inside of his cheek. "My brain knows that but I still..."

"Worry?" Rhodes offered after a silent moment.

"Yeah," he sighed.

With a snort, Rhodes told him, "Join the club."

Not able to think about the scary and unrealistic scenarios flooding his mind with what might be happening to Trevor at this very moment, Pete forced himself to change the subject. "Remind me to pick up a lawnmower."

Rhodes grunted. "So what're you going to do with this lawnmower after you sell?"

"Sell?"

"Trevor said in his e-mail you're selling the place once all this is over," Rhodes reminded him.

Pete frowned. "Right."

"And all that furniture you're planning on buying?" Rhodes added.

"Well..." Pete hunted for an answer but came up with nothing.

"You're never selling that place."

"No," Pete admitted. "Probably not."

"Good," Rhodes told him. "I like it. Like it even more with furniture."

Pete shot him a shy grin. "It's a nice house, isn't it?"

"It *will* be," Rhodes corrected. "Right now it's an empty piece of shit with really hard floors."

Pete laughed.

Chapter Twelve

"How'd we get stuck with wall washing when those two get to shop?" Trevor bitched as he scrubbed.

Wash shrugged. "I don't mind. Gives us a chance to talk."

"Does it?" Pressing back a knowing grin, Trevor asked innocently, "What were you thinking of talking about?"

Wash flicked some soapy water at him. Ducking, Trevor laughed.

"Oh, I don't know," Wash said. "Maybe we could talk about that muscle-bound cop who spends most of his time with his hands down your pants."

Concentrating very hard on washing a certain spot on the wall, Trevor felt heat creep into his face. "What about him?"

"We could start with the part where he had his hands down your pants," Wash suggested, tossing his rag into the bucket and giving up any pretense of doing anything except talking.

"You didn't seem to mind watching," Trevor reminded him. His face was on fire.

"That's because I didn't," Wash said baldly. "You two are fucking hot together." He laughed. "You two are fucking hot *apart* too."

Trevor squirmed. "C'mon, Wash. I don't make you talk about Rhodes."

With a laugh, Wash told him, "That's 'cause you don't need to ask. I just talk."

Trevor just looked at him.

"Fine," Wash relented. "But let's take a break. We can do some research on the neighbors."

"Sounds good," Trevor readily agreed, tossing his own rag in the bucket.

They settled on the floor and Wash put Pete's laptop across his thighs.

"Aren't we still missing last names?" Trevor asked, watching as Wash entered Pete's password and his desktop appeared on the screen.

"Nope," Wash said, opening the internet and logging on to a site they often used for background checks. "While you were in grabbing beer for everyone, we did introductions. Pete played dumb, so Morty and Iris helped him out and gave us the rundown of the neighbors. I jotted them down on a bathroom break."

"Ah." Trevor nodded. "Smart."

"I know. My idea." Wash gave him a cheeky grin as he entered a name. "Might as well check our two helpful seniors out first. Let's see." He scrolled down the screen. "Iris and Mortimer Hammitt. They've lived in their house for thirty-two years, owned

their Buick for twelve and that Iris is a bit of a speed-demon—she gets a ticket every year or so. All paid.”

“Huh,” Trevor grunted. “That’s boring. Try the next one.”

“How about our twitchy friend Marsha Hayes?” His fingers tapped against the keys. “Ooh, now we’re getting some interesting shit. Check it out.” Wash turned the computer so Trevor could view the screen.

“What am I looking for?” Trevor asked.

“Right here.” Wash pointed. “Two arrests five years ago—one for trespassing and one for violating a restraining order.”

“Whoa.” Trevor looked at him. “Restraining order. So she was stalking someone?”

“Could be,” Wash told him with a shrug. “Could also be she was protesting somewhere and the company took out a restraining order against her. She also could’ve had a real asshole of an ex-boyfriend who called the cops when she came to get her stuff after they broke up—something like that.”

“Something to look into, at least.”

Wash grinned at him. “Definitely.”

“Do Michelle next,” Trevor urged.

“I thought we’d decided she probably wasn’t the dick-dicer,” Wash said, although he typed in her name.

“We did but we should still look into her. Maybe there’s someone in her life who doesn’t like the shitty way her husband was treating her.”

“Good point.”

As Wash scrolled down, reading the information the search had pulled up on Michelle, the sound of Pete and Rhodes returning came from the floor below.

“Let me grab the guys,” Trevor offered, getting to his feet. “They should be in on this.”

Wash nodded absently, still reading. As Trevor clattered down the stairs, Pete looked up at him and grinned. Warmth spread through Trevor’s stomach at how honestly happy Pete looked to see him. He had to restrain himself from running at Pete and tackling him.

“Come upstairs and check it out,” he told the two men. “Wash is doing background checks and Marsha was a stalker.”

“Yeah?” Pete glanced up at the second level. “Weren’t you guys supposed to be prepping walls for painting?” His voice was teasing though, his eyes warm. Rhodes snorted a laugh as he started up the stairs.

Trevor rolled his eyes. “Which is more important,” he asked, “solving a violent murder or painting some bedrooms?”

"Okay, okay." Pete gave in. He nudged Trevor up the stairs in front of him, murmuring in his ear, "Just remember—as soon as those rooms are painted, we get beds. Real, soft beds you sink into, with a headboard you can tie someone to..."

Trevor swallowed. "Um...maybe we should start painting." Pete laughed softly and he stifled a groan.

* * * * *

Everyone else in the neighborhood appeared to be, according to the background checks at least, boringly normal. There were a few traffic tickets and Terrance had a citation for road rage, but nothing earth shattering appeared on any of the residents' reports that screamed out, "This person killed Greg Lawson!"

They spent the rest of the morning and most of the afternoon painting. Despite a minor argument about color, in which Trevor insisted any color called "Woodchuck Hollow" was going to look like shit, even if it *was* just for one wall, they'd completed all three bedrooms and the bathroom before early evening mellowed the light streaming through the windows.

"Okay," Trevor admitted, studying their bedroom walls. "So it doesn't look like shit. What kind of name is 'Woodchuck Hollow' anyway?"

"Is he still talking about the fucking name of the fucking paint?" Rhodes grumbled from the doorway. He and Wash had just been showering off two days of stain and paint and everyday dirt. "Can't you shut him up, Pete? I'm hungry."

"Steaks on the grill?" Pete suggested.

Trevor raised an eyebrow. "Grill?"

"Yep." Pete grinned at him. "Bought a grill *and* a lawnmower."

With a laugh, Trevor asked, "So lawn work tomorrow?"

"Assholes—focus," Rhodes snapped. "Food."

"Steaks coming up," Pete laughed, grabbing Trevor by the hand and hauling him from the room.

* * * * *

After dinner, they arranged themselves on the front porch. Pete was starting to feel like a settled old man with all these evenings of porch sitting they were doing.

"So what do we know about this case?" Rhodes asked. He seemed to be in a much better mood with some food inside him.

"Well, the general consensus is the victim was an asshole," Pete said.

"A cheating asshole," Wash clarified.

"A cheating bisexual asshole," Trevor said.

"Right." Pete looked over the front yard. "It's a good thing we bought that lawnmower. The grass is looking a little jungle-y."

"Can we focus here?" Rhodes asked politely and Pete grinned at him.

Trevor spoke up again. "The whole cheating bisexual thing sure opens up the field to everyone, men and women."

Wash shook his head. "It was open anyway. Sex isn't the only reason people kill each other. Could've been anger, money, revenge...lots of reasons."

"That's true." Pete flipped through his notebook. "Wish I had a whiteboard. So our best suspect – on paper, at least – is Marsha."

Shaking his head, Rhodes said, "I don't think she did it. What about that kid who's always spying on people?"

"Danny?" Nibbling on the inside of his cheek, Pete considered that. "I can't see him as a suspect but we should talk with him. The kid's looked in enough windows – he might've seen something."

"You guys do realize it probably wasn't someone from the neighborhood, right?" Wash reminded them. "We're not all trapped in a mansion with Mr. Body. People do have cars."

"Maybe," Pete acknowledged. "As you said, though, people murder because of strong emotions. There're a lot of emotions tangled up on this block."

Trevor snorted. "Very poetic."

"Ass," Pete said fondly, reached over to bump his fist against Trevor's shoulder.

"Okay," Rhodes said. "Since we can't interview everyone in the tri-state area, how about we stick with the suspects we know."

"Why not start with Liar-Liar-Pants-on-Fire Terrance?" Wash suggested. "Since we all agreed he was, you know, lying."

"He's a good starting point," Pete agreed. "A road-rage citation – that could indicate he doesn't control his anger very well."

"So his wife is having an affair with Greg –" Wash began, only to be interrupted by Trevor.

"Or *he's* having an affair with him."

Wash nodded. "Or he's having an affair with Greg and something sets him off."

Trevor sat up straight in his chair. "Terrance saw us – in the kitchen, I mean. When Greg was coming on to me. Marsha almost ran into him on her way out."

"Right before we left Marsha's that night," Pete said slowly, thinking back, "wasn't Terrance arguing with Greg?"

Trevor nodded. "They were having an intense discussion about something, at least."

"Interesting," Rhodes said. "That means..." He paused, staring intently across the yard. "There's our peeping Tom."

Whipping his head around, Pete saw the teenager sit on the top step of his front porch. Pete jumped up and hurried down the steps toward the house across the street. Danny was fiddling with a skateboard, which distracted his attention enough to allow Pete to get just a few feet from him before Danny noticed he wasn't alone.

The teen jumped up but Pete took the final two steps to close the gap between them and grabbed the boy's shoulder.

"Danny, hang on," he said.

"Let go," the kid muttered, trying to twist away from Pete's hand.

Tightening his fingers on the wiry shoulder, Pete held on. "I'm not going to hurt you," he said. "I just want to talk to you."

Although Danny wasn't pulling back anymore, his muscles were tense and ready to flee.

"I know you see a lot of what goes on around here," Pete said. "I was wondering if you had seen anything that night Greg Lawson was killed?"

Dropping his eyes, Danny shook his head.

"Nothing? A strange car? Someone coming out of their house?"

Another headshake.

"That's okay," Pete told him. "What about earlier? Did you see Greg fighting with anyone? Was there anything at all unusual?"

Danny hesitated, shooting a quick glance up at Pete's face.

"There was, wasn't there?" Although the prospect of a lead had him excited, Pete forced his voice to stay calm and even. He didn't want to spook the kid now. "What'd you see?"

"Nothing," Danny said.

Pete snorted. "You're not a very good liar, kiddo."

Shooting him a glare, the boy resumed his struggle to escape.

"C'mon, Danny," Pete urged. "Don't you want the sheriff to catch whoever did this to Greg?"

Danny stilled. "Yeah," he muttered, not raising his head.

"Then tell me." There was only silence.

I've lost him, Pete thought, looking at the top of the kid's bowed head. He'd dyed his hair a dull black. "What'd you use on your hair – black shoe polish?"

His head shot up at that and he glowered at Pete.

"Sorry." Pete grimaced. That wasn't the best thing to say when interviewing the kid. "What color is it normally?"

"Blond," Danny told him gruffly, his eyes still angry and suspicious.

Pete grinned at him. "You should go back to that. With those blue eyes, you'd look like Joey's little brother."

The kid actually blushed. His scowl had faded, so Pete thought he'd try his luck again.

"Won't you tell me what you saw?" he asked.

Danny hesitated and then mumbled, "He and Terrance...you know."

His eyebrows shooting up, Pete clarified, "Greg and Terrance were lovers?"

Bright red, Danny gave an awkward nod.

"You saw them?"

"Didn't mean to," the boy protested. "They were drinking beer and watching baseball at the Lawsons' house a few weeks ago. They were getting pretty wasted, so I was thinking I could sneak into the garage and take some beer out of the fridge, but then..." The poor kid's face was as red as clown lips.

"Homerun?" Pete offered, his mouth twitching up at the corners.

Danny gave a huff of embarrassed laughter. "Yeah."

"Was that..." Pete stopped talking when Danny's gaze shifted over to something behind them. Half-turning, Pete watched as Len's minivan screeched into the driveway.

"Get your fucking hands off him," Len snarled as he jumped out of the driver's side door and circled the van. "Get away from him, do you hear me?"

Releasing Danny's shoulder, Pete lifted his hands, palms out. "It's okay, Len. We were just talking —"

Len charged forward and gave Pete a shove. "Stay away from him, you fucking homo!"

Pete gritted his teeth, dying to shove Len up against the house, jerk his hands behind his back and slap cuffs on him, but Pete didn't have his handcuffs. He also didn't have his badge or any kind of authority to arrest the man. Still, Pete was tempted.

"Get inside, Daniel," Len ordered.

"Fuck off, Dad."

Pete turned to look at the kid, surprised at the tearful crack in Danny's voice — and that's when Len swung. Pete jerked his head back to avoid the punch but wasn't quick enough. Len's fist clipped his jaw, knocking his head to the side. He staggered but managed to stay on his feet.

"Pete!" Trevor yelled. Rhodes and Wash appeared behind Len. They each grabbed one of Len's arms as Trevor ran to Pete.

"You okay?" Trevor asked, touching the spot on Pete's jaw where the punch had landed.

Pete nodded. "Fine."

"Should we call the sheriff?" Rhodes asked and Pete shook his head, regretting that move when a flash of pain reverberated through his teeth.

"Better not." He didn't want to discuss Trevor's safety – and the damage an assault case could do to their cover stories – in front of Len and Danny, so Pete just gave Rhodes a meaningful look. The other man nodded back, understanding.

"What's your problem, asshole?" Trevor demanded, stalking toward Len. Pete grabbed Trevor and yanked him back.

"Let it go, Trev," he muttered warningly. "Why don't *you*," he nodded at Len, "head into your house and we'll go back across the street to ours."

"Don't you want to fight, you fucking fairy?" Len taunted.

Wash gave him a shake. "It's four against one, you dip. He doesn't want to fight and we're not going to let you get another swing in, so why don't you just listen to the nice man?"

Len scowled but didn't say anything. Rhodes and Wash escorted him to his stairs. Shaking off his captors, Len stiffly climbed the steps as Danny stood back to let him pass. Stalking into his house, Len slammed the door behind him.

"You okay?" Pete asked Danny.

"Fine," the kid said flatly, sitting down and pulling his skateboard across his lap. "You'd better go."

Frowning, Pete reluctantly left the yard with the other three. He glanced back to see the kid staring after them.

* * * * *

They moved their chairs inside while Trevor grabbed a bag of frozen peas for Pete's sore jaw.

"Thanks, sweetie," Pete said absently, taking the bag. It wasn't until Trevor did a double take that he realized what he'd said. "Sorry," he told him with a wry grin. "Too mushy?"

Trevor blushed. "No." He ran gentle fingers over the red spot where Len's fist had landed. "I like it."

Pete turned his face to kiss Trevor's fingers.

"C'mon, you two," Wash told them with a long-suffering, very loud sigh. "Save it for later. We have a case to solve."

Trevor snorted. "Okay, Velma from *Scooby-Doo*."

Rhodes laughed.

Wash looked offended. "Why Velma? Why can't I be Fred, at least?"

"Because," Trevor explained with put-on patience, "Velma was always cock-blocking Fred and Daphne."

It was Pete's turn to laugh. "Wash is right though," he said. "About the case part. Before you guys had to ride to the rescue, Danny told me Terrance and Greg were having an affair."

"Told you!" Trevor crowed. "I knew Abby wasn't hooking up with Greg. She's too nice for him."

"What about Len, though?" Rhodes asked. "He seems a little unstable."

"Beyond being just 'homo-scared'?" Wash asked.

"Exactly."

Pete nodded. "He was panicked about something. He just jumped out of the car swinging."

"Could he have been worried Danny was going to tell you something?" Wash suggested.

"What, that his dad chopped up the neighbor?" Trevor asked, skeptically. "What's Len's motive?"

"He was awfully quick to think the worst of you," Wash reminded Pete. "Could Greg have been sniffing around Danny?"

Pete winced. "Hope not. Kid seems to have enough on his plate without having to deal with Greg."

"Are we back to thinking anyone could've done it?" Trevor sighed.

Pete's laugh didn't hold much humor. "Pretty much." He stood up. "I'm going to jump in the shower then." He returned the peas to the kitchen, wrote "Cold Pack—Don't Eat" across the bag with a permanent marker and tossed them back into the freezer. Climbing the stairs, he poked at his developing bruise.

"Ow," he grunted, feeling very sorry for himself.

* * * * *

Eyeing Pete's form through the fogged curtain, Trevor dropped his clothes on the floor. He pulled the curtain over enough to step into the shower. Pete watched him and smiled slowly, his gaze flicking up and down Trevor's naked body.

Despite the warm spray and the heat that flowed through him at Pete's perusal, Trevor shivered.

"Cold?" Pete asked, stepping close and running his hands up and down Trevor's arms as if to warm him. He definitely was doing that.

"Not anymore," Trevor said huskily. "You mind if I join you?"

"Does it look like I mind?" Pete laughed, gesturing at his swelling cock.

"I can't really tell from here," Trevor teased. "I'd better get a closer look." Crouching until he was face-to-cock with Pete, he brushed his rough cheek lightly across the hardening erection.

Pete hissed out a breath, all his laughter gone.

"Did that hurt?" Trevor asked, doing it again.

"Yeah, a little," Pete gasped out. "Don't stop!"

Trevor chuckled. "Wasn't planning on stopping." Steadying himself with a firm, two-handed grip on Pete's ass, he touched his lips to the tip of the cock in front of him, his tongue darting out to taste it. Pete's fingers were already laced through Trevor's hair, not holding him still but just there, ready to grab on and direct his movement.

With another shiver of delight, Trevor licked the cock again. He raised his head to touch his chin against the sensitive head, giving a low laugh at Pete's sharp inhale, the tightening of his fingers against Trevor's scalp.

"Devil," Pete growled. "Get up here."

Trevor got in a last teasing flick of his tongue across the tip of his cock before standing up. Yanking him into a kiss, Pete nipped at his mouth, a tiny punishment for the handling of his cock, and then licked away the small pain. Trevor melted, loving the combination of rough and sweet, strong and soft.

He clutched at Pete's ass, pressing closer so their cocks were trapped together between them. Breaking the kiss, Pete grabbed the liquid soap and poured some into his hand. Delving between their bodies, he grasped both of their cocks in his soapy hand.

Trevor sucked in a breath. There was something about Pete feeling the same grip and slide along his cock he was feeling that intensified Trevor's pleasure. It was almost as if Trevor really could feel through Pete's skin, experience what was shooting through the nerve endings of his cock.

His hand still moving, slipping up their lengths to squeeze the cock heads together, Pete found Trevor's lips again. His mouth took over, claiming Trevor's as his own, as his hand moved faster, his grip became rougher.

Trevor moaned into Pete's mouth as he came, spilling over Pete's cock. His lover's hand milked his climax, drawing it out with each pull of his fist, until Trevor was shaking and wrung dry.

Pete came just seconds later, his cum mixing with Trevor's as his hand continued to move. Trevor took over the kiss as Pete convulsed, giving him what he'd given Trevor, sucking and licking and nipping at his mouth. Pete groaned, the sound vibrating against his lips.

He clung to Pete, not sure if he were holding his lover or himself up and not really caring. Trevor just wanted to be close, to extend the moment in the wet and steam, not knowing if he was feeling Pete's heartbeat or his own.

It ended too soon. Pete pulled back to smile at him, tucking a strand of hair behind Trevor's ear.

"Have I mentioned I love your hair?" Pete asked.

"Only about a thousand times," Trevor told him.

"Oh." He turned them both so Trevor's back was to the showerhead. "Sorry."

Closing his eyes, Trevor tipped his head back so the water turned his hair into a heavy curtain. "It's okay," he said, a smile touching his lips. "I don't mind hearing it."

Pete licked his exposed throat. "Then I'll say it," he said roughly. "Over and over."

Chapter Thirteen

"Aw," Wash sighed as Pete carried the air mattresses up the stairs, followed by Trevor with his arms full of sleeping bags. "No more sleepover?"

Rhodes wrapped his arms around Wash from behind. "Privacy," he rumbled in his partner's ear, although Pete heard it halfway up the stairs.

"Right," Wash said, sounding much happier. "Not that your show wasn't great, guys, but that bathroom is tiny."

"Thanks?" Trevor said and Pete laughed. As hot as it had been last night, performing for the other two men, he was dying to get Trevor back into a bedroom. They put Wash and Rhodes' things in the guest room and set up their own bed.

"So," Trevor said quietly, ducking his head.

"Yeah?" Pete tried to hide that Trevor's shy look burned straight to his cock.

"We'll be alone tonight." He shot a glance at Pete.

Stepping closer until they were almost touching, Pete said, "Yeah?" This time his voice was lower, almost a growl. He saw Trevor's excited shiver and Pete's eyes just about rolled back in his head.

"So do I get to fuck you tonight?" Trevor asked, peeking up at him again. "Like you promised?"

Putting his mouth by Trevor's ear, still not touching, Pete whispered hoarsely, "Yeah, you can fuck me." He could hear Trevor's breathing speed up. "Any way you want."

"Jesus," Trevor breathed and Pete pressed back a smile. This was fun, turning Trevor on with just words.

"You can tell me to get on my hands and knees to fuck me," Pete went on. "Or you could fuck me face-to-face. Or maybe you want to fuck me against the wall. Any way you want, my ass is yours to fuck." He pulled back and saw Trevor's eyes were glazed with hunger. Pete would've laughed if he weren't so turned-on himself.

The doorbell rang.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Trevor sighed.

"Wait up here," Pete told him, immediately in caution mode. Grabbing his gun, he hurried out of the bedroom and down the stairs.

"Someone who wants to kill me is not going to ring the doorbell," Trevor told him, right behind him as usual.

Rhodes and Wash were already flanking the door.

"Who is it?" Pete asked quietly as the bell rang again.

"Can't see from the window," Wash told him.

With a short nod and a mental note to have some security cameras installed—or at least a peephole—Pete slid the chain closed and unlocked the deadbolt. He opened the door a crack, holding his gun out of sight behind the door.

His shoulders relaxed. "Hey Danny," he said to the kid slouching on his front porch. "Just a sec." He closed the door and undid the chain before opening it again. "What's up?"

Shifting uneasily from foot to foot, Danny finally raised his head. There were tracks down his cheeks where his tears had smeared his black eyeliner.

Pete frowned. "What's wrong? Is your dad okay?"

Scowling, Danny shrugged. "The asshole's fine."

"Watch your mouth," Pete warned, but he opened the door wider and stepped aside, shoving his gun into the back of his jeans. "Come on in."

Danny hesitated for a second and then stepped inside and looked around. "Where's all your shit?"

"Mouth," Pete reminded him, eyeballing Wash, who turned his laugh into a cough. "And we don't have any furniture yet except these camp chairs, which you don't get to sit on unless you quit swearing."

Rolling his eyes, Danny muttered something unintelligible and flopped down in one of the chairs.

"This is Rhodes, Wash, Joey and I'm Pete, as you know." He took one of the chairs next to Danny. "You have a fight with your dad?"

"Yeah." Danny frowned fiercely at his shoe.

"What'd you guys fight about?" Pete asked.

"You."

Pete blinked. "What about me?"

"You're gay."

"And?"

"He hates gay people."

"Oh." Pete still didn't get it. "So what was the fight about?"

"I *told* you." Danny gave a long-suffering sigh.

Pete restrained the urge to smack the kid. "No, you didn't. You said I'm gay, which I knew, and he hates gay people, which I suspected. Why don't you tell me something I *don't* know?"

"He wants to talk to you."

That is something I didn't know. Pete's eyebrows shot up. "Your dad?"

"Don't worry," Danny reassured him. "He won't try to hit you anymore. He's just embarrassed now."

"C'mon, kiddo," Pete told him, standing up.

Danny looked at him. "Seriously?"

"Seriously."

With a heavy sigh, the boy stood up and slouched over to the door. Pete rolled his eyes at the other men and followed Danny. As all three of the others filed out the front door after him, Pete stopped.

"Nope," he told them.

"You're not going by yourself," Trevor stated, crossing his arms over his chest. "The guy tried to jump you."

"If he does try something again, I think I can take him," Pete assured him.

"Unless he has a shotgun pointed at the front door right now," Rhodes said flatly.

Pete sighed. "Fine. You two," he pointed at Rhodes and Wash, "stay here on the porch. You," he jerked his head at Trevor, "come with me."

"Why does Trev get to go?" Rhodes asked, looking a little offended.

"He'd come anyway," Pete told him, resigned. Trevor grinned and nodded.

"C'mon, Petey," Wash complained. "We're going to miss all the fun!"

Pete snorted. "Yeah, fun."

"Coming?" Danny asked from halfway down the walk.

"Yeah." Pete headed toward the house across the street.

At Len's porch, he stopped. "Why don't you tell your dad to come out here." Although he hadn't said anything, the idea that this was an ambush had already crossed Pete's mind before Rhodes' shotgun suggestion. Tugging on Trevor's arm, he pulled him to the side, out of range of anyone in the house. Pete was careful to keep his own body between Trevor and the front door, as well.

"I know what you're doing," Trevor told him.

Pete blinked at him innocently. "Waiting?"

Trevor snorted. "You're in protect-o-matic mode."

"What?" Pete asked him, amused. "Am I Robocop?"

"Well," Trevor drawled. "Some of your parts are as hard as metal." He pinched Pete's ass.

Pete's teeth clicked together. "What was that for?"

"Putting your body between me and danger — *again*."

"That's my job," Pete reminded him. "Plus I'd rather not see you full of bullet holes."

"Oh and they'd look so good on you," Trevor said sarcastically. "You know, you..."

Pete didn't get to hear what he said next, since Danny emerged with his father in tow.

"Hello," Len said stiffly as he stepped onto the porch.

"Hello," Pete responded cautiously. "Mind if we talk out here?"

With a short laugh, Len shook his head. "Don't blame you, after how I acted earlier." He sat on one of the steps and gestured to the space next to him. "Have a seat."

Pete did, although Trevor remained standing, propping himself up on a porch support post.

"I'm...ah, sorry about what happened," Len told them, leaning his elbows on his knees and staring out over the lawn. "I'm not normally like that."

"Thank you," Pete said. "Mind telling us what the problem was?"

Len looked over his shoulder at Danny, who had boosted himself onto the porch railing. "Dan, go inside, would you?"

"No." Danny's face set. "I went and got them. I want to hear."

"Inside!" Len barked. "Now."

There was a tense moment as the two stared at each other, neither looking away nor blinking. Finally, Danny made an impatient noise and jumped down. He slammed his way into the house and Len turned back around.

"A few months ago," Len began quietly, "I began to wonder if Danny was..." His hands moved, as if they were trying to grasp the right word.

"Gay?" Pete offered.

"Shh!" Len hissed at him, shooting a glance at the closed front door.

Trevor made a noise suspiciously close to a snort. "I think Danny knows the word."

Pete cleared his throat. "What made you think that?"

"I put one of those tracking devices on his computer," Len said slowly, the tips of his ears darkening in the glow of the porch light. "You know, one that shows what websites he's been going to? It takes a screenshot every few minutes. He'd been looking at..."

When he trailed off, Trevor offered, "Hot-bear-hunting-dot-com?"

Resisting the urge to kick him, Pete just shot him a "shut-up" glare and turned back to Len. "Have you talked to him about it?"

"No!" Len stared at him. "How do I talk to him about *that*?"

"I don't know," Pete said, trying hard to keep the bitter sarcasm from his words. "Maybe, 'Son, are you gay?' If he is, you could always tell him it's okay, that you love him, that you accept him for the person he is, that you'd rather have *him* as your kid than this imaginary son who you made up in your head who likes girls and beats up on gay kids."

Len was shaking his head, staring at the ground. "I tried so hard. When my wife died, Danny was only three. I should've dated more, remarried. He needed a woman around, obviously." His whole body slumped in defeat. "I loved her so much though. I couldn't look at anyone else. I tried to be enough for him."

"You didn't cause him to be gay," Pete told him. "He just is. If your wife had lived, he'd still be gay. If you remarried, he'd be gay."

"But what if it's not too late?" He looked up at Pete with a desperate hope. "There are camps for kids like him, right?"

"No," Pete snapped. "There are camps for parents like *you*, who'd rather make your kid hate himself than just accept your son is gay."

The hope faded from Len's gaze and he looked away from Pete. "I don't know if I can do that—just accept it."

Looking at the stubborn jaw of the man sitting next to him, something cracked inside Pete. "Well, you have no fucking choice." He stood abruptly.

Len looked up at him, startled.

"You're his father," Pete bit out. "Unconditional love is part of the deal. You can't just stop because he likes dicks instead of boobs."

"I love him," Len protested, pushing to his feet and standing toe-to-toe with Pete. "He's my son—of course I love him."

"What about everything you said before—'homo' and 'fairy'?" Pete demanded. "Is that what you call someone you love?"

"I didn't call *him* that!" Len's voice was getting louder.

"Y-you did!" His voice was betraying him again. Pete took a breath before saying more quietly, "Every time you say those things, you say them to him. What is he supposed to believe? That you hate all gay people *except* for him?"

Jerking back as if struck, Len sputtered, "I don't...I don't hate gay people."

"Danny said you do," Pete told him. "I doubt if he thinks he's the exception."

Len stared at him and then sat heavily on the step. "He's my son. He knows I love him." There was no certainty in his words.

"Pete," Trevor said quietly, taking his hand. "We should go."

"Just a moment," Pete told him before turning back to Len. "Did anything happen? Between Greg and Danny?"

The shock in Len's expression as he looked up answered the question before he even spoke. "Greg and...? No, of course not! Why would you even ask that? I mean, I didn't agree with the way Greg slept around or how he treated Michelle, but he was no child molester. That's just sick!"

"I didn't think so." Pete started to turn away and then faced Len again. "I'm not either, by the way."

"You're not what?" Len raised his gaze to Pete's. He looked tired.

"A child molester. What you said earlier..."

Len waved away the rest of Pete's sentence. "I know. I never really thought you were."

"So why this?" Pete gestured toward the bruise on his jaw.

"I don't know," Len sighed. "You two just kind of brought it all to a head. I'd talked myself into thinking his web surfing was just curiosity, a stage he'd grow out of, and then you two moved in across the street. Two attractive men, living together, working outside with their shirts off, kissing..." Staring across the street at Pete's house, where Rhodes and Wash waited on the front porch, Len shook his head. "I could tell Danny was fascinated by you. It bugged the shit out of me that you were making it look so easy."

"Making what look so easy?" Pete asked.

"Being gay."

"It's not easy," Pete told him. "It's hard. Danny already knows that. He doesn't have a choice, so don't make it harder. You're his dad. Act like it."

Len gave a grudging nod and Pete turned to go, Trevor next to him. As they walked back to the house, Trevor put his arm around Pete's back, giving his shoulder a squeeze.

"I don't know if I did any good just now," Pete muttered.

"You did," Trevor assured him. "Plus I think you eliminated one suspect, at least."

"Yeah." Pete shot a quick look over his shoulder at Len, who still sitting where they'd left him, watching them walk away. "I think his denial was pretty genuine, don't you?"

Trevor nodded. "Yeah. He might not be the greatest dad but at least he didn't kill Greg."

With a short laugh, Pete told him, "When you put it like that, it sounds like something you'd put on a gravestone."

Trevor gave an amused snort. "Think we're a little punchy."

As they climbed the porch steps, Rhodes and Wash moved in close.

"Thought we were going to have to ride to the rescue at one point, Petey," Wash told him.

"What? Just because they were yelling at each other with their noses two inches apart?" Trevor scoffed.

"We weren't yelling," Pete protested.

Wash rolled his eyes. "Please. If your faces were any closer you would've been kissing."

Pete shook his head. "Not Len. Pretty much any other male in this neighborhood though."

"The kid's gay." The way Rhodes said it—as a statement rather than a question—made Pete cock his head.

"You guessed?"

Rhodes gave a short nod. "Little too interested in watching you and Trev together."

"True," Wash agreed. "A straight kid would've been in Marsha's tree, not yours."

Looking toward the front door longingly, Pete asked, "Mind if we go inside to talk?" He really didn't want to hang out on the porch, looking across the street at Len.

"Sure." Wash held the door and they made their way inside.

"Fuck," Trevor sighed, sitting heavily in his camp chair. "What I wouldn't give for a couch right now."

"Want to shop for beds tomorrow after we get the lawn under control?" Pete offered.

"While you do that, we can start on the floors down here," Rhodes offered.

Wash's head snapped around to stare at him. "'We', darling Rhodie? That would be you and who else? Do you have some hottie on the side who refinishes floors between blowjobs?"

"Course not," Rhodes told him, a smile tugging on one side of his mouth. "You're the only one I let refinish my floors."

Wash laughed. "How reassuring." He stretched out a leg so he could bump his foot against Rhodes'. "Ass," he said fondly.

Rhodes just smiled at him. Pete looked back and forth between the two. They were so easy with each other, so settled. He'd never had that—fuck, he'd never even *known* a relationship like that. It warmed him just listening to their banter, the undertones of affection. It made him feel safe.

He shook off the thought. "You don't have to keep working on the house," Pete told them. Both men looked at him in surprise.

"Is that your way of telling us to get out?" Wash asked, sounding amused.

"No! Of course not," Pete insisted, flustered. "I just thought... Don't you have a business to run?"

"We're on vacation," Rhodes said, stretching his legs in front of him. "Cleared up all the urgent cases and gave Carlos the week off."

"You're wasting your vacation babysitting me?" Trevor asked. "In a house with no furniture?"

"Best vacation we've ever been on," Wash told him, grinning.

Rhodes cleared his throat. "*Only* vacation we've ever been on."

Flapping a shushing hand at him, Wash shook his head. "Don't listen to him. He's loving this do-it-yourself shit. Plus there's a murder, we get to keep an eye on Trevor *and* meet his new boyfriend. It's Rhodie's vacation wet-dream."

With a snort, Rhodes scoffed, "Like you're not loving this too."

"Of course I am," Wash agreed. "Murder, paint fumes, power tools, Trev's bare ass... It'd be anyone's vacation wet-dream."

"Okay," Trevor said. "That's enough about my bare ass."

"Speaking of the murder..." Pete changed the subject, flushing. Just the mention of Trevor's naked bits was enough to start a slow burn in his groin. "I asked Len if he thought there'd been something between Greg and Danny."

"Yeah?" Wash sat forward.

"He was pretty sure there hadn't been," Trevor told him.

"You believe him?" Rhodes asked.

Trevor shrugged and looked at Pete. "He sounded sincere." Pete nodded.

Wash sat back, looking disappointed. "If it'd been true, that would've been such a good motive for Len to cut off Greg's dick."

"At least it narrows the field a little," Pete said. "Now we're down to Marsha, Michelle and Terrance for suspects – at least in the neighborhood."

"Don't forget the wife," Rhodes told him.

"He said her already," Trevor reminded him. "Michelle."

"Not Michelle," Rhodes said. "Terrance's wife. What's her name?"

"Abby," Pete said. "Right. Forgot about Abby."

Trevor looked thoughtful. "I think Abby gets forgotten a lot."

With a snort, Wash said, "Especially by her husband, when he's got a dick up his ass."

Pete stared at him. "You're right. I'd totally dismissed her as a suspect. I need to talk to Abby. Trev, you should come with me – you two bonded over tomatoes."

"Sure," Trevor agreed. "We should probably give the hot sheriff a call too and give him an update on what we know."

Scowling, Pete asked, "Do you have to call him that?"

Wash snickered. Even Rhodes' cough sounded as if it were covering a laugh.

Trevor widened his eyes in mock-innocence. "Does that bother you?"

Giving him a glare that promised future retribution, Pete said evenly, "We'll call the average-looking, definitely-not-more-than-a-six-and-a-half sheriff tomorrow morning."

Rhodes, Wash and even Trevor laughed outright at that.

"So by six and a half," Wash asked, "do you mean on a one-to-ten rating scale or the size of his –"

"Okay," Rhodes interrupted, although he still looked amused. "Sounds like tomorrow's filling up. We should probably get to bed."

Wash frowned at him. "I'm just doing a little investigative questioning here."

Standing up, Rhodes offered a hand to Wash and pulled him to his feet. When Wash was standing, Rhodes gave another sharp jerk of his hand and pulled Wash against him. Tipping his head forward, he said something in Wash's ear.

Pete could see Wash melt against the other man. His mouth was dry as he watched the intimate moment. Even though they were fully clothed and weren't even kissing or

doing much of anything except standing close together, desire was thick around them. Pete swallowed.

"You going to keep watching those two or do you want to go to bed?" Trevor growled in his ear. Startled, Pete turned his head to see Trevor's face next to his. He was standing behind Pete, bent over so their heads were level. Trevor wrapped his arms around Pete's shoulders.

"Bed," Pete tried to say, although no sound managed to escape. Trevor must have understood him, however, since he smiled, a slow, hot, knowing smile.

Unable to resist those curved lips, Pete touched his own mouth to them. Trevor stilled at the kiss, his small moment of dominance disappearing beneath Pete's lips. Grabbing Trevor's enfolding arms, he tugged, easily breaking the hold without interrupting the kiss.

Taking Trevor's hand, Pete drew him around in front of him and tugged him onto his lap. Trevor came eagerly, sitting sideways across his thighs and diving into another kiss.

Wrapping one arm around his hips, Pete cupped the back of Trevor's skull with his other hand and pulled him forward, meeting his lips roughly as a fresh surge of need drove through him. He nipped at Trevor's lips until they opened on a gasp and then plunged his tongue inside. Trevor sucked at his tongue with an urgent moan and Pete's hips bucked beneath the other man's weight.

The thought of Rhodes and Wash watching made Pete break off the kiss and look around, but the other two men had vanished, turning off the light as they went. Pete heard a low laugh from upstairs and then a bedroom door shut with a definite click.

Privacy, Pete thought with a rush of anticipation. "Stand up," he said out loud.

Trevor stared at him for a moment, his eyes confused and hot.

"Stand up," Pete said again and Trevor scrambled to his feet, standing in front of him with that look—a mix of invitation and apprehension that made Pete's cock swell in his jeans.

"Strip."

Even in the dim light, Pete could see how the command made Trevor's eyes dilate. His hands flew to his shirt, grabbing the hem and yanking it over his head. His hands reached for his jeans and then his fingers hesitated. He raised one hand and pulled the band from his hair, releasing it and then shaking his head so the strands fell in a silky sheet around his shoulders.

Pete sucked in a breath, raising his hips to unfasten his own jeans, shoving them and his underwear down past his hips. The nylon of the chair was cool against the exposed skin of his ass, contrasting with the smoldering heat of his body.

Closing his fingers around his cock, Pete watched, unblinking, as Trevor slowly lowered the zipper on his jeans. He ran teasing fingers inside the waistband, giving the fabric tiny nudges so, inch by inch, Trevor's skin was exposed.

When his jeans hung from his hipbones, just a breath away from falling down to his thighs, Trevor turned his back on Pete. A final drag of his fingers revealed his ass and Pete couldn't hold back a groan. His fingers tightened around his cock, sliding down and back up with a rubbing friction that almost hurt.

Trevor bent at the waist to pull his feet free of the jeans, shoving his ass high in the air.

"That's it," Pete snapped, coming out of his chair to his feet.

Startled, Trevor straightened and stared at him. "Something wrong?" he asked, a slight quiver of humor in his tone.

"Upstairs," Pete growled, closing the distance between them in two strides. "Now." He gave Trevor a sharp smack on his ass, making him jump. Pete's hand lingered, squeezed the hard, round cheek and then softened to stroke across his skin.

Trevor made a soft noise, half-moan and half-sigh, pushing back into the touch. "Fuck. What is it with you?"

"What?" Pete asked, brushing the curtain of hair aside so he could kiss Trevor's nape.

"You touch me and I need more." Trevor tilted his head to the side to expose his neck to Pete's mouth. "It's like I'm addicted." He gave a choke of laughter.

"What?" Pete asked again, smiling against his skin just because Trevor was laughing.

"You're also making me sound like a cheesy-ass '80s song." He lifted a hand to hold Pete's head against his neck. "You know, one you'd sing along with at the grocery store?"

Growling, Pete bit him lightly, drawing a shiver from Trevor, whose laugh turned into a moan. "Done mouthing off?" Pete asked, mock-sternly.

"If that's the punishment?" Trevor's voice was breathless. "Then never."

"Oh I'll think of lots of different ways to punish you," Pete promised, jerking Trevor's hips back against his. "All night if I have to."

Trevor's only answer was a groan as he ground back on the cock jammed against his ass. Closing his eyes at the wonderful pressure, Pete reached for Trevor's cock. As his fingers gripped the shaft, Pete marveled at how familiar it felt against his palm, how *right*, as if his hand had been missing this cock his entire adult life and only now was he whole.

Trevor moved in his hold, bringing Pete back to the moment. "Upstairs," he said again.

After a second, Trevor told him, "I can't move unless you let go."

Never. The shock of that thought made Pete release his grip.

Trevor made a disappointed noise. "I didn't mind not moving."

Pete smiled. "Me neither."

Trevor grabbed his clothes and they ran upstairs, shushing each other and giggling like kids. Once inside their bedroom, their amusement fell away as they stared at each other.

"Well?" Pete asked.

Blinking at him, Trevor asked, "What?"

"It's your turn," Pete reminded him. "Where do you want me?" He smiled and his voice deepened into a purr. "*How* do you want me?"

He watched Trevor's face as realization set in, as arousal narrowed his eyes and tightened the skin over his cheekbones. "I want..." He stopped and bit his bottom lip. Pete's erection surged in reaction. "I want you naked." Trevor's words rushed out, forced past his hesitancy in a show of bravado.

With a knowing smile, Pete pulled his shirt over his head, flexing every muscle in his torso as he stripped. His jeans were next. Since they were already undone, he just had to push them down over his hips and past his thighs before kicking them free of his feet. He swept his underwear off with them and straightened, standing naked with his feet braced apart. Cocking an eyebrow, he waited for Trevor's next command.

Trevor's tongue snuck out and wet his bottom lip before disappearing again. Pete's eyes focused on his mouth, his chest rising and falling with each heavy breath. Every second of silence ratcheted the tension higher, until sweat rose on his skin and his cock felt ready to burst.

"On your hands and knees," Trevor finally ordered, jerking his head at the sleeping bags. A barely noticeable tremor vibrated underneath his voice.

Pete obeyed, although it was incredibly hard not to take charge, to stride over to Trevor and kiss away that nervous hesitation, to shove him against the nearest wall or floor or air mattress and fuck him until he howled. Pete resisted the urge, lowering himself to his hands and knees. He'd promised and he'd follow through.

Turning his head to look at Trevor, Pete waited for his next move. This had its own anticipation, its own dark excitement. There was something about not knowing what would happen that made his cock pulse with eagerness.

Trevor crossed the room to Pete's suitcase, crouching to retrieve the condoms and lube. Just watching him move, seeing the liquid shift of his muscles under his skin, brought sweat to the surface of Pete's skin. He took a deep, furtive breath, trying to regain control. For fuck's sake, Trevor hadn't even touched him yet and Pete was ready to explode.

The air mattress shifted as Trevor knelt behind him. Seconds ticked by and Trevor didn't touch him. A shiver ran through Pete as he struggled to remain still.

"I like this," Trevor breathed, his fingertips feathering across Pete's back. His skin rippled beneath the touch as he bit back a moan. "I wasn't sure if I would. I mean, I get so turned-on when you hold me down or make me do what you say, especially when you get a little rough, so I figured this wouldn't do anything for me."

His fingers explored lower, tracing patterns on Pete's ass, the lightest brush of a touch. Pete was panting now.

Fuck, he thought, almost panicky. I'm never going to make it.

Trevor didn't seem to be giving him any choice. "This is really hot," he continued, as if oblivious to Pete's distress. "You're usually so strong and in charge, but now..." His fingers trailed down the backs of Pete's thighs, making his hamstrings tighten in reaction. "I can do whatever I want with you and you'll let me." His mouth touched Pete's back, right below his shoulder blade, and Pete hissed out a breath. "I feel like I tamed a lion or something." Another kiss touched down, this one halfway down his back. "And I can do anything," this kiss landed on the back of his waist, "I," his tongue lapped the skin right above his ass cheek, "want." Trevor nipped his ass.

Pete flinched and grunted. The small bite hadn't hurt but it had sent a shock of pleasure straight to his straining cock. "Anything within reason," he rasped and felt Trevor's laugh against his ass.

"Nope," Trevor told him, lightly biting his ass again. "No restrictions. If I wanted to bring a rhino in on this, you'd just have to deal."

Choking out a laugh, Pete asked, "I'd have to deal with rhino dick?"

Trevor's laughter was muffled against Pete's lower back. "Damn straight. You're just lucky I'm not into rhino dick."

"I'm lucky, all right," Pete agreed, and then gasped as Trevor drew a wet line with his tongue from Pete's tailbone to the opening of his ass.

Trevor pulled away just enough to ask, "How lucky?" The breath from his words blew against his damp skin.

"Christ," Pete hissed. "I've got a fucking overflowing Easter basket of luck, okay? Now rim me, Goddamn it!"

Trevor tsked. "Such a dirty mouth," he sighed. Pete dug his fingers into the sleeping bag, holding tight fistfuls of fabric so he didn't grab Trevor and fuck the shit out of the teasing bastard.

Without warning, one of Trevor's hands landed sharply on his ass. A roar of shock and pleasure filled Pete's head, freezing him in place as the punishing palm fell again. Before Pete could even figure out how he felt about that, Trevor's fingers stroked the stinging cheek.

"Was that okay?" Trevor asked, the touch of hesitancy back in his voice. "It always turns me on when you do it to me, so I thought..." His words dried up and Pete could almost picture Trevor's tentative expression, his bottom lip caught in his teeth.

Although he wasn't sure he could even speak, Pete forced the words out. "Yeah," he rasped, before clearing his throat to try again. "If by 'okay', you mean it almost set me off like a firecracker, then yeah, it was okay."

Trevor's laugh was relieved. "Good." Without any further teasing, he pushed Pete's cheeks apart and kissed his puckered hole.

It was incredible. Pete tried to stay silent but he couldn't hold back, the groans and gasps tearing from his throat of their own volition. Trevor plunged the pointed tip of his tongue into the tight grip of Pete's body, working inside like a small, wet, squirming cock. He pulled out and traced around the edge, using his teeth just enough to send currents of intense pleasure through him. Pete's cock jerked, as if he were being shocked over and over.

He rammed his tongue in again, loosening the tight hole as he pushed inside. Each time he retreated, Pete's heart skipped as he worried Trevor was done and this searing ecstasy was over. When Trevor finally did pull out, there was only a second of loss before he was licking Pete's balls.

With a groan, Pete widened his knees. Trevor took full advantage of the better access, sucking one side of his sac into his mouth.

"I'm about to come," Pete warned, and Trevor pulled back.

"Not yet," he ordered, giving Pete a warning slap on his ass.

Gritting his teeth, Pete closed his eyes. "Doesn't help," he grunted.

"I want you to come when I'm inside you," Trevor told him breathlessly.

Pete almost whimpered. "Saying *that* doesn't help either."

"How about this?" Trevor's fingers, slick with lube, pushed into Pete's ass. "Does this help?"

Pete couldn't answer.

"Or this?" Trevor wrapped his free arm around Pete's hip and closed his fingers around his cock. "Any better?"

So, so much worse. So wonderfully, amazingly worse. Trevor's hands found a rhythm, a stroke and plunge, squeeze and retreat, until Pete could only shake, dripping with sweat and heaving for air. Then Trevor's hands were gone.

"No," Pete protested hoarsely as he was left dangling, just a thrust away from coming. Trevor didn't answer, except to press the tip of his cock against the entrance to Pete's ass. The head pushed inside, stretching him open.

It had been a long time and Pete was tight, but he didn't care. Trevor's cock felt incredible as it advanced, stretching him, filling him.

"Fuck," Trevor gritted out, his fingers gripping Pete's hips so tightly they were sure to leave bruises. "You feel so good."

It wasn't the most flowery of compliments but the fact it was Trevor saying it in that raspy, overcome voice made Pete shudder and groan, fighting Trevor's grip so he could shove back against the invading cock.

"Be still," Trevor ordered, driving his hips forward and burying his erection deep inside Pete's ass. He stayed there for a moment, breathing hard.

Pete made a sound, low and feral, every nerve in his body focused on the throbbing cock buried deep in his ass. It felt exactly right, as if they'd snapped together, two perfectly matched parts.

Leaning forward so his lightly furred chest brushed Pete's back, Trevor wrapped his arms around him. One hand coasted from his belly to his pecs, searching for his nipple. His fingers pinched the sharp point as his other hand closed around Pete's cock, sliding from base to head in a slow, slippery pull.

Pete bucked his hips, shoving his erection into the gripping hand while simultaneously pulling almost free of Trevor's cock. This almost-emptiness wasn't acceptable. Thrusting his hips back, Pete took every inch of Trevor's length. All his nerve endings were firing as the stretch and squeeze and slide of Trevor's cock and hands sent pulses of shattering pleasure through his body. He couldn't stop it, couldn't hold back any longer—he had to come.

His climax burst free as colors exploded in his brain. Over and over, his body convulsed, clamping around the cock lodged in his ass. Vaguely, he heard Trevor give a guttural cry, felt the rough and wild thrusts as Trevor's control disappeared, as his hands returned to Pete's hips and he pounded into him.

Pete gripped handfuls of the sleeping bag, clung to it fiercely as he reveled in the cock hammering into his ass. His skin buzzed, every inch of it alive. Each thrust, each slap of skin against skin, each fingertip digging into his flesh was magnified, lit with overwhelming sensation.

With a snarl, Trevor rammed home for a final time. His hips jerked as he came, as if trying to force himself impossibly deeper into Pete's body. A final aftershock of pleasure rippled through Pete and his ass clenched. Trevor gave a low cry and shuddered, echoing the sensations ricocheting through Pete.

His trembling limbs gave way, sliding out from underneath him. Trevor pulled free of Pete's ass and followed him down, stretching his body over Pete's like two cards in a deck.

Pete just lay still and breathed. Everything felt stripped and raw—his cock, his ass, his soul.

"You okay?" Trevor whispered, kissing his shoulder.

Pete grunted, unable to form actual words.

"Is that a yes grunt," Trevor asked, stroking his hands down Pete's arms, "or a no grunt?"

He could tell he wasn't going to get out of talking. "Yeah," Pete managed to say, turning his head enough to get a sideways kiss on the mouth.

"Good." Trevor slid off to his side. With an extreme effort, Pete managed to turn over and pull Trevor half on top of him.

With a soft laugh, Trevor settled his head under Pete's chin.

Pete stroked the other man's hair. "So you like being on top, huh?"

"Uh-huh."

"So are we going to have to play a game of King of the Mountain every night to decide who gets to be in charge?"

Trevor chuckled again. "Sounds fun but no. Let me order you around once in a while and I'll be happy to be your bottom boy the rest of the time."

With a smile, Pete said sleepily, "Okay, bottom boy." Although unconsciousness beckoned, something was niggling at the back of his brain and it wouldn't allow him to drift off. "You ever going to finish the story?"

"What story?" Trevor sounded half-asleep.

"About your dad."

Trevor's entire body stiffened, all sleepy softness gone. "Can't we just roll over and go to sleep? It's kind of traditional."

"If you want," Pete told him, tugging gently on a strand of hair. "I'll just lie here quietly, wondering how the story ends, staring at the ceiling, not able to turn off my brain, wide awake—"

When Trevor's groan interrupted his monologue, Pete bit back a grin.

"Fine," Trevor sighed, sounding extremely put-upon. "How far did I get?"

"You were gay," Pete reminded him, "and in college."

"Right." This time, his sigh was flat and not amused. "I messed around for my first three years, had a gay ol' time, in fact."

"Funny," Pete told him and felt Trevor shrug.

"Lame joke, sorry. My junior year, I met Shep."

The wash of jealousy hit Pete unexpectedly and he frowned. "Shep? His name was seriously Shep? Like a dog?"

"It was a nickname," Trevor huffed. "This story can stop at any time, you know."

"Sorry." He actually did feel bad for mocking Shep's name. The guy was dead after all. He pulled Trevor a little closer.

"Anyway..." Trevor stretched out the word. "I met him in the library, as clichéd as that sounds. I noticed this guy following me through the stacks, so I doubled back, circled around behind him and scared the shit out of him by tapping him on the shoulder. When I asked him what the hell he was doing, he told me he was trying to get the nerve up to approach me."

"Isn't that cute?" Pete sneered. "Like a fucking Meg Ryan movie, only gayer."

"And meeting at the coffee shop wasn't cute?" Trevor demanded.

Blinking, Pete said, "But that was made up."

"Whatever." Trevor brushed it off. "Just be quiet and let me tell my fucking story, okay?"

"Fine, fine," Pete muttered, his stomach still tight with jealousy.

"So that was Shep. After that, we started going out. He was my first actual boyfriend."

His voice went soft as he said it, which just drove Pete even more nuts. He gritted his teeth, holding back the snarky comment wanting to slip out. The worst part was

Pete knew why the fucking story of Shep was bugging him so much—it was because Trevor was *his* first actual boyfriend.

"He said he'd just gotten out of a bad relationship," Trevor continued. "He asked if we could take it slow. I liked him enough that I said yes—plus I think I liked the challenge of seeing if I could get into his pants. He held me off, though. Said he liked me too much to fuck things up by...well, fucking.

"A couple months went by of kissing and touching with no sex. I had such a bad case of blue balls, I thought I'd go insane. Right before Christmas break, Shep told me he was ready. Before I could rip his clothes off right there in the library—"

"Again in the library?" Pete interrupted, unable to stop himself. "What kind of nerd was this Shep?"

"A gorgeous one," Trevor shot back. "Dirty blond hair, green eyes, lips that you could just picture wrapped around your co—"

"Enough," Pete growled, cutting him off. "Just tell the fucking story."

Trevor sighed. "I'm *trying*. So he tells me that, before we have sex, he wants to meet my family."

There are so many Shep insults I could say right now. Pete held back though.

"I'd come out to my dad my sophomore year and he seemed okay with it—not thrilled but he didn't kick me out. I figured bringing Shep home to meet my dad would be an easy way to finally get Shep into bed."

"So did you?" Pete asked, sucked into the story despite his loathing for Shep.

"I introduced him to my dad." Trevor's voice hardened. "They got along great. I was as happy as a guy who's about to get laid, watching as they talked and laughed. It got later and later until I finally went to bed and left the two of them alone. I don't know where Shep slept but it wasn't with me."

Pete knew he should be ashamed about how happy that made him.

"The next day, Shep picked a fight about something stupid—I don't even remember what—and broke up with me. He didn't come back for spring semester but started working for my dad instead. Within six months, Shep was managing one of his stores for him.

"Turns out though," Trevor's tone grew serious, "Shep was actually an undercover cop trying to get evidence of my dad's illegal activities. He just pretended to be gay in order to use me to get to my father. Somehow, Dad found this out, but not until late that summer, after he'd shared a few of his secrets with Shep."

Sucking in a hard breath, Pete asked, "Your dad killed a *cop*?"

Trevor nodded against his shoulder. "He thought I was in on it, since I'd introduced Shep to him. My dad asked me to meet him behind the store around 10 o'clock one night, said he had some boxes I could use to move back to my apartment near campus for my senior year. Like a fucking idiot, I went. My piece of shit car died a mile from the store, so I walked the rest of the way. When I came around the corner of

the store, I saw Shep and, without thinking, ducked back against the side—you know, dodging the old boyfriend kind of thing?”

Pete didn't really know but he nodded anyway.

“I can hear them arguing and then Shep starts begging, which I thought was weird, so I look around the corner and see Dad shoot Shep in the chest three times. It hardly made any noise,” Trevor said, sounding almost bewildered. “The gun must've had a silencer on it because it was so quiet. Shep just crumpled. I must've made a sound because Dad turned around and looked right at me. Looked at me and raised the gun again and said, ‘You're late, son.’ I could tell by his face that's what he'd planned for me too. That's why he'd asked me to come.

“My dad was going to kill me.”

“Fuck, Trev,” Pete breathed, cupping Trevor's head and holding it against him.

“I ran,” Trevor went on. “I ran for almost three years, working at shitty jobs in different cities, moving on when I got too paranoid to stay.”

“Why'd you finally decide to testify against him?” Pete asked.

“It just...caught up with me.” Trevor shrugged. “It's hard to explain. I just couldn't stand that he'd killed Shep and nothing happened to him. He was free. It started to eat at me until I finally walked into the police station and said I had information on Harold Haas. After that dirty cop almost got me killed last year, I told myself I'd tried to do the right thing but the cops had screwed up and that was that. It was still bugging me though. If McDonald and Salas hadn't tracked me down, I would've gone back. Eventually.”

Pete kissed him, hard and short. “It's almost over. Once the trial's over, he'll be locked up for the rest of his life. You'll be the free one then.”

“Yeah,” Trevor said. “Soon.” He didn't sound convinced.

Chapter Fourteen

"You bought a lawnmower," Morty said approvingly.

Unfortunately, Trevor thought but forced a smile. "Yep." Pete had tackled the backyard and Trevor had done the front. Waving away the gnats that seemed determined to glue themselves to his sweaty face, Trevor remembered how much he hated mowing.

Glancing around, he checked out their work. Rhodes and Wash were almost finished edging and trimming, and the yard, although not perfect, looked considerably better than it had earlier that morning.

Pete joined them, tossing an arm around Trevor's bare shoulders as he inspected the yard. "At least it doesn't look like we could hide a car in it anymore."

Trevor laughed. "That's something, I guess."

"It's easier if you keep up with it," Morty suggested, looking at them sideways.

"We'll be better," Pete promised, catching the older man's hint. "We won't let it get this long again before we mow."

Morty gave him a doubtful nod and headed back to his own house.

"Don't think Mortimer believed you," Trevor murmured.

Pete snorted. "Nosy old fart. You done?"

"Do you see a big hairy patch of grass I've missed?" Trevor shot back. "If you do, don't tell me. I don't want to know."

Laughing, Pete gave Trevor's shoulders a squeeze. "Putting the lawnmower back in the shed of death then?"

"Yeah," Trevor shot him a curious glance. "Why?"

"Thought I might go with you," Pete told him, letting his hand slide off his shoulder and down his sweat-slick back. "You know, make sure you don't get injured in there."

Pushing the lawnmower around the corner of the house toward the garage, Trevor glanced over his shoulder at Pete. "Why do I suspect you have an ulterior motive?"

"Maybe," Pete suggested softly, catching up to him easily, "because I do."

Twisting the knob, Trevor pushed open the side garage door and backed in, pulling the lawnmower into the cool dimness of the building. "What's that?" he asked throatily, parking the mower out of the way, all his attention on Pete as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

"I was watching you," Pete told him, stalking toward Trevor, and just the rough edge to Pete's voice made his cock begin to stiffen. Trevor took a step back and then

another, his heart pounding. "Your shirt's off and you're all sweaty. I kept thinking how much..." He stopped just a foot away.

"Yeah?" Trevor's voice wasn't much more than a growl.

Pete smiled slowly, his expression predatory. "How much I wanted to fuck the guy who was mowing the lawn."

His laugh had a husky edge to it. "Sounds like the start of a porno."

Bracing his arms against the wall on either side of Trevor, Pete leaned in. "Yeah, it does," he said, his mouth just inches from Trevor's. "So what would my next line be?" Trevor bit his lip as Pete thought. "You missed a spot out there, young man. What should I do about that?"

He was definitely hard now. Trevor sucked in air, his chest working as he stared at Pete's mouth, the firm, determined, sexier-than-hell line of his lips.

"Teach me a lesson?" he asked tentatively, caught up in the game. Flicking a glance up to Pete's eyes and then dropping them down, he added, "Sir?" Just the word was enough to make his head spin, with all its implications—restraint and control and rough, dirty sex.

"I *will* teach you a lesson." Judging by the rasp in Pete's voice, he was as turned-on by this little skit as Trevor was.

"I'm sorry, sir," Trevor said breathlessly, his eyes on Pete's lips again. His whole body shook with the effort of not grabbing Pete and yanking him against him. "What are you going to do to me?"

Pete used his body to flatten Trevor against the wall. Before Trevor even had time to melt into him, something smacked against his head.

"Ow!" he yelped, covering his head with his arms. Pete yanked him away from the wall, tucking Trevor against him.

"You okay?" Pete asked, examining Trevor's head.

"Yeah, I'm fine." Trevor rubbed the sore spot, scowling. "What hit me?"

Bending to pick something up from the floor, Pete held out a broken piece of a two-by-four. "We must've jarred this loose when I, um..."

"Slammed me against the wall?" Trevor asked, taking the piece of wood and turning it over in his hands.

"I wouldn't say I *slammed* you," Pete protested. "Nudged, maybe? Pushed a little bit?"

He sounded so defensive Trevor grinned at him. "It was definitely a slam. Don't worry, though—I loved everything up until I got smacked on the head." He rubbed the spot again.

"You sure you're not hurt?" Pete pressed, his fingers inspecting Trevor's scalp.

Swatting at him, Trevor insisted, "Yes! Yes! Quit picking at me like we're a couple of monkeys pulling fleas off each other, okay?"

"Sorry." He dropped his hands. "You'd tell me though, right? If you were hurt?"

"Of course," Trevor lied. His head was already aching like a son-of-a-bitch. He tossed the piece of wood to the floor next to the wall. "I'm thinking we should get out of this death-trap, though."

"Right." Pete ushered him out the side door, hovering like a mother hen. "Let me just check your head in the light."

"Pete," Trevor warned. "If you don't quit fussing, I'm going to sleep in Rhodes and Wash's room tonight."

That did it. Pete drew back as fast as if Trevor had bitten him.

"C'mon," Trevor said, feeling a little guilty for the unhappy look on Pete's face. "I can't hear anything up front. I think the guys finished up." He turned the corner into the front yard to see Rhodes and Wash talking with Sheriff Osgood.

"Sheriff," Pete greeted him and Trevor jumped. He hadn't realized how close Pete was behind him.

The sheriff looked over and rolled his eyes. "Don't you two ever wear shirts?"

"If you'd call before you dropped by," Trevor grumped, "we'd know to wear our very best." He knew he was being bitchy but his head felt like shit.

Osgood didn't seem offended by Trevor's tone. "I need to have a word with these two." He jerked his head at Rhodes and Wash. "Why's there blood in your hair?"

"Trev!" Pete grabbed him by the arm and tried to look at his head again. "You *are* fucking bleeding. Why did you say you were okay?"

"I'm fine," Trevor gritted out, jerking away. He hated being fussed over. "It's nothing."

"Hold still." Ignoring his protests, Pete held Trevor by the shoulders. "Tip your head down."

With an exasperated sigh, Trevor obeyed. He figured the more he struggled, the longer this would take. Rhodes, Wash and the sheriff all crowded in to see. Trevor clenched his teeth.

"Looks like a pretty good lump but you'll live," the sheriff said, stepping back.

"Hardly any blood at all," Wash said, sounding slightly disappointed at the lack of gore.

"See," Trevor told Pete, pulling away. "I'm fine."

Pete's mouth was set. "I don't like when you're hurt."

With a snort of laughter, Trevor said, "Me neither."

"What'd you do?" Rhodes asked.

Shooting a look at Pete, Trevor bit back a laugh. "Um...a chunk of wood fell in the garage."

"It just fell?" Sometimes Rhodes was a little too perceptive for his own good.

"I, um, tripped and fell against the wall," he muttered. His cheeks were so hot, he knew his face was bright red. "Dislodged the board."

"But how..." Wash trailed off, staring at him for a second before a smile lit his face. "Oh! Right. Got it. Tripped, fell, something hard and woody smacked you on the head."

Rhodes' cough sounded a little strangled.

"Exactly." Trevor turned to look at the sheriff. "Weren't you here to arrest these two or something?"

The sheriff shook his head. "Just talk to them, actually."

"Do you want to come in?" Pete asked. "I have to warn you—there's not much to sit on in there except camp chairs."

"No, thanks—this shouldn't take long." The sheriff turned to Rhodes. "You have an interesting history, Officer."

All humor, all emotion, disappeared from Rhodes face. "I'm not an officer anymore," he said evenly.

"Yeah, I saw that." The sheriff didn't seem to be intimidated by the large, stone-faced man standing in front of him. Trevor was a little impressed. "Also saw why."

"No you didn't," Wash interjected, shifting closer to Rhodes. His usually good-natured face was set. The sheriff raised an eyebrow at him. "What you saw was a bunch of bullshit."

"Wash," Rhodes told him. "Enough."

"What concerns me," Osgood said, "is having what appears to be an emotionally unstable, trigger-happy ex-cop in my county, especially right across from a murder scene."

"Emotionally unstable?" Pete scoffed. "Rhodes? He's the most stable person I've ever met."

Osgood didn't respond. He just kept his gaze steady on Rhodes.

Trevor's hackles were definitely up. "What are you saying?"

The sheriff eyed him calmly. "Exactly what I said."

Wash took a step toward him, his eyes narrow with fury, but Rhodes stopped him with a hand to the chest. "Are you accusing me of murdering Greg Lawson?" Rhodes' voice was almost casual, as if he were asking the sheriff what time it was.

"No," the sheriff said. "I don't think you killed him. I'd feel more comfortable if you cut your vacation short and headed home as soon as possible though."

Before Rhodes could speak, Pete snapped, "That's too bad, Sheriff, since he's not going anywhere. He's staying right here as my guest for as long as he wants. If you don't like that, you can just go fuck yourself."

Osgood looked around the circle of set faces and gave a slow nod. "I'll go do that then." He took a few steps toward his car parked at the curb and then stopped and

turned. "As much as I appreciate the help, I'd prefer you all stay out of this case from now on. Can't have laymen disrupting the process, you understand."

"Fine," Pete said shortly. The sheriff gave him another nod and walked to his car.

The four of them watched silently as he drove away.

"Going for a run," Rhodes told them as he headed into the house.

"Shit," muttered Wash, watching him go. "I'll be scraping him off the sidewalk in a couple hours."

Pete looked at him, confused.

"He'll run 'til he's about to drop and then go another five miles. Usually he ends up in the next state," Wash explained, still staring at the front door. "I'll see if I can talk to him." He climbed the porch steps and disappeared inside.

"What a fuckwad that sheriff turned out to be," Trevor growled.

Pete nodded. "Know what we should do now?"

"What?"

The corner of Pete's mouth twitched. "I have a few gardening questions."

Trevor stared at him. "What?"

"Who do I know who knows about gardening?" He tapped his lips as if deep in thought.

Realization struck Trevor. He grinned. "Abby! You're going to interview Abby."

"Interview?" Pete shook his head. "Never. The sheriff specifically said to stay out of this case. I'm just going to ask her a few gardening questions."

"And if she happens to talk about Greg's death...?" Trevor couldn't stop smiling. Pete was awesome.

"Sometimes the brutal murder of a neighbor has a way of coming up in conversation," Pete said innocently. "Coming?"

"Fuck yeah." Trevor fell in next to him and they headed across the street. "Wouldn't miss this."

* * * * *

They found Abby in her backyard garden, snapping heads off a bushy, red-flowered plant.

"Don't like the red ones?" Pete teased and she jerked upright, her eyes wide.

"Oh!" She rested a gloved hand over her heart. "You startled me."

"Sorry," Trevor said, smiling at her. "Thought we'd see how your garden was coming."

"Sure," she agreed, although her smile looked forced. "I was just taking the dead blooms off this salvia."

"Are you okay?" Pete asked, taking a seat on a small concrete bench. "You seem a little anxious."

Abby took up her beheading again, her eyes focused firmly on the plant. "I'm fine."

"It's understandable," Pete told her. "I mean, our neighbor was killed. We'd just met him but it must be really hard for you to have lost a friend."

She shook her head. "He wasn't really a friend – not a close one, at least."

"Terrance must be pretty torn up about it though," Trevor interjected, pretending to inspect a yellow pepper hanging heavily on a plant.

"Why do you say that?" Abby stiffened, her head swiveling to look at him.

Should I be doing this? Trevor wondered. He had no interrogation experience. Shooting Pete a quick questioning glance, he received a slight nod in return. "You know. Because of their...close relationship."

Abby was staring at him now, her gardening forgotten. "What relationship? They didn't have a relationship," she told him. "Where did you hear that?"

"I can't really remember who mentioned it." Trevor pretended to think, glancing over at Pete, who shrugged. "Someone at the barbeque? Or maybe it was the sheriff?"

"People tell him things," Pete said to Abby, sending Trevor a besotted smile. Trevor resisted the urge to flip him off. "He has one of those faces."

"Well, whoever it was lied." Her fingers gripped a stem and twisted, snapping off another blossom. "Terrance had nothing to do with Greg."

"Sounds like that was probably smart," Pete told her. "From everything we've heard about Greg, seems like he could be a troublemaker."

She shrugged, moving over to yank a yellow leaf off a tomato plant. "I wouldn't know," she said evenly. "I told you, I didn't really associate with him."

"I couldn't believe the sheriff asked for our alibis," Trevor said, deciding to change the subject. "I've never been asked for an alibi before."

"Good thing we were together when he was murdered." Pete picked up the interrogation ball and ran with it. "I'd hate to be the one home alone watching T.V."

Her eyes flickered and then she bent to pull out a weed.

"I suppose you and Terrance were together that night," Pete said casually.

"Yes," she confirmed. "Terrance was watching a movie and I was working out here. If I look away for two minutes, this garden gets wild on me."

"Oh, so you weren't together?" Trevor tried to keep how interesting he found this information out of his voice.

"I can see him from here," Abby explained, gesturing toward a window. Despite some reflection on the glass, Trevor could see into the room, noting the back of a sofa and a flat-screen T.V. mounted on the far wall.

"That's good you can vouch for each other," Pete told her. "Gets the sheriff off your back, at least."

"Why would the sheriff be on my back?" she asked a small yellow squash.

"Hasn't he been here to question you?" Pete asked. "We were stuck in a little room at his office for hours as he asked us questions."

"No," she said slowly, still staring at the vegetable. "I just gave my information to one of the deputies. I haven't talked to the sheriff at all."

Pete stood and stretched. "Guess we were first then. You're busy – we'll leave you to your gardening."

"Thanks for talking to us," Trevor added, following Pete out of her backyard. "See you later, neighbor!"

"Okay, Mr. Rogers," Pete murmured under his breath as they cut between Abby's and Len's houses. Trevor gave him an elbow to the gut. Pete grunted and then laughed.

"She was lying." The voice came from behind them.

Whirling around, Pete shoved Trevor behind him, only to relax when they saw the whisperer was just Danny.

"You scared the sh— Stuffing out of me, kid," Pete growled. "Were you lurking again?" The boy shrugged in what may or may not have been an apologetic way.

"What do you mean she was lying?" Trevor asked. The three of them crossed the road and climbed Pete's porch steps. The two men settled on either end of the top step. Danny hesitated a moment before taking a seat between them.

"She just was," Danny said.

"About what?" Pete met Trevor's gaze over the boy's head and Trevor stifled a laugh at his exasperated expression. Getting a straight answer out of the kid was never easy.

"Being in the garden."

"When Greg was killed, you mean?" Pete asked.

"Yep."

Trevor sighed silently. Obviously they were going to have to pull the information out of the kid, piece by piece. "How do you know?"

"I can see her yard from my room," Danny explained. "Through the window behind my computer. I saw her at, like, eight but then she left."

"She left?" Pete repeated. "Did you see where she went?"

Danny shook his head. "I just looked up and she was gone. I didn't see her come back."

"How long were you working on your computer?"

"Til I heard a scream."

This is interesting, Trevor thought, once more meeting Pete's eyes over Danny's head.

"So how's it going, Danny?" Trevor asked, breaking the short silence.

He shrugged again. "Okay, I guess."

"How's your dad?" Pete asked.

Danny frowned at the toes of his athletic shoes. "Dunno. Acting weird. What'd you guys say to him last night?"

"That he should talk to you," Pete said.

"He tell you...about me?"

"That you're gay?" Trevor asked.

Danny's nod wasn't much of one, more of a twitch of his head combined with a shrug as he continued to stare at his feet.

"Yeah," Pete said, watching the kid closely. "He told us."

The edges of Danny's ears flared hot and red. "It's none of his fucking business."

"Yes and no," Pete told him. "It is because it's freaking you out and, as your dad, it's his responsibility to help you out with whatever's going on with you. On the other hand, your sexuality is no one else's business except your own. Get used to people sticking their noses in though. That doesn't stop with family members and it sure doesn't stop when you reach eighteen." He paused. "And watch your language."

Danny didn't seem to know what to say to any of that. He just shrugged and picked at a seam in his shoe.

"Is your hair different?" Trevor asked him, studying the top of the kid's head. The black dye had faded to a...less-black dye.

"Yeah." Danny snuck a quick glance at him. "I washed it a bunch of times last night."

"Going blond?" Pete asked, a small, quickly hidden smile touching his mouth.

"Yeah." Danny reached up as if to touch his hair and then snatched his hand down.

Trevor looked back and forth between the two, feeling as if he were missing something. "It'll look nice blond," he said. "You have a boyfriend?"

The color rushed back into Danny's face as he shook his head. "I don't know anyone else who's..." He waved a hand to replace the missing word.

"Gay?" Trevor held back a laugh. "What are we, chopped gay liver? Kid, you live on the gayest street in the world. I think there must be something in the water."

"No." Danny shook his head. "I meant, I don't know anyone who's gay and not...old."

Pete and Trevor's eyes met yet again. "Uh-huh," Pete said, a quiver of laughter touching his voice.

"Let me tell you something, Danny," Trevor said, tossing an arm around his shoulders. "You know lots of kids who are gay. You just don't know any kids your age who are gay and *out*."

"So how do I figure out which ones are gay without getting my ass kicked?" Danny asked, meeting Trevor's eyes straight on.

"Isn't that the million-dollar question," Pete muttered.

"Well..." Trevor floundered. He hadn't dated guys in high school—he'd just privately crushed on them. "You get to know them, I guess. Look for the signals that show someone's interested in you."

"If you come out, they'll come to you," Pete offered.

Danny stared at him as if he'd just suggested going to school naked. "Come out? In Honeysuckle? No fucking way!"

"You have to decide what's better for you," Pete told him. "Hiding who you are for the next four years or dealing with the fallout of everyone knowing you're gay."

"The first one," Danny said without hesitation. "Definitely."

Len stepped out of his house, closing the door behind him. When he saw the three of them, he stopped and stared for a few moments.

"Daniel," he finally called. "Let's go!"

"Great," Danny said, standing up. "More together time so he can be weird some more."

"You know," Pete told him, "you could try talking to him too."

Danny gave a short laugh. "Right. Talk to my dad about being gay. 'Cause that wouldn't be a fucking train wreck. Later."

"Watch your mouth," Pete growled. "See you."

"Bye," Trevor said, trying to swallow back his laugh.

Pete shook his head, watching him go. "Remind me to never have any fucking kids."

* * * * *

Wash had left a note on the kitchen counter, scribbled in the margin of their ever-expanding list of things they needed to buy.

"Went running with tall, bald and moody," Trevor read out loud. "I hate running. I'm only doing this because I love the fucker. Wash."

Pete laughed. "Does this mean we'll have to pick both of them up in a couple hours?"

Shaking his head, Trevor told him, "Doubt it. Wash will whine and bitch enough to get Rhodes to turn around before total exhaustion sets in." He tilted his head, thinking. "Although Wash might call for a ride just to get out of running."

"Want to take a shower then?" Pete suggested with a slow smile. "Now that we have the house to ourselves for a while?"

All his blood supply rushed to Trevor's cock. "Sounds good." It really did.

He took the stairs three at a time, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Pete was following.

"Get in there and strip," Pete told him, moving to close and lock the front door. "I'll be there in a sec."

"Hurry up," Trevor tossed back at him, laughing. He shoved open the bathroom door with his shoulder and reached for the button on his jeans. As he stepped into the bathroom, the door slammed shut behind him and cool metal kissed the skin below his ear.

"Hello, son."

Chapter Fifteen

Pete was at the bottom of the stairs when he heard the bathroom door slam. He hurried upstairs, laughing at himself for his urgency. He was acting like a sixteen-year-old kid around Trev—horny all the time. Having Rhodes and Wash around made it worse and better at the same time.

He seized the knob and slammed up against the door when it didn't open. "Hey, Trev, let me in," he ordered, amused. "I can't fuck you through a locked door."

"I've changed my mind, *Daddy*," Trevor called, his voice fast and urgent. "I don't want company."

A flush of rejection heated his face even as his brain registered the total wrongness of the situation. Trevor's tone, the words, the split-second change of mood...

There was someone in the bathroom with him.

And "daddy"? Trevor had never called him anything so cheesy. That had to mean Harold Haas.

Pete went cold—a numb, frozen, unable-to-move cold that was almost instantly melted in a wash of rage. He held himself back, even though he was dying to put his shoulder to the door and smash through the jamb, but he knew how easy it was to pull a trigger.

A wave of helpless fury struck him. How could he have been so careless, so stupid? Pete'd been acting as if they were in a fucking fairy tale again, the devoted couple fixing up their dream home, when Trevor's life was in danger.

Enough! Pete's brain roared, knocking away the flood of self-recrimination. It was done. He had to start thinking about how to save Trevor.

"Okay." Pete's voice sounded rusty as he took a step and then two away from the door. He debated running downstairs and grabbing his gun from the kitchen but decided against it. "I'm tired anyway. I'll be in our room taking a nap." He winced at how stiff and wooden he sounded, like a kid trying out for the school play—a kid who couldn't act.

"Okay," Trevor called back, his voice tight.

Pete headed into the bedroom where Trevor had spent part of that first night. With a final, agonized glance at the bathroom door, he pulled the door closed, making sure to slam it hard enough to be heard in the bathroom. Striding to the window, he silently slid open the lock and eased the window open. He punched through the screen, pulling it out of its frame.

Thanks to their tree-trimming work, the branches were farther away from the window. In fact, they were an impossible distance away. Looking down, Pete saw the

ground was a dizzying drop below. It wouldn't help Trev for Pete to be lying in the backyard with a broken leg.

He looked up. This might be the solution. Twisting his body around to face the house, he eased himself out until he could get his feet beneath him and stand on the sill. In this position, the heavy metal gutter edging the roof was at his shoulders.

Hoping the gutter and all its supporting hardware would hold, Pete gripped the edge with his fingers and hauled his body upward. He scrabbled against the shingles for a hold, and the rough surface tore at his palms and fingers.

Pete started to slip.

* * * * *

Don't do anything stupid, Pete! Trevor heard the bedroom door slam and knew Pete wasn't going to take a fucking nap. He was going to do something heroic and utterly stupid, like trying to save Trevor's ass.

Without moving the gun away from Trevor's head, Harold pushed him toward the tub. Reaching over, Haas turned on the shower.

"Open the door," he hissed in Trevor's ear. As he turned the knob, Trevor squeezed his eyes closed for a second, desperately hoping Pete wasn't standing there, ready to take on Harold and his gun. When he eased the door open and looked, his knees went shaky with relief. The hall was empty.

Harold pushed him out of the bathroom and closed the door quietly behind them. He hurried Trevor down the stairs, the gun a constant pressure against his head. Clamping his fingers on Trevor's upper arm, he steered him through the kitchen. Shifting the gun so it was now pressing against his spine, Harold urged him through the side door and then paused.

"Where are we going?" Trevor asked, lightheaded with relief. They were out of the house and Pete hadn't been shot.

"My car's on the next block. We'll cut through." Harold nudged him into motion again, heading along the house toward the backyard.

"Why didn't you just shoot me in the bathroom?" Trevor asked. Oddly enough, he wasn't scared. It all felt inevitable, as if his life had been heading toward this moment ever since he'd stared at his murdered ex-boyfriend as his father pointed a gun at his only son.

"Because this way you just disappear," Harold explained in a rational tone. "No body, no crime and, best of all, no witness."

* * * * *

Ignoring the pain burning his hands, Pete dug in his fingers and swung one leg up toward the edge of the roof. After whacking his knee on the edge of the gutter, he

managed to wedge it into the metal channel. Thrusting against his throbbing knee, he heaved himself higher onto the roof. Just inches away from his right hand, a plumbing vent protruded from between the shingles. Gritting his teeth, he gave another shove against his knee and closed his fingers around the pipe.

With his new handhold, he dragged himself up so he was on his hands and knees on the shingles. Although the roof was sloped, it wasn't so steep he couldn't crawl across it. His first instinct was to head toward the bathroom window but he knew Haas wouldn't be keeping Trevor in there for long. Harold had to get him out of the house.

When he reached the peak of the roof, Pete peered over. He couldn't see anyone in the front yard but his view was obstructed by the porch roof on one side and the overhang on the other.

He scooted to his left, headed for the side of the house. He peeked over the edge to see the kitchen door swinging open. Trevor walked out first, followed closely by Haas, who had the gun pressed against his son's back. Haas was trying to use his body to hide the view of the gun from any casual observer on ground level.

The sight of that black pistol pointed at Trevor's spine brought another surge of rage. Pete shoved it back, knowing it was useless to be angry, to be scared or guilty or any other emotion. Right now, he needed to act. If Haas got away, Trevor was dead.

Haas was nudging Trevor toward the backyard. Sliding as quietly as possible toward the back corner of the roof, Pete rose to a low crouch. When the two men passed beneath him, Pete knew this was his only chance to save his lover's life—even if his half-assed plan probably *would* get Trevor shot.

He couldn't think about that now. It was do-or-die time.

Pete jumped.

Despite knowing for years his father was a nasty, murderous son-of-a-bitch, it still seemed surreal to Trevor that the guy holding the gun against his spine was Harold Haas—his *dad*.

"How'd you find me?" Trevor asked.

"When you're trying to hide out," Haas began in the same condescending tone that had driven Trevor nuts in high school (the familiarity didn't help his feeling of unreality), "don't let your picture make it into the national news. The guy who was killed and got his dick cut off—the story was in all the papers. Guess who I saw in the background next to the sheriff?"

"I'm so honored you came for me yourself," Trevor bit out, the sarcastic words heavy and bitter in his mouth. "Figured you had employees for this sort of thing."

"Of course I came," Haas said. "You're my son. There're some things a man has to do himself."

Trevor opened his mouth to explain exactly how fucked up that logic was—when something huge and heavy fell out of the sky and sent them sprawling.

There was a spitting sound and his body jerked as if someone had punched him. He tried to scramble to his feet but his right side refused to cooperate, dragging behind like dead weight.

He finally gained his feet and stood there, hunched over and swaying. Pete had Haas pinned to the ground, the gun resting several feet away.

"Run!" Pete yelled at him.

Trevor shook his head and took a stumbling step toward the gun. He couldn't run—he had to help Pete.

"Fucking run!" Pete snarled at him, fighting to hold Haas down. Harold was a big guy. Trevor got his size from his dad. "Go!" Pete tacked on, sounding so desperate Trevor turned away and broke into a shambling run. Everything looked overexposed and progressed in slow motion.

Get help, Trevor's brain demanded, but Morty and Iris' house looked so far away. He knew he'd never make it. Turning back toward the struggling men, he decided to go back to help Pete. He had to—no matter what Pete had ordered him to do.

Before he'd even taken a step back in their direction, Haas raised an arm. There was something in his hand. Trevor couldn't tell what it was. Haas' arm swung in a swift arc and the thing connecting with Pete's head, toppling him to the side.

"Pete!" Trevor screamed, although he couldn't tell whether he actually screamed it out loud or if the name was just echoing in his head. Haas climbed to his feet, glancing around and then stepping over Pete's limp body toward the fallen gun.

Taking three stumbling steps backward, Trevor turned and ran, moving so slowly, as if he were in a nightmare. The garage loomed in front of him and Trevor fell against the side door, the knob sliding in his hand and refusing to turn. He wiped his fingers on his jeans and tried again.

The knob turned, the door falling open and tumbling him inside. He fell to his side, jarring his shoulder against the floor. Twisting over to his back, he kicked the door closed. He scrambled to his knees and turned the flimsy handle lock. Looking around frantically, the only thing he could see to prop in front of the door was the lawnmower.

He tried to stand but the floor shifted under his feet and he went down to one knee. Pushing up to an unsteady stand, he squeezed his eyes closed when the world rocked and went gray. The dizziness eased and he opened his eyes and took the two steps necessary to reach the mower.

"Thank Christ it rolls," he muttered, pushing it in front of the door. Trevor was pretty sure he wouldn't have been able to lift a damn thing, whether it was ninety pounds or nine.

The garage was swaying again, so Trevor blinked hard. Most of the building was cluttered with unusable crap. Pete had joked about having a huge neighborhood bonfire to burn all the pallets, cardboard boxes and scrap wood piled in the garage.

Pete. Trevor's side was throbbing but it didn't matter, not when he thought about Pete slumping to the side, his body motionless. Shoving the image out of his mind, he took a shambling step and then another, moving toward a messy pile of oddly shaped pieces of wood.

He had to hide, had to survive—it would totally piss off Pete if Trevor got himself killed.

He huffed a humorless laugh at that, which turned into a rough inhale at the rattle of the side door. Trevor moved faster toward the corner next to the wood-scrap pile. His foot caught on the corner of a pallet and he went down, hitting the ground straight and hard like a felled tree.

Trevor just lay still until a crash at the door jolted him out of his gray haze. He half-crawled, half-dragged himself the final six feet, wedging his body into the corner. There was another crash and a thump, followed by a stream of steady swearing. Trevor curled even smaller. His father was coming after him.

"Trevor Harold Haas," his dad scolded, his voice sickeningly fatherly. "Did you leave this lawnmower in front of the door? Didn't I teach you to put your tools away?"

His footsteps were audible, echoing through the dim space. Trevor knew his father could walk completely silently, so this was just an intimidation technique. Huddled behind the wood scraps, Trevor felt ten years old again, powerless and scared out of his mind.

"You know you left a trail of blood, right? A path that leads right to your pathetic hiding place?"

Shit. He looked down at himself for the first time since the bullet hit him. There was a small round hole in his right side, just above the waistline of his jeans that seemed to be bleeding quite a bit. No wonder he was lightheaded. Trevor had to suck back a laugh at that.

The side door slammed shut.

"What the fuck was that?" Haas barked and Trevor smiled. He had no idea who or what had closed the door, but it was nice to hear his father rattled. He turned his head against the back wall, his eyelids drooping closed.

Trevor's eyes popped open again. There was a gap between the back of the woodpile and the wall behind it, large enough for Trevor to slide between. If he could move between the junk piles and the wall and emerge behind Haas, Trevor could knock him out with a chunk of wood or something.

Slowly, painfully, he began to ease to the side, working his way behind the woodpile. An unpleasant smell drifted beneath his nose and he inhaled, trying to identify it. It was familiar but his brain wasn't working very well...

When it finally clicked, Trevor frowned. Why was he smelling gas?

"Could it be your little boyfriend?" Haas was obviously over his startled moment. "No, guess not. I knocked his brains loose with a chunk of concrete. Serves him right for having such a shitty driveway."

Trevor had to swallow back bile. *Don't think about Pete*, his brain chanted over and over. *Don't think about Pete*.

"You do have bad taste in men, don't you?" Haas continued. "And you always had a weakness for cops."

Trevor was past the woodpile and was working his way behind the tall stack of pallets next to it. With the door closed, only trickles of light struggled through the small, dirty pane set high in the sidewall. Although the gaps between the boards making up the pallets didn't hide him as well as the woodpile, the garage was hopefully dim enough to finish the job.

Another smell tickled his nose. This one he knew right away—smoke. What his blood-starved brain couldn't figure out was why he was smelling smoke. Trevor decided to ignore it for now and concentrate on the most immediate threat—the gun his father was holding.

"I don't know why you turned your back on me," Haas said. "I was hoping to pass the business on to you some day. Very disappointing."

The rational tone his dad was using added to the feeling of unreality. Trevor shook his head to clear it. He was having a hard time focusing. The rough wood of the pallets blurred in front of him.

"Is that smoke?" Haas asked. Trevor could see his hazy figure walking slowing in front of the pallets. "Would your boyfriend be trying to burn me out?" He gave a long-suffering sigh. "I should've hit him harder."

The roar filling Trevor's head wasn't from lack of blood. It was pure rage.

Putting his shoulder to the stack of pallets, he shoved with all his remaining strength.

Haas yelled as he went down, buried in a pile of pallets. Trevor went down as well, carried to the ground by his momentum. He saw the gleam of Haas' gun as it spun away from him, coming to rest several feet away, looking as inert and harmless as a toy.

Everything appeared brighter now. The colors were strange, though, the flickering light surrounding them in hues of red and orange. It reminded Trevor of the night by the fire, when Pete kissed him and jerked him off while Rhodes and Wash watched, entranced.

Pete. The thought of his lover jerked Trevor back to reality, which was beginning to hurt more and more. He just wanted to watch the pretty flames climbing the walls but knew he had to get out. He tried to crawl on his hands and knees but they slid out from under him. On his belly, Trevor pulled himself across the floor, his eyes fixed on the door.

A hand caught his ankle.

Trevor kicked but the grip held. He looked around and saw his father, his face battered and bloody, just his head and arm protruding from beneath the pallets. Trevor lunged forward and closed his fingers around the grip of the gun. Twisting around, he pointed the gun at Haas.

Trevor didn't say anything. He just held the gun and his father's gaze...until the hold around his ankle loosened.

The gun made crawling harder as he headed for the side door. Pulling himself along the floor with his forearms, pushing with his knees, he worked his way, inch by inch, toward the small door, toward freedom...toward Pete.

Despite the roar of the flames, he heard his father yelling, heard the shouted threats that swiftly changed to wordless, agonizing screams. Trevor clenched his molars together and crawled, not allowing himself to stop or look or turn around to help. This wasn't over. He wasn't safe. If he didn't get out of the garage, Haas could still win, still get his wish of Trevor's death.

The heat was incredible. His skin felt sunburned on his cheeks, his lips chapped. The flames licked their way closer to the door, making it look like the only exit from hell. His vision narrowed to that single spot, that rectangle of freedom, and everything else fell away.

There was a cracking sound and a crash. Trevor ignored it and kept crawling. The next loud snap matched a searing pain across his arm and back. He cried out and tried to pull away but something kept him pinned. He fought and struggled, but whatever lay across him was immovable.

The pain faded until his entire body was numb. Trevor let his eyes close.

I always knew Dad would kill me eventually, he thought, and then there was nothing.

* * * * *

"Fuck!" Pete regained consciousness in hell. His head felt like it was being used for meat cleaver storage and red light licked his face with warm tongues. Memory came back in an agonizing rush. "Trevor!" he gasped, rolling to his hands and knees.

He pushed to his feet and stood for a moment, swaying, so dizzy the flames eating the garage looked like horizontal streaks. There were sirens in the distance, adding to the nightmare of the day.

"Trevor," Pete said again in a hoarse whisper, staring at the inferno of the garage. He was in there. Pete didn't know how he knew, but he was willing to stake his life on it. Trevor was in the burning garage.

He started running, falling to one knee and then standing again, wanting to scream at the ground for its wavy undulations. He reached the side door, swearing and jerking his hand away when the doorknob burned his fingers. Pete grabbed it again, ignoring the pain, but the swollen door wouldn't open. Shoving his shoulder against it, he slammed his weight into the door and it opened just a foot.

Something was blocking the door. Pete wedged his arm and shoulder in, reaching for the obstacle, pushing at it until the door opened enough to allow him in. The smoke stung his eyes, blinding him.

"Trevor," he shouted. On his next inhale, the smoke stripped his lungs and his next yell was already raspy. "Trev!"

A chunk of the roof crashed to the floor in front of him, sending up a shower of sparks. In the flare of light, Pete saw something gleam on the floor. Crouching low, he ran toward it, blinking hard to clear his vision and see through the watery sheen of smoke tears.

Bits of charred debris fluttered down like confetti, stinging his skin where they landed. A larger piece of wood fell, bouncing off his shoulder. Pete barely felt it, concentrating on the glimmer he desperately hoped was blond hair.

It was. When he saw Trevor's face, Pete fell to his knees next to him. A blackened beam lay across his unmoving body. Pete shoved aside the small, burned boards, exposing the full length of the beam pinning Trevor to the ground. Standing up, Pete began coughing and couldn't stop. His eyes ran with tears until everything blurred into a nightmare-colored blob.

Rubbing his arm across his eyes just made the stinging worse. Blinking rapidly, Pete focused on the black length of the beam. He wrapped his hands around the rough, burnt wood and heaved, straining to shift it off Trevor. It didn't move. Adjusting his grip, Pete braced his legs and pulled until blackness crowded his vision.

The beam shifted, reluctantly at first and then faster as the end digging into the ground pivoted. Pete stumbled back two steps and then dropped the beam, staggering at the loss of weight.

"Trev," he tried to say but it came out as an airless croak that set off a fit of coughing. Pete crouched down and turned him over onto his back, shoving away creeping panic and refusing to think about how still and limp Trevor was. Grasping him beneath the arms, Pete lifted him against his body and pushed to his feet.

Supporting the other man with an arm locked around his waist, Pete raised Trevor's arm and leaned forward. Trevor's weight collapsed across his shoulders. Wrapping an arm around Trevor's knees as he kept his grip on his arm, Pete lifted his weight across his back.

The ground appeared to tilt in front of him as he staggered toward the narrow rectangle of light marking the half-open door. Pete tripped and almost fell, lurching sideways as he tried to keep his balance without dumping Trevor on the ground. His head spun and his lungs ached, the light in front of him blurring and shifting as he stumbled toward it.

The fire roared in his ears, each crack and pop making him start. Pete knew the whole building could come down on top of them at any moment but each step felt as if he were wading through pudding. He just couldn't move any faster.

Covering the last few feet in front of the door seemed to take forever. The opening wasn't large enough to allow Pete through with his human cargo, so he gave the lawnmower blocking it a shove with his foot, moving it over a few inches. It was enough for him to wedge them through and out into the sunshine.

Once out, he didn't stop but instead ran down the driveway and into the front yard. Lowering Trevor gently to the grass, he looked around for the emergency vehicles. He knew he'd heard sirens while in the garage. It'd felt as if he'd been in there for hours—where was the fucking ambulance?

The sirens were louder but there were no flashing lights at the curb, only a gathering group of neighbors bordering his lawn. Morty was pulling a hose toward the garage, his slight figure silhouetted against the flames.

"Get back!" he roared, wincing at the raw sound of his own voice. "There's gas! Get away from there!"

Morty didn't stop. He hadn't heard. Pete staggered to his feet, intending to chase after the man but Iris must have heard his rasping yell.

"He said to get away from there, you idiot!" she screamed at Morty, grabbing the hose and giving a hard yank that almost pulled Morty off his feet. That caught his attention. He hurried back toward Iris, rounding the corner of their house just as the garage exploded in a huge fireball.

Pete threw himself down, trying to cover as much of Trevor as he could. Pressing his cheek against Trevor's forehead, he could feel the light puff of breath on his neck.

"Trev," he gasped, grabbing his head so he could hold Trevor's face against him. "You're br-breathing, baby. That's good, really g-good. Just k-keep it up, Trev. Keep on b-breathing and I w-won't have to kick your ass, okay?"

The explosion had settled to a dull, crackling roar, so Pete slid off Trevor onto his knees, still cupping his face in his hands. He wiped at the black soot streaking Trevor's cheeks with his thumbs.

"You st-still with me, baby?" he asked, the closed eyes scaring the ever-loving shit out of him. "Trev? Don't d-die. Don't l-let that asshole w-win. I need you, okay?"

"Sir?" It was a stranger's voice. Pete looked up. When he saw it was a fire department paramedic, he almost cried in relief. Help was here.

"I pulled him out," Pete told him in a rush. "He's been unconscious since. A beam fell on him. He has a G.S.W., right side." He tried to get out of the paramedic's way but Trevor's hand moved, clutching at his arm.

"Trev?" Pete grabbed the searching hand and held it tightly.

Trevor's eyes opened a slit. "Where'd...your stutter go?" His voice was a faint scratch of sound.

"My stutter?" Pete repeated, with a choke of incredulous laughter. Tears of sheer relief pressed on the back of his eyes and nose. "If you're going to ask me stupid shit like that, you might as well stay unconscious."

His cracked lips twitched up in a tiny smile. "Going...to knock me out?"

"If I have to," Pete tried to joke. He blinked, attempting to force the tears back, but a few escaped despite his best efforts. He rubbed his face against his shoulder and swore as ash stung his eye. "I'm sorry, Trev. I shouldn't have been so careless. It was my fault..."

"Shut...the fuck...up," Trevor wheezed. He started coughing, a weak bark of sound.

"Sir, we need you to give us some room here," a second paramedic told Pete, who nodded and stood up, intending to move back just far enough for the paramedics to work but where he could still keep an eye on Trevor's face. As he pushed to his feet, the world tilted around him, the house and yard and neighbors and firefighters all spinning like a carousel until all went black.

Chapter Sixteen

The beeping sound woke him. Well, that and the pain that thrummed up and down his side, from shoulder to hip. Trevor blinked at the white ceiling, trying to place it. When he didn't have any luck with that, he gingerly turned his head.

Pete was watching him from a chair by the bed.

Trevor smiled. "Nice," he rasped.

"What?" Pete's voice wasn't much better. Both of them sounded like their vocal cords were covered in sandpaper.

"Like the look," Trevor explained, his gaze fixed on the hospital-issue gown that showed off Pete's hairy legs.

Pete raised a suggestive eyebrow. "Best part is easy access."

Trevor's laugh turned into a fit of coughing. When it was over, Pete had a glass hovering by Trevor's mouth, straw touching his lips.

Although he did take a sip, Trevor snorted. Turning his head away from the glass, he said, "Are we in some sort of gay soap opera? I feel like the doctor's going to be in any minute, telling me I died and I'm my evil twin."

Frowning, Pete put the glass back on the tray next to the bed. "If you keep talking crazy, I *will* call the doctor and tell her you need to lighten up on the meds."

Trevor winced. "Don't do that."

"Bad?"

"Bad enough." He didn't want to talk about that. "You're not dead then."

"Not even close." Pete pointed at a shaved and bandaged area by his temple. "Just a bump on the head and a little smoke inhalation."

Trevor nodded.

"You, on the other hand," Pete told him, "have smoke inhalation, a bullet hole, multiple contusions, burns and major blood loss."

"Huh." He was pretty sure he could feel every hole, contusion and burn. "Did...um, did he get out?"

"Harold Haas?" Pete was watching him carefully. "No. They found him."

Trevor turned his head to stare at the ceiling again. There was too much pain and too many drugs running through him to even start to process how he felt about that. "Who set it?"

"Don't know yet but I have my suspicions," Pete said.

"Think we poked a tender spot with our questions?" Trevor asked, turning back to look at him. The pain was making it hard to concentrate.

"Yeah. Need more painkillers?"

Hurting too much to put a tough face on it, Trevor just jerked his head in a nod. Pete stood up, turning to open the door and call for someone. Trevor wasn't in too much pain to appreciate the view Pete's open-backed hospital gown offered. He gave a weak whistle.

Pete gave a mock-glare over his shoulder but then tugged a little on the side of the gown so it opened farther, exposing even more of his firm ass. Trevor smiled.

Stepping aside so the nurse could enter, Pete grinned back.

"I'm Julie," the nurse told him. "On a scale of zero to ten, how's the pain, Mr. Haas?"

"About a six," he told her. "And call me Trevor."

"He's trying to be tough," Pete said, frowning. "It's more like a nine."

Trevor raised an eyebrow. "Hey, it's my pain scale. Butt out."

"It is," Pete told him, totally deadpan.

He had to laugh at that, even though it put him into another coughing fit, which made his side feel as if it were being ripped off his body. "Okay," he gasped, trying not to puke from the pain. "Nine."

Julie injected something into his I.V. "Tell the truth, Trevor," she advised. "You get better drugs that way."

Noted, he thought, his eyes closing as a fuzzy cloud numbed the edges of the pain.

* * * * *

Rhodes and Wash brought him some clothes.

"Maybe I should bring this home," Pete said, eyeing the discarded hospital gown. "Trevor kind of liked it."

"I bet," Wash said, smirking.

Rhodes just scowled. He'd had the same expression since the previous evening, when the two had come to visit. "Tell me again how you two almost managed to be shot and burned to death, all while we're out on a fucking run?"

"You're just sorry you missed all the action," Pete joked. He was feeling much better since he'd found out Trevor wouldn't be dying anytime soon. "Mind if we get out of here first? I'll tell you everything again once we're in the car."

"What about Trev?" Wash asked.

"Right now he's in painkiller la-la land. I'll come back this afternoon to see him."

"We'll come too," Rhodes told him.

Pete nodded. "I was hoping you'd say that. I'm not supposed to be driving with my concussion and I'm pretty sure my truck was totaled in the explosion yesterday."

"Yep," Wash confirmed and Pete sighed.

"I liked that truck."

The door swung open and Pete turned, expecting it to be the nurse who'd wheel him out of the hospital. Instead, Detective McDonald stuck his head inside, the wispy remains of his hair even wilder than usual.

"Way to fucking almost blow up my witness, Giordano." McDonald's mock-scowl broke into a grin. "How're you doing?"

"I'm fine," Pete told him, reaching out to shake his hand. "Concussion, minor burns and smoke inhalation. Trevor's the one who's hurt."

"You said when you called that he'll be okay, right?" Salas asked as she followed McDonald into the room.

"Yeah," Pete said, shaking her hand as well. "Rhodes and Washington, meet McDonald and Salas."

"The private investigators." McDonald nodded to the two men. "Looks like Trevor can go back to work with you now."

"He has some healing to do first," Pete interjected, shoving away the reminder that Trevor had his own life waiting. Now that his father was dead and the threat on his life gone, Trevor could do whatever he wanted. It made Pete feel like a total ass that this thought made him sick to his stomach.

McDonald and Salas left the room to check in on Trevor as the nurse arrived with a wheelchair. Feeling a little silly, Pete sat down and let her wheel him toward the exit, Rhodes and Wash trailing after.

A familiar figure was striding down the hall toward them.

"Turn around," Pete hissed at the nurse, who stared at him in confusion. "Go the other way...oh shit."

"Officer Giordano," Sheriff Osgood greeted him. "Mr. Rhodes. Mr. Washington."

Pete heard what could only be called a growl from behind him, although he didn't know if it came from Wash or Rhodes. "Sheriff."

"Can I have a word?" Although it was couched as a question, it definitely had the ring of an order.

"Mind if I get out of here first?" he asked shortly.

"Be my guest." Osgood gestured for them to continue, falling in next to the wheelchair. Silence fell for the rest of his trip to the exit.

Pete got up and thanked the nurse. He rubbed his forehead. It still felt like he had a pickax lodged in his skull.

"Why don't I give you a ride home?" the sheriff suggested. There was another rumble on the Rhodes and Wash front.

"Yeah," Pete agreed, turning to the other two men. "I'll talk to you guys when we get home."

They nodded grudgingly, watching as Pete climbed into the passenger seat of the sheriff's car.

"How's your...ah, partner doing?" Osgood asked.

"Shitty but he'll live," Pete told him. "Haas shot him, plus he has some burns and bruises from the garage fire."

"I see Haas is dead."

"Only good thing to come out of this." Rubbing his still-sore eyes, Pete sighed. Fuck, he was tired. "Now Trevor can quit hiding."

"Happen to know who started that fire?" Osgood asked almost casually.

Pete laughed, a humorless bark of sound. "Isn't that *your* job, Sheriff?"

"Figured I'd check, seeing as how the fire was started when Haas showed up."

Biting the inside of his cheek, Pete debated how much to tell Osgood. "We had an interesting conversation with Abby before the fire started, followed by an even more interesting conversation with Danny about how Abby was lying about her alibi."

The sheriff's sideways look held a mix of exasperation and amusement. "So my request to stay out of this case...?"

"Just pissed us all off," Pete finished.

A muscle worked in the sheriff's jaw but when he spoke, it was with his usual calm. "Well then, why don't you tell me everything you've found out?"

* * * * *

They pulled up to the curb in front of Pete's house, leaving enough room for Rhodes and Wash to park behind them. He stared blindly through the windshield. Now that he was home, where the ashes of his garage mingled with those of Trevor's father, where he'd held Trevor in the front yard, terrified his lover was going to die, where one of his neighbors had intentionally caused this heartache...

He couldn't wait a second longer to find out the truth.

Pete got out of the driver's seat and headed across the street. The sheriff jogged around the front of the car to catch up to him.

"Where d'you think you're going?" Osgood asked mildly, falling in step with him.

"Talk to Abby."

"Hey, wait up!" Wash called from behind them.

"I'd prefer to talk to her alone," the sheriff told him.

Pete didn't even look at him. He just kept walking. "That's too bad, Sheriff."

Wash and Rhodes caught up to them.

"Is 'wait up' a difficult concept to understand, Petey?" Wash complained. "What's going on?"

"He's going to ask her why she set that fire," Rhodes stated.

Pete glanced at him, startled. "You figured it out?"

"Not hard." He shrugged. "Get home from the hospital and she's the first person you want to see. Add that to the killer glare you have going..."

"Couldn't it have been Terrance?" the sheriff asked quietly as they circled the side of the house. "He had more of a motive, being dumped and all. He was arguing with Greg after the incident in Marsha's kitchen."

"Could be," Pete agreed. "Either way, though, she knew. She gave Terrance his alibi."

Abby was sitting on the garden bench, not doing anything except staring into space.

"Why'd you try to kill Trevor, Abby?" Pete demanded, crossing to stand in front of her.

"Who's Trevor?" she asked.

"Joey," he gritted out. "Why'd you hurt him, Abby?"

"Hang on," the sheriff muttered behind him. "Abby, you don't have to answer his questions here. We can talk at the station." When she remained silent, he asked, "Do you understand?"

"Of course, Sheriff," she said calmly, looking up at him. "I'm not an idiot."

"Then why'd you try to kill him?" Pete asked again. He knew he should've been the one to remember to Mirandize Abby but the events of the past twenty-four hours had messed with his head.

"You knew," she told him simply. "I heard Danny telling you. You knew I lied. You knew I killed him."

"So you did kill Greg," the sheriff said.

She nodded. "I was coming over to talk to you two. I didn't know how I was going to convince you not to turn me in. I just knew I needed to do something before you talked to the sheriff. I saw you both go into the garage. I grabbed the can of gas and one of those propane lighters from our shed. When I got to your garage, I thought I'd prop something against the door but it opened the wrong way, so I just closed it. I dumped the gas along the outside and lit it. It was so easy."

Pete blinked at her. The story sounded so unbelievable, told in such a flat, unemotional voice. "It was full daylight! These neighbors watch *everything*. Did you think you wouldn't be seen?"

She looked at him as if *he* were the crazy one. "I'm never seen. No one ever notices me."

"Didn't you see me lying there next to the house?"

"What?" Abby shook her head. "No, you followed Joey into the shed."

"That wasn't me," he told her. "That was Trevor's father."

"Oh." She was quiet for a moment. "I didn't mean to hurt anyone's father."

"But you wanted to hurt Trevor?" Pete's voice cracked on his name. "How could you want to hurt Trevor? He *liked* you!"

"It was the only way," she said, no remorse in her expression at all. "You both knew. I didn't want to go to prison. Not for killing that worthless piece of trash."

"Greg?" the sheriff clarified and Abby nodded. "Why did you kill him?"

Her jaw set and anger flashed in her eyes. "He was such a spoiled brat. He had to have everyone! Terrance wasn't gay. He *wasn't*. Greg saw that as a challenge. He got him drunk, seduced him."

"Did Terrance tell you this?" Osgood asked.

Abby shook her head. "I suspected. Then I heard them arguing about it at the barbeque after Terrance saw Greg hitting on Joey." She shot a quick glance up at Pete. "Or Trevor, I guess. Then I knew for sure."

"How'd you do it?" the sheriff questioned.

"I made up an e-mail address—one of those free ones—with Joey's name in it. I sent Greg an e-mail saying Joey had reconsidered and wanted to meet. I knew Michelle was going to be out of town that night. I told him to leave the door unlocked, strip naked, blindfold himself and lie on the bed. When I went up there, I couldn't believe he'd actually done it. I didn't say anything. I just tied his hands and feet and then took the blindfold off. The look on his face..." She looked almost proud. Pete felt sick.

"So get a divorce," Pete told her in disgust. "Throw things at Terrance. Why torture and kill Greg, for fuck's sake?"

"Terrance isn't much," she said in that creepy, rational tone, "but he's mine. He was jealous of Joey—didn't want to be just a one-time thing. I wasn't about to share my husband with a greedy brat like Greg."

"So Greg's dead," Pete stated, feeling rage clamp into a hard ball in his stomach, "and T-Trevor almost died, all b-b-because you didn't want to *share*? You f-fucking selfish, crazy *bitch*!" He lunged for her and she shrieked, flinching back. Pete was jerked back against a hard chest, arms banded around his in a reverse bear hug.

"Settle," Rhodes rumbled in his ear. "Not worth it, Petey."

"Stand up," the sheriff ordered Abby. "Turn around." He clicked handcuffs around her wrists. Closing his fingers around her upper arm, he walked her across the backyard. "You're under arrest for two counts of murder, two counts of attempted murder, arson..." His voice faded as they disappeared around the side of the house, leaving Pete still locked against Rhodes chest.

His throat was too tight. Pete tried to breathe but nothing was working. Rhodes turned him around so they were face-to-face, gripping his biceps and giving him a small shake.

"It's okay now," Rhodes told him in that deep, sure voice that didn't allow any doubt. "Trevor's going to be fine." Wrapping a hand around the back of Pete's neck, he pulled him against him. "You're okay, Pete."

Sucking in one painful breath and then another, he mashed his face against the hard side of Rhodes' neck. His whole body shook as he struggled to breathe, each exhale tearing from his lungs like a sob.

* * * * *

"I'll wait here," Pete whispered, glancing at Trevor's sleeping face. "Why don't you two grab a bite downstairs?"

Wash was doing some kind of hand signals.

Pete stared at them and then gave Rhodes a confused look. "What's he doing?"

"Being an idiot." Rhodes' whisper wasn't very whisper-y. In fact, it was fairly loud. "We'll check back in twenty."

"Aww." Trevor's raspy voice brought all their heads around. "Grandma and Grandpa came to visit me."

"How're you feeling?" Pete asked him, moving next to the bed.

Trevor grimaced. "Same. They need to add another option to the pain scale—shitty."

"Guess what, Trev," Wash said, plopping down on the bed next to Trevor's hip. "Petey figured out who killed Greg and set the fire."

"Abby?" Trevor guessed and then winced. "Fuck, Wash, quit bouncing. You're killing me here."

"Sorry," Wash told him. "Yeah. She's turned out to be a real psycho. When she was confessing, it was like she was telling us about her day at the zoo. It was nuts."

"How'd she kill Greg?" Trevor asked.

"Pretended to be you," Wash said.

Trevor stared at him. "Seriously?"

Wash nodded, giving another small bounce of excitement. Rhodes' hands clamped onto his shoulders, holding him still. "Shit—did I do it again? Sorry, Trev. Yeah, she sent Greg an e-mail saying you wanted to hook up and he should blindfold himself and lie naked on the bed. She got there, tied him up and then..." He made a stabbing motion.

"Why'd she start the fire?"

Pete's stomach twisted at the mention. "She overheard Danny telling us she was lying about her alibi. She saw two men go into the garage, you and a big, dark-haired man she thought was me. Figured she'd get rid of us before we could go to the sheriff."

Although Trevor just nodded, his eyes were distant.

"We'll let you talk," Rhodes told them, tugging Wash to his feet. "C'mon Wash."

"Want anything from the cafeteria?" Wash asked as Rhodes pulled him toward the door. "Jell-O? We could get you any color."

With a half-smile, Trevor shook his head. "Thanks though."

"Your loss," Wash warned him, giving a final grin before pulling the door closed behind them.

Pete was quiet for a moment, biting his cheek. "Would it hurt too much if I..." He didn't finish, feeling a little stupid for even beginning to ask.

"What?" Trevor's smile grew a little. "If you fuck me? I don't think so. I might want to ask the nurse for another dose of painkillers first though."

Pete laughed and shook his head. "I just wanted to lie down next to you."

"Sleepy?"

"It's just that I keep looking at you," Pete explained awkwardly. "And I don't really believe you're here and okay. Would you mind if I," *Oh fuck, how cheesy is this going to sound?* "just held you for a few minutes?"

"Knock yourself out," Trevor told him, flipping his hand at the empty space to his left side. "Just don't jump around like you're in a fucking bouncy castle and I'll be fine."

Easing himself onto the bed, Pete stretched out on his side. His arm hovered in the air above Trevor's body.

"You can touch me, you know," Trevor told him with an amused snort.

"Where doesn't it hurt?"

"Good question." Trevor circled his fingers in the air above the right side of his abdomen. "Just avoid where the bullet went in and I should be fine."

Gingerly, Pete allowed his arm to rest diagonally across Trevor's chest, his hand curled over his shoulder. He slid his body a little closer until his front pressed along Trevor's side and rested his cheek on the pillow, his face buried against Trevor's neck.

"Okay?" he asked.

"Yeah." Trevor sounded a little breathless.

Pete raised his head to check on him. "Sure?"

His smile was pained. "Except for not being able to do anything with that dick pressed against my hip...yeah, I'm sure."

Pete lowered his face to Trevor's neck again, trying to smell through the antiseptic hospital odor and the lingering traces of smoke to Trevor's familiar scent. "By dick," he asked, "do you mean the body part or me?"

"Body part." Trevor's laugh ended in a cough but it didn't sound as painful as it had earlier. Pete kissed his neck.

"If you're going to do that," Trevor complained, "do it right."

Lifting his head, Pete gave him an offended glare. "I *always* do it right."

"Please?"

There was no way Pete could resist him. Ever so softly, he touched Trevor's lips with his own, feeling the slick balm they'd plastered on to help the chapped skin. He pulled away and Trevor frowned.

"Tongue please."

Pete grinned. "Anything for the patient," he said piously, lowering his mouth to Trevor's. This time, he kissed him a little harder. Trevor groaned and Pete jerked his head back.

"Did I hurt you?"

His eyes narrowing to slits, Trevor growled, "No, but if you don't fucking kiss me, I'll hurt *you*."

Staring at the familiar sulky twist to Trevor's mouth, Pete felt as if the bed was falling out from under him. Instead of kissing him, Pete buried his face back into Trevor's neck and fought back the remembered terror.

"Pete?" Trevor's hand stroked his head. "What's wrong, Petey?"

"Thought you were dead," he said against Trevor's skin. "Nice protector I am."

"Don't turn this into a fucking pity-fest," Trevor told him sharply. "It was Harold and Abby — they're the bad guys here. It wasn't anyone else's fault."

The mention of Trevor's father brought Pete's head up. "Your father," he began and then didn't say anything more. There were so many possible endings to that sentence but none of them expressed what Pete was feeling. "I'm sorry."

Trevor's skin tightened over his cheekbones and a muscle flickered in his jaw as he stared at the ceiling. "I'm not."

"For you, I mean," Pete clarified awkwardly. "Even though he was a terrible father, he was yours. Are you...?" Once again, he didn't know how to finish.

"I'm fine," Trevor bit out. "Why are we fucking talking? Can't you just kiss me again?"

"You don't seem fine," Pete told him. "It's okay to feel...whatever."

"Thanks for your permission," Trevor said sarcastically. "You know what? I'm kind of tired. I'd rather not talk or kiss anymore, okay?"

"Sure." Pete told his body to withdraw, to remove himself from this situation. Trevor had just asked him to leave, so why couldn't he force his limbs to move? "If I'm quiet and don't kiss you, do you mind if I stay here?"

"Here in bed?" Trevor asked.

"Yeah." He could feel his face burning with embarrassment. "Sorry, stupid idea. I'll get up."

"No." Trevor grabbed his arm. "It's okay. Stay."

"Sure?"

"Yeah."

They stayed like that, pressed against each other, until Rhodes and Wash returned.

* * * * *

It was dim in the room when Trevor woke up again. He turned his head to see Pete slouched in the same chair next to his bed. It appeared as if he'd moved in. Although Pete's eyes were closed, Trevor could tell he wasn't asleep.

"You're still here?" he asked, regretting the irritation that spiked his words. He wasn't annoyed to see Pete. He actually wished he were strong enough to yank the man into bed with him.

Pete looked at him a little warily. "That okay?"

"Yeah," Trevor muttered, not meeting his eyes.

"How're you feeling?"

Scowling at the ceiling, Trevor snapped, "Like I want to shoot the next person who asks how I'm feeling."

"Okay." There was silence and then Pete spoke again. "You want me to go?"

"No." The word was out more urgently than Trevor's pride would've preferred.

"I'll stay then."

"Why are you in the chair?" Trevor grumped.

Pete sighed. "I thought you said you wanted me to stay."

"No," he snapped. "Why aren't you in bed with me?"

"Oh." Pete sounded a lot happier now. "Night nurse Melia kicked me out. Want me to risk her wrath and climb back in with you?"

"Well, duh." Trevor sounded so sullen, even to himself, he was embarrassed. "Sorry."

Pete slid into bed next to him, his warmth pressed against Trevor's side like a huge heating pad. "For what?"

"For acting like such a baby," Trevor explained. "I feel like shit."

"Don't worry about it." Pete's hand stroked a strand of hair away from his face with such gentleness, Trevor felt tears scratch the back of his throat. "Want me to call the nurse and get you some more drugs?"

"No." Trevor snagged a handful of Pete's shirt. "I don't want you to get kicked back to the chair."

"Tell me when it gets too bad, okay?"

Trevor nodded, his fingers tightening around his fistful of shirt. He turned his face into Pete's shoulder.

"Aw, baby," Pete murmured, cupping the back of Trevor's head. "I wish I could switch with you."

With a short laugh, Trevor asked, "You want a bullet hole?"

"If you wouldn't have to have one, then sure."

"Don't say shit like that."

Pete kissed the side of his head. "Why not?"

Drawing in a shaky breath, Trevor explained, "Because I'm trying to hold it together here and you telling me fucked-up things like that doesn't help, okay?"

"You don't have to hold it together, Trev." Pete kissed him again, his mouth lingering this time. "It's two a.m. and you've been shot and burned and had a garage fall on your head, plus your dad died. If anyone has the right to lose his shit, it's you."

"He wasn't any kind of dad," Trevor protested. "Up until he died, he was trying to kill me. I should be happy he's gone."

Pete just made a noncommittal sound and stroked his hair.

"I mean, here I am with a bullet *he* put in me," Trevor went on. "If he'd managed to kill me, *he* wouldn't be sad. He'd be happy he'd gotten rid of the only witness to Shep's murder."

"Are you sad?" Pete asked him.

"Fuck no." He pressed his face so hard against Pete's shoulder it hurt. "I mean, what kind of weak asshole would that make me?"

"No kind of weak asshole." Pete inched even closer, until it felt as if his warmth surrounded Trevor. "You can't help how you feel."

Pulling back, Trevor glared at him. "Yes, I can. He can't make me feel anything anymore. He's lost the fucking right!"

As he tucked Trevor's head back against him, Pete said mildly, "If you feel something, you feel something. Can't just decide not to 'cause you're pissed off."

"Well, I did," Trevor insisted, his mouth in a hard line. "I decided years ago not to ever let him hurt me again. It's bad enough the bastard shot me. I'm not going to fucking cry over him too."

"Okay," Pete soothed and Trevor jerked back, scowling at him. The movement set off reverberations of pain through his side but he ignored it.

"I'm not."

Pete just looked at him.

Unable to hold that steady gaze, Trevor buried his face against Pete's shoulder again. "I'm sick of talking about this. Tell me about yours."

"My father?" Pete sounded amused. "What is this, therapy time?"

"C'mon, Pete," Trevor urged. "Distract me."

"Fine," he agreed grudgingly. "For you. What do you want to know?"

"What's he like?"

Pete's hand found Trevor's head again and stroked in a soft, even rhythm that was almost hypnotic. Trevor closed his eyes. "He's big. When I was a kid, I thought he could fix anything." He laughed softly. "Remember how I told you I worked for him through high school?"

"Yeah," Trevor murmured, lulled by the deep voice and caressing hand.

"He rode my ass." Pete didn't sound angry though. He sounded fond—and a little sad. "He was so worried the other guys would think he was favoring me, he went the other direction. Any little screwup on my part and he acted like I'd brought down the entire building."

"That must've sucked," Trevor said.

"Nah," Pete told him. "I actually missed it after..."

"After what?" Trevor asked when Pete trailed off.

"I came out."

Indignation brought Trevor's head up. "He fired you?"

Pete was quiet for a few seconds. "Not really. He seemed to take the news okay but he was...different after that. Separate."

"Conditional love." He pressed a kiss against Pete's shoulder.

"Exactly. I could tell he didn't want me working there. He said he didn't want me to have to hear the jokes—as if a construction site was the only place you'd run into gay bashers. I think he was embarrassed."

"Embarrassed?" Trevor slid a couple fingers beneath the hem of Pete's shirt so he could touch the skin of his stomach. "Did he think you'd wear a rainbow t-shirt and sparkly tiara to work?"

Pete didn't laugh. "I think he thought everyone could tell."

"Please," Trevor scoffed. "You're the butch-iest guy I know, 'cept for Rhodes. Well, you probably tie with Rhodes."

"Rhodes had to hold me back when Abby confessed she'd started the fire," Pete admitted.

Trevor stroked the backs of his fingers against Pete's hard stomach. "My avenger."

"Then he hugged me and I hyperventilated."

With a snort, Trevor said, "Yeah, he does that to people."

There was a tap on the door and then it swung open.

"Officer Giordano!" Night nurse Melia snapped and he jumped up, shaking the bed a little as he went. Trevor bit back a groan, knowing his pain wouldn't help Pete's case with Melia.

"Yes ma'am?" Pete asked innocently, as if he hadn't been snuggled in next to her patient.

She eyed him balefully. "What are you doing in this room?"

"I'm here to protect Trevor, ma'am."

Trevor tried very hard not to snort. He'd been wondering how Pete had been getting around visiting-hour rules.

"Not in his bed, you're not," Melia told him. "You can protect him by sitting outside his door." She pointed.

Panic bubbled in Trevor's stomach. "Can he stay 'til I fall asleep?" he asked before he caught himself and immediately flushed. How old was he? Six? Besides, there was nothing to be afraid of anymore—everyone who wanted to hurt him was either dead or locked up. "Sorry," he muttered, fixing his gaze on the ceiling. He was becoming much too familiar with that ceiling. Maybe he should put a poster up there—the one with the kitten that read "Hang in there!" He snorted.

"Fine," Melia conceded and Trevor looked at her in surprise.

Pete smiled at her. "Thank you, Nurse Melia."

"Not in bed," she ordered, pointing at the chair. "There. Once he's sleeping, you're out in the hallway."

"Yes ma'am."

"You two are just lucky you're cute," she said sternly, moving to Trevor's side. "How's the pain?"

"Seven," he told her and saw Pete wince.

"Trev," he rebuked. "You should've told me."

He shrugged as much as he could without feeling as if he were ripping in half. "We were talking."

"You were hurting," Pete told him with a frown.

"I'm always hurting." Trevor flipped a dismissive hand.

That just made Pete's scowl worse.

Melia snorted. "You're not really helping, Trevor."

Maybe not, but the painkillers Melia had given him were definitely starting to help. "Thank you, Melia." His voice was already beginning to slur.

"You're welcome, Trevor." She eyed Pete. "In the hall when he falls asleep."

"Yes ma'am."

Trevor smiled, his eyelids drifting to half-mast. Pete's innocent expression was always entertaining. "Kiss me g'night?" he murmured.

Pete darted a look at Melia.

"Gently," she told him, heading toward the door. "And stay off the bed." She left the room, closing the door with a definite click of the latch.

The pain was still there but it felt distanced, as if there were a fluffy layer of foam between it and him. Pete's mouth touched his in a soft press and withdrew too soon. Trevor was going to protest but floated on a narcotic cloud instead.

Later, he thought hazily. I'll make him kiss me right later.

Chapter Seventeen

"Quit looking at me like that."

"Like what?" Pete frowned.

"Like I'm your hundred-year-old grandpa who just broke his hip," Trevor bitched, knowing he was whining and not really caring.

Pete rolled his eyes. "Then quit acting like a crotchety old guy."

Swallowing a laugh, Trevor clung to his scowl. "First day home, I'm not even in the house yet and you're out of sympathy. Nice."

"I ran out of sympathy two days ago," Pete told him, grinning. "Sorry."

Trevor shook his head. "Where are Wash and Rhodes? They'd be sweet to me."

Reaching for his elbow, Pete tried to help him climb the porch steps but Trevor shook him off. "I don't know which Wash and Rhodes you're talking about, since the couple staying here would never have been sweet."

"Yeah." Trevor tried to hide how breathless he was after climbing the steps. "Hey, you got a porch swing!" He paused, holding onto a post, using the break to both admire the swing and catch his breath.

"Yep," Pete said proudly. "And?"

Trevor looked around. "You painted the floor."

"Before they left, Rhodes and Wash helped me finish up a few things around here."

"It looks great." Trevor told him. "When'd they leave?"

"Sunday. They're going to be back this weekend though. I think they kind of consider this their vacation home." Pete unlocked the door and pushed it open, then moved back so he could follow Trevor inside.

Stepping into the house, Trevor laughed. "Great. Now we'll never..." His words dried up as he looked around. "Holy fuck! Finished a few things up, my ass."

Pete grinned. "You like it?"

"It's great!" Trevor couldn't stop staring. "You even got a rug."

"And a couch."

He couldn't believe the change. "You bought a T.V.!" Trevor stared at the flat screen mounted next to the fireplace.

"Figured we'd want to stare at something while we sat on the couch," Pete told him. He looked as if he was trying to restrain himself but his grin kept popping out. "I got us some chairs too."

"What?" Trevor laughed, easing himself into one of the armchairs. "In case we have a fight?"

"You have to see upstairs," Pete told him. "Besides, you should probably take a nap."

Trevor groaned. "We're back to treating me like Grandpa, are we?" Pushing to his feet, he headed toward the stairs.

"Don't start," Pete warned, although he couldn't hold his stern expression. "Hurry up or I'll get you one of those Mr. Burns stair chairs."

"The kind that goes up the banister?" Trevor asked, stopping to rest halfway up. "I'd love one."

"Want me to sweep you off your feet and carry you?" Pete teased.

Trevor glowered at him. "Don't even fucking try." He started climbing the stairs again. He managed to make it to the top, although his head was spinning by the time he made it to the hallway.

The door to their room was open and he walked in. When he saw the huge, beautiful, wonderful bed, Trevor almost burst into tears. "It's gorgeous," he breathed.

Pete wrapped his arms around him, pulling Trevor back against him in a gentle hug. "Isn't it?"

* * * * *

That Saturday, they brought Rhodes and Wash to Mallory's to meet Cindy and experience Tina's cooking. Although Trevor was still moving slowly, he stated he would go totally fucking bat-shit nuts if he didn't get out of the house, big T.V. or no big T.V.

"Hey superstars!" Cindy called across the diner when they walked in. Tina popped her head out of the kitchen and gave a bashful wave. The elderly couple by the window stared at them. Cindy hurried over to hug Pete and give Trevor a gentle squeeze. "How are you two? It's been all over the news."

"We know," Pete sighed. The week after the fire, reporters had camped out on their lawn but it hadn't really bothered them. He'd been at the hospital with Trevor or working inside the house. Marty and Iris were probably going nuts because the lawn was so shaggy though.

"And these are your friends?" she asked pointedly. Pete grinned and made the introductions. "Well, come sit down, sit down." Cindy ushered them over to a table. "I'm so happy to see you. I was so worried when I heard what'd happened. I mean really, Joey —"

"Actually, it's Trevor," he interjected with a smile.

"That's right—you were hiding out here, weren't you? So exciting. But really, Trevor, getting shot and almost burned to death in the same day? Do you think you're James Bond or something?" she scolded.

"Not anymore," he told her straight-faced and she laughed.

"Are you having the chicken or do you want menus?"

"Chicken," Trevor and Pete chorused.

Wash looked back and forth between the two. "And you call *us* the old married couple," he scoffed. Turning to Cindy, he smiled. "Chicken for me too."

She blushed and waved a hand at her face, giggling. "You are too cute for your own good."

"That's what I keep telling him," Rhodes said crankily, before turning toward Cindy. "Chicken please."

"Good enough," she said cheerily and headed back toward the kitchen.

"Everyone loves Wash." Trevor smirked at him.

"Hey," Wash protested, "I wasn't the one getting a big hug."

"That didn't squeeze anything loose, did it?" Pete asked, his eyebrows drawing together. "I knew it was too early for you to go out."

"Quit fussing, momma bear," Trevor told him. "I'm fine. Cindy was gentle."

Wash found that hysterical. Rhodes just rolled his eyes.

"So," Rhodes asked, "how *are* you doing?"

"What Rhodie really wants to know," Wash translated, finally over his laughing fit, "is when you're getting your ass back to work."

Pete's stomach twisted. "Work? He's just been shot," he growled. He'd been hoping for at least another few weeks of living with Trevor.

"Not to disappoint you guys," Trevor chimed in, "but the thought of work right now just makes me tired. Give me a couple more days on the couch, okay?"

"Take your time," Rhodes told him. "Wash just misses you."

Wash bumped his shoulder. "And you don't?"

"Sure," Rhodes agreed easily enough. "How about you, Pete? Is your lieutenant pushing you to come back?"

"Not really," Pete lied. Lee had called him but he'd put her off, exaggerating his injuries a little.

Trevor straightened and grinned. "That reminds me. Guess who got a job offer?"

"You're not leaving us, are you, Trev?" Wash asked.

Shaking his head, Trevor told him, "No, not me. Pete. And guess who made that offer?"

"The sheriff," Rhodes stated.

Trevor stared at Rhodes. "How do you know these things?"

He shrugged. "Osgood would be stupid not to grab Pete. He's a good cop."

Pete flushed. The compliment from another cop—even ex-cop—warmed his gut. "Thanks, Rhodes."

"What'd you tell him?" Wash asked, leaning forward.

"No, of course," Trevor answered before Pete could. "He's selling the house and going back to the city. His lieutenant pretty much promised he'd be made detective after this."

"Selling the house, huh?" Rhodes raised an eyebrow.

Shifting his shoulders in an uncomfortable shrug, Pete played with his napkin-wrapped silverware.

"Can't you keep the house?" Wash asked, frowning. "After all that work..."

Trevor scowled. "Don't make him feel guilty about it," he told him. "He just bought the house so he'd have something to do while babysitting me."

Wash snorted. "He found something to do all right."

Pete smiled at that, staying quiet and hoping the subject would slide away from the sheriff's job offer and selling the house. He didn't want Trevor to know how tempted he'd been when Osgood made that offer. The only reason Pete was going back to his job in the city was to be close to Trevor, who didn't need to know that pathetically needy fact.

To his relief, Cindy chose that moment to bring their food over. "Here they come again," she sighed as she put their plates in front of them. "Brace yourselves."

Pete glanced behind him and saw the diner had filled up while they'd been talking. The crowd, like last time, seemed to be predominantly young and female.

"Mmphf," Wash groaned around his first bite as his eyes rolled back in his head. Swallowing, he said, "This is amazing. Your daughter made this? That little girl in the kitchen?"

Cindy beamed. "She did. I'll tell her you like it."

"It's great," Rhodes agreed and took another bite.

After Cindy hurried off to serve the other customers, the four men were quiet as they ate.

"I'd live in Honeysuckle just so I could eat here every day," Wash told them.

Rhodes nodded. "Sure beats IHOP."

"You should try their brisket," Trevor said, his voice amused.

Cindy stopped by their table again. "The girls are driving me nuts," she told them, sounding harassed. "Are the two of you gay?" she asked Rhodes and Wash.

Rhodes choked a little. "Yes."

"That's what I tried to tell them," she said, exasperated. As she hurried away, she called out in a voice loud enough to reach all corners of the diner, "No need to suck it in anymore, girls—they're gay too."

"Seriously?" Wash asked, staring after Cindy.

Trevor laughed and took a bite. "Gotta love Honeysuckle."

* * * * *

Pete nudged the porch swing into a gentle sway, enjoying the peace. Rhodes and Wash had headed home three days ago and Trevor was napping. For the past week, he'd been working on the house while trying to care for a stubbornly independent Trevor, so it was nice to have a moment to sit and do absolutely nothing.

"Hi." Marsha stood on their property line, holding a plate covered in foil.

"Hi Marsha." Pete smiled at her. "C'mon over."

She crossed the lawn and climbed the porch steps. "How's Joey?"

"Trevor," Pete corrected. "Getting better."

Flushing, she hovered by the arm of the swing. "That's right. He never was really Joey, was he?"

Pete shook his head.

"Here." Marsha shoved the plate toward him. "Jo— I mean, *Trevor* liked these cookies so I made some more. I probably should've made something nutritious, like a hot dish or something."

"These are great," Pete reassured her, taking the cookies. "He'll love these. Besides, Iris and Morty brought over a bunch of nutritious meals earlier. We were just missing dessert. Want to sit?"

"Oh, no thank you," she said, taking a step back. "I didn't want to bother you. I just wanted to drop off the cookies."

"You're not bothering me," he told her but she gave him a quick, nervous smile and hurried back down the steps.

"Marsha," he called after her. When she stopped and looked at him curiously, Pete got up and leaned on the porch railing. He didn't know how to word the question tactfully, so he just asked straight out. "What was the deal with you stalking someone?"

"Oh!" Her hands flew up to cover her flushed cheeks. "You know about that?"

He nodded. "You don't have to tell me. I'm just curious, since you don't really seem like the stalking type."

"It's so embarrassing," she sighed. "I had such a crush on my college botany professor. I didn't mean for it to go so far. I mean, *stalking*..." Marsha shook her head. "It sounds like I boiled bunnies or something, doesn't it?"

Pete laughed. "A little, yeah."

A reluctant smile touched her mouth. "Well, I certainly didn't harm any animals—or people, for that matter. I was silly, that's all."

"Good to know," Pete told her. "About the bunnies, I mean. Since we're neighbors."

"Oh, I'd never—!" She broke off when he grinned. "Tease. I see I'm going to have to watch you. Goodnight, Pete."

"Night, Marsha."

Pete had just settled back in the swing when Danny showed up.

"Hey."

"Hey, Danny." Pete gestured toward the empty half of the swing. "Have a seat."

The boy sat. "You actually got some furniture."

"Inside too."

"Huh."

They swung in silence for a few minutes.

"How's Joey—I mean, Trevor?" Danny asked.

Pete smiled a little. It was like a reflex—Trevor's name was mentioned and the corners of his mouth went up. "He's better, thanks. Sleeping now."

"But it's not even nine yet," Danny said.

"He takes a lot of naps." Giving a little shove of his foot, he set the porch swing rocking gently. "Helps the healing." He laughed. "Drives him nuts though."

Danny grunted in agreement.

"How're you doing?" Pete asked. "Your dad ever talk with you?"

"Kinda." He touched his toe to the porch floor each time the swing went forward. "It was too weird though, so I told him to stop."

Pete smiled. "Things are better though?"

"Yeah," he admitted. "A little. He's not so freaked out anymore. Still looks at me sometimes like I have a tree growing out of my head or something but he's calmed down. Think it helped he met you guys—since you're pretty normal, I mean. Before that, all he thought when he heard 'gay' was ass-less leather chaps."

Well, now I know the kid's website preference. Could've lived without that in my brain. With a strangled cough, Pete said, "Glad to help. School starts soon, doesn't it?"

Danny made a face. "Eleven days."

"Not that you're counting," he teased. "Are you dreading it?"

With a shrug, the kid said, "A little. Could be fun though. Who knows?"

"I think," Pete told him seriously, "you're going to have a great year."

"Yeah?" He grinned. The smile lit up his thin face for just a second before it was gone. He settled back against the swing. "Maybe."

"Your hair looks good." The black was almost completely gone and the blond locks had been trimmed into an actual style, rather than his usual dragged-through-a-bush-backward look.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome."

* * * * *

Trevor was still sleeping when Pete joined him in bed, curling around his back in the positions they'd fallen into ever since he'd been released from the hospital. He wrapped his arm around Trevor and kissed his bare shoulder. With a sleepy mutter, Trevor shifted back against him, his ass grinding against Pete's groin.

Pete stifled a groan as his cock instantly responded.

"Mmm," Trevor murmured drowsily. "Hi."

"Sorry I woke you," Pete whispered. "Go back to sleep."

"S'okay." He was quiet so long Pete thought he'd fallen to sleep again. "Pete?"

"Yeah?"

"I like this bed." Trevor patted the mattress next to him.

Pete smiled. "Me too."

"I like this house."

His smile fading a little, Pete sighed, "Yeah. Me too."

"You ever tempted to live here?" Trevor asked. "Permanently, I mean?"

Yes, but not without you. "Like you said, my detective shield is waiting."

"That didn't really answer my question."

Pete frowned. Trevor had woken up enough to be perceptive, damn him. "I like the city."

"You did it again," Trevor told him. "You know, the whole not-answering thing?"

"Fine." Pete gave in. "Yeah, I'm tempted. It's stupid but I'm tempted."

"Why's it stupid?"

"Aren't you tired?" he grumbled. "What's with the game of Twenty Questions?"

He felt Trevor shrug against him. "There's something going on with you. You won't tell me what, so I'm trying to chip away. If you'd just tell me straight out, we could both go to sleep."

Pete growled low in his throat. "You're a pain in the ass, do you know that?"

Trevor just laughed.

With a sigh, Pete admitted, "I'm going to hate selling this house."

"Then why sell?"

"What, and commute a couple hours each way to work every day?" Pete shook his head even though Trevor couldn't see him. "That would drive me nuts."

"You could always take that job the sheriff offered you," Trevor suggested. "That'd cut your commute down to ten minutes." He snorted. "Twelve during Honeysuckle rush hour."

"I've thought about it." He'd thought about it a lot but it all came down to Trevor.

Trevor turned his head. "What's holding you back? Is it the way he went all asshole-y with Rhodes?"

"No," Pete told him truthfully. "He could've been more tactful but I get where he was coming from. He doesn't know Rhodes. All he knows is what was in the official report. Plus, having four Nancy Drew wannabes in the house across from the crime scene must've been a major pain his ass." He paused, considering it. "I think I could work for him. He seems pretty upfront."

Trevor's sigh was impatient. "Then what's the problem here, Petey?"

"You." There. He'd said it—and without a stutter even.

"What?" Trevor said with a laugh. "It's my fault? I'm trying to talk you into staying!"

"But if y-you're two hours away..." Closing his eyes, Pete mentally regrouped. He knew his stammer-free speech had been too good to last—especially in *this* conversation. "I don't want to just see you every other weekend."

"What? You're not going to invite me to stay with you?" Trevor asked.

Pete stilled, unsure if the other man was joking.

"Unless you don't want me—"

"No!" Pete's arm tightened around him. "I m-mean, yes. I mean, I didn't think you'd want..." He trailed off, his heart beating at a hundred miles an hour. Was Trevor actually considering staying with him?

"Could've asked me," Trevor told him. "What I wanted, I mean."

Although he took a deep breath, his heart still raced out of control. "What do you want?"

"I want to finish college. I just had a year left when...everything happened." Trevor twisted his head around briefly to kiss him, a glancing peck on Pete's cheekbone. "I want you."

"What about Rhodes and Wash?" Pete asked, hardly able to breathe. "Your job?"

Trevor shrugged. "They'll understand. After I get my degree, maybe I could open a satellite office around here. Honeysuckle seems to be a hotbed of crime."

Pete's laugh was choked. "But you hate this town."

"But I love you." Trevor's tone didn't change and it took a few seconds for the words to penetrate Pete's brain. "Besides, this town isn't so bad. The restaurant's pretty good and we like our remaining neighbors."

Swallowing, Pete shifted, rolling Trevor onto his back so he could see his face. "S-seriously? You're not fucking with me?"

Running his knuckles over Pete's cheek, he smiled. "Okay, so maybe we don't like Terrance so much."

With a growl, Pete kissed him, cutting off Trevor's laugh. When he raised his head, they were both breathing hard.

"I'm not fucking with you," Trevor told him, watching him intently.

Pete smiled. "I love you too."

Lifting his head from the pillow, Trevor gave him another quick kiss and then shifted back to his side. "I know."

"Yeah?" Pete teased, settling in behind him again. "And how do you know that?"

"You bought me a bed."

Pete laughed and gave him a gentle squeeze. Wriggling back against him, Trevor gave a satisfied hum and then was quiet. Pete held him close, happy the other man couldn't see him since he was grinning like an idiot—a *loved* idiot.

Trevor's ass nudged against Pete's groin. "You finally going to fuck me tonight?"

"No." Pete tried to sound stern but the word came out more desperate than anything. "Not until you're better."

"Thought I was pretty good," he shot back, turning his head toward Pete. "You've never complained before." His eyes held a wicked glint and Pete's heart rate doubled.

"I don't want to hurt you," he said hoarsely, although his hand seemed to belong to someone else, since it was stroking Trevor's chest. Pete made it stop.

"You won't," Trevor promised, wiggling his ass again. "Unless you want to. I wouldn't mind."

Pete's eyes almost rolled back into his head at that. "You're not playing fair, Trev," he complained roughly. His fingers were misbehaving again, playing with one of Trevor's nipples this time. He couldn't seem to stop.

"C'mon, Pete," Trevor urged, sliding his hand down Pete's arm. "We should try out the new bedside table. I noticed the drawer is fully stocked." He took Pete's hand and led it to his cock, wrapping his lover's fingers around the shaft.

"Fuck," Pete groaned, unable to pull his hand away from the erection he held.

"We should," Trevor said, laughter in his voice. "Please, Petey?"

Running his fingers down the hot length of Trevor's cock, Pete said, "You'll tell me if it hurts."

"Sure," Trevor gasped, his hips thrusting into Pete's grip. "Anything. Whatever."

"I'm serious, Trev," Pete warned as he tightened his fist in a firm squeeze. "Promise?"

"I promise." The teasing had gone out of Trevor's voice. He sounded completely serious now—serious and desperate. Pete released him reluctantly, turning to fumble in the drawer. He'd felt slightly guilty when he'd stocked it. Trevor had still been in the hospital at the time, still in so much pain, and Pete was already thinking about when he could get into Trevor's ass again.

"Hurry," Trevor urged and Pete grabbed a packet and the lube. When Trevor rolled toward him, as if intending to help put on the condom, Pete stopped him.

"No," Pete ordered. "I'm doing all the work. Back on your side."

Although he gave an amused snort, Trevor obeyed. "It's not like it's that much work," he mocked as Pete rolled the condom on.

"If you want to get fucked," Pete told him, "you'll do as I say." He lubed his erection, already huge and rigid, eager to plunge into Trevor's ass. Pete kissed his shoulder and the tip of his cock bumped against Trevor's ass cheek, as if trying to find its own way in.

There was no way he was going to last. Already Pete's lungs struggled to pull in enough air and his cock leaked with need. He wanted to go slowly, to use his fingers to stretch Trevor's tight hole gently, to make it last, but that wasn't going to happen.

Lining the blunt tip of his cock up with the puckered opening, Pete seized Trevor's hip and shoved the head of his erection inside, loving how Trevor's body gripped him with that mix of resistance and acceptance.

Trevor groaned and Pete froze. "No," Trevor gasped. "Please! Don't stop!"

Pete reached over him and grasped his cock as he thrust again. Trevor bucked his hips, shoving his cock into Pete's hold and almost pulling off Pete's invading shaft.

"Be still," Pete rasped in his ear and then nipped the lobe, drawing a moan from Trevor. Pete's free arm snaked beneath the body in front of him, wrapping around his chest. With another push of his hips, Pete drove halfway in and then paused.

"Quit with this gentle shit," Trevor demanded, "and fuck me!"

Instead of obeying, Pete slid his hand up the other man's cock until he could trace circles over the tip with his thumb. "Not yet, bossy," he growled. "Just for that, you have to wait even longer." He kissed a spot under Trevor's ear, feeling him shiver beneath Pete's lips.

"Sorry," Trevor gasped. "Please fuck me!"

With a small smile, Pete licked the shell of his ear. "No."

Trevor's inhale sounded almost like a sob. As Pete sucked on his earlobe, his fingers still played with Trevor's cock, his thumb smearing pre-cum around the head. Except for shaking beneath his touch, Trevor remained still and Pete rewarded him by pushing his cock another inch into his ass.

Inhaling sharply, Trevor shoved his ass back a fraction of an inch and then froze, his body contracting around Pete's erection.

"Good boy." Pete nudged in farther as sweat prickled his skin. It had been weeks and Trevor felt so tight, so amazing, so incredibly good. Their control games were going to have to wait until another day. If he didn't fuck Trevor now, Pete's head would explode.

With a thrust of his hips, Pete buried the full length of his cock in his ass. Trevor cried out and Pete's whole body stiffened.

"You okay?" he demanded, his voice raw. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," Trevor groaned. "Don't stop!"

Giving the other man's cock a final squeeze, Pete released his erection and grabbed his hip. "Stop me if it hurts," he said.

"Fuck that." Trevor's laugh was strangled. "That's the best part."

Closing his eyes, Pete fought for control. "I'm serious."

"Me too. So fuck me already." Trevor clenched his ass, enclosing Pete's cock in a squeezing grip.

It was too much. The clamp of Trevor's body around him, the hard, sweaty body plastered against his, the deprivation of the previous weeks—Pete gave in. His fingers digging into Trevor's hip, he began to thrust.

He groaned as his cock slid out of Trevor's tight hole, the friction sending vibrations of pleasure through his body. Plunging back in, Pete shuddered. Fuck, he'd missed this!

Although he wanted to be gentle, to not jostle Trevor's healing body too much, it felt too good. His thrusts grew rougher, his hold tighter, until he was pounding into him, his balls slapping Trevor's ass.

Trevor cried out, his body convulsing around the cock filling his ass and hauling Pete over the edge with him. With a roar, Pete's thrusts went wild, his cock stabbing deep with each out-of-control plunge. Sensation shot up his spine as he came, his arms clamping around Trevor, holding him against him.

As they lay panting, Pete was reluctant to pull out. This was one of his favorite parts of making love with Trevor—the drifting, satiated security of knowing he didn't have to leave, either his body or his bed.

"I've missed that," Trevor murmured, turning his head to offer his mouth for a kiss. With a grunt of agreement, Pete lifted his head to press their lips together. "Took you long enough though."

Pete gave a sleepy, half-assed growl. "Just you wait. Once you're better, I'm going to spank that mouthy ass of yours."

"Mmm." Trevor shivered in reaction, his body clamping around Pete's cock.

Pete hissed in a breath, his hips jerking involuntarily. Reluctantly, he slid free of Trevor.

"Don't go," Trevor begged.

Kissing his neck, Pete reassured him. "Don't worry. I'll be back in there soon."

"Now?"

With a laugh, Pete kissed him again. "Greedy *and* bossy. You're half-asleep. I'd prefer to fuck you when you're conscious."

It was Trevor's turn to laugh. "You'd 'prefer'? So if you're really desperate, I might wake up with your cock in my ass some morning?"

"Just if you really needed your sleep."

"So considerate," Trevor mocked. "No wonder I love you."

Hearing the words sent a pleasant shock through Pete. "I love you too," he said, the words foreign enough to make him redden as he said them. He was grateful Trevor's face was turned away so he couldn't see Pete's flustered blush.

Trevor chuckled. "You say that now but what about when I start to drive you nuts?"

"Start'?"

"Hey!"

Pete laughed. "I'll still love you."

"What about when we fight about what kind of kitchen tile to get?"

"Still love you."

"How about when I flush the toilet while you're in the shower?"

Pete frowned. "I'll be pissed but I suppose I'll still love you."

Twisting his head around, Trevor kissed him, short and sweet. "Good." He settled back into his pillow. "And I'll still love you even when you're annoying."

"I'm never annoying." Pete grinned as Trevor elbowed him.

"Hah." His voice was slurring a little from sleepiness. "What about when you're bossy?"

Pete pulled him closer. "You love me even more then."

"S'pose that's true." Trevor yawned. "Did I mention I love this bed?"

"Yeah."

"Did I mention I love you?"

Pete smiled. "Yeah."

"Good."

Yes it was.

About the Author

Katie Allen grew up in the Midwest with a horde of sisters (five) and one beleaguered brother. After an enjoyable four years working on her creative writing/art degree, and two not-so-pleasant years struggling toward her MBA, Katie somehow ended up as a mechanical engineer in Denver, Colorado. When her job disappeared during the recession, it was the kick in the rear she needed to head back to Minnesota and jump into writing full-time.

When she's not writing (many books are necessary to pay for her unfortunate equine addiction), Katie rides horses, reads (of course), does gymnastics and looks for new (and occasionally insane) ways to research her books (cop school, anyone?).

Katie welcomes comments from readers. You can find her website and e-mail address on her [author bio page](#) at www.ellorascave.com.

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