



The One That Stayed

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This story is dedicated to my dear friend Durval V. Martins, in loving memory.
Too soon gone, never forgotten, baby. ~T

Chapter One

It was a nice evening, David admitted silently. Unseasonably warm, considering the fact that it was already November and a balmy sixty-eight degrees, even though the sun had set a good two hours earlier. The cobblestone Boston street was picturesque in the light of the streetlamps, too.

"I do love a bit of Indian Summer," he said, giving Russell a smile as they walked along the sidewalk. He gave a short squeeze to the fingers tangled with his own. And Russell was smiling back at him, though David could see just a hint of mischief in those blue eyes.

"I know you do, dearest," and yes, he did let Russell call him dearest. Always had. Not with anyone else nearby, granted, but still. "In fact, I've been wondering whether you might be interested in purchasing our little getaway. It might be nice to have a winter house somewhere that's not quite so... wintery."

That was something of a shock, really. In fact, it wasn't something David had even considered. Boston was their home, after all, and had been for... good Lord, was it really twenty-two years that he'd known Russell? And nearly that since they'd become *them*? Together?

Well, yes. It had been. It felt like less, even while it seemed like forever. The good variety of forever. All of it spent right there in Boston. In their same house, in point of fact, and David loved their house.

They'd gotten to know each other there, back in the beginning, though David had been somewhat banged up at the time. It was where they'd first fucked; then later, where they'd first made love. It was where he'd gotten to know Russell's children: Jamie, Alicia and Joss. Where he'd finally come to understand that he had become part of a *family* that included not only Russell and his children, but by extension, Russell's ex-wife, as well.

Their house was where David had suddenly and without warning realized, one day, that his father had been wrong. That just because he liked men didn't really mean that he'd condemned himself to a hopeless future. It was where he'd invited his father to visit, with Russell's encouragement and support, and then had the entirely welcome epiphany that... his Dad hadn't meant it as some sort of insult or slur. He'd just honestly believed that being openly gay would only lead David to a life of sorrow and shattered hopes and dreams, and Dad had been worried for him. Afraid that David would never have a good life.

It had been right there, in their house, that David and his father had broken down and cried with each other while Russell stood by, after promising to always be there for David. Or Dave, as he'd been called then, by everyone but Russell and Russell's family.

When Dad died a few years later, David could only be glad that they had come to terms, had cleared the air. And when Dad's will was read, David had been nothing but thrilled to hear that his father had left what little he'd had to AIDS research, because according to the hand written note left for him, *'Just because you got lucky, boy, don't mean everyone else did. Seeing you and*

Russ showed me just how wrong I was for most of my life. Nothing left for you, son, but I know you and your man will be fine. ' Yeah, Dad had really understood.

It was the house where they'd had their first "wedding", though it hadn't been legal. They'd exchanged rings, though, and then used those same rings a good fifteen years later, when they'd gotten married for real, in the eyes of the law and God and the world.

It was the house where everything had happened for them and between them, and David couldn't believe that Russell would even consider giving it up.

Still, it would never do to sound as stunned and somewhat disappointed as he actually felt, so David merely squeezed Russell's fingers again and arched one brow. "I don't know," he answered slowly. "I'm rather attached to our current home, after all. The children are here. Our firm. Jamie and young Elliot have been talking about possibly adopting in another few years. Are you certain that you're willing to miss out on that?"

God, what he really wanted to say wasn't fit for Russell's ears because *'Are you out of your fucking mind? This is our home, and I always figured we'd live here until we died! We have friends here; family! Don't be a fucking moron, Russ! We can buy more fucking blankets and crank up the heat if we need to, and we make enough money to stay inside for the whole fucking winter while people bring us shit, if we want! Don't ruin our lives!'* was perfectly valid, but it was Dave who would have said it in that way, not David. David was a bit more diplomatic, most times.

David had a feeling that Russell heard the unspoken words anyway, because Russell's eyes crinkled at the corners and the man's thin, incredibly expressive lips quirked up at the edges.

"I didn't say anything about selling our home, dearest," Russell pointed out logically, calmly. "I was simply thinking that it might be nice to have a vacation home somewhere... warmer. Neither of us is getting any younger, after all, and I seem to recall the winter temperatures wreaking havoc on you last year." And oh, now that David knew to look for it, there was concern hiding deep in Russell's gentle eyes.

"You may not like admitting it," Russell went on, with a soft, worried smile that had David's heart swelling, even after all the years they'd been together, "but the arthritis isn't going to go away, love. Spending the colder months in South Carolina would be a blessing for your poor joints. And the children can visit whenever they wish. All of the children. The house in Charleston has enough rooms that they could all visit at once, if they so chose. Jamie and Elliot, Michael and his Jim, Alicia and Carl. There would even be room for Joss and... whomever. And Chandra and Trish, if they can be dragged away from that flower shop of theirs. I understand winter to be a rather slow season for weddings, in any case, so they'd likely be willing."

God. Even after all this time, Russell was only thinking of him. Wanting what was best for David, even when it might drag Russell away from the city he loved so much. It was enough to have David teary-eyed.

Russell was right, too. David didn't like admitting that his body was breaking down. It was especially disturbing because Russell was more than ten years his senior, but was still going strong. Hell, Russell was only a year away from sixty, but still looked like a man in the prime of his life. Looked maybe five years older than David's forty-eight, in fact. Less, when he was well rested.

"Will you at least promise me that you'll think about it?" Russell murmured, and David couldn't do anything but sigh and nod.

"I will, Russ. I just... God, this whole getting old thing just isn't fair."

Then Russell laughed, agreeing, and pulled David into his arms for a tight hug.

They weren't kissing. Weren't doing anything but hold on to each other, and even that was only for a few seconds. That was why, David would tell himself later, he didn't even consider that the sudden, accented shout of "Faggots! Rot in Hell!" could be directed toward them. He didn't even know he'd heard it until after the loud, sharp report echoed on the street.

All David knew for sure, right in the moment that changed his life, was...

He was holding Russell's hand. Then Russell's body went stiff. Russell's fingers went tight around his own, then loose. And Russell was falling, the look on his face so surprised, stunned, baffled that David thought for a moment that his lover--his husband--had had a stroke.

He only noticed the sound of running feet in a vague sense, because he was following Russell down, still holding that lax hand. And when he was on the sidewalk beside Russell and his free hand slid around Russell's head in an effort to keep it from the cold pavement... that was when he felt the blood.

He didn't know it was blood; not at first. Didn't want to know. He convinced himself that the wetness was anything but. A small puddle of rain left from the storm the night before. The remains of a water balloon, because kids liked to drop that kind of thing from windows. Maybe someone's dog had chosen that spot to relieve itself. Please, God, let that be it. Even vomit would be fine, David begged silently.

But it was too slick, too thick, and there was just more and more of it, and... "Help!" he screamed, not caring that he sounded like a fucking banshee. "Help me! Jesus fucking Christ! Someone! Anyone!"

He felt it, the moment the world stopped spinning. Felt the end of everything as thick, red fluid leaked around his fingers, no matter how tightly he pressed them to Russell's head.

Then he felt bone shifting beneath his hand, and David knew he was sobbing. He just didn't know whether it was because he was so sure that his husband was dead or because he was breathing so hard, trying not to heave. Maybe both, not that it mattered.

"Russell... Russ, don't leave me," he begged, even as he heard sirens in the distance, coming closer. "Don't leave me, honey, don't die. You have to hold on, Russ. If you don't, I'll... fuck, honey, I'll come after you, you hear me? I'll come after you, just to kick your ass and show you what an asshole you were for going! Hold on, honey. Just... please! For me, Russell! Stay with me, lover. We promised for better or worse, right? And I never agreed to that 'until death do we part' thing! We don't *part*, Russ! Not ever! So you can't die, see? You have to stay, or I have to go with you, and that would just piss off the kids, and... Jesus, Russ! Fucking Christ, don't do this to me!"

The world narrowed to nothing, until David couldn't see or hear anything but Russ and labored breathing that he thought might be his own between words. Then the ambulance was there, and the police, and Russell was put on a gurney, taken away, and the fucking cops wanted a statement, and David couldn't deal. Couldn't stop the angry tears that were pushing their way from his eyes.

"Fuck off," he finally snarled at the cops. "My husband just got *shot*! In the *head*! Do you really think I give a flying fuck about your questions? Now, either find me a cab or take me to the hospital, because even if I thought I could drive right now, Russell has the..." And he was breaking. David knew he was breaking, but he couldn't stop the words.

"Russell has the keys, oh my fucking God, Russ has the keys in his pocket, and I'm not there! You don't understand, it's... Jesus fucking Christ, I. I need to call Jamie, he has the spares, and I. God, fucking *God*! Russ! He won't stay if I'm not there and I. Jesus fucking Christ, *help me*! It can't... it can't end like this. It *can't*! We only had twenty years, for fuck's sake, and it's not enough! We were supposed to have at least thirty more, and he's. I'll walk."

He had no idea of what the cops were thinking, but then again, David doubted that he was the first hysterical fag they'd ever seen. They were probably laughing behind his back, but he didn't care at all about that. The closest hospital was maybe a couple of miles away, so that's where he was going. And if Russell wasn't there, he'd go to the next. And the next. He had to. Couldn't do anything else. Russ needed him. Needed David; David's voice. Needed David's hand in his, to keep him grounded, keep him there. With David. And David would make sure that happened, no matter what it took.

He barely noticed the police car pacing him, didn't even hear the voice speaking from the lowered window for the first few minutes. Then he did, because that voice said something that actually mattered. A name that mattered.

"... Russell would want you to get in the car, sir. Sir, please. I'll get you there much faster than your feet will. Please, sir. They've taken him across town. It'll take you all night to walk there. But it's got the best trauma center in the city. So please, sir. Get in the car and let me take you to your husband, okay? Russell will be missing you, even with as bad as... but head wounds always bleed a lot. Please, sir. Just get in the car."

David barely noticed doing as the officer said. He heard it when the young man told him that the other cop had stayed behind to secure the crime scene until backup showed, but he didn't care.

All that mattered was getting to the hospital. Getting to Russell. Being at his side, holding his hand, seeing those bright blue eyes when they opened again. Because Russell wasn't dead. Couldn't be dead. Russell would never go and die on him. And the kid driving the car had said... David thought he'd heard something like... Russ would miss him if he didn't get there, and that meant Russell wasn't dead, and please, God! Let Russell not be *dead*!

Jamie. He had to call Jamie. Tell him that his father was... "God, no. It's all a nightmare, right?" David whispered, not even wanting an answer. "This isn't happening. I'm home, in our bed, and Russ is just in his office, watching some old war movie. I'm going to wake up soon, and he'll laugh himself silly once I tell him about this... horrible, fucking terrifying *dream*. Then we'll go downstairs and make milkshakes, and I'll even let him have whipped cream because I'm so glad that none of this is fucking *real*."

Except he was in a police car and the lights were on, flashing red and blue against the buildings as they passed... and Russell was in the hospital, and David wasn't there, not yet, and, "Faster," he begged the officer driving. "Please. He's my... fuck, he's my world."

And the car went faster, faster than David had ever known a car could go. But he still thought that it maybe wasn't fast enough.

Chapter Two

David wasn't entirely thrilled to see Elliot--Russell's son Jamie's lover--rush through the glass doors, but he wasn't completely opposed, either. Elliot could be rather brash and bold, on occasion, but by the same token, the fact that the young man was there could only mean that Jamie wasn't far behind.

"For fuck's sake, what the fuck happened?" Elliot was being much louder than people usually were in Emergency Rooms, but David couldn't quite manage to respond. "David. David, what the fuck? Where's Russ? Jamie didn't say anything other than we had to get here, and he's talking to that cop, what's his name. Johansen. Jamie's talking to him right now, so I don't have a fucking clue! What the fuck? *David!*"

Then there was a big hand on his, Elliot's fingers covering his own, and David took one long, deep, shuddering breath, trying to force himself to speak. "He..." God, was that his own voice? He sounded so broken. So hollow. "He's back there. Somewhere," David said. "They won't... won't tell me what's going on. Just that he's in surgery and they don't know anything yet. I. Is this real, Elliot? Fucking God, tell me this isn't real."

He didn't want to be hugged. Didn't want anyone, even Elliot, holding him, comforting him, because if there was comfort then that meant there was something really wrong, and there couldn't be. David wouldn't allow it.

He tried to push away from the arms around his shoulders, tried to retreat into his own space, his own place. A place where Russell hadn't suggested an evening stroll, where they'd been on some other street. Where some God damned homophobic *asshole* hadn't taken the short, simple hug between them as license to act on whatever sick fantasies the fucker'd had racing through what passed as a brain.

Then other arms joined Elliot's, holding David while an even more familiar voice whispered nonsense, and David lost his hold on himself, on his mouth.

"God, Jamie. They shot him. Oh, for fuck's sake, they shot Russ. I... so much fucking blood. It was. Jesus, I could feel his... the bone was... Jesus fucking Christ, Jamie, what do I do now? I can't. I don't. God, Jamie, what do I do?" But Jamie was shaking, too, David realized. Of course he was. Russell was Jamie's father, his Dad. And Jamie was sitting there trying to comfort *him*. "Fuck. Sorry, son. I. God, it's just so..."

"I know," Jamie answered, his voice thick and quiet. "I know. But David, he's alive. Dad's alive. And I know that doesn't make it much better, but the nurse said we got lucky. They've got a really good neurosurgeon on staff, and he was getting ready to leave when the call came in, but he stayed, and God, David. This is all so far from okay, but Dad's alive and they're working on him, and we just need to be calm. Pray."

David had no idea of how Jamie was managing to be so logical; he couldn't even fathom it. But at least someone was, because he could hear Elliot's low, angry growling in his other ear, so it was just Jamie being the voice of reason. "I... fuck, son, I'll try. Jesus, I can still feel his blood on my hands."

"I'll get you some paper towels," Elliot grunted before pulling away. "And some of that rubbing alcohol, not that it'll help any."

"Elliot!" That was Jamie again, trying to warn the young man, though of what, David had no idea.

"Th-thank you, son," David answered, after swallowing hard, and he was stunned to notice that he sounded almost normal. Sounded like everything that mattered to him *wasn't* lying pale and vulnerable in an operating room while some man David had never met, whose name he didn't even know, dug around in Russell's... "Oh, God." He could feel the slick, hot stickiness again. "Hurry, Elliot. Please." It wasn't until Elliot's hand rested lightly on his cheek and David opened his eyes that he even realized he'd closed them.

"Russell's in great shape for his age, David," Elliot said quietly, leaning down. "He's strong. And he loves you more than anything, so he's gonna make it, okay? He's not gonna leave you alone. Neither are we, got it?" And Elliot kissed his cheek, which only made David that much more worried.

"I'll be right back," Elliot added.

David swallowed again, jaw clenching as he fought to hold the sobs that definitely wanted out.

"You know he means well," Jamie offered gently, once Elliot was gone. "He just... it's not that he doesn't get it, David. He just doesn't know what to say, so he says what he's thinking. Look, I know you probably don't want to talk about it right now, but the police really do need a statement, and God, David. Fucking God. I need to know, too. Can you. I mean, Officer Johansen said it would be better if you told him what happened while it's still. Christ."

"Fresh?" David laughed, bitterness and horror coming out with the sound. "Jesus, Jamie. It's never going to be anything *but* fresh! God, even if Russell comes out of this, do you really think it's ever going to be anything but razor-sharp for me?" And damn it, David could feel the tears building again, but for once he didn't care. Didn't care that he was sitting there in a public place, fast dribbles of salt flowing down his cheeks.

"Please, sir," and David remembered that voice. Remembered that it belonged to the young cop who'd driven him there at least... Jesus, David thought, glancing at the big, stark clock on the waiting room wall, had it really been two hours ago? It felt like more. And less.

"Please, sir," and this time David made himself turn, meet eyes that were more sympathetic than he ever would have expected. "I know this is hard for you. Believe me, I *know*. But the more you can tell me, the sooner we can start looking for the person or persons who did this. It may not

seem important right now, but every minute counts. And I *want* the assholes who shot your husband. Uh, but I didn't just say that. Okay, sir?"

David could hear how much the young man meant it. He steeled himself and gestured his agreement. "I... yes. You're right. But, oh, God. I didn't see anything. I was looking at Russell, and then there was... God. Blood." He would have vomited again if he'd had anything left inside him. "I want to wait for Elliot. I don't think I can say this more than once."

The officer sat down in the row of chairs across from him, and David felt Jamie's arm tighten around his shoulders, and David thought that he might--just *might*--be able to make it through telling the policeman what had happened. Without crying any more than absolutely necessary.

Less than a minute later, Elliot returned with some sort of professional-type wipes, rather than the promised paper towels and isopropyl. "The orderly I talked to said these are better," he explained quickly. David could only nod as Elliot sat down beside him again, one strong, steady hand finding David's knee and giving it a small squeeze. "What's going on here?"

"David's going to tell this nice officer what happened tonight, sweetheart," Jamie said softly, "and then we're going to corner someone who can tell us something about Dad." And Elliot frowned, but didn't disagree, even as David saw him give the young police man across from them a warning glare.

It was... well, it would have been heart warming if his heart wasn't frozen with fear and ready to shatter, David thought sadly, as he began to speak, answering Officer Johansen's questions to the best of his ability, though that wasn't much.

Christ, if anyone had told him two years earlier that Elliot would someday be trying to protect him from emotional harm, David would have laughed his ass off. They'd disliked each other on first sight, after all, though David knew that had been his own fault. He'd been downright rude to the young man. Deliberately.

"Well, well," Russell had said, chuckling with amusement as they sat at Sparks, sipping their coffees and talking about David's newest project. "I do believe that our boy has just walked in. Accompanied by a rather delicious young man, in fact. Emphasis on 'young', dearest."

David had glanced over, fully prepared to see some attempted approximation of Michael, or even Gabriel, the failed relationship before the one that had never happened with Michael, but no such luck. Instead... "Oh, Lord," he said. "It must be that gym rat Jamie's been pining after. I thought he'd let that go."

Hoped was more like it, really, because regardless of Jamie's words on the subject, David had known there was a deeper interest there. And when he actually saw the kid, David thought he understood the attraction. Young. Pretty in an entirely uncommon way. Built like a brick outhouse. And young. Too damned young to ever do anything but break Jamie's heart.

But Jamie noticed them then, and minutes later there were two more chairs at his and Russell's table, and David hadn't been anything like happy about it. What was Jamie thinking? That he'd introduce this too young, too good looking boy to them and they would approve?

"You must be the towel boy," were the first words out of David's mouth. "You don't look anything like I thought you would. You're rather... ordinary, aren't you?" Elliot's answer had only proved David's opinion to be right, as far as David had been concerned.

"If you mean I'm not a stuck up jackass like some people I could mention, then yeah. I'm fucking 'ordinary'."

Russell played peacemaker, of course, but David hadn't allowed it. Jamie tried to run interference, too, but the smart-mouthed child hadn't let him, and while they were both relatively civil to each other, David realized that he and Elliot had taken each others' measure and found each other wanting.

When the short meeting--possibly fifteen minutes at most--ended, David was certain, entirely certain, that Jamie wouldn't be seeing the opportunistic, too-young bastard again. And he'd been more than glad. Which merely went to show, David told himself sternly, that he didn't know everything. Of course, Russell had explained it all to him later, and God. Russell. Christ.

"Thank you, sir," the officer said, and David jumped just a little bit at being pulled from his memories. "I know you didn't see much, but what you've told me will definitely help. Especially the fact that the one you heard--if there was more than one, which we can't be sure of yet--had an Irish accent. I'm not sure of how you can tell the difference between that and Scottish or English-like from England--or even Australian, but it really does help that you're so sure."

The cop leaned forward and patted David's hand lightly for just a moment, and it was strange. Not what David would have expected from a policeman. Then Officer Johansen stood and gave them all a sad smile.

"I'm going to give you guys my card. My cell number's on the back. I'd appreciate it if one of you would call me later to let me know how the surgery went, no matter what time it is."

David blinked, and Jamie and Elliot did, too, he was sure. It was just so strange, to hear such sincere concern and interest coming from a stranger. Especially one in law enforcement, because while Boston was a fairly liberal town, sneers were still more likely than sympathy when a victim was known to be gay.

"I... look, I shouldn't be telling you this, but I understand how you're feeling. My... friend. In college. He was the victim of a hate crime, too. It made us both feel so helpless, so hopeless. And Wyoming doesn't have any hate crime laws, so the bastards who hurt him didn't get much more than a slap on the wrist." Officer Johansen sighed and shook his head.

"That's part of the reason we moved here once we finished our degrees. Massachusetts is a good state, that way. It just makes me sick that this happened, okay? So, please. Call me when you know something. Anything." He shook his head again.

David found himself agreeing, even though he hadn't taken a second to consider it.

"That was... weird, but kinda cool," Elliot murmured, once the cop was gone.

David couldn't help but smile a little because the words were entirely true. They didn't make anything better, but yes.

It was decidedly cool that the cop who'd been so helpful and considerate was one of their own. That he'd had some sort of understanding of what David was feeling right then. Any other police officer probably would have pushed for more of a statement at the scene. Would have kept him there and possibly restrained him when he'd tried to leave.

It still didn't make anything about the situation any better, of course, but for some reason, just knowing that the young officer--Paul Johansen, according to his card--actually cared made it a little bit easier to bear.

"I... Can one of you please see whether there's any news?" David whispered, his eyes burning again. "It's been hours, now."

God. Please, God. Please let Russell... just please.

Chapter Three

Elliot was shaking on the inside. Not as much as Jamie and David were shaking visibly, but still. Shaking. Fucking horrified. Scared. Furious.

Not quite two years yet, but he'd started to get used to having a family again. A father who loved him just the way he was, and sure it was Jamie's father, but he'd been fine with that. Hell, he'd been looking forward to the next however many decades of his life, during which Russell would be there, guiding him, advising him, telling him with words and smiles and gentle reminders that Elliot was a worthwhile person. That he *deserved* the sort of love Jamie gave him each and every day. He'd been so looking forward to seeing the look on Russell's face when he and Jamie told Russ and David that they were engaged. That they wanted to get married on Russell and David's anniversary.

Jamie had only asked him two nights earlier, and they'd decided to wait until the Dads' next party to make the announcement, but that wasn't going to happen now, Elliot knew.

Fuck, it might *never* happen, because the last thing David needed right then was any sort of reminder that Russell might not make it through the surgery. That even if he did, he might never be the same. And even if he was, some day? Well, it wasn't likely that there would be any parties at the Dads' house any time soon. Of course, he wouldn't know for sure until he found someone to ask, which meant he needed to find the desk.

It didn't take long, considering the signs pointing the way, but Elliot moved with care, avoiding gurneys and wheelchairs, nurses and doctors bustling around with a sort of relaxed urgency that made no sense to him.

"Sorry," Elliot said when he reached the information desk, though he knew he didn't sound even slightly apologetic. "I know you guys have a lot going on here, but can you please just tell me something about Russell Hartwell? It's... we're going crazy with worrying and wondering, ma'am."

He gave the woman his best puppy dog eyes, then frowned slightly when she asked if he was family. "I guess so," he answered after a moment. "I'm engaged to his son."

Fuck, it felt wrong to be saying that for the first time to some woman who was frowning at him as though he'd just said 'I'm fucking his dog while the cat rims me'.

"Really." She sounded cold. Icy, even. And yet there was a fire to the wintery tone, too. "And I guess I'm supposed to just take your word for it. You don't even have a *ring*." She shook her head, but not quickly enough for the motion to hide her smug, nasty-looking little smile. "I can't hand out information on a patient just because some man says he's *engaged* to the patient's *son*. It's hospital policy."

For fuck's sake, why were the fucking homophobes out that night when they usually spent their time off somewhere chortling with insane glee and plotting the wholesale decimation of everyone tainted with even the slightest bit of "not like them"? Why couldn't they just stay the hell away from him and his family?

"Look," Elliot tried, doing his best to sound reasonable and not fucking angry, damn it. "Russell's husband is waiting. So is Russell's son. And nobody's said anything other than 'he's in surgery'. You obviously don't like what we are, ma'am, but all I'm asking for is a little compassion. Some information, okay? Like how he's doing. Please, ma'am." And let no one say that the last couple years or so with Jamie hadn't taught him to be diplomatic, because what Elliot really wanted to do was slap the woman for being such a bitch.

"I can only give information to immediate family," the woman said. "If Mr. Hartwell's *son* wants to ask, I'll be happy to see what I can find out. Assuming he has appropriate identification, of course."

And Elliot really did almost slap her. He was fairly sure he could call Officer Paul and get out of it, once the guy came back and saw how nasty the nurse was. Fuck, the way she said it. Like Jamie was automatically suspect just for being gay.

"Identification. Seriously." Oh, he was losing it. Elliot knew he was. Sadly, he just couldn't make himself care. "Are you completely out of your fucking mind, lady? My fiance's father was shot in the fucking head and you're too much of a God damned prude to even bother finding out what's going on without 'proper ID'? Jesus Christ! How the fuck did you even get this job? I thought nurses were supposed to care about people, for fuck's sake! Not sit back and gloat and act like anyone who isn't just like them is a fucking *pervert*! For fuck's sake, you're *sick*!" He was just getting warmed up, too.

"How would you feel if *your* Dad was lying on a fucking table with his *head open*! With some guy's fingers poking around in his *brain*! And how would you feel if it was your husband, assuming anyone would ever be stupid enough to marry your gay-hating, closed-minded, ugly *ass*!"

He didn't even notice the way her hand was flapping until he felt a different hand on his shoulder. "Oh, fine, you homophobic bitch, have Security throw me out; I don't care! Fuck, have me arrested if you want. Just tell me what the fuck is happening to Russ. Please! I won't even resist and you can get me thrown in jail, but tell me something. Anything!"

Then the hand on his shoulder was joined by another and Elliot felt himself being dragged backwards. "Jesus Christ," he shouted at the evil nurse. "Don't make my lover suffer just because you can't stand fags, okay? It's still his dad. Just... fuck, throw me a bone! Please!"

The smug, overly satisfied smirk he got from the woman told him he'd failed. Told him that even Jamie wouldn't have fared any better, ID or not. The hands dragging him away had gentled a little bit, though, and when Elliot finally stopped resisting--but not fighting, because he wasn't that stupid--he felt himself being released. He also found himself in the small cul-de-sac that was

home to the vending machines, confronted by what was possibly the prettiest man he'd ever seen in his life, bar none.

"Are you going to behave yourself?" Pretty asked him.

Elliot nodded quickly, still staring as Jamie and David pushed into the small space, as well.

"Good," the man said with a smile. "I'd hate to have to call the cops on you just because Tracy's a huge bitch."

And that was when Elliot noticed that the guy was wearing scrubs, rather than any sort of Security uniform. He filled them well, too.

"El," Jamie said, moving around the so pretty man and wrapping an arm around Elliot's waist. "You okay, sweetheart? What was all the yelling about?"

Elliot actually saw the amusement fill Pretty's eyes when Jamie's not so subtle display registered. Then he saw a small degree of sorrow there when David stepped up, as well, eyes red and swollen from the tears David wouldn't want to be reminded of.

"Your fiance just ran afoul of the resident fundamentalist," Pretty told Jamie quietly. "And she'd like nothing better than to have all of you thrown in jail for being evil, which she defines as killing babies, sacrificing animals, eating human flesh, and oh, yeah, liking cock when you already have one of your own."

Elliot was fairly sure that David's snort of laughter surprised David just as much as it did the rest of them. It was a good surprise, even though David's eyes turned weepy again in less than a second. Hell, Elliot wanted to cry, too.

"If I don't bitch-slap her," Elliot asked--nearly begged--sincerely, "is there any way you can try to find out what's happening with Russ? Please. We're fucking scared, okay? I. Anything."

Then Pretty nodded slowly, frowning just a bit, and Elliot could have kissed the man. It would have upset Jamie, though, so he didn't.

"Hartwell," Elliot said instead. "Russell Hartwell. He was... Jesus fuck. He was shot, okay? I..."

Just like that, Pretty was all business. "I'll check the logs. The ORs. And Tracy's shift ends in less than an hour. Christine comes on then, and she's different. She'll be good about keeping you guys updated."

Then the pretty man was gone, with a promise to be back soon with whatever information he could glean.

"You thinking about it, sweetheart?" Jamie muttered as they followed David back to the chairs in the waiting room that had become theirs. It actually took Elliot a moment to realize what Jamie was asking him.

When he did, though, he blinked. Jamie couldn't possibly think Elliot was hot for the male nurse, pretty or not. Could he? Well, maybe not seriously, but the question still deserved an answer.

"I'm thinking about how much I love you, how much I wish none of this was happening," Elliot answered honestly. "And I'm thinking that I still want to beat that bitch until she's begging to tell me everything she can find out about Russell. I'm also thinking that whatever his name is doesn't even rate, next to you. He's nice to look at, sure. But I know what you look like naked, darlin', and no hundred and whatever pound *nurse* could ever make me feel the way that just thinking about you does."

Elliot grinned then, even though he knew it was a piss poor effort. "And I'm kinda thinking that he just blew our secret, Jamie. He called me your fiance. In front of David."

"Yes," David said carefully, and Elliot blushed at the keen gaze the older man was suddenly giving them both. "And David is wondering why an admittedly lovely young man in the Emergency Room happened to know that little bit of trivia before *he* did."

Well, at least David seemed to be distracted, Elliot thought with a silent sigh. Annoyed and a little bit... querulous, which was from the word-a-day calendar Elliot kept at the gym, and he wasn't sure he was using it right, which was why he'd only said it in his head. Either way, Elliot thought it was a good thing. Distracted was good for David, just then. It had to beat the merry hell out of just being terrified. Horrified. Both.

Jamie explained about their engagement and their plan to announce it at the house, and David nodded, saying something about full circle because that was where David and Russell had tried so hard to set up Jamie and Michael, and...

"Oh, fuck," Elliot yelped. "Jim and Mike. And the girls. Fuck, Alicia and Joss, too. Did anyone call them? I mean, do they know?" Because fuck knew Elliot hadn't even thought about calling, what with all the rushing and scared and still being fucking petrified underneath the pseudo-calm he'd slapped on for Jamie's and David's benefit. He wasn't even slightly surprised when it turned out that none of them had even considered it, though Elliot blamed himself.

Russell was David's husband; Jamie's father. The two men had more on their minds than calling Wentworth to tell Jim and Mike what had happened. But *he* should have thought of it. Even with Russ being like a Dad to him, as well, Elliot should have thought of calling the guys. Trish and Chandra, too, because they'd all become close over the last nearly two years. Twenty-three months, if he was going to be anal about it.

He wasn't anything like as tight with Alicia and Joss, Russell's other children, but Alicia was in Europe somewhere with that Carl guy she'd been seeing for almost a year, and Joss... well, who the hell knew where Joss was? On tour somewhere or other, and not very damned good about

keeping in touch. They could be told later. It wasn't as though they could get there any time soon.

"I'll call the guys," Elliot announced. "Jim's used to me calling late, so it'll be... not less of a shock, but yeah. Okay. I'll be back soon."

It wasn't that he didn't want to be there with Jamie and David, Elliot told himself as he made his way out through the glass doors, finding the small seating area off to the side. That wasn't why he kept running off. It was that he wanted to be helpful. Useful. And if he sat there with his fiance and sort-of other-Dad for too long, he just knew he'd start crying, too.

That wouldn't do anyone any good, Elliot thought sternly, because Jamie was holding up well, but it was only a matter of time before the man broke, and at least one of them had to be semi-calm and non-hysterical later. Even if the worst didn't happen, *one* of them had to be able to think and act, rather than just react.

He pulled out his cell and scrolled down to Jim's number, then pressed the call button and waited for two rings that felt like twelve, the crisp night air steadying him a bit.

"El, what's up?" were the words that greeted him, and Elliot had to swallow a few times before he could actually make himself speak.

"Jim. I. It's bad. Russ. I. You guys need to come, okay?" Because that was all he could manage, and suddenly Elliot thought that he'd maybe taken the worst job of all, other than waiting to find out if his husband or father was going to live or die.

"Elliot, what the fuck? Where are you? What are you talking about?" And yeah, Jim sounded just as freaked and scared as Elliot was feeling. "Russell? What. Did he... God, did he have a heart attack? Mike and I have been telling him he needed to slow down, and..."

Jim's voice faded a little, the phone obviously being pulled away from his mouth because Elliot heard him call "Mike! Mike, there's something wrong with Russ! Elliot says we need to go to Boston!" Then Jim was back, and Elliot felt tears start to prick at his eyes with Jim's next words.

"How bad is it, El? I mean, bypass, or what?"

Jesus. Jesus fucking Christ, there was no easy or good way to say it. There just wasn't.

"H-he was shot, Jim. Some f-fucker shot Russ. In the head. It's... he's still being operated on, and David's a mess, and Jamie's not much better, and I'm about to be worse than either of them, so get Mike and get the fuck *here*! Tell the girls, okay? I. I can't do this again. I thought I could, but I *can't*!"

Elliot had no idea of how long Jim's stunned, nearly unintelligible questions went on, but by the time he finished trying to answer them, he could hear Mike and the girls in the background. "Just

come, Jim. All of you, if you can. I don't... God, they haven't told us anything, but it can't be good, right? Just come."

Less than another minute, relaying where the hospital was, and Elliot ended the call. He was shaking more than he'd done when he and Jamie had gotten the initial call. God, his chest was heaving, just from trying to breathe normally. His throat hurt from holding back the emotions suddenly clogging it while everything inside him screamed that none of this should be happening.

Russell should be at home with David, the two of them having one of their usual spats about what to watch that night or which wine to have with whatever Russ was cooking. Elliot should have been with Jamie, curled up on their big, soft couch while they watched whatever was on ESPN, fingers meeting in one of the big bags of salt and vinegar kettle chips they loved so much.

None of them should be where they were, Elliot thought desperately, but especially not Russell.

He found himself sitting on the bench outside the main ER doors a few minutes later, with no recollection of how he'd gotten there, small tears sliding down his face even though he did everything he could to keep them inside.

"He must be a very special man," Elliot heard, and it was only the fact that he didn't jump that told him he'd known, on some level, that there was another person just a couple feet away. "Mr. Hartwell, I mean. He must be very special."

Elliot didn't even look over, he simply took the already lit cigarette that appeared in front of him and nodded. He didn't smoke, but he thought it might be the perfect time to start.

"He is," Elliot whispered, though he didn't know if the man--because it was a male voice he'd heard--would even hear him. "He's Jamie's Dad, and that would have made him special all by itself, y'know? But God, once he knew I was really with Jamie, like never leaving, he just. Jesus fuck. He took me in. Him and David. Both of them. He's just... Fuck, he can't not make it, y'know? He just *can't*. There's too many of us who love him, need him. Not just Jamie and David, but me, too. The rest of our... fuck, our family."

Elliot raised the smoldering stick of tobacco to his lips and took a drag. Then his eyes teared even more as he tried to cough up a lung. Possibly two, considering the way his entire body was convulsing.

"Sorry, man," the guy said, slapping him on the back. "Sorry. You looked like you needed something. That obviously wasn't it. Christ."

It was only when he was able to breathe again that Elliot managed to look at his... companion was the best word, he figured, and lo and behold, wasn't it Pretty, the guy from earlier.

"No," Elliot sighed, tossing the cigarette into the big, standing ashtray nearby. "I should have known better. And you're right. I did need something. Not that, but something." Then they were

laughing. For about three seconds before Elliot remembered why he was even there. "Sorry. I should. I mean, Jamie."

Pretty nodded, but even so, the man raised his non-cigarette-holding hand and rested it on Elliot's arm. "I... okay, this is really unprofessional. I know that. But can I ask you something, Mister... God, I don't even know your name."

He had a feeling that the man's question was going to be something entirely inappropriate, but Elliot could handle that. Could even let the guy down easy if it came down to it. "I'm Elliot," he said carefully. "Elliot McRayne. Soon to be McRayne-Hartwell," because a reminder couldn't hurt, even if "soon" was later than it would have been even a few hours earlier.

Pretty's eyes brightened, and the way the man's perfect lips twitched told Elliot that he was amused, even while having the decency to hide it as much as possible.

"I'm not hitting on you," Pretty announced gently. "And you can call me Lex. Or Lexus. That's what Christine started calling me, the first shift I worked. She says I look 'expensive and fast', whatever that means." Then Pretty--Lex--rolled his eyes. "I'm pretty sure she only came up with it because my real name is Alexis. It's a family thing, not a gay thing, okay? It's on my birth certificate and everything."

And that was actually funny, or would have been if Elliot hadn't been so fucking worried and scared. "Okay..."

"Okay," Lex said, his pale blue eyes staring at his cigarette, apparently. "I just wondered what it's like. Loving someone who actually loves you. I mean, like I said, crap timing, and even worse because I'm on the job for another..." He looked at his watch. "Another forty-two minutes. But I was in love once, and it could have been so amazing, but he loved someone else. I could tell. And I saw you and your fiancé, and I can tell how much you love each other, and how much your... well, how much the older man loves Mr. Hartwell. So I want to know. What's it like? To love someone and know--really *know*--that they love you, too."

Jesus, that was a hell of a fucking question to ask, and the only reason Elliot even considered trying to form an answer was because of the way the man had basically kept him out of jail, earlier. And told David, Jamie and him that Christine would be more open about telling them what was going on. It still wasn't easy to put it into words, though.

"This is just me," Elliot finally said, his words coming slowly but surely. "I can't say it's the same for anyone else, even Jamie." He smiled softly. "But for me, it's like finding out that you're only a part of a puzzle, but you didn't know it until the rest of you is suddenly there, y'know? Like you're the part in the middle and didn't even realize that you were missing your edges. Then they show up and you know you're done. Finished. Complete. But your borders are also your center. And fuck if I'm saying this right. It's like... I don't know. Feeling alone and then suddenly knowing--*knowing*, without any question--that you just fit with someone. That you're exactly where you're supposed to be, and it's the best place ever. That it's a place you never want to leave."

Elliot sighed and shook his head. "Jamie's way better with words, so if you want an answer that actually makes sense, you should probably talk to him."

The nurse laughed softly, then got to his feet, so Elliot stood, too. He'd been outside long enough, anyway, and he wasn't crying anymore, so he was going inside to sit with his man. And David.

"No," Lex said quietly, and Elliot thought that maybe the guy was thinking hard, he sounded so distant. "No, that's... pretty much what I thought. Thanks. And my friend Lisa is working the OR. I should have something to tell you guys soon, okay? Thanks. Again. Um, later."

Elliot sat there for a few more minutes, not really noticing the passage of time until Jamie joined him.

"You okay, sweetheart?" Jamie asked softly, and Elliot shook his head as he stood, moving into Jamie's open arms.

"Not even close," he admitted, his own arms wrapping tightly around Jamie's waist. "I... they're on their way, but... Fuck, darlin', it was so damned hard. Calling them. And Jim thought at first that your Dad had a heart attack, and I had to tell them. I. Jesus fucking Christ." But he was being selfish, Elliot knew. "How's David?"

God, this was a fucking nightmare. Except there would be no waking up, and that just sucked, Elliot decided for probably the hundredth time in the last three hours. Damn it.

Chapter Four

David hated waiting. He always had. And to be waiting there, in the hospital's waiting room, while slowly going out of his mind with fear and worry and a whole slew of other things that he'd never expected to experience? Well, time was crawling by.

If he was being honest and fair about things, David supposed time had a right to. His life with Russell had flown by, thus far, after all. But he wanted more.

Twenty-two years and it still felt like he'd just met Russell, though David rarely felt like the confused, conflicted young man he'd been on that first day, when David had still been Dave and had no expectations that he could be truly, deeply happy.

He'd been ashamed of himself, back then. Ashamed of his own desires, and afraid. Yet not quite willing to pretend; to ruin some poor woman's life by trying to live a lie that would have been accepted without a blink by the world, but would have left him--and her, whomever she might have been--miserable and empty.

He'd been making do with furtive, hurried hand jobs and blow jobs and cocks and asses in alleys and dark corners for years, by then, and he hadn't even been willing to imagine that there might be something more for him. Something good and fine and compellingly right. Nothing like that could possibly exist, and Dave knew it. He'd never seen it between two men, anyway, no matter how many clubs and porn theaters he went to.

None of which explained why he was thinking about sex during his latest job interview, Dave reminded himself. He should have been talking about his experience; the projects he'd worked on in the five states between Boston and home. Should have been telling Mr. Hartwell about his skills with plane and level; how he liked heights and knew his way around a crane. Instead, he just sat there in the site trailer, staring wide-eyed at the man in front of him, and all the while Dave wasn't thinking anything more complicated than... drooling over the guy who was interviewing him was probably a pretty good way to get his ass kicked. Also, sort of a guarantee of no damned job, and he needed the fucking money. Like, right away.

"I'm honestly not terribly impressed with your lack of a standard resume," Mr. Hartwell said, and Dave forced himself to focus, even though the way the man perched, splay-legged on the edge of the desk just two feet away, was more than distracting. Hell, Dave could basically make out the entirety of that package, and it was... yeah. Distracting, and he needed to keep his head in the game.

"Yeah, sorry about that," Dave muttered, sounding a little bit surly, even to himself. "I don't type, and I was planning on getting it done, but..." But his money had run out along with his time in Hartford, because he'd been fired from his last job very suddenly. The day after one of the guys on the crew reported seeing Dave coming out of an "adult" store in the gay part of town. Of course, nobody had bothered asking why TJ was there, and Dave hadn't been about to tell them. They'd find out sooner or later, and then every single one of the guys on that crew would

start wondering what TJ might have done to or with them on the many, many nights they all got falling-down and passing-out drunk together.

Besides, he hadn't had the chance. Not when he'd been so interested in getting out of town before they all got off shift. Dave had counted on them not caring enough to chase after one absent fag who'd been gone for hours, and he'd been right. It hadn't left him with any hope of a decent reference, or even his last paycheck, unfortunately, but there he was.

He needed work, damn it, and this Hartwell guy had a sign out on the fence around the site, and Dave would pretty much take anything, right then.

"Look," he said, trying to sound like he wasn't begging, "I'm gonna go out on a limb and be honest with you, okay, Mr. Hartwell? My last job didn't go so well. Not because of anything with work. There were some problems, off site. But I'm good at what I do. I can promise you that. I. All I need is a chance, okay? I'll do, fu-fudge, anything. Day labor, even. Sweep up trash. Sort nails. Whatever the fu... whatever the heck you need, okay? I just..."

Jesus fucking Christ, he hated this. Hated sitting there with his hand out like some fucking beggar, and all because TJ'd been pissed off that Dave wouldn't blow him without a rubber, that asshole.

He watched, feeling hopeless when Mr. Hartwell closed those too damned blue eyes like the man was trying to find a way to turn him down politely. Because he had been entirely too mannered the whole time Dave had been there. Like Mr. Hartwell was just a suit and the real day to day running of the site was taken care of by someone else. Someone who didn't talk like a God damned English text.

Dave was actually opening his mouth to ask who he should really talk to about work, but then those blue eyes opened again and Mr. Hartwell's thin lips were curving a little, and Dave actually felt something he hadn't dared to imagine since his headlong flight from Connecticut. Hope.

"Tell me, Mr. Sargent, what size bit would you use when drilling holes to secure a twenty foot section of rebar?"

Even though Dave hadn't been called 'Mr. Sargent' since he'd been sent to the principal back in tenth grade, he wasn't at all uncomfortable, surprisingly enough. It was even possible that he'd been wrong about Mr. Hartwell, because that wasn't really the sort of question a suit would ask.

"Depends on what it's being secured for, you know? I mean, that's really a broad question. If it's sectioned rebar that's gonna be used for support, then I wouldn't drill at all. Do better to set it, secure it, and pour around it. But if it's being used for..." and he was off and running.

Yeah, Dave thought with a tiny grin, he could do this. He'd always loved a challenge, even in school. Hell, he would have finished college with damned fine marks if he hadn't blown his elbow--and his scholarship--in his sophomore year. The elbow had healed, but not enough for pro ball, or even college ball, damn it.

Mr. Hartwell's questions went on and on, becoming more and more detailed, and Dave was actually grinning by the time one slender, tanned hand was held up to stop him.

"Enough," the man said, laughing quietly, which just did amazing things for those sharp as shit cheekbones. "You do seem to know the business. Or the right answers, in any case." Then Mr. Hartwell looked at Dave's application again, more closely this time, along with the hand written resume that Dave *knew* was half-assed. "You worked for Steve Morgan in Hartford?"

Dave nodded, blushing a little. "Yeah. Uh, he's the one who fired me, just so that part's out in the open. I doubt he'd have anything good to say if you mentioned my name." Because Steve Morgan was a raging homophobe who had liked Dave well enough, right up until he'd found out the truth, as witnessed by the way the asshole had cussed him out on the phone and told Dave not to bother stopping by for his check. As if he would have.

"Well, that's truly perfect," Mr. Hartwell said sincerely, and Dave blinked. "He was a foreman for my father for ages, and I never could stand him. An absolutely rude, repulsive individual with far too many prejudices to detail. I was more than happy to accept his resignation when Dad passed away. So. Steve Morgan's opinion of you doesn't particularly matter. Not in the sense of having a detrimental effect upon your quest for employment, in any case."

The man looked thoughtful for a moment more, then nodded, apparently to himself. "Yes. All right. I believe that I'm willing to take a chance on you, Mr. Sargent. I will allow you two weeks, on a trial basis. You'll work under my crew chief, answering directly to him, and at the end of that time, he will give me--and you--an accurate assessment of your abilities and possible worth to this company. The pay will be perhaps less than you're hoping for, but again, that is subject to review in two weeks time."

And thank fucking God, because he barely had enough cash to pay for a cheap--very cheap--motel for the night. He'd pay it, though, just so he could start out with a good night's rest. After that, Dave figured, he could sleep in his car.

He blushed, stammering as he stood up, nearly falling over from sheer relief. "Thanks. I... seriously. Thank you, okay? You won't... I swear you won't regret it, Mr. Hartwell. Really."

The man chuckled. "I have some degree of certitude that you're correct, Mr. Sargent. Or may I call you David? This is a construction site, after all. We rarely stand on formalities."

"Um, Dave. It's Dave. But yeah. Call me whatever you want. Just, thanks. Um, again."

A soft sigh and Mr. Hartwell stood, too, and Dave was surprised to notice that they were almost the same height. The man had seemed much larger, for all that he wasn't muscled or bulky. Just hot, especially with those eyes, but Dave needed work more than he needed an ass kicking, so he tried to ignore that.

"Well, then," Dave's new boss announced, looking pleased. "I don't believe us to be too terribly distant in age, so I would appreciate it if you called me Russell. Or Russ, as most of the men do. I'm afraid that it will always be my father whom I think of when I hear 'Mr. Hartwell'. Sometimes, I don't even remember to answer."

Dave left a few minutes later with a small spring in his step, suddenly wondering whether he might be able to stretch his few dollars enough to get himself some sort of a meal. He hadn't been hungry in days, what with worrying about what he was going to do next, but now that he had at least temporary work, he was starving.

TRH Construction wasn't the biggest firm out there, but the really huge companies hadn't even been willing to interview him for anything remotely like a skilled labor position. By the time he'd worked through the list, Dave had lowered his standards. He really would have accepted a day labor job, like he'd told Mr. Hartwell.

But the man was giving him a shot, and that was... well, fuck the big construction companies. TRH did good work, even if they didn't get the contracts for projects over a certain size. It only meant Dave wouldn't move up as fast as he might have in another company, but he didn't even care about that anymore.

He had a job. A real job. And he'd be getting a paycheck. He would prove himself, and then he'd be getting a bigger paycheck. He might even be able to afford an apartment within a month or so, and that would be... fucking awesome.

"David?" He actually jumped when he felt Jamie's hand on his shoulder, pulling him from his thoughts, though he regretted it when his back screamed at the abuse it had suffered from the hard, plastic chair the hospital deemed fit for humans.

"Shit, what's wrong? Did they tell you something?" Ah, and that was Elliot, sounding more worried about him than David liked. Probably because he was crying, but likely to be smiling, too.

"No. No, boys. Everything is... as it was. I was simply remembering." David swallowed hard, then let loose a tiny little laugh. "I was remembering the day I met your father," he added, looking at Jamie. "The day my entire life changed, though at the time I didn't know how much."

"Oh..." Jamie chuckled, too, though no louder than David. "You mean when he chased after you and insisted on buying you lunch because he'd quizzed you so hard?"

David nodded, then shook his head. "It was months before he told me the real reason, you know. Of course, I'd only recently discovered that he was gay, so it somewhat floored me, to say the least. That he'd been interested in me from the first, I mean."

Jamie hugged him and David sighed quietly, relaxing into that gentle contact as much as possible, considering the circumstances.

"Uh." Elliot again, which had David smiling just a bit.

He had two sons, even if neither of them were his biologically. Four, if he counted Michael and Jim, which he rather did, most days. And daughters galore, between Alicia, Chandra and Trish. And then there was Joss, who was a special case.

It was an embarrassment of riches for a man who had originally envisioned a lonely existence broken only by short, shameful fumbblings in the dark, and David knew he should be grateful. He was, really. But the man who had made David's entire life into something other than a nightmare was... he wanted Russell, damn it. Whole and well and without a huge fucking hole in his skull.

He was going to make himself sick if he kept this up, David realized. It would likely be hours, yet, and if he kept dwelling, he would break. Again. And that wouldn't be fair to Jamie or to young Elliot.

"Yes, Elliot," he answered the muttered 'uh'. "What is it, son?"

"Uh, what the fuck are you guys talking about? Russell was a teacher or something?" Elliot demanded, but carefully, like he didn't want to upset either of them, and Elliot probably didn't.

"No, no. He was my boss, in the end. Or the beginning, rather. It was... well, now it's amusing. At the time, I was rather nervous." David smiled slightly.

He told Elliot the things he'd been remembering, then closed his eyes as he went on, his own words vanishing from his ears as the memories took over again.

Chapter Five

His two week review was in a couple of hours, and Dave was nervous. Anxious, even. He knew he'd been doing good work, following the plans and even pointing out a measuring error once that could have cost them at least two days and who knew how many thousands of dollars. He'd even learned a couple of new things from Manny, the crew chief for that portion of the project, but the man didn't seem to like Dave much. In fact, he was surly and curt and always seemed to expect more from Dave than any one person could possibly accomplish in one day or hour or however long.

That didn't keep Dave from trying, though, because he'd be damned if he was going to lose this job. Especially after Mister... Russ, he reminded himself--after Russ had somehow pulled whatever strings guys like Dave didn't know a single thing about and gotten Dave's last paycheck from Hartford couriered over.

That check had possibly saved Dave's life, too. Or his job, at least, because with the way Manny had been putting him through his paces, Dave was pretty sure that trying to sleep all cramped up in his 1977 Toyota would have been the kiss of death.

Instead, he'd had enough to get a weekly room at a residential motel one of the day laborers knew about, and Dave thanked God every day for those Spanish classes in high school.

So he thought his job performance was good enough to be hired on permanently, or at least until the project was finished. He just didn't know how much Manny's obvious dislike of him was going to color the man's report. It was worrying. Kind of unsettling, if Dave was being honest.

Of course, there was nothing he could do about it, aside from hope that Manny cared more about Dave's abilities than whatever part of his personality put the guy off. It was a shame, though, because even with the surly, bad-ass attitude, Dave kind of liked Manny. Liked his work ethic and no bullshit manner.

Russell did, too, which was clear when they reported to the trailer at five on the dot, because the man greeted Manny with an obviously affectionate hug that had Dave's stomach going sour. He thought maybe he'd gotten a bad burrito from the lunch truck, but it didn't matter. He'd manage.

Then Russell was pointing them to chairs, and the man's secretary was leaving with a reminder for Russell to call his ex-wife about their youngest kid, and Dave's stomach settled, oddly enough. He felt sort of disappointed, though; God only knew why.

"All right," Russell said simply, "Davi... Dave's grace period is at an end. You've been working with him very closely, Manny. So. Speak, yes? Is he any good? Will he be disruptive to the crew?"

Manny laughed then, and Dave nearly fell out of his chair. It was the first time he'd heard the man do so, and it sounded nothing like the stark coldness Manny had used with him for the last

two weeks. Neither did Manny's voice, though, and the words just weren't what Dave had been expecting.

"Kid's good, Russ," Manny said, and Dave knew his eyes were wider than wide as he listened. "Knows his shit; knows *my* shit, too, most of the time. I played the whole 'I don't like you, but the boss is making me do this' angle the whole time and he just took it. Not like a doormat, but like he knew it was something he had to make it through and wasn't willing to fuck up."

Then Manny winked at him and Dave couldn't decide whether to be pissed off or relieved. Manny had been jerking him around. For two fucking weeks. "Bastard," Dave muttered, and Manny laughed.

"Like that, Russ," Manny went on. "He puts up with bullshit pretty good, but he'll call you on it if he needs to. Except when he's afraid of losing his job, anyway. He knows as much as he said he did. Maybe more, if you want the truth. He's not an asshole, so I think he'll do fine on his own with the guys. He'd be good here. Good for the company."

God, that was a fucking relief. Dave even relaxed a bit, letting the chair support him instead of holding himself so tightly that it was just something beneath him telling his body what shape to be frozen into.

Dave thought Russell looked pleased, too, but then the boss raised one eyebrow in what Dave thought was a skeptical look.

"But?" Russell asked, and just like that, Dave was so tense again, he was nearly vibrating.

"But," Manny answered, and he sounded so unapologetic, so smug, Dave thought maybe the man really did hate him, no matter what Manny said. "He caught that mistake that Myers and DuBois both signed off on. He just looked at the sheets and told me the numbers were wrong."

Manny sighed, sounding sheepish. "I wouldn't even have noticed, Russ. Myers and DuBois, they've never been wrong like that before. But this kid. Dave. He not only noticed, he spoke up. Hell, I don't have a fucking clue about how he saw it without using a calculator or some shit to check *all* the figures, but he did. He just looked and zeroed in on that one column and told me the numbers were off. Then he proved it in miniature. Off the top of his head. It was fucking awesome! I just don't know how long he'd be happy here, Russ. Even at my level, it's still manual labor."

"I'm just good with math," Dave broke in desperately, even though it sounded like Manny was complimenting him. Russell was listening really closely, and Dave couldn't afford to lose this job, damn it! He liked it and it was work and if he had to leave he wouldn't be able to see Russell every day, even though he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt that Russell was straight, and... "I swear. Angles and shit? That's easy. And the geometry was off, the... pattern. I could see it in my head. But it doesn't mean anything, okay? I like working here. I swear. I'll be happy."

Then Russell was blinking and Manny shook his head and Dave wanted to find a hole to crawl into and die. He'd lost his job. The only job he'd been able to find that paid anything like a decent wage, and he'd lost it because he'd saved them some time and money, and it wasn't fair. It was stupid, even, Dave realized a moment later. Why would Russell fire him after he'd done something good, something that benefited TRH?

He wouldn't, Dave told himself, the sour taste at the back of his throat receding, so there was something going on that he didn't understand. Obviously.

"I do believe that our Davi... Dave believes himself to be in some sort of trouble, Manny," Russell announced, sounding just a bit amused. "However, before I go to the effort of explaining his situation, perhaps you might make it clear to me whether you're merely expressing your admiration of his fine mind or possibly recommending him for... special training."

Jesus, Dave had never been so up and down in his life. Well, not when it didn't involve a heated body and a dark corner, but this was different. Not physical. This was... fuck. Emotional. He found himself praying that Manny would tell their boss that Dave was fine doing exactly what he'd been doing for the last two weeks. Building shit. Making sure it was right and sturdy and going to last for as long as possible, given the tools and materials available to him.

Manny looked at him then, and Dave nearly wilted under the weight of that stare combined with Russell's.

"I think Dave could--should--be designing buildings instead of just putting them together, Russ," Manny said after a moment or two of pure silence. "I think if he stays in construction--the manual labor side of it--he's gonna end up as foreman, or even as a multiple-site supervisor. He'd be great at that, too. He keeps all kinds of shit in his head. What do they call it? He multi-tasks. Yeah. But he could do more. Could be a bigger asset for TRH if he got some special training. As good as you, maybe, Russ. Before you took over the business end, I mean."

Dave didn't have a fucking clue about what was going on. All he knew was that he wasn't losing his job, and that was what really mattered.

"So you're not firing me," he said, just to be sure, and the looks he got from both Manny and Russell made him grin.

"No," Russell said gently, and Dave did everything he could not to squirm in his seat at the look in those bluer than blue eyes. Russell was straight, he reminded himself. Ex-wife and kids, for God's sake.

"No," Russell said again, smiling. "We're simply deciding your future. But don't worry. You do have a say in things." Then the man handed him what looked like a business card, but wasn't when Dave looked at it. It was the same size, but only showed a hand written address. "I will expect you there tonight. Eight o'clock sharp, yes? I have a proposition for you."

It wasn't the sort of proposition Dave had hoped for, he was sure, but then again? Ex-wife. Kids. Duh. It might be just as good, though.

"So," Russell recapped later that night, as Dave tried crème brulee for the first time and decided it was like fancy vanilla pudding with burned sugar on top, "TRH will have you tested for spatial relationships, mathematical skills, and an entire plethora of other things that we might find useful. Assuming you do well, of which I have no doubt because Manny has never once been erroneous in his assessments, the company will pay for your schooling. We will extend you a loan, at very reasonable rates, so that you may continue to have a home and such. And when you finish the Architecture program, you will work exclusively for TRH until you have repaid your cost of living advance, as well as your educational expenses. You and I will sign a contract to this effect."

Russell looked slightly pinkish, but Dave chalked that up to the diffused lighting in Russell's dining room. He still couldn't quite believe that his boss had invited him over, though it had been more of an order, now that Dave was thinking about it. Still...

"Do I have to tell you right now?" Dave asked carefully, "Because it sounds like a good offer, but I really do like working with my hands, you know? There's just something about building things, from start to finish. It's like creation, and God knows I'm never going to have kids, so every project is sort of my baby. And a few hundred other guys', I guess." Okay, and now he felt like a huge dork. And he'd said he wasn't having kids which was probably making Russell wonder, and God help him if he'd just outed himself right onto the unemployment line, Dave growled silently.

Luckily, Russell didn't seem to notice. In fact, the man just nodded. "Of course. Take your time, Davi... Dave. If you do decide to take me up on the offer, though, I'll need a week's notice to arrange for the testing. Will that suit?"

Dave nodded, taking another spoonful of the fancy pudding. "Yeah. I... if I say yes, I'll get you copies of my college transcripts, okay? I mean, I liked school, but..."

"The next thing I knew," David said softly, "I was telling Russell all about playing ball and being injured. Losing my scholarship and thinking my life was over." He turned eyes that he hoped were only slightly teary to Elliot's. "Now, looking back? It was probably the best thing that ever happened to me. I never would have met Russell if it hadn't happened. Never would have known what it felt like to be so scared and hopeful and so very frighteningly in love."

And God help him, David thought, because both Elliot and Jamie were holding him tight, from opposite sides, and he could feel the their chests heaving, feel their tears against his skin as the salty liquid soaked through his shirt.

It was good, David decided a moment later, his own arms tight around their shoulders. They hadn't cried yet, not really. Not like he had been doing, off and on for hours. It was good that

they were starting to realize exactly what they'd all lost. Because it was taking too long. David knew it with a sudden certainty that had him wanting to do as he'd sworn to Russell out on the street... nearly four hours ago, he saw, looking at the clock. Three of which had passed right there in the waiting room.

He wanted to follow Russ. Be with him. But he couldn't, not with their boys holding him so tightly, counting on him to be their comfort when they'd already been such a comfort to him.

"He was surprised," David whispered, going back to his memories and sharing them almost desperately. "That I'd been to college but was working construction. He was actually rather disgusted that the university had sent me on my way once I was no longer of any use to their athletics program. And he was that much more determined that I could be something more, if I wanted to. But I didn't want to. Not then."

Chapter Six

Dave had gotten used to the weekly meetings with Russell in the site trailer. Had even started penciling them in, in his mental organizer. Hell, he kind of looked forward to them, when he was being honest with himself.

Yes, he thought the boss was fucking hot. He'd come to that conclusion even before that night of dinner and crème brulee and muted lighting that had shown off Russell at his best. Russell wasn't good looking in the usual way, but he was unique. Not cookie-cutter gay-guy handsome. Which made sense, Dave told himself as he trudged toward the trailer for the benefit of the guys still hanging around, because Russell wasn't gay.

Russell had an ex-wife named... something bizarre, which Russ had said was because her parents were religious crazies when she was born, then hippies later. And Russell always sounded so happy, so affectionate when he mentioned his ex, that Dave figured it was only a matter of time before the estranged couple got married again and made still more babies.

So it wasn't the hotness that Dave looked forward to each week. Wasn't anything like some sort of hope that he'd be getting laid. He did that enough, anyway. Got as much ass and cock as he wanted, now that he'd found the Horny Bull and discovered the dress code, which was *less is more*. He couldn't even count the number of times he'd gone out in cut off jean shorts--very short--his work boots, white tube socks and a smile. Sure, the sex wasn't always great, or even good, but at least it was something. Some sort of contact. Release.

So, no, Dave told himself as he paused outside the trailer, he wasn't looking forward to talking to Russell because he thought there was any chance of the man ever touching him. He just liked Russell. Russell was safe. A friend, almost, even though the man was his boss.

His hand raised, ready to knock on the open door of the trailer, but then Dave heard the voices and he stopped. Someone was obviously in there already, and judging by Russell's strained tone, the man wasn't too happy about it.

"Look, Blessing," Russell said, and oh. The ex-wife. Fantastic. "I don't know what to say, okay? Just tell him he can't act like that at school. I'll talk to him about it next weekend."

"It's all your fault, Russ," a woman's voice said, and it sounded so hollow, so tinny that Dave suddenly knew Russell's ex wasn't actually there but was on the phone. That the phone had a speaker, which Dave had seen but never heard used before.

"You know I love you," the woman went on, "and I know he's experimenting or whatever, but I'm only his mother. You're his dad, and he loves you more than anything, so if you'll really do that, really talk to him? I'll owe you one, baby. Because *my* dad's talking about sending him to military school, and you know how much Daddy's against that kind of thing."

"Okay. Okay, Bless. Honestly." God, Russell actually sounded shocked. "I'll talk to him. Certainly. I can't promise that I'll force him to any particular pattern of behavior when he's with me, but I'll see to it that he understands that not every place is appropriate for certain actions. Especially school. Deal?"

Okay, why did Russell sound so normal with his ex but so pedantic with him, Dave wondered. He and Russ were both guys, after all, so shouldn't it have been the other way around?

Then again, Dave admitted, spending years with someone was likely to make a guy relax whatever walls he put up with the rest of the world, which meant... ex-wife. Ex-wife who Russell was clearly very friendly with. Definitely on the short list of people who got to see and know the real Russ.

"You're the best," the ex was said, and Dave frowned at his own clenched fists. "I'll drop them off next Saturday morning, okay? And you can keep them 'til Monday night since you're supposed to have them from after school on Friday."

Jesus, it was the most amicable custody dispute Dave had ever heard of, and working in construction, he'd heard plenty.

"That'll be fine, Blessing," Russell said, and Dave sighed silently. One more day that he wouldn't be able to look his fill, on the rare occasion that Russ came out of the trailer. "Between Manny and David, I'm not even remotely worried about the site." And okay. That made it better, sort of.

"How *is* David?" he heard the ex-wife ask, and Jesus fuck. Russ and Blessing were even closer than he'd thought. Obviously. "Any progress?"

A snort, then Russell's voice, and Dave just knew the man was shaking his head.

"If there were, you'd be the first to know, hon'. Or second, rather, because hopefully I'd be first. But I don't think he's even thinking about it. I could have been wrong, you know. It wouldn't be the first time. He's just... well. It's entirely up to him, isn't it? And you know me, Bless. I don't push. Won't. No matter how much I want him to... God."

"Jump right in with a shouted yes," Russell's ex-wife finished. "I really do understand, baby. So when do I get to meet this David? He sounds... interesting."

Russell groaned then, and Dave had the strange notion that the man was looking at the clock. "Goodness. I really must go now. He's due here... well, five minutes ago, to be truthful. We'll continue this later, yes, Blessing?"

And that was pretty much proof, Dave realized. Even thinking about him had Russell getting all proper English again. Or close enough that Dave knew the difference.

He moved away from the trailer as silently as he could manage in his boots, hoping the sound of the ex-wife's voice would cover whatever noises he couldn't avoid. Then he strode forward, deliberately stomping as he made his way up the three stairs again.

The conversation was more of the same, of course. 'Have you thought about my offer', 'I'm still not sure', and 'Anything I need to know about the site', though this time Dave had an answer for the last that wasn't no.

"Yeah," he said softly, looking behind him to make sure the door was firmly closed. "I think... I mean, I don't know for sure, but... Jesus, Russell. I think Gabe Harcourt is stealing shit, okay?"

Fuck, he felt like an asshole for saying it out loud because Gabe was a good guy. Had a wife and five kids, for God's sake. Which didn't change the facts as Dave knew them.

"I left last night, just like always, but I only went down to the diner."

Russell nodded, which told Dave that the boss knew all about the cheap but clean little spot that made the best meat loaf in the world.

"So, I was coming back past here a couple hours later, and the gate wasn't locked. It wasn't *open* or anything. Just... the chain and padlock weren't there, you know?" And Russell nodded again, still silent, so Dave went on.

"I thought maybe I forgot," he said, blushing, "but when I got out of my car to lock it up, I heard him. Gabe. Maybe two or three other guys, but I didn't recognize their voices. So I thought maybe he was catching up on some shit he didn't get around to earlier and got some friends to help. You know how it is." He hoped so, anyway.

"I got back in my car and went home." Home to his residential motel room, because Dave had decided that he wasn't going to rent a place for real until he could afford to furnish it.

"So far," Russell said with a small arch of one brow, "it sounds fairly unremarkable. Gabriel has been with TRH for years, after all. He has the authority to be on-site whenever he chooses, as well as authorization for whatever extra help he may deem necessary."

Christ, Dave realized. He was making himself out to be a troublemaker. That didn't mean he could stop now, though. Not when he was so *sure*.

"I thought that, too," Dave admitted carefully, "but when I got in today, the pile of copper plate was maybe half the size it was when I left last night. Other things, too. Drywall, cement mix, PVC pipes. And I checked the lists. There wasn't any work recorded between six last night and eight this morning, and nothing's been altered to hide off-shift labor, so..." he blushed at lying even a little, which he was about to do. To Russ, which just felt *wrong*.

"Like I said. I'm not entirely sure, but I can't think of any other reason for Gabe to be here with strangers and supplies to be suddenly missing without any visible or recorded progress. I'm

sorry, Russell. And I hope it's something innocent, but..." Jesus, Dave felt like a worm for putting that suddenly suspicious look in Russell's eyes.

"You'll not speak of this to anyone else," Russell said then, and Dave agreed quickly. Of course he wouldn't. It wasn't his place.

"Thank you," Russ said, and the sheer degree of that gratitude in Russell's stare had Dave blinking. "You might consider going home now," Russell added, "and I will see you on Monday, yes? Hopefully with a different answer to the question of your imminent schooling."

And as that was their usual way of saying good bye after their meetings, Dave just grinned and stood. "Have a good weekend," he offered as he turned and left, imagining that he could feel Russell's eyes on his ass, even though he knew that was ridiculous.

"He's asleep, darlin'," David heard, and he frowned slightly.

No I'm not, he thought, but the words wouldn't come out of his mouth and he couldn't seem to open his eyes, so maybe Elliot was right. Half-asleep, anyway.

"That's a good thing, El," Jamie whispered back, and David wanted to snort. "It's been a fucked up night. He's got to be exhausted. You know how he usually holds things in. All the emotion has to have worn him down."

"You too, Jamie," Elliot murmured, and David knew that much was true. "You don't get all... internalized or whatever like David, but you're fucking tired, man. You should try to rest, okay? I'll keep an eye out. Wake you guys up if anyone comes."

David could actually hear Jamie thinking about it. Russell's son had a passion for cracking his knuckles when he was worried and trying to process, which thankfully wasn't often.

"Yeah," Jamie said, after a moment that should have seemed longer, "but just me, sweetheart. Let David sleep. Let him forget, even if it's just for a little while."

No, David thought, even as the soft murmur of their voices lulled him until he barely heard them at all. He didn't want to forget. He wanted--needed--to remember. Hell, his memories might be all he had left, once this awful, nightmarish experience was over.

Chapter Seven

He'd been right about Gabe Harcourt, though Dave didn't take any pleasure in that. In fact, he still felt like shit, even three weeks after the man had been fired. Harcourt had been lucky that Russell felt some sense of loyalty to the man who had worked for TRH for years, though. That was the only reason Gabe wasn't sitting in a jail cell.

On the one hand, Dave knew he should be happy that he'd been able to help Russ. Help the company. But on the other... Jesus, he couldn't stop thinking about Gabe's wife and kids. Couldn't help wondering how the family was going to survive.

"It's not your problem," Manny said again, breaking into Dave's thoughts with that sometimes scary perception of his. "Not your fault either, kid. He did it to himself. You're just the one who caught him. Now, do you think we could maybe get some fucking work done instead of sitting around crying over a thief?"

Well, Manny had a point, Dave figured for about the hundredth time. He'd suspected Gabe and told Russ what he was thinking, sure. But Gabe Harcourt was the one who'd hit the site again, less than a week after the first time Dave had noticed. It wasn't Dave's fault that the security guards Russ had hired without warning literally caught Harcourt red-handed.

He tried to focus, to pay attention to what he was doing, but Dave couldn't claim to be anything but relieved when Manny told him to take off early. Christ, if he'd tripped over his own feet one more time, Dave thought he probably would have hurt himself. As it was, the last time he'd stumbled had been a pretty close call, considering the nail gun he'd been holding.

Jesus, he needed to just not think. To kick back and find something else to occupy his mind. Fortunately, it was Thursday, which meant he had a paycheck to cash. That meant, in turn, that Dave could numb his brain well enough on the draft beer at the Horny Bull and quiet his body with enough nameless men that he'd at least be able to sleep well, for a change.

"Christ, there's a lot of white pickups in this town," Dave mumbled as he wove through traffic toward the bank. "Maybe I'll get one myself. Some day." His little shit-box Toyota wasn't going to last forever, after all. Hell, it was amazing that the old car had lasted *that* long.

"Maybe I'll go for a blue truck," he announced to the radio a few hours later, not even paying attention as he drove the well-known route to the Horny Bull. "Or red. White ones must be damned hard to keep clean. Shit, every one I've seen for the last couple weeks has been filthy." And he might be in construction, but he was still gay, even though nobody outside of the bar knew it. He'd hate it if people saw him in a dirty white truck and thought he was just that lazy, but he didn't want to be washing the damned thing every day, either.

Blue, Dave had decided by ten o'clock, the thought just a bit fuzzy after the six or so beers he'd had. Blue would work. And then a short, pretty guy was giving him the once-over, and Dave didn't care about his imaginary truck any more.

He bought the guy a beer instead, and when that pretty mouth opened to ask Dave if he wanted to fuck the round little ass that showed so well in the spandex bike shorts the man was wearing, Dave nodded.

There was a short moment when it nearly went to hell, there in the back of the club, but Dave wasn't stupid. He knew what STDs were. Even knew he didn't want one. And there was that other thing going around--that killer virus he'd heard about--and after a few minutes, the guy he was with shrugged, turned, pushed the spandex down.

"Whatever, man. Use the fucking rubber, if you want. I just want to *feel*." So Dave made him feel. Made him feel so much that Dave knew he could have the guy again, whenever he wanted. And he might go for it, some day, even though that wasn't something he usually did. The guy, whatever his name was, had been a damned sweet fuck. Moved on Dave's cock like it was the best thing going. Yeah.

Another hour, another beer, another guy. This one leaned back against the wall and moaned while Dave sucked him, fingers tight in Dave's hair and hips jabbing in short, needy thrusts. He hadn't really reacted to the rubber, other than to smile, pat Dave's cheek and say "bright boy, now blow me."

God, he wished it was Friday night. Wished he didn't have to be up at the ass crack of dawn for work. But even so, Dave figured he couldn't really complain. He'd gone from unemployed to being Manny's second in command on the site in less than three months, and yeah, it was worth it, even if he had to go back to his room sooner than he really wanted to. He could stay out later the next night, and there was always a better crowd on the weekends, anyway.

He paid his tab, then laughed as the bartender blew him a kiss for the tip he'd left. Minutes later Dave was outside, digging in the pocket of his cut-offs for his car keys.

Later, he would blame the beer and orgasms for the fact that he hadn't heard anything, hadn't noticed footsteps or voices or even the creepy sensation of eyes on him. In the moment, though, he only knew someone was behind him when something slammed against his back.

"Wha...!" He didn't even get to finish the first shouted word, because a hand covered his mouth and he was being dragged somewhere and... Fuck, there was more than one of them, and what the hell was going on?

He felt every kick, every punch, every sharp tear as the blows rained on his body. Felt the welts rising, cuts opening to spill blood on the dirty pavement beneath him. He didn't even try to see who was hitting him. He just did his best to keep his arms wrapped around his head and wait it out. At least three guys beating him, because he made out that many different voices, but Dave wasn't stupid enough to try to fight back. It would just piss them off more, he figured.

"Fuckin' teach you! Fuckin' teach your faggy ass! Mother fuckin' pervert, shouldn't be anywhere near real men!"

Another blow, this one from a foot and landing between Dave's legs from behind, and he screamed. Another, and he felt his ribs crack. One more kick, this time to his back, and Dave stopped trying to protect himself, started hoping to pass out.

He *must* have passed out, he thought blearily, however much later it was that he woke up, because he was alone. He was lying on his side in a filthy alley, wearing nothing but boots, socks and obscenely short cut-offs.

His groin throbbed--in the bad way--and Dave seriously wondered whether one kick could rupture his balls.

His ribs screamed at him every time he tried to take a breath, and his nose was bleeding. It felt three times its usual size, though he didn't remember getting hit in the face, but it was all a big blur, and...

He was bleeding and in more pain than he'd ever even imagined before, but he was alone. Thankfully, blessedly *alone*.

Fuck, he'd heard that there were gay-bashers everywhere, that no place was entirely safe, but he'd never expected to run into their kind himself. And now he had.

He lay there for what felt like hours, trying to gather his strength. Trying not to breathe too deeply, because every time he did, he almost passed out again from the pain in his chest.

The minutes he spent moving onto hands and knees felt like an eternity in Hell, but he wasn't weak, damn it. Wasn't crying, either, Dave told himself sternly. He was sweating and it was dripping into his eyes before splashing in the dirt of the alley. Not crying.

Except he was, however many years later, when he finally managed to crawl out of the alley's mouth and collapse on the sidewalk. He was crying. Relieved to be in something like light--even if it was just from a streetlamp--and entirely unable to speak. He didn't have the breath. All he could do was lie there and bleed.

"Oh my fucking fuck! There's a sex God down! Someone call 911!" Dave heard, and that voice was so clearly from the flamey end of the spectrum that he relaxed, let the wave of blackness break over him again, pushing him down to a place where he still hurt, but didn't know it.

Dave woke up slowly, fighting it with every fiber of his being. Then he was actually awake and he remembered why being unconscious was a good thing.

Christ, he fucking *hurt*. He didn't just ache, he felt like he'd had a steel beam dropped on him.

And maybe he had. He wasn't sure, for a minute or so. Maybe he'd gotten hurt at work and was being treated. But, no. He was pretty sure he would remember that. In fact, the last thing he remembered was...

"Oh, fuck..." Shit, even his voice sounded bad, Dave realized. Like he'd been gargling glass. It felt bad, too. Sandpaper and sawdust. Then a hand touched the back of his head, and the gentlest fingers Dave had ever felt were there. A small plastic tube brushed his swollen lip and Dave nearly whimpered as he tried to pull it in.

"Slowly, David," Russell's voice was rough, harsh. Raw, in a way. "Be careful. Let me help you."

God, it went against everything within him, but Dave couldn't make himself fight. Couldn't be stubborn, not with Russell sounding so damned angry. Instead, Dave parted his lips as best he could, only closing them when he felt the end of the straw placed between them.

"Slowly," Russell said again, and Dave nodded a little, even as he sucked wonderfully cool moisture into his mouth then let it slide down his tight, sore throat. It felt like Heaven.

"Wha'... where am I?" Dave managed to whisper a few minutes later, during which time Russell had just sat there holding his head and offering more sips of water. "And why the fuck are you here? I mean..."

It was the still angry but also somehow embarrassed throat-clearing sound Russell made then that had Dave opening his eyes, and it was only then that he realized they'd closed at all. "Is this something you do for all your guys?" he asked, before wishing he'd just kept his big mouth shut.

He'd been attacked less than a block away from the Horny Bull, after all. He'd been wearing... well, not anything normal for a straight guy. His savior had been some girly-sounding man who'd shrieked like a banshee. And Dave figured Russell knew all that.

His cover was not only blown, Dave realized, but vaporized. And Dave had just asked whether Russ did this sort of thing for all his guys, which would probably have Russell thinking that Dave thought he was gay, too, and oh, yeah. Goodbye, job. Goodbye *Russ*, too. Fuck.

Except, "No," Russell said, and Dave couldn't help the small moan he let out when he frowned at Russ' tone, his face was that sore.

"No, David," Russell said carefully, voice so tight; so... something. "You're in the hospital, obviously, to answer your first question. Apparently, you wandered in to an alley and beat yourself up until you were bloody and bruised and... well. Then you robbed yourself, taking your own cash and such. You left yourself your identification, fortunately, along with today's check stub, which you seem to have urinated on before you dropped it beside your own bloody body."

God, Dave suddenly thought. Russell really went snide and sarcastic when he was pissed off. And it was obvious that the man was; even more so than before. "I must have been mad at me," he offered, trying not to move his lips too much. "You know, for not giving myself much of a fight."

Russell's laugh sounded bitter, but also surprised, and Dave thought he could handle a little more of that. The surprised, not the bitter.

"Perhaps," Russ answered, slowly relaxing as he stared at Dave, which only made Dave wish... something. Something he shouldn't. "In any case, that's why I'm here, David."

Apparently Dave's confusion was as blatant as the bruises he could feel on his face, because Russell went on quickly.

"The check stub. The police found it during the course of their investigation of the immediate area where you were found. They called TRH, and since it was official police business, the night switchboard forwarded the call to me." Russell frowned, but Dave felt those fingers rub softly at his scalp, and it was nice.. Comforting.

"I... thanks, Russ. For coming," Dave muttered, not sure of how to react. Nobody had ever treated him as nicely as this man, after all. Not even Dave's own father, once he'd found out about the whole liking boys thing. "Um... when can I go home?" he asked then, because he for damned sure couldn't afford to laze about in a fucking hospital when he didn't have any insurance. Christ, the emergency room bills alone were going to wipe him out, and then some.

Russell actually looked uncomfortable when Dave raised his eyes again. "That's the rub, I suppose, David. If there were someone at your place of residence who could and would be willing to keep an eye on you over the next few days, you could be discharged before dawn. Unfortunately..." and Russell seemed even more uncomfortable, all of a sudden.

"Sadly," Russ continued, those blue eyes staring past Dave's shoulder, "your current domicile is not one that is known for forming close friendships. Nor have you gone out of your way to do so amongst your co-workers. I would possibly suggest Manny, but he and Joyce have family in town this weekend."

And that sounded kind of like a really wordy and polite way of saying 'you're screwed', to Dave. "Fuck," he groaned, almost ready to cry. Again. He was going to miss God knew how much work, and while he wasn't making money, it would be hemorrhaging from his bank account until he was worse off than he'd been before he'd even gotten the job with TRH.

Russell made a sympathetic sound then, as though he somehow knew what Dave was thinking, and Dave found himself holding his breath, hopeful for whatever reason. "There is, of course, one other option. You could stay with me."

Damn if Dave had seen that one coming.

"I do realize that I'm likely the last person a young man like yourself would choose to spend time with," Russell went on, still staring past Dave's shoulder, "but I do genuinely like you, David. I enjoy your company and conversation. It wouldn't exactly be a hardship for me if you were to spend your recovery in my spare bedroom." Then Russ gazed at him and David swallowed hard at the look in those blue eyes. "I would like it if you were to agree to at least consider it as a possibility."

Well, there hadn't actually been that much to think about, Dave told himself as Russell helped him up the stairs of the big house Dave had been inside only once before. Hospital room or what he was sure would be a luxurious room in a beautiful house. Easy decision, in the end, though it had taken Dave a good two minutes to make up his mind.

The stairs had him regretting his choice, but then he was left on the landing, leaning against the banister while Russ retrieved Dave's bag of clothes and toiletries from the car.

God, it had been fucking embarrassing to direct Russell to the crappy motel. Even more so that Dave hadn't been able to go inside himself. Instead, he'd had to give the key to Russ and explain where everything was... and wait in Russell's Mercedes while the man pawed through and packed up Dave's things.

"I couldn't find your underwear," Russ had said, once they were driving again. "Perhaps you left it at the laundry?" And fuck Russ, Dave had thought, because there was no way he was going to tell the man that he'd fallen out of the habit of wearing any when he'd had to choose between buying socks or briefs, before TRH and having an actual income again.

"Yeah," he'd agreed. "I left them in the machine and someone stole them. Um, the other night. I'll get new ones. Soon."

Dave frowned, leaned a bit more against the landing's railing. He was fucking wiped. Jesus, all he really wanted was a bed and maybe twenty hours of uninterrupted sleep. Possibly a shower, but he didn't think he could manage to stand up that long.

Then Russell was back and helped him to a room that was even better than Dave had imagined, and he was horrified to find himself getting all teary-eyed again. Not from pain this time, either, though he was definitely still hurting. So he swallowed it back, thought he'd be fine. Right up until Russ' arm tightened around his waist. Right up until that soft, so proper voice murmured, "So brave. So very brave, David."

Dave shook, broke, shuddered. Moaned, even, because every involuntary shiver twitched and twisted muscles that were sore and abused. And Russell was holding him, the duffle bag of Dave's things on the floor somewhere, and it just felt so damned *good* to let go of at least some of the hate and fear and anger inside him. To know that--for the moment, at least--he was safe. Protected. *Safe*.

He took the pain pills Russell pressed to his lips a few minutes later. Swallowed them down with a long sip of tepid water from the tap in the bathroom attached to his temporary bedroom.

He balked a bit when Russ tried to help him from his clothes, but a mere thirty seconds of trying on his own convinced Dave that he needed the assistance.

He blushed hotly when the worn, holed sweat pants he usually slept in were pulled from his bag, but Russell only arched a brow and smiled before proclaiming, "I have a pair that are remarkably similar. They are possibly the most comfortable thing I've ever worn. The more so because they are so... familiar, yes?"

Dave knew when the pain meds finally kicked in. He felt fuzzy around the edges--in the good way, this time. He still did what he could to help Russell get the sweat pants up and covering what they really needed to, and he was all of a sudden not so worried about the incredibly short cut-offs the hospital had let him have back once they'd determined that the kick Dave remembered to his groin hadn't done any permanent damage.

The doctor had recommended an ice pack for Dave's still tender and throbbing bits, but that wasn't going to happen. He would rather suffer through it than even *think* about putting ice down there.

"Um, gonna fall asleep, Russ," Dave heard himself saying, like he was at one remove from his own body. "Sorry. For all this." And he started to fade even faster.

So fast that when he heard Russell's murmured "You're welcome, dearest," Dave thought he'd dreamed it. Was sure of it, in fact, no matter how much some part of him wished it had been real.

"Jamie!" his name was nearly a shout, and while Jamie appreciated the sentiment and emotion behind it, David was still sleeping. Restlessly, but sleeping none the less, and he'd be damned if he was going to let Michael's anxiety pull David from what was probably the best thing for him, at the moment.

"Hush," he hissed, pushing out of his chair and catching Michael as that small body flung itself at him. "Hush, Michael. David's... resting." He still hugged Michael hard, though, especially once he saw that Elliot was in a similar clench with Jim, Michael's lover and Elliot's childhood friend.

"Come on, guys," Jamie murmured a few minutes later, once they'd all changed partners and hugged some more, "Let's take this outside, okay? Let David sleep. We'll tell you what we know, but it isn't much."

"Is David... not okay, because how could he be? But I mean..." Jamie would have laughed at Michael's rambling question, any other time. As it was, though, he just shook his head.

"He's wrecked, Michael. He's wrecked and lost and so fucking scared." Jamie swallowed hard. "I know he is, because so am I. But he was crying before. Crying and God, I think he's already

thinking about what to do if Dad doesn't make it, and it won't be good, okay? So we need to..." And he looked back at David, saw the tiniest twitch at the corner of the man's lips, and it seemed like David was almost smiling, just a little.

"We need to go outside," Jamie said again. "We need to talk. All of us. And get some coffee."

"Yeah, come on, babe." Thank God for Jim. The man had always been able to steer Michael when needed, which it definitely was, right then. "We need a family meeting. We'll fill the girls in when they get here." Then Jim looked at him and Jamie nodded, though he wasn't sure why.

"Jesus fucking Christ. Outside. Now." And Elliot was pushing Michael and Jim toward the door, leaving Jamie to follow with a tiny smile at the reminder of just how pushy his lover--fiancée--could be.

Chapter Eight

Dave was expecting the soreness when he woke the next day. He was even expecting the pain that spoke of a somewhat full bladder, as well as the residual agony of his groin. Another pill or two would take care of everything but the bladder, so he wasn't too worried.

Still pissed off, yes, and wishing that none of the last night had ever happened, but not worried. Russell had offered Dave a place to stay while he recovered, and Dave was determined that it wouldn't take long. He didn't have any broken bones, really, aside from the cracked ribs that hurt even with the thick tape and ace bandages wrapped around his chest.

He groaned softly as he tried to roll over, then again when the groan made his ribs scream. He probably would have done it a third time, but nobody would have heard him anyway. Not over the loud shout in a young voice Dave didn't recognize. "Hey, Dad! He's waking up!"

Jesus. What the fuck? Dave grunted and managed to turn his head, shifting just enough to be on his side, which was a really bad idea even if it did let him see the tall, lanky kid who'd spoken.

"What...?" he managed, and the kid grinned, blue eyes just like Russell's twinkling under floppy brown hair.

"What happened to you, man?" the kid asked, and those Russ-like eyes dimmed as they traveled over the little skin Dave's bandages and sweats didn't cover, pausing at what Dave was sure were still-growing bruises. "You look like you got used as a tackling dummy."

The kid looked like he was maybe thirteen or fourteen. Looked horrified, yet somehow fascinated, too, though Dave figured that was just because he'd never seen anyone who'd been beat up before. Black eyes on the playground didn't count.

Dave shrugged, then hissed at the way it made his body pulse painfully. "Something like that, kid," he grunted, once he'd caught his breath. "So where's your..." and he didn't even have to finish the question because Russell was suddenly there.

"Jamie!" Russ said, frowning deeper than Dave had ever seen him do before. "I believe I asked you not to disturb our guest, or did I imagine that part of our conversation? David isn't well, you know."

Then Jamie, because that was clearly the kid's name, was rolling his eyes. "Jeez, Dad, I didn't wake him up or anything. He was, like, groaning and shi... stuff. I figured you'd want to know. You've been acting all freaky about him ever since I got here."

Dave could swear he saw a blush starting on Russ' face, but maybe he was just seeing things. It was always possible, what with the punch in the nose he'd taken, though the hospital had ruled out a concussion. "I have not been 'acting freaky', son," Russell said sternly, "I have merely been rather concerned. David had something of a difficult evening, after all."

The kid snorted. "Yeah, no shit. Look at him. Did he get hit by a bus? Jeez."

Then Russell was looking at him like he was waiting for Dave to say something. Dave didn't know what, though, so he just shrugged. Carefully. And still hissed, though it didn't hurt as much as the bigger gesture he'd tried earlier.

"No, son," Russell said bluntly, as he bustled around to the side of the bed and opened the bottle of meds, pressing one pill gently to Dave's lips, which Dave was only too happy to swallow dry. "David was attacked by a group of men who disliked his attire, as well as the area of town he was in. They beat him badly, simply because they disapproved of his choices."

Dave would have panicked, but he didn't have the energy. And Russ wasn't glaring or anything. Hell, Russell was just saying--in his long-winded, overly pedantic way--that he knew Dave was gay but didn't believe that made it okay for some bunch of assholes to beat him up. It was... comforting, sort of.

And Russ' kid wasn't freaked out that his Dad had a gay guy in the house, either, because Jamie just made a disgusted face and shook his head. "I know it's wrong to hate people, Dad, but I do. I hate fag-bashers. Like what other people do is any of their business. Shit, it's not like David was hurting anyone, right? Um, right?" The last was directed at Dave, but he didn't know what to say. He just sat there and blinked.

"No," Russell said firmly, sounding so sure of it that Dave actually felt... shit, warm inside. "David isn't the sort of young man to deliberately harm anyone, Jamie. However, his experience last night merely emphasizes what I've been trying to tell you for months now. One never knows what might happen, even in a location which one has reason to believe is reasonably safe."

And Jamie sighed, nodding and mumbling to himself, but Dave was completely sure he was hearing wrong. Because there was no possible way Russell's son was complaining about staying in the closet until he finished high school. There just wasn't.

"Well. That was my eldest," Russell apologized a few minutes later, after Jamie wandered off to do homework then watch some crappy beach show. "Please forgive his language. Thankfully, my younger two are in New York with their mother. They don't have projects due for science class first thing Monday morning. Now, how are you feeling, David? Was the one pill enough, or will you need another?"

It was the last thing Dave wanted to do, but he didn't think he had a choice. He just couldn't seem move enough to get out of bed by himself. Not yet. "Um, honestly?" He was blushing. He knew he was. "I kind of need the bathroom, Russ. But I... Fuck. Can you help me? Just to get there. I'll, um, handle the rest of it on my own." Christ, could he possibly be any more embarrassed?

Yeah, Dave told himself a moment later, because while he'd taken one hell of a kick to the family jewels the night before, that didn't stop his stupid, aching cock from trying to say hello to

Russell, who was--thank God--busy enough helping Dave walk that the man clearly didn't notice.

Christ.

Dave felt a lot more like himself by Sunday. Oh, he was still dozing off just about every time he took one of those damned pills, but his body had started to heal. He was able to make it to and from the bathroom on his own, which was a huge relief in more ways than one.

Saturday morning, Russell had moved a spare TV in to the room Dave was using, and the sound of the cartoons Dave was addicted to had drawn Jamie to come watch with him. Dave was a little bit surprised by how well they got along.

The kid was smart. Dave knew it by the time their good-natured argument about the old Three Stooges re-run that came on after two hours of animation was even started. Hell, they'd spent most of the day on Dave's bed--with the door open, so Russ wouldn't think Dave was trying anything weird and perverted with the kid--talking about sports and cars and what it was like to actually work construction.

By Sunday, Dave knew Russell had a great kid. A kid who wasn't at all homophobic, which made sense, he figured, because Russ wasn't, either.

In fact, Jamie had a very active mind and was curious about all sorts of things. Including, like most boys of his age, sex. Which was made very clear to Dave Sunday night, while he and Jamie sat on Dave's borrowed bed eating ice cream and watching... some piece of crap Jamie liked, for whatever reason. *Dynasty* it was called, and Jamie'd been all excited when the game they'd been waiting to watch had been cancelled, but only because the station had announced the show that would be filling the unused time.

While Dave had heard of *Dynasty*, he'd never bothered to watch. Not even when he had a TV. He might have if he'd known about the allegedly bi-sexual character, though. The actor was kind of good looking in that Hollywood way. The women, on the other hand? He shuddered. They reminded him of some of the women he'd seen in Connecticut. In Boston, too. Too rich and too... polished.

"David," Jamie said softly during the next commercial, and try as he might, Dave just couldn't get the boy to call him Dave. It was always David. Dave blamed Russ. "I... can I ask you something?"

Dave shrugged, with much less pain than previously, expecting something about cars or even Dave's too brief time playing ball. "Sure, kid." Then Jamie did, and Dave thought he might faint, once he figured out the question.

"What's it like?" Jamie asked carefully. "I mean, nobody will tell me, you know? I... I've read some books. Um, Gordon Merrick, mostly, but that's not the same as *knowing*, you know? And Dad's no help. So, will you. Please, David, tell me what it's like?"

Jesus. Jesus fucking Christ. Jamie was reading Merrick? But Merrick wrote... and he was... and Dave forced himself to breathe.

God, what the hell was he supposed to say to that? How was he supposed to answer Jamie in a way that wouldn't have Russell wanting to kick Dave's ass for encouraging the boy, but wouldn't have Jamie feeling like there was something wrong with being curious, even if Dave sort of thought maybe there was.

Fuck. It hit him like a freight train, and right then. Right there. He really did believe that there was something wrong with him, Dave realized. Even with gays being more accepted than ever before, he still thought he was twisted. Wrong, in some way, like his dad had always implied. But that was something Dave was for damned sure never going to say to Jamie.

It was all prejudice, Dave told himself carefully, angrily. And he'd grown up with it, but Jamie clearly hadn't, and even though the kid was probably just going through a phase, it wasn't Dave's place to make the boy feel badly about himself. Hell, he didn't even want to, though now he was sure he'd actually heard Jamie right, on Friday. And he agreed with Russell, too.

If Jamie really was gay, it would be better for the boy to hide it until he was older, away at college or something. He still needed to give the kid an answer, though.

Dave opened his mouth with no idea of what was going to come out of it. The words that did, surprised him.

"I can't say, Jamie." He found himself nearly whispering. "I guess it's different for everyone. It feels good. Of course it does, or no one would want to do it, right? But it's not just about how it feels, it's about how it makes *you* feel." And in a radical departure from what Dave actually thought he believed, "I think a lot of it depends on your reasons, okay? A lot of guys--gay *and* straight--are just out there fucking around for the sake of fucking around, and that can get kind of old."

Jesus, Jamie was so young, so fucking hopeful. Dave could see it right there in the kid's face, the way Jamie was wishing for a future that would be happy, regardless of what gender he ended up liking when he was older. Dave couldn't let himself break that dream, no matter how much he didn't want to lie.

"I'm not gonna tell you to wait until you're married or in love or whatever, Jamie. Because you're young and you have all these damned hormones bouncing around inside you, pushing you to just do it, already." Dave sighed and ignored the twinge from his ribs.

"But when you do, just... be sure you at least like the girl. Boy. Whichever. That's important. Your first time is gonna color every time after it. It'll always be there in your mind. If you like

the person, it'll at least be a good memory. Oh, and always use rubbers. There's all sorts of freaky diseases out there, and you can catch them from anyone. No matter how healthy they look. Girls, boys... either." Though at least some other boy wouldn't get pregnant if Jamie really was gay and not just confused.

Jamie frowned then, and Dave shook his head. "Sorry, kid, but that's all I have to say. If you're still wondering in five or six years, look me up and I'll tell you whatever you want to know. But right now? Your dad would probably kill me for saying as much as I just did."

Fuck. Gordon fucking Merrick. Dave sort of doubted that Russ knew anything about his son's recreational reading habits.

"Fine," Jamie sighed, sounding sulky as all hell. "I bet Steven Carrington would tell me everything."

Dave looked at the TV and snorted softly, trying not to jar his ribs. "Yeah, right. Because he's so well adjusted. God, if he mopes around like that in every episode, it's amazing they haven't killed him off yet. Hell, I already don't like him, and I've only seen him for maybe five minutes."

Jamie laughed then, which Dave knew meant he was forgiven for *not* telling the fourteen-year-old boy things that no man of twenty-six should ever explain to any kid, gay or not.

It was forty minutes later, after the end credits had started, that Jamie looked at him again, from the doorway this time. "You know, David," he said easily, "I know you're not, but I kind of wish you were. I *thought* you were when I found out you were here." Jamie made a face that Dave thought was meant to be apologetic. "I figured you'd be some asshole, though. Then I met you and you're not. I like you. So I really wish you were, even though you're not."

Okay, and that entire thing made absolutely no sense. Not even when Dave replayed it in his mind for a second time. "Huh? You wish I was... what, kid?"

"Dating my Dad," Jamie announced, rolling his eyes, "Duh. You're *way* cooler than that jerk William. 'Don't call me Will, young man, it's William'. Heh. He probably wanted me to call him 'Mr. Worthington', but Dad never woulda gone for that. Thank God. Anyway, g'night. It was cool hanging with you. Maybe I'll see you again, sometime."

Right. Jamie was off to school in the morning, then back to his Mom's place. "Y-yeah... nice meeting you, kid..." he managed, though Dave wasn't sure how. He was too busy trying to wrap his brain around what Jamie's words had suggested. What Jamie had flat-out *stated*.

Russell... was gay. Russell was gay? Oh, good lord. *Russell*. Was *gay*!

Dave turned that thought over in his mind, then turned it over again. And again, ignoring the little thrill he felt in the pit of his stomach. Even with all the wrapping and turning, though, he just didn't get it. Didn't see how he could have missed it.

Russell, Dave's boss and sort-of friend, Dave had thought, was gay. Liked cock. Dated *men*, for fuck's sake, and Dave hadn't had a single clue, right up until the moment when Russell's probably gay son had announced it so easily. As though Jamie had been saying it was dark outside. Jesus.

The question, Dave decided a good hour later, according to the clock beside his bed, was what he was going to do about it.

He liked Russell. Had from pretty much the moment they'd met. Aside from that whole interview thing and the awkwardness and all. Hell, he even thought Russ was attractive. In fact, if Russell had been anyone else, Dave was pretty sure he would have been down the hall, crawling into what was probably an even bigger bed than the one he was lying in just then.

Fuck, he would probably have his lips wrapped around Russ' cock, moaning around the thick, bulbous, rubber-covered head he could imagine, based upon the many, many times Dave had checked out Russell's crotch through linen or cotton or denim. Even with his ribs and the still present aches that sometimes screamed, Dave would have given it a shot. If Russ was someone else. Anyone but Dave's boss. His friend, kind of. Close work associate, at the very least, though friend really might be closer, after Russ had taken him in and everything. But Russell was still the boss, even if Dave was right about the friend thing.

"And that answers that," Dave muttered, shifting just a bit to get more comfortable. "I don't do anything about it because it doesn't matter. Do I want to fuck him? Yeah. Do I want him to fuck me? Sure. But will it ever happen?" Dave snorted softly. "Not in a million fucking years. Not if I want to keep my job, anyway, and I do."

He'd learned his lesson in Hartford. No screwing around with co-workers. Screwing around with the boss would be even worse, Dave was sure. Besides, Russell didn't want him. The man got all proper and shit whenever Dave was around. Got uptight and sort of bad-stiff, no matter how well they got along.

That was a sign if he'd ever seen one, Dave realized yet again, with a good bit of relief. Russ didn't want him. And that meant Dave's life could go on just the way it had been. Once he felt well enough to go back to the motel and start working again, anyway, and that would definitely be soon.

A few days, at the most, Dave figured, and everything would go back to normal.

He was looking forward to it.

Chapter Nine

David frowned, then blinked a little as the nudge to his shoulder was repeated, pulling him from memories and sleep. "Russ...?" Because yes, he was perhaps a tiny bit out of it.

"No, David, it's Jamie. The... the Doctor's here. We need you to wake up, okay?" And it felt like going from zero to sixty in maybe three seconds, which David had actually done once. Russell had bought him three and a half hours in a race car for his thirty-fifth birthday, and it had been *amazing*. Scary, too. This was more frightening than anything else, but it was still a good simile, David thought.

He sat up quickly, barely even noting the crackling of his spine from however long he'd been slumped in the awful plastic and metal chair, and David wasn't even slightly surprised to see that Michael was there, along with Jim. He'd known they would come, just as soon as they could. "Thank you, boys. For being here," he murmured, standing slowly to let himself be enveloped in their arms.

"I'm sorry," he announced a minute or so later, as he pulled away from the comfort of family and looked at the stranger on the fringes of their group. "Jamie says you have... news?" And God help him, David thought, he just might collapse at finally hearing something. Anything.

He'd been so sure that he wanted information, but now that the moment was here, now that he might hear the words that would end what had been a nearly idyllic existence, David wasn't nearly as impatient as he'd been. Thought it might be better not to know for certain, except... "I... please." God, was he crying again? He couldn't tell.

The doctor looked at him, something in the man's face saying that he was trying to decide how much to say in front of everyone, and David swallowed hard. He reached out, finding hands that slid into his own and gripped tightly, as well as other hands that rested on his back, and that was about as grounded as he was going to get, he knew.

"Please, Doctor," David said carefully, glad to notice that his voice was steadier, less thready and thin than it had been seconds earlier. "Tell me what's happened with my... my Russ."

The doctor--Dr. J. Fabray, according to the hospital I.D. tag hanging from the white jacket he wore--smiled slightly and stepped a bit closer. "Well, it's not entirely good news, to be honest, but it isn't exactly bad, either. The damage is fairly extensive, but nothing like it would have been with a larger caliber bullet."

David took a sharp, shallow breath, his heart hammering away as he tried to decide whether to focus on the *not good* or the *not bad* portion of the doctor's words.

"What do you mean by 'extensive'?" Jamie asked then, his hand tight on David's. "I understand that you can't be completely sure yet, but..."

A small shrug lifted Dr. Fabray's shoulders for just a moment and David bit his lip to keep himself from saying... he didn't know what. Nothing that would make any sense, he was sure. His throat felt swollen shut, just as his eyes felt hot and sticky and wet.

"The wound itself," the doctor said, "while serious enough, seems to have had more of an excising effect, rather than invasive. We were able to repair a fair bit of the damage, but there's still a lot we don't know about the brain. There are a lot of details I could give you, but frankly, the most important thing here is that Mr. Harwell got lucky. In a way."

David heard Michael and Jim behind him, Jim clearly shushing Michael, but David didn't look at them, didn't comment. He couldn't force himself to look away from the doctor, who seemed to be offering hope with one hand while snatching it back with the other.

"Define 'in a way,'" Elliot growled, and yes, that was good. David's mouth wasn't working just then, but Elliot was speaking for him.

Dr. Fabray's eyebrows rose, the man's eyes darting to Elliot. "He's alive. The damage to Mr. Hartwell's occipital and parietal lobes is minimal, as far as any brain injury can be considered minimal. Assuming the bleeding and swelling follow normal parameters, there's a very good chance that he'll *remain* alive. It's even possible that Mr. Hartwell will recover to a substantial degree."

The bullet had passed through the back of Russell's head, the doctor went on. It had taken some bone and tissue with it on its way out, though, emerging less than two inches from where it had entered.

Jamie likened it to slicing off the corner of a fingernail, which made David shudder, because it wasn't a fingernail; it was his husband's *skull*.

"We'll be keeping a very close eye on him in the ICU," Dr. Fabray added, "but I'm comfortable with saying that I'm cautiously optimistic. Barring any unforeseen complications, Mr. Hartwell stands a very good chance of recovering fairly well."

Even in the best case scenario, there would still be months, maybe years, of physical therapy; possibly even special sessions to retrain Russ' brain if there were spatial issues, which there might be. David understood that. Hell, Russell might have to relearn everything--how to dress himself, how to make his eyes focus... and there might be problems with perception of colors and such, but David couldn't help being optimistic.

Not foolishly so, of course, because there was zero chance of Russell simply waking up after everything that had happened and being fine. But David could handle that, he told himself, still smiling a little. Barring infection--which was still a danger, even in post-op--Russell would likely still be himself, once he woke up. Weak, yes. Damaged, certainly. But still Russell; still the man David had fallen so hard for, all those years ago. All those years that seemed like forever, but also like a mere blink of time.

"I know, children," David murmured as the doctor left them, finally able to speak. He refused to believe anything but the best, now that he knew--with a reasonable degree of certainty--that his world hadn't ended. That it went on, still beating away in Russell's chest. "I know. But we'll make it through this. Russell will, as well as the rest of us." He nodded, squeezing hands and patting backs before falling into one of the horribly uncomfortable chairs again. "We will. I'll not allow anything else."

He let the boys talk him in to going home to shower and change, and it was just as well, David realized, because he thought he could still feel Russell's blood on him. Even in places it couldn't possibly be.

Jamie and Elliot accompanied him, of course, because they needed a little bit of down time, too, before the three of them returned to the hospital, where Michael and Jim were keeping watch. They were being aided by the rather lovely Christine, who had been recommended by the too-pretty male nurse whose name David couldn't recall. Christine had flagged Russell's chart on the hospital computer for them, even though she wasn't supposed to do so. Any new information would be directed to her, and from her to the boys; then to David, Jamie and Elliot.

That being the case, David felt relatively comfortable with cleaning up a bit before returning to see his husband. Hell, he figured he needed the time, if he was being honest. He'd seen other people after surgeries, after all, and they never looked more than minimally alive, no matter how well they recovered later. David needed to prepare himself as much as he could for what he would see when he looked at Russ.

"I don't expect to be more than an hour or two," he told the boys, hoping they wouldn't mind rushing back that soon. "I'll just shower and change, perhaps pack a few things for Russell. For when he's feeling better. A robe. Definitely pajamas. You know how much he's likely to hate that hospital gown." David shuddered. Russ would never be happy in anything that left his ass hanging out for all to see. Neither would David. Russell's ass was *his* to look at, not anyone else's.

It was only when Elliot cleared his throat that David started to suspect he'd been set up. He was sure of it a few seconds later, when Elliot finally spoke. "Um... Christine said--and the *doctor* said--Russ is gonna be out of it for hours; maybe days. So we were thinking. I mean, *I* was thinking..."

And David actually heard the moment when Elliot stopped trying to be gentle, because that low voice got stronger, rougher. "Look, David. It's gonna be a while. And I know you think you need to be right there, but there's no visitors in post-op, and even when he's in ICU they only let family in for like five minutes at a time. Mike and Jim will call us if anything happens, so I think--we think it's a good idea if you take your time. Shower. Eat. Sleep, for fuck's sake! You're not gonna be any help to Russ when he wakes up if you're all... fucking exhausted from trying to sleep on those torture devices the fucking hospital calls chairs, okay?"

The fact that Jamie was standing right there behind Elliot, looking like he agreed with the sentiment of Elliot's words if not the words themselves, was the only thing that kept David from saying something he probably would have regretted later. As it was, though... Jamie had always been level-headed, even when he'd been a whiny teenager. Much like Russ, David admitted silently, though not the teenager part, because he hadn't known the man then.

"I... we'll need to retrieve the car, then. Soon, unless it's been towed." Which was entirely possible, David realized, and that just added insult to injury. The thought that the city of Boston might have towed Russell's car because it was possibly in a time-limited spot while Russ was fighting for his life in an operating room was just... God, it was yet another thing to hate about the entire situation.

"I need to get Russell's car," David said again, his voice thick and desperate and slightly irrational, even to his own ears. "Russ loves that car." And with that, David turned tail and ran, taking the stairs to the second floor as quickly as possible, leaving Jamie and Elliot as far behind as he could, just then. He needed to be alone. To find his own way through the relief he was feeling, as well as the fear, the anguish, the hatred for whoever it was that had done this awful thing to his lover.

Then he was standing in the doorway of the bedroom that had been *theirs* for more than twenty years. He stared, suddenly seeing it as though for the first time, and it wasn't that different from the way it had been the first time.

The furniture was the same. Heavy wood, dark and elegant. Antiques now, probably. The colors hadn't changed much, either, because both David and Russell had always been fond of deep, rich shades. Forest green rugs on the floor, burgundy drapes with matching green trim. So-soft silk-velvet quilt on the bed, custom made in their third year together, when David had mentioned how much he loved the soft nap of velvet against his skin... and lots and lots of pillows.

God, Russ loved pillows. All shapes and sizes, all sorts of fabrics. They'd had at least ten on the bed at a time, even though David had always thought it was a little bit stupid. Of course, that meant there was always something to shove under Russ' hips--or his own--and bite down on when they got carried away, so maybe not so stupid after all

Just like that, David was sobbing. Harder than he'd done at the hospital when he'd been so sure Russell was dead, even. Harder and deeper than he'd ever sobbed in his life, and he knew it.

He found himself on the bed a few minutes later, could still hear the echoing slam of the bedroom door. His face was buried in Russ' pillow, just breathing in the scent of his husband, his lover, his... everything, and it wasn't enough. Would never *be* enough, not until Russell was home and healthy and entirely David's again.

David kicked off the shoes he'd been wearing for far too long, not caring where they landed. He'd be throwing them out, after all. He would never wear them again, or anything else he'd had on when some fucking asshole had tried to destroy his world.

More minutes later, and David was naked, clothes tossed away with disgust; then he pushed himself into and under the mussed sheets because they'd never gotten around to making the bed that... wonderful morning that had led to such a horrific night.

He imagined that he could feel the heat of Russell's body still trapped within the covers; told himself that if he tried hard enough, he'd be able to feel Russ' arms around him, just as they'd been the last time they'd woken together. David twisted himself in the coverings, wrapped them around his body and Russell's pillow until he couldn't move, could barely breathe. And then he inhaled slowly, drawing Russell's scent into him, letting it fill his senses, fill his soul.

It wasn't a complete sort of peace, because that would have to wait until Russ was home and right there with him, but David felt a little less scattered, somehow. A little less... wrong. And it was enough, he decided. For the moment, it was enough. It had to be.

He didn't notice it when his eyes closed. Didn't notice much, other than the fact that he felt... floaty. Hell, David didn't even realize that the familiar scents and sensations of home and Russ and their bed had him slipping into slumber, a wistful smile on his lips.

Chapter Ten

Two and a half weeks since he'd been back at work, and Dave was almost obscenely proud of himself.

He'd left Russell's house after Russell's lawyer arranged to have Dave's car released from the police impound lot. He'd also gone back to the dive he'd been staying at, which seemed even more dingy and pathetic after his time at Russell's. He'd been better, though, so it had been time to return to his hovel.

Work had been hard at first, but while the guys had been sympathetic about Dave's "mugging", they hadn't treated him like an invalid. Sure, they'd helped out when it had been obvious that Dave couldn't quite manage to lift something or move as many cases of shit as he'd been able to before, but they hadn't been all smug and snide about it. Just "hey, I'll take that if you'll carry this", which was... damned fucking cool, Dave thought.

The project was going well, too, even if Manny had been a little annoyed by how long Dave had been out. "No one else gets it, kid," Manny said on Dave's second day back. "They just see the work, not the building."

It was good to be back. Good to be feeling the stretch and burn in his muscles, even if Dave thought he should be used to it again, by then. Hell, his bruises were gone, his ribs were mostly healed, and even though his nose hadn't set quite straight, it was fine. He was a guy, after all, so who cared whether he had a little bend there?

So, yeah. He was working again, doing his job pretty much as well as he had from the start, with the minor exception of not being able to lift things the way he'd done before. Even that would be back to normal in another week or so, though, so what did he have to complain about?

Nothing, Dave growled to himself, as Russell wandered through the site in hard hat and work clothes. Nothing, except... God, it had to be his imagination. There was no possible way that Russ' pants got tighter every day. There was no chance that Russell was spending more and more time out of the trailer, "inspecting" things near wherever Dave happened to be working that day.

And there wasn't even a single snowball's chance in Hell that Russell was deliberately posing against the steel girder across the way for *Dave's* benefit. It just wasn't possible, except...

Those blue-blue eyes were looking in his direction, and while Russell's thumb was hooked in a belt loop of the man's jeans, the rest of those long, elegant fingers were sort of stroking over Russell's groin, and when Dave really looked, he noticed that Russell was not just staring his way, but staring at... well, something a good two feet or so below Dave's face.

And there was definitely something there for Russ to look at, Dave admitted with what he thought was a silent groan. He just hoped none of the guys noticed.

"Oh, for Christ's sake," Manny grunted, giving Dave what seemed like an amused but irritated smile. "Just get a room, okay? Maybe then we'll be able to get some actual work done. Because this whole 'you watching Russ, Russ watching you' thing is starting to get tired. Besides," and this time Manny's grin was less annoyed and more laughing, "the pool's up to about five hundred bucks, and Joyce has her heart set on a rabbit fur jacket. So get a move on, Dave. I'll be really pissed if Jonas beats me by a day."

It was the first hint Dave had that at least some of his co-workers suspected--knew--what he was, and it was... terrifying. But also not, considering what Manny had said about there being a...

"Pool?" Dave snarled, "There's a 'pool'? Why would you even think I was..." Jesus. A pool. On when he and Russell would fuck. Christ.

Then Manny was snorting and shaking his head, even while shouting out for Jason to start measuring a second time. "Calm down, kid," he said, and Dave couldn't even make himself *try*. "Everyone knows which way the boss swings. Didn't take more than a month of you not going out to the titty-bars with the guys for us to wonder. Then Rob saw you heading out from that fucking shit-hole you live in, about a week later, and..."

Manny shrugged. "Look, kid. No harm, yeah? You're cool. Good at your job. You don't hit on anyone here, or even stare like you're interested. And this crew--Russ' crew--isn't made up of fag-hating assholes, okay? Shit, the boss saw to that after his Dad died. And if you wanna know the truth, Tom Hartwell didn't stand for that kind of shit, either. Not even *before* Russ owned up and did the right thing by getting divorced."

Manny chuckled, and Dave figured that was a good thing because he was entirely speechless.

"Guess what I'm saying, kid, is go for it. Hell, never seen anyone look so hungry as you two do when you think no one's looking. Fuck, if Russ wasn't still so tense and shit, I'd think you two were doing it while you were 'getting better' after that so-called mugging of yours."

Dave's head was swimming for the rest of the day, and even though he knew he'd worked, he couldn't have said what all he'd done, even if his life depended on it. All he knew was...

Manny had noticed his attraction to Russell. Had even implied that Russ was interested, too.

Russ had been looking at him. Possibly more than Dave thought.

And Russ had been standing just a hundred or so feet away that afternoon. Standing and staring and rubbing his cock through his too-tight-for-work jeans.

There was a fucking *pool*, for Christ's sake! And yet...

And yet...

Russell still got all proper-sounding and reserved when he was talking to Dave. Acted like they were barely even on speaking terms since Dave had gone back to the motel, unless it was something to do with work. Even then, Russ sounded like spending enough time with Dave in order to share information was a hardship.

It was fucking confusing. And Manny was wrong, anyway, Dave decided. If Russ wanted him--even a little bit--the man would have just said so. It was what men did.

"I want you." Simple. Easy. Up front. Or up behind. Whichever. Then there was fucking or sucking or even just hands and skin and rubbing. That was normal, reasonable.

Not some weird fucking gazing and staring and lurking around, hoping...what? That Dave would somehow notice, all of a sudden, and give Russ some sort of signal?

Well, maybe, Dave figured, but how much bolder could he be than getting hard every time Russell wandered within fifty feet of him? And... and Russ had kids, damn it! Going to bed with a guy with kids--especially when Dave had met one of them and liked him--kind of meant something more. Especially if the guy was a good dad and not a slut, which Dave knew Russ was. The first, rather than the second.

"I don't want that anyway," Dave told himself out loud, his voice breaking the silence since the radio in his car had given up the ghost a few days earlier. "I don't want... Fuck, I do so. I want Russ. I just don't know if I can handle it when he gets tired of me."

Because that was the problem. That was *Dave's* problem. He wanted Russell, but he also wanted... more.

More than a night, more than two or even three. More than shaking orgasms, though those were always a good thing... and more than just a few long, sweaty bouts of skin and cocks and asses and rubbers that would only leave him wanting things he couldn't have.

Gay men didn't look for forever, after all, and no matter how much Dave might want a... fuck, a commitment? That just didn't happen between guys. No matter how much one of them might want it. No matter how much... well. No matter. It wasn't going to happen.

Hell, Dave told himself over and over, he should just go back to his motel and stroke off. Or maybe go to the Horny Bull and see what he could find.

But he was still sore around the ribs, he justified, and he didn't have any rubbers with him, and by the time he went back to his place, then got rubbers and lube, then showered and changed and headed out again, the pickings would be damned slim, and...

And he was even trying to lie to himself. He knew it.

He wanted Russ, for fuck's sake. Not some nameless guy in a fucking bar. Russ.

And he was for damned sure going to have him, or at least try.

Dave was nervous. Not the twitchy kind of nervous, either. No, he was the bone-deep-shaking, dry-mouthed kind of nervous, but he was still standing there on Russell's front steps, and that had to count for something.

Of course, he'd been there for a good five minutes, hand rising to push the button for the doorbell at least twenty times before dropping to his side again without ever quite managing the task.

Christ, what if Manny was wrong? Hell, what if Manny was just fucking with him, having a joke at Dave's expense? Worse yet, what if Russ answered the door and already had someone inside? It was possible, Dave thought, looking back at the tree-lined street and the rows of luxury cars sitting curbside. Fuck, his little shit-box Toyota stood out like a sore thumb. And Jesus, another fucking dirty-ass white pickup. Yeah, Dave decided, for sure this time. When and if he ever had enough money for a truck, it was going to be blue.

And he was stalling. He knew he was stalling. It was stupid and cowardly and nothing like the bold Dave he had always believed himself to be, but he was for damned sure doing it. Not doing it. Whatever. He was just standing there in his one good pair of jeans, trying to think of anything but the reason he was at Russell's house.

He didn't even know what he was planning to say, assuming he ever made himself ring the damned bell, because "Hey, Russ, I know you barely know me, but I thought maybe you were watching me, and if you were, does it mean you want to fuck? Because I could do that" was maybe a little too blunt, especially when the man he might say it to was his boss. Even more so when it wasn't exactly the whole truth.

Still, it was worlds better than "I know we're both guys, but let's date, okay? With sex. Lots and lots of sex," which would likely have Russell running away screaming. Or telling Dave kindly--because Russ had always been kind, really--that he appreciated the thought, but they weren't women, and men didn't date each other. That he should just go home to his shit-hole motel, because that was a much better place for Dave to have a nice, girly cry.

"This was a stupid idea," Dave growled to himself as he turned and started down to the street, each step making him more sure. "Stupid idea and a huge mistake, too. Fuck." Then there was suddenly light behind him, and he realized someone had opened the front door of Russell's house, and "Fuck!" he said again, a little bit louder, this time.

"David?" And yeah, Russ sounded surprised. But also kind of worried. "David, what's wrong? Is it something with the site?" It was an out, and Dave latched on to it with both metaphorical hands.

"Yeah," he said quickly. "Yeah, Russ, it's..." and then he turned around and couldn't help staring. "Um, but you're going out. You look..." Sexy. Stunning. Fucking edible. "Well, you're all dressed up."

Russell flapped one hand, the gesture clearly brushing aside the importance of whatever plans he'd had. "Bob Rogers is having another of his so-boring soirees. He only invites me because I contributed to his campaign, but I must say... While he is a rather brilliant politician, his charisma is solely for the cameras. In actual life, he's a bit more dull than a bowl of plain oatmeal. Now, please. Come inside, David, and tell me what has you here looking so... flustered."

Christ, Dave realized, he'd already forgotten whatever he was going to say about the site. Just seeing Russ in an actual suit had forced it from his mind completely. "Um, no. No, it's okay. I was just, um, not too far from here and figured I'd stop by and tell you about... something. But you have plans, and I can tell you tomorrow, so it's fine. I... I'll just go, okay?"

He had no idea of how he ended up in Russell's living room, but that was where Dave found himself, maybe a minute later. Russ was a few feet away, and the soft clinking of glass made it clear that the man was pouring drinks. From an actual decanter, Dave saw, when Russ joined him and sat just a few feet away.

"So, David. Perhaps you might tell me what it is that has actually brought you here, hmmm? I don't wish to imply that you were lying to me out front, but the fact is that there is nothing in this entire area that would be of enough interest to have you 'nearby,' is there? Thus, I am assuming that you're here to some purpose. Would I be correct?"

Jesus, why did Russ have to be fucking smart? Why couldn't he just take Dave's word for it and go on to his society function or whatever, so Dave could just go home and... well, mope.

"Christ," Dave grumbled before tossing back the three fingers of Scotch, Bourbon, whatever the hell it was that Russell had handed him. "It's not important, okay? I just. Manny said something today and it got me thinking, and..."

"Ah..." Damn it, Russell sounded surprised. And sort of disappointed, which really wasn't helping any, Dave decided as Russ went on. "Is this about... that is to say, have you actually decided to consider... well, of course you have; what else could it be? I had hoped... but this is good news. I will call to arrange testing in the morning. As I said before, it will take a week or so to get things organized. Is that enough time to acquire your transcripts? If it would help, I'd be happy to call the college myself."

Again, it was an out, but somehow Dave wasn't anything like as anxious to latch on to it as he'd been before. Not when he was sitting there just inches--lots of inches, but still inches--away from Russell's long body. "I... um, okay. I guess we... I could test and shit."

Then Russ was blinking just a bit and sipping his own drink. "You don't sound terribly excited, David. Please tell me this isn't something you're doing merely because Manny has managed to wear you down."

"It's not," Dave answered, because what else was he going to say? 'I thought you meant something else and I was thinking about sex, not school'? Right. At least he knew now that Russ wasn't interested, no matter what Manny thought. "So, now I told you, and I guess I'll head on home, okay? Um, thanks for the drink."

"You're welcome, of course," Russell said, and Dave could hear Russ' footsteps behind him, those shiny dress shoes just tapping away at the polished wood floor. "I wonder if I might ask you a question, however. David?"

Dave sighed and nodded, even as he turned around to meet Russell's curious gaze. "Sure, Russ. What's up?" Then those blue eyes dropped, stopping at Dave's groin, and Russell nodded sharply, seemed to come to some sort of decision.

"Apparently, David, *you* are. At least partially. I find myself wondering whether that is the sign of a rather perverted delight in education, or if it might possibly have something to do with the company. By which I mean me personally, rather than TRH."

Dave was blinking, unable to speak, even though he knew his mouth was opening and closing as though he was reciting the secrets of the universe. "I... huh?" Okay. Words. Good. He could talk. Except he couldn't, because Russ was shrugging out of that sleek black suit jacket, and Dave could suddenly see that Russell's pants were tented a bit, and... oh, God. No words at all. He was back to the shaking, dry-mouthed nervous thing again.

"I must admit that I am quite hoping it to be the latter option, David. If so, there's much less chance of you suing me when I kiss you. And make no mistake, dearest. I *am* going to kiss you. I have had enough of wanting and waiting. To do so any longer, when you're right here in front of me, would be... criminal."

Then Russell was there, in Dave's space, those long fingers finding skin, somehow, while that thin-lipped mouth closed over Dave's own, and Russ was right, Dave admitted. Not doing this, not feeling this, *would* be criminal. Hell, it even felt good enough to be illegal, anyway, which maybe it was, because Dave wasn't sure. Didn't care, either. Not when Russell's tongue was pressing, prodding, asking Dave's lips to let it in.

"Fuck, yes," he thought he groaned, but he didn't hear anything but grunts, moans... loud, sucking breaths from himself and Russ as their mouths moved harder, faster, tongues sliding deep while nostrils flared, drawing in enough air to let them keep going, to not stop, to never even pause in their hungry explorations.

Fuck, he was gonna come in his pants. He knew it. But that was fine because it felt like Russ was just as close, just as ready. Dave was pretty sure, anyway, because every rock he made against Russell's body was met in kind, and those hands... Jesus fucking Christ, those hands were down the back of Dave's pants, fingers kneading his naked ass, and Dave didn't know when Russ had unzipped his jeans, but Dave didn't care. Didn't care about anything but touching Russell, too. Feeling that hot, smooth skin under his own fingers.

He fumbled for a moment, trying to get at Russell's pants, but was sidetracked by the man's shirt. The buttons didn't make sense, wouldn't cooperate, and finally Dave just grabbed the fabric at either side of the placard and yanked, laughing into Russ' mouth when small bits of metal went flying and one hole ripped.

"God, David," Russ groaned, pulling away for just a second or so to offer up a shaky smile, "what did my shirt studs ever do to offend you?"

"They were being stubborn," Dave growled, licking his lips at the tight white T-shirt Russell wore under the even whiter dress shirt. "Gonna kill your undershirt, too, if it doesn't get the fuck out of my way." And they were kissing again and it was... fuck, even better, Dave realized. Hotter. Wetter. Deeper. Less sloppy as they learned each other. Fucking awesome.

Dave had no idea of how they'd gotten to Russell's bedroom, though he had a very vague recollection of stairs and halting steps as they tried not to break their clench, so he thought they might have walked. Stumbled. Maybe staggered. It didn't matter, though, because they were there and Russell wasn't wearing those damned shirts any more. Wasn't wearing anything but open pants and socks, in fact, and the pants were just barely hanging on to Russ' lean hips.

"I hope I'm not... rushing you," Russell pushed out, sounding breathless and so damned ready that Dave could only shake his head while Russ' strong, long-fingered hands pushed denim and cotton away. "But I've wanted you, dearest. For so long. This. Oh, damn. David. This is going to be over far too quickly."

And there was something to be said for fast, Dave knew. He was familiar with fast and hard, after all. But this was Russell, and God, Dave wanted more. Wanted slow and sweet, even, but neither of them were in any sort of shape to hold out that long, and Dave knew it.

"Fuck, man," he moaned, shaking his head, "just lose the pants and lie down. I'll blow you first. We can do the rest later, okay?" And they would, too, because they had all fucking night. Dave had decided. No rushing off as soon as he came. Not this time. Not with Russell.

They would come, maybe kiss some more... and when they were ready, Dave was going to open himself wide for the prick he hadn't even seen naked yet. "Come on, Russ. Pants. Off. Let me make you come."

Yeah, he thought, licking his lips when Russ actually obeyed, letting Dave get a good look at thick, hard, deep red flesh. Not too long, but that girth more than made up for it, and who really needed more than six inches or so, anyway?

Not him, Dave decided, and he sort of thought his grin might be a touch predatory, because Russell seemed to be a little bit scared and a whole lot turned on. He was backing away from Dave, in any case, while his so-nice cock just dribbled and tinged the air with a scent Dave wanted more of.

Christ, it sucked that he'd be tasting fucking latex instead of Russ, but he would deal. He'd have to. Except "Fuck! This isn't good, damn it!" He didn't have any rubbers. They were all back at his room, and...

"What is it? What's wrong?" Russ sounded worried, then those bluer than blue eyes closed for a second and when they opened again, Dave couldn't quite figure out why they were so... muted. "Ah. I see. Well. Perhaps another time, then. Or not. I... I apologize, David." And okay, that explained it. Still, it wasn't all Russell's fault.

"No," Dave answered with a disappointed groan. "I should have thought of it before I even came here, but seriously, Russ? I guess I didn't figure you were interested, no matter what it seemed like. I should have... fuck. I should have brought some. I just didn't think about it, and now? Here we are, hard as fuck, and ready, willing and able. Except we don't have any fucking *rubbers*! Shit!" He groaned again, then threw himself the three feet or so onto the bed, appreciating the way it bounced under his weight. "We could just rub off, I guess. Or go to my place, even if it *is* a shit hole..."

Okay, Dave told himself, making a mental note, Russ had the whole mood swing thing down pat. Because those eyes were hot again, raking over Dave's body, and if anything, Russell's cock was even harder, small dribbles of nearly clear fluid bubbling from its head. He could see that much very well, and even better when Russ sat down beside him on the end of the bed.

"I am exceedingly pleased to hear that you prefer protected sex, David," Russell murmured right into Dave's ear, and Dave shivered a little bit at the warm breath against his cheek. "I do, as well. And if that is truly the only difficulty here, then perhaps you will allow me to supply the appropriate items."

Oh, for fuck's sake! Russell was back to sounding all prim and proper... which was kind of funny, considering the fact that they were both hard, and naked, and on Russ' bed with rubbers somewhere nearby and the intention of using them. Actually, it was more than sort of. It was fucking hilarious, which was what had Dave laughing.

Fortunately, Russell understood--even agreed--when Dave explained his seemingly inappropriate humor. "Yes, well," Russ said quietly, once his chuckles had ended, as well, "it's something of a reflex. Some people stammer when they get nervous. Others fidget. I tend to... well."

"Sound like a stuck up jackass?" Dave offered with a grin, "Because you kinda do. And, wait a minute. You always sound like that when you're talking to me. Does that mean you're..."

"Always nervous?" Russell answered with a shy grin and a deep blush. "Yes. I have been. I did say that I've wanted you for ages. In this particular case, 'ages' translates as... from the moment you walked into the trailer and talked your way in to a job." Russ blushed even deeper, and Dave tried not to grin. "I'm rather ashamed to say that I would likely have hired you even if you hadn't known which end of a hammer drove nails. Now, have we finished embarrassing me yet? I believe there was a blow job on offer, after all."

Oh. Oh, yeah. No more laughing. For the moment, anyway, Dave decided. Still, it was good to know that Russ had a sense of humor. Almost as good as knowing Russ had "Rubbers?" Dave demanded, licking his lips again as he gazed into Russell's lap. "God, Russ. Want to swallow you."

The speed with which Russell rolled from the end of the mattress and got to the table beside the bed was fucking awesome. Told Dave that Russell was still as into what was going to happen as Dave was, himself. Even though the laughter, brief as it had been, had let them both calm a bit.

And that was good thing, Dave decided, as he rolled the latex down over Russ' thick dick. It meant he would have time to actually learn the prick he was getting ready to blow. Time to really feel it, to experiment a little and find out what Russell truly liked.

"Good. Good, David. Already so good," and that was almost funny, because all Dave had done so far was get Russ' cock sheathed and wrap his fingers around the base.

"About to get better, honey," Dave heard himself mutter, and it was true. He was sure of that much. He was damned good at sucking cock. "Just let me..."

He took one playful swipe of the tongue across Russ' tip, wrinkled his nose at the taste, then looked up into Russell's eyes and winked as he pursed his lips tight, resting them against the rubber he'd just lapped. Then Dave pushed down, mouth slowly opening, lips still tight as he took that thick flesh deep.

"Fuck!" Russell grunted, and Dave's eyes widened. He could count the number of times he'd heard Russ say that on one hand and still have fingers left over. "Jesus fuck, dearest! You're... God, just... let me..." And then there was moving and shifting, and Dave just went along with it, never releasing the cock in his mouth, just taking it in deeper, pushing until the thick, bulbous head was lodged deep at the back of his throat.

God, Russ felt good in his mouth. Like he belonged there. Not too long, which only meant that when Russell thrust, Dave didn't choke. Not too short, either, and that let Dave have that one moment he loved, over and over. The moment when the tip of someone's cock pressed just right, blocked his airway for a bare second.

Usually, that only led to Dave trying to control the way someone was fucking his mouth because he really didn't want to suffocate on cock, and he was kind of afraid that he might when a guy pushed deeper, going for more tightness, more sucking heat and friction, but with Russ... oh, it was fucking perfect. A thick plug of a cock that could only go so deep, that throbbed on his tongue when Dave pulled back. Yeah... just fucking right.

"Come on... come on, David... fuck, just let me..." Russell's hands were on his skin and Dave couldn't help doing whatever they wanted. Just moved, shifted more. And when he felt tight slickness on his own dick, he moaned. Oh, God. Oh, fucking God!

The thin layer of rubber kept him from exploding as soon as he felt Russell's mouth close around him, but only barely. Then that heat was sliding over him, so damned good, and Dave felt the world move--literally, because he was suddenly on his side, and so was Russ--and oh. Just... *oh*. Oh, and yes, and more, and... God, just like that. Because Russell could suck cock, too, and damned well, at that. He couldn't take more than the first five inches of Dave's, but that was fine. That was... well, the whole sixty-nine thing was more of a bonus than anything else.

And then it was much more. It was fire and heat and throbbing balls. It was Russell moaning around Dave's shaft, the vibrations traveling through every inch of Dave's body and then some. It was shattering, breaking, stunningly unexpected, and when Dave came, he did it with a silent shout as he felt Russ shivering, shuddering, that fine, thick cock held deep in Dave's throat as he swallowed repeatedly, in time with the pulses he could feel against his tongue.

Hours or minutes later, because Dave couldn't manage to track time, they lay side by side on Russell's bed, both of them still panting slightly. "Fuck, Russ," Dave whispered, staring at the ceiling with its raised patterns picked out in gold leaf, "That was... Jesus fucking Christ. And you said 'fuck'. I heard you." He grinned.

Russell's hand found his, there on the rumpled blankets, then squeezed lightly. "Yes, well. When one is having his brains sucked out through his cock, I believe 'fuck' to be an entirely appropriate and reasonable expression of appreciation, don't you?"

Well, okay. Yeah. Dave couldn't argue that. Even so... "Having your filthy-dirty potty-mouth wrapped around my cock said 'thanks' even better," Dave answered with a grin. "Hey, what do they call that textured, patterned shit on the ceiling, anyway? I don't think I've ever seen it before, except maybe at my Gram's, but she died when I was a kid."

"I do not have a dirty mouth. Especially when compared to that of a certain young man who happens to be naked and in my bed right now. And they're tin patterns. There was a time when they were made by hand, but as with most things, they are mass produced these days." Then Russell was leaning up, perched on one elbow as he looked down into Dave's eyes, which felt... weird, for some reason. Possibly because he'd only had sex in an actual bed once before, Dave decided.

"I don't wish to discuss architectural design elements at the moment, David," Russell said next. "I do, however, want to thank you. For coming here tonight. For saving me from an endlessly miserable evening during which I would likely have drank far too much champagne and woken up with more than one headache." He smiled. "And for not being a... what do they call it? Oh, yes. A size queen. Though I must admit myself to be somewhat in awe of your..." And Dave got another blush, which was just too damned cool.

"My what?" Dave teased, one hand dropping to brush lightly over his own dick. "My cock? Prick? Throbbing muscle of love?" He winked. "My zipper lizard? Pulsing shaft of man-meat? Oh, wait! I know! My spitting, one-eyed trouser snake!"

He looked down, smirking as his cock twitched under his own light touch. "I guess it's not bad. Yours is thicker, though. Fatter. I mean, I just know I'm gonna feel it for *days* after you fuck me, Russ. Every time I sit down or even move."

And that soft, needy groan was what he'd been going for, so Dave figured he'd done exactly what he'd intended, which was getting Russell to think about shoving that so-nice prick right up Dave's ass. Maybe even thinking about what Dave's eight and a half or so would feel like buried deep in Russ' little hole, but whatever. As long as he could have Russ opening him wide, spreading him and driving deep, Dave didn't care if morning came without his own cock even coming close to Russell's ass. He'd never seen a cock as thick as Russ', but he could imagine how damned good it would feel.

The look on Russell's face was stunned, though. Shocked, even, and Dave had no idea of why, which bothered him. It shouldn't have, because they were just fucking around, having fun, spending time... whatever not so charming euphemism fit. That look did bother him, though. Like Russell wasn't quite sure of whether he should believe what Dave said.

"Tell me," Dave heard himself demanding, and that was so far removed from his usual methods that he cringed on the inside. Of course, his usual methods didn't involve going to his boss' house and ending up in an actual bed, either. The usual was more like... let someone buy him a drink, then go off to some dark corner and fuck before zipping up and walking away without a backward glance. This was different. Completely. Jesus, he actually cared about what Russ might say. It was weird. A little bit scary, but also just... not.

"Not so much to tell, dearest," Russell murmured after lying back down, apparently admiring the same ceiling Dave had been looking at earlier. "I have simply had a... variety of lovers who for the most part chose to believe that my lack of length implied an inability to please them, and thus largely refused any interest I might have had in... How shall I put this?"

"Driving?" Dave offered, up on his own elbow now as he stared down at Russell with shock. "You're kidding, right? Jesus, how fucking selfish are the guys you usually fuck? And how fucking stupid? Because anyone who's taken even Freshman biology knows the prostate is only like... a few inches inside a guy's body. And seriously, Russ? With as thick as you are, I doubt you could keep yourself from giving any man the ride of his life." Then Dave blushed as those wide blue eyes dropped from the ceiling and speared his own. "Um, if you really want to test that theory, I'm all about helping out. With the, um... testing. Experimenting. Whatever."

Chapter Eleven

David woke with a smile on his face, warm and comfortable in his own bed. He murmured softly, then rolled a few feet, hand searching for Russell's smooth skin, because the light streaming through the window across the room made it abundantly clear that it had to be the weekend. They'd have been up and about hours earlier, otherwise. It was only when his search yielded nothing but cool sheets that he sat up.

"Russ?" he called softly. "Honey?" And then it all came rushing back.

It hit him like a blow to the chest, a harsh, sharp pain. Russell. Hospital. Surgery. Their boys. Home. *Christ*.

David didn't know how long he sat there, tangled in the sheets, staring at the same ceiling he'd noticed that first night. Didn't care, either. The house was silent but for his own rough breaths, and it was too... too much.

An eternity later, he heard movements in the hallway, and even with remembering, his heart leapt with hope. Then he heard Elliot's voice mumbling, though not the words, and Jamie's saying something or other in reply, and David forced himself to work his way out from the twisted mass of blankets.

The boys were awake, after all, which meant they could go back to Russell soon. Just as soon as David managed a quick shower, got himself dressed, and packed a few things for his husband.

"Russell is going to wake up soon," he told himself sternly, the words echoing just a bit in the bathroom as hot water poured down over David's head, his back. "He's going to wake up, and he's going to want to see me, and he's going to be fine, damn it. No matter how long it takes." Because David was through crying. It was time he acted like the strong, capable man he'd become over the last two decades with Russell.

He made a mental list of things he needed to do that day, as well as which could be farmed out to the boys; the girls, too, if they'd made it to Boston yet.

Get Russell's car. Go by the office to let people know where and how to reach David if their General Manager couldn't handle something. Talk to the doctor--like a rational human being, this time--and find out *exactly* what was going on with Russ' head, no matter how long it took. And then he would call around, David decided, to see whether there was a specialist who could or should be called in.

Russell would have the best, if David could arrange it, and David was good at arranging things. In this case, though, he would move Heaven and Earth, as well as Hell if he had to. Some fucking homophobic jackass wasn't going to rob him of Russ. Not in David's lifetime.

He was feeling determined, stronger than he had earlier, and possibly, David admitted, a little bit militant, when he made his way down to the kitchen, following the scent of freshly brewed coffee. He didn't get even a little bit teary when he realized that either Jamie or Elliot had brewed Russell's favorite, Columbian Mountain Blue, rather than the hazelnut flavor David preferred. In fact, it only made him that much more intent on carrying out his plan.

Once the plan was in place, everything would go just the way David wanted it to. That was how the world worked, and he wasn't going to let that change.

"Good morning, boys," he greeted Jamie and Elliot, almost smiling at the surprised way they were looking at him. "I appreciate the coffee, but I think we should stop somewhere to eat on the way to the hospital. It'll be faster than cooking and doing dishes, and we need to go by the office on the way, as well. I'll need one of you to handle the car situation. It has undoubtedly been towed by now, and I'd like it to be here, at the house, by this evening. Call Mike Fortenbras if there's any problem with getting it released. The police are still rather afraid of him, after that suit he won last year."

Jamie blinked as though David had just grown a second head, and at any other time it would have had David laughing. He wasn't feeling terribly mirthful at the moment, though. In fact, he was feeling... impatient, more than anything.

"Actually," he added, as the thought hit him, "I'd appreciate it if you two could do all those things. I need to speak with whoever is in charge of Russell's case; the sooner the better. I'll take my truck."

It was only when David was a good block away from the house and pulling around the corner that he realized... neither of the boys had said a single word. Of course, David told himself, he hadn't given them much chance.

He would apologize later, he decided. After he'd learned everything he never should have needed to know about head injuries.

It was a relief to be back at the hospital, though Jamie was well aware of the bizarre nature of that thought. Of course, it did mean that he and Elliot were close by if anything happened. Jamie had been a little worried about that while he and El had been running David's errands. Luckily, those very tasks hadn't taken as long as they might have. As it was, they strode back into the waiting room just over two hours after David's abrupt departure from the house. And maybe something *had* happened, because he didn't see David there, which Jamie thought the man should have been.

"Where's David?" Jamie asked, after giving and accepting long, tight hugs with Michael and Jim. "Is Dad... I mean, is he better enough that they let David in already?" Because that didn't seem possible.

Wasn't possible, Jamie amended, because Michael was shaking his head. "Christine said he's still in recovery, but that was a couple hours ago," Michael answered. "She tried to stick around after her shift ended, but they ran her out, so we don't really know anything since we're not 'family'. But the last we heard, he was doing pretty well, considering."

"David stormed in here maybe an hour and a half ago," Jim added, "and next thing I knew, he had some administrator guy down here. They went somewhere to talk, I guess. Haven't seen him since. And what the fuck happened to him, anyway? He was all... hanging on by a fucking thread before, and now he's..."

"Rah-rah, take charge guy?" Elliot suggested, with a grin that made Jamie smile, too. "Yeah. He was like that when he woke up. It's kinda fucked up, but whatever. Hell, he came down the stairs with a whole list of shit for me and Jamie to do."

Jamie rolled his eyes at all of them and dragged Elliot up against his side with one hand. "He's in denial. Obviously. Pretending he can have some effect on what happens. And I hope he's right, guys. I really do. But we need to be careful with him, okay? Because once he realizes that there's nothing he can do to fix things, he's going to crash. Probably spectacularly. And that means we'll need to catch him."

And possibly himself, too, Jamie knew, because he was managing, somehow, to hold it together, but he was going to have a breakdown, sooner or later. Something bigger and louder and definitely more dramatic than the tears he'd cried on Elliot's shoulder after they gone to bed earlier.

He could see the others thinking about that, see them making an effort to understand. Elliot probably did, Jamie thought, just by virtue of hearing about some of the things Jamie dealt with in his practice. Michael and Jim, on the other hand...

Well, they weren't stupid, Jamie knew, but they had to be exhausted. He doubted that either of them had slept for more than a few minutes since... God, since the previous morning, what with Elliot calling them the night before, then the driving, then... well, everything.

"Go to our place," Jamie told Jim, trusting the man to see the logic of the suggestion. "The guest room is still made up from the last time you visited, and you guys need some sleep. Food. El and I have this, and you know we'll call if anything... changes."

Michael was still complaining as Jim dragged him away a few minutes later. Of course, that was Michael, some days. Besides, Jamie reminded himself, his friend would be thanking him, once he'd slept and woken to realize just how stretched-thin he'd been. That was Michael, too.

"Come on, sweetheart," Jamie murmured, lacing his fingers through Elliot's. "Let's go see if they'll tell us anything. He's my Dad, after all." And God help the hospital if they tried to stonewall him, because Jamie had Mike Fortinbras on speed dial now, and the lawyer didn't have any problem with suing. Anyone, anywhere, any time.

"Let's try that again, but in English, shall we?" David said for what felt like the fiftieth time, trying to keep his tone as pleasant as possible, under the circumstances. "What exactly are you saying? Because it sounds to me as though you're admitting that you have no idea of what to expect. He might need help dressing, or he might not remember how to walk without training. He might have blind spots, or he might see things oddly--as in too large or too small or simply out of context. He might know me, or he might think I'm the devil himself. Does that more or less sum it up?"

God, this was hard.. Sitting there in this bureaucrat's office while the man flung around all sorts of impressive-sounding words--most of them Latin--clearly expecting David to be intimidated. To give up and go back to the waiting room like a good little gay boy.

He wasn't a little boy, though. In fact, he was nearly old enough to be the condescending bastard's father. He was made of sterner stuff than this... jackass had ever seen, especially in this case. And David wasn't leaving the man's office until he either had some answers or the prick admitted to merely blowing smoke.

He wasn't even slightly put off by the man's put-upon sounding sigh. "Look, Mr. Sargent, I could sit here and explain until I'm blue in the face, but I'm afraid you don't even have the vocabulary to..."

And it was a shame, David decided then, that the man stopped short of calling him stupid. David wasn't the sort to toss lawsuits about. He didn't need the money. But sometimes it was necessary, just to teach someone a lesson.

"To what? Understand?" David offered, with a raised brow that he knew looked skeptical. Russell had told him so at least a thousand times. "I assure you, Mr. Worthington, I am far more capable of understanding your meaning than you might like. So unless you are finally willing to page a neurosurgeon so that my questions may be answered in a manner that involves actual *answers*, rather than a verbal song and dance, I do believe that you are entirely stuck with me."

He smiled, hoping it looked as nasty as it felt. "Now, let us begin again, shall we? What, exactly, is my husband's status? Prognosis."

Stammers and comments about security and how important the administrator was did nothing to budge David from his seat. In fact, he tuned it out after another minute or so, his eyes wandering to the walls of the man's office.

Diplomas and degrees, certificates of all sorts that declared John Worthington the Second to be a graduate of Harvard, Yale, certified as a hospital administrator.

Photos of the annoying, caustic man, though younger, in a football uniform, cap and gown, jacket and tie behind a podium, standing beside an older man and smiling smugly for the camera, and...

"I know him," David murmured, getting up to look more closely.

Dear God. William Worthington the Third. The man who had almost ended David's relationship with Russell before it had managed to even really begin. The bastard who had nearly won, nearly ruined their lives--because nothing would have been right if David and Russell had remained apart. The fucking asshole who'd made David doubt himself, his own worth... and more importantly, had made him doubt Russell. Russell's feelings.

"God. You're related to William Worthington. I should have known, but I haven't thought about him in *years*." By choice.

"You knew Uncle William?" Suddenly the little bastard sounded more human. "I don't remember seeing you at the funeral..."

David shrugged, willing to pretend to affection if that was what it took to get some real information. "As I said, it's been ages since I've even thought about him. We... knew each other briefly, more than twenty years ago. But I will never forget the impact he had upon me, upon my life. We ended up surrounded by different circles of people, however. In fact, I hadn't even heard that he'd passed away." But it was good to know, David told himself. One less unwanted face to worry about seeing, except like this. In an old photograph.

John Worthington the Second was nodding when David looked at him. The man even had what looked like a tear in the corner of his eye. "It was unexpected. Quick, thank God. Uncle had an aversion to even the idea of a colonoscopy. By the time he was diagnosed, the cancer had spread throughout his body. He passed away two years ago, this December fourteenth. It was in all the local papers."

Yes, William Worthington the Third was exactly the sort of man who'd be afraid of having his ass probed, David realized. That was likely why he'd insisted on always topping with Russell, back when Russ had been foolish enough to believe his thick, beautiful cock was in any way substandard. He couldn't say that, of course. Not to John Worthington.

Instead, he nodded slowly. "Ah. Well, that would likely explain it. My husband and I have spent December through February out of town for the last five years or so. And as we travel in less... rarified circles than your Uncle..."

And just like that, the rat bastard administrator was acting almost friendly, admitting what David had already suspected.

The man didn't know what was happening with Russell. Didn't actually have more than a superficial understanding of the words and phrases he'd been spouting. He did agree to have the surgeon who'd operated on Russell find David later, when the Dr. Fabray came back on shift.

As that was the best he was likely to do, David sighed and nodded. "I suppose I will simply have to be patient," he said with a frown, "although it's not really in my nature. I'm worried about my husband, after all."

"Just a moment, then," Worthington offered. "Let me see if I can... Oh, this is good." He clicked a few more keys on his computer, and David was suddenly glad that he hadn't said anything about what an asshole the man's Uncle William had been.

"It's not strictly within hospital policy, but seeing as you're an old friend of the family... your husband's been moved to ICU, as of half an hour ago," John Worthington said. "He's not allowed visitors for another six hours or so, because he's not awake and there's a slim chance of infection, even now. But if you're willing to go the whole gown and booties route, I think I can approve you to sit with him."

"I'll even shave my head, if that will get me in there," David announced sincerely. "But... God, I don't believe I'm saying this, but... if I could harm him somehow, even with just my presence, then I should wait. I should... until he's..." And he felt the tears he'd thought gone starting to prick at his eyes. "I... thank you, Mr. Worthington, but I should probably just wait."

"John," Worthington said gently. "It's John. And he's bandaged, wrapped up tight as a drum. I think... that is, Uncle William would have liked to know that I was helping one of his friends. I'll call over to the unit. One of the nurses will walk you through everything so you'll be safe for Mr. Hartwell."

Another round of thanks, the tears finally retreating once they realized they weren't going to be allowed free rein, and David was on the elevator, suddenly wondering whether he was going to Hell for misleading the younger Worthington the way he had.

Then again, the man had been an enormously rude piece of shit until David had mentioned "Uncle William", so perhaps not.

Either way, though, David was going to see Russ. Was going to sit by his bedside and hold his husband's hand, even if he had to wear surgical gloves to do it. He was going to sit and stare and thank God that Russell was still alive, that the wound wasn't anything like as bad as it could have been; that there was a chance--a good chance, maybe--of having his Russell back. Of looking into those so-blue eyes and seeing recognition, as well as the love and admiration David had come to count on more than he'd known over the last twenty-two years.

He was also going to curse that same deity for letting the whole thing happen, but David figured that was a private matter. He might even let that part go, once Russell opened his eyes.

Chapter Twelve

He'd been right, Dave thought with a grin, even as he moaned, pushing back onto Russell's thick cock. He was going to feel Russ for hours, maybe even days. "God... do it, Russ. Come on..." But those hands on his hips merely tightened, holding Dave still as Russell pressed deeper at his own speed.

"If I go any faster, David, or harder," Russell grunted, and Dave moaned again as that warm breath brushed along his ear, then cheek. "You'll likely be too sore to do this again in the morning." And okay. Russ was fucking brilliant.

"Good point," Dave agreed, though he couldn't keep himself from clenching as tightly as he could around the fat prick pushing so slowly into him. He already loved the way Russell moaned when he did that. "Take... fuck, Russ. Take your... yeah, time."

It took longer than he'd thought it would, because Russ was being so damned gentle, and possibly because Dave really hadn't ever had a dick like Russell's in his ass. Jesus, it felt huge. Like a wrist, maybe, though without a fist at the end, thank God. It took forever, really, with Russ pressing in less than a quarter inch at a time, it felt like.

Yeah, it took an eternity, the length of which Dave spent moaning, biting his lip, trying not to beg. Then Russell's arms wrapped around his waist, and Dave could feel that smooth, hot skin all along his spine, and... oh, God. Yeah. Russell's full, heavy sac was brushing against his own, and... "One... more... moment, dearest," was murmured against Dave's neck.

A sharp, shallow push that Dave felt all the way to his toes had him crying out, but Russ was shouting, too, a loud, exultant "ah!" that made Dave shiver, and fuck! Fuck, he should feel like he'd been ripped in half, but instead, Dave just felt stretched. Full. Fuller than he'd ever been in his life, and it was good. So fucking good.

"Russ," and fuck him if he'd ever sounded so breathless, but he did, Dave realized. Breathless and helpless, all at once. "Russ, please..." Because he was already aching, but in the good way, and if Russell didn't fucking move, Dave thought he might just die from the sensation of being right there on the brink of... something. "Please, Russ. Just..."

"God. God, David. Dearest. I... I'll come. If I move. I can't. You're so... fuck, David, you're so tight. So very... tight."

Dave was pretty sure he'd be feeling proud of the strain in Russell's voice, but later. Right then he didn't feel anything but frustrated. Horny. Full of hot, meaty cock that was just sitting there, shoved inside his body and refusing to make good on the promises it had made. So he clenched again, though he couldn't tighten much. He was already stretched nearly to breaking.

"Come on. Fuck, Russ, if you have to come, come! Just tell me you'll get it up again, okay?" Because that was the other option, and either way, Dave was going to feel Russ fucking him.

Soft and slow, so they could do it over and over again, or fast and hard, until Dave's body cringed at even the idea of a repeat until he'd recovered. "Do it, if that's what you need, but for fuck's sake, do *something*!"

He honestly expected Russell to get all mannered again. To come and be embarrassed and nervous and maybe even shy. What Dave got, though, wasn't quite that.

Those surprisingly strong arms around Dave's waist tugged him back even tighter to Russell's tense body, and Russ was groaning, shifting, and Dave found himself more or less upright, his thighs spread wide around Russell's as Russ sat back on his heels, holding Dave there. On him. And that fat, pulsing cock was even deeper, somehow, and pressing hard against that amazing fucking spot inside his body, and Dave grunted.

"Fuck! I. That's... yeah. Yeah, Russ. Feels..."

Awkward. Unsteady. Kind of dangerous. But so fucking good. Almost perfect. Then "Will you be able to come like this, dearest?" Russ groaned, something deep and new in his voice, like a growl Dave could feel more than hear. "Will you come for me, David, spread so wide around me?"

And even if Dave had been thinking of saying 'no', which he wasn't, it would have changed to a shouted 'yes' the instant he felt Russell wrap long, elegant fingers around his throbbing, dribbling prick. "Oh, oh fuck! Fuck, Russ, just like..."

Dave didn't know what to call what they were doing. It wasn't fucking; didn't have the sharp edge of desperation to it that fucking always did. Wasn't raw and hurried, or even dirty. It was definitely sex, though, with a bright edge of urgency that didn't seem to translate to actions. Then Russ did... something. Rocked, maybe. And Dave actually saw stars.

He felt them, too. Like small explosions, starting right where Russell's cock rubbed against his prostate, then spreading, shooting up his spine, down his chest, settling in Dave's balls before starting the return journey, and all the while, Russ' hand was wrapped around him. Stroking him. Squeezing in time with those little motions that weren't actual thrusts, but were killing him, Dave figured. "Unnngh..."

"Just like this?" Russ muttered, and how the fuck could the man even talk? "Come, David. Come, dearest. I can't... God, David, I can't hold... on..." And Russell was moving faster, the same subtle rocking, but Dave was feeling it even more, which shouldn't be possible, but clearly was.

And Dave was coming, his body pushing back, pushing down, legs spreading wider as his spine bowed. His head fell back, finding Russell's shoulder, and Dave's eyes closed tightly as he shouted, heat pulsing from his body to cover Russ' fingers and then the sheets.

He knew he was saying something, but Dave didn't know or care what his actual words were, if they were even words at all. And he was sure Russell didn't care, either, because the man was

adding his own nonsense sounds to the air as Dave felt that thick heat inside him swell further, then pulse repeatedly; felt the small pain as his hole tried to accommodate the slightly bigger girth.

It was the best sex Dave had ever had. In his life. And all without a single hard, rough thrust. It was... fuck. So much better than good. And Russ had said he wanted to do it again, Dave thought with a silent little laugh.

God help him, but Russ wanted to do it again. And God help him, too, Dave thought, as he fell forward, Russell's grip drawing the man down hard on top of Dave's sweat-sheened body. God would *have* to help him, Dave figured. Divine intervention was the only thing that would keep him from dying of sheer pleasure.

Dave moaned a little bit when Russell untangled from him, pulling that softening shaft from Dave's body. Still, he admitted, it was necessary. There wasn't much difference between not using a rubber at all and waiting until it came off in someone's ass.

Russell was back less than a minute later, and Dave smiled against the pillow beneath his cheek, exhausted even though he hadn't been anything like as energetic as he was used to. "That was... fun," he murmured, grinning as Russell pulled him, settled him against Russ' body.

"*That*, David," Russell announced, soundly a little bit smug and a whole lot breathless, "was a good bit more than 'fun'. That was... inspiring."

A tired chuckle left Dave's lips, and he tried not to yawn. "Cool. You let me know any time you're feeling inspired again, okay? And I do mean *any* time."

"I'll wake you in a few hours," Russ said, sounding pleased, though Dave couldn't quite make his eyes open to find out for sure. "Sleep, dearest. I'm fairly certain you'll be glad of it, later."

David came back to himself surrounded by the beeps and whirrs of more machines than he cared to count, and for a moment he wasn't sure of what had woken him. Not even once he realized that he'd fallen asleep in the padded but still uncomfortable chair by Russell's bed.

"Oh, honey," he whispered, staring at the too pale, too still shape under the thin hospital sheet. "I'm sorry. I'm still here, Russ. I didn't leave. I just dozed off, I suppose. I was... God, I miss you. And I know you're hurt. I know. I know it would be easier to just give up, but I need you, Russ. I need you to stay, okay? I... I wish I could be unselfish and tell you that I want you to do whatever's best for you, but I can't. I don't. I want you to do what's best for *me*, honey. More than twenty years, Russ, and I don't know who I am without you. So you have to stay, you understand? Whatever it takes."

He was crying again, David noticed, but it was fine this time. Maybe because he was there, holding Russell's hand. Maybe because he could hear one of the machines beeping out the

rhythm of Russell's heart. Maybe because he'd finally gone insane, which he'd felt like doing ever since the whole horrible mess had begun. And maybe... maybe he didn't care why, David told himself. Somehow, his tears felt right. Like something he should be sharing with his lover. Husband. Russ.

He talked for hours, not really noticing what he was saying, just wanting Russell to hear his voice, to hopefully know that David was right there with him, wasn't leaving.

"... and it only got better after that first time, honey. God, I think I was already lost. Hopelessly. Because that next month..."

"... related to that bastard William, if you can believe it. I can. In fact, now that I think about it, it seems a perfect profession for a Worthington, doesn't it? I still can't believe I fell for old Willie's line of crap, though..."

"...always so glad you didn't give up on me, honey. Though I'm still not sure of how you found all those damned power tools, drafting tools, everything. And I never told you this, but... I didn't really like them. The tools. I treasure them to this day, of course, but only because they came from you. They were proof that I mattered to you. That you thought I was good enough. And in the end, that's all that matters, Russell. You. God, Willie-boy was so mad when he found out we were back together. Do you remember? He kept..."

"... and God, the look on your face when you realized it was Gabe Harcourt and his buddies who'd beaten me up. Christ, I was even more shocked, remember? It never even occurred to me that it was a revenge-beating, rather than... well, what we thought it was. I still get chills when I think about how many times I saw his ratty old white truck. Like he had no life after you fired him, aside from following me around and waiting for another chance. Fuck, honey, I'm so glad you noticed and..."

It just went on and on. David didn't stop, not even when one of the ICU nurses came in to change Russell's IV bag. She came back a few minutes later with a small pitcher of ice water and a plastic cup, and David could have kissed her. He didn't, but he could have. He wet his mouth and throat instead, then went back to talking, whether Russ could hear him or not.

"... so I still say it was stupid to have our first wedding, or whatever you want to call it, on the same day TRH finished construction on my first building. Then again, you never forgot the date of either, so maybe that's why you insisted. And remember how young our boy was? So young, and so damned bold. All of eighteen and he brought his boyfriend. I must say I'm happy that he only got into a few fights at school. Of course, he was already quite large by then. It was the first time he called me 'Dad-vid' and it sort of scared the crap out of me. I was so afraid I'd screw him up..."

"... and that day Blessing walked in on us... God, that was fucking funny, Russ. I don't think I've ever seen a woman look so shocked, aroused and jealous, all at once. It's lucky that she and I were friends by then, though. If it had happened even three years earlier, I think she would have hated me forever. Oh, she's not here, honey. She and Steven are backpacking in the Himalayas,

of all places, in case you forgot, what with all the... well. All this. I did call and leave a message on my way back here today, so I'm sure she'll be along as soon as they check in. I'm afraid I may have failed her, though. She did entrust me with your safety at our last wedding, so..."

"... not sure of when the big day will be, but I had to tell you about their engagement. I don't know which of them did the asking, or even how, but they're planning to make honest men of each other. I'm so very glad, honey, that you sat on me--literally--and made me listen until I could admit that you were right. I really *did* hate Elliot because he reminded me of myself at his age... and until I met you, until we became *us*, there wasn't much that I liked about me. Aside from my cock, of course, but as you know, there's nothing to dislike *there*. In fact, I seem to recall--with a crystal-like degree of clarity--a certain evening at the theater. That New York trip, when Dennis Travers gave us tickets to 'Seussical the Musical', and you..."

He was rambling, David knew, much as he'd been doing since he'd woken up beside Russell's bed. Just going on and on, yammering endlessly, because it was better than the beeping, whirring, whooshing sounds of the various machinery. It was better than being quiet and admitting how much Russell's silence made him feel panicked and helpless. Russell was never silent, not like he was now.

"I miss you, honey," David whispered, "and I know they said it might be a few days before you even start to wake up. Your... God, your poor brain is bruised and bleeding, and that can't be easy for you. Hell, it's hard for *me*, and my brain's just fine. And they need to put some sort of plate in your head, it sounds like, and I understand if you don't want to be awake for that. So you take your time, okay, Russ? Just... come back to me when you're ready. Please. Everything else will work itself out. It'll all be fine, just as long as you *stay*."

It would, too. David knew that much. Whatever problems Russell might have, whatever they needed to go through or work their way past, it would be fine just as long as Russ was there.

David was never sure, either then or later, whether he'd dozed off again or not. All he knew was that one machine--the one monitoring Russell's heart beat--was suddenly going crazy. And when he jumped and squeezed Russ' fingers tighter than he probably should have, they squeezed back.

Oh, God, they squeezed back!

He didn't know what to do. Whether to shout for a nurse, try to find the call button, or pinch himself to make sure he wasn't dreaming. In fact, David didn't know much of anything. He couldn't, not with the sudden sense of relief singing through him, overwhelming every reasonable and logical fiber of his being.

His eyes flew to Russell's ghost-white face, and he nearly fainted with sheer reaction when he saw those blue-blue eyes, open and reddened and staring back at him.

It was only then, as he sat there holding Russell's suddenly responsive hand, that David realized. No matter what the doctor had said, no matter the somewhat hopeful prognosis? He'd honestly

expected Russ to die. To leave him alone, trying to pick up whatever shattered remnants of their life together David could find. No matter how much he'd pretended otherwise.

"Honey. Oh, God, honey. You're... I thought I lost you, Russ. Thought I was... God, and you're awake and they said... but you're not 'most people', you're my lover, my husband, and..."

And Russell's eyes were scared. More than scared. Terrified.

"Hush," David murmured, squeezing Russ' fingers again. "Hush, beloved. You're going to be fine." He finally found the call button with his other hand, though it took a few moments. He wasn't willing to look away from Russell's bloodshot eyes, not even for a second. Even though he knew he was crying again, heavy, salty tears streaming from his eyes to drip steadily onto the sheets and their entwined hands.

Chapter Thirteen

There were still some issues, even a year and a half later, some of them stemming from the operation to replace the missing piece of Russell's skull with what had ended up being some sort of composite resin, rather than metal. Even so, David wasn't complaining.

Yes, it was hard to watch his once-decisive lover pause at the top of the stairs for a good thirty seconds before latching on to the railing with one hand while holding his cane in the other before making his slow, careful way to the ground floor. But once Russell was on a level surface, the man was just as confident as he'd always been.

Helping Russ to adjust to the differences in spatial recognition had been difficult, surely, and even though there were still times when he needed help, David was more than happy to accommodate him.

He tied Russell's ties every week, then hung them--loosened but still knotted--on the hooks inside their closet door. And David was more than happy to help Russ dress some mornings, when it was necessary. He was even happier to help his lover undress, though that assistance wasn't strictly required. Russell had never told him not to, though, and that was just another thing to be thankful for.

Russell hadn't been back to the office since the shooting, but David understood that. Hell, he only went in once a week himself, now that their home computers were networked with the ones at work. He wouldn't have bothered with the Friday visits if it hadn't been made clear to him that the staff felt better when he did.

They hired a driver for the times David wasn't home, because Russell couldn't drive any more. Not with his perception problems. So David sold his own vehicle, happy to use Russ', since the man had always been so attached to it. A car was a car, David figured, and if Russell enjoyed the Mercedes, even as a passenger, then David was on board.

His shiny blue, vintage pickup truck sold for more than four times what he'd spent on refurbishing the used 1968 Ford he'd bought during the month or so that he and Russell had spent apart, back in the early days. So, in a way, that was thanks to William Worthington the Third, which David figured had to have the man rolling in his grave even more than he already must be at knowing they were still together.

His world was intact, David told himself silently, just as he did at least ten times a day.

Russell was alive and his. They were happy, more than content. And whatever physical problems Russell might still have were so much better than Russ being dead.

He moved up behind his lover slowly, making sure to walk loudly on the bare, wooden floor of their bedroom, which had borne rugs until Russell came home. The solid wood was better for Russ' conceptualization of space.

"Are you ready, beloved?" David asked as he wrapped his arms around Russell's tuxedo-clad waist and met those so-blue--true blue--eyes in the mirror. And that was another thing that had changed in the last eighteen or so months. He still felt uncomfortable with the three little words that others thought meant everything. He always had. It seemed too... facile. But 'beloved'? Oh, he could--did--say that as often as possible. And Russ knew, understood what it meant. "Or would you rather hide for a few minutes longer?"

Because Russell was definitely hiding. David knew it. There were people downstairs who hadn't seen Russ since before the shooting.

"I... tell me... this is... going to be... okay." And that was part of Russell's worry, David knew. He couldn't speak as quickly or as easily as he'd done in the past. But all of the guests had been briefed, and God knew David would kill anyone who made Russell feel self-conscious. Kill them slowly. Messily. As painfully as possible.

"It's going to be fine, beloved," David murmured, pressing a soft kiss to Russ' cheek, watching those pretty eyes smile at him in the mirror. "It's going to be perfect. And everyone's here, you know. Our boys and girls. Alicia and Joss. Joss' latest... fling. Blessing even made Steven come." He smiled. "It's family, honey. Good friends. And a few people who've worked with us for long enough to be called family, too. So. Are we going down? Or are we going to miss Jamie and Elliot's wedding because you're scared? Either way is fine with me."

It was, too. David would be fine with taking Russell to bed, holding that still-fine body against his own while they listened to two of their children taking vows through the bedroom window.

"No, we... should go down... dearest. I... need to... give away the... groom. One of... them... anyway." And Russ was smiling, which was the best thing ever. Just as it had always been, David admitted.

"Good, beloved," he murmured, kissing Russ' cheek again before pulling back. "We'll go, get the boys married off, have some food and champagne... then we'll sneak away and have an entirely different conversation about 'going down'. It isn't likely to involve many words, other than 'God' and 'yes' and 'now', however. Just to be clear." Because that was one thing that hadn't changed. At all.

Once Russ had been well enough to come home, David had been thrilled to discover that they still affected each other just as much as they always had. They'd had to be careful, for the first year or so, but...

"Come on, honey. If we wait any longer, they'll think we're up here doing what we're going to be doing later." And if they waited any longer, David thought with a smug grin, they really *would* be.

"Wait..." Russ said, stopping David at the top of the stairs before they could start down. "I... love you... David. I always... have. And I heard... heard you. In the hospital. I heard... you. I stayed... for you. I... never told... you. I stayed... for you. Because... I love... you."

"I would have been lost without you," David answered, his eyes suddenly hot and damp. "You are my beloved, Russell. Forever." One soft, slow kiss later, David pulled away and shook his head. "We'll finish this later, honey. After the wedding. Speaking solely for myself, I need to be somewhere that my tears of joy will be believed to be for the happy couple."

"They... are," Russell said softly, as he made his way down the stairs right behind David, and David was almost entirely certain that Russ knew he'd break his fall, if Russell fell. "We're a *very* happy...couple, dearest. Even with my... problems. I... thank you... David. For staying."

David waited until they were both on the ground level, four feet and one cane solidly planted, before he glared at Russ. "Shut the fuck up, Mr. Hartwell. There isn't a single place I'd rather be than right here. Because I love you. Need you. Christ, I still want you like I did that first time. And okay, you're not exactly the same as you were then. Neither am I. Because we're *old*, you jackass. Hell, my joints were all messed up before you ever got shot, and you wanted us to buy the South Carolina house, just to spare me more Boston winters! But even with that. With everything that's happened. I don't want to be anywhere but here. With you. Loving you."

David rolled his eyes. "Okay, I said it again. Twice in maybe twenty seconds, so you know I mean it. You're my beloved, Russ. My past, my present, and my future, too. We're going to be old and wrinkled and crotchety together, sitting on the front porch and bitching--slowly, in your case--about how we don't get to see the grandkids enough. Or the price of gas. Or those little blue pills, not that we'll need them. Whatever." David smiled. "And we're going to love it. But we won't get the grandkids unless we get a move on. Jamie and Elliot will have a much easier time adopting once they're *married*."

Yeah, Russ was over sixty. Had been horribly injured and had recovered as much as he was likely to. But David knew Russell loved him. Always would. And he was counting on that thirty more years he'd mentioned to Officer Paul on the day everything had... changed.

Paul was there, too, David noticed, as he and David walked down the center aisle. Paul and his... lover, David assumed, judging by the way the two men were smiling at each other and holding hands. Much as he and Russell were.

He made a mental note to offer their house if Paul and... Marshall, he thought the man's name was, ever decided to tie the knot. It was the least he and Russell could do, since Paul and his less-friendly partner, meaning Paul's work partner and fellow police officer, had managed to collar the man who had shot Russ.

The trial wouldn't be for God knew how long, but David was hopeful that they'd be able to find some closure in it. He and Russ had been through enough without worrying that the same homophobic asshole was out there targeting still more gay men.

He shook all of that off when the opening strains of "Here Comes the Bride", or whatever it was actually called, started, and he joined Russ and everyone else in laughing as Joss came prancing down the aisle in jeans, a frilly blouse, construction boots and a lacy veil, tossing rose petals here, there, and everywhere. Trust Jamie and Elliot to make their wedding into a circus of sorts. Even if it only had one act.

Then the men in question were coming toward them, hands locked together, and David nodded to himself. Jamie and Elliot were already joined. It was obvious, just by the way they were always so aware of each other. And just like himself and Russell, the boys--men--would last. Hopefully forever.

"Who gives this man?" the minister asked a few minutes later, and David frowned slightly when Russ stayed silent.

"Beloved," David murmured, but Russ had that look on his face. Like he was trying to figure out what to say with the least possible words.

"Um... who gives this man?" the minister tried again.

"No... body," Russell said haltingly, and that was the moment that David knew his lover had been planning whatever was going on. Russ was just nervous, and with his speech impediment, couldn't get overly wordy.

He reached around the grooms and squeezed Russ' hand, and that was apparently all his lover had needed.

"David and I..." and how cool was it to be included. Very. "We don't give... either of... them. We... claim Elliot. As our... own. Our son. So we... give no one. We... take. Elliot becomes family. More... than before."

After that, it was a surprisingly fast wedding, the vows and "I do" parts just flying by.

David stood with Russell, watching Jamie and Elliot take their first dance as married men, and he smiled. Smiled even more when Elliot came to claim Russ for a slow dance, while Jamie demanded the same of David.

"It's tradition," Jamie told him with a grin. "The just-married people have to do a dance with their in-laws. And you're the closest thing Elliot has to a father, these days, aside from Dad, so..."

And yeah. He could live with that. For the rest of his life.

His eyes met Russell's when Jamie spun him, and David grinned.

Their boys were married, at least two of them. And, eventually, Michael and Jim would take the plunge. Maybe even Chandra and Trish, who David could see from the corner of his eye, though the girls seemed to be just fine as they were.

Yeah. Life was good, even if it wasn't what he'd expected it to be when he'd first walked into the TRH trailer and talked himself into a job.

Hell, it was better than anything he could have imagined. He only had to look at Russell and see the love in those bluer-than-blue eyes to know that for sure.