



TURQUOISE

SOMETHING'S
GOTTA GIVE

KIERAN
KELLY

Turquoise: Something's Gotta Give
by Kiernan Kelly

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Heath Ambers knew a bad deal when he saw one, and the battleship gray, '82 Dodge Caravan with the blistered paintjob and missing rear fender definitely qualified.

There was an oil slick underneath it from a visible leak, staining the concrete driveway black in slow, steady drops. The rear window was missing, replaced by a sheet of heavy-duty plastic and wide bands of silver duct tape. Enough scratches and dents graced the driver's side panels to qualify as accordion pleats. The upholstery was torn and reeked strongly of cat piss—at least, Heath *hoped* it was cat piss. The engine turned over—after three or four tries—but it was sputtering and hiccupping, threatening to die at any moment.

The only thing the piece of shit had in its favor was the price tag. "It's good for parts," the balding owner said, scratching his beer gut under his yellowed wife-beater. "A hundred bucks and it's yours."

Heath left the engine idling and climbed out from behind the driver's seat. He popped the hood and peered intently at the twisted, blackened heap of junk that laughingly passed as an engine, recoiling as a sudden hiss of steam escaped the radiator hose.

"Got a brand new battery," the owner said encouragingly, hovering in the background.

Yeah, sure the battery's new... or at least it was, sometime back in the late nineties, Heath thought, eyeing the square, black box. A full decade later saw the connections corroded,

and Heath doubted it would last out the month. He was surprised it still held a charge—the owner must've jumped it before Heath got there.

Heath also spotted a badly worn fan belt, and he heard a miss in the transmission among other, not so readily identifiable clinks and clanks, none of which sounded remotely healthy.

Still, it was only a hundred bucks, and he needed a new set of wheels desperately.

Goddamn Johnny for fucking me over the way he did! Heath thought, grinding his teeth. Johnny had cleaned Heath out when he left—the new television, the stereo system, the computer, most of the furniture, not to mention Heath's car, leaving Heath with a virtually empty apartment, no ride, and a mountain of credit card debt.

No, Heath thought. *I take it back. Damn me for trusting that scumbag in the first place. I should have known better. Johnny was always bad news, even when we were kids. I should have kicked his ass out the minute he showed up at the door.* He slammed the hood of the car down, wincing when the entire chassis creaked ominously. "I'll take it," he told the owner, mentally crossing his fingers that the rusting heap would last out the rest of the month.

He couldn't believe his own eyes when he'd come home from work last Thursday. Johnny had the car for the day, which necessitated Heath taking a cab. Johnny was *supposed* to run errands—grocery shopping, picking up Heath's dry cleaning, and take-out dinners from Giovanni's. They'd made

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plans to eat in and catch the game on TV that night. Instead, Heath came home to an empty apartment.

Heath remembered staring at the wide open space that used to be his comfortable living room, then backing out of the door and checking the apartment number, as if his key had somehow turned into some sort of magical passkey, and he'd unlocked the door of the wrong unit by mistake. It was easier to believe than the bald, painful truth.

Johnny had taken nearly everything—all of which, of course, belonged to Heath, including his late model Audi—and helped himself to all but the last couple hundred dollars in Heath's bank account. Heath suspected Johnny had left *that* much only because he'd hit the limit of cash withdrawals on Heath's bank card. If Johnny could have, he probably would've scraped Heath's account completely empty, and licked it clean for good measure.

The only thing he left behind was the cell phone Heath had given him, probably because he knew Heath would cancel his service immediately if he took it.

Worst of all were the personal items Johnny had taken, irreplaceable things, like the ring Heath had been given by his father. It was gold, set with a large turquoise stone, but the ring meant far more to Heath than its market value. His father had given it to Heath shortly after Heath came out; to Heath it was a tangible reminder of how loved he'd been by his parents. Now that his dad was gone, it meant even more to Heath and its loss devastated him far more than any pricier item Johnny had taken.

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Instead of gorging on pasta primavera and watching the Patriots take on the Raiders as he'd planned, Heath drank a cup of stale coffee at the police station as he filled out a report. The police were sympathetic, and said they were confident they'd find Heath's car, but Heath wasn't so sure. Johnny might be a coarse and serious asshole, but he was a smart one, too. The car was probably already in pieces, scattered across the floor of a chop shop, the rest of Heath's stuff sitting in a dingy pawnshop somewhere, and Johnny himself, halfway to Mexico. Even if the cops found Johnny, it would probably be too late to recoup any of Heath's losses. If he knew Johnny, whatever cash he'd gotten from hocking Heath's belongings and selling the car would already have disappeared up his nose.

Fucking crackhead.

The saddest part was that Heath had never seen it coming. Unlike the Caravan, which was obvious in its faults, Johnny managed to convince Heath he was sincere, that he'd turned over a new leaf. No more trouble with the law. No more drugs. The last two years in prison had reformed him, he'd said.

"I'm a new man, Heath. I swear it! All I need is somewhere to crash until I can get on my feet, and find a job. It'll only be for a couple of nights. Please, for old times' sake, help me out, okay?"

Those "couple of nights" stretched into weeks, then months. Looking back, Heath realized Johnny had played him like a Stradivarius from the very beginning. Johnny was so slick, so good at running the grift that Heath had never

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suspected he was being taken. He'd believed Johnny, and God help him, was lonely enough to let Johnny blind him with sex, and stupid enough to mistake it for affection.

God, when did I become such a pathetic loser?

As he stared at the rusty and dirty minivan, waiting for the owner to sign the pink slip, his mind replayed his trip from riches to rags that had begun the very first night Johnny Brazzio showed up at his door.

* * * *

They sat on the sofa and tossed back a few beers—well, Heath tossed two, while Johnny tossed the rest—reminiscing about the old neighborhood and friends, and their own history together.

"It used to be good between us, remember, Heath?" Johnny said, cracking open his fifth or sixth. Heath had already lost count. "Never should have left you. Should've held on tight to what we had."

"Well, the police didn't see it that way, Johnny," Heath said wryly. "They figured it was better if you went with *them*, considering how they were arresting you and all."

"Yeah. I was stupid when I jacked the black Corvette. Man, it was a sweet ride, though! I guess I should've dumped it instead of driving it home, huh?"

"Maybe—just a thought here—you shouldn't have stolen it in the first place."

"Yeah, that, too. Well, it's water under the bridge, right? I learned my lesson. Everybody's entitled to a mistake, right?" He drained his beer and reached for another, passing one to

Heath. "You look like you're doing okay for yourself. Got a good job and all?"

Heath bit his tongue. There was no sense in throwing the fact that Johnny hadn't learned from his mistake, or that the Corvette incident was only the first of several run-ins with the law that'd left Johnny with all-expenses-paid trips to prison, in his face. Heath knew of at least three such "mistakes" in Johnny's past, and who knew how many others *hadn't* ended in his arrest? "I'm doing okay. I'm working as a graphic designer in an advertising agency downtown. It's not a big company, but I like it there, and the money's good."

Johnny nodded, staring into his beer bottle. "That's cool. You, uh, seeing anybody? Got somebody special?"

"No, not at the moment." There were a few men Heath saw from time to time, but they were more like friends with privileges than relationships. There was no one Heath was seeing seriously. He hadn't found anyone he wanted to spend more than a night with, although to be truthful, he wasn't really trying to find one, either. He was happy as he was—at least, that's what he told himself when he crawled into his cold, empty bed at night. Someday it might be nice to settle down, do the whole white-picket-fence-thing, but not yet.

"Oh, yeah? Me either. I'm surprised about you, though. I would've thought you'd be knee-deep in monogamy by now. You never seemed the type to fuck around."

"I'm not. I just haven't found Mr. Right yet, that's all," Heath sniffed, a new wave of irritation washing over him. It was a case of the pot calling the kettle a slut, in Heath's opinion. Johnny was known to fuck anything willing to bend

over, and he wasn't very particular about getting incidentals first, likes names and phone numbers.

"Okay, okay. Don't get your nose out of joint. I just meant that you were always such a nice guy, a real looker, with a good job... I figured somebody would've scooped you up by now."

Heath relented and smirked. "Yeah, I'm a prize, all right. Put a coaster under your beer, will ya? I don't want rings on my table."

"I mean it, Heath. You're still hot. I haven't been able to stop staring at you since I got here. Listen," Johnny said, putting his beer down—without a coaster—and taking Heath's from his hand, "I'm going to be truthful here, get it off my chest and out in the open, okay? If you don't like what I'm saying, just tell me."

"You know I just got out of the joint. It's been a really long time for me, you know? I mean, there were guys in there, sure, but... you look so good, so *clean*. You smell good, too. Fuck, I've been hard since I walked in the door."

"Wow. I can see you haven't lost your silver tongue, Johnny. Way to flatter a guy." Heath gave a little, uncomfortable laugh. "I'm sure you didn't go without all these years."

In truth, Johnny looked damned good, too. Prison must've agreed with him—at least physically. He'd buffed up in the years since Heath last saw him. His arms bulged with muscle, and they were both covered with sexy, tribal tattoos. A tight, white T-shirt clung to his sculpted chest, and Heath hadn't missed the strong legs and solid ass under Johnny's jeans.

Oh, don't even go there, Heath thought. He's a criminal, fresh out of the joint. He's bad news. Bad Johnny. Bad Heath, for even thinking about what he'd look like naked

"Come on! You know what I mean. With the guys inside, it was always fast and hard. They were fucking pigs, Heath. It was about power, control, and release, nothing else. Not like it was with us. I remember what it used to be like. I used to dream about you, about how we used to make love, slow and easy, all night long. Remember how we used to drive down to the Jersey shore in the summer, to the boardwalk? We'd go underneath the pier at night, and spread a blanket out on the sand."

Heath remembered. They'd make love to the sound of the crashing waves, with calliope music playing from the merry-go-round above their heads on the pier. Afterward, they'd run naked into the water of the Atlantic to wash off before returning to the sand and starting all over again. He remembered many Monday mornings when wearing underwear had been an exercise in pain because of sand-burn on his ass and privates.

"We were kids then, Johnny. Things have changed."

"I know, I know, but I can't help it, Heath. I still want you. I never stopped wanting you," Johnny whispered. He gently stroked Heath's face with calloused fingers, then suddenly, Johnny's lips were on his, and Heath was lost.

Heath met Johnny in a scorching kiss full of tongue, teeth, and memories of limber young bodies and thundering surf. Johnny's urgency showed in his brutal kiss; his weight pushed Heath back against the sofa, hands on his face, pulling at

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Heath's shirt, smoothing across his chest, sliding down to his crotch, as if Johnny couldn't decide where he wanted to touch Heath first.

Neither could Heath—he was hard and aching already, and all they'd done so far was kiss! He felt like a teenager again, when the universe revolved around his prick and balls and nothing else mattered.

Oh, God! How long had it been since Heath wanted someone so badly that clothing suddenly became disposable? He ignored the tearing sound as he ripped off his shirt, buttons popping and flying like small white missiles, too anxious to get down to skin to worry about shredding his favorite Abercrombie and Fitch.

Johnny stripped out of his T-shirt, flinging it across the room. Their pants went next, amid grunting and awkward scooting as both he and Johnny peeled off their tight jeans. Finally, when nothing separated their bodies from each other but air, they paused.

Heath stared. He couldn't help it. Johnny looked so different from the last time Heath had seen him. Back then, Johnny had been so young, skinny, all elbows and knees, sharp hips and long, lean, boyish muscles.

Today, Johnny was six feet of rock-hard man. No matter where Heath looked, there was bulging muscle, sculpted from the years of hard labor thanks to Uncle Sam's penal system. His olive-toned skin was smooth, although marred by several vicious-looking, pale scars that Heath didn't remember him having before, including several on his left forearm that looked like cigarette burns. There were new tattoos as well—

the tribal designs on his arms that Heath had noticed earlier, a tiger on his chest, and a series of Japanese characters across the nape of his neck. Another stream of oriental markings graced his left hip.

"Pretty, huh?" Johnny said, rubbing his hand over the tiger on his chest. Heath licked his lips as he watched Johnny's fingers slide across his skin, and settle over one dusky nipple. "Got 'em in the joint. My last cellmate was an artist on the outside—'til he offed his old lady. Society's loss was my gain, I guess. He was great with ink, but a lousy fuck."

"Real pretty," Heath breathed. "Want to lick 'em, Johnny. Taste them."

Johnny laughed and lay back on the sofa. "I'm all yours. Just call me 'Johnny, the All-You-Can-Eat Human Buffet.' Anyplace in particular you want to start?" His finger flicked over the tightened nub of his nipple. "Here?" His hand slid slowly down his ripped abdomen to his crotch, fingers wrapping around his thick cock. "Or did you plan to go right for the main course?"

"Oh, yeah," Heath breathed, leaning in. He swatted Johnny's hand away. "Give me some of that." He leaned down, head already swimming with the musky scent of male that clung to Johnny's crotch, when suddenly reality kicked in. He popped up like a cork in an over-shook bottle of champagne, his eyes wide. *Whoa! Hold on... am I crazy? This guy just got out of prison for God's sake, and I'm ready to suck him off without any protection? I must be nuts!*

"What's the matter?"

"Uh, look, Johnny, no offense, but... I think we need to use a condom," Heath said softly. He hated having to spoil the mood—*really* hated it, considering how hard he was—but no matter that he felt as if his balls were ready to explode, he didn't have a death wish. "I've got a box of rubbers in the bedroom."

Incredulously, Johnny laughed. "Why? You got something you need to tell me about?"

Heath felt his cheeks heat up. "No, I'm clean."

"Oh, so it's me you're worried about. Oh, I get it. Just out of the joint, so I must be positive, huh?"

"Johnny..."

"It's okay. I understand. The numbers are against me. Yeah, let's get to the bedroom before I lose control and come all over your pretty leather sofa." Johnny was smiling, but Heath could see bitterness flashing in his eyes.

"We don't have to—"

"Oh, yeah, we do. You can't leave me like this. That's cruel and unusual punishment, baby," Johnny growled. He fisted himself, drawing Heath's eyes back to his engorged cock.

Pretty. Very, very pretty, and well worth the trip into the bedroom for the rubber... and some lube, Heath added mentally as Johnny stood up and turned around, and Heath got another look at Johnny's plump, firm ass. *Oh, yeah, lube's going to be very useful, because I'm going to drive myself into that ass up to my ankles.*

The trip to the bedroom was short, a quick sprint across the living room. Heath dove for the nightstand drawer where he kept his supplies, while Johnny flung himself backward

onto the king-sized bed, lying spread-eagled across the goose-down comforter. "Man, now *this* is a bed!" he grinned, moving his arms and legs as if he were making a snow angel in the satiny fabric. "It beats the fucking shit out of the cots in the joint! It used to feel like you were sleeping on a tissue-covered ironing board in there. This is like lying on a cloud, dude."

"Yeah. Pillowtop mattress. Come here," Heath said, kneeling on the edge of the bed, a condom in one hand and the slick in the other. His cock was at full staff, already wet with pre-come. He needed, badly, and didn't want to waste time discussing the benefits of a Sealy vs. Simmons.

"Ooh, in a hurry, huh? Okay," Johnny replied, sitting up. He propped his arms behind him, and licked his lips. "How do you want it, big boy? You gonna bend over this fine mattress for me, or did you want to bury that monster in my tight, little hole?"

"I..." Heath was so horny that he found it difficult to make pleasantries. His hips rocked in parody of sex, humping the air. "God, I want to fuck you, Johnny."

"Just like old times, huh?" Johnny said, his cheek hitching in a half-grin. "You always liked to top."

"Still do."

"Did some riding of my own in the joint, you know. I didn't bottom for anybody, unless they were bigger and stronger than me, and beat the shit out of me first. You don't look like you could take me."

Heath blinked, looking confused. "I'm not going to fight you, Johnny. I just thought... you know, we were going to... oh, shit. I'm fucking this up."

Johnny laughed. "Nah, I'm just yanking your chain." He clambered to his knees and crawled closer to Heath. He stuck his tongue out and licked a long, slow path up from Heath's bellybutton to his right nipple, drawing the tight bud into his mouth, teasing it with his teeth for a moment before moving on to Heath's throat. He nipped him just under the jaw line, wringing a soft moan from Heath's lips that felt like it came directly from his balls. "You want me, you got me, tough guy."

Suddenly, Johnny pulled away and turned around, turning his beautiful ass toward Heath. Between the cheeks of Johnny's bubble butt, Heath could see his asshole, a dark brown, ridged ring dusted with black hair. It was clenching as if beckoning to Heath's cock to come in and take a look around.

Okay... so who needs foreplay, anyway? Heath thought, ripping open the condom wrapper with his teeth. He rolled the thin latex over his cock, wincing as his touch made him even harder, and flipped open the top of the tube of slick. He squeezed a gob over his fingers, and spread the viscous liquid generously between Johnny's ass cheeks.

"Mmm, mmm, good," Johnny murmured. His head hung low, and his hips bucked as Heath worked the lube into his hole. His hand flipped around his hip, palm up. "Gimme a dab, man."

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Heath complied, squeezing a dollop of goo onto Johnny's palm. He watched as Johnny fisted himself, heard the wet sounds of Johnny's hand sliding over his cock. His own cock twitched with jealousy, and he turned his attention back to Johnny's tight hole.

He slid a finger in, feeling the silken walls of Johnny's ass gripping his digit, hot and soft, clenching around him. Heath bit back a whimper. He wanted inside in the worst way. Now. Five minutes ago.

The tube farted as he squirted the last of the slick over his latex-covered cock. He tossed the empty container to the side and grabbed his dick, aligning the fat head with the tiny entrance into Johnny's body. Heath squeezed his eyes shut, his head falling back as he eased into Johnny, pushing past muscle that resisted only for a moment before letting him in.

Something told him Johnny had played bottom a lot more often than he'd admitted.

He pushed the thought away, concentrating on the delicious tightness, the heat, and the building pressure in his balls as he began to pump himself into Johnny's ass. All the way in, then nearly all the way out. Again and again, he picked up the tempo, his hips slapping against Johnny's ass cheeks, filling the room with the music of sex.

Johnny's head hung so low, his hair brushed the mattress. "Oh, fuck, yeah!" he groaned. Heath could hear his hand working his cock feverishly, felt his ass clench as he began to come. "Fuck me!"

I am, Heath thought, then ceased thinking altogether as his orgasm rolled up. His thrusts grew harder, erratic, and he

pulled out at the very last moment only by sheer force of will, ripping off the condom, shooting his load over Johnny's back. One, two, three strokes was all it took, his eyes rolling back in his head, shards of sharp pleasure spearing him, every muscle in his body growing rigid with ecstasy.

"Oh, fuck, that was good," Johnny breathed. He rolled over, smearing Heath's come all over the comforter. "You have fun back there, tough guy?"

"Yeah. Fun. Good," Heath gasped, out of breath and heart still pounding. He collapsed on the bed next to Johnny, listening to the blood pound in his ears. Either he was out of shape and needed to hit the treadmill more often, or that had been a fuck for the ages. His ego preferred to think it was the latter.

"Just like old times. So, do you mind if I crash for a couple of days?" Johnny asked.

Still reeling from his orgasm, heart banging against his sternum, Heath nodded. It would be worth the inconvenience of a houseguest if it meant a few more orgasms like that one.

Of course, later he would ask himself if the sex was worth the loss of all his worldly possessions and the shredding of his self-esteem, because in the end, that's exactly the price he'd paid.

* * * *

Heath pushed Johnny and his talents in bed out of his mind, concentrating on the minivan. *A minivan, for God's sake! Do I look like a soccer mom?*

Then again, no soccer mom alive would be caught dead driving around town in this piece of crap

It was no use. He couldn't afford anything else, not right now. Not with the pile of credit card bills Johnny had racked up, and the rent coming due. He sighed, and dug out his wallet, counting out five wrinkled twenties.

The owner looked surprised, as if he hadn't thought Heath stupid enough to go for it, but recovered quickly, grabbing the money out of Heath's hands, exchanging it for the pink slip. He tossed the keys onto the hood and disappeared into his house. No doubt, he was worried Heath might come to his senses, grab his money back, and run for the hills.

Heath could swear he heard his love life's death rattle in the grinding and groaning of the minivan's engine as it bucked down the driveway to the street.

Surprisingly—no, *astoundingly*—the clanking heap made it back to Heath's apartment complex without falling completely apart or dropping miscellaneous parts along the highway like a breadcrumb trail. He pulled into his reserved parking space, the one that'd once been home to a sleek, shiny, silver Audi, and fought with the shifter to put it into park. He turned off the engine—which continued to wheeze, gasp, and ping for a few moments as if dying a difficult death—and got out of the minivan. He almost locked the doors before he realized no one in their right mind would ever want to jack it.

"Nice ride." The voice startled Heath, and his fingers tightened around the plastic keychain shaped like the state of Florida. He turned, and found himself looking into a pair of twinkling, turquoise eyes. He recognized the man immediately

as one of the cops who'd been at the station when he'd gone to give his statement. *Officer William Brady*, Heath thought, as his eyes flicked to the neat nametag pinned above his badge.

"Sorry I startled you," Brady said, smiling.

"It's okay. What can I do for you, Officer Brady?" Heath turned his back on the minivan, as if he could hide it from Brady. *Nice ride. Yeah, no sarcasm there*, he thought. *Be fair. What did you expect? The van sucks. You know it, and he knows it.*

"Call me Bill."

"You're in uniform."

Bill grinned. "Just got off. Duty, that is."

Oh, those blue-green eyes were dangerous. They gleamed like polished chips of turquoise under Bill's long, thick lashes, and reminded Heath of the ring he'd lost, but he shoved that thought out of his head. His day had been sucky enough as it was; he didn't need to dwell on his precious ring.

Besides, Bill's eyes also made a man wonder if Bill meant the double-entendre, and whether that was an invitation Heath heard in his voice.

Stop it! Thinking with your dick is what got you into the trouble you're in, Heath silently lectured himself. "Have you found my car, yet?"

"Sorry, no. We've had a few leads, but they didn't pan out. Put out an APB on the Audi, although if he's switched the plates, it's going to be hit or miss whether anyone will spot him. I can't believe you didn't have Lo-Jack on that thing."

"It was an option at the time I bought the car, but I didn't think I'd need it."

"Well, hindsight is twenty-twenty, as they say."

"So... you came all the way out here just to tell me you *haven't* found my car?"

"Not really. Your place was on my way home, so I thought I'd stop and see if you had any photos available of Brazzio. All we have are mug shots, and they're a couple of years old. You mentioned he had new tats, so..."

"The only pictures I have of Johnny are even older than his mug shots. They were taken over ten years ago, when we were teenagers," Heath said, arching an eyebrow. "I described all of his tattoos in my statement. Isn't that enough?"

Bill laughed softly, looking down at his spit-polished dress shoes. "Yeah, well... okay, you got me. I lied. I didn't come for photos. I came to see if you'd maybe want to have coffee with me... or dinner."

So, he hadn't imagined the invitation in Bill's deep voice after all. "Do you take every victim who comes in to file a report out to dinner? Seems like an extreme—if pleasant—waste of taxpayers' money."

Again Bill laughed, but this time his eyes met Heath's. "No, just you. How about it?"

"I don't know. I just got taken pretty badly. He got everything... well, you already know all the sorry details. I'm not very good company these days."

"You still have to eat, right? Plus, I seem to remember that he took your microwave and your pots and pans."

"The microwave, the utensils, most of my Calphalon cookware, and just about everything else he could carry out of the apartment. I was almost surprised he left the paint on the walls and the rugs. He must've used a truck to cart it all away."

Bill nodded. "We figure he had an accomplice: somebody driving a rented truck."

The idea had occurred to Heath before, although he hadn't let it surface for very long. It was bad enough that Johnny had used him and ripped him off, but the thought that Johnny had someone else all along only made it worse. Maybe his accomplice wasn't Johnny's lover, but odds were...

Why do you care? Heath clamped down on his emotions before they ran away with him. *Johnny's a crook, scum. Whether he was fucking somebody else while you were at work hardly makes a difference, does it?*

It did, though.

"Come on. You really look like you could use a good meal," Bill said. "I know a great Italian place down on Fifth. Giovanni's. They have a wonderful manicotti—"

"I know the place," Heath cut in, remembering that Johnny was supposed to pick up dinner from Giovanni's on the day he'd cleaned Heath out. "I—"

"Good! It's settled. Come on, we'll take my car," Bill said, eyeing Heath's newest purchase. "I, uh... I have to put gas in 'er anyway. I have work early tomorrow, and the gas station is on the way to the restaurant."

Heath felt his lips curve in a smile. "You sure? It's not everyday you get the opportunity to ride in a fine luxury

automobile like this one," he said, patting the driver's door of the minivan. He winced when the side view mirror fell off, barely catching it before it hit the ground. He swore, opening the door and tossing it onto the front seat.

Bill laughed. "Yeah, maybe next time. I'll make sure to bring jumper cables and duct tape with me. Come on, my car's over here. Do you mind if we stop at my place so I can change? It won't take but a minute."

Heath gave up, laughing. "Sure, no problem. You're driving and buying. You make the rules." He followed Bill to his car. It was a green, older model Ford, nothing snazzy, but still miles better than the beauty Heath now owned. He slid into the passenger seat, buckling up.

Bill chattered non-stop on the drive to his place, mostly about his job. By the time they reached his house, Heath had learned that Bill's grandfather and father had both been cops, and Bill was proud to follow in their footsteps. He loved his job, lived alone, and didn't even mind it when he was put on the night shift.

His home was a small Cape Cod cottage out near the city limits, surrounded by a neat yard edged by a genuine, white picket fence. The front steps were flanked by twin, carefully tended flowerbeds. *Hallmark country*, Heath thought. *It looks like it belongs in a Norman Rockwell painting*

"Here we are. I know what you're thinking just by the look on your face. It's sort of too cute, right? It was my parents' house. I inherited it. Why pay rent when I can own, right? It's a little out of the way, but it's private, and the neighborhood's

quiet," Bill said, popping open the car door locks and swinging his door open. "Come on, I'll give you the grand tour."

"It's great. It beats an apartment, anyway—especially one that's been stripped of everything but the toilet bowl."

Bill laughed again, and Heath grinned. Bill was open and funny, and extremely easy to like. *Dangerous*, Heath reminded himself. *Remember Johnny. Learn your lesson. You don't know this guy.* His smile faded as he followed Bill through a gate into the front yard and along a colorful slate walkway to the stoop. He heard barking coming from inside the house.

Of course Bill would have a dog. Bill was a walking, talking ad for Middle America.

The front door swung open and out bounded a yapping bundle of fur that was all floppy ears and big paws. "This is Clancy," Bill said, scooping up the wriggling puppy. He was immediately rewarded by frantic wet licks across his face. "He's a golden retriever—or will be when he grows up. Right now, he's just a ball of energy wrapped up in a fuzzy coat."

Heath grinned, reaching over to scratch between the pup's ears before Bill set Clancy down. Clancy yapped a few more times then high-tailed it down the steps onto the lawn to take care of business. Before Bill could usher Heath inside the house, Clancy was back, yipping and jumping up, clamoring for more attention.

"Hey! Down, Clancy!" Bill said sternly as the pup jumped and slapped his large paws on Heath's pant leg. "Behave yourself. We have company."

"Nah, it's okay. I like dogs. He's cute," Heath chuckled, squatting down so Clancy could reach his face. Energetic wet licks and puppy breath were his reward. "He's a sweet little guy."

"Yeah, I'd love him more if he'd stop peeing in my shoes," Bill said, raising an eyebrow at Clancy, who thumped his tail against the carpet and smiled a doggy grin. "Yeah, I'm talking about you, sport. I don't even have to go look to know you did it again."

"Didn't you say you work a lot of long shifts? He's probably lonely, and that's his way of letting you know about it," Heath laughed, giving Clancy one last scratch before standing up again.

"Yeah, well, I'm lonely too, but I don't go around pissing in other people's loafers."

Heath bit back a smile, wondering if Bill was aware of how much information he'd given out with that last statement. He cleared his throat. "Dinner? Anytime soon, do you think?"

Bill grinned sheepishly and nodded. "Yeah. Come on in. Kitchen's through the back. Help yourself to something to drink. I think I have a few cans of soft drinks stashed away in the back of the fridge, behind last week's spaghetti and a container of blue stuff that might've been Jell-O once upon a time. I'll be right back. A quick pass-through in the shower and fresh clothes—I'll be ready in no more than fifteen minutes. Promise." He trotted down the hallway, ostensibly toward his bedroom. Heath heard a door open and click shut again.

He looked down at Clancy. "You've got some master there, pup. Kind of like a really cute, buff Barney Fife. Come on, I could use a drink." He ambled in the direction Bill had pointed toward and found himself in a wide, airy kitchen. Yellow curtains hung over the windows; matching towels and potholders were strewn over the laminated countertop. A small oak table was shoved against one wall, flanked by two captain's chairs. The stove and refrigerator were avocado green, remnants from the early seventies.

Heath snagged a Coke from the fridge, cracked it open and took a long, cool swallow while Clancy sat between his feet, looking up at him and drooling.

"Puppies don't drink soda," Heath said, shaking his head at Clancy. "Go lap up some water, pal. This stuff will rot you from the inside out."

Heath meandered to the kitchen door and looked out through the curtain swags framing its window into the backyard. Neat as a pin, it was complete with emerald green grass cut to a uniform length, a doghouse (which Heath somehow doubted Clancy ever used, unless Bill dragged it inside every night and laid it at the foot of his bed). There was a redwood picnic table with a gigantic, striped umbrella sticking out of the middle of it, and a huge, stainless steel grill. Along the length of one side of the white picket fence that continued from the front yard around the rear, was a neatly tended vegetable garden. From the look of tall, leafy plants with bright red-orange fruit, he guessed tomatoes, and something dark green and leafy, maybe cabbage or spinach.

Yup. Definitely Mayberry, he thought, taking another chug of his Coke. *I wonder where he keeps Andy, Aunt Bea, and Opie*

No matter how sarcastic his thoughts, there was a small voice inside his head that whispered, *"Me, too."* Maybe it was his experience with Johnny, but suddenly, being in the middle of a fifties' sitcom didn't seem half as bad as Heath would have thought just the week before. No noise. No traffic. No ex-lover-hoodlum-former-convicts stealing him blind.

It was kind of nice—peaceful, if a little corny. He looked down at Clancy. "Guess you come part and parcel with the rest of it, huh? The house, the picket fence, the dog... it's all part of the Norman Rockwell gig. I gotta admit, you're cute for a furry poop factory."

He returned his gaze to the yard. There were colorful flowers planted around most of the perimeter of the property, except for the space taken up by the vegetable garden. He recognized roses and daisies, but didn't know names for the rest. Short evergreen trees edged the yard, too small to be very old. The thick green grass made him want to kick off his shoes and socks and run barefoot through it. He could almost feel the blades tickling between his toes.

Clancy yipped and jumped up, resting his paws on Heath's leg. Heath could swear the little bugger was making "puppy dog" eyes at him.

Of course he is, he thought. *That's where the expression comes from. Dogs have begging down to a science, particularly cute, fuzzy, baby dogs.*

"Stop looking at me like that," Heath said to the pup. "This stuff will strip the paint off a car—just imagine what it'd do to your squishy puppy innards. Even if I offered you some, you'd probably turn your little wet nose up at it, anyway."

"Don't be so sure. He's not the brightest pup in the litter. He'll eat or drink anything. Once, he ate one of my socks. Hand to God. You did *not* want to be around when it came out of the other end, either."

Bill stood in the kitchen doorway, dressed in a pair of tight jeans worn so thin Heath could practically see Bill's spleen, and a blue, button-down shirt. He wore it open at the collar; a clean white T-shirt peeked out from underneath, and looked altogether too sexy against Bill's tanned skin. His blue-black hair was wet, and finger-combed. A dribble of water, missed in the drying process, dripped down the side of his neck. Heath felt a sudden, almost uncontrollable urge to lick it off Bill's smooth, golden skin.

Heath sucked in a breath, fighting his body's urges as it hardened against his will. He knew Bill was good-looking, but somehow he hadn't been aware of just *how* hot Bill was while he'd been dressed in his uniform, with the bulky leather belt and radio, holster, gun, and flashlight hanging off it. Or maybe Heath had been too distracted by his problems to notice. Bill was breathtaking dressed in his civvies, and Heath's doubts about going out to dinner with him redoubled.

It was going to be extremely difficult for Heath to suck down manicotti while drooling profusely and uncontrollably at his date, not to mention the awkwardness of the inevitable

goodnight kiss, particularly when Heath's body was already insisting that a kiss alone wouldn't be nearly enough.

"Are you ready to go?" Bill asked, drawing Heath out of his thoughts.

"Yeah, sure," Heath said, tossing his empty can into the blue plastic recycling bin near the kitchen door. It clinked against a dozen others, masking Heath's small sigh.

"Clancy, be good," Bill said, sternly wagging a finger at the frisky puppy. "Guard the house."

"*Guard the house?* Are you kidding?" Heath gestured toward Clancy, chuckling. "I get the feeling the worst he could do is lick a thief to death. Somehow, I don't think 'Death by Puppy Tongue' is much of a deterrent."

Bill laughed. "Shh... I'm trying to convince him that he's a ferocious pit bull."

"Good luck with that," Heath said, as Clancy yapped and pounced, nipping at Bill's shoelaces.

A few minutes later, Bill and Heath made their getaway to the car by distracting Clancy with a doggie treat. Bill found a station playing smooth jazz, and they rode, mostly in silence, all the way to the restaurant, which suited Heath just fine. He spent the time trying to convince himself that he did *not* find Bill as sexy as sin, and that the night would end with nothing more satisfying than a plate of marina-drenched pasta.

Funny, but even though his mind accepted it and agreed keeping their date platonic was the right—*the smart*—course of action, his cock refused to listen. He shifted in his bucket seat several times, and noticed Bill doing the same, before he

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reluctantly accepted the fact that the only thing limp at their table was going to be the overcooked manicotti.

* * * *

Heath fed himself blindly, his hand automatically lifting his fork and finding his mouth out of habit, unable to keep his eyes off Bill.

Candlelight loved Bill, even when the source was a cheesy old wine bottle dripping with colorful wax. It darkened his eyes to midnight blue in the flickering light, and his skin to flawless, dark gold. When he smiled—which was often—his teeth gleamed incredibly white. Shadows played up his high cheekbones, the deep cleft in his chin, and the razor-sharp line of his jaw.

"So, I come in through the door and there's Watkins, pressed up against the wall. His pants are down around his ankles, and he's getting a blow-job from the fucking perp! It was like something out of a sleazy porn movie, except Watkins is sixty, balding, and no part of him except for his head and arms has seen the sun in fifteen years. He looks like he's swallowed a beach ball, for chrissakes, and has enough varicose veins to make his legs look like roadmaps. Not a pretty sight, my friend, not pretty at *all*."

Bill's laugh was low and contagious, a sexy rumble that began somewhere deep in his broad chest and bubbled up through his full, sensuous lips. *Honestly*, Heath thought, stuffing a piece of garlic bread into his mouth, *no cop should be this sexy. It should be a requirement that they all look hardboiled and craggy, like Columbo, or Kojak.*

"Heath? Hello?" Bill's hand waved in front of Heath's eyes, snapping him out of his less-than-pure thoughts. "Where'd you go?"

"Sorry," Heath said, feeling a flush creep up his neck. "It's been a tough week, you know?" True, but lame, and not at all the reason for his wandering attention, but Bill didn't need to know it.

"Yeah, I understand. I've been on the force six years, and it still amazes me at how many scumbags are running around this city. We lock 'em up, and the courts let 'em go. A week later, we're locking 'em right back up again. Revolving door justice, and all that. It's frustrating."

"I should never have let the slimy little bastard into my apartment in the first place. I should've slammed the door in his face, or better still, physically kicked his lying, cheating, thieving ass to the curb," Heath said quietly. His hard-on waned with the same effect as as if Johnny barged in on their date and stood next to their table. "I don't know what I was thinking, or how I let myself get so involved with him again."

"Yeah, you said he was an old boyfriend. It's bad enough when a stranger shakes you down, but it's even worse when somebody you have feelings for takes you for a ride. It sucks, man."

"*Had* feelings for—not have," Heath corrected, failing to keep the rancor from his voice. "I couldn't care less if he ends up in as many fucking pieces as my car."

Bill's lips tilted in a small smile. "Liar. First of all, we don't know yet that your car ended up in a chop shop. We may still find it. Secondly, your feelings are written all over your face."

He broke your heart, didn't he? From the pain in your eyes, I'd say maybe more than once. That hurts a lot more than losing a car or a set of dishes."

Heath shook his head. "I loved him a long time ago, when we were both kids. Maybe it wasn't even love then, but it felt like it. Yeah, it hurt before, but this time it was my own damn fault. I think I just wanted to be with somebody, anybody, and Johnny was the first warm body available and willing." *Oh, God, what am I saying? I sound so fucking pathetic! Bill must think I'm such a loser... and he'd be right.* He took a sip of wine, refusing to look at Bill, wanting to crawl under the table and disappear. What was it about Bill that had Heath laying his heart out on the table? Either Bill was a far better cop than Heath gave him credit for being, or Heath was a lot more desperate and lonely than he'd realized.

"Been there, done that," Bill murmured. His large, warm hand stretched over the table, trapping Heath's underneath it. "Don't sweat it, Heath. This stays between you and me. Nobody down at the station needs to know. As far as they're concerned, you were only trying to help out an old friend."

Heath nodded, feeling suddenly choked up. *Oh man, I'm in trouble. Sexy, funny, and sweet? He's a fucking keeper. He's killing me, here. I will not break down. I won't.* He thought hard, desperate to change the subject, struggling to keep his emotions in check. It was only when he finally felt he could speak without breaking into self-pitying sobs, that he took another stab at small talk. "So, tell me about Clancy. Where'd you buy him? I mean, who was his breeder?"

Bill blinked at him, his hand retreating to his side of the table. "Uh, I didn't buy him. I got him at the pound. He was the last of an abandoned litter we'd found during a drug bust. Poor little guy wasn't much more than skin and bones. The vet wasn't even too sure he'd survive."

"You rescued him? That's really nice," Heath said. His hand suddenly felt cold and lonely without Bill's calloused fingers covering it, and his skin was still tingling from the contact. He slid it off the table, resting it on his knee.

"Yeah. I like rescuing sweet, abandoned things... well, two things, anyway."

Okay, Bill was talking about more than dogs there. Heath's eyes flicked up, meeting Bill's. "Oh? Who's... er, what's the other thing you rescued?"

Bill's cheek hitched in warm, sexy grin that zapped Heath's cock into full attention again. He reached over the table once more, but this time his knuckles grazed lightly over the scruff on Heath's cheek. "A sweet, abandoned guy who doesn't mind drooling puppies, and has marinara sauce on his chin." A thumb pressed lightly against Heath's bottom lip. Bill showed him a speck of red sauce before licking his finger clean.

Heath's cock jerked as he watched the pink tip of Bill's tongue dart out from between his lips, licking at the pad of his thumb. *That settles it*, he thought. *I'm doomed. I'm going to come in my fucking pants if he touches me again, and I'll have to walk out of the restaurant with a menu clamped over the fly of my jeans to hide the stain.*

"I'm going too fast, aren't I?"

Heath pulled his gaze from Bill's mouth to meet his eyes again. "Huh?"

Bill sat back in his chair, looking down at the table, fingers swatting at breadcrumbs. "I'm scaring you off."

"No, it's just that..." Heath began, but stopped himself. What did he really want to say? He should end it now, before it even began, but couldn't bring himself to do it. There was something about Bill besides his sexy good looks that drew Heath in, made him want to get to know Bill better. "I guess I'm just a little gun shy right now, Bill. I had a really bad experience, and I'm feeling a bit... you know, *raw*."

Bill nodded. "I understand." He slapped both palms down on the table, making their wineglasses clink together, and silverware rattle musically against their plates. "Okay, 'nuff said. You know where I stand, and I know enough when to shut my yap about it. If and when you're ready, you'll let me know if you're interested. Until then, we're just buds. Now, how about dessert? I'm thinking tiramisu, or maybe a cannoli."

Heath chose a wedge of cheesecake, and silently congratulated himself on pegging Bill correctly. He *was* a keeper. Now all Heath had to do was figure out if he wanted to be the one who did the keeping.

If it sounds too good to be true, Heath Andrew Ambers, it probably is. The voice of Heath's mother, rough and ravaged by smoke, spoke in his memory. She'd died five years ago, but her good-intentioned nagging lived on in his memory.

He watched as Bill placed a forkful of creamy tiramisu on his tongue, lips closing over the fork, an expression of utter

ecstasy coating his features, and thought, *I love you, Mom, but please, shut the hell up. Go play canasta with Jesus and leave me alone*

He cringed inwardly, instantly regretting his less-than-charitable thoughts. His mother had loved him as much as his father had, even if she'd never quite accepted his lifestyle. *Sorry, mom. You didn't deserve that, but... I really like him. I think he's just what he appears to be—one of the last, truly good men alive*

Then go for it, sonny boy, his mother said in his mind. *Nothing ventured, nothing gained.* Another of her favorite sayings, and this one, Heath decided, applied to the situation.

He reached across the table, swiping a finger full of cream from Bill's plate, and slowly licked it clean. The one thing he decided he would not do was play games. It was all or nothing, take it or leave it. "Bill? Do you want me to go home with you tonight?"

Bill blinked at Heath's sudden one-eighty, but a slow grin spread across his face. "I don't think there's anything I'd like better. Are you sure? If you're not, it's okay. I can wait until you are."

"No, I'm sure. I need this, I think. As long as you understand there are no strings, right? No awkward morning after, no phone calls, no me coming home to find a bunny boiling in a pot on my stove," Heath warned, remembering a scene from *Basic Instinct* about a jilted, insane one-night stand stalking Michael Douglas' character. The damn scene had given him nightmares for a week afterward, and he hadn't been able to watch the movie again since. Not that he

believed Bill would ever do such a thing, but... well, you never really knew about people. He'd learned that lesson with Johnny.

"That's cool, but there's one thing about me you should know—I'm not much for one-nighters, Heath. I don't make a habit of picking up tricks for sex. So, yeah, we can do this tonight. I want it, too, so badly I can almost taste you already, but I'm giving you fair warning. I'm not going to give up on trying for something more. Don't get me wrong, I'm not going to stalk you or anything—no boiling bunny worries, here—but I *am* going to call, and I *am* going to ask to see you again. Tonight was fun—dinner, I mean. I want to do it again, soon. Okay?"

"Fair enough," Heath said, returning Bill's smile with one of his own. His cock jerked against his fly, as if nodding in agreement, too. "One night together. After that, we'll play it by ear."

"Great. Discussion over. Let's go."

* * * *

Clancy was so overjoyed to see Bill and Heath return that he peed on the living rug, and they spent the next twenty minutes on their hands and knees, scrubbing the stain out and steam cleaning the rug.

Finally, Bill plopped down on the sofa, smiling sheepishly. "This isn't exactly what I had in mind for when we got back here. I was thinking more along the lines of dimming the lights, maybe playing some soft music and sharing a glass of

wine, not debating the finer points of removing dog urine from deep pile."

Clancy poked his nose out from under the couch where he'd ducked as soon as his puppy chow-gluttled brain realized his master was angry over the mess he'd made, whining softly. One look from Bill sent him scurrying back among the dust bunnies.

Heath laughed, wrapping the electrical cord around the handle of the rug steamer. "It's okay. Don't be too hard on the pup. He was just a little over excited to see you."

"Not just me... he's taken a shine to you, too," Bill said. "Truth be told, so have I." He sighed, wiping his hands on a rag, then froze and looked chagrined. "Oh, shit. I did it again, didn't I? Got a little too serious too quickly, and made you uncomfortable. I guess it's a bad habit of mine—I tend to say whatever's on my mind. My old man used to call it 'foot-in-mouth disease'. Sorry."

"Nah, it's okay. I'm good." He was, too. It was nice to meet a guy who actually *wanted* more than just a roll in the sheets, and made no bones about it. "Listen, my hands smell like Clancy's butt, and the rest of me is getting a bit on the ripe side. Can I use your shower?"

"Sure. Last door on the left, towels are in the linen closet just outside. Help yourself."

Heath stood up, and helped carry the cleaning supplies into the kitchen before tossing Bill another smile and heading toward the bathroom. He saw Clancy scoot out from under the sofa, trotting into the kitchen after Bill, and smiled to himself. *What a pair*, he thought. *What a trio, for that*

matter—the blind leading the blind leading the toilet-challenged.

Bill's bathroom was spacious, built for a man Bill's size. There was no tub, but it did have an extra-large, glass-enclosed, hexagonal shower, with double heads. Heath draped his towel over the bar, turned on the water and peeled off his clothes, placing them neatly on the closed toilet seat.

Steam was wafting up and clouding the shower doors by the time Heath stepped under the hot, dual spray. He scanned the toiletry items on the built-in shelf. Shaving cream, a razor, and a bar of Ivory soap stood next to a bottle of no-nonsense shampoo, and another of conditioner. There was nothing fancy or flowery, just the basics. Simple, straightforward choices bought by an open, honest man who lived his life the same way as he shopped.

Heath picked up the soap and lathered up, enjoying the clean, uncomplicated scent. He'd just finished rinsing the conditioner out of his hair, when he heard the bathroom door open.

"Hey." Bill's voice floated through the steam, his large shadow dark against the foggy shower doors.

"Hey, back. I'm almost through."

"Yeah, about that..." The shower door opened, and in came Bill.

Six feet of red-cheeked, hard-bodied man, wearing a hangdog smile and nothing else, stepped inside the shower next to Heath. Water splashed on Bill's skin, beading up, and

dripping down the middle of his wide chest to parts that were just as impressive as the rest of him.

His long, black eyelashes blinked away water droplets.

"Couldn't wait any longer. This is okay, right?"

Heath started to speak, but all that came out was a froggy groan. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Oh, sure, it's okay. More than okay."

"I kept thinking about you in here, all wet and soapy and... shit. Am I fucking it up again?"

"Hell no. Does this look like you're saying the wrong thing?" Heath glanced down, drawing Bill's attention to the hard-on rising at his groin. It matched the one Bill was already sporting, although he had to admit Bill had him by at least an inch or two. *At least two*, Heath thought honestly. *That sure is a pretty pecker he's got there.*

Bill reached for him. "Oh, now that's fucking sweet. Been thinking about touching you ever since you came in to the station."

"Yeah?" Heath's hand cupped Bill's heavy sac, kneading the stones together. Smooth-shaven and solid, Bill's balls made a perfect handful. "I remember thinking you looked pretty hot in your uniform."

Bill hissed between his teeth, and Heath grinned as the sound turned into a full-fledged moan when he dropped Bill's balls and went to work stroking the thick cock.

Bill's hand cupped the back of Heath's neck, pulling him into a sloppy, heated, open-mouthed kiss. Bill tasted minty, his tongue soft and warm. Stubble prickled his cheeks even though he'd shaved earlier, scraping Heath's jaw.

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"Does this taste as good as it feels?" Bill whispered, nipping at the delicate skin of Heath's throat, hand squeezing Heath's cock.

Heath felt the sting of Bill's teeth and gasped, knowing there'd be a purpling mark there the next day. God, how long had it been since he'd sported an honest-to-Christ hickey? Johnny hadn't been much on foreplay. Now that Heath thought about it, Johnny acted more like a hooker than a lover in bed. With Johnny it was more like wham-bam-thank-you-sir, what's on TV tonight? It was yet another sign of trouble that Heath should've heeded, but had chosen to ignore.

When Bill kissed him again, deep and wet, Heath forgot about Johnny. As Bill slowly lowered himself to his knees, Heath almost forgot to breathe. There was something about the big guy kneeling in the shower, water splashing off his head and shoulders like an erotic fountain that Heath found so hot, that his cock beaded with pre-come. Bill's eyes, darkened by need, blinked up at him. "I'm clean. You?"

They were three simple words, but fraught with more than their simple definitions. Heath realized Bill was trusting him, and asking for trust in return. It was a frightening, unsettling question, particularly after Johnny had so recently raked Heath over the coals.

Take a minute. Breathe. Think! We should stop. We should take precautions. We should...

Heath looked again into the trusting turquoise eyes looking up at him, long eyelashes blinking water. Bill struck him as a man of principle. He was a cop, a dog-lover, and gave Heath

every indication of being a truly sweet, honest man. Before Heath realized he was going to take the step to trust Bill, he nodded.

At the touch of Bill's flicking pink tongue snatching the pearly drops from the head of his dick before the water could wash them away, Heath's eyes rolled back in his head. He braced one arm against the slick shower wall, threading the fingers of his other hand into Bill's head of short, black hair. He tightened his fingers in the wet, silky strands as Bill's warm, wet mouth closed over the head of his cock.

Bill's hand squeezed his shaft as he drew his lips over Heath's sensitive skin, his tongue flitting like a butterfly under the ridge, teasing the slit. *The boy's got talent*, Heath thought. He turned his face up into the hot spray, hips pumping into Bill's equally warm mouth, feeling Bill's soft tongue, smooth, hard teeth, and ridged palate in exquisite detail.

Dipping his head, he watched Bill's cheeks hollow as the man sucked, and felt a large hand reach around his hip, squeezing his ass. "Stop, Bill. Gonna come. Fuck!" He bit his cheek, hoping the sting would help hold back the orgasm roiling in his balls.

Heath's cock popped out of Bill's mouth, although he gave it one last lick before standing up. "My turn?" he asked with hope shining in his beautiful eyes.

"Fuck, yeah." Heath didn't have the luxury of mincing words. He was still too close, still trying to stave off his climax. *Not yet, not yet*, he thought, continuing to bite his

cheek, practically gnawing at it. He lowered himself to his knees, skidding a little on the slippery tile.

Bill's cock was fully engorged, rosy-red, crowned by a carefully shaped patch of black, curly hair. Heath opened wide and took Bill in, the taste of male and salt filling his mouth. His fingers curled around Bill's girth, hot skin burning his palm.

"Oh, God, that feels so fucking good!" Bill gasped. Heath barely heard him over the splashing water, and the blood pounding in his ears. *Shit, I'm going to come all over his feet at this rate*, he thought. He was so hard, so ready, that the drip of water on his cock was nearly enough to make him shoot.

He redoubled his efforts on Bill's prick, not wanting to shortchange the man, but needing to hurry things along. He reached around Bill's hip, working his fingers between Bill's clenching ass cheeks, searching for his hole. When Heath found the tiny, ridged opening, he tickled at it, his thumb stroking Bill's perineum, and the spurt of pre-come on his tongue told him he'd found Bill's magic button.

His finger teased the opening, his tongue swirling over the head of Bill's cock, fist pumping his shaft, when suddenly Bill's hands were under his arms, pulling him up and away.

They faced each other, water splashing against the backs of their heads, dripping in their eyes, jerking themselves in tandem. Although Heath had been sure it wouldn't take more than nanosecond for him to come, Bill beat him to the punch.

Heath watched him, fascinated by his face. Bill's eyes squeezed shut, his teeth bared, tendons cording in his neck

as he shot his load. *Fuck, he's sexy when he comes!* Heath thought as he felt the splash on his stomach and legs, several degrees hotter than the shower water, and finally let his own climax wash through him. He cried out something garbled and incoherent, nothing more than an expletive spliced with Bill's name, and added his spunk to the water swirling down the drain.

Bill was smiling a goofy, satisfied grin at him when he opened his eyes again. "Pretty good, huh?"

"Oh, yeah. Good. Better than good," Heath replied, panting. His legs felt like jelly, quivering in an effort to keep him standing, but he smiled and took the washcloth Bill handed him.

They washed up, taking turns soaping each other's backs as if they'd been taking showers together forever. Heath admitted privately that it somehow felt just as intimate as the sex, nice, comfortable, and easy. Just a mutual give-and-take, no demands afterward, no false need to say words nobody meant.

Heath ended up spending the night, and while they didn't do anything more than sleep in Bill's king-sized bed with Clancy warming their feet, he enjoyed himself. Falling asleep with Bill's arms around him felt right in a way it never had with Johnny: natural, comforting, and calming, just like the shower.

He awoke to a wet tongue slobbering his face, and the smell of coffee and bacon coming from the kitchen.

"Get off me, Clancy!" Heath groaned, trying to roll out from under the dog's overenthusiastic, puppy-tongue wake-up call.

Clancy took Heath's efforts to shove him away as a cue to play, his tail wagging fiercely, wriggling butt raised in the air, and head resting low on his big paws. He yipped expectantly.

"Coffee first, boy," Heath said, patting the pup on the head. He pulled on his underwear and visited the bathroom, then padded into the kitchen with Clancy dancing around his bare feet.

"Ah, I see my furry alarm clock woke you up," Bill said, laughing as he flipped sizzling bacon in a frying pan. "How do you like your eggs?"

"Over easy, but you don't have to make me breakfast, Bill."

"Over easy it is, and shut up. I like cooking."

Oh, brother. Heath's wariness from the day before came roaring back. *He's gorgeous, and gives great head. He's sweet, likes dogs, and cooks? Something has to be wrong somewhere — he really is too good to be true.* "Tell me the truth, Bill. You have bodies buried in the basement, don't you? Or maybe you have a meth lab in your garage, or you knock over banks in your spare time. Come on, what is it? Do you sell human organs on the black market, or want to make coats out of human skin?"

Bill looked at him from over his shoulder, laughing. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"I'm just thinking that something's gotta give with you. You're too good to be real. You're sweet, considerate, a fantastic lover-"

"We've only pulled one off in the shower together, Heath. That's not exactly enough to give me a five-star rating, although I have to admit, you were pretty hot in there."

"See? You've just proved my point! What guy says that? Most men would agree with me, and then tell me how lucky I am to have hooked up with them. Hell, I'd be lucky to get a cup of coffee out of them in morning. Not you, though. So, I need you to tell me right now what skeletons you've got cluttering up your closet. I couldn't handle being blindsided again."

Bill transferred the crispy bacon from the pan to a plate, and cracked half a dozen eggs into the skillet, his expression thoughtful. Then he nodded. "Okay, fair enough. First off, I'm a cop. It's a stressful job, and sometimes I get a little broody, especially when I'm shot at. I work crazy hours, and lots of night shifts. I hate the club scene, and when I dance, my shoulders hunch up to my ears and my neck disappears. I like to watch action movies where things blow up; I'm not too keen on chick flicks. My idea of the perfect vacation is to sit on my ass all day, drinking beer, and eating barbeque until I burst. I love football, and if I'm not working on Super Bowl Sunday, you couldn't pry my attention away from the television if you were on fire."

"Whoa, back up. You were *shot* at?"

"Yeah, a few times." He shrugged a shoulder, as if it were no big deal that he dodged bullets for a living. "Lucky for me,

the assholes with the guns couldn't hit the side of a barn with a bazooka."

"That's fucking insane, Bill."

"Tell me about it. Now you know my deepest, darkest secrets. What about you?"

"Me? Oh, I come fully equipped with an ex-convict former boyfriend whose face is soon to be featured on a post office wall near you, a ton of bills, a mini-van held together with spit and duct tape, and virtually nothing else to my name," Heath said sarcastically. "Ain't I a catch?"

"Actually?" Bill said, setting a plate with three perfectly cooked eggs, four strips crispy bacon, and two slices of lightly browned toast in front of Heath, "I think you are."

"You don't even know me, Bill."

"Maybe, but I like what I *do* know. You're a strong person. You were shit on, but you kept your head and didn't fall to pieces when the asshole cleaned you out. Other guys would've gone ballistic, went gunning for him, or crawled inside a bottle. You didn't do any of the above. I also think you're sexy, fun, smart, and can suck cock like nobody's business."

Heath nearly choked on his toast. Bill reached over and smacked him a few times on the back. "What's wrong? You asked, and I told you the truth," he said, grinning.

Heath coughed a few times and finally caught his breath. "Just so we're clear—you're telling me there's nothing sinister hiding behind those pretty turquoise eyes of yours? No penchant for drinking blood, or sitting in your basement

wearing a tin foil hat waiting for the mothership to pick you up?"

"You really think my eyes are all that?"

"Yes, and don't change the subject."

"I'm not a serial killer, Heath, and I'm not crazy. I'm just a homebody with a dangerous job, who happens to really like you."

"Okay."

"Okay, what?" One of Bill's dark eyebrows arched.

"Maybe we can try the dating thing. We said we'd play it by ear, right? I mean, if you're still willing."

Bill's answering smile was wide and reached all the way up to his eyes. "Hell, yes, I'm willing! Did you hear that, Clancy? We've officially got ourselves a boyfriend. What do you think about that, pup?"

Clancy yapped, as if his consent sealed the deal.

Who knows, Heath thought, smiling as he tucked into his eggs, feeling lighter than he had since before Johnny had fucked him over, *maybe it does*.

* * * *

Two steps forward and one-step back seemed to be the only dance in Heath's repertoire lately.

Things had finally started looking up for him. The minivan, for all that it was ugly, kept running, getting him back and forth to work with little trouble aside from a voracious appetite for oil. His apartment insurance cut him a check for most of the items Johnny had stolen. It wasn't nearly enough to replace everything, but it was enough to get the essentials.

His car insurance policy covered the theft, paying off his loan for the stolen Audi. He'd begun socking money away in his account for a down payment on a new car.

Then a month after his first date with Bill nearly to the day, the phone call came.

Heath was at his apartment, now furnished mostly by IKEA bargains and Bill's castoffs. He'd just set a large pot of water on the stove to boil for spaghetti when the phone rang. Thinking it was Bill calling about their dinner date that night, he was smiling when he picked up the receiver. "Hello?"

His smile faded instantly when he heard the gravelly voice on the other end. "Hey, babe, it's me. Miss me?"

"Johnny? You fucking asshole! Where are you? Where's my car? Where's my stuff?" Heath's fingers tightened on the coiled telephone wire, squeezing, wishing it were Johnny's neck. "I helped you, and you robbed me blind! How could you do that to me?"

"I needed the cash." Heath could almost hear the shrug in Johnny's voice. "Who's the cop you're screwing?"

Heath froze as the meaning of Johnny's words sank in. "How do you know about him? Where are you, Johnny?"

"Never mind where I am. I wasn't gone more than a couple of days before you replaced me with a fucking *cop*? I thought you cared about me, but you turned ass-end up for a fucking pig! Man, you pissed me off, Heath."

"Are you kidding me? Fuck you, Johnny! You were cheating on me, and then you stole from me. I am more than done with you. Leave me alone!" Heath yelled, slamming the phone back into the receiver. He immediately checked the phone's

list of received calls, but it read "*Unknown Number*." No help there.

He was breathing hard as he sank into the brown leather cushions of the sofa, one of his recent IKEA purchases. It wasn't the best or most comfortable couch on the market, and the minimalistic, light wood trim wasn't really to his taste, but the price was within his budget and he'd bought it. It sure as hell beat sitting on the floor.

Heath's mind whirled. *Johnny's back in town. Not only is he back, he must've been watching me to know about Bill.* His skin crawled as he thought about Johnny in the shadows, watching him and Bill.

Bill! I have to warn him! Heath grabbed the phone, dialing Bill's number. It rang several times before his machine picked up. "Bill? Bill, are you there? Pick up, it's me!"

He listened for several seconds, but there was only silence. "Bill, call me as soon as you get this!" He tried Bill's cell phone, but got his voicemail. He left the same message, hung up, and then ran around the apartment locking the windows and drawing the drapes.

The water was boiling on the stove, but he shut it off. He couldn't cook. He could barely think! His mind was buzzing with questions. Was Johnny outside, right now, watching his building? What did he want? Where was Bill? Why hadn't he called back yet?

A new thought struck him, making his knees weak. *Johnny said he knew about Bill. What if Johnny's done something to him? What if he's hurt Bill?*

The telephone rang again. This time it sounded ominous, low and grating, as if the phone were warning him. He checked the caller ID before answering it.

It was Bill's number, and the resulting wave of relief made him feel almost lightheaded. Heath snatched the phone from the receiver, pressing to his ear. "Bill? Oh, God, Bill. Where are you?" His fear washed out of him, calmed by the sound of Bill's voice.

"I'm home. I was in the shower when you called. What's wrong? Your message sounded frantic. Are you okay?"

Heath sank onto the couch and exhaled a long *whoosh* of air. Now that he heard Bill's voice, he felt embarrassed overreacting the way he had. Bill was a big boy, and a cop. He could take care of himself, and Heath had no business clucking over him like a mother hen. Besides, there was no indication that Johnny even knew where Bill lived let alone would be crazy enough to go after him. "Yeah, I'm fine, Bill. Johnny called, and I guess I got a little crazy—"

"What? Your ex? The same Johnny who stole your stuff?"

"Yeah, that's the one. Listen, Bill. I'm a little worried. He knows about you and me—he must be watching me. I don't trust him."

"Shit! Listen to me, Heath. I want you to lock the door and the windows. Stay put. Don't answer the phone unless it's me, and don't open your door for *anybody* until I get there. I'm on my way." He hung up before Heath could say anything more.

Feeling immensely relieved that Bill was all right and on his way, Heath took a deep calming breath, then turned the pot of water back on to boil.

The phone rang for a third time. It jangled, sounding the way Heath's nerves felt, edgy and harsh. "You have to stop this. It's only the fucking phone, for God's sake!" He glanced at the caller ID, fully expecting it to be Bill again.

Unknown Caller

Fuck! He knew without needing to answer it that it was Johnny again. His fingers itched to pick up the receiver, to blast Johnny with a verbal assault that'd strip the skin from his bones. *No. Bill said not to answer the phone. Don't be a schmuck. Don't let Johnny suck you in again. This is just another game he's playing.*

He let the machine pick up.

"I know you haven't left the apartment, Heath. Pick up the fucking phone!" It was Johnny again, and he sounded furious. "Didn't you hear me? I said, 'pick up!'"

Heath actually backed away from the phone, as if Johnny could somehow reach through the circuitry and touch him. *Fuck off, Johnny*, he thought. *I'm not your bitch. I don't fucking heel.* In the next instant, he thought, *Hurry up, Bill... and please, be careful!*

"Is your pretty boy pig on his way there? Is he tracing this call? Good fucking luck with that! I'm smarter than the two of you put together. Heath? You hear me, Heath? I'm smarter! And I *always* get what I want. You'd better dump that pig on his curly tailed ass if you don't want to see his corpse on the six o'clock news. You belong to *me*."

The answering machine beeped, and the line went dead.

A trickle of icy cold sweat trickled between Heath's shoulder blades as he realized something crucial. Johnny wasn't just a two-bit thug; he wasn't just a user without a conscience. He wasn't just a thief.

Johnny was insane.

And right now, he was fixated on Heath. He grabbed the phone and punched in Bill's cell number. Bill picked up on the first ring.

"Heath? You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Bill, you need to be really careful. Johnny just called again, and the message he left on my machine... he's threatened you, Bill. Maybe you shouldn't come here." Heath chewed anxiously on the cuticle of his left thumb. He wanted—needed Bill to be there, but not if it meant Bill might be hurt. Nothing was worth that.

"I'm coming. Heath, don't worry. I deal with low-life scum like Johnny Brazzio every day of the week."

"Yeah, and you get shot at, too. I don't want to risk Johnny being the first one to have good aim."

"Sit tight, and don't answer the phone or the door." Heath heard grim determination in Bill's voice. This was Cop Bill talking now, not Boyfriend Bill. His voice was authoritative, stern, but comforting. "I'm almost at your place."

"Okay. Please, please be careful!"

Heath hung up, sinking down on the couch, holding his cell phone like a life preserver. The minutes ticked by with agonizing slowness. He jumped at every small noise, and cringed as his mind created horrifying scenarios in his mind.

Bill, shot in the head as he stepped out of his car. Bill, shot in the back just as he raised his hand to ring the bell at the door. Bill dying a painful death in Heath's arms, as Johnny laughed.

The phone rang again.

Unknown number.

Heath actually began to shake as he waited to hear the next set of threats Johnny would make.

It was even more frightening to hear silence. Johnny didn't utter a word this time, no threats or accusations, just a couple of long minutes filled with heavy breathing, ending with the unmistakable grunts of a man having an orgasm. The caller clicked off.

Good God, what kind of nutcase has Johnny become?

Heath's fingers tightened around his cell phone as he resisted the urge to call Bill again. If Bill was as close as he'd said to Heath's apartment, Heath didn't want to distract him with another phone call. He wanted Bill to focus.

When his cell phone rang, he nearly jumped out of his skin. "H-hello?"

"I'm here, Heath. Let me in." Heath heard Bill's voice, strong and steady, just a moment before he heard the light rapping at the front door.

Heath scrambled to the door, unlocking it and throwing it open. Bill stood framed in the doorway, dressed in civilian clothing, his police revolver clutched in his right hand.

"You okay?" he asked as stepped in side, and closed and bolted the door. He placed his gun on the small lamp table next to the sofa, and turned toward Heath.

"I am now," Heath answered truthfully. He was never so glad to see Bill as he was at that moment—not because Johnny's calls had scared him shitless, but because Bill was in one piece, without any bullet holes in his gorgeous hide. "I guess I flipped out a little. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You did the right thing, Heath." Then Cop Bill was gone, replaced by Boyfriend Bill's arms crushing Heath to his chest. "I was worried."

"That makes two of us." He reached for a kiss, deep and comforting. "I was going to make spaghetti."

Bill's lips quirked in a smile. "Let's not worry about dinner right now. I want to hear those messages."

Heath sat next to Bill on the sofa as Bill listened to the messages once, twice, three times. "He's crazy, isn't he?"

"Yeah," Bill said. He sighed, and patted Heath's knee. "We need to report this, Heath."

Heath nodded. "I know. Is there any way to trace the calls?"

"Not now. I'll get our team in here, set up a trace. If he calls back, we'll get him."

"Guess there's no spaghetti in our immediate future, huh?"

"Sorry. We'll have to settle for pizza... after the boys get here. Nobody comes in or goes out until then. Something tells me the asshole is close by, watching, waiting for his opportunity," Bill said, then flipped open his cell phone and called headquarters.

Suddenly, Heath was frightened all over again.

* * * *

Heath did a lot of sitting that night.

He sat on the sofa, glancing nervously at the telephone, waiting for it to ring again. He sat at the dining room table giving his statement—repeatedly—to the detectives who came in response to Bill's telephone call. Finally, when it all got to be too much for him, he sat on the edge of his bed, and stared down at his feet.

Heath heard Bill's soft voice in his ear as a heavy weight settled on the mattress next to him, and a strong arm wrapped around his shoulders. "Hey. You okay?"

"Not really. My life officially sucks, Bill. Just when I think I've gotten it back together, that I'm back in the game, somebody slams me upside the head with a shitball."

"What? Naw, this is nothing. Trust me. Johnny is an asshole who likes to play with your head, that's all. I know scum like him, Heath. All talk, no walk. He's getting his rocks off because he knows he's got you running scared."

Heath looked up at Bill. "You think?"

"Hell, yes. I'll bet the minute all the squad cars showed up in front of your building, he took off, and he probably hasn't stopped running yet."

Heath's lips curved in a small smile. "Yeah, you're right. Of course, you're right! Johnny is only a thief. He's not a serial killer, for God's sake. I'm letting him get to me. So, he's been watching the house. His brain is so fried by the drugs and booze he used to do, he probably figured he could squeeze more money out of me, or set me up to rob again. Like you said, he's probably long gone now that he knows everybody's looking for him."

"Right. Everything's going to be fine. Tonight, you're coming home with me." When Heath started to protest, Bill held up his hand. "That's an order. You won't get any sleep here alone, and you know it. You come home with me. Clancy will be happy to see you."

"Bill, you don't think Johnny might..."

"Nah. He doesn't even know where I live. He probably only knows I'm a cop because he saw me coming in here wearing my uniform."

Heath nodded. "I'm *still* letting him get inside my head."

"So, no arguments about tonight, okay?"

Heath smiled. "Okay. Just for tonight, though. I have to face sleeping alone sooner or later."

Bill looked thoughtful for a minute, chewing his bottom lip. "Uh, actually, you don't. You could move in with me. I mean, my house isn't big, but it's big enough for the two of us."

Heath gaped at Bill, stunned. "Are you kidding? You're asking me to move in with you? Bill, we've only known each other for a month!"

"I know, but that's long enough for me to want to ask you," Bill said softly, cupping Heath's chin. His thumb made lazy circles over Heath's lower lip that sent tingles shooting down Heath's spine. "You don't need to decide now. Think about it, okay?"

"I-I will."

"Good. Now, let me get rid of the last of the uniforms out there, and we can head home," Bill said. He kissed Heath, long and slow, then went out into the living room, leaving Heath feeling more than a little shell-shocked. The entire

evening left him feeling like an emotional wreck. First Johnny, then being inundated with police officers, and now Bill's offer... frankly, Heath didn't know *what* to think. He simply couldn't process it all. It felt like his brain had shut down, and forgotten to tell the rest of him it was time to call it a day.

Finally, he shook himself and stood up. "Call me Scarlett O'Hara, but I'll think about it tomorrow," he said to the empty room. Grabbing a duffle bag out of the closet, he packed a change of clothing, and threw in his toothbrush, cologne, deodorant, and a few other necessary items.

By the time Bill came back into the bedroom after seeing the other officers out, Heath was ready to go.

"What if he calls again?" Heath asked, glancing at the telephone as they walked through the living room.

"Let him. Our team will be in here early tomorrow—the super will let them in—to set up the trace. For tonight, we're not even going to think about Brazzio. Got it? We're going to go home, settle in, play with the pup, take a shower, and go to bed. Understood?"

Heath smiled. He noticed Bill had twice referred to them going to his place as 'going home.' His smile broadened as Heath realized he rather liked the way it sounded.

"Understood."

"Good, then let's go. The pup has probably pissed in every pair of shoes I own by now."

* * * *

Heath had no idea what made Bill suspicious that something was wrong, but the moment he pulled his car into

the driveway of his house, he tensed. "What's wrong?" Heath asked, squinting to see through the darkness. Everything looked okay to him—there was no one around, and the house looked like it always did.

"I don't know. Something doesn't feel right."

"Now who's letting Johnny get inside his head?" Heath chuckled. His laughter died at the stony expression on Bill's face as he leaned over Heath's lap and popped the glove compartment, withdrawing his service revolver. "Wait... you really think something's wrong?"

"Stay here. Lock the doors."

"Oh, shit, Bill... if you think something's not right, shouldn't you call for back-up?" Heath asked, tugging on Bill's arm. "Come on, this is no time to play Robo-cop!"

"I'll be okay. It's probably nothing. Just stay here, stay low, and lock the damn doors."

Bill was out of the car and walking toward the house in a low crouch before Heath could form a better argument. He hesitantly did as he'd been instructed, hitting the 'lock' buttons on the driver's side door. All four locks popped down with soft clicks. His skin crawled as he watched Bill climb the stairs to the stoop, and slip inside the dark house.

Five minutes went by, each one painfully, maddeningly long. There was no sign of Bill, although the lights flicked on throughout the house, one at a time. Finally, Heath couldn't take it anymore. He picked up the long flashlight Bill kept between the front seats, popped open the lock and jumped out of the car, and ran up to the front door in an awkward

imitation of Bill's practiced crouch. Holding the flashlight like a club, he stepped inside the house.

Bill's living room was a wreck.

Someone had used something sharp to shred all the sofa cushions; tufts of yellow foam poked like untidy mountain ranges from the brocade fabric. Everything in the room that had been breakable was in pieces. The flat screen television was toppled and cracked, vases and bric-a-brac smashed, picture frames stomped into bits. Long scratches, perhaps made by the same object used to shred the sofa, gouged the walls. Even the rug had been hacked at; the flat, blue-and-white matting could be seen through several jagged rips in the deep pile.

Heath's arm lowered unnoticed as he surveyed the damage. "Oh, my God..." He suddenly remembered what he'd come in for, and called out as he turned toward the hallway. "Bill! Bill, where are you? Answer me, Bill!"

"Damn it, Heath! I told you to stay in the car!" Bill growled as he appeared, coming out of the kitchen.

"What happened? Who did this?" Heath asked, ignoring Bill's angry hiss. "Oh, God... it was Johnny, wasn't it?" Suddenly, he looked down at his feet. Something was missing... something fuzzy and warm, and yipping. "Where's Clancy? Jesus Christ, Bill, *where's Clancy?*" His voice raised an octave as panic began to seep through his shock.

"I don't know. I haven't found him yet," Bill answered. His fury of a moment ago seemed to bleed out of him, and he reached for Heath. "Fuck! I can't believe..."

"Have you searched the whole house?" Heath said as he melted against Bill. They held each other tightly, as if both were afraid to let the other go and risk falling.

"Just enough to make sure whoever was here is gone. I have to call this in..."

"Not yet. First we find Clancy," Heath said firmly. He'd grown to love the little guy, and was heartsick that something might've happened to him. He could see misery in Bill's eyes, and knew that, of course, he felt the same way. He was worried sick, too. "Come on. Let's start in your bedroom."

The damage continued every step of the way. The hallway was a shambles, the same long gouges cut into the wallpaper, and every plate and picture frame Bill had hanging there was smashed. Glass and porcelain crunched under their feet as they made their way into the master bedroom.

Here, the damage was complete. The intruder had taken every shred of fabric, from the comforter, to the sheets, to the drapes, and sliced them into ribbons, scattering them across the floor. The mattress was torn with gouges so deep the springs poked through. Every drawer was upended and emptied, the contents destroyed methodically, so utterly ruined that Bill's clothing was unrecognizable. His closet was empty as well, its contents meeting the same fate, including his uniforms. The bedside lamps lay on the floor in pieces, the shades torn. Sheets of torn paper from magazines and books littered the rug. From what Heath could see, there wasn't a single item in Bill's bedroom that might be salvaged. It was a total loss.

"Clancy? Clancy, boy, come here," Bill called. They listened but heard nothing. "Clancy? Oh, please, boy, come out. It's okay. We're here now."

The silence grew thick, but just as Heath turned to leave the room to search elsewhere, he heard a slight noise. "Did you hear that? Clancy? Clancy, come on!" He called, dropping to his knees. They hit something sharp, but he ignored the sudden stab of pain, leaning down to look under the bed.

Far up, huddled against the wall beneath the headboard, was a small dark shape. "I see him! Bill, he's there, under the bed!" Heath jumped to his feet, ignoring the sting at his knee where he'd managed to slice open the skin on a broken piece of glass.

Together, they lifted the heavy, king-sized mattress and tipped it to its side. Clancy whined softly as he picked his head up to look at them, his tail feebly thumping against the rug.

Bill carefully picked him up, cradling him gently in his arms. "Poor pup. Poor guy. You're hurt, huh? Cut yourself on all that broken glass?"

"Is it bad? We need to get him to the vet, Bill."

"I think he'll be okay. The cuts don't look deep, but we can get him checked out at the vet's. I have to call this mess in, first. As soon as the units get here, we can go." Bill handed Clancy to Heath, and dug out his cell phone to make his second call to the station that night.

Heath wandered through the rest of the house with Bill as they waited for the squad cars to arrive. No room had escaped unscathed. The spare bedroom, the bathrooms, the

kitchen—it was as if a bomb had exploded in every room of the house.

He walked into Bill's bedroom again, surveying the damage with a sinking heart. *There's so much anger here*, he thought. *Rage. This wasn't a theft. This was an attack. Thank God Bill wasn't home.* A brief vision of Bill sprawled on the bedroom floor in a pool of bright red blood, made him shiver.

Heath's gaze wandered around the room until it lit on Bill's dresser. What he saw made him freeze, his heart beginning to pound. The surface had been swept clean of Bill's jewelry box and other odds and ends he'd kept there. In their place was a single item, but it was proof that Heath had been right all along. He stared at the turquoise ring, shaken anew. He couldn't move. He couldn't breathe.

He felt Bill walk up behind him, but was unable to tear his eyes away from his father's gold-and-turquoise ring. The one Johnny had stolen. There. On Bill's dresser. Johnny had been in Bill's house. His mind had difficulty wrapping itself around what his eyes were seeing.

"Johnny was here while we were at my apartment," Heath said in a low, sure voice. "You were wrong, Bill. He *did* know where you lived. Maybe he followed me here one day. The calls were a ruse, a smoke screen. He knew you would come to my place. Johnny knew I'd phone you, and that you'd come running. He knew you'd call the cops, and how that we'd be tied up at the apartment making a report, setting up a trace. He planned to do this to you all along."

"Maybe. Maybe not. It could be just a coincidence. I've put a lot of scum away over the years. It could've been anybody

with a grudge against me, Heath," Bill said, but Heath heard the doubt in his voice clearly.

"No, it couldn't." He pointed to the ring. "My father gave me that ring. I haven't seen it since Johnny cleaned me out. He was here. He did this."

Clancy whined softly again, drawing their attention, and they fell into silence as the sirens in the distance grew louder.

* * * *

Clancy's wounds were minor, but the pup was skittish and frightened. He cried piteously while the vet treated his small cuts and abrasions, and he cowered in Bill's arms afterwards.

Bill didn't want to return to Heath's apartment, and wouldn't hear of Heath doing so, either. There was no longer any doubt about who'd done the deed. Johnny's prints had been all over Bill's house. He'd been extremely thorough in destroying it, methodical even, but sloppy in the process.

"We'll get a motel room. We can pick up essentials at a convenience store if need be, but we're not going back to your place at all. If it was Johnny, he may be watching your apartment. I'm not taking any chances with you or Clancy."

"Bill, be reasonable. There was a whole platoon of cops at my apartment. He wouldn't be stupid enough to—"

"We're not talking stupid here, Heath. We're talking crazy, and crazy assholes like Johnny Brazzio are unpredictable. Nothing you have in that apartment is worth the risk." He sighed and leaned back, stroking Clancy's trembling body.

"Please don't fight me on this. There's an APB out for Brazzio,

but until he's found, I want—need—to keep you close and safe. Okay?"

It was Heath's turn to sigh. "This is all my fault. Poor little Clancy... he never did anything to anybody. Neither did you. I got you mixed up in this craziness."

"Bullshit. The only one at fault is Brazzio."

"If I hadn't accepted your dinner invitation—"

"We wouldn't have what we do. I don't know about you, but I've never felt this way about anyone before. There's something real here, Heath, between us. I can feel it. Can't you?" He reached over and gently brushed his knuckles along Heath's jaw.

Heath leaned into Bill's touch. "Yeah, I do." He smiled, and patted Clancy's head. "We'll need a motel that will take pets. I don't want to let this little guy out of our sight, either."

"The Holiday Inn over on 27 allows pets. It may not be five stars, but it's clean, and it has room service."

"Sounds like a plan."

Heath took Clancy into his arms and slid into the passenger seat of Bill's car, while Bill took the wheel. He was grateful for Bill's strength. If Heath had tried to drive, he was sure he would've wrapped them around a telephone pole. He was far too shaken and distracted to drive safely.

Bill drove aimlessly for over a half hour, to make sure they weren't being followed, then headed to the Holiday Inn. They made one stop, at a convenience store to pick up a few essentials for Bill since Heath already had his overnight bag, and puppy chow for Clancy. He also bought a bottle of

peroxide and a box of Band-aids for Heath's knee. It had stopped bleeding, but Bill insisted it be treated.

Heath sweated the entire five minutes Bill was inside the store, imagining Johnny leaping out at him from every shadow. Fifteen minutes later, they were safely locked inside Room 445 with two burger platters on the way up from Room Service, and he finally blew out a long, shuddering sigh of relief.

Clancy sampled his food and water, but soon curled up on the bed and fell asleep. He was no doubt exhausted from his terrifying night. Heath couldn't blame the poor creature. He felt the same way.

"How can you be so calm?" he asked, watching Bill pick over the last of his platter. All that was left were a few odd French fries, and lettuce. Heath had hardly touched his food. The thought of eating made his stomach cramp. "I still feel like I'm ready to jump clear out of my skin."

Bill shrugged one powerful shoulder. "I'm trained to be calm in stressful situations. Besides, I know we're safe. I took every precaution I could think of, and I know we weren't followed. I didn't tell anyone where we were going; the boys at the station know my cell phone number if they need us. There's no way Brazzio could know where to find us."

Heath nodded, but he was still nervous. When he jumped at a child playfully screaming outside their door, Bill frowned, walked around the table to Heath, and began massaging his shoulders. Heath let his head drop forward, surrendering himself to Bill's ministrations. It felt wonderful, but not even

Bill's magic fingers could manage to relax his knotted muscles.

Finally, Bill sighed. "Heath, go take a shower. Maybe the hot water will help you relax. You're going to give yourself a heart attack if you don't chill."

Heath gave a short, sardonic laugh. "Are you kidding? I'm doing great. So far today, I've gotten threatening phone calls from a crazy ex-lover, found my new lover's house torn to pieces, and his puppy bleeding. I'm surprised I'm not curled up on the floor in the fetal position yet."

Bill laughed and kissed the top of his head. "You're stronger than you give yourself credit for being, babe. Go on, take a shower. It'll do you a world of good."

He silently admitted that a steaming hot shower did sound appealing. Nodding, he heaved himself up out of his chair. Bill caught him before he could take two steps, pulling him into strong, comforting arms.

"I won't let anything happen to you," Bill whispered, then sealed his promise with a slow, deep kiss that curled Heath's toes.

His tongue swept Heath's mouth, and for a moment, Heath was lost in Bill's taste. He wrapped his arms around Bill's back, finding comfort in the play of muscles under his hands.

Bill's groan was a raw, ragged sound. "Man, you are more addictive than crack. One taste and I'm hard for you."

"You say that like it's a bad thing," Heath whispered, tilting his head so that he could kiss Bill's neck. It was corded with muscle, and Heath could easily spend hours—indeed, had—exploring it with his teeth and tongue.

"Nah, it's a good thing. A very good thing, but if I don't stop now, I won't be able to at all. Your muscles are tighter than a miser with his last dollar." Bill pulled away, and ran his hands over Heath's shoulders. "Look at this... rock hard, and I don't mean that in the good way. Get on in the shower." He spun Heath away and swatted him on the rump. "Go on."

"Tease."

"Oh, no, baby, that was a promise, and one I intend to keep as soon as you're dry."

"I'm going to hold you to that," Heath said with a half smile. He reluctantly stepped away from Bill and made his way into the bathroom. Bill was right. Shower first, and sex until he either exploded or fell unconscious, later.

He turned on the water and stripped, then stepped under the hot spray, letting it sluice over the tight muscles of his neck and upper back. Clouds of steam fogged the air; hot water swirled around his feet. He lost track of how long he stood there, trying to let his tension drain away with the water.

Eventually the hot shower did its job. He began to relax, and soaped up, washing his hair and body quickly. Bill's promise made him smile, and he was suddenly eager to dry off and get into bed.

He turned off the shower and dried off, brushed his teeth, finger-combed his hair. With only the bath towel wrapped around his waist to keep him modest, he walked back into the bedroom.

Bill was completely, gloriously naked, and sprawled on the first bed—Clancy had claimed the one nearest the window—with his arms tucked behind his head.

Sound asleep.

They made quite a picture. Clancy's paws twitched in his sleep, and Heath hoped he was dreaming of chasing cats and rabbits in wide, sunlit fields of clover, and not of Johnny's rampage in the house.

Bill's full lips were slightly parted, and he snored softly. *He's had a helluva day, too, Heath thought. Far worse than you. All you had to do was endure a couple of hateful phone calls. His entire house was destroyed, and yet he was more concerned for you than himself. Instead of dwelling on what he's lost, he played nursemaid to his dog and his boyfriend. He's such a good man.*

My man, and the thought made him smile.

I should let him sleep. God knows he deserves it, Heath thought, biting his lip. A wicked little voice reminded him that there were some things worth losing sleep for, and his lips spread into a sly grin. He quickly rummaged through the convenience store bag for the lube and condoms he knew Bill had bought, deeming them "essentials."

He crept onto the bed carefully, trying not to jiggle the mattress or disturb Bill and wake him. With one knee planted on either side of Bill's calves, he took a minute to appreciate Bill's body.

Bill had the body of a man who was fit, but not bulky with muscle. No super protein drinks, or steroids, or endless hours

at the gym for Heath's Bill. His was natural muscle, the sort good genes and an active lifestyle provided.

Bill's chest was wide, dusted with just enough hair to be manly without qualifying as a bear. Perfect, in Heath's humble opinion. The hair trailed in a thin line over his stomach to his belly button, then on to his groin.

Nestled against a thatch of black curls, Bill's cock was beautiful even in repose.

Heath lay the condom and lube to one side. Supporting his weight on his arms, he leaned down for a taste. His tongue slid over Bill's softened organ, the taste of salt and man filling his mouth.

Bill stirred, and he paused, watching until Bill settled again into sleep. He didn't want to wake Bill, not yet. He felt greedy, and wanted these few moments for himself, as he slowly awakened Bill's body with his mouth.

His tongue flicked lightly over the smooth, silky skin of Bill's cock. Each touch of his tongue solicited a response—a twitch, a bob, or a droplet of pre-come beading the tip. It was almost like a well choreographed dance, as Bill's cock met and reacted to each move by Heath's tongue.

Bill's body was receptive even in sleep; it didn't take long for his cock to lengthen and harden, proud and rosy red, slicked with pre-come.

Heath peeked at Bill's features, still relaxed in sleep, although his lips were parted, and his breathing quickened. Good. He didn't want Bill to wake until Bill was seated deep inside Heath's body. He wanted them connected when Bill finally opened those beautiful turquoise eyes.

He worked quickly, tearing open the foil wrapper and sheathing Bill's cock in latex, then coating it well with lube. The next part was more difficult. He squeezed a dollop of lube onto his fingers and reached around his own hip, searching between his cheeks for his hole.

He hadn't bottomed in a long time, and his hole was tight, unwilling at first to open easily for his questing fingers, but fucking his own hand wasn't his intention anyway. He only needed to grease the way for Bill's cock.

When he felt he was sufficiently ready—or as ready as he could be, given the circumstances—he inched up over Bill's groin, and gripped Bill's hard cock in his hand, and slowly impaled himself on it.

That was moment Bill's eyes flew open, and he groaned. The heated look in Bill's sleepy eyes was sexy, enough so to take Heath's mind off the burn of being entered.

"W-what? Oh, my God..." Bill whispered. His voice was rough and drowsy, sleep-heavy, and as sexy as all fuck.

"Fuck, yeah," Heath breathed. He let his head fall back, enjoying the feeling of fullness, of *connection*, as it surged through his body. It awakened his own desires, his cock growing hard and needful.

Bill's hands slid over his thighs to his hips, helping him ride. He leaned down low over Bill's chest, his lips seeking Bill's, giving over control. The tempo increased as Bill's hips pumped upward, thrusting into Heath's body.

Heath's cock rubbed against Bill's stomach and the pressure within Heath grew, until it was unbearable. He came, crying out Bill's name, his voice muffled by their kiss.

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He felt Bill's fingers tighten on his hips, digging in, as Bill's thrusts grew erratic, and swallowed Bill's groan as he came.

The smell of their sex was heavy, pungent, and comforting as he collapsed on top of Bill in a tangle of arms, legs, and sweated skin.

"That settles it. I'm keeping you," Bill murmured. "That was phenomenal. Unexpected, but fucking awesome."

Heath chuckled, still feeling too sated to want to move off of Bill, but he knew he must be getting heavy. He grunted as he rolled off and onto his back. "I have my moments."

Bill got up, and Heath watched through heavy-lidded eyes as he padded into the bathroom and returned with a wet washcloth and clean towels. He wouldn't let Heath clean himself, insisting on doing it for both of them.

The towels ended up in a heap on the floor as they cuddled together naked under the sheets, and fell asleep in each other's arms.

* * * *

"The Chief gave me a few day off from work because of what happened so I can deal with the mess Brazzio made," Bill said, as they polished off breakfast. Waffles, bacon, eggs, and two pots of strong coffee had been delivered by room service. "I need to go get replacement uniforms today. Thank God I had my service revolver with me. At least Brazzio didn't get that." He reached down and fed Clancy a strip of leftover bacon. "Would you mind keeping an eye on Furface, here? I don't think he'll be happy being left alone yet."

Clancy seemed to have recovered fully from his traumatic experience of the day before. Heath wished he could cope as easily as the pup. He was still worried sick about Johnny coming back.

There was no telling what Johnny might do next. He hadn't been found, and although Bill was convinced he'd either gone to ground or was running, Heath wasn't so sure. Johnny was obviously deranged, and the rage Heath had seen in Johnny's handiwork at Bill's house made him wonder whether Johnny would give up so easily.

"Are you sure you don't want us to come with you?" Heath asked. He hated to admit he didn't want to be left alone either.

"Nah. It won't take me long. I'll be back before you know it." Bill leaned in over the table, cupping Heath's chin in his strong hand. "You'll both be fine. Brazzio doesn't know where we are. I made sure we weren't followed last night, and I didn't even tell the detectives where we were going, remember?"

"Okay. Just be careful, all right?"

"I will. Promise." He stood up and came around to Heath's side of the table, bending over for a deep kiss. "Be back soon."

Heath nodded, and followed Bill to the door, locking it after him. He turned back to the empty room, and looked at Clancy. "Guess it's just you and me for a while, pup. Want to see what's on television?" He sat on the bed and picked up the remote, turning on the television.

Clancy yipped as if in reply and dutifully jumped up on the bed. He circled for a bit, his paws flattening the comforter until he felt it was just right, and then curled up close to Heath's side.

There wasn't much on at that hour of the morning except for news programs and morning talk shows. He paused on the local news station, but there was no report on the break in at Bill's house, at least not during the few minutes he watched. Flipping through the stations, he finally found one playing a sitcom rerun he could tolerate, and settled back against the pillows.

Fifteen or twenty minutes passed, and his head bobbed in a light doze when he was startled awake by a rap at the door. A voice called to him from the other side. "Housekeeping!"

Shit. Bill must've forgotten to hang the "Do Not Disturb" tag on the door the night before. He debated for a few minutes about whether he should answer or not, then figured if he didn't, the maid would come in anyway, thinking there was no one in the room. He climbed off the bed and trotted to the door, but didn't open it.

"Um, I don't think we need housekeeping today," he called through the door.

"Okay. I give fresh towels," the high-pitched voice, heavy with an accent, said. "You want, yes?"

He thought about the two bath towels lying in a heap next to the bed, sticky with come. They'd need clean towels if they wanted to shower later.

Stop being so paranoid, he thought to himself as he twisted the door's lock open. *Johnny doesn't know where you are. It's just the maid. Get the towels*

No sooner had he turned the knob and cracked open the door than it slammed inward, snapping the chain and knocking him back. A body burst into the room, slamming the door shut and sliding the bolt.

It took Heath a few precious, stunned seconds to realize it was Johnny. "How the fuck did you find me? Get out!" he yelled, scrambling away. He heard Clancy barking behind him, and hoped the pup would have enough sense to hide.

"You know, I'm getting sick and fucking tired of you cheating on me. I told you to dump the pig, but instead you hide in here, with him and his fucking dog. I should've killed that mutt when I had the chance," Johnny snarled. He looked over Heath's shoulder and bellowed at Clancy. "Shut up!"

Clancy whined, jumped off the bed, and wriggled behind the drapes. Heath's heart clenched when he started barking anew. "Leave him alone. He's only a baby," he said. "Your beef is with me, Johnny."

"Yeah, you. Thanks for reminding me."

A ham-sized fist plowed into Heath's face, knocking him onto the floor. Pain blinded him, making his breath catch in his throat.

"Did you let him fuck you? Did you? You wouldn't let me. No, Johnny had to be the good little bottom for big, rich Heath. My dick wasn't good enough, was it? You think you're so fucking perfect, but I showed you who's perfect, who's

smarter, didn't I?" Madness made Johnny's eyes glitter like black diamonds.

"Y-you're sick, Johnny. You need help. I can help you," Heath said, babbling as he struggled back to his feet, holding the injured side of his face with one hand. His jaw hurt when he talked, but he kept at it anyway, hoping to distract Johnny from Clancy, whose frantic barks continued unabated.

"Shut that fucking mutt up!"

"Never mind him. We can go away, anyplace you want. The beach! You always liked the beach. We can go there, get a room—"

"Liar!" Johnny screamed, pushing Heath. He pushed again, and Heath felt the edge of the bed behind his knees. He fell backwards, bouncing on the mattress.

His blood iced in his veins when Johnny pulled a gun out of his pocket and aimed it at him. He watched in terror as Johnny unbuckled his belt and unzipped his pants with his free hand. Suddenly, Heath knew death wasn't the only thing on Johnny's mind.

Oh, God, he's going to rape me and then kill me. Right here, in this hotel room. Please, Bill, stay away, he silently prayed. Don't come back until it's over and Johnny's gone.

"Y-you don't need to do this, Johnny. It can be like it used to be, I swear. I can be good to you, you'll see..."

"Take your underwear off. Show me that pretty ass. Now!" Johnny yelled. His dick was out, although he hadn't bothered to push his pants down. He stroked himself, leering at Heath.

Heath's mind was racing, but he managed to say what he thought Johnny would want to hear. "Why don't you put the

gun away, Johnny? You want me, right? Want to touch me? You need both hands for that. I've missed you. Nobody is as good as you are. Bill... er, the cop was just a mistake. I was mad that you left with my stuff. I should've known better, that you'd come back to me."

The gun didn't waver. Johnny held it aimed at Heath's head. "Yeah, you should've known better. You owe me for that. Now I get to take you however I want you. Roll over."

Heath didn't want to turn his back on Johnny. He moved slowly, inching his underwear down a fraction of an inch at a time, pretending to give Johnny a show. His lips were curled in what he hoped was a seductive smile, but feared was more of a grimace. He never was a very good actor.

Johnny's eyes were wide and his pupils dilated. His brow was furrowed, but he watched Heath intently, and didn't seem to realize Heath was repulsed by him.

Heath silently thanked God that Johnny's attention was on him when the door opened and Bill slipped silently into the room. Johnny was too focused on Heath to see or hear him.

Everything seemed to happen in slow motion.

Bill yelled for Johnny to drop the gun. Johnny snarled and swung the gun toward Bill.

A shot rang out; Johnny toppled to the floor. A second shot rang out. A chunk of plaster exploded out of the wall next to the bed. A warm, furry body pounced on top of Heath, barking furiously. Another shot echoed in the room.

Except for Clancy's barking, wriggling body, everything seemed to go very still after that. Heath blinked as the light in the room grayed, and he wondered why Bill's voice sounded

so far away when he knew Bill was standing only a couple of feet from the bed. Then blackness took him, and he wondered nothing else.

* * * *

In his dreams, Bill was bleeding out on the hotel room floor, riddled with bullet holes, as Johnny's maniacal laugh bounced off the walls.

"Told you to get rid of him! You were too selfish, Heath. You kept him, and now he's dead!"

"No! No!" He tried to get up off the bed to go to Bill, but his body felt leaden. It was difficult to move. He thrashed, but Johnny had tied him to the bed. "Let me up! Bill! Bill!"

"Heath, calm down. I'm right here. Look at me, Heath. Open your eyes and look at me."

Was that Johnny's voice, or Bill's? He didn't know, couldn't tell. Where was Clancy? Had Johnny hurt him? Oh, God, Johnny had killed Bill. Bill was dead, and it was Heath's fault. Grief, deep and unimaginably painful, rose up within him, choking him. Tears spilled, and he blinked his eyes against the wet burn of them.

The first thing he saw when his vision finally cleared was Bill's face, hovering over him.

"Hey, you," Bill said. His face wore a sweet, concerned smile. "You're okay now. It's all over."

"I dreamed that he killed you," Heath whispered, trying to reach for Bill. He need to touch Bill, to know that Bill's death was only a nightmare, but realized he couldn't move because his arms and legs were secured to the bed. His shoulder hurt

like hell, too, and he could see white bandages neatly taped to his skin.

"Sorry about that, hon," Bill said. "You were thrashing around so much in your sleep, even with the sedatives, that the doctors thought it best if you were restrained. Let me get those for you." He quickly removed the Velcro restraints, and gathered Heath into his arms. "Thank God the bullet only grazed you. The docs say you're going to be fine. Just a few stitches, is all."

Well, that explained his shoulder, but his wound was the least of his worries. He was still consumed by his dream. "You're really okay? He didn't hurt you?"

"Nah, I'm fine. He's got a couple of holes in him, though. He had surgery last night. As soon as the docs say he can be moved, they'll transfer him over to County until his trial." Bill's arms tightened around him. "Fuck, I was never so scared as when I came in and saw him standing there with a gun in his hand. I didn't know if he'd already shot you, or what... I don't even want to think about what might've happened if I hadn't come back when I did."

"He was going to rape me, then kill me, I think," Heath said. "Clancy! Is the pup okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine. He's boarding at the vet for a few days. Don't worry about him. Dolores, the vet's assistant took a liking to him. She'll make sure he's taken care of until you get out of here, and we can bring him home."

"Home. Home sounds good," Heath said, resting his head on Bill's shoulder. He enjoyed the safety of Bill's arms for a

few minutes, letting Bill's heartbeat calm him. "How did you know Johnny was in the room with me?"

"I heard Clancy barking. He never barks like that. Yips, yes. Yaps, sure, but flat out barking for no reason? Never," Bill answered. "I knew something was wrong. I used my key to get in, saw Johnny standing there with the gun, and shot him in the leg. He managed to get off a shot when he fell, but I hit him next in the arm, and he dropped the gun. It was all over then."

"I still don't understand how the fuck he found me in the first place. We were so careful!"

"The detectives found his laptop in your stolen Audi outside of the motel, and the answer was right there on his desktop in a folder with your name on it. I've been beating myself up about it all night. I can't believe I didn't figure it out sooner. Seems he had a cell phone under your plan, and you never cancelled it or changed your number after he left. While he was with you, he contacted the cell phone company pretending to be you, and signed you up for their locator service. He was able to track your cell phone online. That's how he found my address, and how he knew you were in this motel."

"Oh, that rat bastard, using my own fucking cell phone provider against me!" Heath sighed, shaking his head. "It's not your fault, Bill. I'm a moron. I got two phones with my cell phone package, and gave him one. His phone was the one thing he'd left behind when he left. I just tossed it in a drawer, and forgot about it. I never thought to change *my* cell

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phone number or my plan. I never really looked at my bill, either, just paid it every month when it came in."

"Hey, don't beat yourself up about it. Brazzio is nuts, but he's smart, too. He was banking on you being so upset you'd forget about changing your phone plan. That's probably why he never called you on your cell. He didn't want you to change your number, and find out what he'd done. He planned to come back all along. He must be truly fucked up in the head to think you'd fall for his shit again."

"I'm so sorry, Bill. If it wasn't for me, you wouldn't have lost all your stuff, and Clancy wouldn't have gotten hurt, and—"

Bill's beautiful eyes narrowed at him. "I do not want to say this again, so listen close. This was not your fault. This was all Johnny Brazzio's doing, and besides, I'd go through it a thousand times if it would mean I could have you. I actually owe Brazzio. If he hadn't been such a douche bag, I never would've met you. Understand?" His expression softened, his lips curving in a soft smile. "I love you, Heath."

"Oh... oh, man. Bill. I-I love you, too," Heath whispered. It was true, although he hadn't realized it until then. Once he did, he felt his heart swell with the weight of it, pushing more tears, happy ones this time, into his eyes. They overflowed, much to his embarrassment. He swiped at them with his arm. "Shit. I'm not usually weepy like this."

Bill laughed. "We'll blame it on the meds, okay? Although I have to admit, I'm feeling a little moist here, myself." Wetness glittered in the turquoise eyes Heath loved.

They held each other silently for a long while, but then Bill pulled away, looking at him intently. "So, have you decided, yet?"

"Decided what?" Heath looked at him, puzzled.

"On whether or not you want to take me up on my offer. Of course, the house is going to need some renovations, and new furniture, dishes... well, new *everything*, really, but in a way, I think that'll be a good thing. It'll be really ours then, not just the house my folks left me."

Heath gaped at Bill until he realized what Bill was talking about. It seemed like a lifetime ago that Bill had asked him to move in. In reality, it had only been a couple of days.

It was amazing how much had changed in just forty-eight hours, including Heath's feelings for Bill. He was no longer doubtful about their relationship, nor did he have to think about his answer. He knew.

"Oh, *hell*, yes!" Heath said, throwing his good arm around Bill again. "Nothing would make me happier. We can stay at my apartment until the house is ready, but after that, you're stuck with me, pal."

"Great!" Bill exclaimed with a grin. "Oh, I have something for you, by the way." He fished in his pocket and pulled out Heath's father's ring. The turquoise stone seemed to glow in the sunlight. "I went back to my place to get it. I thought you might want it with you. I know how much it means to you." He took Heath's left hand, and slowly slipped it onto his ring finger. "Just like I know how much you mean to me. I know you never want to lose this ring again, and I never plan on losing you."

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The gesture wasn't lost on Heath. Bill was claiming him. Evidently, Bill thought *he* was a keeper, too.

With a smile and a long, deep kiss, Heath decided to be kept.

END

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