



TWO IN-TWO OUT

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Two In, Two Out

A novel of homoerotic romance by

G. A. HAUSER

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Chapter One

Blake Hughes could feel the perspiration running down his skin. There was nothing glamorous about being a firefighter in the boiling LA summer. The thick, beige, flame-retardant fabric turnout coat and trousers over his uniform shirt and work pants, the rubber boots, and the helmet with face shield made him feel like he was melting from within. The smoke was thick as the flames took hold of an old ratty sofa and litter debris. Blake was in charge of the irons; the solid steel pike pole weighed heavily in his hands. The tank of oxygen on his back pumped air into the mask, which was cloudy with condensation from his body heat and breath.

He stared at the back of his co-worker and, in the smoke and haze, could barely make out the 'Rasmussen' written in bold black block letters on his best buddy Hunter's shoulders.

"Back out!"

Blake jumped at Hunter's command. It was becoming impossible to get the house fire under control from the inside. He knew Hunter was right. The incident commander, Lt. Thomas Smith's voice came over their radios ordering the same thing. "Get out, boys!" Blake wanted to make sure Hunter came with him. He spun around. The clear path to the front door was suddenly not so clear any longer. Blake raised the pike and smashed it against a wall repeatedly, opening an exit of his own. The heat from the fire, the outfit, and the physical exertion was brutal, but he had to get them out. *Now.*

Another powerful swipe of the pike at the plasterboard and it crumbled in a heap of white dust. "Hunter!" Blake grabbed his arm.

Hunter acknowledged him with a nod. Just as Blake was making his way to the exit, the two firemen outside, their personal rescue team, were about to come in and drag them out if

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they had taken any longer.

Once Hunter and Blake had moved clear of the residence, the firemen manning the hoses opened up the valves and blasted the blaze with their full force. With the valves wide open, five hundred gallons of water could pass through the hoses in three minutes.

Setting down the heavy pike, Blake pulled the shield off his drenched face and noticed Hunter leaning over his knees to recuperate. Blake helped him remove his mask, making sure he was okay. "You all right?"

"Fucking hot!" Hunter snarled, pushing his dark hair off his forehead as it stuck from his sweat.

Blake kept his hand on Hunter's shoulder, for he was the more experienced and older of the two of them. He turned back to the blaze which was finally beaten back into submission. He checked the oxygen level in Hunter's tank. The air support team was nearby if they needed to top up.

The inferno was an unoccupied dwelling that had been set on fire. Blake assumed it had to be arson. Either that or a careless vagrant who set his home ablaze.

Lt. Smith made his way over to them once the fire began to subside. "You two all right?"

Hunter stood straight, nodding, as Blake replied, "Yes, sir."

"Hang tight until it's no longer a working fire. It's fully involved at the moment."

"Okay, Lieutenant." Blake watched the water turn the orange flames into white smoke. He craved shedding the suit and tank but knew it was premature. Hunter was still quiet. Blake touched his arm. "You gonna live?"

"Yeah. Christ, it's hot."

Blake shot the handsome young man a big grin. "If ya can't stand the heat..."

"Shut up." Hunter winked at him.

Blake adored him. They had only been working together a few months, ever since Hunter transferred from San Diego. They were on the C-shift, so they had the same schedule.

Spending twenty-four hours with the same crew, you learned a lot about a person, mostly the firemen you could stand and those you couldn't. He could stand Hunter. They were two

peas in a pod.

Blake heard the lieutenant's voice over the radio calling out their badge numbers.

"Come on, Hunt. Our turn to play two out."

Hunter gave Blake his impish smile, the one that made his blue eyes sparkle like a wicked little boy. "Yeah, Blake. Come out. Why don't you just come the fuck out?"

"Shut up, Hunt-man, before I use this pike on your butt." Blake picked up the heavy iron again.

Repositioning their face shields, they stood outside the smoldering, dripping building, acting as the Rapid Intervention Team for two other firefighters that had gone inside. *Two in, two out*. The standard safety tool in the fire fighting buddy system and the one phrase abused with the most homophobic jokes on the division.

Blake cut the chatter to listen. The last thing he wanted was for someone to need help and for them to not be paying attention. Even a wet, soggy residence could collapse unexpectedly.

In silent contemplation, Blake stood next to Hunter. Blake could hear the two firefighters inside smashing at smoking walls, making sure the fire was completely out. He couldn't remember the last fire they'd been to. Most of their calls were medical in nature, or false alarms. He didn't think they'd had more than a hundred fires during the whole year for his station.

He had forgotten how exhausting and hot gearing up was. Obviously Hunter was suffering as well. And it was early in their shift.

They had just come on at seven and were about to workout for an hour when the alarm came out. *Christ, it's only nine thirty*.

Blake closed his eyes for a second to rest them. Fuck he was hot. A drip made its way down his chest. He could feel it running slowly between his pectoral muscles. He rubbed his gloved hand against it to stop its tickling progress. The movement caught Hunter's eye. "Sweatin' like a fucking bitch in heat," Blake explained.

"Ditto. Christ, I'm thirsty. Could use a beer."

"I'll buy you one. Next day off."

"Deal." Hunter shut up, listening again.

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Twenty minutes later the two inside appeared at the door. “It’s out.” Dwight Carter nodded to them. Beside him was the only woman firefighter on the scene, Hailey Barnet.

“Tell the lieutenant,” Blake instructed.

Dwight acknowledged him.

Blake tapped Hunter and tilted his head to their rig. They walked to where it was parked and began peeling off the heavy tanks and clothing. As Blake removed his turnout coat and boots, he heard Hunter groaning in pleasure as he did the same. Looking over his shoulder, Blake found Hunter’s uniform shirt and pants drenched with his perspiration. Hunter was a big man, six-three, two hundred and twenty pounds of solid muscle. It seemed to Blake that both Hunter’s blue shirt and slacks were burdened at keeping his bulk covered. Like the Incredible Hulk, Blake expected Hunter to explode from his garments one day. *I’d like to see that.* Blake smiled.

But he could never say it. If you even murmured you had a sexual preference other than the ‘norm’, you risked being murdered by your homophobic co-workers. The fire department was worse than the police. Firemen were a very macho bunch of males. You could kid, but didn’t dare come out.

Blake didn’t worry. He played it straight and he assumed Hunter was straight, though he truly had no clue what Hunter’s preference was. It didn’t mean anything that he enjoyed Hunter’s good looks, that he loved spending the shift with him, working out with him, having a beer on their days off. It was normal. They were good friends. No one had to know he imagined Hunter naked every time he saw him. It was no one’s business but his own.

* * * *

Piling his bunker gear inside the truck, Hunter was finally rid of his exterior garments. Once he had placed everything in the rig, Hunter fanned his shirt, unsticking it from his body to try and cool off. He’d have to change when he got back to the station. He was drenched. Blake moved in front of him, setting his own heavy coat and boots down next to his. Hunter could see the back of Blake’s shirt clinging to him as well. As Blake

moved, Hunter caught his sweat scent, inhaling it deeply. Every sinewy movement of Blake's back showed through the clinging fabric. Hunter chewed his lip as he stared. Blake was four years his senior. He idolized Blake for his skill on the job. Out of all the men he'd met while working as a fireman, Blake Hughes was the nicest of the bunch. Not to mention the damn best looking.

Hunter was surprised his body was reacting to staring at Blake that way. He was hot and tired, and that shouldn't make him hot and bothered as it often did with a man as handsome as Blake around.

When the lieutenant appeared, Hunter tried to pretend he hadn't been ogling his co-worker.

"The residence needs securing. Why don't you two help out nailing some boards over the windows?"

"Yes, sir." Hunter nodded obediently. After the lieutenant left, Hunter waited for Blake's eye contact.

"Grab a hammer out of the toolbox, Hunt."

"Okay." Hunter pulled open a side panel of the rig, digging out a claw hammer. As he did he noticed Hailey and Dwight placing wooden panels under each broken window. Stuffing a box of nails into his shirt pocket, Hunter handed Blake the hammer, smiling adoringly at him. He got a sweet wink in return and followed Blake to the burned out shell of the building, staring at Blake's sweat-stained slacks as he walked.

Working as a team, which came naturally to them, Hunter held the large wooden board in place as Blake secured it to the window frame with strong confident hammer strokes. With Blake wearing his short-sleeved uniform shirt, Hunter was able to admire his rolling biceps, wide flaring forearms, and engorged, roping veins. Blake was three inches shorter than he was, but that still made Blake a strapping, six-foot-tall, powerfully built male. Hunter wouldn't want to challenge Blake to a fight. The man was extremely strong and fast on his feet.

Once the entire bottom access into the wrecked building was secured, Hunter noticed the investigation team had arrived. If he had to guess, he'd say the fire began with a smoldering cigarette on a dirty mattress on the floor of the upstairs bedroom.

Deliberate? Who knew? Most likely accidental and set by a street person who inhabited the vacant premises.

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Hunter felt a hand on his shoulder. Seeing Blake's warm brown eyes, he teased, "Yes, dear?"

"We're done. Come on. Let's see if we can clear."

Blake swung the hammer at his side while Hunter walked with him to the incident commander, who was the lieutenant on the scene.

"Hey, Lieutenant," Blake addressed him. "You still need us?"

"No. Clear and head back."

"Thank you." Blake looked at Hunter, expressing his relief.

Hunter climbed into the truck after putting the hammer back into the kit and making sure everything was secure on the engine. Blake dropped heavily into the driver's seat. Once they had buckled up, Blake started the engine with a roar.

Hunter waved to the police officer who let them through the roadblock, which had been set up to keep traffic off the side street. Once they were on their way, he sighed. "I'm too tired to workout now."

"I hear ya." Blake steered the big rig confidently up to an intersection where he stopped for a red signal. "If we feel up to it, we can do it later."

"Or not." Hunter laughed.

Blake grinned at him knowingly. "We can miss a day. I won't tell."

"I'm already starving." Hunter rubbed his belly.

"I did a food run. The fridge is stocked."

"Good. Who's cooking lunch?"

"You!" Blake laughed at him.

"Oh. Right. I forgot. You cook better than I do."

"I do everything better than you do."

Hunter shoved him playfully. "Shut up."

"Hey. I'm drivin'. Behave."

Smiling as he relaxed in the passenger seat, Hunter loved hanging out with Blake. Fucking loved it.

Chapter Two

Blake backed the truck up into the open bay. Once he parked, he shut it down with a hiss and climbed out. Hunter checked the water supply in the tank as he arranged their bunker gear for quick access for the next possible call to service. Once they had finished tending the engine, they entered the station to write up their reports.

Blake booted up the computer and rubbed his hands over his hair to massage his damp scalp. He needed a shower and a change of clothing but wanted to get the paperwork done first.

Behind him, Hunter took off his drenched shirt. Blake paused to admire him. As Hunter draped the dark blue material over the back of the chair he was about to occupy, Blake licked his lips at the sight of Hunter's swollen pectoral muscles and ripped abs. Forcing himself to stop drooling overtly, Blake deliberately faced the computer screen, getting that provocative sight out of his field of vision.

He clicked at the keyboard for a few minutes knowing Hunter was doing the same on his laptop. Hitting print, Blake sat back, staring at the monitor. "Right. Shower."

He stood, moving behind Hunter. The urge to slide his hands down Hunter's smooth shoulders to his chest from behind felt like a dull ache. Yes, Blake touched him on occasion with light, friendly taps and brushes of his hand. Nothing to cause any suspicion or concern. He was very careful. If he offended Hunter or brought out any ridicule from him, he'd be devastated.

In the five years he'd been a member of LA County's fire department, he hadn't enjoyed working with a man as much as he enjoyed Hunter. He wouldn't jeopardize that for the world.

Just as he was about to move along to the shower, Blake caught Hunter's bright white smile. "All done."

"Did you want to shower first?" Blake imagined showering

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with him. He wished the station had a different set up. Wouldn't it be nice to have a wall of showerheads? Like in the old days at school?

"No. Go ahead."

When Hunter reached out and touched his hip, encouraging him to go first, Blake wished Hunter would assault him. Grab his crotch. Do something naughty. But he knew it would never happen.

"Right. Hopefully I can get done before the next call out."

"You can always go naked." Hunter's wicked smirk reappeared.

"You wish," Blake teased.

A small chuckle was his reply.

Blake walked to the shower, unbuttoning his shirt as he did, weaving a delightful fantasy about Hunter along the way.

* * * *

Relaxing where he sat, Hunter dazed off tiredly, thinking about Blake soaping up. The noise of a diesel engine out in the bay woke him from his fantasy. Dwight and Hailey were back. He and Blake had to behave. *At least marginally*. Hunter smiled. The teasing he and Blake shared was well known. They even pulled an occasional practical joke on each other. But that hadn't happened in ages.

Motivating himself to stand, Hunter draped his shirt over his shoulder and met Dwight and Hailey as they entered the lounge area. "You guys survive?"

"Fuck, it's hot!" Dwight ran his hand over his shaved head.

"Blake's in the shower, and I got dibs next." Hunter noticed Hailey's gaze lost on his chest. Feeling self-conscious in front of her, he slipped his shirt back on, not buttoning it, but closing it in front.

It seemed to interrupt her daydream. She walked to the kitchen and removed a bottle of water from the fridge.

As if the idea was contagious, Dwight waited his turn to get his water, standing behind her.

"Did you guys already write your reports?" Hailey asked.

"Yup." Hunter stared into her dark eyes. He had felt her

admiring glances on more than one occasion. Hailey was a big girl. Tough. Confident. Her hair was short, like a boy's. When he first met her, Hunter assumed she was gay. It wasn't until she had batted her lashes at him flirtatiously that he realized his assumption was incorrect.

Sadly for Hailey, he didn't feel the attraction for her, or for any woman, for that matter.

"Why did the lieutenant cut you free first?" she teased. "Playing favorites again?"

"I can't help it if he loves us."

"I'll be in the write-up room," Dwight mumbled as he left.

After he was gone, Hailey sat in the chair next to Hunter. He peered over at her curiously.

"You didn't have to put your shirt on for me. I don't care." She drank more water from her bottle.

"I'm not used to working with a woman. I was surrounded by men in San Diego."

"Yeah? Do you like it?" she crooned, leaning closer.

Backing away from her advance, Hunter replied, "I don't care either way, I suppose." He noticed Blake watching at the threshold of the room, and jumped to his feet. "My turn." As Hunter squeezed past Blake in the doorway, he whispered, "You leave any hot water for me, stud-man?"

"Nope. Used it all." Blake rubbed his shoulder against him.

"You smell good. New soap?"

"Yes. As a matter of fact. Help yourself. I left it in there."

"I will." Hunter took off his shirt as he walked, glancing back to see if Blake was looking. He was.

* * * *

It took a moment to calm the flutter of passion that little contact had caused. Blake knew Hailey had seen it and he didn't think the playful banter between he and Hunter was anyone's business. Besides, his co-workers knew they were close friends.

Avoiding Hailey's gaze, Blake walked to the fridge and removed a container of juice, pouring himself a glass. "I wonder what Chef Rasmussen has in mind for lunch?"

"Does Hunter have a girlfriend, Blake?"

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Pausing mid-sip, Blake met Hailey's eyes. "I don't think so. Why? Interested in him?" Who wouldn't be? The guy was gorgeous.

"Maybe. But I don't think I'm his type."

"Really?" Blake couldn't stop his smile of amusement. "You've asked him out?"

"I've hinted enough."

"Sorry, Hailey." Blake didn't think Hailey stood a chance in hell, even if Hunter was straight, which Blake himself was hoping he wasn't. He imagined Hunter with some runway model not a tough boyish woman firefighter.

"Oh well." She rose up. "I'll write my report now."

Blake watched her go, thinking about her interest in Hunter.

* * * *

Naked in the shower, Hunter had already scrubbed up and knew he needed to get out of the bathroom to get ready for the next call. Unfortunately, thinking about his handsome co-worker had gotten him into a state.

Staring down at his erect dick, Hunter peered at the locked door once before he used Blake's spicy masculine scented soap to lubricate his palm. Just inhaling the smell reminded him of Blake, his taut muscular frame, and chiseled Hollywood good looks.

"Damn." Hunter closed his eyes and began working his cock slowly, spreading his legs for balance. Once he had a good rhythm going on his cock, he reached back and pushed his finger into his ass. With visions of Blake fucking him, or on his knees sucking him, Hunter stifled a throaty grunt and spewed out creamy thick strings of cum. As all his back muscles tightened, Hunter tried to get back to earth again after his little fantasy. Opening his eyes and rinsing off, making sure there was no sign of his spunk anywhere, he took a few deep breaths to calm down.

Savoring the aftershocks of the climax, Hunter knew he shouldn't masturbate on company time, but Blake just made him too damn hot.

Once he'd washed the cum from his leg, Hunter shut the taps off and stood dripping for a minute. Shaking himself out of

his daydream, he dried off quickly. After wrapping the towel around his hips, he opened the door to go to his room to change into fresh clothing. Blake was there.

"Hello." Hunter smiled, blushing from thoughts of this man that he had used to orgasm a minute ago.

"Better not let Hailey see you like that." Blake's gaze darted down to his crotch.

"I know." Hunter walked beyond him, down the hall. When he was at his own room, he peeked behind him, smiled wickedly, and dropped the towel right before he vanished. Hearing Blake's gasp and seeing his eyes widen in shock was worth its weight in gold. Christ how he adored that man. And teasing him was just so much fun. Luckily Blake was a good sport and appeared to enjoy the game as much as he did. *Man, if you were gay my life would be so fucking awesome!*

Finding his clean uniform in his locker, as Hunter dressed he couldn't wipe the smile from his lips. Even if he never got to lay a hand on Blake sexually, he was the best friend he'd ever had. And that meant a lot to him.

* * * *

The image of Hunter's tight ass cheeks made Blake an inferno. Shaking himself out of his stupor, he finally managed to shout, "Flirt!" Hearing Hunter's laughter on the other side of the door, Blake wished Hunter was gay. *No way. He ain't. Or is he?*

"Who's a flirt?" Dwight showed up for his turn to wash.

"Hunt. He's misbehaving as usual."

"It's his turn to cook." Dwight announced to the closed door Hunter was behind, "We're hungry, Hunter! Cook us lunch!"

"Yeah, yeah..." Hunter moaned back from the other side.

"Wish you were cooking, Blake. Don't tell him I said it, but he sucks."

"I heard that!" Hunter replied, still behind the door.

"Good!" Dwight retorted and grinned at Blake.

Blake and Dwight laughed together before Dwight closed himself into the shower.

Staring at the door Hunter was behind, Blake would have given anything to be comfortable enough to go inside that room

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and watch Hunter dress. Nope. That wasn't going to happen. Forgetting completely what he had come down the hall to do, Blake took a moment to backtrack in his mind. When the door opened to Hunter's bunkroom, Blake caught his gaze.

"Waiting for me?" Hunter's grin was full of mischief.

"Yeah, what took you so long? In there preening in front of a mirror?" Blake teased.

"Next time come in and see for yourself." Hunter's stare was on fire.

"Don't tempt me." Blake remembered what he had come down the corridor for.

"Aw, come on, Blake. Don't be chicken."

Shaking his head as he walked off he heard Hunter clucking like a hen and laughed. Under his breath he warned, "I swear, one of these days, Hunt, I'm going to take you up on one of your bold dares."

* * * *

Hunter gazed after Blake, enjoying his confident strut. He wished they could cross that invisible line, but Hunter thought he was coming as close to it as he could without revealing too much about himself. He wasn't crazy enough to let that cat out of the bag. No way. Not here.

Heading toward the kitchen, he met Hailey coming down the hall as her turn to clean up drew near.

"I'm hungry."

"I know!" Hunter held up his hands in guilt. "I'm on my way to cook now."

After she passed by she joked, "Wish it was Blake cooking and not you!"

"Me too!" Hunter chuckled. He hated cooking. He was clueless in the kitchen.

Seeing the television left on to a sitcom repeat, he shut off the set with the remote and opened a few cabinets up to figure out what to make to feed the hungry crew. All the while his mind was on Blake, hanging out with him off shift, exchanging playful banter, and living in his fantasy world.

* * * *

Just after eating the boxed, instant mac and cheese lunch, a tone was heard over the PA. Blake paused to listen. They were being dispatched to a medical emergency.

"Right." Blake rose up, set the plate near the sink and shouted, "Let's go, Hunt!"

"I'm here!" Hunter jogged out to the bay with him.

"See ya!" Blake waved at Hailey and Dwight as he sprinted by them. Hopping up and into the medic rig, Blake ordered, "Buckle up, Hunt."

"It's a short ride to the beach."

"I said, buckle up."

"Okay!" Hunter fastened his safety belt.

They drove over the sand, whelping the siren to clear the bathers. Blake spotted a fellow paramedic and lifeguard, Tanner Cameron. "What's he got?"

"Looks like two down?" Hunter leaned closer to the windshield.

Once they parked, they both jumped out.

A woman lifeguard waved them to her victim. "I've a surfer here who's been throwing up salt water since the rescue. And I think he's either got a sprained or broken ankle."

"Okay." Blake opened his first aid kit. "How you doin'? You all right?"

"I feel sick, man. I swallowed too much of that crappy salt water."

As Hunter took the surfer's blood pressure, Blake checked his pulse and temperature first before inspecting his leg. "He's got to get an x-ray, Hunt."

"Yeah. Let's load him in the truck."

Blake helped the young man to stand, wrapping his arm around his waist as he limped. Once the surfer was seated comfortably, Blake looked back at Tanner. He could see him tending a fellow lifeguard. They were arguing.

"I'm okay!" the pretty-boy lifeguard replied to Tanner.

"Get over here and sit your ass on the running board," Hunter ordered.

Tanner escorted the younger lifeguard to the truck, standing

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behind Hunter, crossing his arms over his chest.

Hunter shined a light into the attractive young lifeguard's brilliant green eyes.

"What's his name?" Blake asked Tanner quietly.

"Josh Elliot."

Wow. Pretty, pretty boy! Blake observed his partner in action with such a gorgeous victim.

"Are you guys firemen?" Josh asked, smirking.

"Yup." Hunter shut off the light and ran his hands over Josh's head, checking his scalp.

"Oh, yes..." Josh closed his eyes. "I love firemen."

Tanner coughed to cover his laugh. Blake spun around to exchange looks with him. Tanner shrugged innocently.

Blake almost died. *You kidding me? That gorgeous lifeguard is gay?*

"Find 'em hot, leave 'em wet," Josh moaned.

"Josh, behave." Tanner bit his lip to stop laughing.

Blake smiled broadly. "He's well enough to flirt."

"I'm fine. But don't stop touching me." Josh spread his legs for Hunter. "I think I hit my balls on the sand."

Hunter twisted around and met Tanner's eyes. "Is he your responsibility, Tanner?"

"Unfortunately."

"He's a real handful."

"More than a handful," Josh purred, "especially with two gorgeous firemen groping my body."

"Groping?" Hunter paused in his exam. "I'm checking you for injuries. Not groping."

"Damn. I swear my ass and nuts are really sore."

"Mr. Elliot, rein it in a little." Tanner appeared to be holding back his hilarity.

"Sorry, Tanner." Josh winked. "You're the one who insisted I get...felt up."

"He's just fine." Hunter stood, snapping off his rubber gloves. "We need to get our surfer friend to the hospital."

"Dude!" the young surfer yelled. "Hold my board. I'll call a friend to pick it up."

"Okay." Josh slid off the running board of the truck slowly.

Hunter and Blake shook Tanner's hand. "Good to see you

again, Tanner.”

“You too. Take care of yourselves.”

Blake had to bite his lip as they climbed back into the truck. There was so much he wanted to say at the moment, but not with an injured surfer sitting behind them. Getting them on their way to the emergency room, he glanced at Hunter. Hunter’s expression was showing some intensity, but Blake couldn’t decide what it was from.

“You still doing okay?” Blake asked the surfer.

“Yeah. Thanks, man.”

Hunter exchanged looks with Blake. Blake had no idea what he was thinking and was dying to ask.

Parked out in front of the ER, Hunter left to get a wheelchair as he combusted internally, dying to mention Josh’s overt sexual teasing to see what Hunter thought about it.

Once Hunter emerged with the chair, Blake helped the surfer onto it, wheeling him in to get him checked out.

After they turned him over to a hospital employee and filled out some paperwork, Blake tapped Hunter and gestured for them to go. Gnawing his lip as they sat back in the medic rig, Blake began the trip back to the station, wanting to say something and not knowing how to say it without giving himself away completely.

Hunter broke the silence. “You believe that guy was so open about his sexuality?”

Blake felt his heart beating faster. “I know. Huh.” He wanted to know if Hunter found it good or bad.

“Poor Tanner!” Hunter laughed. “He’s really got his hands full.”

That comment deflated Blake. Struggling to interpret it, he didn’t reply right away.

“He was a really good looking guy,” Hunter muttered casually.

In jealousy, Blake bit his lip again. He had no idea what to say that wouldn’t sound defensive or possessive.

“You think,” Hunter continued, his voice showing its humor, “you think a guy that good lookin’ could turn straight Tanner gay?” Then he laughed heartily.

Blake was completely at a loss. Suddenly, he wondered if

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any retort on the subject could be taken correctly. It felt like a trap.

“Blake?”

“Huh?” Blake woke up, glancing at Hunter.

“You’ve gone quiet.”

“Uh...” Blake stopped in front of their station and backed into the bay. “Uh...” *Shit, what do I say? Agree with him? Tell him yes, Tanner could be turned gay? What the fuck?*

“Never mind. Forget I mentioned it.”

Surprised at his annoyance, Blake shut off the engine and was about to say something when Hunter hopped out of the truck. Blake made an attempt at grabbing Hunter’s arm to stop him, but missed. Sitting still for a minute, he ran back the comments in his head but they didn’t offer clarification on Hunter’s mindset.

* * * *

Hunter was so disappointed in Blake, he was angry. Assuming the man’s lack of conversation on Josh Elliot’s overt flirting was homophobia left Hunter with a bad taste in his mouth about a man he thought he knew.

When he came through the station door, it was vacant. Obviously Hailey and Dwight had gone on another call. Hunter sat at the computer to document their incident with the surfer.

He heard Blake come into the room. Looking over his shoulder, he found an odd expression on Blake’s face. “Are you all right? Jesus, Blake. The guy was gay, not a space alien. Take a chill pill.”

“What?” Blake choked. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“Nothin’. Let me write this up.” Hunter was about to scream.

“Hunt...”

“Whatever. Leave me alone for five minutes. Let me get this done.” Hunter waved him out in irritation. Hearing Blake’s deep exhale, when he peeked again, Blake was gone.

* * * *

Sprawled out on the sofa, Blake used the remote control to turn on the television to catch the news. Checking the time, knowing they were on shift until seven in the morning, Blake felt tired suddenly. Rubbing his face, he tried to figure out what had happened between him and Hunter. *Alien? What the hell's that all about? Did I say something against gays? No. What the fuck?*

Twenty minutes later he heard Hunter come into the room. Blake twisted over his shoulder to watch him. "Hunt. Get your ass over here." Blake shut off the television.

"I'm hungry."

"You're always hungry. Sit down for a second."

As if the task was one of extreme agony, Hunter scuffed his shoes on the linoleum and dropped down. Blake moved to close the gap between them because he felt Hunter was too far away. "What's the deal with the attitude?" Blake asked. "Did I say something about Josh? No, I didn't." He noticed Hunter look away purposely not connecting to his eyes. "Why should I say anything bad about that beautiful creature?"

Hunter instantly met his gaze. "Creature?"

"Man! Beautiful man!" Blake growled. "What the hell's eating you? You think I care that Josh is gay and out? Don't you know me better than that?"

"I thought I did."

"You do. Believe me, Hunt. You do." Blake touched Hunter's knee. The size and warmth of Hunter's leg was an instant turn on. Blake imagined leaning over Hunter's lap and going for his mouth. It felt so necessary, like Hunter needed to be reassured he was not offended by gay men, quite the opposite.

The moment Hunter opened his mouth to say something, the other engine backed into the bay.

Blake moved his hand away from Hunter's leg. As they waited for Hailey and Dwight, Hunter and Blake locked eyes. Blake was lost on those baby blues. Lost. If he could, he'd reach out behind Hunter's head and draw him to his lips for a kiss. If he could. So *help me God I want to. Look at his lips. Perfect.*

"Hey, guys."

"Hey." Blake stood, never wanting suspicion to fall on either him or Hunter. "What did you have?"

"Medical call over at the senior center." Dwight kept

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walking through the room. “Going to write it up. Be back.”

Hailey dropped on the sofa next to Hunter. “You watching television?”

Hunter handed her the remote.

“Thanks.” She turned on the TV.

Blake paused a moment, trying to think of something to do in the break between calls and prior to their dinner. As he stood idly, Hunter peeked back at him from over the couch. Blake melted at the look in his eyes. The amount he wanted Hunter on an intimate level was beginning to gnaw at him. And after seeing that adorable lifeguard grab his homosexuality by the balls, Blake envied Josh Elliot. The man had guts.

Lowering his eyes from Hunter’s gaze, Blake headed back to the computer to look up the latest paramedic training bulletins. He had to keep busy.

Chapter Three

It was Blake's turn to cook dinner. In the quiet lull between calls, he had read in his room while the other three were sitting and watching television. For some reason Blake didn't feel like being social. When five rolled around, he motivated himself to begin cooking. Wrapping a denim apron over his uniform to avoid getting it stained, Blake glanced over at the back of Hunter's head sadly. It was going to feel like a long night if they didn't joke around.

They had tomorrow off, then they were on again the next day. Blake wanted to see Hunter on his day off. Now he didn't know what to do.

Washing his hands, Blake began creating the lasagna for dinner, keeping busy, not looking back at Hunter.

* * * *

Television bored him. Allowing Hailey the controls was sometimes not a good idea. Resting his head on his arm as it lay on the back of the sofa, Hunter gazed at Blake as he cooked them dinner. He loved when Blake was chef. He was the best cook in the station. The scent of garlic bread and sauce was making his stomach growl. *Look at him. How fucking adorable is he with that apron on, holding a wooden spoon? Damn. Damn adorable. That's how much.*

Hunter's passion began burning again as he watched that man, busy, cooking, setting the table. He only wished he could tell Blake how crazy he was about him. But after today? After the incident on the beach with Josh Elliot? Hunter didn't know what to think anymore.

He had this problem in San Diego. Everyone he worked with was married and teased him that he wasn't. He was only

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twenty-six. That had to be too young to get hitched even if he was straight. It felt as if he were walking on eggshells down there. LA was different. Or at least he prayed it would be. Couldn't a fireman come out here? Christ, it was L-fucking-A! All the good-looking guys here were gay.

Hunter caught Hailey staring at him while he was lost on Blake. As an excuse Hunter said, "I'm hungry."

In stereo, Hailey and Dwight replied, "You're always hungry." When they did, they laughed at each other.

Hunter noticed Blake pause in what he was doing and they connected. In reflex to his good friend's sex appeal, Hunter gave him a sweet smile. It instantly reflected back at him. *I adore you, Blake Hughes. I am absolutely crazy about you.*

"Hungry, Hunt?" Blake asked seductively.

Hunter was very glad the ill will of earlier seemed to be evaporating. "Yeah. What's the delay, chef?"

"It's lasagna. It takes time."

"Mm. I love your lasagna."

"I know." Blake winked at him.

And I love you, you fucking gorgeous man! Hunter melted at his warmth and affection. Slowly he spun back to the other two who were staring at him. "What?" he asked them curiously.

They both turned back to the television screen hastily. Shaking his head, Hunter hated everything about sharing the place with anyone other than Blake. Dwight was married with small children. But he was black so he should have an open mind when it came to minorities, right? And Hailey. She must get mistaken for being a lesbian. Why were they looking at him like that? Couldn't he like Blake because the guy cooked a nice dinner?

"Hunt."

"Yeah?" He spun back to Blake.

"Give me a hand, will ya?"

Hunter sprang off the couch. When he drew near, he asked, "What do you need?"

"Nothing. I just thought you needed an escape." Blake tilted his head at the other two.

A slow smile spread over his lips. "You know me too well."

"Yeah?" Blake's brown eyes sparkled in the florescent

light.

"Yeah." Hunter nudged him. "Salad too?" He just noticed the bowl on the table.

"Yup. I just hope we get through the meal before a call comes in."

"Make them go," Hunter whispered, brushing his lips against Blake's hair, taking a deep inhale of him into his lungs. Instantly his cock swelled. He loved being this close to the man, touching him, cock teasing him.

Blake shivered visibly. "Stop. Behave."

I can't around you! Hunter was suddenly feeling amorous. Seeing that out gay man on the beach had given him ideas. What if he ran his hand down Blake's back to his ass? Hm? What if he just very lightly smoothed his palm down and cupped one of those perfect cheeks? What would Blake do?

"What are you two up to?" Hailey asked jealously.

"Nothing. Go back to your stupid *Friends*' rerun."

Blake jabbed Hunter, shaking his head in admonishment. "She'll beef you. Be careful."

Hunter looked back at Hailey. "Kidding!" he added to soften his annoyance.

"I know!" She waved him off with a smile.

Once she turned around, Blake warned, "Be careful. Don't tease her. Women are very sensitive about work shit."

Loving the way Blake's face pressed against his ear, Hunter was covered with goose bumps. Inhaling again deeply, he caught Blake's scent over the overpowering garlic and lasagna aromas. Closing his eyes, he took another sniff. On the tip of his tongue was, 'Damn you smell good.' But what kind of giveaway would that line be? Straight men don't go around sniffing each other. At least not overtly.

"All right!" Blake laughed. "Let me take it out of the oven to set up. Have some salad."

Knowing Blake thought he was sniffing the food, Hunter smiled and sat at the table.

"Are we eating?" Dwight got to his feet.

"Have some salad while we wait." Blake pointed to the bowl.

Hailey shut the TV off and joined them. Once they were

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munching on the salad, Hailey asked, "Why aren't you married, Blake?"

Blake caught Hunter's eye quickly as he sat down. "Why do you ask?" he replied.

"I don't know. You'd make such a good husband." Hailey sipped her bottled water. "How old are you again?"

"Thirty." Blake shifted uncomfortably in his chair.

"Thirty?" Hailey laughed. "Man, you should be hooked up by now, Blake."

Hunter's lip curled in a snarl. He didn't like Hailey asking Blake those kinds of personal questions and knew how he'd feel if she were aiming them at him.

Taking it calmly, Blake replied, "Hailey, how many firemen marriages end in divorce?"

"I don't know. How many?"

"Eighty-five percent."

"No!"

"Yes!" Blake mimicked her tone. "Three times the national average, Hailey." Blake stood to slice up the lasagna.

"That sucks." Hailey sulked.

"What's the point of hooking up that way?" Blake shrugged.

"My marriage is doing okay." Dwight wiped his lip on a napkin.

Hunter asked him, "How long have you been married?"

"Six years."

"That's not very long." Hunter smiled.

"We're good."

Blake began serving the lasagna, placing a plate in front of Hunter first. "I just don't want the aggravation."

"Do you have a girlfriend, Blake?" Hailey asked, watching Hunter as he devoured his food.

"Not at the moment." He gave Hailey and Dwight their dinner.

Hunter caught Blake's gaze again as he did. "Why are you so nosy, Hailey?"

"I'm not nosy." She blew on her food and took a bite. "Mm! Blake, this is awesome!"

"It is, Blake." Dwight nodded. "I love when you cook."

“Let’s just hope we can make it through dinner without a call.” Blake sat across from Hunter.

“Eat fast.” Hunter smiled adoringly at him.

“I see that’s your tactic. Go get seconds.” Blake gestured to the tray of food.

“I will.” Hunter carried his plate to the stove. Cutting a large portion for himself, Hunter smiled proudly. He loved when Blake cooked for them as well. Once he had his plate refilled, he sat back down, tearing a chunk of bread off the loaf. Moaning at the taste of the garlic bread, he moved his foot across the floor to touch Blake’s. When he did, Blake raised his head from his plate in surprise.

Hunter winked at him. “Damn, you’re good.” Enjoying the blush to Blake’s cheeks, Hunter couldn’t stop staring at him but forced himself to bring his attention back to his plate.

He couldn’t make it more obvious than that. Any gay guy would have gotten the hint by now. Hunter assumed Blake was just the kind of straight guy who was the consummate bachelor. There were a few out there. Men who didn’t want to marry a woman yet weren’t gay. Hunter tried not to let it influence the way he felt about Blake. Heck, a best friend was a pretty good thing to have.

* * * *

The alert tones sounded over the PA. Blake stopped what he was doing to listen. A motor vehicle accident was being broadcast from central dispatch. “Hunt?”

“Let’s go!” Hunter jumped to his feet.

“See you boys and girls later.” Blake hurried out to the bay jumping into his turnout gear again. “I thought we’d be done with this for the night.”

“We never are.” Hunter sat on the truck to pull his boots on.

Once they were geared up, Blake climbed behind the wheel and opened the bay doors. Hitting the siren, he shouted to Hunter, “Buckle up! Fuck, Hunt! Why do I have to remind you?”

“I hate putting that thing on over my bunker gear.” He fastened the seatbelt.

“You know better! Half the goddamn MVAs we go to were

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worse because someone didn't have a damn belt on."

"All right." Hunter reached out and squeezed his knee through his thick outer slacks.

Trying not to be distracted by that hot, male hand, Blake paused at a red light clearing the intersection before he barreled through it. He blasted the engine's horn in addition to the wailing siren to get the traffic to stop.

When they arrived, two cars were smoking in the middle of a cross street. They hopped out and found a pair of occupants in one car, the driver trapped in the front seat. Instantly, sirens blared around them as the police arrived to help with traffic control.

Blake depressed the button on his lapel mike and requested an ambulance to the scene while he hurried to the worst of the injuries. He leaned into the smashed Ford's open window and found the driver bleeding from the head. Taking the C-collar out of his kit, Blake wrapped it around the woman's neck before he did anything else. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes."

"Good. Stay still."

After Hunter evaluated the passenger, he rushed to help Blake. Crawling into the back seat, Hunter held the woman's head still from behind as Blake fastened the collar with its Velcro straps.

"Door's not going to open, Hunt. Let me get the trimmers."

"Go." Hunter held the woman's head, keeping it from moving.

Another medic unit arrived.

The EMT poked his nose in. "Hey. We're here for you."

"Thanks." Hunter acknowledged him as Blake stood by ready to cut into the metal.

"You still with us?" Blake addressed the woman.

"Yes. How's my friend doing?" she asked.

"She's fine. It's you we're worried about." Blake began cutting into the doorframe like butter. Once he had the door pried open, Blake set the tool down and noticed the other two paramedics had a backboard ready. With four medics working as a team, they removed the woman gently, setting her down on the board for transport to the hospital. Once she was loaded into the

back of the ambulance, Blake finally was able to check on the passenger. She was already out of the car and pacing worriedly with a police officer asking her questions.

"Hang on, Officer," Blake interrupted. "Let me just check her out. You mind?"

"No. Not at all." The cop backed up.

Blake brought the woman to the curb and sat her down. He checked her over quickly and held her wrist to feel her pulse. "How are you doing?"

"Shaken up."

"You hurt anywhere?"

"Just my arm. I think when the airbag deployed it shoved me into the door."

Blake looked over the wreckage. Hunter was examining the driver of the second vehicle. Once he established where Hunter was, Blake went back to his exam. "Let me take a look." He ran his hand over the woman's bruised arm. "This hurt?" He moved it around.

"No. I don't think it's broken."

"No. Neither do I. Do you want a ride to the hospital? Just to get checked out?"

"Is that where my friend is going?"

"Yes. You can go with her."

"What about the car?"

"The cop will call a tow truck for you." He helped her to stand.

"Thank you. Let me just get our purses out of it first."

Blake followed her to the steaming wreck. "I'll get them. Where are they?"

"Just in the front seat. I think mine's on the floor."

Blake leaned into the demolished Ford and found two purses. He handed them to the woman.

"Thank you. I mean it. You guys are great."

"My pleasure. I'm just glad the injuries seem minor."

She paused, undecided, about to join her friend in the ambulance.

"What?" Blake asked when she grabbed his arm to stop him from moving.

"I never do this, but...are you single?"

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Blake blushed to the ears. "Yes, but I'm not available. Sorry." It wasn't the first time this had happened. He knew exactly what to say. And as far as Blake was concerned, he belonged to Hunter, whether or not Hunter was his to take.

"Well, she's a lucky lady. Thank you again...uh..." She read his name off his helmet, "Fireman Hughes."

"You are very welcome. Now, go join your friend. My guess is she needs you."

He watched her rush to the ambulance driver.

Coming back to the present, Blake found Hunter spreading sand on the leaking antifreeze. Watching him for a minute, Blake licked his lips in longing. *Oh, buddy, I adore you. So much.*

Retrieving his hydraulic trimmer, Blake wrapped up the hose and returned it to the rig.

Leaving the police to wait for the tow trucks, Blake waved at them and waited for Hunter to sit down and fasten his seatbelt before he took off. "That wasn't too bad."

"No. I love airbags." Hunter took off his helmet and tossed it on the floor by his feet. "That chick ask you out?"

Blake spun around to meet Hunter's eyes, feeling guilty. "Yeah. Why?"

Hunter shrugged. "I just thought she was."

"I told her no."

"Why? She was pretty."

"You're beginning to sound like Hailey."

"No. Seriously, Blake. You don't want to even date a woman?"

There it was. What was he supposed to do now?

Why was being single at thirty a bane to everyone's expectations? Did it instantly label a man as gay? Or weird? Or what? Blake had heard this conversation before from several members of his family. His parents were the worst, and he avoided them because of the cross examination he endured at every meeting.

"Are you dating? Do you want us to set you up with someone? Have you tried a dating service? How about joining a club of some kind?"

Sick and tired of it. He ground his jaw in annoyance as suddenly his best friend hopped on the '*Why is Blake single?*'

bandwagon.

* * * *

Hunter wanted to know. Wasn't Blake interested in dating? He knew why he wasn't. But why wasn't Blake? If Blake was gay, he damn well wanted to know about it. That woman was very attractive. What man would have turned her down flat out? A gay man? *Is that what you are, Blake? Goddamn it. Are you gay?*

"Leave it alone, Hunt. I'm tired."

Moving to recline in the seat, Hunter rested his arm against the passenger's door. Why was this so hard? It sucked. It truly sucked. If Blake was gay, what on earth were they waiting for?

Taking a discreet glance over at Blake while he drove the engine back to the station, Hunter salivated at his profile. The man was gorgeous. Downright, mother-fucking gorgeous.

Grinding his jaw at the notion that they were both gay and petrified, Hunter felt like screaming it was so unfair. But being a macho, LA County fireman, you had to hide. Yes. It was true. No one wanted to sleep in the same damn station as a gay firefighter. Oh, hell no. And God forbid you share a bunkroom. They'd sooner kill you.

It suddenly began to feel like a miserable game. Or worse. Lies. Like there was something between them, separating them. And it was maddening to him. He didn't like games. He needed to know where he stood. And he thought he did with Blake. Maybe he didn't. Maybe there were some secrets here that weren't being revealed.

The urge to tell Blake he was gay, to relieve Blake of any guilt he may be suffering if he was as well, was overwhelming. But damn if he would suffer what he did down in San Diego, or lose his best buddy over it.

Hell. I've found hell. Hunter grimaced.

* * * *

Blake was, once again, hot. He didn't have another clean uniform at the station and had to deal with the one he was

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wearing. It wasn't nearly as damp as the first one had been. Just his pits and chest were sweaty. Once again parked in the bay and getting the truck ready for its next run, Blake noticed Hunter looking pinched as he arranged his bunker gear into a neat pile. What was he supposed to do? Tell his best friend he was gay? No fucking way!

By eight o'clock Blake was exhausted. He came through the station and found Hailey and Dwight still planted in front of the idiot box. Without a word, Blake headed to the write-up room to do a report.

Once he had the program ready on the computer, he began typing. Hunter had entered the room. He didn't have to look, he knew it was him. When he felt Hunter's hands on his shoulders, his breath caught in his throat and he gazed up into those blue eyes.

Hunter massaged his muscles gently. "You look tired."

Getting over the shock of the unexpected contact, Blake tried to finish typing. "I am." Hunter's hands kneaded his sore back and neck. Blake felt like coming in his pants it was so amazing. Clearing his throat, he whispered, "Damn, that feels good."

"Good."

"Are we getting together tomorrow?" Unable to focus on the report, Blake closed his eyes to concentrate on Hunter's touch.

"I'd like to. I didn't know your plans."

Blake hung his head forward as the sensation of delight rushed over his body. He was hard as a rock. "Other than some errands I can do in the morning, I'm free."

Hunter's thumbs ran tiny circles around Blake's neck under his hair. Chills rushed up and down his spine and he was fast becoming a wreck. And if either Dwight or Hailey spotted this, they would never hear the end of it.

"Let me finish." Blake didn't want Hunter to stop, he just knew he had to. Hunter's hands slid down his back before they ceased contact. Knowing Hunter was still standing there, silent, Blake slowly turned in the swivel chair to see his expression. What the heck was Hunter doing?

Beginning at Hunter's waist, his gaze rose to the soaring

heights of Hunter's face. Hunter was looking through him, like weariness and exhaustion had him. "Hunt..." Blake reached to touch Hunter's hip.

"Hey!"

At Hailey's voice, they both jumped out of their skin.

"I'm going for an ice cream run," she said. "Any particular flavor?"

"Chocolate," both Hunter and Blake said in stereo, then laughed.

Hailey laughed as well. "That seems to be the popular consensus. I'll be back in a bit."

Blake watched her go. After pausing for a minute, he faced the computer screen, trying to remember where he left off.

"I'll let you finish."

Turning back, he watched Hunter leave.

This was just their usual attention to one another, wasn't it? Did it seem like something more since the contact with Josh Elliot? Or was he sensing something stronger coming from Hunter? "I just can't decide if it's wishful thinking or not." He rubbed his forehead, trying to get his mindset back to his work.

* * * *

In the blissful silence of the coming night, Hunter scooped the last melted drop of chocolate ice cream from his dish. When he was done, he set the spoon into the bowl and slouched in the wooden chair at the kitchen table. Hailey and Dwight were still glued to the summer television repeats as Blake walked around, collecting the dishes to wash up in the sink. Hunter stared at him, the way he moved, his tight ass as he stood near the sink, the thick, dark hair on the back of his head.

In a half hour Hailey and Dwight would leave. He and Blake would be in the station on their own. After a quick glance at the two absorbed in *Numb3rs*, Hunter ran his fingers down his zipper flap, feeling his erection under it. He and Blake alone. All night. Though the possibilities were endless, he knew it was his fantasy life, not reality.

Blake spun around.

Hunter jerked his hand away from his lap too late. Knowing

Blake had seen him, Hunter waited as he walked over to the table.

“You done?”

“Yes.” Hunter didn’t release his hold on Blake’s brown eyes.

As Blake reached for the empty bowl, Hunter raised it up to him. In his opinion, the sexual tension was so obvious between them he was going completely insane pretending it wasn’t. Hunter released his grasp on the bowl.

Blake stood straight with it in his hand, pausing, staring back. “You okay?”

“Tired.” It was Blake’s excuse, so he decided to use it as well.

“It’s the heat.”

“Definitely. The heat.” *The heat of the goddamn inferno in my crotch, you fucking god!*

Blake’s expression didn’t change in its intensity. Hunter knew damn well he was reading something in Blake’s eyes that was not there. Or was it? Where’s the secret gay handshake when you need it?

As Hunter observed him, Blake’s glance darted to the other two in the room before he turned back to the sink to wash the last bowl. Tonight Hunter could not stop staring at him.

Damn you, Josh Elliot. Damn you.

“Right,” Dwight announced as he stood and stretched his back. “Ten o’clock and time for me to head home, gentlemen.”

“Do you want the TV on?” Hailey asked.

“No. Go ahead and shut it off.” Hunter needed them gone.

The running water in the sink stopped. Hunter tilted towards Blake to see him wiping his hands on a towel while he watched the other two gather their things to leave.

“Goodnight, guys. See ya in a couple of days.” Dwight waved.

“See ya.” Blake and Hunter echoed.

Hailey stepped closer to them. “Hopefully you’ll have a quiet night.”

“I hope so.” Blake smiled.

“You guys just be careful.”

“Thanks, Hailey.” Blake folded the towel and draped it over

a cabinet door.

"Bye, Hunter," she made an attempt at making it sound personal.

"Bye, Hailey. Have a good day off." Hunter found the effort to give her a friendly wave. Watching her leave, hearing the outer door open and close, Hunter did nothing in the ensuing silence but drift off. He was very tired, and the long day was catching up to him.

"Alone again." Blake leaned against the kitchen table across from where he sat. "She does have one mean crush on you, Hunt."

He shrugged. *I don't give a shit about Hailey.*

"You want to bed down? We may as well. Lord knows if we're in for a late call."

I want to bed down with you. His jaw tightened as he stared at Blake.

"Come on. We have to at least try and get some shut eye." Blake walked around the table to stand beside him.

When Blake was right next to him, he rose up, almost, but not quite brushing against Blake as he did. Hunter didn't know if the charge of electricity passing through his body was being echoed by Blake, but it was so intense for Hunter he closed his eyes to savor it. His cock swelled as he caught Blake's scent. Damn the man smelled so good, it was an instant aphrodisiac.

"You look exhausted, buddy." Blake squeezed Hunter's shoulder. "Get some rest."

Before Hunter could react, Blake was walking down the long hallway to their separate bedrooms.

"Goodnight, Hunt."

"Night." Hunter watched him close himself into his room in agony. Lowering his head, he entered the small cubicle with the locker, bed, and draped window. He sat on the twin mattress, leaned over his lap, and rested his face in his hands.

* * * *

As Blake removed his shoes, he tried not to think about Hunter's strange mood. Today he did not receive the usual carefree banter and joking repartee he was used to from Hunter.

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It was as if Hunter was preoccupied and deep inside himself. "Maybe I should let you do your own thing tomorrow." Blake sighed. He felt like he was bothering the guy. Seeing him both at work and their time off? Perhaps that wasn't smart. Maybe Hunter was growing tired of his company.

Blake unbuttoned his uniform shirt and yawned. He was absolutely exhausted. "Please let me get a few hours of sleep before a call comes out," he begged quietly. Sliding his slacks down his legs, he lay prone on the bed, turned off the light and shut his eyes, dreading the tones and the dispatcher announcing a call to wake them up.

* * * *

In the next room, Hunter tried to close his eyes. His body was spent but his mind was racing. In the darkness he smoothed his hands over his chest across his erect nipples. Imagining Blake lying beside him, his heat and the scent of his cologne, his cock throbbed in his briefs. He'd had other men in his life. Sexual encounters. Good ones. Nothing too serious but good man on man loving. But it had been a long while since he connected with anyone. And he never connected both in physical attraction and personality the way he did with Blake. This was a first.

The amount Blake excited him, stimulated him completely was beginning to drive Hunter to distraction. And working so close...so close. Right in the next bunkroom, next to him in the engine, side by side at the scenes of fires, accidents, medical emergencies, wasn't it normal to form a bond?

Hunter dug his hand under the waistband of his briefs. He was fully aroused. Nothing made him as hot as thinking of Blake. Though he was weary, and sick to death of masturbating for his pleasure, he knew if he came it would help him sleep. And inevitably, thoughts of Blake were what made him come.

He had a favorite fantasy. Blake standing near his bed, undressing slowly. One by one the uniform Blake wore would drop to the carpet. Once Blake was naked, he would touch himself, give his cock a few pulls as it hardened. With his index finger he would coax Hunter closer, a demonic smile on his lips.

And instantly he would crawl over the bed, opening his mouth to taste Blake's cock.

What did Blake's cock look like? It was a question he was dying to know. Imagining it thick, long and perfectly straight, Hunter jerked his hand on his own dick in response to his thoughts.

After he sucked Blake's cock, making him moan in pleasure, Hunter would lay back, legs spread wide and return the invitation. First he would feel Blake's tongue on his dick, Blake sucking him to the base of his cock. Then Blake would kneel between his legs and lick his balls, his ass.

"Ahhh." Hunter writhed on the tiny cotton bunk, his eyes sealed shut.

Once Blake had lapped at his ring and devoured his nuts, Hunter wanted Blake inside him. Just imagining Blake pushing his stiff dick into his ass, made him wild with desire.

He reached down and pushed his finger against his rim. "Fuck me, Blake. Fuck me," he whispered, his hand working himself feverishly.

As the perfect image of Blake jamming his dick into Hunter's ass past through his mind, Hunter arched his back and came, shooting his wad across his chest and under his jaw it was so powerful.

Whimpering softly, rocking his hips as he recovered, Hunter wanted that fantasy to be a reality so badly, it was beginning to create a dull ache in his chest in longing. "Baby. Come to me. Come to me and let me have you the way I want you," he whispered, catching his breath.

* * * *

Blake heard Hunter's bunkroom door open. Harkening to the sound, he half expected, half hoped, half dreaded, Hunter knocking at his door, asking to come in.

Straining to listen, he heard the water running in the bathroom and the toilet flush. He didn't know if he was disappointed or relieved Hunter wasn't making his way to his door.

"Disappointed," he muttered, rolling over to try and get to

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sleep. Yeah, he was hard again, but he ignored it, trying not to get into the habit of masturbating at work.

It would be too easy to do with that brawny hunk sleeping in the next room.

A door opened, closed, and Blake could even hear the springs of the mattress of Hunter's bed as he lay back down on it.

Trying not to think of that incredible body right next door to him, Blake finally closed his eyes and fell asleep.

Chapter Four

The seven AM wake up bell sounded. Blake moaned in agony and rubbed his weary face. They had made it through the night without a call. *Be thankful for small miracles.* Rousing himself, sitting up, Blake ran his hand over his messy hair and rubbed his eyes. Standing, he stripped the bed for the next shift and balled the sheets up on the foot of the mattress. Changing into a pair of shorts and a LA County Fire department t-shirt, Blake tidied up the room and packed his dirty uniforms in his backpack to wash at home. Stuffing the used linens in the laundry, Blake heard the new arrivals already in the lounge laughing and talking loudly.

"Blake, my man!" Don Nelson shouted obnoxiously.

"Mr. Nelson," Blake greeted him. "Hey, guys." He nodded to the three other men calling out his name.

"So?" Kim Lu approached. "What was yesterday like?"

Blake just noticed Hunter enter the room wearing a pair of navy blue gym shorts and a white muscle tee. Momentarily distracted by the sight, Blake forced himself to concentrate. "Uh, unoccupied residential house fire early in the morning. I think that one was accidental. A few medical calls, an MVA...what else, Hunt?"

"That was pretty much it." Hunter ran his hand through his hair and yawned, looking adorable.

"The Hunt-ster!" Stanley Field slapped him on the back.

"Ow." Hunter moaned and gave him a frustrated look. "Go away, Stanley. I'm still trying to wake up."

Tom Young shook his head at Hunter. "Man, look at you. You look like you should be on Laguna Beach."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?" Hunter snapped angrily.

Blake knew Hunter was in a foul mood. He crossed the

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room and grabbed his arm. "Let's go. Time to call it a shift."

"Geez, Hunt!" Tom guffawed, "Take a chill pill."

"A chill pill?" Hunter resisted Blake's pulling. "You tell me I look like I should be on a gay beach, then you tell me to take a chill pill?"

"Hunt." Blake shoved him. "Go."

"Fuck you, Young! Fuck you!" Hunter roared while Blake forcefully dragged him out.

Trying to keep Hunter in front of him, Blake spun around and found all four men staring at Hunter like he had horns and a tail. Once Blake got him into the parking lot, he jerked Hunter around to confront him. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Shut up. Leave me alone."

He gripped Hunter's arm to stop him from escaping. "Hunt! It's me, Blake. Hello? Talk to me."

As if it took a supreme effort, Hunter stopped his progress to his truck. "Look, Blake, I had enough of that crap in San Diego. All right? I'm not putting up with it again."

"What crap?" It was the first time he had heard of Hunter putting up with anything. "What are you talking about?"

"Nothing. I gotta get home."

As Hunter stormed to his brand new white Ford Ranger pick-up, Blake stood there, watching him go. He thought he knew everything there was to know about Hunter Rasmussen. But he had no clue what the hell was going on now.

* * * *

Hunter didn't even look out of his window at Blake as he drove off. He was so angry and disappointed with himself he couldn't.

After a lousy night of tossing and turning, expecting the damn tones and dispatch to wake him up for an emergency, he hadn't slept a wink. Rubbing his eyes as they stung, he tried to calm down to be able to drive safely and not scream in frustration. When he stopped for a red light, he realized he hadn't put his seatbelt on. Hearing Blake's words of admonishment in his head, Hunter fastened it. With both arms he leaned on the steering wheel drumming his fingers anxiously. He

just wanted to be home.

Pulling into the parking garage under his apartment house, Hunter stopped the truck and grabbed his pack, slinging it over his shoulder. After chirping the alarm on the truck, he entered the lobby, checked his mailbox, and stuffed the junk mail under his arm as he climbed the stairs. One floor up, he jammed his key in the door and opened it. He dumped the mail on the table, taking the dirty uniforms out of his pack. Hunter rounded up the rest of the dirty laundry to head to the washer and dryer in the basement before he forgot.

Doing a quick check in the bathroom for anything he missed, Hunter caught his scowl in the mirror's reflection. That made him halt in his tracks. He needed a shower and a shave. It looked like he had rolled out of bed and left, which was exactly what he had done. Leaning both palms on the sink, Hunter stared into his blue eyes.

He was sick of the closet game. Sick of having to hide who he was and even more weary of the snide comments from his co-workers. Especially Tom Young. The anguish in his chest came out like a roar of a lion, echoing off the tile. And having Tom make a comment like that in front of all the other guys, and Blake! He said that in front of Blake!

Hunter balled up his fists in fury. Grabbing the bottom of his t-shirt, he tore it over his head and brought it with him to the laundry room. With a pile of quarters in his pocket, his bottle of laundry soap, and his keys in his hand, Hunter jogged back down the steps to the basement. No one was using the facility. He loaded a washer and pushed the coins into the slot. Once the machine was running, he left the empty basket and soap, checked his watch, and headed to the front door of the lobby. In just his dark blue shorts and sneakers, Hunter tried to burn off his rage, timing his run with the end of the wash cycle.

* * * *

Blake walked through the door of his home in Monterey Park. Tossing his keys on the kitchen table, he dumped his dirty clothing into the washing machine and started it. Filling a carafe with water, he got the coffee dripping and found some frozen

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waffles to drop into the toaster. Leaning back against the counter by the kitchen sink, he crossed his arms over his chest and thought about Hunter. Something was eating Hunter. Something serious.

What the hell could have happened to Hunter in San Diego that was so bad he never mentioned it to him? Blake thought he was Hunter's best friend. Didn't best friends talk about shit like that?

Three months they had worked and hung out together, and Blake didn't get any other vibe from Hunter other than the carefree bachelor who loved his job and had a smile for everyone around him. Then Tom Young showed up, also a transfer from San Diego.

What the fuck?

The waffles popped up. Blake found a plate and tossed them on it, buttering them and dousing them in maple syrup. After filling a mug with coffee, Blake relaxed at the kitchen table to eat. He and Hunter usually got together on their days off to run, work out, hang out, drink a beer, have dinner...talk.

Blake missed him. He didn't want to make arrangements with any of his other friends. His civilian friends who worked in offices and other white-collar professions asked too many questions about firefighting. Blake needed the break on his off days. He and Hunter never talked shop together. Yet they never were at a loss for conversation. They shared so much in common it amazed him.

The last bite of food consumed, Blake sipped his coffee, staring out at his backyard. He'd neglected it. The shrubs were overgrown, the flowerbeds needed weeding. He was hoping in the heat everything would dry up and die. Unfortunately, the previous owner planted succulents and other boiling heat loving plants, so the backyard was becoming a wild Eden. "Well, Hunt, if you're not around, what's my excuse to neglect it?"

Motivating himself to stand, Blake set his dishes in the sink and decided to busy himself with the grim, hot task of yard work.

* * * *

Drenched in sweat, Hunter opened the lobby door and

walked directly to the laundry room. He moved the load to the dryer and dropped down on a plastic chair to catch his breath.

When the door opened, he glanced up.

“Oh. Hi.” A young woman with her arms full stepped in.

Hunter grabbed the door for her, holding it open.

“Thanks.” She smiled shyly, setting her basket on top of the available washer. “Uh...I don’t know you. I’m Abbey.”

“Hunter.” He reached for her hand to shake quickly.

As she loaded the machine, she asked, “Just been for a run?”

“Yes.” He dabbed at the fast moving drops of sweat that were tickling his temple. Watching as she dumped soap into the basin and loaded the slot with quarters, Hunter had originally imagined hanging out until his clothing dried, now he reconsidered.

When he rose up off the chair, he looked back at it and wiped at the dewy drops he’d left on it. “That’s not very nice, is it?” He looked for something to mop it up with.

“Here.” She handed him a paper towel that was left on the dryer behind her.

“Thanks.” He cleaned up the sweat in the awkward silence.

“Wow. You’re really well built.”

Figuring something like that was coming, Hunter was seriously not in the mood for it. “Thank you. See ya.” He checked his watch and knew he had time for a shower before he needed to check back on his clothes. That was the one thing he hated about living in an apartment. No private laundry facilities. Saving for a condo took time. But he’d get there.

Hunter climbed the stairs, finding his key and letting himself into his place. Emptying his pockets he stripped for the shower while standing in his bedroom, catching the blinking light on his answering machine. Before he washed he hit the play button.

“Hey, Hunt. It’s me. Look. Save me from this damn yard work. I hate it. Call me.”

Smiling brightly, Hunter immediately picked up the phone. After three rings he expected the machine to answer when a breathless Blake did. “Hello?”

“Mr. Hughes. Or should I say, Mr. Landscape-Hughes.”

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Hunter tugged on his cock a few times as he stood naked.

"Hunt. Thank fuck! I'm up to my fucking eyeballs in weeds. I hate this shit."

"Hire a landscaper." Hunter's dick hardened with both his teasing and that masculine voice.

"Too expensive. I hate to think I'm not man enough to pull a few weeds."

You are definitely man enough, you gorgeous fucker.

"So?" Blake asked, still catching his breath. "What are you doing?"

Hunter peered down as he played with his stiff cock. "Just came back from a run and doing the laundry."

"You already ran? Without me? That's cruel."

"Sorry. I guess I just wanted to burn some time while the washing machine was going." He was completely erect, smoothing his hand over his shaft to the seeping tip.

"Look, Hunt, I could tell you had some things on your mind earlier. If you want me to fuck off, tell me."

I want to fuck you, not for you to fuck off.

"No. It's not like that. You know I want to see you on our days off." Hunter closed his eyes and moved his hand faster.

"I'd like that too. So? What's the plan? Laundry? And?"

Hunter had to slow his fisting down or he'd come. And that would not sound very good at the moment. Running his thumb over his dripping slit, he replied, "Anything. You want me to help you with the yard clean up?"

"God. I can't ask you to do that. Are you kidding me? Talk about use and abuse."

"You know I don't mind." Hunter shifted his weight to one leg, still smoothing his fingers over his hard-on.

"I can't. It's taking advantage of your good nature."

"Blake..." Hunter chided. "Do you want some help or what? I'm about to shower and if you do, I won't."

A long silence followed.

"Hello?" Hunter laughed. "Did I lose you?"

"I caught you before you were going in the shower?"

"Yes..." Hunter smiled wickedly, pulling on his cock quickly a few times. "I'm nekkid."

After another pause, Blake stammered, "Uh..."

Hunter held back a laughing fit. "Blake Hughes doesn't have a snappy comeback for that one? I'm stunned and disappointed."

"Jesus. After what happened with Tom Young earlier, I'm scared shitless to give you my usual perverted wit."

"It's different coming from you," Hunter purred.

"Is it?"

"It is." Hunter needed to come. Closing his eyes, savoring Blake's deep voice, he could so easily. "So? You want me dirty?"

After a hearty laugh, Blake replied, "Yes. Come dirty, you nasty boy."

That sent a chill over his skin.

Blake added, "But don't moan when you see how much work you have to do."

Moan? I'll moan for you now, hot stuff!

"I won't. Promise. Let me check on the clothes I put in the dryer. I stuffed my sweaty uniforms in it." Hunter glanced at the clock on his nightstand.

"Why don't you bring them here? I can do the wash for you. You don't have to pay for it, or stand around in some stupid laundry room, waiting."

"I hate taking advantage of you. You're too nice. I know you. You'll iron them for me as well."

"So?"

Hunter laughed. "Let me go. I'll be there soon."

"Bring beer."

"Got it." Hunter hung up, closed his eyes and pumped his hand more quickly on his cock. Before he came, he walked to the bathroom and aimed for the sink. Arching his back, imagining sucking Blake's dick, Hunter climaxed, grunting in a deep, growling whimper. "Oh, Blake...if only..."

* * * *

Staring at the phone after he hung up, Blake wondered if these conversations with Hunter were getting slightly more bizarre or if he was just imagining it. Shaking himself out of his thoughts, Blake made sure his front door was unlocked for

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Hunter and headed back to his weed pulling.

The backyard was small, so it didn't take too long to finish tugging the overgrown weeds from the perimeter. Blake was about to begin edging when Hunter appeared, pushing back the sliding doors to the patio. "About time!"

"Hey! You wanted me to stop for beer." Hunter closed the door behind him.

Blake took him in his blue running shorts and the same white muscle tee he had been teased about earlier at the station. "You bring a change of clothes? I'm already sweating buckets out here."

"Yeah. I did." Hunter took the shovel out of Blake's hand. "What were you doing?"

"Edging. I envy you. I wish I had an apartment."

"Sure you do, Blake." Hunter walked to spot where dead grass met dirt around some scrawny plants. "Here?"

"Yes. Should I get that beer on ice?"

"I already put two in the freezer."

"Did you lock the front door?"

"Yup." Hunter stomped on the shovel with his beige work boot and it sunk into the dry soil like butter.

"You're too efficient. Wait before you do that. Here." Blake handed him a pair of gloves. "Use these. You'll have blisters if you don't."

Hunter leaned the shovel against his body and took the gloves.

As Blake watched him slide them on, he admired that entire package. In the skimpy outfit he was wearing, Hunter's brawny physique was shown off to perfection. Tom Young was right. He'd be a standout on Laguna Beach. He'd be beating the gay boys off with a stick.

"You going to watch me work or get busy?"

Blake snapped out of his trance. "Just making sure you know what you're doing."

"Hey, I lived with my folks before I moved into an apartment. Who do you think their slave boy was?"

"You?" *Slave boy...mm...*

"I know how to edge, Blake."

"I see that. Right." He picked up a bag of mulch and

dropped it near Hunter. "After you edge I'll throw the mulch down."

"Okie dokie." Hunter stomped on the shovel, wrenching up the sloppy edge.

Moving to the opposite side of the yard, Blake trimmed the shrubs, constantly distracted by the sight of Hunter's brawny body in action.

After a half hour, Hunter yelled, "Ya better check on those beers in the freezer."

"Right!" Blake stood from his kneeling position stiffly before he walked to the back of the house. Kicking off his shoes, he found the two microbrews ice cold and poured them into frosty pint glasses. One in each hand, Blake used his elbow to open the slider and found Hunter had taken off his shirt and was wiping his face with it. The sight was so erotic he had to bite his lip on a comment expressing his true thoughts. "Take a break, Hunt."

Hunter rested the shovel against the wooden fence, removed his gloves and approached. After he draped his t-shirt over one of the wicker deck chairs, he dropped into it.

Blake handed him the beer. "I feel like crap asking you to do this on our day off."

After he took a deep swallow of the beer, Hunter replied, "You didn't ask. I offered."

"More fool you." Blake sat next to him on another wicker chair with a padded cushion.

"I don't mind. What the hell else do I have to do today?"

"I don't know. Rest? Sleep?" Blake chuckled.

"I'll sleep when I'm dead."

"Okay, Warren Zevon." Blake smiled at him.

"Wasn't that Bon Jovi?"

"He did the cover version. Get your music history straight, Hunt."

"Sure old man."

"Old?" Blake choked, trying not to take offense. "I'm only four years older than you, Mr. Rasmussen."

"Ooh, touchy! Did I push a button?"

His face dropping its smile, Blake asked seriously, "Did Tom Young push yours?" Blake felt like it was the elephant in

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the room and he wanted to figure out what was going on.

Hunter ignored him, dumping the beer down his throat like water.

“Hunt?”

“After the edging, what’s next? Your lawn is dead.”

“A dead lawn doesn’t have to be mowed.”

“It’s a waste of water anyway.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Blake hated the fact that Hunter would not talk about the incident. “What happened in San Diego?”

Hunter set his empty pint glass down on the wicker table, stood, put the gloves back on, and continued his edging.

Knowing pushing Hunter wasn’t going to get him to spill, he shouted, “You want another beer in the freezer?”

“Please.”

“I’ll be right back.” Blake took the empty glasses inside to set in the sink. Opening the refrigerator, he found two six packs and pulled a couple more bottles out to set in the freezer to ice up. Seeing Hunter’s backpack on the polished wood floor in the living room, Blake rubbed his hand over his sweaty head and sighed. “I’m here for ya, Hunt. Just tell me what’s wrong.”

Once he slipped his shoes back on, he found a garbage bag and began cleaning up the grass clumps and branches he’d trimmed. When that was done, Blake sliced open the mulch bag and shook out the dark, woody contents under the sparse landscaping that surrounded the perimeter fence. On his third bag he caught up to Hunter who was almost finished. Kneeling on the brown grass at Hunter’s feet, Blake took a break and sat back on his heels. A fly landed on Hunter’s leg. Blake brushed it away, causing Hunter to look down at him before he stomped on the shovel.

“Bug.”

“Oh. I thought you were trying to get my attention.”

“Are you tired of doing that? You want to swap?”

“I’m almost done.”

Blake waited as Hunter finished the last few inches. When he had, Blake emptied the remaining contents of the mulch bag on the soil, spreading it out evenly. Standing with an effort from his stiff joints, he crushed up the empty mulch bag and had a

look at his yard. "Looks good."

"It's a big improvement, Blake."

"Beers!" Blake had forgotten he put them in the freezer. He sprinted to the back sliding door, kicked off his shoes, dropped his gloves and rushed to the freezer. Checking them, finding they weren't frozen, he poured them into fresh pint glasses and returned to the patio. "Icy cold."

"Fantastic." Hunter tossed his gloves on top of Blake's on the patio and unlaced his beige work boots, taking them and his white socks off.

"Thanks, buddy." Blake held his glass up for a toast.

Hunter tapped his, bringing the frosty glass to his lips and chugging the contents down his throat.

After a deep draw on his own, Blake paused to watch Hunter swallowing the beer. How masculine could you get? *You fantastic mother-fucker.*

Done, wiping the foam off his lip, Hunter burped. "Brain freeze." He closed his eyes for a minute.

"What did you expect?" Blake laughed at him. "It's been in the damn freezer for twenty minutes."

"Fucking tasted great."

"You brought two six-packs. Get another."

"In a minute." Hunter slouched in the chair causing his legs to straddle. From where he sat, Blake could see inside Hunter's gym shorts. He was dying to get a glimpse of his balls but knew he'd be spotted if his gaze lingered.

"You must be starved," Blake began. "What are you hungry for?"

"I'm easy. Why? You cooking?"

"Cooking? After all this work?" Blake tilted his head at him comically.

"I love your food. I have to wait for work to get you to cook for me."

"Damn straight." Blake took another gulp of the refreshing beer.

"You need a pool."

"We could go to the beach." Blake instantly thought of Josh Elliot.

"Too long a drive."

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“Too long a drive?” Blake exclaimed. “It’s ten minutes.”

Hunter toyed with his empty glass.

“Let me get you another beer.”

“I can get it.”

“Sit.” Blake touched his hand. When he did, Hunter jerked his head up at him. Ignoring the odd reaction, Blake took Hunter’s empty glass and brought it inside. *Something’s going on. What the hell is going on?*

* * * *

Hunter looked at his hands. Even through the thick gloves the skin of his palms felt sore. He rubbed at the calloused pads gently, trying not to think about anything. If he did, he’d either get angry or sad. He was here with Blake, having a beer in the sun. Alone. What more could he want?

If he thought about what more he wanted, he’d get either sad or angry. *So stop it!*

When Blake appeared with two beer bottles, sans caps, Hunter reached for one.

“I washed the glasses and stuck them in the freezer, but it’ll take a few minutes to ice them up.”

“It’s all right,” Hunter said. “I don’t mind drinking from the bottle.”

“You’re so butch.” Blake laughed, sitting back down.

“Yeah. That’s me.” Hunter allowed his eyes to wander down Blake’s neck and chest. The sweat and dry dirt coated him like he’d been at a construction site all day. His faded, gray Pacific Whale Foundation t-shirt had the sleeves torn off. A gaping hole had opened up on the chest, showing a peek of his taut, tanned bod underneath. Blake’s navy blue shorts were skintight with white lacing crisscrossing on the outside of the crotch like football-type apparel, and white stripes adorned each hip. The material was as soft as a pair of sweatpants and accentuated the bulge between Blake’s solid, muscular thighs. Hunter thought if anyone would look at home on Laguna Beach, it was Blake in that outfit.

He’d been so occupied edging, sweating, and being hot, he hadn’t had time to ogle. With Blake sitting directly in front of

him, his damn legs wide open, Hunter was trying not to become mesmerized.

“What are you hungry for?”

You! You fucker! You!

“I told you. Anything.” On his third beer with no food all day, Hunter was finally getting a head buzz. Thank fuck.

“Pizza?”

“Fine.”

“Sausage? Pepperoni?”

“You know I like anything, Blake. You decide.”

“You do realize tomorrow is the fucking Fourth of July.”

“I know.” Hunter finished the third beer, craving number four. “How many kids with blown off fingers you think we’ll get?”

Blake cringed. “Christ, I hate that shit.” After Blake adjusted his dick from the outside of his shorts, he said, “Go get another. I can tell your either dying of thirst or want to be drunk.”

Hunter was lost on the casualness in which Blake touched himself. “Uh. Yeah. You ready?”

“Not yet. Still working on this one.”

Hunter rose up with an effort. As he passed Blake on his way to the sliding door, he noticed Blake staring at his crotch. *Yes, I’m hard, okay? You touch your prick in front of me and I get excited. So? Shoot me.*

Opening the refrigerator, Hunter took out another beer. Since it left only one in the pack, he removed the last one from the cardboard and folded it up to stuff in the garbage. When he looked up, Blake had come in with his empty.

“Let me call for some food.”

Hunter nodded, trying not to stare at Blake’s fantastic body accentuated by those incredible shorts.

“Why don’t you go shower.”

When Blake touched his shoulder, Hunter felt a flash of fire rush to the tip of his dick. The urge Hunter had to cup Blake’s rough jaw and bring him to his mouth was almost too overpowering to ignore.

“Hunt?”

Hunter bit his lip and tensed every muscle in his body.

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Softening his tone, Blake asked, "Please tell me what's going on."

"Nothing's going on." Hunter wanted Blake to back up. He could smell his sweat, his deodorant, the beer he'd just drunk, and maybe his...if he inhaled deep enough, even his crotch.

"You sure?" Blake tilted his head, his brown irises with their long, dark lashes emitting care and worry.

Closing his eyes, Hunter had to stop himself. Images of sliding his hand down the front of those provocative football shorts were making him insane. "Let me shower." Hunter needed release. Now. He brushed against Blake's body to escape. He had no choice. Their cocks rode over each other as he did. Hunter went into meltdown.

Without looking back, he grabbed his backpack and made a beeline to the bathroom. Once he was in the relative safety of the closed room, Hunter dug his hand down the front of his gym shorts and held himself. His cock was throbbing with the beating of his heart. How many times had he jacked off thinking about Blake Hughes? Augh! Too many!

Hunter was about to combust. It was getting to him.

* * * *

Blake was left spinning in Hunter's wake. The contact of their crotches rubbing together reverberated through him in waves. Reaching back for the counter, Blake closed his eyes to recuperate. Looking down, he could see the raised mound under the fabric of his shorts. *What you do to me, Hunt...it's criminal.*

But he didn't dare. After what happened since they had met Josh Elliot on the beach and the reaction Hunter had to Tom's comment that morning, Blake didn't fucking dare.

He still didn't hear the shower. Trying not to think about his best buddy, the object of his perpetual erotic fantasies, showering in his bathroom, rubbing soap all over his amazing physique...

"Stop!" Blake inhaled a few deep breaths and found the Yellow Pages. Locating a pizza delivery service, he picked up the phone. "Yes, hello. I would like a pizza delivered." Blake rubbed at the sandy grit on his neck. "Uh...pepperoni and

mushroom. No, that's it. Okay." After he gave the man his address, Blake hung up and found his wallet on the dresser in his bedroom. He removed a twenty from it, glanced back at his bed, had a flash of him and Hunter naked, rolling around like sex fiends in it, and left the room.

* * * *

Hunter recuperated after he had come. The water beating on his back, he forced himself to return to reality and finish washing. Once he was standing on the bathmat drying off, he heard a rap on the door.

"Hunt?"

"Yeah?" Hunter tried to sound normal, though his cock was still slightly tingling from his orgasm.

"I called for a pizza. They said thirty minutes. I left the cash by the front door."

"Okay."

"Will you be out soon?"

"Yeah. Go shower."

"Thanks."

Listening to Blake's footsteps fade, Hunter draped the towel over the shower door and dressed in his clean khaki shorts and black sleeveless tee. Running a brush over his hair, Hunter stared at his face critically, wondering if a man as good looking as Blake even thought he was attractive.

Repacking his backpack with his toiletries and dirty clothing, Hunter left it by the front door and headed back for another beer. The pint glasses were icy cold now so he used one.

The doorbell rang. Jumping at the sound, Hunter set the glass on the kitchen counter and jogged to answer it.

A young man waited outside with a cardboard pizza box. Hunter opened the screen door for him.

"Fifteen dollars and sixty-three cents, man."

Hunter exchanged the bill for the box and noticed the young man taking a good long look at him. Typical surfer dude, earring, pierced eyebrow, blond with blue eyes, he appeared to get lost on Hunter's crotch. "I was going to tell you to keep the change, but it seems you already got your tip ogling my dick."

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The young man coughed and sputtered at being caught. "Sorry, man. No penalty for leering, is there?" The young man started counting out the change.

"Not in this town." Hunter tried to keep his humor. After all, this was harmless. "Keep it."

"You're awesome. And freakin' hot." The young man peeked over his shoulder to the street before he asked, "Gay?"

"No. Sorry, dude." Hunter couldn't even imagine saying he was under these circumstances.

"My loss, man...definitely my loss."

"See ya." Hunter watched him walk back to his car with the blue and red sign attached to the top.

"Everything all right?"

Hunter whipped his head around to see Blake, fresh from his shower, standing behind him. "Uh..."

"I assume you had enough money." Blake took the box from him.

Hunter was about to die. "Yes."

"Was there a debate?" Blake carried the pizza to the kitchen.

Licking his lips at the curves of Blake's ass in his skin tight, faded jeans, Hunter forgot the question. He followed that perfect buttocks in a daze.

As Blake removed two plates from the cabinet, he asked, "Hunt?"

"You want another beer? The glasses are cold."

"Sure."

Hunter busied himself preparing Blake's drink, ignoring the question he couldn't remember and thinking Blake looked like a model in those jeans and that tight white t-shirt. *Christ, I can see his erect nipples through it. Did the guy know he would drive me crazy when he put that outfit on?*

After pouring Blake's beer, Hunter set it on the kitchen table for him. Picking up his, Hunter stood at the backslider to stare at their landscaping job.

Warmth mingled with his from behind and Blake's breath whispered in his ear, "Thanks for helping me. It looks great."

Instant erection. *Does it fucking matter I just jacked off two minutes ago in the damn shower? No!*

"Have a seat."

Hunter spun around. Two slices of pizza were on each plate.
"My favorite."

"I know." Blake smiled.

"How do you remember that shit?" Hunter relaxed next to Blake and set his glass down on the kitchen table.

Blake shrugged, smiling at him as he raised a slice of pizza to his lips.

"You're the best damn friend I ever had, Blake."

"Good."

Hunter folded the dripping slice long-ways and devoured it, grinning at Blake as he chewed.

"There's a Dodger's game on tonight. Interested?"

"Yup."

Blake winked at him as they stared at each other while they ate.

* * * *

By ten o'clock Blake was standing with Hunter at his front door. "Get a good night's sleep, Hunt. Long shift tomorrow with the Fourth of July madness."

"I will." Hunter stepped out onto the porch.

"Thanks again for all your help in the garden."

"And thank you for the pizza."

In the pause Blake felt like he was ending a date. Kiss? Don't kiss? It was silly. Hunter had such a delightfully contented smile on his face Blake almost chuckled at his expression of bliss. "Yes?"

"Yes?" Hunter mimicked.

"Anything else I can do for you, Mr. Rasmussen?" Blake teased, his arms crossed over his chest. To his absolute shock, Hunter pecked him on the lips.

Blake almost keeled over.

When Hunter roared with laughter, Blake realized it was a joke. "Funny, Hunt!"

"You loved it!" Hunter shouted over his shoulder as he walked down the path to his car.

I fucking did!

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“You wish!” Blake shared the good-natured banter.

“Yeah, yeah, keep denying it, Blake.” Hunter waved as he closed the door of his truck.

“You little imp!” Blake waved to him as he drove off. “Kissing me like that? And leaving? Talk about hit and run. You should have done that an hour ago, Mr. Rasmussen.” Blake shut the door, leaning back on it to recover. He touched his lips lightly. “Man! That’ll last me all night long.”

Humming happily to himself, Blake got ready for bed.

Chapter Five

Blake parked his Camaro Z28 convertible behind the fire station. Seeing Hunter's truck already there, he hurried out with his clean extra uniforms on a hanger, pressed and ready for action.

Seeing the double crew on for the holiday event, Blake nodded to the crowd quickly and hung his spare uniforms up in his locker.

"Hey."

"Hey," Blake greeted Hunter who poked his head into his room.

"We're doubling up. You mind if I share your room?"

Blake's knees went weak. "What? Says who?"

"The captain. He's got some folding cots."

"Oh." Blake had an image flash of the two of them sleeping on the twin mattress on top of each other. "I think I can stand you."

"Good, because if I got stuck with Tom I'd end up committing suicide."

"Can we choose who we want to bunk with?" Blake met him at the doorway.

"According to the captain we can. I just spoke to him privately."

Blake wondered on the nature of that conversation.

"Come on, we've got the meeting first. Hurry your ass up."

Tucking in his uniform shirt as he went, Blake tried to keep calm with the idea that he and Hunter were going to share the tiny room. But it was July fourth, and the opportunity for them even to get five minutes to eat was going to be impossible.

The double shift of crewmembers felt exceptionally odd. The entire group was called in. Finding a seat next to Hunter at the already crowded kitchen table, Blake shut up to hear all the

chatter around him.

Captain Anderson quieted them down. "I'm just here for the briefing. Your IC is going to be Lt. Smith."

Blake and Hunter exchanged satisfied glances. They both really liked the guy.

As the captain reviewed some safety procedures and reminders of protocol with them, Blake noticed Tom Young sneering at Hunter. Hunter hadn't noticed it yet and Blake was glad. He doubted Hunter would be able to guard his tongue at the overt nastiness. What the hell was Tom's problem? *Jealous, Young? Envious of Hunter's great looks and body? You should be, you fucking skank.* Blake imagined punching him in the face. It could only be an improvement.

"Right." The lieutenant announced the working pairs for the shift, which were pretty much the norm. When he said Blake and Hunter's names, Blake caught Tom's deriding laugh, which came out like a cough to cover it in front of the brass. But everyone heard it.

Next to him, Blake felt Hunter key up for the pounce. Under the cover of the table, he grabbed Hunter's knee, shaking his head at him.

In response, Hunter's lip sneered in contempt.

Okay, baby, calm down. Blake was trying mental telepathy, smoothing his hand over Hunter's wide quadriceps.

"Any questions?" the captain asked.

"Who gets to cook dinner for this mob?" Hailey, the sole female, laughed nervously.

The lieutenant looked directly at him. "You do, Hughes."

"Yes!" came a few cheers in relief.

The captain raised his eyebrow. "We have a chef in our midst?"

"We do," the lieutenant boasted. "Stop by, sir, and see for yourself."

"If I can, I will." The captain smiled as he stood. "Just be safe. Don't let the pressure of the call volume make you lower your safety tactics. Just take each call as it comes. We've got plenty of help out there, so if you feel you need extra engines, call for them."

The lieutenant shook the captain's hand and they spoke

quietly as they left the room.

“What’s for dinner, chef?” Hunter nudged Blake playfully.

“Hm...” Blake rubbed his chin as he thought about it. “Just did the lasagna.”

“Let’s go on a food run.” Hunter got up. “May as well go now before it gets busy.”

“Okay.” Blake headed to the refrigerator and took a look at what was inside first before he began a list.

“Why does Hailey get her own room?” Tom whined.

“Because she’s a woman, ya dork!” Kim Lu shook his head at him.

“I think we’d be safer if Hunter had his own room.”

Blake spun around in fury and found Hunter’s fists clenching in rage.

“What the fuck is your problem, Tom?” Don Nelson asked.

“You should ask Hunter that,” Tom scoffed.

Before Hunter made hamburger out of Tom, Blake intervened, backing Tom up against the wall. “Look, the captain and the lieutenant are here today. Do I go and make a formal complaint or what, asshole?”

“Whatever.” Tom shoved him out of the way and left the room.

Stan shouted after Tom, “Lay the fuck off him, Young!” Stan glanced back at Hunter. “Ignore him, he’s a cunt.”

Blake looked over his shoulder. The others were quiet while Hunter appeared about to combust. “Let’s go.” Blake gestured him over. As if it took nerves of steel, Hunter moved one leg in front of the other. Blake was sick about it. Hunter was in such a good mood a few minutes ago.

Climbing into one of the smaller medic trucks, Blake started the engine and waited for Hunter to get in. “Buckle up, Hunter.”

Blasting out an exhale in frustration, Hunter fastened the seatbelt. After they drove off the lot, he asked, “Why the fuck is Young tormenting you?”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I want you to file a complaint. He’s way out of line.”

“I said I don’t want to talk about it!” Hunter roared.

Stunned by the venom, Blake shut up. Allowing Hunter to decompress, he kept quiet on the ride to the grocery store.

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Once they were in the market pushing a cart, Blake said softly, "I know everyone prefers Italian food. What do you think?"

"Yeah, whatever."

"I could make baked ziti. Or spaghetti and meatballs. I can even make the meatballs with sausage meat."

"Sounds good." It was completely lackluster and defeated.

"Or how about Italian sausages with peppers and onions?"

"Blake, you know I like everything you make. You decide."

Seeing it was up to him, Blake threw some items in the cart, including a loaf of bread and fixings for a salad.

"I'll get it prepared while it's quiet."

"I want to workout with you."

"Okay. Just let me get it done and we'll hit the gym."

"K."

Blake couldn't take Hunter's pout. It was killing him.

They checked out, carried the bags to the truck, and headed back to the station. The silence was wearing on Blake but he knew Hunter well enough to stop pushing him.

When they walked in, the lieutenant had three of the men mopping the floors and wiping down counters. Blake asked Hunter to help him unpack the groceries, not wanting him to get stuck with some dirty job. "Cut up the salad."

As if Hunter knew exactly what Blake was doing for him, he nodded, washing his hands at the sink. By nine thirty the meal was ready for baking when dinnertime came and was in the fridge under a foil cover. The salad was prepared on the shelf next to it. Blake finished washing up dishes. When he was through he approached Lt. Smith. "Sir?"

"Yes?"

"Okay if Hunt and I workout?"

"Yeah. May as well do it now while it's still dead."

"Great."

Hunter was waiting at the doorway to the hall looking meek and avoiding everyone's eye contact. Blake had never seen him do that before. Brushing against him, he whispered, "We got the okay for a workout."

"My stuff is in your room."

"Good." Blake met Hunter's eyes. "You want me to wait

outside while you change?”

“I don’t care if you don’t care. I just don’t want—”

Blake paused for the conclusion of the sentence. It didn’t come. With his hand on Hunter’s back, Blake urged him down the hall to their room. A folding cot was already in it, leaning against the locker.

Shutting the door, unbuttoning his shirt, Blake stared at Hunter in exasperation. “I know if I ask you what’s wrong again, you’ll either go quiet, deny, or snap at me.”

“Then don’t ask.” Hunter stripped off his uniform shirt, facing the wall.

Digging through his pack, Blake removed his gym shorts and t-shirt, tossing them on the bed. As he undressed he peeked at Hunter. His dark briefs fit like a glove over his perfect bubble butt. Blake twisted to stare at the wall before he became erect. Tonight would be the first time they ever shared a room and the excitement Blake felt was making him giddy.

He just wanted his perky Hunter back, not this broody clone.

Sans a shirt, Hunter held his leather fingerless gloves and had already put on a pair of running shoes. When Blake looked up, he sighed, “Man, I wish I was built like you.”

“You kidding?” Hunter gaped at him. “You’re perfect, Blake.”

“I don’t have those pecs.” Blake tucked his t-shirt into his shorts.

“Shut up. You say the stupidest things.”

They walked across the hall to their gym. It was more than adequate with a brand new treadmill, free weights, Nordic track, universal, and a television and CD unit suspended on a wall rack. They didn’t use the TV or stereo so they could listen for emergency calls. Yet with nine manning the station, including the IC, they most likely could get away with an hour undisturbed.

Blake began his warm up on the treadmill as Hunter stretched in front of the wall of mirrors. There was nothing he enjoyed more than watching Hunter workout.

“What are ya hitting today?” Blake asked.

“Chest and biceps.”

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“Cool.”

“You?”

“I’ll do legs, just so I’m not in your way.”

Hunter nodded.

It was Blake’s turn to go into a trance. Seeing Hunter naked from the waist up, his chest swelling with each pump of a loaded bar, Blake was so hot and bothered he was about to jack off on top of Hunter as he lay back on the bench. *What a gay fantasy that would be. Me spraying cum on that bod.*

Unable to prevent himself, Blake stood behind his buddy to spot him.

“Thanks,” Hunter acknowledged.

“No problem.” Blake noticed Hunter peek up his gym shorts quickly. *Oh? Can’t resist?* He smiled and widened his stance for a better view, just in case. “You checking out my balls, Hunt?”

Hunter broke up with laughter. Blake was very glad he took it in the right vein.

“Shut up. I have to concentrate.”

“And my balls are distracting you? Oh, baby!” Blake almost exploded with hilarity.

“Well, Christ, they hang down to your knees.”

“What?” Blake doubled over with laughter, holding his side. “My knees? Hunt, you are impossible!”

“Shut up and spot me, hung-man.”

“Christ, I adore you.” Blake dabbed at his eyes.

“Yeah?”

“Did I say that out loud?” Blake teased.

“I’m afraid you did.”

“What was I thinking?” Blake loved their playfulness, loved it!

“Come on, Hughes, we gotta finish. I know Kim likes to workout.”

“True. I’ll behave if you will.” Blake helped him hoist the bar.

“No chance of that, Blake.”

Smiling, Blake watched him pump iron, loving him more every damn day.

* * * *

Showered, in uniform, Blake met Hunter back in the lounge. Stan had made sandwiches for lunch and set them out with a few bags of potato chips and pickles, making it feel like a Fourth of July picnic.

"Nice one, Stan." Blake filled his paper plate.

"Not as good as that meal I peeked at in the fridge. Mm!"

"You like Italian sausages?" Blake munched on a chip.

"Hell yeah."

Blake smiled at Hunter as he filled his plate. When he caught Hunter's quick glance over at the sofa occupants, he found Tom glaring back at him. *What the fuck?* Blake was going batty trying to figure out this mystery. Tom was a recent transfer from San Diego, just like Hunter was. Something had obviously happened down there to color their opinion of each other.

Blake wanted to talk to the captain to get them separated. There were so many stations to be assigned to in LA, why were these two mortal enemies in the same monkey house? But it wasn't Blake's position to say something. Wasn't it between Hunter and Tom?

"Cut it out." Blake shoved Hunter before another spat erupted. "Sit with me."

Blake forced Hunter to face his back to Tom's sneering expression. Taking the seat next to Hunter, he whispered, "You realize I'm going insane."

"You already are there. Or it's one short fucking drive." Hunter took a huge bite of his ham and cheese.

"What the fuck is going on between you and that asshole?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"At least talk privately to the captain and get his ass transferred. You don't need this aggravation on the job."

"Let me deal with it."

"How? By caving in the guy's head?"

"You got it."

Chewing his food, Blake stared at Hunter's profile. "You know how I feel about you?"

Hunter met Blake's eyes instantly.

"Hunt. You do."

Suddenly Hunter began choking on his food. Blake patted

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his back lightly, avoiding the curious gazes from the couch potatoes.

"Babe..." Blake rubbed his back briefly before returning his hand to his food. "Please. Trust me."

As Hunter continued eating, Blake wondered if Hunter was considering his offer.

The moment lunch was consumed, the tones from the dispatcher indicating an emergency and calls for service began in earnest.

A private dwelling was on fire from a bottle rocket that had landed on the dry roofing. And it was only the beginning of the July fourth festivities.

In their bunker gear in the scalding heat, Blake behind the wheel and shouting at Hunter to buckle up, they hit the sirens and were off.

Blowing the deep basso blasting horn as well as the wailing siren, Blake shook his head. "I hope to shit the cops are out on DUI patrol tonight. The assholes are already on the road."

Hunter grabbed Blake's thigh. "We'll get there."

"Stop. You're turning me on," Blake teased.

"Yeah?" Hunter ran his hand higher on Blake's thigh, through his thick turnout slacks.

Smiling at Hunter's antics, Blake roared the engine through an intersection to their location.

Smoke curled from a tiny spot on the roof. As Blake manned the valves, Hunter pointed the hose and shot the water.

In a few minutes the tiny, smoldering spot was drenched. Making sure it was out, Hunter used the ladder to inspect the roof. Blake waited for his signal. The homeowner was shouting at the poor police officer who was on the scene.

After Hunter was back on solid ground, Blake approached the beleaguered cop. "It's out. It didn't even burn anything."

"Thanks." The handsome cop smiled at him.

Blake took note of his name. He'd never run into him before. "Officer Chandler?"

"Jeff." The cop shook his hand. "Hughes?"

Blake noticed him reading his last name from his helmet. "Blake. Blake Hughes. And my colleague is Hunter Rasmussen."

"Cool. That's my partner, Mickey Stanton."

Pivoting around, Blake caught sight of a gorgeous blond in blue. *Wow! "Right." Control yourself, Blake.* "It wasn't a fire." He tried to calm the homeowner. "The bottle rocket was burning itself out."

"Fireworks are illegal in LA!" the old man ranted. "I want the police to put a stop to it!"

"We do our best, sir." Jeff gave Blake an imploring glance.

Stepping in to help this handsome cop, Blake said, "Look, sir, the police are undermanned. You know that."

The old man shut up.

"This poor policeman," Blake touched Jeff's shoulder, "is running himself ragged today. What," he asked Jeff, "twelve hour shift?"

"Minimum."

"Minimum!" Blake echoed loudly. "Pity the poor police, sir. There's no damage. None. Let the poor man go and save a life."

The old man appeared remorseful. "Yes. Sorry, young man. I just got upset. I shouldn't take it out on you."

"No. You shouldn't." Blake led the cop away from the whining.

"Thanks. I owe you." Jeff held out his hand.

Blake gladly took it. "My pleasure. Are you new? I've never run into you before."

"Just transferred from Seattle."

"Right. Sick of the rain?"

"Yeah. But this heat! Fuck!" Jeff tugged at his Kevlar vest.

Blake caught Hunter's curious eye as he rolled up the hose. "You just be safe. I'm sure we'll meet again."

"Yeah. You too."

Blake gave the handsome officer a warm smile, took another look at his gorgeous blond partner, and shook his head. "Damn, this job is the stuff of gay boy fantasy."

Helping Hunter with the hose, Blake felt him leaning against him from behind. "You flirting with that cop?"

"Yeah, jealous?" Blake grinned wickedly.

"Hell yeah!" Hunter laughed.

"Good." Blake nudged him playfully.

Once they had the truck put back together, Blake climbed into the driver's seat. After Hunter had joined him, he began

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moving them out of the area. The two pretty cops waved. Blake and Hunter waved back.

“I love my job,” Hunter sang sweetly.

“Me too, Hunt. Me, too.” Blake winked at him.

* * * *

Hunter set up his turnout gear for the next call. He noticed both the medic truck and second engine were gone on other calls. Once he and Blake made sure the rig was ready for the next incident, they walked together into the building. The PA was broadcasting another call for service, but it wasn't for them so they kept moving to the kitchen.

“You need a drink?” Blake asked.

“Yes, please. Scotch.”

“Ha. Ha. Don't I wish.” Blake removed the orange juice from the fridge and poured two glasses full.

Dropping to sit at the table, Hunter glanced at the daily newspaper with little interest where it lay spread out over the surface chaotically. Blake joined him, drinking from his glass as he sat down, placing the other one in front of Hunter. After Blake had finished the juice, he began folding up the scattered newspaper sections.

Sipping the refreshing liquid, Hunter watched him again. In the peaceful quiet, Hunter stared. Blake's jaw was smooth from his morning shave. His sideburns were so dark they looked black compared to his brown hair. They were cropped halfway down his ear and Blake's hair needed a trim. It was beginning to curl in soft waves that covered the tops of his ears and shirt collar. Regulation made them cut it short, but no one would scold Blake. He still looked like the consummate professional. Hunter knew Blake was well respected and admired for his paramedic skills, intelligence, and kindness. Everyone loved Blake.

The summer had tanned Blake's skin. His brown eyes were framed by the longest eyelashes. He had high arching eyebrows, angular cheekbones, and a square jaw with just a hint of a cleft.

“You all right, Hunt?”

Once again Hunter was caught gazing dreamily at him. And tonight they were sharing a bedroom. If only tonight wasn't July

fourth. "Yes. I'm fine." He set his empty glass next to Blake's.

"We've got the next two off after this." Blake made the newspapers into a neat stack, even placing the front page on top. "Want to do anything special?"

Hunter did. He wanted to spend forty-eight hours in bed with him. "Sure. What have you got in mind?" As Hunter waited for a reply, Blake parted his lips as if to speak, but said nothing.

Hunter wasn't sure what was passing through Blake's thoughts at that moment, but the connection between them seemed more intense than usual.

Loud tones broke up the silent staring match. "...medical emergency...location Santa Monica beach...lifeguard tower number..." the dispatcher's voice droned on.

Without a word they jogged out to the sally port to run code to the beach.

Parking the fire engine as close to the sand as possible, Hunter and Blake rushed between the parted throng and knelt down next to a familiar face.

Tanner Cameron relayed information to them concerning the victim. "He's got a laceration down his left shin. Pulse is one hundred BPM and BP one forty over ninety. Conscious and alert." Tanner asked the man, "How old are you?"

"Nineteen," the injured surfer said.

Hunter took a look at the bandage that was already seeping. "I'll get the board. Better keep him horizontal and that leg elevated."

"Okay. Josh, go check on Nathan," Tanner said.

Hunter caught Blake staring at that pretty boy, Josh Elliot. "I'll get the board, Blake."

"Okay, Hunt. I'll stabilize his leg."

Hunter jogged over the sand to the rig, calling for an ambulance over the radio as he did. There was Josh again to remind him of what he was missing: gay, out, proud, and gorgeous. *Jesus God, help me.*

Returning with the backboard, Hunter crouched down next to Blake. With Tanner's help they secured the injured man to the long board. "I called for an ambulance transport, Blake."

"Great. Yes, I heard you over the air." Blake relayed to Tanner, "We've got the engine. We can't transport him

ourselves.”

While they waited, Hunter couldn't take his eyes off of the pretty gay lifeguard wearing just his red swim trunks. He noticed Blake having a hard time avoiding staring at him as well.

Josh crouched down by the wounded surfer. His hand was grasped by the victim when Josh offered it. “You still alive?” Josh smiled.

“Yeah. Thanks. I owe you,” the young surfer said.

“You don't owe me. I'm just doing my job.” Josh pushed the young man's hair back from his eyes. “You'll be okay. You're in good hands now.” Josh tilted his head, indicating Hunter and Blake.

Hunter asked Josh, “How are you doing? All better now?”

“I'm raring to go.” Josh gave him a big smile. “What is it about firemen?”

“Down boy.” Hunter grinned playfully.

“Is he causing trouble again?” Blake teased just as the ambulance arrived on the scene. “Tanner, put a leash on him, will ya?”

“That's easier said than done.” Tanner's light eyes gleamed.

Just before the two medics and Hunter and Blake got the young surfer loaded in the ambulance, Hunter heard the young man ask Josh, “Are you gay?”

Josh blushed and leaned closer to whisper, “Yes.”

The heat in Hunter's face made him feel like he was standing in front of a fully involved house fire. He peeked at Blake to see if he was listening.

“Single?”

“No.” Josh winked at the surfer affectionately.

“Too bad.”

“Are you flirting again?” Hunter gasped. “We have to get this young man to the hospital for stitches.”

“Go!” Josh released the man's hand. “Good luck to you.”

“See you around?” the surfer shouted.

“I'll be here,” Josh replied. “Goodbye, gentlemen. Always a pleasure seeing you.” Josh waved to Hunter and Blake.

“You too, Josh, you too.” Hunter waved back as they left. They carried the injured surfer to the back of the ambulance. Once he was loaded, the ambulance driver chirped the siren to

get people out of their way.

While he was standing beside the engine's driver's side door, Blake snapped off his latex gloves. Hunter rolled his off as well, completely preoccupied with this second encounter with Josh. *If Tanner can resist a beauty like that, I'd be amazed.*

"You ready, Hunt?"

"I am." Hunter walked around the front of the truck, climbing in. Before Blake reminded him, Hunter fastened his seatbelt. Once they were back on the road returning to the station, he mumbled, "You think Josh and Tanner are...you know?"

"Josh and Tanner what?" Blake halted at a red traffic signal, looking over at him.

"Never mind." Hunter was sorry he brought it up.

"Are lovers?" Blake asked with rather an incredulous tone. "Tanner?"

"I said, never mind."

After a long pause and a few more miles, Blake replied, "Who knows? That boy is damn pretty."

Hunter twisted to see Blake's profile. *Pretty? Blake thinks a man is pretty? Is that evolved or gay?* "So...you think it's possible for a pretty gay guy to turn a straight guy gay?"

Blake shrugged. "Why? You want Josh?"

Hunter died, the blush washing over his skin was worse than it had been earlier. What was he doing? He didn't need this. He'd had enough of this crap in San Diego.

* * * *

Blake was so jealous he was about to explode. Arriving at the station, he backed into the bay and shut off the engine. Without a word, he hopped out of the truck and replaced the missing backboard they had used for the surfer. When he was done fussing with the equipment, he found Hunter staring at him. Blake felt like shouting at him, "Fine! Go flirt with the pretty lifeguard, get out of my face."

Avoiding him, Blake turned on his heels and entered the station to write up a quick report. Hailey and Dwight were back from their call as well, sitting on the sofa with the TV on.

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Walking through the lounge, Blake sat at the computer and booted it up. He was fuming.

Battering the keyboard, doing a simple one-page documentation of what they had done at the scene, Blake hit the print button and heard the printer buzzing. Once it was done, he slouched in the chair and stared at the screen without seeing it.

The idea of Hunter being gay and interested in another man cut through Blake like a knife. He knew he was too old. Why the hell did he even imagine anything more than friendship with Hunter? He was sick of disappointments and getting hurt. He knew better than to put himself out there.

But he hadn't even done that. He'd done nothing but fantasize about the guy.

Resting his elbows on the counter after shoving the keyboard aside, Blake rubbed his face. Life was so frustrating at times. He hated being gay and in the closet. Gay and celibate. What a fucking existence. Why couldn't he just go out with a damn woman, get married, and have fucking kids? *Why? Why torture myself? Oh, God, no. I can't be with a woman. No way.*

* * * *

Hunter could not believe he had made such a stupid comment. There was no way Blake wouldn't think he was gay now. Visions of Blake acting like Tom Young, getting his belongings moved out of his room, telling the lieutenant he wouldn't be caught dead sleeping in the same bunkroom as a queer, made Hunter feel sick.

Numb, Hunter dropped down on the sofa to stare at the rerun of *Family Guy*. He hated that stupid show. It was obvious Hailey and Dwight shared the same interests because they were both laughing at the dim-witted comedy.

"You all right, Hunter?" Hailey asked.

"Just tired." It was his pat answer for everything.

"Have some coffee. We got a long night ahead."

Blake entered the room. Hunter stared at him. When Blake didn't catch his eye, he sank even lower.

Dropping down at the kitchen table, Blake flapped open the paper and began reading.

Hunter propped his head on his hand and gazed at him. He wanted Blake so badly it was slowly killing him.

"You all right, man?" Dwight asked softly.

Instantly Blake made eye contact with him.

"Yeah," Hunter replied while staring at Blake.

"Go lay down, Hunter," Hailey offered. "Get a nap in."

Agreeing, Hunter rose up, scuffed to the bunkroom he and Blake were going to share, and stared at Blake as he passed. Blake didn't release his hold on Hunter's gaze until Hunter was in the hallway.

Once inside their private room, Hunter didn't open the cot, instead he lay back on the bed Blake would sleep in that evening. Keeping his legs over the side of the bed so his dirty shoes didn't touch it, Hunter relaxed on the pillow, staring at the ceiling. He never would get what he wanted, would he?

The sensation that he once again needed to move on, get away, escape, like he had done in San Diego, gnawed at him. *I feel like a fugitive always on the run. What on earth am I running from? You can't run away from being gay.*

* * * *

Blake was staring at the newsprint without reading it. So? What now? Hunter was gay? If he was, it certainly was the reason for Tom Young's abuse. Had Tom and Hunter worked together in San Diego? Had Hunter come out? Been blackballed? Chased up to LA? And? Now what?

Hunt was gay and interested in a young pretty-boy lifeguard?

Blake covered his face in his hands to rest his eyes. The sound of an engine coming into the sally port echoed in the building. Soon the rest of the team would be inside, laughing loudly, joking, and making a racket. Blake wanted a nap as well. He was beginning to feel worn out. He checked his watch. It was only four. And the real fun wouldn't even begin until nightfall. He had to rest. Had to.

Rising up from the table, he watched Stan, Kim, Don, and Tom coming back from their last call. Roughhousing, acting like the young boys they were, they went to the fridge for food and a

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drink or dropped heavily on the sofa to watch TV.

Blake heard the lieutenant's voice. Blake knew with Lt. Smith in the building people wouldn't react quite as rudely if he managed a quick nap in the same room as Hunter. He had to lie down.

Before Blake left the lounge, he mentioned it to the lieutenant so he knew where he could be found. "Sir, I'm going to lay down for a bit."

"All right, Blake. No problem. Where's Hunt?"

"I think he's taking a break as well."

"It's going to be crazy later. Go. When you wake up, we'll try to catch dinner. By nightfall I expect we'll be out 'til morning."

"Yes, sir." Blake tried to smile but failed. He scuffed his leather soles down the corridor. Without knocking, because he didn't want to wake Hunter, Blake opened the door and looked in. He was surprised to see Hunter asleep on his bed. As quietly as he could, Blake tried to set up the cot.

"Blake."

He turned around. "Sorry. I didn't mean to wake you."

"Do that later. There's room here."

When Hunter scooted over on the mattress, Blake felt his body rush with an electric shock. "It's all right." He fussed with the cot.

"Blake, just lie the fuck down."

Giving up on the frustrating folding bed, Blake leaned it against the door so no one could get in without them knowing. Stretching out alongside Hunter on the slim padding, it seemed so odd to share it and the pillow with him. Blake wasn't sure how he felt. Tilting to see Hunter's face, Blake found his eyes closed.

Knowing he would love a ten-minute power nap, Blake rolled to his side, keeping his back to Hunter and shut his eyes. Hearing Hunter's breathing, feeling him so close, was both tantalizing and comforting. The urge he had to close the tiny gap between them and seal their bodies together was overwhelming. Giving in to his exhaustion, he fell asleep.

Chapter Six

When the alert tones sounded, Blake opened his eyes. Disoriented, he stared at the lockers and the curtained window. An arm was resting over his shoulder. He could hear the dispatcher's voice. Residential fire.

Hunter sat up behind him. "Shit."

"We gotta go, Hunt."

"Go!"

From a sound sleep to running for their bunker gear, the two men found everyone in the sally port dressing in their hats and boots. The lieutenant was shouting orders as he too dressed in his flame retardant clothing. Over the radio he was requesting an air unit to keep their oxygen tanks supplied.

"Go! Go!" The lieutenant waved as the garage doors elevated.

Dwight was behind the wheel, Hailey co-pilot, and Blake and Hunter were in the seats behind the cab facing backwards. Still fastening his coat and jamming his feet into his rubber boots, Blake felt Hunter helping him fasten his seatbelt. "Thanks."

"You always get on me about it."

"I do." Blake sat back as Hunter clicked the buckle for him.

From where they were seated, Blake could see the ladder truck behind them with Don at the wheel and Kim beside him. The lieutenant was in the medic unit with Stan. Blake assumed Tom was riding behind Don in the big rig. Updates came over dispatch. The house was fully involved.

Blake felt his adrenaline pumping. It was nearing five in the evening and already they had a large house fire. This wasn't good.

He and Hunter had slept side by side for an hour. It didn't feel strange in the least. Blake was so comfortable with Hunter it

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seemed natural.

Hearing the engine decelerate and the siren stop, Blake unhooked the seatbelt, and he and Hunter jumped down for their first look at the house.

“Holy fuck.” Blake helped Hunter on with his tank and he did the same for him. The house was an inferno, totally engulfed.

Lt. Smith, the acting incident commander, began ordering each fireman to their duties. Dwight manned the truck’s water valves as Hailey located a fire hydrant.

“Don!” Lt. Smith yelled. “Get the residents on either side of that house out! Now!”

Don took off running.

Blake pressed his face shield against his skin to seal it. He removed the ax and pike from the truck. Hailey and Stan connected the hoses to the hydrant and Tom opened it up with a wrench. Once water was available, they began drenching the house.

Police cruisers arrived and set up a perimeter for traffic control. Uniformed officers backed the hysterical residents and spectators up.

Lt. Smith grabbed Hunter and Blake. “When we get it under control you two are in. Got it?”

“Yes, sir,” Blake shouted, just noticing the air support showing up on the street behind them.

“Kim! Tom! You’re the rapid intervention team for Blake and Hunter! Two out!”

“Yes, sir!”

Blake glanced at Hunter. Having Tom responsible for their wellbeing was making him uneasy. He couldn’t imagine Hunter’s mindset but knew it would be worse than his.

Another three engines from a neighboring station were set up and pounding back the blaze with hundreds of gallons of water.

Four hoses were cranked open and flooding the two-story dwelling. Someone from another unit raced over. “All the occupants got out safely, sir!” he reported to the lieutenant.

Blake was very glad because no one would survive that blaze.

As the fire became defeated and hissing white smoke

replaced the orange tongues of flames, the IC approached Blake and Hunter. "Go in."

"Yes, sir," Blake responded. He made eye contact with Hunter. Hunter held an ax as he fingered the pike. Before he went inside, Blake twisted around. A determined, trusting look was on Kim Lu's face, while Tom's was wearing a nasty smirk.

There was no way Blake was going to let Hunter out of his sight.

The entire ground floor was a charred mess. Everything was smoldering. Blake entered the kitchen. Pitch blackness surrounded the stove, obviously where the fire had originated. About to say something to Hunter, he didn't see him. "Hunt?"

Backtracking, Blake found him climbing the staircase. "Hunt!" He knew there was no way to know if the floor above was sound. "Hunt!" he shouted. "God damn it." He followed after him, feeling the wooden stairs sagging and weak from flames and water.

He made it to the top landing. "Hunt!" Blake heard Hunter using the ax. Moving to the doorway, Blake found him trying to open up a wall that was still smoking. "Hunt, watch the floor."

Hunter gave him a wave but didn't turn around. Blake was getting the feeling that Hunter was distracted and not paying attention as he should be.

Seeing he was okay for the moment, Blake checked the three other bedrooms. Most of the fire damage was on the first floor and the second seemed to be less affected. He noticed a birdcage. Taking a peek in, he found a dead parakeet lying on the bottom of the cage. "Poor thing."

A crashing noise scared the crap out of him. "Hunt?" Blake raced to the room he'd last seen him and found a gaping hole in the floor.

"Augh!" Blake screamed and barreled down the stairs. Suddenly the wail of Hunter's personal emergency alarm sounded. Blake knew it would go off either if he pressed it, or stayed still for more than thirty seconds. "Hunt!"

By the time Blake had made it to the ground floor, Kim was with Hunter, sitting him up. Tom was just standing there, doing nothing.

Blake dropped to his knees. "Hunt!"

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"I'm okay." Hunter nodded to him through his face shield.

Kim stood on one side of Hunter as Blake stood on the other, and they hauled him up to his feet. Blake began checking him for broken bones.

"Let's get him out of here," Kim shouted.

The sick sense of panic inside Blake shook him to the core. With an arm around Hunter and Kim mirroring him on the other side of his buddy, Blake shoved Tom violently out of the way. "Move, asshole!"

"Hey!" Tom reacted defensively.

Blake allowed Kim through the door, then Hunter, before he exited. He and Kim brought Hunter to the trucks where an ambulance had been standing by. The minute he could, Blake took off Hunter's mask, tank and helmet. "Hunt, talk to me."

"I'm okay." He panted. "Just shook up." Hunter sat down on the running board of a rig, his face dripping with sweat.

The lieutenant raced over. "You okay, Hunter?"

"Yes, sir." Hunter removed his heavy gloves and wiped his dripping face.

Blake was near tears with worry. The thought of anything happening to Hunter was too painful to imagine.

"Kim, Tom, hose down the interior. Hailey, Dwight! You're two out! There's still the chance of a flashover," the lieutenant instructed. When his attention was back on Hunter, Lt. Smith said, "You need some oxygen?"

"No. I'm okay."

"What the hell happened?"

"I fell through the upstairs floor boards."

"Get to the damn hospital."

"No. I'm all right."

Blake was a nervous wreck. But if Hunter was insisting he was okay, there was nothing he could do. When they were finally left alone, Blake grabbed Hunter's hand. "You'd tell me if you weren't okay, right?"

"Yes," Hunter replied, giving Blake a weary smile. "You think I'd miss that dinner you prepared?"

As Blake laughed, tears ran down his cheeks in relief.

With a delicate touch, contrasting Hunter's powerful presence in his full firefighter regalia, he brushed Blake's tears

away.

A familiar man in blue appeared. "Here."

Hunter took the offered bottled water. "Thanks, Officer Chandler."

"Jeff."

"Jeff." Hunter smiled, opening the cap and guzzling it.

"You okay?"

"Yes. I'm fine."

Blake took the bottle when Hunter offered it to him, sharing it.

"What the hell happened?" Jeff asked.

"I fell through the second floor."

"Shit!" Jeff choked.

"What's up?" His handsome partner Mickey Stanton appeared, leaning against Jeff's shoulder.

Jeff explained, "Hunter fell through the fucking floor!"

"Jesus!" Mickey's eyes widened. "I wouldn't want your damn job."

Blake started laughing. "And I wouldn't want yours!"

As Jeff harkened to his radio mike on his shoulder, he said, "Sorry, fellas, gotta go. Do you believe they are dispatching us to every report of fireworks in the district? What a waste of fucking time."

"Come on, Chandler," Mickey sighed, nudging him.

"Bye!" Blake waved. When he looked back at Hunter, he was tugging the water bottle out of his hand. "Finish it," Blake offered.

Once Hunter did, he said, "Let's see what we can do."

"Do you feel well enough?"

"Yes. Honest. I'm okay."

Blake helped him to stand off the running board. They headed back to the charred home and found Hailey and Dwight still hosing down a few remaining hot spots. The media and investigation crews had arrived.

Finding their ax and pike on the front lawn, Blake brought it back to the truck to place them in the side storage area. After he clamped it shut, he returned to see Hunter and Tom at it each other's throats again. "For cryin' out loud!" Blake rushed to shove between them. "Can't you two stop for a minute?"

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“Tell him that, not me!” Tom whined.

“You sound like a fucking toddler!” Blake used his body to separate them. “Get lost!”

As Tom walked off, still muttering under his breath, Blake spun around to Hunter. “Why do you let him bait you? Can’t you ignore the bastard?”

Before Hunter could reply, the lieutenant appeared. “Go get some boards off the truck. We’re about ready to secure it.”

Soaked with sweat, Blake helped Hunter nail the boards over the broken windows and shattered doors. An hour later they were back in the truck. Sitting behind Dwight and Hailey, facing the rear, he reached for Hunter’s hand.

Whipping his head around in surprise, Hunter glanced behind him to see if the other two could spy it. They couldn’t.

“I’m so glad you’re okay, Hunter,” Hailey’s voice sounded as exhausted as they all felt. “When your alarm went off, I panicked.”

“Me too, man,” Dwight added. “You scared the hell out of us. No more falling through floors, okay?”

Blake met Hunter’s dazzling blue eyes, squeezing his hand tight.

“I promise.” Hunter gripped it back firmly. “I swear it looked sound or I never would have walked on it. It must have been burned out from underneath.”

“Yeah, most likely,” Dwight sighed.

“In one of the bedrooms I found a little dead bird in a cage,” Blake explained. “I felt so sorry for it.”

“Aw...that is sad,” Hailey moaned.

“You ol’ softy,” Hunter whispered.

“Man, I’m starving,” Dwight shouted, “I am so ready for your dinner, Blake.”

“Me, too.” Hunter brought Blake’s hand to his lips for a quick peck.

Shocked at the act, Blake was finally getting the feeling Josh Elliot was not the object of this fantastic man’s desire. Maybe he was.

Trying not to give anything away to the two front seat occupants, Blake kept his voice steady. “I just hope we have five minutes to eat it. Christ.” Blake checked his watch. “Will this

night ever end?"

"I hope it never does," Hunter mouthed silently to Blake.

Blake gave him a loving smile.

The minute they began backing into the bay, Blake released their clasped hands. Climbing out, the four of them got the truck and their gear back in ready condition for the next call.

Blake could hear firecrackers going off all over the area. "Poor Jeff and Mickey."

"Yeah, no shit." Hunter followed him into the lounge. "Can you imagine chasing noise all night?"

"Hell no. But we'll be chasing flames. Nice choice." Blake stretched his stiff back.

Though Blake needed to change his uniform, he washed up at the kitchen sink and stuck the dinner into the oven, getting it going. Hunter stood behind him while he did. "Are you changing?"

"I was thinking about it." When Blake spun around, he and Hunter were almost connected at the hips. Blake looked down, quickly making space between their crotches as the rest of the crew began showing up.

"I assume we'll be in our bunker gear all night. How many damn clothing changes do you have?" Hunter asked.

"You're right. I just hate being damp." He caught a wicked glint in Hunter's eyes. "Behave."

The lieutenant shouted, "After your reports, I want a debriefing."

"Get that dinner going, Blake!" Kim shouted.

"It's in, Mr. Lu!" Blake smiled.

"Go!" Lt. Smith urged them. "Write it up. Blake, Hunter, you two do the honors."

"Aye, aye, boss!" Hunter teased, saluting him.

Blake headed to the computer room. As he walked down the hall, he felt Hunter touch his bottom. Spinning around, Blake asked, "What are you doing?"

"Sorry," Hunter replied, but his eyes were shining.

Dropping heavily at the desk, Blake began typing up a quick report as Hunter used his laptop.

Blake wondered what possessed him to hold Hunter's hand in the truck. Maybe it was to let him know how relieved he was

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that he was okay. It was impulsive, but he knew Hunter would take it the right way. Or the wrong way? Blake smiled. The touch to his ass made him think it was a good idea after all.

* * * *

Blake held his hand!

Hunter was so pumped by it he was smiling like a fiend. That fall through the floor had scared him. When the boards gave way on him, Hunter thought he was dead. Landing on his oxygen tank had jarred his back, but it broke his fall somehow. It did remind him, however, how dangerous the job was. He knew he had become complacent. They didn't go on many fully involved fires, and the fact that they had two within a week was an anomaly. He should have been more careful. But...if that fall brought out something in Blake? Well, how worth it was that?

Finishing the report, hitting print, Hunter spun in the swivel chair to stare at his fantasy man. They were both soaked in sweat. Blake's uniform shirt and pants were sticking to him. Hunter wanted to give him a tongue bath.

* * * *

"Right." Blake stood, finding Hunter smiling at him. "All done?"

"Yup."

"Ready for the tongue lashing from the lieutenant about our shoddy procedure?"

When Blake drew near to where Hunter sat, Hunter rubbed his palm over Blake's hip. "Yup."

The fire Hunter lit in him was making Blake swoon. All Blake wanted to do was close his eyes and thrust his pelvis into Hunter's face, but from where they were located in the building Blake could clearly hear all the other occupants close by.

"Mm." Hunter obviously was enjoying his reaction.

"Behave yourself." Blake stepped back, finding his wits. "Man, you are trouble."

"Something smells good." Hunter sniffed the air.

"That's the sausage and peppers cooking."

“Oh no, it ain’t.”

Blake choked in shock. “Hunt!” Never had Hunter been so blatant in his attraction, and though Blake loved it, he was not interested in someone spying it.

“All right.” Hunter rose to his feet. “Time for my lecture.”

“I’m afraid so.” Blake rubbed his back in comfort.

As Blake followed Hunter down the hall, he finally knew their attraction was mutual. You didn’t sexually tease a man and not want him, did you?

The lieutenant waved them over to the overcrowded table. “Talk tactics, gentlemen.”

Blake and Hunter sat side by side on the only available chairs.

Tom sneered, “Yeah, Hunter, tell the lieutenant why you fell through the damn floor.”

“Shut up, Tom,” Don snapped.

The lieutenant glanced from Tom to Hunter. “Something going on that I should know about?”

Everyone went silent. Blake knew once again it was up to Hunter to speak up, not him. Hunter didn’t.

“Right, anyway,” Lt. Smith continued, “Hunter, what happened up there?”

“The floor looked sound, sir.” He shrugged. “I found no sign of any fire damage from the top floor. Just smoke damage.”

“Blake?”

Blake made a brief glance around the circle of eyes. “He’s right, lieutenant. No sign of any fire damage. The floors were wall-to-wall carpet. And, well, sir,” Blake smiled wryly, “Hunt’s a big muscular male. I doubt anyone else would have had the bulk to fall through.”

Hailey giggled flirtatiously.

“True,” Lt. Smith agreed. “With the bunker-gear and the tank, he’s an imposing figure.”

Blake loved Hunter’s blush. Tom, meanwhile, was looking pinched.

“Maybe it’s a lesson in expectation,” the lieutenant said. “Expect the unexpected. I keep repeating to you all about becoming blasé. There’s no room in this job for complacency. Each call can be lethal.”

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Blake caught Hunter's smile. It was filled with some new found lust, some unleashed passion that he savored.

"I smell that food, Blake. Any chance it's ready?"

"Yes, sir. A good chance." Blake rose up to check.

"Good. Let's eat. By ten o'clock the city will be a zoo." The lieutenant stood.

Blake opened the stove and removed the casserole dish. When he turned back, Lt. Smith had escorted Hunter out of the lounge, obviously for a private chat. Blake tried not to worry for him.

Blake peeled back the foil and announced, "Dig in."

A line quickly formed. As it did, Blake set the salad and bread on the table.

Standing back as the horde descended on dinner, Blake waited for Hunter. Accepting the moans of gratitude for the food, he smiled and thanked everyone as they scoffed the meal hungrily. Finally Hunter returned. He appeared preoccupied and upset. Blake was not happy with his expression. Finding a clean plate, he filled it for Hunter. As Hunter stood behind him, he handed it over. "Is it enough?"

"Yes. Thanks."

"Take some salad and bread."

"Where are you sitting?"

"With you. Find a spot." Blake prepared his own plate and followed Hunter to the sofa. With the plates on their laps, they ate hungrily.

"*Oh*, Blake," Hunter moaned so sexually it made the hair on Blake's body rise. "This is so amazing."

"Thanks, Hunt." Blake smiled adoringly at him. When he looked up, the lieutenant had led Tom Young out of the room for his private chat. It drove Blake mad he didn't know what it was about, yet, he had a very bad feeling he did.

* * * *

All night and into the early morning until six, the department did not get a break. There was no sleeping. No bedding down. Just call after call for medical emergencies, burned fingers, faces, eyes; grass fires from bottle rockets,

smoking roofs, car accidents from drunk drivers, barbeques singeing off hair and eyebrows...the list never ended.

Hunter was on overdrive. Even his sweat had a layer of sweat coating it. His dark blue uniform was stained with white, salty perspiration from tugging on and off his bunker gear for twelve hours. His head hurt, he was beyond hungry, and dead on his feet.

By seven the relief crew of part-timers and volunteers arrived to give them all a much needed break.

With heavily lidded eyes, Hunter packed his backpack. The cot was still on its side, unused in their room. They never even got a chance to sleep together except for the hour's nap.

"Blake," Hunter moaned.

"Yeah?"

"You still want to do something?"

"Definitely."

"How much sleep are you going to get?" Hunter slung his pack over his shoulder. "If we crash now, the day will be shot."

"How about forty-eight hours?" Blake joked, but he barely had the strength to laugh.

"What do you want me to do?" He could not think.

"Stay over."

"Huh?" Hunter tilted his head.

"Follow me."

"You sure?"

"Am I sure?" Blake laughed. "Am I sure I'm asleep or awake right now? You tell me?"

"I'll follow you."

"Follow."

"That is what you just said, right?" Hunter turned off the light in their bunkroom.

"I have no idea what I just said." Blake left the building and headed to his car.

Hunter dumped his backpack on the bench seat next to him. Turning over the truck's engine, he waited for Blake to move out of the lot first and hugged his bumper. He was exhausted. He craved being horizontal so badly he ached.

Parked in Blake's driveway, Hunter took his pack with him, though he didn't remember why. They stumbled through the

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front door. Still in a coma-like state from the agonizing twenty-four hours they had just endured, Hunter dropped his pack on the polished wood floor of the living room, kicked off his work shoes, and tailed Blake as he dragged to his bedroom. They both stripped off their filthy uniforms and dropped dead on Blake's king-sized bed.

Chapter Seven

Blake stirred. Cracking his eyes open, he found the clock read noon, or something like that. He didn't even know which day it was. He felt filthy and hungry, and still physically worn out. "Noon?" he muttered to himself. "Noon what?"

"Hm?"

Hearing someone answer him, Blake made the effort to look. Seeing Hunter in his bed, wearing only his briefs, Blake gasped in shock. "Hunt?"

"Mm?" came an exhausted moan.

Blake raised the sheet to look down at himself. He was wearing only his briefs as well. Was that good or bad? Did they do anything? *No way. I'm too fucking wiped.*

"Hm?"

"Nothing. Gotta piss." Blake rolled to the edge of the bed and set his feet on the floor. Rubbing his forehead, he could feel the grittiness of sweat and soot still on him. "Christ. What a fucking night."

"Mm..." was echoed in agreement.

"I feel like a dirt ball."

"Mm..."

"I gotta shower. I gotta."

"Okay." Hunter turned over but didn't open his eyes.

"How did you end up in my bed, Hunt?" Blake gazed down at him.

"Hm? What bed?"

"Nothing. Sleep." Blake scuffed his way to the bathroom and flipped the toilet lid up to pee. "Hunter's in my bed." It was just a statement of fact. "What the hell is that all about?" After he urinated, Blake fell against the wall and pushed back the shower curtain, turning on the water. He almost dozed off waiting for it to get warm enough to enter. Forcing himself to

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move, Blake stripped off his briefs and stepped under the water. He went through the motions of cleaning up, but all he wanted to do was get back to sleep. His body was in agony.

Done. He shut off the water and parted the curtain. Hunter was leaning over the toilet, his eyes almost closed, peeing.

“You showering?” Blake moaned.

“Mm.”

“I’m going back to bed.”

Hunter nodded, barely opening his eyes.

“Here.” Blake shoved a towel at him. It dropped to the floor. Hunter stepped inside the shower, turning it on.

Dragging his feet, Blake fell on the bed and crushed the pillow under his face, groaning.

A few minutes later, he felt the bed shift. He didn’t even bother to look.

* * * *

Six hours later, the day had slipped away from them and dinnertime approached. Blake finally opened his eyes again. “Six. Six what?” he asked the clock. “P.M.? Holy fuck.” He rolled over and crashed into Hunter.

Gasping, Blake sat back and gaped at his best buddy’s naked body. “Agh! Hunt?” Blake wrapped the sheet around his hips.

“Yeah?” Hunter replied wearily.

“Did we intend on sleeping together?” While he watched with wide-open eyes, Hunter spun over to face him.

“I don’t remember.”

Unable to prevent it, Blake took in the sight. Hunter Rasmussen naked and in his bed. *Wow!*

Remembering his fall through the floor, Blake asked, “You feel okay? You know, after yesterday?”

Hunter ran his hand over his gorgeous body.

Blake felt his cock go rigid.

“Yeah. I think I am.” Hunter reclined on the pillow, his hair an unruly mess from sleeping on it wet, and his jaw coarse with his shadow. “I’m in Blake Hughes’ bed. Naked. How unreal is that?”

“Do...do you want to be?” Blake asked. “Or was this just because we were too wiped out to think?”

Hunter scooted closer, slowly.

As Blake held his breath in anticipation, Hunter caressed his hair. Without another word, Hunter leaned over and kissed him.

The contact of their lips was hotter than a blazing factory fire in June. Blake received that tongue in amazement. Though Hunter was powerful and strong, his touch was astonishingly tender.

The tingles it sent to Blake’s crotch were tantalizing. Moaning at the passion, Blake gripped Hunter’s scratchy jaw and devoured his mouth.

As if Hunter had been waiting for a signal that this was okay, he leapt over Blake’s body and pinned him against the bed. At the feel of that heavy weight, the heat, and Hunter’s erect cock grinding into his, Blake spun out of control. Spreading his legs, he wrapped them around Hunter’s body and clamped his arms around Hunter’s neck.

How long had Blake waited for this? How many nights had he dreamed it, fantasized it? Rushing his fingers through Hunter’s dark hair, he deepened the kiss until they were writhing on the bed in agony for each other. Hunter rolled to his back, bringing Blake on top of him. Blake opened his legs in a wider straddle, feeling Hunter’s muscular body grinding against him.

Hunter parted from their kiss with a breath, inhaling deeply to gain air. “You ever been with a guy, Blake?”

“Yeah...You?”

“Yeah.”

Blake connected to his mouth again, sealing his eyelids shut, sucking on Hunter’s tongue. After another long bout of kissing, Blake leaned up on his elbows to stare at him. Shifting his weight to his right elbow, Blake caressed Hunter’s coarse jaw with his left hand, staring into his eyes. Their crotches were still pressed together and he could feel Hunter’s cock throbbing against his own. “Hunt...I don’t know what to say.” Hunter’s blue eyes sparkled with his smile.

With a devilish laugh, Hunter nudged Blake so they lay on their sides, facing each other. Hunter reached between them, gripping their cocks in his large hand so they nestle together.

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Blake sighed in delight, relishing the touch of Hunter's hand on his length.

"You're my fantasy man, Blake."

"I am? Not Josh Elliot?" Blake teased.

"He's a pretty boy, but you, Blake Hughes, are all man."

As Hunter pumped their cocks, Blake shivered with the rush of pleasure. Forcing his eyes open again, he placed his hand on the nape of Hunter's neck and urged him back to his mouth.

It was as if they had been lovers all their lives. Though the passion was scorching, it was also familiar. Hunter and he had become best friends. This wasn't some pick up or one night stand from a gay club. This man meant everything to Blake. And whether or not they had ever touched sexually, he would always love Hunter.

* * * *

He was kissing Blake. Finally! Hunter allowed Blake to dominate in the tongue dueling, happy to receive his affections. Hunter knew he would soon take over dominating this male. And finding out Blake was experienced in gay sex was such a fucking turn-on to him that he was already oozing pre-cum all over both of them. Parting from the kiss, Hunter needed more from Blake. And he couldn't wait another minute.

Nudging Blake to his back, Hunter ran kisses down Blake's throat to his chest. As he smoothed his hand along Blake's solid torso, Hunter licked his way to Blake's nipple and teased it hard. After a playful nip, he ran his lips down Blake's abdomen, kissing the line of hair that bisected Blake's taut stomach. A deep moan made it to Hunter's ears. Smiling in pure pleasure, he maneuvered himself between Blake's thighs. Hunter nuzzled his face into Blake's balls, inhaling his clean masculine scent. It was reality this time, no more fantasy. He was about to devour Blake from head to toe, and mostly in between.

"Oh...Hunt...oh, baby..."

"I haven't even started." Hunter laughed wickedly.

"I can't believe Hunter Rasmussen is about to give me head. Am I dreaming?"

"Yeah. It's a product of your exhaustion. I'm a figment of

your imagination.” Hunter tilted Blake’s cock towards his mouth and licked the seeping tip.

“Some figment!” Blake chuckled. “More like all my erotic fantasies come true.”

“Are you kidding me? Me too! Growl! What a nice thing to say. Mr. Hughes, prepare for takeoff.” Hunter wriggled against the sheets and enveloped Blake’s cock all the way into his mouth.

A low, whimpering moan echoed in the room.

Hunter tried hard not to smile so he could suck properly. Leaning up enough to be able to draw Blake in from base to tip, Hunter closed his eyes and went into his own meltdown. He had known damn well this would be amazing, and he was not disappointed. Gripping the base with his right hand, Hunter massaged Blake’s heavy balls in his left, sucking deep and hard as he did. Blake’s hips elevated and his vocalizations increased to panting moans. Yes, Blake’s cock was perfect. Exactly as Hunter had imagined it would be. And he tasted divine. No amount of pretending could have prepared him for the intensity of this act.

Hunter found heaven. Three months ago on his first day in that station house in Santa Monica, he had laid eyes on this god. Three long, fucking months he had dreamed of touching Blake this way, of making love to him, kissing him, holding him in his arms, but Hunter never thought those dreams had any basis in reality.

Blake Hughes, his best friend, was squirming under him naked, about to come in his mouth. It was so intense Hunter didn’t know if he should cry or shout for joy, or both.

“Hunt! Hunt!”

Hunter sucked faster, shoved his finger against Blake’s ass, and prepared for the blast.

A long, agonizing groan preceded the taste of cum. Hunter gulped him down as Blake seemed to empty the contents of his balls down Hunter’s throat. And Hunter loved it. Massaging him, encouraging more, milking his shaft, Hunter didn’t want to stop.

Finally letting up, Hunter slowly sucked Blake’s cock to the tip and allowed it to slide out of his lips. Sitting back on his heels, Hunter took in that sight.

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Blake was panting, his chest heaving with his respirations, his eyes were still closed, and his mouth open to form his sensual pout. Every sinewy muscle showed through Blake's tanned skin. As he ogled this amazing man, Hunter stroked his own cock a few times. "Blake, you gorgeous fucker."

"Ha...me? Holy crap, Hunt..."

"Did I kill you, old man?" Hunter teased.

"I'm in love with your tongue."

When Blake's dark brown eyes opened, Hunter gave him his most adoring smile. Blake laughed, though it sounded more like panting for air as he continued to recover.

As Blake recuperated, Hunter smoothed his hands down Blake's shins, gently, slowly urging his legs up and off the bed. When he did, he got his first look at Blake's ass. He hissed a breath through his teeth. He needed to fuck him. To get his message to Blake without a word, Hunter began pressing Blake's legs back against Blake's chest.

It made Blake laugh harder. "Oh, that's subtle."

"I want in."

"Really? Gee, I couldn't have guessed that."

"You have rubbers and lube?" Hunter tickled his index finger over Blake's ring.

"I do." Blake grinned wickedly.

After a pause, Hunter laughed, "Where is it?"

"How badly do you want to know?" Blake teased.

Hunter wet his finger and pushed it inside Blake's ass. "Very badly."

Blake closed his eyes in pleasure. "In the nightstand."

"Now, that wasn't so hard was it?" Hunter leaned over Blake to reach for it.

"No, I have a feeling it's very hard, Hunt."

As he dug around the drawer blindly, Hunter growled, "I have got to get in you..." He scooted down on the bed and began licking at Blake's balls, sucking them into his mouth.

Blake groaned and arched his back.

Hunter forced Blake's legs wider and lapped at his rim. He was so excited he was about to spontaneously combust.

"Holy fuck, Hunt...augh..." Blake's body jerked as Hunter's tongue entered his ass. "I figured you'd be a top. And,"

Blake's smile was broad as well as ironic, "you want me to be your perpetual bottom?"

Coming up for a breath, wiping his face on the inside of Blake's thigh, Hunter replied, "In an ideal world, yeah, but I can share that role." Hunter tore open the condom and slid it on his erection. "I don't mind bottoming one bit. Especially for you. You kiddin' me?"

"Yeah huh? I have a feeling you'll be the man of this family. I can't compete with your brawn."

Hunter smoothed lubrication on his cock, then using his index finger to glide inside Blake's ass, loosening him up for the act. "You don't have to compete. When you want to fuck me, fuck me."

"I love it when you say things like that to me." Blake placed his hands behind his head, propping it up to watch.

Hunter shrugged. "What's fair is fair." He pressed Blake's legs back again, opening up access. "Christ, look at you. Jesus, Blake." Hunter was so primed he knew he'd come the minute he pushed in. Right before he did, he met Blake's dark eyes. *Oh, what the fuck.* Hunter whispered, "I love you, you do know that right?"

"Yes. I do." Blake's eyes glistened.

Placing his cock on target, Hunter pushed in deep and slow. It made him shiver Blake was so tight. Clenching his jaw and shutting his eyes, Hunter felt his body react so strongly to loving this man, he was about to explode. Moving in very slowly, allowing Blake to relax and get comfortable, Hunter knew fucking Blake would be unbelievable. He kept making sure his eyes were open just to witness this act. He was about to come inside Blake Hughes. How amazing was that?

"How you doin', buddy?" Hunter was ready to hammer and needed to know if Blake was.

"Okay. Been a while." Blake exhaled loudly, and Hunter could feel his body let go its tension.

"I'm going easy on you." Hunter edged in slightly deeper.

"I appreciate that, babe." Blake's chest rose and fell rapidly. "Keep going."

Staring down at the connection, Hunter was very close to completely penetrating his best friend. "Damn, almost there,

gorgeous.”

“Christ you’re big!”

“I’ll take that as a compliment.” Hunter tried not to laugh. He paused, letting Blake set the pace.

“Okay, a little more.”

Hunter met Blake’s ass cheeks with his pelvis. “Oh, man!” He was completely enveloped by Blake’s body. “Baby! That is so nice!”

Blake let out a breathy chuckle and took a few deeper breaths.

“Can I pump?”

“Yeah. Go slow at first.”

Hunter braced himself up on his arms, drawing his dick out gently, but pushing in quickly. It was too hard to resist.

Blake hissed out a sensuous breath of air.

“Good?” Hunter was ready to begin a good hearty fucking.

“Getting there.”

Feeling Blake beginning to participate in the thrusting, Hunter knew Blake had completely relaxed his body and was ready.

“I need to fuck you, Blake. Hard.” Hunter ground his jaw at the urge to go completely mad and screw his brains out.

“Go for it.”

It was what Hunter had been waiting to hear. “Yes! Thank you, babe!” He pulled out to his head and jammed it back inside.

* * * *

As Hunter commenced with some good hard anal sex, Blake connected to Hunter’s expression of euphoria. It made his cock rock hard once more. Feeling that gentle penetration change to fierce aggressive screwing, his body being filled by a man he adored so much it hurt, tears stung Blake’s eyes. “That’s it, babe...that’s it.”

Again and again Hunter’s balls were pressing against his body as Hunter began thrusting, deep and fast.

The sight of Hunter fucking him, and the sensation of that luscious rubbing massage against his prostate, Blake felt the urge to come again. Releasing one of his hands to hold his cock,

Blake caught Hunter's eyes blinking open, spying the action. It seemed to tantalize him. Knowing that, Blake jacked off, fisting himself in time with Hunter's humping hips. It was bliss.

So many months of going without, now finally ending the sexual drought with a man as amazing as Hunter, his lover, his co-worker, his best friend. Life couldn't get any better than this. At least that's what he thought, until he watched the expression of nirvana wash across his lover's face. Blake was in awe of the sight.

"Ah! Blake! Ah!"

Squeezing his body tightly around Hunter's cock, Blake felt Hunter's length go rock hard and throb like mad against his prostate. At Hunter's deep, sexual grunting, and the internal friction, Blake came, spraying cum onto his own chest.

Blake couldn't remember the last bout of hot sex he had. It had been too damn long ago. And sex with a man he loved as much as Hunter was bringing him to a level he had never experienced before. He had found paradise.

Recuperating as Hunter ground against him for those last, lingering pulses of pleasure, Blake opened his eyes and caught his breath, still milking his cock slowly as he did.

As he stared at Hunter, Hunter's eyes opened. His expression made it appear as if he were astonished by his own orgasm. "I don't want to pull out."

Blake laughed softly, loving the glow in Hunter's cheeks. "We can't stay like this forever."

"Why the hell not?" Hunter glanced down at the creamy white spatters on his skin.

Reaching out to touch Hunter's face, Blake smiled. "I love you so much. You're amazing."

Hunter sat back on his heels and stared down at the spent condom. "I'm in love with your ass."

"Nice!" Blake shook his head. "What a romantic."

Hunter took off the condom and dropped it over the side of the bed. "It's very romantic." He leaned over and began lapping the cum off of Blake's torso.

Raising his eyebrows in surprise, Blake craned his neck to watch the tongue bath, propping his head up with pillows. "I've known you three fucking months and we could have been doing

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this the whole time?”

“I know. Crazy, huh?” Hunter continued licking.

“I can’t believe a man as big and macho as you is gay. How lucky can I get?”

“Very fucking lucky, Blake.” Hunter finished the clean up job and smiled at him.

“Modest to a fault.” Blake squeezed him between his knees.

Hunter made his way back up Blake’s body to drop heavily on him when they were nose to nose. “I can’t believe how much I love you.”

Blake melted in the embrace of those sky blue eyes. He cupped Hunter’s sandpaper jaw and drew him to his mouth to kiss, tasting his own cum on Hunter’s tongue. They made out passionately for a few minutes, until Hunter snuggled around Blake and rested his chin on his shoulder.

They closed their eyes and dozed on and off for another hour.

* * * *

By eight in the evening, Hunter lazily cuddled Blake in his arms and hummed happily. “I know we should get out of bed, I just don’t want to.”

“Me neither. But we do have to eat eventually.” Blake nuzzled Hunter’s neck.

“All I want to do is be naked with you in bed. Make up for lost time.” Hunter smiled at him.

“I think we’ll be doing that from now on.” Blake pushed Hunter’s hair back from his forehead.

Staring at Blake for a long while, Hunter enjoyed his scruffy jaw and shaggy head of hair as it appeared they were certainly in bed all day. “You’re adorable.”

“Golly gee, Hunt. You know how to sweep a gal off her feet.”

Hunter pecked his lips playfully, but it turned into another long kissing session. He couldn’t get enough of those lips of his, even though Blake’s coarse jaw was scratching his skin.

“We need to make some dinner.” Blake pecked his lips a few times. “And get out of this bed eventually.”

“No. What if I refuse?” Hunter wrapped his legs around Blake’s trapping him.

“They’ll find two gay skeletons tangled in bed.”

“So what?”

“More later. Let’s at least try and be civilized.”

After another hug and peck on the lips, Hunter released his grip on his lover.

Finally finding the energy to get up and eat, Hunter relaxed at the kitchen table, sipping one of the leftover beers he had brought over on the last visit. Blake was busy cooking them a light dinner.

Staring at him, his own body sated in so many ways, Hunter wanted Blake with him full time. But that wasn’t an easy thing to broach with a man. It wasn’t like a straight relationship where the woman craved the security and the attachment. He and Blake had never discussed things like that. Why would they? Prior to that evening, they had never touched one another sexually.

Now that they had, and the love was so much more fulfilling than Hunter could have dreamed, he wanted more of Blake. He wanted to marry him.

“You sure I can’t help?” Hunter offered.

“No. You just relax.”

Grinning to himself, Hunter replied, “You’d make an excellent wife.”

Blake peered back over his shoulder at him. “Christ, Hunt, you’re already making me feel like the ‘little woman’.”

“Yeah?” Hunter sipped his microbrew. “You like it?”

“Shut up and drink your beer.”

Hunter rose up, standing behind Blake as he sliced up vegetables at the counter. Kissing Blake’s neck, rubbing his hand along Blake’s naked thigh to his shorts, Hunter purred, “You want to be my woman?”

After a short laugh, Blake replied, “Wasn’t I already?”

Hunter increased the stroking he was doing to Blake’s ass, pressing into his crack. Blake stiffened up and stopped chopping.

Snaking his arm around Blake’s waist, Hunter drew him back against his hard cock, licking Blake’s neck hungrily. “I want you to be mine.”

“Yours?” Blake chuckled, shivering with a chill.

“Uh huh. Mine.” Hunter sucked on Blake’s neck.

“If you give me a hickey, I’ll kill you.”

Hunter released his suction from Blake’s skin and dug his hand down the front of his shorts.

“I thought you were hungry.” Blake flinched when Hunter found his dick in his pants. “We haven’t eaten since the dinner I made at the station yesterday.”

“I know.” Hunter stroked Blake’s cock in the confines of his tight shorts. He was wearing those football shorts again. Hunter couldn’t get enough of him in those things.

Blake relaxed against his body, the paring knife hovering over the salad vegetables on the cutting board. “I thought you were hungry,” Blake echoed softly, as if he were losing his train of thought.

Hunter dragged Blake’s soft blue shorts down his hips, exposing his ass.

Blake dropped the knife and spun around, grabbing Hunter’s jaw in both hands and kissing him. Hunter revealed Blake’s cock, stroking its length as Blake sucked on his mouth and moaned.

Breaking the kiss, Hunter knelt down on the kitchen floor and drew Blake’s dick between his lips. Blake gripped the counter behind him and thrust his hips out, deeper inside Hunter’s throat.

Hunter released his own cock from his shorts and took a quick peek up at Blake who was lost in a swoon. He gripped the base of Blake’s cock firmly and began sucking quick and hard while fisting himself. When Blake dug his hands into Hunter’s hair and forced him to press against his body, Hunter heard him whimpering in pleasure as he felt Blake’s cum enter his mouth. Going wild at Blake’s orgasm, Hunter climaxed, covering Blake’s bare foot in his cum.

Hunter slowed down his sucking and fisting, and sat back, looking up. Blake was catching his breath. “Jesus, you’d think we didn’t just spend eight hours in bed fucking.”

Climbing Blake’s body to get back upright, Hunter wrapped around him and kissed him. “I want more. I want it all the time. Blake Hughes. Be mine.”

“Aren’t I already?” Blake gave him a weak laugh. “Christ,

I'm putty in your hands. Or should I say mouth? Not to mention covered in your spunk."

"I want you exclusively, Blake."

Blake met his eyes. There were no more giggles or smiles. Both of their expressions were dead serious.

"Are you sure?" Blake struggled to breathe normally. "Hunt, you're still so young."

"I want you. I don't want anyone else touching you." Hunter rubbed his fingers over Blake's coarse chin stubble.

Blake kissed him again.

Hunter embraced him, rocking him side to side as they connected.

When they parted, Blake rested his forehead on Hunter's shoulder. "I thought you had a thing for Josh Elliot?"

"No. You. Not Josh. You." Hunter tilted Blake's chin up so they met eyes.

"And those two cops—Jeff and Mickey. Christ, Hunt, they could be gay—"

"Blake!" Hunter felt his heart breaking. "If you don't want me, say so!"

At the harsh tone, Blake shut up.

"I get it." Hunter stepped back in defeat.

"No. Wait a minute." Blake brought him back in contact with his body. "Hunter, you're everything I want in a man, and more. But I have already had a few relationships with guys and I feel ready to settle down. You're only twenty-six—"

"Shut the fuck up. Don't tell me how I should feel."

Blake stopped babbling.

"I want you. Okay? I don't know how much clearer I can make it."

"Are. You. Sure?"

"Yes. I'm. Sure!" Hunter mimicked his halting sentence. "Christ, Blake. I've lusted after you for months. Now that I know you're fucking dynamite in the sack, I want you! Exclusive! *Capiche?*"

"*Capiche.*" Blake smiled, going for his lips again. Once they had kissed, Blake pulled back and looked down at himself. "Now. Put my dick back in my shorts, wipe up my sticky foot, and let me finish dinner before we both drop dead from

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starvation.”

Hunter tugged on the waistband of Blake’s shorts and tucked his soft cock in for him. He wet down a paper towel and cleaned up his mess, kissing Blake’s leg as he stood back up to wash his hands.

“Thank you. Now, go sit down and behave.”

Returning to his chair, Hunter took another swig of his beer and smiled happily. “So, no one touches your body but me. Right?”

“Right.” Blake winked at him, rinsed his hands at the sink and continued chopping more vegetables.

“Good.” Hunter reclined in his chair.

Chapter Eight

By the time they had finished dinner it was nearing nine. The day was lost but not forgotten.

Blake relaxed on his overstuffed sofa in the den, Hunter laying crossways, his head on Blake's lap, the television set on ESPN. As Hunter rubbed Blake's leg gently, Blake ran his fingers through Hunter's soft, thick, brown hair. Even though they had slept most of the day, they were both still recovering from the long twenty-four hours on July fourth. Neither felt motivated to do anything more than rest. And Blake was glad for it. He couldn't imagine pushing himself at the moment.

Glancing down Hunter's body at his naked torso and briefs, Blake smoothed his palm down Hunter's neck to reach his muscular back. In response, Hunter wriggled and hummed happily. It felt so right. So comfortable.

A week ago they'd been doing the same thing, Hunter slouched on the couch beside him, watching sports on cable, the silence never strained between them. Hunter was still keeping him company, but now they could touch. Stroking Hunter's silky skin, Blake felt his cock shiver under Hunter's cheek. Obviously Hunter felt it too, because he raised his head up to chew on it.

"Are we sex fiends?" Blake sighed softly.

"We went from sex starved to sex fiends. Which would you rather be?"

Blake slid his fingers into Hunter's shorts to his ass. "Fiends."

Hunter moaned in agreement, using his teeth to stimulate Blake's growing cock through the material of his shorts.

Blake rested his head back on the top of the couch. "I can't believe the day is gone."

"We still have all day tomorrow." Hunter grabbed the outer white lacing of Blake's football shorts in his teeth and pulled on

it, snarling like a dog.

It made Blake laugh. He squeezed one of Hunter's tight ass cheeks before he moved his touch to his crack, rubbing up and down its length. Hunter spread his legs instantly, placing one foot on the floor beside the couch. Leaning over him, Blake was able to touch his balls from behind.

Hunter gripped the material of Blake's shorts and peeled it back from his crotch roughly, returning to gnaw his cock without the fabric interfering.

Blake closed his eyes, the sound of the sport's announcer becoming a wordless drone in the background. As his cock grew harder, Blake located Hunter's rim and rubbed against it hungrily. It made Hunter hump the couch.

"I want in!" Blake teased, using the same pleading tone Hunter had with him. "I have got to get in you!"

Hunter started laughing. Rolling to his side, Hunter gazed up at Blake with a big smile on his lips. "Man, two tops...bummer."

"Tough shit." Blake winked.

"You want to do it in here?"

"Yeah. I'd like that." Blake shifted Hunter over so he could stand. "Don't go anywhere."

"Where am I going?" Hunter replied.

"I don't know. If you don't like bottoming, you may run away."

"I don't mind. Go." Hunter nudged him.

Blake jogged up the stairs to his bedroom to get what they needed. He was so happy, he couldn't stop the silly smile from forming on his face. What had they been so afraid of all these months? Look at how great they got along now. The sex? The sex was so fricken good, Blake felt honored Hunter didn't want anyone but him. Having Hunter's cock all to himself? It was the stuff of his dreams.

Yeah, I'll be your wife. Ask me to marry you, Hunt. Blake laughed at his silly thoughts. He knew he was content now, just the way it was. Hunter's body his to enjoy, his companionship at home, and his skills as a firefighter at work. Can you say perfection?

When he returned he found Hunter resting across the coffee

table, his ass at the ready. "Oh, yes!" Blake laughed in delight.

Hunter wiggled it enticingly. "Come and get it," he sang.

"Damn!" Blake ripped off his shorts and knelt down, the yearning in him piqued. "I can't wait to be in that perfect fucking ass of yours, Hunt." He tore open the condom and slid it on. "Fucking dreamed of screwing you for the last three months. Damn!"

"Yeah, yeah...I know."

"Christ, I can come just staring at you like that." Blake used a generous amount of lube and began massaging Hunter's ring to relax it. "You tight, mother-fucker. I am going to screw my brains out in you."

Hunter chuckled.

Blake was so excited he knew just getting into that delightful treat would make him come. On his knees behind Hunter, Blake held Hunter's hips and pushed the tip of his cock in, pausing to gain control. "Oh, man!" Blake exclaimed. "Baby! You are amazing." Slowly making his way in, Blake asked, "You okay, big fella?"

"Peachy keen, boss." Hunter wriggled backward, helping Blake with complete penetration.

"Oh, holy crap, that feels fantastic. Tell me when I'm good to go..."

"Almost, little more."

"Oh Christ, I can't hold on. Jesus, Hunt. I can't tell ya the last time I was in a hot hole, cause I can't fucking remember."

"Not with all your blood going to your cock, ya can't."

"Ha. Ha. You ready? Cause I'm about to make you pay for that comment."

"I'm ready, lover. Plow away."

Shivering in delight, Blake hissed, "Good, because I can't hold back. Hang on to your hat." Blake tightened his grip on Hunter's body and thrust in deep and fast. His skin lit on fire and his body rushed with chills. "Fuck! I don't want to come yet! Holy fucking crap, you're so tight." Blake closed his eyes and knew he was about to come. Getting in a few hard, slamming pumps before it hit, Blake shivered down to his soles and pressed up against Hunter as forcefully as he could. He felt his balls and cock throbbing with his racing heart.

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"Come for me, hot stuff," Hunter coaxed.

"Fuck! Fuck!" Blake couldn't stop if he wanted to. He deepened the penetration as far as he could and then held on as it rode over him. The intensity of the climax was making his body convulse and he was suddenly drenched in sweat. "Damn!"

"I'm in big trouble." Hunter chuckled. "You sounded like you really got off on that."

"You have no idea, holy fuck." Blake jammed his dick in one last time, pulling out slowly. Sitting back on his heels, getting a good eyeful of the sight in front of him, he sighed. "That can become addicting. Sorry."

"I know the feeling." Hunter peeked at him from over his shoulder. "I don't mind. Honest. Anytime, babe."

"Jesus. You mean, all the time." Blake wiped his face with his hands. "I'll be back. If I can see straight."

Hunter laughed at him as he waited for Blake to stand.

Managing to get to his feet, Blake used the downstairs bathroom to clean up. After washing his hands at the sink, he checked his reflection out in the mirror and brushed his fingers through his hair to tame it. Hunter stepped in behind him, using toilet tissue to clean off the remaining lube from his bottom. Blake enjoyed the sense of comfort they shared. It felt so nice to finally be comfortable to change in the same room. They used to face the wall modestly, but not any longer. As Blake observed, Hunter flipped up the toilet lid to pee.

"You want me to go?"

"No." Hunter grinned wickedly. "Watch me piss. It turns me on."

Blake leaned against the doorframe while he urinated. "You have such an outstanding body, Hunt."

"Thanks. So do you."

"I wasn't fishing for a compliment."

"I know." Hunter flushed the toilet and washed his hands. "Bedtime?"

"You say that with glee in your eyes as if we didn't just have a sex marathon since we woke up."

"I can get used to this." Hunter wrapped around him from behind so they could see themselves in the mirror over the sink. Blake hugged Hunter's arms to his body as Hunter rested his

chin on Blake's shoulder.

"I love you, Blake."

"I love you, too, Hunt." Blake felt Hunter inhale deeply and sigh as he exhaled.

"Live with me."

Blake tried to twist out of Hunter's arms to face him, but Hunter held him firm. Having to look in the mirror to see him, Blake asked, "Aren't you moving too fast?"

"Am I?"

"What about work? What about the change of address and everyone finding out?"

Hunter's expression darkened.

"What happened in San Diego?"

Instantly Hunter released his embrace and left the bathroom.

"Hunt!" Blake shouted, growing angry. Storming after him, Blake stated, "We just spent all day fucking and sucking each other but you can't talk to me? What the hell's that all about?"

Having returned to the den, Hunter dropped down on the couch like a sack of potatoes. Blake used the remote to shut off the set. Sitting down next to him, Blake took Hunter's hand in his and petted it lovingly.

Allowing Hunter the time he needed to gather his thoughts, Blake waited patiently, never moving his gaze from Hunter's eyes.

"I fucking came out in San Diego."

Blake figured as much.

"I got sick of the stupid lies, the come-ons from the women firefighters, the whole stupid deal." Hunter ran his free hand through his hair wearily. "Well, my life became a living hell, Blake."

Blake scooted closer so they were connected.

Hunter released his hold on Blake's hand so he could rub his face and eyes. Blake waited. Keeping his mouth shut.

"No one would partner up with me. No one," he enunciated slowly. "And when the IC forced someone to work with me, they wouldn't speak to me, or they'd sneer in disgust and flinch if I even brushed by them."

Blake was dying inside.

"No one would touch or wash my plates or silverware, like I

was HIV positive. Which I'm not," he added quickly. "And the fucking lieutenant and captain kept making our crew go over and over again the manual on harassment and diversity until even I was ready to puke. They resented the hell out of me for all the political correct bullshit we had to keep regurgitating." Hunter rubbed his face again. "They made me go to the damn department psychologist. I had the fucking chaplain visiting me weekly." Hunter looked back at Blake, his eyes were now red from the rubbing.

"I was working out in the gym and two guys I didn't really know came in. The minute they saw me, they began taunting me, until it came to blows."

Blake felt a lump form in his throat. *Oh God no. Do I want to hear this? This is the shit I dread happening to me here.*

"We beat the crap out of each other. All three of us were written up and suspended." Hunter wiped at his nose as his eyes teared up. "I was moved. It didn't help. Word had spread." Tears began to roll down Hunter's cheeks.

"Someone taped up a naked male centerfold to my locker. I had to sleep in the solo room reserved for women. All the men refused to be in the bunkroom with me."

As Hunter began to cry, Blake did as well. He could imagine it so clearly, he was in agony. His chest tightened and he felt his breath catch in his throat.

"The older guys shunned me like I had the plague and the young ones either baited me to suck their cocks or took pot shot punches at me when they knew no one was looking."

Blake put his arm around Hunter's shoulder, rocking him, the water streaming down both their faces.

"I started bringing my own food. One of the women told me they were spitting in mine before they served me. And whenever I was in a jam on a fire scene, no one bailed me out. I had to deal with every crisis solo. And the more the brass reacted in anger to my treatment, the worse it got."

It was a nightmare scenario for any gay man in the emergency services. No back up, constant harassment, and helplessness of the supervisors to do a damn thing. A complete disaster. It was just too easy to picture. And the fact that Hunter had been through it and was bearing all the burden on his own,

made Blake miserable. Blake grabbed Hunter and cradled him in his arms, crying over his shoulder. Hunter broke down in his arms as the painful memories sought to overwhelm him. Blake knew Hunter had held this in a very long time.

"Shh...okay." Blake kissed his hair, trying to calm both of them.

Once they had a little more control, Hunter sat back again, his face streaked with his tears. "Tom Young knew everything that happened to me in San Diego."

Nodding, wiping at his eyes, Blake replied, "I figured."

"He was one of them. One of the assholes that tortured the living hell out of me. When I realized we were in the same battalion again, I died. But I was petrified of complaining and beginning the cycle all over again."

Bobbing his head in understanding when words failed him, Blake was a wreck at the torment his lover had suffered.

"The lieutenant asked me what was going on yesterday." Hunter wiped his face with his arm. "Like hell I was going to tell him."

Blake grabbed Hunter's hand, kissing it.

"I told him it was just us joking together. That I didn't mind." Hunter laughed in a cough. "I'm scared shitless that fucking asshole is already spreading the gossip about me. That comment about Laguna Beach? Jesus, Blake, it was just the tip of the iceberg with Tom. I know he was responsible for most of the torture I went through."

"I don't think he has told anyone he thinks you're gay. I haven't heard one thing yet, Hunt." Blake wiped at his face again. "Shit. Let me get us some tissues." He hopped up and grabbed a box from the bathroom, setting it between them on the sofa.

Hunter dabbed at his eyes and nose with a Kleenex, looking drained. "I thought LA would be different. There's a big gay population here. And Josh. Josh Elliot is out. Yeah, it's the lifeguard division, but it's still LA County fire."

"No." Blake grabbed Hunter's thigh. "No. Not in the fire service. Don't come out here."

The disappointment in Hunter's eyes was so great, Blake almost wept more at the sight.

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“Babe, I’ve worked with LA for years and though it appears safe for us, it isn’t. My guess is that Josh is dealing with plenty of fallout from his decision and his co-workers will be a mixed bag.”

“But...” Hunter struggled to speak. “Everyone except Tom is so cool.”

“They love you, Hunt. But still...” Blake knew it wasn’t a risk worth taking. And he certainly was not going to dare.

“Blake...” Hunter’s eyes filled. “I want us to eventually cohabitate. I need you.”

Cupping his jaw, Blake kissed Hunter to reinforce his own feelings. When he parted, he met Hunter’s bloodshot eyes. “If we do, we’ll be risking the same treatment you withstood in San Diego.”

“No!” Hunter moaned.

“Yes!”

“No. Blake, no! Don’t let them decide for us. Please.” Hunter wrapped tightly around Blake and clung to him.

Blake held him close, knowing damn well homophobia was rampant in the fire service. The department had not evolved. The politically correct paperwork looked pretty from the outside, but anyone who exposed themselves as gay took a big chance. And Blake was not willing to do it. He’d been very happy in that station house for a long time. Respected, left alone to do his thing, well liked, did Blake need that to change? Did Hunter want to risk all the harassment reappearing again and making his life miserable?

The answer to that question was no. Neither of them needed the extra stress. Being on the front lines of the emergency services was enough as it was. Risking death every call, rushing into blazing fires, bio-hazards, electrical emergencies, wasn’t that enough pressure? Did they need the constant backstabbing, sneering accusations and public humiliation that went with being an out gay man?

“No.”

When Blake voiced his thoughts out loud, he received a look of complete devastation from his lover.

Shaking his head to reinforce his feelings, Blake added, “No, Hunter, we do not need that extra burden. Please. Let’s just

let it go for now. We have this. We have each other on our days off, now we can spend more quality time together. Please, be happy with that. I can't come out. Don't ask me to. I won't do it."

Hunter's expression was so painful to see, Blake turned aside from his stare. He didn't create the rules, he just had to live by them. And as far as he was concerned, the torment Hunter had endured down south was testament enough for them to keep their mouths and private lives shut to the rest of the world.

Another admonishing glance at Hunter to be sure he understood, Blake whispered once more, "No."

* * * *

After they washed up, they were back in Blake's bed once again. Hunter rested his head on Blake's chest as Blake caressed his hair affectionately. Listening to Blake's heart was comforting. Inhaling to fill his lungs with Blake's scent, Hunter closed his eyes. It had been another crazy twenty-four hours.

Hunter felt conflicted. On one hand he and Blake had finally consummated their love affair. Yet there were limits and restrictions placed on it. *We can't live together?* The pain of that truth struck deep. But he wouldn't wish the agony he had gone through in San Diego on anyone, least of all the man he loved.

But 'no' was the hardest word to hear. He didn't want to accept that this, what they had, separate lives but pretending to be one, was it. A final decision on the rest of their lives. It seemed so shallow and cruel.

Hunter was trying to cope with that two letter answer. 'No.' It was a harsh reality, but one he did understand.

"You still awake?"

"Yeah." Hunter shifted off Blake's chest lazily so they could connect gazes. Crushing a pillow under his head, Hunter snuggled against Blake's side, draping his leg over Blake's crotch.

"You can stay here every night."

Hunter narrowed his eyes in confusion, not responding.

"I would love it if you were here all the time."

"And keep my apartment?"

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"No good?" Blake reached down and held Hunter's leg in place over his body.

"It doesn't make sense. You know how much money I pay for that place?"

"Can you use your parents' address?"

"They live in San Diego."

Blake gazed at the ceiling, like he was struggling to think.

"Blake."

He tilted to look at Hunter again.

"Who has our home info?"

"Everyone. Are you kidding?"

"What if I get a P.O. box?"

"No. The department won't allow that. They want a street address."

Hunter flopped over to his back in frustration. "This sucks! Blake, we have to find a way to do this. I want you with me. And I don't want the fricken expense of paying for a place I'm not using. It's not possible."

"Okay, look...today is only the first day we've connected on a physical level. Let's try not jump ahead of ourselves and take it a day at a time."

Hunter pecked his cheek and snuggled back down on Blake's shoulder. "Stop being the sensible one."

"Someone has to or we'll be completely fucked up at work."

"I'm thinking you mean more to me than work."

"Hunter," Blake chided tiredly.

"Whatever." Hunter exhaled in frustration.

"Get some rest." Blake snaked his arm under Hunter's torso and hugged him tight.

Hunter closed his eyes and let go a deep sigh to relax. As long as Blake was in his life he could manage. Right? Wrong. He wanted to live with him, marry him, and announce to the world how proud he was to have a man like Blake Hughes as his lover.

What world do you live in, Hunter? he asked himself. *Some fantasy land where there are no homophobes? That land doesn't exist. The fuckers are everywhere.*

Trying not to get himself into a state of complete rage over the injustice of two men trying to be together because they loved each other, Hunter began to hate the world and in particular, the

fire department.

After a loud groan of annoyance, he closed his eyes and his exhaustion finally caught up to him.

Chapter Nine

Blake woke out of a bad dream. On more than one occasion he had nightmares about the job; burning alive, falling from great heights, and every horror scenario his warped imagination could concoct. Though he hated them, he was used to them. Clearing the image of melting human bodies from his mind, he gazed around his bedroom and finally found the clock. It was just after eight.

Yawning, stretching his back, Blake heard Hunter stirring next to him. As if just remembering he was there, Blake rolled to his side to smile at him. *Hello, beautiful*. He purred sensually at the sight of Hunter's big, brawny arms in a relaxed pose on his white sheets. *Oh, Hunter Rasmussen, you Greek fucking god you*.

Instantly turned on, Blake held the cover between his fingers and peeled it back from Hunter's fantastic body, right down to his thighs. At the sight of Hunter's morning erection, Blake began to squirm on the bed. He crept downward until he could get his mouth around him. The moment he sucked, Hunter woke.

"Wow!"

"Morning." Blake tickled his tongue around the tip of Hunter's cock.

Hunter fell to his back on the bed and spread his legs.

"You have to piss?" Blake asked as he crawled between Hunter's massive thighs.

"Not at the moment." Hunter propped his head up to watch.

"Good." Blake pressed his face into Hunter's balls, nuzzling them in delight. "Damn, you smell nice."

Hunter chuckled. "I can get used to this type of spoiling."

"So can I." Blake leaned up higher, enveloping Hunter's entire cock in his mouth. Holding it tight and still, Blake felt it

throb deliciously. Beginning a smooth rhythm with strong suction, he glanced up at Hunter. His eyes were half-lidded, his lips parted sensually.

Getting to his knees, Blake kept up the sucking as he explored Hunter's testicles and ass. Feeling Hunter's cock thicken and shudder, he groaned in pleasure. Hunter slowly bent his knees, giving Blake better access between his legs splaying out in a seductive straddle. Blake pressed his inner thighs apart even wider. His own excitement growing to insanity with Hunter's fantastic cock in his mouth and his passionate vocalizations, Blake wanted in again. *Yes. Let me fucking in.*

He gripped the base of Hunter's cock and sucked fast and hard. Hunter arched his back and thrust into his mouth, ejaculating with a masculine grunt of pleasure. He slowed down his movements, milking Hunter's cock gently. Blake sat back and wiped his mouth, smiling down at him.

"That was incredible." Hunter panted, trying to catch his breath.

With an evil grin on his lips, Blake reached for the nightstand.

A low, knowing chuckle came out of Hunter. "And you think you're the woman?"

Blake rolled a condom on, slathering himself with lube until he was well coated. "You're no woman. Believe me."

Smiling contentedly, Hunter relaxed his head onto the pillows and gripped his own knees, pulling them back for Blake.

Once Blake softened up Hunter's tight ring, smoothing his slick finger in and out gently, he entered paradise. When he was up to the hilt, Blake gazed down at their connection. "I really get off on being in you. I feel so close to you when I am."

"I feel the same doing it to you, Blake."

Closing his eyes, bracing himself on the bed, Blake began fucking his best friend. Shivers ran up his spine and made goose pimples rise on his arms. He wanted to spend all morning inside Hunter. It felt so damn right.

"Fuck me, Blake."

Hunter's sensual whisper woke Blake out of his daydream. He felt a flash of fire rush over his skin.

"Slide your big dick in me...that's it."

TWO IN, TWO OUT

“Christ, Hunt...” Blake was suddenly on the edge, grinding his jaw.

“Deeper...Blake, fuck me deep and hard...yeah, that’s it...faster...”

Blake spun into an intense climax, though he had visions of taking his time and having a nice slow screw. Pressing their bodies tightly together to feel the last few throbs of pleasure, Blake opened his eyes and found Hunter’s smirk. Then it occurred to him. “You devil.”

“Well, Christ, Blake. You camped out in there.”

Pulling out gently, Blake stared at him in awe. “You SOB. I wanted a nice long bout.”

“I know you did!” Hunter laughed.

“I will get even,” Blake warned, pointing his finger at him as he climbed off the bed.

Laughing heartily at him, Hunter followed. “Jesus, Blake. I’m the top! You get that?”

“Like fuck you are.” Blake was laughing so hard he could barely tug off the spent condom. Once he had dumped it into the trash in the bathroom, Hunter wrapped around him from behind. Blake could see them both in the mirror’s reflection over the sink. Hunter was smiling adoringly at him.

“You will get used to me fucking you.”

“Yeah, yeah...” Hunter licked his neck.

Blake twisted in his arms to seal their fronts together. “Were you usually top dog in your other relationships?”

“Yup.” Hunter teased Blake’s lips with the tip of his tongue.

“Exclusively?”

“No. I couldn’t do that. I’d have to find a real wimp if I wanted that. No thanks.”

Blake was afraid to tell Hunter he liked taking it up the ass. He enjoyed topping Hunter too much to give him knowledge like that.

“Let’s shower.” Hunter reached into the stall to turn the water on.

“I can make pancakes for breakfast,” Blake offered, “or waffles.”

“Yum! You are the best.” Hunter picked Blake off his feet.

“Hey! Jesus, Hunt.” Blake had never been subservient in his

relationships and was struggling with Hunter's strength and power. "Put me down, alpha dog!"

"Woof!" Hunter grinned wickedly at him.

"What on earth have I gotten myself into?" Blake shook his head.

"Trouble, Blake Hughes. Big time." Hunter set him back on his feet and entered the shower.

"No fucking kidding." Blake sighed, following him in, only to be fondled in numerous ways.

* * * *

It felt awesome to have a day to do as they liked. And what they liked was relaxing in between bouts of screwing. Hunter hadn't been this sexually satisfied in years.

Out on Blake's back patio, sucking down cold beer, Hunter checked his watch. "I do need to stop home some time."

"Okay." Blake shrugged agreeably.

"Uh. Am I sleeping here tonight?"

"You want to?"

Hunter gave him an incredulous look.

"Good." Blake grinned excitedly. "We'll head to your place so you can pick up some toiletries and clean clothing. Oh, that reminds me." Blake stood. "Give me your dirty uniform. Let me get them in the wash so they'll be clean for tomorrow."

"It's in your bedroom. I think I stuck it on the chair by your dresser."

"Okay. I'll be right back."

Hunter watched him go. Thinking of work in the morning, Hunter was torn with a mixture of thoughts. He did like his job and had always believed he was a career firefighter. There was something very enjoyable about helping people, even with the backlash of his miserable time in San Diego. And having Blake as his partner and lover? Did it get any better than that?

Blake returned after a short while. "You need another beer?"

"In a minute. I'm good for now."

Shutting the sliding door behind him, Blake sat back down at the wicker table.

TWO IN, TWO OUT

"I hope it's slow tomorrow," Hunter announced. "I'm still recovering from the fourth."

"I know. That day took it out of me as well. I don't remember a July fourth as bad as that one."

"We did not get a break." Hunter sat up higher in the chair. "I swear, Blake, I expected we'd at least get a couple of hours of sleep."

"Me too. We did last year. I remember it quieted down at around one-ish."

"Who were you partnered with before I came along?"

"It was mixed up a little. I worked with Stan quite a bit. Then he went off the twenty-four/forty-eight shift rota."

"He seems like a decent guy."

"He is."

"Does he know you're gay?"

Blake gave Hunter a frustrated glance.

"What?" Hunter asked.

"No one knows I'm gay. And I plan on keeping it that way."

"All right. Don't bite my head off." Hunter drank his beer in silence. Finally he said, "You know, Tom Young will assume you are if you and I work together."

"How can he assume that?" Blake set his empty pint glass on the table.

Hunter shrugged. "He will. I know the jerk. He just will."

"We should both have a little 'chat' with him then. Straighten him out."

"I tried that in San Diego. Forget it, Blake. He doesn't scare easy."

"Is he married?"

Hunter paused to think. "He doesn't wear a ring." Hearing Blake's ironic laugh, Hunter asked, "What?"

"Bet he's a closet queen."

"Hell no. I doubt that very much, Blake."

"Wanna bet? All the ones whose manhood is threatened usually are."

That set Hunter back. Out of all his tormentors, Tom had been the loudest and cruelest. "Christ, do you believe that?"

"I bet he's been fucking horny for your ass since he met you." Blake ran his fingers back through his hair, pushing it off

his face. "And he followed you here."

Hunter's mouth gaped open in awe. "No. Oh, fucking no way."

"I'll put money on it."

"Blake, that is just too impossible for me to believe. Tom Young is a right-wing homophobe. My guess is he's a religious zealot, not a closet queer."

Blake shrugged. "I'd love to test that theory."

"How?" Hunter felt a nervous twinge. "If you say something like that to him, he'll be on you for being gay and it'll be your turn to deal with what I dealt with down south."

Blake rose up. "I'm getting another beer. Want one?"

"Yes. Please." As Blake entered the kitchen, Hunter rubbed the stubble on his jaw and thought long and hard about Blake's evaluation of his arch nemesis. *Tom Young? Gay? No way.*

* * * *

By five, Hunter drove Blake over to his place in his truck. Parked in his underground spot, Hunter armed his rig and walked briskly with Blake to the lobby door stopping to check his mailbox. Once they were ascending the stairs, Hunter muttered, "I hate apartment living." Instantly regretting it, Hunter wondered if it sounded like he was begging for Blake to allow him to move in. He didn't intend on that and added, "But it's okay for now."

Blake didn't reply.

After thumbing through the bills, Hunter set them on the kitchen counter. He went to his bedroom to pack a small bag of clothing and toiletries while Blake wandered around the one-bedroom unit leisurely.

When Hunter emerged from his bedroom, he found Blake in front of the bookcase in the living room, perusing through titles.

"You read a lot of erotic gay fiction?" Blake asked.

"Yes." Hunter set his bag down by the door and opened the envelopes he had taken in from the mail.

"Huh."

"I watch gay films as well." Hunter inspected the bills, setting them into a pile separate from the envelopes.

TWO IN, TWO OUT

“Do you?”

“Yeah. Why the hell not?”

“Gay films, as in...”

“Some triple-X. But mostly just gay romance types.”

“They make gay romance movies?”

Hunter slapped the paperwork in his hand down on the counter. “Are you for real?”

“You keep that kind of shit here in the apartment?”

“You’re looking at my damn book collection now, Blake,” Hunter replied in exasperation.

“I know...but...”

Hunter walked to a cabinet his television set was propped on. He crouched down, grabbed a handful of DVDs and held them out to Blake.

After setting the novel back on the shelf, Blake took the films to inspect. While he was, Hunter returned to the kitchen, checking the contents of his refrigerator for spoiled food that needed dumping.

“Wow.”

Hunter looked up at him as he poured the sour milk down the sink. “Find a good one?”

“I’ve never seen gay porn.”

“What? Come on.” Hunter shook his head at the absurdity.

“I’m serious.”

“Why not?”

“I was too chicken to buy it.”

“You order it on line, you dork.”

“Yeah, but what if my parents or my sister noticed it when they stop by. I’d be out.”

After rinsing the sink, Hunter asked, “You’re not out to your family?”

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

Blake rolled his eyes at him.

“Christ, Blake. At least my family knows I’m gay.”

Setting the films back in the cabinet, Blake approached him. “How did they find out?”

“I just sat them down one evening and told them.”

“When?”

"My senior year of high school."

"No!"

"They're pretty cool about it. I'm glad they know."

"I seriously can't imagine telling my folks."

"How do you explain the fact that you're still single at thirty?"

"Like the way I explained it to Hailey. Too many divorces in the fire service, too busy, you know the usual."

"Do they think you date women?"

"Of course."

"I suppose me meeting them eventually is out of the question." He went back to sniffing suspect food.

"I can always say you're a friend."

"What if they figure out I sleep at your place?"

"How will they figure that out?"

"I don't know. What if one of them shows up early in the morning on your day off and we're both in bed?" Hunter tossed out some leftovers.

"They don't just pop over. They call first."

"My mom would love you." Hunter didn't realize how hurt he felt at the possibility that Blake would never tell anyone they were a couple. At work, yes, he understood. But hiding eternally from all the rest of his family and life? Never allowing anyone to know? Hunter wasn't so sure he could handle that. "Are you telling me," he began, "You never once had the impulse to just tell them and stop living a lie?"

"I fantasize about it. But my parents aren't the type to be cool. And my sister would be even worse."

"How do you know?"

Blake tilted his head at Hunter in reaction. "I know because they're my family. Look, Hunt, don't start pressuring me to go places out of my comfort zone."

"But look at you," Hunter expressed, "you're thirty, never read gay romances, watch gay videos, you hide in the closet like a—"

"Hunt! Can it!"

Hunter shut up, blinking in surprise. "I found Mr. Hughes's Achilles' heel. Son of a bitch."

Appearing completely irritated, Blake asked, "You done?"

TWO IN, TWO OUT

"Let me wrap up the garbage and take it out." Hunter flipped open the lid and tied it up. "Don't you get sick of the game, Blake?"

"Sick of it?" Blake shouted. "Look at what you went through in San Diego? Did you enjoy it?"

Hunter showed his teeth as he snarled. He didn't need that thrown in his face and thought it was over the top. "I'm not talking about work. I'm talking about getting love and support for what we're doing. My family would support us. How can you live on an island, Blake? It's too hard to handle."

"Now you know what's right for me and my family? I can't win with you." Blake threw up his hands in frustration.

"Wait here. I'll be right back." Hunter muttered profanity under his breath as he left to throw out the garbage. "I don't fricken believe this. This is the guy who's afraid of nothing on the job but terrified of what his parents will think?" Shaking his head as he descended the staircase, he said, "Ya don't know unless you try, Blake Hughes. They might surprise you."

* * * *

Blake heard Hunter's heavy footfalls trod down the hall. When silence fell in the apartment unit, he tried to recover from their spat. It was a sore issue with him. He'd had other lovers complain about the same topic. Going public, walking around holding hands, kissing where they could be seen. It was too risky and Blake wasn't interested in the fallout that came with being honest about being homosexual. No way. Coming out brought too many problems. He just didn't want the hassle.

Even the thought of his parents knowing brought chills to his skin. He wasn't ready to lose them, never have them speak to him again. He liked his family and didn't need to throw this at them, see the revulsion in their expressions and continue life feeling like a leper.

"No, Hunt, you can't make those decisions for me. No way."

Looking back at the bookcase, Blake removed one novel again, the same one he had eyed a minute ago. A gay erotic romance. It boggled his mind. He had no idea they existed.

Opening to page one, he read the first few lines. He was intrigued; he couldn't deny that. Even the cover was sensuous; two naked male torsos embracing. "Damn. What have I been missing?" He slid the book back into its place. Yes, he'd love to read it, but he sure as shit wasn't going to have incriminating stuff like that lying around his house.

His eyes were drawn back to the DVDs. They were even more captivating than the novels. Listening for Hunter's return, Blake knelt down and took another gander. The triple-X videos had a very obvious look to the cover designs. Naked, young—with the emphasis on *young*—men groping each other and tiny stills of cocks being sucked or inside bottoms. No mistaking the content of those. But there were other movies that were more subtle. Only by reading the back blurb could he see they were male love stories. A tingle of pleasure made its way to his crotch.

Hearing the door, in paranoia Blake shoved the movie back in its place and stood quickly.

As he stepped inside Hunter paused, looking at him. Very slowly, Hunter's smile emerged. "Will you just grab a couple? We'll watch them tonight over at your place."

"Uh...er..." Blake tried to come up with an excuse. *Oh, God no way. Have those DVDs in my house? What if I were killed on the job and my parents found them while cleaning out my place? I'd be humiliated!*

Hunter stalked him like a jaguar. When he wrapped around Blake, Hunter hissed in his ear, "Embrace your inner gay man." Licking Blake's earlobe, Hunter laughed at his own wit.

"I...uh...I was just curious to read the back covers. I don't really...uh..." Blake closed his eyes as Hunter slipped his hand down the front of his shorts.

"You're fucking hard, Blake. Pick a damn movie."

As Hunter tugged down Blake's gym shorts, Blake shivered to his toes. Fine! You can't deny you're gay with a man playing with your dick. He ground his jaw and asked meekly, "Do you have a favorite?"

Kneeling in front of Blake, Hunter began sucking him. "Mm hm."

Blake steadied himself, holding Hunter's shoulders as his knees grew weak. "Then...you pick one." His head fell back as

the sensations rose. "Damn, you make a convincing argument. You bastard."

Hunter sucked deep and hard, gripping Blake's ass tightly to plunge him in from behind. Blake heard him snicker as he sucked.

Images of naked men fucking each other from the triple-X boxes running through his head, Blake knew damn well he'd enjoy them. He'd envisioned enough gay sex in his lifetime to fill a video shop with porno. He'd just been too scared to go near them. Like they would instantly stain his skin and he would be labeled for life. How long had he lived with that paranoia? Too long. Was he insane?

Peering down as a Greek god sucked his dick, which was almost crimson it was so hard, Blake ground his jaw on the coming explosion in his loins. The sex, the craving, the contentment all cried out for him to let go and live the life he was intended to live. But fear and pride were very big obstacles to overcome in a world dominated by straight people, and homophobes.

"Shit." He couldn't hold back and didn't know if he wanted to. It seemed Hunter was eager for his cum. He was orally piston fucking him like a madman. Blake's balls were being mauled and his ass pucker was now impaled by a pushing index finger. "Afffuck..." he moaned as his knees gave out and his balls tightened in pleasure.

While he came, he tightened his hold on Hunter so as not to fall over.

Once he had devoured Blake, Hunter looked up, grinning like a demon. "Your turn."

Trying to recover, Blake caught his breath and found Hunter's hard cock poking out of his shorts. His heart was still racing in his chest, and he took a moment to force his breathing to go back to normal. Avoiding the knowing look in Hunter's eyes, and the literal, 'I told you so' gleam in them, Blake tucked his own dick back into his briefs and swiped at the sweat dripping from his forehead.

He got to his knees, took a good look at that big engorged dick of his, and nudged Hunter back on the carpet. The man was so sensual, Blake went for him with enthusiasm. His own cock

still tingling from the climax, Blake worked Hunter's to give him his. It was the least he could do for the great BJ he'd just had.

Blake closed his eyes and sank Hunter's cock so deeply it hit the back of his throat. Holding it there, feeling it throb, Hunter let out a deep breathy whimper at the penetration.

Cradling Hunter's balls, Blake pressed them upwards around the base of Hunter's cock and massaged them while they were still hot and soft. Kneeling higher, Blake sucked more quickly, wetting Hunter's dick with his saliva and using the slick wetness to coat his finger. Then he went probing.

"Fuck!"

Blake smiled even with a big thick dick in his mouth. It sounded like Hunter was enjoying it as much as he was. After savoring Hunter's balls, playing with them and tugging on them to his heart's content, Blake wrapped his fingers around the base of Hunter's cock, and still pushing inside his ass, Blake began sucking like he meant it, giving as good as he got.

Hunter gripped Blake's head and fucked his mouth, gasping and moaning, his legs beginning to shake at the tension.

Loving every fucking minute of it, Blake sucked harder, pushed inside Hunter deeper and felt for gold inside his back passage.

"Ah! Fuck! Fuck!"

It was music to his ears.

Coming hard inside Blake's mouth, Hunter arched his back and thrust his hips deeply into Blake's throat. Blake moaned at the taste of his cum and swallowed him down in bliss. Sucking until he was certain he'd gotten the last of his load, Blake allowed Hunter's cock to pop out of his mouth and caught his breath as he relaxed his jaw.

Sitting back, staring at Hunter's spent, glistening cock, Blake felt his own heart beating wildly as he too caught his breath.

Still sprawled out on the carpet, Hunter's hips rolled lazily from side to side as he recuperated. "Damn."

"Good?" Blake laughed at him.

"I can't move."

"Yes, it was good." Blake chuckled at his expression.

As if it took every ounce of strength he possessed, Hunter

reached into the cabinet beside him and removed two movies. "Fine, Mr. Hughes. Here." He tossed them at him. "My favorite triple-X." *Out in Africa* landed on Blake's lap. "And my favorite romance movie." Next he was handed, *Shelter*.

As Blake sat on his rump on the carpet he read the back covers curiously.

"You'll love them. Promise." Hunter tugged up his shorts and stood, reaching down for Blake.

Holding both DVDs in one hand, Blake took his grip and was assisted up to his feet. He felt nervous about having films like this in his home, but as long as Hunter kept them with his belongings and took them back with him, he decided it would be okay.

"Here." Blake handed them to him. "You keep them with your stuff, all right?"

Laughing sadly, Hunter took the DVDs and stuffed them into his suitcase. "It's bad, Blake, when you can't even be seen holding them."

"Why don't you shut up?" Blake tucked his t-shirt into his shorts. "I didn't argue about taking them to my home, did I? And I'll even watch the damn things if you don't make an issue of it."

Hunter didn't reply but Blake could see the smug smile on his lips. "You ready yet? Or still want to ogle my collection of gay erotica."

"Yup. I'm ready."

"Good. I'll make you read my favorite books next." He caught Blake's raised eyebrow and chuckled. "I will make a gay man out of you yet, Blake."

"We just exchanged blowjobs!" Blake threw up his hands in exasperation.

"You know what I'm talking about. Come on. Let's go."

Feeling nervous for some reason about being associated with those films, Blake looked back at the movie selection under Hunter's television as though it would leave a permanent mark on him, telling the world he was gay. And that was something Blake was not ready for.

* * * *

On the drive back to Blake's house, they stopped at the grocery store for more booze and food. After loading the back of Hunter's truck with the bags, Hunter headed to Blake's house. Parking in the driveway, he shut off the engine and hopped out, taking his suitcase to the door as Blake carried the grocery bags.

Waiting as Blake found his key, Hunter entered behind him and stopped off at Blake's bedroom as Blake made a beeline to the kitchen to unload the food.

Once he had set his suitcase on the floor and hung up his spare uniforms in Blake's closet, Hunter began wondering about paying for an apartment while living here. Knowing it was just the first few days of their relationship as lovers, he bit his lip on more conversations concerning the topic.

Blake was almost finished unloading the bags when he came in. Taking a peach out of the glass bowl on the table, Hunter washed it off and took a bite, the juice running down his jaw. "Mm, good one."

Blake spun around to look, as if he'd been preoccupied. "The peaches?"

"Yeah. Taste."

Blake waited as Hunter brought the fruit to him. After he took a bite, Hunter licked Blake's chin tasting the sweetness from it.

"They are good. They can be mealy sometimes."

"Not these. Another bite?"

Blake nodded, cupping Hunter's hand as he was fed. "Damn. Sweet as honey."

"I'll say," Hunter purred, lapping at Blake's chin.

When the phone rang, Hunter thought Blake would fly through the roof he jumped so hard. As if they had been caught in a criminal act, Blake shook his finger at Hunter in warning. "Don't talk."

Hunter glared at him but shut up and finished the peach.

"Hello?" Blake glanced back at Hunter, walking out of the room as he said, "Oh, hey, Dad."

Sucking on the pit, Hunter spit it out into the garbage can and washed his hands and face. Through the open doorway he could hear Blake's conversation.

"Yes, it was brutal. No. We didn't even get a chance to

sleep.”

Hunter took two beers out of the fridge and put them in the freezer. Not wanting to be obvious, he sat down on the living room sofa, closer to where Blake was, and picked up the newspaper that had sat unread on the coffee table.

“Nothing really is new. How’s Maya doing? Oh? I suppose I can go. When?”

Frowning, Hunter wished he could be included in Blake’s family gatherings. As far as he was concerned, Blake would be welcome to all his family events from now on.

“I’ll have to double check my schedule... Now?”

Hunter averted his gaze as Blake passed through the living room to the calendar hanging in the kitchen.

“Yes, I’m off. What time?”

Hunter ground his jaw.

“Okay, Dad. A suit and tie okay? Yes. No...I really don’t have any problem with it. I’m happy for her. Okay. I’ll call her. No...yes, I’m on tomorrow, then off, then on for two in a row...”

Tossing the newspaper back on the coffee table, Hunter stood, leaning against the doorframe in the kitchen, staring at Blake.

Blake glanced at him for a second, turning his back to him as if he couldn’t focus with Hunter in his sights.

“I think it’s great. No. Just me alone. I’m not seeing anyone steady.”

Hunter made a *humph* sound and Blake waved his hand at him frantically.

“Yes. I’ve marked it on my calendar, Dad. Okay. See you then. Bye.” He disconnected the phone and brought it back to the cradle in the living room, glaring at Hunter.

“What?” Hunter asked in annoyance.

“You know what.” Blake returned to fold up the paper grocery bags and stick them under the sink.

“So? What’s the occasion?”

“My sister Maya is graduating from graduate school so Dad’s taking us all out to celebrate.”

“Nice.” Hunter pouted at being excluded. “What’s her degree in?”

“Business administration.” Blake paused. “Don’t give me

that look.”

“I want to come with you.”

“You can’t!”

Hunter sidled up against him softly. “You’ll come to all my family’s events.”

“Do I have to?”

“Yes.”

“What if I’m with you and I see someone I know.”

“Blake, cut it out.”

“No, Hunter, you don’t get it.” Blake tried to get out of his grip.

Hunter held him firm. “You think I don’t get it? Blake, you’re not the first gay man to be deeply entrenched in the closet.”

Giving up battling Hunter’s powerful grip with a sigh, Blake went limp against him. “I’m sorry. I’ve just always lived this way.”

“There’s no freedom in it, Blake.”

“There’s no hassle, no insults, no threats, no disowning of me, no—”

“Shut up.”

“Shut up?” Blake gaped at him. “Don’t tell me to shut up just because my opinion differs from yours.”

Hunter kissed him, urging his tongue into Blake’s mouth.

Blake softened his tone. “We just have to agree to disagree.”

“Mm. I can still taste that peach.”

“Oh. I was going to put some beers on ice.”

“Already did.” Hunter licked Blake’s neck and jaw.

“Aw, babe, I’m sorry it has to be this way.” Blake closed his eyes and hugged him.

“I’ll wear you down.” Hunter rubbed their excited dicks together.

“I doubt it.”

“You’ll see.”

“Don’t push it.”

“We’ll go to the gay pride festival together.”

Blake laughed sarcastically. “Not in this lifetime.”

Hunter gaped at him. “You don’t go?”

Wrenching out of his arms, Blake glared at him. "Maybe this wasn't a good idea."

"What's not a good idea?" Hunter's heart broke. "You mean us?"

"I'm never going to be able to fulfill some out gay man expectation you have of me."

"No, Blake...don't talk like that." Hunter tried to close the gap between them.

Blake pointed his finger at him. "Every time you think of pushing me out of the closet, think about San Diego and what you endured. Okay?"

Hunter swiped Blake's finger out of the air and sucked it.

"Hunt!"

After a playful nip, Hunter took Blake's finger out of his mouth. "Party pooper. I'm not talking about work. I get that. I'm talking about everything outside of work. Of our family get togethers, our playtime. I mean, you won't even go to a gay bar with me, will you?"

"You are trouble!"

Smoothing his hands all over Blake's body, Hunter made him laugh. "You will. I will get you out of this cage you've made for yourself, Blake. You can still be in at work, and out and enjoy yourself outside the fire department."

"No. It's too risky."

"It's not risky, it's just living your damn life."

"I feel as if I'm battling an octopus!" Blake swatted Hunter's roving fingers.

"I can't get enough of your dick."

"I see that."

"You still love me?"

"What do you mean still?"

"Even after my gay porno collection, my need to be out, my desire to meet your family?" Hunter laced his fingers behind Blake's waist and rocked him gently pushing their crotches together.

"Yes, even after all that." Blake smiled.

"Mm... Good." He chewed on Blake's neck again.

"No hickies!" Blake panicked.

"Don't worry." Hunter continued to gnaw his skin.

G.A. HAUSER

“Please understand.”

“I do, Blake. More than you know.”

Chapter Ten

Blake set up the barbeque grill, spreading coals out in a neat pile, dousing it with lighter fluid. While the chicken marinated in Blake's homemade honey-teriyaki sauce, Hunter sat under the shade of the patio umbrella, sipping his beer. Blake had washed and ironed their uniforms, cut up a large salad with a rainbow of vegetables, feta cheese, olives, and his own recipe of vinaigrette dressing, while Hunter looked on in amazement.

Hunter was not domesticated. He couldn't cook to save himself and only recently had to attempt it since his name was included on the schedule at work. Though, his name appeared less and less as his culinary techniques were found lacking.

Blake Hughes was the complete package. Hunter was in awe of him in so many ways. Not only was Blake competently equipped to run a household like a ship, he was a smart fucker. Once the flames were shooting high in the grill and Blake backed away from it waiting for it die back, Hunter asked, "Why the hell are you a fireman?"

"Huh?" Blake tilted to look at him quickly before he brought his attention back to the flames.

"You're too good to be a fireman, Blake."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"You should be a doctor or a lawyer or something."

Blake laughed.

"I'm fucking serious." Hunter had consumed three beers in rapid succession. Maybe he had a tiny head buzz. But he was not drunk.

"A doctor?" Blake used a metal tong to poke at the square briquettes of charcoal.

"Yes. You're smart enough. And you're already a paramedic."

"You do realize the difference."

"I realize the difference in pay," Hunter responded.

"I'm too old to go back to school." Blake left the coals to heat and picked his beer up from the table, sipping it.

"No you're not."

"I can't go to school. I have to support myself." Blake stared at him. "What the hell brought all this on?"

"You're too good to be working on the same level as a dumb schmuck like me."

"Dumb schmuck?" Blake gave him a silly smile.

"Yes. You're way smarter than I am."

"I didn't peg you as having low self-esteem." Blake walked around the table so he could stand next to him.

Immediately Hunter reached out to pull Blake down on his lap.

"I don't. Not really. I just look at you and I can see so much potential in you."

"Thank you. But I like my job." Blake set his beer down so he could cuddle Hunter. "And if I wasn't doing what I'm doing, I never would have met you."

"True." Hunter shoved Blake's t-shirt up his chest and sucked his nipple.

Blake hummed happily and stroked Hunter's hair back from his forehead.

Hunter looked up at him. "I'm horny again."

"Well, you're either always hungry or always horny. At least you're consistent."

"Doesn't it get you hot knowing we can be screwing any time we want to?"

"Yes. Of course."

Hunter began taking Blake's shirt off his back. Blake helped him, draping it over the chair next to him. Since Hunter had removed his shirt earlier, their naked torsos overlapped sensually.

"I like to let it build." Blake kissed Hunter's hair as Hunter lost himself on his nipple again. "I was thinking, after dinner, you know, once we've digested a little...put on that video or something."

Hunter peeked up at him, smiling. "Which one?"

"I don't know." Blake looked over at the grill.

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“Which one.” Hunter nudged him, knowing damn well which one.

After a pause, as if he didn’t want to seem anxious, Blake mumbled, “What’s that Africa one like?”

Hunter buried his face into Blake’s chest to stop laughing.

“All right.” Blake admonished.

“It’s hot. Fucking hot.” Hunter rubbed the bulge between Blake’s legs.

“Does it have any plot?”

“Plot?” Hunter had a hard time controlling his laughing fit.

“Yes. Plot.”

“You did read the back of the DVD box, didn’t you?” Hunter molded the nice package in Blake’s shorts to feel where he’d grown hard in them.

“Not all of it. It just said something about playing and not working.”

“Blake, it’s sex. Guys screwing.”

“I know that. First you tell me I’m smart enough to be a doctor and now you think I’m an idiot. Make up your mind.”

When Blake tried to stand, Hunter held him back. “You’re pretty naïve when it comes to gay porn. But that doesn’t make you stupid.”

“Let me up to check the coals.”

“I can see them from here. They’re not ready.” Hunter slid his hand into Blake’s shorts.

“Don’t do that out here.” Blake stopped him. “It’s bad enough I’m sitting on your lap.”

“What the hell does it matter what we do here?”

“My neighbor can see over that fence if he comes out.” Blake pointed.

“Man, are you paranoid or what?” Hunter released him.

Standing, Blake walked over to the grill to check on it.

Hunter wondered if he could do this, this stupid game of being freaked out all the time.

As if Blake knew what he was thinking, he spun around and warned Hunter, “Two words: San Diego.”

“I never should have fucking told you about that.”

“It wouldn’t have made any difference. I still wouldn’t come out.”

"I wonder what the San Francisco Fire Department is like."

"You keep running away. You think that's the solution?"

"I thought coming to LA was the solution, but it's just as bad here as down south."

"Not in all fields. Just paramilitary."

"The fire service is paramilitary?"

"In a way. Yes." Blake passed him to go to the kitchen. "More beer?"

"All right." When Blake left the patio, Hunter heard the door on the house next to them close. He spotted an older man in a ball cap from over the wooden fence.

The man looked at him. "Good afternoon."

Hunter waved. "Hi."

"Nice night for a barbeque."

"It is."

"Me and the Mrs. are planning on one. You a friend of Blake's?"

"I work with him."

"A fireman?" The man grinned broadly. "I think the job you guys do is fantastic. Bet you had your hands full on the fourth."

"We did."

Blake stepped out, handing Hunter a beer and setting the bowl of marinated chicken out on the table.

"Hello, Blake!"

"Charlie. How are you and Gladys doing? Tolerating the heat?"

"We stay indoors in the air conditioning when it's too hot. I was just talking to your friend here."

"That's Hunter Rasmussen. Hunter, Charlie Filmore."

"Nice to meet you, son." Charlie waved again.

"You too, sir."

"You enjoy your dinner. I'll talk to you soon."

"Bye, Charlie." Blake waved back. The minute Charlie vanished, Blake gave Hunter a warning glare. "See."

Hunter drank his beer, not answering him. "Gotta piss. Be back." He set the bottle down and slid open the door to the kitchen. When he was inside, he yanked his shorts down, pressed his ass against the glass and banged on it to get Blake's attention. When Blake found his moon, he roared with laughter.

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Hunter smiled and continued to walk to the bathroom. "I'll pry you out of the goddamn closet, Blake. I will. At work is one thing, but this is time off. And we need to be free, lover."

* * * *

After they ate dinner, Hunter loaded the dishwasher and cleaned up since Blake had cooked. Blake finished putting away leftovers and wiped the counters down with a sponge. Once they had done enough to satisfy themselves, they headed to the den to relax.

Blake thumbed through the television guide of the newspaper.

"Uh uh..." Hunter shook his head. "I know what we're watching."

"Gulp." Blake shivered in exaggeration.

"I'm going to deflower you, Blake Hughes." Hunter left the room.

"You're fifteen years too late for that," Blake laughed.

When Hunter returned with the two movies he asked, "You lost your virginity at fifteen?"

"Yes." Blake puffed his chest out proudly.

"To a boy?"

"No. A girl." Blake took the movie Hunter was handing him.

"Another fifteen year old?"

"Nope. An older woman," Blake crooned.

"How old?" Hunter sat on the sofa.

"Nineteen. Oooh!" Blake opened the DVD slide and dropped the disk in.

"How the hell does a fifteen-year-old kid hook up with a nineteen-year-old woman?"

"I had a paper route. She was on my route."

"You were seduced on your paper route?"

"Yup." Blake sat next to him on the couch and handed him the remote. As he waited, Blake looked over at him. "What?"

"You mean she just..."

"Just..."

"Just fucked you?"

“Yes. I was collecting and she told me to come inside while she got her mom’s purse. When she came back she was naked.”

“You’re just making this up.”

Blake crossed his chest with his finger. “God’s honest truth.”

“And?”

“And?” Blake laughed at his fascination.

“When did you decide you liked men?”

“Later.” Blake reached for the remote when Hunter didn’t start the movie.

“Hang on a second.” Hunter blocked his hand. “You didn’t always like men?”

“Hunt, I was fifteen and an older woman seduced me. Give me a break. All I had done up to that point was jack off.”

“I’ve never been with a woman.”

Blake whipped his head around to gape at him. “What? Never?”

“No.”

“Why the hell not?”

“Did you just ask me why the hell not? Christ, Blake, maybe you’re not smart enough to be a doctor after all.”

“You were never curious to see what a woman was like?”

“No. I knew it wasn’t for me.”

“That’s unreal. Most of the guys I’ve been with have had both. And prefer men.”

“Nope not me.” Hunter pointed the remote at the TV but didn’t start the DVD. “I feel like we need to get through this before we watch gay porn.”

“Get through what?”

“Your shock of me never sleeping with a woman.”

“Shock? I wouldn’t call it shock. Hey, if you knew you didn’t like girls at an early age, more power to you. I had a lot of confusion in that area before I came to the conclusion.”

“And?”

Blake became exasperated and teased sarcastically, “And? I’m straight and you’re just my bi-curious fling. Will you shut up and start the movie?”

“That better have been a joke.”

Blake deflated and sunk into the couch. “It was!” Blake

threw up his hands. "I can't win. You don't even know when I'm kidding you."

"Come closer. You have to watch gay porn with your hand down your lover's shorts."

"Rasmussen rules?" Blake peered down as Hunter dug into his waistband.

"No. It says so on the box."

Blake waited as Hunter cupped his palm over his soft cock. "Turn the fucking video on."

Finally pointing the remote, Hunter started it.

Reclining on the cushions, Hunter's hot hand scratching his balls soothingly, Blake had no idea what to expect. After a minute, Blake whispered, "They are way too young."

"Not all of them."

"Come on. Are they legal?"

"Yes. It says they're all over eighteen on the DVD box."

"Eighteen?" Blake choked. "Jesus! I'm thirty. I can't watch eighteen year olds fuck."

"That guy there looks older."

"All of twenty. Come on. I feel like I'm watching kiddie porn."

"Shut up! Kiddie porn? Cut it out."

"Turn it the fuck off."

Hunter tugged his hand out of Blake's shorts and stopped the movie. "Blake, it's not kids. You're making me feel like the worst pervert."

"If I was twenty-one, I'd love it. But Hunt, I'm fucking thirty. And in reality, guys that young don't turn me on. I like men. M-E-N. They don't even have hair."

"They shave it. And they do have some hair."

"Fer cryin' out loud..."

"It's off. Okay?" Hunter ejected the movie and placed it in the box. "I thought it would be hot foreplay."

"No. Not for me."

"Try the other one."

"Maybe I'm not cut out for this kind of thing."

"Wait. Sit tight." Hunter set the second disk into the DVD player.

Blake cringed. He had visions of the FBI raiding his house

and carting him off to jail.

Hunter snuggled next to him starting the second movie.

Rubbing his face and coarse jaw, Blake was afraid to watch. "How old is this guy supposed to be?" He pointed to the screen.

"Jesus, Blake, he's at least my age."

"Shut the fuck up, he is not."

"You shut up. Give it five minutes."

"If you're attracted to young guys, what the hell do you see in me?"

Hunter pinned him back on the couch. "I love you, you stubborn asshole! Now will you act gay for five fucking minutes?"

"Act gay? Like sucking your cock and taking it up the ass wasn't gay?"

"Fine. Shut it off." Hunter threw the remote at him.

Blake caught it and sighed, giving the film another few moments to sweep him in. Setting the remote control down on the coffee table, Blake leaned his elbow on the arm of the couch, dropping his jaw into his palm as Hunter rested his head on his lap.

The plot began to take shape and Blake was interested.

In silence they watched. Blake peered down to see if Hunter was asleep. He wasn't; his eyes were on the TV screen.

Suddenly one hot mother-fucking sex scene played out. Blake felt his body shiver and grow hard under Hunter's cheek. Another peek down and he found Hunter's smirk.

As it continued and the actors on the film rolled around in bed, kissing and simulating sex, Blake salivated. *Oh, much better...yes.*

Hunter shifted on Blake's lap. While his eyes were glued to the tube, Hunter untucked Blake's cock from his shorts and enveloped it with his mouth. Staring at two men kissing on the screen, Blake shivered down to his toes. He had never watched another male couple make out and it was H-O-T.

"Fuck..." Blake closed his eyes as Hunter devoured him. Hunter led Blake's hand into his shorts. Blake dug under the fabric and located Hunter's erection. As his cock was sucked, Blake worked Hunter in his palm. Hearing the grunts of the actors over the musical interlude, Blake came in Hunter's mouth

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just as Hunter spurt semen into his hand.

Catching his breath, Blake opened his eyes to see the two men on the film smiling adoringly at each other. *Is this what gay guys look like together?*

He stared down at Hunter. Hunter still had Blake's cock in his mouth but wasn't sucking. His hand was covered in Hunter's cum. Closing his eyes, Blake lay his head back on the couch to savor the moment. It was unbelievable.

* * * *

By eleven, Blake locked up the house and shut off the lights. Once they had washed up, they cuddled naked in bed. Blake was sated, content, and weary. All in all it was an incredible two days off.

"Goodnight, Hunt."

"Night, Blake. Love you."

Blake kissed him. "Love you too."

Chapter Eleven

They drove in separately. Blake parked in the lot behind the station and waited as Hunter carried his spare uniforms and rucksack. Using his key, Blake opened the door for him and followed Hunter to their individual rooms to drop off their belongings.

They both silently began the routine of checking their equipment. In a room that had automatic lights that turned on and off with sensors, Blake removed his bunker gear, helmet and boots to set up by the engines in the bay. Hunter was right beside him, doing the same. After a check of the trucks and all the essential tools and medical supplies were accounted for, Blake returned to the lounge to meet up with the fire crew that was leaving the station.

Hailey and Dwight were just coming in and greeted him and Hunter politely. As Blake poured a cup of coffee for himself, he read the schedule for the day and once again penciled in his name to cook dinner since the job was available.

When everyone was settled at the rectangle table that was used for eating, relaxing, and their meetings, Blake placed his cup in front of him as the exiting crew caught them up.

He found Hunter dazed off, staring at him. Looking at the other members of their station to see if they noticed, Blake tried to send a message to Hunter to stop looking at him but Hunter was lost inside his head.

If Hunter wasn't on the other side of the table, Blake would have booted him discreetly, but even that wasn't possible.

You are determined to out me, Hunt, aren't you? That thought angered Blake immeasurably.

Hailey appeared to catch something out of thin air. Blake connected to her gaze before she glanced at Hunter. While the droning crewmember rambled on about the last night's medical

emergencies, Hailey nudged Hunter to get his attention.

Blake died as he witnessed something he could do nothing about.

Hunter woke up at her prodding elbow and looked at her. She smiled at Hunter and immediately looked back over at Blake. *Just shoot me!* Blake avoided her eyes like the plague and pretended he was interested in the woman who had a stroke and was transported...blah, blah, blah...

The icy cold feeling in Blake's stomach was making him nauseated. For five years he had managed to hold this job without any rumor or innuendo about his sexual preference. One weekend off with Hunter had changed all that. Why the hell was Hunter staring at him that way in front of everyone? Blake wanted to kill him.

The meeting adjourned and Lt. Smith said to Blake, "You and Hunter go workout."

"Yes, sir." Blake washed his coffee cup in the sink before he left the room. When he spun around, Hailey had a silly grin on her face aimed his way. Seeing Hunter had already left the room, Blake made a direct line for her and asked, "What's with the look?"

With her tongue planted in her cheek, she replied, "Nothin'."

"Hailey," he chided, "don't 'nothin' me. Tell me what's going on."

"Did you and Hunter spend the weekend together?"

The gleam in her eyes was unnerving him horribly. Saying no would catch him in a lie. Saying yes would confirm her suspicions. "I have to get my workout in." He walked away.

As he opened the door to his room to change, he looked back down the hall. Hailey was still grinning smugly at him. He gave her a frustrated glare back and closed the door. He didn't need this shit at work. It was a hard enough job without any unnecessary static going on. And the look from Hailey was so telling, Blake felt as if he and Hunter may as well have been holding hands.

Why did Hunter need to do this to him? Why?

* * * *

Hunter was standing in front of the mirrors, stretching his muscles when Blake entered. Hearing the door he checked the reflection and found Blake entering the room wearing a tank top and a pair of gym shorts. Blake didn't meet his gaze and appeared more preoccupied than usual.

"Hey." Hunter tried to get his attention. "What are you working out today?"

"Chest and triceps."

"You okay?"

"No. I'm not fucking okay."

Hunter hurried to him in alarm. "What's wrong?"

"Did you have to stare at me like that?"

Taken aback, Hunter paused to think. "When? Stare at you?"

"This morning during the meeting. Hunt, you were lost on me."

"Was I?" Hunter didn't recall. "If I was, it wasn't intentional."

"Hailey noticed it."

"And?"

"She fucking asked me if we spent the weekend together."

"We always spend our time off together. I think most of the guys know we're friends."

"Forget it." Blake waved him off and began to warm up.

"You're paranoid."

"I am not paranoid."

"Yes, you are."

"Shut the fuck up and let me workout."

Hunter stepped onto the treadmill and began running on it, avoiding looking at Blake as he did. *So? Is this how it will be? Constant accusations? I don't need this shit.*

The fun banter was gone. In complete silence they did their required hour of exercise.

Watching Blake load up the bar for bench presses, Hunter pouted. He liked to spot him, play as they did their routine. In the past it was filled with sexual innuendos and teasing. Now?

Well, Hunter imagined now that they had made love, it would be fantastic to workout together. Touch, giggle, tantalize

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while they were alone in a room getting sweaty together.

As his speed increased for his warm up on the treadmill, he felt completely let down. If sex made he and Blake enemies at work, was it worth it? That was a question Hunter was not prepared to answer.

* * * *

Lying back on the bench, staring at the bar over his chest, Blake wanted Hunter standing behind him to spot. He wanted to gaze up into his tiny gym shorts trying to spot his nuts. It's what they had done for the past three months. Kid about being attracted to each other, and pretend they were straight.

It was fun. Blake loved the connection between them. What happened?

A few days of sexual heaven and he'd found work hell. Didn't he know this was inevitable? Even straight relationships surrounding work were doomed to fail or come upon major obstacles. But having Hunter leer at him overtly at work? Big no-no in his book, and Hunter should know better.

Hoisting the bar off the mounts, straining at the load, Blake wished Hunter would get his telepathic signals and come over and give him a hand. But Hunter was in his own world, doing his own routine, and asking Hunter to help him now, seemed hypocritical after the chastising.

"I can't fucking win." Blake bit his lip on his frustration and tried to get through the hour without exploding in fury.

* * * *

A medical call came out over dispatch. Hunter jogged with Blake to the sally port and hopped into the passenger's seat beside him. "Back to the beach." Hunter tried to strike up a conversation after a morning of the silent treatment.

When Blake didn't reply, Hunter threw up his hands. "Are you breaking up with me?"

"Put your seatbelt on."

Hunter gaped at him in annoyance. "Whatever, Blake. What fucking ever."

Grinding his jaw in fury, Hunter barely waited for Blake to stop the rig when he hopped out. Jogging across the sand, Hunter was upset to see the injured victim was Tanner Cameron. Rushing to where Tanner sat on the sand with another lifeguard, not Josh Elliot, Hunter could see a bruise across Tanner's handsome face. "Jesus, Tanner!"

Gesturing to the water, Tanner said, "A kayaker nailed me with his paddle when I tried to right his craft."

"Let's go. You need x-rays." Hunter helped him up.

"Can you get my shit out of the hut?" Tanner asked. "I have a feeling I'm done for the day. The red backpack."

"Sure." Hunter glared at Blake. "You think you can manage to get him to the rig on your own?"

Blake snarled in reply and held onto Tanner's waist as he walked him off the beach.

Tanner shouted back to the second lifeguard, "Nat, tell Josh what happened, will ya?"

"Sure, Tanner."

Hunter paused at hearing Josh's name. Shaking his head sadly, he jogged to the tower and found a red pack inside. Slinging it over his shoulder, Hunter looked around for Josh so he could tell him what happened to Tanner but didn't see him. Heading back to the medic truck, Hunter was so angry at Blake he couldn't focus on the job. Their love affair was over before it had begun because of fear. As far as he was concerned that was the worst reason of all.

He found Tanner resting in the back seat of the truck. Hunter opened the door and handed him his backpack.

"Thanks."

"My pleasure." Hunter climbed beside Blake reluctantly, wanting to steer clear of him while Blake was in a bad mood.

Blake said, "Tanner, we'll hang out with you to take you home after the x-rays."

"You don't have to do that."

"Yeah, we do."

"Thanks, Blake. I owe you."

Hunter listened to the pleasant exchange and grew upset knowing Blake's anger was obviously only aimed his way.

They arrived at the ER and Hunter jumped out to help

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Tanner down from the truck. When he did, he held Tanner back and took a better look at his cheek. Running his thumb over the bones underneath, Hunter whispered, "How bad does it hurt?"

"Bad."

"Come on. Let's get you inside." Hunter held Tanner tight and walked with him inside, never once looking over his shoulder to see his partner's expression. Suddenly he couldn't care less.

After Hunter got Tanner the attention he needed for his injury, he noticed Blake loitering around the entrance. Hunter walked over to him. "I'm glad you offered to drive him home."

Blake met Hunter's eyes but didn't reply.

"Is this it then? I get the silent treatment from now on because Hailey said something to you about us being friends?"

"I'm not giving you the silent treatment."

"Like fuck you're not. Look, forget it. *Okay?* It was a mistake. You want me to transfer out of the station?"

"No. Don't play the martyr with me. *Okay?*"

"Fuck you."

Blake walked away from him.

In a half hour, Tanner showed up with a prescription bottle in his hand. "Vicodin, gentlemen. I'll be just fine in a few minutes."

"Come on, buddy. Let's get you home." Blake rubbed Tanner's shoulder.

Hunter waited for Tanner to get into the back seat, closing the door for him. When Hunter was in, he twisted around to him. "Did you fracture your cheekbone?"

"No. Just bruised."

"Lucky." Hunter smiled at him. "You're a tough SOB, aren't ya?"

Tanner laughed softly.

"What's your address, Tanner?" Blake asked as he pulled out of the hospital lot.

As Tanner relayed the information to him, Hunter wanted to touch Blake. He wanted to rest his hand on Blake's thigh to somehow let him know he still loved him and they shouldn't be angry at each other. He just didn't know how.

When Blake pulled up in front of Tanner's house, Hunter

jumped out again to help him. Holding Tanner's arm, Hunter walked him up to his front door. "You going to be okay?"

"Yeah. I'll just sleep."

"Ice it."

"That too."

"What about your car? You need help getting it here?"

"No. Don't worry about it. It's fine in the lot at headquarters. You guys just get back out there."

"Okay, Tanner. Take care of yourself." Hunter waited for him to go inside before he walked back to the truck. Sitting down in the passenger's seat, Hunter stopped Blake from putting the transmission in drive.

When Hunter held back his hand, Blake met his gaze.

"Babe..." Hunter felt his eyes water.

Blake exhaled a deep sigh, and a smile began to edge out his frown.

"I love you. I'm sorry if I did anything earlier..."

"Hunt." Blake touched Hunter's lips lightly. "I'm sorry too."

Hunter smiled adoringly at him. "Don't give up on me. I love you too much for you to give up on me."

"You won't out me against my will, will you?"

"No. I know how afraid you are." Hunter held his hand.

Blake took a moment to assess Hunter's assurances. "Come on. We've milked this call long enough. Let's head back."

Hunter squeezed his hand before he released it, sitting back in the seat with a big grin on his face.

"Hunt?"

"Yeah, Blake?"

"Put your damn seatbelt on."

Grabbing it and clipping it shut, Hunter rested his hand on Blake's thigh while he drove back to the station, his heart once again feeling warm and alive.

On their drive back, Blake asked the lieutenant, via his mobile phone, if he and Hunter could do the grocery run while they were out. Since it was slow, they got the okay.

Brushing shoulders as they walked to the main entrance of the food store, Hunter asked, "What's cookin', good lookin'?"

"I was thinking homemade pizzas."

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"No! Homemade? Like the crust and all?"

"Like the crust and all!" Blake laughed at Hunter as he took a shopping cart from the row of stacked trolleys.

"You are amazing."

"Calm down. I'm not that amazing." Blake paused at the produce section, stocking up on fresh fruit as well as peppers, onions, and tomatoes.

"Says you." Hunter winked at him.

"Stop. There you go, misbehaving again," Blake chided. "In public, Hunt. We're in public."

Trying to curb his enthusiasm, Hunter stuffed his hands in pockets only to rub against his erection when he did. "I will have my way with you the minute we get alone."

Blake laughed softly, shaking his head.

* * * *

After Blake put the bowl of rising dough in the warm oven, he washed his hands and removed his flour-spattered apron.

"What a boring day." Hailey yawned. She and Dwight were slouched on the sofa.

"Be quiet. That always jinxes us." Dwight flipped channels on the television in vain.

Hunter was seated at the kitchen table, having watched Blake in his preparations for homemade pizza dough. "I'd love a damn beer with that pie tonight."

"Tomorrow," Blake whispered, winking at him. "Day off."

"Deal." Hunter smiled adoringly.

"So," Hailey shouted over the back of the couch to them. "What did you guys end up doing over your two days off?"

"Sleeping!" Blake answered.

"Me, too," Dwight replied. "I was so damn tired after the fourth. The wife kept nagging me to get up and do shit, but I was dead."

"How about you, Hunter?" Hailey asked.

"Slept most of the weekend as well." Hunter ran his hand through his hair. "I think the day took it out of all of us."

"It's so weird hating holidays when most normal people like them." Hailey glanced back at the television as Dwight still made

the rounds of channels. "Just put the news on," Hailey moaned.

"You're exactly like the damn wife!" Dwight laughed at her.

"All that flipping is making me dizzy."

"Don't watch."

"Children," Blake admonished, "behave."

Hailey leaned her arms over the back of the couch, resting her chin on her forearm. "You want kids, Blake?"

Knowing Hunter was hanging on his answer, Blake sat across from him at the kitchen table. "I don't think so."

Laughing, Hailey echoed, "You don't *think* so?"

"Okay," Blake clarified, "how about no."

"Why not?"

He shrugged. "I just don't have the desire."

"You'll struggle to find a woman who doesn't want one," she warned. "Unless you find one with older kids or something."

Blake didn't answer, pulling the daily newspaper closer to peruse.

"Blake?" she persisted.

"Yes?"

"Do you have a steady girlfriend?"

Blake found not only Hunter staring at him, but Dwight now as well. "Uh...why are you asking me this crap again, Hailey? Didn't we do this a few days ago?"

She moaned persistently.

He hated lying as much as Hunter did, but that was life. "I date around a lot. I don't have one special lady. Okay?"

"Oh? Play the field? Lots of clubs and one-night stands?" she giggled.

"Yes. That's me. The playboy of Santa Monica."

Hunter covered his laugh. Blake was glad Hunter's back was facing the other two.

"Seriously, Blake?" Dwight inquired, "You screw around with a lot of women?"

Avoiding Hunter's eyes, Blake affirmed, "Yes. A lot of women. Tons."

"Man, you better be careful. You may end up with some nasty bug." Dwight made a face.

"I take precautions, Dwight. Don't worry."

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“Universal precautions?” Dwight teased, laughing.

Knowing in medical talk that meant gloves, facemask, and booties, Blake smiled. “Yes. Exactly. My nickname is Zorro.”

Hailey replied, “I don’t doubt it, Blake. You’re really good looking.”

“Thanks, Hailey.” Blake met Hunter’s devious eyes again.

“Do you just not call them after you screw them?”

“Hailey,” Blake sighed, “can we change the topic?”

“Okay. Hunter, do you screw women like that as well?” She laughed at her own wit.

“Yeah. Tons.” He stared at Blake as he replied, grinning at him.

“Am I the only one not getting any?” she gasped.

“Looks that way.” Dwight went back to his channel surfing.

“What bars do you guys hang out at?”

“Hailey...” Blake scolded.

“I’m just killing time.”

The tones echoed over the loud speakers as the dispatcher broadcast a traffic accident.

“There,” Blake advised, “now you have something to do.”

“Bye!” Hailey waved as she and Dwight jogged to the sally port.

After they left, Hunter whispered, “Sucks, doesn’t it?”

Blake shrugged, flipping the newspaper pages in search of the funnies.

“You’d rather they think you’re a whore than in a committed relationship?”

“Yes, shut up. You want me to read *Luann* out loud?”

Hunter rested his head on his arms on the top of the table. “Yeah, go on.”

After giving Hunter a wink, Blake read the comic strip to him.

* * * *

By five, Blake had two handspun pizzas in the oven. Hunter’s mouth was watering thinking about it. The day, in contrast to the fourth, was long and dull. Other than a few minor accidents and two medical emergencies, they were trying to

amuse themselves and pass the time.

"Hunt."

"Yes, dear?" Hunter teased.

"Set the table for me, will you?"

Hunter rose up and removed a stack of plates from the cabinet. "Is the lieutenant joining us?"

"Good question. Is he even still here?" Blake placed a big bowl of salad on the table.

"I'll check his office." Hunter put four plates out and headed down the hall. Listening first, he rapped his knuckle on the door. "Lieutenant?"

"Yes?"

"You joining us for pizza?"

"Come in, Hunter."

Hunter opened the door and peered at Lt. Smith who sat among a quagmire of paperwork. "Blake made a couple of homemade pizza pies."

"Homemade?"

"Yes. Even the sauce and crust," Hunter boasted.

"Remind me to never let him leave our station," Lt. Smith said as he stood.

"You got it." Hunter wanted the same thing.

As he and the lieutenant walked to the lounge, he asked, "How were your days off, Hunter?"

"I slept."

"Yes. So did I. Well, at least the fourth is behind us now."

Hunter felt his friendly pat on the back and found Hailey and Dwight already at the table scooping salad on to their plates.

"Lieutenant," Blake greeted him. "Hiding in your office?" He found him a dish and some silverware as the lieutenant joined them.

"Yes. If you ever get promoted to lieutenant, you'll have the pleasure of paperwork."

"I think I'll pass." Blake put the first pie on top of the hotplates on the table, using a pizza cutter to carve it into perfect triangles.

"Nicely done, Blake." The lieutenant appeared impressed.

"Thank you, sir. Help yourself."

"Will you marry me?" Hailey teased as she used a pie server

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to take one of the steaming slices to her plate.

“Get in line.” Hunter laughed.

Blake’s eyes widened in surprise at his comment. When they all laughed heartily, Hunter could see the relief on Blake’s face.

“Sit down, Blake,” Lt. Smith encouraged.

“Let me just get the second one out of the oven first.”

As he tended the task, Hunter took his first nibble of the food. “Mm! Blake! I love you!”

“Easy, Hunt,” Blake chided him.

The other three roared with hilarity, and Hunter knew he could get away with it under the circumstances. When Blake returned, finally filling his plate, he wagged his finger at Hunter. “You behave.”

“They say a way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, Blake,” Hunter explained. “You cook too good.”

“Even my wife can’t cook like this,” Lt. Smith said, taking another bite.

“Thank you, Lieutenant.” Blake smiled modestly.

Hunter finally caught Blake’s eyes, giving him an adoring smile and, to his delight, he actually got one back.

Yeah, so what, I love you, so sue me? And we used to tease each other like this even before we had sex, remember, Blake? Hunter studied him closely. Maybe now that they had sex, it just seemed too real when they said those silly lines to each other. But Hunter knew he and Blake did this for three months in the station house, and no one thought twice about it.

As he glanced around the table at everyone devouring the delicious meal, no one batted an eyelash. Hunter wished Blake would just lighten up. They had played this way for ages. No need to worry.

He just wished he could communicate those words to Blake and he would believe them.

* * * *

Dwight did the dishes as Hailey mopped the floors. The lieutenant vanished and Blake checked the time, knowing Dwight and Hailey would go home at ten that night. Only he and

Hunter were assigned for the twenty-four hour shift that day.

It would be the first time he and Hunter were sleeping on their own in the station since they had begun a physical relationship. Blake had no doubt it would be business as usual and they would retire at ten to their separate rooms. At least those were his expectations.

The tones of another dispatched call sounded throughout the station. Hunter and Blake paused to listen to the context. "We got it," Hunter told Hailey and Dwight.

"Let's go, Hunt." Blake jogged out to the engine and hopped in.

As Blake buckled up, Hunter said, "We haven't had a call at the senior center for ages."

"I know. I dread them." Blake paused. "Hunt!"

"Oh." Hunter fastened his seatbelt.

"Do you wear one in your truck?" Blake hit the siren as they left the bay.

"Yes. Of course. I just forget."

"One of these days you're going to fly through the windshield and I'm going to be furious with you."

"You do love me!" Hunter teased, squeezing Blake's thigh. "Can't wait for later."

Blake glanced at him quickly as he ran code to the old age home. "Uh. Why?"

"Heh heh..."

"No way. Wait for tomorrow on our day off."

"Blake, we'll be alone from ten to seven."

"I said no."

Hunter took back his hand from Blake's leg in a huff. "Here we go again."

"Respect my feelings, Hunter. Please." Blake checked the cross street before he barreled through a red light, hitting the loud air horn as he did. He didn't need this while they were running lights and sirens to a medical emergency. "Hunt. Later. Okay? I have to concentrate. Not at work."

His arms crossed over his chest, Hunter gazed out of the window in silence.

Blake parked in front of the main entrance and they grabbed their medical kits and jogged in. A nurse met them at the front

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desk. "This way." She waved to them.

They walked briskly down the hall. Blake looked into open doors as they passed, seeing gray haired seniors in every corner of the home.

The nurse showed them to a room. Blake hurried in. An old woman was laboring for breath, hunched over in her bed. Dropping his kit, Blake gloved up quickly. "All right, sweetie, we're here." He shouted to the nurse. "O2. Now."

She nodded and dashed out.

While Hunter wrapped a blood pressure cuff around the woman's arm, placing the stethoscope to his ears, Blake held the woman's free hand. "Did it just come on suddenly?"

"Yes." She wheezed.

"You have any medical conditions?" Blake took her pulse as he asked her his questions.

"Yes. I've got emphysema and high blood pressure."

"Have you been taking your medicine?"

Nodding, she pointed to a collection of pills on her nightstand.

The nurse wheeled in the tank as Hunter hooked up a nasal cannula. Blake waved Hunter over and Hunter gently placed the clear plastic tubes around the woman's head and into each nostril. "You okay?"

"Yes. Thank you."

Blake used his radio mike on his shoulder. "I'd like an ambulance to our location for transport."

"Copy," the dispatcher acknowledged.

"I want her to go to the ER as a precaution," Blake told the nurse.

"Yes. We thought it would be best as well."

Blake stroked the old woman's hair back from her forehead. "Are you breathing easier now?"

"A little."

"That's my girl." Blake held her hand. "Take deep breaths slowly."

Hunter took her temperature from a hand gauge to her ear. He kept recording the numbers onto his rubber glove with a pen. "Pulse, Blake?"

"One-ten." Blake looked back at the old woman. "Anyone

you would like us to call?"

The nurse spoke up, "We already have her daughter on her way."

"Good." Blake sat next to the old woman on the bed. "You'll be fine. You just need to see the doctor as a precaution." He paused, asking, "I'm sorry. What was your name?"

"Helen."

"Helen. That's a lovely name." Blake watched her breathing rate for a minute. Then he asked Hunter, "Did you check her lungs?"

"I can now."

Blake stood, giving Hunter the space to use his stethoscope on Helen's chest.

"Inhale for me, Helen," Hunter whispered, checking her lungs' four quadrants, front and back. When he stood straight, he told Blake, "There's fluid."

"I figured there would be by her rasping." Blake sat back down again and held her hand. "Okay, Helen. I think the oxygen is helping. You're breathing easier."

"Yes, thank you."

"Mom?"

Blake and Hunter spun around to a woman at the entrance. She hurried in and Blake rose up to give her space.

"How is she?" the young woman asked.

"Breathing better with the oxygen," Blake replied, "But with her condition, she's bound to have good and bad days. I just want her checked out to make sure it's not pneumonia."

"Thank you so much," she whispered to Blake.

"No problem."

An ambulance medic showed up at the room with a cot. "Someone need transporting?"

Hunter met him at the door. "Keep the O2 flowing for her. I have her at six at the moment."

"Okay." The medic entered the room. "Hello, dear."

"It's Helen," Blake spoke softly to him.

"Thanks. Hello, Helen. Are you ready for a trip with us? Or do you need to stay with these handsome firemen a little longer?"

A low laugh circled the room.

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Helen smiled at the joke. "I'd love one of them to ask my daughter out."

"Mother!" The young woman blushed to the ears. "She's feeling just fine, gentlemen," the woman added.

Blake backed up as the ambulance worker and his partner brought the gurney into the room.

"Okay, Helen. We're going to lay you down on this."

"Not flat. I want her elevated. She's got some fluid in her lungs," Blake instructed.

"You got it, cookie," the ambulance driver smiled at him.

Blake nodded for Hunter to go out to the hall. Hunter urged the nurse out with him.

"I need her full name and date of birth," Hunter said, transferring the info from his rubber glove to a form.

As Hunter was caught up on all the information they needed for a report, Blake watched the two men in white loading Helen onto the cot gently. They hooked her cannula to the tank under the gurney and adjusted the airflow.

When the men began wheeling her out, with her daughter by her side, Blake stood back from the door. The first ambulance driver was at the head of the cot and his partner was on the foot.

"Thanks, gorgeous." The ambulance driver winked at Blake.

Blake was so stunned he didn't answer.

"See you on the next one? I hope?"

Opening his lips to reply though nothing came out, Blake heard the good-looking young man laugh at him. "Come on, Helen, time to go. Say goodbye to the pretty firemen!" He waved, licking his lips seductively at Blake who was in shock.

Hunter handed the nurse from the home a copy of his paperwork after he had transferred the numbers from his hand to the form.

"Thank you for your quick response time." The nurse smiled sweetly. When she met Blake's gaze she added, "That's Connor. Don't let him ruffle you."

"Uh..." Blake caught Hunter's eye.

The nurse came closer to speak quietly. "He's a very rambunctious gay man, and we love him. He flirts with all the old gals and they get such a kick out of him."

Hunter stated, "An out gay man on the job. Imagine that."

"Shut up." Blake nudged him.

"Thanks again, fellas." The nurse waved as she walked away.

Blake rolled off his latex gloves as he clipped his kit closed and carried it to the main entrance. Once they were sitting inside the engine, Blake pointed a warning finger at Hunter. "Not a word."

Hunter laughed at him wickedly, remembering to fasten his seatbelt.

As they drove back to the station, Blake thought long and hard about Connor and admired him for his bravery. And not just his skill on the job. But...was the ambulance service as homophobic as the fire service? Blake would love a chance to speak to Connor and find out.

* * * *

Blake left Hunter to type up the report while he made sure his first aid kit was restocked with more gloves and medical items.

"Bye, Blake."

Blake looked up at Hailey and Dwight. "Is it ten already?"

"Yes, finally." Hailey sighed.

"Have a good night." Blake waved.

"You too. I hope it's quiet and you can get some sleep," Dwight said.

"Thanks, man." Blake smiled at him. Once he finished his task, Blake walked through the dim, hollow halls to the write-up room. Hunter was still seated at the computer. Blake walked behind him and rested his hands on Hunter's shoulders.

"Hey, gorgeous..." Hunter laughed.

"I knew you wouldn't let that go."

"Are we alone?"

"Yes."

"Mm!" Hunter swiveled around and grabbed Blake's waist.

"We can't mess around, Hunt."

Ignoring him, Hunter rubbed his face into Blake's crotch over his uniform slacks.

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Though he knew he should nudge him away, it felt so good, Blake enjoyed it for another minute.

Hunter wrapped his arms around Blake's hips and drew him closer nestling his face against where Blake had grown hard under his zipper.

At the sound of a scuff of a shoe, Blake gasped and shoved Hunter back as he sat up in alarm.

The lieutenant appeared at the doorway. "I'm done for the night, gentlemen."

Blake felt pale and sick. "Okay, sir."

"You all right?" Lt. Smith stepped into the room.

"Fine." Blake tried to adjust his expression and smiled.

"It should be quiet so get some rest."

"Thank you, sir." Blake didn't even look at Hunter who was still seated behind him.

"Goodnight. See you in a couple of days."

"Goodnight, sir," they both echoed.

The sound of his footfalls faded out.

Feeling sick to his stomach, Blake staggered to the hall, using the wall to find his way to his room. Dropping down on the bed, he caught his breath and tried to slow his pounding heart. This was what would happen if they let down their guard and were careless. The lieutenant walking in on them doing something lewd. Did he need that? Would that kind of thing enhance his career? Or ruin his life permanently?

He knew the answer to that question and had to keep reminding himself that although Hunter touching him was a temptation, it was taboo at work. Strictly off limits, no exceptions.

Hunter materialized at his door.

Meeting Hunter's eyes, Blake almost screamed at him in fury that this kind of scare was exactly the reason they needed to cool it at work, but Blake knew he allowed it. Tearing his gaze away from those punished blue orbs, Blake rubbed his eyes wearily.

"I'm sorry. It was my fault."

"I didn't push you away." Blake hunched over in defeat.

"I always forget the lieutenant. He hides in his office all day."

"I know. Me, too."

"What do you think he would do if he saw us?"

"He'd immediately transfer one of us out."

"No." Hunter sat next to him.

"Yes. No question. Even if we were a straight couple he would. They don't want the sex distracting anyone. It makes sense, Hunt."

Hunter held Blake's hand. "I don't want to stop working with you."

"Working and sleeping together?" Blake asked, "Is that sensible?"

"Please stop hurting me."

Blake cupped Hunter's rough jaw. "But it is a distraction, babe. Like now."

"Now?" Hunter kissed Blake's hand, holding it with his own.

Knowing it was wrong and he should not do it, Blake leaned forward and kissed him. Hunter dug his hands into Blake's hair, deepening the passion. The attraction between them was so powerful, it wasn't as easy to turn the 'switch' off as Blake wished. Hunter made him hot. It was purely chemical, cosmic, fate, whatever you wanted to call it. And impossible to ignore. But they had to. For his sanity, they had to.

Slowing them down before they went crazy, Blake parted from him, pecking his lips a few times as he did. "We can't. If we're found humping together, we're dead."

"I know." Hunter ran his hand along Blake's thigh.

"It's only until tomorrow." Blake touched the nape of Hunter's neck to comfort him. "From the time we hit my home we can screw to our heart's content."

"Yes!" Hunter laughed.

"But let's not jeopardize our jobs. Okay? Can we be sensible?"

"Yes, Blake. I know you're right."

"Thank you, babe. I mean that."

After gazing into each other's eyes for a long moment, Hunter kissed him again. "Goodnight, Blake."

"Goodnight, Hunt."

Their hands dropping to their sides as Hunter rose up. They

stared at each other as if the parting was agony. Blake lost sight of him as he left the room and rested his head in his palms to try and calm down. It felt as if he was inside a cyclone suddenly and too many things were happening at once. Blake liked order and calm. Hated change and chaos.

Finally finding his strength, he took off his shoes and dropped back on the bed to think, and then again, not to. And his thoughts inevitably turned to Hunter and the scale of balance that was hanging before him. There were hard choices here he had never thought he would make.

He was very sensible in life and if someone had asked him if he would have an affair with a co-worker a year ago, Blake would have adamantly insisted never. It was a terrible idea and no one should 'shit where they eat'. But what had he done? Unwittingly Blake had fallen into the same trap so many other firefighters did. He fell in love with a fellow he worked with. One only needed to watch television dramas to see partners in every sector of the workforce coupling up.

It was natural. Instant common ground. Couldn't only another emergency worker understand what he was going through? He'd dated civilian men. Instantly they would complain about his schedule, working through weekends and holidays, not giving him the space to vent and relieve the stress of a very hard job.

The attraction to go with someone of your ilk was strong. He and Hunter didn't need to discuss work stress. They lived it side by side. Was it the same with cops? Didn't they struggle with their marriages as well unless they were paired up with another cop?

Blake began unbuttoning his uniform shirt, praying for a night uninterrupted. He was still tired from the fourth and knew it would take more than a few nights' rest to recover. Not to mention worrying about being exposed as a gay man at work? That was almost more stressful than running into a burning building. You didn't come out of being outed a hero, only a freak. He preferred being a hero.

Standing, folding his uniform shirt neatly on a chair beside him, Blake reclined on the cot and tried to close his eyes. With so much on his mind, it was a struggle, and he imagined Hunter

in the exact same position.

Chapter Twelve

The seven AM wake up bell sounded throughout the station. Blake was already up and stripping the bed. He shut his locker and was about to carry the linens to the laundry when Tom Young appeared at his door.

“Hey.” Tom set his personal belongings on the floor by the wall.

“Hey,” Blake muttered, not smiling at him.

“Was it a slow night?”

“Yes. It was dead.”

“Good. I’m still recovering from the fourth.”

“That seems to be the popular consensus.” Blake was loath to speak to him. He slung his backpack over his shoulder, and picked up the crumpled sheets. Tom moved aside as he approached the door.

Blake passed, looking down his nose at him with disdain.

Tom didn’t notice, entering the room which was now his for the night. Blake headed to dump off the sheets. *I’d love to tell you, you bastard, you’re sleeping on the same mattress as a gay man.*

Nasty images shot through him of playing a prank on Tom to expose his true sexual preference. With deviant acts on his mind, Blake met the new crew coming in as they gathered for their briefing.

“Hey, Blake.”

“Hi, Kim.” Blake set his backpack aside and sat down at the table.

Don and Stan joined them, coffee mugs in their hands.

“Was it dead yesterday?” Stan asked.

“Yes. Very slow. Just a couple of medical calls and an MVA.” Blake looked up as Hunter came in the room. He placed his rucksack next to Blake’s and sat down with the group.

“Hey, Hunt,” the three men greeted him cheerfully.

“Gentlemen.” Hunter smiled sweetly at them. “You all recovered from the madness of the fourth?”

As they answered Hunter’s query, Blake watched the snake enter the room. Instantly, Tom’s lip sneered as he set his gaze on Hunter. Blake was fascinated Hunter bothered Tom so much. Did a gay man’s private sex life really offend people to such an extent that they made a point to recognize it? It just didn’t make sense to Blake. If he disagreed with something, he’d simply not take an issue with it at all. No one was confronting Tom Young about being gay. Why was it in the forefront of the loser’s mind?

Stan looked back at Tom. “You joining us?”

Blake noticed the only open seat was next to Hunter. “Yes, Tom, aren’t you joining the meeting?”

“I’ll stand.” Tom crossed his arms over his chest.

Hunter’s expression became pinched.

Kim shook his head in annoyance and stated, “So, nothing of note?”

“Nope.” Blake kept being distracted by Tom shooting daggers into Hunter’s back. It was so over the top, Blake was certain Tom was attracted to Hunter and it was causing him some internal conflict that erupted as rage.

Stan opened his palms in question. “Then what are you two still doing here? Go home.”

Blake rose up from the table, watching Hunter do the same. Keeping a sharp eye on Hunter and Tom’s non-verbal communication, he watched as Tom continued to sneer and Hunter avoided him.

They waved goodbye to everyone and picked up their backpacks as they left. Blake took a last look over his shoulder and found Tom still staring. “Unbelievable.”

“Huh?” Hunter asked as Blake and he stepped out into the parking lot.

“Tom Young has one hell of a crush on you.”

Hunter stopped short and glared at Blake.

“You think I’m kidding?” Blake chirped his car alarm from his key fob. “He ogles you more than Hailey does.”

“Am I going to your place or what?” Hunter asked impatiently.

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“Your call.”

Hunter entered his truck and started the ignition. As Hunter waited, Blake climbed into his car and drove out of the lot, Hunter’s truck tailing his bumper.

* * * *

The idea that the bane of his life had a crush on him was ludicrous as far as Hunter was concerned. He hated that SOB and wished Tom would die in a horrific fire.

Parking behind Blake’s car in his driveway, Hunter carried his pack with him and met Blake at the door.

“You want breakfast?” Blake asked, thumbing through his mail as he walked to the kitchen.

Hunter followed him, distracted by the earlier comment.

“Hunt? Some eggs and toast?”

“Sure.” Hunter sat down at the kitchen table.

Blake took a look at him first before he started a pot of coffee. “What’s up? You look upset.”

“Tom Young is not attracted to me. He is disgusted by me.”

Blake laughed softly, filling the carafe. “It’s a thin line between love and hate.”

“You talk shit, you know that?”

Filling the coffeemaker, Blake found the filter and scooped some Sumatra coffee into it. The aroma filled the kitchen even before it dripped. “I’d love to test the theory.”

“I’m not touching him.”

“I don’t want you to touch him.” Blake curled his nose in revulsion. He wrapped the coffee bag up and returned it to the fridge, taking out bread, eggs, and butter. “I wish I knew a pre-op trans, or a sexy gay man who looked incredible in drag.”

Hunter let out a single syllable laugh.

Looking back over his shoulder as he turned the burner on under the fry pan, Blake asked, “Wouldn’t you want to see him seduced by a fantastic cross-dresser? And be there when the guy showed him his dick?”

“I love you, Blake.” Hunter shook his head.

“Where do guys like that hang out?” Blake dropped butter into the pan and it sizzled.

“Gay bars?”

“You know any gay bars?” Blake cracked four eggs into the pan, loading the toaster with four slices of bread.

After another laugh, Hunter inquired, “And if I do? You’re going to locate someone who fits the bill and persuade them to do your dirty work?”

“We have to get him, Hunt.” Blake lowered the burner and used a spatula to tend the eggs. “Over easy, right?”

“Right.” Hunter stood, taking two coffee mugs out of the cabinet and setting them out with plates and silverware. “Forget it, Blake. Just ignore him.”

“No. I will work on it. I have to see that asshole exposed for what he is.”

Hunter filled the coffee mugs and added milk to both. “If you do that, I’ll end up with the backlash.”

“Not necessarily.” Blake took the bread out of the toaster when it popped, buttering the slices. “If we do a good job, it may just shut him up permanently.”

Hunter stood behind Blake as he worked at the counter. He planted feather light kisses down Blake’s neck.

Shivering from the chill it created, Blake scooped out two eggs for each plate and handed one to Hunter.

Taking it to the table, Hunter sat down and waited for Blake. “You don’t have to do anything, Blake.”

After a sip of his coffee, Blake replied, “Let me think about it for a little while. Pulling a practical joke in the station isn’t exactly a rarity. It happens all the time.”

“True.” Hunter began devouring his food hungrily.

“And if everyone but Tom is in on it, how hilarious would that be?” Blake smiled as he chewed.

“Pretty fucking hilarious.”

Blake winked at him, and continued to eat, his brain working on a plan.

To Hunter it already felt as if he and Blake had established a routine of cohabitating. Perhaps it was due to the teamwork and regimented tasks set by the fire department, or maybe even their comfort of being together. Whatever it was, he and Blake had a tendency to harmonize. Blake cooked, Hunter washed up. Blake did the laundry, Hunter cleaned the house. There were no

complaints, moaning about inequity, just cooperation.

When Blake stood still for a moment in the kitchen, as if he was checking to make sure all that could be done had been done, Hunter found his opportunity. Lunging for him, Hunter picked Blake up off his feet and laughed wickedly as Blake gasped from the abruptness.

"Time to play the little woman, Blake Hughes." Hunter carried Blake to the bedroom.

"I was wondering what took you so long." Blake bounced as he hit the bed.

Hunter grinned down at him while he quickly stripped off his own clothing. "Well, we had to eat."

"True." Blake pulled his t-shirt over his head and his shorts down his legs.

When they were both naked, Blake reached into the nightstand and set out the things they needed. After he had, Blake leaned up on his elbows and smiled. "Right. I take it I—"

Hunter pounced on him and shoved Blake's thighs apart. "Yes. You." Rubbing his face against Blake's genitals, Hunter crooned, "My turn."

A soft chuckle was Blake's reply as he reclined against the pillows.

Hunter moaned in delight and pressed Blake's legs back, exposing his ass. "Fantastic." He licked Blake from rim to balls, making Blake shiver and whimper. Getting off on Blake's body first, Hunter purred as he nestled into his soft testicles and gnawed on the base of his dick.

"Christ, I am one lucky fucker," Blake announced.

Hunter laughed wickedly, finally sitting back on his heels to take a look at the whole picture. "You are damn sexy, Blake."

"You took the words out of my mouth."

Hunter rolled on a condom and squeezed the tube of lube onto his fingers. Urging Blake's legs back again, he used two fingers to enter him, sliding over his prostate to make him shiver.

Blake grabbed his knees, holding a wide straddle for Hunter. "Yes...very nice..." Blake closed his eyes and exhaled deeply.

Seeing Blake so subservient and exposed, Hunter could hardly stand it. He was so hot from twenty-four hours without he

was ready to spurt.

Holding back, knowing he would most likely come too quickly once he penetrated Blake, Hunter shifted closer and continued finger fucking him slowly.

“Keep that up and you’ll make me come.”

“I thought that was the idea,” Hunter hissed seductively.

Taking his time, Hunter watched Blake’s expression as he found just the right spot inside him to make Blake writhe on the bed. As if he couldn’t stop himself, Blake released one of his knees to grab his own dick. Hunter smiled in satisfaction. “Nice?”

“Fuck yeah.” Blake fisted himself in time with Hunter’s deep, slow penetration.

“You do love being a bottom. Don’t lie to me.” Hunter slid his fingers out, moving his cock on target and shoving inside to continue the same rhythm with his dick, not missing a beat. The rush at being inside Blake was almost enough to push him over the edge, but he fought to make it last. Rocking his hips, hypnotized by Blake masturbating under him, Hunter listened to the sound of their breaths and the moans of pleasure that were beginning to rise.

“You ready, baby?” Hunter gripped Blake’s legs.

“God yes.”

Hunter increased the speed and depth of his thrusts as Blake’s hand did the same to his cock. Spinning out of control, Hunter grunted in ecstasy as Blake’s arm became a blur of motion. Once Hunter pumped his seed into Blake, Blake’s cum splattered his own chest in a blasting spray. Both continued to milk the sensation; Hunter’s dick throbbing inside Blake’s tight hole as more milky cream oozed out of Blake’s cock.

They both stilled their motion simultaneously. Hunter closed his eyes and hung his head as he recuperated, not wanting to disconnect from Blake. “Jesus, that was intense.”

“Fuck...” Blake caught his breath. “Hunt, I swear...”

Hunter pulled out gently, leaning over Blake’s body to lap at his spent cum. “Mm, you taste good.”

Blake chuckled tiredly.

Once he had cleaned Blake up, Hunter sat back and wiped his mouth. “I’ll be right back.”

"I'll be here."

Hunter climbed off the bed and scrubbed up in the bathroom. He returned with a damp washcloth and used it to wipe Blake's skin clean, and the residue of lube off his ass.

"Thanks, babe."

"My pleasure." Hunter tossed the washcloth into the bathroom sink and dropped down next to Blake on the bed. Wrapping around him and sealing Blake against his chest, Hunter whispered, "You prefer bottom. I can tell."

Smiling as he spoke, Blake replied, "In your dreams."

"You can't fool me, lover. I know."

"And you can't turn me into a bottom-only lover, like you want to."

"No?" Hunter cuddled against Blake, kissing his neck.

"No." Blake started laughing.

"Aw, come on..." Hunter teased, licking Blake's jaw.

"Begging won't help."

Hunter urged Blake onto his back and climbed over him, pinning him to the bed. Leaning up on his elbows, Hunter smiled down at him adoringly. "I'm so happy when we're together like this."

"Me, too." Blake pushed Hunter's hair away from his forehead.

"We really get along. In every way."

"I agree. What's your point? Where are you going with this?"

"I'm just stating facts. I'm not going anywhere." Hunter wriggled his hips on him.

"No? Not back to us cohabitating?"

"In a perfect world." Hunter kissed Blake's lips.

"There's no such thing."

"I can dream, can't I?"

"Sure. And in your dreams I'm the perfect bottom." Blake's brown eyes shined.

"Exactly." Hunter pressed their cocks together.

Blake wrapped his arms tightly around Hunter's body and squeezed him. "I love you."

Hunter melted at his words. "I love you, too."

* * * *

Blake was content to spend most of the afternoon horizontal in Hunter's arms. Neither of them had anything pressing to do and they were working the next forty-eight after this, so getting their fill of each other was important. Blake knew it would have to hold Hunter for two whole, non-physical days.

As Hunter dozed on and off cuddled against his chest, Blake lazily ran his hand through Hunter's soft hair. They should live together. It was silly for Hunter to pay rent on a home he would never see. Blake assumed from now on they would sleep where they were, in his bed.

Hunter stirred, kissing Blake's chest before he leaned up to look at him. "Are we being lazy or what?"

Blake shrugged. "Anything you want to do?"

A wicked smile appeared and Hunter cupped his hand over Blake's crotch.

"You are insatiable." Blake reflected Hunter's demonic grin.

"It's your fault. You get me hot."

"I get a fireman hot. How appropriate."

"Want me to hose you down?" Hunter began pumping Blake's cock.

"Why don't you suck on my hose instead?" Blake narrowed his eyes at him.

"You got it." Hunter eagerly complied.

When he was inside Hunter's silky mouth, Blake groaned in bliss. Yes. They have got to live together somehow. They had to find a way.

And the battle once again began in Blake between choices. He knew what he wanted and what would be sensible were miles apart. If they had the same address and everyone knew at work, that was it. Out. There was no way to keep that information private. And even if it stayed in the lieutenant's personal file, what about the lieutenant knowing? Blake knew instantly either he or Hunter would be transferred to another station.

Could Blake live with that? With not working side by side with the man he loved?

Why did his devotion to this man come with so many

obstacles and sacrifices? Was it the same for straight couples?

Blake assumed in some ways it was. But straight couples were not set up for ridicule, unaided when they were in dire circumstances, and tormented with crude magazine photos and words of hatred.

Heaven and hell. Blake had found both and just didn't know what the right thing to do was any longer. The last thing he wanted was his need to live with Hunter to cloud his judgment and force him to make bad decisions.

And that didn't even take into account his family.

The notion that his parents would know he was gay scared him to death. At this point in his life they were proud of him, boasted to their friends he was a hero who saved people. How would that change the minute he was pronounced 'queer' by society. And it would change. Make no mistake, the label would be like a flaming cross on his forehead warning everyone of his deviance.

Shaking himself out of his nightmarish thoughts, Blake knew he'd never be able to come if he didn't stop thinking about it. Peering down at that magnificent male, giving him equally magnificent head, Blake let the nasty images of his future go for the moment. They had here and now. And here and now he was inside Hunter's mouth. That had to account for something, didn't it?

Chapter Thirteen

The next day Blake and Hunter went through their routine of driving in separately, preparing their equipment and bunkrooms, and meeting with the staff from the day before to exchange pertinent information.

Hailey and Dwight were off and in their place were Kim Lu and the dreaded Tom Young. Blake rapped on the lieutenant's door and was bid entry. "You mind if I make a food run, sir?"

"No, Blake. It's always best to get those errands done first thing in the morning."

"Thank you, sir."

"What gourmet delight were you planning?"

Blake smiled at the praise. "I'm open to suggestions. Any favorites?"

The lieutenant chuckled at the offer. "I won't pretend to know a good meal for you to prepare. I'm sure whatever you make will be fine."

"Thank you, sir." Blake nodded and left the room. When he entered the lounge, Hunter was waiting for him. Blake crossed the room to whisper, "Will you behave on your own and stay away from Tom while I'm gone?"

"Can't I go with you?"

"It'll look weird. Not this time." Blake tilted back to see Tom already watching them like a hawk. "Stay away from him. Go play games on your laptop. I'll be back soon."

Hunter nodded, turning on his heels to get away from Tom's stare.

Blake checked his watch and headed out to the lot, taking the SUV medic unit for his errands.

Before he went to the grocery store, he stopped at one of the American Medical Response team buildings. Parking in front, Blake jogged to the door and rung the bell. A man in a white

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uniform shirt and dark blue slacks answered the door.

"Hi. I'm looking for a guy named Connor. Do you have any idea where he works?"

A big grin appeared on the man's face. "You lucked out. Come in."

"He works here?" Blake entered the building. "I knew this was the closest ambulance building to the scene where we met."

"I'm John." He shook Blake's hand.

"Blake." Blake took it, smiling.

"Connor!" John shouted as he walked, "Oh, Connor? You have a visitor!"

When Connor met with Blake's eyes his jaw dropped. "You have to be kidding me."

"It's not what you think." Blake smiled.

"What am I thinking, you gorgeous stud?" Connor raced over.

"Easy, Connor. Don't scare the poor fireman." John laughed.

"Get over here and let me tell you." Blake grabbed Connor's arm and drew him aside. "I have a big favor to ask you."

"I hope to hell it includes me giving you a blowjob."

Blake shook his head in awe. "You're that okay with being out?"

"Honey." Connor put his hands on his hips, tilting his head at the stupidity of the statement.

"Never mind. Listen. There's a real homophobe working at our station and I think he needs to be taught a lesson."

"Oooh! Do tell!"

"I wondered if you would be interested in a little practical joke?" Blake grinned demonically.

"To teach a homophobe a lesson?" Connor made a noise in his throat. "Count me in, gorgeous!"

* * * *

Hunter slouched in a plastic chair in the write-up room playing solitaire on his laptop. Hearing someone come in, he looked over his shoulder. Seeing it was Tom, he ignored him and

kept playing his game.

“Hey, homo...fucked any men lately?”

“Shut up and leave me alone.”

“Why don’t you get out of fire fighting, homo? No one likes your kind here.”

Closing his eyes to calm down, Hunter remembered all the misery he endured in San Diego and dreaded it happening again.

“Gonna cry, homo?” Tom taunted. “Like you cried down south when someone put a dildo and gay porn in your bed?”

Hunter swiveled in the chair and stared at him. “Someone? Don’t you mean you? Why are you here? Why did you follow me up here?”

“Follow you?” Tom made a sound of disgust. “My family moved here. I didn’t fucking follow you, queer-bait. I just got fucking stuck with you again.”

“Tell the captain you want to work at another station.”

“Fuck you! I want you to move. I’m happy here.” He curled his lip. “Christ, I can’t stand the sight of you. You make me sick.”

“The feeling is mutual, asshole.”

“I should tell Blake you’re a fucking fag. He wouldn’t want you anywhere near him.”

“What makes you think Blake, or any of the other guys in this station, are as sick in the head as you?”

“You’re the sick fucker. It’s against the fucking Bible, dickwad. Your kind are all going to rot in hell.”

“Can’t you just live and let live? Didn’t the Bible say that as well?”

“You fuck men!” Tom cringed. “It’s unholy and against fucking nature.”

“It is nature, you jerk.” Hunter felt like kicking the crap out of him. “Human nature.”

“Yeah, keep telling that to yourself, homo.”

“Leave me alone.” Hunter spun back to his computer, his temper beginning to get the best of him.

“I’ll never leave you alone, you cursed cock-sucker. I won’t be happy until you’re dead.”

Hunter spun around to see his face. “You are completely fucked up.” He couldn’t believe the hatred emanating from

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Tom's glare. "What the hell did I ever do to you?"

"Just you being a diseased faggot is enough to make me want to fucking murder you."

"Murder me?" Hunter gaped at him.

Tom took a quick look behind him before he stepped closer to Hunter. "Your kind need to be wiped off the planet, faggot."

"You know something, asshole? I didn't mention the way you treated me to the captain, but I think you've gone too far this time. Murder me?"

"Yes. I want you to die, you cock-sucking cunt."

"Hunt." Blake stood in the doorway.

Tom spun around at his voice and tried to escape, slipping passed him.

"Oh. Tom. There's a woman here who needs some help. Are you available? She's really pretty. Know what I mean?" Blake elbowed Tom in the ribs.

After giving Hunter a leer of superiority, Tom snickered, "Where is she, Blake? I'd love to help a damsel in distress."

"The beautiful doll is in the sally port. I'm not sure what her problem is, but she's got it bad for firemen."

"Nice! I'm on my way."

Blake allowed Tom to run by, giving Hunter a wicked smile. "Follow me, Hunt. You have got to see this."

Shaking off his dour mood, Hunter shut his computer down and trailed after Blake. When they stood at the entrance to the bays, still occupied with all the engines and ladder truck, Blake held Hunter back. "Shh. Just watch and listen."

Hunter leaned against Blake's back and waited.

* * * *

Tom's eyes lit up at the sight. "Hello. What can I do for you?"

The sultry blonde in the stilettos, batted her long lashes at him. "I think it's the heat," she purred, touching her hair with her white gloved hands. "I don't do well when it's hot."

"Do you want to come inside and—"

"No. I don't. I like it out here just fine."

Tom had a feeling she was flirting with him. Why Blake had

passed up this treat was beyond him. Some women were just hot on men in uniform. He closed the gap between them. "Why don't you tell me what you really want?" Tom eyed her large bosoms and long legs in her mini skirt.

She smiled with a slight hint of wickedness that was setting his insides on fire.

"I love firemen."

"I had a feeling." Tom moved even closer, inhaling her perfume.

"I just think it's a girl's duty to provide a service to the men who are our heroes."

"Do you? What kind of service?" He touched the blonde curl that fell onto her shoulder.

"Mm...you know what kind, sugar."

Tom looked over his shoulder quickly. "Come with me." He led her to their bunker gear storage room. The light flipped on instantly as they entered. He closed the door behind them and whispered, "It'll be dark in here in another minute."

"Good. I like the dark," she purred, opening up the top button of Tom's uniform trousers.

Panting as she unzipped him, Tom's heart was pumping in his chest. "Are you going to suck it?"

"Uh huh. And I swallow."

"Holy shit!"

The light flicked off on the timer.

He heard the rustle of her getting to her knees. When her painted lips surrounded his cock, Tom thought he would pass out. He'd never had a blowjob before. He wouldn't think of asking the girls at church to do such a thing. But from this wicked harlot? Oh, yeah.

"Some chicks really get off on firemen, don't they?"

She moaned with her mouth full.

"Shit...I'm coming."

She stopped short and sat back.

He shouted in annoyance, "What are you doing! I was about to come! You said you swallowed."

The door behind him opened, the bright lights illuminated, and Hunter, Blake, and Kim were standing there gloating.

Tom shoved his dick back in his pants. "Hello, guys. I uh...

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You know how it is. Women.” He shrugged, laughing.

“Women?” The blonde asked, wiping her lips. “What woman?”

Tom shook his head in bewilderment.

When the blonde removed her wig, Tom felt his knees give out. “I ain’t no woman, sugar.”

Kim roared with laughter and doubled over as Blake and Hunter exchanged satisfied grins.

“Not a woman?” Tom choked and backed away from the stranger in the dress.

“And I hated sucking your homophobic dick, asshole, but it was worth it just to see you humiliated.” He high-fived the three other men who were in tears at the hilarity. “Bye now!”

Tom watched the man holding the blonde wig leave the sally port.

Kim was choking he was laughing so loud. “I can’t wait to tell Don! Oh, that is so fucking funny! Burn, Tom! Complete burn!” Kim took out his cell phone. “Don? Kim! You aren’t going to believe the practical joke Blake just pulled on Young!”

In the midst of the confusion and hilarity, the tones of an alarm rang out. Over the air the dispatcher’s voice said, “Fire at an apartment complex...units responding to the location...the fire is fully involved at this time...”

Hunter and Blake sprinted to their bunker gear and got dressed as Tom walked numbly to his.

* * * *

Hunter continued to hook up his gear, fastening his radio mike to his shoulder and jamming his foot deeper into his boot as Blake hit the siren and roared out of the bay with the overhead lights flashing and his air horn blasting. When Blake hit the brakes to prevent sideswiping a car that didn’t yield to them at an intersection, Hunter slammed into the dashboard.

“Hunt! Seatbelt!”

Hunter sat back in the seat and clamped it on.

“For cryin’ out loud!”

“Shut up, I’m all right.” Hunter rubbed his sore shoulder.

When they arrived, several other units from neighboring

stations were setting up hoses onto fireplugs. Hunter hopped out and helped Blake with his air tank, and Blake did the same for him. They got set up and looked for the incident commander on the scene. A captain was shouting orders, as a three-story apartment complex was an inferno.

“Get the irons!” he roared at Blake. “Go door to door and get people evacuated!”

Hunter rushed back to the truck to grab the pike and ax. They hustled up the outside staircase and began banging on doors to make sure the occupants were out. When no one answered, Hunter swung the ax to gain access to make sure a senior or disabled person wasn’t stranded inside.

They worked their way down the outer balcony as close to the fire as they could. Hunter waited as Blake spun around to survey the scene. Hunter found a ladder extended from its truck and the hose dousing the flames from above. Four open hoses were already in use on the building and, from where he stood, Hunter could see a dozen cop cars, overhead lights flashing, blocking the streets as air support and medic trucks arrived.

Hunter pounded his gloved fist on another door. Just before he swung the ax it opened. “Out! Now!” Blake shouted.

The man panicked and rushed back in, grabbing his cat and racing out down the stairs.

“Next floor!” Hunter yelled through his mask to Blake.

They jogged back to the landing and climbed to the third level. The same scenario played out one by one as they cleared the building occupants.

When it seemed they had completed their task, Hunter took another moment to look down at the blaze. Orange flames continued to rise and popping sounds were now present as the internal structure began to rupture.

“Go.” Blake nudged Hunter across the wooden balcony to the stairs. They met the IC again.

The captain shouted, “Everyone out?”

“Yes, sir!” Blake replied.

“Stand by. No one goes in yet.”

Blake and Hunter waited impatiently, their irons resting in their hands as the other fire crews continued to pour thousands of gallons of water on the building.

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Suddenly a personal alarm went off. Blake jolted and Hunter watched Blake check to make sure he was still with him. Hunter had dazed off from the heat and sweat he was enduring inside his outfit. Blake seemed relieved when he found Hunter was there, at his side.

"Where's that coming from?" Blake shouted through his facemask.

"I thought no one was supposed to be inside!" Hunter and Blake ran up to the fiery building.

* * * *

There was a sense of complete panic at the area burning most fiercely. Blake grabbed the firefighter who was standing closest to the flames. He spun him around and found Kim's horror written on his face.

"Kim?"

"It's Tom! He went in! Now I hear his alarm!"

"What?" Blake felt icy cold through his boiling heat. "He went in?" Blake rushed the IC. "Captain! There's a man inside!"

"No one is supposed to go in!"

"He did! Captain, it's one of ours!" Blake was a wreck. Too many thoughts were passing through his mind, the foremost being guilt.

"No one goes in!"

"We have to get in there, sir, and get him out. His alarm is going off!"

The captain approached the fire-engulfed building. Even Blake could see it was suicide to go in.

"No! No one goes in! That's an order!"

Blake felt someone grab his arm. Hunter was pleading with him silently not to play the hero.

"Not this time, Blake." Hunter's eyes reflected the orange flames.

Blake stood back as more water was aimed at the opening that Kim had last seen Tom.

No. This isn't happening. Blake was falling apart at the thoughts in his head. Not like this. Oh, God, please. Not like this!

What felt like a disastrously long time, Blake waited with

everyone else, holding his breath. The minute the IC nodded, Blake rushed into the smoldering unit with his pike poised to smash walls, Hunter behind him with his ax. It didn't take long.

There, on the floor, was Tom.

Blake cried out at witnessing him so obviously dead. He dropped to his knees beside him and could only see charred skin through a melted face shield.

Blake screamed in agony as Hunter grabbed him from behind.

"It's not safe in here. There's nothing we can do. Blake, we found him. Let's get out and let the investigators deal with it."

Wailing in anguish at causing a man's death, Blake could not be consoled. Hunter urged him to his feet and wrapped around him tightly pushing Blake out of the smoking shell of the apartment.

Blake was completely numb. He knew damn well Tom committed suicide. The man had no other reason to go into that blaze other than to kill himself. And Blake also knew he was the reason Tom had done it. Wasn't it all down to the humiliation of what he had done to him? Some men were so homophobic that knowing they were sucked by another man was fatal to their mental state. In reality, there was no excuse for Blake to bring a man so much humiliation, and knowing he was the reason Tom raced into an inferno, Blake couldn't deal with it.

He barely felt Hunter removing his air tank and face shield. When he connected to Hunter's worried eyes, Blake fell apart. "What did I do? Hunt?"

Hunter embraced him, holding tight.

A few fellow firefighters hurried over to comfort them. Kim was on his knees weeping, two men crouched beside him to console him.

"Hunt," Blake sobbed, "what did I do?"

"Hush. You didn't do anything, Blake. Please. Calm down." Hunter used both his hands to wipe the rushing tears and smoky soot from Blake's face.

Blake curled around him, weeping over his shoulder. "I did this to him. I humiliated him. How am I going to live with this?"

Hunter pressed his lips to Blake's ear. "Blake, he threatened to kill me."

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Jolting at the information, Blake's sobbing halted in his throat.

Hunter continued, "Just before you made it into the write-up room, he told me he wanted to murder me. And, Blake. I believed him."

Blake set back enough to see Hunter's blue eyes. "No."

"Yes. He had it in for me, Blake. He said I disgusted him and he wouldn't be happy until our kind were exterminated from the planet."

"He didn't say that." Blake dug his hands into Hunter's sweat drenched hair.

Nodding, Hunter said, "He did, Blake. He said he wouldn't be happy until I was dead."

"Oh Christ, Hunt."

"So don't mourn his loss, Blake. Don't."

Blake grabbed Hunter's head and kissed him before wrapping around him and rocking him in his arms. Suddenly, Blake's actions caught up to him. He had kissed Hunt. Blake opened his eyes in panic. Jeff and Mickey were standing right behind Hunter, giving Blake an adoring smile.

When the two handsome cops approached, they hugged Blake and Hunter to support them. "You men are awesome," Jeff boasted.

And as if Hunter just realized what Blake had done, he gasped and stared at him. "Blake?"

Blake was in shock. Had he just outed them? He took a moment to look around. There were dozens of residents, cops, firefighters, reporters, spectators, medics, and commanders, most were watching the spectacle of the two firemen, not the quenched fire. "What did I do?"

"Blake!" Hunter exclaimed in excitement, holding his face in his sooty hands. "I love you!"

"Get over here, big guy." Mickey wrapped his dark blue uniformed arms around Blake and hugged him. "Man, you are my hero."

Blake felt lightheaded. He wasn't so sure he was anyone's hero at the moment. Mickey kissed Blake on the cheek and grinned at him with affectionate light eyes.

"Officer Stanton!" Blake gasped. "Not in front of my

boyfriend.” Hearing the laughter from the two cops, Blake tried to feel better. But deep inside, he was petrified. And not only from coming out unwittingly, he felt as if he had killed a man.

“We gotta get back to crowd control.” Jeff signaled behind him. “Later, boys.”

Blake’s gaze was drawn back to the morbid scene. With Hunter holding his hand, they walked to Kim, who was watching the investigators enter the first level of the burnt out building. Blake put his hand on Kim’s shoulder. “You okay?”

“I’m in shock. Why did he run in there? It was suicide, Blake.”

Though Hunter shook his head at him, Blake spoke his mind. “Kim, I think I humiliated him earlier.”

Kim shrugged. “It was a practical joke. The fucking homophobe needed it to wake him the hell up.”

Blake choked in awe at Kim. “What?”

“I’m gay, Blake, and I was sick to death of hearing that moron’s comments about gay men.” He paused and lowered his voice, “I’m not that sorry to see him go. Am I a bad person?”

Hunter leaned closer to Kim and asked, “You’re gay?”

“Shh. Me and Don are lovers. Don’t tell anyone.” Suddenly Kim looked down and realized Hunter and Blake were holding hands. “OhmyGod!”

Hunter put his palm over Kim’s mouth. “Don’t. Not here. The coroner is wheeling him out.”

The crowd went silent.

Blake put an arm around each of his comrades as they watched the grim task. Tom’s body was loaded onto a stretcher, covered with a sheet, and rolled down the path to the coroner’s van. All the firefighters and cops removed their hats in respect.

“This is so fucked up,” Kim whispered.

Blake could feel Kim shiver under his grasp. “I know.” Blake tightened his hold on both men.

The captain approached them. “Go back to the station and get cleaned up. We’ll finish up here and meet for a debriefing.”

“Thank you, sir.” Blake shook his hand.

Kim hugged Blake, then Hunter. “I’ll see you two back at the station.”

“Okay, Kim.”

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Hunter asked, "You sure you're okay to drive?"

Nodding, Kim walked back to the engine he and Tom had arrived in.

Blake held Hunter around his shoulders as they returned to the rig. Making sure the ax, pike, and two tanks were with them, Blake started the engine and looked over at his lover. "Hunt."

"Oh." Hunter fastened his seatbelt. "Sorry."

"It's okay." Blake touched his sooty cheek and started them moving out of the chaotic scene. Mickey and Jeff parted the crowd for them, both giving them a big smile and thumbs up.

"I love those guys." Hunter waved at them.

"Me too. Maybe we should see them socially."

Hunter gasped loudly. "Blake Hughes wants to see another gay couple? No!"

"Shut up."

"You kissed me in public," Hunter teased. "In a moment of weakness, Blake Hughes kissed a man!"

Though he wanted to be annoyed, Blake had to laugh. "I don't know how I feel about what happened."

"Kim and Don. Unreal. I had no idea."

"Well, the good thing is, they can't kick us all out or break us all up." Blake paused at a red traffic signal.

"That's true. Besides, we can cry discrimination or something. They can't treat us badly just because we're gay couples."

"I'm not sure about that. It depends on policy concerning couples in general on the job."

"Come on, Blake. You know how much hanky-panky goes on at these firehouses?"

"No. How much?"

"A lot. Believe me. If Hailey was a knock-out, she'd be doin' it, too."

"You're probably right." Blake nodded.

When they arrived at the station, they backed into the bay just as Kim did the same beside them.

To Blake's surprise, Don was waiting for them. When Kim raced to his arms, Blake felt like everything he thought he knew was upside down.

"You guys okay?" Don asked, holding Kim in his arms.

“Yes.” Blake unhooked his turnout jacket. “Just a little shell shocked.”

“Kim told me you guys came out.” Don smiled. “I guess it’s our turn as well.”

“Does Stan know?” Hunter asked as he kicked off his boots and peeled off his heavy outer garments.

“No. Does he know about you two?” Don helped Kim take off his bunker gear.

“No.” Hunter asked Blake, “What happens after one of the station members are killed, Blake?”

“They usually call in replacements and send us home.” Blake reached out for Hunter’s hand and the two couples walked into the main building.

The chaplain was waiting so they broke off the hand holding quickly.

“How are you boys doing?”

“I think we’re in shock, Chaplain.” Blake shook his hand. “Thanks for coming.”

“I need a shower.” Hunter patted the chaplain’s back. “I’ll be just a few minutes.”

Kim smiled knowingly. “Why don’t you go clean up too, Blake? We’ll keep Chaplain Olsen company for a while.”

“Thanks.” Blake winked.

He followed his lover down the corridor and stopped at his own room for fresh clothing.

When he met Hunter at the shower, Hunter asked, “You want to go first?”

Blake nudged him into the bathroom, locking the door behind them.

“You kidding me?” Hunter gaped at him.

As he stared into Hunter’s blue eyes, Blake took off his uniform.

“Jesus. I must be dreaming.” Hunter undressed quickly.

“No fooling around, Hunt. Let’s just wash up so Kim and Don can get in here, too.”

“No problem.” Hunter turned on the shower and waited as it heated up, staring at Blake.

Once they were both wet, Hunter began soaping up Blake’s back to both clean and comfort him. “Are you okay?”

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"I don't think everything has really hit me yet." He stepped under the water. "Thanks." Blake smiled at the back rub. "Want me to wash yours?"

"Mm."

"Your back, Hunt."

"I know." Hunter chuckled.

Blake massaged Hunter's large muscular back for him. Feeling emotional, Blake embraced him, choking up as he held onto him. Hunter gripped Blake's arms tightly, standing still.

Getting control of his emotions, Blake released him.

Hunter spun around to check on him. "It wasn't your fault."

"That's not entirely true." Blake rinsed the rest of the soap off his body and waited for Hunter.

Hunter shut the taps and pushed back the curtain. "Blake, the guy was nuts."

"I had no idea he'd react as badly as that." Blake rubbed a towel over his hair. "I thought he'd be humbled. That he'd stop tormenting you. That was my only goal."

"I know." Hunter touched Blake's cheek lightly.

"I can't believe some guys are so freaked out by being with a man, they'd jump into a burning building."

"He wasn't all there, Blake."

"What are we supposed to tell the captain at the debriefing?"

"Let me explain it." Hunter stepped into clean briefs, tucking himself into them.

"Shit. I am so dead. He'll have no choice but to discipline me."

"Not after what I tell him about Tom. And you say nothing about that joke."

Blake set his towel on a chair and dressed in a clean uniform. "No. Hunt. I have to tell them and Lt. Smith hates practical jokes."

"Only when he's the butt of one. He's done a few." Hunter buttoned his shirt.

"Come on. Let's let Don and Kim clean up." Blake opened the door and gathered his wet towel and dirty uniform.

* * * *

Within the hour several people had shown up at the station; Lt. Smith was called in from home, two men from the department psychologist's office, Captain Anderson, and the chaplain.

The chaplain had set out the chairs in a circle, incorporating one of the sofas to give everyone room.

Hunter relaxed next to Blake on the couch, wanting Blake as close to him as possible. Horrible memories from San Diego were washing over him when he was required to visit all these units because he was homosexual. How liberal was LAFD? Hunter was about to find out.

Kim and Don returned after a brief few minutes.

The captain waited until he had everyone's attention. "Today's event is something no supervisor wants to speak about with his men. But as we all know, being a firefighter is a very dangerous job. If a crew member disobeys orders or makes a bad call in judgment, sometimes a fatality is the result."

Hunter leaned against Blake's side. Blake leaned back in support.

"I have no idea what made Tom Young enter a fully involved building. It was a mission of suicide and I'm looking to the men who worked closely with Tom to help me find answers."

Blake covered his face in reflex.

Hunter did not want him to take the fall. No way. "Sir?"

"Yes, Hunter?"

"There is something I'd like to say." He met both Blake and Kim's worried expression. "Tom Young was harassing me."

The captain urged Hunter to continue with a nod of his head.

"I worked with him in San Diego. I came out as a gay man down there, and Tom never stopped torturing me about it." Hunter paused to see if his coming out right then to the rest of the brass made an impact. No one flinched. "Anyway, he made my life a living hell."

"I asked you if there was anything going on between you two," the lieutenant chided. "You said it was just playful banter."

"I lied." Hunter felt Blake flinch beside him. "Lieutenant, I dreaded going through what I had been through in San Diego. It

was agony, sir. So I lied, hoping Tom would just let up on his own.”

“Go on,” the captain prodded.

“Well, he didn’t.” Hunter inhaled deeply. “As a matter of fact, earlier today when I was in the write-up room, he came in and threatened me.”

“Threatened you how?” Captain Anderson’s face was very stern.

To Hunter’s amazement, Blake reached to hold his hand. Hunter choked up as Blake met his eyes. Getting his thoughts back, Hunter replied, “He said he wanted to murder me.”

“Murder you?”

“Yes, sir. He said ‘my kind’ didn’t deserve to live and that he wouldn’t be happy until I was dead.”

Lt. Smith snapped, “Were you intending on reporting this to me?”

“The fire alarm came out directly after, sir. I didn’t have the chance.”

“There’s more,” Blake began.

“No.” Hunter shut him up. “There is no more other than Tom knew about me and Blake and he was angry.”

Kim added, “Captain, sir, Don and I are a couple as well. We kept it very quiet because Tom was so outspoken about his hatred of homosexuals.”

The chaplain crossed himself and muttered. Hunter wondered if he was trying to cleanse himself from all the nasty sinners in the room. Hunter hated religion.

One of the men from the psychologist office asked, “Why do you think Tom would commit suicide after that incident, Hunter?”

“Guilt.” Hunter crushed Blake’s hand praying he wouldn’t mention the prank. He knew damn well Blake would be punished for it if he did. “Maybe he realized he’d pushed it over the line and I’d have to reveal to my supervisor what he had done.”

Hunter tightened his grip on Blake’s hand again. *Please shut up, please shut up. Don’t mention the prank...*

“Yes. I could see that,” the psychologist agreed. “He would have been suspended.”

“Damn right he would have!” Lt. Smith roared. “Hunter,

don't you know me well enough to come to me about this kind of thing?"

"No. I'm sorry, Lieutenant. I was pretty gun shy after the treatment I received in San Diego."

"Hunter," Lt. Smith softened his tone, "my son is gay."

"I...I had no idea, sir." Hunter looked at Blake, then Kim and Don. It seemed none of them knew.

"Will you be transferring us, sir?" Blake spoke softly.

"Why?" Lt. Smith asked. "Don't you think you men can act in a professional manner while on duty?"

"Yes, sir!" Hunter replied.

"Blake? You think I'm going to allow anyone else the pleasure of your cooking?"

"No. I suppose not. Thank you, Lieutenant."

Captain Anderson leaned over his knees as if to speak privately. "Right. In light of his information, can I come to the conclusion that though this has been a harrowing event for everyone who worked with Tom Young, you will manage to recover to full working duties?"

All four men answered in unison, "Yes, sir."

"You know," Captain Anderson stated, "even with the information about Tom Young's reputation, he will be buried with all the respect of a firefighter with the Los Angeles County division."

"Yes, sir," was echoed.

"If any of you, for whatever reason, feels the need for some extra counseling or debriefing, please don't be ashamed."

"Thank you, Captain." Hunter smiled at him.

"Lieutenant, I'd like a word with you if you have time." The captain stood, pushing his chair under the table.

"Yes, sir." Lt. Smith winked at Hunter to offer him comfort, leaving with Captain Anderson.

The two men from the psychology department handed out their cards. "It's anonymous, gentlemen. No one has to know if you need to vent."

"Thanks." Hunter read the card in his hand.

One leaned closer to Hunter and Blake. "Bet you're glad the cock-sucker is dead."

Hunter blinked and looked over at Blake for his reaction.

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"I wouldn't wish anyone that kind of demise." Blake shook his head.

"No. Not in public anyhow." The man smiled a little too knowingly.

Hunter was beginning to think gay men in the LAFD ranks made up slightly more than the tiny silent minority.

Finally the chaplain made his rounds, shaking hands. "I'm here if you boys need it. I do weddings as well."

Blake coughed in shock as Hunter laughed hysterically.

"I'm joking," the chaplain added. "But you never know."

"Thank you!" Hunter shook his hand.

When everyone had gone but Kim and Don, Hunter leaned his head on Blake's shoulder. "What a fucking day."

Kim nudged Hunter over to sit with him while Don relaxed on the arm of the sofa to be next to him. "I can't believe you two are lovers."

"You can't believe it?" Blake blew out a breath of air between his teeth.

"We had to hide, Blake." Don held Kim's hand on his lap.

"Do your families know?" Hunter asked.

"Yes. We have full support on both sides. Awesome, huh?" Kim nestled against Don.

Hunter peered at Blake.

"Don't start." Blake held up his hand in defense.

"Uh oh. A sore topic?" Kim smiled.

"It shouldn't be," Blake admonished. "I kissed the guy in front of God and the world."

"You did!" Hunter rubbed noses with him.

"We're really lucky Lt. Smith's son is gay." Don leaned against Kim. "There are some supervisors out there who make Tom Young seem like a saint."

"Hunt."

Hunter met Blake's eyes.

"Thanks for covering for me."

"You can't tell anyone about that prank we played, Blake. They'd have no choice but to discipline you."

Don leaned closer. "I am so sorry I missed it. Was it a good looking drag queen?"

"Oh, hell yeah," Blake whistled. "She was a beaut. Tom fell

hook, line, and sinker.”

“Who was it, Blake?” Hunter asked.

“A friend of Connor’s.”

“Connor?” Hunter laughed. “Gay ambulance driver Connor?”

“That’s the one.” Blake smiled.

“We’re infiltrating,” Kim whispered. “I love it.”

“Those gorgeous cops are as well,” Hunter explained.

“Which ones?” Kim tilted his head.

“Chandler and Stanton.” Blake smiled.

“No!” Don gasped. “I can have wet dreams over those two doing it.”

They shut up when the lieutenant showed up. “Go home. Dispatch has been advised to use other units tonight. Get some rest. Come back in the morning.”

“You sure?” Kim asked.

Don nudged him. “Don’t ask twice, Kim.”

“Thank you, sir.” Hunter rose up and reached out his hand. To his surprise, Lt. Smith embraced him.

In his ear, the lieutenant said, “If anyone, and I mean anyone, says a disparaging word to you, Hunt. You report it to me. You hear me?”

“Yes, sir.” Hunter smiled happily.

“Good man.” The lieutenant, patted Hunter’s back. “Go play. See you in the morning.”

Blake rose off the couch. “Thank you, Lieutenant.”

“No need to thank me. Captain’s orders. Go.”

“You guys want to get a cup of coffee?” Blake asked Kim and Don.

“You mind if we take a rain check?” Kim replied. “I’m exhausted.”

“No. No problem.” Blake hugged both Kim and Don. “Thanks for all the support.”

“Ditto.” Don smiled.

Hunter walked behind Blake as they collected their backpacks. Once they were out in the parking lot, Hunter said, “See you home?”

“Yes.” Blake threw him a kiss.

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* * * *

When Blake entered his house and tossed his backpack on the floor, he started unbuttoning his uniform shirt. Hearing Hunter coming in, he turned to see his weary face and smiled sadly. Just as Blake was stepping into his bedroom to change out of his clothing in favor of shorts, the phone rang. He checked the time on his watch curiously. It wasn't even noon yet. Stripped down to his briefs, Blake picked up the extension. "Hello?"

"Blake, it's your father."

"Hi, Dad." Blake peered back at Hunter who was nearly naked as he stepped out of his uniform.

"I just watched the news and I saw you at that horrible fire."

Blake's blood went cold. He dropped down to sit on the bed. "Oh?"

"They said a firefighter was killed. Was it someone you knew?"

"Yes. It was, Dad. One of the guys from my station." Blake glanced up. Hunter was standing naked, staring back.

"I'm so sorry, Blake. You and the other firemen looked devastated."

"Well, it's always a shock, Dad."

Hunter sat on the bed bending one knee under him.

"Blake..."

"Yes?" Blake rubbed his hand through his hair.

After a pause, his father said, "I have something to ask you. And I don't want you to be upset."

He'd seen their kiss. Blake felt the bile rise in his throat. "Dad..." Blake moaned in expectation.

"Are you gay, Blake?"

Spinning around when Hunter touched his arm affectionately, Blake felt the overwhelming urge to shout denials to prevent the fallout.

"Blake?"

Reaching his hand out to clasp Hunter's, Blake inhaled for courage. "If I am? What then?" He didn't take his gaze off of Hunter's.

"Then you are."

Against every fiber in his body, Blake croaked out from a

closing throat, "Yes. Do you hate me now, Dad?"

"I don't hate you, son."

A hot tear rolled down Blake's cheek. "What? What did you say, Dad?"

"I said I don't hate you, Blake."

"You...you..." Blake dabbed at the drop, wiping it.

"Why have you kept it from your mother and me for so long?"

"I thought you'd freak out." He squeezed Hunter's hand.

"You never even gave us a chance. You know how much we love you. How proud we are of you."

"Yes, but that's just for my work, my job..."

"Blake."

Biting his lip on his emotions, Blake shut up.

"Is the man you are involved with, the one you were with at the fire scene?"

"Yes. His name is Hunter Rasmussen." Blake wiped at another tear.

"Are you living together?"

"We will be."

"Why don't you bring him by for us to meet?"

Choking in a sob, Blake replied, "Am I hearing you right? You're okay with this? Jesus, Dad, I thought you'd disown me."

"How could you think that? Blake, when have your mother and I given you the impression we were intolerant of gay men?"

"I...I just thought, well, not really gay men in general. But Mom constantly asked me about getting married, so I assumed..."

"Blake."

"Yes, Dad?"

"Bring Hunter by."

"Can..." he cleared his throat. "Can I bring him to Maya's graduation?"

"Yes. That's an excellent idea."

"Should you tell Maya? Or do you want me to call her?"

"What do you think?"

"You tell her. Can you do that, Dad?" Blake gave Hunter a warm smile.

"Fine, son. If she hasn't already seen the news on television,

I'll tell her."

"Yes...right." Blake swallowed down some nervousness he was enduring at the conversation. "Thanks, Dad."

"No problem. I'm very glad you are all right. Please be safe on the job, Blake. Don't let things like this distract you."

"No. I won't. See ya soon." Blake hung up and met Hunter's sweet expression. "I really can't believe any of this."

"It's like you're getting slammed with everything at once."

"No kidding." Blake dropped back against the bed heavily.

"But..." Hunter smoothed his hand up Blake's naked torso. "It's all good. Even the fear you had of coming out to your parents hasn't materialized into a traumatic event."

"Pinch me. I'm not awake." Blake rubbed his face in both hands. "I'm sure this is some wicked dream." Feeling a pinch on his side, Blake whispered, "I meant figuratively."

Hunter dug his fingers into Blake's briefs. "So? I'm meeting your family at your sister's graduation?"

"Was it presumptuous of me to do that without a discussion first?"

"No! It's awesome." Hunter pumped Blake's cock a few times as it hardened.

"You own a suit?"

"Yes..." Hunter licked Blake's chin.

"When can you move in?"

Hunter's blue eyes widened in surprise.

Blake wrapped around him and drew him down to his mouth, kissing him. In excitement, Hunter climbed on top of Blake and spread his legs over Blake's hips as they kissed passionately.

Feeling the energy surge through Hunter's contact, Blake cupped his bottom and ground their cocks together hotly. "I love you."

"I love you so much!" Hunter smothered Blake with kisses.

Wrapping around Hunter, holding him close, Blake savored everything about him—his scent, his taste, his weight crushing him. It was bliss.

Chapter Fourteen

The next morning they drove into work together. Blake parked his car in the lot and he and Hunter walked side by side to the back door. Once they were inside, Blake waved at Hailey and Dwight who were smiling at them like they were possessed.

"Get over here, you two!" Hailey rushed them and grabbed them both into a three-way hug.

"Man, word sure travels fast," Hunter gasped.

Dwight had a very impish smirk on his face as he approached them.

Blake managed to squirm out of Hailey's grasp to see what Dwight was holding. "I'm going to die."

"What?" Hunter nudged by Hailey and both he and Blake grabbed the newspaper Dwight was holding. On the front page was a color photo of Blake and Hunter's kiss. The caption read, "Though the flames were out, the fire kept burning."

"What newspaper is that?" Blake pulled it closer. "Oh. It's one of the silly gay presses. I thought that was a little callous of a major newspaper considering Tom died in that fire."

"I knew you two were a couple," Hailey gushed. "Hunter always gets lost on you, Blake. It's so darn cute."

"Stop, Hailey," Hunter teased, "I'm blushing."

"You two macho guys? Gay?" Dwight shook his head. "I'm stunned. Honest."

"You okay with it?" Blake asked Dwight seriously.

"Yeah. No problem, man. Who am I to judge a minority? Know what I mean?"

Blake rubbed Dwight's shoulder affectionately.

Hunter cleared his throat, crossing his arms over his chest.

"Yes?" Blake smiled at him.

"How's it feel? You're out."

Blake swept his eyes around the smiling faces.

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“Feels...ah...”

“Different?” Dwight asked.

“Free?” Hailey laughed.

“Let’s just say I’m going through a period of adjustment.” Blake gave Hunter a reassuring wink. “We need to get our equipment ready.” Blake continued to head to the bunkroom. As he made the bed with fresh sheets, Blake smiled to himself. Maybe this was a better life. It felt honest. He had always prided himself on honesty and integrity in every aspect of his life.

When he returned to the lounge, Lt. Smith had shown up for the morning briefing.

After getting himself a cup of coffee, Blake sat with Hunter and the rest of the crew at the table.

Lt. Smith handed them all paperwork. “This is the date and time of Tom’s funeral. There’ll be a procession with the ladder trucks at the end forming an archway to the cemetery.”

Blake’s good mood vanished.

Lt. Smith handed out mourning badges. “Hunter.”

“Yes, sir?”

“Are you okay wearing one? Under the circumstances?”

“Yes, sir.” Hunter pinned it on.

“The flag is at half-mast out front and we’ve started a collection for his family.”

Blake’s eyes burned and he rubbed his face in agony. Under the table, Hunter’s hand gripped his leg in comfort.

“Blake?”

Forcing himself to get under control, Blake met Lt. Smith’s concerned gaze. “How are you handling it?”

“Fine, sir,” he lied.

“Please use the resources we have at our disposal. There’s no shame in seeking help.”

“Yes. Thank you, sir.”

After a few other details pertaining to handling the death of a colleague were discussed, the lieutenant retired to his office.

Hailey leaned over the table toward Blake. “Are you dealing okay with Tom’s death, Blake?”

“I’m fine.”

Dwight whispered, “I thought the popular consensus was that Young was a racist pig.”

“Racist?” Hunter gaped at Dwight.

“Yeah. Racist.” Dwight’s teeth showed under his snarl.

“Fucking, hell.” Hunter shook his head in disbelief. “Did he say something to you, Dwight?”

“He said things, not at me, around me. Hated the bastard.”

Blake sighed, “I’m trying to find some comfort in the fact that such a nasty Nazi is dead.”

Hunter rubbed Blake’s back. “Please don’t worry.”

“Was he screwing with you guys as well?” Dwight asked.

Before they were able to reply, the tones came out and dispatch announced a motor vehicle accident with injuries.

“We got it.” Hunter nudged Blake and they took off to the sally port to dress in their bunker gear.

Once they were ready, Blake hopped into the driver’s seat of the engine and felt Hunter grab his arm. “Blake. Belt up.”

Trying to find some humor in it, Blake fastened his belt, hit the siren and revved the heavy truck engine moving them out onto the street.

They arrived on the scene of a two-car crash. Blake jumped out and gloved up as he assessed injuries in one car and Hunter did the same to the second. Seeing the airbags had deployed and most of the occupants were shook up, nothing more, Blake felt someone touch his arm.

“Jeff,” Blake sighed in relief.

“How are you and Hunter holding up?”

Nodding but his mouth grim, Blake didn’t reply verbally.

“The sarge wants a bunch of us to go to the funeral. Mickey and I offered.”

“Thanks.” Blake rubbed Jeff’s shoulder warmly.

“We’ll meet up there. Somehow.” Jeff touched Blake’s cheek with one knuckle before he jogged to Mickey to help him set up cones and flares for traffic control.

Snapping back to the present, Blake continued to treat the vehicle occupants with care and patience. He hoped with time and some good friends, his guilty conscience would let up and he could find some peace.

Chapter Fifteen

Blake tied his necktie in the mirror in the bathroom. In the reflection he watched Hunter step in, lift the lid, and pee into the toilet next to him.

“Are you nervous about meeting my folks?”

“No.” Hunter flushed and nudged Blake so he could wash his hands at the sink.

“Damn, you smell good.” Blake leaned into his hair and sniffed.

“Keep that up and we’ll be late for Maya’s graduation.” Hunter dried his hands, twisting Blake to face him to fix his tie. “You dress up nicely, Blake. Too bad you don’t wear a suit and tie for work.”

“I’m nervous.”

“Don’t be. They know and they still want us to come.” Hunter kissed Blake’s nose.

“What a fucking week. First this, then the funeral tomorrow. My guts are tied up in knots.”

Hunter held Blake’s jaw and met his eyes, a very serious expression on his face. “You did not kill Tom Young.”

“Says you.”

Hunter increased his grip on Blake’s jaw. “Blake. Stop it.”

“Let me go. We need to hit the road.” Blake left the bathroom and made sure he had his keys and wallet. “You have the card?”

“Yes.” Hunter waved a greeting card at him.

“Let’s go.”

* * * *

Hunter didn’t even consider asking about the college Maya was graduating from. Until...

"Shit." Hunter gasped as they pulled into an overcrowded parking lot. "Mount St. Mary's College?" he choked. "Are you shitting me?"

"No." Blake parked and shut off the engine. "Now you see why I thought my family would go ballistic about my sexuality."

"I'm going to die." Hunter began laughing. "It's all women, isn't it? Women and nuns!"

"Yes. Behave!" Blake waved a warning finger at him.

"Is Maya gay?"

Blake opened his mouth to respond, shutting it as it appeared the question perplexed him.

"Never mind. Let's go." Hunter opened the car door and straightened up his tie, putting his jacket back on over his dress shirt.

"Don't hold my hand. And please, no sneaking kisses to my cheek. Let's just pretend we're not perverts."

"Perverts? What are you now, Tom Young?"

"Hunt." Blake rolled eyes.

"Son?"

Hunter spun around in the dense crowd to see a couple in their late fifties making their way toward them.

"Mom. Dad." Blake kissed his mother's cheek and shook his father's hand. "This is Hunter."

Hunter smiled sweetly, holding out his hand in greeting.

"What a nice looking man," Mrs. Hughes admired.

"I can't believe you're being so cool about this." Blake shifted nervously.

"How are you both after that tragic accident?" Mr. Hughes asked.

"Trying to deal with it, Dad," Blake whispered. "The funeral is tomorrow."

"That must have been very hard for both of you." Mrs. Hughes touched Blake's cheek, rubbing her lipstick mark off of it.

"When's this thing starting?" Blake checked his watch nervously.

"Soon. We should get to our seats."

When Mrs. Hughes reached out to hold Hunter's hand, he was stunned. He clasped it snugly and allowed her to lead him

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into the dim hall.

Hunter sat next to Blake's mom, who still had his hand in hers, as Blake sat on his opposite side. Blake's father sat next to his wife.

"Which one is she?" Hunter whispered.

Both Blake and Mrs. Hughes began pointing Maya out. Blake kept quiet to allow his mother to do it, and Hunter knew Blake had just realized his mother was holding his hand.

As if it gave Blake some courage, he went for Hunter's available one.

"She's the pretty brunette, third from the left." Mrs. Hughes pointed. "See her?"

"She's a lovely girl." Hunter winked at Mrs. Hughes playfully.

"Do you have a brother?"

"I do!" Hunter bit back his laughter.

"Is he single?"

"He is." Hunter thought this conversation was hilarious.

"Well, there you go." Mrs. Hughes patted Hunter's hand affectionately.

Blake nudged him. "What are you talking about?"

"Your mom wants me to fix my brother up with your sister."

At the shock, Blake choked, coughing to cover his surprise.

"It seems they can stand me, Blake. All that worry was for nothing."

"I cannot believe any of this." Blake shook his head and rubbed his forehead.

"Maybe some people in this world have evolved and we have to have a little faith." Hunter looked up at a sculpture of the Virgin that was dominating the front altar.

"Maybe..." Blake tightened his grip on Hunter's hand.

* * * *

It was late when they finally made it home. Blake unknotted his tie as he walked to the bedroom, tossing his keys and wallet on the dresser.

Hunter removed his suit jacket, smiling at him. "You believe I had to dance all night with your mom and sister?"

"I couldn't get a dance in edgewise." Blake hung up his jacket and kicked off his shoes.

"Maya is fantastic. How could you ever think she wouldn't approve of your decisions, Blake?" Hunter handed his suit jacket to Blake to hang up for him.

"I don't know. I guess I've led a separate life for so long, I've lost touch with who they are."

"You have. They are so damn wonderful, I love them."

Blake paused to give Hunter a warm smile. "They are crazy about you."

"You realize my family will react the same way to you."

"How is that possible?" Blake unbuttoned his dress shirt.

"It just is."

Once Blake was in only his briefs, he met Hunter at the foot of the bed. Helping him remove his shirt, Blake smoothed his hands over Hunter's chest. "I still feel as if this is some weird dream and something unexpected will happen."

"Something unexpected already has." Hunter kissed him softly.

Blake wrapped around him, deepening their kiss. Hunter cupped Blake's face, moaning as the passion ignited in him. Blake's hands slid down his body and under Hunter's briefs. As Blake's hands found him, molding his length in his fingers, Hunter was awash with chills. Gently Blake parted from Hunter's lips, kneeling down before him and taking him into his mouth. At the feel of Blake's hot silky tongue, Hunter closed his eyes and groaned in pleasure.

Urging him on, running his hands through Blake's dark, thick hair, Hunter lavished in the physical touch that meant so much to them both.

Backing away, Blake gave Hunter a wicked smile.

Though he was still deep in a swoon from Blake's talented mouth and tongue, Hunter watched as Blake stripped the rest of his clothing and offered himself on the bed for the taking.

Stepping out of his own briefs, Hunter crawled up the bed to that amazing man. As he knelt up between Blake's bent knees, Blake slid a condom on Hunter's cock, lubing him up with tantalizing flicks of his fingers.

"Blake..." Hunter moaned in longing.

“Your bottom boy awaits.”

Blake gripped his own knees and splayed open for Hunter, a delightfully impish smile on his face.

Taking the lube, Hunter used some to enter Blake’s ring, massaging inside until Blake was writhing on the bed and begging him. “Fuck me. Fuck me.”

Sliding his fingers out, Hunter glided his cock in, shivering at the penetration. Blake interlaced his fingers behind Hunter’s neck and drew him down to his mouth. As Blake did, his cock completely submerged inside Blake’s body. While his tongue fucked Blake’s mouth, Hunter’s cock thrust into Blake’s ass. The kissing was beyond anything Hunter could remember. It was as if Blake had been set free of all his inhibitions. Yes, the sex was always spectacular with Blake, but this?

In between breathy wet kisses, Blake crooned, “Fuck me...fuck me hard...” sending chills of ecstasy over Hunter’s body.

Angling his body to rub against Blake’s prostate, Hunter felt Blake jolt under him with the thrill and the kissing went into a wild frenzy. Blake clutched Hunter’s face and jaw, devouring his mouth and lips. Suddenly, Blake inhaled sharply and arched his back, his head pressing into the pillows and his teeth bared from a climax.

Feeling Blake’s cock pulsate and the hot cum rush out of it between them, Hunter jammed his dick in one last time and rose to the heavens. Opening his lips, he howled at the intensity, feeling free and madly in love. Another thrust into Blake’s heat and Hunter felt his toes tingle as well as the rest of his body. Bracing his hands on the bed beside Blake, Hunter couldn’t resist one more deep pump, this time watching Blake as he gazed back at him. “I love you, you fantastic fucker!”

Blake grabbed Hunter’s cheeks and drew him back down, locking his arms around Hunter’s neck to keep him inside and tightly sealed to his body.

As Hunter recuperated he felt their hearts pounding as one. Dropping down on him, Hunter dug his arms behind Blake’s back and they kissed for a long while before they had the desire to stop.

Chapter Sixteen

Dressed in their formal parade uniforms, Blake and Hunter stood in formation as two extended ladder trucks created an inverted V shape at the entrance of the cemetery. Hundreds of fire engines, medic trucks, patrol cars from state, county, and city departments showed their solidarity.

Graveside, a lone bagpipe played *Amazing Grace*.

The entire station was in a tight line, Hailey, Dwight, Stan, Kim and Don, and he and Hunter, all shoulder to shoulder in their pressed, polished best.

The honor guard had their flagpoles held on their belts, firm hands frozen in a salute as the bagpipe's haunting melody finished.

The chaplain stood at the deep hole, the coffin draped in an American flag, Tom Young's black garbed parents and siblings dabbed their eyes.

Blake was having a rough time keeping it together. He'd been to funerals before. Firefighters, cops, medics. Unfortunately, it wasn't rare.

The turnout was always impressive; thousands of uniformed men and women, horse patrol, K9 units, hundreds of marked vehicles in the parade with their overhead red and blues flashing.

The mayor, the governor, the press...it was a big deal to lose a firefighter. A very big deal.

Hot tears rolled down Blake's cheeks. As discreetly as possible, he dabbed at them. Other than the family, no one else was crying. Just him. The guilty one.

Hunter brushed against him lightly. Blake knew he was trying to comfort him.

Blake dreaded anyone thinking he missed the guy, or that he had shared common beliefs with Tom Young. But that didn't stop the nightmare inside Blake at what he had done.

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The chaplain prayed, saying things to comfort the grieving. Blake couldn't hear. His brain was becoming clouded.

The casket was lowered once the flag was folded and handed to Tom's parents.

Blake was about to lose it. Forcing his gaze up to the hazy heavens, Blake pretended this wasn't happening.

A bugle blew taps. Blake felt his knees give out.

Kim on one side and Hunter on the other gripped him around his waist, holding him up.

"Hang in there, Blake," Hunter whispered.

His lips moving, Blake silently begged, "I'm sorry, God. I'm sorry... Forgive me..."

Almost as if he had lost consciousness, Blake noticed motion around him. The ceremony had ended and people were beginning to either walk back to their cars or mill around whispering.

Kim twisted Blake to face him, meeting his eyes. "You did nothing wrong."

Blake didn't answer, nor did he agree.

"Blake," Hunter hissed, "please stop blaming yourself."

Shaking his head, Blake knew if he answered he'd cry. So he bit his lip. Thoughts of approaching the mourning family and confessing, apologizing to them, raced through his mind. He needed to tell them he was sorry.

Someone else was grabbing him. Blake was forced to meet a set of brilliant green eyes. "Blake."

A spectacular LAPD cop in his parade dress and hat was holding him. "Jeff?"

"I have something I need to tell you."

"Are you arresting me?" Blake felt his voice strangled in his throat.

"No, shut up and listen to me."

Blake nodded but he wasn't sure he could focus on Jeff's words.

"When Tom's parents went to his apartment to clear out his belongings, they found some Nazi propaganda."

Blake tried to focus on Jeff's handsome face and strange words.

"He had some unusual weapons, Blake. Are you following

me?"

"Nazi propaganda," Blake echoed weakly.

"On his computer he had a plan to kill Hunter."

When Blake didn't reply, Jeff shook him. "Blake, pay attention."

"Say that again?" Blake asked in confusion.

"Tom Young was going to bring Hunter someplace in the woods to torture and kill him." Jeff shook Blake again. "Can you hear me?"

Blake looked for Hunter. Hunter was standing beside Jeff with Mickey, Kim and Don, listening. "What?" Blake gasped.

"You saved your lover's ass, Blake. Don't cry for that schmuck."

His mouth opening in astonishment, he met with Hunter's eyes. "Hunt?"

Hunter reached out to him, crying.

Jeff backed up allowing Blake to embrace Hunter.

"You saved my life, Blake." Hunter rocked him in his arms. "Thank you. Oh, Jesus, thank you."

Blake closed his eyes and finally felt the pain in his chest and head subsiding. Holding Hunter tight, Blake kissed his neck and hid his face in his epilates and brass buttons.

"Good job, my man." Kim patted Blake's back. "Damn good job."

After Blake exchanged a peck on Hunter's lips, he looked back at Jeff and Mickey in gratitude. "Thank you."

"You're very welcome, hero." Jeff smiled.

Hunter reached out to touch Jeff affectionately. Jeff took a small step back and looked around.

"Oh?" Hunter asked. "Not all the way out?"

"Not yet." Jeff smiled slyly.

Mickey joked, "We're getting there, but not yet."

Kim laughed with relief. "Well, just like we say in the fire service, men. Two in-two out!"

Blake laughed. It felt so good to laugh, it was as if a load was lifted from him. They walked back to their cars and engines together. Hunter held Blake's hand tightly, giving him adoring smiles when he met Blake's eyes.

Once they were seated in their big, red fire engine, Blake

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was about to warn Hunter, when Hunter buckled his seatbelt. “I got it, Blake. I’ll remember from now on.”

Blake reached out for Hunter’s face and drew him to a kiss. “I love you so much. Thank you.”

“Thank me?” Hunter choked at the absurdity. “Can you imagine what that freak would have done to me if he managed to succeed in his wretched plan? I owe you my life, Blake.”

“Thank you, Hunter. For making me realize that loving you isn’t wrong or frightening or immoral. It’s right. And you have made me feel whole and free. I will always adore you for it.”

Hunter kissed him again, smiling broadly. “What’s cookin’, good lookin’?”

“Hungry again?” Blake laughed, starting the engine.

Purring, Hunter held his hand. “Always hungry for you.”

“Two-fucking-out!” Blake shouted, blowing the air horn to celebrate.

“Get over here.” Hunter unhooked his belt and climbed on top of Blake in the driver’s seat.

Laughing hysterically at his lover’s antics, Blake wrapped around him tightly, devouring him with kisses.

About the Author

G.A. Hauser was born in the shadow of the Manhattan skyline in the suburbs of New Jersey in the sleepy town of Fair Lawn. After graduating with a degree in Fine Arts from a university in New York, she gave up the idea of being a starving artist and headed for Seattle. For over a decade she lived in Rain City, and the last eight of those years she wore a blue police uniform working for the Seattle Police Department as a patrol officer. She's been writing since 1990 but it wasn't until she reached the wet British Isles that she published her first book, *In The Shadow of Alexander*. She lived in Hertfordshire, England for six years and from there she was able to travel and see the wonders of the world. She's back in the good ol' USA once again and is convinced *there's no place like home*.