



**BEYOND
THE NORM**
Shawn Lane

I

THE one drawback of being the owner of Dave's Bar was having to close it up the six nights it was open.

David Johnson closed and locked the heavy oak door and glanced at his watch in the light of the neon sign of the bar. A little after three in the morning. And pouring rain.

"Shit," he muttered. Apparently the weather man had been right after all. Lightning flashed in the distant horizon. Unusual weather for December in southern California.

He fingered his suede jacket. With the rain coming down as hard as it was, he'd have to run to his truck to avoid getting completely drenched, and even then he'd be pretty damn wet. The suede would be ruined.

Grimacing, Dave reopened the bar door while shrugging out of his jacket. He hung it on the coat hook just inside and re-locked the door.

His pickup truck was the only vehicle left in the strip mall parking lot. He made a run for it and nearly skidded on the wet asphalt. Reaching the truck at last, he slipped his hands into the front right pocket of his jeans and pulled out his truck keys.

A loud crack of thunder startled them right out of his hand.

"Shit," he said again. He squinted down at the ground and saw them under the truck next to the front driver-side wheel. He crouched down. His red muscle T-shirt had already soaked through and stuck to his skin. Any minute his teeth would start chattering, Dave figured.

He dropped to his knees to reach for the keys, and lightning flashed overhead. Looking out from under his truck, he spied three shadowy figures across the parking lot. He couldn't see very clearly, but he thought they were men. One lay prone, and another knelt beside him, dealing blow after blow to the man's head. The third man stood and directed repeated kicks to the man lying on the asphalt.

"Hey!" Dave yelled, but if they heard him they ignored him. He stood and went to the other side of his truck, stopping to grab a crowbar out of the truck bed. He hurried to them. "Hey, stop!"

The man standing froze in the act of kicking. "This isn't your business, mister."

"Yeah? Well, I'm making it my business. I've already called the cops," Dave lied. He should have, of course. Would have even, maybe, if he'd actually had a cell phone. It was one of those stupid parts of modern life he had yet to adapt to. He only had land lines. He'd get one someday, Dave always promised. It would have come in handy just then. He waved the crowbar.

The man crouched next to the one on the ground pulled the hood of his sweatshirt up around his head and scrambled up. "Let's go."

"We can take this guy," the kicker said with an ugly snarl on his face. Dave hadn't gotten close enough to make out their features very well, but he thought they were both in their mid-twenties.

"I'm out of here," his accomplice said, and he ran away, his feet sloshing in the puddles.

Dave took a step forward, brandishing his weapon.

“Dickhead,” the assailant swore, and then he followed his buddy.

Dave watched them for a moment to make sure they were really leaving. When they didn’t come back, he hurried to the man on the ground.

“Hey, pal, you okay?”

The man lay face down, so Dave turned him over and cradled him in his arms. Rain splattered his face. His breath caught in his throat.

Holy shit, the guy was beautiful. Just a kid, really. Pale white with long, dark lashes. Black eyeliner. A tiny diamond stud on the left side of his nose. A little silver cross in his right ear. Thick shoulder-length black hair was plastered to his skull.

Dave frowned, glancing briefly at his attire. He had on black pants and a T-shirt, combat boots, and a black trench coat. Even his nail polish was black.

Nail polish?

Oh right. Dave nodded. The kid was Goth.

The kid groaned and opened his eyes, blinking rapidly. Dave strained to see by the parking lot lights what color eyes he had. Would they be blue or brown?

Gray. Deep, gorgeous, pewter gray. Dave’s chest constricted. For a moment his world tilted.

“Hold on. I’ll get you to the hospital,” Dave assured him.

“No,” he whispered. Closed his eyes briefly, opened them, and focused his killer gray eyes on Dave. “No hospital. Please.”

“Are you sure? Those guys beat the crap out of you.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m okay. H-help me up.”

Dave stood and reached down to help the kid up. He swayed a bit, and Dave held him. “You don’t think anything’s broken?”

“Nah,” the guy said, feeling his ribs under his trench coat. “Just a little unsteady.” He had a slight lilt to his voice, but it was so faint, Dave couldn’t quite place it.

Lightning flashed overhead and was followed quickly by a very large clap of thunder.

“Look, we’d better get out of here. You got any place to go?”

The kid bit his plump, sensual lip pensively, and he shook his head. “Not really.”

Dave hesitated. He knew nothing about this young man. For all he knew he could be an axe murderer. He might regret this, but.... “I don’t live far. Let’s get you dry and look at your injuries and maybe get you some food.”

The younger man assessed him for a moment and then nodded. “Sounds good.”

“Can you make it? Or do you want me to bring the truck over here?” Dave asked.

The kid took a step but wobbled.

“Stay here. I’ll be back.” Dave ran back to his truck, got in and started it, and drove across the parking lot to stop next to the kid, who opened the door and climbed in the passenger side. He leaned his head back on the seat and closed his eyes.

“What’s your name?” Dave asked.

“Kyle.”

“Kyle what?”

Kyle stared at Dave. His mouth curved up at the corners just a bit. “Just Kyle.”

Dave pulled out of the parking lot, switching on the windshield wipers. “Mine is Dave Johnson.”

“Thanks, Dave Johnson.”

Dave nodded and turned down the street that led to the block his house was on. He wasn’t kidding when he’d said he didn’t live far. His house was literally about two streets over from the bar. He’d chosen it for that very reason.

“So why were those guys beating the crap out of you? Were they friends of yours?”

“Did they seem like friends?”

“No. So, then?”

Kyle sighed and ran his long pale fingers through his wet black hair. “Could be one of two reasons, I guess. I’m Goth, and for some reason that annoys certain people.”

“And the other?”

“I’m gay. That seems to annoy guys like that even more.” Kyle shrugged. “Maybe it was some of each.”

Dave’s grip on the steering wheel tightened. Okay, so Kyle was gay. He was probably too young anyway, and Dave was supposed to be rescuing him from a bad situation. Not lusting after him. But, God, did he have to be gay? Because Dave’s cock had certainly perked up at the news.

“You a runaway?”

Kyle snorted. “Dude, how old do you think I am?”

Dave shrugged and pushed the button on his garage door opener. “Fifteen or sixteen?”

“No. I’m nineteen and three-quarters.”

Dave laughed. “Three-quarters?”

“Yep.”

Dave exhaled. Okay, so Kyle wasn't jailbait. Which shouldn't mean a damn thing, but tell that to his now fully erect cock. He was in big trouble. Kyle was probably some sort of hustler, and he sure as hell didn't need to get involved in anything like that.

He parked the truck, careful not to bump the motorcycle already parked to the side, and closed the garage door behind them.

“How old are you?” Kyle asked, getting out of the truck.

“Twenty-seven.” Dave opened the door leading into the house. “I'll get us some dry clothes. You want to take a shower?”

“That would be wicked cool.”

Dave guessed that was a “yes.” He went down the hall to the linen closet, took out a big fluffy bath towel, and tossed it at Kyle. “I'll lay some clothes out for you while you shower.”

Kyle nodded. “Thanks, dude. I really owe you.” He disappeared into the bathroom.

DAVE bent over to peer into the refrigerator to see what he could feed his guest. He'd changed into sweats and a thin white muscle T-shirt, and he'd taken out his contacts and replaced them with his gold wire-framed glasses.

He had some leftover Chinese food he'd picked up a couple of days ago. He opened the little white package and sniffed. Smelled okay. He set the container on the counter and reached into the cabinet for two plates.

“Hey, cool glasses.”

Dave turned to see Kyle standing just inside the kitchen doorway. “Thanks.”

“Dude, don’t you have anything in black?”

Earlier when he’d brought him the clothes, Dave had resisted taking a peek while the young man showered. He hadn’t even glanced in the direction of the steamy shower glass. But now it was hard to keep his gaze off Kyle.

Kyle had pulled on the navy blue shorts and pumpkin orange T-shirt Dave had left in the bathroom. They were way too big for him and hung rather awkwardly on his slim body. And he had reapplied his eyeliner.

Damn, the man was just adorable. Not at all Dave’s usual type. If he had one. Did he? He didn’t know. Maybe guys like himself. Whatever. But not pretty boys with black eyeliner and pouty, kissable looks. He sure hoped his sweatpants hid his obvious erection. But damn, the kid was hot.

“No, the navy shorts were as close as I could find,” Dave said. “I threw your clothes in the washer. There was some blood on them. You okay?”

He noticed Kyle’s left cheek was already turning a bit purple, and there was a small cut there too. There was a bruise developing by his mouth. Dave suspected his ribs were probably bruised, too, if they weren’t broken. He wondered if Kyle had any head injuries. He really should have insisted on taking the kid to the hospital.

“Yeah, I’m all right. Just a bit banged up.” Kyle smiled crookedly. “Maybe a bit sore, but I’ve had worse.”

Dave nodded. “You working the streets?”

“You mean selling my body or something?”

“Yeah.”

Kyle shrugged. "I've done it before, but it's been a while. A couple years, at least. And I only did it for a short time."

Dave spooned Chinese food on to the plates. "Drug habit?"

"Is this the Spanish Inquisition or what?" Kyle sighed. "Maybe I should just go."

Dave turned and leaned against the counter. "Sure, you could. Where would you go?"

"I guess I'd go hitching."

"You hitch rides?" Dave wondered if Kyle had a brain in his pretty head. "Do you know how dangerous that is? You got a death wish?"

"No. I've been hitching for years. Never had any problems." He pulled out a pack of cigarettes out of the pocket of the shorts. "You got some matches?"

"Oh for God's sake. You smoke too?"

Kyle pulled out a cigarette and stuck it in his mouth. "Yes. You want me to smoke outside?"

"It's pouring rain."

"This house doesn't have a patio?"

Well, it did, yes, but damn, did he want this kid smoking on his fucking patio? He gritted his teeth and stuck the plates in the microwave.

"Yes, I guess you can smoke out there. If you want to give yourself cancer, what does it matter to me?"

Kyle's lips twitched. "Matches?"

Dave grunted and opened a drawer. He pulled out a box he used to light his barbecue and threw it at Kyle. Kyle caught the box.

For some reason, Dave found himself staring at the little diamond in Kyle's nose. He gestured to it. "Didn't that hurt?"

Kyle's gaze briefly went to the dragon tattoo on Dave's left arm. "Didn't that?"

"Touché." Dave grinned for the first time since he'd brought Kyle the Goth guy home. He was definitely not Dave's type at all. But God, Dave wanted to fuck him just the same.

II

KYLE blew a puff of clove-scented smoke out into the rain. He stood on Dave's patio in just the shorts and orange T-shirt he'd been provided. His feet were bare because his socks and combat boots needed to dry.

He shivered in the cool air. At least it appeared the thunder and lightning had moved out of the area.

He'd started smoking clove cigarettes when he turned fourteen. He'd thought about quitting a few times but hadn't really bothered with it. Everyone he'd known smoked too. Taking another drag on his cigarette, Kyle glanced through the double glass doors into the house. Dave was fussing around in the kitchen, heating food and making hot tea.

No doubt about it, the dude was hot.

Dave looked like a biker. Or Kyle's image of what biker guys looked like anyway. And Kyle had noticed the motorcycle parked in the garage when Dave pulled his truck in.

Dave had sandy-colored hair that he kept cropped short and spiky on the top. He didn't have a full beard and mustache, but he had stubble. Five o'clock shadow, they called it. It was sexy as hell. Kyle wondered what it would be like to kiss Dave. Rough and bristly, he guessed. And would it scratch on his cock if Dave gave him a blowjob?

Okay, wow, he liked that image, yes, sir. Kyle's cock tented the too big shorts he wore. Man, if Dave hadn't been right there inside, ready to turn around at any time, Kyle would reach in and stroke his shaft right there on the patio.

Instead, he puffed on his cigarette, sucking on the end like he'd like to suck on Dave's cock.

Dave had green eyes. Not fake green contact eyes. But real green, like olive green with gold flecks. His nose was a little crooked, like maybe someone had broken it once. Kyle guessed it would have been when Dave was much younger because with big beefy biceps like Dave had, he couldn't imagine anyone taking him on.

Oh, yeah. Kyle appreciated those muscle T-shirts Dave wore. Wife-beaters, they called them. And freaking six-pack abs too. He could just imagine Dave bending him over and sticking his....

Ah, geez. Kyle looked down and saw a wet spot on the damn shorts. His too-aroused cock had leaked pre-cum. Was it noticeable? Kyle turned away from staring through the doors at Dave.

Dude was probably not even gay. A guy like that had women beating down the door. In fact, Kyle had half-expected to find some hot little number waiting for Dave when they got to his house. He'd been glad when the house was empty. Which meant exactly nothing. Didn't mean Dave

didn't have a girlfriend. Kyle had checked his big, beautiful hands earlier, and he hadn't seen a ring.

Not that it mattered, even on the off chance his rescuer was gay. Kyle didn't need another complication in his life. He was already steeped from head to toe in more trouble than he could handle. Adding mind-blowing sex with the hot biker dude... well, Kyle shouldn't even be considering it.

He'd always had a thing for bad-boy types.

Not that he thought Dave actually was a bad boy. Kyle figured Dave was more a Boy Scout type or the Lone Ranger coming to the rescue of those oppressed. Or getting the shit beat out of them, anyway. Nah, Dave seemed pretty squeaky-clean.

Damn hot, though.

Kyle looked around for an ashtray or something to stub out his cigarette. He didn't see one. Normally he would smash it out with his foot and then pick it up for the trash. He hated littering. But since his feet were bare he didn't relish that idea.

Shrugging, Kyle opened the sliding doors and entered the house, waving the stub. "Hey, you don't have an ashtray."

Dave looked at him like he'd turned into the creature from *The Fly*. "No smoking in my house," he said, making a move toward Kyle.

"Yeah, I know, but I need to put it out." Kyle saw an empty saucer on the table next to him, so he leaned down and mashed the cigarette.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Dave yelled, his face turning a dark shade of red.

“Man, are you having a stroke?” Kyle asked. “You don’t look so good.” He picked up the saucer and headed for the kitchen, giving Dave a wide berth. He tossed the butt into the trash and then rinsed off the saucer.

Dave had followed him. “Don’t ever do that again.”

“S’cool. But you might want to give me some kind of cigarette-butt receptacle when I go out for the next smoke.” Kyle smiled.

The muscle in Dave’s jaw jumped. Kyle found himself staring there. He had a great jaw, Kyle decided. In fact, Kyle had to fight the urge to run his fingertips along the stubble there. His balls tightened.

Think of something else, Kyle.

“So, what are you feeding me?”

Dave made a sort of growling noise and strode past Kyle to pick up two plates of food. “Leftover Chinese.”

Dave practically slammed the plates down on the dining room table, but Kyle decided not to take it too personally. Some people were just high-strung.

He sat down and forked a large bite of something that might be chicken with brown sauce and nuts. He stuffed the bite into his mouth. “Are you married?” he blurted out around the mouthful of food.

“Don’t talk with your mouth full,” Dave said as he sat at the table. “Geez, don’t you have any manners?”

Kyle felt his cheeks heat, and he swallowed the food. “Um, yeah, sorry.”

“No, I’m sorry, kid. I guess I’m getting a little tired is all.” Dave took a bite, chewed, and swallowed it. “I’m not married. I was once. Got an ex-wife.”

Bitter disappointment formed a lump in Kyle's stomach. Well, he knew it was a long shot. He shouldn't care, but he did. He lowered his gaze to the plate, afraid his dismay would show. "That's too bad."

"Just as well," Dave muttered.

"She cheat on you?"

"No."

"You cheat on her?"

"No," Dave said more sharply.

Kyle shrugged.

"We got along great, actually." Dave stabbed at his food.

"Then why aren't you still married?"

"She had a problem with my sexual preference. She was the wrong sex," Dave said, and then he stood up and took away his plate of mostly untouched food.

It took a moment for Dave's words to sink in, but when they did, Kyle's ears weren't the only things to perk up. And he also realized he had a big stupid grin on his face.

"What are you smiling at?" Dave asked, suspicion in his voice.

"Nothing." Kyle watched him sit back at the table, a mug of hot tea clutched in his hand. "You own that bar in the strip mall? Dave's, huh?"

"Figured that out, did you?" Dave smiled. He had great lips, full and sensuous, and when he smiled a tiny dimple appeared on the right side.

"So, it's pretty late. Don't you want to go to bed or something?" Kyle cleared his throat. "I mean to sleep."

Dave eyed him over the mug. "Well, normally I don't go right to bed, no. Most people don't go to bed as soon as they

get home from work. I try to keep my schedule pretty normal. Besides, today is Sunday, and I'm closed on Sundays. I'll probably take only a short nap and then get up for the rest of the day."

"Hey, that's cool." Kyle took another bite of his food to take his mind off the idea of sharing Dave's bed during his "nap."

Really, it would be a mistake. Gay or not, Kyle couldn't—shouldn't—get involved in anything with Dave. Certainly not for Dave's sake. But a one-night stand couldn't really count as getting involved, could it? Hmm.

Kyle blew out a breath and pushed the now empty plate out of his way. He patted his stomach but instantly regretted it when he touched a tender spot from being kicked. "That was good."

Dave stood, carried the plate into the kitchen, and set it in the sink. Then he returned to his seat. "Where are you from, Kyle?"

Kyle tensed. Okay, this was exactly what he didn't want to talk about.

Dave held up his hand. "What I mean is, I detect a slight accent."

Kyle relaxed and shifted in his chair. "I was born in Ireland. We came to the states when I was ten. Of course the schools here immediately put me in speech classes to rid me of the strange way I talked."

Dave smiled. "Not quite all of it though. It's sex—nice. It's nice."

"Thanks."

Dave hid his face behind his tea. "Did you want a cup of hot tea?"

“Nah, it’s cool. I’m more of a coffee drinker.”

Dave didn’t say anything for a moment. Then he put down his cup and stared at Kyle. “Are you running from a pimp?”

Kyle shook his head. “No. I told you. I don’t sell myself.”

“But you did.”

He sighed. “Yeah. It was a while ago, though.”

“Were things really that bad?”

“Pretty bad. My father left right after we came to the states. My mom hooked up with this other guy, and he threw me out when I was fifteen.”

“Jesus, so young? What the hell for?”

Kyle grimaced. “Because I was Goth and gay. I had nowhere to go, and I needed to eat. So I turned tricks. I always used protection, though, and I didn’t do it for long.”

Dave frowned. “Did you finish high school?”

“No. How could I? I lived on the streets.”

“I can’t believe your mother let him throw you out.”

“He was her dealer. She had to have her shit. Anyway, I don’t talk about it much. It happened. There’s nothing I can do to change it.”

“Kyle—”

“What?” Kyle glared, daring him to say something... anything. Life sucked some times. He’d had to get used to that.

“Nothing. Just you seem like a really smart kid. Someday you should try to get your diploma.”

Kyle nodded. He got up from the table and went to the back door to look outside at the rain. He did want his diploma; of course he did. But he didn’t know how the hell

he would get it. Not now. Not after what happened. He should have tried before, but well... time got away, and he'd been too involved with Dax.

"You okay?" Dave asked.

"Yeah, fine. I don't think I've seen it rain like this down here. I was in San Francisco for a while, and it rained cats and dogs there." Great, now he was making comments about the weather. He turned to face Dave again, and his gaze went to the dragon tattoo. "You got other tattoos?"

Dave had his arms crossed and leaned against the bar counter by the kitchen. "No, but I'm thinking about getting one on the other arm."

"Another dragon?"

"Probably. Or a snake." Dave tilted his head. "What about you? Got any more piercings?"

Kyle grinned. "Oh yeah. Want to see?"

Dave's tongue came out to run along his bottom lip. "Uh huh."

Kyle inched up the pumpkin orange T-shirt and up over his head to expose his nipple rings. Two tiny silver hoops. One in each nipple.

Dave moaned. "Shit."

III

THE sight of Kyle's little nipple rings might have been a big turn on, but the purplish bruises on his ribcage quickly

reminded Dave that very recently, the kid had the shit kicked out of him. What kind of pervert was he anyway?

Really, a doctor should see Kyle. He might say nothing was broken, but it had to have hurt. In fact, seeing Kyle's battered body pretty much deflated his erection. Dave turned away and started fussing with some papers he'd left on the bar earlier.

"I really think you ought to see a doctor."

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched Kyle lower the shirt. Unfortunately he didn't miss the sad disappointment in Kyle's gaze. Dave felt like a first-class jerk.

"No doctor," Kyle said, his tone cool. He reached into the pocket of the shorts he wore and removed the pack of cigarettes. "Do you have something I can use for my cigarette butts while I'm out there?"

"Kyle—"

"Do you?"

Dave sighed and went into the kitchen. He had an old chipped plate he never used anymore in one of the cabinets. He pulled it out and returned to the living room. Kyle had already gone outside. He stood on the patio, puffing on a cigarette.

Dave watched him for a moment, struck by his natural beauty. Most Goths he'd seen over the years were very pale. Some even used makeup to whiten their skin. But Kyle's face had a creamy ivory tone, and his cheeks had a tint of pink to them. Dave found it very appealing.

Earlier, when he'd rescued Kyle, he'd been wearing black lipstick as well as eyeliner, but although he'd reapplied the liner, his lips were bare and red. Plump and kissable, actually. Dave wanted to kiss him. Wanted to do so much

more. But he didn't want to take advantage of him. Dave had a feeling Kyle had been taken advantage of often enough.

His chest hurt thinking of men using Kyle. He certainly didn't want to be one of those losers. Hell, he wanted to protect the kid. He just had to keep his errant cock from having its way. But damn, he hadn't missed the rejected hurt in Kyle's eyes when he turned away from his naked chest. Dave blew out a breath and went to the sliding door and opened it. Clove smoke drifted toward him.

"Here you go," Dave said, handing him the plate. "You want a jacket? Must be cold out there."

"No." Kyle took the plate but didn't look at Dave. He stared out into the rain.

"You should try and get some sleep when you come back inside. I have a spare room you can rest in. No black pajamas, though." Dave tried to smile, but it was wasted because Kyle refused to look his way.

Kyle stubbed out the cigarette after a few more puffs and turned at last. Dave stood aside to let him into the house.

"Are my clothes dry, you think?"

Dave swallowed. "I'm not sure. I'll find you something more comfortable to sleep in."

Kyle shook his head. "No, don't bother. If my clothes are dry, I'll just go."

His stomach plummeted. "Hey, that's crazy. You don't need to. You have nowhere to go. It's okay. I want you to stay. I want you to feel like you can."

Kyle looked down at the floor for a moment before his gray gaze met Dave's. He smiled a little. "All right. But I don't need any pajamas. I'll sleep naked."

Dave blinked, clenching his teeth against the rise of his cock at Kyle's words. "H-here, let me show you the room." He ran his fingers through his spiked hair. He walked down the hall and turned right. "Listen, I'll probably go out to do some shopping in a couple of hours or so. You want to come with me?"

"I'm not sure that's a good idea," Kyle said. He followed Dave into the spare bedroom. "I'd sort of like to lay low for a bit."

He might not be running from a pimp, but it seemed pretty clear to Dave that Kyle was running from *someone*. Dave began to wonder if there wasn't something more to the guys beating the crap out of him.

"Okay, that's fine. What size are you?"

Kyle stopped in the middle of the room and raised one dark brow. "Pardon?"

Dave chuckled. "Clothing size. I thought I'd pick you up a few things."

"You don't have to do that."

"I know I don't have to. I want to. And yes, I'll get black. Hold on a second." Dave went into his own bedroom where he kept a pad of paper and pen on the nightstand in case he had a weird dream and wanted to remember it. He brought it back to Kyle. "Here. Write your sizes and if there are any particular brands you like. And the style of underwear too."

Once more Kyle's brow rose, but he turned away and started scribbling on the pad with his left hand.

"All right, so here's the bed," Dave pointed out unnecessarily. "The sheets are clean because I changed them not long ago, and no one's stayed in here since." He felt like he was babbling a little bit, but thoughts of Kyle slipping

under the sheets naked had entered his head, and now his cock was fully hard again. Geez, he really needed to get a grip.

Kyle handed him the pad and pen and sat down on the edge of the bed, bouncing up and down a bit. “Nice.”

Dave would *not* think of other ways to make the bed bounce. He would *not*. He glanced at what Kyle had written. “Black lipstick?”

“Yeah, man, I lost mine. Must have fallen out when my two good buddies knocked me to the ground. It’s probably still in the parking lot.”

Dave shrugged. “All right. I’ll look for it. No guarantee I’ll find it, though. Never bought makeup before.”

Kyle smiled a little, his gaze going from the top of Dave’s head down to his toes as though assessing him. Dave’s balls tightened at the open perusal.

“Okay. Think I’ll get undressed now. So unless you want to see me naked, you might want to leave.” Kyle tugged the shirt off, exposing those damn nipple rings again. Dave tugged at the collar of his shirt.

“Um, I’ll see you later. An-any foods you like or don’t like?”

“I don’t like asparagus.” Kyle stood and slipped his fingers into the waistband of his shorts. “Or lima beans. I’m not real fond of ribs either. But I’ll eat just about anything else. Enchiladas would be cool.”

Dave stood in the doorway of the bedroom telling himself to leave now. If he stayed and watched Kyle remove the shorts... well, he’d see something he wanted. That was for damn sure.

“Enchiladas it is, then. Are frozen ones okay? I’m not much of a chef,” Dave admitted, his gaze now transfixed on Kyle tugging down the navy shorts. He had to admit he stayed there in the doorway on purpose. He wanted to see Kyle’s cock and ass.

Kyle’s lips curved upward, and he turned his back to Dave, lowering the shorts past his knees. Dave quickly noted Kyle had gone commando. He had a nice rounded ass, tight and pale. Dave licked his lips. Kyle still hadn’t turned back around to face Dave. Instead, he stepped out of the shorts and bent down to pick them up, his ass cheeks spreading to almost show Dave his hole and his ball sac. Not quite enough, though. Dave had a feeling Kyle knew exactly what he was doing. It took all of Dave’s self-control not to rush over, bend him over the bed, and stick his cock up that beautiful ass.

Next Kyle raised his arms behind his head and clasped his fingers together, stretching.

“Yeah, sure,” Kyle said.

“What?” Dave’s mouth watered.

Kyle lowered his arms and turned around at last. Dave’s gaze went right to the other man’s cock, standing proudly erect between his legs.

“Frozen enchiladas are fine.”

Dave blinked, unable to process the words coming from Kyle.

“Something you wanted, Dave?” Kyle asked, a devilish smile playing on his lips.

Kyle was definitely a tease.

“No, no. I’ll leave you to get some sleep. See you later.” Still Dave lingered in the doorway.

“Yep.” Kyle pulled the sheets down and crawled onto the bed, this time spreading his ass enough to show what was hanging between his legs.

Dave’s self-control was being tested like it had never been before. Why the hell hadn’t he left? But Dave didn’t fuck strangers, and really, Kyle was a stranger. One in trouble, no less.

Kyle lay on his back, the sheet pulled up just enough to cover him from the waist down. The sheet tented over his erection. The nipple rings glittered teasingly at Dave.

“Fuck,” Dave muttered, and he forced himself to leave the room. He closed the bedroom door and leaned heavily on it.

Before he left to do the shopping, he planned on taking a shower, and during that time he would have to use his own hand to give himself relief from his too-tempting houseguest.

KYLE woke with a start. How long had he slept? He scrubbed his hand over his face and sat up.

Dave’s house. For just a second, he’d forgotten where he was. Not a dark alleyway or a homeless shelter. He exhaled. His racing heart began to slow.

It was daytime, because the sun streamed through the mini blinds on the bedroom window. Last night’s storm had ended.

He glanced down at his lap and caught sight of his hard cock. Apparently stroking it to orgasm before he went to sleep hadn’t done much to help. Well, okay, at the time it had. Kyle listened. He didn’t hear any sounds coming from

the house, so he guessed Dave must be out doing the shopping. He leaned against the headboard.

How long could he stay here? He liked the idea of having a clean, dry place to sleep with plenty of food in his belly, without having to worry about guys like the clowns who wanted to kill him last night. He hoped they weren't part of it. He didn't think they were, but honestly Kyle had learned nobody could be trusted.

If they were part of it, then they might be able to trace him through Dave. Dave's bar was in the same strip mall. They could possibly figure out Dave helped him and track him down that way. Kyle didn't like the idea of endangering Dave.

Whatever the case, Kyle couldn't stay with Dave indefinitely, even if those idiots hadn't been sent to take him out. But if he could stay a few days... that would be something. Some normalcy in his life. When had he last had that?

Kyle reached for his cock. It had hardened even more with thoughts of Dave. The dude was so hot. Kyle had tried to seduce him earlier, and it hadn't worked. He guessed Dave could have his pick of guys.

He ran his index finger across his slit, rubbing in the drop of pre-cum that formed there. Closing his eyes, Kyle closed his hand over the tip and then down the shaft, rubbing and stroking the length.

Dave didn't seem attracted to him. There were a few times when he thought he saw something in the man's eyes to indicate otherwise, but if so, Dave didn't act on it. Like his little striptease in front of Dave. The man just left the room.

With his other hand Kyle tweaked his nipples, tugging on first one ring and then the other. He could see Dave's face, the sexy stubble lining his jaw. The olive green eyes. The spiky sandy-colored hair. And the damn muscles.

Kyle stroked faster, harder. He moved his other hand from his nipples to his balls, squeezing in rhythm to the stroking of his shaft. A moan escaped his lips. Instead of his own hands, he imagined Dave stroking him, sucking him.

He was working himself into a frenzy thinking of Dave bending him over the couch, parting his ass, shoving all the way in.

"Ahh!" Kyle cried out, his balls tightening, and cum shooting out across the sheets.

The door of the bedroom flew open.

"I heard you scream... oh, my God."

Kyle opened his eyes, his hand still wrapped around his just-released cock, cum splattered everywhere. Dave stood staring at him, his mouth agape.

IV

"UM... SORRY." Dave closed the door with a loud bang and hurried into his kitchen to finish unloading groceries. His face was flaming hot and his cock raging hard.

He definitely had not expected to see that.

He opened a cabinet and took out a glass that he promptly filled with iced water from his refrigerator water dispenser. Dave held it against his face.

“Hey, man, sorry about that.”

The object of his nearly overwhelming lust now stood just inside the kitchen, thankfully fully clothed. Kyle’s black hair was disheveled, and the T-shirt and shorts he’d pulled on were slightly askew, but he still looked good enough to fuck, as far as Dave was concerned.

Dave turned away from the temptation and rubbed the cold glass all over his face. “No, I’m the one who’s sorry. I shouldn’t have just burst in like that.” Stupid thing to say, Dave realized. Now he was imagining Kyle’s cock bursting with cum again.

Kyle cleared his throat. “Well, I didn’t realize you were home yet.”

“Yeah.”

“Let’s just forget it, okay? I’m sure you’ve given yourself plenty of hand-jobs over the years.”

Dave bit his tongue hard. Surely pain would deflate his too painfully hard cock.

“So.” Kyle shifted and leaned against a nearby counter. “What did you get at the store?”

“All kinds of stuff. Food mostly. I’m going to make fajitas tonight for dinner. You like shrimp, chicken, or steak?”

Kyle grinned. “I’m a combo kind of guy. But I thought you said you weren’t much of a chef?”

Dave shrugged. “I’m not, but I looked up the recipe. And besides, it’s just throwing a few ingredients together with some spices. I got the enchiladas too. We can have that another day.” He turned back away quickly when he realized

he was implying Kyle would stay for an extended period of time. For all he knew, Kyle would be out of there in the morning.

“Awesome,” Kyle said. “What about my lipstick?”

“Yeah, sorry.” Dave reached into a bag on the counter and handed a package to Kyle. “Couldn’t find black. I found dark brown so I bought that.”

Kyle grimaced. “No can do, dude. Brown isn’t black.”

Dave nodded. “Well, I tried. Got you black clothes, though. They’re in a bag I left in the living room. Even got you black boxers.” He’d noticed Kyle wore boxers when he’d thrown his clothes in the washer.

“You’d make someone a good mother,” Kyle said, laughing when Dave threw a hand towel at him as he headed for the living room. Dave found himself following, staring at Kyle’s ass, remembering it naked.

Kyle reached for the department store plastic bag and peered into it. He whistled low. “This stuff looks expensive.”

“Don’t worry about it.”

Kyle removed a couple of black shirts and two pairs of black pants. “Wow, this is all great, but... I can’t pay for this.”

Dave folded his arms across his chest and shrugged. “I’m not looking for money.”

“Oh.” Kyle nodded. Without looking at Dave, he returned the clothes to the bag. “Yeah, I get it.”

He frowned. “You get it? What do you get, Kyle?”

Kyle waved his arms around. “You know, what you expect for all this.”

He didn't know why, but Kyle's assumption angered him. "I don't expect anything. I don't expect money, and I sure as hell don't expect sex. I just wanted to do something for you. Okay? That's all the fuck it was."

Kyle bit his lip and stared at him. "But why? You don't even know me. I'm just some loser you saved from getting the shit kicked out of him."

"I guess I'm just a really nice guy, Kyle."

For the first time in several minutes Kyle's grim expression disappeared, and he smiled, a soft, sexy-as-hell smile. "Yeah, I guess you are. Thanks, du—Dave."

Dave's anger faded, and he found himself smiling back. "You're welcome. I'm going to go get dinner started."

KYLE crouched down next to the monstrous motorcycle in Dave's garage.

"So? What do you think?" Dave asked from the doorway leading into the house. Kyle glanced over at him and grinned. His big, muscular biker dude had an apron tied around his waist. The smells of grilled vegetables and meat wafted out to the garage.

"It's wicked cool." Kyle stroked a finger over the seat. "I'd love to go for a ride."

Dave snorted. "Not on my bike, kid. No one drives Martha except me."

Kyle laughed. "Martha?" Dave grinned and shrugged. "Well, maybe you could drive her, and I could just be the passenger. You got extra helmets." Kyle inclined his head toward several motorcycle helmets on a nearby shelf.

“I thought you wanted to lay low.”

“Yeah, but with the helmet on I should be okay.”

“Okay. You ready now?”

Kyle stood up, excitement soaring through him. “Really? What about dinner?”

“It’ll keep. We’ll heat it up a bit when we return. We’ll just go for a short ride.”

“Awesome! Let me just get my trench,” Kyle said, running past Dave in the doorway. He went into the little spare bedroom where he kept his stuff. A short time ago he’d dressed in a pair of the new black pants and shirt and pulled on his combat boots. He grabbed up the coat and pulled it on.

When he made it back to the garage, Dave was already seated on the motorcycle with his helmet on. He handed a helmet to Kyle. Black, of course.

Adrenaline rushed through him. Kyle hoped he could get away with this. In reality, he didn’t know. If the punks who beat him had really been after him specifically, they might already be in the neighborhood seeking him. But how long could he hide, anyway?

He swung up on the bike behind Dave and grabbed the big beefy biker around the waist. At least he’d removed the apron. Kyle grinned. He liked the feel of Dave’s abs.

“All right, kid, hold on tight,” Dave called, and the garage door popped open.

The sun had already begun to set as Dave rode out of the garage, down the driveway, and into the street. Kyle had only ridden on one other bike, and that was back when he was thirteen. His friend’s father had a bike, and he gave

them rides one day. It was one of the few really good times in his childhood. A lifetime ago now.

Dave's speed was exhilarating, and at the same time, a little frightening. Kyle doubted he was going the speed limit, which worried him a bit. He didn't want Dave to get a ticket. Kyle laughed at himself. Nineteen and three-quarters and he already thought like an old man.

Dave turned a corner rapidly causing the tires to squeal. Okay, while he couldn't deny the ride was fun, he couldn't help wondering if Dave rode his motorcycle like this every day. Kyle didn't like the idea of a splattered Dave on the road.

"Hey, dude, maybe you should slow down?" Kyle yelled, fighting the noise of the wind, the motor, and the traffic.

"What?" Dave shouted back.

"Slow down!" Kyle gripped Dave tighter. He closed his eyes when Dave cut off a car to pull into a gas station. The motorcycle came to a stop. "Praise God," he muttered, opening his eyes. He swung off the back watching Dave stand at the pump making his gas selection.

Dave had removed his helmet and grinned at him. "Having fun?"

"Well, yeah," Kyle said. "But do you always drive so recklessly?"

His biker's smile faded. "Reckless? I don't drive reckless. I'm a perfect driver."

"If you say so."

"I do say so. I've been riding motorcycles all my life." He jabbed a finger in Kyle's direction. "Probably before you were born."

Kyle laughed. "You're only eight years older than me."

Dave shrugged. "What's your point?"

Kyle rolled his eyes and turned away. The station had a little mini-mart, and the place was happenin'. Kyle watched a lot of people going in and out. Yeah, he was a little paranoid, but he couldn't help wondering if some of them were staring at him, watching him. They couldn't know it was him, could they? Even if they were part of it? Which, hey, was crazy. They'd have to be following him or something to be at the gas station. And that couldn't be.

Kyle turned to look at the street. Maybe they could, if they'd seen Dave rescue him from the goons last night.

Nobody saw, Kyle. Knock it off.

It was probably nothing, but coming out into public like this so soon after making his escape was probably not the greatest idea.

"You, um, almost done?" he asked Dave, hoping he kept the nervous tremor out of his voice.

"Just finished," Dave said. "Where do you want to go next?"

"Back to your house, actually. If it's okay."

"So soon?"

Kyle rubbed his stomach. "I'm hungrier than I thought."

Dave nodded. "Okay, no problem. Get on."

DAVE inhaled the mouth-watering aromas coming from his fajitas. Who knew he could cook so well? True, the packaged seasoning he bought at the store helped.

"Kyle, are you ready to eat?" he yelled from the kitchen.

Kyle walked into the kitchen holding up one of Dave's purchases. "Is this a smoker's patch?"

Dave cleared his throat, feeling his face heat—and not from standing over the pan on the stove. "Yeah, I thought... maybe." He shrugged.

Kyle laughed. "You're too cute, you know that?"

Dave glanced at him in surprise. His reaction was not what Dave had been expecting. He had expected Kyle to be irritated, maybe even to tell Dave to mind his own business. "You don't mind?"

"Nah. Want to put it on me?" Kyle asked. His voice had dropped low and soft, ridiculously seductive.

Dave licked his lips and came forward to take the patch from Kyle. The way his cock perked up, Kyle might as well have said "Put this condom on me" or "Could you stick that cock in me?" or something. He blew out a breath, pushed up the sleeve of Kyle's shirt, and attached the patch to the other man's skin.

Against his will, his fingers fanned out around the patch, stroking and caressing the warm, surprisingly soft skin of Kyle's arm. Dave knew he should stop, pull away, and dish out their fajitas. Instead, his fingers closed around the arm, squeezing the slight muscle there.

Kyle's breath hitched, and he stepped closer to Dave. Dave wasn't sure who leaned forward, but Kyle's mouth was mere inches from his. He found it simply too tempting. He lowered his lips to Kyle's, touching them briefly, seeking permission to continue. Kyle whimpered low in his throat, and his hand rose up to Dave's neck, bringing his lips back to his. Dave pulled the other man's bottom lip into his mouth with his teeth and sucked. Someone moaned; Dave

thought maybe it was him. He hands went to Kyle's too cute, too perfect ass, trying to get him even closer. Kyle tried to slide his tongue inside Dave's mouth.

"God, yes," Dave groaned. He sucked on Kyle's tongue. He loved the taste of this man. Their hard cocks pressed against each other, and Dave ground his into Kyle's. The urge to fuck overwhelmed him. He deepened the kiss, sucking Kyle's tongue even further into his mouth.

Kyle whimpered again and started crawling up Dave's body.

A loud screeching alarm pierced the air.

"Shit!" Dave gasped, quickly pushing Kyle away. He'd left the fajitas on, and smoke was now billowing from them. Tiny flames shot up from the pan.

Kyle burst out laughing and snatched up the nearby fire extinguisher. Dave grimaced as he watched Kyle cover their dinner in foam. He hurried to the smoke alarm and disconnected it. The ear-piercing squeal ceased.

Kyle set down the fire extinguisher and grinned. "How about I call for pizza?"

V

DAVE tossed the paper plates they'd used for the pizza into the trash. He still couldn't believe he'd burned their dinner. He'd been so proud of his new culinary skills. Even more unbelievable, he was still rock hard. The burned dinner and squealing alarm should have deflated his erection.

“Hey,” Kyle said from behind him. He rested his hand on the small of Dave’s back, sending jolts of excitement throughout his whole body, especially his cock.

Dave closed his eyes. “Want some coffee or something?”

“No,” Kyle said softly. “I have a way better idea.”

Dave turned to face him. He couldn’t mistake the desire in Kyle’s pewter eyes. He hadn’t thought it possible, but his cock grew harder, pressing against his jeans. “What idea would that be?” His voice sounded raspy to his ears.

Kyle smiled and then ran his tongue along his bottom lip. “That we pick up where we left off before you tried to burn down the house.”

“I didn’t try to burn down the house,” Dave protested, feeling his cheeks heat.

“Whatever.” Kyle laughed. He grabbed Dave’s hands. “In your bedroom... now.”

Dave swallowed. “Are you sure? I don’t want you to feel obligated and—”

“Dude, you talk too much.” Kyle tugged him out of the kitchen, pulled Dave down the hall toward Dave’s bedroom, and then pushed him through the door. Kyle slammed him against the wall and smashed his lips over Dave’s.

Their teeth clacked together, almost painfully, but it sent thrilling jolts up Dave’s spine. He threaded his fingers through Kyle’s black hair and tugged hard.

“God, yes,” Kyle said, breaking the rough kiss. “Do that again.”

When Dave yanked on a hunk of hair, Kyle launched himself at Dave’s neck and sucked at his pulse. Dave groaned and pushed Kyle onto his four-poster bed, pulling the combat boots from Kyle’s feet. Next he tore at the

buttons of Kyle's black pants, pulling those down to his knees with his black boxers.

"Take your damn clothes off the rest of the way," Dave ordered. He reached into the nightstand next to his bed and removed three items. The lube and condoms, he set on the nightstand.

Kyle divested himself of the rest of his clothes, and Dave paused to check out his naked body again. For such a slim man, he had great, defined muscles and abs even with the bruising there from the attack. He frowned a moment, wondering if this was a good idea what with Kyle's injuries, but he guessed Kyle would tell him if he was too uncomfortable. His gaze moved to Kyle's tight, round ass.

Dave quickly shed his own clothes and jumped onto the bed, laying on top of Kyle, kissing him madly, and desperately, barely giving the other man the chance to catch his breath.

"Raise your arms above your head," Dave said, nipping Kyle's lip.

"What?"

"Do it!"

Kyle lifted his arms above his head, frowning slightly.

"Put your wrists together."

Kyle raised a sculpted eyebrow but did as Dave said. Nice. Dave loved an obedient lover.

Dave snapped the cuffs he'd pulled from his nightstand onto Kyle's wrists. Kyle's eyes widened, but he didn't protest. In fact, his cock seemed to get harder. He got off Kyle and went over to his chest of drawers and took out several lengths of rope.

“What are you going to do?” Kyle asked, rising up to watch him, his arms cuffed above his head.

“Lay back down,” Dave said sharply. He approached the bed and threaded a length of the rope through the handcuffs. He tied each end to a post on the bed securing Kyle’s wrists in place. Then he hesitated. He didn’t want to freak Kyle out, especially since he guessed Kyle had probably been through some major shit in his young life. “Okay?”

“Yeah,” Kyle said, his voice sounded hoarse and excited.

Dave licked his lips and walked to the bottom of the bed. Using another hunk of rope, he attached it to one of Kyle’s legs and tied that to the post. Then he did the same thing to the other leg. His cock was so hard he thought it might snap off. He swallowed. “Still okay?” He ran his fingers along Kyle’s left calf.

“Yes,” Kyle whispered. “Wow, I didn’t know you were kinky.”

Dave’s fingers stilled on the other man’s bare skin. “Does it bother you?”

“No way.”

Dave grabbed up the strip of condoms he’d left on the night stand and tore off two. He ripped one open and quickly rolled it over his aching hard cock. He knelt on the bed, close to Kyle’s head, and leaned down to kiss him, shoving his tongue in none-too-gently. Kyle sucked on it, sending wicked ideas through Dave’s mind. He ended the kiss and then swung his leg to the other side of Kyle’s head, straddling him. His cock brushed along his lover’s lips.

“Open your mouth,” he ordered hoarsely.

Kyle moaned and parted his lips. Dave lowered his cock into Kyle’s mouth, going slow, being careful not to gag him.

The feel of Kyle's warm, moist mouth around his sheathed cock had him gritting his teeth to calm himself down. He didn't want to lose it too soon. But shit, it had been so long since he'd had sex.

He looked down at Kyle's face. It was flushed red, and his cheeks were hollowed as he sucked Dave's cock down his throat.

"Ah, fuck, that's good," Dave said. His hips moved; he rocked in and out of Kyle's mouth, unable to stop himself. He braced his hands on the wall above the bed and thrust in deep, hitting the back of Kyle's throat. Kyle made a little strangled noise so Dave eased back, but damn, it was difficult.

He was close to coming. He knew he needed to stop if he was going to bury himself balls deep in Kyle's pale ass. Instead he thrust faster, deeper, urging Kyle to suck harder with moans and gasps he couldn't prevent from escaping his lips.

"Gotta stop," he muttered, lacking the willpower to do just that. His balls tightened, and his spine tingled. "Kyle!"

His orgasm slammed through him as he pumped into the condom. Gasping from the force of it, he pulled out of Kyle's mouth and sat nearby, breathing heavily.

Dave clenched his eyes closed. "Sorry."

"For what?"

"I wanted to fuck you," Dave admitted, feeling his face heat with embarrassment. "You're just really good at that. Amazing."

Kyle chuckled, and Dave opened his eyes to look at him. He was beautiful with his gray eyes sparkling and his skin flushed pink. "So fuck me."

Dave pointed at his deflated cock and removed the soiled condom.

Kyle laughed again. “Fuck me with your ass, dude. Get another condom and put it on me.”

Dave swallowed, renewed excitement sparking through him. He reached over, tossed the used condom in the wastebasket, and then grabbed the other condom and the tube of lube from the nightstand. Since Kyle was still restrained, he rolled the condom over Kyle’s erection.

Squirting a generous amount onto his fingers, Dave slipped two fingers into his ass, spreading himself for Kyle’s entry. Kyle lifted his head, watching Dave prepare himself. “Wow, that’s hot.”

Dave grinned and positioned his ass just over Kyle’s cock. “Ready?”

“Shit, yeah. I can’t wait to feel your ass squeezing my dick.”

Dave pushed down, impaling himself on Kyle’s shaft. He slammed all the way down, his eyes widening when Kyle hit his prostate. He was more than a little surprised when his own cock filled and rose.

With Kyle still unable to move more than his hips, Dave fucked himself, pulling out and pushing down hard and frantic. Beads of sweat formed on Kyle’s forehead and his top lip. His brows furrowed.

“You’re so tight,” Kyle gasped. “I’m gonna come soon.”

Dave squeezed his ass muscles, tightening around Kyle’s cock. He loved the idea that he could get Kyle excited. For some reason he wanted to rock Kyle’s world. Gripping Kyle’s hips, Dave rode him roughly, not caring about the burning sting the rough fucking caused. Kyle’s groans had

turned to little keening cries that turned Dave on like crazy. He knew Kyle was close to coming. Dave tilted his ass just enough for Kyle's cock to hit his prostate again. He could hardly believe he was ready to come again.

"Oh, yeah," Kyle said, tensing beneath him as he shot his load into the condom.

Dave followed his orgasm quickly, his cock shooting cum all over Kyle's stomach. Dave lifted off Kyle's now-soft cock. He peeled off the latex and threw it over the side of the bed toward the trash. Dave didn't know or care if it made it into the basket. He collapsed on top of his lover and wrapped his arms around his middle.

Kyle sighed. "Are you going to release me now?"

Dave peered up at Kyle and grinned. "Hmm. An interesting question. I don't know if I should."

Kyle raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

"I could leave you like that all night," Dave said, rubbing his chin. "I kind of like you like that."

"Very funny, Dave. My arms are tired." Kyle yanked on the cuffs and the rope.

"All right, all right." Dave struggled up from the bed, his legs feeling weak. He untied the ropes from Kyle's feet first. Kyle immediately bent both legs and flexed them while Dave dug into the drawer of his nightstand and took out the key to the cuffs.

"Um, how is it you have handcuffs?" Kyle asked.

Dave shrugged. "You can buy all kinds of things off the Internet." He turned the lock and removed the cuffs and then untied the ropes.

Kyle sat up and leaned against the headboard. “Thanks, Dave. Hey, that was amazing. Can we do that again? Only this time you can be the one locked up.”

Dave groaned. “Are you kidding? I’m going to fall asleep as soon as my head hits the pillow.”

“Well, I guess I can give you a couple of hours of sleep.”

Dave lay down on the mattress next to Kyle and pulled him close. “Will you stay in my room with me?” He’d rarely asked another guy to sleep with him. To stay in the same bed. Usually he was happy for them to go away once the sex was over. He found himself waiting for the answer, holding his breath.

“Yes.” Kyle yawned. “I don’t think I could move enough to go to the spare room anyway.”

Dave closed his eyes, relief filling him. He didn’t know how long Kyle would hang around, but he intended to enjoy whatever time they had.

VI

DAVE’S eyes fluttered opened with some reluctance. He stretched his aching muscles and yawned loudly. Damn, he had to work tonight. If he had a partner in the bar, he could maybe have taken an extra day or two off. He would have liked to spend more personal time with Kyle.

Kyle.

Where the hell was he? Dave looked at the empty spot on the bed. Had he skipped out on Dave already?

Disappointment started to settle in his gut when he smelled... pancakes? He inhaled again and tossed the blanket and sheet aside to rise from the bed. He picked up plaid pajama bottoms from a nearby chair and pulled them on.

As soon as he stepped outside his bedroom door he could hear rummaging in the cabinets. He walked down the hall and peeked into the kitchen.

Kyle stood at the stove, a white apron wrapped around his waist, contrasting oddly with the rest of his all-black attire. His black hair was wet and sort of askew. He held a spatula in his hand, and, sure enough, flipped over several pancakes he was cooking on a griddle on the burner. Next to him on the cabinet, Kyle had placed a plastic bowl of pancake batter and a large serving plate already holding several completed pancakes.

“Wow,” Dave exclaimed. “Those smell amazing.”

Kyle turned. “Hey, hi.” He’d already lined his eyes in black, but his sexy lips were bare. “I started coffee, too, but if you’d rather have tea let me know.”

“Coffee is fine.” Dave glanced at the digital clock on the stove and saw it was already after eleven. “I didn’t know I had any pancake mix.”

Kyle grinned. “Please, dude. You didn’t. I made these from scratch.”

Dave felt his jaw drop. “You know how to do that?”

“It’s not that hard, trust me.” Kyle shrugged. “It’s one of the few things I can make, though, so don’t get all gooey on me over it.”

Dave laughed and went to the cabinet with the coffee mugs. "I'll try not to."

"Go sit at the table when you're done getting your coffee, and I'll bring you a plate."

Dave poured his coffee and added cream from the refrigerator. He noticed Kyle had laid out butter and maple syrup on the dining room table. He couldn't help but smile. "How long have you been up?" he asked, taking his seat.

"A few hours. Dude, you snore like a freight train." Kyle brought two plates of pancakes to the table and set one in front of Dave and the other at the empty seat. He went back for a mug of coffee and then sat down.

"Sorry about the snoring."

Kyle shrugged. "I'm sure you can't help it. You also tended to flip a lot and almost squashed me."

Dave's cheeks grew flaming hot. "Uh, sorry."

"No big deal. I'm guessing you don't let a lot of your lovers sleep with you, huh?"

Dave poured syrup on his pancakes and sliced off a hunk with his knife. "You guessed right. I can't remember the last time I had someone sleeping with me."

Kyle had slathered his pancakes with butter, but no syrup. Dave shoved the syrup bottle in his direction.

Kyle shook his head. "Don't touch the stuff."

"You don't use syrup?"

"Nope. Too sweet. Just butter."

Lots of it from the looks of it, but Dave decided not to mention it. Kyle was being too cooperative with the smoking to ruffle him over butter use.

"These are fabulous," Dave said around a mouthful.

“Thanks.” Kyle blushed and looked down at his plate. After a moment, he glanced up at Dave, his pewter eyes gleaming beneath his ridiculously long eyelashes. “What are you doing today, Dave?”

“Have to open the bar at three. I’ve been thinking about closing on Mondays as well as Sundays, but I haven’t gotten around to it. Monday nights are pretty slow, and I usually close up between midnight and one.” Dave sipped his coffee. He didn’t want Kyle to leave, not just yet, but he didn’t want to appear overly eager. “You’re welcome to stay here all day watching television or whatever.”

Kyle bit his lip and glanced toward the sliding glass doors to the outside world. He kept his gaze there for a few seconds before looking back at Dave. He fidgeted. “Actually, I’d sort of like to go with you. Do you think I could?”

He didn’t say it, but Dave got the impression Kyle didn’t especially want to be left alone for an extended period. Maybe it was the strangeness of the house or the area, but Dave figured it more likely had to do with whatever— whoever—Kyle was running from.

“Yeah, I don’t see why not,” Dave said, and then stopped. “Oh wait, damn, you’re not twenty-one.”

“Is that a problem?”

“You can’t hang out at the bar.” Dave grimaced. “I have an office in the back with a desk and a computer. You can stay in there and mess around on the Internet if you want.”

Kyle smiled. “That would be wicked cool, thanks.”

KYLE was grateful Dave chose to drive his pickup to the bar for two reasons. He seemed to be a more careful driver in the

truck than he'd been when riding the motorcycle and Kyle could slump down in the passenger seat so no one could see him.

The couple of blocks to Dave's bar didn't take long at all, and soon they were parked pretty close to the entrance. Dave got out right away, but Kyle lingered, trying to peer out the window to see around the mostly deserted parking lot.

Besides Dave's place, the strip mall housed a dry cleaners, a nail spa, a florist, and a pet store. Only a handful of cars were parked in front of the other storefronts. He didn't spot any people outside other than Dave, who stood outside the truck, holding the door open, peering in at him.

"Are you getting out?"

"Yeah. Can you open the bar door first? Then I'll get out."

"Kyle." Dave clearly wanted to question his odd behavior, but with a sigh he slammed his truck door, walked over to the bar, and put the key in the lock in the door.

Kyle cracked the passenger side door. "Do you see anyone?" he asked.

"What?"

"Do you see anyone watching or whatever?"

"No. Come on, Kyle, get out," Dave said impatiently.

Kyle slipped out of the truck as fast as he could and didn't even close the door. He hurried into the bar, breathing easier already. He exhaled and looked around the darkened bar Dave owned. There were several booths and a few tables as well as the bar with about a dozen stools in front of it. On the walls were the usual beer displays and flashing neon signs.

Dave came up behind him, turned over the open sign on the door, hit a light switch, and then turned to Kyle. “I suppose you aren’t going to give me an explanation for that.”

Kyle shrugged. “I thought maybe the guys who beat me before might hang around or something. I don’t want to run into them again.”

“Uh-huh. Come here; the office is this way.” Dave led him to a door to the left of the bar. He used a key to open that, too, and then flicked on a light. Sure enough, Dave’s office had a desk and a computer as well as a small fridge and microwave and one of those coat rack things.

“Cozy.” Kyle flopped himself down in the desk chair.

“Glad you approve. There’s soda, iced tea, and water in the fridge as well as some sandwich stuff if you get hungry. There are also chips and crackers over there.” He pointed to a shelf near the fridge.

Kyle grinned. “You are so cool.”

“Just cool or wicked cool?”

Kyle let his gaze drift across Dave’s body and ran his tongue over his bottom lip. “Definitely wicked.”

“Stop that. I have to work.” Dave turned dark red and shifted his leg.

Kyle laughed. “Okay, okay. Give me a kiss at least.” He jumped up from the chair and aimed his lips at Dave’s mouth. Dave pulled him close and mashed their lips together. Just as Dave went to pull away, Kyle slipped his tongue inside.

“Mmm,” Dave said against his mouth. He allowed Kyle to press closer, their crotches brushing. Dave’s half-hard cock pushed against Kyle’s. Abruptly Dave ended the kiss and quite firmly pushed Kyle away. “I have a bar to run.”

Kyle nodded, swaying just a bit on his feet. He exhaled and went back to sit in the chair behind the desk. “What time will we get out of here?”

Dave shrugged. “Usually Mondays are my slowest nights. My hours are three to close, but most nights I don’t close up until two.”

“Shit,” Kyle grumbled, powering up the computer.

“But as I said, Mondays are slow, so we might get out of here just after midnight.”

“Cool. I’m looking forward to having that—” Kyle gestured with his head toward Dave’s crotch, “—in my ass.”

Dave shook his head but smiled. “Try to behave. I’ll check on you later.”

“Yes, sir.”

DAVE generally worked the first couple hours at the bar alone during the week. Like most bars, his busiest days were Friday and Saturday.

At five, his waitress, Louise, came on duty, and at six, his bartender, Ivan appeared. Those two, together with him, made up the majority of his staff. He had another part-time waitress who came in only on Fridays and Saturdays.

Only two of his regular customers sat at the bar drinking beers with their eyes glued to the basketball game he had on the television above the bar. Dave refilled the bowls of peanuts and set them in front of the guys.

Because it was December, he’d set out a few Christmas decorations. Some twinkling lights around the door, a small artificial tree with some dollar-store decorations and a

couple of cardboard Santas tacked to the wall. He wasn't really into Christmas much, being raised by a Jewish mother and an agnostic father, but his customers seemed to want the stuff.

The door opened briefly, letting a cool breeze in. Louise stepped through the door and let it close behind her.

"Good evening," she said, walking straight back toward the office.

"Hey there, Lou," one of the customers called. The other one grunted.

She shrugged out of her coat, nodded at Dave, and disappeared into the office where he'd left Kyle.

"Hi, I'm Louise," Dave heard her say.

"I'm Kyle. Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, Kyle."

Louise returned to the bar wearing her apron. She raised an eyebrow at Dave. "Who and what is that?"

Dave smiled. "Kyle's my houseguest."

Louise, a large-bosomed, brunette woman in her thirties raising four kids on her own, shrugged. "Houseguest, huh? Pretty. Is he even legal?"

"No."

Her eyes bugged out. "Dave, you can't have a minor—"

"No, he's not a minor. I meant he's not twenty-one. That's why I have him back there. I'd never get mixed up with a minor."

She nodded. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"Me too."

Louise patted his arm. "Like I said, he *is* pretty. Haven't seen too many Goths around lately. The eyeliner's nice."

“Maybe he can give you some pointers,” Dave teased.

“Funny. Seems a bit young for you, though.”

“Yeah, maybe. If you’ve got things covered, I’m going to go check on him.”

“Sure thing.”

When he walked through the door of the office, Kyle was frowning, staring at the computer screen. He had a glass of iced tea in front of him. He had a pack of cigarettes in his hand, and he was flipping the carton over and over.

“You can’t smoke in here.”

Kyle glanced at him. “I’m not smoking, dude. I have the patch, remember?”

Dave took the cigarettes from his hand. “Then what are these?”

“Just playing with them. Nervous habit, I guess.”

Dave slipped the pack into the front pocket of his jeans. “Find something else to play with.” Kyle raised a dark, sculpted brow. Dave felt his cheeks heat. “You can’t do that here either.”

Kyle snorted. “This place is full of rules.”

Dave sat down on the edge of the desk. “You could have stayed at the house. What are you doing?”

“Nothing in particular.” Kyle leaned back in the chair and stuck his feet on the desk, crossing them at the ankles. The combat boots were clunky and a bit scuffed.

“You have to stick your dirty feet there?” Dave winced at his own voice. He sounded like a pain-in-the-ass old man, for Christ’s sake.

Kyle glared but lowered his feet. “I’m getting hungry.”

Dave nodded. “I thought you might. Do you want the sandwich stuff or you want me to order something?”

“How about Chinese food?”

“Okay, that’s doable. I think I have a menu for a place somewhere around here.”

“Cool. You got a bathroom?”

“Just outside the office, to the right.”

Kyle stood. “I’ll be right back.”

“I’ll look for the menu while you’re gone.” Dave went around to the desk drawers, sitting in the chair Kyle recently occupied. His gaze automatically went to the computer screen. The site Kyle had most recently been looking at was still on the screen. The criminal section of the Los Angeles Superior Court site. Frowning, Dave checked out the computer’s most recent browsing history. One for the Los Angeles Police Department and the Drug Enforcement Administration. “What the hell is going on, Kyle?”

VII

DAVE glanced at the clock over the bar for what seemed like the hundredth time. Fifteen minutes after eleven. Would this damn night ever end?

At the other end of the bar, Ivan, his full-time bartender, mixed a drink. Originally from Russia, Ivan had hair the color of sable, and it went to about the middle of his back. Tonight, as usual, he had it pulled back with a rubber band.

Dave had known Ivan for about five years now. Prior to Ivan working at the bar, they'd been friends with benefits. They were friends still, but without the benefits. Things went smoother between them without the addition of sex.

Ivan glanced his way, placed the drink in front of the customer, and walked along the bar toward him. "If you want to take off, I'm sure Louise and I can manage this crowd." He gestured with his shoulder to the handful of customers in the bar. "I know how to lock up."

Dave bit his lip. God knew he wanted to take Kyle home. He'd checked on the young man about a half hour ago, and he'd been asleep in the chair, awkwardly twisted. The position couldn't be comfortable.

Louise walked behind the bar carrying a tray. "He's right, boss. We can handle it. It's just a typical Monday."

"If you're sure?" Dave said hopefully.

"I'm quite sure." Ivan pushed the sleeves of his long-sleeved T-shirt up to his elbows. He reached a large hand toward the ring with the bar keys hooked to Dave's jeans. Dave removed them and handed them to Ivan.

"Hey," Ivan called after him as he walked toward the office.

"Yeah?"

"That boy, are you sleeping with him?"

Dave's cheeks grew very hot. "What if I am?"

Ivan grinned, showing perfect white teeth. He shrugged. "Just wanted to know if he's available. He's very cute."

Dave frowned in annoyance. "He is most definitely not available. Especially to you."

“Okay, okay, no worries, Dave. I would never step on your toes.”

Dave nodded but shot one last glare at his friend before entering the back office. The sound of soft snoring greeted him. Kyle’s dark head now rested on the desk. His mouth was slightly parted. Damn, he really was cute.

Dave gently touched his shoulder to wake him. Kyle bolted upright with a startled gasp, his eyes wide. His skin had gone very white.

“Kyle, shh, it’s all right; it’s me.” Dave put out a reassuring hand, gently rubbing Kyle’s arm.

Kyle nodded, a slight pink returning to his creamy cheeks. His black hair was tweaked on the side he’d been resting on the desk “Y-yeah. S-sorry. I’m a little jumpy.”

Dave closed his hand over Kyle’s. “When do you think you’ll trust me enough to tell me what’s really going on?” Kyle’s gray eyes looked down, his long lashes covering them. He shifted his feet. “All right.” Dave sighed. “I woke you because it’s time to go.”

Kyle’s gaze rose, his lips curved into a smile. “Yeah?”

Dave smiled. “Ivan and Louise are giving me a break. They’ll close up tonight, so you’re lucky. If you’re ready, let’s go.”

Kyle threaded his fingers through Dave’s, squeezed a little, and released his hand. “Thanks.”

Dave was aware of his customers’ stares as they stepped out of the office. It was hard not to stare at Kyle. The black clothing, hair, and eyeliner contrasting with the pale, creamy skin were incredibly dramatic. Plus, he was damn beautiful. Movie-star or maybe rock-star gorgeous.

He automatically moved closer to Kyle, feeling oddly protective because his customers, not to mention his so-called friend, Ivan, were giving the young man the once-over. Kyle looked wary, but he managed not to bolt from fright.

“Goodnight, Dave, Kyle,” Louise called after them as they reached the door.

“Night,” Dave said. Kyle gave a little wave and then dashed outside to the truck with Dave.

He got them into the truck quickly, but he noted the parking lot was deserted save for the couple of cars parked outside his bar. Kyle had him almost a little paranoid, checking around for hidden thugs. He started the truck.

“You okay?”

“Fine. Is that a gay bar?”

“No, why?”

Kyle scrunched down as Dave pulled out of the parking lot. He yawned. “I just thought, well, they seemed to be sort of leering.”

Dave noticed when Kyle got tired the hint of Irish lilt in his voice was a little more pronounced. He found it incredibly endearing and sexy. He nodded. “Yeah, I think they were. I don’t really advertise it as a gay bar, but I think my being gay myself probably makes most gay men feel pretty comfortable there. Plus my bartender is gay too.”

Kyle shot him a surprised look. “That big Russian guy?”

“Yes. Didn’t you notice him leering at you?” Dave shook his head. “He thinks you’re cute.”

“Hmm. He isn’t bad looking, but you’re way cuter.”

Dave couldn’t keep himself from grinning. “Yeah?”

“Definitely.” Kyle grinned back. “And yes, I *am* trying to seduce you.”

“You don’t have to try. I’m already half-hard.”

“Only half? We’ll have to change that.”

KYLE lay naked on his stomach on Dave’s bed. Dave wanted to take a quick shower before getting down to business. Unfortunately, Kyle had been getting sleepier and sleepier. He had to admit he loved this big soft bed. It was quite the luxury.

It beat the hell out of sleeping in parks or next to trash bins, hoping rats didn’t come to gnaw on your flesh while you slept. Or the fear of something even worse finding you. Of course he’d been scrunched in next to a big trash bin hiding from an abusive john when Dax had found him. At the time it seemed like a good thing.

“Hey, there.”

Kyle heard the softly whispered words from his hiding place in the alleyway behind an old battered strip mall just before a man’s hand reached out to touch his cheek. He jumped, trying to back further into the narrow hiding place where he’d wedged himself.

“It’s all right, man, I’m not here to hurt you.” The man dropped to his haunches and peered in at Kyle. He couldn’t make out the man’s features in the barely lit alley, but he didn’t appear to be the man who’d kicked the shit out of him. “My name is Dax.”

“K-Kyle.”

“Why don’t you come out of there, Kyle? It can’t be very comfortable.” Dax reached for Kyle’s hand and tugged. Kyle came out of the narrow space with some effort. The man, Dax, studied him. “You’re just a kid.”

Kyle turned instantly belligerent. “What do you want? If you want a job, I charge twenty-five.”

Dax shook his head, smiling a little. “No, that’s not what I want.” He studied Kyle intently for several moments. Dax was easily ten years older than himself, maybe even more. He had dark curly hair and soulful brown eyes. To the left of his lips was a tiny sexy mole. He was obviously of Latino heritage. “Someone’s been messing with you, huh?”

Kyle tried to maintain his cool, his bravado, in the face of such intense scrutiny and the gentle, caring tone Dax used. He opened his mouth on a sarcastic come back, but it didn’t come.

Dax ran a thumb gently over the darkened bruise on Kyle’s chin. “You shouldn’t be out here, Corazón. Not on this night.” He glanced around the alley as though searching for someone, some thing. “You will come with me. Somewhere safe where you can clean up and get some food.”

Kyle thought he should protest, but he was hungry and cold, and Dax had the kindest eyes. He tried anyway. “No, I—”

“Shh, Corazón. I cannot leave you here.” His gaze darted around the alley again, turning fierce. He grabbed Kyle’s hand, pulling him along.

“Kyle?”

He opened his eyes, blinking sleep out of them, and stared into Dave’s green eyes. He was kneeling beside the bed, his face mere inches from Kyle’s. Dave frowned.

Kyle forced a smile. “Hi. I guess I fell asleep.”

Dave brushed a lock of hair off Kyle’s forehead. “You were whimpering in your sleep.”

“I was?”

“Uh-huh. Who is Dax, Kyle?”

Oh, shit. Casual, Kyle. There was no reason to freak. “Just someone I used to know. Not important.” He peered over the bed and noticed Dave only wore a white terry cloth towel around his waist. His gaze swept over Dave’s tattooed biceps, down over his muscular chest and then his six-pack abs. He detected a definite rise under the towel. “Yum. Your body is freaking awesome.”

“Are you sure you’re up for something?” Dave asked. “You seem pretty tired.”

Kyle smiled, licking his lips. “I’m wide awake now.”

Dave stood and discarded his towel, flinging it in the general direction of the bathroom. His erection pointed at Kyle, a pearly drop of pre-cum appearing on the tip.

Kyle’s own cock hardened underneath him, and he moved to turn over, but Dave stopped him with a large hand on his shoulder.

“Wait.” Dave had knelt on the bed just behind him.

He looked over his shoulder at Dave. “What’s up?”

Dave smiled. “I’m going to give you a massage.”

“Wow, really? That would be awesome.”

“Lay your head down and close your eyes,” Dave ordered. “And keep them closed.”

Kyle eagerly complied, waiting for the touch of Dave’s hands on his bare skin. The bed shifted a little as though Dave leaned forward. Then he heard a sort of sloshing noise.

The scent of spicy cloves drifted to his nostrils. “Cloves?”

“Mmm. Massage oil. It happens to be scented with cloves.”

Kyle grinned. “You rock.”

Dave chuckled even as his hands began to knead Kyle’s shoulders. Kyle groaned. He couldn’t help it. Dave’s hands on his shoulders and now moving to work his back were amazing. He sighed.

“You like?”

Kyle nodded. “Damn, that’s good.”

“Well, I was a masseuse.”

Now that did surprise him. His eyes popped open. “You were?”

“Yes, close your eyes.” Dave swatted him. “Before I opened my bar I worked at a massage parlor.”

“Okay, you know how to do this, you’re gorgeous, and you’re gay? Geez, I’m in love,” Kyle said happily.

“Yeah, yeah, be quiet and just feel, brat.”

Dave’s hands moved lower, massaging his lower back and dipping down toward his ass. Okay, that changed his mood from relaxed to sexually alert. Dave squeezed the cheeks, his fingertips stroking along the crease.

“Ah, shit,” Kyle said, shaking with sudden intense lust. “This wasn’t part of your hour massage at the parlor, I hope.”

Dave’s laughter was deep, throaty, and so fucking sexy, Kyle thought his hard dick would break off. “Definitely not.”

Kyle heard the tear of a foil wrapper, and he moaned, “Yesssss.” He spread his legs without urging from Dave, lifting his ass and pushing it up toward Dave’s probing

hands. More sloshing noises and then a cool, slicked finger slipped into the entrance of his ass.

“Dave, God, you’re making me crazy.”

“That’s the idea.” Dave withdrew his finger and dropped down near Kyle’s ear, his lips trailing along the sensitive flesh there and whispered, “I’m going to pound you into the mattress.”

Kyle swallowed, willing his errant cock not to splurt all over the sheets underneath him right then. He wanted to come with Dave fucking him.

Dave’s mouth latched onto his throat, nibbling and sucking. Kyle gripped the sheets, squeezing. His lover once more massaged his shoulders and back, making a painfully slow beeline for his butt once more. He opened himself for the finger Dave slipped in, probing, pushing, feeling for his prostate.

“Fuck,” Kyle gasped, a jolt of sensation shooting up his quivering spine. He pushed up, trying to get more of Dave’s finger. Another finger slipped in, stretching. It stung a bit, burned, but he welcomed it. Knowing what was coming. Needing it so badly. “Dave, please.”

“Please what, brat?”

“Please fuck me.” Kyle opened his eyes and looked over his shoulder, taking in the sight of the beautiful, sandy-haired man.

“Eyes closed, babe.” Dave’s fingers pulled out, and he rose over Kyle’s body. He didn’t move; he just poised himself over Kyle’s entrance waiting for Kyle to acquiesce to his demands.

Gritting his teeth, Kyle closed his eyes again. The tip of Dave’s cock pressed into his snug hole.

“Relax, babe, let me in,” Dave whispered soothingly. Kyle exhaled, pushing out even as Dave pushed in. His cock thrust deeper, squeezing past the ring of muscle and sliding in all the way, balls deep.

“Stroke yourself.”

Kyle reached underneath and grasped his erection, his fingers encircling the shaft. He shifted up just a bit to make it easier to touch himself. Above him, Dave grunted, ramming in hard and fast. His breath came in short, heavy pants.

“Not gonna last, Kyle,” Dave moaned. “You’re too damn tight.”

Kyle jerked his cock faster, feeling his balls tighten. He heard moaning gasps and couldn’t distinguish whether they were from him or Dave or maybe both.

“Dave, God, it’s too much.” Kyle’s release slammed through him like a freight train, draining every bit of energy from his muscles, causing them to turn to jelly.

Dave gripped Kyle’s hips, thrusting in again and again, quick and sharp. He tensed and yelled. “Kyle!”

A rather loud snoring startled Kyle awake just a minute later. Dave had collapsed on top of him, his cock still within him. They’d both fallen asleep. He wouldn’t mind, except Dave was pretty damn heavy. Kyle couldn’t keep a chuckle from bubbling forth. He nudged the man with his elbow.

“Uh?”

“Want to use the bed to sleep on instead of me?”

Dave didn’t answer but slid off him and lay down, pulling Kyle with him and wrapping his arms snugly around him. The snoring restarted immediately.

Kyle smiled. “Night.”

VIII

KYLE woke to loud voices raised in anger. He shrank down under the covers, not quite burying his head in the blankets. His heart thudded almost painfully.

Not again.

Martin Ramirez's voice rose above the others, sharp, deep, and particularly mean. He clenched his eyes tightly closed. After a few minutes, the voices lowered and then disappeared as if they had moved further into the big house.

He blew out a breath. The house in the Pacific Heights part of San Francisco was amazing. A mansion, really. So many rooms Kyle hadn't even counted them. When Dax first brought him there, he'd been awed by the archways and Spanish tile. In the backyard was a large Grecian pool. He'd had no idea Dax was so rich.

Then he found out the house didn't belong to Dax, but rather his boss, Martin Ramirez. He adored Dax but hated Ramirez. He scared the crap out of Kyle. He wished they could just leave, but they never did.

The door to the room opened quietly and then closed again. "Corazón?"

Kyle sat up. "I'm here, Dax."

Dax came to sit on the bed, and he pulled Kyle into his arms. "Did the shouting wake you?" At Kyle's nod, he whispered, "I'm sorry."

“Is... is everything okay?”

Dax ran his fingers through Kyle’s hair. “Shh, Corazón. Everything is fine. You don’t need to worry; I will protect you.”

“But—”

Dax cupped his jaw and turned his face until his lips met Dax’s. “You are so sweet. It was a mistake to bring you here. I wish I hadn’t, but... now I can’t send you away.”

“Dax, I don’t want to go anywhere.” He didn’t want to, really, though he wished they could leave Ramirez.

Dax murmured something against Kyle’s lips and pushed him down on the mattress.

Sex with Dax was fairly tame. Sweet and gentle, almost like he was afraid to hurt Kyle in any way. As it was, Dax had insisted they wait until Kyle turned eighteen even though he’d already had sex when Dax took him in.

DAVE was gone when Kyle woke, his sleep disturbed by unpleasant dreams. He stared at the ceiling for a moment, wondering why he had begun to dream about Dax. He’d hoped to put all that behind him. Of course, that would be very hard with him having to constantly look over his shoulder, afraid of who might be after him.

He rose from the bed and went into the bathroom to take a leak. He noticed a lined piece of paper by the faucet as he washed his hands. A note from Dave saying he went to the store.

Kyle peered back into the bedroom to see the time on the digital clock. Almost noon. Damn, he hated sleeping late. It usually made him groggy. He turned on the shower and

peeled off the black pajama bottoms Dave had bought him. Sooner or later he'd have to leave Dave's house. He couldn't continue to rely on Dave or, worse yet, endanger him. Ramirez and his people would probably find him eventually.

When Kyle came out of the shower he quickly dressed and put on his eyeliner, noticing he'd have to retouch his nail polish soon. The house was so damn quiet; it was sort of creepy. He made himself coffee and stared out the front windows, wondering how long he could stay with Dave.

Kyle really liked him. The sex was amazing, and Dave was such a nice, normal guy. He'd never had that before. Biting his lip, Kyle reached into his pocket for his pack of cigarettes and then recalled he didn't have them. Damn, he wanted a cigarette, but he'd promised Dave he would try to quit.

He looked out at the houses of Dave's neighbors. Just an average suburban area where they probably never thought about whether they would live another day. Because it was December, most of the other houses had Christmas decorations in their yards.

Kyle tried to remember if he'd ever had a normal Christmas. Even before his family left Ireland for the states. But no memories of a happy, excited Christmas came.

He turned when he heard the garage door open.

After a moment, Dave came in carrying a very small live Christmas tree and a shopping bag. He smiled at Kyle. "Hi. I thought maybe, you know, since you were here, you might like a tree or something."

Dave lowered his gaze then, turning a dark shade of red. It was so unexpectedly sweet that for a moment Kyle found himself speechless. He just watched as Dave set the tree on

a little end table. The other man reached into the shopping bag and pulled out a box of plain red Christmas bulbs.

“I didn’t have any decorations so I just got these. I figured we could decorate it before work.” Dave reached into the bag again and took out a small wrapped present and set it under the tree. Kyle didn’t think it possible but the man turned even redder. “I thought you might like a present.”

Say something, you asshole, Kyle told himself. But he couldn’t make his mouth work, couldn’t swallow past the lump in his throat. The fact Dave hoped he would be there for Christmas staggered him. He doubted he would. And that just made the gesture that much more heartbreaking.

“Dave....” was all he could croak out.

“So,” Dave said with a false cheerfulness. “You want to come to work with me tonight or are you staying here?”

Kyle knew he should stay behind so that while Dave was at work he could leave, maybe. The longer he was here, the harder it would be to leave. It was already going to be damn hard. But the vulnerable look he caught in Dave’s gaze just before he looked away again prevented him from thinking he could leave. Not tonight.

“I definitely want to go to work with you.” Kyle forced a smile, though it felt brittle to him. “Let’s have some lunch, and then we’ll decorate that tree.”

HE WAS bored with sitting in Dave’s office night after night. Usually Dave checked on him a few times during the night, but this being Friday, Kyle hadn’t seen Dave since they’d arrived. Kyle could have stayed at Dave’s house, of course, but he liked being near Dave.

Ivan had brought a portable television for Kyle the night before, so he'd been messing around with that, but he found his attention span pretty short for most television shows, and the set had no remote control.

He glanced at the clock on the microwave. Only ten. No doubt he had several more hours to wait for Dave.

The office door opened, and Louise walked in. She closed the door and smiled. "Hey, kid, break time."

"Thank God someone is here to talk to me. I've been going crazy."

"I'll bet." She took a can of cola from the small fridge and sat down on the edge of the desk. "You're in luck, though, Dave is closing up for a week after tomorrow's rush."

Kyle perked up. "He is?"

"Yep, he just said so. He's going to close for Christmas week. And why not? He's the boss; he can do whatever he wants. Ivan and I think it's because of you, though." She winked.

"Me?"

"I think he's using the holidays as an excuse to take off some time with you. He deserves the break, though. The bar will still be here."

Kyle bit his lip. Damn, if Dave closed for the week, he would feel obligated to stay with him. Ah, hell, who was kidding? He didn't want to leave anyway.

"That's pretty cool," Kyle said. "But what about you and Ivan? Won't not working affect you?"

Louise grinned. "That's the great thing about Dave. He gave us Christmas bonuses, and they were pretty generous, so we're very okay. Funny, he's never been into the holidays until you came along."

Damn, the man made Kyle turn to mush.

She finished her cola and tossed the can into a recycle bin. “Better get back. See you later, Kyle.”

Though he didn’t want to admit it, he was pretty thrilled Dave had decided to close the bar for a week. Sure, he kept telling himself he needed to leave, but now he decided maybe this week together with no work for Dave would be the perfect way to leave things. Then when life really sucked when he had to go, well, he’d have this time with Dave.

Kyle leaned back in the chair and put his feet on the desk intending to take a short nap. But even as he closed his eyes the door opened again. He opened one eye and immediately straightened from the desk.

“Didn’t I tell you to keep your damn boots off my desk?” Dave grouched, shutting the door, and to Kyle’s surprise, turning the lock.

Kyle frowned. “Something wrong?”

“Nope, why?”

“You locked the door.”

Dave smiled and winked. “Can’t you think of why I might have done that?”

Kyle’s cock sure did. It perked right up, pressing against his black boxers. He shifted in the chair. “R-Really?”

“Yeah. Things are a bit stressful out there tonight. I swear the word must already be out about closing for a week.”

“Louise told me. That is so awesome. But are you sure you can afford that?”

Dave came to stand between Kyle's legs. "I'm sure. Anyway, I decided I needed a little break." He licked his lips, staring down at Kyle's mouth. "A little relief."

"I'm all over that, but didn't you say you didn't want to get naked or something on the job?"

Dave laughed. "Not going to get completely naked." He reached down and unzipped his jeans. Then he reached into his pocket and brought out a condom.

"Shit, yeah." Kyle pushed Dave's hands away and scooted the jeans down just to his knees, and then he pulled Dave's already erect shaft through the opening of his blue-checked boxers. He grabbed the foil wrapper from Dave's fingers, tore it open and rolled the latex over his lover's erection, and dropped to his knees in front of his lover.

"Damn, you look pretty with your lips parted next to my cock."

Kyle blew on the tip. "Imagine how I'll look with my lips wrapped around it then."

"Ah fuck." Dave pushed his sheathed cock at Kyle, rubbing it along Kyle's closed mouth, seeking entry.

He opened his mouth, and Dave slid in. He darted his tongue across the slit, wishing he could lap up the bit of pre-cum there. Dave's fingers gripped his black hair a bit roughly, but Kyle ignored the pain. He'd always kind of liked having his hair pulled.

Kyle gagged just a little when Dave pushed farther down his throat. His lover stilled, but he patted his leg to let him know it was okay. He relaxed his muscles and sucked on Dave's prick in earnest.

"Oh my God, babe, you are so gorgeous," Dave murmured as he thrust in Kyle's mouth.

Kyle'd had to learn this skill from his prostitute days, because more often than not the customers had wanted blowjobs. One of his rules had been no swallowing, and usually he made them wear condoms. Some customers had been rougher than others, though, as Kyle had learned before Dax found him.

He pushed aside thoughts of those days. This was Dave, and he adored Dave. He didn't need to think of the bad days. Not now. Not while he wanted his time with Dave to be happy.

The little whimpering moans Dave made wiped away the last of his unpleasant memories, and he concentrated on giving his lover pleasure. He sucked harder, hollowing out his cheeks and using his hand to work it in and out. Kyle closed his eyes, loving the sound of Dave's heavy breathing and moans.

Dave's thrusts sped up, alerting Kyle that he was close even before the words spilled from his lover's mouth. "Kyle, I'm gonna come."

He winced a little as Dave tugged particularly hard on a chunk of his hair, but he didn't ease up on working Dave's shaft in and out of his mouth.

"Fuck," Dave rasped. He tensed and warm liquid filled the condom.

Kyle gripped Dave's ass hard when the man tried to pull out. He continued sucking and licking until Dave was only half-hard. Finally, he released his lover with a satisfied grin.

"God, babe, that was incredible," Dave said, leaning heavily against the desk.

Kyle struggled to stand, trying to ignore the telltale jerk of his own hard cock.

Later.

He grabbed some paper towels and wet them in the office sink. First he wiped off his face where he'd drooled a little, and then he gently removed the used condom and cleaned Dave up before tucking him carefully back into his boxers and jeans and zipping him up.

Dave stared at him through partially closed eyes. "What about you?"

"I'm a little uncomfortable," Kyle admitted. "But I want to wait until we get home."

Dave's eyes flared fully open then, and for a moment Kyle couldn't figure out why. Then he realized he called Dave's house "home."

His lover pulled him close and kissed him. It wasn't a rough kiss or even a deep kiss, but rather a sweet promise kiss. Dave pulled away, his skin tinged with red. "Sorry. I really should get back to the bar."

Kyle grinned. "It's okay, hon. I'll be here when you're done."

ON CHRISTMAS morning, Kyle stumbled out to the living room just a bit bleary-eyed. He scrubbed a hand, his nails newly painted black, over his face to try to wipe the sleep out of his eyes. Surely after the night he and Dave had spent together Dave hadn't actually gotten him out of bed at seven? But damn it, he had.

Dave thrust a mug of coffee at him. "Hey, babe, Merry Christmas."

Kyle reached into his black pajama bottoms and scratched his bare hip. He took the mug of steaming liquid and took a fortifying sip. “Louise said you’ve never been into Christmas before. Aren’t you even half Jewish?”

Dave smiled. “Yeah, how’d you know?”

“Ivan mentioned it.”

“Well, it’s true, but I thought it might be nice this year to do it. Anyway, stop being grumpy.” Dave walked over to his CD player and hit a button. Bing Crosby singing about a snowy Christmas started playing.

Kyle wanted to roll his eyes, but he resisted. He wouldn’t spoil this for Dave. He took another sip, approached the brightly lit tree, and plopped down on the sofa.

Dave came to sit next to him and handed him the small wrapped package he’d set under the tree last week. “I’m afraid black wrapping paper isn’t very festive so you’re stuck with traditional red and green.”

“Hmm, it’s cool. I would have settled for shiny silver though.” Kyle stared at the package and couldn’t help but feel a little embarrassed. He had no present for Dave.

“What’s the matter?” Dave touched Kyle’s hand and then covered it with his.

The gesture made the lump in his throat more painful. “I-I just don’t have anything to give you.”

Dave shook his head and to Kyle’s surprise pulled him into his lap. He kissed him thoroughly. “I have my present.”

Kyle blinked a few times and then tore the wrapping paper off, tossing it to the floor. He opened the box to reveal a silver skull ring with large black stones.

“That’s onyx.”

Kyle grinned and slipped it on his middle finger. “I know, way cool.” Underneath the ring was a little tiny onyx stud for his nose and underneath that were two containers of black lipstick. “Hey, you found it.”

“I looked everywhere for that stuff.” Dave’s eyes sparkled.

“God, you are just the most awesome guy,” Kyle exclaimed throwing his arms around Dave’s neck and drawing him in close for a deep kiss. “Thank you so much.”

“You’re welcome, babe. Now, you think you can make me some of those great pancakes for breakfast?”

“I’ll make you dozens. But first, do you think we could go back to bed and you can fuck me senseless?”

Dave moved so fast he almost dumped Kyle on the floor. He yanked Kyle’s arm and dragged him to the bedroom.

“Hey, hey, hey,” Kyle said, laughing, as Dave practically tossed him on the bed. “Slow down there, hon.”

“No way. Want you now.” Dave reached for Kyle’s pajama bottoms and pulled them off. Kyle’s hard cock slapped against his stomach, already leaking pre-cum despite his lame protests about Dave’s eagerness.

Dave quickly divested himself of his own bed clothes and then reached into his nightstand for the lube and a condom. He tossed the tube at Kyle. “Slick yourself up, babe.”

Kyle swallowed and scooped up the lube, pausing to check out Dave rolling the rubber over his hard dick. Absently, he squirted out the slick goo and rose up to insert two fingers in his ass.

“Oh, my God, Kyle, you are so damn hot.” Dave crawled onto the bed. He sloshed some lube on his sheathed erection. “Hurry up.”

Kyle spread himself, lubing his entrance liberally, and then he tossed the lube off the bed and lifted his legs up. Dave scooted forward and flung Kyle’s legs up over his shoulder.

Kyle grinned, loving this aggressive Dave. His lover pushed in, slow and deliberate. He gasped. “Oh, yeah. Fuck me, Dave, fuck me hard.”

Dave pushed all the way in, pausing to allow Kyle’s ass to adjust to the invasion. He didn’t need long. He urged Dave to move with a thrust of his body upward. “Please,” Kyle begged. His hand wrapped around his leaking cock, stroking up and down the length.

“Damn,” Dave growled, pumping hard and fast, managing to hit Kyle’s prostate repeatedly. He grabbed a lock of Kyle’s shoulder-length hair and laced it through his fingers, pulling it.

Kyle closed his eyes. He knew he was whimpering but couldn’t keep the little mewling noises inside. A powerful orgasm tingled along his spine.

“Dave,” he moaned.

“That’s it, babe, come for me.”

Kyle needed no further urging. His release burst from him, white globs of cum splashing his stomach and thighs.

With a roar of his name, Dave emptied into Kyle and collapsed.

Breathing heavily, Dave pulled out, tossed the condom away, and dragged Kyle into his arms, holding him close. He inhaled deeply next to Kyle’s hair.

Kyle sighed and snuggled even closer. “Wow, I could really learn to like Christmas.”

Dave chuckled. “Me, too, babe, me too.”

IX

“SO THOSE are really all made of flowers?” Kyle asked for what seemed the fifth time.

“Yes, babe, all the floats are made of flowers,” Dave said indulgently.

They lounged on his oversized couch, Kyle lying against Dave. He had his arms wrapped snugly around Kyle, holding him close while they watched the Pasadena Rose Parade on New Year’s Day.

Things were going so well, it kind of scared Dave. He hadn’t felt this good about a relationship in so long that he wondered if he actually ever had felt this good. Kyle was just so damn cute and sexy, Dave couldn’t help but fall under his spell more every day. If Dave’s friends from his biker days, before he owned the bar, could see him now, he could just imagine the ribbing he’d take.

“I’ve never seen the parade before.” Kyle sighed. “Come to think of it, I’ve never seen any parade before.”

Dave ran his fingers through Kyle’s dark hair. “It’s been a number of years since I’ve caught it. Used to watch it all the time when I was a kid.”

“You know, I’ve never really asked you about that,” Kyle said softly.

“What, honey?”

“About your family. You must have some, right? I know Ivan said you were half Jewish.”

Dave nodded, placing a kiss on Kyle’s dark hair. “Yes, my mother was Jewish. She’s been gone for a few years now. I was about your age. Had the big C.”

“I’m sorry.”

“My father didn’t believe in much of anything, I guess. Not even staying with his wife. I was twelve when he and my mom divorced. He was raised Presbyterian, but he followed his own thing.”

“Is he still alive?”

Dave shrugged. “I think so. I haven’t kept in touch. I’ve seen him a few times over the years, but he’s not terribly thrilled with having a gay son.”

“Sucks.”

Dave had long since gotten over the pain of not being accepted by his loser father. His loss, Dave figured. “I have a sister who lives in Texas. She’s divorced, no kids. And a brother in the Army, stationed overseas. That’s it.”

Kyle covered Dave’s arms with his hands and held them to him, chewing on his bottom lip. “Would you... I guess you’d miss them if you never got to see them again, huh?”

Dave frowned. “Yeah, I suppose I would. What’s wrong, honey?”

“Nothing,” Kyle mumbled. “You and Ivan were lovers once. He told me.”

“Sure, but that’s been over a long time. We weren’t in love or anything. We both just liked sex with men, and we were friends.”

“Friends with benefits.”

“Exactly. But even that stopped a while ago.”

“Would you miss Ivan if you couldn’t see him?”

Dave cupped Kyle’s jaw and turned his face toward him. “Why the weird questions, Kyle?” Kyle dipped his head but didn’t answer. Dave sighed and tightened his hold. “You mean if they died or something?”

“Yeah, something like that.”

“Unfortunately, in life we all have to deal with losses, honey. No one can live forever, no matter how much we might wish them to. The best thing you can do is enjoy and cherish whatever time you have with your loved ones.” Dave didn’t know exactly how they went from talk of flower floats to something so unbelievably maudlin. And worse, it made him think about how his time with Kyle might be all too short.

Kyle nodded. “That’s true.”

“Hey, the parade’s just about over. What do you want to do today?”

Kyle smiled a little. It was a welcome change from the far-too-serious expression of a few moments ago. “You know what I’d love to do? Can we go to the beach?”

“The beach? It’s a little cold.”

“I don’t want to go swimming. I just want to walk along the beach with you. Please?”

He looked so damn cute and hopeful; how in the hell could he say no? Dave had a feeling he'd always have trouble saying no to Kyle about anything.

“Okay, okay,” Dave said, laughing. “Let’s get dressed in warm clothing, and we’ll go. We can take my bike.”

Kyle hesitated but said nothing for a moment. Then he shrugged. “Maybe we should take the truck.”

“Well, we could, but the truck needs gas, and the bike’s ready. It’ll be okay, babe.”

“All right, dude, but only if you promise not to speed like a demon.”

“I told you before; I’m a safe driver,” Dave said, pretending to be affronted.

Kyle rolled his kohl-lined eyes. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Just promise.”

Dave kissed him, long and thoroughly, taking his time. Finally he broke the kiss with some reluctance. “Fine. I promise.”

KYLE whipped off his helmet and glanced around the pretty much deserted beach parking lot. “Do you think it’s safe to leave your bike here?”

Dave hooked his helmet to the motorcycle and took the other one from Kyle’s hand. “I think it should be fine. Nobody but us is here, from what I can see.” He pulled up the collar of his leather jacket against the slight wind blowing off the ocean. January could be cold in California. Well, cold for them. And since Dave had been born and raised here, to him it was cold.

He eyed Kyle. Damn, he looked good in his black trench coat, his dark hair blowing in the breeze, his lips glossed black. Dave was horny as hell, but he wanted Kyle to have a good day today. Dave didn't get too many days off, so New Year's Day was the perfect time for them to have a day together that didn't involve just sex. Not that he didn't love that.

He held out his hand for Kyle and was pleased when the younger man eagerly grasped it. Dave led them out to the ocean. His sneakers and Kyle's combat boots indented the sand. He couldn't see anyone else. Usually when he came to this particular beach, there'd be a few people walking dogs, even in the off-season. He supposed too many people were nursing headaches from last night's revelry.

Kyle inhaled as they approached the water. "This is nice. I can't remember the last time I was at the beach."

"With being in San Francisco, you didn't spend time at the beach?"

Kyle stared out over the water, his gray eyes mostly unreadable. "Not much, no. A lot of the time I was cooped up in a house there. I didn't have much in the way of my own transportation, so it was hard to get around without someone else's help."

Dave tamped down his disappointment when Kyle didn't continue. There was so much he wanted to know about Kyle and the life he led before, but Kyle clearly didn't trust him enough to open up about it. Kyle was running from something... someone, probably. It scared Dave. He knew his lover was in trouble, but he wouldn't tell Dave what it was. And Kyle could bolt anytime.

Kyle's gaze strayed from the ocean to back where they'd left the bike. He glanced left and right, his eyes searching warily for something. After a moment, he tugged Dave's hand and smiled. "Let's walk along the shore for a bit."

The two of them walked about a mile down the coast, watching gulls and pelicans. Every few minutes, Kyle would look back toward the street. His anxiety was so strong it tore Dave's heart. He had to nearly bite his tongue off to keep from demanding Kyle tell him what he feared so much.

"Thanks, you know. You've made this time so great for me. This is the best holiday season I've ever had," Kyle said, stopping to watch a sea lion swim in the distance.

"I feel the same way." Dave squeezed his hand. Kyle had only been with him a few weeks, but he knew he was in love with him. Funny how life can turn on you sometimes. He never expected to fall in love, let alone with some Goth kid who had Dave wrapped around his little finger.

"And now I'm absolutely starving." Kyle grinned. "What are you feeding me?"

"There's a great fish and chips place not too far from here, provided they're open today. Why don't we pick some up and take it back to the house?"

Kyle leaned over and kissed him. "That sounds fantastic. Especially if after we're done eating we spend the rest of the day exploring each other's bodies."

Dave's lips twitched. "I can pretty much guarantee that."

A WHILE later, Dave crushed Kyle underneath him on the bed, melding their lips and tongues together until it was

nearly impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. They'd already removed their clothes.

Finally he let Kyle come up for air. He held his lover's jaw and looked into those incredible eyes. "What do you want, honey? I'll do whatever you want to please you."

Kyle's cheeks flushed pink. "Hmm. How about you just spent hours thrusting inside me?"

A jolt of intense lust made his cock jump. "Oh yeah, I think I can do that." Dave chuckled. "Well, I don't know about hours, but I definitely want to be inside you."

He leaned over, lifting off Kyle a little, and grabbed a foil wrapper and the lube from the nightstand. He dropped a quick kiss on his lover's nose by the onyx stud and then tore open the condom package.

"Hurry," Kyle begged, his gray eyes glazed with passion and a deeper emotion Dave desperately wanted to believe in.

Dave shook with his need and shifted off Kyle completely so he could roll the condom over his erection. He tossed the lube at Kyle. "Hold on to that for just a moment."

He scooted down the bed and lifted his lover's legs high in the air. His breath fanned over Kyle's balls.

"Dave?"

"Shh, honey." His tongue darted out, slipping into Kyle's entrance.

"Ooooh, wow," Kyle gasped. "That... that's amazing."

Dave paused just as he was about to thrust his tongue even deeper. "Have you never had this done to you before?"

"No, never."

Dave resumed his loving of Kyle's hole, giving extra care to make sure Kyle enjoyed it. Really, he could spend hours

rimming the younger man, but his cock had other ideas. It was so hard he feared it would burst before he even got inside his lover's tight ass.

"Mmm. Okay, give me the lube, Kyle." He held out his hand for the tube and then squirted a generous amount over his fingers. "Ready for my fingers?"

"Uh huh, for your cock actually."

Dave bit back a groan. "In a minute." He sloshed some lube over his shaft. "Are you sure you're ready?"

"Yes, please," Kyle pleaded breathlessly.

Trembling with need, Dave rose above Kyle and poised at his lover's entrance. He pushed slowly in past the ring of muscle, savoring the way Kyle tightened around his cock, drawing him deep. He linked their hands together over Kyle's head. He didn't pound hard or fast but took his time making love to Kyle as his lover had asked. Dave gritted his teeth and pushed aside the demands of his body to conquer.

Kyle reached between their bodies and started stroking himself. Dave knew by the glazed look in his eyes and the way his teeth tugged his bottom lip that Kyle was getting close to coming. Dave increased the pace of his thrusts just a little, trying to hit Kyle's sweet spot each time.

"Dave...." Kyle groaned, drawing out the word. Cum splattered over his abdomen.

Dave released Kyle's hands and hooked his arms under the other man's legs, now pounding fast, he was so close. His balls tightened close to his body and he roared his release.

He eased out of Kyle and pulled his lover into his arms, pushing Kyle's head onto his chest. He opened his mouth to say something, but Kyle's soft snores reached his ears.

“No! DAX!”

Dave sat straight out of bed, his heart pounding hard and rapid. Kyle, too, had sprung awake, his eyes wild and frightened. He was gasping for air.

“Honey, honey, what is it?” Dave asked, wrapping his arms around Kyle’s shoulders.

“A-a dream.”

Dave blew out a breath. “When are you going to tell me what’s going on, Kyle?”

Kyle bowed his head, his breaths still coming out fast. He shook. “I want to. But I-I can’t.”

Disappointment washed over him. Kyle still didn’t trust him enough. He ran his fingers over Kyle’s dark hair. “Okay, honey, I won’t push it. Do you think you can go back to sleep?”

Kyle leaned against him and closed his eyes. “Yeah. I’m sorry I woke you.”

Dave kissed the man’s forehead. “Don’t worry. You’re safe with me.”

X

KYLE closed his eyes, hoping he could pretend he didn’t have to do this. He did though. He knew it. He owed it to Dax.

Through the closed door of Dave's office he could hear live music. Dave had hired a local rock band to perform tonight and also tomorrow night. Even though he was in the office, the noise made his temples pound. He imagined it must be much worse in the bar.

He blew out a breath and reached for his cup of hot tea as he pulled up the web site for Drug Enforcement Administration.

Just as he had any other night, Kyle prepared for bed by brushing his teeth and pulling his pajama bottoms out of the drawer Dax had given him to use. He had just reached into the drawer when the bedroom door flew open.

"Dax?"

Dax closed the door quickly and turned the cheap lock. His dark hair stood on end, and his eyes were wild with fear. "Corazón, you must leave now."

"What?"

Dax hurried to the window and flung it open. He stuck his head out and peered first left then right. "Out this window now, Kyle."

"I—"

Dax grabbed his shoulders and pushed him toward the window. "I do not have much time to explain, Corazón. I am an undercover agent with the DEA. My cover has been blown, and they are coming to kill me."

"You're what?" His heart thundered in his chest.

Dax shook his head. "I should never have involved you, but I could not resist. When they kill me, they will kill you after. You need to go. Now."

The sounds of yelling and running got closer to their shared bedroom. He desperately clutched at Dax. "You-you come with me then."

"No. There is no time. They will pursue us both and catch us both. This is your only chance, Corazón. I will not ask again. Go." Dax shoved him at the window.

Kyle swung his leg over the ledge and slipped out the ground-floor window. He crouched down on the damp grass, his heart pounding so hard he thought it would burst from his chest. Dax closed the window.

He peeked up and could see the bedroom door being kicked open. In the doorway stood Martinez and a couple of his men. They all held machine guns.

Kyle nearly bit off his tongue to prevent himself from screaming. If he made any sound at all, he knew they would kill him. The lump in his throat almost choked him, and he could barely breathe.

He couldn't make out if they spoke, but he watched as Dax held up his hands in surrender. Martinez and the others opened fire in a barrage of gunfire. Dax fell face forward.

For a heart-wrenching moment, all Kyle could do was stare, unable to move. But then he remembered Dax wanted him to get away, and he broke into a run.

Kyle wiped at a tear spilling down his cheek. For a few seconds he let the grief overtake him, and he covered his face with his hands. He'd shed his tears over Dax and the horror of seeing him murdered... or so he'd thought. He needed to get it together. Crying wouldn't bring Dax back, and he needed to see justice done.

Besides, he didn't want those men finding Dave. If he were the cause of any harm to Dave, Kyle didn't think he

could live with that. And that meant getting out of here. He knew what he'd have to do to put the men who'd killed Dax away, and he couldn't ask Dave to give up his life. Dave had a good life, and Kyle wouldn't destroy it.

The thought of not seeing Dave again started the tears anew. It was probably silly to care so much about Dave with the short time they'd been together, but he did. If he'd been normal, if life hadn't sucked, he could maybe have been with Dave forever.

Damn, and now his eyeliner was running. He dug into the desk drawer looking for a tissue or a napkin or something. The door opened, letting more of the blaring rock music in for just a moment. He quickly clicked out of the DEA site.

"Kyle?" Dave closed the door and came over to him. He knelt in front of Kyle and grasped his hands. "Kyle, what is it?"

Kyle wanted to stop the tears, mortified by them, but he couldn't. It seemed like a faucet had been turned on inside him, and the tears gushed from his eyes. The lump in his throat was too large, too painful to allow him to speak, and before he could push it away, he was sobbing.

Great, now he was hysterical.

Dave stood, pulled Kyle up out of the chair, and then sat down and pulled Kyle into his lap, holding him. He made little soothing sounds or words, but Kyle didn't seem to be coherent enough to tell the difference at the moment. He only knew he clung to Dave, allowing himself to have the comfort of this man.

Finally his tears slowed to just a trickle, and his sobs changed to erratic hiccups. One of Dave's hands stroked his

back and the other his hair. Kyle closed his eyes and rested his head on Dave's shoulder.

"When are you going to trust me enough to tell me what's going on?" Dave whispered.

Kyle shook his head, willing the pain to go away, wishing for some sort of numbness to dull the ache, but wishes were for fools. The ache stayed.

"I know you're in trouble, Kyle. I'm not stupid. Did you commit a crime?"

"No."

Dave sighed. "That's good. Then anything else we can deal with, honey." His arms tightened around Kyle. "Is it HIV? Do you have it?"

"No. I don't think so, anyway. I got tested about a year ago." His fingers clenched Dave's T-shirt. He blew out a shaky breath. Now was the time he had to tell Dave they were through. Had to tell him he couldn't see him again. He had to protect Dave. "I can't do this anymore."

"Do what?"

"You." Kyle grimaced or maybe gasped, he didn't know which, but damn, it had been hard to force out even that single word.

Dave's stroking of his back and hair paused for a second, but then it resumed. The pounding rock music faded. Probably on a break, Kyle guessed.

"What are you trying to say, Kyle?"

"I guess it's time to go. It's been fun, you know, but, um...." His voice trailed off. He just couldn't say it. He wasn't that good of an actor.

Dave would have none of it and moved his hand he'd had on Kyle's back and raised Kyle's chin to look at him. Their gazes held. "No."

"No?"

"I don't believe you. You're trying to run. To hide. It's not going to be that easy, Kyle. You can't just come into my life and make me fall in love with you."

Kyle felt the burn of tears anew. "Fall in love?"

"Yes, I love you. What about you? How do you feel?"

He turned his head, breaking Dave's grip on his chin. "It doesn't matter."

"You can't pretend it doesn't matter. It matters. And I think it matters to you too."

An image of Dave lying in a pool of blood floating through his head forced out, "You're wrong."

The door of the office burst open, and Ivan stood there. He looked a bit sheepish but said, "Hey, boss, sorry, but we need you for a sec."

Ivan disappeared around the corner. Kyle got up from his lap.

Dave stood and touched his arm. "Stay here, Kyle. We're not finished."

"But—"

"Don't you dare leave." Dave kissed him lightly on the mouth.

EVEN though Dave knew in his head that when he went back to his office Kyle would be gone, he had hoped otherwise. For just a few beats of his injured heart, he stared

at the empty office. It hurt more than he could have imagined that Kyle did not trust him, but Dave refused to allow Kyle's wariness to wreck everything they'd been building together.

Shaking his head, he closed the office door and walked over to Ivan. "I'm out the rest of the night."

"What?"

Any other time Dave would have laughed at the comically shocked look on his friend's face; tonight he was not in a laughing mood.

"You heard me. You and Louise have worked here for years. I think you can handle things."

Ivan stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. "Is everything all right?"

"I'm not sure, honestly. But I'm going to try to make it so. I'll call you later."

Dave pushed his way through the throng of bar revelers to the front door. He assumed Kyle had taken off on foot, so he should be able to catch up with him pretty easily. He hoped. He just hoped Kyle wasn't foolish enough to hitch. Given that Kyle had made his way down to Los Angeles from San Francisco, he could pretty much guess the young man had done it via those means.

The parking lot was pretty full when he got outside. Between it being Friday and having a live band, his bar was packed. He couldn't see Kyle, so he suspected his lover had already made his way down the street. Dave went straight to his truck, got in, and started it up.

When Dave got to the street, he looked left and right, unsure of which direction Kyle would have taken. A bus stop

was a couple of blocks down on the right, so he decided to head in that direction first.

A few car lengths ahead of him was a dark sedan—he couldn't tell what kind—with very dark tinted windows. The car moved at a slow pace and kept to the far right, very close to the sidewalk. Dave frowned. He didn't like it. He kept glancing at the sidewalk, searching for Kyle.

Then the passenger side window of that car lowered, and he watched a hand shoot out, holding a gun.

Ah, fuck.

Dave floored the accelerator of his truck, catching up to the car, and without really thinking it through, he rammed the rear end of the car. The gun went flying and hit the asphalt.

Just a little ways up ahead, he spied Kyle walking very fast, looking nervously all around him. Dave checked to make sure another car wasn't coming from the opposite direction, and he changed lanes to pass the car with the tinted windows.

He pressed the pedal to the floor, wanting to get past before they pulled out another gun and shot him or Kyle. He zoomed past and in front of them, his tires squealing as he attempted to reach Kyle. He barely slowed down as he pulled alongside the younger man.

“Get in, get in,” Dave yelled even as he slid the window down. He couldn't afford to stop or even slow down much. “Now!”

Kyle's expression went from shocked to scared, but he ran toward the truck. He grasped the door handle, almost falling but righting himself. The engine of the car behind

them revved. Dave glanced in the rearview and thought he spied the glint of metal coming out of the driver side window.

Kyle wrenched the door open, his combat boots skidding on the street. He lunged into the truck, and Dave took off before Kyle had even closed the door.

“Dave,” Kyle exclaimed, grabbing on to the door and pulling it closed. “How—what are you doing here?”

“Saving your ass,” Dave ground out. “Duck down.”

“What?”

“Duck the fuck down.” He reached over and pushed Kyle’s head toward the floor of the truck. “There’s a car back there gaining on us. They’ve got guns.”

“Shit.” Kyle scooted down, squeezing himself between the seat and the dashboard.

“Yeah.” He turned a corner at a rapid speed, hoping like hell the truck wouldn’t spin out. He watched for the other vehicle and turned another corner.

“Have you done this before?” Kyle asked, looking up at him with some surprise.

“No, but I’ve watched enough movies and cop shows.” It was amusing, really, to admit learning how to try to get away from someone following you by watching movies. He shrugged. “Plus I used to do some racing in my teenage years. Off road stuff too.” The truck skidded down an alley as Dave watched the rearview mirror. “You want to tell me what’s going on now?”

Kyle bit his lip and lowered his head. “I witnessed a murder.”

Dave blew out a breath. He’d guessed it must have been something like that if Kyle hadn’t killed someone himself or

had a disease. He nodded. “Okay. And these people know you witnessed it.”

“Yes. I guess I should tell you everything now.”

“Might be helpful.” Dave turned on to yet another street. He didn’t see the vehicle that had been following Kyle, and he wondered if it had backed off because he was traveling on more crowded streets. But he had to be careful. Ultimately he planned on going to the police station, but he wanted to be sure they’d really lost the other car.

“Is it safe to get up?”

“Not yet. I don’t want to take any chances, babe. Stay down.”

“Well, it started when I was on the streets. I told you I had to do a little bit of selling after I got kicked out. I was usually pretty careful, but once in a while you’d get some crazy motherfucker.”

Dave winced. He didn’t like hearing what Kyle had to endure before, but it was part of Kyle so he had to listen.

“I met Dax on a night like that. This dude wouldn’t take no for an answer, and so when I tried to get away he hit me. I kneed him in the nuts and got away, but I had to hide because he was looking for me for a while.”

Dave clenched his jaw. “Go on.”

“Dax found me wedged next to a trash bin. I don’t know why, but I trusted him, and I ended up going with him. I was still a kid, really.”

“Did he rape you?”

“No, never. We didn’t even do anything until I was eighteen. He just took care of me. But even then, I knew something was strange. We lived in this big Victorian house in Pacific Heights, but the house didn’t belong to Dax. It

belonged to some guy he worked for named Martinez. I never did like that guy. And he had all kinds of security and always had people over.”

“Drugs?” Dave guessed.

“Yeah, how did you know?”

“Not too difficult. And then?”

“Eventually Dax and I became lovers. He’d often say stuff like how he shouldn’t have involved me and it was a big mistake.”

“Yet he never made you leave,” Dave said dryly.

“No. I didn’t know then, but now I do. Dax was an agent with the Drug Enforcement Administration. He’d been working undercover, I guess, to bust Martinez and the others. Somehow they found out who he really was.”

“Bastard,” he muttered. Dave got on the freeway and headed in the direction of the nearest police station, still keeping an eye out for the other car or any suspicious vehicles.

“What?”

“He had no business involving you in that.”

Kyle’s sigh was heavy. “Yeah. Anyway, when they found out who he was, Dax came to warn me to get out. I barely escaped the room when Martinez and his men came in and killed Dax.”

“I’m sorry, honey, that must have been awful.”

Kyle leaned his head on his bent knees. “It was. But I didn’t really have time to think about it. I had to get away. I’ve been running ever since. A few times they’ve come close to finding me. I never stayed in one place for too long. Until now.”

“Those guys that beat you the first night I found you. Were they involved?”

His lover shrugged. “I’m still not sure, but they might have been. There had to be some way they found me here with you, so maybe they were part of it.”

“Okay, well, we’re going to the cops, and you’ll tell them everything.”

Kyle just nodded without saying anything.

“Did-did you love this Dax?” Dave got off the freeway, still not seeing anyone behind them. He drove toward the police station.

“I did, I guess. I cared about him a lot, and he took care of me and got me off the streets.”

“And into the mess you’re in now.”

“Yeah. But if he hadn’t, I wouldn’t have met you,” Kyle said softly, his head still resting on his knees, his face turned away from Dave.

Dave swallowed the lump in his throat and willed his heart to return to normal beat. It had been a near thing. And he still had to get Kyle in to see the police. Into safety.

IT HAD been hours since he’d been allowed to see Kyle. The police had called all the necessary agencies, and several lawyers and guys in suits had come. Dave had been questioned too, but other than what happened with the car tonight, he really didn’t know anything, so they hadn’t spent a lot of time with him. Now Dave was going a little nuts waiting.

Finally a uniformed police officer took him down a long hallway. At the end was a single door. The officer unlocked it and stepped aside to let Dave into the room.

Kyle sat in an uncomfortable-looking plastic chair. He leaned forward, his elbows on his knees and his face buried in his hands.

Dave hurried to him and knelt in front of him. “Honey, are you okay?”

Kyle looked up; his eyes were red, and tears pooled in his eyes. “Dave.”

Dave grabbed his hands. “What happened?”

His lover closed his eyes, squeezing out his tears, and then reopened them and stared sorrowfully at Dave. “I’m going to have to testify.” Dave nodded. “And... they want to put me into witness protection.” Kyle’s breath stuttered.

Dave’s heart twisted a little. It wasn’t the greatest news, but really, he could hardly be surprised. They’d have to deal with it. “I’m sorry. That’s going to be tough. Do you know where?”

Kyle’s fingers tightened on Dave’s hand. “Not yet. B-but they want me to change my name and my appearance.”

“Your appearance?”

“Not like plastic surgery or anything, but the-the Goth,” Kyle said, his bottom lip trembling. “I’m sorry, Dave, I’m so sorry.”

“Shh, what are you sorry for? This isn’t your fault, honey.” He gathered Kyle into his arms.

“They said you’d have to probably go into witness protection too. They said these guys knew about you, and there was evidence they might have gone to your house

tonight.” Tears streaked down his cheeks. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to ruin your life.”

Dave pulled back a little. He stared at Kyle, pretty sure his shock and hurt showed. He wished he could hide it, but he felt like he’d been kicked in the gut or maybe the heart. “You didn’t ruin my life, Kyle. I can’t believe you actually think I would have let you go without me.”

“You-you....” Kyle ducked his head.

“Kyle, I love you. I’m coming with you no matter what they say.”

“But your bar and your house and your sister and your brother—”

Dave touched two fingers to Kyle’s mouth. “I’m not saying it won’t be hard, babe, but you’re worth it.” He hesitated, his heart pounding hard. “Unless, you don’t feel the same. I could be just making an ass out of myself.”

Kyle shook his head frantically. “No, no. I do. I just couldn’t ask that of you. It’s huge, Dave. You couldn’t be you. You’d have to give up everything.”

“Except you, babe. Except you.”

XI

DAVE’S arms closed around him as he studied himself in the bathroom mirror with a critical eye.

“Well?” Dave nuzzled his neck, nipping the tender skin there. “Are you ready, honey?”

Kyle sighed. It wasn't terrible. He'd had to wash out the dye in his hair. His hair was still dark. Maybe not black, but dark brown. The blue-tinted contacts altered his gray eyes to a sort of blue-gray. The style of his hair was a little shorter than he would have liked, the brown locks curling a bit under his ears. He still wore an earring in his ear and a tiny stud in his nose. But he had clean, bare nails and no eyeliner, damn it. Still, all in all, it wasn't so bad.

Dave sucked his earlobe. "Hmm?"

Kyle grimaced and fingered the navy T-shirt he wore. "It's not black."

"No, but navy's a good color for you, babe. You look good." Dave's gaze drooped to his jeans, then to his sandals, and then up to his ass. "Damn, your ass looks great."

Kyle chuckled, turning in his lover's arms. "Flattery will get you everywhere."

"And what about me? Do you approve?" Dave smiled.

Really, Dave hadn't changed much. Kyle was glad. His sandy hair was no longer short and spiky and biker-like, but had been cut in an elegant GQ-style. His jaw was clean-shaven without a hint of sexy stubble. And his tattoos were covered by a long-sleeved T-shirt. He was still fucking hot.

"I most definitely approve." Kyle threw his arms around Dave's neck and kissed him. "How about we forget going out there and instead you take me to bed?"

"Nice try, babe. It's a neighborhood block party, and we are going to meet the neighbors." Dave snagged his hand and pulled. "Come on."

"Wait!" Kyle reached onto the bathroom sink and picked up a peach lip gloss. He rolled it over his lips and puckered. "Where'd you put my blush?"

Dave bent down and opened the cabinet under the sink. He pulled out a compact. "Here, let me."

Kyle allowed Dave to brush peach blush lightly over his cheeks. Since he couldn't be Goth, they'd compromised with the peach makeup. It made him a little happier, at least.

"There."

Kyle glance at the mirror and nodded his satisfaction. "I'm ready." After enduring all those questions about Dax and Martinez at the trial, he hadn't heard a thing about the verdict, and he was fine with that. He'd done what he needed to do, and it was now behind him.

They walked hand-in-hand out of the bathroom and through the living room, picked up the casserole dish they'd prepared earlier, and went out the front door. A sea breeze greeted them. It was a little cool, but neither of them bothered with jackets.

The street in front of their house was filled with neighbors and tables filled with food. They lived in a little cul-de-sac just a block from the ocean. Shortly after they moved in, they had learned about this annual block party.

Kyle bit his lip nervously when a couple, a man and woman probably in their forties, approached them. Fortunately they were smiling.

"Hello there," the woman said. "You must be the new couple that moved in. I'm Mary, and this is George."

"Hello," George said, thrusting out his hand to shake theirs.

"I'm Kurt," Kyle replied, "and this is Desmond."

"I prefer Des." Dave shook George's hand.

"What's that you have there?" Mary asked, gesturing to the casserole Dave held.

“Broccoli cheese casserole. We’re not very good cooks, I’m afraid.”

Mary took the dish. “I’ll put it over on the table. Are you two married?”

“Mary,” George said under his breath.

“Well, they might be, George.” She shrugged.

“Not yet,” Kyle said. “But maybe someday, since it’s legal here.”

George shot his wife a look. “I heard something about you guys owning your own business. What sort of business do you have?”

“We just opened a massage parlor, actually. I’m a trained and licensed massage therapist. Kurt is going to manage it along with an assistant. We’ve hired a couple other massage therapists as well,” Dave said with an easy smile.

“Oh, wonderful. I look forward to checking it out for myself,” Mary said. “Come with me, Kurt. I’ll show you the other food.”

Kyle allowed her to drag him toward the tables with a backward pleading glance at Dave, but Dave just smiled. Kyle stuck his tongue out at him.

MUCH later, Dave’s hand rested on his back as he was staring out at the ocean. Kyle had slipped away from the party a short time ago and made the short walk to the shore.

“Everything okay, babe?”

“Yeah. Just trying to get used to the view of the Atlantic Ocean.” Kyle leaned back against him.

“It’s going to take some getting used to. Everything will.” Dave wrapped his arms around Kyle’s middle.

“Do you miss it? Martha and the bar and your house? Everything, really.”

“I’ll get another motorcycle eventually,” Dave said, nuzzling his ear. “Ivan will do a great job with the bar. And the rest... I’ll miss my brother and sister, sure, but we weren’t that close anyway. And a house is just a house. We’ll make this one a home together.”

Kyle smiled. Dave was right. Everything would be all right. And maybe he could even get his high school diploma and take some college courses.

“It’s a little cold. Want to go back to the house?” Dave whispered in his ear.

“Got anything in mind?”

“Well, I did just get some ropes and handcuffs.”

Kyle tilted his head to look at Dave. “You did?”

“Uh huh. They arrived today.”

“And you made me go to the party?” Kyle pulled away from Dave and broke into a brisk walk toward their house. “Come on, come on.”

“You’re practically bouncing, honey.” Dave chuckled and followed at a much slower pace.

Kyle ignored his taunt and waved at the remaining neighbors who milled around the street. He resisted, barely, running up the pathway to their house, but as soon as he made it in the door he started pulling off his navy T-shirt.

The front door closed behind Dave. “I’d tell you to go to the bedroom, but I can see you don’t need to be told. A little anxious?”

Kyle grinned and threw his shirt aside as he went through the doorway to their room. He sat on the edge of the bed, toed off his sandals—he still couldn't quite get used to wearing them instead of combat boots—and then unsnapped his jeans.

Dave entered the bedroom holding a small square box. He tossed it at Kyle and started stripping off his own clothes. Kyle opened the box and fished out the rope and cuffs. Excitement shot through him. “How do you want me?”

“Just get on the bed for now.”

Kyle squirmed out of his jeans and left them pooled at the foot of the bed. Dave came to the bed, nude now himself, and pushed Kyle underneath him.

“Kiss me,” Dave whispered, lowering his lips to mere inches above Kyle's. Dave's erection pressed against his belly. Kyle encircled Dave's neck and pulled his lips down to his, kissing him with as much love and passion as he felt.

“Mmm, peach,” Dave murmured against his mouth. “I love you.”

Kyle kissed him again. “I love you too.”

“Now what did you do with the rope?”

Kyle reached over his head on the bed, grabbed the rope, and pushed it into Dave's hands.

“Lie on your stomach, honey.”

Kyle turned over and scooted up the bed. The new bed had open scrollwork on the headboard, perfect to thread rope through.

Dave handed him a pillow. “Put this under you.”

He placed the pillow under him, lifting his ass up. He spread his legs, waiting for whatever Dave planned next. He

expected his lover to loop the rope around his limbs, but instead Dave inserted a lubed finger in his ass.

“Ah,” Kyle groaned. He pushed back. “More.”

Dave chuckled but pressed in another finger. He spread Kyle, readying him.

“What happened to tying me up?”

Dave placed a kiss on each of Kyle’s cheeks. “That comes later. Right now I just want to be inside you.”

Kyle closed his eyes and smiled. “I want that too.” He heard Dave tear open the foil wrapper and roll on a condom. He wiggled his ass.

“So, Kurt, are you ready?” Dave asked, lowering himself over Kyle’s body. His cock probed against Kyle’s entrance.

“I’m more than ready, Des.” Laughter rumbled in his chest. His lover pushed in slowly, past the ring of muscle. “Oh God.”

Kyle reached underneath to close his hand over his shaft, stroking himself. He buried his face in the sheets as Dave thrust in harder and harder. Dave’s fingers dug into his hips, pivoting him to raise him for better access. His lover’s cock hit his prostate sending tingles up his spine.

“God, Dave,” he whispered.

Kyle fisted the sheets with his free hand. He didn’t think he could ever get enough of this. Of this man. He was damn lucky, and he hoped to show Dave how happy he made him the rest of his life.

“Kyle, I’m gonna—”

“Cum,” Kyle urged. “I’m close.” He quickened the strokes to his cock and tightened around his lover. Dave’s breaths

came in heavy pants, and he tensed above him, shaking as he found his release.

“Yes,” Kyle screamed, pumping the cum from his own cock.

Dave collapsed on him, wrapping his arms tightly around Kyle’s middle, their bodies still joined. “God, I love you.”

He sighed. “I love you too. So much. I was so lucky when you rescued me that day.”

“I’m the lucky one.” Dave kissed the back of his head.

“So what about it, babe?”

“Hmm?”

“Are you going to make an honest man of me?” Kyle’s heart swelled with love.

Dave picked up the rope he’d left on the mattress next to them. “Yes, even if I have to tie you to me.”

Kyle laughed. “I think maybe it’s time I tied you up.”

“Kyle, I’m already tied to your heart.”

SHAWN LANE is a multi-published author of erotic gay romances and believes love and passion know no boundaries. Happily Ever After is for everyone. She lives in California and holds down a boring day job in a legal department of a giant corporation dreaming of the nights and weekends when she can create new stories.



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