

A large, semi-transparent image of a shirtless man's torso is centered in the upper half of the poster. The man has a light complexion and a slight smile. His arms are slightly away from his body, and his chest is well-defined.

INDEPENDENCE day



CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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...Al closed his eyes, all the better to absorb Nick's nearness, along with his taste and his smell. He couldn't believe how much he'd missed Nick. Or how downright boring his life had become without Nick there to love and motivate him. If Nick had been patient and waited just a little while longer until Al was able to straighten out a few things and be offered the partnership at Hilldale's he'd always dreamed of, anything would have been possible. Despite Al's requests, however, Nick had refused to even try to understand how fragile these things were. How loyalty and ambition were the measure of a man at Hilldale. And how everything Al had spent this past year working his ass off to achieve could be lost by nothing more complicated than being seen even briefly in the company of the wrong person.

As Nick's eager tongue tangled with his, Al gripped Nick's butt cheeks, rubbing his aroused cock against Nick's burgeoning shaft. For weeks now, Al had gotten hard just thinking about Nick. In fact, it had been so bad on the plane coming down to Vegas, he'd had to go to the bathroom twice and jerk off like an over-sexed teenager. Now he was hard again, aching with the need to lose himself in Nick's heat.

He ran a finger down Nick's crack. Damn, but this felt so fucking good. What had Nick been thinking about, taking off without as much as a single word? Nick knew Al's marriage was nothing more than a joke, a convenient and temporary arrangement for all concerned—a way around a major obstacle on the road to success. It was a means to an end and nothing more...

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BY

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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INDEPENDENCE DAY
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For Roy and The Boys.

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Nick Gregorio leaned against the counter and played idly with a pen as he waited for the waitress to finish cleaning up the sticky mess of a spilled banana-caramel smoothie and straighten the spindly French café-style chairs.

He glanced again at the clock on the wall. Eight forty-six. Two minutes since he'd last looked and still another fourteen to go before he could close Butterscotch Dreams for the night and get the hell out of here. He could hardly wait. He'd felt restless and uneasy from the moment he got out of bed that morning—jumpy, unable to concentrate on anything for more than a second or two. It was the same unpleasant queasy feeling of impending doom he always got while waiting for the results of a test, or when a cop pulled him over for no apparent reason.

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Nick wondered if was the result of eating the extra spicy wings that had mysteriously found their way into his take-out order last night. He couldn't think of anything else that would make him feel as if his whole world was about to crash and burn. He had a secure job with the Neapolitan Hotel, money in the bank, and his bills were all paid. Also on the plus side, he had no dark secrets, nothing on his conscience, guilty or otherwise, and he wasn't being stalked or harassed by an ex-lover or anyone else.

At least, not that he was aware of.

Anyway, he hadn't been living in Vegas very long, just a few months, and most of that time had been spent organizing and opening Butterscotch Dreams. The few people he knew were all fellow hotel employees or casual acquaintances rather than actual friends. And what currently passed for his love life hadn't progressed beyond a few hook-ups he'd found at the bars over on Paradise when he'd felt really desperate. Brief, no exchange of names or any other info type, relationships that didn't mean a single damn thing to either one of them, other than the achievement of that exquisite but momentary rush of sexual release.

Most likely it was the strain of proving himself in a new job, and he needed to chill out for a while. Maybe he'd spend a couple of hours in the hotel gym and try out a few of those new machines he'd noticed on his last visit. Then, once he got home, he'd have a stiff drink or two to settle him down, and he'd be right back on track.

"Hey, Nick, how goes it?"

"Good." Nick put down the pen and smiled as Trip Browning, director of personnel for the food and beverage division of the Neapolitan, and also the person who'd hired him, came into the

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café and sat down at the counter. “Something I can do for you, my man?”

Nick felt a warm rush of genuine affection as Trip returned his smile. Trip looked exactly like the California surfer boy he’d confessed to having been as a teenager—slim, tanned, nicely muscled body, topped with a professionally coiffed mop of sun-streaked blond hair.

“Actually, it’s the other way around this time.”

If Nick could count one person as a friend since coming to live here in Vegas, then it was Trip. After hiring Nick as launch manager and dessert chef for the Neapolitan’s latest specialty café, Butterscotch Dreams, Trip had helped Nick find a home by introducing him to the manager of an apartment complex just a short walk from the hotel. Although Trip had promised Nick’s current job would only be temporary, just a stopgap until something better suited to his training and experience opened up, Nick hadn’t really believed him. He’d figured it for the standard speech given to all over-qualified new employees.

However, one night about a week later, he and Trip had found themselves sitting at the same poker table over at Caesar’s, and later they’d gone for a drink together. Since then, a few hands of poker and a couple of drinks had become their regular Saturday night routine.

According to one of the waitresses, Trip’s wife had died not long ago, leaving him with a young son. The two of them now lived with Trip’s mom so she could take care of the boy. Presumably, the story was true, but Trip hadn’t said anything, and Nick hadn’t asked. He wasn’t one to pry into people’s lives by asking personal questions, and neither, it seemed, was Trip. For sure, Trip loved to talk, but it was always about anything and

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everything except himself, and that suited Nick just fine.

“You’ve found a new place for us to play tomorrow night?”

“No.” Trip’s smiled widened. “I just heard about a couple of opportunities I thought you might be interested in. Of course, that’s only if you’re tired of creating even more delicious new desserts or inventing yet another in your endless variety of exotic smoothies.”

If Nick were to tell the truth, he wouldn’t care if he never saw another smoothie again. “Try me.”

“Silvia,” Trip said, referring to Silvia DiMarco the owner of the Neapolitan, “has had her heart set on opening a seafood restaurant for some time now, but for that I need a particular kind of chef—someone experienced with both seafood and traditional Italian cuisine. She wants it modeled on a place in Italy where her family used to go when she was young.”

“An Italian seafood restaurant?”

“That’s what she said. Complete with singing waiters and dancing bears if she has her way, I wouldn’t wonder. I’ve also heard the Bellagio is considering opening another specialty restaurant. But I’ve heard that one so many times over the past year, it’s probably just another rumor.”

“The restaurant I used to own specialized in seafood,” Nick said, still not sure if he’d done the right thing by selling the place and coming down here to Vegas. “Everyone was crazy about my deep-fried calamari.”

“That’s exactly why I’m here. I promised I’d give you first shot if something better opened up and it has. Between your experience with Italian cuisine and your knowledge of seafood, you’re just the combination I’m looking for. Did you also have singing waiters?”

“No, just a mad Italian-Canadian sous-chef who thought he was Caruso, and a talking bird who came with the fixtures. Thankfully,

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someone had the good sense to move the bird's cage near an open window and it developed permanent laryngitis."

"What did the bird say?"

Nick grinned, remembering. "Stupid thing screamed, 'Greedy pig, greedy pig,' every time a customer sat down at a table and picked up the menu. Needless to say, not too many people found it amusing."

"I guess not." Trip hesitated. "So—"

Before Trip could finish whatever it was he'd intended to say, a man appeared in the restaurant doorway. In a flash, Trip, Butterscotch Dreams, the hotel and everything that was Vegas disappeared. Nick was back in The Marinated Mushroom, the restaurant he'd owned up north until a few months ago.

Nick's breath caught in his throat and his heart did some form of scary double-clutch. He gripped the edge of the counter for support. No wonder he'd been feeling so edgy and off-balance. It wasn't those extra-spicy wings; it was that fucking annoying ESP thing that came from having an Irish mind-reading grandmother on his mom's side of the family and an Italian crystal-ball gazer on his dad's. A non-fail combination that almost always warned Nick when something earth shattering was about to happen.

"Al," he said in a husky voice he barely recognized as his own. "How in hell did you find me?"

Alan Martinsen favored Nick with a chilly, thin-lipped version of his well-remembered, trademark smile—a heart-stopping combination of beautiful, deep set, dark eyes, a handsome, nicely tanned face, and flashing white teeth that had turned Nick to mush on more than one occasion. "Well, babe, since you didn't bother to leave a forwarding address and there was no trail of breadcrumbs for me to follow, it wasn't easy. But not to worry, I managed just

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fine. I have contacts, connections, ways of finding whatever might try to elude me.”

Nick tried for a smile of his own. “Meaning what? Don’t tell me you hired a PI?”

“No. Something much better and far more reliable than that, and it didn’t cost me a cent.” Al hesitated, his smile widening a fraction, but remaining as stiff as the painted grin on a store mannequin. “It just so happens that one of the secretaries was down here on vacation. Said she was positive it was you she’d seen working here, slopping sodas, or whatever the correct term is. I believe her exact words were, ‘You remember that skanky client of yours who used another law firm when he sold his restaurant and disappeared? Well, guess what? I just saw the miserable S.O.B. working at this cheesy place in Vegas.’”

Nick gripped the edge of the counter, determined not to lose it despite the fact he knew Al was deliberately trying to provoke him. “Those were her exact words?”

Al had the grace to look faintly embarrassed. “Maybe not one hundred per cent exact. But as close as I can remember.”

“And so you came down here to see if what she told you was true?” Nick countered, feeling slightly better now he had he had a handle on his temper.

While Al had always represented him in any legal matters, when it came to the sale of the restaurant, the choice of a lawyer hadn’t been Nick’s. The new purchaser’s brother was a lawyer and it had been a condition of the sale that the brother complete the transaction. From Nick’s perspective, the provision had worked in perfectly with his decision to just sell the business and vanish from what had become an impossible situation. That way, Al hadn’t had a chance to try to talk him out of leaving town because he didn’t

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have a clue what Nick was planning on doing. Nick had warned Al at least a dozen times he couldn't continue to live on scraps and empty promises, but like always, Al hadn't paid his warnings any attention. By the time Al found out Nick meant every word he'd said, The Marinated Mushroom had a new owner and Nick was long gone.

"I haven't made a special trip, if that's what you're asking. I'm here for the wedding of an old school friend. But, naturally, after what the secretary said, I was a tad curious. So, since I happen to have a little extra time on my hands, I thought I'd drop by and check things out for myself."

From the rude, disrespectful way Al was behaving, Nick knew Al was more than a little upset. But then that was Al, a man who only ever saw things from his own point of view. It wouldn't have occurred to him the reason Nick left was that he was sick and tired of always having to take second place, and sometimes third or even fourth.

"You here on your own? Or did Missy come with you?"

Al's smile slipped a notch. "Missy wasn't interested in coming. She said Vegas is always much too hot at this time of year, so she and her girlfriend went to her parents' place in the Muskokas for the weekend. Anyway, why do you care?"

Nick felt another surge of irritation he barely managed to stifle. Missy was a subject he and Al would never see eye-to-eye on. "I don't. I just wondered."

While they were talking, the last customers had left, and the waitress had disappeared, probably to start cleaning up the kitchen, which Nick usually did himself. However, Nick realized Trip was still there, sitting at the counter and looking from him to Al and back again as if he were watching a tennis match.

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“Sorry,” Nick muttered, cuffing Trip gently on the arm and wondering what he must be thinking. Nothing good that was for sure. “You’ll have to excuse my friend’s bad manners. He’s not used to the summers we have here in Vegas, and I guess the heat has gotten to him. Anyway, this is Al Martinsen, an old friend from my hometown. Al, this is my boss, Trip Browning.”

“Pleased to meet you,” Trip said as he stood and shook Al’s hand. Turning to Nick, he added, “Sounds like the two of you have some catching up to do. Nick, the job’s yours if you want it. We’ll talk more about it tomorrow.”

“That your new boyfriend?” Al asked his smile now a sneer as Trip left and closed the door behind him.

“Cool it, Al. The audience has left. I don’t have a new boyfriend. Like I said, Trip’s my boss.”

“That all?”

“We play poker together once a week.”

The waitress returned with a wet cloth in her hand and quickly wiped down the half-dozen tables and the counter. “It’s only a couple of minutes to closing time, boss, so will it be okay if I go now?” she asked Nick when she was through. “I need to pick my kid up from the sitter and take her to my mom’s before I go to my other job.”

Like many other single mothers who lived and worked in Vegas, Nick knew Cinda had to work several low-paying jobs in order to make ends meet. “Sure, go ahead. I’ll finish up.”

After Cinda left, Al waited while Nick locked the door and changed the “open” sign to “closed,” and then he said, “So you’re saying this new boss of yours is a friend as well? What do you play? Strip poker?”

Nick didn’t need ESP to know Al was more than just a little

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upset. He'd gone from hurt and angry to full-blown furious. Nick could see it in his face and feel it in the tension that radiated from his body. Probably jealous, too, after getting an eyeful of Trip, adding two and two together and coming up with five. But that was okay. It was way past time Al got a taste of what Nick had had to put up with the past few months, watching Al perform as the brilliant son-in-law and perfect husband for all the world to see. Why Missy continued to play his game by allowing him use her, Nick had no idea.

"Texas Hold 'Em. Usually at Caesar's."

"And here was me thinking you'd be pleased to see me," Al said, keeping his stiff, I-couldn't-care-less smile in place. "Maybe even delighted. It's been what—three, four months?"

Nick looked past the smile to the tightness around Al's mouth, the smoldering heat he could see in his eyes, and the jerky way Al's fingers moved as they rubbed at a non-existent spot on his cream linen jacket. A little more than three months had passed since Nick had felt that creative mouth against his and those long, magical fingers stroking his shaft as Al brought them the release they both craved. And yes, damn it, he still loved Al. Still wanted him, too. Al was a hard act to follow, a fever in his blood, an addictive drug he craved with every fiber of his being. No one else had ever made love to him the way Al did. He'd never met anyone except Al who knew how to stretch out the moment and make it seem as if the pleasure would last forever.

For a few brief seconds, Nick almost forgot he'd spent most of the past three months congratulating himself for having had the savvy to realize Al would never be the lifetime partner he'd always dreamed of. What had started off as a joke, a means to an end, had backfired big time and it didn't take a genius to realize Al enjoyed

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his double life far too much to even consider quitting.

Nick forced his mind to concentrate on the here and now. He needed to stop thinking about stuff he couldn't change before the memories and the futile wishes gained the upper hand and drove him slowly mad. What he'd had with Al was over. Finished. Done. No way was he going down that road again. Let someone else deal with Al and his fairy dust and the disappointment and heartache that always came from believing in his empty promises. "What time's your friend's wedding?"

Al lifted one dark eyebrow and moved in even closer. "You trying to get rid of me?"

"No. I..." Yes, actually he was. Nick wished with all his heart he could just snap his fingers and have Al vanish back to wherever he'd sprung from. Since he couldn't do that, he sucked in a breath and tried his hardest to ignore Al's familiar scent—the body heat, the expensive men's cologne Al favored, and...the faint smell of good, old-fashioned sex. He knew it wouldn't take much for him to weaken—to forget all those promises Al had probably never had any intention of keeping and just live for the moment. One kiss would do it. Just the taste of Al as he slipped his tongue into his mouth and the firm touch of Al's hand on his ass, and Nick would be back in the land of his dreams. Even better would be Al's all-time favorite—sliding down the zipper on Nick's pants in a crowded elevator or under cover of a restaurant table, so he could play with Nick's rod without anyone but the two of them knowing.

"We alone here?"

"Yes." Nick could feel his heart pounding, while his breathing reduced to short, painful gasps. Yes, he hated the way Al had treated him, and yes, he'd sworn over and over never to let Al do it again. But, much as he disliked admitting it, he needed Al as much

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as Al needed him. They loved one another—they always had—and if the way Nick felt right now was any indication, that would never change. Trouble was, unless and until Al came to his senses, all they could have together were brief, stolen moments like this, but that was okay. Somehow, Nick knew he would find a way to live with it again. He always had.

Al moved in even closer, edging Nick around the counter, through the door, and into the kitchen at the back. “Where’s the light switch?”

His gaze locked with Al’s, Nick fumbled a shaky hand across the wall until he found the line of switches and plunged the whole place into the semi-darkness achieved by the low-wattage glow of the security lights.

Al’s scent quickly took over Nick’s mind and his senses. The tender brush of Al’s velvety lips against his mouth sent a shiver running down Nick’s back, making the bad stuff vanish completely. Nick held his breath, knowing what he wanted most was about to happen as the tip of Al’s tongue levered his willing lips apart and slipped into the heat awaiting him inside.

* * *

Al closed his eyes, all the better to absorb Nick’s nearness, along with his taste and his smell. He couldn’t believe how much he’d missed Nick. Or how downright boring his life had become without Nick there to love and motivate him. If Nick had been patient and waited just a little while longer until Al was able to straighten out a few things and be offered the partnership at Hilldale’s he’d always dreamed of, anything would have been possible. Despite Al’s requests, however, Nick had refused to even

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try to understand how fragile these things were. How loyalty and ambition were the measure of a man at Hilldale. And how everything Al had spent this past year working his ass off to achieve could be lost by nothing more complicated than being seen even briefly in the company of the wrong person.

As Nick's eager tongue tangled with his, Al gripped Nick's butt cheeks, rubbing his aroused cock against Nick's burgeoning shaft. For weeks now, Al had gotten hard just thinking about Nick. In fact, it had been so bad on the plane coming down to Vegas, he'd had to go to the bathroom twice and jerk off like an over-sexed teenager. Now he was hard again, aching with the need to lose himself in Nick's heat.

He ran a finger down Nick's crack. Damn, but this felt so fucking good. What had Nick been thinking about, taking off without as much as a single word? Nick knew Al's marriage was nothing more than a joke, a convenient and temporary arrangement for all concerned—a way around a major obstacle on the road to success. It was a means to an end and nothing more.

He opened the zipper on Nick's pants and slipped a hand inside, his breath catching with excitement as his fingers encountered the kind of heat and hardness that made his belly cramp and his heart beat faster. He wanted Nick's cock in his mouth. He wanted to suck him, and then he wanted Nick to do the same thing to him and more. He wanted to feel Nick's big rod, ramming up his ass. He wanted...

Al's hands were shaking with a combination of frustration and long-suppressed need, but somehow he managed to unsnap Nick's pants and push them down, along with his boxers. For a brief second, he hesitated. In the old days, they'd never bothered with condoms, but now, after all these months apart? Did he dare take a

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chance? Refusing to think about what Nick might or might not have been doing, he removed one of the tiny packages he'd put in his pocket before leaving his room, knelt down and quickly sheathed Nick's arousal with the protective covering.

He took a deep breath, wrapped his lips around Nick's cock, and began stroking the tip with his tongue the way he knew Nick liked. Then, as he began to suck, a shudder ran through Nick's body and he began pushing hard against Al's mouth. Once he had Nick all the way in, Al began to caress Nick's balls with one hand while he probed the entrance to his hole with the forefinger of the other.

Nick pushed again, and Al began to suck harder. Much as he enjoyed leisurely lovemaking, this was not the time. He knew Nick was on the verge of coming, and from the way his own cock was straining against the confinement of his clothing, Al knew it wasn't far off for himself either. Continuing to keep Nick in his mouth, he undid his own pants, feeling a rush of excitement as his engorged penis sprang free and he was able to cradle its heat and hardness in his hands. He began to caress himself lightly from root to tip. Then, as he felt Nick's whole body stiffen and he heard him groan, he began sucking Nick harder and rubbing himself faster, until suddenly it was like the whole world was exploding around him. He felt dizzy with relief, and delirious with happiness. And here he'd been afraid Nick had taken off because he no longer loved or wanted him.

The next thing Al knew, the two of them were on the floor, trying to catch their breath and laughing all at the same time. For a few seconds they remained where they were, holding onto one another, but then Nick released him and got to his feet.

"Come on, we need to get out of here," Nick said, offering him

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a helping hand. "I just manage this place, and these lights are on for a reason. If security is doing its job and they realize someone's here, they'll come in to investigate."

"So, let them." Al chuckled as he zipped up his pants. "We could always say we had some rather pressing business to attend to."

Nick rolled his eyes. "Very funny. Except it could end up with me losing my job."

As Nick started for the door, Al touched his arm. "I'm sorry. But I was..."

"Desperate?"

"How'd ya guess? Love you, babe."

"Love you, too."

"That was good though, huh?"

Nick turned and enveloped Al in a crushing bear hug. "You know damn well it was all that and more."

Feeling better than he had in months, Al squeezed Nick's ass cheeks, hard. Al already knew Nick wasn't going to like what Al had to tell him, but at least Nick still loved him and that would make the telling a whole lot easier. All he had to do now was make Nick understand what had happened wasn't his fault and get Nick to agree to the plan he had in mind. "A whole lot better than good, but it was merely the appetizer. We have a lot of time to make up for. And right now I need a drink. Want to come up to my room? I'm staying here in this hotel."

"Why don't we go to my place?" Nick replied. "It's only a short walk from here, it's a hundred times more comfortable than any hotel room, and I have lots of cold beer."

* * *

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Nick's condo apartment was large, airy and on the top floor of a recently renovated building located less than two blocks from the Neapolitan. Unsure exactly how long he wanted to stay in Vegas as he explained to Al on their way over, he'd sublet the place furnished for a year while he tried to make up his mind. For that reason, the frilly, feminine décor, complete with highly polished tables, velvet-covered sofa and chairs, and a bunch of fussy ornaments Nick kept reminding himself to put in a cupboard out of harm's way, reflected the owner's taste rather than his own.

"So, where's the owner?" Al asked. "Has he taken a year off or something?"

"He's a she. She's with an international news service and on assignment in Europe for the next year. From what she told me, it sounds like a great job. Especially the traveling the world at someone else's expense part."

"And being constantly told when to come and when to go whether it suits your plans or not? Nah. I'd hate a job like that. So would you. In fact, I'm surprised you're working for someone else instead of opening your own place," Al said, as he followed Nick into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. "Is there any cold beer in here?"

"At the bottom. You hungry?"

Al pulled out two cans of beer. "You have chips and dip?"

"Several kinds of chips, including your favorite barbecue flavored. As for dips, there's a jar of nacho cheese and a couple of other kinds in the fridge. Take a look and see what you'd like."

"I'm going to start with a few tortillas and the cheese dip, and see how it goes?"

After loading the beer and snacks onto a tray, Nick led the way back into the living room. "You want to watch TV? Maybe listen

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to some music? The woman who owns this place has enough CDs to start her own store.”

Al sat down on the blue velvet sofa and patted the spot next to him. “How about we start off with an explanation?”

Even though he’d been expecting it, Al’s belief he was owed anything, especially an explanation, made Nick bristle like a wary dog. Al wasn’t his mother, his boss, or anyone else to whom he was obliged to account for his actions. Al was just the asshole he loved. A man who could drive the most patient, laid-back person crazy given even half a chance. And Nick had given him chance after chance after chance. Now it was happening all over again.

Taking a deep breath in an effort to relax, Nick reached for a can of beer, popped the tab and took a sip. “What’s to explain? Why Vegas has such hot summers? Or why I don’t have a car and insisted we should walk over here instead of taking a cab?”

Al shot Nick a long-suffering look. “No, babe, but I love you, and you say you still love me. In case you’ve forgotten, we were supposed to be spending the rest of our lives together. What happened to all that? Did you change your mind or what? It might be nice if you told me why you just up and vanished without a word because, frankly, I don’t have the first clue.”

Nick drank a little more beer and put the can down on the table. “You honestly don’t know?”

“I figured you’d found someone else and I was toast. What else was I to think when you disappeared like a thief in the night?”

“After all the warnings I gave you, you should’ve expected it.”

“What warnings? I don’t recall you saying a thing.”

“I did. Every time you broke a date or a promise, or decided you’d rather dance the night away with all your new friends than spend time with me. I told you I was sick and tired of all the

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excuses, and that one of these days when you called, I wouldn't be there. You don't remember?"

Al sighed and squeezed Nick's hand. "True, you did. But you always got over it so..."

"So you figured I was just mouthing off?"

"Something like that, I guess. To be honest, I had so much going on trying to make partner, I thought you'd got fed up and found someone else." Al opened the jar of cheese dip and checked the contents. "Is this stuff fresh?"

"Should be. I only bought it yesterday."

"In that case..." Al scooped up some of the mixture with a tortilla chip and put it in his mouth. "Did you find someone else?"

"No. Not then and not now."

"But I bet there could be. In fact, I'm sure that boss of yours would be down on his knees in a flash if you gave him the slightest bit of encouragement."

Nick felt his face redden with embarrassment at the mind picture Al painted. "Don't be ridiculous. Trip isn't gay. He's a widower with a young son. We're casual friends and nothing more."

Al gave Nick a narrow-eyed look. "You quite sure about that?"

"Sure about what?"

"All of it. Widower with a young son makes for perfect cover if you're trying to present a nice family-man public image."

Nick took another sip of beer, wondering if, just for once, he should let his temper rip and tell Al to take his insecurities and fuck off home to his wife, his precious job and his socially important lifestyle. "Trip doesn't deal with the public. He's director of personnel for the hotel's food and beverage division. In other words, he works strictly behind the scenes."

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Al reached in the bag for another chip. “If there was no one else, why did you really leave?”

“Because...” Nick sighed. He’d rehearsed what he wanted to say a thousand times. He’d even thought about writing Al a long letter spelling it all out in infinite detail—how he was sick of being what amounted to an afterthought, to constantly taking a back seat. Except he’d realized there was no point.

“Come on, Nick. Spit it out. Or are you worried I won’t understand?”

“It was a combination of several things,” Nick said, wanting to kick himself for wimping out. “First, an amazing offer for me to sell The Marinated Mushroom. Far more than I expected.”

Al frowned. “I didn’t even know you were planning to sell. You never mentioned anything.”

“I wasn’t, but then this guy made me an offer. It was just too good to refuse.”

Al’s frown deepened. “I see. But you should’ve at least discussed it with me. After all I am, or at least I was, your lawyer.”

“Nothing to discuss,” Nick said. “Anyway, it all happened very fast. I got my price, plus a full release of everything past, present, and future. And once the new owner took possession, I needed a new place to live, so I thought—”

“You’d take off while I wasn’t looking,” Al said with a sneer. “So much for love, loyalty and the pursuit of happiness. What happened to *our* plans? Did you forget about them completely? Or did they just temporarily slip your mind?”

“No. I love you. I always have, and I probably always will. But a person can only live on plans and dreams for so long,” Nick countered. “You asked me to be patient for a couple of months, and I was. In fact, I’m damn sure I was a helluva lot more patient

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and for a helluva lot longer than I can imagine anyone else would have been given the circumstances. But even I have my limits.”

“You mean you just ran out of patience?”

“I guess I ran out of everything. Look at it from my perspective for a change, why don’t you? The more mergers and takeovers you pulled off for Hilldale, and the more charity balls and other public events you and Missy attended along with the rest of the town’s elite, the more important you became, and the less I saw of you. Hilldale and Missy had become your life. I was just your bit extra on the side. Of course, that was only when you happened to remember me.”

Al hesitated with another chip halfway to his mouth. “Is that how you felt? I’m sorry, babe. I had no idea.”

“Do you blame me? A whole lot more than a couple of months had gone by and, from where I was sitting, it didn’t look as if things were ever likely to change.”

Al stuffed the chip in his mouth and chewed. “I suppose that’s the way it may have looked,” he conceded. “But you know damn well that’s not the real truth of the situation. Just as you know it was never intended to be anything more than temporary. You were right there when Missy came up with her brilliant idea. Even you thought it was brilliant. At least that was the impression you gave at the time.”

True, Nick had been there. One night, Al, Nick, and a bunch of friends and hangers-on had gone to a nearby club after The Marinated Mushroom closed for the night. At some point, the conversation had turned to jobs, what they were all currently doing, and where some of them hoped to be in five years. Al had mentioned what he considered to be his less-than-wonderful position with what was considered to be the local sweatshop law

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firm. He'd said the job was not what he'd expected, that he was nothing more than a name and a number and likely to remain so. And how his dream had once been to get a job with Hilldale and eventually make partner. However, that was never going to happen because old man Hilldale only looked at applicants who'd graduated in the top five per cent of their year, and Al had barely scraped his way into the top ten.

But then Missy, whom neither Al nor Nick had met before and who was there with someone else, surprised the hell out of everyone by saying, "If a job with Hilldale is what you want, I can make it happen, no problem. All you'd have to do is to marry me. I'm Missy Hilldale. And, actually, you'd be doing me a big favor."

Of course, everyone had thought it was the biggest joke ever and they'd all screamed with laughter. As the conversation moved on to other things, Missy came and sat beside Al. She'd told him she was gay, but had to keep her affair with the woman she loved under wraps or her family would go ballistic. However, if she was married, she could come and go as she pleased. The marriage wouldn't have to last more than a few months, a year absolute max, and then they'd get a quickie divorce citing irreconcilable differences. People did it all the time, and it was the only way she could think of to get out from under Daddy's thumb.

Nick remembered Missy had finished by saying, "You don't have to give me an answer right now. But this is a serious proposition, so please, think about it and let me know."

At first, Al had laughed as hard as anyone else, but the following day he'd talked about it to Nick and said it really was too good an opportunity for him to turn down. Although, privately, Nick had thought the idea was completely mad, stupid and potentially risky, Al was so jazzed with the possibility of getting a

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job at Hilldale Nick had kept his thoughts to himself. As far as Al was concerned, what could possibly go wrong? It was the perfect arrangement with Missy being gay, too. Oh sure, they'd have to live a lie and endure a little short-term pain to get what they both wanted, but where was the harm? They wouldn't be hurting anyone, and it wouldn't be for long. Divorce was no biggie any more. People made mistakes all the time. Besides, once it was final, they'd both be able to do whatever they wanted and live happily ever after.

Or so Nick and Missy had believed at the time.

"What I remember is warning you to be careful," Nick said, picking up their empty beer cans and getting to his feet. "I believe what I actually said was to check the fine print. Anything that sounds too good to be true usually is. There's always a catch somewhere. You want another beer?"

"Sure, why not?"

Nick went to the kitchen for more beer. When he returned, he set the cans on the table and resumed his seat. "So, when did you find out I was right?"

Al started to reach for another beer, only to hesitate. "Right about what?"

Nick shook his head and helped himself to a few chips. "Come on, Al. You know exactly what I mean. The catch in your and Missy's wonderful plan to get the better of her dad. I'm sure there was one."

"Did Missy say something?"

"No. Just a feeling I had right from the start, plus a chance remark from one of my customers at The Mushroom about a few dealings he'd had with old Hilldale. He said the man was upright, uptight, and smart as they came. And he could never imagine

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anyone ever getting the better of him. Is that really how he is?"

"Okay, so he's smart." Al shrugged and opened another can of beer.

"And?" Nick prompted. "Did he figure out for himself that you and Missy weren't exactly love's young dream? Or did someone tell him?"

"I think he had me checked out. Not that I was worried. I've always been careful about my private life. I've never advertised my sexual preferences in any way, nor have I gone to places that might give people cause to raise eyebrows or ask questions, but even so..."

"You hadn't been careful enough?"

"Apparently not. One day, shortly after Missy I were married, the old man called me into his private office. I'd just snatched a client, along with the fee for an extremely lucrative merger, out of the hands of the competition, so I was expecting a pat on the back, maybe a bonus or a raise, and possibly a hint about a partnership somewhere in the not too distant future. But that's not what I got. Instead, he said, 'Someone just told me he thought you might be a homosexual. I told him that was quite impossible, and he shouldn't listen to nasty rumors. However, if you are that way inclined, young man, I don't care if you are my son-in-law, you have two options: either get over it or get out.'"

Nick couldn't pretend he was surprised because he'd always figured Al would eventually get caught. "Just like that? No lead-in? No tiptoeing around?"

"Exactly like that."

"And it was never mentioned again?"

"I made damn sure it wasn't. That's why I could only meet you in out of the way places, and only under the guise of old friend and

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client with a legal issue to deal with. Otherwise..."

"He doesn't know about Missy?"

"No, she knows enough to keep that well under wraps because if he ever found out, he'd probably disown her in a heartbeat. He thinks her *girlfriend* is her girlfriend. But while she knew about his rigid views, she had no idea Hilldale has an active bias about hiring gays."

"Isn't that kind of discrimination illegal?"

"Yes, and so are murder and a lot of other things, but it doesn't stop any of them from happening. Of course, if Missy had known about their antiquated hiring practices there's no way she'd have suggested marriage as a way of getting me into the firm."

"You're saying they'd fire you if they could prove you were gay?" Nick asked.

"Absolutely, but they'd have to come up with some other reason. And that's usually a whole lot easier than any of us might like to think. One that would almost certainly call my character and honesty into question, and make getting another job close to impossible."

"Couldn't you sue?"

"I could, but it would get very messy. It's the reason why most firms do a complete background check on any potential new employee. That way they don't have to worry about hiring any unpleasant surprises and then having to figure out how to get rid of them without attracting media attention."

"Such as gays, terrorists, and the like?"

Al smiled. "Don't forget smokers, tree-huggers, and vegetarians. Daddy-in-law has all them on the list, too."

"Did they do a background check on you?"

"I'm sure they did. Someone must have suspected I wasn't

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quite as a straight as I appeared, and that's why I was given the warning."

"Why didn't you tell me when it happened?"

"Missy wanted me to. But I said no. I thought we should wait and try to figure a way around it. But I'm afraid there really isn't one. Especially after she mentioned about a friend filing for divorce while we were having dinner with her parents a few days later. Talk about a sudden frost."

"Don't tell me Daddy's against that, too?"

"He said there's never been a divorce in his family and he'd disown any child of his who went that route. As far as Daddy's concerned, there's nothing that can't be worked out with a little understanding and forgiveness on all sides. Rah, rah, rah. In other words, as the old saying goes, we've made our bed and now we get to lie on it ad infinitum."

"And there's no way of unscrambling the eggs?"

"Not unless you can think of something."

"I wish I could." Nick truly felt bad for Al. Instead of a quick marriage, and an even quicker divorce, following which Missy would go live with her girlfriend, and Al could console himself with the job of his dreams, everything had gone horribly wrong. They'd ensnared themselves in a mess of lies and deceit from which there was no way out—not without Missy being disowned by her family, and both she and Al losing everything important in their lives.

Nick felt a little guilty about his own behavior, even though there was no way he could have known what had happened. He'd thought Al's plea for patience was because Al had become so addicted to his double life with all its glamour and excitement he was using Missy to hang onto it. And, at the same time, keeping a

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hold on Nick by making promises he had no intention of keeping. Hell! It was the reason Nick had grabbed the opportunity to sell his business and leave town. He'd been so sure Al was just playing him.

Al slid an arm around Nick and gave him a brief hug. "I admit being able to sneak off and spend a few hours with you made a life a lot more bearable than it's been lately. I realize I should've stopped to consider how things must have seemed to you. I didn't, and for that, I'm sorry. If I could've explained..."

"You could've tried."

"And have you say, 'I told you so'? No way."

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing we can do. So long as Missy's dad is around, we're both screwed. Anyway, I'm expecting to be made a partner any day now, but it will only be a junior partnership. I won't get a say in policy or any of the other important stuff."

"And the partnership's for sure?"

Al shrugged. "Nothing's guaranteed, it never is. But as the old man's son-in-law it's pretty much a given."

"And when old Hilldale's no longer around?"

"That's not going to happen any time soon. Old Bill's healthy as the proverbial horse. He just turned fifty-one, so he's still a relatively young man. There's no point in even discussing it."

"Well, as they say here in Vegas, you can't win 'em all."

Al frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"What I said. You tried and you lost. I guess all you can do now is accept it, cut your losses and move on."

The expression on Al's face was a mixture of total shock and horror. "You're not suggesting I quit Hilldale are you? Not after the way I've worked my ass off every second of every day since

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Missy got me in there. Like I said, I'm about to become a partner. You can't ask me to give it all up now."

Nick swallowed a sigh. Even though he was pretty sure he knew the answer, he figured he should ask the question. "Becoming a partner is really that important to you?"

"Of course it's important. It's the realization of my dreams. But you already knew that."

"What about Missy? What does she think about the situation?"

"Missy?" Al's lips twisted in a manner indicating disgust, or maybe it was just annoyance. "Why would she care? Being married to me is the perfect cover for her little games. She's free to go jazzing off wherever and with whomsoever she wants, and no one gives a crap. No way is she likely to suggest ways of rocking the boat when she's got it made."

Nick didn't believe for a second that Missy had been totally unaware of Hilldale's employment policies. She had to have known—or at the very least guessed—how it was. She knew what her father was like, otherwise why bother going to such extremes to hide the fact she was gay herself? Despite her childish name, Nick had always thought the woman was one savvy chick. In fact, rather than Al using Missy, Nick was fast coming to the conclusion it was the other way around. Missy had recognized blind ambition when it came calling. All she'd had to do was dangle the carrot, and Al had walked straight into her trap with his eyes wide open.

"So you're willing to put up with the situation for the next fifteen, twenty years?"

"Like I have a choice?"

"There are always choices, Al. You're still young. Quit the damn job and move down here. You can always find something with another law firm or open your own. If money's a problem..."

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"It isn't. And in the event we did split, there's no way Missy would come after me for money. She'd be too afraid I'd let her kitty cats out of the bag."

"Would you?"

As Al's lips thinned to almost nothing, he gave Nick a humorless smile. "I don't know. It would serve the little bitch right for getting me into this mess in the first place and wasting a year of my life. Anyway, we both know divorce is out, so we've never gotten around to discussing anything in the way of terms and conditions."

Maybe Al didn't know, but Nick had a nasty feeling he did. Al wasn't the kind of person who would take being made to look a fool lightly. Al would want revenge—the more painful, the better.

"Life down here takes a little getting used to, but it's good. L.A. is less than an hour away by plane. And if you want snow, you can always go north to Reno and Tahoe."

Al sighed and shook his head. "I know you're trying to help, but you can't. I'm stuck with no way out. So, can we change the subject, please?"

Nick reached for a new beer, opened the can and drank half of it down in a single swallow. "When's this wedding that you're here for?"

"Tomorrow evening. And I'm the best man so I can't be a no-show."

"That's okay. I have plans of my own for tomorrow night."

"Strip poker with your boss man?"

"Texas Hold 'Em," Nick corrected. He didn't need his grandma's trusty ESP to know the mere mention of Trip made Al jealous. "You have a problem with that?"

"No. I'm the one who blew it. I have no right to complain."

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Although..."

"Although what?"

Al put the lid back on the jar of cheese dip. "Nothing important. Forget it!"

Nick controlled the urge to kick something. "If it wasn't important you wouldn't have thought about it, so don't tell me to forget it."

"Okay, so I'm wishing you'd give up this so-called new life of yours and come home. For obvious reasons I can't promise you my complete and undivided attention, but I'd make a bigger effort to spend more time with you. I love you, Nicky, and I don't want to lose you. We'd work something out, and we'd be happy again. I promise."

Despite his better judgment and his firsthand knowledge of what would probably—no, what would definitely happen—to Al's promises, Nick felt himself weaken—just a little. "Where would I live? What would I do?"

Al gave him the benefit of one of his brightest, most heart-stopping smiles. "That wouldn't be a problem, babe. As your lawyer, it would be my job to help you find a new business and a new home. Of course, we'd take our time looking and that would give us more than enough opportunity to spend lots of quality time together. Of course, you'd have to stay in a hotel temporarily. What do you think? Great idea, yes?"

"I don't know. I..." The day Nick arrived in Vegas he'd been hit with a rush of homesickness the moment his plane landed at McCarran. With very little forethought and even less planning, he'd moved to a strange town where he had no friends, no family, and no job. For that first month, he'd have given anything to return home to the familiar, to weather divided into seasons rather than

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one long heat wave, to the people and places he knew, to his favorite brew that was unheard of down here. Eventually, he'd gotten over feeling like an alien from a far distant planet to the point where he enjoyed his new life, and if it wasn't for Al...

There was nothing Nick wanted more than for the two of them to get back to the way things used to be between them. But it could never be the same, not while Al stayed married to Missy and his dream job. So, while his mouth was tempted to form the word yes, his head warned him not to follow Al's example by rushing into a situation he might regret. It had been incredibly hard for him to make the break and move down here. He couldn't even begin to think about doing it a second time.

But I love Al. He's everything I'll ever want or need. And if I have to settle for whatever small scraps of time he can spare me, then that's—

"You need time to think about it?" Al sounded surprised. "I thought maybe you'd jump at the chance."

"Jumping was what got you into this trouble," Nick reminded him with a sigh. "It's not because I don't love you...you know I do. It's just...truth is I can't make a major, life-changing decision, snap, just like that. Not even for you." Nick took a deep breath, trying to marshal his thoughts. "How long are you down here for?"

"Tonight, tomorrow night, and then there's a seat in my name on the three o'clock flight home Sunday afternoon. I have a major closing first thing Monday morning."

"Give me a chance to think about it, okay?"

"Meaning, I'm supposed to hold my breath for the next twenty-four hours while you decide who is most important, me or your poker-playing buddy? I don't understand why you're being so difficult."

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“Difficult? Are you kidding? I’m trying to be practical. I can’t criticize you for not stopping to think something through, then turn around and do exactly the same thing myself now, can I?” Nick was fairly certain what his answer would be. However, once put into words it could never be unsaid.

“I was even hoping you might consider coming back with me.”

“Are you completely nuts?” Nick stared at Al in shock, wondering if he’d misheard. “You mean on Sunday?”

“Sure, why not? All you have to do is quit your job and pack your stuff.”

“There’s no way I can leave that fast, even if I wanted to,” Nick said, surprised Al would say something so stupid. “Whatever my decision, I’m established here. I have commitments and responsibilities. There’s not only the sublease on this place, but I’m currently under contract to the Neapolitan. I can’t just up and leave at a moment’s notice. I’d have arrangements to make, things to work out. Plus a whole bunch of small but important details I couldn’t get cleared up overnight. Anyway, when was the last time you came to Vegas?”

Al frowned, concentrating. “I don’t really remember. Must be close to ten years, or maybe even longer. Why? What’s that got to do with you making a decision about us?”

“Not a thing. But seeing as you’re only in town for a short visit, I thought you might want to do the tourist thing while you’re here. We can hit the Strip, check out some of the newer casinos, and have a little fun.”

“Is this your way of avoiding the issue?” Al asked, capturing Nick’s gaze.

“No, but you just showing up out of the blue like this has been one helluva shock. It still feels a bit like I’m dreaming. And now

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you suddenly decide you want me to drop everything and come home with you. I think we both need to step back and take a breath.”

“Speak for yourself. I know exactly what I want. However, if you feel you need time to think about it...”

“We both need to think about it,” Nick said forcefully. “You’re in a situation you say you can’t get out of. I’ve made a brand new life for myself. I’ve also been offered a fantastic new job.”

“Okay, so you feel I’m rushing you. Take all the time you want, but I know it won’t make any difference in the long run, fantastic new job notwithstanding. We’ve always wanted the same thing, and we always will.”

“You sure about that?”

“Positive.” Al smiled and licked his lips in the slow, suggestive way that never failed to turn Nick on. “Since you won’t drop everything and come home with me, why don’t we forget all this agonizing or whatever it is and get down to some serious loving instead? Just might remind you how good things used to be.”

“And how they could be again?” As he knew would happen, Nick felt an immediate answering response to Al’s overtures pushing against the zipper of his pants. In all the time he’d known Al, Nick had always been a sucker for Al’s demands, sexual and otherwise, and Al damn well knew it. Apart from his refusal to return home with Al on Sunday, Nick couldn’t ever remember refusing Al anything. Until Missy and her brilliant ideas showed up, he and Al had been joined at the hip. They’d done everything and gone everywhere together.

Selling his restaurant and leaving town without Al knowing had been an act of desperation on Nick’s part; a way of saying, “Hey, what about me?” A couple of Nick’s old employees knew

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where he was living, and if Al had asked around, he would have known, too. In fact, if Al had done that and gotten in touch the way Nick had hoped, Nick would have come running. No question.

Of course, Al had probably been busy. Hurt and upset, too, at the way Nick had taken off without a word. Nick knew he should have said a proper goodbye—either left Al a note or called him after arriving here in Vegas.

“You need time to think about that, too?” Al asked.

“No, of course not. If a little loving is what you want...”

“You know damn well it’s what I want. I haven’t had any action since you took off, and with Missy’s old man breathing down my neck, I don’t dare take a chance and go looking for it.” Putting down his beer, Al pressed a hand hard against Nick’s cock. “Come on, babe, let’s stay right here. We can get naked and find something far more interesting to do than checking out a bunch of dull old casinos.”

“Like I said, I think we both need to take a breather. Going out will give us a chance to do that.”

Al pushed his bottom lip out in a pout. “We can do the sightseeing thing tomorrow.”

“No, we can’t. Tomorrow I have to work all day, and you have a wedding to attend. If we don’t go now, we won’t get another chance.”

The touch of Al’s hand against his dick had sent Nick’s heart rate rocketing into the danger zone. He didn’t want to go out any more than Al did; he wanted to stay in and make up for the time they’d spent apart. And that’s exactly what they’d do if Al were only here for a visit.

However, Al wasn’t here for a fuck and a cuddle. Al was here on a mission. He wanted Nick to rearrange his life and make

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instant decisions, and since Al didn't like to lose, he was prepared to push, and push hard. It was all happening way too fast for Nick. He realized he was being bulldozed. In fact, if he wasn't careful...

Nick knew he needed time to really think about what *he* wanted, rather than what he thought he wanted, or what Al wanted. Right now, he wasn't sure about a single thing. He loved Al, and Al still loved him, but love wasn't always enough to hold people together. It hadn't stopped him from selling The Marinated Mushroom and leaving town.

Edging out from under Al's hand, Nick began gathering up the empty beer cans and putting them on the tray, along with what was left of the chips and the jars of dip.

"You want any more beer?"

* * *

"No, thanks. I'm good." Much as he disliked acknowledging the fact, Al knew he was the one in the wrong. Instead of going along with Missy's stupid plan—he should have listened to Nick and seen it for the clever con he now knew it to be. As it was, he'd screwed up royally. Even more important, he'd treated Nick like an afterthought, and he felt bad about that. Still, after not seeing one another in so long, and especially after the way they'd gotten it on at the soda shop, he'd thought Nick had forgiven him. That he and Nick would have been fucking their brains out the moment they got here to Nick's place. Instead, here they were, talking about taking a walk and going out sightseeing like a couple of old ladies on one of those package holiday deals.

Al picked up a chip that had fallen on the floor and added it to the tray. Nick had always been the cautious one, the one who

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always had to check things out from every angle and read the fine print. As a lawyer, Al knew he should do the same and, for his clients, he did all that and more—he checked every last comma, every period, and if there was a loophole, he always found it. Still, he didn't see why Nick felt it necessary to think so hard about a simple request to return home, or bother with any of the other precautions he seemed so hell-bent on taking. Okay, there was a small catch to his request, one he couldn't go into right now, but one Nick was bound to understand and sympathize with, given time. He needed Nick. Without Nick, he was just so damn lonely.

Of course, there was always a chance Nick hadn't forgiven him for marrying Missy and was just pretending he had. In which case, give him too much time to think and Nick would start finding reasons why it wouldn't work out or whatever, and Al wasn't in the mood to argue. He wanted Nick to concentrate on other, more important things, like wanting, needing and getting it on the way they used to. He wanted Nick aroused and right on the edge because that way Nick would be more likely to give in and come back home.

Of course, Nick didn't yet have the whole picture, so, in a way, Al knew he'd be taking advantage, but so what? He didn't dare give Nick chapter and verse on what he'd really gotten himself into, not until Nick came home and Al had a chance to explain things to him properly. Anyway, Nick wasn't so perfect either. He could be pretty slick and underhanded when it suited him, like the way he'd just up and vanished down here without a word. All he knew for sure was that he and Nick had too long a history together for him to give up without a fight.

Nick picked up the tray and headed toward the kitchen, and Al followed. As Nick dropped the empty beer cans into the recycling

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bin, Al wrapped his arms around him from behind and began nuzzling his neck.

"I love you so damn much, babe," Al whispered in his ear. "Don't shut me out. I need you so much it hurts." Sliding a hand under Nick's shirt, he felt encouraged by the way Nick's body reacted as he pinched the flat nipples and tugged on the soft sprinkling of chest hair. Lowering his hand, he undid Nick's pants and stroked his belly, careful not to touch his cock. "You wouldn't deny me a quickie, would you?" Al pleaded softly. "Please, babe? And then we'll go do whatever you want. Okay?"

"What kind of quickie?" Nick asked.

"The kind you like the best. The one that requires a bottle of lube and a couple of condoms." As he spoke, Al let his hand brush briefly against Nick's cock. He wanted to hold it, stroke it, squeeze it, and milk it dry, but he avoided temptation by quickly withdrawing his hand and caressing Nick's ass cheeks instead. Nick had never much liked dragging things out, but if he could keep Nick hanging on the edge just long enough to get him to agree to what Al wanted, what Al knew would eventually work out to be one hundred per cent right for them both, it would be so worth the effort. "You have some lube?"

"In the bathroom." Nick groaned as Al deliberately made his caresses a little more insistent. "Condoms are there, too. You want me to go get them?"

Al laughed softly and used his tongue to rim the outer edge of Nick's ear. "Sex in the kitchen might be different, but it doesn't sound overly comfortable. So why don't *we* pick them up on the way to the bedroom."

Nick made a sound halfway between another groan and a sigh. "I thought this was supposed to be a quickie. If we take it in there,

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we'll never get out of here."

It was Al's turn to sigh and he did so with pleasure as he pushed Nick's pants down around his knees. "I know, babe. It's going to be a terrible hardship, but maybe..." He paused and ran his fingers down Nick's hot and heavy shaft. "If we take our time, I think we might enjoy it even more than your sightseeing thing."

"You think?"

Positive he was winning, Al continued to caress Nick with a feather-light touch. "I'm sure *I* will. You will, too, if you'll just allow yourself to relax and go with the flow."

"I am relaxed."

"Not really." Al stopped what he was doing, pulled Nick's pants up and closed the zipper. "Do you have any massage oil?"

"I think so. Why?"

Al turned Nick toward the kitchen doorway. They'd played this game a thousand times before, but it always worked best when they pretended it was something new. "Let's go find the oil, and I'll give you a really deep massage. It'll make you feel marvelous—all relaxed and ready for anything, I promise."

Nick laughed, a skeptical expression on his handsome face. "Oh, yeah? I'm already turned on. You don't have to go for overkill."

Al grabbed Nick's hand and pressed it against his own erection. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm turned on, too. But a little overkill is highly under-rated since I've heard that, properly done, it makes the good part that tiny bit better. Although if you keep on talking, we'll never get to find out."

Al waited while Nick collected what they needed from the bathroom and then he watched as Nick lined the items up on the bedside table: massage oil, condoms, and lube.

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“Now what?” Nick asked as Al stripped off his clothes, and he followed suit.

“Lie face down on the bed, and the master will get to work.”

Nick laughed and did as Al asked. “I hope the master doesn’t intend spending too much time on this foreplay crap, otherwise...”

“Otherwise what?” Al opened the bottle of oil and poured a little on Nick’s shoulders.

“Otherwise— Holy shit! That feels fantastic. Please, please don’t stop.” Nick moaned as Al began digging his fingers into the tightly bunched muscles across Nick’s back and shoulders. “Can you move your fingers down a bit? Somewhere about the center of my left shoulder blade. Aaaaaahhh, that’s it. Right there. Can you do it again? Yesssss...that’s awesome. And again? Perfect! Now the other one?”

Al poured on a few more drops of oil and continued his ministrations all the way down Nick’s back to his waistline. “I get the impression you haven’t had a good massage like this in a while.”

“How can you tell?”

“Because, in case you’ve forgotten, I’m a certified expert who earned most of his college tuition money working for a massage parlor. Because I’m an expert, I can see, even without touching you, that you’re uptight and your muscles are in knots. How can you sleep in this condition?”

“I haven’t been sleeping, at least not very well. All the stress of relocating down here and working my way into a new job, I guess.”

Al started working on Nick’s upper thighs. Like the rest of Nick’s body, they made concrete feel supple in comparison. “God! You’re a mess. Good thing I came for a visit.”

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"If you moved here permanently, you could do this for me all the time."

"And blow my chance of a partnership with Hilldale?" Al gave Nick a friendly slap on the butt. "No chance. I've hung in this long and now I have to see it through. It'll be worth it, you'll see."

"For your sake, I hope you're right, but I wouldn't bet on it happening. Not after you were given that warning. Like you said yourself, there are no guarantees."

Although the same thought had crossed Al's mind a number of times, he refused to dwell on the possibility he was still being played. Anyway, as far as he knew, after going that extra mile he now had everything well covered. On top of that, as a good lawyer and one helluva rainmaker, he was a great addition to the Hilldale firm. In fact, even if he were a total idiot, as the husband of Bill Hilldale's only child, there would be more than a few eyebrows raised and questions asked if he got passed over. And old Bill was a man who didn't take kindly to criticism of any kind, especially the public variety.

"I suppose there's a chance he could make me wait another year or so, just to show me who's boss," Al said, knowing, deep down, he had nothing to worry about. If it didn't happen soon, he might have to persuade Missy to give Daddy a little nudge. He'd done his part, so either way his partnership with Hilldale was in the bag. "Still I'm not overly concerned. So long as I keep smiling and don't make a fuss, I'll be fine. You'll see."

After completing Nick's massage, right down to his toes, Al recapped the bottle of massage oil, put it back on the nightstand, and lay down beside Nick on the bed. "Feel better?"

"Wunnerful," Nick murmured, snuggling his face against a pillow. "Like a wet noodle, all limp and lifeless."

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Al ran a hand lightly down Nick's back, stopping just below his waistline when he felt Nick's body tense.

"Don't stop."

"Wouldn't dream of it." Al laughed softly as he straddled Nick's legs. After spreading his butt cheeks wide, he blew against Nick's hole until Nick shivered with excitement. "Remind me if I've forgotten any of the details, okay? First a little gentle loving to get you in the mood, right? And then, once you reach the point where you think you'll die if you don't get what you want, I'll—"

"You'll slide the full length of that big dick of yours up my ass and..." Nick sighed.

"No. That's when I go fetch us a couple of cold beers."

"What do we want beer for?" Nick asked fretfully. "I'm not thirsty. At least, not yet."

"Sipping beer during sex helps to heighten and prolong the moment. Missy read about it a book. Wanna give it a try?"

"Nooo." Nick shook his head vigorously. "I just want to be fucked until I'm totally satisfied, not experimented on like I'm some kind of guinea pig in a lab."

"Say please."

"Whatever," Nick muttered as Al gave in and ran the tip of his tongue slowly down Nick's crack. "Just don't make me wait too long."

Al dampened Nick's hole with some spit and slid one finger inside, then two. After a few seconds, he withdrew his fingers and replaced them with his tongue. He could never get enough of Nick's taste and scent. He felt like an addict craving a fix. Still, no matter how much he wanted to speed things up, it was essential he take his time. He wanted Nick to remember how good they were together. Once he'd accomplished that, Al hoped Nick would try to

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understand the past year of constantly dancing to old Hilldale's tune hadn't been that great for him either, and he'd just come home where he belonged.

As Al withdrew his tongue, Nick lifted his butt in anticipation of Al's impending penetration. Instead, Al reached between Nick's legs and began to stroke Nick's cock until it jerked against his hand and he felt the moistness of pre-cum at the tip. "This feel good?" he asked.

"It'd feel even better if you'd quit playing games and got to the main event," Nick said.

"What's the hurry?" Al countered. "We have lots of time, so I thought we'd just take it slow and easy the way we used to when we went up to your cottage for long weekends. Remember how we'd stay in bed making love until noon? Then, in the evening, we'd fire up the barbeque and cook hot dogs, and later on, if we had any marshmallows we'd toast them over the embers. Remember?"

"Of course, I do, but if you have some convoluted notion a slow glide down memory lane will get me to make a quick decision in your favor, it ain't going to happen."

"Whatever you say," Al murmured as he reached for the lube and squirted a little into Nick's hole. After covering his own arousal with one of the condoms, he spread Nick's ass cheeks, inserted the head and pushed. "That better?"

"Aaaah!" Nick sighed as he rocked his body against Al's. "I'd almost forgotten how good this feels."

Al withdrew and then pushed back in, gradually increasing the depth and the speed of his strokes until he felt like he was flying. It was always good like this with him and Nick, and if Nick would stop making such a big deal about what they both knew his

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decision would be, the only possible decision that would make them both happy... Nick didn't need to think; he just needed to feel.

When he was a heartbeat from coming, Al slowed and began to lick Nick's back, loving the salty, sweaty taste of Nick's skin. Then when he could no longer hold off, he took possession of Nick's shaft, alternately squeezing and stroking from root to tip until they both suddenly stilled, their muscles tensed, and they hit the jackpot together.

"And?" he inquired a few seconds later as he wrapped his arms around Nick's body and kissed his ear. "Was that good or what?"

"S'okay, I guess."

Al felt a surge of self-doubt that bordered on panic. "What do you mean by okay, you guess? I thought it was great. Nothing short of fantastic. Every bit as good as it used to be."

Nick's only response was something that sounded halfway between a groan and a snore.

He shook Nick's shoulder. "Hey, don't duck out on me." But, to Al's annoyance, Nick was already fast asleep.

Aware Nick was most likely exhausted from a hard day's work rather than bored with him, Al went into the bathroom and took a long, hot shower. With Vegas in a different time zone, he was feeling a tad tired himself. Still, he wasn't worried. He had tomorrow morning, tomorrow night after the wedding, and the whole of Sunday morning before he had to leave for the airport. More than enough time for him to chase away Nick's doubts and convince him that coming home was the right thing to do.

* * *

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When Al awoke next morning, the digital clock on the nightstand showed 5:05, and Nick's side of the bed was empty. After a quick trip to the bathroom, he found Nick in the kitchen, wearing only a pair of boxer shorts, and staring out the window at the snow-tipped Sierras in the distance while he waited for the coffee to finish brewing.

He ruffled Nick's hair and gave him a wet kiss on the neck. Feeling Nick's body react, he slid a hand down inside his shorts. "Wanna come back to bed for a bit?"

Nick lifted a hand and caressed Al's face. "I'd love to, but no can do. I gave my assistant manager the day off, so I'm doing a double shift. I have to be there by six."

"What time will you be back from your poker date?"

The toaster popped a solitary slice of bread, and as Nick turned to grab it, he pressed a quick kiss against Al's mouth. "Depends whether or not we're winning. But we usually quit around ten and go for a drink. I should be back around eleven-thirty. What about the wedding? Where's it being held?"

"Caesar's. The actual ceremony's scheduled for six o'clock, followed by a formal dinner and whatever else their top of the line package provides."

Nick slathered a thin layer of butter on his toast and took a small bite. "Meaning you won't be finished until around midnight."

"Unless I get bored and leave early." Al hesitated. "This isn't working, is it? At least not the way I'd hoped. You're going to tell me no. I can just feel it. What about us?"

Nick's lips thinned and he rubbed a finger along the edge of the counter, his reluctance to answer Al's question exceedingly clear.

"Well?"

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Nick shrugged. "There is no *us*. Not any more. And not so long as your dream of a partnership at Hilldale remains your number one priority to the exclusion of everyone and everything else."

"That's hardly a fair accusation. I never ignored you," Al protested.

"Not completely, no. But pretending we didn't exist by sneaking around and meeting in out-of-the-way places may have fit in great with your double lifestyle, but it didn't work for me. I can't live that way. I *won't* live that way. Sorry."

"I only got into this thing with Missy because I love you and because I thought it would give you and me a better life."

Nick captured his gaze, and Al held his breath, knowing he'd lost for the moment, but as a seasoned lawyer, he also knew there was usually a way of fixing things. A little time and space to figure something out, and he'd be back, ready for round two.

"Really?" Nick's faint smile was less than a millimeter from a sneer. "Then prove how much you love me by telling Missy and her papa to go to hell, then move down here with me. I guarantee you'll find a job in this town that's every bit as good as what you have up north with Hilldale. Maybe even better, and the best part is there won't be any strings attached. You know I'm right."

Al shrugged offhandedly.

If only it were possible. Unfortunately, it's completely out of the question.

He watched as Nick pushed the last morsel of toast into his mouth and followed it with the rest of his coffee. Picking up his steel-banded watch from the counter, Nick slipped it on his wrist. "Contrary to what you may think, I've always loved you and probably always will. But you need to bear in mind there are times when love is just not enough."

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"I know that," Al said, then wondered, since there was no way he could go along with what Nick wanted, if would Nick just walk away? *Nah! Not a chance.* Nick might threaten, but Nick was so much of a pussycat, he'd never follow through. In fact, Al suspected Nick's sudden move to Vegas had been little more than a childish bid for attention.

"I hope you do because I'm not going to change my mind."

Al grinned. "You sure 'bout that?"

"Positive. But if you want to come back here after the wedding and kick it around some more, be my guest. There's a spare key in the drawer of the nightstand. Now, I really gotta go, or I'll be late." He gave Al a brief hug and headed out of the room. "Help yourself to coffee and whatever you can find in the fridge that looks edible, and I'll see you later tonight."

After Nick left, Al poured himself a cup of coffee and took it back to the bedroom. Heaping the pillows into a pile, he leaned back against them and thoughtfully sipped the fragrant brew. Maybe it had been easy for Nick to sell out and start over, but it wouldn't be so easy for Al. Even if it were possible, there was no way he could give up the chance of a partnership with Hilldale. Let a brilliant opportunity like that slip through his fingers, and the most he'd get in Vegas or anywhere else was a mundane job figuring out mortgages, the odd *pro bono* job representing penniless criminals, or maybe working as a partner's assistant in another firm. He didn't have the family name, the moneyed background, or the right kind of track record to get into any of the really big, important firms with star-spangled clients. Even though he'd done spectacularly well at Hilldale, Al knew the old man well enough to realize any request for a reference, either from him, personally, or a potential new employer, would almost certainly go

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unanswered.

Nick was and always had been an important part of his life. Without Nick by his side to love and encourage him...

Al quickly finished his coffee and put the mug on the nightstand. The annoying part was, he knew Nick was right about his priorities: he'd thought about Hilldale first, and Nick second, and maybe that said it all. He'd gone for the gold and screwed things up in a way sometimes even he had trouble believing. He shuddered to think how Nick would react when he found out the full story. Maybe, though, if he could just shut his mind off for a while until he could look at things more objectively, he could figure out a workable solution.

He got out of bed, gathered up his clothes and headed for the bathroom. From what he could see through the window, it was a beautiful, sunny morning—a bright blue sky with a few puffy, white clouds. First, he'd take a walk before it got too hot, and he'd find a place for breakfast somewhere along the way. After that, he'd go back to the hotel and change his clothes, then perhaps try his luck in the casino for a while before making his way over to Caesar's for the pre-wedding get together at five. At least the wedding would take up the rest of the day, leaving him with little or no time to think about the nightmare his personal life had become.

That he was the author of his own misfortunes was, he supposed, just the price of allowing ambition to cloud his judgment. But who was to know? If he'd had even the smallest glimmer of an idea there might be a couple of glitches along the way—maybe really stopped to think about what he was doing or even, heaven forbid, taken the trouble to check out each and every angle of Missy's plan to make sure it was workable and he wasn't

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being conned—he wouldn't be in this mess. Since he'd done none of those things, all he could do now was smile, suck it up, and do his best to achieve the impossible by figuring out a way of putting things right.

He grinned at his reflection in the mirror as he picked up Nick's electric razor and switched it on. Nick giving him that ultimatum had been one huge surprise. Always one to take the easy way out, like selling the restaurant and leaving without a word, he hadn't thought Nicky had it in him. But he was glad Nick hadn't rolled over and played dead. Besides, there had been something so damn sexy about the take-or-leave-it tone of Nick's voice. It was just the kind of challenge he loved, and one Al knew he would be hard-pressed to refuse. If he had a choice, which, regrettably, at the moment he didn't.

* * *

Nick had just finished filling the glass-fronted display cabinet with a selection of that day's special desserts and turned the sign to "Open," when, Mary, one of the three waitresses currently assigned to Butterscotch Dreams, came rushing into the café.

"Sorry I'm late," she said, making for the back area to stow her purse. "Cinda was supposed to be doing my early shift today, but her kid got sick last night. Then I couldn't find a ride, and..."

Although the café officially opened at nine-thirty, there was rarely much in the way of traffic until later in the morning, and Nick had never been one to crack the whip with his staff—unless they saw it as a sign of weakness and took advantage.

"No problem...you're here now." Closing his ears to the fading litany of excuses, Nick retreated to his cubbyhole of an office and

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closed the door.

Nick knew he hadn't behaved very well following Al's unexpected appearance. This was the man Nick had loved his entire adult life, yet he hadn't been very welcoming or loving, but then he hadn't felt welcoming or loving. He'd felt embarrassed about the way Al had shown off in front of Trip, and, yes, meeting again face-to-face after all these months apart, he'd felt guilty about disappearing from Al's life without a single word of explanation.

Sure, they'd made love a couple of times, but there had been none of the emotion or magic they'd once shared. It had all felt as mechanical and meaningless as hooking up with someone along the Fruit Loop—a momentary high and then nothing. Probably because, from the moment Al stepped through the door of Butterscotch Dreams, Nick had known Al was using sex in an attempt to rearrange his life to suit his own.

Nick also knew giving Al an ultimatum wasn't the smartest thing to do, and he might well live to regret it. Al had always been proud and arrogant, positive he was right and the rest of the world wrong. Rather than argue, for years Nick had just rolled his eyes and gone along with it. Now, it was time for him to show some independence, and way past time for Al to understand sex wasn't everything. As he'd told Al earlier, love wasn't always enough. What he should have added was that for a relationship to work and be strong, there needed to be an element of give and take plus consideration on both sides.

Being a Saturday, business was brisk, but Nick still found time to think about his relationship with Al. Nick knew Al hadn't taken his ultimatum seriously for the simple reason Nick had never taken a firm stand on anything before. He'd always gone along with

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whatever Al wanted or suggested, and Al had no reason to think he might have changed.

Still, despite what Al thought, Nick knew he'd changed quite a bit over the past few months. Although he was still Mr. Nice Guy with his staff—he'd learned long ago it was the only way to get any genuine respect—he'd become more assertive over other aspects of his life. These days, he was his own man, not Al's spare part, and if there were even a remote chance of them still having a future together, Al needed to understand and accept that.

Saturday was the one day in the week Butterscotch Dreams closed at eight rather than nine, and Trip showed up just as Nick was about to lock the door.

"You ready to roll?" Trip asked, looking as put together and refreshed as if he'd spent the day at a spa rather than at the pressure cooker job of constantly arranging and rearranging the Neapolitan's non-stop staffing problems.

"Give me a few minutes to wash my hands and change my clothes, and I'll be right with you."

Knowing he wouldn't have time to go home after work, Nick had brought a fresh pair of jeans and a clean T-shirt with him. After washing his face and hands with cold water, he checked his appearance in the mirror. Too bad he'd forgotten his razor, but it was no big deal. If celebrity fashion was so *in*, then to his mind that included what he decided was his own rather sexy version of five o'clock shadow.

"Feeling lucky tonight?" Trip asked as they left the Neapolitan and walked up the street toward the Strip.

"Not particularly. In fact..." Nick hesitated. "Would you mind if we forget poker tonight and go for a drink instead?"

"Fine with me. I guess you're feeling tired from the double

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shift. I did warn you it would be too much.”

“No, the double shift was fine. I’m...I guess I’m just not in the mood.”

“So, how did it go with your friend last night?” Trip asked.

“Okay, I suppose. I’m still trying to figure it out.”

Trip shot him a quick sideways glance. “That a polite way of telling me to mind my own business? Only I got the impression his visit was something of a surprise.”

“No, I’m not telling you that. And you’re right—it was a very big surprise.”

“So he’s not just a casual friend from back home?”

“No. Al and I lived together until ambition got the better of him, and I started feeling excess to requirements. That’s why I left and came down here.”

“And now he wants you back?” Trip hazarded.

“That’s what he says. On his terms, naturally. Anyway, you don’t want to know. It’s one big, complicated, screwed-up mess that sounds more like something out of a soap opera than real life. He started making demands, and I countered with an ultimatum of my own. Where we are now is anyone’s guess.”

“I’m a good listener if you want to unload.”

They decided to have a drink in one of the smaller casinos where the noise level was low enough for normal conversation. After they were settled at the bar and the bartender had brought them their drinks, Trip said, “We both know you’re going to keep chewing on whatever it is that’s bothering you until you come up with a solution, so why not just spit it out?”

“It’s okay. I’ll...” Nick hesitated. “No, maybe you’re right. This is one time I could use an outside, unbiased opinion and since you’ve been married, maybe you can—”

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Trip held up a hand. "Hey, stop right there. Where did you get the idea I was married?"

"You're not?"

"No. Not even once."

"But I ..." Nick tried covering his embarrassment by grabbing his glass and taking a sip of beer. "Guess I misunderstood. That'll teach me to listen in on other people's gossip?"

"You overheard someone say I was married?"

"It was a couple of my waitresses. I overheard them chatting while they were on break. I thought it was you they were talking about."

"What did they say?"

"That your wife had died and left you with a young son, and that the two of you were now living with your mom so she can take care of the child."

"That's my assistant, Jim, they were talking about, not me. His wife died in a car accident. I've never been married, and I live alone. Anyway, you were saying."

"Really? That's too bad. About your assistant's wife, that is."

"Yeah, I know. I really feel for the poor guy. But it happened a little over a year ago, and the good news is Jim is finally getting himself back on track. Now, you were starting to tell me about your friend. What happened?"

Nick gave Trip a short, bare-bones version of events and then he said, "It's difficult to believe a lawyer, someone who's trained to check all the facts, would close his eyes and jump into something so potentially tricky, but I'm afraid that's what he did."

Trip smiled and shook his head. "That's the problem with these seemingly simple plans. You figure nothing can go wrong, but there's always a catch somewhere."

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“Right. In this case, the catch was Missy herself. She presented the plan as a *quid pro quo* arrangement: since we’ll both be winners, how can it possibly fail? And Al went for it without even blinking. He’s even convinced himself she knew nothing about her family’s attitude on divorce, or the ‘no gays’ thing at her father’s law firm, but I mean, come on. She knew exactly what she was doing.”

“You think she did?”

“How could she not? It’s her family, she’s smart, well-educated, and way over twenty-one. You bet she knew. She found out about Al’s burning ambition to get into Hilldale and used it to her own advantage. I imagine it’s worked out perfectly from her point of view. She gets to live her life any which way she pleases, while Al’s stuck in what I gather is a semi-hostile environment.”

“He could always tell her to stuff it and leave.”

“Tell him that. He won’t listen to me. He’s too enamored with the idea of a partnership at Hilldale, which he’s quite sure he’ll get, and I’m just as sure he won’t. The old man had him checked out, so he knows Al’s gay. He even confronted Al about it. Said for him to get over it or get out. He couldn’t have made it plainer.”

“So what’s Al doing down here?”

As Nick finished his beer, he noticed Trip was almost done with his, and signaled the bartender for a refill. “Some friend of his is getting married tonight over at Caesar’s, and Al’s best man. I guess he saw the trip as a golden opportunity to try and talk me into going back home.”

“And?”

“That’s the dilemma I’m in. Do I stay, or do I go? We were together a long time, ever since we were teenagers. So, do I go back to a life of sneaking around and hope something happens to

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put an end to his ridiculous double life? Or do I stand by what I told him this morning?"

Trip drank a little of his fresh beer. "What did you tell him?"

"Basically, to cut his losses and move down here with me."

"Think there's a chance that he will?"

Nick shrugged. "I doubt it. Not so long as he allows ambition to be his master. He refuses to see that while Missy's dad has to put up with him as a son-in-law because of his strong stand on divorce, he'll never permit a gay man to become a partner in his precious law firm. Ain't never gonna happen, I guarantee. But Al can't or won't get that very real possibility through his head."

"Does Missy's family know about her?"

"If they do, they'll never admit it. People like the Hilldales don't deal well with what they don't understand. Either they pretend it doesn't exist, or they tell themselves it's nothing she won't get over, given time. Anyway, it's Al who I care about, not her. I just wish I knew what to do."

"Are you asking my opinion, or using me as a sounding board for what you've already decided?"

Nick picked up his glass and stared into the amber depths of his drink. "I'm in one of those classic catch-22 situations. I'm split down the middle between emotions and commonsense, and I don't have a clue which one is right. So, if you have an opinion, let me hear it."

Folding his arms, Trip leaned forward and rested them on the edge of the bar. "No question but what you love the guy. Problem is the relationship no longer works. Sorry, but there's no way I can see how you going back will fix it because the same conditions still exist that made you leave in the first place."

"You mean Al's double life and his refusal to face reality?"

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“Exactly. And if you can’t talk him into giving it up and moving down here, then I hope you love him enough to face the fact it probably never will work and let him go.”

Let Al go? As in permanently, forever and for all time? Nick knew it was something he might have to consider, but could he actually go through with it? Moving to Vegas didn’t count because he’d been sure Al would eventually come after him, and he had. “I don’t want to go back. I really don’t. The thought of looking for a new place to live and then all the hassle of starting up a new business is enough to make me puke. Plus, as you say, the same conditions still exist.”

Just then, Trip turned and captured Nick’s gaze. Suddenly, the air between them felt thick with tension, expectant, and Nick noticed something in Trip’s expression he’d never thought to see. It reminded him of those longing but resigned looks he’d seen on kids’ faces at Christmastime when they checked out stuff in the store windows, knowing their parents couldn’t afford to buy it for them.

“Would it surprise you if I said I don’t want you to go either?”

Nick was quite aware something important had just happened between him and Trip, except he was unwilling, or perhaps he was just too afraid, to acknowledge what it was. Was Trip trying to tell him he was gay? Usually Nick knew right away, but the odd time he didn’t. Then again, maybe he’d misinterpreted Trip’s look, or seen what he wanted to see rather than what was there.

In an attempt to cover his confusion, he laughed and said, “I’m sure you don’t because then you’d have to find someone else to make Silvia’s dreams of that Italian fish restaurant a reality.”

Trip laid a hand lightly on Nick’s forearm. “No, Nick. That’s not the reason I don’t want you to go. It’s not even close.”

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Nick sucked in a breath, still feeling very much off balance. So he'd guessed correctly, and Trip was gay. Even so, it seemed weird he hadn't managed to figure that out for himself in the three months he'd been working for the man. Maybe it was because until a few minutes ago, he'd been under the impression Trip was a widower with a child.

Trip drained his glass, put it back on the bar and stood up. "Feel like trying your luck on the machines for a while?"

* * *

When Nick got home, a little after eleven, he found Al already there, watching an old movie on TV and drinking what looked like tea.

"How was the wedding?"

"Everything went off just fine. No hitches, glitches, or last minute problems. I actually had a good time. What about you? Did you have fun with your friend?"

Nick sat down beside Al on the blue velvet sofa. "Yeah, I did. I wasn't in the mood for poker, so we played the slots for a change. You know I said Trip was married with a kid? Well, it seems I was wrong. The conversation I overheard was about someone else, not him."

The muscles around Al's mouth pulled tight. "And this affects me how?"

Nick couldn't resist pushing Al's jealousy button a tiny bit harder on the off chance it would make him think and perhaps bring him to his senses. "No way I know of. I just thought you'd like to know you were right about him, that's all."

"Did you win?"

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Pulling a roll of bills from his pocket, Nick grinned as he dropped it on the table. “Last machine I played, I won a thousand bucks. Whadya think about that?”

“That you’re lucky.” Wrapping an arm around Nick’s shoulders, Al pulled him close. “But then I always knew that. You got me, doncha, babe?”

“I may have at one time, but not any more.”

Al withdrew his arm and frowned. “Come on, Nick. Don’t start giving me a hard time. You’re the one who left. If you’ll just come back home, I’ll be all yours again in a heartbeat.”

Nick gave him a skeptical glance. “Not while Hilddale has you, you won’t. And from where I’m sitting, they have you by the balls.”

To Be Continued...

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

Christiane truly believes that love makes the world go round, so she likes stories with both happy and bittersweet endings. Christiane has been writing romance for the past twenty years and lives near Niagara Falls with her husband and The Boys—two black and white Persian cats.

* * *

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