



MASTER BEAR

Angelia Sparrow
& Naomi Brooks

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...Chris clenched his hands on the edge of the counter. "My lover is dying and you're asking about pizza?" Too well-trained to raise his voice, he let his anger come out as silent tears.

"Shh." Mike turned him around and folded him into a big, warm embrace. Chris felt really at ease for the first time in months. Mike's strength held him up, the play of muscles under the shirt saying he didn't have to carry everything all by himself, at least for now. He cried a little more, leaving damp spots on Mike's Captain Marvel scrubs.

He finally got himself under control and nodded. "If Master says it's all right."

William cleared his throat from the kitchen door. Chris started guiltily, almost leaping out of Mike's arms, and rubbed away the tears.

"I think it would do you a world of good," William said, smiling at them. "Go on. Shoo."

Chris disentangled himself and went to William, dropping to his knees at his master's feet. "I'm sorry, sir."

William laid a hand on his head and stroked him. "Nothing to be sorry for, dearest. Now, if you two will put me back to bed, I'll take that shot, please, Mike."

"Of course, Mr. Davis."

Chris rose and supported one side while Mike took the other. William walked carefully, as if every step hurt him. They eased him to the bed and Chris helped him lie down as Mike went for his bag. William caught a missed tear by the side of Chris's nose.

"It's all right, my boy. This can't be easy on you. Take all the comfort you need, from anyone you need it from."

"Only want you, Master." Chris smiled as William pulled him down for a kiss...

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The Curse of the Pharaoh's Manicurists

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This kinky little fairytale is a labor of mourning. It's dedicated to Sue Rea, Angelia's mother and one of our biggest fans, who "lived" as both Chris and Mike while her husband died of cancer.

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“Yes. I see.” William crumpled the postcard in his hand as he listened. “Thank you,” he said and hung up the phone. A wave of pain rolled through his body. He breathed against it, setting his mouth tightly and clutching the sink. He sat at the kitchen table and opened the folder he’d been meticulously compiling for the last few months.

It held everything he needed to make this next phase much easier. He glanced at the top of the will and rifled the papers, pausing at the Durable Power of Attorney. He read the “no code” status he had chosen and thought about how final it all sounded. The burial plan, cremation plan, really, all prepaid and in order, only emphasized that feeling.

When his boy, Chris, pulled into the driveway, he had

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everything ready. Chris let himself in and set the groceries down at once upon seeing William.

“Sir?” he asked, dropping to his knees beside William’s chair, his blue eyes frightened. “Are you all right? You’re all gray. What’s hurting?”

William petted his solicitous boy’s hair. Chris was a good boy and took excellent care of him. He was dreading what had to be said.

“Bring the groceries in and put them away, dear. I’ll tell you everything.”

Chris got him a glass of water, then went back for the next bags and began putting things away. William sighed. Chris was an excellent shopper, a fair house cleaner, and a moderately bad cook. He could usually turn out an edible meal but it would seldom be anything interesting to eat. This made everything more difficult.

“Front room, boy. We have to talk.”

“Pardon me, sir, but you don’t look well enough to get to the front room. Do you need a pain pill? I think there are still a couple in the medicine chest from the chemo.”

William shook his head. He needed his mind clear, unhazed by morphine. Pain was a small price to pay for that. Chris helped him to his feet and he leaned heavily on his boy as they made it to the front room. William sank into his big chair with a sigh of relief. Chris curled up at his feet.

“Chris, my boy, I got some bad news today.” Chris looked so adorably guilty William wondered what he had done. He decided he didn’t have the energy to care. “It’s back, boy. The radiation wasn’t enough.”

Chris looked stricken at this news. “But, sir—”

William held up a hand. “Love, let me finish. I haven’t the

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strength for a fourth course of treatment. I'm going into a hospice and let this run its course."

"Run its course?" Chris gasped. "You'll die."

William nodded. "Yes. With good palliative care and not puking my guts out every ten minutes."

Chris sat quietly, clearly remembering the last round of chemo and radiation therapies. In a small voice he asked, "What about me, sir? I'm sure they won't let me go along."

"I know, pet, and I feel very selfish about doing this. It really is best for us both. This way, you need not tend me as I fail. Before I go, we will find you a suitable top. I'll make some phone calls this evening."

Chris knelt silently, his eyes on the floor. William stroked his thick black hair, trailing his fingers down Chris's neck to the silver collar he'd put there five years ago. It had been good—no, great—for three years, until he'd gotten sick. Three courses of radiation treatment had not managed to rid him of the cancer and the thought of a fourth made him long to die quietly. His only regret was Chris.

"Sir, I don't want to be given away. Maybe I should study to be a nurse and come with you?"

William tipped Chris's face up. He could hear the desperation in his boy's voice. Chris was a kept boy who had never been interested in working for a living. "Darling, I don't have that long. The doctor says a year at most, six months is much more likely."

He hadn't meant to deliver it so bluntly. The tears that streamed down Chris's face made him wish he hadn't. But it was better they have it all out up-front. He pressed his lover's cheek to his thigh and stroked his hair, making soothing noises as Chris sobbed, his shoulders shaking.

William let Chris cry for many minutes, calming and petting

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him. After half an hour, he set a firm hand on his boy's head and said in his sternest voice, "That will be enough, boy." Chris immediately tried to get a grip on himself, taking deep breaths and wiping away his tears.

"Can I come see you? I mean, when you're there?" Chris asked.

"If your new top says so, precious. I won't want you to see the worst of it."

"I don't want a new top, please." He wiped away some of the last few tears and hitched a little. William was proud of how quickly he'd gotten hold of himself.

William nodded. "I know. But I can't just turn you out with no money, no skills, and nowhere to live." He gestured. "Almost everything is going to have to be sold, including the house, to pay for the hospice."

Chris buried his face against William's leg and clung to his calf, a sign of distress that he hadn't exhibited during the entire remission period. William sighed. They had thought he could beat this and so never talked about this possibility. It had haunted him in the dead of night, when he couldn't sleep because he was vomiting from the radiation.

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. Dearest boy, I am sorry that I am frail and mortal. I'm sorry we will never get that trip to London or even another Christmas together. I want to know you are safe and well cared for. I want to know you're loved before I go. I'll make some calls this evening," he repeated. "Is there any top we know that you won't go with?"

Chris shook his head and wiped his face on William's slacks. "I don't know. Only you."

William stood and opened his arms. "Come here, boy."

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Chris rose slowly, scrubbing the heel of one hand across his face, and went into William's arms. William pulled him close and stroked his hair and back some more.

"I love you, Chris. I have loved you for years. These last five have been the best of my life because you were in them and you were mine. Death is just another journey, sweetheart, but it's one I can't take you along on. This doesn't have to be done at once. But you needed to know."

"What am I going to do without you, sir?" Chris asked, the words muffled by William's shirt.

"You're going to live. You're going to love. You're going to serve and be punished when you fail and rewarded when you do well." William lifted his face again and kissed him.

Chris clung in the kiss, turning it from the gesture of affection to something more akin to a good-bye. William suspected most of their kisses would be that way from now on.

"Right now, you're going to go make us supper." Before Chris could protest, he laid a finger across his boy's lips. "I know your cooking is poor. It will improve with practice. You will be getting a lot of practice. We shall keep it simple tonight, hmm?"

"Thank you, Master," Chris said. He sounded appreciative, as if he knew that William wanted to take his mind off their talk for a while, letting it settle in his mind.

William let Chris stay wrapped around him as he led them to the kitchen. He settled himself in a chair and gestured Chris to the stove. "The steaks are in the meat drawer. Set the broiler."

William talked Chris through the easy dinner preparations and fed him by hand from his own plate. Usually, Chris ate kneeling beside his chair. Being hand-fed was a treat for him, a reward that his master was well-pleased.

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After Chris had cleaned the dishes, he came back to kneel by William's chair. William pulled him to kneel up and kissed him, making this one hot and sweet, putting his desire for his handsome boy into the kiss. He nudged for entrance and Chris parted his lips eagerly. Chris's tongue came up to meet his at once, welcoming him in, almost showing him around. He loved these kisses.

When they parted, he smiled. "I think we'll play tonight. I haven't the energy for a full scene, but I think three from the bullwhip should leave you nicely responsive."

"Thank you, Master." Chris bowed his head, like the pretty pain slut he was. William could see the excitement in his eyes. "Whatever you want."

He knew the bullwhip was Chris's favorite but also that the boy couldn't take more than four without fainting on him. Three should leave him begging to climax. He would consider it. Perhaps even a paddling if he had the energy for it. But definitely the bullwhip.

"I want you to scream for me, little bitch," he snarled in Chris's ear. The words alone made Chris shudder and he saw his boy get hard in his jeans. Chris spread his knees wider at once, his eyes closed and his face blissful. Verbal abuse always had that effect.

William smiled down, but kept the dominant growl in his voice. "My sweet whore. You're going to beg me for the whip. You're going to beg me to stop. You're going to beg me to fuck you." Chris never moved out of his perfectly held position, but his cock pressed more against his zipper.

William smiled. It was an impressive cock. He liked his boys well-hung. But tonight, Chris would be getting no pleasure of it until he said so.

William pulled him up and bit his neck sharply. Chris sucked in a breath at the pain and William saw the abortive movement of his

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hips as he barely stopped himself from rubbing against William's body. Chris knew better, but William loved making him so hot he forgot and had to stop himself.

He swatted Chris lightly. "Now, get to the playroom. I'll be along shortly. Be naked and lock yourself in at the wall. Make sure that useless worm you call a cock is soft before I come in." He had his doubts Chris would manage the last. If he did, all well and good. If not, he would simply relieve the boy's tension at the cost of some pain, which Chris would love all the more.

William took a moment to swallow a daytime pain pill. Unlike the night sedatives that knocked him out, this would let him play and enjoy his boy. He didn't like taking too many, since they would lose their effectiveness over time, but he needed to be the strong, commanding master tonight. Chris needed him to be commanding tonight, after the bad news.

He sat for ten minutes, letting the pill work. Then he rose and went to the playroom. Chris waited, on display and chained naked to the wall. His cock was soft, to William's surprise.

William laid out the toys for the scene, then came to Chris with a brass figure-eight. He slid one ring onto Chris's cock, seating it at the bottom. "Boy, this will be much more difficult if you get hard," he warned, feeling the heat pulsing under his hand and bringing Chris awake. With deft fingers, he bent Chris's cock in half and shoved the head through the second ring.

Chris whimpered. "Thank you, Master."

"How did you get soft, boy? Did you masturbate?"

"No, Master. I..." Chris hesitated. "I just thought of a future without you, sir." He sounded almost ready to cry at the thought.

William shook his head. "But that is not tonight, precious," he said, kissing Chris's forehead, wanting to take the sadness from his

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eyes. "Tonight is ours." He dangled the vicious alligator clips in front of Chris, whose nipples went tight almost at once.

William bent to lick them, following his tongue with his teeth until Chris shivered and let out a soft moan. Then he clamped the alligator clips on to the hard peaks. Chris gasped, but said nothing.

"Turn around, sweet. Use your safewords if you need them."

Chris turned, the chains twisting above him. William shook out the whip and snapped it on the floor. The sound had a most salutary effect on his boy, sending shudders through him. Chris moaned again, this time with a small whimper in the sound, and William suspected the chastity device was doing its work. He dared another crack, letting the tip of the fall go off right next to Chris's ear. Chris held perfectly still but William heard the small sob that escaped him.

He snapped the whip again, this time letting the fall come up to lick Chris's back, leaving a bright mark blooming on his shoulder blade.

"One, sir," Chris gasped. "Thank you, sir."

He was lovely with the single mark, but William added a second, relishing the crack and the way the leather flicked over Chris's back leaving scarlet in its wake.

Chris clutched the chains and his knees sagged. William watched his breathing carefully. Chris loved the whip but could only take a little of it. He didn't want the boy to faint. He waited and listened.

"Two...two, sir. Thank you, sir."

William shook out the whip and limbered his wrist. The Quick Sixer was his favorite whip trick and had made more than one sub wet himself in fear. He swung the whip around his head and snapped it six times, starting about a foot from Chris's foot and

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moving up his body to snap just above his head with a sound like a shot. Chris jerked in the chains, startled. William coiled the whip. He knew the boy couldn't take another blow.

"Beautiful, sweetheart," he said as he put it away and got cool, wet cloths for Chris's back. "You did perfectly."

Chris shook under his hands. The bullwhip always took a lot out of him. He slowly calmed down and centered himself again. William felt him relax, his shoulders losing their tension and his breathing becoming more regular.

"Let's get you undone, sweetness." He unfastened the cuffs and rubbed Chris's cold hands. "Poor little titties, all pinched and sore," he whispered, rubbing the tips. Chris hissed under his fingers. "Off they come," he warned and released the jaws of the clips. Chris wailed as blood flowed back into his nipples. William remembered the sensation well.

Chris looked up at him, blue eyes adoring. William smiled at him and kissed him, his mouth gentle on the boy's. He tasted salt where Chris had bitten his lip. He ran light hands over Chris's arms and face, reassuring him.

"I love you, sir," Chris said, when they parted.

"And I you, my boy. I love you as my own heart." He pulled Chris close and held him there, mindful of the marks on his back. "I know exactly what you need right now."

Chris, his teddy bear boy, would need a long cuddle, a lot of attention and an orgasm. Then he would sleep all night in William's arms, never moving out of reach. Chris needed his pain but he needed the cuddles afterward just as much. Chris cuddled close even standing here.

William allowed it for a few moments, then took him to the bedroom and eased him to sit on the bed. "Ice first then loving, my

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sweet teddy bear.” Chris nuzzled him at the use of the nickname.

Chris nodded and shivered as William pressed cold packs to the whip-marks to reduce the swelling and discoloration. William rubbed the goose bumps on his arms and licked at his hard nipples, tonguing the grooves made by the clamps’ sharp jaws.

He watched Chris’s eyes roll up and saw the boy tremble. He was so deep, so overwhelmed in sensation that William could watch him for many minutes, sometimes even hours, delighting in his handiwork and his boy’s pleasure.

He took the cold packs away and said softly, “Get under the covers, sweetheart. You’ve done very well and it’s time for a reward.”

Chris obeyed quickly, sliding under the blankets. William stripped his own clothing off and joined him. He ran his hands over Chris’s lovely face, tracking his high forehead and full mouth. He stroked lower, feeling the collar around the tender column of Chris’s throat. The warm silver always gave him a possessive thrill. He loved seeing it peek out of the collar of Chris’s shirt or touching it, the metal hard next to Chris’s soft skin. He tweaked nipples that he knew had to be sore, and Chris bucked against him, unable to achieve an erection in the device, but aroused anyway.

“Please, sir,” Chris begged, pressing closer.

“What, boy? What do you need?” William licked at the trapped head of Chris’s cock. “Beg me.” The cool skin under his tongue, the soft sponginess of a cock unable to get hard delighted him and he sucked a little, flicking his tongue over the slit.

“Please give me more,” Chris said. “Please, sir. I need more.”

William took his whole cock, device and all, into his mouth. He slid his tongue in the bend the organ made, teased the base and head and sucked hard, in a way that would ordinarily bring Chris

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off. "More, dear boy?"

Chris whimpered under the treatment and the sound was pure music. "Please, sir, let me come?"

"Ahhh." William unfastened the device and freed Chris's cock. It hardened at once, jutting out, ready for his touch. William tasted the head again, hot and hard, the first salty droplets of pre-come leaking over his tongue.

He looked up at Chris. "All right, boy, you may come when I fit the second finger into your ass. Not before. Understand?" He reached for the lube and gooped up two fingers.

Chris took a deep breath. "Understood, sir." William smiled. This was going to be great fun.

He licked the length of Chris's cock, only the shaft, and avoided the head. Then he lowered his mouth to lick Chris's balls as he eased one finger into the boy's ass. He listened as Chris kept his breathing even, but the tension in his boy's thighs and the way his balls drew up, tightening in preparation for orgasm, told him how much work Chris was doing to hold off.

He decided not to torture his boy too long. He was eager to be inside Chris's tight ass. He sucked Chris's cock back into his mouth, taking him deep, letting his tongue press all over the whole organ. He added the second finger.

Chris shot, his whole body spasming, with a shout that almost rattled the windows. He let out a series of smaller gasps as the aftershocks hit, the little spurts that William swallowed against. His boy tasted wonderful. He reached deeper inside, found the soft protrusion of Chris's prostate and stroked it, sparking one last wracking shudder and a tiny dribble of semen across his tongue.

William licked a little longer, then looked up. "My sweet boy. I want to make love to you but find you have almost exhausted me.

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Accommodate me, please?" He withdrew his fingers and wiped them on a bedside towel, then slicked his cock and rolled onto his back. "Ride me, boy," he said, sharply.

Spurred to action, Chris knelt up on the bed and straddled William's hips carefully, making sure not to touch his stomach. William appreciated the consideration. Even with the pain pills, he could not abide having his belly touched. His boy was so perfect. Chris tipped his cock up and eased down on it, engulfing him in tight heat that made him want to pound until he exploded.

Chris took him all, but did not sit on his hips. William used the small distance and thrust up into him. If he did too much of that, he wouldn't last. Chris bent forward, bracing on his hands, and rocked gently.

William pulled him down for a kiss. He thrust into his boy, mouth and ass, relishing the sensitive body above him. After a moment, a wash of pleasure swept away any lingering discomfort. He held still for his orgasm, holding his breath.

Chris sat up and eased off. William could see his thighs trembling with the effort of holding him up. He dropped to the bed beside William.

William rolled over to cuddle him close. Chris snuggled into his arms. He breathed in the scent of his boy's hair, drank in the sensation of his skin. "My own sweet teddy bear," William whispered.

* * *

The next few days were the last peaceful ones Chris was to know. William seemed healthy enough, although he was often tired from making arrangements. Chris hated the arrangements. He

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hated the thought of funerals and auctions and wills. It got to the point that someone saying “arrangement” on the radio or television made him flinch.

He did all of the shopping and more of the cooking. William sat in the kitchen, coaching him, endlessly patient. He treasured those times. Most of all, he watched William, trying to memorize everything about his lover. He wanted to remember it forever. All of it. The way William held a book, the way sunlight fell on his hair. The particular shade of gray his eyes went when he was happy and the sound of his laughter. Chris held these thoughts, going over them like photos in an album when he was alone.

The next step of the nightmare started when William announced he had invited Jonathan Goldberg over for dinner on Monday evening. Everything felt off-kilter all weekend, from the extra cleaning to the special menu. Chris scowled over the sink as William made him wash the dishes by hand before putting them in the dishwasher.

“That’s a stroke tonight, boy. You’re being petulant.”

Chris swallowed. Since he was already onto punishment strokes, he might as well speak his mind. “I don’t like Master Jonathan, sir. He’s arrogant.” He hadn’t had a punishment stroke in three months, so if he was going to get one tonight, he would make it worthwhile.

“That’s two. And you’re right. But that doesn’t excuse your disrespect of a top. I like Jonathan and your kinks are compatible with his tastes. He might do you a world of good, my boy.”

“I don’t want a new top, sir,” Chris said more the pot he was washing than to William.

“It’s not an option, Christopher.”

Chris swallowed hard and shut his mouth. He knew when

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William called him by his hated full name that he was in desperate trouble. He was going to pay tonight. William knew just how to arouse him with pain, but he also knew just how to hurt so Chris did not repeat an error. It had been a long time since he'd been called "Christopher."

William supervised the cooking very closely. Chris thought it was a big waste of time. Special religious diet, of all the dumb ideas. He scowled again, but stirred the broccoli.

The doorbell rang and William left him in charge of the stove. Although tempted, he did not sabotage the food. He had to eat it, too, after all.

He ladled out the food, listening as the men talked in the dining room. When William rang the small silver bell, he carried out the tray with the soup and bread. Once each man had a bowl of soup, Chris returned to the kitchen for the short ribs with carrots.

"Very good, boy. You may eat in the kitchen," William said.

"Yes, Master." Chris left, wishing he could keep an ear on the conversation. He found it uncomfortable to be discussed when he was out of the room.

He stole a last glance at Jonathan as he left. Surely William wouldn't give him to this man. From the impeccably polished shoes to the impossibly coiffed hair, everything about him was wrong for Chris. This was not a top that would let him curl up in flannel pajamas and eat oatmeal in bed with him on cold winter mornings. Jonathan was a vain man and the scenes Chris had seen him play showed he demanded the same attention to appearance from his bottoms.

Even the dinner proved that he was a man devoted to detail. A special menu, plates sterilized before they were fit to hold the fully kosher food, and Chris being banished to the kitchen all told Chris

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this was the wrong top for him.

Chris sat looking at his plate of food. He didn't really want to eat. Just the thought of leaving his William, his comfortable, much-loved William, for the rigid, demanding coldness of the arrogant Jonathan turned his stomach. Chris managed two bites of the spare ribs knowing he would need it. William was going to let Jonathan play with him, test him out before deciding.

He winced at the thought of playing with a top he'd never experienced before and then punishment, too. It was going to be a long night. The bell interrupted his sulking and he cleared the table.

"We'll take dessert after the scene, boy. Leave the dishes and go to the playroom," William said. "Strip and be ready when we come in."

Chris did his best not to droop all the way out of the room.

"Such an attitude," Jonathan clucked. "When he's mine, he will leap to obey or pay the consequences."

"Peace, old friend. Would you not be a bit dispirited if your love had just informed you he was dying?"

Chris winced again at the words and shut the door behind him. He stripped down and settled himself in a comfortable kneeling position to wait. The men came in, silent and almost grim. Chris waited, not anticipating or showing his nervousness.

Jonathan took off his suit jacket and rolled up his sleeves. "Shall we begin, slave?"

Chris rose, keeping his eyes to the ground and walked over to kneel at Jonathan's feet. The big top laid a heavy hand atop his head.

"You're a pretty toy and William needs the security of knowing you're well cared for. But I don't take raw boys. Let me see you.

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Display position.” He removed his hand.

Chris immediately moved his thighs wide apart. He locked his fingers behind his head, with his chin up and his eyes down. He felt very exposed, with his chest and genitals visible.

“Very good,” William said. “Perfect.”

“Don’t praise him for basic expectations,” Jonathan snapped. “You spoil him. Standing display, boy.”

Chris got to his feet, but kept his legs apart and his hands behind his head. He felt like a prize bull being shown off for auction.

“Obedience,” Jonathan ordered.

Chris held still. He didn’t know that position. “I’m sorry, sir?”

“Obedience position. English Obedience?” Jonathan’s voice went sharp and his hand came down hard across the whip welt on Chris’s shoulder. Chris held his position but blushed, ashamed of himself for failing William and making their guest angry.

Jonathan sighed. “Since you’re standing, Whip.”

Chris hoped William wouldn’t let this man whip him. Much as he loved the whip in William’s hands, he didn’t trust Master Jonathan. He took the position at the wall, with his feet braced and his hands planted on the wall. He shook a little, wondering what Jonathan would do.

Jonathan ran his hands over Chris’s back, cool and gentle. He touched the fading bullwhip marks. “Does your master often use single-tails on you?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Pain-slut? Or are you just badly behaved?”

“Pain-slut, sir.”

Jonathan’s hands drifted over Chris’s ass and legs. “What is your favorite?”

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“The dark handled one, sir.” It was the one William had used most recently. He loved the sound of it and the bite.

Jonathan sounded more pleased. “Standing display again.”

Chris returned to the position, still shaking a little. Maybe he wouldn’t be flogged tonight. He steadied more as Jonathan ran his hands over his body, feeling his neck, his nipples, his back. The touch became more intrusive when Jonathan handled his cock and balls as if they were simply fixtures. Chris blushed as he got hard from the touch. Jonathan circled him and spread his ass a little, feeling his cheeks and running one finger up the cleft. He tried to relax when Jonathan slipped a finger into him.

“You have a sweet and responsive body, bare minimal knowledge, and a very bad attitude.” He pressed the finger a little deeper, then withdrew and wiped it against Chris’s thigh. “Present, boy. English Present.”

Chris went to his knees, with them wide apart again. This time he put his hands on his thighs with the palms up. He tried to hold still and breathe deeply, but he couldn’t find his headspace with Master Jonathan. He felt himself tremble.

“Surrender,” Jonathan ordered.

Chris gasped, panicking. He’d never heard of the position. He felt his face flush and his pulse race. He was going to shame William and Jonathan was going to beat him. Then William would add to his punishment strokes. He wouldn’t be able to sit for a week if he did this badly.

But Jonathan just nodded. “Last chance, boy. Humble.”

Chris hung his head, the wave of panic passed. Now he just ached with shame.

Jonathan stroked his hair with a gentleness that surprised Chris. “You are a good boy. You love your master very much and he does

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not use these commands, I am quite certain.” Jonathan stroked the side of his face. “So, then, let us see how fast you learn. Surrender is a simple movement out of Present or Display.”

Chris waited for the directions, passive and quiet.

“Go facedown, wrists and ankles crossed.”

Chris went. He knew the movement wasn’t as graceful as if he’d practiced the position, but he got into it quickly and with no wasted motion.

“Back to Display.”

Chris got back up, on surer ground now. Jonathan petted him again.

“Obedience is also a simple movement out of Display. Wrists behind your back and forehead to the floor.”

Chris obeyed, but his nerves cost him his balance. He knocked his forehead on the floor rather than just pressing it to the wood.

“What are you afraid of, boy?” Jonathan ran a slow hand over his back. Chris shivered under his touch.

“Failing you, sir.”

“A wise answer. Very well. You have performed, if not well, at least adequately. Last position, Humble. You spread your legs and arms wide, spread eagle, facedown.”

This was an easy movement from the current position. Chris went into Humble and lay quietly.

“Very good. Now, back to Present.”

Chris scrambled back up to his knees in time to see Jonathan draw William over to the wet bar for a brandy. He breathed a silent sigh of relief. William never allowed drinking if they were going to play. He wouldn’t be beaten and Jonathan wouldn’t fuck him either. The last thought pleased Chris more than he wanted to admit. The tops talked quietly and Chris strained to hear. After

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they finished the drinks, they came back.

Jonathan bent and kissed Chris's forehead where he'd bumped it. "Be a good boy and maybe he won't give you to Bear." William showed him out, scowling.

When William returned, he checked Chris's forehead and then pulled him up to cuddle on the loveseat in the playroom.

He kissed Chris's ear. "I'm sorry, my boy."

Chris, still feeling a bit shaken by the encounter, held William tightly.

"He's an old friend, but I didn't know his style had become quite that...ritualized. Last time I saw him in a scene, he was wielding a flogger with abandon that would do a maenad proud and his bottom was about to spend all over the wall."

Chris shuddered. "No love. Just commands."

"He has grown colder in the last year," William acknowledged. "He is not a good fit for you, my sweet." He held Chris a few moments more. When Chris relinquished his clutch for something more comfortable, William kissed him. "Put on some clothes now and clean up the kitchen. Then we'll go to bed and cuddle more. You obeyed beautifully."

"Thank you, sir." Chris got up but William pulled him right back down for a kiss.

"You cannot be faulted for what I did not teach you." William followed him down and sat in the kitchen, looking very tired. Chris hated the dark circles under his eyes and the hollowness under his finely chiseled cheekbones. He hurried a bit to get to the promised bed-cuddles. William spoke up as he washed dishes. "Michael will be here tomorrow. He's our new home nurse. He'll come twice a week from now on."

"Yes, sir."

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“He’ll help us stay together as long as we can.” William pulled him close for a kiss as he passed, not caring about the soapy hands.

* * *

Chris had just put breakfast on the table when he heard a knock at the kitchen door. He opened it to see a tall man with a very short Quaker-style beard and dark curly hair caught in a low ponytail. His scrub-top had Spider-Man on it and his bright red stethoscope matched his pants.

“Hi, I’m Mike. I’m here to see Mr. Davis?” He smiled at Chris.

Chris let him in, liking him at once. “He’s in the kitchen. I’m just getting breakfast.” He stole a glance at the nurse as he went to turn off the coffeemaker.

Mike sat quietly with William at the table and talked to him. Chris kept taking glances and saw Mike take a pulse and listen to William’s lungs. He poured three cups of coffee and offered one to the nurse.

“Thanks, kid.” Mike took the coffee and went back to working with William. Chris returned to stirring the hot cereal. Finally, the nurse packed up his things. “Sorry to keep you from breakfast, gentlemen.” He watched as Chris put William’s cereal on the table and then showed Chris the chart he’d put up on the refrigerator.

“You take good care of him for me, okay? I’ll see you Thursday.”

Chris stuttered a moment. “I’ll try. I’m not a nurse, though.”

“It’s easy. See, you can just read it off the chart here.” He showed Chris the medicine schedules and when to take William’s pulse. “You can take a pulse, right?”

Chris nodded and read the chart.

MASTER BEAR

“Easy?”

Chris nodded again.

“Good boy. My number is at the bottom in case of emergency. Take care of him. And take care of you, too.” He went to the door. “Good morning, Mr. Davis.”

Chris smiled a little as the nurse left. He definitely liked Mike.

* * *

The next two weeks slipped by. Mike’s visits became routine, every Tuesday and Thursday. Chris decided he really liked the big nurse. Mike always asked how he was doing, checked on how he’d kept the chart, and generally treated him like a competent person.

William hadn’t said anything more about other tops, so the day he announced that Chris needed to shop for something nice for dinner because Ian Boyd would be joining them was a surprise.

“Yes, sir,” Chris said and went out. Master Ian was all right, for the most part. He had the usual Napoleon complex that a lot of short doms seemed to develop and he wielded a brutal flogger. Chris remembered the night William had let Master Ian borrow him for a wax scene. He had flown very high that night. Ian found his limits easily, pressed them gently, and took him up another level with a single drop of wax at the right moment. He might be all right with Master Ian.

Chris served dinner at the kitchen table, at Master Ian’s request. He joined them for the meal and listened to the doms talk. He ate silently, not looking up from his plate. Master Ian was funny and smart. Part of Chris was pleased with the way he made William laugh, while part ate him with jealousy.

He cleared and cleaned up, then joined the men in the living

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room. William stroked him as he curled up at his master's feet. He looked at Master Ian, subtly, not raising his eyes, but watching the way the little dom mixed a Manhattan for himself and poured some brandy for William. He watched Ian's walk as he brought the brandy over and then made himself comfortable in the other easy chair.

"He is so cute," Ian said, sipping his drink. Chris took that as a good sign they weren't going to play tonight. "God, William, you look awful. I see why you're in a hurry to get him taken care of."

Chris flinched. Funny and smart and no tact at all. He wasn't sure he liked Master Ian so well anymore.

"Chris," Ian said softly, "will you come here, please?"

Chris startled at the request and clung to William's leg. William nudged him away, toward Master Ian. Under that order, he crawled to the little top and knelt in basic Present position. Master Ian stroked his face.

"He's beautifully trained, William. And I remember that night with the wax. He suffers so prettily." Master Ian kept stroking him, sending little shivers down Chris's neck. "Boy, would you like to scene with me again soon?"

Chris said nothing and looked at the floor. He didn't want this little man. He wanted his William, only William. He didn't mind a scene or two, but the thought of doing it without William watching made him go cold.

William cleared his throat. "Answer him, Chris. Truthfully. There will be no punishment no matter what you say."

Chris nodded. "Yes, sir," he said to Ian. "I would like to."

"But not tonight. Tonight, I want to know more about you. Chris, look at me, please. I don't bite and I like to see someone's face when I'm talking. I have trouble talking to hair."

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Chris looked up, made brief eye contact and looked away. Ian never stopped stroking him. He blushed and managed to raise his eyes as far as Ian's shoulders.

"Very good. Just look where you are comfortable, boy. Tell me, what do you like doing for William? Service submission? Sex? Role-play scenes? Speak freely. Tell me about yourself, what you like."

Chris screwed up his face. He took a deep breath and smoothed out his features. "I don't want to, sir."

Master Ian's eyebrow went up. "Indeed." His tone said he was not used to being balked by subs. "I already know you like your pain. I know how much you like, too. But I'd like to know more. Tell me one thing you like. Either in the playroom or out of it."

Chris swallowed and took the out Master Ian offered. "The whip."

Master Ian stroked his face some more. "I like the whip, too. I like watching a sub flinch at the sound of the cracker going off. I like the marks it makes. I like watching my boy fly under its kiss." He smiled and Chris looked at his forearm, studying the smooth play of muscles that came from use and not from a gym. "What's your favorite food?"

"Pizza..." Chris hesitated to say it. William didn't like pizza at all, so he only rarely got it.

Master Ian's hand on his cheek soothed him. "Can you make it? I like good pizza. I like making it, too. Especially with a boy who enjoys cooking."

Chris half-shrugged. "I can. But not as good as Tony's pizza." The little place down the road made the best pizza in town. Chris sometimes thought he could eat an acre of it.

He let his mind wander as Ian talked over his head to William.

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Absorbed in the thought of mushroom and onion pizza, Chris didn't notice when Master Ian leaned forward to kiss him. The barest brush of lips across his cheek made Chris flinch as if Master Ian had slapped him. He steadied himself and Master Ian patted his cheek.

"Such a nice boy. Too nice for someone like Master Bear." Ian looked him over, scrutinizing him, staring into his face and eyes. He let out a long sigh. "Boy, would it be easier if I hauled you into the playroom, flogged you bloody, and told William you weren't good enough for me?"

Chris looked at the floor, embarrassed at his transparency, and whispered, "Probably."

To his surprise, Master Ian leaned in and kissed his forehead. "I know." He pressed his own forehead to Chris's and sighed. "I really do know." He sat up a little, but never took his hand away. "Watching my boy die was one of the hardest things I've ever lived through. And it's got to be just as brutal on you. Let's set William's mind at ease and at least try?"

Chris nodded. Master Ian might be all right. He still really didn't want the little man. But he was willing to try, for William's sake.

"I'm going to kiss you, properly. You can tell a lot about a person from his kiss." Ian tipped Chris's face up and ran his thumb along Chris's lower lip. Then his lips came down, slow and sweet on Chris's own. Chris relaxed into the kiss. Master Ian tasted all right. His tongue tapped gently, as if knocking and asking for entrance. Chris liked that. Some tops just grabbed the hinge of his jaw, forced his mouth open, and plunged in.

He gave himself over to the kiss, letting Master Ian taste him. Ian's tongue went deep, reaching the roof of his mouth and down

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into the corners of his cheeks. He stroked it with his own and sucked it. When they parted, Master Ian was breathing hard and smiling. It wasn't a bad kiss, but Chris felt no desire from it.

"Pick out a movie for tomorrow, Chris. I'll be by for dinner." He patted Chris's cheek and stole a quick peck of his lips. He got up and kissed William, with sweet affection but no heat. "Better yet, I'll be by with dinner." Ian let himself out.

Chris stayed on his knees by the empty chair, not looking at William. His master cleared his throat and Chris looked up to see him frowning.

"Christopher." Chris flinched at the use of his full name. "I am disappointed. You will behave better for Master Ian tomorrow."

"Yes, Master." Chris kept his eyes down and waited to hear what his punishment would be for his bad behavior.

"Come to bed. I'm exhausted."

That hurt most of all.

* * *

Ian came knocking about six o'clock, carrying a large pizza and a box of take-out lasagna for William. Chris let him in and took the food. He served it up on the already set table as he watched Ian kiss William and then help him into the dining room to eat.

They talked of nothing much. Chris listened more than he spoke. He caught Ian smiling at him and did his best to answer with more than a single word when Ian asked a question. His mind was in the playroom. William had told him they would all three be playing tonight.

Master Ian was good and Chris had enjoyed the other scene,

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but tonight, his hands shook as he tried to eat. He didn't have any appetite for the pizza. His stomach lay like a ball of knotted snakes in his middle. He ate a slice anyway, hoping it would help. Master Ian had gone to some trouble for him and it would look ungrateful to not eat.

"Chris," Ian said, "why don't you go to the playroom and center yourself? I think you'll feel better."

Chris stole a look at William, who nodded. He went to the soundproof playroom that had once been a spare bedroom, stripped, and knelt to wait.

As much as he tried to breathe slowly and evenly, he still shook. His breath came in little pants. He closed his eyes and thought of nothing. It only made him think of death, the biggest nothing of them all. He thought of the big nothing his life would be without William.

By the time William and Ian came in, he was crying.

Arms went around him and a low voice murmured comfort. He relaxed into the chest but the touch was all wrong. Ian smelled wrong. Chris took deep gasping breaths trying to bring himself under control, ashamed that he had behaved so badly and disgraced William yet again.

"Baby, it's all right. You cry as much as you need to. It's rough on you, I know, sugar." Ian's words formed a steady drone. Chris tried again with the deep breaths.

A light hand came down on his hair. "Chris," William said softly.

"I'm sorry, Master," he managed. Somehow the sobs seemed less urgent. He leaned on Ian but relaxed under William's touch.

"Darling boy, do you feel well enough to play? Or do we need to make ourselves comfortable and cuddle you?"

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"I'm all right." Chris took a deep breath. This time it really helped. He wiped his face.

Ian held him until the last sobs stopped. "Chris, if you don't want to, we can wait."

"I'm fine." Chris didn't want to. He didn't want anyone but William touching him. But William wanted him to give Ian a chance.

"Here. I think he needs grounding."

Chris looked up to see William hand Ian a paddle. He smiled a little. Just one blow. That was all he needed. He craved it until he ached, the hunger and need surprising him. The night with the bullwhip had been much too long ago.

"Over the spanking bench, boy," Ian said, giving him a soft kiss.

Chris went, the command and sight of the paddle doing more to ground him than all the breathing he could muster. William sat in front of the bench to watch.

"Count them for me, boy," Ian said, his voice a solid command as he brought the paddle down sharply.

"One, sir. Thank you, sir," Chris said. He felt infinitely better. "Two, sir. Thank you, sir," he added when Ian struck him again. He didn't hurt. The paddle just warmed his ass. The fire would come later. Better, oh-so-much better. William had been too sick to play or even punish him. Chris needed the attention like he needed food, almost as much as he needed air.

After ten strokes, his bottom felt like it was glowing. Chris smiled up at William. William returned it. He stroked his crotch to Chris's surprise. The medicine destroyed William's sex drive, most of the time. He must be feeling very good indeed.

"Perhaps I should bring in someone just to spank you. You

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look so lovely when you're deep." The praise glowed even more than his ass.

"Boy, go to the wall and take the Whip position," Ian said, rubbing a gentle hand over his back. "You're grounded so you should find your space nicely now."

Chris rose gracefully and went to the wall. He planted his feet wide and braced with his hands, his bright pink ass on display. All the confusion of the last weeks had melted out of him. Maybe William was right. He usually was.

Master Ian came up beside him. His hands were cool and gentle on Chris's back as he felt Chris's shoulder blades and ribs. "You have safewords, yes?"

"Red and teddy bear." He made sure to give them in that order. The first would pause the scene long enough to correct the problem. The second would end the scene at once.

"All right." Ian shook out the elk-hide flogger and snapped it once. "Use your words if you need them. Count for me."

"Yes, Master Ian." Chris relaxed as much as he could and almost smiled when the flogger thudded across his shoulders. "One, sir. Thank you, sir."

The heavy elk-hide came down again and again. Chris realized he wasn't in the right head-space. He couldn't let go and ride it. He wasn't flying. The blows only hurt, with no pleasure behind them. The flogger hurt enough that he was crying. He almost never cried for a flogger. By the eighth stroke, he regretted the pizza. The tenth stroke landed badly, the edge of one of the blades slicing his skin. "Ten, sir. Teddy bear, sir."

Ian came up behind him and set the flogger aside. His cool hands moved over the unmarked places. "I'm sorry. Hold still."

Chris waited while Ian and William hurried to the first aid kit

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and came back with clean towels and bandages. "It's all right." He liked blood-play well enough but they hadn't negotiated for this.

"It's not all right. Chris, I'm sorry for the clumsy blow. William, I'm sorry I damaged your boy. Let me get him patched up. Do we need to call Mike?"

William shook his head. "No, I don't think so, as long as you can stop the bleeding. Mike will be in tomorrow. He can look at it then." He kissed Chris's neck. "You did fine, sweetheart."

Ian looked ghastly, sick at the harm he had done. Chris felt sorry for the little top. Accidents happened. "I'll be fine, Master Ian," he said. "Thank you." He would need a lot of cuddling tonight and hoped William might be up for some level of sex, or at least give him permission to masturbate.

Ian simply kept applying direct pressure until the bleeding stopped.

* * *

The next day, Mike came in after breakfast time. Chris tried not to move gingerly as he cleared the table, but Mike noticed.

"You okay, Chris?" He sat at the table drinking coffee. He and William had just gone over a treatment plan. Chris had heard a bit of it. "You're favoring that left arm a lot."

Chris took a gamble. "I'm okay. A scene got a little intense last night."

"Let me see," Mike said, opening his bag. "Intense how? Dislocated? Bruised?"

"Cut, sir," Chris said without thinking. He had his shirt half unbuttoned before he stole a look at William. His master smiled and nodded. Chris stripped off his shirt and showed where Master

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Ian had cut him.

Mike undid the bandages and scowled a little. "Should have called me. I'd have come over and stitched you. Now you're going to scar. Sorry."

"We got the bleeding stopped, so I decided to wait until today. It's my fault," William said.

Chris stared, surprised at the generosity. "We can call you? Even for stuff like this?"

"That's why you got my number, kid. And especially for stuff like this. Let me wash up. You go lie down on your stomach and I'll stitch that up."

Chris went to sofa. William smiled from his big easy chair. They heard Mike scrub and then come back in, snapping bright blue rubber gloves onto his hands. He took a hypodermic out of his bag and Chris's eyes went big.

"I have to get a shot? It wasn't a rusty nail or anything."

"Is your tetanus booster up to date?" Mike raised an eyebrow at him and Chris did some fast mental arithmetic. He shook his head and Mike grinned. "Thought not. But not today. Gotta give you a local, kid. Otherwise it hurts like hell." Mike raised the sleeve of his Superman print scrub top and showed a long, twisty scar on his upper arm. "Got fragged back in Desert Storm. And our medic was out of Novocaine. So, I got a bullet to bite on and two gunnys sitting on me to hold me still." He swabbed Chris's back near the gash. "Just a needle stick. You've had worse, I'm sure. Breathe, find your space." Chris found himself slipping into subspace just from the calm confidence in Mike's voice.

The needle pricked his skin and he got hard from the sensation rather than yelping. He lay quietly, breathing, wondering how much of a top Mike was. Mike sent him into subspace with three

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words when even a spanking from Ian couldn't manage it.

A series of small tugs at his back, around the wound that no longer hurt, told him that Mike was stitching. He thought on the idea of him against the wall, Mike's big hands coming down hard on his ass. That just made his cock wake up even more.

"Ian Boyd, huh?" he asked William, careful not to disturb Chris's concentration. "He's usually okay. Bad throw last night?"

"Indeed," William said. "I had hoped..."

Chris relaxed under Mike's hands, not really listening, just letting the sounds of dominant voices wash over him. He'd not been this deep for a long time. Mike felt right touching him. He wanted more touches.

"Come up, boy," Mike said softly. "I'm done. You did just fine."

"Thank you, Master Michael," Chris said, adding the honorific automatically. He blinked a couple times, then covered his mouth.

Mike smiled. "It's fine. You went deep, didn't you?"

Chris nodded. He hadn't been that deep since the night with William and the bullwhip, weeks ago. He felt light in himself, almost floaty.

"Now, keep those stitches dry. I'll check them next time. When you need a shower, have William tape some plastic wrap over them."

"Yes, sir."

Mike left the instructions and checked William one last time before he left. Chris put his shirt on and went to sit at William's feet, a little disconcerted that he had gone so quickly and easily into subspace, with only Michael's hands and voice. It usually required pain, even from William.

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* * *

Mike came twice a week. William didn't have any more tops over for dinner or scenes. Chris liked his quiet life and looked forward to Mike's visits. His cooking improved even as William's appetite decreased. He hated the dark circles under his lover's eyes and the way the last hour until the next painkiller became an exercise in clock-watching.

One Thursday, Mike caught up with him in the kitchen. "He's in a lot of pain today, kid. I'm going to give him a shot. It'll put him out for about four hours."

"He's getting worse," Chris said softly. "He's losing weight. He's weaker and he sleeps a lot more than he used to."

Mike nodded. "Yes, that's how this progresses. He'll need full-time care soon." Chris looked away and said nothing. Mike laid a hand on his good shoulder. "Do you like pizza?"

Chris clenched his hands on the edge of the counter. "My lover is dying and you're asking about pizza?" Too well-trained to raise his voice, he let his anger come out as silent tears.

"Shh." Mike turned him around and folded him into a big, warm embrace. "I'm off after I leave here. I thought you could use some lunch and a chance to be out of the house for a while."

Chris stayed in Mike's arms, feeling really at ease for the first time in months. Mike's strength held him up, the play of muscles under the shirt saying he didn't have to carry everything all by himself, at least for now. He cried a little more, leaving damp spots on Mike's Captain Marvel scrubs.

He finally got himself under control and nodded. "If Master says it's all right."

William cleared his throat from the kitchen door. Chris started

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guiltily, almost leaping out of Mike's arms, and rubbed away the tears.

"I think it would do you a world of good," William said, smiling at them. "Go on. Shoo."

Chris disentangled himself and went to William, dropping to his knees at his master's feet. "I'm sorry, sir."

William laid a hand on his head and stroked him. "Nothing to be sorry for, dearest. Now, if you two will put me back to bed, I'll take that shot, please, Mike."

"Of course, Mr. Davis."

Chris rose and supported one side while Mike took the other. William walked carefully, as if every step hurt him. They eased him to the bed and Chris helped him lie down as Mike went for his bag. William caught a missed tear by the side of Chris's nose.

"It's all right, my boy. This can't be easy on you. Take all the comfort you need, from anyone you need it from."

"Only want you, Master." Chris smiled as William pulled him down for a kiss.

Mike returned and waited. He smiled and took out the hypo. "Let's shoot you up so Chris and I can sneak off to the No-tell Motel for a secret rendezvous," he teased.

Chris stifled a laugh at Mike's silliness. "You rest, sir. I'll be home soon."

"I'll call if I need you." William's weak reach in the direction of the phone turned to a snuggle of his pillow that Chris knew well. He had spent many nights inside that snuggle and missed it now that William hurt too much to endure anything touching his stomach.

"Yes, sir." Chris followed Mike out to his bright green compact car. The big nurse unlocked the doors and put his bag in the

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backseat.

“How do you like your ‘za?” Mike asked as he buckled up. “And where do you like it from?” He put the car in gear and rolled down the drive.

“Tony’s just a few blocks down? I like their veggie.”

“Good choice. I’m a carnivore myself.” Mike gave him a smile.

Chris felt an impish smile spreading over his face. “Half and half?”

“Suit yourself. I was going to pop for two smalls.” Mike smiled again. “You’re cute. William’s a lucky man to have you. A lot of cute boys bail at the first snuffle.”

“Not me. He’s...” Chris wasn’t sure he could explain, so he summed up with a cliché, “...everything to me.” There was no way to explain the whole history to Mike, about being kicked out of the house, about drifting from top to top in the scene.

William had taken him in during one of his unmastered periods when he’d been working as a cash-register jockey. While not a wealthy man, William lived comfortably enough. He’d inherited the house from his parents and his work as a library director brought in more than enough to live on. Chris enjoyed his days at home and his nights with William. He ran his fingers over the collar. His whole world lay sleeping under a net of drugs, dying of his own body eating itself. He wrenched away his thoughts as they pulled into the pizza place’s parking lot.

Mike took him in, ordered the pizza and drinks. They filled their cups at the fountain and Chris sipped his pop as they waited.

“So, do you work?” Mike asked. “You’re always home when I come by.”

“No. Just for William. Taking care of his house.” Chris hid his confusion under a drink of pop. He hated small talk.

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"You're lucky. I'm sorry we had to meet under bad circumstances." Chris nodded and studied his hands. He didn't want Mike's pity. "I know this is a difficult time for you, and I'm here to take care of you as much as William."

"I am so afraid," Chris whispered to his hands.

"I know you are. You'd be silly if you weren't. And you're neither silly nor stupid. So tell me what you're afraid of...in just a second." Mike got up and came back with the pizza. He set the pies in the middle of the table and slid a slice of the vegetable one onto Chris's plate.

"Being alone," Chris said. He knew Mike would pick up on the conversation exactly as he had left it.

"Yes. I'll hazard you haven't many friends? Many subs don't."

"Not really." Chris stared at the pizza. The thought of putting anything in his mouth turned his stomach.

"I'd like to be one. You need one badly. You need to get a support system in place so that you aren't totally alone."

"I'd like you to be, too. Do you have a sub?" he asked. He had to know.

Mike's face fell a little and he looked very sad. Chris wanted to kiss him and see if it took some of the sadness away. "No. I'm nobody's master. I haven't been for quite a few years now."

"You were a good one," Chris said quietly. "I can tell."

"Let's get acquainted." Mike took a determined bite of his pizza and deliberately turned the conversation to trivial things, books and movies, hobbies and television.

Chris enjoyed listening to Mike talk about his interests, but he caught himself flirting. He saw Mike smile a time or two, but otherwise, he spared Chris the embarrassment of responding to the flirt.

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“You’re a quiet sort.” Mike scooped another piece onto Chris’s plate, clearly without thinking about it. Chris loved how Mike slipped naturally into taking care of him. The sub that made him look so sad was a fool to have left such a good thing, Chris decided.

“I don’t talk much. I’m not very interesting.”

Mike nodded. “Quiet is good. Just being quiet with someone is a powerful thing.”

“With someone being key.”

“Yes, that is key. But, Chris”—Mike laid one big hand over Chris’s—“alone isn’t all bad.”

“It’s kind of bad for me. I’ve never worked a real, serious job. I probably don’t even know how to job hunt anymore.”

“William will make some provision for you to get on your feet, I’m sure. How’s your education?” Mike took the last piece of the Meat Special.

“High school. I was pretty average.”

“Think about what your skills are, and your interests. We’ll talk more later. Right now, you’re getting edgy and I have an appointment of my own.” Mike made a face. “I have to go to the dentist. I hate the dentist.”

Chris stifled a giggle at the way this big handsome man turned into a petulant six year old at the thought of the dentist. He stacked plates and made sure all the trash was picked up.

“Let me get you home. You’re such a sweetie.” They drove back in comfortable silence and Mike let him out. “I had a good lunch. I’ll see you Tuesday.”

“Thanks. See ya.” Chris let himself in, feeling better than he had since William had gotten sick. He cleaned up a little, dusted and straightened the playroom. He started supper and had a smile

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and kiss for William, who came in and sat at the table.

“Did you have a good lunch, sweet?”

“Yes. Michael is very nice.”

“That’s good. We’ll have some company next week. Master Steven is interested in you. But he wants to know more about you before any scenes.”

Chris nodded, hating the getting acquainted part. Master Steven scared him, all black and towering with a commanding voice that could clear the club in ten seconds. He’d seen Master Steven do it once, too, when a candle scene got out of hand and started a fire. The great stentorian voice had flushed men out from every nook and corner of the club, sending them out the exit in various stages of undress, to mill around the courtyard until the manager gave the all-clear. The fire brigade had shown up after it was out and credited Steven with having saved several lives.

“Yes, sir. I’ll do my best.” He ladled up the stew he’d made.

“I know you will, my boy.”

* * *

Mike took him out for pizza again the next Tuesday and Chinese on Thursday. Chris enjoyed spending time with Mike, who knew when to be quiet and when to be silly. Both made him feel better, even though he felt guilty about leaving William alone. William always had a pain shot and slept through the outings.

“Why do you always have superheroes on your scrubs?” Chris asked over the Chinese. He loved seeing who Mike would be wearing with each visit. He liked Superman best. When Mike showed up in the scrubs with lots of S’s on them, Chris felt as if he had his own big, powerful guardian to protect him and just him.

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“To remind myself that my patients are the heroes. They may see me as their superhero, taking away their pain or making everything better, but they are the real heroes. Even those like William who can’t fight anymore are still heroes, especially when they choose a graceful exit instead of a protracted and messy one.”

Chris dropped his eyes back to his food and went quiet. He didn’t want to talk about that particular subject. Mike understood. They finished lunch in silence and Mike took him home.

Once back, Mike went to check on William. When he came back to the kitchen Chris was holding the painkiller bottle. He looked at it thoughtfully and voiced the thought that had been taking shape for a few days.

“You know, if I decided to follow William and left a note saying to cremate me with him, you’re the only one who would care? The other tops would notice and I’ll just bet Master Jonathan would write it into his next sub’s contract. But only you would care.”

“Chris, I’m sure that’s not true.” Mike moved closer and Chris saw him tense as if preparing to grab the bottle. Chris set the medicine down.

“Why not? I don’t work. I don’t have friends. My family doesn’t give a flying fuck since they kicked me out for being gay. William is my whole life. Boys like me, we’re invisible and disposable and no one knows or cares.” Chris slammed his fists into the kitchen counter. He did it again and again, until he shook with a rage that terrified him.

Mike was there, holding him. “Chris, it’s all right. Anger is all part of the grief process.”

“Maybe I should. Maybe I should just leave that note.” He sighed and buried his face in Mike’s chest. “But I’m a coward.

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And I love him too much to leave him first.”

Mike said nothing but held Chris in his arms until he stopped shaking.

* * *

Chris made a roast the night Steven came over. He served, trying not to be too timid, but he still caught himself scuttling and ducking and trying to be invisible. Steven scared him until he felt all woozy. After dinner, as the men drank tea, he sat at William’s feet, trying not to sweat.

“Chris, please come here,” Master Steven rumbled. Chris cowered, trying to shrink behind William’s legs. Steven chuckled, and asked, his tone gentler, “Am I that terrifying, little one?”

Chris eased out and nodded.

“Then you will obey perfectly and not make me angry, yes?”

“Yes, sir.” Chris couldn’t argue with that logic. He crawled across the living room floor to Master Steven’s feet and knelt up. Steven took his chin in one huge hand, smiled, and kissed him. Taken aback by the gentleness of the kiss, Chris opened, inviting Steven to come in deeper. The big top entered his mouth, tasting him, feeling him so delicately that Chris moaned against his tongue before he realized what he had done.

Steven was still smiling when they parted. He ran one thumb down the side of Chris’s face. “William tells me you like being bound. Will you trust me to tie you?”

Chris, back in his element at last and hoping for more kisses, possibly more of everything, smiled back. “Yes, sir.” Master Steven wasn’t quite so scary after all.

He followed William and Steven into the playroom. William

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made himself comfortable and Steven set about choosing the ropes from the selection in the cabinet. He held up a hank and started undoing it. "Blue ropes would be lovely with your eyes."

He found the midpoints of the two ropes in the hank and looped them together, starting a new tie that Chris wasn't familiar with. He breathed slowly, relaxing as Master Steven worked.

"I enjoy rope bondage." Steven pulled the loops through each other, working down his chest. "I like having a beautiful immobilized sub to stroke and arouse." The ropes slid silkily against his skin and Master Steven's deep voice soothed him.

The ropes encompassed him, holding his hands behind his back, giving his torso definition. They zigzagged, each looping into the one above it, until Master Steven tied off a loop for his cock and then another for his sac. A knot went over his hole as Steven snugged it up tight and fastened it to the wrist ties.

Chris felt beautiful, desirable, and Steven's words only reinforced the idea. He stroked Chris through the ropes, teasing the general erogenous zones and exploring places Chris had never thought of as erotic until tonight. He never stopped smiling.

"Talk to me, boy. Tell me how it feels."

"Very good, sir." Chris could manage no more. He simply stayed in the ropes and waited for the next touch.

Master Steven stroked the insides of his arms, making him shiver. "You are lovely like this. I knew you would be." He brought one big hand down on Chris's ass, tightening the ropes and jarring the knot, which sent a wash of sensation over Chris. He stroked Chris's cock, running one finger along its length and circling the head.

He looked over at William. "William, may I make him come?"

William smiled. "If he is willing, absolutely. Chris?"

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Chris just nodded.

Steven's hands, huge and powerful, roamed all over his body, from knees to neck, always gentle. Chris breathed, secure in his space tonight. Steven could be a good master.

When Steven grasped his cock and stroked, Chris gasped and thrust into his hand.

"Boy, do you want a finger or two?"

"Please, sir?" It almost always took penetration for him to come these days. William had trained him well.

Steven unfastened the rope that came up between his buttocks and untied the knot over his anus. He wrapped each end around one of Chris's legs and secured it above the knee. Chris listened and heard the lube cap open.

Steven returned to stand in front of him. He pulled Chris close and eased one thick well-lubed finger into his ass. He stroked Chris's cock in the other hand.

"Come when you need to, beautiful boy."

Within seconds, Chris came, his orgasm sending him to lean against Master Steven, shuddering. The big man supported him patiently, seeming to enjoy the contact. Chris rested there a while. He could get used to this. Steven didn't scare him as much now. His deep voice was more soothing than terrifying and his height and breadth only made him feel secure, strong enough to take care of his man, like Mike.

Steven held up his hand and Chris licked his come away. Steven kissed him as he eased his finger out, then went to wash his hands.

"You're very sweet." Steven started untying him, rubbing each area as he removed the ropes. "Let's get your blood flowing again, shall we?"

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Chris stood quietly, focusing on his breathing. He could live with Steven, he decided. He knew what William had seen as well.

Once he was free, Steven kissed him one last time and escorted him back to sit at William's feet. Chris curled up there, just soaking up the smell and feel of his lover, a little light-headed, as he always was after a great scene.

"Keep me under consideration, dear," Steven told William. "He's too tender a morsel for Master Bear. I would take care of him and love him well." He bent in and kissed William's cheek, then kissed the top of Chris's head. "Thank you for a lovely evening, but you are both fading fast, my friends. I'll show myself out."

"Thank you, dearest," William said, patting Steven's hand. "Thank you for everything." Steven left them sitting there and they listened to his car pull out of the drive.

William stroked his hair and tipped his face up. Chris saw his smile. "You did beautifully, my boy. Steven seems to work well for you."

Chris nodded. "I like him, sir." The words would have been unthinkable a few hours earlier. Now, they were the simple truth.

"Not so scary after all?" William teased. "He's a good man. But I get the feeling he bored you. We haven't done a lot of kinbaku like that."

"No, sir, and it took a while. I stayed in my space." Chris tried not to make it sound like an accomplishment. Before William had gotten ill, there had been whole days spent in subspace. Now staying down for a single scene felt like a challenge.

"Of course I'm not terribly exciting myself these days." William ghosted a kiss over his lips. "I'm sorry, darling."

Chris laid his head in William's lap and tried to decide whether

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or not to tell him about Mike. If he did, how would he broach it?

William's finger played in his hair. "We need to talk, love, and seriously." Chris shivered. The things they had put off could wait no longer. William went on, remorselessly. "My will is made out. I will be cremated. You may do as you like with my ashes. Scatter them, keep them, use them on the roses. I hear potash is very good for roses," he added with a smile. "You've been seeing a lot of Mike. I approve."

"Yes, sir. I like him." It wasn't the opening he had hoped for but he might manage.

But William went on and he missed his chance. "How well? Better than Steven?"

Chris nodded. "Much better. We both like the same movies and he fumbles his chopsticks on the orange chicken just to make me laugh."

William smiled. "Good. Keep seeing him, with my blessing."

Chris gathered his nerve and blurted, "I might love him." He regretted the words as soon as they were out of his mouth. He looked at the floor, waiting to be punished.

William smiled as he lifted Chris's face back up. He kissed Chris deep. "That is wonderful. The best news I've had in weeks. No more tops coming to dinner. Although, we might have Mike over?"

Seeing William wasn't angry at all, Chris brightened. He nodded but still said nothing.

"Darling, were you afraid of hurting me by telling me this? I've been aching for weeks with the fear of placing you with a master you don't love."

Chris kissed his fingers. "I wanted you to know I still loved you, too."

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William shook his head, still smiling. "I know you do, sweetie. You'll love me the rest of my life." He tugged the loop of Chris's collar and Chris knelt up. William pulled him into an embrace. "I'm sorry I am so ill, love. I would take you to bed and make love to you, just to show you I still know your heart."

"Don't be sorry, sir."

William's smile went sad. "I am. I don't want to leave you. You are my only regret. Not having loved you, never think that," he added as Chris looked back at the floor. "But that I could not love you forever."

Chris nuzzled up, kissing his neck and ear. William just cuddled him closer.

"I'll speak to Michael," he promised.

"Thank you, sir." This had gone better than Chris had dared to hope. He was careful not to put any weight on William and hurt him, but he remained in his beloved master's arms for several minutes.

"I want you happy, precious. That's the only thing left that I want." William yawned. "Help me to bed, sweet. Watching you play has exhausted me as much as it entertained me."

Chris nodded and helped him up. William got into bed and Chris brought him a pain pill.

"Come cuddle," William invited. "I'm feeling no pain tonight. I suspect my own endorphins are as active as yours right now. I do love you, Chris."

"My master," Chris said, settling under the blankets.

* * *

Chris found his life narrowing even more. Caring for William

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took most of his time. He made one grocery trip a week. Seeing Mike a couple times a week was the high point. He looked forward to the lunches. But another hunger had been growing in him, spurred by the evening with Master Steven.

One lunchtime as they pulled up in front of their favorite Italian place, Chris wet his lips nervously and decided the time had come to ask for something for himself. When Mike turned off the car and glanced over at him, he grabbed the nurse's face and kissed him.

Mike let him for a moment and then looked at him, smiling but surprised. "Chris? What do you need?"

Chris scooted a little closer, finding the console and gearshift in his way. He mentally cursed bucket seats, but never let go of Mike's face. "Just touch me?"

Mike moved over himself, flipped the console back out of the way, and wrapped an arm around him, pulling him close into his side. "We have permission, you know. William said we could." He kissed Chris's lips, and Chris opened for his tongue.

Chris luxuriated under the kiss, tasting Mike seriously for the first time. He barely felt Mike's hands moving over his face and back. His cock woke, as if from a long sleep, and demanded satisfaction, at once if not sooner. It wanted its own share of the kiss.

"Can we take this more private?" Mike asked. "The parking lot of Mama Fiorella's doesn't strike me as the place for a romantic tryst."

Chris nodded. "Anywhere with you."

Mike drove them to a cheap apartment in the student section. He led Chris up a rickety stair to an attic apartment that had been sparsely furnished sixty years ago. The iron-framed bed was a double, but the whole place smelled unused, almost forgotten.

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Small and empty, it didn't seem to suit Mike at all. Chris wondered if it was his place, or just a place he brought tricks.

"You live here? You never moved after school?" Chris looked around the tiny room, standing in the fall of sunlight from the lace-curtained window.

Mike stood in the center of the room, staring at him, clenching and unclenching his fists and breathing very hard. "No. But I use it when I need it." He pulled Chris in, his hands hard and hot on Chris's arms. "Chris, how much do you need? Before we go any further at all, I have to know. Because once we start, we aren't negotiating or stopping for anything."

"I want you to fuck me. Hard." Chris laid a hand on the crotch of Mike's purple cotton pants. Warm and hardening, Mike's cock rose to meet him.

"So unprofessional. Such a bad friend to take advantage," Mike said, before lowering his mouth to devour Chris's, feasting on his lips and throat. He tore at Chris's shirt, shoved at his own pants and Chris's jeans in turn.

"Don't care. I won't tell," Chris managed, his own hands trying to get Mike out of the ridiculous scrub top with little gray Hulks all over it. They fought their way out of the clothing to tumble on the big iron bed. The mattress and elderly springs groaned under them.

Chris ended up on top, straddling Mike and kissing him, his hands all over the big nurse's body, playing in the thatch of black chest hair that thickened to almost a pelt at Mike's crotch. He rubbed his own very hard cock against Mike's, drawing a low growl from Mike.

Mike rolled them over so he was on top and stroked Chris's slender, smoother body. "So pale. Just the stitches," he mumbled, licking at Chris's nipples. "My boy's bottom was never anything

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but pink.”

Chris said nothing, but raised his arms above his head and grasped a bar at the head of the bed. Mike just stayed on top of him, kissing him all over and exploring his body. After a moment, Mike looked up and saw his hands. He clamped one big hand down, circling both of Chris’s wrists, holding him immobile.

“Is it a top you need or just a lover?” The dominant tone in his voice almost sent Chris into subspace then and there. He fought it. Today he was just Chris, nobody’s boy or sub.

“Just a lover,” Chris whispered, feeling bold just for voicing it. “William is...my top.”

Mike let go of his wrists and the demanding kisses turned very sweet. “I had hoped you would say that. I’ve wanted you from the moment I saw you.”

Chris smiled at him. “Same.”

Mike grasped his cock in one hand and stilled his hips. “How long has it been?”

“Years...”

Mike looked started for a moment. “Years since you had anyone else. Surely William has made love to you more recently than that.”

“But he hasn’t fucked me,” Chris insisted.

Mike thrust against his belly. “Just hard and rough and ready?”

Chris nodded. Mike knew exactly what he wanted. Everything would be fine. The next kiss was harder, less sweet and more demanding. Chris met it with the same wild urgency, almost whimpering when Mike got up.

“Safety first, babe.” Mike kissed him and then went to rummage in his bag. He dropped a strip of condoms and a bottle of lube on the nightstand. “Roll over, brat,” he teased. “A fucking you

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want, a fucking you'll get."

Chris rolled over fast, lifting his hips and wiggling a bit. Mike swatted him for the impudence and then ran two rough fingers down the crack of his ass, slathering lubricant over his hole. Both fingers went straight into him, startling him into a gasp, as Mike ripped open a condom with his teeth and rolled it on one-handed.

Chris watched over his shoulder, his eyes wide. "Yeah, give it to me."

Mike parted his legs and spread his ass. He removed his fingers and Chris almost cried as the big, blunt head of his cock pressed slowly inward. Mike couldn't be compelled to move faster. He took the entry at his leisure, savoring every inch of the penetration. Chris clutched the bars above his head and breathed against the slow burn in his ass.

"Easy does it. Want to feel you, all of you." Mike rubbed his shoulders and arms.

Chris lifted up, trying to get more. He felt Mike slide all the way in. The big man's hairy thighs against the back of his own made him gasp and count backward from a hundred to keep from coming there on the spot. He wanted the fucking badly enough that he held off.

"You feel great." Mike made a small motion that left Chris whimpering with frustration. "So good. I won't last if I pound." He put his weight on Chris and kissed his neck and shoulders.

"Should have my ring," Chris said. "Keep going...long as you can. Hard."

After another moment, Mike moved. "Hard, you said?" He grasped Chris's hips and shoved, slamming his groin into Chris's ass. "Hard enough?" He pounded at Chris's ass.

Chris could no longer form words as the colors and light burst

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inside his eyelids. He could only lie still and moan under the exquisite torment. He muffled what sounds he could in the pillow and never let go of the bars.

“Fuck. Tight and hot and so good!” Mike plunged in, grinding as deeply as he could, and then held still for a long moment, shuddering.

“Yeahhhh.” Chris sighed. He wanted Mike to move some more, to stay hard in him for a long time. But that didn’t feel likely. Mike was already wilting.

Mike waited another minute, then pulled out and chucked the condom. He rolled Chris over and stroked one finger up his cock. “You didn’t come yet?”

Chris shook his head, aching from the touch of that finger. Mike rummaged again and came up with a mint-flavored condom. He slid it on and followed it with his mouth.

Chris relaxed under that touch. “So nice.” He sighed, coming very soon as Mike’s tongue swirled around his shaft and worked over the head.

Mike peeled that one off, too, and then came up for more kisses. They lay together in the old iron bed and Mike let Chris cuddle close. He burrowed in, smelling and trying to memorize the feel of Mike.

“Chris, are you all right with this?”

Chris nodded and gave him more kisses, content just to lie there in golden sunlight, enjoying a few moments of selfish pleasure.

After a while, Mike stretched. “Time to get back.”

Chris nodded agreement and rolled out of bed. He collected the clothing they had strewn over the whole bed-sitting room. They dressed in silence. Mike ran his thumb over Chris’s collar.

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"I was a bad friend and very unprofessional today."

"I won't tell," Chris reassured him.

He kissed Chris. "Anything you need, you just ask, all right, sweetheart?"

They went back to the house, Chris feeling better than he had for weeks.

But once home, seeing William's angular face made almost gaunt by the disease, relaxed in a drugged sleep, the weight of his world crashed in on Chris again. William was dying. There was no escaping that fact as he stood in the darkened bedroom, looking at his master's wasted form, smelling the sickroom smell that William seemed to exude.

He didn't feel guilty about Mike. William had told him to take what he needed. He needed a man. He needed a friend. And he had needed that orgasm today like none other. It had been weeks and he hadn't asked William if he could relieve his own desires. Mike was young, vital and made him feel alive. While he would never leave William, he needed them both right now.

Chris knelt beside the bed and stroked William's hair, his touch light so as not to wake the sleeping man. "I love you, sir. I'll stay until you don't need me anymore." He pressed his lips to William's cheek and got up. One sharp blue eye opened and fixed him. He froze.

"My boy," William said. His voice had grown as thin as his body in the recent days. Chris hated the weak sound of it.

Chris went back to his knees beside the bed. "Yes, sir?"

"We're going out on Saturday night. To the club." William stroked his face.

Chris looked at him, surprised at this announcement. "Are you going to be up for that, sir?"

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William smiled. "Leave that to me. Our nurse has arranged it all, including enough stimulants to get me there."

"Will he be there?" Chris asked, hoping to watch Mike in action, maybe even enjoy a scene with him.

"Unlikely. I am taking you to meet Master Bear."

"Yes, sir." Chris hid his horror at the statement. The other tops had made Master Bear sound like a threat, someone who chewed bottoms up and spat them out if they didn't meet his standards. But William knew best, always.

* * *

Saturday night came around. Chris dressed slowly. It was the last time he would accompany William to the club. He knew that. The last night he would kneel at his beloved master's feet in front of others. A selfish part of him wished William felt much better and would flog him in front of the other men. That seemed unlikely. Chris leaned in to the mirror and added eyeliner. William always liked him just a little androgynous.

Chris finished dressing and went to the front room for inspection. His leather pants hung loose where they normally clung. William slept so much that he missed meals. Chris just didn't feel much like eating alone. The mesh shirt still looked good. He settled the headband with the leather bear cub ears on his head. William had found them and thought they were the perfect touch for his teddy bear boy. He always felt a little silly wearing them.

William smiled from his armchair. He looked pale and fragile in the leather tuxedo, almost wasted, his muscle tone mostly vanished from too many hours in bed. "Ready, my dear?"

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“Yes, sir.” Chris came and knelt by the chair. William stroked his face and bent for a kiss. Chris hoped William would let him get off tonight. He hadn’t had an orgasm since Mike. His body, almost hibernating, had been reawakened first by Steven and then by Mike, until the need for sex burdened him throughout the day. William was too sick to do more than cuddle and Chris hadn’t asked permission to take care of things himself.

“You look adorable.” William stole another kiss. “I need you to drive, boy.”

Chris nodded. “Yes sir.” He took the keys and helped William to his feet. After getting William into the car, he drove very carefully to their club. They hadn’t been in over a year, not since William’s second remission.

He stole a glance at William at the stoplight. His lover leaned against the door, his knuckles white on the handle and his face almost gray.

“Are you okay, sir?” Chris asked. “I can take us home.”

“No, my dear. I’m not okay. But I need to do this.”

“Yes, sir.” Chris went quiet as he parked. He helped William out and took them into the club.

“I have a room reserved for tonight,” William told the host. They found themselves in a small, private room near the back of the club. Only a large chair sat in the middle of the room. William took the seat and Chris shed the mesh shirt and went to his knees beside it.

“Beautiful, darling boy.” William kissed him. A knock interrupted them.

Master Jonathan came in, scowling at William. He bent in to kiss William and laid a hand along William’s face. “You should be in bed,” he said. Chris caught a glimpse of him feeling William’s

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face and throat as though hunting for a pulse.

"I'm sleeping the end of my life away, hopelessly addicted to morphine. I will have one last night as myself." The edge in William's voice told Chris that Master Jonathan had prodded just a little too much.

"As you like it, old friend." Jonathan laid a hand on Chris's head. "Have you chosen yet?"

William nodded. "I have. Chris will be well cared for."

"Be a good boy," Jonathan said, tugging Chris's hair. "And you, take care of yourself."

William drew Jonathan down for a long kiss. "I love you, Jonathan."

Jonathan stood and looked for a long minute. "Always, William. *Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash sh'mei raba b'al'ma di v'ra khir'utei v'yam'likh mal'khutei b'chayeikhon uv'yomeikhon uv'chayei d'khol beit yis'ra'el ba'agala uviz'man kariv v'im'ru.*"

William responded, "Amen. May his great name be blessed forever and ever."

Jonathan kissed him again and left quickly.

"Sir?" Chris asked. "What was that?"

"The Kadish, the Jewish Mourning Prayer. If I remember, the first part is about exalting and sanctifying the name of God in the days of my lifetime and the life of Israel. Later, it talks about there being abundant peace from Heaven. Jonathan's wish for both of us, my boy."

Another knock came. Ian Boyd came over and kissed William. They chatted.

"Have you found someone for him?" He stroked Chris's hair. "I'm really sorry."

William nodded. "I'm sorry it's not you, Ian. But I think he'll

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be just fine.” Chris breathed a sigh of relief. Ian was all right for a scene, but he needed heat and passion. He wondered who William had chosen. Only Steven was really left.

“I’m glad.” Ian bent in for another kiss. “I love you, William. I’ll light a candle for you.”

William smiled. “I love you, Ian. You who have loved me in life will not abandon me to torments in death, I’m sure.”

Ian nodded, his face tight, and left.

Chris understood then. William had needed to come tonight to say good-bye. He was seeing each man, letting each know how he felt, and receiving their wishes for a good journey out of this life. Chris bit his lip as his eyes pooled. He swallowed hard when a tall bearded man, wearing a bear mask came in.

He stole a few curious looks at the much-threatened Master Bear. The mask left his mouth free and he kissed William carefully.

“Is it time, old friend?” His voice rumbled very low, lower than Steven’s, but comforting.

William nodded. “It is.”

“You are not alone. We are here and the beloved dead await you. Go from love into love.” He kissed William again.

William laid a hand on Chris’s head. “This is my boy, Chris. We have spoken of him.”

Chris curled in on himself a little, wishing he could be inconspicuous. Master Bear looked him over.

“Yes. He’s beautiful, William. You should have brought him around before now. Boy, would you spread out please, so I can see more of you? Present, please.”

Chris did the position perfectly, feeling the stretch in the insides of his thighs. Master Bear’s eyes were hidden behind black

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cloth near the snout of the mask, but he felt the weight of them on him.

“Thank you, boy. Oh William. I see why you worry so.” Master Bear gasped and Chris looked up despite himself to see the big top stripping off his leather gauntlets to feel for William’s pulse. “Your color is terrible. Are you—”

“You take him. Love him.” William gasped the words, clutching Bear’s wrist, his face gray as he gasped for air.

Master Bear eased him to the floor. “Boy, go get Dr. Goldberg. Master Jonathan. He’s not far from the door.”

Chris staggered to his feet, staring as Master Bear began CPR on William. He fled out the door. Master Jonathan was indeed near the door, drinking water and tapping a flogger on his thigh as if looking for a sub to use it on.

“Please, sir,” Chris gasped.

“Boy, where’s your master? Are you all right?”

“He needs help. In the room.”

Master Jonathan turned and almost ran. Chris felt the world go gray and swimmy around him and he clutched a barstool to stop himself from falling. Master Bear was there somehow, folding him into big arms.

“Come back in,” he said softly, leading Chris back in. Two subs were doing CPR under Master Jonathan’s orders as two more wheeled in the club’s defibrillator. “The medicine stopped his heart, Chris. Jonathan may be able to get him back. The paramedics are on their way.”

Chris just clung to Master Bear and watched. The machine powered up and Master Jonathan rubbed the paddles together.

“Clear,” he barked and the subs backed away from William.

The electric shock wracked William’s body, but nothing

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happened. Jonathan hit him again with the charge. On the third, a distinct smell of urine filled the air and Master Bear pulled Chris out of the room.

"I'm sorry, boy. It's going to be a long evening talking to paramedics and doing paperwork. I'll take you home afterward. You're his next of kin, yes?"

Chris nodded. "Power of Attorney and all." He couldn't cry. He could only cling. Master Bear didn't seem to mind. Chris let the man's big, powerful frame support him.

"He gave you to me tonight, you understand that much, yes?" Chris nodded again. "I'll take care of you until the memorial service and we'll go from there."

"All right." Chris found the tears and cried into the front of Master Bear's very soft black shirt. Low growls of comfort soothed him until ambulance sirens broke the night.

Hours later, closer to dawn than midnight, Chris stood awkwardly in the middle of Master Bear's living room. He remembered very little of the rest of the night, other than an endless stream of official people asking nosy questions and making him sign form after form. Right now, he wobbled on his feet, too wrung out to even take in his surroundings.

The big top came back with a pile of things. "I realize this is short notice. You can go move out of William's house later today. Get any knickknacks you need. Do you have a friend you can call to help you move?"

Chris thought of Mike and nodded.

"You can have the spare bedroom. Here are pajamas, a towel, and washcloth. Spare toothbrush, but you'll have to use my toothpaste. I only have one bathroom."

"Thank you, sir."

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"I know it's late and you've had a very, very awful evening. But, we need to talk before we sleep. You are my responsibility, but you are not my sub. I require you to clean up after yourself, and I'd like you to make dinner if you don't mind."

Chris nodded. "My cooking is only passable, but I will, sir."

"You may contact any friends you like. Your cell phone or the house phone, within reason. Any calls to other continents will require reimbursement. You have run of the TV and stereo. We will be attending the memorial service, when the date is set. I'm one of the executors of William's will and will be busy until then with work and that responsibility."

Chris nodded.

Master Bear put a large hand on his shoulder. "Chris, I am here. I will listen when you need to talk."

Trying not to sound impertinent, Chris took a large breath against the sobs he could feel getting ready to start. "I'm not ready to share yet, sir."

Bear just smiled and set a box of tissues on the top of the towel. "Then get some rest. Morning is wiser than evening. I'll leave you some breakfast. I have to be out early. You'll be all right until your friend comes?"

Chris nodded and swallowed hard. "Yes, sir."

Bear kissed his forehead, just like Mike had done. "Good night, Chris."

Chris fled for the spare bedroom and barely got the door shut before he burst into great heaving sobs. Part of him was shocked he had any left after all the tears earlier. He cried it all out and lay, feeling thin and fragile, on the bed.

Master Bear didn't seem awful. He was being very generous. Chris hoped the memorial service wouldn't be too far away. He

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just hoped Mike would go for the idea that had hit him in the last stages of the crying.

* * *

Good as his word, Mike came over the next day when Chris called. Chris stared a moment, trying to figure out why he looked odd. Then he realized he'd never seen Mike in anything but a scrub top. The black polo shirt was a complete change of pace. But the subtle little Superman emblem reassured Chris.

"When you asked me to help you move, I talked to Bear. He said you could use his pickup and the keys are on the buffet."

"Thank you. I'll thank him tonight. Tell me what you know about Bear? What does he like?"

Mike picked up the keys and offered them. Chris shook his head. He didn't feel stable enough to drive. He wanted to talk and that would take most of his concentration.

"He likes neatness. He likes his den kept in order. He likes a grateful boy and a submissive one who is very obedient."

"I meant to eat. I was going to make him something special as a thank you."

"Are you up for that?" Mike glanced over at him as they stopped for a stoplight.

"I think so, if it's not too hard." Chris checked his hands. They weren't shaking.

"Don't get distracted and burn his house down." Mike picked back up as the light went green. "He's pretty easy taste-wise, but he likes chicken more than pork. If you really wanted to treat him, we can get the makings of a chocolate meringue pie on the way home."

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"I never made meringue." Chris wondered if he could manage a whole pie as well as dinner. Cakes were easy enough, but pies daunted him.

"It's easy and I'll help. Can't stay though, I have a late afternoon shift."

"Thank you." Chris scooted to the middle of the seat and laid his head on Mike's shoulder.

"You're welcome, babe. Always."

Mike parked next to the kitchen door of William's two-story house. "How much are we taking, kid? Do I need to plan two trips?"

Chris shook his head. "Not too much. I don't have much. Just my clothes and some books." He unlocked the door, feeling a pang. Yesterday evening, he had walked out this door with William. Today, William would never walk back inside. His throat went very tight and his heart felt as if it had turned to ice at the thought.

William would never drink another cup of coffee out of his favorite blue mug. He would never sit comfortably in the captain's chair, chatting as Chris did dishes. The place already smelled empty and musty. Tears rolled down Chris's face as he saw William's big empty chair in the living room. Only Mike's hand in his helped him not break down.

When Mike folded him into a hug, he did cry again. "He's everywhere," Chris gasped, "but he's gone."

"I know, kiddo. I do know." Mike's own voice sounded tight and Chris felt a couple of tears drip onto his back.

Chris caught his breath and stepped out of the embrace. "Let's get this done." He went straight to his little bedroom and packed all his clothes. He'd been planning a little ahead and most of the

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winter things were already packed away for the summer. He pulled out the cedar boxes.

“This needs to go out?”

“My winter stuff. I’ll pack the summer.” He started folding slacks into a suitcase. Mike picked up a box and carried it out.

Chris looked at his skiing things. He hadn’t been skiing in years, not since William got sick. He wondered if Bear liked to ski. He packed his skis and poles and even the snowboard he’d messed around with. He’d never do flips in midair, but surfing down the hill had been great fun.

Mike came back to find him holding a box with photo albums. “I should sort through them,” he mumbled.

“Not today. Just take them with you. The house goes on the auction block, as is, in two weeks. Anything you want, get it out today. Tomorrow the de-kinking and de-gayng crew comes to, pardon the expression, straighten it up.”

“Who?”

“Me, Ian Boyd, a few other guys. We get all the gay movies and porn, any item that shows a gay kinky man lived here, and we split or sell them. But, like I said, you get first pick. So if there are any toys or tchotchkes you’re fond of, grab ’em. William would rather you have them.”

Mike took the suitcases to the car as Chris went through the kitchen. A few tools, the owl-shaped refrigerator magnet made out of half a walnut shell and an apron that said “spank the cook” went into the bottom of a plastic box he carried. Then, he headed into the playroom. The bullwhip went into the box, as did Chris’s favorite flogger and the inflatable plug. He added a set of soft cuffs and a small painting of William in full leather. Then he migrated to William’s bedroom and picked up the silver-framed picture of

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them at his collaring that stood on the nightstand.

Chris buried his face in William's pillow, wishing he could take it, too, but knowing the scent wouldn't last. It didn't smell right anyway, all sickness and drugs with only a hint of William. He did take William's favorite scarf.

"My books and movies are in the three boxes by the big purple tote," he told Mike, handing over the box. "Leave the tote."

"Got 'em," Mike said and carried the box out as if it were a Faberge egg.

Chris cast about and found it. William's pride and joy, an actual bit of a Norse grave site he'd worked when he was a grad student. The three carved soapstone beads rested on a bit of black velvet under archival glass. The certificate of authenticity hung beside them. All the students had been given three beads from a broken string as their summer bonus. Any museum in the country would pay him four figures to have both beads and certificate. He carried them out and put them on the little Queen Anne telephone table.

Mike came back, almost bumping into him as he headed out the door with table and artifacts. "Bout ready?" Mike asked.

Chris nodded. "This is the last of it."

Mike took a look and whistled. "He showed me those once. Yes, I think you should have them."

Chris loaded the things, then came back in. Mike stood in the middle of the front room. When Chris came in, he opened his arms. Chris went right into them.

"This is it, Chris."

Chris shook for a moment, but no tears came. He took a deep breath. "This is it."

Mike kissed him, slow and deep, his easy command making

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Chris's knees quiver and his cock twitch. Chris opened his mouth to ask the question he'd thought of the previous night, but Mike kissed him again and stopped his words.

"I love you. I'm only as far away as your phone. Anytime, night or day. Call me if you need me and I'll be there."

Chris nodded, clinging to Mike. He knew he held on too long, but Mike made no move to shove him away or break contact. Instead, he gave Chris another kiss.

"Do you need me here?" He felt Mike glance at the clock which was up and over his shoulder.

"For a little while?" Chris hated imposing and his failure to contain his emotions felt more acute here in William's world. Mike stood quietly and held him until it didn't feel like home anymore.

* * *

He'd been with Bear a week. Sometimes, it felt as if all he did was eat and sleep and cry. Mike came every afternoon for an hour or so. Bear ate dinner and then vanished behind a locked door. He still hadn't taken off the bear mask he'd worn since the night at the club. Chris couldn't figure that out. He wasn't sure he liked living with a bear. He wondered what Bear's face looked like, or if he'd ever get to see it. Maybe he didn't want Chris getting too attached to him.

That night, Bear beckoned him over. "I have something I want to show you, Chris."

Chris dried the last plate and put it in the cabinet. He looked at Bear curiously, wondering if now was when he had to pay for all the comforts.

"The playroom is in the basement." Bear led him the opposite

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direction, and opened the locked door. A big den with a large fireplace welcomed them. It smelled of wood and leather and paper. Several big chairs, a wet bar, and even a set of antlers on the wall completed the rugged room. "This is my space. Come on in."

Chris looked around, checking out the shelves of fine hardbound books, the bar, and the chessboard. He noticed Bear went right to the mantle and touched a little carved wooden box. He joined the big man there.

"Danny," Bear said to the box, "this is Chris. He's staying with me a while. He just lost his top. We're getting along okay and it's nice having someone else in the house."

Chris stared at him. "Has every top in town had a sub die on him?" He covered his mouth. "I'm sorry, sir, that was rude."

"No, just myself and Ian. Ian's boy died of the Plague. Danny went in a car accident. He dozed off behind the wheel coming home from work one morning. Hit a bridge abutment." Bear's voice went tight. "He never felt a thing." He patted Chris's shoulder. "You can spend any time you need to in here." He stroked the box. "I'm not sure which would be harder, watching someone like William go, or the sheer shock of the wreck."

"Both bad, sir."

"Yes, both are bad. Make yourself comfortable. It's quiet time." Bear picked up a big leather-bound book and a fountain pen. The scratching of the pen soothed Chris as he made himself comfortable on the floor near the chair. The quiet pleased him.

William would have liked this room, even as he would have called it...Chris thought about what William would have called the very masculine den. Ah, "an architectural paean to virile masculinity," sounded about right. He smiled and wondered if William had ever sat in here, drinking whiskey and talking with

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Bear. He must have. William would never have given Chris to him if he hadn't known Bear very well.

The clock tolled out eight and nine, the last startling Chris awake where he'd been dozing. Bear sat in the big chair, his hands crossed on his stomach and his head drooping. He was either meditating or napping. Chris didn't dare take the mask off. It could be a test to see whether he would. That sort of thing always ended badly. He shuddered thinking of Bluebeard and the Phantom of the Opera.

Master Bear shifted and yawned. "Nine already? Bedtime, I think. Chris, I know I'm being pushy, but here." He pulled a business card from his wallet. "I've made you an appointment with a grief counselor."

Chris stood up and took it. "Thank you."

"She's good. She helped a lot." Bear gave him a quick squeeze and shut the door to the den, without locking it.

* * *

"You're okay living here with Master Bear?" Mike made himself comfortable on the sofa. Chris sat beside him for a second and then shrugged. "Chris, you aren't talking to me. This worries me."

"I just...don't know." Chris hoped his voice didn't sound as shaky to Mike as it did in his own ears. "I haven't really seen much of him since the club. He's busy."

"Come here." Mike opened his arms and Chris moved right into them. The big nurse's arms felt strong and secure around him. "Will you be okay until the memorial in two weeks?"

Chris clung to him, shaking. "I think so? Why is it so far

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away?”

“William wanted to give everyone time to get here and carry out his wishes. You’ll be getting his ashes.” Chris, nodded, clinging harder as he felt tears start. Mike held him in close and kissed the top of his head. “If I know Bear, he offered to let you put William right next to Danny.”

“I miss him,” Chris whispered. The sobs finally came again. He buried his face in Mike’s X-Men scrub top, thoroughly drenching several Wolverines.

“I know you do, kid. We all do. But none like you.” Mike rubbed his back and nuzzled his hair, sounding a little sniffly himself.

Chris tried to stop crying, but even the deep breath trick didn’t work today. He just curled up in Mike’s arms, safe and secure, and let all the hurt and anger and confusion pour out of him.

Mike held him through it all, saying nothing, just touching him. He loved that about Mike, the way he never needed to fill a silence with empty talk. Cried out, Chris just leaned against Mike, closing his eyes and ignoring the wet shirt under his face.

They sat like that for a long time, maybe half an hour, just a quiet cuddle. Mike knew when to talk, too, and Chris found he loved that just as much.

“So how are you and Bear doing?” he asked again.

Chris sighed. “It’s going to take a while. He’s not William. I’m not even sure who he is, except a big scary voice and a big hand that leaves me food.”

“He’s more,” Mike said softly. “He’ll show himself when you’re ready for him, I’m sure. Right now, he’s just giving you plenty of space and time to grieve.” Mike kissed him again. “Can you stay with him a while, or do you want to try things on your

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own?"

"I'll stay. Even a big scary voice is better than an empty apartment with cheap furniture."

Mike nuzzled in his hair. "You let me know if anything is wrong." He went quiet, cuddling Chris closer.

"Yes, sir."

They cuddled a while more, then Mike looked at his watch. "I need to get home. And you need to get Bear's supper ready." He stood up, not letting go of Chris.

Chris dared a look up into his dark eyes. He saw only sadness and great love there.

"Call me when you need me, I mean it," Mike said.

Chris knew he could call at any hour and Mike would come.

"Yes, sir."

Mike ran one finger along the side of his face. "Chris, I'm your friend, not your top. And I'm about to be a very bad friend again." He kissed Chris full on the mouth. Chris startled under the kiss, having dreamed of it for days, and then relaxed, giving Mike everything.

"Please, can I come stay the night with you?" he asked. "I need a friend and lover."

Mike frowned as Chris pressed against him. "I'm not made of stone, boy. Don't tease."

"Mean it," Chris said and pulled Mike down into another kiss, this one much hotter and deeper, showing the big nurse exactly how much he meant it. He'd meant it since the day William had found him crying in Mike's arms in the kitchen.

"After the memorial, kid. I promise," Mike said thickly. "Do your master one last honor and stay celibate until the memorial."

Chris nodded but stayed clinging to Mike. Mike kissed him

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gently and disentangled himself. "I'll see you tomorrow."

Chris just nodded and watched him go. He still hadn't had a chance to ask about moving in.

* * *

They gathered in the living room of William's house. Chris bit his lip, uncomfortable to be back here. It didn't even smell like home anymore. It was too clean. William's magazines and books were all shelved or disposed of. The small clutter of everyday life had vanished. He snuck in and peeked at the playroom, which was once again a spare bedroom, with a desk and book shelves, and no sign of manacles or a rack or any toys.

Master Jonathan rose, unshaven and bleary-looking, his skullcap and fringe impeccable. Chris wondered if he'd slept for the last week. He suspected Jonathan had observed some sort of Jewish mourning ritual in William's honor. He held up the will.

"Gentlemen, we are gathered here to celebrate the life of William Davis, a good friend. He left instructions for everything. You will each find a parcel with your name on it. The money from his accounts and from the sale of his house and property will be placed in trust for Christopher Price, who will also receive William's ashes to do with as he sees fit."

Chris shivered. He didn't have to stay with Master Bear. He would have enough money to make it on his own. And he would have William with him, always.

He barely listened to the rest of the reading of William's will. He had the important part. He looked around the room, searching for Mike. Only ten people were here and Mike was not among them. He'd promised. Chris grumbled to himself about how

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promises to a sub meant nothing.

“There is a handwritten codicil, dated a week before his death,” Master Jonathan finished. “I hereby appoint Michael Cipolla, informally called Master Bear, to care for Christopher until such time as he finds his feet without me. I love you both. William.”

Chris just stared as Master Bear removed the mask he had always worn. Underneath, his own Mike, his friend and lover, smiled, finally revealed. Chris stuttered a little.

“Chris,” Mike—Master Bear—said, coming to him and embracing him. “You are welcome to stay with me as long as you like, spare room or in my bed as you choose.”

Chris threw his arms around Master Bear’s neck and hugged him hard. Words still wouldn’t come so he let his touch speak for him.

William’s friends crowded around, congratulating Bear and Chris, taking hugs and kisses and shaking hands. One by one, they started leaving, each picking up the box he’d been assigned.

Chris found the boxes labeled for him and Bear and picked up William’s urn. He heard Master Jonathan talking to his Mike.

“You’ll be good for him. And he loves you already,” Jonathan said.

“Loved him for months,” Bear said. “Chris, let’s go home.”

“Yes, sir,” Chris said, and walked out of the house for the last time, carrying William’s urn with him.

* * *

They came in from the memorial, Chris hugging the urn tightly to his chest, the tears on his face a contrast to the smile he wore. Mike parked the truck next to his compact and unlocked the house.

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“Let’s make William comfortable, shall we?” Mike opened the study door and moved Danny’s box about a foot to the left. Chris kissed the lid of William’s urn and set it on the mantle next to Danny.

“I love you, Master. I miss you,” he said. “But I’ll be all right.”

Mike came up behind him and wrapped his arms around Chris’s waist. “We’ll be all right,” he said and kissed Chris’s neck. He opened one hand and showed Chris a key. “I’ll replace the collar with my own in due time, if that is what we both want.” He unlocked the silver collar Chris had worn for five years.

Chris held it, staring. His neck felt very bare. After a moment, he reached up and placed it around the base of the urn.

“Together, sir.” Chris turned into his master’s arms and kissed him.

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* * *

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* * *

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