

Loose Id

PYROMANCER

AMANDA YOUNG

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Loose Id.®

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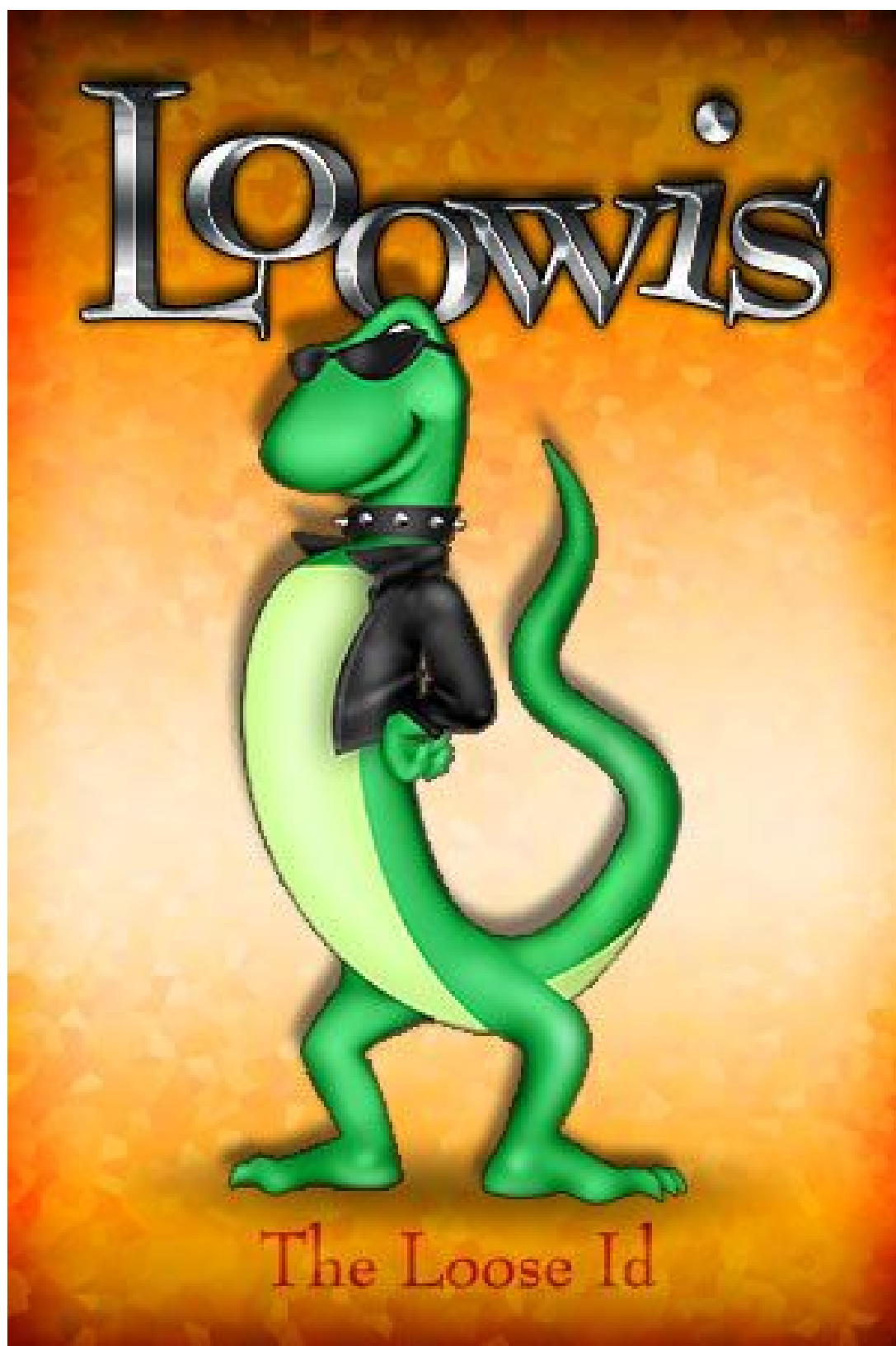
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Chapter One

Christian Ryder sat in the dark, slowly stroking his fist up and down the length of his swollen cock. His gaze was locked on the flickering television screen, where two men were in the final throes of orgasm. The brunet top -- his body heavily laden with muscle -- gripped his thick prick around the base and took aim, spraying cum all over the younger blond man's upturned face. It was a hot scene, one that never failed to get him off.

Until tonight.

As the ending movie credits began to roll across the screen, Christian exhaled a disgusted huff and released his semihard shaft. He reached for the remote control lying next to him on the bed and hit stop on the DVD player. Turning off the TV, he plunged his bedroom into darkness. His frustration mounted as the hollow sound of his pulse pounded in his ears.

It'd been over six months since he'd gotten laid. The last time he'd taken a chance and risked being with someone else, it hadn't gone so well -- a fucking disaster, really. The end result had tested his rigid self-control almost past the limits of his endurance.

The guy he'd picked up and brought home had taken offense at being asked to leave right after they'd screwed, and had thrown a temper tantrum. Not something he'd expected from a six-foot-tall body builder who'd claimed he was only interested in a good time. By the time Christian forcibly removed the man from the property, his body temperature had been dangerously high and his head was spinning.

After that close call, he'd decided it was too dangerous to indulge in one night stands, which left him with few options other than his own left hand. Especially since he already had a self-imposed rule against developing anything long-term or risking the emotional attachment that came with it.

Mixing emotions and sex fucked with even the most normal person's head. For the people around him, it could mean much more than a broken heart -- it could be deadly.

Security lights from outside filtered through the miniblinds covering his bedroom window in sporadic spurts of light, briefly illuminating his damp and sweaty body lying atop tangled, white cotton sheets. He kicked at them, unraveling himself.

Irritated, Christian sat up. He leaned back against the cool brass headboard and flipped on the bedside lamp. His gaze flittered down to the big, red numbers on his alarm clock. Almost midnight.

Restless and exasperated, he picked up yesterday's newspaper off the side table and spread it out over his lap. Since jerking off wasn't going to work for him, maybe he could bore himself to death by reading the paper. It was worth a shot. Losing sleep made control over his curse temperamental.

Page by page, Christian skimmed over the paper until he reached the personal ads. Those babies were like the funny pages to him. Why someone would put an ad in the newspaper, hoping for a good outcome, was beyond his comprehension. Only the fugly and desperate sunk to that level.

He read over a few ads, laughing, until a small square down on the bottom, right-hand corner caught his eye. It was an advert for an escort agency. One that claimed to cater to men of his persuasion: gay men looking for nothing more than a hot body to warm their lonely beds. The agency, Male Companions, promised anonymity and, more importantly, clean bills of health for all their available staff. He never fucked anyone without a rubber, so it was a bit of a moot point, but the words comforted him somehow.

Before Christian realized his intent, the cordless phone was in his hand, his fingers tapping out the number. A feminized male voice answered, saying, "Thank you for calling Male Companions. Nigel speaking. How may I help you?"

Christian opened his mouth to speak and froze. What the hell was he doing? He didn't want to pay for sex; doing so went against every moral he had. He clicked the off button, hanging up.

He exhaled, relieved he'd come to his senses before doing something he knew he would later regret. His gaze wandered over his bedroom, hovering on the fifty-two-inch plasma TV, the only other thing in there besides his bed and nightstand. Not a single picture or piece of artwork marred the clean lines of the bare, white walls. Whereas the stark sterility of his room usually appeared simple and clean, it now felt barren and depressing, not unlike his personal life.

His hands shook as he picked up the phone and redialed the number.

* * * * *

Tanner O'Bannon sat slumped over his kitchen table, trying to balance his checkbook. Money was tight, his balance down to just above two bucks, but at least he wasn't in the negative anymore. He couldn't afford the outrageous overdraft fees the bank charged. The last two charges had forced him to eat ramen noodles for a month. If he never saw another pasta dish in his life, it would be too soon.

Tanner's eyes blurred as he ran through the figures once last time before flipping the checkbook closed. He folded his arms and laid his head on the cool surface of the mahogany table. He was exhausted, but needed to stay awake for just a little longer. On call for work until three a.m., he couldn't afford to fall asleep or miss a single phone call. He needed the money too badly to risk losing his job, even if it was one he was ashamed of. Necessity overruled pride.

With heavy-lidded eyes, Tanner jerked his head up and shook it, trying to force himself to stay alert. He rose to his feet, walked over to the sink, and splashed icy water on his cheeks. As he mopped his face with a clean dishtowel, the phone rang. Only one person would be calling this late.

He didn't know whether to be happy or sad. On the one hand, it meant money; on the other, degradation. His father would be rolling over in his grave if he knew what his only son was doing to pay the debts he'd left behind.

Tanner crossed the room and picked up the phone. He listened for a moment then set it back in the cradle before jogging up the stairs. Upstairs, he hopped into the shower and quickly scrubbed himself from head to toe with citrus-scented body wash. He stepped out and yanked a dry towel off the rack, briskly rubbing it over his hair and skin while he fumbled through a drawer under the sink for lube and a butt plug.

He squeezed a dollop of lube into his hand and ran it over the plug, liberally coating its short length. He reached behind to swipe the remaining moisture through the crease of his ass. The toy in his right hand, he leaned over the toilet and braced his left hand on the back of the commode. He spread his legs shoulder width apart and took a deep breath, trying to relax his muscles as he pressed the blunt rubber tip against his asshole. Due at the motel in thirty minutes, there was no time for finesse. He exhaled and shoved it home, wincing at the sharp burn of his anal ring stretching around the plug.

The things you have to do to make a buck, Tanner thought, as he grabbed the washcloth he'd used in the shower and wiped off the excess lube around the wide base of the plug. He dropped it in the sink and headed into his bedroom to dress.

It was time to go to work.

* * * * *

Waiting inside the modest motel room he'd rented for the night, Christian glanced at his watch for the umpteenth time. Perched on the end of the bed, his sock-clad toes tapped

an unsteady rhythm on the cheaply carpeted floor, his body practically vibrating from anxious anticipation.

He was nervously trying to figure out what would happen once the escort showed up. Payment for the guy's services had already been rendered over the phone -- apparently even hookers took American Express these days -- so at least he didn't have to worry about having that conversation. Things would be awkward enough as it was.

More pertinent was how things would play out. Was he supposed to strip and get right down to business as soon as the guy got there, or make small talk first? Would he inadvertently break some kind of silent rule if he asked the man anything personal? Could they even exchange more than first names? How would they decide who did what to whom?

He wasn't stupid enough to think the escort would turn down anything he asked for, but would it be possible for him to tell if the guy really wanted to do it or not? Was it just a job for him, a way to make a buck, or would he really enjoy it? The thought of fucking someone who just laid there and went through the motions repulsed him.

So many unanswered questions floated around in his head he was beginning to get a headache. Sweat beaded his brow, and his knees cantered up and down. Maybe it wasn't too late to cancel. He could call. Whether they refunded him his money was of little concern. They could keep it; he had more than he'd ever be able to spend anyway.

He didn't think he could go through with this after all. It seemed too cold, too impersonal. A little voice in the back of his mind screamed, "*That's the point, jackass. You need cold and impersonal. Do you want to be responsible for someone else's death?*"

That thought chilled him. Christian forcibly shut down his memories before they transported him back to a time he didn't want to visit. He pushed away his reservations and tried to consider why he'd called Male Companions in the first place.

He was lonely. Though he didn't like to admit it, even to himself, it was the truth. The acquaintances he'd made over the years at work, on the rare occasions he deigned to go in and check up on things, and at the firehouse where he volunteered, only went so far. During the day, he was fine. It was at night, after a long day at work or returning from an emergency fire call, that the loneliness crept in and haunted him.

He realized that this wasn't even about sex, not solely. Sure, he wanted to get off, but what he really needed most was simple human contact, companionship. Sadly, that was the one thing he could never allow himself to possess. Attachments meant caring about someone, making himself vulnerable. In essence, losing control. That was something he could never allow.

Christian took several deep, calming breaths. He could do this. He *had* to. There weren't any other options left for him. It was anonymous sex or nothing. Though he doubted it, all he could do was hope it would be enough to sustain him.

* * * * *

Tanner arrived at the motel with five minutes to spare. Town had been dead, not a car in sight on his way over. A good thing since old Bessie -- his ten-year-old Mazda -- had sputtered and died twice during the trip across town. It was only a matter of time before the old clunker finally gave out for good.

Part of him wished he'd hung onto his dad's car instead of selling it when his father was killed six months prior, but at the time he'd needed the money even more desperately than he did now. The debts his father had left behind were astronomical. Even after he'd sold off everything of value besides the house itself, he still hadn't brought in enough to cover half of what was owed. Hence, the reason for his shady new career.

For the last four months, he'd been working nights for Male Companions as an escort. Selling his body to the highest bidder wasn't the most respectable line of work, but he hadn't known what else to do. It wasn't like he could make enough to cover his college tuition *and* pay the mortgage, along with making payments on all the other debts his father had left on his shoulders. He supposed he could have sold drugs; he knew enough small-time dealers. He could have easily bought a little pot and divided it up for resale. Unfortunately, his conscience wouldn't allow him to do that. Drugs killed people, and no matter how often his buddies tried to convince him marijuana never hurt anyone, he just couldn't quite believe them. A drug was a drug, plain and simple. Having sex for money, degrading as it was, didn't hurt anyone besides himself. Besides, it wasn't like he hadn't had his share of casual sex along the way, just like everyone else. The only difference was now that he got paid for doing it.

Or so he tried to convince himself as he hustled through the motel lobby toward the service desk.

Though he'd been told which motel to go to and given a name, he hadn't been given a room number. That meant he had to go to the desk and ask, something he dreaded every time he was forced to do it. He always imagined the clerk knew exactly who he was and why he was there. It was humiliating.

He rang the bell and waited, tapping his fingers on the hard surface of the beige counter. A bored looking blonde, somewhere around his own age of twenty, sauntered out the back room, long, blood red fingernails plastered over her widely yawning mouth. Her eyes lit up when she saw him. "Oh, hello." She smiled. "Can I help you?"

Tanner groaned inwardly. He was used to being hit on by women, but that didn't make him any more comfortable with it. "I'm supposed to meet a friend here." *Damn, what was the name he been told to ask for? Chris...or Christian?* "His name is, um, Christian, Christian Smith." God, he hoped that was right. The last name was easy. It was always Smith. People had no imagination.

The smile on the girl's face dimmed a bit as she turned to the computer and began to type. Silently, he watched her, wondering how she could type at all with those god-awful nails in her way.

She nodded down at the computer screen and then glanced over at him. "I'll have to call up and ask permission before I can give you any information." She turned away from him and picked up the phone. From over her shoulder, she said, "It'll be just a moment."

"Sure," he mumbled, his eyes scanning everywhere and nowhere. He just wanted to get to the room, do what he was being paid for, and go home. Afterward, he would be one day closer to financial solvency. One trick closer to owning the home he'd grown up in, free and clear.

He listened as she quietly spoke with someone, her side of the conversation consisting of mainly "yes, sir" and "uh-huh." Finally, she hung up and faced him. "Mr. Smith says to send you up. He's in room 204."

"Thank you," he uttered, already striding away from the desk. There was an elevator, but he bypassed it, choosing the stairs instead. He jogged up them quickly, without breaking a sweat, and shoved through the entrance door onto the second-floor hallway.

The walls were adorned in hunter green wallpaper with a burgundy trim. The floor was carpeted in the same deep shade of green. The minute details were absorbed as he hustled to the end of the hall, glancing at room numbers along the way. Room 204 was on the right, near the end.

He stopped outside it and took a breath, giving himself a mental pep talk. *You can do this. Just keep your eyes on the prize and get through it, same as always. It was no different than picking someone up at a club. No different at all.*

He raised his clenched fist and knocked, his gaze dropping to his feet. Beginnings were strange. Some men wanted him to come in and bend over, take it up the ass like a good little whore and leave, while others wanted to make polite chitchat first. Out of the two, he wasn't sure which he liked best. Probably the fuck-and-run guys -- at least those assignments were faster.

He was still wondering what tonight's call would be like when the door swung inward. Tanner looked up, and higher still, craning his neck back to gaze into the eyes of his client for the night. The standard greeting he recited to each of his johns died in his throat.

Saliva pooled in Tanner's mouth. Fuck. The man was easily six and a half feet of yummy muscle and lean, bottled sex, dwarfing his own five feet eight stature.

Tanner's brain turned to mush as all the blood in his body drained south and squeezed into his cock, making his balls draw tight inside his Levi's. His gaze cruised from the man's tousled, short black hair to his socked feet and back up, absorbing all the details in between. Brooding eyes, square jaw, broad shoulders, and trim hips -- every inch sex incarnate and designed to entice a man like Tanner to his knees in supplication.

The man was exactly the sort of guy who got Tanner's motor running in overdrive. The kind of hunk he would've tried to pick up in any one of the bars he used to frequent, back when he actually had a life. A man he would've happily fucked for free, under other circumstances.

Except this was business.

A sheet of ice fell over Tanner, cooling his ardor, easily putting him back in his place. He wasn't here on a social call. He was here to fuck for money.

Tanner schooled his features into a smile he'd carefully rehearsed in front of the mirror at home. It was supposed to look seductive, but something about the tight feel of his skin stretching out over his cheekbones told him it fell flat tonight. *Oh well*, he thought ruefully, *another night, another dollar*.

He met the big man's gaze and held it. "I'm Tanner. The agency sent me."

Chapter Two

“Come on in.” Christian stepped back to make way for the escort to enter the room.

“Thanks,” the young man mumbled as he walked by, his face downcast and shoulders curled inward.

The guy’s arm brushed up against Christian’s chest as he passed. Christian had to make a conscious effort not to jerk away. He wanted to be cavalier about the situation and act as if it was no big deal, but it was difficult. No matter how he wanted to rationalize the situation by pretending there was little difference between this and picking up a complete stranger for an anonymous fuck, his mind wasn’t having it. He’d hired someone for sex and his conscience was throwing a fit.

His body, however, was a different story. His libido was beyond ready to play.

Christian turned his back on the escort and shut the door, sliding the chain into place. No way was he going to take the chance of someone walking in on this. He was antsy enough as it was without adding the risky element of discovery to the mix.

He felt the escort’s gaze on his back as he reached down and rearranged his aching dick as discreetly he could manage. If at all possible, he wanted to take this slow. Having his dick break through the zipper of his jeans and shout “Peek-a-boo!” didn’t seem like the best way to facilitate that.

He took a deep breath. “So what --” Christian turned in midsentence and almost swallowed his tongue. His eyes goggled as he took in the vision before him.

His escort -- *the kid’s name was Tanner* -- was turned away from him, facing the window. Christian absently noted a discarded T-shirt, socks, and a pair of ratty sneakers lying in a heap at the foot of the bed. All that remained were the jeans, and they were still on. *Barely*.

Bent at the waist, Tanner was in the process of yanking his lowered jeans off over his bare feet. The lean lines of his back flexed and rippled with each move, enticing Christian to step forward and lay his hands over all the silky skin on display. All that pale, creamy skin called out for Christian to touch and taste, and that wasn't even taking into account the smooth, rounded globes of the guy's ass.

His gaze dropped, taking in the firm mounds as Tanner kicked out of the final pant leg, and caught a glimpse of heavy, low-hanging balls swinging between lightly furred, athletic thighs. His dick lurched at the sight, and Christian jerked his gaze upward, staring at the crown molding around the ceiling, at anything but the perfection tempting him to ravish his *date* first and ask questions later.

Instead, he jammed his hands into his pants pockets and tried not to move...or breathe. Deep inhalations would just push his hands against his dick, which would in turn remind him of who he'd rather have petting his cock. That would only incense him more.

Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.

If the kid could get him riled up this fast, with no effort on his part other than shaking his sweet, little, naked ass in Christian's direction then... He realized he was being spoken to. "Huh? Sorry, could you repeat that?"

The young man's eyes lifted, his gaze falling short of Christian's eyes. "I asked what you'd like to do now, sir."

Sir? Christian sidestepped around Tanner, sat on the edge of the one of the two wingback chairs across from the bed, and humphed. "Well, the first thing you can do is drop the 'sir' bit." Christian smiled, trying to put the guy at ease, though he himself felt anything but. "It makes me feel like a dirty old man."

"Yes, si-- um, I mean, sure..." Tanner shrugged. His arms hung limply at his sides, hands opening and closing as if he wasn't sure what to do with them. A cute pink stain blossomed over the lower half of his lean face and spread down his neck. "What would you like for me to call you, then?"

Tanner's discomfort was reassuring, in an odd way. Not being the only one out of his comfort zone somehow made Christian feel better. Almost as if they could feel their way through this together, instead of him being out on a ledge all by his lonesome. Tanner's entire demeanor could've been a put on for his benefit -- after all, some people got off on being a despoiler of innocence -- but Christian didn't think that was the case here.

"Christian would work."

Tanner sat down on the bed and reclined, his thighs falling open to frame a slowly thickening dick. "Okay...Christian. So, what do you want to do?" His gaze rose and met Christian's, a slight smile curving the corners of his mouth. His lips parted, his tongue peeking out to swipe over his thick, full bottom lip and make it glisten. "What exactly did you have in mind for tonight when you called the agency?"

Though Christian didn't think it possible to get any harder, his dick seemed to lurch and fill with more blood. Every beat of his heart resonated through the taut length of his shaft, making it hard to think about anything other than setting it free from its denim bondage.

The little shit was teasing him. Maybe he wasn't quite as new to this as Christian had thought. A good thing, since tutoring a neophyte wasn't high on his list of priorities. He'd much rather be with someone who already knew what they wanted, and how to go about getting it.

Two could play at that game. "I thought we could start off with something light. Maybe begin with rope and clamps, and work our way up to the chains and whips."

Wide-eyed, Tanner stared at him. The muscles in his abdomen and thighs tightened, belying his inner struggle to bolt. The cute blush from a moment before was replaced with a whitish pallor. "I, um...I don't really --"

Christian immediately felt contrite for joshing him and interrupted whatever he was about to say. "Relax. I'm only kidding, Tanner. I don't really know what I had in mind for tonight. Just company mainly."

Tanner's taut muscles relaxed. "Jesus, man, you had me going there for a second." He grinned. The small smile did wonders for his already adorable features. "I don't really do things like that."

Which brought up a pertinent question... "What do you do, if you don't mind my asking?"

The blush returned with a vengeance, coloring Tanner's fair complexion from face to collarbone. Christian wondered if the rest of his skin would flush that lovely rose-colored hue during sex.

Tanner leaned back on one elbow, his left hand absently toying with a loose thread on the comforter beside his hip. "I do pretty much whatever, as long as it isn't anything too kinky. I'm not into bondage or waterworks, anything like that."

Christian sat back in his chair, his hand kneading at the front of his jeans, where his cock strained against the coarse fabric. "You're versatile then?"

Tanner looked confused for a moment. "I suppose, though I've never really, um, topped."

And wouldn't that be a fun thing to introduce the kid to. Though, not tonight, as he was already much too on edge to be patient enough for something like that. It had been way too long since more than a finger or two had found their way into his ass. *Maybe next time...*

Whoa. Hold on there. Where did that come from? What the hell was he thinking about? More than one night wasn't in the cards for them.

Disturbed by his derailed thought, Christian stood and approached the foot of the bed. Now was not the time to let his loneliness color what was about to happen. This was sex for sex's sake -- nothing more. Froufrou feelings didn't apply.

He stopped between Tanner's splayed thighs, staring down at the kid. He pulled his T-shirt over his head, dropping it to the floor as his fingers worked his jeans open and let their weight carry them down his legs.

As he revealed his body, honed from long, sleepless nights spent working out in his home gym, he was gratified to see his physique hadn't left Tanner unaffected. The kid's -- *he really needed to stop thinking about the guy as a kid* -- cock rose long and thick over the soft cushion of his lower abs, flushed a deep shade of rose, and glistened slightly at the bulbous tip. Christian's mouth watered for a taste. He could well imagine the salty-sweet tang of Tanner's skin. Shame he was going to have to cover up the ambrosia of Tanner's natural flavor with a rubber.

He palmed a condom in one hand and reached out to Tanner with the other. "Tanner, I want to..." His hand hung in the air, afraid to touch without asking permission. "Would it be all right if I...?" Jesus, he felt like a moron. He didn't know how this was supposed to work.

He was used to being in charge -- the man on top -- and in this situation he was at a loss, adrift in a sea of confusion about how things were supposed to progress. Did he have to ask for everything he wanted, or just take it? It was as mystifying as it was frustrating. The best he could figure was to take things slow and try like hell not to cross any invisible boundaries.

Tanner searched Christian's face, his large green eyes skittish. He sucked his lower lip into his mouth, trapping it between straight white teeth, and nodded his consent.

Christian tossed the condom on the bed and kneeled between Tanner's legs. He ran his hands up and down the strongly corded muscles of the younger man's thighs, the skin under his palms warm and smooth, the sparse blond hair covering them silky rather than coarse. He let his fingers wander, just touching and reveling in the moment. Every time he crept higher, his fingertips inching ever closer to Tanner's groin, Tanner would tense, the muscles in his thighs and abdomen rippling with unease.

He gentled his touch, barely gliding the pads of his fingertips over Tanner's skin, trying to sooth him. When he felt the taut muscles relax he moved higher, the open L of each hand framing Tanner's cock and balls, and stopped. "Is this okay?"

Tanner's Adam's apple bobbed. "Yeah. Touch me."

Christian took that as all the permission he needed and leaned closer. Surely Tanner would speak up if anything wiggled him out.

He massaged the silken skin inside the crease of Tanner's thighs, his fingers wrapping around the side of Tanner's legs and holding on. He leaned closer, inhaling the sweet musk of Tanner's body, and gave in to temptation.

With the flat of his tongue, Christian licked a slick path up the middle of Tanner's balls. Delicate skin wrinkled and grew taut under his mouth. Tanner's hips shifted, and a breathy little moan spilled from his mouth. One of the younger man's hands rose from beside him on the bed and cupped Christian's cheek, silently egging him on.

Christian nuzzled in, pressing open-mouthed kisses to the delicate orbs of Tanner's balls and the slick band of flesh directly behind. *Slick?* He lifted Tanner's balls, curiosity getting the better of him, and spotted the base of a small, black butt plug stretching Tanner's opening. He groaned.

The thought of slowly easing out the plug and replacing it with his thick cock frayed his control. He rose to his feet before he could give in to his desires. He would stick by his earlier notion and take this slow, even if his dick split in two in the process.

Tanner scooted up the length of the bed. He patted the mattress beside him. "Come up here."

Christian was damn tempted. One kiss or intimate touch that could be misconstrued as anything other than cold, impersonal sex, and he would be fucking the kid through the wall. His control was hanging by a thread; the tender feeling Tanner resurrected inside him was unimaginable but undeniable. He needed to get what he wanted and then get the hell out there. Tanner was a paid whore, only there for his payday at the end of the night. For Christian to feel anything other than lust made him a fucking moron.

He shook off his thoughts and stretched out alongside Tanner, placing his body in the opposite direction of Tanner's. At eye level with Tanner's groin, Christian picked up the rubber beside his hips and tore into it. He gripped the ruddy stalk of Tanner's cock and rolled the thin bit of latex on, letting his touch linger more than was necessary to complete the task. As dicks went, Tanner's was a thing of beauty -- flushed and hard, with delicate blue veins ringing the solid shaft; who could blame Christian for wanting to take an extra moment to admire it? Finally, when he realized he was teasing himself as much if not more than Tanner, he slanted his mouth over the blunt crown and sucked it in.

Tanner's pelvis arched, a low mewling sound filling the air as he rocked into Christian's willing mouth. His hand tightened on the comforter between his torso and Christian's body, bunching the material in his fingers. "Christian. *Oh, God.* I should be the one..."

Christian suckled the tip of Tanner's cock, his tongue working the flared ridge around the crown, before he popped it from his mouth, and said, "Only if you want to." The last word was barley out before he pulled Tanner's dick back between his lips and went back to work on it, relishing the sensuous glide of smooth, hard flesh over his tongue, and the energy he could feel coursing just below the latex.

A hand tugged at Christian's hair, the slight sting making him look up over the undulating expanse of Tanner's abs and meet wide green eyes filled with longing and confusion. "But you're the one who's..."

Christian took a deep breath through his nose and swallowed the kid down to the root, wanting nothing more than to cut off his words. As if he needed a reminder of who they were to each other. *A rent boy and his john.*

Tanner vaulted up off the bed, his upper body rising, while his lower body stayed trapped under Christian's bulkier frame. "*Holy shit.* No one's ever..." His head dropped back, and his hands fisted in the cover.

Christian sucked harder and worked his throat muscles, repeatedly swallowing around the dick buried in his throat. He could only deep throat for a minute. He would undoubtedly pay for it in the morning, but if the kid liked it that well... He would have smiled, had his mouth not already been occupied.

When he could hold his breath no longer, Christian rose up and swirled his tongue around the head of Tanner's cock. He wrapped his fist around the base, pumping in time with his mouth's forays up and down the solid shaft. Tanner's prick pulsed with life under his ministrations, growing hotter and harder by the second.

Tanner's need drove Christian's. His skin felt tight and feverish, his own staff hard and ignored against the bedding. He wished he would've thought to grab another condom, so the kid could've returned the favor, but it was just as well that he hadn't. He didn't want the kid to feel obligated. If he came right out and asked, he feared Tanner would suck him off whether he wanted to or not. Lord knew, people probably asked him to do all kinds of things in his line of work. Some contrary bit of Christian's psyche balked at the thought of being like all the other horny old goats Tanner had serviced. Besides, Christian could always finish himself off later, after he escaped this room with his memories intact. Memories he would use to warn him off whatever next foolish idea he came up with.

* * * * *

Hot. Wet. Oh God, yes.

Tanner's neck arched, pushing the top of his head into the pillow. Christian's warm mouth wrapped around him, bathing every inch of his dick in slick, wet heat. His tongue worked over every nerve from crown to base with a single-mindedness that stole Tanner's breath and made him pant. Tiny bursts of pleasure coursed through him, each one greater than the last, as suction pulled and released, and Christian's sweet lips worked up and down his shaft.

God, so good. So fucking good.

Tanner moaned, the pitiful whine sounding foreign to his ears, as he was overcome with sensation. It'd been way too long since someone had taken the time to suck him off, to make sure he was as turned on as they were before they took him.

His pleasure expanded and ebbed with the tide of Christian's mouth. His need escalated and rose from one plateau to another, every lick and caress driving him higher, closer to the pinnacle his body strained to reach.

Tentative fingers stroked his sac and the small, but sensitive skin right below, then jostled the plug in his ass. Tanner groaned, his hole stretching and burning around the plug, and lifted his head to look down at the man inflicting such delicious torture on his body.

God, what a sight. Christian was built like a brick shithouse: tall and broad, his limbs compact with heavy muscle. Stretched out across the bed, every inch of Christian's body was on display for Tanner's eager gaze, each muscle defined and flexed for his appreciation.

The choicest morsels were right in front of Tanner's face. The dude's slim hips tapering down a groin covered in dark ringlets before separating into strong, muscle-corded thighs. Between them, heavy, furred balls cushioned a long, stiff cock that could rival John Holmes's for top billing.

Even with their difference in height, the other man's rigid cock pointed at Tanner's chin at just the right level to take into his mouth and torment in retaliation. Thick and swollen, the plump cap fatter than the meaty shaft and tinted an alluring shade of plum -- the enticement to suck was strong, but impossible without a condom. He may have been a lot of things, but stupid wasn't one of them. No rubber, no action.

Tanner consoled himself by imagining how the other man's flesh would taste in his mouth, all bittersweet warmth and silken skin, and reached out to touch instead. Running the tip of a finger over the angry, blue vein that pulsed beneath the crown, he followed it down the rigid stem and wrapped his hand around the thick base. The stiff column of flesh quivered, alive with strength and vitality, and -- like snake to tamer -- tempted Tanner into petting it. He stroked from root to head, up and over the widely flared head and squeezed down, loving the feel of smooth flesh pulsing under his fingertips, another man's pleasure at his control.

He felt the end of his dick hit the back of the man's throat, the undulating muscles at the back squeezing down on the hypersensitive tip of his crown, and a lightning bolt of effervescent tingles shot up the base of his spine.

His hand fell to the bed, playing with his client's dick the last thing on his mind, as Tanner lost all cognizance of what he should have been doing and submersed himself in the pleasure being so readily offered. What did it matter if he didn't give the guy a hand job before they fucked? Right now, he was going to relish being the one on the receiving end for a change.

* * * * *

Amid a milieu of breathless pants and moans, Christian upped his game and sucked harder at the turgid flesh in his mouth. His hand fisted the portion not in his mouth; the

other massaged the plump sac beneath. He swirled his tongue around the head on every upstroke, flicking over the tip, and laved the intricate web of veins along the shaft on the way back down.

Tanner's thighs tensed beneath Christian's fingers. The younger man groaned and pushed up with his hips, sinking his cock deeper into Christian's mouth. The shaft pulsed and jerked over Christian's tongue, the first drops of semen splashed against the condom, ballooning out the latex at the back of Christian's throat. He petted Tanner's thighs as the kid trembled and shook, coming down from his orgasm.

Tanner's palm slid down the side of Christian's face, his thumb rubbing a circle over Christian's cheek. "Oh my God, you're good at that." He stiffened, as if only then becoming aware of what had happened, or in this case, what hadn't. "Jesus...You didn't...I mean...I'm sorry. I forgot all about..." He rolled to his side, shoving Christian away from him, and made a grab for Christian's dick.

Christian was quicker. He swung away, rolling his legs over the side of the bed, and rose to his feet. "You don't have to do anything. I'm good."

Tanner scrambled to the foot of the bed. "But... Don't you want to fuck me? I'm supposed to take care of you."

Christian skirted Tanner's outstretched hand and bent to pick up his jeans. "That's okay. I'm fine. *Really.*"

Tanner bit into his lip and watched as Christian shrugged into his clothes. The kid's uncertain gaze made Christian even more anxious to bolt out of the room. This was, without a doubt, the dumbest idea he'd ever had.

Christian stomped into his shoes and turned to leave. His hand on the doorknob, he stopped and turned back around. "Thanks for, um, everything. It was nice meeting you, Tanner." And didn't that sound like the dumbest thing ever?

He was halfway down the hall before it occurred to him that he might've been supposed to leave a tip. Did escorts get tips? *Well, it was too late to go back now.*

Christian walked out into the balmy late-night air feeling like an ass.

Chapter Three

Being woken out of a Tanner-inspired sex dream by the shrill whine of his pager sucked, but Christian answered the fire department's summons. For the first time in over a week -- amid the chaos and adrenaline of combating a fire -- the steel pipe between his thighs subsided and let him concentrate on something other than jerking off.

Sweat beaded and rolled down Christian's face beneath his Nomex hood. Salty moisture soaked his hair to his forehead and stung his eyes. The dead weight over his left shoulder shifted. The barely conscious child he'd found huddled at the back of the second floor closet squirmed briefly before she once again succumbed to oblivion. He raised a glove-covered hand and patted the child on the back, sacrificing a second to try and comfort her, even as the burning rubble that was once her home crumbled around them.

He could well imagine the terror the poor little pixie must have felt upon waking in a house ablaze with fire. He'd been a young and immobilized by fear the first time it'd happened to him. That fire had resulted in the deaths of both his parents and his older brother, Mike. The lingering guilt for being unable to save them still haunted him, twenty years after the fact.

Christian hustled down the narrow hallway, away from the bedrooms. His gaze darted back and forth, careful of where he led himself and the men behind him. They'd done their best to make sure everyone who was in the house had been found -- locating two children, in two separate bedrooms, but not a single parent -- and it was past time they got out. The flames called to him, dancing and singing from the floor below, warning that it was only a matter of moments before they ate through the floor beneath his feet and brought down the old, clapboard farmhouse.

He led his men to the end of the landing and stared down into the swirling fog of smoke. He held up a hand to the two men behind him -- his teammates, Steve and Mark -- and waved them to a halt as he studied their only way down.

Even through the thick layers of protective gear he wore, sweltering heat rose from the ground floor and slapped at him. Flames licked up the sides of the staircase, thick smoke roiling through the banisters. The stairs themselves looked sturdy and untouched by the blaze, but Christian knew from hard-won experience just how misleading looks could be. There was every chance that the fire had already eaten away the structure beneath the staircase, making it a deadly for whomever was first to step on its untested surface.

Staring down, his head spun for the briefest of seconds until his curse and training as a firefighter kicked in and reminded him of what he needed to do.

Christian cleared his mind and reached down deep within himself. He found his center -- the pyrokinesis that was both a gift and a curse -- and concentrated. His eyelids drooped, eyes unseeing, but remaining open out of necessity, as he sent out feelers to track the inferno's progress through the house. Within his mind's eye, he envisioned the flames retreating, the bursts of fire growing ever smaller, and pushed it back. He directed and prodded at it with his telekinesis until the brunt of it was trapped in the basement, smothering between the heavily lined cement walls, deprived of the oxygen it needed to flourish.

He heard a prayer from behind, followed quickly by a curse from Steve and jerked back to the here and now. They were waiting for his go-ahead, and as it was, his teammates probably thought he'd choked, terrified of moving forward.

One arm securing the little girl to his shoulder, Christian cautiously moved forward. Each step tested before he placed his weight on it, he found himself at the bottom in no time, his men right behind him.

In single-line formation, they burst out of the front door and into the chaos awaiting them outside. Firemen sprayed high-powered sheets of water over the outside of the building. Red and white blasts of light from the truck, police vehicles, and ambulances lit up the nighttime sky with smears of red, white, and blue.

Moving fast, they crossed the lawn, away from the hot zone and into the relative safety of the outer perimeters of the yard. A swarm of EMTs surrounded them and took the children off their hands, quickly rushing back toward their awaiting ambulances. All but one feisty, red-haired, female EMT disappeared; the last choosing to stay behind and make sure none of the men had suffered undo complications from being inside the burning house.

One by one, the men unmasked and dropped their heavy equipment onto the truck. Christian breathed in a deep lungful of smoke-tinged air and turned to survey the wreckage behind them. The EMT stepped into his view and reached for his arm. He waved her off, unconcerned with being looked over. "I'm fine. Check over Mark and Steve."

Out of the corner of his eyes, he watched her shine a light into each man's eyes and check their pulse. When she toddled away, apparently satisfied they were all fine, he turned his full attention to the gutted house. All his scrutiny remained on the few remaining firefighters who beat at the home with axes, knocking out chunks of the walls, and spraying them down to eliminate the last of the hotspots.

Finally, the fire marshal declared the fire out, and the men dispersed. Those that had their own vehicles pulled out, while Christian, Mark, and Steve climbed aboard the truck. Anxious to reach the base and unwind, Christian hung on as the truck made wide-arching turns that shook him and his teammates around like yo-yos.

He lingered over his shower, then dressed in the spare set of clothes he kept at the firehouse. He looked forward to getting some rest, but the thought of returning to his empty house didn't really appeal to him. Neither did visiting any of his old haunts -- the bathhouses and gay clubs in and around the city -- because that inevitably led to sex, and he simply wasn't interested.

Not taking into account his decision not to get involved with anyone new, his brain refused to let him forget Tanner, the debauched angel he'd hired a few weeks before. He knew it was foolish, but he couldn't get the kid out of his thoughts. He hadn't even gotten off that night -- at least not with Tanner -- so he couldn't even use the age-old excuse of it being the sex that still lingered in his mind.

A damp hand slapped down on Christian's shoulder. "Earth to Christian."

Startled, Christian turned to find Mark smiling down over his shoulder. His teammate plopped on the bench beside him, a white towel slung around his trim waist and another in his hand. He used the extra one to blot at the moisture clinging to his shoulder-length black hair. "I've been talking to you for the last five minutes. Where were you, la-la land?"

Christian shrugged, not interested in explaining where his mind had been. God forbid any of the men he volunteered with should find out he'd called an escort agency; he'd never hear the end of it. "Just thinking about things. What's up?"

"Not much. Steve and I are going to go shoot some pool, unwind a little before heading home. Thought I'd invite you to come along."

His teammates always offered. Mark usually extended the invitation, because Steve wasn't much of a talker. Christian always politely declined. They seemed like nice enough guys -- Mark a little younger and an adrenaline junkie, while Steve was somewhere around Christian's age and the more laid back of the pair -- but Christian had yet to take them up on a single invitation. He wasn't even sure why they kept offering.

Other than the whole gay thing, and his not wanting to take the chance of alienating men who were supposed to watch his ass in a fire, Christian hadn't wanted to tempt fate by being overly friendly with his coworkers. No matter how careful someone was while on the job, firemen got hurt and people died. It was a simple fact of life, one Christian wasn't sure he wanted to open himself up to any more than he absolutely had to. He'd lost loved ones,

and he'd lost fellow firefighters, some through no fault of his own while others...well, he wasn't going to think about the deaths he could have prevented. Culpability for those were the reason he found himself alone, and desperate for company now.

When he opened his mouth to say no, Christian discovered he didn't want to decline this time. He wanted to go out with someone and just shoot the shit for a little while without having to worry about any of the usual nonsense of work or fighting fires. Maybe just this once, he would throw caution to the wind and try to form a friendship with someone. Just because he went out for drinks or whatever didn't mean he had to open his soul to them.

"Sure, Mark, that would work."

Mark seemed stunned for a minute; then a slow smile crept along his narrow face. He clapped Christian on the shoulder and rose. "Great, man, it'll be fun. We usually just swing by Aces and Eights, around the corner. It's just a little hole-in-the-wall bar with a couple of pool tables, but it's a real laid back place. You know it?"

"Yeah, I know it." Aces and Eights was a tiny little biker bar a few miles from the base. He'd stopped by there himself often enough when he was just looking for a stiff shot and a moment extra away from the house. It was odd that he'd never run into either man there, but then again, he usually went straight home after a fire.

"Good. Um, Steve and I rode in together, so you can just follow us, or go on ahead, if you want to. Steve likes to prune up like a little old lady before he drags his ass out of the shower room."

Christian stood. "I'll just go on ahead and order us a pitcher." Buying the first round was the least he could do, when they'd been nice enough to keep inviting him along. "Do either of you have a brand preference, or something you don't like?"

"Nah, as long as it's cold and wet, whatever is on tap should be fine."

"Good. Then I'll see the both of you in a bit." Christian exited the building and drove to the small, corner bar, oddly relieved he wouldn't be sequestered under his empty roof with only his thoughts for company.

By the time Mark and Steve strolled in the door half an hour later and slid into the cracked vinyl booth across from him, Christian was working on his second beer and fighting like hell to school the irrational flare of jealousy building in the pit of his gut. He forced his gaze away from the pretty strawberry blond at the bar and summoned up a smile for his coworkers.

They poured themselves a beer and settled in across from him, neither seeming to notice his preoccupation with the young man across the room. Christian unclenched his fists underneath the scarred table and reached for his own drink, swallowing a healthy slug of it before trusting himself to speak. "So, the two of you come here a lot? I've stopped by on occasion, but not very often." It was the best small talk Christian could think of with his mind so muddled.

Tanner's unexpected arrival a moment earlier had him all messed up. He knew it was a small world, but the chance of running into the younger man while out had never occurred to him. He'd just blindly assumed he would never see Tanner again. At the moment, he felt a bit like someone was dangling a raw steak in front of a wild beast -- him being the aforementioned animal. The urge to cross the room and approach Tanner, pull him off his barstool, and kiss him breathless, before dragging him home for a night neither of them would forget tempted him greatly. It took every ounce of his self-control plus a little extra to stay seated.

Steve held his mug up and stared down into the foamy brew. "Often enough."

Mark chimed in, "Usually just after a fire. It's nice to sit back and swallow down a few, unwind some, before going home. You know how it is, all that adrenaline left coursing through your veins after you've fought a hell of a blaze and come out on top. The only thing that works better than a good brew is a nice, hard fuck."

Christian choked on his beer.

Steve's round cheeks turned pink, but he smiled into his beer.

Mark laughed. "Oh, come on. We're all guys here. You know it's true."

Christian joined in on the laughter, but it was more out of being uncomfortable than any real humor. The last thing he needed was his sexuality coming up. He was saved from having to comment by Mark's scooting out of the booth and saying he had to take a leak.

He and Steve sat in silence, until it grew uncomfortable and Christian had to say something to break the uneasy quiet. "So, what do you do for a living, Steve?"

Steve face jerked up, as if he'd forgotten anyone was sitting with him. "Oh, um, construction. Mark and I work together over at Ryder Construction. He does a little bit of everything, but I mostly do drywall. It's an all right job, pays okay."

Christian took a big gulp of his beer, letting the bubbly liquid wash away his embarrassment. He wondered if they'd connected him with Ryder Construction. If they knew he owned it and several other small businesses in the area. He hoped not, since Ryder was a common enough last name.

Their being his employees -- though not directly, since he didn't actually have a hand in running any of the companies his parents had bequeathed him -- made him feel even more awkward. If they weren't aware of it, they couldn't hold it against him. People got surprisingly standoffish when they found out exactly how much wealth he possessed. The thought of them clamming up around him, when he'd just reached for the tentative olive branch of friendship they'd extended, was depressing.

Mark slung himself back into the booth, bringing all his restless energy with him. "You won't believe who I spotted at the bar."

His gaze darted toward Tanner -- who sat nursing the same bottle of beer and fiddling with a bowl of pretzels -- then back to the men across from him. The kid's presence never far

from his mind, Christian wished Tanner would just finish his drink and leave, taking his alluring little heart-shaped ass out of temptation's reach.

He was glad for the distraction Mark provided. He didn't want to think about Tanner or give Steve a chance to ask after what he did for a living. The thought of lying didn't sit well; he wasn't ashamed of coming from money, had no reason to be, but that didn't mean he wanted to spill the entire truth either.

Steve lifted up off the seat and peered over the back of the booth. "That's not... It is." He dropped back down. "What's Bill's boy doing in here? I didn't even think he was old enough to be in a bar."

Mark twiddled with his mug. "Got me. Last I heard he was still living in the family home, and that's way across town. There are a lot of better places to hang out between here and there. Nicer too. He's old enough to be in here though. Just barely, I think."

Christian watched the byplay between the two men, trying to figure out what they were talking about and who. He only knew of one Bill, and there wasn't anyone in the bar who favored the stocky, grizzled old man he remembered. "Bill?"

Mark lifted an eyebrow. "Bill O'Bannon."

Same Bill. Another shining example of how Christian let down the people around him when they needed him most. "I didn't even know Bill had any kids." Though they'd worked closely together for several years, he'd never really talked to the man about anything other than what the job required. "Hi" and "Bye" in passing was about the sum of it. Their lack of communication didn't make the man's death rest any easier on Christian's conscience.

"The skinny blond at the end of the bar is his son, Tanner. Isn't it awful about what happened to...?"

It felt like all the air had been sucked from Christian's lungs. Tanner -- *his Tanner, the rent boy* -- was Bill's son? *Sweet Jesus.* What the hell had happened since Bill's death to cause his son to start hooking? Old Bill was probably rolling over in his grave.

His gaze shot back to Tanner, and he scarcely heard the rest of what Mark said. Tanner was no longer alone, an older man with dark hair liberally sprinkled with silver now stood beside him. The man wore a dark-colored, lightweight trench coat though it had to be close to seventy degrees outside. Charcoal slacks and black dress shoes polished to a mirror finish peeked from beneath the hem. Christian's jaw clenched as the man laid a hand on Tanner's shoulder. He spoke, and though Christian couldn't make out the words from where he sat, the nod toward the door made it obvious what the old man wanted.

Was the old dude a trick? The thought of him touching Tanner made Christian's blood run cold. He sat immobile, thoughts chaotic, and watched as the man directed Tanner out of the bar with a hand at the curve of his lower back. They'd just crossed the threshold when Christian's control snapped.

"I have to go." He jumped up from his seat, knocking over his beer in the process, and bolted after them with a quickly muttered "Sorry" to Steve and Mark.

Christian pushed through the door, heart racing, in time to see a black Porsche speed out of the lot, spinning gravel and dust in its wake.

Fucking shit.

His hands balled into fists as he strode toward his car with every intention of speeding after them. It wasn't until he sat behind the wheel, the motor running and his hand on the gearshift, that he realized the foolishness of his idea. By the time he got out on the highway, they would be long gone.

Christian let go of the gearshift and smashed the side of his fist into the steering wheel. The sting of the leather against his hand helped him regain a little of the calm he needed. He couldn't let his emotions control him, not when so much was at stake. Now more than ever, he needed to keep his cool and try to be rational. Going after Tanner in his current state of mind would do no one any good.

Several deep breaths helped him bring himself under control. He weighed the things he knew against the things he only suspected and came up with one conclusion. Bill wouldn't be dead if Christian had been responsible and fulfilled his duties the night of the fire. Tanner wouldn't be selling his body if his father were still alive. Ergo, it was partly Christian's fault for Tanner's current predicament. It was up to him to figure out how to fix it.

* * * * *

Tanner stepped into the motel room behind his client and shut the door. The sound of the lock catching seemed loud compared to the silence inside. Seeing one trick -- *Christian, if that was even his real name* -- while waiting for another had been off-putting, but he'd tried to ignore his discomfort. Walking out of the bar, feeling Christian's penetrating stare on him every step of the way, hadn't been quite so easy. His imagination spun the intense scrutiny into disapproval, making him feel about as superior as a slug. Then again, what was the significance of one more shot to his pride, when it was already below sewer level?

"Strip for me."

Tanner turned to the man sitting on the edge of the narrow full-sized bed and silently did as he was told, mechanically removing each piece of clothing one at a time in a bid to put off the touching for as long as possible. It was dumb to drag out the inevitable. Every second allowed him to rebuild the tough inner wall he erected around his emotions. He could do this. He could. *He would.*

The man -- who had instructed Tanner to call him Daddy on the otherwise quiet drive over -- shifted on the bed, one perfectly manicured hand tugging at his tie. Naked, Tanner

stood still, watching as “Daddy” tore at the buttons of his shirt, revealing a sickly white chest and paunchy belly matted with coarse silver hair.

Tanner shivered, his dread building. Was paying off his father’s debts and hanging onto the house -- the last tangible connection he had to his parents -- really worth this? He wasn’t so sure anymore. It felt like a piece of his soul withered every time some anonymous man rammed inside him.

“Come over here.” The man patted the bed beside him. “Sit down and touch yourself for Daddy.”

Nausea roiled in Tanner’s stomach, but he did as he was told. Ass perched on the very end of the bed, as far away from his client as he could sit without falling off the side, Tanner took his flaccid cock in hand and began to pull on it.

Chapter Four

Inside Hallow Grounds, a trendy coffee shop located in the middle of campus, Tanner sipped a lukewarm French vanilla cappuccino and contemplated his life. Alone, at a small table in the back corner, he gazed out the floor to ceiling windows. Carefree students strolled past the shop, on their way to their frat parties, drunken revelries, or whatever else it was they occupied themselves with on a Friday night. Part of him wondered if he'd ever been that clueless and happy-go-lucky. He assumed he had, at one time, before everything had gone to hell. Six months could seem like an eon when you were alone and miserable.

Today had been a day for resolutions. He'd taken a cold, hard look at his life and made some decisions. Quitting his job as an escort was the easiest, while leaving school was by far the most difficult.

He'd miss the classes, the sense of accomplishment that came with every hard won A, but his self-worth was more important to him than a diploma. Without the considerable income from hooking, he would have to work two, maybe even three jobs, to make ends meet, and that wouldn't leave any time for classes. Not that he'd have the money for books and tuition anyway, so it was a moot point really.

It would've been nice to have a close friend he could bounce ideas off to make sure he was doing the right thing, but there was no one he could turn to. He'd always been awkward around strangers, living more in his head than in the world at large, and the few people he'd talked to in high school were long gone, moved away to larger areas with better colleges. The small group of acquaintances he'd made in college had all disappeared as soon as his cash dried up and he couldn't afford to party with them every weekend.

Alone, he was adrift on a sinking raft in a sea of confusion with no hope of aid. Tanner shook his head and smiled, amused at his own overdramatic bullshit. Being by himself wasn't so bad. If anything, it had enabled him to stand on his own two feet and if he tripped and fell

along the way, there wasn't anyone there to see his disgrace. He could pick himself right back up and try again without any scathing comments.

Tanner swallowed the last extra-sweet gulp from the bottom of his cup and rose to leave. The girl behind the counter smiled at him as he passed the register and he found himself automatically smiling back. He could get the hang of living on his own and make something out of himself in the process. It might take a couple of years to climb out from underneath the mountain of debt, but he could do it. College would be waiting for him when he finished. He could always come back.

He took his time walking across the campus, enjoying the sun on his shoulders. It was a beautiful day, made more so by his resolution to quit Male Companions. No more hands groping him or long, scalding showers afterward. No more feeling dirty or somehow less than everyone else. From now on, sex would be for his pleasure alone. Lord, how he'd missed that.

For a change, the Mazda started right up and didn't backfire or die on the way home. He liked all the songs that played on the radio and didn't have to change the station once. Things were looking up.

Pulling up in front of his house, Tanner parked behind a fire engine red sports car. He was used to his neighbors hogging all the parking, so he didn't think much of the fancy BMW Roadster, other than to wonder how awesome it would be to have one of his own. His fingers itched to rub over the shiny red paint of the hood, to step closer and get a better look at it, but he resisted, figuring an alarm would go off if he so much as breathed too close to the machine.

Halfway up the sidewalk, his brain swirling around dreams of expensive vehicles and whether or not he had anything edible in the house besides Easy Mac and Ramen noodles, Tanner spotted the man sitting on his front porch swing. The rose-covered trellis offered him a peek of the giant reclining there, but blocked him from getting a clear view of who it was.

Part of Tanner wanted to turn around and get back into his car. Drive around until they left because he knew without a shadow of a doubt it wasn't anyone he wanted to talk to. None of his old friends could afford a vehicle like the one he'd admired, even if they'd miraculously decided to finally grace him with their presence.

Refusing to run, he stiffened his spine and stormed up the walk. If one of his johns had been persistent enough to track him down, they were probably too determined to be swayed by his leaving now. No, he would face whoever it was and send their ass packing. This was his home. He'd be damned before he'd let some swaggering prick scare him away from it, not after everything he'd gone through to keep it from being foreclosed on.

His temper rising, Tanner stomped up the cement steps and reached into the pocket of his jeans for the small can of mace he carried. His finger curled around it, ready to yank it out and use it at a second's notice. Mace may not kill, but it would sure as hell bring the fucker to his knees long enough for Tanner to get the better of him.

The large man who perched on the end of the swing glanced up as Tanner stepped onto the porch. Blue eyes the hue of a stormy sea met and clashed with Tanner's. He skidded to a stop, his pulse thumping madly.

Christian, *if that was even his real name*, rose to his feet. He shoved his hands into his pockets and had the grace to look slightly bashful. "Hi."

The big man's uncertainty went a long way toward Tanner forgiving him for seeking him out. "Hi. Uh..." All of Tanner's brain cells seemed to misfire and reroute his thought process through his cock. The anger he'd felt a second before leaked out of him like oxygen from an over inflated balloon. "What are you doing here?"

"That's a little complicated. Would you mind if we talked about this inside?"

Tanner was torn. Though deeply curious about why Christian was there and tempted to invite him inside in order to find out, the more cautious part of his brain screamed a warning. He didn't know this man from Adam's housecat.

He let go of the mace and pulled his hand free, his fingers still toying with the thick denim rim of his pocket, just in case he needed it. Christian had been so...gentle. He doubted the man was prone to violence, but then again, you could never be too careful. Just because the guy had sucked his brains out through his cock didn't mean he wasn't a serial killer in disguise.

Looking at the man -- wide brawn hidden beneath a thin veneer of pressed chinos and an off-white polo shirt -- made Tanner wish he'd been allowed to touch and taste more of the magnificent male creature before him during their night together. All those muscles, yet he'd been so gentle. Tanner imagined that if someone could just break through the thin veil of civility and reach the baser desires inside, Christian would be an animal in the sack.

With the hand not busy monkeying with his pocket, he waved at the table and chairs sitting on the opposite side of the porch, not willing to sit on the swing and put himself directly in the man's pocket. "This is private enough, I think." He turned, pulled out the plastic chair closest to the wall, and flopped down on it.

"Okay." Christian moved to join him, crossing the porch and sitting in the chair across from him.

"So..." Tanner gnawed his bottom lip, waiting for some kind of explanation. Sex was the easy answer for why the man would show up here, but that didn't make much sense after Christian had refused to fuck him the night he'd called the escort service. On the other hand, maybe Christian regretted not taking what he'd paid for, and was there to collect what he thought was still owed to him.

Christian's gaze dropped, his shoulder moving inward, and blunt tipped fingers picked the plastic ring around the edge of the glass tabletop. "I didn't know who you were that night."

Tanner sat up a little straighter. "Excuse me?"

"I, um, didn't recognize you when you showed up at the hotel that night. You don't look anything like Bill."

Tanner fidgeted, embarrassed. He'd always known being an escort would come back to bite him in the ass. Some people were lucky enough to get by with murder, never him though. "You knew my dad?"

"We volunteered at the firehouse together. I know it's a little late, but I'm so sorry for your loss. I didn't even know Bill had a son, or I would have come sooner."

God, not another one. Tanner tried to read Christian's face and failed. The man had the best poker face he'd ever seen, which said something after all the gamblers that had come through his life in the past several months. A slew of men who claimed to be his father's friends had shown up in the weeks following his death, and alleged that they were still owed money for one thing or another. Could that be Christian's reason for being there as well?

Tanner sighed and shoved back his chair, rising to his feet. He was so fucking tired of hearing about all the money his father had borrowed from everyone willing to give him a loan. Why hadn't he known about his father's gambling problems before his death? "I don't know what my dad owed you, but if you'll just jot it down on something, I'll make sure his debt is repaid. Mind you, it could be a while before I can afford to send you anything. I'm not made of money."

Christian jumped to his feet, knocking over the chair he'd sat in, the sound of the heavy plastic hitting the deck echoed like a gunshot. His hand shot out, landing on Tanner's arm. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you, but --"

Tanner cut him off before he could finish. He'd heard all the platitudes he could stomach and he didn't want to listen to any more. "Don't worry about it." Tanner shrugged off the hand on his forearm and walked the two steps to the door. Over his shoulder, he said, "Please leave. You can send a bill for whatever you need me to repay in the mail." He entered the house, and slammed the door behind him. The man could take the hint and go, or he would call the cops. Harassment was against the law, and he wasn't above calling the police and letting them in to enforce it.

* * * * *

Christian stared at the door, befuddled as to what exactly he'd said to make Tanner react that way. He replayed the scene in his head, seeing the tired, pale cast to Tanner's handsome features and the way his eyes had dimmed when Christian mentioned he would have come sooner had he known Bill had children. He was at a loss for what he'd said to make Tanner think he was there to collect a debt. As if he would've asked for money, even if it had been owed to him. What kind of monster did Tanner think he was?

He stepped forward and banged on the door, determined to straighten out whatever misunderstanding stood between them. "Tanner, open the door. I don't know what I said, but --"

Tanner's muffled voice came through the thick wood. "I asked you to leave."

"I'm not leaving until we get this straightened out. Just open the door and talk to me."

"If you're not off my property in two minutes, I'm going to call the cops."

What the fuck? "Tanner, I just want to help. I don't know what I said to piss you off, but --"

The curtain was pushed aside, Tanner's handsome features popping up in the window. "You don't know what you said to piss me off? You come here under the pretense of wanting to help me when all you really want is to leach money out of me like every other SOB who's blown through here since my dad died. What the hell am I supposed to be? Happy to see you?" Tanner's nostrils flared. "Just because you blew me doesn't mean you're going to get preferential treatment above all the other slimeballs who've come calling for their damn money. Get the hell out of here."

"Wait just a fucking second. I didn't come here for anything other than to check up on you after I found out you were the son of a fallen colleague. As I've already said, I didn't know who you were that night. If I had, you can rest assured I wouldn't have laid a finger on your scrawny little ass."

That, more than anything else he'd said, seemed to unleash a fury under Tanner's ass. He flung the door open and flew outside, not stopping until his pointer finger was right under Christian's nose. "Fuck you. I didn't see you complaining about my ass when you're hands were all over it."

The kid's eyes were wide open and flashing fire. His lean cheeks flushed a rosy hue from temper, and Christian thought he'd never seen a more beautiful man in his life. "Your dad didn't owe me anything, Tanner. All I want to do is help. Let me."

All the fight seemed to drain right out of Tanner. His shoulders slumped and he exhaled. "Why? Why do you want to help me? What's in it for you?"

A stray strand of strawberry blond hair fell over Tanner's forehead. Christian's fingers itched to brush it away. "Nothing's in it for me. I just don't want to see you continue the way you are. Your father would want more for you."

Tanner stared up at him, his luminous green eyes shimmering, and shrugged. "So what? What difference does it make what my old man wanted? He's gone, and I'm the one left cleaning up his mess. It doesn't matter." He turned and stepped back towards the door, his hand on the knob. Over his shoulder, he said, "Thank you for the offer, but I can take care of myself," before stepping inside and slamming the door behind him.

The self-defeated tone of Tanner's voice, the proud way he'd behaved, all of it just made Christian that much more determined to get through to him. The thought of the kid

going out -- maybe even later tonight -- and selling himself just broke his heart. He banged on the door again. "Tanner --"

"Go away, Christian. I'm asking you nicely this time. I won't ask again."

Christian gritted his teeth, the urge to yell overwhelming. Instead of raising his voice, he reached into his back pocket and pulled out his wallet. From inside, he plucked a business card, his cell phone number the only one on it since he was so rarely at the main office, and stuck it in between the glass panel and wood frame of the door. "I'm leaving my card on the door. Call me, and we'll talk."

He turned and stalked down the walk, his temper carefully in check. He'd expected a little resistance from Tanner, even taken into consideration the kid's pride balking at the idea of accepting help from a virtual stranger. Getting shot down and being threatened with the police was too over the top for him to make sense of it. All he'd come to do was offer Tanner a way out of the mess he was in, and this was the thanks he got for his trouble?

This was bullshit.

Pulling the remote from his pocket, Christian clicked off the alarm and slid behind the wheel, slamming the door shut behind him with a satisfying crack. He started up the ignition and peeled away from the curb, roaring away from the house without a backward glance in the mirror.

Chapter Five

Spying out of the one of the windows located on both sides of the door, Tanner waited until the Roadster disappeared around the bend to breathe a sigh of relief. Part of him wanted to believe in Christian, to accept that he really wanted to help him out of the bind he was in. The smarter, more street savvy half that had developed in recent months out of necessity knew better than to put his faith in someone who'd been one of his johns. People did not offer support without attaching strings to it.

He dropped the curtain and cracked the door, pulling the card off the doorframe. Telling himself he was being ridiculous, he stuck it in his pocket.

Just in case he needed it.

Tanner closed the door, and put on the chain before he crossed the room and grabbed the cordless off the wall. He flopped back on the sofa with it, dreading the call he was about to make. His shift at the agency was supposed to begin in a few hours. He wanted to call and quit before the time drew any closer.

He dialed the number and listened to the phone ring in his ear, nervous butterflies dancing in his stomach. A recording sounded, listing off a group of choices, and he punched in the employee extension, his fingers shaking a little as he pushed the buttons. He hoped they didn't put up too much of a fuss for the short notice, but he really didn't want to work another night. The thought of one more john touching him actually made his gut roil in protest.

"Nigel speaking."

"Nigel, it's Tanner. I'm sorry, but I'm not going to be able to come back in to work."

Silence echoed over the line and then, "Oh, are you sick?"

Tanner swallowed, trying to force his dry mouth to produce moisture. "No. No, I'm not sick. I...I just can't work for Male Companions anymore. I hope you understand." His finger

itched to press the off button, but he wasn't a pussy, and he wasn't about to act like one. If there was a lecture coming, he would take it. No big deal. It wasn't like he'd ever see Nigel or anyone else from the company again.

"I'm sorry to hear that, Tanner. We'll miss you, but these things happen."

Tanner sighed. "Thanks, I --"

"Unfortunately, I've already accepted an assignment for you tonight. If you could just take this one final client, before you resign, we would appreciate it. I wouldn't ask, but he's a repeat customer. To turn him away now, after he's already made arrangements, could hurt the business. I'm sure you understand."

"Nigel, I really don't think I'm going to be able to do that, man. I --"

"You would be doing us a huge favor, Tanner. I think I could even manage to double your usual fee, if you would make an exception this one time and help us out." Nigel's nasal voice grew pleading. "Say you will."

Shit. Double what he usually made was hard to resist. He could use the extra cash to tide him over until he started another job and got his first paycheck. He didn't really want to, but... *Hell, what was one more night?* "Okay. I guess I could go out on this one last assignment for you. At double my usual pay, right?"

"Sure. No problem, Tanner. Mr. Smith wants you at the Hilton on Drake Street at eight."

Tanner suppressed a groan. *Another Mr. Smith?* "Okay, I'll be there. Do you know --" The disconnect tone buzzed in Tanner's ear, cutting off him off in the middle of asking which repeat customer had requested him for the night. It was a little hard to know who was who when they all went by the same surname.

He hung up the phone and trudged up the stairs to take a quick nap before it was time to get ready.

* * * * *

A few minutes before eight o'clock, Tanner pulled up outside the hotel. His damp palms slipped on the keys as he cut the ignition and exited the vehicle. As he crossed the dark parking lot, his anticipation to finish this final assignment and begin his life anew built inside him. Something about knowing this was his last client made him more nervous than usual, though he couldn't figure out why. If he fucked up tonight, it wasn't like the thought of losing his job hung over his head. He was always a little apprehensive before an appointment, but tonight his nerves felt stretched to the breaking point.

He chalked his jitters up to performance anxiety, and walked through the revolving glass doors and entered the hotel lobby, the cavernous room done in shades of cream and beige. His footsteps echoed off the marble flooring as he trudged over to the service desk and

tapped his fingers on the counter, impatient for the clerk to hang up the phone and wait on him.

"Can I help you?"

"Hi. I'm supposed to meet a friend here, but I can't remember the room number he told me. His last name is Smith."

The clerk -- an older man, with graying hair at his temples and a round, pockmarked face -- turned to the computer and typed. "I'm sorry. There's no one with the last name Smith registered. Are you sure you have the right hotel? There's another Hilton on the other side of town."

Tanner wrinkled his brow in confusion. He knew this was the right place. "Thanks, he might just be late checking in or something." He wandered back outside, staring up at the bright abundance of stars filling the sky, and wondered what he was supposed to do now. He'd never had a no-show before.

Across the lot, on the opposite side of the street, he spotted a pay phone. Well, the least he could do was call and tell Nigel the man hadn't shown up -- so much for earning a few extra bucks before quitting. In a way, he was relieved. His nights as a rent boy were well and truly behind him now. Maybe he'd even stop on the way home and pick up a newspaper, get an early start on scouring the classifieds for a job, since he wasn't going to have anything better to do tonight.

At the curb, Tanner glanced both ways and waited for a lone SUV to pass before he darted across the street. He rustled through his pockets for change, cursing himself for being the last person alive who didn't have a cell phone, and finally came up with enough. After he slid the change into the drop slot, Tanner dialed the number and waited, his foot tapping restlessly on the sidewalk.

"Male Companions, Nigel speaking."

"Nigel. Tanner. Um, the guy I was supposed to meet hasn't shown up. I just wanted to let you know before I call it a night and head home."

"Yeah, well, your guy called and said there's been a change of plans. I would have called you, but there wasn't any way to reach you since you've always claimed you couldn't afford a cell."

Irritation flared inside Tanner at the man's snotty tone. "Well, I guess you won't have to worry about that anymore after tonight."

"Shit. Sorry. It's been a killer night. Your dude says to meet him at the Dogwood Motel on Route 5. He's in room 101."

"Um, okay, I guess." *That was odd.* Why would someone claim they were going to the Hilton then end up in a seedy little shanty on the other side of town?

Tanner hung up and jogged back to his car. He cranked up the radio, listening to the speakers crack and pop right along with every song the DJ played, and tried not to let his

paranoia get the better of him. He'd been to plenty of cheesy places over the last few months, even visited the Dogwood a time or two. There was no reason to be so antsy.

By the time he crossed the train tracks that separated the nicer section of the city from the trailer parks and lower income housing, Tanner was ready to turn back. Something wasn't right about this. Every nerve in his body screamed for him to say to hell with the money and go home.

He drove through an underpass, the black interior closing over the car like a rolling fog of dark, wet silk, and came out of the other side with his decision made. The motel in sight, Tanner gave in to his fears and made a big U-turn in the middle of the road, heading back the way he'd come from.

Fuck it.

He didn't need money badly enough to go through with this shit. He would make do with what he had. If Nigel wanted to withhold his last check, the bastard could have it. He wasn't stupid enough to ignore his gut feeling, and go ahead with something that felt... *wrong*.

A vehicle came up behind him and flashed its high beams, sending a blinding shaft of light into the car. Tanner winced and adjusted the rearview mirror, cursing the idiot. He pressed down on the accelerator, hoping to put a little extra distance between his car and the jackass behind him. The headlights advanced right along with him, growing brighter.

Tanner sped up. A finger of dread skated down his spine as the vehicle continued to ride his bumper. What was this asshole's problem? He thought about slamming on his brakes and taking a hit in the rear for the hell of it, just to show the jerk a lesson about tailgating, but quickly dismissed it. He put on his signal to turn, planning to pull off and let the vehicle go around him, since the moron was in such an all-fired hurry.

A hard jolt to the back of his car propelled Tanner forward. His eyes widened, his heart giving a little sickly gallop, as he realized that whoever was driving the SUV behind him had just bumped him. *Jesus fucking Christ*. He floored the gas pedal, the little car rocking around him, as he pushed the speedometer past its limits.

A fresh rush of adrenaline sped through his blood. Sweat popped up on his brow and upper lip in spite of the icy tendrils of fear holding him in their grip. His mind raced, trying to figure out what he should do. There was no way he could outrun anyone in a car held together by duct tape and WD-40. If they were determined to run him off the road, they would. His only hope was to find somewhere open and pull in, with people present to see what was going on. Surely, whoever was fucking with him wouldn't stoop to doing anything front of witnesses. *Right?*

His mind spun, going over what he knew of the area, attempting to pinpoint where he could find safety. Nothing came to mind. Most of the companies on this side of town had gone out of business or only kept daytime hours due to the staggering crime statistics.

The underpass loomed ahead, like a yawning mouth to hell. Darkness seeped over the hood of his car, passing up over the windshield, just as he was hit from behind again. Tanner gasped and his hands jerked the wheel, overcorrecting. The right front fender hit the wall; the shriek of metal scraping metal accompanied by a deluge of sparks lighting up the interior of the tunnel.

He gulped air, swallowing the acrid ball of terror in the back of his throat, and set the car back to rights. The sudden, jarring thump of being rammed from behind made him cry out. *Fuck*. There wasn't anything he could do to get away from them. Trapped inside the tunnel, there was nowhere to go, nowhere to escape.

What the hell did they want from him?

It wasn't like he drove an expensive car, someone they could expect to rob and glean a nice chunk of change from. He had nothing, and it showed.

Finally, his car shot out of the tunnel, the SUV hot on his rear bumper. Only a few more miles and he would cross the railroad tracks into a more populated area. He sucked in a deep breath, pulse racing, and...was hit from the rear, impossibly harder than before. The impact put the previous ones to shame, as if they had been nothing more than teasing.

The back end of his car fishtailed, sending the vehicle in a wild tailspin. Tanner screamed as the tires squealed in the background. His knuckles white from the grip he had on the wheel, his stomach in knots, he tried to hold onto his lunch. The car jerked to a sudden stop, the lurch forcing his chest forward. The seat belt tightened across his sternum. Acid filled the back of his throat and flowed into his mouth.

He barely released the seatbelt and popped the door open before the first spasm hit. The chunky contents of his stomach spilled onto the oily, black asphalt. Ears ringing, Tanner heard the slam of a door but couldn't find the energy to lift his head. He retched, his eyes watering and his nose burning under the duress of stomach acid trying to force its way out of every available outlet.

Thick-soled boots appeared in his line of vision as he gagged, foamy waste splattering over their black surface. The person who wore the shoes spouted a string of curses. Hysterical laughter filled the air, and it took Tanner a moment to realize it was coming from him. He tried to stop, but found he couldn't. The unholy noise continued to pour from his mouth. Was this it? Was he going to lose his mind before he was killed?

"What's so goddamned funny, asshole?" Strong hands gripped Tanner's hair and lifted his head, forcing him to look up. The faceless drone was somehow scarier than any of the other images he'd conjured in his mind. The grip on Tanner's head tightened, and he was lifted out of the driver's seat and slammed against the side of his car. "Fucking little prick. I'll teach you to puke on me."

He had to do something. He had to... Tanner balled his fists up and swung. His knuckles connected with the man's chin, pain lancing through his hand upon impact. He reared back and tried for another, but his fist was caught in midair, his arm twisted and

yanked up tight against his back. He jerked and pulled against the hold on him, trying to break loose with little effect. As a last ditch attempt to gain his freedom, Tanner kicked out at the man, taking a hellacious amount of satisfaction in the grunt of pain he got in response to his sneakers biting into the man's shins. "God damn it! Let me go, you fucker!"

A fist slammed into Tanner's stomach and knocked the air from his lungs, making him gag. Spit flew from his mouth as the hands dropped away and allowed him to crumble unceremoniously to the ground. The back of his head thumped off of the front tire as a hard foot slammed repeatedly into his stomach. Tanner rolled to his side and wrapped his arms around his midsection, trying to protect himself.

The kicks kept coming, one right after another, slamming into his side, his stomach, anything the feet could reach. Tanner screamed, at one point even begging as a vicious punt to his arm sent an agonizing blaze of pain through his shoulder and beyond.

The onslaught abruptly stopped, replaced by the sound of two men arguing. Tanner tried to pull himself off the pavement, intending to crawl away while the men's attention was on each other, but his arm gave way after the slightest weight was exerted on it. He yelped and dropped to the road, clutching it to his chest.

The voices quieted; then footsteps sounded in two different directions. Tanner glanced up into the emotionless void of blackness where his attacker's face should have been and felt all his hope of surviving this ordeal drain away. "Please. Just leave me alone. No more."

The man leaned over him and began to pat him down, his hands fumbling over Tanner's shirt and pants, searching through all his pockets. His wallet was pulled out, the man who'd taken it cursing a blue streak in response to its empty folds. "Fucking little bitch. You don't even have any damn money. What good are you?"

Through cracked and bloodied lips, Tanner whispered, "Car... Take the car. Please. I won't tell. Just go."

Sadistic laughter echoed. "As if I need your permission. Maybe I'll just take our payment out of your pretty little ass. You've been selling it anyway, whore. What's a couple more dicks up you before we finish you off? Hell, you'd even probably like it."

Tears spilled from Tanner's eyes, the salty moisture seeping into cuts and adding another layer to his pain. "*No.*"

Hands tore at his clothes, ripping his shirt. With the last of his strength, Tanner slapped at the hands, knowing the futility of his actions as he tried.

"Fuck him once for me, Rick. I'm going to take this piece of shit car and dump it. Pick me up when you're done. Just don't take too long, man. Nigel wants us back and on shift soon."

Tanner's mind latched onto that one word -- *Nigel*. "Why?" he croaked.

"Why?" The hands pulling at his clothes stopped trying to strip him and angled his face upward. A fist slammed into his nose. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth as it

poured from his nostrils. "You don't quit working for Nigel, you stupid cum-dump. No one walks away. No one."

His head slammed against the pavement and bright pinpoints of light exploded behind his eyes. The man grabbed him by his feet -- which he used to kick out at his attacker with no effectiveness -- and began to drag toward the side of the road. The back of his head and side of his face scraped against the rough pavement. With his good hand, he clawed at the sandpapery surface, searching for something to hold onto. He came up empty-handed.

He was dumped callously on the side of the road, legs in the dirt, his head cradled by the unyielding lip of the pavement. He heard a zipper being lowered and squeezed his eyes shut.

A determined voice in the back of his head spoke up, yelling at him to fight. An inkling of an idea popped into his head. A last ditch attempt to -- if not escape -- then at least inflict some fucking damage before he died.

He waited until his attacker approached and stood towering above him before opening his eyes. The man stood between Tanner's legs, his pants hanging open with his cock on display between the parted folds of denim. Tanner gulped air, pushed all the energy he could into his lower extremities and leveraged his foot right into the man's package.

His attacker squealed and clutched at his groin, dropping to his knees. With split seconds to act, Tanner rolled to his side and used his good arm to push himself to his feet. Limping, his legs weak and shaking, Tanner hobbled out into the road. His gaze blurry, tears poured down his face obscuring his vision even more, Tanner could barely make out the tracks ahead. He headed in that direction, his gait unsteady, knees threatening to give out with every single step and one ankle throbbing like mad.

Cursing boomed from behind him and he picked up his pace, ignoring his body's warning that it couldn't take much more abuse. He no longer knew why the tracks signified freedom, but they did, and he would get there or die trying.

A strong shove from behind pushed him to his knees. A plethora of excruciating aches and pain wracked his body as he was flipped over to face his executioner.

This was it. This was the end. There was no more fight left in him. He hurt too badly; the pain welling up inside him to previously unimaginable proportions. He shut his eyes, waiting for the death blow to come.

Tanner's attacker yelled, "Fuck," and rammed the toe of his boot into the side of Tanner's head. "This isn't over, bitch. Count on it."

An explosion of bright red light colored the inside of Tanner's eyelids, and he wondered if that was what happened when you were damned to hell. People who claimed to have seen heaven always saw a white light; maybe the damned got a red one. The light faded to black, the loud squeal of tires barely audible as darkness pulled him under.

Chapter Six

Christian slammed on the brakes, damn near hitting the cement block at the edge of the parking space, and burst from his car like a horse from the starting gates at the Kentucky derby. Nervous sweat leaked from his pores. The thin, cotton tank top and sweatpants he'd jumped into straight from bed stuck to his skin.

He burst through the emergency room doors and made a beeline for the service desk. "The young man who was brought by the ambulance with no ID, Tanner O'Bannon, where is he? How is he?"

His outburst caused the bored registrar behind the desk to look up. "Are you family?"

"Someone from here called me. Said Tanner was found unconscious with no ID. Only my card in his pocket."

"I'm sorry, sir. I can't let you go back or tell you anything unless you're family."

A robust burst of anger over the woman's indifference overcame him. He did the only thing he could think of to find out what he needed to know. "Yes. I'm Tanner's uncle. Now will you please tell me what the fuck is going on?"

The nurse looked down her pointed nose at him -- a hard feat when he was the one towering over her -- and said, "There's no reason to get hateful, sir. I'm only doing my job."

"I'm sorry." Christian blew out a frustrated breath of air. "Will you please tell me how he is, or find me someone who can?"

"If you'll just have a seat, sir, I'll let the staff treating him know you're here." She fiddled with a stack of forms and a clipboard. "While you're waiting, we need to know his information. If you could just fill out these forms for us..." She slapped the clipboard with what looked like a small book worth of papers onto the counter in front of him.

“But I --” Christian started to protest at having to fill out the forms -- *what do I know about the kid besides his name?* -- but stopped short when he realized he couldn’t admit that without giving away his lie and jerked his mouth shut.

An eyebrow was arched at him. When he didn’t continue, she waved a hand bearing talonlike, red fingernails toward the waiting area. “If you’ll have a seat, sir, someone will be with you shortly.”

Tanner was somewhere behind closed doors -- in God knew what kind of shape -- and the stupid cunt behind the desk was worried about insurance forms?

Disgruntled, but figuring it wouldn’t win him any points if he caused a scene, Christian turned around, only then noticing the room full of people staring at him. He probably looked like a freak, with his hair standing up all over his head and furry bedroom slippers still on his feet. The will to care never showed up. What the hell did it matter if he looked like a hobo?

He crossed the room and plopped down on the edge of one of the harder-than-nails seats and glanced down at the top sheet on the clipboard. A cluster of questions loomed large, as unanswerable as the equation for world peace. *Insurance provider and number, social security number, and next of kin...* He didn’t know any of this crap. He filled in Tanner’s name and address, put his own info under next of kin, and marked no insurance on the rest. At the bottom, he scribbled in his credit card number for payment and hoped that would suffice. He’d donate enough cash for a new fucking wing if they would just tell him what he wanted to know.

He wasn’t sure what to think. Being woken out of a sound sleep by a nasal voice asking if he could identify an unidentified young man who’d been brought into the ER had sent his groggy brain into a tailspin of confusion. The man they’d described -- young and slim, with strawberry blond curls and green eyes -- was undeniably Tanner. He’d told them his name, asked after his condition, was told nothing more than stable, and ran out of the house like his balls were on fire.

Damn it. All he knew was that Tanner had been unconscious when he was brought in and that he wasn’t dying. *Of course, that was half an hour earlier,* the contrary part of his brain chimed. *Anything could have happened since then.*

A fresh rush of fear swamped him, and he rose to stand, intent on strangling the snarky little woman behind the desk if it got him the information he wanted, when a woman sat in the seat next to him and placed her hand over his forearm, stopping him.

“I’m sorry to bother you, but I couldn’t help but overhear what you said to the registrar. You know the young man who was brought in?”

Only the patient look of remorse in the older lady’s large brown eyes kept him from taking out his aggravation on her by telling to mind her own fucking business. He sighed and ran his free hand over his hair. “Yeah, I know him.”

“I’m so sorry. I was the one who called in the ambulance. I’m so ashamed to admit it, but I almost ran him over before I saw him lying there on the street. The image of him lying

so still, crumpled on the asphalt like a broken china doll is going to haunt me for years.” She shivered, as if she were replaying it in her mind.

Christian gasped at the image she painted and jerked his arm away. Tanner had been lying out in the middle of the road? *Broken doll?* Sweet Jesus, what was going on?

Her gaze focused on him, contrite. “I’m sorry. I seem to be good at sticking my foot in my mouth. I should’ve been more considerate. He’s your nephew?”

“Huh...uh, yeah.”

“Do you have any idea what he was doing in that neighborhood? That area isn’t safe for man or beast at night.”

Too much worry, too little sleep, take your pick, but the accusation in the woman’s voice, as if he’d somehow been responsible for Tanner’s condition, caused his temper to snap. “You know more than I do, lady. Would you mind telling me what happened? The staff...no one has told me anything. Just that he’s here.”

“Um, well, I don’t know much. I was taking a short cut home, cutting through to take Route 5, and I’d just come over the train tracks, you know. A truck roared past me with its lights on bright and blinded me for a second. When everything came back into focus I saw what I thought was a deer lying in the road and slammed on my brakes. As I got closer, I saw that it was a young man and got out to check on him. He... Well, do you really want to hear this?”

“Yes. Please.”

“He was lying kind of on his back and his side, one of his arms outstretched. The shirt he had on was torn, hanging off his body. There was blood. God, he was covered in blood.”

Christian shut his eyes. “Stop.” He didn’t want to hear any more. He was sorry he’d asked.

What the hell had Tanner been doing out on that end of town so late? Scratch that. Knowing what Tanner did for a living, it wasn’t too hard to figure out. But why had he been lying out in the middle of the street, and what had happened to his car? Had a customer roughed him up and dropped him off on the side of the road like a busted toy? Christian vowed to find out and see that whoever had hurt Tanner was brought to justice.

She patted his arm. “I’m sorry. You said you wanted to know.”

Christian looked at her, the compassion on her face. “I know. It’s not your fault. I thought I did.” He took a deep breath. “What did the EMT people say? Do you know how badly he’s hurt?”

“No. I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “God, I keep saying that, don’t I? The police were questioning me while they loaded him into the ambulance. I think one of the officers is still in the back, waiting to talk to your nephew about what happened. At least, I haven’t seen him come out yet. I’ve been hanging around here, hoping to overhear how he’s doing, but so far...” She shrugged.

He glanced up and spotted a clock mounted on the wall next to the small television that looked to be playing an infomercial. It was almost midnight. "They don't get in a hurry to tell people anything, do they?"

Christian glanced over her shoulder and noticed a man in a white coat coming out of the admittance door leading into the ER. "Excuse me," he muttered to the woman and rose to his feet, crossing the room in quickly, in an effort to reach the doctor before he disappeared.

The registrar nodded toward Christian as he approached and the doctor, whose name tag read Petrolovich, turned to face him. "You're Mr. O'Bannon's uncle, correct?"

"Yes. Can you tell me how he is?"

"The injuries Tanner sustained in the attack are bad, but he's going to be just fine. He suffers from a Grade II concussion and needs to have an eye kept on him for the next twelve to twenty-four hours, depending on the symptoms he exhibits. He has a fracture of the ulna in his left arm that we've stabilized with a lower arm cast he'll need to wear for the next eight to ten weeks. Bruised ribs and a host of scrapes and cuts are among his other, less pressing injuries. Tanner will be just fine. He's just going to need time to rest and recuperate."

Thank you, God. He's going to be okay. "Can I go back and see him now?"

"You can. He's lucid, but groggy, so don't be surprised if he seems a little out of it. Also, he's suffering from some short-term memory loss. That's common in concussions like his and nothing to worry about. His memory, however, may or may not come back. The brain has a way of blocking traumatic events to protect itself. Some people recover the lost memories. Some don't. It really all depends on Tanner. He was given some potent pain meds, so you can rest assured he isn't feeling a lot of the aches and pains he'll feel in the morning."

The doctor glanced down at his watch then reached into his pocket and pulled out a couple of small sheets of paper. He handed them to Christian. "The nurses are working on Tanner's discharge now and will go over his aftercare with you before you go. I suggest you get those prescriptions I just handed you filled before you go home tonight. He'll be in need of them in the morning."

Christian watched the doctor walk off, feeling a little overwhelmed by everything he'd just heard. As he hit the call button on the doors leading into the back, the main thought on his mind was how Tanner would react to being released in his care. If the kid was unhappy after their earlier discussion, he was going to be livid now.

After identifying himself to the nurse in charge, the door buzzed and swung open. Christian walked into the back with the outlook of a man headed for the gallows. This was not going to be pretty. He wanted to be there for Tanner -- though he was nervous at the thought of letting someone stay with him -- and he hoped like hell the kid accepted his help, but he somehow doubted that things would go his way now any more than they had earlier.

Christian approached the nurse's station and was directed to the last cubicle on the left by a tiny Asian woman in blue scrubs. As he approached it -- and mentally prepared for what

he would say before he opened his mouth -- voices reached his ears. He slowed his pace to a crawl and listened.

"Mr. O'Bannon, I'm here to help you. It would be in your best interests to cooperate and tell me what happened to you."

"Don't you think I would, if I were able?" Tanner's hoarse voice rang out, loud compared to the officer's tone. "I already told you. I can't remember what happened. I was on my way to meet a friend of a friend. They weren't at the hotel where we were supposed to meet up. After that...I just don't know."

The last bit of speech was mumbled so low Christian could barely make out the words, but the heartbreakingly pitiful tone was enough to cause him to pull back the curtain and step into the cubicle. He knew the officer was only trying to help, but he wasn't going to stand by and let Tanner be harassed by anyone, not after everything else he'd been through. If and when Tanner's memory came back, he could pay a visit to the police station and finish filing a report. He didn't need to do it right that minute.

It wasn't until two pair of curious eyes turned in his direction that he remembered he was there under false pretenses and chances were good that Tanner would kick him right back out of the room.

"Can I help you with something, pal? We're in the middle of a *private* discussion here," the officer barked at him.

Christian glanced at Tanner, whose eyes possessed a glazed tint from the medication he was administered, and tried to convey his apologies for misleading the staff about his identity, while pleading for Tanner to stay silent about who he was until the nurse left and they could talk. "I'm Tanner's uncle. I'm here to take him home."

The lie rolled off Christian's tongue like it was the truth, though he felt like shit about lying to a cop. That couldn't be a good idea. He shot a glance at Tanner who just lay there on the bed, blinking as if he wasn't sure what was going on.

The cop flipped the notepad he held closed and slid it into his jacket. "Well, Mr. --"

"Ryder. Christian Ryder."

"Well, Mr. Ryder, when your nephew happens to remember anything about tonight" -- he held out a card -- "have him give me a call, and I'll finish filing a case report. Until then, unless his car turns up, there isn't much I can do."

Christian took the card and slipped it into his pocket. "Thank you, officer. I'm sure Tanner will want to speak to you the minute he recalls anything."

No sooner than the curtain dropped behind the cop, Tanner spoke. "What are you doing here, *Uncle* Christian?"

Christian moved the single chair in the room over beside Tanner's bed and sat. "Yeah, sorry about that. They wouldn't tell me anything unless I said I was family." He gave Tanner

a good look over, what little he could see outside the thin blanket draped over the kid's lap, and winced. *Damn, that had to hurt.*

The pale complexion of Tanner's face was covered in angry, mottled bruises. One of the kid's eyes was swollen halfway shut, the other darkened but otherwise normal. A large patch of skin over one of his cheekbones was covered in a rough, bloody scab, as if a coarse piece of sandpaper had been scrubbed over it. The bridge of his nose was swollen, his nostrils puffy and larger than they should have been. A thick white cast covered Tanner's left arm from elbow to hand and wrapped around the base of his thumb.

"Ugly, aren't I?"

Christian glanced up. "No, never ugly, kid, but you took a hell of a beating. What happened out there?"

Tanner shook his head and then winced, as if the slight movement hurt. "I don't know. I can't remember."

"Oh, I didn't know if you..." Christian let that line of thought go, thinking it might be better not to finish it.

"You thought I was lying to the cop?" There seemed to be no accusation in his tone, just curiosity, which told Christian more than anything else, how tired and drugged up Tanner was. The kid was touchy about everything. Accusing him of lying would have sent him through the roof on a good day.

"Well, I thought you might have been out on business or something." Christian shrugged. "Sorry."

"S'okay. How'd you know I was here anyway?"

"One of the nurses called. Said you'd been brought in with no ID and wanted to know if I could tell them who you were since my card was in your pocket."

He yawned, groaning as he did it. "Damn, that hurts."

"Yeah, I bet." Christian yawned. *The damn things were contagious.* "Listen, I know we had some misunderstandings earlier, but the offer to help you out still stands. I think, now more than ever, you could use it."

Tanner opened his mouth, but Christian held his hand up. "Just hear me out for a second okay?" Tanner nodded.

"I just want to lend a hand. I figured if things were good, you wouldn't be been doing what you are, you know? Your dad was a good man, and I know he wouldn't want to see you working in the business you've fallen into."

Tanner groaned, but the corner of his lips twitched. "Not fair, playing the dad card. That was low."

"I need all the help I can get." Christian smiled. "Did it work?"

“Maybe.” Tanner blinked, his eyelids lifting up slowly as if they were extra heavy and he shifted, trying to pull himself upright a little more. Halfway up, he slumped back down on the mattress and cried out. “Fuck, that hurt.”

Christian stood and moved to rearrange the pillows behind Tanner’s back. “There. That should be a little better.” He sat back down.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Listen, I’ve already spoken to your doctor, and he says they’re working on your discharge papers now. I’m sure they’ve been in to talk to you, but he said you can’t be alone for a day or so, because of the concussion. So, unless you’ve got family I don’t know about, or some friend who’ll look after you, I think it would be a good idea if you came back to my place for a day or two. Just until you get back on your feet and all.” Christian sucked in a breath of air and waited to hear what Tanner had to say.

“Just a couple of days? I might be able to do that. ’S not like I have to worry about you wanting to molest my hot bod. God, I feel like steam-rolled shit. Don’t imagine I look much better.”

Christian guffawed; he couldn’t help it. “Yeah, I don’t think you’re going to win any beauty pageants anytime soon, pal. Sorry.” He rose to his feet. “Well, then I’ll just go and see about your paperwork and get you all checked out of this place.” He laid a gentle hand on Tanner’s shoulder. “It’s going to be okay, Tanner. I promise.”

Tanner didn’t speak, but he didn’t have to. The look in his heavily lidded eyes conveyed his gratitude more than was necessary.

Chapter Seven

Tanner gasped and jerked from sleep, a sharp lance of pain shooting through his chest at his choppy motion. He cried out, one hand lifting to protect his face from his attackers, and whimpered when his palm touched down over his swollen nose.

His eyes flew open, the remnants of the dream disappeared. Tanner found himself looking at the swirling plaster design on the white ceiling. He was only dreaming. He was not back there -- wherever *there* was. He was safe. *Just a nightmare.*

Each individual part of his body seemed to chime in at the same time with an unending list of ailments. His head pounded and the skin covering his entire face felt like it was on fire. He couldn't breathe through his nose, or inhale very deeply without his ribs feeling like they had a choke hold on his lungs. And his fucking arm throbbed like the devil.

Worse was not knowing how he'd ended up the way he was. He knew the officer from the night before thought he was lying, Christian too, but he couldn't remember anything after leaving the hotel. The last he recalled was standing outside, looking up at the stars, and wondering what he was supposed to do about a no-show client. Nothing but a blank slate remained between then and when he'd woken up in the hospital.

Since he couldn't figure out what to make of his own life, he might as well think about the man who'd swooped in to save the day and offer him a place to crash. Christian was an enigma. Tanner had a hard time believing anyone would take in a virtual stranger out of the goodness of their heart -- even because they'd known his father, as Christian claimed. For the life of him, Tanner couldn't come up with a plausible ulterior motive behind his benefactor's invitation.

Being that he didn't have two nickels to rub together, money wasn't a motivation. And though he hadn't gotten to see much of the house the night before, what he could remember was opulent to the nth degree, so Christian obviously didn't need cash. All that left was sex,

and there was no way that was happening. Even if he felt up to it -- and he didn't -- he looked like hell. Considering he didn't think he looked all that hot on a normal basis, he had to be downright scary right now, what with his face looking like someone had used it for knuckle tenderizer.

Maybe Christian had some fucked up, male version of the Florence Nightingale syndrome. That thought almost made him smile, until the gargantuan T-shirt Christian had loaned him twisted and bunched up, abrading the bruises on his chest.

Leaning on the arm not sheathed in a cast, Tanner leveraged himself upright, his back to the pillows, and gasped at the sharp ache that spread across his chest and the accompanying thumpa-thumpa behind his eyeballs. Jesus fuck, if it hurt that much just to sit up, what ten kinds of hell would it be like when he tried to find the bathroom in this place?

After who-knew-how-many hours of sleep, his bladder was shouting to be relieved. He glanced around the room, taking in the plain walls and heavy, expensive looking bedroom suite made from cherry wood, and realized he had no idea what time it was. Or what day it was. Chances were good he'd slept the day away as doped up as he'd been the night before. He vaguely remembered being woken up a few times, Christian leaning over him and asking him silly questions until he'd snapped at the man to leave him the hell alone and let him go back to sleep. He couldn't have said with any real certainty how many times that had been. Each encounter blurred into one long merry-go-round of Christian's hazy features hanging above him, the man's whiskey-rough voice speaking in that low monotone Tanner had found so damn sexy during their one night together.

Part of him wondered if Christian ever thought of that night the way he did when he was by himself and lonely.

Tanner moved the covers off his legs and eased one to the side of the bed. When that didn't set off any explosions of pain, he did the same with the other. Sitting on the edge, he noticed two bottles of pills and a half-full glass of water on the nightstand. He reached out, not thinking about which arm he used, and winced as he moved the wrong one. He recalled the doctor saying it was only a fracture of one of the two bones in his forearm, but it he couldn't imagine how much more it would hurt if he'd broken the whole thing. His entire arm ached, not just the lower half.

Because of the way he sat, he would either have to twist and reach across his body to get to the meds, or stand up. Twisting didn't sound like much fun, all things considered, so he eased himself off the bed by scant inches at a time until both feet were firmly on the floor. He rose to his feet and stood statue still for a moment, waiting for pain to blindside him. It never came, and he breathed a sigh of relief. Well, that hadn't been so bad. As long as he was careful, and didn't jostle himself around, apparently he could move without his body throwing a hissy fit.

Tanner picked up the bottles and studied them. One was Tylenol with codeine. The other a gigantic word he couldn't pronounce, but recognized as an antibiotic because he'd

been given the same thing the year before for a bad case of strep throat. He set the antibiotic down and started to open the Tylenol until he realized that he would need two hands to do it with.

He could do without, or he could find Christian and ask for help. He decided that he could live without the pain meds for the time being. It wasn't like he was in that much pain anyway.

An itch crossed over his nose, and he wiggled it out of habit. A bolt of red-hot pain shot up the bridge and between his eyes. Tanner grimaced and choked on the whimper in his throat. God, he hurt. Maybe he would find Christian after all. It wasn't like it would kill him to ask for help. He just didn't want to bother the dude when he'd already done so much. Maybe he would find him, after he took a piss.

* * * * *

Christian was in the kitchen, draining his hundredth cup of black coffee and working on trying to figure out what he could fix for dinner that Tanner might eat, when he heard the distinct tinkle of glass breaking. He rushed up the stairs, hopping two and three at a time, to find Tanner leaning against the sink with one hand pressed against his face, water dripping off his cheeks and clinging to the neckline of the shirt Christian had lent him to sleep in.

Christian hurried to his side, unconcerned with the broken shards of the ceramic soap dispenser shattered on the tile, and put his arm around Tanner's slender waist in support. "Jesus, kid, are you okay. I think you shaved ten years off my life."

"Yeah," Tanner replied quietly, looking up at Christian from underneath pale, curling lashes. "Sorry about the soap thingy. I was trying to splash some water on my face, and I got dizzy. I'll, um, I'll replace it for you, if you tell me where you bought it."

"Don't worry about the stupid dispenser. I'm more worried about you. What are you doing out of bed? You shouldn't be up and moving around yet." Christian leaned down, swept his free arm under Tanner's legs and hefted him up off the floor, careful not to hold him too tight.

Tanner squealed. "What are you doing? I'm fine. Put me down."

Christian ignored him, navigating them around the broken shards of glass and out of the bathroom. He carried Tanner across the hall and into the guest bedroom. "You're not fine. And even if you were, you're barefoot and there's glass on the floor. The last thing you need to do is cut one of your feet open and have to go back to hospital for stitches."

Tanner's back stiffened. "I can take care of myself. Put me the fuck down. Right now."

Looked like Tanner's pride was back in full swing. Christian stopped at the foot of the bed and gave Tanner what he wanted. He dropped him on his ass on the bed. "There. Happy now?"

The younger man grunted at the impact and screwed his face up, obviously in pain, and Christian immediately felt bad. He bent down to apologize, aligning his face with Tanner's. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean... You okay?"

Tanner swung out and boxed Christian in the side of the head. "I told you to put me down, not drop me, asshole."

Christian winced at the surprisingly strong slap to his ear and grabbed Tanner's hand in midair before it could strike him again. "Hey, I said I was sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you. What else do you want from me?"

Tanner tugged at Christian's hold on him, trying to break free. "I don't want to be treated like a damn baby."

Christian held onto Tanner. "Quit it. You're going to hurt yourself. And for your information, I wasn't trying to treat you like a baby, but if you keep acting like one I might have to rethink doing just that."

The kid gave a sharp tug of his arm, more violent than the others and pulled Christian off balance. He toppled forward, unable to stop his momentum and crashed into Tanner, pushing him onto his back atop the mattress.

Tanner cried and pushed at Christian's chest with one hand. "Get off me. God, get off me. You're on my damn arm. Fuck."

Christian jerked back and rolled to his right. Lying side by side, he looked at Tanner and took in the kid's drawn features, the grimace on his bruised but still pretty face. "Jesus, I'm sorry. I can't seem to quit bumbling things up around you. Are you okay?"

Tanner looked at him like he'd lost his mind and then gave a great heaving sigh. He squeezed his eyes shut. "Yeah, I'm okay. Not your fault, but that fucking hurt."

"Sorry."

"You don't have to keep apologizing. You wouldn't have fallen on top of me if I wasn't being an asshole." He lifted his lids -- his luminescent green eyes appearing even larger against the pale backdrop of his features -- and peered up at Christian. "I wouldn't turn down one of those pain pills, if you were nice enough to offer. I tried to open the bottle earlier, but..." He dropped his chin in the direction of his arm cast. "I can't really do it one handed, you know."

Christian rolled to his back and grabbed the bottle and glass off the nightstand. "You should've come and gotten me. I would've opened it for you."

He set the cup on the bedspread, its side resting against his stomach, and popped the child-safe lid off the bottle. Christian shook one of the pills out of the bottle and held it out

to Tanner. "Here you go. It's not quite time for the antibiotics yet. I think you have another hour or so before you're due for another one of those."

On his right side, his uninjured arm propped under his head, Tanner didn't have a hand free to take it. He opened his mouth and stuck out his tongue. Christian reached forward, something tugging in his chest at the implicit trust being placed in his hands, and laid the capsule on Tanner's tongue.

Christian pulled his hand back and picked up the glass. He wiggled a couple of inches closer to Tanner and held the rim of the cup up to his mouth. Tanner's lips parted and Christian tilted the glass, spilling a little of the water out at a time. It shouldn't have been sexy; all he was doing was helping Tanner take a drink of water, but he may as well have been feeding Tanner his dick for all the effect it had on his libido. Something about lying next to the younger man and watching his lips glisten with moisture and his throat work as he swallowed was highly erotic. His gaze glued to Tanner's mouth, Christian lowered the cup and leaned in. He just wanted a little taste, just one kiss.

At the last second before their lips connected, Christian glanced up at Tanner's eyes, trying to gauge if his kiss was welcome or not. Tanner's beautiful green eyes -- the most attractive Christian had ever seen, even while ringed with garish navy circles -- were huge and glazed over. Christian would've liked to think they were glassy from mutual desire, but it was probably just the drugs kicking in.

Christian jerked his head a little to the left and tried to pretend he'd only been studying Tanner's face. "Your nose looks better. It's not quite as puffy as it was last night. I think some of the swelling around your eye has gone down too."

Tanner bit into his bottom lip, his gaze briefly meeting Christian's before skittering to the mattress. "Yeah, I guess. I don't really know what I looked like last night. If this is better, I don't think I wanna know either."

Rolling off the side of the bed, Christian put as much space between them as he could without fleeing the room like a scared virgin. "Well, you should rest. I'll bring up some dinner in a few, okay? Hamburgers all right with you? It's about the only thing I can cook without screwing up."

"That sounds good. Thanks." Tanner's mouth opened wide in a yawn, showing off a perfect set of pearly whites and the warm wet, interior surrounding his undulating tongue.

Christian's dick pulsed inside his jeans. "Uh, yeah. I'll be back." Christian exited the room and pulled the door closed behind it. As soon as the latch caught, Christian pressed his back to it and resisted the urge to beat his head against it.

What was wrong with him? Tanner had put enough trust in him to come here and rest, and what was he doing? Lusting after him. *He should be ashamed of himself.* The kid was hurt, had been through who knew what, and he'd tried to kiss him. God, he was going to hell.

Chapter Eight

Six days after the attack, Tanner was going stir crazy. He paced back and forth around the confines of his room, waiting on Christian to show up. They'd been taking all their meals together and he could almost set his watch -- if he'd had one -- by Christian's punctuality. Dinner was at six. According to the clock radio Christian had brought him on that first night after he'd complained about not being able to tell the time, it was almost ten till. That only gave him another nine to ten minutes to figure out how to tell Christian he was ready to take off without sounding like an ungrateful shit.

It wasn't that he didn't appreciate the man's hospitality -- *he did* -- but he wasn't used to being so sedentary. Even with the uncomfortable arm cast and his ribs aching like a motherfucker, he needed to move...to do something besides lay around and think.

Sleeping wasn't the answer. He was plagued by nightmares he didn't remember after waking. Then his days were spent worrying about why he couldn't dredge up the first inkling of memory regarding the attack. With too much time on his hands, Tanner was steadily being lead down the path to paranoia. It was no use; he couldn't remember a goddamn thing. He didn't know who had hurt him or who he could trust other than Christian. It would be all too easy to just stay where he was and hide from the world. Something he damn sure couldn't do when he had bills to pay and a new job to find in order to be able to do it.

Life waited for no one, least of all him. Hurt or not, if he didn't find a job soon and start bringing in some money, he was going to be in trouble. He groaned and swiped his right hand over his face, scrubbing gently at his eyes. *And all this after he'd just gotten caught up.*

Tanner didn't think he could wait another second to talk to Christian, much less ten minutes. He needed to get his thoughts out before he had a chance to second-guess himself and ended up keeping his mouth shut. Tugging at the drawstring waistband of the

sweatpants Christian had loaned him for the umpteenth time, Tanner crossed the room. It was nice of Christian to loan him some clothes -- though they were several sizes too big -- but he missed having his own things, being surrounded by the familiar comforts of home.

He yanked open the door and stepped out into the hallway, determined to find Christian and say his piece. Austere white walls spread in both directions, the cool beige tile chilly underfoot. Christian's house -- if a building so large could be called something as simple as a house -- really was a monstrosity. He spied the staircase to his left and headed in that direction. He'd just go downstairs and give Christian a holler as soon as he reached the lower level. *That should be easy enough.*

When he found Christian, all he needed to do was tell the man how he felt, thank him for his help, and ask for a ride home. *The hell with candy-coating it.* Failing that, he could always call for a cab or something. The ride from the hospital to Christian's humongous house was a blur of passing trees and easy-listening music, but it couldn't be that far from civilization if the man had volunteered at the same firehouse as his dad.

Since he hadn't heard a peep from the police about his missing car, he was going to have to get used to public transportation anyway. Good thing he lived on the bus line.

As he passed the first door, he recalled Christian saying something about his bedroom being on this hall too, near the room Tanner slept in. At the time, he hadn't been paying much attention. Rarely had he left the guestroom, other than to take a leak or wash off, so it hadn't seemed to matter. Christian had hand delivered all his meals and stayed to eat with him, keeping him company and telling him again and again to rest and then rest some more -- *it really would be too soon if he ever heard that blasted word again.*

His contrary nature had wanted to balk more than once as Christian fretted and waited on him, seeming to never be more than a foot away every time Tanner groaned or tried to move more than a couple of inches to sit up. It almost would've been sweet, if he hadn't been feeling so fuckin' irritable.

When the man hadn't been lecturing him on the virtues of sleeping his life away, he'd actually been pretty cool to hang out with. He had a dry wit that took a little getting used to, but he was pretty laid back and easygoing. Most of what they'd talked about had been basic, music and movies, things people chatted about when they didn't really know each other. He'd found out that while Christian pretended to like action and suspense, he knew more about chick flicks and spoof ball comedies that Tanner himself favored. They both liked classic rock, though Christian's taste ran more toward the Beatles or the Rolling Stones, and Tanner's more in the direction of Jimi Hendrix and the Doors. He also noticed that as soon as the conversation had turned to anything more personal, Christian excused himself for the night -- more often than not, with a tent prodding against the front of his pants.

Flattering as it was to have someone want him that badly and not do anything about it out of concern for his health, it was also frustrating as hell. With his body plagued by aches and pains, he never would have guessed that getting off would be high on his list of

priorities. He would have been dead wrong. Not being able to do anything about the sexual tension brewing between him and Christian only seemed to make it that much stronger. With his left arm in a cast, he couldn't even beat off properly. That hadn't stopped him -- he'd made do with his right -- but it hadn't been as good as what he could have accomplished with his left, or nearly as satisfying as it would've felt to have Christian do it for him.

Not that getting involved with a former client, no matter how nice they were, would be very bright. It was probably just as well that nothing had happened between them. This way, there could be a clean break when he left. He could just thank Christian for his help and leave it at that, without any lingering expectations to muck things up.

In the process of reaching for the wooden banister, a muffled noise caught Tanner's attention. He froze and cocked his head to one side, trying to listen and see if he could figure out where the sound was coming from. When it came again, Tanner was ready for it. He crept toward the room two doors down from the bathroom, the last one on the right before the staircase, his curiosity getting the better of him. At first, he thought the door was closed, but upon closer inspection he found that it was open just a hair, as if someone had entered in a hurry and failed to make sure the latch caught properly.

With nervous fingers, Tanner reached out and pushed the door open a fraction more. His lips parted on a silent moan, the sight before him something directly out of his fantasies.

Christian lay spread out crossways on the mattress of a large sleigh bed, one hand working the long, swollen length of his cock, while the other pinched and plucked at his nipples. His long legs dangled over the edge, the jeans he'd worn earlier hastily bunched around his tensing thighs. Bare from groin to nipple, a white sleeveless T-shirt was heedlessly shoved up his torso and gathered under his arms. His face was turned to the wall, away from where Tanner stood gaping at him through the slit in the door.

Jesus, fuck...

Every muscle in Tanner's body clenched as blood rushed south to fill his groin and harden his dick. He stared, transfixed by the undulations of Christian's groin as his hips lifted to push his cock through his fist. The bulbous tip was wet with desire, the veined shaft thick and glistening with moisture as it slid through the tight grip of Christian's fingers.

Tanner palmed his crotch, rubbing at his erection through the nappy cotton of his sweatpants. He pressed down against the outline of his dick and felt it pulse under his palm.

Riveted, Tanner watched Christian stroke his meat. His gaze alternated between the hand gaining speed over Christian's cock and the way Christian twisted his stiff copper-colored nipples, making them flush a deeper shade of red and bead up against the hard mounds of his pecs. His broad chest was sprinkled with dark, silky-looking hair that thinned between his pecs and trailed down over the expanse of his flat stomach. The crown of curls around the base of his cock was darker, almost black in color and more dense than the rest of his body hair. Tanner longed to run his fingers through it, to rub his cheek over Christian's entire body and test the different textures.

Independent of his brain, Tanner's foot lifted. Before he could complete that first step, Christian moaned. Tanner froze, watching as Christian's body bucked, his abs tensing and rippling. The fist Christian had around the upper half of his dick froze and squeezed down. Pearlescent ropes of cum sprayed through the open ring of Christian's fingers and splashed the naked breadth of his abs, the final strands losing force and oozing around his fist.

Tanner's heart beat wildly, every pulse resounding in his aching cock. He began to back up, not wanting to be caught spying on Christian during such a private moment. As he pivoted and fled -- with the bedroom door unconsciously left open behind him -- the sound of Christian's deep voice crying out his name echoed in his ears.

* * * * *

Christian's vision of Tanner leaning over him, sucking his cock through swollen, puckered lips, faded with his orgasm. He sighed and slowly lifted his eyelids. The ceiling came into focus as his body floated down from the endorphin rush of release and propelled him back into stark reality. Underneath the smooth, boneless feel of his afterglow, a small niggling doubt resurfaced, whispering of things he could have -- things he desperately wanted -- if only he'd give in and make a grab for them. Give up his solitary existence, and make a play for Tanner.

The kid was just down the hall, but he may as well have been a figment of Christian's imagination. If anything, having Tanner so close, being able to talk with him and spend time together while not being able to touch him was more torture than before. Things were easier when all he'd had was his memory of their single night together and fantasies of what might have been -- what would have been possible if he were normal and brave enough to start a relationship.

Tanner wanted him. That much was apparent in the way his gaze followed Christian around on the evenings they ate together, the way he stared and licked his lips when Christian wasn't able to hide how hard he got just from being in the same room with him. What he wasn't sure of was whether or not Tanner was just horny and looking to score, or if the kid might want to try for something more.

Pessimism was so deeply ingrained in his psyche, it was hard for Christian to imagine a positive outcome for them. Second-guessing his wants and needs, trying to balance the two, and come up with an encouraging conclusion was near impossible. Still, he fought his baser instincts, wanting to visualize a satisfying ending for Tanner and him. The kid was young -- only twenty to his thirty-two -- but he was bright and hardheaded and so sure of himself. It was damn hard not to like him. More than like, if Christian was honest with himself.

Tanner had been living under his roof for going on a week, had tried his patience continually, and nothing untoward had happened. There hadn't been a single flare of his peculiar curse, not a single scorch mark or bout of smoke. It seemed like, if he was going to lose his cool and blow up -- hopefully not literally -- he would have done it by now. Lord

knew, the kid had been a little shit on more than one occasion. Surly as a bear with a thorn in its paw at times, Tanner had never pushed Christian past the limits of what he could tolerate.

The kid pushed all his buttons, good and bad. He found it rather ironic that he'd gone from not being able to beat off with any success at all to having to sneak into his bedroom and jerk before dinner.

Dinner.

Shit.

Christian jolted upright, his gaze jerking toward the bedside clock. 6:15. He was late with dinner.

* * * * *

Tanner was beginning to think he would wear a path into the hardwood flooring of his bedroom before Christian showed up. He'd thought and rethought things over the last forty-five minutes and come to only one conclusion.

He thought about things way too fucking much.

There was a time for speculation and a time for action. Now was not the time to question the way he felt. He was sick of being responsible, sick of being alone and having no one in his life.

He wanted Christian. Right or wrong, he was going to have him.

Chapter Nine

When the knock he'd been waiting for sounded, Tanner was ready. He stood at the foot of the bed. Nervous anticipation hummed through his body, and he smiled as Christian came through the door.

Christian bustled into the room holding a large pizza box with two twenty-ounce soda bottles balanced atop it, and set the pie on the dresser. "Sorry dinner's late. I was, um, doing something and lost track of time." He held out one of the two pop bottles. "Hope pepperoni is okay. I ordered from one of those thirty minute or less places."

Tanner accepted the soda and set it down on the dresser. Two steps and he stood in front of Christian, close enough to feel the intense waves of heat coming from his large body, and gazed up into a pair of concerned stormy blue eyes.

Christian raised his hand and brushed his fingers over the side of Tanner's face. "Are you all right, Tanner? You look a little flushed."

Tanner turned his face into Christian's palm and rubbed his cheek against it. "No, I'm not okay. I thought I was, but...I hurt."

Christian's forehead wrinkled, confusion filling his eyes. "I thought you were feeling better. This morning you said --"

"Shh." Tanner cut him off, placed a finger over his lips. "Not that kind of pain." Grabbing Christian's other hand, he brought it to his groin. "Here. This is where I hurt. Where *you* make me ache." He ground the man's palm over the hard, aching length and pleaded for understanding with his eyes. "Please, Christian. I need you to make it better. I just...need you."

Christian squeezed down on Tanner's shaft and pulled a whimper from him. He swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing, and licked his lips. "Tanner, I don't think this is such a

good idea. It's only been a week since you were in the hospital and I...there are things you don't know about me."

"It's doesn't matter. I know everything about you that I need to, and I'm fine. A little sore still, but nothing for you to worry about. I know you won't hurt me." Christian's palm still against his face, Tanner turned and pressed a kiss into his palm. "Please. Make love to me, Christian. I want you to."

* * * * *

Christian's heart beat double time as he stared down into Tanner's wide green eyes. His palm tingled from the sweet press of Tanner's lips, the soft skin of Tanner's cheek right at home under his touch. Had anything ever felt better or more right? If it had, he couldn't remember.

Every reason he had for refusing Tanner, for walking away and not taking advantage of his offer, washed away like ink from an eraser board. All that was left behind was his need and the desire so clearly written on Tanner's expressive features. Nothing seemed more urgent than claiming the little slice of heaven he'd been offered and wallowing in the moment. The rest could be settled later.

Christian bent and brushed his lips softly over Tanner's. The kid moaned and opened his mouth, accepting his tongue and welcoming it with sweet little flicks of his own. Christian raised his other hand, using both to cup Tanner's jaw and tilt his face at the right angle to deepen the kiss. His thumbs rubbed circles over the downy soft skin of Tanner's cheeks. He wondered at the smooth texture of Tanner's skin, so silky and unlike the coarse stubble Christian sprouted at a moment's notice, as he tasted the sweet ambrosia of Tanner's lips and lost himself in the feel of the lean, hard body pressing against his chest.

Christian tore away from Tanner's mouth, his breath coming in choppy pants. "God, I want you." He ran the tip of a thumb over Tanner's kiss-swollen lips. "Are you sure you want this, want me, 'cause I'm not sure I'll be able to stop myself from taking you this time?" *He wasn't sure how he'd managed to resist the first time.*

Tanner nodded and moved up on his tiptoes to kiss Christian.

Christian stopped him. "No. I need to hear you say it, Tanner. Please. I need the words, pretty."

Tanner smiled, a grin that should have shown fangs sprouting from between his lips, and flicked his tongue over the closed seam of Christian's lip. "Yeah, I want you, Christian. Now shut up and kiss me."

With a groan, Christian closed his eyes and let Tanner kiss away his insecurities. He grasped Tanner's ass in both hands, gave the taut mounds a squeeze, and lifted him off the floor. Tanner clung to him, one arm going around his neck to hold on, while his legs wrapped around Christian's waist and pressed their bodies flush together. Christian walked

them over to the bed, never breaking the seal of their lips until he felt his knees butt up against the edge of the mattress.

Tanner's legs vised around him, the tongue in his mouth working like a cyclone around his own. He took a minute, enjoying the heft of Tanner in his arms, before breaking away and gently easing Tanner onto the bed.

Flushed and out of breath, Tanner stared up at him. His chest rose and fell. His lips parted and swollen and looking about as fuckable as anything Christian had ever seen in his life. He'd dreamt of those sweet lips sucking him for what felt like forever. Now, they were his for the taking.

Impatient, Christian stripped, letting his clothes rest where they fell. He stepped to the bed, prick swinging out in front of him, and reached for Tanner. He wanted the kid's mouth, had every intention of taking it, but not until Tanner was naked and he'd touched and petted every inch of his lover's pretty skin.

"Off." The sound of his own voice surprised Christian, coming out as little more than a growl. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Your clothes. Off." *That was better. Almost a sentence.*

He busied himself with Tanner's sweatpants, working them over thin hips and down Tanner's pale legs, content to let the kid deal with his shirt. As revved up as he was, he didn't want to chance hurting Tanner's arm in his haste to get him naked.

Hurting him in any way was the last thing Christian planned to do. He wanted to take things slow, to be gentle and make Tanner fly, but he needed release first. He'd spent too many nights lying awake yearning for Tanner to be able to maintain his patience now. His need was too strong -- his cock full and aching -- for him to be able to take things as slow as he wanted their first time together. Making love to Tanner the way he deserved, slow and sweet, would be impossible without taking the edge off.

The fact that he'd come barely an hour earlier didn't matter. That was alone, with Tanner only playing a part in his head. This was so much more...

Finally, the clothing was gone. Tanner sat on the edge of the bed, and Christian stood at its edge, nervous despite his desire. He'd seen Tanner's body before, had even gotten to touch and taste, but this felt different. Christian wasn't Tanner's john this time, and Tanner wasn't obligated to do anything.

Christian's gaze traveled over every inch of Tanner, from shoulders that narrowed into a smooth, hairless chest, pecs slightly defined and topped with taut, nickel-sized rosy nipples, above a stomach tight with muscle. Tanner's long legs were spread, framing a long, thin prick flushed rosy pink with blood. A heavy, wrinkled sac lay below, covered in short, springy blond curls. Not even the fading, yellowish bruises here and there on his creamy skin could hide Tanner's radiance.

As Christian looked his fill, he felt Tanner's gaze on him in return, his appreciation obvious in the way his green eyes darkened and his slim, red prick bobbed higher against the flat of his stomach.

"Jesus, you're beautiful."

Tanner's eyes flared, heat and something softer filling his expression. He met Christian's eyes for a moment, glancing down before he spoke. "Thank you."

Christian moved forward, his fingers tilting Tanner's chin up. "I mean it. You're beautiful. Prettiest man I've ever seen."

Tanner sneered. "Pretty, my ass."

Grinning, Christian bent down, stopping with his lips a fraction away from Tanner's. "Mmm, that too." He pressed his lips to Tanner's, taking a quick kiss, before standing back up and regarding Tanner with serious eyes. "Do we need to talk about protection?"

Tanner bit into his bottom lip. "I was tested in the hospital. I'm clean."

Christian nodded. "Me too. Tested clean for work about a month ago, and I haven't been with anyone except you in almost seven. I have papers, if you want proof."

Tanner's fingers walked up Christian's thigh. "No. I trust you."

Goosebumps appeared in the wake of Tanner's touch. A shiver skated down Christian's spine and settled in his balls. Tanner leaned the slightest bit forward and then licked his lips, causing Christian's control to snap. He fisted the base of his dick and gave it a stroke before stepping between Tanner's thighs. He carded his fingers through Tanner's hair and rubbed the swollen crown over his lips. "Tanner...suck me." The request came out as an order, though Christian would have happily begged had it gotten the results he wanted. Thankfully, begging wasn't necessary.

Tanner's lips parted and his moist, pink tongue extended to flick over the tip of Christian's cock. He tilted his head to the side, looking up at Christian through thick blond lashes and did it again. "Like this?"

Watching Tanner tease -- his tongue barely graze Christian's engorged cock with tiny fluttering licks -- was torture. "No. Harder."

Tanner tapped his tongue on the underside of Christian's crown, hitting the sensitive nerve endings. Christian's prick jerked and slapped back against Tanner's chin.

"More. Suck me."

Smirking, Tanner cupped his balls and rolled them. "What's the magic word?"

Christian growled. "You little tease. You know payback is hell, right?"

Tanner laughed and licked him from root to head, smacking his lips over the tip in a loud, wet kiss. "I'm counting on it, baby."

Smiling, Christian tightened his grip on Tanner's hair. Not enough to really hurt, but just so much that Tanner could tell how bad he was wanted. "Suck me, please."

The last word was barely out of his mouth before Tanner sucked him in and swallowed his dick to the root. Christian cried out, his eyes closing then popping back open to watch as Tanner worked his eager flesh as if were the best thing he'd ever tasted.

Fuck, it was good. "So...damn...good, Tanner."

Tanner hummed a little around his dick, his mouth vibrating against Christian's cock. Christian's hips bucked, pushing into the pleasure, begging for it. Tanner's wicked tongue darted into the slit, the tip sliding and pushing against the tiny opening and setting Christian's entire body aflame.

Christian begged and pleaded for relief, but none came. Tanner kept torturing, dragging out the grueling pleasure until Christian felt like he'd sell his soul if only he were allowed to come first. His body was on fire, his balls tight and aching to release his seed inside the wet inferno of Tanner's mouth.

Finally, blessedly, Tanner laved the slick curve of Christian's crown and swallowed him down, all the way to the base. Christian rocked his hips forward and pushed his cock deeper into that hot, tight mouth. The head of his cock butted the back of Tanner's rippling throat as he came in long, torrent gushes.

Great racking shudders passed over his body, making him tremble under the force of his orgasm. Tanner pulled off him with a pop and sat back, a self-satisfied smirk on his face.

"God, you're good at that." Christian's knees shook, threatening to give out. Before they could, he sank down on the mattress beside Tanner and pulled his lover against him. He kissed him, tasting the bitter flavor of his seed. "Thank you, pretty." Christian rolled to his side and pushed Tanner to his back. "Your turn. Put your arms over your head for me."

Tanner blinked up at him. "Huh?"

He grasped the wrist of Tanner's good arm and lifted it over his head. "Arm over your head."

Tanner lifted his other arm, stretching his torso out and lifting his chest off the bed. "Happy? Now touch me."

"In a minute."

"Now, Christian. I want to come."

Christian propped himself on one elbow. He leaned over Tanner and kissed him breathless. With a last lip-smacking kiss, he said, "Hush. It's my turn to make you feel good."

With a feather-light touch, Christian ran his fingertips over Tanner's chest and circled his nipples, watching the tiny buds pucker. He loved how responsive Tanner was to the slightest touch.

This was what he wanted, what he'd been waiting for: Tanner lying spread out on the bed, a veritable buffet of silken skin over hard and flexing muscles. His desire still ran hot, his dick never even softening after he came, but with the razor-sharp edge gone, he could take his time, work his way over Tanner's body bit by bit and savor every lick and whimper

in response to it. Tanner had been fucked enough in his life; Christian wanted to make love to him, to show him the beauty of sharing himself with someone, trusting someone else with his pleasure.

Tanner wiggled, his hips moving from side to side. "Damn it, Christian, quit treating me like I'm made of glass and touch me. I'm fucking dying down here."

He nuzzled his face into the hollow of Tanner's throat and lapped the salt from his skin. Following the lean line of Tanner's neck, Christian kissed his way up to Tanner's ear and pulled the fleshy lobe into his mouth, nipping it with the edge of his teeth.

Tanner moaned and arched his neck. His hips rocked, fucking the air and making his prick bob and dance. Unable to resist, Christian grasped Tanner's stiff cock and loosely stroked it, feeling the silky texture of his skin, the steel muscle beneath.

Tanner cried out and bucked into Christian's fist. "God, yes. More."

Christian let go of Tanner's prick and ran the pad of one finger over the glistening fluid on the tip. He spread it around, making the entire circumference of the ruddy head shine with moisture, before he lifted his finger to his mouth and licked it. Bitter sweetness flooded his mouth. "God, you taste good. Sweet." He bent down and kissed Tanner. "Makes me wonder if you taste this sweet all over."

Tanner grinned up at him, his eyes dark with need and his bottom lip swollen from the hold of his own teeth. "Mm hmm, absolutely everywhere. Just call me the candy man."

Christian chuckled, overjoyed with being able to laugh and love at the same time. Being with Tanner was a delight. "We'll have to see about that."

He kissed Tanner again, mating their lips, as he ran his hands over his shoulders, down his arms and his chest, everywhere he could reach. He stroked and played with Tanner's cock, cupped his up-drawn balls and rolled them in his palm, gently tugging the tightly wrinkled skin loose. Tanner moaned and whimpered, squirming under Christian's attention.

Christian swirled his tongue over Tanner's nipples and licked a slick path down to the inward dip of his bellybutton. He rolled, moving between Tanner's legs, and ran his tongue over the soft hair that led from navel to groin, darkening it with his saliva. The way the sparse hair matted to Tanner's toned belly made Christian picture what his come would look like splattered there as well and sent a bolt of heat to his groin.

The kid's body tensed, the muscles in his abs and thighs stiffening in anticipation. "Christian. Jesus, quit teasing me and get on with it. Please. Want you."

* * * * *

His eyelids heavy and his body overwrought with a riot of sensation, Tanner was on the verge of begging. Sucking Christian off, feeling the man come in his mouth, had almost done him in but he'd held on, wanting to feel Christian inside him when he came. Now though, he was on the verge of pleading for Christian to make him come any way he could

get. With his balls tight and his dick aching, he'd waited long enough. He wanted to come. *Now.*

Anticipation made his skin hypersensitive as he gazed down at Christian, waiting for the man to do something, to touch him before he lost his mind. "Christian. Please, God. Do *something*."

Christian winked at him and scrambled off the bed. Standing by the side, he said, "Scoot forward," and patted the mattress.

Tanner obeyed, moving forward until his ass was at the edge of the bed, his feet flat against the surface. Christian knelt between his thighs and dipped his head down. Tanner dropped his head to the bed and squeezed his eyes shut, waiting anxiously for the feel of Christian's mouth on his cock.

What he got was a long, slow lick up the center of his balls, Christian's tongue pressing down hard between his testicles and laving the firm root of his shaft where it joined his body. Whimpers filled the air as Christian lapped at his balls, taking one and then the other into his hot mouth and wetting them down as he sucked and tugged the delicate skin. Warm fingers manipulated his cock, rubbing and stroking, the touch too light to give him what he needed, before they pulled his balls up out of the way, and Christian's mouth descended on the small stretch of skin between his balls and ass. Christian licked and sucked, pressing in with the tip of his tongue, and moved steadily down until he ringed the clenched entrance to Tanner's body.

On autopilot, Tanner's hips rocked up into Christian's touch, seeking more contact with the warm, prehensile tongue trying to worm its way into his body. Every nerve seemed to go numb; his entire being centered on his ass and the way Christian's mouth played over him.

"God, Christian. Oh. *Fuck*, that's good."

The tip of Christian's tongue poked at his hole, seeking entrance, and Tanner's brain short-circuited. He jerked away, pulling his ass back from the edge at the same time he rocketed up off the bed, sitting straight up.

Christian gazed up at him, his hair wildly disheveled and his lips glistening with saliva. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Tanner slid off the edge of the bed and right into Christian's arms. He pressed their mouths together, tasting himself and Christian and everything in between. He groaned, rubbing his entire body against Christian and rose to his feet, pulling his lover with him. "Nothing's wrong. I don't want to come until you're buried balls deep inside me."

Christian groaned and kissed him, stealing his breath and making his dick pulse harder, before pulling away and staring down at him with serious, lust filled eyes. "We need things -- lube and rubbers."

"But, I thought we'd decided not to use them."

“Blow jobs are one thing; sex is another. I’ve never *not* used condoms for sex.”

“Me neither, I just thought we could...” Tanner shrugged. It wasn’t a big deal. He was probably being stupid to even think of not using them, but the idea of Christian being inside him bare was a hell of a turn on.

“I decided a long time ago there would only be one person I went bareback with.” Christian blushed and ducked his head, nuzzling Tanner’s neck. Against his ear, he whispered, “I know it’s an antiquated idea, but I can’t let go of it. Call me a bit of a romantic, but I like the thought of holding out *something* just in case I ever do find that one special someone.” A kiss was pressed to Tanner’s cheek and then Christian looked down into his eyes. “I’m not saying you aren’t special, but it’s a little soon and...”

“Hey, it’s okay. It’s kind of sweet actually.” Tanner smiled. “And I think you’re special too.” He patted Christian’s firm ass. “Go get what we need.”

“Okay. I’ll be right back.” Christian gave Tanner a quick peck on the lips and hurried from the room.

Tanner’s heart gave an odd little pitter-patter at the thought of being that special someone Christian had mentioned. They barely knew each other, but the care Christian felt toward him was obvious in every little thing he did. The looks he gave Tanner made him feel safe and...loved. It went to his head and made him think things that couldn’t be possible. You just didn’t fall for someone in the short amount of time they’d known each other. *Could you?*

Before he could finish the thought, Christian was reemerging in the doorway. Smiling, he held up a strip of condoms and a battered bottle of Astroglide. “Okay, how do you want me?”

Tanner waved at the bed. “On your back, leaning against the headboard.”

Christian’s eyes flared and then he moved to do as Tanner asked. Tanner watched Christian’s ass -- high and tight, with the sexiest little indents on the outer flanks -- as he moved, getting into place on the middle of the bed, and tried to control his breathing. God, Christian was fine. Sweet and gentle, generous to a fault, and everything Tanner had ever wanted in a man. He couldn’t wait to make love with him.

Christian settled back against the pillows, his gaze locked on Tanner as he climbed onto the bed. Christian’s attention was so intense, Tanner felt it against his skin, like a caress. Being so wanted -- even battered and bruised -- was heady. The need in Christian’s eyes went to his head faster than liquor.

Tanner crawled onto Christian’s lap and straddled him, a knee on either side of Christian’s thighs. He brushed his good hand over the steely contours of Christian’s chest, feeling the steady beat of the man’s heart against his palm. He slid his fingers around Christian’s neck and held on as he leaned in and feathered his lips against Christian’s.

Before he could get lost in Christian's kiss, he reached for the condoms lying next to Christian's hip and tore one off. He opened it with his teeth and reached between their bodies, steadying Christian's cock with the fingers of one hand, while rolling the slick latex over his shaft with the other. His fingertips brushed the plump sac beneath, and Christian groaned.

Tanner did it again. Christian was so damn quick to respond to the littlest thing, it was a power feeling being able to reduce such a strong man to moaning with so little effort. *God, this was fun.*

"Tanner. Keep that up, and we won't need the condom."

Tanner tried for a repentant look and failed, a smile peeping through the serious façade against his will. Christian grinned back at him and held up the lube. "C'mere."

Leaning forward, Tanner rested his head on Christian's shoulder and whispered in his ear, "Gonna get me ready? Stretch me all out for your fat cock?"

Christian groaned, his chest vibrating against Tanner's. "Yes. Hold on to me, baby, and tell me if I do anything that doesn't feel good."

Tanner listened to the sounds of the lube bottle popping open behind him and the wet squelch of Christian pouring it out. He latched his mouth to the strong cord of muscle where Christian's neck connected with his shoulder and busied himself with trying to pull a mark up on Christian's neck.

The first cool touch of slick fingers against his crease caused Tanner to moan. Christian's fingertips whispered over his hole and massaged the tightly clenched pucker, seeking entrance. Tanner forced himself to breathe and relax his muscles, anxious to feel some small part of Christian inside him.

The tip of a fingertip breached his hole, a slight twinge accompanying it, and Tanner bore down. Christian's finger slid inside him, all the way to the webbing. Tanner bit into his lip, stifling his cry.

This time, it was Christian who moaned. "God, you're tight."

Tanner wiggled, trying to get Christian to move. "Mm hmm. More."

"Your wish, pretty." He pumped the one finger in and out a few times and then pulled it out. Tanner whimpered at the loss and was appeased by the return of two fingers. His hole burned, Christian's large fingers massaging him from the inside out, opening him right up. Christian's arm twisted, pushing his fingers in a fraction deeper, and hit Tanner's sweet spot.

Tanner cried out and bucked, shoving his ass back against Christian's hand. "Fuck. Fuck. Now. God, I'm ready now. Fuck me."

Christian's fingers pulled free and the blunt tip of his dick brushed Tanner's needy hole. "Ready?"

"God, yes. Do it."

Christian petted Tanner's hip. "Okay. I'll hold my cock steady, so you take me in at your own pace." He leaned forward and flicked his tongue over Tanner's nipple. "Just take your time, pretty."

Tanner shoved down, impatient to feel his lover, and forced Christian's cock inside him in one fell swoop. He cried out, his channel clenching around the behemoth invader stretching his ass wide open, and squirmed. "Jesus fuck, you're huge."

Christian panted, his jaw visibly tense. "God, you're tight. Feels so good, Tanner." Christian's hips pushed up, lifting Tanner off the bed by scant inches. "Move, baby. Want you to ride me."

Tanner ground himself against Christian, giving himself a moment to stretch, and leaned forward to kiss him. His lover's lips parted like butter, his tongue plunging through the open circle of Tanner's lips. Tanner moaned, the noise swallowed up by Christian's mouth, their breath mingling as their tongues entwined and fought.

They kissed, mouths in constant motion, as Christian's hands roamed Tanner's back, fingers gently rubbed up and down his spine and pressing in, working the sore muscles loose and encouraging him to move.

With one last nip at Christian's bottom lip, Tanner pulled away. His gaze locked with Christian's, and sat up. A whimper escaped his mouth, filling the air, as Christian's fat cock abraded the sensitive lining of his channel and rubbed over the places that made him want to howl with pleasure. He dropped back down, impaling himself on Christian's cock in one smooth, hard glide, and received a grunt from Christian in return.

"God, yes, pretty. Take all of me." Christian's hands moved to Tanner's hips, bearing part of his weight and helping, as Tanner pumped his body up and down, taking Christian deep, time and again, over and over, until nothing existed but the burn in his ass and the man holding him.

"Close. So close, Christian. Please."

Christian's face nuzzled against Tanner's neck, kissing him, laving his skin with that sandpapery tongue. He reached between them and wrapped a fist around Tanner's shaft, pulling in time with every long, slick glide of his dick into Tanner's ass. "Come for me, Tanner. Let me feel you. Come on my cock, pretty."

"Fuck, yes. Touch me. Make me come, Christian. Come with me."

Tanner dropped his head back, his hair tickling the back of his neck, and rode Christian faster. He pulled up and dropped down harder, taking every inch of his lover's dick into his body and loving it. Christian's hands were all over him -- moving over his prick, petting his hip, and dipping into the crease of his ass. His fingers rubbed over where their bodies were joined, massaging the tightly stretched entrance into Tanner's body. His mouth was on move too, so hot as it nipped at one nipple and then the other, causing little bursts of fire behind the taut nubs.

God, how could his mouth be so hot, yet feel so damn good?

Tanner clenched down and used his inner muscles to squeeze Christian's prick, trying to bring his lover over the edge with him. The extra friction was a double-edged sword, pushing Tanner closer to his own release. His balls pulled tight, heavy as stones, and tried to crawl up inside his groin even as Tanner fought it, not ready for the pleasure to end.

Christian wiggled underneath him, changing the angle of his thrust, and began to peg Tanner's gland with every stroke. The hand around his dick squeezed around the tip, and that was all it took. White light exploded behind Tanner's scrunched eyelids. His climax shot up the shaft of his dick and sprayed from the tip, dousing Christian's stomach and chest in cum. Every muscle in his body locked down, his ass clenching Christian and pulling his lover over the edge of insanity along with him.

Christian grunted, Tanner's name spilling from his lips, and pushed deep, burying his dick to the hilt as he came. For long moments – whether it was the longest thirty seconds of his life or closer to an hour was unclear -- neither of them moved, holding tight to one another as they came down from the aftershocks of bliss.

Finally, Christian wiggled and his hand slipped between their groins and wrapped around the base of his softening prick. "God, I don't want to move, pretty, but I have to get rid of the condom."

Tanner pressed a lingering kiss to the side of Christian's neck and then lifted up, allowing Christian to slip from his body. He whimpered, the friction against his channel unbearably pleasurable, and rolled to his side on the bed. He watched as Christian removed the condom and tied it off, pitching it into the trash basket beside the bed, before flopping back down on his back and reaching out for Tanner.

Tanner moved into his lover's embrace and snuggled into the crook of Christian's arm. He rubbed his cheek over the crinkly hair covering Christian's chest. The thump of Christian's strong pulse under his ear was steady and comforting, lulling his eyelids to grow heavy and close.

Christian stirred. "Are you hungry? We, uh, still have the pizza. Nothing wrong with eating it cold."

"No, I'm pooped. You can go ahead, if you want."

"Maybe I should go back to my room. I don't want to roll over in my sleep and hurt you."

Always so careful to be polite. Tanner wondered what it would be like to unfurl all that tightly leashed control Christian held onto and break into the heart of the man. *Wouldn't that be something to see?* He reached across Christian, hugging him with one arm, and pressed a kiss against his collarbone. "Stay. Sleep with me."

Christian purred, his chest vibrating under Tanner's ear. "That's the best offer I've had in a long time. Think I'll take you up on it."

“Good.” Tanner slipped his hand down Christian’s chest, petting a little, before he reached Christian’s soft prick and loved on it a little with the tips of his fingers. “Wanna wake up with you in the morning, and do everything all over again.”

Christian groaned piteously, his prick twitching and firming under Tanner’s touch. “You better quit that, or we won’t be waiting until morning. I’d love to take you again right now, but I think you’ve drained me for the night.” He smiled. “You wore me out, pretty.”

Tanner laughed, happier than he’d been in a long time, and moved his hand up to rest over Christian’s heart. Nestled under the covers, warm and satiated from earlier, he could be good and wait for morning. He surely could.

Maybe he’d even wait until after round two or three before he broke the news to Christian. Making love to Christian had made one thing crystal clear. Now, more than ever, he needed to go home.

Chapter Ten

Tanner slowly crept from sleep to wakefulness, an insistent buzzing noise dragging him from slumber. He snuggled under the bedding, burrowed his face deeper into the plush pillow under his head to dull the racket, and wiggled his butt against the solid wall of firm heat pressing against him from head to toe.

Christian stirred behind him, a hand skimming over his butt cheek as the man kissed the side of his face that wasn't trying to burrow deeper into the pillow. "Just the phone, pretty. Go back to sleep. I'll get it."

Tanner grunted in response, too sleepy and comfortable to move or think up any kind of response. The mattress dipped, and cool air washed over his backside. He squirmed, trying to recapture the comfort he'd lost.

The night before flooded over him in Technicolor snatches. Making love to Christian and napping. Waking up to cold pizza and warm soda, he and Christian feeding each other slices and sating one hunger, only to reawaken another. At Christian's insistence, they moved to his bedroom, where they made love again until the hazy light of dawn crept through the blinds and lulled them to sleep.

Tanner groaned, his dick firming from the memory of Christian's hands on him, the hot look in his lover's gaze locked with his as he came. He cracked open his lids to look for the man, wondering if he could talk him into coming back to bed for a morning repeat. He'd never had morning sex -- never spent the entire night with someone to give himself the chance to -- but he liked the thought of it. So did his hard-on, currently rubbing against the sheets in search of friction.

He could hear Christian's voice, low and muffled, so he couldn't have gone far. "Christian?"

In the process of closing his cell phone, Christian waltzed out of the walk-in closet. Much to Tanner's disappointment, Christian was dressed. A belted pair of black slacks hugged his trim hips and a pale blue button up shirt hung open on either side of his sculpted chest.

"Hey, pretty." Christian sidled up to the bed and bent down to kiss Tanner. "Sorry if the phone woke you."

Tanner turned his face, offering up his cheek. When Christian straightened and gave him a curious look, he mumbled, "Morning breath," and rolled out from underneath the covers. His mouth tasted like stale cum and probably smelled twice as bad. No sense in making them both suffer with it before he brushed his teeth.

Christian gave one of his ass cheeks a pinch as he tried to scoot past him on his way into the bathroom. Tanner jumped and swatted at Christian's hand. "Ow. What was that for?"

Strong arms wrapped around him and pulled him close, Christian's large hands palming both his butt cheeks. "That was for not giving me a proper good morning. Now kiss me."

Tanner turned his head as Christian lowered his mouth. "Just let me brush my teeth first, and then you can have anything you want."

Christian squeezed Tanner's ass. "Nope. I've got you right where I want you, and I'm not letting go until I get my kiss. Unless you really don't want to?"

Tanner smiled. Such a worrier, his Christian. *His*. Man, that had a nice ring to it. "It's not that I don't want to. I don't want to kill you with my funky breath."

"As if I'd let a little morning breath stop me from kissing your sweet lips." With two gentle fingers, Christian tilted Tanner's chin and pressed their mouths together.

Tanner's lips softened and spread, happily twining his tongue with Christian's. By the time Christian pulled away, Tanner had to cling to his shoulders to hold himself upright. His morning wood ached from more than the need to piss, his balls ready to unload.

Christian rubbed his cheek against Tanner's. "Mm, that's better. Good morning, pretty." A hand trailed up and down Tanner's spine. "How'd you sleep?"

Tanner hugged Christian. "I slept like the dead. How 'bout you? I didn't kick you or drool or anything, did I? I'm not really used to sleeping with someone."

Christian grinned at him and let go, stepping back. "No, you didn't do any of that. I slept better than I have in ages." His gaze wavered a bit, as if he was nervous or something, and then he met Tanner's eyes. "In fact, I could get used to waking up next to you."

Tanner sighed. God, that was sweet. "Me too." He smiled a little as he watched Christian button up his shirt. "Now I have to go to the bathroom before I pop."

Christian glanced up. "Go on, then. I have to finish getting dressed anyway. That'd be easier without you in here tempting me to take my clothes off, instead of putting them on."

Tanner scampered into the bathroom and carefully relieved his screaming bladder. He still hadn't quite gotten the hang of aiming with the wrong hand. He flushed and turned to the sink to wash his hands, only then remembering that his stuff was down in the hall in the guest bathroom.

"Hey, Christian, you mind if I use your toothbrush?"

Christian appeared in the threshold and leaned back against the doorframe, looking sweet as sin and twice as handsome. "I don't know. You might give me boy cooties." He faked a shiver.

Tanner laughed and picked up Christian's brush, slathering it with toothpaste. "Well, I have to share them with someone. Might as well be you." He winked and started brushing. After a moment, he spit and rinsed his mouth. "So, who was that on the phone earlier?"

"Work. Something's come up at the office, and they need me to come in for a little while. Think you'll be okay hanging around here by yourself today? I wouldn't go, but..." Christian shrugged.

Tanner dropped the rinsed toothbrush back into the ceramic holder. "Course I will. You don't need to babysit me."

He squeezed past Christian and walked back into the bedroom, pretending a nonchalance he didn't feel. Maybe he was being overly sensitive and reading more into Christian's words than the man meant, but it sounded like he was afraid to leave Tanner alone in his house. As if he was some half-wit who couldn't take care of himself. Was that why Christian had been home all week?

He parked his ass on the edge of Christian's bed -- wishing he had something to put on, but recalling that the clothes he'd been wearing last night were still lying scattered over the floor of the guest room -- and plopped a pillow over his groin.

Christian sat beside him on the bed. "I know I don't need to babysit you. I just hate leaving you here. You'll probably be bored out of your mind."

This was it; the opening he needed to broach going home. All he had to do was say the words. "I, um..." So why did his throat feel clogged with cotton at the thought of going home? "Do you think you could drop me off at home on your way in to work?"

"Are you sure that's a good idea? I mean, I know you're feeling restless, but it hasn't been that long since the attack. Not to mention, we haven't even heard back from the police yet." Christian fidgeted, twisting his fingers in his lap. "I just don't want anything to happen to you."

It was the expression on Christian's face -- the genuine concern and affection shining through his eyes -- more than his words, which caused Tanner's planned speech to veer off in another, more subtle direction. "I'm sure it will be fine. It's not like I have a slew of enemies waiting outside in the bushes for their chance to pounce on me." He gave a derisive snort. "You need to have a life in order to make enemies. Besides, I really miss having my

own things. As much as I appreciate your loaning me clothes, they're just not mine, you know?"

"Say no more." Christian grasped Tanner's hand and gave it a squeeze. "How about I leave you the keys to my Navigator? Unlike the Roadster, it's an automatic, so you shouldn't have any problem driving it with your arm the way it is. That way, you can go by your house and pick up a few things, and I won't have to worry about you being stranded there all day by yourself. Sound good?"

What was he supposed to say to that? Christian was being so thoughtful. "That's sweet of you, Christian, but are you sure? That's an expensive vehicle. What if something happened, and I wrecked it? I would feel awful."

Christian rolled his eyes. "God, don't give me anything else to worry about."

"I would be really careful with it, Christian. Swear."

Christian tugged him over and kissed him. "As if I would be worried about the car if you were in accident. It's just a big hunk of metal, Tanner. Unlike you, it can be replaced. Just be careful. Okay?"

Heat suffused Tanner's face at his misunderstanding. He'd really thought that Christian was worried about the vehicle. God, he felt like a douche bag. "You bet."

Christian was so damn sweet. It was going to break Tanner's heart to leave him. The more he got to know the man, the more he liked him.

* * * * *

It'd been a long-assed day, one problem after another cropping up to frazzle his nerves. However, by the time Christian hopped into his car and hit the highway, he was floating on cloud nine. Though he'd hated having to rush from bed and leave Tanner to his own devices all day -- especially after the passionate night they'd shared -- he had one hell of a surprise in store for the kid to make up for his absence.

Between dealing with disgruntled clients and contrary contractors who'd failed to come through on time with a large restoration project one of his companies was working on, Christian had somehow scrounged together enough time to make a few phone calls of his own. His time with Tanner -- listening to the worry the kid unintentionally expressed over his financial plight -- had given Christian some ideas he wanted to explore on his own, before mentioning them to Tanner.

In the last eight hours, he'd pushed, wheedled, and forced the law firm he kept on retainer to earn their exorbitant fee. The end result -- Tanner's house free and clear of the liens previously on it -- was more than worth the effort, or it would be, as soon as Christian told him the good news. He couldn't wait to see the look on Tanner's face when he found out he no longer had to worry about paying the mortgage. For show, Christian made his lawyers fax him copies of the preliminary paperwork. The forms waiting for Tanner inside

Christian's briefcase weren't official -- there was still red tape to be cut through that no amount of money would hurry -- but the real deed would be in Tanner's hands soon enough.

As luck would have it, traffic was light. That, paired with a heavy right foot, enabled Christian to cut a thirty-minute drive down to just under twenty. He maneuvered the Roadster into the garage -- relieved to find the Navigator there as well -- and parked. He nabbed his briefcase off the passenger seat and hurried into the house, anxious to see Tanner after a long day apart. He found it a little scary how quickly the younger man had become a fixture in his life. After only a week, he felt like Tanner belonged there. He would've been freaked out by that thought -- probably should've been -- but things were going so well between them he forced the more pessimistic side of his personality into the back corner of his mind and shushed it. He didn't want to speculate on when the other shoe would drop. All he wanted was to bask in the unusual glow of happiness he felt and roll with it for a change.

The scent of tomatoes and garlic hung in air of the back hall as Christian entered the house through the garage door. He followed the aroma into the kitchen and found Tanner standing at the stove. Dressed in a plain white T-shirt and pair of faded blue jeans, the denim worn white around the pressure points, Tanner stood with his back to Christian, busily stirring something in a tall copper pot with a long-handled wooden spoon.

Tanner was cooking dinner for him -- spaghetti by the smell of it. How sweet was that?

It was almost enough to make him feel normal, as if Tanner was his partner in every sense of the word and he was coming home to him after a long workday. What he wouldn't give to come home to this, day in and day out.

Smiling at his mushy thoughts, Christian cleared his throat. Tanner jumped and cursed. He swiveled around to face Christian, the spoon still in hand, and splattered the wall with chunks of thick red marinara sauce.

"Holy shit, Christian. You scared the hell out of me." He dropped the spoon in the pot and grinned. "You should make some noise when you come home or something." He laughed. "We could buy you a cowbell."

Christian laughed, something inside him overjoyed at hearing Tanner refer to his house as their home, and weaved around the center island to pull Tanner into his arms for a kiss. Tanner tilted his face up, those grass green eyes of his staring right up at Christian, and kissed him back. What Christian had meant to be a chaste kiss turned molten as he felt Tanner's tongue flick over the closed seam of his lips. He opened his mouth, allowing his lover in, and glided his tongue alongside Tanner's in a soft and slow parry of the lovemaking he hoped would follow dinner.

The shrill cry of the stove alarm rang. Tanner jerked away. "Sorry. I have French bread in the oven." He swiped a green potholder off the counter and bent to open the oven.

Amused, Christian watched his lover, paying close attention to the way Tanner's tight little ass swayed beneath snug denim as he pulled a tray of crusty, buttered bread from the oven and set it on a wire rack on the countertop.

The scent of butter joined the stout marinara sauce and filled the air, causing Christian's mouth to salivate. Christian leaned against the counter and watched as Tanner dumped the bread into a bowl. "Everything smells wonderful, Tanner, but you didn't have to go to such an effort. After last night and then running around today, I know you must be tired. We could have just ordered out or something."

Tanner leaned up on tiptoe, reaching past Christian's head for the plates and pressed a quick kiss to Christian's chin, before walking back over to the stove. "I'm good. Besides, you've been so good to me that I wanted to do something nice for you."

"I know and, believe me, it's appreciated. I can't remember the last time I ate anything that wasn't nuked or store bought, but your body's still recuperating from the attack. You should be taking it easy, not trying to do so much."

"Nag, nag, nag." Tanner leaned forward and turned off the stove. "You know, if my ass wasn't so sore, I would swear you were a woman by the way you worry and lecture." Tanner smiled, taking the sting out of his words, but Christian noticed that the expression didn't quite reach his eyes. He mentally chastised himself for fretting and made a note to lay off. Tanner was a big boy; he could take care of himself.

"Was that a hint that you want top tonight, pretty? You can if you want, you know? It's not my favorite thing in the world, but I'm not an asshole." Christian quipped, trying to change the subject to something more pleasant.

Tanner turned to the stove and began piling their plates with spaghetti, but not before Christian noticed the red flush to his cheeks. "Um, yeah, well... The thing is, I've never really topped before." He darted a glance at Christian over his shoulder. "We could try it though, sometime, if you really want to."

Christian thought Tanner's blush was about as cute as anything he'd ever seen. He was tempted to tease his lover, but decided he'd better behave. "How about I just leave that in your hands? You can tell me if you ever want to give it a shot. Okay?"

Tanner shoved two plates heaped with pasta into Christian's hands, one at a time. "Sure. If you would you carry these into the dining room, I'll grab the bread. I already sat our drinks on the table. I hope iced tea is okay. I would have bought wine or something, but I don't turn twenty-one for a few months yet." He shrugged.

The reminder of how young Tanner was made Christian feel like he was robbing the cradle. Trickle of doubt slipped through the wall he'd erected, whispering that maybe starting a relationship with someone so much younger wasn't such a good idea.

He gave himself a mental shake. *Not going to go there.* Things would either work out or they wouldn't. Either way, ending a relationship with the potential to be the best thing that had ever happened to him, over something as paltry as a twelve-year age gap would be ludicrous.

Christian carried the plates into the connected dining room and saw that Tanner had set out a glass pitcher of tea and two tall glasses on one end of the long, mahogany table,

along with a crystal vase filled with wildflowers. He recognized them as the same species planted in Tanner's front yard, and thought it was sweet the kid had actually picked flowers for the table. Two, unlit white pillar candles in matching crystal holders framed the flowers. Christian knew the crystal set was his, but he couldn't remember the last time he'd used them, if ever. Tanner must have done some real digging because only God knew where he'd had them stashed. He'd forgotten he even owned them.

He set the plates down and looked around for something to light the candles with. He came up empty-handed. Short of going back into the kitchen -- which Tanner would probably misinterpret as nervous hovering -- there was only one way he could think of to light them. He placed his hands over the candles and narrowed all his concentration into his palm chakras. A single tingle at the back of his mind -- the same sort of feeling one gets with a bout of really strong *déjà vu* -- and the candles burst to life, tiny flames engulfing the short black wicks.

He exhaled and pulled out a chair. Hindsight chimed in a moment too late to tell him what a dumbass risk he'd taken by using his ability to light the candles when Tanner could've walked in and caught him. He sat, though he was tempted to go back into the kitchen and see what was keeping Tanner. He wanted to offer to carry the bread in, but was smart enough to keep his mouth shut and his butt in the chair. After all the work Tanner had gone to making a special dinner for them, he didn't want to do anything to rock the boat and kill the mood his lover was trying to set for whatever reason. He was just thankful he finally had someone in his life who wanted to go to such an effort for him.

Tanner walked in -- the basket of bread and a green jar of parmesan cheese balanced precariously between his good arm and chest -- as Christian was pouring them both a glass of tea. Christian took the items from him and set them in the middle of the table. "You should have hollered. I would have come back in and helped."

Tanner dropped onto the chair beside Christian. "It's okay; I managed. I just forgot that I needed to carry the cheese in too. The pasta isn't as good without it."

Christian waited until Tanner had covered his pasta in an avalanche of white before winding noodles with his fork and taking the first bite. He closed his eyes and moaned, the flavor of tomatoes and spices bursting over his taste buds.

Opening his eyes to scoop up another mouthful, Christian caught the smirk on Tanner's face. "It's really good, pretty. I didn't know you could cook."

Tanner swallowed the food in his mouth. "Oh, yeah. After Mom passed away, it was either learn or be forced to eat Dad's chili every night. It was the only thing he could throw together that didn't come out of a microwavable tray."

Christian laughed. "I'm not much better as I'm sure you noticed over the last week. Cooking for one person is almost impossible, unless you really like leftovers. I can't stand them, so I usually just stick to the microwave or order out most of the time."

"And here I thought you just really liked hamburgers."

“Smart ass.”

Tanner took a sip of tea and set his glass down. “You’re not complaining about my ass already, are you?”

An inopportune burst of laughter caused Christian to choke on his food. “Jesus, I almost killed myself on that bite. You’re something else, you know that?”

“You know you love me.” Tanner winked and then seemed to realize what he’d said. He blushed and filled his mouth a huge chunk of French bread.

Silence stretched between them as they ate, the tension palpable. Christian tried to think of something to say to diffuse Tanner’s comment. “So, how was your day? What did you do while I was being tortured by snarky clients?”

Tanner grinned around his fork. He put his hand over his mouth and spoke with his mouth full. “Snarky clients, huh?”

“Oh, yeah, but I’m much more interested in hearing about your day. I’ll just bore you to tears with mine.”

“Well, since you asked, I didn’t do much. Went home, checked my messages then stopped by the grocery store on the way home. There was an interesting message on my machine from that snooty officer I met at the hospital. They found my car, or rather, what was left of it. Apparently, it was driven off the side of a high ravine and was lodged at the bottom of the lake. They found it by accident, while they were dragging the lake to search for some fisherman that went missing over the weekend. He said unless I remember something, or a witness comes forward with information, which is damn doubtful, they’re at an impasse.”

Christian scowled. The thought of the degenerates that had attacked Tanner getting away scot-free was enough to make his blood boil. “That fucking sucks. Couldn’t they get fingerprints or something from the car?”

Tanner snorted. “You’d think so, as much fancy forensics as you see them doing on TV, but he said the water washed away any trace evidence that would’ve been inside. Just my luck.” He put down his fork. “The good news is, now that they’ve found it, I can turn it in to my insurance. The Mazda wasn’t worth much, but I might be able to buy another junker with what I get back. As long as it has four wheels and runs, I’m not that picky.”

“Well, you’re welcome to use the Navigator until you get something worked out. I don’t really drive it that much.”

“I appreciate it, but I’ll be glad when I can get something of my own back on the road, you know?”

“Sure.” Christian pushed his plate away. “God, I’m stuffed. Thanks for dinner, Tanner. It really was good. I think I ate my weight in spaghetti.”

"Thanks. I like cooking, though it's been a while since I made anything like this. Groceries are usually the last thing I splurge on. It's unbelievable how much food can cost, if you want to cook something nice."

Christian had never really thought it about it that way. Having money, he just went out and bought whatever he wanted. He knew Tanner was in dire straits, but...*Jesus*. Tanner buying dinner, when he so obviously needed the money for other things, made Christian feel like a tool.

Instantly, he was concerned about whether or not the Navigator had had gas in it that morning. He couldn't remember. The SUV sucked gas like it was water and had a huge tank; the cost of filling it up wasn't cheap. He wanted to ask, to offer to reimburse Tanner if it hadn't, but knew that would make the kid feel bad, so he stayed silent.

Maybe now would be a good time to broach the mortgage. He was itching to tell Tanner what he'd done and could already imagine the way his eyes would light up like a little kid on Christmas morning. More than anything, Christian just wanted to be the one to make Tanner happy. He knew removing the mountain of debt from his young lover's shoulders would go a long way toward making that goal happen.

Christian took a long, deep breath and slowly let it out before he stood and retrieved his briefcase. He set it on the table in front of his seat and popped the lock. "I had some time to think today -- about us and the situation you're in and I --"

"Me too." Tanner interrupted. "I haven't been able to think about anything else for a while now, and after last night, I really think we should talk. I mean, just because I need to go home, doesn't mean I want to stop seeing you. I'll be pretty busy looking for a new job and stuff, but there's no reason we couldn't go out on the weekends or something." Tanner frowned. "Unless, I have to work on the weekends too."

Christian wrinkled his brow, unable to believe what he was hearing. He should have expected this, but he'd let his stupid fucking heart hope for something it would never have. He should have been smart enough to know Tanner would want to go home the first chance he got, but the thought had never even occurred to him. The dinner Tanner had cooked for him was meant as a good-bye gift. He'd read so much more into it that he'd practically had them standing in front of the minister and saying vows of commitment.

The bitter disappointment he felt was his own fault. There was no reason to take out his anger at himself on Tanner, who was just trying to be honest with him. After carefully schooling his features into a calm mask of resignation, Christian looked up from his hands and met Tanner's eyes. "So, when are you going home?"

"Tonight, I guess. There's no reason to put it off, and I really need to get back into the swing of things. It's not like I haven't enjoyed spending time with you, or that I don't appreciate everything you've done for me. I really do, Christian. You have no idea how much. But I have bills to pay and responsibilities that aren't going to wait while I take a vacation from life to play house with you."

Play house? Here he was, in the middle of falling for the kid, and Tanner thought they were playing house. He tried not to be hurt -- to look at things from Tanner's point of view and act like a reasonable adult -- but the tight fist squeezing his rib cage made that hard.

"Sure, Tanner. I understand." Christian was proud of the steady timbre of his voice. It didn't waver in the slightest. That felt like a hell of an accomplishment at the moment.

"Great. I'm so glad you understand. I was worried... Well, that's not really important. I'm just thankful you get what I'm trying to say." Tanner smiled at him, his entire face lighting up, and that somehow made Christian feel worse. "So, you said you had something you wanted to talk about too, right? What is it?"

Christian swallowed over the lump in his throat. "Right." *The mortgage*, how could he have forgotten that so quickly?

He popped open his briefcase and removed the papers. He closed it with a snap and looked over the cover page -- recalling how excited he'd been at the prospect of giving the forms to Tanner -- and his guts clenched in misery. Sweat beaded on his brow, his internal temperature spiking as his emotions tried to twist and pull his curse to the surface.

He picked up his glass and gulped the icy contents in one swallow, trying to cool himself. He slammed the glass down -- absently noting that the ice cubes had all but melted from the heat of his palm around the cup -- and leaned forward to pick up the pitcher, refilling his glass to the brim.

Tanner crooked an eyebrow. "Are you okay? You look a little flushed. You're not upset are you?"

"No. I'm fine." Christian swallowed another cup of cool, refreshing liquid before the immense ball of heat in his stomach dissipated. He breathed a sigh of relief and picked up the paperwork that had fallen to the tabletop in his haste to drink. "While I was thinking about things today, I decided to do something nice for you. I hope you appreciate all the hard work my lawyers went to in order to make this happen on such short notice."

Tanner's forehead wrinkled. "Uh, okay..."

Okay, so that came out more snarky than he'd intended, but damn it, he felt entitled to be a little bitchy.

There was no reason he couldn't still do something good for the kid, even if he didn't particularly feel being nice at the moment. After all, he'd paid off the house to make Tanner happy. Just because they weren't going to be lovers in the way he'd hoped for didn't make his intentions any less true.

If anything, he should probably thank Tanner for reminding him that dreams were for children who hadn't yet learned the meaning of a hard-knock life. Flights of the imagination weren't for the likes of him. He had worked too hard to distance himself from sloppy emotions to be pulled under by them now. He was stronger than that -- he had to be.

Suspicion clouded Tanner's eyes as Christian thrust the papers at him, careful to avoid being touched as he reached out to take them.

He held his breath, waiting for Tanner's response.

Chapter Eleven

Tanner accepted the papers Christian handed him, ignoring them for a moment in favor of studying his lover. Christian was obviously upset -- trying his damndest not to show it, but failing miserably. Tanner wasn't sure what to say to smooth things over. Everything that came out of his mouth ended up making him sound like more of an ass. He wasn't sure what Christian wanted from him. Was he supposed to give up his entire life and trail after the man like a puppy?

Finally, he gave up trying to read Christian and glanced at the papers. He had to scan them twice before what he was reading dawned on him. The boy desperate to be taken care of was overjoyed, while the man stiffened in disbelief. Was it even legal for someone to pay off a loan of that size when their name wasn't on the lien?

He glanced up and found Christian watching him, a curious flush across his cheekbones, like he'd been sitting out in the sun for too long. Odd, considering it wasn't all that hot in the house.

Tanner cleared his throat. "Christian, this is really nice, thoughtful, but I can't let you do this. That's way too much money for me to feel comfortable owing anyone other than the bank."

"It's a gift, pre-- Tanner. You don't owe me anything."

Tanner noticed the switch from pet name back to his real one, but chose to ignore it. "Still, I don't feel right letting you do this."

"It's done." Christian pushed his chair back and stood. "Live with it." He walked from the room, while Tanner gaped at him like a fish from water.

Live with it? What the fuck was that supposed to mean? Tanner stood, knocking his chair over in his rush to catch up with Christian. He found him in the kitchen, standing in front of the open freezer door as if he were searching for something else to eat.

"Excuse me, Mr. High-and-Mighty, what the hell does 'live with it' mean? And why are you searching through the freezer? You can't possibly still be hungry. We just ate."

"Just say thank you and leave me alone, Tanner. What's done is done."

The lofty tone of Christian's voice rattled Tanner's nerves. "Would you mind telling me what crawled up your ass and died? I appreciate the offer, Christian, but I'm not going to be indebted to you or anyone else for this much money. Tell me you can stop the payment before it goes through. I don't want your money."

Christian whipped around and stared at him, his nostrils flaring and his eyes fiery. "Then what do you want from me?"

"Nothing. Not this. Fuck, I don't know, but you can't buy me. I'm not for sale." His voice lowered. "Not anymore." He waited, fist clenched to punch Christian in his damn face if he so much as made one comment about his former profession.

"I'm not trying to buy you. I thought --" Christian's jaw clenched, and he started over. "Apparently there were some wires crossed between us last night while you were crawling all over me. I misguidedly thought you wanted something more than a casual fuck." He slammed the freezer door.

"Fuck you."

"You already did, but thanks for the offer. I'm not interested in being one in a long line of stiff cocks for you to ride."

The fingernails on Tanner's good hand dug into his palm and stung as he stared at Christian and tried to hold on to his temper. He didn't know who the asshole in front of him was, but he didn't resemble the sweet man Tanner had come to know over the last week. The Jekyll and Hyde routine was throwing him for a flip.

"What? Nothing to say?"

"Not when you're going out of your way to be such an asshole. What the fuck is your problem?"

"I don't have a problem." Christian squeezed his eyes shut. A pained expression crossed his features before he opened his eyes and focused on Tanner. "You wanted to leave. Leave."

Tanner lifted his hand, reaching out for Christian before he even realized his intent. "Christian, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to --"

Christian held up a hand, palm out, and stepped back out of range. "Save your excuses. I'm in no mood to listen."

Static electricity filled the air, and something made a loud snapping noise. Tanner looked across the room in time to see sparks shoot from the chrome toaster. The embers blew up and out, neon red exploding in tiny bursts of color.

Tanner jumped. "Holy shit." He opened his mouth, ready to warn Christian -- who stood not two feet from the sparks -- to move before he got burned. Christian glared at him, not saying a word, and reached through the sparks to pull the plug from the wall. As his

fingers wrapped around the cord, a flame shot from inside the toaster and came precariously close to searing Christian's forearm.

Tanner bounced on the balls of his feet, his nerves getting the better of him. "Christian. Be careful! You'll burn yourself."

Christian remained silent, almost seemed to take his time as he pulled his arm away from the fire and bent to open one of the cabinets beneath the sink. He pulled out a fire extinguisher, aimed the nozzle at the toaster and covered it in white foam. When it was clear the fire was out, Christian stepped over to the sink and turned on the tap. With one hand braced on the rim of the counter, he slumped over it and stuck his arm under the flow of cold water.

Tanner moved toward him, glancing around Christian to see a big circular burn in the middle of his arm, the skin red and blistered. "Jesus, are you okay? What the hell was that -- a short in the wiring or something?"

Christian turned off the water and dried his arm off with a clean dishtowel. "Just leave me the hell alone, and get out. I don't need you." His voice lowered as he turned away and began to mop up the foam around the defunct toaster, the whispered words barely audible. "I don't need anyone."

Tanner bit into his bottom lip, at a loss for what he should do. Christian seemed dead-set on making him leave right then, so maybe that was what he needed to do. They could always hash out the mortgage issue later. There was no way he was going to let that drop. Tanner O'Bannon was no one's charity case.

* * * * *

His eyes brimming with tears he refused to shed, Christian faced the counter long after the front door slammed. He listened for the taxi he'd overheard Tanner call and waited until the engine droned away in the distance before daring to move. The first thing he did was grab a paper towel to blot the moisture from his eyes. The second was clean up the mess he'd made. Foam covered the scorched countertop, bits of it already drying against the granite in odd circular formations. He scrubbed until the surface shined, his weary reflection staring back at him accusingly.

Fuck.

He'd thought he would lose his mind when Tanner had tried to let him down easy, making excuses for why they wouldn't be able to see each other after he left. *Unless I have to work on the weekends* indeed. Christian knew a blow-off when he heard one. And then when Tanner had tried to apologize -- God, he'd felt like he was going to blow a gasket. The thin filaments of his control had snapped like dry twigs. The fried toaster had paid the price which brought home how careless he'd been to put aside his fears. He knew better, had

always known he was doomed to spend his life alone thanks to his unstable abilities. Yet he'd let his emotions cloud that knowledge in an effort to appease his desire to be with Tanner.

As if Tanner would want to be with a freak like him. The kid had left easily enough without knowing the truth about him; he certainly would've bolted at the first discovery of Christian's ability anyway.

He finished scrubbing the countertop and dropped the soapy scouring pad into the sink. He crossed the room and stood on the threshold of the dining room, his arms folded across his chest, surveying the cluttered table where everything had gone to hell. Unable to imagine ever being able to use the dishes and settings again without remembering the evening, Christian was tempted to swipe the entire assortment into the trash.

Instead, he decided to ignore the mess until he'd had time to cool down. He didn't feel like putting things back to right when everything else still felt as if it were up in the air, hovering overhead and waiting on him to make some kind of decision. Though he was unsure precisely what it was he needed to consider. It wasn't as if he had some grand plan to rush after Tanner and beg him to come home. That would be absurd.

Harsh words had been spoken, feelings hurt, and anyway, what good would it do, even if he could talk Tanner into coming back? It was better for the kid to walk away thinking of him as an asshole than the emotional train wreck he truly was. Since he wouldn't have Tanner to hold, Christian wanted to at least be able to hang onto his dignity. He didn't think that was asking for too much.

As he deliberated, thoughts circling around in his head like a maddening merry-go-round, Christian paced through the house. Up and down the stairs. Through the foyer and past the front door. Back and forth in the upstairs hall and past the guestroom, where he'd foolishly believed making love with Tanner had signified more than the means to an orgasm. Clearly, it meant more to him than it had to Tanner.

Asshole.

Cute, stubborn, proud, scrupulous little asshole.

Fuck. Who was he trying to kid? He was already in love with Tanner. So deeply ensnared, he'd never be able to untangle the threads of tender emotion wrapped around his stubborn heart. His stupid emotions had woven him into a hopeless mess he couldn't see any way out of.

Christian entered the room and sank down on the edge of the bed. He plucked a pillow -- the outline of Tanner's head still imprinted in the fabric -- and hugged it to his chest. The musk of Tanner's skin wafted under his nose, causing something inside his chest to clench painfully.

What the hell was he going to do now? He'd fucked things up royally; trying to step in and play the hero -- damaging Tanner's pride in the process -- and alienated the only man he'd ever really loved.

No way would Tanner ever forgive him for the horrible things he'd said. On the very slim chance he would even consider trying to work things out, their relationship would be contingent on Christian's being open and honest about who and what he was. Dare he confess his secret to Tanner and open himself up to the incredulity and rejection that would surely follow?

Why did everything have to be so fucking complicated?

Christian groaned and buried his face in the pillow, taking deep breaths of Tanner's scent. He knew what he wanted -- needed it more than his next breath of fresh air. He simply wasn't sure whether or not he was willing to risk Tanner's safety over his own happiness.

Chapter Twelve

Tanner entered his house and slammed the door shut behind him, taking way too much pleasure in the resulting bang. He'd waited a long time for the cab outside Christian's place. The entire time he'd hoped Christian would come out and apologize or curse him or something. Even saying good-bye would have been enough. He hadn't so much as cracked a curtain and peeked out the window. Tanner knew, because he'd watched, waiting to see if Christian would give him the slightest reason to stay and talk things out.

He hurried through the living room and into the kitchen, headed straight for the fifth of vodka he'd stashed in the fridge. Though he may not have been quite old enough to buy his own hooch, it wasn't all that hard to con someone else into buying it for him if he hung around outside the liquor store long enough. This bottle had been sitting in the freezer for a while, unopened and waiting for just the right pity party. Now -- when he was so damn confused about absolutely everything -- seemed like the perfect time to get hammered. Anything to rid his mind of the sad visage of Christian's face as he'd turned away from him.

He cracked the seal on the bottle -- not an easy task when he had to use one hand and his teeth to pry it open. Turning it up, he gulped down a huge swallow. He grimaced at the bitter taste as the nasty liquid slid down his gullet and hit his stomach with a one-two punch of burning heat. Too many drinks of that size and he wouldn't have to worry about obsessing over Christian. He'd be unconscious. That was a nice goal to aim for.

He wasn't sure what kind of response he'd expected from Christian in regard to his need to move back home, but the temper tantrum he'd gotten sure as shit wasn't it. And the deal with the mortgage, what was that about? *As if he couldn't take care of himself.* He didn't need some sugar daddy to come to the rescue and save him from the bank. That was just fucking ridiculous.

Nice thought though, not having to work his fingers to the bone for the next who-knew-how-many years. It would've been so easy to give in and let Christian take over the burden of his life, but he couldn't do that. If he was going to be in a relationship, it would have to be fifty-fifty. Never again would he let himself become someone who'd be bought or sold like a toy. Not that he really thought that was what Christian was trying to do, but he'd opened his big mouth and the words had just flown out. Leave it to him to fuck things up with a few poorly chosen words.

Bottle in hand, Tanner ambled back into the living room and dropped down on the sofa. He propped his feet up on the coffee table and took another sip of vodka.

The things Christian had said bubbled up in his mind, but he shut them down before the whole, sordid fight could replay. There was no sense in torturing himself.

He liked Christian -- more than liked him, if he were being honest with himself. Christian was kind and sweet, hot as hell, and apparently as insecure as a prepubescent girl on the first day of junior high. Why else would he jump to the conclusion that he was being dumped, when all Tanner had meant was he needed to get back to life as he knew it? Casting Christian aside had never entered his mind. Sure, it would be a little harder to make time for each other when he went back to work, but that was a fact of life.

Just because he valued his independence didn't mean he didn't want Christian. It was simply that he'd been raised to believe men took care of themselves. They didn't accept charity, and they didn't allow others to fight their battles for them. He wanted to share his life with someone, not give it over to their control. If Christian wanted to be that someone -- even after their fight, Tanner hoped he did -- then he needed to understand. While he could appreciate that Christian wanted to help him, his pride wouldn't let him accept it. He wanted Christian to be his friend and lover, not his sugar daddy.

The shrill ring of the telephone jarred him out his thoughts and made him jump. Tanner cursed and got up, swaying ever so slightly from side to side, as he made his way across the room to the phone. He glanced at the caller ID, squinting to read the little numbers, and realized it was Christian calling. His fingers shook as he reached for the handset.

Tanner had already decided to forgive him -- people said things they didn't mean when they were upset -- but he thought it might be more fun if he kept that to himself. Maybe make Christian beg a little -- preferably on his knees -- before he told him all was forgiven.

He clicked the talk button and brought the phone to his ear. "Hello."

As Christian's voice came through the phone, something smashed into the back of his head. Tanner hit the floor, darkness clouding his vision. The last thing he heard was the sound of Christian's voice echoing "hello" over and over again.

When consciousness returned, Tanner found himself tied to a high-backed, armless kitchen chair. Disoriented, he wondered what a kitchen chair was doing upstairs in his bedroom. Then the fact that he was tied to it sank in, a bright yellow nylon rope stretched

tight across his chest, and he started to thrash, trying to break free. All he managed to do was hurt himself. His arm protested at the vigorous strain and his head throbbed like someone was driving hot poker straight through his temples.

"I see you're finally awake, pretty boy. I was beginning to worry I'd already killed you with that lamp to the head. That would have been disappointing finale after all the stress you've put me through the last couple of weeks."

Tanner jerked his head up, his vision wavering as pain lanced through his skull. He blinked, staring up at the man towering above him. "Nigel? What the hell are you doing? Untie me."

Nigel threw his bald head back and laughed, the amused expression on his face slowly morphing into scorn as the chuckles faded. "I don't think so, not after all the trouble you're caused me."

Tanner's mind spun, trying to come up with any reason Nigel would have to hate him so much. He drew a blank. "I don't know what the hell you're talking about. Why are you doing this?"

Nigel sneered, his nose wrinkled and gave his chubby face a piggish cast. "Don't ask me stupid questions. You know why you're here." He stooped by the door and picked up a red container with a yellow spout.

Gas can. Oh fuck.

"Listen, Nigel, buddy, I don't know what you're talking about -- honest -- but I'm sure I can fix it if you'd just give me a chance. There's no reason you have to..." Fear clogged his throat as Nigel uncorked the spout of the gas can and tipped it, spilling the flammable fluid over the toes of his sneakers. He tried kicking out at the man, but Nigel only laughed and sidestepped around his flailing feet.

"I don't think so, boy. You see, I let you into my fold, gave you a job when you needed it. And how do you repay my generosity?" Nigel's beady brown eyes flashed. He reared back his hand and slapped Tanner across the face. "You go to the fucking cops!"

The impact to his cheek jarred Tanner's head back and made his eye feel like it was going to explode out of its socket. Tears sprouted behind his eyes. He blinked to clear his vision and felt moisture slide down his face. "I didn't, Nigel. I never told anyone about your business, not even after I was attacked. They wanted to know why I was out that night, but I kept my mouth shut. I swear it."

"Liar!" Nigel slapped him again, this time from the other side.

Pain ricocheted in Tanner's skull, and the taste of blood filled his mouth. Bile crept up the back of his throat, his stomach threatening to unload its contents. "Fuck. Stop. Please stop. I didn't tell the cops anything about you. Not a word."

Nigel's eyes narrowed. "At least have the balls to admit what you've done, you sniveling coward. One of my boys saw you talking to a cop over three weeks ago. The pig came right up to your front door and knocked, all chummy-like."

Three weeks ago? Think, Tanner, think. With a blast of recollection, Tanner realized what Nigel was referring to. "No! You've got it all wrong. Dan, that's the officer's name, he came to the house to collect a debt my father owed him. I haven't told anyone anything you or your business. I swear, Nigel." His voice caught on the last word, growing thick. "Please, don't do this."

"Be that as it may, it's too late to turn back now." Nigel shook his head. "It's a shame you have to die. You were one of my best sellers." Nigel began to back toward the door, pouring a line of fuel in his wake. "You should have died like a good boy out on the highway, instead of making me dirty my own hands with your death. It would've been a much easier way to go." He stepped into the hallway.

Tanner struggled with his binds. "Stop! Wait, Nigel. You can't do this. Someone will find out and come looking for you."

"Watch me." The door slammed shut with a bang, the finality of that loud noise putting the fear of God into Tanner's soul.

"Nigel," Tanner screamed, tugging at his bonds. "Get your ass back in here and let me go!" Silence met his cries. "They'll fry you for this, you fuckin' bastard!" The ropes didn't give an inch. With every movement, the knots against his abdomen bit into his chest through the thin shirt he wore and abraded his skin.

Fuck. Tanner fought harder against his bindings, making the chair wobble from side to side. It tipped over, slamming Tanner onto his side. He landed on his fractured arm and screamed as sharp, agonizing pain shot through his body.

As he lay there -- panting and trying to staunch the upward flow of puke rising in his esophagus -- Tanner knew he didn't want to die. There were so many things he'd never done. Experiencing love, however, wasn't one of them. If he hadn't been so fucking scared of dying, he would've laughed at how unimportant and stupid his argument with Christian now seemed.

* * * * *

Christian pulled up outside of Tanner house and killed the engine. He flipped off his headlights and let darkness slip into the car in an effort to try and soothe his jangled nerves. He wasn't sure why he'd come here after the way Tanner had hung up on him when he'd called, but he hadn't been able to stay away. His conscience wouldn't let him rest until he told the kid he was sorry and tried to explain why he'd acted like such an ass. Putting that into words wasn't going to be easy when he didn't completely understand it himself, but he felt like he had to try. Having the door slammed in his face as soon as he knocked wouldn't

surprise him, nor could he blame Tanner for doing it. As big a fool as he'd made of himself, he deserved whatever penitence the kid heaped on him.

Christian slipped from the car and started up the walk. Shadows loomed, distorting the area and making the lights inside Tanner's house glow an eerie red color. If he didn't know better, he could've sworn...

Furtive movement at the side of the house caught Christian's attention and brought his thoughts to a standstill. At first he thought it might be Tanner, but then he realized the kid wouldn't be lurking around outside of his house in the dark. A tingle of dread skated down Christian's spine and he quickened his pace.

The windows along the side of the building exploded outward in a hail of glass. Bright orange flames flew out in the wake of the glass and licked at the edges of the empty window casings. Fifty feet from the house, Christian jerked to a halt, unable to believe his eyes.

A blast of localized heat spilled from the house in waves. Christian's body answered; his temperature rocketed skyward then plummeted, leaving him covered in cold sweat. He sprinted toward the house, screaming Tanner's name.

As he jumped the porch steps, he heard someone shout at him and turned, hoping to find Tanner behind him. Instead, he saw an older gentleman in a blue housecoat come running out of the house next door.

"Hey! Don't go in there, Mister. I just called the fire department. They'll be here in a minute."

Christian ignored the man's warning and reached for the door handle. No way was he going to wait on backup when Tanner could be trapped inside. He didn't know how or why, but he was sure he was to blame for the fire ravaging Tanner's home. This was his fault, his price to pay for trying to find happiness. He had to get to Tanner, to save him before the kid paid for Christian's sins. He'd gladly lay down his own life in exchange for Tanner's, if only he could reach him in time.

The knob didn't budge. Panicked at the thought of Tanner being trapped inside, Christian stepped back and rammed his shoulder into the door with all his strength. The wood creaked and gave, flying inward and taking Christian with it. His momentum carried him forward into an inferno of smoke and fire. He slapped his side against the hardwood flooring. Flames leaped and bit at his clothing.

Gut instinct caused Christian to swat at his clothes, trying to put out the flames. After a moment of alarm, he reached down inside himself and pushed out with his mind, creating a halo of clear space around him. Flames danced around the edges, flickering and retreating as they tested the bonds of his safety zone. Noxious gas burned Christian's eyes and nose and made his vision waver.

Toward the back, a ghastly orange-yellow specter of fire lit up the back end of the house. A growing path of blue tinged flames crawled along the floor and up the stairway, explaining the sudden explosion and warning Christian that a strong accelerant -- gas or

kerosene, most likely -- had been used to start the blaze. Until it burned itself out, he wouldn't be able to stop the fire. As long as it was fed by a steady source of fuel and oxygen, he had no hope of taming it. It would take all his strength and concentration just to clear a path to keep himself from being burned alive while he hunted for Tanner.

Ignoring the cry of his hurt shoulder, Christian jumped to his feet and screamed for Tanner. The crackle and hiss of the flames was the only sound that greeted him. He pulled his shirt up over his mouth to prevent as much smoke inhalation as he could and moved toward the stairs.

He followed the trail of gasoline up the stairs and bypassed it at the top of the landing. There he noticed the fuel path had been laid out on top of the oriental hallway runner. It seemed to veer off halfway down the hall and enter a closed door to his right. He was confident he would find Tanner in that room.

Before he could give in to his desire to rush to his lover's aide, he needed to assure himself that the fire wouldn't continue its path into that room. He bent and tugged at the rug, knocking over a small side-table and lamp in the process, and flung the runner down the stairs. The fuel would burn itself out on the stairs, giving Christian more control over the blaze, but they would have to find another way out of the house.

He screamed for Tanner, praying for his lover to answer him, and sprinted toward the room. If he was wrong, and Tanner wasn't upstairs, if he'd been anywhere near the room the original explosion had begun in... Christian shook his head, unwilling to even consider that line of thought. He would find Tanner and get him them both to safety; he wouldn't accept anything less.

Chapter Thirteen

Moments after the explosion, the room Tanner was in began to fill with smoke. He toed off his fuel-soaked sneakers and dragged himself across the room, as far from the pool of gasoline as he could manage. He screamed for help, each yell coming out as little more than a squeak before he started to cough. Though smoke rose and he was lying on the floor, his nose and eyes burned and his throat was raw from the simple act of breathing.

At one point, Tanner could have sworn he heard someone calling his name, but he knew it was wishful thinking. He figured lack of oxygen was making him hallucinate. No one was coming for him. He was going to die, trapped inside a burning house, just like his father.

A litany of prayers silently passed his lips. Most of all, he prayed to live long enough to tell Christian how he felt about him. The little things -- money, pride, and petty insecurities -- all of them slipped away in the face of death.

In an attempt to curb the amount of smoke he inhaled, Tanner gripped the edges of the bedspread with his teeth and pulled it, inch by inch, off the bed and burrowed his face into the plush material. The piled cotton lining tickled his nose and made him sneeze, but it was preferable to the alternative. The chances of one of his nosy neighbors calling the fire department was good, so he figured all he needed to do was hang on long enough for the cavalry to arrive. Assuming all of his neighbors weren't on vacation the one time he actually needed them to have their noses pressed to their windows. *Wouldn't that just be his luck?*

The bedroom door burst open and crashed into the wall. Tanner flinched, knowing it was too soon for any help to be there, and tried to burrow deeper under the cover. Tied to the chair, it was a useless attempt. If Nigel had changed his mind and come back to finish him off, there wasn't anything he could do to stop the man from following through with it. He was shit out of luck.

Heavy footsteps pounded on the floor, growing closer. "Tanner!"

"Christian?" Tanner burst into another bout of coughing and whimpered as pain wracked his lungs. He struggled to untangle himself from the blanket, unwilling to believe what he was hearing until he could see.

The blanket was yanked away, leaving him to blink up at Christian. The man kneeled beside him, his handsome features clouded by a swirling fog of smoke. "God, Christian, what are you doing here? I thought I'd never see you again. I'm so damn sorry, baby. I --" he wheezed.

Christian laid a finger over his lips to hush him. "Shh, pretty. I'm sorry too. Now, save your breath." Strong fingers feathered over Tanner's swollen eye. "Jesus, your poor eye is turning purple." He leaned in and kissed Tanner on the forehead, his lips only lingering for a second before he pulled away and began to tug at the ropes binding Tanner's arms. "First, I'm going to get you out of here. Then I want you to tell me what the fuck is going on. Seeing those windows explode -- knowing you were in here -- shaved ten years off my life."

The rope gave a sharp jerk, making Tanner wince, and then his arms were free. Christian shoved at the chair, knocking it away from him, and helped Tanner sit up against the side of the bed. "Where's the bathroom, pretty?"

Tanner shook his head, trying to clear his mind of all the pain radiating through his body long enough to figure out what Christian was saying. He couldn't believe the man was worried about emptying his bladder now. "Uh, over there," Tanner rasped, pointing toward the closed door on the attached bathroom. "Why?"

Christian pushed the edge of the blanket into his hands and rose to his feet. "Keep this over your face and stay here. I'll be right back. I just need to get something and then we'll get the hell out of here."

Tanner lifted the blanket to his mouth as he stared at Christian's retreating back. A rush of pins and needles cascaded up and down his arms as circulation slowly returned. He rotated his stiff and aching shoulders, almost thankful for the pain because it meant he was alive.

Christian came back into the room carrying two, dripping-wet, white towels. He held out his hand and pulled Tanner to his feet. "We need to wrap these around our faces. The water will help filter the air."

Tanner held still as Christian wrapped the sopping fabric around his head like a weird turban. The cold dampness felt good against his overheated skin. He wanted to ask Christian what he was doing there, but the truth was, he didn't really care. He was thankful his lover had shown up when he did. The why and how wasn't important.

He watched as the bigger man wrapped his own towel over his head, idly wondering if he looked as silly as Christian. Probably, he figured, but it didn't really matter. He would've worn a tutu if he thought it would help him get out of the house unscathed.

Smoke thickened the air around them, growing deeper with the door left open. Tanner's pulse grew. Sweat soaked through his shirt. They needed to go. *Now*. He didn't understand how Christian could be so calm. He bounced on the balls of his feet, nervous tension vibrating through his body. "I'm ready, Christian. Let's go."

"Wait, Tanner. We can't just trot downstairs and walk out the front door. The steps are probably a total loss by now. We need another way out."

Sirens sounded in the distance. "Do you hear that? We could just wait for the firemen. They'll get us out."

"Only if we have to. Is there any other way out of the house from up here? Anything you can think of?"

Tanner shook his head. "No. I don't think so. Shit." He thought for a moment. "Uh, there's a trellis outside of the spare bedroom window. I used to climb down it when I was kid. It might be strong enough to hold our weight. I'm not sure."

"It'll have to do. Where's the spare room?"

"On the other side of the stairs. First door on the left."

"Okay." Christian hugged him, his body exuding more heat than an electric blanket on a cold winter night. Tanner snuggled into his embrace, comforted by Christian's arms around him. After a long moment, Christian pulled back. "We need to go. Just stay close behind me and follow my lead. I'm going to get you out of here, pretty. I promise." He grabbed Tanner's good hand and led him from the room.

Walking out of the smoky little room he'd slept in from birth was like stepping from a hazy dream straight into the fiery pits of hell. Several feet down the hall, flames shot from the stairway and curved around both sides of the wall. Smoke hung thick in the air, making it hard to see much of anything except the bright orange flames eating away the cream colored wallpaper his father had put up the summer before. Tanner's breath hitched, a deep well of sadness pooling in his stomach at the thought of losing the only home he'd ever had.

Christian squeezed his shoulder in commiseration. "Come on."

Tanner followed him down the hall, careful to stay right on his heels. Though he could walk the house blindfolded and never stub his toe, an innate sense of fear bombarded him at thought of being separated from his lover.

A hiss split the air -- the kind of sound you'd expect to hear from a snake seconds before its venomous bite -- and a gust of air hot enough to singe his nose hairs precipitated a burst of fire from the stairway. It whooshed out in front of them, scant feet from Christian, who stood slightly in front of Tanner.

Tanner recoiled and fell on his ass, doing a strange one-armed version of the crab-walk away from the blaze. "Christian! Fuck. We have to go back." He screamed over the loud crackle of wood dying. "We have to wait for help."

Christian glanced back at him. "No. Stay there." He turned back to the fire, the epitome of cool and collected. Tanner had to wonder if Christian had inhaled too much smoke. He was acting wonky, as if he thought he could stare down the fire and win.

Rising to his feet, Tanner tugged at Christian's arm, trying to pull him back from the flames. Christian shrugged him off. "Quit it, Tanner. I know what I'm doing."

Tanner latched back onto Christian's arm and tried to forcibly drag him away. "No. You're delusional, Christian. You need to come with me. Please, baby, back away from the fire." Tears thickened his voice. "I don't want to lose you."

Christian wrenched his arm out of Tanner's grip and pushed him away. "Back off, Tanner, and trust me. It's going to be okay. I just need a moment to concentrate."

Tanner watched in disbelief as Christian turned away from him and faced the fire head on. Long, interminable seconds passed, while Christian stood with his head down, immobile. Finally -- when Tanner's nerves were stretched to the breaking point -- Christian raised his head and lifted hands out at his sides, palms facing forward. Nothing happened for the longest time; then the flames seemed to jump higher. Tanner shrieked, certain Christian was going to be caught in the backlash. At that moment, the strangest thing happened. The fire retreated and slithered back down the steps as if scared into submission.

Christian dropped his arms and whipped around, staring at Tanner, who stood with his mouth agape, unable to believe what he'd just seen. His eyes had to be playing tricks on him. There was no way he'd just witnessed what he thought he had. That would mean...what? That Christian had some psychic power over fire? *Impossible*. That sort of thing only existed in campy horror films.

Christian held out his hand. "Come on. We need to jet."

Tanner placed his hand in Christian's and allowed himself to be dragged down the hall behind Christian, his mind awash with confusion. It had to be the smoke. He'd inhaled too much of it and was seeing things. It was the only excuse that made any sense.

Christian let go of his hand as they entered the room and hurried over to the window. "Shut the door, Tanner. We don't want to give the fire any more oxygen."

Tanner pushed it closed and joined Christian by the window as he shoved it open and poked his head through, presumably to check out the trellis. Apparently satisfied with what he saw, Christian waved Tanner over. "It looks okay. More sturdy than the typical pressboard crap most homeowner's use."

"Yeah. Dad made it for Mom when I was a kid."

"You go first. It's more likely to hold your weight than mine. I won't risk going down first, breaking the damn thing and leaving you stuck up here. Just take it slow, and be careful. It's not going to be easy, with your arm in the cast."

Tanner glanced outside, looking down at the trellis. He wasn't so sure this was a good idea. The last time he'd climbed down, he'd been sixteen -- blinded by desperation to get out

of the house -- and a good twenty pounds lighter. If the trellis did give out, he was fairly confident the fall wouldn't kill him, but it was hard to tell how many bones he would break upon impact. He turned his head to tell Christian he couldn't go through with it, when flashing lights in his peripheral vision caught his attention. Twisting his head around, he saw a fire truck pull up alongside the curb at the front of the house. Two police cars sat on the opposite side of the road, four uniformed officers looking on as firemen piled from the truck.

"Christian! Look!" Tanner pulled him closer to the window. "Firemen. We can stay here and wait for them. There's no need to climb out the window."

Christian regarded him with a sad expression. "We need to do this now, Tanner. I don't think you realize how bad the fire is. Your house is burning down around us. It's only a matter of time before the flames eat through second story floors. We can't just sit here and wait."

"I don't know if I can do this."

"You can." Christian bent down and kissed him, a soft merging of lips only meant to comfort him. "Now go." He patted him on the bottom. "As soon as you're safely on the ground, I'll be right behind you."

* * * * *

Christian watched his lover slowly make his way down the trellis, the knot in his gut twisting tighter with every downward step. Every time Tanner moved, the wood gave an ominous squeak, threatening to give way, and Christian's fear would kick up another notch. Finally, blessedly, Tanner's feet hit the ground and Christian could breathe easier. He'd made it down, safe and sound. That was all that mattered.

He swung one leg over the windowsill, ready to stand good on his promise to follow right behind, though he seriously doubted the trellis would hold his weight, not after they way it'd creaked and groaned under Tanner's much slighter frame.

"Christian! Christian, wait!"

Christian looked down at his lover, where he stood waving frantically upon the grass. "What is it?"

"Can you stay there for just a second? There's a ladder in the garage, I could go and get for you. I don't think the trellis will withstand anymore. Can you hold tight for a just a second?"

"Yeah. Hurry."

Christian shut his eyes and concentrated on the fire raging below. He felt it creeping closer, trying to get away from the water being sprayed onto the house. It slipped into the cracks and crevices -- into the very structure of the walls -- and climbed higher.

A bang against the side of the house precipitated Christian opening his eyes. He looked down to find two firemen flanking Tanner and holding the ladder steady. With a shaky breath, Christian slung himself over the ledge and began to climb down, one rung at a time.

Hands landed on either side of his back, steadying as he stepped off the ladder. Tanner rushed him, throwing his arms around Christian's waist, and hugged him tight. "God, I'm so glad you're okay. I thought we were both toast there for a little while."

"Hey, I said I would get you out of there, didn't I?" Christian tilted Tanner's face and kissed him. Tanner moaned and wiggled closer, pushing their groins together. The firm outline of the kid's cock butted against Christian's slowly awakening member and coaxed it into full hardness. He palmed Tanner's ass with both hands and ground against him, losing all sense of time and place.

A voice cleared their throat. "Excuse me, gentlemen, but is anyone else in the house?"

With reluctance, Christian eased out of Tanner's arms. "No. It was just us. The house is clear."

"Good." The firemen hustled Tanner and Christian away from the house, toward the curb, where the police and ambulance were waiting. "The EMT workers are waiting to check you both out --"

"I don't need --" Both Tanner and Christian blurted out then looked at each other and grinned.

Christian smiled at Tanner and brushed a stray strawberry-blond curl out of his eyes. "Are you sure, pretty? You were in the house for a lot longer than I was. Maybe you should let them look you over. It won't hurt anything."

"No." Tanner shook his head and grimaced. "I've had enough of being pricked and poked for a lifetime. I'm okay. A little sore and woozy, but okay."

"In that case, the police would like to speak with you," The fireman nodded at two officers standing a few feet away and hustled off to help their teammates.

The police approached, one standing behind the other, and introduced themselves. The one in front spoke first. "Would either of you mind telling us who the owner of this residence is?"

"I am, sir," Tanner piped up.

"And your name is?"

"Sorry. I'm Tanner O'Bannon and this is" -- Tanner bit into his bottom lip and shot a sideways glance at Christian -- "my friend, Christian Ryder."

Being called Tanner's friend wasn't that big a deal -- it wasn't as if he expected the kid to wave a rainbow flag and call him lover in public -- but the sneaky glance Tanner had flung his way bothered him a bit. Made him feel like Tanner might not yet know how to classify their relationship. He knew they'd both apologized, but maybe that wasn't enough.

What if Tanner was genuinely sorry about how they'd ended things, but had no intention of taking him back anyway?

"We'll need you both to come down to the station and give a statement about what occurred here. If one of you could just ride with Officer McNamara, we'll move this along. I know you've both been through a lot tonight, so we'll try not to hold you up long. I'm sure you'd both like to get some rest."

Christian noticed the two officers shared a look as he was being escorted away from Tanner toward one of the police cars. It made him nervous. God, they couldn't possibly think he and Tanner had set the house of fire while they were still in it, could they? That would be fucking idiotic.

A loud shout from the firemen pulled their collective attention to the house. One side of the roof -- the side where the explosion had originated -- crashed in with a trumpeted blast of noise. A cloud of debris flew from the wreckage, littering the yard of the house next door.

Tanner whimpered and Christian looked over to see tears pouring down his face. Tanner smiled at him through the tears and bent his head to get into the back of the police car. As Christian himself was urged into the other vehicle, he wished there was something he could do to save the kid's house, but it was beyond help. Whoever had set the fire had used enough accelerant to make sure it would burn fast and hot, leaving behind little evidence for the police to sift.

If he could find the original blueprint for the house, and use what little he could remember of the interior design, maybe he could get his crew to work overtime and build a close to exact replica of the house. That might be a nice gesture, though he'd never be able to duplicate the more personal items that had been lost in the fire.

No! He couldn't even think of doing that. Not talking to Tanner and discussing such a large gesture beforehand was what had gotten him into trouble with the kid in the first place. He'd just have to satisfy himself with being there for Tanner in the aftermath of the fire.

If Tanner will let you, a little voice whispered into his ear as scenery whizzed past the window. *What's to say he's going to want anything to do with a freak like you after he realizes what he saw you do?*

That lingering thought stayed with Christian as he replayed the night's events for the police. They made him go through it twice, as if trying to catch him in a lie, before they finally agreed to release him. By then, over an hour since they'd arrived, Christian was tired and frustrated. All he wanted to do was find Tanner and go home. He wasn't entirely sure the kid would want to come home with him, but, at the very least, he wanted to talk to Tanner, find out what had happened before he'd shown up, and make sure the kid had somewhere to spend the night. He wouldn't sleep a wink without knowing Tanner was safe, regardless of where he ultimately chose to stay.

Since the police had kept him and Tanner separate while they gave their statements, Christian wasn't sure where to find him. He figured the easiest way to find out was just to ask. As he was being led through a labyrinth of cubicles and dim hallways by one of the two uppity cops who'd interviewed him, Christian turned to the man and asked, "So, where is Tanner? He's going to need a ride home...or well, somewhere."

The cop -- whose name Christian couldn't pronounce -- turned his nose up higher, if it was even possible, and said, "He's already left."

"What?" Christian sputtered, coming to a standstill in the middle of the hallway. "How did he leave? He didn't have a car. Where did he go? His damn house burnt to the ground."

"I'm not his keeper, Mr. Ryder. You'll have to find your little *boyfriend* on your own." He sneered and pointed to a red exit sign above the door at the end of the hall. "There's the exit. I'd advise you stay in town, Mr. Ryder. We'll be in touch." With that, he pivoted on his shiny shoes and stalked back toward the direction from which they'd come.

Christian wasn't sure what to think as he walked into the boisterous lobby -- filled from wall to wall with people from all social classes as they waited for only God knew what -- and used one of the two pay phones to call for a cab. He waited outside, a headache brewing behind his eyes, and tapped his foot impatiently on the cracked edge of the sidewalk.

Standing in the midst of a halo of light from the lamppost above, Christian sulked and wondered what he should do. He could try to find Tanner, but barring the kid's house, he didn't know the first place to look.

The mind-boggling drama of the day coalesced and weighed heavily upon on his shoulders, bogging down his body and mind until all he could think of was finding his bed and falling into a comatose heap for the next twelve hours. He couldn't control Tanner's actions; he couldn't even manage to hold his own eyes open. All he could hope was that Tanner would come to him if he needed something. There was nothing else he could do.

He'd almost convinced himself he was okay with letting Tanner go -- if that was what it took to make the kid happy -- by the time the taxi pulled up outside of his driveway. He asked the cabbie to stop at the gate and paid, keying in the code after the car pulled away. The short walk up the driveway depleted what miserly amount of energy he had left, leaving him weak-kneed as he climbed the stairs of the porch.

As he slipped the key into the lock, Christian was startled by movement to his right. He looked up and saw Tanner slumped over, his head resting against one of the porch rails, fast asleep. He felt the tension flow out of his body, the muscles in his back and neck relaxed, making him realize just how worried he'd been about him.

He crossed the porch and knelt down at Tanner's side. His lover looked so serene, thick lashes fanning out in a smooth arc over fine porcelain skin. Christian brushed his fingers over Tanner's jaw, taking pleasure in baby-soft texture of his skin. "Tanner, pretty, wake up."

"Mmm. Christian?" Tanner groaned and his eyelids slowly lifted. "God, how long have I been asleep? My neck is stiff as hell."

"I don't know. I just got here." Christian moved around behind him and sat with his back against the rails. "C'mere. I'll see if I can work it out for you."

Tanner scooted over between Christian's thighs and leaned back against him. "They must have kept you longer than me. I thought -- well, when I came out and you weren't there, I just thought you'd finished early and left without me. When I got here, I just figured I would wait you out, you know. Must have fallen asleep."

Christian worked at the tense muscles in Tanner's shoulders and upper back, squeezing down in rhythmic waves, trying to work out the stress of the day. "Guess so. You should have known I wouldn't just leave you stranded there, pretty. That's not my style."

Tanner moaned and shifted, pushing his ass back against Christian's groin. "I know. I wasn't thinking. There are just so many other things taking up space in my head tonight."

"Want to share some of those thoughts with me?"

Tanner shrugged and just like that, all the tension Christian had worked out of his muscles returned. "Not really. I feel like I've already gone over everything a zillion times."

Christian moved his thumbs in tight circles over the back of Tanner's neck. "I'd really like to know what's going on. You could at least tell me how you ended up tied to a chair in the middle of a damn bonfire. I want to know who hurt you. Please."

Tanner sighed, snuggled back against him, and began to talk. Christian wrapped his arms around the kid and listened, his teeth biting into his tongue hard enough to draw blood. His anger built with each whispered word, every shudder that passed through Tanner's slight frame as he recounted the horrific details.

If he could just get his hands on the bastard who'd dared to threaten Tanner...which brought up another point. "What did the cops say?"

"They said they'd look into it. Nigel wasn't in the system, but from the description I gave them, they felt certain it was an alias of another con. I had to look at some photos and ID him. His real name is -- get a load of this -- Harry Trickle. It's no wonder he uses an alias." Tanner paused. "He has a rap sheet as thick as a phone book, everything from petty theft to aggravated assault and pandering. The police said they would put out an APB on him and shouldn't have any trouble charging him with the fire and assault on me. The attack, however, is a lost cause. They said that as long as I can't remember, there isn't enough to proof for the district attorney to charge him with anything. Not without a full confession, and I don't have to tell you how slim the chances of that are."

"That's fucking bullshit," Christian shouted, hugging Tanner tighter. He was just so fucking thankful the kid was all right, there in his arms, where he could keep him safe. "That bastard better hope the police find him before I do, or..."

Tanner craned his neck around and met Christian's eyes. "Or what, Christian? You gonna kill him? Spend the rest of your life in jail over some fuck who doesn't deserve the price of a bullet? Don't be stupid. Let the police can take care of it."

Christian huffed, but he knew the kid was right. He was being stupid. However, that didn't calm the irrational urge he had to hit something, to track the guy down and tear him to itty-bitty fucking pieces with his bare hands.

Tanner twisted at the waist and angled his chin up. "Kiss me."

Christian was happy to oblige, grateful for the distraction from the impotent rage he felt over not being able to protect his lover. He brushed their lips together, in more of a tease than anything else, and flicked his tongue over Tanner's mouth, wanting a taste of the kid. Even as tired as he felt, it wouldn't take much stimulation before he'd be begging Tanner to lie down on the cool, wooden porch and let him have his way with him. There was just something about the kid that brought out the perpetually horny teenager side of Christian's personality.

His dick rapidly rising to the occasion, Christian pulled away. Tanner swiveled around in his lap and straddled him, pushing their groins together and running a trail of hot kisses down the side of Christian's neck. Christian groaned and tightened his grip on Tanner's hips, trying to still the downward grind before he lost his mind to the sweet sensation of Tanner in his arms, moving against him.

They needed to talk, not fuck. No matter how much his dick disagreed. "Stop, pretty. We really need to talk."

"No." Tanner panted, running his tongue around the shell of Christian's ear. "No more talking." Tanner slid back a few scant inches and looked Christian in the eye. Their gazes connected, and it was like a bolt of lightning shot through Christian's nervous system. His muscles tensed. A dizzying rush of blood sped to his cock, swelling it out against the soft inner lining of his jeans.

Christian opened his mouth to speak and found it filled with Tanner's tongue, their mouths moving together in a rhythm set to inflame. It was just as well; he had no idea what he would've said anyway.

Tanner tugged at Christian's bottom lip with the sharp edge of his teeth and let go. "Just want you to fuck me. Want to still feel you inside me when I sit down tomorrow. Please, Christian. I need you to help me forget, even if only for a little while." He nipped Christian's lobe and all thought of talking fled. They could talk later. Right now he wanted to give Tanner what he was begging for.

He stood, rising awkwardly to his feet with Tanner in his arms, the kid's legs around his waist. "Come on, pretty. There's a shower waiting upstairs and a bed with your name on it."

Tanner's thighs vied, holding onto him tight. "Yes. Please."

Chapter Fourteen

After a scalding hot shower to wash off the stink of smoke and a long, slow blowjob from the softest pair of lips in creation, Christian floated on a sea of bliss. He flopped down on the bed in his room, dragged Tanner down on top of him, and sighed in contentment. Against his hip, Christian felt the kid's iron hard dick pushing against his skin, leaving a trail of moisture as Tanner humped against him like a wily puppy, kissing everywhere he could reach.

Tanner nipped at his earlobe, panting. "Want you, Christian."

"You've got me for as long as you want, pretty." Christian was content to let the kid do whatever he wanted to him. As far as he was concerned, Tanner could hog-tie and flog him with a willow branch if it made him happy, especially after the way he'd sucked down his cum with a smile, like it was the sweetest damn thing he'd ever tasted.

"No," Tanner said, his fingers wandering down Christian's groin and brushing over the taut skin between Christian's balls and ass. "I want to, um..."

Christian smiled, amused at how bashful Tanner was only moments after sucking him off. "You trying to say you want to fuck me, pretty?"

A cheek rubbed over Christian's pec, Tanner's teeth sharp on his nipple. "Oh, yeah. Want to feel you from the inside, Christian. Please?"

As if he could ever refuse. For Tanner, he was willing to offer up everything: his heart, his soul, his fucking life. Nothing was too much for the man he loved. "Okay."

Tanner rose up on his knees, kneeling between Christian's thighs and looked up at him, his eyes wide with surprise, as if he'd expected Christian to say no. "Are you sure? I mean, we don't have to, but I've never done it and I really want to. With you."

Damn if that didn't make Christian's cock jerk to attention. His shaft thickened and elongated to full girth in the blink of an eye. Without a moment's hesitation, he caught his

legs behind each knee and pulled them back, opening himself to Tanner. "Do it. I want you to."

Part of him felt self-conscious, laying himself bare to his young lover. He wondered what he looked like, wanton and spread as he was, his cock straining over his groin, balls pulled tight at the thought of Tanner sinking inside him and fucking him. Then he decided he didn't care; the hot look in his Tanner's eyes, the sweet flush over the kid's cheekbones, and the way his pretty prick bobbed higher as he reached over Christian to pluck a battered, half empty bottle of Astroglide off the nightstand told him enough.

Though he'd never been overly fond of bottoming -- had, in fact, only done it a time or two in his life -- he liked the thought of taking the man he loved inside him, making Tanner a part of him, if only for a short time.

Tanner flipped the cap on the lube bottle and poured a deluge of clear liquid over Christian's ass. Christian jumped as the cool lube hit the bottom of his balls and slid down his crack. "Shit, that's cold."

"Sorry." Tanner gave him an unabashed grin. "I would have heated it up, but I'm only working with one hand here."

"It's okay. It's already warming up anyway."

"Course it is. It's on your hot ass, isn't it?" Tanner leaned in and ran the tip of his tongue over the little strip of skin behind Christian's balls. "God, you have the sexiest ass."

Christian growled and pulled his legs up higher. "Christ."

Chuckling, Tanner glanced up at Christian through the frame of his thighs. "Like that do you?"

After everything they'd been through, his lover's laugh was the sweetest sound Christian had ever heard. He grinned at Tanner. "Oh, yeah. What's not to like?"

"How about this?" Tanner asked, skirting his fingertips through the slick crease of Christian's ass. He massaged the clenched pucker of Christian's anus, running his thumb over the taut muscle.

Damn, that felt good. Christian shuddered, his stomach muscles going tight as a bowstring. "Mmm. That's nice too."

One of Tanner's fingers pushed against him, exerting just the slightest pressure. The tip slipped inside, rubbing in a hesitant circle around the circumference of his hole, gently working him open. "Damn, you're tight. You have done this before, right?"

"Uh-huh," Christian breathed, the last syllable coming out as a moan as Tanner's finger forged deeper. "It's just been a really, *really* long time."

"I'll go slow. Just tell me if I hurt you, okay?"

"Mm hmm," Christian murmured.

Tanner's gaze dropped to Christian's groin and the digit he was currently sliding in and out of Christian's ass. All of Christian's attention focused on Tanner's face, watching his lover's color rise, while he tried to relax and make his muscles loosen up. His hole burned, unaccustomed to something being inside it, but it was a good ache. One he wanted more of.

He pushed up with his hips, fucking himself faster, deeper on Tanner's finger. The kid must've taken that as the permission it was, because he pulled back and squeezed in a second digit alongside the first. He pushed deep and twisted his fingers at just the right upward angle, pegging Christian's gland.

Christian grunted, pleasure slamming into him. "Oh, God. Right there. Again. Please."

"Jesus, you're burning up inside. So hot and tight." Tanner's pearly white teeth sank into his lower lip, a thoughtful expression on his face. "Um, Christian, would you mind if I...I mean, would it be all right if I... Shit." Tanner frowned. "You know I'm clean. I know you are. Would it be okay if I forgot the condom?"

"Tanner, I --" Christian's voice cut off on a strangled moan as the finger's inside him separated and spread him wide, making him burn.

"I remember what you said about the rubbers, Christian," Tanner continued. "Every word. I know we still have some things to work out, but I think we could have something here. If you're still interested in trying, after all the trouble I've caused you."

The thought of taking Tanner inside him bare, being able to feel every solid inch and ridge of his lover's cock as it was meant to be experienced, went to Christian's head faster than liquor. The little one currently throbbing at the very thought of letting Tanner come inside him.

Christian gazed up at Tanner, into the hesitant, sparkling green eyes he knew so well, and realized with startling clarity that no matter how things played out, there would be no one else for him. He didn't know why he felt that so strongly; it was just the way things were. Tanner was the only man for him. "I want you, Tanner. Take me bare. Fuck me. Now."

* * * * *

Christian's plea, spoken in his hoarse, sexy as fuck voice, would have brought Tanner to his knees had he not already been on them. As it was, he could hardly hold back the overwhelming urge to come. Only the prospect of making love to Christian bare kept him from blowing his load right there.

Anticipation of pleasing his lover eroded any anxiety he had over topping for the first time. Christian felt like living silk around his fingers, rippling and alive, and so fucking hot it was amazing. When he'd inadvertently hit Christian's prostate and felt those slick muscles clamp down on his fingers, then heard his lover call out in pleasure, it was a high like nothing he'd ever experienced. Christian was always so kind and loving; Tanner looked forward to giving something back to him. Making love to him until neither of them could

form a coherent sentence. Frankly -- as he pulled his fingers from the slick inferno of Christian's body -- he was almost there already.

Tanner lined the plump cap of his dick up with the tiny entrance to Christian's body. The hot little ring of muscles fluttered and sucked at him, trying to seduce him inside. He pressed forward, watching as the wrinkled whirl of flesh spread open by tiny increments and swallowed the tip of his cock. Forcing himself a fraction deeper, he felt his crown pop through the resistant muscle; the tight, elastic entrance snapped down around his shaft just past the flared rim.

"Holy fuck," he panted, trying not to come right then and there. He wasn't sure what was sexier: feeling the intense pressure of Christian's silky heat surround him, or seeing it.

Christian flexed his fingers, the grip he had on his thighs tightening as he pulled his legs back further to make room for Tanner between his legs. He shifted his hips upward, forcing another inch of Tanner's cock inside him. "More, pretty, give me more."

Tanner pulled back and rocked his hips forward, shoving all the way in with one long, slippery glide. Christian's deep growl filled the air at the same time Tanner whimpered from the divine feel of Christian's body undulating around him. He held still for a moment, giving Christian a chance to adjust, then gave in to his body's demand to thrust.

He moved in and out, his hips rolling as he searched for Christian's sweet spot. There was no mistaking when he found it, because Christian bucked and wailed, his thick cock jerking against his groin as he called out Tanner's name.

Making note of what made Christian howl, Tanner concentrated on sending his lover to the moon. He wasn't going to last much longer, not with the amount of pressure squeezing his cock, and he wanted to make Christian come first. As intoxicating as Christian was, Tanner felt grateful his lungs still remembered how to drag in ragged gulps of life-giving oxygen every few seconds.

Reaching between them, he trailed the fingers of his good hand over Christian's balls, loving the way the delicate sac wrinkled and pulled taut in reaction to his touch. He wrapped his hand around the base of Christian's fat prick and pumped in time with his thrusts.

Tanner lunged into Christian faster. His balls tightened, drawing up against the base of his dick, and began to burn. He was so close, so damn close. All he needed was a little more, a little harder, and he would tip right over the edge.

His gaze met Christian's and locked, the moment seeming to drag on forever. The pure blissed-out look on Christian's face, the emotion he saw shining in his lover's eyes, tipped the scale. "Oh, God, Christian. Love you. Love you so fucking much."

Christian bucked, his eyes rolling back in his head. "Jesus, Tanner. So good." He let go of his leg, wrapping it around Tanner's hip, and reached for his cock, stroking fast. "Oh, God, yes. I'm coming... *Oh*." Semen burst from Christian's cock, bathing their stomachs and chests in sticky fluid. The musky scent of sex filled the air.

The tight channel around Tanner's cock clamped down in rhythmic waves, milking him to orgasm seconds behind Christian. Liquid lightning shot from his cock, each spurt dragging another shudder from him as he came inside his lover. It went on and on, Christian's body rippling around him, wringing him dry. Tanner held on tight, his eyes pinched shut to the incredible bliss washing over him.

He collapsed on top of Christian, boneless. He hoped Christian didn't mind being used as a mattress, because he was in no hurry to move, too replete from his orgasm to care about the mess they were making on the sheets. It could always be washed out later, after he had enough wherewithal to move.

Strong hands petted his back and hips, the soft touch making him sleepy. As his eyes grew heavy and sleep began to pull him under, Tanner heard Christian whisper, "I love you too, pretty."

* * * * *

His heart full-to-bursting, Christian brushed a light kiss over the frazzled curls atop Tanner's head and rolled from bed. Too satiated to dress, he padded naked into the connected bathroom, relieved himself, and wet a washrag to clean up. He glanced at himself in the mirror over the sink as he wiped himself clean, chuckling a little at the goofy grin on his face.

Tanner loved him. He could hardly believe it.

Briefly, he thought about taking another cloth into the bedroom for Tanner, only to dismiss it, not wanting to disturb his lover. The kid could always take a shower after he napped. It wasn't as if the bed didn't need clean sheets anyway. That thought brought another smile, remembering how they'd gotten so messy.

He dropped the wet cloth in the sink and walked back out into the bedroom. His gaze landed on Tanner, sleepy so peacefully, curled up on his side upon the bed, before he continued on his way out of the room. His stomach was growling something fierce, reminding him that he hadn't eaten anything since the early dinner he and Tanner indulged in before the shit hit the fan. Hard to believe that'd only been six hours prior when it felt like a lifetime had passed between then and now.

He and Tanner had come full circle, moving from an easy camaraderie to something worth building on. Unfortunately, Tanner had lost something precious to him in the process. He was a little worried that the kid hadn't been more upset, but he figured it was coming. After the shock wore off, the healing could begin and Christian would be right there to help him through it. There wasn't anything he wouldn't do for the man. All Tanner had to do was say the word and whatever he wanted would be his. Until then, Christian was going to keep his mouth shut and try not to stomp on the kid's toes. It was damn hard not to step in and take care of things on his own like he'd been doing all his life, but he was going to give it his best shot.

Christian ambled into the kitchen, making a beeline for the fridge. He dug out a half-full carton of butter pecan ice cream and plunked it down on the counter. Something sweet sounded mighty good after all the bitterness of the day. He leaned up, reaching for the knob of the little cabinet holding the bowls and paused, hearing footsteps behind him.

He twisted just enough to see a shadow cross over the floor to his left. "Hey, pretty. I figured you were out for the rest of the night." He turned back to the cabinet and grabbed two bowls, instead of one. "There's plenty of ice cream if you want some. I think there might even be some of the chocolate topping you like in the fridge."

He dug around in the drawer next to the sink, searching for two teaspoons. Why was it that all he could ever find was the huge ass tablespoons? The damn dishwasher must've been eating them, as quick as they disappeared. He was going to have to buy a new flatware set soon. Well, that, or quit throwing the silverware away when he didn't feel like washing them. Christian turned, a smile on his face for Tanner, and froze.

Tanner wasn't standing behind him. A short, bald man with piggish features -- fat, round face and beady brown eyes -- stood at the counter, a Smith and Wesson pistol pointed right at him. Christian blinked. "Who the hell are you?" He took a step forward.

"Ah ah ah," the man said, waving the barrel of the pistol. "I wouldn't do that, if I were you." He smiled, revealing a mouth full of crooked teeth, stained a dark yellow. "As far as who I am...I wouldn't worry about that."

The name didn't really matter anyway. Though Tanner had failed to describe his attacker, Christian could think of no one else who would be ballsy enough to break into his house. This foul little man had to be Nigel. "How did you even get in here, you piece of shit. The alarm system --"

"Is a piece of shit, with more bells and whistles than usefulness. However, now is not the time to worry about how much you were overcharged for one of your toys. If I were you, I would be much more concerned about what I'm going to do to you and your little boyfriend."

Unadulterated rage swept through Christian's body. He took a step forward, unconcerned with his own safety. "You won't lay a fucking hand on Tanner, you worthless bastard."

Nigel cocked the hammer on the pistol, sheer evil joy inundating his features. "Oh, I wouldn't say that."

A fiery burst of pain exploded in Christian's head as the world went topsy-turvy and black.

Chapter Fifteen

A loud thud echoed from downstairs, jerking Tanner awake. Groggily lifting his eyelids, he peeked across the bed, found it empty, and decided he if couldn't go right back to sleep, he was going to throttle Christian for waking him up. He didn't know what the man was doing, but did he have to make so much noise?

Tanner tugged the blanket up around his ears and snuggled into his pillow, careful to stay on the side of his face that didn't hurt. His eye was sore and achy, an instant reminder of things he'd rather forget. Maybe in some small fucked up way, his temporary amnesia after the first attack was a blessing in disguise. Part of him wished he could block out the night before as well, though that would mean he wouldn't be able to recall making love to Christian -- something he wasn't willing to forget.

Being able to look into his lover's eyes while they were so intimately connected, watching the pleasure unfold in Christian's eyes bit by bit, and knowing he was the cause of it was the most powerful expression of love he'd ever experienced. Even without the words, he'd heard Christian's declaration of love in every sigh and moan, in every ripple of his lover's body around him. No amount of stress relief would be worth losing that memory. It was one he planned to treasure.

Though he would've liked to lay there and bask in the joy of making love to Christian, thoughts of the fire and Nigel crept into his mind and lodged there. The brave front he'd put on earlier was beginning to dissolve. So much had happened, in so little time, that it left him reeling.

He supposed the fire had taken care of one thing -- Christian hadn't had the time to pay off the mortgage for him. Luckily, his homeowner's insurance would take care of it. He would own the charred land, free and clear, but he was officially homeless. Everything he owned was gone. All the mementos from his childhood, his mother's china, and his father's

fishing gear, destroyed. The only thing he had was the clothes on his back -- or the clothes lying crumpled on the floor, as it was.

He heard Christian come back into the room, his footsteps unusually heavy and sluggish. The bed dipped, and Tanner kept his eyes closed, forcing his respiration to stay slow and easy. He knew they needed to talk, but he simply wasn't up to it yet. With his mind in chaos from everything else, he hadn't really had a chance to make heads or tails of what he'd seen Christian do, and he didn't want to ask a straightforward question that might make him look like some green kid who still believed in the boogeyman.

Fingers trailed over his nape and caught the short hairs on his neck, sending a rampant shiver down his spine. The hand continued around, the touch gentle until a sweaty palm slapped over his mouth and squeezed. "Guess who, whore." Humid breath wafted over his cheek, the stench of stale body odor and rotten breath invading his nose, as a hoarse voice spoke in his ear. "Told you I'd be back, didn't I, bitch?"

His eyes flew open. Nigel stood at the side of the bed, his soulless black eyes locked on Tanner, the business end of a revolver pointed right at his face. "Surprised to see me?"

If Nigel was in front of him, then who...? Tanner tried to crane his neck to see who was behind him, but the hand over the lower portion of his face tightened, preventing him from turning.

What in the...?

Where was Christian? Had they done something to him, was he hiding, or possibly gone in search of help? No, Christian wouldn't have just left him there. He wouldn't believe that. His love was either in the house, waiting to pounce on the men in surprise, or they'd already found him. Tanner didn't know what to think or do. If he said something about Christian, then they would know he was in the house, and Tanner could put his lover at risk.

Oh God, the thump he'd heard earlier... He struggled against the man holding him. "Christian?" With the hand over his mouth, it came out more like a long, garbled O.

The uppermost finger pressed against the base of his nostrils, threatening to cut off his air. Tanner struggled and kicked at the man behind him. Lying on his side, with his good arm crimped underneath him, there wasn't much he could do.

Nigel laughed, his gaze on the man behind Tanner. "Aww, I don't think he likes you, Rick."

Rick? As if it were being spoken aloud now, instead of over a week earlier, the sound of a high-pitched male voice echoed in his ears. "*Fuck him once for me, Rick.*"

Like scenes from a Technicolor slideshow, sounds and images besieged Tanner. Though his eyes were open, he didn't see the room around him or the men threatening him. Instead, he saw one memory after another, recollections of the night he was run off the highway and beaten rushing back to him. He twitched and jerked, a deluge of remembrances overtaking him, as his eyes rolled back in his head.

From somewhere outside himself he heard a panicked voice blare. "Fuck, man, I think the little cocksucker is having a seizure or something. Do something, bro."

"He's faking it."

The sharp sting of a palm hitting his cheek brought Tanner back to the present with a gasp. He stared up into the malevolent face above him, pain flaring through his head from the impact to his newly bruised eye and barely healed nose. Much to his dismay, he heard a whimper slip through his parted lips as he dragged air into his barren lungs.

His gaze moved frantically over the room, trying to assimilate what was happening. For a moment, he'd been back on that lonely stretch of highway, alone and lying on the hot asphalt, waiting for a death blow that had never come.

Nigel stood to one side of the bed, his younger brother Rick on the other. Though Tanner had never actually met Rick -- without the benefit of a ski mask -- the resemblance he and Nigel shared was uncanny. The brothers shared the same bulbous nose and close-set, soulless dark eyes. The only difference was where Nigel's head was shaved, Rick's wide face was framed by thin wisps of greasy, dishwater brown hair that clung to his scalp. Rick was also missing the air of malice that radiated from Nigel like an unholy beacon. Instead, he fidgeted, as if waiting for Nigel to yank his strings. The power dynamic between the two was crystal clear. If he could take out Nigel, Rick would tumble as well. Without a leader to follow, the flunky would be clueless.

Now if only he could come up with a viable way to do that, without getting himself shot in the process...

"Where is Christian? What have you done with him?"

Rick snorted and smiled at his brother. "You don't need to worry about your boyfriend. We done took care of him."

Chaotic white noise filled Tanner's mind, tears he refused to shed building at the back of his eyes. No, he wouldn't believe Christian was dead. He couldn't. Not when they'd only just found each other. "I don't believe you, you fuckin' liar."

Rick shrugged. "Suit yourself, but I snuck up on him and bashed his head in while Nigel here held him at gunpoint. You should have heard the way he whimpered when he hit his knees."

Tanner leaped up and scrambled across the mattress toward the vile man. "I'll kill you, you piece of shit."

Rough fingers wrapped around Tanner's upper arm, above his cast, and forcibly yanked him backward. "Enough," Nigel snarled at him. "I don't have all night to waste on your prissy ass."

Tanner latched onto the blanket, trying to keep himself covered, as he was dragged from the bed. His feet hit the floor and his knees tried to buckle, the bed sheets tangled around his ankles.

With the gun poking him in the ribs, Tanner didn't dare put up a fight. Not when he knew the slightest provocation would make Nigel pull the trigger. He didn't give a shit what happened to him; he just wanted to live long enough to make the bastards pay for what they'd done to Christian. He owed his lover that much.

Tanner allowed himself to be led out of the room and down the stairs, Nigel in front of him and Rick pulling up the rear. His muscles tense and ready to pounce on any opportunity he could find, Tanner mimicked a docility he didn't feel. Toward the bottom of the staircase, he was shoved from behind and stumbled down the final two steps. Rick cackled as Tanner tripped and knocked into Nigel, who promptly turned and shoved him into the foyer table opposite the stairs. "Watch where in the hell you're going."

Tanner threw out his hands, trying to waylay crashing into the table, and jerked his fractured arm back just in time to prevent it from hitting the wood. His other palm hit the table, landing on a stack of mail and scattered it to the floor. A glint of silver from beneath the remaining envelopes caught his attention, and he quickly palmed the short, letter opener, careful to keep it between his hand and thigh as he lowered his arm to his side.

He stood upright and glanced over his shoulder to see Nigel glaring at Rick. "Would you quit fucking off and make yourself useful?" Nigel huffed. "Grab the kid, and come on. I don't want to be here all night."

Rick's narrow shoulders hunched inward as he hurried down the final steps. "Sorry, bro." He gripped Tanner by the shoulder, his spindly fingers biting into Tanner's flesh, and roughly propelled him forward. "Little fucker," He feverishly whispered. "What do you think you're trying to do? Get me in trouble with Nigel? You're going to get it now." He shoved at Tanner's shoulder.

Tanner staggered forward, the jar from being pushed almost enough to cause him to lose his tenacious grip on the letter opener. He pressed the cold blade tighter against his skin, praying it didn't drop or cut into his flesh deep enough to break the skin and make him bleed, calling unwanted attention to the hidden weapon before he had a chance to use it.

So preoccupied with thoughts of how and when he could strike out against the brothers, Tanner didn't notice the feet until he was halfway across the living room. The bottoms of Christian's feet peeked from behind the center island in the kitchen, his toes curled back toward the soles, unmoving.

White noise filled Tanner's mind, clearing it of all else, and he rushed forward, shouldering past Nigel in his rush to reach his lover's side. A strong grip on his hair dragged him backward, stopping his forward momentum.

Tanner propelled around, his fingers balling around the base of the letter opener, and thrust his arm outward. The letter opener plunged into the base of Nigel's throat. A gasp slipping from Tanner's mouth as he let go of the blade and reeled backward, astonished at how easy the blade had sank into the other man's flesh.

A startled expression crossed Nigel's features as color drained from his face. He gurgled, blood pooling around the wound. Nigel dropped to his knees, the gun falling to the floor with a loud clatter, as his hands fluttered around the instrument lodged in his neck.

Rick screeched, the sound more animistic than human, as he dove for the gun. Tanner punted it with all his might and sent it flying across the room, out of sight.

The gun out of reach, Rick grabbed Tanner instead, his bony fingers digging into Tanner's ankle. "Fucking whore! You stabbed him. You stabbed Nigel."

Tanner kicked Rick in the face, a burst of pain rocketing through his toes at the impact with the other man's nose. The fingers around his ankle loosened as Rick grabbed his bloody nose and howled.

A string of obscenities colored the air behind Tanner as he dashed into the kitchen. He skidded to a halt beside Christian's prone body and fell to his knees. Thick, congealed blood clung to the visible side of Christian's face, his lashes a dark fan against the startling, pallor of his skin. Moisture cascaded down his cheeks as he bent over his lover and searched for a pulse in his neck. "Please, Christian, don't die on me, baby." A sluggish pulsation kissed his fingertips and Tanner smiled through his tears. "Thank God. I love you, baby. Hang on for me. Fight. I'm going to get you some help."

Tanner ran to the phone, grabbed the handset, and dialed 911 as he rushed back to Christian's side. He wanted to turn his lover over and check him for other injuries, but he knew better. Instead, he satisfied his need to comfort Christian by touching him and whispering sweet nothing in his ear as the phone rang in his. When his call was answered, Tanner rambled off Christian's address to the operator and began to explain what had happened.

Christian groaned and lifted his head. "Wah? Tanner."

"Oh, thank you, Jesus." The operator quieted at his outburst. Tanner said, "He's waking up," and hung up the phone. They could finish explaining when the police arrived.

He leaned over his lover's shoulder, barely able to restrain his desire to pepper kisses all over Christian's face. "Baby, are you okay? Tell me where it hurts." He racked his brain, trying to think of anything he could use to gauge how badly Christian was hurt and fell back on an old TV standby. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Two. Now get them out of my face." Christian rolled onto his side and slowly sat up, a grimace contorting his handsome features. "Fuck, my head hurts." His hand lifted and gently roved over the side of his face, marring the pads of his fingers with sticky blood. His eyes widened, appearing twice as big against the pale backdrop of his features. "Are you okay? There was a man --"

Besides being freaked out that I just killed someone... "I'm okay. Don't worry about me right now."

"You're not going to be okay for long, bitch."

Christian jerked as if he'd been stung by a livewire and shoved Tanner behind him. Tanner looked up and found himself staring into the metallic barrel of a gun. He had been counting on Rick turning yellow after Nigel was down, but that didn't look to be the case. If anything, Rick appeared even more desperate, a man barely clinging to sanity.

Tanner blinked, took in the nervous sweat clinging to Rick's upper lip, and decided that he wasn't above pleading, not when so much more than his own life was at stake. "You don't want to do this, Rick. I know Nigel made you help him. I'll tell the police that. They'll understand you were forced into helping and won't charge you with anything."

"Bullshit." The gun wavered in Rick's shaky hand, moving back and forth between Christian and Tanner. "I'm not stupid enough to fall for that."

"He didn't say anything," Christian tried to reason. "Tanner only called an ambulance. That's all."

Rick turned the gun on Christian. "You shut up. You're supposed to be dead. I bashed your fucking head in myself. How're you even alive?"

Christian shrugged and Tanner had to bite his lip to keep from blurting out anything that would piss Rick off. He did not want to antagonize the man with the gun.

"And you!" Rick turned the gun toward Tanner. "You stabbed Nigel." He shook his head, greasy tendrils of mouse brown hair flying, as if he couldn't believe anyone would dare take a stand against his brother. "He's going to be so pissed." A creepy smile spread across the man's face. "But that's okay, because I know what'll make cheer him right up." His thumb eased up and pulled back hammer, cocking the gun as he took aim.

Christian shouted and lifted both arms, palms out.

Rick fired, the sound of the shot deafening in the close quarters. He recoiled and jerked backward, his eyes wild.

The air beside Tanner's face moved, the bullet missing him by scat centimeters. Tiny, invisible copper fragments from the projectile bit into the apple of his cheek and stung like a bee. Half a second too late, he slammed his eyes shut and threw his arms up to protect his face.

Rick's shrill scream propelled Tanner's lids open. The scene before him was akin to a grisly horror movie. Like something from Vincent Price in the *House of Wax*.

Tanner gasped, his mouth falling open. Rick's skin bubbled and steam began to pour from beneath his clothes, as if he were on fire from the inside out. The visible skin of Rick's face and neck turned beet red one second and a sickly gray in the next. The gun dropped from his hand and fell to the floor, forgotten. Strange gurgling sounds spilled from Rick's parted lips as his arms flailed wildly, beating at his clothing, though no apparent flame could be seen.

Rick dropped to his knees, the grimy T-shirt he wore hanging off his torso, whereas before it had clung to him like a second skin. His mouth lolled open, his tongue a hideous

shade of dark, mottled purple. The flesh above the sweaty ring of his shirt collar had taken on a bluish hue and began to ripple, the skin sliding from muscle and bone. Charred ashes spilled from the hem and puddled on the floor around his knees. In the space of a single breath, the shirt caved inward, Rick's limbs and head landing atop an insubstantial pile of cinder and gore.

Through it all, Christian's arms had remained up, his palms facing Rick, fingers extended out like divining rods of death and damnation. Only once Rick was no more did they lower, Christian collapsing back against Tanner, falling into his arms.

Tanner didn't move, barely able to draw air redolent of scorched meat and smoke into his lungs, as he held his shaking lover. He trembled, his mind spinning with the implications of what he'd just seen. He tottered on the brink of incredulity; waffling between what seemed like an impossible truth, and the distinct possibility that he'd lost his mind.

What had previously seemed like little, inconsequential details began to fall into place. The way the toaster oven had burst into flame when he and Christian fought. Christian's odd behavior inside Tanner's burning home. The way his lover always seemed to radiate an ungodly amount of body heat. Separate, all those things could be whittled away to nothing, explained away as meaningless coincidences. Together, added to the fact that he'd just watched a man spontaneously combust within touching distance, and he was left with only one conclusion, no matter how farfetched.

He was in love with goddamn fire-starter.

* * * * *

Christian stood at the front door and watched the cadre of police and emergency vehicles pull down the drive, putting off facing Tanner for scant seconds longer. The moment of truth had come. No matter the outcome, he couldn't put off telling Tanner who... *what* he was any longer. Tanner had said he loved him, and Christian wanted to have faith in that sweet sentiment, but sometimes -- like in the case of watching your lover roast someone from the inside out -- love wasn't enough. It would kill him to watch Tanner walk away, but that was preferable to living a lie.

He could scarcely believe what he'd done. The man he'd killed was a deviant, true, but he hadn't deserved to die the way he had. No one did. Yet, thinking of the gun Rick had held on Tanner and his intent to use it made Christian feel justified in his actions. The guilt and recriminations would come later, after the sheer terror of seeing his lover in danger began to fade, but for now, he couldn't find the will to be sorry.

Tanner had admitted to stabbing Nigel in self-defense, but they both plead ignorance as to the cause of the other man's death. Detective McNamara hadn't bought their excuse, but he was gone for the moment. A call would be made to his lawyers in the morning, to warn them of the shit storm ahead. Regardless of what had really happened, the police couldn't prove he was responsible for Rick's demise. There wasn't a single grain of tangible evidence

they could use against him. However, that didn't mean he wasn't going to be prepared for any likelihood. He hadn't gotten to where he was in life by being stupid.

Christian shut the door and headed up the stairs. Tanner had already gone up, claiming he wanted a shower, as soon as the police had finished their questions and left with a parting warning for neither of them to leave town.

He entered his bedroom and was pleasantly surprised to hear water running in the connected bathroom. Part of him had expected Tanner to draw away from him and choose to bathe in the guest bathroom further down the hall. He took that as a good sign and sat down on the edge of the bed to wait, willing to accept any silver lining he could find.

Christian heard Tanner puttering around behind the closed door. The echo of wet feet slapping on the tile, the sink running, for whatever reason, then finally the rattle of the door knob as the door opened and Tanner walked out, a white towel slung low around his trim hips. Damp curls clung to his nape, a shade dark than his normal strawberry blond, and his pale skin was still flushed pink from the hot water. As always, Tanner's beauty took Christian's breath away.

Tanner looked his way, his gaze wary and it almost broke Christian's heart. He couldn't stand the thought of Tanner being afraid of him. Hope seeped out of him like helium from an over inflated balloon. "I'm not going to hurt you, pretty."

Tanner's startled gaze met Christian's. "I know that." He bit into his bottom lip, his hands toying with the towel's knot at his hip. "I trust you, Christian. I'm just a little shook up. It isn't every day you see something like that, you know."

Christian nodded, his gaze following Tanner as his lover perched on the end of the bed just out of reach, not quite sure what to say. They needed to talk, to get everything out in the open, but he didn't know how to begin. Talking had never been his forte, not about himself, never about his abilities.

He'd never been so afraid of words in his life. His entire future rested in the words he said, and how he said them. He supposed he should have felt lucky Tanner hadn't run out of the house screaming before now, but he didn't. Not when the only thing he'd ever wanted -- and never allowed himself to dream of having -- stood before him, covered with scrapes and bruises and wrapped in a little white towel that matched the cast on his arm.

"About what happened, Tanner..." Christian stalled, trying to find the right words. "I can't say I'm sorry that man is dead -- he would've killed us both, if I hadn't done something -- but I am sorry you had to witness the way he died."

"I want to understand, no, I need to know *how* you could do something like that. You..." Tanner shook his head. "Shit. I can't even find the words to describe what you did."

Christian hung his head. "I don't know why I have the ability to control fire. If you even want to call it that. Sometimes it feels more like the other way around. As if the fire controls *me*. It has been that way for as long as I can remember."

“Jesus,” Tanner exclaimed. “That’s fucked up.”

“I’m sorry. I wish I could change, be a better man, less of a freak, but I can’t. This is who I am. There’s no changing it.”

Tanner scooted closer and laid his hand on Christian’s thigh. “You’re wrong.”

Christian looked up, startled to find Tanner so close and willing to touch him. “Huh?”

“You’re wrong. I can’t say I’m not a little freaked out by your ability, but it doesn’t have any bearing on how I feel.” He laid his palm over Christian’s breast. “I love you. *You*. The man who opened his home to me after I was hurt. The man who volunteers his time to help others.”

Christian swallowed over the lump in his throat. “How can you care about me after what I’ve done? You’ve seen firsthand proof of what a monster I am.”

Tanner nodded. “I did. And I know that you wouldn’t have, if you’d had any other choice. You saved my life, and I’m grateful to you for that. I wouldn’t be here, talking to you, otherwise. I know who you are, Christian, what you are, and it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” Christian picked up Tanner’s hand and moved it back into his own lap. “You don’t understand. There are things you don’t know about me. If you did, you wouldn’t be so willing to accept me.”

Christian stood and walked to the window, looking out over the dark ground below. Though his heart rejoiced at Tanner acceptance, he knew it wouldn’t last. Once Tanner knew the whole truth, he would leave. “I’m no good for you, Tanner. I love you, but you’d be better off without me. Safer.”

The bedsprings creaked and warm hands wrapped around Christian’s waist from behind. “I love you, too.” Tanner snuggled up to Christian and kissed his shoulder blade. “But you’re mistaken about me being better off without you. There’s nowhere I feel safer than with you. You would never hurt me.”

“You don’t know that, Tanner. You have no idea what I’m capable of.”

“Oh really?” Tanner snorted. “With all due respect, I just watched you incinerate someone from the inside out. I don’t think it could get much worse than that.”

“No, you wouldn’t.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Tanner let go of him and tugged at Christian’s shoulder.

Christian turned and faced his lover. He would have been more comfortable confessing to the window, but he owed Tanner better than that. “The people around me die, Tanner. Everyone I’ve ever cared about. My family, the people I work with, your father...”

“My father? What does he have to do with this?”

Christian exhaled. *Here we go*. “It’s my fault he died.”

Tanner’s shoulders tensed. “What?”

"If I had been there that night, instead of drowning myself in a bottle of scotch until I was too inebriated to answer my pager, he wouldn't be dead. I could have saved him, Tanner, but I *wasn't* there."

Tanner's cheeks bloomed a ruddy crimson. "You arrogant bastard." One of his hands shot forward and shoved at Christian's chest, catching him off guard. His back slammed into the wall. "What makes you think you would have been able to do *anything*? You're not God, Christian. It's not your fault. You were just a kid; it's no wonder, you weren't able to drag your entire family out of a burning building. It's not your fault you're human and couldn't make one single fire call. I wish to God someone would have been able to save my dad, but the truth is, I wish a lot of things. Shit in one hand, wish in the other, right? None of those deaths are your fault. All you're doing is torturing yourself with all the guilt you've bottled up inside, and it's eating away at you.

"Your ability doesn't make you who you are. It's just one tiny little facet of your personality, not even the most important one. Frankly, I wouldn't care if you pissed standing on your head over the toilet. The little things aren't important. It's the entire package that matters. I love you, Christian, flaws and all."

Christian swallowed over the lump in his throat. He blinked back moisture, overwhelmed by the surge of emotion he felt. "But --"

"*No!*" Tanner exclaimed and grabbed Christian by the shoulder, shaking him. "No ifs, ands, or buts. I love you."

"I love you, too. More than I ever thought possible." Christian sighed and pulled Tanner into his arms, hugging him as tight as he dared. "I don't want to lose you, but I'm terrified of what might happen if you stay." He breathed in the clean scent of soap and man, wiping the excess moisture rolling down his cheeks into Tanner's hair. "I don't want anything to happen to you."

"Nothing will," Tanner whispered, burying his face in the crook of Christian's neck. "There are no guarantees in life, but it'll all work out. We'll find a way."

Christian pulled back. "I just want you to know what you're getting yourself involved in." He stared down into his lover's expressive green eyes. "My power is tied to my emotions. I can't always control it. You would be putting yourself at risk every day you're with me and you deserve better. You should be able to live a normal life, without having to worry about your partner throwing a temper tantrum and blowing up the house."

Tanner rolled his eyes. "Jesus, Christian. Are you listening to yourself at all? Don't you think you're being just a little overdramatic?" He flounced over to the bed, dragging Christian behind him, and sat on the edge. "If this is how you try to talk me into staying, I'd hate to see what you'd say to get rid of me."

Christian was at a loss for what to say. Tanner was deliberately making light of the situation, but his lover was right. He'd been so busy trying to point why Tanner should go, he was belittling all the good things between them. The hurdles they would have to jump in

the future didn't stand a chance of bringing them down, if Tanner could laugh in the face of all he'd already heard.

With a deep breath, Christian took a leap of faith and chose to believe their love was strong enough to overcome all the diversity facing them. He wasn't sure what the future held in store for them, but with Tanner by his side, he felt like he could brave dragons. "Are you sure you want this, Tanner, me and all my neuroses? I'm not going to give you another chance to bow out gracefully."

"Hmm...let me think about it." Tanner tapped his fingers on his chin. "A miserable, cold and lonely life without you, or a future filled with love, happiness, and all the hot sex I can stomach. Oh, decisions, decisions," Tanner said with a grin. "How many times am I gonna have to tell you I love you before it sinks through that thick skull of yours?"

Christian smiled. "Once a day for forever sounds just about right."

 THE END 

Amanda Young

Amanda Young is a multi-published romance author. All of her books are steamy and not for the faint of heart. Since she tends to write whatever strikes her whimsy, all of her novels fall into various subgenres. Among her titles you'll find contemporary, manlove, and paranormal.

The stories she writes are bold and usually push the boundaries of what's acceptable. Basically, she writes stories about men and women who love indiscriminately and wholeheartedly. Her characters are never perfect; they're flawed and oftentimes troubled. Which makes it that much more satisfying when they receive the happy ending we all deserve. No matter what genre her books fall into, she can guarantee they'll end with a happily ever after. In her opinion, it's just not a romance without one.

Learn more about Amanda by visiting her website at <http://www.amandayoung.org>.