



INDEPENDENCE day 2

CHRISTIANE FRANCE

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...Nick's flow of words ceased abruptly as Trip's arms tightened around his body and then the hot, moist heat of Trip's mouth brushed softly against his lips. Unable to move, Nick closed his eyes, savoring the magic of Trip's embrace. He could feel his heart thudding against his ribs and the blood pulsing in his veins. He could also feel Trip's heat and smell his scent, but he didn't know what to do or even what to think. Okay, so it was something he'd secretly wondered about and hoped for. Now, it appeared what he'd suspected about Trip was true.

But why hadn't Trip made a move before now? Nick tried to pull free to ask, but Trip held firm, one hand cupping the back of Nick's head, while his tongue slipped into Nick's mouth, gently at first, seeking, exploring. As the kiss became more passionate, Nick knew he didn't want it to stop. He wanted—

As suddenly as it had begun, the moment was over. Trip released his hold on Nick and stepped back, his face flushed and his expression confused. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I had no right. It's too soon. You need time to recover, time to heal and put the past behind you. Forgive me, I—"

Before Nick could collect his thoughts and say he didn't want or need an apology, Trip had abruptly stopped speaking, wrenched opened the door and rushed out, leaving Nick on his own.

Nick took a deep breath and touched his mouth with the tips of his fingers. He let the breath out slowly. *Oh, man!* Trip had kissed him. A real, honest-to-goodness, lots of tongue involved, French kiss. It had been so damned good, he hadn't wanted it to end. He'd wanted it to continue on all the way to its natural conclusion. He'd been ready to rip off his clothes, go down on his knees...

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BY

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AMBER QUILL PRESS, LLC

<http://www.AmberQuill.com>

INDEPENDENCE DAY 2
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Copyright © 2010 by Christiane France
ISBN 978-1-60272-672-7
Cover Art © 2010 Trace Edward Zaber

Layout and Formatting provided by: Elemental Alchemy

PUBLISHED IN THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

For Roy and The Boys.

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“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?”

“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.”

* * *

Nick Gregorio dropped his electric razor in the top drawer of the vanity and scowled at his reflection in the mirror. If he had a dollar for every time that particular conversation with his good

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friend, Trip Browning, had replayed itself over and over in his head, he could make a substantial donation to his favorite charity.

Okay, so Al Martinsen, his longtime lover and partner, was impulsive and a bit thoughtless, a man who often got his priorities screwed up. But he and Al loved one another, and for that reason alone Nick had thought Al would have smartened up long before now.

As it was—Giving in to a sudden flash of impotent fury, Nick slammed the vanity drawer shut with a loud bang. Six weeks ago, just when he'd decided what he and Al had had together was almost certainly over and he'd started feeling more settled in his new life, Al had blown into Vegas like a summer storm and made it clear he still cared. However, instead of apologizing and admitting he was to blame for the break-up, Al had acted like he was the injured party and Nick the villain of the piece. He'd even had the nerve to demand Nick give up his new job and return home.

Just thinking about the way Al had shown up at Butterscotch Dreams, where Nick was working at the time, sent Nick's temper up another couple of notches. Al had behaved as if all he had to do was snap his fingers to get Nick's full attention. Whatever Al might think, Nick wasn't his pet dog to command whenever Al felt the urge. In fact—His eyes burned and his stomach was in knots. He sucked in a deep breath, wishing he could write Al off as the total shit many people thought him to be and move on.

He still remembered the way Al had boldly taken that first, all-important step to break down any barriers that existed the day he unexpectedly showed up here in Vegas. How his one simple action had so quickly brushed all the hurt and all the lonely months they'd spent apart to one side. And then, how they'd both grabbed at each

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other like a pair of starving animals, without a thought for anything or anyone except the need to feel and experience what Nick was still trying to convince himself he could actually live without. He could still feel the heat and the magic of Al's body locked with his, along with the sound of his breathing and the beat of his heart. He remembered every single part of every second, all the way from that first incredible moment of penetration up to the final exquisite moment of mutual release.

He pressed his fingertips against the throbbing sensation in his temples. Trouble was, letting go wasn't that easy or that simple. Nick still loved Al, but it wasn't just the letting go. It wasn't even hurt pride, a broken heart, or plain, old-fashioned disappointment. It was the gut-wrenching, soul-destroying pain of Al treating their longtime relationship as if it was nothing more important than a casual fling, a meaningless one-nighter that he could forget in less than a heartbeat. The same relationship Nick had put his entire heart and soul into because he'd believed it would last forever. Was he now supposed to forget all those years, all the wonderful memories, and yes, even the love he and Al had once shared? Simply sweep it all up into one big pile, stuff it into one of those big black plastic bags, then throw it out with the rest of the trash and hope it made him feel better?

Rather than give in to his emotions, Nick turned on the cold tap full blast and slapped handfuls of icy water on his face until his skin burned with the cold. Then, grabbing a handful of tissues, he blew his nose, hard. If Al had stopped to think for even one single moment instead of allowing his unrealistic dreams of joining the prestigious Hilldale Partners' law firm to get out of hand, none of this would have happened. Al wouldn't have gone along with Missy Hilldale's suggestion he could accomplish his dreams by the

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two of them getting married, temporarily. Nick wouldn't have felt he had no choice but to leave their hometown and start a new life here in Vegas. And the conversation Nick had had with Trip would never have taken place.

He turned off the cold tap and dried his hands and face on a towel. Sure, on the face of it, especially after drinking a few beers, Missy's suggestion had sounded like a real winner. All the more reason why anyone with even half a brain would have taken a step back, waited for his head to clear and checked things out—made absolute certain a partnership in Missy's father's law firm, which was the whole point of the exercise, was a guaranteed part of the package. Too bad Al hadn't done that.

Even more importantly, since the whole thing had been Missy's idea right from the start, Al should have realized the woman hadn't come up with such a convenient plan out of the goodness of her heart, and probably not on the spur of the moment, either. Missy had had her own agenda—one with no thought or regard for Al's life or ambitions.

As for Missy's upright, uptight father, if Al had had even the slightest idea of what that dude was about, he would have laughed in Missy's face. In fact, for a lawyer, someone trained to check every angle, dot every i and cross every t, Al had proved amazingly shortsighted and unbelievably naive.

And it hadn't stopped there. Even when Al found out his new father-in-law wasn't the easy mark Missy had led him to believe, instead of admitting he'd been conned, he still clung tight to his dreams. However, Al's belief he could successfully lead a double life—with Missy as his wife in public, and Nick as his lover behind closed doors—had been pure madness. By then, of course, ambition to succeed professionally by becoming a partner at

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Hilldale was Al's number one priority. He'd become so caught up with the whole tangle of lies and subterfuge he'd virtually forgotten Nick's existence.

On the odd occasion when he did remember Nick and was able to spare him a few minutes, it was always some carefully pre-arranged meeting under the guise of business, or somewhere out of town, or even an apparently accidental encounter in some dark corner. Wherever it happened, the hurried, secretive nature of their meetings were beyond unsatisfactory. They made Nick feel as if he were doing something wrong.

Nick had attempted to get through to Al on more occasions than he could count—tried to make Al see he was the victim of a clever con game, and that what he wanted was never going to happen. However, Al had refused to listen and with no other way he could think of to win him back, Nick had resorted to desperate measures. He'd made the ultimate sacrifice and sold The Marinated Mushroom, the restaurant Nick had worked his ass off to acquire and what Al knew damn well was Nick's pride and joy, and left town. He hadn't even bothered to give Al a heads-up, say goodbye, or even let Al know where he was headed. He'd figured such drastic action would have the same effect as a heavy duty electric shock—once Al realized Nick was gone, he'd find out where and be on the next plane.

When that hadn't happened, Nick figured it was partly because Al probably thought he was just yanking his chain, and partly because Al had too much damn pride to admit he was wrong. Al hated giving in on anything; hence his arrogant attitude when he had finally shown up.

A glance at his watch told Nick he would be cutting it fine if he expected to make it to work on time. Grabbing a pair of jeans and a

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checkered shirt, he quickly finished dressing and headed back to the kitchen. His head still full of Al and his machinations, he quickly downed half a cup of cold coffee, picked up his briefcase and left the apartment, almost forgetting to lock the door behind him.

As he waited for the elevator, Nick decided the real root of Al's problem was that he wanted it all. He didn't seem to realize other people had needs and wants just as important as his. Then again, maybe Al knew, but didn't care. He hadn't liked it when Nick had refused to give up his new life and go back to the way things were before he came to Vegas, which was what Al wanted. He'd acted as if Nick was in the wrong, and for Nick, it had become one of those defining moments when he knew he had to make a stand. No way was he going back, eyes wide open, to that miserable half-life of sneaking around.

Of course, Al had liked it even less when Nick had said Missy was playing him, and added that demand of his own: Either give up the double life and move down here to Vegas with me, or else...

Or *else what* Nick hadn't needed to spell out.

Anyway, instead of trying to tell Al anything, Nick knew it was time to spell out a few important facts for himself, such as getting it through his head that the past was over. He had a great life here in Vegas, and a good friend in Trip Browning. There was even a chance what he had with Trip could eventually turn into something more. He'd really like that to happen. He'd like it a lot. He also knew it might never get beyond wishful thinking, but a guy could dream.

Outside the apartment building, Nick paused on the sidewalk and turned his face up to the warming rays of the early morning

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sun. It was another beautiful Vegas day. By noon, the temperature would be hitting a hundred degrees or more, but at this hour, it was still cool enough for Nick to walk the few short blocks to his job at The Neapolitan.

The immediate future promised to be extra busy and more than a little stressful for Nick and for Trip, who also happened to be his boss. Renovations were nearing completion at Franco's, the new upscale Italian seafood restaurant named in honor of the owner, Silvia DiMarco's late husband, and opening night was just over two weeks away. Now, it was up to Nick, as managing chef in charge of the new venture, and Trip as the recently appointed vice-president of the hotel's entire food and beverage operations, to ensure everything went ahead exactly the way Silvia wanted. Knowing Silvia and her hot Latin temper, heads would roll if anything happened to spoil the gala opening bash she had her heart set on.

A mental image of Trip's blond hair and handsome face slipped into Nick's mind. He loved spending time with Trip—at work, playing poker together. *If it weren't for Al...*

Nick dragged his thoughts away from Trip and back to the day ahead. As far as Nick was concerned, subject to running a double-check on all the various supply issues, everything was coming together nicely. Silvia wanted singing waiters and, this being Vegas, he'd had no trouble finding half a dozen. He also planned to surprise her with an added attraction—a singing chef as the star of the show. Enzo Lucca, one of the sous-chefs at the restaurant Nick had owned up north, not only made the most delicious *sfogliatelle*, he also did fantastic Pavarotti impressions, and he'd jumped at Nick's offer of a job. Enzo had arrived in town last night and was starting work this morning. When Silvia heard his

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voice...

Nick laughed out loud at what he expected would be her reaction when Enzo opened his mouth, then shook his head as a couple of pedestrians gave him curious looks and hurried across the street. Silvia would be blown away for sure.

Instead of worrying about stuff he couldn't change, Nick was glad to be concentrating his thoughts on the here and the now. He was feeling super-excited about the new restaurant, and, once Al came to his senses, there was a chance his private life would soon be back on track.

* * *

When Nick reached the unfinished space that was to be his new office, he found Trip already there, talking on the phone. He hesitated in the doorway, his fingers itching to tousle the sun-streaked blond curls as he watched the play of emotions on Trip's expressive face—the happy grin fading to a look of consternation, then a softening as he relaxed and his mouth curved in a welcoming smile. Nick allowed his mind to wander for a moment, wondering what would have happened if there had been no Al when he and Trip first met that night at the poker game. If he'd made a subtle move on Trip on the off chance of reciprocation...

He cut himself off mid-thought before his imaginings got too far out of hand. Back then, he'd thought Trip was straight. Even now, despite a throwaway remark Trip had made the weekend Al was here, Nick still wasn't one hundred percent sure whether he was or not. Maybe he'd imagined the innuendo in the remark and misinterpreted the look that accompanied it.

Trip had said something about not wanting Nick to give up his

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job here at The Neapolitan and go back up north. Nick remembered joking that if he did give in to Al's request, it would mess with Trip's staffing arrangements. When Trip replied, he hadn't given a reason, he'd merely said a potential staffing problem wasn't it.

So what was his reason? Their relationship? There was nothing else. Maybe Trip wanted them to be more than friends. Although if he did, why hadn't he said something, made a move, a gesture, anything that would have made his intentions clear?

Frustrated by his thoughts, Nick glanced over at Trip, who was still absorbed in his phone conversation. He only had to look at Trip to know that if Trip had made a move, he would have welcomed it. Whether he would have done anything about it with Al still in the picture was difficult to say.

Of course, there was a real good possibility, regardless of Trip's sexual preference, he wasn't attracted to Nick in that way.

In the few short months Nick had lived in Vegas, Trip had become an important part of Nick's life. He appreciated having Trip as a confidant, but, much as he wanted to know whether Trip was gay or straight, he wasn't about to risk screwing up what they had with inappropriate questions or clumsy attempts aimed at finding out. Nick wondered idly if Trip had a private life he kept securely under wraps. Or maybe he was one of those men who wasn't interested in sex.

Trip suddenly looked up, smiling in a way that gave Nick an unexpected, but delicious feeling of warmth as Trip beckoned him forward. For sure, Trip liked him, and he liked Trip—maybe a little too much, bearing in mind he didn't have a clue if it could ever be anything more.

“Sure, Silvia. Absolutely. I'll tell Nick. Opening night guest list

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is now one hundred fifty, and instead of the set meal, you want a seafood buffet instead. *Cioppino*? Oh, right, you mean that fancy Italian fish stew. And you want to have crab as the principal ingredient. I'm sure Nick'll be more than happy to do that. Okay, and I've made a note, no *tiramisu* unless it's an authentic recipe, but preferably something else.

"Right! Primo everything all the way. There's not to be anything that's been made elsewhere and frozen; no shortcuts with the ingredients or with any of the dishes. And Calabrese country-style bread from your friend's brother's bakery to go with the *cioppino*. Yes, ma'am. Whatever you say."

Trip put down the phone, swiped his fist across his forehead, and murmured, "Phew! I think we've created a monster."

Nick grinned. "You talking about Silvia? No way...that woman's a pussycat."

"Not since I told her she could have whatever she wants for the opening she's not. I think I've released her inner demons."

"Nah. Silvia's a lovely lady. You just need to understand where she's coming from."

"Where's that? Dictator school?"

"No, Trip. Give poor Silvia a break. She and her late husband came here from the old country—man work; woman stay home. That's the way it was. Now, she needs to prove herself."

Trip started ticking off items on his list. "By changing her mind every two minutes?"

"No, by showing the world she can do just as good a job as Frank did when he was running The Neapolitan. When he was alive, all she got to do was to take care of the house, dust the furniture and cook dinner."

"She tell you that?"

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Nick shrugged. "She didn't have to. My family's all from the old country, too—a mixture of Irish and Italian, and my mom and my aunts always stayed home. I figure Silvia did the same thing."

"Well, before you get a sore throat from singing her praises, I should mention she now wants crab as the main ingredient for the fish stew and that, my friend, could be a very big problem."

"How's that? Crab in short supply or something?"

"Not in the way you mean," Trip replied, frowning. "Our seafood supplier had a bad fire at his warehouse a couple of nights ago, something to do with faulty electrical wiring. Now, he reckons it could be a month or more before he has everything back on track and is able to guarantee deliveries again."

"You have a back-up supplier?"

"We do, but he says he's taken on a lot of extra orders due to our regular guy being out, so now he's reluctant to make promises. If you know of anyone, let me know."

"I used a couple of small suppliers when I had my own place," Nick replied. "But that was small stuff compared to this. I have no idea if they can supply in any real quantity."

"In that case, why don't you give my assistant, Jim, the necessary info, and he can take it from there."

Nick pulled out his cell and checked the names in the directory. He'd tidied up the list since selling his own place and coming to work here, but he'd kept all the important stuff like the names of suppliers he'd dealt with for years, just in case. "Good. I still have them on here, so I'll give Jim a call. Now what's this about the *tirasmu*? I wasn't planning on serving any. It's been way too overdone."

"Silvia's feelings exactly." Trip laughed and shook his head. "To use her exact words, she said if we served that we might as

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well save ourselves a whole lot of trouble and make do with spaghetti and meatballs for the entrée.” He hesitated, frowning. “So what *are* you planning for the dessert?”

Nick rolled his eyes and sighed. “A fabulous Sicilian *cassata* full of the finest Italian ricotta, chocolate chips and fresh fruit. And if our new sous-chef will oblige us with his specialty, *sfogliatelle*, we’ll have the guests’ eyes popping right out of their celebrity heads.”

“Sssf... What’s that?”

“A classic Italian pastry filled with ricotta and candied orange peel. It has a taste that’s out of this world, and it originated in Naples where Enzo’s family is from and where he learned how to make it.”

“Sounds great. And once we have a supply of crab guaranteed, we’ll be all set to go?”

“Looks that way.” Nick quickly ran through the checklist he kept in his head. “Provided my old contacts are able to come through with sufficient king crab, and there are no early frosts, international disasters, or other unforeseen events, we should be just fine.”

“And if anything should go wrong?”

Nick shrugged. “If all else fails, we have plenty of canned tuna and melba toast. We’ll just have to improvise. Maybe I should prepare a ton of meatballs, just in case. What do you think?”

* * *

With their meeting over, Trip stood up and punched Nick lightly on the arm. “Don’t even joke about stuff like that.”

Much as he wanted to stay and chat, maybe ask if Nick had

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heard anything from his friend Al, he had a whole string of other problems waiting for his attention and that was just as well. Asking about Al was dangerous ground. All he could do was wait for Nick to realize he was stressing himself out for nothing and let Al go. Until he did, whatever was or was not going on between Nick and his on-again, off-again lover was none of Trip's business.

As he turned to leave, he remembered one other thing Silvia had mentioned. "In case you didn't hear, Silvia's upped the guest list again. And there's still two weeks to go before the party."

"I heard. When she doubled the original fifty, I figured two hundred would be a safer number to work with. Think I should add another fifty?"

Trip made a face. "Why not? Take away the partitions that form the private dining rooms and there's enough space to seat three hundred. Silvia knows that. Anyway, the hotel has enough restaurants to use up any excess food, so there's no way anything will go to waste. I say add whatever you think is necessary, but maybe err a little on the side of caution, agreed?"

As he left Nick and made his way back to his office, Trip thought about Nick and the crushing weight of the personal problems he knew his friend was under. Trip was pretty sure if he'd been in Nick's place, he'd have told Al to go stuff such a stupid, self-serving idea as a marriage of convenience right from the start. It was hard for Trip to believe anyone with half a brain, never mind an educated man such as Al, would buy into such a bizarre plan. The fact he'd had the nerve to ask the person he professed to love to go along with it blew Trip's mind.

In some ways, Trip could understand Nick feeling compelled to support Al's ambitions. The two of them had been together for years so Nick was heavily invested in an emotional sense. But so

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what? Love could only be stretched so far and, in Trip's opinion, the kind of sacrifice Nick had been expected to make was way too much to ask of anyone. Marriages and every other type of relationship that were supposed to last forever broke up all the time. People changed and so did their goals and ambitions.

It broke Trip's heart to have to stand by and watch his friend tear himself to shreds over a piece of shit like Al Martinsen. Still, if Nick couldn't figure all that out for himself, there was nothing Trip could do... Except maybe hang around and help Nick to pick up the pieces if and when that day arrived.

* * *

After Trip left, Nick ran his fingers over the spot where Trip had punched him on his arm. The blow hadn't been hard enough to leave a mark, but Nick could still feel a slight tingle, just enough to set his imagination on fire and to wonder if Trip touched him in other, more sensitive places, if it would have the same effect. He could imagine the two of them naked, stretched out on his bed and—

As the thoughts traveled down his body and settled in his cock, he sucked in a breath and forced his thoughts away from Trip and back to the job at hand. He was supposed to be working, damn it, not behaving like a teenager, lusty over his first crush.

Grabbing the notepad he kept by the phone, he decided to go along with Trip's suggestion and double up on everything right now. Better to have too much than too little, and adding another dozen or so of this or that along the way as Silvia sent out more and more invitations could get confusing. With this in mind, Nick called Jim, Trip's assistant, gave him the phone numbers of the

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seafood suppliers he'd used when he had his own restaurant and told Jim to mention his name when called them.

"And what if they can't help us?" Jim asked, the negative tone of his voice alerting Nick to the fact he'd probably run out of places to call.

"Then we'll have a very big problem on our hands. Let me know, okay?"

Nick put down the phone and went to look for Enzo. He had a feeling his former employee would be delighted when he discovered his first task at his new job would be to make *cassata* and *sfogliatelle* for three hundred guests.

When he finally found him, Enzo was sitting at a table in the back of the hotel's main kitchen, drinking black coffee and peeling oranges.

"Good trip down?" Nick inquired.

"It was great. And I have a room here for a few days while I find somewhere to live."

"If you have any problems finding a place, let me know, okay? What are you up to with that?" Nick asked, indicating the pile of thinly peeled orange rind.

Enzo grinned. "Sooner or later I know you're going to want me to make *sfogliatelle*, so I talked to the kitchen supervisor. He told me about the opening party for the new restaurant and he agreed I should get a head start. He thought I should figure on enough for about a hundred and fifty guests."

"Make that three hundred and add Sicilian *cassata* to your list as well."

"Fresh fruit or candied for the *cassata*?" Enzo asked.

"How about half and half?"

"Sounds like a plan. By the way, boss..." Enzo hesitated,

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appearing a little embarrassed. “You been back home recently?”

“Not since I left. Why?”

“You still in touch with any of the old gang?”

“To be honest, no. I haven’t really had the time. Why? What’s happened? Something I should know about?”

Enzio kept his eyes firmly fixed on the orange in his hands. “I probably shouldn’t even be bringing this up because it’s none of my business, but I thought maybe—”

“Bring what up? Come on. I’m busy. I gotta go, so whatever it is, just spit it out.”

Color flamed in Enzio’s face and he put down the knife he was using. “Just wondering if you’d heard the latest news about your old friend, Al.”

Although tempted to say he wasn’t interested, Nick’s muscles tensed and he raised his eyebrows inquiringly. “What news is that? Has he finally achieved his ambition to become a partner at Hilldale?”

“I don’t know anything about that. What I mean is, he’s about to become a father. I’d heard some talk, and if it had just been a rumor making the rounds, I wouldn’t have said anything. But I know it’s true for a fact. I ran into Missy a couple of days ago at the market, and it’s plain as the nose on your face she’s—”

Nick’s mind went blank, his gut contracted, his chest felt tight and there was this awful ringing sound in his ears. He didn’t know if he was about to pass out, throw up, or heaven forbid, if he was having a stroke.

“Hey, Nick? I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you. I just thought you might want to know. You okay?”

The only thing Nick knew for sure was he felt like his heart had been ripped out of his body without benefit of any anesthetic. He

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needed to get away, preferably under his own steam, and find some quiet corner where he could hide out and try to get his head around what he'd just learned. The idea of Al and Missy playing daddy and mommy was too ludicrous to contemplate. The mere thought made him want to throw up. Anyway, it couldn't possibly be true. Enzo was wrong.

"Nick?" He felt Enzo reach across the table and grip his arm. "Please, Nick, talk to me. I'm really sorry. I thought at first I should maybe keep my mouth shut. Then, I figured someone had to tell you and it might as well be me."

"Thanks for nothing, *friend*." Nick snatched his arm away. "Where did you hear such rubbish? Who told you?"

"Like I said, I'd heard rumors, and then I ran into Missy, and I saw her with my own two eyes. She has a belly sticking out to here." Enzo held his hand a few inches in front of his own belly.

"And she told you she was pregnant?"

"She didn't need to. Anyone with eyes could figure that out for themselves."

"Maybe she's been overeating and put on weight."

"Come on, Nick. I realize this has come as a shock, just as I know you and Al were real close at one time, so you're probably hoping I'm wrong. I'm sorry, but I'm not wrong. I'm not stupid either. Even I know the difference between weight gain and pregnancy. And I can assure you Missy is pregnant. Looked to me like the happy event could be any day now."

Close!

The word rang in Nick's ears like a high-pitched scream. He and Al were more than *close*. Al had been his lover, his soul mate, his whole fucking life. Even more important, with Missy's pregnancy that advanced, how could Al have come down to Vegas

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and not said one damn, fucking word about it? He'd even lied about Missy's reason for not wanting to come with him. At least now Nick knew why the traitorous sonofabitch wouldn't move down here to Vegas. He'd wanted Nick to go back home so he could douse him with another load of fairy dust and tell him how great everything would be again. All Nick would have to do was be patient and wait a while.

Well, for Al's information, Nick was through with being strung along, lied to or given any of the other crap Al felt entitled to hand out.

Feeling the coffee he'd drunk earlier start to rise in his throat as a flood of bile, Nick pushed away from the table. He was shaking and sweating, but somehow he managed to reach the door. After that, he just began to run as far and fast as his feet would carry him. He was vaguely conscious of the slap-slap sound of his shoes hitting the floor and voices calling his name, urging him to stop. He couldn't stop, didn't want to stop. He had to keep on running and running. He needed to outrun the voices in his head and the excruciating pain in his heart. He loved Al, and Al loved him, and if he could just hold onto those two essentials, he could get past this. He had to get past it.

He continued blindly onward, pushing through doors, running down stairs, along corridors and walkways, around corners, until finally, he crashed into a wall and slid to the floor in a shaky, shivery heap, howling like a banshee. His heart pounded, tears streamed down his face, and all he wanted to do was die. How could Al betray him like this? There had to be a mistake. Somehow, Enzo had misinterpreted the situation and got it all wrong. Al and Missy didn't have a real marriage, so there was no way in hell she could have gotten pregnant. Missy didn't even like

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men in that way.

Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!

Nick pounded his fists against the floor. He couldn't breathe; he couldn't think. He wanted to throw up, he wanted to scream his pain out loud for the whole world to hear, and...and... Gasping for breath and feeling as if he was about to choke, he forced himself to sit up and fill his lungs with air. He released the breath slowly, counted to five and then repeated the process a few times until his breathing was under control and he was able to stand.

He tried to convince himself there was a good chance what Enzo had told him was nothing more than a simple misunderstanding. Of course, Enzo hadn't realized that or he wouldn't have passed it on. Nevertheless, it was the only possible explanation. Al was ambitious, selfish, too, but even he wouldn't pull something as crazy as that. Why would he? What would be the point? Al wanted a partnership in Hilldale, and then a divorce so he and Nick could pick up where they left off. There was absolutely no place Nick could think of where playing happy family figured into that plan.

What if what Enzo had said was true?

Nick didn't want to consider that possibility. Instead, he looked around the immediate area and realized he was in one of the basement storage rooms. Getting to his feet and using the wall for support, he began to retrace his footsteps slowly. Now that he'd started to get his head around the situation, he felt embarrassed about the way he'd reacted to Enzo's news, and it didn't help that his outburst wouldn't have gone unnoticed by his fellow employees. He felt like a complete fool. Nevertheless, determined to save face, he ignored the curious looks that came his way and responded to the odd, "Everything okay, Nick?" with a shrug and a

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smile as he passed through the kitchen.

By the time he was back in the space that would shortly be Franco's restaurant, he had his emotions more or less under control. He was even beginning to wonder why he hadn't stopped to think logically for a moment, instead of simply reacting.

Nick was normally the most laid back guy in the whole world, but he wasn't made of stone. Enzo's news had caught him by surprise, and the shock value alone had been more than enough to set anyone off. Maybe, if he'd been able to stop and think rather than react like a jilted teenager, he'd have realized right away that something was wrong somewhere. Regardless of what Enzo *thought*, there couldn't possibly be any truth to Missy being pregnant. In fact, as soon as he had a few minutes to spare, he'd break his resolution not to call Al and get confirmation of that firsthand.

* * *

In his position as Nick's boss, it had been Trip's responsibility to find out the reason behind Nick's sudden, seemingly inexplicable outburst the moment he'd heard about it. The last thing he needed was for Nick to lose focus with Franco's opening just a short time away. While it had come as no surprise for him to learn the problem had something to do with Nick's so-called friend, Al, Trip had no intention of ruining a perfectly good friendship by sticking his nose in where it didn't belong. Al Martinsen was a world-class asshole and selfish bastard in Trip's estimation, but being Nick's friend as well as his boss meant he had to walk a very fine line between the two. He knew that getting involved in anyone's personal problems, be they friend or

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employee, was never a good idea. Especially in this case where he had more than a passing interest in the outcome.

It was also up to Trip to ensure Nick was back on the job and able to function properly. And sharing the good news he'd just received gave him the perfect opportunity to do it all in person.

To Trip's relief, Nick was where Trip had left him earlier, in the makeshift office at Franco's. However, instead of just sitting there, staring into space the way Trip had half-expected, Nick had his laptop up and running and, from what Trip could see, he appeared to be revising the menu for the opening gala.

"Yo, bro! What's happening?"

Nick looked up with a smile. On the surface, he had himself under control, but his smile wasn't quite as wide or as bright as what Trip was used to. Plus, from the redness in his eyes, it looked as if he'd been crying. At least, one thing remained the same as always: no matter what, for Nick, the job always came first.

"Just putting the finishing touches to the party menu," Nick said. "Once it's done and out of the way, maybe it'll discourage Silvia from coming up with any more of her brilliant ideas."

Trip sat down on the only other chair. "You think?"

"No." Nick's smile widened, making him look more like his normal self. "And you know what? I don't care if she does come up with a few more suggestions. She's having such a blast arranging this party to celebrate her late husband's life, I wouldn't deprive her of a single second of the fun she seems to be having. I think it's totally awesome."

"I guess she really loved the guy," Trip observed. "I hear they were together for over fifty years."

"I'm quite sure she loved him. In fact, I know she did. Probably still does," Nick said, a raw, wistful note to his voice that clearly

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showed his recovery from the news about Al's impending fatherhood was only surface. "I just hope he loved her as much in return."

The breath caught in Trip's throat. It felt like a giant hand was squeezing his heart. He hated seeing Nick in such pain. He wanted to reach out and hug him, share his agony, hold him tight and tell him how much he loved him. Tell him to stop wasting his time, fretting over lost causes like Al Martinsen who thought only of himself, never anyone else. Convince Nick it didn't matter whether the story he'd heard was true or false. Tell him it was time to accept Al for who he was, then push the whole sorry mess out of his mind and start living again.

However, wishing he could help was as far as Trip could go. The accepting part was something Nick had to do for himself and in his own good time. First, Nick needed time to grieve, and the sooner he got that over and done with, the better.

Wanting to change the subject fast before he got sidetracked into even more places he couldn't allow himself to go, Trip switched gears. "Well, you'll be happy to know Jim has talked to one of your old contacts, and they're able to supply us with all the crab we need. So, that's the biggest of our immediate problems taken care of."

"Hey, that's great. And Enzo, the singing chef I told you about who used to work for me, arrived last night. Right now, he's here in the main kitchen peeling oranges for the *sfogliatelle*. He also makes the most magnificent *cassata*, so we can tick both those items off the list, too."

"Good. Now, is there anything else I need to know about the opening? Anything that's missing, still undecided, or any other small stuff I can maybe help you with?" Trip asked.

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Nick frowned. “Nothing I can think of. Of course, that’s not to say there won’t be before this day’s over. I’m still waiting for Silvia to let me know if she wants white linen cloths with black napkins or vice versa. It’s not a problem because we have enough of both colors in stock to do it either way. Apart from that the only other thing I’m waiting on is a definite delivery date on the monogrammed silverware.”

“Is that likely to be a problem?”

Nick shook his head. “Nope. The last time I spoke with the engraver, he assured me the job is well in hand, and we’ll have delivery either the end of this week or first thing next.”

“And what about the flowers for the tables? Anything definite decided there?”

“Silvia’s still playing with various color combinations. Last time we spoke, she was wavering back and forth between different shades of pink, or alternatively, everything between the palest mauve to the deepest purple. Anyway, that’s not our problem. Once she makes up her mind, she says she’ll have our regular florist take care of the details.”

“Okay. The rest of the new chairs arrived yesterday, the tables will be here tomorrow, and the actual construction work is closer to being completed than I realized. Once the plumbers and the electricians finish what they have to do, and the appliances are in and the kitchen is operative, we can start working on the set-up. In the meantime, if you want to cut out early today, that’s fine by me. I’m sure you’ll more than make up for the time in the weeks to come.”

Nick gave him an inquiring glance that Trip ignored by simply looking in another direction. Nick had to know that Trip would, of necessity, be in the loop about what had gone down earlier.

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However, it didn't give Trip license to start giving opinions on what Nick should or shouldn't do about the situation, or offer him a shoulder to cry on.

In an effort to cover what felt like an awkward moment, he leaned back in his chair and said, "This week has gone by so damn fast, I can't believe it's Friday tomorrow. What do you say to going across to the Rio this weekend and checking out their poker games for a change? Maybe we could eat there, too? Try out their seafood restaurant and see if we can pick up any ideas."

"Such as make sure our regular menu in no way resembles theirs?"

Trip chuckled. "You see anything wrong with that?"

"No." Nick shook his head. "You can be quite sure one of their people will be over here, checking us out the moment we open for business. That's why I've based our menu on some old family recipes and also tweaked a few of the traditional ones. I'm also in the process of creating a couple of really different signature dishes that I'm hoping will give us an edge."

"Inspired by dishes you've had elsewhere, or are these your own brand new creations?" Trip asked.

"A little of this and a little of that." Nick laughed, exposing a tiny dimple near his chin. "As soon as I'm ready to take them public, I promise to let you have the first taste."

* * *

When got home to his apartment, Nick took a beer from the refrigerator and flipped open the tab. After taking a long pull of the cold beverage, he sat down at the kitchen table and stared at the phone. Should he go with his gut that Enzo was wrong about

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Missy and forget what he'd said? Al and Missy hadn't been married that long, and, as with most newlyweds, people were bound to be a tad curious about their intentions regarding a family. Anyway, as an only child and a single man, what did Enzo know about pregnancy? She could have put on weight; it could have been the clothes she was wearing. Clothes could be misleading. He remembered his mom throwing out a dress she said she hated because it made her look pregnant. In fact, if Missy had put on a few pounds, Nick was pretty sure Enzo wouldn't have been the only one to put two and two together and make five.

Although ninety-nine percent certain that was what had happened, Nick knew he'd never get the possibility out of his mind until he was completely sure. However, the only way he could know was to call Al. And if, as he suspected, what Enzo had told him was untrue, then what?

Would Al figure it was just an excuse he'd made up to call? Take it as a sign of weakness? Maybe figure that after six weeks of silence, Nick was worried enough to give in and call so he could find out if Al was still interested?

Taking his beer with him, Nick went into the living room, stretched out on the blue velvet sofa and turned on TV.

For months, he'd been telling himself he still loved Al and, despite all his reservations and everything Al had done, he still wanted him back. But did he really want that? And if he did, how come Trip seemed to be taking over his thoughts so much lately? Why had he been so affected by Trip's touch earlier, and why had he imagined himself and Trip getting naked? If he cared so much for Al, he wouldn't be having thoughts like that, not even casual thoughts, and they'd been anything but that. He also wouldn't care whether Trip was gay, straight, bisexual, or plain not interested.

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Okay, so he'd thought about calling Al a thousand times, just to hear his voice, or so he'd told himself. However, like Al, Nick was stubborn. He didn't want to be the first to give in. If he did, Al would likely take it as total capitulation and assume Nick was prepared to move back up north.

Nick was prepared to do no such thing. If they did get back together, Nick knew the only way their relationship could be saved would be on his terms. Al would have to move to Vegas. If he made that clear from the word go...

Did he even want them to get back together? He was fast coming to the conclusion stubborn pride wasn't real the reason he hadn't called Al; it was just an excuse. Another excuse not to come straight out and say, "I love ya, babe, but this isn't working and we both know it never will."

No! He wasn't ready for that...or was he still looking for even more excuses to delay admitting he was more than ready and it was time to actually do something about it? One thing was certain—he could not continue this waffling back and forth. One minute holding his breath and hoping Al would smarten up. The next giving himself a hard-on by imagining Trip naked.

He finished his beer and went back to the kitchen. After staring at the wall phone for a moment, he picked up the receiver and dialed Al's private number.

It was late in the afternoon and, although he half-expected the call to go to voice-mail, Al picked up on the second ring. "Hello. Who is this?"

"It's me," Nick said shortly. He wanted to lay it straight on the line, but something held him back. "And before you get any wrong ideas about the reason I'm calling, it's because I'd like to know if you've given any consideration to moving down here."

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“No, I’m afraid I haven’t. I’m sorry, I really am. I’ve...um...err...I’ve been so busy lately what with work and one thing and another I’ve barely had time to think, let alone breathe. You know how it goes. Anyway, it’s nice to hear from you. How are things in Vegas? Job still going well, I hope.”

Just listening to Al’s nervous gabble made Nick’s spirits, as well as any hope he may have had about Enzo’s news being wrong sink to the region of his ankles. He didn’t have to worry about Al assuming a single thing about his call. Al was too busy trying to cover his ass by pretending everything in his world was just cool as could be when Nick could tell it was the complete opposite.

“So, I guess what I’ve heard is true then,” Nick said, trying not to let his pain show in his voice. “That congratulations are in order since you’re about to be a daddy?” He paused, swallowed the lump in his throat and cursed softly. “You know what really pisses me off the most, though? It’s the way you came down here, pretending you wanted to kiss and make up, knowing damn well that could never happen. That the real reason Missy didn’t come with you was because her pregnancy was too far along, and no way could you have talked yourself out of that one. God, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but you two deserve one another. Neither one of you has a clue what’s really important.”

There were a few seconds of complete silence, and then Al said, “How the hell did you find out about this? Who told you?”

“A friend. You live on the outskirts of Buffalo, Al, not on the far side of the fucking moon, you moron. How long did you expect to keep this a secret?”

“I...um...I...err...I don’t know. Look, Nick.” Al’s voice suddenly got stronger, more confident. “You have no idea what it’s

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been like for me here. I had no choice. I was constantly hassled by Missy's dragon of a father. The sonfabitch even had the audacity to call my manhood into question. He said if we didn't have some good news to share with him very soon, he'd assume one of us had a problem, and he'd make arrangements with a fertility clinic to have us checked out. The man's a lunatic, Nick. What else could we do?"

"How did Missy feel about being forced into motherhood the old-fashioned way? Bearing in mind she's also gay."

"Yeah, well, that's another thing." Al sighed deeply. "And before you say you told me so, that you warned me she had some kind of agenda, well, guess what? You were absolutely right. She's not gay and never has been. But her father was bugging her to get married and settle down, and she said all the guys in her social set had faces like fried running shoes and personalities to match, and she'd rather die than marry one of them."

"She pretended to be gay just to get out from under?"

"She said she did it to give herself some breathing space. She thought if she pretended to be gay, her family would back off and leave her to live her own life however she wished. But I'm afraid what happened after that was pretty much my fault because I gave her the idea."

"You did what?"

"I had a feeling she wasn't really gay, so I asked her straight out and, after a couple of drinks, she admitted I was right. After telling me about her dad and the reason for the pretence, she started rabbiting on about how all the cutest and best-looking men were all gay. And if she could just figure out a way of getting one to use for window dressing, she'd be happy and it would get Daddy off her case permanently. But, of course, she knew there

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was no way that could ever happen.”

Nick felt physically ill. “And you said?”

“That everyone had their price. All she needed to do was find someone who wanted something she had and then make him an offer he couldn’t refuse. I was just joking, Nick. I swear. I had no idea she would take me seriously.”

“That was until you heard what she was offering and you just closed your eyes and went for it. I don’t believe this!”

Nick banged his fist hard against the wall, making the dishes in the cupboards rattle. Between frustration and impotent fury, he was about ready to explode. “What in hell were the pair of you thinking? That it was okay to throw the rest of the world under the bus provided it got both of you what you wanted?”

“I don’t know. It seemed like a good idea at the time. I don’t know what else to tell you. It was intended as a temporary measure to solve both our problems. How in hell were we to know it would get so far out of hand?”

“Because neither of you stopped to think of anything except yourselves and what you wanted. You should both be locked up.”

“I know you’re angry, Nick. I can’t say I blame you. I’d be pretty damn upset myself if our positions were reversed. Unfortunately, it is what it is. You know I love you. I’ll always love you, no question there; you know that without me having to put it into words. But please, Nick, you have to see this situation from my perspective. The old guy told me he had proof I was gay, so he laid it right on the line. If we didn’t get busy and give him a couple of grandkids, I’d never get anywhere in the firm, and I could forget about a partnership. I’d never get a job anywhere else—he said he’d make sure of that, too. Plus, if there were no grandkids, there’d be nothing for Missy to inherit either. He swore

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he'd leave every last cent to charity."

"And, of course, you believed him."

"You bet. Old Hilldale is a man of his word. Like I said, he gave us no choice. Either go along with what he wanted and do it now, or else. Look, Nick. I'm sorry. I really am. I realize you feel that I've screwed up, and maybe I have, a little."

"A little? That's one helluva understatement."

"Maybe so, but sometimes a guy's gotta do what a guy's gotta do, and this was one of those times. That's why I wanted you to come home, so I could explain the whole thing to you properly, and we could work out some kind of a solution. We still can."

"You have really got to be kidding!" Nick's vision began to blur, and he knew he needed to calm down. "Are you completely nuts?"

"Come on, Nick. I'm willing to give it a shot if you are."

"Meaning you want me up there with you so your life can return to the way it was. You'll be able to have all the joys of both worlds again. We'll be back to sneaking around, inventing trips out of town and having a quickie on the sly whenever you have a few minutes to spare. Or, hey, maybe we can even resort to the odd bit of DIY over the phone if all else fails. Whatever floats your boat, right?" Unable to cope with his feelings of anger and disgust, Nick's voice had started to crack, and his eyes were burning with unshed tears.

As for the pain around his heart, it was close to unbearable. Nick had had no idea this kind of betrayal could hurt so much. "Well, fuck you. That ain't gonna to happen, no way and no how. If money and position mean so much to you, then go for it, sucker, because I'm done. Finished. You're one sick, selfish bastard. And I won't say, have a nice life, cuz the truth is, I hope you burn in

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hell.”

Nick slammed down the receiver, his face wet with tears and the pain of feeling he'd been kicked in the gut for the second time that day. All he wanted to do was curl up and die. His thoughts flashed to Trip for a brief second, but he blocked the image. *No!* That wouldn't be fair.

Nick knew he should have expected something like this. For as long as he'd known him, ambition had been Al's number one drug of choice—the guy their classmates had voted most likely to succeed. Now, it seemed his precious ambition had taken over his life to the point it was clear there was nothing Al wouldn't do to achieve his dreams. Always striving for the next chance to show-off and shine, the next promotion, the next opportunity to preen and say, Hey, folks, look at me and see how well I'm doing.

He should have made a firm stand when Missy came up with her bizarre plan of marriage, insisted that Al choose between what they had and what Missy was offering. Fact was he'd been all ready to do exactly that, but then he'd seen the stars in Al's eyes at the thought of what Missy was promising and realized he couldn't win. Because he loved Al and because he couldn't face losing him completely, Nick had made the mistake of settling for whatever he could get. All the while, of course, hoping Al would figure out if Missy was on the level or, if she was working some kind of con, get out while he still had the chance.

“Well, there's no way out for him now,” Nick muttered, reaching in the fridge for another beer. Missy's agenda had been a whole lot different than either he or Al could ever have imagined, and no way could either have them guessed her real goal was to acquire a handsome, sexy man any which way she could and hang on to him, permanently. He tried to imagine Al as a daddy—Al

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bouncing a baby girl on his knee or teaching a boy to play baseball, but the images wouldn't come. The only picture he could see in his mind was Al turning up unexpectedly at Butterscotch Dreams and the wicked grin on Al's face as he'd maneuvered him into the kitchen in back where—

Nick blanked his mind, fast. He couldn't go there—wouldn't go there—not if he hoped to hang on to his sanity. He thought about calling Trip, but again only briefly. He'd already sought Trip's advice on the problem, and he wasn't about to put unfair pressure on their friendship by unloading on him again. He cared for him too much to do that. This was something Nick knew he had to work through on his own.

He returned the can of beer to the fridge, unopened. For starters, moping around the apartment rehashing everything over and over would only make things worse. He needed to get out of here and clear his head. Find something else to occupy his mind for a few hours. If it was cool enough, he could take a walk down the Strip—there were still a whole bunch of places he'd never found time to check out. Or maybe he'd go over to the Loop. Find a spot with music and dancing, maybe one of those places that had a show. Anyplace where he could have fun and pretend Al didn't exist, had never existed, or even get a bit hammered and spill his guts to a stranger if he felt so inclined. Any place would do, provided there was enough action it didn't allow him the opportunity to think.

* * *

After going into one very crowded club and watching an amazingly talented drag queen do perfect imitations of several top

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female singers, Nick gave up on waiting for the drink he'd ordered and moved to the place next door. At least there was room for him to sit down at the bar, and it took the heavily tattooed barman less than five minutes to bring him his vodka and tonic. Nick rarely drank liquor and, when he did, he usually asked for a beer chaser, but not tonight. Tonight, he needed the extra buzz liquor always gave him, and a couple of quick vodkas would do that. If for some reason it didn't do the trick, he'd order one of those extra-strength imported beers to help it along. One way or the other, he needed to lighten up and let loose a little, and maybe, by morning, he might even start seeing life without Al as a plus.

He took a sip of the vodka and watched a couple of young guys making out on the dance floor. They looked so young, so vulnerable, it reminded Nick of himself and Al way back when they first met back in high school. They'd been so much in love, so sure it would last forever.

"Hey! Can I buy you a drink?"

The soft, deep voice and blast of bad breath made Nick turn his head, and he found himself almost nose-to-nose with the pockmarked face of one of Vegas' innumerable Elvis look-alikes. At one time, the man had probably been quite good-looking. Now, he was way past his prime, seriously overweight, close to sixty, and with the pathetic, almost desperate air of the constantly-on-the-prowl who found very few takers.

He felt sorry for the guy. After all, a few years from now, who knew where he might be himself. Rather than ignore the man or be rude, he resorted to a time-honored lie by saying, "Thanks, man, but I'm waiting for someone. Sorry."

"Hey, beat it. He's waiting for me," a laughing, younger voice chimed in on Nick's other side. "Sorry 'bout that, Gus. Better

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pickings elsewhere, yeah?”

The older guy shuffled off, and Nick turned to look at the newcomer. His glance took in a cap of tight, dark curls, hot chocolate eyes, and skin the color of café au lait. Just then, the newcomer smiled and slowly licked his lips with the tip of his tongue, and Nick felt his insides do a shimmy. Dressed in a black tank top, black jeans, a gold stud in one ear and a watch that would probably have felt more at home at NASA HQ, he looked good enough to eat.

Nick figured him to be maybe a couple of years younger than he was, but taller and broader across the shoulders. All in all, a body to die for and with a smile designed to melt even the strongest objections. Suddenly, Nick’s cock was as hard as a rock and pressing against the zipper of his newly washed jeans. “Thanks, I think,” Nick murmured.

“You’re welcome. Gus is a nice enough guy, but not exactly what most of the customers here are looking for, if you catch my drift? By the way, I’m Sacha,” he added.

“And I’m Nick. You a regular here?”

“I guess you could call me that. I work as a dancer in a couple of shows on the Strip. The one at the Flamingo is dark tonight, and I don’t have to be at the other place until midnight, so I thought I’d come over here for a while.”

Nick signaled the bartender. “What are you drinking?”

“A dark beer would be nice.” The chocolate eyes looked hot enough to melt everything within a two-foot radius. “I find it gives me that extra bit of energy.”

Nick’s hard-on was developing a significant ache, but he waited until after he’d ordered the beer for Sacha and another vodka for himself. “Wanna dance?” he asked. “Or do you have

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enough of that on the job?”

“I’d rather do this.” Sacha’s hand moved up Nick’s leg from his knee to his groin, and he began to fondle Nick through the fabric of his pants.

Nick’s first reaction was to pull away, to tell the guy to get lost. Even though it would never amount to anything more than a one-off, he liked a bit more of a build-up, such as a couple of drinks, or a dance or two...something to get him in the mood. Sacha had dispensed with the need for any preliminaries. He’d stated his case with that single look, and now it was up to Nick.

In fact, why not? Sacha was good-looking and sexy, and Nick would be lying if he said he didn’t want him. Mostly, though, he needed what he was offering—a few minutes of mindless sex to restore his confidence and soothe away the hurt. He closed his eyes as he bucked against the probing fingers and groaned his pleasure, all the time wondering how long he could hold back.

“Feels good, hmm?”

“Something like that.”

“Want me to stop?”

Nick was having trouble with his breathing. “God, no!”

“What say we check out one of the rooms in back?” Sacha said softly. He kissed Nick’s ear and trailed the tip of his tongue wetly around the outer rim. “We can enjoy our drinks and have ourselves a little lovin’ all at the same time. You in the mood for that?”

The room was small and basic—a padded couch that doubled as a bed, a table for their drinks, a sink and a toilet. As Nick put his drink down on the table, Sacha moved in behind him, and he felt the other man’s huge dick pressing against his ass. Between the broad shoulders and well-conditioned hips, Nick had suspected he might be well-endowed, but that was fine by him. Big was good.

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He drew in a breath of anticipation as Sacha kissed his neck and pinched his nipples before sliding his hands down Nick's flat belly and opening the zipper on his jeans. Sacha's touch was gentle but insistent, and Nick could hardly wait for the real action to begin.

"Hey, what we got going on in here?" Sacha said as he liberated Nick's shaft from the confinement of his clothing. "Didn't expect you to have such a nice big fella like this all ready and waiting for me."

As Sacha continued to stroke his cock and alternately squeeze his balls, Nick pushed his disaster of a day to the back of his mind and concentrated on the familiar build-up engendered by the other man's touch. *Yes, damn it!* This was exactly what he needed. He'd always enjoyed sex, the kissing, the touching, and the closeness of two bodies locked together. Everything about it felt so good, so liberating. It made him feel alive.

Since this was sex plain and simple, Nick had expected they would get straight to business and it would be over before they were halfway through their drinks. However, Sacha seemed content to take his time. His clever fingers pushed Nick to the edge and eased him back a couple of times, and then he used the pad of his thumb to add a little extra excitement by teasing the damp tip.

Nick snuggled his butt against Sacha's belly. "What's the hold up, man?"

"No hold up. Just don't like to be hurried is all."

Pushing Nick's jeans down below his knees, Sacha took a couple of condoms from his back pocket and handed one to Nick. He then took off his black jeans, covered his own impressive arousal with the other condom and reached for the dispenser of hand soap at the side of sink.

"Bend over, man, and relax, I don't want to hurt you," he

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instructed, squirting a generous amount of the liquid down Nick's crack. "This stuff works almost as good as regular lube."

For some reason, the splash of cold liquid added an extra dimension of anticipation. Nick closed his eyes and held on tight to the padded bench as Sacha inserted a finger in his hole and then added a second. When he'd loosened the muscle sufficiently, he added another squirt of the cool liquid to ensure easy entry. His breathing suddenly ragged with excitement, it took all Nick's powers of concentration to keep still as Sacha parted his ass cheeks and he felt the tip of Sacha's shaft pushing against him. Once he had the head in place, Sacha wrapped his arms around Nick's waist and pushed all the way in.

"Now, we just take it easy," Sacha said as he grasped Nick's cock in both hands and began to ride him in slow, unhurried thrusts.

Nick loved the feeling of Sacha's big dick buried in his ass and then withdrawing, while Sacha's hands stroked and squeezed.

But all too quickly the few minutes of intimacy and closeness were over. Nick started to orgasm, and then it was Sacha's turn.

By the time they'd cleaned up and were back at the bar, ordering fresh drinks, those few minutes in the back room felt to Nick like something that had happened in a dream. He even had the familiar sense of letdown that followed a dream.

This time, Sacha paid for their drinks, and as he returned his change to the front pocket of his jeans, he gave Nick a wide, sexy smile and said, "That was great. Maybe we can do it again. I'm usually in here every Thursday night, and sometimes on weekends, too."

An image of Trip's blond hair, handsome face, and surfer boy body invaded Nick's thoughts. "Sure, sounds good," Nick lied,

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making a mental note to avoid this particular bar on Thursdays and weekends. Sacha was a nice guy and everything anyone could ask for in a hook-up, but if Nick had been looking for anything really meaningful, he was sadly out of luck. There had been the great build-up, the fantastic rush, then nothing. Still, for Nick that was pretty much the norm with a one-off. It almost always left him feeling depressed and miserable, as if he'd somehow missed the mark, and tonight was no different.

Just then, Sacha turned away to talk to someone he appeared to know, and Nick avoided the embarrassment of inventing an excuse to leave by grabbing the opportunity to disappear. He'd find another bar and have a couple more drinks. Following that, he'd find a cab and head home.

The next place where Nick stopped was a block away and the clientele appeared to be a mix of gay and straight. He knew there was no guarantee he wouldn't get hit on, but figuring it would be less likely here than elsewhere, he found a spot at one end of the bar and ordered another vodka.

"You alone?"

The query came from a young guy in impossibly tight, but ragged jeans, a muscle shirt, a nose ring and one of those imitation prison-style tattoos on his neck. He didn't look old enough to be out on his own at this hour, never mind hanging around a bar. Nick shook his head, mouthed, "No," and the boy-man melted back into the crowd near the dance floor.

Over the next half-hour and two more drinks, Nick was accosted by several men of varying ages and a middle-aged woman so drunk she could barely stand. Deciding it was time for him to go, Nick quickly finished his drink and was about to vacate his seat when the young guy who'd approached him earlier returned with a

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friend, apparently for round two.

“So where’s your friend?” the first boy asked with a sneer. “He one of them invisible dudes like the little kids have? Or you got something personal against me?” He stuck out a hip. “We got a special going on tonight. You can have the two of us for the price of one. Best deal you’ll find, guaranteed.”

The boy was clearly trolling for business and probably panicking because he was having a bad night. As far as Nick was concerned, he’d get better results if he dropped the belligerent attitude in favor of a smile and a little sweet talk, but he wasn’t about to tell him that. Boys in his line of work weren’t likely to take any type of advice kindly and, since Nick knew many of them carried knives for protection, he decided to keep his mouth shut and just leave.

As he went to push his way past, the first boy grabbed a handful of Nick’s shirt and held on tight. “Didn’t your mom teach you it’s rude not to answer when someone asks you a question,” the boy demanded. Up close this like, Nick could see into the boy’s eyes and realized the kid was also a druggie and obviously desperate for his next fix.

“Hey, you tell him, Slick,” another young voice encouraged from somewhere behind Nick. “Teach the old fucker some manners, why don’t you?”

“Just let me go, okay?” As Nick tried to disentangle the first boy’s hand from his shirt, he kneed Nick in the crotch, creating a wave of excruciating pain that momentarily paralyzed his body. As the pain receded a little and he tried to straighten, someone else kicked him hard in the ass, shouting, “Drunken fucker tried holding out on us. Won’t pay us our money.”

In seconds, Nick was down on the floor being punched and

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kicked by what felt like everyone in the immediate area. All he could do was wrap his arms around his head to try and limit the damage, and wonder what in hell was keeping the bouncers from intervening.

How long it went on, he didn't know. His body was being hammered like a drum, and Nick could hardly believe he was still alive and conscious. Then, as suddenly as it had started, the brutal assault was over. The last thing Nick remembered was someone picking him up bodily, flying through the air and landing on something cold and exceedingly hard. After that nothing.

* * *

Trip hadn't been asleep for more than a few minutes when the phone awakened him. He considered letting it go to voice mail, but very few people had his number and none of them were likely to call him at this hour without a good reason, so he picked up.

"What's the problem?"

"Hi, Trip, it's Jim. Sorry to be calling you this late. Hope I didn't wake you up."

"It's okay. I'm assuming this is important."

"I just had a call from Lenny DeSantos."

"Lenny in payroll?"

"Yeah. He and some friends are over by the Fruit Loop. Apparently, they were walking past one of the bars, when the door flew open and the bouncers threw a guy out into the street. At first, they figured it was just a drunk causing trouble. Then Lenny thought there was something familiar about the guy, and when he didn't move, he went over and checked. He says it's Nick Gregorio. Seems he's been badly beaten up and his wallet's been

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stolen.”

“Lenny’s quite sure it’s Nick?”

“He said he recognized him right away. Anyway, I asked if he’d called the cops or an ambulance, but he said not. Before he had a chance to do that, Nick started to come around. Told Lenny he didn’t want him calling the cops or taking him to the hospital. He just wanted Lenny to find him a taxi so he could go home. Lenny didn’t think that was a good idea because he says Nick’s taken quite a kicking and he’s still pretty woozy. That’s why he called me. He doesn’t want to go against Nick’s wishes, but he says Nick is in no condition to be on his own. I told him to sit tight while I called you to see what you thought.”

Trip felt a tiny clutch of fear that he refused to explore. He already knew having feelings for a fellow employee could be tricky, but it was a lot too late for him to start worrying about that. Whether Nick realized it or not, Trip was very much involved. “Where are they now?”

“Waiting in Lenny’s car, somewhere in the area of the Fruit Loop from what he said. You want his cell number?”

“Please.” Trip wrote down the number Jim gave him and said, “Thanks, Jim. You get back to whatever you were doing. I’ll take it from here.”

The moment Jim disconnected Trip tapped in Lenny’s number.

Lenny answered immediately with a brief, “Yo.”

“Lenny? This is Trip Browning. Jim tells me that Nick has got himself into a little trouble. Where are you, exactly?”

“I’m parked over on Paradise, just before the intersection with East Harmon. Nick doesn’t seem to think anything’s broken, but his face is a real mess and he’s definitely hurting. He was also unconscious when I first found him. He says he’s fine and that he

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doesn't need to go to the hospital. Even so, I don't think it's a good idea for me just to drop him off at his place. He says he lives alone. What do you figure I should do?"

After a moment's indecision, Trip decided to take charge. If Nick didn't like him interfering that was too bad. If Lenny read something more into his offer than Trip wanted him to, that was also too bad. Leaving Nick alone with a possible concussion wasn't an option as far as Trip was concerned. He cared too much for Nick to do anything that irresponsible.

"Tell you what. I live only a couple of blocks from where you are. Maybe you should bring him over here, and I'll make sure he gets whatever care and attention he needs. Do you want to write down the address?"

* * *

By the time Trip got Nick out of Lenny's car and upstairs to his apartment, he knew his decision had been the right one. One eye was swollen shut, the other looked red, and he had a split lip. On top of that, his clothes were covered with a mixture of blood and dirt, and between a bad case of the shakes and difficulty walking, Nick was in no condition to take care of himself.

"What happened?" Trip asked, barely resisting the urge to wrap his arms around Nick and hold him close as he settled Nick on the living room sofa.

"I got jumped by a couple of drugged up kids who, I guess, were looking for money for their next fix. When I wouldn't play ball, they pretended I'd stiffed them, so they beat me up and took my wallet. How did you get involved?"

"Lenny called Jim, and Jim called me. Was there no security

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around?”

“Sure there was. But by the time they showed up, the kids had vanished, and I guess I was out for the count. You know the policy in most places when it comes to bar fights. They don’t worry about guilt, innocence or calling the cops. They just want everyone out, fast. The next thing I remember is Lenny and some other people showing up and asking me what happened.”

“And since no one will confirm you were even in that bar in the first place, they don’t need to worry about claims on their insurance or law suits. Right?”

“Right. I’m pretty sure I’m gonna live, so no hospitals, okay?” Nick said on a groan as he tried to change his position.

“My neighbor is a doctor at the medical center down the street, and I know he just came home. Will you let him check you for concussion? Just as a precaution.”

“I was only out for a minute or so.”

“Humor me? Please.”

“A couple of painkillers and a glass of water, and I’ll be fine come morning.”

“Maybe you will, but I’d rather hear what the doc has to say.” Without giving Nick the chance to come up with any more arguments, Trip was out of his apartment and, within a minute or so, came back with his neighbor in tow.

“Nick, this is Doc Simms. Doc, my friend, Nick.”

Once Nick told him what had happened, the doctor wanted to know if Nick had a headache, blurred vision or felt dizzy. Nick told the doctor that right now all he had was a bunch of sore spots from the kicks and punches. Following a brief examination of Nick’s actual injuries, the doctor stepped back and shrugged. “No signs of concussion and no broken bones that I can find, but I’d

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still recommend you go get yourself checked out. Never hurts to be really sure.”

“Can it wait until tomorrow?” Nick asked.

The doctor gave another shrug. “That’s up to you. But if you start feeling any worse, develop a headache, or any other symptoms, such as blurred vision or you get dizzy or disoriented, I suggest you go right away.”

After the doctor left, Trip said, “I’ll find you a pair of my jogging pants and a shirt, so you can get out of those clothes and help yourself to a hot shower.”

“Sounds good.” Nick levered himself off the sofa. “You’re not going to ask me what I was doing over there?”

Trip could guess, but no way would he ask. “It’s none of my business. But offhand, I’d say you were there because you’re a free agent and you felt like having a drink.”

“I got some bad news this morning. I needed to have a couple of drinks and clear my head.”

“So I heard.”

Nick seemed surprised. “You know? Meaning Enzo told you?”

“Of course, he told me.”

“Everything?”

“Yes, everything. You were very upset, and I’m your boss. I needed to know why. It’s part of my job.”

“Well, in case you’re wondering, Al won’t be moving down here. And I definitely won’t be moving back up there. We’re through. Really through this time.”

Trip forced out the words he knew were expected. “I’m sorry things didn’t work out the way you’d hoped.”

“At least one of us got what he wanted.”

“How do you figure that?”

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“Al thought there was still a chance for us. He said all I had to do was go home, and we could work something out. As if!” Nick made a sound halfway between a groan and a snort. “Lucky for you, that won’t be happening. Otherwise, like you said a while back, you’d have had the hassle of finding another experienced Italian chef with a knowledge of seafood to take over Silvia’s party.”

“I said that?” Trip asked, knowing quite well he hadn’t.

“Not in so many words. But I thought that’s what you meant when you said you didn’t want me to leave.”

“I seem to recall me saying that wasn’t the reason.”

“It wasn’t?”

No, Nick. That’s not even close. But you’re not ready for me to tell you the real reason. At least, not yet.

“Just go get that shower while I find you a couple of painkillers and some clean clothes. It’ll be morning before we know it.”

* * *

Despite everything that had happened the day before, including being beaten up at the bar, Nick awoke the following morning feeling a little sore but strangely refreshed. Maybe it was the relief of knowing his affair with Al was finally over. No more wondering, second-guessing, or driving himself crazy with a constant string of what ifs? What if he’d said no to Al in the first place? What if he’d made it clear to Al he was done before moving down here to Vegas?

Even though it was officially over, Nick knew there would be the occasional memory to trip him up. Perhaps he still had a few more tears to shed, too. He and Al had been together a long time.

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Now, he needed time to put it all behind him.

After folding up the sheet and blanket he'd used to sleep on Trip's sofa, Nick followed the smell of freshly brewed coffee to the kitchen. Trip was sitting at the table, eating a slice of toast and reading the morning paper.

The temptation to ruffle Trip's hair, give him a hug and thank him for saving his ass last night was almost too strong to resist. Somehow he managed, although barely. "Morning."

"Morning to you, too. How are you feeling?" Trip inquired. "Better? Worse?"

Nick stretched, helped himself to a mug of coffee and sat down in one of the chairs. "Good. Actually, I feel more than good. Like today is the first day of the rest of my life. Like...I don't know. The way I used to feel when school let out for the summer, or on Christmas Eve. You know what I mean."

"Like a huge weight has been lifted off your shoulders?"

"I guess that pretty much describes it."

"And no ill effects from being attacked?"

"Not really. I feel like I was in a fight, but no headache and no dizziness. Nothing another hot shower won't fix." Nick gently touched the cut on his lip and the still puffy area around his right eye. "I guess my face is a bit of a mess."

Trip gave him a wry grin. "Definitely not a pretty sight. But there's a bag of frozen peas in the freezer. Hold that against your eye for a while and it'll reduce the swelling. I also have a stick of concealer in the bathroom that should help with the bruising."

"I'm really sorry you got dragged into this," Nick apologized. "All I wanted was for Lenny to call me a cab. I would've been fine."

"Maybe you would, and maybe you wouldn't. Who knows?"

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Trip reached across the table and gave Nick's hand a brief, impersonal squeeze that had exactly the same effect as when Trip touched him the day before—a weird, tingly sensation. “As far as I'm concerned, Lenny did the right thing. I care about you, Nick. As an employee, but more importantly, as a friend.”

Nick felt a sudden rush of emotion he did his best to hide. It felt good to know someone cared. Although his friendship with Trip was purely platonic, it was also an important part of his life and no way did he want to screw it up. Not by indulging in wishful thinking or making what Trip might interpret as inappropriate moves.

Pushing away from the table, Nick found the bag of frozen veggies in the freezer and held it against his eye while he finished his coffee. By the time he'd showered, borrowed Trip's razor to shave, and used the concealer to hide the worst of the bruises, if anyone asked, he might just get away with saying he'd run into a door.

“You driving or taking a cab?” Nick asked as he rolled up the dirt and blood-spattered jeans and shirt he'd been wearing the night before and stuffed them in a plastic bag.

“Driving. Why?”

“Could you give me a lift to my place? I need work clothes, plus the info I'll need to cancel all my credit cards is there.”

“Sure. No problem. I just hope those kids didn't get your keys.”

“Oh, shit!” Nick experienced a sudden surge of panic at the all too likely possibilities exploding in his mind, all the while praying that hadn't happened. He pulled the jeans from the bag and checked the front pocket, giving a quick sigh of relief as his fingers closed around the small bunch of keys. “No. They're still here, thank God!”

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* * *

Nick used the first part of the following week to check on the offerings of the various seafood restaurants around town. The second half he spent in the small test kitchen Trip had authorized to be set up off the hotel's main kitchen, perfecting and refining a couple of new dishes he hoped to add to Franco's menu. The first was an appetizer based on a dish he'd had while vacationing in Europe, and the other was a shrimp entrée he'd planned to serve in his own restaurant, but had never quite managed to achieve the taste he'd been aiming for.

He'd tried any number of different and unusual dishes while in Europe, but the one that still stuck in his mind was an appetizer made of poached white fish, topped with a section of banana and smothered in a fruit sauce. The taste had been unexpectedly delicious, but for some reason the restaurant owner had refused to share the recipe or even identify the fruit used in the sauce.

Nick had tried duplicating the dish on several occasions, but his efforts had been less than encouraging. That was until he began working in Butterscotch Dreams. With the customers constantly demanding new smoothie flavors, he'd asked the staff for their suggestions and someone had mentioned mango. It wasn't a fruit Nick had worked with before, but the moment he tasted the sharp, sweet flavor obtained by blending pureed fresh mango with fresh orange juice, he knew right away that the secret ingredient in the fruit sauce was a secret no more.

The problem with the shrimp entrée had, in Nick's opinion, always been the bland, lackluster flavor of the sauce. After a few experiments and without losing the subtle taste of the shrimp, he'd managed to improve and enhance the fennel flavor he wanted by

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the addition of a small amount of Pernod.

Early Friday afternoon, Nick knew the white fish appetizer was as close as it would ever come to the original dish he'd had in Portugal. And his problems with the shrimp entrée were now also solved.

He'd also created a new salad composed of baby romaine, sliced pear, gorgonzola crumbs, and toasted pine nuts with a raspberry vinaigrette dressing.

Nick knew his next step should be to call Silvia and have her taste-test all three new dishes, but first, he wanted Trip's opinion on presentation and taste. If Trip approved, he'd ask Silvia to join them.

Taking out his cell phone, he keyed in Trip's number.

"You had lunch yet?" he asked the moment Trip answered.

"Matter of fact I was just thinking about doing exactly that. You want to join me somewhere?"

"No. Stay where you are. I'll bring it to you."

After loading everything, including tableware and cutlery, onto one of the room service carts, Nick added a bottle of chilled white Chianti, a carafe of iced water and another of coffee, and managed to talk Enzo into parting with a few small slices of his latest *cassata*.

Taking a deep breath, he headed out of the kitchens. If Trip liked the new creations, there was every chance Silvia would, too.

When he arrived at Trip's office up on the third floor, he knocked on the door and called out, "Room service."

Trip admitted him with a heart-stopping grin and an appreciative sniff. "Something smells good. What is it?"

"A test session. Remember I promised you the first taste of the new dishes I'd like to add to the menu? Well, boss, this is it."

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“Is Silvia coming? No matter what I think, you realize she has final say?”

“I know. That’s why I’ve brought enough for you both.” Nick poured a glass of iced water and handed it to Trip. He then removed the cover from a small plate containing a taste-size portion of the fillet of haddock in fruit sauce that he’d decorated with a couple of tiny carrot curls and a minute sprig of watercress. “But I wanted your opinion first, just in case anything needs a bit of tweaking.”

Trip drank enough water to refresh his palate, then picked up a fork. “This looks very different. I can see white fish and banana. What’s in the sauce?”

“Just taste it.”

Trip popped a small piece in his mouth, closed his eyes and chewed. “Wow!” he muttered as he opened his eyes and put down the fork. “That’s fabulous. I can taste orange and ginger and... What’s the main base? I know it’s not apple or peach.”

“It’s mango.”

“Of course! Mango.”

“Now, the salad.” Nick waited while Trip had more water before handing him another fork and a small amount of salad.

“Romaine, blue cheese—”

“Gorgonzola,” Nick corrected, his gaze glued to Trip’s mouth as Trip used his tongue to catch a stray crumb of something. He swallowed a sigh, unable to prevent himself from wondering what that tongue would feel like, and what other tricks it could do. “Silvia would kill me if I used anything else.”

“Pine nuts, fresh pear, and a light raspberry dressing. Did I miss anything?”

“No. What do you think?”

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“Again, fabulous.”

“If Silvia agrees, I thought we could start by serving it as a side, and then later, if it goes over well, we might consider serving a larger portion as a lunch entrée.”

“Good idea. What do you have hiding under there?” Trip tapped the side of a silver cover.

“Shrimp.” Nick topped up Trip’s water glass and opened the bottle of white wine. “It’s something I’ve been playing with for a while.”

Nick removed the cover to reveal a small dish containing three shrimps nestled on a bed of linguine and covered in a light tomato cream sauce.

Trip reached for another fork and speared one of the shrimps. After chewing and swallowing, he frowned. “I love the licorice taste, and I want to say white wine and fennel, but that’s not right, is it?”

“No. That was my first attempt. But it was too bland, so I tried a dash of Pernod, and *voilà!*”

“Well, you’ve got my vote on all three,” Trip said as he reached for the phone and entered a two-digit number. “Now, we’ll see what Silvia has to say.”

“Hi, Silvia, it’s Trip. I have Nick here in my office, and we’re wondering if you can spare the time to taste a few new dishes he’d like to add to the menu at Franco’s.” He paused, listening. “Of course, we can serve them at the opening party if that’s what you decide. Shall we come up?” He paused again. “Okay, that’s fine. We’ll see you in a few minutes.”

“She’s on her way down here,” Trip announced as he disconnected.

A few minutes later, the door opened to admit Silvia DiMarco,

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dressed in her usual tailored black suit, and with every hair of her blonde coiffure firmly in place.

“Nick. Trip.” She acknowledged both men with a warm smile before turning her attention to the food cart. “I haven’t had lunch, so I hope you’ve brought lots.”

Nick went through the same routine as he had with Trip. First, he gave Silvia a glass of iced water and one of the silver forks, and then he produced another test-size portion of the fish.

“This look interesting,” Silvia said. “What do you call it?”

“At the moment, it’s just the fish appetizer with fruit sauce. If you approve, we can come up with a fancy name.”

“Well, here goes,” Silvia said, using the fork to break off a piece of the fish and put it in her mouth. “Oh, my, yes!” She rolled her dark eyes in appreciation and shot Nick a mischievous grin. “This is very, very good. An absolute must. Can I finish what’s on the plate? It’s just a tiny piece, and I wouldn’t want it to be wasted.”

“Be my guest,” Nick invited. “There’s plenty more.”

After tasting and also giving her approval to the salad and the shrimp entrée, Silvia poured a cup of coffee and helped herself to a sliver of the *cassata*. “Just a couple of small suggestions, if I may. I always associate linguine with heavier, richer dishes made with cheese or a meat sauce, so you might consider substituting angel hair pasta to go with the shrimp. And while the pine nuts are Italian and definitely add an authentic touch, I find them to be a little too bland—completely overwhelmed by the other ingredients. I’m wondering if pecans might work better. What do you think, Nick?”

“Spiced pecans are what I use when I make it for myself, so sure, we can do that.”

“In that case, gentlemen, you have my permission to include all

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three dishes in the menu, and I'll leave you to think up suitable names."

Nick had been literally holding his breath, praying for Silvia's approval. If she'd given thumbs down on all or any of the three dishes, he'd have been hard-pressed to come up with replacements at this late stage. Instead, to his relief, she'd loved them all!

As the door closed behind Silvia, Nick let out his breath in a rush, grabbed Trip and waltzed him around the room. "She liked them. In fact, I think she loved them. This is so totally fantastic because I was terrified she would hate them all, and in that case I would have been totally screwed because I—"

Nick's flow of words ceased abruptly as Trip's arms tightened around his body and then the hot, moist heat of Trip's mouth brushed softly against his lips. Unable to move, Nick closed his eyes, savoring the magic of Trip's embrace. He could feel his heart thudding against his ribs and the blood pulsing in his veins. He could also feel Trip's heat and smell his scent, but he didn't know what to do or even what to think. Okay, so it was something he'd secretly wondered about and hoped for. Now, it appeared what he'd suspected about Trip was true.

But why hadn't Trip made a move before now? Nick tried to pull free to ask, but Trip held firm, one hand cupping the back of Nick's head, while his tongue slipped into Nick's mouth, gently at first, seeking, exploring. As the kiss became more passionate, Nick knew he didn't want it to stop. He wanted—

As suddenly as it had begun, the moment was over. Trip released his hold on Nick and stepped back, his face flushed and his expression confused. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I had no right. It's too soon. You need time to recover, time to heal and put the past behind you. Forgive me, I—"

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Before Nick could collect his thoughts and say he didn't want or need an apology, Trip had abruptly stopped speaking, wrenched open the door and rushed out, leaving Nick on his own.

Nick took a deep breath and touched his mouth with the tips of his fingers. He let the breath out slowly. *Oh, man!* Trip had kissed him. A real, honest-to-goodness, lots of tongue involved, French kiss. It had been so damned good, he hadn't wanted it to end. He'd wanted it to continue on all the way to its natural conclusion. He'd been ready to rip off his clothes, go down on his knees...

Trouble was it had all happened too fast, and ended much too quickly. Now, he could hardly believe it had happened at all. But it had. Trip had kissed him. It hadn't been a dream or his imagination. It had happened. He closed his eyes, trying to relive the moment. He wanted to chase after Trip, ask him why he'd rushed off like that. He wanted to feel Trip's arms around him again. He wanted to feel his mouth, his hands...

Damn!

He hit Trip's desk with his closed fist. The best thing that had happened to him in months and then to have it snatched away like that. He wondered where Trip was and what his chances were of finding him. Except Nick knew, wherever Trip had gone, chasing after him was the worst possible idea. Trip had mostly likely acted in the heat of the moment, and now he needed a little time and space to get his head together. He'd be back when he was ready.

The good thing was even before that kiss, he and Trip were close. Trip had interviewed him for a job at The Neapolitan within a few days of Nick arriving in Vegas, and they'd clicked right away. In fact, Nick knew he wouldn't have settled into his new life as easily without Trip's help. Still, there were limits beyond which he couldn't go. Until now, he hadn't been quite sure of Trip's

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sexual orientation, and perhaps Trip hadn't been either. It wasn't the kind of thing he could just come out and ask.

For all Nick knew, Trip was one of those guys who'd been teetering on the edge all his life, unwilling or unable to declare himself. But then Nick's moment of triumph had given him the shot of courage he'd needed to just close his eyes and jump. And ended up scaring the hell out of himself?

Whatever the reason behind that kiss, Nick knew it had left Trip feeling confused and embarrassed. He wanted to go to him, hold him and tell him everything was okay, but right now, he knew Trip needed to be left alone to work things out for himself. He didn't need Nick hounding him for answers he most likely didn't have, or probing for motives of which he was unsure.

When Trip was ready to talk, he'd be back in touch. Nick glanced at his watch and made a mental note of the time. If that didn't happen within the next few hours, then it would be up to him to make the next move.

After cleaning off Trip's desk and returning everything he'd brought with him to the service cart, Nick made his way back to the test kitchen, where he put the leftovers in the trash, and the dirty dishes and cutlery into the dishwasher.

Since he still had a couple of hours to go before his normal quitting time, Nick returned to his makeshift office in Franco's. With the construction workers gone for the day and the noise of power drills and hammers temporarily silenced, it gave him the peace and quiet he needed to complete the menu for the party. However, as he waited for the computer to boot up, he ran a finger slowly along his lips and found himself reliving Trip's kiss, his touch...the heat, the passion, and the intensity of a moment he'd been quite sure would end in a totally different way to what it had.

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He wondered if Trip had ever kissed another man. He hadn't noticed anything awkward or fumbling about the kiss they'd shared, and that was a pretty sure indicator Trip wasn't exactly inexperienced. Then again, there was always such a thing as beginner's luck. Lead with your heart and everything else will come naturally?

But now what?

Once Trip resurfaced, would he want to pick up where they'd left off, or was Nick supposed to act as if the kiss had never happened?

He flipped open his phone and tapped in Trip's speed dial number. He'd give him a quick call, just to say hi and make sure he was okay. But the call went to voice mail so he hung up.

He'd wait a while and try again. In the meantime, maybe Trip would call him.

Nick tapped his pen impatiently against the edge of the desk. If he knew where Trip might be... Unfortunately, he didn't and, since sitting here worrying wouldn't change a thing, Nick opened the folder containing the party menu and started rechecking what was needed for each item and ensuring it was in stock or easily available. After adding the three new dishes to the menu and readjusting the ingredients in one of the basic side salads, he emailed copies to Silvia and Trip with a note asking them to give him their final approval.

Unable to concentrate on work, he tried Trip one more time. The moment he heard the click signaling voice mail, he ended the call. *Damn!* He closed the folder and turned off the computer.

Where the hell was he?

In an attempt to occupy his mind with something else, he leaned back in his chair and looked around at what he hoped would

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soon turn out to be one of Vegas' smartest and highest rated dining spots. Silvia wanted the best of everything, and that's what she was getting—from the finest imported wines and liqueurs, to the highest quality tile flooring, wall coverings and handcrafted decorations, to the specially designed and manufactured furniture, monogrammed silver, linen, table and glassware. In addition, it would have a menu featuring a selection of signature, one-of-a-kind dishes made from the best, freshest ingredients and obtainable only here at Franco's. As an extra precaution, Trip had chosen the most experienced members of the hotel's kitchen and wait staff to ensure the launch party went without off a hitch.

Nick rubbed his tired eyes and got to his feet. It had been a tough couple of days and he was beat. If he'd forgotten anything important, hopefully someone would think of it before the big day. If they didn't...well, then they'd just have to get by without it.

Picking up the office phone, he dialed Trip's extension, but as he'd expected, the call went straight to voice mail. He then keyed in Trip's home number on his cell. Once again there was the click, then voice mail, but this time he left a message.

"Hi, Trip. It's Nick. I'm just leaving and I'll be home all night. Call me when you get this, okay? Ciao."

For a moment, Nick continued to sit at the desk impatiently tapping his foot on the floor and his fingers against the surface of the desk. He wanted to see Trip, talk to him. If Trip didn't want that, however, there was nothing he could do except wait.

* * *

It was a beautiful evening, warm with a light breeze and the setting sun glinting off the snow capping the highest peaks of the

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Sierra Nevada. As usual, Nick walked home, and, once he was inside his apartment, he opened up a cold beer and headed for the shower. He thought about trying Trip's number again, then decided against it. He wanted to see Trip, make sure he was okay, and if Trip was willing, pick right up where they'd left off, but what if Trip didn't want to see him?

Nick was a little afraid Trip might interpret a second message as overkill. The one he'd left had been light and friendly, making it clear he wasn't upset or offended by what had happened earlier, and that was enough. Now, it was up to Trip to make the next move.

After taking a shower, Nick threw on a pair of comfortably soft and ragged jeans, added an equally ancient tank top and headed for the kitchen. For supper, he made himself a medium-rare rib steak plus a large bowl of salad. Dessert was fresh fruit and a cup of his favorite, freshly brewed Arabica coffee.

He'd just taken his coffee into the living room and switched on the TV to watch a favorite show when he heard a knock on the apartment door. He figured it was either one of his neighbors looking to borrow something, or the building superintendent. But when he looked through the peephole, his heartbeat moved up a few notches. Trip stood on the other side of the door, dressed in jogging pants and a hoodie, looking better than any man had a right to. The slump of his shoulders and the strained expression on his face, however, tore at Nick's heart. He looked so damn confused, worried, too, as if he wasn't quite sure what reaction he'd get if and when Nick opened the door...

Telling himself to stay cool and let Trip take the lead, Nick unlocked the door and waved him inside. "I see you got my message."

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“Yeah.” Trip shrugged, but remained where he was, looking more embarrassed than worried now. “You mad at me?”

“Because you kissed me?”

“What else? Are you?”

“No, of course not. Why would I be? We were both pretty excited about getting Silvia’s approval. Suddenly, after weeks of planning and worry, everything was finally coming together perfectly, and we were flying. I figured you just got carried away.”

Trip frowned. “That’s all? You thought I just acted in the heat of the moment?”

“You didn’t?” Nick said, hopefully.

“Hell, no. I’m not saying the moment didn’t give me the courage to do something I’d wanted to do for a very long time because it did. I care about you, man.”

“Hey, I care about you, too. We’re friends. Right?”

“What I mean is that I *really* care about you.” Trip’s lips twisted in an uncertain smile as he shuffled his feet. “But I knew you had a lot on your mind. I figured I should wait. Let you work things out...”

Nick didn’t really want to talk. He wanted to grab Trip’s hand, pull him inside the apartment, and—

“Why don’t you come in,” Nick urged. “I just made coffee, or there’s beer if you’d rather.”

When Trip continued to hesitate, Nick went with his heart. He reached out and pulled Trip inside, wrapped his arms around him and kicked the door shut. His head and his heart were full to bursting that Trip had come to him. *Yeah, man!* This was so much better than imagination.

“You know, coming over here and getting this kind of welcome feels exactly the way I hoped it would,” Trip murmured against

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Nick's mouth.

"And how is that?"

"Like coming home."

Trip's lips brushed gently against Nick's, not with the same passion-filled intensity of earlier in the day, but in a soft, tentative, getting-to-know-one-another way that melted Nick's heart and made him feel he was finally doing something right.

"If you're plain not interested, or need more time, just say the word." Trip captured Nick's gaze. "I'm not here to rush you into something you don't want, or aren't ready for."

"Don't worry. I'm fine, and you're not rushing me into anything I don't want. In fact..." Nick paused, knowing what he was about to say was the whole truth and nothing but. "I'm really glad you're here. Whatever Al and I had was over a long time ago. It's just taken me a while to realize that."

"You're sure?"

"Positive."

Trip visibly relaxed and gave Nick a wobbly smile. "In that case, can we please sit down? I'm so damn wound up from worrying my legs are shaking."

Nick took Trip's hand and led him through the apartment to the bedroom, where he pulled Trip down beside him on the bed. Turning onto his side, Nick gently stroked Trip's face. He wanted to kiss Trip the way they'd kissed earlier, and although his cock was hard, and all he could think about was how much he wanted the man lying beside him, Nick knew he had to be patient. Right now, Trip was the one who needed a little reassurance. Everything else could wait temporarily. "What were you so worried about?"

"That you'd slam the door in my face. Maybe kick my butt down the stairs. Report me for sexual harassment. I don't know."

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“Walk off the job and leave you to do Franco’s opening on your own?”

“Yeah, that, too. I admit it crossed my mind. Except I couldn’t believe you’d screw up Silvia’s big night for something I’d done. You wouldn’t have, would you?”

“No. Not a chance. It’s not like you were using your position as my boss to hit on me.”

“True. If I’d been doing that, I’d have told to you to just drop your pants and bend over.”

“You’d have what?” For an instant, Nick thought he’d misheard, but then he howled with laughter. “You wouldn’t have dared.”

“You’re right, I wouldn’t. Even though it once happened to me.”

“Where you were working?”

“A weekend job I had at a wine shop while I was in college. One day I was late getting in, and as I was about to leave that night, the boss called me into his office. He said he didn’t tolerate tardiness in his employees, and I needed to be taught a lesson so I’d remember to be on time in the future.”

“And then what happened?”

“He said to bend over and drop my pants. He was a big guy with fists like a pair of Virginia hams, and he was leaning his full three hundred pounds against the door. No other way for me to leave, so I had no choice but to go along with the request. Anyway, he rammed his surprisingly skinny dick up my ass a couple of times and when that didn’t do the trick, he said I had to suck him off.”

“Did you?”

“Nope.” Trip grinned and shook his head. “I might have done

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it, but the reason I was late was because I'd been up all night partying and I didn't feel that great. Then I got a whiff of his disgusting body odor, and I threw up all over his fancy handmade shoes. The guy smelled gross, like dead fish or worse."

"And that was the end of your job, I imagine."

"Sure was. Actually, it's a miracle it wasn't the end of me. I was so damned scared, I took off running, and I didn't stop until I was far enough away to be sure he couldn't catch up. I wanted to go to the cops, but that guy had connections everywhere from the dog catcher up to the mayor. I was too damned scared to say a word about it to anyone."

Nick had reached the point where he could no longer ignore the ache in his cock, and as Trip's aroused shaft was now pressing against his leg, he rubbed the pad of his thumb along Trip's lower lip. "Would you do those things for me if I asked you nicely?"

"Do what things?"

"Suck me off." Nick slipped a hand inside Trip's jogging pants and stroked his cock. "I want to feel my dick in your mouth, and I want to feel you sucking me until you've sucked me dry. Then, if you want, I'll bend over for you, and maybe after that, you'll bend over for me. Sound like a plan?"

While Nick was talking, Trip pushed Nick onto his back, unzipped his jeans and slid them off. "You have any condoms handy?"

Nick opened the nightstand drawer and took out a couple of small foil packets. After opening one of them, he covered his hard-on, and gave the other to Trip.

Trip positioned Nick on the edge of the bed, then knelt down between Nick's legs and, holding Nick's arousal firmly in one hand, he took him into his mouth. As Nick gave a sigh of pleasure

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and lay back on the bed, he felt Trip start to squeeze his balls gently with his free hand.

Nick held his breath because, between the heat of Trip's mouth, the insistent sucking, and the havoc Trip was wreaking with his balls, he knew he wouldn't last long. But then the tension eased slightly and Nick felt a finger pushing into his hole. One finger became two, and as his muscles stretched to accommodate the intrusion, Nick's whole body was awash with sensation.

Suddenly, Trip released Nick's cock and told him to turn over. As soon as Nick did what Trip asked, he heard Trip open the package containing the other condom. There was the interminable two-second wait while Trip covered his own erection. And then Nick drew in a sharp breath as Trip spread his ass cheeks wide and ran his tongue slowly up and down his crack.

"You have some lube?"

"Same drawer as the condoms."

Nick heard the soft whoosh of the drawer opening and closing, and he felt the cold splash of the gel against his warm flesh. Almost afraid to breathe, Nick held on tight to the bed, emitting a soft groan of satisfaction as Trip gave a small experimental push against his hole before sliding all the way in. For Nick, locked together with Trip like this, and with Trip's arms around his body, stroking his cock, and his face pressed against his back, felt so good and so right. Whether it was a one-off or the first day of the rest of their lives, Nick knew this moment of the two of them finally coming together was one he would never forget.

"This feels so unbelievably great. I mean us together like this," Nick said, knowing what he felt for Trip was both real and important. Whether it was love and would last a lifetime, only time would tell. But if wishes had anything to do with it, he wished the

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way he felt right now would last forever.

"Yeah, even better than my imagination," Trip said as he withdrew and pushed back in.

"You've imagined us together like this?"

"Once or twice," Trip murmured as his tongue began to investigate Nick's ear and his hands began to stroke Nick's cock.

"Me, too," Nick admitted. "But the reality is a thousand times better. Like whatever happened before today wasn't important. Almost as if it was just a rehearsal."

"And not an especially good one?"

Nick sighed. "I feel like that princess who had to kiss a thousand frogs before she found her prince. You keep thinking you've got it right, until the day comes when you *know* you have for sure."

Trip had started to up the speed of his strokes, pushing Nick closer and closer to the edge, and Nick gripped the bed even tighter.

"You mean like the way I feel right this minute?" Trip asked.

"If it's anything the same as what I do, then yes!" Every muscle and nerve in Nick's body had gradually tightened until, finally, he felt Trip orgasm, and then it was his turn. For a moment, everything stopped, including his breathing, then the explosion came. One incredible sensation after another rolled through his body in wave after wave. It was like nothing he'd ever known before. But then as his arms gave out and he collapsed on his face, he gave one long yell of happiness and satisfaction.

Nick rolled onto his back, pulled Trip down on top of him and nuzzled his mouth. "Man, are we good together or what?"

"We'll be even better with a little practice."

"Okay, if I catch my breath first? I'm totally beat."

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“Jeez, Gregorio, you’re such a wuss,” Trip complained, laughingly. “No staying power whatsoever. Here I am, all ready and raring to go for round two, and you want a time out? Next thing I know, you’ll want to take a nap. I don’t believe this.”

Nick slid a hand between their bodies and fondled Trip’s limp dick. “Ready and raring to go, hmm? It’s all in your head. Sorry to be the one to give you the bad news, but I think this little guy’s gone on furlough.”

“Little?”

Nick grinned. “Well, I didn’t want to hurt your feelings by saying tiny or microscopic.”

“Bet yours isn’t very big right now, either.”

“Probably not.” Nick hesitated, doing his best not to laugh out loud. “Want to play show and tell?”

With a quick flip, Trip reversed their positions and whacked Nick hard on the butt. “No, I do not want to play show and tell. But maybe we can reconsider having round two after a little cuddle.”

“Followed by a ten-minute nap?”

* * *

Trip awoke a little after midnight to find the room bathed in moonlight, and Nick cuddled into his side, snoring his head off. For a moment, he stayed where he was, enjoying the comforting warmth of Nick’s body. It had been a long time since he’d shared a bed with someone he cared about. In fact, it wasn’t something he’d ever thought or expected to do again until he met Nick and all his resolutions went out the window. But being with Nick like this felt so good. Maybe too good? If this turned out to be a one-night stand, or—

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Trip refused to consider the possibilities. Like Nick, he knew all about falling in love and the pain of betrayal. The way it started with the ready smile and the passionate sex, the feeling that you were the only person in his world that mattered. Then the unexpected feeling of distance, the excuses, the late nights, the trips out of town, and, finally, the knife straight between the shoulder blades when you'd least expected it.

Trip had sworn a thousand times never to put himself through all that again. He'd be better off alone. It was safer that way. After all, sex and temporary company were available in every bar in every town, and for a while, they'd sufficed. But as everyone knew and he'd come to realize, life without love and companionship was no life at all.

He hadn't planned to fall in love with Nick. It had just happened. And the fact Nick was still emotionally involved elsewhere at the time had had its advantages. It had made Trip step back, wait to see how things played out and test the strength of his feelings, rather than jump into something too fast and end up regretting his actions.

Needing to use the bathroom, Trip tried to ease away from Nick and slip off the bed without disturbing him. He'd just about made it when Nick grabbed his arm. "Where you going?"

"The bathroom. I'll be right back."

"I thought maybe you were going to leave without telling me."

"No. I wouldn't do that."

"Al did it all the time, and it really pissed me off. He'd say he was going to stay the night, and I'd wake up say around two or three and find him gone. Of course, he always had a great excuse, like he couldn't afford to be seen arriving home at dawn, or he'd just remembered something he needed to do. Bullshit...all of it. He

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was scared sick someone might guess he was fooling around and screw up his partnership dreams.”

Trip knew exactly how it felt to wake up and find himself alone. Tom, the guy Trip had expected to spend the rest of his days with, had done it a lot, and always with the same solid gold reason—according to Tom, the security company he worked for had just called about a break-in and sorry, but he had to go. Of course, it wasn’t until much later Trip discovered Tom liked the variety he got by driving around late at night, looking for a little extra action, and that going on calls wasn’t and never had been a part of Tom’s job.

When he returned to bed, Nick appeared to have gone back to sleep. Nevertheless, whether awake or asleep, it didn’t prevent Nick from tucking an arm securely around Trip’s waist and pulling him close the moment Trip lay down beside him.

* * *

The following morning, Nick awoke to the delicious aromas of coffee and frying bacon. The coffee was no mystery—he had plenty of that—but he hadn’t bought bacon since he couldn’t remember when.

Pulling on his comfortable, raggedy old jeans, he left the bedroom and padded barefoot down the hall to the kitchen. To his surprise, the table was set for two, the ready light was glowing on the coffee machine and Trip was removing strips of bacon from the pan and laying them on paper towel to drain.

“You want eggs?” Trip asked without looking up from what he was doing.

“I don’t have any eggs.”

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“You didn’t have any bread, butter, milk, or tomatoes either, but now you do. I woke early and went shopping.”

Nick scrunched his eyes to focus on the digital clock on the stove. “It’s barely seven. It’s also Saturday and my day off. Yours, too, I believe.”

Trip slipped an arm around Nick and gave him a brief hug, and what Nick assumed was supposed to pass for a kiss. “That all I get?”

“For the moment, yes. One egg or two? Toast, yes or no?”

Nick collapsed into the nearest kitchen chair. “One’s fine, and one slice of toast. I didn’t know you knew how to cook.”

Trip grinned as he broke an egg into the hot fat and sprinkled it with black pepper. “I live alone and eating out all the time gets tiresome, so I figured I needed to learn a few basics. Nothing fancy, just enough to get me by. How do you like your egg?”

“Flipped over, thanks.”

“Hey, this looks great,” Nick observed a few minutes later when Trip placed a plate before him containing perfectly cooked bacon and one egg, half a broiled tomato, and one slice of buttered wheat toast. “If you get fed up with your present job, you can always find employment as a short order cook.”

Trip poured two mugs of coffee and handed one to Nick. “If we survive all the temper tantrums and everything else that’s bound to happen between now and Franco’s opening, we may both be ready for a new job.”

Nick swallowed a mouthful of bacon. “Franco’s doesn’t open officially until the Thursday after the party, so I’d be content to take a few days off. Maybe find myself a nice, quiet beach where I can just laze in the sun, sleep and eat someone else’s cooking.”

“Any plans for today?” Trip asked, pushing his empty plate to

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one side.

“Nothing much, just our Saturday night poker game. You?”

“With Franco’s launch more or less organized, Silvia has already come up with a new idea she’s asked me to consider.”

“Do I want to hear about this?”

Trip chuckled. “Probably not, but I’m going to tell you anyway. She’s found what she says is the best Thai/Vietnamese restaurant she’s ever been to, tucked away in a strip mall that’s being demolished to make way for something else. Long story short, the owner can’t find affordable new premises, so Silvia wants to bring him over here.

“Before he died, her husband had plans to install a few fast food places in the basement, but, of course, that never happened. Now, instead of fast food, Silvia is thinking of giving the basement over to the Flavors of Asia. This Thai place will be the opening act. Eventually, we can add a sushi bar, then whatever else she comes up with. If you like Thai food, we can have lunch there and check it out. What do you think?”

“Matter of fact, I love Thai food. Lunch sounds great and so does Silvia’s idea.” Nick smiled. “Of course, the best part of her idea is that I know nothing about Asian cuisine, so it won’t be my problem. Now, would you like a hand cleaning up the kitchen, or can I go have a shower?”

“Nothing much to clean up. You go ahead.”

After deciding on what he wanted to wear that day and checking his wallet to see if he still had cash or if he needed to make a trip to the ATM, Nick’s next stop was the bathroom.

He’d just closed the shower door and turned on the spray full force when the door opened and Trip joined him.

Looping an arm around Nick’s waist, Trip closed the space

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between them so his arousal pressed firmly against Nick's butt. "This a game two can play?" he said above the noise of the cascading water.

Nick bent forward to turn off the water, and Trip moved in even closer, his hands bringing Nick's dick to life, while he licked and nuzzled the smooth expanse of Nick's back.

"Hey, that tickles," Nick complained with a chuckle, trying pull free of Trip's embrace. "Anyway, in case you've forgotten, it's my turn."

"Your turn for what?"

"I bent over for you, so now it's your turn to do the same for me. Unless, of course, you have some objection."

With a laugh, Trip let Nick go and reversed position, his legs slightly apart and his hands against the tiles. "What are you waiting for?"

Nick had had a feeling Trip might join him, so he'd put condoms and lube next to the shampoo in the shower caddy. He nudged Trip and handed him one of the foil packets. "Here, since you're in so much of a hurry."

Once they were both wearing protection, Nick turned Trip back to face him. Cupping Trip's face in his hands, Nick began to kiss him deeply, his tongue tangling with Trip's and then exploring his mouth in the hope he could imprint every corner and crevice in his mind. They were both highly aroused, and with their hard cocks playing some kind of prod and poke game, Nick moved his hands slowly down Trip's back to squeeze and stroke his ass cheeks.

As he continued to kiss Trip, he inserted a finger in his hole and moved it slowly back and forth. Kneeling down, he took Trip's cock into his mouth and sucked hard, but the moment Trip tried to fuck his mouth, he stopped and turned Trip around so he was once

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again facing the wall. Pushing Trip's legs a little farther apart, he ran a finger down Trip's crack and followed it with his tongue. Nick smiled to himself as he heard Trip groan with delight and then give a surprised gasp as Nick used a little spit and inserted two fingers into his hole while he squeezed Trip's balls with his other hand.

Trip was much tighter than Nick had expected. If this was something Trip didn't like to do, though, Nick figured he would have said by now. Since he hadn't, he could only assume Trip's sex life wasn't very active. Maybe he didn't even have one.

Reaching for the lube, Nick inserted the nozzle into Trip and pressed.

"Jeez, that feels like liquid ice," Trip said, his muscles tensing.

"Then hold on tight, cuz I'm about to warm you up," Nick promised as he carefully positioned the head of his shaft and pushed in very slowly. "Feel good?" he asked. With Trip's ass positioned against his belly, Nick reached around his body and stroked his cock.

He'd wanted to take it slow, stretching out the enjoyment. However, with Trip's butt rocking against him, urging him on, and Trip's cock bucking against his hand, he had no choice but to speed things up and bring them both to a much faster conclusion than he'd planned.

As Nick withdrew, Trip turned around and gave him a big wet kiss. "That was great, babe. Fantastic. Best ever."

"Really?" Nick snagged Trip's gaze and hung on tight. "It was good. But great? If we had more time, I know we could do a whole lot better."

"Well, for me it was really great. For me—" Trip stopped speaking and looked away, giving Nick the impression he'd

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already said more than he intended.

"It's okay. You don't have to explain a thing," Nick said, meaning every word. As he knew from personal experience, some things were just too painful to talk about to anyone.

"Thanks." Trip hesitated. "There's really nothing much to tell. Like you, I fell for someone who was more concerned with his wants and needs than he was with mine. I'm just glad I've met you."

"I'm glad you have, too." Nick laughed as he reached out and ruffled Trip's blond hair, then hugged him close as he felt a shiver run through Trip's body. "Sounds like we've both had lucky escapes. Except if we don't finish showering and dry ourselves off, we're liable to find ourselves in the hospital with a bad case of pneumonia."

* * *

The next few days leading up to the opening party at Franco's became one long, continuous blur in Nick's mind of checking and rechecking that nothing had been forgotten, mislaid, or overlooked. Still, he needed to be certain that everything possible was being done to assure the opening party's success, even though it was starting to stress him out. Not too surprisingly, tempers flared at the least provocation and tears of frustration were the order of the day. There was even an incident when two of the kitchen workers almost came to blows over a piece of equipment that had mysteriously disappeared.

To Nick's relief, his order of fresh crab had arrived right on time and exactly as promised, so he knew the huge dish of *cioppino* he was planning would merit its place as the focal point

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of the buffet table.

During those preparations, what little free time Nick and Trip were able to snatch from their busy schedules, they spent enjoying their new life as lovers as well as friends. One night they'd spend at Trip's place and the next at Nick's, talking, making love, and trying to fit in a few hours of much-needed sleep.

Then, finally, Saturday dawned clear and bright and Nick was a bundle of pre-party nerves. Screwing up was something he didn't dare think about, but even so, he spent most of the day trying to ignore the pack of butterflies that had taken up residence in his stomach. However, the moment he took up his position at one end of the buffet table dressed in his white chef's hat and jacket and black-and-white checked pants, the nausea and uncertainty vanished. With his confidence restored, he was back to feeling like his normal self again.

He glanced slowly around the room at the tables with their black linen cloths and white napkins, the cutlery and glassware glinting in the candlelight, and the simple centerpieces composed of soft pink and pale mauve flowers. Everything looked even more perfect than he'd hoped and, as the guests began arriving, he felt a heady surge of excitement. This was it! His big moment had arrived.

Just then, Trip appeared at his side and discreetly squeezed his hand. "Good luck, babe," he whispered. "Silvia sends her love and says from what she's seen so far, she just wishes Frank could be here to enjoy it all with us."

"You told her we have singing waiters?"

"No." Trip smiled happily. "She didn't ask, and I didn't tell."

"And no one but you and I know about Enzo, right? I made him promise not to say a word."

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“All Silvia knows is that Roberto will be coming down to sing a couple of songs both before and after his regular show,” Trip said, referring to Roberto Ventura, Silvia’s nephew and The Neapolitan’s resident star singing attraction. “The rest is all one big surprise...and I think she’s about to find that out,” Trip added as the maitre d’ escorted Silvia and her party to their table and one of the waiters broke into song as he stepped forward and pulled out Silvia’s chair.

Then the other waiters began moving between the tables, taking orders for drinks and special requests, and as one song finished, another one started somewhere else in the room.

After the first rush to sample the delights of the buffet table had died down, to the delight of everyone present, Roberto Ventura came through the kitchen door, dressed as a waiter, carrying a jug of water, and singing “Quando, Quando.” After following it with “Amore, Scusami” and promising to return later, Roberto went back the way he’d come, through the kitchens.

“I think the last time I saw so many famous faces present at the same time was when I was watching one of those award shows on TV,” one of the assistant chefs muttered in an aside to Nick as he replaced an almost empty bowl of house salad with a fresh one. “I can’t wait to tell my mom.”

Nick wasn’t much of a celebrity hound, but he was pleased when he recognized one of the stars from his favorite TV show. Even more pleased when the man came over and told him personally how much he was enjoying the food.

Then the high point arrived that Nick and Enzo had been planning all week. Trip, who was in on it and was sitting at Silvia’s table, stood up and clapped his hands a few times to get everyone’s attention.

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“If you’re all wondering what happened to dessert, well, wonder no more.” Trip pointed toward the kitchen door as it opened and Enzo came through, singing “Volare” in an amazingly clear tenor voice and pushing a serving cart on which reposed a massive Sicilian *cassata* that was about the size of a small ice floe and was flanked with piles of Enzo’s freshly baked *sfogliatelle*.

While the guests enjoyed dessert and coffee, Roberto returned to sing “Ciao, Ciao Bambina”, which everyone who worked at The Neapolitan knew was Roberto and his wife Dani’s special song.

After Roberto left for the second time, Silvia came over and congratulated Nick on a successful evening and said she’d been absolutely delighted by the inclusion of the singing waiters. It reminded her of a place her family had taken her to when she was a child. Then, the guests began to drift away until the only people left in room were Nick and Trip.

“I guess we did good,” Nick observed as he sat down on the nearest chair and regarded the mostly empty dishes on the buffet table. “Not enough food left to worry about, so I’m sure that makes you happy.”

“You make me happy,” Trip said softly, reaching for Nick’s hand and stroking the back with his thumb. “Remember what you said to me about taking the next couple of days off?”

Nick frowned. “Vaguely.”

“Well, before she left, Silvia said she was so pleased with tonight she insisted we both take the next two days off to rest and relax so we’re all bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for Franco’s official opening to the public on Thursday.”

“Those were her exact words?”

Trip laughed and gave Nick a quick hug. “The bright-eyed and bushy stuff? Absolutely. She also said she knows we’re friends,

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and to make sure we follow her orders, she gave me this.” Trip handed Nick a letter-size envelope.

“What’s in here?”

“Plane tickets to L.A. and the key to her beachfront place in Malibu.”

“Oh, wow! You mean I’m gonna get sea, sand, sleep and—”

“Sex, babe. Lots and lots of sex. I’m gonna have you screamin’ for mercy before I’m through with you.”

Nick leaned forward and kissed Trip on the mouth. “Oh, yeah. If that’s a challenge, my man, you’d better watch out. Could be I’ll turn the tables and have you eating those words.”

Trip laughed and grabbed Nick’s leg, just above his knee. “You really think you’re that good?”

“No, lover. I *know* I am. And once we’re inside that beach house, you’re gonna find out just how good.”

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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Misinformation and misunderstandings drove Chad Varaday and Reese Harmer apart and shattered their dream of a new life together...

Ten years later, the men meet again in Las Vegas, and try to figure out what went wrong between them. Reese, however, tells a completely different story to the one he gave back in New York, and now Chad's convinced that what he heard was true and Reese is lying. The problem is, he still loves Reese, and Reese says he feels the same way.

But can love overcome all the hurt and the pain and give them a second chance at happiness?

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