



# Moby's Dick

K. Z. Snow

Loose Id

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*“The magician depends for the success of his art upon the credulity of the people. Whatever mystifies, excites curiosity; whatever in turn baffles this curiosity, works the marvelous.”*

~ Alexander Herrmann, magician (1844-1896)

## Part One

## Prologue

*Chicago, 1899*

The ponderous green velvet curtains opened on a famous illusion called the Fountain of Youth, and the audience stirred with anticipation.

It was a half-moon-shaped diorama, a whimsy alive with color and movement. Low hills rose along its arc. Bushes studded the eight-foot-high slopes, their flowers slowly opening. Birds fluttered among the blooms. Old Sol, glowing and grinning, winked above the foliage. At the center of the diorama lay a tranquil pond.

Professor Prospero, the master of this magical landscape, stood to one side, his hands grasping a gnarled walking stick. It was taller by far than he, for Prospero was a small, stooped, slightly built man. He raised his hoary head and gazed at the inviting scene, then haltingly approached it. His tattered robe barely swayed as he walked.

After ascending a modest rise at the front of the diorama, he stood on the grassy bank of the pool and gazed into it. Within a moment, his resonant voice boomed throughout the theater.

*“See, what a grace was seated on this brow;  
Hyperion's curls; the front of Jove himself;  
An eye like Mars, to threaten and command;  
A station like the herald Mercury  
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill;  
A combination and a form indeed,  
Where every god did seem to set his seal,  
To give the world assurance of a man!”*

His declamation concluded, Prospero made a great show of hanging his head and sagging his shoulders. The sympathetic audience understood. He had seen, or imagined, his youthful self reflected in the pool, and he mourned the loss of his vigor and comeliness to age and infirmity.

With a series of dainty clicks, the sun's smile slipped into a frown as its eyes closed. A gray cloud scudded across its face.

It didn't matter to the enrapt audience that Prospero, the namesake of a character in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, had just borrowed the words Hamlet had

used to describe his father. The Erudite Enchanter quoted from many sources or recited verses he himself had composed.

He lifted his arms to the invisible heavens beyond the proscenium arch and cried, "I wish to be that man once more, ere Death's shadow darkens my door. Gods, for but a few blissful moments, restore, restore!"

Aflame with petulant determination, he thumped his walking stick on the bank of the pond, then poked the bottom end into the water. "Now, I say! Now!"

A perfect circle of springs bubbled up, higher and higher, until the numerous crystalline plumes rose six feet into the air and formed a cylindrical curtain. Prospero waded into the shallow water. He had only to take a step or two before he was at the fountain.

As the audience held its breath, he disappeared into the middle of the vaulting springs, as if swallowed by a liquid throat.

The cloud fell away, and the sun's eyelids began to crack open. Its blue irises shifted toward the pool. The only sounds in the house, save for the faint metallic snapping, were the plashing of the fountain, an occasional cough, a rustle of silk or bombazine. In a matter of seconds, perhaps ten or fewer, a brass horn emerged from the green hills and played a brief triumphal fanfare.

And out from the fountain bounded a beautiful, lithe young man, his wet curls black as pitch, his eyes bluer than the painted sun's, his cheeks rosy as a babe's. He stood on the bank for a moment, hands on hips, and looked around as the audience whistled and cheered. Wearing a small, tight suit fit for bathing, he was displaying himself like Arthur Saxon or Eugene Sandow, although he was taller, leaner, and lovelier than any notable strongman of the day.

The sun's frown reversed itself.

The youth proceeded to strike several poses as the fountain died down at his back. Old Prospero was not in the pool. He was nowhere to be seen.

The audience knew the young man was Puck, not from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, but from Professor Prospero's past. It was *his* image the Erudite Enchanter had earlier glimpsed in the water.

Members of the audience showered the young man with a fusillade of demands: "Puck, introduce yourself," "Come mingle with us, Puck," "Have you a sweetheart?" "Join us for a glass after the performance."

Once more the fountain shot upward.

Puck answered his admirers with only an enigmatic smile and a sweeping bow before retreating into the fountain. The audience issued a collective sigh. Again within mere seconds, Prospero emerged—quite damp, but still in possession of his dignity. He held out his arms, both to invite and gather in his thunderous ovation.

"Where is Puck?" called out a male voice.

"We'll not see him again," a woman answered quite dolefully. "It's the end of the illusion."

Occasionally at this point in the performance, a well-known citizen would appear onstage and attest to the fact he or she had examined the diorama for hidden compartments...and had found none. The painted backdrop had virtually no depth. Affixed to its back were boxes, yes, but they housed the mechanisms that drove the diorama's clockwork elements, and none was anywhere near large enough to accommodate an adult male in addition to working machinery.

Tonight, however, there was no testimonial. The illusion had become so renowned and beloved, none was necessary. Prospero merely accepted his plaudits. Head held high, he hobbled off the stage to prepare for his next presentation.

The curtains laboriously glided closed.



## Chapter One

*Milwaukee, 1899*

Carrying a wood casket lined with silk the color of wild phlox, Alain Mobry paused for a moment before the two-story building at 175 Waverly Place. Buttery light spilled from the leaded-glass panes set into its double doors. He glanced at the plaque above the arched entry. Looking at it was something he did out of habit, not curiosity or necessity, for he was well acquainted with the building.

The green carnation, meticulously carved from verde marble, was, of course, still there. Although little more than a gleaming smudge against the cream brick, this emblem of the private club's name and nature made Alain smile.

In the distance, a trolley bell clanged. Then, as if answering a summons, a foghorn moaned balefully over the lake. Mist saturated the darkness, turning sidewalk lamps into Monet dandelions. Pavements slick with moisture had tested Alain's footing at every step.

A carriage, spectral in the fog, clattered down the street at his back. Alain thought of Jacob Marley's phantom hearse preceding Scrooge up the stairs of his gloomy flat, and he shivered.

He turned his attention back to 175. Mounting its stone stairs was difficult under the best of circumstances. Tonight Alain positively dreaded the ascent. His clubfoot resisted climbing. The heavy freight he carried taxed his small frame. The steps would be slippery.

Thinking of the marvel he held—how it would astonish and amuse his fellow members and, he fervently hoped, please one man in particular—gave Alain the impetus he needed. He began his laborious climb.

Winded, he reached the doors without incident. The incantation he'd murmured along the way had surely aided him. Shifting the casket in the cradle of his arms, he reached for the bell rope and gave it a feeble pull. The club really did need an electric chime.

His effort was enough. Within a moment or two, the doors swung open and Bernard Criswell, vest buttons straining within their holes, beamed at Alain. His pellucid blue gaze immediately fell to the walnut box.

Raising his arms, Criswell exclaimed, "Mobry, my good man, what *have* you brought us tonight? Here, let me relieve you of your burden."

"Only long enough to let me get out of my coat," said Alain as Criswell reached for the box and Alain stepped inside. He despised appearing weak.

Bernard, he noticed, hadn't kissed him. Whoever opened the doors of the Green Carnation Club to admit another member usually greeted the new arrival with a kiss. Alain was rarely greeted with a kiss.

The Turk, however, *had* kissed him. Four months earlier. A long, sweet, savoring kiss delivered by full, velvety lips. No other man in the club was possessed of such a mouth. From that moment on, Alain was smitten. From that moment on, it no longer mattered that he and the Turk were the club's only illusionists and, therefore, rivals. It no longer mattered at all.

Wondering if the Turk was present, Alain removed his hat and gloves and then tucked the gloves inside the hat's bowl. After setting them on a bench beside the hall stand, where perhaps ten other hats were arrayed, he shucked off his coat, brushed the tiny droplets of water from its fur collar, and looked for a free hook on the coat tree. It was a particularly wide, sturdy stand of golden oak, but all its brass hooks were in use. Alain draped his coat over the bench arm.

Good audience, he thought, happily anticipating the impression he would make. But his creation was ultimately intended for one man alone, the man who'd enchanted him with a single kiss. What lay in the casket was more than a gift. It was a symbol of gratitude and hope and, most important, a willingness to open his heart.

"Come now," said Criswell, draping an arm over Alain's shoulders. "Show us what the Master of Magical Mayhem has devised for our entertainment."

Alain, who'd freed the walnut box from Criswell's grasp, answered, "I'd rather leave it out here until I'm ready to make the presentation." He set the box on one of two damask-upholstered chairs in the hall. "Please don't say anything about it. I dislike feeling pressed into service."

"Do you first need to fortify your spirits with brandy, Professor Prospero?"

Alain merely smiled and followed Criswell into the main parlor.

The room smelled of musty fabric and a floral fragrance produced either by nature or Guerlain. Even the odor of dirt in the fern jardiniere had been drawn out by the evening's dampness. Alain quickly surveyed the room's occupants. William McCarty sat at the upright piano, where he played a rather starched version of an operatic aria. John Dishane stood behind William, his arms wrapped loosely around the piano player's shoulders. Harold Morgan, a glass of Vin Mariani in hand and legs crossed elegantly, sat nearby and listened with a slight grimace. Julius Ludoff shared the tête-à-tête sofa with George Bibby, and James Langston sat on the floor beside Oscar Frank, who reclined like a sheikh on a Gothic mahogany couch laden with plum-colored cushions. Several other men stood together, softly conversing and laughing.

From high on the walls, paintings tilted toward the gathering, like viewers in a theater gallery staring at the stage.

"Saw your Fountain of Youth again, Mobry," said Harold Morgan in his studied drawl.

"Ah, so you were in Chicago," said Alain. He straightened his loose cravat and vest, reset his sack coat on his shoulders. "Why didn't you come backstage to say hello?"

"Sorry, but I had to dash off to meet with my agent. I was already late by the time your performance ended." Morgan took a long draft of Mariani. "When will you be performing locally again?"

"Next year and the following. As I recall, I have engagements at the Alhambra, the Davidson, and the Pabst." Alain chuckled. "I have a terrible memory for such things. Too easily distracted by my own imagination, I suspect."

"Speaking of your imagination," said Harold, "how *do* you manage to produce that handsome young 'drake from your diorama?"

"How do you know he's a 'drake?" asked Alain.

Harold lifted his fingers off the chair arms and recrossed his legs. The movements were laconic, in keeping with his voice and smile. "I don't. But I can dream."

"To spare you further wondering," said Alain with a wink, "he is."

In a show of dramatic bliss, Harold sighed and closed his eyes.

"I'm also working on a new illusion in which to use him."

"I could 'use' him quite realistically," said Harold, obscene images obviously dancing behind his still-closed lids. "No illusion necessary."

"Mobry," called Oscar Frank from his cushions, "have you heard about that drunken fellow in Beaver Dam who wanted to emulate the Great Herrmann?"

Alain chuckled. "Oh, the one who bet his equally besotted companion he could cut off the man's head and reattach it through magic. Yes, I got quite the laugh out of that."

"It truly happened?" asked James Langston, turning from Oscar to Alain and back to Oscar.

"Indeed it did," said Oscar, stroking Langston's hair. "The second fellow suffered two nasty gashes to his neck. So instead of losing and regaining his head, he acquired a quilt's worth of stitches."

Langston grimaced in empathetic pain.

"You're the only man for whom I've lost *my* head," cooed Oscar to his pet.

Alain's smile broadened. He was in his element. The Green Carnation was a gathering place for scorned men. Scorned because they were theatricals—actors and playwrights and other denizens of the stage. And scorned with vitriol because they enjoyed the intimate attention of members of their own sex.

The Green Carnation was, down to the last fellow, a brotherhood of irredeemable nances.

"Is the Turk here?" Alain quietly asked Criswell before any of the others addressed him.

Criswell responded with raised brows and a sly, crimped smile as he bent toward Alain. "I believe he's riding the camel with Jack Orley. Either that, or they're in one of the rooms upstairs." He pointed toward the ceiling. The building's second story was taken up largely with bedchambers.

The revelation left Alain thunderstruck. Jack Orley was a ginger-haired builder of scenery. No older than twenty, he was coarse and loud and spouted profanities like a lumberjack. Dear God in heaven, how could a cultured man take the slightest interest in him? Even a fleeting, carnal interest?

Silently grieving, Alain nodded to those of his comrades who gave him some sign of welcome. He immediately went to a console table where crystal decanters and silver serving plates glimmered above a tangle of cherubs and acanthus leaves on the table's apron and legs. The thumping of his large "special" shoe on the floorboards rarely troubled Alain when he was here—the other men had grown accustomed to it—but tonight he wanted to sever the deformed foot.

He poured brandy into a tumbler, drank it down, and poured more. An image of Jack and the Turk riding the camel so tormented him, he feared he might smash the glass. The camel was designed for one activity only. It consisted of two conjoined padded stools of different heights. The shorter of the two could be raised or lowered slightly.

It was the perfect arrangement for comfortable fellatio.

Alain left the parlor. Casting a look up the staircase, he crossed the entryway into the library. Even the smell of books and wood smoke, which normally soothed him, couldn't persuade him to linger in the peacefully empty room. Instead he traversed the expanse of patterned carpet, passed the fireplace, and went to a door set between two banks of shelves. He'd exercised care in placing his foot as he walked, so his steps would be less audible.

Without knocking, he eased open the door to a room members called, for no logical reason, the nursery. The sight that greeted him made him sway as he gripped the knob.

The Turk, his vest hanging open and white shirt parted to the base of his sternum, sat on the camel's upper stool. His trousers, too, were undone. Lolling against the wall, his head seemed ready to topple from his body.

Alain had never seen him like this—disheveled and limp and nearly stuporous. The Turk's mouth hung open. His heavy-lidded eyes, specks of light within their darkness, looked like glowing coals about to die. They were fixed on Jack Orley's face, which moved to and fro below the Turk's waist.

Alain's throat went dry. Although he felt queasy, a deeper fullness in his abdomen made his cock pulse and thicken. He stared at the Turk's flushed, slack face and broad chest, perspiration twinkling within threads of black hair. Rapidly,

shallowly, his chest rose and fell. Alain's gaze lowered, and he became transfixed by the interplay between wet pink mouth and glistening cerise horn.

The Turk's cock was cut and enticingly large.

Jack's suckling sounds were maddening.

Although he'd surely been aware of Alain's presence, the Turk was unfazed by it. Or perhaps, rather liked it, since he thrived on attention. Finally his eyes shifted lazily in Alain's direction. A smirk lifted his mustache.

"Prospero, do you wish to relieve Jack?"

Apparently spurred by Alain's presence, Jack redoubled his efforts. The droll question had no sooner escaped the Turk's lips than his breath caught in his throat like milkweed silk on a burr. As he expelled it, his eyes closed and his hips began jerking in an oddly dainty way. Jack's mouth and hand remained firmly clenched around the spewing organ.

Alain made a strained sound as his hand fell to his own crotch. His balls felt like clock weights. How heavenly it would be if the Turk sucked them while gripping and pumping Alain's prick.

Jack drew back. The Turk's cock, a white smear at its tip, bobbed out of his mouth. The head was plump and gleaming and utterly delectable.

"I imagine you need relief yourself," the Turk said breathlessly.

Alain couldn't determine to whom he was speaking. *If only, if only...* "Kafele," he pronounced softly, as if the Turk's name were a plea.

Jack turned and gave Alain a dim-witted look.

The Turk's face clouded as he dismounted the camel and buttoned his trousers. His shirt was still open. He approached Alain and curled a thumb and forefinger over his rival's chin, forcing Alain to tilt his head back.

"Be careful how you address me in front of others," he said in a low voice, barely moving his lips.

"Secure my silence with a favor," Alain murmured back, then insolently added, "Kafele."

Astonished by his own boldness, he stared into the Turk's pitch-black eyes as he lifted a hand to the man's chest. He let his deft fingers crawl slowly over one hair-embellished mound, damp and warm and solid beneath his palm, and inscribe arabesque designs over and around the taut nipple. His cock pushed against his undergarment. How he wanted this man!

"Take care of me," he whispered. "I'm hard for you. So unbearably hard."

The other illusionist seemed stymied, but only for a moment. Then, smiling, he bent forward. Alain's heart raced in anticipation of a kiss. Instead the Turk gave Alain's genitals a nearly painful squeeze.

"I don't fuck or suck men," he whispered, his mouth just a hairbreadth above Alain's parted lips. "Keep that in mind, my randy little friend." He straightened. Putting his clothing in order, he left the nursery.

The ache in Alain's balls could, he knew, turn to piercing pleasure with the right touch. But no touch was forthcoming. His breath came and went in clipped spasms.

"I'll take care of you, Mobry, if you let me see your foot," Jack offered. He still sat on the low stool, idly fondling himself.

"Go to hell."

\* \* \*

Alain was no longer sure if he should present his invention. His enthusiasm had melted in the simmering waters of resentment and unspent lust. How could he have misread Kafele's attention? Over the past five or six months, since he'd been accepted into the Green Carnation, the Turk had not only kissed Alain, passionately, but brought him refreshments, graced him with smiles, hung on his every word when he spoke, laughed at his outrageous puns. Furthermore, Kafele's frequent touches had seemed suggestive of future intimacy.

Rumor had it the Turk also engaged in dalliances with women. A good number of women. He'd had affairs with his assistants. His appetite was notoriously insatiable. But many of the Green Carnation's members had female consorts, at least on occasion, and two were even married. Such activities simply deflected public attention from their secret lives and private desires. Even if the Turk did accept women into his bed, that fact obviously did not negate the delight he took in illicit interaction with men.

So why had he spurned Alain's advances with such blatant contempt after courting those advances?

The matter of Alain presenting his new creation was decided by Bernard Criswell. Too many glasses of port had made him convivial to the point of indiscretion. As Alain, still brooding, more listened to than participated in a lively discussion about Jacob Litt's latest theatrical ventures, Criswell announced in his booming voice, "You know, gentlemen, the modest Mr. Mobry has brought something for our entertainment tonight."

Alain slanted a glance at the Turk, who lay supine in all his smoldering, exotic splendor on the Gothic couch. The Turk's arched eyebrows rose.

"Do show us," he purred, moving to a sitting position.

Alain considered. "All right." He would whet Kafele's appetite as Kafele had whetted his. But he would not sate it.

He went to the entrance hall, lifted his marvel out of the casket, and carried it upright into the parlor. As the others watched with keen interest, he set it on an oak table. It was the clearest surface in the room, since the table bore only a glowing lamp and an empty wine goblet. The taint at the bottom of the glass matched the lamp's etched cranberry globe.

The men gathered round.

"What in God's name *is* it, Mobry?" asked Dishane.

Alain smiled with private pleasure. "My version of Aladdin's magic lamp."

"Magic candle, you mean," said McCarty as Dishane ran a hand up and down his back.

That he would so describe the mechanism made perfect sense. It was, in its sealed state, a thick, tapered metal cylinder and looked nothing like a lamp.

"Why don't you sit on it, Jimmy, and see what happens?" Morgan suggested to Langston. "You love having a stiff branch between your apples."

The other men chortled.

Alain kept his mysterious smile in place. He knew curiosity gnawed at the Turk.

"Well...what does it *do*, exactly?" asked George Bibby. "Is it a clockwork piece?"

"Of course it is." The Turk, who'd been kneeling on the couch to view Alain's invention, now stood and approached the table. The small sea of men parted to let him through, since he was the only other magician there. "That's what Prospero is famous for."

Indeed he was, and Alain was proud of that fame. He deserved it; he'd earned it.

The Turk was strong and limber. He could easily perform larger-scale illusions that required manipulation of apparatuses and a certain amount of precise footwork. He could dash around or on and off the stage to change costumes for his "sketches," and make dramatic flourishes to distract the audience.

Alain, however, was not as powerful or nimble. In fact, he'd capitalized on his physical defect by adopting a unique professional persona.

"Prospero" could and did perform more standard illusions. Alain had even devised a mechanism that fit beneath his robe and allowed him to drift rather than hobble across the stage when he so chose. Still, he shied away from cumbersome displays that required a small army of people to build and maneuver. His forte and the centerpiece of every show were his elaborate automatons.

Clockwork had always beguiled him. To Alain, mechanism brought to life and invisibly manipulated through sleight of hand seemed much more the stuff of magic than whatever effects could be achieved by mirrors and hidden compartments, trapdoors and wires.

He knew the Turk envied him in spite of the relative modesty of his performances. Kafele, by his own admission, was not an imaginative magician. And he certainly had neither the talent nor patience for constructing automatons. He relied heavily on empty drama and his own commanding presence to keep audiences entertained.

"May I examine it?" asked the Turk.

"Visually," said Alain. "You may look..." After an appropriately weighty pause, he added, "But not touch." The final words were blisteringly acerbic.

Kafele, narrowing his eyes, responded with a shrouded glance that couldn't entirely conceal his defiance.

The Turk proceeded to circle the table and peer closely at every square inch of the automaton. He likely noticed the hair-thin seams near the top that indicated the presence of moving parts. But he couldn't see inside the piece, and it was within the cylinder and its ebony base that the structure's mysteries were concealed.

Its mechanical mysteries, at least. Few people would be able to fathom its more occult nature, from which Kafele could have derived great benefit had he not been so disdainful of Alain's acute need.

He was an arrogant, hypocritical fool.

"Are you going to activate it?" Criswell asked.

"I think not," Alain said, cavalierly crossing his arms over his rib cage. "I shouldn't have even brought it here. The piece isn't perfected yet." He pointedly met Kafele's gaze. "I wouldn't want to foist an imperfect work upon my fastidious brothers."

The Turk's chin shifted forward as he tightened his lips and looked away. He knew. It was his earlier rebuff that had eliminated all possibility of a presentation.

"Why do you compare it to Aladdin's lamp?" asked Ludoff.

Alain's smile widened. "The answer," he said, "is something only a select few, or maybe only a special one, will be allowed to discover."

By now the Turk surely realized he'd been excluded from that elite group. Alain hoped the realization would eat him alive and make him repent his behavior.



## Chapter Two

### *Southeastern Wisconsin, Present Day*

The stink of the portable john followed Cameron Waters into the bright autumn sunlight. He was surprised everybody at the flea market didn't run screaming as the miasma crept over the grounds like the Blob. Inflating his lungs with the blessing of fresh air, he looked at the man waiting to use the facility.

"Don't go in there," he said, "if you value your sanity."

The man smiled. "That bad, huh?"

"Worse."

"I should've guessed by the look on your face."

Cam tried to relax his grimace. The waiting man had no such look on *his* face. He had the comfortable ease of a young guy who knows he's nicely put together and handsome enough to turn heads. In fact, the mellow sound of his voice as well as his looks seemed completely out of place in this tacky world of Chinese imports and used household goods.

The stranger glanced beyond the enclosed cesspool. "I suppose I'll take it to the bushes."

Cam looked over his shoulder. Scrubby woods abutted the flea market on three sides. "Bet there's plenty of dead vegetation back there."

The man laughed. "I feel sorry for the women who have to relieve themselves." He began to head toward the tree line, then abruptly turned back. "By the way," he said, "have you been walking around here for a while?"

Cam shrugged. "Not too long. Maybe a half hour or so."

"Did you happen to see something sort of like"—the man's face gathered in thought—"an artillery shell? It was standing upright on one of the vendors' tables."

"An artillery shell." Hell, even if Cam *had* walked past something like that, he wouldn't have paid it any mind. Armaments didn't interest him.

"Well, it had more of a blunt nose," the man said. "I caught a glimpse of it a couple rows away from where I was browsing. Then something else got my attention. I sort of wandered off and lost track of where I'd seen it."

Cam shook his head. "Sorry, can't help you."

"Just thought I'd ask." Flashing a quick smile, the man lifted a hand. "Thanks for the warning, though. Now I'd better take care of business."

Cam watched him stride toward the woods, certain wordless thoughts gathering around his receding form. Cam pushed them away. His stare was bold enough; it didn't need any garnish.

\* \* \*

"Don't even ask what it is, 'cause I don't have a clue."

Frowning, Cameron removed his sunglasses and bent toward the item sitting in a corner of the vendor's table. The bustle of the flea market retreated as his attention funneled toward the object. Until now, nothing had grabbed his interest.

He wondered if this was the "shell" that man at the porta-crapper had been looking for.

Carefully, Cam lifted the oddity to study it. The vertical cylinder was under a foot tall, but its substantial wood base added another six inches or more to its overall height. The tip was somewhat tapered, but not nearly sharp enough to be a deadly projectile. What really threw Cam off, though, was the color. Creamy rose paint, dull with age, covered the metal body. The paint had begun to crack and flake.

Why would an artillery shell be painted?

"It's heavy," Cam said, raising and lowering the thing to make his point. He wanted to tap it, test it for solidity, but feared further damaging the already stressed exterior.

Lifting it higher, he squinted at the bottom of the footed base. There appeared to be incised lines, like an old scar, in the center. Cam touched them to confirm their depth. Yup, too deep to be mere scratches. He angled the base toward the sun and peered more closely.

Two words? Or a marking?

"Where'd you get this?" Cam asked as he set the thing back on the table. He lightly rested a few fingers on the base, signaling he had dibs on the piece in case another interested shopper came along.

The vendor scrunched his face as he lit a cigarette. "Can't remember exactly." A veil of smoke drifted from his mouth. "We clean up so many places, they all sort of run together."

"Clean up?"

"Yeah. Old houses and barns and commercial buildings. Places that are gonna be demolished or renovated. We haul away whatever stuff's been left behind. 'Declutter' is what we call it."

Cam nodded. "I see." He'd heard of such businesses. "Do you pretty much stay in this area?"

"Well, Milwaukee to Chicago mostly. Sometimes we'll go a little farther up the lakeshore. Depends on the project."

The answer was encouraging. There were plenty of historic buildings in that corridor, just as there were along the shores of all the Great Lakes. Cam was sufficiently intrigued to talk price.

Someone who'd been wandering by the table suddenly stopped and ogled the missile. Cam tightened his hold. The woman dawdled for a moment, checking out the vendor's other offerings, then moved on.

"What do you want for it?" Cam asked.

The vendor pulled down the sides of his mouth as he studied his strange treasure. Or pretended to. "I'll take fifty."

Cam coughed out a laugh. "You don't even know what it is! Or where it came from."

Grudgingly humbled by this reminder of his ignorance, the vendor made a show of reconsidering. "I know it's old," he said. "And prob'ly collectible."

Cam rolled his eyes. *Old and collectible*—an uninformed seller's favorite justifications for overpricing his wares.

"Old, yes," Cam said. "But if it turns out to be nothing more than a piece of junk missing all kinds of parts, it isn't even worth fifty cents. I'm just curious about it, that's all."

Or maybe it was the other man's interest in it that had sparked his own interest. May he'd run into the guy again...

He did a quick scan of the flea market, but it proved futile. The place was too big, too packed with people.

Pondering, the vendor rolled the filter end of his cigarette between thumb and forefinger. "Well, that ebony base alone..."

The large cube of dark wood *was* beautifully carved. "Okay, I'll give you ten. Just because of the base."

His gaze falling to the treasure, the vendor released a weary sigh. "Yeah, I suppose. I don't wanna haul that thing back home with me. It's been a bitch to lug around."

Cam handed over the ten. The vendor slipped the bill into a cigar box and began swaddling Cam's purchase in newspaper and duct tape. When he reached over the table to deliver the package, Cam felt someone else's presence behind his right shoulder and caught a peripheral glimpse of that someone. He slid a glance at the shopper, and his breath caught. It was the guy from the portable toilet.

"What'd you buy?" the man asked in an oddly intimate way, the way a soon-to-be lover might ask, after stripping for the first time, *Do you like what you see?*

"Oh, hi," Cam said self-consciously. He shifted the wood-and-metal enigma in his arms, trying to accommodate its weight. The thing now looked and felt like an enormous frozen fish. "Actually I'm not sure *what* I bought. It just caught my eye."

"Do you think it might be that object I described to you?" The man carefully squeezed the layered newspaper, obviously trying to feel the form buried within it.

He stood close to Cam, too close, his body a firm length of heat against Cam's side and back. It was probably his nearness and his low, smooth voice that made his simple questions so disconcerting.

"I don't know," Cam said. He ambled away from the vendor's table. "Could be, but I doubt it. Then again, I don't know jack squat about artillery shells."

The young man walked beside him. "I don't either."

Stopping, Cam gave him a puzzled look. "But I figured you were a collector."

"I *am* a collector," the man said, "but not of artillery shells." He looked down the pathway between the rows of tables. "Would you mind if we sat down for a minute so I could hold that? I won't open it; I just want to...get a sense of its shape."

The request pleased Cam far more than it should have. "No, I don't mind. I already feel like I'm toting around a freakin' anchor."

*Don't do this to yourself. Don't give in to it.*

They took a seat at the first bench that appeared. Cam almost set his purchase between them but at the last minute decided to hold it. He refused to examine his motives. They didn't require examination.

It hadn't hit him in a merciful while, this unsettling impulse to be close to an attractive man, to drink in the sight of him and store that image in a hidden well he tapped only in his dreams. But the impulse was hitting him good and hard now, and he was having more trouble quashing it than he cared to admit.

"My name's Paul Patrillo, by the way." Smiling, the man offered his hand.

"Cameron Waters." He clasped Paul's hand but made the contact brief. Then he handed over his purchase. "Feel away," he said.

For a deliciously disturbing moment, he watched Paul's fingers creep over and press into the bunting of newspaper. He flicked a glance at Paul's face, now gathered in concentration. This collector—although of what, he hadn't said—was probably around Cam's age or maybe a year or two older. In spite of his apparent youth, he had an aura of maturity and intelligence that didn't quite suit his appearance. He looked like a model, tall and dark and handsome. Strikingly so.

Enough for even a straight guy to notice.

*Yes, enough for anybody to notice. A nun. A child. An eighty-year-old former athlete who'd fathered an entire football team.*

Cam turned his eyes to the chaotic pattern of shoe prints on the broad, dusty path. The restless churning inside him intensified. The hidden well was filling.

*Don't.*

"Damn," Paul whispered, then spoke the word again, with greater frustration.

It gave Cam another excuse to look at him. "What's wrong?"

Paul sighed. "The shape and dimensions seem right, and this location seems right, but I can't be sure of anything unless I study it." He handed back Cam's find.

His explanation was more confusing than his exasperation. "What're you hoping it might be?"

Paul leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest, and stretched his legs out in front of him. He continued to regard the bundle. "A chimera," he murmured.

"I beg your pardon?"

Paul gave him a half smile. "I'm afraid I'll jinx myself if I talk about it. Let's just say it's something that's intrigued me for years, something relating to my studies."

He again touched the newspaper, wistfully, as if he could wish his chimera into reality. Cam's gaze felt glued to him. A mild breeze stirred Paul's rich brown hair, and its strands made a fluttering tracery around his features.

"Would you be willing to sell it?" Paul suddenly asked, reeling Cam's attention back to the simple surface of things.

"Uh...boy, I don't know," he said, caught off guard. "I'd at least like to know what it is I'm selling. I'm curious about it too."

Paul tilted on the bench and pulled a wallet from his jeans pocket. Cam's wayward gaze fell to the delicate shift of muscles in Paul's long, lean thighs and sleekly muscled arms. Light soil patched his knees. He must've knelt to study something on the ground, beneath one of the vendors' tables. Maybe sat on his haunches, legs spread...

A business card, dark blue and shiny as patent leather, glinted wickedly in the sunlight. It took Cam a moment to realize the card was meant for him.

"Here's my contact information. If you change your mind..."

The sentences jolted Cam. They echoed what a guy named Trent had said to him when Cam had applied for a position after graduating from the University of Michigan. "*If you change your mind*" had had a double meaning, the least of which had to do with reconsidering the job offer.

"Thanks." Cam took the card. Embossed white lettering in a classy yet simple font read, *Paul Patrillo, Historian*. Below, to the left and right, were his street address and phone number, and his e-mail address and fax and cell numbers. Cam looked up. "You're a historian?" he asked with surprise. His image of a historian—a dour old fart with pinched features and eyeglasses that rested near the tip of his nose—sure didn't jibe with Paul's appearance. That was idiotic, of course. Historians weren't born old just because they studied history.

"PhD candidate," Paul said. "I'm specializing in the history of American theater. The bastard spawn of the theater actually. Popular melodramas, jugglers and acrobats and magicians, vaudeville acts."

Fascinated, Cam angled toward him. "Late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century stuff. The Gilded Age."

"Yeah. You're familiar with the period?"

Cam cocked his head. "A little."

"You know, that's really nice to hear. It's amazing how many people in this country don't know shit about its history."

"Well, I made it through college, and I'm still a pretty avid reader." Cam was pleased by Paul's approbation. He refrained from saying more, afraid he'd just keep running his mouth in some out-of-control attempt to impress the guy.

"I've met *way* too many airheaded men," Paul murmured. "It's kind of depressing."

"Only men?" Cam asked, puzzled by the gender discrimination.

For the first time since they'd met, Paul's self-possession wobbled. Just a little. He might've even blushed faintly, but it was hard to tell through his tan. "Well, women too." He abruptly slapped his hands on his thighs. "I really should get going."

"I should too."

They rose simultaneously. And at that instant, the words of Wendy, a female friend from college, a woman in whom Cam had always confided, skipped through his mind.

*"So maybe you're bisexual. So what? A lot of people are—probably more than researchers realize. It's nothing to agonize over. Just go with it."*

Cam reached for Paul's arm, knowing damned well it wasn't bisexuality he'd been quailing from.

Their eyes met. Paul's were blue enriched by slate gray and quite beautiful.

*"But...but...I wouldn't have a clue how to come on to a man,"* he'd told Wendy. *"Worse yet, I wouldn't have a clue if he was gay or straight or something in between. It would be really sick to hit on a straight guy. Humiliating. Maybe dangerous too."*

*"You'll figure it out,"* Wendy had said.

Problem was Cam never *had* figured it out. He'd just avoided the whole issue.

Maybe he conveyed that when his eyes met Paul's—conveyed the jumble of uncertainty and yearning that made him feel too vulnerable to take any chances—because the look lasted a beat too long. Maybe Paul saw something he recognized in Cam's gaze.

Still, Cam found his voice. "Are you here alone?"

Paul nodded. "Yeah."

"Got any plans for the rest of the day?"

"Nothing set in stone. Why?" Paul's voice had that silky, suggestive tone again. Or maybe it wasn't suggestive at all. Maybe he just happened to have a naturally alluring voice.

"I live pretty close to here, only five or six miles away. If you'd like to follow me home..."

Paul beamed. “Oh Christ, I was hoping you'd propose a get-together. I'd really appreciate it, Cameron.”

“You should've said something.”

“I didn't want to seem pushy.”

It was another statement that struck Cam as a double entendre. His reaction to Paul flustered him, made him second-guess his offer. “I wouldn't have taken it that way,” he said. “You don't strike me as the pushy type.”

Paul's grin dwindled to a smile. “That depends on how much I want something.” He lightly laid a hand on Cameron's back. “Come on, let's get to your place so I can see if you found my chimera.”

From the point of contact to the pit of Cam's stomach, excitement shivered to life.

## Chapter Three

"I've always loved houses like this," Paul said as soon as they'd stepped into the foyer. "Older. Cozy."

His gaze moved around the clean, modest space to the flight of stairs on the right, with their freshly painted white rail and turned posts, to the living room that spread out on the left.

"I've always loved them too," said Cam. "Want me to hang up your jacket?"

"No, that's all right. Has the house been remodeled very much?"

"Yeah. That was one of its selling points. Late-nineteenth-century charm, late-twentieth-century amenities. The upstairs is especially nice. Master bedroom with bath, a sizable office." Cam led Paul down the central hallway. A spare bedroom was on the right, a good-sized bathroom at the end. On the left, where Cam was headed, lay a dining and kitchen area separated by a breakfast bar; behind that, a combination laundry and mudroom. "I *would* like to knock out this wall," Cam said, touching the one on his left. "It would open up the floor plan and give me more dining space."

Feeling ridiculously proud, as if Martha Stewart had just complimented him on his good taste, Cam flipped on the light centered over the table. The ceiling fixture, too, was classy in an understated way. He wondered vaguely if that was how he saw himself, or *wanted* to see himself, and why it suddenly mattered.

There wasn't much to wonder about. Cam knew damned well why it mattered. The reason was standing just a couple of feet away from him.

Cam set his purchase on the table. "Would you like some coffee?" he asked as he walked around the breakfast bar.

Paul, who'd brought in an attaché case, laid it beside the swaddled tower and snapped it open. "Love some, thank you. Black with a little sugar."

"Sorry it's from this morning. I could make a fresh pot..."

"No, no, don't bother. I'm imposing on you enough just by being here."

"If it were a problem, I wouldn't have invited you over." Boy, Cam thought, the good host is just oozing right out of me today. He'd always been mindful of his manners, but he knew damned well it wasn't courtesy that was driving him on *this* occasion.

He carried the two mugs back to the dining table and set them down.

"So, what takes up most of your time, Mr. Waters?" Paul asked affably.



Cam began carefully unwrapping his ten-dollar investment. "Selling real estate. I got into it the summer between my sophomore and junior years in college." He tried not to let himself get distracted from his task.

"Ah, I might've guessed." Paul gathered up the newspaper and duct tape as Cam peeled it away. "Has the economy been tough on you?"

"Things are a little rocky, but I've done pretty well."

The newspaper crinkled as Paul bunched it in his hands. "You don't seem like a salesman."

"Oh? Why's that?" Cam cringed every time he tilted his mysterious treasure. Sporadic, faint snaps and rattles came from inside.

"Too cute. Too young. Too unassuming."

Cam's heart stuttered. "Cute?" Strange description, coming from another man. Concentration broken, he let the non-artillery shell slip from his hands.

Paul caught and righted the thing before it thudded to the table. "Yeah, you're a cute guy. What can I say?"

Cam cleared his throat. He'd always thought he was on the okay side of ordinary. "And I can't be that much younger than you are."

"But I'm still a student," Paul said with a grin. "I don't have to wear three-piece suits and lay the schmooze on people, trying to get them to buy property they can't afford."

"I don't either," Cam said a bit defensively.

"Excuse *me*," Paul's grin dwindled to a smirk. When he wasn't eyeing Cam's purchase or putting the newspaper aside, he kept sliding amused glances Cam's way.

Cam tried to ignore him.

He reminded himself he was proud of his work. He never pressured or tried to take advantage of his clients. And they seemed to like him, to like his honesty, his low-key yet informed approach to showings, his firm handshakes and modest smiles. That was the word that had filtered back to him anyway. He had a quiet command of the whole sales process, from knowing where and how to list, to matching buyers with properties, to working out the best deal for all concerned and navigating through oceans of paperwork.

"I'm good at what I do," he murmured, stripping away the last pieces of paper. After all, it was a couple of very lucrative transactions back-to-back that had allowed him to take this month-long leave following his father's death, so he could regularly check on his mother and get his own head together.

"I believe you are," Paul said quietly.

Cam flipped him a skeptical glance, but Paul's whole demeanor had changed. His smile was softer, conciliatory. Cam set the revealed treasure between the two of them as Paul put the last of the wadded newspaper on an empty chair. Cam took a seat, but Paul continued to stand.

They both stared at the mystifying sculpture, or whatever the hell it was, as it stood like a heavy metal dildo on the tabletop. Sunlight slanting in from a nearby window highlighted every flaw on the piece. The wood of the base was scarred by a smattering of nicks; beneath its chipping, flesh-colored paint, the upper cylinder bore crusty spots of corrosion like scabs. Afraid he might further damage it, Cam decided to leave it alone.

Paul, however, didn't leave it alone. Wide-eyed, he lifted it and studied the base and then nearly dropped the piece as recognition obviously dawned. He actually trembled as he set it back down.

As he sipped his coffee, his stare took on a different quality. He seemed to be gawking at a vision of the Virgin Mary.

"I don't believe this," he whispered. He'd already whispered a string of excited, incredulous exclamations while he'd checked out the base.

"So what did I buy?" Cam asked with growing curiosity.

It took a couple of seconds for Paul's eyes to shift in his direction. "Cameron, I'm pretty sure you just found Mobry's Dick."

Sputtering into laughter, Cam nearly spit out his coffee. "*What?*" He grabbed a napkin from the center of the table and wiped his mouth.

"That's how it's come to be known."

Paul shuffled through the pile of papers and notebooks he'd pulled from his attaché case. After a minute, his hands stilled, and he peered at one of the papers, then lifted and turned it, showing it to his host.

It bore a faded diagram, but of what, Cam couldn't tell. A signature appeared to be scrawled across the left bottom corner of the page.

"Alain Mobry was an illusionist," Paul said, "who performed around the turn of the last century. He specialized in intricate clockwork pieces." He poked at the paper he still held and then at Cam's purchase. "His signature is on the bottom of that thing."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. I'm familiar with his handwriting. And I've seen his signature a dozen times at least." Reverently, Paul touched the structure with his fingertips. "Mobry's automatons were very fanciful and meticulously made. He would usually take some small personal item from an audience member and then, through sleight of hand, make it emerge from the mechanism. He liked to challenge himself. One of his demonstrations was called the Gypsy's Trail of Tears, in which he'd set up a line of motionless objects or smaller mechanisms that led to his primary automaton. The borrowed object would appear in one after the other, until it made its grandest showing in the most elaborate piece."

Cam's mind scrambled to catch up. He was tempted to ask what Mobry's invention was worth, but the question struck him as inappropriate. Paul clearly didn't see its value in monetary terms.

"Have you ever seen the movie *The Illusionist*?" Paul asked.

“Uh...yeah. With Edward Norton, right?”

“Yes. Remember the Orange Tree?”

Cam trolled through his memory, then nodded. Okay, now he was getting a better sense of what Paul was talking about—a mechanism that artistically mimicked reality, with some magic thrown in.

“That was Hollywood's version of an actual automaton created by Jean Robert-Houdin—from whom Houdini took *his* stage name, by the way.”

“No kidding. The Orange Tree really existed at one time?”

Paul smiled. Cam's flare of interest seemed to please him. “Nickel-plated automatons were fairly common around the mid-nineteenth century. In fact, they'd been around for a hundred years by then, but Robert-Houdin added a degree of finesse to his mechanisms, and his working of them, that was truly groundbreaking.”

“But he and this guy Mobry weren't contemporaries.”

“No. Alain Mobry was a case of born-too-late. Automatons were pretty much regarded as the charming toys of a bygone era by the time he began performing. Magicians were devising illusions similar to the kinds of things we see today. But Mobry was still a freakin' genius.” Paul carefully slid his papers aside and pulled the Dick toward him. “He was also gay.”

Blinking at him, Cam swallowed to lubricate his throat. “How do you know?” *And why does it matter?*

“I've read everything about him I could get my hands on. I finally bought some of his personal and business papers at auction—journals, correspondence, clippings, drawings. I still haven't gone through them all.” Paul patted his drift of papers. “They cost me a good chunk of my inheritance, but they were well worth it. There's plenty of evidence of his orientation. Actually his story was rather sad.”

“Why?”

“Here, Cameron, help me figure out how to activate this thing,” Paul said, his attention again welded to the structure. He got up without bothering to answer the question.

Cam went over to him. “I'm not sure how—”

“It obviously doesn't work with compressed air,” Paul said, examining the piece. “And from what I know of Mobry's craftsmanship, there won't be any pull strings involved. I just hope the damned thing hasn't seized up over the decades. There are probably dozens of working parts inside.” Finally he looked at Cam. They stood inches apart. “Very, very lightly feel around the base with your fingertips. If something happens, stop. I'll feel around the upper portion, although I'm willing to bet the triggers are down there.”

“Okay.”

Cam carefully ran his fingertips over the elaborate rosettes and spiderwebs carved into the sizable ebony block. Aside from the shallow gouges, they were

smooth as oil. Leaning forward, trying to see what he was touching, he felt his bare arm brush against Paul's. Heat spread over his chest and through his face.

"Sorry."

"It's all right," Paul said with a ghost of a smile. "Close quarters."

Within seconds, it happened again. Paul's skin still felt sun warmed; the hair on his arms, silky as a toddler's. His scent filled Cam's nostrils, and something like an electrical current shimmied through Cam's belly.

He tried to change his stance to allow for more distance, but it looked ridiculous when he stood back from the table with his arms outstretched, as if he were touching something slimy and malodorous. He immediately moved back to his original position.

More radiant heat. More enticing hints of Paul's scent. His nearness was making Cam's nervous system—and other systems too—go haywire. It was worse than the other times he'd experienced this feeling, this switch tripping and its resulting unease. Paul would have to feel up Mobry's Dick on his own.

Cam was about to step away when the tip of his middle finger dipped into a depression, and a short, narrow drawer slid out of the base with a hiss. He nearly toppled backward in shock.

"Yes!" Paul cried.

Paul's longer hair caught briefly on Cam's shorter hair as they both leaned forward to peer inside the drawer. A handwritten note on yellowing paper, its ink faded to a delicate lacework, was affixed to the bottom.

*A gentle touch*

*Results shall yield.*

"Guess so," Cam said, smiling at Paul.

Their eyes met. Paul's lips were softly parted. Goose bumps spread across Cam's shoulder blades and down his arms.

Paul smiled back at him.

And then it was over. Paul tried nudging the drawer back into place. It resisted for a second before withdrawing.

"Keep going," he said quietly. "Seems you've got the right touch." He straightened.

Cautiously, Cam palpated the centers of the other carved flowers. On the next panel to the right, another drawer popped out.

*A firmer touch—*

*The senses reel!*

Cam lifted his eyebrows. "The notes are getting a little suggestive, don't you think?"

Paul's smile had broadened. "Hell yeah."

"But why? What *is* this thing?"

"It's an uncut penis, Cameron." Paul put a hand on Cam's back and left it there as he, too, began fingering the base. "You can't expect to find a nursery rhyme."

"Are you serious? It's really supposed to be a dick?"

"You bet."

Vaguely Cam wondered what would happen if he turned his face a little more, if he kept his eyes on Paul and relaxed his lips; what would happen if he let that frozen cube of desire at his core simply melt and ripple out of him. Would Paul feel it? Would he lean in for a kiss, or would his mouth curl in distaste as the realization hit him? *Oh shit, this guy's a homo and wants to get in my pants.*

Too flustered to concentrate, Cam simply let his fingers continue their exploratory crawl over dead wood. Paul now felt it with both hands. Taking a cue from him, Cam did the same.

Falling leaves, nudged by a gust of wind, briefly clattered against the window.

The whole scene was oddly intimate—two men drawing from the same pocket of air, their exhalations mingling; two men trying to unearth another man's secrets. Paul's eyes were closed. Cam closed *his* eyes. Their fingers kept meeting, sometimes creeping over one another and then withdrawing—slowly, not abruptly. Their arms kept making gliding passes. Once, twice, the sides of their heads grazed or briefly nestled together.

The movements weren't deliberate, but neither were they shunned.

Something was happening. Cam's panicked need to backpedal, to race away from that something, had magically settled into a dreamlike indulgence. He didn't want to disengage himself. It was as if his conscious mind had divorced itself from his body, and his body was merely doing what it had to do.

From within the ebony block came a muffled sound of straining, slipping gears. *Whirr...snick...whirr...snick.*

The spell was broken.

And no drawer opened.

"Shit," Paul whispered.

"This is what you were afraid of." Cam stood up.

"Yeah." Paul gave the spot another push. The sound ceased, but the drawer remained closed. He ran a hand through his hair and blew out a breath.

"What do you want to do next?"

"Just let it sit for a while, I guess. I don't want to force anything."

"*Don't want to force anything.*" Cam licked his lips. They tasted a little salty. He'd been sweating. "You never did explain why Mobry's story was a sad one."

Paul resumed his seat. "I told you he was gay."

Nervous, unable to look at him, Cam nodded and also sank into a chair.

"It wasn't that Mobry minded being homosexual. He really loved men—the way their minds worked, the way their bodies worked. He even had a beautiful young male assistant. It's in part because he loved men that he built this piece. He'd intended to show it off at his club, a kind of secret society for gay men of the theater. But Mobry loved one man in particular. Or was infatuated with one man—another magician who called himself the Turk, although his heritage was actually Egyptian or Algerian."

Cam didn't understand where Paul was going with this. "So...Mobry was persecuted or spurned by this guy, or...what?"

"Could've been both. Alain didn't seem to have an easy time of it on the sex-and-romance front." Paul again started paging through his reference materials. "He was short—five-five or -six judging by descriptions and the one photo I've seen—and not very good-looking. Worst of all, he had a birth defect called TEV, known as a clubfoot back then."

"So where does the persecution part come in?"

"There's no record of anything specific, but that's moot. Whether or not homosexuals ended up behind bars, they still had to live like the oppressed minority they were."

"In secrecy," Cam said quietly.

For a brief moment, Paul's gaze locked with his. "Yes."

Cam jerked out a couple of nods and looked away.

Paul lifted his coffee mug, tilted it, and set it back down. "In any case, Mobry disappeared. Under very mysterious circumstances. He was only thirty-one and at the height of his career."

"That's strange."

"Maybe stranger than people realized." Holding his coffee mug, Paul was about to rise from the table.

"I'm sorry. Would you like more coffee?" Cam asked.

"No, thanks. But I'd like a drink of water. Do you mind?"

"Uh...no. No, of course not. I could use one too."

After taking the mug from Paul's hand and grabbing his own, Cam got up and walked around the breakfast bar into the kitchen. Ever the good host, he intended to bring a glass of ice water to the table, but Paul followed him. Cam fixed them both a drink, and they leaned against the counter as they sipped in silence for a while.

Paul set his glass on the counter and curled his hands over its edge. Cam continued to hold his glass, but his free hand was disconcertingly close to Paul's.

For no apparent reason, Paul's little finger slid against his—down, up, down. Whether idle or deliberate, the movement caused a soft friction that monopolized Cam's attention. He froze in place.

Too much of this sort of thing had been happening. Too many touches that may not have been accidental. Too many freighted looks and pregnant pauses as each man carefully unwound his attention from the other. Cam didn't know how to interpret any of it. More likely, he was afraid to try.

Fed up with his own self-protective instincts, for he had no idea what he was trying to protect, he looked at Paul and asked, "Did you just rub my finger?"

Paul snapped out of his thought-induced daze and looked at Cam. A shallow crevice sank between his brows. "Did you just ask me to pull your finger?"

After a moment's stupefaction, Cam began snickering. "Why would I say that?"

"I don't know. Because you have an adolescent sense of humor?"

His laughter intensifying, Cam leaned forward. "P-pull my finger," he stuttered.

Paul was snickering too. "You didn't actually say that, did you?"

"No!" Cam sighed out a few more titters, then sniffled and wiped his eyes. "Jesus, we hardly know each other. And even if we were old friends, I wouldn't—"

"Actually I did."

"Hm?" Cam looked at him. "You did what?"

"Rub your finger."

It was as if someone had thrown water in Cam's face, melting the mirth right out of it. It felt as if his features were drooping all at once. "Why?" he asked in an arid voice.

Paul's smile had shrunk. "Just testing." He stood up from the counter and began walking out of the kitchen.

Cam grabbed for his arm. "Wait!"

Paul turned, his expression mildly expectant.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't. Testing what?" Cam laughed nervously. "Are you trying to find out if I'm—"

"Gay?"

Cam shook his head, nodded his head.

"Guilty as charged."

"But...why would you do something like that?"

"Gee, could it be *I'm* gay?" Paul looked down at himself. "Son of a bitch, I guess I am!"

Gaping at him, Cam felt a little dizzy. "Why didn't you just ask? I would've told you I'm not—"

"Out," said Paul. "Yeah, that much is obvious. But being out and being willing are often two different things." He flashed a perfunctory smile and left the room as a final statement trailed over his shoulder. "Don't worry. You're safe with me."

Heart jiggling and thoughts colliding, Cam stared after him. Now what the hell did *that* mean? All of it, the whole spiel?

"What does *that* mean?" Cam overcame his inertia and followed.

Paul returned to his seat at the small table. "You're overthinking this," he said to the sprawl of papers. He lifted one. His eyes slid from left to right as he started reading. "The word *safe* is self-explanatory."

"But what about the rest?" Cam sat across from him.

Paul coolly lifted his gaze. "That's self-explanatory too. You're attracted to me but don't feel comfortable with it. You'd rather think of yourself as a breeder." He shrugged. "Fine. That's *your* business."

"A breeder?" Cam repeated. He felt tossed about like a juggler's club.

Paul shook his head. "You're a smart man. I don't think I have to explain every word that comes out of my mouth." He leaned forward. "Relax. Be what you want to be. I'm not here to recruit you. Like I said, you're safe."

"You mean safe because I'm not your type? I don't appeal to you? Or because you have...a boyfriend or partner or something?"

Paul rolled up his eyes and dropped his hand to the table. "Jesus, Cameron, let it go. Why does it matter what the reason is?"

They stared at each other for a moment. Yet another endless moment. Sighing, Paul lifted the top half of the paper he still held. He looked at it, but he obviously wasn't reading now. "I don't force myself on people. *That's* the reason."

Cam swallowed. "I assume you don't have to."

One side of Paul's mouth curved up. "No, I don't have to."

Of course he didn't have to. He was gorgeous. Cam's imagination threatened to run amok again and take his whole restless body and roiling mind along with it.

"Do you make it a habit of testing every guy you come into contact with?"

"That's ridiculous," Paul said dismissively. He was reading again. "I've only done it maybe three or four times. With guys I find attractive but can't quite get a fix on." He glanced up at Cam. "It's usually pretty easy to figure out what side of the fence men prefer." He turned his eyes back to his papers. "Not always, though."

Cam's cell phone rang, shrilling through the house's silence. "Shit," he whispered irritably.

"Go ahead, answer it," Paul said. "I won't be offended."

Cam didn't try to keep his vexation from spilling into the look he gave Paul. He pushed back from the table and grabbed his phone off the breakfast bar.

"Hello." Since he hadn't anticipated any private calls, he sat on one of the stools at the island.



"Hi, Cameron. It's Julie."

"Hey. What's up?" Bad timing. Bad, bad timing. Julie was the woman he'd lackadaisically been dating. There was nothing between them, but she clearly harbored hope. Far too much hope.

"We still on for tonight?" she asked. "I thought you were going to call yesterday, but you didn't."

Cam briefly closed his eyes, rubbed them with a thumb and forefinger. Damn. He'd forgotten all about the date. "Uh, yeah, we're still on for tonight."

"Hey, let's go to the drive-in. Can we? It should be a beautiful evening. In terms of the weather, I mean."

Cam screwed his face into a wince. *Fuck*. "The drive-in? I don't even know what's showing."

"Does it matter?" Jules asked coyly.

He almost called it off right then and there. Almost said, *I can't keep up this charade; I like you, but I'll never like you the way you want me to*. Paul's appearance in his life, as insignificant as it might be, had driven home that fact with a vengeance, and Cam knew he couldn't keep ignoring it.

Still, he had to go through with this date. Backing out now would've been inexcusably rude, and backing out on a lie would've been even worse. Besides, he needed to tell Julie he couldn't keep seeing her, and that was the kind of message that had to be delivered in person.

They decided on a time for Cam to pick her up. He was still, regardless of his confusion, a gentleman.

When he set down the phone, he rested his head in his hands. Paul's attention was palpable, like hot breath on Cam's nape.

"I should go," Paul said. "It appears you have plans for the evening."

Papers rustled. Cam swiveled on the bar stool. He wanted to say something but had no idea what. Paul had unceremoniously, without warning, cracked open an enormous can of worms. And now it sat on Cam's lap, waiting to be dealt with.

"You still sure you don't want to sell this?" Paul asked, his fingertips resting on Mobry's creation.

Helplessly Cam's gaze inched from Paul's face to his hand then back to his face. "I'm sorry. I can't think about that now."

"May I come back, then? Say, tomorrow? I'd really like to get this thing to work. I'm sure there's a lot more to it than what we've seen."

Cam scratched at his forehead. This was too much too soon. Why the *hell* did he have to be attracted to this guy? Someone he'd just met and didn't entirely trust and wasn't even sure he liked.

"I don't think that would be a good idea," he said, dropping his hand to the countertop. "Maybe in a couple of weeks..."

Paul kept looking at him, silently, perceptively. He probably wasn't trying to be intimidating, but his gaze was intimidating nonetheless. Damn the intelligence behind those slate-blue eyes.

"All right," Paul said quietly. Looking away, he finished sliding the papers into his attaché case and snapped it shut. "Thanks for your time."

## Chapter Four

Sitting within a halo of light at one of his worktables, Alain used a jeweler's loupe to study the tie tack he'd filched from the Turk.

"You need to choose your lady friends more carefully, Kafele," he murmured with a smile.

The Peruzzi-cut stone, set in gold, was large enough to be noticed but not large enough to be flamboyant. However, it was a low-grade white diamond, with that faint, dull yellow cast indicative of poor quality, and its facets were not particularly well executed.

It was essentially one and one-quarter carat's worth of mediocrity.

The piece wasn't a family heirloom. Alain knew that as well. Criswell had once asked about its origins, and the Turk had said, with one of his intentionally cryptic smiles, the adornment was a gift from an admirer.

A widow probably. And that meant there was a good possibility the Turk would not miss it. Between his state of drunken oblivion—for he always left the Green Carnation in some state of intoxication—and his contempt for the fairer sex, he likely placed little value on this "gift." There would undoubtedly be others.

Well, thought Alain, he'll get it back soon enough. And get much more. If, that is, he makes amends.

He pulled his delightfully scandalous clockwork in front of him, repositioned the lamp, and let his dexterous fingers find the narrow, well-concealed compartment on one side of the base. It wasn't visible—except, of course, to *his* eyes—and the mechanism that opened it was beneath the bottom edge. Slender as a needle, the latch lever had its own sliding door, which was camouflaged by the surrounding wood. Both responded only to the right touch placed on just the right spots, like a person in the arms of a lover.

Were he presenting an automaton onstage or at the home of a wealthy patron, Alain as Prospero would graciously ask for a bauble from an audience member: a lady's ring, a gentleman's cufflink. He would then appear to nestle the item within a frilly handkerchief or small velvet pouch, and he would place the handkerchief or pouch on a glass shelf within a locked glass case. The audience would be able to see it resting there, untouched, throughout the remainder of the performance.

But of course the bit of jewelry wasn't truly in the glass case. It was either secreted on Prospero's person or already tucked within the automaton from which it would eventually emerge.

Like magic.

Alain compared the size of the Turk's possession with the small compartment at the base of what he called the "lift shaft." Another stone was already secreted there. He would not replace it with Kafele's until their relationship was made right again, until Alain saw fit to demonstrate to him how the automaton worked. And what blessings it could bestow.

He tucked Kafele's diamond into one of several concealed pockets within the box's lining.

Sighing, he lightly rested his hands on the automaton's base for a moment and closed his eyes to rest them. This device would never have a public presentation, for it was never intended to. Although the mechanism would delight the members of the Green Carnation, it would shock a theater audience. Alain would never dream of offending anybody's sensibilities...and getting himself arrested in the process.

Just as he once again laid the apparatus to rest in its cushioned casket, a series of quick raps echoed from the front door. The sound startled him. Few unexpected visitors came to his workshop, and the arrivals he *did* anticipate used the mechanized chime he'd devised. This person, obviously unaware of the chime's existence, must be a stranger.

After throwing a piece of linen over the casket, Alain made his way to the building's small entry hall. He stepped through the black curtain that divided the hall from his high-ceilinged workspace and, once at the door, slid open a rectangular panel set horizontally a few inches above his eye level.

"Yes. Who's there?"

The dark eyes that met his through the narrow space were unmistakable; the rumbling voice, equally so.

"Mobry, it is I. May I speak to you?"

Alain smelled tobacco on the Turk's breath. He had a vivid, jarring memory of the kiss they'd shared, how the rich taste of cigars had seemed to rarify the experience, to make it a tryst rather than a touch. For those precious few moments, Alain and Kafele weren't in the entry hall of the Green Carnation. They were in some smoky den within an exotic, labyrinthine casbah, a place of silk tapestries and soft, yielding flesh. And sin most divine.

Curtailing this flight of fancy, Alain gathered his wits. "Go to the side door in the alley." Regardless of his excitement, he could not admit the Turk through this door. Very few people, and *no* fellow magicians, were allowed into Alain's studio.

He closed the door's viewing portal and made haste to the rear entry. The thudding of his heavy shoe on the floorboards seemed to drive the beating of his heart. Trying to slow his steps as he entered the storeroom, Alain made his way to the delivery door. He didn't want his guest, who must've been standing just outside, to hear the reverberant fall of his clubfoot.

After casting a glance over his shoulder to make certain he'd closed off his workshop, Alain undid the locks that secured the rear entrance. There was nothing

to see back here. At least, nothing revealing. Stacks of mostly empty crates, racks of wigs and costumes, and common stage props were scattered throughout the space. The sagging shelves along one wall bore only ordinary things like tools and nails and hinges, paints and spools of wire, patterned and solid-colored cloths.

Full of hope and trepidation, Alain swung open the door.

The Turk's broad mouth snapped into an uncertain smile. "Thank you for agreeing to talk with me."

Alain nodded once. "My parents taught me that courtesy can turn a stranger into an admirer, and kindness, an admirer into a friend." With the same graceful sweep of the arm he employed onstage, Alain stepped aside and invited the Turk to enter. "I realize this makes for an inadequate parlor, but I assume you understand."

The Turk cocked an eyebrow as he stepped inside. "Perfectly." His coat was open, but he didn't remove it. He took off only his hat.

Alain pulled two mismatched chairs up to a small table and invited the Turk to have a seat. Although the storeroom was dim, for its sole window was begrimed with dust and soot, the light was certainly sufficient for conversation. Alain had a telephone in his studio and two electric lights, but there were no such conveniences back here.

"I'm sorry I'm not prepared to entertain guests," he said, sitting across from the Turk.

"You needn't apologize."

Alain crossed his legs, the good resting atop the bad, and folded his hands on his thigh. Patiently he watched his visitor, waiting for an explanation of why the man had called on him.

The Turk cleared his throat. He seemed to have trouble meeting Alain's gaze. "I believe I was rather...curt with you last evening."

"I suppose you were." Alain began to soften, his indignation slowly remolding itself.

"I prefer to be called by my name only in front of intimate friends." A blush suffused the Turk's face. "Regardless of what Jack was doing, I do not consider him a friend."

Blinking in embarrassment, Alain looked at his interlinked hands. "I understand. Please forgive me."

"Yes, of course. If *you* will forgive *me*."

Alain's resentment dripped away like warm wax. "Here, while we're alone, may I call you—"

He fell silent as the Turk rose from his chair and stepped around the table. How dark he was, like the essence of something forbidden. How strongly he radiated the most exciting kind of danger. Slowly he leaned over Alain and cradled Alain's delicate jaw in one large hand.

"Kafele," Alain whispered, a wonderful weakness overtaking him. His eyes drifted shut just before he felt the scour of the Turk's heavy mustache, the crush of his full lips.

Hot and moist, so hot and moist. Reflexively, Alain fisted his hands around Kafele's lapels and tried to pull him closer, although, had the Turk leaned forward any farther, he would have pushed Alain backward and sent him crashing to the floor.

"I ache from wanting you," Alain said against Kafele's mouth.

He tried to deepen the kiss, slipping his tongue between his lips to glide across Kafele's lips and coax them into parting. The Turk's body seemed to stiffen. Was he resisting or merely teasing? Before Alain could determine how Kafele was reacting to his boldness, the Turk's tongue whispered against his. It wasn't a surrender, but it was enough of a concession to fuel Alain's passion.

A brilliant sparking, low and deep in Alain's belly, kept intensifying. It thrilled through his torso and limbs. His cock had already hardened, and now his balls felt as tightly clenched as his fingers.

"How easily you arouse," Kafele murmured almost curiously. He drew back, straightened, and began unfastening his trousers.

Light-headed, Alain stared at the movement of Kafele's hands. He fumbled to open his own trousers. Of course he aroused easily with men he found appealing. He never had the opportunity to be close to them. The only men who would have him weren't particularly desirable.

The storeroom was hardly conducive to intimacy. Its slightly dank coolness smelled of excelsior and dust, machine oil and musty fabric. But it faded into nothingness as soon as Kafele's cock appeared before Alain's eyes.

It wasn't rigid, but he would make it so.

Alain drew the length of warm, resilient flesh into his mouth, relishing the feel of it nestled snugly between his tongue and palate—like his new automaton, encased in its soft billow of pink silk. Before he turned his hands to the task, he let them glide along Kafele's loins and softly haired buttocks. From belly to thighs, the Turk had oiled himself. He felt slick and smooth. Even his wiry delta bore the oil's fragrance, both earthy and grassy.

Alain was intoxicated. He curled one hand around the Turk's shaft and placed his other hand lower and farther back, so he could stimulate the dense sac and the track that lay behind it.

Gasping each time Alain moved his lips and tongue, his hands and fingers, the Turk finally said on an exhalation, "By God, Mobry, you're good at this."

Of course I am, thought Alain.

His touch was deft and sure. He was expert at feeling the workings of things. The human body was, after all, just another mechanism, a collection of sensitive parts elaborately interconnected. The more a man intrigued and excited Alain, the more careful he was in his attentions.

*I'm not crippled now, am I?* was the unspoken question that ran through his mind when he ministered to a lover.

With Kafele, he exercised every ounce of skill at his disposal.

When he sensed the Turk would not be able to restrain himself much longer, Alain put a hand to his own jutting member. He worked both their cocks, imagining his pressure building against Kafele's, building until that dual pressure could no longer be contained. He whimpered at the thought as well as the exquisite feel of it. Another stroke, another tight, cajoling suck...and both springs uncoiled with a startling burst of energy.

The pleasure was excruciating, like lightning in his blood. As the Turk's cream jetted into his mouth and his own fell like a fountain onto his fist, Alain fancied that the two uncoiled springs were now twining around one another, forming a double helix of perfect passion perfectly shared. In this, at least, and at least for these moments of uncorrupted satisfaction, they were together.

They were one.

Alain's body wouldn't stop trembling, even as his climax waned. He didn't want to release Kafele's beautiful cock, even when it had nothing more to yield. Their physical ecstasy couldn't go on forever—of course it couldn't—but a quieter bliss could go on. Fond words and adoring touches carried promises that had no terminus.

"Ahh," the Turk sighed. Holding up his trousers but not yet closing them, he stumbled back to his chair and fell into it. "That was really quite extraordinary. You do know your way around a man's pride."

Alain refastened his own trousers. He was vaguely flattered, but he wanted to be valued for more than that. He reached across the small table, tempted to touch the back of the Turk's broad hand or wrist, but sudden diffidence stayed him.

"I know I'm not beautiful," he said ardently. "I know I lack the strength and grace of other men. But I beg you to give me a chance, Kafele. A chance to prove my worth as a suitor, as a lover. I can please you. I can do *more* than please you. You must believe me."

The Turk chuckled. "I do believe you. You've demonstrated quite effectively how well you can please." Looking down, he began to straighten his clothing.

"But that's not entirely what I—"

"Why don't you begin by showing me your invention, Mobry? The one you brought to the club last evening. I found it fascinating."

Forehead furrowed, Alain stared at him a few ticks longer. Did the Turk understand or didn't he? "Well...all right," Alain said uncertainly. He wouldn't make the jewel appear from the clockwork, though. He would save that until he was sure of Kafele's intentions. "Wait here while I get it."

"Don't dawdle," said the Turk, obviously pleased.

Alain rose from the table and went to a washstand that stood beside the storeroom's inner door. After taking a drink of water and cleaning his hands, he reentered his studio.

He removed the automaton from its box. Just as he turned, holding the mechanism like an infant, the Turk entered the room.

Alain's eyes widened. "You can't be in here!" he cried, trying to hurry forward to intercept the intruder. For that was all the Turk *was* now, a person who'd barged into his studio uninvited. Alain's hobbling gait nearly caused him to drop the heavy clockwork.

"Oh come now, Mobry," said the Turk, hooking his thumbs into his vest pockets and quite brazenly looking about the room. "Surely our relationship is now on different, uh"—he glanced uneasily at Alain's ugly shoe—"footing."

He abruptly lifted his gaze and again let it wander about the large space. It alit briefly on the Fountain of Youth, which sat shrouded in a corner. To keep an edge on the public's appetite for the illusion, Alain only presented it once every month or two. He, too, glanced at it before his gaze snapped back to Kafele.

"Your assistant, the one you call Puck," the Turk murmured, "where does he keep himself when he's not performing with you? Everybody's quite curious about him, you know."

"Yes, I know," Alain answered distractedly. "But we both prefer that information to be confidential. He's a very...private individual. And for good reason."

"Has he a lover?" The Turk's dark eyes gradually shifted back to Alain.

Alain's eyes fixed on them. "I don't know," he whispered.

His scrutiny seemed to discompose Kafele, who made a sound low in his throat as he once again focused on the clockwork Alain held. Then he came forward. "Here, my friend, let me take this from you and find a place to set it."

Alain's first impulse was to swing his arms to the side, showing Kafele he had no intention of relinquishing his creation. Instead, stunned by his own complaisance, he merely stared as the Turk took the clockwork from his arms. Had their relationship truly turned a corner? Would he advance his cause if he became more trusting of Kafele?

The Turk's gaze lowered as he set the automaton on a table, nearly crushing a set of small mirrors and lenses. A gully had sunk between his brows.

"What are those strange marks on the floor?" he asked. "They have a heathenish quality."

Alain knew what the Turk was staring at. He, too, glanced down. "I find them inspiring," he said. "Whenever I travel, I almost always discover something that feeds my imaginative mind." There was more to it than that, but he didn't yet feel comfortable explaining such things to Kafele. Esoteric matters were difficult to discuss with men who made a living off trickery.



There were other such “heathenish” things in the room, but they were either concealed within cabinets or the Turk hadn't spied them.

Perhaps someday Alain *would* explain. If he and Kafele became close. If they became so close, they seemed to inhabit each other's skin. No other arrangement would persuade Alain to share the deepest of his secrets.

“Food for your genius, eh?” the Turk said with a smirk. “You *are* a strange creature, Mobry.”

“No doubt I am, in most people's eyes.” Alain indulged in a private smile. *But that doesn't mean it is mere illusion that fuels the creative power of this illusionist.*

He approached the table where the clockwork sat. “I've spent the morning trying to work out the few remaining sticking points,” he said, which wasn't the case. The mechanism had been in perfect working order last night. “Now please, if you would, stand a bit farther away. Unless I'm doing close sleight of hand, I prefer some distance between myself and my audience.”

Finally the Turk obliged without trying to impose his will on the situation.

Alain stationed himself behind his clockwork. He had no introduction to this object, and certainly no short play written around it, for he'd always known it would never see the limelight. His creation had a purpose unrelated to the advancement of his professional reputation. It was meant to entertain his friends and offer a unique gift to one person who proved of the utmost importance in his life.

Still hoping Kafele might be that person, Alain set in motion his clockwork. But he wouldn't run it through the full gamut of its capabilities. Not yet.

The Turk watched with wide, bright eyes and a delighted grin. He occasionally chortled and clapped his hands in approval. As the final bit of motion revealed itself, he tossed back his head and hooted.

Seating himself in a nearby chair, the Turk curled his hands over his knees. “How did you acquire such skill, Mobry? It's truly astonishing.”

Alain was delirious with pleasure. He pulled up a chair to face the Turk and answered in a rush of ebullient pride. “I spent the first twelve years of my life in a town near the Jura Mountains on the French-Swiss border. I couldn't be as...active as the other children, so I haunted the shops of watchmakers and clockmakers. My grandfather was one of them. Then my parents moved to London, where I saw Maskelyne and Cooke perform at Egyptian Hall, and I began to absorb everything I could about them and Robert-Houdin and De Kolta. I saw Kellar at his first Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia, shortly after I arrived in America when I was seventeen. I'd built my first automaton by the time I was twenty. And then, more recently, I began delving into—” Alain caught himself. He felt uncertainty overtake his expression.

“What?” asked the Turk, curiously studying Alain's face.

“Other aspects of magic,” said Alain vaguely. “It's important to me that I never become complacent.”

“What other aspects?”

"Just...little tricks and secrets I picked up in my travels."

Apparently realizing he'd get no more explicit an answer, and perhaps not caring to, the Turk stood. "Well, that was quite enjoyable, Mobry. I do thank you for the demonstration. I'm quite impressed, sir." He nodded. "Quite impressed."

Alain, too, rose from his chair. "When may I see you again?"

"I don't know," said Kafele, summarily patting him on the back. "I have a great deal of work to do. And I have other friends with whom I like to spend my leisure time." He moved toward the storeroom door.

"When will you again be at the club?" asked Alain, anxiously thumping along behind him.

Kafele's expression darkened as he abruptly turned. "I don't know," he said, crisply enunciating each word, then biting it off. He rolled his head, cracking his neck, and tugged at his lapels. The look on his face began to moderate toward a simulacrum of kindness. "Unless there's something else you'd like to show me, share with me..."

Alain stared at the Turk as he fought off the painful suspicion that had begun to creep over him. "No," he said quietly, "there's nothing else." He reached around the Turk to open the storeroom door.

If he couldn't secure this man's interest without bribery, he didn't want to secure it at all. Genuine affection didn't come with a price.

Kafele strode into the rear room and lifted his hat from the small table. "Then I bid you good day," he said, his back to Alain. Only when he was about to step into the alley did he once again turn, and only for the briefest moment. "Thank you for your courtesy, Mobry."

Alain stood in the doorway and watched Kafele stride toward the street, his overcoat swaying. A chill wind funneled down the alley and seemed to buffet the Turk beyond Alain's line of sight.

He withdrew into his building and securely locked the door.

*I pray I haven't been a fool.*

## Chapter Five

Cam gave Julie a quick hug, a light kiss. He wanted to be just about anywhere else but here.

"Do you mind if we don't go to the drive-in?" he asked as she reached for a jacket on the hall tree. "It's pretty chilly outside. And I need to talk to you about something."

Her arm stilled as she looked at him. She was a lovely young woman, really—smart and good-natured and pretty—who, at the end of this school year, would have her master's degree in social work. From the day they'd met, when she'd accompanied her house-hunting parents to a showing, Cam had valued her friendship. Problem was, he didn't value it in quite the same way she valued *his* friendship.

Julie lowered her arm. "Do you mean you want to go somewhere else or stay here?"

"Where's Alice?" Cam asked. He didn't want to stay here if Julie's condo-mate would be cranking up the tunes or the television set. Alice's presence was obtrusive, to say the least.

"Where she always is on a Saturday night," Julie said. She continued to watch him, warily. "Out with Neil."

A night-cooled breeze slithered from an open window and skated across Cam's face. It felt good. He'd been uncomfortably warm since stepping through the door.

"Then let's stay here," he said, and hastened to add, "unless you're hungry. We could go to Pietro's or the Highline. They don't require reservations."

Julie finally lowered her arm. "No," she said with a cheerless smile. She led Cam into the living room, where she immediately lit a trio of fat, fragrant candles on the coffee table. "I have a funny feeling I won't have much of an appetite."

Christ, he felt like a schmuck. On the drive over here, Cam had decided he would not, under any circumstances, resort to the dull old saw, *It isn't you; it's me*. Skip Kratzner, one of the other agents in the Bell-Jablon Realty office, had once bragged about that line being his standard whenever he cut a woman loose.

"*They never question it,*" he'd said smugly, "*if your delivery's right. You gotta sound like you're really confused and afraid of commitment and just generally messed up.*"

What the line actually meant was *I've found someone younger, with a smaller ass, bigger tits, a better job, and a more lenient attitude toward my fondness for*

*vodka*. And Cam knew damned well that any astute female was familiar with the translation.

He refused to be a cowardly shithead like Kratzner. He vowed to be candid with Julie.

They both sat on the couch, but not close together. That was yet another indicator of Julie's suspicion. The fact she didn't offer Cam a drink didn't mean too much, though. She'd made it clear from the start that her casa was his casa and he could help himself to anything...except Alice.

"I'm gonna grab a beer," Cam said, getting up almost immediately after sitting. "You want something?"

"Bring me one too, please."

Wondering how to phrase his revelation, Cam strode across the open area between living space and kitchen-and-dining space. He pulled two bottles of beer from the fridge—leave it to Julie to have a seasonal brew on hand—but didn't bother grabbing glasses. She'd once said she hated "*drinking like a girlie girl*."

A pansy.

A sissy.

*Can it. You know she doesn't think like that.*

*Yeah, but other people think like that. My dad thought like that.*

*Your dad's dead. Or have you forgotten why you're on a month's leave?*

Cam thought he might be losing his mind. Just a little. He reconsidered his mission. Then Paul Patrillo's image swam up from his subconscious.

*You can't keep ignoring it. If it isn't Paul, it will be somebody else.*

Cam handed over one of the bottles and resumed his seat, careful not to move even farther away from Julie. Her gender might not appeal to him, but she didn't have viral hemorrhagic fever.

"How's your mother doing?" she asked, then took a drink. "Did your sister ever come in from Palo Alto?" Her clear hazel eyes were bright, alert.

"Mom's doing all right," Cam said, reminding himself to call her within the next day or two. "Carly keeps making excuses."

Julie put an arm on the back of the couch and rested her head on her hand. "I get the impression your sister isn't like you at all."

Cam shrugged. His fingers made clear tracks on the moisture of his bottle. "Fraternal twins aren't all that much alike, often."

A Felix the Cat wall clock suddenly caught his eye. It belonged to Alice, who loved cartoon characters. Her bedroom was Betty Booped and Popeyed to death.

"Cameron?"

"Hm?" His head snapped in Julie's direction.

"What's wrong?"

"I think I'm gay." It just popped out of his mouth like a burp. He took a long swallow of beer as blood rose in his face. A real belch rose on its heels, and he quickly put a loosely curled hand over his mouth to stifle it.

Julie's eyebrows rose, but considering the confession she'd just heard, she didn't look too shocked. "Are you serious?"

Cam let out an acerbic laugh. "Believe me, no man is going to kid about something like that."

Her eyebrows hitched higher, then fell. "I suppose not."

As if mocking him, Felix rhythmically swung his tail and shifted his eyes. Cam wanted to shoot the damned thing.

He turned toward Julie. "Haven't you noticed anything...different about me?" Now that he'd cleared the biggest hurdle, he began to feel relieved.

She studied him, probably trying to recall any telltale signs. "You mean, aside from the fact you're the most polite man I've ever met?"

*Polite. Nice way of saying "aloof."* The thought prompted a wan half-smile. "Yeah, aside from that."

Julie turned down her eyes and picked at the bottle's label. Sam Adams began slowly to lose his head. "Like what?"

Shit. *Now* this was getting humiliating. Cam feared he would have to spell out for her all the things she should've noticed by now—how restrained a lover he was, right down to his passionless, almost demure kisses; how he'd never gone down on her; how certain practices *did* excite him, like bondage play and being teased while he was tied to her pencil-post bed; how he loved having his ass fondled.

"Remember when we went shopping at Sp'racy for toys?" he said, hoping to spark some realization.

"Sure I do." Julie smiled. "That wasn't so strange."

"Don't you remember the kinds of things I was looking at?"

"We looked at a lot of things. Laughed at a lot of things. I only remember what we bought."

Cam, too, put an arm on the back of the couch. He scratched at his forehead. Much of his laughter that day hadn't exactly stemmed from amusement. It had been forced laughter, a jittery eruption of nerves and guilt.

"I didn't buy the things I wanted *most* to buy," he said. "Because you didn't seem too thrilled with them."

Julie's brow dipped. Her gaze slanted off to the side. "Oh."

*Yeah, "oh." Oh, the eighty-dollar plug. Oh, the leather wrist restraints and the mask and the switch.* The only reason Cam had wanted the mask was so he wouldn't have to look at Julie while he got off on the other stuff, while he imagined a man in her place. He hadn't realized it then, but he realized it now. If a man was doing him, he'd sure as hell want to see the hunger in the guy's face, watch his cock rise.

God damn. Even here, now, the thought excited him. Shamed him too.

"But the porn we've watched; you seemed to—"

"I was reacting to the men, Jules, not the women."

"Not at all?" She seemed to be voicing her last shred of hope, which was obviously that he was bi, not gay.

"Not too much." He turned up his free hand. "I couldn't seem to help what I kept focusing on."

Cam couldn't bring himself to be *brutally* frank. Julie didn't need to hear how some of those close-up shots sort of turned his stomach. He'd averted his eyes whenever the camera zoomed in on some spread-legged actress. It was the blowjobs that kept him riveted to the screen, the masturbation sequences involving hard and nicely hung actors, the crawl of fingernails over their chests or abs or thighs.

Julie puffed her cheeks as she blew out a breath. "Wow." She stared at nothing halfway across the room.

Felix leered.

Cam had said what he'd needed to say. Now, he decided, he'd just let her ask questions. Or talk about it. Or cry. Shit, if he didn't know how *he* was supposed to act, he sure as hell didn't know what would be appropriate for *her*.

"I actually thought I might be falling in love with you," she said to the room. Moving woodenly, as if she'd been numbed by Cam's bulletin, she set her beer bottle on the coffee table.

"Good thing you'd only thought about it." Cam cringed as soon as the words left his mouth. Although he was trying to get her to look on the bright side, the statement came off as flip.

"Yeah, good thing," she said wryly, her glance matching her tone.

"I'm really sorry, Jules." Cam slid closer to her and grabbed the hand that lay limply in her lap. It was cool and slightly damp, kind of the way he felt inside.

She didn't resist, just tried to muster a smile. "You're a decent man, Cameron. I know you wouldn't lie about something like this just to blow me off."

"No. No, of course not," he said ardently. "I like you. A lot. I like being with you. I just, I guess I just—"

"Don't like being with me in a certain way." Julie's smile broke through, and she squeezed his hand. She was finally able to look at him. "What brought this on? When we met, which was only like eight or nine weeks ago, you didn't exactly shy away from me. People don't just wake up one morning and realize they're gay."

This was another difficult part of the Big Reveal, trying to explain to her something Cam didn't fully understand himself.

"I met someone," he murmured. That was the easiest explanation. At least it was the one uppermost in his mind at the moment, so he'd spontaneously plucked it out and tossed it on the table.

It certainly caught Julie's attention. "A man, I presume."

Cam nodded. "It isn't like we're together or dating or anything. He just...he's gay and he's attractive, and there's a certain...chemistry I can't ignore."

"But you must've had some inkling before *now*. I mean, you're twenty-four years old!"

Sometimes, talking to a bright woman *wasn't* a pleasure. Cam fidgeted, repositioning his butt, his legs. He took a long swallow of beer. The alcohol finally started doing what it was supposed to do: loosen his thoughts and his tongue.

"Yeah, I had plenty of inkling," he said, withdrawing his hand. It no longer felt right resting in Julie's. "But I always tried to repress it, mostly because of my dad. Until I went to college, anyway. And then it just became a habit, I guess. Maybe peer pressure played a part." It sounded so trite, but it was the truth.

Cam gave Julie a condensed and sanitized version of his childhood. A good childhood, for the most part, but lorded over by a father who was the quintessential man's man, an ex-marine steelworker who loved sports and the outdoors and clearly wanted his son to be a tough guy too. He'd urged Cam to get into some competitive extracurricular activity in elementary school and carry it into high school.

Cam had chosen wrestling.

Wrestling. How predictable it seemed now. He could put his hands all over guys' sweaty bodies and feel the taut exertion of their muscles and listen to them grunt. Cam remembered now, or allowed himself to remember, how often he'd masturbated in his parents' shower after a wrestling match. Many of those engagements had lent ripe substance to his late-night fantasies.

His parents' freaking shower. Damn, if his father had known...

No sports in college, though. Instead, immersion in his studies. Hopping from one major to another in an ongoing attempt to land on something practical, something his father would perceive as a fast track to respectability and financial success. So art history, Cam's first love, was out. On he went to interior design—no, that wouldn't do—and finally, real estate and urban land economics. He hadn't been a brilliant student, just an assiduous one. It kept him occupied.

Julie listened with interest and sympathy. "So now that your dad's passed away," she said delicately, "you feel free to come out."

Cam took another drink to relax his tightening stomach. "That might have something to do with it. I'm not really sure. But I think it was more..." *Having Paul Patrillo close to me. Having him looking into me and seeing the truth, trying to draw it out.*

"That man," Julie said.

"I think so."

Sighing, she reached for her beer and tilted the bottle to her mouth for a long swallow. "Well"—cradling the bottle in her lap, she slumped against the back of the couch—"there's really nothing I can say except to wish you luck." She gave his thigh an encouraging pat.

"Thank you. You've been really good about this, Jules. And thanks for the wishes. I'll need all the luck I can get."

Her smile was regretful but kind. "Just be careful who you hook up with and why. Okay? There are a lot of predators out there, regardless of orientation."

A chill of anxiety slithered through Cam. His naïveté on this front was pretty damned appalling. He was vulnerable; he really would have to watch himself.

What he'd just done fully hit him then, like a walloping slap. Good Lord. He'd actually taken the first step toward his own liberation. His father really *was* gone, and peer pressure, such as it was, had become immaterial. Clients and coworkers didn't have to know about his personal life. It was *his* life now, all his.

Cam thought about the sex. Anticipation supplanted his caution. Then doubt supplanted the anticipation. Would he embarrass himself through his inexperience? Would the first man he went after think him a bumbling clod and have no patience with him? Maybe even ridicule him?

Julie's voice pulled Cam out of his thoughts, although she seemed to be talking more to herself than to him. "I suppose Alice is going to say I told you so."

Frowning, Cam looked at her. "Why's that? Does she think I'm...effeminate or something?"

Julie chuckled softly. "Don't worry, Cameron. You're not. Al just thinks every guy with good looks, taste, and manners is gay." She rolled her head on the back of the couch and snickered again.

The grinning cat on the wall rolled its eyes.

*Great.*

Cam wondered how many other people wouldn't be surprised.



## Chapter Six

Cam's heart faltered as soon as he pulled into his driveway. He'd left on the porch light, as well as a lamp in his upstairs bedroom, but an ambient glow patched the lawn on the left side of the house.

Okay, so he never left on more than two lights. But, Cam reminded himself, he'd been preoccupied when he'd set out this evening. More preoccupied than he'd been in a long time. He'd turned on the light over the dining table when he'd brought Paul over here this morning, and he'd probably neglected to turn it off.

Keys in hand, he walked as quietly as possible to the front door. Adrenaline shot through him as soon as he put his hand on the latch. The door was unlocked.

Trying to still his breathing, Cam eased the door open. He kept thinking he should maybe call the police. But if the unsecured lock was simply an oversight on his part, the result of a distracted mind, he'd feel like an idiot. He didn't need the flashing lights of one or two cruisers glaring through his neighbors' windows and scaring the piss out of them. He'd never be able to show his face on the street again.

As he crept inside, he was more and more convinced of his own carelessness. There were no signs of forced entry or vandalism. Everything seemed in order.

Until a body bumped into his in the darkness of the living room, and he nearly dropped from shock.

"Sorry."

"Wha—"

"It's me."

Cam squinted, although it didn't do much good to squint at a clot of shadow. "Paul?"

"Yeah. I just had to come back."

Cam's heart was hammering wildly, driving the breath out of his lungs. "What the *fuck* are you doing here? You broke into my house!"

"No, I just walked in. The door was unlocked."

Paul was utterly calm. How the hell could he be so calm? "Don't you believe in *knocking*?" Cam cried as his fear dissipated. "And waiting until someone *lets* you in?"

"I'm sorry," Paul said, a little too unconvincingly. "I saw the light on upstairs and figured you'd canceled your date, that you were reading or watching TV and couldn't hear me at the door."

Cam couldn't clearly see him in the gloom, just the shine of his eyes near the top of his dimly defined form, but tension had begun to ratchet beneath Cam's skin again. The tension he'd felt earlier, that tight burn of unsatisfied need.

"Get the hell out of here," he said levelly. Or tried to. His voice wavered.

"Not yet," Paul answered, as if the decision were his to make.

"*What?* Are you out of your mind?"

"Actually no."

"But I told you earlier—"

"I got the stuck drawer open. Come and see what's in it." Paul's hands curled over Cam's upper arms. His breath gently ruffled Cam's hair. "You smell good," he murmured before lowering his hands.

Unsteadily Cam backed away, turned, and dipped to switch on an end-table lamp.

"I told you not to come back," he said, sorry now that he'd bathed Paul in light. His conversation with Julie seemed to have pulled his hunger to the surface like the bad root of a tooth. It was right there, sharp and raw and throbbing, a decade of unsatisfied need he'd tried to ease in every way but one.

"Cameron..." Paul reached for him.

Cam batted at his arm. "Get away from me."

"Do you really mean that?"

Quaking now, Cam hated him. Hated himself more for his damned transparency. "Of course I mean it!" Cam shoved the intruder. That's what Paul was now; that's *all* he was. "Get out of my house." Cam shoved him again, harder.

Paul swayed and shoved him back. Forcefully. Cam lost his footing and fell heavily onto the couch.

And Paul was on him, crouching on Cam's lap, his calves bracketing Cam's thighs and his hands pinning Cam's wrists to the backrest.

"Cameron, please. This is important to me," he said in a coarse whisper, his lips less than an inch from Cam's forehead.

"Shit." Cam closed his eyes and rolled his head back.

He tried freeing his arms, but he didn't try very hard. All he managed to do was make Paul tighten his grip. Then he lifted his hips, testing Paul's weight, pretending to himself for a futile moment that he was prepared to fight back. But his tilted head made it seem he was offering his mouth for a kiss, and the shift of his hips was more like a sign of invitation than of resistance.

He was pinned to his couch, and damned if it wasn't turning him on more by the second.

Paul lowered his head. Their breath was audible now, gusting hot and harsh against each other's face. Paul's lips hovered over Cam's mouth.

"You keep squirming," he murmured, "and something's going to happen that neither one of us had planned on."

He'd made sure Cam could feel the movement of his lips as he spoke, could feel the light pricking of the stubble around his mouth. Cam wanted to keep feeling it. He wanted to feel a lot more.

When Paul inched backward instead of crushing forward, Cam was surprised by his own disappointment.

"Please," Paul said, "just let me spend some time with the automaton. Go to bed or watch TV or take a bath if you don't want to be around me. I won't bother you. I won't poke around in your house. I swear."

Cam's breath began to even. He gave up anticipating a kiss. Paul released his arms, and Cam knew a plea was all he was going to get.

"You really have a disturbingly sensuous mouth," Paul said in a voice like melted chocolate. "Do you know that?"

Just as Cam shook his head, desire again thrilling through him, Paul put his observation to the test. He dipped forward, and his lips touched Cam's.

The contact was just as Cam had imagined: satiny warmth surrounded by sandy coarseness. And a welling scent of man, wholly natural. As his lips flexed back, a response he couldn't have controlled if he'd tried, Paul fit one hand to the side of Cam's face. For a brief moment, the press of his mouth intensified and sent a sharp sizzle from Cam's groin through his torso and limbs.

Then Paul withdrew.

Cam stared up at him.

Paul smiled. "I didn't come here to seduce you. Honest."

"Then what—" *Go ahead; try!*

"You just really have the most freaking irresistible mouth. I had to treat myself to a sample." He got up. An unmistakable bulge had appeared at his crotch.

When Cam realized he was staring at it, his gaze shot up to Paul's face. "What are you doing to me? What do you want from me?"

This was crazy. A guy he'd met for the first time that morning had waltzed into his house uninvited, while he was gone. And earlier, had touched him and made insinuating comments. And had just kissed him.

Yet he felt no aversion to the man, about whom he knew next to nothing. What the hell...?

Paul still wore that musing smile. "Come on. Come look at the automaton."

He hadn't bothered to answer Cam's questions.

"How'd your date go?" Paul tossed over his shoulder. "You're back awfully early. I assume you never made it to the drive-in."

Huh? He was casually asking about Cam's evening, as if the two of them were college roommates. Dazed, Cam followed him to the dining table. His outrage over

Paul's presence had evaporated, as if it had been charmed right out of him. This whole day seemed surreal, from Paul's sudden and startling appearances to Mobry's mechanical Dick to that life-altering conversation with Julie.

"We, um, never left the condo," he said. "We talked. I told her I...couldn't keep seeing her."

Paul stopped when they reached the table. "Why?" He gave Cam an arch look. "Because she doesn't suit you?" He seemed to be holding in a smile as he pulled out a chair.

"You could say that," Cam murmured. He, too, took a seat. "How did you get here? There's no vehicle in the driveway."

Paul rotated the automaton to display the newly opened drawer. "On my scooter. I parked it on the side of the garage."

"Why, if you thought I was home?"

"Just in case someone else pulled in. I didn't want it to get hit." Paul's gaze never left Mobry's creation.

"How far away do you live, anyhow? It's a little cold to be riding a scooter, don't you think?"

"Not too." The vague answer could've fit either question. Paul's mind obviously wasn't on them. He redirected Cam's attention. "Here, look at this."

Cam glanced into the drawer. The same kind of paper with the same kind of writing lay in the bottom.

*Deliver love*

*And make him feel,*

*If thou wouldst have*

*A wish to steal.*

Cam rotated the clockwork and read the other verses in order, for Paul had reopened the first and second drawers as well. "It's as if Mobry wants something. Unless he's just dropping clues about how to activate this top portion."

"I think it's both," Paul said excitedly. "I think the Dick was a symbol of his need, and he was willing to reward the man who filled that need. Alain wrote some pretty dreadful poetry, but those stilted lines were full of truly heartfelt yearning."

"For a lover?" Cam wished he'd grabbed something to drink. His throat was dry and getting drier.

"Yes, but not just a fuck buddy or user. A genuine lover, one who truly appreciated him and cared for him. Mobry wasn't a superficial man."

"Do you think it was directed at that fellow illusionist?" Cam asked. He and Paul were sunk into their own world again, its boundaries delineated by the spill of light, like a veil, from the ceiling fixture. Beyond, all was darkness and silence. They seemed caught in a moment of history, a blur of thought from a dead man's mind, a rush of feeling from his heart.

"Quite possibly," said Paul. "Based on what I've read in Mobry's journals, he wasn't sure of the Turk's intentions. Alain kept swinging between trust and suspicion, hope and despair. His worst fear seemed to be that the Turk had never stopped being his rival and was only manipulating him, trying to get him to lower his defenses. Yet Alain didn't want to give up on him. That asshole got more second chances than he probably deserved."

Nodding, Cam leaned back in his chair. "So the Turk *had* paid him attention. It wasn't just a case of unrequited lust or love or whatever."

"No. Alain didn't just worship the Turk from a distance. They definitely interacted."

"Intimately?" Cam asked. Paul's features were eerily patterned with light and shadow. He looked both sinister and alluring...and not quite real.

"I get the impression there was *some* degree of intimacy," Paul said. "Most of their contact took place at the club, but Alain does make vague references to other meetings, private meetings."

Cam idly ran his fingers over the third drawer. "But what do the last two lines mean? 'If thou wouldst have a wish to steal.' What kind of wish could Mobry grant?"

Paul stared glassily at the drawer. Self-consciously, Cam withdrew his hand. Paul's gaze flickered up to his face, then lowered again.

"I don't know," Paul said quietly.

"Divulging one of his professional secrets?"

"Maybe."

"Or offering a ménage with his attractive assistant?" A thin thread of laughter wound through the words.

It drew another glance from Paul, a more pointed one that drove deeper into Cam. "Maybe."

Inexplicably, Cam shivered inside. "So how do these verses explain how to activate the, uh—" He flipped up a forefinger to indicate the still-sealed cylinder.

"The Dick," said Paul. He crossed his arms over his chest and held Cam's gaze. "Maybe you have to simulate making love to it."

*Simulate to stimulate?* Cam blinked at him and coughed out a tense laugh. "Are you serious?"

"Absolutely."

"Have *you* tried?"

"It's not for me to do. You're the owner."

Incredulous, Cam laughed in the same way he had before. "What difference does it make?"

Paul looked bemused. "I'm not sure. I just have a feeling it does make a difference."

"But why?"

Paul's gaze caressed the piece, as if he wouldn't have minded giving it a go. "Because Mobry dabbled in real magick too. I mean the occult kind. Even traveled to Great Britain and got involved to some degree with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. You know, the group usually associated with Aleister Crowley."

Cam *didn't* know. Magick, in his experience, belonged in myths and fairy tales, in the adventures of Harry Dresden and Harry Potter. "Are you talking, like, Merlin-type stuff?" he asked. "Casting spells? That sort of thing?"

"Wizardry, yeah. Kind of." Paul was obviously accommodating Cam's ignorance. "Anyway, Mobry had no patience for the Golden Dawn—too much silly posturing and infighting—and decided to pursue other paths, possibly somewhere in the Orient."

"What other paths?" In spite of his skepticism, Cam's fascination had rapidly taken a new turn.

"Don't know. I'm not aware of any journals he kept on that aspect of his life. Seems he was very secretive about it. But there's anecdotal evidence, in addition to some oblique references he made."

"And you think he took it seriously."

"I do." Paul leaned forward, resting his arms on the table, and continued to regard the automaton. "So I assume you wouldn't feel comfortable fondling this thing."

Cam's cheeks heated. "Come on, Paul. Jesus. It's a hunk of metal shaped like a prick. What do *you* think?"

Paul's eyes smoothly shifted in his direction. "Have you ever been with a man? Sexually?" His gaze remained steady. Unnervingly so. Christ, he had beautiful eyes.

Cam rubbed his face, as if he could scrub away his discomfort.

"I won't tell anybody," Paul said with a hint of amusement. "And you obviously won't shock me if you say yes."

Cam dropped his hands. "No, I haven't been with a man. Only a boy."

Paul's eyebrows shot up.

When Cam realized what he'd said, blood again rose so furiously in his face, he was surprised it didn't shoot his hair right out of his follicles. "I mean, *as* a boy, with another boy. You know, kind of an accidental thing. Or experimental. Anyway, it was spontaneous." Shit, he couldn't seem to find the Off switch for his blabometer.

"Relax, Cameron." Paul's voice and expression were as gentle as his smile. "Don't get so jumpy about it. A lot of kids go through that. Boys especially. So what happened?"

*You see, Doctor, it started with this crush I had on Lance Bass of \*NSYNC.* Cam cleared his throat. "A buddy of mine, Josh something, was sleeping over one weekend. We were thirteen, maybe fourteen. It was summertime. We were in our underwear, ready to turn in for the night. Then we started horsing around."

"And you sprouted wood."

Nodding, Cam looked down and picked at his fingernails. "We were both embarrassed, so we tried to make light of it. And see where it would lead, I guess. We took off our underwear and turned the horseplay into"—he flicked a self-conscious glance at Paul—"Wiener Wars."

Paul burst out laughing. "Swordplay, right?"

"Exactly."

"Been there. And then?"

*Oh Christ, why am I telling him this?* In a way, though, it was a relief. Cam had never told anybody. He'd simply tried to put the incident out of his mind, relegate it to that dim keep of insignificant memories about growing up.

Only it wasn't all that insignificant.

"You might as well tell me," Paul said, still smiling, "or I'll just make a logical assumption."

"I'm sure." Cam sighed, resigned. "And then Josh squirted and I squirted, and I said, 'Wow, that felt pretty good,' and he agreed, and about fifteen minutes later we were at it again. Only this time we had our hands on each other. Then I tried—" Cam's throat sealed.

"Kissing him?" Paul asked softly.

Damn, he was digging deep. "Yeah. But he acted like I was crazy."

"And he probably pulled away or pushed you away and said something like, 'Yuck, Cam, that's what dudes do with chicks.'"

"He didn't say 'yuck,' he said 'fuck.' How did you know?"

"I told you, I've been there. Shit, Cameron, I didn't just pop out of the womb and then crawl into the next bassinet in the hospital nursery and start humping away."

Another nest of spiders squirmed in Cam's belly. *Paul, naked, humping away.* He couldn't shake the image.

"Has anything happened since then?" Paul asked delicately. "Aside from my having the audacity to kiss you, I mean."

The spiders wriggled at the reminder. Without lifting his gaze from the tabletop, Cam shook his head. "No." He didn't want to get into the other stuff: Lance and Trent and, in between, his opponents in wrestling and a couple of guys in Ann Arbor. *And my having the audacity to kiss you back.* Nothing had happened with anybody. Why bring it up?

"Ever watch gay porn?" Paul asked.

Cam swayed backward in the chair. "Do you really think that's any of your business?" He'd begun to perspire. The discussion was getting into too much detail.

"I need to know if you can deal with Mobry's Dick. If you can't, I have to come up with some other options. One way or another, I intend to set it in motion."

"No," Cam said, trying to sound indignant, "just straight porn."

It was true. But his focus, as he'd confessed to Julie, always seemed to be on the studs. He didn't tell Paul that part. Dimly, he knew his reticence had something to do with his fear—not just of wanting men, but of his own ineptitude.

“And you never fapped over photos in *Playgirl*?” Paul asked.

Cam frowned at him. “I never what?”

“Jacked off.”

What the hell did *that* have to do with making the automaton work? “No. *Playgirl* is a women's magazine. Isn't it?”

Paul taunted him with a grin. “In name only.”

When his implication became clear, Cam blushed. “Why are you pushing this?”

“I already told you.”

“But what did your second ques—”

“Sorry, didn't mean to offend. After our little kiss, I just thought you might've at least stuck a foot out of the closet.” Before Cam could respond, Paul got up. “Well, that was fairly painless, wasn't it? At least we've cleared the air.”

Of what? Cam wondered dismally. And if we've cleared the air, why is it so difficult to breathe?

“Do you mind if I lie down on your couch and take a quick nap?” Paul asked. “I really need to freshen my mind before I get back to studying the clockwork, since you don't seem too willing to test my theory.”

The request seemed guileless enough. As flabbergasted as he was, Cam turned up his hands. “Sure. Why not?” There was resignation in his voice, and beneath it, a growing sense of inevitability. Maybe everything *did* happen for a reason. Maybe Mobry's Dick and Paul Patrillo were necessary steps in a journey.

“Thanks,” Paul said with sincerity. He touched the back of Cam's hand before he headed for the couch.

Head swimming, Cam watched his form get swallowed by the darkness of the hallway.

This maddening man, whom Cam found every bit as intriguing as Alain Mobry, had somehow managed to rechart his life. It probably would've happened anyway, and sooner than later, but Cam had never expected the change in course to be so abrupt, so uncertain.

He felt befogged and apprehensive. And as hard as it was to admit to himself, he felt grateful.

It had taken Odysseus ten years to return to Ithaca. He'd made many perilous yet meaningful stops along the way. So maybe, Cam thought, he too was on a voyage home. After all, he'd been tossed around on his own turbulent seas for a decade.

He began to smile at the thought—Cameron Waters, epic hero—but the smile didn't fully manifest. Where, or what, was *his* home? And what surprises might await him there?



## Chapter Seven

Chin in hand, Cam continued sitting at the dining table and gazing vacantly at Mobry's Dick. He was tired, but he couldn't go to bed. Not with Paul in the house. Besides, he knew that even if he did go to bed, his mind wouldn't shut down. He'd just lie there, hunched around his body pillow and craving sleep, while his brain continued spinning out thoughts.

He wished he could be certain he'd done all the right things since getting up this morning. The whole day still felt like a dream. So maybe he was already asleep.

No, no such luck. Life's more incredible interludes couldn't be explained away that easily.

Holy hell, he'd actually outed himself. Now what? Cam had no idea where to go from here. He'd even begun wondering if he'd maybe jumped the gun, if Paul's insinuating comments had so colored his self-image that he'd branded himself gay when he really wasn't. Maybe he *was* bi, as Wendy had suggested several years ago. Maybe if the right woman came along, he'd fall for her.

"Guess I have to wait and see," he whispered, touching Mobry's Dick. Chaos was a hell of a state to be in after he'd put so much effort into building a tidy existence for himself.

Still looking at the metal cock, Cam rose from his chair. "*Simulate making love to it.*" Why would Paul entertain such a bizarre notion? Was he just trying to trap Cam into revealing his gayness?

It didn't matter right now. Paul was asleep on the couch and couldn't see him. Smiling at the perverseness of the impulse, Cam slowly wrapped his fingers around the top portion of Mobry's Dick.

There was no way he could stroke it the way he stroked himself. His hand would keep catching on all those sharp flakes of paint and probably send most of them raining to the tabletop. So instead of pumping the tube, Cam cautiously worked his way along its length by exerting a rippling pressure.

He inched his hand downward, paused, then simultaneously squeezed the Dick and pressed his fingers, one after another, against its surface. He repeated the movement, firmly yet gently, until his hand was at the base.

*This is crazy. I'm crazy.*

Still, he repeated the sequence, moving this time from base to tip.

The topmost section of the tube began, faintly, to hum and vibrate.

Eyes snapping wide, Cam carefully withdrew his hand and gaped at the thing. He got up from his chair.

Snicking softly, its apex began to open like the shutter of a camera. Something was emerging from the structure's interior, from just beneath its "skin." More strained, muted clicking, and the top bloomed farther. A shape rose up.

The new element looked just like the glans of a penis—a perfect cockhead, pink and plump and smooth, complete with fine fissure and small hole.

Cam chuckled in surprise and delight. Grasping the bottom edges of the base, he eased the automaton closer to himself, then lightly ran a fingertip over the head's surface. It wasn't metal, at least not on the outside. The material could've been vellum, dyed to a ruddy blush and snugly fitted to a metal or hard rubber form.

To test it, Cam gently squeezed the cap's rounded brim and then squeezed the crest on either side of the hole. His touch set off another sharp *click*. The hole widened. A faceted stone rose from the aperture and stood poised on its rim.

"Holy shit," Cam whispered with another disbelieving chuckle. It must've represented a drop of precum.

He moved closer and, squinting, studied the stone. Cut glass or a crystal, maybe, attached to an invisible spring or wire. It couldn't have been a diamond. Why would Mobry stuff a precious gem into one of his clockworks? Even more bewildering, there seemed to be markings inside or beneath the stone.

Cam shifted around to find the best viewing angle. When he looked at it from straight above, he saw the markings were actually letters. They spelled out two words: *Kiss Me*.

*Why not? I've gone this far.*

The stone wasn't really large enough to kiss, though. Cam touched it, wondering how best to position his lips. With a low hum, the stone withdrew as demurely as it had appeared.

"Shit." The pressure of his finger must have triggered the withdrawal. Cam frowned at the Dick, wondering what to do next.

From all indications, the mechanism's performance wouldn't end with a droplet of faux pre-seminal fluid. Mobry seemed to have gone out of his way to construct a detailed clockwork erection, and that in turn suggested the thing should be able to "come." Cam figured there might be a small reservoir in its base meant to contain liquid. Maybe a tube ran up the center of the shaft, and the liquid could somehow be pumped through the tube and out of the hole.

At the moment that possibility was moot. There'd be no liquid in it now, over a hundred years after its construction, and Cam had no idea how to access any such reservoir.

Still, he could test his theory. Maybe. If he drew lightly at the hole, he might be able to detect a residual trace of whatever fluid had once served as the spunk in Mobry's Dick.

Bending over the structure, he centered his lips on the hole and gave it a quick suck.

“Ew.” He tongue-spit whatever he thought he'd pulled out of the thing.

He couldn't tell if it was liquid, but he sure as hell had drawn out *some* kind of essence. A smell as much as a taste, and probably a combination of congealed oil and old metal, it wafted through his mouth and into his nasal cavity.

Grimacing, Cam leaned over the Dick again. He gripped the shaft just beneath the fabricated head, pressed his lips onto the vellum, and sucked harder. Nope, no liquid.

Then a response rattled down the length of the cylinder.

Keeping his eyes trained on the crown, Cam moved his head back and swiped a hand over his mouth. This time the aperture opened wider. Gracefully drooping parabolic figures lifted out of the gap—first one, then another, then another—and dangled over the Dick's tip. The pieces were swirly white and semitranslucent.

With great care, Cam grasped one between his thumb and forefinger. It was a stone, certainly custom shaped. A moonstone maybe? Cam could just barely make out the interior wires to which the three were attached.

“You came!” he whispered with a grin.

Each piece also bore a word, etched into its surface.

*Wish. Come. True.*

Cam pulled down the corners of his mouth. Well, okay, for a lot of people a jetting cock *was* a wish come true. There was nothing like a good orgasm.

Now how to get the whole thing to close up again...?

Cam didn't have to wonder for long. Within moments, the delicate white stones drew together and slowly sank back into the head. Then the head, too, receded, covered once more by its metal foreskin. There must've been some kind of timing mechanism built into the base or the cylinder.

Cam glanced toward the living room and thought of Paul. *I really should wake him and show him. This is what he's been waiting for.*

Without bothering to mute his footsteps, Cam walked to the living room. Paul had switched off the table lamp, but Cam could make out his reclining form.

Dropping to one knee beside the couch, he was simply going to give Paul's shoulder a gentle shake to rouse him. He was simply going to say, *I did what you suggested and got it to work; you'll never believe what it does.* But “simply” flew out the window as soon as Paul opened his eyes.

Without any jostling to wake him, and without looking drowsy or disoriented, Paul slowly lifted his lids. He stared straight into Cam's eyes. His hand rose to the back of Cam's head and gently cupped it.

With no forethought whatsoever, Cam kissed him. Just impulsively lowered his face and closed his mouth over Paul's and kissed him with all the passion he'd held in reserve for ten strained years. Paul responded as if he'd been waiting. Their

lips pressed and slid, their tongues thrust around and against each other, and their breath came out hot and quick.

Relishing their abandon, Cam shoved his hands into Paul's silken mass of dark curls. His cock pulsed into stiffness. This was nothing like the kisses he'd shared with women. Nothing at all. Taste, smell, feel were all different. Even the sound was different. This was like a woodland wildfire, smoky and pungent, aggressive and demanding,

Every nerve in Cam's body became a bare live wire, crackling dangerously, making his skin prickle and emptying his head. No touch from anybody had ever aroused him like this. Freed hunger sent tremors through his groping hands.

"That's it," Paul whispered between the eager flexions of their lips. "That's it, cute man. Give me your best sales pi—"

"Shut up."

Paul's laughter died in his throat as the kiss intensified.

He pushed Cam backward onto the floor and rolled on top of him. Words rushed out of Paul as his weight settled on Cam's body, as his fingers stroked down Cam's temples and over his jaw and along his throat.

"You're exactly my type," he murmured, delivering firm kisses and light touches. "Slender and smooth and ready to jump out of your skin. Oh God, I *love* this kind of fever in a body like yours. Want me to tell you what I'd like to do to you if we were naked?"

Cam could only let out a weak groan and push his hips toward Paul's. His cock needed desperately to connect with something.

Paul kept talking, hurriedly, as if Cam's groan were an affirmative. And it probably was.

"I'd like to fold my arms around you and hold you against me and feel you up, Cameron. Feel the sleekness of your limbs and the slope of your back and the swell of your ass. While I'm kissing you. While my tongue slides between those goddamned sumptuous lips of yours and our rigid cocks slide together. Then I'd like to grab your pretty ass and grind your hips even harder against mine."

He punctuated the statement with a pelvic thrust. Cam whimpered and pushed back. He vaguely realized he was a mass of reflex now—no delicate reservations, not a cringing doubt in sight—and he couldn't be bothered to care.

"I'd be on the brink by then," Paul breathlessly told him, "after caressing your body and feeling our mouths play together. Damn, I'd need some relief. You'd have to get on your knees. And I'd have to restrain you so you wouldn't be tempted to touch your cock, because *my* cock would need the attention."

"*Restrain you.*" Those two words alone nearly made Cam come.

"But I'd make up for it," Paul said, his lips and tongue deftly working Cam's right ear, gliding over his throat. "I'd slip something really delightful up your ass, something you could squeeze and work while you sucked my dick." He lifted his head. "Ever done that, Cameron? Ever used an ass buddy to get off?"

Cam nodded. He couldn't talk. He could barely breathe.

Paul smiled. "Soon you won't need it as often. Soon you'll have the real thing inside you." He grabbed one of Cam's restless, roaming hands and directed it to his crotch. "This," he said. "This will be inside you. You're as natural a goddamned bottom as I've ever seen, and you excite the hell out of me."

After listening to those words, delivered on warm breath gusting between moist lips, the feel of Paul's arousal was too much. His cock was a concentration of dense heat, rubbing in a circular motion against Cam's palm, and Cam's hard-on butted against the back of his trapped hand.

He was going to break soon. Every nerve and muscle in his body was spooled around a shimmering thickness low in his belly. They were tight, too tight, and each one of Paul's words and movements, each breath, wound them tighter.

"Got to..." Cam whispered, and began scrabbling to undo his pants.

"I know." Paul's mouth closed over Cam's. Their lips opened, tongues tangling in a wet frenzy, as Paul wedged one hand between their bodies and tightly caged Cam's straining prick. His fingers firmly massaged and stroked it through the layers of cloth. "Just let go, baby."

At this point it wasn't a matter of choice.

Cam sent a weak cry down Paul's throat as he came, the jarring contractions dampening his briefs and creaming the gully below his hip bone. The pleasure of the orgasm, powerful and paralyzing and unlike any he'd ever felt, sent endless ripples through his helpless body. It was a rocket ride to paradise, and Cam wanted it never to end.

"There," Paul said softly with a smile in his voice. "Isn't that better than self-denial?"

Cam just lay there, eyes closed and limbs still quaking slightly. He felt mindless and mortified and utterly at the mercy of whatever torrents Paul Patrillo had unleashed in his blood.

"It won't be like this forever," Paul said, petting Cam's hair. "It'll go slower and be even better. You won't feel quite so ripped apart at the seams."

Cam weakly put a hand over his forehead. "I swear, you're like some damned Svengali."

"Am I? Thank you." Paul moved off him.

Cam laughed through his nose. Leave it to him to take that as a compliment. "What are *you* going to do?" He was pretty sure Paul hadn't come.

"I suggest we shower together," Paul said.

Just as Cam opened his eyes, Paul kissed him again, gently. Cam's lids lowered as he gave himself over to the sweetness of it and again let his hand get lost in Paul's hair. He wanted this, the drift of a man's mouth over his lips. He wanted all of it—the kiss they now shared and the other kind, ardent and careless. He wanted everything Paul had been talking about.

"Let me take care of you," Cam murmured.

"You sure?"

"I'm sure." Cam was eager for it. He'd fantasized countless times about having cock in his mouth, cum on his tongue. "Yeah, let's take a shower. I need one anyway."

Paul helped him up. Without any more talk, Cam led him to the bathroom. Mobry's Dick could wait. Two very real dicks needed the attention more.

Cam turned on the overhead light. He didn't want to miss anything. Atmosphere could come later.

"Is there a way you'd like to do this?" Paul asked, one hand resting lightly on the back of Cam's neck.

"Do what?" Cam's pulse thrummed in his ears as he turned to face Paul. He wondered vaguely if his legs would keep supporting him.

"Take our clothes off." Paul's fingertips moved over Cam's face. He was trembling slightly, maybe from self-restraint. "Do you want me to undress you? Do you want to undress *me*? Or just watch."

"Watch," Cam said, barely able to form the syllable.

With a hint of seductive smile, Paul stepped away from him. Cam began clumsily unbuttoning his shirt as his gaze locked on Paul's body. That barbed knot of heat was forming deep in his belly again.

Paul pulled his sweater over his head, mussing his hair. It caught the light, gleaming here and there, making him look even sexier. He undid the button on his jeans and partially lowered the zipper. Then, slowly, he pulled off the long-sleeved rugby shirt he'd worn beneath his sweater.

Cam's breath tattered. He swallowed, trying to moisten his throat. Paul's well-defined chest was covered in a spray of dark hair that seemed to draw attention to his nipples. His abdomen, a taut plane with low rises, tapered toward his crotch. Cam's gaze instinctively followed the dark trail that led from navel to low-riding blue underwear.

"You'd better pick up the pace, Cameron." Paul slid a hand into his briefs and fondled his still-hidden erection. "I feel like I'm gonna split open."

Woozy with lust, Cam fumbled off the rest of his clothing. He felt skinny and awkward, an adolescent again, compared with the gorgeous, self-possessed man who was stripping just a few feet away from him. Struggling to keep his balance, Cam kept staring as Paul hooked a finger around the top of each sock and pulled them off, then shoved down and nudged aside his jeans.

And stood there, as if defying Cam not to crave that dense, rigid roll straining at an angle against the blue fabric of his briefs. *Lead us into temptation...*

Cam shucked off the rest of his clothing as Paul pushed his underwear to the base of his crotch and let his cock spring free. It was straight and hard, so hard it *did* seem ready to split open.

Shakily, Cam leaned inside the shower stall and turned on the water. He knew exactly where the knob should be for just the right temperature. Paul came up behind him and ran both hands from Cam's shoulders to his belly and around to his ass.

"I want you so much," Paul said breathily against his back. His cock gently probed the cleft in Cam's ass but went no farther. "Jesus, I could feel you and rim you and fuck you for hours."

Cam wanted him to go farther. His interior muscles had already begun to flutter into contractions as he stepped beneath the shower. He had to remind himself that naked hardwood wasn't the same as a lubed plug.

Hell no. It would be immeasurably better.

Cam turned. Without any preliminaries, Paul drew Cam into his arms as soon as their bodies were water-slick. Cam exhaled, surrendering himself, surrendering all pretense of not wanting this.

"My knees are weak," he murmured against Paul's ear.

"Don't worry; I'll hold you."

Paul's arms tightened, enfolding him. He pressed Cam's body against his own, his hands skimming over Cam's back, his fingers reaching for Cam's ass and digging into the flesh, nearly lifting Cam off his feet. The nubs of his nipples poked against Cam's chest. Their hips bucked together. Fervidly they began kissing.

Kissing each other's wet lips and face and throat, their mouths moving with greedy abandon as Paul pushed Cam into a corner of the shower stall and Cam allowed him to, because being overwhelmed was exactly what he wanted.

"Perfect," Paul breathed, his hands sliding and clutching. "You're perfect."

"No."

But they were perfect together, or it felt that way. Cam fondled Paul's chest—the tough mounds and tight nipples, the plastered hair that was both coarse and soft against his palms—and dragged his mouth over it, licking and biting and sucking. This was the chimera *he'd* been seeking, this conviction of belonging exactly where he was. And that was in another man's arms.

His prick was erect again. He wanted to do this all night, fuel his desire into excitement, feel it crest and then careen uncontrollably.

"I wish you'd fuck me," he said, almost pleading. He dimly realized it was a foolhardy desire. He'd never had dick up his ass, and he hadn't brought lube or a condom into the shower. But he wanted it so much, the thought alone honed his arousal.

"Shit, don't tempt me." Paul pushed Cam onto the seat molded into the corner. "We'll get to that part later. But right now..."

He didn't even have a chance to angle his hard-on toward Cam's mouth. Impatient and eager, Cam gripped it.

Paul gasped. "Yeah, that'll work." He flattened his hands on two of the walls.

Trembling, Cam slipped the plump, resilient head between his lips. More perfection. It felt made for his mouth, a natural fit. He cradled the cap with his tongue and slowly drew in the rigid shaft, trying his damndest not to hurt Paul through his excitement. Grasping his own wood, he began to suck Paul's cock, his lips sliding as they cinched and relaxed, his tongue seeking out every feature of its perfect form.

His fingers slid behind it and caressed Paul's taut sac, tracing the geometry of the balls within, lightly squeezing them, plucking at the skin. Then farther back, gliding along the narrow, tender track to the crevice of Paul's ass.

Paul made breathy, quavering sounds of pleasure. His hips began a careful, rhythmic thrusting, obviously restrained. Every once in a while, as Cam's lips worked the cockhead or his tongue flicked along the shaft's dense ridge, Paul uttered a strangled groan.

Then the groan became a grunt as he came abruptly, his cock driving toward the back of Cam's throat and nearly triggering a gag. The reflex subsided as cum spurted into Cam's mouth. He swallowed it greedily, relishing the mild, salty tang, as his second orgasm of the night nearly made him slide off the seat.

Paul dropped to his knees and rested his forearms on Cam's thighs. They were both catching their breath. The rivulets of water snaking down Paul's shoulders and biceps momentarily mesmerized Cam. He realized how much he loved men's bodies, and this one was exceptional.

"Either you've sucked dick before, or you've got superb instincts," Paul said.

Cam smiled demurely. "It just felt right."

"Did it? I'm glad. I love the feel of you, Cameron. As soon as I wrapped my arms around you, I thought I'd shoot right on your belly. I swear, the next time you offer that ass to me, I'm not sure I'll be able to hold on long enough to get inside you."

Paul was a few inches taller and more built than he. It excited the hell out of Cam to be enfolded by a strong, muscular body, to feel all gathered up and helpless...and to know that the feeling of helplessness went both ways.

"Would you like to spend the night?" Cam asked, blinking against the droplets on his eyelashes. He reached forward and gently cradled Paul's head, brushed his thumbs over Paul's longer, darker lashes.

"I'd love to." Paul took one of Cam's hands and pressed a kiss to its palm. "But don't think you have to prove anything, to me *or* yourself. Just set your own pace. I don't mind. It's been a long time since I've found someone worth waiting for."

Incredulous, Cam gazed into those lovely eyes. He'd pretty much just thrown himself into a physical relationship with a man. And although he had no experience to bring to the bedroom, he was wanted. He was genuinely *wanted*.

Cam rose from the shower seat. "I'll make us a nightcap. Take your time finishing up."

Paul stood too and gave him a tender kiss.



Cam's head was airy as he got out of the shower, towed himself dry, and threw on his bathrobe. Whatever the hell he was feeling—the beginning of a crush probably, fed by feral desire—was utterly new to him and dizzying in its force. Maybe, he thought as he made his way to the kitchen, this blaze would burn itself out as quickly as it had ignited. Maybe he'd be over Paul Patrillo by next week or next month. But that didn't matter. Right now it didn't matter at all. He was on his way to a place where he belonged, and he wanted nothing more than to enjoy the journey.

Cam made hot cocoa from scratch and drizzled peppermint schnapps into both mugs. Perfect bedtime drink for a chilly fall night. As he carried the mugs toward the guestroom, which was cleaner than his bedroom, he thought of Mobry's Dick and realized he hadn't yet told Paul about activating it.

The revelation could wait until morning. It was a selfish decision, but Cam forgave himself. He didn't want Paul to fuss with the automaton all night. He didn't want their fire to lose its momentum.

Just as he set the cocoa on the nightstands, he heard the muffled trill of a phone come from the bathroom. Paul must've had his cell in one of his jeans pockets. The sound was unwelcome, a jangling intrusion, and Cam hoped it didn't signal an end to the evening's delights.

He couldn't help but pause in the hallway and listen after he left the bedroom.

## Chapter Eight

Paul's voice was lowered, but Cam could hear it.

"Yeah, I'm still here."

Cam's spirits sank. Did Paul have a boyfriend, some guy who'd been waiting for him, some guy he'd just cheated on?

Afraid the floor might creak if he moved, Cam stayed put and craned an ear toward the bathroom door.

"No, no progress. Not with him *or* the mechanism... I don't think that's going to work either... I know, Edgar, because I tried... Well, believe it... Listen, I think this is a waste of time on all levels. The guy..."

Paul must've turned his back to the door and walked farther into the bathroom, because his voice suddenly faded to a mumble. Individual words and phrases occasionally reached Cam's ears.

They were enough to bring on a sickening realization. Paul wasn't the only person interested in Mobry's Dick, but Paul was the person tasked with acquiring it—through any means possible.

Leaning against the wall, Cam tried to piece together what he was hearing with everything that had happened that day. Maybe Paul had called his cohort as he followed Cam home this morning, then provided an update after he'd left. Maybe the two men had decided Paul should return, because somehow, some way, they were hell-bent on getting Mobry's Dick away from the naive man who'd bought it.

The sexually vulnerable man.

The chump.

Fragrant humidity spilled into the hallway as the bathroom door opened. Paul walked out, his jeans and socks on, but his shirt and sweater draped over one arm. Cam looked up at the handsome, calculating bastard who'd managed to coax him out of the closet and fill him with joyful anticipation.

As soon as Paul saw Cam's face, his expression filled with concern.

"Who's Edgar?" Cam asked, the question soft and unsteady.

Sighing, Paul rolled his head back and briefly closed his eyes. "You heard."

"Yes."

"Fuck."

"The two of you want to get the automaton away from me."

"It isn't that simple."

Cam tried to meet Paul's gaze but soon had to lower his eyes. This guy had really gotten to him, was still getting to him. Feeling queasy, Cam went back to the guestroom and dropped onto the edge of the bed. The schnapps-laced cocoa teased him with its aroma.

This was supposed to have been such a lovely night, his coming-out celebration actually. He'd thought of that as he stood over the stove, smiling dreamily; thought of Paul lying beside him as they talked and laughed and kissed, as they studied the landscape of each other's body and shared their warmth and, finally, fell asleep in each other's arms. In the morning they'd again make love, and Cam would know with absolute certainty he'd done the right thing.

He would never look back.

Now, with all that blissful conviction drained out of him, he slumped forward, arms on thighs, and stared at the floor.

After tossing his clothes on the bed, Paul sat beside Cam but didn't touch him. "Cameron, please don't jump to conclusions."

"Who's Edgar?" Cam repeated in a firm monotone. His gaze never shifted from the carpet. He didn't even blink.

"Edgar Jonns," Paul said. "He's a...a kind of trader, specializing in precious gems. Some of his transactions are more or less aboveboard. Others..."

The description wasn't what Cam had expected to hear. It only bewildered him all the more. Frowning, he looked at Paul. "Are you saying he's some sort of black marketeer?"

"The less you know, Cameron, the better. Believe me. *I* don't even want to know the details. I already know too much."

Cam kept staring at him. He noticed shallow lines in Paul's face that he hadn't seen before. "Why would someone like that be interested in an old automaton?"

Paul rubbed his face, as if he were aware of Cam's scrutiny and wanted to buff the lines away. "Jonns became obsessed with some story he'd heard about a rare yellow diamond that once belonged to an illusionist of the 1890s, someone who frequently worked or was based in the Midwest. So he had one of his employees do some research. Nothing much turned up. People familiar with the history of stage magic dismissed the story as either exaggeration or fabrication. Theater history is full of legends. But Jonns did hear another twist on the tale—that the diamond may have ended up in a clockwork automaton from which it was never retrieved."

Swallowing hard, Cam looked away as an image flashed into his mind—that faceted stone, the one that had emerged like a bead of precum. Good thing he hadn't told Paul about activating the clockwork; good thing all the stones had withdrawn shortly after they'd appeared, and Mobry's mechanism now looked inert once more.

"How did *you* come into the picture?" he asked, hoping Paul wasn't a crook too. Shit, this just kept getting worse.

"Alain Mobry's name turned up. And that led to me, the alleged expert."

"So now you, what, work for this guy? Do research, hunt for old apparatuses?"

"Sometimes." Paul had begun to look and sound dodgy.

Cam studied his face. "You're not...you're not like his rent boy, are you?"

Paul flexed and relaxed his interlinked fingers. "Not exactly. We don't live together. I still have my own place. It's just a small apartment, but it's mine."

"You're lovers, though."

"No," Paul said sharply. Then the backbone slipped out of his denial. "I mean, I don't think of it that way."

"How *do* you think of it?"

Paul cleared his throat and continued his hand exercises. "That I happen to know a rich forty-nine-year-old who fancies young men and doesn't mind spending money on them."

"In exchange for sex."

Paul shrugged, but his attitude wasn't as blasé as he seemed to intend it to be.

"He's your sugar daddy." Cam's interrogation had become increasingly snide.

Apparently spurred by the phrase *sugar daddy*, Paul bolted up from the bed. "Fuck it, Cameron. Do you know what the cost of graduate-school tuition is nowadays? And that's on top of books and travel to do research and just keeping up with everyday living expenses."

"I thought you had an inheritance."

"I *don't* have a fucking inheritance. That was a lie." Paul suddenly stopped and frowned. Sniffing the air, he glanced toward the nearer of the two nightstands, then at the farther. "Are those our nightcaps?" he asked gingerly, pointing at one of mugs.

"*Were*," said Cam.

"Homemade cocoa?"

Cam nodded.

"Is that peppermint schnapps I smell?"

"Hundred proof."

"Oh, man." Paul gazed longingly at the dwindling plume of steam.

"Go ahead and drink yours if you want it."

"Thanks," Paul said. "That was really nice of you. I love hot cocoa. And quality schnapps." He lifted the mug and sipped, closed his eyes and purred with pleasure.

Cam got up, went around the foot of the bed, and lifted the second mug. What the hell? Why waste it?

He and Paul resumed their seats on the edge of the bed. Cam drank, letting the cocoa warm him, the schnapps soothe him.

"I spent most of my life getting bounced from one foster home to another," Paul said without preface. He tilted the mug to his lips and drank more. "Even with the scholarships I got, I was ass-deep in student loans when I met Edgar." He slumped

forward once again. "Money can be very persuasive to a person who's never had any."

Cam bit at his lip. *Don't soften; don't feel sorry for him.* "So Sugar Daddy paid for Mobry's papers."

"Yes."

"And he's the one who'd pay for the Dick if I wanted to sell it. Except he'd screw me over by offering a fraction of what it's worth, with or without some hidden diamond."

Swirling his cocoa, Paul nodded. His face was drawn, almost as if he were in pain. "I've been declining most of his offers for a while now. A few months into it, I was already regretting that I'd accepted *anything* from him."

"Oh? Why?"

"Don't play dumb," Paul said irritably. "You know why."

"Because the more he paid for, the more time he expected to spend with you. And your sexual favors." Cam's sourness rose again, stronger than before. "God knows you've worked *them* to perfection."

"You don't understand. There's a huge, qualitative difference between what you and I—"

Cam wasn't listening. Too many sordid realizations were bombarding him. "Has he been calling the shots? Did he tell you to come back here?"

"Yeah." After a final swallow, Paul set his mug on the floor between his feet. "I was going to respect your wishes and wait, but Edgar's...impatient. He's used to getting what he wants when he wants it. I tried putting him off the track, but he insisted I come right back and either get the automaton to work or get you to part with it."

"And was it part of the master plan that you seduce me?"

Paul propped his elbows on his knees and covered his face. One muffled word, "shit," came from behind his hands.

"Well? Was it?"

Dismally, Paul met Cam's furious glare. "He suggested it when I told him you weren't interested in selling."

"So you must've also told him I was gay. Or you *thought* I was."

Paul sighed. "Not exactly. He asked if I found you attractive, and I said yes, and then he asked if it went both ways, if you seemed to find *me* attractive, and I said I was pretty sure you did...but that you weren't willing to admit it to yourself."

A flash of anger heated Cam's face. "Aren't *you* astute? Did Daddy reward you for that too?"

"Cameron, damn it, you need to know that what happened between you and me—"

"How badly does he want the automaton?"

"He *doesn't* want it. He couldn't care less about it. All he wants to do is dismantle that extraordinary, one-of-a-kind clockwork and look for his fucking phantom diamond. I can't let that happen. If I'd known his intentions from the start, I wouldn't have breathed a word about meeting you at the flea market."

"Why?" Cam asked bitterly. "Won't you get your fair share if there *is* a diamond?"

Groaning quietly, Paul hung his head for a moment. "Listen, I know what you must be thinking, but everything else aside, I *am* very drawn to you, and I *do* care about Mobry's creation. It's like the Holy Grail to me."

"Holier than all the money that's been thrown at you?"

"*Yes!*" Snatching the empty mug off the floor, Paul got up. "You have no fucking idea how much I respect Alain Mobry. It's almost as if...we're connected somehow." He strode around in front of the bed, the cup punctuating his sentences like a fat white exclamation point. "Regardless of all the strikes against him—his looks and stature, his birth defect, his homosexuality—he never caved in to society's standards, never gave up following his *own* route to happiness. That man remained true to himself. He was a courageous magician and, for that matter, a courageous queer. He never got married, was never even seen in public with a woman who wasn't one of his assistants. He didn't turn to boy prostitutes either. He just wanted to perfect his craft and enjoy his sexuality and find a man to love him."

A point begged to be made, and Cam didn't flinch from making it. He spoke in a measured voice. "If you have so much goddamned respect for Mobry, such a psychic connection, then please explain how you could play me the way the Turk played him. And apparently for the same reason."

His point hit home. Hard. Paul closed his eyes. A faint line of moisture glimmered along his dark lashes. "I couldn't," he said in a near whisper, then drew his thumb and forefinger across his eyelids. "I lost my stomach for it as soon as I realized what you were going through. And that I liked you. A lot."

Cam coughed out a sardonic laugh. "You melt my heart."

Paul still looked stricken. Nobody could feign a look like that. He strode out of the bedroom, and Cam panicked for a moment, thinking he'd driven Paul away without resolving this mess. He hated any lack of resolution. Just as he was about to follow, Paul returned to the bedroom. The cocoa mug was gone; he must've taken it to the kitchen. And maybe taken a few minutes to think.

"I despise Edgar Jonns," he said. "I despise that I let myself be bought by him. Once I finish dealing with this bullshit quest of his, I'm bailing out. I want my life back." He hesitated, then sat on the bed again.

"Oh really? But I thought whoring yourself and conning unsuspecting people gave you a *better* life."

That did it. With a startling surge of ire or exasperation or both, Paul swiveled toward Cam, gripped his shoulders, and shoved him backward onto the mattress. He leaned over Cam. This time there was nothing sexual about the move.

“Just shitcan the sarcasm for a minute. Okay? I'm well aware of what a venal jackass I've been, so I sure as hell don't blame you for how you feel. But suddenly I'm not so venal anymore, believe me, and I've been hoping we could see more of each other. I rarely meet men like you.”

Paul slid his hands down Cam's chest beneath the wide lapels of his bathrobe. They came to rest over Cam's rib cage. When he spoke again, his voice was softer but no less sincere.

“I'd love to get to know you better, Cameron. I mean that. No ulterior hidden motives, no sugar daddy lurking in the background and pulling my strings. Will you at least think about it?”

The guy really had some nuts on him. “Oh, you've given me *plenty* to think about,” Cam said, looking Paul in the eye, trying to ignore the feel of his hands and the heat wavering from his body. “Like why I should believe your deceitful ass.”

Paul sat up. Limply, he lifted and lowered his arms. “Because everything I said is the truth. That's the only reason I've got.”

Cam boosted himself onto his elbows. Paul's touch still radiated across the skin of his chest and belly. He didn't know *what* to think anymore, didn't know if he could rely on his own judgment or even what his own judgment was. He wanted to give Paul the benefit of the doubt. Some font of intuition he usually tapped only when dealing with clients suggested he do that. But intuition could be faulty.

Cam kept watching him, trying to read him. He'd never met anyone like Paul—a man as tantalizing and multilayered as a phyllo pastry and, possibly, as damaging to one's health—so he had to keep probing. “How are you going to get rid of your patron?”

Paul's answer came without hesitation. “Easily. Edgar Jonns doesn't need me. I've already told him everything I know, and if he just wants sexual kicks, he can buy another boy. But I *do* need something. I need to be able to develop a relationship that won't be tainted by his presence in my life.”

He sounded determined enough, but Cam's tenuous trust had been seriously undermined. “Maybe you should get back to me once the strings are completely severed. Puppets don't appeal to me.”

Paul lowered his head for several seconds. Then, indecisively, he glanced from the bedroom doorway to Cam. “I suppose you want me to leave now.”

“I suppose I do.” Cam got off the bed. “I'll get your jacket while you put the rest of your clothes on. How far do you live from here?”

Grudgingly, Paul rose. “Between seventeen and eighteen miles.”

“Your hair's still wet.”

Paul ran a hand over it. “Oh well.”

Cam hesitated. It was certainly cold outside by now. *Fuck it. The son of a bitch managed to get here; he can just as easily get home.*

They looked at each other for a few uneasy moments before Cam left the guestroom and crossed the hall to the dining area. Mobry's Dick, the root of all this subterfuge, sat immobile on the table, keeping its secrets. That faceted stone he'd seen couldn't have been a rare yellow diamond. Cam knew next to nothing about gemology, but he did know exceptional stones were exceptionally clear and brilliant. That one hadn't been. He grabbed up Paul's jacket and noticed a thin fan of papers on one of the chairs. As he reached for them, Paul walked up behind him.

"You got it to work, didn't you?" Paul said quietly as he took his jacket from Cam's hand. "I'm not a very sound sleeper."

Cam tried to keep his face from betraying anything. He didn't answer.

Paul slipped on his jacket and shrugged it into place before grabbing his attaché case off the table. "It's wise of you to keep your mouth shut. I have a feeling you're a shitty liar." He shoved a hand in one of his jacket pockets; keys jingled. "That's one of the things I find so appealing about you."

*"Appealing."* Paul looked irresistible in that jacket, in this light. Regret rolled through Cam. He didn't know how to quash it. He felt like screaming, *Why the hell did this wrinkle have to turn up? Why do you have to be some conniving schmuck? The last thing I needed was to have my first experience with a jaded jerk like you!*

But Cam couldn't put a voice to his aching frustration. In fact, he wasn't sure those descriptions were accurate. Instead he said, without thinking, "The automaton is wonderful. I'll bet it's worth a thousand times more than anything Mobry put inside it."

"Not quite," Paul said. "*No* price can be put on that piece. It's invaluable." Dawdling, he tapped his attaché case against his thigh and seemed at a loss for words. "Shit, Cameron, I'm so sorry." His Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed.

Cam half expected to hear more blandishments, more flattery, more assertions of Paul's interest in pursuing a relationship. But none came.

"I am too," Cam said quietly.

Eyes lowered, Paul nodded. "A word of advice: Get the clockwork out of here. Take it to a friend or relative's house and soon. Like tomorrow, during the day."

"So you're saying—"

"I'm saying Edgar isn't happy with what I told him and probably doesn't believe me. He wants to see for himself." Glancing up, Paul touched Cam's face and quickly withdrew his hand. "A person doesn't get that rich by trusting people, even the ones he sleeps with."

"What exactly *did* you tell him?"

"That I was mistaken about Alain Mobry's signature. That your find is pretty much a worthless hunk of junk, but you still don't want to sell it because you're something of a pack rat. I also have to convince him it won't be in your house after tonight, that tomorrow you're taking it to a storage unit."

His implication was disturbingly clear: Edgar Jonns would steal Mobry's Dick if he had to. Or rather, have a lackey steal it for him.



"You think somebody's going to break into my house," Cam said thinly.

"I'm going to do everything in my power to prevent that. Just rest assured that Jonns won't persist in this too long. Maybe he *will* lose interest after I work on him a little more. He knows finding a rare diamond is mostly wishful thinking on his part." Paul smiled wanly. "Most wishes don't come true. Except, maybe, Alain Mobry's. I like to think he found his happily-ever-after."

"You told me he disappeared." Cam said.

"Exactly."

## Chapter Nine

1899

The Turk hadn't visited the Green Carnation in nearly a month. He had been seen, however, pursuing entertainment in more public places, where he showed abundant evidence of scorning temperance. Alain knew the Turk had a fondness not only for alcohol, but for cocaine as well as opiates like morphine and its much-touted sister, heroine. Perhaps he battled some physical pain he endured in silence.

Alain had great empathy for such struggles.

Regardless of the state of his health, the Turk had reportedly been boasting of exciting new elements he would soon be adding to his performances. He planned to tour South America and Russia. Alain listened to this news with both alarm and skepticism. He didn't want Kafele to be gone so long, yet he doubted Kafele *would* be gone. The Turk had never before toured so extensively. In fact, he rarely ventured beyond Rapid City, St. Louis, and Pittsburgh.

Alain had sent him two letters, a more reliable and discreet method of contact than using the telephone. Kafele had answered the second with a dashed-off note that read, *Perhaps I'll call on you when I have a free moment*. When Alain received it, he immediately positioned the Turk's shabby diamond in his profane yet mystical automaton.

It was a cold November night. Alain's shop had no basement furnace, so the acrid smell of coal, burning to ash in his stove, hung heavily in the air. Lamplight cut wavering swaths through shadow. When his day's work was completed, Alain often lit a lamp or two. He found the nimbus cast by a yellow flame far more soothing than the glare of an electric bulb. The glow seemed to pave his way to sleep.

Feeling pensive and tentatively hopeful, Alain activated the automaton. Inscribed on the stones of the moon was the right to wish. Kafele could earn that right if he demonstrated courage and integrity, a desire to love and be loved regardless of risk. But if he demonstrated perfidy and put himself beyond Alain's reach, the gift would be beyond *his* reach. Forever.

Once the automaton had completed its various cycles and again sealed itself, Alain got up and went to his favorite piece of furniture, a wide dental cabinet of quartersawn oak. Its numerous drawers and shelves of varying sizes held watch and clock parts, appropriate tools, and meticulously drawn diagrams. He'd modified

the cabinet slightly to add several concealed slots and drawers, and it was from one of these that he pulled a small silver chest.

Carrying it to a morris armchair, he nudged aside the footrest and sank into the tufted leather. Alain loved this chair perhaps more than he loved the dental cabinet. This was the seat of his dreams. It was here that lines drew themselves in his mind, looping and intersecting, as if the blades of invisible skaters were inscribing them on a frozen pond. It was here that he, dreaming further, plucked bits of brass and nickel and steel from a corner of heaven and fit them lovingly to the lines.

Growing wistful, Alain moved his fingertips over the silver box. In this chair he also dreamed of that one man—not perfect, but pure of heart—with whom he could share his magic and for whom he would always make more. He still didn't know who that man was. Probably, he thought ruefully, not the Turk. But he still clung to his unraveling threads of hope.

Never did fame play a role in Alain's dreams. It had never been important to him.

He opened the lid of the silver chest, embossed with birds and butterflies. Whenever he looked at it, he thought of taking flight. How glorious it must be to soar or glide through life, unencumbered and unimpeded. How glorious...

The envelope that lay within the box was circled in dried ivy and bore symbols Alain had executed. He lifted the envelope and withdrew the folded paper it contained. The scent of a complex potpourri rose to nostrils, a blend of apple blossom, dragon lily, amaranth, grass, iris, rose, carnation, angelica, and yew. Plant fragments formed a cushion both beneath and within the envelope, thus imbuing the paper he held.

Which of his skills, Alain wondered, did he value the most? The natural sensitivity and dexterity he displayed when pleasuring men? The acquired craft through which he earned a living? Or the secret arcane art that allowed him to cheat fate?

He couldn't decide.

On the handmade paper was a wish Alain had composed for himself. He'd held off employing it, thinking there must be some man in this vast, complex world who would come to care for him before he grew too old to enjoy such fellowship. His parents had always taught him patience was a virtue and that there was immeasurable strength in bearing one's burdens with grace. But he was past thirty now and often weary. If Kafele ultimately disappointed him, why should he resign himself to a life of bitter loneliness?

Alain rubbed his eyes, reached to his left to turn up the lamp's flame, and read what he'd written.

*It is the time  
That his is mine  
And love comes, fresh as dew.*

*Across the ages  
We'll turn our pages  
And with each page, renew.*

It was an ambitious wish, perhaps even unforgivably arrogant, and for that reason he would hold it in reserve as his last resort. He tucked the paper back into its envelope and set the silver box on the table where the lamp stood.

After rising from his chair, that friendly seat of inspiration and optimism, Alain went to his stove and opened the door. Iron squealed against iron. He touched the envelope to his lips and whispered, "Wish come true when I need you to." With a small flick of his wrist, he tossed the envelope onto the bed of glowing coals.

And hell broke loose.

A chorus of alarming sounds abruptly shattered the stillness: a tinkling spill of broken glass; erratic thumps; the low rumble of a man's voice, soon joined by another voice as the rear door thundered open and footsteps shuffled at the threshold of the inner door.

Heart pounding, Alain turned to and fro. He had a pistol...somewhere. He was fastidious about keeping his papers and work materials in order, for they mattered to him, but the pistol meant nothing. He'd never had occasion to use it, never foreseen any reason to use it. Now, panicked, he felt hopeless about finding it.

There was no time to spare. Alain retreated to the dimmest cubbyhole he could get to before the intruders burst into his workroom, and that was a wedge of dark space between the dental cabinet and his shrouded Fountain of Youth. Breathing rapidly but silently through his mouth, he peered around the corner of the cabinet.

Every muscle in his body contracted as the inner door banged open. A large man stumbled into the studio, his cohort at his back. Neither made any attempt at stealth. They wore wool shirts and coarse britches. They had cloths tied around the lower portions of their faces, knives in their belts, gunnysacks and lanterns clutched in their hands.

"Somebody's here," one of them said with a thick accent. It wasn't German, the most common of accents in the city. "A lamp is burning. The stove is still hot."

"He could have fled out the front door."

"He better have."

Alain withdrew into his hiding place and remained still as a stone. He couldn't risk the men spotting him. What could they possibly want? He had no money in his studio, no safe. Very little of *any* value, in fact.

Except his notes and drawings and clockworks. Except the very essence of his life, which could be of no importance to thieves, of no importance to anybody but him. Unless...

He heard the men rushing about, shoving furniture, opening and closing drawers. Hazy patches of light from their lanterns swung and bobbed through the studio's relative gloom. More than once, something clattered or crashed to the floor.

"This?" one of them asked.

"Yes, yes. You know what he said. You know what to look for."

Alain squeezed his eyes shut. "*What he said.*" Someone had sent the men here. Someone had orchestrated this robbery and provided the thieves with a list of sought-after items. But who would do such a thing to him?

"There. That too."

Something else tumbled to the floor, rolled, and stopped.

"Damn it, Gus. Use more care."

One of the men moved to the storeroom door. He set down what were obviously two weighty burdens. The gunnysacks. They were filling the gunnysacks.

"Start on that cabinet."

Alain's heart seemed to wither in his chest. He couldn't bear this violation any longer. Yet how could he put an end to it? How could he even show himself without risking grave personal harm?

One of the invaders was near Alain now, mere feet to his right. Drawers and shelves hissed out of the dental cabinet. Papers rustled and metal clinked against metal as the vandal rifled through the contents of each carefully organized nook and cranny.

Tears welled in Alain's eyes. A sound knotted in his throat, a sob, a bellow of outrage. He thought, irrationally, of the tales he'd read and heard of Spanish colonial oppression, and Indian raids on white men's settlements and white men's violent incursions into Indian camps, and of colored men being ripped from the bosoms of their families and hung from trees. He thought of those who'd had to watch and listen helplessly, in horror, while their lives crumbled around them and everything they held dear was desecrated by cruel hands and cold hearts.

"No!" he cried, pitching forward.

The man at the cabinet froze in stupefaction for a moment and gaped at Alain with pale blue eyes. The kerchief that had covered his face now circled his neck.

"Get him, you idiot!" the other man shouted. "He's seen us now! He's heard us!" The man charged toward his comrade, bumping into a glass-fronted bookcase. An unlit lamp atop the case skidded toward the edge, teetered, and smashed on the floor. Spilled kerosene sent its pungent odor into the coal-tainted air.

Clumsily Alain wheeled to his left. He pulled aside the sheet covering the Fountain of Youth diorama. *Now. Now, now, now!* A hand grabbed the waistband of his trousers. Resisting, he continued to lunge forward, his world spinning into a blur. Someone clutched his ankle and foot simultaneously, wrenching the thick-soled shoe from his crippled foot. A firebrand of pain shot up his leg and merged with a deeper, more searing burn on the back of his thigh.

But the shoe was gone. It was gone, and he was nearly free.

"Puck," he sighed, floating like a petal toward the empty pool.

A dark voice, rapidly receding, sounded faintly in the distance. "Just leave him in there to bleed out. At least we won't have to look at him."

He smiled as a cloud of dazzling, scintillating whiteness embraced him. He'd escaped. He was ready to be reborn.

## Chapter Ten

What a shitty night.

Cam hadn't slept worth a damn, and when he had slept, disturbing dreams had unfurled. In one, his father banged relentlessly on the bathroom door, yelling at him to get the hell out of the shower. Cam couldn't tell if his father was furious or frantic, but in either case, Cam couldn't move; he was in the midst of an orgasm. In another, vandals spread cake frosting over his house. He feared they would break in and smear him too, so thickly he would suffocate. When he awoke, he realized he'd had a wet dream. Then he remembered Paul had also been prowling his subconscious and had maybe been in the dream-shower with him.

After he dragged himself out of bed, and while he chugged two cups of black coffee, he wondered if his Great Sexual Awakening was really all he'd thought it had been. Hard to tell now, with Paul gone. That sickening revelation he'd left in his wake had further muddled the issue.

Then Cam thought of what they'd done together and what more they'd planned to do, and he couldn't deny the spinning brilliance of the excitement he'd felt.

It was real. There'd be no turning back.

The day's first order of business was to give his mother a call, see if she needed anything—like his company. As much as she prided herself on being a strong woman, her pain was still excruciatingly fresh. Cam could read it in her face and especially in her eyes. Bill Waters, for the time being at least, remained the love of her life, and she struggled daily to stave off the paralysis that often sprang from grief.

Too soon to tell his mother, though. She had enough to deal with. Again, Cam felt guiltily grateful his father wouldn't have to hear the news.

After he talked to her, he'd get Mobry's Dick out of his house. Right now he just wanted to set the damned thing at the end of his driveway with a note attached: *Take me*. But he wouldn't do that. He'd schlep it to the family's storage unit, where his and his sister's school-related mementos and baby clothes shared space with unused furniture and building materials left over from household projects.

Still seated at the breakfast bar, Cam picked up his cell. His mother almost always answered after two rings.

“Hey, Mom, it's me.”

"Hi, honey." The phone clattered. She was on her landline, probably reaching for something.

Cam stifled a yawn. "Want to go on a date today? Or invite me over and feed me?"

"Oh, hon, I'm sorry," she said. "Rose is here. We're going to the Mitchell Park Domes. You can come along if you'd like." She sounded better today, perkier.

Sure, yeah. He'd just admitted to himself he was gay. Spending a Sunday with his mother and aunt at the botanical gardens would *really* bolster his sense of masculinity. "Thanks, but I shouldn't have a problem keeping myself occupied."

His mother chuckled. "You're too big for your stroller, anyway."

Cam smiled. She'd always been able to read the subtext of everything he said. "Want me to come over later? Or tomorrow?"

In the background, his aunt Rose called out, "Hi, Cameron!"

"Did you hear that?" his mother asked.

"Yup. Tell her not to pick any flowers. I can't afford to bail her ass out of jail."

More movement on the other end of the line. When his mother spoke again, her voice was lowered. "To tell you the truth, Cameron, I'm starting to feel a little smothered. I mean, I appreciate the food and the condolences and everything, but I really don't want to be babysat. It also helps me to have time alone. You know?"

"I understand. Just do what feels right for you. Start telling people to buzz off if you have to. Fuck 'em if they don't get it."

"Your father would have approved of your language," she said, and meant it.

Cam wished his mother a nice day, got cleaned up and dressed, and finally trundled off to the dining area to deal with Mobry's Dick. At least nobody had burst into the house last night, waving automatic weapons and screaming in accented voices about a yellow diamond. That had been one of his more unpleasant dreams.

There it was, as if waiting for him. Paul's papers, too, were still sitting on one of the chairs. Distracted by their conversation, he'd obviously forgotten to grab them last night. Shit, that was more Cam had to deal with.

As he bundled Mobry's Dick in a couple of old towels, he couldn't help but think of Paul, couldn't help but think a lot of things. *You son of a bitch. I wish you were just a decent guy with no Edgar Jonns in your life and no hidden agendas, and you cared about me enough to let me care about you, and we could roll merrily along together, talking and learning and fucking and laughing...and maybe finding some happiness.*

"You're young," he whispered to himself, because it was something his mother would've said. "There'll be others."

He set the Dick in an empty box and, after making sure the house was locked up tight, left for the C-Kure storage facility, detouring only to grab a fast-food breakfast.



All the way there and back, thoughts bounced around Cam's mind as if it were a pinball machine. Should he get a security system installed in his home? Buy a gun? He'd never felt the need for protection before; he lived in the country. How was Paul faring with Edgar Jonns? *Was* there an Edgar Jonns? Cam had been wondering how much of anything Paul had said could be believed. Maybe he just wanted the damned automaton for himself. Maybe he was trying to make Cam afraid to own it, so Cam would just turn it over to him.

Yet Paul had seemed utterly resigned to walking out of Cam's life. For good.

At the storage shed, he poked around a little, trying to find stuff he could use. Reminders of his father were everywhere. They were unsettling for all kinds of reasons, so Cam quickly abandoned his mission.

It was just past two when he got home. The house was still standing and still locked...and, for some reason, felt disconcertingly empty. Cam grabbed a beer from the fridge and ambled back to the dining table, where he'd set Paul's forgotten papers. Chin in hand, he idly leafed through them, wondering what Edgar Jonns had paid for the collection. From what Cam had seen, the pieces Paul had left behind were merely a fraction of the whole stash.

They were invoices and receipts mostly, interspersed with yellowed newspaper clippings that had flaked along the edges—advertisements for Mobry's performances and accounts of his performances that were far too colorful to be classified as reviews. It looked like the kind of stuff Mobry's manager might have kept.

Toward the bottom of the sprawl was a folded clipping. When Cam opened it, the headline immediately caught his eye.

Painstakingly, he flattened the article on the table and began to read.

#### MAGICIAN TRULY VANISHES

Foul play is suspected in the disappearance of renowned magician Alan Peter Mobry, who trod the stage as Professor Prospero the “Erudite Enchanter.”

Admired far and wide for his beautiful automata, which he incorporated into such illusions as the Phoenix and the Flame, the Gypsy's Trail of Tears, and the Fountain of Youth, Mr. Mobry's ingenuity delighted audiences both here and abroad. Performances at the World Columbian Exposition in Chicago garnered praise from his peers and the public alike. His shining talent was undimmed by an unfortunate physical defect, the club-foot that had rendered him a cripple since birth.

Tirelessly devoted to his craft, Mr. Mobry was in the habit of working well into the night at his city studio. It was in these dark hours that police believe a gang of thieves surprised the magician as he toiled alone, no doubt creating yet another wonder to add to his bag of tricks.

There were no witnesses to the heinous crime, but robbery was certainly the primary motive, as police deduced upon first entering the wizard's den, which was

in considerable disarray. Overturned furniture, ransacked drawers, and broken glass amid puddles of kerosene attested to the violence of the invasion.

Mr. John Guiddinger of Chicago, Mr. Mobry's business manager, is overseeing a thorough examination of the premises to determine the full extent of the theft. It is already believed a number of the magician's famous clockworks were removed. Mr. Guiddinger is under the impression there was no money in the workshop but that the magician, who had little faith in banks, did keep a good amount of cash in another location, which he never divulged.

Dreadful evidence of homicidal malice appeared in the form of Mr. Mobry's blood-drenched orthopaedic shoe and a similarly tainted knife, yet no corpse was discovered. Police are of the opinion the hooligans made off with Mr. Mobry's lifeless body to avoid prosecution for murder, should their identities ever come to light.

A tramp found loitering near the scene by Adolph Kuhlmann, proprietor of a neighboring undertaking and furniture establishment, has already been questioned. The fellow claimed to suffer from somnambulism. He was considered innocent of wrongdoing and promptly returned to the Mendota asylum, from whence it was learned he had recently escaped.

Mr. Mobry was not known to have any enemies, but his acclaim may have been his undoing. People with knowledge of theatrical life say acrimonious rivalries often simmer, unnoticed by those happily seated on the other side of the footlights. Local thespian Clara Hill was poisoned three years ago, the Paris green that killed her having been administered by her sister, also an actress, but, it was generally acknowledged, an indifferent one.

As of this writing, not a living soul has reported seeing or hearing from the magician, who has no known family in this area. His occasional assistant, a young man known only as Puck, has not shown his face in the city. Mr. Guiddinger says he is not privy to the youth's identity, which the magician kept a well-guarded secret.

The search for Mr. Mobry will continue until it is thought to be in vain.

\* \* \*

Cam let the clipping fall from his fingers. *They could've at least spelled his name right.* The dropped *i* in "Alain" had both irked and saddened him. He continued to stare at the yellowed newsprint. Beneath its verbal excess, the story was heart wrenching.

He wondered if the Algerian or Egyptian "Turk" was behind the break-in and whether the perpetrators were ever found and brought to justice. Paul would know. Hell, the Internet might know too. But that possibility wouldn't eliminate the need for a phone call. All curiosity aside, Cam had to return these papers. They weren't his, and their owner treasured them.

After digging Paul's business card from his wallet, he reached for his cell. His nerves seemed to vibrate as he tapped in Paul's number.

The sound of a woman's voice took him aback. "Uh...hi," he said uncertainly. "Is this Paul Patrillo's residence?"

“Yeah. Who's this?”

“A friend of his. Who are you?”

The woman hesitated before answering. “Ava Gertsen, Paul's landlady. I'm cleaning up while my husband changes the locks.”

Cam's forehead furrowed. What the hell was going on? Did Paul sneak away without paying the rent? There were all sorts of possible reasons for *that*. “Doesn't he live there anymore?”

“Not at the moment.”

Cam's frown deepened. “What do you mean?”

The woman seemed to cover the phone's mouthpiece and speak to someone else nearby. Then her voice abruptly returned. “Someone broke in last night and beat the crap out of him. He's in the hospital.”

The words echoed and faded, as if Cam were on the verge of passing out. His stomach clenched. Then he summoned his will and mentally slapped himself into clarity. “Which one?”

## Chapter Eleven

"Hey, Cameron." Drowsily, Paul smiled. "What a nice surprise. A lot nicer than cops asking questions."

Cam stopped just inside the door and pushed it closed at his back. The second bed, the one nearest him, was empty. That meant he had to cross the room.

He'd kept himself together on the drive over here. Intently focused, he'd managed to fend off the natural impulse to let his imagination fill in the many blanks left by Ava Gertsen. But now, facing a man who bore no resemblance to Paul Patrillo yet spoke in a thickened version of Paul's voice, his legs went rubbery.

"Don't be horrified. It looks worse than it is."

"I hate hospitals," Cam said, a cover-up for his reaction to Paul's condition. His mouth felt numb.

"So do I. Could hardly avoid *this* visit, though." Paul tried to sit up higher, but the effort made him wince in pain and give up.

It was enough to get Cam's feet moving. He hurried up to the bed. "Jesus, don't move if it hurts. Can I get you something?"

"Maybe a morphine milkshake." Paul tried to relax against his pillow. He closed his eyes and laboriously caught his breath.

God, he looked terrible. Judging by the placement of bandages and bruises, he'd taken plenty of hits. His left eye was swollen shut and hideously discolored, and the right didn't look so great either; his nose or cheek was broken—or maybe his nose was broken and his cheek was cut; his lower lip bore the raw red line of a shallow split. And those were only the *visible* injuries.

"Is your purchase safe?" Paul asked.

"Yes."

"Good. Although that's probably immaterial now."

"Why?"

"Edgar won't risk pressing the issue after *this*." Paul lifted his arms by a few inches, apparently indicating the assault he'd suffered.

"Why should he care?" Cam had gotten the distinct impression Edgar wasn't a particularly caring guy.

"Maybe he won't. Maybe I'm just trying to be optimistic."

Not sure what to do or say, Cam continued to stand over Paul. They weren't relatives, and they weren't lovers. They weren't really friends, yet they certainly

weren't strangers. But there was a peculiar sort of intimacy between them—the kind that came from feeling drawn to someone, strongly yet inexplicably—and it kept Cam rooted to the spot. He felt as if he were waiting for instructions.

“You look like shit,” he finally said.

Paul's somewhat-good eye inched down Cam's body. “You don't.”

Cam cleared his throat. “I called your place. To remind you about the papers you'd left behind. Your landlady told me...what happened.”

“They're good shits, Ava and Arnie.” Paul inclined his head toward the side of the bed. “Why don't you have a seat?”

Cam got one of the two chairs positioned opposite the foot of the bed and sat as close to Paul as he could. “What's wrong with you? I mean, you know, physically.” His gaze wandered over the V of bare chest exposed by the hospital gown. That part of the patient looked fine. Very fine, in fact.

Memories of the previous night began to needle Cam.

“Aside from the obvious,” Paul said, “a few cracked ribs and more bruises. I'm just under observation now. They want to make sure I don't have a concussion or any internal injuries. So far, so good. The scans didn't show anything out of the ordinary, and I don't feel any worse.”

Relief washed through Cam. Thank God, he thought, but only said, “That's good. What exactly happened?” Cam's imagination had danced around the edges of all kinds of possibilities. An attack by a jealous ex. A burglary gone awry. A gay-bashing incident. A bar brawl that had led to retribution.

Paul eliminated all of them. “I made the mistake of calling Edgar when I got home last night.”

Queasiness rolled through Cam and momentarily swept aside his relief. “*He* was behind this?”

“Who else?”

Cam seamed his lips and shook his head. Edgar again. Fucking Edgar. “What did you say to...to drive him to *this*?”

“Well, first I reiterated what I'd told him earlier about your purchase being junk and not worth the bother. I thought I had him convinced, until he said, 'I'd still like to see it.' So I had to play my trump card.”

“What trump card?”

“I reminded him what a good memory I have, and if he were to initiate a break-in at the home of one Cameron Waters, or any mischief against Mr. Waters himself, my good memory might just find expression through a pair of loose lips. So around three o'clock in the morning, I got a visit from two very unfriendly men.” Paul shifted, grimaced. “I'm surprised...they didn't sodomize me with a broken bottle.” It took several more seconds for his face to relax.

Cam wished he could just lay hands on Paul and heal him. Gently touch whatever was bruised or broken and make it right again. “Did you recognize them?”

"One of them, vaguely. Don't know his name, though." Paul pawed at his nightstand but obviously couldn't reach what he was after. "Cameron, could you hand me that cup of water?"

Cam was wildly grateful for the chance to do *something*. He added more ice water to the cup from a thermal carafe and then held the bendable straw to Paul's lips. Paul dribbled a little—the cold water must've stung that cut—so Cam lifted a small white towel from the nightstand and tenderly dabbed away the spillage.

"Thank you," Paul whispered.

Cam nodded, his heart flooding with sympathy. "Did you tell the police what you know?"

"Uh-uh. That would've been dangerously counterproductive. I just let them think whatever the hell they wanted to think, which probably has to do with drugs."

"You don't happen to have—"

Paul's eye shifted toward him. "No. Believe it or not, I'm a pretty serious student. I have a few drinks now and then. That's it."

Cam pinched the bridge of his nose and wagged his head in disbelief. "Damn it, Paul, more shit could happen. If Jonns was capable of *this*, what's he going to do next?"

"What he's going to do, Cameron, is hope this doesn't come back to bite him in the ass. That means as long as I leave him alone, he isn't going to push his luck. All he cared about was delivering one last, spiteful message."

"Which was?"

"You threaten me, fuck boy, and *this* is the kind of present you get." Paul let out a limp chuckle and, of course, winced again. "Told you I'm replaceable. Good thing we live in a throwaway society."

Cam didn't see the humor. "So, uh...when do you expect to get out of here?"

"Tomorrow, I think. Maybe the next day. I don't know yet."

Cam lifted his brows in surprise. Unbelievable. The guy could hardly move, and the hospital was kicking him to the curb. "Where are you going to go?"

"Home, of course." Paul gave Cam a wry but limited smile. "I have to clean the blood off the carpeting."

Just the mention of it conjured images that made Cam ill and put him on the brink of both fury and grief. This whole mess sickened him. Paul had only been trying to protect him, and Paul had suffered for it.

"I think your landlady was doing that when I called," Cam said in a cracked voice.

The sound of it caught Paul's attention. He looked concerned. "Cameron, what's wrong?"

Blinking, Cam shook his head and gazed vacantly at his lap.

"Cameron? Look at me."

Cam quickly pinched his nostrils as he sniffed up incipient tear-snot and then drew his fingers over his eyes. He didn't look up.

"Hey," Paul said gently. "Please don't be upset."

"How can you go home?" Cam mumbled.

"By getting a ride from somebody. And not through hitchhiking."

Cam's gaze finally moved up to his face. "But you can't stay at your apartment."

"Why not? I keep up with my rent. And I told you, Edgar won't risk—"

"No, I mean you can't take care of yourself. You're more than half fucking blind. You've got broken ribs, a broken nose, a body full of bruises, Christ knows what else. Besides, the more rest you get, the faster you'll heal."

"What're you saying?"

"I'm just"—Cam lifted and dropped a hand—"I'm just wondering if you have somebody lined up to take care of you."

Silently, Paul regarded him. He obviously hadn't considered his degree of impairment. "Day in and day out, like a live-in nurse?"

Cam nodded.

"I don't know anybody with that kind of free time."

"No colleagues or friends?" Cam was trying to get off a hook he'd just forged for himself. That's what he figured, anyway. Further back in his mind, he found the hook uniquely appealing.

"Fuck no," Paul said. "That's one hell of an imposition. And since I don't have any family..."

Cam licked his lips. "You could stay at my place if you'd like. I still have two and a half weeks of leave coming, and I have that empty guestroom. I can look after you."

"Are you serious?"

Cam sighed and rolled his eyes, although he'd just asked himself the same question. "No, Paul, I'm kidding. What I really want is for you to go back to your apartment and lie there in crippling pain until you rot away."

A corner of Paul's mouth tilted up. "I wouldn't blame you if you did feel that way."

"You got your ass beat because of me. It's the least I can do."

"Whoa, hold on. No no no. I got my ass beat because of *me*."

"That's true, come to think of it." Still, it wasn't enough to erode Cam's compassion.

"You realize we've only known each other for twenty-four hours."

"Closer to thirty, actually."

"You realize you kicked me out of your house last night because of my duplicity, even though my duplicity was gone by then."

Cam dropped his face to his hands. The offer *was* insane. But he couldn't bring himself to retract the invitation. He lifted his head. "It isn't like I'm proposing to you. You're in a jam. So maybe I've got a Good Samaritan complex. Maybe I'm bored. Maybe I'm fascinated by the shit you know and I'd like to learn more about Alain Mobry and automatons and magic."

"Or maybe you just like me." Paul managed another smile, lopsided but charming as hell.

Cam huffed and wagged his head. "Yeah, maybe. And I know I can easily take you down if you try anything. Somebody as messed up as you are doesn't pose much of a threat."

Paul's smiled widened. He flinched and touched his bandaged cheek.

Cam was tempted to kiss it, but he didn't want to get too soft too fast. "Well, do you want to or not? I can't spend all day arguing about it."

"Yes, I want to. I'd love to. Shit, Cameron, I don't know what to say. That's...incredibly kind of you."

Cam shrugged and then voiced what he was *trying* to think. "At least it'll give me something to do."

"So you'll be Joe Buck, and I'll be Ratso Rizzo."

Surprised at the reference, Cam lifted his eyebrows. "*Midnight Cowboy*. I love that movie."

"So do I." Paul extended an arm to the edge of the mattress. "Hey, that's like the third thing we have in common, after knowing American history and being queer. You *are* resigned to being queer, aren't you? Sure seemed that way in the shower."

Cam sputtered into weak laughter. Without realizing it, he'd touched his fingertips to the back of Paul's hand.

That, too, felt right, as if he'd just found something to see and believe in behind the mask of the moment.

So maybe he *was* being rash, driven by wishful thinking as much as Edgar Jonns. He didn't know if it was Paul's charisma to which he was reacting, or the strange, spellbinding tale of Alain Mobry and his world of multifaceted illusion, or a fragment of underdone potato sitting undigested in his stomach. He only knew he saw something in Paul, something worth claiming...or reclaiming. It was a start.

"I'm glad you came," Paul said. "I hated leaving last night while you were thinking what you were thinking."

Cam merely nodded. He wasn't sure if *he* was glad or not. The outcome of any risk was never immediately apparent. But he did feel he'd arrived at a place he needed to be, at least for the time being.

So this was where he'd finally landed: a harbor of uneasy comfort. Behind him, confused seas. Before him, a craggy shore. But maybe, if he let himself be dashed



upon that shore, he'd find a welcoming cushion of grass and moss instead of unforgiving rock.

Maybe he'd find peace.

"I'm sorry," he said.

Paul was still watching him. "For what?"

"Jumping to conclusions when you asked me not to."

Paul turned his hand over and grasped Cam's hand. "A failure to believe."

Cam returned the pressure. "Yes." He crept a little closer to gladness.

"Too bad so many people suffer from that. Miracles can't exist without credulity. As long as one is willing to believe, miracles have opportunity." Paul playfully tugged at Cam's arm. "Now may I have a kiss from those magical lips?"

Cam blushed, heat suffusing his skin from neck to hairline. "Come on, don't embarrass me."

"It would embarrass you to kiss me?"

"That's not it. You're making fun of me."

"No," Paul said soberly. "Cameron, please kiss me. I could use a kiss."

"And I could use a miracle."

"So maybe we'll have plenty of both."

As tenderly as he could, Cam leaned over and touched his lips to the uninjured side of Paul's mouth.

"If we don't drive each other crazy," Cam murmured as he lifted his head.

"There's good crazy, you know, not just bad crazy."

Cam smiled. He was starting to believe.

## Part Two

## Chapter One

As soon as he awoke, Cam wondered why he was on his belly. He never slept on his belly. The foot of the bed had dropped too, putting him on a low incline. Somebody was between his parted legs. The same somebody who must've eased him into a prone position without waking him.

Belly-down made wonderful sense when a pair of hands cupped his buttocks like a soft, sentient vise. Fingers curled into the flesh, heels pressed into the muscles, and thumbs slipped into the cleft.

They obviously belonged to *somebody*. Disembodied hands had never before fondled him while he slept.

*Oh yeah, that's right. Glen. Or is it Doug? Or Greg? One syllable, with a G. I think it's Doug.*

Cam purred into his pillow and lifted his hips slightly to welcome the considerate invader. What a lovely surprise...

Gently, Doug dug in. His thumbs made slow passes along the tender skin within the crevice, inscribing tiny, teasing loops. Down...up...down. Cooler fingers joined the thumbs. Cam closed his eyes and parted his lips. His breath sawed out of his mouth as a new kind of arousal, springing from a whole new source, undulated from the back to the front of him and seemed to tickle the walls of his abdomen. He could hardly believe he was being touched this way. His bed buddy, a little on the coarse side, hadn't seemed the careful type. So much for assumptions.

Cam licked his lips. Anticipation filled him like a force field, making his nerves vibrate.

Doug's fingers did a dainty dance around Cam's entrance but didn't breach it. Instead they withdrew and glided to the sides of Cam's hips. It wasn't a quick, idle movement like setting one's hands on an armrest. The sweep of Doug's palms and fingers was an admiring, nearly loving caress Cam hadn't thought he was capable of making. His fingertips traced the shallow folds beneath Cam's cheeks before he gently gripped the flesh.

Cam almost twisted around then, almost said, *Please don't stop*, but he soon realized Doug wasn't stopping. Doug pressed his lips to Cam's butt, one side and then the other, the kisses slow and savoring. He eased apart the hemispheres. Something slick and moist and cool circled Cam's hole, skated above it, skated below it, returned, and feathered against it. The touch, startling in its intimacy, made Cam quiver from his belly to his shoulder blades. His skin tingled. His eyes rolled up beneath fluttering lids.

Doug was using his tongue now, not timidly, but with bountiful confidence and even more bountiful finesse. He flicked it against the puckered ring, cajoling. He gave a quick suck, like a plea. Cam's cock plumped beneath him as tight sounds, half sighs and half whimpers, crawled up from his throat. He felt as if he were being worked by the hands and mouth of a lover, not a man he'd met mere hours earlier. And not the man who'd done such furious pumping when they'd beat off together.

With an adroit shift of position, Doug used one finger to caress the track to Cam's balls while his tongue kept up its play. Cam squirmed and shuddered out a moan. The combined sensations were new to him and utterly beyond compare. His nerves seemed to gather around and strain toward the stimulation, like a crowd raising its hands toward manna dropping from heaven.

Another series of tongue flicks. A drawn-out lap. And then, arrowing his tongue, Doug probed the hole by a few centimeters. He did it again and again, firmly and rhythmically, his tongue making little swirling movements when it was inside. Cam had full-body shivers now. A fluttery feeling, like the beating of soft wings, rippled throughout his groin and lower abdomen. His balls tightened as his cock swelled.

"Fuck me," he said, his voice constricted with need. "Hurry. I'm ready."

He'd just recently come out. This would be his first time. Grateful he'd stumbled upon so eager and sensitive a lover, he couldn't wait for Doug to fill him.

Movement on the mattress beside him was countered by a stilling of the movement between his legs. Hands and tongue withdrew. His hole continued its spasmodic puckering, matched by a maddening current that ran through his muscles.

"Huh? You say something?"

Cam frowned. That was Doug's voice, thick with sleep. Only it came from his left, not from behind and above him.

An abrupt movement on the mattress jounced Cam. Weight shifted. A leg butted the inside of his left thigh.

"What the...?" It was Doug's voice again, carrying confusion and annoyance.

Light flared from the nightstand lamp on Cam's side of the bed. He blinked against it as he boosted himself onto his elbows and tried to focus on Doug's muscular bulk. Doug wasn't looking at him. Doug was looking past him.

"Well, well. Little Cameron found a playmate." A different voice—and one Cam knew well.

He clumsily flipped onto his back and scooted toward the headboard.

Naked, Paul stood over the bed, his incipient boner shrinking.

"Who are you?" Doug asked. A logical question.

"The invalid who's been locked in the spare room."

Doug shot Cam a befuddled glance before focusing on Paul once more. "You don't look like no invalid." His bleary gaze fixed on Paul's cock.

"I don't look like *an* invalid."

Reality swam away as Cam stared at Paul. His houseguest had been doing this and not his pick-up? He blinked, even more stunned than poor, blindsided Doug, and tried to shed the feeling he was precious to the man who'd been exploring his body so intimately.

"That's what I said," Doug countered. "Why were you locked in another room?"

Cam finally found his voice as his haze of arousal, and shock, dissipated. "He wasn't locked in any damned room. He was just downstairs asleep. Or so I thought."

Paul coolly regarded him. "Where'd you find the bear?"

Cam clamped his hands to his head. "What the hell are you *doing* in here?"

"I thought that was fairly obvious."

"You didn't tell me you had a boyfriend," Doug said to Cam. He sounded both irked and a little hurt.

"I *don't* have a boyfriend. For shit's sake, I just came out—"

"Three weeks ago," Paul said, looking at his wrist as if it bore a watch.

"Then who the fuck *is* he?" Doug was clearly flustered. As if underscoring his frustration, he farted—an oddly high-pitched sound for so beefy a man. Its thin squeal seemed to burrow into the mattress.

Paul frowned at him. "Did you just—"

"Get *out* of here!" Cam scrambled off the bed. As he guided Paul toward the door, he said over his shoulder, "His name is Paul. He's my temporary housemate. Don't worry about it. Go back to sleep."

"Maybe we could have a threesome." Doug obviously became more alert the longer he ogled Paul.

"I think Cameron's already met his group-sex quota for the week."

"Will you please shut the hell up?" Cam hissed into Paul's ear.

Paul tried to step past him and head for the nightstand. "Just let me grab my lube and condoms, would you? Remember, I don't have a sugar daddy to pay for this stuff anymore."

Cam blocked him. "Later."

"Don't you dare use them."

"Christ, Paul, I *do* have my own." Cam managed to guide Paul onto the landing outside the bedroom. "What the hell were you trying to do?"

"Repay you." A shaft of moonlight slicing through an octagonal window made Paul a shadow with features. A tall and handsome shadow that smelled of male heat and clean linen and herbal shampoo.

"For what?" Cam eased the bedroom door closed at his back.

Paul's eyes gleamed as he rolled them upward. "For putting me up. You invited me to stay here when I got out of the hospital. Remember? You've been taking care of me. Remember?"

*"Repay you."* Hardly an act of adoration. Hell, it barely qualified as intimate, regardless of where Paul's mouth had been. "Don't get smart," Cam muttered.

How could he forget taking care of this guy and keeping him entertained for the past three weeks? Watching movies and playing Scrabble with him. Cooking for him. Taking him to doctor appointments and driving nearly thirty-six miles every other day to pick up his mail. Helping bathe him—a unique agony because, even blotched with bruises the color of old boiled-egg yolks, Paul had an irresistible body.

The fresh memory of that masterful rimming sent a pulse through Cam's cock.

Paul reached forward and cupped it, as if he'd sensed the reaction. "Hey, how was I supposed to know that after three weeks out, you'd start turning into a slut?"

Cam jerked backward. *"Shhh."*

"The bear didn't peel your bud, did he?"

"What?"

"Muscle Man in there. It doesn't seem he fucked you. Thank God. That would've been an unpleasant surprise."

"No, he didn't. As if it's any of your business."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why didn't he fuck you?"

"Because we jerked each other off." Why did Cam even tell him? They were starting to seem like fraternity brothers, that's why. Fraternity brothers who happened to be attracted to each other and had once had sex together.

Paul felt Cam's pubic hair. "Sure as shit. Feels like somebody wiped his shoes on your welcome mat. What a waste."

Cam was tempted to touch it and double-check, but he refrained. He was embarrassed enough. "You're making that up. I washed it off. In fact I washed up back *and* front."

"Well, you must've missed some." Paul again reached for Cam's crotch, but Cam eluded his touch. "At least your butt is fresh as an Irish spring."

Truth of the matter was, Cam had always hoped Paul would take his ass's virginity. Paul had certainly expressed interest. But he wasn't in any condition to engage in vigorous activity. He was still on the mend from that beating he'd sustained, and barely ambulatory until just recently. Cam was afraid the slightest wrong move, not to mention the strain of heavy breathing, would recrack his fragile ribs.

Besides, some guy named Henry had started showing up and spending time alone in the guestroom with Paul. He was a good-looking kid in a bookish sort of way—lean and stoop-shouldered, with a mop of wavy black hair and dark brown eyes that peered soulfully from behind stylish glasses. Whenever he made an appearance, Paul's mood mellowed.

"Sorry if my new sex life doesn't live up to your standards," Cam said, "but God knows I've waited long enough for it. I'm not going to take a step this big and then become celibate."

"You idiot, why do you think I was in there?" Paul pointed toward the bedroom just as Cam shushed him again. He minimally lowered his voice. "I don't generally rim a guy in the middle of the night because I need an appetizer before breakfast!"

"How was I supposed to know you'd be sneaking into my bedroom? Especially now that you've got Henry."

"Cameron, I don't 'have' Henry. I don't *wish* to have Henry. I told you, he's a nineteen-year-old undergrad with a crush on me. He kind of serves as my research assistant."

"Yeah, kind of." Cam suspected Henry was researching Paul's anatomy.

"It's true!"

"So what does he do when he comes over here?" Cam asked. "Sit at the foot of the bed and gaze at you longingly while the two of you discuss the history of the theater?" He tried to give the final word a poncey pronunciation—*thee-ah-tuh*—but it sounded silly rather than sardonic. He really had to work on his sardonic.

"Oh for fuck's sake..."

"Or does the intellectual discourse begin *after* he sucks you off?"

A hitching string of snores came from the bedroom. Paul glanced at the door and shook his head. Doug, who was only Cam's second pickup and the first he'd brought home, seemed a nice-enough guy, but he wasn't reflecting well on Cam's taste in men. From now on, Cam vowed, he'd pay more attention to brains and less to brawn. At least until he could figure out what his taste in men *was*.

"Well?" Cam prompted.

Paul shrugged. "Depends."

"Lovely." Cam was disgusted, even though he knew he had no right to be.

"Why don't you get rid of Sir Fartsalot?" Paul said. "Or let him wander through dreamland while you come down to the guestroom? Jesus, Cameron, I've been itching to fuck you since we met. I finally feel good enough to do it."

"You just *think* you feel good. You've got another four weeks of healing ahead of you, at least. Which reminds me, where the hell is your rib belt?"

"Downstairs somewhere." Paul touched his side. "As long as I don't bounce or twist around too much, I should be okay."

"For such a smart man, you are really acting stupid."

"Stupidly."

"What do you want to do, puncture a lung? You shouldn't have even been...doing what you were doing."

"I liked it." Paul grinned. "I'm pretty sure you liked it too."

Growling in frustration, Cam tilted his head back. "That's not the point."

“Cameron, I'm in love with your ass.” Paul leaned forward and palmed a cheek. “What do I have to do, bring it flowers?” His voice had gone all French silk pie. He knew damned well it made Cam crazy when his voice got like that.

“I thought you wanted to repay me.”

“That too.”

The motive irked Cam even more the second time he heard it. “Paul, go back to bed.”

“You coming with me?”

“No. I have company. How would *you* feel if I kicked you out because I'd found a hotter guy to put up?”

“You don't have to kick Conan out. Just spend the rest of the night downstairs. We'll figure out how to safely get my dick into you.”

Cam scratched at his scalp. The proposition was really, really tempting. But disregarding Paul's well-being would be unforgivably selfish. And so would abandoning one man so he could fool around with another on the floor below, in the course of the same night, shortly after a third guy, Henry, had given the second guy head. Hell, that heaped *unforgivably rude* and even *smarmy* onto *unforgivably selfish*.

It was just a bad idea all around.

“I can't.”

“Come on. You know you want to.” Paul smiled alluringly. “You implied I was hotter.”

“Just go to bed.”

The whole go-round exhausted Cam. He leaned against the nearest wall but jumped when his shoulders connected with a picture frame that housed a portrait of his parents. His mother and sister still didn't know about his shift in orientation, which of course hadn't really been a shift at all. His mom *might* have suspected something was up when she came over last week and Paul sauntered out of the guestroom. Cam had simply told her he was looking after a friend who'd recently gotten out of the hospital. It was the truth, as far as it went.

A deep sigh wafted through the moonglow and darkness. “All right.” Paul turned toward the stairway. “You'll probably be bringing home leathermen next.” His fading voice trailed behind him. “Turn your room into a goddamned dungeon.” His footsteps, thumping softly on the stairs' runner, soon receded down the hallway.

Cam hurried down a few steps and leaned over the handrail. “Put your rib belt back on!”

Paul's answer was unintelligible. The guestroom door banged closed. That part of his response was audible enough.

“Like a spoiled brat,” Cam murmured.

The phrase *repay you* continued to rankle him.



## Chapter Two

"That a fuckin' dildo or what?" Doug, freshly showered, his hair a field of dewy, daffodil-colored spikes, thrust his coffee mug at the dining table's centerpiece.

Cam wheeled around the breakfast bar carrying platter of buckwheat pancakes and pork links.

Paul grimaced when he saw the food. He didn't like heavy breakfasts. "It's an object of great sentimental value," he said to Doug. The guy was a barbarian. Except when he talked. His voice was more Annie Alto than Billy Baritone.

They'd formally introduced themselves to each other just minutes before.

"Yeah? Why's that?" Doug poured more coffee from the carafe, dumped in a plantation's worth of sugar, and commenced filling his plate.

"It's what brought Cameron and me together."

"I didn't think you *were* together."

Paul didn't know how to respond. That issue was a bitch to explain. True, he and Cameron hadn't had any sexual interaction since the assault. At first Paul was either in pain or rendered limp by painkillers. Cameron probably figured he didn't require servicing, which was understandable. Getting one's ass kicked and getting one's rocks off were usually not complementary activities, except to a hard-core masochist.

Even after Paul had started feeling better, even after his hormones had begun to rebel and holler, *Fuck this shit; we're sick of being ignored*, he simply couldn't bring himself to request a job, of the blow *or* hand variety. Hell, Cameron had been his companion, nurse, cook, valet, chauffeur, and errand boy. Paul wasn't about to add "sex slave" to the list. How could he say, in all good conscience, *Oh, by the way, once you've finished pissing away your day by driving me to and from the hospital and waiting five hours while I get X-rays and consult with medical professionals, I'd like you to suck my dick*. How tackily presumptuous was that?

So Paul turned to Internet porn and his fist and Henry, while Cameron struck out for the bars. All *those* routes seemed to have done was carry them in opposite directions.

And none of these directions had brought them any miracles.

Cameron took a seat and stabbed two pancakes. "We're *not* together," he said to Doug. "We happened to meet at the flea market where I bought that...thing on the table." He carefully coated the pancakes with flax-oil margarine and drizzled

real maple syrup over the pair. “Then Paul got hurt, and I took him in because he couldn’t look after himself.”

Doug didn’t seem to be processing this very well. The food, however, he ingested with marvelous ease. “So you’re...what? Friends? Fuck buddies? I don’t really get it.”

“I don’t think we do either,” Paul murmured.

The look Cameron gave him wasn’t too difficult to decipher—*don’t embarrass me*—but Paul was more focused on how pretty Cameron’s eyes were in this light. He’d been noticing that kind of thing more and more. Their gazes fused for a moment, then split apart.

Doug nodded and chewed. He poked his fork toward the metal cylinder on the carved ebony base. “So what is it?”

“An artillery shell. We refer to it as the Dick.” Paul sure as hell wasn’t going to tell this cretin it was a priceless antique automaton and he’d almost gotten killed because of it. Maybe bringing it out of storage *wasn’t* such a good idea, but Paul found the mechanism inspiring as he worked on his doctoral dissertation.

Cameron kept his pretty hazel eyes lowered, but a corner of his mouth tilted up. His tawny lashes lay like fledgling feathers on the crests of his cheekbones. Paul wanted to kiss his eyes, his mouth. Son of a bitch had the most inviting lips, full and smooth and beautifully shaped.

Kind of like his ass, except a lot more expressive.

Well, not *that* much more. His ass was pretty damned expressive too. Not like Doug’s, but in a pleasing way, a responsive way.

*God damn.*

Paul swallowed some orange juice, then linked his hands on his lap. His ribs were indeed hurting today. He’d even put his “girdle” back on. But sampling that ass last night had been well worth any subsequent discomfort. He’d had to beat off when he got back to his room.

“Aren’t you going to eat?” Cameron asked him.

“I had some granola before you came down. And a vitamin.”

“I see you’re wearing the rib belt.” Subtext: *I told you so.*

“Shows off your pecs,” Doug said.

Cameron pursed his lips slightly but didn’t look up from his plate.

“You think so?” Paul wore only pajama bottoms. Putting on a shirt could literally be a pain, unless he had help. He languidly rubbed his chest, making his nipples a tad more prominent, and wondered why he was trying to be provocative. He didn’t give a rat’s ass about Doug.

Except...he did. This hulk had been fondling Cameron, kissing him, sleeping with him. And making him come. So maybe he wanted to show Cameron what a shallow man-whore the guy was.

"You need to eat better, keep your strength up," Doug said, assuming an air of authority. "I can tell you been banged up. What happened, anyway?"

"Well, I entered this ninja competition..."

Although Cameron snorted, Doug didn't scoff. "You got a nice body." He eyed Paul from face to feet and back. "You should take care of it."

"Or somebody should," Paul muttered.

Doug smirked around a mouthful of food and gave Paul his best come-hither look.

"Why don't you call Henry?" Cameron, acting unfazed, pushed back from the table and grabbed the coffee carafe.

Aware of the little barb in that statement, Paul watched him walk to the kitchen. He enjoyed the way Cameron moved—with a straight-backed yet graceful efficiency perfect for his wiry body type. He was maybe five-eleven, slightly but tightly built. A lot of gay guys with a body that slender and an ass that outstanding got too swishy. Not Cameron. He'd been living straight until a few weeks ago, and it showed. Besides, he was far too self-effacing to be an attention hound.

"So what do the two of you have planned for today?" Paul asked with strenuous nonchalance.

"I told you yesterday I have two showings," Cameron said from the kitchen. No wonder he was dressed in his casually conservative, I'm-a-wholesome-American-boy clothes.

"Goin' to the gym first, though," Doug added as he chewed.

Cameron returned to the table with a full carafe of coffee and more pancakes. He nudged them from a small plate onto the platter and resumed his seat.

"Are you serious?" Paul said to him. "You're turning into a gym bunny?"

"Working out once in a while won't make me a gym bunny. There's nothing wrong with firming and toning." Cameron's voice kept getting starchier. "You obviously work out somewhere."

"Yeah, in my apartment. Haphazardly." Leaning forward, Paul tried to capture his gaze. "You don't *need* firming and toning. Your physique is perfect."

"It could use more definition." Cameron didn't look at him. In fact, Cameron was looking at him less and less, which made Paul more and more determined to get under his skin.

He began his incursion by turning to Doug. "Did *you* feed him this 'definition' shit?"

Cameron's gaze snapped up. "Lay off. It's none of your goddamned business what I do with my body."

More subtext, even weightier.

Paul eased away and rested against the back of the chair. Things were getting tense around here. "You're right," he said quietly. "Bulk up to your heart's content."

He and Cameron had had a peculiar chemistry from the start, an unstable mix of fascination and physical attraction, wariness and wishful thinking. As Cameron had nursed Paul back to health, the ingredients had begun to reduce to a grudging fondness. But pulling other men into the pot had upset their delicate dynamic. They simply hadn't known each other long enough to define their relationship, to render it into something balanced and immutable.

What the hell *were* they to each other? More than host and houseguest, that was for damned sure, but a whole lot less than lovers.

Paul got up. Doug, the impolite douche bag, gave him another head-to-toe scan. Paul had suspected from the start that Cameron was a natural bottom with submissive tendencies, but the fact he'd gravitate to someone like Doug was pretty freaking appalling.

Maybe he was overcompensating for all those years of wanting men and not having them. Maybe he just needed to wallow for a while in the biggest masses of meat he could find. Paul couldn't be of much help to Cameron in *his* condition, so it was only natural for Cameron to look elsewhere. It was also natural that his zeal for homo sex would be misdirected for a while.

As Paul walked away, Cameron called his name. He turned.

"Want me to pick up anything for you?"

"Yeah. A good lay. Just leave the STDs behind."

Doug chortled. Cam seamed his lips and shook his head.

\* \* \*

After calls to his landlady and his thesis adviser, Paul took a shower, grateful there was some hot water left, and wrestled on a pair of jeans and a flannel shirt. He had to work on his dissertation, *had* to, regardless of the thought that kept chewing at him: maybe it was time he went back to his own place and took care of himself. It wouldn't be impossible at this stage of his recovery, just inconvenient.

Pondering this, he set up his laptop on the dining table. He grabbed some books and a portable file full of index cards from a stack of research materials that had been growing in a corner of the guestroom.

Cameron had gone back to work at the real-estate office after his monthlong leave, so he was no longer available round the clock. Paul was getting used to fending for himself. Moreover, it was clear their hook-up habits would continue to be a source of friction. He and Cameron didn't need that. They'd been developing a solid friendship, and allowing it to be undermined by other swinging dicks would be both absurd and deeply regrettable.

Before he began working, Paul eyed the metal cylinder in the center of the table. He was in awe of Mobry's Dick. After three weeks of studying and photographing this incredible find, he still marveled at its ingenuity, delighted in its carefree obscenity. And puzzled over its occult significance.

*Wish. Come. True.*

"Sure would be nice," he murmured, touching the base.

He considered activating it, a tricky process both he and Cameron had come to master. No, he decided, he didn't have time to indulge himself. He had to get to work. Activating the automaton required patience, concentration, and a very deft touch.

Close to two hours later, his cell phone chirped out its jazzy ringtone. The thing was buried beneath a dune of scribbled notes, printouts from Internet sites, a slew of old periodicals, and photocopied pages from Robert-Houdin's *Confidences d'un Prestidigitateur* and Dormeyer's *Gilded Age, Tarnished Stage*. Scowling at the interruption, Paul dug the cell free and answered with a clipped "yeah."

"Are you working?"

Familiar as Cameron's voice was, the sound of it made Paul feel fuzzy around the edges as well as inside. "Yes, I am. Making pretty good progress too."

"Sorry to bother you, but I just wanted to see how you're doing. You're still not used to functioning on your own."

Paul slipped off his reading glasses. "I'm not in a full-body cast. I *can* get around."

"How're your ribs?"

"A little achy."

"You wearing the belt?"

Smiling, Paul sat back. Cameron the Caregiver was always like this—concerned, solicitous. Conscientious to a fault, actually. It was touching. "Yes, mother."

"Need anything?"

*You.* The thought just formed, unbidden. *I need you.* "No, nothing. Thanks for asking, though. Cameron, I've been thinking..." Paul hadn't planned on bringing up his departure—not over the phone, anyway—but that abrupt swell of feeling had spooked him. Emotional dependency had to be far more treacherous than physical dependency. "Maybe it's time I went back to my apartment."

Two seconds of silence, then, "What brought *this* on?"

"I do have my own place, you know. And you have...a life to attend to."

More silence.

"Cameron?"

"I've got to go. We'll talk about it when I get home."

"There isn't much to talk about. I'm well enough to—"

"Just don't do anything about it yet. Okay?"

"Are you coming home alone?"

"Yes, I'm coming home alone."

"These days it doesn't hurt to ask."

Minutes after Paul tossed the phone aside, it rang again. He answered more civilly.

"Hello, Paulie."

Only one person called him by that detested name. Paul froze. His stomach seemed to fold in on itself. Rage and revulsion, along with a hard slap of apprehension, made his heartbeat accelerate like an uncontrolled trip-hammer. He would've hit the disconnect button if perverse curiosity hadn't overridden his other reactions.

"How are you?" asked Edgar Jonns, cool as a slab of cement in winter.

Now the rage rose to the top. "Fuck off."

Just as Paul lowered the phone, fighting an impulse to pitch it against the wall, his former patron said, "Don't hang up."

Paul's fractured ribs stitched hurt into his side, reminding him this was the very man responsible for his pain. He tried to calm his breathing. "What more do you want from me?" he asked in a low voice stripped of inflection. "Why can't you just leave me alone?"

"Where are you, Paulie? Seems you haven't been staying at your little hovel."

Fuck. So this bastard and his flying monkeys had been nosing around Paul's building. "I moved out."

"No, you didn't. Your landlords say you're still a tenant."

"I moved out temporarily." His tone curdled. "So a friend could take care of me. I don't think I need to tell you why that's been necessary."

"I'm sorry our relationship had to end the way it did." The statement was actually a shade rueful. "I enjoyed your companionship. To a point."

"There was no companionship," Paul said, suddenly thinking of Cameron. The burble of warmth he felt was fleeting but undeniable. "You used me, and I got compensated for it. Then I got hospitalized for it." His gaze moved to Mobry's Dick. "Now if you called to pressure me again about that piece of crap from the flea market—"

"I don't believe it *is* a piece of crap."

"It's *junk*," Paul said. "Waters put it in storage somewhere. He hoards shit."

"And people?"

"What?"

"Isn't that where you are? Holed up with your cute hoarder?"

"You're crazier than I thought," Paul said with a brittle laugh. "I hardly know the guy. You think he trusts me enough to—"

"He's an upscale real-estate broker, isn't he? With Bell-Jablon, I believe."

A fresh wave of fury swept Paul's fear and caution aside. "Listen, you prick, if you start stirring this shit all over again—"

"I hope you're not about to threaten me," Edgar said as if he were advising Paul against buying a particular shirt.

He didn't have to be any more explicit; he didn't have to roar in outrage. His implication came through loud and clear. *You know what happened before when you threatened me.*

Rather than act chastened, which would only have encouraged further bullying, Paul met Edgar's implication with one of his own. "Of course not. I don't like repeating myself."

"Maybe your intelligence is finally working to your advantage," Edgar said.

Maybe it was. Shortly after Paul had gotten out of the hospital, he'd made a written record of everything he knew about Edgar's shady dealings. Cameron had stashed the printout in his own safe-deposit box, just in case Paul met with further misfortune.

"I hope so," Paul said. "I've got a thesis to finish. That's all I care about right now. So let's just agree to part ways."

Dramatically, Edgar sighed. "As much as I hate losing a companion with so many...assets, I'm more than happy to be rid of you. You're a cocky son of a bitch, Paulie. And not in a good way. I like my boys young, dumb, and full of cum. You only meet two of those criteria."

"Then why the hell did you call me?"

"To ask you a question."

Paul closed his eyes and rubbed his neck. A sullen pain had lodged there. Its knotted tendrils began to creep toward his temples. "You really need to quit worrying that bone, man. I told you the hunk of metal Waters found at the flea market is just that. It's probably some art student's idea of sculpture. And even if it *were* an antique automaton, I guarantee it wouldn't contain a rare diamond. I've been studying Alain Mobry and his circle for years—"

"And *that*," Edgar barked, startling Paul, "is exactly why I know you're a lying sack of shit. Right after the twink bought that fucking piece, you were more excited than if you'd been offered the perfect ass of every perfect young buck on the face of the planet."

"I misidentified it! I do make mistakes!"

"You sure the fuck do, pretty boy. But not when it comes to your *other* area of expertise—eighteen-nineties stage magicians."

"There's no goddamned yellow diamond, Edgar. It's only a legend. Mobry had no interest whatsoever in rare gems. The only material things he cared about were related to his work. Besides, he was *not* insanely wealthy. Let the fantasy go, for Christ's sake."

Their exchange had become intolerably wearying, and all the more so because Paul was telling the truth. He'd seen the automaton operate a dozen times in the past three weeks. The diamond it held was so relatively small and unremarkable, it couldn't have been worth more than a couple of hundred bucks. Less, probably. Still,

he wasn't about to show Edgar Jonns this invaluable clockwork just to prove his point. Edgar wasn't only a crass, controlling, vindictive asshole, he was the asshole who'd instructed two of his minions to batter the piss out of Paul...with vicious zeal. He wasn't coming anywhere *near* Mobry's Dick.

"I'm almost inclined to believe you about the diamond," Edgar said. "I haven't decided yet. But there's something else, something you've been babbling about since I met you."

Paul rested his forehead in his hand. He wanted simply to hang up. He wanted Edgar to go away and stay away, so he could just get on with his life. But he'd jostled this beehive by getting involved with the bastard, by going for that honeycomb of financial security, and now he had to deal with the consequences.

"Paulie?"

"What? And don't fuckin' call me that."

"Just answer a question. That's all you have to do to be rid of me."

"You'll get off my back and stay off? Along with your squadron of Neanderthals?" Paul nearly made another threat then, nearly said, *Because if you don't, I'm taking you down. I'll blow the whistle on the assault and on your whole scummy little empire. You're not getting any more free passes from me.* But he couldn't. Cameron was involved in this too, however unwillingly, and that meant his welfare was also at stake.

"You have my word," Edgar said.

Paul choked out a scoffing laugh. "Your word. Just ask your fucking question, Edgar. Then disappear. I shit you not, my patience is at an end."

"Okay. There was this other thing about Mobry that really diddled your nuts. You thought he could make *real* magic, that he messed around with the occult and maybe harnessed certain powers."

"Something like that," Paul said quietly. He stared at the Dick.

"Whenever you were drinking, you *really* spouted off about that shit."

The reminder prompted a vague half-smile. "Liquor always did loosen my tongue." *And my libido.*

"You jabbered about how he conjured a gorgeous male assistant who was actually his own double. And how he maybe even *became* that guy."

Paul felt a little dazed. "Yes, Puck. Alain's idealized version of himself." He cleared his throat and tried to clear his mind. "That was just some fancy of mine. It didn't even qualify as a theory. My imagination—"

"Hey, I know you, Patrillo," Edgar said. "You *believed* what you were saying. You thought it had something to do with wish granting, that Mobry had figured out how to make wishes come true, and he'd boasted about constructing a kind of magic lamp for that purpose. In the form of an automaton."



"Like Aladdin's lamp," Paul said, fading again, fading into his fantasy or illusion or delusion—whatever the psychological quirk was that made him feel a connection to Alain Mobry and the mysterious, elusive Puck.

"Yeah, that's it," said Edgar. "Like Aladdin's lamp. So *did* he ever make the thing?"

Reverently, Paul touched Mobry's masterpiece. "I don't know," he said, his voice barely above a whisper.

But suddenly he did know. This fanciful clockwork automaton was indeed the magician's version of Aladdin's lamp. The words *wish, come, true* incised into the moonstones weren't simply a reference to a man's satisfaction at reaching orgasm. Mobry had built this piece for someone he'd hoped would become his lover. Granting a wish was his way of showing his gratitude.

"You sure you don't know?" Edgar asked, insinuating just the opposite. He was obviously skeptical of everything Paul said, at least now. Edgar was shrewd enough to realize his former playmate was no longer inclined to share anything with him.

"What I do know," Paul said, "is there's no written record of Mobry's constructing such a miraculous piece. A man thinking he can do something and actually doing it are two entirely different realities. When I was a kid, I believed I'd become Batman's successor. People are irrepressible dreamers, Edgar. Take another jaunt to Vegas if you need to be reminded of that."

"But you were convinced—"

"I was drunk, that's what I was. And indulging my own wishful thinking."

Paul knew he'd been making sense, because Edgar was thoughtfully silent for a moment. "Mobry was the only magician of that period who dabbled in the occult?"

"As far as I know. But I sure as shit don't know everything." With no little sarcasm, Paul added, "Although I'm flattered by your faith in my expertise, I'm not a time traveler or a psychic. I'm hardly privy to everything that happened in the world before I became a cognitive creature."

Not everything, he thought, but some things. And damned if I'll share that conviction with you ever again.

There was another brief stretch of silence. "Okay, Paulie. Go back to your miserable life. I don't have any further use for you."

Paul was about to disconnect when Edgar's voice again came through. "Oh, by the way, you'll find a substantial deposit has been made to your bank account. It should cover your recent expenses and keep you comfortable for a while. Just my way of saying thanks for the memories."

## Chapter Three

Cam set the food he'd brought home on the breakfast bar, then crossed the hall to the guestroom. He didn't have to listen before knocking; there wasn't a vehicle in the driveway. That meant neither Henry nor some other somebody was here. Paul was alone. When there was no answer to Cam's three soft raps, he eased the door open and quietly padded inside. Ambient sunlight from the west side of the house crept in with him.

The room smelled of Paul now. The scent brought Cam a strange comfort, like eating homemade macaroni and cheese.

He paused beside the bed just to look, just to take in the scarred but lovely scenery. Although he vaguely felt his mouth move into a musing smile, he didn't bother pulling it in. No one was watching him.

Paul was asleep. He lay on his back, head facing away from the door and one knee bent, the button of his jeans undone and the fly slightly lowered, his worn flannel shirt parted. Its sides fell in uneven folds on either side of his chest. The fool had taken off his rib belt again.

It was never easy, seeing him like this—still and vulnerable and inviting, his tousled curls staining the pillow like a storm cloud against a pale blue sky. The spray of hair on his chest, a bit darker, always reminded Cam of fine metal shavings.

When he was a kid, he'd found a cheap handheld game at a garage sale and gladly forked over a dime to assume ownership. It was nothing more than a silly-looking man's face under plastic, with a sprinkling of black steel fur at the bottom of the shallow case and a small magnetic stylus that allowed you to arrange the flecks on the cartoon head. You could give the guy a beard or mustache or funny hairdo, make bristles sprout from his nose or ears. Primitive as it was, the game had entertained Cam whenever he sat on the crapper.

Only, Paul's chest hair was much softer than steel sprinkles.

Cam suddenly wanted to rub his cheek against that chest, kiss the demure, dusty-rose peaks of Paul's nipples. *His* muscles didn't need definition. Their burnished curves and low, hard mounds flowed as smoothly as lines from a calligrapher's pen.

For a week after the assault, Cam had had no desire for Paul. He wouldn't allow himself to have any. It would've been shamefully inappropriate and made him feel like some lecherous old pervert. But once Paul's recovery was well under way, all that studious repression came to an end.

The knuckles of Paul's right hand, scraped and puffy a few weeks ago, had healed fairly quickly. At least he could work a keyboard now. Cam had been surprised to see the injury, which he hadn't noticed on his first visit to the hospital; he'd sat on the left of Paul's bed. "*You fought back?*" he'd asked, hoping the question didn't seem insulting. And Paul had answered, "*What else was I supposed to do? Pray? Wring my hands and plead with them not to hurt me? Shit, they were pulling me out of bed before I knew what was happening. So yeah, I got some licks in.*" Then he'd added, "*I've been in my share of scuffles. Growing up openly gay and parentless made me a popular target. But it didn't make me a passive one.*"

The swelling of his blackened eye had diminished, leaving behind a couple of purplish charcoal arcs, as if Paul had tried to apply guyliner in the dark while he was drunk. His nose apparently felt fine—good enough to wear his reading glasses, anyway, which now lay on the nightstand—but it would be another couple of weeks before the bones were solidly mended. The bruises on his body were fading; the cuts on his face, sealing. It was mostly his ribs that needed pampering now.

Yet that stubbornly defiant son of a bitch had again removed his rib belt.

Cam walked to the side of the bed. Gingerly, he sat on the edge. Paul stirred. His eyelids shuttered and lifted on a depthless twilight blue.

"I was dreaming," he said with a touch of quiet wonder, as if the dreams beguiled him. He absently placed a hand on Cam's thigh, his touch as languorous as his voice.

Warmth filtered through Cam's pant leg. "About what?"

Paul's smile was distant, bemused. He shook his head. "Strange stuff."

"You hungry?" Cam asked.

Paul's hand slipped away. He rubbed his face. "Yeah, now that you mention it." Using his arms and legs, he carefully boosted himself into a sitting position. "What time is it?"

"Close to five."

Paul's gaze slid down Cam's body. "You don't look any bigger."

The comment took a moment to register. When it did, Cam smiled. "One session at the gym isn't going to turn me into Arnold Schwarzenegger." He got up and retrieved the rib belt, which Paul had tossed onto a reading chair. "Put this on, and we'll have some sesame chicken."

Making a face, Paul reluctantly took it from Cam's hand. "When are you going to see Tarzan again?"

"Never. We're not exactly compatible. Need some help with that?"

"If you wouldn't mind. How'd your showings go?"

Trying to focus on the rib belt rather than the torso it cinched, Cam secured the closures. "Mixed. One could result in a sale. The other I don't have much hope for."

"Good commission?"

“Very good. If everything pans out.”

Cam rose from the bed before temptation got the better of him, and headed back to the kitchen. He set two places at the breakfast bar since Paul's stuff was still spread over the table, and he microwaved the chicken just long enough to give it some warmth but not long enough to toughen it. A disconcerting thought again began to nettle him. *What if Paul's serious about leaving?*

He didn't know whether to counter that suggestion or go with it. What he did know was that he normally hated November—a sere and dreary month when hunters were afoot and wintry cold began to seep into one's bones—but this year he didn't mind it at all.

Paul wasn't nearly as talkative while they ate dinner as he normally was. He seemed pensive, and his relative quiet made Cam uneasy.

“Is something wrong?” Cam finally asked. “You seem preoccupied.”

“I'm okay.” Paul wiped his mouth with a napkin and took a drink of water. He swiveled his stool to face Cam. “Now, about my leaving—”

“You really shouldn't,” Cam said without any forethought.

Paul's eyebrows rose.

“It wouldn't be wise. You still can't get around all that easily.” Cam didn't know why the hell his face felt warm, why his heart pattered. He got off his stool, went around the breakfast bar, and grabbed up the dishes. “Besides, *someone* has to keep hounding you about wearing that damned belt.”

“Cameron, this shit with Henry and Rocky and whoever else comes along—”

“Who's Rocky?” Cam asked from the sink. He knew Paul meant Doug. He just didn't want to entertain the possibility their sex lives were buffing up some static between them.

“You know who I mean. Doesn't matter, though. He could be anybody.” The stool squealed as Paul swiveled. “I can't begin to tell you how much I hate it that I'm...impaired. Not that you'd stop seeing other guys if I weren't, and not that I'd expect you to. But it's just awkward, you know?” Paul spoke haltingly, which was just as unusual as Paul not speaking at all.

Cam turned and rested his butt against the sink. “It doesn't put me out to have you here. Honestly.” His thorax felt tight, as if he were the one wearing a rib belt.

“But do you *want* me here?”

“Yes, I want you here,” Cam said with a shrug, trying not to betray the small coil of desperation behind the words. It was unnerving, feeling as dependent on Paul as Paul had been on him. “I enjoy your company. Just don't barge into my bedroom in the middle of the night.”

One side of Paul's mouth lifted. The imp had returned. “How about if I check the driveway for any strange vehicles and *then* barge into your bedroom?”

“You really need to rest up and let yourself heal. Seriously.”

“I really need some touch. Seriously.”

"You know that's not a problem." Cam grabbed the takeout containers off the breakfast bar and chucked them in with the burnable trash. "Somebody's bound to take care of you. You're not exactly Quasimodo."

Cam wanted to be the designated doer—man, did he ever—but the appearance of Henry and the likely presence of other men in the background of Paul's life made him skittish. Cam had only been out for three weeks; he might suffer through comparison with the others. Worse, he might read too much into sexual interaction with Paul. At this early stage of his coming-out, he didn't need misplaced sentiment messing with his head.

"Yeah, okay, I've never been at a loss for partners," Paul admitted without vanity. "But it isn't all that satisfying, sitting or lying there like a pornographic mannequin while somebody services me. I mean, it does the trick, but it isn't the same as hugging and tumbling and just generally getting wrapped up and lost in somebody else."

Paul slipped off the stool and came into the kitchen. He grabbed Cam's wrist. For a few disorienting seconds, Cam thought Paul was about to pull him close, kiss him, make another argument for sharing a naked, feverish fuck. Cam wasn't sure how long he could keep resisting those persuasions. The gorgeous man who stood before him, shirt open and beautifully molded chest rising and falling, had made him light-headed since the moment they'd met. But that wasn't a good-enough reason for jeopardizing his recovery.

Either that, or maybe, just maybe, he wouldn't be able to stand the thought of sharing Paul once their bodies had joined.

Exclusivity was a ridiculous wish. Both of them were young and frisky and free. *Shit, if I told him that, he'd probably guffaw and say, You mean, like a couple of colts in the lush green pasture of manlove?* But Cam couldn't shake his ingrained notion that once he gave of himself to that degree, fidelity was in order.

Paul spared him the agony of having to fend off another come-on. He simply said, "Cameron, let's go out tonight."

"Where?"

"The Corral. You drive, and I'll mentor you." Paul smiled.

"What does *that* mean?" Cam asked with uncertain laughter. Since the Corral was a gay bar, he could make an educated guess.

"Give you the benefit of my experience. Steer you toward the right guys." Paul's hand fell away from Cam's wrist. "Judging by what you brought home last night, you don't know how to cruise worth a shit."

"It's not like I'm looking for a life partner, you know."

"Yeah, I know. But there are good hook-ups and not-so-good hook-ups. You need to be more discriminating."

Skeptical, Cam narrowed his eyes. "I think you just want to do some cruising yourself."

"No, I swear. I'm in no condition to show anybody a good time."

"You didn't seem to think that last night."

"And I paid for it this morning." Paul sighed. "Let's just do it, okay? I need to go somewhere other than examining rooms."

Hands on hips, Cam looked down. He rolled his tongue around his mouth and considered. "All right."

Paul clapped him on the shoulder. "Great. I'll go get ready." He headed for his room.

Not the guestroom. *His* room.

Cam called after him, "Just be sure to wear—"

"Yeah, yeah."

\* \* \*

Paul looked great. Paul smelled great. Paul was sized up as soon as he walked through the Corral's door. Before he and Cam had even made it to the bar, he'd exchanged greetings with a half dozen guys.

"Looks like you'll be the star of *this* show," Cam said as they bellied up.

Paul waved the observation aside. "I know people, that's all. They're not even friends." He ordered a dry martini and put in Cam's request for an Irish coffee.

The Corral was a tolerable fake roadhouse with a bare-bones Western theme. The lights weren't blinding; the music wasn't deafening. Although just off the freeway, it was in a rural area and closer to Cam's house than the trendier and more frenetic club he'd been to last night in the city, the place where he'd found Doug. In fact, the Corral was the first gay bar he'd ever ventured into. And that had been a mere week ago.

He couldn't remember the name of the guy who'd picked him up that evening, just that he was a tattooed trucker who was spending the night at a large oasis not far from the bar. They'd sucked each other off in the sleeper of his cab, which smelled of diesel fuel, old smoke, and greasy vinyl. Cam had been wearing his Aneros Maximus, a primo plug, and he'd come hard. Afterward, feeling thoroughly scuzzy, he'd driven straight home and vowed never again to go hunting for casual sex.

Until the following weekend, which happened to have begun last night.

Paul paid for their drinks and grabbed his martini off the bar. "Let's find a table with a decent vantage point."

Cam sidled past him and lifted the coffee mug. "Good idea. You don't need to get jostled."

"Oh, I need to get jostled," Paul said, "just not by a bunch of drunken screamers."

Cam glanced around them. "Nobody's acting up."

"Not yet. Getting loud and stupid takes time."

"You mean it takes alcohol consumption."

Paul scanned the Corral's spacious interior. "That's how time is measured in these places."

They took a serpentine route around the perimeter of the sparsely populated dance floor. In another hour or so, it would likely be crammed with writhing bodies. Paul pointed, apparently indicating a table that suited him, just as a well-proportioned guy who looked like a freakin' Tommy Hilfiger model—merino wool turtleneck, corduroy chinos, short hair artfully mussed—appeared next to him and asked, "Are you two together?"

Paul glanced at Cam. "Uh, sort of."

The man kept pace with them. "*How* sort of? I just want to know if you'd like to dance."

"Not yet," Paul said. "I want to enjoy my cocktail first."

"Catch you later, then." After flashing a suggestive smile, the guy strode away.

"Fuck." Paul sipped at his drink, then set it on the table and pulled out a chair.

Cam sat before taking a drink. "What's wrong?"

"That guy seemed like your type."

"He wasn't interested in me."

"Exactly. So we have to scratch *him* off the list." Paul rested his arms on the table and leaned toward Cam. "Okay, here's how we'll do it. If somebody who strikes your fancy asks you to dance, go ahead and dance. Or *you* ask somebody."

"I'm not much of a dancer," Cam said.

"You can handle the slow stuff, can't you?"

"Well, yeah. I just start looking like a malfunctioning robot when the beat picks up."

Paul grinned. "Man, I'd love to see it."

"No. You'd break more ribs laughing."

That alone made Paul laugh. He briefly curled his fingers over Cam's. The breadth and noticeable veining of the back of Paul's hand belied the cool softness of his palm.

Confessions, shared amusement, spontaneous touches—they all bespoke that indefinable closeness Cam found so gratifying yet so bewildering. "I still haven't gotten the hang of dancing with men," he said, spurred on by that closeness. "There's no protocol like there is for dancing with women. I never know where to put my hands."

Paul leaned forward. "Simple solution. Take your cues from your partner. Put your hands wherever it feels most natural, based on how he holds you."

Nibbling at his lip, Cam nodded. The only other times he'd gone to bars, he'd more or less parked his ass in one spot and waited to get hit on. He'd only danced once.

"Just don't invite anybody to join us," Paul said. His breath smelled of martini, pleasantly piquant. "We might not be able to get rid of him once he's at the table. When the dance is over, we'll compare notes. You give me your impression of the guy; then I'll give you my impression. Don't exchange numbers with him unless you get the go-ahead from me."

"Are you serious? You're going to screen the men I talk to?"

"That's why I'm here, Cameron." Paul sat back. "Now, do you see anybody you like?" He took another drink.

*Yeah, you.* Damned if it wasn't the truth. Cam blew out a breath. Paul was a bigger distraction than he'd anticipated. It was going to be hard to gauge his attraction to anybody else.

"Shit, I don't know."

"Relax and look around. Just don't pick another bottom, for God's sake."

The admonition irked Cam. "I don't know why you insist on pigeonholing me."

Paul shrugged as his gaze wandered from dance floor to tables to bar. "You are what you are."

"You can't be sure what I am. *I'm* not even sure what I am."

Paul gave him a let's-get-real look. "Cameron, you sure as shit aren't a power top."

"That doesn't mean I wouldn't like switching now and then."

*That* shut Paul up. Cam took another sip of coffee, reached in his pocket for a mint, popped it in his mouth, and rose from the table.

"You gonna trip the light fantastic now?" Paul asked with a smirk. "Do I need to tighten my girdle to keep my ribs in place?"

"Just get your damned notepad ready."

And so began the sifting and winnowing.

Cam danced with four guys as Paul watched. In fact, he watched so intently, Cam had trouble concentrating on his partners. After each dance, an evaluation.

Contestant Number One alternately whistled through his nose and hummed to the music. Droned, actually. "Not good," Paul said, "if you ever plan on having sex with the guy." He decided Number Two lacked subtlety because he had "Roman hands and Russian fingers." The assessment made Cam groan once he caught the pun. Number Three was "too starchy and bland."

"How do you know?" Cam asked. "He hasn't gotten within ten yards of you."

"Cameron," Paul said, as if explaining that water couldn't freeze if it was boiling, "he *exudes* starchy and bland. Like factory-made pasta served without any sauce."

As the evening advanced, the frequency of slow songs increased. One sultry ballad after another spun itself from the fading notes of its predecessor. When Contestant Number Four didn't seem inclined to let Cam go, it was obvious Paul



had finally lost his patience. Cam couldn't blame him for being sick of sitting in that hard chair as if his butt were welded to it, sick of turning down invitations to dance because he was playing the role of duenna.

He got up and cut in.

"Are you sure you're up to this?" Cam asked.

"You bet I am. So just be quiet and cooperate."

Immediately the dance was different from Cam's others, which had all begun with a moment of awkward hesitation as the men positioned their bodies. Paul's right arm slipped around Cam's waist; Cam curled his left hand over Paul's shoulder, his arm tight against Paul's back. Their free hands interlocked and drew snugly between their bodies.

Two seconds and they were sealed together, moving like a braided cord in a breeze.

Paul eased back by a couple of inches and tenderly brushed a strand of Cam's hair back into the layout of its perfect trim. "Are you having fun?" he asked. "I mean, not just tonight, but whenever you go out and get all gay and everything."

Cam responded with a muted chuckle. "I wouldn't call it fun. I just, you know..."

Paul nodded. "I know. I want you to be careful, though. Okay?"

"I will. You've been a good mentor."

Paul barked out a laugh. "What I've probably been, Cameron, is a fool."

"How?"

Pulling him close again, Paul said, "Let's just dance."

"Why didn't you put your hands on my ass?" Cam murmured. He hadn't felt this content in longer than he could remember.

"Do you *want* me to put my hands on your ass?"

"Only if you have an extra pair." Cam nestled his face in the crook of Paul's neck, felt Paul's head rub gently against his. "I like this."

"So do I." The quiet, low rumble of Paul's voice vibrated into Cam's chest. "Very much."

Cam's feet seemed too heavy to lift off the floor. He rested his mouth against Paul's pulse point. Beneath a prickle of whiskers, humid warmth glazed his lips. He tasted a hint of salt. He smelled a headier distillation of the guestroom's scent.

Quite naturally, their interlocked fingers loosened, and their arms went around each other's body. Paul stroked one hand over Cam's back; the other, over his butt. Cam let his fingers conform to Paul's shoulders, then his nape and the back of his skull. His hair felt like a cascade of embroidery thread.

At that moment, he seemed like a fairy-tale prince.

Cam's hips pressed forward, an uncontrollable reaction.

"You're feeling a little chubby below the waist, Cameron."

"Damn, Paul. Damn. I really..."

"What?" Paul said, his lips moving against Cam's ear, his cock sporadically butting Cam's. "What's bothering you?"

As if he didn't know.

A shift of their heads, hair briefly catching and light stubble rasping, and they were kissing. Kissing with gentle fervor, Cam's hand forking farther into Paul's hair, Paul's hand coming around and up to cradle the side of Cam's face. They were both breathing hard. Too hard for Paul to be breathing, Cam thought, just as another customer pinballed into them, and a stifled grunt came from Paul's throat. He eased backward, his face pinched in pain.

"God damn it," he whispered, flattening a hand against his side.

Cam helped him back to the table.

Paul slid the martini glass toward Cam as soon as they were seated. "Get me another drink, would you?"

"I think we should go. It's too crowded in here."

"Just get me another drink, Cameron." Grimacing, Paul shifted on the chair and tried surreptitiously to rearrange his cock. "I shouldn't have kissed you. Kissing you does things to me. Now I want to shove you against a wall."

Cam's dick found the confession titillating. "And do what?" he asked, his throat as dry as last year's fallen leaves. How stupid of him to want the details. He had no relief to look forward to other than his hand and a ribbed stroker.

Paul's dusky blue eyes, lids seductively lowered, fixed on Cam's face. "Right now I'd settle for dry-humping you until we both came. I wouldn't give a shit if my zipper tattooed itself onto my cock and I had to walk around all evening with my junk stuck to my underwear."

"You want to go into the basement?" Cam had discovered on his last visit that there were dimly lit rooms down there with couches and easy chairs and futons, rooms set up specifically to accommodate the bold and the restless.

Paul scowled at him. "Don't even think about it. We're not going to make love in some cubbyhole that reeks of other men's—"

Cam put up his hands. He didn't want the graphic details. "All right. It was just a thought."

"Find another thought. Please."

It was only when Cam was halfway to the bar, Paul's glass in hand, that the phrase *make love* hit him. He tried not to dwell on it as he strategized his way through the triple row of drinkers crowded in front of the trough. He tried not to rerun his vivid memories of those dizzying times when they *had* been intimate. Or all those quiet times when they'd been doing nothing of any importance and their eyes had met. It had happened just earlier today. At those moments they were like two craft transferring valuable cargo in space, except they were exchanging... What? Cam refused to speculate. He was afraid of being wrong.

He did know Paul Patrillo was the only man he genuinely wanted to touch him, to murmur silly and smutty and sentimental things to him. But that wouldn't happen anytime soon. Maybe it wouldn't happen at all. The chemistry that made Paul physically vulnerable made Cam vulnerable in a more consequential way. And the longer that situation existed, the greater the likelihood one or both of them would pair up with somebody else.

He really had to get over this crush. It was far too soon in his tenure as a gay man to get hung up on somebody.

Just as Cam turned away from the bar, somebody's crotch introduced itself to his ass. "I like it," a gravelly voice said near his ear. The odor of gin wreathed Cam's head.

He didn't turn to look. He didn't want to be nose to nose with somebody he hadn't even glimpsed. Trying not to spill Paul's drink, he pulled his shoulders in and slid through the crowd of bodies.

"Hey!"

Cam reflexively glanced to his right, where the call had come from.

A man hustled up to him. A rather striking, dark-eyed man of about his height, but with a shaved head and sinewy arms. Cam figured it was the same guy who'd just given him the bump. Without preface, he held Cam's face and crushed his lips against Cam's.

It was a sloppy kiss, long on aggression and short on passion, but Cam's pump was primed. His body's response couldn't be quashed.

"You free to share that ass with me?" the man murmured. "And that mouth?"

Cam pulled his head back and to the side. "No." He could barely squeeze out the tiny syllable without betraying his excitement.

The guy palmed Cam's crotch and smiled. "But you want to be."

This wasn't the time to debate why the space beneath Cam's zipper had disappeared. He ignored the remark and strode toward his table, leaving the provocateur behind.

Paul sat against the chair's backrest, his arms crossed over his chest and his gaze fixed on Cam. "You just let a stranger kiss you." He reached for his fresh drink and downed a third of it.

"I didn't exactly let him."

"Did you like it?"

"Not particularly." Cam frowned at him. "What's with the interrogation?" And what were those eyes conveying?

Paul's attitude relaxed. He lowered his gaze and fingered the base of his martini glass. "Actually, he looked like the kind of guy who could give you what you want. But only on a temporary basis. I'd advise against getting in *too* deep with him."

Cam studied his mentor. "You don't know what I want, Paul."

Around them, lights pulsed and swirled. Laughter bobbed on a rising tide of voices. Occasionally a shriek of surprise or amusement cut through the cacophonous backdrop.

Cam's scrutiny clearly made Paul uneasy. He pulled back a little, slid his glass around the tabletop. "You want to get laid. You want to make up for lost time. It's understandable. You deserve it too."

He was right, but only in the most general kind of way.

After watching Paul a moment longer, Cam realized he wouldn't be collecting any phone numbers tonight. He wasn't interested.

## Chapter Four

*They were clutching at him—those brutal men who'd been sent by an unfeeling man. He pitched forward to get away from them, lunged toward a darker, more welcoming space, a place where liberation was within his reach. Pain blasted into his leg; it felt like a red-hot spike that could pin him to the floor. "Now," he whispered urgently, both to someone deep inside of himself and something far beyond himself...and his whole body shuddered like a building about to collapse.*

*The feeling was jarring at first but then melted away as he walked, whole and beautiful, into a humble, cozy cottage where a humble, sweet-faced youth dwelled. He looked a lot like Cameron Waters.*

*"What do you do?" he asked the young man.*

*"Paint pictures of beautiful places and try to sell them."*

*"I like makers of things," he said, "much more than destroyers of things."*

*"Can I offer you some coffee?"*

*"Yes, so long as you're not afraid. Don't be afraid, Carl. I'm only an orphan. Until a short time ago, I was a cripple too." Then Peter kissed the fear out of him and thought, Maybe he's supposed to kiss the fear out of me.*

*If the kiss worked both ways, so much the better. Everything was better if it worked both ways...*

\* \* \*

Paul awoke to an exhalation gusting out of his mouth. He put a hand over his forehead and felt perspiration at his hairline. As he lay motionless on his back, staring at the familiar ceiling fan, he gave his breath time to find its natural rhythm. Good thing he'd worn the rib belt to bed. Judging by the twisted quilt and top sheet, he'd had a restless night.

His overriding feeling was relief. He'd safely exited the theater of his subconscious.

"This is crazy," he whispered.

Mobry's Dick had fueled some mighty strange fantasies in his head. Now those fantasies were invading reality...and fueling some mighty strange dreams, which always involved Cameron.

*This dream, or at least some part of it Paul couldn't remember, had ended up fattening his cock. Shit, he was horny.*

Last night at the Corral hadn't helped matters any. The evening had been an all-around torment. Watching other men's arms twine around Cameron's lithe body, other men's faces nestle in the fragrant gully between his neck and shoulder, had made Paul distinctly ill at ease. Seeing other hands conform to the swell of Cameron's ass was even worse. Paul had wanted to stride onto the dance floor and bat the hands away.

Small wonder only one of Cameron's dance partners, the least grabby and good-looking, had marginally passed Paul's muster. In truth, the ratio should've been reversed. Three seemed like decent possibilities. But Paul had nitpicked them out of the running.

The fact he'd been so petty and possessive still gave him a twinge of guilt. He knew Cameron needed to ogle men openly and smell them and touch them and feel hard dick in his mouth. Right now he needed that as much as he needed air.

*"I want you to be careful, though. Okay?"*

*"I will. You've been a good mentor."*

*"What I've probably been, Cameron, is a fool."*

*"How?"*

Paul hadn't answered. Not aloud, anyway. But a reply had sure as hell rung resoundingly in his mind: *Because I've been trying to give away the best gift I've ever received.*

Their dance together had been a torment too. A beautiful torment.

"God damn it," Paul whispered, repositioning his semierect cock.

He wondered if he should call Henry or one of his other occasional fuck buddies. The best antidote to confounding complexity, he figured, was a satisfying simplicity. *I'm horny; therefore, I need to get off.* Maybe he should focus on that. It was a superficial and temporary fix, but a fix nonetheless.

Henry was still the best fixer. He'd already been fed the car-accident explanation for Paul's injuries. With Henry, no prefatory bullshit was necessary, which gave him a clear advantage. All Paul had to do was call him and then lie around in a pair of loose pajama bottoms and wait.

Once Henry got there, they'd pretend for about eight minutes that Paul needed him to pursue some line of research for his thesis—track down archival photos or old playbills, find out at which museum or university certain documents were housed. Then, unable to sustain his academic demeanor, Henry would be on him, lapping at his chest and following the trail to his treasure.

Paul had told him months ago, *"Please understand I'm not in the market for a boyfriend."* Henry had answered, *"What does that have to do with anything?"* and then gone about his business, which often consisted of sucking Paul's cock. Henry was a bit of a blessing, actually. He was smart, diligent, gave decent head, and didn't expect a card on Valentine's Day. He wasn't fawning, just eager. What more could Paul ask for in a research assistant?

Today, though... Today, dogged by thoughts of last night's outing and his increasingly disquieting dreams, Paul didn't think he could tolerate company. He just couldn't bring himself to call Henry. Or anybody else with similar inclinations.

He'd just have to come up with another way of making his inner fog dissipate.

After shambling to the bathroom, he tossed back one of the six-milligram ibuprofen to which he'd been downgraded after his script for Vicodin had run out. He could probably get more if he whined enough, but he didn't want more. Industrial-strength painkillers buzzed him up too much and turned his dick into a length of elastic. Not good when his hormones churned. He'd rather have aching ribs than aching balls.

Midway between the bathroom and guestroom, he paused in the hallway and listened. No Cameron sounds. *Yeah, that's right: he has an open house today.* The realization sent a feeling of emptiness through him, like a cool wind blowing through a cave. Fuck, he had to get over this. He'd never really been attached to anybody before—had never allowed himself to be, given the transient nature of foster homes and, later, the demands of academia—and the feeling was discomfiting.

He headed for the kitchen to rustle up some breakfast before he took a shower. Then he'd throw himself into his work. Since he'd entered college at seventeen, his own mind had been his best, most reliable friend.

At least until it turned on him and let both Alain Mobry and Cameron Waters take up residence there.

\* \* \*

Cam hated nearly everything about open houses. Setting up beverages and hors d'oeuvres, burning scented candles that made him want to sneeze, waiting for opportunities to scuttle into the bathroom and take a leak. And worst of all, being gracious to a trickle of people who had nothing better to do on a Sunday than poke around a house they had no interest in buying. He didn't have much choice, though. This market required every conceivable effort to move property from one owner to another.

After he'd escorted three couples and a quartet of elderly women through the house, mindful of drawing their attention to the open floor plan and abundant closet space, he had a lull. Faux logs burned smokelessly in the fieldstone fireplace, and the thick carpeting beyond the hearth was inviting. Cam considered sitting there, legs stretched out, to give his butt a respite from the folding chair he'd brought along.

Before he had a chance to indulge himself, a man walked in.

A lone man, maybe a tad older than Cam, wearing beautifully tailored slacks and a black all-weather coat of medium length. He was clean shaven, and his auburn hair flowed in neat waves away from his face.

Nice-looking guy. Didn't have Paul's dark, sensuous beauty, but handsome nonetheless.

Wearing his professional smile, one that struck a pleasant balance between diffidence and overconfidence, Cam strolled up to him. The man had just picked up one of Cam's business cards from the small wood folding table inside the door. There were more cards fanned out near the eats.

"You must be Cameron Waters," he said, meeting Cam's smile.

"Yes. Welcome."

They shook hands. The man's grip wasn't unusually firm, but it lasted a beat too long. His dark gaze fixed on Cam's face. Cam felt a mild spring of adrenaline.

Anticipation. That was what caused it. The dim sense this guy was testing him, the way Paul had tested him by doing that sly finger-rub the day they'd met.

"David Wolzak," the visitor said. When their hands parted, he motioned vaguely toward the house's interior. "Would you mind showing me around?"

"Not at all." Cam's smile broadened for an instant. "That's why I'm here." Cam glanced at the door behind Wolzak's back. "Will your wife be joining you?"

The nature of the man's smile changed. "I don't have a wife. I'm here alone."

"Oh, all right, then." The spring of adrenaline became a fountain. Cam moved toward the cloth-draped table set up near the fireplace. "Care for something to drink?"

"Yeah, but I doubt you have what I'd like. So I'll pass. Thanks anyway."

It was getting harder and harder for Cam to concentrate. David Wolzak wasn't the typical open-house attendee. He didn't trail behind Cam, as most viewers did, but walked beside him, *close* beside him. Their shoulders often brushed. As David's body warmed, the scent of his cologne seemed to merge with his pheromones and strengthen their lure.

Cam struggled to stay focused. Normally his tour spiel rolled smoothly out of him. Now, he had to concentrate on pointing out every feature of every room they entered. David asked more questions about Cam than he asked about the house.

Upstairs, a short hallway connected the master bedroom suite to a large loft. Cam stopped in front of a shallow walk-in closet and opened its door. Casually laying a hand on Cam's back, David leaned past him to look inside. His chest grazed Cam's upper arm; their heads came within an inch of touching.

"I've always wondered," David said, taking far too much time to study the space, "if real estate agents' families are bothered by all this weekend work they have to do."

When he finally drew back, Cam and he were bookended within the span of the door frame. David's gaze moved around Cam's face.

"I, uh...I'm fortunate that I don't have to worry about that," Cam said. "I'm single."

"Ah. Kind of nice, isn't it?"



Cam half nodded, half shrugged. He didn't want to jump to any conclusions, but he could've sworn David Wolzak was putting the make on him. Either that, or he was one of those rare straight guys who were damned secure in their sexuality.

"Got a girlfriend?" David asked, finally easing out the doorway.

"No." Cam headed for the suite. Now David did walk a step behind him.

"Boyfriend?"

Cam's heart lodged in his throat as they entered the bedroom. He didn't know how to respond. Laugh at the question? Simply answer in the negative? Turn around and ask, *Are you getting at something?*

He did manage to turn around. "I assume that's supposed to be a joke," he said with a tense smile.

"No," David said pleasantly. "Some men do have boyfriends, you know."

"True." Cam cleared his throat of the ashes that seemed to be clogging it. "Come look at the deck outside the—"

"Mr. Waters?"

"Hm?" Cam whipped around so abruptly, he nearly lost his balance.

"Would you like to go out with me sometime?"

"Cam. You can call me Cam. Yes, I would."

\* \* \*

Paul was cleaning up the kitchen after his dinner of frozen pizza when he heard the familiar sounds of Cameron's return. The front door opened and closed; a dropped briefcase and then a pair of shoes hit the foyer's tiled floor; the closet door unlatched, coat hangers clattered, and the door latched once more.

His pulse picked up speed. He'd decided to greet Cameron with a kiss and say, *Let's do it; let's turn to each other instead of people who don't mean anything to us. You're the only man I truly want, and I know you want me too.*

"Paul?"

"In the kitchen."

Judging by the sound of his footsteps, Cameron jogged down the hallway. He came wheeling into the room like Gene Kelly about to launch into a tap-dance routine. He was smiling, his color high.

"You'll never believe what happened," he said breathlessly, before Paul could launch into *his* routine.

Stymied, Paul asked, "So what happened?"

"Let's go relax." Cameron swung out of the room as abruptly as he'd swung into it.

Feeling a hitch of apprehension, Paul followed him. Cameron flopped onto his camel-colored corduroy sofa, where he loosened his shirt collar and tie.

Paul sat stiffly in a nearby recliner.

"I met someone." Cameron flashed a triumphant smile.

"Oh?"

"At the open house." Cameron pitched forward. "At the fucking *open house*, Paul." He fell against the well-cushioned backrest and threw his feet up on the cocktail table.

Paul watched his legs rise, stretch out, thump down, and cross at the ankles. Cameron never put his feet on the cocktail table. Paul's vacant gaze moved back to Cameron's face, still flushed from the cold and from excitement.

"His name is David Wolzak, and he's a *knockout*. He actually asked me on a date!"

"Really."

"Yup."

Paul wasn't getting it. "A guy walks into an open house, immediately pegs you as queer, and asks you out?"

"It wasn't *quite* that simple." Cameron flung his arms across the back of the couch. "He sort of fished around first. You know, asked pointed questions. Maybe he sensed I found him attractive."

Woodenly, Paul nodded. "What do you mean by attractive? He had you stiff at hello?"

Cameron blushed. "No. I mean late-twenties, nicely dressed, dark-eyed attractive. I mean not-like-Doug attractive."

"That's a plus."

"I think even *you* would approve."

He couldn't have been more wrong. Paul didn't approve at all. Rather than examining his reaction, he tried to examine the circumstances surrounding the oddly felicitous meeting. "Has this sort of thing ever happened to you before?"

"Nope. A female buyer once flirted with me, but that was about it." Still wearing that maddening, self-satisfied smile, Cameron mused for a moment. "Remember how you rubbed the side of your little finger against mine to test me that Saturday we met?"

The reminder sent tiny-legged creatures scuttling through Paul's stomach. "Yeah, I remember. Don't tell me he stole my trick." Even wry humor was proving elusive. This wasn't the first time he'd liked a man who was drawn to somebody else. He was used to having competition sooner or later, but it had never affected him like this.

"David *perfected* your trick," Cameron informed him. "He started making pretty obvious contact almost as soon as he walked in."

Paul frowned. "What's obvious? Grabbing your crotch? Sticking his tongue in your ear?"

Cameron laughed. "No, nothing that gauche."

How dare he laugh? Elbow on the chair arm, Paul idly scratched at his head. He worried his upper lip with his teeth. The whole thing was just weird. A man going to an open house alone and immediately coming on to the sales agent, whom he couldn't possibly have known was gay. That was tantamount to inviting the cops to go house hunting with him.

"So, uh, when are you going to see him again?"

"Tomorrow night. I'm meeting him after work." Cameron suddenly turned sheepish. His smile shrank. "I didn't want to invite him over here until I talked to you first."

"You mean until you got rid of me first."

That provoked a deeper blush. "No, that's not what I mean. I know you still can't drive safely."

"I can drive just fine, Cameron."

"You can't twist around to look behind you."

"Cars are built with side mirrors." Apprehension rose within Paul, an amorphous shadow spawned by something more troubling than Cameron's being lathered up about another man. It had to do with how, and why, this guy named David Wolzak had just breezed into Cameron's life. "You didn't mention *me*, did you?"

"No. Not yet, anyway."

"Good. Don't *ever* mention me. I mean it. Don't bring up my name in any context, even in passing. You can't let him know I'm staying here."

Cameron's brows drew together. "Do you know him?"

"No. It's just a precaution."

"Against what?" The warning had clearly sent an ominous cloud over Cameron's private paradise.

Paul didn't want to tell him about Edgar's phone call. There was no reason to alarm him. But an offhanded statement Edgar had made and his continued interest in Mobry's Dick suddenly came together in Paul's mind. The connection was like a mallet striking a gong.

"Don't worry about it," Paul said. "I guess I'm just hinky about strange men being in the house."

Cameron narrowed his eyes. "Since when? You're not a nervous kind of person."

"I am now." Paul got up, exaggerating his lack of mobility as he did so. "You would be too under the same circumstances."

Cameron bolted up from the couch. "Here, let me help you."

"I don't need help," Paul said, so frigidly it surprised him, so frigidly it made Cameron pull up short. "I just want to go lie down."

He took a few steps toward the hallway, then turned. Cameron was still staring after him, mouth slightly open. He looked...wounded. Everything about this new development made Paul feel like shit, no matter *who* David fucking Wolzak turned out to be.

"By the way," Paul said, "now that you're bringing your hook-ups over here, the Dick should go back to the storage unit."

"Another precaution?"

"Exactly. Can you do it tomorrow on your way to work?"

"Yeah, I can do that. If it would make you feel better."

"Thanks."

Paul knew the only things that would make him feel better were Edgar Jonns not being part of his life...and Cameron Waters being an integral part.

## Chapter Five

*"He's an upscale real-estate broker, isn't he? With Bell-Jablon, I believe."*

Why would Edgar Jonns know that? Why would he bother making a point of knowing that?

The small television set in the guestroom yammered quietly as Paul considered what to do. He had to find a way of either confirming or banishing his suspicions. Cameron was too jazzed up about the new man in his life, and therefore too much at risk, for Paul to let the matter drop.

He wondered if he *should* move out, just pack up and scurry back to his apartment without leaving a trace of himself behind. It seemed, at first thought, the most logical thing to do—obliterate any hint of an ongoing tie between himself and Cameron Waters. But that would mean losing his insider's view of this situation and leaving Cameron, naive and hopeful Cameron, to fend for himself. No. It would be like throwing him to the wolves.

Confronting Edgar obviously wasn't the way to go. Paul had led Jonns to believe he hadn't had any further contact with Cameron. Confronting David Wolzak wouldn't do it either. The fucker would just lie and then rat him out to Edgar.

The situation required behind-the-scenes sleuthing.

Paul called Henry, his all-purpose go-to guy, to ask for his help. No answer. He left a message and got ready for bed.

This is unacceptable, he thought, slipping beneath the quilt. Cameron is putting himself out there and taking too many chances. I'm hanging back and not taking enough chances. And we're both sleeping alone again.

Unsettled, he dozed off.

\* \* \*

*Somebody tentatively knocked on the door.*

*Friend or foe? he called out in the dream, because he had both.*

*No answer.*

*He went back to making love with Carl, believing he had the power to make that love eternal.*

\* \* \*

Paul awoke suddenly and remembered he had important things to do. As soon as he left his room, he caught the smells of breakfast coming from the kitchen. Coffee, toast.

"Paul? You up?"

"Yeah, hold on a minute."

After a hurried trip to the bathroom, he went to the dining area.

Cameron, dressed in his office best, sat at the table before a nearly empty coffee mug and a nearly full briefcase. He finished perusing a sheet of paper, then snapped the briefcase closed. At least he seemed to have his feet on the ground this morning. Last night he'd been airborne.

Mobry's Dick was gone from the center of the table. Cameron had obviously taken Paul's advice and removed it. Maybe it was sitting beside the front door so he wouldn't forget it.

As Paul took a seat, he noticed Cameron watching him. A barely discernible smile had touched Cameron's lips.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

The question poked Cameron out of his daze. He twitched out a shrug, a shake of the head. "You haven't shaved yet."

Paul ran a hand over the lower half of his face. "Yeah, so? Am I too scruffy for the breakfast table or something?" He hadn't combed his hair either.

A blush rose on Cameron's cheekbones. "No. I just... I think you look good that way."

"Like a vagrant?"

After staring into Paul's eyes for another beat or two, Cameron sighed. He dusted the handle of his briefcase with three fingers. "Listen, I might not be home for dinner."

"Yeah, that's right. You have a date."

Cameron nodded.

"Please don't ask me if I'll be okay."

Eyes lowered, Cameron nodded again.

A remnant of dream flashed through Paul's mind. Carl—who the hell was Carl? And who, for that matter, was Peter? Why did they seem connected to Alain Mobry? Why did they seem connected to Cameron and him?

"I've been meaning to ask you something," Paul said, idly fingering the saltshaker. "The times you activated Mobry's Dick and those moonstones came out of the tip, did you ever make a wish?"

Cameron lifted his coffee mug, glanced into it, and set it back down. "I don't think I did. I mean, not consciously, not that I can remember."

True, most people made absentminded wishes, usually when they were frustrated. *Shit, I wish I could afford a new car. I wish I had a better job.* Small

wonder Cameron couldn't remember. No one ever remembered such fleeting thoughts.

"Have *you* ever made a wish?" Cameron asked. He laughed once and shook his head. "I can't believe we're taking this seriously enough to talk about it."

"Why? 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' And no, I haven't made a wish. It isn't for me to do. You're the rightful owner of the piece."

Cameron's restless fingers now tapped at the briefcase handle. "That was the reason *I* had to activate the automaton for the first time. Or so you claimed."

"Exactly." It was knowledge Paul couldn't explain yet didn't doubt. And now those dreams... "Cameron, do you believe in reincarnation?"

He knit his brows. "I've never given it much thought. Why?"

Thin sunlight cast a hazy glow over the dining table. A ray glinted off the metal cap of the shaker Paul still held. He tapped at the spot. "It's starting to seem like there are more people in this house than you and me." He got up from the table before he had to explain himself. Impulsively, he cupped the back of Cameron's head and lightly stirred the short hair with his fingertips. "I hope your day and evening go well," he said softly.

\* \* \*

"Henry, I need a favor."

"Want me to come over? I'll be free after two o'clock."

Paul smiled. Nice to know *somebody* was eager to be alone with him. "No. Not today. I need you to call the phone number I'm going to give you and say exactly what I tell you to say. Got a pen handy?"

Henry, bless him, didn't press for an explanation. "I'm getting one right now. Okay, shoot."

Paul gave him the number. "Ask the person who answers, 'Might David Wolzak be there?' Just those words, nothing else." Paul took a shot at spelling *Wolzak*. "After you get a reply, hang up. Don't say anything more. Then call me right back. Got that?"

Henry repeated the brief script.

"Good. I really appreciate this, Henry."

When he got off the phone, Paul resolved to give his loyal research assistant some of the money Edgar had allegedly put in his account. Until now he hadn't given the deposit much thought—a rather astonishing fact, considering how financial concerns used to consume him. But they no longer did. Other things in his life far outweighed them.

The realization made him feel good about himself. Hell yes, Henry deserved more compensation than the honor of sucking Paul's dick.

The phone rang, giving him a start.

"Done," said Henry.

"And?"

"A man answered. His reply was, 'No. And he shouldn't be giving out my number. Who is this?' That's when I hung up. Dude was very curt."

"Fuck," Paul whispered.

"What?"

"Nothing. Thanks, Henry."

"You're welcome. Just let me know when you need me to drop by."

*What a trooper.* Paul smiled without much cheer. He had to stop taking advantage of this kid. "Henry, you need a boyfriend."

"I already have a boyfriend. We just happen to have an open relationship, and I happen to think you're wicked hot."

Paul didn't give his ego a chance to bask in the compliment. His thoughts centered on Henry's call to Edgar Jonns. Edgar *knew* David Wolzak. And now Paul knew who David Wolzak was.

The guy was his replacement, and Jonns had sent him to hook Cameron.

Just as he'd once sent Paul.

\* \* \*

Cam's anticipation level ratcheted toward the swoon zone as he pulled into a parking space at David's apartment complex. Their initial meeting at Starbucks had gone smoothly enough, although David had seemed a little more uptight today. His smiles were few; touches, nonexistent. David was clearly more at ease being demonstrative in private than in public—the rule for most gay men, Cam figured, himself included. He didn't read anything into it.

"Don't mind all the girly stuff scattered around," David said as he opened his apartment door. "My sister and I have been living together. It cuts down on both our expenses."

The place was a standard two-bedroom apartment in a standard complex. Not shabby, not chic.

What was strange about it, though, was that it didn't reflect the kind of income David would've needed to bid on that Brookside Lane property. But maybe he *had* been severely cutting corners so he could squirrel away every extra penny. Parsimonious people had a much better chance of getting and keeping a house than spendthrifts.

"Make yourself comfortable on the couch," David said as he headed for the kitchenette. "And flip through the DVDs if you want. We can watch a movie. Do you like margaritas?"

"Love them." If he drank too much, Cam figured, he'd spend the night. He might even spend the night regardless.



He took off his coat and laid it beside a multicolored afghan carelessly draped over a recliner. Beside it, a Dean Koontz paperback lay open and facedown on the floor. The place wasn't exactly tidy. An open can of Mountain Dew, hardened candle wax, a bottle of prescription meds, a small, skewed pile of magazines, and two mugs—one holding the sludgy dregs of coffee; the other, a withered tea bag—were scattered across the cocktail table. Cam settled into a corner of the couch.

Getting this cozy with the stuff and smells of other people's lives was a bit unnerving. Cam didn't see himself as a neat freak—Paul, of course, saw things differently—but he took pride in his home and always kept it presentable. Here, he had to make a concentrated effort to distract himself from the mingled, unfamiliar odors of strangers' bodies, cooked food, female fragrances, and some kind of pet.

Just as he got up again, remembering David's suggestion, a calico cat sauntered in from another room. It froze when it saw Cam, then spun into a one-eighty and dashed away. Cam walked over to the rack of DVDs beside the entertainment center.

"Find something?" David asked at his back.

"I just started looking."

David set down the drink pitcher, two glasses, and a shallow bowl of salt. He picked up some of the crap on the cocktail table and shoved aside the rest, then grabbed a pillar candle from an end table and put it in the empty space. As Cam turned back to the array of movies, he heard the scrape and hiss of a match being struck and caught a filament of pleasant scent. Hot apple pie—that's what the candle smelled like. It sure beat grungy couch.

After one more trip to the kitchenette, probably to deposit the pill bottle and soiled mugs, David turned off the overhead light. He squatted beside Cam and began scanning the lower reaches of the rack.

"I don't know what to pick," Cam said. He bypassed the loud action-adventure flicks, the gorefests, the brainless comedies. Just as he began to despair of David's taste in cinema, he spied *The Princess Bride*.

Once the movie started playing and the drinks were poured, Cam wasn't sure how to proceed. David hadn't made any definitive moves. They sat close, their hands on each other's thigh, so Cam figured maybe he should start there. Damning his inexperience, he began slowly to rub David's leg. David began slowly to squeeze Cam's leg.

Cam's dick began to fill. The touch of any man he found attractive still aroused him with embarrassing speed. He slid his hand to David's crotch and began to fondle the low mounds clustered near his zipper. David squirmed and made a quiet, strained sound. He held Cam's hand against his genitals. With another pulse, Cam's cock hardened further.

"Here," David said urgently. He wriggled toward the armrest, slid down with his back against it, and began fumbling with his zipper.

Folding his legs onto the cushions, Cam scuttled toward David and straddled him. He held the side of David's face. "Slower," he whispered, lowering his head.

The attempted kiss seemed to catch David off guard. Cam compensated for the lag in his reaction time and managed to fit his lips to David's. They were slightly parted and dry from the rush of his breath.

The kiss was all wrong. Cam subtly repositioned his mouth and exerted soft pressure. His tongue moved tentatively to the gap in David's lips, but the gap didn't noticeably widen. Just as Cam was about to withdraw, he felt the warm, moist flick of David's tongue...but just the tip. It seemed like a grudging concession.

"Maybe we should go to the bedroom," Cam said, hoping he wasn't pushing his luck. He was having trouble reading this date. He thought David might loosen up once they got naked on a smooth expanse of linen-covered mattress, behind a closed door.

David had already shoved down his jeans and freed his cock. "No time."

His prick tasted faintly of bath soap; his pubic hair smelled of baby powder. At least this part of his anatomy was more responsive than his mouth, which had felt like the aftermath of a trip to the dentist. For the first time in his brief sojourn in the world beyond the closet, Cam was able to keep his excitement in check. It even waned a little as he worked David's cock.

David was a quiet comer. All he did was issue a muted grunt before he shot. It wasn't much of a load. After a brief recovery, he said, "Pull your pants down." He got off the couch and knelt on the floor.

Cam lowered his pants and issued an order of his own. "Take your sweater off. Shit, David, I'd like to see and feel some skin."

David pulled off the sweater and the T-shirt beneath it and tossed them aside.

"That's better." Cam leaned forward and swept his fingers over the smooth humps of David's shoulders, the interlocked muscles of his back. Unable to resist the lure of a hard chest, he brought one hand forward and felt up David's pecs.

Cam loved the feel and smell of men's bodies, the feel and taste of their mouths. He wanted to be with a man who loved these things as much as he did, and he wondered just how much David reveled in them—the soft scour of whiskers against his face and the clench of a smooth ass beneath his hands, the graceful raw aggression of thrusting tongues, the tangle of furred legs, the sparring of stiff cocks. For Cam, intimacy with women had always been a lukewarm, joyless exercise driven more by diligence than desire. But the minute Paul had touched him and he'd allowed himself to touch Paul in return...

Cam's caresses slowed and stilled.

"Ready?" David asked, stroking Cam's rampant cock.

"Yes." He circled his thumb and forefinger around the base of his hard-on, offering it to David's mouth, then closed his eyes and let his hands move where they wanted. Freshening arousal made his body tighten and quiver.

Impossible to take issue with a blowjob.

*"My name is Inigo Montoya."*

Cam tightened further, but with suppressed giggles.

*"You killed my father. Prepare to die."*

His stomach fluttered; his shoulders jiggled.

If Paul had just heard those lines, he would've ejected Cam's dick with his laughter and crumpled onto his side. And Cam would've too. No doubt about it.

Oblivious, David earnestly kept at his work. Cam, putting his fingers in his ears, prepared for his favorite kind of death.

## Chapter Six

Paul rose from the sofa, where he and his visitor had been sitting. "Oh, hi. I didn't expect you home until morning. Or maybe tomorrow evening after work."

"That much is obvious," Cameron muttered as Paul's guest also stood.

Paul caught the comment, although he likely wasn't meant to. One side of his mouth lifted. "Cameron, this is Eli Kogen, *Professor* Eli Kogen. Eli, this is my generous friend, Cameron Waters."

Kogen was a striking man in his midforties, tall and angular, with sharp eyes that matched the luminous swaths of silver-gray at his temples. He looked like the half-sporty, half-dapper kind of guy who might pilot a craft in the America's Cup race. None of his assets seemed to be lost on Cameron. Paul could practically eavesdrop on his thoughts.

The men shook hands. "It was incredibly kind of you to have taken Paul in after his accident," Eli said, underscoring his sincerity with a handsome smile.

Cameron looked uncomfortable. "Well, he needed help for a while." His hands fidgeted within his pants pockets, where they'd sought refuge. His gaze skittered from Eli to the floor back to Eli, like a bird trying to find the right branch for perching.

Paul watched them with interest. Although he was a classy man, Kogen was very personable. Cameron seemed thrown off by his easy geniality. It had surprised Paul too at first. As had Eli's passion.

The professor turned to him. "You seem to have settled in here. Will you be giving up your apartment?"

"No, of course not." Paul chuckled after his too-abrupt answer. "I'm afraid I'm just malingering now."

"That's not true. You're still not up to par," Cameron said quietly.

"I suppose I do have a bit of a way to go yet."

"Speaking of which"—with a neat flip of the wrist, Eli checked his watch—"so do I."

"I'll see you out." Paul laid a hand on the professor's back and steered him toward the foyer.

"Nice meeting you, Mr. Waters," Eli called out to Cam.

"You too, sir," answered Cameron from the living room.

Paul smiled as he retrieved Eli's coat from the hall closet. *Sir*. He wondered if that was Cameron's gentle way of being snarky about his visitor's age. He faced Eli as the professor slipped his coat on.

"Thanks for stopping by." Paul smoothed the coat's lapels against Eli's chest. "I liked your suggestions for the preface. Needed them too."

Eli caught his hand. Their eyes met. "You're more than welcome." Like an old melody dimly recalled, an undelivered kiss momentarily hung between them. Paul lowered his gaze.

They stepped outside together, where frost silently gathered in the clear air. Eli looked up at the sky. While his head was still tilted upward, he reached over and cupped Paul's face.

The touch mildly startled Paul, but only for a second. "Are you practicing misdirection?" he asked with amusement.

Eli lowered his head and smiled as he looked at Paul. "Sometimes I think my whole life is about misdirection. I hope yours isn't."

"I don't know what—"

"Your gracious host. Cameron. There's something going on between the two of you, but you don't seem willing to admit it." Eli glided his hand over Paul's cheek before lowering it. He pulled a pair of fine leather driving gloves from his pockets and slipped them on.

Paul vacantly watched him mold the gloves to his long fingers.

"You're fond of him," Eli said, "aren't you?"

There was no point in denying it. "Yes. Very." Paul finally met his gaze.

"Then don't pretend you're not. That's one of the ways we lose what's important to us—by pretending not to care."

He could've been talking about the two of them, about their three-month fling. He could've been talking about his wife or a hundred other things. But that didn't alter his message.

"I hope everything's going well with Joan," Paul said, trying to deflect attention from his own muddled relationship.

"We're still trying. That's always a good sign." Eli slipped into casual mode and lightly patted Paul's upper arm. "I do have to run. And you must be freezing. Now go get warm with that cute young man in there."

Eli walked to his hybrid car as Paul stared at the moonlight gleaming dully on its roof. He lifted a hand in farewell. "*Don't pretend...*"

As soon as Paul got back in the house, he could tell Cameron was upstairs but still awake. Laughter, real or canned and certainly emanating from a syndicated sitcom, drifted down the stairway. Paul hesitated, his hand on the newel post.

He drew a deep breath and went up.

Cameron sometimes slept with his bedroom door open, sometimes with it closed. The pattern seemed somehow tied to his moods. Tonight it was open.

Paul stood in the doorway. "May I come in?"

"Suit yourself."

Paul sat on the edge of the bed. They often talked here. Hell, they talked everywhere.

"So," Cameron said, staring blankly at the TV screen, "is he another one of your casual—"

"No. He was once, but just for a short time. Eli's married." Paul moved the unused set of pillows aside. Sliding fully onto the bed, he situated his back against the headboard. It took some of the strain off his ribs. "I don't think he's having an easy time of it."

Cameron finally looked at Paul. "I'm sorry to hear that. He seems like a nice guy."

"He is. He's in the English Department. Makes a great editor and proofreader." Paul touched Cameron's left thigh through the bedclothes. His legs were lean, tight. "Why *are* you home already?"

"I never intended to spend the night with David. It was only our first date after all."

Paul snorted. "Did I just hear you correctly?"

Cameron gave him a tight-lipped, disapproving look. "I want to do this right."

"What does 'right' mean?"

"One step at a time."

"Why didn't you tell Dirk that?"

"Doug. Because he didn't seem like a keeper."

"And this guy does?"

"Maybe."

Paul had to concentrate on not betraying his feelings. *Keep it on the buddy level. At least for now.* "So how'd it go?"

"Pretty well. We met at a Starbucks, went back to his place."

"Did his place meet with your approval?"

Cameron shrugged one shoulder. "It's modest. He shares it with his sister."

"His *sister*? He's pushing thirty, and he lives with his freakin' *sister*?" Whoops. Slip of the mask.

"What of it?" Cameron said peevishly. "They're both trying to save money. David wants to buy a house. Most people can't finance a house without making *some* sacrifices."

"Yeah, all right." Arguing about it would've been a waste of time. Paul simply made a mental note for future reference. "So, uh, did you...do the deed?"

Cameron scrunched his face. "What are you talking about?"

It was clear euphemisms weren't going to work. Sighing, Paul rolled his eyes. "Did you have sex with the guy?"

The straightforward approach only made Cameron self-conscious. His interlinked fingers repeatedly bent and straightened. "Some."

Some. What the fuck was *that* supposed to mean? "Was he...more adventurous than Don?"

"Doug."

"Yeah, the one who makes amusing noises."

Cameron ignored the reminder. "We took care of each other. It was nice." His reflective smile was a little too smug.

Suddenly Paul didn't feel so good. "Nice."

"I enjoyed it."

"It's hard *not* to enjoy shooting a wad."

Cameron's smile gradually shrank. "Except..."

"What?"

"There were some things he didn't seem comfortable doing."

A ray of hope! "Like...?"

"Kissing."

Paul's brows drew together. "*You?* On the lips?"

"No, Paul. His cat. On the ass."

Paul smiled. "No need to get insolent, you little minx." It made no sense. Cameron was built for kissing. "That's strange. What did you have to eat?"

Light from the TV flared and faded on the side of Cameron's face. "Huh?"

"Did you eat something that made you reek?"

"I never reek," Cameron said indignantly.

It was true; he never did. "Pardon *me*. So what else did he find repugnant?"

"I wouldn't say 'repugnant.' He just...I don't know...seemed to resist certain things. Maybe he was worried about his sister walking in on us. It doesn't matter."

"Doesn't it?" Paul would sure as hell have serious doubts about a guy who was sexually squeamish.

"I just feel strange talking about this stuff," Cameron murmured.

"I imagine you would, considering how tepid—"

"Let's just drop it."

Paul looked away but kept wondering. There *were* some guys who avoided any kind of penetration, either for religious reasons or because of health concerns. It wasn't completely unheard-of. But kissing? Someone like Cameron?

"What does he do for a living?" That seemed an innocuous-enough subject.

"He's like a salesman at Owen McCrae Clothiers."

“*Like* a salesman?”

“Well, it's a fancier job title than that, but it amounts to salesman. He also works sometimes with his sister. She's a professional organizer.” Cameron chuckled uneasily. “I think he was trying to recruit me as a client for her.”

Paul found that an odd turn too. A guy would have to be pretty damned crass to pimp his sister's business on a first date. “How? I mean, what makes you think so?”

“He just asked if I had a space that needed decluttering. Basement, attic, garage, storage unit.”

“Storage unit,” Paul echoed as more pieces fell into place.

“I told him I was pretty neat, but I'd check with my mother about—”

“*No*, Cameron!” Paul threw his arms over his head. “Oh fuck.” He let his hands skim over his face before they fell to his lap.

“What's wrong with that?”

Paul didn't answer at first. He needed to line up all his duckies before parading them in front of Cameron.

“Paul?”

“Just let me think for a minute.”

Paul mentally flipped through his evidence file. His telling Edgar the flea-market purchase was now sitting in a storage facility. Edgar's response to Henry's call. David's alleged sister and her alleged career as a professional organizer. David's sexual reticence, which didn't logically follow from his pointed come-on at the open house. Owen McCrae, the chichi men's apparel store where Edgar got much of his wardrobe. Paul realized he might have even seen David Wolzak. He'd accompanied Edgar to Owen McCrae on two occasions.

This was making more sense all the time. Disturbing sense.

Paul sat up and swiveled to face Cameron. “You really should hold off on seeing this guy for a while. I don't trust him. There are things—”

“Save it,” Cameron snapped, making Paul jerk backward. “Why is it that every person I find appealing, *you* find something wrong with? Why is that, Paul?”

“Because I'm trying to keep you from making bad choices!”

Cameron met his raised voice. “Keep me kowtowing to your damned ego, you mean!”

“This isn't about my fucking ego, Cameron! I barely *have* an ego right now.”

“Oh yeah? Then how do you explain those flirty, juvenile little seduction games you're always playing? And the jealousy games?”

“*What* jealousy games?”

“Importing men to service you, when you know goddamned well I'm—” Cameron pulled his lips between his teeth. Elbows set on bent legs, he steeped his hands against his mouth.



Facing forward again, Paul leaned against the headboard. He put a hand on Cameron's bare back and took a deep, calming breath. *Enough of this bullshit.*

"Why are you so resentful of me?" he asked gently.

It was a moment before Cameron lowered his hands. "Because I want you. Don't you get it? I've always wanted you. And I don't think I'll ever be able to have you the way I'd like to. But whenever I try to find someone else, you run interference. Like you're doing now."

"You mean between you and David?"

"You know damned well that's what I mean. I'm attracted to him. Maybe not as much as I am to you, but enough so that I'd like to spend more time with him, see if we have potential."

Paul lifted Cameron's left hand and pressed a leisurely kiss to the palm. When he spoke, he kept his voice low and smooth, because Cameron knew what that tone meant. "How would you like to have me?"

Cameron swallowed hard enough for the movement to show. "To myself. And that's absurd."

"Keep away from Runaround Sam," Paul sang softly. "Come over here and stand in front of me. Don't ask why. Just do it. Please."

Cameron did so without protest.

Paul maneuvered to the edge of the bed and stood, facing him. "It isn't absurd," he murmured. "Don't you know I'm already yours?"

There. He'd said it. *Are you proud of me, Eli?*

With exquisite care—a care that required so much restraint, it sent a faint tremor through his limbs—Paul began smoothing his hands down the length of Cameron's naked body. He started with the fine, fawn-colored hair that was rarely gelled because it was short enough to behave without an application of any sticky product. After brushing his thumbs over Cameron's long, straight eyelashes, he explored the unique irregularities of Cameron's ears and the perfect symmetry of his high cheekbones. He kissed the soft cushion of Cameron's parted lips with only his fingertips, and Cameron returned the light pressure with a delicate dance of his tongue. His breath fanned Paul's palm.

"Did Doug do this to you?" Paul asked. "Did David?"

Cameron shook his head as his eyelids lowered.

"I didn't think so."

Paul let his hands drift lower, cupping the cylinder of Cameron's neck before gliding over his shoulders, upper arms, forearms. Fingers splayed, he caressed the contours of Cameron's back, following the top slope of his ass to the shallow gully of his spine to the hard flatlands of his shoulder blades.

Cameron's cock rose as the fondling progressed. When it twitched against Paul's, the exploration nearly came to an end. Paul forced himself to keep going. He didn't want to abort the message in his movements; it was too important.

He caressed Cameron's sleek, divided chest, then gently kissed each nipple before sinking onto the bed and licking his way down Cameron's taut belly.

The texture of his skin was unblemished—so fine grained and creamy smooth, it seemed poreless.

"I love the feel of you," Paul murmured. "It's like you spend each night in a marinade of baby lotion."

Cameron's responsive laugh never quite made it out of his throat, but Paul felt it in the quick contraction of his abdomen. Just as Paul's mouth and hands dipped into his fragrant puff of pubic hair, he gripped Paul's shoulders.

"Don't go any farther," he said on a coarse, strained breath.

Paul looked up. "Why?" He idly stroked Cameron's loins, his sparsely furred thighs. So hard yet so damned soft...

"Because I haven't showered."

"Are you saying—"

"Yeah."

The adorable bugger was so conscientious, it made Paul smile. He petted Cameron's jutting cock. It had obviously been in David's mouth, and Cameron didn't want Paul to take in a lollipop someone else had just sucked on—not without rinsing it off.

"Then I suggest you crawl back into bed," Paul said, "and lie on your right side. Because I'm crazy about you, Cameron, and I intend to finish what I started before life so rudely interrupted."

He got undressed.

## Chapter Seven

Again with loving care, Paul massaged Cameron's tight, round ass with his fingers while his lubed thumbs tenderly readied the entrance—stroking, slipping in by fractions of an inch, stroking more. Cameron made the most enticing sounds of pleasure and excitement Paul had ever heard. Immediately the ache in his groin eclipsed any discomfort in his injured ribs.

He replaced his thumbs with two nimble fingers and slowly coaxed Cameron's muscles into relaxing. “Let me know when you're ready. No need to rush. We've got all night.” He slipped his fingers deeper, massaging...massaging...

“I'm ready,” Cameron said in a strained voice. “I've *been* ready.” Then a predictable footnote: “Please don't hurt yourself.”

“Don't worry; I'll just rock into you.” As Paul slid his sheathed dick vertically between those heavenly orbs, he was sure he would've fainted if he hadn't been lying down. He hadn't fucked anybody in a long while. He hadn't fucked Cameron ever. And his desire for Cameron felt infinitely greater than his desire for any other man had ever been.

“I won't be rough,” he said, intent on taking his time. “Don't bother telling me when you need to let go. Just do it. Lose yourself.” Concentrating on control, he pushed in. His plump cockhead was so acutely sensitive, a spangling shiver rustled down to his balls. Cameron was maddeningly tight. “Is that okay, baby?”

An exhaled response: “Yes.”

Paul crept deeper. “More?”

“Yes.”

God damn, this was difficult. Paul's appetite had been whetted to a glinting, keen edge. Impulse told him to pump hard into that hot, snug burrow and let his neglected cock throb cum into the condom's well. But he had to go slow and easy, had to find the right pace and the right place, no matter how eagerly his dick was being clenched. It's Cameron's first time, he kept telling himself. I can't ruin it for him.

Cameron pushed against him, welcoming the fullness and pressure. Paul understood the reflex. He'd been fucked before. Being in control was a preference, not a requirement, and now that preference was working out well.

He slipped into a rhythm Cameron seemed to like, judging by his synchronized sway and fluttery moans. *His first time, and I'm the one.* Paul's muscles tensed, nerves shrilling through them. His balls felt like collapsing stars. *Must hold on.*

*Must.* He wet a few fingers with saliva and slicked Cameron's left nipple, then gave it a series of upward pinches. Cameron cried out weakly. His torso bowed forward as his hips thrust backward. Anybody who was near him would've felt the excitement splintering through his body. Paul certainly felt it, showering through his own excitement, adding to its brilliance.

He lifted Cameron's left hand and guided it to Cameron's chest, so Cameron could feel the heightened, spit-slick bud. Their fingers played there together, Paul's pinching and tugging, Cameron's testing the result. Cameron's right hand was around his own cock. Paul felt the movement of his shoulder on the mattress as he pumped, the dual stimulation manically driving his fist.

Ragged syllables came from their throats and collided. The shock of pleasure, the ache of restraint. Then the sounds throttled down to quavering groans. Paul's open lips were slack against Cameron's sweat-misted back. Weakly, he flexed them, delivering a kiss.

"You're beautiful."

Cameron uttered a fractured grunt, and his whole pelvis seemed to contract around Paul's dense cock. Paul made another deep thrust, and relief finally came, the rolling tug and release of orgasm bringing that sugared oblivion he hadn't felt in days that seemed like years. If anything was more incandescent than his pleasure, it was his contentment. He'd finally found someone who offered him more than temporary, blind escape.

Pain nattered at Paul's ribs, but it was tolerable. For this, anything was tolerable. He kept his cock in place as long as he could.

Cameron curled in on himself slightly as the steel that had filled him turned back to pliant flesh, an alchemy Paul had always mourned. He lazily stroked the damp silk of Cameron's skin.

"See?" he murmured. "Where there's a will, there's a way."

As if mocking him, his spent dick dropped into the air and onto his thigh. Paul sat up for a moment, peeled off the laden condom, wrapped it in a tissue, and let it fall to the floor. He gingerly got back into position and once more angled an arm over his lover's side.

Cameron caught Paul's hand and held it to his chest. The thumping of his heart had begun to slow. "Did you mean what you said before?"

"Yes. All of it." Paul had no doubt, even though it frightened him a little.

The glow from the LED clock on the nightstand looked like a halo around Cameron's head. He rolled onto his left side and kissed Paul, who felt ever more vulnerable to the warm, sweet press of those lips. He was falling fast now, and the plunge sent a quiver through his gut.

"Why didn't you say so before now?" Cameron asked, his fingers playing over Paul's chest.

"Because your inexperience scares the shit out of me."

Cameron's fingers froze. He dropped onto his back and laid a hand over his eyes. "Oh fuck, I knew it."

"Wait, no. I didn't mean that the way you think I did."

"Well you sure as hell didn't mean my inexperience at water polo."

Paul flattened a hand on Cameron's chest. "Listen to me. You were skittish because I've played around so much. I was skittish because you haven't played around enough. Really, Cameron, how could you possibly know what you want in a partner? You just came out. What if I—" Paul cut the question short. He'd spent most of his life mastering self-protection, not self-revelation.

"Please keep going," Cameron said gently.

Paul sighed, resigned to his fate. Not much he could do about his feelings, he realized, except voice them and hope for the best. "What if I invest myself in you—I mean *really* invest myself—and a month or two down the pike, you have this epiphany that I'm, you know, not..."

Eyes wide and guileless and pretty, even in the dull glow of the television screen, Cameron stared up at him. Paul couldn't think. He groaned softly and rested his forehead against Cameron's.

"Not what I want?" Cameron asked with a smile in his voice and a hand in Paul's hair. "Not right for me? Not—"

Paul lifted his head. "Yeah, okay, you've more than filled in the blank."

Cameron's smile widened momentarily. As he continued to study Paul's face, that smile became pensive, affectionate. "Remember when your sugar daddy first came to light, and you asked me not to jump to conclusions about you?"

Paul nodded. "Former," he added.

"You called it a failure to believe. And you said belief gives miracles opportunity."

"Yes," Paul whispered. He'd not only been talking about himself and Cameron—he'd been thinking of Alain Mobry and his belief in magick.

"Believe in me, Paul." Cameron reached for the side of Paul's face and coaxed his head down.

Their lips came together, a perfect fit, like one vow met with another of equal sincerity. The joining was slow but ardent, and it went on and on.

When the kiss finally broke, Paul felt muzzy. He didn't ask the question that scratched through his mental haze—it was too soon, and he didn't want to spook Cameron *or* himself—but one issue had to be raised.

"Cameron, we need to have a talk."

"Didn't we just have one?" His desultory smile made him look both enchanted and enchanting.

"I mean we need to have a talk about David Wolzak."

"Don't worry. I'm not going to see him anymore." Mild shame tinged Cameron's expression. "I kind of exaggerated how well we got along."

*Thank God.* Paul touched Cameron's lips. "You may *have* to see him again."

"Why?"

With some careful, step-by-step shifts in position, Paul sat up. Cameron stared at him in bewilderment for a moment before he also sat against the headboard.

"Believe me," Paul said, "I hate like hell having to tell you this."

He *did* hate it. Cameron had been used and deceived enough, and it was all because of Paul's stinking, star-crossed liaison with Edgar Jonns. Still, there was no way to soften the blow. And no longer a reason to.

Paul laid out the David Wolzak puzzle, piece by interlocking piece.

The furrow between Cameron's brows kept deepening. "Shit," he said, and a moment later, "*Shit*. So you think David is Edgar's new—"

"Pay-to-play boy. Yeah. And I'm willing to bet David's bisexual, with a preference for women, and that sister of his is actually his girlfriend. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if she knows about David's arrangement with Edgar and maybe even encourages it."

"Because of the money."

"Why else?" Paul chuckled bitterly. "I know how irresistible that compensation package can be. And I don't mean the one between Edgar's legs."

Cameron curled forward and dropped his face to his hands. "I was set up. Again."

The final word stabbed at Paul's heart. He ran a soothing hand over Cameron's hair, over his back. "Christ, I'm sorry. You've come to mean so much to me. If I could, I'd rewrite our meeting at the flea market. I'd rescript that whole weekend." Paul felt like throwing up on himself when he thought about how *he'd* been sent to manipulate this innocent, caring man.

Smiling weakly, Cameron tilted his head and laid a hand on Paul's thigh. "I really mean a lot to you?"

"Oh fuck yes." Paul squeezed Cameron's hand for emphasis. His fervency surprised him, but he didn't try to backpedal and downplay it. *Just don't ask me how much.* That question would've hit his T-spot, the Terror Spot, beneath which lay the realization that he was falling in love for the first time in his life.

Cameron didn't ask how much. Instead he said, "When I came to see you in the hospital, you said Jonns was out of the picture, that after you threatened to expose him and he sent his goon squad to mess you up, he wouldn't risk any further contact."

"Not with me," Paul said, "unless I really piss him off. He knows the Dick isn't in my possession. I'm sure the messengers he sent to my place were instructed to look for it. That means he knows *you* still have the automaton. Or what he thinks could be the automaton. And he still wants to get his hands on it for a look-see."

"So David's spiel about his sister being a professional organizer—"

"I'm pretty sure he was trying to gain access to your family's storage unit or at least find out where it is. The last thing I told Edgar about the Dick was that you took it there. I've never deviated from the story. Now he seems intent on exploring *that* trail, via David."

"But...what does he want it for? You thought he'd given up on it."

"Yeah, I did. At least I figured he would. But he's not entirely convinced it doesn't hold a yellow diamond. What's worse, he's becoming obsessed with Mobry's involvement in the occult. I made the mistake months ago of telling him about Mobry's plan to construct a kind of magic lamp that could make wishes come true—that he wanted to make it in the form of a clockwork automaton."

"And he did build it," Cameron said quietly. "The wish-come-true Dick."

Paul nodded. He didn't tell Cameron the rest—that he believed in the efficacy of those wishes, because he believed the magician had mastered magic both on and off the stage. He didn't mention the unnerving dreams he kept having or that niggling sense of some ethereal tendril linking his life to Alain Mobry's.

He didn't wonder aloud if he was losing his mind and ask for Cameron's forbearance.

"What are we going to do *now*?" Cameron asked. "I want these assholes out of our lives, Paul. For good."

"So do I." And that was *why* Paul didn't tell Cameron the rest. They had more real and pressing issues to resolve. "Let me sleep on it. I think I'm on the verge of coming up with something. We'll talk about it tomorrow when you get home from work. Right now I just have to"—he let the word float out of his mouth—"dream."

## Chapter Eight

Before falling asleep, Paul knew only one thing for certain: Edgar Jonns had to be convinced Cameron's flea-market purchase was forever out of his reach. And that meant he or someone close to him had to witness its departure from Cameron's life. All the talking in the world wouldn't convince him it was junk and it was gone, especially if Paul was the one doing the talking.

Earlier, after his conversation with Henry and before Eli Kogen had arrived, he'd considered packaging the real Dick in the near future and then meeting Edgar at a post office or other shipping station. He'd show Edgar the automaton just before sealing up the box and sending it off, perhaps to a colleague at a different university. But that plan allowed for too many bad turns. Edgar would see the address on the box. Or he might even kick up a fuss right there in public and accuse Paul of having stolen the clockwork from him. The guy was definitely getting strange enough to pull any manner of bizarre stunts.

Even more worrisome, Paul could be inviting another beating if he brought all his lies to light. He'd been claiming he'd misidentified Cameron's flea-market find, insisting it was a worthless tower of metal. He'd led Edgar to believe he no longer had any contact with Cameron Waters. None of this would sit well with a dyed-in-the-wool control freak. Edgar Jonns couldn't overlook being jerked around. There were bound to be consequences, possibly for Cameron as well, and Paul refused to let that happen.

He had to come up with some other course of action and soon. Simply turning Mobry's Dick over to Edgar was *not* an option.

Paul lay on his back as Cameron curled against him, his head on Paul's shoulder, his leg bent over Paul's leg, and his hand resting over Paul's heart. Sleeping together, something they'd never done, brought Paul a quiet joy that came from knowing he was exactly where he needed to be, doing exactly what he wanted to do. It was right from every vantage point, and Paul felt a contentment that had, until that moment, eluded him—except when Cameron and he had danced.

He kissed the top of Cameron's head. *We'll make it right, baby. We'll get this bullshit out of our lives.*

"Paul?"

"Hm?"

"I think I did make a wish. And I think it might be coming true."

\* \* \*



*Paul sat at the Corral's bar, watching Cameron mix drinks, wondering why he was mixing them in an artillery shell. Or was it Mobry's Dick? The possibility alarmed him.*

*"Hey, don't use that as a cocktail shaker!"*

*Cameron smiled at him. "Why not? It is a cocktail shaker."*

*A man sat beside Paul. At first Paul resisted looking at him. He didn't want to encourage the stranger's attention, didn't want to give the impression he was out cruising and ready to flirt. It was important he remain true to Cameron in every way.*

*Only, the stranger wasn't just any customer. He was Alain Mobry, and he didn't look crippled at all. He looked hale and quite handsome.*

*Paul was thrilled.*

*"I'm so glad you came," he said, trying to mute his excitement. He didn't want to hurt Cameron's feelings by gushing over another man.*

*"Well, I had to," Mobry said casually as he faced Paul. His expression was very kind, glowing with bonhomie.*

*"I had to as well," said Paul. "So I could spend more time with Cameron."*

*Mobry smiled. "I see you love him."*

*"I do, but how can you see that?"*

*"Because I'm looking through your eyes." Mobry gazed across the bar once more, only Cameron was no longer there. A man who resembled Cameron worked in his place. Paul seemed to recall his name was Carl. Fondly, Mobry watched him. "Not perfect, but pure of heart."*

*"Yes," Paul said with full understanding, because now he was looking through Mobry's eyes. Yet he was thinking of Cameron. "Alain, I don't know what to do with the clockwork cock."*

*"Just don't let the thieves get it. Be the trickster you are, Puck. Oh, and don't forget to use your wish."*

*"But the clockwork isn't mine; it's Cameron's."*

*Alain laughed—indulgently, not disparagingly. "You darling fool. It's always been yours. I just let him find it to bring you together. And when that happened, it belonged to both of you." His gaze shifted to the men behind the bar.*

*Men. Paul had to stare to make sure he was seeing two, not one. Cameron was dancing with his coworker. Was it Carl? Their dance was carefree and innocent, devoid of any sexual overtones, as if they were children. But their outlines were blurred. They looked like two amoebas joining beneath the soiled lenses of a microscope.*

*"It would be all right if you kissed me," said Mobry. "We're brothers"—he winked—"but beyond the constraints of taboos."*

*"Like Cameron and Carl?"*

*Mobry smiled cryptically as the Corral's DJ played that dreadful Monkees song, "I'm a Believer." Paul grimaced. Yet the song didn't seem quite as out of place as it should have.*

\* \* \*

Breathing hard, Paul slid from beneath Cameron's limbs and gingerly sat up. He rested his forehead on the heels of his hands. Okay, what was *that* about?

After taking a moment to collect his wits, he got out of bed. He grabbed his clothes, went to the downstairs bathroom to relieve himself and gargle, detoured to the guestroom to shed his rib belt and don a bathrobe, then headed for the kitchen. Cameron would be up soon; his clock was always set for six thirty. Coffee came first, followed by a shower and breakfast. Paul put on the coffee. When its drip cycle was finished, he filled two cups and carried them upstairs.

All the while he'd been pondering his recent dreams, trying to find the umbilical cord that connected them to his waking life. After he settled onto the bed, he petted the hair back from Cameron's forehead and thought, with no little wonder, I'm in love with this man.

Cameron stirred just seconds before his alarm sounded. His mind must've been conditioned to slough off sleep at the same time each morning. He inched closer to Paul's bent, bare leg, laid an arm along the calf, and kissed the knee.

"I smell coffee," he said drowsily.

"Sit up, and you'll be able to taste it."

Cameron took a moment to roll over and boost himself up. Immediately he smiled. It was a lovely smile, weighted with sleep, honeyed with pleasure—the way he looked and smelled and felt. Before Paul handed him the coffee mug, Cameron swayed forward and touched his lips to Paul's. They were enticingly plush and radiant with heat.

"Why did we wait so long for this?" he asked, taking the mug Paul offered. He lifted it to his mouth.

Paul watched its ascent. "Fear, I guess. Insecurity. Stupidity."

"But that's all over now, isn't it?"

Mechanically, Paul nodded. "That part is over." *And this one's just beginning.* He felt drugged.

They sipped in silence for a while, swaddled in near darkness and free-floating feelings and the threads of each other's warmth. Soon, sometime after seven, the curtains would appear before the windows like veils of ash. A new day would be under way. A genuinely new day.

"Let's shower," Cameron said. He reached for Paul's hand.

Even Cameron's mundane morning ritual of peeing and tooth brushing couldn't pull Paul off his cloud. He got the water just right as Cameron took care of business, and checked to make sure there was enough soap and shampoo. As Cameron lightly rubbed Paul's ass, they stepped inside.

It all felt so familiar. They'd done this nearly a month earlier in the bathroom downstairs. Cameron had given head for the first time then, and he'd been stunningly good at it. But the interlude had ended badly. This morning's shower would be better. Each one from now on would be better.

*"I'm a believer."*

They lathered up their hands and washed each other, slippery fingers stroking slowly over slippery bodies, until their cocks lifted and met. Cam pressed against Paul for a kiss. Then Paul lowered himself to his knees and drew Cameron's sweet rigidity into his mouth. Simultaneously, he gently soaped between Cameron's thighs. From tender silken skin to tightened sac, he cleansed his once and future lover of the taint of other men as his mouth wished Cameron to be his own.

"You're so good," Cameron said, his dreamy voice muffled by the falling water.

Paul slipped his fingers farther back. Splaying them, he let the middle one sink into the groove of Cameron's butt while the others caressed those heaven-sent cheeks.

Paul hadn't sucked dick in months. The feel of his lips sliding and tongue curling around that rod of flesh was even more delectable than he remembered. This was the only bond that truly mattered, this ecstatic giving and taking. The airy reverence Paul felt for Mobry paled beside the marrow-deep excitement and adoration he now felt for Cameron. Warm water spilled over him, a dear man's morning wood filled his mouth and hand, and his knees and ribs hurt from the joy of it all.

"So good, so good," Cameron murmured into the streaming water as Paul savored the length of him. His words came out as sighs. *"So good."* His slim hips rocked rhythmically toward Paul's face.

Another surge of arousal further packed Paul's groin and stiffened his cock *Yes. So good.* This was life; this was real. No dream could be finer.

Cameron came suddenly, pulling Paul's wet hair. But he didn't have to hold Paul's head in place. Nobody was going anywhere, not until they'd both had their fill.

When he was empty, Cameron sank down to meet Paul. They indulged in an ardent, water-drenched kiss. "Your turn," Cameron whispered, then slid his lips over Paul's mouth and up to his ear. He tugged at the lobe.

Paul felt dazed as he got to his feet. Need wound his muscles tight. He grabbed the base of his turgid cock, and his own touch made it twitch.

Cameron gave the head a teasing lick. "Do you need me?" He delivered a quick tonguing suck to the taut apex. "Do you?"

Jerking, Paul was tempted to start stroking himself. This was torture. "Quit talking to my dick, Cameron. It can't answer you. Its throat is swollen."

"But *you* can answer me." Cameron circled the crown's spongy brim with his lips. He tightened them and plucked at the soft ridge of flesh.

Paul gasped as he watched. "Yes, I need you." He closed his eyes. "Do I ever."

With a level of skill that was still startling, Cameron drew Paul's cock into his mouth. His hand, lips, and tongue worked in concert, tugging and relaxing.

"Please, thank you, you're welcome, may I," Paul blabbered in an ecstasy of pleasure, his head dropping back, the water pelting his chest and arousing him even further.

Cameron had taken almost all of him in, and as the force of his sucking peaked, Paul's tension broke. The orgasm that pounded through him made him whimper like a puppy. Cameron's expert draws became more subtle with every throb. Christ, he had great instincts.

He rose when Paul was spent.

"I do need you," Paul said, stroking his quaking hands down Cameron's face, that touchingly unremarkable face that had become precious to him. Cameron's smile shone through the cascading water.

They kissed. They'd never held their passion in abeyance when they kissed, but this time was different. The slick feathering of their lips became a firm, careful compression; their tongues languidly made love. A fresh wave of feeling rolled through Paul, as if chasing down his climax.

Yeah, he'd fallen. And for a wholly ordinary man with some extraordinary assets. He wasn't sure he liked it. A moment later, he was.

"If there's anything you want to try out," Paul said, "please tell me. Or if you don't like something, tell me. Sexual or not. I don't care what it is. I want you to be happy. This is the first time I've ever—"

Smiling, Cameron put three fingers to his lips. "You're prattling."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. I like it. You have to tell me what you want too. Or don't want."

Paul nodded. "I will." Honest communication. Damn. It was almost more daunting than surrendering to love.

They got out of the shower before they wrinkled up like old men.

"I'm making breakfast today," Paul said as they toweled each other dry.

"You don't ha—"

"I want to."

Actually he needed to. Paul had to focus on something mundane and methodical to bring his brain up to speed. It had just been shuffling until now, groping along one cord and then another, trying to come to terms with his dreams and his very real emotions. They were interlaced at some point. Although he was close to finding that point, he'd soon have to veer off in another, more consequential direction.

He'd have to set in motion his plan to get Edgar Jonns out of their lives.

\* \* \*

Cooking and eating had helped slap Paul into alertness. He was a competent cook, but not an inventive one, and his simple breakfast—eggs scrambled with diced ham and onions, toast spread with apple butter, and milk on the side—had seemed to suit Cameron just fine. In fact, his approval filled Paul with pride.

After he saw his lover off to work, he snatched up his cell phone and got to work. A securely grounded determination had, thank goodness, supplanted his drifting sensation. A sense of direction had smoothed and sharpened the contours of his thoughts.

"Henry, you have to find me something ASAP. I need an artillery shell that's mounted on a thick wood base. It has to come with a nose or whatever the hell that top piece is called."

As usual, Henry didn't ask why. He was good that way. "Not just a casing, then. How big?"

"About nine to twelve inches long."

"Could you narrow it down? I can't find what you're after unless you give me a millimeter size."

Paul sighed. His assistant's fussiness could be exasperating. "I don't know shit about shells. Nine to twelve inches, Henry. Porn-star size. It can be a little nicked up, but it can't have any identifying marks on the sides. None."

"You know, there were art deco cocktail shakers that were made to resemble shells. They're very collectible now."

Paul's breath stopped for a beat. He could almost hear a click in his mind as fancy fit itself to fact. "Yeah, that's even better." His lips moved into an incredulous smile. "A freakin' cocktail shaker. How much would one cost?"

"I'm guessing around one fifty to two hundred."

"Fine." *Now that Edgar's compensated me for that pummeling.* "What's the quickest I could get my hands on one?" Henry would know better than Paul, since he bought a lot of stuff online and cruised antiques stores as regularly as other gay men cruised bars.

"Today, if the shaker's still available. There's a shop four blocks from my flat called A Cuppa that specializes in vintage barware and kitchenware. I saw one in there last week."

"I'll be damned," Paul whispered. "Can you afford to buy it? I'll pay you back immediately, and if you dress it up and deliver it, I'll give you fifty bucks more."

"Yeah, I can afford it. But what do you mean, 'dress it up'?"

Paul licked his lips. His mind was moving at a fast trot now. "I mean make it seem like there's mechanical clockwork inside. You don't have to get elaborate, just give the thing some weight, maybe throw in some pieces of junk that'll click and clack when it's moved. Know what I mean?" Henry *should* know what he meant; he'd been Paul's volunteer research assistant since the beginning of the previous school year. But just to be on the safe side, Paul gave him more instructions for the altered shaker's feel and appearance.

"I'd do it myself," he added, "but I don't have the right crap lying around my apartment. And I wouldn't feel comfortable filching stuff from Cameron. He's at work now."

"You need it that soon?"

"Sooner." Paul scratched at an eyebrow. What was he leaving out? "Oh shit, and the thing has to be secured to a dark wooden base. A thick one. Any strong adhesive would do." Fuck the drawers, he thought, hoping their absence wouldn't even be noticed.

He himself would incise something resembling Mobry's signature on the bottom—not that David Wolzak knew what Mobry's signature looked like. And it would be David viewing the counterfeit piece, not Edgar Jonns. Paul counted on fuck boy's ignorance to make the ruse fly.

And Cameron's acting ability.

"Do you want anything else?" Henry asked slyly.

"No. There's nothing more you need to do. I'm..." Paul wondered how to phrase it.

"Fully functioning again?"

"In a relationship. A committed one." After the words left his mouth, Paul was tempted to turn around and see if somebody was working a lever in his back.

Henry was silent for a moment. "You're kidding."

"No. I'm not."

"Wow."

"Yeah, wow."

"That was sudden."

"Not really," Paul said with a bemused smile. "I think it's been over a hundred years in the making."

## Chapter Nine

Cam faced Paul as they stood before the front door. It had been four days since his weird first date with David Wolzak, and this morning he'd be seeing David again. Even though the meeting was taking place under Paul's direction, Cam felt strange about being around a man who was once the object of his misplaced desire.

His affection swelled as he watched Paul. Earnestly, with one side of his lower lip trapped between his teeth, Paul was straightening Cam's tie. His gaze did a double take when it flickered up to Cam's face.

"Why are you smiling?" he asked with a frown.

"I love it when you do things like this. When you fuss over me."

Paul withdrew his hands and crossed his arms over his chest. "I'm not fussing," he said. "Crooked ties drive me crazy."

Cam smiled wider. "I suppose that explains why you pull the covers over me when I've thrown them off and why you bring me coffee and why—"

Paul's frown deepened. "Cameron, shut up and listen. For God's sake, don't forget to take the box out of your backseat and put it someplace in your office where Wolzak can't miss it."

"I won't forget."

The nature of Paul's frown changed. He began to look more concerned than annoyed. "Are you sure you're not gonna be thrown off by seeing him again? Because if you get all flustered—"

"I'm sure." Cam tenderly placed a hand on the side of Paul's face, leaned forward, and kissed him. "I'm very sure."

Blushing, Paul cleared his throat. "Because it's really, really important that you're convincing."

"I'll be convincing."

"And don't forget to tell him you're getting off at five and going straight from work to—"

"Yes, I know. That way he won't be inclined to hang around in his parked car and wait for me so he can follow me." Cam began to recite Paul's instructions by rote. "And if he *does* come back at five, so he *can* follow me, I'll be long gone. Because I'll blow out of the office as soon as he leaves and the coast is clear."

Ruefully, Paul smiled. "I hate putting all this on your shoulders, but I don't know how else to get Edgar Jonns off your back."

"Hey, I think it's a great plan. He needs to believe the Dick is no longer in my possession. And this way he won't be able to prove or disprove where exactly it went."

As Paul absently brushed at Cam's shoulders, he must've remembered that "fussing" remark, because he abruptly stopped and shoved his hands in his pockets. "Now let's just hope Wolzak shows up on time."

Cam grabbed his briefcase off the floor. "He will. I told him I had a tight schedule today. And he seemed *really* enthusiastic about seeing me again."

"Dickhead."

Cam chuckled. Aside from feeling a little averse to seeing David again, he wasn't daunted by this challenge. He was exhilarated. The man he wanted, wanted *him*, and he felt capable of doing whatever it took to smooth their way to happiness.

"Now give me my good-bye kiss," he said. "I need to get going."

Paul hesitated and gave him a peck.

"That wasn't a kiss," Cam said, grabbing the front of Paul's T-shirt.

"I don't want to get in a clutch with you, Cameron. It gets me too excited."

"But we just had sex."

"We had sex an hour ago. I'm already on the brink of another boner from your last kiss."

Cam was too, for that matter. But damn it was heavenly, floating through his days on this raft of mutual desire.

*And love.* His gaze was unwilling to release Paul. *I love this crazy bastard.*

"You'd better leave," Paul said quietly.

"Yeah." Cam reached for the door latch. "Yeah, I'd better."

\* \* \*

Cam remained confident of David's appearance even as his office clock blinked past ten. For at least the fiftieth time, he glanced at the open carton of miscellaneous stuff sitting against one wall, no more than four feet from one of the chairs where his clients always sat. A person would have to be blind to miss it.

If Paul's theory was correct, David Wolzak would notice the phallic canister that stuck out from the neat jumble of folded clothing, small appliances, vases, and knickknacks that filled most of the box. When Cam had asked Paul, "*Why don't you let Edgar himself see the decoy?*" Paul had answered, "*First, because there's no way to show it to him without my getting involved, which would make him suspicious right off the bat. And second, because he knows I'm not stupid enough to have mistaken it for Mobry's Dick. Best to make the bozo have to describe it to him.*"

The bozo was David, of course, and "it" was a sleek but slightly scuffed art deco cocktail shaker fashioned after a World War I artillery shell. Its cap looked like a ribbed nosecone. The loyal Henry had apparently made himself indispensable in a whole new way by filling the shaker with enough screws, poker chips, cotton



batting, and God knew what else to give the piece some heft and make it rattle a little when it was moved. He'd used the strongest bonding agent he could find to secure it to a wood base, which concealed the manufacturer's mark. Paul had scratched an illegible scrawl on the bottom of the base, just in case David got inquisitive enough to look for a signature.

Aside from a vague similarity in shape, the decoy bore little resemblance to the real Mobry's Dick, which was now locked securely in the trunk of Cam's car. Paul claimed the differences shouldn't matter. After all, he'd been swearing to Edgar that he'd misidentified the piece, which he'd never described to Edgar in minute detail. So, filtered through the lens of David's even-less-informed perception, the shaker should be able to pass as the item Cam had bought at the flea market. Let Edgar draw whatever conclusions he wanted to draw.

When David appeared in the open doorway nine minutes beyond his scheduled arrival time, Cam's heart nearly stopped. He stood up from his desk and affected a pleased smile.

"Hi," David said. "Hope I'm not *too* late."

"No. I have plenty of time to show you the listings I mentioned on the phone. Why don't you have a seat?"

David closed the door behind him. "Why don't you come here first?" His tone was undeniably suggestive.

Shit. Cam didn't want to be pawed by the guy. Not only did he feel bound to Paul now, but the man he faced only wanted to manipulate him. Even further.

*So what? Use it to your advantage. Don't get angry; get even.*

With that smile still plastered to his face like stage makeup, Cam came around the desk...and just happened to stub his toe on the cunningly ill-placed box. Its contents made a satisfying racket, further drawing attention to it.

"Damn it," Cam muttered. He looked in vexation at the obstacle.

The ploy worked perfectly. David eyed the box. "What's all *that* for?"

"Oh, it's part of a family tradition," Cam said.

David cast him a brief, uncomprehending look. Then his gaze snapped back to the carton. "What tradition?"

*He sees it! He's wondering about it!* Cam stayed where he was. Maybe he wouldn't have to put his hands or mouth on David after all. "Each year before the holiday season gets under way, everybody in my family puts together a boxful of things they don't need or want anymore. We donate the stuff to a charity resale shop."

"That's nice," David said distractedly. "Which one?"

"Whichever one we choose. I usually donate to St. Vinny's. Sometimes the Salvation Army."

"So you're dropping off the box today?"

“Yeah, on my way home from work. That's why it's sitting there, waiting to make me look like a clumsy oaf...just as I'm about to greet a buyer I really, really like.” Cam slid his visitor a demure smile.

David nodded.

Cam hoped beyond hope that David didn't realize these charities had, between them, close to ten outlets in the metro area. He didn't seem like the thrift-store type, though. No, sir. Not a gentleman's assistant at Owen McCrae.

“What's that thing on the top?” David's eyes narrowed as he stared at the cocktail shaker.

“A really stupid purchase I made about a month ago.” Cam chuckled. “I don't know what's with me and flea markets. I can't seem to leave one without buying something.”

“What is it?” David took a step forward. It looked like he wanted to crouch to the carpeted floor and examine the shaker.

“To tell you the truth, I don't know. It just caught my eye. A guy I met that day thought it might be something valuable, but it turned out he was wrong. That's what he said, anyway. So when I couldn't find a place in my house to put the damned thing, I just hauled it to my family's storage unit.” Shaking his head, Cam laughed again. “Let that be a lesson to me. God, I really need to stop acquiring useless crap.”

Bending at the waist, David tried tentatively to lift the decoy, but its base was lodged within the other make-believe castoffs. He didn't force it. The cylinder did, however, respond obediently to its jostling by sending up some muted *clinks* from within.

“Seems to be something inside of it.”

“Seems to be,” Cam said. “It's kind of heavy too. But I haven't been able to get it open.”

“What's attached to the bottom?” David straightened.

“It's secured to a wood base.”

David dawdled over the box. “May I have it?” Shrugging, he added, “I'm intrigued. And as long as you're giving the thing away...”

“I really can't,” Cam said with feigned regret. “I'm sorry. We—my family and I—kind of take this ritual seriously because we make our donations in honor of my grandparents. They were destitute and homeless for a period of their lives and had to rely on charity to get by.” Cam was astonished by his burst of creativity. He had to caution himself not to get too carried away. “You can always buy it from the resale shop. Call them tomorrow or the next day and ask them to set it aside for you. Their prices are reasonable. Low, actually.”

“The Salvation Army or...which one?”

Sure as shit, he was clueless. “St. Vincent de Paul.”

David looked stymied. "Yeah, I...guess I could do that. You said you're going there after work?"

"You bet. I'm hoping to get out of here by five or six. And that box is definitely going with me. Damned if I'm going to trip over it again."

"Why did you even bother bringing it in here?"

Cam hadn't anticipated that question. He scratched at his eyebrow. "I, um...I'd asked the other agents and office staff if they wanted to throw in anything. And I had some stuff of my own lying around here." Before David could press him for more details, Cam resumed his seat behind the desk and spun his laptop in the direction of the visitors' chairs. "Sit down. Let me show you the houses I found for you." He lapsed into a more seductive tone. "Then maybe we can make plans to get together later."

"Uh, Cam"—David glanced at his watch—"do you mind if we reschedule? I'll call you in a couple of hours. I have to be at work by eleven."

"Then why did you agree to come by?" More pretense, this time of confusion tinged with disappointment.

"I just wanted to touch base with you." David's mouth twitched into a wholly unconvincing smile.

Go fuck yourself, Cam thought, struggling to keep the disdain from showing on his face. David had been ridiculously eager to meet him today. In fact, he'd been calling Cam, pestering him about getting together again. Now it was obvious he'd only wanted to tighten his net.

But he'd been spared the effort. His *true* catch was within his reach. So he thought.

Cam nearly choked on his next words, but he had to keep the ruse alive. "I'd like to do more than touch base, you know. I'd like to spend some time with you, David. Alone."

David moved toward the door. He'd never even gotten around to taking a seat. "We will. I'll call you, and we'll set something up."

When Cam smiled this time, his smile was genuine. *You've already been set up, ass wipe. And it couldn't have happened to a nicer person.* "I'm looking forward to it." He got up from his chair. "Come on. I'll see you out."

Feeling lenient in the face of victory, Cam ran a hand down David's back as he opened his office door. It wouldn't hurt to strengthen the illusion he was still the gullible, moonstruck mark he'd initially been. The only reason he wanted to walk David to the front door was so he could loiter around the Bell-Jablon lobby and make sure David drove away. Because once the prick was gone, Cam was going to hightail it to his mother's house and drop off the real Mobry's Dick. Then he was going to take his butt home and make love with Paul until they both passed out.

As long as Paul was wearing his rib belt.

\* \* \*

Their lovemaking, Cam thought dimly, was like an erotic dance. Without breaking their embrace, they moved naked from the living room to the breakfast bar to the doorway of Paul's room, kissing and fondling, their cocks bumping and rubbing, until Paul turned Cam around and forced him up against the hallway wall.

His hands swept over Cam's nipples. "Did I hurt you?" He'd done a lot of nibbling and plucking and sucking.

Cam felt another electric shudder. "Yes." He'd asked for it, wanted it.

"In a good way or bad way?" Paul's hands swept down to Cam's hips. He pulled them toward his own.

"A perfect way."

"We need some toys," Paul said, gently humping Cam's ass as Cam humped the wall.

Cam pressed backward. "Put it in. I need you to."

"Don't move. I'll be back in a flash."

Paul darted into his room as Cam fondled himself, cock twitching in his hand. Then Paul came back, pushed Cam against the wall once more, and followed his order.

Arms and hands and cheek flattened against the wall, chest burning, thighs tense, Cam forfeited all control. Orgasm hit him in a spangling rush, and he throbbled smears of milky whiteness onto the fern green paint. He didn't think about what he'd done until after he'd done it. Even then he didn't care.

"I came on the damned wall," he said, still catching his breath.

Paul patted Cam's ass. "That's better than punching through it, cowboy."

Cam began to snicker. He turned, they embraced and kissed, and Cam said, "I love you."

After two heartbeats, Paul cupped the back of Cam's head and said, "I love you too, Cameron." He slowly stamped a kiss on Cam's neck.

Cam closed his eyes.

They stood there for a moment, holding each other, saying nothing more. What had just happened didn't seem quite real. But the love Cam felt was the realest thing he'd ever experienced—an event as common yet miraculous as birth. And as essential to life.

"Shouldn't we cry or something?" Cam asked.

"What we should do is have a good stiff drink. Or several."

## Chapter Ten

After cleaning up, they grabbed a couple of beers and went to the couch to talk. Cameron recounted David's visit in more detail.

Paul was more than pleased by Cameron's performance, but he did find one cause for concern. "Edgar's gonna flip," he said, "when he realizes Numbnuts didn't ask which store or where."

Cameron got up to light a candle. He'd already had enough presence of mind to close the drapes. He skimmed a hand over Paul's hair as he resumed his seat, and Paul glided a hand down Cameron's arm.

*This is what it must've been like for Alain Mobry, when he finally found love.*

True magic. More incredible than any stage illusion, more powerful than any spell. Paul felt a bit awestruck. Still, he couldn't shake the suspicion that he'd been through this before. His feelings were new and startling as well as old and familiar. He had a milder form of the same reaction, he realized, whenever he smelled the musty velvet of seats and curtains in historic theaters, whenever he viewed garish antique playbills.

"What do you suppose is going to come of it?" Cam asked. "Edgar's being pissed off, I mean."

"I suppose you should anticipate a phone call."

Cameron looked troubled. He idly ran the bottom of his beer bottle over his bathrobe-covered thigh. "From David."

"Of course."

"So what do I do when *that* happens?"

Paul's gaze went to the regulator wall clock as it chimed the hour. What was it he'd once read about the nature of time? He tried to shake loose the thought and concentrate on Cameron's question. "Invite him over."

"*What?* Are you crazy?"

"Maybe."

"I don't want him here, Paul."

"I don't either, particularly." Paul's gaze shifted back to Cameron. "But chances are he'll never make it inside the house."

Cameron gaped at him. "I don't have a freaking clue what you're talking about."

"Sometimes we just have to face our demons. In order to chase them away." Paul took a drink of beer, relishing its coldness and complex flavor and effervescence. "And sometimes, in the process, we realize they weren't nearly as god-awful as we thought."

\* \* \*

The next day Cameron got three voice-mail messages from David Wolzak. Clueless had finally gotten a clue, most likely from Edgar Jonns and in no uncertain terms.

As Paul had predicted, Wolzak wanted to know at precisely what thrift shop on what street his onetime lover had deposited the donation.

Although he was home today, Cameron didn't exactly jump to return David's calls. Paul kept his mouth shut about it as long as he could. Finally, as Cameron walked past him while he worked at the dining table, Paul grabbed his hand.

"Well?"

Letting out a weighty sigh, Cameron flopped into a chair. "Why do you want me to invite him over here? Why can't I just talk to him on the phone? Or better yet, ignore him? That's what's hanging me up, you know."

Paul smiled. "I'm glad you don't just dismiss my suggestions offhand."

"But your things are all over the place. We'll have to hustle to erase every trace of you."

"No we won't."

After staring at him for a moment, Cameron tossed up his arms in exasperation. "Okay, I'll play along. Why won't we have to pretend you're not staying here? Does Edgar already *know* you're staying here?"

"I doubt it. I've told him we haven't had any contact since that first weekend. And my car's been parked in your garage, so it can't be seen from the road. Besides, where I'm staying is irrelevant to him. Or certainly not important enough to set up round-the-clock surveillance." Paul began gathering up his research materials to clean off the table. "I told you yesterday, Wolzak won't be setting foot inside the house. Just tell him to be here at three. After he pulls into the driveway, don't go outside if he doesn't come to the door. Stay in the house. And make sure all the curtains and blinds are closed before he gets here."

Cameron's stupefied gaze skittered around as it alternately followed Paul's movements and searched his face. "Why wouldn't he come to the door? Why can't I—"

Paul leaned over and kissed him. "Cameron, honey, please. Just do it. I have to leave for a while."

"Why?"

"To take care of some business." After making sure his papers were in order, Paul slid them into his briefcase.

"Is someone picking you up?"

"No."

"Then how—"

"In the vehicle I have parked in your garage." Paul came around to where his lover sat. Dropping to a squat, he put his hands on Cameron's knees and gazed into his face. "Trust me. Please."

Cameron stared into his eyes and then wilted a little. "Oh shit. When you look at me like that, talk to me like that..."

Paul smiled. "I wouldn't play my 'trust me' card without good reason, you know."

Looking resigned, Cameron exhaled. "Yeah."

Paul rose, cradled his head, kissed his hairline. He couldn't help but be moved. Finally, someone had faith in him. "I won't let you down."

\* \* \*

Engine idling to keep his car warm, Paul waited on the rutted service road of a nearby field. Stalks of feed corn, tall and dry, rattled beyond his windows in a surprisingly mild breeze combing through the field from the southwest. Zephyr and Notus bumping bellies, he thought, and he marveled again at how much useless information was stuffed in his brain.

He focused on the slice of county highway he could see from his hiding place. Wolzak would be driving a blue 2005 sedan, and he'd be heading east.

Tomorrow, light snow. The temp would dip from fifty-two to twenty-nine overnight. Cameron could make hot cocoa. They could snuggle beneath the duvet on his queen-size bed and watch movies. Starting this evening.

"I love you," Paul whispered to the windshield, still testing the sound and feel of the words as they left his mouth, as if he were trying to master a foreign language. And in a way he was.

The phrase still sent a warm current through the center of him.

"I love you."

Along came David Wolzak.

Seeing the car gave Paul a jolt. He eased onto the road. He could've sworn he saw two people in the front seats. Anticipation supplanted his romantic reverie. He wasn't afraid, just powered suddenly by adrenaline.

Had that prick been ballsy enough to bring his girlfriend with him, his phony sister?

*Fuck it; it doesn't matter.*

Just seconds after the blue car turned into Cam's driveway, Paul pulled up to the edge of the shallow ditch on the other side of the road. He waited until David got out of the car before he got out of *his* car. As soon as he did, he slammed the door. As he'd expected, the noise caught David's attention and made him turn toward the road.

Hands in pockets, Paul stood still and straight, staring at him.

Wolzak didn't seem to know what to do. He glanced at Cameron's house—Paul had moved Cameron's car to the center of the garage and left the door open, to show that no one else was staying there—and glanced uncertainly at Paul again.

Paul cocked his head and flipped a hand toward himself in a “come here” motion. He kept his gaze steadily on the visitor.

David's height was between his own and Cameron's, which made him around six feet. He was impeccably dressed. Hard to tell if he was broad shouldered or if his physique was enhanced by padding, as Ronald Reagan's had allegedly been. He wasn't bad looking, but Paul didn't find him appealing at all. With that small nose and broad face, he looked a bit like a scrubbed-up, arrogant, “goin' to the state fair” pig.

The person in the passenger seat leaned past the steering wheel and began rapping impatiently on the window. Paul squinted at the car as Wolzak answered the summons by cracking open the driver's door. Bending over, he spoke to his companion, then pointed across the road.

David closed the door. He began sauntering toward Paul with a studied air of indifference. His passenger, who obviously didn't appreciate being left behind, got out of the car.

It wasn't a woman.

Paul's breath stopped for a moment and seemed to clot in his chest. He felt his face harden.

Edgar Jonns strode toward him, hands in the deep pockets of his cashmere overcoat. The breeze made his hair flutter—at least, the strands that had been carefully plugged in between his forehead and crown. It was reddish gold, a color Paul had come to detest.

He overtook David, who suddenly looked more ruffled than Edgar's hair, and made it clear *he* was now orchestrating this unexpected encounter.

“Mr. Patrillo,” he said. “What might *you* be doing here?”

When Edgar stopped in front of Paul, his gaze went immediately to the fading bruises on Paul's face. The smug smile shrank a little. Yeah, he looked uneasy. Edgar liked to pretend he never got his hands dirty. Seeing Paul obviously shattered that pretense.

“I called Waters,” Paul said in a cold, flat voice, “and asked to see him. He must've thought I was angling for some action, because he told me he was already seeing somebody.” Paul glanced at Wolzak. “A man named David he'd met at an open house. He said David was on his way over.”

“So why the fuck are you here if he doesn't want anything to do with you?”

Paul's gaze didn't waver. “To warn him. I feel bad about having jerked him around. He's a decent guy, and it appears he just recently came out. So he's naive, and he's vulnerable.”



Edgar sneered. "Since when did *you* grow a conscience, Patrillo? And what do you mean, 'warn him'? Warn him about what?"

"Your continued interest in that metal tube he found at the flea market. I wanted to tell him either to get rid of it or just hand the fucking thing over to my replacement here." Paul nodded toward David. "Because I know goddamned well you sent this nimrod to work Cameron. The way you once sent me."

David's face colored. He looked at the pavement.

Edgar didn't so much as blink. Shrugging, he lifted his hands, which lifted his coat. "It was pure coincidence that he and David met."

Paul countered this assertion with a smirk. "Right. You know goddamned well Waters is a real estate agent at Bell-Jablon. That was the tell, Edgar. You let on to me that you knew. And then, lo and behold, a lone gay guy just *happens* to show up at an open house, and that gay guy just *happens* to hit on the totally straight-seeming agent."

"He's cute," David murmured.

"Shut up," Paul snapped. "You're a lousy actor." He turned his attention back to Jonns. "So that meeting was about as much a coincidence as your appearance here."

Edgar and David exchanged glances. Obviously none too good at thinking on his feet, David clearly wanted his patron to do the talking.

"David works at Owen McCrae," said Edgar, cool as a cucumber. "We had an appointment to do a little clothes shopping today." He eyed Paul's battered flight jacket. "You could benefit from his expertise."

"This is hardly on your way to Owen McCrae."

"I'm aware of that. But when David picked me up, he said he had a stop to make first. I didn't mind riding along."

"I'll bet."

Edgar's jaw shifted around. Paul, itching to knock it out of alignment, silently watched. "So, uh...you're still convinced the piece is crap?" Edgar asked.

Sighing, Paul dropped his head back and closed his eyes. "Okay. Okay, I'll prove it. You want to see what the *real* Mobry's Dick looks like? I scored a photo of it three days ago. My undergraduate assistant tracked down the automaton to a private collection in Arizona. I have the picture with my other research materials in my car."

Edgar pursed and relaxed his lips. "Sure. Why not?"

Paul reached for the handle of the back door. "Are you certain?" he asked over his shoulder. "It might gall the ever-fucking hell out of you to admit I was right."

"Whose collection?"

"I don't know." Paul leaned in and began riffling through the papers in his battered briefcase. "The owner apparently doesn't want to divulge his identity or exact location."

"One of *those*," Edgar muttered.

And that was when Paul knew they'd reached the end of it. Jonns was buying his story, and that meant Cameron was free.

Paul extracted the photo and handed it to Edgar.

For reference purposes as well as sentimental reasons, Paul had taken at least twenty photographs of the automaton and even made a video of Cameron activating it. Then, when Henry had brought over the cocktail shaker, he and Paul had done some computer manipulation of one picture—the Dick in its motionless, sealed-up state—to give it an archival look, complete with title in the lower-left corner and a faint watermark.

"That doesn't look like what he had in the box," David said, peering past Edgar's shoulder. "I see some similarity. The shape is kind of the same, and it was stuck on a wood base, but..." He shook his head. "No."

"Wait, wait." Paul looked back and forth between them. "What box? Where?"

"Cam was hauling some stuff to a resale shop. I saw it when I stopped by his office a few days ago. That bullet-shaped thing was in the box. He said he got it at a flea market but regretted wasting his money on it."

Paul acted stunned. "I'll be damned. He *did* give it up."

Sighing, Edgar thrust the photo back at Paul. "Come on," he said to David. "Let's go do something worthwhile."

"On to your next treasure," Paul said as Edgar strode away. "Oh, Edgar, by the way—"

Jonns stopped and turned. Paul gave him the finger. Edgar couldn't be bothered pulling his hands out of his pockets, so he simply proceeded up the driveway.

David pretended he was about to follow, but he hung back. He didn't speak until Edgar was ensconced in the car, and even then he spoke quietly.

"What happened to you? It looks like...you were in a fight."

"Ask Daddy Warbucks," Paul said with undisguised contempt.

It was hard to tell if David looked befuddled or alarmed. Maybe Edgar had dropped some hints about the fate of boys who didn't know their place.

Paul didn't give a shit.

As he tossed the photo of Mobry's Dick in his backseat, David spoke again, his voice low and hurried. "You know, you're a really hot-looking dude. My girlfriend and I have been talking about bringing in a third."

Circling around to the driver's door, Paul squawked out a scoffing laugh. "Buddy, I like cock jockeys, not cunt jumpers. I don't want your dick anywhere near me, or mine anywhere near a woman."

"That's pretty narrow-minded," Wolzak said, putting on his snotty.

“What can I say? I'm a gourmand.” Shaking his head and still chuckling, Paul opened the door. “And by the way, fuck you too.”

He planned to go to his apartment, just in case the odd couple felt like following him. He wouldn't stay there long, though; just pick up his mail and some other things.

It was *here* he wanted to be.

With Cameron.

## Chapter Eleven

There wasn't much explaining when Paul walked through the door of the house he'd come to think of as his home. Feeling revitalized, he kissed away Cameron's questions, sat him on the couch, pulled down his jeans, and sucked his dick into a rock-solid candy cane that didn't exactly melt into sugar but melted nonetheless. What fell on Paul's tongue pleased him more than any saccharine syrup. Afterward all he said was, "Let's go upstairs and get naked and crawl into bed. We'll talk there. But would you mind making some hot cocoa first?"

Looking a bit thunderstruck, Cameron answered, "You seem to feel pretty good about what happened today. I guess I can relax now."

Paul grinned and headed up the stairs.

Later, as they cuddled in bed and an oil lamp flickered and the movie *Brief Encounter* dropped British voices and train whistles into the background, Paul did fill Cameron in.

"What made the scheme work is that I 'accidentally' ran into the two of them," he said. "This way Edgar has no reason to believe I faked the photo just for his benefit. He and Wolzak didn't anticipate seeing me, and I, as far as they know, didn't anticipate seeing them. But if I'd made a *point* of sending or showing the picture to Edgar—"

"He would've been suspicious, thought you were pulling a fast one on him."

"That's right." Paul slipped the remote out of Cameron's hand and lowered the volume, which got louder when the movie's Rachmaninoff soundtrack rose to the fore. "Of course, I hadn't planned on Edgar making an appearance. I was going to show the photo to Numbnuts and let *him* inform the puppet master they were chasing down junk. But the way it played out was even better."

Cameron tilted toward him. "From now on you really need to tell me when you're going to do something that could give me heart failure." His fingers skated down Paul's belly, gently stirring the dark trail, tickling a little. "When I looked outside—"

"I'm sorry, baby." Paul kissed him, matching the tenderness of his touch. "But I didn't want you to worry."

The light fondling continued. Cameron seemed reflective. "So that was Edgar Jonns."

"The one and only."

"He isn't very attractive."

Disengaging only slightly, Paul reached for the mug on the nightstand and drained it. "But his money is. Kind of like Hugh Hefner or Donald Trump."

They'd never discussed in any detail what Paul's servitude to Edgar had entailed, but Paul had a feeling they'd be discussing it now. He didn't mind being forthright. He did mind his new lover taking his old liaison too seriously.

"What exactly did you do with him?" Cameron asked. "Or for him?"

*Sure enough.* "You mean, when he 'kept' me?"

Cameron nodded. He looked into Paul's face, his gaze tintured with anxiety.

There were times when he looked so young, when those shining eyes reflected such aching innocence, Paul just wanted to hold him and cry. Or say, *You need to get away from me; I don't deserve you.* Or roll him over and fuck him hard. Hell, he didn't know what to do. How was it possible that a man only a year his junior could be so unlike him yet capture him so thoroughly, speak so strongly to his needs? He'd never before realized he *had* needs that went beyond the physical.

"You don't have to tell me," Cameron said, misinterpreting Paul's hesitation.

"I don't mind," Paul said quietly. *Honest communication. It's imperative.* "I just hung out with him once in a while, went places with him."

"Did you top or bottom?"

Paul took a deep breath and pinched his fingers over his eyes. "Cameron, do we really—"

"Just tell me."

"He likes sucking dick. He likes his boys to come on him."

"That was the extent of it?"

"I didn't fuck him if that's what you're getting at. Never kissed him either." The movie ended. Paul lifted the remote from the covers and turned off the player and the TV. Darkness and quiet enveloped the bed. "He did like me to parade around his place in nothing but these awful, tiny briefs he kept buying for me. He'd talk dirty, feel me up—that kind of stuff."

Easing to the right, Cameron must've lifted his mug of cocoa off the nightstand. Paul heard two swallows, then a soft *thud*. He turned Cameron's face toward his face and kissed him deeply, holding his head in place, savoring the residue of chocolate and alcoholic peppermint on his lips and tongue.

"I like you in boxer-briefs," Cameron said against Paul's mouth. "Or those pajama bottoms that look one stretch away from falling off your pelvis."

"I like you in nothing. Or a suit."

Cameron pulled back. "A suit?"

"Yeah. The sight of your ass in dress pants really turns me on." Beneath the duvet, Paul's cock was getting restless. "Shit, now I'm getting horny again."

"Me too."

With a soft *snick* and a bloom of light, the television came back on.

"Why'd you do that?" Paul asked.

"We have more to talk about. I don't like having sex with the TV on."

Paul snorted. "An electronic chastity belt." He shifted onto his right hip to fully face Cameron—they were both half sitting and half reclining—but the position made his ribs complain. He'd have to be content with turning his head.

"Paul?"

"Hm?"

"How did you feel about your relationship with Edgar?"

"We didn't have a relationship beyond employer and employee." Paul really didn't want to talk about it. That whole sordid episode of his life filled him with shame. "Is there anything else you want to know? I'd rather not reminisce about my days as a call girl."

"That'll do for now. Thanks."

For some contemplative minutes, he and Paul simply touched each other—petted the silky hair overlaying a forearm, traced the slope from outer to inner thigh or the softly rumpled skin of recumbent cock, cupped the knob of a knee. When their hands met, their fingers loosely interlaced.

"What do you think happened to Alain Mobry?" Cameron asked. "What's your honest opinion?"

"You might think I'm crazy." Paul smiled at their hands. "If you don't already."

"Nothing you say or do surprises me anymore. Maybe I should be worried about that."

Laughing, Paul held Cameron's hand in both of his. "Nah. I'm not *that* far gone." He'd been doing some wondering of his own, about whether Cameron shared his growing conviction—or even had any inkling of what that conviction was.

"But you do have a theory about how and why Mobry disappeared."

Paul nodded, considering how to explain it. "I think he lived a long and happy life, but not on the stage. He abandoned the stage. I think he was doing something else he loved, with someone he loved at his side."

"And under a new identity."

"Yes."

A pause now, as Cameron's mind must have worked the possibilities. Although Paul had dropped hints over the past month about what he'd come to believe, he'd balked at being more explicit. First, because he was bemused by his theory. It seemed his fascination with Mobry had played havoc with his imagination. Second, because he was afraid of coloring Cameron's attitude toward him. He didn't want to come off as some new age wacko.

"He acquired that new identity through magic," Cameron said carefully, as if the bed might eject him if he guessed wrong.

"Real magick," Paul said. "With a *k*. Not illusion."

"Yes." Cameron's eyes slanted off to the side. "The kind that made him think he could grant wishes."

Curious and anxious, Paul watched Cameron's face. It always mirrored his thoughts.

"Do you think magick brought Puck into being?" Cameron asked.

"I do. Puck was the young, strong, beautiful man Alain wished he could be."

"Because he was crippled and unattractive and nearing middle age."

"And lonely," Paul added. "So very lonely and needful. He craved love far more than he craved fame." Drifting again, Paul pulled himself back to the moment. "But at first he could only become Puck for brief periods in the course of his performances. I think he was testing the transformation. He didn't have complete faith in it, wouldn't let himself believe it could last. Or maybe he felt presumptuous about wanting it to last."

"Until he had no choice but to believe. Until he faced—"

"A threat that made him desperate."

"A threat to his life."

"Yes."

Abruptly, Cameron's gaze met Paul's. "He willed himself to become Puck. Then he went away to start a new life, under a new name."

Paul nodded. Tears rose in his eyes. Spooked by their unfamiliar sting, he quickly looked down. "I believe he made his wish-world a reality." He felt Cameron watching him.

"Paul, why did you ask me if I believe in reincarnation?"

So, it appeared Cameron hadn't forgotten. Of course not. He paid close attention to everything.

"Have you had any strange dreams lately?" Paul asked.

"I don't know. I don't usually remember. What kind of dreams?"

"About...a man or men you don't know but who somehow seem familiar to you."

"No. I don't think so." He blinked as Paul's implication became clear to him. "Are you saying you believe—"

"*Believe* is probably too strong a word."

Shit, now Paul didn't know what he thought. The whole notion that a century-old love had been reborn through him and Cameron suddenly *did* seem ludicrous. Maybe his interest in fin de siècle theater had moved from intellectual curiosity to emotional connection. Maybe his imagination had been the bridge. It probably happened to a lot of scholars.

"Forget I asked." Paul dropped his head back and raked a few fingers through his hair. "Christ, I can't wait to be done with this dissertation. It's starting to feel like a parasite that's taken root in my brain."

"And what? Made you delusional?"

"That's one way of putting it." Dropping his hand, Paul blew out a sigh. "What do *you* think?"

"That it doesn't matter," Cameron said. "Whatever's fact and whatever's fantasy, it won't change the way I feel about you."

Paul stared at him as if he'd just answered a riddle of great consequence. Cameron Waters, aka the Delphic Sybil, had nailed the defining truth of their situation. They'd found each other; that was all that mattered.

Alain Mobry would've probably felt the same way.

"Were his attackers ever found?" Cameron asked.

"No. Not to my knowledge, anyway."

"Do you believe the Turk was behind it?"

"He's the most likely suspect."

They lapsed into a brief, thoughtful silence.

"What should we do with Mobry's Dick?" Cameron asked.

Paul had been thinking about that too. He'd studied the automaton as best he could without dismantling it; made drawings, taken photographs. "We' don't own the Dick. You do. I suggest you find a damned safe place to keep it, though. That mechanism is worth a small fortune."

"But I don't want it."

That was a shocker. "Cameron, do you realize how rare that thing is? It could be your nest egg. Don't you get it?"

"I get it. I just don't want it."

"Why?"

"You ask too many questions." Cameron looked and sounded perturbed.

"*Me?*" Paul said on a laugh.

In a squirmy way, Cameron resituated himself beneath the covers. "For one thing it's too big for my safe-deposit box. I don't have a damned vault."

"You've got a point there." Paul considered alternatives. "So contact one of the big auction houses. Christie's, Sotheby's."

The nature of Cameron's scowl changed. He seemed more flustered than irked. "Selling it, profiting from it, just doesn't...seem right. Maybe I feel I've profited enough." He flung a warning glance at Paul. "And don't ask me why."

Paul put up his hands in concession.

"I feel I should give it to someone. Pass it on. You know?"

"Then may I suggest a museum?"

Cameron hesitated. "Eventually. Yeah, that would be perfect. But it has to go somewhere else first."

And Paul thought *he* was cryptic. "Where?"



Cameron looked at his lap before looking at Paul. "To you."

Paul was dumbfounded for a moment. "Oh, baby..." He could've puddled up right there, right beside Cameron's cherished ass. And right before he was struck by a realization that made no sense whatsoever, considering how he revered Alain Mobry, yet made complete sense *because* of his reverence.

*But it's more than reverence. It is a connection...whether fate devised it or I fashioned it myself.*

"So, do you want the Dick?" Cameron asked like a boy asking a girl to go steady.

*"It's always been yours. I just let him find it to bring you together. And when that happened, it belonged to both of you."*

Numbly, Paul shook his head. "No." He began to smile. "I don't need it anymore." He rose up on his haunches and faced his lover; held his head, stroked his hair. "I don't need it, Cameron."

"Not even..." He licked his lips. "Not even to make a wish?"

Paul's smile grew. He leaned forward to kiss those soft, soft lips and then whisper, with unshakeable conviction, "I don't need it, Cameron."

## Epilogue

*Vienna, 1903*

"What's that you're reading?" Standing behind his seated lover, Carl crossed his arms over Peter's chest and kissed the wispy black curls that fell over his temple.

Carl's quiet approach had made Peter flinch slightly since he'd been lost in thought. "A death notice. For a performer I've heard of."

Dipping forward, Carl squinted at the paper. "This one?" he asked, touching a block of print.

"Yes." Peter quickly folded the paper. "It isn't important. The name simply caught my attention."

"It would mine, as well. The Turk. How very exotic. Did it say he died onstage?"

"Shortly after the accident, apparently."

"I imagine being an illusionist has its dangers."

"I imagine it does." Peter cleared his throat.

"You seem melancholy."

"Do I? I'm sure it's the weather." Peter forced his attention back to the clock on which he'd been putting some special finishing touches.

"Your new piece is exquisite," Carl said. "But of course I expect no less from you."

Peter looked over his shoulder and smiled. "This is for us, you know. It won't be sold."

"For us?" Carl sounded almost childlike in his pleasure. He was an innocent creature, a youth in transition from boy to man. "Then you must let me see it work."

Peter held the clock upright and wound it. He nudged the hour hand to twelve. Instead of a chime sounding, a pretty tune tinkled from inside the clock. Above its bezel, two small doors opened at opposite sides of the face.

Out came two male figures that glided toward each other. Each had one arm extended; each clutched a pennant in the opposite hand. As the figures met at the center point between the two doors, their extended arms slid around each other's back, and the pennants nestled one atop the other. The upper bore the word *love*; the lower, *eternal*.

Carl exclaimed in awe and delight. Again, he kissed Peter's temple. "How did I manage to be blessed with a companion both beautiful and brilliant?"

Peter reached up and touched the side of Carl's face. "Because you saw beyond both qualities."

Chilly as it was, the room seemed to have an aura of enchantment. Carl sank to his haunches beside the chair and rested his crossed arms on Peter's thigh. He gazed up at his lover. "I adore you more each day, you know."

"Yes, I know. *I'm* the one who's blessed. And I shall never lose sight of that."

"Do you really think love can be eternal?" Carl asked, his eyes bright in the light from the fireplace. "The spiritualists seem to think so. And many other believers in many other faiths."

"They may be right." Peter stroked the young man's hair. "Would you like them to be right?"

"Yes, very much. I wish never to be without you."

"Then believe, and make it so." Peter glanced at his new creation. "Whenever our clock sings the hour, wish it to be so."

Carl smiled. "I shall." He ran a hand from Peter's knee to his foot. "How is your leg today? Do the cold and dampness plague it?"

"Only a bit." Peter ruffled Carl's hair. "I can still chase you down."

"As you did last night. But winter will soon be here."

"Inevitably," Peter said on a sigh. The sky beyond the windows was as dull as the lead between their quarrels. Within a few short weeks, snowflakes would sparkle against the pewter backdrop, and ice would embellish the eaves.

"And I know your leg stiffens and aches," Carl said, "the more frigid it gets outside."

"It's an old injury and doesn't impair me. The pain is like a fading memory." Peter turned in the chair and held Carl's face. "But since you've mentioned winter, I may as well tell you of a notion I've been entertaining. Would you like it if we left the city?"

"And go where?"

"The Greek Isles. Or the Balearic Islands."

"Majorca!" Carl cried. "Oh, Peter, that would be so lovely. Yes, let's. Can we afford it? You know my paintings are just now beginning to find acceptance."

"You needn't worry. We can easily afford it." Smiling, Peter rose and pushed a few stray locks from his face. A vigorous man in spite of his aches, he was tall enough to loom over Carl, even when Carl stood. He now folded his lover into his arms. "The value of my timepieces has risen considerably in the past year."

"Peter Allen's time-defying timepieces," Carl murmured against Peter's neck.

The craftsman indulged in a private smile. "It's settled, then. We'll winter in Majorca."

“And leave all melancholy behind?”

“Every last shred. I’ll make our arrangements tomorrow. And who knows how many more places we’ll go?”

THE END

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*Finding Utopia*

## K. Z. Snow

K. Z. Snow is the daughter of Milwaukee tavernkeepers and learned her first words off a gleaming troll of a Wurlitzer jukebox (“good night, Irene”). Nine years of higher education, resulting in 2-1/2 English degrees and a stint as a teacher, did not dampen her enthusiasm for beer, Green Bay Packers football, classic R&B, and various forms of political incorrectness.

KZ has been many things in her life, including a varsity debater, a Catholic, a hippie, a Girl Scout, a junker, a fag hag, a gardener, an editor, a saxophone /bassoon/tambourine player (not all at once), a damned good dancer, and a companion to most species of domesticated animals, including men.

She now lives in rural Wisconsin, not far from the birthplace of surrealism, a.k.a. The Dells, where her imagination and her hips continue to grow unchecked.