

Dreamspinner Press
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Epilogue

Published by

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To Pam:
Sex, cock, panda!
This one's for you.
Don't ever change.
* * * *

To Brandon:
Thanks for the indulgent trips for ice cream
and not having us committed.
That kind of thing means a lot to a girl.
Love you forever, A

Chapter One

Cameron Walker drummed the fingers of his right hand against the counter. He was staring intently at the postcard he was gripping in his left hand. He spared a glance at the cast adorning his left arm and gave it a glare. It was almost as if the plaster was mocking him. The cast on his arm was also a reminder of why he had the postcard in his hand in the first place. He needed to call Julian.

It really was the only solution. There was no possible way that Patrick would be able to take the time he needed to heal if he stayed at home. Cam had tried having Patrick stay in the spare room, but that hadn't helped. He'd come home one day to find Patrick attempting to rearrange the furniture. He had to get Patrick out of town if he wanted his friend to get the rest that he needed. This was something that both he and Patrick's boss had agreed on. Hell, Cam had Patrick's bags packed and had him booked on a flight that was leaving the next day. He just needed to tell Julian that Patrick was coming to stay with him. For a month.

It was Sunday, so Cam was fairly certain that Julian would be home. Julian was a doctor, and Cam didn't know many doctors who worked on Sundays. Picking up the phone, he punched in the numbers and listened to it ring. He was just starting to worry that Julian might not be home when the phone was picked up.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end of the line was male but not one that Cam recognized.

"Um, hi. Can I talk to Julian, please?"

"Sure. Hang on."

Cam could hear the unknown man, whom he assumed was Julian's boyfriend, move away as the

phone was put down on a hard surface with a soft thud. After a brief conversation that was too far away for Cam to hear, the phone was picked up again.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Julian. It's Cameron."

"Cameron?" There was surprise and pleasure in Julian's voice. "It's been forever. How are you?"

"I need you to take Patrick," Cam blurted. He groaned and thumped his head against the counter. That wasn't how he had wanted to break the news. He had wanted to at least talk a bit before he got to that part. He really did miss talking to Julian, and he didn't want Julian thinking his need to get Patrick out of the city was the only reason that he had called.

"I'm sorry? It sounded like you said that you need me to take Patrick."

"I did." Cam sighed again. "I'm sorry I just blurted it out like that. I really did want to have a conversation first."

"Cam, is something wrong? I can't read you as well as I can read Patrick, but it sounds like something is bothering you."

Cam sighed again, followed by a small laugh. He was starting to sound like a broken record. Julian and Patrick had dated in college. Cam was pretty sure that Julian was the only guy Patrick had been even remotely serious about. While Cam had enjoyed some wonderful sex with the two men, it had been obvious that they had been a caring couple. Cam had been surprised when Julian broke up with Patrick the day before the other man had been planning on doing the same. He had been hoping that Julian would be the one that Patrick stuck with. Of course, with Julian taking the lead in the breakup, the two men had managed to stay friends. Cam knew that Patrick's reluctance to be in a permanent relationship had contributed to the split. Patrick just hadn't been ready to really commit to someone when they were in school. Hell, he still wasn't ready.

"Cam, are you still there?"

"What?" Cam ran a hand over his face and attempted to shake the cobwebs from his mind. "Shit, sorry, Julian."

"It's okay. So, why are you sending me Patrick? And can you even do that? I mean, it's not like he's a file that you can e-mail me."

Cam chuckled. "I guess not. Patrick was hurt a while back and he's not giving himself the time that he needs to heal. His boss wants him off for a month to give him a chance to rest, and I don't think he'll take the time if he stays here."

"Hurt how?"

Cam took a deep breath. This was the part that Julian really wasn't going to like. "He got shot."

"What the *fuck* !?"

Cam winced and pulled the phone away from his ear. "I said that he got shot. Last month."

"*Lastmonth* !"

"Julian, could you please stop yelling at me?"

"Why didn't anyone tell me?"

"Patrick didn't want to worry you. He said that he was fine. Of course, he always says that he's fine." Cam sighed again. He knew he was babbling. He always babbled when he wasn't sure what to say. Especially when he was stressed. And boy, was he stressed. After all, it was sort of maybe a little bit his fault that Patrick had gotten shot in the first place. "Can you take him?"

"For a month?"

"Yes."

Julian sighed softly. "Yeah, he can come here."

"Good. His flight gets in at two o'clock tomorrow afternoon."

"What? Damn it, Cam, do you think you could have waited any longer to tell me that he's coming here? I still have to tell my boyfriend."

"So, that was the boyfriend who answered the phone." Cam perked up at the news. He knew that Julian and his boyfriend had been having problems earlier in the year, but things had obviously gotten better if the boyfriend was answering the phone. Especially considering what Cam knew about Julian; for the boyfriend to be answering the phone, they had to be living together. "What's his name again?"

"Jack. Don't think my boyfriend living here gets you off the hook."

"Jeremy and I finally got together, and we've been living together for a month," Cam blurted. He was hoping that if he distracted Julian the other man would forget to be angry with him.

"That's great, Cam. Now, why did you wait so long to tell me that you were sending Patrick here? And why didn't he call me about it?"

"He doesn't know yet," Cam replied. He knew that his voice sounded timid, but he didn't care. Julian was the only other person who really knew how Patrick would react to the news.

"You've got to be shitting me. Cam! How could you not tell him?"

"Because he would have made a fuss and refused to go. You know how he can get. This isn't something that I can let him talk his way out of. *Heneeds* this, Julian. If he keeps pushing himself the way he has been, the only thing that he's going to do is hurt himself more."

"You're right." A sigh came over the line. "I'm sorry I snapped at you. I just can't believe that he didn't call and tell me that he got shot."

"He likes to appear strong, Julian. You know that. There is no way in hell he would tell you about something that made him seem weak."

"You're right. I really should know this by now. I've got to go and talk to Jack."

"I understand. Call me later? We really do need to catch up."

"I'll call you tonight. I want to hear how Patrick takes the news that you're shipping him to Alberta."

"Ugh, don't remind me."

"Bye, Cam."

"Bye, Julian." Cam hung up the phone with a sigh. Julian was right. He needed to talk to Patrick.

Unfortunately, it was the last thing that he wanted to do.

* * * *

Jack watched Julian hang up the phone with an amused expression on his face. He'd overheard just enough of the conversation to have a rough idea of what was going on. It was about time he met some of Julian's friends from his so-called wild days. They had been together for close to a year now, and living together for six months. From the sounds of it, he was going to get his wish. He just hoped this mysterious houseguest wasn't going to put a crimp in their sex life.

Like that was ever going to be a concern with Julian. Yeah, right.

"So, friend of yours?" he asked casually, leaning against the far wall.

Julian turned around, scratching the back of his neck sheepishly. The sheepish expression faded into something lustier as he raked his gaze down Jack's bare chest and back up again. "What? Oh, yeah. Cam. We went to school together, sort of."

"Sort of?" Jack asked, smirking a little. He loved the little games they played.

"We never had any classes together," he explained. "We're the same age."

Ah. That explained it. Julian, boy wonder that he was, had started university young and finished his undergraduate degree before he'd turned 18. He and Cam might have attended the same school, but Cam would have only been in first or second year when Julian graduated and went off to med school. "And?" Jack prompted.

Oh, there was a flush! Jack crowed mentally. Julian hardly ever blushed like that around him anymore, and Jack loved that embarrassed look.

"And what?" Julian evaded, unsubtly.

Jack could have asked him how many times they'd slept together, but that would have spoiled his fun later. "And what did he say?"

"He said—" Julian was steadily advancing, closing the space between their bodies. Then he looked up at Jack's face instead of between his legs, stopped, sighed, and basically threw himself into Jack's arms. "Don't be mad. He's sending our mutual friend here for a bit."

Sending? Interesting choice of words, although of course Jack had known that someone was coming. This Cam would have to be a pretty close friend to just ship someone out here into the middle of nowhere and expect Julian to put him up. "Oh?" he kept his tone light.

"He got shot," Julian mumbled unhappily into his bare shoulder.

"What?" Jack managed, tightening his arms around Julian's waist. "Jeez. Is he okay? Are you?"

Julian leaned into him. Jack didn't like even the mention of that kind of violence around his lover and encouraged the snuggle by pressing a kiss to the side of his face.

"His name is Patrick," Julian finally said, "and it was a month ago, and he didn't tell me, and knowing him, he hasn't been resting, and honest to God, Jack, I could just kill him for not being careful."

Well. Jack carefully lowered his eyebrows back into the vicinity of his face. That certainly had been eye-opening. In more ways than one. Julian hardly ever spoke of his old friends with that much emotion in his voice. "So, when's he coming?"

"Tomorrow."

That figured. "Railroaded into it, huh?" Then something twigged in Jack's mind. "Wait a second. This wouldn't be the same Patrick under whose shining example we have the story of the pool game, the motorcycle, and the striptease?"

"That wasso not my fault," Julian said. Jack could feel his face burning against his shoulder. "I can't believe Roz told you that story."

"I can't believe you told her!"

"Who do you think bailed him out of jail? I didn't have any money! I lost it all in the pool game!"

Jack chuckled. "All right, so we're going to have a houseguest. I have to say, I'm definitely looking forward to meeting him."

"Really?" Julian asked. "That's funny. I didn't think that would be your first reaction."

"You didn't?" It came out sounding more hurt than Jack would have liked.

Jack felt Julian shrug, but the muscles seemed to stay tense in his back. "I don't know. I guess I just thought—well, I don't really have anything to compare it to, I guess. I mean, I've never met any of your ex-lovers—"

The way Julian stopped talking in the middle of a sentence informed Jack that the stiffening of his spine had not been as unnoticed as he would have liked. He hadn't been prepared for Julian to use the word "lover" in reference to anyone else, he guessed—even with the word "ex" in front of it.

"Hey," Julian said softly, wiggling back far enough that he could look into Jack's eyes. Jack met his gaze levelly. "I'm sorry. I thought you knew that Patrick was my...." He stopped. "But that was a long time ago. We were practically kids then."

"Relax." Jack soothed him in return and found himself following his own advice. "I'm not jealous. Well, *notthat* jealous," he amended. "Not jealous enough to be rude to him or anything. I'm only human. Besides, I've never been shot, but I think if I had, I'd be glad to have someplace to go to recuperate."

Julian snickered. "Patrick's not going to see it that way. Cam had to conspire with his boss to get him away from work. He's not very good at taking time off."

"Speaking of time off—what time does his plane get in?"

Julian groaned. "Two. I don't suppose you can get away with taking the afternoon off tomorrow?"

Jack shook his head. "Sorry, Jitterbug, no can do. I've got a meeting with some prospective clients. Why? Can't you get away?"

"No. Dan's on vacation in the Bahamas with his wife. Ugh." Julian straightened, grabbed Jack by the hand, and started pulling him toward the stairs. Jack followed willingly, bemused. "It's fine. Roz can get him; I know she's got a window on Monday afternoons. Besides, she and Patrick get on like a house on fire."

"Why does that not surprise me?" Jack let himself be pulled into the bedroom. Julian didn't bother closing the door, just pulled his shirt over his own head and threw it in the corner. "What's got into you?"

"Tomorrow we're getting a semi-permanent house guest," Julian pointed out, yanking Jack toward him by the belt loops.

Jack gave him a little shove that toppled both of them onto the king-sized bed. "And?"

Julian made a face as he rolled his body on top of Jack's. "We'll have to *bequiet*," he said with obvious distaste.

Personally, Jack wasn't sure Julian could do quiet, but that didn't bother him at all. He certainly wasn't going to complain about the treatment he was getting now. "Guess we'd better get all those latent screams out of your system," he said cheerfully, wrapping both hands in Julian's unruly hair and taking his mouth in a kiss.

Julian's muffled sound of appreciation made Jack tingly all the way down to his toes. "Now you're getting it."

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Chapter Two

Patrick hissed in pain as yet another airplane passenger bumped into him. Why did they all have to bump into his right side? Why couldn't they bump into the left, where he was holding all his luggage? They *justhad* to hit the arm where he had been shot. People usually walked into luggage in airports. Patrick had been counting on that. His memories of suitcases being knocked out of his hands were so vivid it hadn't even occurred to him that the people would walk into his injured arm. It looked like it wasn't going to be his day.

He continued on his walk through the airport, dragging his luggage behind him. He still couldn't believe that not only had Cam planned this trip, he had packed for him. Hiding his irritation from Cam had been hard for Patrick. He hadn't wanted to hurt his friend's feelings. He knew that Cam only wanted what was best for him, but he didn't like being treated like a child, especially when he felt like a naughty child being sent to his room. Patrick hissed as another line of pain ran down his arm. Unfortunately, it seemed as though Cam may have been right.

A rather excited teenager practically hip-checked him, and Patrick had to hold back a shout of pain. He aimed a glare at the young man while smothering the urge to run over and choke him until he lost consciousness. Patrick was fairly certain that action would cause him to be hauled off by airport security, so he gritted his teeth and continued on his way. At least the number of families he was running into indicated he was at the arrivals area. Scanning the crowd, Patrick spotted a familiar form. He felt a smile cross his face as he started walking toward the tall blonde.

When he pushed through the throng of people to get to her, she turned and smiled at him. Patrick looked into her green eyes and flashed her his most flirtatious smile. "Hey, Barracuda, how's hunting?"

"Water's full of fish," Roz Piet replied. She reached out and pulled him into a hug. "It's good to see you, Patrick."

Patrick winced as he hugged her back. Since his luggage was in his left hand, he was forced to hug her back with his bad arm. He was praying that she didn't notice the wince. "It's good to see you too, Roz. You look amazing. Have you lost weight?"

"Don't make me hurt you for being a smart-ass." Roz reached around him and grabbed one of the bags. The humor in her voice and eyes faded as she leveled a stare at Patrick's arm. "Why are you trying to carry all of your bags with one hand?"

"For fun."

"Don't lie to me; I saw you flinch."

"My shoulder hurts. I must have twisted it a bit while I was on the plane."

"Uh-huh." Roz shot him an annoyed look and walked off with one of his bags in her hand.

Sighing, Patrick followed her. He wasn't sure how much Roz knew about his situation. Hell, he didn't know how much Cam had told *Julian*, and he was the one that Patrick was going to be staying with. Patrick winced as he stepped out of the dim interior of the airport and into the bright sunlight. He lifted his right hand and pulled his glasses out of his hair and slipped them over his eyes. Sunlight always hurt his eyes. He didn't like the sun.

Following Roz out to her truck, Patrick tossed his bags into the back. He had to bite his lip to keep from screaming at the pain that the motion caused. Holding his right arm against his chest, he opened the vehicle door with his left and climbed in awkwardly. He pulled the door closed with his left hand as well, refusing to move his right arm. Patrick was done experiencing pain for the day.

"So, are you going to tell me what's wrong with your arm?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"What did Julian tell you?"

"That you needed to be picked up. Why? Is there more?" Roz pulled out of the airport parking lot and merged into traffic. "We have a long drive ahead of us."

"How far in the middle of nowhere do you live?" Patrick watched as the scenery passed by the windows.

"You've been here before."

"Yes, but I was making out with Julian in the backseat. I have no idea how long it took us to get there."

"You are shameless." There was a laugh in Roz's voice. She tossed him a smile as she continued to drive.

"It's a gift." Patrick settled himself more comfortably against the side of the car. He managed to find a position that didn't hurt his arm too much. He was tired. The pain in his shoulder had been keeping him from sleeping for the past few days. The exhaustion was getting so bad, he was actually considering taking the sleeping pills the doctor had given him. Patrick hated drugs. He didn't like the way that they made him feel.

"So, are you going to tell me what's wrong?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Don't bullshit me, Patrick. I can tell that you're in pain. I'm not an idiot."

"It's nothing. My shoulder just hurts a bit."

"You were wincing in the airport. When that kid banged into you, I thought you were going to kill him. That's a lot more pain than 'a bit'."

"Fine!" Patrick snapped. Due to his refusal to take any type of painkiller, the pain had him so on edge that his control over his temper was nonexistent. "It fucking hurts a lot! That's what happens when some asshole shoots you."

"Do you want me to take a look at it when we get to Julian's?"

Roz's calm voice made him feel like an idiot. That, or a spoiled child. Patrick wasn't sure what was worse. He was starting to see why his captain and Cam had conspired together to get him out of town. He was turning into an ass. "I'm sorry, Barracuda. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"That's okay, Peacock. You didn't answer my question."

"Yes, I would like you to look at my shoulder. The damn thing is hurting so much that I can't sleep."

"Didn't the doctor give you something for the pain?"

"I hate taking drugs."

Roz laughed softly. "That is just like you. You would rather be in pain than take a tiny pill that will help you feel better."

"I don't like what they do to my head." Patrick pouted and crossed his arms. At least he tried to. The pain from his shoulder stopped him from completing the motion. "They make my head all fuzzy. I hate that feeling."

Roz just continued to laugh. Patrick tried to glare at her, but he could feel his eyes drifting shut. The movement of the car was soothing. Leaning his head against the window, Patrick closed his eyes. He would just rest his eyes for a moment. When Patrick heard Roz start to hum along to the radio, he smiled. This was nice. Maybe he would be able to relax and take the time everyone seemed to think he needed. With that thought in mind, Patrick fell asleep.

* * * *

"Hey." Patrick awoke when someone nudged his uninjured arm gently. He opened his eyes and winced as the pain that had dulled with sleep returned—with a vengeance. Roz was leaning across the center console, looking annoyingly concerned. "We're here."

Patrick unclasped his seat belt and reached for the door handle with his left hand. "This doesn't look very familiar."

"That's because Julian moved in with Jack six months ago. You've never actually been here." Roz slammed the truck door behind her and then tossed him her keys. He managed to catch them awkwardly. "They're both working, or they'd have been there to pick you up. You want the one with the yellow tag. Oh, and watch out for the dog—she's friendly, but she'll probably slobber all over you."

Patrick opened his mouth to ask her what she was doing, but stopped when he realized that she was unloading his luggage. "I can do that, you know."

"Yeah, I know, but from the way you were favoring your arm earlier, I bet it's not a good idea." She set the first bag easily on the ground and reached for the second. "Besides, I'm professionally in shape. I can handle it."

He had to admit that she had a point there. Roz had always been athletic, but apparently running the local recreation center really agreed with her. "All right, I guess I'll get the door."

It felt strange to be letting himself into his old friend's new house like this when he wasn't home; in fact, it bothered him. He wouldn't have had the slightest compunction with Cam or Justine, but he hadn't seen Julian in ages, and the idea of staying for a month with his ex-lover and his ex-lover's new flame was pretty daunting. Oh, well. At least there was Roz, and the mysterious dog, to keep him company.

As soon as he had the door open, he heard barking coming from the back room, coming closer. The second Patrick laid eyes on the dog, he fell in love. She was a beautiful Siberian Husky, well-built and with bright blue eyes. She stopped warily in the kitchen when she saw him, and he thought for a second she might growl, but evidently Roz's presence put her at ease, because as soon as Roz followed him in the door, she surged forward again, greeting Roz first and then devoting her nose to sniffing out Patrick. He held out his hand to be inspected, all the while admiring the dog.

"Hi, Robot," Roz said cheerfully. She patted the dog's rump as—Robot? Okay, that probably was going to require an explanation—soaked in the attention Patrick was offering, one-handed. "I think she likes you, but don't let it get to your head. She likes everybody. Here, I'll show you the guest room."

"Thanks." Even though he was sure he'd slept for at least an hour in the car, Patrick was exhausted. "I appreciate you coming to get me."

"Please." Roz waved him off. "It was a good excuse to take the morning off and go shopping. But even if it hadn't been, I wouldn't have minded. I missed you." She led him past a linen closet, a cluttered office with some sophisticated-looking hardware and a lot of textbooks with names like *Geology for Dummies* and *Fundamentals of Thermodynamics*, and a bathroom. The guest bedroom was at the end of the hallway. Roz set his bags down in the empty closet—Patrick thought that was kind of odd; who had completely empty closets?—and pointed to the bed. "Take off your shirt."

Patrick blinked at her. "You know, I don't think I've ever heard that from a woman before."

"There's a first time for everything," she said optimistically, rolling her eyes. "Now, off. Or do you need help?"

Making a face, Patrick sat down and tugged off the sling. He didn't need help, thank God. He wasn't sure he could cope with losing his independence like he had the last time he'd been shot, but

dressing and undressing with a shoulder wound wasn't exactly easy, either. "I can do it." Wincing, he managed to get the buttons undone and shrug his shirt off his left shoulder. Then, carefully, he pulled it off of his right arm.

Roz hissed when she saw the wound. Patrick figured that was a bad sign, since it was still wrapped up. Carefully, he peeled away the edges of the bandage.

"Oh, right. Because you couldn't wait until you'd recovered to get the tattoo," Roz sighed. She knelt beside him on the bed, bracing her right hand on his left shoulder, and leaned in for a closer look. "God, that must've hurt."

"Is that your professional medical opinion?"

"I'm withholding that until I've done a little more research." Roz ran her fingers lightly down his right side from his neck to the top of his shoulder, a thoughtful expression on her face. "Scapula, clavicle, supraspinatus, bursa, CL." She whistled under her breath and touched the skin just to the side of the wound gently.

Patrick winced, but tried to hold still. "Could you not... do that?" She might as well have taken a sledgehammer to it, after as much as he'd been jostled around today.

"Patrick, this was a serious injury. It's*still* a serious injury. Why haven't you been seeing your doctor on a regular basis? Or at least a physiotherapist?"

Crap. Patrick didn't want to tell her about the reason behind his aversion to doctors—after all, Roz was a medical professional herself now. "I don't like going to the doctor. All he does is tell me to take drugs that either make me cranky or make me sleepy. I just need to man up and get over it."

"You need to man up and listen to your doctor. You have an infection because you haven't been taking your antibiotics, you're in pain because you won't take your drugs, and you're actually hindering your recovery because you haven't seen a physiotherapist so your sling is at completely the wrong height for someone your size! And you haven't slept properly in a month, so you're cranky anyway!"

Patrick groaned and eased himself backward on the bed. "You're going to make me go to the doctor, aren't you?"

"I think in your case, the doctor might make a house call. Special consideration." Roz smiled a little, picked up his sling, and adjusted the length. Taking a black marker from her back pocket, she drew a line on the strap. "Now you'll know for next time. I've got to get back to the complex—checks to sign, schedules to draw up, you know the drill. I'll see you later, okay? Try not to strain yourself while you're unsupervised."

"Yes, Mom," he said dryly. Roz had done a lot of growing up since he'd seen her last, that was for sure.

He might have imagined it, but he thought Roz froze for a second. Then her smile slid back into place. "Good boy. Don't get too nosy!"

Patrick waited until he heard the door close behind her and then picked himself up off the bed. There were a couple of towels sitting on the chair by the closet, he noted thankfully. Air travel always made him feel filthy. He wasn't ready to hop in the shower just yet, though. Not bothering to re-bandage his shoulder, he put his arm back in the sling—which did feel remarkably better now that Roz had adjusted it—and wandered into the kitchen.

A quick snoop through the kitchen drawers proved that either Julian wasn't as fond of kitchen sex as Cam and Jeremy seemed to be, or he was a lot sneakier about it. The fridge was stocked with two different kinds of beer, the dishwasher looked like it was newly installed, and there was what looked like some dried macaroni and cheese sauce on the stove. Patrick knew that Julian was a good cook and rather anal about kitchen cleanliness, so it must have been Jack who left the mess.

Robot followed him on the rest of his tour. The laundry room, with its interesting dog food smell, seemed to be directly beneath the master bedroom; there was a hole in the ceiling under which a basket caught discarded clothing. The living room seemed almost too clean to sit in, though he quickly discovered the reason: A room on the other side of the laundry, connected to the hallway in which his bedroom was located, with low, used, comfortable furniture, a big screen TV, and a couch with a blanket thrown haphazardly across the back.

Finally, Patrick found himself at the base of the stairs near the kitchen. The house wasn't that big; there could only be one room at the top. Shrugging, he ascended the steep steps, eventually entering a large, airy room with a south-facing balcony overlooking the rear yard, a huge picture window complete with window seat, and a four-poster king-sized bed. *Well*, Patrick thought, a spike of amusement tugging at his lips. *No wonder they don't have much sex in the kitchen.* Even the two wardrobes, standing on opposite sides of the room, were oversized; it felt as if the room were inhabited by giants. An attached second bathroom at the far end of the room had a rack with two towels and a cup for his-and-his toothbrushes.

Everywhere he went in the house, there were photos: Julian and Roz at the beach in Florida, visiting their parents; a few posed shots of older people Patrick didn't recognize; and snapshot after snapshot of Julian in the arms of the man Patrick naturally assumed had to be Jack. They were grinning ear-to-ear in all of them—except one. In the last photo, the one framed on the bedside table, they were seated around a campfire. Jack was playing a guitar, obviously in the middle of a rousing rendition of something, from the slightly manic expression on his face. Beside him, though, Julian's smile was gentle, his eyes soft, posture relaxed.

Patrick wondered for a sharp second if Julian had ever looked at him that way. Then his shoulder twinged unpleasantly, and he decided that maybe it was time he tried to sleep again. He didn't want to be grumpy when Julian got home, though once the other man started prodding at his shoulder, grumpiness was probably inevitable. With a yawn, he descended the stairs back down to the kitchen, careful to close the door to the master bedroom behind him, and made his way back to his room.

Patrick tugged back the covers one-handed, switching off the bedside lamp. There was *awhoomph* as a hundred pounds of friendly dog hit the bed beside him. Thankfully, Robot seemed to sense that he was injured and kept her distance. Closing his eyes, Patrick prayed for the oblivion of sleep.

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Chapter Three

When Jack entered the house, the first thing he noticed was the music. It was loud enough to be noticeable but not so loud that whoever was listening wouldn't be able to hear what was going on. It was also not the type of music that he or Julian usually listened to. From the sounds of it, it was some type of rock band. A loud rock band. Jack wasn't sure if he liked this new development. Then he noticed the smell.

"What is that smell?" Jack asked. It wasn't a bad smell. In fact, it was such a good smell that his mouth was starting to water.

"It's barbecue sauce," Julian replied. He had hung up his coat and was in the middle of removing his shoes.

"Our barbecue sauce doesn't smell like that."

"Patrick made barbecue sauce." With that said, Julian dashed into the kitchen. Jack sighed and finished taking off his shoes and putting his jacket away. When he reached the kitchen, he almost ran into Julian, who had stopped dead in the doorway. Looking over his lover's shoulder, he could see why the other man had stopped.

The man he assumed was Patrick was standing at the stove with his back to them. The strap of a sling cut across the smooth line of his bare back. The jeans he was wearing were hung so low, Jack was surprised they were staying on. There was a series of numbers tattooed just below his neck. Jack had to admit that the man had a very nice ass.

None of these things were what had stopped Julian, though. Jack was pretty sure the angry, red scar on the back of Patrick's right shoulder had done that.

It looked awful. Not only was the actual wound a fairly vivid shade of red, so was the area around it. The joint looked swollen. The color actually reminded Jack of the one time he had let a wound get infected. This was not going to go over well with Julian. Jack could also see what appeared to be writing underneath the bullet wound.

Oh, boy. Brace for impact.

"What the fuck!"

Yep, time to make a strategic retreat. "Um, if anybody needs me, I'm going to be over here—"

"Sit down!" Julian thundered.

Jack's legs folded him neatly into a chair at the kitchen table. He would have been embarrassed about it except for the fact that the look on his guest's face was definitely uneasy rather than smug, not to mention that he'd seen the way the other man's knees had bent at the command.

"Good, I'm going to need a witness," Patrick said dryly. "Nice to see you, too, Ace."

"Next time, come see me *before* you get shot! In fact, next time, you can leave that part out altogether." Julian stalked over to the stove—Jack took the opportunity to appreciate his lover's phenomenal rear end—and took the spoon from Patrick's hand. "I won't yell at you if you give me the recipe."

"I'm a man, I can take it," Patrick groaned.

Jack leaned back in the chair, put his arms behind his head and prepared to enjoy the fireworks.

"That tattoo is fresh," Julian started. Then he continued, "Excuse me, *those* tattoos. And so is that gunshot wound. What a coincidence!"

Patrick put his hands up and started backing away, and Jack noted the top of what was probably another tattoo peeking over his jeans. "So much for being a man," Jack smirked.

"Oh, shut up; you take orders better than your dog."

Jack shrugged. When you were right, you were right. "I'm Jack, by the way."

"Nice house," Patrick commented. He was still steadily backing away, although Julian was, at that particular moment, licking the barbecue sauce off of the spoon he had stolen from Patrick.

"Thanks."

"What the hell were you thinking?" Julian looked like he was getting ready to throw the now sauce-free spoon at him.

"I'm sorry." Patrick's voice practically dripped with sarcasm. "The next time the guy stalking my best friend attempts to kill his current lover, I'll just let him die. Does that sound like a good idea?"

"Cam was being stalked?" Julian's anger deflated slightly. "He didn't say anything about being stalked."

Patrick timidly moved closer to his friend. "Hey, he's fine, Ace."

Jack watched in amazement as Julian's anger sprang back to life. Normally once Julian had started to calm down, he continued to calm down. He didn't like arguing with people. It was a side effect of Julian's rather awkward social skills. For him to continue to yell at Patrick meant that they were close, which—considering that they had been lovers—Jack should have expected. He just hadn't realized that they had been *that* close.

"Why do you and Cam insist on keeping these things from me?"

"We don't want you to worry."

"I don't worry that much," Julian complained.

Jack cleared his throat. "Um, actually, you do."

"See, even your boyfriend says that you worry too much." Patrick crossed his arm over his chest. There was a smug look on his face.

Jack was starting to feel a tad stupid for opening his mouth. The last thing he wanted to do was get in the middle of a fight between the two of them. It was never a good idea to be in the middle. Unless, of course, there were more pleasant things than a fight going on. That was not going to happen with Patrick and Julian, though. Jack wasn't the sharing kind.

"Patrick, this isn't like you got a cold. You got shot!"

"I'm a cop. It tends to happen."

"It shouldn't! Damn it, Patrick, I don't want you to die!"

With that comment, Julian seemed to crumble slightly. All of the fight went out of him. Jack was just about to push himself out of his chair and pull his lover into his arms, but Patrick acted first.

Patrick crossed the distance between them and pulled Julian to his chest with his good arm. "I'm not planning on dying any time soon, Ace. You're stuck with me."

"Good," Julian muttered. He rested his head against Patrick's uninjured shoulder for a moment, then lifted his head. "You know that you're coming with me to the office tomorrow so I can take a good look at that shoulder."

"I know." Patrick pulled away and pointed at the table with the spoon he had managed to steal back from Julian. "Now sit down. I made you and Jack a nice dinner and now you have to eat it."

Jack laughed at the rather excited look on Julian's face. When his lover sat next to him, he leaned over and stole a kiss. Pulling away, he ran his thumb over Julian's lips. "Feeling calmer?"

"A bit."

"Are the two of you going to argue like this the entire time that he's here?"

"No. I think we got the big one out of the way. It'll mainly just be little ones about the number of guys that Patrick goes through while he's here."

Jack shot a confused look between Patrick and his lover. "What?"

"He's a slut."

"Hey." Patrick whacked Julian on the back of the head as he set a plate in front of him. "It's not nice to tell tales."

"They're all true."

"That doesn't matter." Patrick put a plate in front of Jack while awkwardly holding his own with his bad arm. "You shouldn't tell Jack all of the stories until he gets to know me better."

"What if I don't want him to get to know you better? Getting to know you better usually involves nudity."

"Sassy," Patrick chided. He turned his attention to Jack. "I like what you've done to him."

"Hey, I can't take all of the credit." Jack took his first bite of barbecue-coated stir-fry and moaned. "Oh God, this is amazing."

"Thank you."

Jack turned his attention to Julian once more. "I don't care what it takes, you are getting this recipe."

Patrick's laughter made him turn back. The laughter wasn't normal laughter. It was the type of laughter that sent shivers down Jack's spine. Patrick's green eyes seemed to have darkened. "I don't think you want to tempt me with an offer like that."

Jack swallowed as Julian laughed. Julian's laughter seemed to break the tension and they started eating again. As Julian and Patrick's conversation flowed over him, Jack's thoughts wandered to Patrick's lust-darkened eyes. Something about them had seemed terribly familiar.

* * * *

Julian rubbed a hand over his face and let out a deep breath. He knew he wasn't very good with people getting themselves hurt; ironic, considering that he was a doctor, for crying out loud, but he couldn't help it. Part of it stemmed from his parents' tragic deaths when he was very young, and though Roz's family had taken him in without question, he had still felt essentially homeless for a

very long time. It wasn't easy for him to fit in in new places, or make new friends, which was why he tended to keep the ones he had as safe as he could.

Then Patrick had gone and gotten himself shot, and someone had been stalking Cam—he was going to have to get the whole story out of Patrick, but that could wait till later—and now he was not a happy Julian.

"Relax," Jack murmured from just behind him, wrapping his arms around his waist. Julian leaned back into the touch, a small smile quirking his lips when he realized Jack smelled like barbecue sauce. "He's not broken."

"I bet the X-rays say otherwise." Julian sighed, feeling a good deal of the tension leave his body anyway. There was no way Patrick had taken a bullet in that area without some substantial bone and tissue damage. "Sorry, I know I'm all...." He gesticulated aimlessly, trying to convey his neuroses with his hands. "I don't know why I get this way."

"I do," Jack reassured him, planting a kiss on the back of his head. "You're not rethinking your decision, are you?"

For a minute, Julian wasn't sure which decision Jack meant: having Patrick over to recuperate for a month, or his recent decision to take on duties as an emergency on-call surgeon at the nearest hospital's ER in addition to his regular practice. Julian didn't regret either of them, though he was wary about both. "No."

"Good. Now, go make nice with your friend. It's going to be a long month if you're this awkward and fidgety the whole time."

Julian turned around so they were facing each other and slid his hands into Jack's jeans pockets. "I'll show you awkward and fidgety," he promised lightly, squeezing.

"Promises, promises." Jack swatted him on the butt. "Now go! Kiss and make up. Except without the touching, please. I'll be out of the way, walking the dog, should you need time to dispose of the body."

"You're the best," Julian said fondly, kissing him briefly. "I'm going. Say 'hi' to Roy and Hallie for me, okay?" Roy and Hallie were their nearest neighbors; Roy was a single dad whose wife had left him unexpectedly, leaving him to raise his extremely precocious daughter by himself.

He left Jack and Robot in the front room and wandered down the hallway into the guest bedroom. Patrick was there, suitcase open, putting things away one-handed. It was pretty obvious that Cam had folded his clothes, since Patrick was barely capable of keeping them folded while transferring them from the suitcase to the dresser. "Make yourself at home," Julian told him with a small smile, flopping down onto the bed to watch.

"Yeah," Patrick said dryly, tossing a pair of balled-up socks onto his chest, "you, too."

Julian raised an eyebrow, wondering what exactly that might mean. He propped his head up on his arm, rolling a little to watch his friend. "So, Cam and the infamous Jeremy, huh?" Even going back to their university days, they had known about Cam's teenage crush—and teased him mercilessly. "Didn't see that coming." He kept his tone deliberately casual and blinked innocently when Patrick narrowed his eyes at him.

"Me neither," the other man answered noncommittally. He finished putting away his clothes and then put the empty suitcase under the bed and joined Julian, staring up at the ceiling. "They're very...."

Julian waited. When Patrick didn't finish the sentence, he prompted, "Yes?" The soft sigh Patrick let out was worrisome, to say the least. *Uh-oh*.

"Happy. They make me feel old, Ace. Now you, too? And your boyfriend is practically a senior citizen."

Julian spluttered with laughter. Maybe something was going on, but Patrick wasn't ready to talk about it seriously. Not yet, anyway. "I'll be sure to tell him you said that. Maybe he'll help me hide the body."

"Is it time for that talk already?" Patrick seemed to deflate. Well, except for his swollen shoulder, anyway.

"It's always that time with me," Julian said mock-cheerfully. That shoulder wound had to hurt, and if he knew Patrick, which he did, he wasn't taking his pain medication. Julian was going to have to send a blood sample for lab work tomorrow, which he was sure Patrick would not appreciate, so it was probably best to prepare him now. "How long has it been that color?"

Patrick looked uncomfortable. "What do you mean?"

Rolling his eyes, Julian reached over and poked the skin just below the wound. The skin was burning hot. Patrick hissed. "This color. The one that looks a little like the shade I turn when I have a sunburn." Julian pointed out. "This says to me, 'I'm infected!'" He made a little high-pitched bacteria voice.

Patrick was definitely squirming. "I don't know. A couple of days, I guess. Maybe a week?"

From his tone of voice, Julian guessed it had been at least a week, and probably longer. "And the reason you have not been taking your antibiotics is because...?"

"Would you believe my health insurance doesn't cover it?"

Julian let his expression show that he was not snowed even for a second. "The real reason, please, Patrick."

"The ones they put me on made me feel like shit. I couldn't keep anything down, I slept fourteen hours a day, and when I did manage to stay awake, my head was fuzzy." He flopped his good arm over his eyes. "I'm a cop, Julian. I can't live like that. I'll go crazy."

"Too late for that," Julian muttered, sitting up. "Okay. Here's the deal. There is a reason they put you on antibiotics." He poked Patrick's shoulder again, gentler this time, and let himself feel for bone or tissue damage briefly. Patrick grimaced, but didn't stop him. "The reason is so this doesn't happen."

He got up and went to the dresser, where Patrick had laid out all of his supplies for cleaning the wound, and prepared an alcohol swab. "Once you're infected," he continued, sitting down again and swabbing across the worst of the wound, "the little buggers clog up your systems and surf your bloodstream looking for other targets." He paused to let the effect of his words sink in. "Popular vacation destinations include, but are not limited to, the lungs, the heart, the brain, and the intestines. That leaves you at risk for pneumonia, meningitis, encephalitis, endocarditis, and some really nasty things you don't want to hear about. So. How 'bout them antibiotics?" He glanced at Patrick's face. "And a painkiller."

"I am trying really hard not to hate you right now," Patrick sighed. The pain he was obviously still

in was clearly visible in his expression.

"I appreciate the effort," Julian said, trying to hide a sigh of relief. He didn't remember Patrick being quite this stubborn about his health before, but then again, Patrick had never really been his patient before, either. That one surgery didn't really count. "As it so happens, I brought a selection home with me. You're not allergic to anything I should know about, are you?"

Patrick shook his head.

Padding into the kitchen, Julian poured a glass of water and perused his medicines. He wanted something strong enough to work quickly but mild enough not to cause Patrick any extra discomfort.

"Ta-da," he said, handing them over. "The blue ones are the antibiotic. White is Percocet. For the pain," he added, catching Patrick's sudden expression of revulsion. "Patrick, I can tell you're hurting. I know you probably hate the way they make you feel, but give yourself a break, okay?" He paused. "Roz told me you haven't been sleeping well."

Patrick dumped the little white pills on the nightstand. "I'll take the antibiotics, Ace, but not the painkillers. I don't need them."

Why won't people just trust their doctors? Julian wondered with a sigh. "You know, I can see those bags under your eyes."

"Drop it, Julian. I'm not taking them."

Whoa. The temperature in the room had just dropped a few degrees. Patrick obviously had some deep-seated aversion to analgesics he wasn't going to talk about. "Fine," Julian snapped, his voice harsher than he'd intended. Breathing deeply, he made an alternative offer. "How about a sedative, then?"

It was a little bit risky, especially if Patrick made a habit of it, but Julian was hoping that clearing the infection with the antibiotics would decrease the pain enough that Patrick would be able to sleep naturally before he could develop a dependency on the sedative.

Patrick was quiet for a moment, obviously struggling with the decision. "Yeah, a sedative sounds good," he said at length. He sounded like he wanted to say something else, but Julian waited in vain.

"All right," he agreed. "I'll be right back."

When Jack and Robot got home an hour later, Julian was curled up on the couch in the front room, his knees tucked up under his chin, arms around his legs.

Jack let Robot off the leash and sat down beside him. Julian leaned into his body a little helplessly, feeling bone-weary.

"Good talk?" Jack asked quietly, wrapping an arm around his shoulders.

Not knowing how to answer that, Julian didn't. He just shook his head vaguely. He couldn't help but feel that there was something wrong with Patrick, something that hadn't been there the last time he'd seen him.

"Okay," Jack said after a minute, rising and pulling Julian up after him. "I get it. Come on. Bedtime, Dr. Love. You can solve your patient's personality disorder in the morning. I've got a

shotgun in the back shed if nothing else works."

"I love you," Julian said automatically, the ghost of a smile crossing his lips.

"I know you do," Jack said, kissing him warmly. "Let's go to bed."

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Chapter Four

When Patrick finally forced his way to consciousness, his head felt slightly heavy, but he felt rested. He'd just had his first good night's sleep in a month. Maybe Julian had a point about actually taking the pills the doctor had told him to. Patrick used his good hand to rub at his eyes. He was starting to feel like an ass. He needed to apologize to Julian for the way he'd been acting. Unfortunately, he wasn't sure how he was going to do that. Apologies weren't his strong point.

Patrick sat up with a stretch. The pain in his shoulder flared back to life as he moved. Patrick hissed in discomfort. *Ow*. Pulling himself out of bed, he grabbed one of the towels that Julian had left for him. Hopefully a shower would help ease his aches and give him an idea of what to say to Julian.

As he padded back to the guest room with the towel wrapped around his waist, he heard the *Indiana Jones* theme. His phone was ringing. Patrick skidded into the room and grabbed up the phone.

"Hawkins."

"So, how goes the vacation?" The lilting female voice on the other side had an Irish accent.

"Hey, Sparky." Patrick carefully lowered himself onto the bed. He smiled at his partner even though she couldn't see him. "How are things going?"

"Not too bad. I miss you, partner. Are you getting the rest that you need?"

"I've only been gone a day." Patrick sighed and ran a hand over his face. "Justine, can I ask you a question?"

"This can't be good. You used my full name."

"How do I apologize for being an asshole?"

"Well, *you* usually use sex."

"I can't use sex. Julian has a boyfriend."

"How did you get Julian mad at you in one day? Good God, Patrick, are you trying to make him hate you?"

"Of course not!"

"Then why do you need to apologize?"

"Because I snapped at him when he tried to give me painkillers."

"Well, he should have been expecting that. I mean, you've barely taken an Advil since the last time that you were shot."

"Well, he kind of doesn't know about that," Patrick admitted.

"What?" Justine's voice was a rather loud shriek. "Patrick, the pregnant woman named her son after you. He just turned three! How could you not tell him?"

"I didn't want him to worry."

"You need to tell him. You can't apologize until you tell him."

"What if he gets mad at me?"

"I'm sure he's going to." Justine sighed. "Look, you need to tell him, or you aren't going to get any type of rest while you're gone. You need the rest, Patrick. You're starting to burn out, and I don't want that to happen to you."

"You really think that I should tell him?"

"Yes. You *need* to tell him. I'll call later to see how you're doing."

"Bye, Sparky."

"Get some rest," Justine replied. Before he could argue with her, she hung up the phone. Patrick sighed and flipped his phone closed, tossing it on the bed. Justine's advice was to tell Julian. How the hell was he supposed to do that?

Patrick sat up with a sigh and a wince. He knew that Justine was right, but how? He couldn't just come out and tell Julian. That would most likely lead to Julian trying to harm him, and with his arm in a sling, that just wouldn't be fair. As he glanced around the room, his eyes fell on a pad of paper and a pen sitting on the dresser. A grin crossed his face. He could do a letter. A letter meant that he wouldn't have to be there when Julian read it. He could be safely hiding. Patrick snatched the pad of paper off the dresser and began to write, carefully ignoring the complaints from his injured arm.

* * * *

Julian,

Yes, I realize that I am being a rather large coward by doing this, but I couldn't tell you to your face. I just didn't want to see the disappointment in your eyes. I need to explain to you why I didn't take the painkillers or any of the other pills that the doctor gave me.

Three years ago, Justine and I (She's my partner. I can't remember if I told you that. I must have) were in a convenience store when some punk burst in to rob it. I know what you're thinking. Only me, right?

Anyway, this guy must have been on drugs or something, 'cause he just started screaming and waving his gun around. I guess things were going too slowly for him, 'cause the next thing he did was point his gun at a pregnant girl and pull the trigger. I did the only thing I could think to do. I jumped in front of her and pushed her out of the way.

I got shot in the spine. When I woke up in the hospital after surgery, they told me that they got the bullet out, but that I would never walk again. I know that I should have called you, but you had your own problems and I didn't want to burden you with an ex who couldn't walk. Hell, Julian, we used to go dancing all of the time. If I'm honest, I didn't want you to see me like that.

The doctors never believed me when I told them that I could feel pain in my legs. They said I was either imagining it or I was just transferring pain from somewhere else so I thought it was my legs. All they did was continue to pump me full of drugs. Every time that I mentioned my legs, they upped my painkillers.

You know, my mother came to see me when I was in the hospital. She said that the bullet should have killed me. She told me that losing use of my legs was punishment for my deviant ways. She never came again after that. The last time I saw her, she spat on me in the grocery store. Guess she didn't like that I was walking again.

One of the nurses, Keith, he believed me when no one else did. He started to cut back on the pain meds. The more he cut back, the more I could feel my legs. When he saw me wiggle my toes for the first time, he stopped giving me the pain meds all together. Well, at least the strong ones. I'm not sure how he managed not to get fired. I guess he got all of the nurses together and they covered for him. All I know is that after that first time I wiggled my toes, all of the nurses started to help.

It was the nursing staff that got me through the hard part. Keith was at my side the entire time. Yes, I slept with him. The man is gorgeous. We're still friends. When I got to the point where I was starting to make progress, they brought in a physiotherapist and one of the doctors. The looks on their faces when they saw me stand up and walk a few steps away from the bed were priceless. Needless to say, after that they started listening to me.

This is why I don't like painkillers. Painkillers almost kept me from walking again. It has nothing to do with you. I think that you are an incredible doctor. You amaze me, Julian. You really are like Asclepius, Ace. You're a god of medicine. I'd trust you any day. It's just the drugs I don't trust. Even now, I'm afraid that if I take a strong painkiller I won't be able to feel my legs any more. As long as I can feel pain, I'm still feeling.

What it comes down to is that I'm scared. I'm scared of the way I feel when I'm on the drugs. I don't have some weird need to be in pain. I just don't want to stop feeling.

So, there you have it. The whole crazy thing that I was too chickenshit to say to your face.

Please don't be mad at me, Ace. Love you,

Patrick

Patrick scrawled Julian's name on an envelope and shoved the letter inside. He took it up to the bedroom and placed it on top of a pillow on the bed, where he knew Julian would notice it. He also figured if he left it there, Julian wouldn't get it until he went to bed, which meant that Patrick wouldn't have to deal with it until tomorrow.

It was time for phase two of the plan, which was to apologize in person with a gift of some sort. Flowers had worked in the past, so Patrick decided to try that. His usual technique of offering up his body was most likely not going to work with Jack in the picture, so he was actually going to have to grovel. That meant leaving the house.

Patrick tossed on a pair of jeans and actually managed to get a T-shirt on without too much pain. Opening the hall closet, he found the jacket that he had been wearing when Roz had picked him up.

He slipped it on and then put the sling on once again. Patrick found a spare house key hanging on a hook by the door and slipped it into his pocket. Sitting on a conveniently placed bench, he pulled on his boots. Once fully dressed and ready for the outdoors, he left the house.

It was sunny enough outside that he had to put on his sunglasses. There was a nice breeze in the air, and birds were singing in the trees. It was a beautiful day for a walk, which was a good thing since Patrick didn't have a vehicle. Making sure that the door was locked behind him, Patrick stepped off the porch and started walking.

The slight breeze ruffled his hair as he walked, and Patrick actually felt himself relaxing. He was starting to think that Cam may have had a point. He really did need to relax. He just hoped that he was relaxing in the right direction. Since he had spent the entire drive up sleeping, he wasn't sure which direction he should be headed in. Hopefully someone would tell him if he was going the wrong way.

He hadn't been walking that long when a car pulled up next to him. Patrick stopped as the window came down.

"Do you need a ride?" The man asking the question had blond hair and a pair of very nice blue eyes. Patrick found himself smiling as he leaned his upper body in the window.

"That depends." Patrick smiled at the man in the car. He was cute, and Patrick was a sucker for a nice pair of eyes.

"On what?"

"On whether or not you're heading into town."

"I am."

"Then I would love a ride." Patrick climbed in the passenger side of the car and pulled the door closed. Once settled, he turned to face the driver. *Hot damn, is he fine.* "I'm Patrick."

"Brad." Giving him a rather shy smile, Brad pulled the car back onto the road. "So, are you visiting?"

"Yeah. I'm staying with my friend and his boyfriend for a month while I get my strength back."

"What happened?"

"I got shot." Patrick laughed softly as Brad's eyes widened. "I'm a cop, not a serial killer. You don't need to worry about me shooting you."

"That's good to know." Brad cleared his throat and glanced at Patrick. "So, which one is your friend, Jack or Julian?"

"Julian. We used to date." Patrick grinned as Brad's eyebrows nearly merged with his hairline. "I'm sorry. Have I made you uncomfortable?"

"No!"

Brad seemed to realize that his last comment had been rather loud, and blushed a charming shade of red. Patrick was itching to reach over and touch him.

"Sorry, that came out much louder than intended."

"I don't mind. I like vocal people." Patrick shifted so he could look at Brad. It made his bad shoulder press against the window slightly, but it was worth it for the chance to watch the other man. "So, what were you doing today that ended with you riding to my rescue?"

"I was visiting my grandmother." The flush crept back into Brad's cheeks.

"That must have made her happy." Patrick could tell that Brad was embarrassed, but he thought it was sweet that he had been visiting his grandmother. "I loved my grandmother. After she died, I got her name tattooed on my left forearm."

"Really?"

"She was the only member of my family who didn't disown me when I told them I was gay. When she found out what my father did to me, she told me that he was an ass and I would always be her little boy and that she would love me forever," Patrick replied. He could feel tears misting in his eyes. He really missed his grandmother. He could also see that Brad had started to relax while he was telling his story. Patrick got the feeling that not many people were supportive of his visits to his grandmother.

"What did your father do to you?"

"He beat the shit out of me when I told him I was gay and then threw me through a window. It took twenty-seven stitches to close up my side."

"I bet that left a scar."

"Yeah—do you want to see it?" Patrick grinned as Brad blushed again. Patrick liked the reactions that he was getting from the other man, but he had the feeling that Brad didn't have much experience with men. Not wanting to push too hard and scare him off, Patrick decided that a change of subject was needed. "So, Brad, what do you do?"

"I tend bar at *Brenda's*."

"Sounds exciting."

"Not as exciting as being a cop."

"Hey, I've seen a lot of bar fights. Hell, I've even started a few." Patrick ran a finger along Brad's arm. "Nothing like a good fight to get the blood pumping."

Brad cleared his throat nervously as his arm trembled under Patrick's touch. "Where did you need to go?"

"Well, I've got to go and see Julian, but first I need flowers."

"Flowers?"

"I was a prick. I need to apologize, and for that I need flowers. Plus, I'm going to get some flowers and chocolates for Roz as a type of preemptive apology, since I'm pretty sure I'm going to be a horrible physical therapy patient."

"Flowers it is," Brad responded. He drove just a bit farther, then pulled into a small parking lot. Putting the car in park, he turned to face Patrick. "This is it."

"Thanks for the ride." Patrick ran his hand through his hair. Looking into Brad's blue eyes, he had to force back an unexpected case of nerves. "Can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

"Would you like to have dinner with me?"

Brad's mouth opened and closed in surprise. "You mean, like a date?"

"Yes."

"Um, I'd really like that." A blush was covering Brad's face. "But I work most nights at the bar."

"Lunch, then?"

"I could do lunch."

"Great." Patrick smiled brightly. "I'm staying with Julian and Jack; do you have their number or do you want my cell?"

"Um—"

"I'll just give you my cell." Patrick reached into his pocket for a piece of paper and pulled out one of the business cards that he gave witnesses. He hadn't remembered putting it there. The card had his cell number on it. "Here you go. Call me when you figure out what day is good for you."

"I will."

As he pulled his hand away, Patrick let his fingers trail over Brad's hand. He gave the other man a soft smile and turned to let himself out of the car. Patrick got as far as putting his hand on the door. *Ah, screw it.*

Patrick spun back around. With his good hand, he grabbed the back of Brad's head and pressed his lips to the startled man's mouth. Patrick ran his tongue over the seam of Brad's lips, gently prying them open. When Brad opened for him, Patrick let his tongue dive inside, learning the unique taste of the other man. He moaned when he felt Brad's hands in his hair. Patrick gave the roof of Brad's mouth one last lick and then pulled away from the kiss. He stared into dazed blue eyes.

"You better call me." Patrick brushed his lips over Brad's once more before he got out of the car. He waved at Brad and then stepped into the flower shop.

It only took Patrick a few minutes to pick out two beautiful bouquets. He gave the rather perky girl behind the counter an obscene amount of money for the flowers and then headed out of the store. On his way to Julian's office, he stopped in a chocolate shop and bought a box of what he knew were Roz's favorites. Arms full of his apology tools, Patrick stepped into the medical center.

After giving the woman at the desk his name and charming her a bit, he headed into the exam room that she indicated. Julian had his back to him as he entered.

"I'll be with you in just a minute."

Patrick moved up behind him and slipped his arm around him with the bouquet in his hand. "These are for you, Ace."

Julian actually jumped as he spun around. Patrick's sudden appearance had apparently startled

him. Patrick managed to back away quickly enough that Julian didn't bang into him or make him drop the flowers. Julian was staring at him. "Patrick?"

"Ace?" Patrick shoved the flowers into his hands.

"These are for me?"

"Yes."

Julian looked at the flowers in his hands then back at Patrick, confusion plain on his face. "Why?"

"Because I was an ass and I wanted to say that I was sorry." Patrick leaned against the exam table. He was still holding the chocolates and flowers for Roz. "These are for Roz, so don't you get any ideas. You're holding your flowers."

"This is not how you normally apologize."

"Yes, but I can no longer apologize to you in that way because you went and got yourself a boyfriend."

"Sorry."

"No, you're not."

"Patrick."

"Julian."

"These flowers are in a vase."

"Of course they are. I was bringing them here. I knew you wouldn't have something to put them in."

"And the ones that you are holding are also in a vase."

"Yes."

"You should not be carrying things this heavy with that shoulder!" Julian put the vase of flowers on the counter with jerky movements. Patrick was pretty sure that he was resisting the urge to throw it at him.

"I'm trying to say that I'm sorry, and you're yelling at me again."

"Well, you're doing stupid things!"

Patrick put the vase down on the exam table then moved toward the angry doctor. "Ace, calm down."

"Do not tell me what to do! If you aren't going to take care of yourself, someone has to!"

Patrick lunged forward and did the one thing he knew would stop Julian from yelling at him. He shoved his tongue into his mouth. Patrick thrust his hand into Julian's hair and pulled him closer. He plundered Julian's mouth, relearning the way that he tasted. When he felt Julian's hand clutch at his jacket, he pulled away. Julian was panting and staring at him

"Done yelling?"

Julian nodded.

"Good." Patrick moved back to the exam table and hopped onto it. He started to remove the sling as Julian shook himself out of his daze and moved over. "Now, tell me about Brad the bartender."

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Chapter Five

Patrick knocked on the window of Roz's office and made a funny face when she looked up at him, feeling oddly cheerful. He and Julian had made up; he'd met someone; and the horrible examination process involving a lead skirt and a bunch of X-rays and being stuck full of holes was past. Now he just had to get through an hour of physiotherapy with Roz, and his karma would be back on an even keel.

Roz laughed at him when he opened the door and then laughed harder when she saw the flowers.

"What?" he asked, perplexed.

Roz put the chocolates in a tiny bar fridge and set the flowers on her desk. "It's nothing. Ask Jack to tell you about the first time he brought me flowers some time. It was an experience for both of us." She smiled. "Thanks. What's the occasion?"

Huh. Patrick wondered what Jack could have done to piss off Roz. Maybe he'd been her patient once or twice too. Julian did tend to fall for the needy ones. He himself was just one example in a long line. "I'm apologizing in advance," he said, and then slouched down onto her smooth, leather couch. "We all know what a terrible patient I am. So, Barracuda, what's on the agenda today?"

"Well, I just finished seniors' aquafitness." Her expression forbade him from making a comment. "I've got about an hour window, and then I'm scheduled to do a bit of supervision, waiting for the eight-to-ten swimmers' parents to pick them up. You want to get started today already? I thought you might want some time to wind down."

Patrick thought that maybe the truth, or at least part of it, would best serve him here. "I can't take my pain medication. It's a long story. So the faster I get this arm back in working condition, the faster I can start sleeping again, and the less grouchy I will be for the majority of my time here. I think it's in everyone's best interests if I start physio as soon as possible."

Roz apparently took his refusal of pain meds at face value, because she didn't comment at all; what she did was gesture to the door in the opposite wall of her office. "In that case, we'll get started. I know you won't mind taking your shirt off again."

"Pervert," Patrick said helpfully.

Roz helped him out of his sling, jacket, and T-shirt, and Patrick hopped up on the massage table. For the next ten minutes, she had him moving his arm around and demonstrating his range of motion. Then she strapped a small weight around his wrist and had him repeat the process.

"Ow," Patrick finally complained when Roz had him press against her outstretched arm for resistance. His shoulder was telling him that continuing this exercise would be a bad idea. "Can we leave this one for a few days? I don't think those parts of me are healed yet."

"We'll wait for your X-rays to come back," Roz agreed. "I wish we had the extra hour to wait for the development. Julian's been pushing them to switch to a carbon nanotube X-ray so we can get instant results, but if you've ever applied for a government grant, you know what that's like. They just don't have the staff to process them any quicker." She peeled the Velcro and spandex weight away from his arm. "You up for a swim instead?"

"Are you trying to drown me?" he asked suspiciously.

Roz snorted. "Don't worry, I won't make you get out of the shallow end. I know you're most comfortable there."

"Hey!" Patrick said, affronted. "I am not shallow!"

"You're right," Roz agreed. "You are a slut, though."

"That's why you love me."

"You got it. So. Are you coming swimming, or what?"

"I didn't exactly come dressed for the occasion," Patrick pointed out. "And as much as I know you want to see me naked, I don't think I should be parading around in the altogether around the eight-to-ten-year-olds. Some of the parents might complain."

Roz grinned. "Some of them might," she said. "Luckily for you, one of us prepared for the occasion." She led him out of the back room and into her office again, and then pulled a bathing suit from the bottom drawer. "I figured you might need one. Your friend might have forgotten to pack you one all together."

"I'd hate to have to go skinny-dipping," Patrick lied with a leer. His arm was tired already, but he was never going to get anywhere if he didn't push his own limits. He'd learned that the last time he was shot. "You're the boss. Lead the way."

Patrick changed in the back room; then Roz handed him a towel, and he followed her downstairs to the basement, where the pools were. It smelled strongly of chlorine, and the echoes of the swimming instructor's voice from the lap pool reverberated off the tiled walls. There was a smaller, chest-deep pool for, he assumed, aquafitness and physical therapy, as well as a shallow kiddie pool and a large spa. He was definitely interested in checking that out later.

"I had no idea this place was so big," Patrick admitted, throwing the towel over the back of a chair. "I'm impressed."

"It's the only public pool for miles around," Roz told him, stripping off her own clothes to reveal a bright red one-piece bathing suit underneath. "It's good to have a monopoly." She gave him a gentle shove toward the edge of the pool. "Come on, water's warm, I promise."

"Hey, no pushing." They made faces at each other, and then Patrick slid into the water. It was warm, but still cool enough to be refreshing. "Does your kiddie swimming instructor always look at you like that? I've still got one good arm; I could punch him if you like."

"Patrick! No beating up my staff." Roz jumped in with a splash. "Besides, you'd likely just break your hand, and then where would you be? Pete's a very good teacher, and he's great with the kids,

but he is also very young.” She grinned. “He hasn't yet got the fine motor control to keep his eyes above the neck. And as long as it's me he's ogling and not one of the other employees, there won't be a problem.”

That seemed fair enough. Besides, it wasn't like Patrick could blame the guy for staring. He wasn't exactly well-known for being able to keep his eyes—or his hands—to himself. “Okay, so where do we start?”

The exercises were draining but surprisingly relaxing. It was good to see how great Roz was at her job and how much she obviously enjoyed it. By the time their hour was up, Patrick was sore—not just in the shoulder area, but a couple of other places too—and he wasn't making a big secret about it either.

“Oh, quit whining,” she finally snapped. “Patrick, honestly, I have eleven-year-old patients who complain less than you do.”

He pouted. He hadn't realized how much he'd been favoring the shoulder by punishing other parts of his body. The tension he'd been feeling for a month now was starting to ebb, though, more than making up for the rest of it. “But I feel like I've been hit by a truck,” he complained, wiping his face with the towel. He gave Roz a smile to show that there were no hard feelings. *This* was why he'd had to bring her flowers. And chocolate.

“You haven't been, have you?” Roz asked. “Because Julian would absolutely *flip*, and honestly, I think one freak-out per visit is enough.”

“Funny,” Patrick told her. He didn't laugh. He agreed with her on the one-freak-out quota, though. “I am old enough to know to look both ways before I cross the street.” He eyed the spa longingly. “Mind if I soak for a few?”

Roz shrugged. “Hey, my hot tub is your hot tub. Figuratively speaking. It'll be good for you. Just remember to keep hydrated. I've got to—”

Patrick remembered about her supervision duties just as she was approached by a little girl with twin brown pigtails and dark brown eyes. By that time, he was already waist-deep in blissfully hot water. “Hi, Miss Roz!”

Cute kid, Patrick thought, easing back against the wall. His shoulder was mostly above the waterline, but the jets felt great against his back.

“Hi, Hallie,” Roz said. “Did you have a good lesson?”

Hallie nodded. “We practiced *diving*,” she said proudly. “I'm going to be a diver when I grow up.” She looked at Patrick. “Miss Roz, is that your boyfriend?”

Roz covered a laugh—badly. “No, sweetie, I don't have a boyfriend. This is my friend Patrick. He's a police officer.”

Patrick waved hello with his good hand. “Nice to meet you, Hallie.”

The little girl walked over to shake his hand. Mercifully, she took the left one. “Officer Patrick, is there something wrong with your arm?”

Observant too. Roz shot him an unnecessary warning look. Patrick wasn't about to traumatize the kid with the whole sordid story. “Yes, there is. I hurt it while I was working. Miss Roz is helping me get better.”

"Miss Roz is good at everything," Hallie said matter-of-factly. "What's that?" She was pointing to one of his tattoos.

"That's my grandmother," Patrick told her. "I miss her very much."

"Is she an angel? She's very pretty."

Roz looked like she was ready to intervene and save Patrick from the sudden onslaught of personal questions, but Patrick shook his head minutely. "I like to think so," he said. "You're a very smart little girl. Has Miss Roz been teaching you how to ask the tough questions?"

"Oh, no," Roz protested. "That's all Hallie." It was easy to see why she was so popular with, well, everyone. "You'd better get rinsed off and changed, kiddo. Your ride will be here soon. Or he will be, if he knows what's good for him."

Hallie scampered off, and Roz was left with a few others casually observing the kids who'd already changed. Parents started dropping in one by one, and then in twos. Patrick ignored them almost subconsciously, lounging in the delicious hot water. When his eyelids started drooping, though, he pulled himself out of the tub and grabbed his towel. Time to head home—temporary home, anyway. Besides, he was starting to go pruny. Patrick dripped over to the men's dressing room to rinse off the chlorine.

The kids from the swimming lesson had all changed already, and the showers were screened off by curtains anyway, so he wouldn't be scandalizing anybody. Patrick peeled the swimming trunks off and tossed them into a corner. He let the lukewarm water rinse the chemicals away.

Damn, he was tired. He couldn't believe a little exercise had taken so much out of him. He was normally in great shape. Besides, he'd slept well the night before for the first time in a month. One would think he'd have a little more stamina than this.

Maybe he had been burning out, as Justine had feared. Nap time was looking better and better by the minute. Maybe he could con Roz into giving him a ride back to Julian's.

"Patrick?" Another man's voice echoed off the tile walls. "Are you in here?"

"Yeah," he called back, trying to scrub some of the chlorine from his hair. Damn, he was definitely bringing soap and shampoo next time. And a bigger towel.

There was a sloshy, suctiony-type sound. He assumed the other man had picked up his discarded bathing suit. "Are you naked?"

The tone was decidedly suspicious. Patrick grinned. "Depends! Who wants to know?"

"That means yes." He heard Jack sigh, followed by a wet, schlupping noise as the swimming trunks vacuum-sealed themselves back to the floor. "Roz sent me down with your clothes and sling."

"Thanks." Patrick shut the water off and wiped the stray droplets from his face with his good arm before pushing the flimsy shower curtain aside. "Pass me that towel, will you?"

Jack rolled his eyes, but handed the towel over.

Jack surprised him by seeming more interested in the tattoo on his arm than anything else. Most gay men who saw Patrick naked didn't check out the tattoo until much later. Then again, most gay

men who saw Patrick naked weren't in a committed relationship with his ex-boyfriend.

"How'd it go today?" Jack asked casually, sitting back on a bench.

Patrick shrugged, roughly drying his face and hair, and then wrapping the towel around his waist while he sorted out the rest of his clothes. "Don't know yet. Julian took some X-rays, which I'll find out about when I get home, and a blood sample to be cultured, which we won't find out about for a week or so, and changed my prescription. Roz put me to work moving my shoulder. It hurts."

"You don't say," Jack drawled. "Wonder why."

"Because she is a cruel, cruel woman who pushed me until I could be pushed no further?"

"Or it could be because you walked into a bullet," Jack said, annoyingly chipper. "Come on, hurry up, I have to have Hallie home in time for dinner."

Patrick looked up from stepping back into his jeans. "Pigtails? You know her?"

"I'm her ride. She's our neighbor," Jack explained. "Her parents split up when she was two, and her mother doesn't have visitation rights. She's her daddy's world, but in order to see her off to school in the mornings he has to work the day shift, so he doesn't get home until after five. I have to pass by this way most days, anyway." He shrugged, a sheepish smile on his face. "Besides, she's adorable."

"Can't argue there." Patrick pulled on his shirt, retrieved the towel and swimsuit, and headed for the door.

Roz and Hallie were the only two left in the pool room. "There you are," Roz said. "I was starting to worry."

Patrick and Jack rolled their eyes in tandem. "Got your backpack?" Jack asked Hallie.

She nodded and went to retrieve it from behind a chair. Jack looked at Patrick. "What about you, champ? You got everything?"

"Yeah." He saluted Roz with the bathing suit and towel.

"No," Roz corrected, handing Jack a printed sheet. "These are the exercises he's supposed to do. Don't feed him until he does them."

Patrick glowered.

Roz beamed, wrapping Jack in a hug and kissing his cheek. "Good boy. See you later!"

Hallie must have misinterpreted the expression on Patrick's face, because she said, in a very loud whisper, "Don't worry, Officer Patrick. They're not getting married."

Twitching, Patrick gave her a smile. "Well, that's a relief."

Roz hid a smirk and shooed them out the door.

"Race you to the truck!" Hallie challenged, which Patrick thought was a bit unfair, since he had no idea which one it was. He followed close on her heels the whole way. "I win!"

"You cheated."

"Children!" Jack interrupted, voice lacking in rancor. "Some of us have to be home in time for dinner, or we get very grouchy."

Hallie climbed up into the backseat, and Patrick walked around to the other side. The temperature had dropped a few degrees since his walk earlier. He was glad he had someone to give him a ride home.

Patrick was all set to lean back and close his eyes for the ride home when his phone started jingling in his pocket.

Jack looked over, eyebrows raised. "Is that what I think it is?"

"If you don't love Indiana Jones, I'm sorry, but we can't be friends." Patrick flicked the phone on. "Hawkins."

"Patrick?"

The voice was tentative. Now, who wouldn't be sure it was him when he answered? Ah. "Brad. I hope you have some good news for me."

"I guess that depends on whether you like food."

"I'm more interested in the company," Patrick said lightly, leaning back in his seat. "But, yeah. I like food. What did you have in mind?"

"Hey, you asked me. The details are up to you. I just called to say I'm available Thursday. Does that work for you?"

Patrick grinned. "Oddly enough, my schedule is clear on Thursday. Is this the best number to reach you?"

Brad rattled off his home number too, and Patrick dug a ballpoint pen from the armrest of Jack's truck and scribbled it on his hand. Jack was casting occasional glances over at him, clearly intrigued.

Patrick capped the pen. "Okay," he said, stashing the pen back in the armrest. "I'll call you with details tomorrow. Sound good?"

"Sure. Listen, I've got to go get ready for work." Brad paused, sounding nervous. "You could stop by if you like?"

That is kind of adorable, Patrick thought, smothering a yawn. "Sorry. That in no way reflects upon you. Roz worked me pretty hard in physio today. I can barely keep my eyes open. Rain check? I could stop by tomorrow."

"Tomorrow's my day off," Brad said. "That's all right. I'll see you Thursday."

"See you then." Patrick closed the phone—and his eyes.

In the backseat, Hallie was giggling. "What?" he asked, deadpan.

"Was that your girlfriend?"

Oh, boy. Patrick opened his eyes just enough to read Jack's expression. He was smirking. "I don't

have a girlfriend," he said.

"Oh." Hallie thought about that for a moment. "So it was your boyfriend?"

Jeez! Does this kid take after Roz, or what!? Patrick coughed. "Uh, no. Just a friend." He must be tired if a nine-year-old could surprise him like that.

"But you like boys, right?" she persisted.

Jack looked like he was about ready to explode any minute from holding in his laughter. *If he put her up to this, he is going to pay.* "Yes."

Weren't they home yet? The longer they were in the truck, the more potential there was for awkward questions from the G-rated peanut gallery. Talk about uncomfortable.

Luckily—or unluckily—Jack took over. "Who was it?"

"What?"

"Your not-boyfriend. Who else?"

Oh, boy. Here we go. "Brad."

"Brad who?"

Patrick shrugged. "I don't know. Your bartender."

Jack pulled into his driveway. "Wilde? Brad *Wilde*?"

"I guess."

Jack hopped out of the truck, shaking his head. Patrick followed him, curious. Was there something wrong with the guy or something? "You have a date with Bradley Wilde."

"Yes? Is there a problem? Oh, God, he's not Julian's ex-boyfriend or something, is he?" That would be just *perfect*. Typical Patrick move. He should've done an ex-lover clearance first. *Crap.*

Jack snorted. "No. I just thought he was straight."

"Seriously?" Patrick blinked, and then grinned. "Oh, well. Not for long, if I have anything to say about it." He helped Hallie down from the cab. "There you are, little lady."

"Thank you, Officer Patrick." She waved good-bye and then hoisted her backpack and crossed the street into her father's waiting arms.

Patrick and Jack both waved and then made their way into the house.

Damn. Julian must have been home for a while already, because delicious aromas were floating around the kitchen like nobody's business. He'd forgotten what it was like to come home to Julian in his kitchen.

"We're back," Jack called, toeing off his shoes. He inhaled deeply. "That smells fantastic."

Julian wandered in, hair sticking up in funny places, a ratty old T-shirt clinging to his chest for dear life. He looked good enough to eat. "Veal Parmesan," he said easily.

"Yum." Apparently Jack agreed with Patrick, because while Patrick was busy trying to wiggle out of his shoes, Jack scooped Julian up in a kiss that was nowhere near G-rated.

By the time he finally managed to free himself and stand up straight again, both Jack and Julian were done groping each other and were looking at him. "What?"

Julian stepped forward and grabbed a fistful of Patrick's T-shirt, reaching up to cover his mouth in a very hot, Parmesan-flavored kiss. "Mmph!" Patrick managed. Then, figuring he might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb, he leaned into it, letting Julian explore his mouth with his tongue.

After a few seconds, the other man backed away, smirking just slightly. Under that, though, there was a definite warning. Jack was watching them both, a mild expression on his face, but his eyes were dark. "If you're quite finished? I think the noodles are done."

Okay, Patrick thought, shivering a little. That kiss had been the exact reverse of the kiss he'd laid on Julian at the office. The message was clear: there were no secrets in this house. At least not between Jack and Julian. "Great," he said, "I'm starving."

He brushed past Jack on the way to the kitchen, shivering again. He couldn't help but wonder how much longer they could all keep this up before the tension exploded—and when it did, there was no telling what might happen.

* * * *

Julian smiled as Jack came back from the attached bathroom with a warm, damp cloth in his hand. He gave a soft moan as his lover wiped him clean. He was floating on a post-orgasmic high. The kiss that he had given Patrick in the hallway had made Jack quite vigorous in the bedroom. Julian was starting to think he would have to kiss Patrick more often if this was going to be the result. He felt absolutely relaxed and boneless.

"Well, you look happy." Jack smiled at him as he crawled back into the bed.

"I am happy." Julian ran his hand along Jack's cheek with a slow smile. He pulled his lover close and gave him a soft kiss. He was about to roll himself into Jack's arms when he realized that Jack was leaning over the edge of the bed. "Um, what are you doing?"

"Something fell on the floor when I tossed you on the bed. I just wanted to see what it was." Julian goosed him as he leaned over the edge of the large bed. Jack growled but continued with his search for the elusive object. After a few moments of reaching, he crawled back onto the bed with an envelope in his hand. "Hey, it has your name on it."

"Thanks." Julian took the envelope from his lover's hand. He recognized Patrick's rather elegant scrawl. Patrick had fairly decent handwriting for a man. Frowning in suspicion, Julian tore open the envelope and started to read. As he read the letter, he could feel all of the blood rush from his face.

"Julian, is something wrong?" The concern was thick in Jack's voice, but Julian didn't hear it. He was entirely focused on the letter. Reading the last paragraph, Julian tossed the letter at Jack and jumped out of the bed. "Julian, what's going on?"

Julian grabbed a pair of pajama bottoms with shaking hands and pulled them on. He knew that Jack was talking to him, but he couldn't make himself hear the words. He needed to see Patrick. He needed to know that he was all right. A spinal injury. Patrick had had a spinal injury and kept it from him. He practically fell down the stairs as he raced to the guest room.

Finally reaching his destination, Julian flung open the door and flipped on the lights. Patrick's bare

chest was visible above the sheets that had pooled around his waist. He twitched as the lights finally penetrated the sleep that must have been clouding his mind. The light glinted off the silver ring through his right nipple. The wound on his shoulder was very red against the white sheets of the bed. Julian walked over and poked the red area.

"Ow!" Patrick sat up fast enough that he nearly knocked Julian over. "What the fuck, Ace?"

"Show me." Julian's hands were shaking as he pulled the covers away and tried to turn Patrick onto his stomach so he could look at his back.

"What?" Patrick was groggily rubbing at his eyes.

"Show me the scar from where you got shot. Damn it, Patrick, just roll the fuck over."

Grumbling under his breath, Patrick rolled over. Julian finished pushing down the covers, revealing the blue and white striped pajama bottoms Patrick was wearing. He found the scar right away. There was a date under it just like the one on his shoulder. Julian traced the scar with trembling fingers. Even though Patrick was lying in front of him warm, alive, and capable of walking, he couldn't stop the shaking. The scar told him that Patrick could easily have died, and no one had told him. Patrick had almost *died*, and no one had told him.

The anger started to chase away the edge of the fear.

"How dare you!" Julian hit Patrick hard enough that the other man actually flinched. "How dare you get hurt like this!"

The logical part of his brain told Julian that he was overreacting and only succeeding in hurting the other man, but he couldn't stop himself. He kept hitting Patrick while tears made of fear, anger, and a faint hint of panic started to form in his eyes. Strong arms grabbed him and pulled him against the tattooed chest. He tried to keep hitting him, but his arms were effectively trapped.

"Ace, baby, calm down."

"Don't you dare tell me to calm down, Patrick. I'm mad at you."

"I know you are, but you're hurting me."

Julian struggled in Patrick's arms. "How can I be hurting you? I can barely move."

"You think this is easy on my shoulder?"

Julian could feel the strain in Patrick's injured shoulder, mostly because his face was pressed against it. He could feel the muscle twitching against his cheek. Julian continued to feebly attempt to pull away, but the arms simply tightened around him. He had forgotten how strong Patrick was. "Let me go."

"If I let you go, will you stop hitting me?"

"Yes."

"Promise?"

Damn it all to hell. "Yes."

"Okay. I'm going to let you go now."

Julian felt the arms around him loosen, but they didn't pull completely away. The tattooed arms settled at his waist, holding him loosely. Julian pulled back so he could look Patrick in the eyes. The green eyes stared back at him. He raised a hand to Patrick's cheek. "You got shot in the spine."

"I did."

"You didn't tell me."

"I don't tell you everything, Ace."

Julian glared as Patrick flicked his nose. "This was different. You got shot in the back. Now let me see the others."

"What?"

"The other scars."

"What other scars?"

"Shut the fuck up and lie down." Julian pushed against Patrick's chest until the other man fell back on the bed. Patrick tucked his left arm under his head and looked up at Julian with an amused expression on his face. "Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Looking so damn smug. You don't get to look smug until I say so." Julian glared, but the amused expression didn't leave Patrick's face. He gave Patrick a sharp jab in the side; a satisfied smile crossed his face as Patrick let out a yelp. Making sure that Patrick wasn't going to move, Julian turned his attention to the muscled body.

Julian ran his fingers over the tattoos of the Japanese symbols for Health and Strength above Patrick's heart. He let a trembling finger trace the small, very faint scar on Patrick's collarbone. It wasn't one that he recognized. Arching a brow, he looked at Patrick expectantly.

"Tonka truck."

"What?"

"Daniel, Justine's son, tossed a Tonka truck at my head when he was two."

"How did a two-year-old give you a scar?"

"We'd just finished playing in the sprinkler on the lawn, so I didn't have a shirt on and apparently the toy had a sharp edge."

Julian shook his head with a laugh. "Only you could get a scar from a two-year-old."

"I'm special."

Julian snorted as he continued his exploration of Patrick's chest. He gave the pierced nipple a flick as he went on his way, enjoying the slight gasp that provided. Julian had many good memories of nights spent playing with that ring. His fingers moved to the jagged scar that covered the right side of Patrick's ribs. He splayed his hand across it and gripped slightly.

"Hey, I've had that one since I was fifteen. You can't get mad at me for that one. You've seen it before."

"I still can't believe your father did that to you."

"People are not made to go through windows." Patrick placed his hand over Julian's. "My father is an ass, Ace. I'm okay."

"I know." Julian noticed a line on Patrick's bad arm and turned it gently. Patrick winced at the movement, but Julian got a good look at the scar that ran in a line across his forearm. "Where did you get this one?"

"Uh, convenience-store robbery. I was trying to get a knife away from the suspect and he got me across the arm with it."

"You should be more careful."

"I am careful, Ace."

"You've been shot twice."

"Stop dwelling."

"You got shot in the back. You had a spinal injury that your doctor apparently couldn't diagnose properly." Julian placed both of his hands on Patrick's chest. "We should get you an MRI."

"I can't get an MRI, Ace. I have a pin in my left leg."

"What?!"

"Julian, stop yelling at me. You know that I have a pin in my leg; you're the one who put it there. Now, have you calmed down enough to go back to that man of yours and get some sleep?"

"You're not hiding anything else from me?"

"Nothing serious. I might have a few scars on my legs, but I think most of them are from the motorcycle accident that got me the pin in my leg."

"You can't hide shit from me anymore, Patrick."

"I won't, Ace. I promise." Patrick grabbed one of his hands and placed a kiss on the palm. "Now go back to your man. I'll be fine."

"Okay." Julian leaned forward and brushed a kiss across Patrick's forehead, then rose from the bed. He turned off the lights on his way out. When he pulled the door closed behind him, he ran into the solid form of his lover. "How long have you been out here?"

"Since you took off." A sheepish look crossed Jack's face. "I read the letter."

"That's okay. I'm glad that you're here." Julian curled himself into Jack's arms. He needed the comfort. He could still feel tremors in his arms.

"He going to be okay?"

"He's going to be fine. He's always fine. I really should learn not to worry so much." Julian pulled

out of the hug and linked his fingers with Jack's. He started walking toward the bedroom, tugging his lover along behind him.

"You worry because you care."

"I know. Come on, I need you to hold me." Julian dragged Jack upstairs and tried to banish images of a blood-soaked Patrick from his mind.

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Chapter Six

Julian shucked off his towel lazily, sweat still dripping from the ends of his hair, and pulled on a pair of boxers from his hockey bag. Not a bad turnout tonight—twenty guys, meaning everyone was pretty tired and sore from a lot of ice time. *Maybe we should get a hot tub*, he mused, wincing as he bent over to find his sweatpants. He could think of a lot of fun things to do in a hot tub.

He finished dressing and leaned back against the wall with his eyes closed, sipping his beer, until he heard Jack sit down beside him. "What do you think?" he said neutrally.

"He's off his game," Jack answered easily. "Scattered. He didn't even see you coming when you checked him."

"Huh." Julian took another sip of beer. "Never would have guessed in a million years."

"Me neither. Think he has any idea what he's getting into?"

Snorting, Julian finished the beer, opening his eyes again. He started to pack things back into the bag. "I know he doesn't."

Jack raised an eyebrow. "Really."

"This is Patrick we're talking about," Julian said, quietly enough that Brad, across the way, wouldn't be able to hear him. "Nobody knows what they're getting into." Including himself, apparently. Shot in the fucking spine! Julian was so not over that. "Think we should warn him?"

Jack considered, snapping on his skate guards and fitting his size fourteens into his hockey bag. "Probably. Both of them, really. Patrick can come on a little strong."

Julian gave him a small smile. "You don't say?" He collected their empty beer bottles and slotted them into the case.

"Trust me on this."

Julian cocked his head to one side, curious. "All right. So you think we should have a little chat with our friend?"

"I think some advice wouldn't go amiss."

"Good word," Julian said absently. The other hockey players were starting to file out the door,

calling out good-byes as they did so. "Let's meet him outside. We don't want to keep Marianne out all night."

Jack nodded, and together they grabbed their bags and headed toward the truck, waving good-bye at the night manager as they went. The complex was open round the clock on weekends, but they lived in a small town, and there wasn't enough demand to warrant hours past ten thirty during the week.

Jack threw the hockey bags in the back of the truck. Julian kept an eye on the door, making sure they wouldn't miss their friend.

"If Patrick finds out we did this...."

"What he doesn't know won't hurt him." Patrick wasn't the only one who could keep a secret. "Besides, we can't just throw Brad to the wolves. Figuratively speaking." Poor Brad wouldn't know what hit him otherwise. "Hey, Wilde! We need a word with you!"

Brad waved good-bye to Tommy and Marianne at the doors and dropped his bag at his car on the way over. "Hey, guys." He seemed a little hesitant. "What's up?"

Jack put the tailgate on the truck down. "Have a seat."

"Why do I feel like I'm fourteen years old right now?" Brad wondered aloud, doing as he was told.

Julian smirked and hopped up next to him. "So," he said casually, "what are your intentions towards Patrick?" He'd sort of always wanted to say that.

Brad squirmed. "This isn't funny."

"It kind of is," Jack opined.

Julian quelled him with a look. Brad's discomfort resonated. Here was a twenty-something-year-old man sitting on his hands because he was probably afraid he'd fidget otherwise. "Shut up a minute. I think he's right. This is not a joke. Brad, if you're not serious about this, you'd better speak up now, because Patrick's not going to mess around. Uh." *Okay, that could be taken in two ways, and one of them is a lie* . "You know what I mean. Until yesterday, as far as the town was concerned, you were straight. Tomorrow? You're not going to be able to hide it, so if you're not serious, you need to back out. Now."

Jack and Brad turned curious gazes on him. Julian sighed and flopped backward into the bed of the truck. "Okay, here's the deal. Patrick came out at fifteen. His parents did not take it well." He sighed. This was not going to be easy for Brad. Hell, it wasn't a picnic for Julian, either. "*Bydidn't take it well*, what I mean is his father threw him through a window."

"Shit." That was Jack, white-faced in the darkness.

Brad was quiet. "Yeah, he mentioned that. Twenty-seven stitches, right?"

"Hell of a scar," Jack muttered.

"Noticed, did you?" Julian asked dryly. Patrick was making a habit of failing to wear his shirt around the house. Not that anyone was complaining. "I'm not trying to talk you out of anything, Brad. I just don't want you going into this with your eyes closed. Patrick doesn't keep secrets. Not about his sexuality and not about yours."

Shifting off his hands a little, Brad shrugged. "I don't have a problem with that. I don't care about labels." He paused, considering. "Unless they're on alcohol."

Julian barely managed to resist the urge to groan aloud.

"What Julian is trying to say," Jack interrupted smoothly, "is that after tomorrow, there will be no going back into the closet. And if even we didn't know you were in it, you can bet that people are going to be pretty surprised."

Brad was apparently finding it difficult to take this conversation sitting down. He hopped down from the tailgate again and paced around the parking lot a little, both hands twisting in his short, blond hair. Julian could definitely see how Patrick had been attracted. Not to mention the fact that Patrick was a bit of a slut.

"This isn't exactly the first time I've been attracted to a guy." He stopped fidgeting and leaned against the lamppost, staring up at the sky. "It's just the first time I've acted on it."

"Yeah, well," Julian muttered under his breath. "Once you get to know Patrick better, you're gonna want to act on it a lot more often."

Jack snickered. Brad flushed under the glow of the street lamp. "It's just one date," he protested.

"It's the rest of your life, and this is a small town in a conservative province," Jack said. "If this is what you want and who you are, then go for it. Just don't expect nothing to change." He paused. "Are you nervous yet?"

"Are you kidding? I've been tying myself in knots since yesterday."

"That's kind of adorable," Julian observed with a small smile. "Patrick's a good guy. Just be straight with him."

Both Brad and Jack fixed him with knowing looks.

"I mean *honest*," Julian corrected himself with an eye roll. "For God's sake. Why is this actually *more* difficult than the teenagers who keep coming into my office asking for sex tips?"

"Oh, God," Brad said very quietly, sliding down the lamppost.

Jack nudged Julian's shoulder. "Way to go, Jitterbug. I think you broke him."

"This is not going well," Julian agreed. They should probably have just given him a copy of the gay *Kama Sutra* and run away. "That figures. Sex is probably the one thing *hedoesn't* have to worry about."

Jack chuckled, sliding his arm around Julian's waist, and lowered his voice. "We could distract him."

Julian's body reacted as Jack slid behind him, tucking his hands into the pockets of Julian's suddenly tight jeans. His fingers teased the flesh at the tops of Julian's thighs. "What sort of distraction did you have in mind?" he asked. His voice sounded strained to his own ears. Jack's erection was pressed firmly up against his ass.

Jack's fingers traced ever-widening circles in his pockets. His stubble rubbed—very distractingly—across Julian's neck. "I'm sure you'll come up with something."

Julian swallowed hard, breathing heavily as blood rushed southward, filling his erection. Poor Brad looked like he couldn't decide if he wanted to be somewhere else or stay exactly where he was. Julian could sympathize. On the one hand, he couldn't discount the exhibitionist factor. On the other hand, he wanted to be naked in their bedroom about five minutes ago.

Jack finally quit teasing and pressed both hands firmly along Julian's cock, framing it in the tight jeans. Gasping, Julian let his head fall backward against Jack's chest, hips thrusting up instinctively into the touch.

"Jesus." Brad finally panicked enough to move, picking himself up off the ground rather stiffly. He walked to his car without looking back, started the engine, and then drove off at a speed that would have been frowned upon by local law enforcement officials.

"Thought he'd never leave," Jack murmured, fingers migrating to the fly of Julian's Levis. He popped the button and drew the zipper down slowly.

Julian panted as Jack reached into his boxers and drew out his prick, running a thumb over the pre-come gathering at the head. "Jack—oh, fuck—" He bit his lip as Jack began stroking him slowly but firmly, left hand tight against Julian's belly.

"You're so hot like this," Jack said, his voice low, closing his teeth gently over Julian's carotid artery. "Needy." Stroke. "Desperate."

Julian was lost for words or coherent thought as Jack played his body. Jack's left hand traced a line across his belly and downwards, cupping Julian's balls roughly through the denim.

Julian's knees gave a little. Jack splayed his legs wider to support their combined weight, tightening his grip just enough as he added a twist to the end of his upstroke. "Julian."

That tone of voice, so low and close to his ear, did it for him every time. Julian inhaled sharply as his vision went white around the edges. Jack's left hand covered his mouth as he came, stifling the sob threatening to escape. His legs went numb and he sagged against Jack's body, breathing hard. "You and your parking-lot-sex thing."

Jack grabbed him by the belt loops and rubbed his groin against Julian's ass. "I'm pretty sure you started it the first time. Now it's just learned behavior."

"Don't go all Psych 101 with me," Julian said sedately, somehow mustering the energy to do up his pants. "I'll win. Oh, look. Brad left his hockey bag."

"Think he was in a bit of a hurry," Jack snickered.

"We probably scarred him for life," Julian pointed out. He retrieved the bag and set it alongside the other two in the back of the pickup.

Jack's expression made it clear that he, personally, thought Brad had more than likely just pulled over to masturbate, a possibility Julian wasn't discounting. "Scarred. Sure."

Julian let himself be reeled in again, smiling contentedly against Jack's mouth. Life was pretty good.

"Let's go home," Jack said after another few minutes of intense kisses. "I want to fuck you on the balcony."

Scratch that, Julian thought, prick twitching in renewed interest. Life was *great*.

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Chapter Seven

Patrick checked his reflection in the mirror one last time. Due to the exercises that Roz had him doing, he was collapsing into sleep every night, which had finally removed the dark circles from underneath his eyes. He hadn't realized how bad the circles had been until they started to disappear. Patrick was starting to think that Cam had been right to send him here. He really did need to relax. Hopefully, Brad would be willing to help him with that.

Patrick had managed to get the blue T-shirt on without too much trouble. While his shoulder was still sore, he could at least move his arm without screaming in agony. The faded jeans he was wearing were his favorite pair, and he had received several comments on how great his ass looked in them. Grabbing his leather jacket, Patrick gave Robot a scratch behind the ears and headed out the door, making sure to lock it behind him.

Thankfully, Julian had hitched a ride to work with Jack and had left him the truck. It would have been bad form to call Brad and ask him to come and pick him up. Putting the truck in gear, which caused a slight twinge in his shoulder, Patrick headed out on his way to Brad's. He had memorized the directions, but he had a GPS on his cell phone, just in case. While getting lost in a vehicle on a date sounded romantic, Patrick didn't want to get eaten by bears. Or whatever else was roaming around in rural Alberta.

After a rather short trip, Patrick pulled into the drive of the charming little house Brad lived in. He put the truck in park and admired the house. It was a nice house with a well-tended yard and neatly trimmed gardens. Either Brad liked plants or he had a service come and take care of the flowers. Turning the truck off, Patrick slowly climbed out. While he was feeling better, the last thing he wanted to do was jar his shoulder and be in pain for the date.

He was halfway to the door when Brad stepped out of the house. *Aw, he was waiting. Cute.* Patrick gave him a once over. *Nice.*

A pair of faded jeans encased Brad's hips in a way that made it seem like they were molded to his body. Patrick couldn't wait to see them from behind, so he could see how they hugged his ass. He hadn't had a chance to get a good look at the blond man's ass yet. The mentioned blond hair was neatly combed, but the minute Brad's eyes landed on Patrick, he nervously ran a hand through it, giving it a mussed look that Patrick liked quite a bit. A dark green T-shirt was visible under the jean jacket he was wearing. Patrick thought he looked good enough to eat.

"Got something for you in the truck, but you're going to have to get it because I'm not allowed to lift it," Patrick stated. When Brad gave him a confused look, he waved at the truck and smiled. He liked confused. Confused looked good on him.

Brad walked past him to get to the truck. Patrick turned to watch as he walked. *Nice ass. Yum.*

"You brought me my hockey bag."

"Julian said that you forgot it." Patrick moved over and leaned on the truck next to Brad. "You know, it's kind of strange that you forgot your hockey bag. I thought that was something that most

hockey players would try to remember."

A blush crept up Brad's neck. "I was distracted."

"In the parking lot?"

The blush got worse. "Do you think that we could just say that I'm forgetful and leave it at that?"

"Sure," Patrick replied, even though he was more curious than ever. He gave the other man a bright smile and settled himself against the car. "Why don't you go and take the bag inside? I'll wait right here."

"Thanks." Brad smiled shyly and then hurried into the house with the bag in his hand. Watching him run into the house, Patrick got another chance to ogle his ass. The man did fill out a pair of jeans quite nicely. It looked so tempting, Patrick wanted to follow him into the house and toss him across the nearest horizontal surface. Fortunately, contrary to popular belief, he did have some self-control. Brad deserved more than that.

When Brad came back out, Patrick noticed that his hands were shaking slightly. It seemed as though the bartender was nervous. The thought made Patrick smile. "If we go for food now, you won't be able to eat anything because of how nervous you are, right?"

"That about covers it."

"Okay, we'll do the fun part first." Patrick watched as the flush crept back into Brad's cheeks. He raised an eyebrow at the other man. "Do I want to know what it is that you're thinking?"

"Probably not," Brad responded. He walked close enough to touch and stood looking nervously at Patrick.

Reaching out his left hand, Patrick gently cupped his cheek. "Brad, if you don't want to do this, we don't have to. I can honestly say that I would be sad if you didn't want to. I'd like to spend time with you, but I'm not going to force you into anything."

"I want to go." Brad leaned into the touch with a smile. "I just can't figure out what you could have found around here that would be considered fun."

"Trust me, it'll be fun." Patrick gave the captured cheek a quick caress and then turned and carefully climbed back into the truck. Brad was already sitting with his seat belt on by the time he got in and got the door closed. "Sorry, I'm moving a little slow."

"Shouldn't you be wearing the sling that you had on the other day?"

"Most likely. Promise not to tell Roz?"

"Hey, if she asks, I'm not lying. She's scary."

Patrick sighed. "No one ever takes my side." He backed the truck out of the driveway and started to head to the mystery destination. "So, are you a career bartender or is it just your night job?"

"Just my night job. I'm a web designer."

"Okay, those are two very different things. So, which one is easier?"

"Web designing."

"Really? I would have guessed bartending."

"Web pages don't yell at me." Brad shifted in the seat so he was facing Patrick instead of the front window. "What about you? Do you like being a cop?"

"When I'm not getting shot," Patrick joked. He tossed a glance at Brad and smiled to ease the tension he saw. Brad was looking at his injured shoulder. "In all seriousness, I love my job. I like helping people."

They drove in silence for a few moments until Brad noticed that they were headed in the opposite direction of town. "Um, where are you taking me?"

"Don't like surprises?"

"I'm in a truck with a strange man. I'm not sure I'm up for surprises."

"Don't worry, I'm not that strange." Patrick grinned at him and continued to drive. "You know, I actually had to do research for this date."

"Why? Did you forget how to be a gentleman?"

When Patrick glanced over, he saw the teasing glint in Brad's eyes. He let a rather wicked smile cross his face. "I never learned." His smile widened when Brad laughed. "What I meant was that I've never taken someone out on a date when I wasn't on home turf."

"So this is new for you?"

"I love learning new things." Spotting the road that he needed, Patrick made the turn, ignoring the pull in his sore muscles. A strong hand landed on his shoulder and gently rubbed the area until some of the tension eased. Patrick practically purred into the comforting contact. "That feels amazing."

"I'm not hurting you?"

"No, you'd have to move your hand a bit lower on my shoulder to actually hurt me."

"I'll keep that in mind." The tone in Brad's voice and the feeling of his fingers trailing across his arm made Patrick shiver. When he felt Brad's hand settle on his thigh instead of making its way back to the other side of the car, he smiled. Brad was finally starting to relax.

They drove along in silence, but it wasn't one that was strained. Brad seemed to be looking at the scenery, and every once in a while the hand on Patrick's thigh would stroke him absently. Patrick was having a hard time not pulling over and jumping the man sitting next to him. The only thing that kept him from stopping the car and doing just that was the knowledge that Brad didn't even seem to realize that he was doing it. Finally pulling into the parking lot of their destination, Patrick turned off the engine.

"You brought me to paintball?" Brad was looking from the sign to Patrick with a confused look on his face.

"Where did you think that we were going to go?"

"I honestly had no idea."

"I like being full of surprises. Makes life interesting." Patrick grinned and climbed out of the truck.

He was feeling so happy with how things were progressing that he wasn't paying attention when he climbed out. He banged his shoulder against the door as he closed it. He just managed to keep from screaming.

"Shit! Are you okay?" Brad was instantly at his side, giving him a strong frame to lean against while he rode out the last waves of pain. "Patrick? You okay?"

"I need to not hit myself with doors, but other than that, I'm just fine." Patrick pulled back and lifted his hand to trace his fingers along Brad's cheek. "Thanks for worrying."

"It wasn't a problem."

"Come on, let's go." Patrick pushed himself away from the truck and grabbed Brad's hand. When Brad linked their fingers together, Patrick gave him a tug and propelled them toward the entrance. Ten minutes later they were wearing coveralls and safety goggles, holding bags full of paint-filled balloons, and standing in the middle of the paintball field. Patrick flashed Brad a grin. "I'll give you a two-minute head start."

Brad grinned at him and then took off into the field, disappearing behind a large stack of straw bales. Patrick counted off two minutes in his head. His watch was underneath the coveralls and he didn't feel like attempting to pull it out. When he reached one hundred and twenty, he set off after Brad. Twenty minutes later, they had empty bags, were covered in paint, and were laughing. All the tension that had filled Brad earlier in the day seemed to be gone, and the smile on Brad's face caused an immediate spark of arousal in Patrick. He wanted to lick that face.

Coveralls back with the manager and cleaned up as well as possible, they headed back to the car. Brad's fingers linked with the fingers of his left hand, and Patrick gave them a squeeze. He tugged Brad to his side and wrapped his arm around the other man's trim waist. When they reached the truck, Patrick opened the door and held it open for Brad. Brad gave him a sweet smile and pulled his door closed.

Patrick climbed into the driver's side and turned to look at Brad. He had streaks of red, green, and blue paint in his hair, and his cheeks were flushed with excitement. He turned to face Patrick and grinned. "So, now where are you taking me?"

"Not telling." Patrick put the truck in gear and started to drive. Once he hit the street, Brad's hand landed on his thigh once again. The simple touch sent pleasure zinging through his body. After a shorter drive than the one that took them to the paintball place, Patrick pulled them into the parking lot of a diner.

"You brought me to *Debbie's*?" There was amusement in Brad's voice.

"Been here before?"

"I come here all of the time. Debbie makes the best onion rings."

Patrick smiled. "Yeah, I know. Her mom taught her."

"You know Debbie?"

"We grew up together. Her mom owns the best diner in town." Patrick turned in the car so he was facing Brad. He reached out and tugged at a strand of green hair. "You look like you had an accident in art class."

"So do you."

"I like the messy look on you," Patrick replied. He leaned in and pressed a gentle kiss to Brad's lips. His fingers threaded into Brad's hair as the kiss deepened slightly. He pulled away before things got too intense. "Come on; let's go get something to eat."

Patrick exited the truck much more carefully this time. He managed to get out without banging the door against his bad shoulder. When Brad slid an arm around his waist, Patrick smiled and pulled him closer. They entered the diner like that.

Once inside, Patrick found himself in almost an exact replica of *Maude's*. It reminded him of being at home. A woman who appeared to be about his age looked up as they walked in. A smile crossed her attractive face as she spotted Brad. "Hey, Brad. Back already?"

"Can't keep me away. Plus, this time I have company."

"I can see that." Her eyes moved to Patrick and widened in pleased surprise. "Holy shit, is that Patrick Hawkins?"

"Hey, Deb, what's going on?"

"You get that lanky ass over here and give me a hug!" Deb dashed around the counter and pulled Patrick into a hug. He tried not to wince as she pulled on his shoulder. "What are you doing here?"

"Taking Brad out for lunch." Patrick pulled out of the hug and fought the urge to pull his right arm against his chest. The paintball hadn't bothered him that much, since he had mainly used his left hand, but having his shoulder squeezed after he had hit it with a car door was starting to make the pain mount.

"I guessed as much. I meant, what are you doing in Alberta?"

"I'm staying with Julian while I recuperate from an injury. My boss figured that I needed to be away from home if I was actually going to get any healing done."

"You're staying with Julian?"

"Yes."

"Julian Piet?"

"Yes."

"You mean to tell me that he's moved back here and hasn't come to see me?" Debbie had her angry look on. The last time Patrick had seen that look, Debbie had punched a guy who had been grabbing her ass without permission. "You tell him if he doesn't come out here to see me, *I will* show up on his door."

"I'll do that. Can we sit down and order some food now?"

"You can sit down, and I'll bring you your food."

"But we haven't ordered."

"Honey, Brad eats here once a week and always gets the same thing, and I'm sure that I still know what you like, so sit your ass down, and I'll bring your food out in a bit."

Patrick gave her a mocking salute, grabbed Brad's hand, and marched over to one of the booths. He released Brad's hand when he had to slide in. Once seated, he looked into Brad's blue eyes and smiled. Brad seemed happy and relaxed, and that made his day. It was nice to know that he could still pull off the date thing. It had been a while since he had been on one. "If I ask you a question, will you give me an honest answer?"

"Sure." Brad took Patrick's hand and linked their fingers again as he waited for the question.

"Are you having a good time?"

"I'm having a great time. This is the most fun I've ever had on a date."

"Good. I was worried that you wouldn't have a good time," Patrick admitted. Tugging on Brad's hand, he pulled the younger man across the table. He kissed Brad, running his tongue over his lips in a teasing manner until Brad opened for him. After a brief dip inside, he pulled back. "Mmm, you taste good."

Brad turned red and bashfully looked at the table. He was given time to recover by the arrival of their food. Debbie placed a cheeseburger in front of Brad, a cheeseburger with bacon in front of Patrick, and a large plate of onion rings between them. "Eat up, boys."

Smiling their thanks, they gave their attention to their food. Patrick moaned as he bit into the burger. *Damn, does Debbie ever make a good burger*. The burger was juicy and the bacon was perfect. After eating his first bite, he picked up the glass of lemonade that he hadn't even noticed Debbie putting on the table. Brad seemed as intent on his meal as he was, so they didn't have much of a conversation while they ate.

When he felt a foot graze him, Patrick looked up. Brad smiled at him over the rim of his glass and did it again. Grinning, Patrick changed the angle of his foot so it was rubbing against Brad's. They continued to polish off their burgers and the plate of onion rings, playing footsie the entire time. By the time they were done with the food, Patrick was running his foot up and down Brad's calf, and Brad seemed to be trying to keep his breathing under control.

"You boys get enough food?" Debbie was holding their empty plates in her hands.

"The food was great, and we're stuffed."

"Good. I'll meet you at the counter." Debbie walked off with a smile and a skip in her step. She had always been a rather cheerful person.

"Ready for me to take you home?"

Brad gave him a small smile as he nudged his foot once more. "No, but if you don't, I won't have time to get ready for work."

"Well, I don't want you to be late." Patrick slid out from behind his side of the booth and into Brad's side. Looking around the diner to make sure that they wouldn't draw too much attention—this was a small-town diner, after all—Patrick looped his arm around Brad and pulled him close.

He let his mouth descend with a bit more force than he had before. Brad opened to the assault instantly, and Patrick thrust his tongue inside. He twined it with Brad's and sucked, pulling a moan from the younger man. A hand landed in his hair as Brad's tongue met his in a rather active dance. Running his tongue over the roof of Brad's mouth, a move that had the other man trembling in his arms, Patrick pulled away. He smiled into Brad's dazed eyes as he tried to regain control of his

raging libido. "Let's go."

Debbie was waiting with their bill when they made it to the counter. She had an indulgent smile on her face as Patrick paid for their lunch. When she handed him a pie box, he looked at her in confusion. "That is for Julian."

"You're sending Julian a pie?"

"It's apple crumble, his favorite. Give that to him and tell him to come see me."

"Will do. It was good to see you, Debbie."

"You too, Patrick. Take care of yourself."

"I'll try." With a final wave, they made it out of the diner. Once outside, Brad took the pie from Patrick so he wouldn't have to carry it with his bad arm. Patrick smiled his thanks, then held the door of the truck open so Brad could climb in with the pie.

The drive back was silent. Patrick was thrilled with how well the date had gone and even more so with the fact that Brad's hand was once again on his thigh. He loved it when Brad touched him. The joy over how well the date had gone still wasn't enough to stop the disappointment when he pulled into Brad's driveway. He didn't want Brad to leave.

"I had a good time," Brad stated, putting the pie box on the dash and undoing his seat belt. "This was really fun."

Patrick was about to respond when he suddenly found himself with an armful of web designer. This was the first kiss that Brad had initiated, and Patrick surrendered willingly. Brad's tongue forced its way into his mouth and his hands ran over Patrick's T-shirt clad chest. When Brad's fingers brushed the nipple with the piercing, Patrick groaned and nearly hauled Brad into his lap. By the time Brad released him from the kiss, his head was spinning and his erection was trying to drill through his jeans.

"I want to invite you in, but I'm not ready." Brad's words were panted against his neck.

Patrick ran his hand up and down Brad's back. "I know. It's okay, baby, I'm not going to push. Plus, it is only our first date."

"True." Brad pulled away with a smile. "I guess the next one is up to me."

"That it is. Give me a call."

"I will." After one more ravenous kiss, Brad got out of the truck and headed into his house.

Patrick watched his ass the entire time. Once Brad was safely inside and waving good-bye, Patrick put the pie on the seat and started to drive. He was headed for the shower when he got back to the house. Patrick shifted uncomfortably as his erection continued to throb behind his jeans. A very long shower.

* * * *

Brad was staring at his fireplace. There wasn't a fire in it; it was still too warm for that. It just happened to be the only thing directly in front of him where he was sitting. Sitting and staring. Sitting and staring and thinking. In the exact same place he had been sitting since after breakfast.

He glanced down at his watch. It was after two. No wonder he was hungry. He had missed lunch.

He really needed someone to talk to. Brad was sure there was a rule somewhere that said best friends weren't allowed to be out of town when you were having a sexuality crisis. Stupid Graham.

Graham, his best friend since they were five, was staying with their mutual friend Cooper for at least the next month. Cooper's family owned a ranch and, on top of losing one of their ranch hands to a ballet company, Cooper's father had broken his leg. Graham was helping out until they could get things back under control, which was nice, but it meant he wasn't there for Brad to talk to.

Fuck it, I'm just going to call him. Brad grabbed the phone and dialed Graham's cell phone. He stood and started to pace while the phone rang.

"Hello?"

"Graham?"

"Brad? Hey, it's great to hear from you. You won't believe some of the stories I have." The sound of Graham sitting down could be heard over the phone. "Remember Cooper's sister, Dawn? Well, we were out checking the fences and—"

"I went on a date with a man."

"And your story is now officially more interesting than mine."

Brad gave a weak chuckle. "I guess."

"So, you really went on a date with a guy?"

"Yes."

"Was it good?"

Brad smiled as he thought back to the day before. "It was probably the best date that I've ever been on."

"Wow, who is this guy? Someone I know?"

"No, and that's the problem. He's leaving at the end of the month." Brad sighed and tossed himself back onto the couch. He and Patrick had only been on one date, and Brad was already dreading him leaving. This was not good.

"Wow."

Brad glared at the phone. "Is that the only thing you can say?"

"Hey, give me a break, Brad. This is the first I've heard of you being interested in men. I'm trying to adjust."

"Me, too," Brad sighed. "I've always been interested. I was just too scared to do anything, and I hadn't met anyone who was worth it."

"Well, you do like to cuddle a lot."

"Fuck you!"

Graham's laughter bubbled over the line. "You do. Even when we were kids. If we were watching

a movie, you would end up half on top of me by the time it was over.” There was a long pause. “You've never been attracted to me, have you?”

"No, never."

"Wow, way to save my ego."

"Your ego doesn't need saving."

"What about Cooper?"

"Cooper's a walking wet dream. Of course I was attracted to him."

"Hey, I'm just as good-looking!"

"*You* like to think so." Brad laughed weakly again and ran a hand over his face. "God, I really wish you were here right now."

"So do I." Graham sighed. "So, do you want to keep dating this guy, or was this just a one-time thing?"

"I think I want to keep seeing him. Graham, he kissed me the day we met."

"Huh, I didn't realize that you were so easy."

"Hey! I am not easy."

"You just said that he kissed you the day you met. You didn't even get a date in before the kissing started. I'd say that makes you easy."

Brad glared at the phone. "I really want to hit you right now."

"Well, now I'm glad I'm not home. I really don't want you to hit me."

"You suck."

"Not really, but apparently you're thinking about it."

Brad turned bright red at the image that conjured. "Sometimes I really hate you." He sighed and ran a hand over his face again. "I don't know what to do, Graham. I've never done anything like this, and I'm a bit scared of how much I want to."

"You know that this will change everything for you, right? I mean, hell, I'll still love you, man—you're like family—but you have to know that it's going to change things for you."

"I know."

"Are you ready to handle that?"

"I think so."

"Okay, then the only thing you need to answer is: do you like this guy?"

"Yeah, I like him." Brad thought about the way Patrick had smiled at him while they were eating lunch. "I really like him."

"Well, then go for it."

"Cool. So, how are things going at—" Brad stopped talking as his cell phone chimed at him. "Shit."

"What is it?"

"I got a text. Just let me check it." Brad flipped open his phone to look at the message.

Get off the phone. Now.

"What is it?"

"It's a message from Isaac. He wants me to get off the phone." Brad sighed. "Sorry, Graham. I've gotta go."

"Not a problem. Look, call me later. I want to hear more about this guy you're dating."

"I will. Thanks for listening, Graham."

"Anytime. Bye."

"Bye." Brad hung up the phone with a smile on his face. He was starting to feel better about the Patrick situation. Brad settled against the couch while he waited for his brother to call him back. Hopefully whatever Isaac wanted to talk about wouldn't take too long. He really wanted to talk to Patrick.

He had a second date to set up.

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Chapter Eight

"Hand me that patch cord?" Jack asked, straddling a barstool and leaning over a guitar in a way that was extremely appealing. Patrick had made fun of his age to Julian in jest, but the man was in excellent physical condition, there was no doubt about that.

Julian handed it over without looking up from the mess of other wires he was untangling. "I'm beginning to think we shouldn't have left in such a hurry last week."

"Are you saying you didn't enjoy yourself?"

Julian flushed right up to the tips of his ears—some things never changed; Patrick would never get tired of seeing that as long as he lived—and glanced over coyly. "I wouldn't go that far."

"Oh, stop it," Patrick groaned from his barstool. "The two of you are giving me cavities." Not to mention putting inappropriate images in his head. He craned his neck around, looking for Brad. If he was going to be having inappropriate thoughts, they might as well star his favorite bartender.

Roz hit him on the arm. "Your giraffe impression is impressive, Peacock, but your boyfriend's not

coming."

"But I put on my lucky pants!" he protested, trying to hide his disappointment. Brad had said he would be here. They still needed to schedule that second date. Besides, he had been looking forward to stealing him for a dance or two. And maybe copping a feel or two, as well.

On Roz's lap, Hallie giggled, both hands over her mouth.

"Well, it'll *bestaying* in your lucky pants tonight. He went to see his brother in Edmonton," Roz explained. "Isaac is divorcing his wife or something. It was last-minute. Gord's covering." She waved over at the interim bartender, a man in his fifties with white hair and a mustache. "He was the bartender here before I was even legal."

"Oh." He thought he might recognize the man from a past visit to Julian, but he didn't want to think about that right now. "Well, family's important," Patrick said absently, eyes tracking back across the crowded bar to Jack and Julian on the makeshift stage. As far as he was concerned, family was something you could choose.

"Yeah," Roz agreed. She sounded off; Patrick whipped his head around to ask what was up with her lately, but Julian interrupted with a triumphant cry from the stage.

"Got it," Julian announced, separating the last two in a nest of black cords. "I knew that medical degree would come in handy someday."

Jack played a few notes, fiddled with the tuning peg for the highest string, strummed another couple of chords, and turned up the volume with his foot.

Julian blew him a kiss and went to sit with Patrick, Roz, and Hallie at the bar. "Is he any good?" Patrick asked casually. He was still watching Roz out of the corner of his eye.

Julian gave him a wry look. "I'm kind of biased."

"He plays with my dad," Hallie told him matter-of-factly. "My daddy isn't a very good singer, but don't tell him I said that. It might hurt his feelings."

Oh, she's going to break hearts, all right. Patrick smiled. "Don't worry, Sprocket, it'll be our secret. Tell me, do you dance?"

She nodded. "Dr. Julian taught me the Jitterbug!"

So that was where that nickname came from. Good to know. "Hmm, I don't think I know that one."

"Don't worry. He'll teach you."

Patrick grinned. "That'd be a nice change," he teased.

Julian met his gaze squarely, eyes lighting with the challenge. "You're going to eat those words," he promised gleefully.

There was a short burst of static as the microphone came on, and all heads in the bar turned to Jack. "Hey, Roy, I need you on those drums."

The neighbor Patrick hadn't officially met slid onto the stool behind Jack and picked up the drumsticks. "Everyone say hello to the traveling cop sitting at the bar and remember to behave yourselves," Jack said cheerfully.

Patrick waved. A couple of girls near the back exchanged whispers. Well, they'd learn soon enough.

Jack launched vigorously into the opening chords of a well-known Queen song that had the whole bar tapping its collective feet in no time. "How 'bout that lesson?" Julian grinned, standing and offering his hand.

What the hell. Maybe it would take his mind off the disappointment of not seeing Brad tonight. Besides, it'd be fun to see if Jack got jealous. Patrick finished his beer and let Julian pull him out onto the small dance floor, already crowded with happy patrons. "What's with all the youngsters?" he asked, finding the basic pattern of the steps fairly easily with a little coaching. "This is a bar, right?"

"The under-agers have to leave before ten," Julian explained. "But they like the music, and it's good for business. Those kids have more money than is good for them." During the chorus, he added a tricky little maneuver that had Patrick faltering for a minute. "Besides, Roy and Hallie are inseparable on weekends. After the first set he takes her home to tuck her into bed, and Jack finishes up the second half solo."

Patrick gave up trying to follow Julian on this song—it was just too quick—and grabbed him around the waist instead. "It's just too easy to make that into an innuendo."

Julian snorted. "Please. Like you've got a right to apply the word *stoo easy* to anyone or anything."

Patrick pinched his ass. Julian had filled out a lot since they'd met, and the extra weight suited him extremely well. Patrick had seen him getting out of the shower the other day and been caught practically staring at his ex-boyfriend's sculpted body by Jack, who hadn't seemed so much annoyed as smug about it. "Are those girls done ogling me yet?"

"I think they just regained interest when you started groping me." Julian pulled them to a stop as Jack segued into a slower song. "Okay. So, your first official lesson. Move your feet like this."

Patrick had a feeling that this wasn't the Jitterbug, but he had no way to prove it and it didn't matter. Julian was a fantastic dancer, and if he hadn't also been a decent teacher, it would have been impossible to keep up with him. The patrons around them had stepped back, both to give them space and to enjoy the spectacle and try out the steps for themselves.

When Jack and Roy broke for intermission, they sat down, grinning and breathing heavily. Gord slid a couple of bottles of Alexander Keith's down the bar. Jack came over, sitting heavily on Julian's other side as Roy and Hallie made their exit.

"Speaking of taking orders," Jack said cryptically, snagging a bottle and downing most of the contents.

Patrick scowled at him good-naturedly. "Old habits die hard."

"So he was always this bossy?"

"Actually, when we first met, he was too shy to try to order us around." Patrick smiled, thinking back on the first time he'd met Julian, on Julian's eighteenth birthday. "He got over that pretty quickly." They had had some good times together after that. It had taken Julian some time to translate his natural tendency to boss people around into the bedroom, and he hadn't done it often, but damn, it was hot when Julian got all toppy.

"So it's learned behavior." Jack took another long pull from his beer and then set it down. "Well, it's not like I'm going to complain about that."

"I can hear you," Julian pointed out. "The rest of the bar does not need to know about my kinky bedroom habits, thanks."

Jack and Patrick exchanged glances. Jack said, quietly, "I doubt there's anyone here who hasn't guessed." Julian had already turned away again to talk to Roz, so he didn't comment.

Patrick snickered. And speaking of guessing.... "You ever been to *Fever*? It's this night club in Calgary—"

Jack sputtered a cough, put his beer back down—empty this time—and glanced at his watch. "Time for the second set!"

Patrick watched him go, eyes narrowing.

Julian didn't let him dwell on it for long, though; someone had pulled Roz onto the dance floor, and now Julian wanted to go too. Besides, it wasn't like it was any kind of hardship to have the hot doctor practically draped over him. Patrick let himself be pulled back into the crowd, Julian leading the way.

"Okay," Julian nodded, turning to face him. "You've got the moves down. Now let's see if you can do them backwards."

Patrick made a face. "You're not going to let me lead?"

"Not this time, hot stuff." Julian took one of his hands and put it on his waist and then rested his own hand lightly on Patrick's shoulder. "Ready?"

Patrick let him guide him around the floor, their chests inches away from each other. "Have you gotten better at this since college?"

"I may have taken a lesson or two."

Patrick stopped thinking about his feet and started following more naturally. He was starting to work up a sweat, but Julian was moving as easily as ever. It was distractingly hot.

"That's not my hip," Julian said conversationally.

"That's all right," Patrick replied, squeezing. "That's not a banana in my pocket."

"What a coincidence." Julian closed the remaining distance between them and dropped the hand from Patrick's shoulder neatly into the waistband at the back of Patrick's pants.

"Shit." Patrick wanted to moan when the rough denim of Julian's tight black jeans buffed smoothly across the leather covering his groin. "Julian, it'd be really bad form if we got arrested." Julian had always had perfect confidence on the dance floor, but this was borderline obscene.

Looking up at him from under a mop of curly hair, Julian smirked. "You wanna lead now?"

If Patrick started leading, there was only one place they were going to go, and it was not such a great idea in a public place with Julian's boyfriend a few feet away. "Bad plan. You lead. I'm injured, and your boyfriend's bigger than I am." Besides, they'd walked that road years ago. It had been a bad idea then, and it was a worse one now. Patrick didn't think he could go through that

mess twice.

"I'll let you in on a secret," Julian said. His movements had taken on a hypnotic quality. "Jack gets really horny when I make him jealous."

"You don't say." The devil in question had just segued into a slower, louder song with crashing guitar and rasping vocals. God, could the man sing. The combination of Jack's voice grating low in his ears and Julian's heat against his body had Patrick's head spinning. "I never would have guessed."

They were so caught up in the rhythm that Patrick didn't even notice when the amplifiers on stage switched off and someone flicked on the stereo until Jack tapped him on the shoulder. Patrick pointedly removed his hands from Julian's ass, after he was sure Jack had seen them there. He squeezed with both hands first, just for good measure.

"Hey, slutcake. Unhand my boyfriend for a minute, will you? I want a dance before we head home."

Patrick backed off gladly, copping a feel of Jack's bum as he passed. The older man acknowledged him with a wink, and then Julian melted into his arms, immediately absorbing all of his attention.

That was all right with Patrick. His arm was starting to throb. He fell onto a barstool beside Roz, who looked like she'd also been recently discharged from the dance floor, and promptly stole her rum and coke. He knew he'd already had enough to drink that Julian wouldn't be sedating him later on, and he needed something to dull the pain in his shoulder or it was going to be a very long night. Christ, he'd gone and got himself all worked up, and he wouldn't even be able to jerk himself off properly. It just wasn't the same if he could only use one hand.

Patrick downed the drink in two long swallows and then coughed. It was a double. "Damn, Barracuda, you're a tank."

Roz raised her eyebrows at him and then gestured to Gord for two more of the same.

Flashing her a grateful grin, Patrick sagged against the bar, breathing deeply. "Hold this," Roz told him, sliding a drink over. "Left hand. And turn around."

Patrick did as he was told. Roz hopped off her stool and stood behind him, fingers playing lightly at first over the tense muscles, then more firmly. It hurt like a son of a bitch, and the ice in his glass rattled warningly. "Jesus, Roz—ow! That fucking hurts!"

"Take it like a man. You'll thank me later." She dug her thumbs in.

Patrick took a long sip, rum burning all the way down, and then shrugged mentally and finished the rest of the drink.

Roz's hands on his shoulder gentled and then finally stopped. The fierce throbbing had dulled to an almost bearable ache. "Someday you're going to have to teach me that."

"What did I tell you?" she smiled. "Looks like the taxi's leaving. You'd better get going."

Patrick kissed her on the cheek. "Thanks, sweetheart. I'll see you tomorrow."

* * * *

Patrick followed Julian into the house and tugged off his boots, muscles knotted in all sorts of uncomfortable places. Between his physiotherapy session with Roz and the dancing, he should have

been exhausted, but instead his body seemed to be surging with adrenaline. He groaned inwardly. Sleep was going to be difficult tonight—he'd been drinking, so there was no way Julian was going to give him a sedative. He would just have to....

Jesus. He would just have to watch while Julian dropped to his knees and started *nuzzling* Jack's crotch through his jeans right there in the hallway. Jack had a hand in his hair, though with the low light Patrick couldn't tell if it was in encouragement or not. Either Julian had forgotten he was there, or he was just too horny to care. Patrick's mouth went dry. "Um... guys?"

He was pretty sure he wasn't drunk enough to be hallucinating this.

On the other hand? Hot. "Uh, you do realize I'm still here, right?"

He just caught the edge of Jack's grin in the darkness as he pulled Julian to his feet and pushed him up against the wall instead. "You can look but you can't touch."

Now there was a thought. "It's not nice to tease. Don't make me promises you aren't going to keep."

Julian yelped from where Jack had him pinned. There was the distinct rattle of a belt being unbuckled. "You just fed right into his public-sex kink," he warned with a throaty moan.

Patrick was unconvinced Jack was the one with the public-sex kink. "Oh, really?" Maybe he could still salvage the evening, after all.

Jack paused in his assault on Julian's mouth to drag him toward the staircase, throwing Patrick a backward glance. "You coming?"

Far be it from Patrick to turn down an invitation like that. A brief but vicious battle was fought in his brain, with the reasonable half pointing out what a bad, bad, terrible idea this was, while the less rational, more horny part of him countered with "holy shit, this is going to be so hot." Rationality lost spectacularly. Live porn would definitely go a long way toward relieving all the tension he'd worked up tonight, even if it was all just Jack's macho display of ownership.

"You're free to make some suggestions," Julian offered casually, undoing the buttons on Patrick's shirt as soon as he got close enough. Jack's hands pulled it off his shoulders and dropped it onto the stairs. "I'm all ears."

"All hands is more like it," Patrick commented automatically. With Jack's hands roaming up his chest and Julian's on his ass, his body was on sensory overload.

"You're the one who was pinching my ass earlier." Halfway up the stairwell, Patrick was still stuck in the middle, but that didn't seem to hinder Jack from manhandling Julian up against the wall and holding him there with his mouth.

"Don't think I didn't see that, by the way," Jack put in, pulling away momentarily. Patrick could feel Jack's erection pressing against his ass. "Let's move this party upstairs."

"Yes, please," Julian chirped, leading the way. "Faster, if possible."

"Aw, Ace, I missed having you boss me around."

"Don't get used to it," Jack drawled, giving Patrick a smack as he followed Julian up the stairs. "Scribbles."

What the fuck? What kind of a non sequitur was that? Patrick turned so quickly at the top of the steps he almost fell, but Jack caught him by the hand before he could. Patrick followed his gaze, which was tracing a meaningful path down his arm to the angel tattoo. "Oh, shit, you do remember." Instinctively, Patrick jerked his arm back. His head was spinning, and this time it wasn't just lust and booze.

"You can just relax," Jack said dryly, closing the door to shut the dog out. "I told Julian at the bar as soon as I figured out where I knew you from."

"Who's the slutcake now?" Patrick snarked. He'd recognized Jack almost from the first moment, but what was he going to say? *Hey Julian, guess what? Your boyfriend and I hooked up a couple of years ago for a no-strings, sex-filled weekend in Calgary?* Julian had enough issues with boyfriends sleeping with ex-boyfriends already.

"Like he said—relax," Julian soothed, taking Patrick's other arm and tugging him back onto the enormous bed. Now that he had both hands free, Patrick concentrated on getting his pants off. "Think of yourself as the director. You just sit there and give—" Julian was momentarily interrupted by Jack pulling his shirt over his head, "—directions."

Patrick watched as Julian's T-shirt was thrown to a far corner of the room and then directed—ha!—his attention to more pressing matters. And speaking of pressing.... Now stripped down completely, he slowly rubbed his left hand over his growing erection. In front of him, Jack's hands were traveling slowly over Julian's firm body, working his nipples into tight little buds before dancing across his stomach. Jack went for his fly, exposing yet another perfect pale inch of skin. Then another. Then—

Patrick swallowed, hand stilling. There was a black-and-gray mark being revealed just above Julian's hip. "Goddamn, Julian, you got inked?"

"Hmm?" Julian said, arching obscenely into the caress of Jack's palms on his skin. "Oh. The tattoo."

"Yeah, the tattoo." The perfect curled lines of the caduceus were stark against the flat skin of Julian's stomach. "When did that happen?"

"About—" Julian gasped, lifting his hips as Jack jerked his jeans off. "Eight months ago or so, I guess?" He swore as Jack grazed his teeth across it. "What is it with you two and the tattoo? I have other interesting body parts."

It was pretty, delicate, and intricate, and the contrast against Julian's skin made Patrick's mouth water. Jack seemed as fascinated as he was, bent over Julian's pliant body with his mouth pressed open against the design. Patrick could see his tongue flicking out, tracing ownership into the flesh; Julian was effectively pinned between Jack's arms and upper body and couldn't do much but writhe and enjoy the light touches.

"You're blocking my view," Patrick finally interrupted. If Jack and Julian wanted him in charge, he was at least going to see what he wanted to see.

Jack's gaze flickered up to meet Patrick's briefly, his lips quirking up in a quick smile. "Where do you want me?"

Patrick debated, but only for half a second. "Get him up further on the bed."

Jack did, with Julian's compliance. Now Patrick could see both of him in their entirety, both Jack's broad, muscular body and Julian's leaner one. Jack's erection was straining obviously against the

front of his jeans, creating a sizable bulge.

"Julian. Help him out, would you?" Patrick suggested, keeping one hand on his own cock. "That can't be comfortable."

"My pleasure." Julian turned onto his side, throwing a leg over Jack's hips and pulling his shirt up, pushing it under his armpits. Jack's body was almost as firm as Patrick remembered, though a few of the sparse hairs on his chest were grayer. Of course, Julian got distracted at that point, with Jack's arms raised obligingly over his head and the broad expanse of his chest under Julian's hands. Patrick certainly couldn't blame him. Still. There was something different about the way Julian was mapping out his boyfriend, carefully, like he was making sure everything was the way he left it. Jack hummed happily as Julian licked across his collarbone, pausing to suck up a red mark right in the centre.

"Sometime today, Julian," Patrick reminded him dryly. "Before Jack's dick strangles itself."

"Thanks for that," Jack huffed as Julian finally yanked his shirt off. Patrick could imagine what the sensation of Julian squirming on his lap was doing to him. The pressure would be just right, Julian's sinuous movements a delicious torture, the rough filter of Jack's jeans a barrier to keep it all from becoming too much.

Jack sat up a bit to watch as Julian crawled down his body, only stopping when his nose was level with the button of Jack's jeans. He pressed his face to the fabric for a long moment, working his hands up Jack's inner thighs so that eventually they cradled his erection. Slowly, Julian threaded the top button back through the denim loop and then curled his fingers into the waistband on either side of the fly and pulled until the zipper gave.

Jack was wearing plain dark boxers under his jeans, but Julian fit his nimble fingers under those as well, tugging the material down until Jack's erection sprang free, dark and thick and hard. Cutting a sideways look at Patrick, Julian raised an eyebrow, hands spanning Jack's thighs.

"Don't let me stop you," Patrick encouraged, curling his fist loosely around his own prick.

Julian licked his lips—Patrick had almost forgotten what a slut he was for sucking cock—and went to town, wetting Jack's erection with a few teasing flicks of his tongue before sliding his mouth all the way down with a happy groan. If Jack's answering moan was any indication, Julian was even better at this than Patrick remembered.

Jack threaded his fingers in Julian's hair and held on for the ride. Ignoring the slight ache from his right shoulder, Patrick cupped his balls in his other hand, transfixed by the way it looked, Jack's glistening cock disappearing again and again into Julian's mouth. Julian's dick was hanging heavy between his legs, occasionally brushing the side of Jack's thigh. With every not-quite-accidental touch, Julian made a low sound, and Patrick could practically see his fingers tightening their grip on Jack's legs. Subconsciously, he found himself echoing Julian's rhythm.

"Stop," Patrick commanded, hardly recognizing his own voice.

Julian looked up at him, eyes shadowed, lips glistening, and slowly let Jack's cock fall from his mouth. "Spoilsport."

"Shut up," Patrick told him. "I want to see Jack fuck you."

"I knew I liked you," Jack smirked, releasing Julian's hair and reaching back with one long, well-defined arm. He fished under the pillow behind his head until he came up with a bottle of lubricant, which he flashed at Julian. "C'mere."

Julian crawled up Jack's body until they were face-to-face, their bodies pressed up together. Patrick ruthlessly choked his own erection, which wanted to spurt at the sight of their cocks brushing. As Julian ducked his head for a long, slow, wet kiss, Jack snapped the cap of the lube open.

They'd obviously had plenty of practice with this position—with Jack's long arms, he could reach Julian's ass easily. Patrick's mouth went dry as he watched Jack prep Julian, circling his hole twice before penetrating the outer circle, pushing in fast and deep. He could feel Julian's resultant groan in his own chest, could almost see Julian relaxing those muscles, welcoming the invasion. His back dipped, bringing his now-leaking cock into sticky contact with Jack's stomach.

"Jesus," Patrick muttered. "Give him another one."

Julian broke the kiss with a gasp when the second finger slid in beside the first, his head thrown back, eyes shut tight. He moved his body in time with Jack's little thrusts, riding those fingers, face flushed with obvious pleasure. "God, yeah," he said, circling his hips. "More."

"Not yet," Patrick directed, wanting to drag it out.

"Patrick, I hate you. Jack, harder." Flushed, muscles trembling, he fisted his hands in the sheets.

"What did you do to him?" Patrick gasped. "He's like a sex-crazed little monkey."

"You mean he wasn't always like this?"

"Good point."

"I am *rightthere*. "

"Slower," Patrick commanded, feeling a little mean. Julian's eyes shot open and speared him with a brief glare, which would have been more effective if he hadn't also let out a little moan. Jack was apparently taking Patrick's directions and adding his own little twist; he might have slowed down, but he was going deeper than ever. From the constant gasping noises Julian was making, Patrick made a guess that he was massaging Julian's prostate steadily.

"What now?" Jack asked idly. Patrick didn't know how he'd missed it, but at some point the older man had taken himself in hand, stroking his own dick as Julian rode his fingers.

"One more," Patrick instructed, following the movement of Jack's fingers in Julian's ass with his own hand on his cock.

There was a momentary pause while Jack added some more lube, and then Julian was cursing loudly, begging for Jack to quit fucking teasing and fuck him already.

"That's enough," Patrick decided, breathing heavily. "Stop."

That earned him another glare from Julian, which Patrick didn't really get, since Julian had *asked* for this. Patrick didn't think the glare would last too long after his next instruction. "I want you to ride him," he explained.

Julian's cock twitched hard against his stomach, leaving a smear of clear fluid. "Jesus. Yeah." He lifted himself up, letting Jack's fingers slip out of him, and reached down to steady Jack's dick. "Finally."

"Cheeky," Patrick managed, but his attention was focused on the way Julian's body was opening, the expression on his face as Jack's cock speared him open.

"Shit." That was Jack, hands braced on Julian's hips, tendons popping so obviously that Patrick knew he was keeping Julian from moving.

Julian's head was lolling on his neck, his features painted with ecstasy, eyes half-closed. In the light spilling in from the window, Patrick could see his pulse fluttering in his neck. After a long moment, his eyes opened again, liquid and dopey, looking straight down at Jack, fingers curled tightly in against Jack's shoulders. Someone—Jack, Patrick guessed—made an impossibly hot noise, and the muscles in Jack's forearm flexed, and then the two of them were moving perfectly in sync, Julian throwing his body down to meet each of Jack's thrusts, no trace of a hurry, just a steady, crashing rhythm.

Patrick picked up the pace on his own dick subconsciously, mouth going dry as he watched Jack disappear inside Julian's body over and over.

Julian made a low groan somewhere between desperation and satisfaction, and Patrick's gaze flickered up to his cock, pressed tight and drooling against his stomach. Reaching for his own erection, Julian was interrupted by a particularly firm buck of Jack's hips, the force of the thrust knocking him forward so he was bent over Jack's chest. Jack flipped them over easily and pinned Julian's hands to the mattress, pounding into him without restraint.

"Jack!" Julian's voice was almost a whine. "Let mego !"

"God, I love it when you're bossy."

"You love me all the time," Julian said breathlessly, back arching.

They were too involved in each other to pay Patrick any mind, faces close together. The strain of pleasure was obvious in both their bodies, muscles and tendons flexing in Jack's tanned arms and thighs, Julian's paler chest and stomach. It was so perfectly erotic Patrick had to curl his hand hard around the base of his erection to take the edge off.

Jack and Julian seemed so in sync that if it weren't for Julian's choked-out pleas, Patrick wouldn't have been able to tell which one of them had set up the slow, heady rhythm. Julian gritted his teeth, fists curling above Jack's hands on his wrists, demanding to be released.

"What's the magic word?" he rumbled back. Patrick watched his lips caress Julian's earlobe and shivered.

"Oh, God,*please*—" Patrick fucking loved that tone of voice Julian got when he was close like this....

Jack let go.

Julian's hands went immediately to his cock, his face contorted into a mask of pleasure, and then he let out an inhuman sound of pleasure as Jack sank his teeth into his shoulder, a rope of white shooting from the head of his dick and striping his chest.

It was too much for Patrick, and he groaned, pumping his dick one last time as hot semen sprayed from the tip, splattering his own chest and stomach. Eyes closed, he could just hear the quieter sounds of Jack falling into orgasm beside him.

Two sweaty, exhausted bodies collapsed next to Patrick's on the bed. He made a mental note to

thank Julian later for not squishing his shoulder. Julian kissed him briefly on the cheek. Where he got the energy, Patrick had no idea; he couldn't have even *thought* of moving.

The last thing he remembered was the feeling of a warm cloth on his stomach; then everything went dark.

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Chapter Nine

That was a bad idea.

That was the thought running through Patrick's head as he woke up with Julian curled next to him. Jack was on the other side of his lover, sleeping peacefully. Jack was curled around Julian, as if even in sleep he didn't want to be parted from him. That sight sent a jolt through Patrick. He needed to get out of there.

Moving slowly, Patrick crawled out of the bed. He made sure that the covers were around Julian before he left. He didn't want Julian to get cold and realize that Patrick had gone. Julian moaned softly in his sleep and turned toward Jack. Patrick felt as if someone had stabbed him.

Patrick made his way through the house to the guest room, picking up his discarded clothes along the way. Usually, the feel of the leather pants made him smile; this time, it just made him feel sick to his stomach. By the time he reached the guest room, he was shaking. He needed to have a shower. He could smell Jack and Julian on his skin, and it was making his stomach twist.

Grabbing some clean clothes, Patrick walked as quickly as possible to the bathroom. He tossed his clothes on the counter, turned the water on with trembling hands, flipped up the lid of the toilet, and threw up. By the time he had tossed up everything he had eaten the night before and the dry heaves had finished, there was steam coming out of the shower.

Shaking slightly, Patrick flushed the toilet, then climbed into the shower. He hissed in pain as the hot water hit him. He hurt. It wasn't just the throbbing pain that was his shoulder—he was pretty sure he'd slept on it funny—his heart hurt. For the first time in his life, Patrick actually felt dirty after sex. Turning the water up to an almost scalding heat, Patrick washed himself as quickly as possible. He needed to get out of the house.

Finishing his shower, Patrick toweled off, relieved himself, dressed, and brushed his teeth twice. When the taste of mint had covered the unpleasant taste of bile, he put his toothbrush away and left the bathroom. Patrick headed back into his room for a sweater and his phone. If he was going to go for a walk, he'd need something warmer than the T-shirt he was wearing. As he pulled a blue sweater on, his eyes landed on his suitcase. *I wonder.* He hadn't traveled in a few years, so there was hope.... Rummaging through the pockets, he let out a triumphant grunt as he pulled out a half-full pack of cigarettes and a lighter. *Thank God Cam didn't go through this thing before he packed it.*

Cigarettes and lighter in hand, Patrick slipped into his boots, tossed on his jacket, and left the quiet house. Taking a deep breath of the fall air, Patrick stepped off the porch and started to walk. He waited until the house was out of sight before lighting up. The last thing he wanted was for Julian to catch him.

He moaned as the first bite of nicotine hit his system. He could feel his shaking hands slow slightly. It had been a long time. Pulling his phone out of his pocket, he dialed as he started walking toward town.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end was groggy with sleep.

"Keith?"

"Patrick?" The voice suddenly became more awake. "What's wrong?"

"How do you know something's wrong?"

"Because you're calling me from Alberta, where you're supposed to be relaxing. Now tell me what's wrong."

Patrick sighed and took another drag off the cigarette. "You know, I've always known that I was a slut, but this is a new low for me."

"Shit. What happened?"

"I, ah, I sort of...." Was there any good way to say this? "I saw Jack and Julian... together." Patrick could feel tears forming in his eyes. He'd spent the last ten years dreaming of what it would be like to have Julian in his arms again, but knowing he was with someone else was different from seeing him love someone so much firsthand. It felt like someone had run razor blades over his heart.

"Okay, babe, this is going to sound like a heartless question, but why did you call me instead of Cam?"

"Cam wouldn't have understood what the problem was, since I had sex with him and Jeremy before I got shot. I mean, it's not like I participated here." Patrick's hands shook on the cigarette.

"But you were never in love with Cam or Jeremy. This was Julian. He was your first love."

"God." Patrick flung the cigarette butt onto the street and kept walking. He knew he was crying now, but he didn't care. There was no one around to see him. "Do you have any idea how much it hurts to witness the proof that you will never be good enough?" Patrick gave a weak laugh. "You know, it never felt like this when he was with Richard and Derek. This feels different. The way they are together is different."

"I thought you wanted Julian to be happy?"

"I do, it's just... I thought it would be me, you know? I thought I would be the one he would end up with." Patrick growled and tilted his head to the sky. "God, I sound like such a selfish prick."

"No, you sound like someone who's been hurt. Shit, babe, I wish I could be there. You really sound like you could use a hug."

Patrick gave a watery laugh. "Yeah, I could. God, I just feel so sick with myself. There's this guy. We went on a date, and he's a really nice guy, and I want to see him again, but I feel so fucking guilty about last night, and I should, 'cause who the hell would want a fucked-up guy like me, and—"

"Patrick! Calm down!"

"How can I calm down? Julian apparently didn't think that I was worth waiting for, how the hell am I supposed to think that someone else would? It's been made perfectly clear to me that all I'm good for is sex!"

"That is not true! Do you think that's all I am? Do you think that I use people for sex?"

"What? No, of course not!"

"Then shut up for a minute and let me talk. Do you know why I come to you when I have a bad day? It's not for the sex, which is amazing; it's because I can count on you to hold me when I have a bad dream. I go to you for comfort, Patrick. You're a good man. You deserve the chance to be happy. Don't push it away because you think that you don't deserve it."

"Keith, I don't know what to do." Patrick walked a few more steps, then a sharp pain ran down his leg. "Shit!"

"What happened?"

"It's nothing, just a pain in my leg."

"What type of pain?"

"It's nothing, Keith."

"What type of pain?"

Patrick sighed. His authoritative police-man voice never worked on Keith. "Sharp pain in my leg. It just shot right down my leg."

"What did you do last night?"

"Keith, I thought we went over this?"

"You're going to have to be a little more specific, Patrick. Did you do something last night that might have put too much strain on your back?"

"Um." Patrick went back over the events of the night before in his head. "I kind of maybe sort of tripped up the stairs. Jack caught me before I fell, though."

"Shit!"

"Um, I'm not sure why you're having such a problem with this." Patrick was clumsy. He tripped *all the time*.

"You got shot in the spine, Patrick. They assumed when they took the bullet out that you were never going to walk again, so I'm not sure how well they closed you up. Every time you jar your spine could be dangerous!"

"I'm fine."

"I want you to have your physiotherapist call me."

"What?"

"Hey, if you get to call me this early in the morning, I get to make demands. I expect a call tomorrow."

Patrick sighed. He knew that Keith was just worried about his well-being. "Fine, I'll have her call you."

"Good. Is there anything else that you needed to talk about?"

Patrick smiled at the concern in Keith's voice. "No, that covers it."

"Patrick, you are a good man. Don't let your doubts keep you from finding someone special."

"Thanks for listening."

"Don't worry about it."

Patrick disconnected with a sigh. Talking to Keith had helped a bit—at least he no longer felt like he was going to throw up again—but he still felt terrible. He was reaching for another cigarette when his phone started to ring. "Hawkins."

"Hey, Patrick, it's Brad."

Patrick felt a smile cross his face, followed by another wave of guilt. "Hey there, Wilde Thing."

"Wilde Thing?"

"I thought that you needed a nickname." Patrick felt his stomach turn as Brad laughed. *Heso* didn't deserve this man.

"I like it. I'm sorry that it took me so long to call, but I had to leave town. My brother is getting a divorce."

"I heard. Sorry about that." Patrick smiled as he kept walking. "I missed you last night. I was looking forward to seeing you at the bar."

"So was I." Brad cleared his throat nervously. "What are you doing right now?"

"Right now? I'm walking."

"Do you want to join me for breakfast?"

Patrick grinned at the phone. "Is this our second date?"

"No, our second date is on Tuesday, when I take you out on a picnic. I just want to see you."

"I'd like that."

"Where are you?"

"Um." Patrick stopped and took a good look at his surroundings. "I appear to be at the rec center."

"Okay, meet me at *Brenda's*? I should be there in about ten minutes. I'm still on the road."

"I'll see you there."

"Bye, Patrick."

"Bye, Brad." Patrick disconnected and looked at the phone in his hand. He was having breakfast with Brad and they were going on a picnic on Tuesday. Maybe he would finally be able to stop feeling so worthless. Turning, Patrick headed down the street toward *Brenda's*. He just hoped he didn't look as horrible as he felt.

* * * *

"Hey."

Julian looked up at the smell of coffee and the sound of his lover's voice and smiled, uncurling a little to make room on the porch swing. "Hey, yourself."

Jack sat beside him, handing over a glass of orange juice. "How are you feeling this morning?"

Julian had been trying to work that out for himself all morning, ever since he'd woken up to find Patrick gone. All of his stuff was still in his room, which meant he hadn't gone far, or at least was planning to be back, but he was worried.

All right, he was heartsick. "I think last night was a mistake," he sighed, leaning against Jack's shoulder.

Jack pressed a kiss to the top of his head, an almost absent gesture that made Julian love him all the more for the circumstances under which it was given. "How so?"

He took a deep breath, gathering his thoughts. "Do you remember when I told you, a long time ago, that I'd met someone on my eighteenth birthday? The man I thought I'd spend the rest of my life with until I met you?"

"You were young," Jack soothed, leaning their heads together. "You didn't know any better."

"That was Patrick," Julian told him, shaking his head. "And it was that serious, at least for me. But Patrick wasn't ready." He curled his legs back under him again, needing the comfort of the position. "Jack, I don't think we should have done that last night. I think he's still... he is still a little bit in love with me."

Jack put down his coffee to wrap both arms around Julian, practically pulling him into his lap. Apparently, he wasn't going to be allowed to escape so easily. "So?" he said gently. "Aren't you still a little bit in love with him? You seem to be doing fine."

God, Julian should *be* so lucky, to have a lover who was so understanding. "It's not the same. Yes, a part of me will always love him—but a bigger part of me, the biggest part of me, loves you. So while last night was a bad idea—and don't say it wasn't, I don't care how great the sex was—in the end it doesn't matter so much. I'm not going to fall apart over it, because I've got you to lean on. I have you..." He sighed again, scrubbing his eyes with one hand. "I have you to talk to about these things now. *I am* the one Patrick talks to. He doesn't have anybody." He felt terrible. For all intents and purposes, he'd just rubbed his best friend's face in the fact that he, Julian, had moved on... while Patrick hadn't.

Jack just held him tighter. Julian felt the pressure in his chest reach an unbearable level, and then he squeezed his eyes shut and tried to let the tension flow out of him. Jack let him sit like that for a few more minutes and then kissed the top of his head again. "You want pancakes?"

A tiny smile crept across Julian's face. "You can't make pancakes," he teased. "You burn macaroni and cheese."

"That's why I asked you," Jack snuggled into his neck. "Nice, fluffy, buttery pancakes, with real maple syrup. Ooh, and breakfast sausage. What do you say?"

"I love you," Julian said, lacing his fingers together with Jack's. "You're insane, and you're perfect, and I love you. Also, I'm starving, and you'd better pray there are breakfast sausages in the fridge."

Jack pulled him to his feet and they went back into the kitchen. Julian started pulling ingredients from the cupboards, brain on autopilot until he discovered the canister of flour was nearly empty. He went into the pantry to fill it, walking through the laundry room as he did so.

There was a T-shirt on the floor, stained around the collar with about fifteen different colors of paint. It was obviously Patrick's from his date with Brad—clearly, those coveralls didn't cover as much as they claimed. The knot in Julian's chest tightened, and he toed the garment into the dirty laundry basket.

Patrick would be okay. He had to be.

* * * *

Brad parked his car in front of *Brenda's* and took a deep breath. Patrick was waiting for him inside. Patrick, who had not sounded good on the phone, was waiting for him inside. He took a deep breath and got out of the car. He had to force himself to walk slowly in order to keep from running inside. He didn't want to seem too eager.

Patrick had been on his mind during the drive to and from his brother's house. He kept replaying their date over and over again in his head. The entire day had been fun. Brad was surprised by how much he enjoyed being in the other man's company. The kissing had been a nice bonus, but just being around Patrick was wonderful.

He stepped into *Brenda's* and looked around. He spotted Patrick right away. The detective was sitting at one of the tables, holding a mug of coffee in his hands. He looked up, and Brad found himself caught in green eyes. He smiled at the other man and saw a small smile cross Patrick's face. Brad tried not to frown at what he saw in Patrick's eyes. The other man looked like he had been crying.

Brad walked over and, without really thinking about it, he leaned across the table and pressed a soft kiss to Patrick's lips as he sat down. "Hey."

"Hi."

Brad licked his lips, tasting coffee and a hint of Patrick. "Are you okay?"

"Just had a long night."

"You sure that's all?"

"Do I really look that bad?" There was a hint of self-deprecating humor in his voice.

Brad reached across the table and ran a finger down Patrick's cheek. "I think you always look amazing, but right now you look a tad upset."

"I'm better now."

"Morning, boys," Bess remarked. She was standing by the table, holding an order pad in her hand. "What can I get you?"

"Could I get pancakes and bacon?" Patrick ordered.

"Sure thing." Bess jotted his order down on the pad and turned her attention to Brad. "What about you, Brad?"

"Could I get an omelet with ham, mushrooms, and green olives?"

"Sure. Do you want hash browns with that?"

"That would be great."

"Anything to drink?"

"Can I get a glass of orange juice?"

"Sure." Bess finished writing and turned back to Patrick. "Do you want some more coffee?"

"That would be great."

"I'll be back in a bit with your food," Bess stated. She gave them both bright smiles, then headed off to the kitchen with their orders.

Brad took a moment to study Patrick. He didn't like what he saw. The pain lines around his eyes were deeper than they had been on Thursday. His eyes were slightly red and puffy, as if he had been crying, and he looked pale. "Patrick, are you sure that you're okay?"

"I'll be fine," Patrick stated. He reached across the table and grasped Brad's hand. "You're here now."

"So, I make things better?"

"Yes, you do." Patrick gave his hand a squeeze, then released it. "So, how's your brother doing?"

Brad knew that Patrick was changing the subject, but he let him. Obviously, whatever it was that had upset him was something that he didn't want to talk about. Brad told Patrick his brother's story while they ate. That led into stories of his childhood, which had Patrick laughing. Throughout the conversation, Brad noticed that all of the stories Patrick mentioned were things that had happened in university. He didn't say anything about his childhood.

As Bess brought Patrick his third cup of coffee and Brad his second glass of juice, Brad felt a foot rub against his leg. "Are you trying to get my attention?"

"I don't know; is it working?"

"It might be." Brad returned the nudge with one of his own. When Patrick smiled at him, he did it again.

"So, you're an omelet fan?"

"I love omelets."

"I make a pretty mean omelet."

"Really? You'll have to make me one sometime."

"I'd like that." Patrick's eyes darkened slightly and his foot ran up and down Brad's calf.

Suppressing the shiver that Patrick's action caused, Brad blushed softly as he smiled at the other man. "So would I." He reached across the table and laced his fingers with Patrick's. "You ready to go?"

"Do we have to? I'm having a good time."

"I'd like nothing more than to stay here with you, but I need to go home and get some sleep."

"Okay."

"Come on," Brad stated. He tossed enough money on the table to cover breakfast and leave a sizable tip, pulled Patrick from the table, and headed for the door. He squeezed their laced fingers as he tugged Patrick to his car. "I'll give you a ride home."

"Fine. I guess you can drive me home." Patrick flashed him a wicked smile as they reached the car. "Of course, I'd rather go *to your* home."

"Maybe later," Brad replied as he felt a blush creep over his cheeks. He held the door open for the older man. Patrick grinned at him as he climbed in. Shaking his head, Brad walked around the car and climbed behind the wheel. "I'm starting to think that you might be a bad influence."

"Always," Patrick replied. Brad laughed, put the car into gear, and headed for Jack and Julian's. The moment he got onto the main road, he felt Patrick's hand land on his thigh. Not needing both hands to drive the automatic, he laced his fingers with Patrick's.

As they got closer to their destination, the tension that had left Patrick during breakfast started to come back. Brad felt a slight tremble start in the hand that he was holding. He lifted it to his lips and pressed a kiss to the back of Patrick's hand. "You sure that you're going to be okay?"

"I'll be fine."

Brad kissed his hand once more and then lowered their linked hands back to his thigh. He pulled into the drive at Jack and Julian's and put the car in park. He could see Julian sitting on the porch. When he noticed the car, Julian stood up and started to walk toward them. Brad shifted around so that he was facing Patrick. "Well, this is your stop."

"Seems that way."

"You really don't want to get out of the car, do you?" Whatever the hell had happened while Brad had been away, he was sure it had something to do with Julian. Patrick wouldn't be this distraught over just anyone.

"Not really, but I guess I have to."

"I'll see you Tuesday."

"Yeah. You know, you can call me any time that you want to."

"I might do that," Brad replied. Pulling on the hand that he was still holding, Brad inched Patrick closer. When he was within range, Brad leaned forward and kissed him. Brad ran his tongue over Patrick's lips until the other man opened for him. His tongue delved inside, hunting for the taste of Patrick underneath the pancakes and maple syrup. When they broke away, Brad ran his thumb

over Patrick's bottom lip. "I'll see you on Tuesday."

"Tuesday," Patrick repeated. He gave Brad's fingers a final squeeze, smiled at him, and then climbed out of the car. He waved and headed to the house, completely bypassing Julian.

Brad rolled down his window and stuck his head out. "Hey, Julian! Can you come here for a second?"

"Sure." Julian walked over and leaned against the car. "What's up?"

"Remember when you asked me what my intentions were towards Patrick?"

A confused frown crossed Julian's face. He looked a little green. *Good*, Brad thought; *he should be suffering*. "Yeah."

"Maybe you should ask yourself the same question." Brad gave Julian a long stare before he backed the car out of the driveway. He took one last glance at the house, spotting Patrick standing on the porch. He waved before he drove off. Hopefully, Patrick would be feeling better by Tuesday. If he wasn't, Brad was going to have words with Julian.

* * * *

"Fuck!" Julian dug his fingers into his hair, fighting the urge to scream, cry, or both. He'd been waiting on the front porch for Patrick to come home, but he hadn't counted on Brad.

He hadn't counted on a lot of things.

Brad's words had hit home. Julian knew they had been intended to hurt him, but he deserved it and Brad had a point. Part of him didn't want to let Patrick go, even though he knew realistically that he should have done it ages ago.

Now he had two options. He could track Patrick down and try to talk to him, which would be difficult, painful, and probably unsuccessful, or he could let Patrick run from him and hope that someday they would be on speaking terms again, which would also probably not work.

Those weren't really options at all. Given the choice between doing nothing and doing something, Julian had to do something. If he was really lucky, he might walk away from this whole thing with both his sanity and Patrick's friendship.

It was kind of an all-or-nothing deal.

Stomach churning, he followed the sound of slamming doors into the house.

He found his quarry in the kitchen, sitting at the table with two beer bottles in front of him. One of them was empty. "I don't want to talk about it, Bambi."

"Fuck, me neither." Julian crossed his arms self-consciously. "Patrick, I don't even know where to start, but I know—I know what'll happen if we *don't* talk about it, and I'm not ready to let that happen."

Patrick slammed the second bottle down on the table. Julian flinched. "Why'd you do it, Ace? You have the perfect fucking life. The perfect job. The perfect little town. Even your boyfriend is fucking perfect. You can't possibly need me, too."

Stung, Julian took a step back. "Fuck you and the horse you rode in on. You've been here less than a week. We haven't *evenspoken* in months. You don't know anything about my life or what I

need."

"Yeah, well, maybe if you weren't so busy being *perfect* you'd have found the time to call me your damn self!" Patrick stood up, pushing back from the table. "You know what I'm like. You know I sleep around, and you know I'm not that discreet about it, but I've never done that with *you*. You never thought about that? You never thought that might mean something?"

"You weren't exactly complaining last night!" Julian said furiously. "Not a word of protest, Patrick. In fact, I seem to remember you literally *asking for it*! It takes two!"

"Three, apparently," Patrick corrected with a sneer. "Is one not good enough for you anymore?"

Julian slammed his fist down on the table. "Goddamn it, Patrick. I love Jack, okay? I love him, we have a lot of sex, and it is *good*. It was a mistake to invite you into our bed and *we all know it*, and I am so fucking sorry, you will never even know. We broke up almost ten years ago! I sort of expected us both to be over it!"

"*You left me*," Patrick reminded him sharply. "Or have you forgotten that little detail? You left me because I wasn't good enough, so don't you dare go around playing the victim!"

"Oh, I am *so sorry* I spared you the pain and did all the work for you. What did you think, that I just spontaneously decided to leave you in my sleep?" Julian took a step forward. "I heard you in the kitchen, Patrick. I heard you talking to Cam. Leaving you was the hardest fucking thing I've ever done in my life, so don't think it didn't affect me!"

Oh, shit

Patrick had stopped yelling.

The bottom dropped out of Julian's stomach. He knew immediately they'd gone too far—*way* too far. Patrick was never supposed to know that he'd overheard that conversation. The only person who knew was Cam, and Cam had been sworn to secrecy.

"Patrick, oh my God, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—say something!"

Patrick's face was ashen. He raised one trembling hand to his mouth. "I think...." He swallowed. "I think... I think I'm going to be sick."

Julian honestly hadn't thought he could feel any worse, but slumping against the wall to the bathroom, hearing Patrick empty the contents of his stomach into the toilet, proved him wrong. He raised a shaking hand to his face to hide his eyes. His fingers came away wet. Sometime in the last few minutes he must have started crying and just not noticed.

Finally, he heard the water running in the sink. Gathering what remained of his courage, Julian knocked on the door. "Patrick?"

There was no answer, but the door turned out to be unlocked. Julian pushed it open and slipped inside.

Patrick was leaning against the wall by the sink. He still looked green in the face, but now there were water droplets clinging to his skin.

Julian handed him a bottle of water and slumped his head against the opposite wall, sliding down. Patrick scooted his legs over to make room. "Sorry."

"Yeah," Patrick said, uncapping the bottle. "I got that." He held the bottle against his forehead. "Me too." He took a small sip, grimacing. "What the fuck did I miss?"

Julian laughed humorlessly. "Where do I start?" His head thunked back against the tile wall. "Okay. Before Jack and I were together, his mom came into the clinic for a refill for her cancer meds. Roz got pregnant and had a miscarriage. Then, while we were in the hospital, Jack's mom showed up and collapsed. Did I forget to mention the part where Jack's mom had never told him she was dying?" He scrubbed a hand over his face. "Needless to say, Jack found the empty prescription bottle with my name on it, which sort of threw a wrench into that relationship. Oh, and then I did an emergency appendectomy on my neighbor's little girl in a morgue. When we got home from the hospital, Jack and I talked it out. Things were finally starting to go right again." Julian's gut twisted. "Then Jack's mom died."

"Shit." Patrick raised the bottle to his lips and took another shaky sip. Julian bit his lip, watching Patrick screw the cap back on. "God, no wonder Roz looked at me like I was such an asshole when I called her mom. Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's kind of difficult to bring up," Julian pointed out. "Besides, you know Roz. She's as bad as you. She doesn't want anyone's sympathy, and she *definitely* doesn't want pity."

"I guess." Patrick put the bottle down by his hip and then turned his face into the tile a little. "Should I tell her I know? Should I apologize? What do I say?"

Julian shifted on the cold floor. "There's nothing you can say. At least not until she brings it up. I wouldn't worry about it." *You've got enough on your plate as it is.*

He watched his friend for a few silent minutes. Patrick still didn't look good. In fact, he looked like someone who had been beaten so hard and for so long that they had just given up. Julian didn't like the look on Patrick. Even though he'd always been what Cam had called "damaged," Julian had never seen him look as defeated as he did right now. Something else had to be going on. "Patrick, what happened to you? I mean, besides getting shot?"

Patrick huffed a short little laugh. "Where do I start?" he sighed. "Cam's stalker turned out to be this guy I used to date. Timothy." He snorted. "Turns out he was only dating me to get to Cam. Anyway, I apparently missed the sociopath vibes. He cut the brake lines on Jeremy's car, which led to Cam getting in an accident, which led to a shoot-out at the hospital." He motioned to his shoulder. "He was going to kill Jeremy. So I shot him." Quietly: "He died. I killed him, Ace. I don't even think I regret it."

Julian picked at Patrick's sock. He wasn't ready to speak just yet. He hated that life had been this cruel to someone who had always been good to him, even when he didn't really deserve it. Patrick's sense of self-worth was fragile enough as it was without someone using him to get to another man. He wished he'd remembered that last night instead of this morning. It had taken him months to understand the lasting emotional damage Patrick's parents had inflicted on him when he'd told them he was gay. He'd always been sensitive to that—until it mattered most, apparently.

Patrick shouldn't have had to question his conscience over this. Julian knew he wouldn't have killed anyone unless he had no choice. So did everyone else who'd ever met him—it was only Patrick that doubted himself. "Think we should go on Dr. Phil?"

"Oh, God, we're fucked-up enough to warrant daytime television. This is a new low."

Julian nudged Patrick in the hip with his foot. "I think Brad's good for you."

"Yeah?" Patrick nudged him back. "Why do you think that?"

Julian smiled a little, wistfully. "You didn't sleep with him."

"What?!"

Patrick's shock at Julian's unexpected pronouncement was pretty cute. "It's obvious, Patrick. You got sulky when he wasn't there last night. You obviously missed him, and you went home with us." He shrugged. "You're a lot of things, Patrick—slut doesn't even top the list—"

Patrick stuck out his tongue.

"But you're not a cheater." He scratched the back of his head ruefully. "Actually I think Brad kind of wants to beat the snot out of me right now. Hell, even *I* think I deserve it. Maybe I should just tell him to take his best shot."

If Patrick could have gone whiter, Julian had the feeling he would have. "Brad knows?"

"You're not exactly Mr. Subtle Pain, you know. Besides, what else could have happened that you wouldn't talk about with Brad? You're staying in Alberta with your *ex-boyfriend*." Julian thought it was pretty damn obvious. "Brad may or may not have noticed the bad decision-making."

"Well, at least I don't have to wonder what to tell him." Patrick sighed. "I'm—ow, fuck, that hurts."

Julian frowned, following Patrick's gaze. His leg had just twitched a little on the floor. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Patrick said. Julian could tell he was lying by the way he winced. "I tripped going up the stairs last night. Jack caught me before I could fall, but I think I jarred something."

Fuck. That was all Julian needed, for Patrick to be further injured physically as well as emotionally. Fantastic. Groaning, he rolled to his knees. "Okay, stand up."

Patrick scowled.

"What, you think I'm going to make you take medication for your shoulder but that I'm not going to check out your spinal cord injury when you complain about it? You're delusional. Come on, get up. If you're good, I'll give you candy or something; that's what we do for the whiny kids at the clinic."

Patrick stood up, grimacing, shifting from foot to foot for a minute. Julian knelt behind him and pulled up the back of his shirt, pressing his fingers along Patrick's spine. He wasn't a chiropractor, but there weren't any major problems. "I still wish you'd called me."

The muscles in Patrick's back tensed. "Ace...."

"You didn't have to call me as a doctor, you know. You could have called me as a friend." Biting his lip, Julian probed the skin a little deeper. There didn't seem to be any slipped discs or anything. "I would have believed you."

"Julian—" The muscles tensed again and then slowly went lax. "Here's the thing. I don't think I'd have been able to take it if *you* told me I'd never walk again."

Oh. That... made sense. Julian inspected the area around the bullet wound carefully, but there was no damage he could see, at least not without some X-rays. "It hurts here?" He poked Patrick in the

back of his right leg.

"Ow! Yes. Keith wanted me to have Roz check it out, just to make sure...." Patrick trailed off.

"You can relax, Patrick. Keith doesn't want to talk to me because I was an ass. I'll get over it." He leaned back and stood up, stretching the kinks out of his back. When had he gotten so tense? Probably when they were screaming at each other in the kitchen, Julian reflected.

"So? What's the problem?"

"You want my professional opinion?"

Patrick nodded. Poor Patrick. He was so used to things being wrong with him that he always expected the worst.

"You're getting old. You pulled a muscle."

Patrick's mouth dropped open. "Seriously?"

"Sorry. No surgery required." Julian smiled, relieved. "I can take some X-rays this week if you're still worried. I know how much you love them. You can send them along to Keith with my regards."

"Getting old?"

"Yes."

"You know you're older than I am, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't abuse my body. It is a temple, not a bad horror movie." Julian poked him in the stomach. Patrick wasn't looking quite as green as he had a few minutes ago. "You want some leftover pancakes?"

"God, no." Some of the green returned. "No pancakes. Not for at least a week."

"But you love pancakes."

"Not anymore."

Julian grimaced. Apparently Patrick had seen those pancakes more recently than he would have liked. "Right. Sorry. Um—"

Ding.

"Saved by the bell," Patrick quipped.

Julian stuck his tongue out at him and went to answer the door. "Hi, Hallie," he said, surprised. "Roy. What can I do for you?"

"Hey, Julian," Roy said, smiling slightly. "Is Jack home? I need to ask him a favor."

Julian shook his head. "Sorry. He's walking Robot. Is there something I can do?"

Roy sighed. "I don't know. I hope so. I need to take my mom to have some tests done at the hospital, and my regular babysitter just called. She's got the flu. I was hoping you wouldn't mind

watching Hallie for a few hours. I can take her with me if it's a problem."

Deus ex machina, Julian thought with a small smile. "Nah, it's no problem. Come on in, little lady."

"Thanks," Roy said gratefully. "I really appreciate this, man. I'll be back around two-thirty."

Julian and Hallie waved him off, and then Julian shut the door. He exchanged a smile with Patrick before turning to Hallie. "So, tell me, Miss Klein. Have you ever seen *The Princess Bride*?"

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Chapter Ten

Sitting in his car, which was still in his driveway, Brad went over everything he needed for his date with Patrick. He'd done the same thing before he left the house, but it wouldn't hurt to do it again. He needed to make sure that everything was perfect. He wanted the picnic to be as good as the first date.

Coming to the conclusion that everything was ready to go, Brad put the car in gear and headed to Jack and Julian's. Even though he had spoken to Patrick several times since Sunday, and the other man had assured him that he was fine, Brad was still angry. He had a fairly good idea of what had happened between the three men—he wasn't as naive as most people thought—and he was less than impressed.

Oddly enough, he was more upset with Julian and Jack than he was with Patrick. He'd seen the look of guilt and devastation on Patrick's face when he got to *Brenda's*. Watching as the haunted look in Patrick's eyes had been replaced with happiness while they ate had helped to dispel the anxiety Brad had been feeling. Seeing how hard it was for Patrick to get out of the car when he dropped him off had actually made Brad angry enough that he had snapped at Julian. Brad wasn't normally the type to get angry—it was part of what made him such a good bartender—but after watching Patrick bypass his friend to get into the house, he had felt the anger rise.

The drive home was when he realized that he might be in trouble. Brad knew that he was setting himself up to get hurt. Patrick was only in town until October, and then he was heading home, but Brad couldn't help himself. He wanted to be with the other man. Just thinking about the several kisses they had shared made him tremble with desire. He'd take what he could get, even if the result was a broken heart.

Pulling into the drive at Jack and Julian's, Brad put the car in park and looked toward the house. Patrick was sitting on the porch waiting for him. Brad watched a large smile cross the other man's face as he noticed the car. That smile sent a jolt of heat through Brad. This was going to be an interesting date. Climbing out of the parked car, Brad had just about made it to Patrick when his cell phone rang.

Frowning at the interruption, Brad pulled the phone from his pocket. "Hello?"

"Bradley, I need you to come and get me."

"Gran?" Patrick had reached him, and Brad leaned into the soft touch on his cheek with a smile.

"Aren't you supposed to be playing cards today?"

"That's why I need you to come and get me. Ida's waste of a grandchild forgot to come and pick me up. Again."

Brad sighed softly as he looked at Patrick. He couldn't say no to his gran. "I'll be there soon, but I only have time to pick you up. I'm on a date."

"Oh, was that today? I'm sorry, sweetie, I forgot."

Brad didn't believe her for a second. She may have been getting old, but his gran had a mind like a steel trap. "I'll be right there, Gran."

"Thank you, Bradley."

"Bye, Gran." Brad disconnected with a sigh. He felt Patrick's hand slide into his hair, and he leaned into the touch. "We need to make a detour before we head out on our picnic."

"What's up?"

"I need to go and get my grandmother. Her ride flaked on her." Brad sighed and bit his lip. "I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it. I like that you care about your grandmother."

Brad smiled at Patrick and moved into his personal space. He tilted his head up and pressed a kiss to the tempting lips. He was about to press closer when he felt an arm pressing against his chest. He pulled away and looked down. "You're wearing your sling again."

"Yeah. Roz tried to kill me."

"Really?"

Patrick flushed. "Okay, maybe I was being an ass, and she made the exercises harder because I was pissing her off."

Brad laughed and wrapped an arm around Patrick's waist, leading him to the car. "That sounds more like you."

"I'm not that bad."

Brad pulled open the passenger door, ushering him inside. "Liar." He leaned in and kissed Patrick again. God, did he ever love the way that man tasted. Brad threaded his fingers into Patrick's soft hair and put more pressure into the kiss, slipping his tongue past Patrick's lips. Patrick opened for him, pulling his tongue in to play. He pulled away only when his back started to protest the angle.

"Wilde Thing, if you keep that up, we will be late getting to your grandmother's."

"Sorry, can't help it." Brad ran his fingers down Patrick's cheek with a smile and then closed the door. Walking around the car, he climbed into the driver's side, did up his seat belt, put the car in motion, and headed for his gran's.

"Okay, so what side of the family is 'Gran'?"

Brad spared Patrick a quick glance, noting the honest interest on his face. "She's my father's

mother. My parents wanted her to go with them when they moved to B.C., but she said no. She wanted to stay here."

"I take it she ran the house?"

"Most definitely. Gran is the one in charge." Brad linked his fingers with Patrick's when he felt the hand settle on his leg. He pulled their linked hands up and pressed a kiss to the back of Patrick's hand. "Thank you for not making a big deal out of this."

"Why would I? You seem to love your gran as much as I loved my granny. I have no problem with pushing our picnic back half an hour or so to give her a lift."

"We won't be that long, because you *aren't* going into the house. I want to actually have a date, not watch Gran show you the photo albums."

"There are photo albums?" The teasing tone was practically dripping from Patrick's voice. "Are there naked baby pictures?"

Brad felt his face heat up. "I'm not going to answer that."

"The blush sort of answered it for me, baby. Sorry."

"Well, you won't get to see any today. She'll be waiting for us when we get there."

"I have to admit, I'm a little nervous about meeting your grandmother."

"So am I," Brad replied. He gave the hand he was holding a squeeze. His gran had terrified every one of the girls he had brought home to meet her. She'd even terrified Rebecca, his brother Isaac's soon-to-be-ex, and she was a bit of a bitch. He'd never brought a man to meet her before. This was going to be interesting.

"Baby, does your grandmother know that you like men, or am I going to be an unwelcome surprise?" The question sounded normal, but Brad could hear the uncertainty underneath. Plus, Patrick's hand was squeezing his repeatedly, a good sign that he was agitated.

"Yes, she knows. I talked to her when I realized that I was attracted to men."

"You talked to your grandmother?"

Brad gave Patrick a brief look and a smile. "You talked to yours."

"Good point." Patrick laughed lightly and squeezed his hand.

Brad smiled to himself as they continued the drive in silence. He couldn't believe how comfortable he felt with Patrick after such a short time. Brad let go of Patrick's hand when he reached his gran's house. He needed both hands to turn the car into the rather narrow drive. He swallowed nervously as he parked the car. *Now or never*. He stepped out of the car and headed to where his grandmother waited on the porch.

Annabelle Wilde had been a beautiful woman when she was young, and that beauty was still visible in her lined face; those lines were mainly laugh and smile lines. Her iron-colored hair was in a French braid that hung down her back. Brad could feel her blue eyes on him as he walked closer. There was a smile on her face. "Bradley, you look very handsome today."

Brad felt his face flush. "Thanks, Gran." He had worn one of his favorite blue sweaters and a pair

of khakis.

Her eyes moved past him and landed on Patrick. "You must be the date."

"Patrick Hawkins." Brad watched as Patrick came forward, took Gran's hand, and placed a kiss to the back. "It's nice to meet the woman that Brad says such wonderful things about."

"Well, this one is a charmer." Annabelle smiled at Patrick. "You can help me to the car."

"I would love to." Patrick helped her down from the steps with more grace than would be expected of someone with an arm in a sling. He winked at Brad as they walked past. Brad shook his head with a smile and followed them to the car. Since Patrick's good arm was the one that Gran was holding, Brad opened the passenger door for her.

"Thank you, boys." She settled herself in the passenger seat.

Brad turned to his date. "Thank you for letting her sit in front."

"Not a problem, but you will have to get the door for me." Patrick grinned at him and used his free hand to toy with the bottom of Brad's sweater. "I can't get it on my own once I'm in the car."

"Not nice to tease me like that when my gran is in the car," Brad replied. He leaned in for a quick kiss and then opened the door for Patrick. Once sure that the other man was settled, he walked around the car and climbed behind the wheel. They managed to make it out of the driveway before the interrogation started.

"So, Patrick, what do you do for a living?"

"I'm a detective."

"Is that dangerous work?"

"Sometimes."

"Is that what happened to your arm?"

"Actually, my arm is fine. I was shot in the shoulder."

Annabelle smiled. "That mouth of yours gets you in trouble, doesn't it?"

"If I'm lucky."

"Does it get you back out?"

"Depending on the trouble." Patrick's eyes met Brad's in the rearview mirror, and Brad felt himself flush once again. "Some trouble is worth getting into."

The laughter coming from his gran startled Brad so much that he actually jumped. He managed to keep the car in a straight line by sheer force of will. He couldn't believe that Patrick was teasing him in front of his gran. Wait; yes, he could.

"I like this one, Brad; he's feisty. Much better than those girls that you used to bring home."

"Gran!" Brad seriously considered dying of mortification. He felt something brush the back of his neck and caught Patrick's eyes in the mirror again. He relaxed slightly when he saw the smile on

Patrick's face.

"Well, he is." Annabelle's eyes suddenly narrowed in concentration as she turned in the seat so she could face Patrick. "Tattoos?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Do you have tattoos?"

"Gran! How is that important?"

"I just want to know. He looks like the type that would have tattoos."

"Eight."

"Pardon?" Annabelle looked from Patrick to Brad and then back again. Brad was fairly certain that his eyes were as wide as his gran's.

"I have eight tattoos. Oh, and a pierced nipple."

A strangled whimper forced its way past Brad's lips. He was slightly mortified that he was starting to get hard with his gran in the car, but he couldn't help it. Visions of playing with Patrick's nipple ring while hunting out all of those tattoos with his tongue were filling his head. Brad bit back another whimper as he finally turned onto Ida's street.

"You have a pierced nipple?" Annabelle's voice was a mixture of shock and intrigue.

"Yes."

"Did it hurt?"

"Gran!" Brad was sputtering in surprise. He couldn't believe the questions that his gran was asking. If she had treated the girls he brought home to the same type of questioning, it was no wonder they all ran away.

"A bit, but it was worth it," Patrick replied. Brad glanced in the rearview mirror. There was an absolutely wicked smile on Patrick's face. Brad wanted to press him down in the backseat and kiss him until he couldn't breathe.

The sight of Ida's house was like salvation. Brad loved his gran, but he wanted her out of the car. Now. He pulled into the drive fast enough that the tires squealed. Brad could feel himself blushing as he put the car in park.

"Trying to get rid of me, Bradley?" Annabelle gave him an amused grin. "I don't think I've ever been in the car with you when you've been driving this fast."

"I'm sorry, Gran, I just—"

"Want to spend time with your young man. I understand. I was young once."

"And it must have been a short time ago," Patrick interjected.

"You are trouble, I can tell you that much." Annabelle smiled at him. "But I believe you to be the good kind. Now, someone needs to help me out of the car."

Brad practically leaped out of the car, but by the time he made it around, Patrick was using his good hand to help Gran out. She smiled and gave his cheek a pat. "I like you, Patrick."

"And I like you, Mrs. Wilde."

"You can call me Annabelle." She stepped away from Patrick and kissed Brad's cheek. "You should bring him by the house. I'll make the two of you lunch."

"I'll do that." Brad gave her a kiss and then watched as she walked up the drive. Once sure that she was safely inside the house, he turned back to Patrick. Brad took two steps and settled his arms around Patrick's waist. He smiled into the other man's eyes. "You just managed to charm my gran."

"I think she likes me."

"She wants me to bring you to lunch. She never wanted me to bring any of the girls back after she met them for the first time."

"That's because she thinks I'm special. She said that I could call her Annabelle."

Brad leaned into the embrace. "I think you're special too." He tilted Patrick's head up and gave him a kiss. Brad licked along Patrick's lips until the other man opened for him. He twined his tongue around Patrick's and tugged it into his own mouth. He pulled away when he felt Patrick's good hand land on his ass. "We should go."

"Don't want to make out in the driveway?"

"Not this one. Come on; I've got a picnic for us in the back." Brad pulled away and held the door open for Patrick to climb in. Once his date was settled in the car, Brad closed the door, walked around, and got behind the wheel once again.

After the chatter that had filled the car earlier, the drive to the park seemed very quiet. It wasn't a strained silence. Brad smiled as a hand linked with his. It didn't take him long to make the trip to the park. Once he had the car parked, Brad climbed out and retrieved the basket and blankets from the backseat. Settling them on one arm, he hurried around the car and opened the door for Patrick. He knew that Patrick could get out of the car on his own, but he didn't want him to strain himself.

"You know, I actually like the way that you hover, Wilde Thing."

"Good, because I am going to hover until you get better." Brad gave him a soft kiss, locked the car, grasped his hand, and started tugging him into the park.

They passed several other couples out enjoying the day. Keeping a grip on Patrick's hand, Brad led him through the park. He wanted to take him to his favorite area of the park, and just hoped there wasn't someone there already. Brad stepped off the path near the pond and steered them around a group of trees. They ended up in a rather secluded area, near the pond, that was surrounded by trees.

"Wow, this place is nice."

"I like to come here and draw. I like the seclusion." Brad placed the basket on the ground and then spread out one of the two blankets he had brought with him. Once he had it spread out, he grabbed the basket, settled himself on the ground, and held out his hand to Patrick. "Join me?"

Patrick lowered himself to the blanket with a smile. "So, what's in the basket?"

"Picnic food."

"Picnic food? What exactly is picnic food?"

"Well, let's take a look." Brad pulled the basket closer and opened it. He started to pull out food. "I've got sandwiches."

"What type?"

"Chicken salad, ham, turkey, and tuna." Brad blushed slightly. "I wasn't sure what you would like."

"Sounds good. What else?"

"Beer, water, and lemonade. I wasn't sure what you were allowed to drink with the pills you're on. I also have potato salad, coleslaw, and strawberries with chocolate dipping sauce." Brad felt his blush darken as he said the last part. His mind was providing him with wonderful suggestions of what he could do with the chocolate sauce.

"That's a full basket." Patrick maneuvered his way around the food and sat next to Brad. "I like that you packed this much food."

"I wanted to make sure that you had enough to eat." Brad watched as Patrick grabbed a bottle of lemonade and a chicken salad sandwich. When Patrick gave a happy moan after he bit into the sandwich, Brad smiled. "You like?"

"This has to be one of the best chicken salad sandwiches that I have ever tasted."

"I'm glad that you like it. My gran taught me how to make it."

"It's amazing." Patrick emitted another moan as he continued to eat the sandwich. Smiling at his lunch date, Brad picked out a sandwich for himself.

They chatted easily as they ate most of the sandwiches. During the course of their lunch, Patrick had sprawled across the blanket. By the time they were done with the sandwiches, Patrick had his head pillowed in Brad's lap. Brad was absently running his fingers through Patrick's hair. Patrick's uninjured arm was running over Brad's leg in idle patterns. Brad smiled down at him. "You look incredibly comfortable down there."

"I am. Although I would like some of those strawberries."

"I guess I could help with that." Brad leaned over and pulled the strawberries and chocolate out of the basket. He dipped one into the chocolate and held it to Patrick's lips. The hand not holding the strawberry curved around Patrick's head to rest against his jaw.

Grinning up at him, Patrick opened his mouth and took in half of the strawberry. His eyes closed in apparent pleasure as he swallowed the bite of fruit. Brad moaned softly as he watched, running his thumb along Patrick's jaw. Patrick's eyes opened, and he licked his lips. He tilted his head up for the rest of the fruit, letting his lips graze Brad's fingers as he pulled it into his mouth. A jolt of pleasure shot from Brad's fingers to his groin. He could feel his cock start to harden.

"These are good. Do you want one?"

"I think I like watching you eat them." Brad continued to run his thumb over Patrick's jaw, smiling

at the look of pleasure on the other man's face.

"I can't eat all of these, Brad. I'm stuffed." Patrick laced the fingers of his good arm through the fingers that weren't caressing his cheek. "You pack a good picnic."

"You didn't have to have one of each of the sandwiches."

"But you made them."

Brad smiled at him. "I'm glad that you liked them." He leaned over Patrick so he could look at his watch. "We need to get going. I've got to get ready for work."

"Do you have to?"

"Yes."

Patrick sighed. "Fine." He released Brad's fingers and heaved himself into a sitting position.

Brad ruffled Patrick's hair and placed a quick kiss on his lips. "Come on, I'll take you home."

Brad climbed to his feet and reached down to help Patrick. He pulled the older man up and into his arms. A soft laugh escaped his lips as Patrick nuzzled his cheek. Brad wrapped both arms around the detective and pulled him as close as possible. Pressing a kiss to his cheek, Brad released him and packed up the picnic stuff. Taking Patrick's hand once again, he started to lead him out of the park. It had been a wonderful day. Brad was actually sad that he had to go to work. The night would be dull without Patrick.

* * * *

Patrick straightened his shirt once more as he stood in front of *Brenda's*. The earlier date had been so amazing he hadn't wanted it to end. Patrick had spent the time at home playing with Robot and thinking about Brad. After a surprisingly comfortable dinner with Jack and Julian, Patrick had decided that he wanted to go and surprise Brad. He'd quickly changed his clothes, and, after refusing the offer of transportation, walked to *Brenda's*. He'd left the sling at home, since it would only get in his way at the bar. Now, standing in front of his destination, he actually felt a tad nervous.

Fuck it. I'm going in. Patrick took one last, deep breath and stepped inside.

Brenda's was nowhere near as busy as it had been on Saturday night, but there was a good crowd. Patrick smiled and nodded at some of the people he had seen on Saturday as he made his way to the bar. Finding a space at the bar without other people around, Patrick sat down and waited for Brad to notice him.

When Brad finally turned and faced him, Patrick watched as a large smile crossed his face. "Patrick."

"Hey." Patrick flashed Brad his best dirty smirk. "Nice boots; wanna fuck?"

Brad blinked. "But I'm wearing sneakers."

"I'm not picky." Patrick laughed lightly at the confused expression on Brad's handsome face. "I'm just teasing you."

Brad flushed. "Sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry about. I happen to think that you're adorable when I tease you."

"I guess it's a good thing that one of us does."

"If you want me to stop, Brad, I will." Patrick dropped his teasing smirk and gave the bartender a serious look. "The last thing that I want to do is make you uncomfortable."

"I'm not uncomfortable." Patrick shivered as Brad ran a finger down his cheek. "So, you hungry?"

"After the lunch you made me and the dinner Julian stuffed me with, the last thing that I need is food. At this rate, I'm going to get fat."

"You don't strike me as the get-fat type."

"Working out with a bullet wound is not easy."

"I guess we'll just have to find a way to make sure you get a good workout." Brad turned bright red as he realized what he had said.

Patrick had to hold back a chuckle. Flustered Brad was fun. "How about you get me a beer? Will that give you enough time to stop blushing? I mean, *I* love the blush, but I'm not sure how you feel about it."

"I'll be right back with your beer," Brad stated. He continued to blush as he walked farther down the bar. Patrick smiled as he watched the flustered young man walk away. Coming to *Brenda's* had been a good idea. He was feeling better already.

Several hours and a couple of beers later, Patrick was still sitting at the bar while Brad was closing up. He watched as Brad moved around the bar with precision, putting everything where it should be before he turned to Patrick with a smile. They were the only people left in the bar.

Patrick was still sitting on the barstool when Brad walked up to him. The younger man inserted himself between Patrick's thighs and ran his hands up Patrick's legs. Patrick felt himself start to tremble under the younger man's touch. When Brad's hands skimmed his ribs before settling on his waist, Patrick actually moaned. Since the barstool made him slightly taller, Patrick had to lean down to meet Brad's lips. The feeling of Brad urging his lips apart had Patrick moaning into the kiss. Patrick rested his forehead against the bartender's when the kiss ended.

"Patrick?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"Come home with me?"

"You sure?"

"Positive."

"Then take me home, Brad," Patrick instructed. He slithered off the barstool and into Brad's waiting arms in a motion that had them completely brushing against each other. Patrick moaned at the contact. Inside Brad's arms was quickly becoming his favorite place to be.

Patrick smiled as Brad linked their fingers together and tugged him out of the bar. He shoved his hands in the pockets of his jacket while he waited for Brad to lock up. The temperature had dropped while they were inside, and now there was a bite in the air. He rocked back and forth on

his heels while he waited. When strong arms wrapped around his waist, he leaned back with a smile. "All done?"

"All done. Let's go."

Patrick leaned against Brad's side as he was led to the car. He let Brad open the door for him, enjoying the feeling of having someone care for him. It wasn't something that he was used to. He hated admitting when he actually needed someone to look after him, so Julian and his grandmother were the only people who had ever really taken the time to make sure that he was being cared for. It was nice to have someone else to add to the list of people who cared.

The drive from *Brenda's* to Brad's house was quiet. Patrick let his fingers dance across Brad's thigh as the other man drove. He had never expected he would end up dating during his forced exile, but he had to admit that he was enjoying it.

Brad pulled the car to a stop in his driveway. Patrick turned slightly so that he could see Brad and took a moment to simply enjoy the sight of the other man. He ran his fingers down Brad's cheek when he turned to face him. Using the slight grip that he had on Brad's chin, Patrick pulled Brad into a gentle kiss. He licked at the seal of Brad's lips until they opened for him. Patrick dipped his tongue inside for a taste.

He felt Brad's hands come to rest in his hair. As Brad's fingers began to massage his scalp, Patrick moved closer and deepened the kiss. He tried to wrap his arms around Brad, but within the close confines of the car, his shoulder gave a throb of protest. He hissed in pain and pulled away from the kiss.

Brad's eyes softened with concern. "Shoulder?"

"Yeah." Patrick winced slightly as he moved fully back to the passenger side of the car.

"Why don't we go inside?"

"I think that might be a good idea," Patrick replied. He rested his head against the cool glass of the car window as the pain slowly ebbed. Opening eyes that had fallen shut while he warded off the pain, Patrick saw that Brad was standing outside the window. *Damn, I must be in pain if I didn't hear him leave the car.*

"Come on, let's get you inside." Brad reached inside the car and helped him to his feet. Patrick allowed the gentle pull to propel him into Brad's arms. When those arms settled on his waist, he rested his head on Brad's shoulder and sighed. He loved being held.

They pulled apart slowly, Brad keeping one arm around Patrick's waist as they walked up the drive to the porch. Even though it was dark, Patrick was once again drawn to the beauty of the gardens. "Brad, the gardens are beautiful. Do you do all the planting?"

Brad laughed lightly. "No. My neighbor does all of the planting. She loves to garden. I can barely tell the difference between a flower and a weed."

"Neither can I, but I used to love helping my grandmother in the garden. She would let me pick the flowers that she planted." The happiness from the memory carried Patrick through the door and into Brad's house. He was slipping off his shoes when he noticed the change in Brad.

Patrick looked up to see Brad standing by the door he had just finished locking. The way he was holding himself *screamed* "nervous." He glanced from the door to Patrick with what looked like slowly rising panic in his eyes. Patrick took a slow step toward him and held out his hand. The

hand that grasped his was trembling.

"Patrick?"

"Yeah, baby?"

"I think I'm starting to freak out a bit."

"I can see that. Why don't you take your shoes off, and then we can go sit down and talk?"

"That sounds like a good plan." Brad released his hand in order to remove his shoes. Patrick made sure to stay close enough to be supportive but far enough away that he wasn't crowding. It wasn't an easy thing to do.

Once Brad had his shoes off, he led Patrick through the dimly lit house to the living room. The only lights on were the ones Brad had left on before he went to work. He sat on the couch by the fireplace and looked up at Patrick, nervously biting his lip. Patrick wanted to pull him into his arms and soothe the bitten lip with his tongue. He settled for sitting on the couch within touching distance of Brad.

"I feel like an idiot."

Patrick looked at Brad in surprise. That wasn't what he had expected to hear. "Why?"

"Because I asked you here, and now I'm freaking out." Brad sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

"Nothing has to happen, Brad. In all honesty, I'd be thrilled to just spend the night sleeping in your arms. It may make me sound like a wuss, but I love being held."

"I want this, Patrick, I really do. More than I thought I would, actually. I'm just not sure how to go about it."

"It would help if you told *mewhat* you wanted." Patrick reached across the distance between them and threaded his fingers with Brad's. He gave the hand a squeeze and a soft tug. He smiled when Brad moved closer and rested his head on Patrick's shoulder.

"I want you."

"You've got me, Angel." Patrick gently cupped Brad's chin and tilted it up for a kiss.

The kiss started out soft and tender but soon filled with more passion. Patrick buried his hands in Brad's blond hair and pulled the man closer. He opened to Brad's questing tongue, going so far as to pull said tongue into his mouth. While one of his hands stayed in the blond hair, the other ran over the strong back. He broke the kiss with a startled yelp as Brad pushed him back against the couch.

Brad was instantly concerned. "Did I hurt you?"

"No, you just startled me." Patrick pulled Brad back into the kiss. He shifted underneath Brad, managing to get the younger man to fall between his legs. Patrick wrapped one leg over the back of Brad's thighs to hold him in place, and then he gave himself over to the kiss.

And could Brad ever kiss. Patrick felt like he was melting into the couch, and he didn't want it to end. He fisted his hands into the fabric of Brad's shirt and pulled the man closer. When Brad's lips

left his, he actually whimpered with loss. Those lips then traveled down his neck, nipping and licking at the skin. Brad made it halfway down his neck before he stopped to suck a mark into existence. Patrick moaned and clutched at the strong back beneath his hands.

Teeth bit into his neck, and Patrick cried out in pleasure. "Oh, God, Brad."

"Like that?" Brad's voice was downright wicked.

"God, yes. Again."

Brad chuckled against his neck and then bit down on the skin once more. Patrick whimpered and pressed his neck closer to the mouth attached to it. He moved one hand from Brad's back to the back of Brad's head and pressed him more fully against his neck. From the way Brad's teeth were worrying at his neck, Patrick knew that the mark was going to be huge and incredibly noticeable, but he just didn't care.

Patrick gasped as he suddenly felt hands on his skin. Brad had managed to worm his hands beneath Patrick's sweater. When one of those hands crept up and flicked his nipple ring, Patrick howled and nearly bucked Brad off the couch.

"I think we should move this to the bedroom."

"Please." Patrick's voice came out in a long moan. He was whimpering and tossing his head back and forth on the couch. He felt as if his entire body was on fire.

He knew that Brad was only moving away so that they could get off the couch, but he still moaned at the loss. His fingers actually clutched at Brad's shirt as the other man pulled away from him. The sharp tug to his hand got him moving. Once Patrick was on his feet, he moved into Brad's arms and pulled him into a hungry kiss. His hands roamed over the toned body pressed against his, dipping to grab the rather delectable ass.

Brad moaned in his arms and thrust his hips forward. Patrick groaned as Brad's erection brushed his own. He gripped the firm cheeks in his hands and ground himself against Brad. The smaller man pulled away from him with a gasp, and Patrick moaned as he pulled away.

"Patrick, if we don't stop now, I'm going to come in my jeans like a teenager."

No, not good. We need a bed. I want this to be special. Patrick forced himself to take deep, calming breaths. "Right, stopping now."

"Come on, let's go upstairs."

"I'll go wherever you want me to, Angel."

"Follow me." Brad grabbed Patrick's left hand and started to tug him toward the stairs. Patrick trailed slightly behind Brad so he could get a good look at his ass. It was a very nice ass. It was a very nice ass that he wanted to see naked.

Patrick barely noticed their surroundings as Brad pulled him through the house. He was too intent on where they were going. Brad's case of nerves was apparently catching. He was starting to think he wasn't going to be good enough for Brad. They reached the master bedroom, and Brad pulled him inside. Patrick stopped moving and stared at the bed.

"Patrick, are you okay?"

Patrick gave a wry laugh. "I think your case of nerves is contagious."

"What do you have to be nervous about? You've done this before."

Patrick leaned into the arms that suddenly surrounded him. He pressed his face into Brad's neck and breathed in the other man's scent. "I'm worried that I won't be good enough for you."

"Hey, where is this coming from?" Patrick moved his head as he allowed Brad to force him to look up. "What would make you think that?"

Because all anyone ever wants from me is sex, and I don't think I deserve you. "I want this to be good for you, Brad. You deserve that. Hell, you deserve so much more." Patrick touched Brad's face with gentle fingers. "I don't want to disappoint you."

"I don't think that's possible." Brad pulled him back into his arms and into a kiss so tender that Patrick thought his heart would burst. "Although you will have to tell me what to do."

"For starters, naked is good." Patrick pulled back far enough to grab the bottom of Brad's shirt, drawing it up and over his head. He tossed the shirt across the room and looked at the feast before him.

Brad's fairly loose clothing hid an impressive set of defined pecs. His shoulders were broad and built in the way that only years of playing hockey could do to a body. Patrick ran his hands down the smooth chest to roam over the sculpted abs. This was the reason he loved hockey players: the muscles. In fact, before he had started dating Julian, he had slept his way through half of the university hockey team. *Hockey muscles, yum.*

Patrick was so intent on his exploration of Brad's chest he didn't realize Brad had undone his shirt until he felt hands on his skin. He had to pull his hands away as Brad slid the shirt from his shoulders. He trembled slightly as the strong hands ran over his chest. The fingers lightly skimmed the red and slightly swollen area of his injured shoulder. From the feel of things, Brad was hunting out his tattoos.

Slipping his fingers through Brad's belt loops, Patrick pulled him toward the bed. When he felt the back of his knees hit the mattress, Patrick fell back and pulled Brad on top of him. He used his feet to kick the covers to the bottom of the bed. Patrick was fairly certain that they only ended up in a tangle at the bottom, but he just needed them to be out of the way. He ran his fingers over the strong back as Brad's mouth settled over the Health and Strength tattoos. As Brad began to slowly lick the tattoos, Patrick moaned softly. He'd had lovers who ignored the tattoos, but he loved it when they were given attention. He was practically purring as Brad licked them.

Brad's lips moved down to his nipple, and he gasped, which caused Brad to stop. "No, don't stop."

He felt the grin against his skin as Brad went back to tormenting his nipple. Patrick's head thrashed against the pillows as the sensations ran through his body. He could feel his erection straining against his pants. The feeling of Brad's answering erection pressing against him was enough to drive him mad. Brad moved his mouth to the other side of his chest and pulled the nipple ring into his mouth.

Oh, fuck, yes! Patrick cried out in pleasure and buried his hands in the blond hair. He tugged on the strands as his erection swelled to almost painful fullness. Patrick moaned as Brad tugged on the ring. When Brad nipped at the pierced nipple, Patrick couldn't take it anymore. With a strangled growl, Patrick flipped them over so he had Brad pinned underneath him.

"My turn," Patrick purred. He gave the surprised man a quick kiss and then started an exploration

of his own.

Patrick ran his tongue down Brad's neck. When he found Brad's pulse, Patrick locked his mouth at that point and pulled the skin into his mouth. He sucked the skin until he could feel the blood rising under his lips and Brad was panting beneath him. Patrick pulled back to look at the mark he had left on the slender throat. He looked up from the mark to see that Brad was flushed with arousal. It was a good look on him.

Patrick gave the bruise a soft kiss and then moved down Brad's chest. He paused on his way to press kisses to random pieces of skin. When he reached the first nipple, he pulled it into his mouth while using his fingers to toy with the other one. Brad writhed beneath him, and his hands buried themselves in Patrick's hair. Patrick groaned at every tug on his hair. Releasing the nipple that was in his mouth, he moved on to the next one. When Brad was trembling beneath him, he released it and started to move down his chest.

Trailing kisses down Brad's chest, Patrick continued downward. He momentarily dipped his tongue into Brad's navel. His actions made Brad squirm, causing Patrick to repeat the action. While he was licking and nipping Brad's navel, his hands were tracing the waistband of his jeans. When they met at the center, Patrick popped the button.

"Patrick." Brad's voice was a strained whisper. He'd removed his hands from Patrick's hair, and they were now gripping the bedsheets. His entire body was thrumming with tension.

"Hush, Angel, no need to worry."

"God, please, just touch me."

"I will, just let me get your pants off. They're in the way."

"Yours too. I want to see you."

"Anything for you, Angel." Patrick moved up Brad's body and pressed a kiss to his lips. He then slithered back down to Brad's pants. Hooking his fingers behind the opened button, he held the fly open slightly. He then lowered the zipper with his teeth.

"Oh, shit, Patrick." Brad's fingers were clenching the sheets so tightly Patrick was surprised the cotton wasn't ripping under the pressure.

With a wicked grin, Patrick pulled Brad's jeans down, managing to get his underwear as well. He climbed off the bed so he could get the jeans fully off. Once they were, he tossed them over his shoulder, not caring where they landed. Patrick took a moment to stare at the feast in front of him. Brad was gorgeous. He was all long, lean muscle, and a leaking erection that Patrick couldn't wait to taste.

Looking into Brad's eyes, he slowly undid the buttons on his button-fly jeans. Every time he popped a button, Brad's eyes got darker. When he had all of the buttons undone, he grinned at Brad and then shucked his pants. He wasn't wearing any underwear. Ignoring the slight twinge in his shoulder, he stepped out of his discarded pants and climbed back onto the bed. He situated himself next to Brad and then rolled onto his back, pulling the other man on top of him.

Patrick ran his fingers down Brad's cheek. Brad nuzzled into the touch, causing Patrick to smile. He could feel Brad's hands running over his sides. The touches were light and probably meant to be soothing, but they had the opposite effect on Patrick. Each touch only increased his arousal. He moaned and thrust up against Brad, bringing their erections into contact.

"You really do like to be touched, don't you?"

All Patrick could do was nod. His hands trembled against Brad's skin as he tried to arch into every touch Brad gave him. He loved having hands on his skin. Patrick, lost in his own haze of desire, almost missed it when the body above him stilled. He forced himself to pay attention to where Brad's hands were. One of them was on the large, jagged scar on his right side. Forcing one of his hands to move, Patrick gently cupped Brad's chin, forcing the blue eyes to meet his.

"I'm okay, Angel."

"This could have killed you."

"But it didn't, and I'm here in your arms, so you don't need to worry." Patrick ran his thumb along Brad's jaw. He lifted his head and pulled Brad's lips into a gentle kiss. Patrick shifted his hips and brushed his still-aching erection against Brad's. The younger man groaned and thrust down. "Do you have condoms and lube?"

"What?" Brad pulled away slightly, and Patrick could see a faint apprehension in his eyes.

Framing Brad's face with his hands, Patrick made sure he had the younger man's complete attention. "I want you in me, Angel. Now."

"Are you sure?"

"I want you, Brad. Please."

Brad's body slithered across Patrick as he retrieved the required items from the nightstand. "You'll have to walk me through this."

"The first thing you need to know is that there is no such thing as too much lube." Patrick spread his legs and allowed Brad to settle between them. He ran his hands over the strong arms and smiled at his lover. "Start with one finger and work your way up."

"How many?"

"You'll know. Trust yourself."

"I don't want to hurt you."

"You won't hurt me, Angel. I trust you." With a start, Patrick realized that he really *did* trust the other man. This was a bit of a surprise, as trust didn't come easy to him. *What am I getting myself into?*

Patrick was running his hands over Brad's back when he felt the first lubed finger press at his entrance. He gasped softly as it slipped inside. The motion was so slow and tender that Patrick barely felt the burn of entry. He rocked his hips back, trying to pull more of the digit inside. The feeling of one of Brad's fingers inside him made Patrick ache for Brad's cock. He wasn't sure how he was going to manage waiting. He wanted Brad so badly that he was tempted to impale himself on the rather impressive erection.

Brad's mouth closed over his pierced nipple at the same instant that a second finger entered him. Patrick gasped as his body started to shake. He couldn't decide which sensation he wanted to press into. When Brad's stretching fingers hit his prostate, Patrick screamed in pleasure and nearly tossed Brad off of him as his body reacted.

"Patrick?"

"More, please, Angel, more." Patrick could hear the whimpers coming from his mouth, but he didn't care. He wanted too much. His desire to have Brad buried inside him was nearly overwhelming.

As the third finger entered him, Patrick began thrusting against them in earnest. He was dizzy with arousal, and his cock was leaking pre-come onto his stomach. His hands were digging into Brad's back with enough force that he knew he was leaving bruises, but Brad didn't seem to be complaining. Patrick was rapidly approaching the point where he would go crazy if Brad didn't do something when he heard the sound of a condom being opened.

Patrick didn't realize he was begging until Brad's lips covered his, and the sounds he had been hearing disappeared. He had hoped that all the "pleases" had been in his head. When the blunt head of Brad's erection pressed against him, he whimpered and tried to press down.

"Are you sure you're ready?"

"Please, Angel, I need you." Patrick could hear the sob on the end of his words and was stunned to find that he was close to crying with need. Brad pushed in and Patrick hissed. "God, *yes*!"

Patrick wrapped his legs around Brad's waist and pulled him all the way in. Brad's forehead came to rest against his as the other man fought for control. Patrick squirmed beneath the weight of the body on top of him, loving every minute of it but wanting Brad to *move*. He felt the first, tentative thrust and moaned. Taking his moan for the encouragement that it was, Brad started moving.

The pace that he set was slow and so tender that Patrick thought his heart would burst. He could feel the tears forming in his eyes again, but these were from the sheer beauty of the moment. He forced them away before they could fully form. The last thing he wanted was for his Angel to think that he was in pain. As their movements began to match, Patrick looked up and met Brad's eyes. The moment he did, he was lost. He drowned in a sea of passion-filled blue, and he never wanted to leave.

Brad broke the connection when he leaned down to kiss Patrick. Patrick put everything he was feeling in that moment into the kiss. He couldn't hold back, but what scared him the most was that he didn't want to. He continued to rock against Brad as his Angel took possession of his body. His whimpers were escaping the kiss. When Brad hit his prostate with a well-aimed thrust, Patrick broke away from the kiss and howled.

Using the movement of his body, Patrick encouraged Brad to take a faster pace. He was beyond the ability to even think the words "harder" or "faster," let alone speak them. Brad sped up to meet the new pace that Patrick was creating with his hips. He was close. When Brad's hand closed around his aching erection, that was all it took.

"*Brad!*" Patrick's orgasm hit with enough force that he saw stars. He could feel the warm, sticky release hit his chest, but it seemed very distant from the pleasure he was feeling. He felt Brad give two more thrusts and then still as he released within Patrick. The feeling of Brad's erection swelling as he released pulled a tiny whimper from Patrick's mouth.

Patrick's hands were still on Brad's back, so he could feel the fine tremors running through his lover's body as Brad tried to keep from falling on him. Patrick ran his hands in soothing strokes down the trembling arms. When the trembling slowed, Brad gently pulled out of him. Patrick whimpered at the loss. Soothing kisses were placed on his face, and then Brad was gone. He returned moments later with a damp cloth and proceeded to clean Patrick off.

"Are you okay?" Brad's voice was full of concern as he settled next to Patrick. "I didn't hurt you?"

"I am more than okay, and you very much didn't hurt me." Patrick turned his head and looked into the blue eyes that were slowly becoming incredibly dear to him. He reached out and gently touched his cheek. "Angel."

Brad's cheeks darkened with a blush. "I like it when you call me that."

"Then I guess I'll have to do it more often, Angel." Patrick used his hand to pull Brad into a tender kiss. He blinked sleepily when they parted.

"I think you need some sleep."

"I think you wore me out, Angel." Patrick yawned. He was having trouble keeping his eyes open. When he felt sheets settle over him, he murmured softly.

A soft stroke to his side had Patrick rolling until he was in Brad's arms. He rested his head on the strong chest and placed his right hand over Brad's heart. Thankfully, Brad had positioned himself on Patrick's left side, so he could snuggle into him without hurting his shoulder. Patrick smiled as Brad tucked the covers around him to make sure he was warm.

"You warm enough?"

"Perfect." Patrick was starting to worry about just how perfect. The last time he had felt this comfortable after sleeping with someone, he and Julian had been dating for months. How easily Brad had slipped past his defenses was starting to scare him.

"Patrick?"

"Yeah, Angel?"

"I'm glad it was you."

"Me, too."

"Goodnight."

Patrick felt a kiss placed to his head and then Brad's body relaxed in sleep. The thought of someone else touching Brad had his mind spinning with possessive jealousy. He hadn't felt this way about anyone in ten years.

I am in deep shit.

* * * *

I had sex with a man.

Brad stared at the ceiling in his bedroom. The man in question murmured in his sleep and burrowed closer.

I had sex with a man. I had sex with a man and it was good—it was amazing.

Brad ran his fingers through the soft strands of Patrick's hair. The detective sighed and wrapped his arms around Brad's waist. They had spent the entire night wrapped in each other's arms. Several of his previous female lovers had spent the night, but he had never woken with them wrapped in his arms. Most had ended up on the other side of the bed with all of the covers. He

really enjoyed the change. Waking with Patrick in his arms was something that he could get used to.

That last thought made him freeze. Patrick would be gone at the end of the month. He shouldn't let himself get used to anything. It would only make it harder when Patrick eventually left. Brad's grip on the other man involuntarily tightened, causing Patrick to emit a small whimper of pain. Brad had accidentally squeezed his shoulder.

"Ow." He felt Patrick move against his chest. A soft kiss was pressed there. "Can we pretend that I didn't wake up saying 'ow'?"

"Sorry. I didn't mean to squeeze your shoulder."

"That's okay." Patrick levered himself onto his elbows. Brad found himself looking into a pair of oddly shy green eyes. "Hi."

"Hi," Brad repeated. He lifted his hand and ran his fingers along the stubble-dusted jaw. He smiled when Patrick leaned into the touch. He liked how responsive the other man was.

"How are you feeling?"

"Me? I should be the one asking you that question."

"I'm happy." Patrick stretched against his body in a way that made Brad's cock incredibly happy that he was in the bed with him.

"I didn't hurt you?"

"No, you didn't hurt me, Angel."

Brad felt a jolt run through him at the pet name. He'd never had a pet name before. He liked it. It made him feel like Patrick thought he was special. Brad ran his fingers over the rather vivid mark he had left on the man's neck. He'd felt like such a teenager putting it there, overcome by his own lust, but he had to admit he liked the possessive thrill it gave him.

"I'm sorry." Patrick dropped his eyes, but not before Brad caught the flash of guilt and shame.

"For what?" Brad was surprised to find himself with an armful of trembling detective who wouldn't look at him. He slowly started to run his hands over the strong back.

"For what happened with Jack and Julian. I didn't mean for it to happen, especially not after I met you." Patrick sighed and gripped his sides. "It's just... it was Julian. He was the only one who ever made me feel like I was good for more than sex, until you."

Brad felt a surge of anger at the slightly broken tone in Patrick's voice. He didn't like hearing Patrick sound like that. "It's okay."

"No, it's not. I feel awful. I feel even worse when I think about how wonderful last night was."

"Patrick, look at me." Brad waited until the wary, guilt-filled eyes met his. "You are worth more than sex, and I'm not angry with you."

"You're not?"

"No, I'm not." Brad tilted his chin up and gave him a soft kiss. "So stop worrying. You're here

now, and that's all that matters"

"You're amazing, Angel; you really are."

"So are you." Brad gave him another kiss. It was just starting to get heated when his stomach growled. He pulled away from the kiss with a blush.

"Was that your stomach?"

"I think I might be hungry."

"How about I make you an omelet? I seem to remember you eating one."

Brad smiled. "And I remember you saying that you made a good omelet."

"I do."

"Well, then, let's test that theory." Brad gave him one more kiss and then released him from his hold.

Patrick smiled at him and slithered out of the bed. Brad's observant eyes noticed the slight twinge as he climbed out of the bed. He seemed to be favoring his shoulder. Brad watched as he pulled on his jeans and headed for the door. Patrick turned to him with a smile. "Are you coming?"

"I'm coming." Brad heaved himself out of the bed and grabbed his own discarded jeans. He pulled them on and met Patrick at the door. A smile bloomed on his face as Patrick grabbed his hand. They walked through the house holding hands. Patrick didn't release him until they got to the kitchen.

Brad sat down at the table and watched as Patrick moved around the kitchen. He liked the way the other man looked in his kitchen. He also liked the way Patrick looked in nothing but jeans. Brad was so intent on watching the way Patrick's ass looked in his pants that he didn't notice Patrick had everything he needed for the omelet until he could smell it cooking. "That smells amazing."

"Thank you." Patrick expertly flipped the omelet onto a plate and set it on the table in front of Brad. "Go ahead, try it."

Brad picked up the fork that had appeared with the plate and took a bite. Flavor exploded over his tongue, and he moaned. It was amazing. The omelet had all of his favorite things in it, but there was something else. Patrick had added something to the eggs that just made it taste better. "Oh, God, this is amazing."

"You like it?"

"This is the best omelet that I have ever had." Brad reached out with his free hand and grabbed Patrick. He pulled him to his side and placed a kiss on his stomach. "Are you going to join me for breakfast?"

"Yes, but you'd have to let go of me first, and I'm not sure that I want that." A gentle hand ran through Brad's hair. "I like having your arms around me."

"I like putting them there, but I would like for you to have breakfast with me." Brad reluctantly let go of Patrick. As the other man made himself an omelet, Brad got juice out of the fridge for both of them. By the time he had the juice ready, Patrick was sitting at the table with his own omelet.

Reseating himself at the table, Brad grabbed Patrick's free hand with his and gave it a squeeze. He released his hold on Patrick when the other man squeezed him back, and turned his attention to the omelet. As he ate, Brad kept stealing looks at him. He liked having Patrick in his kitchen in the morning. It warmed up something inside him that he hadn't know was cold until Patrick walked into his life.

And he was going to hang on to it for as long as he could.

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Chapter Eleven

Brad finally gave up attempting to decipher which of the plants in the backyard were legitimate flowers and which ones were weeds and slumped on the steps to the back deck, head resting against the railing. He'd thought he should probably clear his mind, do some mindless task to keep himself from thinking too much, and since his neighbor, who normally took care of his plants, was gone for the weekend, he'd decided to chance it. Now he was more confused than ever, and judging by the rainclouds that were threatening, his bad mood was about to get a lot worse.

"This a private sulk, or can anyone join?"

Brad opened his eyes, startled to see Jack lounging by the corner of the house, Robot at his knee. She never seemed to be on a leash, but she was so attached to Jack it hardly seemed to matter. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, your car's here, but there was no answer at the front door. It was nice out until a few minutes ago, so I thought to myself, 'Jack, I'll bet he's in the backyard.' And here you are."

Sighing, Brad rephrased, "No, I mean, why are you *here*—" before he realized that Jack was having him on.

Jack gave him a half-smile. "Stay, Robot."

The dog panted at him a little, chased her tail in a circle, and flopped over in the grass. Jack wandered over and leaned against the house, hands in his pockets. "I came to talk to you. Well, that's not it exactly. I came to talk to you, and I figured you could probably use an ear right about now. So here I am."

Brad's conscience lurched with guilt and shame. He couldn't believe Jack was here after what had happened yesterday at hockey. After spending the night with Patrick, Brad had been—angry, yes, but also *hurt*—by whatever had passed between Julian and Patrick. Somewhere down the line, Patrick had learned that he wasn't good enough, wasn't worthy enough, for a relationship. Brad figured that, in this case, Julian definitely was not helping. Once he'd managed to make sure he and Julian would be on opposing teams, he had spent his ice-time head-hunting the older man. Julian had never once made a noise of complaint about the hits—though most of them had been illegal, and they had to have hurt—but Jack, who'd been playing on Brad's team, had noticed, and in the first minutes of the second period had boarded Brad so hard he'd seen stars. "Save it for the locker room," Jack had advised and skated away, leaving both teams vaguely mystified.

"Are you going to say something, or should I start?"

Brad wanted to growl at him, but he didn't have it in him. He was in deep water here, and he knew it. This thing with Patrick—it should have been a casual fling, knowing that Patrick would soon be recovered and leaving again. But the way Patrick looked at him, the way things sparked between them when they touched, the way he'd felt when they had—well, anyway, the word *casual* didn't enter his head when he thought about it. Nothing about what he and Patrick had was casual.

Jack sighed. "You could at least move over. Don't make me do this standing up. It's embarrassing enough that I'm here in the first place."

Brad shoved over, making room on the step above or below him. Jack squeezed through the gap and sat with his knees splayed just slightly. "You've got to stop blaming this on Julian. And I'm not just saying that because I'm the one who has to be careful of the bruises."

Brad snorted. "You would take his side."

"There aren't sides," Jack snapped back just as sharply. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. You want to blame someone? Tough, because there were three of us in the bed that night, and let me tell you, everyone was there by choice. If you want to be angry, be angry at me, because it was my idea in the first place."

What? Why would Jack invite Julian's ex-lover into their bed? How was that in any way a good idea? "Why?" he asked stupidly, before he could stop himself.

"Because they needed it," Jack said simply. "You haven't been in the house much since Patrick got here. They have a lot of history, and they've never talked about any of it."

"You thought throwing them into bed together was the best way to get them to talk? Man, you are even crazier than everyone seems to think."

He sensed more than saw the muscles in Jack's legs tense. "Don't judge what you don't understand." His tone was cold enough to make the hair on Brad's neck stand up.

"How am I supposed to understand if no one will *tell me anything* ?!" Brad was shouting before he even realized he was speaking.

"I am trying to tell you, but you aren't *listening* ." Jack huffed in frustration, jumping back to his feet. "Or you're listening wrong. Stop using *this* "—he poked Brad in the forehead—"and start using *this* instead."

Brad looked down at the finger sticking into his chest and then back up at Jack. He was serious. This was important to him. He *wanted* to help.

God, relationships did stupid things to people. Brad would have to be careful or he'd end up as bitter and jaded as his brother Isaac. "Sorry," he said finally. "I really do want to understand. But it's not easy for me."

Jack sat down again, half-turned on the lowest step this time. "It's not exactly a walk in the park for me, either, knowing the love of my life still has feelings for his ex. I know he loves me, but he's always going to feel a little bit responsible for Patrick and his multitude of issues, and they needed to talk about that."

"Why?" Brad repeated. He was starting to think he wasn't going to like the answer.

Jack scratched the back of his neck. "Because they, especially Patrick, needed to know—*I* needed

to know—that what Patrick and Julian had was really over. Now that he's seen us together firsthand, he can start to heal."

Oh, my God. "You really are one crazy sonofabitch." The words came out sounding almost reverent. Brad had always sort of thought of Jack as the book-smart, not people-smart, type. Apparently he was a lot more intuitive than anyone gave him credit for. And now Brad had to ask the question he had sworn to himself he wasn't going to ask. "So you and Julian... and Patrick..." Brad didn't even know where to start.

Thankfully, Jack took pity on him. "We didn't touch him, I promise. Besides, I'm a possessive bastard. Patrick was broken up about it because he had to face up to the fact that it was really over. That's not easy, especially after ten years of waiting and hoping. Julian had it a little easier, since he'd already moved on without realizing it..." Jack pinched the bridge of his nose. "But the guilt just about killed him. You know he wouldn't hurt a fly, Brad. That's not the kind of guy he is. He's used to being the one to make things better, but *hecan't*, because this time it feels like it's his fault. Please don't make it any worse for him than it is already."

Fuck. *Fuck!* Now Brad felt like an asshole. How screwed up was this? "Please tell me relationships with other guys are not always this complicated."

Jack snorted in laughter and looked up at the sky. A raindrop landed between Brad's feet. "They're not always this complicated," Jack said, standing and offering Brad a hand up. "Only when they're worth having. By the way...."

Brad noticed the lightening of his tone and met Jack's gaze again. His eyes were laughing. "What?"

"That bruise you left on Patrick's neck? That's some quality work. Very professional. What did you do, try to eat him?"

Brad felt his cheeks flame as his mind suddenly supplied a whole lot of other, very graphic examples of things he could do to Patrick with his mouth. He remembered how Patrick had moaned when he'd bitten him, how he'd pulled Brad's face closer to his neck. "I, uh, um...."

"Relax." Jack put a hand on his shoulder. "I get it. Now stop trying to outshine the sun; you'll give us all radiation sickness." He whistled, and Robot stood, wagging her body over to his side. "I think we'd better go before the rain gets any worse. I'll see you on Saturday."

* * * *

When Jack walked in the door, he made sure to stay on the mat. Water ran down his hair and face, soaked his jeans up to the knee, and saturated the jacket he'd been wearing. Grimacing, he peeled off most of his clothes, toed off his shoes and socks, and tossed the whole lot back out onto the front porch. They were pretty muddy.

Then he picked up Robot and carried her into the laundry room, passing Julian in the kitchen as he went. Julian gave him a small smile. "Look what the dog dragged in."

Jack made a face and then grabbed a towel from Robot's expanding collection of second-rate linens and gave her a firm rubdown. When he'd finished, her fur was sticking up all over, giving her a strange resemblance to an oversized porcupine, and the towel was hardly worth washing.

"Must've been a long walk," Julian commented. He'd pulled himself up onto the counter to watch the show and was swinging his bare feet back and forth.

He always looked about ten years old when he did that. It drove Jack crazy, because it should not have been such a huge turn-on, but it was always so easy to just step up to him like this, and

insinuate himself between Julian's legs, and lean forward and capture that mouth—

"You're all wet," Julian pointed out, hands underneath Jack's sticky T-shirt. He didn't sound like he was complaining.

"I'm dirty too," Jack said helpfully, relieving Julian of his pullover. "You wouldn't want to get any on you." He ran his hands up the smooth, creamy skin of Julian's back, bending his head to kiss him again.

He pulled back when Julian made a noise in the back of his throat. That was not one of Julian's normal make-out noises. It sounded like he was in pain. "What's wrong?"

Julian shook his head, trying to draw him back in. "It's nothing. My foot's just asleep."

Jack didn't buy it for a second. Using his larger size to his advantage, he scooped Julian up off the counter, deposited him back on the floor, and then spun him around. What he saw made his stomach clench. Julian's normally pristine skin was blemished with a dark bruise on his right shoulder blade. He couldn't believe he hadn't noticed earlier.

"Julian...."

"It's nothing," Julian protested, reaching for his shirt again.

Jack stopped him. "It's not nothing." It was normal for Julian to have bruises after hockey—he was an aggressive player, and often exchanged hits—but the majority of those bruises were to his chest, shoulders and arms, and they didn't look anything like this because he was protected by his pads. "Julian, is this from last night?"

"It's fine," Julian reiterated. "I've had worse bruises. Hell, I think I've *given* worse bruises. It's just that this one's in a really inconvenient place."

It was, in Jack's estimation, nowhere near fine. He tugged Julian by the hand and led him upstairs. "Come on. I am wet and dirty and you're sore. Let's go soak in the tub."

Jack traced the bruise while Julian filled the tub with hot water. He didn't understand. Julian should have been protected by his hockey pads, unless he'd gone on the ice without them. But Julian wouldn't do that, not even if he were still feeling like he needed someone to beat him up. He was a doctor, for God's sake; he had to know what playing without the proper equipment would do to him.... "Julian?"

"Hmm?" Julian was unfastening his jeans. Jack did his damndest not to get distracted. "What?"

Jack swallowed hard and tried not to watch him pull the zipper down, but the sound drew his eyes like a magnet. "Why weren't you wearing your pads?"

Julian flushed. "I was." He stopped fiddling with the zipper on his jeans and looked up from under the mop of hair in that way that was so irresistible. "I noticed last week that the fastenings on my shoulder pads were loose. When Brad checked me the first time, they broke completely. I just didn't notice until the second hit."

Jack winced. Loose shoulder pads could be worse than no pads at all. Now that he knew what had happened, he could see that the bruise was shaped like the edge of Julian's hockey pads. "I guess we need to go shopping."

"Yeah." Julian stood on tiptoe to kiss him. "Can I finish getting naked now?"

* * * *

Julian answered the frantic pounding at the door with wet hair and a towel wrapped around his waist. If it was Patrick having forgotten his key again, he was going to be pissed. He'd been sharing a bath that had been extremely relaxing, if not particularly good at getting anyone clean.

It wasn't Patrick at the door. It was Roy, and he looked terrible. He didn't even seem to notice that Julian wasn't dressed. "Julian. Hi. Is Jack around?"

"He's upstairs," Julian said, deciding for the time being to leave out the part where he was also naked and in the tub. He stepped back from the door. "Uh, do you want to come in?"

Roy didn't answer him directly. He said, "Listen, have you seen Hallie?"

The hair on the back of Julian's neck stood on end. "Not since Jack brought her home. Why, is she missing?"

"She was in the yard," Roy said. "She was just playing in the tree house while I washed the dishes. I went out to tell her to come in from the rain, but she wasn't there. Can I talk to Jack? I need to ask him if he's seen her."

Julian was dripping into a small lake on the floor now, but he barely noticed. "I'll ask him. He's sort of... anyway, I'll ask him. Did you call the police?"

"I looked everywhere," Roy said frantically, as if he hadn't heard the question. "All of her favorite hiding places. In closets, under beds, behind the couch, in the cupboards. I called her for almost an hour. She's gone. I haven't, I couldn't call yet, I wanted to make sure she wasn't over here, I wanted her to be over here—" Roy shut up when Julian handed him the phone.

"I'll be right back." Julian fled back up the stairs, let the towel fall to the floor beside the bed, and frantically opened his dresser drawers until he found a clean pair of jeans. "Jack!"

"What's the holdup?" Jack complained. He was standing in the bathroom doorway, wet and naked. "I thought you were coming right back up."

Julian grabbed a pair of jeans from his side of the wardrobe and then threw a pair at Jack. "Change of plans. Hallie's missing." He shoved his legs into the jeans, heart beating way too fast to be healthy.

"What? Since when?"

"I don't know, I didn't ask for details. When's the last time you saw her?"

"When I dropped her off," Jack said, buttoning his fly. "She went right into the house; dinner was ready. Where's Roy?"

Julian headed for the stairs. "He's in the living room, I gave him the phone and told him to call the police. I'm going to—"

He stopped and listened. Downstairs, he could hear voices talking to each other. He looked at Jack. "Do you hear...?"

Jack nodded, quiet.

"Jack?" The more Julian listened, the less he liked what he could discern of the tones coming from

downstairs. Ice formed in his stomach. He'd heard that tone an awful lot lately. *Oh, shit.* "Patrick!"

Julian bolted for the stairs, but Jack caught him by the back of his jeans. "Thirty more seconds," Jack said firmly, dragging him over to the closest wardrobe. He pulled out a T-shirt—Jack's, it happened to be his closet—and unfolded it, tugging it neatly down over Julian's head.

"What?"

Jack traced the edge of the bruise on his shoulder-blade gently through the soft cotton. "You don't really want Patrick seeing that, do you?"

What? Julian must still have looked confused, because Jack said, "He's going to ask you how that got there, Jitterbug, and you're a shitty liar, especially when it comes to Patrick. He and Brad are going to have enough problems as it is; we're not going to add to their troubles. Now let's go."

They thundered down the stairs just in time to see Roy brandishing the phone at Patrick. "You stay right there until the police get here! Keep your hands where I can see them."

"Is this guy for real?" Patrick asked out of the corner of his mouth. He was white-faced and white-knuckled. Julian knew he'd really connected with Hallie, as he tended to do with kids. Just a few days ago they had bonded over popcorn and cheesy movies.

"Unfortunately," Julian answered. Once upon a time he would have curled his hand up into Patrick's for mutual support. He never got the chance, though, because Patrick beat him to it.

"You know that's a phone and not a gun, right?" Jack put in.

Roy didn't seem to notice them at all. "Who is this man? He shows up here out of nowhere and suddenly the whole town is under his spell. Now my daughter is, *isgone*, and where the hell has this *vagrant* been all day?"

Screwing Brad, probably, Julian thought.

"This is ridiculous."

"I'll say," Patrick snarled, bristling. "I'm a cop, asshole. Here's a statistic for you. Seventy-five percent of child abductions are by family members or close friends."

Without speaking, Julian went for Patrick's arms as Jack restrained Roy. It was a good thing Patrick's shoulder was injured, or Julian would have had no chance at holding him back. Julian didn't hear Roy's angry retort, but he didn't need to. Patrick was snarling and struggling against his arms, and he needed all of his concentration and strength just to keep him from lunging across the room at the other man.

"Patrick! You're going to set your recovery back by *weeks* ! Stop struggling; it's not worth it!"

Jack was having a similarly difficult time with Roy—difficult in that Roy clearly wasn't going to stop struggling against Jack's arms any time soon, even though Jack had immobilized him easily. "Roy. Shut up and listen for a minute. Are the police coming?"

A knock at the door answered the question. "Jack? Julian? Is Roy here?"

Julian stilled for a minute, trying to judge whether it was safe to let go of Patrick's arms.

"Behave yourself, all right? I'm going to get the door."

When he was reasonably sure he wasn't risking anyone's immediate personal health, he let go and went to the front door. The woman waiting for him was petite, about five-three, with short, wavy brown hair and blue eyes, dressed in police blues. "Roxanne. Come in." Julian stepped back to let the petite woman inside.

"I've got two patrol cars with search lights out and a K-9 unit sniffing the area." She took out a digital recorder. "I'm just here to take statements."

"Roxanne's here," Julian said unnecessarily, walking her back into the front room. "Let's let her have the kitchen."

Jack and Patrick followed him out onto the front porch. It was still drizzling out, and the sky was an inky blue. Julian curled up on the porch swing, pulling his legs under himself. Jack sat down next to him, staring blankly out at the night. Patrick stood, feet bare on the wood porch, hands curled around the rail. "I need a cigarette."

Julian didn't even have the heart to yell at him. A police car drove by slowly, lights sweeping the area. In the distance, a dog barked. Julian leaned his head on Jack's shoulder and watched the rain come down.

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Chapter Twelve

"It's your turn," Jack said, an interminable amount of time later. Patrick stopped consciously thinking of having a cigarette and turned around.

He'd thought Julian had looked haggard when he came out from giving his statement, but Jack looked worse. He'd seen it a hundred times before from the other side—giving an official account of something somehow made it real to people. "Thanks," he nodded, trudging back through the living room.

The officer sitting at the table looked up as he walked in. With his experienced eye, Patrick could tell she was just as shaken as Jack and Julian, but she was better at hiding it. "I don't think we've been formally introduced."

"Patrick Hawkins," he said, shaking her hand.

She was tiny, but her grip was firm. "Roxanne Keyes. Please, have a seat."

He took the chair across from her and lowered himself into it. Patrick *wastired*. His body hurt more or less everywhere. This was the least relaxing vacation he'd ever been on. Well, except for the Brad part, but that didn't really count.

Officer Keyes checked the remaining memory and battery strength on her digital recorder and then put it back in the middle of the table and pulled out a blank statement sheet and pen. "Mr. Hawkins, the purpose of this interview is just to help us establish a timeline. When was the last time you saw Hallie Klein?"

"Just after five, I guess." Patrick rubbed at his eyes, trying to keep them focused. "Jack dropped me off at the complex for dinner and physiotherapy with Roz Piet. I talked to Hallie before she and Jack left, just to say hello." She'd asked him where his boyfriend was, and he'd laughed at her. "It was just... normal."

"You didn't notice anything unusual? No one who could have been watching her and Jack leave? No one there who shouldn't have been?"

This was the problem with being on unfamiliar turf. "I've barely even been here for two weeks," Patrick explained. "I'm at the complex almost every day, but it's just for physio. No one stood out." There had been gym-goers, soccer moms, kids, instructors. Patrick searched his memory again and again, wondering if he had missed someone or if he was losing his edge. "I didn't see anyone or anything suspicious."

This obviously jibed with what Jack had told her, because Officer Keyes was nodding unhappily. "Okay. Around what time would you say Jack and Hallie left?"

Patrick thought for a second. He'd met Jack in town about ten after five, and the drive to the complex was about five minutes. As usual, Jack had spent a few minutes chatting with Roz and a few of the parents before leaving. "Maybe twenty after, five-thirty?"

Keyes made a note on her sheet and rubbed a hand across her forehead. A wisp of curly brown hair was sticking up funny on top of her head. "That matches what Jack and Mr. Klein have said. That would put dinner at just before six, and her disappearance somewhere around six-thirty."

Patrick looked at the clock on the wall. It was a quarter to nine, still raining and starting to get cold. Hallie had been missing for over two hours. "Anything on the radios?"

She shook her head. "Not yet. I'll keep checking." Sighing, she switched off the digital recorder and slid the statement sheet across to him along with her pen. "If that's everything you can think of that might be helpful, you can sign. Anything you want to add, just pencil it in."

Patrick read over the brief account and picked up the pen. It was complete, concise, and to the point. It was also, as far as he could tell, utterly unhelpful. He uncapped the pen and signed it, for all the good it would do.

"Here." He handed it back.

Keyes put it in a pile with the others and turned off the recorder. "You've been in the service, am I right?"

He motioned to his shoulder. "I mentioned the physiotherapy?"

"Bullet wound?"

"Through-and-through at point-blank range," Patrick confirmed. His shoulder twinged in recognition.

"You sound almost proud of it."

"I had it tattooed in commemoration." He stood up, scrubbing at his hair. "I take it this doesn't happen often out here."

Keyes shook her head. "I haven't had a case like this in the ten years I've worked here. I hoped I never would."

"If you need any help, you can call me." Patrick fished his wallet out of his back pocket and flipped through until he found a card. The idea of sitting on his ass while a little girl was in danger chafed.

"Didn't they send you out here to recover?"

"Technically."

She smiled a little. "I'm starting to see why they had to do that." She picked up her attache case and set it on the table, flipping it open and putting the signed statements inside. His card she put in her breast pocket. "I'd say you should stick to your vacation, but the truth is, we could probably use all the help we can get. Thanks."

"Sure." He walked her to the door. "Keep me posted?"

"If anything happens, the whole town will know about it. You won't need to hear it from me."

She had a point.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hawkins. I wish it had been under better circumstances."

"It's Detective, but you can call me Patrick."

"Roxanne."

They shook hands again, and then she was gone. Patrick closed the door. He wanted to sag against it, but he was afraid if he did, he might never stand back up again. It seemed like the day had gone on forever. All he really wanted was to—

"Here."

He turned around. Julian was behind him, hair ruffled, eyes tired, holding out his hand.

Patrick accepted what he offered automatically. "Car keys?"

"Go," Julian said.

"What?"

"To Brad, you idiot. You do want to go, right?"

He did. He wanted to go—badly. He was actually *twitching*; he needed to go so badly it terrified him. The keys were jingling in his palm. "I..."

"Go!" Julian said again. "Stay late. Hell, stay over. I don't think either one of us is going to work tomorrow."

Patrick grabbed his arm and pulled him close, wrapping his arms around Julian. "Thanks."

"Are you gone yet?" Julian asked into his shoulder.

The shoulder twinged again. Damn, Patrick was really going to have to start favoring it. At least it was less sore and more mobile since Roz had started treating him. "I'm going," he said, and he went.

Twenty past nine on a Thursday night. Brad would still be at the bar. Patrick climbed into the truck and put it in gear.

Five minutes later he was walking into the bar. There weren't many patrons on a Thursday night—someone had put curling on the televisions, which was a bit of a dead giveaway.

Brad looked up as he walked in, all smiles, and Patrick couldn't resist. He didn't even want to. He sidled up to the bar, straddled a stool, reached across, and pulled Brad into a deep, probing kiss.

Someone wolf-whistled. Patrick could practically feel the heat radiating off Brad's face, but Brad didn't pull away. Instead, he threaded his fingers into Patrick's hair, pulling him closer. Patrick flicked his tongue across the seam of Brad's lips, moaning happily as they opened for him. Brad was just closing his teeth around Patrick's lower lip when someone sat down next to Patrick at the bar.

"Hey! Can't a lady get some service around here?"

Roz. Hearing her voice reminded Patrick of why he was there in the first place. Reluctantly, he pulled back, releasing Brad's shirt. "Hi."

"Hi, yourself," Brad said. The blush didn't stop at his face, Patrick could see; it went all the way down his neck under the collar of his shirt. He wondered exactly how far down it went. "What's wrong?"

"You're going to want to sit down," Patrick sighed.

Roz shot him a worried glance.

Brad walked around the end of the bar and sat on his other side. "Patrick?"

"Don't take this the wrong way," Roz put in, "but you don't look so good."

He didn't feel that great, either. "I just came from Jack and Julian's." Patrick was used to delivering bad news—he had to do it all the time at work—but never to people he cared about. Brad reached across the bar top and laced their fingers together. Patrick squeezed gratefully. "Roy's daughter is missing."

Brad let go of his hand. Roz went pale. "What?"

"Sometime this evening, after dinner." Patrick kept his voice low so as not to disturb the other patrons. "They have three squad cars and a dog team out looking for her." *And no leads*, he didn't add. There was no sense in being defeatist about it, at least not in front of Brad and Roz.

"Oh, my God." Roz covered her mouth with her hand. Patrick knew how close she and Hallie were. "Oh, my God."

"Shit," Brad breathed. "Shit, man, she is in here every Saturday with her dad; the whole town knows her. I can't believe it—someone took her?"

That was Patrick's first instinct, but they didn't know anything for sure. "If they did, it was right out of her yard, practically under her dad's nose. That's pretty ballsy. If they were capable of that..." He hadn't meant to let the sentence hang, but it did. The implications were pretty terrible. If someone was capable of taking such a huge risk to abduct a child, they had to want her pretty badly.

Roz gathered her purse from the back of the stool she was sitting on. "I'm going home," she announced. The color still hadn't returned to her face. "Maybe I'll swing by the complex first, just... see if she's there, if she went there for some reason. Put it on my tab, okay, Brad?"

Brad nodded, face grim. Patrick reached for his hand again and held onto it this time. He was somehow easier to hold onto than Julian. Patrick didn't want to think about what that might mean. "Sure. Good luck."

Roz disappeared into the rain, not bothering with her umbrella, leaving only a handful of patrons in the bar. Brad sighed and fished his cell phone out of his pocket with his free hand.

"What're you doing?"

"Calling Brenda," Brad explained, dialing. "I'm going to close up early. Maybe if I send everyone home, someone will see something."

Patrick thought that was unlikely, but it was *something*, and he understood the urge to act. Besides, it might sound selfish at a time like this, but he really wanted Brad to himself. This was turning out to be one hell of a day, and he just wanted to curl up beside Brad and go to sleep, hoping that maybe in the morning this would turn out to be a bad dream.

He knew he wasn't going to be quite that lucky.

A few minutes later, after Brad had quietly explained what was happening to the few men and women remaining at the bar, Brad was locking up, flicking off the lights, and joining Patrick outside. Patrick felt Brad's arms wrap around him and returned the embrace automatically, Brad's square chin poking into his left shoulder. It was still drizzling out, but he was in no hurry to move. "How're you doing?"

"Better than Roz," Brad admitted, taking his hand and leading him to the parking lot. "Still not great. Did you get a ride here, or did you drive?"

"Julian gave me his keys and pushed me out the door," Patrick said sheepishly. He held up the key ring. "Not that I wasn't already thinking about it, I just wasn't looking forward to the walk in the rain."

"Good," Brad said absently.

Patrick didn't know exactly what that meant, but he opted not to ask for clarification.

"Are you going to follow me home, or do you want to ride with me? I don't know if you want to leave Julian's truck here overnight... who knows what's going on?"

Patrick's heart skipped a beat. He liked that Brad just assumed he would spend the night, without him having to ask. He pecked the younger man on the lips. "I'll meet you at your place."

"Drive carefully," Brad warned him, leaning their foreheads together for a minute. "These roads get pretty nasty in this weather. They need to be repaved."

"Thanks for the warning." They climbed into their respective vehicles.

Julian needs new windshield wipers, Patrick noted as he pulled up behind Brad's car. He'd been too distracted on the way to *Brenda's* to notice. That wasn't a good sign. He probably shouldn't drive if he was distracted. It was a good thing he was staying at Brad's tonight, because Patrick

knew he was in no shape to be on the road.

Brad was waiting for him in the doorway. He opened the door as Patrick approached. The rain had been steadily increasing as he'd driven home, and now it was pouring again—not good news for the police dogs attempting to catch Hallie's scent. Trying not to think about it, Patrick ran inside and stood dripping on the welcome mat, shaking water droplets from his hair. "Sorry."

Brad tugged down the zipper on his sweatshirt. "Don't worry about it; just get the wet stuff off. Roz will not be happy if she hears I let you get pneumonia or something."

"You'll have to keep me warm," Patrick agreed. "Roz will kill you, and Julian will kill me, and that wouldn't be any good for either of us." He squelched out of his shoes and socks and then unbuttoned his jeans—they were wet enough to fall to the floor of their own accord—and stepped out of them. At least he was wearing boxers this time.

"I think I can handle that. Why don't you go upstairs, and I'll throw these in the dryer?"

That sounded like a plan to Patrick. He planted a lingering kiss on Brad's lips before taking the stairs up to the bedroom.

The bed was still unmade, probably because Brad hadn't been expecting him. Patrick spent a few minutes straightening the sheets, just for something to do, before climbing in and pulling the blankets up to his waist, smelling Brad on the pillows. He could hear Brad pattering around downstairs, presumably in the laundry room putting his clothes in the dryer. Shifting onto his side, Patrick put an arm under his head and waited for Brad.

He didn't have to wait long. A minute or so later, Brad appeared, minus socks, shoes, and jeans. He closed the door behind him gently and then crawled into bed next to Patrick, lying on his side, facing him. Brad traced a finger down his cheek. "Are you okay?"

"This is the strangest vacation I have ever been forced into," Patrick sighed, closing his eyes to enjoy the touch. Bullet wounds, physiotherapy, missing children, ex-lovers.

New lovers.

Putting the thought away before he could dwell on it, Patrick pressed a kiss to Brad's finger.

"They send you away often, do they?" Brad asked. There was something in his tone that Patrick couldn't quite put a name to.

"Not as often as they'd like to, I'm sure." He put his right arm around Brad's waist and decided to risk the pain of forcibly pulling him closer. "But in response to your question, I'll be okay. I can take it. I've been through worse."

"I don't like to think about it," Brad confessed. His eyes were soft and very blue this close up.

Patrick smiled at him softly. "That makes two of us." He ran his fingertip gently across Brad's lips and then down his chin, which he tapped.

For some reason, the simple motion made Brad flush dark red. Patrick would never get tired of watching that. He reached down and lifted the hem of Brad's shirt, pulling it up until he could see Brad's pale chest.

"What are you doing?"

"Research," Patrick told him, dragging the finger from his chin down his neck, over the bunched T-shirt to his rib cage. "I'm checking how far down that pretty blush goes. I forgot to check on Tuesday."

"Oh." The color deepened. Patrick knelt astride Brad's body so that he could lean over and press a kiss to the fading line of red. "Can this experiment maybe wait until later?"

Patrick looked up and met his eyes. Brad was still blushing, but there was something besides embarrassment in his expression. Patrick reached up and pulled the shirt the rest of the way over his head before bending down and brushing his lips lightly over Brad's.

Sighing into the caress, Brad chased his mouth, finally sinking both hands into Patrick's hair to hold him still when Patrick continued to tease. Smirking around the kiss, Patrick let Brad take the lead, opening to allow the younger man's tongue to explore his mouth.

Shifting to lean closer, Patrick put his weight on his left arm, sliding his body down to press more of it against Brad's. The movement caused Brad to break away from the kiss, gasping, as Patrick's barely clad ass brushed Brad's hardening cock. Patrick dove down for another teasing kiss, fluttering his tongue lightly over Brad's lips as he writhed purposefully on Brad's erection.

Brad whimpered into his mouth. The sound went right to Patrick's cock, filling it with blood as Brad's hands migrated from his hair to his thighs, inching their way upward and inward. He knew he could make Brad make even more achingly hot noises. He wanted to work his way down that firm body, taking his time to explore Brad's chest, his nipples, the sharp bones of his hips. He wanted to trace his tongue down the inside of Brad's thighs, roll his heavy balls in his palm, and hear him cry out when Patrick sucked his cock into his mouth for the first time. But it was impossible to move away with Brad's prick rubbing against his ass and Brad's questing fingers circling slowly up his legs, slowly but surely zeroing in on his throbbing erection.

"Why did I let you keep the rest of your clothes?" Brad breathed between kisses, slipping his hands under the hem of Patrick's boxers and drawing his fingernails lightly up his thighs.

"Temporary insanity?" Patrick suggested. He licked across Brad's open mouth once more before sitting upright long enough to pull off his shirt and drop it on the floor.

That was a mistake, if he wanted to retain any control tonight whatsoever. He'd forgotten how crazy Brad went over the nipple ring. Once Brad's eyes caught it, it was only a matter of time before Patrick was on his back again, Brad mirroring his position from earlier, ass pressing down firmly on Patrick's dick. Patrick couldn't keep his body from arching up into the incredible heat of Brad's mouth as his tongue played with the ring through Patrick's nipple. Every time he did, his erection slid perfectly against Brad's ass, sending bolts of desire to his brain. God, Patrick wanted to be inside him, wanted to show Brad how good it felt to give your body to another man, show him just how good Brad had made Patrick feel the other night, but he knew Brad wasn't ready. Not yet.

"Oh, fuck, Angel!" Brad had closed his teeth around the nipple piercing again, only this time he was turning the ring with his tongue, twisting the flesh around it. Patrick threw his head back, grabbing onto Brad's hips to grind him down hard against his cock.

Brad moaned deeply, mouth falling open against Patrick's chest. Panting, Patrick rolled them over again, taking Brad's shorts in both hands and pulling them swiftly down his long legs. If he couldn't have Brad's ass, he sure as hell was going to get that cock in his mouth. Tuesday night, Brad had undone him with his hands and tongue. Now it was Patrick's turn.

Skimming his hands down Brad's body to rest on his hips, Patrick traced a slow path down Brad's chest with his tongue, starting by dragging his teeth over Brad's collarbone and then following it

down the center of his chest, pausing midway to suckle at one hard nipple.

"Patrick!"

Patrick tugged at the flesh with his teeth as Brad writhed beneath him. He pulled back, circling his thumbs teasingly against the skin of Brad's hips. "You know, Wilde Thing, if you like the piercing so much, we could get you one."

"Shit." Brad whimpered hotly as Patrick continued mapping his stomach with his tongue. "What are you—oh, God, what are you doing?"

"Writing sonnets to your thighs." Patrick bit him gently, reveling in the encouraging noises Brad was making in the back of his throat. "With my tongue."

"Oh." Brad's breath hitched and his stomach heaved under Patrick's palms.

"Stop me at any time," Patrick invited, with absolutely no intention of being stopped whatsoever. Holding Brad's body down with both hands, he finally flicked his tongue out to taste the end of Brad's erection, sliding the drop of salty fluid down his throat as Brad trembled beneath his touch.

"Oh, God."

That didn't sound like *stop* to Patrick. His own cock twitched in sympathy as he moved a hand to curl around the base of Brad's prick and took him into his mouth.

The sound Brad was making now was more a pitchy whine than anything else, hotter than any noise Patrick had heard him make yet. Moaning around his prize, Patrick hollowed his cheeks, slowly moving back up as he sucked, watching Brad's reactions. The younger man's eyes were closed, his mouth fallen open. His skin had taken on a permanent rosy flush that was rapidly spreading down from his shoulders. Patrick let his free hand caress Brad's stomach and thighs as he worked his mouth back down again, picking up his pace and sliding his right hand down to play with Brad's balls.

Brad's hips came right off the bed at that, thrusting automatically in reaction to the stimulation, but instead of fighting him back down again, Patrick went with it, letting him thrust right down his throat as Brad's fingers curled into his hair. "Oh—shit, *fuck*, Patrick—"

Easing him back onto the bed, Patrick never once let up on Brad's cock, sliding his lips down until he had all of it. He laid his left arm across Brad's hips to keep him in place and drew his head back again, achingly slow, carefully scraping his teeth against the sensitive skin. Brad bucked and swore, the motion tugging Patrick's hair just hard enough to cause his dick to swell even further, but Brad was held in place by Patrick's arm. Grinning inwardly, Patrick lashed his tongue over the slit before sinking quickly onto his cock again. Just as Brad's prick nudged the back of his throat, he released his hold on Brad's balls and slid one dry finger back to rub Brad's entrance.

Brad's hoarse shout echoed off the walls. His stomach muscles were so tight under Patrick's forearm that they were starting to tremble with the strain. Patrick eased back as Brad released his head, reached into the nightstand, and quickly retrieved the necessary supplies.

Patrick didn't waste time. He stripped off his boxers and crawled up Brad's body again, licking a hot path up his neck. "Think you can work with this angle?" he murmured into Brad's ear, groaning as Brad's erection brushed against his bare ass.

"Fuck, I'll try anything once," Brad gasped in agreement as Patrick closed his teeth around his earlobe. Patrick heard the cap of the lube being flipped open, his whole body buzzing with

anticipation.

The first finger was cool and tentative against the pucker of his ass, and it was Patrick's turn to whimper as Brad took his time circling the hole before slowly and gently pressing forward. He pressed a shaky kiss to Brad's neck as Brad worked the finger in and out slowly, drawing out the pleasure.

"More," Patrick demanded quietly, scoring his thumbnail over Brad's nipple. "More."

Brad obliged, stretching him with a second slippery digit, moving the two of them in tandem. Patrick rocked his body back against the fingers and then forward again, rubbing his dripping cock across Brad's sculpted stomach. Brad scissored his fingers gently and then stroked deeper, and Patrick twisted until Brad was grazing his prostate with every touch. Moaning deeply, he let his head fall next to Brad's on the pillow.

Brad turned, the scrape of five o'clock shadow against Patrick's neck sending another spike of desire to his groin. Then the stubble rasped across the bruise on Patrick's neck, followed by soothing lips and a tongue, and then Brad slid a third finger deep into Patrick's body.

"*Fuck!*" It took everything Patrick had not to come right there. His cock jerked where it was trapped between their stomachs, leaking more fluid on their skin. "Brad, Angel, you're killing me."

"Ready?" Brad murmured, kissing that spot on his neck again.

"Oh, yeah." Patrick sat up just long enough to help Brad roll the condom on. Then, watching as Brad steadied his prick, Patrick lowered himself down.

Patrick bit his lip as Brad moaned, trembling with the need to move. Inside him, Brad's cock was pressing just right against his prostate, stretching him perfectly, filling him up. Brad's eyes were hooded as he held Patrick's gaze, hands migrating to Patrick's thighs.

"God," Brad whispered, hands flexing convulsively around Patrick's legs. "Patrick, kiss me."

More than happy to oblige, Patrick leaned down, supporting his weight on his left arm. Brad's cock shifted within him as he did so, setting off a chain reaction in Patrick's body and making him gasp as he gently pressed his mouth to Brad's.

Brad seemed to have other ideas. His lips parted hungrily and his tongue flicked out to tangle with Patrick's. Patrick's body shook as Brad kissed him furiously, aching powerfully with the strain. When he couldn't hold still for a second longer, he broke away, panting. "Fuck, Brad, that's—I have to move."

Brad nodded frantically, lips swollen and eyes dark. He smoothed his palms up Patrick's thighs, planted his feet more firmly on the mattress, and rolled his hips. "Good idea."

Stars appeared behind Patrick's eyes, and he fought to keep his movements slow and even, wanting to draw out the pleasure. He and Brad both gasped as he raised himself upward, Brad's cock slipping out of him inch by inch until only the head remained inside. Brad's nails dug into his legs when he slid down again, fueling the desperation Patrick felt rising inside him.

"Sorry," he groaned, swallowing as he shifted his weight. A drop of clear fluid dribbled down his cock.

"What for?"

"For not being able to hold back any longer." Brad felt too good inside him, *looked* too good spread out beneath him like that. Patrick had had his eyes closed the last time, but he'd been able to feel and hear Brad coming apart above him. This time, he wanted to watch.

Patrick centered a palm on Brad's chest, using it for balance as he began to rock on Brad's erection. Every time Patrick sank back onto the thick member, Brad groaned. The sound went straight to Patrick's dick every time. He was starting to think he could get off just on the noises Brad made. They would have to test that theory—later. Much later, if Patrick had anything to say about it. He wasn't ready to take that kind of sweet torture just yet.

Brad was utterly lost now, skin painted with a thin layer of sweat. The spreading blush had reached his navel, and Patrick traced its progress with his left hand as he continued to ride Brad's cock.

"Patrick." Brad was watching him through slitted eyes, fingers clutching convulsively around Patrick's thighs. "Shit, that's good, that's—oh, God, don't stop."

Patrick didn't stop. His mouth was dry, his body overheating as Brad's prick rubbed right across his prostate. The pleasure of it was so intense he wanted to close his eyes, but he didn't, needing to watch Brad's face as he found his release.

Needing Brad harder, deeper, faster, Patrick leaned back a little, hovering high above his lover for fractions of a second before grinding down again hard, feeling Brad's erection scrape perfectly over his sweet spot. Brad's fingers crept further up his thighs as he did so, circling the skin around his balls lightly.

Instinctively, Patrick reached down and flicked Brad's nipple, twisting the hard little bud between his fingers as he moved, and was rewarded with soft, needy pants. "Oh, oh, oh, God," Brad keened.

The flush was full-body now, disappearing at the base of his dark red cock. Patrick's balls tightened at the sight, and Brad's left hand curled around to caress them as he smoothed his right thumb through the fluid at the tip of Patrick's leaking dick. Ruthlessly tamping down on the urge to come, Patrick leaned over and licked a line up the center of Brad's chest just as he gave his nipple a particularly vicious squeeze.

"Fuck—shit—*fuck*, Patrick, God, oh, God, yes, *yes* —" Brad's color deepened. His head fell back against the pillow. As his cock pulsed hard inside Patrick's ass, he made the hottest little noise, almost a sob, and his hand contracted firmly on Patrick's dick.

Patrick was breathless, or he would have howled. He kept fucking himself on Brad's still-throbbing erection until he couldn't hold it back any longer, and then he threw his head back and came in thick, ropy spurts, shooting his seed over Brad's stomach.

Breathing hard, Patrick let himself fall forward, finding himself nose-to-nose with a blissed-out Brad. He kissed Brad quickly, needing to break it off so that his body could continue to pump air into his lungs.

"Did you see God just then?" Brad panted, rubbing his nose against Patrick's cheek.

Patrick sighed into the touch. "No." He kissed the bridge of the nose and then the skin between Brad's eyebrows. "Just an angel."

Brad's shy answering grin was far too sweet to endure, so Patrick kissed it off of him, cupping Brad's face in his hands. He was so far out of his depth with Brad that it wasn't even funny. It was

way past too late to get away from this—whatever this was—with his heart intact, but fuck, who cared? He was not going to let the fact that he was ultimately going to have to leave Brad ruin what was quickly becoming the best experience of his life.

He was already broken, anyway. What would it matter if his heart broke too?

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Chapter Thirteen

Jack hung up the phone. Finally, they were getting somewhere. Now that it was morning and they would once again be able to see in the wooded areas, they were forming search parties. Due to the massive amount of rain the day before, the dogs had been unable to pick up Hallie's trail.

"Was that Roxanne?" Julian appeared at his side the moment he turned around. Jack pulled him close and wrapped his arms around his lover. The young doctor melted into his embrace with a sigh.

"It was. They're organizing search parties, and asking that everyone who wants to help meet at the rec center, and then they're going to split us into groups from there."

"Do you think we should call Patrick? He'll probably want to help." The suggestion had just left Julian's mouth when Jack heard the front door open. "Never mind."

"I'll go check if he wants to come with us." Jack gave his lover a quick kiss and then left the room. When he saw that the entranceway was empty, Jack headed down the hall to Patrick's room. After Patrick had been there for three days, Jack had realized that he would never again think of the room as the guest room. Patrick had put so much of his personality into the small room that it would always be Patrick's room in Jack's mind. He was oddly okay with that development.

Jack stopped in the doorway to stare at the spectacle in front of him. Patrick's back was to him. He seemed to be struggling to pull something on over his shoulder, but it wasn't working. Jack was having a hard time figuring out what the contraption was until he spotted the gun on the bed. "Scribbles, what are you doing?"

"Officer Keyes called while I was at Brad's and said that they were forming search parties, so I'm getting ready to go."

Jack continued to lean against the door and watch Patrick's antics. He was trying very hard not to laugh. "Is Brad going?"

"Of course he is."

"Then why aren't you going with him?"

"I told him I had to change."

"And did you?"

"I changed my shirt." Patrick growled in frustration and finally turned to face him. His green eyes

were nearly glowing with annoyance. "Are you going to help me or are you going to just stand there?"

Jack laughed, stepped away from the door, and headed over to the cranky detective. "What exactly do you need me to do?"

"Help me get this damn thing on! I can't do it with one hand."

"Should you even be doing this?" Jack stopped in front of him and grasped the shoulder holster, sliding it slowly up Patrick's bad arm.

"You don't really think that I'm going to go searching for a missing little girl in the woods without a gun, do you?"

"You really think a handgun will be useful against wildlife?"

"It's really good for shooting pervs." Patrick winced as Jack settled the leather strap on his sore shoulder. "Ow."

"Are you sure you want this on your shoulder?"

"Not really, but I left my inner pants holster at home."

Jack tried to keep a straight face. "You have a holster for your pants?"

"Shut up."

Jack took one look at Patrick's annoyed face and burst into laughter. He released Patrick's shoulders so he wouldn't hurt the injured man and collapsed onto the bed. Jack felt Patrick kick his ankle, but that didn't stop him. He was laughing so hard he had tears in his eyes.

"Jack, don't make me shoot you."

"You wouldn't shoot me."

"You don't need both of your legs," Patrick snarled. Jack stopped laughing long enough to look up at the other man. The presence of actual anger burning in the green eyes caused the laughter to die in his throat. Patrick had settled the holster while Jack had been having his laughing fit, and the gun was now in place. He looked a lot more dangerous than he had when he first arrived.

"Um, sorry?"

"Thank you." Patrick sighed. "Can you help me adjust these straps so it doesn't dig into my shoulder so much?"

"Sure." Jack climbed off the bed and slowly approached Patrick. He was feeling a tad nervous about touching the obviously still-annoyed man. When Patrick gave him a small smile, he relaxed.

Following the instructions that Patrick gave him, Jack managed to help him adjust the holster so it wasn't digging into his shoulder. Once everything was to Patrick's liking, Jack stepped back, running his hands down the other man's arms. Looking at Patrick with his shoulder holster on made him seem different. Jack had known that, as a cop, Patrick was dangerous, but he had never seen it before.

"So, ready to go?"

"Help me put my jacket on? I don't want Julian to see the gun."

"He probably knows what we've been doing in here."

"I know, but he feels better when he doesn't see that I have it on." Patrick sighed and held out his jacket. "Please?"

"Fine," Jack sighed. He took the jacket from Patrick's hands and after helping Patrick pull the garment on, he stood back and watched as Patrick settled the jacket to his liking. Once he was finished, it didn't look as though he was wearing a gun. "That is impressive."

"What is?"

"If I didn't know that you were wearing a gun, I never would have guessed that you had one under your jacket. You can't even tell."

"That means I'm doing something right."

"Are the two of you ready yet?" Julian's voice echoed down the hall.

"Keep your pants on, Ace! We'll be right there!" Patrick smiled at Jack. "We better get out there before he comes back here to get us. Don't tell him I have the gun?"

"I won't." Jack put his hand on Patrick's uninjured shoulder and gently pushed him toward the door. When they got to the front door, Julian was waiting for them with Robot sitting at his feet. "Hey, Jitterbug, ready to go?"

"I was waiting for the two of you." Julian narrowed his eyes at them. "What were you doing?"

"I was helping Patrick get his jacket on. He was having problems with the sleeves." Jack was impressed with his answer. It was entirely plausible and, best of all, it was partially true.

"Why aren't you wearing your sling?"

"It will be in the way on a search, Ace. Don't worry, I'll be fine." Patrick patted his cheek and headed out the door. Julian watched him go with a small frown on his face. The frown made Jack smile; he thought that Julian looked cute when he was angry.

"He really should be wearing his sling."

"Let it go, Jitterbug. He's stressing over Hallie."

"We all are, but you and I aren't jeopardizing our health."

Jack laughed softly and pulled Julian into his arms. He pressed a gentle kiss to his lover's neck. "He'll be fine. We'll make sure that he puts it on the moment we get home."

Julian snorted in apparent disbelief and then headed out of the house after Patrick. Smiling to himself, Jack hurried to catch up, Robot following close on his heels. Jack locked up and followed the two of them to the truck. By the time he got there, both Patrick and Julian were leaning against it, waiting for him. Instead of leaning against the metal of the truck, Julian was resting against Patrick, with Patrick's cheek pressed to the top of his head. Jack shook his head at the pair. Sometimes they reminded him of two little kids.

After getting everyone, including Robot, settled in the truck, Jack drove them to the rec center. He had a hard time finding parking. It seemed as though most of the town had shown up to volunteer for the search. Jack finally found a spot, though, and then they all trooped into the rec center. Officer Keyes met them at the door.

Jack gave her a tight smile. "Roxanne."

"Jack. The two of them with you?"

"Yep."

"Okay, go and see Officer Hanson. He'll assign you a grid."

"Thanks." Jack scanned the rather full hall, looking for a familiar shock of honey-blond hair. Finally spotting it, Jack led the way to Officer Hanson.

Officer Nathan Hanson was fairly new to the force, having only lived in the town for the last two years. He was a good example of the saying "built like a brick house." The tall blond was solid muscle, and Jack had seen his mere presence break up fights at *Brenda's*. He looked up, and his hazel eyes brightened slightly as he spotted Jack. Jack had been the first person that the then-twenty-four-year-old had met. Realizing that they had quite a few things in common, they had quickly become friends.

"Hey, Jack, glad you made it."

Jack shook the hand that was extended to him. "I wish we didn't have to be here at all." Jack turned slightly and motioned for Patrick to move closer. "Nathan, I'd like you to meet—"

"Holy shit! Patrick!" The large man pushed Jack out of the way and pulled a rather stunned-looking Patrick into a hug. "What are you doing here?"

"Recuperating, so it would be great if you would let go of me," Patrick replied dryly.

Nathan blushed and let him go. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"Sorry to break up the reunion," Jack interjected. "But how do the two of you know each other?"

"I wouldn't mind knowing that, either," a new voice commented. Jack tried to contain his amusement as Brad walked up and situated himself against Patrick's side. A smile broke free of his control as Patrick automatically wrapped an arm around Brad and pulled him close.

"Nathan's father is my captain. Nathan did his rookie training with Justine while I was in the hospital." Patrick smiled at the other man. "When your father said that you had moved to Alberta, I had just assumed that you ended up in Calgary or Edmonton."

"Nope, I came here. It's a nice place."

"So, what exactly are we supposed to do?" Julian asked. "I've never been part of a search before."

Jack pulled his lover close, feeling the fine tremor that ran through the slender frame. Julian wasn't exactly known for his ease with handling stress unless there was a scalpel in his hand, and he was fond of Hallie. In all honesty, the entire town was fond of Hallie, which would explain why so many of them had shown up to help.

"Well, here's a map of the grid section that you will be searching." Nathan handed Jack a map with a clearly marked area on it. "These three going to be searching with you?"

"Most likely." Jack pulled Julian against his side and pressed a kiss to his lover's hair. Jack grinned into the messy hair as he noticed the look that Brad was giving Nathan. He'd never seen the bartender look jealous before. It was an interesting look on him.

"This is going to be a simple search. Here's your radio." Nathan handed Jack a radio marked with a piece of masking tape that had the number seventeen on it. He also handed him a bag with evidence flags. "You're search group number seventeen. Use the radio to call in anything that you find and mark what you find with the evidence flag. When you've covered your area, radio in that you're done, and then head on back here. There will be an officer here, most likely me, making sure that everything stays organized." He winced, obviously wishing he were a bigger part of the action. "Sucks being the rookie."

"Got it. Thanks, Nathan."

"Not a problem." Nathan shook Jack's hand. Jack stumbled slightly as he was pulled closer to the larger man. "You find someone with that little girl, let Patrick take the shot. I know you can handle yourself, but he's a good shot and has more experience with shooting at people than you do."

"Okay." Jack gave Patrick a brief look and realized that he had moved Brad so he would be able to pull his gun if he needed to. Brad was still against his side, but he was against the side with the gun instead of the arm that Patrick would need to pull it. Jack gave Nathan one more nod and then turned his full attention to the men with him. "Okay, campers, ready to go?"

They had just made it back to the truck when Julian stopped, slinging his backpack into the bed, and turned around. Jack followed his gaze to see Roz and her friend Marianne stashing their gear in Roz's Silverado. He waved them over. "You ladies going out alone?"

Roz gave him an unimpressed look. "We're not going alone. We're going together. Besides, the smaller the groups, the more area we can cover." She held up the map. "We're missing enough ground as it is."

Jack understood, but Julian looked squirmy. He wasn't very good at letting people do dangerous things, especially when one of those people was his sister. "What area have you got?" he asked before Julian could open his mouth and put his foot in it. The last thing he needed was to have to break up a fight between the siblings.

"Eleven." Marianne took the map from Roz and unfolded it. "Pinecrest Cemetery to Road Forty-Two. Not a whole lot there. Trees. Rocks. Trees."

"There's a stream too," Brad put in. Everyone turned to look at him. "What? It's up by my grandmother's place. I used to play in those woods for hours when I was a kid. I know them like the back of my hand. Trust me, there's a stream."

"I believe you," Roz said, smiling.

Julian and Patrick both looked at Jack. He squeezed Julian's hand and nodded at Patrick, thinking that if Patrick didn't want Julian to know he was carrying a gun, *hereally* wouldn't want Brad to find out.

Roz's smile turned slightly evil. Whoops. Without even realizing it, Jack had just thrown Brad to the wolves. "Why don't you come with us?" she said. "You know the area, and we could probably

use an extra set of eyes."

"Meanwhile, Roz can ask you all kinds of inappropriate personal questions," Jack said with a touch of devious cheer.

"Me and my big mouth," Brad over-acted. "All right, that sounds like a plan." He didn't exactly look happy about leaving Patrick, Jack noticed. For the first time, that made him wonder. Patrick only had a couple of weeks left in Alberta—how the hell was Brad going to react then?

Patrick, on the other hand, was trying not to look too relieved and mostly succeeding. Jack worried about that too.

Patrick kissed Brad quickly. Jack noticed that he didn't let the other man close enough to feel the gun underneath his jacket. "I'll see you tonight?"

"If we're lucky." Brad smiled. "Be safe. Don't get shot again."

"No promises," Patrick said dryly. "Come on, we'd better get moving."

* * * *

"We don't even know what we're looking for," Jack pointed out when they'd reached their designated part of the grid. He sounded completely frustrated, and they hadn't even begun.

Patrick didn't blame him. He wasn't exactly an expert on how to track people's movements through a forest, himself. They didn't even know for certain if Hallie was in the forest somewhere, or if she was still alive, or if she'd been kidnapped, or had just gotten lost.

There was no starting point. No leads. No scent trail now for the dogs to pick up, not after all that rain.

Statistically, most missing children who were found—alive—were found within the first twenty-four hours. Hallie was edging in on fifteen hours, and there was no sign of her, no suspects, and no clues.

"We are looking for a terrified little girl," Julian reminded him, squinting into the over-bright morning. He shifted the pack on his back—stocked with food, water, medical supplies, and the GPS Nathan had given them—and headed into the tree line.

They were far from the only people out on this search. Half the town was out, doing everything they could think of from sending out flyers to nearby communities, to patrolling highways, to going door-to-door asking people if anyone had seen Hallie Klein.

At Jack's knee, Robot whuffed, wagged her tail a little forlornly, and set off after Julian. She seemed to have picked up on her masters' subdued moods and was sticking close, nudging hands and knees, herding the three of them together.

Patrick shrugged his shoulder, trying to unknot some of the tension. He would never have admitted it aloud, but his holster was kind of chafing at the freshly healing skin. Jack gave him a knowing look as they headed into the vegetation.

It was a sunny day, but you wouldn't have known that from the temperature or the consistency of the dirt underfoot. The trees blocked out most of the light, meaning the previous night's rain was still muddying the ground, causing Patrick's boots to sink in, sticking to the legs of his jeans. Robot kicked up clods of mud as she trotted along beside them, wandering off every ten yards or so to sniff at something interesting.

As far as Patrick could tell, no one had been around here for thousands of years. The rain had given the forest an untouched feel, drops of water still clinging to the undersides of leaves that were starting to change color. Everything smelled wet. If there had been a path or footprints through here at one time, last night's storm had washed away all traces. "Cheery," he commented, almost losing his boot in the sucking mud. *Creepy* was what he meant.

Robot whuffed and licked his fingers.

Jack unfolded the map, took a pen and the GPS out of Julian's backpack, and marked out a few things, looking thoughtful. Then he shook his head, dark curls bobbing a little, and said, "Let's go that way."

Patrick let him and Julian lead, hanging back with the dog and scanning the ground cover for any signs that anyone could have been back this way. He checked low branches for hair or fibers, but there was nothing. Either there had never been anything there in the first place, or the storm had erased any evidence.

He wasn't even sure which one he was hoping for.

Ahead of him, Jack and Julian were taking turns calling into the forest, never farther than a few feet apart, sweeping back and forth so that they didn't miss anything. It seemed to confuse Robot, who stuck by his side instead, occasionally nosing at his hand like he needed reassuring.

"Over here!" Julian shouted a minute later, jolting Patrick out of his quiet observations. He and Jack hurried over, staying well clear of the ground where Julian was standing and staring.

At first, Patrick didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Then he looked down, really looked, and saw the handle of a child's butterfly net sticking out of the mud. "Is that hers?" he asked quietly, an icy knot of dread forming in his stomach. Robot nudged into his leg.

Jack knelt, not touching it, not even near it, just getting a better look. "I don't know," he said at length. "She has one like it, I think."

Fuck. Patrick pulled the radio from where he'd stuck it in his back pocket and radioed Officer Keyes. "I'm flagging this for the evidence team." He held out his hand and Jack forked over the GPS. "Roxanne, it's Patrick Hawkins from group seventeen. We might've found something."

He described the scene and gave her the GPS coordinates, and then he grabbed one of the little orange flags from the backpack and planted it a few feet away.

"I'll send a team right away," Roxanne promised. "Should I reassign you to a different part of the grid, or are you going to keep going?"

Patrick looked up at Jack and Julian. Julian's expression was nonchalant, but Jack's face was set. "We're going to keep going," he said. "If we get close to anything, we'll back off."

"Be careful. Keep them safe."

Judging by Julian's eye-roll, he'd heard that. "Keep them safe. Right. Thanks, Roxanne, I'm never going to live *that* one down."

He thumbed off the transmit button and shoved the radio back into his pocket, making sure it was set loud enough that they'd hear it if they were hailed. "Let's go."

Robot stuck close to his side for the rest of the morning, deferring to Jack and Julian when they stopped for lunch. By the time they started walking again, the sun was directly overhead, and the forest was starting to warm up. Patrick had stopped sliding in the muck. His shoulder still chafed, though.

Jack led them deeper into the forest, and the ground became rockier as they started on an incline. The trees started to thin out a bit, seeming to shrink as they went on, with many of the larger ones toppling over into the bracken. Patrick guessed their roots couldn't support them in the rocky ground.

Robot paced him for another half an hour or so, and then she picked up a branch from the ground and tried to put it into his hand. This wasn't really the time or place for fetch, but the dog was bored, and that wasn't her fault. Patrick couldn't quite bring himself to tell her no. She didn't understand why everyone was quiet and upset and was just trying to make them feel better.

"Do you mind?" he asked Jack, lifting the offending stick.

Jack looked troubled for a minute, but then he looked at Robot, who was peering up at him with her ears perked and tail wagging slowly, tongue hanging out in anticipation. Apparently he was as helpless at saying no to her as Patrick was. "Don't strain yourself," he advised with a small smile. "Julian will have our hides."

"Yes, he will," Julian warned, pulling a water bottle from the pack and taking a few long swallows.

Patrick hadn't considered the impact on his shoulder, but he *had* considered how well he would be able to draw his gun with a stick in his hand. He took it with his left and flung it into the woods, watching Robot take off after it.

They kept walking as they played, Patrick's eyes never ceasing to scan the surrounding area, Jack and Julian's voices calling out Hallie's name every few minutes. Robot was pretty consistent with bringing back the same stick, which Patrick thought was pretty impressive considering the sheer volume of debris left over from the winds of the night before.

When Julian called a break an hour or so later in a clearing that smelled a little unpleasantly of decaying vegetation, Patrick's left arm was starting to get sore. He figured he should probably stop throwing the damn stick soon, or he was going to be left with two lame arms, and wouldn't that just be fun. Robot pushed the stick—now slippery with doggie drool—into his hands, though, and he figured one more throw wouldn't kill him.

"Patrick, don't throw that." Julian was staring at him, color draining from his face as he sat in a small patch of sunlight.

"Don't be stupid, Ace, I'm fine. This is the last one, I promise."

Jack was looking at him now too, only instead of just pale, he was distinctly green. "Oh, my God."

"What?" Patrick asked, putting his hands out. He forgot all about the stick in his hands.

Robot whimpered.

"Don't wig out," Julian said. "And don't drop it." He was doing some freaky breathing thing. Had he developed allergies Patrick didn't know about? "Jack, call the dog."

Jack whistled, soft and low, and Robot came to sit beside him, tail between her legs, looking at Patrick's left hand.

That seemed to be where everyone was looking, so Patrick looked too—and, well. That explained that sickly sweet smell. “Oh, fuck.”

It was an arm,—or at least, it had been, once. Now it was a decaying mess, flesh rotting from the bone, bloated with bacteria and rainwater, and utterly disgusting. Also utterly in Patrick's bare left hand. He couldn't even think about the implication of finding a rotting *arm* in a forest, not when he was still touching it, not when it was *a little girl* who was missing. What he said was, “Please tell me you've got some kind of super strength antiseptic in that backpack.”

Julian nodded, still white as a sheet. Stomach roiling, Patrick put the appendage on the ground and reached for the radio with his right hand. He gave it to Jack. “Call Roxanne,” he instructed, taking a few steps back and away and then sidling over to Julian. “Soap,” he demanded.

Patrick washed his hand with still-freezing bottled water until it felt raw and chapped, with Julian supervising. Julian had actually taken the radio and the GPS from Jack, who had walked a few feet back into the trees before throwing up rather noisily, and was giving out their coordinates and keeping an eye on the situation at the same time.

When Julian snapped the radio off, he whistled to Robot, who stood, wagging a little, and came to his side. He met Jack's gaze across the clearing. “You want to stay here a minute, or are you coming with?” he asked.

Jack wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and tugged another bottle of water and a short lead from the backpack. “I'm coming with you,” he said firmly.

There was no chance Patrick was letting them split up now, so it was a good thing they were all agreed. Jack clipped the leash to Robot's collar and stood, looking a little steadier. Patrick met his gaze squarely and nodded once.

Then he reached into his jacket and pulled out his nine millimeter.

“Jesus! Patrick, you brought a gun? You brought a gun on *vacation* ?”

“You can thank me later when we haven't been killed by some perverted child molester,” Patrick snapped back and then immediately wished he hadn't. Jack's mouth set in a hard line, and Julian flinched. Patrick took a deep breath and tried to get a hold on his nerves. “Come on. Let's get to work.”

They were definitely dealing with at least one dead body, maybe more than one. Hell, this could be a dumping ground for a serial killer for all he knew. Patrick thumbed off the safety and motioned to Jack and Robot to lead the way.

It didn't take them long. They found the body a few meters away, half-covered in a shallow grave. There was enough flesh left on the body to identify it as female, but it was ripped away in places, bones in the ribcage sticking out at funny angles, and the body was, frankly, gooey from the rainwater.

The smell was indescribable.

“Jesus Christ,” Jack said, and Patrick thought he might look a little relieved, because if there was one good thing they could take from this, it was that the body lying there in the mud and leaves was obviously not Hallie Klein's; it was too tall and too round about the middle and chest.

Patrick didn't feel any better. Somehow the finding of one body seemed to cement the possibility

they might find two, and he didn't think they'd be so lucky next time. Ignoring the pain in his arm, Patrick leaned up against a tree, put the safety back on his gun, and took a deep, shaky breath. God, he wanted a cigarette. Better yet, he wanted Brad—just far, far away from here. Preferably somewhere with a nice big bed and nothing to do all day.

They waited until they heard the evidence retrieval team in the clearing behind them, and then Jack and Robot went back to fetch them, pointing them toward the rest of the scene. By that time, the daylight was fading quickly, and Patrick was sore and tired as well as hungry. The evidence team took measurements, soil samples, photos, and whatever else, and loaded the body onto the back of an ATV.

What Patrick wouldn't have given not to have to walk out of this place. He sighed, stretched, and stood up straight again, looking meaningfully up at the sky. "Well? Think we'd better get going?"

They did. Jack's path had taken them in a wide circle, so although they had been walking for most of the day, it was only a forty-minute hike or so back to their starting point. Patrick practically fell into the backseat of the truck, leaning his head back against the rest tiredly. Robot climbed in beside him and rested her chin on his knee.

"Hell of a day," Jack commented. There was no trace of amusement in his voice.

They stopped by the rec center just long enough to drop off the borrowed equipment, and then Jack took them back home. Patrick was looking forward to a long, hot shower and a good night's sleep.

Then he saw Brad's car in the driveway and thought of something even better.

Jack and Julian took the dog inside while Patrick wandered over to Brad, who was leaning against the hood of his car. "Hey, Wilde Thing," he smiled, knowing he sounded as exhausted as he felt. "Been here long?"

Brad shook his head, reaching for his arms and pulling him into a lazy embrace. "Ten minutes or so. News travels fast in this town. Are you okay?"

Patrick didn't know how to answer that. Sure, he'd seen dead bodies before. It wasn't exactly his favorite part of the job he loved, but he dealt with it because he needed to. He just wasn't used to seeing them on vacation in tiny little close-knit backwater communities in Alberta. "Not really."

"Is there anything I can do?"

Patrick leaned his head against Brad's shoulder. What had he ever done to deserve this? "I thought you'd never ask," he sighed. "Let me go get changed. Then maybe you can take me home?"

Brad ruffled his fingers through Patrick's hair. Patrick tried not to lean into the touch, but he needed it too much to resist for long. "You're sure that's what you want?"

Patrick was frighteningly sure. He just needed two minutes to take off his gun. "I'm sure. Are you coming in? I just want a new pair of jeans." He looked down at himself, noting how far up the mud went. "And maybe a shower."

"You can shower at my place," Brad invited. "Just... hurry, would you?"

Patrick did.

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Chapter Fourteen

Jack leaned back against the cold bench, hands between his knees. Beside him, Patrick crunched loudly into an apple. Jack thought about glaring, but if he did, there was a chance his gaze would slip right past Patrick and onto Julian, who was decked out in scrubs and a lab coat, not to mention hovering over the table with the body on it.

Patrick was eating. In the coroner's lab. That was beyond "wrong" and well into "disgusting."

After spending the night at Brad's, Patrick had joined them early this morning for breakfast to catch up on the proceedings. He looked like shit. They all did, really; Jack couldn't remember the last time he'd actually shaved, and his face itched. Patrick seemed to be regretting their long hike of the day before. Julian had been fine, until Roxanne had called halfway through breakfast.

Julian had not been pleased when Roxanne reminded him that Dr. Dan Matheson, the local coroner, was in fact on vacation in the Bahamas with his wife. ("I hope you get a sunburn, you smug bastard," Julian had muttered under his breath.) An autopsy was not something that could wait, not when it could lead them to Hallie.

It didn't take a genius to figure out that Julian wasn't happy about being asked to do the autopsy, even though he hadn't complained.

"This is the record of an autopsy conducted September thirteenth, 2008." Julian's voice echoed in the sterile room. Patrick crunched another bite of apple. "Subject is a Jane Doe, mid-thirties to early forties. Dental records have been submitted to the Doe Network as well as the RCMP, and DNA is being run through local databases."

Jack started tuning out the background noise when Julian said, "Making the first incision. The time is nine twenty-three a.m."

Jack couldn't imagine what there could possibly be left to cut open, but he didn't want to watch.

Patrick crunched his apple again. Jack chanced it and shot him a glare. Patrick just shrugged. It was odd. Jack would have sworn that he had been uncomfortable or at least unsettled yesterday. Today, in the lab, he was casual, relaxed, like he'd been in this situation a hundred times. Maybe he just wasn't used to being the first on the scene.

Finally, after what seemed like years of sitting around and waiting and trying like anything not to watch Julian at work, Jack heard the distinctive snap of the recording device shutting off, followed by the rustle of a sheet. Figuring it was safe to look, Jack raised his head just in time to see Julian de-glove and tug off his mask.

For some reason he felt like he should stand up. Patrick said, "Well?"

Jack registered the calipers Julian was holding in his left hand as he shrugged. "Give me two minutes."

Jack sighed. They'd been waiting what seemed like forever. A few more minutes wouldn't hurt.

Not them, anyway.

Julian left the calipers on a metal shelf and retrieved a textbook from under a counter somewhere. He checked the index and then rifled through the pages, made a note, ran his hand through his already mad-scientist hair (Jack made a mental note to remind him to get a trim), and sagged down into a rolling chair. "Patrick, you'd better get Nathan and Roxanne up here."

Patrick just gave a sharp nod and left the room, his posture singing of the tension he was feeling. Jack went a little cold inside, stomach clenching, and decided he'd had enough of sitting on his ass. He got up to pace because he didn't know what else to do while he was waiting.

Julian seemed to. He stripped off the lab coat and tossed it in the biohazard bin and then crossed the room and snuggled his face into Jack's shoulder. "That was horrible."

Jack let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding and rested his chin on the top of Julian's head, stroking his back slowly. His own impending breakdown could wait until Julian was done with his; Julian had done all the dirty work, after all. "Yeah."

They were still standing like that when Patrick came in with the two police officers, all looking grim. Jack released his hold, and Julian reluctantly pulled away, straightening.

"Dr. Piet," Nathan acknowledged with a nod. "What have you got for us?"

"Jane Doe, late thirties to early forties. Time of death sometime in the past week—hard to tell with all the rain. And, uh—" Here, he looked a little green. "Animal activity."

Roxanne winced. Jack's stomach rebelled.

"Do you have a cause of death?" Nathan wanted to know.

The room went—Jack winced for thinking it—deathly quiet.

"Yeah." Julian led them over to the examination table. Jack held his breath and pointedly didn't look while Julian peeled back the sheet a few inches. "Cause of death was a single blunt-force trauma to the frontal bone."

"With what?" Roxanne asked.

"Well, I'm not an expert." Julian pulled the sheet back down and scratched at the back of his head self-consciously. "But my best guess?" He indicated a table on the other side of the room containing the evidence collected from the scene. "Second rock from the left. It's got a blood smear that matches pretty closely."

"Homicide?"

Julian shrugged. "Who knows? Where it hit, she could have tripped and fallen... it wouldn't have taken much."

"You said something about, uh—" Nathan looked like Jack felt. "Animal activity?"

"Uh, yes." Julian's hand reached out almost automatically, and Jack twined their fingers together. "Birds. Rats. Bugs. Coyotes." He stopped, his fingers squeezing tight around Jack's.

"Okay, what aren't you telling us?"

"There were some teeth marks on the bones consistent with those of a larger predator."

"A larger predator," Nathan repeated.

"How big are we talking?" Patrick asked.

Julian squirmed. "I'm not sure. I told you, I'm not an expert."

"Guess," Jack said hollowly. He was doing his best not to imagine Hallie lost somewhere, being attacked by whatever had torn this woman apart.

Julian released a long breath. "Like I said, I'm not sure. But the bite patterns are suggestive of larger mammals. A wolf or maybe a bear."

"You have *bears* ?!" Patrick exclaimed.

"I'm kind of distressed that you chose to focus on the bear part instead of the *being eaten* part," Jack countered.

"Officer Keyes?"

Everyone in the room turned to see the young uniformed man who had just walked in the door with a yellow envelope in his hands. "I'm sorry to interrupt, but I have a message from Dr. Tennant. He said you'd know what it was about."

Julian and Roxanne locked eyes. "The dental records?"

The kid handed it over to Roxanne, who took a deep breath and opened the flap. She reached in and pulled out two sets of dental X-rays and a sheet of paper.

"Well?" Jack finally asked after a few seconds of silence.

Roxanne handed the evidence to Nathan. He looked at it carefully and then passed it to Julian. "What do you want me to do?"

Roxanne looked uncomfortably green. "Put out an APB on Roy Klein," she said very quietly.

"*What?*" Jack said, shocked. "Why? Who is it?"

Julian was staring down at the dental records, expression blank. "Her name is Patricia Raintree."

Oh, shit. "Oh, God." Jack realized the truth, taking a step back. "That's Roy's wife."

* * * *

Patrick kicked the rock that was in his path out of the way. They were searching the woods again, but the weather had not improved. In fact, it had become worse. There were large, dark clouds in the sky, and the temperature had dropped. The sudden chill made the wound in his shoulder ache, and he swore that he could feel the pin in his leg getting cold. If the temperature was affecting him this much, Patrick didn't want to think about what it was doing to Hallie.

They still hadn't found her. It was the second day of searching, and Patrick was starting to worry. The body they *had* found had turned out to be the missing girl's mother. How fucked-up was that? Roy, who was still distraught over his daughter's disappearance, was being questioned about the death of his wife—a wife he allegedly hadn't seen in years—*and* the disappearance of Hallie. Patrick could hardly believe it. It was like he had gone on vacation and ended up in a mystery novel. These

things never happened to other people. It was obviously a fucked-up situation when Julian didn't bat an eyelash as Jack dragged a rifle and a box of shells out of the back shed.

"Hey, are you okay?" Julian asked. Patrick turned to see his friend standing on his left side. There was a concerned look on Julian's expressive face.

"Not really, no."

"What's wrong?"

Patrick sighed and ran a hand through his hair. He smothered a grimace as his shoulder protested. "It's just—she's a little girl, Ace. She's just a little girl."

"I know." Julian put a gentle hand on his arm. "We're going to find her, Patrick."

"And then what? Tell her that her mother is dead and her father is the main suspect? After whatever she's been through, how is that going to help her?" Patrick let out another aggravated growl. "She doesn't deserve this shit, Ace. She's a good kid."

"You're only saying that because she agrees with you that *The Princess Bride* is the best movie ever made."

"It's the best movie ever made. And that just proves my point. She's a smart kid."

"Yes, she is." Julian squeezed his arm. "We'll find her."

Patrick grunted as Julian gave him another small squeeze. He kept his eyes on the trees as the doctor made his way over to his lover. Jack was standing farther away from them, glaring at a map. Patrick figured that was a bad sign. As the day had progressed, Jack's anger seemed to rise. It seemed as though he would just stay in an increasingly bad mood until they found Hallie. Patrick couldn't blame him, but Robot was steering clear of her owner. She was once again sticking close to Patrick.

They continued to search for several more hours. When Patrick could see that Jack was getting ready to take a break, he glanced down at his watch. It was after one. No wonder he was hungry; they had started searching at nine. He was turning to reach into his pocket for an energy bar when something caught his eye. It was a flash of color. Pink, if he wasn't mistaken. Patrick turned back toward the flash and felt his eyes widen.

"Julian!"

"What?" Julian came over to look where Patrick was pointing.

"Is that...?"

"Oh, my God!" The relief in his voice was almost palpable. "It's Hallie!"

Patrick was still pointing, because Julian had missed the larger picture. "And that?"

"Shit! That's *abear*!"

Hallie's pink jacket was visible from beneath the rock overhang she was sitting under. She seemed to have rolled herself into a small ball and was rocking back and forth. Even from the distance that they were standing, Patrick could see tears in her terrified eyes. Eyes that were focused on the bear.

"Jack!"

"I see it!"

The bear—Patrick really hoped it was the same one that had been chewing on the body, as opposed to there being two people chomping animals—was making its way toward the petrified young girl. Patrick followed Jack as the other man started to run toward the bear. He pulled his gun as he ran but was fairly certain that his handgun would do next to nothing against a grizzly except make it angry. He really should have brought a larger gun with him.

When he felt Julian run up next to him, Patrick stopped moving and put a hand on his arm. "Stay here, Ace."

"What? Are you crazy? I'm not going to stay here while you and Jack go and face an angry bear!"

"You're unarmed, Julian!"

"And that puny gun of yours is going to be just as effective as throwing rocks at it!" Julian was so close that he was shouting in Patrick's face.

Patrick put his free hand on Julian's chest and actually attempted to shove the other man back. Julian didn't move. He was a lot stronger than he used to be. "Damn it, Ace, just stay here!"

"No!"

"Don't make me shoot you!"

"Like you'd really do that."

"Don't tempt me!"

"Um, guys?" Jack's voice trailed back to them from where he was, up ahead of them.

"A little busy right now," Patrick replied.

"Yeah, well, you seem to have attracted the bear."

The flat, tense tone of Jack's voice caused Patrick to stop arguing and turn around. The bear was no longer looking at Hallie's small, huddled form. Instead, it was looking at them. Apparently the argument was more exciting to the bear than Hallie's whimpered cries.

"Run?" Julian suggested, fingers tight on Patrick's bicep.

That was sounding like a better and better idea to Patrick, especially as the bear reared up on its hind legs and roared, the sound echoing through the forest. It was easily eight or nine feet tall standing like that, and it looked, well, *hungry*.

Then it dropped back to all fours and charged toward them.

Before Patrick could even start to panic, a loud shot rang out. Patrick watched in shock as blood arced from the animal's head as it dropped to its side on the ground. Ignoring the rather distressing dying sounds from the animal, Patrick turned slightly and saw Jack standing a few yards away, the smoking gun still held to his shoulder. He had to admit that the man looked hot, especially considering that he had just saved all of their lives.

Patrick just managed to get his fingers around the rifle as Jack passed it to him. He hissed slightly as his hand wrapped around the hot barrel. Patrick watched as Jack stormed over to Hallie and pulled the terrified young girl into his arms. Her tiny hands fisted into his jacket as she clung to him and cried. Patrick turned, still holding both guns, and faced a rather stunned-looking Julian. "Um, you might want to radio this in, Ace."

"Radio, right." Julian raised the radio that he had been holding in his hand the entire time and called in their location.

Things moved rather quickly after that. Patrick could hear the excited voices on the radio. By the time that they finished questioning Julian, Jack had made his way back to them with Hallie in his arms. She seemed to have stopped crying, but it didn't look as though she would be letting go of Jack any time soon. Patrick was actually impressed that Jack could breathe with the way that Hallie's arms were wrapped around his neck. Julian immediately moved over and began to give the small child a cursory exam. Well, as much as he could, considering she wouldn't let go of Jack.

"She okay?" Patrick asked. He fumbled slightly to get his own gun away, and when he had a hand free, he gently placed it on Hallie's back. He could feel her trembling.

"She's scared," Jack replied. He shifted the small girl in his arms.

"I'm not scared." The tiny voice was raspy from crying, but Hallie pulled her head far enough away from Jack's neck to give him a dirty look. With her head finally out of hiding, Julian darted forward to take a look at her pupils. Hallie included the doctor in the dirty look she was giving his lover.

Tough kid. Patrick laughed and ran his hand over her hair. "You'll be just fine, Sprocket."

"Of course I will." Hallie gave a tiny snuffle and wiped a small hand across her face. "When can I see my Daddy?"

The three men were spared having to answer that question by the arrival of the cops, some EMTs, and most of the town. Everyone wanted to see for themselves that the little girl was all right. Patrick watched as Jack had to talk Hallie into going with the paramedics. Once the little girl was safe in the hands of the professionals, Jack moved back to them and pulled Julian into his arms. Watching them hold each other, Patrick wished that Brad was there. He really wanted someone to hold him.

"Patrick?"

Patrick turned to see Nathan standing next to him. "Hey, Nathan. Something I can do for you?"

Nathan nodded toward the rifle still in Patrick's hands. "Did you shoot that bear?"

"No, that was Jack." Patrick gave the other cop a weak smile. "I'm just holding the literally smoking gun."

"It doesn't look like it's smoking."

"It was when he tossed it to me." Patrick nodded toward the commotion. "Is she going to be okay?"

"They seem to think so." Nathan sighed. "I hate to do this to you, but I need you to come down to the station so I can get a statement."

"I know. Um, do you want me to take this with me?" Patrick bit his lower lip and hefted the gun that he was still holding.

"Yeah, that would probably be a good idea."

"After you," Patrick stated. He used the rifle to indicate that Nathan should lead the way. Giving one last look to the little girl who was surrounded by people who loved her, Patrick set out after Nathan.

I wish just one person would care about me that much.

* * * *

"Oh, good, you're here."

Julian nodded, exhausted. He hadn't slept properly since before Hallie had wandered off and gotten lost in the rain. Now that she'd been found, dread of the work waiting for him here in the coroner's lab was keeping him awake at nights. He looked up when Roxanne smiled wanly and handed over a manila folder. "What have you got for me?"

"Toxicology reports came back from the lab," Roxanne explained, leading him down the hallway. She swiped her access card to allow them into the morgue area and turned into the tiny office. "They don't mean much to me, and Dr. Matheson's flight doesn't come in for another three days. We were hoping you might have some insight for us."

Julian slid the folder onto the desk and dropped into the chair. "I'll give it a shot. This isn't exactly my area of expertise."

"No. But we need to know if there's any evidence that Patricia Raintree was murdered." Roxanne sighed, leaning both palms on the desk. "And if Roy had anything to do with it."

Privately, Julian didn't think so, but he wasn't about to draw any conclusions from his own subjective experience. Not until he'd had a chance to examine the tox report and correlate with a reexamination of the body. "Did you get her medical records like I'd asked?"

Roxanne nodded. "Her family doctor is forwarding all of her charts. Nathan should have it printed for you in a few minutes."

Julian exhaled loudly. "Okay. I guess I should take a look at this, then." He opened the folder, feeling a tension headache building just behind his eyes.

He stared.

"Julian? Is something wrong?"

"I... no," he answered, closing the folder again. "Do me a favor and let Jack and Patrick in, then meet me in the lab?" He'd left them waiting outside, not expecting to get results this complicated. "I want to bounce some ideas off of you, and it'll work better for me if everyone's there."

"If you say so. I'll be right back."

Julian picked up the documents and headed to the autopsy lab, wanting to check a few more details of the body's condition before he announced his suspicions.

"Hey, Doc?"

Julian looked up. Nathan was standing in the doorway with another folder. "Roxanne said you were looking for these."

"Yeah, bring them over," he said absently, tossing the files into a pile on the cabinet. "And then can you give me a hand over here?"

"With what?"

Julian pulled open the drawer with the Raintree body in it.

"Sorry I asked." Nathan sighed, walking over. Julian pointed him over to a box of latex gloves, and they both snapped on a pair.

"I need you to help me turn the body."

"Okay, wow, if possible, even sorrier." Nathan grimaced.

"On my count," Julian instructed, and together they turned the body over.

"What exactly is the point of this?" Nathan asked.

"I'll fill you in when everyone else gets here."

They didn't have long to wait. A minute later the door opened and admitted the rest of the Scooby gang. "Don't take this the wrong way," Patrick said, "but what the hell, Ace?"

"Bear with me," Julian asked. "Pardon the pun."

"Oh, no," Jack said. "Really?"

"It's just a hunch," he shrugged. "Okay, here's my thought. According to the blood sample we sent in, Patricia Raintree was clean, nothing in her system that you wouldn't expect. But there's another way to check for long-term usage." He sighed. "According to the *hair* sample we sent in—and her medical records corroborate—until two weeks or so ago, Patricia Raintree was on some powerful antipsychotics."

"She was going through withdrawal?"

"Not just that. She stopped taking her drugs against the advice of her psychiatrist. She would have experienced not only withdrawal but severe depression and maybe even hallucinations, depending on what her symptoms were before she started treatment."

Roxanne frowned. "So she could have just been sick, wandered off, and hit her head?"

"I have a theory about that, actually." Julian lifted the sheet to expose the back of the body. Four deep claw marks were scored across her shoulder blades. "She sustained these injuries antemortem. Does this remind anyone of a paw?"

"Your theory is the bear, what? Pushed her? Bears aren't normally that aggressive."

"Not normally, no," Julian agreed. "We still have the one Jack shot in the freezer, right?"

"And I reiterate my 'oh no'," Jack said.

"Twenty bucks says your rabid bear had a really tasty last meal," Patrick put in.

Jack said, "That is vile."

"Yeah, you get used to it."

"So, based on your observations, can I release Roy Klein or what?"

"He didn't do this." Julian pulled the sheet back up over the body. "Whatever other shortcomings he might have, Roy's no killer, and he sure as hell wouldn't do anything to put his daughter in danger."

Roxanne's body relaxed visibly. "Thank God, I really didn't want to have to call child services."

"Yeah. I'll let Roz know; she can drop Hallie off at home later today." Julian leaned his head into Jack's shoulder and sighed. "I'll be so glad when all this is over."

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Chapter Fifteen

It had been a week since Hallie had been found, and Brad thought that things were finally getting back to normal. Well, as normal as they could get in a world where he had a boyfriend. He still couldn't believe it sometimes. That after years of denying the attraction he felt for men, not only was he in a pseudo-relationship with one, he was the happiest he ever remembered being. Brad glanced out from behind the bar and smiled. The reason for his newfound happiness seemed to be having a good time.

It was Saturday night, and *Brenda's* was as busy as always. Jack was singing. Julian was sitting at the bar next to Patrick's empty barstool. The minute the customers noticed that Patrick was showing up every day to see him, they had started leaving him a barstool. No matter how busy the bar got, there was always an empty stool waiting for him.

Patrick was dancing. With Roz.

Brad had to admit that they looked good together. So good, in fact, that if he hadn't known that Patrick was one hundred percent gay, he would have been jealous. Patrick's arms were resting on Roz's hips, and Roz had the back of her slender, toned form pressed against Patrick's chest. Watching the way they moved together in *Brenda's*, Brad wondered what they would be like in an actual dance club. It would most likely be downright indecent.

Julian cut in and Roz spun to the bar, laughing. She smiled at Brad as she leaned on her elbows. "Wanna dance?"

"With you?"

Roz cocked an eyebrow at him. "I'm asking, aren't I?"

"Uh, sure. Why not," Brad replied. Checking to make sure that everyone sitting at the bar was taken care of, Brad stepped out from the relative safety of the back of the bar. The moment he was

within reach, Roz grabbed his hand and pulled him into the throng of bodies. Brad stumbled for a moment and then found the rhythm. He spun Roz around in a circle a few times and then pulled her close and continued to dance.

"So, you and Patrick, huh?"

Brad felt a small blush start to creep across his cheeks. "Yes."

"What's he like in bed?"

"Roz!" Brad felt his blush darken as he stared at her in shock.

Roz laughed. "Come on, I'm curious." Roz tilted her head to see where Patrick was dancing with Julian. "He looks like he would be fucking awesome in bed."

"Roz!"

"Come on, Peaches, I know what you're like in bed, why can't I know what he's like?"

"Good God, woman! When did you become so nosey?"

"Julian wouldn't tell me. I need to get my answers from someone."

"I'm not going to tell you."

"Come on, Peaches. I've seen the marks you've been leaving on Patrick. Now tell me what the sex is like." Roz locked her arms around his neck and stared into his eyes. "Spill."

Brad looked past her to where Patrick was spinning a laughing Julian around in a circle. He felt a rather goofy smile cross his face. "The sex is good."

Roz punched him on the arm. "Good? That's it? That's all you're giving me?"

"What? Do you want details?"

"Yes!" She gave him a bright smile. "A play-by-play would be good."

"What, do you want pictures too?"

"You have pictures? Gimme!"

"I was kidding!"

"Oh come on, like Patrick hasn't posed naked for you to draw."

"I'm starting to not like this conversation."

"Please, you knew you were going to be in trouble the moment you agreed to dance with me."

Brad gave the woman in his arms an annoyed look. "You do have a very good point. Why did I say yes?"

"Because you love me."

"Doubtful."

"Don't make me kick your ass, Peaches."

"Take a hike, Barracuda; I want to dance with my man." Patrick gave Roz a slight shove and dislodged her from Brad's arms. He quickly inserted himself in the vacated space.

"I will get you for that, Peacock."

"Put it on my tab."

Brad slid his arms around Patrick's waist and rested his head against the detective's shoulder. "Thank you. The questions were starting to become uncomfortable."

"She wanted to know about the sex, didn't she?"

"Yes."

"She's a perv."

"She's just doing it to make me blush."

"No, she's a perv." Patrick pulled away slightly and tilted Brad's chin up. "She sent Julian a dildo for his eighteenth birthday. By courier."

"Are you shitting me?"

"No. That's how we met."

"That must have been interesting."

"Julian turns pretty colors when he's embarrassed." Patrick leaned forward and licked his ear. "But I like that full-body flush of yours better."

Brad groaned softly and buried his head in Patrick's shoulder. He moved his arms from Patrick's waist and ran his hands up and down his lover's back. Patrick shuddered underneath him. Brad loved how responsive Patrick was to his touch. He nuzzled Patrick's neck as his hands continued to map out the strong back. Patrick moaned and tilted his head to one side, a gesture that Brad recognized as him silently begging for teeth in his neck. Brad licked Patrick's throat and then bit down gently, delighting in the way Patrick's hands clenched in the material of his shirt.

"Damn, Wilde Thing. The things that you do to me." Patrick's voice was breathy, and his hands kept clutching at Brad's shirt.

Brad grinned and pulled his mouth away, giving the slender throat one last lick. He let his hands rest on Patrick's waist once again. "Sorry, couldn't help it." Brad cast a glance back to the bar. "I should get back there."

Patrick groaned. "Do you have to?"

"Have to work, babe. Sorry." Brad pressed a gentle kiss to his lips before extricating himself from his lover's arms. He squeezed Patrick's hand briefly before heading back to work.

The rest of the night seemed to fly by. Patrick managed to steal him for a few more dances, and he even managed a dance not full of questions with Roz. Brad waved as the last of the regulars left, and then he turned back inside. Jack, Julian, and Patrick were the only ones left in the bar. Patrick

was actually helping the other two to pack up. Apparently, the other man was eager to get Brad alone. Brad had to admit that he liked the idea very much. He enjoyed being alone with Patrick.

"Hey, you almost done?"

Brad looked up to see Julian leaning against the bar. "Just about. You in a hurry to get home?"

A rather wicked-looking smile crossed the normally bashful doctor's face. "I'll admit to having some plans for the night."

"Naked plans?"

"Probably the same type of plans that you have."

Brad blushed. "I may have some plans."

"You know, Patrick was right. You really do have a cute blush." Julian winked at him and headed over to Jack. Trying to get his blush under control, Brad turned his attention back to finishing up his closing duties. By the time he was done, he was alone with Patrick. "Jack and Julian gone?"

"Yep." Patrick leaned across the bar and kissed him. "I locked up after them."

"So I guess you're ready to go."

"You taking me home with you?"

"You know it."

"Then let's get a move on," Patrick announced. He grabbed Brad's arm and tugged. Brad laughed and let the pressure of Patrick's hand pull him around the bar and into the detective's arms. He smiled as the strong arms wrapped around him and held him close. Patrick no longer needed to wear his sling all of the time, and Brad could feel the difference in the way that he was held.

Giving Patrick a quick kiss, Brad pulled him out of the bar. Brad locked up and then turned around, finding himself once again in Patrick's arms. He smiled at the older man and pulled him into a kiss. When he felt Patrick's arms wrap around him, he pulled him closer. Brad grunted as the force of his pull caused Patrick to push him into the door. He wove his fingers into Patrick's hair and licked at the seam of his lips. When Patrick opened for him, he thrust his tongue inside, twining it around Patrick's. Brad moaned and rubbed his body against Patrick's, tightening the hold he had on his hair. He felt Patrick's hands on his back and was momentarily surprised to feel them against his skin. He didn't remember Patrick getting his hands under his shirt. It was the sudden flash of cold against his back that jolted Brad out of his passion-induced haze.

"Patrick."

"Hmm?"

Brad moaned as Patrick's lips slid down his neck. "We need to leave."

"Why?"

"Because I want you to fuck me, and I don't want it to happen in a parking lot."

"What?" Patrick moved away so quickly that Brad actually fell back against the door. There was surprise and a great deal of hunger in Patrick's eyes. "Did you just say what I think you just said?"

"Yes." Brad reached up and gently touched Patrick's cheek. "Let's go."

"Anything for you, Angel," Patrick breathed. Brad shivered slightly. He loved when Patrick called him Angel. He moaned when he felt lips brush against his forehead. Brad opened eyes that had slipped shut and held out his hand. When Patrick took it, he gave a soft tug and pulled him to the car.

The drive home was quiet. Brad had thought that after mentioning to Patrick what he wanted, he would be nervous. He wasn't. He had been thinking about it long enough that all he felt was a sense of excitement. He knew in his bones that Patrick wouldn't hurt him. Brad felt a hand settle on his thigh, and he smiled. When the hand started to move slowly, Brad felt sparks of pleasure jolt through him. He shifted as he started to harden. He was hoping to make it home before he got too turned on and crashed the car. Thankfully, Patrick didn't move his hand from his thigh until they got to the house. The moment he parked the car, Brad found himself practically dragged into the passenger seat.

Brad gasped in surprise before giving himself over to the kiss. He opened to the onslaught of Patrick's tongue. Feeling the wicked muscle dance around his own, Brad groaned and pulled Patrick closer. He buried his hands in the soft brown hair and tugged. His actions caused small whimpers to escape from the kiss. Brad wasn't sure if they were his whimpers or Patrick's. He didn't really care. All he wanted was to feel Patrick's hands on him. He tried to get closer and gasped in pain when he smacked his hip against the steering wheel.

"Ow."

"Shit, baby, you okay?"

"I hit myself on the steering wheel."

"Maybe we should get out of the car."

"I think that's a good idea," Brad replied. He pressed one last kiss to Patrick's lips and then moved away. He slowly eased himself out from around the steering wheel, being careful not to bang into it again. When he got out of the car, he rubbed the part of his hip where he had hit the steering wheel. Patrick was waiting for him by the door. Brad saw the soft smile on his face and felt his insides melt.

Brad walked up the steps and into Patrick's arms. He slipped his arms around the detective's waist and unlocked the door while giving him a kiss. Hearing the click of the lock, Brad started to walk Patrick into the house without breaking the kiss. He kicked the door shut behind him and wrapped both arms around his lover. Patrick moaned into the kiss and bit at his lips. Brad whimpered when the appealing mouth pulled away from his.

"You sure that you want this, Angel? I don't want to push."

"I'm sure. I've been thinking about it for a while. I want this." Brad stared into rapidly darkening green eyes. "Take me to bed, Patrick."

Brad suddenly found himself minus his coat and being dragged down the hallway. He laughed as Patrick pulled him up the stairs and headed for the bedroom. He felt a brief flutter of nerves as they entered the room, but one look at Patrick had those nerves fading away. Brad wanted this. He wanted to feel Patrick deep inside him, where no one had ever been before.

Once they reached the bedroom, Patrick pulled him into his arms and kissed him. Brad melted

against his chest at the absolute sweetness of the kiss. He opened his mouth and pulled Patrick's tongue inside, gently rubbing it with his own. The kisses in the car had removed all traces of beer from the other man's mouth, so now all he could taste was pure Patrick. It was a taste to which he had become addicted.

Brad slid his hands beneath Patrick's shirt and ran one up the muscled chest while the other twined around the trim waist. His questing hand found what he was looking for. He gave the nipple ring a flick and was rewarded with a deep moan. Smiling against Patrick's lips, he did it again. Brad really was incredibly fond of Patrick's nipple ring. He pulled out of the kiss and used both of his hands to remove Patrick's shirt. Once the nipple ring was bared to his sight, Brad wrapped his lips around it and tugged. He felt Patrick's hands fist in his hair as he was pulled closer to the muscled chest. It appeared as though he wasn't the only one who enjoyed his fascination with the nipple ring.

The hands in his hair tightened and pulled upwards, forcing him to release the nipple. He opened his mouth to protest, but ended up with Patrick's tongue in his mouth. Moaning happily, Brad returned the kiss with enthusiasm. As they kissed, Brad backed him toward the bed. Patrick grunted and broke the kiss as he hit the mattress. Brad leered down at him. It was like having his own private feast laid out before him. Yummy.

Brad quickly shed his own shirt and pants and then, naked, knelt down and started to remove Patrick's pants. He peeled the tight jeans from the lean body and tossed them behind him. Brad put his hands on Patrick's ankles and then ran them up his legs as he stood. When he was back on his feet, Brad simply stared down at his lover.

"Join me on the bed, Angel," Patrick instructed. Brad took the hand that was held out to him and allowed Patrick to pull him onto the bed. He fell mostly on top of Patrick, and the other man's arms immediately wrapped around him. Brad murmured in approval and licked his way from Patrick's neck back to the nipple he had been playing with when he had been interrupted. He yelped in surprise when those strong arms tightened and the body beneath him rolled until Brad was on his back underneath the detective.

"Hey, I was having fun."

"I noticed that, Angel, but if you want me inside of you, you need to stop driving me crazy."

"I drive you crazy?"

"You make me need, Angel. All you have to do is smile at me."

Brad smiled. "I don't think I've ever had that effect on someone before. I like it." He looped his hands behind Patrick's neck.

"Good. Now be quiet. I have things that I need to do." With that said, Patrick shrugged Brad's hands from his neck and moved down.

Brad smiled softly as his hands hit the bed and then moaned when he felt Patrick's tongue on his neck. He arched into the tongue that was bathing his throat. When teeth bit into his skin, Brad moaned and grabbed at Patrick's shoulders. He slid one hand into Patrick's hair and pulled his mouth tighter against his neck. Every nip against his neck sent jolts of pleasure flowing through him. He moved his hand away from Patrick's injured shoulder so that he wouldn't hurt him when he clenched his hands. He felt one more bite to his neck, causing him to clench his hands, and then Patrick's mouth moved down to his collarbone.

The only thing Brad was capable of doing was sprawling on the bed in bliss as Patrick played him like an instrument. His entire body was thrumming with pleasure. Patrick's tongue left goose bumps

in its wake as it traveled down his chest. Brad gasped and wove his fingers into Patrick's hair as the hot mouth on his chest surrounded his nipple. As his nipple was licked and sucked, Brad briefly wondered what it would feel like if he had a piercing in it. When Patrick gently bit down, Brad howled and arched his back. The pleasant suction was transferred from one nipple to the other. Brad knew he was making incoherent pleasure sounds, but he didn't care. It felt too good.

The teasing mouth released his nipples and headed down his chest. Brad could feel Patrick's tongue trace the muscles in his chest. He moaned and writhed beneath the onslaught. He was so hard he ached, and he could feel sweat forming on his skin. Patrick licked the indentation of his hip, and Brad moaned and bucked.

"Mmm, you taste good, Angel."

"Patrick." Brad could hear the low, pleading moan that his voice had become. "More."

"I'm getting there, Angel."

"Please."

"Hush."

Brad whimpered as a soft kiss was pressed to his stomach. He felt fingers trail across his hipbones, leaving tingles in their wake. He tried to shift his body, wanting to get Patrick's hand or mouth wrapped around his cock. A frustrated growl escaped his throat as Patrick completely bypassed his cock with both mouth and hands. When Patrick started to lick where his thigh joined the rest of his body, Brad spread his legs further apart. Patrick's mouth moved along the inside of his thigh, stopped, and started sucking up a mark. Brad gasped and moaned as his attention was suddenly focused on the sensitive skin of his thigh. When the sucking turned to long licks over the marked area, Brad panted and clenched his fists in the sheets.

"Hand me the lube, Angel," Patrick requested. Brad reached for the nightstand with trembling fingers. It took several tries for him to open the drawer. He managed to grab the lube and a condom, and then dropped the items into Patrick's waiting hand. Another kiss was pressed to the mark on his thigh. "Are you sure about this, Brad?"

The use of his first name startled Brad enough that he was able to open eyes he hadn't even realized he had squeezed shut and look down his body at the man between his thighs. He could see the desire and passion in the green gaze, but there was also concern. Even in the middle of what they were doing, Patrick was willing to stop and make sure it was what Brad wanted. Brad reached out and traced a cheek with trembling fingers. "I'm sure."

Patrick gave him a slight nod and lifted his hips, slipping a pillow beneath them. Patrick's mouth settled on his hip as Brad heard the sound of the lube being opened. Brad gasped softly as a cool, lubed finger pressed against his opening. He hissed slightly as that finger slowly pressed into him. There was a burn, but Patrick was moving slowly enough that it didn't last that long. Brad shifted his hips at the new feeling. It was strange, but at the same time, he was enjoying it. The fingers of Patrick's free hand ran over his chest and sides in teasing patterns. When a warm, wet mouth closed over his aching erection, Brad gasped and tried to thrust up. There was suddenly an arm across his hips, holding him down.

Brad whimpered at the sensations that Patrick was causing in his body. The wet suction on his cock continued as another finger slid inside him. The feeling of fullness was odd and a little uncomfortable; then Patrick's fingers hit something inside that made him see stars. Brad howled as pleasure shot through his entire body. "Shit!"

"Say hello to your prostate, Angel."

"Do it again."

Patrick chuckled but complied with Brad's wishes. As the pleasure ran through him, Brad found his erection once again inside the warm haven of Patrick's mouth. God, the things that man could do with his tongue. He barely noticed when the third finger joined its friends inside him. Brad started rocking his hips, thrusting up into Patrick's mouth and down against the fingers in his ass. He was enjoying a pleasure-induced haze when, suddenly, all of the sensations he was enjoying were taken away. He forced his eyes to focus on Patrick. Seeing that the other man's lips were moving, Brad realized that he was talking to him.

"Brad? You with me, Angel?"

Brad nodded. "Uh-huh."

"Okay, this may hurt a bit. Just keep breathing, okay?"

Brad nodded. He spared a moment to notice that Patrick had managed to get the condom on, and then Patrick was sliding into him and everything else fled his mind. It burned more than the fingers had, but once the head was in, some of the pressure eased. Patrick's cock felt *fuckinghuge*. Patrick stilled, and gentle fingers ran in soothing circles over his stomach. As Brad relaxed, he felt Patrick slide in further. This cycle continued until Patrick was fully inside him. When Patrick bottomed out, Brad gasped and opened his eyes. He found himself staring into the green eyes directly above him. The emotion he could see in them was staggering.

"Patrick." Brad was surprised to hear that his voice came out in an almost reverent whisper.

Something must have shown in his eyes, because the green orbs above him softened even more. "I know, Angel. Trust me, I know."

Brad trembled softly as Patrick hands moved over his legs, pulling them to rest on Patrick's strong shoulders. Brad was suddenly thankful that he played hockey every week. Having his legs in the air like that, braced on Patrick's shoulders, was more of a stretch than he had expected, and Patrick hadn't even started moving yet. Brad shifted a bit, getting used to the feel of Patrick inside him, and he managed to make Patrick's cock brush against his prostate. The jolt of pleasure made him gasp. He gazed up into patient eyes and nodded.

Keeping Brad's eyes locked with his, Patrick slowly pulled out. Brad whimpered at the sensation, his hands running over Patrick's arms. Patrick leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss to his lips at the same time as he thrust back inside. Brad let out a strangled gasp as the thrust hit his prostate. This was so much better than having Patrick stimulate it with his fingers. Brad moaned in pleasure and started to move his hips. His small motions alerted Patrick, who started thrusting again. It only took a few strokes for Brad to match Patrick's rhythm.

The entire time that they moved together, Brad kept his eyes locked with Patrick's. He couldn't stop looking into his lover's eyes, and it appeared as though Patrick was feeling the same way. Brad could hear the small, hitching breaths he was taking as Patrick moved inside him. He kept gripping and releasing his lover's arms; he was sure Patrick would have bruises in the morning. Patrick didn't seem to care. When one of Patrick's hands wrapped around his erection, Brad started to shake. He could feel the pleasure mounting inside.

As the pressure of his impending orgasm increased, Brad started to moan. His moan increased in volume until he came with a keening howl, gripping Patrick's arms so tightly he knew that his nails were digging in. Brad broke the intimate eye contact as he screamed out his completion, tossing his

head back and closing his eyes as he felt warm semen hit his chest. He felt the condom-encased cock inside him throb and pulse as Patrick cried his name. Brad hissed softly as Patrick pulled out and lowered his legs to the bed.

"Brad, Angel, are you okay?"

Brad forced himself to look at Patrick when he heard the concern in his voice. He lifted a still-shaky hand to Patrick's cheek. "I am more than fine."

"Good. It would kill me if I hurt you." Patrick leaned forward and kissed him. "I'm going to go and grab something to clean us up."

Brad watched as Patrick left the room. He felt sleepy and sated. He'd had another man inside him for the first time, and it had been amazing. Brad knew that he had a dopey smile on his face, but he didn't care. He felt too good to care.

Patrick came back into the room with a damp cloth and wiped Brad off. "Think you can lift up for a minute?"

"Maybe, why?"

"You're lying on the bedspread."

Brad giggled softly. "Oops." He managed to lift up enough for Patrick to get the bedspread out from underneath him and get him into the bed. When they were both under the covers, Patrick curled into his arms. "Patrick?"

"Yeah, Angel?"

I think I'm in love with you. "That was wonderful."

"You were amazing, Angel." A soft kiss was pressed to his chest. "Now get some sleep. I'll make breakfast in the morning."

As Patrick drifted to sleep in his arms, cuddled happily against his chest, Brad had only one thought on his mind.

Letting Patrick go was going to *hurt* .

* * * *

Patrick woke to the feeling of hands and lips sliding along his shoulders. He smiled into the pillow. He must have moved slightly, because the licking and petting suddenly stopped. Patrick stayed perfectly still as a warm body draped itself over his back.

"You awake?"

Patrick chuckled. "I could be. Why?"

"Wanna play?"

"Maybe." Patrick moaned as a warm tongue traced over the tattoo on his back. He could almost see each of the numbers as he felt Brad's tongue trace them. Patrick shivered as Brad finished by licking across the entire tattoo.

"So, what do the numbers stand for?"

"It's my badge number."

"It's pretty."

"My badge number is pretty?"

"Well, it's more that your skin is pretty." Brad licked his shoulder. "Tastes pretty good too."

"I'm glad you like it."

"I might have to taste some more, just to make sure."

"Feel free to taste as much as you want." Patrick smiled into the pillow as Brad started to kiss his way down his back. It felt like Brad was licking every inch of his skin. His fingers were running up and down Patrick's sides, making him tremble slightly. Patrick was just starting to really enjoy the attention when the licking stopped.

"Patrick?"

"Yeah, Angel?"

"Why does this scar have a date tattooed under it?"

Patrick sighed into the pillow. He had known that this was eventually going to happen. "Because that is the date when I got shot."

"You got shot in the back?"

"Just once." The bed dipped as Brad crawled off of his back to settle next to him. Patrick rolled onto his side and ran a finger down his cheek.

"How many times have you been shot?"

"Twice."

"The one in your back was worse, wasn't it?"

"Yeah. I had to learn how to walk again. Not good times."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. You weren't the one who shot me in the spine." Patrick moved forward slightly and pressed a gentle kiss to Brad's lips. "I'm fine."

"Can you promise me that you won't get shot again?"

"No, but I can promise you that I'll try to not get shot again." Patrick nipped Brad's nose and pulled Brad into his arms. "So, are you going to tell me how you're feeling this morning?"

"I'm sore, but it's a good sore." His hands started to roam over Patrick's back again. "You never mentioned how good that felt."

"The screaming wasn't enough of an indicator?" Patrick laughed as Brad tickled his sides. "Stop it! Not fair!"

Patrick howled with laughter as Brad continued to tickle him. He tried to roll away, but he had no real desire to be out of Brad's arms. Brad tickled him until there were tears running down his face. While Patrick was trying to get his breathing back under control, Brad's hands started to run over his skin again. This time, instead of tickling, they were hitting all of the spots that made him writhe with need. Patrick moaned and shifted under the attention of those hands.

"Roll over," Brad instructed. Patrick moaned and rolled onto his stomach. They'd moved enough during the tickle fight that he now had his head on Brad's pillow. He inhaled Brad's scent as he settled himself comfortably on the bed.

Brad's tongue started tracing patterns over his back once again. Patrick moaned softly and arched into the sensations. Brad's teeth fastened on the back of his neck and he gasped. When Brad began to suck, he groaned and started to tremble. He could feel the blood rushing to the area as Brad continued the suction. It was going to be a *verybig* mark. As Brad gave the trapped piece of skin one final bite, Patrick clenched the sheets in his hands.

This time Brad avoided the tattoo in favor of sucking up bruises on the undecorated parts of Patrick's skin. *I'm going to look like someone tried to eat me.* Patrick cried out as Brad actually bit his ribcage. He tried to shift some more, but Brad had his body draped over his lower half, so he couldn't move very well. He attempted to knock Brad off of him, but Brad simply shoved him back onto the bed and bit his shoulder. Patrick hissed in pleasure and stopped trying to move.

By the time Brad made it to his ass, Patrick was shaking with desire and could feel beads of sweat forming on his skin. He moaned as Brad bit into one of his ass cheeks. As he felt deft fingers playing with his ass, Patrick reached out, grabbed the lube and a condom from the nightstand, and tossed them to Brad. "In me, now."

"Demanding this morning, aren't you?"

"Please, Angel." Patrick could hear the desperation in his own voice. He spread his legs and managed to lift himself onto his knees. Strong fingers gripped his thighs as a bite was given to the other side of his ass. Patrick was pretty sure that by the time Brad was finished with him, he wouldn't be able to sit very well. He didn't really care.

Cool, slick fingers slipped into his ass and he gasped at the burn. Patrick thrust back against Brad's hand, trying to get the fingers farther in. Brad complied with the unspoken request by twisting the two fingers and nailing Patrick's prostate. Patrick howled, suddenly rock-hard and dripping. He whined and shifted his hips in an attempt to make Brad rub over his prostate continuously. His actions earned him another bite on the ass.

"Damn it, Angel, stop teasing and get in me."

"Not yet. I don't want to hurt you." Brad ran a hand down his back as the motion of his fingers slowed. A third finger joined the other two inside of Patrick. The pace was fast enough to stretch him but slow enough to drive Patrick nearly insane with lust.

Patrick writhed and whimpered, but Brad wouldn't increase the speed of his fingers. He could feel the tenderness in the motions. It was enough to bring tears to his eyes. Patrick cried out at the loss when Brad removed his fingers. Gentle fingers and lips soothed him as he felt the head of Brad's cock press against his entrance. Brad slid inside with one slow, gentle thrust. Once he was fully seated, Brad draped himself over Patrick's back and pressed soothing kisses to his spine.

"Am I hurting you?"

"No. Please, Angel, move. I need—" Patrick's words were cut off by the groan he let out as Brad started to move.

"You need what?"

"I just need."

"I've got you," Brad whispered into his ear. Patrick shivered as that announcement was followed by a lick. Brad's hands ran down his arms until they reached his hands and then linked their fingers together. His mouth latched onto Patrick's neck as he started to move.

Patrick squeezed Brad's fingers and trembled. He was drowning in sensation. Brad was hitting his prostate with every thrust, sending pleasure zinging through his nerves. Patrick tightened his hold on Brad's fingers in time with the movements inside him. The feel of Brad's mouth on his neck was driving his pleasure higher. It was the same spot that Brad always chose. He was starting to get an almost permanent mark there. It made the repetitive biting slightly painful, but the pleasure was worth it.

As he moved, Brad's chest rubbed across the numerous bite marks he had left on Patrick's back. Patrick gasped and rocked his hips in an attempt to match Brad's movements. His efforts were made difficult by the way that Brad was draped over him. The younger man had him practically pinned to the bed. He was completely under Brad's control. Instead of continuing to try to fight for movement, Patrick gave in and let the sensations roll over him.

He could suddenly feel every point of contact between his body and Brad's. The constant bombardment of his prostate was making his leaking erection throb. He could feel Brad's nipples rubbing against some of the bite marks on his back, causing tingles to run through his body. Brad's fingers tightened on his as he lifted his mouth from Patrick's neck. Patrick moaned at the loss of sensation, but Brad kept thrusting, and he could feel orgasm creeping closer.

Brad's cheek rubbed over his, and he felt breath, hot against his ear. "Come for me."

That was all it took. Patrick screamed as his orgasm ripped through him and shattered him into pieces. He was drowning in the pleasure, and all he could feel was Brad. Teeth in his shoulder and a throbbing cock inside him as Brad came triggered aftershocks of pleasure that were nearly as intense as the original orgasm. Patrick was shaking uncontrollably, and the only thing holding him up was Brad. He was also fairly certain that there were tears running down his face, it had been so intense. When Brad gently pulled out of him, he collapsed onto the bed. He went willingly when Brad pulled him into his arms. Patrick pressed his face into Brad's neck and trembled.

"Patrick, sugar, you okay?" Brad's question was as soft as the hands running over his back. "You're trembling."

"Intense," Patrick murmured. He burrowed closer to Brad, practically climbing on top of him. Brad didn't say anything else, just held him close.

Patrick hoped that Brad couldn't feel the tears he was dripping onto Brad's chest. He wasn't ready to leave. He didn't think he ever would be.

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Chapter Sixteen

The circumference of the ice rink at the rec center was decorated to within an inch of being considered a fire hazard. There were streamers and balloons everywhere. All of the skaters were wearing party hats—and that was a lot of hats. The place was packed. Half the town seemed to be inside, either on the rink or sitting in the stands. They were all there to see the same person. The guest of honor was in the middle of the rink doing figure eights with a bunch of her friends while her father watched from nearby. Roy hadn't let Hallie out his sight since they had arrived.

Brad smiled as he glided by the little girl. She seemed to be doing all right, if the bright smile on her face was anything to go by. He moved through the people on the ice looking for his friends. Hearing his lover's laughter, Brad turned to locate the sound. When he finally spotted Patrick, he felt a smile cross his face. Patrick was seated on one of the hockey benches, with Julian at his feet tying his skates.

"You know, I can't tell if that was Julian's idea or Patrick's," Jack commented. Brad turned his head to find the older man standing next to him. Without all of the hockey padding, Jack looked slightly less intimidating than he did during their weekly games.

"I think it's a bit of both." Brad moved closer to Jack and lowered his voice. "Patrick's shoulder still really bothers him when he has to tie things like shoelaces."

Jack frowned slightly. "He never said anything about that."

"Does that really surprise you?"

"No, I guess not." Jack chuckled. "Let's go see how they're doing."

Brad nodded and followed the other man to where his boyfriend was sitting. Boyfriend. Brad still couldn't believe that he was actually dating a man. He felt a blush grace his face and a throb in his ass as he thought of what they had done the night before. While it had only happened twice, he was starting to crave the feeling of Patrick buried inside him.

As they reached the bench, Patrick looked up, and Brad felt his heart clench. How was he supposed to give up this man in a week? Brad wasn't sure if his heart would be able to take it.

"Hey there, Wilde Thing. Wanna give me a hand?" Patrick held out his good arm as Julian moved away from his now-tied skates. Brad frowned when he saw the sling once again on Patrick's arm, but he knew the other man had been pushing himself, with a little help from Roz.

Brad grasped the offered hand and gave a small tug. Patrick got to his feet, only swaying slightly. Wrapping an arm around the detective's waist, Brad helped him onto the ice. While he knew that Patrick could skate, he also knew that his balance would be off with his arm in a sling. Once on the ice, Patrick glided right into his arms. Brad smiled and nuzzled his cheek. "Hey, sugar."

"Hey, Angel."

"You ready to skate?"

Patrick pulled back slightly. His eyes were glittering with happiness. "Only if you promise to hold my hand."

"I think I can manage that," Brad replied. He laced his fingers through the fingers of Patrick's good hand and slowly started to skate. It took a few strokes for Patrick to pick up the rhythm, but once

he did, they began to glide easily around the rink.

The warmth from Patrick's fingers seemed to run up his arm. Brad smiled at the sensation. Having Patrick's hand in his felt wonderful. It felt natural. Brad couldn't remember ever feeling that way with any of the girls he had dated. The years he had spent being afraid of his attraction to men seemed silly now. Brad kept them moving until he felt Patrick start to slow. Tightening his grip on Patrick's hand, Brad spun around so he was directly in front of Patrick and skating backward. He smiled into his lover's surprised eyes.

"You're a bit of a showoff, aren't you, Angel?"

"Hey, I have to find some way to hold your interest."

"Trust me on this one, Brad, you don't have to try and keep my interest."

The serious tone of Patrick's voice made Brad blush. He stopped skating, which allowed Patrick to glide into his arms. He wrapped both of his arms around Patrick's waist and pulled him as close as possible while in public. Their height difference, which Brad normally didn't notice, was more apparent while on skates. Brad found himself staring up into Patrick's green eyes. There was a soft look in them that Brad had been seeing more of lately.

Those beautiful green eyes frowned in concern. "Brad?"

Brad shook his head slightly when he realized he had been staring. "Kiss me."

The smile returned to Patrick's eyes as his mouth descended. Brad opened his mouth the instant he felt Patrick's tongue touch his lips. He sucked Patrick's tongue into his mouth with a moan as he buried one of his hands in his lover's brown hair. His other hand stayed on the trim waist, keeping the force of the kiss from pushing them apart on the ice. Brad had always enjoyed kissing, but kissing Patrick was like nothing he had ever experienced. Patrick kissed like he was making love with his mouth. In fact, during one lengthy make-out session, Brad had actually come in his pants.

"If you two keep that up, you might just melt the ice."

Brad broke away from the kiss to see Roz next to them. He flashed her a smile. "Jealous?"

"Of course. I know how good you kiss."

"What?" Patrick's voice had gone low.

Brad felt his stomach drop. *Shit* .

Roz was smiling. "Bradley and I used to date. Well, actually, I'm not sure if date is the right word. We definitely used to hook up."

Brad caught the look on Patrick's face before the cool cop mask slid into place and he felt himself pale. *Double shit* .

"Excuse me," Patrick said. He pulled away from Brad and skated toward the bench. Brad watched him go with a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"What was that about?"

"Patrick didn't know about us."

"Shit, Brad, I'm sorry. I just wanted to tease you." Roz shook her hair out of her face and looked after Patrick. "I've never seen him act like this."

"Neither have I. I'm going after him."

"I really am sorry," Roz repeated. Seeing the upset look on her face, Brad reached out and gave her arm a squeeze. He quickly took off after Patrick. While he was able to catch up fairly quickly, Patrick's head start had allowed him to get off the ice.

"Patrick, wait." Brad reached out and grasped his good shoulder. "Can we—"

"Why, if it isn't Brad Wilde," a female voice commented. A voluptuous blonde pushed her way between the two men. "Where have you been hiding?"

"Karen."

"You look great." Karen ran her hands over his chest. "You feel great too."

Brad saw pain flash in Patrick's eyes before the other man turned and hobbled to the locker room. "Patrick!" Brad pulled Karen's hands off of his chest. "Damn it, Karen! Get your hands off of me!"

Karen looked from Brad's face to where Patrick had gone and back again. There was disbelief in her eyes. "No fucking way."

"Get out of my way."

"You're fucking *aman* ?*You* ?"

"Just get out of my way!" Brad snarled. He attempted to push past her, but she grabbed at his arm. With the skates still on his feet, the grip forced him to stop or risk falling on his face.

"Don't worry, Brad; I'll still be here when you get this out of your system."

Brad shrugged out from under her touch with a glare. "Get away from me, Karen. I don't hit women as a general rule, but right now you are making breaking that rule very tempting." He got a small amount of satisfaction from the insulted look on her face, but Brad really didn't care if he hurt her feelings. All he cared about at the moment was Patrick.

Brad stepped into the locker room and looked around. He spotted Patrick sitting on the bench and leaning back against the wall with his eyes closed. Brad could see lines of pain around Patrick's eyes and had a feeling he, not the injury, was the cause. The thought that he had hurt Patrick made Brad feel as if he was going to be sick.

"Patrick?" Brad bit his lip as his lover's eyes opened. "Can I join you?"

Patrick looked at him for a moment, and then gave a slight nod. Brad crossed the distance between them and sat down on Patrick's left side. What he really wanted to do was grab Patrick's hand, but he wasn't sure if his touch would be welcome. Taking a deep breath to steady his nerves, he reached out and grasped Patrick's hand anyway. When Patrick's fingers laced with his, Brad exhaled in relief.

"You know, sometimes I forget," Patrick murmured. He lifted their linked hands and brushed his lips across the back of Brad's.

The press of Patrick's lips sent shivers up Brad's arm. "Forget what?"

"That you're bi." Patrick gave a weak laugh and turned his head to face Brad. "I'm not used to having to compete with women."

"You don't have to compete with anyone, Patrick. You're in a league of your own." This time it was Brad who kissed his lover's hand. He could feel a slight tremble in the hand he was holding, and was surprised to see a glimmer of tears in Patrick's eyes when he looked up. "Patrick, sugar, what's wrong?"

"I don't know how I'm going to do this."

"Do what?"

"Go home to my life without you." A single tear escaped and rolled down Patrick's cheek. Brad brushed it away then pulled Patrick closer, resting his lover's head on his shoulder. Patrick's grip tightened on his hand, and he could feel lips pressing against his neck.

"Don't worry, sugar; we'll figure it out. I promise." Brad tilted his head and pressed his lips to Patrick's forehead. His arms tightened as he felt the damp heat of tears against his neck. They had to figure it out. The last thing Brad wanted was to lose the man in his arms.

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Chapter Seventeen

"You're quiet," Jack observed, passing over a mug of hot chocolate to Julian, who was on the porch swing.

Julian took it with a small smile. "Yeah, I guess I am."

Jack settled next to him on the swing and curled an arm around his shoulders. "Okay?"

"Hmm." Julian snuggled into him noncommittally. "Never better."

"You sound tired."

"Exhausted." He tucked his feet up and set the mug down, adjusting the blanket he had to cover Jack as well.

Jack smiled to himself and leaned backward, bringing Julian with him and carding his fingers through his hair. "It's been a long couple of weeks."

"Hmm," Julian agreed. "Do you think they'll be okay?"

"Brad and Patrick?" Jack clarified. He was pretty sure that was what Julian meant, though he could have been referring to Roy and Hallie.

"They just seem so...."

Jack knew what he meant, and more than that, he knew how *hefelt* . Julian always took it so hard

when someone he cared about was hurting. "Lost?" he suggested, stroking his lover's back softly.

Sighing, Julian relaxed against him. "Lost. Yeah, that fits. I mean, I'm sure you've noticed the difference."

In Patrick? "What do you mean?"

"You saw him when he first got here. Jack, he was so—I don't know. Tense. Miserable. And yeah, part of that was a through-and-through to the shoulder, and part of it was enforced exile until he recovered, and God knows we didn't help matters much, at least not at first. But now?"

Jack understood, even if Julian didn't quite yet. "You haven't seen him like this in a while, huh?"

"Maybe," Julian said very quietly, "maybe never."

Patrick lit up like a damn Christmas tree at the slightest mention of Brad's name. And Brad—God, Jack didn't know who it would be harder on when Patrick eventually had to leave. Jack had known Brad far longer than he'd known Patrick, and he'd never even known him to have a serious relationship with a woman, let alone with a man. They were both in for a world of hurting. He pressed a kiss to the top of Julian's head, not having any words of comfort to give, and stared into the night.

Jack knew the exact moment Julian's eyes drifted closed. Gradually, his head slumped down further against Jack's chest.

Jack pulled the blanket up tighter and dropped another kiss to the top of Julian's head. They had a lot to talk about, but it could wait a few minutes. He raised his coffee to his lips and took the last sip, and then he set the empty mug down on the porch. Closing his eyes, Jack tipped back his head and waited for the stars to come out.

* * * *

The slight rustle of bedsheets let Patrick know that Brad was on the verge of waking up, and he cursed inwardly. He had been hoping for a few more minutes of quiet contemplation at least. So much was going on in his head, it felt like the world was spinning out of control.

Patrick wondered if he could manage to climb back into the bed without waking Brad. He doubted it, but it was worth a try. He knew they had limited time left, and he wanted it all to be perfect.

"Patrick?"

Shit. The best-laid plans. "Shh," he said, sliding back under the covers. "Go back to sleep."

"The bed is cold," Brad rejoined sleepily.

Patrick could imagine the pout and resisted the urge to smile wistfully as something twisted inside his chest. "Sorry." He curled his arm around Brad's waist again, hating himself a little for needing the contact, and stroked the firm belly a few times for comfort. "That better?"

Brad made a barely conscious noise of assent, leaning into the touch. "Why'd you get up?"

"Bathroom," Patrick lied, cringing. It was a good thing Brad was still mostly asleep. Even Patrick could tell the lie was unconvincing. The tone was too light, too casual, too forced. Any second now Brad would call him on it.

Brad was quiet for a minute, his breathing deep, and Patrick dared to hope that he'd gone back to

sleep, that they could have one more night with a specter hanging over their heads instead of an elephant in the room. Then Brad inhaled deeply and turned over, blue eyes fixing on Patrick's in the darkness. "Okay, what's up?"

Patrick froze, swallowing hard. "Nothing."

"Bullshit. I know how much you like to cuddle." Brad's normally sweet, gentle tone was overlaid with something that sounded a lot like anger. The hair on the back of Patrick's neck prickled. "And I know you well enough to know when you're lying. You can either tell me what's going on so we can fix it and go back to sleep, or—"

He couldn't help himself. "Or what?"

Brad's eyes narrowed. "Or you can let me go to bed angry."

Great. So he could have Brad either asleep and angry or awake and hurt. Patrick wasn't liking his options much. He knew *he* wasn't going to be sleeping either way. Ignoring the sinking sensation in his stomach, Patrick took a deep breath and practically begged, "Can it wait until morning?" At least then, even if he couldn't sleep, he could have the night to himself to watch Brad's chest rise and fall with every breath. At least then there was a chance, however small, that he would be ready to do what he had to when the morning came.

Sitting up in bed, Brad leaned against the headboard. "Judging by how uncomfortable you are, I'm thinking not. You're starting to worry me, Patrick. What's going on?"

Patrick wasn't going to get out of a confession tonight. Sighing, he sat up, tilting his head toward the ceiling. It made it a little easier to keep his tone even if he didn't have to look into Brad's eyes when he was talking. "You aren't going to like what I have to say."

"I pretty much figured that out on my own, thanks." Brad picked at the bedspread. "Let me guess: it has something to do with the fact that you're leaving in five days."

He should have known there would be no hiding it. "Of course it does." They had known from the beginning that this—whatever this was—couldn't last, that at the end of the month Patrick had to go back home, go back to work, get on with his life. It was just that he hadn't counted on how big a part of his life Brad would become. Maybe Brad hadn't counted on it, either. "I didn't mean for this—us—to happen when I came here," he said. It was as close to an apology as he could get, because as much as this was going to suck, Patrick didn't *regret* anything. "I was supposed to sit around on Julian's couch for a month playing Mario Kart and teasing him about his boyfriend. You weren't exactly in the cards."

"Sorry to spoil your plans." Brad sounded bitter. Patrick didn't like what it did to his voice and couldn't even imagine being able to handle the expression on his face, so he didn't look. "I didn't exactly have you scheduled, either, you know."

"That's not what I meant!" Patrick protested, curling away from him. God, he wanted a cigarette; his fingers were trembling. He clenched them into fists and pressed them into the maelstrom whirling in his stomach. "I don't regret anything except having to leave you."

"Ah." Patrick couldn't help it—he looked, just in time to see Brad's expression twist to match Patrick's heart. "Would this be a literal or metaphorical leaving?"

Patrick didn't answer, not trusting his voice. Both—God, it was both, and he was such an asshole and such a *coward*, and nothing he'd done had ever been this hard.

"I see."

Shoving the covers down with his feet, Patrick rolled out of bed and dug on the floor for his jeans. He couldn't deal with this right now, couldn't hear these words from Brad's mouth, so far from what he needed to hear. He couldn't deal with needing someone so badly, especially someone he'd only just met. Maybe in the morning, when he had a clear head, they could talk—maybe when Patrick had the perspective a few hours' distance could give him, he would know what to do.

"Where are you going?" Brad pushed himself into a sitting position. "Patrick?"

Patrick struggled into his jeans, trying to ignore the tone of desperation in Brad's voice. He managed to do up two of the buttons, but his hands were shaking too badly to finish. He didn't bother, deciding to forego finding his shirt as well. Brad's bedroom was suddenly too small, the walls closing in around him. Patrick had to get out of there as soon as possible, before one of them did or said something they'd both regret forever.

"Patrick!"

"It's better if I go now," he said bleakly, not turning around. He tried not to let his head droop, but it was no use; he felt utterly defeated, and he couldn't help but show it. "The longer I stay, the harder it's going to get." It was already going to tear him apart.

"What, so you're giving up? Just like that?" Brad stood, obviously furious, but Patrick didn't turn around. "I thought we had something worth fighting for, but I guess I was wrong."

Patrick felt the slice of the words like a knife across his heart. It killed him that he'd brought Brad to this, and hearing those words from Brad's mouth hurt more than anything he'd ever thought possible. But if that was the way Brad felt about it, then there really was no point in staying any longer. He paused with his hand on the doorknob.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, and walked out.

* * * *

"Wake up, sleeping beauty."

"Hmm," Julian said sleepily, blinking his eyes open slowly as something brushed across his lips. His right side was cold, but he was comfortable and warm on the other side, and under his cheek Jack's chest was moving up and down steadily. He snuggled in deeper.

"You know, you are ridiculously hard to get into bed sometimes."

Julian heard the teasing in his tone and let a small smile form on his face. "I just wanted you to kiss me again."

"Well, if that's all." Jack obliged, longer and sweeter, with tongue this time. Julian just had to turn his body inward and snake his arms around Jack's neck, sighing through his nose as Jack's tongue slid wetly against his own. When they finally broke apart, Julian was practically in his lap, their foreheads leaned together. "You up to a trip inside anytime soon?"

"I could be persuaded," he said, stretching a bit before climbing down off of the swing, the blanket wrapped around his shoulders like a cape. He pulled Jack up beside him, noting absently how much time had passed since they had collapsed on the swing. There was still no sign of the truck in the driveway; to be honest, Julian wasn't expecting to see Patrick before the morning. "What's in it for me?"

"I am," Jack said seriously, hindering any progress at approaching the door by draping himself over Julian like a second blanket.

"Good deal. Do you think we could maybe get inside before we both get pneumonia?"

Jack poked his chin into Julian's shoulder and planted his hands on his hips. "Where's your sense of adventure?"

"In the bedroom," Julian teased. "Come on, let's—*oh*, your hands are freezing. I think you just proved my point, because you are not touching me anyplace fun until those are warm."

"Spoilsport."

"Oh, you love me."

"Yeah. Yes, actually, I do."

"Sappy," Julian accused fondly as the front door closed behind them at last. He heard Jack engage the lock.

Jack took the blanket and tossed it haphazardly onto the couch as they passed. "I'm guilty of that too." He laced his fingers with Julian's and pulled him close. With their bodies pressed together like that, Julian could feel a tension in Jack's chest that he was sure had nothing to do with the tightness in his pants. Jack feathered a kiss over his neck. "There's something I want to talk to you about. I thought it could wait, but I was wrong."

Julian squeezed his fingers and turned around so that his back was to the stairs. It had to be something good—Jack rarely ever got *this* touchy. "So talk." He grinned. "You can walk and talk at the same time, right?"

Jack didn't move. "I'm not going up there, Julian."

That gave him pause. "Why not?"

"Because it's taken me this long to get up the nerve to say something, and if I go up those stairs, I'm going to let you distract me." Jack's green eyes were serious in the moonlit kitchen. "I need to do this here."

Julian took his other hand too. "Okay."

* * * *

Patrick pushed open the door to the house and walked inside silently, toeing off his shoes as he went. It was almost October now, but he barely felt the cold autumn night. He was numb, just going through the motions. He barely remembered the drive home and had no idea how he'd unlocked the door. It felt like there was a giant hole inside him where something once had been.

There weren't any lights on in the house, but he could just barely hear a low murmur coming from the kitchen. If he squinted, Patrick could see Jack and Julian outlined against the moonlight filtering in through the patio doors, almost indistinguishable from one another.

Feeling more alone than he had in years, Patrick took a step forward involuntarily. For a second he wanted to interrupt, but then Jack's low rumble cut into the night. "You're really going to make me say it, aren't you?"

Something about the tone or the way Julian's body language seemed to just soften all over set the

hair on the back of Patrick's neck on end.

"Come on, this is kind of a once-in-a-lifetime thing for me." He raised a hand to Jack's face. Patrick took a step back again, feeling like an intruder in their house for the first time. His stomach wrenched.

"Me, too, I hope," Jack huffed. Patrick could see him leaning into the touch; then he reached up to take Julian's hand, pressing a kiss against the palm. "You're not going to make me do the one-knee thing, are you?"

"That would just be embarrassing for both of us," Julian teased. They kissed again, obviously slow and tender, and Patrick frantically tried to back away but couldn't. He was rooted to the spot, an unwilling spectator of what was turning into an increasingly private moment. "Now hurry up and ask me so I can say yes."

There was a suspiciously wet-sounding laugh. "Marry me."

"Yeah, okay," Julian said tenderly.

There was more kissing, and more of everything else. Whatever spell had been holding Patrick in place broke, and he eased quietly away, managing to close the door to the bathroom behind him before the nausea overwhelmed him and he sank to his knees in front of the toilet, only to find that there was nothing in his stomach to bring up. He heaved a few more times, the convulsions making his head spin, and then his body relaxed and he slid down to lay on the floor. The ceramic tiles were cool against his sweaty body.

Brad had been cold lying in bed without him there, Patrick remembered dully. Like Patrick was cold now, goosebumps rising on his chest and arms. He curled himself up, pressing his knees to his chest, trying to fill the gaping wound there, but nothing worked. He closed his eyes when he decided he'd rather not know why his vision was blurring. He was only partially successful, since he could still feel the moisture on his face.

Seeing Jack and Julian together tonight had brought the reality of how lonely his life was crashing down around him. Patrick finally admitted to himself what had been missing from his life for years. He could no longer hide what he wanted from himself, couldn't keep pretending to be satisfied with one-night stands or shallow flings.

Not after Brad. Not after seeing, knowing what it would be like, watching Jack and Julian dote on each other as they did. The longer Patrick stayed here, the more he had to admit to himself that he wanted someone to come home to. He didn't just want a roommate. He didn't want just another warm body.

He wanted Brad, and he couldn't have him.

Shakily, Patrick picked himself up off of the floor and washed his face with warm water. Then he crept down the hall to Jack's office and slipped inside, sitting down on the well-worn piano bench. He pushed back the cover on the keyboard and ran his fingers over the smooth ivory keys. He hadn't played since he'd been shot, but he could feel the instrument warming to his touch, welcoming him like an old friend. Without really thinking about it, he began to play, softly, filling the house with the strains of a classical sonata.

Patrick had no idea how long he sat there, notes sighing into existence around him. Sometime after the first four bars, his hands stopped trembling and the calm came washing over him like a wave, but his throat still felt tight. He was still swallowing with difficulty after the entire first movement, but he forced himself to keep playing, caressing the keys. Beethoven filled the room with sound,

but unlike the other times he'd been able to lose himself in the music, this time Patrick still felt alone.

A warm brush against his leg made Patrick's hands falter. He looked down to see Robot sitting beside him, her head on his knee, looking up at him with actual puppy-dog eyes. She whined pitifully.

"I thought music was supposed to soothe the savage beast," Patrick said, ruffling her ears. His voice sounded rough and foreign. Robot leaned into the touch. "Not make it drool all over my jeans."

Robot didn't answer, but then, she was a dog. "Not a fan of Beethoven?"

She whimpered again, pushing her ears against his hand. Her tail wagged a little, sweeping against the slightly dusty piano leg. Then she sneezed.

"I'll play Mozart next time," he promised, wiping his hand on his already dog-goobered jeans. He couldn't remember ever feeling so tired. "What do you say; is it about time to turn in?"

Robot stood up, nosing his leg. Apparently, that was a yes.

"You can't sleep alone, either, eh?"

Patrick let her lead him down the hallway and into his bedroom. Without further prompting, she hopped up onto the bed and started burrowing at the covers. When she had pushed them down far enough for him to get in, she stopped and looked up at him pointedly.

Sighing, Patrick shucked his jeans and crawled under the covers, tugging them up as he turned to face the wall. He felt the mattress move as Robot turned around to get comfortable, finally settling with her back pressed up against his. A few minutes later, he heard the deep almost-snore of her breathing, and Patrick let go of the tension that had been keeping him upright for the last hour and closed his eyes.

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Chapter Eighteen

"Hey, have you seen Patrick?"

Julian looked up from toweling off his hair and frowned. "You mean this morning?"

"No, I mean yesterday." Jack rolled his eyes. "Yes, I mean this morning." He snatched the towel and used it to snare Julian around the waist, tugging him in for a kiss.

"He's not much of a morning person," Julian confided, reaching around to try to grab the towel back. "Except for lately. I don't think he's been sleeping very well."

"He certainly hasn't spent much time with Brad this last week. You'd think, with him leaving and everything...."

The towel fell to the floor. "Uh-oh."

Jack paused in his perusal of Julian's neck and stepped back. "Uh-oh?"

"Yeah." Julian grabbed his sweatpants off the floor, struggling into them as he headed toward the stairs. "I've got a bad feeling."

"About what?"

Julian skidded around the corner in the kitchen and slipped barefoot down the hallway, footsteps thudding on the hardwood. He threw open the door to what he'd started to think of as Patrick's bedroom and froze. "Shit."

The bed was neatly made, the pillows fluffed. The windows were closed; they'd been open for the duration of Patrick's stay. Patrick wasn't there, and neither was his suitcase.

Jack came up behind him, looking over his shoulder. "Uh-oh. Got it. I thought his flight didn't leave until tonight?"

"It doesn't," Julian said grimly. "Or at least, it didn't. Do me a favor and check online to see when the next flight out is, will you?"

"Yeah, sure. What are you going to do?"

"I'm calling Brad."

* * * *

"Hello?"

There was a relieved-sounding sigh on the other end of the line. "Brad, it's Julian. What are you doing right now?"

What the hell? Brad hadn't quite forgiven Julian yet, even though it seemed like Patrick was out of his life for good. "Julian? It's my day off. Why, what's going on?"

"It's kind of complicated. Listen, did you and Patrick have a fight?"

Was that a joke? Did Patrick seriously not tell anyone? Brad started to feel sick. Well, sicker. He hadn't felt quite right in a week. "What the fuck? That's none of your business."

"Brad, it's *important*. Please."

Brad had never heard Julian sound desperate before. Whatever was happening, he was legitimately worried. "If you have to know, yeah, we broke up. Patrick didn't tell you?" Brad's stomach demanded that he sit down before he fell down. Every time he said Patrick's name, it hurt.

"No. Sorry. He didn't. God, no wonder he's been such an asshole this last week."

What? "What?"

"I told you, he's emotionally fragile; he doesn't deal well with rejection—"

Brad cut him off before he could get any further. "Julian." He took a shaky breath because *fuck*, he *did not* want to talk about this, not now and especially not with him. "Patrick is the one who left."

There was a long pause on the line. Then: "No no no no no. Not again."

The hair on the back of Brad's neck stood up. "Julian?"

"Patrick always fucking does this; he gets too close and he gets scared and hepanics . I can't believe I didn't see this coming, I didn't think you were that close—"

"Hey!" That stung, even more so when Brad realized that Julian was right—they*weren't* that close. Not anymore.

"Brad, no offense, but it was more than a year before he tried to do that to me. I thought it'd take a little longer."

Brad didn't know whether to be flattered by that or not, but if Julian didn't get to the point soon, the suspense was going to kill him. "And you're calling me now because?"

Another long breath. Julian was definitely panicking. "Patrick's missing. I think he took an early flight; all of his stuff is gone. You really must have made an impression."

"Julian, this is really fucked-up, you know that, right?"

Julian huffed impatiently. "Look, are you coming to the airport or not?"

Like he had to ask. "Of course I'm coming."

"Good. I'll be there in ten minutes."

Brad flipped his phone shut, white-knuckled. What had he just got himself into?

* * * *

Brad was in the truck almost before it had stopped moving and had the door closed before he even realized he was riding with the dog. Robot gave him big, sad puppy eyes and put her head in his lap. Brad scuffed her absently behind the ears and fastened his seat belt with his other hand. "Let's go."

Jack was a pretty good driver, and Brad wasn't normally the kind of backseat passenger drivers wanted to hit, but today he couldn't keep his anxiety from showing, and he kept silently urging Jack to drive faster, gripping the door handle and rocking until Jack told him firmly, "Do you want to pay for the ticket?" at which point he managed a modicum of control. He couldn't have said why he was so anxious. Just because Patrick possibly, maybe, loved him didn't mean they could fix anything.

It might even make everything that much worse.

What if they missed him?

Well, so what, right? Patrick had broken up with him, after all. Well, sort of. It was more of an argument that never got resolved.

Patrick wouldn't see it that way. Patrick would see it as—

"I can hear you thinking," Julian said from the front seat.

"Would you like me to stop?" Brad would have been more than happy to oblige, if that were even

a remote possibility.

"Relax," Jack commanded. "Worrying about it isn't going to change anything. You can freak out as much as you want when we get to the airport."

Brad fell silent, nervously watching the country flash by. He tried calling Patrick's cell phone a few more times (he'd been dialing more or less continually since Jack had pulled up in his driveway), but Patrick must have had it turned off. All Brad got was a recorded voice repeating the same message: "The wireless customer you are attempting to reach is currently unavailable." It was the same one he'd been getting for the past hour, the same one he'd gotten the night Patrick had walked out of his life.

Unavailable. That almost covered it. Brad ached.

Finally, Jack pulled up in front of the domestic departures terminal. "You guys go. I'll stay here with Robot."

Brad climbed out of the cab and stood staring for a second at the clear sliding doors. The last thing he needed was to start thinking about this, but it was too late. He grabbed Julian's arm before he could make it inside. "What if he doesn't want to see me?"

Julian stared at him. "What do you mean, 'what if'? He's leaving the province, you scare him so bad." He gave Brad a push toward the doors. "Go on, hurry!"

Patrick's flight—or the one Jack predicted he'd try to take, anyway—left in just over an hour. Brad pushed through the crowd, standing on tiptoe, trying to see. A few times he saw a tall man with a head of dark brown hair making his way to a ticket counter, but they always turned before he could call out, allowing him a glimpse of their faces.

Patrick seemed nowhere to be found.

Brad was just starting to despair when Julian grabbed his elbow. "There!"

Brad followed his gaze. Patrick was in line at the security checkpoint, shoulders hunched, boarding pass in hand. Even from behind, he looked broken.

Brad opened his mouth before he could think about it. "Patrick!"

In the distance, he could see Patrick's whole body stiffen. Brad wanted to soothe the tension out of him, to make him relax, to *fix this*.

"Patrick!"

He didn't turn around. Brad watched as he toed off his shoes, unbuckled his belt and put everything into one of the X-ray machine trays. He didn't flinch again.

Julian appeared at his elbow again.

"Why doesn't he—I thought you said—" *I thought he loved me.*

Julian's voice was quiet and a little rough. "Patrick doesn't look back, Brad. Not if he can help it."

"He did with you." Brad surprised himself by keeping an even tone.

"That was a long time ago," Julian told him ruefully. They both watched as Patrick handed the

woman at the security checkpoint his boarding pass.

"Why did you bring me here? I mean, if you knew...."*If you knew I'd have to watch him walk away* . "What good does this do him, if he won't even say good-bye?"

There was a certain soft sadness to the doctor's eyes that Brad had never seen before. "I didn't bring you here for him, Brad."

They both stared as Patrick collected his things, shoving his feet into his shoes without tying the laces and slinking off with his head down. When he disappeared from sight, Brad surprised himself by whispering, "Good-bye."

The word had barely left his mouth when he felt his throat close up, and suddenly Julian was there, wrapping him up tight enough that Brad almost thought he wouldn't fly apart. "I don't," he choked. "I've never... what do I do?"

"The only thing you can do," Julian told him. "Wait."

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Epilogue

Three Weeks Later

"Has he called yet?"

"No."

"Why the fuck not? Do you want me to go and kick his ass?"

Brad sighed as he flopped onto his couch with the phone in one hand and a glass of juice in the other. "I don't think that would work very well, Graham."

"What? You don't think I can kick his ass?"

"In all honesty, no, I don't."

"Hey, I can hold my own."

"I know that. I remember all the shit you used to get me into by fighting." Brad gave the phone a slightly annoyed look. "You know, you really did get me in a lot of trouble. Why are we still friends?"

"Because without me your life would be boring and meaningless."

"I'm not sure if that makes me feel better or worse. What were we talking about?"

"Why you don't think I can beat up your boyfriend."

"One, he's a cop. He could probably beat the shit out of you before you got a punch in. Or he

could just shoot you. Two, he's gone back to Ontario, so unless you can teleport, it's not going to happen. Three, I'm not even sure if he is my boyfriend."

"Did you break up?"

"Maybe?" Brad growled in frustration. "I have no clue. We had a fight and then he left without telling me. And he hasn't called."

"Have you called him?"

Brad fidgeted uncomfortably on the couch, feeling sullen. "No."

"Why not?"

"Because I don't want him to tell me that we did break up. Plus, I'm still kind of mad at him."

Graham's laughter flooded the line. "You're a bit of a freak, you know that, right?"

"So you keep telling me." Brad sighed and leaned back into the couch. "So how's Cooper's dad doing?"

"He's getting better, but the recovery is going slower than he wants. Of course, if he'd stop trying to do shit with a broken leg, it might heal faster."

"That sounds like him." Brad chuckled lightly, not really feeling the amusement. "How's Cooper?"

"Fine." Graham's voice had lost some of its humor. "Why didn't you tell me that Cooper is gay?"

Brad nearly choked on his juice. "What? Cooper's what?"

"So you didn't know that he was gay?"

"No! How did you find out?"

"He told me after I caught him making out with some guy."

"He was making out with some random guy?"

"No, this guy is apparently his boyfriend." Graham nearly growled the word "boyfriend."

"So, do you have a problem with Cooper being gay or the boyfriend?"

"I don't give a shit that Coop's gay. I just don't like this guy."

"Why?"

"Gives me bad vibes. I don't like him, Brad. He doesn't fit."

Brad sighed. Graham had had hunches about people since they were kids. And the scary thing was, his hunches tended to be right. If Graham said someone didn't fit, there was usually something wrong with that person. Brad normally gave him the benefit of the doubt, but he was still reeling from his own emotional fallout and didn't want to deal with anyone else's. "You told me that you thought Patrick fit."

"I still think he does."

"He left, Graham. He left, and I haven't heard from him in almost three weeks."

"Don't count him out yet."

Brad sighed once more. *God, I'm sighing so much I sound like I have respiratory problems. Shit. I am so pathetic.* The thought annoyed him so much that he actually sighed again. "Fine, I won't give up on him yet." Brad heard the sound of the mailbox on his porch closing. "Look, my mail is here. I'll talk to you later."

"Bye."

"Bye," Brad echoed. He hung up the phone and tossed it on the couch. Groaning, he pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. He needed to stop thinking about Patrick all the time. All it did was depress him.

Brad pushed himself to his feet and headed for the door. He was waiting for the new issue of a graphics magazine, and he was almost positive it should be arriving within the next few days. It was sad to think that a magazine was all he had to look forward to. Now completely depressed, Brad opened his front door and collected his mail.

He closed the door with his hip as he looked through the pile of mail in his hands. Most of it appeared to be bills or junk mail, but there was a box that appeared to be some type of package. Brad tossed everything except the box on the table by the door and then walked over to the couch with the box. He sat and looked at the postmark. When he saw that it was from Ontario, his hands started to shake. It took two tries before he was able to open the box.

It was just a plain shipping box; Brad pulled back the flaps, revealing a mess of packing paper. With still-clumsy hands, he yanked the paper out and reached further inside. His hands encountered something soft. Frowning slightly, Brad pulled it from the box. He stared for a moment before he felt a smile. In his hands was a stuffed giraffe wearing a green, blue, and white striped scarf.

Brad remembered the giraffe. He and Patrick had taken a trip into a neighboring town for lunch one day and had been wandering around when he spotted it in a window. Patrick, knowing about the collection of stuffed animals that Brad's grandmother had started for him when he was twelve, hadn't batted an eye when Brad dragged him inside the store to look and see if they had one with a scarf. All of his animals had scarves. The first one had been a polar bear with a scarf that his grandmother had brought back from a trip to Alaska. He really wanted a giraffe.

Unfortunately, while the giraffe in the window had been perfect, the store didn't have one with a scarf. Brad had left feeling somewhat down, but spending the rest of the day with Patrick had made everything better. He couldn't believe that Patrick had remembered how much he had liked the giraffe. What was even more astounding was that Patrick had somehow found a scarf for it.

Settling the giraffe in the crook of his arm, Brad dug back into the box. He pulled out a matching scarf, mittens, and socks for himself. Brad flung the scarf around his neck. *Okay, I don't think anyone has ever sent me knitted socks before. So either Patrick had someone make these, or he's gone insane.* It was kind of amusing to imagine him at some kind of gay man's stitch-n-bitch.

At the bottom of the box was a CD with "Play Me" written on it in Patrick's handwriting. Biting his lip, Brad stood, giraffe still in his arms, and put the disc in the player. He hit "play" and then curled back up on the couch, scarf around his neck, giraffe in his arms. *"Hey, Brad, it's me. Patrick."*

Brad shivered as his estranged lover's voice washed over him. With Patrick's voice echoing around

the room, he could almost smell the scent of his skin.

"So, I bet you're wondering why I sent you this instead of calling. Well, I couldn't really send the giraffe through the phone, now, could I?"

Brad chuckled softly.

"Okay, I'll be honest. I was afraid that if I called, you'd hang up on me. And I'd deserve it, I really would. God, I was such an asshole. I'd completely understand if you never want to talk to me again. It would break my heart, but I'd understand." He let out a frustrated sigh. "Look, I'm horrible with words, well, at least words of my own, so I'm going to try and tell you how I feel a different way."

Brad settled against the couch cushions as a piano started playing a vaguely familiar tune. Patrick's surprisingly good singing voice joined it a second later, and the feeling of connection that Brad had with Patrick, which had been fading since Patrick had left three weeks ago, flared back to life as he listened to the words of the song.

Patrick still thought about him.

And if the words in the song were true, Patrick still cared about him, too.

Brad was shaking slightly as the song finally came to an end.

"Well, I guess that's everything I have to say. I would really like to hear from you, Brad. I know I have a lot to make up for, but I'm willing to do it if you'll just give me a chance. Please, Brad, just give me a chance. Be my Angel again."

In the sudden silence of the room, Brad could hear the sound of the wind hitting the side of the house. A loud gust startled him so much that he actually jumped and clutched the giraffe tighter to his chest.

Shaking his head at his own reaction, Brad took a deep breath and turned his attention to the phone. He reached out a still-shaking hand and picked up the phone, dialing the number from memory. Brad started to breathe faster as the phone rang.

"Hawkins."

"Patrick?" Brad whispered. He flinched as a loud thud came over the line.

"Shit! Brad! Brad, are you still there?"

"I'm here. What was that?"

"I dropped the phone."

Brad felt a small smile cross his face. "You dropped the phone?"

"Well, you sort of surprised me."

Brad laughed softly. "I find that hard to believe. I never really took you for the type that is easily surprised."

"No. I'm more the type that makes stupid spur-of-the-moment decisions." Patrick took a deep breath. "Did you get the package?"

"I did. Where did you get the giraffe?"

"At that store we went to a few towns over."

"But where did you get the scarf?"

"I may have pouted until Cam's mom made it for me."

"You had Cam's mother knit a scarf for a stuffed giraffe?"

"Yep. Plus, there was so much yarn left over, she made one for you."

"She also made me mittens and socks."

"Mittens and socks? What are you going to do with knit socks?"

"Hey, it gets cold here. Now my feet will stay warm."

"I'm glad that your feet will stay warm."

Brad took a deep breath. "Patrick, did you mean it?"

There was a slight pause on the other end of the line that could have meant anything at this distance, followed by a breath Brad could hear. "Yes, I meant it. I meant every word."

"Why did you leave?"

"Because I'm an idiot. And an asshole. I should have never left like that."

"You just left and you never called." Brad was horrified to hear how choked up his voice had become. Just thinking about the hole that Patrick had left when he ran away made his heart ache.

"God, Brad, I am so sorry."

"You should be. You hurt me, Patrick."

"I know. And I know that you have every right to want nothing to do with me ever again, but please, Brad, please; I want another chance. Can you do that? Can you give me another chance?"

"You really want to do that, Patrick? You not only want to have a relationship, but you want to have a long-distance one?"

"If it's with you, I'll take anything that I can get. These last three weeks have been awful."

"It hasn't exactly been a picnic for me, either. The first time I let a man into my life, and he takes off on me." Brad felt some of his anger start to bubble over.

While he was happy to be talking to Patrick once again and thrilled that Patrick wanted to work on their relationship, he was still angry over the way he had been treated. In fact, he was fairly certain that if he and Patrick had been in the same room, he would have punched the other man.

"Oh, God, you've called to break up with me, haven't you? I've actually managed to fuck this up enough that you don't want anything to do with me."

Patrick's outburst reminded Brad that he wasn't the only emotionally fragile one. With a little effort, he managed to get his anger under control. "Wow, you jump to conclusions worse than a woman."

"Huh?"

"I'm not calling to break up with you, you moron. I want to work things out. I just need you to know that you have your work cut out for you. You hurt me, Patrick. You hurt me and you're going to have to make it up to me."

"I'll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, if you'll just give me a chance."

"Don't jump too far ahead of yourself, Patrick. Let's just take this one day at a time and see how it goes." Brad finally relaxed into the couch. "So, you have a pretty decent singing voice."

"Thanks."

"Who did you get to play the piano for you?"

"That was all me, Brad."

"You play the piano? Why didn't I know that?"

A soft chuckle came over the line. "It's not exactly something that I advertise."

"But you're good."

"I am."

"And so modest," Brad teased. The conversation was slowly losing the stilted quality that had tainted it earlier and was transforming into their normal banter.

"Hey, my grandmother wanted me to be a concert pianist. I know I'm good."

Brad gave the phone a stunned look. "If you're that good, why *didn't* you become a concert pianist?"

"I wanted to be a cop. I went to the Julliard audition, mainly because my grandmother really wanted me to, but I wanted to be a cop." Patrick laughed softly. "She sighed at me and made some crack about boys never doing what their elders wanted them to."

Brad laughed. "She sounds like she was a cool lady."

"She was. She would have loved you."

"You think so?"

"I know so. She was smart. She would have seen how amazing you are."

Brad flushed, momentarily glad that Patrick was still in Ontario and couldn't see the color on his cheeks. "You think I'm amazing?"

"I do."

"You're not that bad yourself."

"Even though I'm an idiot? And an asshole."

"You do have your asshole moments, but on the whole you're a pretty decent guy."

"That means a lot coming from you. For the life of me, I still don't understand how guys like you and Julian can give me a second chance."

"You deserve a second chance, Patrick."

"So, how are we going to do this, Brad? I know that we're going to have to go slow so you can trust me again, but how do we do that?"

"You're leaving that up to me?"

"Hey, I'm the one who fucked up. You get to call how I make it up to you."

Brad took a deep breath and actually thought about the question. While he wanted nothing more than to have Patrick fly to Alberta so he could wrap the older man up in his arms, he knew that going slow was the best idea. The way Patrick made his emotions jump would be a problem face-to-face until they worked out some of their issues. "How about phone calls and e-mail?"

"Phone calls and e-mail?"

"For now. We should talk on the phone at least once a week, maybe more. You know, take the time to learn all about each other."

"You mean that step we kind of skipped last time?"

Brad smiled. "That would be the one."

"Sounds like a plan. Would daily phone calls be a bit too crazy-stalker?"

"Maybe a bit. I wouldn't mind daily e-mails, though."

"That's right; the web-designer likes the Internet."

"I do. You probably just use it to look up porn."

"Mean. I can e-mail you a picture of my new dog."

"You got a dog?"

"I did."

"Wow, I guess we have a lot to talk about."

"Yeah, we do."

"So, do you have time now, sugar?" The endearment slipped past his lips before Brad could stop it.

"Yeah, Angel, I have time."

"Good," Brad replied. Warmth flooded through him at the sound of the treasured pet name. His

stuffed giraffe in one arm, Brad twisted his body so he was sprawled comfortably across the couch. "Tell me about the dog."

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Between hiding from the snow in the winter and the grass in the summer, Bethany Brown ends up spending a rather absurd amount of time with her trusty laptop Desmond. Yes, she has named her laptop. She's also named her car Blue, but that's neither here nor there. While she hopes to one day be able to support herself by writing full time, she keeps herself fed with various customer service jobs, the most recent of which is at a tuxedo rental shop. Thankfully, spending the day fitting men with tuxedos helps to fuel the writing side of her brain. Other writing help includes: chocolate, ice cream, and movies with cute boys. On bad days, she can usually be found sitting on her couch with a stuffed penguin watching the Donald Strachey movies. She is thrilled to have found a home with Dreamspinner and plans to stick around until she runs out of ideas. Or the Earth's sun implodes. Whichever comes first.

Visit her blog at bethanybrown.livejournal.com/.

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Wild Angels

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