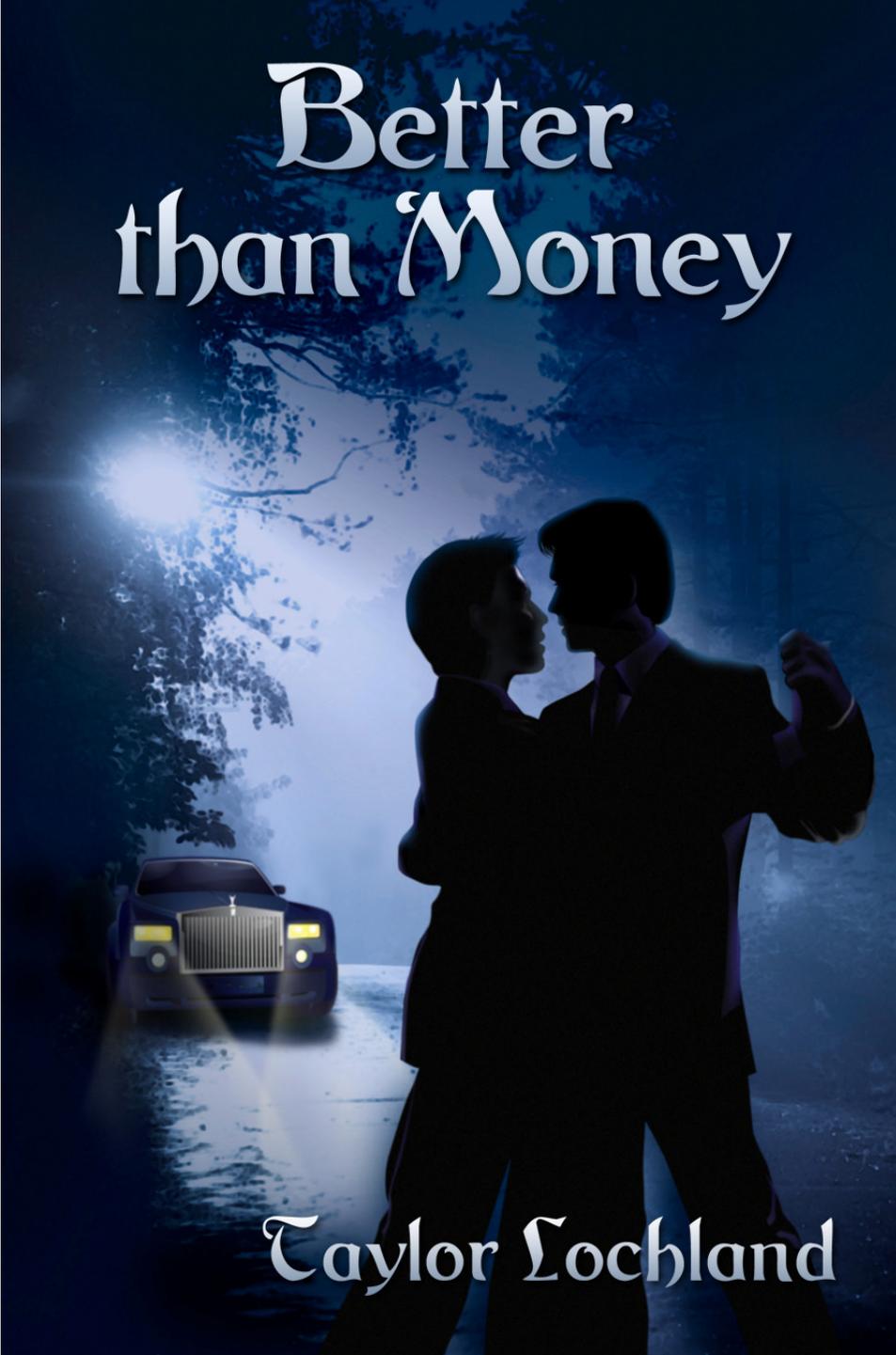


Better than Money

A man and a woman in formal attire are shown in silhouette, embracing on a misty night path. The man is on the right, wearing a suit and tie, and the woman is on the left. In the background, a Rolls-Royce Phantom is visible on the path, illuminated by its headlights. The scene is set in a wooded area with trees and a bright light source in the distance, creating a romantic and atmospheric mood.

Taylor Lochland

FELIX leaned over and pulled me into a hug. “We should do this more often. I miss spending time with you, Jack.”

“Miss you too.” I hugged him back and caught a whiff of his shampoo. I missed that scent almost as much as I missed him.

When Felix was a male escort like me, he was my best friend and roommate. He was still my best friend, but he’d moved out to live with his boyfriend a few months back. I wasn’t mad at him or anything—especially since I’m the one who helped him get with Julian in the first place—but it made the apartment seem too big and a little lonely. Felix and I got together for a guys’ night out a couple times a month, but after years of seeing him every day, those few nights weren’t much. I reluctantly let go and opened the passenger door. “See you next time.” I started to get out, but he put his hand on my arm to stop me.

“Julian’s throwing a holiday party at the hotel on the seventeenth. You should come by.”

“Who’ll be there?”

“Mostly Julian’s friends from his book club, so it’s not going to be very exciting, actually. Still, you should come.” He shot me a half smile. “Will you?”

I thought about it for a moment. Julian used to be one

of my regular johns, and even though he and I were still okay with each other, I felt a little weird around him now that he was in a relationship with Felix.

“Julian would really like to see you. You rarely come to The Portara anymore.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“You don’t have to feel weird around him. Really.”

I chuckled. Felix could often tell what I was thinking. We knew each other far too well. “All right. I’ll come. What time?”

“From eight until midnight, so don’t make any appointments for that night.”

I rolled my eyes and shook my head. “Man, you’re always making me lose work.” I turned down potential johns on the nights Felix and I got together, and there was that time I pretended to be sick and cancelled my appointment with Julian so Felix would have the chance to fill in for me. At the rate those two had been going, they never would have gotten together if I hadn’t done something to help.

“You’re never going to let me forget that, are you?”

“Course not. Why would I?” I got out of the car. “Then I guess I’ll see you on the seventeenth. Want me to bring anything?”

“No, we’ve got it covered. Shelly and Tom are throwing together a full dinner with appetizers and desserts.”

“Awesome. Why didn’t you start with that? I would’ve agreed without hesitation.” The Portara’s new cooks were the best.

Felix laughed. “Maybe because I wanted you to come for me and Julian, not the food. Now close the door. It’s freezing.”

“Night.” I closed the door and headed up the walkway to my apartment. Once I’d entered the building, I turned and waved to let him know he could go, since I knew he wouldn’t leave until I was safely inside. Even though we didn’t live together anymore, we still had each other’s backs.

I went to bed right away, but I had a hard time falling asleep. Granted, I had nights like that a lot thanks to my messed-up schedule, but this time, it was for a different reason. I hated to admit it to myself, but the loneliness was getting to me, and it wasn’t just because I didn’t have a roommate. After seeing Felix fall in love and end up in a relationship, I started thinking I might want to try that too.

Shit. It wasn’t something I ever expected to feel, at least not while I was tricking. *Damn you, Felix.* It was all his fault. He and I tried a relationship together once, but we were at each other’s throats the whole time. Luckily, we were smart enough to quit before we hated each other. It made me think guys like us weren’t meant to be in love, but then he had to go and prove me wrong. *Maybe I need to get a cat or something.*

I SPENT the next several days taking care of johns as usual. The busier I was, the less time I spent thinking about wanting a boyfriend. It was better that way.

When the time came for the party, I thought about skipping out on it. I loved Felix and liked Julian, so I wouldn't mind spending time with them, but I wasn't too keen on the idea of hanging out with a bunch of Julian's book nerd friends—not that I had anything against book nerds. I just didn't think I'd have much to talk about. *Eh, who knows? Maybe one of 'em will be lonely and in need of my services.* I decided to make an appearance, at least.

As I was getting ready to go, I realized I forgot to ask Felix if the party was casual or formal. I decided to go for middle ground and put on my black sweater and khakis. That was about as dressed up as I usually got, anyway. Then I looked in the mirror and ran some gel through my hair to fix my spikes. I was going to have to bleach the damn things again pretty soon. My roots were starting to show.

I got to the party a little after eight, and it looked like most of the guests were there already. I'd always thought people showed up late to parties, but things must have been different with Julian's crowd. I glanced around but didn't see very many people I knew. Just Marcus behind the front desk.

He gave me a polite smile. "Shelly and Tom are in the kitchen. Felix had a final exam, but he should be here anytime. I'll get Julian for you, though." He leaned back in his seat and knocked on the office door.

A moment later, Julian opened the door, and when he saw me, he came out from behind the desk. "Jack. Hello!"

"Hey, Professor." He wasn't actually a professor, but he got his nickname because of his glasses and his stacks of

books. It seemed like I was the only one who still called him that. “Felix invited me. I hope that’s all right.”

“Of course it’s all right.” He grinned and pulled me into a hug, which kinda surprised me. I may have taken care of his sexual needs in the past, but he’d never touched me in front of other people before. “I’m glad you could come.”

I hugged him back, and I realized I actually did miss him. I couldn’t say I missed the sex, since for me it wasn’t anything different from sex with any other john. However, the two of us had a lot of late-night conversations and had gotten to be friends. That’s what I missed.

“Sorry I haven’t been by.” I didn’t offer an excuse since I didn’t have one that wasn’t lame.

Julian let me go, squeezing my shoulder as he pulled away. “The deal on hotel rooms still stands you know, if you ever need it.” Back when Felix and I first met Julian, he gave our johns and us discounts on the rooms at The Portara—if I returned the favor with discounted services. I knew it wasn’t a kosher business practice, and I never figured out exactly why he did it. He said it was because we brought him business, but I think it was more because he was lonely.

“Thanks, man.” I rubbed the back of my neck and looked around. “So, those are all your reading buddies?”

“Mostly. Let me introduce you.” He draped an arm around my shoulder and led me to the lobby, where most of the guests were sitting near the big fountain with the Greek statues. Julian was a Greek mythology nut, so there was Greek stuff everywhere. “Um, hi, everybody,” he said nervously. Felix once mentioned how Julian hated talking to

groups, even if the people in the groups were friends.

“Hey,” I said, trying to jump in to his rescue. “I’m Jack. A friend of Felix and Julian.”

The men and women around the fountain all introduced themselves, but there was no way I could remember all the names, so I didn’t even try. When they invited me to join them, I thanked them, but said I was going to give Julian a hand. Julian didn’t seem to mind.

Julian made small talk with me while I helped him and the cooks get the dining room ready. He asked me what was going on in my life, but I didn’t have much to share. I didn’t think he wanted to hear about my tricks. He did ask if I’d thought about looking for “another job” yet, but I just shook my head. I knew it was something I’d have to think about eventually, but right now, I didn’t have a reason.

As I set the trays of sun-shaped cookies on the tables—Julian said they were to represent the winter solstice—I heard the door open and a familiar voice call out, “Hey, baby!”

I knew Felix wasn’t talking to me. I looked up and watched as he walked straight to Julian and threw his arms around him from behind. He’d gotten mushier since the two of them got together.

Julian’s face turned pink as he smiled and patted Felix’s hand. “How’d your exam go?”

“Excellent, mostly thanks to you.”

“You’re the one who took it.”

“But you helped me study.” Felix walked around Julian

to face him and then pressed their lips together.

I looked away from the scene. Not that I had a problem with it, of course, but it gave me that weird lonely feeling again. Tom made eye contact with me and pretended to gag until Shelly cuffed him on the shoulder and told him to knock it off.

He shrugged. “I don’t care if they’re both dudes, but my God. Sometimes the sap gets so thick around here I feel like my boots are going to stick to the floor.”

Shelly rolled her eyes. “Oh please. They aren’t that bad. I think it’s kind of sweet, actually.”

I laughed a little. “The sweetness is a little sickening, but yeah. They really *are* into each other.”

Tom smirked and folded his arms across his chest. “That’s putting it mildly. How about you? Been seeing anybody?” As far as I knew, he didn’t know about my work. I wanted to keep it that way.

“Nah.” I ate one of the cookies as I thought about how to change the subject.

Felix saw me and saved me from the conversation altogether. “Jack! I’m glad you came.” He disentangled himself from Julian and hurried over to join me. “I was worried you were going to skip it.”

“I knew you’d never let me live it down if I did.” I turned my head and waved to Shelly and Tom as Felix pulled me away from them.

“You’re right. I wouldn’t.” He lowered his voice. “Sorry about the other guests.”

“They seem all right.”

“They’re nice people, but they’re nothing like us. But never mind them.” He led me to the Christmas tree in the back corner of the dining room and bent down to pick up a small wrapped box. “It’s from me and Julian both. I know it’s early, but Julian’s dragging me to visit some of his relatives for Christmas. We’re leaving the day after tomorrow, and won’t be back until the twenty-sixth.”

“What?” That hurt a little. I’d spent at least part of every Christmas with Felix since we were teenagers. My blood family stopped talking to me after I came out to them the day of my high school graduation, and since then, Felix had been the only family I had. “Who’s gonna man the inn?”

“Marcus and the rest of the staff can handle things. It’s only a week, and Julian will have his cell phone with him just in case.”

“I see.” I tried to hide my disappointment as I accepted the package and stared at the happy Santa Claus pattern on the wrapping paper.

“You can open it now. You don’t have to wait until Christmas.”

“I didn’t get yours yet.” I looked up and saw Felix smiling at me.

“Don’t worry about it. I didn’t give you much notice. I would have told you sooner, but Julian sprung it on me two days ago. Go ahead. I want to watch you open it.”

“All right.” I peeled off the paper. “Holy shit.” I dropped the wrapping on the floor and gaped at the box. It was one of

the newest iPod models. The one that costs around four hundred bucks. “You didn’t have to do this.”

“We wanted to. I remembered you saying you wanted to get a new one since your old one was full.” He put a hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “It’s our way of saying thanks.”

“For what?”

“For helping Julian and I find each other. Jack, if it weren’t for you, I never would have met him. You’re the one who found The Portara, and you’re the one who pretended to be sick so I could have a night with him.”

I looked at the box again. The sting of the news that I’d be spending Christmas without Felix faded a bit. “Oh, yeah, but I’m not sure what to get you guys now.” I couldn’t think of anything quite as valuable.

“You don’t need to get us anything, really. You already gave us the best thing we could ever want.”

Best thing. Just when I was starting to feel better, he had to go and remind me how he had love and I was alone. “I still feel like I should get you a little something.”

“It’s up to you.” Felix pulled me into a hug and kissed my cheek. “You know I love you, right?”

I hugged him back, the box still in my right hand. My eyes got a little watery, and I squeezed them shut for a second to take care of that. I’d never been one for showing any mushiness—not even to Felix—and I didn’t want to start right then. “I love you too. Even though you’re abandoning me, you jerk.”

Felix pulled away and let go. “Hey now, don’t go making

me feel bad.”

“Kidding. Jeez. Don’t worry about me. You go have fun. I don’t mind.”

He gave me a sympathetic smile, and I took a wild guess it was because he didn't believe me. “I don’t know if I’d call visiting Julian’s relatives fun, but who knows? It might be.” He paused and took a breath. “If I had my choice, I’d spend Christmas with just you and him.”

“Nah. That would make me into a third wheel, and being a third wheel sucks. Unless there’s a threesome involved.”

He laughed. “That might not be a bad idea. We could probably make it work, seeing we’ve all been with each other at some point before.”

I dropped my jaw in mock shock. “Felix. I can’t believe you’d say such a thing.” After a brief pause, I cocked my head, trying to look interested. “When should we set this up?”

Julian walked over right then, grinning when he saw the iPod in my hand. “He was so excited to give it to you. I hope you like it.”

“It’s the best Christmas present I’ve ever gotten. You and Felix rock.”

Felix snorted. “We do our best.”

“That we do,” Julian said. “Dinner’s about ready. I’m going to have everybody come in here. You guys go ahead and sit where you want. I’ll join you when I can.”

We sat down at the empty table closest to the buffet, but

it wasn't empty for long. A couple members of Julian's book club decided to grace us with their presence. They talked with Felix about Greek mythology—Julian had gotten him interested in it—while I sat there playing with my napkin. I'd read some Greek myths when I was in school, but I didn't remember much beyond the names of the characters and who some of the gods and goddesses were, certainly not enough to be a part of the discussion. I thought about excusing myself to go home, but I decided to suck it up a little longer. I didn't want to hurt Julian's feelings by sneaking off so soon.

Shelly and Tom had just started to set out the food when Julian left the dining room and went toward the main lobby. I glanced at Felix.

"Probably got a customer."

"Ah. Can't Marcus take care of it?"

"He could, but you know how Julian likes to greet the overnight guests when he can. He thinks it gives the hotel that personal touch."

"Yeah, that's our Professor." Seeing a convenient excuse for doing something besides sitting there not participating in conversation, I got to my feet. "I'll go see if he needs help."

Felix caught my wrist. "If anyone does that, it should be me."

"I don't mind." I shook his hand away and leaned in to speak into his ear. "Working on points for that threesome."

He lightly pushed me away. "Fine. Just go."

I went. When I caught up to Julian, he was behind the

front desk with Marcus, and a tall man in a suit was on the other side. Julian looked up when I got close. “Good timing, Jack. Mr. Seymour here is checking in for the night. The chauffeur went back outside to get the suitcases. Could you run out and give him a hand?”

“No problem.” I nodded and headed outside. The chauffeur had the trunk of the limo open and his back was to me. “Hey. I was supposed to come out and help you with the guy’s stuff.”

The man straightened and turned around. He was probably in his late twenties, like me, and had light brown hair that fell a few inches below the edge of his cap. He smiled, which showed off his dimples.

My God, he’s hot.

He started to take the suitcases out of the car. “Are you a new hire here?”

I had to give myself a mental smack before I could speak. “Nah. The owner’s a friend of mine.”

“Oh, you know Mr. Lucas?” He set the first suitcase on the ground.

Mr. Lucas? That just sounds weird. “Yeah, Julian’s... um...” I knew Julian was open about his sexual orientation to his family and close friends, but I didn’t know how open he was in general. “His friend who lives here is my best friend.”

The chauffeur took out another suitcase. “The good-looking guy with the wavy brown hair? I thought they were lovers.”

That answered my question about how much he might already know. “They are. Sorry.” I sheepishly rubbed the back of my head.

“Don’t be. You didn’t want to out your friends. It’s understandable.” He took the handle of one suitcase.

“I got this one.” I grabbed the other one before he had a chance to.

He thanked me and nodded, and then we rolled the bags into the hotel lobby.

“Good evening, Charlie,” Julian said, giving the chauffeur a pleasant smile. He turned to me. “Whenever somebody comes in a limo, it seems like Charlie’s the one bringing them.”

“It’s my pleasure, sir.”

I guessed The Portara didn’t get many guests in fancy cars, but I could imagine they’d get the occasional traveler looking for an unusual place to stay—or a gay-friendly place. “How often do you come here?”

“Oh, about once every week or two.”

Our paths must never have crossed. Someone as cute as him would have left a mark on my brain for sure.

“I’ll take the bags,” Julian said, coming out from behind the counter. “Charlie, if you don’t have to rush off to take care of another client, why don’t you stay for a little while? We’re having a holiday party, and there’s plenty of good food.”

I wondered if Julian only invited him because he’d

noticed the way I'd been staring.

Charlie's face kept up its professional expression, but it seemed to me that his eyes widened a bit. "Mr. Seymour was my last client for tonight, but I need to return the car. I can come back in an hour or so if that's not too late."

"We'll all still be here." Julian looked at me out of the corner of his eye. "Right, Jack?"

"Oh, yeah. Sure." I hadn't originally planned to stick around that long, but I suddenly had a reason. I wouldn't mind getting to know Charlie better.

"Then I'll see you in an hour." Charlie nodded and touched his cap before heading back outside.

As soon as Julian and I were alone, I turned to him and narrowed my eyes. "I know what you just did."

Julian grinned and shrugged. "Forgive me if I was presumptuous, but you seemed interested. I think he might have been interested too."

"I was. I am."

"Then what's the problem?"

I couldn't think of one. "Nothing. Thanks."

He put his hand on my shoulder. "Don't forget, I owe you for helping get me and Felix together."

"Felix said that's why you guys got me an expensive gift. No need to go playing matchmaker now," I said. His smile faltered, and I regretted my words. "Thanks, Julian. I do appreciate the thought, but relationships aren't easy for someone like me, as you well know."

He gave my shoulder a squeeze before dropping his hand. “I know, but Felix tells me you seem lonely.”

“He says that, does he?”

“Don’t be mad at him. He feels bad that he isn’t there for you as much as he used to be. Anyway, I’m not saying you should take Charlie into one of the rooms and attack him—though I wouldn’t mind if you did—I’m only saying you should talk to him. Wouldn’t hurt to make a friend.”

“Yeah. I just hope he doesn’t get put off by what I do.”

“You never know. You could always tell him you’re a men’s health practitioner. It’s sort of true.”

I wasn’t sure if he was joking or not.

ABOUT an hour later, I found myself wandering into the entrance lobby to keep an eye out for Charlie. My palms started to sweat. *I’m such a dork. It’s not like I don’t know how to deal with a guy.* I couldn’t help thinking it felt a bit like a blind date.

I glanced at the clock and saw it was after nine-thirty. Another few minutes passed, and right when I was about to give up and go back into the dining room—I hadn’t eaten yet—the door opened and Charlie walked in. He took off his gloves and cap and smiled when he saw me. “Jack, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Nice to actually meet you, Charlie.”

“Likewise.”

“You hungry? Last I checked, there was still plenty of food in the dining room. Oh, and you can hang your stuff up over there.” I pointed at the coat rack in the lobby. “It’s for the party guests.”

Charlie nodded and hung his coat and hat on the rack. He still had on his chauffeur uniform. “Am I going to be overdressed?” Hell, he looked nervous too. It really did seem like a blind date.

“Maybe a little, but you’ll still be one of the hottest guys in the room.”

His face colored, but he grinned and seemed to relax. “Thanks. I doubt I’ll know anybody here except the hotel staff, and I don’t know them all that well.”

“They’re the only ones here I know. It’s mostly people from Julian’s book club. Nice people, but all they talk about is reading.”

“I like to read.”

“Oh, I do too, don’t get me wrong. But it seems like they only read that hoity-toity literature and ancient stories.”

Charlie chuckled. “Ah, I see. I’m familiar with some mythology. As far as the other stuff, maybe I can remember some of it from my school days.”

We went into the dining room. Most of the guests had finished eating and were sitting together at a table near the Christmas tree. Big surprise, they looked like they were in the middle of a conversation.

“Maybe we shouldn’t bother them,” I said as we headed toward the buffet table.

“Maybe not.” He watched me fill my plate. “You didn’t eat yet?”

“No. I thought you might feel weird eating alone.”

“Oh. Thank you.” He smiled again but suddenly looked shy. “That was very considerate of you.”

I smiled back at him and shrugged. “No big deal. I figure we can feel out of place together.”

Julian came up to us right then. “Glad you could come back, Charlie. Let me know if you need anything.”

“Thank you for inviting me, sir.”

Felix joined us. “You don’t need to call him ‘sir’, Charlie. It gets to his head.”

Julian draped an arm around Felix’s shoulder, nuzzled his neck, and nipped at it. “You just want to be the only one who calls me that.”

I stared for a moment. Julian normally didn’t act like that, at least not in public. He must have hit the wine pretty hard.

Felix kissed his cheek. “We’ll discuss that later.” He then turned to Charlie and me. “We’re going back to the table where everybody else is.” He leaned in and whispered into my ear, “Don’t feel like you have to join us. And let me or Julian know if you need a room key.”

I pushed him away, shaking my head. When he and Julian returned to the group, I turned back to Charlie and saw his questioning look. “Never mind. He was just being an asshole. He’s good at that.”

Charlie didn't press, but I noticed his cheeks were pink as he finished filling his plate.

We sat down about two tables away from everybody else. Charlie picked it. He said it wasn't so far away that we'd seem rude—we were the only ones still eating, after all—but far enough to let us talk to each other without feeling like we should be part of the other conversation.

Shelly brought both of us a glass of wine, and once she was gone, I took a bite of chicken. “Eh. The food's cold. I can probably go warm it up if you want.”

Charlie tasted it. “Don't worry about it. It tastes fine cold. At any rate, it's much better than the fast food I would have had tonight if it weren't for this.” He took another bite and then looked up at me with those gorgeous blue eyes of his. “I guess I lucked out tonight. In more ways than one.”

I couldn't believe how warm my face got. “Heh,” was the only thing that would come out of my mouth. Damn it, I felt like a dork again. I made a living out of charming men, and there I was, unsure of how to react when one seemed to be charming me. Not that I never had johns trying to charm me, but this was different.

“Sorry.” He took a sip of wine. “I meant it's nice to have somebody to talk to over dinner. You seem like a good guy.”

So maybe he just wanted a friend. “Hard to believe a good-looking guy like you doesn't often have dinner companions.”

“Believe it. It's hard with my schedule. I work different hours every day and every week.”

“I know the feeling.” As soon as the words were out of my mouth, I wished I could take them back. A statement like that begged for the dreaded “oh, what do you do for a living” question. Before he could ask it, I blurted out, “Bet you meet a lot of people, though.”

“I do, but I’m separated from them in the car for the most part, and it’s not like I spend enough time with them to become friends.”

“Ah. I get it. Well,” I picked up my wine glass and did my best to sound hoity-toity, “it’s my pleasure to be your dinner companion tonight.”

Charlie laughed. “If that was supposed to sound like one of my clients... it was actually pretty good.”

“Why, thank you.”

“It’s the truth.” He looked down at his wine and twirled the stem of the glass between his fingertips. I started to wonder if something was wrong, but a few seconds later, he spoke. “Did you mean it?”

“That I’m enjoying your company? Of course.”

“That... and that you think I’m good-looking.”

“Mm hm. You’re damn hot, and that’s putting it mildly.”

He looked up at me again, the smile back on his face. “It’s not something guys usually say to other guys. Unless they’re—”

“Like Felix and Julian,” I said, finishing for him. “I *am* like them.”

“I thought you might be, but I wasn’t sure. Just because

a guy's friends with gay guys doesn't necessarily mean he's gay. I mean, I'm gay too, but I have a couple of straight guy co-workers I get along with and consider my friends, even though we don't hang out very much because of the schedule issues." He took a deep breath and gave me a sheepish look. "Didn't mean to babble. I do that sometimes when I'm attracted to somebody and find out there's a chance it might be mutual." He paused again to take a breath. "Is it? Mutual, I mean?"

I leaned over the table and pressed my lips to his. I kissed him only for a couple seconds before pulling away. "I hope that answers your question."

His face was bright red, but he looked happy. "It does. Thank you."

I wondered if Felix saw that, so I turned around to look at him. Both he and Julian were watching. No big shock. They quickly turned away when I made eye contact, but not before I saw the grins on their faces. I sighed, turned back to Charlie and jerked a thumb over my shoulder. "Looks like we made them awfully happy."

Charlie's blush deepened. "So what now?"

"Let's finish eating and take it from there."

"Good idea."

We chatted as we finished our food and wine. Mostly small talk—I was careful to keep the conversation on general things like the weather and fun places to go around town. I knew I'd have to tell him about my job eventually, but I didn't want to scare him away so soon.

Once we were both done eating, I said, “We could go sit by the fountain in the lobby. I don’t think Felix and Julian will care.” Charlie nodded and we both got to our feet, but Felix caught up to us before we’d even left the dining room.

“You guys aren’t leaving already, are you?”

I shook my head. “Nah, we were just going to sit somewhere more private.”

“If that wouldn’t be too rude,” Charlie piped in.

“It’s fine.” Felix pulled a room key out of his pocket. “In fact, you’re welcome to use one of the guest rooms if you’d like.” I glared at him. Last thing I needed was for Charlie to get embarrassed. “Not that I’m implying anything,” Felix added quickly. “But you won’t have to worry about mingling with the other guests, and there’s a TV in there.”

Nice attempt at a save. I took the key. “Thanks. I’ll come see you before I head out.”

“All right. By the way, I put your gift in the office so it wouldn’t get lost.”

I’d forgotten all about the iPod since Charlie showed up. “Thanks again.” I touched Charlie’s arm, and we left the dining room. “We don’t have to use the room if you don’t want.”

“No, we can. No point in turning away a nice offer like that.”

I nodded and led the way to Room 6. I’d been in that room several times before, but always for work and never for my own fun. I unlocked the door, pushed it open, and reached in to turn on the light. “After you.”

Charlie entered the room, took off his suit jacket, and hung it on the back of a chair. As he took off his shoes, he looked at the paintings of Greek ruins on the walls and the lamp that looked like a Greek vase. “Even the rooms have the Greek theme, huh?”

I walked in behind him and closed the door. “Yeah. Julian’s really into that stuff.”

“I see that.” He took off his shoes and sat down on the edge of the bed.

For a second, I just stood there. I wasn’t sure what to do. Except for Felix, it had been years since I’d been alone in a bedroom with a man who wasn’t a client. When Charlie smiled and patted the empty part of the bed next to him, I could finally move again, so I joined him on the bed. *C’mon, Jack. It’s not like you don’t know how to act around a guy.* I put a hand on his knee and squeezed it; then I leaned in for a kiss. We were alone, so I could kiss him more passionately. I took full advantage of that.

I put my hand on the back of his head and tangled my fingers in his hair, and he responded by pushing his tongue past my lips. I sucked on it and slid my own tongue over it, taking in the taste of wine still lingering in his mouth.

“You’re pretty good at that,” he said when we broke apart for air a few moments later.

I’d hope so. My answer was to press my mouth to his again. Kissing wasn’t something I did with all my clients, but I did it enough to be better at it than the average guy. I worked Charlie’s tie loose, pulled it off, and dropped it on the floor. Then I unbuttoned the top button of his shirt. Before I

got to the second one, he put a hand over mine and broke the kiss.

“Jack, let’s slow down.”

“Oh. All right.” I dropped my hands and sat up straight. I guess I was so used to getting right to business that I hadn’t thought he might want to take it slow, if he even wanted to do anything at all. “Sorry.”

“It’s okay.” He propped a pillow against the wall and scooted back on the bed to lean against it. “I just prefer getting to know the other guy first.”

I stretched out on my side next to him. “I thought that’s what we’ve been doing for the past hour or so.”

Charlie laughed and looked up at the ceiling. “An hour? That’s not very long at all.”

“It’s more time than a lot of guys spend getting to know each other.”

“I guess that’s true.” He turned his head to me, still smiling a half smile. “In fact, I know it is. You should see what goes on in the back of a limo sometimes.”

Hell, I’d had johns take me in the backs of limos before. “I can imagine.”

A moment of silence passed. I racked my brain trying to come up with something to talk about, but he came up with something before I did. Unfortunately, it was exactly what I didn’t want him to come up with.

“You know what I do for a living, but you never told me what you do.”

Shit. I thought about making something up, but in the few seconds I had to think about it, I realized that would be a bad idea. If we ended up seeing each other again, I didn't want to worry about covering up a lie. Besides, he seemed like a sweet guy. I may have been in a sleazy line of work, but that didn't make me a bastard. He had a right to know the truth, even if it did ruin my chance with him. I took a deep breath and looked him in the eye. To act embarrassed about it would make it worse.

"I'm a male escort."

A strange look I couldn't read passed over his face. "A male escort? You mean you—"

I nodded. "Sell my body. Have sex with dudes for money." I waited for him to scoot away from me or to make up an excuse to leave.

Instead, he gently touched my cheek. "Why do you do that to yourself?" He'd spoken so softly that it took me a moment to figure out what he'd said.

"It's easy, and it's good money."

"But isn't it dangerous?"

"I insist on protection, and I get tested regularly. I don't have any diseases or anything."

Charlie nodded. "That's good. But don't you get rough customers sometimes?"

"Once in awhile, but I've been at the job long enough to know how to deal with them, and they never get a second appointment. I mostly stick to my regulars now. I have enough of them."

His fingers traced my jaw line and it made my skin tingle. “I can understand why you would be popular.” He leaned over and kissed my forehead. “Haven’t you thought of doing something else?”

“I have, but I haven’t had a reason to change jobs yet. It’ll be a pain in the ass when I do. Not sure how I’d explain my lack of previous employment on a resume.” I rolled over on my back, took one of his hands, and massaged the palm. “I guess I’ll have to go back to school or something.”

“Ah.”

He stayed quiet long enough to make things awkward. “What’s wrong?” Dumb question, but it was all I could think to say.

“You’re not... I don’t... I don’t pay for it, if that’s what you’re after.”

Fuck. I never wanted him to think *that*. I let go of his hand and sat up. “No way, man. I’m here because I like you. Plain and simple.” I wanted to touch him, but I suddenly felt I shouldn’t. I sat on my hands to help fight the temptation.

Charlie’s face softened and he put a hand on my knee. “I’m glad of that.”

I glanced at the hand and felt the warmth of it through the fabric of my pants. It seemed like, at the very least, I’d made a new friend. I needed that. “So what do you think? Are you still interested?”

He hesitated for a moment before opening his mouth. “I think so, but I’m not sure.”

Oh well. At least it wasn’t a flat-out rejection. I nodded.

“I get it.” I slid off the bed and moved to one of the chairs. Might be safer that way. “Now what?”

“Let’s just talk a little more, if that’s okay.”

We ended up talking until almost two in the morning. It was actually kinda nice. It almost reminded me of the nights Julian and I stayed up late shooting the shit. Charlie seemed to enjoy talking about the people he’d met on the job—the celebrities and professional sports stars, the businessmen and women, the people from other countries. It actually sounded like an exciting job. I’d taken care of a few minor celebrities myself in the past, but I didn’t share that information.

Eventually, he yawned and glanced at his watch. “I should probably go. It’s late.”

“You can stay here, you know. The room’s ours for the night.” I shot him a smile. “Even if all we do is sleep.”

“Are you staying the night?”

“Yeah.” I stood up, pulled my sweater off over my head, and dropped it on the floor. “I won’t touch you... unless you want me to.” I took my pants off as well but left on my boxers.

Charlie snorted and started to unbutton his shirt. “I’m going to get some sleep.” I watched him out of the corner of my eye while he stripped down to his undershirt and boxers and then got under the blankets.

I joined him and turned onto my side, facing away from him. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Jack. Thanks for the good conversation

tonight.”

I felt the shift in the mattress telling me he turned over as well. A little while later, I fell asleep wondering if we would've had sex if I did something else for a living.

WHEN I woke up the next morning, Charlie's arm was draped across my waist. The bigger shock was that something hard pressed against the small of my back. I turned my head to look at him and saw he was still asleep. *Just an unconscious action on his part. Nothing to get excited about.*

Unfortunately, my body couldn't help but get excited about it. I tried to ignore it. I closed my eyes and imagined I was alone in my own bed, but his warmth against my skin made that impossible.

The only safe thing would be to put some distance between us. As I tried to wriggle free, I heard him sigh and yawn. Damn. I was trying not to wake him. His arm tightened around me.

“You don't have to go,” he whispered. “This is nice.”

I rolled over in his arms to face him. “It is, isn't it? Excuse my morning breath.”

“As long as you'll excuse mine.” He kissed me gently, and it made my heart beat faster. Maybe he was still interested in me after all.

I ramped up the passion when I kissed him back. My

hand slid down the front of his body and to his hip, and then I grabbed his ass and squeezed it through the thin fabric of his boxer shorts.

He pressed against me, and I started to think I might be getting somewhere. Too bad he pulled away a moment later and gave me an apologetic look. “Sorry, I need more time.”

I glanced at the clock. “It’s only nine. They won’t kick us out of the room until ten.”

Charlie laughed and got out of bed. “I’m going to take a shower.”

I sat up and swung my feet to the floor. “I could use one too. Can I join you?”

He hesitated for a moment. “I guess it’s all right.”

“Awesome.” I stood up and followed him into the bathroom.

The tubs in The Portara were big enough for two people to shower comfortably. While we stood under the water and soaped ourselves up, I couldn’t help but notice him looking at me out of the corner of his eye. I also noticed his erection hadn’t yet gone down. “I can help you out with that if you want. I’ll use hands only.”

His face turned red. “I don’t know, Jack.”

“All right. No big deal.” I picked up the shampoo and squeezed some out into my hands. If he didn’t want me to touch him, I wouldn’t touch him. Maybe another time. But as I lathered my hair, I noticed Charlie hadn’t moved. He just stood there staring at his cock.

Finally, he looked up at me and nodded. “Please.”

I smiled and quickly rinsed the shampoo out of my hair. “Go ahead and turn around.” When he did so, I nudged him to lean against the tile, and then I ran a hand down the damp, slick skin of his back and around to his groin. I teased his balls for a moment, playing with the hair covering them before running a fingertip up and down the underside of his shaft. I ran the finger around the head a few times, loving the way the teasing made him gasp. Finally, I wrapped my hand around his cock and slowly pumped.

I kissed his shoulder and the back of his neck as my hand did its job. I paid extra attention to the tip, massaging it with my thumb on every upstroke. The moans he made urged me on and I pumped a little faster. Seeing and hearing him like that turned me on even more than I already was, and I started to think I’d have to jack myself off when I was done with him. It turned out I wouldn’t have to resort to that, though; he reached a hand back and took hold of my dick.

Charlie pumped me at the same pace I pumped him. Granted, his fingers and thumb weren’t doing as much as mine, but that was okay. His reactions to my touch made up for it. My free hand slid up the front of his body, caressing his belly, chest, neck, and face while my other hand worked his cock a little faster with each passing moment. His legs started to shake and I held onto him to keep him from falling over as he climaxed, taking care not to crush his hand and my dick between our bodies.

As soon as I let go of him, he turned around and leaned

his back against the wall, keeping his hand on me the entire time. He looked so hot with his wet hair plastered to his face and that satisfied smile on his lips. I gazed at him, and it wasn't long before my own legs shook. "Charlie..." I pressed my mouth against his, kissing him so hard it almost hurt. I didn't release his lips until the spasms of my orgasm finished.

We held onto each other for a moment, getting our breath back. "Thanks," I said when he let go of my cock.

Charlie ran a hand down the side of my face and neck. "Thank *you*. This has been the best shower I've ever had."

"Same here."

No other words felt necessary as we finished washing and helped each other towel off.

By the time we went downstairs to the dining room, it was almost ten. Breakfast for the hotel guests had officially ended at nine-thirty, so we had the place to ourselves. I was glad of that. Charlie and I exchanged phone numbers and e-mail addresses as we ate. When we finished and he stood up to leave, he bent down and kissed me. After a couple seconds, he tried to pull away, but I wasn't ready to let him go that easily. I grabbed his tie, forcing him to stay where he was a little longer. He didn't struggle, so I guessed he didn't mind.

When I heard a door open, I finally let him go. "I'll talk to you soon."

He nodded. "I hope so. I really like you, Jack."

"Good, because as I said last night, I like *you*. A lot."

He grinned, touched my hand, and then turned to leave.

I got up and followed him to the lobby so I could watch him go. He turned and waved, and as soon as the door closed behind him, I felt a hand on my shoulder. I wasn't surprised to turn my head and see Felix looking at me with an idiotic grin on his face.

"Looks like you had a nice night."

"I did, thanks." I handed him the key and he slipped it into his pocket.

"You're welcome."

From his expression, I guessed he wanted more information, but I decided to leave him wondering. "I'll get out of your hair and let you get ready for your trip." I found my jacket on the coat rack and put it on.

"All right, but you're forgetting something." He hurried to the front desk and returned with a box.

I couldn't believe I almost forgot the iPod. I'd been a little distracted. "Thanks again, Felix." I took the box and gave him a hug. "Have fun with Julian's family."

He hugged me back. "I hope you won't have to spend Christmas alone now."

I hoped so too.

AS THE days passed, I started to wonder if spending Christmas with someone wasn't in the cards for me. Charlie

tried to call me several times over the next week, but he always seemed to call when I was with a john. When I'd try to call him back, he'd be working. Usually, I'd get his voice mail. He answered a few times, but we'd only manage to get through the typical pleasantries before he had to go.

When Christmas was only two days away, I was in the middle of writing Charlie an e-mail when my phone rang. It annoyed me. I figured it was a john and I didn't want to be bothered until I finished writing that message. The annoyance left me when I looked at the display on the phone and saw it was Charlie.

"Hey! Guess we can finally stop playing phone tag now," I practically shouted into the receiver.

There was a chuckle. "Good. It was getting tiresome. I take it you're not busy?"

"Well, I *was* in the middle of an important e-mail." I closed my web browser and switched the computer to sleep mode. "It doesn't matter now, though."

"Why not?"

"It was for you."

"Oh? I think I'd still like to read it."

"Too bad. I just deleted it."

"That *is* too bad."

We talked about random things and about how our days went. He told me about driving some politicians into town, and I kept my mouth shut about my own work except to say I'd been working. After about a half hour, the simple

conversation petered out.

“So, did you still want to get together again?” he asked after a few seconds of silence.

“Course I do. You doing anything for Christmas?”

“Christmas? I’m visiting my parents in the morning. Then I have work.”

“Damn it. That sucks balls, and not in a good way.”

“Yeah, but a lot of my co-workers have families, and they take Christmas Eve and Christmas off if they possibly can. That means I usually can’t. We still get clients coming into town, and some people like renting limos as a Christmas gift. And most people tip amazingly on a holiday.”

I knew New Year’s Eve would be busy for him, but I didn’t even think about Christmas. “Oh. Yeah. That makes sense.” It seemed like I’d be spending Christmas alone after all.

“You don’t have any plans? What about your friends? Family?”

“No. Felix and Julian are my only real friends in the area, and they’re off visiting family. My own family doesn’t like to admit I exist.”

There was a moment of silence, and then, “Why don’t I come over to your place when I get off? I should be able to get there around nine or ten.”

It was better than nothing. “Sure.” I gave him my address, and we talked a few more minutes before hanging up.

I stared at the phone for a moment before slipping it back in my pocket. Christmas would be late and short for me, but I'd take it. At least I'd get to see him.

CHRISTMAS morning, I woke up and looked at the clock. It was only seven. I rolled over, pulled the comforter up over my shoulders, and tried to fall back asleep. Unfortunately, my brain decided to take that moment to dig up old stuff about how happy Christmas mornings were when I was a kid. How my kid brother Kevin would start trying to wake me up at three in the morning every year, how I'd kick him out of my room, how he'd come back every half hour or so until I finally caved. Don't get me wrong—I was just as excited as he was, but I knew our parents wouldn't get up until at least six. Sitting there in front of the presents waiting for them would be torture.

This Christmas can't pass fast enough.

I hadn't thought that much about my family for a long time, even during the holidays. Felix had always kept me company. The two of us didn't do a whole lot, really. We usually exchanged our gifts in the morning and then stuffed ourselves with cookies and chocolate while watching Christmas movies on TV. One year, we decided to try making our own cookies. That was a disaster. We went back to the store-bought ones the next year.

By eight-thirty, I gave up trying to go back to sleep and got out of bed. I made some coffee and filled a plate with the cookies I'd picked up at the store the day before. Even alone, I wanted to keep up the tradition. Then I went into the living

room and turned on the TV.

After about a half hour, I turned it off and took my remaining cookies back into the kitchen. Keeping up the tradition made me miss Felix even more. *Crap. I haven't felt this shitty in a long time.*

A JOHN called in the early afternoon. I sometimes got calls on Christmas from guys without families or partners, since it was a lonely time for them. Suddenly, I knew how they felt. I thought about accepting the request—it would keep me busy until Charlie got off work—but I decided against it, just in case Charlie got off early by some Christmas miracle.

Eight o'clock at night finally rolled around. I still had time to kill, but at least I could start getting myself ready. When it got to be nine o'clock, I was showered, dressed, and ready to see Charlie. Too bad there was no sign of him. There was still no sign of him at ten.

Around ten-thirty, he called me.

“Charlie. I was starting to wonder if you wrecked the limo or something.”

I heard him sigh. “I’m sorry, Jack. We have another client who needs a ride, and the chauffeur who’s supposed to drive him hasn’t shown up to work. I’m probably going to be stuck for awhile.”

No Christmas for me, then. “Not your fault.” There was silence, so I went on. “I guess we’ll try again another time.” I

tried to keep the disappointment out of my voice, but I'm not sure I managed it.

"I really am sorry. I wanted to spend at least a little bit of time with you today."

"Yeah. Me too. I guess you have to get back to work."

"I do." Another pause. "Merry Christmas, Jack."

"Same to you. Drive safe." I hung up the phone and tossed it to the other side of the room. I wasn't mad at him, but I was mad at the situation.

My phone rang again about a half hour later, but it wasn't Charlie. It was Frank, one of my regulars. He apologized for calling me on Christmas but told me he'd pay me triple my normal rate if I'd see him. Poor guy must have been desperate. *Hell, may as well make some cash. There's no point moping around; I'm starting to annoy myself.*

I GOT back to my apartment around two-thirty in the morning. It had been a long day, even though I'd spent most of it sitting on my ass. In any case, I was out of it when I unlocked my door—so out of it that I didn't see the box at my feet until I almost tripped. The fact that somebody could leave a box just outside my door reminded me how bad the security in my apartment building was, but at that moment, I didn't care. My heart started to beat a little faster as I bent down to pick up the box.

The tag on top told me it was from exactly who I hoped

it would be from. *Charlie*. I took it inside and opened it as soon as I closed the door behind me, and then I smiled when I saw the two mugs decorated with snowflakes and several packets of gourmet hot chocolate inside. My addiction to hot chocolate in winter had come up in our conversation that night at The Portara. I couldn't believe he remembered something so minor.

As I set the box on the kitchen counter, my smile faded. Even though I had a fresh six hundred bucks in my pocket for a couple hours' work, I wished I'd been home instead.

I turned on my phone to send Charlie a text and found out he'd sent me two. One to tell me he hoped I was still awake, because he'd gotten out of work earlier than expected. The other said he was sorry he missed me.

I really shouldn't have taken Frank's call.

THE next day, I called Charlie when I got up and was glad to get *him* instead of his voice mail. He was on his way to work and only had a few minutes to talk, but it was long enough for me to apologize for missing him and to thank him for the gift. He then asked me to save some of the hot chocolate, because the plan was that we could drink it together.

We both agreed to wait until after New Year's to try to get together again. Charlie said he had a full schedule until then, and odds were good I'd be busy too. I would have been more than willing to keep a night free for him, but I didn't want to sound desperate. That wouldn't be cool.

I stopped by The Portara that night. Felix and Julian had gotten back from their trip and I wanted to drop off their gift—a couple Greek figurines to add to their collection and tickets to the art museum. I heard there was a good Greek and Roman exhibit there, and even though I guessed Julian had already seen it, I didn't think he'd mind seeing it again. Especially with Felix.

"It's not as expensive as what you guys got me," I said when Felix opened it.

He handed the box to Julian, whose face lit up even brighter than the damned Christmas tree. "Who cares about the price? It's great." He put a hand on my elbow and steered me to the lobby, where we both sat down on the sofa. "So how was Christmas?"

"It sucked, but what can you do?" I told him about what happened. "We'll try again next week when his schedule settles down a bit.

"Good. It'll happen, Jack. It's obvious how much you two like each other. Your timing just sucks."

I had to agree.

FELIX called me a couple days later and told me not to make any plans for New Year's Eve. Apparently, there was going to be a celebration at The Portara for the hotel guests, and he told me I was going there to spend the evening with him and Julian. No ifs, ands, or buts. I think he felt bad about Christmas. I complained that I was probably going to lose

good money, but in reality, I was glad. Not to sound mushy, but I'd rather spend the time with people I cared about.

Charlie called me the same day and managed to get me when I was free. I didn't think Felix or Julian would mind if I invited him to come along to the New Year's Eve party, so I did. As I figured, he told me he'd be busy with the limo. However, he said he'd be free the next night on New Year's Day, so I promised I'd keep my schedule clear. It would mean two nights of lost money in a row, but that was all right.

NEW YEAR'S EVE came, and I couldn't find my suit. *Where the hell could it be?* Felix had told me I'd better look nice at the party because it would be a formal event, so I was going to have to find the damn thing.

While I was going through my closet for the third time, my phone rang. I smiled when I saw it was Charlie. *Probably calling to wish me a happy New Year before he gets too busy.*

"Hey, Charlie."

"Hey, Jack. Can you look out your window?"

"Look out my window?"

"Yeah. Just look outside to the street for a second." He hung up before I could say anything else.

Could he be...? I hurried to the window, too excited to care that the only thing I had on was a pair of boxer shorts.

I looked outside, and sure enough, there he was,

standing next to the limousine at the curb. He looked up at me with a grin, and I swore I could see his dimples all the way from the second floor. I waved at him, flipped open my phone, and called him back. “You stopping by on your way to pick up a client or something? You can come up, you know.”

“I *am* picking up a client.” He looked up again and touched his cap with his free hand. “You’re my client tonight.”

I almost dropped the phone. “I am?”

“You are. I rented the limo myself so I could take you out tonight. Now, could you hurry up and get ready? It’s cold out here.”

He actually rented the limo for me. Holy shit. “As I said, you can come inside. So get that adorable ass up here.” I hung up and watched him as he locked up the limo and headed toward the main entrance of my building, and a few moments later, there was a knock at my door.

I opened it. “I can’t believe you rented the limo. How the hell did you manage that? I figured New Year’s Eve would be booked up well in advance.” I stepped aside to give him room to come in.

“I got lucky. We had a cancellation a few days ago, and I jumped on it.”

“Still, it must have cost you a fortune.”

“It wasn’t that bad.” He came in, took off his shoes, and then pulled me into a hug. “I decided I wanted to start the year with you. I hope that’s okay.”

“It’s more than okay.” His gloves and coat felt cool against my bare skin as I hugged him back.

He put his finger under my chin and tipped it up to kiss me, and I kissed him back. I knew I’d been frustrated trying to see him the previous two weeks, but I didn’t realize how badly until right that moment. Now that he was with me, I didn’t want to let him go. Eventually, I knew I had to, so I pulled away and stepped back. “Thanks, man.”

His finger brushed my cheek before he dropped his hand. He then took his gloves off and unbuttoned his coat, and I saw he was even more dressed up than I’d expected.

“Why the tux?”

“It’s my formal uniform. I always wear it on New Year’s Eve.”

“You look hot, but I don’t have anything that nice.”

“A regular suit is fine.”

I rubbed the back of my neck. “Yeah, well, I have one, but I’m having trouble finding it.”

“You only have one suit?” He shook his head and took off his cap. “And how could you lose it?”

“I hardly ever wear it.” I shrugged. “Where are we going, anyway?”

“Oh, I have a couple things in mind.”

“Gre—oh, shit.” I couldn’t believe I’d forgotten all about Felix and Julian’s New Year’s party so quickly. “I’m supposed to go to The Portara tonight.”

“That’s optional. Besides, all they’re doing is serving wine and champagne to the hotel guests. Oh, and they’re going to set up a TV in the lobby to show the ball drop in Times Square.”

I narrowed my eyes a little. “And you know this how?”

“How do you think I was able to make sure you’d be home at this time? Felix is in on it.”

I should have known. “Good thing I didn’t leave early.”

“I would have picked you up at the hotel if that were the case. Not a big deal. Now, let’s find that suit.”

WE NEVER found my suit, but Charlie found a navy blue one in the back of what used to be Felix’s closet. It would do, even though it was a little big on me. I got dressed, but when I tried to put on the tie, my knots kept coming out crooked.

After my third attempt, Charlie walked over to me, worked my messy knot loose, and retied it. He then adjusted my collar and smoothed down the front of my shirt. “There. You look handsome.”

Okay, so maybe I’d been screwing up my tie on purpose to get him to do that. “I guess we should at least stop by The Portara long enough to say hello.”

“Agreed. By the way, it’s cold out. You should take a hat.”

“And mess up my hair?” I patted my spikes. “This hairstyle and hats don’t mix. We’re not going to be outside

much, are we?”

“We might.”

“Hold on, then.” I opened the front closet, found my skiers’ headband, and put it on. “There.”

“Better than nothing.”

When we had our coats and shoes on and were completely ready to go, he held open my apartment door. “After you, sir.”

I laughed and shook my head as I stepped out into the hallway.

He closed the door and turned the handle to test the lock, and then we walked down the stairs and to the limousine waiting at the curb. I had to smile a little bit when I wondered what my neighbors might be thinking. You didn’t see limos very often in my neighborhood, let alone in front of my apartment building. He opened the back door and held it open.

“What if I want to sit up front with you?”

“That wouldn’t be proper, sir.”

“Who cares about being proper?” I brushed my hand across his rear as I got into the limo, but I was careful to make it look like an accident in case anyone was watching. Charlie’s cheeks were pink, but I didn’t know if it was from the touch or the cold.

“Do you have any special requests before we go to The Portara, sir?”

“I think I have a request for later.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you making inappropriate advances, sir?”

“Maybe I am. Are you complaining about it?”

“No. Just asking. What is your request?”

“You’re smart. I think you’ll be able to figure it out.”

“If you say so, sir.” Charlie flashed me a grin and then closed the door. It was kinda fun watching him work, even if it was only in play. Kinda fun and really hot. He got into the driver’s seat, and I scooted as close to his seat as I could possibly get on the huge bench in the back of the limo. I had to sit sideways to see him, and even then, I couldn’t see much.

I fiddled with the television since it seemed like the thing to do. I switched it off again after a moment, since watching what I could see of the back of Charlie’s head was much more interesting to me. I wanted to run my fingers through that fringe of hair sticking out from under his cap. Ah well, I’d probably have a chance to do that later.

We pulled up in front of The Portara. I reached for the door handle but then thought better of it. It seemed like he wanted to give me the whole experience, so I dropped my hand and waited for him to come around and open the door.

Once I was out, he closed the door behind me. “Allow me to escort you inside, sir.” He offered me his arm.

Laughing a little, I took it. “Do you always offer your arm to your clients?”

“Just the old ladies.”

“Oh great. So I’m like an old lady?”

He snorted. “No. I don’t call them ‘sir’.”

We went inside, took off our coats, and found Felix and Julian in the lobby. They offered us some wine or champagne, but Charlie didn’t want to drink since he had to drive. It didn’t seem fair for me to drink without him, so I passed as well.

“You both look nice,” Julian said.

“I can’t believe you actually wore a suit.” Felix took a closer look at me. “Hey, that’s *my* suit.”

“Yeah. Couldn’t find mine. Charlie found this one.”

“You can keep it. It looks better on you than it did on me, even if you need to gain a few pounds to fit into it properly.”

“Thanks. And thanks for the surprise.” I looked from Felix to Julian to Charlie.

Felix shrugged, and then wrapped an arm around my neck to pull me toward him. “I’m officially returning that favor I owed you.” He planted a kiss on my forehead. “Happy New Year, Jack.”

“Happy New Year to you too.” I kissed his cheek and then went over to Julian to give him a one-armed hug. “Did you have something to do with this?”

He shook his head. “This one was all Felix. Well, Felix and Charlie. I’m afraid the party isn’t quite what Felix said it would be.” He gestured toward the half dozen guests drinking wine in the lobby.

“Eh, it’s only seven-thirty. I’m sure it’ll pick up when it gets closer to midnight.”

“Maybe a little, but probably not much. We only have about twenty guests in the hotel tonight, and I think most of them are going elsewhere. That’s okay though. I prefer this.”

“Yeah. More laid back.” I returned to Charlie’s side and put an arm around his waist. “Well guys,” I said, looking at Felix and Julian. “I think we’re going to take off. We just wanted to stop by to say Happy New Year and all that stuff.”

Julian looked disappointed. “Won’t you stay for something to eat?”

Charlie shook his head. “I’d love to, but I made dinner reservations at The Summit.”

“The Summit?” Julian’s eyes widened. “Impressive.”

“Damn, man.” I turned my head to look at Charlie. “How the hell did you manage that? Isn’t a fancy place like that hard enough to get into on a normal night, let alone New Year’s Eve?”

“When you work with rich people, sometimes you can manage to pull some strings.”

“That makes sense.” I should have thought to ask my own rich clients for favors like that. Then again, the ol’ pervs would probably want favors of their own in return. “What time?”

“Eight.”

Felix reached out and gave me a gentle nudge toward the door. “Then you’d better get going.”

“Yeah. Well, sorry we can’t stay.”

“No problem.” Julian put an arm around Felix, mirroring the way I stood with Charlie. “You two be safe.”

Charlie nodded. “We will, sir.”

As Charlie and I walked outside and back to the limo, I wondered something. “How much is this evening costing you?”

“Don’t worry about that. As I said, I was able to pull some strings. In any case, I’m sure it’ll be worth every penny.”

WE ENTERED the restaurant and checked our coats, and then Charlie took off his cap, straightened his tuxedo jacket, and smiled at me. God, he looked so good I wanted to fuck him right there. Or let him fuck me. Either way would work. I glanced down to make sure my suit jacket hid the bulge in my pants.

The host ushered us to a table when Charlie gave his name, and as I looked around, I saw why I needed a suit. They probably would’ve kicked me out if I’d worn anything less. The place wasn’t anything like the Chinese places and family diners I usually went to for dinner. The customers were all dressed up, there was a chandelier hanging from the ceiling, candles were on every table, and the staff all wore tuxedos—but they didn’t look nearly as good as Charlie did in his.

The dim lighting in the dining room made the restaurant seem romantic. In fact, I noticed the place was full of couples. Our table was near a window so I could watch the street below, but I didn't care about watching it. The one I wanted to watch was right across from me.

Why am I suddenly so sappy? Could have had something to do with the way the candles on the table flickered and made me think of one of those sappy movies. Or maybe it was because of the way Charlie looked at me. It reminded me of the way Felix and Julian looked at each other—and if that wasn't a prime example of sap, I didn't know what was. Not that it was all that bad a thing. It made me feel... good, in a weird sort of way.

Charlie reached across the table and gave my hand a quick squeeze before picking up his menu. "I'm buying, by the way, so don't worry when you see the prices."

The prices weren't quite as bad as I'd expected, but they were still high. "I didn't realize you were rich."

"I'm not, but I had enough money in my savings."

"You're not blowing your entire savings on this, are you?"

"No, but what if I was?"

"I'd just wonder why you were spending it all on me."

"I'm not spending it all on you. In case you didn't notice, there are two people here." He leaned forward and lowered his voice. "I wanted a nice New Year's for both of us. Especially since Christmas got messed up. Let me romance you tonight. It's probably been a long time since anyone's

done that for you, hasn't it?"

"Yeah." It was a long time since anybody had done it for real, anyway. Hell, as I thought about it, I wasn't sure if anybody ever had.

The food wasn't quite as good as the price tag made me expect, but I wasn't going to complain about it. It wasn't bad—but the food at The Portara was better. Still, the company and the atmosphere made up for that.

When we finished eating and the waiter brought the check, Charlie took it. I insisted on paying the tip, and after a few minutes of arguing, he finally agreed.

"So, where to?" I asked as I slipped my wallet back into my pocket.

"We could stay here. They're supposed to have live music and dancing in the ballroom." He glanced at his watch. "It should be starting in a half hour or so."

I thought about it for a moment but then shook my head. "I think I'd rather go somewhere alone with you." It was the truth, and I didn't feel like dealing with the stares that would probably come with two men dancing together. I usually didn't care about stuff like that, but I didn't want anything to ruin the night.

"Okay." He stood up, pushed in his chair, and started to walk toward the exit.

I got up and fell into step beside him. "Unless you wanted to stay."

"No." He looked at me out of the corner of his eye and smiled. "I like your idea better."

I STRETCHED out on my back on the seat as Charlie drove, and I turned on the television. I absently flipped through the channels, but once again, nothing looked good to me. The Times Square New Year's special was something I could watch without using much brainpower, so I left it there and dropped the remote.

After about an hour or so of driving, the car stopped and Charlie came around to let me out.

"Where are we?" I tried to check out the area, but I couldn't see very much. The full moon and stars were the only lights around. "You didn't bring me out here to do something creepy, did you?"

He laughed. "Of course not. We're out in the boonies, though. There's a hill nearby. I like to come out here and look at the sky sometimes." I felt his arm drape across my shoulders. "There's snow on the ground and we aren't dressed for walking up the hill, but we can still see a lot from right here."

"It's a little cold for stargazing, isn't it?"

"But winter has the best stars and constellations. Look." Charlie pointed to a row of bright stars. "That's Orion's belt." His finger traced more stars in the area. "And there's the rest of Orion. And do you see that bright star there?"

I thought I had the right star. "Yeah."

"That's Sirius, the Dog Star."

He continued to give me a tour of the night sky. I let him. It was interesting, even though there was no way I'd be able to remember the names, let alone remember what stars were part of what constellation. Still, when he pointed out some constellations in the western sky, the names sounded familiar to me.

"Perseus and Andromeda... aren't those characters from Greek mythology?"

"They are."

"Thought so. You should bring Felix and Julian out here some night. They'd probably enjoy that." I knew Julian sure as hell would love it, at least.

"All four of us should come out here. Maybe in the spring when it's not so cold."

My heart beat a little faster at the thought that we might still be hanging out by spring. "Sounds like a plan."

Charlie looked up at the moon and pointed at it with his free hand. "If we lived in the Eastern hemisphere, we'd have been able to see a partial eclipse tonight."

"I never would have guessed you were a space geek."

"I just enjoy the sky. It's peaceful." He dropped his hand from my shoulder. "I think we need some music. You don't mind, do you?"

"No. Music's good."

He crawled back in the limo, and a moment later, I heard a familiar song that I couldn't quite place.

"Moonlight Serenade." He backed out of the car,

straightened, and turned to me. “I thought it might be appropriate. Sorry if it’s cheesy.”

I laughed. “It’s fine.” At least it wasn’t some sappy pop ballad.

“Good.” He held out his hand. “Even though you didn’t seem interested in dancing at the restaurant, I still want to dance with you.”

I accepted the hand. “I have two left feet, just so you know.”

“Doesn’t matter. Nobody’s watching.” He pulled me close and held one of my hands in his. I put my free hand on his shoulder and felt his on the small of my back.

I let him lead. Even though I normally didn’t care for dancing, I had to admit I enjoyed how my body pressed to his, how our cheeks brushed, and how the feeling of his warm breath tickling my neck sent tingles down my spine.

When the song ended, we stopped. The air was cold and chilled the exposed side of my face, making me glad I had the headband covering my ears. Even so, there was no wind. Our breathing was the only sound I could hear. Well, that and the pounding of my heart, though I think I might have heard his too. Still, neither one of us moved. We stood there holding onto each other, as still as a pair of Julian’s statues.

Something happened inside me right then. I’d known all along that I was attracted to Charlie—that I had a thing for him. But I realized it wasn’t just a thing; I was in love with him. I wasn’t sure if that moment was when I fell for him, or if I had just finally noticed it.

So this is what it feels like.

It felt good. Scary, but good. Especially since it seemed like the feeling was mutual. I squeezed him a little tighter, not wanting to let go.

Several moments later—I wasn't sure how many—I heard his watch beep. He whispered into my ear, "It's midnight. Happy New Year, Jack."

I moved my head enough to look into his eyes. "Happy New Year, Charlie. Thanks for tonight."

"You're welcome."

Our faces got closer together until our lips touched. It was a gentle and sweet kiss—and it was *real*. That made it different and better than most kisses I'd experienced in my life.

We pulled apart and he touched my cheek with his gloved fingers. "We should go back in the limo and warm up."

I felt plenty warm from his body heat, but I was fine with his idea, too. "Sure." I reached for the door, but Charlie stopped me with a hand on my arm.

"I'm supposed to be the one doing that, remember?" He opened the door when I moved out of the way, and we both climbed in. We started kissing again as soon as we sat down. His tongue pushed into my mouth and I sucked on it for a moment before sliding my own tongue over it. I inhaled sharply through my nose, taking in his scent. He smelled almost as good as Felix.

As the kiss went on, I rested a hand on the back of his

neck and played with the fringe of hair that stuck out from under his cap. I felt his fingers brush across my cheek and push under my headband to trace my ear. By the time he pulled away, I was breathless. *I'm the one who's supposed to be an expert at this stuff.*

Charlie pressed his forehead against mine and closed his eyes. "Jack."

I tensed. *Here it comes. He's going to tell me he still needs more time.* "What's wrong?" *Ah well. I can hold off if he needs it. It's not like I never get any.*

"I want you, Jack. Do you still want me?"

I couldn't help it. A bit of a laugh got out before I stifled it. I felt like an ass. The last thing I wanted to do was make him feel silly. "What kind of a question is that? Of course I still want you." I pulled one of his hands to my crotch to prove it.

He smiled. It seemed like the laugh didn't bother him. "Good. I just wanted to be sure." He unzipped my coat and unbuttoned my suit jacket. When he started to fumble with my belt, I did something even *I* thought was weird—I put my hands over his and stopped him.

"You said...."

"I know what I said, and I meant it." I gave him a quick kiss. "I don't want to do it here, though." After taking care of johns in the backs of limos, the idea of doing it there with Charlie didn't feel right. It felt almost cheap. I wanted to do it with him somewhere I hadn't done it with anyone else—my bed. I bought the bed after Felix and I switched to doing

outcalls only, because I didn't want to be reminded of a creepy stalker guy who'd been in my old one. Felix and I didn't even use it when we tried our relationship. We always used *his* bed. "Let's go back to my apartment."

His face softened. "You're mean for making me wait."

"At least it's not as long as you made *me* wait."

"We had that shower at the hotel."

"That was hands only. Nice, but not the same."

"I suppose that's true." He pulled away and straightened his clothes. "Do you mind if we stop by my work? I'm supposed to have the limo back by three, and I don't want to feel rushed. I don't think there's anywhere in your street for me to leave it that long, anyway."

"Oh sure, stretch out the wait even longer." I fixed my belt and followed him out of the limo and to the front seats. "I get to ride in the front with you, though."

"There's no TV in the front."

"I'd rather watch you."

He chuckled and his cheeks turned pink. "Fine."

SHORTLY into the drive, I wondered what the hell I was doing making Charlie wait. Making both of us wait. The back of the limo was just as good a place as any, especially after he went through the trouble and expense of renting it for us. I thought about asking him to pull over somewhere so we

could get on with it, but then a memory of taking care of a rich but disgusting old dude in the back of a limo flashed through my mind. No, it would be better to hold off.

By the time we dropped off the limo and got back to my building, I was more than ready. By the look in Charlie's eyes, I guessed he was ready too, and I half-expected him to attack me as soon as we were inside. However, he looked calm and composed as we took off our shoes, coats, and gloves.

I must have been giving him a funny look or something, because he took a deep breath and smiled. "I want it to be romantic."

Real, romantic lovemaking. Yeah, I wanted that too. "No arguments here." I returned his smile, walked over to him, and took off his cap. "Did I mention how handsome you look in that tux?"

"No, I don't believe you did, but thank you."

I took off his tie and unbuttoned his top two buttons. "Even so, it's coming off you soon."

"I hope so." He took one of my hands and tugged me toward the sofa, where he took a seat and pulled me down with him.

I made myself comfortable on his lap. "I don't want to use the sofa."

"Then we'll move in a little bit." He pressed his lips to mine and we spent the next several minutes kissing. We started off slow and gentle, and then we gradually increased the passion for a moment or two before relaxing again. Out

of all the lips I'd ever kissed, his were the softest. When we started to break apart, I ran my tongue along his lower lip and sucked on it lightly, taking in its taste. He responded by resuming the kiss. It was fine with me. Even though I was horny as hell for him, kissing him turned out to be satisfying in itself.

I put one hand on the back of his neck and slipped the other underneath his tuxedo jacket. I felt his toned muscles through the smooth fabric of the dress shirt and unbuttoned another button. I dropped my hands when he started to push my suit jacket off my shoulders, and the jacket slid the rest of the way off and hit the floor. He untied my tie, pulled it off, and went to work unbuttoning my shirt. He released my lips and kissed my chin. When he worked his way down my neck and to my newly exposed chest, I closed my eyes and let out a sigh of contentment.

"You like that?" he murmured against my skin and slid his hands down my sides and around to my back.

"Mm hm. Feels nice."

"Good." He sucked at the base of my throat, hard enough to leave a mark.

"Hey now." I squirmed. "I usually don't let anybody mark me."

Charlie looked up at me with a mischievous grin. "I'd like to think I'm more to you than just anybody."

I ruffled his hair. "That you are. Mark away."

He went back to what he'd been doing. I felt his tongue flick across my skin, tickling me and making me twitch.

When he let go, I bent my head and tried to see it, but it was too high and out of my view. He laughed and ran his finger over it. “It’s going to be there for at least a few days.”

“Damn, man. I’m not gonna be able to work. Don’t want the johns to think they can do that to me.”

He put his hands on my thighs and squeezed. “Maybe getting you to take some time off was part of my plan.”

“Oh, really?” I raised an eyebrow. “You’re a devious one, Charles. Maybe I’ll just add it to my list of services and charge extra.”

“Mm hm.” It didn’t sound like he believed me. He then put another mark by my left nipple.

“Maybe I’ll put a huge one on your neck so you won’t be able to work either.”

“It’s winter. I could get away with wearing a scarf over it.”

“That’s not fair.” I stuck my tongue out, and he quickly captured it with his lips. He sucked on it for a moment before releasing it. Then, without any warning, he wrapped his arms around my body and stood up. He was able to hold me up easily, even though he wasn’t much bigger than me.

“You’re stronger than you look.”

“It comes from hefting suitcases into and out of trunks.”

“Makes sense.” I wrapped my legs around his waist. “Think you can heft me all the way to the bedroom?”

“I’m not sure, but I’ll try.” He wavered after a few steps, so I planted my feet back on the floor.

I smiled at the sheepish look on his face. “I’d rather you save your strength for something else.”

“I like that idea.” Charlie grabbed my hands and walked backward, pulling me toward the bedroom. Too bad it was Felix’s old room.

I barely managed to fight back the chuckle. “Wrong room.”

He looked over his shoulder. “Sorry.”

“No big deal. It’s not like you’ve been here much. Yet.”

The dimples appeared on his face. “I hope to eventually learn my way around.” Once we were inside my room, he closed the door.

I pulled one of his hands to my chest and then guided it down the front of my body. “Focus on learning your way around here first.”

“If you insist.” Charlie pressed his lips to mine again and nudged me to lie down on my bed. As soon as I did so, he took off his tuxedo jacket, crawled on top of me, and planted soft kisses on every inch of bare skin—starting at my lips and working his way down my chest and belly. When he reached my belt, he unfastened it, pulled it off, and dropped it on the floor. He was breathing heavily, and I could feel the warmth of his breath through the thin fabric of my pants and boxers. It made my groin tingle and my palms sweat. By the time he’d slowly—painfully slowly—pulled my pants off, I thought I was going to lose it.

“You sure you don’t want me to do the work? I’m the more experienced one here.”

“I’m trying not to think of that, Jack.” He shook his head. “Besides, you should sit back and let somebody serve *you* for once.” He brushed the bulge in my underwear, making me gasp. “If you don’t mind.”

It *would* be nice to let someone else take the lead. I’d had johns who wanted to play with me, but most of them did it for their own kicks, not mine. “I don’t mind.”

“I’m glad to hear it.” Charlie stripped all his own clothes off before helping me out of the rest of mine. He lightly ran his fingers over the contours of my body and then leaned over to trace the same paths with his tongue. He stopped just short of where I wanted him to touch.

“Damn it, Charlie. Don’t tease me like that. I can understand why you might not want to lick it, but at least use your hand or something.”

He licked his finger and used it to trace a circle around the head of my cock. The finger then slid up and down the entire length a few times, making me gasp.

“Better?”

It felt good, but it made me want more. “It’s an improvement.”

“I take it you’re well-stocked with lube and condoms?”

“Course I am.” I leaned over, opened the drawer to the nightstand, and fished out a condom and a bottle of lube. “Do you want to top or bottom? I’m fine either way.”

He tugged on my legs to give him better access to my ass and teased my entrance with his finger. “I want to make love to you.”

“Mm. I think I’d like that.” I ripped open the condom myself, and when he scooted closer, I unrolled it over his dick. I then squirted a generous amount of lube over it and spread it around, pumping him as I did so and making him moan.

“My turn.” He took the bottle and squeezed some of the gel out onto his hand. When I pulled my legs back even further, he rubbed the lube all around my opening. His fingers pushed past the ring of muscle and got my insides slicked up as well. I could tell he was taking extra care to prep me well, and I appreciated it.

I closed my eyes and sighed in contentment when he slid his fingers in further to touch my prostate. “Nice.” I opened my eyes again and saw him looking at me with the sweetest, most affectionate expression on his face. It made him look cuter than normal—maybe even cuter than he looked when his dimples were showing. Probably because the look was directed toward me.

Charlie put his free hand over mine for a moment, and then he dropped it and got into position between my legs. “Ready?”

“Yep.”

He nodded and pushed inside me with a soft groan. The groan got louder and turned into a moan when I worked the muscles of my ass to squeeze him. I pushed up against him as he started to thrust, rocking my body to match his pace. The thrusts were slow and deep—different from the frantic pace I was used to.

I reached up and stroked his chest, letting my touch

linger on his nipples before sliding my fingers down to his belly. Then I wrapped my arms around his shoulders and pulled him down against me. It was one of the few times sex had held any emotion for me. It was an awesome feeling, but it made me want to hug the hell out of Charlie.

He gasped and whispered, “Too tight,” so I relaxed my hold. He pressed his face into my neck and flicked his tongue out against my skin, sending a pleasant tingle up to my scalp and then down my spine. I slid my hands down his back, moving them slowly and taking in the feeling of his smooth skin underneath my fingertips. I reached his rear, and he sucked on my earlobe. That had always been one of my more sensitive areas, so I let out a moan and tightened my grip on his ass. That seemed to spur him on, because he picked up his pace right then.

When I let go of one of his cheeks and worked a hand between our bodies to grab my own cock, Charlie shifted his weight more to one side and put a hand on my arm. “I’ll do that.”

“All right.” I moved my hand out of the way, and his hand took its place. I moaned again, much louder this time, as he squeezed and pumped me, until he crushed his lips to mine and cut off the sound. I returned the kiss, moving one hand to the back of his head and pressing him closer to me, backing off when it started to hurt.

I felt a thumb rub against the underside of the head of my cock, and I had to break the kiss to take in a deep breath of air. What got in through my nose wasn’t enough. Charlie sped up his thrusts even more, and I moaned loudly and

raised my hips off the bed to let him know I liked it. He must have gotten the message, because he kept up the pace.

As I got closer and closer to the edge, I let myself get lost in the sensation. It was amazing to me how much better sex was when it was for feelings instead of for cash. “Ch-Charlie....” I gripped his shoulder blades and buried my face in his throat, my body going into spasms and clenching around him. I didn’t breathe as I came and made a mess on our stomachs. A few moments later, I heard him cry out and felt his lower body twitch, telling me he’d finished too.

Charlie pulled out and lay down next to me, a satisfied and sleepy look on his face. “This has to be the happiest New Year I’ve ever had.”

“Same here. Even though it’s the first time I’ve done anyone for free on New Year’s.”

He laughed and pulled me close. “Are you complaining?”

“Hell no.”

“That’s good to hear.” He ran his fingers through my spikes—or what was left of them. “I like you a lot, Jack.”

I took one of his hands and laced my fingers through his. “In that case, I guess I should tell you something.” I brought his hand to my lips and kissed the back of it. “I think I might be in love with you.”

His face lit up. “You might be?”

“Well, it’s not a feeling I’m used to. I’m just guessing that’s what the tingles I feel when I’m around you are about.”

“It’s definitely a symptom. I’ve been experiencing it

myself.”

“Awesome.” I looked at him with a smile and half-closed eyes. “Damn. I guess that means I have a reason to change my line of work. At least the new year’s a good time for it.”

“I could probably hook you up with something else. Remember, I have connections.”

“Thanks. It’s not going to be immediate though. I’ll need some time to phase out of it.”

“I’ll wait for you.”

We kissed for a little while and then fell asleep in each other’s arms.

I WOKE up around nine, which was early considering we didn’t get to sleep until after three. The snoring coming from Charlie told me he was still asleep. I kissed the back of his neck and he twitched, but that was his only reaction.

I decided to be nice and let him sleep a bit longer. I tried to fall asleep again myself, but after about a half hour of trying, I realized it wasn’t happening, so I got out of bed. I’d go back for Charlie shortly.

For the time being, I found a clean pair of boxers and put them on. Then I moved the clothes on the floor into a pile on the other side of the room. Didn’t want Charlie to trip on anything when he got out of bed.

Yawning and scratching the back of my head, I went into the kitchen to try to scrounge up something for us to eat

for breakfast. I usually made do with a glass of orange juice or milk and a protein bar or some such thing, but I thought Charlie might want something more than that.

I looked through the fridge, but there wasn't any breakfast-type food that we could eat without getting sick. The eggs had expired around Thanksgiving. At least there was cereal, and the milk was still good.

While I got out the bowls, I noticed the box of hot chocolate on the kitchen counter. I'd been saving it for a time I could share it with Charlie, as he asked. *Now's as good a time as any.* I put some water on the stove, rinsed out the mugs, and went through the packets in the box: cherry, raspberry, mint, dark chocolate, milk chocolate, and white chocolate. I decided to go with cherry. Not for any naughty reason; I just thought it would taste the best.

Once I made the drinks, I took them into the bedroom and saw that Charlie hadn't woken up yet. I set the mugs on the nightstand, and then I stood there for a moment, trying to decide if I wanted to be a little mischievous. *What the hell.* I leaped onto the bed, wrapping my arms around Charlie and startling him awake. "Hiya." I kissed his throat.

"Holy shit, Jack." He took a moment to catch his breath. "Do you always wake people up that way?"

"Nah. Just once in awhile." I'd done it to Felix more often than he liked. Well, without the kisses.

"Good." His lips curled upward. "Because I don't know if I could handle that every morning."

"You saying you want to wake up with me every

morning?”

“Maybe. You know, at some point in the future. If we keep getting along.”

I returned his smile, picked up the mugs, and handed him one. Yeah, I was definitely going to have to start thinking about finding another line of work. “I don’t have much in the apartment for breakfast, so I hope you don’t mind that I broke into the hot chocolate.”

His smile broadened and he sat up. “So you really did save some for us to share.”

“I saved it all. Didn’t seem right to drink it without you.”

“Thank you.”

We both sipped at the same time, eyeing each other over the rims of the mugs. “Oh, I have cereal and milk in the kitchen too. I didn’t want to get crumbs all over the bed.”

He nodded and swung his feet to the floor, holding the mug in both hands.

“By the way, you can borrow some of my clothes if you don’t want to put your tux back on. They might be a little tight on you though.”

“I’m not that much bigger than you, so they should be fine, thanks. Anyway, I don’t think I’ll need them very much.”

“Oh?”

He set the mug down on my computer desk and fished his cell phone out of his tuxedo jacket. “I’m supposed to be on call until six, but I think my cell phone’s going to run out

of charge and I'm not going to notice it." He turned the phone off. "If you don't mind, that is."

I laughed. "I knew you were devious behind that sweet exterior." I set my mug down next to his and dug my own phone out of the pile of clothes. "I think I'm gonna have the same problem." I hit the power button and then touched the hickeys he'd left on my skin. "Can't work like this, can I? Anyway, it'll be more fun to stay here mostly naked with you today." I walked over to him and wrapped my arms around him.

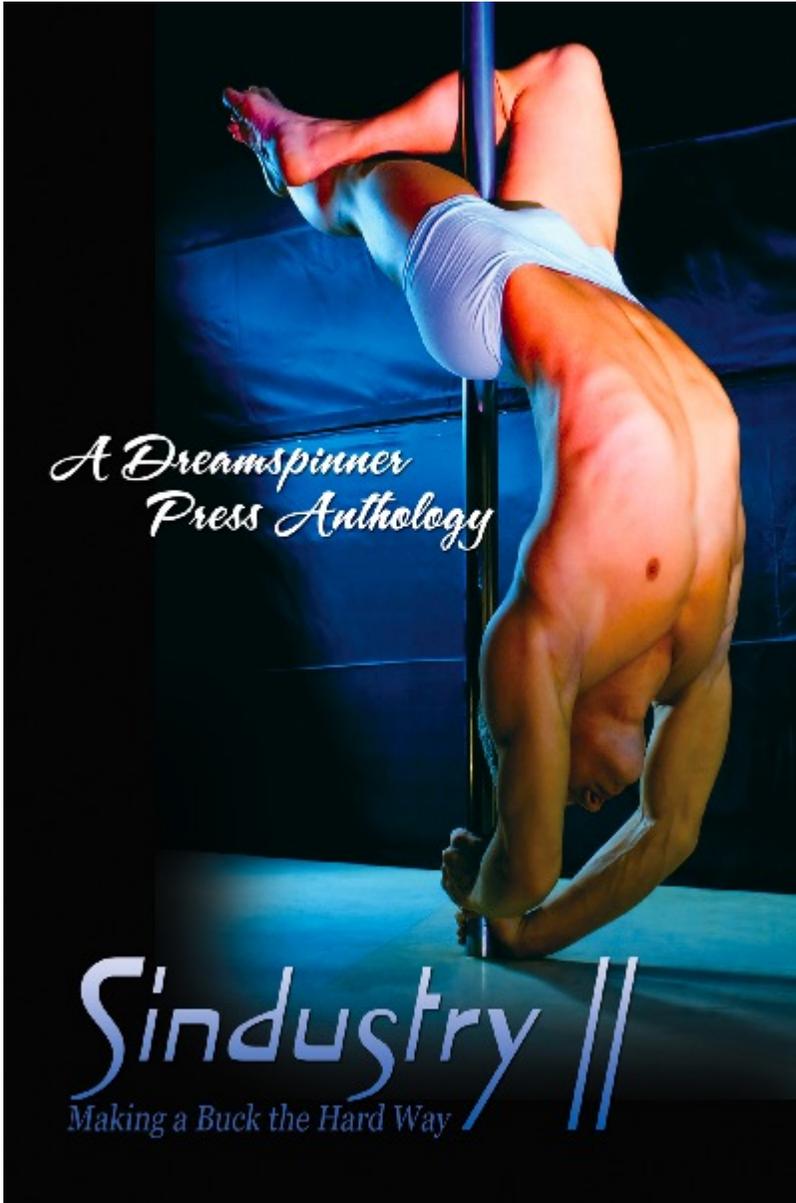
"It's cold though, even with the heat on."

"That's what blankets and body heat are for."

He rubbed my arms for a second before returning the hug. "You read my mind," he said before kissing me. I kissed him back, tasting the cherry-flavored chocolate on his lips and tongue. When we pulled away from each other, he touched the side of my face with his thumb. "You sure you're okay with missing another day of work?"

"It's all right. It *is* a holiday, after all." I grinned and went back for the mugs of cocoa. "Besides, some things are worth more than money."

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TAYLOR LOCHLAND has been reading and writing for as long as she can remember. As a child and a teenager, she spent many weekends holed up in her room with her books. If she didn't like something about a story, she'd often take it upon herself to write her own version. As an adult, she became involved in the anime fandom, which led to an interest in fanfiction and text-based online roleplaying. She later abandoned fanfiction when she discovered creating her own characters was more fun.

She's lived in the Detroit metropolitan area her entire life. When she's not reading or writing, she can often be found playing with her cats, sewing, looking at the night sky, watching baseball or hockey, or going to anime conventions.

Taylor is most creative after midnight but unfortunately has a job that usually requires her to be awake by 7:30 a.m. She just knows that the sleep deprivation will catch up to her one of these days.

Visit Taylor's blog at <http://taylor-lochland.livejournal.com>.



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